

QUEER LIVES OF ASIA: BRIDGING THE PAST AND PRESENT  
OF SOUTH AND EAST ASIAN LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES



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*“Now goddess, child of Zeus, / tell the old story for our modern times. / Find the beginning.” - The Iliad,  
trans. Emily Wilson*

The Friday morning service between Leuchars and Glasgow leaves at precisely 9:22 AM, early enough that the white sun splays across the cold open fields. In two hours, the train traverses the southerly settings of Lanark and the Pentlands, crisscrossing across the snow-washed hills of Carstairs and Motherwell. Pine trees emerge every odd minute, and the winter light beats bright and blaring through the glass windows, tracing a smooth line across my forehead.

It’s early December, the end of my first semester of university. I have quickly fallen in love with St Andrews, entranced the constant thrum of history in every corner: the sprawling cathedral, the mysterious castle, the winding, cobbled streets. I’m slowly discovering my specific interests: readings on colonialism and sexuality intrigue me, but I’m eager for hands-on experience. The Laidlaw Programme seemed perfect: a rare opportunity for self-defined, mentored research. Therefore, let us return to the blinding winter morning; the train gliding westwards, and me, bent over my laptop, trying to build a project worthy of submission.

I am not alone: my mom, or *amma*, is trading ideas with me. A few elements of my project are already clear; I want to focus on sexuality and gender, and I want to work abroad. Research, at this point, is not entirely new to me: I’d worked in archives, and I’d completed an (admittedly rough) thesis-style project – 60,000 words on queer literary censorship in the Western world. However, Laidlaw offered the chance to bring together my developing interests. To be entirely honest, it was my *amma* who introduced the idea that eventually became my Laidlaw project. She mentioned the final chapter of my earlier work: a brief addendum on non-European queer histories that I had been eager to expand upon. She reminds me of this, and it kickstarts a thread that, over the following weeks, unravels into a project I will follow through the next two years.

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*“How come the past tense is always longer?” - Time is a Mother, Ocean Vuong*

*Queer Lives of Asia: Bridging the Past and Present of South and East Asian LGBTQ+ Communities*: the tongue-twistingly long title written atop my proposal. It’s now February, and the days are growing longer. I’m sitting in Northpoint, and I’ve just received my acceptance to the 2025 Laidlaw cohort. Thankfully, I manage to not drop my phone in my steaming pot of tea, but it’s a close call.

Over the past two months, I’ve consolidated my ideas, knitting together strands of interest and identity. In some ways, I think research always stems from who you are. My *amma* studies neurodegenerative

diseases; her father suffered from Alzheimer's disease. My best friend, who grew up crafting with his grandfather, now studies mechanical engineering. Similarly, it was a genuinely personal story that prefixed my project. My grandmother, or *paati*, grew up in a rural Indian village. She lived in a house within the Mylapore Kapaleeshwarer Kovil, a major temple of south India. She is also one of the most accepting and open-minded people I know.

When I came out as bisexual, my *amma* worried about how to tell my grandparents, but *paati* didn't care – date whomever, she said, but grades come first! When my best friend came out as transgender, she reacted similarly. My experience with *paati* ultimately inspired my project: I began to recognise that although India is often considered inherently ideologically conservative, queerness is not foreign to Indian culture; in fact, sexual and gender fluidity is surprisingly common in Indian mythological texts. Conservative ideology was instead often a systemic aftereffect of eighteenth-century colonial influence.

My Laidlaw project was personally inspired, but it was not a solo endeavour. My proposal, initially several interests flimsily grouped together, was refined with the help of my incredible supervisor, Dr Watson. Together, we drafted a plan: a mixed-media study utilising oral history and source-based research, conducted across the UK, India, and Japan. The title was the result of careful brainstorming. *Queer Lives of Asia*: a project that would always, at its core, be about people.

