
The dominant model for understanding contemporary gay and lesbian identities has always been drawn from the theorization of Western queer cultures and communities. It is only recently that the Western (sometimes read “global”) notion of “gayness” has been questioned, criticized or even decentred, and this has occurred mainly along the lines of a critique of cultural imperialism and exemplified by the notion of “global queering.” Recent studies have drawn out the discrepancies between modern and traditional representations of non-Western, non-normative genders and sexualities, bringing forth the reconsideration of what is meant by “gay” or “lesbian” and re-examining appropriate gay and lesbian politics that are sensitive to local and global parameters.

Loretta Wing-wah Ho’s book is situated in this debate. The aim of the book is to examine the emergence of contemporary Chinese same-sex identities—gay, lesbian, lala, les, money boy, tongzhi, duan bei—under China’s opening up to globalization. Her analysis is based on Chinese and English scholarly literature, ethnographic studies of same-sex communities in Beijing and the Chinese same-sex cyberspace. Ho articulates four major trends in Chinese same-sex identities in urban China: an increasingly globalized gay culture; an ongoing construction of “indigenous” Chinese identity that counteracts globalized gay culture; a hybridized transnational Chinese identity; and the emergence of a gay space in Chinese cyberspace.

Conjoined with other scholars (e.g., Lisa Rofel, Tom Boellstorff, Martin Manalansan, Denis Altman, Chris Berry) in discussing globalization and identities in non-Western non-normative genders and sexualities, Ho asks the question: “How have Western notions of gay and lesbian identity been appropriated in non-Western societies as a result of increasing global interconnectedness?” (17). She rejects both the simple logics that Chinese same-sex identities are merely copycats of Western gay and lesbian identities and lifestyles, on the one hand, and that “indigenous” Chinese same-sex identities as being “authentic,” on the other. Rather, she argues succinctly that Chinese gay men and lesbians “selectively (re-)appropriate patterns of gayness through a Western model of modernity, whilst still continuing to defend an ‘authentic’ Chinese same-sex identity and sense of belonging” (21), leading to her overall paradoxical argument of Chinese same-sex identity: “open and decentred, yet at the same time, national and conforming to state control” (138).

Ho’s book is important and timely as it brings together (homo)sexuality and globalization in the Chinese context and offers a strong critique to the hegemonic (Western) notion of gayness. After the introductory chapter, Ho, in chapter 2, uses Ken Plummer’s symbolic interactionist notion of
“storytelling” to bring out the different voices of the “coming out” stories of her interviewees, underlining how these stories are closely tied with the national and global imagining of China’s opening up. In chapter 3, she discusses quite lengthily her fieldwork, paying special attention to the problem of representation and legitimization. She is particularly sensitive to her own role as “a semi-outsider, a non-gay female, a researcher from Australia, a citizen of Hong Kong, a visiting scholar of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, and a non-Beijing resident in the field” (60) who has done research on gays and lesbians in urban China. Chapter 4 is a rather short chapter on the politics of same-sex articulations through the divergent meanings of “homosexual,” “gay” and “lesbian” in the Chinese context, using a linguistic analysis. In chapter 5, she turns into the increasingly commercialized and state-controlled Chinese gay cyberworld.

Building from the previous chapters, chapter 6 is the most important and interesting chapter, as Ho puts forward her main argument that the emergence of modern Chinese same-sex identities cannot merely be treated as “modern” (read Western) or “authentic” (read indigenous), but are constituted by a complicated interplay between local coming-to-terms gay and lesbian generations, China’s project of modernity, and global queering.

This is a rather short book, seemingly converted from Ho’s PhD thesis. As noted by the author, there are plenty of areas for further investigation. I enjoyed reading it very much but would like to read more. For example, I would like to read how the author might take queer theory on board to enrich her theoretical understanding of (decentring) identity. Her present theoretical model is mainly based on Stuart Hall’s notion of cultural identity and Ken Plummer/Richard Troiden’s notion of sexual identity formation. Secondly, I would like to hear more the different voices among the gay and lesbian communities, as the dominant voice presented here was that of highly educated, city-based, male professionals (mainly due to the sample of interviewees). Still, this does not distract from the book’s being a valuable empirical study of sexual minorities in China.

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Whether it is walking into a DVD store in US Chinatowns, or turning on cable television in Taipei, the Shaw Brothers’ logo is still hard to miss even decades after the studio’s last film production. Starting in Shanghai in the 1920s, the later Hong Kong and Singapore-based Shaw Brothers Studio created an extensive business network, transforming itself from a local film industry to