
Book Review

Sexuality and Gender Diversity Rights in Southeast Asia

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As laid bare by critical scholars, Euro-American colonisers have frequently employed gender and sexuality as tools to perpetuate and legitimise their domination over 'barbaric' populations globally. Southeast Asia serves as an illustrative case exemplifying the enduring nature of this gendered and sexualised post/colonial relationship. Due to this legacy, the rights-bearing liberal paradigm has faced scathing criticism from feminist and queer scholars engaged in studying gender and sexuality-related issues within postcolonial contexts. This critique positions the adoption of a rights-based liberal framework as inherently aligned with the agenda of Western entities, perceived as one of their vital strategic efforts to consolidate and advance imperialist and colonialist interests worldwide.

Rather than adhering to the liberal framework that centralises rights as a universal model for non-Western societies, Anthony J. Langlois, in his book *Sexuality and Gender Diversity Rights in Southeast Asia*, adopts a pragmatic stance termed 'rights politics' to investigate the initiatives undertaken by sexual minorities, gender non-conforming groups, and their advocates to broaden the scope of legal entitlements. 'Rights claiming for people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)', he argues, 'has become a potent mechanism for politicisation and participation and has been used to forge connections across the region and internationally' (p. 1). SOGIESC rights claiming serves as a pivotal instrument for activist groups to construct a platform conducive to augmenting visibility, orchestrating contestation, mobilising support, and promoting emancipatory politics centred on sexuality and gender diversity amid the tumultuous social and political transformations prevalent in Southeast Asia. Emphasising rights struggles as the central analytical terrain of his inquiry, Langlois illustrates how these endeavours engage diverse stakeholders at individual, communal, national, regional, and international levels. His objective is to underscore the articulation of claims to rights as a site of power contention directed towards creating spaces for the survival and flourishing of LGBTQ groups. This undertaking is fraught with a spectrum of opportunities and challenges, encompassing instances of violence and discrimination alongside aspirations for transformative change. Expanding upon the framework of rights politics, Langlois examines five members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – namely Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand – as distinctive cases to elucidate how a diverse array of political activities have been organised and promoted by advocates through rights claiming, evolving as a new mode of political participation with potential applicability in other contexts.

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Langlois's inquiry begins with a concise examination of the intricate interplay between the legacies of European colonial forces and the pre-colonial socio-cultural frameworks pertaining to sexuality and gender diversity in Southeast Asia. In Chapter 2, titled 'Historical Trajectories in Sexuality and Gender Pluralism,' he delineates how this intricate relationship has given rise to a highly nuanced and complex landscape within the Southeast Asian region. He asserts, 'National contexts play a key role in shaping rights claiming, as both its general practice and specific substantive claims – here sexuality and gender – are connected to social contexts and conflicts in diverse and multifaceted ways' (p. 13).

The author further investigates the individual cases within the ASEAN by integrating historical specificities and contemporary information in Chapter 3. Titled 'National Case Studies,' this chapter delineates how recent developments, influenced by rights-centred political participation, have manifested in each of the five countries, resulting in divergent outcomes. As he illustrates, the conditions for LGBTQ groups exhibit a deteriorating trend in Malaysia and Indonesia, whereas more positive developments have been documented in Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand.

In Chapter 4, 'Civil Society and Rights Advocacy,' the author explores the pivotal role of civil society organisations in adopting SOGIESC rights, claiming to build transnational solidarity. These organisations cultivate interpersonal connections, forge networks, and devise innovative strategies and platforms to facilitate and enhance political involvement for improving the lives of LGBTQ groups throughout Southeast Asia. Charting the developmental path of rights advocacy, Langlois shows how advocacy groups initiate their efforts by fostering communal solidarity and extending their networks to encompass national and transnational spheres. This process lays the foundation for dynamic interactions between formal governmental rights agencies within the ASEAN and globally, achieved through engagements with the United Nations.

In the concluding chapter, titled 'SOGIESC, Rights, and Political Participation,' the author posits that rights claiming can be conceptualised as a distinct mode of political engagement, wherein the assertion of SOGIESC rights emerges as a new manifestation within this overarching framework. Advocates and activists across the ASEAN have systematically incorporated rights claiming into their agendas, establishing alliances with international counterparts. This development serves as an exemplary model for groups in other geographical contexts to emulate and integrate into their own advocacy endeavours.

This book makes a valuable contribution to the corpus of Southeast Asian studies, presenting a systematic analysis of the complex dynamics inherent in gender, sexuality, and rights struggles within the region. The clearly delineated approach, well-organised structure, incorporation of historical perspectives alongside contemporary information, and engagement with a diverse array of stakeholders at multiple levels render it a valuable resource for students, activists, and policymakers interested in comprehending the intersection of human rights, gender, and sexuality within the context of the ASEAN and beyond.

However, the book exhibits two conspicuous gaps. Despite the author's assertion of engaging with diverse stakeholders influencing rights struggles, a notable omission in the analysis pertains to international geopolitical actors. The escalating rivalry between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region has precipitated a New Cold War scenario. The brewing Sino-US geopolitical competition compels ASEAN member states to find ways to navigate between the liberal paradigm emphasising individual rights and the authoritarian model prioritising subservience to governing authorities. This geopolitical dynamic is poised to exert a profound influence on the grassroots participants engaged in rights-claiming activities. For instance, Thailand, once supported by the United States as an anti-communist stronghold during the Cold War, now confronts the dilemma of balancing ties with its traditional ally against the lucrative market offered by China. Readers would be interested in learning how these global geopolitical developments will impact the everyday civic engagements of marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ populations.

Furthermore, the author's deliberate focus on five ASEAN member states while omitting the remaining five lacks adequate justification. The unaddressed and under-addressed cases possess distinctive characteristics warranting closer scrutiny. For example, as Vietnam undergoes a state-directed process of marketisation akin to China's, one may inquire into how this structural transformation influences rights struggles for sexual minorities and gender non-conforming groups. Additionally, as both Laos and Cambodia strengthen their economic and geostrategic ties with China, an exploration of the ramifications on rights-claiming activities, particularly adverse impacts akin to those documented in China, becomes imperative. The 2021 *coup d'état* in Myanmar also merits engagement, given its profound repercussions on legal rights and personal liberties within the country.

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