

Queer Marxism in Mainland China and Taiwan

{{Queer Marxism in Two Chinas}} {By Petrus Liu} {Reviewed by Jia Tan}

Saturday 6 July 2019, by [DENTON Kirk A.](#), [TAN Jia](#) (Date first published: 24 June 2017).

In the past two decades, the term “queer” has gained increasing academic momentum in China studies across disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, film and media studies, communication, and literary studies. What does it mean to queer China studies, and where is this emergent field of queer China studies moving? And conversely, what is the significance of this sub-field for the broader field of queer studies? Petrus Liu’s *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* is a timely and highly original book that provides theoretical interventions to the above questions. Taking into account the geopolitical implication of the “two Chinas,” the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan, Liu proposes the framework of queer Marxism as an antidote to major debates and concerns in both queer studies and area studies.

In Chapter 1, Liu astutely points out that “a liberal pluralist culture of identity politics that is distinctively American” (7) restricts the dominant approaches in queer and LGBT studies, such as the “queer of color critique,” which is based on the intersectionality of identity categories, and the critique of the “new homonormativity,” which emerged in a neoliberal context. These recent academic fashions, Liu observes, are shaped by the “dematerializing tendency” (10) in two strands of late developments in contemporary queer theory—namely, queer temporality theory and affect theory. Liu presents queer Marxism and the geopolitics of the two Chinas as a challenge to the liberal queer paradigm that endorses “queer emancipation grounded in liberal values of privacy, tolerance, individual rights, and diversity” (7). The notion of queer Marxism addresses what Lisa Henderson has called “class antagonism in queerness and sexual-political antagonism from the American left.” [1] It opens up the often overlooked discussion of Marxism in queer theory and, at the same time, criticizes orthodox Marxist theory that tends to see sexuality issues as ancillary instead of fundamental in understanding social structure and oppression. Furthermore, by bringing historical materialism to bear on queer studies rather than simply queering Marxism (14), Liu offers a constructive mapping of the existing problematic in the field of queer studies that is made visible by Cold War geopolitics.

Chapter 2 further questions and de-westernizes (US-based) queer studies by addressing the politics of the universal and the particular embedded in both area studies and queer studies. Teasing out the asymmetrical structure in knowledge production where China serves as an object of study as opposed to a place that generates theory, Liu presents Chinese queer theory through close readings of the film and writings of Cui Zi'en from China and the academic writings by Josephine Ho, Liu Jen-peng, and Ding Naifei from Taiwan. Though these Chinese queer theorists may not necessarily consider their works as offspring of Marxism, Liu offers an important theoretical framework for understanding these writings as queer theory that engages with Marxist thought. Because existing Anglophone studies on Chinese sexualities “either emphasize the agency of queer desire and bodies against state prescriptions, or expose the complicity between new sexual politics and advanced

liberalism" (4), Liu's re-readings of Chinese writings as Chinese queer theory point to nuanced directions in queer studies that go beyond different sets of binaries such as control/resistance in relation to state, endorsement/subversion of capitalism, or positive/negative queer representations.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide close readings of Chen Ruoxi's 1986 novel *Paper Marriage* and Xiao Sa's 1981 novel *Song of Dreams*, respectively. Excavating the queerness in these two apparently heterosexual narratives, Liu explores how queer Chinese novels demonstrate the relational formation of queer selves in the context of the Cold War. Though the book consciously claims that it is not a Sinophone project (5), I think it does echo the idea of "queer Sinophone," which problematizes the given-ness of nation and Chinese-ness. [2] While the idea of "queer Sinophone" conceptualizes the unsettling nature of Chinese-ness geographically, Liu highlights the Cold War context to think historically about the changing formations of Chinese-ness and queerness: he problematizes the idea of "two Chinas" instead of perpetuating it. The strength of the "two Chinas" framework lies in historicizing China with a queer perspective, questioning conventional demarcations and periodizations of history such as socialist/postsocialist and foregrounding the centrality of sexuality in relation to relevant frameworks, such as Chen Kuan-Hsing's "Asia as Method." Notably, most of the cultural representation, academic studies, and theoretical formations studied in Liu's book were produced in either postsocialist China or post-Martial Law Taiwan. This selection preference, not unlike the omission of socialist cultural products in Tze-lan Sang's perceptive book, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China*, [3] seems to render socialism, or socialist China, in Liu's words, "antithetical and exterior to queer theory" (21). Following Liu's insights on queer theory and geopolitics, I believe future scholarship will engage with texts or social realities from the socialist period in China or question the socialism/postsocialism divide. Additionally, the "two Chinas" framework will be enriched by taking into account places such as Hong Kong in generating Chinese queer theory, especially against the backdrop of Cold War geopolitics.

Chapter 5 investigates how the notion of queer human rights paradoxically derives from both the right-bearers' differences (queerness) and their commonality (humanness). Liu critiques the liberal tongzhi movement in Taiwan, as it "deradicalized the queer movement and transformed homosexuality into an object of consumption and a site of political manipulation" (164). Liu brilliantly contends that in Marx's labor theory of value, relationality of the self is more compatible with queer theory and movements, while liberalism emphasizes individual autonomy, identity, and identity-based rights (167). Although the observation that China has a bad human rights record is too predictable and seems counter-productive to theoretical thinking, I wonder if it may also be helpful to invest more in liberalism in the context of China, especially in light of the recent crackdown on NGOs, human rights lawyers, and the detention of five young feminists in 2015. I do not mean to suggest that the criticisms of individual rights and autonomy in relation to liberal values are not valid, especially when we bear in mind liberalism's historical link with colonialism and imperialism, a link that is clearly illustrated in Lisa Lowe's book *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. [4] Nevertheless, could liberal discourses be strategically used by (queer) activists and scholars to negotiate with hegemonic ideologies, political pressures, and social control in China? If we see Marxism and liberalism not in antithetical terms (167), as Liu seems to suggest we should, perhaps a reconsidering of leftist liberalism could also be productive in coming to terms with the official discourse on national security in China, where Marxism is still considered to be part of the status quo, albeit superficially.

Overall, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* is a theoretically rigorous, intellectually stimulating, and conceptually rich book. Its formulation of queer Marxism challenges the major paradigm in Anglophone queer studies and de-westernizes queer studies by introducing Chinese queer theory. It provides rich accounts of queer and LGBT movements and discourses in the two Chinas alongside

insightful re-readings of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, among others. The book is an important contribution to both queer studies and China studies, and it is well-positioned to (re)define the emergent field of queer China studies.

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Footnotes

[1] See Lisa Henderson, *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 1.

[2] For more on the idea of queer Sinophone, see Howard Chiang and Larissa Heinrich eds, *Queer Sinophone Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[3] See Tze-lan Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[4] For more, see Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).