



# Tradewinds

October 2008

Monthly Newsletter

## Gay Life in Asian Countries *Submitted by Roy Liebman, Publications Chair*

As in all countries of the world official policy on homosexuality may be one thing and actual gay life another---even if it has to be underground. There are still places in the world where homosexuality is a crime punishable by the maximum penalty. This is a rundown of policy and reality in Asian countries.

### CAMBODIA

There are neither laws protecting gay rights in Cambodia nor discriminatory laws. Gay life remains largely underground.

### CHINA

Laws relating to homosexuality have largely been eliminated in China, including the one against "hooliganism" under which many gays were persecuted. 2001 was the year it was removed from the list of mental illnesses. While China remains a conservative society, and the pressure to marry is strong, there is a fairly vibrant gay life in the big cities. There have been a few gay-themed films coming out of the country but not officially sanctioned.

### HONG KONG

A former British colony, in the past Hong Kong prescribed heavy penalties for gay sex, up to a life term. It was decriminalized in the early 1990s and gay rights were somewhat expanded. The Catholic Church is very vocal in its anti-gay stance. There is an active gay life and a long-running gay festival presents films annually.

### INDIA

During the British Raj anti-sodomy laws were passed (because, as every knows, there are no British gays). This is still on the books although it's rarely enforced any more. However, it has led to abuses like blackmail and there is now an effort underway in the Indian high court to challenge the law. The reality is that gay life is flourishing although India is a conservative society in which young men and women feel strong familial pressure to marry.

### JAPAN

Japan neither has laws against homosexuality nor legal protections of gay rights. Historically, Japan has been more accepting of homosexuality than it seems to be now, with pressure to marry very strong. There is a vibrant gay life and the animated manga phenomenon is much involved with strong homoeroticism, especially picturing very young men.

### KOREA (NORTH)

Like everything else in this isolated country nothing is known about gay activity but obviously it is very deep underground (with the permafrost). If there was an official line in homosexuality it would probably be, like Iran's, that there are no gays in the country.

## KOREA (SOUTH)

The President of Korea has called gays "abnormal" and there is a strong Christian evangelical movement that opposes gay rights. The military penal code actually classifies gay sex as "harassment". However homosexuality is not legally criminalized. There is some open gay life in the big cities and it seems to be growing bolder.

## LAOS

Homosexuality is illegal but the Lao people appear to be friendly to the idea of homosexuality as long as it's not too open. Larger cities have a few discreet gay meeting places.

## NEPAL

There are laws against so-called "unnatural" behavior and they have been used to harass gays in Nepal. Penalties are light. In the recent elections several out gays ran for office. In this ultra-conservative society there is discrimination and pressure to conform to "normal" standards. A couple of years ago two men went through a public marriage ceremony, although it was not deemed to be legal. The reality is that there are many closeted (and married) gays in Nepal.

## PHILIPPINES

There are no anti-gay laws on the books but the strength of the Catholic Church is considerable in the Philippines. There is a strong gay scene, especially in Manila, and a gay pride festival is held annually. The culture of machismo frowns on effeminate behavior to the extent that policemen have been warned they could be fired for swaying their hips.

## SINGAPORE

Gay sexual acts are officially subject to a two-year prison term but the law is rarely enforced for private acts. The government has banned parades and fined a television station that aired a program which showed two women kissing. In reality there is a very vibrant gay scene in this authoritarian country.

## SRI LANKA

Since the British were colonial masters here (the former Ceylon) homosexuality is illegal, including lesbianism. Long prison terms up to ten years are on the books but not enforced often. There have been numerous incidents of blackmail and violence. There is some GLBT activity in trying to get the laws softened or eliminated but gay life is pretty much underground.

## TAIWAN

Of all the Asian countries Taiwan is the most advanced as far as legal protections for gays. The first openly gay Christian minister in Asia was ordained there. The country's lawmakers have been discussing legalization of gay marriage, but pressure to marry the opposite sex is strong. There is a thriving gay community and a large gay pride parade in Taipei each year.

## THAILAND

Gay sex has been decriminalized since the mid-1950s but it was not until 2002 that it was declared not to be a mental disorder. Since 2005 gays have been allowed to serve openly in the military. As we all know, gay life flourishes in Thailand, including a large transsexual community, and gay pride parades are held in several cities. There are an increasing number of gay-themed films coming out of the country.

## VIETNAM

There are no laws specifically addressing homosexuality but there is one on public morality that is used against gays. It has been dubbed a "social evil" like drugs or prostitution. In a recent survey of teenagers some 80% agreed there was nothing morally wrong about being gay. Despite official government displeasure toward gays there is somewhat of an emerging gay scene.

