Introduction

A certain tension frequently arises in attempts to think about queer Chinese cultures in a transnational frame. Broadly, this is a tension between emphasising the multiplicity and fragmentation of Chinese identities today, versus emphasising the ‘deep structures’ of ethnicity and culture – especially the family – that are sometimes understood as a point of commonality across otherwise very different Chinese communities. Exemplifying the former position, in closing her recent reflection on trans-border drifts in queer Hong Kong, Helen Hok-Sze Leung writes:

If we look closely enough, we will find that the formulation ‘transnational Chinese queer’ is always already a tautology, because neither ‘Chineseness’ nor ‘queerness’ can or should be understood within national boundaries. Illuminating this insight may well be the single most worthwhile endeavour for transnational queer Chinese studies. (Leung 2008: 129)

For Leung, as for many other contemporary scholars, both Chineseness and queerness are ‘always already’ transnational, and the suspicion of simple, unchanging, essential identity that is a defining feature of queer intellectual projects is brought to bear on the topic of Chineseness (see Heinrich 2014). Chineseness is conceptualised as multiple, contradictory and fragmented: not the expression of a timeless national essence but instead the product of disjunctive regimes of cultural regulation across the multiple transnational contexts where claims to various forms of Chineseness are made.

For an example of the contrasting view, consider the statement below, which was made by a respondent to the author’s survey on ‘lesbian’ (nütöngzhi) identified Sinophone Internet users (discussed further below), in answer to a question about whether she felt any particular affinity with other ethnically Chinese (huaren) nütöngzhi, as distinct from lesbian Internet users of other ethnicities and nationalities. This 32-year old nütöngzhi-identified [lesbian-identified] teacher in Taiwan wrote as follows:

Since we [Chinese lesbians: huaren nütöngzhi] are from the same cultural background, our parents have all been inculcated with similar views. The whole of Chinese [huarende]...
society keeps on reproducing the same range of stuff: continue the family line, worship your ancestors, filial piety is more important than the self, parents are not to be educated [by their children], and so on. To put it simply, patriarchy still maintains a firm grasp on the sexual orientation and sexual desires of sons and daughters. And, confronted with these traditional ethics and the shadow of the patriarchy, Chinese sons and daughters often choose escapism, deception or self-sacrifice. It’s this kind of tragic situation that makes us sense the commonality between us. (Quoted in Martin 2009: 295)

On one hand, the very terms of the question, originally posed in Chinese (and the awkward process of rendering these into English) actually reinforce the points made in Leung’s statement. ‘Chinese’ is no stable or singular category here. In the survey, the term huaren – a term commonest in Sinophone communities outside China, which foregrounds Chinese ethnicity rather than citizenship of any particular nation-state – was deliberately chosen for this question among the many possible renderings of ‘Chinese’ in order to give a sense of Chinese identity in a transnational frame. This is in distinction to other possible terms that could translate the falsely monolithic English term ‘Chinese’ (Chua 2012: 35): Zhongguoren, which emphasises allegiance with the historical mainland Chinese territory and/or the nation-state of the People’s Republic of China; huaqiao or huayi, which refers to communities of ethnically Chinese people in diaspora outside of the territories of the PRC and Taiwan; Hanren, which foregrounds a racialised conceptualisation of Han Chinese ethnicity, and so on. Both the multiplicity of terms designating various differently inflected versions of Chineseness, and the fact that huaren, the specific term used, indexes a de-nationalised Chineseness that is transnational in reach, correlate with Leung’s anti-essentialist, post-national understanding of the ‘Chinese’ in ‘Chinese queer’.

On the other hand, however, the survey respondent’s statement also points to a sense of convergence in the midst of this multiplicity and fragmentation. In her account, the deep cultural roots of heterosexist Chinese patriarchy are what unite queer ‘Chinese sons and daughters’ the world over, in the contradiction they face between the drive to realise queer selfhood and the rigorous demands of a culturally and ethnically specific family structure.

Taken together, then, these two contrasting statements point to transnational Chinese queer cultures and experiences that often seem characterised by heterogeneity, fragmentation and disjuncture while, at different points, also being marked by the perceived commonality of certain inherited modes of social and cultural organisation. Rather than attempting to adjudicate which of these two different representations of transnational Chinese queer culture is the ‘correct’ one – an obviously impossible task – I will engage with a range of current scholarship in the field of queer Chinese social and cultural studies in order to map transnational queer Sinophone cultures as a terrain fundamentally conditioned by precisely this tension between what might be called centripetal versus centrifugal understandings (Heinrich and Martin 2006): the roots versus the routes of Chinese queer life today (Clifford 1997: 17–46).

