



Singapore

by Andrew Matzner

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The Republic of Singapore, a tiny island nation located in Southeast Asia between Malaysia and Indonesia, is today one of the world's most prosperous and cosmopolitan countries, on the cutting edge of economic development. At the same time, Singapore is steeped in traditional, conservative Asian values.

The interchange between old and new has greatly affected Singaporeans who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered, as discrimination and oppression are slowly giving way to more relaxed attitudes and greater personal freedom, though the pace of change is frustratingly slow.

Cultural Issues

Bought by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 and developed into a bustling British trading colony in the nineteenth century, Singapore became independent in 1965. Led by Lee Kuan Yew, who served as Prime Minister from 1959 until 1990, Singapore focused on electronics and manufacturing, and emerged as an economic powerhouse by the 1980s. A controversial leader, Lee enforced strict governmental social controls and espoused the virtues of hard work and discipline, while disdaining as "Western" the idea of human rights.

Today, Singapore has a population of over four and a half million people. Chinese make up the dominant ethnic group, followed by sizable minorities of Malays and Indians. Public policy and law, as well as a vocal Anglican clergy, continue to reflect the island's colonial British legacy. However, traditional Confucian, and, to a lesser extent, Muslim ideals also highly influence people's attitudes and social mores.

Singaporean expressions of sexuality and gender have, until recently, been shaped and constrained by values common to much of Asia. These include the expectation (and in a sense, demand) that people marry; the imperative to bear children, who in turn assume the vital social role of tending to older family members, living and dead; and the privileging of group cohesion and family harmony at the expense of individual interests and personal rights. These values are created and maintained by a Confucian ethic that demands obedience and submission to higher authority (whether children to parents, wife to husband, or citizen to ruler) for the sake of social stability.

However, beginning in the 1990s, traditional ways of thinking and behaving were increasingly subject to challenge, not only in Singapore but throughout Asia. In Singapore, this cultural shift gained momentum with the emergence of a prosperous middle class. Newly acquired financial power; increased exposure to Western and Asian ideas and images via films, television, and the internet; travel abroad; and educating offspring at Western universities: all these factors have led more and more (particularly younger) Singaporeans to question the status quo.

For those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, this questioning has resulted in a push for community organization, a desire for greater individual rights, and the proliferation of glbtq-friendly public venues. At the same time, these developments have been tempered by a recognition of the need to

tread carefully under the watch of a repressive government that is notoriously suspicious of change.

In the Life on the Island

Homosexual relations between men are illegal in Singapore. Section 377 (A) of the Penal Code states that sexual relations (termed "gross indecency") between men, even if consensual and in private, are punishable by up to two years in prison. (The code does not mention sexual contact between women.) Court cases are decided not by juries, but by judges. Accordingly, the government possesses a great amount of legal power.

Traditionally, because of the emphasis on filial piety and the importance of producing offspring, people interested in same-sex relations had to look for them as a supplement to their marriages. Today, due to increased economic opportunity and freedom, more and more men and women are forgoing marriage and living independently. However, those who decide not to marry must cope within a society that, to a large extent, still follows and endorses conservative values.

The "gay scene" has long been centered around Chinatown. However, since the mid-1990s entrepreneurs have realized that gay men, who are believed to have a large amount of disposable income, represent a lucrative market. Hence, the gay scene continues to grow, and the establishment of gay and gay-friendly businesses and venues shows no signs of slowing down.

However, it is vital to stress that the discretion of such businesses is what allows the government to "tolerate" them. Businesses typically do not openly advertise that they are gay-owned or gay-friendly. The government seems to prefer that these businesses be located in a discrete area, a gay ghetto, rather than be integrated throughout the city. In order not to provoke governmental interference or crackdowns, members of the gay and lesbian community have themselves practiced a great deal of discretion. There is little open celebration of homosexuality or confrontation with authorities.

Indeed, the government keeps a close rein on gay activism on the island. For example, it denied recognition as an official organization to the gay rights group People Like Us, whose goal is to raise Singaporean awareness concerning gay and bisexual issues, when it was created in 1993 and when it re-applied for recognition in 1997 and 2004.

In March 2004 the government rejected an application for a forum on gay-related issues open to the public on the grounds that such an open discussion would be contrary to the public good. Moreover, the government has forced a gay-themed publication, *Manazine*, to censor its contents and keep its distribution limited to specific locations within the gay community.

However, change is occurring, though slowly. For instance, Singapore is home to Fridae.com, a substantial, highly informative website that reports on the Asian (in particular Southeast Asian) glbtq community. And in 2003 government officials--with little fanfare--let it be known that they would no longer be enforcing a policy that had prevented openly gay people from entering civil service.

However, the new policy does not mean that openly gay and lesbian workers will no longer experience discrimination or negative attitudes in the workplace. Rather, it means that the government has taken a position that it neither endorses nor persecutes gay and lesbian employees.

Transgenderism

In spite of conservative attitudes, Singapore stands out from most other countries because of several transgender-friendly policies. Postoperative transsexuals are allowed to change their name and gender on official documents, excepting birth certificates. In January 1996, the government announced that postoperative transsexuals would be permitted to marry people of the opposite sex.

However, there are neither laws nor policies that protect transgendered Singaporeans against discrimination in hiring or in the workplace itself.

The Singaporean drag scene enjoyed some international recognition with the release of Yon Fan's film *Bugis Street* (1994), which made its way into film festivals across the globe. The film, set in 1960s Singapore, explores the lives of drag queens living in a residential hotel.

Thus, Singapore is a society rife with contradictions, as the influences of commerce, globalization, and the mass media interact (and often collide) with conservative societal, familial, and filial notions of propriety. There is no doubt that people in Singapore's glbtq community experience more freedom and opportunities today than they have in the past. But the reality remains that they do not yet enjoy equal rights and protections under the law and are, therefore, quite vulnerable in a society with a history of authoritarian rule.

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