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Book Review

## Sexuality and the Rise of China: The Post-1990s Gay Generation in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China

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An ambitious book that is broad in its geographical and thematic reach, Travis S. K. Kong's *Sexuality and the Rise of China* captures the particular zeitgeist of the sexual and intimate politics of Chinese gay men post the 1990s generation. Kong employs what he has termed 'transnational queer sociology' as a method to examine the subjectivities of Chinese gay men across Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China to counter dominant Western-centric methods of queer knowledge production. Kong argues, Western-centrism in queer knowledge production either posits the West as a globalising origin of gayness, or essentialises the non-West as an authentically local and cultural Other to debunk a Western universalism. Kong therefore proposes instead to start with rich sociological analysis of nonnormative sexualities across multiple sites, to demonstrate how 'interregional knowledge systems' shape human experiences 'in critical dialogue with the West and *within* the non-West' (p. 16, emphasis mine). In the book, Kong draws on ninety interviews with gay men across the aforementioned three sites and compares their experiences of coming out, community building, sexual and romantic relationships, and identity formation in response to the changing political and economic regimes across these Sinospheres.

The commonality of Kong's subjects across these three sites is undoubtedly related to Chineseness. The title of the book, 'rise of China,' also signifies a temporal shift in our understanding of Chineseness that is distinct from previous enactments of 'cultural Chineseness' (expressed via Confucianism) or the regional 'Greater China' framework, which centred on mainland China—the People's Republic of China (hereafter, the PRC)—as the homeland of all Chineseness. For Kong, the rise of China indicates both the rise of Chinese nationalism and the Xi Jinping regime (p. xv). For his subjects in Hong Kong and Taiwan, especially, the rise of China necessitates a critical reconceptualisation of Chineseness that was taken for granted. The political particularities of living under democratic governance with a rich history of anti-authoritarian and social justice movements in Taiwan and a postcolonial, cosmopolitan city with conditional forms of democracy and human rights in Hong Kong become the factors that affect the distinct sexual, intimate, and identity building practices between gay men in these two places in comparison to the PRC. As Kong notes in the book, for example, post-Umbrella Movement, political affiliation between pro- and anti- Beijing is a definite 'deal breaker' in partner choices among gay men in Hong Kong (p. 112), whereas the vibrant LGBTQ movement and general societal acceptability of the *tongzhi* community grants gay men in Taiwan a more 'imaginative space' to explore partnership and intimacy (p. 127). In contrast,

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neoliberal precarity and political censorship have made dating and partnership more unstable and unattainable in the PRC.

Kong's analysis on the distinct trajectories of sexuality in these three sites raises the question of whether *Chineseness* can still serve as an unproblematic comparative framework. Despite (partially) shared cultural roots, the LGBTQ communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the PRC are shaped by different colonial histories, political movements, and economic developments, as well as ethnic and class tensions, which render *Chineseness* an ambiguous yet hegemonic concept that is most visibly defined by its Han-centrism and PRC nationalism. Kong's call for 'transnational queer' comparison perhaps only makes sense when *Chineseness* encounters the West—serving as regional case studies that 'resists the dominance of Western models in elucidating non-Western, nonnormative sexualities' (p. 9). To put it another way, a limitation in such transnational approach that even interregional referencing *within* the non-West is ultimately situated in the West/non-West divide to the extent that, from a bird's eye view, the non-West can only be significant in comparison to the West rather than on its own. Similarly, the Sinophone peripheries of Hong Kong and Taiwan are also only meaningful when compared to the *Chineseness* of the PRC rather than having their own significance. The insistence on *Chineseness* as the main common denominator and transnational comparative framework may lose the growing political disconnect across LGBTQ communities in the three places due to Beijing's heightened censorship. This not only drives activists in the PRC to concentrate on more urgent and local demands within the country, such as the rise of patriarchal nationalism, but also build closer political affiliation between activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The discussion on the three enactments of homonationalism in Chapter Five provides the most controversial application of *Chineseness* as a comparative framework. Originated from Jasbir Puar as an analytical tool to examine sexual hierarchy among queer subjects via racialised nationalism, Kong expands the concept of homonationalism as a method to distinguish different forms of sexual nationalism enacted at both the state and individual level. According to Kong, Taiwan exhibits a form of 'incorporative homonationalism,' whereas Hong Kong expresses a 'deficient homonationalism,' and the PRC demonstrates a 'pragmatic homonationalism.' Kong sees the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan (a.k.a. Constitutional Interpretation No. 748) as a definite moment of homonationalism, which 'affirms Taiwan as the global/Western civilized world' and '[views] mainland China as conservative and backward' (p. 135). This analysis fails to capture the local queer and feminist debates and activist confrontations with the transnational Christian Right that drove Taiwan toward the path of legal inclusion, and instead, frames it as a tactical geopolitical move against the PRC. This analytical issue, again, is part of the limitation of using *Chineseness* as the main frame of reference, where countering 'Western hegemony' remains the ultimate goal and any distancing from *Chineseness* can be read as a sub-imperial betrayal, as Chen Kuan-Hsing famously frames Taiwan's relation to the United States and China in his influential book, *Asia as a Method*.

The popularity of the above transnational analysis 'in critical dialogue with the West and within the non-West' (p. 16) is certainly not an issue of Kong's book alone, but a problem of queer studies at large. Whereas queer scholars have attempted to undo their Euro-American-centrism for at least two decades *vis-à-vis* the transnational turn, the turn to look at the 'non-West' (even as an 'interregional knowledge system') in order to provincialise the 'West' is laden with the high risk of self-Orientalising—for who other than a Western audience is the overarching framework of 'Chineseness' as the most salient and digestible way to conceptualise interregional difference? *Sexuality and the Rise of China* certainly has moved beyond the binarism analysis of West/non-West, and in its sociological analysis, readers can encounter many political and economic details of gay men's lives in these three changing Sinophone societies. However, Kong's book brings a new set of issues to light, around how to do comparisons in Queer Asia when there are multiple empires and colonial histories embedded in interregional networks, rather than a singular hegemony of the so-called 'West.' While the centrality of gay Han Chinese male subjects may be an appropriate methodological move to simplify multi-sited comparison, this decision also misses the chance to capture the multi-ethnic, multi-national, and multi-gender dynamics of LGBTQ communities in all three societies. For instance, the rise of Southeast Asian populations in both Hong Kong and Taiwan due to neoliberal labour shortages. The emerging political discourses of queer Indigeneity in Taiwan, and the confrontation of racism and nationalism in the PRC with its economic expansion in Africa, all provide vital knowledge for queer inquiries in the era of the 'rise of China.' Kong's book definitely serves as an exciting beginning of this line of investigation across these queer Sinospheres, but it should certainly not be taken as its end.

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