Queer Chinese roots

If there is a correlate in queer Chinese studies to a roots-based, centripetal, civilisationist view of ‘Chinese culture’ (see Tu 1991), it is found perhaps most clearly in queer responses to what Singaporean-American film scholar Kenneth Chan has called the ‘homophobic Chinese patriarchal system’ (2008: 142). Such responses foreground what is felt to be a deep-rooted cultural similarity, or at least a shared ‘cultural repertoire’ (Yang 2003: 486) among geographically dispersed Chinese queer people based on the presumed consistency of the structures and demands of ‘Chinese family’. Queer critical engagements with this family system occur across a
range of scales, from microlevel studies of how individual Chinese queer people negotiate their relationships with family, to macrolevel critical analyses of how discourses of familialism inform wider state and legal structures. These discussions, which I consider in detail below, range from identification with and idealisation of a culturally distinctive ‘Chinese family’ to strong critiques of the violence and exclusions perpetuated in its name.

At the micro end of the scale, a series of debates that sociologist Day Kit-mui Wong has dubbed the ‘coming out/coming home controversy’ took place among Hong Kong and Taiwan-based queer studies scholars between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, sparked by the works of sociologist Chou Wah-shan (D. K-m. Wong 2007, 2011; Chou 1997, 2000, 2001; Kam 2012: 89–96). With the aim of demarcating the cultural specificity of same-sex erotic relationships in Chinese societies, Chou singled out the Chinese family kinship system as the key marker distinguishing ‘Chinese’ from ‘Western’ modes of homosexual identity and sociality (Chou 2001). Based on a series of interviews with queer people in Hong Kong, Chou concluded that what he saw as the individualist, confrontational politics of Western-style coming out were overwhelmingly rejected by tongzhi (contemporary Chinese lesbigay people: see discussion below) in favour of a strategy of ‘coming home’. According to Chou, rather than making a verbal declaration of homosexual identity, such tongzhi would introduce a same-sex partner into the parental home where she or he would be tacitly integrated into the family circle, without the topic of the couple’s same-sex relationship ever needing to be directly broached. Chou’s analysis elevates the concept of a culturally distinct, harmonious and ‘tolerant’ Chinese family to the level of an ideal that offers tongzhi not just a literal family home but a deep sense of cultural and existential belonging. He writes:

‘Coming home’ can be proposed as an indigenous lexicon of tongzhi self-confirmation. Jia (home/family) is a culturally unique category that does not have an equivalent parallel in Western language. While jia condenses the meaning of family and home in the English speaking world, it is also a mental space which refers to the ultimate home and roots to which a person belongs. Hui-jia (coming home) means not only going back home but also, more fundamentally, searching the ultimate place-space to which one belongs [sic]. (Chou 2001: 35)

Chou’s theorisation of coming home as a uniquely Chinese approach to integrating queer personhood into the context of family relationships stands as one of the most generative – albeit controversial – articulations of a roots-based view of Chinese queerness. Wong, for example, points out that coming out and coming home are in fact rarely mutually exclusive strategies in Hong Kong, where what is often seen is a hybridised mix of tactics, such as inviting family members to make speeches supportive of their tongzhi relatives at public queer events (D. K-m. Wong 2007).

Denise Tse-shang Tang’s ethnographic research on the living spaces of lesbians in Hong Kong supports this idea of a hybrid mix of queer tactics vis-à-vis family, ranging from the structural integration of queer relationships into family life to the radical spatial and social separation of the two, but in contrast to Chou, Tang underlines the oppressive force of dominant family structures and expectations for queer people in Hong Kong (Tang 2011: 24–39; see also Tang in this volume). In their now-classic article ‘Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics’, Taiwan-based literary and cultural studies scholars Jenpeng Liu and Naifei Ding mount an incisive critique of Chou’s argument, which, they point out, solves the problem of conflict between queerness and family by effectively making tongzhi willingly subservient to the hegemony of familial power (Liu and Ding 1998, 2005). In particular, they critique Chou’s valorisation of ‘silent tolerance’
(moyan kuanrong), which in practice often simply means that queers have little choice but to maintain silence about their sexuality (Liu and Ding 1998: 112–13). Liu and Ding’s genealogy of the classical aesthetic value of reticence (hanxu) leads them to the conclusion that Chou’s argument on ‘silent tolerance’ actually reinforces the local homophobic system which mandates silence – with sometimes fatal results – for queer family members (Liu and Ding 1998: 119). Whereas Chou idealises a culturally specific form of sexual being in the relational, family integrated tongzhi self, Liu and Ding critique a culturally specific inflection of homophobia in the reactionary value of sexual reticence, a view that highlights the family system’s powers of shaming and abjection visited on subjects who refuse to reproduce its structures.

