K-BARS, K-BOYS & THE K-BOOM:

Korean Gay Space, Place, and Identity in Japan and Asia

韓国のゲイ空間、場所とアイデンティティー

日本とアジアにおけるKバー・Kボーイ・Kブーム

BY

ALBERT GRAVES

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Dissertation Committee

Professor Yuka Kanno, Chair
Professor Kozue Akibayashi
Professor Kazuya Kawaguchi, Hiroshima Shudo University

ABSTRACT

Korean gay space is in constant flux. From the shadows of cruising theaters and parks in the 1970s and 1980s to bars, campuses, and online forums in the 1990s, city streets for pride and film festivals in the 2000s, and now the plethora of dating apps awash with the fresh faces of Gen Z, gay spaces have been taken and shaken, establishing new places of belonging for those who inhabit them. If Korean gay men were ever trapped in an identity crisis, now is their time of "identity opportunity." The stars have aligned with the Korean Wave, and Koreans have become the shining pie in the sky—hot, fresh, and everyone wants a piece. As Koreaphilia sweeps the world, Korean gay men are forced to come to terms with not only where they stand but also where others must sit. Yet, where exactly is "Korea" and who are the "Koreans?" What does it mean to "be" Korean, and do gay men have the agency to reshape Koreanness? These are the core questions this body of work seeks to answer among many others, as it traverses the broader region of Asia in search of Korean gay space, place, and identity.

Chapter One starts at the turn of the century during the advent of Korea's pop cultural "boom"—and, simultaneously, Korean gay bars—Japan. The chapter presents a series of personal conversations with, and observations of interactions that involved, the owner and staff at Seoul Soul, where the researcher worked from 2006 to 2007. Sections touch on a range of issues, including changing faces and Koreanness with the South Korean "master," cultural dissonance and sexual racism with the *zainichi* North Korean *miseko*, and racial representation and workplace romance with the Japanese *miseko*. The stories seek to clarify who the master and *miseko* are; how they mediate their lives inside and outside the bar; how they represent the bar and how it in turn shapes their self-representations; and, who others are to them and what prejudices they hold. The experience and resulting identity of masters and *miseko* are revealed to be multifaceted yet distinctly shaped by their positionality at the intersections of race and sexuality in the bar. The chapter sheds light on a chronically overshadowed community, focusing its narrative on the people who sustain the scene from behind.

Chapter Two zooms out from Seoul Soul to look at the broader Korean gay bar scene in Tokyo, with the inclusion of those that came before (Stairways of Heaven) and after (Anyoung). It introduces not only the actors that produce these establishments but also those who consume them. Korean gay identity is examined against the backdrop of Koreaphobia in Japan and homophobia among *zainichi*, along with the Korean Wave, its impact on the queer diaspora, and the gay commodification of Koreanness. It comparatively analyzes "racial" and "national" groupings in the bar, seeking clarity on the representations of self and other among gay Koreans and with gay Japanese. A series of conclusions is made: (1) Korean gay men's experience in Japan is shaped by having to contend with separate closets for race and sexuality, compounded by racism and homophobia from within their own communities dissociated from "Japan." (2) The Korean Wave has created a new category of desire among gay men through a middle ground or third space around a borderless, hybridized community of communities. (3) Korean gay bars simultaneously function as consumer spaces for what the author terms "proximate opposites" with Japanese, and as community centers for racially one yet ideologically divided Koreans.

Chapter Three moves back to the homeland, in search of the origins of Korean gay space, place,

and identity, along with its connections to Japan. Gay districts in Korean cities are in a constant state of redevelopment, and one inconspicuous feature at many of their bars is what may be considered an air of Japaneseness. While Japanese characteristics and customs are fading away from this landscape, the story of their origin has remained obscure. The chapter outlines the decline in recent years of Japan and the Japanese man as fixtures in the consciousness and desires of gay men in Korea. Working in reverse to trace the catalysts for the rise and fall of this imaginary, it makes inferences about the early history of Japan's influences on Korean gay space since colonization (1910-1945) and of Japanese men's interactions with Korean gay men since the normalization of bilateral relations (1965). The case study reveals the current status and outlook of "Japan" in gay Korea based on interviews conducted with the owners and staff of ten gay bars in Seoul and Busan. With its binary focus, the chapter aims to relocate the discussion of Queer Korea into Queer Asia, taking it beyond the confines of its relationship with the discursively predominant West.

Chapter Four zooms out once again, this time to survey the national landscape of bars and other establishments that constitute the thriving gay scene across Korea. As the discursive exclusion of communities beyond Seoul and Busan has resulted in an incomplete picture of gay life in Korea, the chapter discusses formations of gay identity intraregionally within Seoul and interregionally among cities and provinces outside Seoul. In analyzing regionally based attitudes and behaviors toward self and other within the gay community as dispersed around Korea, it seeks to identify representations of gay life as it exists across a kaleidoscope of contrasting centers and peripheries. Out of this pursuit, a set of overarching conclusions is made about regionalism and gay men in Korea. First, regionalism is alive, complex, and witnessing a transformation by a new online generation. Second, Korean gay men—with both regional identities and sexually oriented lifestyles—through their own practice of regionalism contribute to the construction of this subregionalism influenced by consumer culture and sexual imaginaries, not limited to perceptions of masculinity that establish subtle (not always concurrent) hierarchies of desire. In the broader landscape, homoregionalism is shown to function as a regionalizing means of classifying gay space, place, and identity in Korea.

Chapter Five travels beyond Korea and Japan to the broader "Koreasphere"—a borderless zone where Koreans are idealized as romantic and sexual partners by young Southeast Asian gay men, not merely as Koreans but as nexuses to the broader imaginary of Korea. It also examines young Korean gay men as members of a postmodern class with the cosmopolitan, queer mobility to openly explore and express their sexuality through tourism to the gay meccas of Southeast Asia. Yet, despite their increasing contacts with Southeast Asia as a "progressive Orient," their desire for and interactions with Southeast Asian men remain limited both locally and in Korea. The chapter interrogates the reasons behind this self-imposed ethnosexual barrier, tracing attitudes and practices toward *tongnama* (Southeast Asia[ns]) through their chance encounters at home and on trips abroad. Through fieldwork online and on site in Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia—Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—along with Taiwan, the study reveals a Korean gay lens that sees Southeast Asia as a racially inferior gateway to sexually superior zones of self-exploration. As a discourse, it reveals a complicated mosaic of gay space, place, and identity in the binary context of East and Southeast Asia, while contributing to an intraregional dialogue that advances translocal connections in the study of Queer Asia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is a personal journey through the ongoing experience of adulthood, along a winding road that decades ago lured me from the US to Japan, magnetized me from Europe back to Korea, and has now stricken me with wanderlust across the endless region that is Asia. Every step of the way in my lifelong search for deep and meaningful connections in this ancestral homeland, I've met people who bring color and direction into a world that's often gray and hard to navigate alone. I wish to take a moment from the outset to recognize those who've made it possible for me to be here today presenting the fruits of my labor over these arduous years.

The message of thanks must, of course, start with my advisor Prof. Yuka Kanno. Supportive of my academically deviant ways from day one, it's her reckless encouragement of this deviance that has kept any sense of imposter syndrome far at bay against the tide of critics. I'm forever blessed that I cannot relate to the horror stories about advisors I had read online before stepping out of an established career in industry to embark on this precarious path to a PhD. Prof. Kanno has shown me that I have as much say in what academia should be as it does me—a lesson I will keep and pass onto others for years to come.

In that thread, I also thank my committee members Prof. Kozue Akibayashi and Prof. Kazuya Kawaguchi for their honest feedback on the [admittedly, many] flaws that remain in this work, free from any restraint that could otherwise have led me to delusions of grandeur.

Throughout my time working toward this PhD, I've had the honor and privilege to meet so many scholars whose lifetime of work paved the way for this comparative sliver of a contribution. Todd Henry, John Cho, Thomas Baudinette, and Sumi Cho are only a few of these superstars, with many others still to meet in the flesh. This includes my peer reviewers for academic journals whose invaluable feedback honed my ability to make work fit for publication—many thanks to Cheehyung Harrison Kim (*Korean Studies*), Robert Winstanley-Chesters (*European Journal of Korean Studies*), and Peter Matanle (*Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*).

Special thanks must also be made to my Prof. ChorSwang Ngin at CSULA—who introduced me to and lit the fire of my passion for anthropology and Asian Studies—along with Prof. David Slater and Prof. James Farrer at Sophia University, who supported and guided me at separate stages of my foray into ethnography at the Korean gay bars of Tokyo in the 2000s. I also thank Samuel Masuyama (an academic in his own right), who as my boss mentored me during my transition from academia to industry in Japan, before standing by to support my return many years later.

The rest of my acknowledgments I reserve for the many inspiring scholars I've had the opportunity to meet at academic conferences of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), Association of Asian Studies (AAS), and Association for Korean Studies in Europe (AKSE), as well as the institutions that have funded my work, including the Graduate School of Global Studies at Doshisha University, K. Matsushita Foundation (KMF), Support for Pioneering Research Initiated by the Next Generation (SPRING), and the Overseas Korean Studies and Heritage Foundation (OKSHF) at the Korean Heritage Library of USC. Every bit has helped and is the reason why I'm not [yet…] a starving PhD.

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INTRODUCTION

Korean gay space is in constant flux. From the shadows of cruising theaters and parks in the 1970s and 1980s to bars, campuses, and online forums in the 1990s, city streets for pride and film festivals in the 2000s, and now the plethora of dating apps awash with the fresh faces of Gen Z, gay spaces have been taken and shaken, establishing new places of belonging for those who inhabit them. If Korean gay men were ever trapped in an identity crisis, now is their time of "identity opportunity." The stars have aligned with the Korean Wave, and Koreans have become the shining pie in the sky—hot, fresh, and everyone wants a piece. As Koreaphilia sweeps the world, Korean gay men are forced to come to terms with not only where they stand but also where others must sit. Yet, where exactly is "Korea" and who are the "Koreans?" What does it mean to "be" Korean, and do gay men have the agency to reshape Koreanness? These are the core questions this body of work seeks to answer among many others, as it traverses the broader region of Asia in search of Korean gay space, place, and identity.

Korean gay men and the establishments run by, for, and around them can be found not only in Korea but across East and Southeast Asia. Gay bars constitute the largest chunk of these establishments, yet have often been bypassed as fieldsites of study. In Japan, Korean gay bars sprang up as soon as the Korean Wave (*kanryū*) hit its shores in the 2000s and have only continued to increase, further disrupting the picture of "normality" painted in Japan as observed by Wim Lunsing."[1] Chapter One of this dissertation starts with this anomaly, during a time when I worked behind the scenes of the budding community as a barboy (*miseko*) at Seoul Soul in Tokyo's gay area of Ni-Chōme. As a scene setter for the next chapter, it focuses on the personal

[1] Wim Lunsing, *Beyond Common Sense: Sexuality and Gender in Contemporary Japan* (London: Kegan Paul Limited, 2001), 6.

stories of and with the owner and other staff at the bar to reveal a sense of their lives as racialized and racializing gay men within the confines of the "Korean gay bar in Japan." Besides Korean and Japanese gay men, the interactions bring rare insight into gay men from the Korean-Japanese community of *zainichi,* who have had to contend with everything from "Japanization"[2] to perceptions as non-Koreans by Koreans and non-Japanese by Japanese.[3]

Chapter Two then steps out from Seoul Soul and around the corner into other Korean gay bars Stairways of Heaven and Anyoung, broadening the scope of inquiry and examining the customers who come together to make up this scene carrying more than the purely carnal identities seen with Japanese gay men by Mark McLelland.[4] With the community's mélange of backgrounds—South Korean, *zainichi*, Japanese, and otherwise—the chapter looks at how gay bars commodify Koreanness along with the "racial" and "national" subcommunities that form and interact according to the spatial and temporal factors at play within the bar. Delving deeper into the cultural and ideological tensions beneath these divisions, it touches on sensitive issues of racism and homophobia experienced, internalized, and perpetuated across the community. At the same time, it looks at the bar's function for its own survival through the role of its owner and staff in bringing these subgroups together by capitalizing on their mutual desires for one another—as racially one Koreans or "proximately opposite" Japanese.

Returning to this research after my hiatus from academia, Chapter Three then turns focus to the gay bars and community in Korea in the 2020s, seeking connections to my findings over a

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[2] Hiroshi Wagatsuma, "Problems of Self-Identity Among Korean Youth in Japan," in *Koreans in Japan: Ethnic Conflict and Accommodation*, eds. Changsoo Lee and George De Vos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981): 309.
[3] Yasunori Fukuoka, *Lives of Young Koreans in Japan* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2000), 23.
[4] Mark McLelland, *Male Homosexuality in Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000): 202.

decade earlier in Japan. I begin with the premise that Korean gay space, place, and identity have a shared yet untold and fading history with that in Japan. The chapter sets out to make inferences on these origins based on the inextricably tied memories of Japanese colonization from 1910 to 1945 and sex tourism shortly after Korea's normalized relations with Japan after 1965. With the 1970s and into the "Golden 80s," Japan's music industry simultaneously boomed, transforming the nation into an idolized imaginary for Korean gay men—sustained only until the hegemony of soft power switched hands with the Korean Wave. In charting the path ahead, the chapter makes predictions for the further decline of the Japanese imaginary for Korean gay men based on what I consider an increasing "Japanlessness" at Korean gay bars, while acknowledging the Japanophilias that can still be found nonetheless in gay Korea.

Looking back on my sampling of bars in Seoul and Busan, Japan's absence may have become clearer but Korea's presence remained puzzlingly incomplete. This is tackled with a broadened scope of study at gay bars in other cities across Korea in Chapter Four, moving out into the provinces where gay men are no farther behind the forefront of the consumerist identities and lifestyles analyzed by John Cho.[5] As I travel from city to city, I encounter gay life spread out across contrasting centers and peripheries along with corresponding regional formations of gay identity expressed through what I introduce as "homoregionalisms." In Seoul, too, districts and neighborhoods function as their own subregions, while Busan's gay scene intertwines with those in Japan more so than elsewhere in Korea. These intra- and interregional expressions are further found online, through discussions that break down their own and others' national and regional identities along with notions of masculinity that locate gay space, place, and identity in complementary and conflicted hierarchies of desire.

[5] John Cho, "The Three Faces of South Korea's Male Homosexuality: Pogal, Iban, and Neoliberal Gay," in *Queer Korea*, ed. Todd Henry (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 266.

The dissertation treks onward to and ends in Southeast Asia, where Korean gay men are now in recent years venturing in droves out of a search for self-discovery, unsatiated by gay life in both Korea and Japan. With its rapid development, easy accessibility, and pervasive Koreaphilia—in a borderless zone I label as the "Koreasphere"—the region and its gay meccas beckon them as tropical paradises of open sexual exploration and expression. Despite this, selective ethnosexual barriers with local gay men have limited interpersonal contacts, which becomes the focus of interrogation in Chapter 5. The chapter presents these discriminatory attitudes and practices of Korean gay men as "Southeastern disorientations," in contrast to the "Eastern orientations" toward them as white Asians discussed by Dredge Kang.[6] The discourse further complicates the mosaic of Korean gay space, place, and identity in its juxtaposition with Southeast Asia, while contributing to an inter-Asian dialogue on translocal connections among gay men that carries limitless opportunities for further study in the broader scope of Queer Asia.[7]

The methods employed throughout the course of on-site fieldwork for this dissertation included spatial analyses, participant observation, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews with gay men across Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia—Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—along with Taiwan. At gay bars, cruising spaces, and other establishments, owners, staff, and customers became key informants, interacting with me less as a researcher and more as a racial subject and sexual object. As a *miseko*, my perspectives were

[6] Dredge Kang, "Eastern orientations: Thai middle-class gay desire for 'white Asians'," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 182-208.

[7] "Queer Asia" refers to the subject of intersectional queer and area studies covering the expansive region of Asia, which as such includes the national scopes of "Queer Korea" and "Queer Japan." Howard Chiang and Alvin Wong have advocated for the examination of Queer Asia as comparatively transregional, global, and inter-Asian, and this work seeks to advance this aim in its focus on Korean gay men in not only Korea but also Japan and Southeast Asia. For more, see Howard Chiang and Alvin Wong, "Asia is burning: Queer Asia as critique," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 123.

through the lens of "labor participant observation," as Haeng-ja Chung has termed from her own work at a Korean hostess bar in Osaka.[8] As a customer, I became both a consumer of my informants and was duly consumed by them, throughout the process recognizing my own subjectivity be it as a Korean-American in Japan, a descendant of the Chŏlla region in Korea, or a white Asian in Southeast Asia. This "critical autoethnography" as termed by Gilbert Caluya[9]—attentive to my own power relations and lived experiences as researcher and researched—is "queered" in this attentiveness toward my own performance as a racialized and sexualized actor, adopting the inclusive and intersectional method of "queering ethnography" encouraged by Alison Rooke.[10] Inevitably, boundaries had to be set nonetheless; and, as cautioned by Peter Jackson, such can hinder the dynamics at play necessitating one's own contribution as an actor.[11] This I cannot deny, and one can only speculate what outcomes may have taken another turn without these boundaries.

In the online space, digital ethnography became the core method, relying on HPs and social media accounts of gay establishments and their customers' reviews; gay guides and directories in Korean, Japanese, and English; gay portal IVANCITY along with its discussion boards and "pink map"; group chats on community app BAND and messenger app KakaoTalk;

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[8] Haeng-ja Chung, "In the Shadows and at the Margins: Working in the Korean Clubs and Bars of Osaka's Minami Area," in *Wind Over Water: Migration in an East Asian Context*, eds. David Haines, Keiko Yamanaka, and Shinji Yamashita (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 192.
[9] Gilbert Caluya, "The (Gay) Scene of Racism: Face, Shame and Gay Asian Males," *ACRAWSA E-Journal* 2, no. 2 (2006): 3.
[10] "Queering" questions and destabilizes conventional assumptions about gender, sexuality, and identity in ethnography, looking at power dynamics, norms, and hierarchies along with the researcher's own biases. For more, see Alison Rooke, "Queer in the Field: On Emotions, Temporality and Performativity in Ethnography," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, eds. Kath Browne and Catherine Nash (London, New York: Routledge, 2016).
[11] Peter Jackson, *Male Homosexuality in Thailand: An Interpretation of Contemporary Thai Sources* (Meppel: Krips Repro, 1989).

and the countless posts, comments, and memes that abound on social media and other online forums such as X (Twitter), Ilbe, and Quora. Location-based dating apps 9monsters, Grindr, Jack'd, and Tinder were indispensable means of access to the over 5,000 Korean, Japanese, *zainichi*, Southeast Asian, and other gay men's profiles surveyed for data analysis, which lent insights to the study in their users' self-representation as commodities for the desires of others, as emphasized by Sharif Mowlabocus.[12] Hundreds of these indirectly sourced users further became direct contacts or informants through the app and in person, the majority of whom ranged in their 20s and 30s—a mandatory demographic in the study of new trends in gay space, place, and identity and their direction for the path ahead.

