

Intra-Asian Circuits and the Problem of Global Queer

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This paper advances a regional approach to understandings gay, lesbian, GLTB, or queer sexualities in Asia. Debates about queer globalizations have largely rotated on the relation of non-Western to Western formulations of erotic identities: to what extent are queer subjectivities a Western export? As conversations about queer sexualities grapple with the global level, they have had difficulty avoiding the centrifugal powers of Western formulations, particularly those attached to the hegemonic force of United States. The dominant model for global queer subjectivities is an import-export framework: the assumption that legible queer sexualities derive from U.S.-inflected Western modes of sexuality or from Western-based systems of modernity, such as capitalism. One version of the import-export model underpins homophobic nationalist discourses, which assert that Western imperialism produced Third World queers. An import-export logic also surfaces in well-meaning work in sexual rights, which, when it stresses the homophobia of third-world traditions, implies – or even asserts – that modernization will make the non-Western world more liberated for queers. In this way, sexual rights reproduce a geopolitical progress narrative. Discussions about non-normative sexuality in the global south conflate Western, modern, and globalization. Even when they are critical of Western dominance in the world, as is the case with nationalists and many sexual rights advocates, their interpretation recapitulates Western hegemony, by locating the origin and agency of modern queer life squarely in the West.

Western normative and radical cultures have undeniably had great influence over the globe. Yet the default evaluation of non-Western queer life as the product of Western

influence has received trenchant critique in two major ways. One method is recuperative, pointing to indigenous non-heterosexual, non-procreative sexual practices, research which offers important resources for framing queer in national or local ways. These efforts have been critical in proposing alternative sexual histories, memories, and continuities, tracing a local genealogy for queer life in India or Native American communities, for examples. They have also been criticized for nationalism and nativism and for an essentialist (and often romantic) conception of cultures in the past.

A second way to decenter Western queer hegemony uses the insights of post-colonial critique. Usually non-nationalist, this approach rethinks the relation of non-Western sexuality to Western gay culture and indeed challenges the binary of West and non-West. Critical analyses of queer possibilities in the global south and its diasporas challenge the import-export image of southern queer identities as mimicry of the West. Their approach provincializes Europe, to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) phrase, by proposing multiple trajectories for non-heterosexual sex, love, and politics, without forgetting the global dominance of US and Western powers. Post-colonial critics have pointed out the historical and cultural specificity of US or European forms of queer politics as culturally and historically embedded. They also emphasize the significance of culture, history, race, capitalism, and geography for sexuality, noting that sexuality holds different meanings and relates to community, rights, or possibilities in different ways in non-Western contexts. For example, studies of queer Indians and Filipinos have challenged the Western narrative about coming out or the image of first world as beacon of liberty for immigrant queers. In her plenary talk at the Sexualities, Genders, & Rights in Asia

Conference, Gayatri Gopinath (2005) identified this approach with cultural studies, noting that it stressed hybridity, contestation, and resignification. This writing is above all motivated by the political problems with queer Western centrism, especially the ways that knowledge about gay life around the world is intertwined with national, racial, and global power. At the same time, it is empirical as well, pointing out that the prevailing interpretation of non-Western gay lives and Western-centric models of gayness are inaccurate.

Diasporic and post-colonial studies provide a foundation for addressing Western hegemonic interpretations of queerness and of non-Western sexualities. Yet their ability to provincialize the West remains curtailed. Even as they create alternative queer narratives within the global north, diasporic queer studies still pivot on the First World. To radically decenter the West, I suggest, we may need to focus more closely and optimistically on the non-West. A critical area Studies offers the basis for this third approach to analyze queer possibilities within the geographic region known as Asia, and more generally within the non-Western world and the global south. Without denying Western hegemony, the approach I am describing here considers modern queer sexualities *within Asia apart* from the West. It brackets the unbracketable forces of the First World, the United States, and the complex interweaving of diasporas, migrations, and diverse transnational flows between multiple geographic locations as a heuristic and provisional strategy.

My proposal instantly invites critique. As much political and academic critique has shown, “Asia” as is a geopolitical concoction, a cultural dream, a fiction. Whether by Western forces, Asian elites, or by imperialists within Asia, the constitution of a terrain

named Asia is political, not innocent. And memories of Japan's Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere reminds us that pan-Asianism has real risks. Conceptually, a focus on a region risks essentialist conceptions of culture and naive faith in the autonomy of geopolitical entities. It may appear to dovetail with discourses about (presumably bound) civilizations and their clashes. Certainly queer studies has not embraced area studies.

Despite these risks, this approach complements the efforts to challenge Western hegemony within global queer studies. A grounded regional approach provincializes the West more than diasporic queer studies does alone, taking seriously that modernity and global power and transnationalism is also centered in Asia. Empirically, bracketing Asia from the West can make visible forms and phenomena that we otherwise might not see against the global glare of Stonewall, Sydney's Mardi Gras, and San Francisco. The vision of Asian sexuality advanced here would not be seen as part of discrete civilizations or closed cultures but articulated with global flows. It argues for a provisional focus on Asia, understanding the region as a hub for complex cultural assemblages and modes of subjectivity.

