



The Borderlands of Asia

Simon Wickhamsmith

Reviewed title:

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

Mark Bender. 2017.

Amherst, NY: Cambria Press
ISBN 9781604497973

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.

Simon Wickhamsmith

Rutgers, The State University
of New Jersey, United States

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).

Travis Kong

The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong