IN 1848, KING RAMA III OF SIAM ordered the execution of the kingdom’s highest-ranking prince for treason, a charge that partially targeted his indulgence in scandalous sexual relations with members of his cross-dressing male performance troupe. The legal indictment of the prince located his sexual transgressions within a specific transnational moral framework:

Your wives who receive a royal salary have recounted vociferously to others that you don’t care for your children or them and that you have fallen head over heels in love with your dancers and performers. His Majesty is aware of this and understands that [you] have preferences like those of the Lord of Peking (Daoguang), who loves the Chinese opera and sometimes frequents male prostitutes, sometimes female. If His Majesty had forbidden this and admonished you for engaging in these unsavory practices, the matter would have become too scandalous and publicly humiliated the royal family.¹

By comparing the sexual comportment of Siam’s Prince Rakronnaret to Qing China’s Emperor Daoguang, Siam’s ruler gestured toward the relevant comparative field of transnational sexual exemplars, good and bad. Qing China, previously the region’s peerless moral, political, and economic power, had become Siam’s paradigm of the perverse by the late 1840s as a consequence of Britain’s defeat of the Qing in the First Opium War (1839–1842) and its rise to global imperial dominance.²

This triangulated reassessment of sexual ethics offers a hint at the complexity of a transnational history of sexuality in Asia. Transnational history is centrally concerned with flows and circulation (of sexual mores, for example) among sites rather than with historical processes in distinct places.³ The framework of national history, which has been the privileged category of history since the discipline was established

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¹ Chaophraya Thiphakorawong (Kham Bunnag), comp., Phraratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 3 (Royal Chronicle of Rama III) (Bangkok, 1934), 320.
³ This is elucidated in C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” American Historical Review 3, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441–1464.
in the nineteenth century, has become increasingly irrelevant and inapplicable to the interests of scholars focused on themes, developments, and forces—commerce, environmentalism, human rights, disease, diasporas, sexuality, and so on—that cut across national boundaries. In contrast to national history, transnational history analyzes the dynamics of interaction, movement, and exchanges between, within, and among ideas, material cultures, institutions, and peoples. It emphasizes the horizontal and relational aspects of economic, social, and cultural processes as they move across space and embed themselves in various regimes of power. As such, it broaches topics that are both subnational and transnational—local and global—without positioning them against one another. Instead, transnational approaches see the local and the global as inseparable and yet unevenly integrated. Transnational history also offers a particular global framing of the local, defined as subnational in some cases and national in others, that reveals the substance of the relationship between the transnational and the local. Some argue that comparative studies, by contrast, naturalize and reproduce national entities and “areas” as static units with their own distinct historical and cultural trajectories. However, Ann Laura Stoler’s 2006 edited volume has redefined comparative history and thereby given it a new lease on life. Therein, she argues that comparative projects consider “specific exchanges, interactions, and connections that cut across national borders without ignoring what state actors do and what matters about what they say.” These comparative projects, which clearly share a great deal in common with transnational historical approaches, also “help identify unexpected points of congruence and similarities of discourse in seemingly disparate sites.”

Transnational and comparative approaches to histories of sexuality in Asia can be fruitfully evaluated from several perspectives. The paradigmatic scholarship on transnational sexual history focuses on mixed, international, or interracial unions—typically between Western men and Asian or mestizo women. The forms these unions took range from legitimate monogamous marriage to temporary wifedom and prostitution. For understandable reasons, transnational histories of sexuality in Asia are framed by Western imperialism, a fact that makes these studies obviously “transnational,” but also privileges the relationship between “West” and “East” over that between distinct Asian polities and cultures. In addition, a plethora of studies reveal how colonial encounters transformed “local” moral hierarchies. The imposition by Asian and foreign rulers of imperial sexual mores and gender norms, including the demand that male and female be clearly distinguished categories according to Western sensibilities, rearranged and delegitimized local sexual and gender norms. The process also reveals the intertwined nature of the relationship between imperial and local sexualities.

