



Tiantian Zheng, ed., *Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia*

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BOOKS ON GENDER and secularity in Asia have proliferated over the past two decades. Most of them tend to be focused on one region or nation, and on one gender or one type of sexuality. In *Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia*, Tiantian Zheng offers a collection of articles that address a wide variety of societies, both national and regional—Taiwan, Hong Kong, China and Shanghai, Japan and Tokyo, Korea, India, Cambodia, Pakistan and Punjab, and Thailand. In addition, a variety of gender identities and sexual preferences and behaviors—heterosexuality, homosexuality, men's gender display, and women's gender issues—are all included. This collection will prove useful for students to compare and contrast, for example, state attempts at promoting specific types of sexual behavior, such as sexual purity, marriage and procreation, and controlling bodies across a spectrum of nations and societies.

In the introduction, Zheng explains that as a researcher and professor she has “always lamented the lack of a comprehensive volume that pulls together cultural politics, political economy, gender and sexuality across Asia” (1). In this volume, she has achieved her goal. Many of the authors are anthropologists, or grounded in the anthropological methodology of fieldwork, often over a period of several years. Most of the essays state clearly their period of field research that underpins their findings. The various articles are the stories of real people and their experiences. A dominant theme running through the essays is the question as to what degree individuals have agency as they are enmeshed in particular societies and the prevailing sexual economies.

In the first chapter, “Sexuality, Class, and Neoliberal Ideology: Same-Sex Attracted Men and Money Boys in Postsocialist China,” Tiantian Zheng examines the so-called “money boys.” She looks at a wide variety of individuals who serve as male prostitutes to achieve wealth and social status, compete in the market economy, and produce wealth. These often poor and rural young men situate themselves as pursuing the entrepreneurial goals of present-day China by achieving wealth through prostitution. If they are young and attractive, they quickly find that paid sex earns them much more money than factory work. In fact, the Chinese government wants its citizens to be heterosexual individuals so as to produce more workers in order to produce economically productive, “responsible and governable citizens” (27). A few of the more sophisticated and enterprising young men do amass enough money to begin independent economic activities and normal, successful lives. Zheng concludes that “[m]oney boys, carrying heavy historical baggage due to their rural migrant status contest social inequality and cultural stigma by valorizing state ideology and claiming themselves as ‘normal’ Postsocialist subjects” (34).

I found the second chapter by Kevin Carrico, “A Ladies’ Academy in Urban China,” fascinating in his description and analysis of private purity centers known as Ladies’ Academies. In attempting to turn the clock back several centuries, men, in particular,

have founded and run these academies, which Carrico characterizes as “the ultimate misogynistic fantasy in which all problems are attributed to women, who are out of their natural place” (51). The “ladies” that these male instructors wish to produce are to be sexually pure, produce children, and remain silent, and these academies, which Carrico characterizes as “male-constructed educational uterus ... emerged primarily from the anxieties, uncertainties, and instabilities of the present. Caught between romanticized imaginings of the past and the stark realities of the present” (53).

A related essay, “Mobilizing the Masses to Change Something Intimate: The Process of Desexualization in China’s Family Planning Campaign” by Danning Wang (chapter 5), chronicles the Chinese government’s campaign in the 1960s, “in the name of creating a ‘healthy and spirited’ public atmosphere. From dress codes to public behavior patterns and dating rules, this asexual standard governed all aspects of the freedom of love ... [Consequently,] sex and sexuality became a critical tool in regulating Chinese urbanites” (93). The goal of an associated propaganda effort involved “emphasizing mothers’ sacred role in contributing to the modernization of the state and the country, this campaign shifted the focus from women’s sexuality in the domain of reproduction” (93). Thus, women’s sexuality and their desexualization became a goal for both the Mao-era government, which were then reflected in the private efforts designed to create sexually pure women in Ladies’ Academies.

Chapters 9 and 12 look at the role of women in three Asian cities. In her essay “Marriage and Reproduction in East Asian Cities: Views from Single Women in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Tokyo” (chapter 9), Lynne Nakano makes clear that the state and the family encourage women, in many cases, to marry and have children. She looks at the various forces that attempt to influence who and when a woman marries. Her findings indicate that in all three cities, although they differ to some degree, women themselves make the final choice, including the choice to remain single. However, most women want to marry and have children, but most choose not to do so unless they find the right partner.

In “Racialization of Foreign Women in the Transnational Marriage Market of Taiwan” (chapter 12), Hsunhui Tseng describes and analyzes a phenomenon that occurred in Taiwan in the 1990s in which a booming market in foreign brides blossomed. Beginning with Vietnamese and mainland Chinese brides, the industry began to seek women from Ukraine. Problematizing the issue of race in the latter case, Tseng observes that the phenomenon was short lived and the government attempted to put a stop to the practice. Finally Tseng notes that “an imaginary racial hierarchy among foreign women is pervasive in society, and the transnational marriage market is the venue where cultural racism can most easily be perceived” (218).

