CHAPTER 2
CHINESE QUEER THEORY

The Dilemmas of Queer Theory in China

Aibai (short for aiqing baiji shu, "White Paper on Love") is one of the earliest internet forums for LGBTQ information-sharing, discussion, and community-organizing in China. The website has hosted debates on topics ranging from Obama's stance on same-sex marriage in the United States to recreational drug use in the LGBTQ community. Recently, an Aibai columnist Damien Lu, writing under the penname of Xing Xing (star), published a series of blogs that reignited debates over queer theory's relevance to China's gay liberation movements. Lu is an American-born Chinese (ABC) who writes in fluent Chinese. In his columns, he repeatedly reminds his reader that he holds a Ph.D. from the United States and describes himself as a Western-educated sexologist. Whereas China's famous sexologists from Pan Guangdan to Pan Suiming are devoted to unveiling the mysteries of human sexuality, Lu is invested in a different kind of demystification: he wants to educate the Chinese public about the dangers of queer theory, which he regards as a threat to China's gay liberation movements. Lu argues that queer theory, propagated by Western and Western-educated critics, misleads people into thinking that sexual orientation is fluid, socially constructed, and subject to personal choices. Consequently, the popularization of queer theory in China discourages policymakers from recognizing the legitimacy of homosexuals and their rights. The only way for gay people to free themselves from discrimination, Lu suggests, is to convince the authorities that they are born homosexual rather than choosing to be so.

Without questioning the usefulness of a politics that represents homosexuality as an undesirable but inevitable reality, we can observe that Lu's language conflates the nature/nurture debate (whether homosexuality is genetic or acquired) with the essentialism/constructivism divide (whether the social meanings of homosexuality and heterosexuality are fixed or culturally constructed). Intellectually weak and politically reactionary, Lu's columns are also aggressively nationalist. In "What Is Queer Theory and How Does It Relate to the Gay Movement," Lu defines queer theory as the writings of four culprits: Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, and Diana Fuss. Pointing out that "none of these four writers has any training in sociology, psychology, or biology," Lu concludes that "queer theory is the product of the imagination of those living in an ivory tower, rather than the result of scientific research." Such "ivory-tower thinking" has no use for China, Lu maintains, and the Chinese should just stop importing it.

Lu's writing symptomatises the confluence of two trends that have haunted gender and sexuality studies in China. First, Lu, like many, adopts a narrow definition of queer theory as an American discourse—for Lu, it is specifically the collective oeuvres of Sedgwick, Butler, Rich, and Fuss. As a result, anyone writing in Chinese on queer topics—Li Yinh, Chang Hsiao-hung, or Pan Suiming, to name just a few—is assumed to be working with a translated Western concept rather than articulating an original thought. Second, Lu's empiricist approach to the gay rights movement is a reaction against theory itself: instead of theory and theorists, Lu argues that China needs more medical, psychological, and public health experts who can produce transparent, easily digestible information to convince the general public and lawmakers that homosexuality is an immutable orientation. In his view, China needs science, not queer theory. How is this dichotomy constructed, and how does it persuade and motivate contemporary Chinese queer publics?

Between 2007 and 2014, I conducted four interviews with Cui Zifen, China's preeminent queer filmmaker, cultural theorist, and novelist, about these questions. In the 2012 interview, Cui stated:

"Compared to the American "ghetto" of academic subspecialization, paradoxically, queer theory in China enjoys a much broader media presence. My queer criticisms and essays have a large readership outside academic circles, not to mention that many works by..."
progressive queer theorists in Taiwan and Hong Kong are avidly consumed in the People’s Republic. At the same time, the general climate in China is quite conservative. I am the only openly gay academic in China. With my writings being the only exception, works published in China under the rubric of kūer lǐlùn (queer theory) or xíng yànfú (sexuality studies) are all produced by heterosexual-identified experts outside the literary fields: Sociologists such as Pan Suiming and Li Yinhe, or medical authorities such as Zhang Beichuan. In China, being openly identified as gay or lesbian detracts from your credibility as an expert on alternative sexuality, which is supposed to be described objectively and studied scientifically, preferably with a quantitative methodology.\(^4\)

Cui’s analysis explains the connection between the resistance to theory (which is not limited to sexual knowledge) and Chinese understandings of homosexuality. As Cui points out, homosexuality is recognized in China, but only as an object of medical and psychiatric management, and above all as a threat to public health. Hence, the question of visibility (when does China begin seeing representations of gay people in films and television?) misses the point entirely. Cui’s analysis further explains why an enormous amount of funding for gender and sexuality research in China is funneled annually through AIDS-prevention organizations such as Wan Yanhai’s Aizhixing Institute of Health Education,\(^5\) while organizations in China devoted to causes unrelated to public health (such as sexual diversity) remain underfunded despite queer cultures’ overall increase in visibility in China.\(^5\) The pathologization of sexuality in medical research and social surveillance is matched, on the academic side, by influential studies that present homosexuality as a sociological problem in need of expert dissection. In order to qualify as an expert in this context in China, the researcher must be perceived as a heterosexual. Cui describes the interesting dilemma: in China, being identified or self-identifying as gay undermines one’s credibility in producing knowledge about gender and sexuality, whereas in the United States, being an insider or an “authentic native informant” is typically expected to buttress one’s authority. The reason is that once sexuality studies in China became a medico-scientific concept tethered to AIDS research and prevention funding, sexuality studies also spawned a group of bureaucrats and medical professionals who are answerable to the interests of the state. As Cui explains, because the state’s goal is to contain AIDS rather than combat social stigma and discrimination, homosexuality, even after its removal from the categories of mental disorder by the Chinese Psychiatric Association in 2001, continues to be seen as a matter that should belong to the patient, not the doctor. A homosexual doctor or sexologist is an oxymoron in China—one cannot be both judge and defendant in the same trial. Since sexuality studies experts need to present homosexuality as a mental health issue to the public, gay researchers cannot come out of the closet; otherwise their aura of objectivity will be compromised. Nonetheless, Cui also emphasizes that the phenomenon is gradually changing. While the beginnings of the field were defined by medical, sociological, and psychological approaches exemplified by such works as Li Yinhe’s Subculture of Homosexuality (which she wrote based on interviews and surveys with gay men and lesbians) (1992), Zhang Beichuan’s Homosexual Love (1994), Fang Gang’s Homosexuality in China (1995), and Tong Ge’s AIDS Prevention for the MSM Community (men who have sex with men) (2004), in more recent years the empiricist and quantitative emphasis gave way to more interpretive cultural analysis, such as Pan Suiming’s Sex Revolution in China (2006), and Pan Suiming and Huang Yingying’s Evidence of the Success of Sex Revolution in China.\(^7\) The nascent field of queer theory in the PRC, heavily influenced by queer theory in Taiwan, represents a struggle with the medicalization and pathologization of sexuality.

Cui’s analysis offers an answer to Damien’s Lu’s question: Why does China need queer theory? Mired in the nexus of political surveillance and medico-scientific knowledge, queer China suffers from a particularly pernicious form of sexual empiricism that requires the intervention of theory. More specifically, the political dilemmas of queer life in China call for a specific type of materialist analysis, which the queer Marxists examined in this chapter develop. As Cui points out, the PRC government conflates the issues of AIDS prevention and homosexuality. The state’s understanding of homosexuality as a public health and social order concern is consistent with its modern legal framework, which prosecutes sex between men under “hooliganism” (liumang zui, disruption of the social order) rather than sodomy.\(^8\) With hooliganism, Chinese lawmakers desexualize homosexuality by grouping it under a broader and more understandable category of social management. As
long as queer activism remains constrained by the framework of public health, the intelligibility of homosexuality is predicated on the material funding of AIDS research and regulated by a surveillance network of national experts and international NGOs. In this context, Chinese queer theory enters an alliance with Marxist critique to challenge the distribution of resources (symbolic and material), as well as the monopoly of sexologists and educational experts in the production of knowledge for and about sexual minorities.

In addition to the economic constraints of AIDS and sexuality research, queer Chinese cultures face another unique problem that makes Marxist analysis extremely useful: the legacy of the Cold War. In the Chinese context, the demand for empiricism is not only fueled by the rise of medical and psychiatric authorities in sexuality research, but also reflected by a persistent Cold War ideology that places a premium on the delivery and discovery of transparent information about the Other. In the United States, this ideology of the Cold War is responsible for the creation of area studies programs (and for their generally antitheoretical orientation), while the purging of theory in Chinese gender and sexuality studies programs can be seen as their perversely implanted counterpart. In his famous analysis of the three-world schema, Carl Flatsch argues that the division of the globe into three worlds in the postwar period entailed a division of intellectual labor in kind as well.9 Whereas knowledge produced by the first world is institutionally divided by discipline (music, economics, political science, or psychology), knowledge produced by, for, and about the third world is categorized by language and area (China, Japan, Middle East, Africa, and Latin America). In other words, the preference for empiricism in China studies is always shaped by the ideology of the Cold War, although we are not always conscious of the connections. The antitheory stance of Chinese sexuality studies experts reinforces this division of intellectual labor between the gathering of raw materials in area studies and the production of universal or nomothetic paradigms in (queer) theory.

Since sexuality studies in China, in particular AIDS research, is materially mediated by a global network of NGOs, the formation of sexual knowledge reflects and refracts assumptions about China's accessibility to scientific inquiry. As a postsocialist country and the secrets of its homosexuals are entwined in the popular imagination, forming two intimately related dimensions of the closet. Observing that social scientific research circumscribe Chinese queer theory, Lucetta Kam raises the important point that PRC’s first-generation researchers have all denied allegations of homosexuality against themselves—a phenomenon that Cui also observes in the interviews. Kam points out that PRC-based research projects on gender and sexuality fall into two categories: the first category of sociological studies focuses on the homosexual population, such as Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo’s Their World: A Penetrating Look into China’s Male Homosexual Community. These studies are marked by a “heterocentricism and otherization of homosexuals” that not only “tells a lot about the positioning of the researchers and the relationship between them and their research subjects” but “reflects the overall power dynamics between the heterosexual majority and the homosexual minority.”10 The second type of work consists of personal accounts, anecdotal evidence, and sociological interviews, such as Chou Wah-shan’s Beijing Tongzi Stories, and Wu Chunsheng and Chou’s coedited We Are Alive. These works install the legal, medical, and academic experts in “the role of public spokespersons for the silent populations of lesbians and gays in China” and result in “a similar otherization of homosexual subjects.”11 Kam’s critique demonstrates that tropes of penetration, unveiling, and unmasking dominate Chinese sexuality research. These tropes not only exoticize the homosexual subject as the Other, as Kam explains, but also reveal an important continuity between Cold War Orientalism and mainstream Chinese approaches to homosexuality. The historical irony is that contemporary Chinese sexuality researchers’ language of unmasking and unveiling is indeed reminiscent of Western journalist reports and documentaries on North Korea and China in the 1960s and ’70s. To the extent that the Cold War created the epistemetic preference for empiricist social sciences, a reconsideration of queer Marxist theory across the 1949 divide can also help us unlearn these Cold War bifurcations.

In this chapter, I consider the theoretical works of several PRC- and ROC-based queer Marxists: Cui Zifen, Josephine Chuen-juei Ho, Ding Naifei, Liu Jen-peng, Wang Ping, and Ning Yin-Bin. While most of these writers reside in Taiwan, their works have become a shared resource and standard references for all critics writing in Chinese. Although queer Marxists have produced a shared body of knowledge across the straits,
their insights and concerns are far from being unified: Cui, for example, theorizes the material conditions of possibility for queer expression in the age of China’s entry into global capitalism, while Taiwan-based queer Marxists formulate a synthetic vision of the interconnections among sexualized labor, the discontents of capitalist modernity, and queer resistance to identity politics. From different locations in the two Chinas, these queer Marxists present a collective view on how gender and sexual differences may serve as a liberating force against global capitalism. A telling failure of capitalist modernity is the liberal pluralist creation of identity politics and minority discourses. Liberal pluralist critics assume that social change can be created only through formal correctives (such as legalized same-sex marriage) brought about by the state, and that the state embodies the will of the majority and adjudicates between the conflicting interests of identity-based groups. The starting point of liberal pluralism is an empiricist sociology of such competing groups in need of state management.12 By contrast, queer Marxists regard liberal pluralism itself as a byproduct of capitalism, which has destroyed the totality of social life and replaced it with fragmented, atomized individuals. Against the capitalist reification of identities, Chinese theorists redefine queerness as a critical relation to power that is not immediately assignable to a preexisting group. For queer Marxists, the queer is not a synonym for homosexuality, but a material reminder of one’s relation to an unequal structure of power, as well as a capacity to recognize the distance between the diversity of erotic desires, genders, identities, and intimacies in human cultures and the liberal pluralist reduction of such expressions into fixed categories under global capitalism. Consequently, queer Marxist writers reject the semantic splitting of “sex” into gender (as the proper object of feminism) and sexuality (as the proper object of gay and lesbian studies). The concept of queerness encompasses both sex as gender (female or male, anatomical or chromosomal identity) and sex as sexuality (act, pleasure, orientation, object choice). Recognizing the irreducible richness of human genders and sexual expressions provides a powerful ethical perspective on the postsocialist and the neoliberal states’ technologies of social management in the Chinas.