Another approach to the topic of family vis-à-vis individual queer life is found in the works of scholars who employ the tools of ethnography to map practices of alternative family making in queer Chinese lives. In Chinese Male Homosexualities, his book about the lives of gay Chinese men in Hong Kong, mainland China and London, Hong Kong-based sociologist Travis S.K. Kong includes a chapter on intimate citizenship and family biopolitics among Chinese gay men (membas) in the Hong Kong gay scene. Kong’s findings from his interviews with Hong Kong membas support Day Kit-mui Wong’s (1997) argument that queer tactics in Hong Kong reveal not so much a straightforward, voluntary enfolding of queer offspring into extant family structures, as a hybrid array of practices that reconfigure and subvert, at least as much as they reproduce, dominant family values. Compulsory monogamy and the definition of family through blood ties and marriage are all called into question, in Kong’s analysis, by Hong Kong membas’ creation of families of choice and new narratives for sex and intimacy (2011: 94–119).

Another Hong Kong-based scholar, Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, has recently published the findings of her detailed ethnographic study of lala (lesbian, bisexual and transgender) women in Shanghai (2012). Like Liu and Ding, cited above, Kam focuses on dominant discourses of family harmony, supposed ‘Chinese tolerance’, and compulsory heterosexual marriage as forces of cultural regulation over non-normative sexualities. Kam analyses the widespread lala practice of cooperative marriage: marriages arranged between a lala and a gay man for the purpose of ending once and for all the parental and broader social pressure to get married, while enabling both parties to continue living their queer lives. She frames this as a culturally specific survival strategy enabling lalas a modicum of personal and sexual agency within what remains – no matter how reticently – a highly hostile system (Kam 2012: 89–104; see also Engebretsen 2009). Approaching Chinese family structures with different methods but related conclusions are works by humanities scholars who analyse contemporary queer fiction, film and other cultural texts and performances from P.R. China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese diaspora to reveal how the mutual entanglements of family and queerness in such texts often have the effect of queering dominant discourses of family by calling into question their founding assumptions and directly or indirectly critiquing the basis of their power (Chan 2008; A.K.H. Wong 2012, 2014; E.K. Tan 2014; Leung 2008: 98–103; Martin 2003: 117–84).

While the works surveyed above approach the intersection of queerness with ‘Chinese family’ largely from the microlevel of individual experiences, a different approach is suggested in the work of Taiwan-based scholar Hans Tao-Ming Huang. In his book Queer Politics and Sexual Modernity in Taiwan, Huang traces the institutional and discursive histories of contemporary regimes of sexual regulation. Further developing some of the key ideas first articulated in the works of Liu and Ding, cited above, Huang finds woven through the fabric of Taiwan’s sexual modernity a thick strand of moral-paternalist power which he relates to the neo-Confucianist ‘sage-king’ (shenguang) paradigm. In particular, Huang focuses on legal categories from the cold war period, including crimes against ‘virtuous custom’ (shanliang fengsu) – under which public manifestations of homosexuality were prosecuted – and the category of the ‘woman of good
family’ (*liangjia funü*), positioned as the deserving target of the law’s defence. Although both of these categories have now been removed from the letter of Taiwan’s legal codes, Huang argues that the moral-paternalist power behind them has not disappeared but has been transformed. This enables a reconfigured state power, augmented by government endorsed, culturally conservative state feminisms that continue to centre ‘family values’, to define ‘good’ sexual subjects (monogamous, marital, middle class) versus ‘bad’ ones (associated with prostitution, obscenity and base femininities). Defining the type of neo-Confucianist moral-paternalist power that is the target of his critique throughout the book, Huang writes:

I term ‘sage-king’ the regulatory regime of ‘virtuous custom’ formed under the KMT [Kuomintang] administration during the Cold War, while designating as ‘sage-queen’ the seemingly liberal yet deeply disciplinary regime of ‘sexual autonomy’ espoused by state feminism. In marking out the symbolic dimension of these reigning positionalities as well as their ideological and affective bases, and in tracking the hegemonic process whereby the sage-queen feminist subject emerged from the shadow of the sage-king nationalist subject as the new moral authority, this book delineates the historical construct of normative national heterosexuality … in Taiwan. (Huang 2011: 24)

Huang’s macro-level analysis of the deep structures of sexual modernity again positions family – along with class – as central in the production of both normative and non-normative sexualities. In Huang’s account, the power of family has become more diffuse, more abstract and even more far-reaching than in the analyses cited above. For Huang, rather than representing only a kinship grouping that frames individual sexuality, paternalist power modelled on a neo-Confucian classist and familialist paradigm also reaches deep into the very structuration of Taiwan’s legal system and public culture, providing the underlying framework for the legal and social demarcation of modern sexual subjects into good and bad categories.

