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Queering the transnational turn: regionalism and queer Asias

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, queer studies has increasingly interrogated the racial and colonial unconscious embedded in the earlier studies of non-normative genders and sexualities through the critical frameworks of queer of color critique and queer diaspora studies. This article aims to 'queer the transnational turn' by considering what critical edge 'regionalism' might bring to the investigation of queer modernities in Asia from both contemporary and historical vantage points. The introductory section of the article provides a broad overview of the 'transnational turn' in queer studies, what we diagnose as the 'area unconscious' of queer studies in its exclusive critique of Western colonial modernity, and the related binary of cultural particularism versus Eurocentric universalism. Alternatively, we argue that the concept of regionalism can be productively mobilized in order to study the various scales of queer sexualities that traffic within and circulate across Southeast Asia, Australia, imperial China, and contemporary Sinophone cultures (Sinitic-language communities on the margins of or outside mainland China). Through a paired reading of Johann S. Lee's Singaporean queer novel, *Peculiar Chris* (1992), and Su Chao-Bin and John Woo's Sinophone martial art film, *The Reign of Assassins* (2010), our inquiry accounts for how the spatial-temporal telos of global queering get materially translated across multiple regional hubs of sexual differences. Queer regionalism in Singapore, China, and the Sinophone worlds encompasses relational dynamics, power differentials, and subnational and supranational linkages. Finally, queering regionalism can open up new analytical frameworks for the study of sexualities and corporealities across transcolonial relations and wider temporal and spatial connections.

Queering el giro transnacional: las Asias queer y el regionalismo

RESUMEN

En años recientes, los estudios queer han interrogado cada vez más el inconsciente racial y colonial enraizado en los estudios anteriores de géneros y sexualidades no-normativos a través de marcos críticos de la crítica queer de color y estudios de diáspora queer. Este artículo apunta a 'queering el giro transnacional' considerando lo que el 'regionalismo' crítico podría brindar a la investigación de las modernidades queer en Asia desde puntos de vista tanto contemporáneos como históricos. La sección introductoria del artículo provee una mirada general del 'giro transnacional' en los estudios queer, que diagnosticamos como un 'área inconsciente' de los estudios queer en su

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crítica exclusiva de la modernidad colonial occidental y el binario relacionado de particularismo cultural vs. universalismo eurocéntrico. Alternativamente, argumentamos que el concepto de regionalismo puede ser movilizad o de manera productiva con el objetivo de estudiar varias escalas de sexualidades queer que viajan dentro y circulan a lo largo del sureste de Asia, Australia, la China imperial y las culturas sinoparlantes contemporáneas (las comunidades con lenguas sínificas en los márgenes de o fuera de la China continental). A través de lecturas paralelas de la novela singapurense queer *Peculiar Chris* (1992) de Johann S. Lee y el film sinófono de artes marciales *Reign of Assassins* (2010), de Su Chao-Bin y John Woo, nuestra investigación explica cómo el telos espacio-temporal del *queering* mundial se traduce materialmente en varios centros regionales de las diferencias sexuales. El regionalismo queer en Singapur, China y los mundos sinoparlantes abarcan dinámicas relacionales, diferencias de poder y enlaces sub y supra nacionales. Finalmente, el *queering* del regionalismo puede abrir nuevos marcos analíticos para el estudio de las sexualidades y corporalidades en las relaciones transcoloniales y conexiones temporales y espaciales más amplias.

将跨国转向酷儿化：区域主义与酷儿亚洲

摘要

近年来，酷儿研究透过酷儿的种族批判和酷儿离散研究之批判架构，逐渐开始探究深植于早期非规范性的性别与性慾研究中的种族与殖民无意识。本文同时从当代与历史的有利视角，透过考量‘区域主义’能够为探究亚洲的酷儿现代性带来什麼批判优势，企图‘酷儿化跨国转向’。本文的引介部分，提供酷儿研究‘跨国转向’的广泛概要，而我们将之诊断为酷儿研究的‘区域无意识’，这是来自于其对西方殖民现代性的专门批判，以及与之相关的文化特殊主义相对于欧洲普遍主义的二元对立。取而代之的是，我们主张能够有效地动员区域主义的概念，用来研究游走并流通于东南亚、澳大利亚、中国帝国与当代华语文化圈（中国大陆边陲或之外的华人文化—语言社群）之中和其间的多重层级的酷儿性慾。我们的探问，透过对新加坡酷儿小说《亚洲男孩》（*Peculiar Chris*）（1992）与苏照彬和吴宇森的华语武术电影《剑雨》（*Reign of Assassins*）（2010）的成对阅读，阐明全球酷儿的时空终极目的，如何在性别差异的多重区域中心之间进行物质上的转移。新加坡、中国与华语世界的酷儿区域主义，包含了关係性动态、权力差异与次国家及超国家的连结。最后，酷儿化区域主义能够为跨殖民关係与更广泛的时空连结的性慾及肉体研究，打开崭新的分析架构。

Transnationalism and its queer troubles

In recent years, a number of new theoretical trends have reoriented queer studies. Specifically, queer theory that grew out of poststructuralist theory (Butler 1993; Foucault 1978; Sedgwick 1990) has increasingly interrogated the racial and colonial unconscious embedded in the earlier studies of non-normative genders and sexualities, providing a more complex account for the intersectional relations between race, colonialism, class, (dis)ability, the nation-state, and late capitalist processes of migration, diasporic formation, and economic ‘globalization’. Critics have put forth two particular analytical models to account for these shifts in disciplinary formations – queer of color critique (e.g. Eng 2001; Ferguson 2003; Muñoz 1999; Somerville 2000) and queer diaspora studies (e.g. Gopinath 2005; Manalansan 1995, 2003; Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 2000). In our invocation here to ‘queer the transnational turn,’ we aim to recalibrate the uses of transnationalism as an unquestioned dominant framework within queer studies and consider what critical edge ‘queer regionalism’ might bring to the investigation of queer modernities in Asia from both contemporary and historical vantage points.

