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To cite this article: Howard Chiang & Alvin K. Wong (2017) Asia is burning: Queer Asia as critique, Culture, Theory and Critique, 58:2, 121-126, DOI: [10.1080/14735784.2017.1294839](https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2017.1294839)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2017.1294839>



Published online: 17 Mar 2017.



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## Asia is burning: Queer Asia as critique

Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong

For the last ten years, both queer studies and Asian studies have undergone major shifts in terms of their objects of study and disciplinary orientation. If the separation of sexuality from feminism as a new domain of inquiry in the mid-1980s introduced an early set of precursors for the poststructuralist critique of gender, sex, sexuality and the body,<sup>1</sup> queer studies in its current form has increasingly turned to intersectional categories of analysis. This intersectional model of queer studies shows how queerness is felt, structured and transformed by the sociohistorical formations of race, class, gender, ablebodism and the dominance of the neoliberal state. Such an analytical shift is evident in the 2005 special issue of the journal *Social Text*, in which David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam and Jose Esteban Munoz asked provocatively: ‘What’s queer about queer studies now?’ They answered in the affirmative by laying out the emergent entanglement of queerness with ‘the geopolitics of war and terror ... the denaturalizing potentials of queer diasporas, and the emergent assumptions of what could be called queer liberalism’ (2005: 1).

Looking back now, that special issue marked a watershed moment in which queer theory shifted from questions of psychoanalysis and gender performativity to the geopolitical critique of the US empire, imperialism and neoliberal homonormativity. However, it also revealed a certain intellectual anxiety about the geopolitics of the new queer studies that the editors advanced. Eng, Halberstam and Munoz critiqued the Eurocentric situatedness of queer theory within academia by pointing out the obvious and unfortunate fact that queer theory ‘produced’ from the US is read by non-Western scholars, while work by non-Western scholars outside of Euro-America is hardly read at all. As a practice of self-critique, they ‘propose epistemological humility as one form of knowledge production that recognizes these dangers’ (2005: 15). More recently, critics of queer indigeneity and settler colonialism have borrowed this proposal to problematise the circulation of queer discourses that divides the Native and non-Native under the hegemony of homonational modernity (Driskill et al. 2011; Morgensen 2011).

It has been more than a decade since epistemological humility was foregrounded as a mode to counter the self-referential logics of US-centrism and queer Eurocentrism; yet, despite the productive interventions made by scholars who advance the models of queer of colour critique and queer diasporas, queer theory has yet to fully engage with questions of empire, racialisation, economic regionalisation and late capitalism in other ‘areas’ of the world not dictated by the domineering optics of the Euro-American imperial past and the neoliberal present (Chiang and Wong 2016). In this special issue titled ‘Queer Asia as Critique’, we theorise the missed chance encounter and productive possibility between queer theory and Asian studies; furthermore, we shall demonstrate how the

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<sup>1</sup>For one of the earliest calls to treat sexuality as a separate domain of analysis, see Rubin (1985).

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redirection of queer critique towards questions of colonial history, legality, value and devaluation, and new political imaginary within Asia grounds one powerful technique of overcoming queer liberalism in the West. In so doing, this special issue moves beyond merely the descriptive question of ‘what is?’ in naming queer Asia into existence by simultaneously foregrounding the question of ‘how queer matters for Asia’, and vice versa.