Collectively, the works discussed in this section acknowledge the cultural specificity of structures, practices and discourses of family that have historically dominated in ethnically Chinese communities and, these scholars argue, continue to have a marked influence on experiences of Chinese queer cultural life today. In some responses, ‘Chinese family’ is constructed as an object for idealisation and identification (Chou 2001); in others, it is critically reconfigured in queer practices and representations of intimacy and alternative family (Kong 2011; Kam 2012); in others, it is ardently contested as the root of homophobic oppression in the private and public lives of queer subjects (Liu and Ding 1998; Huang 2011). At the same time, though, through their careful attention to the particularities of specific instances of queer family experience and representation, a majority of these authors are wary of any essentialising construction of ‘the’ Chinese family. As Travis Kong rightly cautions, ‘we have to question the arbitrary formula that equates Chineseness with the family institution’ (2011: 205). In their challenge to essentialist versions of Chineseness as Chinese family, these scholars reflect what is now a dominant approach to understanding Chinese cultures on a centrifugal rather than a centripetal model: one that emphasises the routes rather than the roots of Chineseness in a transnational frame.

**Queer Chinese routes**

As was foreshadowed in the introduction to this chapter, over the past two decades in the humanities and social sciences, there has emerged a strong tendency to critique essentialist
understandings of Chineseness as a singular, ‘authentic’ and nation-based identity. For example, Lydia Liu proposes that the massive influx of neologisms from other languages into what has become the modern Chinese language since the late nineteenth century makes it impossible to conceive of ‘Chinese’ as pure or originary (Liu 1995: 1–42). Allen Chun critically deconstructs the presumed links between Chinese ethnicity, culture and identity (Chun 1996). Rey Chow asks that we recognise Chineseness as ‘always already’ multiple and fragmented, a term to be placed under erasure rather than taken for granted (Chow 1998). Aihwa Ong shows how transnationally mobile Chinese business elites in Southeast Asia develop forms of ‘flexible citizenship’, adapting different forms of cultural and national identity to meet the needs of the moment (Ong 1999: 1–26). Ien Ang reflects on the ways in which the diasporic Peranakan (strait Chinese) experience troubles a monolithic conception of Chineseness as culture, language and ethnicity (Ang 2001: 1–18). All of these works recognise that the many regionally distinct histories, languages and cultures within the nation of P.R. China as well as across the multiple transnational sites of ethnic ‘Chineseness’ in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and the worldwide Chinese diaspora make faith in any singular version of Chinese culture and identity difficult to sustain. In the recent words of David Eng, Teemu Ruskola and Shuang Shen, ‘it is not at all obvious just what makes China … a seemingly solid object of knowledge’ (2012: 2).

This shift toward a centrifugal understanding of Chineseness is reflected in much of the current scholarship on queer Chinese cultures. For example, in his book on male homosexuality in Chinese cinemas, Celluloid Comrades, UK-based Singaporean film scholar Song Hwee Lim directly refutes the idea that such a project could or should produce any simple, unitary picture of Chinese cinematics representations of homosexuality. Rather, ‘representations of male homosexuality in Chinese cinematics have been polyphonic and multifarious, posing a challenge to monolithic and essentialised constructions of both “Chineseness” and “homosexuality”’ (Lim 2006: 2). A related assumption can be seen in Hong Kong filmmaker and scholar Yau Ching’s framing of her edited collection on non-normative genders and sexualities in mainland China and Hong Kong, in which ‘the changing configurations of sexualities are studied in light of the destabilising, internally differentiated and contested notions of the Chinese nation-state through its conflicted relations with regional and local territories such as Hong Kong’ (Yau 2010a: 6). Travis Kong finds that gay male Chinese identities in different national and geographic locations are plural and varied, shaped by distinctive negotiations with sexual citizenship as a result of specific forms of institutional regulation by the state, the market, the queer community and the family (Kong 2011: 27). From the macro perspective of international cultural diplomacy, meanwhile, Petrus Liu argues that Taiwan’s government publicly champions gay rights in large part as a rhetorical strategy to maintain the favour of the USA by presenting a ‘liberal, democratic’ image in distinction to the ‘repressive’ PRC (2012; see also Ho 2008). This illustrates the complex entanglements of divergent and competing national-level representations of ‘Chinese culture’ with claims to queerness on the international political stage. At a more micro level, studies of China’s rural-to-urban migrant ‘money boys’ – young men who have sex with men for money – provide a concrete example of the internal multiplicity and stratification of queer experience inside the PRC, where the poor, rural money boy identity is constructed as the debased Other to the urban, cosmopolitan, middle-class gay self (Kong 2011: 174–93; Rofel 2010).

