

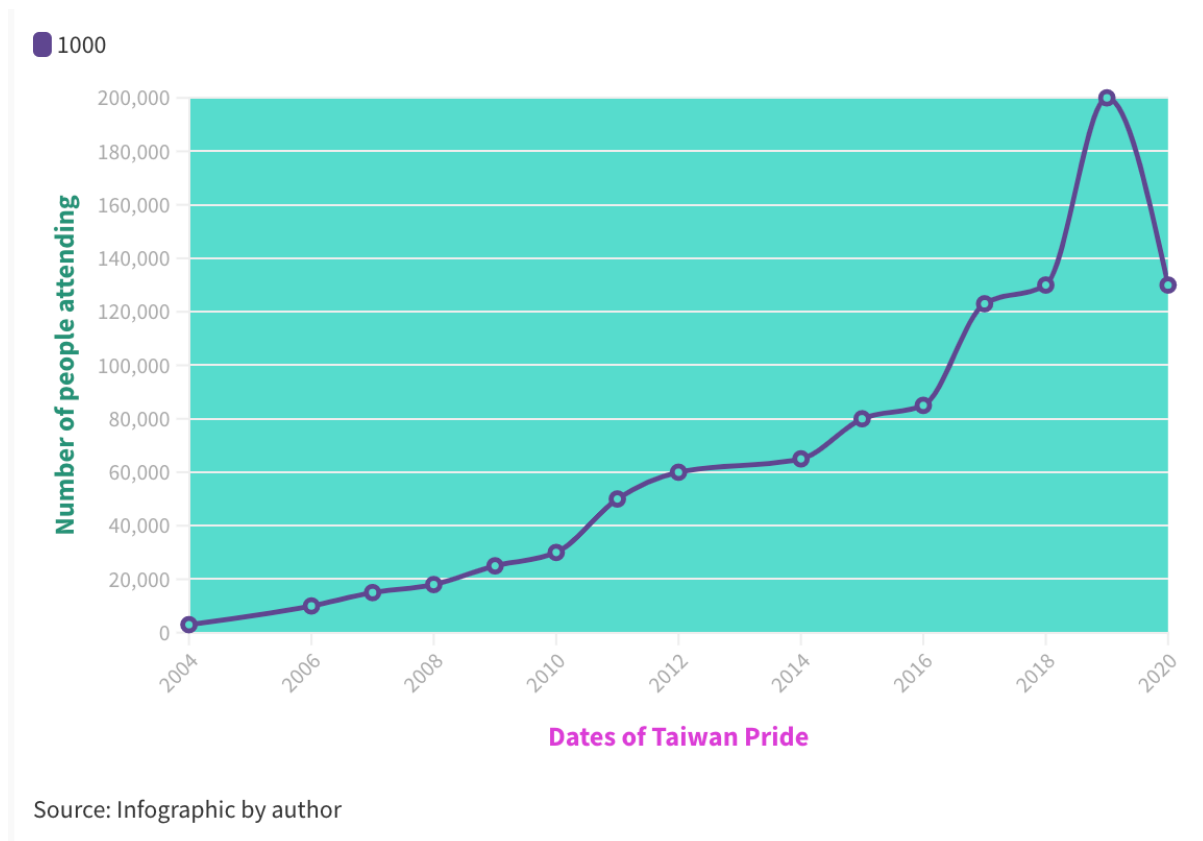


CULTURAL IDENTITY & QUEERNESS: THE BEAUTY OF EXPRESSION IN TAIWAN

Drag queens, directors and dancers: meet the artists dressing up Taiwan's diverging cultural scene

In Taipei's oldest district, Wanhua – a lively area filled with historic buildings and temples, sits Café Dalida. You can hear it from far away – loud, aggressive and packed. It is one of Taipei's most popular gay bars, hosting gloriously extravagant drag nights on Fridays and Saturdays.

What was once a discreet and forbidden underground queer culture has exploded visibly onto the streets of Taipei in the last decade. Taiwan's gay pride is now the largest in East Asia, reaching crowds of 200,000 in 2019.



The growing size of Taiwan's Pride until Covid-19, 2021's event was cancelled due to the pandemic.

A TURN OF HISTORY

This is the same country that 35 years ago came out of an oppressive, military dictatorship. Decades of democratisation and social activism have turned Taiwan into a beacon of cultural progression and liberal values in East Asia.

