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**Book Review: Tiantian Zheng. Tongzhi Living: Men Attracted to  
Men in Postsocialist China**

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*Tongzhi Living: Men Attracted to Men in Postsocialist China*, by Tiantian Zheng. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 244 pp. US\$94.50 (cloth), US\$27.00 (paper).

In this ethnography based in the city of Dalian, China, Tiantian Zheng investigates discourses and practices of male *tongzhi* (同志; literally, “comrade”), a popular self-labeling term used by gay people in Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan since the 1990s. Zheng explores the construction of *tongzhi* identities in multiple real-life and virtual arenas, including gay bars, bathhouses, public parks, NGOs, and online articles. Zheng notes a tension between *tongzhi* desires for sexual and emotional intimacy with other men and their need to respond to parental and societal expectations to marry and procreate. In seeking to meet such expectations, Zheng argues, male *tongzhi* regularly undermine their own efforts for more sexual autonomy and social recognition.

Including the introduction and conclusion, the book contains nine chapters. The introduction opens with an account of a 23-year-old *tongzhi*'s sudden fear upon seeing his father when sitting chatting with friends in a cruising area of a downtown park. When his parents found out he was having sex with men, they grounded him until he agreed to marry. Subsequently, living with his wife and child in his parents' home, he could only sneak out to the park occasionally to see his boyfriend. Complex circumstances such as these prompt Zheng to argue that *tongzhi* identity and practices in postsocialist China are shaped by five key elements: interplay between the local, regional, and global; mainstream disapproval of homosexuality as feminine and degenerate; simultaneous challenges to and reinforcement of gender norms; self-governance and normalization as neoliberal subjects; and wider hierarchies of socioeconomic difference.

Chapter 1's historical account of same-sex relations over several centuries shows how forms of homosexual relations and attitudes toward homosexuality have shifted in the changing contexts of Chinese society. Chapter 2, entitled “Popular Perceptions of Homosexuality in Postsocialist China,” endeavors to show that contrary to the claims of other sexuality studies scholars, attitudes toward homosexuality in contemporary China are not becoming more tolerant. Drawing on media depictions and 60 interviews, Zheng claims that homosexuality is widely blamed for causing effeminacy; a masculinity crisis; criminal behavior, including murder; predatory sex; and high rates of HIV transmission; it is even said that homosexuality undermines the nation's security. Yet Zheng does not present Chinese writings that are supportive of, or at least not hostile toward, homosexuality. Nor does Zheng give an explanation of her methods for selecting her sources or conducting her interviews. She barely describes her “randomly selected” interviewees and produces only a few short quotes from six of them. I was left wondering about the representativeness of these “popular perceptions,” since “in each interview, words such as ‘sick,’ ‘disgusting,’ ‘sickening,’ ‘abnormal,’ ‘freak,’ and ‘not

moral' were invariably invoked by interviewees in discussions about homosexuals" (52).

Chapter 3 argues that most *tongzhi* identify either as "1s" (*yi hao*) or "0s" (*ling hao*), referring to masculine and feminine roles respectively. In accordance with normative gender discourses, many *tongzhi* expect "1s" to be active and promiscuous and "0s" to be passive and faithful. Nevertheless, *tongzhi* also creatively recast dominant gender identifications by appropriating and disavowing particular aspects of gendered identities. This is illustrated in the fascinating account of how Wang, a "1," tried to stop his "wife," Tan, a "0" and a married father, from sleeping with other men, a demand that Tan resisted.

Chapter 4 posits that *tongzhi* reproduce the normative class distinctions of postsocialist China. As with heterosexuals, *tongzhi* chase the ideal of the enterprising, wealthy, consumerist subject of postsocialism. Hierarchies of age and beauty in the *tongzhi* world also create socially stratified spaces. Even the professional world of "money boys" (male prostitutes) is riven by status-deciding earning capacities, from lucrative work in top-end gay brothels, to getting by in medium-tier bars, to struggling in the park and the street amid violence and theft.

