**How Taiwan is using same-sex marriage to assert its national identity**

Liberalism in marriage laws helps bolster (**củng cố**) a separate, progressive national identity



By **Genevieve Tan**

Genevieve Tan is a history Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania focusing on gender and family in twentieth-century East Asia.

June 26

When Taiwan [legalized same-sex marriage](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taiwan-becomes-first-country-in-asia-to-legalize-same-sex-marriage/2019/05/17/d60e511e-7893-11e9-bd25-c989555e7766_story.html?utm_term=.cc474e218cdb) last month, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen [tweeted](https://twitter.com/iingwen/status/1129272671873617920) “#LoveWon,” celebrating the move for making Taiwan “a better country.” A first for Asia, the legislation showcased Taiwan’s commitment to progressive values. The resulting wave of international media attention underscored Taiwan’s political agenda as distinct from the **behemoth** ( **gã** khổng **lồ)** next door, mainland China.

People’s Daily, the Chinese Communist Party’s **mouthpiece** (cơ quan **ngôn** luận), then tried to **blur the lines** (**làm lu mờ ranh giới)**. During the same weekend, the paper posted a celebratory tweet: “local lawmakers in Taiwan, China, have legalized same-sex marriage in a first for Asia.” The tweet, which included a rainbow-colored GIF that read, “love is love,” incensed Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu, who [retaliated](https://twitter.com/mofa_taiwan/status/1129901169906552833?lang=en): “WRONG! The bill was passed by our national parliament & will be signed by the president soon. Democratic #Taiwan is a country in itself & has nothing to do with authoritarian #China. @PDChina is a commie brainwasher & it sucks. JW.”

Wu’s **strident** (gay gắt, dữ dội ) response and the way it sought to distinguish Taiwan from China reveal how the bill had become a display of national identity — a purposeful strategy to mark out a difference between Taiwan and China by positioning itself as the more progressive power. While a popular referendum held in November 2018 saw a majority voting to restrict legal marriage to that between a man and a woman, the Taiwanese government pushed forward a bill for same-sex marriage that ultimately received a high level of cross-party support and passed comfortably.

Why? Because in both form and content, the whole process was political, aimed to show Taiwanese as promoting equality and human rights in direct contrast to the Chinese government, which has notably intensified crackdowns on homosexuality in recent years.

Taiwan has stood at the forefront of innovative approaches to marriage before. In 1933, when Taiwan was ruled by Japan, the colonial government legalized Han-Japanese intermarriage on the island. Historians treat this marriage reform as blatant imperial oppression. But looking more closely reveals that promoting intermarriage in the 1930s had a purpose similar to that of legalizing same-sex marriage today: laying claim to a distinctive and progressive imperial brand.

Taiwan, which became Japan’s first external colony in 1895, was the stage for the new Asian empire to make its mark. Japanese leaders wanted to demonstrate that they were not blind mimickers of the British or other European empire builders. Instead, they strove to integrate new ideas, including nationalism, anti-colonialism and collective security on their own terms.

Legal intermarriage **resonate**d (**cộng hưởng)** with Japan’s advocacy of racial equality at the League of Nations. Japanese leaders saw themselves as representatives of nonwhite peoples and offered their model of empire-building as more progressive than Western-style discrimination. Intermarriage marked Japan as more than just another European power, and the ideal of “harmonious integration” (*naitai yūwa*) was designed to show off Japanese colonial rule as egalitarian.

While primarily self-interested rather than **altruistic (có lòng vị tha)**, Japan’s commitment to intermarriage was a breakthrough at a time when European empires were discouraging or banning miscegenation (hôn nhân giữa hai người thuộc hai chủng tộc khác nhau, chẳng hạn như giữa người da trắng và người da màu). (It would be 34 more years before the United States would strike down anti-miscegenation laws.) Remarkably, the dominant model of intermarriage represented in state-sanctioned media was that between Japanese women and Taiwanese men. This further contradicted European norms, by which a perceived need to protect white women from local men justified further segregation.

A similar assertion of independence is likewise occurring in Taiwan today. Even decades after the end of Japanese rule in 1945, Taiwan continues to be a stage where the tension between imperialism and progress plays out. The island’s political status remains a controversy, as are talks of its eventual unification with or independence from China.

In this context, the culturally transformative experience of Japanese colonial rule is often seen through the lens of nostalgia, as a time of development that gave Taiwan its unique identity independent from China. Within a political and intellectual environment that focuses on Taiwan’s colonial memory, mainland Chinese nationalism is characterized as a form of colonial activity, and “true” post-colonial Taiwan is increasingly articulated as an independent nation-state. Even as Japan no longer controls the island or debates over marriage there, China’s claim over Taiwan still stands. As Taiwan’s closest cultural and geographic neighbor, and the biggest power in the region, China’s looming presence requires Taiwanese leaders to find alternative means of gaining the international recognition necessary for protecting national sovereignty.

With its legalization of same-sex marriages, Taiwan seeks to set itself apart from the mainland and **assert** (khẳng định) its own brand. It is no coincidence that the incumbent government is led by Taiwan’s pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Unlike their main opposition, the Kuomintang, the DPP refuses to acknowledge the one-China principle.

Legalizing same-sex marriage provided an opportunity for Taiwanese leaders to articulate their own brand of Chineseness, shaped by their negotiation of different forces and **enshrine**d (gắn **chặt)** in their law. It is easy to dismiss these innovative approaches to marriage as mere political acts, but here, as elsewhere, progressive ideals and politics are not mutually exclusive. The legacy of intermarriage laws in the 1930s is not unblemished (không có tùy vết), but it stands as a leading factor in the liberalization of marriage laws generally in east Asia. Same-sex marriage laws are **poise**d to do the same.