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SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION



## Feminist and queer critiques of multiple empires: the case of Sinophone Asia

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This Special Issue emerges from a collective intellectual project that aims to critically diagnose and interrogate the entangled formations of inter-imperial power structuring the contemporary global geopolitical landscape. Focusing particularly on the power triangulation among the United States (US), the People's Republic of China (the PRC), and, to a lesser extent, Iran, contributors to this issue examine and unpack how overlapping imperial developments reproduce and are sustained by racialized, gendered, and sexualized logics that are both synergistic and contested across Sinophone Asia and its diasporic extensions.

Since the early twenty-first century, the global ascendance of the PRC as a key geopolitical actor and primary rival to the US has catalyzed renewed scholarly engagement with imperial power and its reconfigurations. On the one hand, critical attention has been directed toward the PRC's authoritarian governance, particularly its coercive measures against ethnic minorities, political dissidents, feminists, and queer communities. On the other hand, the expansion of the US military-industrial complex across the Asia-Pacific – via initiatives such as Barack Obama's Pivot to Asia, Donald Trump's trade war, and Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy – has entrenched a racialized and masculinist vision of Pax Americana that reshapes regional architectures and global imaginaries alike, calling for more critical attention.

Despite their escalating antagonism on the geopolitical stage, the US and the PRC increasingly converge ideologically through their shared investments in heteropatriarchy, racial domination, and nationalist masculinism. Drawing on the conception of interdependent imperial formations (Zhang, Liu, and Lee 2022), this Special Issue contends that the perceived opposition between these two regimes often obscures their parallel deployments of racialized, gendered, and sexualized biopolitical tactics that regulate

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bodies, borders, and belongings. For instance, the resurgence of anti-Asian racism in the US, exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic under the Trump administration, revitalized the logics of the “Yellow Peril,” extending forms of violence and exclusion beyond Chinese nationals to a broader racialized “Asian” subject (Liu 2024). Concurrently, Xi Jinping’s articulation of the Chinese Dream envisions a Han-centric, masculinist project of national rejuvenation aimed at supplanting the post-Second World War liberal international order with an ethno-racialized “Pax Sinica.” Across the US and the PRC, cisheteronormativity is aggressively enforced; while lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities are relentlessly surveilled and suppressed, women from dominant racial/ethnic groups are coerced into reproductive roles aligned with nationalist agendas. These examples underscore the extent to which imperial formation is consolidated through racialized, gendered, and sexualized imaginaries and policies, producing convergent forms of domination with distinct regional manifestations.

These convergences present critical challenges for progressive scholarship, particularly within Anglophone academic and activist spaces, where critiques of Western/US imperialism often obscure or deflect scrutiny of Chinese authoritarianism and expansionism. For one thing, Orientalist frameworks continue to essentialize the PRC as a monolithic, enigmatic Other, thereby occluding the agency of heterogeneous Sinophone subjects. Simultaneously, segments of the Western left, including organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America, Code Pink, and the Qiao Collective, have increasingly denounced critiques of the PRC as reinforcing anti-Asian racism and US imperialism. Such a position dismisses the voices and struggles of activists and intellectuals in the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the diaspora who resist both Western imperialism *and* Chinese state repression. The government crackdown on feminist and LGBTQ+ movements in the PRC (especially the incident in March 2015 in which five feminists were arrested for protesting against sexual harassment on public transportation), the construction of internment camps in Xinjiang since 2017 and the ongoing persecution of Uyghurs, the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law in 2020 that significantly eroded the city’s democratic autonomy and civil liberty guaranteed under the Hong Kong Basic Law, and the unrelenting escalation of military threats toward Taiwan exemplify an increasingly repressive and expansionist imperial trajectory. However, resistance efforts by Sinophone activists and intellectuals to garner international support are often mischaracterized as aligning with Western imperial interests and ideologies, foreclosing opportunities for nuanced engagements with these activists’ anti-authoritarian struggles within the Anglophone academy.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the PRC’s tacit support for Russia through importing their energy sources and deepening trade and diplomatic relations have further complicated the contours of contemporary

