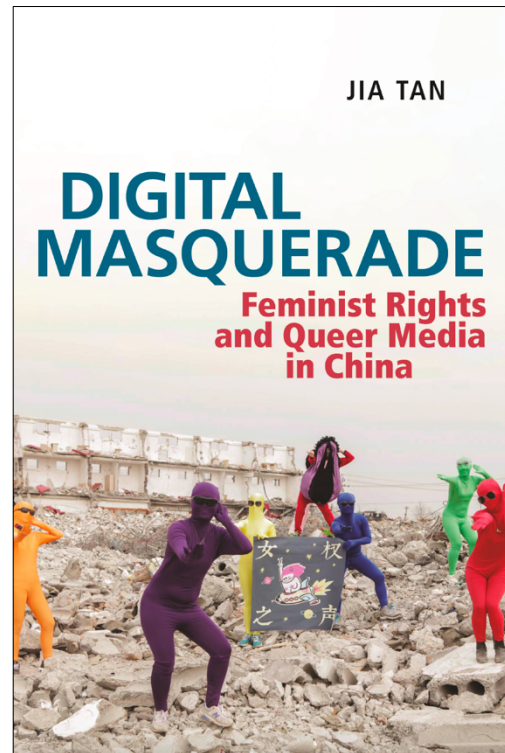Jia Tan, **Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China**, New York: New York University Press, 2023, 208 pp., $89.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
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Jia Tan's *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China* offers a theoretically rich and empirically grounded examination of feminist and queer media activism in China. Through the lens of "digital masquerade," Tan develops a critical framework to analyze how feminist and LGBT[1] actors navigate visibility, identity, and activism in China's increasingly illiberal digital landscape. In the book, Tan conceptualizes digital masquerade as a set of tactical feminist and queer media practices that utilize digital platforms to evade censorship and surveillance, attract public attention, and articulate gender and sexual rights under political pressure and social stigma.[2]

Chapter 1 contextualizes contemporary feminist media activism in China by articulating the role of media as a strategic form of digital masquerade. Tan argues that media is not merely a tool for dissemination but a site of struggle and creativity where feminist activists engage in agenda setting, expanding public influence, and tactically circumventing censorship. The 2012 Shanghai Subway incident serves as a pivotal case, illustrating how activists employed literal and metaphorical masking to counter victim-blaming narratives around sexual harassment. Wearing masks during provocative public performances, activists asserted bodily autonomy while avoiding surveillance, marking a significant shift toward assertive, visually impactful activism. Tan expands this framework through examples like the "Free the Five" campaign and the anti–domestic violence petition, highlighting how digital masquerading through image alteration, symbolic performance, and anonymity has become critical under censorship. Importantly, Tan situates rights feminism within a broader genealogy that includes the lala (lesbian) movement. She emphasizes that rights feminism in China is not solely a heteronormative formation but one deeply intertwined with queer activism, collective identity, and practices of anonymity.

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[1] I use "LGBT" in this review to follow Jia Tan's wording choice in *Digital Masquerade*, where the term is used for its contextual relevance and more common usage.

[2] A previous version of this book review contained an incorrect direct quote, which has been amended in this version.

In chapter 2, Tan delves into the strategic articulation of "rights" in Chinese feminism. Tan introduces the concept of "performative rights," encompassing *performative citations of rights*, *performative tactics of articulating rights*, and *media-centric rights*. These practices reflect the situational flexibility, tactical deployment, and discursive creativity of rights articulation in China. For example, a nonprofit organization named Common Language leverages China's official rhetoric in the United Nations to promote inclusive policy changes at the domestic level. This exemplifies *performative citation*, where rights are appropriated from external frameworks to construct local legitimacy. The second aspect, *performative tactics*, is evident in how groups like PFLAG and Beijing LGBT Center respond to varying audiences by alternating between "rights feminism" and "gender equality" to maximize resonance and reduce political risk. Lastly, *media-centric rights* manifest in legal cases designed more to spark public discourse than to win litigation. Activists, for example, sued the Ministry of Education for the improper content in university textbooks regarding homosexuality, framing her case around the "right to reputation" and the "right to receive accurate knowledge in education" (p. 75). Tan argues, in such cases, the courtroom is not necessarily the primary battleground; rather, litigation becomes a vehicle to stimulate public awareness through both domestic and international media coverage. Tan emphasizes that media are not passive instruments but active co-constructors of activist meaning-making. Through this layered framework, Tan argues that rights should be understood not as fixed entitlements but as performative and mediated practices—dynamic negotiations shaped by political realities and digital affordances.

