

# **LGBT in Malaysia: Discovering Pang Khee Teik - faith, sexuality, art and activism**

Thursday 8 December 2016, by [LAU Chris](#), [PANG Khee Teik](#), [TONG Geraldine](#) (Date first published: 12 June 2016).

## **Four times.**

That was how many times prominent activist Pang Khee Teik said he had to come out to his parents.

Pang, who is gay, is prominent for being outspoken and vocal about LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) issues in Malaysia.

However, the first time he came out to his parents was not about his sexuality, but rather about his faith.

Hailing from Malacca, Pang said he earned a scholarship to study in Singapore when he was 12 years old.

In Singapore, he decided to embrace the Christian faith when he was 14, and his father did not react well when he finally 'came out' as a Christian to him.

Pang was subsequently brought back to Malaysia, so that his father could monitor him closely and prevent him from going to church.

The year before he came back to Malaysia, Pang said he had joined a Christian ministry who helped to heal "sexual brokenness".

Still struggling deeply against his sexuality, Pang eventually confronted his father again with a second 'coming out'.

"I told him, I'm gay and the reason I'm going to church is because I want to be straight. So you choose, gay or Christian." "I didn't envy my father his position at that time," he told Malaysiakini in an interview at his condominium in Brickfields.

His father relented, and he soon joined a church in Kuala Lumpur which had been trained by the Singapore ministry for "sexual brokenness".

Pang poured himself into church, joining the church theatre and writing scripts for them.

After about three years, he said he grew disillusioned with the way the church treated his scripts, which he put a lot of effort into.

They changed a lot in his scripts, often to elicit others in the church to reaffirm their faith in God, he said.

"I started to think that maybe the church, in a sense, doesn't really want my individuality. In fact, it probably wants conformity," he said.

After an epiphany over a discussion with a friend, he said he started down the journey which

eventually led him to leave the Christian faith.

Leaving religion was one thing, but having spent about 10 to 12 years suppressing his sexuality, it took another epiphany for him to decide it was time to stop trying to be straight.

That prompted his coming out to his parents, while they were having dinner at a restaurant in a mall.

“My father asked me where’s my girlfriend, so I said, ‘actually that whole thing didn’t work out. I tried, but it didn’t work so I decided to be gay,” he related.

That was strike three, he said; first, for being a Christian, second, for being but trying to be straight and third, for being gay, no longer trying to be straight and no longer Christian.

Pang, who is the co-founder of Seksualiti Merdeka, said his fourth coming out was in 2011, when the festival was banned and he was detained by the authorities.

His face was splashed all over the media, he said, and that was when he was inadvertently outed as an activist.

“My parents knew I had been doing (activist) work, but they thought it was all small stuff,” he said.

Since Seksualiti Merdeka has been banned, he said the group has moved to Facebook, where it discusses sexuality and gender.

Nowadays, Pang focuses on organising the art festival Art For Grabs full-time. It’s held once every three months.

The former director of the Annexe Gallery in Central Market also now does freelance event organising as well as promotions, especially for arts and activism events.

Specifically, he added, he would like to be able to combine both art and activism.

Scattered around his house is testament to his love for art, with art pieces decorating every wall, including an old, discarded road sign nailed to the wall on his balcony.

As for his activism, Pang said while he is most well-known for being an activist for LGBT issues, he would also like to be involved in activism “at every level”.

Now, he said, he wants to use event organising as a broader platform than just LGBT issues.

This is his story, in his own words:

**I JUST HAPPENED TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN** while I was in Singapore at the age of 14, but I eventually found that it conflicted with my parallel discovery and awakening of my sexuality.

My last year in Singapore, I found a Christian ministry who, in their words, wanted to heal their sexual brokenness, so I joined them.

But when I came out to my father as a Christian, he didn’t like the fact that I’m a Christian, so he brought me back (to Malaysia) so he could monitor me closely.

**I WAS SO MISERABLE NOT GOING TO CHURCH** that it reached a point where I couldn’t take it anymore, so I had to come out to my father. So I told him, I’m gay and the reason I’m going to

church is because I want to be straight. So you choose, gay or Christian.

I didn't envy my father's position at that time.

