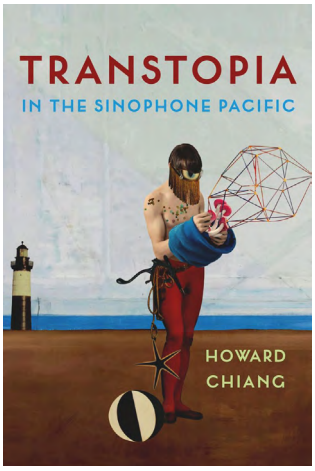

Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific (Columbia University Press, 2021)

Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific

A Conversation with Howard Chiang

Shui-yin Sharon YAM, Howard CHIANG

Howard Chiang's *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* (Columbia University Press, 2021) articulates a methodology that connects Sinophone Studies with transgender history. Specifically, Chiang argues for the need to 'reorient the way transness and queerness are understood in the field of Asian studies' (p. xii). Drawing on transnational archival materials and cultural artefacts, he demonstrates the intimate ties between geopolitics, gender mutability, and queer and trans performances across time and national boundaries. In this conversation, he elucidates on the impetus behind this project and its implications.

Shui-yin Sharon Yam: In the book, you write: 'I use transtopia to refer to different scales of gender transgression that are not always recognizable through the Western notion of transgender' (p. 4). What prompted you to make this ontological intervention? Does using transtopia as an analytical lens necessitate particular methodological approaches?

Howard Chiang: In light of its Western origins, the notion of transgender carries a cultural baggage that needs to be denaturalised. We all know that the very presence of gender norms and conventions conditions the prospect of their subversion and, at various points in time or space, there is evidence of social actors crossing the borders of gender to varying degrees. However, I am not sure that transgender, as an umbrella category, is the best way to capture or describe those historical phenomena. In fact, some readers of my earlier edited volume *Transgender China* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) suggested that the examples in the book were simply 'not trans enough'. That was the main reason that motivated me to find a different conceptual framework to describe these variegated experiences of gender transgression. As David Valentine's book *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Duke University Press, 2007) has shown, a social and intellectual movement coalesced around the category of transgender only by the 1990s. So, this recent genealogy of the term must be taken into consideration as we rethink our approach to queer history, especially in a cross-cultural context. Rather than necessitating a particular

methodological approach, using transtopia as an analytical lens entails an epistemological overhaul that decentres the categories we think we already understand.

SSY: Throughout the book, you identify the ways in which transness is articulated and performed differently in transnational contexts. This seems to be informed by your notion of 'strategic structuralism' (p. 20). You argue that 'social categories, like the category of transgender, have no intrinsic nature and carry no inherent value' (p. 20). By deploying strategic structuralism, however, we can at least 'provisionally accept the structuralist foundations for social cohesion as a strategy for collective representation' (p. 20). Without this concept, it will be difficult to illustrate how trans subjects are connected across time and place. Can you say more about why and how this concept is useful in your own work, in queer and trans* studies? While strategic structuralism can be mobilised to facilitate coalition by highlighting 'emergent modes of solidarity' (p. 20), can it also be deployed as an oppressive tool against non-normative bodies?

HC: Readers familiar with postcolonial theory will recognise the similarity between what I call 'strategic structuralism' and what Gayatri Spivak once called 'strategic essentialism'. If, for Spivak, the strategic deployment of essentialism serves a political purpose, I want to think about how we can render certain subjects or events as trans by not relying on a core notion of identity. Like I said, if the conceptual potency of transgender really took off in the closing decades of the twentieth century, it makes little sense to suggest that earlier historical actors, especially non-Western subjects, identified as transgender (or trans for that matter). However, if transtopia performs the analytical work of identifying the structural trends and patterns in which transness, as we currently perceive it, assumes salience, this opens a horizon of critical inquiry that can also serve a political end, especially coalitional ones. Although I do not identify as transgender in the traditional sense of the term, I comfortably claim a transtopian standpoint. This is because my affinity with folks who self-identify as trans is now routed through the coordinates of a shared commitment to anti-transphobic justice. Such reorientation in subject positions allows us to challenge the structural and conceptual issues that continue to be passed as normal in transphobic discourses. And you are absolutely correct on the possibility of strategic structuralism being deployed as an oppressive tool. Just like the way cisgender and heterosexist essentialisms have operated as a pervasive tool of repression throughout human history, transphobia has never ceased to work in structural terms. Thus, my hope is that transtopia can respond accordingly by dismantling structural transphobia. I invoke the 'strategic' dimensions of transtopia because I know that, for many, transgender identification is deep-seated and no less real than transtopian desires.

SSY: You borrow concepts and language from mathematics and science when describing your own methodology. What do those frameworks allow you to do that concepts from the more conventional humanities do not?

