Reviews

Queer/Tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism and Media Cultures

Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China

Reviewed by Han Tao

Both these books belong to NIAS Press’ Gendering Asia series and bring multi-disciplinary insights into queer politics and tongzhi activism in China. Since the 1990s, the term tongzhi, which literally means ‘comrades’, has become commonly used by Chinese lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people to refer to themselves. Although the last two decades have seen emerging academic research on Chinese gender and sexual minorities, the ethnographic data remains sparse and studies on queer activism remain limited due to social and political constraints. Moreover, the ongoing debates around the transnationality of queer theory in China and the emergence of research on proliferating indigenous queer identities such as tongzhi have situated Chinese queer studies in the tensions between universalism and cultural exceptionalism. Both Queer/Tongzhi China and Queer Comrades take account of these tensions by constantly reflecting on the terms queer and tongzhi.

Queer/Tongzhi China is an edited volume featuring authors from various backgrounds, including academia and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and covers a wide range of issues, spaces, subjects and viewpoints concerning queer/tongzhi politics. A key emphasis is the relationship between queer activism and the media. Stijn Deklerck and Xiaogang Wei’s chapter documents the growth of the webcast ‘Queer Comrades’ from 2007 to the present and the shifting challenges that it has faced. Meanwhile, Hongwei Bao’s chapter on digital video activism offers an analysis of the 2008 documentary Queer China, ‘Comrade’ China directed by Cui Zi’en and an ethnography of the film festivals where it was presented. Bao emphasises the performative practice of film screenings and its relations to the construction of tongzhi identity and queer space. Bao’s chapter echoes Popo Fan’s two chapters on queer film tours and Cui Zi’en. Fan articulates the challenge that queer film tours face and the strategy they employ to minimise risks. In the interview with his student Fan, Cui Zi’en delivers his ideology of independent moving images that challenge both tradition and capital. Additionally, Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu’s chapter on web literature and Qian Wang’s chapter on Chinese pop performance offer critical analyses from a media culture perspective.

Another strand emphasised in this volume is research on the queer community. Wei Wei offers convincing, detailed ethnographic data about the strategy used by a local NGO in Chengdu within and outside the gay community to mobilise resources. Wei also points out the uncertain legal status of queer NGOs and how it limits their capacity. Likewise, Fu traces the changes in social sites that have been chosen by gay men in Shenyang since 1980s. Ana Huang’s chapter on T (stands for ‘tomboy’) takes the analysis beyond the transgender–lesbian binary. Elisabeth Engebretsen and William Schroeder’s chapters stand out, as they provide stimulating viewpoints on the shifting notions of queer politics, activism and visibility in Chinese society based on their ethnographic study and historical events. They look at how the communicative strategies which Chinese queers employ are often indirect and often focus on connections and similarity. Rather than making a unified theoretical contribution, these chapters to-
gether offer readers a comprehensive understanding of the context of queer activism and media cultures in China. Nevertheless, some chapters in Queer/Tongzhi China might be obvious to readers already familiar with Chinese queer cultures, and some chapters do not engage with queer/tongzhi activism.

While some chapters discuss the complexity of tongzhi identity, in Queer/Tongzhi China the term tongzhi is neither comprehensively theorised nor contrasted with other identities. In Queer Comrades, Bao brings us closer to the genealogy of Tongzhi identity and uses this particular term as an angle to articulate Chinese queer experience. This book is based on Bao's fieldwork, which was carried out from 2007 to 2009 in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Chapter 2 introduces different queer spaces in Shanghai and three social identities: gay, tongzhi and tongxinglian (homosexual). Bao then traces the construction of tongzhi identity during and after the Maoist era. Under Mao, tongzhi was recognised as a political identity invested with the socialist sense of equality and anti-feudalism. Anyone could be addressed as tongzhi by others regardless of gender or social class. Since the 1990s, the term has been re-appropriated as a shared identity for sexual minorities. Bao points out the absence of this socialist past from the academic discourse of Chinese queers. Impressively, he draws a connection between the socialist tongzhi and contemporary queer politics. Bao examines the historical context of tongxinglian, gay, tongzhi and queer identities and points out the homo-normative tongzhi politics shaped by neoliberalism. In Chapter 4, Bao uses the diaries of gay men attending conversion therapy in post-socialist China to reveal the connection between subject formation and state governmentality.

