

Queer 'East Asia' as an Assemblage of Power, Alterity, and Postcolonial Affect: An Action Note

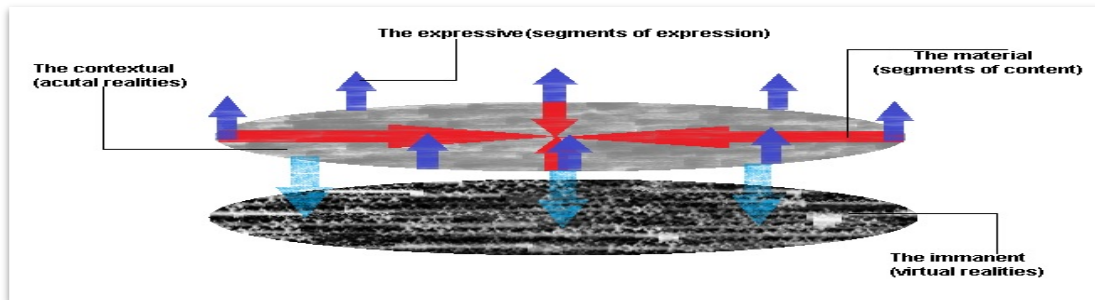
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Abstract

This paper looks at how queer politics emerge in East Asia, a context where globalised LGBT rights discourse and activism has provoked state-sponsored queerphobia. This paper applies Deleuzian *assemblage* theory to analysing the way in which the global, national, public, and private dimensions of queer East Asia are interrelated and co-contribute to nationalist paranoia and queer schizophrenia. Drawing on the field notes concerning activists' ambivalence towards international human rights agenda, queer 'East Asia' consists of a coalition assembling power/powerlessness, nationalist-ego and queer alterity, and postcolonial affect regarding the globalisation/localisation of sexuality politics. Such an assemblage consists of many informal connections between activists and the queer communities they represent, as well as how they, discretely yet unitedly, respond to the high politics between states dominating their bodies, desires and lives. Nevertheless, such a coalition may however become the engine for other kinds of social justice movements against nationalism-based discriminations.

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This paper looks at how queer politics emerge in East Asia, a context where globalised LGBT rights discourse and activism has provoked state-sponsored queerphobia. The term ‘East Asia’ should not be interpreted as simply referring to the area artificially encompassing the legalistic jurisdictions of China, Mongolia, Japan, and both Koreas, as it classified by the United Nations (UN) for statistical convenience. Among and beyond these jurisdictions, this paper also considers Southeast Asian societies—which encompass more diversity in terms of cultural traditions and political systems—as relevant counterparts. Moreover, no categorisation such as ‘Global North’ versus ‘Global South’, ‘Occidental’ versus ‘Oriental’, or ‘liberal’ versus ‘conservative’ can precisely capture the complexities of this area – the home for more than a quarter of the world’s population. ‘East Asia’ then can hardly be accurate in terms of queer lived experiences in varied contexts and ought to be taken as a geographical sketch of the region. Therefore, this paper serves as a preliminary investigation and a foundation upon which to based further investigation and nuance.



Applying the framework of Deleuzian *assemblage* theory, synthesised by Manuel DeLanda (2016) and others, I present the interactions between queer activists, as well as between them and those whom they consider ‘others’, which can be national governments, international actors, or people living in their neighbourhoods. Doing this enables us to observe how queer people respond to defenders of their cultural traditions and how they embrace human rights discourse within the matrix of global sexuality politics. As an analytical approach to social transformation, assemblage theory contains three main elements: contextuality, materiality, and expressivity (DeLanda 2006), including the properties owned by agents ‘in the constitution of encounters across space and time’ (Giddens 1986, 119). Assemblage theory, then, captures the resemblance of queerness as a constellation, which always transforms based on a state of *becoming* despite the fact that such a transformation can be contingent (Lee 2017). However, such movement can be predictable so long as

we identify its *capacities* (to affect and to be affected by), components, the semiotics and the discourses it employs (Fox and Alldred 2017). The purpose of this paper, then, is to use Deleuze's assemblage theory to analyse the way in which the global, national, public, and private dimensions of queer East Asia are interrelated and co-contribute to nationalist paranoia and queer schizophrenia.

