

# INTRODUCTION: TRANSNATIONAL EXCHANGE

---

LAURA WINKIEL

**A**s global flows of texts, media, persons, goods, and cultures traverse national borders, what is gained, what is lost? How do we compare these modes of being, knowing, and aesthetic expression as they move from one context to another? And from what critical ground? The contributors to this special issue of *English Language Notes* on “Transnational Exchange” take up these questions in a series of multidisciplinary interrogations of material ranging from comparative literary modernisms, queer Chinese transnationalisms, contemporary photography, collage form, little magazines, jingo poems, and popular theater revues. These scholars find their disciplinary “homes” in academic departments as various as art history, history of science, cultural studies, women’s studies, sociology, French and Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, comparative literature, and English, and in locations that span three continents. These transnational and transdisciplinary scholarly alliances occur, in part, from the very forces of globalization that they critically explore. As global flows and capitalist accumulation break down cultural, economic, and social barriers, academics follow these formations, sharing approaches and knowledge in ever widening circuits of exchange.

In introducing their path-breaking essay collection on transnational exchange, *Minor Transnationalisms*, Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih explain their unlikely collaboration (between a Francophone, African and African-Americanist and a Sinophone, Chinese and Asian-Americanist) in terms that resonate with the present volume.<sup>1</sup> Their scholarly partnership eschews the hierarchical and vertical integration of disciplinary formations in favor of the relational form that “globalization increasingly favors,” namely, the “lateral and non-hierarchical network structures” that Deleuze and Guattari call a “rhizome.”<sup>2</sup> The notion of lateral affiliation provides a useful paradigm for thinking about the scholarly transnational exchanges within these pages. Take, for example, the hierarchical and vertical integration behind the institutional pressures within English departments, where the English and American literary canons continue to dominate curricula and “serious” scholarship while ethnic and other forms of “minor” literature remain marginal to the discipline. In contrast, the lateral affiliations of various “minor” transnational discourses avoid repeating the center-margin binary, a structural problem that occurs, Lionnet and Shih point out, even in the wake of deconstruction:

The deconstructive procedure has the paradoxical effect of exercising the muscles of the European philosophical and literary tradition, which becomes even more complex and indeterminate for an infinite play of meanings. Critiquing the center, when it stands as an end in itself, seems only to enhance it; the center remains the focus and the main object of study. The deconstructive dyad center/margin thus appears to privilege marginality only to end up recontaining it.<sup>3</sup>

As many of the contributors demonstrate in these pages, transnationalism, with its emphasis on lateral exchanges, offers alternative ways of thinking about globalization that bypass outworn critical paradigms of center-margin. Rather than fixating on Eurocentric understandings of the world, they show how the transnational circulation of forms (whether of experimental art, popular jingo poems, literature, small magazines, or Internet and pop culture expressions of queer identities) unleashes marginality in a manner that skips and weaves around the world, seemingly oblivious to dominant discourses and practices. These transnational exchanges are reterritorialized, as the contributors show, within local and regional contexts in ways that unsettle the notion of colonial imitation.

Many of the essays gathered here concern the pre-history of globalization, especially as it intensified via new technologies such as the telegraph, steamship, and train, and was accelerated by the rate of colonization and modernization around the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These emergent technologies of global exchange fostered early forms of lateral affiliations amongst colonized territories. During the modernist period, however, transnational exchanges often could not avoid reflecting the dominance of empire, given the universalist aspirations the West held of and for itself. For example, Elleke Boehmer's essay in this collection, "Circulating Forms: The Jingo Poem at the Height of Empire and Beyond," examines the circulation among the British colonies of that arch-form and ideological vehicle of empire: the jingo poem. She builds upon Arjun Appadurai's recent argument concerning the global circulation of forms to suggest that the jingo poem served as "both a powerful catalyst *and* a conduit for imperialist attitudes" (12).<sup>4</sup> That is, the jingo poem was at once a circulating form and a form of circulation, both a carrier of meanings and also a mode of carrying meaning. She writes,

Much like the commodity within world capitalism, the jingo poem sought out colonial contexts (markets, audiences) that already shared cultural features in common through being networked by empire, and then, by way of its own networking operations, confirmed, embedded, and further homogenized those common features. (17)

Though she tracks a form of dominant discourse, she concludes by finding aspects of jingo rhetoric in such unlikely places as speeches by Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. That is, jingo resurfaces in aspects of anticolonial nationalism.

Though Sarah Fedirka's essay, "Reorienting Modernism: Transnational Exchange in the Modernist Little Magazine *Orient*" examines roughly the same historical period as Boehmer, the 1920s, she begins where Boehmer's essay leaves off. She takes up a print

forum for anticolonial nationalism and shows how the Orientalist rhetoric of empire reappears within its pages. Fedirka discusses the monthly magazine *The Orient*, first published in 1923 in New York City by Indian nationals Hari Govind Govil and Syud Hossein. The magazine published

prominent Eastern and Western writers, artists, and philosophers, including Ananda Coomaraswamy, Rabindranath Tagore, Kahlil Gibran, Romain Rolland, AE, Bertrand Russell, H. G. Wells, John Dewey, and Albert Einstein, [. . . as well as political firebrands such as] Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu (President of the Indian National Congress), and former Turkish Premier Rauf Bey. (77)

Since the magazine's audience was a mainstream Western one, it often relied on Orientalist tropes to represent India. However, it also countered such stereotypes with biting criticism of the empire and accompanying promotion of Indian independence, much to the alarm of the British India Political Intelligence Service (IPI), as Fedirka recounts. Her essay shows how "modernism circulates beyond such binaries [of East and West], disrupting and unsettling them, even as it at times reinscribes them" (87).

Emily Hage likewise investigates modernist periodical culture, but from the angle of the transnational avant-garde artist group, the Dadaists. Protesting the nationalism surrounding World War I, Dada art journals published images of experimental artwork by loosely defined Dada groups located in cities ranging from Paris, Zagreb, Bucharest, to New York, thus creating affiliations across enemy lines. Analyzing specific Dada journals, Hage demonstrates that the Dadaists played with recontextualization by "reposition[ing] texts, images, collages, photomontages, and their journals in incongruous settings, where they contributed to new, often illogical compositions and expressed Dada's radical diversity and transnational reach" (63). These texts, Hage argues, produced a new kind of space that resists center-margin configurations by means of lateral exchanges across geographical, epistemological, and linguistic boundaries and through the formal experiments themselves. Though Dada remained inscribed within European discourses, Hage shows how artists as varied as Marcel Duchamp, Tristan Tzara, Hannah Höch, Max Ernst, and Dragan Aleksić forged a global movement by means of their Dada periodicals and "paradoxically sabotaged easy legibility, thus flouting ideals of communication and rationality and calling out differences between connecting and actually transmitting information" (63). Hage demonstrates how Dada critiqued the homogenizing forces of incipient globalization, yet used such connectivity to its advantage.

Lisa Shaw's essay shows, too, how global connectivity worked in favor of Afro-Brazilian theater performers during the modernist period. Shaw analyzes the complex ways in which Josephine Baker's Brazilian performance of the *baiana*, a stylized version of the Afro-Brazilian women street vendors of the cities of Rio and Salvador and made famous by Carmen Miranda, was both a form of blackface and a breaking of the race barrier. She writes, "representations of black identity by black performers were only rendered acceptable to white elite Brazilian tastes by virtue of the cultural capital afforded by associations

with Parisian *negrophilie*" (100). That is, Baker's cosmopolitan prestige across the Atlantic world allowed her to take the Brazilian stage to perform the *baiana*. Her distance from the actual street vendors injected playful mimicry and difference—blackface—into the role while, as a *mulata*, she participated in "a play of mirrors" (101) that comprise black Atlantic popular performance. Shaw's investigation of both popular Brazilian vaudeville theaters and elite casinos demonstrates the multi-directional voyages and exchanges between Afro-Brazilian popular culture and the travelling cultures of the African diasporic world. These exchanges both erased and made palatable (by their very distance from local histories and groups) racial difference in the public sphere.

Other contributors to this special issue discuss the lateral affiliations formed in order to combat globalization's nefarious effects. Prior to introducing those contributions, I consider briefly the work of two important theorists of transnational exchange in order to situate the stakes of this resistance. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai captures globalization's spatial organization ("disjunctures") and its simultaneous fluidity (as global cultural flows) with the terms *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes*. He writes, "These terms with the common suffix *-scape* [ . . . ] indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors."<sup>5</sup> These fluid and flexible movements of goods, peoples, capital, media, and ideas within and across national spaces—in other words, these transnational exchanges—and their subsequent solidifications—their reterritorializations—provide the material ground upon which to characterize the abstract term globalization. Rather than flatten out and render equivalent these five "*-scapes*," Gayatri Spivak maintains that the category of history and the process of capitalist accumulation must be kept in view along with the postmodern emphasis on space. She claims that the current age of globalization is a virulent recapitulation of earlier modes of transnationality predicated on world domination and material inequity: namely, colonization, imperialism, and neocolonialism. She calls these earlier modes of globalization, the "old diasporas":

What do I understand today by a "transnational world?" That it is impossible for the new and developing states, the newly decolonizing or the old decolonizing nations, to escape the orthodox constraints of a "neo-liberal" world economic system which, in the name of Development, and now "sustainable development," removes all barriers between itself and fragile national economies, so that any possibility of building for social redistribution is severely damaged. In this new transnationality, what is usually meant by "the new diaspora," the new scattering of seeds of "developing" nations, so that they can take root on developed ground? Eurocentric migration, labour export both male and female, border crossings, the seeking of political asylum, and the haunting in-place uprooting of "comfort women" in Asia and Africa. What were the old diasporas, before the world was thoroughly consolidated as transnational? They were the results of religious oppression and war, of slavery and indenturing, trade and conquest, and intra-European economic migra-

tion which, since the nineteenth century, took the form of migration and immigration into the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Spivak argues that contemporary transnationalism is a significantly new epoch distinct from former eras, but that it is also a repetition from earlier forms of conquest, slavery, migration, and trade.<sup>7</sup> While Spivak emphasizes the massive economic violence and disparity of these transnational flows—including the breakdown of national civil societies—it is important to overlay Appadurai’s emphasis on global flows onto Spivak’s historicity. By doing so, we see both the economic and institutional disparities of transnationalism as well as the fluid exchange of ideas, peoples, and cultures in diasporas both old and new that give rise to circulations of resistance, struggle, and transformation. Spivak would agree with this dual lens, though she cautions those who would represent diasporas old and new that:

The so-called “immediate experience” of migrancy is not necessarily consonant with transnational literacy, just as the suffering of individual labour is not consonant with the impetus of socialized resistance. In order that a transnationally literate resistance may, in the best case, develop, academic interventions may therefore be necessary; and we should not, perhaps, conflate the two.<sup>8</sup>

Matt Hart’s essay in this special issue beautifully illustrates Spivak’s point above. He demonstrates that representations of the most vulnerable of migrants and political asylum seekers are always problematic. Hart explains why it is that the photographer, Melanie Friend, whose photograph provides this issue’s cover, left her images unpeopled. Such a decision not only suggests the detainees’ invisibility within the public sphere, but it also indicates how any image or—we might add—any verbal representation can only represent the experience of “extraterritorial captivity,” as Hart puts it, “in negative form, as a spectral imprint upon an inhuman institutional landscape” (37). In his essay, Hart pairs Melanie Friend’s extraordinary photo exhibit of the U.K.’s Immigration Removal Centers with novelist Chris Cleave’s *The Other Hand* (2008, published in the U.S. as *Little Bee*). He suggests that just as Friend’s photographs render invisible, but differently, both citizen and detainee, so, too, do the novel’s representations of two women protagonists (one a Nigerian refugee, the other a British citizen) both held apart and driven together. Such ambiguities draw our attention to “the cultural, economic, and legislative contingencies through which this division has been reconstituted” (46). Thus it is that political, economic, and cultural forces shape the present transnational moment and potentially allow for future transformations to occur.

Turning to the topic of literary agency and asking how it might foster such transformations, Firat Oruc’s essay tracks the development of the concept of world literature since Goethe. Criticizing recent attempts to conceptualize world literature, especially those by Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, and emphasizing literature as a hegemonic form, Oruc sides with Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz in his notion of “misplacedness,” or catachresis, as a key site for postcolonial transformation and literary agency. “Misplacedness,” which perhaps echoes the tactics of Oswald de Andrade’s foundational “Cannibal Manifesto” (1928),

makes the disparity between local periphery and global metropolis a “constructive principle of the narrative itself,” what Schwarz calls “the autochthonous ‘form-giving content’ of the Latin American social formation” (55). Rather than hold Latin America’s “backwardness” to task, Andrade and Schwarz embrace its local specificity and historical particularity as a starting point for interrogating the very global system that produced it in the first place. Considering global literature as various as Moshid Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* (2003), Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008), Rick Moody’s *The Diviners* (2006), and Viktor Pelevin’s *Homo Zapiens* (1999), Oruc argues that “world literature describes a mode of measurement, rather than a passive absorption, of the forms imposed by modernity and functions as a framework for exploring the triangular relationship of positionality, comparativity, and globality and forms of reinventing language, culture, and tradition” (56).

