

# Down and Out in Late Meiji Japan

Martha Chaiklin

The word 'muckraking' does not appear once in *Down and Out in Late Meiji Japan*. This is somewhat surprising, given that James Huffman's earlier books focused on the press in Japan and the time period defined in the book title aligns exactly with the American Progressive Movement, whereas the inspiration for the title, George Orwell's *Down and Out in London and Paris* (Victor Gollancz, 1933) relates events from 1928. Muckraker was a term used (in reference to a character in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) to label journalists devoted to exposing the corruption of politics and the social ills of industrialization. Although in use since the 1870s as a pejorative to the press rather than the agricultural compost raker of its origins, it was popularized in a speech by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906 and taken as a badge of honor by those so designated. It would have been interesting to know if Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair and their ilk influenced the efforts of Yokoyama Gennosuke, Suzuki Umeshirō, Matsubara Iwagorō and the other journalists Huffman references for insight into the poor, but perhaps that would have been a different book, a shift in focus from 'nameless' destitute people to journalists.

Moreover, given that this book is a work of history rather than investigative journalism, Huffman is not a muckraker either. But nevertheless, his goals are not too far from those journalists of the past: expose the underside of a society. In that much of the scholarship of this period focuses on how Japan successfully industrialized, it is not only a fresh perspective, but an important one to fully evaluate just how that industrial success was achieved. Huffman seeks 'to understand how it felt to live the life of a *hinmin*, or poor person' (p. 2) and explore how modernity impacted their lives. To examine the lives of those made 'voiceless' (p. 2) through

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illiteracy and indifference, Huffman relies heavily on the muckrakers, or as he prefers, 'poverty journalists' of late Meiji Japan, heavily supplemented with literary diaries, government papers, social commentaries and academic analyses. The results of Huffman's explorations have shined light on those underexposed parts of Meiji society. Importantly, he shows that these people did not fit neatly into stereotypes such as victim or criminal, that they were not entirely defined by their poverty but lived in constant 'tension between visibility and invisibility' (p. 97). Where he really departs from the views of muckraking journalists is in the way that he seeks not just to document the misery, crime, and disease of poverty but also to show the joy the destitute managed to make even in their difficult circumstances because there were not always powerless victims without agency.

In order to accomplish this, Huffman like the muckrakers, largely focuses on the urban poor, which he suggests made up between 12 and 20

per cent of urban populations. As the author explains, many of these poor are migrants from rural villages. He therefore does not spend too much time parsing where they came from, and while he acknowledges the presence of *buraku* (an outcaste class), he does not dwell on these kinds of differences, instead narrating as many individualized stories as possible to emphasize the humanity of subjects that are often equated with animals.

The down and out of Meiji Japan are examined in eight content chapters, of which the first six focus on the city, and the last two on the country. In Chapter 1, the scene is set by describing the pull of the poor to the city and the built environment in which they resided. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the working lives (because even beggars do work of a sort) of the underclass looking at the labor through the manufacture of, for example, textiles and matches, and those in the building and service professions like carpenters, rickshaw pullers and masseurs. Chapter 4 is on family life,

noting that the perception in the Japanese media and among the public of the nuclear family unit as the norm was not born out in the reality because the largest number of migrant workers were men, and divorce and disease were prevalent. Written as a comparison, Huffman's description of rural poor is admittedly skeletal and sweeping rather than specific, because its true intent is to elucidate the urban poor rather than ponder the conditions of the countryside. Huffman argues that the strong community ties extant in the countryside alleviated some of the harshest aspects of poverty. The final content chapter completes the system of migration out from Japanese rural communities by examining the emigration of agricultural workers to Hawaii. He notes the similarities between the migration patterns to cities in which, the migration was largely of single men but diverge because the emigrants were able to improve their economic status much more rapidly.

Clearly and objectively written, the book only fails in being accessible to a general audience through Huffman's decision to use Japanese terms like *hinmin* (the poor) or *kasō shakai* (underclass) for ideas that can adequately be expressed in English. Huffman clearly has deep empathy for his subjects, which is only partially explained by his accounting of his own impoverished rural childhood in rural Indiana in the introduction. In using an interdisciplinary approach, Huffman has married individuals to a systemic examination so that the stories appear simple on the surface but underneath are contained deep questions about the nature of poverty. It is an indicator of the state of academics that Huffman felt that he had to justify his choice of topic as a 'middle-class white American' (p. 21). Some historians are inspired by their personal histories, but most of us write about dead people, who otherwise could tell no tales. The down and out of late Meiji Japan were fortunate in having James Huffman as a spokesperson.