Queer matters for Asia because both queer theory and Asia – as a theoretical paradigm and a geopolitical metaphor – share an acute sense of ambiguity, playfulness and non-determination. Queer, like Asia, works against essential determinism and analytical closure. Both terms are caught in endless chains of signification without fixed referents and predetermined signifiers, thus demanding new historical and geopolitical realignment and assemblage. Take, for instance, Judith Butler’s provocation that the term queer ‘will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes’ (1993: 173). Contrasting Butler’s injunction to critically *queer* queerness itself from political, and we would add, geopolitical certainty, the signifier of ‘Asia’ has likewise been put under critical queering and redeployments within new analytical turns of Transpacific studies, Sinophone Studies and new area studies (e.g. Shih et al. 2013; Hoskins and Nguyen 2014). Take, as a parallel example, Sun Ge’s astute remark that for ‘a long historical period, Asia has not been treated as a self-contained geographical concept, but has only been put forward ideologically in opposition to Europe’ (2007: 9). Sun’s reminder that ‘it is important we keep asking “How does Asia mean?”’ goes a long way to disrupt the geographical centrism of East Asia in general and China in particular in determining the meaning of Asia (2007: 10). The more recent work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak goes even further by conceptualising Asia as ‘the instrument of altered citation, an iteration. Indeed, the possibility of the desire for a singular origin is in its iterability’ (2008: 217). Historically, the ever-shifting meanings of ‘Asia’ – from the binary of Asia Minor and Asia Major (designating Turkish Anatolia and the Persian Empire) in ancient Greece, to the Sino-centric tributary system in imperial China, to the late nineteenth century Japanese discourse of ‘shedding Asia’ (championed by Fukuzawa), to 1950–1960s call for Afro-Asian solidarity, and to contemporary economic and political practice of ‘Asian value’ and ASEAN regionalism – all suggest the queer potential of Asia to reconstitute and rename itself in new geopolitical times.

Beyond the shared value in ambivalence, theoretical openness, and indeterminacy, one advantage in stressing the critical alliance between ‘queer’ and ‘Asia’ lies in their mutual transformative potentials in overcoming some of the enduring blind spots in each of their cognate fields of scholarly inquiry. If queer theory needs Asian studies in order to overcome its Euro-American metropolitanism and continual Orientalist selective inclusion of Asia and the non-West into its self-critique, so too can Asian studies revitalise itself through the queer disentanglement of the older version of ‘area studies’ and its complicity with the nation-state form. Here, we acknowledge the perverse and indeed powerful intervention in queering Asian studies through the invocation of pairing ‘area studies’ with the ethic of ‘impossibility’, which approaches both queerness and area studies as ‘a placeholder that might partly express a promiscuous or incoherent desire or a desire whose content continues to be under erasure’ (Arondekar and Patel 2016: 154). In dialogue with this approach, our collective work on queer Asia contributes to a more synergetic project of collaboration and even unruly alliance between the two fields. Instead of the

idiom of failure, erasure and impossibility, however, queer Asia as we envision here contributes to ‘a broader transborder project of Asian queer studies’ that is truly comparative, trans-regional, global and in many ways, Inter-Asian.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite the importance of feminist and queer interventions to the growth of global area studies, inter-Asian cultural studies and diaspora and migration studies, non-Western queerness oftentimes remains as merely the empirical ‘object’ of study within area studies formation severed from ‘theory’ proper.

This special issue proceeds with the premise that superseding such a ‘method’ bias in our intellectual agenda offers a privileged means to draw innovative connections, convergences and comparisons across different manifestations of ‘Asia’ in all its complexity. Contributors from different disciplines across the humanities and social sciences join us in examining the historical, political and socio-cultural formations of queer modernities in globalising Asia. The climate and tensions surrounding the Cold War transition in the last century index an especially valuable genealogy for our investigation. Across Asia, noteworthy turning points constituted the backdrop for broader social and cultural change as the world prepared for a new millennium: the launch of the *Đổi Mới* reform policy in Vietnam in 1986; the lifting of Martial Law in Taiwan in 1987; the Marxist Conspiracy arrests in Singapore in 1987; the June Democracy Movement in South Korea in 1987; the Tiananmen Square incident in mainland China in 1989; Akhito’s ascendance to the imperial throne in Japan in 1989; the beginning of economic liberalisation under Rao in India in 1991; the Black May protest in Thailand in 1992; the postcolonial handover of Hong Kong in 1997; to name just a few. Drawing on the intellectual vitality made possible by this co-constitutive historical context, this special issue features theoretically rigorous and empirically robust inquiries that complement but also problematise the significance of these episodic political unrests, mapping the ways in which the limitations of mainstream Eurocentric paradigms of modernism reshape the place of Asia in convergent and discrepant processes of globalisation.

