



**Queer Korea:
Identity, Tradition, and Activism**

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Abstract

This project is entitled “Queer Korea” and as such investigates issues surrounding sexual identity in contemporary South Korea. While there has been extensive research into non-heterosexual identities in other East Asian countries, especially China and Japan, this field in Korea is still essentially unexplored. Over the course of two years, I was able to conduct in depth interviews with 49 LGBT individuals living in South Korea, and those interviews became the raw material for this project.

The central investigative focus analyzes how various iterations of gay identity intersect with Korean culture and the wider, global conversation on what it means to be a sexual minority. The initial focus on identity led me to postulate the existence of a “Queer Social Compact” which dictates the expression of sexual difference; I then worked to situate the current state of affairs facing LGBT individuals, and gay men in particular, within the wider socio-historical context of Korea. Finally, I examine the oeuvre of Heezy Yang, a gay activist and performance artist, in order to see how one individual is challenging the heteronormative strictures in South Korean society.

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Preface

“Why do you care about me being gay?”

It was a question I should have expected.

I was meeting Luke in one of the ubiquitous Korean coffee shops, still jet lagged from having arrived in Korea just a few days before. I’d spoken to some people I already knew in Seoul, and had told them that I wanted to interview some guys about what it was like to be gay in Korea. Luke was my very first interview, a friend of a friend, and I was eager to get down to business.

After settling in with our coffees in two plush chairs, maybe because we were both a little nervous to start, we took a minute to get up and gaze through the picture windows at the dusky panorama before us. Five stories below the street was bustling with activity, the university students in the Sinchon neighborhood were leaving classes, the cafes and bars were filling up, and the usual cast of musicians and entertainers were busking for tips on the street corners. Looking out together, I pointed out a few landmarks and asked him to help me identify them as a way to break the ice. We did this a couple times before he turned and looked at me and softly asked that simple question.

Knowing I’d be asked about what I was doing, I had already come up with an elaborate answer in Korean and in English detailing my research methodology, my aims and purposes, the rules, requirements, and rights for my interviewees, but this was obviously different. It was a human question and it required something resembling a human answer. I attempted to give him one as I stumbled through some words about amplifying the voices and validating the experiences of gays in Korea through dissemination of research, probably adding a few things here and there about how this was a meaningful subject to me – my answer was forgettable, but the realization that settled over me was not: *I need to be ready for what I’m going to hear.*

In the months after I met Luke I thought back to that first tentative question, and the shadow it cast many times, even though I was much more adept at interviewing – certainly better at coming up with answers to explain what I was doing – better too at listening, understanding how the experiences behind the words, behind the veiled smiles and sometimes distant gazes revealed a reality for these men that was radically different and quintessentially the same as my own. So many times, as I was sitting across from someone talking to me, or walking along the Han River, notebook in hand, I was hearing tales told for which I was wholly unprepared. My original plan of doing some quick interviews, the compulsory review of literature, and a couple of pages of conclusions to be sent off to a journal or two crumbled in the face of what I was hearing.

From his first words Luke set the stage for what this project became – a journey into the lives of a population both wholly integrated and totally marginalized from society at large. They are subjected to a surreal social compact, which says that they can fully participate and partake in all that Korean culture has to offer – just as long they fulfill a certain set of requirements. That anyone cares about what these requirements are, that someone would be interested in hearing about the game of identity hide and seek which is integral to this social compact was something that Luke, and many of my other subjects found perplexing.

This in itself was a surprise. So much of American culture is built upon basic assumptions of identity and affinity, where one is from, background, family – biological and chosen – that it becomes second nature for Americans to ascertain the particulars of identity in most everyone they interact with. *Who you are* seems to be a prerequisite understanding for social intercourse among Americans; this knowledge is the lubricant which ensures the engines of interpersonal connections run smoothly. In this we are obviously not alone, but Americans seem to take a special interest in divining the minutia – and the whole range of assumptions – which color their relationships. Of course, for many, this extends to issues of sexual identity, and we are told to wear the various badges which denote the whole panoply of

orientations *with pride*. Over the previous decades these exhortations have been transformed from radical social acts, to political stances, and now to basic steps one must take to be a self actualized, integrated, well adjusted person. That someone would travel across an ocean with the intent of learning about this aspect of who they were was something that Luke, and many of my other Korean interview subjects, deemed peculiar.

Walking back from the picture windows and settling into some chairs, I took in the scene as I introduced the format of our interview. Sitting across from me was a young man, neatly dressed, subtly bobbing his head and mouthing the words to a relentlessly upbeat K pop song playing in the background. As I told him about his rights as an interviewee, he nodded his head, and when I asked if he would also like to hear the introduction in Korean too he laughed and agreed. We were getting settled in, and I took out my notebook and laptop – no doubt with an expression on my face that tried to convey some vague sense of purpose or professionalism, preparing to channel my inner Barbara Walters. Luke had brought a backpack filled with books and homework, which I assumed was for his college courses, which he started to unpack. Amongst the papers and textbooks were a number of SAT vocabulary books, and various test prep paraphernalia - which I asked him about. I was planning on talking to people over the age of eighteen, and my friend had mentioned that that was Luke's age.

“What are you studying right now?”

“Well, I want to get into NYU when I go to college, so I'm studying as many SAT words as I can,” he said in impeccable English.

“That's great, NYU is an awesome school. How old are you, by the way?”

“It depends where you are. If you're in Korea and follow Korean birthdays, then I'm eighteen. If you ask me how old I am in American age, I just turned seventeen.”

“Ah, ok. Um, I see.”

My interview hadn't even begun yet, and I was already confronted with the unexpected. Should I call off the interview? Does this mean that he is a child and can't be asked these questions? Does being eighteen in one country qualify as being eighteen in another? Awkward thoughts about appropriateness and following rules to the letter were confronted with the obvious interest that Luke's perspective could provide. Why not hear from someone in a Korean high school? Deciding that the only way forward was forward, I decided to plow ahead and asked my first question.

“So, what messages do you get about being gay in Korea?”

And then I listened. In a pattern that repeated itself time and again, for nearly all of my interviews, this question was an invitation to open the floodgates. Words, stories, insights – pain and hurt and tears too – flowed unceasingly from the lips of my subjects. Luke was the first one who used this question to open up and talk and talk and talk, which he did for nearly 20 minutes, as I scribbled furiously. The question itself was open ended, and up for a number of interpretations – and rarely needed any clarification. More than anything it was meant to start a conversation, but ended up being the heart of most interviews as it was an impetus to speak and give voice to experiences which, as I learned again and again, were rarely shared. Luke certainly had a lot to say, and he began in a way which was revealing.

“Well, Matt, what you have to understand is that Asian cultures put family first and foremost. A man, plus a woman, plus a baby. That's the original Korean math!”

It was not apparent at the time, but Luke, as my first interview subject, managed to sum up the issues and speak on these topics in a way that revealed a level of perspicacity that belied his years. As we were talking together, he would offer insights and context – and humor too - for some of the more shocking statements he made. As he continued to talk about the messages and ideas about gays in a family setting, he offered:

“If your father finds out you’re gay, you can definitely expect to get beaten. Most Koreans will tell you this, and it’s something they’re afraid for. Belts, sometimes golf clubs will be used, like on a friend of mine. But after it’s done, at least it’s over. And then you’ll think about it and say, ‘Well, he loves me, but he shows it to me in a different way.’”

He chuckled about this as he was telling me, as I tried to suppress the grimace that was working its way across my face. Going on he explained the situation, the corporal punishments that are *de rigueur* for wayward sons within a Korean family, and without excusing the behavior, he showed great compassion for both the beaters and the beaten. It was a pattern which emerged repeatedly in our interview on that cold March evening.

Without either of us realizing it, Luke was also giving the first voice in what became a chorus of perspectives, insights, and opinions that I heard over the following months. As if these interviews were following the rigorous internal logic of K pop group dynamics, Luke’s first solo voice set the stage for all that was to follow. He introduced many of the same themes I later heard – family, rules, compacts, subterfuges - and underscored the reality of what a queer Korean experience entails. These notes found echo time and again by the many subsequent voices which provided ample backup for what he laid out on that first evening. And, on top of all this – true to any successful boy band or girl group – each subsequent voice sustained the pattern while giving individual color and tone. The resulting ensemble was a rich performance that deserved to be recorded.

As we were nearing the end of the interview, I asked him if there was anything else he wanted me to know about his experiences, any other observations on gay life he could make. He glanced back at picture windows; by now night had fallen and the glittering Seoul cityscape lay behind our reflection in the glass. Following his lead, I too gazed at the uncanny image of the two of us, superimposed on the vast urban panorama. He paused and thought for a while, then began speaking to my reflection about what it would take to change the negative messages that Koreans are given about sexual minorities like him. I

imagined him addressing not me, not our reflections - at this moment he was talking to his compatriots living in the flashing neon forest which lay beyond our reflection.

“I know this is crazy to think about, but Korean guys coming out is the only way for us to change the minds of the people around us. I always tell myself that I should come out to my family, that they need to know someone who is gay. But then I get really scared and just wish that my sister would be a lesbian, so SHE could tell them! But I know in my heart that coming out is something that I’m going to have to do if I want to change what’s out there.”

After thanking him, and promising to meet again, we parted ways; Luke stayed at the coffee shop to study his SAT words, and I made my way home on foot. The cold night air, the incessant buzz of laughter and conversation, the inescapable pop songs, and the lingering aromas of Korean barbeque - it was all exhilarating, but even more so was the effect of our time together. Threading my way through the crowds, Luke’s words were still echoing in my head - he had given me a glimpse of a secretive, significant experience, and I needed to see more.

Thus began my curious odyssey through the worlds of queer Korea. Given all I was to hear over the course of the many conversations with gay men from across South Korea, I kept returning to Luke’s initial query. Why did I care? Why should anyone?

Introduction

It seems to have become an article of faith that there exists, floating around and enveloping us like the oxygen we breathe, an all encompassing gay identity, a set of shared characteristics which lend coherence and understanding to the often muddled, difficult realities of individual experience. This assumption is alluring for many reasons, not least of which is that it provides a sense of understanding and belonging to a people often marginalized and pushed to the edges of society. In far too many settings, a lack of information, a paucity of role models, the absence of honest conversation, or any number of other deficits compel those who are facing the first rumblings of sexual difference towards what has become a pretty standard model of “gayness.” This gay identity, at least how it is understood in contemporary America, is both troublesome and emancipatory, depending on the circumstances through which it is encountered; yet this fundamental “identity” must be grappled with in any discussion of queerness.

We are at the point in America where obvious differences amongst those who take upon themselves the status of sexual minority preclude easy categorization. We have patted ourselves on the back over just how *inclusive* we are, over how *welcoming* we have become in our movement; why, we even have our very own rainbow flag, which just trumpets “we accept you!” On the face of things, our LGBT culture seeks, rightly, to envelope all comers in the big tent of queer identity. All one needs to do is listen for a moment to the unending stream of platitudes about the colors of the rainbow issuing forth from the mouths of leaders – from within and without the movement – to think that yes, you too will recognize your brothers and sisters, and be recognized yourself in a place on that beautiful color spectrum.

Hand in hand with this platitude is the idea that there exists a gay community the world over. If it is accepted that there are characteristics that we all share, then it is a short leap of logic to the assumption that whether one is in Boston, Bangalore, or Busan, there will be places which one can gain access to,

people with whom one can talk – most importantly, a community which one can *already know*. For many gays, added to this assumption is that in any one of these places there will be music which one can listen to, locals one could meet, fun which can be had; in other words, there will be a gay bar somewhere close by which will be playing American pop music. This phenomenon is well documented, and British gay rights activist Simon Watney puts it nicely: “Few heterosexuals can imagine the sense of relief which a gay man or lesbian finds in a gay bar or a dyke bar in a strange city in a foreign country. Even if one cannot speak the local language, we feel a sense of identification. Besides, we generally like meeting one another, learning about which is happening to people ‘like us’ from other parts of the world” (Manalansan 6).

It is quite easy to follow this path further and further towards facile assumptions which only serve to make LGBT identities reductive clichés. For upwardly mobile gay denizens of Chelsea or the Castro, who travel to Rio, Barcelona, Puerto Vallarta, and Bangkok – it’s so easy to realize that *why of course we’re all connected, don’t you see?* In all of these places, people are just so different, but how can you explain that in each place the clubs will play their Madonna, Kylie, Cher, and Britney? In all of these places, so different on the surface, we all like our tight clothes and tight bodies, the strong drinks and strong arms, the beaches and the brunches. Any number of guys making their first journeys overseas, hitting up the destinations splashed across the glossy pages of gay travel magazines will surely come back with versions of this story, usually related to friends in the breathless and excited voice that accompanies those truly revelatory experiences which accrue only to world travelers – after all, that’s the reason we travel across the globe, right? In order to gain one of those deeper understandings that we read about in blogs? In so doing we give continual credence to this “we’re all the same, the world over” narrative.

It is tempting to dismiss these “travel” narratives as bogus or naïve - and indeed, many thought leaders do just that. But their continual production and dissemination in the LGBT discourse proves their allure; it is almost as if we want to, as if we need to, believe that deep down, we’re all the same. The

question becomes, simply, why? While it is certainly true that one can listen to the same playlist in gay bars around the world, these glib assumptions are, obviously, applicable only to a very privileged and very small slice of sexual minorities – it hardly represents that big tent which accepts all comers. The person who flips through a *Spartacus*¹ or *Damron* guide, who visits the latest website announcing the “Top Ten Gay Travel Destinations!” in order to find LGBT spaces in far flung corners of the globe² can just as easily encounter exotica in some neighborhood in their city they avoid, yet they persist in flying around the world. The paradox lies in this quest to seek out the other only to have them reinforce a safe, accepted reflection of ourselves; in other words, we pursue a false ideal of difference with the sole purpose of discovering similarity.

