



Todd A. Henry (ed.)

*Queer Korea*Durham and London, NC: Duke University Press, 2019
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In 2013, two male Korean activists, Kim/Cho Kwang-su and Kim Sŭng-hwan, staged a carnivalesque public wedding ceremony in Seoul to draw attention to the state's official ban on same-sex marriage. Their ceremony, which was protested by fundamentalist Christians by 'covering the stage with human feces' (p. 1), serves as the opening example of Todd A. Henry's edited volume, *Queer Korea*. Such a dramatic display of opposition, Henry argues, highlights the tension in Korean society between those for and against the extension of Western-style, liberal rights to 'sexual minorities' (*sŏngsosuja*). While rights activism in Korea is largely focused on the contemporary moment, this volume aims to contextualise and historicise these activists' issues from diverse and multiple approaches. Developed out of a scholar-activist symposium, film festival and art exhibition in 2014, the volume creatively promotes interdisciplinary examples of non-normativity/queerness as novel and much-needed theoretical approaches to the study of Korean history and culture, and to the field of queer studies more broadly.^[1]

Trying to piece together such a history is by no means an easy task; sources are hard to come by, archives often prioritise the view of observers (or prosecutors) rather than participants, and oral histories are challenging to conduct as individuals are often unwilling to talk about their experiences. In addressing these multiple challenges, the volume presents a multi- and cross-disciplinary approach—including history, literature, anthropology, and film, queer, and transgender studies—as well as a recognition of the plurality of identities and activities involved in Korea's queer past. Henry, for example, emphasises the volume's admirable aim to consider queerness in broad terms of 'historical modes of same-sex sexuality, cross-gender identification, and non-normative intimacies' (p. 4). Indeed, he argues that 'queerness has remained largely invisible in research on the peninsula, buried under male- and elite-centered accounts that have overwhelmingly focused on the tribulations of a modernizing nation' (p. 9). By opening with a critique of same-sex marriage as a liberal, assimilationist and heteronormative act that favours predominantly middle- and upper-class male communities over other forms of non-normative sexuality and gender variance, the contributors convincingly argue for a much broader understanding of queerness as an 'important dynamic of Korean history' (p. 8).

The volume intervenes in three distinct but overlapping fields: Queer Studies (which has largely failed to consider Korea as a unique site); Korean history; and contemporary Korean Cultural Studies, which has yet to consider queerness as a legitimate topic for analysis.^[2] Its ten chapters

are divided into two temporally defined parts: part one extends from the colonial 1920s to the end of authoritarian rule in the 1980s; whereas part two examines the contemporary period from democratisation in the late 1980s to the present day. This temporal division reinforces one of the book's central claims that queerness is not a foreign import; neither is it a development of contemporary modernity, nor a product of a progressive and teleological expansion of individualist human rights. Rather, queerness has historical roots in the Korean Peninsula. Merose Hwang's chapter on shamanistic performance and 'drag' in 1920s Korea, for example, posits a queer reading of shamanism to expose 'a range of historical subjectivities based on intensified stratification of power under colonialism' (p. 56). While Hwang's use of the term 'drag' à la Judith Butler and José Esteban Muñoz perhaps attempts to enforce a concept that has specific Western cultural connotations, her intervention, like other chapters in the volume, is in the deconstruction of the linear development of the nation and empire. By highlighting the 'rearrangement of communal pleasure' (p. 75) and gender-fluid familial ties that paralleled the heteronormative nuclear family, Hwang argues that shamans queered the colony-nation in a manner that permits an alternate historical approach to the 1920s.

