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Lisa, Rofel. (2007) *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. ix + 251 pp. RRP: £13.99

China's contemporary development has successfully caught the eyes of people on the world stage. Following the economic revolution of the late 1980s, it has been at the forefront of global capitalism's drive into Asia. As historian Wang Hui (2004) claims, following the events of the 4th of June 1989, neo-liberalism was successfully injected along with global capitalism into Chinese society, effectively becoming one of China's major contemporary ideologies. For Wang, neoliberalism in the post-socialist era has, on the one hand, aided the State to ease itself out of a legitimate crisis and, on the other, played an important role in unlocking people's desires towards the global dream (ibid., 56). David Harvey (2006) has further stressed the contradictory characteristics of China's neo-liberalism. He argues that, whilst neo-liberalism seems to support market logic in order to privatize everything into the marketplace, the autocratic power of the Chinese State has never diminished in relation to engagement with that same market. Wang and Harvey's important observations raise a set of questions that Lisa Rofel's book, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (2007), aims to answer, mainly: how is such a contradictory logic of neoliberalism enacted in Chinese people's daily lives today, and how do people interpret neoliberalism in contemporary China?

In Rofel's latest book, the pioneering Western anthropologist of Chinese culture combines rich field work data with extensive cultural theory. She carries out an ambitious investigation of how public culture, gender and sexuality have been dramatically renovated under China's neo-liberalism. Maintaining a skeptical and critical stance of Harvey's Marxist interpretation of neo-liberalism, Rofel aims to capture how rapid development and global dreams have profoundly altered the public and private life of China. She does so by drawing together the strands that weave State and sexuality into the fabric of neo-liberalism.

In terms of public culture, Rofel explores how Chinese people, especially women, began to argue over the importance of personal desire or individuality through the popular 1980's TV soap drama, *Yearning*. Basing her analysis on audience-interviews, Rofel found that *Yearning* became a nation-wide phenomenon due to its post-socialist allegory in China today. Its narrative justified the harsh past of the Cultural Revolution while recapturing the importance of individual freedom today. By relating to this context, *Yearning* opens up to the new age of individuality and the freedom of personal desire in public culture. Rofel emphasizes the role its 1989 re-broadcasting played as one of the strategies used by the Chinese State to minimize its governmental crisis and to ease the anxiety amongst many of its citizen in the post-4th of June 1989 context. It was that same year that the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, Deng Xiaoping, officially announced the removal of a ban on foreign capital investment. This allowed for the rest of the world and its global capital to become involved and invest in China.

Having elaborated on this politico-economic and cultural background, Rofel then moves on in the second part of her book to inspect how global capital and its neoliberal logic intricately embodies the sexuality issues of contemporary Chinese society. She illustrates how neoliberalism reshapes queer politics in China and also how queer citizens in this context perform sexuality through class-related issues. From my perspective, this constituted the most stimulating part of the story being told within the book. By performing interviews with 'money boys' (gay men sex workers) and queer rights activists in China, Rofel develops her core arguments: "To be sure, what it meant to be a gay in 1990s China was nothing if not about crossing cultural and national borders" (Rofel 2007, 94).

By combining this point of view with an analysis of the dominant neo-liberal logic, she helps the reader capture a more holistic sense of China's changing social circumstances. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese post-socialist allegory requires maintaining the memory of a difficult past in place in order to justify the importance of individuality for Chinese people today. It is in this sense that, for the younger generations, pursuing sexual freedom could be one of the most important elements in their claim of being an authentic part of the age of individuality. However, as Rofel reminds us, we must not ignore the fact that these politics of desire are emerging alongside global capital flows, facilitating the entry of yet another anxiety, mainly that



of determining, “who represents the cultural competence to carry China into the future and to create the wealth and power for the nation under neoliberal capitalism” (Rofel 2007, 95).

Thus, her intention of comprehending this growing cultural concern and indexing the class exclusion present in Chinese queer politics today, Rofel analyzes the performance of Suzhi (Quality) – a local discursive term and practice. The discourse of suzhi can be traced back to the late 1980’s economic revolution when the State claimed that modern China needed new and improved citizens to join its economic endeavors and create a better country. It also echoes the anxiety between urban and rural residents while great numbers of rural residents migrated as workers into the cities to form part of that economic project. This structure of feeling gradually enables Suzhi becoming the hegemonic discourse and social practice through which the distinction between urban and rural was constructed and made sense of. Ann Anagnost demonstrates that Suzhi is: “a sign that transects all these domains: the evaluation of embodied labor; the goal of educational reform (suzhi jiaoyu or "quality education"); the specter of social disorder; the criteria of cosmopolitan citizenship (through consumer taste); and the evaluation of the child's psychological health (xinli suzhi)” (Anagnost 2004, 192).

In her attempt to rethink suzhi politics, Rofel links its discourse to the Chinese contemporary debates over queer citizenship. She documents the ways in which urban-born gay men employ rhetoric of “low suzhi” to criticize the money-boys, associating their lack of taste and inappropriate sexual behavior to their relationship with money. However, in Rofel’s interviews with some money-boys, this criticism was rejected. They situated their behavior in relation to the spread of global capital and the proliferation and concentration of foreign, white-collar workers in urban areas. Money-boys claimed that, in this context, everyone has the right to pursue the life they want to. For instance, Zhan-Zhan, one of Rofel’s interviewees, responded to the criticism directed against money-boys asking why, if financial arrangements between a husband and housewife were considered normal in society, the same should be deemed problematic when it occurred between two men (106).

Zhan-Zhan’s feedback inspires Rofel to employ the notion of “Cultural Citizenship” as an ideal to be pursued. Through it, she seeks to demonstrate how suzhi politics can help recapture the productive values of neo-liberalism in the queer debate. She also aims to show how, on the



one hand, China's neo-liberalism introduces the cosmopolitan desire to queer citizens while, on the other, it endeavors to authenticate what is considered proper and improper sex. Furthermore, Rofel criticizes the version that presents queer citizens as passive agents who un-reflexively accept the neo-liberal logic. She shows how queer citizens tackle the neo-logic by revealing its violent and hegemonic characteristics.

The author further argues that the so called "global gayness" cannot be suitably applied to the Chinese context, seeing as the neo-liberal logic requires that it be unevenly performed by different subjectivities through diverse social practices. For the Chinese, mapping different queer landscapes includes, amongst others: the legacy of socialism, the cosmopolitan desires from the West, the stigma from the urban gay men, and the pressures of kinship.

Ultimately, the politico-economic analysis that *Desiring China: Experiments in Neo-liberalism, Sexuality, and Public* provides is an important contribution to the field of Queer Studies. It rethinks neo-liberalism as connected to sexuality in its performance of class through the violent and exclusive logic that the same entails. However, if suzhi discourse on queer China became the hegemonic form of politics determined through class issues, the reader may ask how these desiring subjects actually perform class exclusion in the age of individuality and selfhood? That is to mean, how different forms of individuality and personhood were integral to how class interests become inscribed onto different bodies in the name of self (Skeggs 2004, 6). While Rofel here draws from three interviewees to introduce these questions, more interviews with more a diversity of opinions could have proved more revealing for the purposes of this book.

Queer Studies need to be attentive to how global politico-economic powers are reshaping queer subjects of different places and times (Halberstam 2005) and how they negotiate with this global power to rethink the future of sexuality. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public* provides a powerful and nuanced model that begins to do so.



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