

## South Korea

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**Todd A. Henry, ed., *Queer Korea***

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Recent years have seen a growing interest in the lives and struggles of sexual minority communities in South Korea, which remains a steadfastly heteronormative society that lacks many legal protections for same-sex desiring individuals. Indeed, the twenty-first century has seen both an explosion in LGBTQ+ activism as well as counter-protests from influential Christian church groups that seek to position homosexuality as a threat to the continued vitality and development of the South Korean state. Within this context, *Queer Korea* is an important book that intervenes in this debate by centering the experiences of sexual minority communities. Drawing together the diverse work of a range of scholars to investigate queerness across South Korean history, the essays in Todd A. Henry's masterful edited collection explore queerness—broadly defined as non-normative social practices rather than via Euro-American identity politics—as a site to theorize and critique the fundamentally heteropatriarchal nature of South Korean society.

More than simply representing an essay collection of interest to Koreanists engaged in work on gender and sexuality studies, *Queer Korea* also speaks to disciplinary debates within Korean history and cultural studies, as well as the field of queer studies more broadly. In his engaging introduction to the collection, Henry notes that historiography of South Korea has tended to promote a heteropatriarchal narrative of statehood that either presents queer experience as a threat to anti-communist or developmentalist progress or as a decadent importation from foreign cultures (whether this be Japan in the colonial period or the West in the postwar period). Henry, along with the other contributors to the volume, draws upon the latest theoretical work in queer studies to challenge such readings of South Korean history, exposing the queer slippages that exist embedded within historical and contemporary Korean culture and society. This sensitive and sophisticated critical work is also relevant to prominent debates in queer studies over the applicability of Western theory to non-Western societies, with many of the contributors to the volume exploring how “queer Korea” destabilizes the Euro-American logics that remain central to much queer theoretical analysis. As such, *Queer Korea* dialogues through its archival, literary, and ethnographic interventions with the emerging field of queer Asian studies, and thus the chapters in the collection all consciously—and successfully—provincialize Western queer theoretical work. In fact, it is this aspect of the volume that deserves specific commendation, placing *Queer Korea* as essential reading to all who wish to engage in the necessary and radical work of critiquing global heteropatriarchy and homophobia.

The collection is organized into two broad sections. The first, “Unruly Subjects under Colonial and Postcolonial Modernity,” primarily focuses on historical analysis. In one of the most theoretically successful chapters of the collection, Merose Hwang develops

a theory of “colonial drag” to recuperate shamanism (often involving sophisticated cross-gender performance) as a site for colonial Korean women to assert agency and critique masculinist ideologies concerning the Korean nation. John Whittier Treat, in a fascinating reading of modernist writer Yi Sang’s short story “Wings,” explores how this controversial writer adopted queer writerly strategies that disrupt the heteronormative temporal logics of the Japanese-occupied Korean colonial state. Jean Chen likewise turns toward literature to interrogate the relationships between queerness and heteropatriarchal modernity, exploring the role that narratives of female same-sex desire played in the development of notions of romantic love. Also exploring colonial-era literature focused on the love between women, Shin-ae Ha conducts a sophisticated queer reading of short stories typically dismissed by scholars as colonial propaganda to sensitively uncover how “imperialized” women’s nostalgic longing for female same-sex love indexes rejection of colonial heteropatriarchy. Chung-kang Kim, in her study of “gender comedy films” produced in the late 1960s, considers how the comedic figure of the effeminate and cross-dressing man responded to and challenged the conservative gender regimes of Park Chung Hee’s mass dictatorial state. In a tour de force of archival research, Henry investigates representations of gynocentric relationships in authoritarian-era weekly magazines. Another highlight of the collection, Henry’s chapter reveals how the “capitalist voyeurism” of this queer archive provided a space for queer kinship at the same time as subordinating it to the heteropatriarchal logics of Park Chung Hee’s anti-communist developmentalism.

The second section, “Citizens, Consumers, Soldiers and Activists in Postauthoritarian Times,” contains four ethnographic studies that interrogate the contemporary lived experiences of South Korea’s sexual minorities and their responses to systemic homophobia. John (Song Pae) Cho’s longitudinal ethnographic investigation of gay men’s lives reveals, for instance, important changes in how male-male desire was understood during authoritarian and postauthoritarian periods, revealing a shift toward neoliberal identity management. Layoung Shin likewise explores postauthoritarian queer Korean women’s accounts of their desires, arguing that the broader disavowal of *t’ibu* or obviously “butch” modes of lesbian expression among contemporary queer women speaks less to a Western-inflected homonormativity than to specific cultural tactics designed to navigate Korean heteropatriarchal expectations concerning ideal womanhood. Taken together, Cho and Shin provide a much-needed snapshot of contemporary South Korean queer communities that celebrates the particularity of their cultural knowledge. Timothy Gitzen, in the most theoretically ambitious essay in the collection, interrogates the experiences of gay men during compulsory military service to expose the inherent toxicity of Korean military masculinity. Ruin, a transgenderqueer activist and scholar, concludes the second section by exploring how the South Korean resident registration system’s mechanisms of biopolitical control create binaristic understandings of sex and gender that exclude trans individuals.

*Queer Korea*, while an important work, is not without its minor faults. I found myself slightly disappointed by the fact that the book contained less ethnographic reflection than historical work and that the first section was considerably longer than the second. I also wish the collection had engaged more with contemporary media representations of queerness—including within K-pop and the broader Korean Wave (although Shin does engage with this briefly)—as recent work has highlighted that this is an important space where heteropatriarchy is being contested in contemporary South Korea (see,

for example, Kwon 2019). Soliciting work on queer North Korea would also have been beneficial, but I appreciate Henry's explanation in the introduction on why this proved too difficult. These are, however, small criticisms that do not detract from the overall success of this magnificent edited collection. *Queer Korea* will, I believe, become a seminal text on gender and sexuality in Korea that will energize the theorization and practice of ethnographers of Korea and Asia for many years to come.

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#### REFERENCES

Kwon, Jungmin. 2019. *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

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