
Book Review

Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism

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Offering in-depth analyses of a wide range of queer cultural texts produced in the People's Republic of China from the postsocialist era to the present, *Queer China* paints an excellent picture of the vibrant and fast-developing LGBTQ+ cultures that continue to shape and transform the lives of sexual minorities in China. From lesbian painting to gay papercutting, from a transgender documentary to a same-sex wedding in Beijing, the book reveals the effervescent and ever-changing complexion of queer communities and cultures in China.

Significantly, *Queer China* showcases the strong linkage between activism and culture, arguing that queer cultural production such as film, art and performance not only shapes and alters queer communities—it also works *as* political and social activism in a country where political rights and representation is limited. It is a wonderful and timely contribution to the studies of art, film, media as well as to the broader academic fields such as China and Asia studies.

Consisting of four parts (two chapters in each) and covering nearly four decades, the book employs several research methods in its investigation of the complexities of queerness and queer representation in postsocialist China and its immersion in neoliberal capitalism. Part one discusses the emergence of queer desires in postsocialist China. Arguing that the contemporary 'gay identity' is a product of China's historical and social conditions—namely, its entanglement with neoliberal capitalism, transnational (popular) culture and LGBTQ+ movements—Bao presents the case that public declarations of gay desire and identity should be viewed in terms of China's transition from socialism to postsocialism and the subsequent epistemic shift in gender, sexuality and subjectivity. As the country opened up to transnational and global capitalism, so did the intellectual and nationalist discourses on modernity, enlightenment and China's position vis-à-vis the West. Here, discourses on sex and sexuality become parts of China's 'imagining of modernity' where the revolutionary sentiment of socialist utopia is transformed into various and at times competing notions of sexual liberation, change, nostalgia and a coming into one's own. Bao's analysis of the queer filmmaker and activist Shi Tou's 2006 film *Women Fifty Minutes*, for instance, delineates the emergence of queer women's spaces in postsocialist China. By showcasing the multifaced subject positions inhabited by (queer) 'women' in contemporary China, Shi Tou's work engages critically with Western liberal feminist discourses on women's 'liberation', emphasising the heterogeneity of Chinese women and introducing class and ethnicity in her investigation and portrayal of female queerness during China's economic development.

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Bao's close reading of the queer online narrative *Beijing Story*, which was adapted into the film *Lan Yu* (2001) by the Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan, pointedly explicates what Lisa Rofel has identified as 'Desiring China'—the site where desire and sexuality work as means of becoming a transnational citizen-subject. By emphasising other 'desires' in *Beijing Story*, such as wealth and recognition, Bao positions the story as a national allegory of postsocialist China. The emergence of gay identity as well as sexual and desiring subjectivities, he argues, highlights China's full entry into capitalism. Whilst this comes at the risk of concealing the underlying issues of class, as China's socialist past is subsumed into Western notions of gay universality, Bao notes that the historical forms of homoeroticism in the story serve as queer resistance to such a neoliberal subjectivation. Similarly, in *Pink Affairs* (*Feise Shi*), a piece of *Super Girl* (an annual talent contest in China) fan fiction, which depicts homoerotic love between young women and falls into the genre of Girls' Love, queer desires are closely linked with middle-class aspirations of owning a home in a cosmopolitan centre. Becoming 'modern' means constructing a gendered and sexed subjectivity that is contingent on the formation of classed identities and desires that make a 'modern China'. Whilst the story shows the two women's aspirations of being modern and participating in global queerness, it nonetheless does not eradicate their 'Chineseness'. In other words, as the women imagine a cosmopolitan queer life, they also place it firmly within the comforting confines of a Chinese home which offers them comfort and security, something that cannot be found abroad.