From start to end, the research for this dissertation was conducted with a keen awareness of the sensitivity of the topics touched on and the typical resistance of Korean and other Asian gay men against being "researched." Consent forms—as with methods such as formal surveys—were avoided, as they would have distanced me as an outsider to my subjects, invaded their privacy in what should be preserved as safe spaces, and constricted access to a limited selection of "open" fieldsites and respondents (thereby excluding the mass of discreet others who choose to stay "closed"). Consequently, research often had to be conducted covertly, so as not to disrupt the dynamic of interactions with and around me. My intent as a researcher was disclosed only when asked what I do (in no case was it concealed, for transparency), which inevitably diverges from standard practices for informed consent. Yet, while consent was not always requested explicitly, ethics were consistently preserved in relational and transactional ways through the mutuality of my interactions, with fieldsites and respondents anonymized unless otherwise agreed or where identities were already anonymous through aliases. Further steps are taken to

[12] Sharif Mowlabocus, *Gaydar Culture: Gay Men Technology and Embodiment in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 94.

keep identities confidential in my fieldnotes, which protect the personal information therein through storage on a secure server accessible to only me. Serving to prevent any infringement of the research on the rights and interests of the researched without detracting from its credibility, anonymity is a necessary feature that makes this work possible—and it will remain so for others to come.

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CHAPTER 1

Chapter One starts at the turn of the century during the advent of Korea's pop cultural "boom"—and, simultaneously, Korean gay bars—Japan. The chapter presents a series of personal conversations with, and observations of interactions that involved, the owner and staff at Seoul Soul, where the researcher worked from 2006 to 2007. Sections touch on a range of issues, including changing faces and Koreanness with the South Korean "master," cultural dissonance and sexual racism with the *zainichi* North Korean *miseko,* and racial representation and workplace romance with the Japanese *miseko*. The stories seek to clarify who the master and *miseko* are; how they mediate their lives inside and outside the bar; how they represent the bar and how it in turn shapes their self-representations; and, who others are to them and what prejudices they hold. The experience and resulting identity of masters and *miseko* are revealed to be multifaceted yet distinctly shaped by their positionality at the intersections of race and sexuality in the bar. The chapter sheds light on a chronically overshadowed community, focusing its narrative on the people who sustain the scene from behind.

Behind the Scene:
Stories with the Master and Miseko of a Korean Gay Bar in Japan*

*Graves, Albert. "Behind the Scene: Stories with the Master and Miseko of a Korean Gay Bar in Japan." *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022).

Introduction

The year was 2006 and I was 21. After a bit of aimless wandering, a red and yellow panel that read "SEOUL★SOUL" above its transliteration in Korean and Japanese caught my attention, aroused my curiosity, and beckoned me to its entrance on the basement floor. Cautiously, I cracked open the door to take a peek inside. A man in his 20s seated with several others around a table looked over and asked a question that went over my head. I replied that I was only passing by to see what the place was, and he revealed to me that it was a bar. After he explained the system, I decided to enter as a customer. As time went by, a man who turned out to be the "master" came in, took a shine to me, and it was on that evening that I became a *miseko*—a member of staff, and a face of the bar.

Opened in April 2002 on the main street of Tokyo's gayborhood in Shinjuku Ni-Chōme (commonly shortened to "Ni-Chōme"), Seoul Soul (Seoul Soul | *Souru Souru*) is one of Japan's oldest Korean gay bars and was the gateway for my own induction into the world of Ni-Chōme. In Japan, the master (*masutā*) is a man who owns and manages a drinking establishment, whereas a woman would be known as the *mama* or, politely, *mama-san*.[1] This is also the case for gay bars; and, in their play with gender flexibility, customers will often address a master interchangeably between *masutā* and *mama*. Korean gay bars in Japan are no exception, with masters also referred to respectfully as "manager" or "boss" (*sajang-nim*). Formal or informal, these titles are reflective of the reverence accorded to the owner as the authoritative figure and

frontal face of the bar. The master curates the bar's personality according to his desired representation, and wields the strongest influence in regulating interactions with and among customers.

On nights when the master is absent, regulars are less inclined to come into the bar or stay for an extended time unless there happens to be a bartender whose company they enjoy or, ideally, to whom they are attracted. The term for these staff in the gay world is *miseko*, which, in comparison to *masutā*, carries a connotation of subservience and inexperience as the bar's (*mise*) and its owner's "kids" (*ko*). They are as such often selected for their youth and looks—or, if wanting in that regard, their ability in other ways as a trusted proxy of the master to bring customers in and keep them there, normally through humor and wit. *Miseko* who cannot by themselves deliver on one of these expectations risk imparting to customers a sense of alienation from the bar in the master's absence. They are thus to each their own separate facets of the bar's identity, ingrained in its image and invested in its success.

Since the early 2000s, Korean gay bars such as Seoul Soul have steadily come onto the scene in the gayborhoods of Tokyo and, recently, Osaka. Yet, few people outside their clientele are aware of their existence, and this regrettably includes often siloed scholars of the Korean and gay communities in Japan. In this chapter, I will present a series of personal conversations with, and observations of interactions that involved, the owner and staff at Seoul Soul during the time I worked there as a miseko from 2006 to 2007. In moving behind the Korean gay bar scene in Tokyo, I seek answers to an overarching set of questions: Who are the master and *miseko* of the Korean gay bar in Japan? How do they mediate their lives inside and outside the bar? In what ways do they represent the bar, and how does the bar in turn shape their representations of themselves? Who are others to them and what prejudices do they hold? The experience and

resulting identity of masters and *miseko* of the Korean gay bars in Japan are revealed to be multifaceted yet distinctly shaped by their positionality at the intersections of race and sexuality in the bar.

As a select compilation of stories with standalone characters and scenarios, this chapter is limited in the theoretical conclusions—and, admittedly, scholarly contribution—it can make on any one subject area. Its intention nonetheless as a preliminary analysis is to expose—and, as possible, touch on—the breadth of research questions that surround this overlooked and overdue topic. While the topic is perhaps one better interrogated around foundational ideologies of being, I avoid making sweeping assertions about identity so as not to paint masters, *miseko*, or the scene in which they work in any one shade. Instead, I take the liberty to make a panoramic assessment of random contacts with my coworkers which stood out to me in the interplay of their racial and sexual awareness—that is, their expressions of identity as shaped by their roles in a racialized, sexualized space.

My reflections serve as a base for scholarship in the interdisciplinary exploration of cross-cultural and queer studies. On one hand, it sets out to advance research on the marginalized Korean community in Japan from the angle of a subgroup with its own sexually delineated community in Ni-Chōme, along with the Japanese who share in its construction and representation. On the other hand, it identifies key questions about how place or sense of belonging in racially delineated spaces influences the lives of gay men, taking one step further by focusing on the cocreators rather than consumers of these spaces. The discourse not only sheds light on a chronically overshadowed community, but, by examining the people who sustain the scene from behind, also serves as a reminder that in the study of any stage there is always a curtain to be pulled back.

Methodology

The stories I will present were taken from my fieldnotes of participant observation and interviews from inside and outside the bar and its business hours. They are organized into separate sections for each of my coworkers: South Korean master Gilsu (Kirusu), Japan-born "resident" (*zainichi*) North Korean *miseko* Park, and Japanese *miseko* Shin.[2] With each story I will include a selective analysis interlaced with questions for further study. These accounts are not chronologically ordered or thematically connected but span a range of issues—from changing faces and Koreanness with the master, to cultural dissonance and sexual racism with Park, to racial representation and love life with Shin. "Race" as socially constructed, assigned, and associated, is a persistent thread in the self-other groupings at the bar—for the master and *miseko* as much as for customers—and, as such, recurs in my reflections. On one layer there are interracially the Koreans and Japanese, and on another an intraracial distinction by Koreans between South and North. My examination of the bar experience from the perspective of the master, Park, and Shin—not merely as owner and staff but as racial subjects and sexual objects—reveals the intersections of race and sexuality that materialize in Korean gay bars as "imagined communities" in Japan.[3] In this process, I additionally recognize my own subjectivity as a Korean-American *miseko*, and do not shy away from recounting my positionality at these intersections.

At the time of fieldwork, Seoul Soul was one of only three Korean gay bars in Japan, all located in Ni-Chōme. Spatial and temporal constraints in this study prevent more comprehensive commentary on the scene as a whole in the 2000s, and could be partly remedied with revisits to Seoul Soul along with comparative interviews with the masters and *miseko* of Stairways of Heaven (*Cheongugui Gyedan* | *Tengoku no Kaidan*) and Anyoung (*Annyeong* | *Annyon*). Still,

the topics I will examine concern social realities not confined to the bar or its early years but which are prevalent throughout society to this day, with overlapping implications for Koreans and gay men across Japan. With proper theoretical debate, they could easily branch into separate chapters of their own. However, I choose to hone my reflections in on each story as it relates to my research questions on the people behind the Korean gay bar scene in Tokyo. While in the end this produces more questions than answers, it illustrates a fuller landscape of the intimate and undisclosed lives of masters and *miseko*, both inside and outside the spaces they construct. As my analyses repeatedly return to questions about racial and sexual identity and the sense of belonging in overlaying communities demarcated by race and sexuality, I start with a condensed overview of the origins of gay identity, community, and its study in Japan.

Identity and Community in Ni-Chōme

The earliest bars and coffee shops for men to meet other men surfaced in Tokyo immediately at the end of World War II as soon as 1946, simultaneously with the introduction of the term "gay" (*gei*) by US servicemen who patronized these establishments (McLelland 2006, 7). Mark McLelland's (2006, 6) archival work on publications by sexologists such as Kazuhiko Kabiya discovered that the loanword had in fact entered the Japanese lexicon decades before many Americans would even hear about it in the 1970s. The "gay bars" (*geibā*), as they soon started to be referred to interchangeably with other terms—along with the "gay boys" (*geibōi*) who worked there—were studied by sexologist Tenrei Ota (1957, 306), who found as many as 21 establishments in seven districts across Tokyo. This discovery does not, however, imply the early existence of a thriving gay scene in the way that it has since materialized in areas such as Ni-Chōme. McLelland (2006, 13) makes an important distinction that, for Japanese, gei and the

industry that surrounded it at the time was synonymous with artistic forms of transgendered expression in a commercial context. The concepts of gay identity and community as they are now known would not be fully explored until Japan's "gay boom" of the 1990s.

It was then that public and academic discourse on sexual identity and coming out in Japan mounted in mass media and with the release of a series of personal narratives, the earliest of which can be found in Noriaki Fushimi's book Private Gay Life (*Puraibēto Gei Raifu*) in 1991. While the semantics of "gay" (now, no longer *gei* as a third gender) and "coming out" had been imported from the West, Fushimi and other Japanese gay men disclosed a body of consciousness around their sexuality that could not be reduced as Western. Suganuma Katsuhiko (2007, 498) further observed how Fushimi, with his research into social and activist groups and literary texts that predated the introduction of queer theory from the West, sketched out an autonomous picture of gay culture in postwar Japan. In the accounts that came out into the 2000s, there is nonetheless a pervasive sentiment of ambivalence toward gay identity and community. In their book Coming Out in Japan, originally in Japanese and translated into English, Ito Satoru and Yanase Ryuta (2001, 86) described their initial aversion toward the bars of Ni-Chōme, whose closed doors represented to them a physical and psychological barrier beyond which one ceases to be "normal." They outlined the disdain they had for a superficial scene limited to chitchat, alcohol, karaoke, and sex, and exposed internalized phobias in the insinuation that those who do not subscribe to the flamboyant style of speech rampant in the bars do not belong (Ito and Yanase 2001, 87-88).

The attention to Ni-Chōme has been duly shared by the few social scientists who have made it their fieldsite for ethnographic research. Sunagawa Hideki (2003, 218) took a deeper dive into the conversations that take place in the bars, and concluded that beneath all of the

sexual talk is in actuality a desire to establish bonds of intimacy. In this sense, the bar becomes less of a business and more of an institution—a claim that Ishida Hitoshi (2006), however, refuted on the basis of his own fieldwork. McLelland and other Western researchers such as Wim Lunsing[4] also made considerable advancements from an outsider perspective and globalized scholarship in the area by making it accessible in English. In more recent years, contemporary researchers such as Moriyama Noritaka and Thomas Baudinette have explored new angles of gay space in Japan, including the exclusionary practices of bars by "type."[5] Gclick, an online directory of bars and other establishments in Japanese, features a filter with 16 types of customer bases ranging from students (*gakusei*) to businessmen (*sararīman*) to older men (*nenpai*), twinks (*janīzu-kei*) to jocks (*taīkukai-kei*) to heavy men (*futome-kei*). "Foreigners" (*gaikokujin*) are in a category of their own, with the presumption that one can be or not be attracted to all or any of "them." This is indicative of the xenophilias and xenophobias inveterate in Japanese society which are laid bare in the racially subjective, sexually objectifying spaces of Ni-Chōme.

Baudinette (2016) has confronted the overdue issue of gay racism in his interviews with members of racialized groups such as Koreans and Chinese. While his sample was rather limited in size and demographics and included no representation by *zainichi* Koreans,[6] he did manage to excavate disparities between how Japanese as the majority and other East Asians as a minority see a racially inclusive or exclusive community in Ni-Chōme. However, his conclusions monochromatically depict Korean and other East Asian gay men as absent of space and place in Japan,[7] despite that for decades now Ni-Chōme has had gay bars run by and for Koreans and Chinese. While this chapter does not present the origins or scale of these bars, its stories from Seoul Soul will capture the portraits of at least a few of the people who construct such spaces for

their own and others' place in Japan.

The Master

A South Korean man aged 36 who immigrated as an adult from Seoul. Self-described as "direct" (socchoku na) and "hot-tempered" (okorippoi). A typical example of gaten-kei, or blue-collar type, characterized by a touch of machismo that is rough around the edges—one of the commonly found and idealized types among gay men in Japan. Can communicate in Korean and Japanese.

Changing Faces

October 21, 2006

When we close the bar one morning, the master asks if I intend to have breakfast and proposes we go together. I agree, and he takes me to a Korean restaurant close by where we had been before. We see several of our customers there—a South Korean man, two Japanese men, and a Japanese woman—and decide to sit with them. They talk with one another in Japanese and one of the Japanese men tries to communicate with the waitress in Korean, coaxing her for more side dishes (*banchan*) and declaring with pride that he is gay. They turn their attention to me and ask why I am so thin, and the woman insists I have more of the banchan. The flamboyant man compliments me as an entertainer and for my kindness. When I reply that I enjoy his company, too, as there is never a dull moment with him, the group laughs and the man seems flattered. The other Japanese man describes me as cute and angelic and does not believe me when I say that I am not that innocent. He smiles and bows often during the conversation, and I point this out to him. He explains that he wants to always be polite to others.

When the meal is done, we stand up and everyone reaches for their wallets. I am not sure if the master intends to pay for me since he invited me, but I take out my wallet,

anyway. I hand the waitress a banknote and ask her for change. When the others have paid, there is no change; it seems that the total received from the group is exact. The woman who sat with us asks the master about my change, but he reassures her that everything is fine. I am a bit surprised but act oblivious, and we exit the restaurant. The master heads home in one direction, the flamboyant man and the woman share a taxi, and I walk to the station with the other two men. On the way, the polite man now describes me as sexy. Prying into his intentions, I ask him if that means he wants to have sex with me, and he quickly denies it saying that would be strange. We arrive at the station, I bid the men farewell, and they say they will see me next week at the bar.

As I was no stranger to these customers, it seemed out of character for them to direct so much attention toward me. Perhaps I had made a better impression of myself with them earlier that night. Or, maybe their behavior was influenced by the change of space and what I witnessed were their "outside" rather than "inside" faces in relation to the bar. As far as my own face, I was as a *miseko* still consciously performing for those around me whom I continued to see as the master and our customers. The master, too, did not seem to deviate from his energetic and engaged persona at the bar, in contrast to his subdued and relaxed demeanor on outings alone with me. These comparisons relate to face, which is intrinsic to Japan's high-context communication style and can be put on to mask distinctions of how one truly feels versus what they show to others—that is, respectively, *honne* and *tatemae*.[8] Distinguishing faces in my interactions is not so much to determine the authenticity of behavior as it is to understand how relationships develop in, and are sustained outside, the bar, and how the bar as a space influences these processes. The question of boundaries in those relationships is also relevant and displayed in the polite man's possible desire for sex

but hesitance to act on it. Roles factor into these boundaries, be it staff-customer or, as in my dilemma with the bill, master-*miseko*. That I was younger, a subordinate, and invited are all reasons to expect—even if not always in Japan, certainly from a person born and raised in Korea—that the master would pay for my share, much less not dismiss that I was shortchanged. Out of this incident then arises the question of the flexibility of roles, the extent to which they can change, and the spatial and temporal circumstances by which they tend to do so. Other questions include the influence of the master's role on customers' behavior toward *miseko*, and the cases in which representations of "race" may be altered outside the bar.

Koreanness

November 10, 2006

I am at a restaurant with the master again, this time accompanied by a Japanese-American former *miseko* of Seoul Soul. At the end of our breakfast, I rush to pay the bill for the group. The master chases me to the register and insists on paying, but I refuse to let him. When we return to the table, the master says he appreciates the gesture but that I should not do it again as it is his responsibility to pay for his staff (in ironic contrast to my involuntary overpayment days earlier). In concurrence, the Japanese-American lectures me that this is the Korean custom. I reply that my act of consideration, too, forms part of that intricate fabric of customs. He argues that it is not and that I do not understand Korean culture.

