

## Book Review

### Inside the Circle: Queer Culture and Activism in Northwest China

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In Casey James Miller's twelve years of ethnographic fieldwork on queer culture and activism in Xi'an, China, a central question persists: What does it mean to be queer in northwest China? Departing from a Western teleological narrative of queerness, which often assumes antinormativity, Miller's book, *Inside the Circle: Queer Culture and Activism in Northwest China*, scrutinises a Chinese queer theory that elucidates the 'productive dialectic' (p. 13) with seemingly binary sets of queer experiences, such as local and global, East and West, sameness and difference. Coined from the colloquial term referencing one's queer identity and an imagined queer community, 'the circle' (*quanzi*) contextualises Chinese queer notions of personhood through active political engagement and a commitment to moral obligations. The concept of the circle explores practices of queer sexualities beyond the Western understanding of the individualistic self, emphasising collectivism and relationality shaped by Confucian ideals of filial piety and the ethical value of self-sacrifice. Miller's rich ethnography offers a thick description of how queer northwest Chinese activists cope with the challenges presented by China's complicated political landscape. Readers will find compelling stories of queer Chinese experiences introducing every chapter of the book; these intimate accounts reinforce the understanding of queerness as a locally grounded and relational phenomenon deeply embedded in specific contexts, while also facilitating a global imagination of transnational queer solidarity.

The first half of the book explores the cultural practices employed by queer people in northwest China to reconcile their queer identity with their moral responsibilities as sons and daughters, revealing the enduring presence of traditional Chinese notions of romance, marriage, and family despite China's significant economic and cultural transformations since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The second half of the book examines the moral dilemmas and ethical decisions confronted by Chinese queer activists as they strive to pursue their activist objectives while avoiding unwanted state interference. Miller meticulously scrutinises the trajectory of Tong'ai and UNITE from 2007 to 2011, two grassroots NGOs serving gay and lesbian communities in Xi'an. It sheds light on the interpersonal dynamics of queer activists as they navigate changing political landscape in China and engage with global health initiatives, the state, and each other.

One central theme of the book is to reject a universalistic queer theory centred on Western historical values and cultural assumptions. In the introduction, Miller argues for a 'cultural or relativistic' queer theory (p. 4) that

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acknowledges the transcultural and theoretical contributions of Chinese queer scholarship. In other words, he cautions against imposing Western notions of queerness or perpetuating 'Chinese exceptionalism' (p. 13) when evaluating queer activism in northwest China. Instead, Miller advocates for a more nuanced contextualisation of the 'unique queer sex/gender system' in northwest China (p. 21) to decentre Western-centric perspectives, capturing northwest Chinese queer peoples' lived experiences that reflect 'neither a complete continuation nor a total rupture with traditional Chinese attitudes toward gender and sexuality' (p. 44). Throughout the book, Miller theorises the flexibility and relationality of 'the circle' to illustrate queerness as a profoundly local, relational, and transnational phenomenon (p. 12), resonating not only within northwest Chinese queer culture but also among a 'broader "imagined community"' spanning the Chinese diaspora and beyond (p. 6).

The concept of the circle challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about the relationship between queerness and antinormativity (p. 13). The continual need for queer critiques of normativity in Western queer studies overlooks queerness as inherently complex and contradictory. In Chapter 2, Miller demonstrates how the circle functions as one of the fundamental structures of the queer sex/gender system. Loosely defined as 'a group of people who share a common defining characteristic or interest' (p. 26), the circle extends beyond Chinese gays or lesbians. But also exhibits exclusionary tendencies by excluding non-heterosexual people and queers who lack access through other queers' introductions. The contradictory nature of the circle allows for a more intricate examination of its flexible, relational, and transitory characteristics. Apart from the circle, Miller explores local queer linguistic terminologies to demonstrate that while queer northwest Chinese individuals embrace a broad spectrum of gender and sexualities that defy the antinormative nature of queerness, they contradictorily conform to binary notions of gender differences and exhibit misogynistic behaviours towards femininity.

Queer cultures in northwest China embrace complexity and contradiction, defying a binary understanding of queerness and normativity. Chapter 3 provides a vivid example, as Miller conducts a thorough analysis of contract marriage (*xinghun*), an increasingly popular queer kinship practice among gay men. This practice allows individuals to uphold moral duties to their parents while minimising harm to heterosexual women. The contradiction between desiring queer experiences of love and fulfilling their love towards their parents through enduring cultural norms and expectations around marriage and reproduction fosters new queer kinships, while still honouring the moral imperatives of filial piety. It is important to note that the normative priorities informed by filial piety should not be dismissed as examples of homonormativity but rather as strategies to challenge traditional notions and practices of marriage and family. Readers are encouraged to read this chapter alongside Elizabeth Engebresten's *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (2014), as her work illuminates the desires of Beijing lesbian women (*lalas*) for sexual normativities to attain societal respectability and be perceived as good citizens. This offers a valuable complement to Miller's predominant focus on queer men, facilitating a regional comparison between northwest and northeast China regarding their queer management of family pressures related to marriage.

