

Book Review

Queer Chinese Cultures: Kinship, Migration, and Middle Classes

Wen Liu ^{1*}

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Central to the themes of belonging and mobility, *Queer Chinese Cultures* asks two critical questions: where do queer Chinese find 'home' and who are allowed to move across space? Drawing from rich archival and ethnographic data, John Wei refuses to attribute queer belonging to the Confucian tropes about Chinese cultures or to simply reduce queer mobility to a product of China's neoliberal development and individualisation in the past decade. In contrast, he explores the heterogeneous sites where queer Chinese subjectivities are flourishing and evolving via new technology and markets, while simultaneously restricted and narrowed by China's class inequalities and cultural realities. Wei deploys what he calls a 'queer Sinophone Marxist critique' (155) to contextualise queer mobility under the neoliberalised economy and problematise a culturally essentialist approach to analysing Chinese queer subjectivity. Overall, *Queer Chinese Cultures* expands the recent works on queer Sinophone studies and reorients conversations on 'queer Chineseness' from a singular focus of homogenous culture to an analysis of the diverse ways in which queer subjects are impacted by China's class stratification and neoliberal economy.

The argument about the particularity of Chinese sexual culture and its distinctiveness from Western societies is certainly not new, and has been a widely debated topic in the field of queer Asia studies (e.g., Chou, 2001; Kam, 2013; Kong, 2011; Tang, 2011). However, Wei and other scholars (e.g., Liu and Ding, 2005; Martin, 2014) have pointed out the risk this argument runs of falling into cultural essentialism, and particularly, how this mode of cultural analysis via Confucianism (cf. Chou, 2001) often singles out the Chinese kinship system from other connected structural components. To move beyond this Orientalising cultural trap, Wei's book utilises the notion of 'stretched kinship' — the slow yet continuous engagements with the structure and imagination of family — to highlight the diverse 'homemaking' and 'homecoming' strategies that queer Chinese people employ to negotiate with traditional familism and original kinship circuits against a singular 'coming out' narrative in the Western framework (29).

To highlight the multidimensional factors of queer material culture, Wei articulates the notion of *mobility* as inseparable from kinship and queer identity. He illustrates how queer kinship is not a hegemonic cultural system situated in the false binary of acceptance and rejection, but involves dynamic strategies of belonging across class via class privileges and across geographical scale. For instance, he argues that the ideal of 'coming home' no longer works in today's China which has undergone rapid market liberalisation as it has become an imperative for most young people to migrate to affluent coastal provinces for better economic opportunities. Home is not only

¹ Assistant Research Fellow, Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, TAIWAN

*Corresponding Author: wenliu@gate.sinica.edu.tw

‘stretched’ due to a heteronormative cultural constraint, but also economic pressure. The insistence on class as an analytical framework demystifies the taken-for-granted paradigm of Confucian culture.

In many chapters, *Queer Chinese Cultures* explores how queer migrants in the urban spaces find support in LGBT NGOs and other grassroots organisations, or LGBT social media and online dating sites. Although these sites, physical or virtual, are diverse in forms, access to them is stratified by one’s social and cultural capital. Wei argues, “While some social groups’ gender and sexual mobilities have been folded into the process of neoliberal individualisation and human capital accumulation, many others have been alienated who find themselves increasingly deprived of the privilege of mobilities” (141). In Wei’s analysis, what is most significant and sobering about the class stratification and different capacities of mobility within the queer Chinese communities is how wealthy gay Chinese — the urban middle classes who have become ‘life winners’ via neoliberal self-actualisation — have started to build gated communities that only allow a selected few to participate. These gated social spaces, literally located in gated residential compounds, function to narrow the pathways of queer upward mobility and preserve the cultural capital of the wealthy minority. As Wei has argued, the process of gating helps the Chinese state to maintain and reproduce its broader project of class stratification and social exclusion. While other scholars have previously deployed the notion of *suzhi*, or ‘quality’, to illustrate the class hierarchy in queer Chinese subject-making (Rofel, 2007; Bao, 2018), Wei’s concept of gating highlights a process of sexual-class stratification that is not based on essentialised qualities or backgrounds of the individual, but an active form of space-making and territorialisation that occurs at the conjuncture of the state’s neoliberal developments.

Besides the intervention on modes of kinship through a neoliberal class critique, another important contribution of the book is its complication of the position of ‘China’ in the queer Sinophone framework. Shu-mei Shih’s Sinophone theories (2011) have allowed a paradigmatic shift from diasporic studies’ China-centrism to prioritising marginalised Sinophone sites where the political and cultural relations with the ‘mainland’ China are particularly contentious. Queer Sinophone has been particularly productive for the study of queer cultures and subjectivities in places such as Hong Kong and Taiwan that have developed politics against an essentialist notion of ‘Chineseness’ and conceptual fluidity towards ethnic, national, and sexual cultures away from Chinese heteronormativity as the singular reference site (Chiang and Wong, 2020; Martin, 2014).

