



Petrus Liu

Queer Marxism in Two Chinas

Duke University Press
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reviewed by [Michiel Baas](#)

1. Petrus Liu's new book, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*, opens with the observation that when it comes to contemporary China one does not often hear *queer* and *Marxism* uttered in the same sentence. In fact giving contemporary China some further thought, especially with respect to its presence on the economic world stage, one might argue that its association with Marxism itself is increasingly an obfuscated one. In the field of queer studies however there has been a significant increase in publications that focus on China. Liu's study is not only a welcome addition to this burgeoning field because of its provocative engagement with queer and Marxist theory but also for its focus on the People's Republic of China (or simply China) as well as the Republic of China (or Taiwan). In its opening pages it draws attention to the 'homonormative turn' as the assumed best strategy for inclusion and equal rights (p. 1) and the idea of 'morally upstanding citizens who are no different from anyone else' (p. 2). As Liu points out, while there is in essence nothing wrong with the 'desire for mainstream inclusion' it cannot be denied that this has 'alienated, disempowered, and further stigmatized' those who cannot be so easily included in this project (p. 2). What percolates through such initial considerations is a strong sense of inequality that seems to build upon and draw from neoliberalism. Petrus Liu asks here: 'Is neoliberalism truly the dominant cultural logic of contemporary queer Chinese cultures?' His subsequent questions all reveal in themselves what the rest of the book sets out to accomplish through the reading and analysis of postwar queer Chinese works 'that retool and revitalize Marxist social analysis' (p. 4). Treating this as a queer Marxist archive Liu seeks to make two intertwined arguments. The first here is that the 1949 division of China has strongly shaped the way Chinese queer thought has developed since. The second argument holds that many postwar queer Chinese writers, the majority which seemed to have been based in the Republic of China (ROC, or Taiwan) instead of in Mainland China, 'developed a unique theory and literature by fusing Marxism with inquiries into gender and sexuality' (p. 4). In this analysis it is striking how Liu unpacks the way in which these writers came to understand the historical creation of both PRC and ROC as foundational for queer Chinese life itself (p. 5).
2. Liu's study is typically one that requires a detailed introduction like the one provided above, even if it unavoidably reduces some of the more nuanced and precise arguments the author seeks to make. There is a lot packed in these and subsequent pages that I found merits and often requires rereading. A recurring topic here is the engagement with the way 'western' and 'eastern' queer thinking has developed in relation to but also separate of each other. As Liu also suggests here, 'the intellectual tradition of queer Marxism offers a neoliberal alternative to the Euro-American model of

queer emancipation grounded in liberal values of privacy, tolerance, individual rights and tolerance' (p. 5). As is also my experience with queer Indian thinking, LGBTQ[1] communities do not necessarily traverse the same unavoidable path which is rooted in globalising neoliberalism. For Liu, excavating the Marxist intellectual roots of contemporary queer thought in China and Taiwan helps with answering a particularly urgent question: 'How does being queer matter?' (p. 13). This question is particularly pertinent if we consider the way popular culture as well as social science has cast Chinese homosexuals as neoliberal subjects fighting for mainstream inclusion.

3. From the start it is clear why it is so important to engage with *the two Chinas* in tackling such questions. In relation to this Liu's focus is on how queer cultural producers engage with the problematic of China as multiple. Here the author notes: 'Treating China as an object of theoretical reflection disrupts a strong tendency in the current field of gender and sexuality studies to separate theory, in particular queer theory, from empirical and historical perspectives on same-sex relations in China' (p. 21). In relation to this Liu also engages with critiques of eurocentrism in queer thinking but more importantly his study questions 'the assumption that renders China as antithetical and exterior to queer theory' (p. 21). Liu takes the position that queer theory is an incomplete project and one that is constantly transformed by China (p. 21). Queer theory, accordingly, requires a theory of geopolitics. Furthermore, recognising Chinese queer theory as a geopolitically mediated discourse helps to correct the perception of it as a derivative discourse (p. 22). It is such arguments and considerations that build up to a particularly striking section of the book where Liu delves deeper into queer theory and its engagement with the other and its deviations from its 'western' queer context. For Liu the problem is not so much the inherent racism and Orientalism that emerges from some queer studies that focus on the East, but 'that postwar theories of sexuality often unwittingly reproduce the logic of liberal pluralism and fail to develop stronger political responses to the dilemma of the Cold War, which the case of a divided China helps us understand' (p. 30). Strikingly, Liu argues here that queer theory does not need the Chinas because it is ethically imperative to include the Other, 'but because US theory is itself born in the shadows of the failures of liberal pluralism' (p. 30). As such, queer Marxism with its focus on the two Chinas provides 'the conceptual tools to illuminate the historical connections between queer theory and liberal pluralism for the global scholarly community' (p. 31).
4. It is this latter argument which also opens up this book to a wider readership to which I include myself. While subsequent chapters will undoubtedly deepen the understanding of the development of Chinese queer thinking over the past decades for those working on such questions themselves, for those less familiar with the two Chinas' Liu's book is particularly insightful for the way it actually engages with the layeredness of queer thinking/theorisation. Here the engagement with Marxism is revealing for the inherent inequality in terms of access to resources, rights and in a sense 'normalised' or 'accepted' homosexual lifestyles. As Liu points out, 'Chinese queer theory enters an alliance with Marxist critique to challenge the distribution of resources (symbolic and material), as well as the monopoly of sexologists and education expert in the production of knowledge for and about sexual minorities' (p. 38). As he elucidates ~~on further on~~ in the second chapter, '[for] queer Marxists, the queer is not a synonym for homosexuality, but a material reminder of one's relation to an unequal structure of power' (p. 40). And with this comes, in a sense, the obligation to recognise distance 'between the diversity of erotic desires, genders, identities, and intimacies in human cultures and the liberal pluralist reduction into fixed categories under global capitalism' (p. 40).
5. At the heart of Liu's analysis lies an engagement with queer films and books that even if one has no familiarity with these artists' works, Liu skilfully introduces and brings alive. In chapter two the focus is among others on Cui Zi'en, who is considered **as to be** China's most iconic and controversial queer filmmaker, essayist and novelist (p. 48). About his films Liu argues that they are 'complex mediations on the historical moment of their production, and [that] they cannot be treated as