A related example is provided in the survey of 116 users of nü tongzhi-related Chinese-language websites which I conducted in 2003–4 in order to gauge the degree to which Internet communication was helping to forge a sense of transnational nü tongzhi community and identity in the Sinophone world (Martin 2009). Several respondents, like the one quoted below,
emphasised a sense of distance from, rather than commonality with, Chinese-speaking nütongzhi living in different national and geographic territories:

Q: Do you feel you have many things in common with other Chinese-speaking lesbians you meet via the Internet who live in territories other than your own? Or do you feel you are very different from them? Please explain.

A: (from a 26-year-old unemployed graduate in Guangzhou): Aside from the fact that we have the same sexual orientation, I feel that there are many differences, which are to do with the different cultural conditions in each place. In mainland China, lesbians [nütong] from different provinces all have different cultural backgrounds. Lesbians [nütong] who live close to Hong Kong and Taiwan bear virtually no relation to my own sense of sexual identity, and lesbians [nütongzhi] from the interior have to face far greater levels of pressure, pressure that comes from all quarters in relation to all kinds of issues. Personally I feel that what we have in common mainly reflects the information and culture available through the lesbian [nütong] Internet. (Martin 2009: 294)

In their introduction to a special issue of positions, Beyond the Stra(gh)ts, Petrus Liu and Lisa Rofel argue for an understanding of queer Chinese cultures that focuses on ongoing present-tense conversations among different sites of queer Chinese life across P.R. China, Taiwan and the US Chinese diaspora (Liu and Rofel 2010). They thus echo the above respondent’s sense that much shared repertoire among Chinese queer people today is the result of contemporary cultural flows rather than organically shared traditions. Along similar lines, in my work on the distinctive yet connected histories and present-day examples of female homoerotic representation across P.R. China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, I have proposed the metaphor of ‘a cultural archipelago where media cross-flows – both within and beyond “transnational China” – interact with local histories to create distinctive yet inter-linked contemporary cultural scenes’ (Martin 2010: 21).

**Queer Sinophone networks**

These discussions lead us toward a different way of conceptualising transnational queer Chinese cultures, one that allows us to see areas of commonality across geographically dispersed Chinese communities but focuses on how these arise from rhizomatic cross-flows in the present rather than from ‘deep’ cultural heritage. According to this view, the starting point for approaching contemporary Chinese cultures is acknowledgment of their difference, multiplicity and fragmentation, but we should recognise, too, that new forms of shared experience are also enabled as a result of transnational flows of media and migration in a contemporary globalising world. This idea has something in common with Guobin Yang’s influential proposition of a ‘transnational Chinese cultural sphere’, ideologically driven by the complexity (or ‘confusion’, to use Yang’s term) of Chinese identity today and technically enabled by Internet communication across otherwise distant and diverse Chinese-speaking communities worldwide (Yang 2003: 486).

In this context, Shu-mei Shih has introduced her influential theorisation of the Sinophone, which now provides a critical lingua franca for scholars working on trans-local articulations of Chinese-language cultures (Shih 2007; 2011; 2012). Inspired by Francophone studies, the study of sites that are conditioned by their histories as territories connected to the French empire, Shih conceives the Sinophone as encompassing those many and varied locations beyond the territorial and cultural ‘heartland’ of Chineseness in mainland China, dominated by Sinitic languages yet positioned ‘on the margins of China and Chineseness’ (Shih 2007: 4). Shih’s conception of the Sinophone foregrounds the dispersal, fragmentation, heterogeneity, and internal
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incommensurability of ‘Chineseness’ and is emphatically transnational in extension and focus. Shih is committed to a critique of China-centrism, but does not a priori exclude consideration of sites and cultures found within the borders of the PRC nation-state, instead ‘giv[ing] space for minoritised and colonised voices within China, be they Tibetan, Mongolian or Uyghur’ (Shih 2012: 5). Elsewhere, Shih explains that ‘the Sinophone encompasses Sinitic-language communities and their expressions (cultural, political, social, etc.) on the margins of nations and nationalness in the internal colonies and other minority communities in China as well as outside it’ (2011: 716). Shih’s commitment to a politics of minoritised communities both within and outside mainland China opens up two connected questions for the project of a queer Sinophone studies. One concerns the adaptability of the Sinophone framework to studies of ‘Chinese’ queerness in a transnational frame; the other concerns the positioning of analyses of queer cultures inside mainland China within such a project.

