

THE GAY MAP OF ASIA

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Much of the Far East has long recognized and even celebrated homosexuality, and its dominant Buddhist religion is markedly tolerant of same-sex love. In many larger cities, visible transsexual populations promote acceptance of gender variance. Nevertheless, traditional expectations that young people get married and raise families are as strongly enforced throughout Asia as anywhere else in the world, so same-sex romances have historically been carried on more often as discreet extramarital affairs than as central love relationships. Furthermore, countries that fell under British influence are still shaking off the effects of colonial antisodomy laws that criminalized same-sex relations. Concepts of "gayness" and LGBT rights have only recently begun to blossom.

■ QUEER POSITIVE
■ MIXED BAG
■ QUEER NEGATIVE

INDIA

OFFICIAL LINE: The British-introduced antisodomy law, which prohibits "any carnal intercourse against the order of nature," is rarely enforced but is sometimes employed to harass or blackmail gay people. There is some debate whether to scrap the law, with the home ministry arguing that it prevents "delinquent behaviour," while the health ministry wants it repealed to help control the spread of HIV. Local gay rights organization the Naz Foundation Trust is currently challenging the law in the New Delhi high court.

REALITY: Gay culture thrives in larger cities, with some mainstream clubs holding gay nights and screening LGBT movies. Cruising in parks is common. Even so, being gay carries significant social stigma, and almost all young Indians feel immense pressure to form conventional families. In 1996, Deepa Mehta's lesbian movie *Fire* sparked riots. And when one of the country's princes, Manvendra Singh Gohil, came out publicly in 2006, his parents disowned him and furious locals burned his photo. However, the family has since reunited, and Manvendra is active in India's blossoming LGBT civil rights movement.

CHINA

OFFICIAL LINE: Antisodomy laws were scrapped in 1992, a law against hooliganism—often used to persecute gay men cruising in public—was ditched in 1997, and homosexuality was removed from the official list of mental illnesses in 2001. Since 2003 sexologist Li Yinhe has proposed introducing a same-sex marriage law multiple times, so far unsuccessfully. Often stymied by the one-party state, queer activist groups manage to operate under the banner of promoting safe sex among gays.

REALITY: Chinese society, especially the younger generation, is very accepting of gays and lesbians. Beijing, Shanghai, and many provincial capitals have colorful gay scenes. The main obstacle to living openly is intense traditional family pressure. While there is online Chinese-language gay news and entertainment, queers in TV and film are almost nonexistent, with only an occasional, though usually sympathetic, reference in the press.

NEPAL

OFFICIAL LINE: Although ambiguous, laws against "unnatural" sex acts, which threaten a one-year penalty, can be interpreted as criminalizing homosexuality. Late last year Nepal's top court ruled that the government must create new laws to protect gay rights, but with a Maoist majority win in April's elections—in which several out gay candidates stood for office—it may be some time before Nepal's queers are protected by law. Police harassment is commonplace.

REALITY: Nepal remains fiercely traditional, and gays and lesbians face widespread discrimination. Many lead closeted lives, marriage and secret same-sex affairs included. The Blue Diamond Society campaigns vigorously for gay rights despite legal calls for its dissolution. In 2006 two men held a public, though not legally recognized, gay wedding.

LAOS

OFFICIAL LINE: Homosexuality is illegal in Laos, but details of the law and how it is enforced, if at all, are unclear, according to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. Since 2005 the government has earned brownie points by actively promoting HIV awareness and tolerance for those with the disease.

REALITY: Lao society is fairly open-minded, and discreet gay and lesbian couples are largely accepted. Gay-friendly bars and cafés have sprung up in recent years in the larger towns of Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

SRI LANKA

OFFICIAL LINE: A law prohibiting gay male sex—which in 1995 was amended to more broadly address lesbian sex acts as well—carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison, a legacy from British colonial days. For at least 50 years no prosecutions have been brought under this legislation, but police can use the law to target gay men and women with violence, extortion, and blackmail.

REALITY: As in India, gays and lesbians are stigmatized and lead closeted lives. To counter this, several vibrant local LGBT lobby groups are very vocal in battling the government and often-homophobic press. One of the most active groups, Equal Ground, organizes an annual LGBT summer pride festival with parties, shows, and a film festival.

THAILAND

OFFICIAL LINE: Gay sex was decriminalized in 1956, and in 2002 the government's ministry of health made a statement under pressure from a gay rights organization clarifying that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. Three years later the military followed suit, clearing the way for gays and transsexuals, originally barred from service, to be conscripted.

REALITY: Thai society is fairly tolerant of LGBT people, and gay and transsexual characters are prominent in media and entertainment. A queer party scene is already widespread and flourishing, gay civil rights awareness is growing, and annual gay pride parades are held in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Phuket.

WE ASKED OUR READERS: WHICH OF THESE ASIAN COUNTRIES WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO VISIT? YOU SAID...

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Thailand | 24% |
| Japan | 15% |
| Philippines | 11% |
| Vietnam | 10% |
| China | 9% |
| India | 9% |
| South Korea | 5% |
| Cambodia | 4% |
| Laos | 4% |
| Nepal | 4% |
| Singapore | 3% |
| Sri Lanka | 1% |
| Other | 1% |

SOUTH KOREA

OFFICIAL LINE: Homosexuality is not criminalized, but President Lee Myung-Bak has called gays “abnormal” and has spoken against same-sex marriage. Conservative Christian and business groups lobbied to remove sexual minorities from a proposed landmark antidiscrimination bill; the ensuing uproar from human rights groups has caused the legislation to be shelved. Lee’s presidency doesn’t leave much hope for a reversal. Article 92 of the military penal code, which classifies same-sex relations as “sexual harassment,” carries a maximum one-year sentence.