Homosexuality with Chinese Characteristics

Chinese-language queer theory has flourished since the late 1980s. In particular, Taiwan has been a wellspring of queer energy and innovation, spearheading sexual movements in Chinese-language communities. In the past two decades, scholars from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have held numerous cross-strait queer conferences, producing such volumes as Lianjixing: Liang an san di xingzhe xingu (Connections: Trans-Local Exchanges on Chinese Gender/Sexuality) (2010); “Beyond the Stra(g)pits: Transnationalism and Queer Chinese Politics” (2010); Xingdi Tujing: Liang an san di xingzhe qihou (Changing Sexual Landscape: The China Turn) (2011); Zhuanyan lishi: Liang an san di xingyun huigu (The Personal Is Historical: Gender/Sexuality Studies/Movements in Greater China) (2012); and Xin daode zhuyi: Liang an san xingbi xinsi (New Moralism: Sexual Reflections in Greater China) (2013). In its content as well as historical routes of dissemination, Chinese queer theory is a collaborative endeavor created by PRC and ROC scholars; this theory, already geographically mobile and methodologically impure, also critiques nationalist and essentialist epistemologies from the perspective of queer transnationalism.

The “Chinese” in Chinese queer theory is not merely a location that must refer to the PRC, or a linguistic and ethnic marker that must have essentialist undertones. It also refers to the capacity of queer theory to engage questions of Chineseness in the context of the political standoff between the two Chinas. Indeed, much of queer theory in Chinese explicitly examines the intersections between sexuality, gender, and the quandary of two Chinas. The problematization of the signifier of China rests at the heart of Chinese queer theory, which is, from its inception, beset by a nomenclature debate. The story of Edward Lam’s coinage of the term tongzi in 1992 has often been told many times, although with significant variation of emphasis and detail.13 Originally a political idiom in Chinese revolutions meaning “comrade,” tongzi was appropriated by Chinese sexual countercultures to refer to same-sex love. This appropriation of a state-sanctioned idiom by the oppressed is analogous to the parodic resignification of the insult “queer” into a means of self-empowerment in US history. In this sense, the function of tongzi in Chinese is identical to the function of queer in English. However, because the Chinese example is explicitly tied to the revolutionary
legacy of Sun Yat-sen and to Mao’s brand of socialism, the Chinese use of the term as political parody also implies a distinctive attitude toward Chinese Marxism. Critics who are mindful of the connections between queer social discourse and Chinese Marxism often emphasize that it is no coincidence that the term tongzhi first gained currency in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where a culture of Marxism, decoupled from state ideology and bureaucracy, flourished in such a way that made it easier to imagine and articulate a queer Marxism. Like tongzhi, the neologism lala, a common term for lesbians in Chinese-speaking communities, has a linguistic history that demonstrates the affinities between sexual and geopolitical concerns. Popular in Beijing and Shanghai circles today, lala was imported from Taiwan in the 1990s. The term originated from The Crocodile’s Journal, a critically acclaimed novel by Qiu Miaojin narrated in the first-person voice of a lesbian character named Lazi. Both the term lazi (and its derivative lala) and the novel gained immense popularity in Taiwan and mainland China after Qiu committed suicide in 1995.15

In 1994 novelists and critics Chi Ta-wei, Dantangmo, and Lucifer Hung proposed “ku-er” in the journal Ine Manjin as a transliteration of both “queer” and “cool.”16 Chi subsequently popularized the term “ku-er” in two seminal collections on queer theory (Queer Cyclipalago and Queer Carnival, both published in 1997). Another translation, “guai-tai” (queer/freak/mutant), was introduced in a special issue of Ai bao in 1994 and received sophisticated theorization in the works of Chu Wei-cheng and Chang Hsiao-hung, where the semantic specificity of the term allows for brilliant readings of a deflected but persistent desire for kinship in texts that appear to disavow or circumvent heterosexuality.17 Other proposed terms for specific groups, self-stylizations, or nonnormative expressions as a whole include “tongren,” “Tifo” “piaopiao,” “wangliang,” “yaoyan,” “kuiy,” “wai,” and “xie.”

Nonetheless, no universal translation of the term queer proved satisfactory, and any proposal immediately raises the question of whether one is subsuming Chinese tongzhi under the Western category of queer. Accordingly, it has become obligatory for Chinese queer theorists to begin with an account of the conjunction of the Chinese and the queer: how does one justify the connection between Chinese same-sex relations and the English word queer? There are many reasons the nomenclature debate has become such an emotionally charged and controver-
sial topic in queer Chinese studies. Two are particularly relevant to the claims of queer Marxist theory.

The first is the term’s legal implications. Wenqing Kang points out that, historically, the Chinese government never persecuted homosexuals per se, because to do so would require the officials to first recognize their existence, which neither regime (before and after 1949) was willing to do. In 1995, the nonexistent legal category of homosexuality was “decriminalized.” Following the pioneering work of Chinese legal scholars such as Guo Xiaofei and Zhou Dan,18 Kang argues that homosexuality forms a paradox in the eyes of Chinese law because the state cannot oppress a population whose existence it denies.19 Strictly speaking, in China there are no laws against homosexuality as such; rather, the modern Chinese state has historically handled the issue by the name of “hooliganism” (lùwáng zài), which, as mentioned previously, is a broad category of punishable behavior usually of a nonsexual nature, including loitering, public indecency, vandalism, delinquency, and gang fights.20 Kang makes the important observation that homosexual behavior could be criminalized under such provisions—disruption of social order—but not as a sex crime. During the Cultural Revolution, homosexuals were classified as “bad elements” in the idiom of Chinese revolutionary culture. This paradox becomes even more problematic in the case of sexual contact between women, for which the law has no ready “analogy clause” linking it to rape or anal sex.21 As Matt Sommer’s work illustrates, what was criminalized under Chinese law through the Qing period was not homosexuality per se but jijian, “illicit anal sex,” or sodomy.22 The category of jijian did not address the issue of consent, and the definition of homosexuality as forced anal sex means that the system was incapable of handling other types of sexual activities between men, such as oral sex and mutual masturbation, and all relations between women. Therefore, Kang proposes that the much-lauded “decriminalization of homosexuality” in the 1997 Criminal Law of the PRC was a convoluted affair, especially since the term “hooligan” entered China’s legal thought as part of its socialist modernization and nation-building program, quite ironically as the Chinese translation of Marx’s lumpenproletariat.

The linguistic development of contemporary Chinese queer theory—the fact that both comrade and hooligan are borrowed from Chinese revolutionary vocabulary—suggests a suppressed connection between
sexual struggles and Marxist intellectual practice. This point is worth stressing because a colossal body of contemporary queer studies in Chinese is fixated on nomenclature debates, asking whether it is culturally imperialist to equate Chinese tongzhi with Western queer, or to conflate Taiwanese and Chinese experiences under the same category of tongzhi. In my view, these nomenclature debates are best examined in relation to the incomplete character of Chinese independence in postwar history. The proliferation of sexual identities and categories in modern China has always been conceptually merged with the imperatives of national survival and sovereignty against a long history of Western encroachments that resulted in extraterritorial rights, concessions, unequal treaties, indemnities, and the sacking of the palace.21 The current debates of tongzhi on both sides of the straits are animated in no small measure by the traumatic memories of colonial dismemberment, which produced acute anxieties over the right to national self-determination that manifest themselves as sinophobia and Oriental exceptionalism in queer discourses. Over the past two decades, a distinctive group of theorists in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China has formed a coalitional network around the arguments that Chinese tongzhi are not the same as Western queers. These scholars argue that by separating tongzhi from Western queers and by developing an account of the local specificities of tongzhi—or what I would describe as homosexuality with Chinese characteristics—we would successfully fend off the encroachments of Western queer theory and its cultural imperialism. The politics of tongzhi fills a nationalist need to develop a linguistic alternative to Euro-American queer theory by insisting on the impenetrability of Eastern material.

At the core of this argument is the hypothesis that, prior to Western colonialism and imperialism, China had a four-thousand-year record of tolerance and harmony when it came to same-sex relations. Consequently, both homosexuality and homophobia are Western imports. Building on stories about Chinese emperors and their male favorites (nanchong) recounted in Samshasha’s A History of Homosexuality in China and Bret Hinsch’s Passions of the Cut Sleeve,24 Chou Wah-shan emerged in the 1990s as the most influential proponent of this view. Chou argues that China has a unique tongzhi community that cannot be conflated with “gays and lesbians” in the Western context because, while Western societies comprise of individuals, the basic sociological unit of Chinese culture is the family. For Chou, the English language has no equivalent of the Chinese tradition of same-sex erotic relations, tolerance, and harmony. Chou argues that the homo/hetero binary was a modern import, which the West imposed on other parts of the world by instituting distinctive forms of medico-scientific knowledge and taxonomies to consolidate its power.25 While many scholars have criticized Chou’s story of the transition from premodern tolerance to modern homosexuality and homophobia,26 others have accepted Chou’s argument for the existence of “a venerable tradition of homosexuality in China in contrast to the West.”27

Many literary examples do attest to a tradition of alternative sexualities in premodern China. Giovanni Vitiello’s The Libertine’s Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China, for example, delineates a unique form of “male romance” that arises from the crisis of literati masculinity in late imperial China. Vitiello uses both pornography and elite literature to reconstruct an alternative social history of male same-sex relations. He demonstrates that late imperial China developed a surprisingly malleable and distinctive culture that was constantly renegotiating the boundaries between homosociality and homosexuality, as well as differences in sexual roles and social statuses, in ways that are closer to Samshasha’s, Hinsch’s, and Chou’s description than to that of their critics.28

But the question remains: should we read the unintelligibility of premodern sexual categories as their cultural normativity? Ding Naifei and Liu Jen-peng raise this question in their criticism of Chou, drawing attention to an “epistemic violence of silence” in the “order of things whereby some things are more speakable than others.”29 Sophie Volpp makes a related argument in Worldly Stage, which brings an equally rich and fascinating set of texts and historical concerns—such as the liaison between a cross-dressed boy and the King of Linchuan in Wang Jide’s play Nan wanghou (Male Queer)—to bear on the relation between world and stage in late imperial China. Unlike Chou, Hinsch, or Vitiello, however, Volpp does not believe that the existence of such literature suggests a “vogue for male love” in seventeenth-century China, or that the ethnographic notation books on the “strange passions” of the southern custom of male cohabitation could be read as evidence
of a new tolerance of male love. Instead, Volpp argues, these notation books “testify to the seventeenth-century interest in classifying lust, in cataloguing all its permutations” in accordance with the values of Confucian moral topography. In addition to the vexed question of whether we should interpret the large body of homoerotic and homosocial literature from this period as evidence of a positive attitude toward homosexuality or as reflections of a desire to police sexual differences, critics also differ in their opinions on what counts as homoeroticism, homosociality, and homosexuality. Having published Passions of the Cut Sleeve in 1990, Hinsch argues in a much more recent book that the hao-han (good fellow) figure in Ming fiction is a form of premodern homosociality as well, which is a view neither Volpp nor Vitiello is likely to accept. Susan Mann further points out that scholars disagree on whether literary depictions of sexual relations between men indicate that such practices were considered normative among the literati only, or that the definition of normative sex between men was extended to the commoners as well. Wu Cuncun similarly points out that the unique status of the leisureed literati class justified male homoerotic sensibilities and turned them into a display of wealth, power, and “taste” in a culture that prohibited female prostitution. These nuances render the hypothesis of a premodern Chinese tradition of tolerance and homoeroticism even less tenable.