Two articles address the ways in which working class and poor men, both physically as well as through male social solidarity and neighborhood organizing, display and preserve their culturally based standards of masculinity. In Xia Zhang’s article “Labor, Masculinity, and History: Bangbang Men in Chongqing” (chapter 7), Zhang describes the “bangbang” men, who are rural migrant men at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, who act as porters and casual day laborers. To maintain their masculinity, they vaunt their position as independent actors, who do not have bosses. She concludes, “bangbang work seems to provide these working men more flexibility, dignity, and a sense of control” (134). Zhang provides a useful history of the trajectory of Chinese masculinity, with its binary of scholar/warrior in which the scholar was the

more valued individual. Zhang states that the migratory experience “also provides opportunities in certain contexts for them to develop alternative masculine ideals and claim new urban masculine subjectivities” (133).

Madhura Lohokare writes in “Boy II Men: Neighborhood Associations in Western India as the Site of Masculine Identity” (chapter 8) that *mandals* (neighborhood associations), through their political and social activities, provide lower class men with identities. “These activities include celebrating religious festivals and national holidays, feeding pilgrims, organizing blood donation camps, running a gymnasium/library, writing civic messages on notice boards, and organizing minor financial help for neighborhood members” (142). I found this article compelling because it resonated with my studies of urban life in the Muslim Middle East, even existing in Iran when I went to school. Such organizations provide sites of construction of masculinity, and Lohokare notes “the fact of belonging to a *mandal* itself bestows a masculine identity on its members” (143).

In contrast, several of the articles focus on the locus of bars, a popular locus of sexual and sensual interchanges for heterosexual, homosexual, and transgender individuals. As various authors point out, sex does not necessarily occur, but it often does. In “Tonight, You Are a Man!”: Negotiating Embodied Resistance in Local Thai Nightclubs” (chapter 3), Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo and Tracy Royce “focus on nightclubbers’ embodied performances and productions of sexualities and genders in and through a sexualized nightclub space” (57). They found that, not unlike American and European gay bars, in which the participants unsurprisingly are in a hierarchy of desire, masculinity was celebrated and rewarded. “Those clubbers who possess a trim, cut body adorned with fashionable attire have more erotic capital than men whose clothes or hairstyles are out of date, or those whose bodies are less trim” (60). They describe instances in which these less desirable sex objects intrude in the space of the more desirable others, but after the drag shows, it was the masculine acting men who dominated the bar scene in which “Clubbers who embodied femininity were devalued in the space, as were erotic players who failed to live up to a gay masculine ideal” (68).

Nana Okura Gagné (chapter 4) demonstrates the ways in which Tokyo hostesses, through their training and skills, create an intimate environment in which customers pay for expensive drinks, snacks, and conversations with hostesses but no sexual service is offered on site (75), in contrast to hostesses in China and Korea who do offer sex to their customers. Gagné stresses that the Japanese hostesses offer, through intimate conversation and entertainment, a means of bolstering their customers’ masculine images. Following a brief discussion of the historical circumstances of hostess bars from the Edo period, she observes that “[b]y wielding economic capital to purchase the companionship of women at these clubs they promote corporate ideology and ‘salarymen masculinity’ through conspicuous consumption” (75). The skillful “hostesses distinguish themselves by capitalizing on their strengths—singing ability, conversational skill, or physical appearance—in order to attract customers” (86), and through these activities bolster their customer’s positive masculine image.

In “Pleasure, Patronage, and Responsibility: Sexuality and Status among New Rich Men in Contemporary China” by John Osburg (chapter 6), nightclubs appear peripherally, but are one of the sites of places in which nouveaux riches men act out their masculinity through liaisons with younger women, often denigrating their first wives as “relics of the past and representative of a poorer and less sophisticated

period both in their lives and in China as a whole” (114). These rich men, by drinking, singing, and being flattered by female companions in nightclubs, are both creating and enacting a particular version of masculinity associated with being a man of status and wealth in post-Mao China (109). In this way, Osburg’s article somewhat parallels that of Gagné; however, marriages in Japan tend to stay intact, whereas the Chinese counterpart frequently avoids their home and first wife, except for more traditional family gatherings.

In “Media, Sex, and the Self in Cambodia” (chapter 10), Heidi Hoefinger looks at bar girls (a term with which the author notes the women self-identify (182, note 1), who negotiate the competing identities of modern, glamorous women and traditional women who remain submissive and “close to home.” In the bars, “many use sex and intimacy to cement materially fruitful relationships with Western men” (171).

This is a wide-ranging collection both geographically and in relation to the topics addressed. This volume will prove valuable in courses on gender and sexuality, anthropology, and Asian studies.

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