

provides an introduction to gender inequality in the economy; and Jin Yihong's chapter on urban new poverty. The statistics make for depressing reading though.

Overall, the quality of translation is good, although it could have done with more careful copy-editing. I would also have appreciated knowing the original date of publication for each paper. But these are minor quibbles. The book makes a very significant contribution to the social-science literature on China, and will be of interest to a range of scholars and students interested in gender, development, and contemporary China.

TAMARA JACKA  
[Tamara.jacka@anu.edu.au](mailto:Tamara.jacka@anu.edu.au)

*Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*

PETRUS LIU

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015

x + 244 pp. £17.99

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

Edited by ELISABETH L. ENGBRETSSEN and WILLIAM F. SCHROEDER, with HONGWEI BAO

Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2015

xiii + 274 pp. £19.99

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Bringing new critical perspectives to bear on contemporary queer China, the two books reviewed here adopt radically different – even opposing – approaches. Petrus Liu's *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* gives the unambiguous impression that its point of entry is a highly abstract theoretical premise: to bring Marxism and queer theory into dialogue. Rooted primarily in literary examples taken from Taiwan, Liu's book (con)sequentially carries this theoretical inquiry into an analysis of the cultural sphere. It is a book driven by a firm preoccupation with totality, teleology and ideological determinism. Moving in the opposite direction, the volume *Queer/Tongzhi China*, coedited by Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, William F. Schroeder and Hongwei Bao, takes as its point of departure the concrete experiences of political activism and everyday life. Based on this viewpoint "from below," the volume builds a more empirically grounded and pluralist account of what it means to study, experience, and expand the meaning of Chinese queerness in the digital age. It is a book animated first and foremost by the praxis of activism and social change.

Before I offer a critique of *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*, I want to clarify at the outset that this is a book that I very much wanted to love before reading it. Many of the objectives stated in the opening chapter, especially the part where Liu articulates the need to challenge the Western-centrism of queer studies, resonate with those of us who work on non-Western or transnational queer cultures. That is to say, some of the intellectual and political agendas behind the book are commendable, timely and important. Nonetheless, my primary concern with the book's framing is the ways in which it frequently sets up a false straw man in order to build a case for itself. The most obvious example is the antagonism between Marxism and queer studies. In North America, where Liu critiques, a Marxist approach has been foundational to the critical awareness of a non-essentialist and post-identitarian queer thinking

about politics, history and culture (think of the work of John D’Emilio, Lisa Duggan and Peter Drucker, among others). Some of the pressures that Liu puts on queer studies sound surprisingly familiar and even reminiscent of the problems that led many critics in the West to rethink the programmatic basis of lesbian and gay studies decades ago – a task that continues today as evident in the recent calls for queer anti-capitalism and critiques of homonormativity and homonationalism. Above all, it seems self-defeating that the strategy proposed by Liu to de-centre the West is to amalgamate two theoretical strands originated *from the West* and apply it *straight-forwardly* to Chinese texts and contexts. Maybe this strategy ensures that the book will sell to a theoretical savvy Anglophone readership? But then this demands, I believe, a Marxist critique of Liu’s own queer theory.

Even if we take at face value the kind of intervention that *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* claims to make, many of the book’s intellectual pillars simply fall apart and fail to lend weight to its central theoretical tenets. “People living with AIDS, transgendered individuals, non-monogamous gay people, drag queens, transsexuals, drug-users, prostitutes, and their clients” – these are the empty ghosts summoned by Liu that would otherwise help shed light on the provocative theoretical framework that he calls “queer Marxism” (p. 163). Unfortunately, the main protagonists in Liu’s study are not these outcasts dwelling on the sexual margins of China or Taiwan, but the privileged urban-based intellectuals, writers and artists who deploy a substantial measure of social leverage and cultural capital that ironically parodies – even betrays – the materialist notion of human moral equivalence that the book tries to champion unevenly. The focus on urban cultural networks is also ironic given that, for most of the 20th century, Chinese communism (whose connection to Marxism remains unclear in the book) amassed revolutionary popular support first and foremost in rural areas. In fact, the above quote is taken from the part of the book that this reviewer finds most compelling, in the last chapter where Liu reminds us about the queer illiberalism of Taiwan. Yet, the book title itself misleads any reader into anticipating an elucidation of how queerness and Marxism intersect with our understanding of that huge geographical space more commonly known as continental China. Prospective readers might be disappointed by the fact that the book devotes only ten pages to the work of one PRC-based artist, Cui Zi’en, and even here the materials brought to light are far from novel. The rest of the book is primarily concerned with cultural producers from Taiwan, belying the title’s suggestion that the object of systematic investigation is “Two Chinas.”

