

## Rethinking Queer (Asian) Studies:

### Geopolitics, Covid-19, and Post-Covid Queer Theories and Mobilities

John Wei

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## **Rethinking Queer (Asian) Studies:**

### **Geopolitics, Covid-19, and Post-Covid Queer Theories and Mobilities**

*John Wei, Sociology, Gender Studies & Criminology, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand*

#### **Abstract**

This paper considers queer studies in the global geopolitical hotspot of Asia, as well as how we can reimagine queer theories through both the Covid-19 pandemic and the intensified regional and global superpower competition and geopolitical tensions. It argues for a rethinking of queer studies through today's international relations and geopolitical complications in a sociological political economy. The aim is to connect critical studies with analyses of economic and social class structures, an approach that has been substantiated by the current crises, and to present an expanded queer mobility theory with two brief case studies (mini-critiques) of the current socioeconomic conditions facing marginalized people under Covid-19 and the changing geopolitical landscape. In so doing, this paper actively explores what queer studies can do and can be through the current historical turning point of the pandemic and geopolitical rivalry towards potential post-Covid socioeconomic revival and recovery.

#### **Keywords**

Geopolitics, Covid-19 Pandemic, Queer International Relations, Queer Marxism, Queer Mobilities, Queer Theory, Queer Asia

Queer Asian Studies has emerged as an interdisciplinary and intersectional field of inquiry since the turn of the twenty-first century with a growing repertoire in English-language

scholarship. On the one hand, the inception of this field can be traced back to early Oriental Studies underlined by Western scholars' fascination with the East since the encounters between the two civilizations through the work of merchants, missionaries, explorers, and colonizers, although "Asian Studies" has become the standard name today to overcome the early Orientalism that appears racist and Eurocentric. On the other hand, Queer Asian Studies can be traced back to the Second Wave Feminism and the Gay Liberation Movement since the 1960s in the West. In the late 1970s and early 1980s when the limits of identity politics started to hinder social activism and theoretical development in the United States and the United Kingdom, academics started to adopt poststructuralist approaches to replace the grand narrative of a monolithic "truth" about gender and sexuality, exemplified by the emergence of Queer Theory in the early 1990s.

The *fin-de-millénaire* scholarly interests in non-heterosexual cultures, histories, and social practices in Asia led to the inception of Queer Asian Studies in the West. Since the turn of the century, this field has enjoyed increased intellectual diversity and international visibility, led by a critical number of emerging and (now) established scholars with both empirical experiences in Asia and academic training in the West to cast a critical light on the topic. Queer Asian Studies today both considers gender and sexual diversity in Asia "in its own right" and utilizes Asian cultures, histories, and ongoing social changes to challenge the dominance of white/Western discourses, theories, and focuses in the social practices and intellectual understandings of non-conforming gender and sexuality. This trend has become integral and invaluable to the multidisciplinary studies of gendered and sexual cultures and communities in Anglo-European scholarship, inasmuch as Queer Asian Studies offers a site of difference and a framework of reference for the studies of Asia by and for its own people that in turn feed into the efforts of Western scholars to diversify their scope, methods, and arguments to challenge the dominance of white heteronormativity in society and academia.

While local queer cultures in Asia are stretched between their own histories and ineluctable involvements in historical colonization and ongoing globalization, the Western interests in Asia have continued to reshape the contour and content of current Anglo-European academic discourses around global gender and sexuality studies.

However, Asia itself is a highly diverse and rapidly developing area, the studies and understandings of which are far from linear and consistent. Both its rich and diverse histories and its dramatic and ongoing social changes have made Queer Asian Studies a heterogeneous area. The shift of global manufacturing and supply chains to Asia, and the continued supply of international tourists and students from Asia to the West, had shown an emerging “Asian century”—until Asia’s relentless economic growth and supply of people and products were temporarily disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic amid growing and ongoing geopolitical tensions in trade, security, and technology most noticeably between China and the United States. Middle powers and smaller economies are concerned that they must choose between the two, which will endanger this so-called Asian century and reshape the world order established since World War II (Lee, 2020). Meanwhile, Covid-19 has functioned as a multiplier of cascading (geo)political, environmental, and socioeconomic fallouts that already manifested across the globe before the emergence of the novel coronavirus (Erni & Striphas, 2021), compounding and amplifying existing crises with a once-in-a-century pandemic.

While gender, sexuality and queer issues have been at the forefront of Asia’s rapid social changes, the changing regional and global geopolitical landscape and the social, economic, and public health fallouts in many countries caused by Covid-19 have cast a shadow on the lives and livelihoods of queer people. Their marginalized social status in a vast majority of Asian countries has put them at more risk facing the still strong and ongoing social stigma, lack of public and state support or legal recognition, and precarious economic conditions compounded with a public health crisis. The material hardship and the changing

socioeconomic conditions caused by the pandemic and the geopolitical tensions, as well as the shifting modes of productions and supply chains that have had a profound impact on people's lives and livelihoods, are of particular concern in this paper. If the pandemic is a significant historical turning point and a potential dawning moment for a brand-new chapter of humanity, then it is more important than ever to take this opportunity to reflect on what we can learn from the Covid-19 crisis and the changing regional and global geopolitical landscape, as well as how these lessons can benefit queer studies for future theoretical and empirical inquiries.

In this paper, I first consider global geopolitics and the Covid-19 pandemic to cast a critical light on queer Asia. Second, I point out the issues in queer (Asian) scholarship and their inadequacy in addressing our current time and crises. Third, I present an expanded theory of queer mobilities and two case studies (mini-critiques) to demonstrate what queer studies can do and can be in and beyond the current geopolitical and covid-19 crises, or what can be conceived as "post-Covid" queer studies even though the pandemic may still haunt us for the years to come, as theoretical development needs to be forward-dawning and forward-looking. In so doing, this paper aims to reframe and reconsider queer international relations, queer Marxism, and queer mobility theories for a three-pronged critique of existing queer scholarship to explore and construct possible post-Covid socioeconomic analyses in the intersections of queer studies and sociological political economy.