HC: On a fundamental level, I want to discourage the disciplinary division that permeates the sciences and the humanities. As we know, the prioritisation of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects over the humanities and social sciences is characteristic of most modern universities. By borrowing concepts and language from mathematics and science to throw light on cultural and historical phenomena, I hope to demonstrate the heuristic import of cross-disciplinary dialogues, especially those conversations that upend the hierarchy between STEM and the humanities. This not only de-territorialises certain concepts, such as titration, it also positions their use-value beyond a purely scientific discipline (for example, quantitative chemistry). So, rather than seeing this method as allowing me to do something that conventional humanities concepts do not, I would instead call attention to the underlying intellectual preoccupations that cut across disciplinary divides. The fact that scientific concepts such as surjection, asymptotes, and isomerism and poststructuralist theories of assemblage and supplementarity share an aim to deduce certain underlying structures of a system suggests that the animosity between the sciences and the humanities is as much constructed as is the system these disciplines seek to understand.

SSY: While most existing work in trans studies focuses on the history of sex science in the West, you have made a very compelling case connecting the historical development of sexology transnationally. How does understanding this confluence extend current research and discourse in queer and trans* studies or trans historiography more specifically?

HC: The relationship between sexual science and the formation of gender and sexual minority discourse and subjectivity nests a long history of scholarly debate. I teach some of this material in my undergraduate survey course, 'Sex, Science, and Society: A Global History', at the University of California, Davis. Most recently, critics in trans studies have offered a proliferating interpretation of this relationship, which can never be reduced to either purely repressive or liberatory in nature. The way my book captures the global dimension of sexual science, especially in relation to queer and trans formations, is intended to extend this discussion. Above all, the various examples offered in the book seek to complicate the meanings of both 'science' and 'transness' in transregional contexts. That there are other experts in sexology situated outside the West and a diverse range of subjects in trans historiography imply the need for a more nuanced approach—even a more coeval understanding of

how historical events interrelate. At the very least, it should caution against a presumed universalism often found in claims made by scholars of trans studies and sexual science in the West.

SSY: In Chapter 2, you outline several reasons Queer Studies needs Sinophone Studies, rather than China Studies. Specifically, you argue that Sinophone Studies prompts us to interrogate China-centrism, Han-centrism, and the oppressive colonial practices of the Chinese State. A Sinophone lens also allows for more acute transnational attunement in our analysis of gender and sexuality—one that, as you suggest, emphasises 'minor-to-minor relationality' that is not subjugated to China, Japan, or the West. What trends did you observe in Queer Studies that prompted you to make this intervention?

HC: This question presumes a degree of familiarity with Sinophone Studies, which may still be rather foreign to some readers. So let me begin by just defining Sinophone Studies as the study of Sinitic-language communities and cultures around the world, especially in response to the hegemonic production of nation-states and colonialism. One of the most important interventions of recent queer theory has been the questioning of the way queerness helps to maintain the apparatus of nation-states. I am thinking of, for instance, the theory of homonationalism developed by Jasbir Puar and others. At the same time, the expansion of queer or colour critique and queer settler colonial studies has pushed me to think about issues such as race and indigeneity in a comparative framework. China scholars do not talk much about race, or indigeneity for that matter, so I have been very puzzled by claims that seek to centre China or China Studies as a way to unsettle the Western bias of queer theory. Not that it is a disingenuous project, but it often turns a blind eye on issues such as comparative racialisation and the oppression of native indigenous populations (the People's Republic of China does not implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). In contrast, Sinophone Studies calls attention to these issues, including the notable problem of Han-centrism that continues to plague the field of queer Chinese Studies and other mechanisms of minoritisation ignored by Asia scholars. These issues are explored further in the volume I am currently editing, *Queering Taiwan Studies*, based on a conference that I co-organised with Shu-mei Shih at the University of California, Los Angeles, earlier this year, as well as my current work on racial capitalism and trans indigenous studies in Taiwan.

SSY: What kinds of scholarship or inquiries would you like to see emerge from the queer Sinophone method you propose?

HC: There are so many possibilities here and, as the co-editor of the Global Queer Asias book series published by the University of Michigan Press, I am already receiving many interesting submissions that reflect these new and exciting trends. One direction would be a deeper engagement with Sinophone Southeast Asia and its interaction with other regions in the world, including East Asia and Asian America. The work of Ting-Fai Yu and Wen Liu represents a promising development in this regard. Another direction would be to think about how Sinophone theory helps scholars to deconstruct the forces of oppression within neoliberal China, and the scholarship of Hongwei Bao, Shana Ye, and Charlie Zhang exemplifies this rich engagement. I am also hopeful that more critical attention to race, indigeneity, ableness, diaspora, religion, sexual conservatism, and cross-disciplinary approaches will chart fresh horizons in the field. ■

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