

Queer Pop Asia: Toward a Hybrid Regionalist Imaginary

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There is a larger context behind this project of rethinking Asian queer cultural studies, which has to do with the broad critical debate about the de-centering of the existing forms of multicultural critique and theory production at large (Birch, 2000; Cevalco, 2000; Chen, 1996; Abbas and Erni, 2005; Stratton and Ang, 1996). However, the research about queers that originates in Asia today has yet to confront the received forms of inquiry and models of analysis that has mostly been centered on western experiences (see Erni, 2003).

Queer Asia

Over the last decade or so, I have been engaging at an ongoing project of critically looking at the possibility of conceptualizing an intra-Asian regionalist cultural sphere, which can serve as a parallel modernity, and even as an antidote to, western-led forms of global understanding of cultures and modernities. The outline of this massive project can be briefly summarized in this way: Many of us see this as a project to “decolonize” Asian cultural studies, as it were, through a triangulation of three forms or moments of critique, namely a Marxist media and cultural critique, the historical critique of “Asia” as a problematic convergence point for various intellectual disciplines, and local decolonization social movements across sub-national Asia. The source of this movement lies in the realization that the histories of local struggles for many subordinated cultures and practices in non-western contexts have emerged and multiplied in ways that could not be predicted by western theories and research paradigms. We have also realized that this project has grown out of three important (overlapping) moments of development from the 1960s to the present. There was an earlier moment of the politics of appropriation for legitimacy from the 1960s to the 1970s),

then there was a moment of the politics of self-legitimacy through rejecting western cultural imperialism (late 1970s to early 1990s), and then there was a moment of the politics of critical legitimacy through deconstructive postcolonial tactics (early 1990s to the present) (Erni and Chua, 2005). Moving through this roughly mapped out trajectory, Asia-born cultural studies scholars have traveled, shuttled, moved back and forth, and returned across geographical points between Asia and the U.S., Europe, and Australia. Our own travel, educational, and professional histories thus press on our theorization of “Asian culture” and of the relevant analytical practices; a significant part of this project, therefore, must have to do with the negotiation of various *subject positions* of the Asian people and Asian researchers as media consumers and producers living in, and moving across, the region (see Chua, 2004).

I open with this brief backdrop so as to contextualize the development of queer theory and queer studies here in Asia. Now let me say a few things regarding some of the more visible development of Asian queer cultural studies. Any observation of queer cultural development in Asia would begin by marking “Asian queers” in a number of ways: as an object of study caught in the axis of tradition/modernity, or as a site of reworked sexuality that is never completely autonomous from kinship or family structures, or as a celebrated pop hipdom, or in a more pervasive social sense, as ubiquitous forms of same-sex sociality (that can tip in and out of balance with more explicit forms of same-sex sexual interactions). The observation of the broader historical context for studying queer culture would also necessarily begin by noting the *uneven* modernities arising out of diverse historical trajectories in the region. Putting together the growing body of research of queer cultures, the often celebratory tone that accompanies such research, and the uneven social, political, and human rights development across even the cosmopolitan parts of Asia, it is not difficult to see that there isn’t really a coherent “queer Asia” to speak about – perhaps not even at the level of popular culture, which is ubiquitous and fluid in its cross-border movement.

Popular images of queers in Asia have indeed taken diverse forms; there is not one type or one dominant kind of queer iconography across Asia. The diverse forms in fact can be said to index particular kinds of queer desire for visibility that queer producers and consumers want in different local contexts. Take, for example, the consistent, almost non-chalant, blurring of the line between homosociality and homoeroticism seen in, say, the works of Wong Kar Wai. Even in his most explicitly gay film, *Happy Together*, we are given a film that offers an open text for alternative imaginings, and not necessarily a closed text for a typical queer reading. Queer dogma gives way to dialogue with codes of intimacy found in same-sex situations that may or may not be convincingly gay. Take another form of queer iconography, which takes the performativity of drag as an open political allegory. Here, oppressive political structures give way to codes of androgyny and camp, as seen in such powerful works as *East Palace, West Palace* (PRC, 1996), and *Iron Ladies* (Thailand, 2000). Take yet another form of queer iconography, in which the focus is on beautiful, often feminine, youth narratives found in Japanese *mangas*. These mangas belong to a world of explicit subcultural animation of queer sex. *Besoonen*, which is created mainly by women comic book writers, represents the stories of beautiful male youth engaging in explicit homosexual acts. I take these diverse Asian queer iconographies as signposts that suggest not only the different stages of queer cultural development in Asia, but also the very flexible quality of the very idea of “Asia.”

