

Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, William F. Schroeder, & Hongwei Bao (Eds.), **Queer/Tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism and Media Cultures**, Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2015, 274 pp., \$58.99 (hardcover), \$21.35 (paperback).

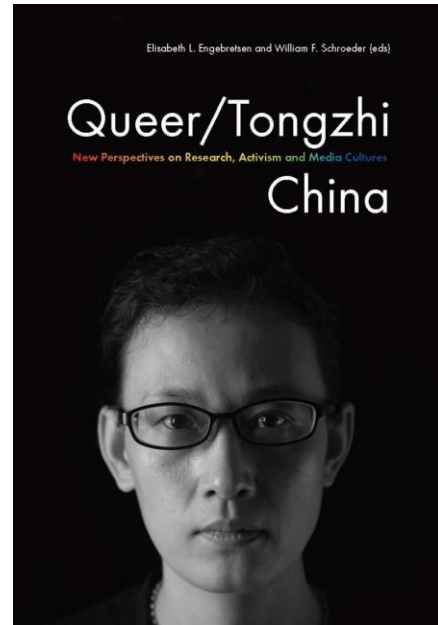
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Petrus Liu once asked, “Why does queer theory need China?” (2010, p. 291). **Queer/Tongzhi China** can be seen as an attempt to answer this question.<sup>1</sup> This collection of 13 essays (including the introduction) is written by Chinese and international scholars, activists, and artists. While some chapters provide a firsthand account of organizing *tongzhi* activities, others present scholarly inquiries into contemporary queer culture in China. As Elisabeth Engebretsen and William Schröder write in the volume’s introduction, “the choice to juxtapose ‘queer’ and ‘*tongzhi*’ evokes both the unevenness and the variety of flows of practice, politics and discourses related to sexuality, gender, identity, nationality and temporality” (pp. 5–6).

Although the chapters are not organized in any particular order, I found that four themes—community building and activism, media culture, lived experiences, and reflection on the research process—emerge throughout the various essays. The volume includes two articles and one interview on the first theme. Stijn Deklerck and Xiaogang Wei’s “Queer Online Media and the Building of China’s LGBT Community” traces the three-stage evolution of Queer Comrades, the independent LGBT webcast they produce. The Chinese government does not regulate the Internet as stringently as it regulates traditional mass media, and this has given activists an opportunity to produce an LGBT-focused webcast. Deklerck and Wei highlight the role of the program in educating the public about homosexuality and building a positive and healthy LGBT community. They are very conscious not to frame their content in a political way so as to avoid the state’s regulatory regime. Similarly, Popo Fan’s “Challenging Authorities and Building Community Culture” is about the China Queer Film Festival Tour. As a queer filmmaker in China, Fan points out the difficulties in making, distributing, and screening LGBT-themed films in the country. Some filmmakers/activists came up with the idea of a “film festival tour” that would show films in places like coffee shops, bars, or individual film salons in various cities. The film tour was only promoted through LGBT websites, online forums, or social media to avoid government censorship. The volume’s last chapter is Fan’s interview with Zi’en Cui, the world-famous queer Chinese novelist and filmmaker. It reveals Cui’s philosophy of filmmaking and his anticapitalist and antitraditional attitude.



<sup>1</sup> In contemporary China, *tongzhi* is a local term same-gender loving people use to refer to themselves.

Three chapters examine contemporary queer media culture. Hongwei Bao's "Digital Video Activism" dissects the phenomenon of queer filmmakers using films to engage with the public. As a form of digital video activism, organizers of the Beijing Queer Film Exhibition presented the festival as an artistic and intellectual event, not a political one. Citing Cui, Bao points out that queer films allow the voices of LGBT people to be heard. In this sense, "'making sounds,' or 'queer audibility,' is an alternative way of thinking about queer politics from the dominant paradigm of 'queer visibility'" (p. 51). Nonetheless, I find that there is a need for Bao to justify his celebration of queer audibility through visual-based media. Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu's chapter, "Queer Texts, Gendered Imagination, and Popular Feminism in Chinese Web Literature," looks at the increasingly popular "Web literature" in China. They identify three genres of queer Web literature: "boys' love," "body change," and "superior women." Yang and Xu argue that these genres "interrogate the presumptively natural and fixed categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, putting deep-rooted binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual all on trial" (p. 147). Qian Wang's "Queerness, Entertainment, and Politics" proposes a twofold logic of queer politics in the Chinese music industry. He first differentiates queer performativity from queer performance, defining the former as "a self-conscious political commitment" and the latter as "the presentation of a static identity . . . that ultimately does not have the ability to influence society and culture" (p. 153). He argues that avant-gardism in the Chinese music industry may produce queer performativity, but the state's push for the commercialism of the industry turns potentially political performativity into purely cool-looking performances. While the chapter provides critical insight into the music industry in China, its digression into the fashion and beauty industries does not add much to the central argument. Furthermore, the indiscriminating use of the Pinyin system to transliterate the names of Hong Kong and Taiwanese singers obstructs readers' understanding.

