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## Cyberqueers in Taiwan: Locating Histories of the Margins

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## Cyberqueers in Taiwan: Locating Histories of the Margins

By Terri He<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In this paper I direct the focus to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) online communities in Taiwan. On the one hand, I argue that such online communities in Taiwan are worthwhile researching and deserve special academic attention because they touch upon Taiwan's perpetual difference in the world as a de-facto, thereby questioning how a transnational perspective permanently influences or even changes the way national identity is or is not formulated. On the other, against the backdrop of globalisation, I highlight the fact of under-theorisation of issues and politics of sexuality dissidence in a non-western, non-dominant location and culture such as Taiwan. As I start to bridge the current gap of such insufficiencies in unevenly distributed research interests in some parts of the world rather than others, I also make a point of fighting against surveillance and control in cyberspace. Ultimately, such studies on Taiwanese LGBT online communities are not possible without continuous attempts and efforts in trying to keep freedom of expression and anonymity to certain extent.

*Keywords:* cyberqueer, Taiwan, LGBT pride, online communities, transnationality

As Chris Berry and Fran Martin have noted, empirical fieldwork of Internet communities has remained unsatisfactorily thin, and academic research based on such works is still in its infancy (Berry and Martin 2000: 74). In addition, although lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) online users are among those most enthusiastic about the internet (McLean and Schubert; Shaw), data and documents on LGBT online users continue to be relatively few since they seem to be underrepresented. Consequently, studies of online communities of LGBT people from a non-western and non-English-speaking background have been even less investigated and thus urgently call for more attention in their own right.

As a way to respond to this call, I discuss the idea that the internet has had an immense impact on communities of LGBT people in Taiwan. I will provide an introduction on Taiwan from the perspective of sexuality in combination with internet technology, delineating my idea of 'locating histories of the margins' as the title states. I will also look through some of the existing academic discussions such as those related to Nina Wakeford's 'cyberqueer' and offer my response to well-known theoretical references of feminist ideas in some articles and books about cyberspace and sexuality. At

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the heart of my response to the previous scholarship is a point of departure in writing this paper. Having read books like *Cybersexualities*, which primarily explores the implications of cyberspace on gender and sexuality, for instance, I recognise that cyborg and feminist cyber theories may function as important metaphorical and conceptual tools. But I also emphasise that my primary concern is located in the narratives produced by online users' experienced memories and interpretations. To be more precise, the techno-cultural construction of these users' self-representedness in Taiwanese online LGBT communities is, as I will show, rather based on a specific time and place, clearly substantial, full of interactive cause-and-effect and almost always questioning as well as reproducing the social, cultural and familial existing orders. This argument constitutes my point of departure and I shall always try to make it the central concern, stressing the importance of being empirical.

Taiwan, to begin with, is an 'island which has for all practical purposes been independent for half a century but which China regards as a renegade province that must be re-united with the mainland' (BBC Country Profile).<sup>2</sup> Due to China, Taiwan is not recognised as a nation-state by most countries around the world. This official non-existence, in Cindy Patten's words, means that

Taiwan might be considered an exceptional nation [. . .], perpetually colonised, and ultimately (in 1949) reimagined as the locus of a government-in-exile under the watchful imperial eye of the United States. Considered territorially peripheral by nations east and west, Taiwan is a palimpsest of the political discourses that have bound and separated, colonized and liberated the East from the West, the East from itself.<sup>3</sup> But in another, more significant way, Taiwan is ground zero (but not the only one!) of the complex interests that now frame and threaten to undo the very idea of nation. (203)

Against this backdrop, then, Taiwan's fast development of such online communities and consequent accumulations of the LGBT participants' online experiences can be regarded as an alternative space in which its marginalised history of both national and sexual identity can be written.<sup>4</sup>

### **Proliferation vs. Restraining of Sexuality**

Starting from the 1990s, various websites such as Women zhijian (Between Us), Tongzhi rexian (Tongzhi Hotline), GLAD (Gay and Lesbian Awakening Day), and Gingin Shufong (Gingin Bookstore) have been established.<sup>5</sup> These websites and online

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<sup>2</sup>Taken from the country profiles on the website of British Broadcasting Company (BBC) on [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country\\_profiles/1285915.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1285915.stm)

<sup>3</sup>Taiwan was once a colony of the Spanish and Dutch in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Later it was a Japanese colony for half a century.

<sup>4</sup>Taiwan's diplomatic relations are limited to its third-world counterparts such as Burkina Faso, the Republic of Costa Rica, Belize, the Republic of Chad, the Kingdom of Swaziland and others, which means that in total 26 countries officially acknowledge Taiwan as a country. In this manner, Taiwan is treated as a peer with other third-world countries which would recognise its official existence.

<sup>5</sup>Very roughly and ideally speaking, tongzhi refers to LGBT and queer people. But in practice, tongzhi shows a tendency of being a euphemism of homosexual, instead of being ideally all-inclusive. The Website addresses are: Women zhijian: <http://groups.msn.com/v4pe6jm9u2g98jn9brm8sgmvh1>; tongzhi rexian:

communities have helped publicise relevant news, encouraged people's participation in collectively building up a homey space via the new opportunity cyberspace offers. Cyberspace certainly worked as a medium for communications facilitating future cooperation in holding meetings, campaigns and social activities for everyone. In this time period, the internet in Taiwan has become a useful means via which LGBT communities share feelings and information, as well as voice their concerns to the public as a group. For example, the annual LGBT pride parades in Taipei, Taiwan have utilised the internet as an effective channel to reach the public.<sup>6</sup> Most of the participants in pride parades, regardless of their sexualities and sexual orientations, were mobilised and united largely via websites, online forums and BBS (Bulletin Board System) communities rather than offline communication.<sup>7</sup>

In Taiwan, LGBT people's use of the internet has been so constant and important that both the government and the gender/sexuality rights associations have been paying meticulous attention to internet-related laws and regulations. Among the laws and regulations, what will be specifically addressed here are internet advertisements and online personal profiles which in any way imply the intention of 'compensated dating'. Considered illegal and criminal, compensated dating basically means prostitution solicited online. It is a term originating from Japanese *enjō kūsai* (also shortened as *en-kou* as a common usage), which in English is usually translated as compensated dating or assisted dating. Initially, this term was used to address the fact that teenagers, mostly female, go online and make contact with older men who will give them money for sex. Later on, compensated dating became more widely applied to teen and adult students of different sexualities: the most notorious and stigmatised example might be university male students soliciting older men online.