In chapter 3, Jia Tan extends the conceptual framework of digital masquerade by theorizing what she terms the *aesthetics of queer becoming* through community-based digital filmmaking in China. This chapter focuses on how Chinese LGBT NGOs employ participatory video production as a form of identity articulation and resistance. Community filmmaking not only provides technical training but also serves as a vital collective space for coming out, discussion, and political imagination. Using the documentary *Comrade Yue* as a central case study, Tan analyzes how queer subjectivity is constructed through digital media aesthetics that foreground personal storytelling, voice performance, and visual representation. The film's integration of first-person narratives, local dialect singing, and everyday imagery constructs queer identity as fluid and evolving. Moreover, the film resists normative portrayals of authentic homosexuality, emphasizing class, labor, and locality to reveal resistance against both heteronormative and homonormative norms. Ultimately, Tan argues that such practices exemplify a form of *digital masquerade*, where queer subjectivity is both expressed and protected through aesthetic strategies that navigate visibility, vulnerability, and the politics of representation.

In chapter 4, Tan examines queer film festival organizing as a strategy of masquerade under conditions of censorship, commercialization, and geopolitical asymmetry. Framing film festivals as tactical sites of digital masquerade, Tan focuses on the Asia Pacific Queer Film Festival Alliance (APQFFA) as a key case study to illustrate how inter-referencing practices among queer organizers in East and Southeast Asia and the Pacific disrupt the Euro-American dominance in global queer discourse. APQFFA serves as an example of transnational cultural networking that fosters lateral linkages among non-Western queer communities, expanding the visibility of marginalized regions. Through this cultural infrastructure, the alliance challenges spatial and temporal hierarchies embedded in the global flow of queer media. Tan emphasizes that while APQFFA enables non-Western queer solidarity, internal tensions remain. For instance, certain member festivals continue to favor Euro-American gay male content, revealing ongoing

masculinist and commercial biases. Tan calls for critical inter-referencing not only across regions but also within the alliance itself, to foreground inequalities and power asymmetries that persist in transnational queer cultural circuits. She also compares the divergent operational logics of member festivals. For example, Taiwan International Queer Film Festival operates in commercial theaters with professional equipment, while other festivals—such as in Shanghai—avoid labeling themselves as "film festivals" altogether, instead organizing screenings in bars and art galleries to evade censorship. Ultimately, this chapter theorizes queer film festival organizing as both a site of cultural production and a strategic masquerade. Through decentralized practices of inter-referencing, APQFFA members co-construct a transpacific queer cultural network that is at once fragile and generative—negotiating between visibility and survival, solidarity and difference, and local constraints and global aspirations.

Chapter 5 examines Chinese lesbian social networking apps (e.g., The L, LESDO) that produce digital content about female same-sex intimacy. Tan introduces the concept of "platform presentism"—a term that captures how these videos are shaped by a logic of immediacy, everyday emotional accessibility, and constant platform-based circulation (pp. 118–119). Tan argues that the "lightness" (short, casual, mobile-friendly) of these videos serves both aesthetic and strategic functions. Importantly, Tan does not treat these representations as inherently emancipatory. Engaging with "liberal paradigm critique," she notes that these videos often center urban, middle-class femininity and reproduce normative gender aesthetics, thereby marginalizing rural, working-class, and gender-nonconforming queer women (p. 119). Although they claim to celebrate diversity, the representations frequently align with consumer-friendly ideals and risk, transforming queer visibility into symbolic commodification. Nevertheless, Tan resists dismissing these platform-generated forms outright. Instead, she highlights their ambivalent position at the intersection of entrepreneurial drive and community making. While operating under the pressures of platform capitalism and state control, these app-produced videos simultaneously offer emotionally resonant narratives that foster a mediated sense of queer collectivity, creating a contingent but meaningful space for digital lesbian presence.

Despite the growing visibility of feminist and queer discourses, Tan documents the escalating repression that has curtailed public organizing. The closure of ShanghaiPRIDE and the disappearance of @FeministVoices, a prominent feminist Weibo account, are emblematic of "systematic homophobia," a regime of institutionalized and individualized heterosexism (p. 148). Yet even in these constrained circumstances, Tan emphasizes the power of digital masquerade to assemble and express dissent in spectral and unexpected ways.

While the concept of *digital masquerade* offers a highly generative and contextually grounded framework for understanding feminist and queer activism, it also warrants critical reflection. Specifically, its emphasis on tactical concealment and circumvention raises important questions about the limits of such strategies in fostering systemic change. Might the very logic of strategic invisibility unintentionally reinforce a form of adaptive politics—one that privileges survival in the cracks of power over sustained structural transformation? As "rights" become flexible discursive tools and "visibility" increasingly fragmented, commodified, or even weaponized, we must ask: How should we evaluate the efficacy and limitations of these resistance practices?

Despite these open questions, *Digital Masquerade* remains an invaluable contribution to the field. *Digital Masquerade* makes a compelling intervention in feminist media studies, queer theory, and Chinese digital culture. Tan's nuanced, nonbinary account demonstrates how digital feminist and queer activism in China transcends liberalism and repression paradigms. The concept of digital masquerade powerfully captures the strategic, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of contemporary activism, offering a framework that is both contextually specific and theoretically generative. This book is an essential read for scholars interested in feminist media activism and queer cultural politics in the Global South.