

Book Review

## Queer Korea

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*Queer Korea* edited by Associate Professor Todd A. Henry (University of California, San Diego) is one of the few – if any – Anglosphere university press compilations of studies on and accounts of a ‘queer’ 한국 (English: ‘Korea’, specifically South Korea). The diverse range of authors includes such cutting-edge and exciting scholars as Layoung Shin, John (Song Pae) Cho, Chung-kang Kim, Shin-ae Ha as translated by Kyunghee Eo, Merose Hwang, and Ruin as translated by Max Balhorn. The work at first glance appears to seek to both imagine and translate a ‘queer’-identified 한국 state. Though the title is *Queer Korea*, it must be noted that this work focuses exclusively on ‘colonial Korea’ and contemporary 한국, and not modern or contemporary 북한/조선 (English: North Korea). Readers might want to ask: to what extent does *Queer Korea* represent the non-heteronormative contemporary peoples of 한국?

Let me begin by pointing out what I view as this work’s slight drawback: *Queer Korea* disappointingly lacks a decolonial title. It is important that we keep in mind how academia is inherently colonial (Landy, *et al*, 2020). Although ‘queer’ Korea is the adopted title, a title such as *Iban* 한국 or *Iban Korea* might have been more appropriate, or *Post-queer* 한국,<sup>1</sup> considering that one of the *Queer Korea* essays offers *iban* as a local translation of queer (it has also been offered elsewhere as a translation by the researcher Choňg Minu, who advocated for an ‘iban theory’). This alternative title could have been offered to the Anglosphere audience so as to introduce more expressly the existence of indigenous *iban* cultures and identity. My second criticism is that *Queer Korea* lacks significant accounts of contemporary ‘queer’ 한국 activism and arts, instead choosing to focus more on and add to academic accounts of colonial Korea and 한국. However, for those who are focusing on these periods and/or prefer academic readings and the academic writing style, *Queer Korea* might be the right choice.

What I feel readers will enjoy most about this work begins with Merose Hwang’s chapter on ‘colonial drag’ (69) and its ‘conspicuous indigenes’ (59), offering an alternative and rare account of a 1920s colonial Korea. Hwang highlights for the reader the mass media’s active role in damaging spiritualism and indigenous traditions in the name of modernisation. Hwang’s work also demonstrates the deeply disturbing impact that applications of white

<sup>1</sup> By ‘post-queer theory’ I mean to imply a more mutual discourse pertaining to multiple non-heteronormative theories, which does not presuppose a western epistemological origin through over-application or transplantation of ‘queer theory’ within this discourse.

heteronormative anthropology have had on understandings of indigenous peoples. This chapter discusses the **화랑** class (*bwarang*, often translated as ‘flower boys’), not always treated in high esteem during 조선 (*Chosŏn*) times, who later came to be addressed as **화랑녀** (*bwarangnyo*, ‘flower girls’). This development demonstrated a homophobic political turn against **화랑** and enabled a scapegoating of non-heteronormative subjectivities, executed to justify a rationale that colonial Korea had become weak from this. For those familiar with Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child* and its place in history, this essay might also be of interest. Particularly outstanding for me as a reader is Hwang’s alternative approach to coloniality, which presents ways in which some under Japanese colonial rule resisted not so much in physical or normatively political ways, but rather through spiritual and highly culturally means.

The chapter on “Problematizing love” by Pei Jean Chen introduces ‘the spiritual love between schoolgirls’ (124). Pei Jean Chen importantly highlights here the lasting colonial effects of homophobic linguistic import, that is, the contemporary usage in **한국어** (Korean) of such terms as **동성애** (*tongsōngae*, lit. ‘same-sex love’) which have their origins in white psychoanalytical demonising of non-normative sexualities. Korea’s premodern terminological history is unveiled to readers with regard to indigenous conceptions of non-normative sexuality. What particularly attracted me in the analysis of this spiritual love is, similar to Merose Hwang, the observation that same-sex love is framed in spiritual terms.

