
Book Review

Perverse Taiwan

Lin Song ^{1*}

Published: September 27, 2018

Edited By: Howard Chiang and Yin Wang

Publication Date: 2016

Publisher: New York: Routledge

Price: £115

Number of Pages: 238 pp. hardback.

ISBN: 9781138227965

With a rapidly growing corpus of works over the last two decades, researches on gender and sexualities in East Asia not only yield new vantage points to theorise the formation of identities, but also challenge Eurocentric modes of knowledge production by underlining the importance of cultural hybridity and specificity. The latest addition to this productive field of research, *Perverse Taiwan* presents a volume of essays that focus upon a range of literary, media, ethnographic, and cinematic texts spanning nearly seven decades in Taiwan's recent history. Diverse in temporal frames and disciplinary backgrounds, these essays are organised around the book's central theme of re-mapping non-normative gender and sexualities in Taiwan by re-visiting their genealogies, positionalities, and embodiments.

Comprised of ten chapters, the book is divided thematically into four parts. It starts with an introduction to the concept of 'perverse Taiwan' as a critical intervention, and the following three sections provide case studies exploring different facets of non-normative gender and sexuality in historical and contemporary Taiwan. Howard Chiang and Yin Wang's introductory chapter marks out the urgency of challenging both the hegemonic knowledge formation about modernity and the monocausal view of history. Highlighting the ambiguity and intricacy of Taiwan's queer history and culture, it raises doubts about the unidirectional rhetoric of post-martial law (i.e. post-1987) liberation and calls for new perspectives and interpretive strategies in understanding Taiwan's sexual modernities.

The three chapters of Part One revolve around a common concern about genealogies, and offer analyses of various discourses in Taiwan before the lifting of the martial law. Collectively, they demonstrate that dominant narratives of Taiwan's queer histories fall short of capturing the richness and complexity of the island's non-normative genders and sexualities. Howard Chiang's chapter zooms in on mainstream Taiwanese newspapers' coverage of the local figure Zeng Qiu Huang's *renyao* stories in the 1950s. Tracing *renyao*'s genealogical roots in Ming-Qing China and the denaturalisation of the category in republican Taiwan, Chiang posits that such a practice of archiving contributes both to re-imagining Taiwan's queer past and to re-interpreting the island's supposedly peripheral position as a critical vantage point of queer historical knowledge production. Ta-wei Chi's chapter challenges the monumentalisation of Hsien-yung Pai's 1983 novel *Exiled Sons* (*Niezi*) as the single founding work of literature of homosexuality in Taiwan. Evoking an understanding of the literary subject as a 'subject-effect', Chi identifies a pluralist cohort of writers in the 1960s, whose works on homosexuality not only exert fundamental influence on later authors but also illustrate the subtlety and nonlinearity of Taiwan's history of homosexuality in literature. Jens Damm's chapter provides rich data of public opinions on homosexuality in the late 1970s to the

¹ Teaching Assistant, Department of Family Medicine and Primary Care, University of Hong Kong, HONG KONG.

*Corresponding Author: linsong@hku.hk

late 1980s, a transformative period of social upheavals and unrest. Through a closer look at medical, psychoanalytical, popular, and literary discourses, the chapter examines how disjunctive flows of U.S. discourses influenced local approaches to gender and sexuality. These approaches, though mostly conservative, are characteristically pluralised, constituting important historical roots for Taiwan's post-martial law democratisation.

Shifting focus to contemporary Taiwan, the two chapters in Part Two draw on detailed ethnographic data to explore queer subjects' identificatory practices and showcase how global and local knowledges converge to produce new sexual identities, experiences, and positionalities. Yu-Ying Hu's chapter teases out categorical politics in local lesbian women's creative engagements with the binary *T* (normatively masculine) - *Po* (normatively feminine) division. Observing how they use hybridised subcategories such as *bufen* (no particular gender inclinations) to complicate existing structures of identification, Hu argues that negotiations among global, local, and subjective sexual knowledges engender an ever-changing and never-complete process of queer identity formation in post-martial law Taiwan. Also writing on local queer subjectivities, Amy Brainer delves into the relationship between transgender identities and Chinese patrilineal kinship ideologies. Her chapter offers a fascinating account of a transman's negotiations with his family throughout the process of his transition, and illustrates how transgender embodiment is profoundly relational to family roles. While Brainer suggests that the recalibration of family roles indicates fluidity and flexibility that unsettle the ideological antagonism between queerness and Chinese kinship, she also cautions that the negotiative process may cost a high psychological and cultural price and needs deeper scholarly attention.