In terms of its practice and subculture, compensated dating has travelled from Japan to Taiwan without much change.<sup>8</sup> But compensated dating has now become a reason to

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[www.hotline.org.tw](http://www.hotline.org.tw) ; GLAD: <http://home.kimo.com.tw/glad9th/>; and Gingin Bookstore & tongzhi gongzuofang: [www.gingins.com.tw/](http://www.gingins.com.tw/); [www.fgu.edu.tw/~literary/wc-literature/drafts/Taiwan/gu-min-yao/gu-min-yao\\_01.htm](http://www.fgu.edu.tw/~literary/wc-literature/drafts/Taiwan/gu-min-yao/gu-min-yao_01.htm). Another point that needs to be made here is pinyin (phonetic notation and transliteration to Roman script). Adopted here is a mixture of Tongguo pinyin (Romanisation of Taiwanese Chinese, Hanyu Pinyin of Taiwanese and Hakka) and Hanyu Pinyin (the Standard system of Romanisation for Standard Mandarin used in People's Republic of China). There has been a lot of controversy over which system to be adopted for the Traditional Chinese users in Taiwan due to issues of national identity and different political interests. As opposed to Simplified Chinese on the other side of Taiwan Strait, Taiwan created Tongyong Pinyin to differentiate itself from Hanyu Pinyin in 1998. In this thesis I employ a mixture in order to keep clear of the extremist tendency on the two oppositional stances.

<sup>6</sup>See BBC News link about the first Gay Pride Parade in Taiwan: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3233905.stm>; Taipei Times: [www.Taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/11/05/2003209807](http://www.Taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/11/05/2003209807). There is also a Taiwanese official website for publishing the pride parade in 2004 on <http://twpride.net/2004/>. The pride parade was also held in 2005 and 2006.

<sup>7</sup>This is known based on my knowledge gained from personal contacts and online dialogues with people who were, at the time of parades, part of the event organisation and preparation. This fact that internet helped significantly in planning and organising can also be found true in the online community that I currently research in my PhD.

<sup>8</sup>In Japanese there are three symbol systems, hiragana, katakana and kanji. The first two systems are the simplified from parts of traditional Chinese characters, and the last one is almost the same with the traditional Chinese used nowadays in Taiwan. For example, *enjō kūsai* is written in Japanese kanji as 援

criminalise LGBT people, particularly gay men, which is probably quite different from the Japanese social context. Becoming punishable in 1999, compensated dating was regarded as moralistically horrifying and threatening to the social standards in Taiwan because it was unheard of that teenagers and young students should sell sex willingly online. In order to monitor as well as exert control over the seemingly proliferating sex-selling business and sexually implicated texts and images online, the legal amendment 'Anti-Sexual Business Provisions for Children and Teenagers'<sup>9</sup> considers any online texts that imply possibility of sexual intercourse the very evidence of committing crimes (See in 'Web Crackdown'). According to Josephine Ho in the *Taipei Times*, for example, 'in order to find people selling or soliciting sexual favors on the internet, police often contact internet users and attempt to have them make a sexual transaction with an undercover police officer' ('Web Crackdown'). Under this law, to be clearer, police were allowed to go online and 'catch' gay men as well as heterosexual men and women who are tricked into believing that the police will be their 'dates'.

In response, the gender and sexuality association in Taiwan for mobilising LGBT people have held many workshops and training camps and organised campaigns to fight for online freedom of speech and online right to socialise in response to this strategy of 'fishing out the criminal'.<sup>10</sup> As a result of this mobilising and campaigning, the police are now no longer allowed to go online and 'fish' for gay men and heterosexual women. What calls for attention other than the fact that such surveillance and controlling jeopardises online space for socialising and relationship-building, as previously pointed out, is the fact that this 'fishing for criminals online' strategy turns out to be nothing but an excuse for criminalising non-normative sexuality. This is worth noticing because for sexual dissidents as such, they as a group tend to use the online as a meeting point as well as a means of finding romantic/sexual partners more frequently than others, due to their limited access to public space and lack of socialising occasions in daily life. As in this circumstance, the conviction always precedes the actual action of having sex and being paid for it, this law that allows police to criminalise people by means of 'indecent contents' distributed online is as good as a revival of literary prosecution that was once practiced in the Ming Dynasty of Mainland China. But this time, such prosecution specifically targets the LGBT population for the purpose of protecting children -- a

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助交際, four characters that are the same as traditional Chinese language. Due to similarity in culture, language and patriarchal social structure, 援助交際, or 'compensation dating' did not encounter much difficulty in transplanting itself from Japan to Taiwan both in linguistic usage and social practices.

<sup>9</sup>The article 29 of the Anti-Sexual Business Provisions for Children and Teenagers, more specifically, states that 'distributors of indecent videos, books and pictures over the Internet, TV channels or publications are subject to a sentence of up to five years imprisonment and/or fines of up to NT\$1 million' ('Web Crackdown'). While distribution of indecent contents over the Internet is severely punished, as Ho points out in this newspaper article 'Web Crackdown Infringing on Freedom' in the *Taipei Times*, 'an adult found guilty of soliciting or selling sex from another adult in a public place is [only] jailed for three days or fined NT\$30,000'.