A related but more significant problem lies in what Liu states as his *prima facie* argument: “a unique local event has centrally shaped the development of Chinese queer thought: the 1949 division of China into the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC)” (p. 4). In insisting on the “Two Chinas” as a useful framework for comprehending not just Chinese queerness but also its very origins (e.g. chapter three), the bulk of Liu’s analysis focuses on texts that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s. This is of course not to deny the profound effects of the geopolitical division between the PRC and the ROC in an era of late capitalism and neoliberalism, but insofar as Liu aims to give an “origin story” of Chinese queerness (his chronology in and of itself is again not entirely new), this argument misses two important historical developments: (1) the diverse array of queer cultural expressions before the 1980s in both Taiwan and the mainland, and (2) the gradual dissolution of the “Two Chinas” as a pertinent actor’s category in the context of post-martial law Taiwan and reform-era China. In fact, when the two governments met in Hong Kong in 1992 to reach a consensus over the “one China” principle (but disagreeing on its possible interpretations), the relevant political stakes of Chineseness or Taiwanese-ness for queer articulation had already far exceeded the “Two Chinas”

formulation that would have been much more poignant in the 1950s and 1960s. This lack of historical consistency – and the intellectually flattening effect of “Two Chinas” – is also captured in the book’s decisive omission of Hong Kong, a region now part of the PRC but which has been identified by Sinophone studies scholars as a productive site for contesting normative paradigms of gender and sexuality and the hegemonic meanings of “China.” Replete with unsubstantiated claims (e.g. that Ang Lee’s film *The Wedding Banquet* is an adaptation of Chen Ruoxi’s novel *Paper Marriage*), *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*, as it turns out, is nothing more than an ideological book that tries to map an idiosyncratic version of Marxist theory onto queer China (or Taiwan?) with forced success at best.

In contrast, *Queer/Tongzhi China* brings us closer to the quotidian issues and concerns faced by queer researchers, activists and lay subjects as China becomes an important global player in the 21st century. The key strength of the volume comes from the diversity of essays and topics showcased. In the words of the co-editors, *pace* Liu’s study, “*Queer/Tongzhi China* does not advance one particular theory or one particular viewpoint and is in fact sometimes at odds with itself” (pp. 2–3). There are two major thematic threads that stitch the different elements of the book together elegantly. One thematic focus of the book concerns how digital media serve important bridges between activism and the social experience of gender and sexual minorities. The chapters by Stijn Deklerck and Xiaogang Wei, Hongwei Bao, Popo Fan, Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, and Qian Wang provide ample evidence for the ways in which digital media and technologies critically anchor the development of new queer subjectivities and cultural landscapes in the post-reform era. Through the fascinating stories documented in these chapters, we meet users of webcasts to trespass restraints typically imposed by physical borders, independent film directors such as Cuizi (aka Cui Zi’en) and his students who pioneered digital video activism, organizers and participants of underground queer film festivals, readers and critics of queer web literature, and artists and consumers of Chinese popular music. Whereas most sophisticated analyses of queer media culture tend to be imbued with high theory (and reasonably so), these chapters present an alternative transit point through which it is possible to feel the nerves and pulses of the *tongzhi* communities on the ground. A cautious reader might long for a more systematic interrogation of the global reach of media cultures as made possible by the conditions of neoliberalism.