Oruc’s emphasis on translation and comparativity brings us to the issue’s special topic clusters that emphasize *methods* of understanding transnational exchange. Introducing the topical cluster on “Queer Transnationalisms in China,” Howard Chiang notes that the formation of the field of queer studies in the early 1990s was focused almost exclusively on American and European cultures. He asks: how might transnational flows of capital, commodities, words, and people and the transregional networks and circuits of queer epistemology not only decenter attention on Western queer formations but also interrupt the localized cultures within East Asia? His own work on Chinese history of science traces the migration of Western biological concepts of sex and sexological categories, such as “homosexuality,” and shows their impact in China in the early twentieth century. To add a transnational twist to this story, he also demonstrates the complexity of “trans postcoloniality” in the Pacific Rim that eschews any direct appropriation of Western knowledge. He tracks the saga of Xie Jianshun, dubbed China’s first transsexual by the Taiwanese press, and argues that emergence of transsexuality in China “also illustrate[s] how the Republican government regained sovereignty in postwar Taiwan by inheriting and embracing a Western biomedical epistemology of sex from the Japanese colonial regime” (112–113). Rather than viewing Chinese discourses on transsexuality as imitative of the West, Chiang asserts that:

in order to fully capture the history of sex change in modern China, one needs to account for the demise of eunuchs as much as the emergence of transsexuals, to chronicle events and processes of change as much as to theorize the genealogy of sex change and the historicity of transsexuality. (113)

Fran Martin, next in the cluster, interrogates the persistent binary at work in transnational debates: between a homogenizing globalization and a heterogeneous *glocalization*. This rather unattractive neologism, she argues, participates in what remains an abstract and general debate: what are the global effects on local cultures? Instead, she proposes to sidestep this stale binary in favor of investigating the effects of an imaginative transnationalism—as a form of community and cultural geography—for Chinese lesbians who visit same-sex Internet sites. They describe this imagined global community in familial terms that relate less to Chinese cultural or ethnic identity than to their sexual identity. Secondly,

Martin examines the lived effects of globalization as an assemblage of material regulatory structures. She notes that Taiwan, following Australia's lead, has passed restrictive legislation prohibiting potentially obscene material in its bid to meet international standards, including the benchmarks set by the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child. She demonstrates how global conventions to protect against the exploitation of children become a means to restrict adult minority sexual practices and representations. Offering a cautionary tale, Martin shows that transnational exchange may not always be beneficial to emergent queer subcultures.

The next two contributors examine how translation impacts transnational exchange. Given that translation is an interpretation, in Lawrence Venuti's words, "that is partial and altered, supplemented with features peculiar to the translating language,"<sup>9</sup> it produces yet another layer of wayward travel. Helen Hok-Sze Leung and Hongwei Bao demonstrate how linguistic differences prevent globalization as homogenization. Both scholars address how the term used in China to designate "sexually deviant subjects" cannot simply be translated as "queer." Leung argues, "the absence of *queer* in the language, however, does not mean the absence of similar kinds of critical and resistant endeavors" (125). She tracks the transmutation of queerness as it travels across languages, cultures, and legal systems. Her first case study is the canto-pop songwriter and scholar Chow Yiu-Fai who compares Dutch gay marriage laws to gay marriage debates in China, but not in a straightforward way. Also avoiding simple one-to-one correspondences with the West, Bao uncovers a fascinating genealogy of the term *tongzhi* (comrades) in its shift from the socialist term for shared political revolutionary struggle to its new usage as a term for queers. Bao sees in the former usage an inherent queerness. He writes that the Socialist *tongzhi* "expresses an ideal of egalitarianism and utopianism. It thus maps social relations in a new way [. . .] that opens the traditional family and kinship structure to relationships and connections between strangers who share the same political views, and it transforms private intimacy into a public intimacy" (132). The term both reflects Chinese history and difference from the West and breaks from that past by parodying it. Thus it is that *tongzhi* expresses the multiple and uneven temporalities of the postsocialist present, by both invoking and cancelling the recent past.

Deeply critical of China's move to a neo-liberal market economy, Travis Kong's contribution builds on Bao's analysis of the uneven present by providing a class analysis of one kind of rural-to-urban migrant, the money boys. He notes the

burgeoning of the informal [. . .] sex market which encourages young people to sell their bodies whilst criminalizing such commercial activities; and the emergence of a new gay discourse of "cosmopolitan respectability" which rejects the old pathological gay persona but privileges a new gay subject that celebrates cosmopolitan middle-class sensibilities. (140)

In effect, the new cosmopolitan gay subculture manifests a strictly middle-class sensibility that excludes the money boys from their queer enclave. While the money boys enjoy urban freedom to express their sexuality, Kong tracks different "zoning technologies" (140), polit-

ical regulations, economic autonomies, and social and cultural variations. Highlighting trans-regional disparities, he notes uneven “effects on money boys in terms of their access to various citizenship rights, market conditions for commercial sexual activities, and different social and cultural environments responsive to sexuality” (140). He demonstrates, as do all of the cluster contributors, that transnational exchanges might be best conceptualized as rhizomes that are unevenly and multiply distributed around the globe. These configurations offer surprising pathways that fundamentally diverge from top-down or center-margin regimes of order.

“Transnational Exchange” concludes with a reproduction of a roundtable discussion of “Comparative Modernisms” held at the 2010 annual conference at the Modernist Studies Association in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Returning to the questions that opened this introduction, the participants of the roundtable consider various methodological questions concerning the global reach of the new transnational modernist studies. Building their discussion from a summer 2009 special issue on “Comparison” published in *New Literary History* and guest edited by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, these contributors focus their exchange on the concept of modernism and how and in what manner it travels, translates, and alters given the local terrain and history in which it is recontextualized.<sup>10</sup>

Mark Wollaeger discusses the dangers of Eurocentric constructions of global modernisms, given the field’s historical construction by the Anglo-American and European academic and literary institutions. He stresses the importance of collaboration to escape the limitations of Eurocentric linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The byproduct of such collaborative efforts, however, threatens to dilute and decenter the very term modernism, but that, and here Wollaeger quotes another participant, Eric Hayot, is precisely the exciting and productive heart of transnational comparison: “We need to act like we don’t already know what [modernism] is” (154). Wollaeger also relates his experience of teaching comparative modernisms, where the conjunction of the Japanese novel *Streets of Fiendish Ghosts* and *Ulysses* “replicates the tension between the genealogical and the comparative that structured the syllabus as a whole” (155). Such tension, he warrants, leads to further refinement and complications of the concept of modernism.

Christopher Bush continues in this vein of comparative East/West modernisms to speak about his own work on East/West comparative discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century. He finds that while earlier nineteenth-century East/West comparisons functioned to “define the distinctiveness if not uniqueness of Western identity,” turn-of-the-century European discourses on Japanese modernization, as it was one of the first non-Western nations to modernize, believed that Japan had a world historical role to play (170). European writers, however, still qualified Japan’s elevation to being a subject of history with hierarchies of racial and civilizational differences. The clear divisions between East and West, Bush argues, function differently than “traditional ‘Orientalism’” (172). Rather, speaking of Ernest Fenollosa, Bush notes that while he still maintained the notion of historical progress, “he is also quite right that Japan [. . .] was in fact sorting, mixing, and fusing a range of political,



economic, and cultural traditions into what would become a powerful and influential non-Western modernity” (172). Comparison here is not so much what Fenollosa does to Japan but what Japan does in its own process of modernization, adapting a variety of transnational forces and ideas to find what works for her.

Rebecca Walkowitz foregrounds an implicit aspect of Bush’s paper, namely, that given the critical consensus that we need to go beyond the “nation-container,” have we simply replaced that rubric with “the language-container”? Addressing her remarks to literary historians at the Modernist Studies Association, she notes that, “Speaking of poetry alone, Anglophone literary history partitions the corpus of writers who work in multiple languages, such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Fernando Pessoa, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and the contemporary multimedia artists Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries” (158). Not only that, but literary studies tends not to consider within its parameters influential works translated either into or out of the English language. If we seek understandings of the transnational, how can we afford to neglect the impact of translation on global circulations of literature, ideas, and identities? Walkowitz also draws our attention to the multidirectionality of transnational comparisons. Offering a reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, Walkowitz argues that Woolf’s move to compare England against Germany “emphasizes [. . .] the transnational networks in which violence is nurtured—and possibly remedied. Woolf’s text thus finds a compromise between emphasizing the nation (and blaming it) and emphasizing past and future ‘connections’ that are both smaller and larger than the nation” (159). Walkowitz’s reading of Woolf provides a stereoscopic view of transnational comparison, one that simultaneously holds synchronic and diachronic dimensions in view and that “generates collectivities at several scales at once” (159).

It is the multidimensionality of transnational comparison—both synchronic and diachronic—that my own contribution addresses. Discussing R. Radhakrishnan’s essay in *New Literary History* in which he delineates two temporalities/spaces at work in comparison: the utopian realm that enables a level playing field and the political realm of global and colonial histories, I extrapolate from this philosophical meditation to read Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Claude McKay’s *Banjo* in terms of a “chronotopic doubleness” that holds both the everyday realm and the utopian promises of modernity in view at once. I then conclude with a brief look at how colonial literary forms negotiate multiple scales using a case study of the 1926 South African controversy over the publication of the little magazine, *Voorslag*.

Anna Stenport’s contribution to the cluster on Comparative Modernisms invites a reconsideration of what Eurocentrism is from the standpoint of someone working on a marginal European literary tradition, namely, Scandinavian modernism. She takes to task the critical reluctance of those working on Scandinavian literature to move outside of a national or monolingual context. When Scandinavian critics look beyond the confines of, say, Sweden, it is at mainstream European contexts that they gaze and offer a straightforward center-margin influence model. Such comparative models are shorn of political, his-

torical, and geographical specificity and tend to be formalist in practice. Instead, Stenport outlines the complex composite that is Scandinavia: replete with competing languages, under-acknowledged native peoples, and divided loyalties between local, national, and transnational forces and institutions.

All told, the essays collected here reveal that transnational exchange moves in unexpected directions, with different historical sedimentations and creative appropriations and revaluations. They produce lively new forms and these forms in turn proliferate different modes of transnational exchange. Accordingly, the scholarly approaches to transnational exchange in this issue reject national, center-periphery, or strict disciplinary frameworks as they seek to understand their material. Instead, their ground breaking work probes the fault lines between language traditions, East/West and North/South divides, genders and sexualities, racial groups, refugees and hosts, enemies and patriots, and between competing definitions of literary movements. Such work, no doubt, redresses critical blind spots and, as Mark Wollaeger suggests, provides “a radically decentering experience” (154). This experience occurs when we follow transnationalism’s logic into how and what we know and compare. It provides a sense of intellectual restlessness: of thought, of disciplinary parameters, of probing locational and linguistic sedimentations. And it will, without a doubt, spark new avenues of inquiry and open new fields of investigation for further discussion and exchange.

Laura Winkiel  
University of Colorado Boulder

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, “Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in *Minor Transnationalisms*, eds. Lionnet and Shih (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> All page citations for the essays appearing in this *ELN* issue are given parenthetically within the text.

<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World,” *Textual Practice* 10, no. 2 (1996): 245.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethic of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 5.

<sup>10</sup> The website and online version of *English Language Notes* contains an audio file of the live roundtable and subsequent question and discussion session. We are fortunate to have the verbal participation of Eric Hayot, Susan Andrade, and Susan Stanford Friedman captured in this file. The audio file can be accessed at <http://www.colorado.edu/English/eln>.