<sup>10</sup>Gender/sexuality rights association in Taiwan: [http://gsrat.net/events/events\\_post.php?pdata\\_id=57](http://gsrat.net/events/events_post.php?pdata_id=57) ; in this traditional Chinese page, the first of the series of workshops/camps on 30 March 2003 is focused on the rejection of state control over rights of cyber-socialising and online freedom of speech. Homepage in English can be found at <http://gsrat.net/>. Nowadays, the police are not allowed to go online and fish for 'criminals', but they are however allowed to have access to registration information and details for many websites and BBS sites in Taiwan.

high-sounding pretext for cleansing the internet and doing away with the unwanted and immoral non-normative activities. This instance can be read as a case of the colliding of two powers in the arena of the internet where 'freedom' and 'human rights' are two of the most controversial notions. While the internet seems to facilitate free communication and real-time message exchange for social purposes, the internet is also believed to be morally degrading and corrupting because of its ready connection to sex and pornography. However, the internet in this very case, too, functions as an effective means for information relay and mobilisation of large groups, through which the action of LGBT people is facilitated.

### **Home and Homeland**

By providing an online space for LGBT people to come together and mobilise, the internet may still be designated as 'a technology of freedom' for Taiwanese LGBT people, despite the government's intention to regulate and control it. As a way to decentralise the mass communication industry and, perhaps more significantly, to find their own homely<sup>11</sup> space free of heterosexism, moreover, building up an online LGBT community appears to be the perfect answer. An online community tends to summon up their expectation for an unpolluted or unedited social and communal environment.<sup>12</sup> As it is today, the proliferation of LGBT online communities in Taiwan is arguably a place documenting LGBT self-representations and life styles. The internet in this aspect becomes a vehicle that simultaneously carries both collective and individual purposes of use.

Along with the possibility of establishing a homely space for LGBT people, the internet in Taiwan is also empowering in terms of their national identity. Not officially recognised as a country and forbidden from using its name 'Republic of China' in any international occasions, Taiwan has adopted the semi-official identifier of 'Taiwan' for the sake of being differentiated from Mainland China. This shift from 'Republic of China' to 'Taiwan' of course connotes myriad political, historical, ideological, social and diplomatic predicaments and complications. Inside the island of Taiwan, it is among culture, social power, and demographical conditions such as migration through which one's identification with Taiwan both as a country, a place, a society and an entity can be formed. Outside of the island, Republic of China on the passport still gets easily confused with People's Republic of China, even though the former has never been under Chinese authoritarian rule.

Among these factors and components in the process of identity formation, choice of language comes into play for members in an LGBT online community. The fact that complex Chinese is only written, read and taught nowhere else than in Taiwan is very

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<sup>11</sup>Here 'homely' is used to signify a feeling as result of comfort, security and happiness.

<sup>12</sup>Many past events related to tongzhi people in Taiwan have been reported against controversial backdrops, such as frequent raids in gay saunas and pubs, which always follows a compulsory AIDS test; a murder that happened in February 2001 where a man was dead in a box while he was having sex with another man (it was phrased as the 'box-body case'); drug use in home parties and disco pubs, and strippers' performances in lesbian bars and so forth. Predictably, when these social incidents were represented in the media, many of the descriptions were sensational with details exaggerated. As these media representations were almost all related to pornography, drugs, AIDS and promiscuity, dealing with these negative and sensational representations can be quite overwhelming for tongzhi people in Taiwan. In the presence of laws and regulations, these incidents compel a diplomatic stance for tongzhi people to take— a stance that does not run against an agenda of liberation and progression and does not violate the laws.

interesting. The exclusive language provides more 'political safety' and 'access' for these online subjects. As Mainland Chinese online users who via self-teaching may still understand the complex Chinese characters cannot after all have easy access to Taiwanese web and BBS sites unless they are abroad<sup>13</sup>, the complex Chinese language that constitutes the majority of online communication establishes a kind of 'ownership' of the complex Chinese cyberspace. Typing phonetic symbols into complex Chinese characters<sup>14</sup>, a Taiwanese online user may locate a sense of electronic ownership of the cyberspace that grants a different and yet 'real' online nation-state of Taiwan that has never been otherwise. The empowerment of finding ownership of some kind of the online world via typing provides an alternative space for a national history to be written. The joys of being the 'natural majority' in the complex Chinese cyberspace along with the security and subjectivity as a result of it, makes the online homeland of the Taiwanese people inviolable and independent.

### **Attitude towards 'Politics'**

The frequently conflicting or sometimes mutually inclusive existence of one's many faces of 'who s/he is' - in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, physicality and others, by the same token, surfaces easily in online textual exchanges and interflows. Despite the eternal entanglements with Mainland China both on and off line, the chief irony of one's Taiwanese identity is that although out of the country one will simply be considered Taiwanese, inside the island one's Taiwanese nationality will be undermined if one comes from a Mainlander family background. Mainlander families are usually those who migrated to Taiwan in the 1950s and Mainlander Taiwanese people, as they are termed nowadays, are second generations of these immigrants, many of whom have never been to Mainland China. Ethnic diversity is a source of tension and oftentimes manifests in various online communities. Online texts in LGBT communities, too, frequently reveal one's preference for a certain political party and, under such circumstances, political strategies employed by the two major political parties — one Nationalist, symbolised in blue and the other Democratic Progressive, green — become a focus of people's online interactions.<sup>15</sup> Although most people in Taiwan tend to avoid interpersonal fights over politics, it is still quite clear who looks blue and who looks green. Green and blue promotes starkly contrasting political options. Accordingly, the reading of one's ethnicity,

<sup>13</sup>Despite China's blocking almost all Taiwanese websites, there are many ways for a Mainland Chinese user to access Taiwanese websites such as using a bypass or installing some crack program designed especially for breaking down the Chinese blocking firewalls. Additionally, in terms of language, people of Chinese ethnicity in Singapore, Malaysia and many other countries may also be able to access and read both traditional and simplified Chinese if they have tried to learn the characters as a way of 'preserving the ethnic heritage'.

<sup>14</sup>The input of the 37 phonetic symbols by keyboard-typing results in complex Chinese characters. These phonetic symbols are also an invention that is solely Taiwanese. While there are certainly other kinds of orthography available for character input, but the one that involves phonetic symbol is by and large the most popular.