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**Social & Potluck**  
Sunday, October 5th  
Guest Speaker: Andre' Ting

**Subject: " The founding of Asian Pacific Lesbians and Gays,  
The FIRST Gay Asian Organization in Southern California"**

**Click here for more information**

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## A/PGF's Halloween Costume Party - Saturday, Oct 25th



You are invited to the A/PGF Halloween Costume Party on Saturday October 25th starting at 8pm until ???

It's going to be a wicked evening of fun, games, and entertainment. Come in your most outrageous costume, hottest leather-man outfit, or sexiest drag for a chance to be the winner of the best costume contest.

Entertainment for the night will be provided by a cast of DIVAS who will be performing the best musical review for the party guests.

Meet new men and indulge in a night of bacchanal celebration. There will be a bonfire in the backyard for the flame worshippers. There will also be a dark and scary dungeon with chains to tie down all the naughty boys.

Beverages, chips, and snacks will be available.

Cost will be \$5 for APGF Members, \$10 for non-members  
(NOT A MEMBER? - No problem: Join that night and your admission is FREE).

PLEASE RSVP IF YOU ARE ATTENDING via the Evite Invitation. .

If you don't feel like driving home after the party, you are welcome to crash overnight. Let us know in advance and bring your sleeping bag.

The location for this event will be provided in the Evite!

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## "Love of Siam" catches on in Taiwan

Why would five Taiwanese dig into their savings of \$31,000 US, just to screen Thai flick *The Love of Siam* in theatres in Taiwan?

It was a warm Christmas in Bangkok last year. Taiwanese tourist Kyan Zheng and friends decided to catch a movie there and chanced upon *The Love of Siam*.

"I could relate to the movie as if it were telling my own story," he said when the movie opened in Taipei on Sept 19.

The Thai film, which combines family drama and a teenage romance between two boys (played by Witwisit Hiranyawongkul and Mario Maurer who is of Thai-German heritage) who had lost touch but reunited in later years, touched Zheng so much that he and four other friends decided to pull money together to make it into the big silver screen.

They had to invest US\$15,000 to repurchase copyrights from a local movie distributor, who decided not to release the movie on concerns of a sluggish box office market.

Generally, major Hollywood productions would fare well in Taiwan, despite a ticket price of 8.50. There are a handful independent theaters that screen non-mainstream foreign titles, including those on LGBT issues, but box office takings tend to be unpredictable and typically lacklustre.

These five friends – who happen to be colleagues – are determined to make the movie accessible to the public. They made use of their network in their advertising firm, pitched proposals to different movie houses, produced promo billboards and wrote publicity material for the screening.

They had even managed to fly actor Witwisit Hiranyawongkul and director Chookiat Sakveerakul from Bangkok to hold a meet-the-fans autograph session last Saturday on Sept 20.

"It is all hard work... We are all inexperienced in distributing a movie, but it is worth it," said Wendy Chen, one of the five who have brought the film to theatres.

But their efforts have not gone unnoticed.

Three hundred toys, replicas of a toy featured in the movie and remade for Taiwan's premiere, were nearly sold out before the first screening. Over 1,000 tickets were also pre-sold in the first week, an achievement considering Thai flicks aren't really crowd pullers in Taiwan.

Now, box office is their least consideration as these five young executives are ready to part with some of the investment – if not all.



Top of page: Billboards in Taipei. Above: Press coverage of the movie and scenes from the movie.

"We knew that some have watched the movie on the Internet, but we want to make it into the big silver screens for public viewing," Chen said.

Opening on 146 screens in Thai cinemas last November, *The Love of Siam* was the No. 1 film at the Thai box office that weekend and dominated domestic film awards last year. It won Best Picture category in all major awards: Thailand National Film Association Awards, Starpics Magazine's Starpics Awards, Bangkok Critics Assembly Awards and Star Entertainment Awards.

*Bangkok Post* commentator, Nattakorn Devakula, said the film contained important lessons for Thai society. "The point that the film attempts to teach viewers – and a largely conservative Thai society – is that love is an evolved form of emotional attachment that transcends sexual attraction of the physical form."

When director Chookiat (flanked by actor Witwisit) met fans in Taipei, he told the audience what gave birth to the tear-jerking title: "I wanted to find out what is love. And if two boys have feelings for each other, does their love count?"

The two and a half hour story intended to connect to the audience by also touching on the love of family, parents and siblings, he said.

Indeed, one moviegoer was moved by the film's depiction of "love in all forms."

"I saw the music video in Thailand and it aroused my curiosity of the movie," Lin, a 25-year-old, told *Fridae* while queuing up to get the poster autographed in Ximending – a hip-and-happening teenage hangout in downtown Taipei.

So when he learned of the movie premiere in Taiwan, he was eager to purchase tickets to feel the big screen impact.

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Check our Event Calendar on our website [www.apgf.org](http://www.apgf.org) for complete details on any of our events

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