imperial relations. Prominent figures such as Noam Chomsky (Scahill 2022; Vock 2023) and John Mearsheimer (2014, 2022) have characterized the war as a proxy conflict between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia. By contrast, feminist scholars from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have challenged such framings as acts of “Westsplaining” – a form of epistemic imperialism that instrumentalizes Eastern European subjects while denying their agency (Dutkiewicz and Smoleński 2023; Hendl et al. 2024). These scholars further point out that framing the Russo-Ukrainian War as a proxy war of continuous Cold War dynamics between superpowers not only legitimates Vladimir Putin’s narrative of resisting US imperialism, but also misrepresents Ukrainian resistance against the aggressor as mere compliance under US and NATO leadership. These critiques resonate with the experiences of Sinophone activists whose demands for autonomy are frequently dismissed as proxies for US foreign policy. In both contexts, a rigid anti-imperialist orthodoxy that centers the US as the sole object of critique ultimately undermines transnational solidarity and obscures the multiple forms of imperial violence.

While escalating geopolitical rivalries are leading to militarized conflicts in other parts of the world that reshape the contours of global power, a grounded and historically attuned approach to theorizing inter-imperial entanglements becomes more urgent than ever. For instance, critical frameworks such as “homonationalism” and “pinkwashing” (Puar 2007) are helpful to illuminate and dismantle the instrumentalization of sexuality by the US and Israel to justify their imperialist violence in the Middle East. However, uncritical application of these frameworks to Sinophone contexts is not only analytically inadequate but also politically perilous. In Taiwan, for instance, the advancement of queer rights is the result of sustained grassroots mobilization rather than state-led liberal reform. To characterize such movements as homonationalist risks legitimizing the PRC’s expansionist claims while undermining Taiwan’s aspirations for self-determination and decolonial sovereignty (Kong 2023).

At stake here is a broader theoretical and methodological concern: the uncritical deployment of intellectual constructs developed in Euro-American contexts, such as “neoliberalism” (Brown 2006), “homonormativity” (Duggan 2002), and “homonationalism” (Puar 2007, 2013), as universally applicable descriptors. While generative in their original contexts, these paradigms risk reproducing epistemic violence when unreflexively transposed to non-Western settings. Jasbir Puar (2022) emphasizes that homonationalism should function not as a static descriptor but as a hermeneutic that interrogates how state-sanctioned sexual rights discourses shape claims to sovereignty, governance, and legitimacy in particular geopolitical fields. Building on this insight, we advocate for a reorientation of

feminist and queer analytics that eschews conceptual overreach in favor of a grounded, situated, and historically informed critique.

This Special Issue therefore aims to advance feminist and queer critiques of the formation and operation of empire that are attentive to the multi-scalar, multi-sited nature of imperial power. Rather than reinforcing the Cold War binary or collapsing diverse resistances into homogenizing theoretical frames, the contributors foreground the political imaginaries and lived experiences of Sinophone subjects navigating inter-imperial violence. By centering local articulations of dissent and tracing transnational circuits through which empire, race, gender, and sexuality co-constitute one another, we propose a framework of feminist and queer Sinophone critique that disrupts the epistemic dominance of Western paradigms and affirms the heterogeneity of anti-imperial praxis.

The Special Issue comprises six research articles and two Conversations pieces. It opens with Yao Lin's article "Interregimatic Solidarity and Anti-Authoritarian Resilience," which provides an important intervention to the epistemic and ethical challenges of transnational solidarity across divergent political regimes. Lin distinguishes between two forms of oppression: regime-specific forms, such as the violation of civil liberties and the suppression of dissent, and structural forms rooted in identity-based hierarchies along axes of gender, race, and sexuality. Introducing the concept of "interregimatic solidarity" – solidarity forged across demostatist and authoritarian contexts – Lin argues that regime-specific forms of oppression often generate forms of "missolidarization," wherein activists inadvertently align with oppressive regimes in other geopolitical settings. To counter this, Lin theorizes "anti-authoritarian resilience" as both an epistemic and a moral virtue that enables actors to identify and resist interconnected global processes such as authoritarian spillover, demostatist sellout, imperial standoff, and capitalist scaleup, and to resist moral parochialism and cynical moralism. While interregimatic solidarity may constitute a weak moral obligation, Lin asserts that its enactment depends on cultivating epistemic responsibility, particularly among those who occupy privileged knowledge positions. This framework offers a vital rethinking of transnational solidarity amid proliferating global authoritarianism.

