

## Book Review

# Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance

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Offering in-depth analyses of a wide range of queer performance in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the post-Mao era, *Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance* is an excellent project of queer theatre and performance in the contemporary PRC context. This interdisciplinary research makes a prominent contribution to the existing literature on LGBTQ identities and communities through the lens of performance culture. Ranging from theatre, performance art, music, photography, and digital media to social activism, the dynamic interplay between cultural texts and practices is closely examined to unravel the pivotal role played by performance in shaping contemporary queer public culture in China and the Chinese diaspora.

In the book, Bao skilfully weaves together ethnography, interviews, and textual and discourse analysis to investigate the complexity of queerness and Chineseness. The analytical focus on body, space and practice enables a more nuanced understanding of queerness in relation to its materiality, sociality and emotional reflexivity. Equally of importance, the book brings to light the contingent and fragmented nature of Chineseness. Bao also develops a critical discussion of how Chinese queer performance is politically significant and globally meaningful. In so doing, the book critically reflects on the Western-centric narratives of China as the authoritarian and homogeneous Other in contemporary geopolitics.

The book includes seven chapters that are divided into three parts. Bao invites readers to navigate through the changing historical and social contexts where queer art and activism have emerged. Part I discusses two historical texts in post-Mao and post-socialist China, a particular historical time marked by China's participation in global neoliberal capitalism and hybrid queer subculture. The analysis reveals how photographic and cinematic representations are intertwined with and constitutive of the shifting cultural discourse and mainstream politics. The first chapter explores Chinese queer artist Ren Hang's photography as a form of performance. Drawing on the Daoist notion of *ziran* and the Deleuzian conceptualisation of body and affect, Bao contends that Ren's photography conveys the artist's subversion of normative perceptions of human subjectivity and gender identity. Featuring the entanglements between human and nonhuman bodies in the rapidly changing urban spaces, Ren's photography communicates a queer way of life that is both fragile and transgressive.

Chapter 2 looks at *Coming Out* and *Lan Yu*, two queer films from the GDR and China respectively. While *Coming Out* portrays homosexuality as an intrinsic part of socialist beliefs, *Lan Yu* suggests that queer identities can be a self-rediscovered process energised by socialist longings. Nonetheless, Bao argues that their shared theme of 'coming out of the closet' should be viewed as a political act with (trans)national and historical significance in the

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post-Cold War world order. Furthermore, the two queer films allow for an alternative imagination of queer resistance in contemporary neoliberal hegemony.

Part II shifts attention to queer activism, bringing out issues that have long been downplayed in the accounts of LGBTQ politics across many parts of the world. The two chapters examine how cultural events, performing arts and digital media serve to empower minority groups and strengthen community solidarity in the Chinese political context. These activities also effectively enhance public understanding of queer culture considering intense social discrimination against sexual minorities. As Bao emphasises, the 'soft' style of activism creates culturally specific queer politics in China, which potentially goes beyond the dominant framework of queer activism represented by LGBTQ Prides. Since the confrontational type of political engagement runs the risk of state intervention, local communities creatively come up with diverse social and cultural strategies to circumvent government censorship. In Chapter 3, Bao presents a case study of the Beijing Queer Chorus (BQC) to illustrate how music and sound can become a powerful impetus for social movements and community building. As the first major LGBTQ choir that performed publicly in China, BQC chooses to engage with queer issues through a gentle approach. For instance, BQC often holds concerts that address issues specific to queer people, and frequently organises choir rehearsals to provide a reliable space where queer identities can be expressed openly. In addition, the social impact of BQC is enhanced through the choir members' enthusiastic and strategic digital labour. Specifically, BQC makes effective use of varied social media platforms for video streaming and interaction with audience. Despite the seemingly apolitical nature, their activities serve as an important means of public engagement based on what he terms 'queer audibility'. As Bao argues, queer audibility contributes to challenging negative representations of minority groups by voicing their real-life experiences, and therefore the political potential of music and sound should not be overlooked.

