Ongoing social relations in lowland Southeast Asian societies are based on hierarchical understandings, which is to say that they are predicated on mutual interdependence through difference. This point helps make sense both of Southeast Asia’s long-standing gender binarism and of the relative tolerance historically afforded people of non-normative gender and sexuality. Difference, in this view, always makes a difference, although some flexibility as to who exhibits which contrasting traits is allowed. LGBT activists mounting campaigns against legal discrimination insist that non-normative gender and sexuality should make no difference. Yet many queer Southeast Asians prefer activities, such as drag shows, in which people compete to distinguish themselves—to instate differences in standing—over efforts to win similar rights for everyone. A growing backlash against queer people appears to stem from their demands for recognition without discrimination: the reprisals are against claims that queerness should make no difference.

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