With four chapters on performing arts, cinema, and literature, Part Three unpacks the cultural politics of imagining, representing, and embodying gendered identities in Taiwan. Chao-Jung Wu's chapter offers a detailed case study of Redtop Arts (*Hongding Yiren*), an enormously popular cross-dressing entertainment troupe in the 1990s. Examining how the troupe hybridises a variety of Japanese, Chinese, indigenous, and Western genres and popular cultural contents, the chapter brings to light the ways in which Redtop Arts' bodily practices, motivated by commercial and cosmopolitan aspirations, signify the constant re-making of contemporary Taiwanese identities at the intersections of tradition and modern, local and global, and nativism and nationalism. Chun-Chi Wang's chapter turns to Taiwanese *tongzhi* cinema and critiques the recent proliferation of queer-themed films in the mainstream market. She points out that although the visibility of queerness has drastically improved, newly produced commercial feature films' representation of *tongzhi* is problematically removed from the rights movement and subordinated to heteronormative ideologies. She calls for a return to the 'offensive' and 'unapologetic' modes of queer representation in order to challenge hetero-mainstream portrayal of domesticated queerness (176-177). Whereas Wang's skepticism toward homonormative politics is well-justified, the exclusion of arthouse cinema and independent documentaries in her analyses seems to have led to a partial judgement of Taiwan *tongzhi* cinema as 'normalising'. The relationship between *tongzhi* visibility and commercial culture needs further exploration, and the chapter also needs to address the key underlying question of whether radical and confrontational politics is the only route to queer representation and embodiment in the Taiwanese context¹. Te-hsuan Yeh's chapter is arguably the most theoretically dense chapter in the book. The chapter contends that Western theorisations of shame as a universal humanising feeling premised upon the Cartesian model are inadequate for understanding affect in Sinophone societies today. Drawing on Tsai Ming-liang's celebrated work *The River*, Yeh argues that the queer film revises the Deleuzian sense of shame by foregrounding the process of disconnection and deterritorialisation, as opposed to association with the disgraced subject, as a key component of shame in Confucian culture. By doing so, the chapter calls for a new theoretical framework that understands nomadic, rather than self-contained subjectivities as capable of generating effective counter-discursive queer strategies. Yin Wang's concluding chapter investigates contemporary female Taiwanese writer Lai Xiangyin's novels as windows to the interwar and postwar formation of Taiwanese consciousness. Looking into Lai's literary representations of Taiwanese intellectuals' ambivalent affective investment in Japan and a generalised West, Wang examines how Taiwan's colonial modernity is deeply embedded in individual sense of subjectivity. The asymmetrical relationship between Taiwan and Japan, Wang suggests, produces battling feelings of love and shame, aspiration and frustration, and hope and pain that constitute 'habitable signs of selfhood' (210).

Presenting rich case studies, *Perverse Taiwan* illuminates how non-normative gender and sexual identity formations in Taiwan are intertwined with its complex histories and unique geopolitical settings. In particular, it

¹ See, for example, Song Hwee Lim's discussion about the burden of presentation in *The Wedding Banquet* in *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (U of Hawai'i P, 2006), Ching Yau's observation about Hong Kong queer subjects' desire to access normality in *As Normal As Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Hong Kong U P, 2010), and Elisabeth Enggebretsen's further theorisation of the "close-to-normal" strategy in *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (Routledge, 2014).

offers an original and powerful historical critique that not only re-imagines Taiwan's queer genealogies, but also prompts new understandings of its non-normative gender and sexual subjectivities. However, I also find the chapters on contemporary Taiwan a little disconnected from the book's historical insight. The question of how a re-thinking of queer histories in Taiwan would inform new theorisations of contemporary Taiwanese queerness still needs to be fully addressed. And the uniqueness of Taiwan's political and cultural settings could be better foregrounded in the analyses of cinematic representations, identificatory practices, and kinship relations in a contemporary setting.

On the whole, the edited volume is a timely contribution that not only re-maps sexual histories and geographies of East Asia, but also deepens understandings of queer subjectivities in the world today. The book's interdisciplinary approach makes it appealing to scholars of diverse backgrounds, including history, Asian studies, gender and sexuality studies, literary studies, film studies, and media and cultural studies, to name but a few.

Citation: Song, L. (2018). [Review of the book *Perverse Taiwan*, edited by Howard Chiang and Yin Wang]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 2(2), 24. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/3892>

Copyright © 2018 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.