Without contesting its historical validity, we can consider the political purpose this postulation serves for contemporary theory. The hypothesis of a premodern Chinese culture of homoeroticism before the advent of Western imperialism promises to make China historically unique and hence analytically impervious to the universalizing pretensions of queer theory. And yet, Chou’s thesis also perpetuates a discourse of Oriental exceptionalism that attempts to solve the problem of Western universalism by reifying nonwestern differences. The postulation of an alternative Chinese sexuality outside queer theory functions as an ideological double-bind. In a field where China often becomes a relevant concern only as the producer of differences from Western queer theory, Chinese tongzhi studies often results in what Johannes Fabian has described as the “allochronism” of racial time. As Fabian argues, modernity’s colonial production of racial others operates through the “denial of coevalness.” This discourse translates the cultural differences between societies into degrees of development, producing an impression of a time lag between contemporaneous cultures. While the political use of cultural constructivist theories seems obvious, the familiar stories about the “invention” of homosexuality in the West also tend to subscribe to an emanation model of modernity. This model presents homosexuality according to the definitions of the European sexologists as an origin for all gay men and women around the globe to emulate, whereas tongxinglian, tongqing’ai, and tongzhi are said to be translations, derivatives, or copies. A queer critique of heteronormativity thus comes into conflict with a postcolonial critique of allochronism. Certainly, a good way to denaturalize heterosexuality is to historicize the invention of the homosexual/heterosexual distinction, but the historicizing effort inevitably provokes debates about whether some human cultures are prehomosexual, prequeer, or altogether different from the West and hence either irrelevant or impervious to queer theory.

As discussed in chapter one, mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have each developed a globally visible and vibrant queer culture industry. An explosive growth of recent scholarship on the topic has clearly charted the sociological development of queer subcultures in these locations. What remains underdeveloped is an account of their queer theory and intellectual contributions, which I offer in this chapter through a bifocal view of the discursive development of queer Marxism in mainland China and Taiwan. By writing this intellectual history, I seek to counter the prevalent perception that China lacks a recognizable queer theory of its own, or that any theoretical discussion in Chinese academic writing must be working with a Euro-American concept. An example from the veteran film critic Paul Pickowicz’s work might illustrate the point. In a reflection piece on the development of Chinese film studies in the past thirty-five years titled “From Yao Wenyuan to Cui Zi’en,” Pickowicz describes Cui’s “bold films on gay sexuality” as the index of a new chapter of Chinese film history. Compared to thirty-five years ago, much has changed—fieldwork in China is now possible, formerly classified archives are now accessible to researchers, and the marketability of Ph.D.’s in Chinese literature and Ph.D.’s in Chinese film has been reversed—but, for Pickowicz, the most important epochal change brought about by Cui Zi’en’s generation is the status of theory in film studies. Observing that China has a unique history that has yet to produce a theoretical paradigm for film scholars who currently...
rely on Fredric Jameson and Edward Said, Pickowicz recommends, "We need to develop theoretical frameworks that are informed by Chinese realities, not western European or American realities." 

Pickowicz's impassioned criticism is directed, of course, at his graduate students and younger colleagues writing about Chinese film in English. But Pickowicz treats "Chinese realities" as a passive object and does not acknowledge the vast body of Chinese-language scholarship, theory, and paradigms of film studies. Cui, whom Pickowicz analyzes as a filmmaker, is also a prolific essayist and novelist, and precisely one of the intellectuals who have contributed to the development of a Chinese queer theory. In the next section, I trace the genealogy of Chinese-language queer discourses, focusing on the works of Cui Zi'en, Josephine Ho, Ding Naifei, and the Gender/Sexuality Rights Association, Taiwan. I characterize Chinese queer theory as a geopolitically mediated discourse that self-consciously reflects on the status of China within the powerful framework of sexuality. The status of China here refers to the theoretical problems of universalism and translation between the Chinas and the West, and within the two Chinas. Significantly influenced by Marxism but hybrid in its use, this theory contributes to global queer discourse by dislodging sexual difference from the domain of liberal rights. Instead, sexual difference is redefined as the historical conditions of thinking and writing about a gendered self. Chinese queer theory provides a unique perspective on the entanglements of cultural and material life by showing that legal, economic, and structural differences limit queer subjects' effective participation in public culture. In this light, queer writing is never simply a voluntary assertion of one's sexual belief in the public realm. Rather, queerness, in Chinese queer Marxism, becomes an occasion in life to explore the mutually constitutive nature of speech and power.

Cui Zi'en: The Communist International of Queer Films

Since the 1990s, Cui Zi'en has emerged as China's most iconic and controversial queer filmmaker, essayist, and novelist. Trained in classical Chinese literature but influenced by an eclectic range of intellectual resources from Confucianism and Buddhism to the poststructuralist thought of Deleuze and Derrida, Cui brings a unique, daring aesthetic style to Chinese cinema that often defies categorization. His work combines Christian liberation theology with a postmodern, carnivalesque subversion of gender and sexual categories that often puts him at odds with the Chinese Communist Party and mainstream cultural critics. The social subjects of his films and novels are not always homosexuals. They could be transvestites, voyeur, boy toys, creepy uncles, gay-for-pay evangelists, bi-curious straight men, money boys, incestuous relatives, MTFs (male-to-female), insatiable sluts, dinosaurs, reptiles, and extra-terrestrials—in any case, subjects who are certainly "queer" and living at some critical distance from cultural norms and power. This deliberate mixture and range of social types in Cui's creative works is a political and performative gesture, whereby Cui expands the definition of "queer" from homosexuality to a wide range of nonnormative expressions and relations in the culture war against homonationalism. Provocative, perverse, and witty, Cui's novels and underground films brought about nothing less than a sea change for China's queer culture.

The immediate context for Cui's theoretical and creative interventions is the rise of the desexualized nouveau riche in China's gay communities. I argue that Cui's films are complex meditations on the historical moment of their production, and they cannot be treated as subtitled images at international film festivals without regard for the Chinese political and intellectual contexts within which these narratives function as an intervention. Furthermore, I argue that Cui's films must be analyzed together with his political essays and novels, whose combined effects create a coherent system of thought that is also a provocative queer theory. Cui's films are not merely fiction or entertainment—they are philosophical statements reminiscent of the fables, allegories, and aphorisms of continental philosophy, in contrast to the programmatic statements and propositions of analytical philosophy. Just as the continental philosophers often create philosophy by telling stories, Cui creates queer theory through his films, but the systematicity of Cui's theory is often lost from view without the aid of his expository prose. My analysis focuses on the dialectic of subversion and containment in Cui's creative and theoretical work, in which he expands and revitalizes a Marxist intellectual tradition by rejecting it. In particular, I explore Cui's works as a reimagining of the possibilities of human sexuality, creativity, and fulfillment under
conditions of reified labor. In this sense, Cui presents an important theory of the liberating potential of sexuality for capitalism. In his films, Cui performs this theory instead of stating it: Cui purposefully creates jarring, dissonant film scenes that do not always cohere into a story. These broken scenes make a political gesture that brings narrative into crisis in order to prevent underground filmmaking from turning into mass entertainment, consumption, and identification for the queer middle-class. Here queerness cannot be celebrated in the name of a political idiom of tolerance, diversity, and pluralism; rather, queerness serves a critical tactic of intervention within a field of power that seeks to silence, erase, and assimilate all nonnormative expressions and desires.

Cui’s underground filmmaking places an emphasis on spontaneity (tuānxíng) as an anticapitalist mode of creativity. In our interview, Cui argued that mass-produced works of art are often funded by foreign-infused, but state-controlled, capital, and that these films are marked by visually impressive special effects, celebrity glamour, professional acting, witty dialogues, and high entertainment value. Cui mobilizes the underground film as a political strategy to disrupt the connection between art, capital, and Americanization. Therefore, Cui’s films are unscripted. He believes that working in an unscripted setting democratizes channels of creativity, and that doing so captures a different truth about China from the one presented on state-run television programs. Due to his conviction in the value of spontaneity, Cui has never adapted his own novels and short stories into films. Improvisation serves a triple political purpose: first, it frees the film from capitalism by dispensing with state-controlled resources and ideological slogans; second, it rebels against the traditional aesthetics of character development imported from Soviet realism and canonized by Chinese film schools in the academic tradition (Cui himself teaches at the Beijing Film Academy); finally, it prevents the queer viewer from identifying with the character and turning it into an object of neoliberal consumption.

Film scholar Wang Qi describes Cui as the “enfant terrible of contemporary Chinese cinema” for his “unconventional, rebellious contents, protagonists, and styles.” Indeed, Cui’s films are outrageously playful, hypersexual, in-your-face, shocking, and perverse. His films have a deliberately unpolished look, constantly challenging Chinese viewers’ Soviet-conditioned, and now Hollywood-influenced, comfort zone and standards of aesthetics. In one famously scandalous scene from Enter the Clowns, the protagonist’s father (played by Cui himself) unexpectedly becomes a woman. On her deathbed, Cui’s character is upset that she never got to breastfeed her son, and demands to taste her son’s own “milk” by sucking him off as a small compensation. The figuration of semen as the nourishment of life runs through Cui’s films and, together with the death scenes, serves as an organizational device. Star Appeal (Xìng xìng xiàng xi, 2004) builds on the theme of semen once more by playing on the homonyms of xìng (cherish) and xìng (suck). While the four-character phrase xìng xìng xiàng xi normally means “kindred spirits” or “talented people who show appreciation to each other” in Chinese, Cui’s homonymous title means “stars who suck each other’s semen.” Mountains and Seas (Shān hǎi jīng, 2001) similarly pivots on the pun of jīng (scripture/semen), showing off Cui’s characteristically irreverent, refreshingly perverse sense of humor. In Feeding Boys (Yàyuà, 2003), men’s milk is both a source of pleasure and a means of survival for China’s subordinated laboring class. The story is centered on a number of young “money boys” who do not enter the profession under financial pressures, as is expected, but, instead, do so purposely to practice “Christian love” and the socialist ideal of serving the masses. For Zaizai and Xiao Jian, men are mammals who must return to their true nature and true mission in life, which is to nourish other men with their milk. This mission entails diligent and dedicated sex work, which the film represents as a normative, rather than socially transgressive, profession. Cui plays on the gap between the viewer’s understanding of what is normal and the characters’ own understanding. The film creates an alternate universe in which sex work provided by men for men goes unquestioned; in so doing, Cui draws attention to the constructedness of our own laws and social values. By thwarting the viewers’ expectations of cultural normalcy, Cui performs an ideological reversal that calls into question two reified cultural assumptions of our time: how did heteronormative, cisnormative, and sex-negative values come to be regarded as normal in the first place, and how did they come to be intertwined with the ethics of labor?

In a brilliant reading of the film, Lisa Rofel points out that Cui “playfully satirized normalized work lives” by showing that society’s “normalization techniques reduce and embed desire in a structured world of intensive labor extraction, one that produces a capitalist-inflected
heteronormativity.” This unexpected mixing of labor issues and sexuality is a recurring theme in Cui’s queer Marxism. Cui’s films depict the blurring of all kinds of boundaries, including economic and sexual categories. Instead of representing a population we may call homosexuals, Cui’s works detach homo-, hetero-, and polyamorous sexualities from individual identities. Gender itself is fluid, as characters in his films habitually transform from one sex to another. Moreover, kinship relations are also destabilized. For example, in My Fair Son (2005), relations between father and son are eroticized—and graphically depicted. The story begins with a father’s failed attempt to repair his relations with his distanced son. The reconciliation process is disrupted when the son develops a crush on the father’s male assistant, Xiao Bo. As soon as the homophobic father realizes it, he banishes the male assistant from their life, a decision that irreparably damages his relationship with his son. But the next scene shows the father undressing and cuddling his naked son from behind. It is difficult to say whether the banishment of desire (Xiao Bo) is motivated by an effort to repair proper Confucian fatherhood, or by the erotic competition between the father and Xiao Bo for the son’s affection. Cui crosses many boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate desires, sexual and nonsexual relations, and homophobic and homoerotic impulses. In Star Appeal, Cui narrates a sexual adventure between a human being and a Martian, with frontal nudity and simulated sex scenes. Cui elaborates the motif of intergalactic intercourse more frequently in his fiction. “Endanger Species Rule!” is a powerful short story depicting extraterrestrial dinosaurs who rape each other. Their flow of desire, as well as unrestrained violence, allegorically expose the contingency of sexual regulation, which humanity has internalized as a historical necessity.