I was raised by a Korean mother, lived in overseas Korean communities, and studied abroad in Korea. Yet, to the Japanese-American—who, coincidentally, had no such experience—none of these were qualifications to know what was truly Korean. His

dismissiveness of the legitimacy of my diasporic identity to self-represent as a Korean in my associations with Koreanness is comparable to the perceived inauthenticity of *zainichi* Koreans as Koreans or Japanese, disempowered by what Iwabuchi (2000, 63) explains as a divided self stuck in "in-betweenness." In relation to the master, there were not only diasporic but also equally legitimate, intergenerational divergences in how he and I interpreted Koreanness. In this case, the interpretations of one cause dispute for the authenticity of the other as a Korean. Yet, just as one who identifies as gay cannot become any less gay by "acting" straight, Koreans across a spectrum of birthplaces, citizenships, and ages act in ways which by default should all be determinative of Koreanness—no matter how seemingly anomalous or contradictory their values, attitudes, and behaviors—in its myriad of representations.

Inside the bar, too, exists a microcosm with its own customs and culture reinvented through racial and sexual intersections. In a sense, the bar becomes a space which produces a separate diaspora, one which is simultaneously Korean, gay, and in Japan. There, "Korean" is not only a racial subject but also a sexual object, and the master along with his *miseko* are presumed to embody that—if not racially, then sexually. That the Japanese-American did not "look" or "act" Korean (concepts that will resurface in the stories with Shin) means that he could not have performed this duty, thereby displacing him in his role at the bar and revealing a possible clue as to why he was no longer a *miseko*. His claim to authority on the subject of Koreanness despite this and absence of any connection outside the bar to Korea or Koreans raises questions about foreign ownership and the appropriative limits of Koreanness. In the end, questions that could be pursued in the context of the bar include the limits of one's ability to dictate what does or does not constitute Koreanness, cases in which a Korean may not be in

control of determining his own Koreanness, and the authenticity of a Koreanness adapted by those who might be considered as outsiders by Koreans. Related areas for further research could include overlaps and divergences of the iterations of Koreanness expressed by Korean diasporas in Japan and the US, along with the tensions that might arise at the bar as a result of interdiasporic or intergenerational disagreements on customs and culture.

Park

A third-generation zainichi North Korean man in his mid-30s, described by the master as "feminine" (josei rashī) and "passionate" (jōnetsuteki). Can communicate only in Japanese.

Cultural Dissonance

October 6, 2006

It is a rainy day. While the bar is still empty, Park decides to sing Frank Sinatra's "My Way." He says that older songs by artists such as Frank Sinatra and Billy Joel remind him of his childhood and make him feel at peace. He thinks the music nowadays is strange, scary, and has no "heart to heart." Korean music is also of no interest to him.

October 13, 2006

Park seems to have become smitten with my renditions of the strange, scary, and heartless from earlier in the evening, as he is now practicing the lyrics and coming up with choreographies for Britney Spears's "Toxic" and Justin Timberlake's "SexyBack," recently released in 2003 and 2006.

October 20, 2006

Returning to our earlier discussion, I ask Park why it is that artists from before his generation remind him of his childhood and how he relates to their music. He explains how "My Way" was

produced during the last years of the artist's life—1969, to be exact—and was the theme song for a movie starring Dustin Hoffman released during his generation around 1979. I have no idea what he is referencing, but it does not matter. When I ask him why he was so infatuated with "Toxic" and "SexyBack," he replies—clearly with a bit of amnesia—that they are only so-so.

In his expressed distaste for newer music, Park was surely generalizing considering his initial fascination with what were in that moment a couple of the hottest tracks in the US. He would have had limited exposure to current hits from abroad, considering their lower target age group and the dominant domestic music market in Japan. Park's childhood interest in US artists who were not popular among his generation at the time, in any case, hints at an escapist desire for another time and place, as a culturally dissonant Korean in Japan in the '70s and '80s. There are reasons why Park as a *zainichi* North Korean gay man may have become disenchanted with his own tribes from his youth. First, as a *zainichi*—exacerbated by the label of "North"—he was discriminated against by the Japanese and their racially exclusive gay community in Ni-Chōme. This is a problem that would have only deepened in his adulthood. In 2002, North Korea officially admitted to the abduction of 13 Japanese citizens between 1977 to 1983. It was an event that led to intensified stigmatization of *zainichi* North Koreans and was a catalyst for many in the community's loss of faith in, and disavowal of, the "homeland," as evidenced in the exodus of students from North Korean schools in Japan to Japanese and even South Korean schools in Japan (Ha 2017, 194). Second, as a Korean who could not speak Korean and had no pride for his racial (much less his ethnopolitical) association—he was shunned by other Koreans. He was a Korean without Koreanness, which, for *zainichi* Koreans, Masaki Matsunaga (2007, 234) argues is marked not by race but by these symbolic fragments such as language and culture.

In his own detachment from the North but also disinterest in the South, coupled with

discordance with (if not resentment toward) Japan, it seems only instinctive that Park would seek solace in a counterculture such as the US. On the surface, it is a trivial matter of musical taste; but beneath that could be a longing for a distant place in a bygone era, in search of anything that resonates to compensate for racial and ethnopolitical identities that never have. Repeat interviews with Park could seek to identify other ways in which he actively or passively replaces Korean and Japanese presences in his life, to determine whether these transposed things share a common thread. Other questions for consideration include how a *miseko*'s cultural dissonance could help or hurt him—and his contribution toward representation—at a racialized gay bar in Japan, and the possibility that a *miseko* could be an outsider in his own bar—or, reversed, how the bar might accommodate or even cultivate his outsideness.

Sexual Racism

October 20, 2006

Park says that he is taking English lessons at the private academy Nova, and his instructor is a man from Germany. When I ask what he thinks about the instructor, he answers that he is probably gay because he has pierced ears. Later on, he says he wants to travel to Italy and that he thinks Italian men are attractive for their black hair (which he seemingly assumes is the case for all Italians). I remind him of a comment he once made in distaste of Western men; but he insists on their difference saying that black hair looks Asian, then making a further exception for Siberians as they also look Asian (obviously, believing them to be European).

A visitor from South Korea enters the bar, and he and Park do their best to communicate in broken Japanese and Korean. The customer confesses his attraction to Park, which clearly charms him. Park flashes his designer silk scarf and humbly bemoans the expense of his

ensemble. As he prances in his haute couture, the customer smiles and watches adoringly. On a notepad, Park writes his name, phone number, email address, and home address for the customer. As we sit across from him, Park turns to me and fawns aloud over the customer's tall stature, big eyes, and glasses which complement his face shape. "He's a nice guy, isn't he?" he asks. I smile and nod my head, as a *miseko* can only do even when he secretly disagrees.

Park's preconception that Western men with earrings must be gay mirrors an impression of the gay foreigner as he is imagined in Japan. While Japanese gay men are not immune to sexual stereotypes within their own society,[9] that does not preclude them from sexually stereotyping other gay men outside what is excused as a racially based sexual preference.[10] This sexual racism, to term it bluntly, was exhibited by customers in their descriptions of white and black men, which reflected an overall sense of fear, caution, and even revulsion (Fieldnotes, October 7 & December 15, 2006).[11] What these portrayals have in common is the other extreme at the reverse end of the hypersexualization and fetishization that occurs between Koreans and Japanese, and that is their sexual distancing from the Westerner.[12] While Korean and Japanese men—straight and gay—are accustomed to the emasculated, asexual associations often ascribed to them in the West,[13] many themselves conversely associate Western men with danger and promiscuity.[14] As for Park, his assumption reduces the instructor as a foreign man who flaunts his sexuality in what must be a foreignly gay way. It is a departure from the standard by which Korean and Japanese men with pierced ears—now pervasive among assumedly straight celebrities—are no longer looked at with suspicion in Korea and Japan.

There is also the question of what is and is not believed to be Asian. The boundaries are demonstrably blurred for Park. Italians with black hair and Siberians are exempted from their actual or perceived Westernness, making them as desirable as Asians. In contrast, the South

Korean customer, with his tall height and round eyes—traits traditionally seen as Western—became exceptionally desirable compared to the average Asian. These contradictions show how attractiveness, as experienced rather than imagined, is—for Park as with other Koreans and Japanese at Seoul Soul (Fieldnotes, October 7, 13, 14, 21, and 28, 2006)—determined not by race but by physical features which are relatable and complementary to one's own race as it is imagined.[15] A comparative analysis of racial stereotypes and their origins in Korea and Japan could lend deeper insight into these discriminations at the Korean gay bars of Japan. With this further inquiry, it should also be asked which racially othered groups within Japan's gay community have yet to establish space and place, what the barriers have been, and to what extent this deficiency is a consequence of exclusion from sexual objectivity or merely absence of racial representation.

Shin

A Japanese man in his mid-20s, described by the master—who was also his boyfriend—as "hot-tempered" (okorippoi) and by customers as "looking" Korean. Can communicate only in Japanese.

Racial Representation

October 14, 2006

Today was scheduled to be the day I try opening the bar alone, but here with me out of the blue is another relatively new *miseko* Shin, whom I know of but have not yet met. As I clean and organize, he sits and works on tasks from his day job. After a while he exits the bar, and I take it he was sent by the master to check on me. When he returns I ask him if he wants a piece of chocolate, which he silently declines. He makes an audible sigh as he resumes his paperwork, as if to let me know how stressful his work is, that he did not mean to ignore me, and that I am

preparing everything fine on my own. I take this as an indication that the ice has started to crack and that he is slowly warming up to me.

The story is mundane, but the characters and scenario are not. Here is an awkward exchange between recently hired *miseko* who do not seem to share much in common with each other nor even the bar. As a Japanese and a Korean-[German-Scots-Irish-]American, we are to disparate degrees socially, culturally, and linguistically distanced—and, racially, it is questionable how much we can truly claim ownership of the space we are charged to represent. Besides his connection to the master who happens to be Korean, Shin, as I would later find out, had not had much exposure to, or any special interest in, Korea or Koreans. There was thus hardly anything which connected him to the bar as a *miseko*. Being Japanese in Japan, communication was not a problem for him with the majority of customers; but his belonging in the space as a *miseko* would be tested in his ability to meet the expectations of customers seeking to consume the Korean experience—that is, Koreanness. What becomes paramount in that instance is this racial representation along with all of its associations, real or imagined. Nights at the bar over the months to come replayed a consistent description of the Korean man as the yang to the Japanese man's yin. The bar functioned as a space of expectancy for the submissive, passive, shy, and indirect Japanese bottom to come in search of his dominant, active, assertive, and direct Korean top (Fieldnotes, October 7, 13, 14, 21, and 28, 2006). It was as though these characterizations were deliberate sexual personifications of the proverbial couple's postwar nations, with the militarized (though, not necessarily divided) Korea in a romantic alliance with pacifist Japan. As stereotypical as this typecasting may come across, it is not totally baseless. One cross-cultural study of student samples in Seoul and Tokyo by Gudykunst, Yang, and Nishida (1987, 7-34) found Koreans to be more extrospective, or public, than the

introspective, or private, Japanese in their outward or inward direction of attention, referred to as self-consciousness.[16]

While this accepted dichotomy may partly be the result of misinterpretations of one group based on the cultural reference point of another, the question for the present study reverts to the role of the Japanese *miseko* in Korean space and the degree to which he can adequately represent it from the perspective of its customers. For Koreans, Shin may be a tolerated if not welcome presence; but, as Japanese men are no novelty in Japan, he would hardly be seen as a necessity or asset to the bar. For Japanese, he is if anything a distraction—an extra who sits at the rear of the stage, in the shadows cast by the stars of the show—as reminded every time a customer would ask the master why he ever hired him (Fieldnotes, November 6, 2006). This brings into further question the ways in which racially othered *miseko* could be empowered to become the face of a racialized bar (besides looking or acting the part) despite—or, even, owing to—their race. Considering the prejudices against Koreans outside the bar in Japan, other research could explore which Korean representations might be considered less desirable to exhibit inside the bar, and the consequences they could have for the image of the bar as Korean.

Workplace Romance

November 10, 2006

At the start of the month, the master had asked Shin not to work on weekends, explaining to him that customers had complained about his presence (which Shin interpreted as a result of his being Japanese). Today, however, he discloses to me that the real reason was that he does not want to work with him as it has affected their relationship as boyfriends. While he enjoys being with him in private, the bar as a workplace is another story. Shin does not comprehend the dynamics of work at the bar, he says. In his interactions with customers the master often charms them and

says that he is single, to the silent dismay of Shin. Shin does not catch on that the master is merely acting as part of his job, he says, which correspondingly renders him incapable of performing his own job as a *miseko*.

It was always clear to staff that the romantic relationship between the master and Shin was to be kept a secret from customers. This secrecy was for no other purpose than to avoid disturbing the inherently rousing air of the bar which secures its business. Young, handsome, and ostensibly available staff are imperative for any gay bar from the standpoint of its customers, many of whom come not only to socialize over drinks and karaoke but also in hopes of a romantic or sexual encounter. With the master and *miseko* at their beck and call, customers who take a fancy to any member of staff rarely feel inhibited from flirting with him.[17] For the master—the frontal face of the bar—to push away a customer's advance by saying he is taken (by one of his *miseko*, no less) would be akin to presenting a menu to a diner with the house special crossed out. One could wait around and see what else comes in; but, with so many restaurants—Korean and otherwise—in walking distance, there is nothing that prevents him from walking out and trying his luck elsewhere.

The question, then, is how owners and staff can pursue and sustain a love life despite their sexual exploitation by and at the bar.[18] Doubly marginalized by society for their sexuality and in the gay community on account of their race, Korean gay men face more of a struggle to find partners in Japan. The Korean gay bar is quite possibly the only physical space where the reality is the inverse; and, irrespective of business interests, the constant attention from customers is enjoyable for many masters and *miseko*. However, this positionality is a double-edged sword. A partner may be easier to find, but it will be harder to keep and there will be limitations to any relationship. Shin as a conventionally handsome Japanese would not have

realized his privilege in Ni-Chōme (only his relative disadvantage at Seoul Soul) or, in turn, the adversities faced by the master, which could be a reason why the master chose to stray from the truth in his reasoning to Shin. No research has been conducted on the dating patterns of masters and *miseko*; but, anecdotally, partners tend to be confined to the nightlife industry, not least due to the work-life schedule. Outside Seoul Soul are other bars that serve as examples where relationships—in many cases, between co-owners—are openly expressed, and could be taken as case studies to examine the alternative ways these businesses manage to survive and thrive.[19] Interviews could clarify ways in which staff couples navigate their love lives in the bar while mitigating and adapting to interconnected conflicts of interest. Analyses could further seek to identify how far these relationships are invested in when on the periphery of personal lives, considering how some in the industry are bound to wives and children at home (as is the case for both the master and Shin).

Conclusion

In relaying my selection of stories with the master and *miseko* of Seoul Soul, I have attempted to lay bare a few of the facets that color the lives of owners and staff and distinguish them as architects and representatives of Korean gay space and place in Japan. These observations and interactions have led to new questions alongside a clearer picture of who the master and *miseko* are, the connections between their lives inside and outside the bar, how they show themselves to one another and their customers, prejudices they both endure and harbor, issues they face as racial subjects and sexual objects, and ways in which they consequently racialize and sexualize others. Collectively, these accounts reveal how race and sexuality intersect to form a distinct set of experiences behind the scenes of at least one of the Korean gay bars in Japan.

The stories presented are but a drop in the soju bottle of lived experiences that incarnate the identity of the master and *miseko*, not to mention of customers who consume the spaces they construct. With all of my scattered analyses comes a stream of topics yet to be explored: What are the representational limitations of South and North Koreans as masters or *miseko* in relation to Koreanness? How does language control interactions and outcomes at Korean and other bilingual gay bars in Japan? In these racialized spaces, is there a hierarchy of "types" (such as bears [*kuma*], chubs [*debu*], and so on) otherwise segregated in the gay community? Do Korean and other racialized gay bars in Osaka exhibit regionalisms that distinguish them from their counterparts in Tokyo? In which circumstances might Korean and other racialized gay space become desegregated in the gayborhoods of Japan? Which racializations of gay space have not been or could not be realized in Japan? There are Chinese and Taiwanese gay bars; but what are the prospects for Indian, Nigerian, Brazilian, or Russian ones, each of which would serve a sizeable group of foreign nationals in Japan?

Today, since my fieldwork at Seoul Soul along with Stairways of Heaven and Anyoung, no fewer than 18 Korean gay bars have come and gone across Japan, making their marks on the gayborhoods of Tokyo's Ueno and Osaka's Dōyama and Shinsekai.[20] Those still in existence each have masters and *miseko* with their own stories to add to the expanding mosaic of Korean gay space and place in Japan, necessitating ongoing fieldwork behind the scenes with owners and staff and in the audience with customers. Other studies in my own pipeline that I anticipate will further contribute to this dormant body of knowledge will look at intraracial representations between South and North Koreans in Japan; interracial representations between mutually seeking Koreans and Japanese; spatial and performative dimensions of Korean gay bars in Japan; transnational influence of Japan's Korean gay bars on and by gay bars in Korea; and regional

interconnectivities among gayborhoods in Korea and Japan, such as between Busan and Osaka.

Notes

1. For more on the motherly contribution of the mama to her customers, see Farrer (2021, 56-58).

2. Out of respect for the anonymity of my *miseko* informants, "Park" and "Shin" are pseudonyms.

3. The Korean gay bar is one of many "imagined communities" within the imagined community of Ni-Chōme, to take Benedict Anderson's term in the context of nationalism which was further referenced to describe the urban-rural binary of gay space in Japan, in Benkhart (2014).

4. See, for example, Lunsing (2000).

5. See, for example, Moriyama (2014, 246-253) and Baudinette (2016, 465-485).

6. His 11 Korean and Chinese informants are all relatively short-term visitors (no long-term residents) in their 20s and 30s, as shown in Baudinette (2016, 472).

7. He explicitly claims that there are no bars for Korean or Chinese men or their admirers in Ni-Chōme in Baudinette (2016, 475).

8. For commentary on these concepts from the perspective of Koreans, see Lee, Murphy-Shigematsu, and Befu (2006, 205-206 & 227).

9. These stereotypes markedly contrast with those in the West. Admittedly, during my early days in Tokyo, I wondered whether many of the men I saw in public were gay. With their long hair and thin, arched brows, the ways in which trendy men represented themselves would have been suspiciously queer in the US. Yet, in Ni-Chōme, I was perplexed at all the seemingly straight men with short hair and goatees, which I would soon realize was common among gay men in Japan. Japan's reality was evidently the inverse of the gay-straight stereotypes that prevail in the West.

10. For an overview of how gay men who identify as Asian and other races discriminate against themselves and one another on the Internet, see Phua and Kaufman (2003, 981-994).

