

Mark McLelland and the AsiaPacifiQueer Project

Peter A. Jackson

My first memory of Mark McLelland is still very strong. We met in 1999 at an international Queer Studies conference in his hometown of Manchester in the United Kingdom. At the time, he had either just finished or was about to finish his PhD on male homosexuality in Japan at the University of Hong Kong.^[1] In collaboration with Mark Johnson—whose PhD had been on transgenders in the southern Philippines and who was then at the University of Hull in the UK—I convened a panel on queer Southeast Asia at that conference. Neil Garcia from the University of the Philippines, Diliman, and Ronald Baytan from De La Salle University in Manila also participated in what was perhaps one of the first panels on comparative Southeast Asian Queer Studies convened at an international conference. The conference organisers contacted Mark Johnson and me and told us that they had received an individual paper on male homosexuality in Japan by Mark McLelland. They asked if we would mind if his paper was included in our panel. We were delighted to add another element of comparison to our panel and agreed enthusiastically.

There were a number of serendipitous elements to Mark's paper being included in our panel. He had not been aware that there was to be a panel on Southeast Asia at the conference or that his paper on Japan had been allocated to it. When we finally met in Manchester, Mark related how, when he had approached the University of Hong Kong to do a PhD on gay issues in Japan, there had initially been questions about whether that was actually an academic topic. He had to convince his panel of potential supervisors that a history of homosexuality in modern Japan was of sufficient academic merit and substance to warrant doctoral level studies. Mark told me that one of the things that had enabled him to convince his supervisors to agree to his proposed study of gay Japan was that my own 1989 book, *Male Homosexuality in Thailand*,^[2] was held in the University of Hong Kong Library. Mark said that he told his supervisory panel that the publication of that book demonstrated the academic import of gay history in Asia. Even before we had met, there had been an intersection between our respective academic careers and interests.

Our experience of the marginalisation of Asian, and indeed all non-Western, Queer Studies at that 1999 conference in Manchester was also a turning point for both of us. This led to productive collaborations when Mark moved to take up his Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Queensland a year or two later. The Manchester conference was one of the first events to be billed as focusing on the international dimensions of Queer Studies, which had only emerged as a field within studies of gender and sexuality in the early 1990s. While Queer Studies was represented as a method of using the positions of sexual and gender minorities as fulcrum points to reflect critically on hegemonic cultures, its practice in British and American universities in those early years perpetuated Eurocentric perspectives. Those of us who spoke on the Southeast Asia-cum-Japan panel in Manchester in 1999 all experienced the marginalising power of so-called mainstream Anglophone Queer Studies at a visceral level. It was expressed in attitudes of almost total disinterest in, and disregard for, queer peoples beyond Britain and the United States on the part of the large numbers of the largely white conference participants. Our marginalisation also had a spatial dimension. Our panel on Southeast Asia and Japan was assigned to the most remote room on the campus of Manchester University. We were given the smallest room in the most isolated and difficult to locate area. In contrast, speakers from the United States were feted by having their panels allocated to rooms around the university's main quadrangle.

Mark contacted me soon after he arrived in Australia to start his Postdoctoral Fellowship and we reminisced about our joint experience of the marginalisation of Asian Queer Studies, both intellectual and spatial, in Eurocentric Anglophone Queer Studies. Around this time, I had also been in contact with Fran Martin in Melbourne who was working on queer issues in Taiwan as well as Audrey Yue, also in Melbourne, who was finishing her PhD on Sinophone cinema. All of us had experienced the double marginalisation of Asia within Eurocentric Queer Studies as well as of LGBTQ studies within Asian Area Studies. The four of us decided to join forces in Australia to push back against our respective multiple experiences of academic isolation and marginalisation.^[3] We felt that the only way to move forward was to organise our own workshops and conferences. That led to collaborations where we convened a series of workshops and conferences under the banner of the AsiaPacifiQueer Network at universities across Australia: the University of Technology Sydney, the University of Queensland, The Australian National University and the University of Melbourne. As James Welker notes in his contribution here, he first met Mark when he presented a paper at the AsiaPacifiQueer 3 conference that we convened in Melbourne in 2003.