Although local sexual mores varied immensely across the vast geographical region referred to as Asia, gender plays a more salient role in sexual eroticism than it is typically accorded in modern histories of sexuality in Western Europe and North America. As a consequence, scholarship on transnational sexuality that uses Western imperialism as a framework or Michel Foucault as a theoretical point of departure privileges sex and sexuality over gender in definitions of the erotic. An overemphasis on heterosexuality and relations between Western men, typically, and Asian women occludes other forms of eroticism and sexuality. It reveals how the primacy of gender over sexuality in heterosexual and same-sex erotic relations has begun to shift only in the past two decades, as studies of the appearance and reproduction of global sexual identities in Asia, especially same-sex sexualities, have proliferated.

This historiography of the scholarship on sexualities in Asia takes two caveats into account. First, since World War II, the study of Asia has fallen within the field of “area studies” rather than exclusively within the purview of any single academic discipline. Indeed, one could question the very premise of this AHR Forum, which organizes the transnational historical study of sexuality on the basis of geographic areas. Had it instead been based on specific religions, language groupings, erotic acts, or another organizing typology, very different essays would have been produced.10 Second, language itself is as important to consider in this analysis of transnational histories of sexuality in Asia as are the theoretical frameworks and the asymmetrical exchanges that occurred under imperialism. The multiplicity of languages, cultures, geographies, religions, empires, and, more recently, nation-states that constitute “Asia” as a region are colossal. A summary of the scholarship in each Asian language on the history of sexuality is impossible, of course, for any single person to provide, so I have had to rely on monographs and articles written in English (and Thai, the other language in which I conduct research). This inevitably shapes the contours of the history of sexuality in each place in ways that we cannot literally see. When possible, however, I have selected authors who utilized primary and secondary sources in the local languages from the subregional areas known as East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.11

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10 As a result of the decision to organize this study of sexuality around geographic regions, my essay is profoundly (and felicitously) interdisciplinary in terms of the kinds of scholarship and types of sources I have utilized. I single out the scholarship that focuses on history rather than other fields, and I concentrate on studies that prioritize sexuality over gender, and the sub-, supra- and transnational rather than the more numerous but strictly national studies of sexuality. As a consequence, the meaning of sexuality in these studies shifts and morphs to include a variety of erotic acts, forms of intimacy, gender practices, reproductive policies, prostitution, marital organization, family life, and sexual identities.

11 East Asia includes China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Taiwan, Tibet, and Mongolia; South Asia includes India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh; and Southeast Asia includes Brunei, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. I do not include the Pacific Islands, Hawaii, or diasporic communities that could be considered part of “Asia.” The fact that East Timor has recently broken away from Indonesia to form its own country reminds us that the boundaries of what constitutes the nations of Asia are shifting and fluid, and this becomes more relevant as we move back in time. Not all of these areas receive equal attention, which is a reflection of the materials available in English on the history of sexuality for each place. The sheer diversity within “Asia” makes it impossible to adequately represent the various ways in which the scholarship on sexuality is written in each place. Many areas had few or no historical analyses of transnational sexuality, but had richly documented studies of acute contemporary issues such as trafficking in women and children; commercial sex; women and development, sexual health, reproduction, and contraception; and sex as a tool of violence.
HISTORICAL STUDIES OF SPECIFICALLY transnational sexuality have converged on the long imperial period, which begins in the 1500s in Asia and about which arguably the first self-consciously transnational histories of sexuality were written. This scholarship examines with great nuance and specificity how the practices, norms, and meanings of sexuality were recalibrated over time, particularly among the internally differentiated subgroupings of ruler—typically elite or upwardly mobile European men—and ruled—marginalized Europeans, indigenous groups, and mestizos or the progeny of interracial unions. The category of imperialism might seem inapplicable to Asia as a whole, given that major swaths of the region—Japan, Siam (Thailand), and most of China, for example—were never directly colonized. Yet, if the scholarship on sexuality is any indication, colonization of the region by Europe and the United States affected the economies, polities, and cultures of non-colonized Asia as intensely as it did those of directly colonized areas.

