

Guest Editors' Introduction

Beyond the Strai(gh)ts: Transnationalism and Queer Chinese Politics

This special issue is a provocation. It both reflects and, we hope, provokes ongoing debates about the meanings, implications, usages, and effects of each of the terms in our title. No doubt our presenting materials from Taiwan, the Chinese/Asian diaspora, and mainland China in a single issue on queer Chinese politics will be surprising to readers who understand the word “Chinese” to designate, immediately, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It would have been less controversial to publish the essays separately (as one reviewer suggested), as two sets of reflections, one by Taiwan-based scholars on queer developments in Taiwan and another of mainland Chinese reflections on China. However, we hope to open up this political debate about Chineseness, and specifically how this debate bears on queer lives, by calling the issue an investigation into queer “Chinese politics” and “transnationalism.” The question of whether and in what ways Taiwan and other

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Chinese-speaking communities can be considered part of “China” or called “Chinese” is perhaps the most dynamic question of our times. These essays, written from different perspectives and locales — Asian America, Taiwan, and mainland China — and by a range of activists, artists, public intellectuals, and academic scholars, collectively provoke the question of what constitutes “Chinese politics” and how these politics shape and are shaped by queer lives as transnational formations. Each author brings a unique, and always queer, answer to this debate.

Certainly, the essay writers do not always hold the same political views. Instead of constructing a singular argument about what is distinctive about queer politics in Taiwan and China, respectively, and then presenting films, novels, and theoretical works that are representative of two separate queer communities, we imagine the issue to be a stage or a platform for these divergent views, as was the original conference that gave rise to this volume. The *Beyond the Strai(gh)ts: Transnationalism and Queer Chinese Politics* conference, held at the University of California, Berkeley on April 29–30, 2005, and organized by Roy Chan, Tamara Chin, Virginia Eleasar, and Petrus Liu, brought together over twenty critics, activists, and artists from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States to discuss and imagine, through a transnational dialogue, how each person perceived the influence of transnational processes on queer organizing and political discourses both within and beyond their specific locations, and the centrality of “Chineseness” to those processes. We regret that we were unable to include essays from some of these other locations in this issue.

By “transnationalism,” we mean to signal a historical moment in which activities, identities, theories, and cultural productions self-consciously position themselves both within and beyond the nation-state. Historically, the moment of nation-states has been a relatively short one. In the last twenty years, various theorists have delineated the limitations of the nation-state and imagined in their stead transnational, regional, or global units of analysis in a manner that would have been previously unthinkable, except in certain Marxist and anarchist internationalisms. These critiques include those both from the left and from capitalists. Our use of “transnationalism” does not mean to indicate that the world has become interconnected only in the

last few decades or that a singular world or “Empire” has now come into existence. Indeed, there have been and continue to be multiple, interconnected worlds. Each location has its own history and its own stories to tell. The advantage of using “transnationalism” as a point of departure for our inquiry is that it allows us to produce a more historically rigorous account of a new kind of queer thinking that imagines one’s world, identity, and politics as either challenging or moving beyond the contours of nation-state politics. Some do so with a reinvigorated sense of political agency and cosmopolitan justice, while others feel compelled by their needs of survival, patterns of consumption, fear, or frustration. In either case, transnational connections are particularly important to consider with regard to queer Chinese politics. Animating this special issue is the conviction that queer politics and identities are lived in and altered by specific locales that themselves serve as sites of multiple intersections. Beyond the partly ironic notion of a queer nation lies the reality that queer people have, through long histories of colonialism, mimicked and mirrored one another’s lives, even as power-laden differences among us have meant not equivalence but fraught alliances. This special issue addresses how these transnational imaginings are changing the meanings of “queer” in different lives and locations.

