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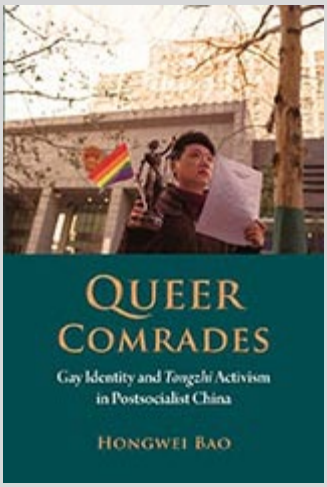

Hongwei Bao

Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi *Activism in Postsocialist China*

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1. *Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and* Tongzhi *Activism in Postsocialist China* by Hongwei Bao explains the community media, queer activism and an increasingly politicised queer identity represented by the term *tongzhi.* Compared with the term of *tongxinglian* (homosexual) and *ku'er* (queer), tongzhi is widely accepted for self-identification by queer people in early-twenty-first-century China (p. 3). In his research, Bao has selected three major cities in China, namely Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. In Beijing where Bao lived from 2000 to 2006, he met the interviewees at the Beijing Queer Film Festival, the Gender/Difference Queer Art Exhibition, the screening of the Queer Comrades film, the HIV/AIDS Prevention Conference, and several activities carried out by the Beijing LGBT Center. Meanwhile in Shanghai, Bao met with interviewees at the Chi-Heng Foundation Shanghai Office, the Leyi Working Group and the Nü'ai Lesbian Group. In Guangzhou, he met two organisers who were holding a queer film festival. There Bao met gays and lesbians who work for the Chi-Heng Foundation Guangzhou Office and the Same-City *Tongzhi* Community (*Tongcheng shequ*).

2. In this book, Bao begins his research in Shanghai, which China calls the 'gay capital'. Many LGBT-related events were held in Shanghai such as the 2009 LGBT Pride Week. Through looking at queer culture in Shanghai, Bao said that we can potentially get a glimpse of where queer culture is heading as China speeds up the process of economic and ideological neoliberalisation (p. 39). According to Bao, the 'imagination' of cosmopolitanism became a central role, both for Shanghai and for China, both by foreign visitors and by the Chinese who live in the city. Bao deploys the concept of 'imagined cosmopolitanism' developed by anthropologist Louise Schein to highlight how cosmopolitanism works as a social imaginary shared by people who may never have met each other but who embrace a common sense of both belonging and aspiration (p. 40). The city of Shanghai, which was simultaneously called the 'Paris of the Orient' and 'whore of the Orient' (p. 42), has many gay spaces such as parks, river banks and public toilets, and in recent years, shopping centres, restaurants, cafes and bars have been popular meeting places in particular for young queer people. The expansion of queer social spaces also happened with the emergence of the internet and social media and the increase in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) who work on HIV/AIDS issues. But why does Shanghai LGBT not like to be called 'gay' or '*tongxinglian*'? It is because the term *tongxinglian* is a stigmatised name for queer people, and the term gay is foreign. Furthermore, *Tongzhi* itself attaches more importance to *qing* (emotional attachment) instead of *xing* (sex). *Tongzhi* are also considered to be socially responsible citizens. They work hard, study hard and

make significant contributions to society (p. 54). In addition, *Tongzhi* is understood as 'Chinese,' which marks it as different from the transnational word> 'gay' (p. 55). In Shanghai people attribute two characteristics to queer culture. First, gay and lesbians in Shanghai know how to take care of themselves and how to enjoy life. Beijing is a space for performing identity, meanwhile Shanghai is a space to be consumed (p. 59).

3. In chapter three, Bao explained the geneology of the word *tongzhi*. The term *tongzhi* was invented to designate a political subjectivity embracing revolutionary and egalitarian ideals in the Republican and socialist eras for anti-feudalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist struggles. In the early 2000s, this term was used in mainland China to refer to a homonormative identity politics influenced by China's neoliberalism (p. 65). *Tongzhi* signified a political subjectivity during China's socialist era because of the socialist revolution, and it is used to signify a queer subject in today's China under neoliberal capitalism (p. 66). After the introduction of *tongzhi* to refer to queer people in Hong Kong, the term was soon picked up and subsequently gained great popularity in Taiwan and in countries and regions with large diasporic Chinese populations before it was accepted by queer activists from mainland China in the mid-1990s. With the development of queer activism and the popularisation of the internet, terms such as *tongzhi* quickly spread in all Chinese societies (pp. 76–77).

4. In the next chapter, Bao returns to the 1990s era when conversion therapy occurred. This therapy is a controversial form of medical treatment which aims to turn gay people straight. One conversion therapy uses diary writing. Each patient was required to keep a diary to document the progress of their treatment. The doctor read and commented on these diaries and accordingly made or revised plans for further treatment (p. 106). The practice of conversion therapy causes serious psychological and physical harm to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other gendered individuals of all ages. After going through this conversion therapy, patients experienced loss of self-confidence, high anxiety, depression, social self-isolation, difficulty bonding with other people, hating themselves, feeling shame and guilt, having sexual dysfunction, high suicidal thoughts, and a tendency to self-harm.