This imagined affinity which is so eagerly sought extends beyond these basic cultural connections, because, it stands to reason, those who share a common identity will be able to grok across multiple spheres: psychological, social, political, etc. But this is where some fancy footwork needs to be deployed, in order to dance around any accusations that these astonishingly broad generalizations deny, contradict, subsume, relegate, expropriate, or otherwise *do* someone else’s identity and self concept in a way that would be objectionable. As open thinkers who are accepting of others, we cannot let this happen! So, all one needs to do is claim that any and every identity attribute necessarily comes *after* one’s sexual identity; that sexuality is a basic, a priori proposition. And yes, for many people this is congruent with their experiences – being a member of a sexual minority is the keystone of their identity – but it is certainly not the case for all. Not every gay man would boil their essence down to a reformulated, albeit fabulous, gloss of Descartes: “I think; therefore I am. Next, I’m gay!”

¹ South Korea comes in at 118 on the ranked listing of countries friendly to gay travelers, behind India and ahead of Lebanon (*Spartacus* Gay Travel Index).

² A quick online search of these listicles reveal some peculiar locales chosen as Top Gay Destinations in 2016, among them Eureka Springs, Route 66, Yangon, and Rwanda (Heideman). The latter was ranked 99th on the *Spartacus* list, due primarily to “hostile locals.”

That type of thinking, prevalent as it is, establishes a linkage, a correlation that suggests that no matter who someone else is, they are first and foremost connected to you in a way *most* fundamental to who they are. This will then allow your voices to be shared, ergo what one of you says speaks with the voice of the other, ergo what you say will speak for everyone. And, just to make sure that all the bases are covered, the acronym which enshrines this shared kinship keeps growing: LGBTIQQAAP at last count. Because, if you are some shade of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, allied, asexual, or pansexual, and someone else is some shade of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, allied, asexual, or pansexual too – then surely you’re both somewhere in that big rainbow colored tent, and, deep down, similar.

The obvious pitfalls in such a glib understanding of difference hardly seem to matter to all those who have taken it on faith that this global gay identity exists, for the image of global “gayness” reflects back the face of those who are seeking it. And, overwhelmingly, the face that is reflected back is white, male, and well off – it is the face of those who are paging through the gay guides or online forums searching for a bar, sauna, or hotel in some other country. This aspect of queer visibility strikes at the heart of the “global gay identity” fallacy, and the reactions against this realization lead to varied management and containment strategies.

Thus, there is an illusion, which, no matter how beguiling, how attractive, is at its heart the very abnegation of what it seeks to celebrate. Confronting this canard is painful, but necessary – and to many of its adherents, dismantling this belief smacks of heresy. Allowing that others’ identities may not be primarily similar might seem at first to be atomizing this painstakingly constructed world community of LGBT brothers and sisters. For many who have felt alone before, or who have already experienced the trauma of losing membership in a communal body due to their sexuality, this is akin to an act of violence; it is ripping apart the rainbow flag. However, and happily, it does not have to be an either/or proposition.

It is a similar dialectic which occurs in the discussions and evaluations of globalization. As sociologist Anthony Giddons points out, “Globalization is often seen in extreme terms either as a foreboding specter of a catastrophic future or as a cause for a celebratory jubilation over the resolution of local repressions” (Manalansan 5). As those on both sides of the debate can admit, sometimes the end result falls somewhere in between both extremes: that the reality on the ground may not be only an authentic and unadulterated paradise laid waste by cultural and capitalistic imperialism, or, that there may not be only an inexorable march to global understanding and *Kumbaya* singing.

Weaving together these two often interrelated strands of societal permutation yields a peculiar tapestry. For years now, academics have been disputing the dominant narratives of this world gay identity, this easy lumping of all together, rightly challenging these ideas and demanding an inclusivity that pays more than just lip service to fundamental differences. At the same time, advocates are working to advance a civil rights agenda that they see as benefiting all sexual minorities, all across the world. It works in their favor to posit a vast, global community, somewhat different in their particulars, but monolithic in their fundamentals.

At the same time, adversaries are making their own, similar assumptions and using scare politics to roll back what they see as threatening. It works to their advantage too to cast all sexual minorities as some variation of perverse, misdirected male lust. Within their gaze, they see a dangerous threat to culture, masculinity – even existence - posed by an encroaching gay male identity. This is revealed in the language they deploy to characterize these perceived threats. When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denies the presence in Iran of a culturally foreign symptom of Western decadence, the specter is one of a hulking, singular presence barely held at bay. Likewise, a curious window into Jerry Falwell’s psychic landscape is opened when one examines what he said during a sermon in 1993: “If we do not act now, homosexuals will own America. If you and I do not speak up now, this homosexual steamroller will literally crush all decent men, women and children who get in its way... and our nation will pay a terrible price” (Omer

276). These foes of gay rights are utilizing similar conceptions of a monolithic identity that the proponents use, and are actually reiterating the notion of a global, gay identity – these two sides are as strange bedfellows as there ever were!

Part I – Identity

The South Korean Situation

All of these currents are at play in contemporary South Korea, and it was to explore this nexus of identity, politics, globalization, and culture that I started interviewing gay men in and around Seoul. As with many similar endeavors, I went over armed with questions, contacts, a program – I went there with what I thought was an open mind, ready and willing to learn about “gay identity.” In order to do this I sat down and listened to self identified young gay men talk about their experiences. These interviews varied greatly in length, and often led to, or were preceded by, social interaction between me and their peer groups. In other words, we hung out a lot, and after a while I would ask them if they could talk to me about the things they experienced as gay guys in Korea.

It was only after I’d completed a good handful of interviews, when I was in the middle of a vast, seething, complexity that I realized that the questions I was asking were not revealing anything that I could have expected. Neat answers, easily conforming to expectations – or at least problematizing those expectations in understandable ways – all this was absent. What was being uncovered were the fault lines of a fractured understanding of progress, of identity itself. It was more than just an argument over how to move forward, how to confront prejudice or advance a political agenda; it was a questioning of the very necessity of movement at all.

These were perspectives coming from men who easily and freely admitted being gay, and I was really surprised to hear something so....well, heretical. After all, the West is used to celebrating the brave activists the world over, who stand up against the forces of misunderstanding and hate. Often in the face of incredible personal danger and fighting for LGBT rights, we commend these individuals by giving them awards and filling our media with their histories. It is an ideal held in the highest progressive esteem

– witness the approbation and prominence due Caitlyn Jenner³. Yet, there I was, talking to so many men who had attitudes along the lines of what one of them, Min, told me: “There are some people fighting for gay rights here in Korea. I don’t even know why they bother.”

It was startling. How could so many of the people I talked to take such a blasé attitude about something that, as it seemed to me, was so important, so necessary for self expression, so personal? Isn’t fighting for gay rights the next big step in building a better humanity? That’s taken as a given here in the United States. As it turned out, this seemingly lackadaisical attitude towards activism and agitation wasn’t a symptom of fear or repression, it wasn’t a result of laziness, either - it was a genuine reaction to what my interviewees saw as not even a problem in the first place.

To them it was self evident that “fighting” for “gay rights” was something of a fool’s errand, because, after all, what were they lacking? As I looked and listened, I began to see what they meant: Korea is bursting at the seams with gay culture. There are thriving gay communities, forged on and offline; spaces claimed and appropriated: “this is Lesbian Girl Park, that’s Homo Hill”; there is, in Seoul at least, a seemingly unending supply of sexual partners, and plenty of friends, clubs, and a real degree of visibility for those I talked to. Within this milieu, it wasn’t the hardest thing to find a niche – one had to look for it, but it was there. But was there cost? Did something have to be traded, or compromised?

The Korean Queer Social Compact

What was revealed was a seemingly surreal social compact: All of Korea’s LGBT culture is yours to explore, and acceptance within the larger domain of Korean society is open to you - just as long as you followed a couple of rules. The first rule was certainly the most important, and it was understood and

³ In the six months following the initial publication of *Vanity Fair’s* article “Call me Cait” in which Ms. Jenner announced her gender transition, she was awarded the Arthur Ashe Courage Award by ESPN, interviewed for a full hour prime time special by Diane Sawyer, was a runner up for *Time’s* Person of the Year, and named *Glamour’s* Woman of the Year and “Most Fascinating Person of the Year” by Barbara Walters (caitlynjenner.com).

internalized as deeply as an Old Testament commandment: Thou shalt not admit to being gay to your family. If this was obeyed, then one was allowed access into all that glistened and gleamed in the Korean queer world.

This rule, this demand that parents are not confronted with evidence of homosexuality, extends into all areas of LGBT life, and the reason for this stems primarily from the fact that today, Korean society is permeated with Confucian traditions. Much more than a religion, in the Western sense, Confucianism is a way of life, a set of broad agreements which dictate the social norms and familial expectations in society (Chung 19). Amongst the people with whom I spoke, the adherence to Confucian ideals of filial piety was an ever-present concern; whether articulated openly or not, they inform and limit the range of action available to those who wish to stay within its scope of morality. These values are inculcated from the earliest ages too; as Edward Chung says in his study of Korean Confucianism, “look at the ethics textbooks which are routinely used in Korean and other East Asian schools: many of the core Confucian values (e.g. filial piety, respect, righteousness, propriety etc.) are actually taught there. There is considerable attention to the inseparability of morality, society, and politics and the harmony of self, family, and community” (Chung 73). While Confucius himself was quiet on the morality of same sex desire (though subsequent thinkers wrestled with the subject), he was adamant when it came to maintaining tradition, obeying parents, and producing heirs – and it is because of this that my interviewees knew that to tell their parents about their contrary sexual preferences was an act of grave moral outrage.

To an American mindset this smacks of the worst types of repression: denial of “who you are” and relegation to the proverbial closet. What is this social compact if not a vast, systemic, suffocating “Don’t ask, don’t tell” imposed across Korean society? How can anyone live within such an oppressive system which denies the very essence of who you are? Again, this is where aspects of American dominant queer identity, the primacy of sexuality within self concept, the *cogito ergo sum tunc ego gay*, bumps into

a different structuring of personal attributes. All of my Korean subjects easily admitted to being gay, and most of them shared similar narratives about coming to terms with their status as a sexual minority. Some even used terminology which sounded as if it was straight from any commonplace American coming out anecdote, talking of “realizing I was more attracted to cute guys” and “coming out to myself”.

According to the accepted logic of the formation of a “universal gay identity” the next steps for most young men would be chafing under the heteronormative strictures inherent in one’s culture, followed by subtle and then overt stratagems to subvert these strictures, namely, coming out as a act of social, political, and psychological activism. Once one’s status as a sexual minority has been admitted to, the full splendor of self actualization, and the myriad benefits (including various forms of martyrdom) which are due will inevitably accrue – and *voila*, you are a complete gay!

Yet, for many of the young men I spoke with, the similarities in the gay identity journey stopped shortly after coming out to themselves. The Korean social compact dictated only a shortened trip, not from A to Z, but only A to B. The question became, simply, why? The picture began to get much clearer after I talked to Seung-hwan and he put it so succinctly:

“What you need to understand is that Korean people always wear masks; we are different to everyone and always present ourselves in certain ways to different people. For example, you are one person when you talk to your parents, and another person when you talk to your siblings. You are one person when you talk to your friends, and someone entirely different when you talk to your coworkers. You would never be the same person talking to your parents that you would be with your friends. In this way, gay is just another thing that you can’t be with some people that you can be with others.”

With this reformulation of gay identity, significant obstacles are averted; it may not be “out” in an American sense, but it’s out enough for Korea! In understanding why, it is quite helpful to understand the decision to come out according to the logic of a cost-benefit analysis. In other words, disclosing that one is a sexual minority must, in some ways, provide a measure of advantage to those who chose to do it; if it

didn't, then there would be no reason claim membership in a traditionally marginalized class. In America in the 1950's, telling the world that you were gay was an act of social suicide, and the total absence of any benefit in the face of overwhelming cost precluded the regular assertion of these identities. On the other hand, as time has passed and various benefits have accrued - not the least of which are political protections and some measure of cultural cache - more and more people feel comfortable enough to place themselves outside of traditional white-picket-fence heterosexuality.

Towards a different understanding of identity

Korea is a country in which a cost-benefit analysis, when applied to a universal coming out, argues forcefully for discretion. Transgressing the social contract will leave you scorned and abandoned, a cautionary tale that is pointed to as an example of what always to avoid. Across the board, the feedback I got from my interviewees was relentlessly negative – consequences for a coming out were dire. Some of the stories related were actually shocking, if not for the threat of (or actual) violence at the hands of a father, then certainly for the humiliation and social cost an out life would incur. For these reasons, the recognizable figure of an “out and proud” Korean gay man was quite hard to come by; in fact, there were some people who had never actually met one. Others had stories of a friend of a friend here, someone they met at a club there, who had stepped across the line and done what few Korean gays would ever dream of doing.

I spent quite a bit of time with one of these men - Heezy, an artist and activist. He was a figure of fascination, because his experience was so deeply rooted within the Korean experience, yet he seemed to be the antithesis of everyone else, everyone who lived their gay lives according to the social compact. For him, a lived life was an out life. And to this end he took it as his mission to be more than visible; being seen and recognized as a gay Korean was just the beginning. As different as this identity was, he then busied himself with pushing the envelope of acceptability even further: as a performance artist he staged provocative, very public performances that forced any who passed by to see not only homosexuality, but

homosexuality within a Korean context. The underside of the social compact was explored, the mechanisms which serve to make the cost-benefit analysis of coming out so one sided he placed squarely within the gaze of the Korean public. Heezy's performances, which will be explored in depth in Part III, were covered extensively in the media⁴, the ramifications of which took on a life of their own.