Here, I resort to the "queer" lens as academic shorthand and a theoretical positioning to extend and expand the possibilities and potentialities opened by queer theory in the context of a global Asia through geopolitics and the Covid-19 crisis. I mostly reject the use of "queer" as a categorical identity, especially in the contexts of Asia and non-Western cultures, to the extent that "queer" as an identity label has itself betrayed the essence of queer theory in challenging and destabilizing fixed identity categories and identity-based politics. Engaging

“queer” as an analytical rather than categorial tool offers a much more expansive method to scrutinize the geopolitical tensions and international relations through the increasingly complex, non-traditional, asymmetrical, and often “non-conforming” engagements and entanglements between the West and today’s Asia in a time of geopolitical, public health, economic, and mobility crises that have marked an epochal shift in the shared history of humanity.

### **Geopolitics, Covid-19, and Queer International Relations**

In this paper, I mostly engage mainland China, Taiwan, and the United States to shed light on geopolitics, Covid-19, and queer studies/mobilities, not because these societies can represent the whole of “Asia” or the entire ontology of the “West,” but that they are at the very center of the current global superpower competition and the disputes and fallouts caused by the pandemic in foreign policies and international relations. The focus on mainland China and Taiwan as case studies is a necessary strategic positioning for a strong critique of current geopolitics and the ongoing pandemic to shed light on intra- and international networks of mobilities, a major focus in recent Asian critiques and social analyses (Martin et al., 2019; Luther & Loh, 2019; Valjakka, 2021; Wei, 2020). This approach is not to monopolize the framing of Asia or Queer Asian Studies to obscure its internal heterogeneity.

More specifically, China is a crucial geopolitical hotspot in the current global superpower competition, while the once-in-a-century pandemic was caused by a virus that originated from China and was blamed on China’s early mistakes in containing the outbreak—as well as the increase in Chinese peoples’ mobilities that has reshaped global trade, migration, capital flows, tourism, international education, and now the spread of the virus. Also, I acknowledge that focusing on China may obscure and further marginalize other, smaller queer cultures and communities in Asia and beyond. Taiwan, on the other hand, is a

small economy that “punches above its weight” as a global role model in the fight against Covid-19 and a key player at the center of the China-US confrontation in regional and global political animosities. Contrasting large and small powers at the very center of the geopolitical storm and the fallout triggered by the pandemic offers an intriguing approach to constructing new understandings of queer theories, studies, and mobilities.

Further, as Petrus Liu argues in his landmark essay “Why Does Queer Theory Need China,” linking China (and by extension Asia) with queer theory is revolutionary in marrying the East and the West to disrupt the binary and make them intimate—hence decolonizing and reframing the US-dominated queer studies (2010, p. 296). In current geopolitics, this argument has continued to offer a timely reminder of the deep historical and ongoing economic and cultural entanglements between Asia/China and the West/United States that are challenged by the pandemic and the ongoing trade war and tech war between the two. The conceptualization of Queer Asia, in this sense, not only embraces the intellectual emancipation and flexibility of queer theory to challenge the essentialist construction of gender and sexuality, but potentially destabilizes the fixed concepts and categories of “China” and “Asia” to challenge current geopolitics that may “de-couple” China from the West, which is difficult in both a conceptual and a practical sense due to the deep integration of China in the world economy.

Since 2019, when flagship Chinese technology company Huawei became a target of US and Western sanctions amid concerns about the integration of its hardware in local 5G (the fifth generation) telecommunication infrastructures, a full-blown “tech war” has started between China and the US on top of the existing and ongoing “trade war” launched by the Trump administration in line with its “America first” policy. The tech war entered a new phase in 2020 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic when the US government tried to ban TikTok, a mobile social media and video-sharing application owned by a Chinese company

and popular among Western youth, and forced its sale to US firms due to concerns of data privacy and its potential in enforcing agendas, censorship, and ideologies imposed by the Chinese Communist Party. The intended ban extended to WeChat, a popular mobile networking tool in China and global Chinese communities that has morphed into a mega-platform of online streaming, e-commerce, and fintech (financial technology).

While the ban on both apps has not yet materialized amid domestic and international backlashes, there had been another incident in the tech war that was somewhat overshadowed by the global media attention on TikTok. In March 2020, half a year before the TikTok saga, the US government forced the sale of Grindr—the most popular mobile dating application for gay men—from a Chinese company to US firms. Grindr was initially developed and launched in the US and then purchased by a Chinese online gaming company that became the majority shareholder and then the owner (Wei, 2020, p. 170). The divestment took a year since the US government cited the ownership of Grindr in the hands of a Chinese company as a “national security risk” in early 2019 (O’Donnell et al., 2019; Wang & Oguh, 2020), indicating that private data on a mobile dating app (including personal locations and HIV-positive status) can be used to identify the users and blackmail high-stake government employees and military or national security personnel who use Grindr but are still in the closet.

The tech war between the US and China surrounding a popular gay dating app itself marks a “queer” moment in the ongoing geopolitical tensions and superpower competition, adding a new note to Jasbir Puar’s famous “homonationalism” (2007, 2013) in the sense that homosexuality is now an issue of national security, and “gay tech” has become a geopolitical and geoeconomic weapon for national interests. The forced sale of Chinese technologies to US firms, as seen in the case of TikTok, was also widely discussed in the West and Asia as a way for the US to acquire advanced algorithms (e.g., those developed by TikTok to rank and recommend content) that will safeguard existing US advantages and curtail China’s efforts to

build capacity in esoteric data processing and intelligent algorithms. Controlling advanced technologies will help the US maintain its technological supremacy and help American companies keep their global market share facing increased competition from China. In other words, the tech war has been driven by both national security and economic concerns.