First, some elaborations on the distinctions between transnationalism, regionalism, and the turn to 'queer regionalism' are in order. While transnationalism broadly refers to the movements of peoples, goods, and ideas that cross national boundaries that have been in practice since as early as the Indian Ocean trade dating back to the third century, economic globalization typically refers to the accelerated intensification of economic, cultural, and technological flows since the global turn to neoliberalism during the late 1970s (Harvey 2005). Yet, even as the term transnationalism becomes a useful category of analysis across the social sciences and the humanities, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan also caution against the flattened use of transnationalism in sexuality and queer studies. They contend that while the salience of 'transnational sexuality' as an analytical lens rests partly in how the term invokes the 'specifics of sexualities in postmodernity,' its close enmeshments in neocolonial queer tourism, and sexuality-based asylum from the developing world to the United States and Europe problematically reproduce narratives of global mobility as 'the movement from repression to freedom' (2001, 664, 670).

In fact, the now established turn to transnationalism in queer studies emerges precisely out of a desire to counter a Eurocentric version of gay and lesbian studies; however, its heavy reliance on the intersectional and diaspora models developed out of US-based ethnic studies also means that while 'such analyses create alternative queer narratives within the global north, diasporic queer critiques of Western hegemony still pivot on the first world' (Wilson 2006). Likewise, Gayatri Gopinath, while in her earlier work theorizes the model of queer diaspora, also recently invokes the concept of 'queer region' to name 'an alternative mapping of sexual geographies that links disparate transnational locations' often elided by the exclusive focus on the local, the national, and the global (2007, 343). Here, we wish to contribute to this emergent conversation about the entanglement of queerness with the regional by showing how the conventional economic sense of regionalism can be queered when the regional is theorized as that which troubles the dominant narratives of 'Asia' in colonial history. The dominant historical narrative frames 'Asia' as a macro-region connected to, and impacted by, the British empire of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, French Indo-China and colonialism in Southeast Asia, and the new American empire in the twentieth century, further connecting distinct sites like Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines exclusively through the logics of Euro-American empire formations.

In contradistinction, our departing premise is that gender, racial, and queer cultural formations do not merely follow the vertical logics of colonial modernity. For example, once non-Western and non-white colonized subjects such as the Tamils, Hindus, Malays, and Chinese migrated to a British colonial site like Singapore in the early nineteenth century, new racial and gender logics placed Singaporean Chinese as a dominant class, resulting in contemporary queer politics that often marginalize queer Singaporean Indian men as a double minority (Phillips 2012). Queer regionalism reckons with the vertical logics of Euro-American empire, but at the same time a queer regional model signals greater attention to less orderly, bilateral, and horizontal intra-regional traffics of queerness across different countries and regions in Asia. Queer regionalism in this sense resonates with what Francoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih term 'minor transnationalism,' which describes 'less scripted and more scattered' forms of minor-to-minor transnationalism 'without necessary mediation by the center' (2005, 5).

In framing 'Asia' through queer regionalism, such a theoretical move also critically unbinds regionalism from its strictly economic meaning of intra-national uneven development in the early incarnation of the concept. In an early formulation of regionalism as denoting uneven patterns of accumulation in intra-national spatial differentiation, Doreen Massey argues that 'region must be constituted *as an effect of analysis*' rather than taken as a given (1978, 110). We take Massey's (1978) caveat seriously and seek to overcome the formalist, functionalist, and strictly economic approaches to regionalism in East Asian historiography (Wigen 1999) by conceptualizing queer regionalism as crisscrossing temporality and spatiality that emerge from within transcolonial encounters. Here, we build on Sara E. Johnson's use of the term transcoloniality in studying the collaboration of black slave subjects under the shadows of French and American empires, but we also relocate the force of transcolonial encounters across imperial China, Southeast Asia, and contemporary Sinophone worlds in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Johnson 2012).

The 'transcolonial' here invokes the intimacies, conflicts, collaboration, and sexual and racial proximity between subjects under different forces of empire, colonialism, and imperial legacy.

Our immediate concern as scholars of modern Chinese and Sinophone cultures (including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Sinitic-language communities in Southeast Asia and beyond) is what we diagnose as the 'area unconscious' within existing dominant forms of queer studies, in which certain geographical areas, nations, and regions within the purview of European and American empires get studied and easily recognized. Furthermore, these 'areas' are often oriented toward, and revolved around, critiques of US empire and European colonial modernity. Unfortunately, postcolonial critiques of US empire and European colonial modernity leave out many regions of the world in which European and American empires gained uneven and incomplete footholds (e.g. in semicolonial China, transcolonial Taiwan, and to a lesser extent the Indian Ocean). The lack of European colonialism converged with earlier developments of queer capitalism, such as in Bangkok's brothel economies, that are more national, local, and regional in scales (Jackson 2009). Alternatively, we argue that regionalism can be productively mobilized in order to study the various scales of queer sexualities that traffic within and circulate across Southeast Asia, Australia, imperial China, and contemporary Sinophone cultures. We also bear in mind the caveat that the turn to regionalism does not automatically yield a more 'accurate' picture of queer transnationalism at work. Rather, queer regionalism can potentially counter the 'area unconscious' of queer studies in order to allow for gender and sexual modernities in 'other Asias' to actualize both objects of studies and conceptual paradigms for queer theory (Spivak 2008).