At the time of writing, a new field of enquiry under the title of queer Sinophone studies is in the process of formation, with Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich’s edited collection, *Queer Sinophone Cultures* (2014), gathering essays by eleven established and emerging humanities scholars based in the USA, the UK, Australia and Singapore on topics covering queer Chinese film, literature and histories. Other works that have explicitly taken up the Sinophone rubric for queer studies include Alvin Ka Hin Wong’s discussion of the concept in relation to transnational lesbian cinema from Hong Kong and the US Chinese diaspora (Wong 2012), and Audrey Yue’s framing of the experimental films of Beijing director Cui Zi’en as queer Sinophone films (Yue 2012a). Yue offers a definition of queer Sinophone cinema that can usefully engage with the project of defining queer Sinophone cultural studies more broadly. Extending Shih’s definition, Yue defines queer Sinophone cinema as a ‘minor transnational network that includes not only queer Chinese cinemas outside of China, but also queer Chinese films in China that are beneficiaries of peripheral Chinese and global Western queer film markets’ (2012: 105). In this definition, the Sinophone begins when transnational flows come into play; this is an important point, to which I will return below. In highlighting the ‘minor’ aspect that is part of Shih’s definition of the Sinophone (see Lionnet and Shih 2005), Yue also opens up potential for broadening Shih’s project in a specifically queer direction.

Shih’s initial concept for the Sinophone was based on the marginalisation of certain communities both inside and outside of P.R. China as a result of colonial and migration histories, and a concern to make audible the voices of the colonised and the ethnically minoritised. This focus on minoritised subjects may also afford a space for the consideration of sexual minorities, both outside and inside P.R. China. In this sense, sexually marginal subjects like the la las studied in Shanghai by Lucetta Kam (2012) and in Beijing by Elisabeth L. Engebretsen (2009), the male homosexual (piao piao; tongzhi) tea-house patrons of Chengdu discussed by Wei Wei (2007), the ‘queer comrades’ of Beijing, analysed by Hongwei Bao as inhabiting an identity fundamentally conditioned by the PRC’s socialist past (2011), and the rural migrant money boys and gay urbanites studied by Kong (2011) and Rofel (2010) could feature as topics within a queer Sinophone studies project, broadly conceived. As Heinrich notes, queer Sinophone studies could be seen as a logical juxtaposition of ‘the margins of gender and sexuality with the margins of China and Chineseness’ (2014). This is especially the case since marginal genders and sexualities are positioned, almost by definition, as occupying the margins of China and Chineseness, even (especially?) when they are located inside the territorial borders of the PRC.

This issue of whether, to what extent, and on what basis considerations of mainland Chinese queer subjects and cultures could be included in a queer Sinophone studies project is a key question for this emerging field. In addition to the fact that queer sexualities in P.R. China can be seen, somewhat like non-Han ethnicities, as minoritised, there is also another good reason to
consider the inclusion of queer mainland China in a queer Sinophone studies project. Mainland China is more and more interlinked into the transnational networks of Sinophone cultural flows, both of broader popular culture and specifically of queer texts, practices and identities. Hence, in a practical sense, it becomes harder than ever to conceive of mainland Chinese queer cultural life as sealed off from that of Sinophone queer communities outside China. Analysis of material exchanges between queer peripheral Sinophone sites and queer mainland Chinese sites can surely be made while continuing to avoid the uncritical China-centrism of which the Sinophone studies project is so suspicious.

One of the clearest examples of such exchanges is the sexual identity tongzhi, which has cropped up throughout this chapter and is now possibly the most common term for non-normative sexualities across all of the major Chinese-speaking regions. First used in a queer sense in the late 1980s in Hong Kong (D. K-m. Wong 2011: 157), the term’s standard English translation is ‘comrade’, as seen in the rhetoric of both the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang. Literally meaning ‘common will’, tongzhi performs a sly citation of the famous words of the founder of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen – ‘The revolution has not yet been accomplished; comrades we must struggle yet’ – while simultaneously punning on the first character of the term for homosexual (tongxinglian) (Martin 2003: 22–23). Starting at the geographic periphery before arriving belatedly at the centre, this term travelled from Hong Kong first to Taiwan, and from there on to mainland China and the Chinese diaspora. The First Chinese Tongzhi Conference, a mixed cultural, activist and academic event, was held in San Francisco in 1996; the second, in Hong Kong in 1998 (Lu 1999; D. K-m. Wong 2011: 158). While it is by no means the only Chinese-language term for queer sexualities in circulation today (in fact there are too many local, regional, gendered, classed and generational variations to list), tongzhi has become the commonest term used in ways comparable to the English LGBTIQ, and arguably constitutes ‘the most extensive non-English language medium of queer imaginaries in Asia today’ (Martin et al. 2008: 14). Although Chou framed the term tongzhi as an expression of the unique Chinese cultural disposition of relational selfhood and familial orientation discussed above (Chou 1997, 2000; D. K-m. Wong 2011: 157–59), its hybrid late modern history, linking Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China and the Chinese diaspora in a transnational queer circuit, makes it very amenable to a more Sinophone interpretation: the expression of queer Chinese routes rather than roots. If mainland Chinese sites are included in the queer Sinophone articulation performed by tongzhi, then it is as nodes in a decentred network, not as ultimate source and origin.