<sup>15</sup>Broadly speaking, the Nationalists hold a deep sense of nostalgia towards Mainland China, and would not object to a unification eventually; the Democratic Progressive people, on the other hand, stress the identity of the 'Taiwanese' primarily based on one's ethnicity, especially for those who were unjustly oppressed and sacrificed in and after the massacre that took place on February 28<sup>th</sup> in 1947 between the in-power Mainlander and out-of-power Taiwanese. Both political parties intend to look for a peaceful way to settle the 'Taiwan problem' with China, but they each have different ways to do so.

in particular, becomes indexical and is always poignant in the sexual identity in the LGBT online communities. Consequently, identity politics is multilayered. In order to avoid confrontational moments, one has to readjust oneself in each actual situation in the online communications when making a comment on politics or anything related to the China-Taiwan issue. Schizophrenias, as it were, of one's identity due to national, political, ethnic and social contexts are therefore common scenarios and are to certain extent taken for granted as a way of life — perhaps, in a way, similar to how LGBT people encounter heterosexist environment, where they might just choose to pretend heterosexual or cover up what they really think in order to stay safe.

To examine in detail these many layers of identity politics in Taiwan, in addition, is not to make it look bigger than it really is — since I am aware that many other countries in the world are also dealing with similar complexities with their localised understanding and establishment of their own identity politics. But these exhaustive complications in Taiwan due to the historical choices<sup>16</sup> certainly leave one feeling tired and uninterested, especially as the future options do not look promising. Feelings of helplessness constitute an indifference to politics amongst many Taiwanese people, while in many other aspects, as has been suggested in the discussions above, Taiwanese people's lives are already full of political manoeuvres and manipulations. In situations as such, 'not caring', 'avoiding topics of politics' or 'not believing in any forms of politics at all' seems to attract some of the LGBT people in Taiwan, although this position is in some other ways impossible, basically turning a blind eye to the reality.

The indifference to politics, however, does have an impact on LGBT people's own political stance as part of the sexually underprivileged in Taiwan. Even though marginalising experiences in life have certainly left numerous depressing memories and emotional residues, a good number of online users in LGBT online communities in Taiwan are not very concerned with getting involved in political statements or campaigning for their rights. This is not to say that they do not want to be treated with respect and equality, but rather that they do not want to be involved in 'politics' which is a notion associated with muddled and controversial matters because of the independence-unification impasse. This argument can also help to explain the fact that a good number of the participants in LGBT online communities in Taiwan have joined in the pride parades masked and fully dressed identically as a team. While marching in

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<sup>16</sup>In 1949 the Nationalist Chinese government, having lost the civil war to the communists, retreated to Taiwan and saw Taiwan as a temporary base from which they would recover the communist China, an ideology that became embarrassing in the 1980s. However, due to the retreat, Taiwan has been receiving more attention than ever before. In comparison, the island's earlier residents (prior to 1949) were never really important. Actually, it was because Taiwan was simply a small island that offered tribute to Mainland China in Ching Dynasty that the fact that Chinese Emperor lost Taiwan to Japan was never regard as a sign of failure. After World War II, Japan had no option but to hand Taiwan back to the Nationalist government in China, only to let the Nationalists who retreated to the island later mistreat the Taiwanese due to heightened ethnic tensions in between. Now in Taiwan, people are still divided into waishenjen (the Mainlanders; or literally people from the outer-province) and benshenjen (the Taiwanese; people from inner-province). So stereotypically speaking, people of a Mainlander genealogy will support the Nationalist and thus are blue, while people of a Taiwanese descendant will be green, the Democratic Progressive. More information can be found at [www.newleftreview.net/PDFArticles/NLR26202.pdf](http://www.newleftreview.net/PDFArticles/NLR26202.pdf) and [www.gio.gov.tw/info/taiwan-story/society/edown/3-1.htm](http://www.gio.gov.tw/info/taiwan-story/society/edown/3-1.htm).

prides might be about a making a physical appearance and political statement for, for example, civil rights and sexual citizenships, it is perhaps much more deeply related to feeling empowered by coming out collectively in costumes and music; walking the streets cheerfully declaring that one's identity as tongzhi without denying or hiding this. The idea of deliberately disrupting the heterosexual order in public sphere as well as being campy or in drag does not necessarily appeal to the marchers as much as being seen as homosexual without feeling disdained.<sup>17</sup>

In this sense, the pride parades in Taiwan were not necessarily employed only for making political appeals. It can actually be argued as well as theorised that their lack of political stances and commitments seeking to oppose heteronormativity instead provides 'a respite from it' (McLelland, 2003: 53). This idea of being able to locate a sense of sexual subjectivity without necessarily politicising sexuality is based on findings in Mark McLelland's essay 'Japanese Queerscapes'. In McLelland's observations in the transgender websites, for example, 'there is a sense of community as well as some collective identification' although they do not politicise what they are or what they do (He 2006). I summarise his points and write in my book review of *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia* on Resource Centre for Cyberculture Studies: 'perhaps from the common understanding of queer politics, when queer is no longer about a kind of political attitude, its positioning as a way to create a community or an identification becomes impossible' (He 2006). This possibility 'suggests a new, or at least an alternative, way of forging a queerly sexualized community' despite not overtly, or even avoid, being politically positioned (He 2006). While in McLelland's case studies, the void of politics in these online communities containing gay contents are perhaps purely for entertainment, I however am interested in finding out if entertainment itself can be a form of potentially political rejection by offering people a chance to be who they are.

### Cyberqueers in Taiwan

Looking at the intersection of internet technology and non-normative sexuality from a perhaps optimistic perspective, at this point, I feel it is proper to draw on ideas of cyberqueer theory. Although Wakeford in her 'Cyberqueer' emphasises the pre-existing 'large-scale socio-economic questions of the demographics of production and consumption of cyberqueer spaces', she nevertheless confirms the possibility of utilising the internet as a means to counter the social hierarchies and make possible resistance across geographical limits (Wakeford, 2000: 404). However, concerns about the question of 'what is queer cyberspace?' are important. Wakeford furthermore incorporates Lisa Haskel's comments on online communities: in an online community the user's participation revolves around a conscious self-construction process in negotiating an identity that will *become valid* in an online communal setting (Haskel, 1996: 52; 403). Haskel exposes the notion that I would like to call 'credited participation' in cyberspace. She thinks that 'Are you lesbian?' may be replaced by the assessment question 'Are you lesbian enough?' when one enters the cyberqueer arena such as online forums, communities and others. These points regarding the digital divide and identity politics illustrates that the 'credited participation' online might involve one's being impelled to be

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<sup>17</sup>The local complication of coming out in masks is explained and discussed in Fran Martin's book *Situating Sexualities*.

familiarised with online environments and more or less restructure one's own selfhood, both a process and a status acquired over time and through continuous efforts, so that one can be accepted in the realm of cyberqueer. This process of gaining that recognised status, despite some possible hardships, cannot be made available without computing skills, internet access, and a certain degree of intelligence, knowledge and experience, thus it further imbalances the social distribution of power.