In theorizing queer regionalism, we acknowledge that regionalism is a terminology that spills over from social science to the humanities; furthermore, its usage can be traced to European integration theory and the establishment of the European Union (Soderbaum 2012). Within the context of East and Southeast Asia, it finds new vitality in the geopolitical goals of intra-regional stability through an organization like ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), in formal and informal trade agreements between China and Taiwan, and in new conservative culturalism like 'Asian values' in Singapore (Rozman 2012). Curiously enough, in most social scientific and policy-driven discussions of regionalism, gender only receives analytical attention when it deals with the advocacy of 'women's rights as human rights.' Rarely do scholarly studies on LGBT NGOs or sexual economic justice enter into the general theorization of regionalism (Barlow 2007). Also, as Jon Binnie points out in his contribution to this themed issue, regionalism, if it is invoked at all in queer studies, tends to be heavily associated with non-metropolitan spaces and provincialism, thus reproducing a certain 'regional essentialism.' For all these reasons, we argue that the critical promise of queer regionalism lies precisely in its refusal to frame scalar units in a pre-defined way. Indeed, the elasticity in both the regional and the queer defies unifying and coherent scalar units.

In order to trace the multifarious modes of queer regionalism that do not always travel from the Global South to queer diasporas in the West, our turn to queer regionalism usefully expands on Gopinath's original conception of queer regions to denote 'the particularities of gender and sexual logics in spaces that exist in a tangential relation to the nation' (2007, 343). Extending Gopinath's model of queer regionalism, we suggest that queer studies can sustain a more creative dialogue with newer forms of sexuality studies within area studies. This transdisciplinary conversation can lead to closer attentions to other global queer modernities that are currently under-examined in queer theory, including nation-based queer formations in the Global South, pre-European colonial forms of modern gay capitals and lexicon, and intensive knowledge of queer commonalities in gender variance across Southeast Asia that are both national and archipelagic (Blackwood 2010; Boellstorff 2005). The regional articulated as such helps shed light on how queerness exists alongside the multiracial transcolonial history of Chinese labor migration to Southeast Asia, Indian indentured labor in British colonial Singapore, and the shared conflation of male and female homosexualities with transgenderism across Thailand and the Philippines (Garcia and Neil 2008; Johnson, Jackson, and Herdt 2000).

If queer studies was to commit fully to a non-Eurocentric perspective, certain nation-based capitalism and region-to-region circuits of queerness outside the West can become the 'method' of queer theory too, instead of remaining as merely the empirical 'object' of study within area studies formation severed

from 'theory' proper (Chen 2010). The critical promise of queer regionalism lies in its possibility in overcoming the Gordian knot which pits theory against area studies and ethnic studies, or perpetuates 'the myth of (Western-derived) theoretical frameworks as general and universal and of local (non-Western) cultures as merely local and particular' (Martin et al. 2008, 15). This article situates queer regionalism within the 'other Asias' of Singapore's queer inter-regional connections and explores queer historical connections nested between imperial China and contemporary Sinophone sites. In particular, we will deconstruct the 'area unconscious' of queer studies through a paired reading of Johann S. Lee's novel *Peculiar Chris* (1992), which holds the fame of 'Singapore's first gay novel,' and the representational meanings of late imperial Chinese eunuchism in Su Chao-Bin (蘇照彬) and John Woo's (吳宇森) Sinophone martial art film, *Reign of Assassins* (2010). Through this unconventional and entangled juxtaposition of queer Southeast Asia with cross-historical renditions of queer Chineseness, we wish to account for how notions of tradition, modernity, sexual progressiveness, and the spatial-temporal telos of global queering get translated materially within and across multiple regional hubs of sexual differences. Such a critical turn to traffics of sexualities across regions and deep time in 'Asia' can illuminate the necessity for why future directions in queer studies must attend to the uneven temporal and spatial calculus of queerness congealing within the grids and gradations of geographical regions outside 'the West' (Dimock 2001).

Coming out in queer Singapore: thinking scales in regional sexual differences

Johann S. Lee wrote *Peculiar Chris* at the age of 21, making the novel both his and Singapore's very own debut of queer writing. In the 'Foreword' to the novel, Lee candidly acknowledges the difficulty facing him as a young writer scripting an LGBT-themed novel for the first time in the nation. He laments that in the Western gay canon, queer authors can develop plot beyond a conventional 'coming out' narrative. 'But no such liberty exists in our country. For this reason, what you are about to read is in one sense, extremely new and yet, in another, very passé' (Lee 1992, v). Lee's disclaimer about the clichés of the 'coming out' genre in many ways parallels the plot, stylistic convention, and character developments in the novel. The protagonist Chris is 'peculiar' not because he is so queerly at odds with the normative sector of society, but precisely because he could blend in quite effortlessly within the spirit of orderly heteronormative masculinity at a junior college. He is 'five feet eleven inches tall, good-looking, and the captain of the swim team' (2–3). Like many handsome protagonists of queer narratives, he is mistaken as straight by a beautiful young female classmate called Sylvia only to encounter later his first crush, Ken, who is an exchange scholar from Indonesia and a member of the Society of Dramatic Arts packed with a 'strong jawline' and good looks. Through the diegetic arc, the story detours from Chris's early infatuation with the Indonesian boy only to develop a distinctively 'local' Singaporean gay romance that paradoxically fits neatly with Singaporean national ethos of order, middle-class upward mobility, and cosmopolitan elite Chineseness. The novel ends with Chris's Singaporean Chinese boyfriend Samuel (who is also a Sergeant in the military) dying of AIDS and the queer protagonist traveling to London in pursuit of a law degree.

