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Wenqing Kang

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Review Essay

Queer Life, Communities, and Activism in Contemporary China

Wenqing Kang, Cleveland State University

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Elisabeth L. Engebretsen. *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography*. New York: Routledge, 2014. 194 pp.

Hongwei Bao. *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018. 277 pp.

What do queer life, communities, and activism look like in contemporary China? The two books under review here provide some valuable answers to this question. Based mainly on ethnographic research conducted between 2004 and 2006, Elisabeth L. Engebretsen's book specifically studies the *lalas* (queer women) in China's capital, Beijing. Hongwei Bao's work, which draws on his field research from 2007 to 2009, attends to the more general issues of gay men and queer politics. Although actively engaged with recent scholarship on queer ethnography and Chinese studies, Engebretsen intentionally avoids academic jargon that might alienate the interested public; the result is an academically informed but highly accessible work. Bao's writing, by contrast, often invokes concepts, ideas, and theories of famous thinkers and theorists that risk muddling, rather than enhancing, his analysis of Chinese texts and situations. Together, however, the two studies, with their different focuses and writing styles, offer a rich picture of queer life and politics in China during the first decade of the new millennium.

In *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography*, Engebretsen, an anthropologist, presents a solid ethnography of the Beijing *lala* in the mid-2000s. Often letting the *lalas* speak in their own words, Engebretsen points out the difficulties that queer women face if they are open about their sexual desire with their family and society in general. One factor is the political situation in China where, depending on the time period, homosexuality could be considered a social taboo, a mental illness, or both. Another factor is conventional Chinese gender norms, which measure women's worth in their roles as wives and mothers (2). The main argument of Engebretsen's book is that queer women in China want to be "normal" and are thus morally compelled to fulfill their filial obligations through the imperative of heterosexual marriage. But insofar as they are

able to maneuver the hetero-familial system to their own advantage and live a “normal life” according to their own queer imaginaries, they are more negotiators than complete victims.

Central to this argument is the question of “whether queerness is necessarily or inherently transgressive and disruptive of normalization regimes” (8). Engebretsen approaches this question by using the personal narratives of Beijing *lalas* to challenge the binary between “being moral” and “being different,” and that between individuality and family kinship. In her study of queer women’s subjectivities (chapter 2), Engebretsen finds that although Beijing *lalas* acknowledge their attraction to women, they do not want to identify themselves solely based on their sexual desire. They do not see that being sexually different prevents them from being “normal,” which requires fulfilling familial and social obligations. For them, it is impossible for individuals to be separated totally from their family ties. An integral part of their life is to balance their longing for same-sex intimacy and their filial obligation, including a heterosexual marriage (chapter 3). The *lala* women thus adopt “tacit accommodating strategies” (59) to compartmentalize their queer life from their familial and social duties and avoid confrontational tactics such as “coming out” and “rights” discourse. By doing so, they aim to achieve social stability and family harmony. But, Engebretsen astutely points out, this kind of strategy has its limits, especially for women who lack resources (79).

Meanwhile, *lalas* also engage in subverting normative heterosexual marriage (chapters 4 and 5). Although same-sex marriage is not recognized in China, some *lala* couples hold ceremonial weddings anyway. Acknowledging that these events “represent ways to resist and rewrite social and gendered scripts for adult conformity and status” (96), Engebretsen also recognizes the limits of their symbolic politics. Engebretsen has, however, serious doubts about the practice of *lala*-gay *xinghun* (contract marriages). Recently in China, many *lalas* and gay men have met through social networks and gatherings conspire to enter into fake marriages as a way of coping with parental pressure. Differing from scholars who see positive possibilities opened up by this kind of marriage (Kam 2013, 99–103), Engebretsen argues that “even though *lalas* and gays exercise considerable agency when directing their fake marriage strategy, and may feel a degree of control over their personal lives in this respect, they are in fact left with full responsibility for its success, or failure, over the longer time” (105). Moreover, the fake marriage could create a situation in which queer intimacy and sociality become impossible, and *lala* women suffer the consequences much more than gay men because of gender inequality in contemporary Chinese society. In the end, “the success of *xinghun* rests on the complicit deployment of the idea that homosexuality must remain invisible and never spoken of,” a “Chinese form [of] homophobic violence” (121), as elucidated in the pioneering work of Naifei Ding and Jen-Peng Liu (2005).

In this context, the emerging *lala* community, first in the form of salon gatherings and later through political networks, provides a space for queer women to meet, fight isolation, explore their identities, collectively seek solutions to their dilemma, and increase their visibility in mainstream society (chapter 6). Using two grassroots

organizations as examples, Engebretsen clearly shows that the activists have gradually combined a nonpolitical and nonconfrontational approach with more extensive discussions of collective rights in their work of community building. The author is very careful not to argue that the Chinese *lala* community is either categorically different from, or is finally catching up with, the queer movement in the Western world, but insists that “lala communities and discourses in Beijing are intimately connected to regional and global circuits of queer activism and culture in ways that cannot be seen as simply ‘Western’ or foreign imports of ready-made models” (157). Moreover, the author also resists a progressive narrative that queer life will improve from now on. Instead, she highlights the very tension of *lala* women’s desire for being normal and the emerging community activism for queer rights in contemporary China.