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*“Let's look on the bright side: we're having an adventure, Fezzik, and most people live and die without being as lucky as we are.” - The Princess Bride, William Goldman*

It is March. I am sitting in a shuttle amongst my cohort, holding a copy of *The Princess Bride*. We are on our way to a secret destination, where the twenty-five of us will spend our next three days exploring one of the most beautiful buildings in Scotland. Perched dramatically on the edge of the stormy, foam-white ocean, Hospitalfield was originally designed as an art residence. For me, it was where I learnt how I needed to grow. After completing a DISC assessment with my cohort, I discovered my strengths in *Conscientiousness*, defined by perfectionism and preciseness. Conversely, I was weak in *Influence*: I often struggle to work in groups, and I am often less outgoing than my peers. Communication and collaboration became my focus for the summer.

Unlike the conventional Laidlaw timeline, my project officially began abroad. The experience was truly an adventure, and I encountered a few notable challenges. For example, I struggled to schedule interviews in India, as people refused to commit to specific schedules. I learnt to work on the move: I began to carry my work bag everywhere, questions ready and phone prepped to record, whether at a cafe in Kyoto or on

a theatre staircase. I also encountered a systemic occurrence known as archival absence: put simply, very few sources on my topic existed. The primary makeup of my sources were interviews, so I learnt essential historiographical theories surrounding oral history, alongside archival theory, poststructuralism, and subaltern studies.

It is impossible to discuss the summer without speaking about the Laidlaw community. Through Active Learning Sessions, our cohort discussed our insights and shared our strengths. Additionally, the leadership seminar hosted by Dr Gardner helped me centre education and awareness within my work. My greatest insights into leadership, however, came from my interviewees: impactful, essential leaders working within their immediate communities. Leadership, I learnt, is not always about changing the world. It can be about changing your pocket of the world – about trying to have a positive impact in a five-mile radius. I spoke with parents waving pride flags, couples holding hands, and students eager to create the representation they never had. Everywhere, I saw community, and it constantly taught me that I am not working alone. Leadership is always a human effort.

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*“The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.” -  
Michel Foucault*

On my nineteenth birthday, I am on a train, headed to the National Archives to view their collection of early modern sodomy trials. This work is not for Laidlaw, but for a separate research programme in the School of History. However, the two are connected: my interest in early modern queer archives stemmed directly from my delve into archival theory during Laidlaw research.

It's December, and I'm preparing for summer. The transition from research to leadership was, in truth, a difficult one. I knew that my LIA would require a greater level of assertiveness and self-advocacy than research had. Before jumping to the work itself, however, I first had to design the project. I knew I wanted to focus on outreach, education, and sensitization, so I reached out to a Mumbai-based LGBTQ+ organisation called the Humsafar Trust. I connected with their advocacy and research teams, and we crafted a detailed project plan: a combination of workshops, educational modules, and community events. The staff at Humsafar were incredibly patient, and, with their support, I crafted a plan that was able to adapt to what Humsafar needed.

The space between summers was dedicated to growth. We grow throughout the Laidlaw programme, but the time in between research and leadership offered a unique opportunity to reflect on my progress. I realised my primary weaknesses were still in collaboration and adaptability: I still struggled with last-

minute changes, and now I would be navigating different expectations, schedules, and timezones. Approaching the summer, I knew what leadership elements I had to prioritise: consistency, clarity, and constant connection.

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*“I lift my arm and the sleeve of memory covers it.” - Anne Rice, The Vampire Armand*

Life in India is constantly moving. It’s a hamster stuck on a spinning wheel, a clock running fast, a strong current sweeping your legs from beneath you. It’s also inexplicably, inescapably hot.

May is ending, but my work has just begun. I’ve been assigned to four projects at Humsafar: a research database, sensitisation modules, an outreach survey, and an autobiography series. Additionally, I’m designing a workshop on storytelling and self-expression. Adaptability is my personal goal; in India, plans can change in seconds, and I practice creating malleable, efficient outlines. Additionally, I learn to communicate frequently and clearly. For example, the outreach survey is a group project, but we all initially work separately, which causes confusion. Eventually, my mentor suggests the entire group meet to exchange ideas, and the project runs smoothly from then. Working on the autobiographies poses a different challenge: I must give constructive, clear, and concise feedback to writers without changing their personal style. To do so, I bring together the various aspects of leadership that I have focused on: collaboration, connection, and communication.