5. What is very interesting, Bao also told a story of Cui Zi'en in Chapter five. Cui Zi'en is China's leading queer filmmaker and activist, and the film was his 2008 documentary *Queer China, 'Comrade' China* (Zhi tongzhi), the first film documenting the history of the queer movement in China (p. 120). He emphasised the multiplicity and polymorphousness of sexuality; he also sees sex itself as a social construct, hence policing sexual activities is absurd and unnecessary. In Cui's worldview, fixed sexual identities do not exist (p. 123). He calls his philosophy a 'Christian post-modernism' that is capable of disrupting and challenging any artificial norms. For him, God is a revolutionary figure and the first postmodernist, who can destroy old social orders and rebuild a world. Cui sees his work as a deconstructive force to established literary, cultural and social norms, and he sees deconstruction as necessary and constructive (p. 125). In his research into writing this book, Bao watched the film *Man Man Woman Woman* (1999) made by Cui Zi'en.

6. Cui uses a digital video (DV) camera to make his films (p. 128). In *Man Man Woman Woman* Cui characterised his films as 'zero rhetoric' (*ling xiuci*), which he describes as a radical departure from traditional filmmaking (p. 127). He makes films about China's queer people because these people are marginalised in contemporary Chinese society; making films about their lives can potentially empower them (p. 130). Cui's film includes no power hierarchy and no capitalist exploitation. He rejects capital, rejecting the industry model of filmmaking practices, and embracing a collective, collaborative and egalitarian mode of independent filmmaking. In his mind, being queer does not have to entail a sexual identity; it is simply about living life in one's own way and refusing to be constrained by societal norms (p. 141).

7. In the next chapter (Chapter six), Bao moved to other city, Guangzhou, where he attended the China Queer Film Festival Tour. He travelled with Shitou and her partner Mingming, two lesbian filmmakers

(p. 150). In this chapter, Bao explored the analytical category of the public sphere to the Chinese context. Bao also wrote that if the North [of China—Beijing and Shanghai] is dominated in China's cultural imaginary by strict state control and rigid Confucian values, the South [of China—Guangzhou] is imagined as relatively free from them. In this sense, the South becomes a cultural trope for the free expression of gender and sexualities (p. 154). Filmmakers bring their films to Guangzhou and other places in China in the hope that their films will be viewed by more people and their political activism also shared by more people. In this chapter, Bao documented two screening events at the China Queer Film Festival Tour. Even though their films may not appeal to every member of the audience, the film screening events helped construct queer identity and communities in different parts of China. In the process, the filmmakers themselves have learned from the communities and from what they see in different parts of China. This has helped them to connect to the communities and to more urgent social issues (pp. 172–73).

8. In Chapters seven and eight (as the conclusion), Bao analysed the event in People's Park in south China's Guangdong Province. In this park, on 25 August 2009, an unarmed confrontation between five policeman and fifty gay men occurred. In analysing this event, Bao uses the word *Renmin* (the people). *Renmin* is a 'keyword' in understanding citizenship and governmentality in China. *Renmin* also has assumed the meaning of the state and the nation (p. 177). As queer people struggle for rights to public space, they also claim more rights for their 'private' selves (p. 180). In the Maoist era, there was no clear division between the private and public sphere but in the post-Mao era, that division has been increasingly manifest. Building parks in China is part of the nation-building project, which is in turn part of a modernisation project for the nation. The 'People's Park' can legitimately be read as a metaphor for China as a modern state implementing its modernisation projects, in whose process aesthetic order is maintained through the creation of legitimate subjects and the exclusion of illicit subjects and desires (such as homosexuality). Thus, the People's Park is a public space for *renmin* (p. 182). But this statement highlights the importance of space for queer people and their communities. Ah Qiang, the outspoken local queer activist, notes the heteronormativity inherent in the police action and in the public outcry for normalising *tongzhi* practices (p. 191). What is emphasised in Chapter seven is the use of online communications between *tongzhi*. Effective online communities are vitally important for China's queer community to continue building and could prove more practical and effective than attempting to defend one's rights through confrontations with the police (p. 192). China's queer community demonstrated the contingencies and potentials of *tongzhi* self-mobilisation, but of course with careful consideration of local conditions and contexts. Overall, this book is worth reading. It shows the emergence and development of a politised queer subject, queer comrades (*tongzhi*), and the potential for a radical queer politics in contemporary China. *Tongzhi* illustrates 'the ways in which media processes and everyday life are interwoven with each other' with its emphasis on the signification and mediation of *tongzhi* culture, and with acute attention paid to how *tongzhi* activists and ordinary *tongzhi* articulate their identities in relation to a mediated culture in everyday life (p. 204). This book, according to the author Hongwei Bao, has an interdisciplinary focus, including cultural studies, media studies, film studies, gender/queer studies, China/Asian studies, sociology, anthropology and political theory thus, we will find terms (in particular the terms from cultural studies) in this book.

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