

sure that the law achieves at least some of its lofty goals. Dr Chua's book brings all of this into focus in a way that few other studies have been able to do. She has blazed a trail for future research, and she has opened up new vistas for our field.

REFERENCES

- Chua, Lynette J. (2014) *Mobilizing Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

COMMENTARY BY AMY BARROW, MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

In this commentary, I would like to acknowledge the distinction awarded to Lynette Chua's book, *The Politics of Love in Myanmar*.

Through her rich storytelling, Chua transports the reader to Chiang Mai, Thailand and to the cities, townships, and villages of Myanmar to meet the book's two protagonists, Tun Tun and Tin Hla, and a myriad of activists in Myanmar's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) rights movement. As Chua identifies, law-and-society scholarship has focused on the vernacularization of human rights without fully exploring the processes behind rights mobilization, including how activists infuse rights with meaning and the way in which the practice of human rights becomes a way of life. Unpacking these processes, which Chua frames as formation, grievance transformation, and community building, the reader is invited to observe the relationship between activists, rights, and social-movement mobilization through an alternative lens—that of emotions.

As Chua examines, emotions such as solidarity and the social ties that connect activists often only appear at the periphery of other studies about rights-based movements—tangential, but not the focus of how and why social change occurs. In part, this may be because socio-legal scholars are expected to distance themselves from emotions. Beyond attempting to interpret meaning and perspectives, socio-legal researchers have been discouraged from engaging with emotions, for fear of attributing meanings to words, which may not be present. We are expected to maintain a veneer of neutrality and avoid any bias, particularly if we are “outsiders” of a particular cultural or social context. Despite these ethical challenges, Chua's book breaks new ground, grappling with emotions and all of their intricacies to present her research subjects with authenticity and humanity.

Writing with and about love and intimacy, Chua revisits her earlier research on the LGBT movement in Myanmar to situate her findings in an alternative theoretical framework. By placing emotions at the centre of social-movement mobilization, rather than at the periphery, Chua demonstrates how emotions and all of their complexities shape and influence the movement's processes. Examining the social ties that connect Tun Tun, Tin Hla, and other activists in the LGBT movement, Chua reminds us of the importance of grounding our scholarship in the lived experiences of our research subjects.

It is not a feat that can be easily replicated—it is not easy to distil emotions from day-to-day exchanges between and among people, nor is it easy to make sense of emotions and their

implications for social-movement mobilization. It is not easy to translate and disentangle emotions into effective storytelling, particularly as an outsider, but Chua's book pioneers this approach.

In her methodology, Chua provides rich detail about the research process, tracing how she met with and followed the lives of activists and the LGBT movement over a number of years together with the support of Moora and Khine Khine, who offer research support and friendship along the way. Moora and Khine Khine play an integral role, acting as “extra sets of eyes and ears” and giving “meaning and context to interviewees’ words and [picking] up verbal and nonverbal cues.”¹ While Chua clearly acknowledges this research assistance within the book, readers may question why Moora and Khine Khine are not given greater visibility in the main text. This leaves open the question of how we navigate qualitative research that transcends borders and boundaries, particularly when we are the “outsider” working in a different language—for example, whether we should directly integrate the experiences of our research assistants in the field into our storytelling. As a pre-tenure scholar, Chua's engagement with the movement took place over several years as she travelled back and forth between Singapore and Myanmar to undertake fieldwork, building trust and rapport with her research subjects. In the age of the neoliberal university, Chua's book serves as an important reminder to both emerging and established law-and-society scholars of the importance of time: time to research deeply and the time required to engage with and tell the stories of our research subjects with authenticity—time, however, that is often denied to early-career researchers, many of whom are at the coalface of tenure-track systems that are unforgiving of slow academic research.

The book develops and builds upon earlier articles that Chua wrote on the LGBT rights movement in Myanmar. As explained in the appendix on fieldwork and methods, Chua was “not entirely satisfied with those theoretical framings in hindsight.”² Significantly, this self-reflection provides the reader with an understanding of Chua's own journey as a scholar. Whether intentional or not, this generous methodological insight together with a detailed notes section will be particularly useful for early-career scholars as they consider the design and implementation of empirical research projects.

Tracing the lives and experiences of the activists in the movement took several years in a challenging sociopolitical context—Myanmar—a society in transition where civil-society organizations' means, methods, and organizing have adapted and evolved in response to changing conditions on the ground. Tracing the early days of the LGBT movement, Chua depicts the extraordinary lengths that activists had to go to, often at great personal risk, first mobilizing outside of Myanmar's borders in Chiang Mai and later returning to Yangon as spaces opened up for civil-society activism, albeit still constrained to some degree. In doing so, Chua's book also contributes to the emerging body of literature on Myanmar's regime change, focusing on the LGBT movement as an interest group that start to frame its claims as a new collective claimant in Burmese politics—“LGBT rights for LGBT people.”³

1 Chua (2019), p. 148.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

The book's richness and depth demonstrate Chua's commitment to telling her research subjects' stories with all of their complexities both honestly and compassionately, including the highs and lows of the movement, the way in which ties are formed and fragmented, and what she calls the flaws and fault lines of the movement. In Chapter 2, Chua locates the ties of the movement in political disaffection with Myanmar's military regime—ties of survival for those economic migrants within the movement and ties of altruism, among workers and volunteers of HIV and AIDS organizations. In Chapter 3 on grievance transformation, Chua explores how individuals with a myriad of sexual and gender identities from both urban and rural Myanmar bond over their shared suffering.