The forced sale and divestment from advanced and capital-driven technologies echo Rahul Rao's critique of "homocapitalism" and "queer international relations" in which capital injection and rejection play a major role in geopolitics. Echoing the "queer turn" in *Critical International Relations* (Richter-Montpetit, 2018), Rao observes that gender and sexual inequality and state homophobia in poor and developing countries have become sanctionable through the rejection of financial aid from the West (2015, 2018, 2020), as the bundled financial aid and request for liberal reform have dominated US foreign policies to promote "capitalism plus democracy" as the international development model. Here, for queer critiques to make further inroads into geopolitics, we can now add mobile technology, data privacy, and national security to the picture of queer international relations and global homocapitalism, where homosexuality is of national and international importance in the current, paranoid geopolitics and the ongoing conflicts in trade, economy, and technology between China and the US.

The bludgeon and bulwark used by both sides in this ongoing saga have shed light on the entangled queer issues and international relations. Also, in terms of regional geopolitics, the rise of China and its continued regional and global power assertion have increasingly squeezed Taiwan's international space. Covid-19 is a vivid example that the World Health Organization, in which China is a strong and dominant member, refused to share information at the onset of the pandemic and rejected the participation of Taiwan. The rejection left Taiwan with no choice but to rely on itself to proactively deter Covid-19, which has paradoxically led to its early success in handling the crisis with one of the lowest infection

and death rates in the world (Wu, 2021, pp. 78–9) until a sudden surge of community cases in mid-2021 and again in mid-2022. Taiwan and mainland China have been competing and disputing over who is more successful in handling the outbreak and supplying medical aid to other countries. The hyper-consciousness of successful pandemic management has become a geopolitical issue on both sides of the strait, marking a conjuncture between nationalism and pandemic response in a new round of cross-strait confrontation.

The pandemic has also been weaponized to provide ammunition for the geopolitical rivalry, with China and the US still disputing the exact origin of the virus. In addition, recent research (e.g., Reid & Ritholtz, 2020) and a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* in 2021 have indicated larger economic and psychological impacts of Covid-19 on global queer communities. Compared to the general population, marginalized queer people face even more risks, such as HIV-positive gay men who had trouble accessing crucial HIV medication during lockdowns, which echoes the concern over the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines that is deeply rooted in global geopolitics and local social inequality—a point to which I shall return later. Covid-19 as a public health and geopolitical crisis has so far caught little attention in Queer Asian Studies, but theories of queer international relations, queer Marxism, and queer mobilities are potentially highly relevant to today’s superpower competition and pandemic management, especially in the current “queer moment” of homonationalist and homocapitalist geopolitics that I have discussed above. That said, these theories need further rethinking and reframing to account for the current and ongoing crises.

### **Queer Marxism and Queer Asia**

In recent queer studies, although Marxism has once again become an important critical lens (e.g., Floyd, 2009; Liu, 2015), the critiques often focus on sociocultural misrecognitions of gender and sexual diversity, while neglecting the Marxist tradition in the analysis of the

economy and social class. This tendency is particularly strong in the US and among the scholars following the US academic discourses, with a few noticeable exceptions discussed below, while their UK counterparts have to a larger extent retained materialist analyses of structural issues such as stratification (see Stoffel, 2021, p. 178). As political scientist Sheri Berman reminds us in *Foreign Policy*, a semi-academic US magazine:

[those] on the left stopped focusing on capitalism entirely during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, turning their attention instead to intellectual currents such as postmodernism, multiculturalism, feminism, and postcolonialism, which were *cultural rather than economic* in nature. ... The left lacked a coherent narrative of the existing order's problems as well as convincing plans for transforming it (2020, my emphasis).

This is largely the case in queer studies during the current crises. For those of us working in queer studies and critical inquiries, we still lack a coherent narrative and a critical mass to challenge deeper socioeconomic structures other than focusing on the cultural trends that are important but lack the “edge” for structural transformations. Cultural and personal politics must fit into the deeper and greater structure and struggle—a struggle that defines our time and marks the way forward.

Further, the poststructuralist approaches in gender and sexuality studies that we have inherited and borrowed from Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Sedgwick are insightful and informative for us to interrogate the differences and discursive power relations in cultural productions and conceptualizations of queer issues. However, such power relations are often understood as separate and distinctive from class relations and political economy (Pollert, 1996; Seidman, 2011), which is no longer sufficient for a deeper and fuller understanding of today's Asia where social changes are driven by rapid economic development, ongoing urbanization, an ever-expanding urban middle class, an aging population in several major

economies, and social class mobility/immobility. It is important to reconsider the materialist approach derived from earlier gay and feminist studies (e.g., D’Emilio, 1983; Hennessy, 1993) to focus on the earthiness and messiness of the underlying structures—economy, class, and demographic shifts that underpin the social practices and cultural productions of gender and sexuality. This is not a return to the old, tandem argument we had in the 1990s of cultural approaches versus the Marxist fascination with class and economy; rather, “culture” and “economy” are mutually informing and reinforcing beyond a binary methodology for our studies of current geopolitics and Covid-19. This argument itself is not new, but the changing geopolitical conditions and the ongoing pandemic have substantiated this thesis with a newly found social contingency and urgency.