In Taiwan, however, starting from the mid 1990s the internet has been widely available due to reduced costs and state encouragement.<sup>18</sup> Around 61% of Taiwan's population are currently regular internet users, and 47% of them equipped with broadband, ideal for all-day connection. People on this small island, where internet infrastructures are implemented rather quickly, have thus been exposed to many possibilities in online spaces in the last decade. In addition, internet cafes are very popular and their customers are mainly students, the unemployed and the working-class after work, who can easily spend the whole weekends chatting, surfing and most likely of all, playing online games. All in all, due to its low costs and ready availability, going online in Taiwan might not exclude as many people as it might do in the Western context, as Wakeford and Haskel have argued. The importance of paying attention to 'economic conditions of production and consumption' (Wakeford, 2000: 413) while analysing cyberqueer activity and participation in a Taiwanese context, as a result, may be relatively reduced.

This fact of easy access to the internet in Taiwan also counters Donald Morton's central idea in 'Birth of Cyberqueer.' From a Marxist perspective, Morton criticises cyberspace and queer theory as the phenomenon of multinational late-capitalism. He stresses that cyberspace is designed by and for the middle-class, inherently hegemonic and privileging the 'Western or Westernize subjects [who] fantasize that instead of being chosen by history, they choose their own histories' (Morton, 1999: 304). In Taiwan, just as workers and the unemployed can generally be found in internet cafes, so do students on campuses with Taiwan Academic Network island-wide come from a range of different family backgrounds and classes.<sup>19</sup> These people, many of whom are far from middle-class, may not be able to afford a computer at home, and yet they are still very active online and should not be neglected or underestimated as an online population. Also, Morton's 'Western or Westernized subjects', in my eye, may be derived from an Orientalistic view, implying the internet only can be owned and used in a 'western' manner.

The coinage of cyberqueer, as Wakeford has it, is however primarily concerned with how the attributes and resources in cyberspace can be utilised to create some relatively

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<sup>18</sup>See [www.find.org.tw/eng/index.asp](http://www.find.org.tw/eng/index.asp) or this survey posted on 13 July 2005: [www.find.org.tw/eng/news.asp?msgid=179&subjectid=2&pos=0](http://www.find.org.tw/eng/news.asp?msgid=179&subjectid=2&pos=0). From this quoted passage in the introduction, as well as other reportages on this website, it is obvious that there is an obsession with ranking in terms of ICT popularity and development in Taiwan: "FIND is an authoritative website that provides abundant and professional information on Internet demographics and trends. To our local citizens, FIND aims to offer important global news, statistics, information and trends related to Information Communication Technology (ICT). To overseas friends, FIND aims to introduce the most updated development and usage of ICT in Taiwan." The obsession in scoring well in ICT ranking is a defining feature of the ICT developments in Taiwan.

<sup>19</sup>TANet is an infrastructure that is basically free Internet broadband, implemented in Taiwan throughout almost all public schools and universities.

favourable sites for counter-hegemonic movements and hence challenge heterosexuality as the norm. Wakeford supports the idea that internet is to be 'promoted and studied by those who subvert the norms of heterosexuality. It is through online action and internet usage as such that the term 'cyberqueer' makes sense' (Wakeford, 2000: 403). It is in this sense that I would like to draw on her ideas about cyberqueer to conceptualise these LGBT online communities in Taiwan in the hope of generating a complex Chinese cyberspace as enabling and empowering a marginalised intersection of nationality and sexuality.

However, it should be emphasized that although potentially 'enabling and empowering', cyberspace is still chiefly accessed by the younger generation (95% are in the age group of 15-24), by people who can secure a stable internet account at work, school or home, and by slightly more male online users than female ones.<sup>20</sup> In terms of gender and regional differences, the figures show a less wide gap. But the age divide is quite deep, and thus the validity of my claim about 'typing Taiwan into history' in this paper is limited to a younger generation. The issue of inequality in internet use, as Wakeford has suggested in 'Cyberqueer', determines the understanding and theorising of LGBT communities in Taiwan.

One of the statistical implications which needs to also be noted is that, along with the younger generations' trajectories of receiving education and working, the internet is always a constant, and thus in a way has imperceptibly influenced, if not formulated, this generation's social, cultural, political and sexual identification. For instance, participants in the internet whose ages range from 15 to 24 are regular online users, and their online visits are frequent as well as significant to their life. Becoming acquainted with the internet in their teens, a period of time when people socialise and locate their identity in relation to the peers, the majority of online users are quite readily integrated into the computing and internet technology. This enhances the possibility of fabricating their selfhood through constant participation in online worlds.

How, then, might LGBT people's online interactions and experiences, and the writing of this 'virtual history' constructed their understanding of themselves and others? As Wakeford describes, '[t]here has been a persistent silence on matters of sexuality in critical cultural studies of technology', and I still find this statement quite true ten years after her comment (Wakeford, 2000: 410). Engaging in studies of LGBT online communities, then, I find it quite fascinating that it requires much more research to bridge over the current scholarship on sexuality and internet studies, despite the ready textuality of online archives in web-based communities participated by LGBT people.

### **The Meaning of Cybersexuality**

As David Silver's review of *Cybersexualities*, a reader edited by Jenny Wolmark, has foregrounded, the critical investigation of how exactly sexuality and internet technology interact and influence each other is somehow absent (Silver, 2002: 235).