Interracial sexual unions included arrangements that varied from prostitution, barracks concubinage between lower-status European soldiers and local women, and temporary wifedom to long-term monogamous marriages. Kenneth Ballhatchet pioneered the early study of transnational histories of sexuality and empire with Race, Sex and Class under the Raj, his 1980 examination of the regulation of white prestige through the management of the Eurasian population and of prostitution as a sexual outlet for lower-class European soldiers who could not financially support a wife and family in British India. The tension between the fundamental concern on the part of imperialists to maintain their power by continually and variously reasserting the boundary between ruler and ruled, on the one hand, and the perceived need to allow European men access to women in the colonies, on the other, runs throughout this literature. Race and class were managed through the regulation of sex along gendered lines.

These themes characterize studies on transnational sexuality that are now considered classics. Jean Gelman Taylor’s 1983 study of the mixed European-Asian society in Batavia from the 1600s to the 1940s revealed that Dutch rule in the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia) was sustained for more than two hundred years through marital alliances formed with local-born women. The Dutch East India Company’s two-hundred-year near-ban on the immigration of European women necessitated the development of permanent family ties with local women for Dutch officials, and less permanent, cheaper barracks-concubinage arrangements for European soldiers. Stoler’s seminal 1989 article on colonial categories and boundaries of rule examines the sexual relations between European colonialists, especially those at the lower end of the class spectrum, and Asian subjects. In her broader oeuvre, intimacy and sexual unions operate as vehicles through which colonial and national state racisms were formulated and reproduced. They have formed the core of her

compelling transnational, comparative scholarship. Although Stoler did not set out to define transnational history, many scholars understand her work as paradigmatic of the growing subfield of transnational studies, especially as it relates to sexuality and colonialism. She consistently juxtaposes the ideals and practices of European metropolitan cultures with those in European and Eurasian communities in colonial Southeast Asia (and elsewhere). Most famously, Stoler’s work on mixed racial unions, Eurasian populations, and domestic arrangements in Europe’s Southeast Asian colonies placed transnational studies of sexuality on the map because of her extensive focus on sexual relations, which she calls, following Foucault, a dense transfer point of power. Racial relations were managed and other inequities produced through sexual relations and intimate ties between European colonizers and members of the local populace. Following closely on the heels of this pioneering work, transnational histories of sexuality within specific cultural regions and nation-states in Asia began to appear in the late 1990s.16

Stoler and other early practitioners of transnational history found in Asia a fertile site to illustrate their exhilarating new approaches to global sexual interconnectedness. With a few exceptions, transnational studies such as theirs typically (and for logical reasons having to do with European and American imperialism) track the influence, integration, imposition, and interaction of “Western” ideas, commodities, peoples, and institutions with their counterparts in non-Western locales. Western European and U.S. dominance ensured and facilitated the study of their various effects on cultures around the globe. However, the treasonous case of Siam’s prince suggests that at least one Asian monarch positioned his kingdom’s normative sexual culture above that of China, once the regional hegemon, where the Qing emperor is described as dabbling indiscriminately in sex with prostitutes and male performers. The latter tended to be young male actors who played female roles in Beijing operas, much like those in Prince Rakronnaret’s performance troupe.17 Although Siam’s king deploys the Qing emperor’s sexual life as a negative example at this late date, the Siamese ruling elite had looked to Chinese elite culture long before they turned their gaze to London as a site of hegemonic cultural values, including sexual norms. Comparisons between forms and discourses of sexuality in European communities and those in their Asian colonies dominate the study of transnational sexuality, when in fact intraregional “Asian” sexual liaisons were more ubiquitous, if less power-laden, in practice.18 Perhaps for this reason, a history of intraregional “Asian” sexuality has yet to be written.

