

Is Asia ready for the Rainbow? – The Challenges, Changes and the Future of the LGBT+ Community from East to South Asia

“India decriminalizes homosexuality”¹ and “Brunei stoning punishment for gay sex”² were both headlines of the past year. Often times, religion is used as a reason for intolerance and discrimination against the LGBT+ community in Asia. However, albeit my limited understanding of religion, I learned from the religious site visits and dialogue during the Temple of Understanding internship program that the basis for all religions is oneness and love, not segregation and hatred. As a queer Asian from Hong Kong myself, I am determined to find out the root causes of the challenges, recent changes and trends, and the future outlook of the LGBT+ community, in the context of East, Southeast, and South Asia.

The Challenges of the “3Cs” – Colonialism, Confucianism, Church

Although there are many root causes of intolerance towards the LGBT+ community in Asia, the main ones can be summarized into the three Cs: Colonialism, Confucianism, and Church (Catholicism, Protestantism, and Christianity).

While a clear causal and effect relationship cannot be applied to colonialism and the criminalization of LGBT+ activity, there is certainly a strong correlation. In particular, more than half of the 71 countries where homosexuality is illegal were former British colonies or protectorates.³ This is mainly due to the fact that the 1860s British Empire was heavily influenced by Christian values when drafting penal codes for its Empire.⁴ As a result, many Asian countries such as Singapore, where the colonial-era penal code section 377A criminalizing sex between consenting adult men, still remains to this day.⁵ Although Section 377A is not actively enforced, many LGBT+ Singaporeans reported that it increases stigma and bullying as

¹ Abhishyant Kidangoor. “India Decriminalizes Homosexuality in a Landmark Ruling.” *Time*, Time, 6 Sept. 2018, time.com/5388231/india-decriminalizes-homosexuality-section-377/.

² Iliana Magra. “Brunei Stoning Punishment for Gay Sex and Adultery Takes Effect Despite International Outcry.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Apr. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/04/03/world/asia/brunei-stoning-gay-sex.html.

³ Ben Westcott. “The Homophobic Legacy of the British Empire.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 12 Sept. 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/09/11/asia/british-empire-lgbt-rights-section-377-intl/index.html.

⁴ Joseph O'Mahoney. “How Britain's Colonial Legacy Still Affects LGBT Politics around the World.” *The Conversation*, 16 Apr. 2019, theconversation.com/how-britains-colonial-legacy-still-affects-lgbt-politics-around-the-world-95799.

⁵ “Section 377A of the Penal Code (Singapore).” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 17 July 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Section_377A_of_the_Penal_Code_\(Singapore\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Section_377A_of_the_Penal_Code_(Singapore)).

students at public schools are taught that homosexuality is illegal.⁶ Moreover, a study in 2012 found that 60.2% of LGBT+ individuals in Singapore had homophobic or transphobic experiences, and that they had a significantly higher risk of mental health issues.⁷

Another strong influence on attitudes towards the LGBT+ community is Confucianism. Confucianism is not a religion, but a way of life that is interwoven into the Chinese social fabric.⁸ In particular, the importance of filial piety⁹ is stressed, and failing to have children is one of the most unfilial acts of all, according to Mencius.¹⁰ In China, although homosexuality is not criminalized, there is immense pressure to marry and produce offspring to continue the family heritage, especially for men. Consequently, this leads to over 90% of gay men in China marrying women without disclosing their sexual orientation, leading to adultery and unhappiness.¹¹ Additionally, as China was the “Middle Kingdom” in the Asia region for almost 5000 years, the Confucian sphere of influence extends out to Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and more.

Lastly, affiliations with the Church lead to less tolerant attitudes towards LGBT+ issues. According to the Pew Research Center, the acceptance of homosexuality is higher where “religion is less central in people’s lives”.¹² This is particularly true in South Korea, where Protestants, Christians, and Catholics make up the majority of those with religious affiliations.¹³ South Korea has one of the most passionate anti-LGBT hate groups, namely the Korean Churches Anti-LGBT Response Committee.¹⁴ The story of the South Korean ex-gay pastor, Jonah Lee, encapsulates the transition of homosexuality from being a non-issue to an “existential threat” to religious leaders.¹⁵ The emergence of the US as South Korea’s most important ally and

⁶ Kirsten Han. “The Fight to Repeal Anti-Gay Laws in Singapore.” *The Interpreter*, The Interpreter, 20 Sept. 2018, www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/fight-repeal-anti-gay-laws-singapore.

⁷ Yangfa Leow. “Various Forms of Discrimination against LGBTQ Individuals Reported to Support Groups.” *TODAYonline*, 24 Sept. 2018, www.todayonline.com/singapore/various-forms-discrimination-against-lgbtq-individuals-reported-support-groups.

