



Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance

Hongwei Bao. Nonfiction. New York. Routledge. 2023. 170 pages. \$170.00 USD. ISBN 9780367500245

Alexa Alice Joubin

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Queer performance as a genre is both complex and challenging to track, especially in the throes of political oppression. Why should people who do not identify as queer care about queer performance? Trans-identified dancer Jin Xing has this to say:

As long as we live together in a society, people can always find excuses to discriminate against each other. If you are not transsexual, you may be gay or lesbian; if you are not gay or lesbian, you may still be single at a marriageable age; if you are married, you may still be poor; if you are not poor, you may be overweight; if you are not overweight, you may need a higher university degree (76).

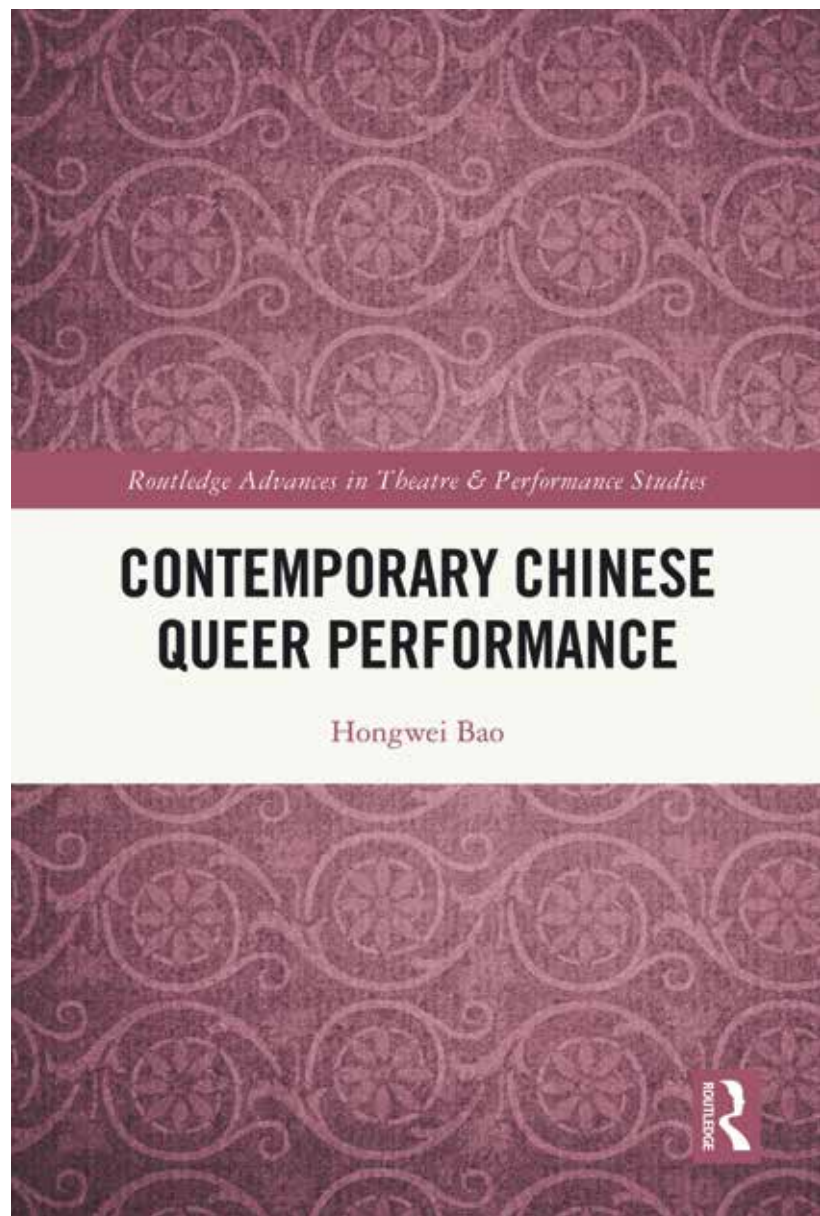
Clearly one does not need to embody all identities in order to oppose systemic oppression, whatever form it may take. This is one of the core messages of *Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance*.

