

## Student Article

# Assimilating to the Rainbow Culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand

**Kyle Tan and Zhiyuan Wang**

University of Waikato, New Zealand

### Abstract

The welcoming environment for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in Aotearoa/New Zealand is appealing for many international students. This article includes accounts from two Chinese students from Malaysia and China respectively. They share their encounters and understandings of Aotearoa LGBT culture in relation to their Chinese identity, based on their personal experiences and communications with other LGBT international students.

### First Account

*The culture that I affiliate to is Malaysian Chinese*

*My founding ancestor is from Fujian, China*

*I am from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

*My parents are KS and CH*

*My name is Kyle Tan*

The paragraph above is the English version of my *pepeha*. A *pepeha* is usually recited as an introductory speech in a formal situation in Aotearoa<sup>1</sup>. I was first introduced to the notion of *pepeha* in the orientation program for international students at my university. I was told the indigenous Māori people in Aotearoa believe that the recital of *pepeha* helps them in connecting to family and people of wider communities who share similar identities. Since then, my interest in indigenous Māori knowledge in relation to how Māori people establish their identities has been piqued, especially of those related to diverse sexualities and genders.

In a bicultural country like Aotearoa, the Western understanding of sexual and gender identities has been problematic. For Māori people who belong in the communities of diverse sexualities and genders, most of them would generally refer to themselves as *takatāpui*, rather than classify themselves into one of the following English identity categories: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). Māori people prefer the term *takatāpui* because it conveys both a sense of indigenous identity as well as their sexual or gender identity (Kerekere, 2017). Simultaneously, this term also emphasises a sense of community by permitting Māori of non-heterosexual orientation to find solidarity through the non-gendered specificity that it encapsulates (Murray, 2003).

Intrigued by the conceptualisation of the term *takatāpui*, I did a quick search for a similar term in both the Malaysian and Chinese cultural contexts. Although there are some local terms in Malaysia to describe LGBT people such as *pondan* and *mak nyah*, they usually carry a stigmatising meaning. Comparatively, there are more positive terms in China, such as 同志, pronounced as *tong zhi*, which portrays a sense of collectivism among Chinese LGBT people. While most people in Aotearoa show respect and provide autonomy for international students to identify themselves, we often have to use English identity terms at places where our cultural terms are least understood. In this instance, most LGBT international students would either specify their sexual orientation or gender identity, or recognise themselves as a member of the LGBT or rainbow<sup>2</sup> communities.

Finding a place to fit in is not an easy task for new international students in Aotearoa. This is especially true for those who identify as LGBT, who may feel that they are ‘minorities within the minority communities’. In my conversation with a Chinese friend who identifies as a 同志 at my university, he told me that he had struggled to find a comfort zone in the LGBT student group. Not only did he feel marginalised for his LGBT identity among his heterosexual friends, he also felt unwelcomed for his Chinese identity in the predominantly White LGBT student group.

The homophobic and transphobic nature of Asian countries have often made LGBT students from these countries look forward to experiencing the LGBT-friendly environment of Aotearoa. When their expectations are not met, they suffer from even greater disappointment. There is a lot

of support for LGBT students in Aotearoa universities, however these support systems are deemed not to be culturally sensitive by most international students. Most LGBT international students who I know, have chosen not to disclose their sexual or gender identities to their heterosexual and cisgender friends. They choose to remain in stealth because they are afraid of the possible discrimination and stigma that they might face. Until the university is competent in providing support for LGBT international students, it is likely that the visibility of these students will continue to be low.

Currently, I am involved in the Rainbow Alliance group, which is part of the university's initiative to promote equality and further social inclusion for LGBT students and staff. It is a group for both LGBT people and allies<sup>3</sup> of LGBT people. We host regular meetings to share research ideas, to discuss recent LGBT issues in Aotearoa, and to design an advancement plan to better support LGBT members in the university. We usually begin the meeting with a round of introduction from all members, where we say our preferred name and pronoun. Although I am the only Asian representation in the group, I rarely felt left out by the members. There were times when I was silenced because I was not familiar with the Aotearoa context, but there were also times when other members would listen to what I have to share and show appreciation to my distinctive cultural background.

On 17th February, I, along with few of my Chinese friends had an opportunity to visit the Pride Parade at Auckland. Almost everyone who participated in that event dressed up in rainbow colours to support the notion of diversity. The organiser was also generous enough to provide each of us with a free rainbow flag. There were more than 50 marching entries that evening, which included LGBT community organisations, cultural groups, political parties, civil servants and universities. The sight of the Prime Minister of Aotearoa in the march was especially empowering as it signifies the government's support and concern for the wellbeing of LGBT people. It was the first time I had celebrated a carnival of diversity, and it was really eye-opening.

2018 marks my third year in Aotearoa. However, I do not consider myself to have fully assimilated into the Aotearoa culture. Very often, I still have to negotiate my Asian identity

while being influenced by the local culture. While I do agree that international students should attempt to assimilate into the local culture to avoid the consequences of cultural shock, it is not necessary for us to forgo our original identity. This is particularly relevant to the context of rainbow culture, in which the notion of diversity is constantly emphasised. In my university, the LGBT student group and Rainbow Alliance group serve as the first point of contact for international LGBT students. These support groups assist international students in embracing their LGBT identity, and provide guidance for international students to ensure that they transition smoothly in the university life. Although efforts are still needed to increase the competency of these support services for international LGBT students, much progress has been made to promote the friendly environment of campus for these students.

### References

Kerekere, E. (2017). *Part of the whānau: The emergence of takatāpui identity He Whāriki Takatāpui*. (Doctor of Philosophy), Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand.