⁸ “Confucianism.” *Asia Society*, Asia Society, asiasociety.org/education/confucianism.

⁹ Definition by Merriam Webster: reverence for parents considered in Chinese ethics the prime virtue and the basis of all right human relations.

¹⁰ Bryan W. Van Norden. “Confucius on Gay Marriage.” *The Diplomat*, The Diplomat, 14 July 2015, thediplomat.com/2015/07/confucius-on-gay-marriage/.

¹¹ Shan Juan. “More China News.” *Millions of Wives Wed to Gay Men: Expert*, China Daily, 3 Feb. 2012, www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-02/03/content_14528838.htm.

¹² “The Global Divide on Homosexuality.” *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project*, Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, 1 June 2015, www.pewresearch.org/global/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality/.

¹³ “Religion.” *Religion in Korea*, KOCIS, www.korea.net/AboutKorea/Korean-Life/Religion.

¹⁴ J. Lester Feder. “This Is What Happened When Christian Groups Tried To Shut Down Korea Pride.” *BuzzFeed News*, BuzzFeed News, 28 June 2015, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/this-is-what-happened-when-christian-groups-tried-to-shut-do#.dtoPkKmJb.

¹⁵ J. Lester Feder. “This Man’s Story Explains the Emergence of South Korea’s Anti-LGBT Movement.” *BuzzFeed News*, BuzzFeed News, 31 July 2015, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/meet-the-former-gay-bar-tycoon-now-trying-to-save-gay-people.

economic power since the Korean War had the Koreans “adopt the religion of the powerful”, as they wanted religion to give them the power the West had.¹⁶ Protestant churches grew exponentially in parallel with South Korea’s economy, as a part of the “prosperity gospel” that preached faith would be rewarded by wealth.¹⁷ Therefore, adopting the 1950s American religious values, which were largely homophobic, is such a crucial part of the Korean identity and nationalism, fuelling the fervent hate against the LGBT+ community.

The Breakthroughs from the “3Cs” – What we can learn from them

Despite the many challenges the region is still facing, there have been some major breakthroughs from the “three Cs” over the past few years, notably the achievements from India, Taiwan, and the Philippines.

Starting with India, the largest former British colony, headlines were made as they repealed section 377A of the colonial penal code last September.¹⁸ Similar to Singapore, the Victorian-era anti-sodomy law was imposed as a direct result of British colonialism, banning behavior that would have otherwise be accepted in their culture.¹⁹ Many attribute the success to the strong democratic tradition and the role of the Indian Supreme Court – it took numerous petitions, failed court cases, and the trend of relatively liberal rulings, for the Court to reinterpret the language of 377A.²⁰ Precisely, the Court went beyond the scope of gay sex and focused on the broader concept of humanity and the Court’s role to protect individual rights, and even apologized for the past mistreatment of the Indian LGBT+ community.²¹ This highlights the importance of a democratic atmosphere with freedom of speech, and a strong judicial system, in achieving the first milestone in post-colonial societies.

Moving westwards to Taiwan, they were the first country to legalize same-sex marriage in Asia, despite strong Confucian roots. The end of Chiang Kai-shek’s military dictatorship in 1975 paved the way for democratic thoughts and political changes in the 1980s, allowing issues

¹⁶ Bruce Knotts. Personal Interview. 17 July. 2019.

¹⁷ J. Lester Feder. “This Man’s Story Explains the Emergence of South Korea’s Anti-LGBT Movement.”

¹⁸ Abhishyant Kidangoor. “India Decriminalizes Homosexuality in a Landmark Ruling.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “How India Decriminalised Homosexuality.” *The Economist*, The Economist Newspaper, 12 Sept. 2018, www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/09/12/how-india-decriminalised-homosexuality.

²¹ “A Win for L.G.B.T. Rights in India.” *Opinion*, The New York Times, 20 Sept. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/opinion/editorials/india-gay-rights-supreme-court.html.

relating to gender and sexuality to be openly discussed in the public.²² Today, under the multi-party democracy, LGBT+ issues are widely discussed, especially among the youth. To them, having a more liberal stance on LGBT+ also distinguishes themselves from the People's Republic of China's conservative policies.²³ Hence, one of the main reasons behind this landmark ruling was its strong youth movement – since the Sunflower Student Movement of 2014, Taiwanese youth was empowered to drive progressive social changes, including on having marriage equality like the West.²⁴ Moreover, Taiwan's oldest LGBT group, Hotline, takes a very different approach in advocacy compared to its counterparts in the region. While the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities usually advocate separately in other Asian countries, they share the same office in Hotline. In addition, their strategy is to work with and support other activists beyond LGBT+ issues, such as environmental and human rights, to garner support based on reciprocity.²⁵ This echoes the sentiment of SDG17: Partnership for the Goals, as local, national, and regional collaboration is key to Taiwan's success in legalizing same-sex marriage.