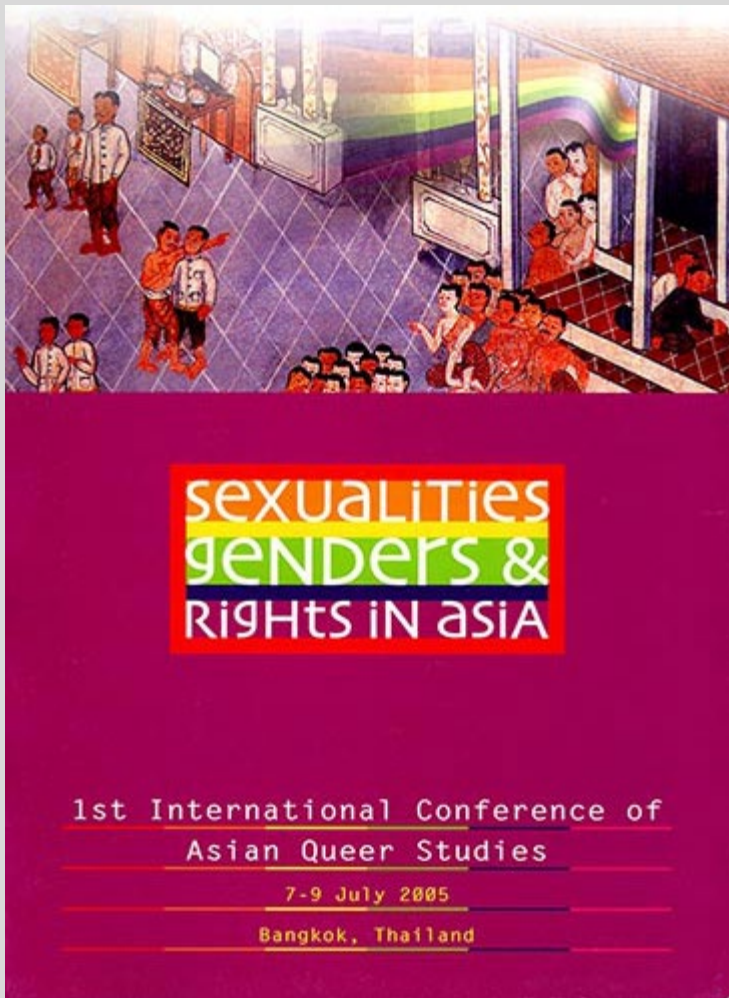


Figure 1. Poster for the First International Conference of Asian Queer Studies, Bangkok, 2005.

