

BOOK REVIEW

## Words like Water: Queer Mobilization and Social Change in China

Caterina Fugazzola. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2023. 168 pp.  
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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 non-confrontational 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.