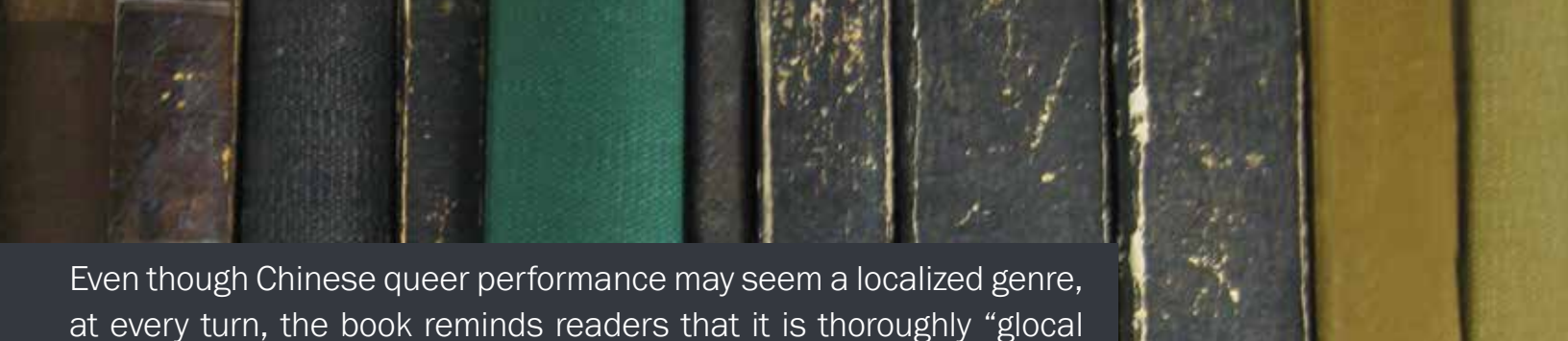
The book opens with, and revisits, its author's own embodied experience in Inner Mongolia, China and elsewhere: "the feeling of loneliness and the experience of alienation growing up queer" (2). Hongwei Bao is as autobiographically honest as he is intellectually stimulating in these moving passages. Bao excels in the art of bringing one's own experience to bear on critical analyses of

the subject matter, a delicate act of balance. At the same time, he maintains a transnational edge and perspective on queer studies, stating that "having lived in Beijing and Berlin, . . . two cities that have witnessed dramatic transformations in the aftermath of the Cold War,"

he has "learned to appreciate a transnational perspective in queer historiography" (34).

This book's seven chapters locate and unpack queerness in twenty-first-century Chinese performing and visual arts. The thoroughly up-to-date and theoretically savvy book





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covers an ambitiously wide and heuristically diverse range of works, ranging from photography, narrative and documentary films, China’s music scene, theatre (with a case study of such renowned productions as *East Palace*, *West Palace*, one of the first publicly performed gay plays in China), documentary theatre, and digital performance in the diaspora during the pandemic of COVID-19. The monograph contains thirty illustrations and reworks materials from six previously published articles (xii).

Through these case studies, Hongwei Bao makes a case for the political and cultural significance of performing queer identities as well as of forming communities through such performances. Notably he deploys queer performativity as a critical lens to shed new light on works that were previously interpreted through heteronormative modes

and subsumed under “hegemonic narratives of historiography” (front matter).

Even though Chinese queer performance may seem a localized genre, at every turn, the book reminds readers that it is thoroughly “glocal and hybrid” and is best understood in “transnational, transcultural and transmedial” contexts (9). Global avant-garde theatre and queer culture have clearly influenced Chinese queer performance. Conversely, Chinese diasporic artists used digital queer performance to interrogate anti-Asian racism and to carve out public space for queer discourses during the pandemic. Thus, case studies in this book avoid the typical pitfall of using knowledge of non-Western queerness as footnotes to white theories.

Acknowledging that “inter-cultural communication is becoming increasingly difficult” (11) and

noting that queer people seem to be “drawn to the glamour and fantasy of performing arts” (2), Bao passionately advocates that it is exactly in today’s “sexually conservative and heteronormative society” (2) where we need queer performance’s “alternative words” and “imaginings for a better world” (11). The book is as poignant as it is optimistic about the social role of queer performance. The power of performance, the book suggests, can play a role in “one’s sexual awakening” when “a person’s sexuality inform their love for performance” (2). At the same time, Bao carefully teases out and debunks the essentialist myth that “queer people are naturally more creative” (3).

Alexa Alice Joubin
George Washington University