However, Wei questions how queer Sinophone studies may neglect the internal heterogeneity of ‘mainland China’ in its attempt to decentre China in its analysis. Drawing from interviews with the owners of Two-City Café in Beijing who moved there after leaving their previous establishment of an iconic queer bookstore, Gin-Gin, in 2012, Wei highlights the possibility of Sinophone mobilities in China, where the bookstore’s marked ‘Taiwanese’ facilitates queer space-making and the building of intimate ties among marginalised queer migrants at the political centre of China. While the Sinophone critique of hegemonic Chineseness remains relevant here to illustrate the capacity of resistant culture via ‘queer Taiwanese’ in China, the example of Two-City Café provides a different spatial politics of queer Sinophones’ relationship with ‘mainland China’ that is not necessarily ‘outside’ but constituted in the ‘within’ or ‘besides’.

It will require more ethnographic details from diverse marginalised ethnic, linguistic, religious, and gendered communities to expand the counter hegemonic possibilities of queer Chinese ‘mainlanders’ that usually centre on the experiences of ethnically Han and cis-gender men. Nonetheless, *Queer Chinese Cultures* presents a case that articulates why China should be considered in the queer Sinophone circuit. Similarly, in “Transnational Queer Sinophone Cultures,” Fran Martin (2014) argues that the ‘Chineseness’ in queer Sinophone knowledge is multiple and heterogeneous as it is increasingly integrated into the transnational network. To Wei, China is inseparable from the transnational queer production, as he states that “it is counterproductive to completely detach Sinophone cultures from mainland China, or China from the Sinophone sphere, when they are deeply connected not only in histories but also in a growing intimate network of mobilities” (96). Rather than approaching queer Sinophone via the Chinese ‘roots’ of essentialising cultures and permanent settlement, Wei utilises Martin’s conceptualisation of queer Sinophone as ‘routes’ both literally in the migration process and metaphorically in the context of multiple cultural and emotional embodiments of queer Sinophone subjects as they navigate the transnational flows.

THE TROUBLE OF CLASS IN QUEER STUDIES

Taking the above interventions together, *Queer Chinese Cultures* expands the recent works on queer Sinophone communities and the evolving gay Chinese identities such as Hongwei Bao’s *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China* (2018), Lucetta Kam’s *Shanghai Lolas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (2013), and Travis Kong’s *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy* (2011) that approach ‘Chineseness’ with its heterogeneous interpretations. These publications on queer Chinese subjectivities are all increasingly concerned with the analytical framework of class and the rise of neoliberal culture in China as they illustrate the growing privatisation of the public and class stratification within queer communities. Reading queer studies as a site of knowledge production transnationally, where previously ‘China’ served as an analytical site of

non-Western culture, it increasingly becomes a site that is utilised for a critique of class and neoliberal economy. This phenomenon is as much about the queer Sinophone scholars' collective concerns about class, as about the lack of class-centred work in North American queer studies.

As Matt Brim (2020) argues, queer studies has a 'class problem' where theories are produced and recirculated within elite North America-based universities, and the queer-class knowledge from 'poor queer studies' that addresses queer poverty is rarely recognised (404). In other words, although the problem of neoliberalism is often addressed and critiqued in queer studies conceptually, there is a gap in queer-class knowledge that is constructed from the subjective experiences of poor queers and rural queers. While Wei's book provides a window into the possibility of a queer-class intervention in Sinophone societies that focuses mostly on middle-class cultural production, it can serve as a productive intervention in elite queer studies that will see the future expansion of the 'queer Sinophone Marxist critique' (155) that he has proposed for queer lives on the class margins. Rather than being confined in the East vs. West or the intra-Asia geopolitical debates within the Sinophone sphere, the critique may be a useful tool to problematise class relations in other contexts, as 'Chineseness' and 'China' have been increasingly embedded in the imagination of transnational late capitalism. While Shih has powerfully articulated 'the structural affinity between queer studies as the study of margins and gender and sexuality and Sinophone studies as the study of margins of nations and nationalness' (224), Wei's approach takes class seriously via the triangulated site of 'queer Chinese cultures.' The book articulates culture as integral to the politico-economic flows of global neoliberalism, and hints at an alternative queer future that is no longer contingent on familism and development.

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