

- He, Xin, Lungang Wang, & Su Yang (2013) "Above the Roof, beneath the Law: Perceived Justice behind Disruptive Tactics of Migrant Wage Claimants in China." 47 *Law and Society Review* 703–38.
- Wang, Hsiao-Tan (2019) "Justice, Emotion, and Belonging: Legal Consciousness in a Taiwanese Family Conflict." 53 *Law and Society Review* 764–90.

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To what politics of love does the title of Lynette Chua's *The Politics of Love in Myanmar* refer? If Chua's goal in going to Myanmar in 2012 was to study how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) activists made sense of human rights and acted upon them to mobilize for social change, then what did she learn that led her to put it this way? What is distinctively political about love as a mode of human rights practice? What is noteworthy about its politics?

Chua does not theorize these politics of love in their abstractions. Instead, she describes and theorizes them via their particulars. She does so by giving voice to her interviewees as they recall lost lovers, recount winding journeys to human rights practice, and reveal the emotional contents of their activism. Emotions are, Chua writes, "the LGBT movement's genesis for political action, its heart and soul" (p. 18). Emotions generate fealty to human rights and comprise bonds among the activists themselves. They make possible what Chua denotes at the outset as "the book's central concept: the practice of human rights as a way of life" (p. 11). This she designates a "key component" of the movement's "distinctive emotion culture" (p. 103). The emotion culture is distinctive, Chua says, because, by infusing human rights ideas with feelings of suffering and transforming these to hopeful emotions, the LGBT movement departs from established queer communities in Myanmar, which, in offering a refuge from society, decline to do anything significant to change it.

But, activists in other struggles for rights in Myanmar might object: don't we also practise human rights as a way of life? Like LGBT activists, people devoting their lives for the rights of peasants, or women, or religious minorities variously work to build up affective communities through which to effect social changes, and address felt wrongs. They also have their own politics, their own emotion cultures. How are the politics of love among LGBT activists, and the character of their human rights practice as a way of life, distinctive from others?

This question invites closer attention to the kind of love animating the politics with which Chua's book is taken up. It does not seem to be the kind of love that the country's political elite enjoins people to bring to politics—the kind of love that Aung San Suu Kyi, as paradigmatic political leader for the country's non-Muslims, encapsulates. That kind of love is love as *metta*; love that is transcendent, asexual, and antiseptic; a kind of love that in its ideal type is selfless and non-specific, radiating outwards. It is love that, in its successes, eliminates conflict, stays aggression, and brings happiness. In short, it is a kind of love that anaesthetizes politics—a kind of love that is in fact resolutely non-political.¹

1. See Cheesman (2016).

The love of Chua's interlocutors, by contrast, embraces politics. It is love not as *metta*, but as *achit*. That the former usage is a classical Pali word—distant, elevated, and a little tricky to spell in Burmese—while the latter is of the vernacular, the stuff of 1,000 rock ballads and the walls of countless public toilets, is telling. Love as *achit* is of this world. It is a kind of love that makes demands, that insists on being seen and heard. It is sensual, adoring, possessive, and selfish—or at least self-interested. It arises from despair and gives rise to pain. It transforms these into the energy necessary for the politics of the LGBT movement. It is not the mediated love of the priest, but the passionate love of the amorous lover—*l'Amoureux*.² And who, in Chua's story, is that? No one other than the *chit thu* of *lein du chit thu*—that subject of the cleverly alliterative Burmese rendering of LGBT—literally, the same-sex lover.

On this reading of *The Politics of Love in Myanmar*, the salience of love as *achit* to the emotion culture of the LGBT movement can hardly be overstated. Although Chua makes quite a lot in the book of altruistic ties between the activists she met, observed, and interviewed, altruistic ties bind many kinds of movements, especially non-political ones. That's because altruism is the stuff of *metta*, the stuff of charity, of the one who self-consciously helps others less fortunate than themselves, who differentiates between themselves and those who are the objects of their selfless goodwill. It is the love of the benefactor or patriarch, the one of superior status and wisdom. This is not at all the love that Chua's interlocutors desire or from which they draw their strength. Altruistic love is not the kind of love that can fashion the new kind of socially present and politically significant person that the LGBT movement wants to create, which Chua describes and theorizes. Self-interested love, the kind of love that is mine, the kind of love that is of and for my kind, just might.

