
Book Review

Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia

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Published: March 19, 2018

Edited By: Tiantian Zheng

Publication Date: 2016

Publisher: Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press

Number of Pages: 229 pp. paperback

Price: \$28.00

ISBN: 9780824852979

As the book title, *Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia*, suggests, this edited volume provides not only a guide to gender and sexuality studies in Asia but also arguments that centre sexuality in Asian cultural politics. The book presents a collective effort to ethnographically examine recent changes within the political economy in Asia through the lenses of gender and sexuality. Moreover, across the twelve chapters, the authors address various methodological and theoretical issues that extend beyond Asia as a regional case and sex/gender as a sole analytical dimension. Such a volume would benefit not only students and scholars who are already interested in Asia, political economy, and sex and gender studies, but also those who primarily study social changes in first-world countries.

Like other excellent ethnographic studies, the essays in this book constantly ask readers to be mindful of specific cultural and historical contexts that may be different from and yet connected to other parts of the world. This volume manifests a critical theoretical position between strong cultural relativism and universalism in anthropology. In other words, the authors simultaneously present their studies as unique in specific contexts and claim broader implications of the cases in relation to studies done elsewhere. For instance, Ahmed Afzal (chapter 11) argues against a universal assumption of premodern or Western gay identity in understanding male-male sexual relationships in Pakistan. Instead, he says that the selfhood and 'homosociality' of these relationships should be understood in the context of localised adulthood, gender roles, familial expectations, and religious beliefs. Danning Wang (chapter 5) stresses the historical situation as an important aspect within discourses of the family planning campaign in China as it simultaneously 'desexualiz[ed] working-class women's family life' (94) and reoriented the notion of family to state interests. Afzal, Wang, and many other chapter authors highlight the importance of specific social and historical conditions in ethnographical analyses, but at the same time, their cases speak to various theoretical and methodological issues beyond particular regions and populations.

While essays in this book focus on cultural politics in Asia, the human subjects in the studies are in the process of migration, and so are materials and ideologies. The authors demonstrate that Asia is never in a closed, homogeneous, or stable state. Rather, it is highly diversified with movements of people, wealth, and ideas in both global and local scales. Furthermore, by focusing on humans experiencing relocation or displacement, the authors identify the constant changes of political economy that shape migrations from rural to urban areas and international movement. In these cases, humans are not confined to a region, and their migrations suggest layers of social changes. In Heidi Hoefinger's (chapter 10) research of Cambodian women engaging in transactional sex with Western foreigners as a means of class mobility, she identifies a series of contradictions and negotiations regarding

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gender expectations, individualisation, and White-centered modernisation mobility among the women migrating from rural areas for class mobility. Like Cambodian women migrating for better life conditions, rural Chinese men also come to major cities to work as ‘money boys’ (chapter 1) and professional porters or carriers, which are termed locally as *bangbang* men (chapter 7). Tiantian Zheng argues that in postsocialist China, rural male migrants become money boys as a route to approach the ‘normal’ citizen subject position in which they ‘contest social inequality and cultural stigma by valourizing state ideology’ (34). Paradoxically, money boys move upward in the class ladder to sanitise the stigma as migrant sex workers. Xia Zhang’s study of *bangbang* men also indicates that the *bangbang* men phenomenon arises from the changing political economy and that their redefinitions of masculinity work against class and migrant status. More importantly, she maintains that the ideal masculinity in China ‘involves many diverse and conflicting meanings in relation to class, work, and the rural-urban division’ and that ‘inconsistency in the meaning of masculinity in contemporary China reflects changes in dominant masculinity ideals over the course of Chinese history’ (127). Hsunhui Tseng’s (chapter 12) study of the transnational marriage markets between Taiwan and other countries presents another kind of human migration in which racial, gender, and class logics are the key mechanisms. Comparing the ways in which matchmaking agents filter Taiwanese male clients and present women from Vietnam and Ukraine, Tseng indicates the differentiated, racialised presentations and expectations for foreign women. Yet, Tseng (212) points out that both the supposedly traditional Vietnamese women from rural areas and the urbane, romanticised Ukrainian ladies underline a ‘gender crisis’ for men and their ‘nostalgia for the traditional gender relations in pre-industrial Taiwan’.