The next two articles interrogate both US-centric and Sinocentric epistemologies that have shaped feminist, queer, and cultural studies in and around Taiwan. In "What Is Left of Queer Anti-Militarism? Queer Fatalism, Sinocentrism, and Taiwanese Sovereignty," Wen Liu critiques the transplantation of US-based queer critiques of militarism developed in the wake of the War on Terror onto the Taiwanese context. In the US, such critiques emerged in opposition to militarized nationalism and the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in the military. When these frameworks are imposed uncritically on Taiwan, however, segments of the radical queer left have

adopted what Liu terms a “queer fatalist” position – one that disavows Taiwanese sovereignty as inevitably complicit with US imperialism. Liu challenges this political stance, highlighting its inability to account for Taiwan’s geopolitical precarity and its grassroots struggle for self-determination.

Building on this critique, Adam Chen-Dedman’s “Self-Determination as Queer Survival: Neo-Idealism and the Remaking of a Cultural Studies for Taiwan” analyzes how the “China factor” has shaped cultural studies in Taiwan. Chen-Dedman critiques the postnationalist orientation of influential scholars such as Kuan-Hsing Chen, who frame assertions of Taiwanese sovereignty as antagonistic toward the PRC. While Chen’s book *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* provides an important critique of US hegemony, it flattens internal Asian heterogeneity and constructs a reductive opposition between a victimized Asia and an imperialist West. Chen-Dedman proposes a more nuanced account of how Asia and the West are often co-constitutive, urging cultural studies scholars to reconceptualize sovereignty and resistance in relational, rather than binary, terms.

In a similar vein, Charlie Yi Zhang, Jilin Duan, and Dušica Ristivojević problematize the simplistic East/West binary in “Gender and Sexuality as Analytical and Political Tools: Expanding the Scope of Knowledge Production about Chinese Feminism for Transnational Solidarity.” The authors criticize the dominant discursive paradigms that reduce Chinese feminism to a “China-versus-the-West” binary, arguing that such frameworks obscure the complex inter-imperial dynamics shaping the lives of marginalized subjects situated between Chinese state authoritarianism and Western imperial legacies. By foregrounding gender and sexuality as critical tools for both analysis and political praxis, the article critiques the unreflexive application of Western feminist and queer theories to Chinese contexts. Rather than rejecting these frameworks wholesale, the authors advocate for their re-contextualization through deep engagement with local conditions under the PRC’s neoliberal governance. Drawing on specific cases, the article illuminates how Chinese feminist activists have developed grounded forms of resistance that resist both state capture and Western theoretical assimilation. In doing so, it calls for a relational and transnational approach to Chinese feminist studies that attends to epistemic complexity, differentiated positionalities, and intersecting modes of domination.

In “Sisters, Friends, Strangers: Queering the Political Discourse of Love,” Ting Guo theorizes love as a contested affective discourse through which state power and grassroots feminist resistance in Sinophone contexts are articulated and opposed. Focusing on the strategic deployment of familial love by both the Chinese state and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government, particularly through Confucian tropes of parental authority and nationalist morality, the article illustrates how these affective regimes reinforce authoritarian logics of order and loyalty. By contrast, Guo

identifies an emergent counter-discourse rooted in feminist and queer social movements such as #MeToo and the Hong Kong protests. Termed “queering love,” this alternative framework mobilizes non-familial sisterhood as an affective-political strategy that subverts normative imperatives of obedience, sacrifice, and heteropatriarchal kinship. Drawing on political rhetoric, cultural texts, and digital activism, Guo positions love not merely as sentiment, but as a site of ideological struggle and potential coalition building across fragmented Sinophone spaces.