Because transnational studies of empire and sexuality necessarily include an in-
tense focus on imperial or foreign powers, which often have left deeper and longer paper trails than have local populations, these studies elucidate more about colonial policies and the concerns of imperialists than they illuminate about local societies, their internal distinctions, and their various moral regimes. Moreover, transnational interactions are uneven in their geographic impact and chronological intensity. As a consequence, studying sexuality as a transnational issue makes sense only when global interaction dominates the history of sexuality in a given place; when transnational influences remain at the periphery, it may be more relevant to privilege the analysis of local cultural, social, and historical processes. Stoler’s focus on interracial unions and domestic arrangements in colonial enclaves places European colonial moral ideals and practices under the microscope while forcefully linking both to normative notions of political power. However, her work has less to say about various “native” cultural and moral ideals, especially the more distant these communities are from colonial enclaves. Her European archival sources similarly lead her to a critical examination of the construction of whiteness through sexual practice, child-rearing, sentiment, domestic arrangements, and notions of belonging. However, these studies tell us little about, say, various Javanese or Vietnamese notions of sexuality or perspectives on interracial unions. Studies modeled on Stoler’s leave ample room for other scholars to explore the impact of colonial hierarchies on local regimes of sexuality.

Perhaps because Stoler’s work is so influential, few scholars work on other kinds of interracial and interethnic unions. For example, most historical scholarship ignores the arguably far more numerous international intra-Asian liaisons between local Southeast Asian women and Chinese or South Asian male laborers whose migration was encouraged by colonial regimes. These unions often remained under the radar of the colonial state (and therefore scholars) because they did not threaten to blur the lines between ruler and ruled. They are worthy of study as another historical form of transnational sexuality that will move the analysis of colonial-era power and race relations beyond a focus on Western colonial encounters in Asia. Such studies require a different set of linguistic skills and a geographical focus that homes in on intraregional, but no less transnational, relations. Although they will not replace the scholarship on interracial unions formed under Western colonial penumbras, they will develop and transform that scholarship to incorporate other matrixes of gender, sexuality, race, and power. The scholarship about national and subnational sexuality and gender within an explicitly global framework refocuses attention on Asian sexualities.

Most scholarship on sexuality in colonized and non-colonized Asia argues that the impact of Western imperialism on sexual practices resulted in a reordering of gender norms and a narrowing, delegitimization, and sometimes criminalization of what was

once a wide range of tolerated sexual practices. In this way, the implications of colonial-era policies for local systems of gender and sexuality are important to consider within the framework of transnational studies of sexuality. Much of this scholarship treats as inextricable the relationship between transnational imperial sexual mores and national sexualities. Without romanticizing the precolonial period, scholars of India, China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia demonstrate, with varying degrees of nuance, that the power asymmetries that favored Western imperial states also authorized Western notions of proper sexuality and delegitimized local variations. The strongest literature in this respect focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when colonial regimes increased their administrative capacity to enforce “civilized” sexual and gender norms through law, coercion, or moral pressure backed by economic and political infrastructures. The polarization of gender roles in the late-nineteenth-century “Victorian” era, the elevation of monogamous heterosexual marriage as the “civilized” conjugal standard, and the construction of a heterosexual/homosexual binary emerged strongly in civilizational and sexological discourses and served as weapons in the imperial arsenal. Scholars who focus on heteronormative sexual relations demonstrate that among the myriad social shifts that the imperial encounter wrought was a hierarchy of “marital” arrangements that redefined the most legitimate sex as that which occurred within the monogamous heterosexual conjugal family. Polygyny was not necessarily prohibited, but it was denounced as a less civilized marital form alongside concubinage, child marriage, and other “native” practices.

Civilizational discourse and ubiquitous reports on the “status of women” in Asia during the colonial period pathologized as backward and patriarchal many heterosexual erotic and gender practices, including footbinding, widow immolation, and polygyny. These discourses removed culture-bound practices from their local religious and historical context, reified Asian women as victims, and compelled imperial governments to intervene to rescue women from such “traditions.” As a consequence, the meanings of these practices were profoundly reevaluated. Polygyny, for example, which once performed the political work of integrating polities, was replaced by administrative and political institutions of territorial rule and reinter-


22 For examples, see Dorothy Ko, Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding (Berkeley, Calif., 2005); and Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on SATI in Colonial India,” Cultural Critique 7 (Fall 1987): 119–156.
presented as a depraved and exclusively sexual institution. New sites of sexuality emerged in factories, mills, and movie theaters, while older ones, including the elite courtesan tradition in places such as Lucknow in South Asia and temporary marriages in port cities, were collapsed into the category of “prostitution.” Moreover, colonial-era Asia witnessed enormous growth in the numbers of prostitutes by the early twentieth century in tandem with an increase in the regulatory policies and moral discourses about prostitution. Similarly, same-sex attachments and other sexual practices such as transvestism that were once compatible with marriage and procreation were reinterpreted as debauched, the cause of Asia’s weak global position, and the justification for colonization. In the nationalist literature by Hindus in India, for example, they were even disavowed as Muslim. In China, public debates about eugenics and non-normative heterosexual practices such as concubinage, prostitution, and footbinding were causally linked to that country’s semicolonial status.

