

Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney

Online Roundtable, no. 4

"Intimacies in Asia in a time of Pandemics"



Chair:

Meaghan Morris, Professor of Gender and Cultural Studies at
the University of Sydney

Speakers:

Olivia Khoo, Associate Professor, Film and Screen Studies,
Monash University, Australia

Hans Tao-Ming Huang, Professor in English, National Central
University, Taiwan

Hendri Yulius Wijaya, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
University of Sydney, Australia

Ding Naifei, Professor in English, National Central University,
Taiwan

Helen Grace, Department of Gender & Cultural Studies,
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Time: Friday 22 May 2020, 2:30-4:30pm (AEST)

Kinship and Individualism under Cold War Quarantine¹

Hans Tao-Ming Huang

I've been following closely reportages about China's response to the covid 19 outbreak in Wuhan and was struck by the scene of intimacy in intensive care units, where emotional support is mediated by kinship tropes of everyday social interactions. With the Chinese tradition of addressing older patients as 'aunts' or 'uncles', the professional work of care takes on a layer of assumed intimacy that allows individual patients to feel connected to strangers with relative ease, as they undergo a harrowing medical process that bans family companionship.

Interestingly, this fictive kinship also fits nicely into the making of national solidarity and fraternity, as embodied in the 190 medical teams dispatched from the other provinces in China to support Wuhan during the Covid crisis. Medical workers, though separated from their own families, convey a profound sense of duty to the nation, dedicating themselves to 'the People's War against covid 19'. This sentiment resonates with popular memories of war-time mutual care and collective resistance to imperial powers throughout 20th century Chinese history.

By comparison, this mode of strong collective feelings is completely missing from Taiwan's response to covid 19 as younger generations groomed by western individualism offer only disdain for this kind of comradeship. Kinship and intimacy are highly suspect in this atmosphere. Last May, on the day when same-sex marriage was legalized, a Facebook friend posted a selfie in gym celebrating 'father and mother, husband and wife are now gone'. It's interesting that gays coming out now proudly present themselves as orphans endowed with a sense of entitlement to individual autonomy.

To complicate the story a bit, I recall a classic Taiwanese queer novel, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, published in 1994 by Chu Tienwen. Set against the backdrop of the rise of Taiwanese nationalism and nascent queer organizing in the early 1990s, the novel uses the figure of a desolate gay man as an allegory for the perceived marginalization on the part of the second generation Mainlanders. With the queerness of those deemed suspect 'Taiwanese', the desolate man growing up under martial

¹ Special thanks to Josephine Ho and Ding Naifei for dialogues and comments.

law finds himself alienated, not only by the ennui of self-centered younger consumer generation but also by the US-style AIDS activism taken up by this old mate, because its 'In-Your-Face' tactic entails a self-righteousness, however progressive the cause, that impedes real dialogues for change. The novel then raises a key question: what happens when homosexuality, poised as the emblem of high individualism, is delinked from kinship ties and thus symbolically removed from cultural roots?

Three decades on, this question becomes even more pressing as the ennui of the present Taiwanese young generations finds its nihilistic outlook in the form of queer liberalism. It is a liberalism that universalizes the elation of the orphan queer as the 'end of history', to the neglect of messy (i.e., not individualistic) intimacies sustained by those displaced under the destructive forces of economic development within the structure of neocolonial dependency. One good example of a site of such messy intimacies would be a make-shift peasant farm in 1980s Taiwan, run by a group of lower rank Chinese veteran soldiers of Sino-Japanese war and the civil war. They were among the 2 million people that fled with Chiang's exile government to Taiwan in 1949 and, later with the ensuing Cold War division, had been effectively turned into orphans who could only marry local deaf women to set up a commune for subsistence.

While the advent of covid 19 has spelt an end to the 'end of history' myth, the official rendering of the pandemic as 'Wuhan Pneumonia' in Taiwan reiterates the logic of cold war quarantine, the history of which people in Taiwan have not yet come to terms with. Young queer progressives might do well to rethink this geography of blame in the wake of the new cold war. Reciting the mantra in HIV education that 'virus does not discriminate' is not by any means helpful in this case. It would be more productive, I think, to get to know more about those old veteran soldiers and to find ways to relate to these faceless, resilient figures of cold war modernity as our 'big uncles' as we fight to recreate kinship and intimacies in this age of growing antagonism.