Next, Mengyang Zoe Zhao and Huixin Tian’s article “Multiple Positionalities, Plural Movements: A Feminist and Queer Interrogation of Sinophone Diaspora Activism” brings into focus the transnational complexities of Sinophone diaspora activism, particularly from the perspective of PRC-born feminist and queer scholar-activists. Based on the authors’ multi-year autoethnography of their participation in various transnational social movements, this article offers an in-depth discussion of the unique positionalities and practices of PRC-born graduate student, feminist, and queer activists in the US. It provides valuable insights into the similarities and differences among various Sinophone diaspora activist communities.

The Special Issue concludes with two Conversations pieces. The first, “Resisting Multiple Empires, Cultivating Transnational Solidarity: A Conversation among Feminist-of-Color Scholar-Activists,” features a dialogue among Lin Li, Sona Kazemi, Wang Zheng, and Yi-Chun Tricia Lin. Framed around the concept of “multiple empires,” the discussion examines how various imperial formations – US, Chinese, and Iranian – collude in suppressing feminist and queer resistance. The interlocutors reflect on recent struggles in Iran, Taiwan, and the PRC, and articulate pathways for cultivating transnational solidarities that are responsive to differentiated locations and intersecting structures of violence.

The second Conversations piece, “A Feminist Reading of Digital Activism in China: The Zhu Ling Case and the Intersection of Justice, Power, and Social Media” by Ming Zhang and Chi Zhang, examines the infamous case of Zhu Ling’s thallium poisoning as a way in which to explore the paradoxes of digital feminist activism. The piece shows how online campaigns for justice have simultaneously facilitated women’s political mobilization and reinscribed gender stereotypes. In doing so, it highlights both the progressive and regressive dimensions of digital activism within the PRC’s highly mediated authoritarian environment.

In conclusion, this Special Issue offers interdisciplinary and transnational analyses of the complex structures of inter-imperial power in the contemporary world. At a time of not only heightened uncertainty but also global militarized repression, Sinophone feminist and queer responses must examine the state of power exercising repression as well as the interconnectedness and interregimatic practices of power across seemingly disparate regimes.

With Trump's regime in the US expanding executive power domestically and inflaming global conflicts across North America, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific, the critiques of the rise of US authoritarianism are urgent and necessary. However, rather than reverting to a singular analytical focus on the problem of the US empire, the contributors to the Special Issue urge us to examine the inter-dynamics of *multiple* empires and the democratic resistance from the Sinophone Asian context and beyond. The issues that these non-Western actors have addressed – including but not limited to militarism, state repression, human rights abuse, heteropatriarchal oppression, and epistemic injustice – cannot be resolved by a united front of anti-US imperialism. The articles invite readers to think beyond simple binaries such as East/West, communism/capitalism, and imperialist/anti-imperialist, among others. Instead, we hope that readers can recognize the complex ways in which oppressive regimes are interconnected, as well as the myriad ways in which we can foster interregimatic solidarity.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributors

**Wen Liu** is an Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. Informed by affect theory, critical race studies, and queer theory, her research investigates queer activism, transpacific geopolitics, and civilian security practice in the context of heightened geopolitical conflict. She is the author of *Feeling Asian American: Racial Flexibility between Assimilation and Oppression* (University of Illinois Press, 2024), which won the First Book Prize of the National Women's Studies Association.

**Charlie Yi Zhang** is an Associate Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Kentucky, USA. His research takes a feminist and queer approach to interrogating neoliberal, neocolonial, and imperial relationships in the Asia-Pacific context and exploring transnational networks of resistance. Trained as an interdisciplinary scholar, he has published research articles in journals across multiple disciplines. His first book, *Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China* (Duke University Press, 2022), received the 2023 Outstanding Annual Book Prize from the Southeast Conference of the Association for Asian Studies.

**Lin Li** is the James P. Storer Assistant Professor of Asian History at Kenyon College, USA. She received her PhD in East Asian history from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA, with a minor in Gender and Women's Studies, after which she completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University, USA. As a gender historian of East Asia, she is interested in the dynamic interactions among structural injustice, historical memory, and popular culture. She has published in the *Journal of Asian Studies* and *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*. She is currently preparing a monograph that examines the emergence and struggle over trans-Pacific historical memories of the “comfort women” system.

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