

***Queer Taiwan:  
A Critical Overview of Discourses on Queer in Taiwan from 1994 to 2016***

Shuo Lee, Open University of Kaohsiung, Taiwan

The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2017  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Queer studies in Taiwan have its own trajectory of development for over two decades. Scholars from different disciplines have been engaging with queer theories, politics, activism, and performing arts, all of which have, in turn, redefined the relation between gender and identity. This paper aims to present a critical reading of discourses on queer in Taiwan from 1994 to 2016 and argues that, while they have destabilized gender binaries and traditional gender norms, these produced discourses seem to restrict the meaning of queer within gay or lesbian identities or desires. In this sense, queer becomes an exclusive term that hardly signifies those who are positioned outside the dichotomy of the heterosexual and gays and lesbians. By appropriating Taiwanese scholar Yin-Bin Ning and Australian queer theorist Nikki Sullivan's conceptualizations of queer, this essay suggests that "queer" is not simply about one's sexual identity or sexual preference. Rather, the idea of queer designates a sort of ability to interrogate, disturb, and reconstruct existing heterosexual norms.

Keywords: Discourse, Queer Theory, Sexuality, Taiwan

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Introduction: Backgrounds and Motifs**

Since the early 90s, a series of critical debates on the concept of queer and its politics have been carried out within the fields of gender studies, feminist theory, and cultural studies in Taiwan. These debates have expanded the theoretical horizon of gender studies which has been shaped by Taiwanese feminist thoughts in the 1980s. However, this essay argues that, while the term queer, including its theoretical and political implications, has been widely applied by the Taiwanese intellectual, theoretical discourses on queer in Taiwan seem to be short of explicit elaborations that differentiate the queer from gays and lesbians. That is to say, queer, whether as an identity or a theoretical concept, is often interchangeable with gay and lesbian identity, sexuality, and desire, making queer studies in Taiwan a theoretical mélange of gender identities, sexual experiences, and sexuality formations. Therefore, the term queer in the Taiwanese context obscures its own potentialities in terms of queer theory, queer politics, and the formation of queer subjects.

This essay aims to present a concise but critical reading of discursive elaborations on the idea of queer in Taiwan from 1994 to 2016 and explains how queer has become interchangeable with gay and lesbian identities and desire in the Taiwanese context. In the rest of this paper, I will firstly present a critical overview of discourses on queer in Taiwan and point out that they share a common interpretation of queer which restricts the queer within gay and lesbian identities. After that, I will elaborate that queer cannot be simply understood as a category of sexual identity or desire. By reading the Taiwanese scholar Yin-Bin Ning's interpretation of queer, I will show that queer should be viewed as a sort of ability that interrogates heterosexual norms.

## **Queer Discourses in Taiwan**

In the early 90s, the term queer was introduced to the Taiwanese intellectual circle along with the idea of gay and lesbian. Before the import of gay and lesbian studies from the West, the word homosexual was widely adopted to signify individuals who did not show heterosexual desires. Similar to how the term homosexual had been invested with negative and pathologized meanings in the West, homosexual as a signifier had carried abnormal and unhealthy implications in the Taiwanese context for a long time. For instance, medical journals often published essays that connected gay men with AIDS, murders, problematic parenting, and mental disorders (Hant, 1982, p. 68-75).

The open prejudice and stigmatization of non-heterosexual desires in Taiwan, however, were not simply a phenomenon shaped by the Western thoughts of homosexuality. Since 1949, the imposition of Taiwan Martial Law had made the circulation of critical ideas very difficult. In many cases, contents of speech and writings were strictly censored by the government before they were published, and feminism was defined as provoking because it asked for a reform of division of labor of gender which might cause systematic changes and endanger the patriarchal authority of the government. Under this circumstance, it was almost impossible to conduct any critical study of how gay and lesbian came to be psychologically or medically "abnormal" sexual experiences.