The subsequent chapters discuss digital video activism practised by queer film-makers and activists in China, from the radical left politics informing Cui Zi’en’s challenges to both state censorship and cinematic conventions, to the affective community that develops between young queer film-makers and attendees during and after two film screenings in Guangzhou. Rather than focusing on media content, Bao presents the personal experiences and community-building activities involved in film-making and film screenings. He describes the queer public sphere in China as ‘fleeting, transient, and somewhat fugitive’ (171), an analysis which resonates with Engebretsen’s essay in Queer/Tongzhi China. Bao examines the changing meaning of renmin (people) and citizenship rights in Chapter 7 as he traces a clash between gay men and policemen at the People’s Park in 2009 and the following online discussion. The chapters indicate how private–public and cultural–political distinctions are constantly shaped in China. For Bao, the tongzhi subjectivity and queer politics in contemporary China are both produced by, and at the same time resist, the state and capitalism. In this sense, tongzhi and queer are not merely indigenous or global, socialist or neoliberal conceptions. Queer Comrades therefore offers an original theoretical approach to tongzhi and radical left politics. By theorising tongzhi as an empty signifier and stressing its performative function, Bao argues that the socialist ‘comrade’ and the post-socialist ‘queer’ are ‘mutually constitutive’ (11).

Furthermore, Bao’s book echoes Schroeder and Engebretsen’s chapters on queer politics and visibility. Instead of refusing ‘Western’ queer identities, both texts show that the meanings and uses of queer and tongzhi are flexible and that the notion of ‘Chineseness’ is constantly being shaped. Also, both books challenge universalist confrontational models of queer activism by mobilising the notions of queer politics and spaces. Both books include detailed personal narratives of well-known queer activists and film-makers such as Cui Zi’en and Shitou. Yet the voices of ordinary queer individuals and discussion on social policy are exiguous. Although the one-child policy and eldercare have shaped queer everyday lives in China, family planning policies are not addressed in these texts, which neglect to treat queer/tongzhi family lives. The absence of family planning policies implies a gap between family/ordinary lives and queer activism. In addition, research data on other gender and sexual minorities such as transgender and bisexual people are limited.

Overall, both texts encourage readers to imagine Chinese queer politics and visibility in a more fluid and creative way, one that is different from the dominant theory of queer politics or ‘coming out’ advocacy. They make a distinctive contribution in that they address the importance of digital video activism. Furthermore, the vivid cases of Chinese NGOs and film tours negotiating social spaces and citizenship rights are inspiring for queer activists. They speak to a wide variety of disciplines and are accessible to readers from scholarly and/or activist backgrounds.

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White Gold: Stories of Breast Milk Sharing

Reviewed by Sevasti-Melissa Nolas

Part of the series To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Reviews of Anthropological Works by Non-Anthropologists

Susan Falls’ ethnography charts the surprising, and little-known, practice of breast milk sharing amongst what she calls a ‘counternetwork’ of women-mothers based predominantly in the southern states of the United States. The practice of breast milk sharing, however, extends across North America and beyond, and is often described as ‘nurture kinship’ (viii).

Reminding us that the particulars of breast-feeding have varied across space and time, the women-mothers who feature in Falls’ ethnography engage in a counter-economics of care that is of the moment and of anti-capitalist counter-cultural practices: surplus breast milk is collected, frozen and shared for free with mothers or other primary care-givers who, for various reasons, are unable to produce their own. ‘White gold’ is how sharers in the network talk about breast milk, signalling their beliefs about its value. The book sets off to understand ‘how milk moves, what it does, and what we can learn from looking at it ethnographically’ (16).