Unlike Engebresten's focus on the social dimensions of *lalas* being perceived as good citizens, Miller delves into the political dynamics of Tong'ai, a government-funded gay HIV/AIDS organization in northwest China. He portrays queer activists' adherence to the image of 'good citizens' (p. 93) as continuous navigation of their precarious position at the margins of state and society. This addresses the second theme of the book, challenging the notion that queer activists in postsocialist China are 'inauthentic' because they tend to collaborate rather than confront the state (p. 10). Chapters 4 and 5 complicate the authoritarian control of the Chinese state by analysing the strategies employed by two grassroots queer NGOs in northwest China to advance their social, cultural, and political agendas. Operating in the legal 'gray zone' (p. 74) as unregistered community-based queer organisations allows queer activists to maintain some independence and create space for counter-hegemonic practices. Despite the 'decidedly unequal' (p. 84) relations between activists and the government, Miller argues that the state relies on queer activist groups like Tong'ai to carry out practical policies and programmes due to their proximity to high-risk communities. The intricate power dynamics between queer activism and the government offer an alternative cultural understanding of civil society, one that is formed through the intersection between the state and society. In the fifth chapter, the author further complicates the tensions between the state and queer activism by introducing the influences of global health initiatives that provide international funding for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. While such global resources professionalise grassroots NGOs, they also turn organisations like Tong'ai from volunteer-based to service enterprises, further alienating themselves from the queer community they aim to serve.

A third theme of the book argues for transcending the theoretical understanding of non-Western queerness beyond the binary perspective of sameness and difference. Instead, Miller proposes 'simultaneity and coincidence' (p. 133) as crucial frameworks within the concept of the circle to deconstruct the binary opposites of East-West and local-global. Chapter 6 situates Chinese queer activists' creative involvement in transnational queer flows to imagine new forms of transnational queer solidarity. For instance, strategic displays of the rainbow flag, often unfamiliar outside of the queer community, facilitate a 'queer politics of semivisibility' (p. 141), effectively transforming semi-public spaces into queer spaces. This strategy enables queer activists to engage in local and

global queer activism simultaneously while minimising the risk of attracting state interference, enacting a sense of belonging within an imagined global queer community that empowers them rather than isolation.

*Inside the Circle* explores various facets of queerness in northwest China through the concept of the circle. While Miller offers rich ethnographic insights into queer identity and activism in northwest China, his discussions on complexity and contradiction occasionally remain overly generalised and descriptive, leaving room for further exploration of how complexity and contradictions work strategically and theoretically in navigating binary oppositions related to gender and sexuality. Specifically, how do complexity and contradiction inform theoretical frameworks and practical strategies for conceptualising non-Western queerness? How do contradictions between normativity and queerness mobilise new approaches to queer identity and culture?

Readers can also benefit from Miller's more extensive exploration of regional geopolitics within China. At the beginning of the book, he astutely highlights how the selection of northwest China as his field site was influenced by the perspectives of his queer interlocutors in Xi'an. As a northwest Chinese city, Xi'an is often perceived as 'culturally and socially "backward" and "traditional"' (p. 5) in contrast to eastern China, where most queer Chinese scholarship has taken place. This minor ethnographic detail prompts inquiry into how inter-regional connections and influences across different parts of China, particularly with 'progressive' queer activists in eastern China, may have impacted the knowledge production about queer personhood and activism in northwest China. Studying how queer activists in northwest China may have been influenced by queer activism in other regions of China to adapt and improve their strategies with the state can avoid situating northwest China as completely isolated from the broader national context. Analysing how regional hierarchies within China might have shaped the concept of the circle adds complexity to the dichotomy of Western and non-Western queerness, enhancing our understanding of queer identities and movements across the nuanced cultural and geopolitical contexts in China.

Moreover, Miller's insightful analysis of the unequal yet mutually interdependent relationship between the Chinese state and queer activist groups operating in the legal 'gray zone' warrants further examination beyond queer men organisations centred on HIV/AIDS programmes and agenda. Comparative analysis, such as assessing whether this predominantly unequal yet interdependent relationship is similarly observed between the Chinese government and the queer woman activist group UNITE, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender differences may contribute to the different strategies employed by queer men and women activist groups in navigating state surveillance and pursuing their social or political agendas.

Although the queer stories at the beginning of each chapter introduce valuable contexts and themes the author attempts to address, readers are sometimes left wishing the author would linger and move us through his analysis of the stories. Returning to these stories throughout the chapters would help readers consolidate the author's arguments within the context of vivid details offered. Nevertheless, Miller's strength in storytelling captivates readers, immersing them deeply in the experiences of his interlocutors in love, marriage, family, and activism.

*Inside the Circle* is a timely and accessible ethnographic study of the emerging queer community and activism in northwest China. In capturing the multifaceted life stories of gay and lesbian activists in postsocialist China, the book makes a valuable contribution, revealing the moral landscape of northwest China that challenges a postsocialist turn toward individualism and privatisation of marriage and family. What is queer in northwest China, after all, is intricately woven with filial obligations to both family and the state.

## REFERENCES

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