Copyright of English Language Notes is the property of English Language Notes and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

# SINOPHONE PRODUCTION AND TRANS POSTCOLONIALITY: SEX CHANGE FROM MAJOR TO MINOR TRANSNATIONAL CHINA

---

HOWARD CHIANG

In the early 1990s, when the field of queer studies was just beginning to acquire some formality in the North American academy, East Asian cultures escaped much of the scholarly debates on gender and sexual identity politics. These debates questioned the inertness and stability of identity categories across time and space, and renowned participants, including David Halperin, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler, drew on literary and historical examples to expose the limits of the analytical labor performed by such concepts as “women” and “gay and lesbian.”<sup>1</sup> At that critical juncture, the kind of genealogical history narrated by Michel Foucault and endorsed by his followers proved to be an indispensable source of methodological innovation for queer studies.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of adhering to a strong historicism, according to Halperin, is “to accede, through a calculated encounter with the otherness of the past, to an altered understanding of the present—a sense of our own non-identity to ourselves—and thus to a new experience of ourselves as sites of potential transformation.”<sup>3</sup> Yet even after Sedgwick’s eloquent critique of the Foucauldian genealogical method, the terms of the debates on queer identity and alterity rarely navigate beyond the parameters of American and European cultures.<sup>4</sup>

English-language scholarship on queer subjects in Asia began to grow in a more conspicuous and systematic manner starting in the mid-1990s. The field’s emerging thematic focus on border/boundary crossing, diaspora, and connections and commonalities across Asia is more weighted toward the discipline of anthropology and the sub-region of Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> The two classic studies of same-sex sexuality in East Asia remain Bret Hinsch’s *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* (1992) on imperial China and Gregory Pflugfelder’s *Cartographies of Desire* (2000) on early modern Japan.<sup>6</sup> As the other contributors to this topical cluster rightly point out, recent scholarship in this field tends to resist the assumption that the “West” occupies an ontological status of originality or authenticity in the production and transformations of gender and sexual order in the world.<sup>7</sup> I have argued elsewhere that this perspective may obscure more than it illuminates the history of the global circulation and transmission of systems of sexual knowledge. This is so because it risks some degree of self- or re-Orientalization, by which I mean an intentional project that continually defers to an “alternative modernity” and essentializes non-Westernness (e.g., “Chineseness”) by assuming the genealogical status of that derivative copy of an “original” Western moderni-

ty is somehow always already hermeneutically sealed from the historical apparatus of Westernization.<sup>8</sup> In a slightly different spirit, Anjali Arondekar has recently argued with penetrating insight with respect to colonial Indian sexuality that the field of postcolonial queer studies still “fixes sexuality within a short-lived history in which the materialities of colonialism and empire emerge as mere referents, rather than terrains of thick description.”<sup>9</sup> For Chinese queer studies, these thick descriptions cannot rely on close readings of recent literary production alone (an example of which can be found in Petrus Liu’s recent essay “Why Does Queer Theory Need China?”), but they will emerge more colorfully and meaningfully from in-depth analyses, structuring, periodization, and narration of non-fictionalized historical events.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, I would like to address the overlapping problems of what a geographical focus on Chinese East Asia can do for queer studies and how to redress this regional focus in a way far more richly layered with historical nuance. Scholars know a fair amount now about the changing meanings of sex, gender, and the body due to the introduction of Western sexology and biomedicine in Republican China, which is my area of expertise, and scholars also know something of the lives and cultures of Chinese queers in contemporary Hong Kong, People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, and even London, which are the geographic specializations of the other participants of this topical cluster.<sup>11</sup> For sexuality and queer studies, the transnational approach seems especially adequate. As historian Joanne Meyerowitz has recently commented in an *American Historical Review* forum on “Transnational Sexualities”: “Sexual behavior, in some of its more common forms, is fundamentally about interconnection, and it is not unusual for sexual actors to transgress the boundaries constructed to constrain them.”<sup>12</sup> But what might we gain from paying closer attention to the transnational flows of capital, commodities, words, and people and the transregional networks and circuits of queer epistemology that transcend the localized particulars within East Asia?

My current research on sex change focuses on China, but it nonetheless convinced me that the history of the science and transformation of sex were inextricably transnational. The First Opium War (1839–1842) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) stimulated renewed Chinese interest in Western military technology, leading to a more systematic translation of Western science during the Self-Strengthening Movement (circa 1860s to 1890s). Western missionaries made their own science translations, and missionary doctors such as Benjamin Hobson (1816–1873), John G. Kerr (1824–1891), John Dudgeon (1837–1901), and John Fryer (1839–1928) published treatises that introduced Western-style anatomy in major urban regions along coastal China.<sup>13</sup> At first, their effort met great resistance from Chinese medical practitioners, as most Chinese patients were not particularly receptive to the practice of Western-style surgery. The situation changed dramatically after the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895).<sup>14</sup> Western anatomical knowledge, including the anatomical discourse of sex and sexual difference, was embraced and even promoted by Chinese modernizing intellectuals in the Republican period (1911–1949).<sup>15</sup> The gradual spread of this

Western biomedical epistemology of sex from elite medical circles to vernacular popular cultures crescendoed in the aftermath of the New Culture Movement (1915–1919).<sup>16</sup> Western biological concepts of sex and sexological vocabularies such as “homosexuality” gained wide currency in and came to reflect the modernizing impulse of the Chinese mass circulation press from the 1920s to the 1940s.<sup>17</sup> Those decades were, to quote historian Frank Dikötter, China’s “age of openness”: “People, things and ideas moved from in and out of the republican era, as global flows fostered an unprecedented degree of diversity which has yet to be appreciated in standard history textbooks: globalization, rather than revolution, appears—with the benefit of hindsight—to have been the driving force of the half-century before the Cold War.”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most significant feature of this period’s global sexual culture is the shift to a new vision of sex as something malleable. The idea of hormones gave Chinese biologists and social commentators a new scientific basis for discussing gender and the human body. They appropriated from Western endocrinologists the theory of universal bisexuality, which posits that everyone is partly male and partly female.<sup>19</sup> This chemical and quantitative definition of sex was supported by findings coming from selected laboratories in America and Europe, especially in Vienna, where famous animal sex reversal experiments were conducted and whose intriguing results reached a worldwide community of biologists.<sup>20</sup> As Chinese scientists began to entertain the possibility of sex transformation based on these foreign ideas and experimental findings, they referred to indigenous examples of reproductive anomalies—such as human hermaphrodites and eunuchs—as epistemological points of reference, and, most importantly, they re-described these old phenomena in a new language of binary biological sexes. Whereas the masculine identity of eunuchs was never an explicit issue of contention in imperial China,<sup>21</sup> their image as de-masculinized “third sex” figures contributed to the growing popular perception of China as a “castrated civilization” in modern Chinese historiography.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the depiction of these castrated men as out of sync with the Chinese body politic writ large in the early twentieth century both reflected and constructed the reciprocal relationship between the demise of such long-standing corporeal practices as castration (in addition to footbinding) alongside their cultural valence, on the one hand, and the rise of a new Western biomedical model of sex and the human body as a marker of cultural modernity on the other.<sup>23</sup>

Because my discussion of the history of sex change so far involves the global circulation and transmission of sexual knowledge, I consider this history a story inherently about “major” transnational China. It is a story about major transnational China also because it narrates the intellectual conflicts and epistemic violence on one of the most seemingly natural, universal, and uncontested terrains of human knowledge—sex (and sexuality)—in the period of China’s struggle to enter the global system of nation-states. But the history of sex change in China does not end there. Having refused the teleological burden of modern formulations of sexuality (that is, consciously resisting the temptation of applying taken-for-granted ideas about sexuality in the modern era to an earlier, different historical context), I

have not identified my project as a study of the history of transsexuality in China. A topical emphasis on “transsexuality” per se inevitably confines the architecture of this Sinological project to be built around ideas already derived from twentieth-century Western biomedicine, especially those coming from psychiatry, endocrinology, and surgery. Rather, as a critical historian, my task ought to be and is to *historicize* the epistemological configuration of transsexuality by situating its emergence in a broader historical trajectory of Chinese cultural modernity—where I end with what I call “minor” transnational China.

In the 1950s, after the Republican state was forced to relocate its base, news of the success of native doctors in converting a man into a woman made headlines in Taiwan. Considered by many as the “first” Chinese transsexual, Xie Jianshun was also frequently heralded as the “Chinese Christine.” This allusion to the American ex-G.I. transsexual celebrity at the time, Christine Jorgenson, reflects the growing influence of American culture on the Republic of China at the height of the Cold War. But was Xie Jianshun a transsexual? In terms of medical intervention and his anatomical transformation, perhaps we can loosely label him so, as a man converted into a woman. However, in terms of the modern notion of transsexual *identity*, Xie’s experience was significantly shaped by the cultural authority of medical discourse and the discursive effect of the popular press. One might even say that a transsexual subjectivity of sorts was imposed upon him by doctors and reporters who labeled him the “Chinese Christine” and anyone who called him a *bianxing ren* (“transsexual”).

In Xie’s early publicity, doctors often spoke of a hidden “female” sex. In contrast, the press provided a cultural space for him to articulate a past heterosexual romantic life and the desire of *not* wanting to change his sex in a masculinist voice. Early on, both medical and popular discourses actually took on a rather neutral position in discussing his psychological gender. Both discourses were fundamentally reoriented, however, by the time of his first operation. The pre-op coverage of the details of his first surgery only foreshadowed a highly sensational outcome—the characterization of Xie as the “Chinese Christine,” the first transsexual in Chinese society. By elevating Xie’s status of iconicity in terms of being the object of medical gaze and the specimen of cultural dissection, both medical and popular discourses foreclosed any remaining spaces of epistemic ambiguity concerning Xie’s “innate” sex, gender, and sexuality. After his first surgery, Xie was destined to become a woman. Or, more aptly put, he became nothing but a transsexual star like America’s Christine Jorgenson. Within a week, the characterization of Xie changed from an average citizen whose ambiguous sex provoked uncertainty and anxiety throughout the nation, to a transsexual cultural icon whose fate would indisputably contribute to the global staging of Taiwan on par with the United States.

The saga of Xie Jianshun and other sex change reports that filled the pages of the Taiwanese press in the following two decades exemplify the emergence of transsexuality as a form of modern sexual embodiment in Chinese society. In a different way, they also illustrate how the Republican government regained sovereignty in postwar Taiwan by inheriting and

embracing a Western biomedical epistemology of sex from the Japanese colonial regime. The juxtaposition between postwar Taiwan and Hong Kong serves as a good entrée into the complexity of colonialism—including its uneven developments and social consequences—in varying parts of East Asia. Whereas Japanese colonialism played a decisive role in the rapid introduction of Western biomedicine to Taiwan, British colonialism was instrumental for establishing Hong Kong as a cultural haven when other parts of mainland China were strictly governed by a socialist state (e.g., during the Cultural Revolution). Together, the quick technology transfer of Western biomedicine and the availability of a fairly open social and cultural milieu enabled the Sinophone articulations of transsexuality to emerge first and foremost across the postcolonial Pacific Rim.

This phenomenon constitutes what I mean by “trans postcoloniality”: the formation of a politics of postcoloniality defined around the historical terms under which the temporalities and spatialities of postwar *trans*-nationalism that helped shape the geopolitical contours of Greater China coincided with the condition of possibility for the emergence of modern *trans*-sexual subjects across the Pacific Rim. This “trans” historical convergence relies on the notion of the “Sinophone” as an amended analytic category for “Chinese” and “Chinese diaspora,” both of which have been the dominant frame for the study of various Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside of or on the margins of China, including the Asian American. The story of Xie Jianshun must be identified with the broader horizon of “Sinophone” production, because its epistemological–historical pillars come from outside the geopolitical China proper, including the legacies of Japanese post-colonialism, American neo-imperialism, and Taiwan’s cultural (which, in turn, was driven by economic) affiliations with other sub-regions of Cold War East Asia, such as Hong Kong and Japan.<sup>24</sup> According to Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, the transnational “can be less scripted and more scattered” and “is not bound by the binary of the local and the global and can occur in national, local, or global spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities.”<sup>25</sup> If “China” and “Chineseness” have indeed evolved over the course of the history of sex change outlined above, the changes over time we witness in this history have less to do with the “coming out” of transsexuals, than with the shifting transnationalism of queer Chinese cultures: from the growing global hegemony of Western conceptions of lifehood and sexuality in *major* transnational China to the rhizomic interactions of geopolitical forces, historical conditions, and cross-cultural contours in *minor* transnational China.

My general argument has been that in order to fully capture the history of sex change in modern China, one needs to account for the demise of eunuchs as much as the emergence of transsexuals, to chronicle events and processes of change as much as to theorize the genealogy of sex change and the historicity of transsexuality. If our perspective is flexible enough to be able to vacillate between the vertical and the horizontal, transnationalism appears to be neither always nor necessarily a top-down homogenizing force, but can very much operate as a bottom-up heterogenizing vector. One of the shortcomings of queer theory lies in its frequent inability to offer meaningful vocabularies that cut across both the



global and the local in order to adequately register the queer otherness of non-Western cultures. But perhaps the problem also lies in the predominant mode of analysis in queer studies that oftentimes lacks in-depth historical insights. On such topics as the evolving meaning and transregional politics of Chineseness and gender modernity, queer studies can benefit from a more historically-sensitive approach to situating the roots of global queer formations in the intercultural articulations of desire and the rhizomic interactions of minor transnational cultures “from below.”

Simply put, focusing critically on a non-Western region alone is insufficient for the theoretical and empirical enrichment of global queer studies. As the example of Chinese transsexuality shows, in order to delineate its proper genealogical context we must also develop such analytical-conceptual portals as “Sinophone production” and “trans postcoloniality,” which help clarify not only the subcultural formations but also the *historical origins* of Chinese queer subjectivity, epistemology, and embodiment. It is in this spirit that I hope readers can leave this topical cluster being more attuned to the possibility of how Chineseness, queerness, and transnationalism can mutate across geospatially-bound temporalities and different Sinophone sites of potential subversion.

Howard Chiang  
Princeton University

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (London and New York: Routledge, 1986); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 15.

<sup>4</sup> For Sedgwick’s critique, see Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 44–48. For a critique of the shortcomings of transnational histories of sexuality, see Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1–34.

<sup>5</sup> Megan Sinnot, “Borders, Diaspora, and Regional Connections: Trends in Asian ‘Queer’ Studies,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010): 17–31.