Murray, D. A. B. (2003). Who is Takatāpui? Māori language, sexuality and identity in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Anthropologica*, 45(2), 233-244. doi:10.2307/25606143

<sup>1</sup>Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand, which indicates the land of long white cloud

<sup>2</sup>Rainbow is the inclusive term for people of diverse sexualities and genders in Aotearoa, as there are takatāpui, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, non-binary and other people of similar identities who might feel left out in the LGBT representation

<sup>3</sup>Ally is a member of the dominant group, for example a heterosexual and cisgender person, who works to end oppression by providing support, and act as an advocate with and for the minority group

## Second Account

*The culture that I affiliate to is China Chinese.*

*My founding ancestor is from Hubei, China.*

*I am from Hubei, China.*

*My parents are HW and AL.*

*My name is Zhiyuan Wang*

Nowadays, the topics of human rights, freedom, equality, and democracy have been discussed and debated for political purposes throughout the world. People fiercely express their opinions by protesting and demonstrating, but they are still not equally treated and respected because of race, religion, and identity. The term ‘political correctness’ has been abused which has created hatred and conflicts among different groups of people. The Orlando nightclub shooting on 12 June 2016 created anxiety and panic for the LGBT people not just in America but all over the world. Is there any way for all people to live in peace and harmony no matter what their races, religions, and identities are? Aotearoa may offer an answer.

Before I came to Aotearoa, I had watched two episodes of a famous Chinese talk show named ‘Morning Call’ which comprehensively introduced the country including its history, environment, people, lifestyle, and especially its diverse and inclusive culture. There is an interesting phenomenon mentioned in the show. Immigrants from China have built Chinatowns almost everywhere they settled like in America, Canada, and Australia, but they have never done that in Aotearoa. Chinese people have a strong sense of protecting their culture, so they build Chinatowns to protect it from being invaded. But when they come to New Zealand, they drop their defence and embrace the culture of Aotearoa. This is because they know Aotearoa is a peaceful and tolerant country that will also welcome and embrace their own culture.

I identified myself as gay and completed my self-recognition after I entered university in 2008 in China. Since then, I gradually came out to my friends, classmates, and even to my colleagues at the workplace after graduation. I was fortunate that I was accepted most of the time but even today, I am not prepared to come out to my parents. This is because, compared to the tolerant

and inclusive culture of Aotearoa, the mainstream culture of China is conventional, strong, and exclusive, and my parents, like thousands of Chinese parents were brought up and educated in such culture.

Confucianism, which has controlled and civilized Chinese people for thousands of years, continues to influence the mainstream of China. Since we were born, we have been educated to set everything including the country, society, the family, and our parents ahead of ‘myself’ in the ranking of who we should be responsible to. During the entire process of receiving education, we barely have the chance to talk to our inner selves and ask ourselves the questions of ‘what you really are’ and ‘what you really like’. We rarely have the tendency to find our own will and establish our own value system but simply follow the mainstream will and values. When it comes to problems of self-recognition, we subconsciously avoid facing and resolving them. Therefore, many Chinese LGBT people are afraid and reluctant to confront their confusion and even deny themselves at the very primary stage when they realize they are different from other people. In the face of the strong mainstream, they would even identify themselves as ‘abnormal’ (contrary to ‘normal’) rather than identifying themselves as ‘different’.

Another factor that influences the self-recognition of Chinese LGBT people is the treatment from the Government. Even after the WHO cleared the name for LGBT people in every aspect of science and social science in 1990 and many countries have passed laws for same-sex marriage since 2001, the Government of China has always held a ‘neither for nor against’ attitude towards LGBT people. There is not a single written rule against the LGBT community in China, but little information related to LGBT is mentioned in publications and media coverage. Public speeches, discussions, arguments, and disseminations are strictly scrutinised by the Government. A famous Chinese internet-based debating show ‘U Can U Bibi’ discussed the topic of ‘whether you should come out to your parents’ in one episode in Season 2, but before long, the episode was ordered to be removed from the website.

The two factors are not isolated and separated. The ‘neither for nor against’ treatment results from the conventional, strong, and exclusive culture which has lasted for thousands of years. This is particularly problematic because Chinese LGBT people have no access to knowledge and

information about sex, sexuality, and self-recognition from official channels when they are confused, struggling, and in need of guidance. There is very famous proverb in the theory of Confucianism which is strongly agreed with by most typical and traditional Chinese families - ‘There are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants’. How to give birth to a child to continue the bloodline of a family is the first, major, and toughest issue faced by most LGBT people in China.

Compared to Aotearoa with an open, diverse, and inclusive culture, without a more tolerant universal value shared by the whole society, or at least most people in the society, it is extremely difficult and complicated for people in a minority culture to build self-esteem and establish their own value system to recognise themselves, stick with themselves, and resist the pressure from the mainstream in China. The LGBT people in China have to struggle for years to resolve the issues of ‘myself’ before they explicitly identify and accept what they really are.

Actually, the first time I was acquainted with the rainbow culture in Aotearoa was in a lecture discussing voluntary disclosure in the heritage reporting in Aotearoa. I still remember the question proposed by our professor - ‘Aotearoa has been one of the first few countries that allowed women to vote and enacted the law of same-sex marriage, but what else can we do?’ This question has impressed me and kept me thinking for a long time, and most essentially, inspired me to start thinking about a concept above ‘myself’ which is ‘community’ when it comes to the topic about LGBT.

Aotearoa has been walking far ahead of China in the LGBT area for years. I have been thinking about the question proposed by our professor, but I still cannot find a good answer. However, through considering the question, I am starting to believe that a good society is one that always allow its people to ask for ‘more’ which will always lead a country to be better.

#### **CONTACT THE AUTHORS**

Account 1 Kyle Tan, [kht5@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:kht5@students.waikato.ac.nz)

Account 2 Zhiyuan Wang, [zw115@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:zw115@students.waikato.ac.nz)