

Island Queerness: A Study on The Experiences of Taiwanese Queer People

Ryan Bishop and Spencer Zhang

Objectives

Through semi-structured interviews and observation of social life in the city, we will investigate how Taiwanese cultural trends, societal values, and laws shape Taiwanese queer people's experiences of their own queerness, and their decisions about visibility in various spaces (family, school, workplace, public) more specifically. We aim to document and analyze diverse perspectives about the future of queer Taiwan, one of the fastest growing in acceptance societies in East Asia, and to contribute to increasing the visibility of queer experiences, struggles, and activism. Our work will enrich the existing (as yet, small) body of literature on the topic, in the form of papers, academic and non-academic presentations, and interactive social media content. The proposed research and research products will lay the foundation for more in-depth and engaging future work on above mentioned objectives.

Description

Our research to date suggests that Taiwan is the East Asian country with one of the fastest developing societies in terms of LGBTQI+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex) visibility, acceptance, and justice. Taiwan has a remarkable number of queer activist organizations which focus on intersections of identities as well. This year, vocal same-sex marriage supporter Tsai Ing-wen became the first female president of Taiwan. Taipei's Pride Parade is the biggest in East Asia, and commercials supporting acceptance of Tongzhi people (as LGBT+ people are referred to in Taiwan; means "comrade") appear with increasing frequency.

Throughout its history as an independent from China nation, Taiwan has been trying to distinguish itself from mainland China politically, socially and culturally by portraying itself as more progressive. In the literature we surveyed, however, many scholars note the existence of a misalignment between the liberal front Taiwan puts on and the pervasiveness of traditional gender norms and expectations, as well as the way laws do not reflect the supposed acceptance of Tongzhi people.

Taiwan is a unique place where tradition and the formation of an independent identity intertwine to create one of the most progressive societies in a largely traditionally conservative region. Our research will look at the way Tongzhi people view the rapid change of the last decade and their own queerness in a Taiwanese and a global context, and seek to find out what Taiwanese Tongzhi people want for their community's future. It will embody OWU's liberal arts and interdisciplinary tradition and translate it into in-depth study and service to minoritized peoples. This research promises to make an impact.

Methods and approach in the field

Informed by the personal experiences of the researchers and by extensive review of published literature and reflections and products of LGBT+ activism in Taiwan, this project will be realized through semi-structured interviews with queer Taiwanese people in Taipei (the capital). We are currently in contact with multiple LGBT+ organizations (Bi The Way, Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline, The Center For Study of Sexualities, Taiwan Alliance Promoting Same Sex Partnerships, Taiwan Transgender Butterfly Garden, GinGin Gay Bookstore) who are willing to meet us in May 2017, and refer us to additional interviewees. We are awaiting responses from other organizations as well. Closer to the time of our travel, we will be creating a “meet up” on websites where queer people in Taipei organize friendly gatherings for themselves, to help expand our interviewee pool. In addition, we have prepared a recruitment post to share on queer Taiwanese forums closer to our time of travel. Our background research and advice from organizations and researchers suggest that we will have good success recruiting interviewees on site too, as well as gathering plenty of diverse observations on queer life in the Red House district.

We plan to arrive in Taiwan on May 15 (departure from Columbus is on May 14, arrival on May 15 due to time zones) and move into The Longstay Hotel in the Red House district, Taipei’s Tongzhi friendly district. On May 16, we will meet with activists from Bi the Way to learn more about their organization and begin our interviews. We plan to spend two weeks in the city and leave on May 31. Throughout those two weeks, we will conduct up to two interviews per day in a space that is comfortable for the interviewees (most often in public or semi-public spaces in the Red House district). The specific time and dates of the interviews will be scheduled with the participants closer to the time of our travels. With permission from the interviewees, we will record either on camera or with a sound recorder, and loosely follow the questionnaire we have composed to accommodate a comfortable, natural flow of the interview. Between interviews, we will also speak to employees at cafes, saunas, shops, and bars in the Red House district to record anecdotal information about the way those districts function as queer social spaces, and the way the Tongzhi movement mobilizes and grows. We will begin translating our interviews and composing preliminary analyses while in Taipei, and will do so in earnest after our return. Concrete information will be tallied on factors such as age, origin, sexual and romantic orientation and gender identity, and occupation, as well as degree of visibility, positive or negative visions for the future, and others. Our findings will not be conclusive, but will provide a close glimpse into the reality of many Taiwanese Tongzhi people and enhance the multilayered visibility of their movement.

Evaluation

The results of the interviews and our observations will be analyzed within the context of what we already know about the sociopolitical climate for queer people in Taiwan. The information will be summarized, integrated into analyses, and/or quoted directly, and will be published online, with permission, to websites such as Academia.edu (using its feedback tool), and on social media.

