Gay Rhetorics: Fashion, Social Media and State-Sponsored Propaganda in Malaysia

Goh Cheng Fai Zach, City University of Hong Kong

On September 13, 2012, the online news provider Malaysiakini, along with other local news agencies, reported that the Malaysian government's Ministry of Education has endorsed "guidelines" to help parents and teachers to identify gay and lesbian symptoms in their children or students so that they can take early corrective measures. These guidelines provided four “symptoms” each of gays and lesbians. Out of the four symptoms listed for gays, three have got to do with stereotypical fashion choices, including a preference for wearing V-neck and sleeveless clothes, preferring tight and light coloured clothes, as well as liking to bring big handbags, similar to those used by women, when hanging out. These criteria were handed out during anti-gay seminars that the Malaysian education ministry held to teach parents and teachers how to curb LGBT behavior. The short list of criteria has stirred up public outrage at the portrayal of homosexual citizens in Malaysia, who feel increasingly discriminated against. The news report has also gained some attention from other news agencies around the world, whose consequent news reports point out that the ‘othering’ of the LGBT community in Malaysia was an effort to gain the votes of the Malay Muslim majority in the upcoming general elections.

This paper explores some of the ways in which the Malaysian government paints the LGBT community as being threatening, and examines the supposed threat to masculinity which male homosexuality brings, by analyzing the way in which the threat is constructed, in this case through the usage of fashion-related discourse. When constructing their list of characteristics on what constitutes homosexuality, the ministry of education has chosen to focus on the fashion choices that constitute the choices of a small group of gay people, and use the fashion choices to stereotype the entire gay population of Malaysia. Is such portrayal and stereotyping of gays based on fashion choices something that is common all around the world, and to what extent does the Malaysian situation conform to such portrayals? Do they conform to the western notions of stereotypical gays or does the Malaysian narrative depart from the usual narrative stereotypes of homosexual fashion? I also look at some of the backlash that emerged out of social media in response to the anti-gay propaganda that was produced by the Malaysian government.
Biography:

Goh Cheng Fai Zach is a Visiting Fellow at the Department of English, City University of Hong Kong. He recently completed his MPhil degree at the School of English, the University of Hong Kong, where he studied the narratives of trauma and memory of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya and Singapore in 21st century Malaysian Literature in English. His research interests include contemporary Asian literature and cultural studies. He is a member of the Asian Shakespeare Association and contributes to Cha: An Asian Literary Journal.