**I FOUND A CHURCH WHICH HAD BEEN TRAINED BY THE MINISTRY IN SINGAPORE**, so I joined them and became very active. It was a kind of catharsis, for the anxiety I felt struggling against my sexuality.

I poured myself into the theatre of the church, but it turned out that even after I've done a lot of research on the scripts, poured myself into it, in the end, they would change my scripts quite drastically.

After three years of that, I got quite bored of it, I was being quite diva, you know. I started to think that maybe the church, in a sense, doesn't really want my individuality. In fact, it probably wants conformity.

**I KEPT IN TOUCH WITH SOME OF THE PEOPLE** who were in the ministry in Singapore, and one guy called Clarence went on to start a positive and affirming fellowship group for gay Christians, after he left the ministry.

One day, I went down to Singapore and talked to him. I was starting to doubt my faith so I told him about a thought experiment I did.

I told him that I had this thought: what if I'm truly alone in the universe, what if we're all truly, truly alone. I had a sensation of freefalling through the universe, through the dark, through a black hole.

He said, maybe God is not an entity that you imagine him to be. Maybe, as you're falling through the universe, the universe is God for you.

That really freed me up to reimagine my relationship with everything around me. It also freed me from thinking of God as an entity that I used to imagine him as.

**I'M NOT TERRIBLY UPSET THAT I BECAME A CHRISTIAN.** I needed that (at that time). It kept me sane.

Many years later, I decided it (struggling against my sexuality) wasn't working. If it's true that by becoming gay, I was going to be miserable and hate myself, it's also equally true if I continue battling my sexuality.

I had these two equally miserable prognoses for my life. I didn't take the Harry Potter advice, I took the easier path.

I said to myself, I have not tried living as a gay man. And now, I'm not miserable anymore.

**EVENTUALLY, I HAD TO COME OUT TO MY PARENTS** (as gay and not trying to be straight). My father said, this does not make him happy.

Then I said, you know what, I can, of course, continue pretending to be straight, pretend to like a woman, get married to her, but for the rest of my life, I will have to shut up this part of my heart and lock it in chains, and I will not be happy.

I will not be able to truly love her, and she will not be happy because I cannot give her what she wants. If we have children, they will also be unhappy.

**HOW MUCH UNHAPPINESS WILL IT TAKE FOR YOU TO BE HAPPY**, I asked my father.

My mother said, if you get married and you have children, there will be someone to take care of you and you won't be so lonely.

So I looked at her and said, you're married, you have children. **DO YOU DARE TELL ME YOU'RE NOT LONELY?**

We're all lonely, but we can still be here for each other. I have learned to be independent and through my independence, I have learned that the best way to deal with my loneliness is to learn to be alone.

Because loneliness is actually not isolation from others, it's isolation from yourself. It's when you're alone and you're confronted with who you truly are, and you hate who you are and you cannot stand yourself, that's when you feel loneliness.

**WHEN SEKSUALITI MERDEKA WAS BANNED IN 2011** and my picture was splashed all over (the media), the next day my cousin helpfully called my parents and said, 'Aunty, you know your son is wanted by the police'.

That was when I was outed as an activist.

Their (My parents) reason for being very upset that I'm an activist were very different. What my father said (after that) revealed to me that he doesn't understand yet. He said, 'What am I going to tell my friends?'

It meant he didn't respect me at all. I didn't feel very sorry for his predicament at that time. But it turns out a few of my father's friends were quite supportive. I suspect a few of them talked to my father about it.

My mother said, if you're taken in by the police, I don't know what they're going to do to you, and I don't know how to protect you.

**I BECAME ANGRY THAT THIS COUNTRY HAS FRIGHTENED MY MOTHER INTO FEELING SO HELPLESS.**

Ultimately, that's what all mothers want; to be able to protect their children, but this country has taken that away from our mothers.

I told my mother, is it reasonable to be living in fear in your own home, in your own country? It's not right, and that's what I'm doing about it.

**A LOT OF PEOPLE DO COME TO ME** when they need someone to talk about LGBT issues, and I'm happy to talk when there's no one else who can do it. I do also try to tell people, can I connect you with someone else who would have a different perspective?