Understanding Heezy's outlook fits more comfortably within the accepted notions of gay identity or coming out stories which contain a phase of overt subjugations of the heteronormative order – part and parcel of this mythic, global gay identity. Heezy, or what he espouses, would be easily recognized and understood in an American gay context. However, to say that his story is following a “Western” archetype misses the point – but it makes one too. He is most obviously in and of Korea, and all of the actions and reactions to his out life are in and of Korea also. At the same time, though, he is adopting a public, gay identity vis-à-vis society that is wholly *not* of Korea; in fact, it is the very antithesis of accepted both within and without the gay community.

The conversations with Heezy helped reveal a central truth about gayness - Korean, Western, global, and every iteration in between. This notion of a teleological structure to gay identities and the process of identity formation within individuals and societies, while tempting and seemingly corroborated many times over, misses the mark. In other words, seeing an arc, a tough beginning and a happy end, a process of steps which both individuals and societies will take on their journey from loathing and hatred, to denial and misunderstanding, to grudging acceptance, and finally to celebration of gay identity is simply not correct. It is certainly true that we can see the outlines of just such an “arc of progress” when we look back at the previous decades in American society: the steady march of acceptance from the conformity and stifling atmosphere of the “high cost of coming out” days, to the beginnings of activism surrounding Stonewall, to the crises of the AIDS years, to the building of critical mass of the movement,

⁴ He has also been featured in Western media outlets, including a profile for the Huffington Post entitled “Here's Why I Walked Around Seoul Dressed as a Drag Queen 'Hurricane Kimchi'” (Yang).

which led to the eventual legalization of same sex marriage across the country. That this arc of progress is a societal mirror of so many personal coming out experiences only reinforces the belief that there is an underline to gayness - that beneath the surface of sexual identity there is an accompanying end goal. A purpose is already built in.

Looking at the situation of sexual minorities in South Korea today, it becomes apparent that someone who is completely out, like Heezy, is extraordinary. Most choose to follow the terms of the Social Compact and carve out for themselves an existence where they feel, in the words of one young man, “free enough” to be who they are. This is not to say, however, that very clear downsides of this Korean Social Compact do not exist. For certain members of the gay community – those who have yet to establish firm links with others like themselves – this facet of their identity can be *extremely* isolating. In my interviews I heard many men speak about the difficulties they encountered as teenagers, when they first began to discern how different from their peers they actually were. What few instances of same sex desire they encountered in the cultural sphere of South Korea were either shunned or held up as an example of what never to be. Until they were able to find reassurance that their sexuality wasn’t the social death sentence that society proclaimed it was, many contemplated actual death, by their own hand. In one of the most striking findings of my research, the majority of my interviewees either knew someone or they themselves attempted suicide.

Finding an accepting community becomes, in this context, an essential task for the well being of most queer Koreans. In the absence of an affirming societal narrative, and faced with such a strict prohibition against coming out and announcing public membership in this oppressed group, many have found solace and support in a place that has, since its inception, provided shelter to countless marginal and marginalized communities: the internet. One of my interviewees was the embodiment of all these trends: as an isolated gay teenager, looking around he saw a South Korea in which he was thoroughly condemned. In despair over his situation, he attempted suicide, not once, but twice. It was only afterwards

that he found online a community which gave him a sense of purpose and belonging. As he told me, “I found myself asking, ‘Was it always this way?’” Was there ever a time when same sex desire wasn’t something to be ashamed of?

Part II – Seung Ho

Seung Ho had quite a bit to say about queer Korea. More than any other person I spoke with, his stories, observations, theories, jokes, anecdotes, gossip, histories, dramas, near death experiences and impossible triumphs (and everything in between) gushed forth in a torrent of hyper enthusiastic conversation. Sitting across from him as he held forth on the subject was akin to walking into a glittering Korean electronics superstore with every television and sound system playing a different program at full volume. It was unreal, fascinating, and utterly exhausting.

As I began with my standard set of questions, I let the process unfold organically and found myself taken on a journey into some very interesting sociological terrain. Seung Ho's personal story took place in the rarified airs of the uppermost of upper crust Korean society; his family clan was one of the most prominent of the old *Yangban* aristocracy which ruled in imperial times. While no longer keeping peasants in enforced serfdom and exercising control over vast swaths of the Korean countryside, the family, just as in old times, found itself very near the centers of power. A faded black and white photograph he showed me of his mother, when she was five or six, laughing on the knee of South Korea's assassinated military dictator, General Park Chun-hee, only served to reinforce the impression that this wasn't your typical Korean family.

And yet, even though he was brought up in a social stratum far above that of any of my other interviewees, his experiences as they related to being gay were remarkably similar to that of everyone else. The social pressures, the family pressures, the questioning, the experiments, the chafing under the suffocating heteronormativity – the stories he told of these aspects of being gay in today's Korea could easily have come from any one of the other young men with whom I spoke, regardless of upbringing. Though the delivery of the message was unlike that of any other I'd received, the underlying themes were

not. Perhaps it was only the insertion of a word not often found in Seung Ho's prolixity that made my ears perk up when he opined,

"One needs to have a solid view of history in order to understand why you are where you are in this fucked up world!"

"Really? What do you mean?"

"Well, did I tell you already that when I was in high school, when I first started to realize that I had feelings for men, that I was so taken aback by these desires, so confused by what I was feeling that I embarked on a quest to find these feelings in Korean history, to look into our past and construct a story that would reflect and affirm who I was today in our country's illustrious past?"

"No, you didn't. Please, go ahead – tell me more..."

And tell he did. Over the course of the subsequent hours, and in follow up sessions scheduled afterwards because the tales and theories and histories kept coming, I listened with ever increasing amazement at three simultaneous narratives. The first was in the actual words he was saying, recounting a pieced together history of homosexuality in Korean society, tracing instances of same sex desire in personages as humble as actors and as exalted as kings and princesses. This was more than the usual declaration, "You know, our great king so-and-so was gay!" which I heard every now and then from my interviewees; this was obviously the fruit of a long, laborious obsession. The second narrative was that of Seung Ho himself: by uncovering a hidden history and connecting the dots he found present meaning and a way to come to terms with his own feelings for other men. And lastly, he was practicing what so many in Korea have done throughout time – looking to ancient and exalted models, learning from the past to help explain why Koreans are where they are in a sometimes, for lack of a better word, fucked up world.

The Problem of the Historical Understanding of "Gay"

One of the things that made Seung Ho's work difficult was the fact that merely understanding what "gay" is and has been through history is a daunting task. The notion that many have today, of that fundamental gay identity underpinning the very essence of who we are, would've been almost incomprehensible to someone living in a different epoch. Acting on feelings of desire for members of the same sex was hardly a defining facet of identity, even though the practice was rife across countless civilizations spanning the globe. Moreover, if Seung Ho were to travel back in time to the Joseon Dynasty, say, 500 years ago, and spoke with the *Yangban* ancestors who helped establish his family, and he started throwing about the words that he and his peers used to talk about same sex desire – well, there is little doubt that he would be met with blank stares and puzzled expressions.

The principal word used in today's Korea to talk about homosexuality in general is *dong seong ae* which is based on Chinese characters and when translated literally means "same sex love". Since the educated classes of Korean society used to use Chinese characters to write their language, this term would have been translatable and perhaps – we can only guess - understood in a similar context to how it is used today. However, contemporary usage has borrowed from English three variations within this broad description to specify further iterations within the category: *kweah*, *geh ee*, and *lehj bi an*. Obviously, words like these find no place in the historical writings of Korea – but then again, neither does *dong seong ae*. Nor does another one of the most well used terms, coined by gays themselves when they wanted to talk about themselves in public, but not draw unwanted public attention, and therefore, disapproval: *ee bahn een*. This word is actually a pun, because it takes the word for "normal people" *een bahn een* and subtracts one phoneme, as if to say that with one small exception, with just one little change, we too are normal people.

The historic annals of Korea which Seung Ho scoured for references to the feelings he was coming to terms with made no mention of these words, nor of any others which could be taken to identify other gays in Korean history, no matter how hard he looked, for one very, very simple reason: in Korea,

as in many other cultures, homosexual wasn't something you *were*, it was something you *did*. Within the historical context of Korean society, a wide range of sexual behaviors, including countless forms of same sex desire and customs, were to be found - yet never was an inner difference to be discerned between those who followed these pursuits and those who didn't. It was left to later generations of Koreans, much later generations under the influence of the West, to claim that people who performed gay acts were themselves a separate class of people. The understanding of identity that I encountered during my interviews was a mixture of both of these ideas. Seung-hwan's quote in Part I is revealing: "being gay is just another thing that you can be with some people that you can't be with others." He seems to be having it both ways, but I would argue that his understanding of gay identity in contemporary South Korea is far more analogous to historical precedent than what others think about it being an essential facet of identity.

Many thinkers have delved into this subject and have worked to trace a clear arc of understanding as sexuality and its myriad expressions have been transformed from being actions into being identities. The philosopher and critic Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, was one of the very first to bring this investigation to the forefront, and countless others have built on his work. In regards to East Asia, some historians have sought to trace the same evolution in understanding within the historical records of these societies, and have found ample proof to back up these assertions. The work of Gregory Pflugfelder, who specializes in Japan, stands out in both its exactitude and breadth as he explores how the various expressions of homosexuality slowly unfold and are imbued with new meaning across centuries of Japanese history.

The simple fact remains that trying to understand pre-modern notions of sexual practice through the prism of modern sexuality leaves one in an intellectual carnival funhouse, with mirrors everywhere warping and distorting concepts almost beyond recognition. Yes, the forms are there, and yes, the actions are too – but two sets of eyes, centuries apart, would yield vastly different interpretations. Rather than reargue these same points, proving and disproving how various permutations of sexuality are expressed,

much less add new theorems to join those advanced by far more illustrious thinkers, I want to examine how the reconstruction and reinscription of Korea's queer past by one small group of modern sleuths serves as a perfect vehicle for understanding the situation of sexual minorities in contemporary society.

Queering Korea's Past

In Seung Ho's case, the finer points of queer historiography, as intriguing as they are and as smart as he was, took a backseat to combing through volumes of Korean history to find examples of *dong seung ae*. As he put it, "It was all there, right in front of me, I just needed to learn how to look for it." And learn to look for it he did, over the course of many months. As is the case for many of his generation, growing up in the late 1990's, the first place he turned was the still young World Wide Web. Scouring local gay chat rooms and message boards, he became part of an underground bulletin board community that worked to uncover in the historical records of Imperial Korea references to same sex love.

Many of the works of history through which Seung Ho and his small coterie of amateur sleuths were poring through, though written in Classical Chinese, have been translated into modern Korean, and when it was put on notice that particular passages could be read to reveal instances of same sex desire, the message boards lit up. He and the others would take turns translating the ancient texts to more fully espouse what they viewed as a very clear homosexual subtext. In a transparent moment of glee, as he was explaining how he did this, he said that he rarely had to leave his high school library:

"Everything was there, right under the noses of all the prudish librarians and conservative history teachers at my school. If any of them had known that I was using their own library to learn about the history of gays in Korea they would've died of embarrassment and burned the books. It was all right there, the whole time! No one was looking for it though, and it made me feel like Indiana Jones to be the one finding it!"

So, what was it that Seung Ho was finding? What were these translations saying about same sex love if, as a concept, "gays" didn't exist? As he said, the material was there, if one knew how to find it.

Korea's historical memory is preserved in a number of vast, encyclopedic collections which were compiled by court historians on order of later kings. Among the most famous are the two accounts of the Three Kingdoms Era (57 B.C.E. -668 C.E.), the *Samguk Sagi* and the *Samguk Yusa*. Both of these works are vast repositories of this early Korean culture, with the translated titles *History of the Three Kingdoms Era* and *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms Era* giving ample clues as to what is discussed on their pages⁵. As entries in the distinguished list of East Asian imperial histories, they are primarily concerned with the rise and fall of kings, transmitting sage advice through the generations, and preserving and extending royal legitimacy. This necessitated a careful approach when the lives of the rulers ran contrary to espoused morality, and the more salacious details of who was sleeping with whom are often passed over or left open to interpretation. These were some of the fertile grounds that Seung Ho and his peers turned to as they sought to excavate a queer history of their culture.

One facet of Korean history with fertile ground to mine for *dong seong ae* subtext would be that of the *Hwarang*, or the “Flowering Knights,” found in the Silla Kingdom (57 B.C.E. – 935 C.E.). These young men were indeed the flowers of this ancient society, commented upon by Chinese travelers for their beauty, even called *hyangdo* “incense men” for their fragrance (Murray 68). A perfect amalgamation of all Silla high culture and ideals – especially to modern Koreans, millennia removed - these were most often the sons of the elite, taught in Buddhist academies, brought up as warrior knights who also bedecked themselves in the costliest clothes and fanciest cosmetics (Hahn 60). Bound together by honor and custom, they symbolize Korea as it wants to be known, and occupy such a place in the collective imagination that it often finds them as stars of various Korean period dramas on television today⁶.

⁵ There are limited English translations of these works, though a good place to start reading, if one is interested, is *Sources of the Korean Tradition Vol. 1* edited by Peter Lee and William Theodore De Bary.

⁶ As I was researching and interviewing in Korea in 2015, the K-Pop universe was abuzz with the news that Hyungsik Park, of the popular boyband ZE:A, would be starring, with other ‘A list’ celebrities, in the new K-Drama *Hwarang: The Beginning*. Heavy promotion of the series ensued, and the first episode will be airing on December 16, 2016 (Do).

Who were they, really? Historians agree that they were a military formation of young men, perhaps a few hundred strong, and elevated into the elite ranks of the *hwarang* by election (Murray 67). Coming from the upper classes of Silla society, their remit was to go into battle with the enemies of the state, defend Silla, and in peace time, work to advance the common good by increasing national power (Lazore). Echoing the *Bushido* code of the Japanese Samurai, these flowering knights of Silla also had their own code of chivalry (Hahn 61).