Let me briefly digress to recall a couple of stories that came out of Asia in order to illustrate the “flexible” and “fluid” quality of “Asia” in an age of high-volume border-crossing – this is just so we can properly orient queer cultural studies in a context that is on the one hand without any sense of simple unity to speak of, but on the other hand a context that is creating a structure of cultural circulation in and beyond Asia.

Love

On May 4, 2000, millions of computers around the world were infected with a virus lodged in their email systems. No one would think what became known as the Love Bug virus could cause an estimated US\$10 billion in damage as it shut down computer systems throughout the world, from corporations to the Pentagon to the British Parliament. “For a time, we were on the map.” Karim Bangcola, senior Vice President of the AMA Computer College in urban Manila, uttered those words as he reflected what his infamous student has done on that fateful day. Being “on the map,” he implies, puts his country’s name in an ambiguous perspective, for the international internet-using community has not forgotten his student’s deed so easily. The fact that this story about internet hacking happens to also be a story about Asia is not incidental. Rather, “Asia” figures in this international incident as a player who loves to be noticed, if only through a cyber crime.

Onel de Guzman’s love message to the world could easily be rewritten as “Asia Loves You.” “I’m not a hacker who destroys. I don’t want to hurt computers. In fact, I want more people to use them,” de Guzman said in an interview (Pimentel, 2001). Described as soft-spoken and acne-faced, de Guzman is an ordinary Filipino youth hailed from one of the Philippines’s poorest provinces on Samar Island. Like thousands of other Asian youth, de Guzman wished for a bigger and better life, and like so many in poor locales in the developing world, realized that honing his skills in the computer field was just about the only ticket to international success.

The thematic of “I Love You” functions as more than a benign joke; it can be said to be a kind of subjectivity indicative of the geopolitical fate of “Asia” caught in the disjuncture between economic disfranchisement in the still-operative development model in global internet diffusion on the one hand, and the real experience of a techno-vernacular life eminently accessible and affordable by the Asian multitude on the other. Indeed, the

narrative of “Asian rising” must be taken seriously for understanding the positioning of an “Asia” as situated somewhere between Asian technological savviness on the one hand and aspects of Asia-based transgressions on the other (think not only internet hacking, but also the vast industry of fake goods and media piracy across Asia). As a global symbolic event, the “I Love You” virus was inviting enough yet destructive enough to put Asia “on the map.” Sporadic but sustained attention to computer viruses abound after this incident, which has only further ambiguated the position of Asia in the international media use communities. For the developed world who habitually claims superiority in technologies, the incident has fueled and re-animated the image of half-literate Third World criminal hackers “tucked away in small bedrooms across the globe” (Elks, 2002) as an addition to the repertoire of terroristic images of the criminal underworld associated with subaltern regions of the world.

If this story about the love bug shows the disjuncture in the position of “Asia” as a site of geo-political violence in the global information society, then another story also about Asian sentimentality will illustrate an opposite tendency, namely a convergence that is also putting “Asia” on the map closer to home. I am referring to the highly visible phenomenon of Asian television idol melodramas. Over the past few years, the flow of these dramas across the region has produced an institutional and broad cultural impetus for transnational media production, distribution, and consumption. The Japanese and more recently Korean TV idol dramas represent another type of love bug that has bitten many devoted fans across East Asia.

Japanese TV idol dramas run through the by-now predictable plot about young lovers in urban Tokyo engaging in complex and subtle romantic hopes and failures, while Korean TV idol dramas place the heart-wrenching, often tragic, stories of young lovers in the Confucian familial framework (see Iwabuchi, 2001). Through interviewing fans of these

Japanese idol dramas in other Asian locales, Koichi Iwabuchi (2001) has theorized the complex articulation of “cultural proximity” in terms of models of romantic pursuit among Asian heterosexual youth and young adults, and identification of social and familial forces impinging upon their love affairs. I would add that this cultural proximity has also been articulated through identification of racial proximity in the norms of beauty (male and female), mannerism, styles in clothing, a sense of Asianness in contrast to perceived Western outlooks, and so on. The “structure of feeling” is that of a translocal reckoning of moral ideals and practical decision-making not only in terms of matters of youthful sentimentality and sexuality, but also of a syncretic “Asian modernity” capable of enlisting a middle-class based, cross-generational, and western-value sensitized, dialogue and sentiment as a part of the social imaginary for an increasingly regionalized cultural Asia. Here, the triangulation of cultural nationalism, postcolonial sentiments, and the globalist mood in Asian media has found its useful *affective* form for imagining alliances through the televisual field.