More specifically, the separation between “economy” and “culture” derived from the schism between Marxism and queer theory in the 1990s (Floyd, 2009, p. 2). For example, Judith Butler criticized the “merely cultural” formulation of queer theory that overlooked the socioeconomic structures (1997, p. 255), but her critique remained unpopular as Marxist materialism and queer theory were considered incompatible at that time (Floyd, pp. 1–3). This incompatibility lies in the fact that orthodox Marxism has neglected sexuality in its theorization of socioeconomic relations, while queer theory has dismissed materiality in its conceptualization of gender and sexual relations (Smith, 2020, p. 3). Derived from Foucauldian thinking, (early) queer theory sees gender and sexuality through “discourses” and “power relations” rather than material and economic relations (Penney, 2014, p. 75), offering a revision to traditional Marxist materialism (Liu, 2020, p. 25). The economic process has thus disappeared from the analysis since the cultural turn in social critique (Valocchi, 2019, pp. 5, 10). Materialism has retreated into the background as a “specter” in a “paralyzing quietism” of postmaterialist queer theory and poststructuralist projects (Liu, p. 29), as if socioeconomic dynamics associated with capitalism and international relations

ceased to affect the lives and livelihoods of queer people in any significant way (Valocchi, p. 10). This is an important argument, to the extent that homocapitalism and homonationalism have become integral to the current geopolitical struggles – i.e. the aforementioned “queer moment” when queer issues have become more visible in the changing international and economic relations, and when the shifting modes of material productions have had major impacts on the lives and livelihoods of queer and marginalized people. The division between “culture” and “economy” is no longer adequate to address our current time and struggles.

James Penney (2014) has attributed this division to both the shift in the *material production* of goods and that in the *intellectual production* of theory in the late twentieth century. On the one hand, queer theory emerged at a time when material production shifted from the Global North to the still developing Global South (p. 73, including Asia). The shift away from material production in the West appeared to have paralleled the departure from materialism in intellectual trends in Western academia. If we agree with Penney, then a focus on economy and class is imperative in today’s Asia, given its role in global manufacturing, supply chains, and mobilities. On the other hand, the surged popularity of Foucauldian theory on sexuality marked “a paradigm shift that changed the very nature of the inquiry” in the late twentieth century, preventing us from connecting the exercise of discursive power to concrete sociopolitical and socioeconomic interests in our intellectual production of theory (p. 75). That said, Penney’s observation has pictured a rather linear progression of history, seeing Marxist and Foucauldian thinking as both intellectually incompatible and historically successive—a view that Petrus Liu has challenged through the complex entanglements between queer theory and materialism (2020).

Since the late 2000s, scholars have started to reunite queer critiques and structural materialism to overcome this schism (see Chitty, 2020; Floyd, 2009; Henderson, 2013; Liu, 2020; Penney, 2014; Smith, 2020; Valocchi, 2019). However, they remain divergent on how

to formulate queer Marxism (see Penney, 2014, pp. 80–88 *vis-à-vis* Floyd, 2009) and what counts as “materiality” (Liu, 2020). Also, “queer Marxism” is seldom clearly defined in the literature and often intentionally kept open and flexible, as queer theory itself often radically embraces fluidity and flexibility against fixed and rigid conceptual constructions. More important, this resurged interest in materialist Marxism remains somewhat marginalized in queer studies. To quote British queer political scientist Nicola J. Smith at length:

Although Butler argues against this depiction of queer theory [as merely cultural], contending instead that it potentially has a great deal to say about material (in)justice, it is also the case that many queer scholars have overlooked—and many continue to overlook—exactly these kinds of questions. This is not least because queer theory has had a rather tetchy relationship with Marxism ... [in] the so-called material-discursive divide.

Thus ... both IPE [International Political Economy] and queer theory have often reinforced the sense that this division is somehow natural and neutral ... This lack of engagement between the two fields matters very much, for it nurtures the illusion that the deployment of sexuality is anomalous, not endemic, to capitalism ... (2020: 2–3).

Here, queer theory has replicated the dichotomy between “culture” and “economy” (3), with the former still dominating today’s queer scholarship to maintain a quiet distance from the latter.

In her essay against this culture/economy dualism, Jessica Kaplan points out that this dualism “remains common sense in political philosophy, theory and public discourse,” where “class sometimes sits uneasily apart from listings of race, gender, sexuality” and other issues that are often framed through a cultural lens (2021, p. 382). Kaplan situates this dualism in the left discourse on social injustice and traces it to the schism in the late 1990s between the “cultural left” and the “social left,” which represent the two ends of a conceptual “spectrum”

that focus respectively on culture and economy but fail to align with the ontological reality that minority groups may face both inequalities simultaneously (pp. 382–5). The dualism treats the economy as an objective mechanism insulated from cultures and politics and free from public dispute, although economic distributions are mediated through sociocultural representations along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality (p. 388). This dualism hence must be abandoned.

While I strongly support Kaplan’s call to reunite culture and economy, I question her approach that sees the economy as mostly “an ideological objectification” of labor value and labor outputs by dominant social groups (p. 392). At any rate, framing “economy” as mainly ideological is still a cultural analysis rather than an economic one. This view essentially drags “economy” into a discursive rhetoric of recognition/representation that is still “cultural rather than economic in nature,” to borrow Berman’s words (2020) once again, and does very little to fix the imbalance in critical queer scholarship that often relies on cultural issues with little *direct* investment in political economy. Socioeconomic structures often take backstage for cultural representations—even if the topic is discussed, the focus is often on *distributions* along the line of sociocultural differences rather than economic *development* and its structural functions. Although we agree on breaking the dualism to reunite cultural and economic analyses, Kaplan’s method is to double down on the cultural approach, while mine is to directly challenge this intellectual dominance that I consider a form of negligence.