The recalibration of primarily “local” sexual hierarchies—that is, sexual mores and practices that were not interracial or did not otherwise directly involve European individuals—occurred nonetheless because of and within the framework of imperialism in Asia. To the extent that authors elucidate the interaction between imperial moral hegemony and national sexual norms, their scholarship is transnational. Moreover, the reinterpretation of sexual and gender practices that took place in colonized


Asia occurred in non-colonized Japan, China, and Thailand as well, suggesting that the centralization of the state to avoid colonization was related to the standardization of sexual practices and discourses. In China, for example, the state may not have been robust enough to enforce a new regime of sexuality, but it and popular sources produced a similar moral and increasingly scientific, eugenic discourse about sexual practices.28 An influx of translations via Japan of Western sexological texts during the May Fourth period in the early twentieth century “liberated” sexual pleasure from the constraints of what it categorized as repressive patriarchal tradition at the same time that it confined sexual pleasure to the conjugal family.29 By the late 1920s, sexual pleasure had been re-stigmatized in new and powerful ways. In Japan, a new paradigm of sexuality condemned as uncivilized all sexual acts—from adultery, prostitution, and same-sex erotics to premarital sex and masturbation—outside state-sanctioned monogamous heterosexual marriage.30 The abundance of sexological materials and their literary offshoots written by Japanese authors in the early twentieth century has enabled a rich density of scholarship about cross-sex sexuality, hermaphroditism, gender ambivalence, prostitution, lesbianism, masturbation, and male homosexuality.31 In both places, discourses favoring polarized gender roles and confining legitimate sex to marriage dovetailed with Western-originated sexological discourses introducing a strict homosexual-heterosexual binary that in many places invented both heterosexuality and homosexuality as distinct, compartmentalized sexualities. Transnational histories of sexuality trace ideas as they were translated across cultural and national boundaries.

In all of Asia, women and sexuality served as a lightning rod for debates about modernity and its flip side, backwardness—both of which were inventions of the modern. Indigenous ideologues privileged certain local strains of morality over others as they participated in this re-categorization of practices along the lines of modernity and tradition. Authors vary in the degree to which they attribute these seismic shifts in evaluations of sexuality to European and U.S. imperialism. The politics of interpreting the relationship between Western imperialism, gender ideologies, and sexual discourses, on the one hand, and indigenous gender and sexual practices, on the other, is fraught with postcolonial anxieties about power and agency. Jennifer

28 Dikötter, Sex, Culture and Modernity in China.
29 Ibid.; Gilmartin, Engendering the Chinese Revolution; Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson, eds., Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China (Lanham, Md., 2005); Hershatter, “Sexing Modern China.”
Robertson most astutely treats this problematic when she argues that “the West” was and arguably is still invoked “as a discursive space for a range of adversarial cultural and political critiques” by Japanese. To extrapolate to all of Asia, Asians of various political stripes used “the West” as a rhetorical device and foil to critique and transform local gender and sexual practices and policies.

This is no less true in postcolonial Asia, where discourses on Asian values and national authenticity often blame (neo) imperialism for the existence of homosexuality, prostitution, and human trafficking. Given the existence of colonial troops and later U.S. bases in parts of Asia, it is not surprising that much of the scholarship deals with military prostitution on U.S. bases in South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. Other studies focus on forms of prostitution that are more accurately categorized under the rubric of “violence against women,” such as those that examine the rape camps filled with “comfort women” who were forced to “service” Japanese soldiers during the Pacific War. Prostitution, sex crimes during war, and international sexual unions are topics of enduring interest to historians of transnational sexuality.