While previous cultural criticism either reads the novel as conforming to Singaporean nationalist visions of 'order, meritocracy, elitism, family values, and material comfort' (Yeoh 2006, 127), or as illustrative of what Audrey Yue termed 'pragmatic complicity' (2012, 12), our reading acknowledges the homonormative force of the novel while attending to how these Singaporean ethics of 'Asian values' are also anchored through the shifting terrains of regional borders and differences. These scales of regional sexual difference, as we will elaborate, rely on the ways in which Chris cultivates a 'local' Singaporean queer self through rationality, order, and sexual normativity. Moreover, he mediates this Singapore regional-cum-national queer modernity through its 'supposed' relational difference from Indonesian and Malay sexual backwardness on the one hand, and its affinity with Australian liberal queer selfhood on the other. A queer surface reading (Best and Marcus 2009) that attends to how layers of locality, globality, and regionality surface and disappear within the narrative can free us from the hermeneutic of suspicion that would evaluate the novel by how closely it aligns with Western queer liberalism. Instead,

an alternative reading can excavate how the queer economy of Singaporean national values depends on the transcolonial mapping of regional sexual differences within the hub of Asian connections.

The novel cultivates a Sino-Singaporean value system that relegates non-Chinese ethnicity like queer Malay to a more 'backward' zone of sexual regionalism. This construction of queer Singaporean Chineseness vis-a-vis the ethnic other is especially evident in the romantic twists and turns between Chris and Ken. While Chris seems to be dating Sylvia, the chairperson of the Debating Society, things take a much queerer turn as Ken enters into the picture as Chris's first boy crush. An initial description casts Ken as a multicultural embodiment of East meeting West. Chris describes, 'But what held my attention most was his pair of dark and deep-set eyes. Strangely, these separate features which were in themselves characteristically Caucasian, combined to form an indisputably oriental face' (6). Given Ken's purportedly 'Caucasian' looking features, one may even entertain the possibility that Ken might be of creolized and mix-raced descent due to Dutch colonial history in Indonesia. Furthermore, given Ken's possible Malay linguistic root, it is quite logical to read Ken as belonging to the locality of Singapore too due to the recognition of Malay as one of the official, albeit minority, languages (Lee 2011). Yet, a curious twist in the plot literally made Ken disappear from the story because of the 'traditional' practice of matchmaking in Indonesia (or so we are told). After Ken breaks the terrible news to Chris that he will return to Jakarta after the exams are over, Chris expresses his cultural shock in an internal dialogue: 'I was dumbfounded. He, who believed in human rights, civil rights, equal rights and personal freedom, was going to let his family choose his life partner for him. I was shocked. I was at a loss for words' (38).

Chris's cultural shock at the traditional 'backwardness' of arranged marriage, here constructed through Ken but (con) fused with the country of Indonesia and the 'other' regions in Southeast Asia, thus normatively centers Singapore as a country of 'progressive' sexual modernity despite its existence of sodomy law, Section 377A of the Penal Code. Ken does briefly return to Singapore in search of Chris when Chris is already happily coupled with Sergeant Samuel Lye, whom he met during his stint in National Service. Yet, Ken's uneventful return only works to reaffirm Chris's newfound happiness with Samuel as well as his self-congratulatory urge to 'grab him by the shoulders, shake him, and tell him to start learning to live for himself' (173). A reading attuned to the queer regionalism and economies of sexual difference at work can help us unpack the sexual logics of Singaporean Sinocentrism and the political landscape of reproductive eugenics in Singapore's nationalist racial order. The novel's centering of the queer Chinese ethnic couple who are locally Singaporean recalls Shu-Mei Shih's ingenious critique of Sinocentrism in the canonization of love and romance in modern Chinese literature. Shih (2010) argues that Singaporean male suitor and female seductress in romantic modern Chinese fictions like Ding Ling's 'Miss Sophie's Diary' and Zhang Ailing's stories often function as the less desirable foils to the uprightly modern 'Chinese' subjects. Shih notes that 'the protagonists incorporate and reject the modernity of the not-so-Chinese Singaporeans, who are more desirable because they are more modern and 'forthcoming,' but who are deemed less moral and less 'Chinese' for precisely the same reason' (2010, 481). Interestingly, as a queer Singaporean narrative, *Peculiar Chris* repeats the very simultaneously incorporative and externalizing logics that Shih locates in the genre of modern Chinese literature, only this time around the externalized others are the queer subjects from the sexual *sub-region* of Southeast Asia rather than Singapore itself.

Another queer regionalist perspective would insist that a character like Ken is not so foreign after all. In fact, given Singapore's colonial historical identity as a British entrepôt, the mass transporting of Indian convict laborers first to Bencoolen in Sumatra and later to British Singapore (Rai 2004), the development of rubber plantations, and the subsequent multicultural inclusion of Indians and Malays alongside the Chinese as national subjects, Ken as a queer Indonesian can equally be read as *internal* to the very transcolonial fabric of Singaporean queerness. In his fluctuating positionality of being an external regional other and an internal national other, Ken's queer subjecthood marks the very boundary through which a Sinocentric Singaporean queer subject like Chris can emerge. Finally, such queer anxiety around sexuality, regional otherness, and national exclusion is intimately tied to the reproductive logics of Singaporean nationalism as well. Specifically, Lee Kuan Yew the Prime Minister consolidated a series of reproductive reforms and mandates beginning in 1983 that encouraged 'graduate mothers' of

Chinese descent to reproduce more talented babies for the nation while warning the threat of excessive reproduction by 'less intelligent' Malay and Indian Singaporean mothers (Heng and Devan 1992). *Peculiar Chris's* queer, colonial, and racializing logics thus bespeak an urgent need for queer studies to attend to how sexual politics, queer cultural productions, and regional ethnic and racial differences operate not only through a local/global lens, but more materially through transcolonial power dynamics as well.