The third section of the book looks at two cases of queer urban activism. The first case is a same-sex wedding 'event' which took place in Beijing in 2009. The wedding, it turned out, was a queer rights advocacy campaign 'performed' by queer activists near Tiananmen Square on 14 February (Valentine's Day) 2009. The performance consisted of two same-sex male and female couples posing for photographers whilst a 'TV crew' interviewed bystanders about their attitude towards homosexuality and same-sex marriage. At the end of the act, both the actors and the audience dispersed and went their separate ways. Bao argues that this kind of 'soft' activism is exemplary of the Chinese queer engagement with politics through performance art and digital media. Significant here is the noticeable dissimilarity between the well-established gay rights activism of the 'West', which is based on visibility and confrontation, and that of the 'soft kind' found in China, which involves other kinds of community-building activities such as cultural and sporting events. This is not to say that there is a clear distinction between Western and Eastern queerness. Rather, Bao argues, the cultural and political codes of the West vis-à-vis queer visibility are being re-appropriated by queer activists in China as a means of raising awareness of queer rights without direct engagement in state politics. This kind of cultural translation creates space for context-specific political activism that circumvents government censorship and enables sexual minorities to participate in sustainable community building practices that do not subscribe to the 'global gay' narratives of gay liberation and visibility. The other example of queer activism comes in the form of a poetry reading by the Chinese queer poet Mu Cao at Dongjien Book Club in Beijing, a public education programme organised by the Bianbian Reading Group. Engaging in participant observation and combining it with textual analyses of Mu Cao's poems, Bao highlights the repercussions of queer China's celebration and embrace of the country's transition from socialism to neoliberalism. Focusing on Mu Cao's literary production and his realist style and aesthetics, Bao argues that the poet's work issues a warning about the precariousness of President Xi Jinping's 'Chinese dream' in the form of a (queer) Marxist critique of neoliberal China and its rise as a global economic power. Focusing on sweatshops and inhuman working conditions in production factories, Mu Cao's poetry introduces queer sexuality as a 'perverse' pleasure that works against the toil of manual labour. As such it 'denaturalises both capital and sex', ushering a critique of the urban Chinese gay identity which is based on consumption and a middle-class lifestyle.

The last part looks at two kinds of migration—transnational migration of an international group of drag queens in Shanghai and the national migration of the queer artist Xiyadie's from the countryside to the city. In these two chapters, Bao argues that migration deterritorialises identities, paving way for new ways of 'becoming' that is never settled and which defies gendered, sexual, cultural and national affiliation and belonging. In chapter 7, he looks at *Extravaganza*, a 2018 documentary film directed by the British filmmaker Matthew Baren, which depicts a drag show (as well as pre-show preparations and post-show celebrations) performed in 2017 at the Pearl Theatre in Shanghai. Whilst the constant flow of people, culture and capital in Shanghai enables the emergence of various forms of queer cultures, making it a highly commercialised city with a 'pink economy'—Bao's analysis of the film shows that drag queens and kings use the city's creative and cultural industries to imagine a future that is based on consumption and entertainment without ascribing to (self-)orientalising discourses of sexual oppression. This transnational film 'gazes back' at homogenising discourses of national and gendered identity, pointing towards a more inclusive queer 'family' which spans national and cultural boundaries. In the last chapter, Bao looks at the papercutting works and the life of the queer artist Xiyadie. Besides being the subject of an award-winning documentary, in which he was portrayed as an artist pursuing his art and passion against the odds (perhaps as an allegory of China as a struggling nation in pursuit of glory), Xiyadie also gained the attention of the Beijing LGBT+ Centre, which recognised his gay identity and bestowed upon him the distinction of being a 'living Chinese queer artist'.

This 'discovery' of a queer Chinese artist, whose work provides a sense of indigeneity to Chinese traditional folk art, happened in the context of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1997, its depathologisation in 2001 and the growing number of LGBTQ+ organisations and social movements in the new millennium. Thus, Xiyadie went from being an artist to being a queer Chinese artist to being *tongzhi*. His work, on the other hand, does not easily conform to cosmopolitan gay middle-class sensitivity. Bao notes that Xiyadie in his papercutting not only inserts homoeroticism within the Chinese folk traditions; he also 'indigenises' it. Significantly, by depicting gay cruising sites in Beijing, his art functions as a political statement, whilst his depiction of the rural and the migrant poor exhibits a class sensibility that speaks to the hierarchies of desire between the periphery of the underprivileged and working-class and centrality of the cosmopolitan bourgeoisie.

Queer China is an important contribution to the study of Chinese queer cultures. It makes a strong case that queer cultural production in China works as a form of queer activism which is culturally sensitive and highly attuned to the contexts surrounding it. This non-confrontational politics re-works, re-appropriates and re-constitutes any fixed notions of a gendered and sexual identity based on national affiliation. Relatedly, perhaps the book could have benefitted from a wider geographical and/or conceptual focus, particularly in terms of documenting and examining the emergence of queer communities outside the two metropolises. Here, I am thinking of the disparity not only within China's queer communities but also between them. In other words, what is the state of queer China on the periphery of 'Chineseness'? Moreover, how and where do we place the most recent work of offline/online activists such as Fan Popo who, in order to escape censorship and pursue artistic freedom, are based outside the PRC?

In *Queer China*, Bao weaves together multiple subject areas across academic disciplines in a language that is personal, reader-friendly and jargon-free. The book will appeal to students, scholars and anyone interested in Chinese queer studies.

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