The Taiwan Martial Law was lifted in 1987, and the lifting had changed the Taiwanese society dramatically in the 1990s. According to Taiwanese literature scholar Liang-Ya Liou (2015), it was because the lifting that feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and queer theories from the West could be introduced to Taiwan (Liou, 2015, p. 48-49). Moreover, this particular historical context of Taiwan explains a very special academic phenomenon regarding the development of queer theories during the 1990s. While many Western experiences show that feminism often starts earlier than LGBTQ's rights movements, the distinct historical and political condition of Taiwan makes feminist activism take place almost at the same time with gay and lesbian and queer movements. In a word, feminist thoughts, gay and lesbian studies, and queer theory start to develop altogether in Taiwan after the Martial Law was lifted.

### **From *Ile Margins* to the Discursive Construction of Queer**

In 1994, the concept of queer firstly appeared in the critical circle of Taiwan. The 10<sup>th</sup> issue of *Ile Margins*, a journal that dedicates itself to discussions of critical thoughts, took queer as its theme and used the Chinese character “酷兒” (pronounced as *ku'er*, meaning “cool kid”) as the translation of the English term queer.

At the beginning, however, the idea of queer is not used as a serious theoretical concept but a trendy term to indicate deviant sexual practices or desires that are not accepted by social norms. For instance, “A Little Encyclopedia of Queer”, an article published in the 10<sup>th</sup> issue of *Ile Margins*, suggests that “queer/*ku'er*” is a new idea about sex, sexual identity, and sexual desire. Accordingly, queer refers to a wide range of sexual fantasies, preferences, and practices beyond romantic heterosexual relationships, such as sadomasochism, transvestism, voyeurism, and fetishism. In this sense, the article blurs the idea of queer, along with its developmental trajectory shaped by feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and other critical theories, and makes queer merely a Western trendy word that promotes “abnormal” sexual acts and fantasies.

The mixture of queer and gays and lesbians remained for a while. For example, scholar Hsiao-Hung Chang, an advocate of feminism and LGBTQ rights, confuses the theoretical and political aspects of queer and gays and lesbians in her essay “Queer Politics of Desire”. In this essay, Chang (1996) analyzes the political, historical, and social meanings of “Gays and Les' Top Ten Dream Lovers”, an activity organized by the Alliance of Gay and Space in Taiwan. The activity, which had lasted for one month in February, 1996, invited gays and lesbians to vote for their dream lovers at Taipei New Park. Chang notices that the place where the activity was held implies the politics of “coming out” because Taipei New Park is a public area and, most of all, had used to be the place where gay men looked for casual sex during the martial law period. From Chang's perspective, the park itself implies the gayness of Taipei's history (Chang, 1996, p. 12). Furthermore, Chang asserts that through the voting process of this activity, one sees how homosexual identity and desire disturb the dichotomous structures of “heterosexual vs. homosexual” and “male vs. female” (p. 8). This is because the candidates of the “dream lovers” were mostly heterosexual celebrities, politicians, singers, and movie stars with high popularity, showing that both homosexuals and heterosexuals share the same object of desire, regardless the sexual identities of those who were being desired. Therefore, Chang argues that

human desire has no strict boundaries, and it may blur and transgress the binary between the heterosexual and gays and lesbians.

However, Chang's essay shows a general confusion of what queer is by relating queer to gays and lesbians. The title of the essay, "Queer Politics of Desire", seems to imply that the essay is about *queer* politics. But one soon realizes that the Chinese title is quite different ("Gay Lover, Very Desire: Gay Movements' Cultural Attack in Taiwan") and, unfortunately, the political ambition of the essay is thus made vague. This confusion of queer and gays and lesbians, from my perspective, is not an accidental ignorance of the queer's differences from gay men or lesbian women, but a general theoretical phenomenon in the *fin de siècle* Taiwanese intellectual circle. Because the Martial Law was just lifted, and because various theories and ideas from the West were imported at this moment, the whole of radical or critical thoughts must be translated and transplanted in a blissful urgency. On the one hand, the Taiwanese experience of queer delineates an alternative developmental trajectory of theories, making a phenomenon of local hybridization of Western knowledge against the larger globalizing background. On the other hand, nevertheless, it is because that queer at the beginning has been discussed with gay and lesbian studies, queer theories in Taiwan scarcely show well-elaborated and distinctive conceptualization of what queer is or who can be called queer.