Cui conducts these thematically deviant experiments with a degree of formal perversity, where the unconventional uses of camera angles, cinematography, and sound add another kind of disturbance to the viewer’s comfort zone. As Wang Qi points out, Cui and Shitous (who is a prominent Chinese queer artist, actress, and independent documentary filmmaker as well) are two historical milestones in China’s film history. According to Wang, Cui and Shitous change Chinese cinema with stylistic decisions such as “simultaneous sound recording, rejection of omniscient voiceover commentary, and dismissal of written scripts” that function as a deliberate gesture “against their previous experience with state-run television practices.” These directorial choices allow Cui and Shitous to “define their differences from the ‘special topic’ documentary serials (zhuan ti pian) produced by official channels.” Helen Leung observes that an “aesthetically violent language is evident in Cui’s fondness for long shots with little depth of field, abrupt and rapid panning shots in place of cuts, and muted and claustrophobic lighting, as well as episodic and disjointed narrative structure. This visually demanding and, indeed, displeasing aesthetic has become Cui’s authorial signature.” While these stylistic features may help capture what Wang describes as “an unofficial Chinese verité,” critics and audience more used to commercially produced queer Chinese films such as Farewell My Concubine or Permanent Residence are likely to be disappointed by the rawness of Cui’s work, thus missing the subtle links he tries to make between the material conditions of independent filmmaking and the anticapitalist potential of queer thought.

In our 2011 interview, Cui discussed at length why he chose independent filmmaking as his preferred medium of expression, and explained his belief in the political value of unpolished, unmediated videos. For Cui, independent film creates a dual refusal: the refusal of Soviet aesthetics that was codified in film school through the study of the “masters”; and the refusal of US capital, which has penetrated the market by co-opting the middle class of queer and queer-friendly consumers. To counter these forces, Cui mobilizes the material rawness of independent film as a political resource. Improvisation in his films, which are unscripted, decents the authority of the director and democratizes the scene of creative exchange by allowing the agency of the actors to emerge. This choice redistributes the power relation between producer and actor, as well as between protagonist and supporting characters. The redistribution of power and agency in the storytelling process reconfigures the relation between the viewer and capitalism as well.

Cui’s aesthetic theory explains his deliberate avoidance of linear narrative in his films. A clear example is the Old Testament (Jìque, 2002). The film consists of three different stories about a man called Xiao Bo that take place in different points in time. The film’s structure forces the viewer to momentarily contemplate on queerness itself as a story—as a
struggle for visibility and equality, as a history of oppression that casts the self as a hero or a victim—and then to dispense with this process of cathedric projection. Cui’s film is carefully structured to prevent the viewer’s identification with the main character, which Cui regards as the dominant mode of mainstream consumer queer Chinese films. The three segments are “semi-stories” or near-stories; that is, just as the narrative is about to cohere into a recognizable story to a viewer of the Hollywood generation, the film interrupts itself with the insertion of a chorus singing about death, and then switches scenes. The infusion of jarring nonnarrative elements within the film’s narrative breaks the typical sequence of signification—our habitual mode of receiving and making sense of meaning in film. In the “Psalter—1981” segment, for example, Xiao Bo is a closeted man living with an adopted family. Xiao Bo is then forced to marry a woman. At this point, the story appears to be quite typical and even relatable—one may begin to think of the film as yet another sentimental tear-jerker about closeted gay men’s struggles with familial expectations, as in Ang Lee’s internationally acclaimed The Wedding Banquet (1993). Then a small chorus suddenly appears in Cui’s film, though no explanation is offered for the narrative non sequitur. The chorus includes Cui himself singing a psalm about Xiao Bo’s death, which further disrupts the neat separation of diegetic and extradiegetic realities most filmmakers would find desirable to maintain. In addition, the use of the chorus infuses Greek tragedy and Christian iconography into Cui’s film, which makes it even more difficult for the Chinese viewer to identify with the story. The breaking up of the queer narrative by nonqueer and emphatically foreign elements also prevents the viewer from identifying the work as a “gay film” centered on a predictable coming out story. Cui’s cheeky, unapologetically perverse style stands in sharp contrast to the melodramatic sentimentalism of mainstream queer Chinese feature films, which either emphasize unrequited or unspeakable love, as Stanley Kwan’s Lan Yu (2001) does, or a tragic-comic resolution of the conflict between same-sex desire and procreative obligations, as Ang Lee’s The Wedding Banquet does. Both trends present the modern homosexual as a victim of an unaccepting society, even when that victim eventually becomes a hero by overcoming these obstacles.

The independent film has neither commercial markets nor investors, and Cui’s use of the low-budget underground film as a political statement, in a milieu where the interests of global capitalism dominate Chinese cultural production, presents a queer Marxist theory of freedom. Underground filmmaking becomes a genuine, nonstate-regulated form of proletarian art, unencumbered by the dictates of the market and stripped of the accouterments of fashionable postmodern gay glamour. Underground filmmaking offers a form of anticapitalist dispersal. It works against the mediation of labor by the interests of capital, democratizing the creative process and returning visual performances to nonalienated labor. The success and the performative aspects of Cui’s low-budget films are well recognized by Chinese and international critics. Jonathan Hall describes Cui’s film as a collection of “boys, girls, queer desires, and fantastic topographies” that “weaves a surreal tale from the materiality of low-budget filmmaking, never forgetting film’s ability to visualize desire in ways both alluring and provocative,” and in these “allegories of love, lust, and transformation,” desire is “a meandering movement between person, body, and gender” that “also coalesces into bonding and community.” Against China’s rapidly rising pink economy, Cui’s underground films imagine and foster a community—and a communism—that embody a queer Marxist critique.

If community-building is indeed one of Cui’s political goals, as Hall suggests, why does Cui want to prevent the viewer’s identification with his characters? Moreover, why does Cui seem to assume that identification with a story—if the film ever becomes a story—immediately implicates the viewer in neoliberal consumption? Cui’s answer to these questions during our 2012 interview points to the particular history of queer struggles in China. For Cui, the present gay rights movement, which is based on an identity politics, constitutes another order of oppression and restriction. Cui does not regard queerness as a synonym for homosexuality, since homosexuality can be yet another identity category. For Cui, queerness rests on a capacity to recognize the distance between received categories and the diversity of erotic desires and modes of intimacy in human cultures. Queerness also marks a willingness to surrender the right to demand to know in advance what forms these relations might take. Queerness is an ability to be offended and edified in good and bad ways.

At the same time, Cui is also suspicious of the terms ku-er and tong-zhi, preferring the often pathologized tongxinglian (homosexuality) as a
political idiom. Cui resists the tendency to characterize queerness as a postmodern, carnivalesque celebration of diversity and nonidentities. Cui wants his audience to remember mainstream society’s understanding of homosexuality as a pathology and that “the revolution is not over.” For Cui, the medico-scientific-sounding term tongxinglian preserves the stigma of the homosexual, upon which his films and fiction try to elaborate. Accordingly, his films are at once about self-identified gay and nongay subjects, but even in depicting gay characters, Cui always insistently connects them to themes and issues the majority of gay men and lesbians in China would not find relatable: a transsexual father/mother performing oral sex on his/her son, a confused father struggling with his desire for his homosexual son, money boys, AIDS, drugs, or aliens and dinosaurs. Cui works against the positive, desexualized image established by the gay movement in the past decade that emphasizes that homosexuals are “just like everybody else” except for what we do in our private bedroom in monogamy. Cui states in our 2012 interview, “My purpose of producing these films is to destroy the respectability of gays, rather than invoking sympathy for homosexuals as the downtrodden from mainstream society.” For Cui, even the “queer” (tongzhi) movement has lost its political radicality (yundongxing) the moment tongzhi replaced tongxinglian as the common Chinese name for homosexuals. While recognizing the important milestones achieved in China, Cui also says, “I want to preserve the combativeness of the term homosexuality against this sanitized language of queer (tongzhi), which reduces it to a nonthreatening, depoliticized lifestyle.” The word homosexuality reminds us that we are pathologized by society and treated as a ‘problem’ (wenti hua), and we cannot afford to forget that.” Cui believes that only by invoking the stigma of homosexuality can we preserve the progressive elements of the gay movement. The term homosexual emphasizes the socially constituted character of the gay subject, even if that subject has access to power, resources, prestige, and money. To be gay is to be part of an unequal structure of power, which the language of pride, tolerance, and celebrating diversity only obscures.

Given his differences with the Chinese Communist Party, in many ways Cui may seem to be the least likely candidate for the dispensation of queer Marxism. Indeed, Cui has criticized socialism as it is practiced in mainland China on numerous occasions. Cui is openly critical of the Communist Party and academics who hold appointments in the bureaucracy. His Men, Man, Woman Woman, a parody of the state-run China Central Television, is frequently cited by critics as evidence of the quarrels between Cui and the Chinese state authorities. After coming out in the classroom in 1991, Cui was prohibited from teaching classes at the Beijing Film Academy, where he remains a tenured professor without teaching assignments. His relationship with the central authorities reached its nadir in 2005, when his efforts at organizing China’s first Gay Pride were thwarted by the government. In Cui’s recently published memoir, he recounts several experiences from his childhood in which his family clashed with state-directed socialism. However, it is important to see that Cui opposes the bureaucratic use of Marxism and not Marxism itself, and that Cui retains and develops numerous ethical ideals and analytical tools of Marxism. In another interview, he states:

Every time I travel to the United States and see these boundless, gigantic, extravagantly constructed private houses, I become afraid. No human being needs all that space. Public ownership of land of course has its problems, but human beings cannot give up the progress we made over private property just because a few problems we ran into with socialized land ownership. To me, communism is the courage to pursue a better future, to imagine a utopia, despite all the hardships and setbacks in the present.55

Here Cui characterizes socialism and communism as a futurity rather than a state policy. The imagination of communism as “the courage to pursue a better future” at once rejects the “actually existing Marxism” in the People’s Republic and asserts the importance of Marxist ethics. In deconstructive terms, Cui’s relation to Marxism functions as a productive failure. The famous Chinese film critic Zhang Xianmin seems to be of this view when he writes that Cui must be “a member of the capitalist class in terms of his unparalleled wealth of cultural knowledge, which he dispenses with reckless abandon.”56 Zhang is fully aware of Cui’s contributions to proletarian visual culture, and his characterization of Cui as a capitalist in terms of the richness of his creative energy aptly captures the productive tensions between Cui’s project
and the historical narratives in which they are situated. For Cui, the contradiction is resolved, poetically, through the creative possibilities of film. In a public lecture titled “The Communist International of Queer Film,” Cui proposes a parodic definition of the Communist International as underground video-piracy, through which viewers and artists like himself gain access to the works of Fassbinder, Visconti, and Bertolucci despite PRC censorship. Through the underground circulation of such films as well as secret showings, the Chinese viewers form an alternative community and solidarity in ways disconnected from the communist ideology of the state. Conversely, Cui and his comrades can also export their underground videos to the West through venues such as international film festivals and, again, video piracy. For Cui, video piracy or free information sharing constitutes the real “communist international of China,” a queer community of free association and property-pooling that out-communists the communists. Film, in other words, makes possible a queer Marxism in practice. Recognizing Cui’s success in engendering a new kind of transnational, borderless intimacy through the dissemination of his underground film, Audrey Yue characterizes Cui as the embodiment of a “queer sinophone” cinema that creates a new kind of “mobile intimacy” between sign, image, constituency, and sexuality in order to emancipate the Chinese underground film from the dictates of China’s neoliberal regime.

Queer Dialogues with Marx: Josephine Ho’s Sexual Revolution

Cui’s emphasis on the possibilities and necessity of creating a nonstate version of Marxist, anticapitalist aesthetics places him in dialogue with the cultural theorists in Taiwan, who also adamantly refuse to let the official political identity of anticommunist Taiwan define them. In the ROC, Marxist thought is not ossified into a bureaucracy but, rather, historically prohibited until the lifting of the martial law in 1987. Many of ROC’s radical cultural theorists of gender and sexuality came out of a reading group in Marxist theory during the height of the KMT (Kuomintang) regime under martial law, when intellectual dissidents were routinely persecuted and jailed by the authorities. However, the most dramatic case of a sexual dissident’s trouble with the authorities takes place after the end of KMT autocracy: the 2003 prosecution of queer Marxist critic Josephine Ho, which is a historical event that ironically and uncannily embodies several analytical points she previously theorized about the nature of gender, sexuality, governance, and social power. My analysis of what has come to be known as the “zoophilia incident” in Taiwan, hence, also serves as an exemplary introduction to her complex queer Marxist theory.