11. Meanwhile, other customers along with the master denied that racism even exists in Japan, pointing out the nation's foreign aid and turning to whataboutism with the US, where Americans are always in a fuss about race—an indication of the ignorance that racism is measured by the visibility of its discourse (Fieldnotes, December 16, 2006).

12. This is in stark contrast to the narrative of a racialized hierarchy of desire in Asia dominated by white Westerners, which has been perpetuated in studies of predominantly young, cosmopolitan gay men by researchers such as Thomsen (2020) in Korea and Baudinette (2016) in Japan.

13. For more on this, see Han (2008, 829-850).

14. For an earlier history on Westerners as "barbarians" and an existential threat in Korea, see Tikhonov (2012).

15. In this respect, Koreans and Japanese gay men in search of each other are what I term "proximate opposites" in their mutual representations, and I return to this with examples in the section on racial representation with Shin.

16. It should also be mentioned that Americans were found to be more publicly and privately self-conscious than Koreans.

17. This is reinforced by the sexualized space as a gay bar, in which everyone inside is presumed to be gay and thus "legitimate" objects for pursuit, as described by Warren (1998, 184).

18. It should be distinguished that Seoul Soul, as with the other Korean gay bars in Japan, is not a "boys bar" (*bōizubā*), where customers select the staff they want to sit and drink with and can even rent their time inside or outside the bar. Nonetheless, Seoul Soul functions with its own sense of companionship between staff and customers in its compact, intimate space, contrary to what could be considered the empty, transactional, and expensive boys bar.

19. Anyoung—Tokyo's third and newest Korean gay bar with no *miseko* at the time of fieldwork—is one such example with its Korean and [Korean-Russian-]Japanese co-owners Sunny and Asuka.

20. These include Arirang, Beloved, For You, Iriwa, Ko:chu, Korea City, Pusanhan (Busan Port), and Say Yes! in Ni-Chōme; Kankoku Yama-Chan ([South] Korea *Yama-Chan*), PAGODA Tokyo, POVI, SEOUL, Yumedokoro Honoji, and ZAZA in Ueno; BiBimBar, Hata, and Tenshinranman PAGODA in Dōyama; and, Shinsekai BiBimBar in Shinsekai.

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CHAPTER 2

Chapter Two zooms out from Seoul Soul to look at the broader Korean gay bar scene in Tokyo, with the inclusion of those that came before (Stairways of Heaven) and after (Anyoung). It introduces not only the actors that produce these establishments but also those who consume them. Korean gay identity is examined against the backdrop of Koreaphobia in Japan and homophobia among *zainichi*, along with the Korean Wave, its impact on the queer diaspora, and the gay commodification of Koreanness. It comparatively analyzes "racial" and "national" groupings in the bar, seeking clarity on the representations of self and other among gay Koreans and with gay Japanese. A series of conclusions is made: (1) Korean gay men's experience in Japan is shaped by having to contend with separate closets for race and sexuality, compounded by racism and homophobia from within their own communities dissociated from "Japan." (2) The Korean Wave has created a new category of desire among gay men through a middle ground or third space around a borderless, hybridized community of communities. (3) Korean gay bars simultaneously function as consumer spaces for what the author terms "proximate opposites" with Japanese, and as community centers for racially one yet ideologically divided Koreans.

Riding the Wave to Ni-Chōme:
Tokyo's Korean Gay Bars in the 2000s*

*Graves, Albert. "Riding the Wave to Ni-Chōme: Tokyo's Korean Gay Bars in the 2000s." *Korean Studies* 47 (2023): 375-406.

Introduction

Cross-cultural analyses of sexual subcultures organized on the basis of racial or national identity are relatively scarce in Asia.[1] This, to no surprise, includes the region's least ethnically and linguistically fractionalized nations of North Korea, South Korea, and Japan.[2] While there is an abundance of scholarly literature on the often isolated subjects of Korean diaspora and the gay community in Japan, almost none of it discusses these groups as one with respect to Korean gay men or other sexual minorities in Japan. Koreans in Japan are chronically subjected to heteronormative assumptions while gay men are presumed to be Japanese or white Westerners, as predetermined objects for comparison and of desire. Be it the gay community's disregard for the Korean diaspora or the Korean diaspora's disavowal of the gay community, there are persisting reasons for why these subjects remain distanced from each other even in academic discourse. However, as I will also discuss, there are also clear indicators of how the transversal quality of being both (or neither) Korean and (or) Japanese is a core component of identity for many who identify as *zainichi*[3] and gay in Japan.[4]

This chapter introduces the Korean gay community in Japan through its earliest commercially organized interactions in the 2000s. Prefacing with an overview of Korean gay identity as it has developed against the backdrop of Koreaphobia in Japan and homophobia among *zainichi*, I proceed to an examination of the Korean Wave and its impact on queer diasporic communities along with its commodification of Koreanness for gay men. Based on an

ethnography from 2006 to 2007 of the Korean gay bars that surfaced in Tokyo's queer district of Shinjuku Ni-Chōme, the study comparatively analyzes intersections of race and sexuality in the interactions among actors sharing these confined spaces. In doing so, it seeks clarity on the representations of self and other intraracially among gay Koreans and interracially with gay Japanese.[5]

I make a series of arguments throughout my discussion. First, Korean gay men's experience in Japan is shaped by having to contend with two closets—one for race and the other for sexuality. This is compounded by racism and homophobia from within their own communities as seen in case studies by Iino[6] and Horie,[7] which they dissociate from "Japan." Contrary to arguments by scholars such as Itagaki who characterize Japanese Koreaphobia as a "cultural racism,"[8] I argue that there are also phenotypical references in Koreaphobic expressions in Japan—directed at an inferior race "within," rather than "without," race—which I support with an analysis of content found in print media and online forums.

Second, the Korean Wave has created a new category of desire among gay men through queer, masculine consumer spaces, which have materialized separately from their feminine counterparts studied by Phillips and Baudinette.[9] In the community's displacement by racial[ized] segregation and the hegemonic practices of Japanese and Western gay space in Ni-Chōme, I argue that the Korean gay bar becomes a middle ground or third space for the desires of a new borderless, hybridized community of communities inclusive of all consumer groups. These bars rely on commodified images of Korean men's hypermasculinity for gay men (in contrast to their soft masculinity for women), furthering the regional trend of "gay hegemonic masculinity"[10] later observed by Kong further afield in queer Asia.

Third, Korean gay bars simultaneously function as consumer spaces and community

centers for separate subsets of the community, akin to Sunagawa's argument for Japanese bars as institutions for intimate bonds[11] rather than merely commercial interests, as countered by Ishida.[12] A series of accounts from the bar substantiates an interracial imaginary of what I term "proximate opposites," shared by mutually seeking "dominant, active top" Koreans and "submissive, passive bottom" Japanese. At the same time, there is an intraracial dynamic among Koreans, who find ways to harmonize with one another in one instance through their consciousness of racial oneness and clash in another on the political divide between North and South. This brings them together against other racial groups including the Japanese, but also exposes fractures through practices of discrimination against their own who do not conform to linguistic or ideological expectations.

The study aims to be a cross-cutting contribution to Korean studies and queer studies, steering the discussion of *zainichi* to bring attention to new angles from which to see them as sexual, sexualized, and sexualizing consumers and commodities. In queering the Koreans of Japan, it shatters the heteronormative mold in which they have been sealed, while also shaking up the discourse on Japanese gay men and their spaces of desire to accentuate the firmly established presence of Koreans—overlooked in academia but certainly not by their burgeoning group of admirers. While racial delineations are often blurred for my subjects, discussions of race and nation contribute to an intraregional dialogue that advances translocal connections in the study of queer Asia.[13] In the context of the bar, intersections between queer Korea and queer Japan are revealed (sans any presumed center or periphery), along with inter/intraracial connectivities that traverse geopolitical borders. In this way, the study pursues a much advocated for examination of queer Asia as comparatively transregional, global, and inter-Asian.[14] By recounting Tokyo's Korean gay bar scene in its infancy, it sets out to recover and preserve a

history that would otherwise have been lost from memory with decades of scholarly inattention to its existence.

Methodology

For over a century, bars have served as key fieldsites in the urban ethnography of sexual subcultures. Organized groups of gay men and others seen as deviants discovered at Chicago's saloons and speakeasies started to be morally rationalized by researchers in the 1920s, as subjects with spatially located and socially distinct lives.[15] At times, bars have been the only clear manifestation of such groups' existence altogether, as with US lesbians from the 1930s to 1950s.[16] The push of heterosexism and homophobia along with the pull of capitalism cast these marginalized members of society into the solace of bars, where a consciousness of sexual identity and community is developed. The study of these people at their haunts in city nightlife has often been the initial step toward their slow but steady destigmatization. Today, these are hardly the hideaways they once were. As globalization constantly reshapes identity politics and consumer trends, so, too, reconstructed are gay bars and the communities they host.

Since Japan's "LGBT boom" in the 1990s, Japanese gay bars have found themselves in the scholarly limelight (despite that earlier forms have been around since the 1940s and studied in the 1950s and 1960s),[17] with ethnographies conducted in Ni-Chōme by Sunagawa,[18] Ishida,[19] McLelland,[20] and Moriyama.[21] For many years, the discussion of gay Japan was confined to an ethnonational binary of "Japanese" and "foreigners." Corresponding bars categorized by preference for Japanese only (*naisen*) and open to—or, rather, targeted at—(implicitly, white Western) foreigners (*gaisen*), along with studies on them, wholly disregarded the presence of racially minoritized groups that straddle these spatial and social delineations.

Only in recent years has attention been directed to these othered members of Japan's gay community. In his interviews of Korean tourists, businessmen, and students in Tokyo, Baudinette[22] sheds light on the necessary question of Asian inclusivity in Japanese gay space. However, his conclusions are regrettably incomplete, with no reference to permanent residents or naturalized citizens—that is, those who have assimilated in society and are often regulars at bars, if not owners and staff. While they were the sole informants in his study, those with a transient presence in Japan represent only a fraction of Korean gay men in Japan. The rest are *zainichi* and recent immigrants. It is also an incorrect assertion that there are no dedicated spaces for Korean men or their admirers in Japan.[23] As is the focus of this chapter, Ni-Chōme alone has had Korean bars since the 2000s—and this is not to mention those which have come, gone, and stayed in other areas such as Tokyo's Ueno and Osaka's Dōyama and Shinsekai.

Korean Gay Bars in Tokyo by the Mid-2000s

	STAIRWAYS OF HEAVEN 天国の階段 | 천국의 계단	SEOUL SOUL ソウル★ソウル | 서울 소울	ANYOUNG あんにょん | 안녕
Owner(s) *	Won Bin (South Korean)	Gilsu (South Korean)	Sunny (South Korean) Asuka ([South] Korean-Russian-Japanese)
Staff *	—	Park (*Zainichi* [North] Korean) Shin (Japanese) Chu ([South] Korean-American)	—
Interior	Fresh flowers; Korean seat cushions; widescreen TV.	TVs playing recent live music concerts in South Korea; posters of Won Bin, Rain, and Se7en.	TVs showing musicals and stage performances on mute; premium sound system playing jazz; marble floors.
SNS **	Twitter (2018.11) | 42 Followers	Twitter (2016.01) | 42 Followers HP (2016.05)	HP (2006.08) Twitter (2011.12) | 175 Followers Mixi (2017.01)
Introduction (KR)	[South] Korean gay bar in Tokyo's Shinjuku.	We do our best so that all of our customers can escape from everyday life and have a nice time at our bar. We provide a space where friends, lovers, and even those who come alone can enjoy a comfortable atmosphere without burden.	[South] Koreans working hard to make it in Japan, [South] Koreans here for business or tourism—relax and have a drink with Japanese friends!
Introduction (JP)	[South] Korean gay bar in Shinjuku Ni-Chōme.	Healing and a sense of escape from everyday life, whether among friends or lovers or those who come alone—that's the kind of space we provide to all customers who come to our bar. Please do try to visit us at Seoul Soul.	[South] Korean movies, dramas, music, cuisine—of course, a drink with [South] Korean friends!

*Owners and staff (incl. the researcher, referred to with pseudonyms) at the time of fieldwork from 2006 to 2007.
**SNS and related figures as of May 2022.

My own ethnography in Ni-Chōme employed participant observation and interviews at the Korean gay bars Stairways of Heaven, Seoul Soul, and Anyoung. At Seoul Soul, I worked as a *miseko*, or member of staff, in which capacity I managed to establish close connections with the "masters," or owners, and customers of my own and other bars—an advantage that comes with "labor participant observation," as Chung has termed from her own work at a Korean hostess bar in Osaka.[24] As a Korean-American, my belonging was welcomed and questioned by Koreans and Japanese. Hired as the young, "cute" face of the bar, I was assigned to come in on Fridays and Saturdays as the busiest nights, preparing from 7:30 PM, opening at 8 PM, and, depending on the day, closing anywhere between 5 and 7 AM. On occasion, I went out with my interlocutors, taking my fieldwork beyond the bar into quiet, casual restaurants at the crack of dawn. This stepping out of the fieldsite also yielded chance encounters with others indirectly connected to the bar, as acquaintances of those directly connected to it.

Any study of racial and sexual place and identity within a spatially and temporally fixed space should be carried out with an awareness that race and sexuality do not necessarily couple to form a distinct, standalone sphere. On the contrary, as will be shown in examples to come, they may more often than not conflict with one another. There is also ambiguity as to who is Korean and whether all can be equally considered arbiters of Korean gay space in Japan. As a precarious member of this community myself, my own performance as a racialized and sexualized actor in the space of study inevitably "queered"[25] my research process and its findings—a result I take with openness and reflexivity, and an acknowledgment that there will always be much more to explored beyond any one person's capacity.

Korean Gay Identity in Japan

One Community, Two Closets

From the end of World War II, the 600,000 or so Koreans who chose to stay in Japan (or otherwise could not return to North or South Korea) came to be referred to as *zainichi*—alienated from the homeland which now saw them as traitors, while denied their rights as equal citizens in a "hidden apartheid" to which they would be subjected for decades to come.[26] Their children—outwardly indistinguishable from the Japanese—were born into, and raised with, an inner sense of Japaneseness yet also a threat of further "Japanization" and loss of identity as Koreans.[27] Despite that subsequent generations of *zainichi* had no reason or desire to "return" to Korea, they remained invisible in a purportedly heterogeneous nation of Japanese. *Zainichi* themselves contributed to that invisibility by staying in a national closet within their own society, averting marginalization at work and in relationships through their inherent ability to pass as Japanese.

In the 1990s, revived scrutiny over Japan's wartime atrocities in Korea caused a reactionary tide of Koreaphobia, instigating a mass outing of the *zainichi* community as a perceived extension of the "enemy" at home.[28] This precipitated the formation of hate groups in the 2000s with a purpose to "restore sovereignty" in Japan (*Shuken*) and fight against "special rights" for *zainichi* (*Zaitokukai*). Since then—fueled by reactive nationalism within the government and general public out of fears for national security[29]—hate speech and threats across major cities, outside schools and other institutions, and on seemingly every online forum have attacked not only *zainichi* as invasive "cockroaches" but also everything remotely symbolic of Korea in Japan.[30] In their reverse victimization, Japanese through their Koreaphobia become defenders of a nation under siege by all Koreans. Their hate for Korea and Koreans is in this way a display of their love for Japan—its territory in the dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima, its culture against the Korean Wave, and its civilians abducted by North Korea. It did not matter that many

zainichi, in fact, became disenfranchised with the homeland and transferred their children to Japanese schools as soon as the abduction issue came to light.[31] Recent immigrants were also not impervious to the rhetoric, with one tour guide I met at Seoul Soul saying to me in English, "I don't want to be Korean sometimes and I don't want to be Japanese. I just want to be a person."[32]

Despite its rationalizations, Koreaphobia in Japan is at its heart anchored in an obsession with the notion that Koreans are racially inferior. I am not convinced that this breed of racism is merely "cultural,"[33] but rather has clear intersections with white, Western racism based on a racial hierarchy that places Japanese above all others in Asia.[34] It is a racism characterized not by "race without race" but what I would alternatively describe as "race within race"—Koreans as a lower phenotype within a spectrum of "yellow" where the "whitest" (not in shade but in desirable features) are Japanese. Any casual reader can recognize this in Koreaphobic content such as the manga *Kenkanryu* (*Hating the Korean Wave*) and in discussions online, not limited to Japan's infamously racist (and homophobic) BBS 5channel but also across YouTube and other common platforms such as Japanese SNS Mixi. In *Kenkanryu*, Japanese characters have large, round eyes and short, petite noses, while their Korean counterparts are often illustrated with slanted eyes and sharp cheekbones. It is typical to see such menacing features portrayed also on yakuza and other antagonists, but it is no coincidence that delinquents and crime syndicates in the real world are regularly stereotyped as Korean. Even in text-based emoticons accompanying Koreaphobic messages online, snarled faces with the trademark eyes and cheekbones such as <ヽ`д´> are no rarity. Many variants of this can be seen in recent posts on Mixi (March 13 & 26, 2020), which redirect to sets of topical threads with comments disparaging Koreans as an "ugly" (*busu*), "inferior race" (*rettōshu*) with "beastly eyes" (*yajū no me*) who can't see the world around them because of their "thin eyes" (*hosoi me*)—no less, as "fags" (*okama*) and "homos"

(*homo*) and who spread COVID and AIDS.[35]

Simultaneously with the backlash against Korea and Koreans in the 1990s, Japan's queer community was bursting out of its own closet amid a boom for all things LGBT. While those at the front and center of this media spectacle were gay men and their coming out stories,[36] they represented a relative few who saw any correlation between their sexuality and society, much less in the context of an identity.[37] The reactionaries in this case tended to be gay men themselves, disinterested in, confused over, and even perturbed by the hype around sexual liberation and gay rights—to them, concepts from a foreign agenda. If anything, their self-exclusion from the discourse was indicative of a consciousness fundamentally dislocated from that of their activist counterparts in or influenced by the West. As far as concerns Korean gay men in Japan, I argue its further function as a subtle (and, possibly, subconscious) form of resistance against a process of othering that occurs through the mass outing of gays among straights—in no dissimilarity to that of *zainichi* among Japanese. Korean and gay are, in this sense, assigned stigmas not inherently seen; and, as such, they can be stigmatized only when shown.