Another series of queer Sinophone routes can be found in the transnational flows of queer Chinese media. Today, the transnational queer Sinophone mediasphere constitutes a distinct cultural world. When a new Sinophone queer film or television series is released, news spreads fast on Sinophone social media sites (including Facebook, Twitter, Renren, Weibo, Feizan, and Douban). Before long, queer audiences across mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the diaspora are downloading, watching, circulating and discussing the latest media offering, along with the subtitled versions of queer British and American films and television series. This queer Sinophone media circuit is in some ways not as new as it might seem, a point illustrated by Chan’s recollections of the queer pleasures of viewing Chinese family melodramas from Hong Kong and Taiwan during his youth in Singapore: queer audiences have been active for decades, no doubt, in the practice of queering regionally mobile popular media texts (Chan 2008; Tan and Aw 2003; Yau 2010b). Today’s queer Sinophone media texts, however, more often openly figure same-sex relationships as central plot elements, and tend to be transnational in character across the levels of production, distribution, exhibition and consumption.

For example, Hong Kong director Yan Yan Mak’s film Butterfly (Hudie, 2004), was made, set, and financed in Hong Kong, based on a 1996 novella by Taiwanese lesbian author Chen
Xue (Hudie de jihao, Mark of the Butterfly), and featured a star from mainland China: Wuhan-born musician Tian Yuan, who plays Yip (Chen 1996). An interestingly ‘pan-Chinese’ linguistic effect – somewhat similar to the one that Shih underlines in Ang Lee’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, which she frames as exemplary of Sinophone cinema and culture (2007: 1–8) – is created in the film by the fact that while co-star Josie Ho delivers her lines in Cantonese, Tian Yuan slips habitually into a northern-accented Mandarin (Martin 2010: 157–64). For Alvin Ka Hin Wong, Butterfly is exemplary of a new form of transnational Sinophone lesbian cinema (A. K. H. Wong 2012; see also Bachner 2014). Underlining the film’s alteration of the story of Chen Xue’s novella to include thematisation of Hong Kong students’ response to the 1989 student movement in Beijing, Wong observes that this lesbian love story ‘can be read as containing Taiwanese “roots”, exhibiting Hong Kong flavor while functioning as a political critique of authoritarian forms of Chinese nationalism all at once’ (2012: 314).

Another salient example is Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan’s film, Lan Yu (2001), which tells the story of a romance between money boy Lan Yu and wealthy Beijing businessman Chen Handong. As several scholars have noted, Lan Yu can be seen as a paradigmatic example of the transnationalism of contemporary queer Chinese-language media (Lim 2006: 39–40; Guo 2013; Chiang 2014; see also Eng 2010). The film is an adaptation of an Internet novel entitled Beijing Story (Beijing Gushi), which was posted on the web in 1996 and published in book form in Taiwan in 2002 by Taiwan Tohan publishers, a branch of Japan’s Tohan Corporation (Guo 2013). The film’s producer, Zhang Yongning, a P.R. Chinese national based in Britain, read the Internet novel and developed the plan for the film, sourcing international funding and approaching Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan to direct it in 2000 (Lim 2006: 39–40). The film found massive popularity among Sinophone audiences worldwide: Chan notes that it was an audience favourite, for example, at the Singapore International Film Festival in 2002 (2008: 155). The fame of queer Sinophone texts like Beijing Story and Lan Yu is also opening up new discursive spaces for critical anti-homophobic scholarship inside mainland China, where some commentary on the novel and the film takes the form of liberal humanist analyses promoting the language of human rights and tolerance for sexual diversity (B. Liu 2012; Fan 2011). In Lim’s apt words, then, ‘Lan Yu is a text that has travelled across nations, transmuted across media, and thrived in the disjunctive order of the new global cultural economy’ (2006: 39).