In 2003, conservative women’s groups and religious organizations in Taiwan brought a lawsuit against Ho, accusing her of spreading pornographic and obscene images in violation of the nation’s laws (Criminal Code Article 235). Their primary evidence was that the website of National Central University’s Center for the Study of Sexualities, of which Ho was in charge, was found to contain hyperlinks to images of and information on zoophilia. None of these images was provided by the Center itself; they were all foreign (mostly US) websites such as discussion forums, sex education articles, and information sites. The only thing the Center provided was a hyperlink to these sites, on a page explicitly framed as educational information on the diversity of sexual practices across human cultures. The page was not specifically about zoophilia; it also contained information on homosexuality, transgender persons, BDSM, and other topics in sex education. In fact, just a simple Google search by an average internet user would yield more images on zoophilia than the Center’s academic website would. Moreover, the hyperlink appeared on a specific section of the Center’s educational contents, far from the Center’s homepage and other introductory materials, which means it would be extremely unlikely for an uninformed reader to stumble upon these pages. Preposterous as it was, the case was accepted by the Taipei District Court. The plaintiff also sent a request to the Ministry of Education, demanding Ho’s immediate suspension from Central University. Major queer, labor, and socially progressive groups in Taiwan immediately came to Ho’s support. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) also issued a letter of support in 2005, recognizing that this case was a violation of the organization’s mission of protecting academic freedom of speech worldwide. Other letters came from the World Association of Sexology (2003) and Hong Kong Sex Education Association (2003). Academics and activists also started an international appeal letter—and I happened to become the first signatory of that letter on July 7, 2003. The final published appeal list in 2004 contains signatures of
804 academics, social workers, and human rights activists from around the globe united in defense of Ho. After eighteen months of litigation, Ho was found not guilty by Taiwan’s High Court.

As I will demonstrate further, the lawsuit against Ho was an ad hominem attack that turned a political disagreement within feminism into a witch-hunt. In order to purge sexual activism from feminism, conservative women’s groups attempted to silence Ho, a “sex-positive” feminist, by inciting moral panic and mass hysteria about sex. We might ask, what does this incident indicate about the different understandings of sex in feminist and queer struggles? Moreover, how does Ho’s work reveal a need to think about the difficult issues of zoophilic, pedophilic, teen sex, and sex work in a queer theory that the normalized discourse of gay rights threatens to assimilate? And how does Ho’s invocation of Marx help her tackle these issues in queer and feminist theory?

In the postwar period, women in Taiwan attained a certain degree of political representation and empowerment. Annette Hsiu-lien Lu, for example, is a pioneering feminist thinker who wrote important treatises on the “new woman” (xin nüxing) that inaugurated the “new feminist movement” in the 1970s. Lu was elected Vice President of ROC in 2000 (and was reelected in 2004). After Lu’s “new feminist movement” (xin nüxing yundong) in the 1970s, Li Yuanzheng established Funü xinzhi, the Awakening Foundation, and the journal of the same name in 1982 to raise women’s consciousness under the slogan of xin liangxing guanxi (new gender relations) in contrast to Lu’s xin nüxing (new woman). The Awakening Foundation was instrumental in introducing several reforms bills to promote gender equality in the workplace. Enormously influential, the Awakening Foundation has inspired several other women’s organizations, but the women’s movement since the 1980s has also gradually become a “state feminism,” meaning that Taiwan’s leading feminists began to regard women’s entry into politics as the only path for greater gender equality, and women’s movements became subordinated to the dictates of the nation. Theoretically, state feminists are all essentialists who do not believe in gender constructivism because they believe that the promotion of women’s political participation requires a united front of women’s interests. Above all, the emphasis on electoral politics means that mainstream women’s movements must cut all ties with marginalized, “unpopular,” and potentially divisive issues such as sexuality. A conservative feminist, Lin Fang-mei, argues that the women’s movement should concern itself only with issues that will appeal to the voting constituencies so that feminists can be elected to power and transform women’s issues into concrete social policies. In Liu’s view, because women’s liberation is sought through the welfare state, feminism must dissociate itself from radical movements that are not compatible with the directives of the state. Feminism in Taiwan, then, experiences a dilemma similar to gay normalization: in order to secure popular support, the movement attempts to craft a respectable image of women by purging sexual issues from its agenda. In this brand of feminism, a sense of proprietorship and entitlement emerges, one that gives certain individuals the right to define what legitimately counts as women’s issues, who represents women’s interests, and who belongs to the category of women. The attempt to protect the theoretical and political purity of women’s issues from other agendas also refuses to examine the intersections of gender and other social differences, despite the fact that adverse conditions of women’s lives are often precisely caused by labor migration, sexual discrimination, ethnic difference, languages, and class backgrounds. I suggest that the debate is not a contestation over the moral legitimacy of sexuality, as is commonly understood; instead, it is a consequence of the contradictory foundation of liberal pluralism. Mainstream feminists are constrained by the logic of political liberalism because their goal is to normalize women’s issues by electing female politicians. As a result, mainstream feminists’ intervention is limited to social issues that can resonate with the conservative electoral base, such as care for the elderly, women’s personal safety from rape, childbirth, and childcare—though these can also be progressive issues if framed differently. Under the constraints of liberal pluralist electoral politics, mainstream feminists are either conservative or at best centrist, while truly progressive social movements are left in the hands of nonstatist feminists.

The rise of state feminism in Taiwan, then, reflects a highly politicized bifurcation between gender-based feminism and sex-positive feminism. Ho’s “zoophilia incident” indicates that feminism in Taiwan is beset with the problem of a chiasmic splitting of the term sex (xing) that Judith Butler describes in “Against Proper Objects”: whereas for feminism, sex is that which one is (male or female), for gay and lesbian studies, sex is that which one does (sexuality). The allocation
of gender to the domain of feminism, and sexuality to gay and lesbian studies, repudiates feminist traditions of enhancing sexual freedom, as well as queer critiques of normative gender expressions and gender identities. As a sex-positive feminist, Ho incurs the wrath of conservative feminists precisely because she refuses the allocation of “proper objects” for feminist analysis and gay and lesbian studies. In Taiwan, however, another context underlies the split between gender-based and sex-positive feminisms: historically, sex-positive feminism in Taiwan is allied with labor movements, in particular with the ex-licensed prostitutes’ movement and migrant workers’ movements. Sex-positive feminism’s attention to labor issues is one reason Marxism has become an indispensable intellectual resource for its theoreticians. Marxism has also provided useful tools for their critiques of state feminists during Taiwan’s transformation into a liberal democracy.

Ho is arguably the most influential figure in Taiwan’s sex-positive feminism. In 1994, Ho inaugurated the sexual liberation movement with the slogan, “I want orgasms (xìng qì), not harassment (xìng suǒ).” Ho’s new feminist slogan instantly catapulted her into heated debates. In the same year, Ho received the “Woman of the Year” and “Woman Who Changed Taiwan” Awards. As Ho emerged as the most formidable theoretician of sex-positive feminism, a conservative backlash ensued, first from medical, psychiatric, and state authorities, and subsequently from mainstream feminists themselves. As it turned out, “I want orgasms” became the watershed event that polarized the “women’s rights” and “sexual rights” factions of Taiwanese feminism. Mainstream feminists, such as Liu Yu-hsiu, began to view Ho’s vision as an impediment to the promotion of “women’s rights” and “gender equality” in electoral politics, for fear that the voting public might not be ready to accept women’s sexual liberation, even if it were willing to acknowledge women’s rights to work. The backlash from Liu and other conservative feminists eventually led to Ho’s removal from the Taiwanese Feminist Scholars Association (TFSA).

The debate between Ho and state feminists corresponds with a Marxist critique of liberal formalism. Marx explains that human emancipation is not equal to the abstract rights sanctified by liberal pluralism. For Marx, substantive equality cannot be brought about by the mere creation of democratic institutions and parliamentary procedures, for the democratic state’s formal emancipation from ethnic and religious particularities does not abolish the state’s actual basis or investments in such particularities. Marx argues that parliamentary freedom is actually the freedom of the elected bureaucrats from public scrutiny, misconceived as the freedom of the people through parliament. To illustrate this point, Marx offers the example of religious freedom. Building on Bruno Bauer’s observation that in the United States “the constitution does not impose any religious belief or religious practice as a condition of political rights,” and yet the United States also remains in reality the preeminent country of Protestant religiosity where “people do not believe that a man without religion could be an honest man,” Marx distinguishes between the freedom of religion and the freedom from religion, arguing that the rhetoric of the separation of church and state actually protects Christian dominance by making it legally impossible for the subjects to criticize the actual alignment of church and state. Following Marx’s distinction between the freedom of religion and the freedom from religion, we might say that Taiwan’s state feminists and female politicians have proclaimed the doctrine of “two-gender co-rule” (liàng xìng gòng zhì) and introduced the formal freedom of gender, but these politicians have not created the freedom from gender. Men and women are legally and formally equal in Taiwan, but there is no equality for those who seek freedom from normative categories of gender, such as transgendered and transgendersing persons, intersexed individuals, effeminate gay men, butch and femme (Ti-po) lesbians, single women, women who choose not to bear children, sex workers who do not believe that sex should only occur under the sanctity of monogamous marriage, and numerous other communities who live and work at a critical distance from the idealized notion of womanhood, which state feminists take to be the basis of the gender equality movement. The discourse of “women’s rights” and “two-gender co-rule” in Taiwan reverses the terms of patriarchal domination while leaving its social organization intact. A queer discourse is not tantamount to the empowerment of sexual minorities; rather, it is a historical response to the rigidity of identity categories that liberal pluralism creates. In Taiwan, the state feminists’ conception of the social whole as the competition between empirically existing minority groups (men and women) not only misrecognizes the operations of power, but also naturalizes the
state as a legitimate apparatus adjudicating between these competing groups.

Ho explicitly draws on Marx's concept of freedom and on his critique of liberal pluralism in her works, which encompass a wide range of topics: feminism, queer theory, gender/sexuality education, sex work, youth, transgenderism, censorship, global governance, psychoanalysis, globalization, depression, and the antinuclear plant movement. In her writings on sexuality, Ho combines insights from Marxist cultural analysis with psychoanalysis and queer theory to demonstrate that, contrary to state feminists' claims, gender and sexuality are inseparable in feminist analysis, because normative gender is consolidated through normative sexuality. Moreover, normative gender is predicated on an unequal distribution of economic and symbolic resources between subjects of different genders, a process that Marxism can help illuminate. Ho's most important theoretical work in queer Marxism is The Gallant Woman. Published in 1994, The Gallant Woman is an innovative work in cultural materialism that reveals the logical and historical relations between capitalist modernity and sexual repression. The book's title is a wordplay on the homonyms haoshuang 豪爽 (gallant, unruly; truthful and unaffected) and haoshuang 好爽 (feeling good, having an orgasm), which allows Ho to reinforce her theoretical argument that the women's subordinate status in society (their inability to become gallant women) is connected to the repression of their sexuality (their inability to enjoy orgasms). Ho's work shows that a tactic of sexual shaming reinforces women's subordinate status in social, emotional, and professional contexts. This shaming conditions women to accept their subordination, first, by making women feel ashamed of their bodies and their sexual desires while maintaining deference to men. Whereas sexual aggression is considered a sign of masculinity and a desirable quality for men, women are taught to protect their bodies lest their value on the marriage market drop. The suppression of women's ability to express and assert their sexual desires forms the emotional nucleus of a structure of unequal power and agency that perpetuates itself. Ho points out that a traditional critique of patriarchy is insufficient because gender under capitalist modernity is much more complex than the domination of one group by another. Women, too, internalize this psychic structure of shame and misrecognize it as a material matter that involves differential salaries, social roles, and opportunities. Ho's queer critique is also a Marxist critique in that her theory describes women's auto-commodification of their bodies. Ho shows that the mechanisms of social control and gender inequality have deeper roots in economic and material forces. Therefore, to rebel against such structures, women must unlearn sexual shame and become active agents in relationships and life.72

The 1990s of Taiwan were overshadowed by an uninterrupted series of high-profile stories of the rape and murders of women. The murder of Bai Xiaoyan was the most grisly event in the series. In 1997, Taiwanese entertainment celebrity Bai Bingbing's sixteen-year-old daughter, Bai Xiaoyan, was kidnapped, raped, tortured, mutilated, and murdered by a gang of criminals. During the ransom negotiations, the criminals cut off Bai's finger and took pictures of her naked body after raping her, and then sent those to the family. They also murdered additional victims, including police officers and a plastic surgeon (after demanding him to perform facial reconstruction surgeries), held a South African military attaché and his family hostage, and raped additional women. While the criminals were still at large, the Taiwanese media leaked photos of the teenage victim's naked and mutilated body. The event became a national trauma, and concerns about women's safety became a dominant social issue.