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# Queer Comrades

Travis Kong

Reviewed title:  
**Queer Comrades: Gay Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China**

Hongwei Bao. 2018.

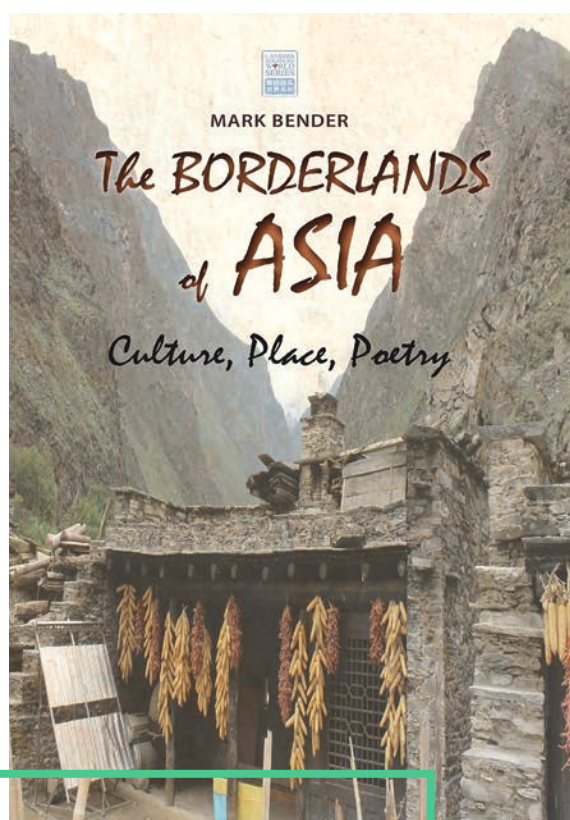
Copenhagen: NIAS Press  
ISBN 9788776942342

Hongwei Bao's monograph offers an excellent example of an examination of gay identity and activism in contemporary China from a cultural studies perspective. It draws from queer theory, feminism, Marxism, and postcolonial and critical race studies for its theoretical lens.



More specifically, driven by a leftist politics, Bao brings queer theory and Marxism into dialogue to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexity and fluidity of non-normative male sexual identities: *tongxinglian* (同性戀), gay, *tongzhi* (同志), *ku'er* (酷兒), MSM. He examines the challenges and potential of a radical gay politics against the backdrop of China's socialist legacy and contemporary postsocialist reality, which is infused with nascent capitalism, neoliberalism and cosmopolitanism.

Inspired by Judith Halberstam's 'queer methodology', which uses various methods to produce knowledge on subjects who have been excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour, Bao brings together medical records, published diaries and films, as well as interviews, ethnographic accounts and personal anecdotes in his analysis. Moreover, he is no detached researcher, but rather a passionate and engaged ethnographer. Bao was born and grew up in China, self-identifies as gay, studied in Australia for his PhD, and has taught at various universities in China and Europe. He is now teaching in the United Kingdom. He was well aware of both the privileges and limitations of his research position as insider and outsider when he was in conversation with queer communities in China, conversation that took place primarily during his field trips to the country over the 2007 and 2009 period. With his distinctive and sometimes witty writing style, Bao illustrates the 'structure of feelings' of the kaleidoscopic



## The Borderlands of Asia

Simon Wickhamsmith

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**The Borderlands of Asia:  
Culture, Place, Poetry**

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It is very rare that a book is published which, rather than presenting new insights into an old topic, actually presents and defines a new topic. Mark Bender's *The Borderlands of Asia* is such a book. It seeks, for the first time in, I suspect, any language, to present the poetic traditions of the peoples who live at the edges of Asia, in Northeast India, Myanmar, Mongolia and the areas of southwestern China, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia and Gansu. In so doing, Bender

and his translators have produced a book of vital cultural importance, a glimpse into cultures which are too frequently passed over in favor of the dominant cultures of the region.

As an expert on China's minorities, and a translator from the Nuosu dialect of Yi, Bender is well placed to guide the reader on this most unusual journey. In his long and detailed introduction, he divides his comments into three

sections. The first, "Landscapes and Lifeforms" addresses the interaction of human beings with the environment they inhabit, through brief historical and topographical observations. The differences between these four key areas may be great, but it is the relationships which exist and develop there, each a changing lifeform of its own, which characterise the cultures in general, and the literatures in particular, of the people who partake in these relationships.