“Transnationalism” marks not only imaginaries of an “after” of the nation-state, but transformed capitalist imaginaries “between” nation-states as well. Capitalist practices, in their guise as globalization, have not created a borderless world. Rather, these transformations have rigidified and deepened existing hierarchies that have significant implications for queer lives. Capitalism and neoimperialism are therefore two significant transformations in postwar East Asia that make the analysis of the United States an urgent and necessary task in Chinese politics. Logically, transnationalism can of course refer as well to Euro-Chinese exchanges, the Afro-Asian Century, and inter-Asian movements, and many exciting scholarly inquiries have indeed been made along these lines.¹ The choice of the United States as the object of critique was made over other transnational linkages because we believe that no analysis of Chinese politics today, if the word politics is to be taken seriously, can afford to overlook the specific role played by the United States in shaping China’s social terrain and in producing new commodities, erotic desires, property relations, and political allegiances within its borders.

The United States has installed itself as a key player in Chinese politics, and this mutual penetration of U.S. and Chinese politics is reinforced by both U.S. foreign policy and structural changes within Chinese societies. The globalization of English as the language of the new elite and the means of upward mobility in China and Taiwan has further facilitated the presence of the United States in Asia. The integration of China into a system of capitalist production dominated by the United States and the disintegration of an older model of Cold War binarism have turned the United States into an “indispensable friend/foe” from within. The phenomenon of “America’s Asia,” theorized by Mark Seldon and Edward Friedman and, more recently, by Colleen Lye, refers to an American foreign policy that has, since the late nineteenth century, identified the Asia-Pacific in general, and China and Taiwan in particular, as its security concern and jurisdiction.² The Open-Door Policy, the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, and the more recent 2005 U.S.-Japan joint declaration of the state of affairs in the Taiwan Strait as a “common strategic objective” are political turns that formalized a long-standing cultural attitude toward China and Taiwan as America’s Asia.

The internality of the United States to contemporary Chinese politics is discernible in the long history of the Cold War, from the entry of the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Straits to the American “Operation Summer Pulse ’04” in the Pacific, deployed as a counter to Chinese military drills during the 2004 Taiwanese presidential race. A branch of the Taiwan independence movement, in fact, was explicitly formulated as a project to join the United States as its fifty-first state.³ If we are used to seeing the United States and China as discrete, autonomous units in political science, this view may itself be a product of the distinctive features of a transnational form of power that we want to analyze under the rubric of Chinese politics. The Pax Americana, unlike traditional European colonial empires, does not strive to enlarge its territory by claiming sovereign power over conquered peoples. Rather, the Pax Americana is dependent on the universalization of cultural norms that benefit the United States in an international system of juridically sovereign states and on the creation of multilateral institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund) and transnational corporations that can defend American interests without the administrative burdens of, and moral objections to, state-based colonialism. While the United States

remains dominant in much of Asia, China is not simply a passive subject of U.S. power. As it rises to the fore as a major “driver” in the world economy, China must grapple with the long-term effects of U.S. hegemony, even as it subtly undermines it by buying up the U.S. debt, going around the contours of current U.S. interests by focusing on Africa and Latin America, and starting an Asian Union that tries to mirror the European Union.

These struggles over hegemony operate through, even as they are challenged by, the decentering of nation-state-based development and modernization programs. Our recourse to a transnational framework engages with, rather than erases, the asymmetries of this U.S.-dominated globalization that has been changed by transformations in China. This special issue reflects, in part, the desire in the original conference to create a forum to discuss possible ties and critical exchanges between U.S. queer politics—in particular Asian American and racial politics—and Chinese LGBT politics. Several of the authors live and work in both the United States and different parts of Asia. However, the authors and other participants brought to the conference experiences and perspectives that are not necessarily U.S.-centric. Rather than naturalize the United States as the common-sense, comparative context for all “other” cultures—thereby reinforcing its own vision of itself—the essays, taken together, provide a critique of this tendency. Indeed, some of the contributors (Josephine Chuen-juei Ho, Petrus Liu) explicitly engage the question of why the United States continues to be such a powerful space for queer theory and queer culture in both China and Taiwan. To what extent is the U.S.-China-Taiwan context an effective site for transnational queer politics and theory? How might queer politics engage the historical conditions of U.S. hegemony, even as these conditions have been transformed by China and Taiwan? We do not believe this volume will undo U.S.-centrism single-handedly, but hope that it will contribute to creating new political imaginations and will perform, not just state, the critique. Transnationalism is, then, both the subject matter and the methodology of this volume. The goal of this volume is articulation (in the Gramscian sense) rather than delinking or disavowal. In this regard, this special issue joins with other recent efforts to decolonize queer theory that have addressed the importance of imperialism and transnational cultural politics.⁴