In the immediate years before the Bai incident, Taiwan's sensationalist media released multiple stories about male perverts lurking in women's public bathrooms. Ho wrote her major theoretical works in this milieu of acute social anxiety about sex. While conservative women's groups quickly mobilized to condemn these bathroom voyeurs, exhibitionists, and the male population in general as oppressors of women, Ho saw the problem in women's own internalization of oppression. With "I want orgasms, not harassment," Ho urged women to develop self-defense skills instead of fearing men and their sex. The Gallant Woman was a historical rejoinder to the conundrum of a conservative feminist theory that represented women as a group in need of state protection and intervention. On the one hand, there was a clear need to devise social policies and programs that would ensure women's safety. On the other hand, the events also fostered a general phobia of sex, and portrayed men as naturally predatory, and women as hopeless victims who needed the management,
protection, and discipline of the state in order to function and survive in society. These connections between the repression of women’s sexuality and the liberal welfare state brought Ho to Marxism.

The Galling Woman shows that capitalism and modernity is reproduced through the illegible and disempowered presence of certain sexual modes of being. In turn, gender hierarchy between men and women takes on a quasi-economic character of profit and loss. Ho emphasizes the centrality of sexuality to modern culture as a whole, and exposes the pervasiveness of moralistic teachings, the unchallenged authority of medical and educational professionals, and the near-universal internalization of sexual repression. Moreover, she builds her argument from a wide array of concrete and telling examples, such as the design of public bathrooms in Taiwan and the narrative logic of heterosexual erotica, demonstrating not only how culture constructs sex, but also how sex constructs cultures.

The Galling Woman describes the nature of sexual repression in Chinese culture from the patriarchal thinking of Confucianism to the conditions of capitalist modernity. Ho argues, in a de-biologizing move, that women’s oppression is not rooted in anatomical differences but in an economic logic of exchange (jiao hua) that constitutes women as losers in every scenario. Ho points out that women lose in sexual exchanges because they are taught to perceive sex as a punishing and negative experience unless it takes place in a monogamous heterosexual marriage. Here, Ho offers more concrete examples than Gayle Rubin’s well-known analysis of “sex-negativity” on a similar point. As Rubin puts it, sex is “bad” unless it takes place in a specific, exonerating context: “The only adult sexual behavior that is legal in every state is the placement of the penis in the vagina in wedlock.” Ho formulates a specific theory of the dynamics of gender and sex negativity in Confucian society by describing how women come to internalize the requirements of patriarchy as an exchange in a zero-sum game: “A woman whose body is seen by a man loses, but if she happens to look at a man’s naked body, she also loses.” This economic logic requires a socially reinforced distinction between “fallen women” who “lose” their virginity before marriage, and “respectable women” who only perform the same act in “exchange” for a lifetime of economic security. Men are winners in both scenarios. Here, Ho shows that women do not obtain equality through the acquisition of rights (suffrage) alone; rather, women’s equality becomes possible only when women begin to see and treat themselves as active agents in decision-making processes. Such a transformation requires a psychic revolution that begins with women’s reclamation of their own bodies. Women must become fushuang, gallant beings confident enough to demand erotic pleasures.

In Ho’s analysis, sexuality is not analytically or politically separable from gender. Rather, sexuality and gender are mutually implicated in each other. This implication is not a liability, but a productive tension that has political uses. Crucially, Ho is not a determinist, and gender does not immediately equal ineluctable oppression. The radical nature of her theory lies in her reading of sexuality as a form of agency, and in her insistence that sexuality is precisely the means by which women overcome the “gendered vulnerabilities” imposed by capitalist modernity. Ho’s culturally specific analysis focuses on the dynamics of unconscious acculturation under capitalist exchange instead of a binary structure of male dominance and female oppression. For Ho, women become “winners” not by reversing the structure of power, but by becoming active subjects of desire. Ho’s theory of sexual revolution shows that gender is not a given or inalterable facticity, but a process, a series of cultural contestations, and if women’s oppression originates from the effects of acculturation rather than a biological necessity, then culture can be unlearned and revolutionized. Sexuality provides the site of agency for the unlearning and relearning of culture that Ho terms “sex revolution,” a concept that forms the basis of her queer Marxist theory.

In The Galling Woman, Ho does not argue for the importance of queer issues to the feminist project from the perspective of coalitional politics. Her analysis of the necessary intersections between queer and feminist interests is not based on arguments about altruism, victim solidarity, or the liberal doctrine of respect and tolerance for individual differences. Instead, queerness signifies a different social configuration of bodies and desires that disrupts and denaturalizes capitalism’s instrumental constructions of good versus bad sex. Ho suggests that women can become liberated by aligning themselves with the disruptive force of queers. Like “bad women” who have multiple affairs and partners, queer people provide a valuable education to gallant women because these social subjects are the material reminder of the irreducible richness and diversity of sexual expressions in human cultures. Their existence reveals the constructedness and arbitrariness of the
institution of heterosexual procreative monogamy that women are induced to view as their destiny. Precisely what constitutes the queer subject in Ho’s writing oscillates from examples of extramarital relations, incest, S/M, to a wide range of other types of sexual conduct that cannot be categorized in terms of any binary models. However, even when Ho is writing more locally on the topic of homosexuality, she emphasizes that the “lesbian” is not a self-same subject. For Ho, the “woman-loving-woman” or “woman-identified-woman” imposes a perilous homogeneity that renaturalizes “true love” or “identification” as the prerequisite for a legitimate connection between human beings. The “woman-loving-woman” in 1960s’ and 1970s’ lesbian feminism, Ho argues, should be replaced by the “woman-licking-woman,” “woman-rubbing-against-woman,” “woman-fucking-woman,” “woman-asing-woman,” and other possibilities.

The analysis of the auto-commodification of the “self-respecting virgin” in The Gallant Woman is clearly indebted to Marx’s critique of homo economicus or the subject of rational expectations. Ho’s advocacy of “sex for sex’s sake” as the means for a revolution of culture in The Gallant Woman prefigures her more explicitly Marxist analysis published three years later, where Ho develops, through a re-reading of Wilhelm Reich, a theory of the contradiction between the forces and relations of erotic production. Ho argues that this overdetermined contradiction produces conditions that are conducing to revolution, but revolution is not a structural inevitability: “Revolution is only possible, but not necessarily inevitable, even when points of resistance are already in place. It would take active intervention and discursive codifications to bring forth a revolution.” For Ho, revolution is not a messianic future. Similarly, culture in her theory is necessarily made and remade through human intervention. This reading of culture-as-process allows her to theorize the usefulness of sexuality to feminist struggles, which cannot be reductively viewed as the natural unfolding of an Asian neoliberalism.

The implications of this theory are profound. Ho offers a theory of sexual revolution that resists the liberal pluralist view of homosexuals as a new ethnicity. Instead, she recasts gay men and lesbians as a kind of queer tutelage for women. The Gallant Woman offers a powerful reinterpretation of queerness as a structure of exemplarity, a scene in which ethical, political, or familial predicaments that are relevant to men and women alike are worked out. We can therefore characterize queerness in Ho’s work as an open invitation for (heterosexual) women to rethink their own positions of power by becoming involved in the dilemmas and consciousness of other erotic social agents. Ho’s theory of sexual revolution is derived from Freudian Marxists (in particular Wilhelm Reich) who insist on the totality of the social (conceiving society as an indivisible whole) and on the possibilities of sublimation and transference (arguing that the relations between society’s individual elements may take on a different appearance and be misrecognized). Although repression may initially appear to be primarily sexual, it indexes a deeper level of gender inequality, which is why sexual liberation is a necessary step in Ho’s feminism. Moreover, repression also indicates the inhibition of energies that can be redirected to other uses. This view of repression has its roots in Freud, but it is also a psychoanalytic adaptation of the labor theory of value developed by Marx, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo. Marx understands society to be a living organism linked by a series of economic, transformative activities which individual agents never fully recognize. When twenty yards of linen become a coat and, eventually, come to be exchanged for a loaf of bread, the value of the original quantum of labor expended in the creation of the linen remains identical despite the fact that it has taken different forms, but the social relations between the plantation worker, the tailor, and the baker are obscured. Marx’s point is that the same value sustains the livelihood of social agents in domains of economic activities that appear, at first, completely unrelated. Because money effectively monopolizes the function of universal exchangeability, the actual constant in the equations, labor-power, is erased from view. The labor theory of value insists that the value of a commodity is not determined by the immediate producer, but, rather, by the (infinitely delayed) aggregate of labors that makes it possible for any particular producer to live, work, and manufacture the commodity for social exchange.

In Ho’s Freudian-inflected version of the labor theory of value, sexuality is conceived of as a fraction of energy (néngliàng, Chinese equivalent of German Trieb and drive or instinct in English). This energy, like the quantum of value in Marx’s labor theory, is both indestructible and transferable. Freud offers an array of metaphors to describe these translations
(displacement, condensation, sublimation, and transference), with specific descriptions of how each mechanism works. These processes do not change the essence of the energy, but they do conceal its origins. For Marx, a fundamental structure of misrecognition is essential for class society, which allows both the dominant and the laboring classes to regard a deeply unequal relationship between human beings to be an equitable and transparent exchange of things. The nexus of Freud and Marx helps Ho develop a holistic theory of the transformative powers of a sexual revolution for society at large.

Ho's view in The Gallant Woman closely aligns with Y.n-Bin Ning's work on the emancipatory power of sexual pluralism. Ning argues that unpaid sexual labor in a heterosexual marriage is analogous to the surplus labor of the proletariat; therefore, by demanding money for their labor, prostitutes reveal the inherent contradictions in the modern family and reverse the ideological workings of that institution. Ning develops Marx's distinction between use value and exchange value to argue that the social movement to criminalize prostitution conflates the particularities of labor (the sexual nature of the occupation) with the universal exchangeability of labor-power. Similar to Ho's conception of queer sexual difference as a form of agency, Ning's theory refuses to see queerness as the identity of a people. Rather, Ning describes sexual difference or perversity (biántai) itself as a cultural resource (juéhua zhìyuan) that people can mobilize for sexual and nonsexual purposes. Therefore, Ning offers a strong counterargument to the conception of queer people as a minority, which is the political doctrine of a liberal politics that seeks to integrate sexual diversity into the dominant order on the principle of diversity.

Ho and Ning's queer Marxism is a significant historical alternative to standpoint theory, the tradition within certain leftist discourses that project women, the homosexual, the proletariat, or some other subjects as a privileged standpoint that renders the contradictions of capitalism visible. Rather than describing oppression, Ho and Ning offer examples of how Marxism and structuralist analysis can help articulate a nonidentitarian approach to the insurrectionary energies of the erotic. Like Cui, however, Ho and Ning are not orthodox representatives of the reception of Marxism in their country. In the 1990s, several influential Chinese introductions to the Marxist-feminist debates appeared in Taiwan. The Marx that arrived in the Cold War anticomunist context of Taiwan was, in a manner of speaking, damaged goods. In an award-winning collection edited by Gu Yanling, Huang Shuling describes "Marxist feminism" as a degenerate version of "utopian socialism." Huang explains that Marxist feminism equals the nationalization of women's private property, collective childrearing, coercive assignment of women to factories, and the state's unquestioned authority over women's labor and bodies. According to Huang, the errors of Marxist feminism have already been made evident by the discredited practices of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Fan Qing's contribution on socialist feminism in the volume presents Marxism as a gender-blind historical/materialism that attempts to subordinate women's needs to those of class struggle. In the Cold War context, Ning and Ho's work on "sex revolution" also represents an effort to deliteralize revolution and to reclaim revolution from the state.