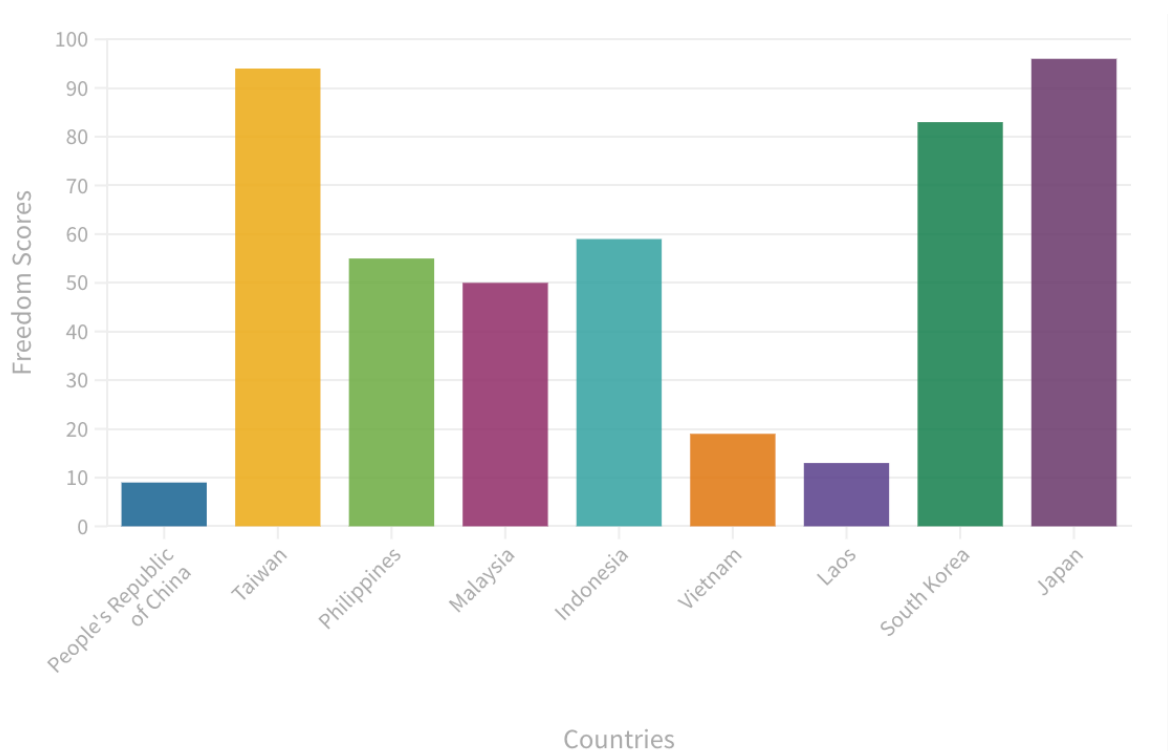
“the symbol of modernity”

It now scores 94 in [Freedom Houses 2021 survey](#), above that of the UK, United States and far higher than most of its neighbouring countries.

In 2019, Taiwan's legalisation of same sex marriage was a distinct political and cultural moment for the country.

“It is the manifestation of Taiwan’s liberal values and the legislation is the result of Taiwan’s democratisation and liberalisation, and the symbol of modernity,” according to Dr Bi-Yu Chang, Deputy Director of the Centre of Taiwan Studies at SOAS.

Yet, it was also the result of a long battle hard fought by the LGBT community. None more so than activist Chia Chia-Wei. The sixty-four-year-old, who made TIME’s [100 most influential people in the world](#) in 2020, began campaigning for marriage equality in 1986. For many, he is a living, breathing example that change can and will happen.



Source: [Data from Freedom House](#), Infographic by author

Freedom Index Scores of Taiwan and its neighbouring countries

Rethinking Taiwan, rethinking gender

Central to these waves of cultural and political change has been art, according to Taiwanese artist-filmmaker Su Hui-Yu.

His critically acclaimed work explores invites audiences to reflect on modern Taiwan– a country that is “very diverse and unstable,” he says.

He calls his method “re-shooting”. “I revisit and remake specifically historical scenes/events/films/arts which were forbidden, misunderstood, forgot, or ahead of the time.”

Sexual, daring and surreal, his art is an open rebellion against the conservative and patriarchal society of 1980s Taiwan in which he grew up. “It’s a natural reaction, and of course it is also a political reaction, if you have been in a world of spiritual forbiddance,” says Hui-Yu.

His most recent work is *Women’s Revenge*, which clashes influences of the exploitation of women in 80s movies with questions of power and sexuality.

“I’ve always had the desire to talk about these kind of issues,” he says. “I believe gender politics is for everyone, not just for specific groups”.

Taipei’s drag world

The explosion of drag in recent years in Taiwan has been transformative for empowering its LGBT community, but also culturally as “it opens up conversations around gender and sexuality”, [Popcorn](#) explains.

The New Zealand-born performer moved to Taiwan for love, and then fell in love with the drag scene.



“It’s definitely a haven for the LGBT community,” Popcorn says. “It’s such a free place in terms of civil society and openness.”

“Drag is not serious and scary but something to be **delighted by and interested in.**”

For [Kimmy Mesula](#)– drag is also very personal, it’s about her own gender expression as a trans woman.

“It’s so much more to me than exaggerated styling, exaggerated hair, clothing and makeup”, she says. “When I’m a drag queen and I see myself in the mirror, I really think wow this woman is so beautiful.”

Young rebels

And yet, the rapid socio-political changes in the last decade have caused the country to rethink what is ‘Taiwan’ or what does it mean to be ‘Taiwanese’.

L.A. Chen and his dance collective is part of this, communicating ideas and helping the international community learn more about Taiwan.

“Politics is everywhere in our daily life,” he says referencing the growing influence of the People’s Republic of China on Taiwan.

“I think the more they [the PRC] bully us, the more we wanna fight back. This is exact the reason that triggers us to stop thinking like our parents.

“We try to define ourselves as an independent country.”

This is a sentiment, Dr Bi-Yun Chang says, that has shifted drastically since the 1990s “from being Chinese, to both Taiwanese and Chinese, to today’s majority of people identifying themselves as Taiwanese.”



An island of wonder and rebellious spirit

This year, Café Delida continues for its 16th year, whilst tireless campaigners continue to work for better gender education and more legal protections for the LGBTQ+ community.

There is always change on the horizon for a country where artists, performers and protestors are redefining and reconstructing a cultural identity – one that is diverse, multifaceted, both old and new, and borne out of social movements.