<sup>6</sup> Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Gregory M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*; Fran Martin and Larissa Heinrich, eds., *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006); Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Wenqing Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900–1950*

(Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009); and Loretta Ho, *Gay and Lesbian Subculture in Urban China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Howard Chiang, "Epistemic Modernity and the Emergence of Homosexuality in China," *Gender and History* 22, no. 3 (2010): 629–57. For a recent reflection on the problem of Chinese self- or re-Orientalization, see Chu Yiu-Wai, "The Importance of Being Chinese: Orientalism Reconfigured in the Age of Global Modernity," *boundary 2* 35 (2008): 183–206. For an informative set of essays dealing with the problem of "alternative modernity" in the context of modern Chinese history, see Madeleine Yue Dong and Joshua Goldstein, eds., *Everyday Modernity in China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Petrus Liu, "Why Does Queer Theory Need China?" *positions: east asia cultures critique* 18, no. 2 (2010): 291–320.

<sup>11</sup> See Howard Chiang, "The Conceptual Contours of Sex in the Chinese Life Sciences: Zhu Xi (1899–1962), Hermaphroditism, and the Biological Discourse of *Ci* and *Xiong*, 1920–1950," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 2, no. 3 (2008): 401–30; Chiang, "Epistemic Modernity"; Howard Chiang, "Liberating Sex, Knowing Desire: *Scientia Sexualis* and Epistemic Turning Points in the History of Sexuality," *History of the Human Sciences* 23, no. 5 (2010): 42–69; Helen Hok-Sze Leung, *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008); Hongwei Bao, "'Queer Comrades': Gay Identity and Politics in Postsocialist China" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2010); Fran Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film, and Public Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003); Fran Martin, *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and Travis S. K. Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi, and Golden Boy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, "Transnational Sex and U.S. History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1274.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, David Wright, *Translating Science: The Transmission of Western Chemistry into Late Imperial China, 1840–1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); and Larissa Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body between China and the West* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> See Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Benjamin Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> The emphasis of my project on Western impact can be read as a direct response to a concluding comment made by Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom in the introduction to their groundbreaking anthology, *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities*: "An interesting historical question, then, is to what degree has contact with the West and its notion of gender influenced Chinese gender in the last two centuries?" Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities," in *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, eds. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>17</sup> Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 99–126; Kang, *Obsession*, 41–59; Chiang, "Epistemic Modernity."

<sup>18</sup> Frank Dikötter, *The Age of Openness: China before Mao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Nelly Oudshoorn, *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archeology of Sex Hormones* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Chandak Sengoopta, *The Most Secret Quintessence of Life: Sex, Glands, and Hormones, 1850–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Jay, "Another Side of Chinese Eunuchs History: Castration, Marriage, Adoption, and Burial," *Canadian Journal of History* 28, no. 3 (1993): 459–78.

<sup>22</sup> Brownell and Wasserstrom, "Introduction," 26–27; Melissa Dale, "Understanding Emasculation: Western Medical Perspectives on Chinese Eunuchs," *Social History of Medicine* 23, no. 1 (2010): 38–55; Howard Chiang, "The (After)Life of an Embodied Imaginary: How China Became a 'Castrated Civilization' and Eunuchs a 'Third Sex,'" in *Transgender China*, ed. Howard Chiang (Palgrave, forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> On the historical demise of footbinding, see Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> For a programmatic view of the contours and definitions of Sinophone studies, see Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and the essays in Jing Tsui and David Der-wei Wang, eds., *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, "Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally," in *Minor Transnationalism*, eds. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 5–6.

Copyright of English Language Notes is the property of English Language Notes and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

# GETTING OVER IT: THINKING BEYOND THE HETERO(GENIZING)/HOMO(GENIZING) DIVIDE IN TRANSNATIONAL SEXUALITY STUDIES

---

FRAN MARTIN

In his 2004 review of *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, Raymond Wei-cheng Chu, a queer studies scholar at National Taiwan University, laid down a challenge to the conceptual rubric that not only framed that particular volume's treatment of transnationalism and queer cultures, but arguably had also shaped a majority of work in the area since the topic began to rise to prominence in the humanities and social sciences around the mid-1990s. Chu queried the relevance of *Mobile Cultures'* central interest in "whether the impact of globalization is homogenizing—in its spread of a certain kind of (sub)cultural formations and identity politics that model on the metropolitan l/g/q existence—or in effect 'glocalizing'—in that any global trends, hegemonic as they are, inevitably hybridize as they become localized and indigenized."<sup>1</sup> He pointed out that "what is disturbing about this polemical framework is its conspicuous *tangentiality* to the various local subject cultures covered in the volume," which appeared unconcerned with the debate as set out in these terms.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Chu notes, "concerned only with the local adaptability of global influences and any possible pitfalls in their indigenous application, local l/g/q cultures basically favor globalization because its hegemony offers facilitating resources that are hard to come by domestically."<sup>3</sup> As a co-editor of *Mobile Cultures* and a researcher whose other work in the field had also been centrally shaped by the framework that Chu questions, this critique came to me as something of a light-bulb moment. Clearly, Chu was right: while the initial questions raised when framing transnational sexualities *from a global perspective* were logically questions concerning the local "effects" of the increased transnational mobility of media, ideologies, subcultures, and identities, nevertheless by the time Chu's review came out, the old debates about homogenization (globalization) versus heterogenization (glocalization) were beginning to feel somewhat inadequate, if not verging on hidebound.

Looking back over those debates,<sup>4</sup> I do still feel in most instances more persuaded by perspectives—like Helen Leung's, in this section—that are attuned to the potential complexity of heterogenized, glocalized sexual cultures than by the inherently abstracting, generalizing perspective of sexual globalization as homogenization. But what strikes me now is that the trouble with framing the issue in these terms is that the question being asked—which boils down to a question about what effects transnationalism tends, usually, to have on local sexual cultures—is inherently a generalizing question. Even if one draws on specific, local case

studies to come down on the side of the heterogenizing, or glocalizing, argument, nonetheless one's response to the question necessarily remains framed in the abstracted terms of the question itself. "Local sexual cultures are *generally* specific and heterogeneous"—the logical contradiction brings to mind Sedgwick's sly observation of the paradoxical ahistoricism of Jameson's commandment *always* to historicize.<sup>5</sup> Organized as it has been for over a decade by the logic of this question about sameness versus difference, the field of transnational sexuality studies tends to remain magnetized by it: it can prove difficult to extricate one's thinking from its force field. Nonetheless I think such a move is necessary and want to suggest that one way this could be achieved is by changing the question to one more aligned with the spirit of Chu's critique: no longer "How is cultural globalization reducing or increasing the plurality of sexual cultures worldwide?" but rather, more broadly, "What are the various kinds of globalism *doing for people* involved in specific, geographically dispersed cultures of sexuality?" In what follows, I want to think about this question in two aspects: first, in relation to globalism as an imaginative resource; second, in relation to globalism as an assemblage of material regulatory structures whose impacts must be engaged in specific national contexts.

In two recent research projects, one about the social function of Chinese-language lesbian-themed Internet sites, the other about the reception of Japanese "boys' love" (BL) manga (comics) in Taiwan, I have focused on what I call imaginative transnationalism, which is a type of imaginative geography.<sup>6</sup> Valentine defines the latter concept as referring to "how we imagine space and its boundaries, how we imagine whose space it is, and how we construct 'self' and 'other.' [. . .] [Cultural geographies] are produced and reproduced in everyday life as a result of individual as well as collective actions."<sup>7</sup> Relatedly, Appadurai has observed that under conditions of accelerating globalization, the imagination—particularly the imagination of forms of geographic space such as regions composed of inter-relating nations and localities—takes on a newly prominent social role.<sup>8</sup> My focus on imaginative transnationalism is about asking how elsewheres—"the world"; "Japan"—are thought about and imaginatively constituted locally, often in the service of elaborating local queer selves and scenes. Thus, instead of asking about any possible material or structural effect that the transnationalization of cultures may have on local sexual scenes, this approach is a "low-flying" one that attempts to see the global or the transnational—as ideas rather than as concrete, actually existing entities—from the point of view of particular local scenes.<sup>9</sup> The approach has something in common with Xiaomei Chen's work in *Occidentalism* about Chinese imaginings of "the West" and the cultural work that such imaginings achieved in post-Mao China. It is also an approach taken by Bobby Benedicto in his research on the imagination of "gay globality" from the point of view of the bright lights gay scene in Manila, and it is implied in Travis Kong's work in this section on the tensions and limits of the cosmopolitan *tongzhi* dream for China's rural migrant money boys.<sup>10</sup> I sense (and hope) that this approach may constitute an emerging trend in transnational queer studies.

Through my Internet study, which analysed the results of a qualitative Internet survey answered by 116 “lesbian” (*nütongzhi*, *nütong*, *lazi*, *lala*, *T*, *lez* . . .) identifying respondents across PRC China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the worldwide Chinese diaspora, I found that while for many of these respondents a sense of *cultural* affinity with people situated geographically elsewhere within the global cartography of “Chineseness” was quite problematic (a point echoed in Helen Leung’s contribution to this section), in contrast, identification with the *sexual* category of same-sex attracted femininity (*nütong*, *lala*, etc.) appeared to be linked with an affective experience of interconnection on a global scale. A thirty-two-year-old journalist in Wuhan wrote: “as a lesbian [*nütongzhi*], I feel that lesbians [*nütong*] the world over are as one; as a *tongzhi*, I feel that *tongzhi* the world over (regardless of whether male or female) are as one.” A fifteen-year-old student in Taipei told me: “even though right now I only use Chinese-language lesbian websites in Taiwan, I still feel like I’m part of a worldwide lesbian community, because all of us as individual units are united by this grouping.” A thirty-two-year-old entertainment worker from China in Kagawa, Japan: “I’ve never used lesbian [*nütong*] websites in languages other than Chinese, but this definitely doesn’t hinder my own sense of identification as a lesbian [*nütongzhi*], which transcends nationality and race.” A twenty-two-year-old import-export worker in Guangzhou: “Even though I don’t use English websites, I still feel part of a global lesbian [*nütongzhi*] community. As a lesbian, I only feel that I am different from heterosexual women, toward other lesbians I have a kind of unconscious friendly feeling—I feel that lesbians the world over are all one big family.”<sup>11</sup> These responses make it clear that the “global feeling” of *nütong* interconnection is not perceived as stemming post hoc from the use of Internet communication: rather, it seems to inhere somehow within the sexual identification *nütong* (or *lala*, or *lez*) itself.

One aspect that my earlier paper on this project was unable to analyse in detail was the domination of respondents’ verbal framing of this “global feeling” of worldwide lesbian community by a very particular metaphor—that of the family (*jia*)—which lends their globalist discourse a certain culturally particular flavor. This “*jia*-ism” is reflected in the frequent repetition of phrases and claims such as: that the mainland Chinese lesbian Internet is a “spiritual home” (*jingshen jiayuan*);<sup>12</sup> that using the Chinese-language lesbian Internet was “like finding my own home” (*jia*);<sup>13</sup> that “lesbians the world over are one big family” (*yi jia ren*);<sup>14</sup> that “after participating in online lesbian forums for a long time, we begin to care about each other; it begins to feel like a family” (*yi jia ren*);<sup>15</sup> that using the Chinese-language lesbian internet “gives you a sense of belonging (*guishugan*), like finding your own family (*zijide jiaren*);<sup>16</sup> that the Chinese-language lesbian Internet is “one big family, regardless of region” (*da jiating*);<sup>17</sup> that “after all, lesbians the world over are one big family!” (*yi jia*);<sup>18</sup> that “homosexuals don’t care where you’re from; wherever you go, we’re all family” (*yi jia*);<sup>19</sup> and that “we [Chinese-speaking lesbians] are a big family, all for one and one for all.”<sup>20</sup> Fascinatingly, then, for this group of women, the familialist discourse does not frame primarily their experience of Chinese cultural or ethnic identity—as it does, for example, for the transnationally mobile Chinese businesspeople studied by Aihwa Ong—but

instead frames their experience of sexual identity. The *jia*-ism that has often been observed as a feature of contemporary Chinese public discourse becomes a rhetorical frame for their sense of worldwide sexuality-based community: a culturally particular language expresses a feeling of global interconnection. There is a definite logic to this substitution of one imagined family for another. Painfully excluded as their online discussions revealed them to be from the central rituals and duties of blood-family—notably marriage and reproduction—Chinese same-sex loving women, like Western gay and lesbian people, construct networks of “alternative family” in community. It thus makes sense that their affective experience of familial-style belonging should be expressed most frequently in relation to sexual community, both material and imagined, and neither in relation to blood family nor in relation to ethnic, national, or cultural “Chineseness,” which tends to carry heavily familialist associations, with racial or cultural reproduction very frequently constructed through heterosexual familial metaphors of “continuing the family line,” and so on, as in the “one big family” of Chineseness discourse.<sup>21</sup> For these respondents, the familially imagined globalism activated through the combination of sexual identification and Internet communication becomes a powerful affective resource to draw on when facing local level everyday life struggles arising from exclusion from the dominant forms of familialist ideology and practice.

