

Book Review

Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific

Chloe Yap Wen Ting ^{1*}

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Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific starts off with the deceptively simple premise of reorienting the way transness is understood beyond purely Western notions of transgender, but unfolds as a monumental and engaging work that challenges our historical understandings of gender and sexual variance. Following their award-winning monograph *After Eunuchs: Science, medicine, and the transformation of sex in modern China* (Chiang, 2018), Howard Chiang's latest work continues to bridge and set new benchmarks in the areas of transgender studies and Sinophone studies, and is an innovative and timely contribution to scholarly understandings of transness, queerness, and Chinese cultural history.

In *Transtopia*, Chiang proposes a new paradigm of queering history with geopolitics as its central analytical lens. In demonstrating the usefulness of such an approach 'to unpack the uneven history of LGBTQ experience around the world, especially when accounting for those communities that seemingly share a common "Chinese" linguistic or cultural descent' (p. 3), Chiang combs through archives, press reports, films, and records to offer detailed insights into sex transformation, queer inhumanity, cinematic castration, and civic change against the backdrop of the Sinophone Pacific that brings into focus cross-cultural politics in anti-transphobic inquiry.

Divided into two parts, Part 1 ("Two Manifestos") consists of two chapters that outline a postidentitarian approach that destabilises gay/lesbian and transgender subjectivities while also denaturalising both China-centrism and Western-centrism in queer theory and history. In Part 2 ("Three Methods"), readers witness these ideas in action through three methods – titrating, inscribing, and creolising – across three chapters which illustrate the uneven, non-hierarchical spectrum of transness across time and space. In the opening chapter, Chiang introduces 'transtopia' as a neologism that challenges a minoritarian view of transgender identity and queers transness by acknowledging the 'different scales of gender transgression that are not always recognisable through the Western notion of transgender' (p. 5). Conceived as the antidote to transphobia, transtopia historicises gender mutability across time and space to reframe transness 'in terms of a continuum model that accredits the diversity of queer experience, and situates the pertinence of this new vocabulary in relation to the practice of critical history' (p. 5). A transtopian approach to trans histories and narratives is thus less concerned with who qualifies as transgender, but instead shifts the focus to how people relate to one another through the notion of transgender.

Besides engaging with transgender history, the second major theme of the book involves moving away from 'China' towards the Sinophone as its site of articulation. Defined as 'a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenising and localising of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries' (Shih, 2007, p. 4), the concept

¹ PhD Researcher at Monash University Malaysia, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding Author: Chloe.Yap@monash.edu

of the Sinophone emphasises the historically embedded and politically contested relationship between Sinophone communities and mainland China, mirroring the troubled relationships between Anglophone societies and England, Hispanophone societies and Spain, or Francophone societies with France. The book further explores the productive tensions between queer theory and Sinophone studies ‘as a coproduced vector through which to double question its own essentialism, defined around any geocultural and temporal unit’ (p. 93) in a compelling and comprehensive manifesto presented in Chapter 2 that considers queer indigeneity, postcolonial theory, and sound studies in relation to the Sinosphere.

One of the notable strengths of this book is its interdisciplinary approach in engaging transgender studies and queer Sinophone studies with area studies and medical humanities. For example, Chapter 1 covers the historical episodes of the ‘global Christines’ in the 1950s, following the media interest surrounding American transsexual icon Christine Jorgensen whereby Japan, Taiwan and Mexico also claimed their own ‘Christines’ who had ‘successfully’ undergone sex reassignment surgeries. Rather than framing any single event as the ‘yardstick’ or norm through which transness is produced or understood, Chiang situates their experiences along a transtopian continuum as inter-related but non-hierarchical. Chapter 3 provides a historiographical analysis of *renyao* (人妖, human prodigy) that maps ‘the fluidity of transness (transtopian continuum) onto the volatility of Chineseness (Sinophone historicism)’ (p. 98) through deep archival work, revealing evolving manifestations and representations of *renyao* from the late Qing period in mainland China to the Cold War era in Taiwan. Chapter 4 looks at the Chinese castrated body in Sinophone cinema as a productive site of Sinophone theorisation, addressing Sinophone studies’ oft critiqued ‘tendency to reify language- centrism at the exclusion of thinking in terms of embodiment or styles and its limited attention to mediation or mediality’ (p. 137) by exploring the entangled meanings of Sinophone eunuchism via ‘intercorporeal governance’ (p. 138). And finally, Chapter 5 traces the asymmetrical trajectories of transgender and queer activism in Hong Kong and Taiwan to showcase the contrasting effects of transgender as a category in relation to queer citizenship, exemplifying the ways in which ‘Sinophone communities such as Hong Kong and Taiwan articulate a vision of sexual politics that is grounded in both a demand of pluralist recognition and a shared legal “difference/distance” from mainland China’ (p. 206).

Taking the above examples together, this book undertakes several theoretical and methodological interventions that significantly contribute to studies of queerness, transness, and Chineseness. Transtopia as an antidote approach against transphobia deconstructs the cisgender-transgender divide and effectively ‘queers’ the borders of transness by charting transgender expressions and politics on a historical continuum. Moreover, even while the book highlights the necessity of debunking Western models of queerness, transtopia offers a vibrant conceptual framework that can be adopted by Western trans scholars to counter ongoing critiques of transgender studies, such as ‘trans studies is over’ (p. 208). Yet, with the rise of PRC imperialism in the twenty-first century, it is equally important to resist romanticising China and the non-West in an ‘us vs. them mentality’ (p. 74) but instead recognise the heterogeneity of queer and Chinese experiences, as shown in other recent works on queer Sinophone communities and contemporary queer Chinese identities such as John Wei’s *Queer Chinese cultures and mobilities: Kinship, migration, and middle classes* (Wei, 2020) and Hongwei Bao’s *Queer comrades: Gay identity and Tongzhi activism in postsocialist China* (Bao, 2018).

Overall, the bold propositions and innovative methods presented in *Transtopia* will expand existing dialogues and debates regarding trans experiences and histories in Sinitic-language societies worldwide. However, one obvious, albeit minor shortcoming is the lack of attention given to Sinophone societies outside the ‘Greater China’ framework encompassing mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. For example, a closer look into the colourful histories, cultures, and influences that make up Southeast Asian Sinophone communities such as those in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, or Vietnam would likely yield important insights into the ways in which politics of gender and sexuality and politics of Chineseness are mutually imbricated. Nonetheless, this book is certainly an important text that will no doubt facilitate further interest in ‘minor-to-minor relations’ (p. 82) and encourage others to address these gaps, and will certainly appeal to scholars and students of gender and sexuality, queer Asian studies, and critical Chinese studies.

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