

*Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies*

**Hongwei Bao**, *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-87-7694-234-2 (cloth); ISBN: 978-87-7694-236-6 (paper)

In *Queer Comrades*, Hongwei Bao demonstrates how China's socialist past induces contemporary Chinese gay identity and queer politics to be both progressive left and radical. The term "queer comrade" is creatively translated from *tongzhi*, the Chinese word that means both gay people and state-sanctioned political comrades. One needs to decipher *tongzhi*'s meanings through contexts and users. Official documents and older generations tend to emphasize the political comrade connotation, while online discussions and young people are more sophisticated with the gay implication. With *Queer Comrades*, Bao proscribes a politicized sexual subjectivity that counters "the erosion of political identities in the face of individualism and consumerist drives" (p.4). Therefore, queer comrades represent the radical left politics and politicized subject that combine queer politics with socialist aspirations. This book will speak to both scholars and activists interested in topics of LGBTQ studies, geographies of sexualities, global sexualities, and Asian studies more broadly. Bao's book is an equally important read for social justice activists who envision an alternative future that does not repeat the cruel optimism proposed by the state-sponsored neoliberal capitalism. In addition, *Queer Comrades* is also valuable for graduate courses in Asian studies, Chinese studies, queer studies, and geography.

Using interdisciplinary and mixed archival and ethnographic methods, Bao analyzes queer films and published personal diaries and conducts two years of ethnographic research of queer film festivals, pride events, and activism between 2007 to 2009 in three of the biggest cities in China, Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Overall, the author argues that China's socialist past interacts with its neoliberal present in shaping contemporary queer activism. Queer

comrades learn from China's socialist past through experiences of grassroots mobilization and longings for a more egalitarian society. In addition, China's socialist past also fosters the queer comrades through dismantling traditional forms of family, kinship, intimacy, and gender norms, and remapping the social relations and everyday lives. All these practices produce *tongzhi*, a politicized sexual subjectivity. Meanwhile, queer comrades are immersed in both the globalizing gay identity politics and an increasingly neoliberalized China. Interacting with all these historical and contextual factors, Bao defines queer comrade as not only "an articulation of forms of subjectivities, power, governmentality, and social imaginaries" but also "social movements and everyday life" (p.4).

Trained in gender studies, cultural studies, and Asian studies, Bao aims to reconcile queer studies with area studies, arguing that "what is queer is constantly expanded, supplemented, and revised by what is Chineseness" (p.24). To that end, *Queer Comrades* addresses both the theoretical concern about disconnections between queer theory and Marxism, as well as the empirical problem of European-US centralism in queer studies. Drawing on scholarship in Marxism, queer studies, Chinese studies, and postcolonial studies to analyze contemporary Chinese queer politics, Bao's book provides three important contributions to these literatures as well as geographic studies of China, socialist states, and queer subjects more broadly. First, Bao provides post-socialist queer politics as an alternative futurity, one that dismantles the hegemony of gay identity politics and sex liberation discourses under neoliberalism. Second, it highlights a long tradition of bringing queer activism and Marxism into conversation, picturing anti-capitalist, radical queer politics. Finally, the book troubles the global gay discourse by presenting queer studies and queer politics outside of European-US contexts, focusing on the less studied state of China.

I was most impressed by Bao's method, particularly how he draws on Michel Foucault's concept of genealogy to produce "information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior" (p.13). In this case, the subjects are queer people and activists in contemporary China and their left politics. By tracing

the genealogy of the *tongzhi* subject from ancient China to the present, the author shows us that the historical continuity of *tongzhi* indicates a political solidarity that is based on shared aspiration for social equity. The book is strengthened by the author's candid reflections, characterizing an engaged ethnography that emphasizes the researcher's capacities for affecting and being affected.