Here, my argument is to link culture (recognition and representation) with economy and social class (development and distribution) by rebalancing our intellectual and empirical investments. We can argue that cultural issues are deeply economic, and the economy is deeply cultural, but this co-constituency does not mean that one must be defined through another. We must look directly at key economic and financial institutions, mechanisms, benchmarks, indicators, and trends and patterns along with social, generational, and

demographic changes that shift the underlying structures and material foundations behind cultural recognition and representation. While shifts in culture and social ethos often take time to materialize, changes in economic conditions and policies often have an immediate impact on people with long-term structural consequences. In other words, a “dialogue of approaches” works better than a fusion of culture and economy (Morson & Schapiro, 2017, pp. 17, 39) with a focus on humans rather than the institutions (McCloskey, 2021). This line of thoughts originated from both Antonio Gramsci, whose work has related economic productions with cultural developments (Chitty, 2020, p. 27) while rejecting the economic determinism in orthodox Marxism (Penney, 2014, p. 83), as well as Pierre Bourdieu, for whom the cultural is inseparable from the economic and other forms of capital, as shown in both US and Asian queer critiques on how various forms of human capital have shaped and structured queer people’s lived experiences of everyday life (Henderson, 2013; Hennessy, 2018; Sender, 2004; Wei, 2020).

This problem echoes Matt Brim’s critique of the “elitism” in institutionalized queer studies in US academe (2020) that leaves “holes” in the silence of its own privilege and its omission of class positions to create “rich” queer studies vis-à-vis “poor” queer scholarship (see also Bérubé, 1997). Such elitism is also evident in the studies of queer Asia that both the researchers and the subjects of their research may come from a more privileged position (see Wei, 2020, pp. 107–8). The problem is that a small number of cultural elites cannot fully account for the lived experiences of regular queer folks whose lives and livelihoods are at more risk due to limited access to resources and the relative lack of privilege and social visibility. The reality facing average queer people in the Global South can be much harsher, including those in rural and less developed areas in middle-income and lower-middle-income countries, as well as the aged, the working class, and those whose job is at risk due to the shifting global supply chains under geopolitical tensions and who cannot work from home

during the pandemic. If the goal of queer studies and academic research in general is to improve people's well-being and living conditions, a lofty goal as it is, then focusing on the general population who have more stakes in our research will be much more powerful and attentive to our current time and struggle.

This omission of social class has dire consequences. Penney has argued that, even in the best cases, socioeconomic determinants are “characteristically reduced to the occasional mention of class” (2014, p. 72). In queer studies and poststructuralism in general, class is “routinely refigured as merely another aspect of the cultural work effected by the play of signification and power ... [leaving] the material determinants of culture, that is to say culture's production in and by a properly capitalist system, entirely out of the equation” (p. 72). Similarly, Matt Brim also points out that

class [is included] nominally in our list of structures of experience and oppression: gender, sex, race, class, ability. You see that list everywhere, but class manages to slip away in the actual work of queer scholarship. Where class appears centrally, queer often does a disappearing act (p. 11).

The silence on class originated from the early development of queer theory at prestigious US universities (pp. 14–15), and the subsequent disciplinary expansion and crossover have further secured “professional elitism for queer theory” (p. 15) that we have become accustomed to self-marking in queer terms but not in class terms (p. 16). In the 1990s, scholars such as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner already called out this kind of elitist high-theorization detached from empiricism, while others like Nancy Fraser and Rosemary Hennessy had pointed out the uneasy relation between class subjectivities and inequalities on the one hand, and cultural recognition and representation on the other, in queer studies (see Watson, 2005, pp. 75–77). This “elite queer theory” (Penney, pp. 74–5) or “academic elitism” (Brim, p. 13) still fails to recognize the appearance of queer theory in the globalized

and mobilized form of more flexible socioeconomic relations (Penney, p. 72; Valocchi, pp. 4, 137–8), overlooking “political economy issues such as low and unpaid labor, precarious employment, access to welfare services, homelessness, incarceration, and health care” in current international studies (Smith, p. 18).

The importance of this argument lies in the fact that most of Asia’s population still live in middle-income and lower-middle-income countries, and material production and economic development are still central to people’s lives and livelihoods. Save for a few exceptions, Asia is not post-industrial and its studies should not be post-material. In the case of China, while it is the world’s second-largest economy and set to overtake the United States by 2028 (CEBR, 2020), its GDP per capita—both nominal and in purchasing power parity—is only a fraction of that of the US (see Qian, 2021). China’s prosperous urban sector often overshadows the poorer rural population and rural-to-urban migrants with less human capital investments, while the shift of manufacturing and supply chains away from China due to the rising labor cost since the mid-2010s has put many migrant workers out of jobs (Rozelle & Hell, 2020). The stark rural/urban divide, together with a rapidly aging population and the sluggish fertility rate shown in China’s latest census released in May 2021 (*The Economist*, 2021b), has been widely recognized as major threats to China’s continued economic growth and geopolitical ambition.

If we look at the US at the other end of the superpower competition, the working class and the working middle class (those relying on wages with limited access to capital returns) are equally discontent about deprived economic opportunities and rising inequalities, leading to Joe Biden’s historic “Foreign Policy for the Middle Class” (Traub, 2021) that effectively continues his predecessor’s approach to international relations based on the economic interest of domestic electorate. This grand strategy aims to reverse the negative impact of free trade and globalization, where foreign policy is contingent on protecting and improving the earning

power and living conditions of the working American (Baer, 2021). This explains Biden's continued hardline policy against China as the pandemic continues to wreak havoc across the world, and international relations are now driven by domestic politics to revive the middle class. Meanwhile, Biden's historic infrastructure investment is marketed to the public as a necessity facing competition from China, where foreign threats are used to justify domestic spending. The home front and the foreign front have once again merged in this New Cold War against China (Brands & Gaddis, 2021) amid the Covid-induced economic downturn, market fluctuation, and future uncertainty.