### **The Postcolonial Queer**

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, queer theory in Taiwan has come to be influenced by postmodern and postcolonial thoughts, and the concept of queer begins to be discussed through the frameworks of race, gender, ethnicity, and national identity.

For instance, scholar Ivy I-Chu Chang (1996) uses the term queer to describe the status of "not being complete" as a contrast to the modern subject as complete. In her essay "Queering Across the Border: Deterritorialization and Eroticism in Richard Fung's Video Productions", Ivy Chang makes the Trinidadian Chinese artist Richard Fung's biological documentary *My Mother's Place* her subject of analysis and suggests that one's queerness, as Fung's experience shows, can be the fact of being gay in an immigrant, monogamous, bourgeois family in the British colonial territory. The queerness of Fung is not only about his gay identity, but also related to his family's diasporic history. All of Fung's experiences show that cultural displacements are often co-existent with heterosexual imperialism. In this sense, Ivy Chang fuses the ideas of colonialism, diaspora, and queer and, through the framework of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, blends them into a "schizophrenic" figure (i.e., Fung) that fights against the meta-narrative of nationalism upheld by a series of systemized heterosexual signs. This schizophrenic figure, however, is positively praised because it has its theoretical root in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, where the authors describe the schizophrenic as the one who continues to wander, migrate, and "plunge" into "the realm of deterritorialization" (Chang, 1996, p. 8-9).

Ivy Chang's analysis of Richard Fung's cinematic works through the framework of Deleuze and Guattari expands the scope of the queer subject. The queer now becomes *the indispensable other* who upholds and secures the legitimacy and discourses of the colonizer, the West, and the heterosexual. And it is through the eyes of the queer as

the schizophrenic that one witnesses how the matrix of different power relations interweave with each other and exercise their effects on individual bodies.

However, Ivy Chang's application of Deleuze and Guattari is not without issues. She claims that she uses Deleuze and Guattari's "anti-Oedipus theory" and their idea of deterritorialization to analyze Fung's "anti-hegemonic discursive strategy" and "the schizophrenic status of Asian-American gay men" (Chang, 1996, p. 8), but she fails to "sexualize" the idea of queer as the schizophrenic. In other words, it seems that queer for Chang is already the sexual other, represented by the already self-claimed gay man Fung. Therefore, what makes a queer subject *queer* is the idea of deterritorialization rather than one's becoming of *the sexual other* through the mechanism of power-knowledge-pleasure within the territories of knowledge production. In this sense, Chang blurs some crucial differences between the normalization of heterosexuality and the exercise of colonial power. Although there have been adequate feminist and anticolonial texts showing that the exercise of colonial power is often interrelated with heterosexual hegemonies, how the queer subject is constituted under colonial power deserves more explanations in Chang's elaboration. In short, one does not become queer simply because he has diverse cultural backgrounds and unusual living experiences. *Who* can be called queer remained uncertain.

### **New Century Queer: The Penumbrae and the Ghostly**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more discourses on queer are produced in the Taiwanese academia, and local scholars begin to interpret the idea of queer through the frameworks of Taiwan's culture, beliefs, and history. While some look for inspirations from ancient Chinese philosophies, others develop fictional strategies of writing as a way to emphasize queer's queerness.

Jen-Peng Liu and Nai-Fei Ding are the first to apply Chinese philosophy to provide an epistemology that explains queer's social positioning. In their essay "Implicit Aesthetics and Queer Politics", Liu and Ding (2007) use the Chinese philosopher Zhuang-zhi's fable of the penumbra and argue that the queer is like the penumbra who always stands in-between the heterosexual subject and its sexual other.

In Zhuang-zhi's *The Unifying*, there is a story about the penumbra, the shadow of an individual's shadow. One day, the penumbra asks the shadow that, since it is dependent on its master's movements, if it ever feels tired of being tied to its master. The shadow replies that it seems that it is not free, and yet it is set free as soon as it is in darkness. What this fable implies is that living individuals often impose too many objective restrictions on themselves, so they often act like the penumbra and feel that everything, like the shadow, is unfree. Nevertheless, Liu and Ding read the penumbra's story quite differently. They interpret the penumbra's asking through the framework of Enlightenment philosophy and suggest that the relation between the master and the shadow may be understood as the dual relation between the knowing subject and its object of knowing. In this sense, queer, like the penumbra, is neither the subject, a "sexually healthy" person who accepts dominant heterosexual norms, nor the object, the other of the subject, who is excluded from "normal" gender codes. Rather, the queer is the one who is positioned in-between the subject-object binary.