The queering of colonial Korea is a theme that Pei Jean Chen further explores in her chapter through examples of literary writings on male same-sex love. Chen suggests that binaries in queer readings of Korean history should not only examine sexual-power relations, heterosexual-homosexual and male-female but 'should also include colonizer/colonized and nation-building/political subversion' (p. 129). While Chen argues that existing non-normative binaries can only be understood when colonisation, nation-building and modernisation are included, however, her argument extends the number of binary categories for our consideration, rather than deconstructing whether binaries are a productive theorisation of non-normative lives. John Whittier Treat's chapter, by comparison, leverages Judith [Jack] Halberstam's notion of queer time to 'release us from the inevitably psychological regime of "desire" to migrate elsewhere?to the movement of people, "queer," "straight," or otherwise, through time' (p. 98). Treat's chapter is one of the most compelling of the volume in its argument for an understanding of queerness distinct from definitions that prioritise sex and sexuality. Instead, queerness is considered as non-normativity that bends and inverts the 'straight/colonial time,' which builds on Lee Edelman's idea of straight time as biological reproduction and the imagination of a future dependent on having children. Through examples in the writings of 'Korea's homegrown Bohemian dandy' (p. 94) by author Yi Sang (1910–1937), Treat conflates objective 'straight time' with 'capitalist' and 'colonial time' as the antithesis of subjective 'queer time.' In doing so, he argues for queerness as a possible expression of anti-colonial (and anti-normative) history through a critical examination of structures of colonial power and its limitations. In comparison to Chen's call for same-sex love as a 'counterdiscourse that opposed the totalization of different forms of life' (p. 126), Treat therefore argues that neither love nor desire are necessary to our understandings of queerness as an analytic of Korean history. Rather, queer time provides a prism through which non-normative behaviour can be included in the study of Korean modernity.

While queer time is convincingly used to expand existing histories of Korea, other chapters instead reinforce the queerness-as-desire framework. John (Song Pae) Cho, for example, not only considers male same-sex desire—although he questionably uses the term 'gay' to refer narrowly to 'masculine' men who are attracted to other men—as clearly defined in Korea, but also as uniformly conditioned by 'distinct periods in South Korea's economic development' (p. 264). Cho's chapter employs a number of essentialist tropes about gay men, the construct of the family as anti-gay, the seemingly shared ideology of Confucianism across Asia (for which he presumably means East Asia), for which Korea is proposed as 'the vanguard of Confucianism' (p. 266)—that is the 'most' Confucian of all Asia—and the assertion that Korea is the 'prototypical "hypermasculine developmentalist state"' in East Asia (p. 268),^[3] without consideration of the

exclusionism and homogenisation that these tropes unwittingly reinforce. Cho's argument is further undermined by his conflation of pressures from the 'Confucian' heterosexual nuclear family with post-war economic development and the Cold War security state that (still) prioritises heteronormativity as key to reproduction, economic growth and national defense. If Cho's argument is that 'Confucian biopolitics' is what separates not only Asia, but specifically Korea, from Western models of queerness, then he fails to provide sufficient evidence for Korea as a *sui generis* site for masculine gay men. Where Cho succeeds, however, is in reflecting the lived realities of a subsection of gay men in Korea whose lives responded to their shifting economic situations.

Chung-kang Kim, by contrast, explores masculinity from the purview of female-dressed men (*yŏjang namja*) depicted in Korean cinema in the 1960s for comedic purposes. In *Male Kisaeng* (Dir. Sim U-sŏp, 1969), for example, Kim argues that the gender-bending of the film—reminiscent of Jack Lemon's role in *Some Like It Hot* (1959)—opens possibilities for queer desires while simultaneously reinforcing the gender binaries that were insisted on by the Park Chung-hee regime (p. 176). As Henry similarly points out in his chapter on female eroticism, queer subjects, like the protagonists of the film, *Male Kisaeng*, allowed the film industry—under the almost literal direction of the Park regime—to feature queer subjects, albeit as a means to profit from these subjects at their own expense, and in doing so reaffirmed the cisgender and patriarchal structures of the development state. While both Kim and Henry examine the role of gender in queerness, they do so through a critical look at the state's moralistic (re)enforcement of gender norms. These approaches echo Layoung Shin's article on contemporary gendered practices in the context of *iban* (queer) during the rise of the so-called Korean Wave. Flipping Cho's construct of the family as an 'Asia' value, Shin instead considers the economic function of the family for young queer women's survival as part of a subjective choice for women (particularly lower class women) to avoid 'butchness' at the risk of losing familial economic support. In contrast to Timothy Gitzen's chapter, which looks at the toxic masculinity of the Korean military as an enforcement of male butchness, Shin therefore considers the negotiation that more masculine women face in terms of upholding standards of femininity as a struggle between emotional authenticity and material well-being. The juxtaposition of these chapters in the volume therefore lends nuance to discussions of gender that might otherwise relapse into relying on the very binaries that they aim to avoid.

