

Queer Marxism in Two Chinas

Friday 5 July 2019, by [KEMP Brandon](#) (Date first published: 20 July 2016).

Brandon Kemp discusses Petrus Liu's latest book arguing that Queer Theory and Marxism belong together and bringing this to bear on gender in Chinese and Taiwanese culture.

Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) 256pp

Petrus Liu's latest book represents an admirable and ambitious attempt to center the marginal in discussions of China by focusing not only on the Mainland metropolises, as so much popular analysis does, but also on Taiwan's often neglected role in debates over Chinese culture, politics, and identity. Liu does so by putting the "two Chinas" geopolitical relationship at the heart of an attempt to reconcile—or suggest the inherent compatibility of—queer theory and Marxism. This approach distinguishes the work from related monographs, like Tze-lan Sang's exploration of emerging lesbian identity under Mainland China and Taiwan's "translated modernities" (a term she borrows from Lydia Liu), that veer between the historical-contextual and literary-textual. Liu weaves in and out of discussions of theory, background, and literature in a more haphazard way (and, unfortunately, with denser prose), but his basic point is clear: Contrary to those who proclaim that queer people's well-being and safety requires the liberal state and its protections, and thus also the transcending of Marxian ideologies and politics, Liu notes how cross-strait engagement with both orthodox and heterodox Marxisms has helped Chinese and Taiwanese queer activists develop important theoretical and political tools for resisting oppression. As a result, transnational Chinese queer activists would be well served if they heeded and drew from this supposedly forgotten legacy of "queer Marxism."



The end result is suggestive and illuminating. Passages discussing how Judith Butler turned to Chinese anthropologist Cai Hua in order to affirm the cultural relativity of gender norms in her seminal *Gender Trouble*, while rightly chiding the theorist for her construction of China as the "Other" of Euro-American practices, highlight important cross-cultural linkages and dependencies that are useful in deconstructing the supposed opposition between "Western" queer theory and "Eastern" history. So too with his take on the work of the Gender/Sexuality Rights Association,

Taiwan (G/SRAT), which advocates for queer labor issues and has produced thinkers, like Ding Naifei and Liu Jen-peng, theorizing queerness in the idiom of the famed Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi. And while Liu may be too hesitant to affirm some of the positive possibilities afforded to Chinese sexual and gender nonconformists by the liberalization of 1980s—chief among them the loosening of state controls over artistic production and the emergence of new urban spaces conducive to queer subcultures, most memorably portrayed by Zhang Yuan’s 1996 film *East Palace, West Palace*—he is better at naming its limits. His discussion of the Taiwanese government’s recent decision to grant housing subsidies in Taipei, where prices are on the rise, only to married couples offers a useful corrective to liberal pluralism, which proposes extending marriage rights to gay people as a “solution” to this problem, leaving everyone who is not married (the single, those in polyamorous relationships, non-conjugal friends and family living together, etc.) out to dry and the more fundamental issues of social inequality unaddressed. It is not obvious, however, why one must be a Marxist to appreciate this point or, for that matter, why one must be a liberal to think that sometimes even flawed reforms are better than nothing, so long as we point out their limits.

Elsewhere, the author convincingly shows how 1960s and ‘70s debates in Taiwanese literary circles over the merits of *Marxisant* social realism versus “art for art’s sake” were deeply informed by Cold War relations and politics, with the result that even many of those inclined toward modernist aestheticism rather than overt political engagement began to take an interest in socially marginal subjects, including homosexuality. The most moving of such discussions centers around his analysis of Chen Ruoxi’s book *Paper Marriage*, which tells the story of a woman from Shanghai who emigrates to the United States, only to be fired from her job and reported to immigration authorities after complaining about her boss’s sexual harassment. The protagonist is able to secure a green card through a marriage of convenience to a gay man, who later dies of AIDS-related complications in his wife’s care. Chen, a Taiwanese woman who defected from her fiercely anti-Communist homeland to go to Mao’s China during the height of the Cultural Revolution, later became a kind of native informant despite her place of birth for the non-Communist world trying to understand Red China. But by 1973, long before *Paper Marriage*’s publication, Chen had become disillusioned with Maoism. In her novel, it is the white American husband, Sean, who idealizes China as a land of sexual freedom and social equality in his final days, drawing unwarranted parallels between American student radicals and the Red Guards much as Chen herself had done during her studies in the US. Astonishingly, the anti-Communist Chen, too, is interpreted by Liu as a queer Marxist of sorts, even as he writes that the novel “also marks the limits of Marxism.”