At any rate, economy/technology and social class/demography now hold the key in China and the US (and many places in-between) in post-Covid recovery and geopolitical rivalry. In queer studies, the focus on cultural elites is inadequate to address current, urgent socioeconomic issues facing average people that have been laid bare by Covid-19 and the changing geopolitics, which have and will continue to disrupt and shift existing supply chains and modes of productions and mobilities. These changes have bestowed on us a responsibility and opportunity to provide structural support through our analyses to challenge the status quo through people's ongoing struggle in and beyond the current "queer moment" of geopolitical conflicts that have reshaped the world. This argument is every bit important in post-Covid queer theories and studies to reunite and break the binary of culture and economy, discourse and social class, and the high theory for conceptual critique and the low theory for the practice of knowledge under structural changes and geopolitical shifts.

Through this lens, materialist Marxism must work together with queer theories and queer international relations to establish a more attentive and proactive framework of queer studies in a sociological and international political economy. This parallels the resurgence of materialist queer studies in the US (Chitty, 2020; Liu, 2020; Valocchi, 2019) and the tradition of class and economic analyses in the UK (Smith, 2020), as well as strands of existent queer

Asian scholarship on social class and demographic shifts, such as Benedicto's work on class and racial hierarchies in gay Manila (2014), Kong's research on aging and older gay men in Hong Kong (2019), and my previous book on social mobility and inequality in queer China (Wei, 2020). I agree with Petrus Liu that the point of material queer analysis is to "show that questions of gender and sexuality are part of a matrix of social inter-dependence that connect the self to others beyond borders" (2020, p. 41), although Liu has framed this "self-other connection" as more socio-symbolic despite its material foundation (pp. 39–40). Here, I maintain the importance of empirical socioeconomic analysis for a materialist approach rather than a cultural-symbolic critique. This method enables us to combine the analysis of social class and stratification with the interactions between the state and the economy to better understand current and post-Covid geopolitical rivalry and socioeconomic recovery.

### **Rethinking Queer Theories and Mobilities**

For any kind of "post-Covid" queer theories to become conceivable in the current "queer moment" of homonationalist and homocapitalist geopolitical struggles, we must address the lessons we have learned through Covid-19 and the ongoing and shifting global geopolitics that continue to reshape the very concepts of Asia, international relations, foreign policy, globalization, and de-globalization (Nederveen Pieterse, 2020; Steger & James, 2020). Also, they should be intersectional and interdisciplinary in nature to connect cultural productions with economic and social class productions for a more powerful and coherent analysis and critique of the post-Covid world. Further, these theories must be both attentive to local social conditions and responsive to global challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic and escalating geopolitical struggles as part of an action plan for social change. Last, they should consider the impact of rapid technological advancements—from information and communication

technologies including 5G, microchips, and mobile apps to medical apparatus such as Covid vaccines and other essential medications and medical supplies and technologies.

That means, first, queer studies should focus more on “at-risk” groups in (lower) middle-income countries who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic as well as disrupted local and global supplies of essential goods and medications, including the rural, the elderly, the lower-income, the working class, and those with compromised immune systems or physical/mental disabilities. Again, this is not identity politics; rather, we should focus on how basic socioeconomic structures shape their access to public health services, benefits, pensions, and other safety nets and social insurance that may compound social stigmas with underlying socioeconomic inequalities. These issues are highly important when some middle-income countries without robust social security systems in Asia are now facing a large and upcoming aging population, which may be worsened if manufacturing and supply chains continued to shift away from Asia, as the US and other countries boost domestic construction, production, and consumption to create jobs and opportunities through large economic stimulations. The struggling working class and the working middle class who rely on wage income and limited savings, including many young queer people and migrants in Asia’s fast-growing economies, are increasingly locked out from asset and capital returns (Wei 2020: 123–4) in the global “asset economy” (Adkins et al., 2020) and “rentier capitalism” (Christophers, 2020) that compound economic inequalities with public health and geopolitical crises, plus ongoing discrimination and social stigma against non-conforming gender and sexuality.

This analysis leads to the second imperative in rethinking queer theories: for us working in feminist, queer, and postcolonial studies, the mainly cultural approach must be connected more closely with examinations of deeper socioeconomic structures. Culture, albeit important, is no longer sufficient by itself in an imaginable and intelligible queer

critique under and after Covid-19, when the post-pandemic economic recovery plays a key role both in global geopolitics and for the well-being of those disproportionately impacted by Covid restrictions (see Qian & Fan, 2020). A crisis like this should not be wasted, and the lesson we have learned is that the traditional Marxist focus on economy and class is crucial to many of our ongoing and future challenges. The discursive functions of power are not at odds with socioeconomic analyses, as long as we avoid the orthodox economic determinism or a tandem theory of class oppression and struggle that no longer suffice under current global geopolitical shifts and social transformations.

The third part in my reformulation of queer theories is that upcoming queer studies must address *mobilities*—an expanded version beyond the mere physical and geographical movement and relocation of people. The pandemic itself is a mobility crisis: (a) the spread of the virus was partially due to the increase in Chinese people's mobilities, compared to the SARS epidemic in 2003 that was mainly contained in China; (b) the pandemic has interrupted domestic and international mobilities and supply chains, showing that mobility can be fragile but still important—think, for example, about the shipping and supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the distribution of vaccines; (c) there has been a re-bounce of mobility when more people get vaccinated and re-start to travel and socialize, although new variants of the virus and new waves of outbreaks may continue to enforce pockets of lockdowns and border closures across the world; and (d) mobility is a privilege underlined by social class distinctions, as in the case of digital mobility that affords some people to work from home but excludes many factory and service workers who cannot.

That is to say, queer theorists need to consider wider social and economic conditions and consequences pertinent to mobilities, including (a) the movements of people, products, and capital as well as the barriers and disruptions caused by Covid-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions, the trade war and geopolitical tensions, curtailed international education and

tourism, and debates on immigration in the West and parts of Asia that need migrant workers to address labor shortage facing the aging population and lower fertility; (b) the mobility of cultures that goes hand in hand with the mobilization of people and ideas, which is already widely discussed in queer studies and Asian studies, as mentioned previously; (c) shifts in regional and global manufacturing and supply chains in geopolitics and post-Covid recovery that will have a major impact on the working class, as well as the privilege of “digital mobility” and “working from home” (WFH) technologies that are less possible and accessible for factory and service workers; and (d) social class migration and upward social mobilities that drive population movements and cultural flows, as well as continued social stratification, that play a major role in today’s Asia and lead to significantly different life outcomes for marginalized people.