The volume's fusing of scholarly and activist voices is clearest in the final chapter by Ruin, a transgenderqueer intellectual, activist and director of QueerArch (the Korean Queer Archive), who prefers the gender pronoun zhe. One of two chapters translated into English for this volume (the other being Ha Si-nae's chapter on femininity in the wartime system), Ruin's chapter presents a welcome exploration of transgender and intersex voices in contemporary South Korea. This highly personal account of zher involvement in activism to change national identification cards to reflect preferred gender identification, among others, emphasises that while gender is examined by the preceding chapters, there are ever-present binaries that pervade even discussions of queerness. Mirroring Shin's chapter, Ruin emphasises a core facet of queerness: for many non-normative subjects, queerness is fundamentally about survival in a normative, non-queer world. While there can be a tricky balance to find between activism and scholarship, the volume successfully presents different approaches to queerness in a manner that both upholds intellectual rigour and reminds us of the necessity for queer activism for some as a matter of life (and death). Indeed, it is challenging to neatly categorise scholar versus activist as many scholars writing on queer studies arguably do so out of an activist imperative, be that broadly understood as a desire to learn more about their own sexuality or positionality, or more narrowly as an intention to affect social or political change through their scholarship. Indeed, even the act of writing about queerness is itself a political act. The volume therefore makes a strong case for the need to include a variety of voices writing on and engaging with queerness in order to construct a fuller

picture of how queer bodies navigate society.

By situating this study largely within the borders of the Republic of Korea (with the notable exception of mentions of Korean diasporic groups in the United States), the volume's intention as a 'preliminary but necessary effort to analyze local manifestations' (p. 21) of queerness also serves to provide a Korean example of the growing literature on nationally specific queer studies, in particular the growing field of queer Asian studies. While examples from Korea are a welcome addition to this field, the volume does not address some of the difficulties of queer Asian studies that undermine the field's claim to deconstruct Western-centric, liberal models of same-sex sex desire. By arguing that Western models lack applicability outside of Western cultural and social contexts, and therefore that Asian models should be developed to explain postcolonial non-normative subjects within Asia, the field (re)examines the conflation of Western with universal validity (in the same vein as Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to 'provincialize' Europe)^[4] but it does not necessarily argue against the *value* of such Western models. Rather, by arguing for an Asian alternative model, queer Asian studies tends to fail at breaking Western-style systems of analysis and instead calls for a replication of Western models but with a new hierarchy that favours Asian subjects, thus duplicating similar power hierarchies present across both localities. While there might be issues with the broader theoretical assumptions of the field of queer Asian studies, however, there is still value in shifting our assumptions about normativity from a Western-centric to an Asia-centric model. Indeed, there is no denying that this volume is a vitally important intellectual contribution, both in providing comparative examples in Korea for the field of queer studies, and (perhaps more importantly) in demonstrating the centrality of queerness to Korean history. Its forthcoming Korean translation will further ensure that its impact will reach an audience to whom it so vitally speaks.

Notes

[1] 'Queer' is understood here as a broad term that encompasses multiple acts and identities. While there is certainly a debate as to whether 'queer' is an applicable term for non-Western contexts, this review takes its cue from Henry's use of the term as one of mutual intelligibility with similar 'queer' instances from other global contexts. Individual chapters further analyse specific manifestations of queerness in Korea, from same-sex love, femininity and homoeroticism, to *iban*, *t'ibu* and trans/gender.

[2] There are seemingly very few serious scholarly considerations of queerness in Korea, with a noted upcoming exception of Samuel E Perry's forthcoming translated anthology, 'A Century of Queer Korean Fiction,' which he describes as the first anthology of homoerotic writings from Korea to be published in English.

[3] Here, Cho draws on J.W. Han and L.H.M. Ling, 'Authoritarianism in the hypermasculinized state: Hybridity, patriarchy, and capitalism in Korea,' *International Studies Quarterly* 42(1)(1999): 53–78, doi: [10.1111/0020-8833.00069](https://doi.org/10.1111/0020-8833.00069).

[4] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, xiii, doi: [10.1515/9781400828654](https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828654).

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