LGBT activists need a politics of love that is robust and partisan—a politics of love that has their back and on which they can rely because, unlike peasants or women or Christians, their kind must itself be forged through its struggle. That is not to be so crude as to suggest that other kinds of person are somehow static and do not also undergo change through struggle; only to say that, whereas the peasant or woman or Christian who makes rights claims can presume that their audience will not, at least, contest the category of peasant or woman or Christian, Chua's LGBT interlocutors work from the opposite presumption—that, for most of Myanmar, *lein du chit thu* is a claimant who does not (quite) yet exist.

The queer does exist. And the prior existence of the queer, designated by a variety of slang usages that Chua discusses throughout the book, is one of the things with which the LGBT activist must reckon. The queer as social type is tolerated within certain delineated places and roles. Lest queers threaten the sexual order of things, they are permitted to congregate and perform on its margins, in socially recognizable and sanctioned ways. This segregating of the queer is what the LGBT activist seeks to challenge, by calling on non-queer members of society to accept the queer not as an abnormality, but as one of them, and as one among them.

For this reason, Chua's LGBT activists are careful to remain within the rules of social conduct. More than just this, they draw upon materials and ideas from these rules when devising strategies for the work they must do upon themselves, and upon others. They use these materials and ideas in ways that, on the face of things, sometimes appear counter-productive to their cause. For instance, they deploy orthodox Buddhist notions of suffering, and karma, to explain their conditions and identify pathways to liberate

2. Barthes (1977), p. 31.

themselves. To gain social acceptance, they “exhort queers to show behavior that meets societal norms, roles, and obligations” (p. 86). They also, inadvertently or otherwise, reproduce social hierarchies within their communities, by privileging queers classed as male at birth and marginalizing lesbians, and by replicating Burman and Buddhist dominance over other cultural and religious groups.

If the task for the LGBT movement might be expressed as how not to be governed in the name of certain heteronormative principles or procedures, then how can it justify drawing upon those very principles and procedures from which it is trying to liberate its members? Isn’t this just the conduct of conduct all over again—that exercise of discipline whose provenance Michel Foucault finds in pastoral power?³ Indeed, the movement leaders do take on pastoral roles, altruistically reaching out to those not yet counted among their ranks, advising their inductees about their responsibilities to themselves and others. How could such practices liberate?

These are misleading questions because they mistake human rights strategy for ontology. They reduce human rights struggle to the sum of its goings-on: to the materials and words used to make it into something that is seen and heard in the world. Of course, to understand a rights claimant and their claim, we have to look to their strategies, to their methods for forming a movement, transforming grievances, and building community—as Chua does. But human rights as a way of life do not reside in the aggregate of strategies to make up *lein du chit thu* themselves, even if these are integral to the political project. Rather, it is in the making-up of a kind of person—in Burmese, literally, *lu myo*—which hitherto did not exist that the politics of love are found, and reproduced. It is in the ontology of themselves, rather than the strategies that the LGBT activists adopt, that these politics inhere.

Put another way, Myanmar’s LGBT activists make both themselves and their struggle through that struggle. The success of Chua’s book is to show how they do that, and to give us the words to explain their practices. Through human rights as a way of life, LGBT literally come to be, individually and collectively. By bringing their bodies and energies to their cause, they also bring a novel social and cultural group into existence—one that refuses the peripheral category of tolerated sexual deviance into which its members would otherwise fall, and that confronts the Victorian morality of a juridical schema in which queer sex is still “against the order of nature.”⁴

The effect is paradoxical. Paradox, Joan Scott writes in her study of revolutionary and post-revolutionary French feminists,

marks a position at odds with the dominant one by stressing its difference from it. Those who put into circulation a set of truths that challenge but don’t displace orthodox beliefs create a situation that loosely matches the technical definition of paradox.⁵

That situation is created not by strategies of opposition to the dominant position, or not by those alone, but by what those persons who take that opposing position constitute—literally, by what they embody through their way of life.

3. Foucault (2007).

4. Penal Code, s. 377.

5. Scott (1996), pp. 4–5.

For Chua, this is a radical achievement because human rights practice as a way of life among LGBT activists in Myanmar “challenges deeply rooted beliefs and the social hierarchy and organization of relations founded on them” (p. 142). It is also a critical achievement, inasmuch as critique as ethical practice works to transform and de-subjugate the self. When done together with others, in public, it becomes political.⁶ It throws into relief the limits of the conventional rules of conduct within which people must nevertheless live if they are to make their claims effective. Once it does so, it is no longer possible for the person’s actions to be subsumed to inherited rules for how to conduct oneself, even if they apparently comply with them. This is why *The Politics of Love in Myanmar* is (and are) noteworthy, and why the emotion culture of Myanmar’s LGBT activists is distinctive. It is why their movement is what it is, and why they are who they are.

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6. See Zerilli (2019).