subtitled images at international film festivals with no regard for the Chinese political and intellectual contexts within which these narratives function as an intervention' (p. 49). As such, his films must be analysed together with his essays and novels. The chapter furthermore pays attention to the case and 2003 prosecution of queer Marxist critic Josephine Ho and what has come to be known as the *zoophilia* incident in Taiwan. Here the attention is particularly on feminism in Taiwan but it is not hard to see the linkages with gay normalisation as well (p. 61). While it does not lie in the scope of this review to reproduce the intricate details of the case of Josephine Ho or the further development of feminism in Taiwan, what this case study in particular underlines is the often difficult relationship between popular public/State-led narratives and the way 'others' who fall outside normalisation efforts and desires get side-lined, prosecuted or simply left out of the equation. As Liu argues,

Men and women are legally and formally equal in Taiwan, but there is no equality for those who seek freedom from normative categories of gender, such as transgendered and transgendering persons, intersexed individuals, effeminate gay men, butch and femme (T/po) lesbians, single women, women who choose not to bear children, sex workers who do not believe that sex should only occur under the sanctity of monogamous marriage, and numerous other communities who lie and work at a critical distance from the idealized notion of womanhood, which state feminists take to be the basis of the gender equality movement (p. 63).

6. Ho's work (in particular *The Gallant Woman*) is particularly important here because her theory of sexual revolution shows that gender is a process, not some inalterable fact or given, and as such a series of cultural contestations. Furthermore, 'if women's oppression originates from the effects of acculturation rather than biological necessity, then culture can be unlearned and revolutionized' (p. 67). Her terming of sex revolution views sexuality as the site to unlearn and relearn culture itself. 'Ho suggests that women can become liberated by aligning themselves with the disruptive force of queers' (p. 67). Here Liu argues that we need to understand Ho's queer Marxism as one participating in the tradition of cultural materialism. This offers 'theoretical reflections on the relations between a society's economic base and ideological superstructure without necessarily arguing that culture is determined in the last instance by the economic base' (p. 71).
7. Such engagement with Chinese queer thinkers is continued in chapter three which focuses on the rise of the queer Chinese novel. Liu shows that 'a distinctive aesthetic apparatus for representing fully ontologized homosexual male characters appeared in Chinese literature first in the 1980s' (p. 86). This 'apparatus' was first developed by Taiwan-based Chinese authors and **that** this has its origins in their queer engagement with Chinese Marxism. Here Liu deviates from Foucauldian histories of sexuality in studies of China: while he does acknowledge that there were important epistemic developments in twentieth-century Chinese literature which impacted **on** queer identities, Liu argues that 'these changes did not take place primarily as a result of Western knowledge.' Instead Liu emphasises the agency of the artists in question and that it is important to situate their work within the historical context of their responses to Marxism 'as both a communist bureaucracy and an indispensable intellectual resource' (p. 87). To substantiate this argument Liu works with a number of queer novels from the early days such as Pai Hsien-yung's *Crystal Boys* and Chen Ruoxi's *Paper Marriage*, both **of** which were written in the 1980s. While it would go too far here to repeat Liu's extensive analysis, it is worth reproducing the comments he makes at the end of the third chapter: 'The story of the rise of queer Chinese literature is an exemplary dialogue between Marxism and sexual modernities' (p. 112). While here this dialogue is particularly underlined by Chen's novel, it also speaks more broadly to the way this dialogue offers an infinite number of possibilities in terms of the implied reconfiguration (p. 133).
8. The final chapter discusses queer human rights *in* and *against* the two Chinas. Like women's human rights there is an inherent paradox here **with** which Liu opens this chapter **with**. 'Queer human rights advocates ask us to imagine individuals as bearers of certain inalienable rights by virtue of a particularity (their queerness) and of a universality (their humanness) at the same time' (p. 138). For