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<sup>20</sup>See [www.find.org.tw/eng/news.asp?msgid=148&subjectid=4&pos=0](http://www.find.org.tw/eng/news.asp?msgid=148&subjectid=4&pos=0) for figures from a 2004 survey. It is stated that 'Another survey . . . found that about 12.2 million people, or 54% of Taiwan's population, were general Internet users. In terms of gender, more men (56%) than women (52%) used the Internet. As for age groups, 95% of people between 15 and 24 years old were Internet users but only less than 10% of people over 60 used the Internet. Geographically, Internet penetration rate was over 60% in northern Taiwan while in other parts it was between 40% and 50%'.

Agreeing with Silver, I would like to underline the need to understand 'cybersexuality' in terms of incorporating empirical studies focused on online interactions (and correlated matters such as power structures, gender and sexual hierarchies) that provide a great source for discussions of online sexuality in public forum, in message boards, in real-time chats, and many others. Of course, the underlying assumption of this stress on the intersection of cyberspace and sexuality is that online users treat the internet as an extension of daily life where the cyber is also seen as 'tangible', as 'part of lived cultures, informed by and informing other parts of users' lives (Berry and Martin, 2000: 80).

That said, the internet does possess an interesting quality of disembodiment. The internet appeals to people with its anonymity and invisibility by staring into the looking glass of the screen instead of face-to-face eyeing each other. Online interactions rely on words to build up attraction rather than physicality. The cyber as a disembodied haven is also validated here as a way to ensure LGBT people's freedom from fear and unwanted exposure in Taiwan. But this safe anonymity is also undermining: as Daniel Tsang describes in his 'Notes on Queer'n'Asian Virtual Sex', '[all] the posted information should be taken with a grain of salt [because] fantasy substitutes for hard reality' (Tsang, 2000: 432-3). The lack of trust, as Tsang continues, reflects his story of being given fake information by a college student and being investigated by an undercover government agent online. However, this further confirms that there is something 'real' and 'tangible' online that is worth both hiding as well as investigating.

### **Globalisation, Transnationality and Translation**

When considering the issues of Taiwanese complex Chinese cyberspace, non-normative sexuality and online textual performances,<sup>21</sup> therefore, I find it imperative to simultaneously examine key vectors which are at work on the intersection of contemporary Taiwanese discourses of sexuality, ethnicity and national identity. Due to Taiwan's geopolitical position and its awkward international status, the conflicting realities of factually being an independent country and yet never officially recognised so constitute Taiwanese perspectives in some significantly different ways from those perspectives of other national groups. This 'difference' is a given that necessitates awareness of transnationality since Taiwan as a de facto cannot be a self-styled country but almost always find itself in demand of some international attention, if not recognition. Transnationality tells a story in which globalisation is no longer a fashionable buzzword but a given fact, in which power from without interferes as well as works in complicity with the power within. People in this globalised, if western capitalist, part of the world have no choice but to live with both host and guest languages as well as the cultural and social translations in between, along with the contending interests of political, national and ideological struggles over modernisation and capitalism.

Transnational understanding thus opens up 'a dialogical space in which we can expect a good deal of disagreement, clashing of perspectives and conflicts, not just working together and consensus' (Featherstone, 1996: 102). Given the ineluctability of cultural, lingual and social translations in this hybrid contemporariness for transnational

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<sup>21</sup>See Lindemann (1995) 'Live(s) Online: Narrative Performance, Presence, and Community in LiveJournal.com', for more discussion of the 'verbal artistry and communicative competence that create and sustain "community" through audience response'.

understanding, complexities are unavoidable. By translation, I mean a translation of cultures, especially of cultures which are not inherently similar or close to each other, as in the translation between Western (mainly US and West Europe) and East Asia.

Translation, after all, happens before any act of research. Take, for example, words such as 'gay' and 'lesbian'. 'Gay' and 'lesbian' are words with their own specific relations to the norm, identity and historicity. So when these terms are used in a Taiwanese context, whether they still invoke the same identity politics and formation becomes the focus of translation. To continue the research about gay and lesbian people of Taiwan, the assumption of this article is that resignification and rewriting of these terms is inevitable and necessary. As much as 'gay' and 'lesbian' have both been used in a range of different societies, circumstances and times within western culture and history, people in non-western contexts should also not be kept from appropriating these terms and being identified with them. Even though the self-labelling and identification does not necessarily correspond to the way it is being used in Western Europe and the United States for example, contemporary Taiwanese men and women can still take possession of these terms and reinvent gay and lesbian in their own terms for their local subcultures. This is, as I see it, the nature of globalisation where local alteration and revision are always ongoing and transcultural translations are simply non-stop. Although this ongoing process is never deprived of power relations and hegemonic forces, it is however possible to locate subjectivity in the midst of modern, hybrid and globalised culture.

As Lydia Liu (1995) argues in her *Translingual Practice*, Chinese modernity is a translated modernity. Modernity in this case is taken as a model to be reinterpreted into a kind of imagining and understanding of it outside of the context where modernity was firstly produced. This very translatedness in the process of imagining and understanding involves dynamics in between languages and thus culture codes. As Liu asserts, 'a non-European host language may violate, displace, and usurp the authority of the guest language in the process of translation as well as be transformed by it or be in complicity with it' (Liu, 1995: 27). Lisa Rofel, too, coined the term 'other modernities' to describe a Third-world imagination: 'modernity enfolds and explodes by means of global capitalist forms of domination in conjunction with state techniques for normalizing its citizens. Along with these specific practices, modernity exists as a narrated imaginary: it is a story people tell themselves about themselves in relation to others' (Rofel 1999: 13). Similar terms such as 'Chinese translationalism as an alternative modernity' and 'Multiple Modernity' are also offered by Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (1997) and Arjun Appadurai (1996). These interactions between host/self/non-west and guest/other/west, along with the imaginarieness embedded, are examples of appropriations of gay and lesbian identities -- as part of modernity -- which tell stories about themselves in relation to others.