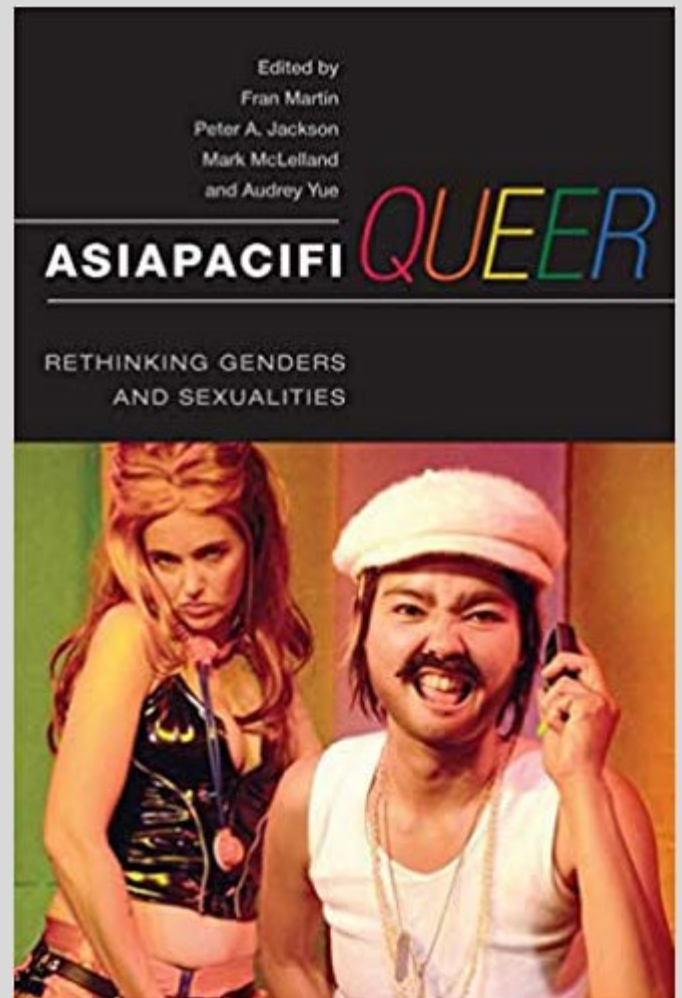


Figure 2. Cover of Fran Martin, Peter Jackson, Mark McLelland and Audrey Yue (eds), *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

Our AsiaPacifiQueer conferences were mostly intimate events with about fifty or sixty participants, but while small they were genuinely important in pushing forward the profile and academic standing of comparative Asian Queer Studies in Australia.^[4] In 2003, Mark, Audrey Yue, Fran Martin and I decided to take the AsiaPacifiQueer Network offshore by convening a panel at the Third International Convention of Asian

Scholars (ICAS), the European-sponsored series of international Asian Studies conferences, which was held in Singapore that year. Audrey Yue—an expatriate Singaporean who was well aware of the island state's heteronormative political and academic culture and its continuing criminalisation of gay sex—wondered whether the powers that be in Singapore would permit a panel on Queer Asia to take place at an international Asian Studies conference. To our collective surprise and relief, our panel was included in the ICAS 3 conference program.^[5]

We once again found, however, that our queer panel was allocated one of the smallest and most remote rooms in the conference convention centre. Nonetheless, by the early years of the new century, comparative Queer Studies was becoming increasingly popular among MA and PhD students across Asia, and large numbers of younger graduate students interested in Asian Queer Studies attended the ICAS 3 conference. We found that the small room allocated for our AsiaPacifiQueer panel, which could seat at most 30 or 40 people, had an overflow audience of more than 80 people who congregated around the door and in the corridor outside. Very quickly, the convention centre staff rushed to dismantle the movable wall that separated the room from the corridor, so that those who were standing in the crowd outside could participate in the panel. While it was a noisy and somewhat disrupted panel, having an overflow crowd of 80 people attend a series of papers that the conference organisers had expected would only attract a small audience was an exhilarating demonstration that Asian Queer Studies had indeed arrived on the international academic stage.^[6]

Many of those who attended the AsiaPacifiQueer panel at ICAS 3 were graduate students from China, Taiwan, Japan and Southeast Asia. They approached Mark, Fran, Audrey and me after the panel and told us that many of them were having great difficulty finding supervisors in their home universities for their proposed graduate research on diverse topics in Asian Queer Studies. Some asked if we might be able to supervise their MAs and PhDs from Australia, which might have been technically possible in some cases but was not a solution for the general lack of supervision in Asian Queer Studies in Asian universities. Instead, we asked the students what would be the most productive thing that we as a group of academics based in Australia could do to support Asian Queer Studies in Asia. The overwhelming response was that convening an international conference under the banner of Asian Queer Studies in an Asian country would give legitimacy to this field in the academies in the region. After much discussion, it was decided that holding such a conference in Thailand would make it accessible to the largest number of participants from the greatest number of Asian countries. While one option was to hold the conference in Taiwan, students from China noted that at that time visa restrictions would have prevented them from participating. Thailand's reputation—deserved or otherwise—as a comparatively queer-friendly country also meant that many from less liberal societies were keen to see an Asian society in which homophobia was less intense than in many East Asian and South Asian cultures. That was the origin of the First International Conference of Asian Queer Studies, which was held in Bangkok in July 2005 as a collaboration between the AsiaPacifiQueer Network and the Centre for Human Rights at Mahidol University. The conference was an outstanding success, with 160 papers and 500 participants.^[7]

To give a further sense of the academic heritage that Mark has bequeathed to comparative Asian Queer Studies, an important outcome of the 2005 Bangkok conference was the establishment of the Queer Asia monograph series by Hong Kong University Press (HKUP) in 2008.^[8] Several scholars who participated in the Bangkok conference—Chris Berry, Helen Leung and John Erni—asked me to join them in proposing a Queer Asia monograph series to Hong Kong University Press. HKUP accepted our proposal largely on the basis that the Bangkok conference had demonstrated the size and diversity of the rapidly developing field of Queer Studies in Asia.