From ‘Totem Recollection’, Tian Tai Quan – 田代

Herein lies the greatest problem with Liu’s argument. Not only does Marxism get defined so nebulously that, ultimately, it seems to mean little more than attention to geopolitical context and the interaction of the economic and the cultural, but many of his supposed exemplars of queer Marxism are, in fact, not Marxists. Liu even admits as much, only to then proceed insisting that these non-Marxists are doing queer Marxism regardless of their intentions. In one passage, the author writes of underground Mainland director Cui Zi’en that “he expands and revitalizes a Marxist

intellectual tradition by rejecting it.” Cui at least has some kind words to spare for communism as a utopian ideal to be reinvigorated—or “communism as futurity,” as Liu, clearly channeling the late José Esteban Muñoz, puts it. (Incidentally, Muñoz, who was inspired by the deeply homophobic Marxist Ernst Bloch, is a fine case in point that dialogue with Marxian thought does not make one’s ideas “Marxist” by default.) In his eagerness to identify an alternative to mainstream liberal pluralist accounts of identity, Liu somewhat disingenuously suggests that certain groups and individuals are practicing a queer Marxism when, in fact, there are good reasons for thinking that they are not.

This shortcoming is indicative of a more fundamental and worrisome trend throughout, which is the author’s ongoing conflation of liberal identity politics and queer theory. It is of course true that much of modern queer theory, particularly the sort influenced by the cultural and affective turns, is concerned with personal experience. But this trend emerged largely in reaction against the kind of Marxist-inflected critical theory that too often elided the cumulative micro-effects of social relations on the individual subject. In short, its intent was never to deny the importance of structural factors like politics and economics but to suggest a more reciprocal relationship between these and lived experience, one that appreciated *both* human agency and its wider contexts and limits. Seen this way, cultural practices and affects were simply alternative starting points for the examination of the frequently hidden linkages between the individual and society. To a large extent, such moves draw inspiration from the work of Marxists like Gramsci and Althusser, who concerned themselves with diffuse apparatuses of social reproduction and their role in forming individual consciousness and beliefs, only going a step further to also examine not only “ideology” (with its false promises of truth uninfluenced by social relations) but also desire and the somatic imprint of different technologies of control as well as how individuals and groups can interrupt dominant feelings and beliefs.

Moreover, queer theory has a fundamental methodological distinction from accounts that begin and end with identity. (Ironically, in America it was self-identified Marxists like Patricia Hill Collins who played an outsize role in the turn toward intersectional, pluralistic identity politics rather than queer theory.) Queer theory does not take identity as a transhistorical given; rather, like Marxism, it seeks to *historicize* social relations in order to de-naturalize them and open up new political possibilities. The point, then, is not that same-sex desire has any inherent meaning or radicality (that was the error of the gay liberationists, now even more abundantly obvious given the rise of homonormative, neoliberal gay organizations and agendas across the globe noted by Liu and documented in the Chinese case by sociologists like Travis Kong). Rather, queer theory emphasizes how gay identity’s conditions of possibility—say, the evolution of the Christian pastoral tradition into the modern psychiatric and sexological discourse brought to China by way of Europe and Japan, the decoupling of subsistence from traditional kinship networks under industrial capitalism, and the gendered division of labor—are neither natural nor inevitable. Consequently, we can imagine new and different modes of being together, alternative ways of organizing and experiencing social relations.