The expansion of capitalism and increasing trading opportunities, various cultural, lingual and social translations, has to a certain extent granted western researchers some kind of common ground for communication as well as a source of model and data in an otherwise social situation (Garcia, 2000). By writing this article for people largely from a western background and upbringing, for instance, I am constantly caught in between trying to demonstrate a still-emerging Taiwanese localised conceptualisation and social articulation of gay, lesbian and queer, and attempting to let the western audience understand what is going on with the assumption of an audience who are aware of their

own relatively-established articulation of gay, lesbian and queer. In this attempt, I experience the inevitable clashes of perspectives and inner conflicts as a two-way traffic, which has also constituted anxieties and fatigues for many other Third World researchers. In order to strive for some coherence in translation, furthermore, negotiation, mediation, compromise and sometimes strategic employment of essentialism may be called for among different and complex perspectives, notions, and points of departure.

To further explain this state of being caught in between, I think it might be helpful to look closer at the fact that issues of transnationality and globalisation did not catch attention until quite recently in the studies of sexuality in the West. In the publication of a collection of essays under the title 'Thinking Sexuality Transnationally' in *GLQ* in 1999, for instance, the editors proclaim that a 'transnational turn' in lesbian and gay studies has arrived and encourage queer theorists and researchers start to pay attention to transnationality, and stop basing their knowledge of social reality within territorial bounds as the self-evident unit of investigation and theorisation. Such a well-intended statement has yet again exposed the privilege that queer theorists from the Anglophone background have, as this privilege unwittingly obliterated the non-Anglophone cultural and social scenarios: Third World researchers at all times have no option but to take into account the predominant western theories and discourses.

The dominant western theories and discourse that are considered pertinent here are really feminist and queer theories and the discourses they have formulated. Starting from making politics the major way to change imbalanced power play and social dynamics, feminists and queer theorists everywhere have since long been aware of the differences in, let's say, being a woman in the UK and Uganda. The 'local specificity', as so has frequently been phrased, warns academics against making assumptions as well as paying insufficient attention to the context. This awareness of the local context, then, brings in the question over same and different, which is all the more complicated under the circumstances of globalisation. But as Tom Boellstorff maintains, 'the issue [of] the world's becoming more the same or more different under globalization ... [should not be the focus] but the transformation of the very yardstick by which one decides whether something is the same or different in the first place [;] that is, the reconfiguration of the grid of similitude and difference [should instead be the focus of discussion]' (Boellstorff, 1999: 480). Boellstorff's suggestion champions a detailed examination of what determines similarity and dissimilarity, in hopes of finding out on what premise the perception of sameness and difference puts a constructive spin on discussions of globalisation. His proposal, in my opinion, is not only meaningful in the age of globalisation, but also essential in being reflective on and sensitive to how power operates in an international academic setting. Especially as somebody from Taiwan, and yet very much involved in an western setting during my days of studies here in UK, I find it imperative to always rethink and re-examine issues as sexuality and gender in terms of how much (or how little) effects of transnationalism has factored in scholarly narratives and what these effects might implicate or produce.

To go back to the online communities, then, evidence of transnational influences is witnessed in LGBT participants' ambivalent feeling toward the western interpretation of gay, lesbian and queer sexuality. On one level western discourses are certainly empowering because they quickly provide ready vocabulary and validated political/theoretical positions for Taiwanese tongzhi people to deploy and occupy. On

another level, though, many cultural and social settings and elements are not in close proximity to the local sets of culture and social situations, which then makes western discourses irrelevant, inadequate and, when one attempts to apply western ideas to the local plights, imposing and oppressive. Invoking this ambivalence, I want to highlight here the simultaneous acceptance and refusal of western importations—academic discourse and theory as well as social campaigning strategy and patterns—which is actually a common theme in many countries in the East-Asian region and beyond. The western strategies and ideas in relation to LGBT issues, in my opinion, are not void of value and effects, but when things as such do not apply in a different political, cultural and social context, it is usually a call for adjustments and adaptation instead of a revelation of ‘problems’ with the local contexts.

### Online Resistances to ‘the West’ and English

Paying attention to the internet use in aspects of popularisation of the sexual discourse, I want to use the example of registering as an online user in an online community to demonstrate the action of screen-naming as a metaphoric paradigm for understanding the so-called westernisation of Taiwan. In the outset, the internet has always been a place where English is incorporated as a common, daily and banal element on Taiwanese websites, in all complex Chinese email exchanges and Bulletin Board Systems.<sup>22</sup> For users in LGBT online communities, too, the first thing to do when joining in is usually the creation of an online screen name in English. As all screen names are English (unless specially programmed otherwise, which is very rare), users whose familiarity with English is not great will always find ways to make it less English and more localised. For example, they may use a Japanese name such as ‘hanabi’ (fireworks), a hybrid name such as ‘wenderslin’ (a person whose last name is Lin and is a fan of the German director Wim Wenders), or miaohand (miao is wonderful in Mandarin; so it means ‘wonderful hand’, a customary way to suggest that this person might be a doctor).<sup>23</sup> As manifested in these examples, the internet as well as the English intervention does not get away without some modification and re-writing before it is integrated to the local life. The use of English screen names, as illustrated, is so non-normative that it might be regarded as a way of ‘recreating English’. By giving this bold suggestion of recreating English, I relate this suggestion in opposition to ideas of ‘linguistic imperialism’ and of ‘cultural politics of English as an International language’<sup>24</sup>.

This usage of English is disruptive as it cannot be readily understood or made meaningful by English native speaker. Hence it might be argued that non-native speakers try to exercise their agency over the dominant language by making new words and localising English in their own way. This is but a common phenomenon; as mentioned elsewhere, perhaps it is fair to say that nowadays the most widely spoken language in the

<sup>22</sup>Even with traditional Chinese windows operation system as well as all the web interfaces mentioned, there are always traces of English which are taken for granted for computer users around the world.

<sup>23</sup>Hanabi as a word usually connotes the image of lovers walking hand in hand along the riverside, appreciating fireworks together. The use of Japanese in daily-life situations in Taiwan is quite common and reflects a Japanese tilt to Taiwanese popular culture.