In what follows, I adopt one theory and present two case studies as mini-critiques to further demonstrate how we can rethink and reframe queer theories and studies in Asia and beyond. The theory I adopt here is convergent “queer mobilities” (Wei, 2020) that connects gender and sexual mobilization with internal and international migrations, inter-generational mobilities, transnational cultural flows, mobile digital technologies, and social class mobility and immobility in today’s Asia. Unlike the common view of mobility as the movements of people, goods, and capital, this theory of queer mobility attributes population movements and cultural flows directly to social class migration/stagnation when new economic conditions and opportunities in the rise of Asia have afforded new forms of mobilizations for younger generations, and both continued and reshaped existing socioeconomic inequalities. This approach echoes recent critical and empirical studies to problematize various forms of conceptual and ontological mobilities in queer Asia (Martin et al., 2019; Rowlett & King 2022), and helps reframe queer mobilities for my case studies below. The two case studies are based on publicized information reported in the news media.

The first case focuses on the difficulties facing HIV-positive gay men in Wuhan, the epicenter of the initial Covid-19 outbreak, who had great trouble accessing HIV medication under the tight lockdown at the height of the outbreak in early 2020. This was potentially life-threatening, as reported later in the news in China (Liu & Yu, 2020), and caught up in a nexus of complex issues. First, although the medication is subsidized by the state and mostly free for those infected with HIV, the distribution is based on where a person first received the diagnosis and entered the public health system. As hundreds of millions of Chinese people work and study in other parts of the country outside their hometown for better economic opportunities—a sheer condition and consequence of mobility—most people can only access subsidized medication in the place they normally reside. The initial peak outbreak of Covid-19 in China occurred around the Lunar New Year, when many people were back with their families and locked down in their hometown. Although the central government promptly allowed people to access medicines locally, they must have their medical records transferred from the place where they received the diagnosis to local public health services in Wuhan, which turned out to be extremely difficult as the latter was already inundated with Covid patients.

Second, many social workers and volunteers in HIV/AIDS-intervention organizations reached out through phone calls and mobile social apps (WeChat) to distribute the medication to those in need, but the highly restrictive lockdown made it hard for them to acquire a permit from the authority to deliver the medicines using motor vehicles, and sometimes they had to make the delivery by cycling or on foot that were less restricted but very slow. Further, elder people without smartphones or did not know how to use mobile apps and how to get in touch with social workers were left with limited options, and some people in the surrounding rural areas had to walk for more than 10 hours to the city to get medication. On top of that, the strong stigma around HIV/AIDS and the taken-for-granted association between HIV and

homosexuality had made most people reluctant to disclose their diagnosis to their family, which would also reveal their sexuality, and some of them put their lives in danger after they ran out of medication but were unwilling or unable to acquire more without raising questions from their families, relatives, and neighbors.

This case itself shows how public health crises like Covid-19 have disproportionately impacted the rural, the aged, and those with HIV infection and compromised immune systems. While the crisis and the lockdown disrupted mobilities and the normal supply and distribution of essential medication, the privilege of “digital mobility” and the support of social workers are not always accessible for the elder and those in rural areas. Similarly, the ongoing and future distributions of Covid-19 vaccines are also structured by socioeconomic inequalities that pose a challenge in a large country like China, where local realities do not always align with central government policies and the stark rural/urban divide often concentrates the resources in the city while leaving rural populations behind. Those infected with HIV already have compromised immune systems but may not be prioritized in Covid-19 vaccination, due to their difficulty in accessing public health services and social invisibility under a strong stigma in many Asian countries like China. Further, as many factory and service workers in large cities are migrants from villages and small towns, the post-Covid economic recovery is still fragile if further community outbreaks once again disrupt productions and mobilities—which already happened in 2021 and 2022 around the world.

The second case focuses on microchip production and supply chain reliability in the world’s continued shift towards a digital economy accelerated by Covid-19. The US has imposed strong restrictions on Chinese tech companies, banning firms from working with Huawei and other Chinese tech giants since before the pandemic while delisting state-owned Chinese enterprises and other tech companies from US stock exchanges. The problem is that these restrictions have disrupted both the global technology supply chain and the flows of

capital that both China and the US rely on, hurting Chinese and Western companies and consumers alike and creating operational problems as the list of banned companies keeps changing. This tech war has created a surprise winner of TSMC, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, that holds advanced microchip technologies and fabrication facilities, leading the industry by a large margin over established chipmakers including Intel and Samsung as well as challengers such as China's SMIC (Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation).

Benefiting from the rise in the demand for digital devices since Covid-19, TSMC has become indispensable in supplying advanced microchips to the world including the US and China for the upcoming post-Covid social renewal and economic recovery. Riding the trend, Taiwan's chipmaking industry helped the island-state achieve a higher GDP growth than mainland China in 2020, the first time in 30 years since Taiwan's manufacturing industry shifted to the latter in the early 1990s (Lee, 2021). Supplies of microchips are now essential for everything from electric vehicles to smartphones and computers powering today's ubiquitous mobilities and tech innovations, as in the cases of TikTok and Grindr discussed earlier as well as WFH technologies that enable people to work from home. TSMC and the chipmaking industry have thus created a buffer for Taiwan and made it indispensable and irreplaceable in the global supply chain (*The Economist*, 2021a), putting the island-state in a so-called "Silicon Shield" (Tsai, 2021) that protects it against heated geopolitical turmoil. The "Shield" functions in a time when the military standoff has intensified in the Taiwan strait since late 2020 and further escalated since mid-2022, and a single miscalculation from either side may become a *casus belli* that triggers a full-blown war. The massive global microchip shortage in 2021 has only valorized Taiwan's chipmaking industry and its geopolitical prowess when China and the US are deep in a New Cold War or "Warm War" in trade, security, and technology.