Significantly, Chua's research offers rich and compelling insight into Myanmar's cultural, social, and political context. The reader learns that the framing of LGBT does not mirror the broad spectrum of queer identities in Myanmar, but this does not mean that the discourse of LGBT rights does not make sense to Burmese people. As Chua explains, rights "can mean different things in societies and to different people, or they can mean absolutely nothing."⁴ In her writing, Chua shows that the way people make sense of rights is complex, influenced and "colored by who they are and where they come from."⁵

Chua's research demonstrates how activists' lives have been shaped by entrenched understandings of gender and sexuality in Myanmar society, and the role played by social hierarchy, norms, and spiritual beliefs, personified in the experience of Seng Naw, who meets Tun Tun, a protagonist of the movement. Seng Naw decides to go to Chiang Mai to learn more about the movement, but first crosses the border to China to buy three handkerchiefs, which he gives to his mother and sisters to apologize, as required by Kachin tradition.⁶ Washing their feet, he explains to them that he cannot marry a woman.⁷ This and other stories of suffering and sadness, as well as moments of humour and laughter, help to open up the lived experiences of the activists, providing evidence of the way in which LGBT people experience discrimination, fears, hopes, as well as a sense of belonging. While often intrinsically linked to Myanmar's social and cultural contexts (framed in the plural because of the multiple ethnic groups in Myanmar, each with their own traditions and cultural expectations), these lived experiences will no doubt resonate with researchers of LGBT rights mobilization in other countries.

Before concluding, the final chapter focuses on faults, fault lines, and the complexities of human agency because, as Chua demonstrates, the movement, like the humans who are part of it, has its own faults and flaws. I found this chapter particularly insightful for teasing out a number of fault lines in the movement, including the Bamar or Burman privilege that has shaped mainstream attitudes within Myanmar's society and also influenced the LGBT movement. Chua also explores the way in which people drop out of the movement, which has privileged the voices and experiences of those designated male at birth. Lesbians in particular have weaker emotional bonds to the movement. As a scholar of gender, equality, and the law, it was disappointing but perhaps not surprising to see how social gender-based hierarchies also impact upon the LGBT movement.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Chua's theoretical contribution to law-and-society scholarship in *The Politics of Love in Myanmar* is significant, but the methodological depth of her work is equally important, and will undoubtedly inspire law-and-society scholars to explore new directions in their own empirical research.

COMMENTARY BY HSIAO-TAN WANG, NATIONAL CHENGCHI UNIVERSITY

Lynette Chua's new book, *The Politics of Love: LGBT Mobilization and Human Rights as a Way of Life*, enhances our understanding of the politics of human rights by exploring how affect or emotion influences legal consciousness and legal mobilization. It demonstrates the development of the movement's networks and describes a social process that has moved activists' hearts, pushing them to take action and transforming their lives. I will discuss four aspects highlighted in the book: emotion culture, social belonging, personhood transformation, and emotion pluralities.

1. EMOTION CULTURE: FROM NEGATIVE TO A WAY OF LIFE

Socio-legal studies have long ignored emotion as a fundamental feature affecting the practices of law. Although some have addressed how negative emotions, such as anger or guilt, can influence the decision to mobilize one's legal rights,¹ only recently have others begun to explore how other more positive emotions, such as the sense of belonging, may affect the role of law in personal and social conflicts.² Chua's new book has initiated a rather thorough exploration of this by uncovering the emotion culture underlying human rights practice in Myanmar and describing the constant construction and reconstruction of the sense of self, social bonds, and political demands.

Chua's writing reminds us that, in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) movement, emotions and social ties are not static, but rather reshaped and cultivated, while simultaneously serving as an emotional driver of the development of human agency. In Chapters 2 and 3, she describes the social process that helps to make human rights relevant within the context of Myanmar; to help LGBT individuals overcome fears and anxiety about discrimination, human rights discourse has acted as a catalyst for the adoption of culturally embedded and faith-based empathy and responsibility for one another. This has the power to transform feelings into a positive sense of belonging that ignites a driving force capable of moving the focus from the individual to the collective (pp. 73–80), thereby creating a new emotion culture that is distinctive from older queer communities (pp. 84–6). Chua refers to this positive meaning of emotion culture “as a way of life” that demonstrates a collective pursuit in community building that is separate from the mere demands of individual interests.

1. He et al. (2013), pp. 703–38; Abrego (2019), pp. 641–70.

2. Engel (2016), pp. 71–83; Wang (2019), pp. 764–90.