For Liu and Ding, queer's in-between position allows it continuously destabilizing the antagonistic dichotomy between the heterosexual and gays and lesbians. The destabilizing is necessary because most discourses on gender in Taiwan primarily discuss gay and lesbian experiences, as if any theoretic activism pertaining to gender identity had no more concerns except same-sex desires. Therefore, the idea of the penumbra (the queer) is introduced by Liu and Ding, and they view it as a sort of implicit existing that is always-already there, and is ready to interrogate the subject-object (i.e., heterosexual-homosexual) dichotomy. Liu and Ding describe this strategy of the penumbra's interrogation as "implicit aesthetics" because it is not the kind of open activism that characterizes the Western politics of coming out from the closet with pride. From Liu and Ding's observation, Taiwanese gay men and lesbian women often choose implicit ways to come out because the whole disciplining culture of gender in Taiwan is also exercised in implicit fashions, and thus it is inadequate to appropriate the whole of Western queer politics and impose it on local queers.

Having been inspired by the idea of the penumbra, the young scholar Lucifer Hung translates this idea into "the ghostly" as a term that indicates the "ugly" queer. Hung began her "queer career" as a writer rather than a scholar. She is known for her writings of science fictions, where queer plots take place with erotic flavors. For instance, Hung's novel *Dissecting Monsters* (1995) describes a world of individuals in half-man and half-machine shapes and how these unusual human beings fall in love with each other regardless of their sex, gender, race, and sexuality.

For Hung, discussing unusual sexual practices and desires in real and imaginary lives may be a strategy to disturb both heterosexual norms and the discursive hegemony of existing queer theories. Therefore, it is common to see how Hung describes S/M practices, public sex, and representations of queer desires in films or novels in her writings and essays. Through elaborating these strange loves, Hung develops a mystic and ghostly style of writing which makes the idea of queer truly *queer*.

For example, Hung's academic essay "Anti-Normative Body Politics and Battles of Trans-Queer Masculinity: Re-reading Queer Masculine Narration in Contemporary Speculative Fiction" (2015) challenges the prevailing discourse of queer in Taiwan. From Hung's perspective, the prevailing queer discourses in Taiwan have reproduced the ideology that the political subject must be healthy and beautiful, and the ways in which these discourses are articulated are often filled with optimistic hopes and terms. The optimistic motif that runs through the whole of queer discourses implies that ugly, disabled, or mentally disordered queers, along with their experiences of existence, are often excluded from these discourses. The queers who are not recognized as "proper queer" thus lose their power to speak and mobilize themselves in real movements of gender equity. Therefore, Hung describes this kind of queer subjects as the penumbra and the ghostly because they are doubly ignored by the public and their queer fellows.

However, while the idea of the penumbra and the ghostly expand the scope of the meaning of queer and show Taiwanese scholars' efforts of appropriating local experiences, the question of what makes an individual queer remains unresolved.

As I have argued in the previous section, the concept of queer in Taiwan has been used to indicate gay and lesbian identity, desire, and experiences due to the specific historical and political condition of Taiwan, and thus lacks explicit elaboration

pertaining to queer's ontological and epistemological issues. Although Liu and Ding have tried to apply the penumbra as a way to form the epistemological framework of the queer subject in Taiwan, I argue that they only reveal a way for scholars to sense the position in which the queer might be situated, but they do not explain how queer politics can be articulated through the idea of the penumbra. Similarly, although Hung develops the concept of the ghostly as the theoretical extension of the penumbra, what she shows is the diversity of those who may be called queer, and thus ignores how these various subjects can be mobilized as a political weapon that fights against both heterosexual norms and the domination of optimistic queer discourses.

### **From Being Queer to Performing Queer**

In regard to the question of what queer is and how it may be used as a political concept with real effects, Taiwanese gender studies scholar Yin-Bin Ning's elaboration of queer is quite useful.