Bender's second section, "Juxtapositions," presents a comparative look at some of the connections between these poetries. This analysis opens up issues relating to how environment can be understood, both by the reader of these poems as well as by their authors, in the globalized twenty-first century. One of Bender's concerns in putting this book together has clearly been to address the sometimes fraught and difficult dynamic which increased globalization produces, and to suggest ways in which this can more effectively be negotiated. The comparisons he makes here offer some elegant and productive ideas through which a reader unfamiliar with such poems might approach them, but they ask us also to go deeper into our own experiences and assumptions, and to question how we ourselves are living in our own corners of the world.

In the final section, "Poets in Places," he gives a brief introduction to the state of poetry in each of the four areas covered by the book, and to some of the poets featured. The placement of this section at the end of his introduction allows the poets to find their natural place within the environment of the book, as those who are gifted with the power to give voice to the land and its inhabitants, as individuals charged with a responsibility and a calling, and not as the kind of literary "figures" to whom we are more used in the west.

I should declare my own professional interest in this book. I have been translating Mongolian poetic literature for more than ten years, and over that time have developed connections with many of the country's leading writers. So it was with particular interest that I read the poems by Mongolian and Inner Mongolian writers. The work of the three Inner Mongolian and six Mongolian poets represented in the book shows well the primary themes of environment and culture which form the kernel of much Mongol poetry. Although I initially felt the lack of Mongolian-language poems by Inner Mongolian poets, I realized that this omission brings up the necessary question of sinification, as it does elsewhere among the texts. Yet the fact that even the translations of poems written originally in Chinese feel Mongolian (at least to me) challenges my

own assumptions surrounding issues of authenticity, and the relationship between language and culture in disputed regions. The inclusion of several generations of Mongolian poets, moreover, shows how constant is the voice of their poetry: even D.Urianhai, much of whose work is characterized by a postmodern sense of experimentation and philosophical play, remains for the purposes of this volume what he perhaps is at heart - a traditional poet of Mongolia's grasslands.

What for me is a ready-made comparative framework, then, that between Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, can be shifted to other areas of crossover, as suggested by the "Juxtapositions" section of the introduction. The choice of poems reflects the rich diversity which exists at the margins of Asia, and it shows also the ways that land affects the human heart, how the world of spirit touches us, unseen and imperceptible. And while even American nature writers like Annie Dillard or Mary Oliver conjure up the spiritual in their work, the sensitivity exhibited here is remarkable - not necessarily better or deeper, perhaps, but remarkably *different*, striking as when struck and surprised by a falling twig, and touching too, as when reaching out in the dark to encounter velvet. These are poems whose unusual nature comes as much from the physical and spiritual environments in which their writers write, as from the minds of the writers themselves.

Bender has enlisted a fine team of translators to assist with this book and, while readers (and fellow translators like myself) will generally find something somewhere to criticize, I find these to be readable and frequently very beautiful translations. The annotations provided for most of the poems are helpful in understanding specific points of culture and linguistic usage, and together with the biographical information for poets and translators and a set of fourteen photographs at the back of the book give the reader sufficient context within which to enjoy the poems.

Scholars of Asia and those more broadly interested in literature and culture owe Mark Bender and Cambria Press a debt of gratitude for producing this fine and timely book. These poems reflect the relationship between humans and the natural environment in ways which a thousand protests, a thousand academic papers, or a thousand laws passed by even the most progressive of legislatures could never hope to reproduce. They should be better known, read widely, and learnt by heart.

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queer culture in China today. The book, he says, is a journey into queer China with him as tour guide.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part (Chapters 2–4) concerns the genealogy of *tongzhi* identity in contemporary China. Bao delineates the usage of the terms *tong* (meaning 'same') and *zhi* (meaning 'ideal' or 'aspiration'), which exist separately in classical Chinese literature, but were first used in combination in 1911 to mean 'comrade', a term signifying a revolutionary and political subjectivity and widely used in Republican and Maoist China. However, the term was later reappropriated to signify a sexual subjectivity ('queer'), first in Hong Kong (1989–), then in Taiwan (1992–) and later in postsocialist China (1992–). By tracing the genealogy of *tongzhi* identity from a political subjectivity (*tongzhi* as comrade) to sexual subjectivity (*tongzhi* as queer), Bao differentiates it from other sexual identities such as the older, traditional (and often stigmatised) *tongxinglian*, the transnational and multilingual 'gay', and the radical and subversive *ku'er*. He is also critical of the normalisation process of *tongzhi* as law-biding, well-educated, model sexual citizens. Bao does not merely treat *tongzhi* as an identity, but uses it creatively as an analytical framework to examine 'subject, power, governmentality, social movements and everyday life in China' (p. 4). By putting the two meanings of *tongzhi* together as 'queer comrades', he advocates for queer Marxist analysis that queers the political subject of comrade while simultaneously underscoring