Contextuality: Inter-state sexuality politics

Since 2013 when the UN launched the *Free & Equal* campaign throughout the world, almost every UN-related agency, which takes part in safeguarding human rights and promoting social development, has worked on 'educating' governments on how to treat sexual and gender minorities in line with liberal-democratic values. Ban Ki-Moon, the then UN Secretary General, defined the struggle for LGBT rights as the 'neglected human rights challenge of our time' (Ban 15 April 2013). Thereafter, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) initiated the regional project *Being LGBTI in Asia* in 2014, which aimed at 'addressing inequality, violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status, and promotes universal access to health and social services' (UNDP 2014). Beyond the aforementioned international programmes, the United States, under the Obama administration, set LGBT rights as one of its foreign policy priorities. Its Secretary of State appointed Randy Berry as the first Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBT Persons in February 2015. After a roundtrip in Asia from January to February 2016, Berry singled out Indonesia as one of the most homophobic countries in the world in a speech on 14 March. Two days later, Randy was awarded by *OutRight Action International* for 'championing human rights for LGBTI people around the world' (OutRight 2016).

On 4 March 2016, Indonesia's Communications and Information Ministry, 'under pressure' from the House of Representatives Commission, announced the drafting of a bill, which would aim at banning websites that spread LGBT 'propaganda' (The Jakarta Post 05 March 2016). In an interview, the Commission's chair told *The Jakarta Post* that LGBT issues can 'damage national security, identity, culture and the faith of Indonesians' (ibid). Although a vibrant transgender culture is socially accepted and homosexuality is legal, with the exception of prohibitions upon Muslims in two provinces, the situation in Indonesia has radically changed in recent times particularly since 2016 (Yulius 9 October 2017). The Defence Minister described the LGBT rights movement as a

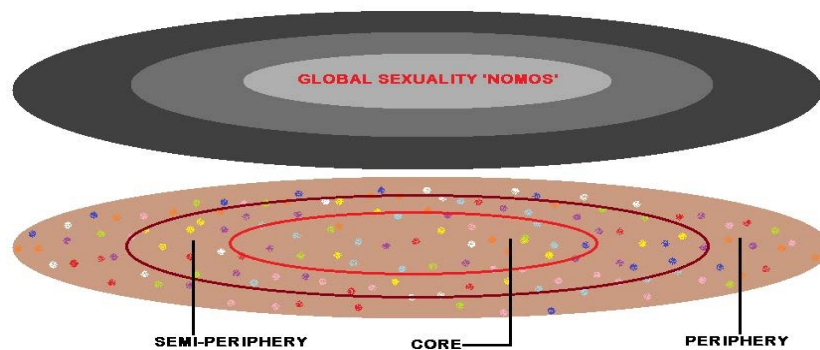
‘modern *warfare* by Western nations’, and the Vice-President, spurred by the transnational movement for equal marriage rights, urged to cut funding for the UNDP project (BBC 29 February 2016). Although an activist assured me in an interview that they are not demanding more than ‘a safe life’, the national government’s response plays a defining role in the game of international politics. Earlier in February 2016, the Indonesian Psychiatrists Association decided to re-classify homosexuality and gender-nonconformity as curable mental disorders. Insisting on the infectiousness of such problems, Suzy Yusna Dewi, a member of Indonesian Psychiatrists Association, confessed in an interview that the decision was taken to uphold cultural traditions, which ‘should not bow to the influence of foreign values that may not fit in with our values’ (Yosephine 24 February 2016).