Shin-ae Ha’s contribution is on “Femininity Under the Wartime System” and was translated by Kyunghee Eo. Also referring to a 1920s colonial Korean context, Ha introduces the writer Pak T’ae-won’s work as published in a literary magazine, noting that similar to how some Korean same-sex love experiences are dismissed as homosocial and as such a mere temporary stage of living in hetero-history, colonial Korean schools in the 1920s and 1930s were deemed as places wherein same-sex love was to be contained and seen as transitional or simply not at all real. Ha presents scholarly attitudes that treated same-sex love as a trend that would not seriously factor into the heteronormative desire for Korean resistance.

“A Female-Dressed Man Sings a National Epic” is Chung-kang Kim’s analysis of the subject of the **남자 기생** (*namja kisaeng*) and 1960s gender comedy films. Kim’s work expands on scanty queer readings of Park Chung-Hee regime contexts, stating that it was a regime that seldom factored in its non-heteronormative subjectivities due to its intense emphasis on military-dictatorial economic developmentalism. Kim argues that 1960s gender comedy films “were complex cultural texts that revealed a liminal space between the heteronormative codes of mainstream national culture and the potentially transgressive codes of a marginalized sexual subculture” (177). I found this chapter stands out for its mention of the demonisation of sexuality as enforced through heteronormative film censorship, yet at the same time Kim reveals that this same censorship was in fact allowing for non-normative language within film production. The conclusion of this chapter speaks volumes on the importance of ‘queer’ studies, in that it is not just that these queer-identified themes were explored in 1960s **한국** film, but crucially that **한국** film, literature, and other arts were real reflections of South Korean non-heteronormative lived experience.

John (Song Pae) Cho introduces “The Three Faces of South Korea’s Male Homosexuality – Pogal, iban, and neoliberal gay.” Cho is “unmooring these categories from their static and sedentary locations in the ‘West’ [sic]<sup>2</sup> and transplanting them to ‘Asia’” (264, parenthesis added). This chapter contains a number of **한국어** terminologies specific to non-heteronormative **한국** communities, and so might interest any linguists reading *Queer Korea*. These terms include ‘neoliberal gay’ and ‘Confucian biopolitics,’ at once speaking to South Korea’s economic development and its genealogical history. The chapter designates and assesses two periods forming a narrative, namely “the ‘dark’ late developmentalist period” – the 1970s to mid-1990s – and “the ‘sunny’ liberal democratic one” (268) – the mid- to late 1990s. Especially notable when reading this chapter is Cho’s emphasis on avoiding a binary between the traditional and the modern, and that more accurately South Korea sits on a complex intersection of culture, politics, and society. One example of this in contemporary South Korea is that many South Koreans choose not to come out, instead negotiating their sexual identity alongside and not against that of bio-familial expectations, among them filial piety. The ‘dark’ and ‘sunny’ periods mentioned above also span the rising of a developmentalist sun wherein the arc of which plots such events as the Kwangju Massacre, the Asian financial crisis and its effects on South Korea, the importance of theatres and other under-the-radar sites for gay men, as well as the explosive impact the internet had for gay people in both progressive and negative ways.

Layoung Shin contributes my personal favourite chapter, focusing on “Survival Strategy Among Young Queer Women in South Korea.” Shin especially highlights economic class as well as the gender unequal-divides in 21st century **한국**, specifically for ‘working class young queer women’ and the ‘**잉여**’ (*ing’yo*, ‘leftovers’ or ‘losers’) (299). Beginning with a look at the ‘fanco’ drag community and female performance of masculinity, we are introduced to such terminology used among young queer women as **티부** (*t’ibu*) and **걸코** (*kolk’o*) (296). Making arguably one of

<sup>2</sup> I advocate for decolonising academic language by instead using the lower case.

