

# INTERVIEW WITH ARA WILSON

ON QUEER POLITICAL ECONOMY IN THAILAND AND  
TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



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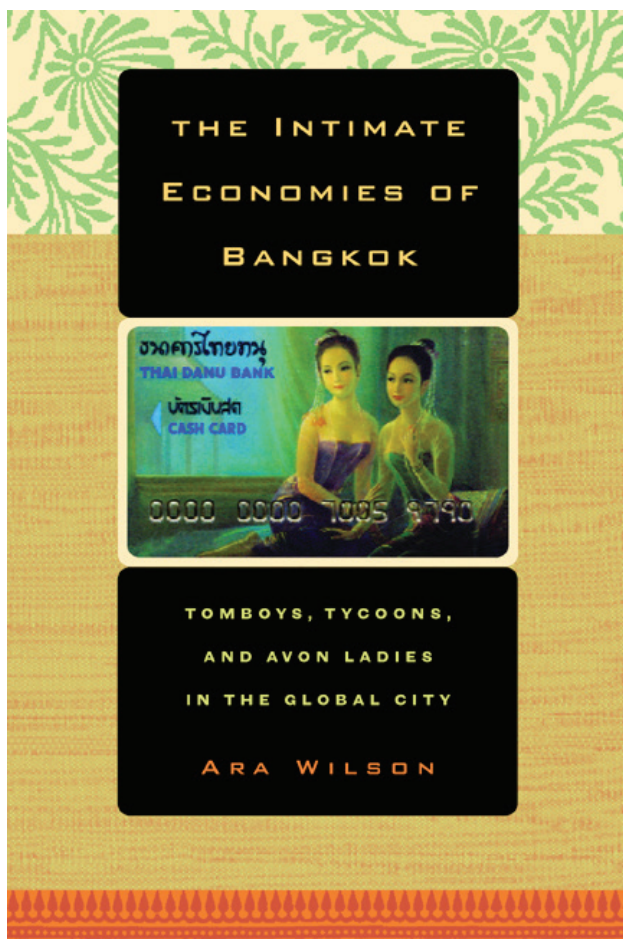


Thailand is known for being one of Asia's most liberal countries toward LG-BTQ communities: it is a signatory of the U.N's declaration of Human Rights and is at the forefront of legalizing same-sex marriage, with a bill already in parliament while many countries in the region still criminalize homosexuality. This image of broad social acceptance is boosted by Thailand's Tourism Authority's open marketing of the country as a gay-friendly holiday destination. However, recent reports of regular discrimination against local LGBTQ groups in the international media have challenged Thailand's perceived culture of tolerance. Rachel Leng from the *Harvard Asia Quarterly* speaks with Professor Ara Wilson (above) on Thailand's localized queer and sexual identities embedded in the infrastructure of embodied capitalist modernity and international economic markets.

**Please tell us more about your ethnographic research vis-à-vis gender and sexuality in Bangkok, Thailand. What aspect interested you the most?**

When I began research in Bangkok, there really was not a lot of analysis of gender or sexuality beyond that which looked at the role and status of women. For example, from my studies, I had no idea that there was a "tom" figure, the masculine female/female-to-male (FTM)/tomboy role, which has now received much more attention. At the time of my doctoral research, feminist theory was being reorganized around new theoretical currents drawing from both post-structuralism and continental theory, and queer theory had only just emerged. I was interested in finding ways to integrate these currents, centered on the West and in humanities disciplines, with political economic approaches and through grounded, empirical studies in the global South. I still think that combining, for example, Foucaultian and Marxist approaches with concrete research in Asia presents challenges for methods, analysis, and intellectual community.

The product of that research was *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the World City*, my ethnographic study published in 2004. Rath-



er than focus an entire book on the “tom” or the sex worker, it was important to me to embed examinations of what can be sensationalized topics within a broader array of explorations of sexuality and gender at the intersection of different economic modalities (like folk or moral economies and capitalist economies).

**In your work with NGOs and the UN, you propose a feminist study of globalization and queer political economy (QPE). Could you share your thoughts on QPE and why you use “queer” (as opposed to gendered/sexual/intimate)?**

I actually would like more critical reflection on queer even if I also use it, often as a short hand. Queer is meant to be a troubling term, but in truth, I think that a lot of its troubles are not actually the interesting sort, and I don’t want to reify queer as meaning anti-normativity, as much of queer theory does. A crucial question that area-scholars need to ask is, what does it mean to use a term that emerged to criticize the normalization of gay and lesbian (and maybe bisexual) identities in places where this liberal normalizing process has not happened? What are the sex/gender norms that are being challenged in a particular site? For instance, much of male-male sex may not be celebrated, but in many places it is allowed to happen on the down-low. Is this queer? If male purchase of sexual services is taken for granted in a particular milieu, is commercial sex work transgressive? It seems as if what counts as queer is often defined in relation to a Western normativity, which may make sense when criticizing Western imperialism, but I am not sure it captures everyday life for most communities in Asia.

