

**‘Queer/ing China’: Theorizing Chinese genders and sexualities through a
transnational lens**

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Stirring up unexpected fissures and disjuncture in global economy, mobility and economy, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the world into a new age of globalization and de-globalization characterized by disparities in socioeconomic systems, new forms of discrimination and social stratification (including those against Chinese and Asian communities located in different parts of the world), and enhanced cross-geocultural flows of (mis)information. Against such a dramatically changing historical backdrop, the ‘Sinosphere’ (Berry 2021)—that is, the Chinese language and cultural world including but beyond the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China hereafter)—of the 2020s has been constituted and continually reshaped by both defiant and normative discourses on gender, sexuality, language, nationality, class and ethnicity.¹ Notably, a rising academic interest in the queer and feminist cultures of the Sinosphere can be seen in recent English-

¹ We use the term ‘Sinosphere’ to problematize the obsolescence and inadequacy of terms such as ‘Chinese’, ‘Chinese-language’ and ‘Sinitic’ in studying emerging media and social phenomena, practices and activism in the Chinese cultural world made possible through transnational flows, including the ones in both the PRC and other spaces and communities associated with Chineseness, even the ones not necessarily ‘in the Chinese language’ (Berry 2021, 185). Meanwhile, our use recognizes the contemporary sociocultural interactions and historical entanglements among diverse Sinitic cultural communities without compromising to the Han-Chinese essentialism, nationalism and the regulatory mentality of nation-states.

language scholarly publications, testifying to the richness and urgency of this line of enquiry.

In 2020 and 2021 alone, four research monographs, including *Queer China* (Bao 2020), *Queer Chinese Cultures and Mobilities* (Wei 2020), *Queer Representation in Chinese-language Film and the Cultural Landscape* (Chao 2021) and *Queer Media in China* (Bao 2021), along with countless journal articles and special issues, have been published in a nascent scholarly field known as queer China studies. This field of research acknowledges the Western origin and cross-cultural appropriation of the term ‘queer’; it also explores the term’s boundary-transgressing, norm-defying potential in dismantling heteronormative structures in translocal and transborder Chinese-speaking contexts. In this sense, queer China studies is deeply linked to and also extends the critical logics of queer Asian studies which has been established and developed since the early 2000s (e.g., Berry, Martin, and Yue 2003; Chiang and Wong 2017; Erni 2003; Grossman 2000; Luther and Loh 2019; Martin *et al.* 2008; McLelland 2018; Sullivan and Jackson 2001; Wilson 2006; Yue 2014; Yue and Leung 2015) and queer Sinophone studies which has emerged since the early 2010s (e.g., Chiang and Heinrich 2014; Chiang and Wong 2020; Martin 2014). More importantly, queer China studies has seen a growing diversity, richness and critical depth of its own academic outputs in recent years (e.g., Bao 2018, 2020, 2021; Engebretsen, Schroeder, and Bao 2015; Zhao 2020, 2022; Zhao and Wong 2020; Zhao, Yang, and Lavin 2017). In this viewpoint essay, using ‘queer/ing China’ as a heuristic, we explore ‘queerness’ and ‘Chineseness’ through an intersectional approach that is attuned to the encounters, syntheses and dissonances of local, transnational and global queer and feminist studies, knowledge and movements. We thus propose ‘queer/ing China’ as an innovative, productive conceptual framework to critically examine

contemporary gender and sexual cultures, subjectivities and politics within and beyond the normative imaginaries of China and Chineseness.

Imagining queer China studies through a transnational lens

‘Transnational’ is not a new term either to Chinese and Sinophone studies or to global queer and feminist scholarship. Scholars have noted that the formulations of both ‘queerness’ and ‘Chineseness’ ‘are “always already” transnational’ (Martin 2014, 35; see also, Liu and Rofel 2010) and should not ‘be understood within national boundaries’ (Leung 2008, 129). Meanwhile, queer and feminist knowledge, movements and politics in the Sinosphere have been in flux, simultaneously shaped by Confucian traditional values, Marxist and socialist feminist thoughts, state-led authoritarian neoliberalization and cross-cultural influences of East Asian and Euro-American modernity (Chiang and Heinrich 2014; Chiang and Wong 2020; Ye 2021). Nevertheless, for China studies scholars, the transnational element remains a timely and much-needed scholarly intervention in a polarized political and scholarly world at this critical historical juncture. Instead of ‘creating a binary opposition between the national and the transnational’ (Berry 2021, 183) or ‘counterposing globalization in the singular to the national’ (184), queer China studies explicates this multi-dimensionally transnational nature.