Liu inspiring examples are offered by queer activists in both China and Taiwan in terms of 'how we can leverage the contradiction between the human and the queer to advance socially progressive agendas' (p. 138). But he also points out that there will always be a gap 'between the universal rhetoric of queer human rights and its concrete practice, **sine sine** any local discourse of the human is inevitably fraught with national interests that exceed the domain of sexuality' (pp. 139–40). One of the key points Liu makes here is that queer human rights demand a 'renewed understanding of the human, one that casts this figure as neither the agent of social transformation nor the subject of universal rights' (p. 142). Drawing upon Marxist thinking, Liu argues that instead the human should be understood as 'an ethical perspective on the equality of human time' (p. 142). It is particularly in these final pages that Liu shows his fluency in Marxist thought but, while the analysis may be too theoretical for some, what stands out is his concern for the casting of queer human rights as a simple reflection of pre-existing diversity which draws upon liberal pluralism. Complex geopolitical relations and interests are always at play here, so Liu argues. His analysis therefore shows that the assumptions of free and unfree queer subjects in China and Taiwan 'are entangled with the unequal distribution of power and resources across the straits, for which reason a Marxist perspective on the construction of the human is both necessary and timely' (p. 154). And it is here that Liu returns to his earlier engagement with the alleged incommensurability of East and West which is a recurring topic of discussion in studies of 'queer Asia.' While this has pushed the idea of cultural-constructedness of various queer notions to the foreground, it has also resulted in a contradiction between a queer critique of heteronormativity and the postcolonial critique of allochronism, the idea that the distinction between gay and straight identities was basically invented in the West (p. 156). As Liu abundantly makes clear in his study, the relationship as well as deviations in queer trajectories between China and Taiwan provides incredibly rich material to rethink such assumptions. As the author points out: 'The category of queer, in either China, does not describe the empirical existence of a social group. It is rather a sign of national difference, flashed for a global audience, between ROC's liberalism and PRC's lack of human rights' (p. 157). Considering Taiwan's global perception as a 'liberal counterpart to authoritarian China' what is lacking here is 'an account of the social conditions under which a sexual subject qualifies as a human being and becomes a recipient of political rights and entitlements' (p. 162). In the end Liu returns to the oppositional positioning of Marxism and liberalism whereby queerness is attributed to the accomplishments of the latter. Yet, what his analysis has made abundantly clear by now is that 'Marx's labor theory of value contains an ethical perspective of the relationality of the self that is more compatible with queer (rather than gay and lesbian) theory and movements, in contrast to liberalism's emphasis on individual autonomy, identity, and identity-based rights' (p. 167).

9. *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* is an immensely rich study both in empirical and theoretical terms and makes a genuinely important contribution to the field of queer studies in general. As an academic not directly involved in research in either China or Taiwan I found this book particularly rewarding for its insightful discussion of the intersections between Marxist and queer thinking. The strength of Liu's study lies in the way it shows how various intersecting unequal (power) relations, struggles and conditions do not just shape queer lives and lifestyles but also frame and guide (academic) discourses of policy, rights and ultimately 'difference.' While the material Liu builds on is clearly Chinas-centric it is not hard to see how this study will prove useful for scholars working on various queer issues elsewhere as well. With reference to my own review essay '[Queer Asia: Advances in a field in motion](#),' it is of paramount importance that studies such as Petrus Liu's are read, explored and discussed within the context of the burgeoning field of publications on queer Asia. While such 'reading' will challenge our conceptualisation of the field itself, it will also contribute to rethinking the specific sociocultural assumptions that studies continue to make.
10. A review would not be complete without a small point of critique and perhaps some readers will already have picked up on this while reading through my lengthy and occasionally convoluted

'summary' of this book. Like many other publications that have come out in the field of queer Asian studies in recent years, Liu's well-crafted study is also a thoroughly complex one. While in this case the author's point was obviously to make an important theoretical argument which clearly draws upon critical, reflexive and ultimately complex previous thinking, it does make an important study such as this one 'less' readable for a wider audience. For those involved in queer activism or **are** 'simply' queer themselves and living in one of the two Chinas, this book might not be particularly accessible. I fully realise that it is a turn academic publishing has taken a long time ago, away from mainstream readership (and as such also those the study speaks 'about' or 'for'), but it is something to keep reminding ourselves of while we continue to **be** involved in questions that relate to issues of inequality and marginalisation. That said I would like to applaud Petrus Liu for this exceptional study which I have no doubt will have an impact on future studies of queer Asia in the years to come.

Notes

[1] I do not necessarily subscribe to one version of this abbreviation but understand the 'Q' not so much as a fifth category but as one that is critical of categorisation in general while at the same time pointing at the exclusion of those who do not fit under the rubric of LGBT.

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