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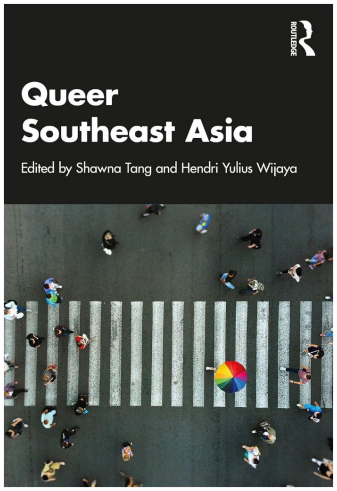

Shawna Tang and Hendri Yulius Wijaya (eds)

Queer Southeast Asia

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reviewed by Lillian Nguyen

Queer Southeast Asia brings together a collection of scholarly works that examines queer developments in the fluid region of Southeast Asia. This book is intended for students and scholars who are interested in gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia and those who seek an understanding of queerness beyond the West while shifting away from the East Asian and South Asian perspectives that tend to inundate broader conversations about Asia. Editors, Shawna Tang and Hendri Yulius Wijaya, introduce the book with contextual and critical framings that guide the intentions of *Queer Southeast Asia,* moving away from the rigidness of traditional Area Studies.

The editors lay out the context first by establishing their positionalities as Southeast Asian postcolonial and migrant subjects on the stolen and institutionalised land of the Indigenous Gadigal people of Eora Nation (Sydney, Australia). They then describe the history of Asian Studies and Queer Studies, both of which had disciplinary (and sociopolitical) tensions with the intersectional Queer Asian Studies when it emerged in the early 2000s with the formation of the AsiaPacifiQueer Network.

Critical layers of Queer Theory, particularly Queer of Colour Critique, inform their Inter-Asia approach. References to critical texts such as David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz's *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?*[1] demonstrate a keen sense of 'queer' in which the meaning is continuously evolving through time and across space. In favour of a mobility of

[1] David L. Eng with Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, 'What's Queer About Queer Studies?' *Social Text*, vol. 23, nos 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2005): 1–18.

reference, they acknowledge the potential obsolescence and dynamic nature of 'queer' but challenge the idea of a stable spatio-temporality of 'queer Asia.' This highlights the interconnectedness and porousness of regions as a result of shifting relations along multiple spatio-temporal scales. Overall, the editors and contributing authors apply from Queer Studies a deconstructive, anti-normative, and anti-identitarian approach to make sense of a queer Asia that counters the need for regional coherence, character, and strict contours. These applications allow for intersectional possibilities and fluidity with their Inter-Asia approach to queer Southeast Asia by de-essentialising what has been established in traditional Area Studies and decentring western and Anglo-American queer knowledge.

This book pushes for a redefinition of Southeast Asia through queering, resisting emphasis of the perspective of the Global North that views them through westernised understandings of 'the Oriental.' Southeast Asia puzzles scholars with its unique history of non-European domination and encounters with the American empire, yet it is often defined in Area Studies restricted by the qualities of the neighbouring East Asian and South Asian regions. Narratives of Queer Asia area re-examined in the Southeast Asian context, reveal nuanced connections and departures in the impacts of distinct histories of colonialism and capitalist exploitations, ideas of utopias for queer modernity and liberation, and roles of the nation-state in surveillance and control of fluidities.

The influence of colonisation and capitalism has and continues to complicate queer conceptions in Southeast Asia. Such complexity is examined in the first chapter by Benjamin Hegarty, 'An Inter-Asia History of Transpuan in Indonesia.' In the Indonesian context, the terms 'trans woman,' 'transgender,' 'transpuan,'[2] and 'waria'[3] all emerged in relation to one another through spatio-temporal developments and have different social and political connotations in varying moments in time. Despite the intentions of inclusivity and visibility in the emergence of these terms, categorisation and labelling are complex political acts that may be exclusive or monolithic in their bounded definitions. In 'Queer Vietnam: Early Notes from Sexuality Studies to Activism,' Daniel Tsang writes that the uncritical adoption of western terminology may risk exclusion and lack cultural specificity. The term 'LGBT' was adopted as queer activism rapidly developed with the influence of western funding on sexuality research in Vietnam. However, amidst the rapid development was also the rush to gain acceptance from the nation-state in ways that may compromise the queering of Vietnamese sexuality to accommodate dominant perspectives of sexuality from the West.