Including the introduction and conclusion, there are eight chapters in *Queer Comrades*. After a strong introduction, the second chapter, "Imagined Cosmopolitanism: Queer Spaces in Shanghai", explores the most cosmopolitan and marketized city in China, arguing that Shanghai could indicate where queer culture in China is heading under neoliberalization. Bao shows the complexity of and exclusions within queer people in Shanghai by comparing three groups: young, international, and rich men who name themselves with the English word gay; middle-class Chinese citizens who identify as *tongzhi*; and *tongxinglian* who are older and lower-class. Chapter 3 takes up a genealogy of *tongzhi* as both subjectivity and governmentality "fraught with tensions and loaded with potentials" (p.33). After introducing *tongzhi*'s temporal developments from Ancient China to the present, the author recognizes the tensions of homonormativity and patriarchal hegemony and the potentials of nomadic subjects in contemporary *tongzhi* communities. The fourth chapter, "How to Transform the Self: Lessons from Conversion Therapy", examines the published diaries written by gay men who became straight after gay conversion therapy, revealing how social and cultural factors transform human subjectivity. Using Foucault's analysis of the technologies of the self, Bao illustrates how ideas about the self and technologies of the self are used to discipline sexuality. Specifically, he shows how these governmental techniques come from Maoist voluntarism in the socialist past.

Chapter 5 focuses on Cui Zi'en, a famous queer filmmaker and activist in Beijing, looking at his commitment to Marxist theory and practice through digital video activism. Cui's independent filmmaking is inspired by Christianity, communism, internationalism, and queer politics. The author then extends this critique, examining three other filmmakers and two queer film events in Guangzhou, one of the first cities to open to the West and one of the most queer-

friendly places in China. The author argues that queer film events help construct queer identities and communities in China, and that the egalitarian interactions between filmmakers and the audience are mutually transforming.

The final chapters center on queer activism outside of elite gay circles through analyzing a clash between cruising gay men and police in Guangzhou and online activism in the country more broadly. Here, Bao recognizes the potential of *tongzhi* self-mobilization and the role of the internet and social media. As a conclusion, the author highlights how Chinese queer politics disrupts the global from the local rather than replicating the Stonewall riots or a global gay identity that is European-US centered. For Bao, queer Asia brings Asian studies and queer studies together, hence disturbing the intellectual division of labor and providing potentials for “decolonialization, deimperialization, and democratization” (p.206).

Although I am impressed by *Queer Comrades*, it also possesses several limitations, some of which Bao also notes. The most obvious limitation is a fixation on metropolises: the field sites of this book, Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, are among the biggest cities in China. As Bao points out, readers must be fully aware that *Queer Comrades* cannot represent the full breadth and depth of queer politics in China. Related to its geographic choice, this book reinforces homonormativity while aiming to unsettle it. Although the author recognizes the politics of sexual citizenship, most of the interviewees are gay, presumably cisgender men in big cities, well-educated and earning high incomes, while gay men in small cities, towns, and rural areas, lesbians, working-class, transgender, ethnic minority, non-Mandarin speakers, and other sexual or gender minorities are underrepresented.

The final weakness is that *Queer Comrades*, at times, overemphasizes the fluidity of the discursive while ignoring the resistance of the material. Throughout the book, Bao highlights the performative nature of discourse, arguing that it “can be articulated, mobilized, and radicalized to serve desired purposes” (p.7). But this statement posits discourse as an apolitical tool that can freely move without any constraints of the weight of histories, materials, and bodies. For example, this book’s key term, *tongzhi*, does shift its meanings from socialist to contemporary

China, but it is exactly its socialist history that enables it to be a radical, politicized sexual subjectivity. In other words, the radical politics proves that *tongzhi*'s material, socialist past can never be erased, and that material matters.

Still, *Queer Comrades* is a strong contribution to the literature, and part of a broader effort to warn against exclusions within LGBTQ identity politics. From the perspective of European-US centered gay identity politics that are based on a linear homonormative temporality, gay identity in contemporary China may appear pre-gay. However, from the radical queer politics perspective that Bao presents, queer politics in China is already post-queer in uniting queer activism with socialist aspirations. The postsocialist queer subject challenges neoliberal arguments that only capitalism can liberate repressed sexual desires. Rather, *Queer Comrades* examines the queerness of the socialist past and questions the popular myth that portrays socialism as either sexless or sexually repressed. Furthermore, it unsettles the global gay discourse and capitalist expansion by conceptualizing “queer subjectivities and queer politics that are non-Eurocentric, non-linear, and less hierarchal” (p.31).

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