First and foremost, the blossom of queer China studies in the past decade can be seen as a critical scholarly response to *both* the visibly growing global influences and complexities of China and other ethnic-Chinese communities *and* a rising feminist and queer consciousness among the younger generation of Chinese-speaking people in the context of transnational feminist and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) knowledge flows, social-political movements and alliances. Against this backdrop, the meanings, cultural imaginaries and scholarly analysis of both ‘queerness’ and

‘Chineseness’, for queer China studies, are transnationally borrowed and cross-geolinguistically reconfigured.

Take, for example, queer Chinese TV and fan research that has been flourishing since the late 2010s (e.g., Zhao 2019, 2020; Zhao, Yang, and Lavin, 2017). This body of scholarship has heavily drawn on classic scholarly definitions of ‘queer’ in the studies of Anglophone queer cinema, TV and spectatorship, such as those offered by Alexander Doty (1993) and Lynne Joyrich (2014). The understanding of ‘queer’ in this body of scholarship moves beyond the concept’s original identitarian-based meaning and remakes it as an active practice, a participatory spectatorial position, a temporary desiring moment, a cultural technology or a nonheterosexual structure of feeling without explicit self-identification or recourse to identity. As Jamie J. Zhao and Alvin K. Wong proposed in their coedited 2020 *Continuum*’s special journal issue devoted to this topic, the creative localization of Western-originated queer theory renders *queer* ‘a powerful, generative tool in the political, cultural and scholarly dimensions of diverse Chinese-speaking contexts’ (477). In addition to cross-cultural theoretical and analytical appropriations, research has also demonstrated that queer media productions in the Chinese-speaking world, such as LGBTQ cinema, TV, art, performance, literature and fan fiction, have frequently deployed non-Chinese settings, postcolonial East Asian and Euro-American cultural references, scenarios and characters to produce gender/sexual non-conforming representations (Martin 2012; Wei 2014; Wong 2012, 2020; Zhao 2017a, 2017b).

Furthermore, recent scholarship dedicated to the daily struggles of gender and sexual minorities of the Sinosphere has demonstrated that queer identity and related politics in the Chinese cultural world have always been translocal and transnational. Queer Chinese subject making and knowledge production are not only intimately linked to the Chinese-speaking world, but also to Asia, America, Australasia, Europe and the

African continent. Particularly, Song Hwee Lim (2006, 11-12) has pointed out that the local renderings of the English term, 'queer' as *ku'er* ('cool kid') or *guaitai* ('strange fetus'), have become popular in the mid-1990s' Taiwan and were circulated to other major Chinese-speaking societies in the 2000s. Similarly, Hongwei Bao (2018) has highlighted the activist and cosmopolitan outlook of the local adoption of 'queer' and Western queer theory in mainland Chinese-language scholarly publications, media spaces and political activism since the early 2000s. He underlines the significant political, activist potential of the glocalized term *ku'er* in mainland China in evading the government's censorship of homosexuality and in working as a practical strategy for subjects who live on the social margins to negotiate with the mainstream, normative social policing of behaviors, desire and identities.

As Bao (2021, 7) argues in his recent work, although the term 'China' is often understood as referring to the PRC, 'both China and "Chineseness" should not be seen as fixed geographical and cultural entities with essential traits', but 'social constructs shaped by hegemonic power relations' that are open to contestation and reconfiguration. Indeed, words such as 'China', 'Chineseness' and 'Chinese-language' have become contentious in both Chinese-language and English-language academic worlds in recent years, which is evidenced by the rise of queer Sinophone research. Queer Sinophone studies has so far relied heavily on Shu-mei Shih's problematization of China-centrism in her seminal theorization of the concept 'Sinophone' as 'a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness' (2007, 4) that invites 'the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions' (2011, 710). While striving to 'deconstruct what the category of China itself might mean in a nonnormative sense—that is, to queer China from the outside in' (Chiang 2014, 265), queer Sinophone scholars also heatedly debated on whether the

‘Sinophone’ should include the PRC in their critical examinations (Martin, 2014; Wong 2018, 2020; Yue 2012). While the PRC has often been conceived as an authoritarian, hegemonic social and political entity, some studies have argued for the necessity of including queer cultures and subjects ‘located inside the territorial borders of the PRC’ in critical analysis as well as part of global queer flows in general (Martin 2014, 43).