Ho's queer Marxism participates in the tradition of cultural materialism, which offers theoretical reflections on the relations between a society's economic base and ideological superstructure without necessarily arguing that culture is determined in the last instance by the economic base. Her queer Marxism also participates in the tradition of dialectical criticism, which consists of writings that reconstruct apparently contradictory or antithetical forces in society into a logical whole. Marxist dialectical criticism's influence on Ho is discernible in her analysis of the issue of global governance. In two important essays, "Queer Existence under Global Governance," and "Is Global Governance Bad for East Asian Queers?" Ho analyzes the contradiction between the global nature of modern surveillance network and its irreducibly local, concrete effects. Ho characterizes Taiwan's regime of sexuality as a new form of global governance created and sustained by supranational bodies such as the IMF and the United Nations, international women's conferences, women's NGOs, religious organizations, and a global discourse of human rights. Amorphous and territorialized, this new regime of power is global in its reach, but it is able to co-opt concrete state-powers to punish deviant sexual expressions within national borders. Because of Taiwan's precarious nation-state status, the feminist state is structurally induced to adopt conservative and even repressive policies to promote an image of Taiwan as a liberal democratic, and hence legitimate, nation-state in the international community. The contradiction between the global and the
local means that queer resistance in Taiwan confronts a transnational vector of power that is difficult to challenge through legal reforms on a domestic scale. Religious and women's NGOs in Taiwan are able to persecute sexual minorities with the current level of ideological persuasiveness and material support from the state because their work is compatible with a global hegemonic moral discourse centered on the United States. The contradiction between global governance and national emancipation indicates the limits of an emancipatory politics tethered to the fortunes of the nation-state. This contradiction also tells us that structural crises do not automatically produce a new form of consciousness.

Queer Minority Discourse and Reticent Poetics

Like Ho and Ning, the Gender/Sexuality Rights Association Taiwan (GSRAT) brings a queer Marxist perspective to combat the liberal pluralist conception of minority rights. Founded by feminists who were expelled by the Awakening Foundation for supporting the ex-licensed prostitutes' movement, GSRAT is the official name of Queer & Class, an advocacy group that works on the interstices of labor and gender/sexuality issues. The existence of GSRAT provides an instructive example of how a labor movement could proceed through an interrogation of gender. From the start, GSRAT’s work is deeply informed by the theoretical debates in feminism, Marxism, and queer theory about the relation between labor and naturalized notions of gender. In their work, the members of the Association—Wang Ping, Chen Yurong, Ni Jiazheng, Jiang Jiwen, and Ding Naifei—emphasize the impossibility of thinking about gender outside the contexts of class and power. For GSRAT, gender is not a person’s universal or immutable essence, but a relation to the world that is inflected by and imbued with other contingencies—class, education, location, language, nationality; consequently, the subject of the group’s activism is not “women” but prostitutes, female factory workers, migrant workers, single mothers, T’s and po’s (“butch” and “femme” lesbians), feminine and masculine gay men, adulterers, bisexuals, transgendered persons, people living with HIV/AIDS, students, betel nut beauties, and migrant workers. GSRAT identifies as one of its main goals “the creation of new discourses about gender,” namely the transformation of the category of gender itself: “For gender to be a useful category for thinking and activism, gender cannot remain in the static, binary definition of “female/male.” GSRAT’s efforts in transforming the concept of gender have had a discernible impact on Taiwanese political culture. An example is the wording of two legal changes in Taiwan, the Gender Equality Employment Law in 2001 and the Gender Equity Education Act in 2004. Initially proposed as “Nan nü gongzu pingdeng fa kao an” (literally the “equal employment for men and women”), the Law was finally legislated as “liang xing gongzu pingdeng fa” (literally “equal employment for the two sexes”) in 2001 in response to GSRAT’s activism. The language shifted from the conservative understanding of gender as “men and women” to the relation between the sexes. Similarly, the Gender Equity Education Act: (“xingbie pingdeng jiaoyu fa”) was originally named “liang xing pingdeng jiaoyu fa” (literally the “bill for the education on the equality of the two sexes”) but the phrase “liang xing” (“two sexes”) was eventually replaced by “xingbie” (“gender/sexual difference”) in order to accommodate other gender and sexual expressions, such as transgender.

GSRAT’s work in Taiwan shows that a queer intervention does not have to be restricted to the political empowerment of homosexuals; rather, it can also bring about concrete social changes on legal, cultural, and material levels through the unlearning of gender categories. While mainstream women’s groups remain committed to the legalization of “women’s rights,” for GSRAT, gender is not synonymous with the category of women, and progressive social change cannot rely on a static conception of gender as male/female. Instead, gender is the material and discursive contestation over these categories themselves. In addition, these categories’ apparent immutability is sustained by distinct state apparatuses. Human freedom, of which gender and sexual freedom is part, cannot be realized through state measures. Rather, freedom can only be reimagined and constructed through democratic dialogues among nonstate actors in civil society. In the midst of the clamor for legalized same-sex marriage, GSRAT marched to oppose the institution of marriage at Taipei Pride 2012, proposing the alternative slogan of “pluralism of relationships” on their banner against “marriage equality.” GSRAT understands that marriage should be made available to those who desire it, but the current
gay movement merely seeks to extend heterosexual privileges to same-sex couples without critically questioning and transforming such privileges. A queer Marxist perspective, by contrast, critiques marriage as an economic institution designed to protect the interests of monogamous couples. The ideology of the family, romance, fidelity, monogamy, and childbearing ensures that privileges and material wealth are selectively passed down from one generation to another. From a Marxist point of view, the idealized, romanticized, and religiously sanctioned notions of monogamous copuledom is a historical product of the rise of private property. Monogamy allows men to pass their private property to their offspring by first ensuring their sexual monopoly over individual women so that the children will be their own.  

In the context of Taiwan, many urgent redistributive justice programs and social reforms are blocked by the movement to legalize same-sex marriage. Wang Ping, GSRAT's Secretary General, uses Taiwan's governmental housing subsidies for married couples as an example to illustrate this point. Wang points out that many gay couples are demanding legal recognition to participate in the government's housing subsidy program, and many gay couples believe that their inability to access such benefits is an example of sexual discrimination. But the government's housing subsidy policy also excludes single heterosexual men and women who cannot, or choose not to, find marriage partners. The government developed the program because it recognized that capitalist globalization has intensified Taiwan's economic stratification, to the point that it is practically impossible for a single person to purchase housing in the greater Taipei area. Unable to devise an effective economic program to counter the forces of capitalism, the government instead resorted to a social policy that benefits married heterosexual couples. The demand for same-sex marriage in this particular case fails to recognize the real economic problems of income disparity, inflation, unemployment, and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few. Instead of arguing for social reforms and greater redistributive justice, proponents of the marriage equality movement accept an obsolete institution that tethers economic rights to the historical requirements of childbearing, monogamy, and procreation. By contrast, a queer Marxist movement should strive to open up the range of legitimate forms of association, union, and intimacy: a woman who enjoys a casual sexual relationship with a man should not be coerced by housing or tax benefits to turn their relationship into a marriage; conversely, two sisters living together and providing emotional and financial support to each other should not need to present evidence of sex for society to consider them to be in a legitimate relationship with legal entitlements.  

In the work of GSRAT's theoretician, Ding Naifei, queerness refers to a wide range of abject beings rendered inarticulate and unrecognizable by the stigma imposed by a social hierarchy of labor. By attending to the historical factors that contributed to the contiguity between labor and sexual stigma, Ding's work makes a significant departure from the liberal philosophy of substantive personhood that characterizes the homosexual as a self-assertive entity. The dual emphasis on sexual and class issues makes Ding one of the most original thinkers in Taiwan's critical arena, since her work demonstrates, through historical research as well as critical analysis, the mutual embeddedness of the stigma of sex and the stigma of labor. This mutual complicity is the condition that inaugurates the queer subject. Queer subjects in Ding's work include bondmaids, concubines, polygamists, polyamorous persons, prostitutes, red shoes, and obscene "things" from the Ming period to contemporary Taiwan and Singapore. Precisely because the queer is not a visible quality of sex, but a sedimented effect of an invisible but resilient historical institution, Ding's analysis also radically alters our opinion on the nature of social exclusion. We should recall that Ding is writing against the entrenched tradition of state feminism and marshaling stigma as an anti-essentialist form of collective disempowerment that does not lapse into an ontological category. As with Spivak's deconstructive reading of the subaltern as a negative accounting (the entire Indian population minus the elite), the queer in Ding's works cannot be defined in advance as a preexisting group (women or homosexuals) by the state. The subject of stigma is, rather, a negativity and an absence, a historical process of exclusion without positivistic contents. In an early essay, "Parasites and Prostitutes in the House of State Feminism," Ding characterizes the queer as the unwanted rats and flies in the feminist classroom that, much to the annoyance of feminists, persistently return. The rats and flies that keep coming back in the face of power in Ding's theory are not mere intellectual abstractions but actual movement strategies in
Taiwan, such as the (g/s)rats that feminism failed to exterminate, and the ex-licensed prostitutes who pestered the Mayor with guerrilla tactics learned from flies (蒅蟾賭行/蠖影賭行).104

Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei develop an immensely influential theory of “reticent poetics” in a number of works.105 Liu and Ding use “reticent poetics” to explain the unrepresentability of queerness within a political and cultural framework that appears to be tolerant, queer-friendly, and even feminist.106 The intellectual source for Liu and Ding’s concept of “reticent poetics” is not Western queer theory but Chinese philosophy: Zhuangzi’s writing about “wangliang” (the shade of a shadow, often translated as Penumbra). In one of Zhuangzi’s parables, a crowd of Penumbrae is intrigued by Shadow’s movement with the sun, but Shadow refuses to explain its Attendance or dependence upon Substance. This refusal performatively produces the unknowability of the source of Penumbrae’s question and displaces the mode of interrogation onto the Form of the Substance, which is not part of the Penumbrae’s question.107 Against the sociologist Chou Wah-shan’s observation that Chinese societies have always been tolerant of homosexuality, Liu and Ding use this revealing non sequitur in Zhuangzi’s parable to develop a persuasive argument that reticence or tolerance is precisely what produces the unintelligibility of the queer. Shadow’s focus on Form is a rhetorical displacement that effectively disables an analysis of the process of hierarchization—that is, how Substance, Shadow, and Penumbrae are established as different positionalities in an indivisible hierarchy in the first place. Penumbrae do not seek to “come out” (xianshen) or to be represented and tolerated, but Shadow persistently misunderstands their questions. This theory of “wangliang” and “reticence” differs from the theory of women’s oppression, which often implies that women must be presented as “victims” in order to have any claim to political rights at all. Women’s emancipation is then problematically predicated on the denial of women’s agency. Against this view, Liu and Ding argue that the “cultural tolerance” Chou refers to constitutes a form of oppression rather than liberation because it is dependent on the melodramatic presentation of the suffering of the homosexual subject.

For Taiwan’s mainstream feminists, women’s shared experience of oppression defines the ontological coherence of women as a social category—where oppression is understood largely as the absence of legal protection in the workplace and education. Because feminism is premised upon a common gender, and the commonality of that gender is derived from oppression, mainstream feminists such as Lin Fang-mei and Liu Yu-hsiu argue that sexuality has to be removed from the feminist agenda, citing the logic that the image of the sexually liberated woman undermines the legitimacy, progress, and respectability of women’s issues, which the liberal state is just beginning to recognize. Since the presumed goal of feminism is the creation of state machineries capable of furthering women’s legal rights, state feminism must suppress the internal differences among women in order to make women’s plight resonate more with a largely patriarchal society. Hence mainstream feminists like Lin and Liu either believe that patriarchy cannot be transformed, or they argue that its transformation has to be postponed. Criticisms of Ho’s politics of sexual liberation include charges that Ho “wants to fly before she learns how to walk,” that her vision is cartoonish, Disneyesque, utopian, irresponsible, disconnected from reality, and that sexual autonomy is a luxury for “bourgeois women” that should not be attempted by lower-class women who do not have the material basis for such rights. For feminist critic Lin Fang-mei, Ho’s “galant woman” is a cartoonish, unrealistic figure similar to “superman or batman,” and Ho’s queer Marxist theory is reminiscent of a “TV commercial for shampoo, stockings, and tampons” that is best reserved “for the promotion of condoms, love hotels, and disco clubs.”108 Conservative critics presume that feminism can only progress if its claims are consonant with the values of mainstream society. As a politics founded on a desire for acceptance, mainstream feminism is mirrored by the liberal view of homosexual as a minority analogue—“people just like everybody else”—and by the liberal use of this analogy as the basis for justice considerations. Queer Marxists, by contrast, use the unassimilability of the queer to reveal that the heterosexual framework is a contingency that passes as natural and universal. Moreover, state feminism relies on a philosophical notion of womanhood as a universalizable singularity. The normalizing operation of state feminism not only seeks to purge sexuality from the domain of gender politics, but also asks different women to “fit” the social model of the virtuous woman by renouncing their sexuality. In short, the theoretical disagreements between mainstream feminists and queer Marxists concern sexuality’s relevance and instrumentality to the feminist cause, and the usefulness of a unitary
notion of womanhood. Because Lin Fang-mei does not regard sexuality to be a feminist issue, she pejoratively characterizes “sex radicals” like Ho and the women fired from the Awakening Foundation as “parasites” who use “women’s resources” to do sexuality-based work.109 Ding’s “Parasites and Prostitutes in the House of State Feminism” is a response to this charge. Again, Judith Butler’s critique of the semantic splitting of sex into gender (as the proper object of feminism) and sexuality (as the proper object of gay and lesbian analysis) helps explain the battles in Taiwan as well.110

As a queer Marxism, Taiwan’s progressive sexual theory was critically informed by the 1997 ex-licensed prostitutes’ movement and other labor struggles. In “Stigma of Sex and Sex Work,” Ding shows that mainstream feminists’ inability to recognize sex work as “work” issues not from a transcultural fear of sex, but more specifically from the successful transplantation of the premodern class stigma of the maid and the little wife. This premodern class stigma transforms into the symbolic debasement of the modern prostitute, whose labor is not recognized as labor, but is immediately seen as exploitation because it is performed outside the sanctity of the heterosexual monogamous marriage. In The Gallant Woman, Ho makes a related point about a new “work ethics” centered on the social engineering of women’s lean bodies.111 Ho suggests that women are induced to increase their productivity and become more competitive on the job market by altering their bodies through dietary control, but this desire is sustained by an enormous amount of social resources committed to advertisements and beauty products that are financed out of the surplus labor of the more productive new woman. Ho explains that her emphasis on the materiality of social reproduction is a resistance to the “neo-Marxist tendency to reduce the reproduction of capitalism to ideology and politics,” which overlooks the fact that ideology, even as false consciousness, is produced at an economic cost borne by the social agents themselves rather than the state apparatus.112 Both Ho and Ding raise, from different materialist perspectives, the question of sexuality’s relation to the reproduction of society.