While he specialised on modern Japanese history and society, Mark McLelland's contribution was much broader. Mark was always interested in and supportive of comparative Queer Asian studies and his perspectives were never limited to Japan or Northeast Asia. Mark's contribution was to a wide range of

initiatives across the region. It is so sad that Mark has left us much, much too soon. We now miss his often- iconoclastic impatience with neat boundaries of nationalist history and single-country perspectives.

On a more personal note, while Mark did not always talk about it much, he was very interested in Buddhism and practised meditation regularly. We also compared notes on Buddhism in Japan and Thailand, as my own graduate studies had been on modernising reforms in Thai Buddhism. Towards the end, as he became ill, I had an increasing sense that Mark was embodying impermanence, that he was taking the Buddhist teaching and attitude of impermanence into a recognition and acknowledgement of his own approach to finality.^[9] That is my final memory of Mark, of his openness not only to life but also to the end of life, and all that comes with that.

Mark, wherever you are, we're really missing you a lot. We appreciate everything that you contributed to across the world. Even though you may have felt excluded in your hometown of Manchester and in other places, you managed to continually push the boundaries, even towards the end of your own life. So, Mark, thank you so very much.

Notes

[1] Mark McLelland, 'Homosexuality and the Japanese media,' doctoral dissertation, Japanese Studies, University of Hong Kong, 2000.

[2] Peter A. Jackson, *Male Homosexuality in Thailand: An Interpretation of Contemporary Thai Sources*, New York: Global Academic Publishers, 1990. A revised and updated version of this book was published as: Peter A. Jackson, *First Queer Voices From Thailand: Uncle Go's Advice Columns for Gays, Lesbians and Kathoey*s, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016, doi: [10.5790/hongkong/9789888083268.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888083268.001.0001).

[3] The marginalisation of Asian queer studies within Eurocentric Anglo-American queer studies is detailed in: Peter A. Jackson, Fran Martin and Mark McLelland, 'Re-placing queer studies: Reflections on the Queer Matters conference (King's College, London, May 2004),' *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6(2) (2005): 299–311, doi: [10.1080/14649370500066035](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370500066035).

[4] For a summary of the background to the first AsiaPacifiQueer conference held in 2001, see: Peter Jackson and Mark McLelland, 'Introduction: Special AsiaPacifiQueer issue,' *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, 6 (August 2001), URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue6/introduction.html>, accessed 19 June 2021.

[5] By contrast, it proved difficult to mount a panel including LGBT activists at a later ICAS Conference in Kuala Lumpur in 2007. The panel was replaced with a visit by some ICAS delegates to a local non-governmental organisation engaged with LGBT issues (personal communication, Vera Mackie). For readers not familiar with the situation in Singapore and Malaysia, like other former British colonies, they had inherited the British anti-sodomy laws. See Michael Kirby, 'The Sodomy Offence: England's least lovely criminal law export?,' *Journal of Commonwealth Criminal Law* 1: 22–43.

[6] A summary of the background to the AsiaPacifiQueer Network and key issues dealt with at the conferences and workshops convened by its members in the early 2000s is included in the edited collection: Peter A Jackson, Fran Martin, Mark McLelland and Audrey Yue (eds), *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Gender and Sexuality in the Asia-Pacific*, Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

[7] James Welker and Lucetta Kam reflect on the First International Conference of Asian Queer Studies and introduce some papers presented at the conference in James Welker and Lucetta Kam, 'Of queer import(s): Sexualities, genders and rights in Asia,' special issue of *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, 14 (November 2006), URL: http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14_contents.htm, accessed 19 June 2021.

[8] For details of the books published in Hong Kong University Press's Queer Asia monograph series, see Hong Kong University Press, URL: <https://hkupress.hku.hk/pro/fnd/results.php?t=s&v=1014>, accessed 19 June 2021.

[9] For a reformist Buddhist take on the religion's teachings on impermanence and other central doctrines, see Peter Jackson, *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003.

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue46/jackson.html>

© Copyright

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#)

Last modified: 16 Dec. 2021 1003