Foreword

When Lynette Chua introduces us to Tun Tun and Tin Hla, two central protagonists in her landmark book on the practice of LGBT activism in Myanmar, her description is riveting, revealing, and unforgettable. On the one side is Tun Tun, a university student who had fled the country after the suppression of the 1988 democracy movement by escaping into the jungles along the Myanmar-Thailand border, where he later joined the armed resistance against the military junta. And on the other side is Tin Hla, a ten-year-boy in 1988 who spent his early years living with his conservative military family while grappling with the implications of his emerging queer identity. Eventually, as Chua describes it, Tin Hla left his family home and “drifted across southern Myanmar trying to scrape together a livelihood, finding and losing lovers along the way.” By the mid-2000s, Tun Tun, Tin Hla, and others had joined forces to create a pioneering human rights movement that would work to alter how Myanmar’s LGBT community was perceived by the privileged within the country’s gendered hierarchy. Even more important, as Chua’s study reveals with nuanced ethnographic insight, the development of Myanmar’s LGBT human rights movement transformed how the activists understood themselves, their rights as citizens, and their moral value as human beings.

By foregrounding the stories of Tun Tun and Tin Hla, among others, *The Politics of Love in Myanmar* signals a particularly compelling orientation to the book’s broader themes, an approach in which the development of the book’s innovative theoretical argument about the practice of human rights is always grounded in the complexities of lived experiences, life histories, and the trajectory of the inner self. In so doing, Chua’s study makes several important contributions. First, it offers a robust justification for relocating the phenomenological subtleties of human rights subject formation to the very center of our empirical research. As she emphasizes, the ethnographic study of the practice of

human rights has traditionally deemphasized the phenomenological, the affective, and the ethical dimensions of activism in favor of the social, the political economic, and the institutional. Chua's study does not deny the importance of these topics. Rather, it provides a blueprint for how a concern with both the social and the affective dimensions of human rights practice can and should be combined methodologically and conceptually.

Second, *The Politics of Love in Myanmar* serves as a particularly strong rejoinder to a line of critique that has too often oversimplified the broader ideological and geopolitical contexts in which the practice of human rights takes place. As Chua demonstrates, nothing is gained by framing research in terms of metanarratives of Western imperialism or with reference to the conventional dichotomies that have commonly been used to locate human rights: Global North–Global South, Global–Local, West–East, individual rights–collective rights, and so on. Instead, as she argues, the elasticity of human rights beyond legal and political categories, something I have described elsewhere as “connotative power,” allowed the LGBT activists whose experiences suffuse her book to appropriate human rights against a background of other cultural values, other logics of actions, and other forms of motivation. After *The Politics of Love in Myanmar*, it seems to me, it is no longer possible to defend an approach to human rights activism—whether animated or not by a wider postcolonial critique—that reduces these overlapping phenomenologies to the implicit orientalism of savages, victims, and saviors.

And finally, Chua's study offers a sobering ethnographic reminder—one derived from research in extremely challenging and even improbable circumstances—of the ultimate limits of what she describes as “human rights practice as a way of life.” Although the LGBT activists in *The Politics of Love in Myanmar* turned to human rights discourse with what Chua describes as “emotional fealty,” the consequences for large-scale or structural change were much less certain. Instead, transformation was measured by much smaller emotional gestures, barely perceptible shifts in social relations, and the partial, yet still significant, relaxing of cultural pressures that had made the lives of queer Burmese historically ones of hardship, fear, and self-doubt.

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