Liu, of course, knows all this. He is adamant in insisting that he does not seek a return to a dogmatic Marxism that claims, à la Althusser, that the economic is primary “in the last instance.” His wager is that Chinese queer activists are particularly well suited to reformulating a non-dogmatic form of Marxism, given the way their work is inevitably forced to engage with the confluence of geopolitics, culture, and political economy. While there may be some truth to this, it still isn’t clear why a queer Marxism should be the best framework for addressing the problems facing these communities (and everyone else). After all, queer theory’s chief innovation was not its abandonment of structural critique for a thinly veiled identity politics, but its rejection of the traditional working class as the sole anointed “subject-object of history” (in György Lukács’s memorable and not-quite-materialist phrase), its refusal of the base-superstructure model in favor of a dynamic, contingently articulated social totality, and a healthy skepticism of liberationist, post-political paradigms combined with a commitment to reducing violence and resisting oppression.



'Hello Comrades', Wang Zi 王紫

Liu might object that Marxism's emphasis on relationality is evidence that it can theorize culture and economics as fundamentally intertwined (oddly enough, his example of choice is the labor theory of value). That this larger point, which he more or less explicitly adopts from Butler, is actually evidence of Marxism retroactively incorporating some post-Marxian insights appears lost on him. Even the least reductionist Marxists, like Raymond Williams, took the metaphysical primacy of the economy as *the* distinguishing feature of Marxian analysis, even if they believed politics and ideology played important roles as well. But, if anything, the Soviet and Chinese examples demonstrated all too well that even if one should abolish—for a time anyway—the private profit motive, the forces that oppress and exclude queers, from psychiatry and the heteronormative family to lingering religious attitudes and mores, can persist and even meld with the state Marxist project. Think, for example, of the Maoist danwei or work unit. By combining both production and consumption, it proved a powerful enforcer of conservative sexual norms, as being outed as queer might mean not only the loss of one's primary source of community, but also potentially even imprisonment under anti-hooliganism laws and a loss of access to the "iron rice bowl's" guarantees of lifetime employment and social security.

In short, the historical practice of state socialism largely vindicated the voices of those like Foucault so disturbed by the rampant homophobia that he observed in the French Communist Party and "actually-existing" socialist states. Their calls to examine not only the state and corporations but a wide array of interconnected social institutions and practices proved right, even if they had the unfortunate side effect in many cases of downplaying the former's importance. Interestingly, Liu evades important analytic distinctions between queer theory and Marxism's terminology: When he speaks of "power relations," "ideology," "discourse," and so on in the same breath, we have reason to pause and wonder whether this dishonestly evades confronting incommensurable aspects of the two approaches. If "power" is nothing more than *something* to be "seized," as in traditional Marxist thinking, then he is in danger of falling into the revolutionary myopia just discussed. If, however, it names a broader expanse of uneven social relations, of which the state and capital are undoubtedly key nodes but hardly the whole story, then hasn't he already conceded that it is a certain kind of queer theory's outlook that better informs politics today, and, if so, what might Marxism add to the picture that a general admonition to take international political economy seriously might not?

The cataclysmic events of the twentieth century led Marxists the world over to reconsider their core doctrines, resulting in creative attempts to meld Marxism and Freudianism and even religion in order to explain what had gone wrong. The result in many cases was certainly a less dogmatic Marxism, but only in light of orthodox Marxism-Leninism's myriad and horrific failures. Today, Liu is probably right that the ground is particularly fertile for renewed dialogues between the two camps. Marxist-feminists, influenced by the heterodox Italian autonomist school of thought, are increasingly noting that while workplace and macroeconomic relations structure intimate life in profound ways, production is also always already predicated on gendered, sexualized, and racialized social reproduction as well. Josephine Ho emerges as a figure particularly attuned to some of these

convergences in Liu's account. Similarly, the regulation school of Marxism and its offshoots are well suited to incorporating the insights of Foucaultian queer theory in naming the diffuse mechanisms of disciplinary and biopolitical control available under late capitalism. And, admittedly, a deeper engagement with class on the part of queer theory would probably be a good thing. But in light of the perennial problems plaguing Marxism, one can be forgiven for doubting its centrality to solving contemporary social and political problems, in China or elsewhere.

Brandon Kemp is a writer and critic whose work focuses on the intersection of film, culture, and embodied experience. His work has been featured in the journal of Slavonic and Eastern European cultures Slovo. He tweets @BrandonMKemp.

Brandon Kemp

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Hong Kong Review of Books

<https://hkrbooks.com/2016/07/20/queer-marxism-in-two-chinas/>