Many of those individuals reaching for “queer” seem to believe that it can function as a critical transnational category that is not complicit with the enduring hegemony of Euro-American intellectual frameworks in defining theory; that is, they believe that “queer” can escape Euro-centrism or imperialism in ways that terms like lesbian, feminist, or gay did not. I don’t agree, and in fact I think that feminist scholarship has had far more reflection on the power-laden nature of research, categories, and the subject-object relation than queer studies have. So I worry that “queer” is being taken up in critical Asian studies in a way that bypasses these questions, as inherently radical, even though part of the mobility of term queer is in fact because many outsiders (e.g.: mainstream heterosexuals) don’t even know what the term means. Ergo while using lesbian or gay might invite censorship, queer can pass below the radar. Such use might be strategic, but it’s certainly not more radical than the by now codified categories of sexual identity.

To put it briefly, I use queer provisionally and as a short hand, because it is a term that many individuals within my various fields (Women’s, Area, Queer Studies and Anthropology) are currently using, and it is easier than listing the ever-expanding set of the sorts of people we mean by the term

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into a long unpronounceable acronym. But I would love to see more discussions about why and how we are using queer in non-Western contexts.

**In your book on *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok* (2004), you discuss how capitalist markets are intertwined with local economic systems to create new sexual identities and lifestyles, ranging from “tomboys” to corporate tycoons to sex workers. In the last decade since the book has been published, there have undoubtedly been changes in Thai contemporary society vis-à-vis globalizing influences. Are there now additional ways that intimate lives are reflective of recent developments in transnational capitalist markets? Or, how has the significance and implications of tomboys, tycoons, and Avon Ladies shifted?**

If I describe my approach as a kind of cultural political economy, I have to acknowledge that I pay far more attention to the economic than the political aspects. So if we're asking about change, anyone even remotely aware of Thailand has to recognize how important political conflict has been for the nation and particularly in its violent expressions in Bangkok. This conflict has dramatized changing class formations, or changes to the relation of class to politics, which surely must be manifested in relation to gender and sexuality, but I am unable to articulate how. I do see a shift to a more liberal acceptance of the tomboy, and interestingly, I feel I am seeing a definition of the tom as an erotic object for the femme in tom-dee and lesbian communities, which feels new. The *kathoey* (MTF transgender) role appears to have become a very class-inflected position, marking a lower class identity. You see wealthy Sino-Thai tom but you don't see wealthy Thai *kathoey*. And now, transgender and transsexual are becoming more well-known as potential ways to define identity, in part through international NGO discourse, media, and the internet, but also particularly as Thailand emerges as a leader in sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) worldwide. The addition of these identifiers will interact with, and likely change the older tom and *kathoey* categories.

I am interested in seeing how new work that will not just map the new configurations of identities emerging across East and Southeast Asia, which is being done, but that will also push the analysis in ways that make it even more relevant to area studies and other disciplines. I am excited by projects that articulate realigned states, different versions of domestic and global capital, with the emerging ways of living out sex and gender in everyday life or in cultural production. At the same time, I think much of the work on sexuality and gender in Asia, as elsewhere, remains on a discursive plane which escapes the kind of economic and everyday realms I have been trying to describe. For example, discussions of policy tend to focus on the textual content of policy, rather than draw on Science and Technology Studies (STS) or material-culture or organizational frameworks to locate sexuality/gender in the ways that policies are made and in their very uneven applications. The amazing new queer Asian film genre and the

explosion of scholarship providing close readings of it, have helped reveal the incredible complexity of sexuality unfolding in the region, but I would still like to see more research on the capital, production, and reception of these texts.

**In regards to feminist issues, specifically the sex work industry in Thailand, many Thai sex workers actually work outside of Thailand, in other parts of Asia or in the West, and send money back to their families, thus still contributing to the local Thai economy. What are the implications of such transnational movement and flows of money, people, and social life for your conception of sexuality, gender and ethnicity in non-Western modernity?**

This is an interesting question, but I have to say, there is such smart work being done on these questions about the Philippines, where the scale of emigration is so much bigger, that I would first look there to consider how diaspora or emigration and remittances are percolating with sex/gender domains in Manila and the nation. I also always seek to integrate discussions of sex work with other forms of labor, such as domestic labor. There's the work of Martin Manalansan, Kale Fajardo or Lieba Faier. And in truth, I think Thai cis-female commercial sex workers could use a break from the academic gaze. There's plenty left to say about customers – it's amazing how relatively understudied they remain – and there is little in-depth scholarship on Thai men or *kathoey*s who have sex with men. In writing about Thai sex worker for foreigners, it was important to me to not reproduce sensational discourse about them. I once presented a paper called “How Not to Write about Sex Work,” which basically said, “we need to stop assuming that more representation of this sort of domain is a necessary or good thing.”