If detailed attention to transnational imaginaries at the local or micro level represents one means of responding to the question of what do forms of globalism do for people located in particular places, another response is to examine structural formations of transnationalism at the macro level.<sup>22</sup> I have in mind here, for example, Josephine Chuen-juei Ho’s trenchant critique of the juridification of sexual life in Taiwan as an indirect consequence of global governance, and Mark McLelland’s work on the proposed mandatory Internet filter in Australia for the “protection” of the population from vaguely defined “harmful” sexual material.<sup>23</sup> Such work maps the material traces of globalizing forms of cultural governance aimed at increasing the penetration of legal regulation into the realm of sexuality. Ho, for example, traces the uptake of a rhetoric of child protection among conservative Christian and women’s groups in Taiwan and shows the influence that such groups are able to wield over legislative processes, resulting in a suite of new legal restrictions on various forms of sexual practice and representation. To take a specific example: in mid-2005, a new “Measure Governing the Ratings Systems of Publications and Pre-recorded Video” saw a huge percentage of queer themed books subject to restriction to readers over eighteen years of age by means of shrink-wrapped plastic covers, “Readers must be over 18” stickers, and relocation to restricted sections of bookshops.<sup>24</sup> The aim of the measure was to carve out a category closed to minors but accessible to over-18s: an “indecent” category in between “general” and “obscene” (the latter prohibited under criminal law). This new category included “those things that through language, text, dialogue, sound, graphics or photographs depict sexual behaviour, indecent plots or naked human sex organs, but not to a degree that would cause shame or abhorrence to an average adult.”<sup>25</sup> At first glance, the measure may appear innocuous enough: not an instance of outright banning of mate-



rials, but rather only their restriction to an adult readership. But because the definition of indecency is so vague, and because the measure leaves the onus on publishers and retailers themselves to classify and appropriately mark publications, they tend to self-police, and are unlikely to risk stocking materials that *could be interpreted* as “indecent” hence inviting a hefty fine and/or suspension of publication rights for up to a year. Ho points out that developments such as the implementation of the new ratings system may be seen as intrinsically linked to transnational developments, as Taiwan’s government strives to bring its international image into line with benchmarks set by inter-governmental organizations such as, most relevantly here, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>26</sup> She demonstrates how local conservative NGOs are able to work in concert with the DPP government’s continuing anxieties over Taiwan’s lack of nation-state status and concomitant desire to be seen to bring the island’s laws into line with international benchmarks, in order to push forward a series of new legal measures regulating local cultural production; among them, the new ratings system.

Whilst at the micro end of the scale, situated analyses of imaginative transnationalism like those discussed above offer one way out of the old local/global polemic, I believe that such analyses also need to be supplemented with more macro-scale work like Ho’s, which attends to the very real ways in which globalizing structures of regulation are materially shaping the conditions under which sexual cultures flourish (or, as in the case outlined above, are actively discouraged from flourishing). Writing the current essay in Melbourne in 2010, the issue of responses by national governments to such transnational trends in cultural and sexual regulation could not be more pressing, as the governing Australian Labor Party continues to defend its plan to institute a nationwide ISP-level Internet filter to protect the populace from the effects of harmful material, including “child abuse material” — a category into which many of the fictional cartoon texts I discuss in my current work on fan cultures of BL manga would fall, according to the category’s extremely broad and fuzzy definition.<sup>27</sup> As McLelland observes in his critique of the proposed filter, its implementation would effectively kill off both Australian BL fan communities and the critical scholarship that interprets them. Attacking as they do both the lifeblood of minority sexual cultures and our own work as engaged researchers of those cultures, these are transnationally motivated national developments that we cannot afford to ignore.

Fran Martin  
University of Melbourne

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wei-cheng Raymond Chu, Review of *Mobile Cultures*, *Cultural Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (September 2004), 195.

<sup>2</sup> Chu, *Review*, 195.

<sup>3</sup> Chu, *Review*, 196.

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of which, see *Mobile Cultures* Introduction, 5–7.

<sup>5</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; Or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think this Introduction is About You,” in Sedgwick, ed., *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>6</sup> I focus below on the Internet study. Martin, “That Global Feeling: Sexual Subjectivities and Imagined Geographies in Chinese-language Lesbian Cyberspaces” in Mark McLelland and Gerard Goggin, eds., *Internationalizing Internet Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2009). A preliminary paper arising from the manga readership study can be found in Martin, “Comics as Everyday Theory: The Counterpublic World of Taiwanese Women Fans of Japanese Homoerotic *Manga*,” in Katrina Schlunke and Nicole Anderson, eds., *Cultural Theory and Everyday Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); the longer paper dealing explicitly with these readers’ imagination of “Japan,” titled “Girls Who Love Boys’ Love: BL as Goods to Think with in Taiwan,” is forthcoming in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Gill Valentine, “Imagined Geographies: Geographical Knowledges of Self and Other in Everyday Life,” in Doreen Massey, John Allen and Philip Sarre, eds., *Human Geography Today* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>8</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 1–19.

<sup>9</sup> On “low-flying” approaches to culture, see Aihwa Ong, “Introduction: Neoliberalism as Exception, Exceptions to Neoliberalism,” in Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 12–13.

<sup>10</sup> Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Benedicto, “Bright Lights, Gay Globality: Mobility, Class and Gay Life in Twenty-First Century Manila.” PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> All of these interviews were conducted via e-mail by the author in 2003 and 2004. Respondents remained anonymous hence there is no name attribution for quotes for participants. Responses are discussed in detail in Martin, “That Global Feeling.”

<sup>12</sup> A twenty-two-year-old student in Changsha.

<sup>13</sup> A twenty-six-year-old service industry worker in Dongguan, Guangdong.

<sup>14</sup> A twenty-six-year-old exhibition worker in Beijing.

<sup>15</sup> A twenty-two-year-old import-export worker in Guangzhou.

<sup>16</sup> A twenty-one-year-old student in Chongqing.

<sup>17</sup> A twenty-five-year-old advertising company employee in Zhongshan, Guangdong.

<sup>18</sup> A twenty-seven-year-old consultant in Taipei.

<sup>19</sup> A nineteen-year-old student in Yingge, Taipei County.

<sup>20</sup> A thirty-year-old Chinese assistant professor in upstate New York; first part of response originally in English.

<sup>21</sup> On Chinese familialist discourse, see Ong, “Anthropology, China and Modernities: The Geopolitics of Cultural Knowledge,” in *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, ed. Henrietta P. Moore (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 60–93; on Chinese familialism in relation to homosexuality, see Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 57–71 and 119–21; and Chris Berry, “Asian Values, Family Values: Film, Video and Lesbian and Gay Identities,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 40, nos. 3–4 (2000): 211–32.

<sup>22</sup> Material in this section is drawn in part from my in-progress article, “Girls Who Love Boys’ Love: BL as Goods to Think with in Taiwan.”

<sup>23</sup> Ho, “Queer Existence Under Global Governance: A Taiwan Exemplar,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 18, no. 2 (2010): 537–54; McLelland, “Australia’s Proposed Internet Filtering System: Its Implications

for Animation, Comics and Gaming (ACG) and Slash Fan Communities," *Media International Australia* 134 (February 2010): 7–19.

<sup>24</sup> Government Information Office, Taiwan, R.O.C., "Guidelines on Printed Serial Publications Measure," <http://info.gio.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=18470&ctNode=3454>. Some material for this section of the essay also appears in Martin, "Girls Who Love Boys' Love."

<sup>25</sup> Government Information Office, "Guidelines," Clause 5 part 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ho, "Queer Existence under Global Governance: A Taiwan Exemplar."

<sup>27</sup> For a thorough and cogent critique of the Internet filter plan, see McLelland, "Australia's Proposed Internet Filtering System."

Copyright of English Language Notes is the property of English Language Notes and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

# VIGNETTES FROM HONG KONG: ON QUEER DRIFTS ACROSS BORDERS

---

HELEN HOK-SZE LEUNG

In Hong Kong, *queer* had never really caught on, not as a descriptive term, or an identity, and even less a politics. Sexual minorities are more commonly described as *tongzhi* (comrades) or by a plethora of ever-changing lively slang terms that arise out of lived experience and self-identification. None of these terms, however, carries the same valence as *queer*, which not only connotes “strangeness” but reflects an injurious history of insult and the resistant movement that turns such insult into power. The absence of *queer* in the language, however, does not mean the absence of similar kinds of critical and resistant endeavors. This essay takes a look at the not always visible efforts of those who, quite literally, go about looking for queer things. They illuminate phenomena that are rendered strange by the dictates of normality. In the process, it also becomes clear that markers of queerness are transmuted when they move across languages, legal systems, and cultures. Such movement can often be understood as “transnational,” but not always. After all, Hong Kong is not a nation, yet it retains borders of its own. Born out of colonial history, these borders are reiterated as the boundary of a Special Administrative Region of China. These are actual, defended borders erected by laws. As a result, they also produce metaphorical borders across which social, cultural, and linguistic differences thrive. The following vignettes are about cultural producers from Hong Kong who creatively perform queer drifts across these borders. Their writings exemplify different modes of “trans” engagement with queer phenomena.

## I. Simply Forget

In October, 2010, a Hong Kong court ruled against a transsexual woman’s request to marry her boyfriend. Even though her identity card designates her legal gender as “female,” her sex at birth on her birth certificate remains “male,” a status that could not be changed under existent laws. The judge ruled that a marriage must be between a “man” and a “woman,” as determined by birth certificates. Unwittingly, this ruling opens the door for a gay transsexual man, who would be deemed female by birth, to marry his boyfriend. If indeed such a case presents itself, it would challenge not only the gender status of transsexuals in marriage laws, but the status of same-sex marriage as well. In this context, the defence of gender norms in marriage actually exposes the incoherence of those norms.

What should we make of this queer state of affairs? Lyricist, writer, and scholar Yiu Fai Chow offers an intriguing answer from a transnational perspective. Moreover, he makes his case by invoking an East/West comparison but *without* replicating a hierarchical narrative of progress. As a lyricist, Chow is well known for his daring and playful disruption of gender and sexual boundaries. Some of the hits he wrote for the group Tat Ming Pair during the 1980s were amongst the first ever iterations of queer lives in Canto-pop music: “Love in the Time of the Plague” (*aizai wenyi manyan shi*) evokes the early AIDS era, while “Forget He is She” (*wanji ta shi ta*) expresses desire that thwarts gendered expectations. More recent songs such as “Eva Eva” (*xiawa xiawa*) (about two women who are attracted to each other’s sameness), “Hermaphrodite” (*cixiong tongti*) (about a desire to embody the gender of one’s lover), and “Dark Room” (*heifang*) (about an intensely pleasurable anonymous sexual encounter in a dark room) continue to portray aspects of queer lives that have never even been expressed publicly, let alone in such profound vividness, in Cantonese popular culture.

While Chow continues to write lyrics for some of the most popular musicians in Hong Kong, he has resided for more than a decade in Amsterdam, a city known for its embrace of gay and transgender rights. In an article titled “Things Can Be Very Simple,” Chow comments on the court ruling through a consideration of the two cities he calls home. He recounts that as early as 1986, the Dutch courts had allowed transsexuals to marry as their post-transition gender, something the transsexual woman in the news in Hong Kong is currently fighting for.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even after the ruling, and even after the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2001 in the Netherlands, legal challenges continue to appear, such as in a case when a person wants the right to not identify as either male or female in marriage. It appears that *as long as* marriage continues to be defined in gendered terms, one or another combination of sexual orientation and gender embodiment would misfit the terms of the law, and a case would arise to challenge its inclusiveness.

As law courts in Hong Kong explore whether they can rule in favor of the transsexual woman’s appeal, Chow suggests that it would save the system future conundrums (as has been experienced by law courts in the Netherlands) if gendered wordings in marriage laws are erased altogether. In other words, forget transsexuality and marriage, forget even same-sex marriage, simply let marriage be between two consenting adults. Chow concludes with a reference to a line in his own song: “Forget she is he is she is he . . .”<sup>2</sup> While he wishes his song had outlived its relevance, Chow laments that unfortunately it’s the laws—not only that of Hong Kong, but *also* those in the Netherlands—that have outlived theirs.

Chow’s outrageously “simple” solution is unlikely to be adopted any time soon in Hong Kong, where homophobia and transphobia remain rampant in public discourse. Yet what is most significant about Chow’s piece is his deployment of a transnational perspective that does not contrast Hong Kong and Amsterdam in hierarchical terms of conservative/progressive, backward/forward or east/west. He does not hold up the Netherlands as a shining example of what Hong Kong should aspire to become. Rather, he shows that the fail-

ures and limitations of the Netherlands can be tapped as a source of creativity for Hong Kong activists, and that queer ideas that have long been circulating in popular culture can provide inspiration for political advocacy.

## II. Bent Straight Through

Broadcaster and writer Brian Leung recently published a book of essays called *Straightly-Gay*.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese title literally means “Bent All the Way”: the word for “bent,” *luen*, is a Cantonese word that has no equivalent in Mandarin, while the expression “all the way” (*yizhi*) literally means “straight through.” The closest literal translation would thus be “Bent Straight Through.” This efficient and economic deconstruction of the supposed opposition between “bent” and “straight” is typical of Leung’s word play in the book, and in his speaking and writing style in general. A true pioneer in queer media, Leung ran the Internet site *Gay Station* throughout the 1990s and currently hosts *We Are Family*, the only radio show in mainstream broadcast that is dedicated to the discussion of queer issues. Leung’s is one of the very few loudly out voices in Hong Kong. As he writes in his book, living in a “glass closet”—i.e., living queer lives as an open secret, without ever coming out in public—is the preferred path for most artists and public figures in Hong Kong. Many do so to avoid being misrepresented in degrading ways or being slotted into rigid categories. That Leung manages to be out while eschewing those all too likely traps is a testament to his perseverance and courage. Also due some credit is his unrelentingly clever use of language. Quite simply, the speed and wit with which he bends day to day language with translinguistic and transcultural innuendo likely defeat any potential detractors’ attempts to mangle his queer viewpoints.