It's little wonder that the stories of the *Hwarang* provided plenty of material ripe for interpretation, for after all, as Seung Ho put it, "What happens when a group of horny teenagers are made to live together, fight together, and be beautiful?" Whatever interpretations and translations he and his fellow investigators used to shed light on these young men, the more mainstream historians of Korea have filled in many of the blanks. Mostly unknown to society at large until after 1945, these *hwarang* captured the public imagination, and plenty of scholarly attention, as Korean society was looking to its past for valorous models as they attempted to forge a new era after the ruination and humiliation of the Japanese occupation.

Curiously enough, this echoes the *Samgak Yusa*, and other of these ancient texts as they justify the formation of this sacred band of warriors. Marrying nationalism and Buddhist ideology, they were formed by the Silla kings as a vehicle for spiritual and martial renewal in the face of external pressures (Lazore). Seung Ho and his own band of historians found other, queerer, echoes: especially since the *Samguk Yusa* refers to them not as *hwarang* (花郎), but actually as *hwanang* (花娘), which can be interpreted as "Flower girls" (Hahn 61). These small matters of interpretation actually portend a great deal, because this harkens back to an earlier practice of Silla, one that mirrored that of what the *hwarang* became. According to the annals, King Jinheung of Silla (r. 540-576) decreed that two groups of beautiful young women would come to the service of the state. Called *Wonhae* (원화, 源花), meaning "original flowers" or "source of the flowers," they were taught dancing, Buddhist philosophy, and entertaining

(Rutt 51). Their exact role in the Silla court is up for interpretation; some scholars argue that they were merely courtesans by another name, while others, pointing to the unusually prominent role played by women in the Silla Kingdom, see them in a different light. At any rate, in the life of Silla these maidens became controversial, and were used as pawns by the various factions seeking influence and control over the king and the state; eventually the *wonhae* were disbanded and later, in their stead, were placed the groups of male youths.

With the outlines of the *hwarang* amply demonstrated by the extant sources, it was left to Seung Ho and his fellow investigators to flesh out the narrative and imbue these young men with qualities both real and imagined. They set to work together and slowly constructed what they felt was a portrait more becoming, more encompassing of who the *hwarang* really were than the unremittingly heterosexual examples which surrounded them across the current Korean cultural universe. For example, if these young men were the heirs of the *wonhae*, seen by many as a resolutely sensual and libidinous group, wouldn't it stand to reason that yielding to sexual pleasures was one of their reasons for existence? Added to this, the obvious attention to appearance and masculine beauty only reinforces the allure they surely possessed; they were Silla's flowers of male beauty, collected from across the kingdom in a resplendent bouquet. This isn't conjecture either, as Seung Ho pointed out to me; it's right there, in the *Samgak Sagi*⁷. When their skill as warriors and status as elite protectors of the nation is added to their resume, what results is not merely a picture of a hushed up male harem, it is – as Seung Ho told me with glee - a veritable cadre of homosexual supermen, loving themselves and their Korea with equal fervor!

⁷ Indeed, some of the passages to which Seung Ho was referring are readily open to interpretation. For example, one *Hwarang*, Sada-ham, was praised as a “youth of sixteen from an aristocratic and distinguished family, handsome and elegant, square-faced and upright. He was regarded as being all the more admirable for having declined a number of rewards from a grateful king.” The next year, Sada-ham lost his fellow *Hwarang* Mugwan, “with whom he had sworn friendship to death...Sada-ham mourned him for seven days, and then died himself” (Rutt 32).

Another one of the places to look for examples of same sex desire in the historical record is in the life of King Gongmin (1351-1374), a ruler of the Goryeo Dynasty, for the simple reason that the material arguing for his inclusion in the ranks of those who practiced *dong seong ae* is simply overwhelming. This is the man – whose name was often not remembered or confused with others – that was mentioned again and again and again when my interviewees pointed to one of the kings being, in the words of one, “absolutely, 100% positively gay!” No amount of whitewashing could hide the fact that his court was one of luminous homosexual desire.

As the ruler of a unified Korean state under the thumb of the Yuan Empire in China, Gongmin took a Mongolian princess as his wife, and remained childless for years. Much of his reign was spent negotiating Korea’s placement within the crumbling Mongol Empire and dealing with the newly ascendant Ming Dynasty. Foreign affairs make up the lion’s share of any historical account of his time as king – though his skill as a classical painter is often approvingly remarked upon, as is the connection to his queen. After her death, contrary to custom, he never remarried because, according to the official court historians, he was just too overcome with grief at her passing and could never find another like her.

Seung Ho and his friends were having none of that; to them the overly pious endorsements in the official histories smacked of a certain “my lady doth protest too much” approach to his marital relations. They did not have to dig too deep to find references to Gongmin’s male favorites by name: Hong Yun, Han An, Kwon Chin, Hong Kwan, and No Son. These royal catamites were even known by their own term, *chajewi*, which suggests that the practice of taking passive male partners was hardly limited to King Gongmin alone (Hahn 61). What stands out about these five men is the fact that their names have been preserved, which suggests that these *chajewi* occupied a more exalted place in Gongmin’s court than others in the many subsequent centuries. Furthermore, as they were examining the references to this Goryeo Dynasty, the message board sleuths learned to look for a particular term: *yongyang chi chong*, or

“The Dragon and the Sun” – the pairing up of two male symbols, a euphemism which came to stand for homosexual practices during the era (Hahn 62).

There is little wonder that Seung Ho waxed poetic over the historical epochs in which King Gongmin and the *hwarang* held sway, for they provide a picture of a Korean society that was – real or imagined, it hardly matters – accepting of a queer lifestyle at stark odds with the reality surrounding him as a gay high school student in the late 1990’s. By constructing a narrative of a Korea that not only accepted, but celebrated, male desire and *dong seong ae*, he and the others in that little corner of the internet made sense of where they were socially - and why they were compelled to post messages to one another in such furtive circumstances. The glittering terms that he used to reimagine and redescribe these early dynasties sounded much like the way people look back in hindsight at any perceived Golden Age. Yet, like all of those brief periods of queer blossoming – Weimar Germany, Renaissance Italy, San Francisco in the 1970’s - there must have been something that ended the acceptance of all of this same sex desire, something that, in properly dramatic fashion, ended the party and brought the curtains down on this seemingly fabulous Korean epoch. To Seung Ho and his friends, it was very obvious what this was: the Joseon Dynasty. Established in 1392 and lasting until the first years of the twentieth century, this long lived kingdom was built on the ruins of Gongmin’s 500 year old Goryeo Dynasty by King Taejo, a usurping general.

It was in this very real transition of dynasties that Seung Ho and his friends found the root cause for their position in contemporary Korea to be so “fucked up.” As Seung Ho related breathlessly to me, King Taejo and his sons, in seeking to solidify their claim to the throne, engaged in their own rewriting of history – blaming the decadence and effeminacy of Goryeo, and the state religion of Buddhism for the many reversals of fortune which beset the kingdom. It was because of the weak Goryeo rulers, both kings and, notably, queens too, that their proud country had been under the thumb of the Mongols. Like any good revolutionaries, they needed an ideology to replace the crumbling remains of the old order. Out went

the ecumenical and accepting Buddhism which encouraged groups like the *hwarang*. In came state sponsored Confucianism: rigorous, dour, and depressing. Seung Ho's contempt for Confucianism was palpable – there was little doubt where he placed the blame for the tenuous position of queer Koreans!

Nevermind that Confucianism was already an integral part of society, its ideals used to organize the civil service and referenced for centuries by Goryeo bureaucrats as they supported royal power (Chung 36). Korean historians have written much on the complex interplay of competing schools of thought in pre-Joseon society, and it could certainly be called simplistic to imagine such a neat cleaving of time into before and after. Yet, when Seung Ho and his amateur historians approached the very same, incontrovertible historical truth – that the early Joseon kings systematically favored Confucianism over all other ideologies – they arrived at a notably different interpretation than many of their mainstream brethren. The accepted historical narrative, espoused by generations of historians, is that this turn to Confucianism helped legitimize the new dynasty and set the stage for many of the greatest achievements of the Korean people (Chung 58).

However, Seung Ho disagreed vociferously:

“During the founding of Joseon, Taejo, and his son Taejong wanted to provide social stability, but ended up producing stagnation instead. Confucianism is an ideology for social control, in it everything is logical, understandable, based on ready made structures. You know what to do in order to get into heaven, you know who is better than you, who is beneath you.

“Confucianism poisoned Joseon from the start – it was a means for social control, not social cohesion. Goryeo represents the true essence of Korea, a civilization which is artistic, full of learning, full of commerce and even social mobility. In Joseon, the status of arts became so low, everyone became entrenched and enslaved, and Confucianism, in the service of the family, forced us to revile others for sexual proclivities which were natural.”

As evidence of this new Puritanism brought about by the wholesale adoption of Confucianism as both a state ideology and religion, he pointed to the immediate family of the most revered of Korean

monarchs, King Sejong (r. 1418-1450). What drew the attention of Seung Ho and his band of historical interpreters to Sejong was an incident which stands out for its singularity, and mystery. While the deadliest of intrigues were par for the course in the upper echelons of courtly politics, regardless of which dynasty was ruling, and while the most damaging innuendo was frequently employed to bring about the fall of this or that particular dynast, what rarely, if ever, entered the official record were instances of homosexual relations. However, in the middle of the official historical record, the *Sejong Sillok*⁸ is a lesbian love triangle.

Centering on the figure of Sejong's daughter-in-law, it is a brief, tantalizing excerpt that Seung Ho pointed to in order to give credence to the theory that now there was a new intolerance when it came to homosexual relations. In the *Sejong Sillok*, the section of the work devoted to this era, is the record of the sovereign calling a special meeting of his cabinet on October 24, 1436 in order to discuss and figure out exactly what to do with this young woman, Lady Pong. She was the second consort of his crown prince, Munjong, and there was a big problem within the walls of the palace: apparently she had been exercising sexual prerogatives with the female maidservants. One of them was called to testify against the princess: "She demanded that I lay with her, but I refused. She then forcibly tore about half my clothing off and pulled me behind the folding screen; there, she took off the rest of my clothes and forced me down. Then, just like a man, she trifled with me" (*Sejong Sillok* 75:7b-9b). As a result, Lady Pong was ejected from the palace and forced into commoner status by royal decree.

This incidence of incontestable female/female sexual relations in Korean history is unique. Subsequently, historians of the era have remarked upon the affair and used it as evidence for a number of

⁸. Sometimes translated as "*The True Record of the Joseon Dynasty*", it gives a fascinating day by day glance at the inner workings of the Royal Family. Unlike the *Samguk Sagi* and *Samguk Yusa*, this later history is the subject of a fully online, translated, searchable database sponsored by the National Institute of Korean History. For example, you may learn that on the 14th day of the 5th month of Sejong's 3rd year of ruling (early June, in the year 1420) he attended a Royal Lecture, while the day before Princess Yeongseon passed away – and for her funeral gifted beans, rice, paper, and inner and outer coffins.

theories. Some, like Michael Pettid, have pointed out that sexual relations between women of the palace must have been fairly commonplace; while not remarked upon at length, the idea of these women “pairing up” even had its own euphemism, *taesik*, in the Joseon Dynasty. These relationships must have been accepted as somewhat normal, and while not fully embraced, much less celebrated, they were a fact of life (Pettid 176). What stood out in this affair was the usurpation of male status, a clear violation of Confucian principles. When this is combined with the fact that court imperatives demanded a healthy heir to the throne, which Lady Pong did not provide to her partner’s concerned father, her transgressions against the Confucian system proved too much to bear – she was called into judgement before the king and thus, salacious charges of lesbian rape entered the official court histories (Pettid 176).

Working from the record in the *Sejong Sillok* Seung Ho and his anonymous friends crafted a tale of thwarted love, betrayal, and heartbreak. In this reading, she became a heroic figure, transformed from a sexual predator who was dangerous to the dynasty into a willful young woman who put her life on the line to love who she wanted to love. Set against the backdrop of a suffocating court morality, her actions in pursuit of love were transgressive three times over: as a woman forced to marry a man, as a consort forced to produce an heir and stuck in a loveless relationship, and as royalty forced to love only within her class. By loving a maidservant she became, to the message board’s contributors, a queer icon launching her own gay revolution. That the object of her love was forced to betray her (no doubt threatened or tortured in this most dire of circumstances), and the back of her one woman rebellion broken on the wheel of Confucian conformity only added to the tragedy and allure of this reinterpretation.

Lady Pong was thus rehabilitated. From the short description in the official history of what could only be taken as, at face value, a sexual assault by a noble of a member of the vast underclass – hardly an edifying tale – a portrait of love and *dong seung ae* as a positive force was composed. As Seung Ho took pains to point out, this may be conjecture, but it very well could have happened. He and his small group of revisionists were working with what historical evidence they could find, and so it is little wonder that

they were most concerned with the lives of this or that crowned head. What the masses of common folk were up to in pre-modern Korea were rarely remarked upon in these message boards for the simple reason that what they were up to was rarely remarked upon by those writing the official histories.

However, it stands to reason that there was, throughout the centuries, a tradition of same sex practice among the lower strata of society. The hard evidence for this is, at times, rather difficult to come by, so it too relies heavily on guesswork, interpretation, and historical parallels. But still, it is not hard to imagine, based on what evidence exists, that *dong seung ae* was alive and well outside the rarified airs of the Korean royal palaces.

Same Sex Practice in Historical Korea

To begin with, there are a number of vernacular songs and poems which have come down through the centuries which are unequivocally addressed to handsome young men, in which the speaker yearns for their love and seeks their attention. Dating from the Silla Kingdom, and found in the *Samguk Yusa*, there is little doubt that these speakers address *hwarang* as the objects of their affection (Hahn 60). Alternating with feelings of sadness, yearning, love, even humor, perhaps, they represent a tantalizingly unambiguous entrance of same sex love into the cultural sphere of early Korea.