National governments (and sometimes LGBT rights activists) have frequently employed the term ‘war/warfare’, which, as a metaphor in describing the conflict of values and rights, is based on a patriarchal-nationalistic imagination of sacrifice and settlement of disputes. Taken as a necessary determination of winning or losing the *war*, this analogy has placed queer lives in situations that are more precarious (Wight 2017, Wilkinson 2017). Since the United States and UK governments have adopted a homo-internationalist approach as one pivotal diplomatic policy, the global top-down approach has encountered much resistance from other postcolonial states, which demonise ‘the lives being saved’ by erstwhile colonising powers.¹ ‘When we frame it in rights, there has not been progress,’ says a member from *Gaya Nusantara*, Indonesia (Mosbergen 11 October 2015). Moreover, the Malaysian highest court made a decision upholding the recent cross-dressing ban following the country’s Prime Minister’s speech, in which he claimed that LGBT advocacy is influencing the younger generation ‘behind the facade of human rights to approve their acts which deviating from Islamic teaching’ (Lavers 21 August 2015). These incidents demonstrate that the self-defined saviours of liberal values actually violate cultural sovereignty through their homo-internationalist policies and that, in response, postcolonial states enact anti-LGBT legislation to reclaim their cultural sovereignty.

Materiality: Intersection of unliveable lives

¹ Despite the Trump government’s ongoing assault on LGBT Rights domestically, the US has not thence stopped its ‘leading’ character in gay rights around the world (Toosi 9 January 2017).

For those governments portrayed in the media as queerphobic, biopower encoded within different expressions of sexual and gender norms is traded between agents of internal and global politics. The act of ‘countermeasure’ in the name of defending cultural sovereignty is aimed at queer people who do not conform to the normality and normativity of ‘the imagined community’ (Anderson 1991), as if sexual and gender diversity had never been tolerated in local histories. Queerness becomes a threshold in circumscribing the battleground between the genres of statecraft, and the labelling of certain states as primitive/peripheral/non-secular/non-liberal has compressed local queer spaces (Weber 2016). The process of producing *alterity* in order to define the ego of a post-colonial state has created so-called ‘queer wars’ out of the conflicts between the liberal West and *others*, and between heteronormativity and queerness in postcolonial societies (Altman and Symons 2016). Nonetheless, the focus on queerphobic countermeasures has ‘overshadowed the role of Western actors in spreading homophobia’ (Langlois 2015, 393) and overlooked the assemblage as ‘a certain manipulation of relations of forces’ (Foucault 1980, 196), which are determined by the self-legitimised international lawmakers – nation-states.



When I attended the 6th ILGA-Asia Regional Conference in 2015, the Executive Director of *AP-COM*, Thailand, urged local activists to evade the opposition between the ‘developed’ and ‘progressive’ (North and Occidental) and the ‘developing’ and ‘conservative’ (South and Oriental). By referring to the *Pinkwashing Israel* movement against Israel’s pinkwashing actions when talking on the situation in Brunei, the Director accentuated the damaging effect of misleading international community’s attention on ‘how to boycott, reject and detest the diplomatic strategies of any country’ from the real needs in local communities. That is, some queer peoples’ lives do not become unliveable simply because of their non-normative sexuality or gender expression, but are further

threatened by many other social injustices against them. According to the Director of the *Sangsan Development Project*, Thailand, who spoke at the same 2015 conference, more than 300 queer youths are documented as ‘incomplete citizens’ living in Mae Hong Son and Tak Provinces, bordering Myanmar: landless and stateless persons are not just concerned about ‘the intolerance of their queerness but how to live a life without fear’. In order to address these complex issues of *being queer*, local activists require a more nuanced strategy to battle and eradicate multiple dimensions of precarity in queer lives.