In 1998, Ning wrote an essay "What is Queer Politics?" (1998) through a Foucauldian lens. He discussed the constitution of the queer subject and how performing one's queerness may be politically effective. Published in *Gender Studies*, the first academic journal in Taiwan which dedicates to introducing radical and critical gender theories, Ning's essay suggests that to be queer is to expand the meaning of homosexuality through the larger framework of sexuality and examine how power/knowledge functions to regulate certain representations and cultural logic of deviant sexual acts (p. 36).

Heavily influenced by the theories of Michel Foucault, Ning argues that the meaning embedded within the term queer is essentially political. It is anti-heterosexual in the way that it questions the formation of sexual stratification, through which a certain type of sexuality that power relations permit and promote is consolidated, naturalized, and normalized. Queer politics is thus one's practices that traverse, unsettle, and subvert heterosexual norms, including the practices that mock or challenge the heterosexual beliefs hidden within same-sex relations. For example, some lesbians may wear military costumes or intentionally have sex with heterosexual men to show that one's gender identity has no direct and determined connection with his or her sexual desire. Since there is no predetermined relation between identity and desire, there can be no pre-given truths about good or bad sexual acts. For Ning, through one's judgements of good or bad sexual acts, one sees how individuals' sex and desire are regulated and represented through the stratification of sexuality operated by what he calls "sex negative culture" (p. 37). And from the idea of stratification, Ning develops his radical conceptualization of queer politics, which is to abandon the stratification of sexuality completely (p. 38).

Moreover, Ning specifically elaborates the question of who the queer subjects are. As Ning suggests, those who are outside "heterosexual conjugal relationship" are potential queers. In his words, "deviant homosexuals/bisexuals, transgender individuals, home-wreckers, the unmarried, people who have multiple sexual partners, sodomites, people who fall in love with their family members, sexual workers, the promiscuous, surrogate mothers, etc.)" (p. 42) may be viewed as revolutionary queer subjects who shall fight against the system of monogamy once they are discursively articulated. However, this does not mean that Ning is proposing sexual practices

which bring harms or dangers to individuals. Rather, what Ning is trying to do is deconstruct the fact that the general belief of “good sex” is fundamentally a social and cultural effect of the stratification of sexuality, which is established and consolidated through the networks of power/knowledge that regulate and manage individuals’ perception of sex.

Theoretically speaking, Ning’s idea is similar to the Australian scholar Nikki Sullivan’s understanding of the queer subject, and this allows more individuals to identify themselves as queer confidently. For Sullivan, rather than a label that indicates one’s sexual identity or sexual preference, queer is a kind of ability and positionality in the sense that it “can be taken up by anyone who feels themselves to have been marginalized as a result of their sexual preferences” (Sullivan, 2007, p. 49). In this way, queer ceases to be an identity category reserved for the non-heterosexual and becomes a descriptive word that embraces anyone who feels frustrated by any existing gender norms. For instance, Sullivan quotes the American scholar David M. Halperin’s words and suggests that “queer” could denote “some married couples without children . . . or even (who knows?) some married couples with children—with, perhaps, very naughty children” (p. 44). That is to say, anyone could have done “wrong” regarding the existing gender culture, so every individual has the equal potential to become or self-identify as queer.

In terms of queer politics, both Ning and Sullivan share the idea of real practices that destabilize the prevailing beliefs set up by heterosexual norms. For Ning, queer politics may be carried out through the works of justifying teenagers’ sex, decriminalizing and naturalizing sexual workers’ social status, and realizing new styles of marriage and family which recognize the legitimacy of same-sex couples and other parenting forms (Ning, 1998, p. 44-45). What Ning is doing is realize and materialize Sullivan’s queer politics that analyzes the “Hetero/Homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desire, behaviors, social institutions, and social relations” (Sullivan, 2007, p. 51), all of which constitute the foundation of “the Platonic parameter of Being” and Western structures where the non-reproductive and non-sterile human relationships are condemned as unnatural abnormal (Sullivan, 2007, p. 52).