[2] 'Transpuan' combines the first syllable of the English word 'transgender' and last syllable of one Indonesian word for 'woman' (perempuan). This term was considered a respectful replacement for the term 'waria.'

[3] 'Waria' combines the Indonesian words 'wanita' (woman) and 'pria' (man). This term had come to hold a derogatory meaning.

In illustrating the imagined queer utopias that serve as aspirations for queer Southeast Asian communities, the book thoughtfully curates a diversity of perspectives about where that queer utopia might be located. 'Exploring Southeast Asian Queer Migrant Biographies: Queer Utopia, Capacitations, and Debilitations,' written by Quah Ee Ling Sharon and Shawna Tang, highlights the desire to be in a queer-hospitable country for its capacitation opportunities but at the cost paid through social debilitations such as inequality. Not surprisingly, the utopias described in this chapter are shaped by the West with diasporic subjects who have relocated to wealthy Anglo-dominant countries such as Australia, the US, Canada, the UK, and Aotearoa New Zealand. In 'Japanese Queer Popular Culture and the Production of Sexual Knowledge in the Philippines,' authored by Thomas Baudinette, queer utopia is not located in the West but rather in the more proximal East. More specifically, Japanese queer media such as Boys Love and GV (gay videos or gay pornography) has served as an aspirational tool for queer Filipinos and symbolises a rejection of the West as a location for queer liberation. These chapters demonstrate that the West does not always dictate the queer libidinal economy.

Surveillance and control of deviations from the heteronormative is also noted in this book as contributors detail the ways queer Southeast Asians may navigate various institutions. Daryl Yang and Yogesh Tulsi describe the influence of queer activism from Yale University, the 'gay ivy,' on their Singapore campus and their queer students in the chapter, 'When the Gay Ivy Comes to (U)Town: The Globalisation of Higher Education and the Possibilities of Queer Student Activism in Singapore.' While the university itself is considered liberal in its acceptance of queerness, the specific queerphobic political context of Singapore complicates student activist efforts. The strategy of cautious contestations or pragmatic resistance utilised by student activists at the Singapore campus emphasises their balanced needs for survival and solidarity. Also examined in Singapore is the way the government condemns queerness in 'private' spaces, specifically public toilets. Carissa Foo examines toilets as a space for private and intimate activities, yet the same space is also prone to public violation and surveillance by the state through the nuanced ways the law will condemn sexual misconduct dependent on the presence of queerness. In 'Keep Singapore Clean and Chaste: Spatial-Sexual Discipline in Singapore's Toilet Narratives,' the distinctive sociopolitical treatment of voyeuristic violations and consensual cruising in public toilets allude to notions of gendered cleanliness and the complicate the concept of the closet.

Queerness is a timeless tool and was thoughtfully employed in this book to illustrate the diversity of gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia while challenging hegemonic perspectives of the region and its queer culture. Sharyn Graham Davies also recognizes the utility of 'queer' throughout this book in dismantling bounds with hope for a precarious yet liberating sense of flux and fluidity. The precariousness may arise from concerns about inclusivity, such as the authentic representation of regions, peoples, and their lived experiences. Tang and Wijaya present a diverse collection of scholarship to illustrate the flux and fluidity of a queer Southeast Asia, including underrepresented perspectives such as the lesbian experience and the indigeneity

of the Igorot. However, the absence of Khmer, Lao, and Burmese experiences must be noted. The identitarian nature of the labels used for countries and ethnic groups might conflict with the intention to queer our understanding of Southeast Asia. Despite this tension, *Queer Southeast Asia* leaves room for dynamic flux facilitated by queerness and still weaves a collective fabric that can be considered home and community for many and hopefully all.