The lion’s share of attention in transnational studies of sexuality has been focused on international interracial heterosexual sexual unions and the restructuring of sexual relations “locally” as a result of their appropriation within an imperial transnational framework of understanding. The reliance on heterosexual definitions of sex in these studies, however, opens them to critique for their implicit omission of non-heterosexual unions, and also for their privileging of sex and genitalia over gender in definitions of the erotic. The term “sexuality” as a category of comparative study stems from scholars’ appreciation of volume 1 of Foucault’s History of Sexuality, which spurred the growth of a subfield in Asian history that overlapped and arose in tandem with women’s and gender history. Stoler, much of whose work relies on a reworking of Foucault, is also deeply concerned with sexuality and the issue of


36 Michel Foucault’s catalyzing effect is related to a major theme that runs throughout most of the literature on the history of sexuality in Asia: the “West” and how it figures into studies of sexuality. Utilizing Foucault or any other “foreign” framework to interpret local sexualities is a fraught subject for scholars working on and in Asia. At their best, these debates expose Western hegemony and the complexities of navigating it, but at their worst they fixate on the aporetic issue of authenticity. In any
commensurability—what is deemed comparable or incommensurable by whom and when— in transnational and comparative histories. “Incomparability compels forgetting, just as comparison prescribes some lessons and effortlessly disavows others.”  

A consideration of Asian histories compels us to turn this fierce critical gaze on the term of comparison herein: “sexuality.” How has sexuality been defined historically, what normative assumptions are imbued in the term, and what can historians say about the sexual life of the population, the majority of whom did not leave much by way of evidence, particularly of the sort that reveals subjective experience? These questions admittedly plague historians of most world areas, but they are especially relevant to the areas where Stoler’s and Foucault’s work has been so influential. Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, based on French history specifically and Western Europe more generally, requires sagacious rethinking to accommodate places with different geographic, religious, political, and economic histories. Historical scholarship about “sexuality” in Asia almost inevitably cites Foucault, often uncritically, without questioning the degree to which his otherwise brilliant theoretical intervention that separated sexual behavior from identity applied to places where gender was the privileged marker of the erotic.

Relatedly, Stoler-esque transnational histories can be critiqued for their near-exclusive focus on heterosexual relations that threatened the imperialist’s continued rule because it literally reproduced a class of mixed-race children who transformed the colony’s social geography. Michael Peletz, who praises Stoler’s work overall, has trenchantly critiqued her for offering a reassessment of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* in light of the colonial experience, yet curiously (given Foucault’s focus on the invention of the “homosexual”) failing to treat same-sex sexuality. In *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times*, Peletz argues that “colonial regimes of gender and sexuality, their local counterparts, and the intertwining of colonial and local genealogies were far more interesting, complex, and fraught with ambivalence and contestation than Stoler suggests in the context of her privileging of heterosexuality and her deafening silences on the subjects of same-sex erotics and transgenderism.”

According to Peletz, the sources prioritized by Stoler offer views that are “more or less isomorphic with the ideological apparatuses underlying colonial governmentality.” She does not rely on other sources that demonstrate the degree to which European men engaged in same-sex erotics with Asian men (and with each other).
Peletz cites numerous instances of these unions in colonial Southeast Asia and the imperial deployment of stereotypes of Southeast Asian men as effeminate sodomites to construct a racial hierarchy that in turn justified colonial intervention. Not only were heterosexual interracial unions threatening to the boundaries of colonial rule because of their potential to reproduce mixed-race progeny, but “intimacies with same-sex bodies, whether fellow colonial or native, could also threaten the manhood of white soldiers and colonial officials alike.”