The second thematic strand of the volume calls attention to the new perspectives on activism generated by scholarly/empirical research. The chapters by William Schroeder and Lucetta Kam, for instance, remind us of the urgency for researchers to confront their self-positioning in order to overcome unforeseen obstacles, whether in terms of linguistic translation, social expectation or cultural belonging. They show that only by coming clean with their role in “the field” is it possible for scholars to strike the most important intervention of their work – that queer scholarship itself always contributes to and can never be dissociated from the advancement of queer political interest. The chapters by Elisabeth Engebretsen, Ana Huang, Wei Wei and Xiaoxing Fu provide refreshing insights about queer community building, political organization and intersubjective transformations. Their rich ethnographies introduce us to grassroots activists who organized pride events in Beijing, Shanghai and Changsha, founders of the first HIV/AIDS intervention organization in Chengdu, the different yet evolving public sites for socializing among gay men in Shenyang from 1980 to 2010, and women who self-identify as *T* but show overlapping transgressions of gender and sexuality that defy either a strictly lesbian or transgender categorization. Although the book can be balanced by including more voices from queer women and transgender individuals, *Queer/Tongzhi China* is an exemplary collection

of essays that demonstrates the strengths of collaboration – research, activist, and otherwise – and sets the model of scholarly activism for years to come.

HOWARD CHIANG

[howard.chiang@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:howard.chiang@uwaterloo.ca)

*Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism*

KA-MING WU

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xiii + 187 pp. \$25.00

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What is the contemporary meaning of “folk culture” in one of the most iconic rural places in modern China? This is the overarching question Ka-ming Wu asks in her excellent short ethnography of villages in Yan’an district, Shaanxi province, based on fieldwork conducted primarily in 2004 and 2008. She examines three arenas of “folk culture”: paper cuts, storytelling and spirit cults.

Yan’an, of course, was the revolutionary base area of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), where Edgar Snow interviewed Mao Zedong for *Red Star Over China*, and where Mao gave his famous 1942 lecture “Talks at the Yenan [Yan’an] Forum on Literature and Art” which set the agenda for cultural production to “serve the people” under the Party vanguard. In her introduction, Ka-ming Wu outlines this history, telling more about how during the Mao years Yan’an was represented as a utopian place and as a “revolutionary mecca.” She argues that now, “folk culture in Yan’an has shifted from a site of state control in Mao’s period to a site of contest in the late socialist period” (pp. 4–5). This “folk culture,” of what she calls the “hyper-folk” (inspired by Baudrillard’s “hyperreality”) – a representation detached from reality – is manipulated by the Party-state, tourism companies, urban intellectuals, foreign foundations and of course, villagers themselves. Curiously, in her introduction, Wu does not discuss the film *Yellow Earth*, released four decades after Mao’s Yan’an talks. Director Chen Kaige and cinematographer Zhang Yimou shocked the film world with their beautiful and poignant film set in Yan’an, which depicts villagers as living a poor, brutal life stuck in patriarchal tradition. The film raised much controversy not only for its style, but also for its intimacy that the CCP has failed the peasants, leading to the film being banned. Discussing the film would have allowed Wu to set up a tension between representations of Yan’an as a utopian or dystopian “folk” place.

Teachers of undergraduates might have students skip the introduction and jump right into the engaging ethnographic chapters. In chapter one, “Paper cuts in modern China,” Wu provides some of the history from the introduction in more specific detail. She tells how paper cuts, once used for ritual purposes – healing or bringing fertility or good fortune – were appropriated by the CCP for propaganda purposes. She then tells how, in the current “late socialist period,” few people are making paper cuts any more. Thus, urban intellectuals from Beijing, concerned that the folk tradition will die out, start training women to work in a small paper cutting factories to sell paper cuts to tourists.

My favorite chapter is the second one, where Wu discusses how intellectuals from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing decided to try to list a Yan’an village as a UNESCO world heritage site. However, since they were having difficulties finding a