Japan vs. Korea and the West

The indifference of Korean gay men to the LGBT boom leads to a paradox of their sense of belonging in Japan. While Japanese gay men with experience living in the West often derided Japan as a constraining place for gays,[38] Koreans across the sea conversely gazed upon it as a safe haven from familial and societal pressures to marry.[39] In one of my interviews, Japan was idealized as a third way over a dually discriminatory imaginary of not only homophobic Korea but also the racist West. To the South Korean master of Seoul Soul, a *zainichi* customer who

lived in San Francisco, and a Japanese customer who studied English, all were convinced that there was no such discrimination—homophobia or racism—in Japan.[40] The *zainichi*, referring to what he saw as an inordinate charity to developing nations by a benevolent Japan, went on to complain that the world had become overly critical of it. Japan was not only free from fault, it was a model of social progress.

For this trio as Asians, Japan was a racial haven from the West, and, to them as gay men, it was a sexual haven from Korea. Put in another way, Korea is not racist but it is homophobic, and the West is not homophobic but it is racist. The only truly welcoming place for a man who is Korean and gay, then, is Japan. While *zainichi* since the turn of the century have started to openly embrace their Koreanness and Japaneseness in a reformulated identity as "Korean-Japanese,"[41] the Koreans in this instance align themselves more closely with Japaneseness (as adopted, for the South Korean) than Koreanness. Their position is seemingly motivated by a bias as gay men, with the implication that only straight *zainichi* would be proud of their Koreanness.

It is not illuminative, though, to say that the men's claims were not based in reality. Korea has racism, the West has homophobia, and Japan has racism and homophobia—indisputably so once the perspective of "where" is rearticulated. On Mixi, gay *zainichi* "Chan," too, disclosed that he had never seen or experienced discrimination against *zainichi* "face to face" (December 30, 2008). As such, he did not even consider there to be any reason to act in solidarity with the community. Yet, in his aside that such discrimination is, however, rampant within the gay community at bars and clubs and on SNS, he relegates Japanese racism to another sphere—a gay racism that exists outside Japan. This cognitive decoupling of the gay community and its racist practices from "Japan" is reminiscent of the exchange at Seoul Soul, even if I did not press the trio further on their thoughts. No matter what they believed about Japan, none could

deny the racism of the community within Japan that indeed confined them (excluding the Japanese customer, of course) to the Korean bar in the racially segregated queer district of Ni-Chōme.

Still, for many Korean gay men in Japan, racism is a Western or, if anything, gay—not Japanese—problem, while homophobia is a Korean—not Japanese—problem. The paradox in relation to their sense of belonging in Japan is that it relies on a selective invisibility—as Koreans in the gay community and as gay men to other Koreans—along with a mental extrusion of these groups from the nation of Japan. They do not show, they are not seen, and, thus, there is no discrimination. When there is discrimination, it comes from anywhere but, even if within, Japan. As a result, "Japan" in the imaginary of Korean gay men who live there is centered as a racial and sexual safety zone away from what often seem to be mutually incompatible, if not outright opposed, racial and sexual communities on the periphery.

'Racist Gays' and 'Homophobic Koreans'

The invisibility of Korean gay men in Japan can indeed be overshadowed by the hardships they face within the isolated Korean and gay communities of Japan. Iino has looked at instances where Japanese lesbians' "disregarding"—and their disregard for such disregarding—of the *zainichi* among them formed a power imbalance at activist events to connect "Japanese who live in Japan" with "Asians who come from outside Japan."[42] In a reverse case, Horie examined *zainichi* pastors' homophobic remarks—and the church association's permissiveness of them—in opposition to a lesbian pastor's inclusion at an event on discrimination and human rights.[43]

Aside from religion, Confucian traditions preserved by Koreans throughout the diaspora fundamentally clash with the lifestyles of queer people. Gay *zainichi* filmmaker Nakata Tōichi

intimates this in his personal documentary *Ōsaka Story*, which showcases the tensions of diasporic identity compounded with the barriers to being a dutiful son as a gay man. It is only one illustration of the complexities behind the balancing act of seemingly antithetical identities, and a clue as to why *zainichi* and gay identities have remained separate evolutionary processes. The accounts by Iino, Horie, and Nakata point to a common sentiment expressed on Mixi by "Sol," a gay *zainichi* with Japanese citizenship: "No matter where I go, I'll always be a minority" (April 29, 2008).

"Sol" is one of the few exceptions of gay *zainichi* who permanently retreated from Japan to the West, associating his experiences of racism and homophobia not with "racist gays" or "homophobic Koreans" but with Japan. In contrast to gay Japanese who have turned to the West for sexual liberation, "Sol" saw the US as a nexus to broaden his relationships with diasporic Koreans—connections he had not had in Japan, serving to remind that membership in a community is not always secured by default. His case exemplifies the "idealized" existence to which *zainichi* in recent decades relate as members of a diasporically nationalist community independent from any one nation as home or host.[44]

Other examples of this involve members of the diaspora with mixed heritage such as "Toniru,"[45] a gay *zainichi* with a Japanese mother. He, too, studied abroad in the US and had also lived in Korea. For him, he felt closer to Korean-Americans and Koreans in the US than with Japanese or Koreans in Korea, to whom he was always othered as a *zainichi*. Only in the US, he says, was that "sticker" peeled away (May 3, 2008). Asuka, one of the co-masters of Anyoung, has an even more complicated racial identity. Despite having a Korean-Japanese mother and a Russian-Japanese father, he did not consider himself to be Korean, Russian, or Japanese. As with "Toniru," Asuka's feeling of disconnect with any one race resulted in a

reverence for the racial diversity he associated with the US, which, in turn, cultivated a fondness for other things American.

"Toniru" has since moved back to his hometown of Osaka where he is nonetheless content, and has even found the younger generation of *zainichi* to be more self-confident, as well as visible at gay bars where they had once been invisible (May 3, 2008). While he and Asuka imagine the West as an opportunity for racial liberation (in contrast to the earlier trope of a "racist West"), both men have chosen to make their homes in Japan. For "Sol" and "Toniru," the West was seen as a gateway to the diaspora (for Asuka, all races) rather than to Westerners. Indeed, at gay bars in the US, "Toniru" even felt intimidated by the Westerners around him as an Asian.

Park, the *zainichi miseko* at Seoul Soul, also set his gaze toward the West—but as an escape from the diaspora. For him, those who acted discriminatorily were other Korean gay men in Japan. Customers interpreted his inability to speak Korean as a marker of incompetence, shunning him as a "Korean without Koreanness."[46] His coping mechanism against this intraracial exclusion was to study English, as a mode of social mobility toward a perceived superiority over Japanese and Koreans. Considering Japanese to be above Korean in this linguistic hierarchy for Japan, Park concealed a degree of reverse discrimination against others in his own community who chose to (or, if not *zainichi*, could only) communicate in Korean instead of Japanese.

The collection of accounts introduced throughout this section demonstrates the transecting ways in which discrimination is experienced in Korean gay men's own communities, to reveal a complicated mosaic of their navigation in and out of racial and sexual closets and of their relationship with Japan. While it is impossible to homogenize the Korean gay struggle in Japan, a few generalizations can be made: 1.) racial and sexual identities are informed by each

other in the experience of intercommunity racism and homophobia; 2.) the transversal quality of being both Korean and Japanese—or, for others, neither one—as gay men creates a consciousness of identity that does not perfectly fit into any one imaginary; and, 3.) as a result, racial and sexual hardships are for only few cognitively assigned to Japan, from which the majority do not seek to permanently escape but rather end up establishing their place.

The Korean Gay Wave

Hallyu and the Queer Diaspora

The Korean Wave (*hallyu*) has transformed the lives of Koreans around the world, perhaps nowhere more so than in Japan. Shortly after reaching its shores, *hallyu* converted a majority of *zainichi* into regular consumers of [South] Korean media, including many with no prior exposure to Korea or Korean schools in Japan.[47] This consumption has cultivated a proud [apolitical] self-awareness of their Korean origin, reversing decades of shame from stigmatization with a renewed "attachment" (*aichaku*) to Korean names, language, and the *zainichi* community.[48] "Community spirit" has extended to broader Japanese society which, through its openness to Korean culture, relates in new ways to Koreanness, agents of which *zainichi* have acted to further interethnic exchange.[49]

Research into the *hallyu* fan cultures of Japanese women has shown a desire for the modernities of Korea[50] and the Westernized lifestyles of Koreans.[51] The soft power of media images that have changed deeply ingrained perceptions of Korea and Koreans has proven to be a formidable counterbalance against the steady onslaught of Koreaphobia in Japan. As further testament to its sway over Japanese society, *hallyu* has found itself featured in the traditional art of *rakugo* and capitalized on by even, ironically, right-wing nationalist politicians such as prime

ministers Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe.[52]

Hallyu has also had a transformative impact on queer Asia, though scholars have often disregarded queer communities in their discursive focus on its relationship with straight women.[53] In 2001, Korean society came face to face with transgenderism in a cosmetics ad that featured Harisu, a stage name fittingly adapted from the phrase "hot issue." In it she ravishingly stares into the camera, only to reveal an Adam's apple before breaking out into a quiet chuckle, presumably at the shock of all those watching who—surely, by accident—had been momentarily taken by "his" or "her" beauty. Harisu quickly went on to become a facet of *hallyu* as a singer and actress, and is still active today.

Her celebrity, however, was not always welcome by the trans community or other sexual minorities in Korea. Back when the controversial ad was released, I came across more than a few at Seoul's gay bars and online who disavowed her as an inaccurate portrayal of a trans person detached from the hardships of the community. Indeed, much of the reason for her acceptance in media is on account of her commodified image as a transcendental, genderless—rather than transgendered—superhuman.[54] Yet, regardless of how she is viewed, what matters is that she was seen; and it was this visibility that catalyzed what is today an increasingly queer (and queered) *hallyu* that pushes the social boundaries of gender and sexuality, at home and abroad.

No exception to this is *Winter Sonata*, the drama series that carried *hallyu* into Japan in the early 2000s. It was only one of many imports to come that brushed aside hypermasculinity for an androgyny resemblant of male-role actresses (*otokoyaku*) from Takarazuka and "beautiful boys" (*bishōnen*) from boys' love (BL) manga[55]—media that, while also commonly assumed to be by and for straight women, owe their existence to inconspicuously queer producers and consumers throughout their histories. The transcultural flow of this soft masculinity from *hallyu*

has shaped queer aesthetics and lexicons around the world,[56] paving alternative pathways for queer Koreans and other Asians to identify with race and sexuality in ways beyond those prescribed to them by the West.

Hallyu has also directly developed globalized queer cultures such as drag. Initial play with drag as a caricature quickly turned to the inclusivity of drag in its many representations, now even pushing its boundaries to territories where masculinities not represented before in media are starting to be accommodated.[57] This clears the stage for a broader representation of queerness among content creators, who are—with or without intention—reproducing commercialized personas in *hallyu*, amassing their audiences from its worldwide fan base.[58]

Koreanness as a Gay Commodity

Koreanness has come to be romanticized and sexualized across Japan, with idealizations of Korean men as beautiful, charismatic, and seductive—an essence of Western sophistication mixed with Japanese relatability, striking the right balance of "cultural distance."[59] Owing to their depictions in dramas, Korean men are fantasized about as spouses and partners, not only for their physical attractiveness but also for their financial stability[60] and familial bonds.[61] Their reverence as objects of desire has commanded the trends in hairstyles and fashion of young men across Japan, influencing a host of industries that supply and service them. *Hallyu*'s physical presence is most palpable at its feminine consumer spaces of Tokyo's Koreatown in Shin-Ōkubo.[62] Yet, despite its mass commodification of Korean men, the gendering of the area and its saturation with women as its target consumers has resulted in limited accessibility to gay men.[63]

Queer, masculine consumer spaces are much less conspicuous, isolated within gay bars tucked away in transient nightlife districts that sleep during the day. As with Osaka's Korean

hostess bars, Tokyo's Korean gay bars are clustered in coexistence with Japanese businesses, and many of their Japanese customers traverse the boundaries of these "interethnic agglomerations."[64] In contrast, however, Korean gay bars are only partially staffed by Koreans, many more of whom come in as customers. This means that Japanese and racially other *miseko* are tasked with producing Koreanness, and that Korean customers also become commodities of the bar. As gay men, producers and consumers of these spaces switch between discreet lifestyles outside the bounds of their districts which serve as "temporary refuges."[65] Koreanness as a gay commodity is thus spatially and temporally confined, and its fandom among gay men rests in a shared closet with their sexuality.

While Korean gay bars are oriented toward gay men, they are not exclusive to them and are occasionally patronized by straight men and women (normally, but not necessarily, accompanying gay men). Korean gay men's experience of otherness in society plays a pivotal role in their bars' practice of inclusivity. In this way, the bars introduce to the district not only new content in terms of Koreanness, but also a new character through their "by the bottle" system of *naisen* bars[66] with the open accessibility and "cosmopolitanism" of *gaisen* bars (which themselves mirror inclusive spaces found in the West).[67] As is the case with *hallyu*, the bars embody a "culture of resistance" to the mainstream—here, Ni-Chōme—with peripheral identities that hybridize Western cosmopolitanism while establishing a sense of cultural proximity among Asians.[68]

The resulting community spirit—closely resembling that of local and diasporic communities around *hallyu*—does not, however, equate to an activism that seeks autonomy from or assimilation into the discriminatory communities of Ni-Chōme (or Japan, for that matter). Rather, I see it as a subconscious, mundane act of self-preservation by a borderless, hybridized

community of communities. Korean gay bars in this sense replicate the "disjunctive modernity"[69] of Japan's gay community as a whole, in its multidirectional currents of neoliberalism coupled with the absence of any progressive logic of sexual (and racial) rights—a fusion of globalization and tradition increasingly seen in queer districts across Asia.[70] The Korean gay bar consequently becomes a space where Koreanness and gay culture interchangeably exist not only for service to the community but also for the play of others.

This was on clear display when a couple of Japanese straight women came to Seoul Soul, stealing the stage to sing and dance and even flash their panties and grope the *miseko*. While this behavior stemmed from their trust in the space as a "place of safety," their presence would surely have been met with pushback had it become anything more than an occasional occurrence, as seen in precedents with the permanent takeover of gay space by outsiders.[71] "Vivi," a Taiwanese regular at Seoul Soul, was another example of the bars' flexibility in catering not only to women but also to cultural representations besides Koreanness. Her presence alone often prompted sporadic exchanges and songs sung in Chinese, making the space a meeting place of cultures centered on a racially and sexually free "Korea in Japan." Few Japanese gay bars would have permitted entry to any of these women due to their gender, never mind their race or sexual orientation.

Owned by Korean gay men who resettled from—and thus have direct ties to—Korea, Japan's earliest Korean gay bars employed marketing tactics resembling those of their feminine counterparts in the appropriation of an instantly recognizable mishmash of *hallyu* heartthrobs. Stairways of Heaven (a rendition of the drama *Stairway to Heaven*), Seoul Soul, and Anyoung set out to capitalize on the new niche of gay desire for Korean sex appeal, plastered on posters and playing on screens set up in their interiors. In contrast to "Yon-sama," TVXQ, and other

"flower boys" (*kkonminam*) worshipped in Shin-Ōkubo, the altar at gay bars was dominated by macho men (*sangnam*) such as Rain and Won Bin pictured as a soldier from the movie *T'aegŭkki*.

The *sangnam* as Korean gay bars' choice of representation is an intentional act by their owners to calibrate Koreanness with "gay hegemonic masculinity."[72] That is, Korean men are framed with an authoritative desirability as heteroperformative and neoliberally privileged subjects with fit bodies—qualities which are in turn pursued by gay men, in a phenomenon that has started to dictate preferences not only in Korea but across Asia.[73] While their customers may be sexually active or passive and seek any range of body types, the bars' alignment with this archetype of the Korean man carries on an enduring assumption that men at gay bars in Japan tend to be bottoms in search of tops—an observation recorded as far back as the 1950s.[74]

In the case of Seoul Soul, this representation was considered so necessary that the master hired a Japanese *miseko* who, with his "masculine" style, was often assumed by customers to be Korean. Irrespective of his Korean ability or connection to Korea, the look was all a *miseko* needed to embody the face of the bar. However, as was soon found, the bar is more than its looks, and Koreanness as a gay commodity must be based on more than mere fantasy. While some customers flirted with Shin, others questioned his belonging. His subsequent determination to fit in pushed him to start studying Korean; but no amount of fluency would change the fact that he was a racial outsider to both Koreans and Japanese in this space of Koreanness. Park, in his inability to be Korean enough, is a reverse example of how Koreanness as a gay commodity demands more than reality, too. These cases couple to show the subjective and often incomplete quality of Koreanness at the gay bar—representations which tread beyond expectations of Korean blood (Park) and looks (Shin), into desires and needs to which only bars as both

consumer spaces and community centers can respond.