The study of queer Asia is a flourishing field with an increasingly interdisciplinary orientation. With only a few notable exceptions, most of the literature to date is confined to national or regional contexts. This special issue adds more nuanced texture to existing research by highlighting the inter-connectivity across different subregions of Asia. A key objective of our intervention is to enable specialists of East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia to no longer construe the West as the only alibi for serious discussion about sexual globalisation or the ultimate neoliberal model of juxtaposition. Rather, we hope to make more transparent the modular comparability of the different regional expertise brought together here. Our project incorporates the agenda of using ‘Asia as method’, as proposed by Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) and others, by asking interlocutors in the growing field of queer Asian studies to rethink the vectors of linkage across various longstanding ‘minor’ regions in area studies (e.g. Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong, etc.) whose significance are made poignant via such transnational affinity, rather than always being mediated through a centre, be it China, Japan or the West. We redress the value of queer theoretical perspectives for contesting the hegemonic preferences of traditional academic disciplines, mapping the biopolitics of gender and sexuality onto the geopolitics of world systems.

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<sup>2</sup>For a programmatic call to theorise the Inter-Asian flows of queer Asia, see Martin et al. (2008: 9).

As Asian scholars begin to divide the map to make exceptional claims about the queer-ness of a particular region (Philippines, Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Taiwan, etc.), this special issue advances the field in new directions in both theoretical and empirical terms.<sup>3</sup> For instance, with a renewed fascination with the role of the capital across different humanistic and social scientific disciplines, we are interested in connecting the global reconfigurations of sexuality to the ‘Asian values’ debate that had punctuated the economic reconfigurations of late twentieth-century Asia. We also believe that the time is ripe for taking seriously the various LGBT prides that have sprung up across different Asian countries in the twenty-first century and ask what they might mean in a globally coherent framework. The relationship between social movements and pink economies has been an important topic of debate, but what lessons can we draw from postcolonial theory to deconstruct the political economy of queer Asian-ness? What about other empires and other Asias that have been in one way or another implicated in the uneven discourses of queer regionalism and secularising modernities? Moreover, how appropriate is it to mobilise universal ethical impetuses – especially those originating from mainstream Western knowledge production (such as human rights and global health) – for challenging homophobia and transphobia in indigenous constructions of Asian nativism?<sup>4</sup>

Pursuing these particular threads of question at the present juncture brings to light the heterogeneous anatomies of gender and sexuality in different parts of Asia and how they interact with regionally inflecting and globalising influences. In contrast to the Asian values debate, for instance, this special issue aims to parse the multiple layers of queer meaning evolving alongside different Asian countries’ *fin de siècle* aspiration for superregional dominance (or alliance), usually measured against economic strength. This kind of attention on discrepant modernities enables us to come to grips with how homophobia and transphobia mutate across the different geopolitical logics of historically specific and culturally saturated contexts. Above all, it demands keeping an eye out for new networks and avenues of circulation across these seemingly disparate formations of queerness in Asia. For example, in what ways is racialised erotic preference in Southeast Asia recalibrating itself alongside the rise of East Asian economic powers? In what ways can gender and sexual nonconformity in South Asia be linked to the genealogies of LGBT movements in the Sinosphere, the Anglosphere, and beyond? As particular solutions for a universal symptom, what alternative models of kinship are conceivable despite their present conditions of impossibility?

The range of answers explored in this special issue do not exhaust the spectrum of probable solutions, but we feel that taken together, the essays do stake out certain pressing and tantalising claims about why Asia is burning and in what ways queer Asia promises to stimulate theoretically meaningful critiques and productive debates in the future. In probing these questions, the following essays incite new measures of concentration on the salient intellectual and political strategies appropriate for addressing the regulatory regimes of heterosexist oppression that are geographically diffused. Through a global prism of analysis, we revisit the mutually imbricated questions of ‘what’s queer about

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<sup>3</sup>For notable summative assessments of the field, see Welker and Kam (2006); Sinnott (2010); Tang (2011); and Blackwood and Johnson (2012).

<sup>4</sup>An important critique of international human rights discourses, though not without problems, comes from Massad (2007). See also Massad (2015).

queer studies now' and 'what's left of the left'. And by connecting globalism in Asia to Asian geocultural legacies in the wider world, we aim to cement contacts across the rifts of conceptual criteria and epistemic coordinates with which critics of Asia are normally familiar. In this way, queer Asia names the desire of practicing intellectual perversity, which invents new objects of study and rethinks the received knowledge of area, scale, geopolitics, and queerness itself.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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