REALITY: South Korea’s traditional Confucian society makes it very difficult to be openly gay. Since the ‘90s the country’s LGBT movement has become increasingly vocal, with out lesbian politician Choi Hyun-sook standing for national assembly in April, though she lost. Seoul and other big cities have dozens of gay venues, the online community is “flaming,” and gay movies and LGBT film festivals are slowly gaining acceptance.

VIETNAM

OFFICIAL LINE: No laws explicitly ban gay sex, but a “public morality law” is occasionally used to harass. In 2002 state-run media called homosexuality a “social evil,” connecting it with drugs and prostitution, and called for it to be banned, yet a few months earlier the gay thriller *A World Without Women*, penned by Bui Anh Tam, won a major literary prize that was partly awarded by the ministry for public security. A local TV series followed in 2007.

REALITY: Society is highly traditional; most gays and lesbians are pressured into conventional marriages, and the autocratic government discourages activism. Ho Chi Minh City, though, has a fairly active gay-friendly bar and restaurant scene. While many people have been taught that homosexuality is a mental illness, attitudes seem to be changing. In a 2007 survey of Ho Chi Minh City teens, 80% agreed there’s nothing wrong with being gay.

JAPAN

OFFICIAL LINE: While Japan has no law against same-sex relations, there is also no nationwide antidiscrimination legislation. Nor are same-sex unions recognized. In 2007, Japan’s first out gay politician, lesbian Kanako Otsuji, representing the opposition Democratic Party, lost in national elections.

REALITY: Japanese society has long been accepting of gay sex—even between Buddhist monks—which at one time was considered the “purest” form of love. Nowadays the Japanese are not so open, with many succumbing to parental pressure to raise a conventional family. But a thriving society exists behind the scenes, especially in big cities, where you will find many bars, saunas, and specialty pickup clubs. Tokyo and Sapporo both hold annual gay pride festivals, while several gay and transgender celebrities appear regularly on television. Queer magazines—in particular, homoerotic manga that appeals to both gay and straight female readers—are widely available.

TAIWAN

OFFICIAL LINE: Often cited as Asia’s most progressive nation for gays, Taiwan has been discussing a proposal for same-sex unions since 2003 and has antidiscrimination laws protecting gays in both school and the workplace. The Domestic Violence Prevention Act addresses same-sex couples. A Presbyterian church ordained the country’s—and possibly Asia’s—first openly gay Christian minister in 2004.

REALITY: While Taiwan’s society appears on the whole gay-friendly—a 2006 survey by the National Union of Taiwan Women’s Associations found that 75% of Taiwanese adults view same-sex relations as acceptable—many gays and lesbians keep a low profile. Parents pressure their children to get married, and there have been reports of police harassment. LGBT social life is vibrant, with dozens of options in major cities. Taipei annually attracts over 10,000 people to its pride march.

HONG KONG

OFFICIAL LINE: Since decriminalizing gay sex in 1991, which had previously carried a maximum life sentence, Hong Kong has expanded gay rights. In 2006 the government informally equalized the age of consent, but it has so far resisted calls to include gays and lesbians in antidiscrimination laws and to recognize same-sex unions.

REALITY: Society is still very conservative—a 2006 radio report on gay lovers caused an uproar—and the region’s Catholic Church is vocal in opposing gay rights. Despite this, the city hosts a vibrant social scene and supports a slew of LGBT lobbying groups. Every year hundreds of protesters march the streets to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, and the region’s best and longest-running queer film festival is held there annually in November.

CAMBODIA

OFFICIAL LINE: Though homosexuality is not criminalized, there are no legal protections. Former king Norodom Sihanouk famously said in 2004 that Cambodia should legalize same-sex marriage, saying God “loves a wide range of tastes.” Sihanouk, however, had no constitutional power. In contrast, last year Prime Minister Hun Sen said he was cutting ties with his adopted daughter because she is a lesbian, yet at the same time paradoxically urging respect toward homosexuals.

REALITY: While there is no explicit gay movement, Cambodians are fairly tolerant of discreet gays and lesbians. There are occasional reports of police harassment. There are small gay scenes in Siem Reap and the capital, Phnom Penh, which also boasts an annual gay pride festival.

SINGAPORE

OFFICIAL LINE: Under section 377A, same-sex relations carry a maximum two-year prison sentence, although the government said it would not prosecute acts conducted in private. In 2005, reversing a pro-gay business policy, the government banned Nation, an annual LGBT beach party that attracted around 8,000 revelers in its heyday. And in April of this year a cable TV station was fined \$7,200 for showing two women kissing.

REALITY: In contrast to its conservative government, Singapore has probably the most vibrant gay and lesbian party and social scene in Asia, including bars, saunas, lobby groups, networking events, and theater productions. Fridae.com, a pan-Asia gay empowerment news Web resource, is based in Singapore.

THE PHILIPPINES

OFFICIAL LINE: Gay sex is not criminalized, but because the Catholic Church has considerable influence on the government, efforts to pass antidiscrimination legislation have so far failed. Religious-based opposition to same-sex unions is so strong that several preemptory bills aimed at stalling any move to legalize gay marriage have been filed in congress.

REALITY: Queer nightlife in the capital city of Manila, where a pride festival is held annually, is augmented by a feisty gay rights movement. The influence of the Catholic Church and cultural pressure to be macho mean that some gays face discrimination in daily life. For example, last year the police force warned gay officers they would be sacked if they “swayed their hips” while on duty.