Song of Yearning of the Flower Boy Taemara

The whole world weeps sadly
The departing Spring.
Wrinkles lance
Your once handsome face,
for the space of a glance
May we meet again.
Fair Lord, what hope for my burning heart?
How can I sleep in my alley hovel?

Song in Praise of Flower Boy Kilbo

Moon
Appearing fitfully
Trailing the white clouds,
Whither did you go?
The face of the Flower Boy Kilbo
Was reflected in the pale green water,
Here among the pebbles of the stream
I seek the bounds of the heart he bore.

Ah, ah! Flower Boy here,

Noble pine that fears no frost!

Of special note in these poems is the fact that the speaker, especially in the first, is most clearly someone not of the upper classes. We are less certain of the gender of the speaker, but it stands to reason that the voice is masculine, if only because that would be following the conventions of the day. We know that both poems were written by men, the first by Taemara himself, a member of the *hwarang*, and the second by a Buddhist monk named Chungdam. Also, both of these date from the reign of King Hyoso of Silla (r. 692-702).

Another poem has come down through time as one of the most interesting references to *dong seung ae* in the entire Korean cultural corpus. Also dating from the Silla Kingdom, its bald references to sexual intercourse find little echo in other works of this era - or of any other (Hahn 62).

Cho'yong's Song

Playing in the moonlight of the capital,
Till the morning comes.
I return home
To see four legs in my bed.
Two belong to me.
Whose are the other two?
But what was my own
Has been taken from me, what now?

In the Korean literary discourse, the above three songs have been broadly accepted as referencing male/male sexual practices among the *hwarang* of Silla (Hahn 61, Murray 69). Interestingly enough, to help understand how embedded the connection became between these young men and gay sex in the broader Korean consciousness it is useful to examine the word itself. Authors Kim and Hahn, as they

were looking at the historical descriptions of same sex desire in poetry, traced the evolution in meanings of the word *hwarang* (화랑). As described earlier, the term was taken to mean "Flowering Knights" but it more literally meant "Flower of Youth." As time went on the word took on different and more negative connotations; in colloquial usage the word gave rise to variations like *hwallyangi* and *hwangangnom*, which have a variety of meanings along the lines of "playboy" or "lazy good for nothing." Today, using the word *hwarang* to describe a man in Korea is done only when one wants to imply homosexual tendencies; as some Korean linguists have pointed out, "modern *hwarang* or 'players' are also perceived of as a homosexually oriented group." How this word came to be freighted with such negativity is worth pondering, but it surely has much to do with the transition from the Buddhist oriented sybaritism of Silla to the more austere Confucianism of Joseon.

These words derived from *hwarang* all glance by homosexual practice, almost as though they were circling around the issue without ever naming it explicitly. Too, these privileged youth represent a middle ground between the rulers and the ruled; however it was left to other words to describe these actions, and the vocabularies reveal much about how *dong seung ae* was lived and practiced in the historical Korea of the lower classes of society. Curiously enough, it is in two uniquely Korean theatrical performance traditions that most of what we can infer about same sex love among the broader population is found.

The first of these two theatrical traditions is called *kkoku kaksi* and is the classic Korean Puppet Theater. Performed by bands of travelling entertainers, the shows blended popular stories and folklore for the entertainment of their mainly peasant audiences. Preserved now mainly through official reconstruction, much of the original stories' overt homosexual themes have been expurgated. One of the stories deals with what could have been a common enough occurrence in rural Korea: an older, upper class *yangban* landlord, widowed, who falls head over heels in love with a good looking village youth named Midongaji. He showers him with gifts and presents, and eventually he and the boy come together.

Henceforth, the word *midongaji* was used to describe a good looking boy who had sex with other boys; a midong was a boy who dressed attractively, often in women's clothing and makeup, and who was a passive sexual partner (Rutt 61). Curiously, this word was also used in early Korean translations of the Bible whenever male prostitutes or Sodomites were mentioned.

The second of the two theatrical traditions which offer abundant opportunities for understanding how same sex love was practiced in early Korea is that of *namsadang*, the traditional troupes of wandering players who were a fixture of life in rural Korea for centuries (Kim 9). Blending together various strands of Korean culture, these male players melded Buddhist mysticism and shamanistic rituals into their circus-like performances. As more attention was paid to this uniquely Korean group, cultural anthropologists found themselves face to face with an overtly homosexual tradition. Travelling through the countryside, the troupes were almost always homeless and itinerant. They recruited from the lowest rungs of society; more than a few orphans joined or were impressed into their ranks. As one historian noted, "The *namsadang* troupe appears to have been a homosexual community. It was composed of forty to fifty single homeless males, including about fourteen senior performers and a number of novices...they were divided into groups of *sutdongmo* ('butch') and *yongdongmo* ('queen'); all newcomers belonged to *yongdongmo*" (Murray 169).

As they traveled from place to place, they would recruit new members into their ranks. Some were seduced sexually, others were seduced by, as one historian put it, "the magic of performing on stage." These boys were called *Ppiri* and always assumed passive sexual roles in the troupe. Moreover, the *Ppiri* were "expected to put on women's dress during the performances and play the female part in their community, whereas the senior members played the male role...The competition amongst the *namsadang* groups for handsome *Ppiri* was noticeable" (Murray 169). One former *namsadang* member, named Kim Keun-Bae, even related how these new members were compelled to sleep with the male servants of the villagers, with the senior members of the troupe pocketing the proceeds (Murray 170).

Whatever the dynamics of each individual troupe happened to be, however they varied, what is in no dispute is the fact that they were the clearest examples of open homosexual relations in Korean history - so much so that the very name of their craft came to be used as a euphemism for same sex love. Throughout the historical record, mentions of these groups as little more than roving bands of homosexual prostitutes abound. Father Richard Rutt, an Anglican missionary who took a keen interest in the expressions of Korean folklore, commented that "among the itinerant players - the dancers and acrobats and puppet-show people - pederasty, male prostitution, and regular homosexual marriages - sometimes with transvestitism - were common and well known" (Rutt 9). The people for whom the *namsadang* performed were unbothered by the sexual proclivities of the troupe (Murray 169).

Be that as it may, it is ironic to note that while over time the word *hwarang* gave rise to increasingly negative meanings, that of the *namsadang* became enshrined as one of Korea's great cultural achievements. Perhaps this can be explained by noting that what emerges is a peculiar dichotomy in homosexual relations in Korean history. While no exact records of the beginnings of the *namsadang* exist, it is known that by the middle and late Joseon dynasty they were firmly ensconced in Korean society. This was the era in which Confucianism forced the upper classes into increasingly strident denunciations of homosexual relations. After all, apologists for the dynasty looked at the pederasty of the Goryeo kings with hearty disapproval. It follows that the *hwarang* as leftovers from the upper society of the pre-Joseon period, came to be seen as effeminate and unmanly, and the associations with the word became negative, while the *namsadang*, products of both the Joseon dynasty and the lower classes, escape from any official notice – and proscription.

Homosexuality and the Founding of Modern South Korea

It's now possible finally, to emphatically assert the presence of a rich tradition of *dong seung ae* across the centuries on the Korean peninsula. That being said, it becomes necessary to come to terms with the fact that for Seung Ho, and for anyone else coming of age as he did in today's South Korea, those who

dared practice some iteration of *dong seung ae*, when they were referenced at all, were the subject of near universal condemnation. Attacked, blamed, misunderstood, pitied, feared – little wonder that Seung Ho and his friends online sought to rescue and resuscitate the reputations of what few of their brethren made it down through history. Long gone were the days when same sex love was a normal, quotidian facet of Korean life. How did this situation come to pass? What accounts for the transformation of something unremarkable and fairly commonplace into a practice freighted with social and cultural ignominy? While there is, understandably, no single reason or easy explanation for the broad shifts in attitude against homosexual practices in Korea, there are a number of factors which, when taken *in toto*, can be reasonably posited as bringing about this “new normal” in which Seung Ho was raised.

The first cause of this shift in attitudes was brought about as a result of the change in global power structures during the latter half of the 19th century, as it was only during post-industrialization and Europe’s quest for colonial expansion that the full shift in cultural attitudes towards homosexuality started to occur across East Asia. Early European travelers arriving in these lands, China in particular, saw the breezy acceptance of same sex relationships and wrote back letters full of pious indignation, shocked and disgusted by what they saw – but it was only when the countries from which these travelers came started to threaten the accepted order that Chinese attitudes began to change (Hinsch 5). So long as Europeans occupied a lowly place as visitors in this most civilized and exalted realm below heaven, the ability of the Chinese to scoff at and discount their moralizing was total. The consternation of early Christian travelers like the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who looked with disgust at the widespread acceptance of these “unnatural perversions” by the public at large, made little impact on their hosts (Hinsch 2). Centuries of interaction with Westerners failed to noticeably change Chinese attitudes; it was only when these foreigners started to assert a muscular interventionism in Chinese affairs that the dynamic began to change drastically.

Scholars like Brett Hinsch, in his pioneering work on the gay history of China, point to the twilight of the Qing Dynasty, as the time when the country began to slowly adopt a more Western, anti-

gay, character. The open espousal of same sex practice by the powerful had been steadily replaced, over the centuries since the Song Dynasty (the last time that the list of the emperor's male favorites had been registered in the official histories), by a tendency to turn a blind eye, or pass the occasional statute regulating consensual sexual behaviors between men. It was during the late Qing, after the upheaval of the Opium Wars, when the rulers began to pass laws aimed specifically against the custom of consensual, non-monetized male/male relations (Hinsch 159). However, the situation took a noticeable turn for the worse only later when, riven by angst over the state of their crumbling society, at the military mercy of colonial powers, and beset by internal strife, a powerful ideology for national renewal was promulgated by leading intellectuals, called the 'Self-Strengthening Movement.'

Among the many planks of this platform for a new Chinese renaissance was a stringent public morality borrowing from its more puritanical European oppressors. In this call for a cultural redemption, anything which smacked of decadence, femininity, lasciviousness, and imperial dissolution was proscribed by these Chinese apostles of the powerful, modern West. The social customs of male/male love came in for particular rebuke, as this was specifically pointed to as an archaic vestige of China's crumbling past, an effeminizing practice sapping the strength of what could be a great power (Hinsch 166). This censure extended to traditional Chinese education practice also – replacing as the centerpiece of scholarship the Confucian classics written 2,000 years previously, the scientific theories originating in the West were given primacy by these modernizers. At the same time, Europe too was undergoing its own revolution in how sexuality was understood; the "scientific" crusade to categorize and pathologize all manner of sexual expression was gaining steam. Ever more specific attempts to explain the panoply of sexual expression were promulgated; deviations from "normal" were treated as psychosexual afflictions which demanded scientific explanation – and cures. These doctrines reverberated across the globe, and found open ears amongst the intellectuals who were eager to trade the supposed superstition of the imperial past for the bright future of a Modern China. The bitter result for those who engaged in same sex relations was far reaching; over the following century and a half, anti-queer attitudes calcified into the

inflexible homophobia which still binds much of official Chinese culture – and the world – today (Hinsch 169).

In a similar way, Korea was swept up in the tumultuous waves of colonialism and imperialism which crashed through East Asia in the 19th century. Society grappled with the implications of clear Western technological and military superiority, and the concomitant tension between tradition and modernization found expression in number of ways. Korea, whose weak late Joseon Dynasty kings found themselves at the mercy of both their larger neighbors *and* the Western imperial powers, began to modernize much later than their neighbors – and for this they paid a dear price. The Gabo Reforms, Korea’s first, tentative steps towards industrialization were only promulgated in 1894. Two years later the most famous native Korean movement for national renewal was founded, the Independence Club. The intellectuals who formed the nucleus of this group called for the adoption of scientific, political, economic, and social customs based on Western models (Lee 303). That the ideas began to take hold is evidenced in a set of imperial decrees calling for modernization, the Gwangmu Reforms which were proclaimed in 1897. Included in this headlong push to emulate the West were edicts which compelled civil servants to replace their traditional dress with Western style suits, and officially proclaiming the founding of the *Daehan Jeguk*, the Great Korean Empire.

It is in this turbulent era, and due to similar factors which influenced its two neighbors, that the beginnings of Korea’s current proscription of queer sexual practices began. The leading intellectuals of the Independence Club worked tirelessly to introduce to the Korean population ideas which were popular in the West. Alongside principles like the sovereignty of Korea, the expansion of democratic values (such as suffrage and the formation of a national legislature), and the adoption of Western models of scientific learning, were found continual calls for social strengthening and reform of the antiquated Korean mindset (Lee 303). Blaming the precarious state of affairs on the moral laxity prevalent across the land, a restoration was achievable only through “promoting public morality” and the “elimination of evil

practices.” Linking the most visible practitioners of *dong seung ae*, the itinerant *Namsadang* troupes, to this call for moral renewal was not a stretch – and it was during this time that these troupes steadily disappeared. Korea was entering the modern world, and it was a world in which the ascendant West dictated what was moral and what was not; and it was most certainly not a world hospitable to open expression of alternative sexual practices.

The second cause of this shift in attitudes is more singularly Korean, though it too is tangentially linked to the wider exchange of global ideas enumerated above. Though known as the “Hermit Kingdom” in the West, and officially closed to foreigners, Christianity first began to make its presence felt during the 17th century. First came Catholicism, when in 1603 a Korean diplomat in the Ming court brought into Joseon a Bible and other theological tracts belonging to the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci – the same missionary so outraged by the homosexual practices of his Chinese hosts. Korean scholars debated the controversial new ideas, King Yeongjo outlawed it as an “evil practice,” but little headway was made in actually drawing a substantial number of converts to this new religion until Yi Seung-hun, a *Yangban* diplomat who was baptized while in Beijing, set up the first prayer house in 1784 in Seoul and began attracting attention (Park 210). Violating Vatican Canon Law, he himself named native priests and tasked them with spreading the word; it was this grassroots approach by Korean prelates, as opposed to foreign priests converting the masses, which some have pointed to as the most significant factor in the spread of this foreign creed in a notably xenophobic era (Choi 5-6).

