

administrative process of divorce by mutual consent (*xieyi lihun*). As Michelson himself acknowledges, while judicial divorce has tended to impact on official and popular thinking about divorce, any such impact has occurred “[d]espite being far outnumbered by uncontested, voluntary, mutual-consent ‘divorces by agreement’ processed by marriage registration offices in the Civil Affairs Administration” (pp. 14, 191). Li, while less court-centric, also does not deal in detail with what became by the late 2010s the main avenue for divorce – the large majority of unhappy couples, voting with their feet so to speak, chose to end their marriage by the administrative process of mutual-consent divorce. This popular form of divorce was seen by the authorities to be spiralling out of control, and so it was made subject to controversial restrictive conditions in the 2020 Civil Code – Article 1077 imposed on not only contested divorces but also divorces by mutual consent a so-called “cooling-off period” (*lihun lengjingqi*) of 30 days in which the married couple might rethink their rash decision to terminate the marriage (*qingshuai lihun*). This has had the effect of applying a sharp brake on the spiralling trend of administrative divorce, starting on 1 January 2021, the day the new Civil Code came into effect. It seems likely that divorce by mutual consent has been a relatively unproblematic process, given its growth in popularity, but further research is needed before firm conclusions can be reached.

Despite their somewhat different focal points – Michelson on civil litigation and trial, and Li on the broader state mechanisms – both books offer essential insights into the ways in which law, state power and culture intersect to perpetuate gender inequality in China. Taken together, the authors’ research and analysis provide a compelling argument for the need to critically examine the manner in which the Chinese legal system operates in practice, particularly given that often patriarchal contexts within which impactful decisions are made. These studies are indispensable for scholars of gender studies and law, especially but not exclusively in relation to contemporary Chinese society, offering rich data and nuanced analyses of the ongoing struggle for gender justice in the PRC.

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Words like Water: Queer Mobilization and Social Change in China

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The study of social movements in non-Euro-American societies poses several challenges within Western academia. First, it must engage with debates rooted in the West/non-West dichotomy inherent in the theorization of political and social change within established disciplines. Second, in seeking ways to transcend this binarism, it is crucial to steer clear of romanticizing/fetishizing local social movements, as doing so can ultimately reinforce such dualities. Caterina Fugazzola’s ethnographically informed research on the *tongzhi*/LGBTQ movement in the PRC addresses these challenges through the integration of social movement theory and transnational queer studies. It offers an alternative approach beyond the Western rights-based framework to explore *tongzhi* activism’s linguistic and rhetorical strategies that contribute to processes of social change.

What counts as social change? How do we understand queer movements within the context of state socialism, especially when liberal modes of participation are not endorsed by the state and are often outright denied? The central research question of *Words like Water* deals with forms of social movement that may not fit within a Western-centred social change model focused on protest and political contention. Instead, Fugazzola argues that Chinese *tongzhi* activists' seemingly nonconfrontational politics, specifically their strategic use of language and discursive tactics, perform significant political and cultural work by promoting social change amidst China's escalating crackdown on grassroots rights-based organizations. Such an approach is aptly supported by a historical review of the emergence of the contemporary sexual identities like *tongzhi* (cultural appropriation of *comrade* to signify non-normative sexualities), *lala* (Chinese vernacular for women desiring women) and *ku'er* (Chinese translation of queer) following the economic reforms of the 1980s. These identities are deeply intertwined with the transnational circulation of sexual identity politics and influenced by traditional cultural values of social belonging and family ties in China. Thus, as the author suggests, insisting on the compliance–resistance binary paradigm to conceptualize social change fails to explain how this type of *tongzhi* activist work effectively brings about change. While “walking the line of contention without becoming oppositional” (p. 12), *tongzhi* activism benefits from the relative autonomy facilitated by the central state's disinterest in sexual identity issues over the past three decades. However, its intimate connection with “out and proud” visibility politics and human rights discourse also exposes these groups to political vulnerability as targets of the new nationalistic security agenda aimed at countering perceived imperialist infiltration. Queer mobilization in this new milieu, as Fugazzola borrows from one of her interviewees when discussing their understanding of successful organizing in the PRC, works like water. A Daoist metaphor by Laozi, the power of water lies in its capacity for malleability and its deeply interpersonal nature. And she contends that this strategic manoeuvring is best exemplified in the linguistic and discursive tactics that *tongzhi* activism utilizes.