We will prepare a presentation for the OWU community, and prepare an abstract for submission to the annual conference of a relevant professional association (e.g., Association for Asian Studies’s Midwest Regional Conference). Those will also allow the OWU

community and communities across the US to reflect on the differences between the Taiwanese, the American and the global climates for LGBT+ people. Depending on interest from the activist groups we are working with, we would certainly be interested to prepare Chinese translations of our research outputs. Finally, the video footage we gather over the course of our research could be edited into a documentary short film.

Personal Statement

The roots of this project trace back to my interest and appreciation for the culture and history of East and Southeast Asian countries. The project is also strongly shaped by my own queer identity. As part of my East Asian Studies minor, in the Spring of 2015 I took Dr. Ji Young Choi's class on Comparative Politics of Asia. In the class, we learned about the politics of China and Taiwan in a historical and contemporary context, and the complex political and cultural dynamics struck me as very interesting. For our final project, I had decided to write a research paper surveying the current sociopolitical climate for LGBT+ people in either Korea or Taiwan. Although my paper ultimately focused on South Korea, the preliminary research on Taiwan that I did informed my choice to focus this research proposal on Taiwan. Last semester, after over 8 months of preparation, I submitted a TiPIT proposal on the same topic with Seoul, Korea as the research location. After its rejection, I was encouraged to improve and refine the project and submit a new proposal. With Spencer's background as a queer Chinese person, I decided that an even better direction for this research would be to explore Taiwan, an island with a unique history and present reflected in the environment for Tongzhi people.

Queer rights and studying the lives of queer people is personally important to me as a queer person who comes from a very unaccepting country. Through my East Asian Studies minor and my interest in East Asian art, entertainment and culture, I've gained a great deal of multidimensional knowledge about the countries in the region, including their history, religions, mythology and literature, and languages. My interest is especially strong when it comes to the way all these different aspects of East Asian countries' background shape queer people's lives.

In preparing for the project, Spencer and I surveyed all available English-language literature dealing with LGBT+ issues in Taiwan, as well as online accounts of queer people living there, newspaper publications, online guides to queer Taiwan and its history, as well as the pages of all Taiwanese queer organizations we could find. Since we realize that the perspective of foreigners on queer Taiwan is different and important details could have been lost in translation, Spencer also perused Chinese websites with a similar focus to supplement our understanding. We reached out to over twenty queer organizations and many activists, and prepared a questionnaire and a consent form for participants. We believe that a combination of qualitative and empirical research approaches are most appropriate in our research, where the empirical part will take into account demographics and certain "yes/no" questions, while the qualitative portion will be focusing on the individual stories, and understandings.

I am currently in my third semester of Chinese language studies at the University, and am in a class on ethnographic documentary filmmaking. I am ready to undertake this project as a potential foundation to a larger comparative project investigating queer issues in neighboring

East Asian countries. Furthermore, I remain committed to continuously looking for ways to contribute to activist projects in Taiwan.

Our research is supported by the Chair of the East Asian Studies department at OWU, Dr. Jim Peoples. The research methods and design were developed in collaboration with Dr. Nick Crane, visiting professor of Cultural Geography in the 2015-16 school year.

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Item	Estimated cost	Source
Flights	\$2,116 Roundtrip, Economy class Port Columbus - Chicago - Taipei (Taoyuan Airport) May 14 (Departure) - May 31 (Return)	Skyscanner.com Justfly.com
Housing	\$1,722 The Longstay Hotel for two single rooms for 15 nights; three star hotel suitable for long stays	Agoda.com
Meals	\$700 Plan for inexpensive meals at \$20 per person per day +/- \$100	Numbeo , PriceofTravel for Taiwan
Transportation	\$70 \$1 per person per subway ride in case we need to travel to meet participants; estimates for taxi fares, if more transport needed	Go2tw
Sound Recorder and Video Camera	\$0 Will rent from Media Center	
Pre-Paid Phone Card	\$32 Pre-paid card with Taiwan Mobile (to contact organizations and interviewees)	Taiwan Mobile
Emergencies and unpredicted expenses	\$60 \$10 per person per week;	
Total	\$4,700	

Itinerary

May 14 – Departure from Port Columbus

May 15 – Arrival in Taipei, check in to Longstay Hotel in the Red House District

May 16 – Meeting with activists from Bi The Way and beginning of interviews

May 17-May 30 – up to 2 interviews per day, supplemented by observation of life in the Red House District, and talks with employees at local cafes, bars, resource centers, etc; at least 1 hour per day spent on translations and reflections on findings

May 31 – departure from Taipei