In his foreword to the book, filmmaker Kit Hung observes that Leung’s many pop cultural references throughout the book are exclusively Western, such as: Oscar Wilde, *Will And Grace*, Jodie Foster, Barbie, Stonewall, Proposition 8, Dan Savage, and *Sex and the City*.<sup>4</sup> One may well get the impression from reading the book that Leung has been living in North America, not Hong Kong. Hung concludes with chagrin that Leung must have found Hong Kong to be a queer cultural desert, with no significant local examples worth citing. I would like to think that when these “foreign” references roll off Leung’s rollicking prose in an endless play on innuendo comprehensible only to Cantonese speakers, he is no longer only citing Western popular culture but actively transmuted it into something local. For example, in an essay titled “A Life In Pink,” Leung offers a riff on “pink”: he recounts a “Pink Dot Day” event that celebrates International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) and an anti-bullying project “Sea Of Pink” in a British high school. These events prompt Leung to remember a celebratory event in 1997 in Hong Kong where Grace Jones sang “La Vie En Rose.” Recalling the haunting image of a “thin, familiar figure, in dark glasses and pink sweater, dancing in a life that is his and ours . . . a life in pink,” Leung ends with this lament: “Danny, wish you were here.”<sup>5</sup> Leung does not provide any context or explanation for this concluding reference: he takes for granted a local knowledge of Hong Kong popular culture, without which the ending makes little sense. Danny Chan, whose cover of “La Vie En Rose” was one of the

biggest hits in Hong Kong during the 1980s, was a wildly popular Canto-pop singer who straddled a delicate balance between his heterosexual teen idol image in the mainstream and widely known presence as a gay man in queer circles. To this day, almost two decades after his death from an overdose in 1993 at the young age of 35, he is still being buried in this glass closet, fiercely guarded by his estate that allows no public acknowledgment of his gay identity. While Leung's essay is ostensibly about pink themed international events against homophobia, its free association with the color pink ends in an oblique but deeply local expression of sadness towards the city's persistently closeted public culture.

Leung's penchant for blending transcultural references through inferences and innuendo is best exemplified by the glossary he compiles for the book: the queer related vocabulary that appears in his writing includes terms in English and Chinese, Cantonese slang, Taiwanese slang, usage from Japanese *manga*, and, in one instance, a slang term from Szechuan dialect. Furthermore, some terms involve bilingual and cross-cultural punning. An example:

*O Le*: Short for "old lesbian," generally refers to queer women over the age of 30. What is its etymology? Some queer women claim: after this age, one needs "Olay"! [referring to the Oil of Olay line of beauty products].<sup>6</sup>

Leung's book should not be taken as merely a citation of Western queer culture. The transcultural and translinguistic *mélange* which Leung so spiritedly captures and which he so gleefully creates in his book solicits an appetite that is poised to consume, absorb, and ultimately reconstitute global popular culture as a tasty and distinctly local dish.

### III. Forever Migrant

*Also A Hong Konger: Memoirs of 70s New Immigrants* is a collection of essays penned by those who, as children, migrated from mainland China to Hong Kong after 1970. The book includes an essay by Yip-Lo Lucetta Kam, a writer, activist, and scholar who has been creating, collecting, and documenting stories about queer women in Chinese communities for over a decade.<sup>7</sup> Amongst her many solo and collaborative works are *Lunar Desires*, a book of "first love stories" amongst women, an oral history project on women who love women in Hong Kong, an ethnographic study of queer women in Shanghai, as well as organizational work for the La-La Alliance which supports lesbian communities in different Chinese cities. Kam's efforts are instrumental in giving thoughtful and diverse exposure to the hitherto barely visible lives of queer women in Chinese societies. Kam's essay in *Also A Hong Konger* only hints obliquely at her queer work towards the end. However, the story that she *does* tell at length, of her experience navigating life in Hong Kong during the last thirty years, speaks volumes about another kind of queerness. Kam's memoir documents the various stages of her life in Hong Kong: as an alienated school child who barely spoke Cantonese and was insultingly dubbed a "Mainland girl" by her classmates; a high school student who received the first taste of a collective consciousness when the city showed its intense identification with the demonstrators during the months before the military crack-down in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989; a university student who witnessed the nas-



cent emergence of new social movements, the city's tortuous struggle with democratization and political reforms, and the collective search for history and identity in the period leading up to sovereignty transfer in 1997; and now, an adult with a complex sense of identity who must navigate new political realities and a new discourse of patriotism. Kam concludes with a quiet declaration that wherever she goes, she will, as echoed by the title of the essay, "forever be a migrant." From the alienation she felt as a "mainland migrant" in the 1980s to the alienation she feels now from the discourse of "patriotic love," Kam writes of the "common reality" between all forms of marginal experience, whether it stems from class, ethnicity, or sexual and gender identity: "After I experienced an earth-shattering realization about my own issues with sexuality, I finally understood the common fate that befalls all those who live on the margin. I also realized how quickly one's relation to centre and margin can shift."<sup>8</sup> What Kam's moving memoir shows us is that movement across borders, however these borders are constituted, is essentially a *queer* experience. Accepting one's status as "forever migrant" can also be a queer act of defiance, a way to live dynamically one's relation to those borders, rather than being defined and alienated by them.

These vignettes highlight the perspectives of three writers who, in unique ways, are significant and longtime contributors to queer culture, not only in Hong Kong but across multiple Chinese-speaking contexts. Their border crossing outlooks exemplify different forms of "trans" engagements with queerness: Chow offers a transnational comparison of legal treatment of transsexuality and marriage without replicating a hierarchical narrative of progress; Leung draws on globalized popular culture while using humor, innuendo, and language play to produce a distinctly local queer expression; Kam articulates the queerness of being internally displaced from *within* the boundaries of a nation and draw parallels between different experiences of marginalization. While they may all be thought of as part of a "queer Chinese" culture, even as individuals they already embody a plethora of distinct experiences across the many social, cultural, linguistic, and political borders within and across Chinese-speaking regions. Thus, if we care to look closely enough, we will find that the formulation "transnational Chinese queer" is always already a tautology, because neither "Chineseness" nor "queerness" can or should be understood within national boundaries. Illuminating this insight may well be the single most worthwhile endeavor for transnational queer Chinese studies.

Helen Hok-Sze Leung  
Simon Fraser University

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Yiu Fai Chow, "Things Can Be Very Simple" (*shiqing keyi hen jiandang*), *Ming Pao* (Mingbao), October 10, 2010, <http://ol.mingpao.com/cfm/style5.cfm?File=20101010/sta13/vze2.txt>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Leung, *Straightly Gay* (Hong Kong: Kubrick, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>7</sup> Yip-Lo Lucetta Kam, "Forever Migrant (*yongyuan de yimin*)" *Also A Hong Konger (Yeshi Xianggang ren)*, ed. Yiyi Cheng (Hong Kong: Step Forward Multimedia, 2009), 154–74.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 174.

Copyright of English Language Notes is the property of English Language Notes and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

# “QUEER COMRADES”: TRANSNATIONAL POPULAR CULTURE, QUEER SOCIALITY, AND SOCIALIST LEGACY

---

HONGWEI BAO

In April 2009, *tongzhi yi fanren* (literally “queers are also ordinary people”), one of the most popular independent LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community webcasts based in Beijing, changed its English name from “Queer as Folk Beijing” to “Queer Comrades.”<sup>1</sup> “We changed the title not only to avoid possible copyright disputes with the U.K. and North American TV series *Queer as Folk*,” the program producer Xiaogang, whom I met during my field work in Beijing, explained, “but also to emphasize the Chinese characteristics (*zhongguo tese*) of the program.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, if the former English name “Queer as Folk Beijing” suggests an association with transnational queer popular culture, an endeavor to locate Chinese queer culture in a transnational world, as well as a desire to keep LGBT people from the stereotyping and voyeuristic gazes of the mainstream media and the general public, the new name “Queer Comrades” is at once an acknowledgement of the program’s close link to transnational queer culture and a conscious departure from it. The term “comrade” conjures up a sense of alterity but also a *déjà vu* through a reference to China’s recent historical past. Juxtaposing “comrade” with the term “queer” strikes a sense of discord, irony, and subversion: can “comrades” be queer?

Together with a local gay friend, I went to a public screening of the program at a gay bar. The bar does not have a Chinese name. As its English name “the Boat” suggests, the bar is located on a boat anchored on the Liangma River in the eastern part of the city, often known as Beijing’s Embassy District. The bar was designed in a trendy style. Many of its clientele were foreign expatriates working in Beijing, either for different embassies or for international corporations, but there were local Chinese there, too. Most of them were young, middle-class, well educated, and widely travelled, and many spoke good English. People sat on the deck or in the cabin, drinking foreign brand beer such as Carlsberg and Heineken, and talking to each other in different, and sometimes shifting, languages.

One of the most interesting things about the bar was that it sometimes rocked in the water. Although tightly attached to the river bank and steadily anchored, whenever there was a large crowd boarding, or people jumping around, one could feel the boat rocking slightly. Many patrons clearly enjoyed this part of the experience and some even tried jumping around to make the boat rock more. The friend who came with me joked that the boat was the “cradle for Chinese comrades” (*zhongguo tongzhi de yaolan*). We both laughed. It was

a pun (*tongzhi* as both “comrade” and “gay”). Only people at least somewhat familiar with modern Chinese history could fully understand this witty word play and its creative appropriation of the revolutionary language designed to transform the Chinese state and the Chinese people. Since primary school, students in China have been taught China’s revolutionary history in school textbooks. This history is a linear, progressive and teleological narrative. It begins with a description of China’s “five-millennium-long” ancient civilization being disrupted by the incursion of foreign imperialists and it points to a triumphant and utopian future enabled by revolution starting from the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> This narrative ends by concluding that only the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could save China and only socialism could help China develop into a strong nation. Central to this narrative is the founding of the CCP in 1921, often portrayed as the crucial watershed in modern Chinese history. The symbolic “birth” of the CCP happened to take place on a boat.<sup>4</sup>

Admittedly, building a gay bar on a boat and naming a gay community webcast program “Queer Comrades” is symbolically interesting and even politically subversive. The ideological fissure between China’s revolutionary history and neoliberal gay consumerism is underscored by the term *tongzhi*. The term *tongzhi* is used in contemporary China in at least two senses: first, as a socialist term for “comrades”; second, as a term to refer to gay people. The first usage is deeply embedded in China’s twentieth-century revolutionary history. A well known example of this usage is the quote by Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the founder of the Republic of China: “The revolution has yet to triumph. Comrades still must work hard” (*geming shangwei chenggong, tongzhi rengxu nuli*).<sup>5</sup> In the socialist era, the term was popularly used to refer to people who share the same revolutionary ideals (*zhitong daohe*): men and women, and young and old. The term *tongzhi* replaced old, hierarchical and gendered honorifics including mister (*xiansheng*), madam (*taitai*), miss (*xiaojie*), and master (*daren*) used in the Premodern and the Republican era. *Tongzhi* is against social hierarchies; it expresses an ideal of egalitarianism and utopianism. It thus maps social relations in a new way, a way that opens the traditional family and kinship structure to relationships and connections between strangers who share the same political views, and it transforms private intimacy into a public intimacy. Thus while *tongzhi* does not privilege the self or the individual, including in terms of gender and sexuality, it is intrinsically queer in the way that it dramatizes incoherences between gender, sex, and sexuality.<sup>6</sup> The second usage of *tongzhi* to explicitly name gay identity is more recent. It was first publicly appropriated for sexual minorities by the organizers of Hong Kong’s inaugural lesbian and gay film festival in 1989 and introduced to Taiwan in 1992 when the Taipei Golden Horse International Film Festival featured a section on lesbian and gay films.<sup>7</sup> The term soon gained popularity in the transnational Chinese-speaking gay community because of, as Hong Kong queer scholar and activist Chou Wah-shan puts it, its “positive cultural references, gender neutrality, desexualization of the stigma of homosexuality, politics beyond the homo–hetero duality, and use as an indigenous cultural identity for integrating the sexual into the social.”<sup>8</sup> In Chou’s theorization, China’s *tongzhi* are different from the gay people from the West because they attach great importance to *qing* (deep sentiment or passion) instead of *xing* (sex). Instead

of “coming out,” Chou argues, *tongzhi* characteristically adopt a “coming home” strategy; that is, bringing same-sex partners home and make their parents accept them as family members.<sup>9</sup> But, as Fran Martin points out, Chou’s theorization of *tongzhi* and *tongzhi* politics is more a utopian imagination of what *tongzhi* should be like than a realistic depiction of what *tongzhi* really is.<sup>10</sup>

Gays and lesbians in transnational China appropriated the socialist term *tongzhi* in order to construct their own identities, which they often believe to be different from Western gay identities, also known as a “global gay” identity. The appropriation of the term was meant to be a parodic political subversion, reflecting the ideological divergences between people in Hong Kong, Taiwan, diasporic Chinese countries and regions, and people in the People’s Republic of China. It is important to note that on the one hand, the appropriation of the term is deeply embedded in the post-Cold War context in which the specters of the Cold War still linger; on the other, the ready adoption of the term *tongzhi* to refer to LGBT people reflects both a conscious departure from the socialist past and the desire to become fully a member of global neoliberal capitalism on the part of many members of the varied LGBT communities in Chinese-speaking contexts.