As the final Joseon kings became unable to control their country and assert their will, they were powerless to prevent the spread of Christianity in their population to the same extent that their neighbors were able to do. This was no doubt helped by the fact that these foreign missionaries set up all of Korea’s “modern” universities, zealously and efficiently quenching the desire of Korea’s burgeoning number of modernizers to learn from the West and reform their society. With the avenues for social advancement traditionally closed to all but the upper classes, the increasingly irrelevant *yangban* aristocracy watched as

their middle class countrymen flocked to these Christian centers of learning, unable or unwilling to reassert their cultural supremacy (Grayson 157). The peasants too, as the economic situation in the countryside became so acute that famine and rebellions against the landlords became a fact of life, turned to the civil organizations founded by the Christians for support and relief from their woes. All of these factors contributed to Christianity being woven into the fabric of Korean society to an extent unprecedented in the Far East.

The links between official Christian doctrine and suppression of homosexual practices hardly needs to be outlined here; indeed, Christians across the world have a vivid history of condemning alternative sexualities (in word, if not always in deed), and their early representatives in Korea continued this tradition. While it is impossible to point to any particular event, time, or action on the part of the Christianizers as the “beginning of the end” for acceptance of *dong seung ae* in Korea, what is true is that this gradual infiltration of Christianity into society set the stage for the adoption of a new public morality and a new organizing national philosophy when the time was ripe. What led the Christians to be the ones who provided this was the confluence of a set of tragic, traumatic national events.

The third, and final, cause for the precarious position of alternative sexualities in contemporary Korea is the combination of these previous trends with that of the peninsula’s subjugation at the hands of its Japanese neighbor, and the ensuing trauma of its eventual independence. When King Sunjong, the final Joseon dynast, abdicated his throne in 1910 and signed the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty, Japan’s de facto conquest of the Korean Empire was complete. In the following 35 years, until Japan’s defeat in WWII, the Korean population was subjected to wholesale efforts to repress all national expression and the brutal quest of the Japanese to absorb the Korean peninsula into their colonial empire.

In this cultural vacuum, when flying the Korean flag, using a Korean surname, or even speaking the Korean language was outlawed, the subjugated population searched for ways to subvert the will of their oppressors. It was during the Japanese occupation that Christianity became associated with Korean

nationalism and the drive for independence (Whittaker 65). Faced with the unremitting pressures of cultural assimilation, the leading intellectuals, many of whom became martyrs when their agitating for independence was punished, were Christians (Grayson 156). Far out of proportion to their numbers in the general population (never more than 2% at any time during the Japanese occupation), Korean Christians took leading roles in the fight against their colonial overlords. For example, in 1919 a group of religious and political leaders called the nation to arms with their own Declaration of Independence; 15 of 33 signatories to this “March 1st Movement” were avowed Protestants, and most were punished harshly by the Japanese authorities (Whittaker 63). The China-based Provisional Government of Korea was first led by Syngman Rhee, who grew up attending Christian schools in Korea and was an ardent Methodist. Catholics were not left out of the game either – in the same year they started the *Ulmindan*, the “Righteous Armies” which had a distinctly theological approach to liberating the peninsula from the tyrannical grip of the Japanese (Choi 10). The subjugated population took note of this, and the esteem in which these Christians were held rose steadily.

This popular conflation of anti-Japanese resistance and Christianity paid incredible dividends for the nascent churches of Korea, and despite efforts on the part of the Japanese to repress the growth of Christianity, the numbers of adherents to this religion grew. When the authorities decreed in the late 1930’s that the Showa Emperor was to be worshipped by the Korean populace as a god, the most notable objectors were Christians, and their unwavering refusal to comply with this edict, in the face of prison sentences and worse, further increased the association of Christianity and Korean Nationalism (Whittaker 65). By the time that the Japanese occupation ended, in 1945, while only 2% of the population was Christian, the stage was set for an explosion in the religion’s popularity.

Guided by President Rhee during the trauma of the Korean War, South Korea became a bastion of Christianity in East Asia. As thousands of their co-religionists fled from the North to settle in the South, charismatic Korean preachers succeeded in bringing nearly 20% of the population to Christianity

(Grayson 163). For a young country struggling in an existential crisis, every avenue which could strengthen communal resolve was pursued, and the evangelical Christianity espoused by growing numbers of new converts became one of the defining facets of the new state. Just as this religion was yoked in the popular consciousness with Korean nationalism during the long darkness of the Japanese occupation, again, it helped define resistance against an aggressor state and imbue the life or death struggle of national preservation with a divine flavor. The contrast with the atheistic North was made clear - this new country was to be godly, and guided and blessed from above.

South Korea was also, as a result of these calamitous events, infused with a resolutely militaristic, masculine spirit. Compulsory military service was required from every male South Korean citizen, and the military played an integral part in the political and economic spheres of the fledgling state. In a telling example of the attitudes of the time, any mixed race man was barred from serving in the armed forces of the Republic of Korea from their inception until 2011. This force would be the country's insurance policy against occupation and war, and it required all of its citizen recruits to buy into its mythologizing of itself as a virile, muscular protector against evil. No longer would South Korea be a helpless victim, at the mercy of its attackers.

This national self conception was promoted, and embodied, by the leaders of the country. Though paying lip service to democratic ideals, these unyielding strongmen, beginning with President Rhee, demanded an unquestioning surrender of personal prerogatives and civil rights from the people in the service of national renewal. Following Rhee, longtime military dictators Park Chun-Hee and Chun Doo-hwan personified this patriarchal, conservative national order. Authoritarian politically, rigidly anti-communist and pro-American, the hard line stances they took extended to issues of public morality, which forced any who deviated from "traditional" norms far underground.

All of that being said, however, the ordeal of the late imperial times, when foreign colonizers were circling a wounded Korea like sharks, the cataclysmic Japanese occupation, coupled with the

absolute devastation visited by the convulsions of a civil war – all of this still required an explanation. In a canny example of historical irony, the new South Korean military and political leadership took upon itself the mantle of protector of the people and the source of a national renewal, seeking to cast the blame for the previous half century of pain and suffering at the feet of the weak, effeminate, hapless Joseon dynasty – much as Joseon’s founding King, Taejo, cast similar aspersions on the booted Goryeo dynasty half a millennia previously. The new Korea turned away from the social laxity which they believed characterized the closing days of Joseon, the days in which easy accommodation with same sex desire was the norm. In its place came a new national spirit, a new motivating consciousness, one of strength, purpose, and moral probity. These features were reinforced by the overlapping ideologies of military power, bounding entrepreneurship, conservative anti-communism, and evangelical Christian morality.

The result of this ideological stew for the country was, if measured in terms of economic achievement, a resounding, overwhelming success. Deemed “The Miracle on the Han River,” South Korea rocketed from being one of the poorest countries in Asia to one of the most prosperous and technologically advanced on Earth. The cost to the nation’s sexual minorities, however, was staggering. The new South Korea left little room for expressions of sexual difference, and the resulting silence grew and grew until it became possible for some modern-day South Koreans to insist, seriously and without irony, that homosexual possibilities didn’t, and couldn’t, exist for their people. This allowed for sometimes jarring statements – for example, even in 2016, when the Korean consul in Orlando, Florida was asked about the shooting at the Pulse nightclub, it was possible for him to opine: “The tragic accident happened at a gay club, so it is highly unlikely that there is any possible Korean victim.”

Part III – Heezy Yang

“Unjustifiable”

On a blustery winter day not long ago, in mid January 2015 to be exact, pedestrians making their way along the busy sidewalks of downtown Seoul were confronted with a startling sight, something completely out of the ordinary, something audacious, brash even. As anyone who has walked along Sejong-daero well knows – this is saying a lot, for it is here that the most consequential of events tend to happen. Under the shadow of the Japanese built city hall, facing the most important of Joseon’s five palaces, *Gyeongbokkung* - these pavements have witnessed the events that have shaped the soul of Korea. It was along this road that its namesake, King Sejong, would process from his palace gates to the royal ministries which flanked the road, where President Syngman Rhee proclaimed the birth of a modern Korea in 1945, and where, more recently, vigils for the victims of the *Sewol* disaster sprang up overnight. In short, this is the country’s living room.

So it was fitting that what confronted the passersby was something of a domestic scene – lined up in a row, one after the other, were boxes of increasing size, all but one of them filled with a slightly defective toy or stuffed animal. As people walked by they read little signs affixed to each box, a short explanation of why these toys were consigned to the trash, why they were on their way out of the house. “Because I have only one eye...” read a box with a well-used, monocular stuffed rabbit. “Because they have too many pets...” said another box with some chewed up toys. And there, sitting in the biggest box, silently, was a man in his late 20’s looking back at those who encountered the scene. Written in bold letters on this box were the words “BECAUSE I’M GAY...” and around his neck was a sign that read “Unjustifiable”⁹.

⁹ See Appendix for photographs.

While the point of this performance would be abundantly clear to most people, it's only when one looks at the scene with the eyes of his audience that the true boldness of his actions become apparent. One can imagine some of the thoughts running through their minds: Who, in this society, would wear a sign proclaiming that they're gay? What kind of young man would sit for hours under the gaze of people, one of whom *may know his family*, and claim membership in a group widely blamed for the perversion of traditional values and most of what is wrong with contemporary society? Even more shocking, is that someone who is *actually* gay? Sure, we've heard about them before, seen one or two of them on TV, but is that a *real* one?

The reactions he got were varied; some paused, some averted their eyes, some hurried on. Of course, this being modern Korea, many took out their phones to snap pictures and take videos, and some (mostly the young) smiled and posed with him. If any were curious enough to find out if he actually was a real live gay person, they could visit his website – the address of which he helpfully wrote on his sign – and learn more about this peculiar young man. Many did - including me.

That is how I found out about Heezy Yang, and how I contacted him, intrigued, in order to find out more about him and these performances. Many of the questions doubtlessly running through the minds of those who first encountered him on the streets of central Seoul were on the tip of my tongue as I sought him out to ask why he mounted this performance, this protest. I wanted to know what compelled him to step out of the comfortable anonymity of the Seoul gay scene into the harsh light of judgment – because, no matter what else the people who saw his performances did or thought, one thing was most obvious: he was being judged. By sitting in a box with the words I'M GAY written on it, by performing that most foreign of actions – coming out to anyone and everyone, self identifying as queer - he was breaking one of the most fundamental rules of the Korean social compact, and for that, he was judged.

What Heezy chose to place front and center in the minds of those who encountered his installation on the streets of the Korean capital was an issue that was slowly making its way into the

collective consciousness of the nation. As is the case in countries worldwide, Korean teens who choose to make their sexual orientation known to their families often face severe consequences – sometimes beatings, sometimes conversion therapy, and, sometimes, being thrown out of the house and driven from the family. Traumatic for those of any society, gay teens disowned in Korea faced the added opprobrium of being doubly marginalized –homelessness rates in Korea are just a fraction of what they are in the United States, mainly because of the strength of family support systems. This possibility of being cast from ones family was reiterated by many of the young gay men I talked with; this was a fate which hung over many of their lives, a very real, though sometimes distant threat which could be too easily imagined for comfort.

Very recently, the government had moved to establish the first shelter in Korea for teens driven from their family. There had been more and more conversation in society and in the media about this phenomenon, and the issue was subject to heated debate. The administration of Seoul City had stepped in to open a shelter for those driven from their homes and with nowhere else to turn. However, this being Korea, there was heated, passionate debate in political circles over not the necessity, but the morality of opening such a refuge. Opposition centered around the expected arguments, ones which would sound at home in any country arguing against LGBT acceptance: that opening such a shelter would encourage homosexuality, that these teens needed to reform and that putting them in such an environment would only encourage their lifestyle, that parents would know best what to do with their children, etc. Eventually, the shelter was set up, but as the debate played out, the foes of such a place won out, and government funding was dropped.

Into this void stepped many quiet, private donors, who sought to keep the shelter open. Some were LGBT, some were not. Being involved in the behind the scenes fundraising and exercising the quiet diligence needed to maintain such a facility, Heezy grew more and more indignant over the fact that this refuge was even needed in the first place. “I’ve seen a lot of my friends try so hard to establish this

organization [the Rainbow Youth Shelter]. I'm not a rich man, and I wanted to help how I could...I wanted to bring attention to this issue," he said. It was this drive - to bring out of the shadows and place squarely in the sight of Korean society the fact that too many of their sons and daughters were cast off like defective toys, relegated to cardboard boxes on the street, and in need of an asylum like the Rainbow Youth Shelter – that resulted in him performing “Unjustifiable” across Seoul.

Fortunately, Heezy himself was never forced out of his home when he took the momentous step of disclosing to his mother and sister the secret he was carrying. In order to come out to his family and break rules of the Korean social compact, he needed to tell only two people, since he was raised by a single mother. However, with his father out of the picture, telling first his mother and then his sister that he was gay was, if not easy, then certainly slightly less difficult a task than if his father were an immediate presence in their lives. Because, as was told to me time and again, it is almost always the father in this patriarchal system which upholds the mores and expectations of blood, and it is left to the mother to support and enforce those strictures. So, in some ways, being raised by a single parent already put Heezy out of the Korean mainstream, for this type of household is still comparatively rare in his society. Nonetheless, his experience growing up without a father in the house may have already, to a certain extent, inured him to the misunderstandings and judgments which accompany living a life outside of prevailing societal norms.