Self and Other at the Korean Gay Bar

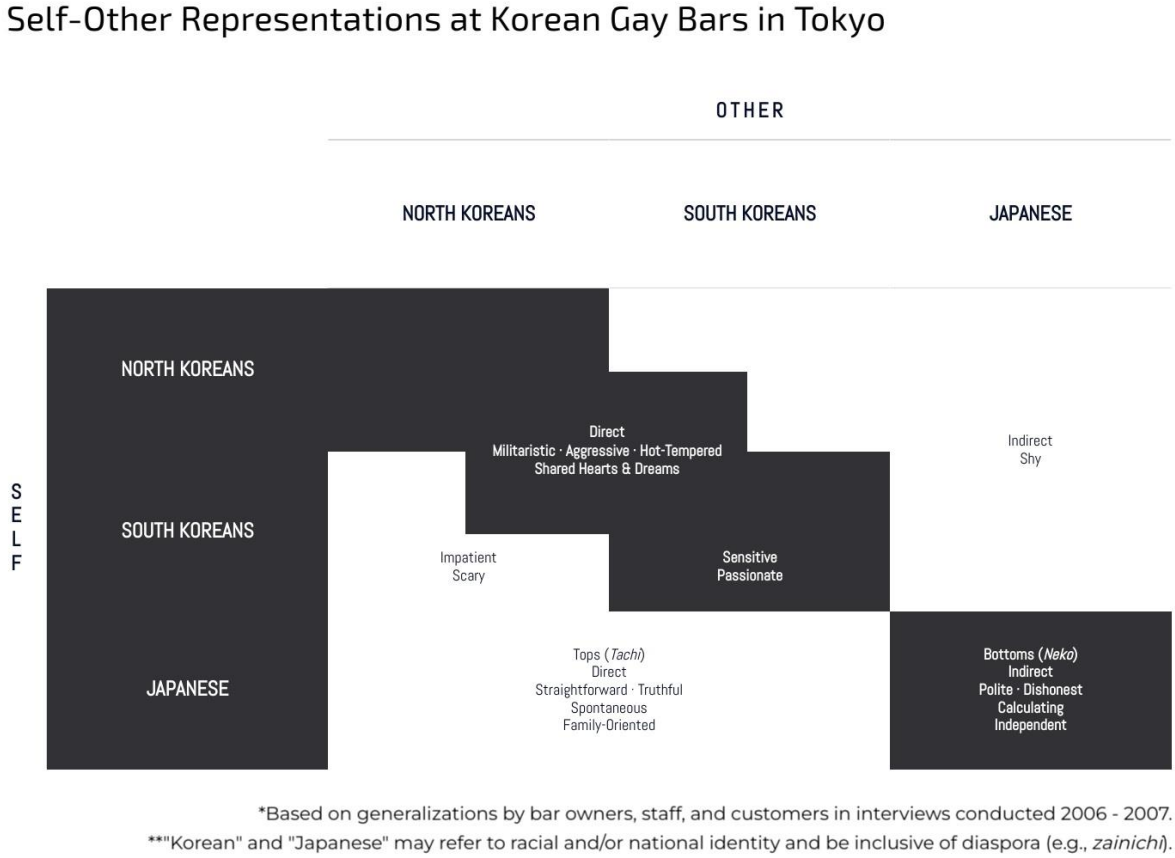
Korean Gay Bars in the 2000s

While there were reportedly as many as 3,000 Korean bars and hostess clubs in Japan by the 1990s,[75] they were part of a postcolonial legacy before the advent of *hallyu* and none are known to have serviced the gay community. At the same time, Ni-Chōme functioned exclusively for Japanese and, to a lesser extent, white Westerners. With all bars divided into *naisen* and *gaisen*, Korean gay men had no choice but to pass as Japanese or be pitted against them for the gaze of Westerners. Even with their entry, Koreans once found out are often asked to leave at *naisen* bars whereas at *gaisen* bars they are consistently ignored by Japanese, thereby making them "ethnosexual invaders" no matter where they went in Ni-Chōme.[76] Despite that Koreans and other Asians (and, indeed, black, brown, and other Westerners, not to mention mixed Japanese) occupy a sizeable chunk of bargoers, their existence in the gay community is, to repeat the phrase, disregarded. When Japanese gay men are confronted by the existence of Koreans among them, they are at best ambivalent about their disregard and at worst hostile toward their presence as thieves out to steal their [white] men with the competitive advantage of *hallyu*.[77]

Since the imposition of their own bars at the turn of the century, dedicated space and place have been carved out for Korean gay men along with those in pursuit of them among an expanding group of admirers in Japan. While there has been debate as to Japanese gay bars' function as institutions for the establishment of intimate bonds within the gay community,[78] there is no question that their Korean counterparts—in resistance to a lucrative mainstream—trade a degree of financial prosperity for the social impact they deliver to a marginalized group within

the gay community. Masters and *miseko* demonstrate their role in community building by making the rounds to one another's bars as customers, keeping their personalized bottles of soju replenished and celebrating special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries by splurging on champagne. The practice is a display of the bars' solidarity, and many regular customers make their own contribution to the community by rotating around the bars even if they have a preference for one over the others.

The subsections below focus on the prevalent representations of self and other among actors at the bars over the course of my fieldwork (Table 2). My analysis reveals overlaps and diversions in the identities of core groups in the bar discussed thus far: "Koreans" and "Japanese" as a racialized symbiosis on one end, and "North Koreans" and "South Koreans" as a politicized dichotomy on the other. Constantly shifting roles and relationships before a revolving door of audiences turn the confined space of the bar into a shared stage, constructing the bar's own fluid and dynamic identity in the process. As I present select exchanges that contextualize these self-other representations, I aim to sketch a clearer picture of the broader community that since rests somewhere between the *naisen* and *gaisen* bargoing communities of Ni-Chōme—as a consumer space for Koreans and Japanese, and as a community center for Koreans among Koreans.



Koreans and Japanese: 'Proximate Opposites'

As products of *hallyu* situated in a commercial gay scene regulated by "types" (*taipu*),[79] Korean gay bars in Japan may seem to implicitly cater to a Japanese subject in search of the "Korean type" as his object. Yet, despite the myriad of established categories in gay slang—besides *naisen* and *gaisen*, covering everything from age (*fukesen* for daddy chasers, and so on) to weight (such as *debusen* for chubby chasers, which alone can be further classified by several subtypes of *debu*)—there is no clear term for a "Korean chaser." While many believe there to be subtle distinctions between Korean and Japanese faces (not necessarily in subscription to the stereotypes propagated in Koreaphobic material), expressions of desire in the bar did not normally take these superficialities into account. Rather, Korean men were part and parcel of

Japanese customers' desire in the context of their fandom around *hallyu*; and, as with their fans among women, they were desired not only for their physical traits but for the whole package of representations. For Japanese gay men, these representations hinged on an imaginary of the Korean man as a close other and ideal contrast to the self, toward a racialized, symbiotic relationship I term "proximate opposites."

Incontrovertibly, the most recurrent trope about Koreans and Japanese of themselves and each other (and by others outside them) among my informants was of "direct" Koreans and "indirect" Japanese. A range of terms was used to establish this: Koreans considered themselves to be aggressive and hot-tempered while describing their counterparts as shy. Japanese phrased it as a truthful straightforwardness in contrast to their own dishonest politeness. These representations of self and other persisted even for those I encountered who presented themselves as outliers through contradictory statements or behaviors, such as a Korean tourist who repeated the comparison but admitted to his own shyness and a Japanese customer who quite courageously went on to me about his penchant for bestiality.[80] Obviously, one's directness or indirectness depends on the case, and there are endless factors that might switch them around pursuant to the dynamics at the bar.

In any case, the imagined polarity was a source of attraction for many who espoused it. One Japanese customer's last few partners were Korean, and he wanted his next one to be, too. "Japanese try to be polite and nice, but what they say is not always true," he explained. "Koreans tell only the truth, even if it hurts."[81] There are also the sexually charged connotations behind such personality types, with translations of "direct" and "indirect" into Koreans as dominant, active tops paired with submissive, passive bottom Japanese—in an abstract way, personifying the sexual tensions between a militaristic Korea and pacifist Japan.[82] The pairing also syncs with

bars' portrayal of Korean men as hypermasculine against the feminine, androgynous, and queer representations that popularize them in other consumer spaces. A Japanese customer who preferred Koreans because they are more handsome, built, and cooler, also complained that there are too many *neko* ("cats" [bottoms] in Japanese) in Japan. What he wanted was a *hyŏng* ("older brother" in Korean). This racialized juxtaposition of roles and even the languages used to convey them[83] binds the Korean and Japanese man to a predetermined sexual purpose, one that intrinsically exists to serve each other.

Contrary to *naisen* and *gaisen*, this racial coupling is not strictly monogamous. While *naisen* Japanese consider only other Japanese and *gaisen* Japanese only Westerners, Japanese at Korean gay bars are more flexible, even if only marginally so (which is one reason why there is no Korean-*sen*). The limits for both Koreans and Japanese at the bar tend to extend only as far as "Asians," reflecting the condition that partners are opposite in personality and sexual position yet proximate in terms of race. The customer in search of a *hyŏng* confessed to me that he did not like white or black men because they look scary and dangerous, have no warmth or compassion, and tend to be promiscuous.[84] Such racially derogatory sentiments were not rare in my observations, and their commonality only reinforces the Korean-Japanese mutual attraction as a desire between or outside—rather than within a gray area among—the desires at *naisen* and *gaisen* bars. For the Koreans and Japanese seeking each other, it is that balance of difference and similarity—but also, frankly, a mutually held racism and xenophobia—that makes them complementary and relatable partners.

There was, however, one bothersome difference for the Japanese men of this group; one which contrarily increased the value of Korean men as a commodity for Japanese women. That is, Koreans as excessively family oriented—a symptom of their sexuality governed by what Cho

has termed "Confucian biopolitics."[85] This was an impression shared even by a Japanese customer who came to the bar by chance with his white Western partner and had no exposure to or interest in Koreans, attesting to the common imaginary (not limited to the gay community) of a conservative and collective Korea compared to a liberal and individualistic Japan. From the other side, Koreans, too, did not always share the mutual gaze with Japanese. As discussed, *zainichi* often seek to connect with other diasporic Koreans and may even resent Japan and Japanese. The bar is no exception, as one *zainichi* customer who was a social worker considered the majority of Japanese to be overly pessimistic, which he associated with their independent mindset in resemblance to that of North Americans. His type was Latin men, whom he found to optimistic. While he is one of few who did not fit the mold of proximate opposites, he was a refreshing reflection of the bars' spirit of inclusivity. As Asuka, the Korean-Russian-Japanese co-master of Anyoung, once beamed to me: "This place is open to everyone, so we're happy. We're not just a Korean bar. We say *annyŏng* [hi] to everyone."

North and South Koreans: Separate Ideologies, Same Hearts

"Korean" is not an easy classification to make in Japanese. Besides the term *zainichi,* there is *chōsenjin,* in self-reference by *zainichi* North Koreans or for all Koreans derogatorily as colonized people by Koreaphobic Japanese, and *kankokujin,* in self-reference by *zainichi* South Koreans, [South] Korean immigrants to Japan, and for South Koreans by average Japanese.[86] Then there are their subclassifications: *kitachōsenjin* for North Koreans by South Koreans and Japanese, and *minamichōsenjin* for South Koreans by North Koreans. In later decades, *korian,* as a transliteration of "Korean" in English, came to be adopted to avoid these distinctions (and the stigmas embedded in them) altogether. Each of these identifiers carries subtle social and political

nuances that infiltrate the otherwise sense of racial oneness among Koreans in Japan. In the bar, Koreans' intraracial interactions were in constant flux between mutual feelings of contempt and camaraderie amid opposing and shared representations of Koreanness, fragmenting the sexualized Korean monolith into sociopolitical groupings of North and South.

As commodified spaces, Korean gay bars in Japan are inherently South Korean; but, as community centers, they serve all members of the diaspora without distinction. Despite their apolitical intent, bars, when dominated by *zainichi* customers, often turned into pulpits to accentuate social and political identities aligned with North or South Korea. With the ability to switch between Korean and Japanese, many *zainichi* exhibited a shifting "process of identification"[87] within the bar, uniting against others in one instance and dividing among themselves in another. Contrary to *zainichi*'s reservation of Japanese in public and Korean in private, the bar as a liminal space between public and private, Japanese and Korean, meant that self-identification was sporadically processed based on who else shared the space at any moment.

As with the divided homeland, hostilities in the bar were regularly traded between the North and South. Every Saturday at Seoul Soul, a group of *zainichi* North Koreans would enter and carefully scan the room. If they recognized compatriots, they greeted them heartily and social interaction proceeded in a manner typical at any gay bar—often, in Japanese. However, if there were South Koreans—*zainichi* or otherwise—conversations, in Korean, often became politically charged with the group's arguments in support of North Korea with respect to recent events in the media or current activities by Chongryon.

A couple things should be mentioned here. Z*ainichi* who went to North Korean schools in Japan often considered themselves to be overseas citizens of North Korea and staunchly

embraced their language and ideology in resistance against South Korea and Japan. That language as taught to them was infused with such ideology, rendering it impractical for everyday, apolitical conversation,[88] inevitably putting any discussion at risk of politicization when in Korean. Also, at the time of fieldwork, tensions had peaked as a result of North Korea's foray into nuclear weapons testing along with disputes over the joint statement in response and other matters between Chongryon and Mindan. With these concerns in mind, South Koreans in the bar often remained cautious in their interactions with *zainichi* North Koreans.

This does not mean that *zainichi* North Koreans were less desirable to the bar, however. On the contrary—from a business standpoint, they along with other *zainichi* as locals were preferred over the South Korean tourist or businessman because of their consistent patronage. As a group they were also more dependable than Japanese customers, who with their racial privilege were not limited in terms of the bars available to them. In their constant purchase and replenishment of bottles kept at the bar, *zainichi* North (and South) Koreans secured their belonging in the space, indulgence by the master over less profitable groups, and, consequently, tolerance for their confrontational behavior.

Less often, but equally disruptive to the bar's atmosphere, were conflicts initiated by South Koreans. In one group of South Korean customers at Seoul Soul (it was not clear if any were *zainichi*), one member took to the soapbox to berate North Korea and claim that its history and culture were inherited from the South. A *zainichi* North Korean customer, whose presence sparked the tirade, sat in awkward silence with his Japanese partner until they were saved by chit chat with the *zainichi* [North Korean] *miseko* Park. Regardless of whether the man was *zainichi*, his behavior is yet another example of how the bar can be converted into a battlefield between "us" versus "them" among the community it seeks to bring together. Karaoke was often the bar's

secret weapon to defuse such tensions, reigniting the common interests between groups through song and dance—be it over nostalgic Japanese enka, trendy Korean pop, or, of course, anything campy and gay ("I Will Survive" and "It's Raining Men" were go-tos for the master of Seoul Soul).

Out of conflict, Koreans leaned heavily on their racial identity to emphasize the oneness of their homeland and sameness in heart, mind, and spirit (*kokoro*), despite the political divide. This narrative was doubly used to distance themselves from others including Westerners and even Japanese. A duo of South Korean and *zainichi* North Korean customers at Seoul Soul who met a decade ago credited their relationship to their shared Koreanness, which physically attracted them to each other leading to casual sex and had enabled them to communicate as close friends ever since. For this reason, they preferred Koreans over Japanese and went so far as to dislike anyone other than "Asians." Besides once again exposing the racist overtones of desire between proximate opposites, this example also reveals a separate category of racially autosexual desire harbored by a subset of Koreans who use the bar to find not Japanese but other Koreans in Japan.

As evidenced in the dilemma of racial identity for Park, the fact of one's Korean blood did not guarantee his inclusion in the flowery message of being one and the same with all Koreans. The majority of *zainichi* at the bar could speak Korean, meaning they went to Korean schools or otherwise studied Korean. Laurent and Robillard-Martel have discussed how language is seen as key to identity for today's young generation of *zainichi*, the majority of whom now go to Japanese schools but study Korean to preserve their heritage.[89] Yet, in their analysis of such "everyday forms of resistance" against Japanese homogeneity, they overlook the ways in which *zainichi* such as Park have had to contend with impositions of Korean homogeneity that

consequently push them out of the *zainichi* community. *Zainichi* who cannot connect with one another through language or ideology—despite their self-identification in other ways[90]—are forced to resort to their own acts of survival (in the case of Park, identifying with countercultures in the West) when confronted by the community that disowns them in spaces such as the bar. With the wealth of scholarly literature on *zainichi*, this is a research topic that could be explored further as the resurgence in *zainichi* claiming their identity spreads across Japan.

Conclusion

In the past 15 years since the term of fieldwork for this study, around a dozen other Korean gay bars have surfaced in Tokyo—not only in Ni-Chōme but also in Ueno, an area traditionally reserved for older clientele—along with several others in Osaka's queer districts of Dōyama and Shinsekai. While only a fraction (including those in this study) have survived to this day, the scene has managed to flourish. *Hallyu* is no longer a passing fad but a force which has broken into the mainstream, internationally and domestically in Japan. With Korea's increasing soft power, expressions of Korean gay identity and desire have grown louder and prouder in profiles on all of the gay dating apps in Japan. What is clear is that, rather than merely a deluge of bars for its gay fans, *hallyu* has instantiated new modes of racial identification and queer sexual desire within Japan. The success of these bars has further paved the way for other ethnosexual spaces to arise in Japan, not limited to Chinese and Taiwanese gay bars since the 2010s.

Today, Korean gay bars are moving inward from the fringe, with appreciation turning into appropriation by a new subculture led by Japanese masters and *miseko* obsessed with K-pop. Outsiders now outnumber insiders, comparably to the influx of women and straight men at gay bars of the West,[91] raising questions of ownership of and entitlement to Korean gay space. The

ongoing COVID pandemic has also restricted travel between Korea and Japan, which has only lessened the Korean presence and contributed to what is now a Japanese majority of *miseko* at Korean gay bars in Japan. With this occupation of space not originally of their own making, the Korean gay bar has become a "permeable, transitional space,"[92] not only for sexuality—with women and others besides gay men as consumers—but also for race, with Japanese as [re]producers. Yet, just as the representation of women within these boundaries results in the reformulation of gender relations, Japanese representation plays a direct role in reshaping race relations with Koreans.

Further research into the more recent Korean gay bars of Osaka could lend new insights to the findings of this study, both in terms of how Korean gay space, place, and identity have changed nationally and the ways in which they may diverge regionally (despite the doubtful claim that *zainichi* on the whole do not embody the regionalisms of Japan[93]). Osaka is home to three times as many Koreans as Tokyo, accounting for around 30% of all Koreans in Japan[94]—closer to 50% when including the surrounding region of Kansai.[95] Koreans—in Korea and Japan—who have been to Kansai often characterize the region as being more "Korean" than Tokyo and its surrounding region of Kanto. Even if only anecdotal, cross-cultural comparative studies by region could indeed reveal closer connections between the Korean and Japanese gay communities of, for example, Busan and Osaka, than by "Korea" and "Japan."

It should also go without saying that a sizeable subset of Korean gay men in Japan can be presumed not to go to bars, and thus identify with their race and sexuality in ways other than any of those presented in this study. Korean gay bars in Japan are limited to the metropolis, with no alternatives for Korean gay men or their admirers in other areas besides the online space. Even for those in and around Tokyo and Osaka, gay bars are by no means cheap and thus require an

amount of capital that could limit or shut out many to or from the community through class inequalities. Furthermore, regardless of their financial stability, Koreans and those drawn toward Korea may also identify with a disparate set of representations of Koreanness, and feel equally repelled by that dictated by *hallyu*, the bar, and the community. All of these are considerations that should be taken in the further study of this subject. Through the interplay of queer Korea(ns) and queer Japan(ese), this study for now has endeavored to at least scratch the surface of all that remains to be discovered amid the intersections of race and sexuality in queer Asia.

Notes

1. Concepts of, and distinctions between, race and nationality are often blurred for Koreans and Japanese, and may include or exclude members of the diaspora and those with regional associations (for example, North and South Korea).