<sup>24</sup>Both phrases in quotation marks are taken from book titles: *Linguistic Imperialism* by Robert Phillipson and *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language* by Alastair Pennycook.

world is ‘broken English’.<sup>25</sup> ‘Broken English’ indicates the tension between ‘potentially lowering the standards of English’ and ‘potentially queering those standards’. The kind of broken English spoken and employed by non-native speakers in Taiwan, for instance, in various online scenarios tends to make significant fractures in perpetuating the intellectual and linguistic aristocracy.<sup>26</sup> This instance of using strange screen names that are not to be comprehended without knowledge in other languages such as Chinese and Japanese may function as a paradigm that exhibits this ongoing process of hybridisation, of making things translated, adjusted, localised and more familiar—eventually just better for the people who use them.

One of the crucial questions in this situation of hybridisation, then, is how to deal with that feeling of threat of losing something authentic and precious, such as the correctly spoken and written language; namely, the flawless state of artefacts. I think other than the nostalgic yearning for something ‘native’, which is a motif explored by many academics throughout different times, the issue of propriety might be able to come to the fore because, in this case particularly, what becomes at stake seems to be a sense of being ‘proper’. Propriety implies a kind of legitimacy, an endowed right and a kind of correctness and its virtue one of decorum and ethos, being acceptable in terms of social rules. So the moment when English became an integral part to internet technology for places all over the world, issues of linguistic propriety seems to be at peril because proper English is certainly not guaranteed, if deteriorating. I believe the coping strategy in resolving that feeling of being threatened might be to challenge such ideas and rewrite that definition of being proper, instead of reminiscing the good old days of propriety and wishing to retreat back to the less mobile life in the past.

### **Against Surveillance and Controlling**

The internet does not only possess the potential of loosening propriety, but also encourages a kind of enabling anonymity. To be able to carry on with studies of the crossroads of sexuality, globalisation and technology, for example, I find it necessary to defend the autonomy of being anonymous. Anonymity in combination with irresponsible online user does produce problems such as flaming and slander. It is also very difficult to demarcate where the lines might be in matters of maintaining the right to anonymity and its entailing freedom of speech, and protecting people’s reputation and privacy. However, I offer contemporary examples in South Korea and China in order to illustrate clearer what I have in mind when maintaining the idea of enabling anonymity. In these examples, let it be noted that my perspective is from that of LGBT subjects in Taiwan, in which I see an essential need for defence against deprivation and violation of online rights.

One example is South Korean policy of compulsory real-name use online in order to ensure a cyberviolence-free space.<sup>27</sup> The other is China’s order of blogger registration, instant messenger’s real-name registration and banning of the use of words ‘freedom’ and

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<sup>25</sup>I believe this was said by the rector in Linköping Universitet in his speech to the International students in early September 2003.

<sup>26</sup>But of course in the academic and degree-pursuing contexts, such assumptions are not quite true as the presence of English is then not primarily for facilitating online communications and setting up the computing system but to grant access to social prestige and economic wealth, for example.

<sup>27</sup>Korean Times: <http://times.hankooki.com/lpage/opinion/200507/kt2005070617103354040.htm>

'democracy'.<sup>28</sup> In the former case, they legalised real-name registration in South Korea, which in itself manifests a sentiment not only in support of people's conservative ideas but also one of stricter control over the nation due to threats of online crimes and calumny. The latter in China, however, in the name of reducing online pornography and crimes, has been done on the basis of upholding an authoritarian state. The internet in both examples is perceived as a threat to the greater 'good' as well as the social order, and that even though the internet has become so constitutive to people's daily life in both countries, the internet nevertheless is still not as 'safe' and 'ordinary' as daily life because, in the eyes of the authorities concerned, the internet easily harbours sinister ideas and evil acts, such as pornography, libel and violation of privacy for South Korea, and democracy, freedom or basically anti-authoritarianism for China.

As mentioned at the beginning, the excuse for protecting children and teenagers from being involved in compensated dating in Taiwan granted the justification of the police's online fishing for criminals. Although this fishing strategy of reconnaissance is no longer justified after protests and objection from the gender and sexuality rights association in Taiwan, the police can still access online users' profiles and registration files from which they can pay close attention to anybody whose profile implies willingness to be engaged in sexual intercourse through email contacts, online chats or message-board interactions.<sup>29</sup> The international trend of states' exercising of power on the internet, both in aspects of online speeches and assertions of anonymity in the East Asian region, has many implications in various respects of life, such as economy, political affairs, social control over sexuality and so on. The law amendments and governance concerning and in response to the current use of the internet, however, should not be reactionary to fear or even panic and thus risk diminishing the significant freedom and anonymity it offers to LGBT population and others in Taiwan. In regard to the importance of sustaining a right of anonymity and freedom of speech, I understand that it is a very complex issue and such anonymity is likely to be employed in a harmful manner. And yet I would still like to make the point that anonymity is one of the elementary components in having the internet as a technology of freedom. The success of an LGBT online community in Taiwan and elsewhere depends not only on the systems and operations of the communication technology, but also profoundly on law, politics, social discourses and perceptions of the online in which the technology and its users are situated. On this note, LGBT online communities in Taiwan can be regarded as fighting against the urges of being regulated and the regulating forces. As they are being positioned outside of hetero-normativity, Western locations and Chinese authoritarianism, contemporary LGBT online communities are confronted with a formidable task of locating their own narratives of their histories of margins.

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<sup>28</sup>For blogger registration, visit: [www.guardian.co.uk/china/story/0,7369,1501184,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/china/story/0,7369,1501184,00.html); for instant messenger registration, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/globalvoices/2005/07/21/china-real-name-registration-for-instant-messenger/>; and for banning of words such as 'freedom' and 'democracy': <http://news.ft.com/cms/s/d07011b8-d9d6-11d9-b071-00000e2511c8.html>

<sup>29</sup>Source of information: [http://gsrat.net/events/events\\_post.php?pdata\\_id=57](http://gsrat.net/events/events_post.php?pdata_id=57) in traditional Chinese.

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