This volume includes three fascinating ethnographic studies on the lived experiences of lesbians and gay men. Ana Huang's "On the Surface" explores the narrative of *T*, the more masculine partner in a lesbian relationship. In her ethnography, she found that many *Ts* wore chest bindings on a daily basis, took an active role during sex, went by masculine or gender-neutral names, and desired "to be treated as the 'husband' in a relationship" (p. 124). These bodily practices conventionally fall under the label of "transgender" in Western discourse. However, Huang also found that the same individuals who performed masculine roles were willing to wear feminine attire when requested by their workplaces, and only a few of them self-identified as transgender. Huang proposes using the Chinese notion of face to synchronize the seeming inconsistency of *T*. She argues that "face enables a relational understanding of gender roles that recognizes gender difference and allows for role changes, providing a sense of authenticity that does not rely on inner depth" (p. 116). In other words, Huang suggests viewing *T* not as an essentialized self but rather a social position that is performed only in social interactions. Moving from lesbians to gay men, Xiaoxing Fu's "Market Economy, Spatial Transformation, and Sexual Diversity" connects the development of gay spaces with the rise of the gay community in Shenyang, a city in northern China. The gay landscape in the city began with a few mainstream entertainment spaces in the 1980s; gradually, various exclusively gay commercialized spaces opened. In tandem with this spatial development was the growth and diversification of the gay community. Fu pointed out that in the early 1980s, there was a high level of trust among gay men: People were not afraid to bring strangers home and left the door keys with them. Yet, the increasing commercialization of the society brought deception and monetary transactions into the gay community. This process of commercialization, while exerting a negative impact on the gay

community in Shengyang, constitutes an important force in the LGBT grassroots organizations in Chengdu. Wei Wei's "Queer Organizing and HIV/AIDS Activism" documents how a commercial gay bar was transformed into a *tongzhi* organization. As the most popular gay bar in Chengdu, Variation was approached by the China-UK HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Project to promote HIV/AIDS among the city's gay community. Variation's owners and its staff, with financial support from the China-UK project, founded the Chengdu Gay Care Organization (CGCO). Later, the owners transformed the commercial venue into a cultural center for the *tongzhi* community. Wei analyzes the ways in which CGCO connects with the local gay community and reaches out to the public and to international LGBT organizations. However, it is extremely difficult to form a legal NGO in China; therefore, CGCO only registered as a nonprofit enterprise, which confines it to HIV/AIDS-related activities.

Finally, three researchers provided reflections on their studies. In "Research, Activism, and Activist Research in *Tongzhi* China," William F. Schroeder reveals his frustration when the *tongzhi* groups he studied did not consider themselves as "activists," a common label used in the West. These groups periodically organized social gatherings for their members, which were "just about creating good feelings, making friends" (p. 65). Schroeder once told the group members that their activities could lead to long-term benefits for the wider *tongzhi* community, but they were reluctant to admit that. Eventually, Schroeder came to accept that fun was the primary logic behind the creation of these groups and that political outcomes were simply a by-product of these gatherings. Similarly, Elisabeth L. Engebretsen's "Of Pride and Visibility" points out that "locally specific strategies and priorities often differ substantially in ways that limit the usefulness of making all-encompassing generalizations" (p. 90). She describes three scenes in China where queer grassroots activists reappropriated these notions of pride and visibility. The secret celebration of the anniversary of the Stonewall movement in a backstreet bar in Beijing, the festive Pride cultural week in Shanghai, and the public antidiscrimination parade near a university in Changsha together demonstrate alternative ways to the standardized parade model widely celebrated in the West. Last but not least, Lucetta Yip Lo Kam's chapter, "Coming Home, Coming Out," shows how she managed her dual roles as an insider and outside in the research process. Her research was conducted in Shanghai, the city where she was born but not where she grew up. Her native Shanghainese sometimes gave her an advantage but often created awkward situations when people expected her to be familiar with current issues in the city. Moreover, her lesbian identity also helped her access other lesbians in Shanghai, but she constantly needed to defamiliarize herself with accounts given by her lesbian informants. In addition, she discusses her responsibility to come out in the academic community.

Overall, this volume provides a broad picture of contemporary queer/*tongzhi* activism and culture in China. Although the book does not cover transgender issues, researchers and students of LGBT studies, queer theory, and China studies can peruse the whole volume or selective chapters based on their interests. The activists' perspective, such as the careful navigation of the ambiguous governmental regulation of *tongzhi*-related activities, is unique and insightful. The chapters on the lived experiences of sexual minorities are complementary to Ho (2010), Kam (2013), and Kong (2011). The three self-reflection chapters are also a good resource on transnational queer research.

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