But the old socialist term “comrade” as an image of citizenship has not disappeared completely. People in China today still use the term to address each other at Chinese Communist Party conferences and in government offices and state-owned enterprises, although it is increasingly used by fewer and fewer people. When people go shopping at a state-owned department store, or ask strangers for directions, many still turn to the old term “comrade.” The use of the term “comrade” also marks an age difference, in that it is mainly used by people in their forties and above, who are more marked by memories of the socialist past. On May 15, 2007, Zhang Fang, a blogger in China, published an article titled “Without the address term *tongzhi*, what is missing in our lives?” on phoennixtv.com. The article was widely viewed and broadly discussed in the Chinese cyberspace. *Tongzhi*, according to Zhang, used to be a sacred term in the communist revolutionary era and an ordinary form of address in people’s daily lives, and has now “become a taboo and something that people are ashamed to speak of. . . . The term is now stained, contaminated, corrupted, disgraced and can no longer be used” as a result of its association with the LGBT context.<sup>11</sup>

Zhang’s conservative and pessimistic view about the queer use of the term *tongzhi* forms interesting juxtapositions with the ready adoption of the term by gays and lesbians in China. Much to Zhang’s disappointment, the term “comrade” has been used less and less in contemporary China. But the rise of an LGBT culture is certainly not the only reason for this. In fact, since the beginning of the postsocialist era, there has been a conscious erasure of the term, together with the socialist past, in China’s public discourse, the reasons for which is glossed nicely by Lisa Rofel with the phrase “allegory of postsocialism.” According to Rofel, gender and sexuality lie at the core of imagining a postsocialist modernity: it has been widely believed in China that socialism has impeded people from pursuing their natural desires, and, in the postsocialist era, it is time to liberate these repressed desires.<sup>12</sup> The

forgetting, or rather, conscious erasure, of the socialist past is central to this imagination. In China, the formation of social memories is a project engineered by the Chinese state and it constitutes the “structures of feeling” in the postsocialist era. The emergence of gay identity in postsocialist China coincides with China’s departure from its socialist past and its entry into global capitalism. The conflation of meanings in “comrade” and “gay” serves as a good exemplar to China’s postsocialist condition.

The two meanings of *tongzhi* (“comrade” and “gay”) constitute the central problematic of my argument. I have pointed out the privileging of one meaning (“gay”) over the other (“comrade”) in the popular use of *tongzhi* in contemporary China. I attribute this to contemporary China’s postsocialist condition, which is characterized by the continuing existence (and gradual erasure) of China’s socialist past and the state’s active incorporation of neoliberal capitalism. If China’s postsocialism is characterized by the synchronic noncontemporaneity of different modes of economy, political and ideological legitimacy, and cultural production, the term “queer comrades” can be seen as an articulation of forms of subjectivities, power, governmentality, and social imaginaries produced in this shift. “Queer comrades” is embedded in the context of post-Cold War neoliberal capitalism. It also challenges transnational neoliberal capitalism by conjuring up the socialist past in Maoist China and alternative social imaginaries. I propose to consider “queer comrades” as an analytic through which to examine subject, power, governmentality, social movements, and everyday life in China. I suggest that subjects in China today are not only constructed by multiple discourses but also live in shifting temporalities, for which both socialism and neoliberal capitalism are critical. While previous researchers have correctly identified the role of neoliberal capitalism in constructing desiring subjects in contemporary China, they have often neglected or undermined the impact of China’s socialist past on subject formation and desiring production. Through the study of gay identity and politics in contemporary China, I aim to illustrate how the socialist “comrade” becomes a foundation of, and indeed a catalyst for, the postsocialist gay subject, and how socialist forms of power and governmentality still reside in postsocialist bodies, desires, and identities. The discussion of “queer comrades,” as such, can offer us a more complex and nuanced understanding of identity, power, and politics in contemporary China, and open up possibilities for alternative forms of subjectivity and politics that are not limited to neoliberal capitalism.

My argument is that the particular construction of socialist subjectivity (“comrade”) has laid the historical foundation for the emergence of the postsocialist alternative sexual subjectivity (“gay”). Socialism did not die in China with the end of the Cold War; rather, it lives in today’s China as postsocialism and coexists in conjunction with transnational neoliberal capitalism. China’s revolutionary history and socialist history, controversial as they may be, have been deeply embedded in people’s lives through explicitly ideological state apparatuses such as the state monitored media and school textbooks. Western scholars tend to dismiss this embeddedness as “propaganda” even when they do not openly consider people in China to be passive receivers of messages from “above.” Although the official historical

narrative is constructed in a particular way, Chinese people's interpretations of history vary, and they use historical resources in creative, and sometimes unexpected, ways. An inquiry into media reception opens up possibilities for more complex and nuanced understandings of the state–society relationship in China. The same historical narrative that legitimizes the rule of a political party also enables ordinary people and marginalized social groups to stand up and fight for perceived rights, sometimes against the Party State.

It is useful in this context to refer to the famous paragraph from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.<sup>13</sup>

The Marxist notion of history offers us a perspective to examine the “seeming” repetition of the historical past and the appropriation of languages in history. It also points to the impact of history on the haunted present. Indeed, today's Chinese gay identity builds on the socialist “comrade” identity. The traits that rhetorically characterize the “comrades” in state history, including collectivism, voluntarism, egalitarianism, utopianism, and public intimacy, leave traces in today's Chinese gay subjectivity. In the same vein, gay politics in China today are not only influenced by transnational LGBT movements, but also draw on strategies and experiences of social movements in China's socialist era. The complicated relation between “comrade” and “gay” identities and politics in China thus deserves more attention in future research.

More importantly, Chinese gay identity and politics reflect changing social structures and increasing social inequalities and injustices in China today. Social inequality and injustice are, in fact, at the core of the Marxist theories and the socialist ideals. As my example at the beginning of this article illustrates, queer culture in China today is predominantly urban, middle-class, cosmopolitan, and closely linked to transnational queer popular culture and consumerism. It effectively excludes people from the countryside and from undeveloped regions, people who are open in sex and relationships, people with different expressions of gender, and people who engage in commercial sex. Moreover, the rhetoric of *suzhi* (quality) in queer community serves the nation state's neoliberal governmentality and reinforces social hierarchy in China today, in that the *suzhi* rhetoric is often used to legitimate social exclusions and inequalities engineered by the Chinese state.<sup>14</sup> I suggest that an examination of transnational queer culture in China should not lose sight of the context of trans-



national capitalism and neoliberalism which shapes social structures and subjectivities in China in significant ways. It is, therefore, useful to rethink the old term “comrade,” together with the socialist longing for egalitarianism, social justice, and public intimacy embedded in the concept with which we can conduct an ideological critique to transnational capitalism and neoliberalism.

Hongwei Bao

The University of Sydney

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Founded in 2007 by a group of gay men living in Beijing, *tongzhi yi fanren* is an independent LGBT webcast that aims to document queer culture and to raise public awareness on LGBT issues. The program has gained great popularity in gay communities in urban China with its wide ranging topics on LGBT issues and its light-hearted narrative style. I interviewed its founder Xiaogang for my PhD research project “*Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Politics in Postsocialist China*,” during my field work in Beijing in November 2008. Producer Xiaogang specifically pointed out that the webcast was designed differently from other LGBT media programs in China in that it documents the “healthy” (*jiankang*) and “colourful” (*duocai*) lifestyles of the LGBT people, as well as the diversity of the LGBT community. The bilingual webcast caters to a young, urban, and middle-class LGBT audience, <http://www.queercomrades.com/>

<sup>2</sup> *Tongzhi yi fanren* is a literal translation of the U.K. and North American TV series *Queer as Folk*, with which most gay people in urban China are familiar as a result of the wide circulation of the programs through the Internet and through China’s pirated DVD market. The name of the webcast *tongzhi yi fanren* was directly inspired by the TV series.

<sup>3</sup> The “revolution” here encompasses both the republican revolution, represented by the demise of the imperial Qing Dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China by the Nationalist Party government in 1911 (also known as the Xinhai Revolution), and the communist revolution, marked by the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the rule of the Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>4</sup> The event that marks the founding of the CCP is its first national conference. It was held in Shanghai’s French Concession in 1921. The conference was adjourned because of interruptions from the local police (the CCP was then considered an illegitimate party by the Nationalist Party government). The conference organizer had to change the venue and its last day session was held secretly in a boat on the South Lake (*nanhu*) in Jiaxing, Zhejiang, in south China. As such, a boat becomes a symbol for the founding of the CCP, mainland China’s longest ruling political party in power since 1949. This story has been told widely throughout China, especially through school curricula. And it has thus become a dominant feature of the Chinese imaginary that a boat is often associated with revolution.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Song Hwee Lim, *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> The genesis of the term in the LGBT context remains the subject of disagreement. For a discussion of its origin, see Song Hwee Lim, *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 189.

<sup>8</sup> Chou Wah-shan, *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (New York: Haworth Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Chou, *Tongzhi*, 15–18.

<sup>10</sup> Fran Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 32–33.

<sup>11</sup> Zhang Fang, “Meiyou le tongzhi chenghu, women shenghuo zhong shaole shenme?” (“Without the address term “comrade”, what is missing in our lives?”), from [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4c1c1962010009w3.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4c1c1962010009w3.html) (accessed July 15, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 595.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of *suzhi* in Chinese gay community, see Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 85–110; Loretta Wing Wah Ho, *Gay and Lesbian Subculture in China* (London: Routledge, 2010), 89–97.

Copyright of English Language Notes is the property of English Language Notes and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

# TRANSNATIONAL QUEER LABOR: THE “CIRCUITS OF DESIRE” OF MONEY BOYS IN CHINA

---

TRAVIS KONG

If you go to a gay bar in any big Mainland Chinese city like Beijing, Shanghai, or Shenzhen, you will find a lot of young men with fashionable haircuts, form-fitting T-shirts, and tight denim jeans combined with other accessories to conspicuously show off their fit bodies. You may be warned to watch out as some of them may be “money boys”—the local parlance for men who sell sex to other men. If you browse any gay websites, you will easily be distracted by the display of semi- or completely naked advertised male bodies, who may look like a boy next door, a pretty young fellow, a muscular stud, a sportsman, or even a “bear” that fulfills all your fantasies.

Who are these money boys and how do we understand this postsocialist labor in the context of China’s tremendous transformations over the past few decades since the reform era?<sup>1</sup> How do we understand these transient queer subjects under the thesis of transnationalism when China has become the world’s factory and increasingly of importance in the global political economy? Money boys are rural-to-urban migrants born in the reform era. They bear three stigmatized identities—rural migrant, sex worker, and men who have sex with other men—and are caught in the web of domination under the new reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and the market economy since the reform era. Money boys illustrate the contradictions in the process of liberalization, modernization, and cosmopolitanism in globalizing China.

Transnationalism captures the asymmetries of the globalization process, which is a highly uneven and spatially differential process<sup>2</sup> that reproduces powerful inclusions, exclusions, and even “inclusive exclusions”<sup>3</sup> of the seemingly multiple interconnected worlds. Transnational sexuality studies examines “scattered hegemonies,” the notion of multiple, fluid, and interlocking structures of domination—e.g., capitalism, nationalism, racism, sexism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.—which are embedded in the complicated process of globalization.<sup>4</sup> Transnational sexualities thus looks at new patterns of inequalities and contemporary resistance along the lines of class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, work, locality, etc., within and outside the nation-state.<sup>5</sup> The money boy is a figure embodying multiple intersections of “scattered hegemonies,” such as the reconfiguration of socialist ideology with neoliberalism,<sup>6</sup> which produces a massive flow of rural-to-urban migrants but deprives them of status and benefits if they live in cities; the promotion of the market economy,

including the burgeoning of the informal labor market such as the sex market which encourages young people to sell their bodies whilst criminalizing such commercial activities;<sup>7</sup> and the emergence of a new gay discourse of “cosmopolitan respectability” which rejects the old pathological gay persona but privileges a new gay subject that celebrates cosmopolitan middle-class sensibilities.<sup>8</sup> These “scattered hegemonies” have become implicated in the globalization of China and cause the multiple and interlocking lived experiences of money boys to be linked to migration, work, identity, and sexuality under the contours of transnationalism in Chinese queer studies.