Petrus Liu has famously stated that ‘what is “queer” is constantly expanded, supplemented and revised by what is “Chinese”’ (2010, 297). In line with this point, the implicative linkage *between* the queer inflections of Chineseness *and* the indispensable inclusion of queerness as a key, constitutive element in mainstream Chinese culture and society has been addressed in some queer China scholarship. For instance, through her conceptual framework of ‘desiring China’, Lisa Rofel argues that sexual minorities have been actively negotiating their identities in a neoliberal China as ‘desiring’ subjects under the PRC’s national project of ‘cosmopolitan with Chinese characteristics’ (2007, 5, 116). This cosmopolitan-cum-neoliberal discourse emphasizes Chinese citizens’ capability of imagining, domesticating and embodying a sense of cosmopolitanism in a postsocialist world (Rofel 2007; Yau 2010). Travis S.K. Kong’s (2011, 2019) transnational queer sociology also highlights the diverse ways in which queer people and communities employ global mobilities and citizenship to negotiate, if not negate, traditional normative identities and values associated with the PRC and Chineseness. Following these pioneering works, a growing body of research have inspected queer lives and cultural productions concerning geocultural-ethnic-linguistic minority groups living within the borders of the PRC (Shernuk 2020; Zhao 2021) or situated in a transpacific or global South context (Bao 2021; Wong 2020a, 2020b). Overall, this emerging strand of research aims to *both* underline queer as an indispensable constitutive element of the heteronormative imaginary of China *and* as verb and an analytical exercise to dismantle

self-conflicting discourses on identity, affect and belonging in highly normative, patriarchal contexts. Queer/ing China therefore gestures toward a ‘minor China’, which subverts, challenges and reimagines a ‘major China’ as is often known and taken for granted (Yapp 2021). It injects the subversive potential of queerness to the discussion of Chineseness and infuses an open, flexible and non-essentialized sense of Chineseness to disrupt the hegemonic, universalist ‘global gay’ (Altman 1997) imaginary.

Queer/ing China as method

Media and cultural studies scholar Audrey Yue identifies two entangled strands of research emerging in queer Asian studies: ‘queer hybridity’ and ‘critical regionality’ (2014, 146). In particular, the frameworks of ‘queer Asia as method’ (Yue 2017; Yue and Leung 2015) and ‘queer Asia as critique’ (Chiang and Wong 2015, 2017) exemplify the scholarly efforts of the strand of critical regionality to de-Westernize and decolonize queer knowledge, epistemology and politics. To continue this endeavor, ‘queer/ing China’ encompasses people, locations and cultures under the influence or even born within the cultural, linguistic and political hegemonies of the PRC; it indexes an alternative form of queer transnationalism and decolonization.

For one thing, the method considers ‘queer’ as a contingent and flexible assemblage of noun, verb or adjective, the meanings of which can be fluid, performative and contingent, especially when being used to unravel and interrogate nonnormative ways of being, doing, desiring and imagining in and cross various forms of traditionally defined boundaries. For another, this approach spotlights the inevitable ‘transnational’ dimensions of queer media, culture and movements of today’s Sinosphere. In this sense, the ‘transnational’ includes both ‘major’ and ‘minor’ forms of transnationalism, or what Chris Berry terms, ‘two globalizations’ (2021, 184), which points to different types of

trans-geopolitical or cross-linguistic or cross-ethnic gender and sexual practices, not all of which are global (some may be translocal, transregional or inter-Asian) and not all of which are hegemonic. Consequently, the transnationalism embedded in the method of ‘queer/ing China’ showcases the political stance and intellectual commitment of queer China studies to debunking Western-centrism and Han-Chinese hegemony; it also calls attention to the cultural-ethnic-linguistic dissonance in the Sinosphere.

Ultimately, our critical paradigm of ‘queer/ing China’ interrogates the cross-border flows of queer cultures associated with Chineseness, some of which are dictated by nation-states and global capitals, while others are initiated by ordinary people and grassroots groups. We hope this paradigm can open up a new conceptual space for studies of contemporary Chinese genders, sexualities, queerness and feminism in an increasingly challenging geopolitical era. Instead of positioning the study of gender and sexuality, especially their nonnormative manifestations, in the PRC as a topic outside of, or in opposition to, queer Sinophone studies, ‘queer/ing China’ positions queer studies and China studies as a generative theoretical alliance to explore the queering potentials and queered realities of the Sinosphere as a key, indispensable ‘critical regionality’ that works in tandem with queer Sinophone and queer Asian studies in complementary, productive and mutually enhancing ways. In summary, the approach of ‘queer/ing China’ enables a critical examination of the deeply entwined constructions of Chineseness, heteronormativity and patriarchy generated through both local, regional traditions and cross-cultural and transnational circulations of knowledge, people and social movements.

Acknowledgement

This essay is a theoretical position piece which responds to the current debates surrounding queerness and Chineseness in global queer studies. It also serves as a

thematic statement for the new research directions and theoretical advancement in queer China studies taken on by the new Bloomsbury book series, ‘Queering China: Transnational Genders and Sexualities’.

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Jamie J. Zhao is a global queer media scholar and currently Honorary Professor and Director of the Center for Gender and Media Studies in the Department of Journalism and Communication at NingboTech University, PRC. Her research spans female gender and sexuality in East Asian and Chinese-language entertainment and pop culture in a globalist, digital age. Since 2022, she has become the founding co-editor of the ‘Queering China: Transnational Genders and Sexualities’ book series published by Bloomsbury.

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