The immense popularity of these TV dramas within and across East Asia serves as a useful contrast to the incident told earlier about de Guzman and his global love virus. Besides the divergence of “technological Asia” and “cultural Asia”, the two “love stories” mark the in-between space for Asian media culture today with respect to the global media world. The globalist tendency of the computer virus incident contrasts sharply to the more inward-circulating *regionalist imaginary* that underpins the flow of popular TV drama series. We may say that the *centrifugal* politics of self-insertion into the global map of media and information technology and the *centripetal* politics of mutual validation of cultural and emotional proximity through the televisual media, have produced a special environment for Asian media consumption today.

Let me return to “queer pop Asia.” The various articulations are hopefully clear – there are some key elements that need to conjoin together in order to provide the context for an increased visibility of queer cultural production out of Asia. Some of those elements have to do with a perceived cultural proximity within a regionalist imagination. Some other elements have to do with the complexity of globalist desires in Asian production to seek alliance with and claim legitimacy through queer pop cultures originating from the West. Let me add some concrete details to these processes.

Three prominent phenomena are noteworthy here. First, we now have a degree of market liberalization, which has helped to open the door for queer cultural visibility and its circulation in and beyond Asia. Urban queer film festivals have first appeared in the West, and then these film festivals, along with art houses and specialty shops are beginning to dot the map in major Asian urban centers. Second, queer middle-class consumerism has been able to keep state censorship at bay, wielding a new logic of decadence that renders state power inconclusive. The very idea of “making politics” out of consumption is of course an idea borrowed from western experiences, where the phenomenon of the “gay market” or the “pink dollar movement” has profoundly transformed gay politics. In cities like Hong Kong, Taipei, Bangkok, and even Singapore, the logic of the gay market is not only accepted by queer people themselves, but increasingly recognized by the state. The third and perhaps the most visible phenomenon has been an accumulative sense of transnational “successes” in queer cultural representations. The enormous popularity of films like *The Wedding Banquet* (Taiwan, 1993), *Happy Together* (Hong Kong, 1997), *Fire* (India, 1998), and *Iron Ladies* (Thailand, 2000), just to name a few, are other versions of the love bug that project themselves onto the transnational cultural sphere. The fact that these successful films flirted with state authority and even evaded direct state censorship while being capable of igniting local and translocal consciousness, points to the an emergent mobility of Asian queer

production that can court an international audience without the hindrances of state interference. I think of the liberalization of the cultural market, the phenomenon of gay consumerism, and the international assertiveness of Asian gay cinema, as the most important outcome of a “queer Asia” being manufactured today through one eye looking at the possibility of the formation of an intra-Asian queer world, and the other eye gazing at the possibility of an Asianization of queer culture and queer research in the West.

My aim in this brief paper has been to outline the contextual orientation of queer cultural visibility in Asia. The framework, I think, is there – what we need is empirical research to fill in the details. Again, what I am suggesting is a framework capable of struggling with western-dominated forms of research and theorizing. It is capable of doing that not because it rejects the west – an outdated form of cultural chauvinism. It is capable of engaging with a “decolonizing” project for queer Asian media and culture because of the idea of a parallel modernity underpinning queer popular culture’s twin footings: a parallelism that is constructed through a hybrid regionalist imaginary.

As we work toward this model, let us not forget, however, that the very idea of “queer Asia” is continuously being produced and imagined through new forms of western cosmopolitanism. The old form of western cosmopolitanism depended on stereotyping and orientalist fantasies. But today there are new forms of western cosmopolitanism that poses queer Asia as a much more ambiguous object, having a much more indefinite relation with the West. Let me conclude this presentation with one such example – a kind of remainder, a cultural residue, if you will, of the western legacy into which “queer Asia” as a cultural sphere is still being absorbed. We can revise the whole notion of “queer Asia” according to a hybrid regionalist imaginary, but I don’t think we can completely rewrite its contour without taking into account the new forms of queer cosmopolitanism arising from the West through which “queer Asia” is re-rendered as an orientalist other.

Queer Neo-Orientalism

In the midst of her then advancing career to quickly become one of the most visible figures in the contemporary art scene in the U.S. and Europe, American photographer Nan Goldin released a collection of her photographs in 1994, featuring teenage male commercial sex workers in Southeast Asia in a volume called *Desire By Numbers* (Goldin and Kertess, 1994). The photographs are displayed alongside a fictional dialogue written by artist and writer Klaus Kertess, a dialogue between two gay men about AIDS and sexual memories and interracial fantasies. The Goldin/Kertess book can be said to be driven equally by the photographs and the text. As the description on the book jacket says, “Photography as memory is played off against writing as memory. The verifiability of one medium becomes the illusion of another.” The book contains twenty three photographs of young Asian boys. Eleven of them showed them performing in bars. The camera reproduced the contrived sensuality in the go-go dancing and sex shows. There are eight photographs of boys in the streets at night. They are not posing; just looking back at the camera with an innocent ordinariness.