But “transnational” is not just another word for the United States. A

central question that animates many of these essays is how “Chineseness” figures in these transnational imaginings. Indeed, the essays do not offer an essential definition of Chinese identity, but rather delineate the political genealogies in which this question has come to matter for queer lives. They compel an acknowledgement of the contingencies and instabilities in what a Chinese identity might be. While concerned with the present, several of the contributors (Ding Naifei, Wenqing Kang) indicate the continued importance of the use and abuse of history for constructing Chinese identity. The provocations in other essays on contemporary conditions go against the grain of many media and social science representations in the West. Cui Zi'en and Shi Tou, two prominent activists and cultural producers who have been central in inaugurating a queer media space in China, articulate a vision of an emergent queer culture that runs contrary to the bleak picture of persecution of homosexuals by the state that dominates Western media. As for the so-called liberal and democratized Taiwan, Josephine Chuen-juei Ho's and Chen Yu-Rong and Wang Ping's contributions identify, in what is perhaps a surprising move, an alliance between state power and conservative civil-society NGOs forged to suppress dissident sexualities and sexual expressions. This sobering analysis offers a provocation to any romantic championing of Taiwan as the polar opposite of the PRC. These essays speak to one another in multiple ways. Several authors reveal the centrality of sex work to the political cultures of China and Taiwan and argue for the contribution sex work makes to the modernity, identity, and language of queer subjects. This more expansive definition of queerness requires a critical apparatus capable of delineating the historical relationships between different types of nonreproductive, nonnormative sexualities. Josephine Chuen-juei Ho, a prominent feminist scholar and activist from Taiwan who was tried by the state for a hyperlink to information on zoophilia on her research center's Web site, offers a unique perspective on the relationship between sexual moral panic, legal reforms, and Taiwan's desire for political independence.⁵ In this volume, she argues that marginalized sexualities are lived and expressed as struggles under “global governance” rather than under Taiwan's new government. Here, global governance refers to a regime of power that connects the United Nations, international women's conferences, women's NGOs, and religious organizations to a global discourse of human rights. Global

governance punishes deviant sexual expressions while inducing Taiwan's government to adopt conservative policies to promote its image as a liberal-democratic nation-state in the international community. Ding Naifei's essay recontextualizes the figure of the prostitute in Taiwan's new urban feminist fiction by placing that fiction in a historical discourse on "base sexualities." This contextualization highlights how the new feminist fiction encompasses and flattens out the differences between concubines, bondmaids, and, more recently, lesbians. Ding's genealogy of the split between respectable and devalued forms of femininity in Chinese history and recent Taiwan feminist politics parallels Wenqing Kang's discussion of the split between respectable and devalued forms of masculinity in early twentieth-century Chinese history. Here, too, we find the figure of the (male) prostitute playing a pivotal role in the forms that homophobia took in China, as the history of male-male sexual relations was reinterpreted in the context of semi-colonial modernity. Yet Kang challenges the conventional wisdom that the West brought homophobia to China and that prior to Western colonialism negative representations of homoerotic relations did not exist. Kang does not merely reverse the argument; instead, he gives us a more nuanced history of how critical evaluations of homoeroticism were imbricated with political critique. Kang's essay in turn is echoed in Lisa Rofel's discussion of "money boys" in contemporary Beijing and the ambivalence about them among gay men who yearn for a neoliberal-inflected cosmopolitan respectability. Rofel's discussion of how money boys, as "inappropriate desiring subjects," create fissures in the social terrain of desire is usefully contrasted with Hans Tao-Ming Huang's provocative reading of the uses to which Pai Hsien-yung's famous *Crystal Boys* has been put in providing a site of identification for Taiwan's queer community to imagine itself into a *tongzhi* nation — so long as the depiction of prostitution in the novel is marginalized.