2. Alberto Alesina et al., "Fractionalization," *Journal of Economic Growth* 8, no. 2 (2003): 186.

3. *Zainichi* (lit. "in Japan") refers to Koreans and their descendants who have permanently resided in Japan since the end of its colonization of Korea.

4. Lawrence Neuman, *Review of Ōsaka Story*, by Toichi Nakata, *Education About Asia* 3, no. 1 (1998): 78.

5. "Race" in this dissertation flexibly refers to any categorization of group identity believed to be biologically inherited, often involving overlap and conflict with concepts of ethnicity, nationality, and culture. "Racialization," by extension, is the imposition of that social construct on oneself or others.

6. Iino Yuriko, "The Politics of 'Disregarding': Addressing Zainichi Issues Within the Lesbian Community in Japan," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 10, no. 3-4 (2007): 69-85.

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18. Sunagawa, "*Shinjuku ni-chōme*."

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33. Itagaki, "The Anatomy of Korea-phobia," 60.

34. Mark McLelland, "'Race' on the Japanese internet: discussing Korea and Koreans on '2-channeru'," *New Media & Society* 10, no. 6 (2008): 826.

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36. See, for example, Fushimi Noriaki's *Private Gay Life* (1991).

37. McLelland, *Male Homosexuality*, 231.

38. McLelland, *Male Homosexuality*, 226.

39. John Cho, "The Luxury of Love: Gay Men in Recessionary South Korea," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 158.

40. Fieldnotes, December 16, 2006.

41. John Lie, *Zainichi (Koreans in Japan)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 134.
42. Iino, "The Politics of 'Disregarding'," 78.

43. Horie, "*Kotonaru hisabetsu kategorī*."

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45. The Japanese transliteration of "*t'ongil*," a common reference to the reunification of North and South Korea.

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48. Kim, "The Effect of the Korean Wave," 142, 144, 147.

49. Yoko Demelius, "Thinking through Community Spirit: Zainichi Koreans in Post-Korean Wave Japanese Communities," *Japanese Studies* 41, no. 1 (2021): 104-105.

50. Samuel Kim et al., "Effects of Korean television dramas on the flow of Japanese tourists," *Tourism Management* 28 (2007): 1351.

51. Millie Creighton, "Japanese Surfing the Korean Wave: Drama Tourism, Nationalism, and Gender via Ethnic Eroticisms," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 31 (2009): 22.

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54. Patty Ahn, "Harisu: South Korean Cosmetic Media and the Paradox of Transgendered Neoliberal Embodiment," *Discourse* 31, no. 3 (2009): 261.

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56. For examples in Thailand, see Megan Sinnott, "Korean-Pop, *Tom Gay Kings, Les Queens* and the Capitalist Transformation of Sex/Gender Categories in Thailand," *Asian Studies Review* 36 (2012): 453-474.

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58. Jin Lee, “‘I don’t understand what you’re saying now, but you are cute, I love you’,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 6 (2021): 1046.

59. Lie, “Obasan and Kanryū,” 129.

60. Creighton, “Japanese Surfing the Korean Wave,” 30-31.

61. Kim et al., “Effects of Korean television dramas,” 1343.

62. Phillips and Baudinette, “Shin-Ōkubo,” 82.

63. Phillips and Baudinette, “Shin-Ōkubo,” 99.

64. Chung, “In the Shadows,” 200.

65. Susaki Seiji, “The Gay District as a Place of Residence for Gay Men and Lesbians in Japan: The Case of Shinjuku Ni-Chome,” *Geographical Reports of Tokyo Metropolitan University* 56 (2021): 80.

66. For more on this system as compared to “by the glass,” see Ishida, “*Jendā to sekushuariti no shinkūken*.”

67. Jon Binnie and Beverley Skeggs, “Cosmopolitan knowledge and the production and consumption of sexualized space: Manchester’s gay village,” *Sociological Review* 52, no. 1 (2004): 52-53.

68. Lee Hyangjin, “The Korean Wave and Anti-Korean Wave Sentiment in Japan,” Edited by Tae-Jin Yoon and Dal Yong Jin, *The Korean Wave* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 191.

69. Audrey Yue and Helen Leung, “Notes towards the queer Asian city: Singapore and Hong Kong,” *Urban Studies* 53, no. 3 (2017): 750.

70. For case studies on this in Singapore and Hong Kong, see Yue and Leung, “Notes towards the queer Asian city.”

71. Binnie and Skeggs, “Cosmopolitan knowledge,” 54.

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75. Chung, "In the Shadows," 195.

76. Baudinette, "Ethnosexual frontiers," 477.

77. Baudinette, "Ethnosexual frontiers," 480.

78. Sunagawa ("*Shinjuku ni-chōme*," 218) makes this argument, which is contested by Ishida ("*Jendā to sekushuariti no shinkūken*"), who considers them to be no more than a cluster of commercial businesses.

79. For more on this, see McLelland, *Male Homosexuality*, 115.

80. Fieldnotes, October 13 & 21, 2006.

81. Fieldnotes, October 14, 2006.

82. Graves, "Behind the Scene."

83. By contrast, the term *nii-san* ("older brother" in Japanese) in this context would feel awkward to younger, urban Japanese.

84. Fieldnotes, October 7, 2006. For more on sexual racisms including of *miseko* at Seoul Soul, see Graves, "Behind the Scene."

85. John Cho, "The Three Faces of South Korea's Male Homosexuality: Pogal, Iban, and Neoliberal Gay," Edited by Todd Henry, *Queer Korea* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 265.

86. *Zainichi* "North" or "South" Koreans are referred to as such based on their self-identification, normally by membership in the respective resident organization Chongryon (North) or Mindan (South). It is not necessarily an identity of regional origin but rather of ideology, as explained in Sonia Ryang, "Koreans in Japan," Edited by Carol Ember, Melvin Ember, and Ian Skoggard, *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World* (New York: Springer, 2005), 974-982.

87. Sonia Ryang, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology, and Identity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 152.

88. Ryang, "Koreans in Japan," 976.

89. Christopher Laurent and Xavier Robillard-Martel, "Defying national homogeneity: Hidden acts of Zainichi Korean resistance in Japan," *Critique of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2022): 47.

90. These ways include the display of ethnic markers such as names, which have been no less important, demonstrating *zainichi*'s respectability and responsibility as citizens of society, as pointed out in Demelius, "Thinking through Community Spirit," 98.

91. See, for example, the case of Manchester in Binnie and Skeggs, "Cosmopolitan knowledge," 54-55.

92. Binnie and Skeggs, "Cosmopolitan knowledge," 40.

93. Ryang, "Koreans in Japan," 980.

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CHAPTER 3

Chapter Three moves back to the homeland, in search of the origins of Korean gay space, place, and identity, along with its connections to Japan. Gay districts in Korean cities are in a constant state of redevelopment, and one inconspicuous feature at many of their bars is what may be considered an air of Japaneseness. While Japanese characteristics and customs are fading away from this landscape, the story of their origin has remained obscure. The chapter outlines the decline in recent years of Japan and the Japanese man as fixtures in the consciousness and desires of gay men in Korea. Working in reverse to trace the catalysts for the rise and fall of this imaginary, it makes inferences about the early history of Japan's influences on Korean gay space since colonization (1910-1945) and of Japanese men's interactions with Korean gay men since the normalization of bilateral relations (1965). The case study reveals the current status and outlook of "Japan" in gay Korea based on interviews conducted with the owners and staff of ten gay bars in Seoul and Busan. With its binary focus, the chapter aims to relocate the discussion of Queer Korea into Queer Asia, taking it beyond the confines of its relationship with the discursively predominant West.

Out with the Old:
The Rise and Fall of 'Japan' in Gay Korea

Introduction

Korea and Japan are often discussed as competing spheres, but beneath the geopolitical tensions of their perpetual rivalry is a self-reflective desire for the other.[13] From music and film to manga and anime, Korean and Japanese cultural exports stand as mutually aspirational benchmarks for soft power from the region to the world. Despite the interdependence of these industries, much of what is produced remains seen through nationally exclusive lenses while its consumption in turn serves as a form of anti-nationalistic resistance. The gay community—as producers and consumers of pop culture—has led its own bilateral exchange for decades. Japanese idols were fawned over by gay men, with their songs sung at Korea's gay bars from the 1970s to 1990s. Since the 2000s, Korean idols and their camp choreographies have found dedicated fans who mimic them at gay bars across Japan. Japanophilia and Koreaphilia fueled by mutual desires based on national imaginaries have thus been constant fixtures in the gay subcultures of Korea and Japan.

In recent years, however, the once adored monolith of "Japan" has been on the decline in gay Korea.[14] With Japan's creative industries at a lull, the Japanese man, too, is peripheralized in the consciousness and desires of gay men in Korea. The fall of Japan comes with Korea's own

[13] "Korea," "Korean," and "Koreans" in this chapter are in reference to the South Korean nation, culture, or "race" unless otherwise indicated or implied (for example, when referring to Korea[ns] before the Korean War), while "Koreaphilia" and "Koreaphobia" express sentiments of obsession or animosity toward all things Korean (North or South).

[14] "Japan" and "the Japanese man" are often referred to in this chapter, not only as the nation proper and the men therein but also as the myriad constructs of such among gay men in Korea. "Japanophilia" and "Japanophobia" express sentiments of obsession or animosity toward these or other things associated with Japan.

rise in gay Korea, before any scholarly discourse on the subject altogether. Gay issues and Japanophilia (construed as "pro-Japanese") tend to be taboo in a relatively conservative, nationalistic Korea. In protest, this chapter explores the past and present symbiosis between these separate yet mutually interactive peripheries: sexually peripheral Korean gay men and nationally peripheral Japan. Seeking to recover the historical origins of Japan's interactions with, and influences on, gay space in Korea, I start with reference to Japanese men's racial fetishization of Koreans since colonialism from 1910 to 1945 and Japanese sex tourism to Korea after the normalization of relations in 1965. Through my inferences on these practices as extended between men, I argue that Korean gay space is founded in an early intimacy with Japan.

In the case study, I outline the current status of Japan and the Japanese man as imaginaries for Korean gay men, in the aftermath of Korea's and Korean men's transition from subaltern to superior in their own imaginary against Japan. I examine the factors that have since distanced Korean gay men from Japan as a result of the seizure of Japan's soft power hegemony through the ongoing Korean Wave, a prosperous Korea repositioned in the gaze of Southeast Asia, and disruptive tides such as the "No Japan" boycott and COVID-19. As of 2023, only one exclusively Japanophilic gay bar remains in Korea. In contrast, there are around a dozen Koreaphilic gay bars—often, run by Koreans for Koreans and their Japanese admirers—in Tokyo and Osaka. The demise of gay bars in Korea targeted at Japanese tourists is explained through testimony from my interviews with other bar owners and staff who themselves have or have had ties with, and customers from, Japan. I conclude with a possible ray of hope for the endurance of an albeit changing relationship between Korean gay men and Japan, by shedding light on how some gay bars manage to keep the flame lit however subdued.

Owing to its intraregional scope, this chapter responds to advocacy for the study of Queer

Asia as comparatively transregional, global, and inter-Asian, rather than that which is inextricably bounded with the West.[15] In doing so, it disrupts the recurrent narrative of Queer Korea's inherent desire for white Western men and the West. While researchers such as Patrick Thomsen have contributed to the study of Korean gay men in an intercultural context, their samples are often limited to young, cosmopolitan subjects who communicate with them in English.[16] Focus on such respondents—representative of merely a fraction of the community—often skews the racialized hierarchy of desire in Asia toward the gaze of white Westerners, which is not the case in largely homogeneous and racially autosexual Korea (or elsewhere, as Lisa Rofel and Dredge Kang have argued with respect to China and Thailand).[17] For the rest of the community, a researcher's positionality of racial otherness can become a barrier of access. The present study, while relying on a modest sample size, turns to this broader group through my racial "privilege" and fieldsites which chiefly cater to a local (as opposed to foreign, Anglophone) clientele base.

My research sets out to advance area and queer studies from transnational and intersectional angles, along "ethnosexual frontiers" termed by Joane Nagel.[18] It discursively looks at Korean gay men not by nativist or global queer assertions, but as a group with an intraregional relationality with Japan. As a Korean-American, my own positionality in this dual

[15] Howard Chiang and Alvin Wong, "Asia is burning: Queer Asia as critique," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 123.
[16] Patrick Thomsen, "Transnational Interest Convergence and Global Korea at the Edge of Race and Queer Experiences: A Talanoa with Gay Men in Seoul," *Du Bois Review* 17, no. 2 (2020): 411-428.
[17] Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), and Dredge Kang, "Eastern orientations: Thai middle-class gay desire for 'white Asians'," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 182-208.
[18] Joane Nagel, "Ethnicity and Sexuality," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 107-133.

relationship was conflicted. On the one hand, I was accepted as a *gyopo*[19]—a member of the diaspora—and, to a degree, respected for my origination in the US as opposed to the criminally associated China, Russia, or Central Asia. As an American *gyopo*, I established trust from those who otherwise avoid contact with "foreigners." On the other hand, my foreign way of thinking and communicating can impede that trust, barring me from the typical bargoing groups (*moim*) in which some exclusively take part in the scene. Consequently, only individuals—as bar owners, staff, or lone customers—became interviewees for this study.

While fieldwork for this chapter was limited to Seoul and Busan, gayborhoods exist in all of the five metropolitan cities while other cities without one have gay bars nonetheless.[20] Gay men in outlying regional, provincial, and rural spaces are no less representative of the gay community in Korea; and bars, too, are only one example of gay space amid the 500 to 600 establishments that include clubs, theaters, karaoke rooms, cruising spaces, and others. Furthermore, much as with scholarship on gay men in Japan, this study cannot extend its conclusions to lesbians and other sexual minorities—often segregated in the bar scene, consequently and by choice. Lastly, although the study of Korean gay men in Japan includes the North Korean diaspora, such access is almost impossible in South Korea. Z*ainichi* North Koreans are born and raised in Japan, whereas North Koreans in South Korea are predominantly defectors, only one of whom is publicly known to have come out as gay and has since relocated

[19] Korean transliterations in this chapter are in accordance with the system of Revised Romanization rather than what I consider to be an outdated (and convoluted to many outside academia) McCune-Reischauer.

[20] "Gayborhood" in this chapter means any area—which, in Korea, is almost always identified by neighborhood (*dong*)—with a cluster of gay establishments. No area is exclusively gay (indeed, straights who come to them may not even be aware of this co-existence), and the purpose they serve is for play—not as places to live and work as a community. As such, they should not be conflated with gayborhoods in, for example, the US and Canada.

to the US.[21]

Methodology

In preparation for fieldwork, online searches were conducted to locate gay bars in Korea that advertise to, or have been reviewed by or with reference to, Japanese. Sources included homepages and social media (Facebook and Instagram) managed by the establishments, along with directories in Japanese (Gaytobu and Gclick) and English (Kiss My Kimchi and TravelGay). Based on the content available, datasets were compiled on owners; customer base by age and body type; limitations to foreigners and women; and other descriptions, including features of the interior such as karaoke.[22] Ten establishments were shortlisted as fieldsites, four of which were later found to have gone out of business and were subsequently replaced during the course of fieldwork. The study relies on my findings from these resulting ten gay bars distributed across four gayborhoods in Seoul and Busan: Seoul's Jongno 3-Ga (2), Itaewon (2), and Sillim (1); and Busan's Beomil (5).

Gay bars have often been bypassed as fieldsites for the study of gay space and place in Korea, and the few exceptions have looked at them solely from the perspective of their customers. A survey in the 1990s managed to measure a sizeable sample of Korean gay bargoers' involvement in queer culture and secrecy around sexual identity, in a study by Chris and Berry.[23] However, its distribution was confined to Seoul's international or "Westernized"

[21] For more on this gay defector, see the article that brought his story to light in *Hankyoreh* (April 16, 2015).
[22] Explicit refusal of entry to foreigners and women is not as common for gay bars in Korea as they are in Japan, and as such no such rules were indicated by or for any in this study.
[23] Chris Berry and Fran Martin, "Syncretism and Synchronicity: Queer'n'Asian Cyberspace in 1990s Taiwan and Korea," in *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, ed. Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue (Duke University Press, 2003), 87-114.

district of Itaewon, thereby limiting respondents to the same highly educated, globally minded demographic that pervaded the study by Thomsen. My choice of interviews over a survey for the present study is partly the result of limited access to—and, thus, sample size of—customers. Business at the bars at the time of fieldwork was slow as many headed directly to the clubs, which had only days before reopened after months of closure due to COVID-19. Even when the bars are busy, the majority of customers assemble in their own social circles which rarely interact with one another, let alone a random stranger. Conducting surveys requires intrusions into each of these personal zones, which can put the surveyor's welcome at the bar and ability to conduct interviews at risk. There is warranted suspicion toward researchers at gay bars in Korea, where the research aim has often been to pry into the sexual lives of gay men.[24]

The subjects of focus for my interviews were correspondingly owners and staff rather than customers. As gatekeepers of the gayborhood, they have exclusive insights on not only their own bars and customers but also others around them—past and present, making them archivists of a history that beyond their memory fades with the passing of each night. They further chart the direction of the gayborhood's constant redevelopment in the ways they choose to represent their bars, interact with their customers, and respond to change. In their role of conversing with customers, owners and staff become informants by default when the researcher takes on the role of a customer. While I did manage to talk with isolated customers at a few bars intermittently with my interviewees, these conversations were often integrated into the discussion with owners and staff and rather served to support or expand on their responses. Participant observation and interviews enabled me to extract thicker descriptions from and about my subjects, interrogate new questions along the way, and, consequently, obtain broader context for my findings.

[24] Berry and Martin, "Syncretism and Synchronicity," 112.

Respondents from Gay Bars in Seoul & Busan

RESPONDENT	SEX	SEXUAL ORIENTATION	AGE	JAPANESE ABILITY	ROLE	BAR	AREA	CITY
1	M	Gay	30s	○	Co-Owner	A	Jongno 3-Ga	Seoul
2	M	Gay	30s	○	Co-Owner	A	Jongno 3-Ga	Seoul
3	M	Gay	40s	○	Owner	B	Jongno 3-Ga	Seoul
4	M	Gay	30s	✖	Staff	C	Itaewon	Seoul
5	M	Gay	30s	○	Owner	D	Itaewon	Seoul
6	F	Straight	30s	✖	Staff	D	Itaewon	Seoul
7	M	Gay	30s	✖	Owner	E	Sillim	Seoul
8	M	Gay	30s	✖	Owner	F	Beomil	Busan
9	M	Gay	40s	○	Owner	G	Beomil	Busan
10	M	Gay	50s	○	Owner	H	Beomil	Busan
11	M	Gay	30s	○	Staff	H	Beomil	Busan
12	M	Gay	40s	○	Owner	I	Beomil	Busan
13	M	Gay	20s	○	Staff	I	Beomil	Busan

*For fieldwork carried out in November 2021.