If Heezy's family situation was unorthodox, so was his temperament as he was growing up. He recalled always feeling different as a boy, ill suited to fit into the dominant masculine mindset cultivated in Korean schools. “I didn't fit in at all in [his all boy's] high school,” he recalled, “I tried really hard to act cool, less girly, less gay. Teachers, especially male teachers, were always saying things like ‘you should act more like a man.’” Try as he could to act otherwise, he was almost always the target for other boys seeking to prove their masculine credentials. Being deemed an outcast by his peers was hardly easy, and his experiences, especially when considered against the backdrop of Korean ideals of collective

belonging and the cultivation of “manliness” which was a founding philosophy of his country, seem especially difficult. “It’s part of our culture as a small country to act manly and not get pushed around. We are very proud!”

Ironically, the torment of the other boys and the general misery of his school experiences steeled him for the pariah status he was to assume with a universal coming out to an extent far beyond that offered to sexual minorities with more conventional upbringings. If he had already accepted his attraction to other males, gone through the uncertainty and apprehension of telling this to his mother and sister, and experienced already what it felt like to be a social outcast, then taking the next step and living openly as gay hardly tipped the scales against “coming out” in the traditional cost benefit analysis. So, it was in this way that he became, in the Korean society he was a part of, a minority three times over: as a kid raised by a single mother, as a boy who didn’t conform with standard masculine ideals, and as a gay man in a resolutely heteronormative society.

All that being said, it shouldn’t be assumed that a universal coming out was an easy step – it rarely is for anyone, any sexual minority, in any part of the world – it’s just that in Heezy’s case he felt he had little left to lose. And so he did the unthinkable, and one by one started telling those around him, becoming the first LGBT individual most of them had ever met. I asked Heezy about this process, and he gave an answer that would sound perfectly at home in any traditional coming out story: “The first ones I told were hard, but it slowly got easier. Plus, people told their friends, and so I didn’t have to do the work after a while. My reputation grew as being gay, and it was something I became known for.”

It is interesting to take a moment and examine his words carefully. Much has been written on what constitutes “gay identity,” and people have never tired of parsing ever more minutely the experiences, actions, and ideals which somehow confer this stamp of being on certain individuals. Of course, this vague desire to learn more about gay identity is what brought me to Korea in the first place, and it was the continual questioning and shifting of the ideal which made the investigation so perplexing,

and so rich. As Heezy pointed out, first he told people he was gay, and then “they did the work” to tell others and, in doing so, he was identified as gay. In this context, identity is conferred by the recognition of the quality by others.

That so many other Korean men take part in the gay underground, yet escape from being identified as gay is one argument against applying to Korea the Western understanding of the fundamental gay identity. Heezy, in his out life and his outspoken advocacy for LGBT issues, is more easily understood by both Koreans and foreigners as having this identity, yet he is one very lone individual and far outside both the mainstream of his culture, and the subpopulation of sexual minorities. What the Korean model of gay life shows is that, more often than not, identity is not assumed by the individuals, but conferred by those surrounding them. With this understanding, it becomes much easier to explain not the lack of a “gay identity” in Korean history, though sex between men was prevalent, but also the decided lack of gay identity and visibility in contemporary Korea. Since few Koreans can point to another LGBT Korean, then queer identity becomes more a notion than a reality.

All this isn't to say, however, that Heezy's decision to live as an out gay man didn't have clear consequences. In some parts of the world, being identified as gay in an unaccepting environment, willingly and openly assuming membership in this community, is a decision fraught with the risk of real danger. This being Korea though, physical violence wasn't at the forefront of Heezy's worries. However, he acknowledged that as the issue became more and more politicized, passions were being channeled in increasingly harsh ways by the opposition. As he said,

“There isn't really a risk of physical violence, but lately there have been a lot of very serious Christian protests. Perhaps I should be more worried in the future. The crime rate in Korea is very low in general, so people in Korea will judge a lot, but not hurt you. And I'm OK if they judge me.”

The primary danger facing Heezy, resulting from the judgement of his society, was not physical, but economic – for he was essentially unemployable. He made his living working odd jobs on the fringes of society, because no respectable firm would hire someone who wouldn't deny being gay, much less openly espouse such an identity. As was reiterated to me time and again, in a country with no anti-discrimination laws protecting sexual minorities, the threat to employment was real. Korea is a place where your job and who you work for is one of the clearest indicators of social prestige, and any who land a desirable position are compensated in countless ways. From a salary necessary to live in one of the world's most expensive cities, to the sense of patriotism inherent in working for a company which is a national champion, to the innumerable social perks due someone in a position of respect – not to mention the glory which will redound upon ones family – employment is as sure a sign of identity and status in Korea than anything. So obviously, the lengths that men would go to live a gay life without their companies knowing, and the creative subterfuges they would employ, were nothing short of astounding.

Heezy, though, for better or worse, had none of these worries. Even though he had attended a good college, and had a near perfect command of English (prerequisites for landing a job at one of Korea's many prestigious large conglomerates, or *Chaebols*) he made a living by giving Korean lessons to foreigners in Seoul, working part time as a bartender in a friend's pub, and by organizing and promoting various parties held in nightclubs which catered to a gay clientele. The extent of this sacrifice may not be apparent to someone unfamiliar with the social cache accorded work in South Korea; more than almost any other country, landing a job with a firm like Hyundai, Lotte, Samsung, LG, or others like that crowns the nonstop drive for achievement and legitimizes the dawn to dusk striving that is the lot of every Korean student. The fact that Heezy was out of this race before it even began - disqualified not for what he couldn't do, but for what he couldn't be - didn't make it any easier. So, he lived at home, and was resigned to economic consequences of his decision to live as who he was.

Lest one should assume that these travails befall only those at the pinnacle of the economic pyramid, those who have access to the prerequisite opportunities and a real chance of landing a job such as this, it needs to be stated that no matter what one's job prospects – being gay is a deal breaker. From Seung-hwan, who worked in a family owned store on the outskirts of Seoul: “If my boss found out I was gay I would probably get fired, because if customers found out they might not come and shop at his store.” Or, from a waiter on why he would never come out: “People don't want to be served food by someone who is gay. They probably wouldn't mind if I was gay, but they just wouldn't want to know about it.” Sobering as these asides are, they reinforce how broadly undesirable it would be to risk one's livelihood – wherever it falls on the economic spectrum – by self identifying as a sexual minority.

For Heezy though, with this economic marginalization came a freedom. Without having to worry about saving up the down payment on an apartment for a future bride, he was free to make just enough money to live on. By the way, not having to live with that nagging worry, faced by almost all of their straight peers, was one of the most cited examples of the reasons my interviewees were happy to be gay. And also for Heezy, without having to put in the crushing hours of a junior salaryman at the firm, and not being required at the innumerable after hours obligations (more often than not booze filled exercises in team building stretching into the night), he had plenty of free time to fill. Without having to worry about his bosses, his parents, or anyone out there discovering who he really was, he could be who he wanted to be. And he chose to be an artist - and a provocative one, at that.

“Peter”

If “Unjustifiable” was Heezy's tentative, initial foray into performance and artistic activism, then it was a remarkably effective and instructive first experience. He had learned over the course of the performances what was accepted and what he could do, and also what boundaries he could push. Especially as it related to authority, and authorization, he learned. For example, when he was under the sweeping curves of the Dongdaemun Culture Park he was continually confronted by security guards who

were not quite sure what to do about him. One after the next, they asked him what he was doing, whether he had permission, who let him do this, etc. He showed them his permits, and try as they could, they never succeeded in dislodging him – if anything, they only enhanced the crowd’s interest in the curious young man in the box.

After these first performances, though, he was ready for something more provocative. As he put it, “This country isn’t ready for gay stuff, and so I wanted to start cute and easy. That’s not life, especially when you’re gay in such a traditional and conservative country. I wanted to do something realistic that reflects real life more.” If starting with toys and stuffed animals was cute and easy, then it was in his next performances that he brought out harsher themes which he felt more truly showed the realities of a Korean gay life. And, if he was seeking a more challenging exhibition, if he was looking to sear into the minds of his audience an image, if not a message, then he certainly succeeded.

This second performance piece, entitled “Peter,” went through a couple of transformations as its message was honed, each time more shocking than the last. The basics stayed the same: it featured Heezy out in public, dressed in one of the ubiquitous uniforms that kids don as they attend school each day. He was, however, spattered in what appeared to be blood, from head to toe, and across his face. In some of his performances he held onto similarly saturated stuffed animals and sat passively staring at those who looked at him; in later ones he took the realism to an extraordinary level and smeared the fake blood around his wrists, clutched a crucifix, and splayed himself out on newspapers on the sidewalk. He still had the title of the performance and the link to his website on a cardboard placard, only this time it was written in the same scarlet liquid with which he was drenched.

If Unjustifiable was seeking to bring attention to an issue just breaking into the public awareness, gay homelessness in Korea, then Peter was taking suicide, an already painfully acknowledged national issue, and highlighting its unique applicability to the situation of his gay compatriots. The country’s agonizing levels of suicide, the highest in world, are a national humiliation, and the subject is constantly

debated. Few institutions or issues of national character have escaped the search for blame; however, in line with the Korean propensity to quickly dismiss LGBT issues, the connection between the two has not been seriously explored. “Peter” was Heezy’s attempt to do just that.

He sought to force into the open the very real connection between youth suicide and being gay. And, by holding in his bloodied hands a crucifix, he brought in a Christian element, triangulating between these three points connections which have been well discussed and acknowledged in many places around the globe– but very rarely in Korea. “My second performance was violence, because my first was pretty, and nice to look at,” he related, “Gay kids kill themselves and get harassed, and so I wanted to portray that.” Tragically, my interviews more than backed this up proposition – almost every single person I spoke with knew someone who was gay who had killed themselves, and a couple of my subjects attempted suicide themselves – some, multiple times.

Heezy was making explicit the link between being gay and youth suicide, and it was a connection which was not often made. In many ways, and with intent, the connection between the two was just as painful and discomfoting as the tableau which Heezy presented to those passers by who saw “Peter.” He took suicide, already a stigmatized issue within families, and combined it with something even more humiliating – homosexuality. He wanted to make clear that even though the two were all too often found in pairs, the fact that one of these could be denied was only making it harder to prevent the other.

Incredibly, there were many stories that I was told which more than backed this up. A couple of my interviewees related stories that they’d heard themselves of Korean families that, when their gay son committed suicide, told people that it happened because they were just too stressed at school, or that they didn’t get the job they were seeking – those were the reasons, not being gay, which drove them to take their own life. While the very real pain of the families is heart breaking to consider, one can’t help but sympathize, and reflect on the lot visited upon their own sons and daughters, often by the well meaning members of their family. Heezy, and many sharing his sensibilities, were angered at what was taking

place under their noses, and the lies necessary to prop up such a system which was exacting a terrible toll. It was almost as if killing yourself over grades was preferable to being gay.

The reactions to “Peter” were certainly what one would expect them to be: shock, horror, screams, and the like. The verisimilitude of the performance led many to think they’d stumbled upon a real suicide; on some occasions police were called and ambulances even arrived. Cellphones quickly came out, pictures were snapped, and videos were shot - word of what was happening made it through social media. When people found out that this was a performance, and that these initial reactions were intended, they were, of course, bewildered, appalled, offended. In short, they were experiencing the same emotions that Heezy wished they would feel if they found out that a significant contribution to the country’s high suicide rate was the desperation and social marooning of their LGBT youth.

The ethics of such a performance are surely in dispute. Heezy would argue that his community is facing a crisis, that the issue of youth suicide is real and pressing, and present to such an extent that raising awareness and placing this issue front and center is more than worth the shock and discomfiture of his fellow citizens. In his telling, because the kids themselves don’t have a choice in confronting the detestation and loathing which presents itself, neither should those who encountered “Peter.” Moreover, he is offering a critique implicating each viewer’s complicity in a system which oppresses LGBT youth to such an extent that those who resort to suicide do so as their only escape from the hell of living in a blatantly homophobic society.

Like the gay activists of the 1980’s in the United States, when the beginnings of the AIDS crisis was being felt with increasing pain and severity and it seemed that no one would pay attention, he is willing to risk blowback and stigmatization in order to get others to *pay attention*. The first social outrage was claiming membership in this group, the second was speaking and acting (or performing) out. He was willing to bear the social opprobrium if it meant that some measure of awareness of gay suicide amongst youth in Korea was raised. Like activists fighting for social change everywhere, he was nearly arrested on

multiple occasions. And of course, when people realized that what they were encountering was an instance of performance art, and not a genuine suicide, he was shouted down and called all manner of names.

However, drawing parallels with other LGBT activist groups like ACT UP, or talking about Heezy in terms of other precedents or inspirations, helpful as they may be, ignores a couple of factors unique to his placement in contemporary Korea. It comes down to this: he is situated at the confluence of politics, art, and queer identity, and while there have certainly been others who have excelled in one or two of these realms, he has sought to place himself at the juncture of all three. Furthermore, he is positioning himself as an inheritor of the celebrated heritage of South Korean expression of dissent, often in the face of official ambivalence (at best) or forbiddance, to force, if not immediate change, then at least acknowledgement.

One could argue that someone like Heezy is given more leeway to do this, solely because he is couching his seemingly radical political rhetoric in purely artistic terms. Artists have played this role of *provocateur* in societies since time immemorial, speaking truth to power and challenging the norms of those around them. By acting as the jester and saying things that, on the lips of others, would be deemed as taking things too far, by bringing into the open topics that are best left undiscussed, they advance the conversation merely by speaking. And finally, performance art itself, especially when taking place within a public setting, is free to engage any and all by chance – the spectators do not go into a museum, the art comes to them, and this lack of “frame” drives an urgency unique to the medium. Heezy understood these dynamics innately, and Peter can be read as a work occupying an obvious place within the Korean social commentary, but with clear *avant garde* antecedents from a globalized artistic discourse. The sum total of all these considerations: artistic, polemical, and social, combined to make “Peter” a radical work of performance art that, when viewed from the Korean milieu from which it arose, absolutely unique in both its potency and daring.