Queer identity and activism are the focus of the second book under review here. Hongwei Bao’s *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China* is based on his 2011 PhD thesis in the Gender and Cultural Studies program of the University of Sydney and draws on interviews, field notes, published texts, films and their directors’ thoughts, and online discussions. The first part of the book provides an analysis of current Chinese gay men’s identities (chapter 2), an account of the vicissitudes of the Chinese term *tongzhi* (comrade, chapter 3), and a theoretical reading of a published diary of gay men who went through conversion therapy in the late 1980s and early 1990s (chapter 4). The second part of the book turns to filmmaker Cui Zi’en’s eclectic radical thought, community building, and film practice (chapter 5); queer film and cultural festivals organized by activist artists Fan Bobo, Shito, and Mingming (chapter 6); and gay men’s fight for their right to use public space in the city of Guangzhou (chapter 7). As a whole, the book traces a history of queer activism in post-Mao China and documents some important community events in urban China—mainly Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou—in the late 2000s.

The main argument of the book is inspired by Cuban American scholar José Muñoz’s theory of queer futurity, which sees queerness as a “not yet here” future-bound phenomenon, and his critique of the present (Muñoz 2009). Bao intends to lend a similar meaning to the Chinese term *tongzhi*, as he declares in the introduction:

This book will argue that in contemporary China, the socialist “comrade” and postsocialist “queer” are *mutually constitutive*. Gay identity and queer politics in China can be best understood through a discourse of the “queer comrade.” That is to say, the socialist past laid the foundation and provided the inspiration for contemporary Chinese gay identity and queer politics, which are both produced by and pose resistance to the Chinese state, as well as to transnational capitalism. (11)

In this statement, the author reduces the meaning of *tongzhi* to the meaning of the term “comrade” during the socialist period (Mao era) in the People’s Republic of China,

despite his constant suggestion to see the term “as an ‘empty signifier’ with no real referent and thus open to resignification” (65). Therein lies a conceptual and historical problem.

The most widely cited Chinese sentence that contains the term *tongzhi* is proclaimed by none other than the early twentieth-century revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen: “Geming shangwei chenggong, tongzhi ren xu nuli” 革命尚未成功, 同志仍需努力 (The revolution has not succeeded, comrades still need to fight). When Hong Kong queer activist artists reappropriated *tongzhi* to refer to queer people in the Chinese-speaking world in 1989 (73), it was Sun’s call to continue to fight that echoed in the ear of queer activists. When the new usage was introduced to mainland China, the association with the socialist period was inevitable. But reducing the meaning of “comrade” to that of the China’s recent socialist past in a work that seeks inspiration for a queer future is problematic, especially when the meaning is historically inaccurate.

Invoking cultural studies scholar Meaghan Morris, Bao acknowledges “the importance of employing historical perspectives when conducting contemporary cultural analysis” (12). But the meaning of the socialist “comrade” formulated in the book is more an idealized imagination than a realistic reflection of history. As Bao describes, “the socialist ‘comrade’ subjectivity, with its radical departure from traditional forms of family, kinship, intimacy and gender norms, together with its remapping of the social relations and everyday lives, intrinsically relates to queer meaning” (11). Unfortunately, this statement is hardly sustainable. Feminist scholarship on Chinese women demonstrates that a big achievement in the socialist era was bringing women out of the home to participate in economic production and empowering them with a new discourse to reconceptualize their past and current experiences. But, traditional forms of family and kinship system have remained very much intact, and women have faced a double burden both inside and outside the home (Hershatter 2011). In terms of intimacy, as historian Harriet Evans says, “the dominant construction of monogamous marriage as the only relationship legitimizing sexual relations makes marriage and sexual relations virtually synonymous” (1997, 113). Sexual transgression did happen in the socialist era, including same-sex relations (Kang 2018; forthcoming), but not in the name of the socialist “comrade.” One of the important functions of the use of “comrade” in socialist China was for the Chinese Communist Party state to curb the privileges of some party officials. By insisting on addressing everyone as *tongzhi* instead of their official ranks, the party reminded those who thought they were higher than others in terms of social and political status that everybody was equal. The same motivation was behind current Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping’s recent call to resuscitate the use of *tongzhi* (Kohlenberg 2016). It is understandable that Bao wants to employ a comrade ideal to fight against the neoliberalist trend in contemporary China. But a critique of the current postsocialist state should not be based on an inaccurate depiction of socialist history.

My criticism aside, *Queer Comrades* is a serious meditation on contemporary queer politics in China, and it is especially effective when read with *Queer Women in Urban*

China. Together, these two complementary works make significant contributions to the field of Chinese queer studies. They should be read by gender and sexuality scholars and China specialists alike.

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About the Reviewer

Wenqing Kang is Associate Professor of Chinese History at Cleveland State University.