As well as demonstrating these flows of finance, narrative, ideology and media within a transnational queer Sinophone network, Lan Yu also instantiates the complex routes of sexual epistemologies within such a network. Chiang, for example, proposes that, insofar as Lan Yu can be read ultimately to champion a contemporary global-style understanding of gay male identity, the film underscores a historical logic whereby what was once Japan’s role in channelling Western understandings of homosexuality into mainland China is now taken up by peripheral Sinophone locations like Hong Kong. Thus, Chiang observes:

what a Sinophone rereading of Lan Yu reveals is precisely this apparatus of historical displacement, in which the social and cultural articulations of non-normative sexualities are rerouted through – and thus re-rooted in – Sinitic-language communities and cultures on the periphery of Chineseness. (2014)

A related interpretation is made in an article by US-based literary scholar Jie Guo. Focusing on Beijing Story, the novel on which Kwan’s film is based, Guo observes that the narrative hinges on a conceptual separation between Lan Yu’s initial identity as a money boy – a boy prostitute exchanging sex for money – and his final characterisation as a morally redeemed gay man. This identity transformation is enabled by Lan Yu’s refusal of payment from his lover and
his unswerving emotional fidelity to his love for the other man. Guo frames this plot as part of the long drawn-out process of sexual modernisation in China, which leads back to the pre-modern history of male prostitution in the theatrical tradition of dan (female-role) boy actors who were available for sexual services with male patrons. To become sexually modern in the world of Beijing Story is, in Guo’s perceptive analysis, to switch from sex for money to sex for love, and to abandon the emotional inauthenticity of prostitution in favour of ‘true’ gay identity. It is through this plot that the novel (and, arguably, also the film) connects a ‘Beijing story’ with a broader global tale of cosmopolitan gay identity.

With the echo that Guo observes between Lan Yu’s initial money boy identity and the historical practice of dan actors’ sex for money, we have also, perhaps, come full circle. For there is a strong resonance between Guo’s analysis of Beijing Story’s ‘cleansing’ of modern, cosmopolitan gay male identity from the taint of prostitution and Huang’s critique of the construction of normative sexualities in contemporary Taiwan through the abjection of the figure of the prostitute (both male and female), discussed above. Guo’s reading thus brings us from the transnational routes of this paradigmatic queer Sinophone text back to the other term in the dialectic that this chapter has argued both structures and troubles the emergent project of a queer Sinophone studies: the partially shared historical ‘roots’ of Chinese sexual modernities.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have mapped the state of the field that is in the process of consolidating under the title of queer Sinophone studies. The material reviewed has revealed some of the central tendencies that currently structure this field as a whole. As well as the conceptual tension between emphasis on the ‘roots’ versus the ‘routes’ of queer Chinese cultures today, noted throughout, the studies discussed have tended to cluster around ethnographic approaches to specific sites of queer social life, on the one hand, and critical interpretations of queer-themed literature, films, and other media, on the other. In conclusion, I would like to note several other areas of contemporary queer Sinophone life that could provide fertile areas for future study.

First, the transnational ethnoscapes of queer Sinophone tourism, migration and other travel stand out as an obvious site for further investigation (see Yue 2011). Gay Chinese men in particular are increasingly mobile in the circuits of specifically gay tourism and circuit parties (Yue 2012b: 4), with a recent study of outward bound gay male tourism from Taiwan, for example, revealing Thailand, Japan and mainland China as their top three destinations (Lin, Lai and Kao 2011). What kinds of regional connections and transnational identifications are being forged in these embodied routes of queer mobility across the Sinophone world?

Second, as Taiwan-based sex radical scholar Josephine Ho observes, cultures of non-normative sexuality in various Sinophone territories, especially Hong Kong and Taiwan, are increasingly under attack from transnational forces of a different kind in the form of US-style conservative Christian groups (Ho 2008). Both these homophobic organisations themselves and the queer activist responses to them articulate powerfully emergent energies in Sinophone public culture: these are urgent subjects for further study.

Third, the rapid pace of development of Chinese-language social media both in mainland China and beyond – and, perhaps most interestingly, in the new interstitial cyberspaces linking mainland China with the peripheries of the Sinophone world – mean that new studies are needed to keep up to date with the implications of these communications technologies for the growth of a transnational queer Sinophone mediasphere. If a study were conducted today on queer users of Chinese-language social media, the findings would most probably look...
significantly different from the results of my 2004 study of Chinese-speaking nütongzhi Internet users cited above. But how so? Would the sense of cultural and affective connection between users in different nations and territories be greater or lesser today than it was then? Or are individuals’ sexual and cultural identifications being transformed in yet other ways by the intervening years and changes in technology?

Finally, it is worth noting the transnational academic networks of scholars of queer Sinophone studies. Throughout this chapter, reference has been made to studies of queer Chinese cultural and social life conducted by scholars in conversation with each other across mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, the USA, the UK and Australia. This scholarly network can be seen not just as a structure for analysing, but as itself an integral part of, the transnational queer Sinophone networks that this chapter has mapped. The current energies of the nascent field of queer Sinophone studies indicate that it is poised to continue growing in size, in complexity, in ambition, and in generative contradiction.

Suggested further reading


References


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