Such practices of 'transmediality' become even more evident in Bao's discussion of queer filmmaker and activist Fan Popo in Chapter 4. Through documenting theatrical performance and disseminating the completed film, Fan articulates his own understanding of identity, feminism and queer rights. For example, Fan was one of the directors of *New Beijing, New Marriage*, a film documenting a same-sex 'wedding' event in 2009. The documentary showcases how the passers-by react to same-sex marriage and homosexuality, and raised heated debates on the Internet. Despite the event's lack of 'authenticity', in that it was performed by gay and lesbian volunteers, it was recognised as a landmark event in the history of China's queer movement. Indeed, the process of documentary filmmaking offers important insights into how local forms of queerness can be empowering and effective without subscribing to a 'global queering' discourse. Fan's most famous work 'family trilogy' takes a similar approach to rethinking intergenerational understanding between queer people and their families. Overall, what distinguishes Fan's queer activism is the innovative use of 'theatre-documentary-media-activism assemblage' (p. 79), which speaks to the contingent, flexible and culturally sensitive feature of queer politics in contemporary China.

Part III is of relevance to the increasingly transnational and transcultural contour of contemporary queer performance. Bao further captures the political significance of performance in a globalised world filled with new patterns of risk and uncertainty. Chapter 5 looks at the cultural translation of European avant-garde theatre and Western queer culture through the case of *East Palace, West Palace*, a gay explicit play performed in Beijing in 2005 and 2009. The play was based on a theatre script co-created by the late writer Wang Xiaobo and filmmaker Zhang Yuan and directed by a French theatre director. In this sense, the play allows for a destabilisation of fixed categories such as the global and the local, the modern and the traditional, as well as the progressive and the authentic. Bao considers the theatrical production of the play as a transcultural process during which the meaning of queerness can be reconstructed into different shapes. Another example of transnationalism and transculturality in theatrical production is Bao's critical examination of *About My Parents and Their Child*, a form of postdramatic theatre portraying parent-child relationships and intergenerational (mis)understanding. Drawing on interviews with the production team as well as textual analysis of the play, Bao explores how queer public sphere can be constructed through the techniques of intermediality and transmediality; by assembling a multiplicity of perspectives, narratives and media platforms, the play serves to trigger critical reflections on sensitive social issues. Meanwhile, the non-linear, fragmented and open-ended style of storytelling mirrors the unorganised nature of mundane life. Bao notes that *About My Parents and Their Child* articulates the complexity of social relations from diverse perspectives, thus challenging communicative hierarchies and hegemonic power relations. In this sense, the play also queers conventional and normalised understandings of parent-child relationship in transitioning China.

In the last Chapter, Bao shifts his focus to queer performance in transnational and diasporic contexts. Looking at three digital artworks created by Europe-based artists, the chapter demonstrates how food and culinary practices are creatively used to reflect on cultural differences and anti-Asian racism under the COVID-19 pandemic. While food has long been a particularly relevant topic among East and Southeast Asian communities, 'eating bats' and 'Chinese' culinary practices have been stigmatised in western popular discourse. Having discussed the political potential of 'soft activism' in previous chapters, Bao addresses the growing importance of applying similar types of activism to engage with the public using the digital format. Artworks and performances on the digital platform

can generate social and political impact just as the traditional formats, albeit requiring innovation and adaption. Furthermore, Bao argues for more attention paid to the critical role played by food and taste to articulate hybrid cultural identities in pandemic politics. In an era of political polarisation and rising nationalism, artistic exploration of culinary practices can act as culturally sensitive tools to enhance international communication and conduct queer activism.

Many of the cases presented in *Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance* are compelling. Bao's analyses capture the creativity, enthusiasm and tenacity of queer artists and communities under ongoing social pressure. The author makes a cutting-edge and critical contribution to studies of Chinese queer culture through the lens of 'soft activism'. For me, the powerful influence of cultural and social activities expands readers' understanding of the confrontational type of queer politics across many Western contexts. The performative forms of queer activism are effective and empowering by attending to cultural and social specificities of contemporary China; they also construct a non-heteronormative, and sometimes even non-anthropocentric, space for both queer and queer-friendly people. Meanwhile, Bao challenges fixed categories such as identity, avant-garde theatre and cultural belonging through the conceptual focus on transnationalism, transculturality and transmediality. For me, another strength of the book is its meticulous attention paid to a range of performances produced by Chinese queer artists and activists, some of which have received limited publicity due to strict government censorship. It would be good to see more discussion on queer performance and activism beyond the urban context, potentially in relation to the rural-urban division and regional diversity. Moreover, generational differences in terms of both art production and audience reception could be brought into future research to generate a broader understanding of contemporary queer performance. Overall, this book provides a detailed explanation of the historical context and political environment where contemporary queer performance was comprehended and practised. The book will appeal to a wide interdisciplinary audience, including students and scholars in queer studies, China studies, media and cultural studies and performance studies.

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