

Book Review

Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China

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Hongwei Bao's monograph, *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China* is a timely book as issues of gender and sexuality are at a particular critical moment in China. Bao is an established scholar in the field of critical theory and cultural studies and *Queer Comrades* demonstrates his highly sophisticated theoretical innovation, while at the same time, remaining accessible for a wide readership. I particularly liked the title of the book 'Queer Comrades': it captures the shifting nature of identities and emphasises a complex process of identification, addressing the continuities as well as the transformations in the formation of gay men's subjectivities in modern China. This emphasis on continuities serves as a critical lens to engage with key analytical boundaries in relation to different historical periods. In Bao's conceptualisation, gay identity and queer politics in China can be best understood through a discourse of the 'queer comrades', which is situated within the context of China's shifting social, economic and political ideologies. As Bao maintains:

If China's postsocialism is characterised by the synchronic non-contemporaneity of different modes of economic, political and ideological legitimacy, and cultural production, the term 'queer comrades' can be seen as an articulation of forms of subjectivities, power, governmentality and social imaginaries produced in this shift' (p. 4)

Queer Comrades brings together cultural studies and modern Chinese history to make sense of gay identities. As Bao states:

'I refuse to Orientalize and compartmentalize Chinese queer studies, but I also appreciate the careful historicization and contextualization of queer subjectivities and cultures by many Chinese queer studies scholars, which serves as a necessary caution against some universalizing claims and tendencies in queer studies in general.' (p.31)

Navigating through key theoretical paradigms, including queer theory, neoliberalism, Marxism and queer Marxism, Bao develops his own theoretical framework. In particular, the book engages critically with key studies in the field of Queer Marxism and situates the contribution of the experience in the People's Republic of China in the literature, alongside other literatures in the field, from Lisa Rofel's *Desiring China* (2007), Petrus Liu's *Chinese Queer Marxism* (2007), to Howard Chiang's discussion on 'self- or re-Orientalisation' (2014). The importance of the book is in its theorisation of 'queer comrades' as an analytical framework that enables us to examine subject, power,

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governmentality, social movement and everyday life in today's China with more intellectual precision, and cultural specificity (given China's modern history).

Bao identifies himself in the book as a 'tour guide' who guides us through a journey into queer China. I especially enjoyed Chapter 2 as I remember reading the chapter on a Saturday afternoon, sitting in a café, enjoying the once-a-year 'heat wave' in England whilst learning about the spatial stratification between the cosmopolitan translational gay scene and Lailai dancing hall as a predominantly working class gay space in cosmopolitan Shanghai. This chapter addresses how queer people identify themselves with different terms, including 'gay', *tongxinglian* and *tongzhi*, in relation to transnational capitalism, the state and local governance in China. What is of significance in this chapter is the identification of different types of sexual subjectivities read through the theoretical lens of queer space, which then go on to unravel the different forces shaping queer subjectivities. Importantly, Bao highlights how class or class identification serves to make sense of queer space in Shanghai. As he states:

many queer interviewees identified Starbucks cafes as popular meeting places, in part because, as one explained, cafes and bars have a 'petit bourgeois ambience' (xiaozi qingdiao). (p. 43)

Equally of importance, Bao underlines the flexibility of identifications within the identities as 'gay', 'tongzhi', '*tongxinglian*', which are always 'multiple, fluid and contingent... they are never fixed or singular' (p. 61). While demonstrating the proliferation of individualities, Bao critically engages with the concept of 'cosmopolitanism', maintaining that 'people from different social backgrounds may imagine cosmopolitanism in divergent ways' (p. 40).

I particularly appreciated the way that Bao analyses his data in a culturally reflexive way. For example, in one section where he analyses the expression of *wō shì gay*, 'I am gay' in Chinese (p. 52), Bao notes, 'most of the people I met in the event organized by Shanghai LGBT groups and at these commercial gay bars identified themselves as 'gay' – as in the frequently-used phrase *wō shì gay* (I am gay). The English word is not often translated into Chinese even in a conversation in Chinese. It does not need to be. It both embraces a transnational and cosmopolitan identity and manifests a classical Chinese aesthetics of *hanxu* (implicitness or reticence), that is, one does not need to articulate it clearly'. His analysis follows this. In this example, Bao demonstrates a more nuanced interpretation of what seems to be a common-sense expression from a Western perspective. Readers can find similar nuanced analysis throughout the text.

Another striking chapter is chapter 4, which is a powerful but disturbing chapter on the diaries of Chinese gay men receiving conversion therapy, concerning how homosexual desire was rejected through shocking medical practices. In this chapter, Bao investigates the different layers of governmentality in the formation of human subjectivities, drawing upon Foucault's notion of 'technologies of the self' with a focus on 'becoming' that involves sophisticated life/artwork that one makes and remakes gay subjectivities. The chapter highlights the role of affect in the process of subject formation and transformation.

Last, but not least, one of the strengths in Bao's book is that he does not shy away from political and human rights issues. The book demonstrates his continuing commitment to engaging with LGBT communities and issues through his rich and detailed empirical data, as well as his nuanced analytical approach. Overall, I consider *Queer Comrades* will become one of the key texts in the field of Queer Studies.

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