The kind of critical approach to area studies I am relying on has two dimensions. First, it draws on the burgeoning new critical area studies, characterized by post-Orientalist scholarship (see, inter alia, Hobson, 2004; *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2000; Lim, Smith, and Dissanayake, 1994; Rofel, 1999; Wilson and Arif, 1994). This work sees Asia both as constituted by European global hegemony *and* as constituted by intra-Asian dynamics. In this sense, Asia can still be read, critically, as economic, political, and cultural construction that operates geographically. Critical Asian Studies provides an alternative frame of

reference for understanding queerness as inherently Western (e.g., Boellstorff 2005; Rofel 1999). The second mode of area studies rereads and recasts canonical Asian Studies, to identify other traces and routes of queer possibility, a practice associated with the reading practices of queer theory itself.

This new research agenda called for by this proposal focuses on how flows within Asia shape erotic formations in the region. Such a reorientation raises large questions that I can only begin to outline here. How might flows of people, culture, capital and politics within Asia inform sexuality? What circuits shape explicit modes of sexuality: public sex, queer symbols, HIV/AIDS work, or erotic terminology? There are also subtler dimensions of sexuality that area studies scholarship can address: what are patterns to the sense of selfhood, of bodies, relationships, gender, sovereignty, or entitlements that condition the erotic? What transnational flows constitute the relevant spaces, practices, relations, and beliefs for sexuality?

To begin to conceptualize what this research agenda might look like, I outline nine very broad and provisional categories of transnational Asian circuits that provide alternative narratives about non-normative sexuality in the region. This is not a review of the compelling new directions in related research; instead it is a simple list assembled out of suggestions from sexuality theory, area studies, and examples familiar to me. My understanding of “Asia” is grounded in Thailand, where I have conducted research for nearly two decades. The specific sexualities that motivate my analysis are Thai female alternative sexualities, particularly the erotic relations in an orbit identified as lesbian, *tom* (loosely tomboy, butch, or f2m), *dee* (loosely femme), or women who love women (*ying*

rak ying). (For Thai formulations of these identities/sexualities, see Sinnott's [2004] comprehensive ethnography and Jackson and Cook, 1999). The nine domains are:

1) Ontology and Epistemology. Critical studies of Asia have shown the interested construction of region, nation, and culture at various historical junctures. How is sexuality part of this geographic construction? Conceptions of Asian countries have often relied on representative erotic figures, often feminine forms associated with heterosexual male desires – the geisha, M Butterfly, Thai masseuses, bound feet. Are there other ways that sexuality constitutes the definition of Asia and the knowledge about Asia? My list of intra-Asian flows below relies on a historical materialist vision of Asia that does not necessarily challenge conventional understandings of the geography of region, even as I assume that the investigation of sexuality in Asia will also be an examination of the sexuality of “Asia.” My outline below also relies on contemporary theories of sexuality, identity, and society. Yet a turn to region invites recognition of multiple analytical traditions. Are there knowledge traditions within Asia that can inform an analysis of sexuality? What are the folk or orthodox interpretive traditions for the erotic within Asia? Here, as elsewhere, canonical area studies has neglected possibilities for a critical project in Asian sexuality studies.

2) Historical flows. Canonical Asian Studies often adopts a different temporal view than most of queer studies, one of the long term (or long durée), which stresses Asian roots of Asian globality, for example in the Silk Route or the “Indianized states of Southeast Asia.” (For one recent example, see Amartya Sen's (2004) overview of two millennia of China- India relations.) Conventional portraits of Southeast Asia stress the complex process

of Chinese, Islamic, Indian and Western influences and the diversity of hill tribe, farming, and urban populations. Thailand is famous for being formed at the crossroads of migrations and traffic. Thai culture is the creole product of strategic adaptation to Arab traders, Chinese populations, Indian statecraft and religion, Malay-Muslim practices, as well the well known imperial forces of the West (which never formally colonized Siam/Thailand). Might it be possible to read non-heterosexual sexuality in a longer temporality, in relation to these historical flows? Or to reread canonical studies of such long-term formations (the galactic polity, the theater state) with an eye towards sexual norms and their transgressions? What are enduring cosmological dimensions of the sexual self? How did kingdoms manage populations and life? How was the body and self situated socially? Have these formed embodied subjects who mediate the meanings and materiality surrounding them (Povinelli and Chauncey, 1999). One obvious example of the historical formation of “queer” in Thailand is the *kathoey*, the well-established category for transgender (usually male-to-female) (Jackson and Sullivan, 1999).

3) Capital flows and political economic linkages. Asia offers a complex political economic landscape: forged by decades of development projects and powerful neoliberal agendas, it also incorporates socialist states and juxtaposes drastic extremes of big money and harsh poverty. That said, important political and economic linkages shape general conditions for sexuality in the region: economic globalization is not merely a Western affair. There is an enormous amount of capital investment within Asia, particularly to and from China. How are queer possibilities intertwined with capital and capitalists? One set of examples might be found in the ways that these economic flows intertwine with

ethnic networks, as I discuss below. New work is unpacking the sexual implications of capitalist institutions in Asia beyond the ready example of commercial sex or sex tourism (Patel 2005; Wilson 2004).