If the novel challenges the area unconscious of queerness through its layered multiplicity of regions, racial hierarchies, and Singaporean Sinocentrism, it equally complicates the many 'areas' within East-West global queer modernity by questioning the assumed trajectory of queer Asian migrations to the 'West.' To provide some context to understand Chris's migratory route and the novel's implication about Singapore's queer regionalism, we will briefly summarize the rapid unfolding of the plot shortly before and after Chris and Samuel became lovers. Before Chris found out that Samuel, his superior in military training, is gay and fell in love with him, he traveled to Sydney and embarked on a sexscape with Jack, a white Australian 'whose blondness was almost translucent' (110). Chris's one-night stand with Jack marks his rite of passage into sexual knowledge, and subsequently Jack's back-and-forth letter exchange with Chris would console him upon the impending death of Samuel due to the contraction of HIV during a blood transfusion after a serious car accident. After Samuel's death, Chris embarks on yet another transnational journey to attend law school in King's College London. While on the plane, just when Chris drops his copy of E. M. Forster's queer novel *Maurice*, a possibly gay Chinese man picks it up and introduces himself as Kuang Ming. The novel ends on this strangely optimistic note.

Previous work by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim on Singaporean literature within Southeast Asian modernism reads how *Peculiar Chris* 'begins with the closed world of Singapore prejudices and is able to break out of it only through deterritorialized flights to a Western global space, first to Sydney and finally to London' (2003, 215). Reframed in a queer regional perspective, we suggest that Australia cannot be so easily aligned with a dominant 'white' version of global queer modernity. In fact, recent work by scholars invested in the transdisciplinary formation of queer Asian studies turn specifically to Australia as a site of promising regionalism because 'Australia is not only south of the West, it is also south of Asia' (Martin et al. 2008, 5). Furthermore, Australia's ambivalent position – as both a racially white dominant site and a geopolitically Asia Pacific-oriented economy in the post-1973 White Australia era – altogether marks 'the West' as a shifting signifier in the novel and within the geopolitical imaginary of queer Asias more broadly. Finally, Lee's decision to end the novel by staging a chance encounter for Chris with the global diasporic Chinese subject has the effect of queering the Singaporean migration route to the West through a Chinese boomerang, in which London-calling may well turn out to be yet another queer Chinese homecoming. Theorizing queer regionalism in this mode enables a way of doing transnational queer studies that attends to local, national, colonial, and global configurations of racial and sexual differences on multiple registers.

Castration in Sinophone cinema: embodied representations, historicity incarnate

In extending our interrogation of the area unconscious of queer studies, the rest of this article draws on the example of castration to bring to light a more axial and yet historically grounded form of queer reading that breaks away from the static binary formulation of 'China versus the West.' Shih (2007, 2010, 2011, 2013) has recently introduced the concept of the Sinophone, echoing but not identical to Anglophone and Francophone theory, to refer to Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside of China or on the margins of China and Chineseness. Sinophone communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, among other places, are situated within a highly volatile political context that *provincializes* continental China (Chiang 2013). The tactical switch in epistemic categorization from the Chinese to the Sinophone re-envision some of the ongoing *straight-forward* blind spots in traditional area studies disciplines, making the Sinophone essentially a queer concept. For instance, Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo have re-conceptualized Chinese diasporic filmic productions in terms of the new theoretical framework of Sinophone cinemas 'in order to re-engage new sites of localization, multilingualism and difference that have emerged in Chinese film studies but that are not easily contained by the notion of diaspora'

(2014, 5). Chiang and Heinrich (2013) have similarly called for a more theoretically robust approach, exceeding the vague formulation of 'transnational Chinese,' to shed light on 'a unique transregional register of queer historicity and meaning at once produced by and generating the very cultural parameters of China and Chineseness' (Chiang 2013, 20; see also Martin 2014). Building on such methodological departures from diasporic or China-centered cultural analysis, this section focuses on the appropriation of late imperial Chinese eunuchism in contemporary Sinophone films in order to highlight how Chineseness can be queered and mobilized in a heterogeneous fashion, both intra-regionally within Asia and exterior to the West. Above all, this cultural reworking of corporeal signification bears witness to the ways in which 'China,' itself an evolving geobody, mutates as both a political signifier and a regional imaginary across time and space (Winichakul 1994).

Although there have been many attempts to deconstruct the critical conceptualizations of Asia as a region in various historical communities since the late nineteenth century, these otherwise innovative efforts often lack sustained treatments of queer topics, examples, or perspectives (Duara 2010; Karl 1998; Wang 2010). Rather than construing China as a queer region, a key objective of this section is to bring queer theoretical inquiry to bear on historicizing the regionalization of Asia. It argues that the project of queer(ing) regionalism opens up an analytical horizon that underscores the way queerness oftentimes indexes history as a source of cultural yearning, desire, and legibility. In particular, through the cross-historical resonances of eunuch corporeality, 'Asia' and 'region' gain epistemic foothold by way of appropriating subversive symbols of the Chinese imperial past. In fact, the way that China is embodied by the contemporary incarnations of eunuchism points to a transgenerating of Chinese history that, at the same time, calls attention to the problematic Eurocentric universalism of the very category of transgenderism itself (Stryker 2012).