Social networking sites have played a key role in bringing families together across distances and have made the practice of milk sharing more visible and more accessible. Nevertheless, Falls finds that the majority of both donors and recipients in the network are white, middle-class and, to her surprise, tend towards political conservatism. Many of the participants are practising Christians and/or members of the US military. Nevertheless, and according to Falls, the network in its practice achieves an assemblage of families across the political spectrum in a time of political division, when many feel like ‘strangers in their own land’ (Hochschild 2016). This is a fascinating example of stepping out of one’s bubble to encounter (an)other, though, as I reflect on below, the possibilities of political transformation seem limited.

The ethnographic material is analysed through a range of anthropological lenses including kinship, exchange, agency and infrastructure, and drawing on the interface between anthropology and art, and architecture in particular, Falls uses the concept of ‘free space’ to grasp the meaning of the emerging practice.

For me, the book achieved its goals of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Before encountering it, I had no knowledge of milk sharing as described in the book and my knowledge of peer-to-peer exchange was limited to things such as time banks, freecycling, and open-source computing. In this sense, this book is an ethnography that deserves to take a place in the growing literature on everyday activism and other ‘experimental forms of dissent’ (24) which have burgeoned since the financial crisis and which still largely focus on conventional politics and political struggles while ignoring gendered aspects of everyday life. What Falls’ ethnography brilliantly illustrates is what Nancy Fraser (1990, p.61) has described as ‘idioms’ of public life, the ways in which women participate in the public sphere, especially, as in the case of many of the women who are sharers, those women who choose to leave the workforce once a mother or those who never joined.

I was also arrested in my hetero-normative and formally lactating steps and forced to think about the many situations that might mean being a non-lactating mother, or a family, and to rethink the options available where women-mothers and/or men-fathers are committed to breast-feeding. In this respect, Falls’ ethnography is both a moving and a welcome discomfiting read. There is rich description of the many ways in which this ‘counternetwork of strange bedfellows’ (25), which includes families across the political spectrum and involves men as well, trades not only in milk but in mutual support and solidarity, something that often goes amiss in contemporary child-rearing and the current neoliberal moment in which all so-
cial movements, publics and counter-publics raise, those between ideology and participants’ lived experience. For those women-mothers who described themselves as ‘lactivists’ and who were committed to breast-feeding, I was convinced that the network offered an opportunity to practice their agency, to feel empowered, and to support like-minded women. Nevertheless, snippets of donees’ experiences suggest that within such a counter-network established ways of policing women’s bodies by other women are also possible and can be reproduced. For me, this raises key questions about the possibility of a feminist activism that, across the political spectrum, can challenge patriarchal notions of womanhood. It is interesting that Falls, who identifies herself as left-leaning, tells us that she avoided conversations about politics with her more conservative donors. The network is also largely middle-class and white. A critical afterword, further contextualising the network within contemporary US politics and debates in intersectional feminism would be a welcome addition to the book.

White Gold is relevant to those anthropologists and other social scientists interested in contemporary practices of exchange, child-rearing and parenting, but it is also likely to find sympathetic, curious and possibly hostile audiences with members of the network itself and the extended and more established communities promoting breast-feeding. The book would be of interest to the research community on maternal and child health as well as practitioners of women and infant care, especially in disrupting professional notions of ‘risk’ associated with milk sharing and encouraging them to think about and work with emergent community risk management strategies and tactics (there is an entire section on how risk is managed by members of the network). Policy-makers might profit from reading the ethnography and thinking about progressive protective policies that could be put in place to support breast milk sharers, to challenge its marketisation, and make milk sharing accessible for those who want it beyond the white middle-classes. This is an ethnography with the potential to generate public debate; as such, it also marks an excellent opportunity for engaged social science.

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**References**