Last but not least, the country with the largest Catholic population in Asia, the Philippines, surprisingly has a high tolerance for the LGBT+ community. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, Philippines appears to be the strongest outlier when measuring the correlation between religiosity and “percentage of homosexuality acceptance” in the general public.²⁶ This can be attributed to its culture of *bakla*, a Tagalog word that roughly translates to the Filipino third gender, denoting the practice of male cross-dressing. Bakla can be heterosexual or homosexual and is meant to be a looser term that encompasses the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Similar to *hijra* in India, the core of this word lies in the recognition of gender fluidity, corresponding to the fact that Tagalog does not use limited gendered pronouns.²⁷ As “language shapes the way we think”, Filipinos' view on gender and sexuality are more progressive than most predominantly Catholic countries with restrictions in language as well.

²² T.F Swinburne. “Same-Sex Marriage in Taiwan.” *The Diplomat*, The Diplomat, 5 Jan. 2017, thediplomat.com/2017/01/same-sex-marriage-in-taiwan/.

²³ Nikhil Sonnad. “How Taiwan Became the Most LGBT-Friendly Country in Asia.” *Quartz*, Quartz, 1 May 2019, qz.com/1470193/how-taiwan-became-the-most-lgbt-friendly-country-in-asia/.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “The Global Divide on Homosexuality.” Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project.

²⁷ Vonne Patiag. “In the Philippines They Think about Gender Differently. We Could Too.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 3 Mar. 2019, www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/03/in-the-philippines-they-think-about-gender-differently-we-could-too.

Riding the Momentum: What is the Future of LGBT+ in Asia?

As lesbian Filipino activist Ging Cristobal said, “We are tolerated, but not accepted. Tolerated is more of, ‘We have to endure you... but only up to here.’” Even in places where the LGBT+ community is more tolerated, there is still a long way to go from being truly accepted in Asian societies with strong Confucian and colonial roots, and influences from the Church.

The first thing the international community needs to recognize is that LGBT+ rights are the same as fundamental human rights. Bruce Knotts, the co-chair of the UN NGO Committee on Human Rights, has famously said in a human rights forum held in Taipei, that these issues pertaining human rights “should never be put to a vote”.²⁸ Therefore, the international community should respond to threats to LGBT+ rights like any other allegation of human rights violations – political and economic pressure is needed on governments that still criminalize homosexuality. Moreover, it is not only important for progressive countries like the United Kingdom to set an example for the others, but also to acknowledge the role of colonialism and take historical responsibility, which they have done so.²⁹

Governments also need to be at the forefront of social change; simply waiting for public opinion to abruptly support the LGBT+ community will never lead to social change. For example, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in a BBC interview that “if I remove it [section 377A], it will not remove the problem.” It is, unfortunately, true, but if governments do not lead the way in repealing the law as a symbol of change, there will never be an open discussion about LGBT+ for all parties to express their opinions. As we learned from Taiwan, having an open and honest discussion among society is key to progress in LGBT+ rights. But if homosexuality is still a criminal offense, how would these conversations ever be not treated as a taboo topic in Singapore? For social attitudes to change, we need dialogue, and governments have the responsibility to create such a space where free speech is unimpeded.

As for LGBT+ activists, learn from your Taiwanese peers and collaborate with other activists. No matter if you are a human rights or an environmental activist, we are all striving towards progressive social change and the betterment of society. Especially in Asian

²⁸ Teng Pei-ju. “Human Rights Should Not Be Put to a Vote: UN Official Visiting Taipei.” *Taiwan News*, Taiwan News, 3 Dec. 2018, www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3588558.

²⁹ Ben Westcott. “The Homophobic Legacy of the British Empire.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 12 Sept. 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/09/11/asia/british-empire-lgbt-rights-section-377-intl/index.html.

democracies, strength in numbers is a great incentive for governments to take action, and to increase general public awareness. To LGBT+ individuals, keep your head up and keep being yourself. Have faith in society and humanity that you will be accepted. For those who are out, share your stories to inspire and give strength to those who are closeted. For allies of the LGBT+ community, remind the community that they are not alone in this fight for basic human rights. Ride the momentum of recent progressive changes and initiate discussions with friends and family; create open dialogues where all sides could express their views freely. The momentum of reinterpreting and reevaluating the three Cs will guide us to the right path.

To conclude, there is no such thing as when “time is ripe”. Personally, as a queer Asian who will soon be living in Singapore, I am afraid of what the future holds. However, I have hope that societal attitudes would change, and I have faith that I could make a difference by joining LGBT+ movements in my community, to facilitate open discourse on gender and sexuality issues. Most importantly, it is time to remind our society, now full of animosity and conflict, that love is at the heart of humanity. Now is our time to fight for fundamental human rights, because at the end of the day, love is love.

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