In an essay called 'Sinophone Production and Trans Postcoloniality,' one of us posited a genealogy of sex change in China from the demise of eunuchism in the late Qing period to the emergence of transsexuality in postwar Taiwan (Chiang 2011).¹ This narrative rests on the extinction of Chinese eunuchs in the face of China's alleged modernization against both foreign imperial encroachment and the lingering shadow of domestic feudal traditions. Indeed, the historical demise of eunuchism in the early twentieth century marked a transitional phase, when the castrated male body, women's bound feet, and the leper's crippled body all seemed out of sync with the Chinese body politic at large (Chiang 2012; Ko 2005; Leung 2009). The transcultural traffic of these corporeal 'types' culminated from a longer historical process whereby the Chinese empire and body came to be associated with a distinctively pathological identity, as manifested in the trope of 'the Sick Man of Asia' that China inherited from the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century (Heinrich 2008; Yang 2010). The last Chinese eunuch, Sun Yaoting, died in 1996, and his biography – translated into English in 2008 – has enabled the global reach of the circulation of stories about the experience of the eunuchs of the last Chinese dynasty (Jia 2008). Despite the physical death of Qing eunuchs, castrated figures continue to fascinate popular cultural producers and consumers, and contemporary Sinophone cinema presents many examples of the cultural imaginary of the embodied castrated experience, especially in *wuxia* (武俠, martial arts) films. By performing a close reading of the *Reign of Assassins* (2010), directed by the Taiwanese director Su Chao-Bin and produced by the Hong Kong-based John Woo, the following analysis utilizes transgender theory to analyze the representations and historicity of castration and situate it within a broader horizon of body modification practices in Sinophone cinema. Our inquiry seeks to shed light on an 'intercorporeal politics' between the anti-eunuch sentiment of the late Qing and the vilification of castrated men in contemporary global culture. An underlying logic of historical change emerges from China's self-repositioning in the course of the twentieth century: from being victims to agents of imperial formation. The concept of embodiment figures centrally in this appreciation, because, as we will see, the queer regionalism of China is itself embodied by the very corporeality of the eunuch protagonist in the film. Our reading of the film therefore advances a theoretical-structural correlation between the body biopolitical and the body geopolitical.

Set in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the *Reign of Assassins* tells the story of an assassin gang, called the Dark Stone, whose goal is to collect all of the mummified remains of an Indian Buddhist monk,

Bodhi. Legend has it that Bodhi's remains, when unified, carry a kind of mystical power that allows the possessor to practice an insurmountable form of martial art and thereby dominate the world. The Dark Stone gang's leader, Cao Feng, is an accomplished martial artist and the master of the gang's top assassin, Drizzle. In a mission, Drizzle collects half of Bodhi's remains from Prime Minister Zhang and kills his family. However, Zhang's son, Zhang Renfong, gets away, while Drizzle, enlightened by a monk, decides to leave the Dark Stone for good and buries Bodhi's remains in a temple. Hoping to cut off from her old way of life, Drizzle turns to a famous surgeon who changes her appearance. With a new identity, Drizzle eventually marries a man, who turns out to be none other than Zhang Renfong himself, now with a new look and a new name after a changeover by the same surgeon that operated on Drizzle. Meanwhile, the leader of the Dark Stone, Cao, recruits and trains a new female assassin, Turquoise, a merciless girl who murdered her fiancé and in-laws on her wedding night. The bulk of the plot uncoils as the Dark Stone gang pursues a rigorous search for Drizzle and the missing half of Bodhi's remains.

In one of the most climactic and shocking moments in the film, Cao Feng is revealed to be a eunuch who has served the imperial palace for over five decades, but remains the lowest rank of the nine-grade system of public servants. His intention in tracking down and unifying the two halves of Bodhi's bodily remains is to stimulate the regrowth of his phallic organ by way of acquiring the mystical power promised by Bodhi's cadaver – in short, to reinstate his biological manhood. Evidently, the story unfolds with all of its major protagonists carrying a *dual identity*. The film opens with Drizzle attempting to kill Zhang Renfong, but the two enemies go on to become husband and wife with new names and appearances not long after their respective plastic surgeries. Turquoise changes from an average girl into a powerful assassin after being recruited into the Dark Stone and, trained under Cao, becomes Drizzle's bona fide replacement in the team. Throughout the film, Cao embodies two opposing social statuses, standing at both the top of the Dark Stone gang and the bottom of the Chinese imperial court (though the latter is revealed late in the film). Incidentally, Ming China is notorious for being one of the historical epochs during which eunuchs wielded an unprecedented, enormous measure of political power (Tsai 1996). When mapped onto Cao's martial art invincibility, this form of political threat to the Chinese world order served precisely as the historical backdrop against which the condemning rhetoric of eunuchs began to accumulate over the course of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The demonization of Cao in the *Reign of Assassins*, therefore, strikes resonance with the culmination of an anti-eunuch sentiment emerging from the waning decades of the Qing imperium.