the most important statements in *Queer Korea*, Shin comments on homonormativity thus: “I argue that this term is insufficient to grasp the specific conditions of South Korea” (297). Also significant is that Shin highlights the necessary critique of the western ideal of ‘coming out,’ which often goes hand-in-hand with a homonormative discourse, pointing out that the specificity of South Korea’s *iban* indigeneity – which perhaps involves more of a coming to terms than a coming out – assumes that there is already some significant homonormative discourse into which South Koreans can come. Shin thus warns us of the danger of simply applying homonormativity or a western queer theory to South Korea, highlighting the current homophobic powers of censorship, specifically online, as well as the issue of scamming and how this is in fact causing queer online spaces and their users to go underground.

Finally is Ruin’s chapter, as translated by Max Balhorn, in which, writing on account of ‘trans/gender identities’, Ruin introduces to us the real-life experiences of transgender South Koreans surviving under the auspices of a gender-policing, identity-controlling state. For those who may not know, Ruin presents the effects of South Korea’s compulsory identity card system, the unique number of which automatically identifies the citizen’s assigned sex at birth. Ruin also provides an introduction to the history of identification politics in 조선, colonial Korea, and modern 한국. This work includes references to dialogue with other trans-people, reflecting diverse self-identifications within the trans-community. Ruin demonstrates how there is a lack of gender-related human rights dialogue and a lack of challenging the gender binary in debates on the history of the state’s identification card systems. The state-sanctioned gender binary is of particular use to the 한국 military, which demonstrates how the state not only heavily monitors citizens but also literally uses male-identified bodies. Ruin describes and poses questions about multiple everyday identity-related problems faced by trans-identifying people in 한국. These include the ambiguity of which familial 한국어 terms to use when discussing a trans-person; that for 한국 trans-people simply having identification on one’s person does not help ‘prove’ trans-identity; that this has implications for trans-people in the workplace and those trying to find employment; and the problems faced when trying to authenticate identity over the phone. Ruin goes on to tell us about the “illegal” humans” that result from an otherwise well-intended gender reassignment law currently being considered. Particularly powerful is the concluding section of Ruin’s chapter, which continues to ask provocative questions about what a trans-body is.

*Queer Korea* is most definitely a work I recommend for those seeking an academic glance at non-heteronormative colonial Korea and modern 한국, with some contemporary explorations. All the chapters are for the most part thoroughly researched and referenced, with an abundance of both 한국어 and Anglosphere sources that will aid academic readers in particular interested in expanding on *Queer Korea*’s topics. I would mostly recommend this work for its inclusion of the aforementioned scholars, as well as for the dedicated translation work of Kyunghee Eo and Max Balhorn. Merose Hwang provides an exciting, non-heteronormative perspective on shamanism. Pei Jean Chen offers a discussion of representations of female same-sex youth love subjectivity, problematising seldom discussed homophobic imports that affected colonial Korea. Shin-ae Ha gives us a study of representations of female same-sex love in wartime literature, including same-sex couples’ suicides during that time. Chung-kang Kim’s work represents inclusion of a non-heteronormative film study that also explores how non-heteronormative sexuality was both restricted by, but also innovated under, censorship. John (Song Pae) Cho presents us with non-heteronormative and newly coined theoretical terminology, narrating ‘the three faces’ of modern 한국 male homosexuality, namely 보갈 (*pogal*), 이반 (*iban*), and ‘neoliberal gay’. Layoung Shin provides an account of the real-life experiences of contemporary ‘fanco’ young queer women and avoidance of 티부 (*t’ibu*; English: ‘obvious butchness’). Ruin provides for us an account of the realities of trans-people living in the identity card 한국 state, for whom identity card inaccuracy can lead to being accused of being a 북한 (North Korean) spy or a criminal. Ruin asks questions about the implications for trans-people when the state faces the challenge of having to amend or abolish laws in order to align trans-people with an identity card, as well as about how a trans-body can even be defined. For readers interested in learning more about one or more of these scholars’ topics, I recommend *Queer Korea*.

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