**In your ethnographic field work in Bangkok, you also worked with Sino-Thai communities. Could you share any insights as to differing conceptions of sexual and gendered identities across the Chinese and Thai communities?**

As your readers might be aware, the Sino-Thai community in Thailand is one of the most assimilated communities anywhere in the world, so there is probably less stark differentiation of norms than elsewhere. Still, there may be broad differences in sex and gender. Jiemin Bao's work says the most about this, but those would also have to be crosscut with differences of class, ethnicity, rural/urban, and so on. I think an interesting question might be, how are conceptions of ancestral China (or province, like Hainan) involved in understandings of sex/gender? In my book, I explain how the Sino-Thai ethnicity changed in relation to capitalist transformations in ways that reformulated the nexus of economics with sex/gender. The Sino-Thai identity has become much more of a positive identification associated with economic development. Among the toms, Sino-Thai identity is always also a class identity. There are other Asian identities which

are relevant to understanding sex/gender dynamics in Thailand as well. For example, Dredge Kang argues that the Thai gay male scene has now oriented to a Korean version of the pan-Asian ideal, manifest in the K-pop style's popularity. Some Sino-Singaporean gay men shuttle to Bangkok for a fun queer weekend. So several of us are more interested in the sex/gender dimensions of a range of complex flows across Asia – intra-Asian or inter-Asian flows, including pop culture and tourists.

**Your current comparative project on medical tourism to Thailand and Singapore is fascinating. Could you comment on the main differences (or similarities) between the flow of bodies in the form of tourism to both countries?**

In my work, I have argued that gendered embodiment of Thai people themselves helped generate Thailand's capacity for medical tourism. That is, the demand for cosmetic surgery by sex workers and MTF *katheoy* helped advance Thailand's skill-based "comparative advantage" in global medical markets.

This past year or so, I have been working on a Mellon funded project at Duke on "Science Studies as Area Studies," which has brought together scholars working on bioscience, technology, and medicine in Asia. We are interested in asking how the grounded area studies in South, East, and Southeast Asia not only apply STS frameworks, but also modify Eurocentric accounts of science and medicine. It was marvelous to gather the work of Aihwa Ong, Judith Farquhar, Mei Zhan, Sarah Pinto, Vincanne Adams, Naveeda Khan, Warwick Anderson, and others scholars. The project speaks to the ways in which Asian Studies is being revitalized by cross-regional thematic questions, like those of STS, and by the post-national emphasis that moves beyond country studies to examine flows of empire, capital, knowledge across Asia, the Global South, the former Second World, or East to West. I would like to see studies of queer subjects be more connected with these important directions in Asian studies. This Mellon project is ending, but I hope that it has helped shape some continuing conversations.

**Could you please share more about your current book project on *Sexual Latitudes*? Any other upcoming projects readers should look forward to?**

*Sexual Latitudes* is less an ethnographic project grounded in Southeast Asia and more of an analytical project. It is based on my observation that much of the discussion of transnational sexuality brings greater sophistication and care to understanding sexuality (as a modern, power-laden category) than it does to the transnational, which often is little more than a gesture to neoliberalism. I hope the book will help queer and sexuality studies scholars see the benefit of paying greater attention to the nitty gritty operations of globalizing processes; in other words, I hope that the cases I dis-

cuss will show how we can get at less obvious, and arguably more core, dynamics of global power for sexuality, by examining how forces that cross nation-states – transnational power – are constituted, and locating sexuality within them. Space is too short to give an example, but I've published early versions of chapters such as "NGOs as Erotic Sites" and "Post-Fordist Desires: The Commodity Aesthetics of Bangkok Sex Shows" (which brings us back to Bangkok). I am also writing about the question of culture in transnational analyses of sex/gender. With powerful global flows, particularly in the vision of analyses of Euro-US power or of neoliberalism, what are we speaking about when we speak of cultural variation or "living otherwise"? How are feminist and queer studies using the culture category? I suggest that use of other terms (discourse, normativity) still partake of the culture categories logic and overall that transnational queer and feminist studies uses different, even contradictory, modes of analyzing power for transnational and local frames but in an unexamined and possibly contradictory way.

**Terms such as "Queer Asia" are gaining currency as there is an increasing consciousness that queerness in Asia manifests itself differently from in the West. Should there also be a separate conception of sexual and gender or feminist rights and embodied life, rather than Western frameworks in neoliberal and transnational contexts?**

I wouldn't speak in a normative way about what rubrics people living in Asia should use. Rather, I am interested in seeing what they do use, and how this articulates with previously existing rubrics – but again, not just at a discursive plane, but in a way which embeds these categories within broader social fields of material and symbolic arrangements.