Ultimately, the various transmutations of identity and the historical and cultural weight they carry in the *Reign of Assassins* revolve around – and therefore must be decoded through the lens of – material corporeal change. In order to analyze the various bodily and subjective transformations in the film, the concept of 'transmogrification' proposed by Sullivan (2006) provides a valuable framework for unpacking the meanings of eunuchism. By assigning the term a new critical theoretical edge, Sullivan undermines the exceptionality of any given type of body modification and, by extension, the moralistic tendency to dichotomize forms of embodiment by which oppositions are set up between, for instance, transsexualism and transgenderism, cosmetic surgery and 'non-mainstream' body modification, conforming and subversive corporeal changes, or 'bad' and 'good' practices.² In considering all forms of body modification as distinct manifestations of 'transmogrification,' which she defines as 'a process of (un)becoming strange and/or grotesque, of (un)becoming other,' Sullivan makes room for acknowledging 'important similarities, overlaps, resonances, and intersections between a range of modified bodies' (561). The trope of transmogrification helps us recognize and theorize the connections across a range of embodied transformations in the film on a continuum, suggesting that Cao's castrated (un)becoming cannot be isolated as the apogee of its narrative development. Structurally, this would merely reproduce the phallogocentric rationale behind the Dark Stone's mission. Rather, in light of the relatively minimal representations of Cao's castration throughout the film, a queer reading practice, drawing on the concept of transmogrification, immerses the signification of castration in deep relations to other examples of embodied and experiential change.

In the *Reign of Assassins*, the very notion of transmogrification demarcates the boundaries between dead and vital bodies. Whereas every living character participates in processes of transmogrification,

the most prominent dead body in the film – Bodhi’s mummified remains – operates along a radically different axis of symbolism. Namely, Bodhi’s dead body presents itself as a token of exchange, legislating and circulating within a moral economy of the common martial world in which the Dark Stone gang thrives.³ The belief that the unification of Bodhi’s remains promises an invincible form of martial art makes it the ultimate asset sought after by the most powerful fighters. The fact that the Dark Stone gang has been able to secure both parts of the remains, though the second half is hidden by Drizzle after she forsakes the team, implies that its leader, Cao Feng, is probably the strongest figure within the broader community of those martial artists who are interested in the acquisition of Bodhi’s cadaver. Simply put, whoever puts his or her hand on Bodhi’s dead body is honored with the recognition of being the most vicious martial artist in existence. This moral economy determines the fate of Bodhi’s dead body – how and where it travels – as well as what it signifies with respect to the living persons who possess it. Note that Bodhi’s remains do not undergo a process of transmutation. They simply go through processes of becoming and un-becoming in relation to the vital bodies that acquire or surrender them, and their social signification functions within a moral economy that dignifies superior martial art skills and justifies its varying proximity to different martial artists. This moral economy of life and death in *wuxia tianxia* (天下, all under heaven) pronounces a queer form of regionalism in representing and recuperating the dynastic Chinese imperium. China, the cultural home to *wuxia tianxia*, is intentionally depicted as a regionalized possibility of queerness insofar as it is articulated within the apparatus of Sinophone cultural production and routed through the martial art prowess of the eunuch Cao, demonstrating the embodiment of geopolitical marginality in the figuration of gender alterity.

In contrast to dead bodies, living bodies in the film always express themselves via transmutation. Both Drizzle and Zhang, for example, seek a form of medical procedure in ancient China known as the ‘art of disguise’ (*yirongshu*, 易容術), which radically transforms a person’s physical (usually facial) appearance and bears close resemblance to modern plastic surgery. Through this invasive type of body modification, Drizzle and Zhang acquire not only new sets of appearance, but also a distinctively new identity. Drizzle’s replacement in the Dark Stone, Turquoise, experiences a slightly different kind of embodied transformation: turning from a merciless girl into a fearless female assassin (and even a hypersexual object of desire). Interestingly, the Dark Stone recruits Turquoise by feeding her a pill known as *guixidan* (歸西丹), which suppresses all metabolic processes of the living body and thereby making it appear dead for an extended period of time. After the local magistrate disposes of her seemingly deceased body, Cao collects her after the effects of *guixidan* dissipates and says to her that ‘since I am the person who gave you a new life, you must do what I say from now on.’ From that point onward, Turquoise becomes Drizzle’s replacement – the only female assassin within the core group of the Dark Stone.

And Cao himself self-imposes transmutation by lowering his voice every time he makes a presence in front of the gang, mutating from a female-sounding low-ranking eunuch to the most powerful martial artist taking charge of the Dark Stone. In fact, throughout the first half of the film, the non-eunuch Cao always appears on screen with a veil covering his face. With such visual and aural alterations, Cao’s masculine identity would go unchallenged until his castrated body is discovered by Turquoise. If the ‘art of disguise’ relocates Drizzle and Zhang from within to outside the moral economy of the common martial world, Cao’s hunt for Bodhi’s remains allows him to capitalize the measures of just and respectability underlying the very same moral economy. We can even add here that the ultimate goal of Cao is to undo his constant self-imposed transmutation through an ultimate one-time transmutation – to abolish the constant switching between the role of a eunuch and being the Dark Stone leader by reversing his castration permanently.