To examine the water-like strategies central to *tongzhi* activism, the author investigates both the harmony-based efforts of PFLAG China (*Tongxinglian qinyouhui*) and the rights-based legal advocacy that advances *tongzhi* rights claims in the PRC. Though seemingly oppositional, Fugazzola argues that both approaches are cultural strategies that create spaces for the *tongzhi* community. The work of PFLAG China is evident in this case as they construct a family-centred narrative that aligns neatly with the state-endorsed discourse of social harmony and belonging. This is achieved by incorporating high-quality (*gao suzhi*) *tongzhi* children and desexualizing *tongzhi* subjects. For activists involved in litigation concerning the absence and infringement of *tongzhi* rights, they articulate “humans and their rights” instead of “human rights,” emphasizing *quanyi* (rights and interests) rather than *renquan* (human rights). Intending to foster constructive dialogues with the government, this approach downplays Western human rights activism methodologies and instead embraces the state-endorsed rule of law project.

Ethnographically rich and supported by discourse and content analysis, this book provides a culturally astute and nuanced analysis of contemporary *tongzhi* movement in China. However, the author's innovative approach to understand *tongzhi* activism is constrained by the ethnocentric disciplinary paradigm itself. The theorization of “nonconfrontational politics” runs the risk of reinforcing binary constructs such as West vs. non-West and confrontational vs. nonconfrontational. Such uncritical usages are also evident in the author's use of “liberal” vs. “illiberal,” and “civil society” as normative concepts when discussing the PRC. Lastly, the author clarifies that her ethical deliberations led her to exclude from her book feminist *lala* groups and individual activists who faced intense state surveillance due to their radical politics. While she focuses the study on organizations that adopt strategies to avoid crackdowns, readers could gain more from a critical gender analysis of movement strategies that lead to divergent outcomes. This is particularly important considering that two out of four content chapters presented in the book focus on the work of PFLAG China, an organization predominantly staffed and run by gay men. The author's discussion of the invisibility

of *lala* activism and the reference to *Queer Lala Times* in chapter one is a valuable attempt, albeit lacking in depth. At the same time, *lala* activists have made diverse cultural contributions by articulating a uniquely gendered *tongzhi* perspective, aligning with the book's theory of nonconfrontational discursive practices. To provide a more comprehensive conceptualization of *tongzhi* movement strategies without singling out and endangering particular activists, the author could enhance the analysis by exploring second-hand materials that include seemingly more confrontational and gendered tactics from the past decade, and by examining cultural works by feminist *lalas*, such as *Les+* magazine and their art productions.

Words like Water contributes to ongoing debates on the theorization of contentious politics in China by foregrounding the cultural impact of movement tactics and challenging the limitations of Western rights-based approaches. It enriches transnational queer studies by questioning ethnocentric dichotomies, demonstrating how discursive strategies contribute to a locally informed yet transnationally connected *tongzhi* narrative. The book is suitable for adoption in general Chinese politics courses, or courses on transnational social movements, particularly those focusing on sexual identity and politics. Its engaging, accessible and eloquent writing style makes it beneficial for any reader interested in understanding contemporary Chinese queer mobilization strategies.

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Sinoglossia

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Sinoglossia is a collection of essays that seek to rethink and push further the concept of the Sinophone and its studies. As Andrea Bachner argues, Shu-mei Shih's concept of the Sinophone is still the topos of this volume (pp. 229–236). Yet, by replacing the suffix *phone* with *glossia* (from *glotta*, which means language or tongue), this new term puts an emphasis on the diversity and multiplicity of *tongues* (Sinitic, non-Sinitic and those that are between these categories), bodies and media, which writers, artists and other media actants use to negotiate the *Sino*. Hence, instead of decentring China, a Sinoglossiac act mediates the differences between the constructive process of China/Chineseness and the corresponding process of its deconstruction (pp. 2–4).

This book does not aim to present a prescriptive definition of Sinoglossia or a unified theoretical framework. Rather, its chapters offer a variety of views that enable the reader to appreciate their *differences* as sites of production. As Ien Ang argues, what these individual interventions reveal is often the contradiction inherent in the term itself (pp. 212–219). Methodologically, most contributors offer in-depth examinations of local or even individual acts of cultural production that either challenge preconceived notions of China/Chineseness or trespass the boundaries between languages, ethnicities and regions.

This book is divided into four sections: corporeality, media, translation and theoretical interventions. The first section opens with Jia-Chen Fu's "Inspecting bodies, crafting subjects," which studies