Insofar as the prostitutes’ movement cannot be understood outside the context of the women’s movement, and insofar as transgender lives are contesting gender norms, neither can be summarily reduced to “a sexuality” that is part of a sexual pluralism. Indeed, queer Marxist theory is not exclusively concerned with sex and sexuality: it is also a critique of gender and gender-based oppressions—the diagnosis of gender identity disorder, the presumed correspondence between gender identity and biological sex, the regulation of hair length, uniforms, and educational content in women’s schools, and coercive or unwanted operations on intersex children. Queer theory contains an analysis of a social mechanism that subjects individuals to harassment, even death, as a result of feminine or masculine self-stylizations. Not all effeminate men or butch women are clamoring for sexual rights or the recognition of erotic behavior. The question of gender normativity does not immediately constitute the victims as a “sexual” minority because social punishments are meted out before any sexual act comes into view, and in ways that are quite independent of normative or non-normative sexualities. We may conclude that queer bodies are situated in struggles against a persistent dualism of gender that functions as a cisnormative regulatory ideal between one’s biological sex and one’s gender identity.113 The critique of the imposition of normative gender attributes on different bodies can be distinguished from the research on sexual conduct in human culture, but these questions demonstrate that gender and sexuality commonly concern feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and queer theory. If queer theory cannot operate without a theory of gender, we must remember that feminism in Taiwan must also include “sexual questions” such as the harassment of women, women’s reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, and pornography. The disagreement between sex-positive and sex-negative feminists is actually a misnomer, for it involves not so much a different attitude toward sex, but, rather, a chiasmatic attribution of gender to women and sexuality to queers. The rhetorical success of this conceptual separation has to be explained in terms of the problems of the liberal pluralist model of personhood. It is a historical result of liberal pluralism, in other words, that gender comes to be viewed as a category that can be defended but not problematized or pluralized, while sexuality must be affirmed in the plural and celebrated as “alternative” or dissident configurations. In order for mainstream feminists to present sexuality and feminism as analytically distinct, sexuality has to be seen as the domain of an entirely separate people with no necessary or logical bearing on gender.
Queer Marxism’s challenge of liberal pluralism then also poses a fundamental challenge of the personification of sexualities on a theoretical and political level.

**A Marxist Theory by Non-Marxists?**

**Revolution in/for the Queer Subject**

In the first volume of Capital, Marx offers a theory of abstract labor as a kind of social power that at once homogenizes individuals and places them into discrete identity groups and ineluctable classes. How and why does abstract labor hold individuals together in a binding social totality while creating distinctions between them? Marx explains that abstract labor reproduces society first by reproducing the conditions of social production. Marx’s labor theory of value holds that the value of a commodity is the sum total of the original value of the raw materials, a fraction of the value of the instrument needed (the means of production), and the value of the labor-power expended in the production of that commodity. However, unlike Ricardo, who defines value as the quantum of labor embodied in each particular commodity, Marx understands the value of labor-power from the point of view of the reproduction of society. Value is therefore not determined by the particularities of articles of utility or by the endless possibilities of different concrete labors that individuals perform, but by abstract labor, the aggregate production of commodities in society as a whole. This correction Marx makes to Ricardo is essential to later feminist readings of domestic labor as labor—which includes certain “immaterial aspects” such as childbearing and emotional repair—labor in the properly Marxian sense, since value in Marx is defined not by the intrinsic properties of a materially existing commodity, but by the cost of social conditions that are required for the production of that commodity and for the reproduction of the laborer who works on that commodity.

A consideration of the value of labor-power must therefore begin with the category of “socially necessary labor (time),” which does not refer to the average of productivity at the current level of technical development (as is commonly understood), but to cultural ideas of what constitutes an acceptable desire and what constitutes a proper means of satisfying that desire, or what Marx calls the historical and moral elements of society. The value of a commodity is the amount of human labor expended to create it, but the value of the commodity of human labor-power is determined by moral and discursive operations outside the capitalist reproduction scheme. These operations require a maintenance cost from the social body and constitute part of the cost or value of labor-power. In order for capital to reconstitute itself, it must reproduce the productive forces (the laborer), the raw materials and the machinery, as well as the moral and intellectual conditions that allow capital to exist in the first place. From an individual point of view, in the expanded reproduction scheme, the capitalist only sees a portion of capital recommitted to the production process at the end of each production cycle, and the capitalist understands reproduction to involve only the renewal of manpower, machinery, and raw materials. From a social point of view, however, at the end of each cycle of the labor process, a portion of surplus value is appropriated by the system itself to reproduce the existing relations of production. This central idea in Marx is the foundation of Althusser’s famous formulation that the reproduction of capital is both the reproduction of the material forces and the reproduction of “the social conditions of production” that include the church, the family, the police, the army, and the school—or what he calls the ideological state apparatuses.

The idea that abstract labor reproduces society first by reproducing state apparatuses explains why G/SRAT, an organization ostensibly committed to the advocacy of gender diversity, has also insistently participated in antiwar, anti-imperialist, and labor movements. G/SRAT recognizes that these events and material forces create the social conditions of gender expressions, and that sexual freedom will never be obtained through a local struggle without a confrontation with the fundamental mechanisms for the reproduction of social power. G/SRAT has organized and participated in the Minority-against-the-War movement in 2003, which protested the Taiwan government’s support for US military actions; the Personal Information Protection Alliance in 2002, which was formed to oppose the passage of a bill that would allow the state to collect citizens’ personal data in the form of a “Health IC Card.” During the 2004 presidential election, G/SRAT and other progressive organizations launched the famous “one-million-invalid-ballot” (bai wan fei piao) campaign, calling on the populace to reject both the “Blue” and “Green” candidates by purposefully invalidating their ballots. Recognizing that “democracy” has become a political tool and reduced to ethnic
tensions, the movement sought to return electoral politics to a rational and democratic debate in civil society. As G/SRAT’s Chen Yu-Rong and Wang Ping have argued, the current political standoff over the cultural and political identity of Taiwan—whether Taiwan is “Taiwanese” or “descendants of the Yellow Emperor”—has usurped and deflected transformative energies originally invested in other social issues, rendering sexuality- and gender-related questions politically unspeakable.\(^{17}\) They strive to show that a critique of the state has now become a prerequisite for all meaningful gender- and sexuality-based struggles in Taiwan, since the dominant debate on Taiwan’s political status has radically impoverished our imagination of what is political. We can extrapolate from G/SRAT’s movement strategies that queer struggles require organized resistance to the workings of state apparatuses. If the queer is not another identity category, but a strategy for the transformation of state apparatuses, queer theory also needs Marxist theory, for it is in Marxism that we find the most useful tools for such analyses.

The perceived mutual exclusivity of gender struggles and sexual struggles is a political consequence of the liberal pluralist assumption of “woman” as a nonpluralizable gender and queer as nonsingularizable sexualities. The homogenization of women is fundamentally dependent on the evacuation of sexuality from women’s lives, which is then phantasmatically reassigned to queers as sexualities. Marx’s analysis of the reproduction of labor-power as the reproduction of a social division is crucial to the understanding of the relation between stigmatized social practices and gender norms in queer Marxism. The apparatuses designed to ensure the reproduction of society along asymmetrical lines are called, in Althusserian terms, state apparatuses that include women’s NGOs, the church, and the family, although these “state” apparatuses are not directly controlled by the government. The Marxist insight that the reproduction of a state requires the reproduction of such apparatuses offers a critical explanation for a historical alliance between labor and sexual concerns in Cui, Ho, Ding, and other queer Marxists.

The bifocal view in this narrative of queer Marxism in the two Chinas also highlights the difficulty of correlating sexual politics to developments of socialism. Both traditions—to the extent that they can be dichotomized—emphasize the need for sexual and gender analysis to resist economic determinism; in turn, these theories offer critical tools for the dialecticization of biopolitics and materialism. The poststructuralist critique of Marxism as a dogmatic elevation of economics to a monocular determination of social life overlooks the importance of the dialectic in Marxist thought, which queer Marxists in the Chinas analyze through readings of queer creativity, sex work, state feminism, queer subject-formations, and civil society. In Marx, this dialectic between materialism and biopolitics is captured by his notion of the “double-character” of the commodity of human labor-power. Labor-power is a special commodity that is reproduced through material and cultural means. His description of the transformation of labor-power into a commodity under capitalism does not imply the primacy of the economic, but is itself a critique of the cultural assumptions of that primacy.

Although queerness is a controversial category in Chinese theory, it is generally accepted that sexuality studies entails a transformation of power relations and identity categories in a culture. A familiar queer argument is that identity-based movements—feminist or gay and lesbian or otherwise—often reinstate the very terms of power that they seek to overcome by naturalizing the conditions of their injury.\(^{18}\) Whether informed by the Marxist notion of social structuration, deconstructive criticisms of linguistic referentiality, or psychoanalytic readings of the unconscious, varieties of queer theory continue to find the opaque, incomplete, or barred subject of desire a useful notion for political contestations. A queer subjectivity is an instance of capitalism’s failure to discipline desire into fixed identities. This failure can be mobilized to create a more self-reflective and expansive model of radical democracy. Queer theory then commonly distinguishes between the transformation of the categories through which political representation is sought, and efforts to secure rights for those already constituted as subjects by those categories.\(^{19}\) Queer theory, in other words, requires that we change the subject, before Marxism requires that we change the social. In queer Marxism, queer sexual identities or positionality do not necessarily refer to homosexuals; rather, these subjects include prostitutes, Filipino maids, factory workers, pedophiles, and high school students. The systemic relation between these seemingly unrelated positions can only be restored by a critique of the historical workings of capitalism. Cui’s
The rise of the queer Chinese novel

When and why did people start telling stories about gay men and lesbians in Chinese? The question of Chinese queer literature’s origins is important for at least two theoretical debates: the invention of homosexuality and queer identification. Since Foucault, critics have been accustomed to describing the homo/heterosexual definition as a modern Western invention, an “event whose impact and whose scope we are only now learning how to measure.” The conception of “homosexuals as a species,” Foucault argues, was unique to the history of the modern West, which radically separated it from former understandings of same-sex sexual relations such as pederasty in Greek culture. As Sedgwick explains it, whereas previously “every person was considered necessarily assignable to a male or a female gender . . . [now every person] was considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or a heterosexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence.” With Foucault’s, Sedgwick’s, and Halperin’s works, the argument that homosexuality was first invented in the modern West has become widely accepted. The corollary of this argument is that the invention of homosexuality had never occurred elsewhere, or that it did only as a consequence of coming into contact with the West. This question has led many critics in Chinese gender and sexuality studies to plumb the large body of erotic literature in premodern China for literary images, anecdotes, and linguistic details that could be used to historicize the invention of homosexuality in China. For critics who disagree that erotic texts in premodern Chinese literature indicate a preexisting homosexual