Queer activists in East Asia have become careful of ‘phrasing’ when coding their needs into rights language. For example, the usage of SOGIE instead of LGBTI holds particular significance due to various sexual cultures and different understandings of gender from the Western definitions. Meanwhile, aware of the impossibility of a general theory of queer lived experience due to regional diversity, activists rely on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) theory of intersectionality to ensure that vulnerable intersections of identity remain at the forefront of their activism. For instance, the *Common Language* in China, the *Taiwan Gender Queer Rights Advocacy Alliance*, and Taiwan’s *DBQueer* have all focused on the rights and dignity of ‘queer crips’ – LGBT people who are at the same time physically or mentally disabled, suffering simultaneously from heteronormativity and ableism. That is to say, the coalitional politics should provide ‘the very house of differences rather than the security of any one particular difference’ (Lorde 1982, 226). This has been well elaborated by a member of the *Transmen Alliance of Thailand* whom I interviewed. He said, we should not ‘erase the particular extent and weight of de-empowerment in each single case’, even within ‘a coalitional umbrella’. In turn, any exaggeration of a single factor may reinforce one’s vulnerability (Butler 2009). In short, he reminds us that we should be very careful ‘to dramatise the politics of powerlessness’, which may induce imposed victimisation by emphasising one single factor of marginalisation over others. Thus, the assemblage of queerness is only possible by acknowledging the importance of each singular situation over the stability of a generalised queer strategy or theory.

Expressivity: A silent change from below?

Compared to the very political approaches to queer activism in Taiwan, including the biggest Pride parade every year, many international participants whom I interviewed have mentioned that such a carnivalesque pursuit of sexual liberation is ‘unimaginable’ in their societies. Rather, their way

of *doing* social movement is better kept *merely cultural* – in contrast with the political – especially when the rule of law in terms of formalist majoritarian democracy is, according to one interviewee, ‘unreliable’. Guo Xiaofei, a queer lawyer from China, concluded his presentation at the 6th ILGA-Asia Regional Conference of 2015 by stating that this – the social movement in cultural domain instead of formal politics – is like awaiting ‘a silent change’. He compared two notable transgender rights cases in Hong Kong and China. The judge on the former case was ‘hostile to the plaintiff’s transgender condition when interpreting the existing laws’, whereas the judge on the latter case showed more sympathy for its claimant since ‘there is a lacuna (no law)’. Xiaofei thus argues that the *non-law* evades the adversary influence of legal professionalism upon sexual and gender minorities by evading legal interference in the first place: ‘we can imagine how bad the law would be if it were existing’.

Vacuums left by legal institutions and political dispositions creates a space for queer activists to negotiate with others in local communities, where the reinterpretation and transformation of the culture ‘becomes the significant establishment for the future agenda regarding LGBT rights’, commented a participant from the Philippines in the 2015 ILGA-Asia Conference. However, the subtly omitted messages are no less important than the spoken, according to a member from *TEA Group*, Thailand: ‘what if the so-called democracy is based on the popular ideology which is homophobic.’ So, sometimes ‘it’s better to voice out quietly’, they said. Moreover, activists from Southeast Asia endeavour to build up the solidarity altogether, for example, by adopting a *Statement on the ASEAN Community Vision* of the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus (ASC),² along which the ASEAN citizenship is projected with more tolerance for sexual and gender diversity in ASEAN’s regional political roadmap, said enthusiastically an activist from the Philippines. Keeping queer activism cultural thus has twofold meanings: the first suggests escaping attention from politico-juridical bodies, while the other advocates for translocal dialogue and solidarity beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

Conclusion

² The ASEAN SOGIE Caucus was formed by queer activists from eight ASEAN countries (Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) since the 2011 ASEAN Civil Society Conference of the ASEAN People’s Forum (ACSC/APF) in Jakarta, Indonesia. For more details, see ASC (23 November 2015).

From an activist perspective, then, queer ‘East Asia’ consists of a Deleuzian assemblage of power/powerlessness, nationalist-ego and queer alterity, and postcolonial affect in terms of the globalisation/localisation of sexuality politics. Such an assemblage consists of many informal connections between activists and the queer communities they represent, as well as how they, discretely yet unitedly, respond to the high politics between states dominating their bodies, desires and lives. All the components of the assemblage—contextuality, materiality, and expressivity—reinforce and affect each other whenever they attach to or detach from the assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 1987). Therefore, such a coalition adopts the intersectional perspective of precarity and aims to cultivate ‘a culture for subcultures’ – stressed by activists from Vietnam and Singapore whom I interviewed – would be the engine for other kinds of social justice movements against nationalism-based discriminations and exploitations.

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