Overall, Ning’s elaboration of queer politics in “What is Queer Politics?” enriches theoretical discourses on queer in Taiwan, and he indeed makes the discursive archive of queer studies more sophisticated and theoretically exact. Moreover, his conceptualization of the queer subject is theoretically and politically useful. For instance, his envision that queer politics shall take conjugal marriage as one of its major battlefields has real effects on the legalizing movement of same-sex marriage in Taiwan. On 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2017, the constitutional court of Taiwan announced that prohibiting same-sex marriage violates the freedom to marriage and the right to equity. This means that the parliament of Taiwan must amend or enact laws that acknowledge the legitimacy of same-sex unions. What might happen in the near future is that there will be more debates on the ideas of marriage, family, and love, all of which points to the core of the concept of queer.



## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have presented a critical reading of queer theories and discursive productions of the idea of queer in Taiwan from 1994 to 2016. Through this reading, I find that, due to Taiwan's particular historical and political reasons, early discourses on queer do not differentiate the queer subject from gays and lesbians. Queer in this sense is often taken as an umbrella term that indicates the identities, desires, or sexual experiences of gay men or lesbian women in Taiwan, and this makes the idea of what queer means or what queer politics may be unclear.

In recent years, Taiwanese queer scholars begin to look for theoretical inspirations from local experiences or Chinese philosophy, making the discursive archive of queer theory in Taiwan more diverse and localized. However, from my reading of the concepts of the penumbra and the ghostly, I argue that the core issue of what queer is remains uncertain. Whether the idea of the penumbra or that of the ghostly only helps the reader to understand the various social positions in which queers might be situated.

In order to answer the question of what queer means or how it may be understood as a political weapon, I use Ning and Sullivan's conceptualizations of queer as those who are frustrated by or excluded from "normal" conjugal relationship or heterosexual norms and suggest that each of us has the potential to carry out queer politics. In the current social context of Taiwan, what queer politics is may be thought as Ning's suggestion that the existing laws and beliefs regarding sexual workers, marriage, family structure, and social perceptions of deviant sexual practices should be questioned, reinterpreted, and reorganized. And this cannot be accomplished if every individual has not realized the potential queerness she or he has.

## References

- Chang, H. (1996). Queer Politics of Desire. *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly*, 25(1), 6-25.
- Chang, I. (1996). Queering Across the Border: Deterritorialization and Eroticism in Richard Fung's Video Productions. *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly*, 25(6), 6-24.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hant, M. (1982). The Cause of Homosexuality. *Health World*, 81, 68-75.
- Hee, W. (2015). From Amorous Histories to Sexual Histories: Tongzhi Writings and the Constitution of Masculinities in Late Qing and Modern China. Taipei: Yuan-Liou.
- Hong, S., Chi, S., & Dang, T. (1994). A Little Encyclopedia of Queer. *Ile-Margins*, 10, 47-71.
- Hung, L. (1995). *Dissecting Monsters*. Taipei: Yuan-Liou.
- . (2012). How Gender-Normativity and Same-Sex Marriage Imagine-A "Straight" Future-Zone Where Penumbra Multitude Must Live Without. *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies*, 88, 291-309.
- . (2015). Anti-Normative Body Politics and Battles of Trans-Queer Masculinity: Re-reading Queer Masculine Narration in Contemporary Speculative Fiction. *Router: A Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21, 161-198.
- Liou, L. (2015). Taiwan Theory and Knowledge Production: A Case Study on Taiwan's Postcolonial and Queer Discourses in the 1990s. *NTU Studies in Taiwan Literature*, 18, 45-81.
- Liu, J. & Ding, N. (2007). Implicit Aesthetics and Queer Politics. In Liu, J., Parry, A. E., & Ding, N. (Eds.), *Penumbrae Query Shadow: Queer Reading Tactics* (3-44). Taipei: Liwen.
- Ning, Y. (1998). What Is Queer Politics? *Gender/Sexuality Studies*, 3&4, 32-46.
- . (2012). Against the "Queer" Current? *Router: A Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13, 324-337.

Sullivan, N. (2007). *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: NYU Press.

**Contact email:** [shuo@ouk.edu.tw](mailto:shuo@ouk.edu.tw)