

Queer Lives of Asia: Bridging the Past and Present of South and East Asian LGBTQ+ Communities

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INTRODUCTION

How have colonial and foreign pressures shaped the present-day experiences of queer communities in south and east Asia? How have differences in colonial occupation and experience affected the perception of queer Asian individuals? How have the experiences of Asian queer communities within their countries and with the Western world developed over the past two centuries? These questions guided my research project on decolonial sexuality in south and east Asia. The project sought to compare how the colonial and decolonial experiences of India and Japan have shaped the societal, cultural, and legal perception of non-heteronormative identities by bridging the gap between colonial-era past and current day.

METHODOLOGY: WRITTEN SOURCES

Secondary Readings

A variety of scholarly articles & books helps gauge both

- Historiography; how have previous scholars approached this topic?
- History; how do we view communities within their regional context?

The Colonial Archive & Archival Absence

The oppression of non-heteronormative communities during the colonial era has led to gaps in historical archives. Written documentation reflects Eurocentric colonising powers in both language and law. It is essential to remain alert to the limitations of the colonial archive, such as:

- The archive is inherently tied to “identity, heritage, and culture,” but identity cannot be defined through a singular narrative¹
- The archive prioritises the recovery of written documentation over all other types of sources²
- The archive has been preserved unevenly, favouring imperial powers and colonial actors

METHODOLOGY: ORAL SOURCES

Interviews

Conducting interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals living in India and Japan ultimately provided me with greater insight into the current experiences of LGBTQ+ people in south and east Asia.

Areas of interest included:

- Education and awareness about the LGBTQ+ community
- Individual & systemic discrimination
- The impact of demographic differences (e.g. regional and generational divides)

Base Interview Questions – QUEER LIVES OF ASIA

Note: These interviews are meant to be semi-structured to allow participants to share information they are comfortable with sharing. These questions provide a baseline, but if participants choose to, they can share less or more than what is asked. Participants are allowed to skip any question they choose, or end the interview at any point. Questions that might cause emotional distress have been highlighted.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Q: Are you part of the LGBTQ+ community? If not, can you please describe how you are affiliated with the LGBTQ+ community?

Q: What do you do for a living? Do you work with the LGBTQ+ community in your professional life?

Q: Have you ever faced discrimination based on your sexuality or gender identity, or have you known anyone who has faced discrimination based on their sexuality or gender?

Q: Have you ever faced backlash from your family based on your sexuality or gender identity?

Q: Are you religious? If so, how does your religion treat LGBTQ+ people? Have you ever had trouble reconciling your religious identity and your sexuality or gender identity?

Q: Have you found support in your country / city regarding sexuality or gender identity?

Q: Were you taught about different sexualities or gender identities in school or growing up? How were you exposed to the LGBTQ+ community?

Q: How would you describe the general societal attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community?

Q: How would you describe the general political attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community?

Q: In the next ten years, what changes would you like to see concerning the LGBTQ+ community?

Q: Is there anything you would like to share with me concerning this study?

CONCLUSIONS

Education: Problem & Solution?

“It’s always the fear of the unknown. You know, they may not have anything personal against you, but it’s more the fear of the unknown.” - Interviewee from Mumbai, India³

- India: Little to no education in schools / universities, growing cross-generational awareness, little positive media representation
- Japan: Inconsistent education in schools / universities, lack of cross-generational awareness, frequent positive media representation

Due to the longstanding criminalisation of homosexuality in India, education is infrequent compared to Japan, where homosexuality was only criminalised for eight years (1872-1880).

Aggression & Discrimination

“What we’ve seen is that – like any other country, the microaggressions are the main form of challenge that people face.” - Interviewee from Kyoto, Japan⁴

- India: Frequent individual aggressions, family backlash, & industry discrimination
- Japan: Frequent systemic discrimination & family backlash

Growing awareness of the LGBTQ+ community in Japan has lessened discrimination on an individual level, although systemic discrimination still exists. By contrast, the lack of knowledge about the community in India leads to alienation. In both countries, third-gender and transgender individuals face the greatest constraints.

Sociocultural vs Legal Change

“There’s less resistance to the concept of LGBTQ+ marriage. It’s heartwarming to see it, since we were treated as sick people before.” - Interviewee from Tokyo, Japan⁵

- India: Significant progress from a legal and political standpoint, especially in recent court decisions; struggle with social acceptance & progress
- Japan: Significant progress from a social standpoint, especially in larger cities; struggle with national legal & governmental progress

While it is impossible to strictly categorise development, India and Japan appear to occupy different, and notably opposing, spheres of progress, due to the difference in Western influence in each country.

COLONIAL HISTORY

Why did British Victorian values bleed into Indian society? Why has Japan’s government not seen significant legal progress? The answers lie in colonial history:

- India was colonised under the British Raj. Homosexuality was criminalised under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which was only overturned in 2018.⁶
- Japan embarked on *Bunmei kaika* (文明開化), a conscious programme of Westernisation, but homosexuality was only criminalised from 1872 to 1880. Post World War II, America influenced the creation of the Japanese Constitution.⁷

IMPLEMENTATION & IMPACT

Expanding research parameters: While this study focused on large cities in India and Japan, there is range to investigate similar topics in rural areas and other Asian countries.

Leadership in Action: I identified the lack of education & awareness as the primary cause of social & legal discrimination. How can educational programs be successfully implemented at a school and university level across Asian countries?

Impact: Studies such as this are essential to expand the study of non-Western gender and sexuality, analyse the experience of non-Western queer individuals within their regional context, and disrupt the colonial archive by tracing the enduring impact of colonial power.

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