

Title

Contesting race, gender and sexuality in Southeast Asian literature: From colonial past to postcolonial present

Convener

Grace V. S. Chin

Senior Fellow

Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), Leiden

Email: gvschin@gmail.com

Southeast Asia's nation-states have come a long way since achieving independence, with glittering metropolises and sophisticated cityscapes symbolizing their arrival onto the international stage of late modernity and capitalism. These striking transformations correlate with changing attitudes and perspectives surrounding race, gender and sexual identities — some of the most contested political discourses in globalizing Southeast Asia — with the terms “pluralism,” “multiracialism,” “feminism,” “LGBT,” and “queer” as essential to the sociopolitical landscape as “globalization,” “transnationalism,” and “diaspora.” Related concepts that powerfully affect the popular imaginary are “difference” and “freedom,” underscoring the hegemonic hold on individual rights as a global ideology.

It would seem that this postcolonial present is far removed from the burdens of the colonial past. Yet a century ago, the colonized world of Southeast Asia was similarly assailed by the changing sociopolitical currents which saw the processes of capitalism, modernization (usually conflated with westernization), women's suffrage and emancipation movements, nationalist uprisings, and globalizing communication networks through which financial, information and labour markets flourished. At the same time — as the iconic 20th-century femininities of the Modern Girl and the New Woman entered the spotlight — concepts of race, gender and sexual identities were as much in flux then as they are now.

Given that notions of race, gender and sexuality have always had to conform to normative and traditional binaries, we investigate to what extent Southeast Asia has truly changed. How are race, gender and sexuality contested as political and cultural domains of expression and representation, then and now? Are they still entangled in structures and practices of territoriality, religion, and class? And in what ways have these entrenched systems of race, gender and sexuality altered shape over the past century?

We address these key questions by analyzing Southeast Asian narratives of race, gender and sexuality in conjunction with the ideas, meanings, and imageries emerging from their colonial and postcolonial contexts. By approaching these literary engagements as contested sites of identity, power and performance, this session explores the extent to which they have evolved (or regressed) through the hegemonic discourses of colony, nation, culture, and globalization. These concerns are relevant not only to our understanding of colonial-postcolonial continuities, but also enable a re-examination of the relations and politics between Southeast Asia and the Western world.