



Queer comrades: gay identity and tongzhi activism in postsocialist China

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BOOK REVIEW

Queer comrades: gay identity and tongzhi activism in postsocialist China, by Hongwei Bao, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2018, 277 pp., £22.50 (paperback)

In *Queer Comrades*, Hongwei Bao analyses “how the socialist ‘comrade’ has become a foundation of, and a catalyst for, the postsocialist queer subject” (p. 5) through the lens of gay identity and queer activism in contemporary China. This ambitious project stretches across disciplines and theoretical genealogies. Bao’s primary data comes from two years (2007 to 2009) of ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, but he also includes etymological and literary analyses of important queer Chinese terminology, a close reading of gay conversion-therapy diaries, and an examination of the *opus* of queer filmmaker Cui Zi’en.

Set in China’s neoliberal recent present, Bao argues that “by drawing strategically on identity formation and experiences of grassroots and longings for a more egalitarian society, queer people in China today have begun to construct a radical response to the actions of a repressive state and the neoliberal capitalist vision it now promotes” (p. 4). That is done, however, not through the transnational queer movement (which is itself difficult to define), but by drawing on China’s socialist history. Before he can make this point, however, Bao first turns to the archeological task of defining his critical term: *tongzhi*.

The *tongzhi* sexual subjectivity that is the foundation on which Bao builds his argument is but one way for queer people to self-identify. Bao traces the historical evolution of the term in the pre-Republican era to its heyday in Maoist China, where it took on the meaning of “comrade”. In the subsequent postsocialist period, the term was appropriated and redefined by queer activists in Hong Kong to “articulate a postcolonial and Sinophone queer politics” (p. 65). Since its adoption in mainland China, the term has referenced a “homonormative identity politics influenced by China’s neoliberalism” (p. 65). Bao provides further context by contrasting *tongzhi* with *tongxinglian* (a largely passé term meaning “homosexual” that has heavy legal and medical connotations), *ku’er* (a translation for “queer” that has found significant purchase in academia) and “gay” (an untranslated sexual subjectivity that connotes an affinity with the globalised queer community and associations with expatriates in China’s biggest cities). Many of the people who inhabit the *tongzhi* sexual subjectivity differentiate themselves from other queer subjects by their high *suzhi* (“quality”), a discourse that has been mobilised by the government in post-Mao China. They are “socially responsible citizens … [and] the only difference between *tongzhi* and straight people is their sexual orientation” (p. 54). *Suzhi* comes back in Bao’s final chapter when *tongzhi* make the claim that they are *renmin* (“the people”) and should not be discriminated against by police for their sexual orientation.

Chapters 5 and 6 start to incorporate Bao’s background in film studies. In his analysis of filmmaker Cui Zi’en, Bao addresses the question of whether Cui’s move from fictional to documentary films was a rupture in his radical queer politics. He concludes that, in fact, the use of *tongzhi* in Cui’s documentaries is a conscious effort to resignify *tongzhi*, to strip it of its heteronormativity, and to instead call forth “a radical political subjectivity and queer politics … through a collective identity of *tongzhi*” (p. 146). Chapter 6 highlights the struggles of queer filmmakers to truly reach “the people” as they travel around China with a roving film festival.

My one critique of this book is that Bao does not define “activism”, but associates each chapter and its corresponding cast of characters with activism. I suspect that this is a conscious decision by Bao, and one that echoes the very polysemic nature of many of the other terms he uses throughout the book (*tongzhi* primarily among them). Unlike these other terms that he clearly explains as being fluid and open-ended, however, he does not provide a similar clarification for “activism”. I believe that had such a brief note and broad definition been provided, there would have been a stronger link between chapters. With such wide-ranging topics as gay conversion therapy, a portrait of a radical queer filmmaker, and an ethnographic analysis of film screenings, specifying how these things relate to queer activism and, thus, relate to each other, would have helped.

Bao’s book is an engaging and accessible read. In a refreshing break from other academic scholarship, Bao does his best to avoid jargon and defines it when it does appear. I presume that Bao, who admits that his book and larger academic project is a reflection of his own experience in and desire for a radical queer politics in China, may have done this with his own politics in mind. Like Cui and the filmmakers who bring their work “to the people”, Bao is engaging with readers outside of Chinese studies, queer studies and anthropology. For this reason, I would recommend *Queer Comrades* for undergraduate or graduate courses on contemporary China or queer studies.

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