4) Flows of people. Overseas Chinese networks have been energized in the last few decades, as Aihwa Ong's (1999) critical work on Southeast Asia's flexible citizens has shown (see also Ong and Nonini, 1997). While the ethnic Chinese are often considered more homophobic than Southeast Asian local cultures, diasporic commerce may also allow for queer subjects, spaces, and relations throughout East and Southeast Asia. Young lesbians or tomboys from the Chinese diaspora travel from Singapore or Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok: their participation in upscale lesbian parties in Thailand or Singapore is connected to capital flows in the region. In Thailand, masculine Chineseness has become reconstituted as a desirable identity associated with economic capacity, the "Chinese look" is considered attractive for men and *toms*. There are other salient intra-Asian flows of people, as there have been for millennia. More tourists come to Thailand from Asia than from the US or Europe or Australia. Thais travel to work in Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Middle East. Laborers come to Thailand from Burma, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Families have kin spread across points in Asia. What are transfer points for desires and intimacy in these routes? What forms of the erotic emerge along these paths or at bustling crossroads?

5) Civil society and the public sphere. What are the queer possibilities of the Asian publics that have arisen in the post-cold-war and post-non-aligned period? The rise of human rights has created spaces for discussions of sexuality, particularly in conjunction

with HIV/AIDS. With the dramatic rise in women's formal organizing during the 1990s, sexual rights, including lesbianism, were raised in regional fora surrounding UN-related conferences. The relevance of NGO and UN organizing extend well beyond the stated content of this work, which has been seriously criticized for participating in neoliberal agendas. NGOs are spaces for practices, relations, and sociality: and some of them have functioned as significant erotic sites. Thai NGOs and large international venues like UN or Asian meetings allow Thai women to meet other women, and Thai lesbians to meet other lesbians, and can be the occasion for female-focused flirtatious energy regardless of identification. They offer an alternative translocal public arena, often the only occasion for Thai lesbians to meet others from Asia. This is one example of unintended and contingent effects of civil society on sexual possibilities. (For an example from South Asia, see Swarr and Nagar, 2004.)

6) Visual and narrative culture. A rich resource for an intra-Asian exploration of queer sexualities lies in the considerable flows of literature, popular culture, arts, pornography, media within the region. The image of US hegemony in commercial culture worldwide, while not inaccurate, obscures the vibrant circuits of representations across Asian countries, languages, and around the global south (Berry, Martin, and Yue, 2003; Iwabuchi, Muecke, and Thomas, 2004). The popularity of Mexican soap operas in the Middle East or Asia is one example. Thai consumption illustrates this point. Alongside Hollywood action films and dubbed American sitcoms, there are the products of Bollywood, Hong Kong cinema, Chinese folk operas, Filipino jazz bands, Malay folk culture, Burmese material culture (copied and passed off as Thai to tourists), and Thai

versions of classic Indian Ramayana. Some have started to analyze the queer possibilities of individual texts, particularly connected with film or new information technologies; there is room to consider how their diversity, the juxtaposition, relates to sexual imaginings.

7) Science, medicine, technology. These areas have been central to much discourse about Western sexuality and the global reach of the West. They might be particularly salient to transgendered or transsexual people in Asia: Thailand is emerging as a regional and international center for sex-reassignment surgery, including top surgery for female-to-male transgenders or tom. It is also possible that the geopolitics and history of bioscience and technology mean that flows *within* Asia are less salient to other forms of sex/gender than they are the routes that follow enduring colonial paths or world system patterns. This category serves as a reminder that, even as Asia cannot be separated from the West, and that the West/non-West is a false binary, there are different circuits and concentrations in different geographic locations; and also places and institutions may be salient for some groups and not others.

8) Spiritual Flows. Without romanticizing or sensationalizing the role of religion in non-Western life, there remains the real possibility that sacred circuits of official and unorthodox forms of spirituality (e.g., shamanism, divination, astrology) enter into queer sexual formations in Asia.

9) Institutional links. Institutions are not a discrete category but rather a way to operationalize these broader questions and categories by identifying concrete sites for investigation. Such organizations as NGOs, schools and universities (among them the proliferating array of business-related schools: Olds and Thrift, 2005), religious networks,

and medical services offer a way to trace exchanges and linkages across nations and to chart select flows of people around the region.

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Considering how sexual flows *within* Asia have shaped sexual subjectivities invites a reinterpretation of the relevant circuits, sites, and processes that inform sexuality. To return to the question of Western hegemonic conceptions of queer, to what extent do the circuits that shape sexuality within Asia differ from those of the West? Do intra-Asian circuits generate different sexual logics or politics? How do intra-Asian sexual formations articulate with those of its diasporas? Even such a brief sketch of intra-Asian circuits suggests different erotic conditions from those of the United States, for example, in spiritual influences, the role of science, or the significance of the NGO world for female flirtations. An alternative geography for the construction of Asian queer possibilities provides a provisional method for decentering Stonewall modernity, the hegemony of the West to define modern global queer life.

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