Another important theme running through many of the chapters is ‘doing gender’. The authors collectively depict how individuals meet or negotiate social expectations for assumed gender roles. In the Ladies’ Academy in urban China (chapter 2), the male instructors find contemporary Chinese society chaotic because men and women do not live up to their ‘proper place’ (47). While they think both men and women are problematic in the present-day, they consider female behaviours to be the root of the problem. Moreover, the all-male instructors hold a neo-traditionalist view of an imagined ‘real China’ to lament the loss of social order and justify their conservative brand of education for women at the Ladies’ Academy. In the cultural activities of the *mandal* in Pune, Western India, Madhura Lohokare (chapter 8) observes ‘moral masculinities’ that emphasise selflessness and helping others among low-caste male youth in urban India. Such masculinities come with a sense of community belonging that instils confidence in these marginalised young men. Just like *bangbang* men (chapter 7) in China, the masculinities in India are articulated along with local cultural forces, such as religion and class. While there are assumed gender roles and social expectations associated with gender, there are always individuals who do not fit the normative assumptions or intentionally reject their logic. For example, Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo and Tracy Royce’s (chapter 3) ethnography of Thai gay nightclubs show queer subjects challenging the sex and gender hegemony in various spaces and moments. Lynne Nakano (chapter 9) compares single women in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Tokyo as they all confront social pressure to marry, though the sources of their stress may vary. While some question their ability to meet the requirements of marriage, others question the institution itself and its underlying assumptions. These studies of ‘failures’ or cases outside normativity precisely reveal the ordinary cultural logics of gender and sexuality. A few of the book chapters address heterosexual male homosociality as constructed by reference to the women in their lives. For example, Nana Okura Gagné’s (chapter 4) argues that the male-centred Japanese hostess clubs function as ‘a space *suspended from* masculine expectations stemming from the professionalization of men’s roles as husbands, fathers, and workers’ (89). Similarly, John Osburg (chapter 6) describes a ‘gendered social formation’ among rich men in the Chinese state-business network as they pursue what the author calls the ‘boss’ ideal of masculinity and participate in a ritualised leisure of masculinity (109). In both cases, the making of male space and homosociality requires women as symbolic references or labour power.

This book also contributes to the scholarship of intersectionality. Echoing feminism of colour, all scholars in this edited volume address intersectionality in their analysis of cultural politics. While it is certainly not new to advocate for intersectionality, I find that the authors are particularly attentive to localised social factors and that the analyses also accentuate the interplay of social forces. While in North American and European societies, scholars often focus on race and ethnicity as these are the primary social categories when talking about intersectionality, studies in Asia such as those in this volume book present a different view of intersectionality in which race and ethnicity are no longer the master categories. In recent years, some scholars question whether the notion of intersectionality has been overused to become a buzzword or at times is confined in a narrow sense of identity framework. This book provides us with studies of intersectionality in Asia that focus on the multiplicity of social inequalities.

More precisely, the studies in this volume collectively show multiple, localised, social forces at work in shaping the practices of individuals as well as their ethos. The authors also demonstrate that the research subjects’ lives are not passively determined by social structures, but that these women and men actively challenge or participate in the social formations. These studies contextualise intersections of social oppressions while being attentive to agency.

Throughout the book, the authors identify various social forces coming together to create particular cultural phenomena and to shape human experiences. At the same time, these studies also show that humans are social actors pursuing their material and ideological interests. However, some discussions or use of theories in this volume are puzzling. For example, in some chapters, the term 'neoliberalism' is repeatedly raised as a critique without further explanations of how it is connected to the problems being discussed. The application 'sexual field' theory to gay nightclubs and the contesting of sexual and gender norms (chapter 3) could also go further.

Finally, on reading this edited volume, questions arose in my mind as to why we need a book about cultural politics of gender and sexuality that particularly focus on Asia. In what specific sense does Asia matter (and matter to whom)? Alternatively, how should we read such a book and locate it in the mapping of knowledge-production? It seems to me that some scholars contributing to this book share similar concerns as they simultaneously challenge Western epistemology and bridge theoretical connections across continents. Therefore, I would encourage people to read the chapters in this book more as critiques of rather than supplements to social theories built in Western academia.

Citation: Jiang, H. (2018). [Review of the book *Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia*, by T. Zheng]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 2(1), 11. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc.201811>

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