In a similar vein, during this time his visual art started to take on a more activist tone, tackling themes which were, and still are, taboo. One of his illustrations from this time was used as an advertisement for a gay rights march, and featured two young Korean men, one in a priest's habit and the other in a police officer's uniform, with their eyes closed and their lips locked together in a passionate kiss. The symbolism for any Korean viewer was obvious: the church and the state had, since the very inception of the country, been allies in defining a national morality which left no room for the action the poster so blatantly portrayed. Infused with a sense of yearning, written across the top were the words "When that day comes" - immediately recognizable to any Korean as the opening words of the most famous nationalist poem written in the darkest days of the Japanese occupation. At the bottom he took this patriotic treasure and rewrote it to imagine a day of independence – for the queer Koreans he represented:

When that day comes

I'll roll and leap and shout in Seoul Plaza

And if I'm still stifled by overflowing joy

I will raise a rainbow flag

And lead the parade with it

Conclusions:

Identity as Activism VS. Activism Without Identity

Taken in sum, what does the experience of Heezy Yang reveal? Given that he represents, as an out gay man, only a tiny sliver of the South Korean population, do his actions represent a viable avenue forward for his gay compatriots who are seeking self expression? Do they actually serve the purpose of advancing the political and human rights agenda that Heezy says they do?

To begin with, Heezy clearly sees himself on the forefront of the LGBT rights movement in South Korea, especially as this “movement” is understood in a Western context. This model for the advancement of civil rights necessitates an openly gay life, confrontation with conservative social advocates, and the scope of advancement judged by the extent to which his society looks like most other Western, liberal democracies. If Korea has a long way to go before it looks like this, then it is only because there is a lot more work that needs to be done – and Heezy and the few others like him will do it. This way forward has been charted by civil rights activists from around the world, who have slowly transformed their own societies from stifling, oppressively conservative societies into the more open and accepting world they have today. The roster of civil rights leaders who have done this before reads like a “Who’s Who” of historical icons – Mandela, King, Gandhi, Milk, etc. In other words, this is the teleological understanding of LGBT identity *and* progress so close to the hearts of activists the world over.

In this reading, the path that these other places have taken on their quest for wider acceptance provides a useful model; it is from them that Koreans should learn and draw conclusions. This is an enticing prospect for a number of reasons, foremost among them being the fact that on so many fronts the South Koreans have adapted Western models – be they social, economic, political, educational, and technological – to build their society into a paragon of modernity. If so many other aspects of

contemporary Korean success have found their genesis in universal blueprints, what is there to argue against seeking similar models for gay rights?

To do this, Heezy puts his prodigious skills to work. We've already seen him as a performance artist and as an organizer, but he cannot stop there. He uses his knowledge of English to act as a translator and, combined with his social media presence, scours the world press for articles about LGBT rights and activism in order to present them to his followers across Korea. He amalgamates these sources, translates them into Korean, and comments on them – all this in order to present to those living inside his country (especially those not living in Seoul) a picture of what gay life looks like outside their borders. He is showing his readership, most of whom would never dream of living a life like Heezy, what he sees as the result of continuous, provocative activism. The seemingly inexorable push to greater visibility and acceptance is due to the confrontation with and triumph over opposing social norms, and the movement relies principally on those most directly challenging traditional society.

Heezy is living in the vanguard of this movement, no doubt, and his actions have resulted in his inhabiting a peculiar place both within the gay world of Korea, and in its wider society. Because for all of his work on behalf of the Korean LGBT population, he is, by any sober assessment, very much an outsider within the community he represents. By his own reckoning, he doesn't have many Korean friends at all – he finds himself most often hanging out with foreigners living in Seoul, or *gyopo*, Koreans raised overseas. Nor has he had many romantic involvements with native Koreans; the majority of his intimate relationships have been with the same types of men who make up his roster of friends. He accounted for this by saying, quite simply, that he communicates better with those who have lived outside of Korean society - his mindset being so far removed from his peers that he prefers to surround himself with people not of Korea.

If Heezy finds himself viewing his compatriots and seeing an alien ethos, then the feeling is mutual. Even to other gay Korean men, at first glance those who would most understand him, he is an

anomaly, someone who baffles them. A couple of my interviewees had never met him, but were certainly familiar with his activism, performances, and persona. No one that I spoke with would even consider living a life like Heezy lived, yet they were gentle and didn't condemn his decisions directly. More often than not, they were puzzled by what he represented; acknowledging that what he was doing was, ostensibly, for the benefit of their community, they nevertheless chuckled or shrugged off suggestions that others could follow in his footsteps. They admire, but dismiss him; they acknowledge what he is doing, but breezily discount this as a viable means to bring about the goals he seeks, however admirable.

Perhaps an explanation of this phenomenon arises when the components of this movement are broken down in different terms, when the implications of all of these actions and social considerations are refracted through a political lens. To start, one could easily argue that the path Heezy is following is a resolutely political approach to social change and the expansion of civil rights. Though of course his preferred medium is performance art, and though it is certainly true that all of his work addresses social themes, at the end of the day he is a political activist with a political agenda working for real political goals. While Heezy is obviously unique to Korea, he represents just one iteration of many similar revolutionary-civil-rights-teleological-movement worldviews.

The unique contours of the contemporary gay rights debate – especially as it is understood in the West - presupposes a linking of two separate ideals: the politics of *identifying as gay* and the politics of *gay activism*. For most of the post-Stonewall LGBT civil rights movement across the West, these two ideals have gone hand in glove. Before this event, by most accounts the beginning of the Gay Rights movement, coming out was almost purely a social performance – played out within the family units, the friend circles, the structures of interpersonal relations, etc. It was a social move to be understood in a social context. However, as time progressed and the nascent LGBT movement began to grow in visibility and advocacy, identifying as gay, though it had social ramifications to be sure, became a political act. As more chose to do this, the implications compounded, and the act of identifying yourself as a sexual

minority gained in political importance; the act was transformed from a purely social move into one with political significance, it was now one affirmation of a growing collective presence. Now in the present day Western context, coming out is very rarely an act of social suicide as it once was. It has become much more than social act, it has become political activism.

The other side of this same coin is the politics of gay activism – the definition of which varies in its particulars, but can stretch to hold within it all that sexual minorities seek to do and be. I would argue that gay activism should be understood in its broadest terms: from the visible and public goals of the movement at large to the private and personal motivations of the individual, *gay activism* and *gay acts* can be considered to be the same thing. With all sexual connotations happily acknowledged, “gay acts” by their very nature existing outside of heteronormative structures, can be considered examples of activism. The larger goals of LGBT rights advocates the world over – civil and religious marriage, recognition of status, anti-discrimination statutes, the repeal of sodomy laws – as well the microscopic, daily individual actions - a woman referring to “my girlfriend” in casual conversation, or two men walking hand in hand down the street – are all examples of gay activism.

At this point, the dichotomy between the two becomes clear. A deeper understanding of the situation of sexual minorities in Korea – and the experiences of Heezy and his place within this milieu – argues forcefully for the decoupling of these two ideals. If queer Korea has taught us anything, it is that it’s wholly possible to create a rich and thriving gay subculture, replete with countless acts of gay activism – by men who don’t identify themselves to society at large as being gay. It’s a concept quite foreign to a Western understanding of what it means to be an activist in the cause of civil rights, to be someone fighting for LGBT causes. The evidence for it is everywhere in Korea: we have activism without identity.

If this is truly the case, then questions can proliferate. For example, what of allies? Must they know on whose behalf they are advocating? And too, if a sexual minority identifies themselves to anyone,

does this couple the two ideals? And lastly, if identifying as gay in the West transformed from a purely social act into a political one, will the same thing happen in South Korea?

An Alternative Understanding of Activism?

Heezy is singular, and how he has chosen to express himself in his art and activism represents a politics as radical as anything to be found in South Korea. It is tempting for those viewing Korea from the outside to look at what he is doing and then to confer upon him accolades commensurate with our own understandings of what gay activism is. He fits so perfectly into Western notions of the brave outsider standing up to the powers of reaction, the fearless activist confronting the forces of hate – even a secular Messiah, taking upon his back the punishment due his people, that he may suffer for them. Heezy presents any viewer with an image of gay activism that is admirable and, for what he is trying to do, very effective. It draws whole heartedly on models of civil rights advocacy and social justice that have worked in the West and been celebrated for doing so. As stirring as many of these interpretations are, they are only partially correct in an understanding of how activism is practiced in South Korea.

A far more typical example of gay activism than Heezy's brand was related to me by one of my interviewees. I bring it up in order to draw both a clear contrast between the Western and Korean ideas of gay activism and to illustrate the necessary decoupling of this gay activism with a compulsory gay self identification. I had many conversations with a young man named Min-soo. He was in his mid-twenties, and came from an upwardly mobile family whose emphasis on bloodlines, heirs, and marriage was typical. But, adding to the pressure, Min-soo and his uncle were the only two males preserving the family's name; marriage and sons were an imperative.

Min-soo had more cause to conceal his identity than anyone. If this truth needed any illustration it was provided when his sister, suspecting he was gay, tried to entrap him by creating a fake gay profile online and befriending him. Drawing out more and more incriminating statements, she slowly compiled

the evidence she desired and then brought this to their father. In a move befitting the plot of a Korean television drama, these pages of damning statements were presented to the family as cause for Min-soo to be disinherited. This happened not once but *twice* – and both times denials, obfuscations, and re entry into the closet (along with a hefty dose of terrifying threats from his father) were sufficient to allay immediate catastrophe. In short, if anyone needed to be careful to not “be gay,” it was Min-soo.

Nevertheless, he had a surprise for his mother one Sunday afternoon when she was visiting him on a summer break as he went to medical school in the United States. Taking time off from their usual itinerary of Smithsonians, reflecting pools, monuments, and, of course, Korean restaurants, he announced “Mom, today I’m going to bring you somewhere really different, and I think you’ll like it.” He then brought her right into the middle of Capital Pride, Washington D.C.’s annual LGBT celebration. Amidst the welter of rainbow flags, marching contingents in various states of dress, and general queer euphoria his mother batted nary an eyelash; in fact, she commented on how happy everyone seemed to be. As their day out was coming to a close, she told Min-soo that she’d really enjoyed herself, and she was really glad he’d brought her there – even though, of course, he wasn’t gay. She smiled at him. And he smiled back. What was unspoken, what was implied between them, according to Min-soo, was that yes, she knew exactly why he brought her there, and even though propriety and the contours of the Korean Social Compact prevented them from *saying* what they each knew, the smile that they shared said what words could not and would not.

This, I would argue, is the true picture of gay political activism as it should be understood in Korea. While an instance such as this is not as public as what Heezy has done, and certainly not as exciting either, and also not as conforming to our own notions of what constitutes gay activism, this promises the truest way forward for wider acceptance of queer identity in Korean society. These examples of pushing the limits of what is accepted, quietly troubling the social expectations of Korean society in

regards to what is expected – by men and women who need not take upon themselves the labels of membership in such a marginalized group – promise a quiet détente in the social wars roiling Korea.

At first glance, this singular adaptation - gay activism without gay identity - seems to be an oxymoron at best, or a denial of personal dignity at worst. But Min-soo and his mother provide a counterargument to those who have so linked the two ideals; they are an example of what this special accommodation looks like and how it is lived out in the real world. This end run of activism, going around and bypassing identity, has become necessary in Korea because of the imperatives of Korean family structures, the country's unique religious and historical heritage, and the current ongoing demonization of alternative sexualities. This conclusion has been echoed by those who examine queer activism within a Confucian milieu; as researchers Yi and Phillips state, "In predominantly Confucian societies....gays seek private solutions instead of political ones; for instance, some gays in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore gradually integrate their same-sex partners within their families, without overtly saying anything about the couple's sexuality" (Phillips 128).

To stand up and come out as queer in today's South Korea renders one voiceless; it is left to people as remarkable as Heezy to still, continuously, and loudly demand that their voice be heard. Is it any wonder that so many of his peers admire what he is doing, but on balance, in order to preserve their voice, turn away from following in his footsteps? Is it any wonder that such a concept as the South Korean Social Compact could be formulated and explored? For countless South Korean men and women, activism must necessarily take on different forms from what is customarily expected. And, though the voices they use will most likely speak at lower volume, audible only to those closest to them, they will no doubt speak the same language as those who deploy a louder activism. For some, like Seung Ho, the voices speak about the glorious past and the demand for dignity in the present; for others, it becomes about the ways that sexual minorities can live lives as "normal" as their heterosexual family members and unremarkable for the ways they are set apart.

Those on the outside looking in may desire for South Korea something which appears more like what we have seen in past social movements. We pine for something exciting and uplifting when it comes to civil rights – we imagine a movement peopled with fiery personalities and lead by exhilarating leaders like Harvey Milk or Alice Paul. We want the exuberance and uncompromising devotion of a Malcolm X and the righteous eloquence of a Martin Luther King. In short, we want inspiration, and thrill, and confirmation that humanity is on an upward trajectory; we long to be assured that these movements will provide an everlasting guarantee of essay topics for students the world over. But - there is a real chance that over-reliance on this model for advancing the cause of LGBT civil rights leaves out a much quieter, but arguably more effective route. A readjustment of expectations is necessary.

The study of queer South Korea becomes, in many ways, a place where canards about LGBT identity, East Asian tradition, and global social justice activism come to die. When I first embarked on this project over two years ago I imagined that I could sit down across from someone and ask them eleven questions about “gay identity” and come away armed with enough information to write a term paper. Like so many of my initial impressions, it was true only insofar as it represented the barest tip of the iceberg looming beneath a naïve, surface understanding of what was truly at issue. I had always taken an intense interest in LGBT issues, but this project forced me to realize that mere membership within a community did not make one’s understanding of that community any more correct – it just made it more personal.

Appendix

“Unjustifiable”



“Peter”



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