Perhaps the problem lies in the use of the term “sexuality,” which places blinders on scholars searching for the erotic in Asia because it privileges “sex” and genitalia over gender. However, studies of the erotic in Asian history reveal that gender played, and arguably still plays, a more significant role in determining sexual morality than the sex of participants. Emperor Daoguang and Prince Rakronnaret both indulged in same-sex but hetero-gendered erotic acts (the prince was masculine, and his male performers comported themselves and dressed as feminine). For much of Asia’s history, particularly before the onset of modern state-building projects during the late colonial period, these acts were considered normative so long as certain hetero-gendered and age-related principles were followed. The erotic, in this case, is not captured adequately in the term “sexuality” embedded in “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality,” which privilege vaginal-penile and same-genitalia acts, respectively, and obfuscate the hetero-gendered aspect of erotics. As a consequence, studies of transnational sexuality risk imposing modern Western definitions of “sexuality” anachronistically onto cultures where hetero-gendered same-sex sexual relations were considered unremarkable, if not normative.

By contrast, transnational regional, national, and subnational historical studies of sexuality in Asia reveal a remarkable regional consistency: gender was primary in determining normative heterosexual and same-sex erotic relations. Forgoing a brief account of these sexual histories would unwittingly downplay this characteristic of the erotic and allow anachronistic Western-derived definitions of the sexual to dictate the parameters of eroticism historically in Asia. Peletz’s transnational examination of gender pluralism, transgenderism, and sexuality in Southeast Asia since the 1400s reveals that differently gendered individuals (with the same anatomies) could partner up—the degree of legitimacy given to such unions varied by context and time—but same-gendered individuals could not legitimately do so; same-gender love has been taboo both historically and today. In other words, individuals’ gender rather than their genitalia determined their sexual object choice.

Region-wide comparisons are still in their infancy. With a few exceptions, these studies merely gesture toward transnational regional similarities while remaining primarily national in their focus. What is clear, however, as a brief overview of national studies reveals, is the primacy of gender in definitions of same-sex erotics. The scholarship is uneven in its geographic and chronological focus, but much of it is richly documented, especially for China, South Asia, and Japan. In India and China,
evidence of same-sex erotics exists as far back as 1500 and 1000 B.C.E., respectively.46 The bulk of these studies concentrate on male same-sex erotics, which reflects the relatively abundant evidence of such relations compared to that for women.

Historically, male same-sex sexuality in Asia was not condemned so long as these relations followed principles regulating social status and age-ranked relations in which the male status superior was the older, active (masculine) sexual partner.47 In Matthew Sommer’s study of law in Qing China (1644–1911), for example, a male penetrator’s masculinity remained intact if he penetrated a male of inferior status, who then bore the brunt of social stigma as the feminized, passive partner.48 Rosalind O’Hanlon suggests that masculinity and same-sex sexuality operated along similar lines in Mughal North India prior to the nineteenth century, and Gregory Pflugfelder reveals in minute detail how male-male sexuality in Tokugawa Japan (1600–1868) was legally regulated to preserve hierarchal notions of loyalty, duty, and obligations between samurai and their younger male adolescent servants or acolytes.49 According to Japan historian Gary Leupp, male-male sexual liaisons were a “highly conspicuous, central, institutionalized element of social life” that was “not merely common in Tokugawa society . . . but normative.”50 Significantly, male-male erotics were not practiced to the exclusion of heterosexual relations, and in fact these men typically maintained heterosexual relations. Theater arts, court life, urbanism, high status, and wealth provided seemingly endless opportunities for erotic relations to develop between male patrons and male actors, pages, servants, female courtesans, prostitutes, wives, consorts, and others.51

By contrast, very little historical evidence of female same-sex erotics exists prior to the nineteenth century. The intense regulation of female sexuality, compulsion to marry and reproduce, and restrictions on female education contributed to the si-


50 Leupp, *Male Colors*, 2–3; emphasis in original.

lences around female sexuality, especially same-sex erotics. To the extent that evidence exists of female same-sex sexuality, it too follows the hetero-gendered model. However, many authors refuse to collapse same-sex relationships into a heterosexual model, arguing that the meanings of female same-sex erotics and relations differ.