My time at Humsafar also teaches me another essential lesson: not everything goes well. My workshop, unfortunately, is not as I planned. I realise afterwards that I should have been more intentional in advocating for my initial design; I must still develop self-advocacy. However, although the workshop wasn’t perfect, I am proud to have participated in projects which will have long-term impacts. The outreach survey will help queer individuals access financial and emotional support. The sensitisation modules will be implemented across classrooms, workplaces, and offices. The autobiographies will spread awareness of transgender stories. None of them were solo efforts, and all of them were important. In Humsafar, I was reminded continuously that leadership is about community, and I will carry that lesson with me throughout my life.

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*“Don’t adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry on the story.” -  
The Lord of the Rings, JRR Tolkien*

Where do we go from here?

In the *Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo sings a walking song when he leaves the Shire: *The Road goes ever on and on / Down from the door where it began. / Now far ahead the Road has gone, / And I must follow if I can.*

Wherever my road leads, I will carry what I have learnt from my time in Laidlaw. My experiences have made me more collaborative, confident, and flexible, and, through the Oxford Character Project, I have learnt the importance of character balance and conscious reflection. My time abroad has allowed me to work across cultures, timezones, and disciplines: I have thoroughly enjoyed the international aspect of the programme. I have discovered specific academic interests, and I have become a more detailed, adventurous, and communicative researcher. Most of all, I have loved being part of a cohort. I wrote earlier that leadership is about community, and our Laidlaw cohort has been a prime example.

Moving forwards, I plan to stay engaged with the organisation however possible. Apart from working with younger St Andrews scholars, I also plan to apply to the Laidlaw advisory board with the goal of encouraging research in the humanities and social sciences. I am eager to see what projects appear in the next few years, and I hope to continue as an active member of the Laidlaw Foundation. Laidlaw has also solidified my desire to pursue a career in academia, and I hope to centre education and representation in my future research.

I ask again, excited for the answer: Where do we go from here?

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*“Did I teach you to dream small?” - Kim Hongjoong, ATEEZ*

The Thursday midday service between Mountain View and San Francisco leaves at 1:58 PM, late enough that the summer sun peaks in the clear blue sky, streaming through the streaked glass. In just over an hour, the train will pass through the suburbs of Palo Alto and Menlo Park into the bustling city, weaving slowly across the Bay Area. I watch the houses go by, small enough to be dolls, baking under the harsh August heat.

Poetically, I am finishing this essay here, on a train – just as my Laidlaw journey began. I didn’t plan it – it’s funny how things work out! Before I end, though, I want to take a moment to thank several incredible people. Thank you firstly to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for their support and the opportunities they have provided us. Thank you to my supervisors, Dr. Elise Watson and Dr. Jacob Baxter, for their encouragement and support. I am inspired by you to pursue a graduate degree and academic career in history. Thank you as well to the St Andrews Laidlaw Team for their guidance and kindness over the past two years. A tremendous thank you goes out to the Humsafar Trust, especially Suhail, Jayakant, Suditi, and Ravendra, for your constant work to support the queer community in Mumbai and beyond; I hope to work with you again soon.

Thank you to my fellow scholars for being the most incredible cohort: it was a privilege to count myself amongst you. To my friends – Ash, Em, Lila, Celia, Henry, Niko, Maya, Aparna – thank you for holding my hand and making me laugh. To my family in India, thank you for hosting me, and I am glad I had the chance to see you all. To Amma and Appa, I always knew you believed in me, but you’ve always taught me to believe in myself as well, and without that I would not have been able to complete this programme. Thank you, and I love you. I suppose I should also thank ATEEZ for soundtracking my essay-writing process (and Appa for coming with me to their concert). Because of you all, I do not dream small.