The relationship between queerness as narrative — as self-elaboration, as discursive formation, as fiction, film, or cultural imaginations — and queerness as a sociopolitical position — as a structure, logic, or relation of power — preoccupies a number of contributors. Many of the essays in this volume are exemplary in their attentiveness to the textual details and the literariness of celebrated queer films and literature in Chinese. Collectively, these close readings make a powerful case for the role of language in struc-

turing what is sometimes taken to be static identity categories. In Amie Parry and Liu Jen-peng's reading, Lucifer Hung's unconventional narrative strategies and uses and subversions of the established language of the sci-fi genre produce a literary "otherworldliness" that is crucial to Hung's fiction's "queerness" in the sexual sense. This literary queerness is also responsible for the historical reception of Hung as Taiwan's most eminent, and strangely "representative," queer writer. David Eng's ingenious reading of *Lan Yu* as a "melodrama of neoliberalism" takes the film's camera angles, visual syntax, and ideological fantasies as important devices conjoining China's new queer subjectivities and its capitalist modernity, from the perspective of the gay Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan. Petrus Liu offers a close reading of *Paper Marriage*, one of the earliest full-length queer novels in Chinese, as a transnational production of new forms of queer intimacy and responsibilities. Liu situates the novel against a liberal paradox between "universalizing" and "particularizing" tendencies within the "late Cold War" queer theory that emerged at the same time as the novel's writing. By recasting both the theory and the literature of transcultural queer connections as historically determinate responses to liberal understandings of cultural comparability, Liu also stakes a claim for "China" as a powerful intellectual tool for radical theories of sexuality.

The question of respectability and normativity within queer communities ranges over many of the essays. Xiaopei He and Lisa Rofel present a recent history of AIDS organizing and prevention in China. Many have praised the interventions of doctors and public health organizations in southwest China for their willingness to confront and deal with the AIDS epidemic. He and Rofel instead take a Foucauldian approach to argue that these experts, along with the media, force those with HIV/AIDS to "come out" into public regulatory regimes. Those with HIV/AIDS craft their oppositional critique through alternative language politics. The essays in this volume were collected in the hope that there could be more such politics in a transnational context.

This special issue, then, brings together conversations usually held apart: the decolonization of queer theory, the meanings of Chineseness, and the contours of transnationalism. It highlights the role that queer politics and theory in this particular transnational world might contribute to the decolo-

nization of U.S.-dominated queer theory and politics. We think of the volume as the product and enactment of a continuous dialogue whose critical energy will no doubt exceed the boundaries of this publication. By making this special issue available, we hope that the conversation will also reach a wider audience and the debates can be kept alive.

Petrus Liu and Lisa Rofel, Guest Editors

Notes

1. On Euro-Chinese transnationalism, see the forthcoming project by Lisa Rofel and Sylvia Yanagisako on the twenty-first-century Silk Road between Italy and China. On transnationalism between Asia and Africa, see the “The Afro-Asian Century,” ed. Andrew Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh, special issue, *positions* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2003). For an intellectual articulation of transnationalism as critical regionalism, see the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Journal*, in particular the inaugural issue (2001).
2. Edward Friedman and Mark Seldon, eds., *America's Asia: Dissenting Essays on Asian-American Relations* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1971); Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
3. Chen Kuan-Hsing, “America in East Asia: The Club 51 Syndrome,” *New Left Review* 12 (November–December 2001): 73–87.
4. See Petrus Liu's essay in this volume for a further elaboration of this argument.
5. The primary documents related to the trial have been published in Josephine Ho, ed., *Dong-wulian wangye shijianbu (The Zoophilia Webpage Incident)* (Chungli, Taiwan: Center for the Study of Sexualities, 2006).