In these cases, local and global supply chains were partially disrupted by geopolitical tensions and the pandemic but nonetheless remain crucial with significant strategic values. The trade war and the rising labor cost already started to shift the supply chain away from China before the pandemic (Rozelle & Hell, 2020), while Covid-19 and the geopolitical turmoil may continue this trend, potentially leaving many unskilled/lower-skilled workers displaced in China's large floating population including women (see Song et al., 2021) and young queer migrants (see Wei, 2020). On the flip side, supply chains often extend to multiple tiers and layers in the economy; moving factories out of China is different from replacing the entire web of suppliers (Ciuriak & Calvert, 2021, p. 400). Even "reshoring" has been widely discussed in the US and the West since Covid, self-sufficiency is practically impossible for small countries and challenging for larger ones (pp. 401, 408), which may also alienate existing geopolitical and geoeconomic allies (Dezenski & Austin, 2021). The manufacturing and distribution of Covid-19 vaccines, for example, still rely on international collaboration to supply both raw materials and finished products, as seen in the "vaccine diplomacy" and competition between China and the US as well as the vaccine shortage in Taiwan and many other places in and beyond Asia.

Further, from China/Taiwan to the United States and everywhere in between, those who must keep working in factories to produce essential products like microchips, digital devices, and medical supplies are at more risk of getting infected with Covid-19, as factory and service workers are unable to work from home. The surge of community transmission of the virus in Taiwan in mid-2021, for example, saw clusters of Covid infections among factory staffers including many migrant workers (Ellis & Wang, 2021), which caused further delays and disruptions when Taiwan's role was crucial in the stretched global tech supply chains. Its unique position in the global economy is both a blessing for Taiwan and a misfortune for its underprivileged workers, as the strategically and geopolitically important "Silicon Shield"

cannot protect its most vulnerable people who face more risks during the pandemic to supply essential products so other people can work from home. When we consider today's queer mobilities in Asia and beyond, we must look deep at these socioeconomic issues such as supply chains (movements and distributions of medical and tech products) and vulnerable migrant workers (who face more risks of displacement and Covid infection) under the ongoing pandemic and continued geopolitical complications.

Here, the two case studies indicate that medical and digital technologies and supply chains carry strong socioeconomic imperatives and contingencies, especially for vulnerable people who need essential medication and who cannot work from home, as well as those who are more likely to become unemployed and displaced under the pandemic and the shifting manufacturing industry in geopolitical tensions. It is these groups of vulnerable people, as well as the changing socioeconomic structures behind their lives and livelihoods, that need our attention in queer (Asian) studies under and after Covid-19. The current crises have emerged at a time when social class boundaries have become more concretized and started to hinder once-promising social mobilities in fast-growing Asian economies like China (Wei, 2020), exacerbating inequalities along the line of existing socioeconomic distinctions (Qian & Fan, 2020). Better digital technologies and a slew of new trade agreements that have come into being since the pandemic have kept the world connected, although the intra- and international networks of mobilities still face geopolitical and socioeconomic disturbance that often has a disproportional impact on the more vulnerable population. All these changes embedded in and shaped by geopolitics, Covid-19, and mobilities/immobilities have substantiated a new urgency for us to focus on structural changes and people's socioeconomic conditions and well-being in the changing landscape of critical international studies.

## **Final Remarks**

Through the geopolitical turmoil and the Covid-19 pandemic that dominate our current time and foreseeable future of superpower rivalry and post-Covid recovery, this paper reframes queer international relations, queer Marxism, and queer mobilities for a three-pronged critique of existing scholarship to explore and construct possible post-Covid socioeconomic analyses. The case studies further demonstrate what global queer studies can do and can be through what we have learned from the intensified geopolitical conflicts, the Covid-19 pandemic, and various forms of mobilities that have been disrupted but remain imperative to save lives and livelihoods. The triangulation of the three factors has connected the arguments for a materialist shift to socioeconomic structures focusing on marginalized people's living conditions and well-being in the entangled forces of mobilities and immobilities shaped by the geopolitical and Covid-19 crises. This approach can be and should be further tested in the analysis of other Asian economies and societies and in other areas of critical analyses and studies. Methodologically, we can further queer/destabilize and mobilize our approaches to queer Asia in particular, and marginalized populations in the Global South in general, to break the boundary and the binary between cultural/critical analyses and materialist/empirical studies to further expand queer theories and methodologies, as shown in this paper and other studies (e.g. Rowlett & King, 2022; Wei, 2020) cited herein.

The expanded and expansive theory of mobilities has marked a possible route for post-Covid queer critiques to make further inroads into sociological and international political economy. This version of queer mobility theory considers the multifaceted force of mobility as a predominant, if not defining, social structure that shapes and conditions population movements, supply chain efficiency, digital mobile technology, social class mobility and immobility, and inter-generational social mobilization in Asia's changing demography. All these factors present important imperatives in post-Covid economic

recovery, mass vaccination, resurged mobilities, as well as future geopolitical tensions and conflicts. Queer theorists and scholars, both during and after Covid-19, have a unique task and opportunity to reconsider people's struggles, lived experiences, and social conditions that continue to shed light on the issues of "mobilities" and "immobilities" substantiated with new meanings and values at this historical turning point. The reframed queer theories and critical international studies, as shown in this paper, can equip us with the analytical tools that are necessary under the continued geopolitical rivalry and post-pandemic social recovery amid unprecedented regional and global uncertainties, complications, and contingencies.

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