In chapter 5, Zheng relates her observations of the activities of grassroots *tongzhi* organizations, partly based on her experience as a volunteer for two groups in Dalian. As with other researchers, Zheng argues that NGOs' reliance on state sponsorship, or alternatively their precarious nonlegal status, leads them to adopt nonconfrontational strategies in their interactions with state authorities so as to avoid brutal crackdowns and internet censorship. Zheng labels these strategies as largely nonproductive (129).

In chapter 6, she documents the power of heteronormative discourses to compel many *tongzhi* to marry, have a child, and condemn the perceived superficiality and promiscuity of the *tongzhi* world, which results in many *tongzhi* leading double lives. In these two chapters, Zheng's critical stance implies despair at the lack of large-scale, overt *tongzhi* "resistance" to the status quo. Yet nonconfrontational *tongzhi* activities should not be so quickly dismissed. In the context of China's formidable antigay norms and controls, they can still be effectively "political" in that they "open up an affective space in which change is potentiated or felt" (William F. Schroeder, "Research, Activism, and Activist Research in *Tongzhi* China," in *New Perspectives on Research, Activism and Media Cultures*, ed. Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, William F. Schroeder, with Hongwei Bao [Copenhagen, 2015], 76).

Chapter 7 discusses numerous reasons that make *tongzhi* vulnerable to HIV transmission: fear of social stigma prevents many HIV positive *tongzhi* from revealing their status; *tongzhi* bathhouses are reluctant to provide condoms because the police claim condoms indicate prostitution, giving them a reason to shut down bathhouses despite a law forbidding such closures; Chinese medicine notions suggest that bathhouse steam can expel toxins from the body, removing the need for condoms; "1s" may choose not to use a condom to obtain a better sexual experience

or to give the impression that they are not promiscuous; and the influence of *yin-yang* beliefs that promote flesh-to-flesh sexual contact.

Zheng ends the book with a paragraph describing recent positive changes, such as increasing visibility of *tongzhi* and their families in the national media, and the winning of a legal case against a clinic that claimed it could cure homosexuality. Yet this “gleam of hope,” as Zheng puts it, belies the gloomy data, one-sided perspectives, and pessimistic arguments presented throughout the book. A more balanced and nuanced approach would have remedied this. Nevertheless, the book still makes an interesting, if partial, contribution to studies of male *tongzhi* lives in contemporary China.

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*Force and Contention in Contemporary China: Memory and Resistance in the Long Shadow of the Catastrophic Past*, by Ralph A. Thaxton Jr.  
 New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xxi+468 pp. US\$39.99 (paper).

This is a sequel to Ralph Thaxton Jr.’s *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao’s Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (2008). That earlier book examined the institutional origins of, and peasant resistance to, the famine of the Great Leap Forward in 1958–61, as well as the state’s failed attempts to rebuild its legitimacy by managing the memory of the famine among rural victims. In this second book, Thaxton scrutinizes how the villagers’ memories of the Great Leap famine have influenced their choices during the reform era from the 1980s to the 2000s when they have fought abuses of power by the state and its local agents. Thaxton deliberates on the implications of his findings in this community in China’s interior for understanding peasant-state relations under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and beyond and the nature of the reform-era state.

Following an introduction that outlines his methodology and his major findings and arguments, each of the 10 chapters of *Force and Contention in Contemporary China* centers on a specific case of Da Fo villagers’ resistance: the Strike Hard (*yanda*) campaign from 1983 to 1987 that targeted the poor in the village for petty theft and other minor crimes; protests against the excessive burden of land taxes and surcharges; resistance to the enforcement of the one-child-per-couple policy; teachers’ grievances over inadequate salaries and problems with village schools; the systematic problem of corruption that involved rural cadres and the police force; the state monopoly of electricity that enabled rural electricians to victimize ordinary villagers; manipulation by township government lead-