My understanding of money boys is based on my continuous ethnographic research on the male sex industry in China since 2004.<sup>9</sup> I have interviewed sixty money boys in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen as well as conducted several field trips with NGO outreach teams who provide services to money boys and gay men at the venues they frequent such as parks, bars, saunas, massage parlors, etc. The three cities chosen are “zone” cities, with different degrees of political regulations, economic autonomies, and social and cultural variations. The different “zoning technologies” of each city have different detrimental effects on money boys in terms of their access to various citizenship rights, market conditions for commercial sexual activities, and different social and cultural environments responsive to sexuality.<sup>10</sup> This confirms the fact that transnational sexuality studies should pay more attention to trans-regional sensibilities within China.

Money boys, as mentioned earlier, are rural-to-urban migrants, and most of them are peasant-workers (*nonmingong*). Migration literature usually rests on the push and pull model: the shortage of land, improper land use, and the surplus of labor in rural areas *push* migrants to leave their hometowns whilst the demand for labor in urban construction and the widening rural–urban income disparity *pull* them towards cities.<sup>11</sup> I agree with other scholars who view the migration process as a project of becoming urban subjects under the reconfigured rural–urban chasm of the development discourse in globalizing China,<sup>12</sup> and also as part of the “desiring project” of joining a new society, which stresses cosmopolitanism, urbanism, modernity, and sophistication.<sup>13</sup> Migration means a lot for money boys. By migrating to cities, money boys can be free to sell themselves as a quick way to earn money, to experience a new world, to realize their gay sexuality, and to escape from their rural homophobic environment, especially from the family pressure to get married. However, they can seldom become urban citizens due to the *hukou* system, which is a household registration system implemented since 1958 and is based on locality and family background.<sup>14</sup> A rural migrant status prevents them from enjoying the same benefits as a local city resident in areas such as housing, healthcare, education for children, etc.<sup>15</sup> There are two ways for money boys to attain the status of urban citizenship—one is by becoming a sex worker with a potential earning power greater than that of an average *dagongzai* (working son).<sup>16</sup> The other is by performing a *tongzhi* identity,<sup>17</sup> since homosexuality is slowly becoming dissociated from mental illness and hooliganism and increasingly associated with cosmopolitanism and urbanism.<sup>18</sup> Yet it is precisely these two new identities that structure new forms of domination to their lives.

Although prostitution can provide monetary and other rewards (e.g., freedom, control over work, and social mobility), money boys have encountered numerous risks ranging from being caught by the police, physical and sexual violence, and the psychological discomfort of bearing a stigmatized identity, to having a short career cycle, and being situated in an unstable working environment governed by the state's policy of criminalizing prostitution.<sup>19</sup> They therefore shift continuously from one occupational setting to another (e.g., hustling at parks, working at massage parlors or brothels, or being kept by a man), from sex work to other occupations, from one city to another, and even from China to East Asian and South East Asian (e.g., Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Malaysia) sex industries.

Money boys, most of whom are gay, passionately hope to transform themselves from a provincial "backward" *nonmingong* to an urban bourgeois *tongzhi*. However, cosmopolitanism, as a result of neo-liberalism, produces strong exclusions inside the gay community.<sup>20</sup> Money boys are typically excluded by *tongzhi* as they are seen as "inappropriate" gay citizens who are not *really* gay (simply wanting to exploit *real* gay men), immoral (blurring the boundary of love and money), illegal (putting sex and work together) and provincial (being a rural-to-urban migrant). They are thus "low" *suzhi* (quality) *tongzhi* who are held to be responsible for the chaotic situations such as robbery, theft, and blackmail that frequently happen in the *tongzhi* community.<sup>21</sup>

If globalization in China produces an asymmetrical hierarchy of inclusions and exclusions that has created a strong bourgeois and cosmopolitan middle urban class, rural-to-urban peasant-workers have thus lost their privileged status as the working class heroes of the Mao era and instead have become underprivileged city outcasts of the present. If transnationalism produces a new kind of queer thinking that alters the meanings of "queer" in different lives and locations beyond the contours of nation-state politics,<sup>22</sup> "queer" in present day China no longer produces a mentally ill sick body nor a socially deviant outcast of hooliganism but a globalized and cosmopolitan *tongzhi* with clear boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, appropriateness and inappropriateness, and class privilege. *Tongzhi*, a derivative of a "global gay identity,"<sup>23</sup> serves less to promote personal identification, social solidarity, and cultural conformity than it does to divide, as it demarcates those who can fully access the cosmopolitan ideal and those who cannot along the lines of class, age, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, place of origin, etc. Chinese queer politics has to deal with discriminations and social disapprovals from the society at large as well as from within the *tongzhi* community. Money boys in China can be seen to exemplify one of these sites of multiple intersections. They are new urban subjects, but also city marginals. They are new labor subjects but also illegal *dagongzai*. They are new gay subjects but inappropriate *tongzhi*. They work in a "queer time," outside "official" labor and production, and live in a "queer place" that does not and will not belong to them,<sup>24</sup> and travel in transversal spaces which form an invisible "circuit of desire,"<sup>25</sup> allowing them to move within and beyond China to other South East Asian countries. They struggle for an identity within "scattered hegemonies" — the state's *hukou* system and criminalization of prostitution, civil society's negative con-

structions of rural migration, prostitution and homosexuality and even the *tongzhi* community's anti-money boy atmosphere—which functions hierarchically along the lines of class, sexuality, work, and migration according to the binaries of rural/urban, provincial/cosmopolitan, low *suzhi* (quality)/high *suzhi*, immoral/moral, diseased/healthy, money/ love, and illicit desire/licit desire.

Sexuality intersects with class and migration; cosmopolitanism mingles with gay identity whilst openness entails exclusion. If “New China” signifies the rule of the Communist Party in the Mao period, a new “New China” signifies the neoliberal political economy since the reform era.<sup>26</sup> This new New China is now *yu shijie jiegui* (linking up with the tracks of the world) and staging itself as an open, global, and cosmopolitan society. Behind the glamorous cityscapes, we may need to ask what are the freedoms and pleasures, as well as dangers and risks that Chinese people—straight or gay, urban or rural, *dagongzai* or money boy—can create, practice, and imagine across transversal spaces in this new New China.

Travis Kong  
University of Hong Kong

I would like to thank Howard Chiang for including me in this special issue. I would like to thank him and also the editor of *English Language Notes* for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also thankful to three funding bodies who have supported my research: The Hong Kong Research Grant Council (research project granted: “The Challenges and Negotiation of Urban Citizenship Among Rural-to-Urban Migrant Male Sex Workers in China” (Project number: 745209); The University of Hong Kong (research project granted: “The Modern Passions of the Cut Sleeves: Identity, Exclusion and Health of MSM [men having sex with other men] in Mainland China”); and lastly, my previous institute, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (research project granted: “Outcast Bodies: Social Exclusion and HIV/AIDS Prevention of MSM in China”).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The reform era (*Gaige kaifang*, literally means reform, opening up) refers to a series of reforms—agricultural decollectivization, the creation of a market economy, the enhancement of social mobility, modernization, and internationalization, etc.—initiated by the then general secretary of the Communist Party of China, Deng Xiaoping, in 1978. These reforms are believed to have changed China's economic, political, social, and cultural landscapes over the past few decades.

<sup>2</sup> See the critiques of globalization as an uneven process that reproduces spatial inequalities and differential patterns of exclusion in Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). See the suggestion of a transnational, rather than a globalization, study that addresses more accurately the asymmetries of the globalization process in Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999).

- <sup>3</sup>The idea of “inclusive exclusion” is borrowed from Young, who argues that the concept of social exclusion carries with it the imperative of inclusion. Jock Young, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity* (London: Sage, 2007), 102.
- <sup>4</sup> Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), 7.
- <sup>5</sup> See also Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, no. 4 (2001): 663–79; Kathryn Farr, “Globalization and Sexuality” in George Ritzer, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), [http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405132749\\_chunk\\_g978140513274935](http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405132749_chunk_g978140513274935).
- <sup>6</sup> Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang, “Introduction: Privatizing China: Powers of the Self, Socialism from Afar,” in Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong, eds., *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 2–3; Li Zhang, “Spatiality and Urban Citizenship in Late Socialist China,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 311–44; Wang Hui, *China’s New Order: Society, Politics and Economy in Transition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 116.
- <sup>7</sup> Elaine Jeffreys, *China, Sex and Prostitution* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 96–122.
- <sup>8</sup> Lisa Rofel, “The Traffic in Money Boys” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 18, no. 2 (2010): 425–58.
- <sup>9</sup> Travis S. K. Kong, “Outcast Bodies: Money, Sex and Desire of Money Boys in Mainland China” in Yau Ching, ed., *As Normal as Possible: Negotiating Sexualities in Hong Kong and China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010): 17–35; Travis S. K. Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy* (London: Routledge, 2011), 174–93. This paper is based on these two book chapters (research done in 2004–05) as well as my new understanding of the current money boy scenes since 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> The ideas of “zone city” and “zoning technology” are borrowed from Ong. See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism As Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 102–11.
- <sup>11</sup> See for example, Cheng Li, “Surplus Rural Laborers and Internal Migration in China: Current Status and Future Prospects,” *Asian Survey* 36, no. 11 (1996): 1122–45; Peter W. Mackenzie, “Strangers in the City: The hukou and Urban Citizenship in China,” *Journal of International Affairs* 56, no. 1 (2002): 305–19.
- <sup>12</sup> See for example, Dorothy Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China’s Floating Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Pun Ngai, “Subsumption or Consumption? The Phantom of Consumer Revolution in ‘Globalizing’ China,” *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2003): 469–92; Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005); Yan Hairong, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism: Organizing Suzhi/ Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks,” *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2003): 493–523; Yan Hairong, “Spectralization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in Post-Mao China,” *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 4 (2003): 578–96.
- <sup>13</sup> Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).
- <sup>14</sup> Dorothy Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*; Chan Kam-wing and Li Zhang, “The hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China: Processes and Changes,” *The China Quarterly* 160 (1999): 818–55; Wang Fei-ling, “Reformed Migration Control and New Targeted People: China’s hukou System in the 2000s,” *The China Quarterly* 177 (2004): 115–32; Chan Kam Wing and Will Buckingham, “Is China Abolishing the hukou System?” *The China Quarterly* 195 (2008): 582–606.
- <sup>15</sup> Li Bing-qin and David Piachaud, “Urbanization and Social Policy in China,” *Asia-Pacific Development*



*Journal* 13, no. 1 (2006): 1–26; Amnesty International, *China: Internal Migrants: Discrimination and Abuse. The Human Cost of an Economic "Miracle"* (2007), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA17/008/2007>.

<sup>16</sup> *Dagongzai* usually refers to an ordinary male worker who works in a factory, which Pun and Smith have called "the dormitory labour regime." Pun Ngai and Chris Smith, "Putting Transnational Labour Process in its Place: The Dormitory Labour Regime in Post-Socialist China," *Work, Employment and Society* 21, no. 1 (2007): 27–45. Pun et al. have argued two main forms of protest against this dormitory labor regime—one is egoistic suicide exemplified by various suicide cases in Foxconn and the other is collective protests. See Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin, "Unfinished Proletarianization: Self, Anger, and Class Action Among the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Present-Day China," *Modern China* 36, no. 5 (2010): 493–519; Jenny Chan and Pun Ngai, "Suicide as Protest for the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers: Foxconn, Global Capital, and the State" *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, September 13, 2010, <http://japanfocus.org/-Jenny-Chan/3408>. Money boys, for me, represent a third form of resistance.

<sup>17</sup> *Tongzhi* has been a synonym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer since the early 1990s. See Travis S. K. Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 14–15.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China*, 85–110; Travis S. K. Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*, 169–71.

<sup>19</sup> First party prostitution is not a criminal offense but still subject to periods of detention and possible fines whilst third party prostitution is a serious crime which is subject to imprisonment and heavy fines. See Elaine Jeffreys, "Querying Queer Theory: Debating Male-Male Prostitution in the Chinese Media," *Critical Asian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2007): 154.

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Rofel, "The Traffic in Money Boys," 428.

<sup>21</sup> The term *suzhi* usually refers to desired children under the restrictions of population control by Anagnost or desired bourgeois lifestyle under neoliberal governmentality by Yan. Rofel argues that *suzhi* is used by gay men to express their discontents with or anxiety about money boys and thus serves as a new exclusionary principle of "quality of desire" according to cosmopolitan respectability in the gay community to demarcate illicit and licit desires and "good" and "bad" homosexuals. Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*suzhi*)," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 189–208; Yan Hairong, "Neoliberal Governmentality and Neo-Humanism; Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China*, 103–106.

<sup>22</sup> Petrus Liu and Lisa Rofel, "Beyond the Strai(gh)ts: Transnationalism and Queer Chinese Politics," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 18, no. 2 (2010), 281–89.

<sup>23</sup> See Dennis Altman, "Rapture or Continuity? The Internationalization of Gay Identity," *Social Text* 48 (1996): 77–94; Dennis Altman, "Global Gaze/Global Gays," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1997): 417–36.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgendered Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>25</sup> See Yukiko Hanawa's edited special issue "Circuits of Desire" in *positions: east asia cultures critique* 2, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>26</sup> Bono Lee, *Chaobao Zhongguo* (Chic Chic China) (Hong Kong: Enrich Publishing Ltd., 2008), 41–44.

Copyright of English Language Notes is the property of English Language Notes and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.