It's a bad, bad situation but I also understand why some people cannot really come out. The cost of social alienation is very high and I think society teaches conformity through the threat of alienation.

**I'M HAPPY TO ALSO SAY** I know a lot of young LGBTs today who are actively doing what they can, where they can, (and) providing space for each other.

This is where I think it's really radical: when a person who is considered an imperfect citizen,

extends his hand and creates a space for someone else, automatically then the two of them, what they've done is that they've carved a citizenship of themselves in that space. (They are) offering (each other) a space to be themselves.

**IT DOESN'T HAVE TO JUST BE A SPACE FOR LGBT.** Your activism can be about LGBT but it doesn't have to be limited to that. You can do something for refugees, women, etc. Just be involved at every level, because what they want you to do is to run and hide in your private space so you leave the public sphere. But the public sphere is where you are able to decide what you can do in your private space.

This is why I'm excited that even as a gay man, I have skills to create space for other people, and also why Art for Grabs is very important to me.

**I'M AWARE OF MY PRIVILEGED STATUS TODAY** as someone who is living relatively middle-class. I have different circumstances from Muslim gays, the LGBT poor, women and trans people. They all have different issues, because of different circumstances. Wealth and connection (also) have something to do with it.

I also get annoyed with wealthier LGBT people who say you just need to work hard and prove yourself and then no one can touch you. It's this illusion that the capitalist market allows us to buy into, and it leaves those without the connection out there to fend for themselves.

We tell them, you just need to work harder, but some of these people have three jobs. You cannot tell them to work any harder.

**TRANS PEOPLE ARE VERY WELL-CONNECTED AROUND THE COUNTRY.** Unfortunately, with the other issues, it's harder. Urban LGBT are so much luckier than those in the rural areas. I constantly get stories of rural places, where they'll lock their lesbian daughter in the house and things like that.

**SEKSUALITI MERDEKA CAME ABOUT** because at that point, we ran an art gallery and we had space. That time we were planning Art for Grabs on Aug 31, 2008, which is how it got its name Seksualiti Merdeka.

Well, I mean at least the government is using the word LGBT now (after Seksualiti Merdeka). I admit this acronym does not completely capture the diversity of sexuality and gender expressions and identity, but it's better than songsang, pondan or bapok.

**I'M VERY HAPPY FOR (PEOPLE) WHEN THEY WANT TO GET MARRIED,** but I also feel that marriage is not the ultimate goal for LGBT rights.

The problem of the US promotion of same-sex marriage is that very much of it is banked on the idea that marriage allows us to marry into equality, instead of the fact that you can get married because you are already equal.

The issue is this: people think of marriage as an expression of love, but is it? Can't you express love without marriage?

The discourse of marriage ends up marginalising unmarried gays. No other kinds of narratives are allowed. The inequality here is between unmarried and married people.

**I'M NOT NAIVE ENOUGH TO THINK THAT WE NEED TO GET RID OF MARRIAGE.** I just think that with marriage, a lot of gradation of possible relationships we can have with one another

becomes impossible.

**LOVE IS ANARCHIC.** Love breaks rules and it makes us break rules, but we're so afraid because society keeps telling us that only these form of relationship is acceptable, then they create a whole system to reward this type of relationship.

The discussion around marriage is partly because of the stupid policy of hospitals only allowing next of kin (visitation and legal rights), but why can't this document be ascertained between two best friends?

(For example), at the end of the life of a person who doesn't want to have anything to do with his family, the hospital will still invite their family to decide on his life. How cruel is that?

**I SAID IN MY POST (A 'PARTY' IN SENTUL) THAT BEING IN MALAYSIA SOMETIMES FELT LIKE BEING IN THE WRONG PLACE AND WRONG TIME.** But I thought about it, and that's what they want you to feel.

We just have to keep doing what we can, until this country becomes the right place and the right time for us, whenever that may be.

We are filled with idealism at this point. Right now, we think we can make a difference so we try.

**MAYBE ONE DAY, I'LL GIVE UP,** and I hope people don't judge me too harshly when that happens.

**Geraldine Tong & Chris Lau**

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**P.S.**

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