The concept of transmutation further enables us to draw comparisons beyond the *Reign of Assassins*. Indeed, there are similar, well-known examples of transmutation in earlier Sinophone films. The most famous of these is perhaps the male-to-female transformation of the Dongfang Bubai character in Tsui Hark’s *Swordsman 2* (1992). Helen Leung has argued that in this loose filmic adaptation of Jin Yong’s 1967 novel, *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* (*Xiao’ao jianghu*, 笑傲江湖), the casting of Brigitte Lin, an actress famous for her immense beauty, exemplifies a genuine attempt to enable certain aspects of transsexual subjectivity to emerge on screen (Leung 2008, 71–77). Above all, the telling differences

between the novel (written in the Maoist era) and its cinematic rendering (produced in the context of increasing queer visibility in Hong Kong) challenge other homonormative critiques of the film (as articulated variously by Chou [1995, 300], Yau [1996, 165–166], among others). Whereas Dongfang Bubai dies within a chapter in the four-volume novel, she becomes the most prominent character in the film, usurping even the limelight of the male protagonist Linghu Chong. With its plot revolving around Dongfang Bubai's transmogrification, *Swordsman 2* also departs from the original novel by orchestrating an erotically charged relationship between Dongfang Bubai and Linghu Chong. The casting of Brigitte Lin is significant in this regard, because it allows Dongfang Bubai to reemerge on screen as a beautiful woman, no longer a half-castrated man.⁴

In conclusion, it is worth noting that castration in either the *Reign of Assassins* or *Swordsman 2* is overwhelmingly represented through the embodied experience of martial art prowess, a narrative technique employed in Sinophone cinema to distinguish the gender liminality of eunuchs. This personification of unconventionalality enables castrated men to exhibit extraordinary skills superior to other gender 'normal' characters in the film, but, at the same time, provides the very condition for the demonization of their social role and status. In Sinophone films, eunuchs and castrated figures resemble subjects of what Stryker (1994) calls 'transsexual monstrosity' and 'transgender rage.' Simply put, the depiction of castrated corporeality in contemporary Sinophone cinemas precipitates from the *peripheral* adaptation of historical *mainland* Chinese culture – a chronological leap in appropriation of an earlier anti-eunuch sentiment that first emerged in late Qing China but continues to linger and define the global cultural imaginary.

Reading the *Reign of Assassins* and *Swordsman 2* as Sinophone rather than Chinese films brings to sharper focus the historically embedded and politically contested nature between the Sinophone world and China, mirroring the fraught and troubled relations between the Anglophone world and Britain, or the Francophone world and France. Cultural production firmly routed through and rooted in these Sinophone regions offers an opportunity to queer other regional categories that we tend to take either for granted or to be homogenous simply by virtue of its geographical location outside the West, such as 'China' (Shih 2010). Viewed in this light, it is not only feasible to speak of China as an empire, which powerfully echoes the dynastic dynamism of this geobody's political past, it is also possible to bypass the framework of colonial modernity with which scholars have so frequently employed to deconstruct the transnational and semi-colonial historicity of the very same geographical space (Barlow 1997; Chiang 2013). The cross-temporal referentiality between the demise of eunuchism around the turn of the twentieth century and the denigration of castrated bodies in present-day Sinophone cinema therefore squarely places modern China's imperial reach at the center of critical transregional inquiry. This queer intercorporeal politics brings forward a set of alternative genealogies that exceeds the otherwise familiar legacy of Japanese and Western imperialisms, at the same time aligning these permutations of 'area unconscious' in congruence with the continual suppression of Sinophone heterogeneities by the People's Republic of China today.

Conclusion

This article offers a thick analysis of two examples in which Singaporean and Sinophone regionalism *strategically highlights* the rhizomatic citationality across hubs of queer peripheral ontologies and *temporarily suspends* a weighty agenda in vogue that solely critiques Euro-American imperialism, which we have described as symptomatic of a critical hermeneutical aporia in transnational queer studies. In *Peculiar Chris*, queer positionalities in Singapore are narrated through a deep transcolonial web of signification taking shape in relation to and under the shadow of other political giants, such as Australia, China, and Britain. The queering of Singapore as both a regional and transnational signifier is consolidated through its vexed yet highly contingent reciprocal dependency on these broader colonial frames of reference. In Sinophone cinemas, the historical connection, or what we call intercorporeal politics, between anti-eunuch sentiment in the late Qing period and the vituperation of castrated men pivots China's imperial status against the polity's evolving image from victimhood to superpower in the

twentieth century. Rather than interpreting Singapore or China itself as a queer region, both *Peculiar Chris* and the *Reign of Assassins* enucleate a queering of transnationalism that contests state-centered efforts to constructing Asia's regionalization and its apparatus of hegemonic modernity, thereby revealing the intrinsically kaleidoscopic underpinnings of Sinophone articulations that unsettle the 'China versus the West' binary in astigmatic area studies inquiries. If there is no coincidence across the two examples examined here that China emerges as the geopolitical materiality and unit basis of the kinds of imperial formation against which queer Sinophone regionalism could recast the center and periphery of our worlding episteme, we must not forget that with other Asias, comes other empires as well.

Notes

1. A fuller exploration of this genealogy is the subject of Howard Chiang's forthcoming monograph, tentatively titled *After Eunuchs: Science, Medicine, and the Transformations of Sex in Modern China*. Minor portions of the following analysis are selectively adapted in Chiang (forthcoming).
2. On the queer appropriation of transgenderism at the expense of excluding transsexualism, see Prosser (1998, 21–60).
3. On the original formulation of 'moral economy' in the context of British working-class social history, see Thompson (1971).
4. In a later reading, Leung (2012) highlights the negative connotations of Dongfang Bubai's sex transformation. Leung argues that Dongfang Bubai's transsexuality 'is explicitly figured in the film as evidence of the character's ruthless ambition, destructive power, and monstrosity. By intimately linking Dongfang Bubai's will to dominate the world with the transformation of her body from male to female, the film has displaced anxiety about totalitarian rule onto the sex-changed body, which it portrays to be both dangerously seductive and violently destructive' (188).

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