The study of hetero-gendered models of same-sex erotics is often conducted within the framework of “globalization.” A great deal of ink has been spilled on several major debates about globalization and sexuality in Asia. These debates, which largely fall within the purview of anthropology rather than historical studies, question the politics and economics behind the localization since the 1960s of Western sexual identity categories such as “gay,” “queen,” “tomboy,” and “lesbian,” and the degree to which their appropriation reveals global homogenization of sexuality or the resurgence of authentic traditions in transnational disguise. Most scholars provide a balanced interpretation of the productive tension between processes of globalization and the histories and sociocultural specificities of particular places. Similar debates rage over the oppressiveness or emancipatory potential of human rights discourse as it applies to sexual identities; the compulsion of traditional sexual norms—including “authentic” versions of same-sex sexuality—among queer Asians in the diaspora; and the deployment of arguments about authenticity by conservatives within Asia to stigmatize queer Asians as irredeemably Other. It has proven

52 Sang, The Emerging Lesbian, 52; Susan Mann, East Asia (China, Japan, Korea) (Washington, D.C., 1999).
53 For examples, see Loos, “Sex in the Inner City”; Megan Sinnott, Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand (Honolulu, 2004); Saskia E. Wieringa, Evelyn Blackwood, and Abha Bhatia, Women’s Sexualities and Masculinities in a Globalizing Asia (New York, 2007); Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa, Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices across Cultures (New York, 1999); Peletz, Gender, Sexuality, and Body Politics; and Jennifer Robertson, Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan (Berkeley, Calif., 1998).
55 For debates over globalized sexual identities, see, for example, Dennis Altman, Global Sex (Chicago, 2001); Boellstorf, The Gay Archipelago and Coincidence of Desires; Jackson, “An Explosion of Thai Identities”; and Mark Johnson, Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines (Oxford, 1997). On rights, see, for example, Manalansan, “In the Shadows of Stonewall.” For debates regarding same-sex sexuality in the diaspora, see Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV, eds., Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism (New York, 2002); Gayatri Gopinath, Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures (Durham, N.C., 2005); and Martin F. Manalansan IV, Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora (Durham, N.C., 2003). For discourses of Westoxification, globalization, and cultural/national authenticity, see Bhaskaran, Made in India; Geetanjali Misra and Rahdhika Chandiramani, eds., Sexuality, Gender and
impossible to avoid discussing the transnationality of sexuality in contemporary studies of same-sex sexuality in most parts of Asia where “national” debates about “globalization,” the “West,” and similar references to the foreign have been interpreted by indigenous conservatives as the origin of “homosexuality.” Only the scholarship on transgenderism in contemporary Asia avoids some of the polarizing debates about origins, because it has a longer and relatively well-documented history in Southeast Asia, India, and China, if one includes eunuchs.56

This recent anthropological scholarship on “new” transnational sexualities encourages historians to revisit the concept of sexuality as it manifested in and across Asia. For example, historicizing diasporas would entail more than a rehashing of J. S. Furnivall’s concept of plural societies in which colonial states subdivided colonized populations according to their ethnicity in order to reap economic profits and to prevent them from unifying against their minority rulers. It would explore not only relations between those from the imperial metropole and their colonies in Asia, but also the massive intra-Asian labor migration that occurred under colonial auspices. A social history of these exchanges would invert the typical top-down view derived from studies of colonial policies and shift the focus from miscegenation between “whites” and members of the colonized populations to include that between local and foreign Asians. A study of sexual subjectivities historically is another inviting area of future research. This kind of study is particularly salient given that studies of Asian sexuality borrow from Foucault without addressing the dissonance for Asia of his deeply culturally embedded notions of the self, including the role of the confessional in sexual subjectivity and the idea that an individual’s sexual behavior came to reflect his or her innate self. How does this “translate” to places where notions of the self and the relationship between sex and subjectivity follow different religious, moral, and historical trajectories? Sex work, sentimentalities, contextualized translation studies, religion, and sexuality each could promisingly be researched from the angle and with the methodologies of transnational history.57

Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia (New Delhi, 2005); and Peletz, Islamic Modern.


Transnational histories of sexuality hold out the promise of enriching history in Asia because, unlike studies of economic and political interconnections, they detail the intimate lives and experiences of people. As social history, transnational scholarship on sex and sexuality restores the texture, contradictions, ambiguities, and ambivalences that characterized individuals and their contexts in the past no less so than such complexities typify lived realities for people today.


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