In the art book, there is a fictional dialogue written by Klaus Kertess. The dialogue is given by two gay men. It is characterized by uncertainties, lapses of memory, fleeting imageries, and eclipsed desires. The story opens with an elaborate reconstruction of an encounter one of these men had with a New York prostitute. His attraction to his voice, he reveals, is that “it was pleasing but without intonation or mannerism that might locate it geographically” (16). Through a voice without an accent, he thus creates him as a global youthful figure without a location, or ethnicity. The exhilaration of this sexual experience then opens into a dreamlike recollection of a mutual friend named Peter.

Curiously, Peter enters the story through a series of transmuting images that are used to stand in for his body. Through the image of a dead butterfly found in a desk drawer, to the sight of the velvety black body of the butterfly corpse, and then mutating to the pubic hair of young Thai and Japanese boys, the distant figure of Peter fades into the dialogue. In a subsequent series of juxtapositions between young boys' highly eroticized bodies and the morbid images of Peter's degenerating body, the effects of AIDS on Peter slowly unfolds. "Number 9" was the name of the boy who was said to have given Peter AIDS.

Although Peter, the weary traveler, fades in and out of the dialogue like being in the condition of a semi-conscious state, his travel stories containing various encounters with young boys leak into the dialogue everywhere. There are dancers in Bangkok, hustlers in New Delhi, kinky prostitutes in Puerto Rico, and Asian boys whose exoticism evoke mythologies of Greek heroes. Peter's death occurred just after he had visited a temple in India. In a dramatic tone, the dialogue between the two gay men who were reminiscing about their old friend climaxes into a mutual confession of their desire and love for Peter, who has already died from AIDS. The mutual projection of desire and melancholia between the two men, which summons Peter as a figure standing in for the traveling virus, finally brings reconciliation and mutual consolation.

In reading it, images and words appear to wrestle for clarity, in a manner enacted by the two narrators in the story. For all the aesthetic fidelity in framing the Asian teenage boys as their own agencies in the political economy of urban Third World poverty, and for all the political weight carried by Nan Goldin as the contemporary embodiment of post-romantic idealism for the rough edges of urban queer life, the book unfortunately chooses to offer us the boys as a muted presence. As for the text itself - the dialogue - there is a repetitive question in the text - "Where does it begin?" - signaling again and again the search for an

impossible origin. This repetitive question therefore works as a self-conscious trope conjoining two trajectories: the movement of the virus and that of the gay traveler.

The politics of queer desire and AIDS that entangle Western men and Asian boys are displayed in a highly sublimated fashion, in order to permit the text's own interrogation of its politics as part of its aesthetic appeal. Standing behind an AIDS death, this text - like many other melancholic Western gay male travel narratives in the two decades of AIDS - sublimates political concerns by aestheticizing white gay men as the inquisitive subjects capable of self-examination while the Third World teenage bodies perform their silent and erotic display. Curiously then, Klaus Kertess's story is written in a way that it desires to be interrogated. It is a story suspicious of itself; it self-consciously produces itself as a politically problematic text. In this way, the Goldin/Kertess collaboration fails to dislodge the consumptive habit of the First World body in its pseudo-radical construction of queer melancholia and despair.

What is "queer Asia"? What does it want? If these are relevant and pressing questions at this and other conferences, then a three-pronged approach to help us imagine a "queer Asia" with commitment and force may be necessary. The three prongs are (a) mapping the effects of a regional flow of queer cultures within modernizing Asia; (b) deciphering queer Asian media's globalist aspirations by mapping the strategic mobility of Asian queer cultural products between Asia and the rest of the world, particularly the West, and then by retheorizing the model of globalization that is transformed by such strategic mobility; and finally (c) learning how to read neo-orientalist discourses that produce the "global Asian queers" according to the patterns of cultural consumption and circulation originating in the West. No matter what forms transnational queer theory may take, it seems clear that they are marked by intellectual and speaking positions that cannot be so easily divided into dominant or peripheral, East or West, international or local, the West or the Rest.

To be sure, there are shifting lines of articulation that produce a mixed and often ambivalent set of subject positions for Asian queer cultural producers, consumers, and Asian queer scholars alike. But this is all part of an internationalist project for understanding a postcolonial queer Asia today.

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