the radical and political potential of being queer (Chapter 3). Particularly fascinating is Bao's mapping of the sexual geography of Shanghai, with the city's transnational gays located in trendy bars, young, educated *tongzhi* in local and community-organised activities (e.g. sport, karaoke, dining), and older, often stigmatised *tongxinglian* in dance halls, public parks, and toilets (Chapter 2). He also discusses how conversion therapy (turning gay people straight) can be seen as an affective project, as well as a postsocialist technology of the self that violently rejects homosexual desires, and delineates the way in which the victims of such therapy have suffered as they struggle to become 'proper' sexual citizens (Chapter 4).

Part 2 of the book (Chapters 5–7) focuses on the media and cultural queer activism. Bao first discusses China's leading queer filmmaker and activist, Cui Zi'en, and the way in which he uses digital video films as a form of queer activism (what Cui calls 'digital video activism') (Chapter 5). Like Bao, who uses queer Marxism to perform his cultural analysis, Cui uses queer Marxism to direct his films. Both men embrace a socialist and Marxist vision and imagine a radical queer politics in contemporary China. In Chapter 6, Bao discusses younger queer filmmakers (e.g. Fan Popo, Shitou, Mingming) and examines the ways in which they organise queer film festivals, travelling from Beijing and Shanghai to Guangzhou and engaging with different local queer communities, for example. In response to government intervention (e.g. sudden forced closures by the police), these

organic intellectuals adopt a guerrilla style of festival organisation, with contingent screening plans in place, resulting in the creation of fleeting queer public spaces for screening, exchange and interaction. Whilst these two chapters focus on queer activism advanced by the queer intelligentsia, Chapter 7 discusses a concrete case of confrontation between the police and a group of cruising gay men over the use of a public park in Guangzhou, showing how some gay men make use of social media to reclaim their sexual citizenship. Whether discussing intelligentsia or ordinary people, offline or online activities, queer film festivals or daily cruising behaviours, Bao presents a picture of *tongzhi* in China as constituting an ephemeral counter-public – or heterotopia in Foucauldian terms – that captures the radicalness of queer activism in China today.

*Queer Comrades* is original and theoretically engaging, weaving textual analysis with ethnographic accounts and personal anecdotes. It is extremely accessible and easy to read and digest. The book makes two major contributions. The first is to cultural studies. The book is an exemplar of an interdisciplinary work in both theoretical (speaking to different fields and disciplines such as cultural studies, media studies, gender and sexuality studies, sociology, anthropology, and China studies) and methodological terms (combining textual and socio-materialistic analysis). In conjunction with Bao's leftist orientation, his proposed queer Marxism is particularly useful for rethinking the radicalness of gay identity,

politics and activism in contemporary China. His use of cultural studies lessens to some extent the tension between textual and social-materialistic analyses that is deeply rooted in the humanities and social sciences. In addition to Bao's proposed directions for future research, including overcoming the male basis of *tongzhi*, going beyond urban and Han ethnocentrism, and examining the role of new media in identity and community formation, I would add social-materialistic analysis and critique of the state and the family and the role they play (both enabling and restricting) in shaping the contours of *tongzhi* identities, practices and politics.

The book's second major contribution is to queer Asian studies, a slowly emerging discipline that is critical of the hegemonic Western understanding of non-Western and non-normative genders and sexualities. Queer Asian studies scholars have examined the complex diasporic, trans-national/regional and hybrid forms of Asian queer identities, practices and cultures under the forces of globalisation, cosmopolitanism and neoliberalism. Bao has critically engaged with these scholars (see his list of other scholarly works on pages 25–28 and 205–206). His work fits firmly within queer Asian studies (or more specifically queer Chinese studies), offering a timely intervention that critically engages with Western theories in order to 'reimagine and reshape queer, China and Asia' (p. 206).

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