


Contemporary Queer Chinese Art

Edited by Hongwei Bao, Diyi Mergenthaler and Jamie J. Zhao. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023. 248 pp. £85.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781350333512

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The inception of this ambitious book project dates to May 2021 when Diyi Mergenthaler, one of the editors of the volume, co-organized the three-day online workshop “Queering the Boundaries of the Arts in the Sinosphere.” Under the auspices of the University of Zurich, the workshop brought together 16 artists, scholars and activists of Chinese descent from diverse backgrounds, providing a unique platform for critical discussion, scholarly debate and personal reflection. *Contemporary Queer Chinese Art* is the outcome of this workshop and was recently published in the new academic book series “Queering China: Transnational Genders and Sexualities,” co-edited by Hongwei Bao and Jamie J. Zhao.

Contemporary Queer Chinese Art impresses with 87 illustrations, rare source material and a well-balanced selection of contributions. The book begins by discussing three key concepts that underpin its theoretical framework – the de-Westernization of queerness, the problematization of the notion of Chineseness, and the queering of art – followed by an introduction to the dynamic history of queerness in China after 1976 and a contextualization of all contributions. The 14 chapters, each between five- and 21-pages long, cover an almost kaleidoscopic range of topics, comprising forms, materials and traditions; feminist interventions; feminist, queer and trans curation; and transnational and diasporic queer art. In the first part of the volume, autodidact Xiyadie (b. 1963) recounts his extraordinary journey of becoming an artist and reminisces on how papercutting, a form of Chinese folk art, helped him come to terms with his sexual identity. Subsequently, queer-feminist activist, director and artist Shi Tou (b. 1969) introduces three notable series of work and sets them against the background of China’s queer movement and her involvement in it. In part three of the volume, curator Si Han reflects on his blockbuster exhibition *Secret Love* (2012) at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, which displayed over 250 artworks by 28 contemporary Chinese artists, interrogating love, desire and affection beyond societal norms. Towards the end of the volume, Diyi Mergenthaler sheds light on Ma Liuming’s (b. 1969) gender-queer performances in the 1990s, arguing that the shifting perception of his performance persona mirrors the transition from cis- and heteronormative chronobiopolitics in postsocialist China to more recent queer and feminist cultural debates. In addition to these rather well-known and established artists, whom one would expect in a volume of this kind, *Contemporary Queer Chinese Art* also steers the discussion in some surprising new directions: US-based psychologist Bohan Gandalf Li, for instance, examines how contemporary rope-tying practices might be considered a form of queer artistic expression in which vulnerability functions as a key communication device; or UK-based performance artist Burong Zeng, who discusses the intersection of neurodivergence, queerness and art-making in tandem with the development of her practice from improvised theatre to socially engaged art and live art.

As with many conference proceedings, the individual chapters of this volume are linked by a set of similar questions, themes and approaches rather than an overarching argument. What is queer about queer Chinese art? How does the notion of “Chineseness” shape our understanding of queer art? And what is it that transforms queer lived experiences and/or activism into a work of art? The questions raised by the editors could not be more timely, and to the delight of the reader

all contributors, in their own way, successfully challenge, contest and stretch any preconceived notions of what queer Chinese art might constitute. The sources discussed in this volume are rich and varied, encompassing papercuts, photography, painting, performance, curatorial projects, exhibition reviews, film screenings, interviews and newspaper articles, among others. Unlike conventional conference proceedings, the poignant personal accounts of the artists, curators and activists, which are woven into the very fabric of many chapters, become primary sources in their own right. Furthermore, the varied approaches used throughout the volume unlock diverse perspectives. On the one hand, the contributors deploy storytelling and personal reflections as their main method, often coupled with textual and visual analysis. On the other hand, the authors also draw on thematic, discourse and semiotic analysis, and to a lesser extent, on interviews and online workshops.

While there is no doubt about the significance of this courageous scholarly intervention, the following two suggestions might serve as starting points for further enquiry. First, the “queer” in queer art tends to be reduced to (a) the gender and sexual identity of the artists in discussion or (b) the theme of the work or event. What would queer art look like, and be conceived of, in the absence of queer-identifying artists or representations of gender-queer bodies? Second, increased visibility not only comes with recognition and support but also with potential risks and dangers. What role do lower-visibility strategies, such as camouflage, non-disclosure and illegibility, play in the production, display and reception of queer art in China?

Over the course of the book’s 248 pages, the reader witnesses how activists turn into writers, artists become critics of their own work, and scholars inevitably transform into advocates for the unconditional acceptance and support of queer lives. The moments in which these distinct perspectives intersect and blur are arguably when this volume becomes most stimulating. *Contemporary Queer Chinese Art* will appeal to scholars and students in the fields of cultural studies, gender and queer studies, Chinese studies, art history and social activism. The volume not only creates a rich archive of feminist activism, queer-themed exhibitions and artistic practices; it also brings to the fore the lived experiences of queer individuals that have been consistently relegated to the margins of public and academic discourse. This pioneering volume is a major achievement for the study of queer art in China and demonstrates the great potential – and urgency – of this novel field of research.

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Hong Kong Crime Films: Criminal Realism, Censorship and Society, 1947–1986

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Hong Kong action-crime films are so extensively studied that there may seem little new to say on the topic. Over the years countless scholars, critics, journalists and fans have dissected the genre’s chief talents, stylistic attributes and industrial practices. Yet, that discussion invariably focuses on films