In total, 13 interviewees working as owners (9) and staff (4) were interviewed over the course of several nights in November 2021. Conversations were in Korean or Japanese, as preferred by the respondent. Six out of the ten bars in the study had owners—two of which additionally had staff—who could speak Japanese, an ability which is directly related to their exposure to (but, not necessarily, love for) Japan. The presence of these owners and staff serves as a further indicator that their bars have been regularly patronized by Japanese customers, who as tourists normally do not speak Korean or English. As bars were preselected on the basis of their marketing toward, or commentary from or about, Japanese, all of those still in business expectably had owners and staff conversant in Japanese. What was, perhaps, less expected was that none of the bars outside this preselection had anyone who knew Japanese. As no other bars in my search advertised by or for Japanese, this suggests with high probability that the absence of Japanese ability—and, accordingly, close contact with Japan and Japanese customers—is also the case for the majority of the 150 or so gay bars across Korea.

'Japan' and its Origins in Korean Gay Space

Korea's gay community from as far back in memory has in many ways existed in close proximity to Japan. Rights activists have denied any suggestion of Japan's role in the development of gay space and place in Korea, but ongoing archival work on this closeted relationship has begun to reveal another picture.[25] Clues are scattered across over a century of history. At the start of Japan's colonization of Korea in 1910, Tapgol Park in the district of Jongno at the heart of Seoul was opened to the public, expanded, and commercialized by design of the Japanese, which included a traditional tea house that came to serve as a symbol of modernity.[26] It is a landmark that only much later became synonymous with the area's gay bars and cruising spaces from the 1970s. Yet, its appropriation as a public place for men to discreetly have sex with other men could presumably have started decades earlier, considering the precedence with Tokyo's Asakusa and Hibiya Parks.[27]

With the end of colonial rule, the Korean War, and South Korea's normalization of relations with Japan, sexually nonnormative bars that surfaced around the capital in the 1960s took shape in ways that mirrored their counterparts in Japan. The earliest of these along with their owners and staff, inspired by Tokyo's *gei* bars (*geibā*) and boys (*geibōi*), practiced their own artistic forms of transgendered expression, disjointedly from the gay culture that had

[25] Todd Henry, "Cross-Strait Queerness: South Korean-Japanese Encounters in Postcolonial Times," presented at *Queering the Straits: Unruly Subjects Across Modern Korean and Japanese Studies* (Columbia, 12-13 February 2022).
[26] Hai-Gyoung Kim et al., "1910's Tap-gol Park Construction Process through Design Document Interpretation," *Journal of the Korean Institute of Traditional Landscape Architecture* 31, no. 2 (2013): 103-117.
[27] Hitoshi Ishida, "(Inter)National Development and the Origins of Hattenba (Cruising Spaces) in Postwar Japan," presented at *Queering the Straits: Unruly Subjects Across Modern Korean and Japanese Studies* (Columbia, 12-13 February 2022).

simultaneously materialized in the West.[28] Many in this industry moved to Japan in search of higher pay and gender-affirming healthcare, with others returning to establish and work in what are today the transgender bars and clubs which service straight men in Itaewon and cities outside Seoul.[29] As *gei* became overshadowed by a culture by and for gay men, Korea's bars started to resemble Japan's "snack" bars (*sunakku*), where the owner referred to as the "master" or "mama" serves drinks and light dishes to, banters with, and hosts karaoke for a handful of customers in his compact, intimate space. *Sunakku* have remained an institution in Japan's straight and gay worlds alike, even with the advent of the less personal, more transient experience of "shot" bars (*shottobā*) imported from the West.

That Korea's transgender and gay bars, too, embraced *geibā* and *sunakku* over the indigenous taverns known as *daepotjip*—ancestors of the soju bar, which has since taken over as the often preferred setup for gay bars across Korea—and the straight bars that catered to American GIs, is revealing about Korean transgender and gay communities' cultural alignment with Japan from the 1950s to 1970s, when Japanophobia was intense and social mobility was pursued by way of Americanisms.[30] Even so, Koreans had an inferiority complex toward their liberators, and not everyone respected or wanted to be close to them.[31] Anti-Americanism in South Korea was not, and could not be, overtly displayed until democratization, and as such is often considered a phenomenon that started in the 1980s. However, subdued resentment toward the Americans had simmered in South Korean society for decades before then over a host of

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[28] For more on the distinction between gei and gay, see Mark McLelland, "Japan's Original 'Gay Boom'" (2006), 6.
[29] Henry, "Cross-Strait Queerness."
[30] Predecessors of the pubs that specialize in makgeolli found across student districts today, daepotjip were highly popular in the 1960s and 1970s. For more on this, see the article in *Dailian* (June 5, 2007).
[31] Sang-Dawn Lee, *Big Brother, Little Brother: The American Influence on Korean Culture in the Lyndon B. Johnson Years* (Lexington Books, 2003), 26.

reasons not limited to US support for Japan's colonization of Korea or crimes against civilians during the Korean War. Such sentiments were expressed in Korean literature of the 1950s and 1960s, over what was then a more prosperous and developed North Korea, incidents of rape around military bases in South Korea, and imperialism in the context of the Vietnam War.[32] While none of this is to insinuate that Korean transgenders or gay men sided en masse one way or the other with the US or Japan, the observations lend perspective to why the spaces they constructed did not necessarily choose to rely on cultural influences from the West.

As sexually marginalized people, Korean gay men had their own precarity to be concerned over aside from foreign relations and national subjugation. In search of an escape from homophobia and societal pressures to marry, Japan was even imagined as a safe haven.[33] Yet this was not a desire for sexual rights or expression. Japan's gay movement did not fully awaken until its "gay boom" in the 1990s, whereas the West's had been ongoing since the 1960s and 1970s. Before the importation of the rights discourse in Japan and then Korea, sexuality was not cognized in the frame of an identity which needed to be liberated. Sexual preference was a personal matter remaining outside the social and political spheres—a sentiment which has for many survived even through the gay boom.[34] So, in Korea, it was not laws or the police so much as family and the workplace that constrained sexual minorities. Such oppression could not be resisted but only abandoned; and, with Korea as a "national closet," Korea's sexually oppressed found no other exit but abroad.[35] Despite its actions as a political oppressor, Japan—racially still

[32] Naoki Watanabe, "Masculinity and Protest Nationalism in 1960s Korean Literature: On Nam Chŏnghyŏn's 'Land of Excrement' (1965)," presented at *Queering the Straits: Unruly Subjects Across Modern Korean and Japanese Studies* (Columbia, 12-13 February 2022).
[33] John Cho, "The Luxury of Love: Gay Men in Recessionary South Korea," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 158.
[34] Mark McLelland, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan* (London: Routledge, 2005), 231.
[35] John Cho, "Faceless Things: South Korean Gay Men, Internet, and Sexual Citizenship," PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2012), 7.

seen as a "brother" to Korea—was for gay men a close and relatable alternative to a distant and alien West.[36]

Gay and Intercultural Contacts

The preceding section has established the bases for how Japan, from colonial to postcolonial force, was better positioned than any other to shape gay space in Korea. Contributing to this were the intercultural contacts between Korean and Japanese gay men, spurred by racialized fetishes evidenced in both literature and tourism. Novels from the 1910s portrayed Japanese men smitten with Korean "beautiful boys" (*bishōnen*) who, in turn, loved and surrendered to their colonizers in a torn desire to become civilized.[37] Gay men's interactions were observably galvanized after colonization, with Japanese tourism to Korea once relations with Japan were normalized in 1965. Personal ads in search of Korean men were put out in Japanese gay guides, and even bellboys were reportedly guaranteed to provide matchmaking services with young men at tourist hotels in Seoul and Busan.[38] The simultaneous influx of *gisaeng* tourism in pursuit of women entertainers saw several hundred thousand Japanese businessmen flood into Korea each year by the 1970s.[39] As many as 80 percent of tourists to Korea were Japanese, 90 percent of them men, and close to 100 percent of them traveling alone or with other men.[40] While there are no figures for gay

[36] Vladimir Tikhonov, "The Race and Racism Discourses in Modern Korea, 1890s-1910s," *Korean Studies* 36 (2012): 44.
[37] Pei Jean Chen, "Problematizing Love: The Intimate Event and Same-Sex Love in Colonial Korea," in *Queer Korea*, ed. Todd Henry (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 128.
[38] Henry, "Cross-Strait Queerness."
[39] Okpyo Moon, "Japanese tourists in Korea: Colonial and post-colonial encounters," *in Japanese Tourism and Travel Culture*, ed. Sylvie Guichard-Anguis and Okpyo Moon (Routledge, 2008), 152.
[40] John Lie, "The Transformation of Sexual Work in 20th-Century Korea," *Gender and Society* 9, no. 3 (1995): 318, and Moon, "Japanese tourists in Korea," 152.

tourists, basic truths about sexual behavior would conclude that hundreds if not thousands among these men had intimate encounters with other men.

Of course, bars were not inherently sexual destinations; but sex tourism—or, sex and tourism—is also complex and nuanced, and extends far beyond the sex trade.[41] Having had no direct contact with Japanese in the decades after their expulsion in 1945, Korean gay men were met with a new, gay face of Japan through its tourists who now sat and drank with them at their bars. With the business of these wealthy consumers, Korea's gay bar scene thrived by catering to Japanese nostalgia for its bygone, prewar traditions now associated with postwar Korea (such as the music genre *enka*) along with shochu, karaoke, and other "familiar" pleasures found back home.[42] Intercultural exchange established personal and spatial bonds, which were maintained if for no other reason than the gay community's commercial self-preservation in an otherwise prohibitive Korea. Accessible modes of travel and strengthened trade that brought and came with Japanese gay men to gay men in Korea became key enablers for them to act on their mutual desire, as has been observed more recently with Southeast Asian gay men's desire for and intimate encounters with "white" Asian men such as Koreans and Japanese.[43]

The dynamics of race and nationality in this relationship cannot be overlooked. Thais and other Southeast Asians are not alone in their monochromatic conflation of Koreans and Japanese, along with the colorized assumptions of their advancement.[44] Since the modern concept of "race" crystallized in Japan (*jinshu*) and then Korea (*injong*) in the mid- and late-1800s, Koreans and Japanese have mutually homogenized each other into their racial imaginaries of self. To

[41] Neil Carr, "Sex in tourism: reflections and potential future research directions," *Tourism Recreation Research* 41, no. 2 (2016): 192-193.
[42] Moon, "Japanese tourists in Korea," 148.
[43] Kang, "Eastern orientations," 202.
[44] Kang, "Eastern orientations," 189.

Koreans, Japanese were semicivilized siblings among an otherwise superior race of "yellows," separate from whites, blacks, and other aliens outside the Sinosphere.[45] To Japanese, Koreans were "brethren" (*dōhō*) in their "outer territories" (*gaichi*), who were so racially and culturally close that they needed not be colonized but merely integrated.[46] The power imbalance despite the trope of racial homogeneity was on stark display during the decades of sex tourism, with common scenes of older Japanese men accompanied by younger Korean women on the streets of Seoul.[47] From this arises an acute sense of national awareness in the sexual identity of mutually seeking Koreans and Japanese.[48] If not in patriotic response to the shame of their nation's emasculation by sex tourism then out of practicality toward modernization, many Koreans pushed themselves to study Japanese, which only more tightly entangled them with those whom they resented.[49] For Korean gay men to cultivate a loving relationship with the imaginary of Japan, there had to be more than an sexual objectification and racial insularity—and, of course, there was.

'Japanlessness' at Korea's Gay Bars

The Japanese music industry has been the world's second largest by revenue since the 1970s. The driving force behind its early success were women such as Momoe Yamaguchi and the duo

[45] Tikhonov, "The Race and Racism Discourses in Modern Korea, 1890s-1910s," 35.
[46] Mark Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea*, 1910-1945 (University of Washington Press, 2009), 143.
[47] Lie, "The Transformation of Sexual Work in 20th-Century Korea," 319.
[48] This has further contributed to the stereotyped roles of Koreans and Japanese at Korean gay bars in Japan, as discussed in Albert Graves, "Behind the Scene: Stories with the Master and Miseko of a Korean Gay Bar in Japan," *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 22, no. 1 (2019).
[49] Noriyo Isozaki, "Mutual Perceptions in Japanese and Korean Civic Society," *Japan and the World*, Japan Digital Library (31 March 2017), 5.

Pink Lady, and audition shows such as *Sutā Tanjō*! ("A Star Is Born!") cemented a distinctively Japanese "idol" market that emphasized celebrity over talent.[50] By the "Golden '80s," there were already over a dozen such idols beloved by swathes of gay men in and around Japan.[51] Women as objects of desire in the straight man's gaze, coupled with personal stories and lyrics illustrated by themes of strength, resistance, and tragedy, often resonate with gay audiences.[52] Seiko Matsuda is perhaps the best example of this, as one of Japan's most successful artists yet repeatedly mired in controversial relationships and scandalous incidents.[53] She and other Japanese idols of her time—buoyed by a booming music industry and rapidly expanding media—intersected a range of sociocultural discourses and self-narrated their place in the world to become iconic personalities for gay men in Korea as much as in Japan.[54]

The "presence" of an idolized Japan in Korea's pop music culture, I would argue, was the hotbed for Japanophilia among Korean gay men and the turbine behind Japan's extended influence on gay space in Korea from the 1970s to the early 2000s.[55] Despite cultural protectionist policies by the state until 1997, the Korean public's consumption of Japanese music through pirated media and covers by local artists contributed to sustained interactivity between the music industries of Korea and Japan. This "postcolonial networking" saw many Korean

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[50] This characterization of *Sutā Tanjō*! is made in Korean (*Seuta Tansaeng*!) in *PPSS* (January 17, 2022).
[51] A historicized overview on gays and their idols in Japan is presented in *All About* (August 13, 2013).
[52] Georges-Claude Guilbert, *Gay Icons: The (Mostly) Female Entertainers Gay Men Love* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018), 5-6.
[53] Eun-Young Jung, "Transnational Cultural Traffic in Northeast Asia: The 'Presence' of Japan in Korea's Popular Music Culture," PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh (2007), 51.
[54] Jonathan Mackintosh, "The Homo Cultures of Iconic Personality in Japan: Mishima Yukio and Misora Hibari," in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, ed. Patrick Galbraith and Jason Karlin (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 142.
[55] I borrow this phrase of "presence" from Jung, "Transnational Cultural Traffic in Northeast Asia."

artists—also women—move to and find success in Japan as enka singers, in turn contributing to Koreaphilia among gay men there (as can regularly be seen in the karaoke choices of older clientele at Korean gay bars in Japan).[56] *Zainichi* artists were also influenced by Korea's music industry, particularly in a spirit of social activism during a national transition toward democracy.[57] While authoritarian rule during this time steered the nation's industrialization—which brought gay men to the cities and led to the establishment of gay districts—it suppressed freedoms for, and reinforced ideologies against, sexual minorities across the board. The dialogue among Koreans, including the diaspora, and Japanese through the iconic personality and sociopolitical commentary of their shared music cultivated a multilateral hybridity of their industries. This then reshaped the previously exploitative relationship between Koreans and Japanese, into a relationship of co-creation—even if not yet as equals.

These examples serve to demonstrate Korean gay men's new duality as not merely a product for, but also a consumer of, Japan. The position of consumption created a new Korean gay desire for Japan—if not Japanophilia—spurred by industrial output that resonated with Korean gay men's cultural and political sensitivities. This Japanophilia of this desire was not always barefaced. The regular adaptation and "decoloring" of Japanese things of their Japaneseness (*waesaek*) in the process of this exchange further hybridized the philias that have developed around Japanese subjectivities cognitively associated with Korea.[58] The result is a blurred distinction between what is Korean and what is Japanese, as much as how much the love

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[56] Hyunjoon Shin, "Reconsidering Transnational Cultural Flows of Popular Music in East Asia: Transbordering Musicians in Japan and Korea Searching for 'Asia'," *Korean Studies* 33 (2009): 109.
[57] Shin, "Reconsidering Transnational Cultural Flows of Popular Music in East Asia," 110.
[58] Seung-Mi Han, "Consuming the modern: Globalization, things Japanese, and the politics of cultural identity in Korea," in *Globalizing Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese Presence in Asia, Europe, and America*, ed. Harumi Befu and Sylvie Guichard-Anguis (London: Routledge, 2001), 197.

of such things constitutes Koreaphilia or Japanophilia—or, indeed, both. Yet, be that as it may, the music industry has since changed, and so has the presence it once brought to Korea.

Today, Japanese men are nowhere to be found in the gay bars of Seoul or Busan. Japan, now commonly associated with the socially and culturally outdated, along with the Japanese man as an object of desire, seem to have diminished in the imaginary of gay men in Korea. Just as soon as Korea started to officially open to the flow of Japanese cultural content, the Korean wave flooded out in the opposite direction and has yet to subside. There is now what I see as an increasing "Japanlessness"—in the loosening of, and disintegration from, Japan—in gay Korea, triggered by three ongoing factors: (1) Japan's declining soft power against the global rise of Korean pop culture and Koreaphilia—and, consequently, a new autosexual desire of self-seeking Koreans; (2) Korea's demographic transition that has discarded the need for safe haven—with Korean gay men's complacency in what I consider to have become an "open closet"—and established a class of gay tourists to emerging markets in Southeast Asia; and, (3) Korean gay bars' loss of Japanophiles amid the "No Japan" boycott and dearth of Japanese tourists due to COVID-19.

Falling Japan, Rising Korea

On the surface, Koreans and Japanese in recent years may seem to share a mutual disdain, their nations deadlocked at one of the lowest points in recent memory. Since 2013, annually conducted joint surveys have successively confirmed that these sentiments are indeed represented by the majority in Korea and Japan, even if directed at the other's government more so than its people.[59] Still, a series of diplomatic spats sparked by recurrent disputes over history,

[59] Yasushi Kudo, "*Nichikan no kokumin kanjō wa yaya ochitsuita ga, izen hiekonda jōkyō:*

territory, and trade have only fanned the incessant flames of Japanophobia in Korea and Koreaphobia in Japan (including against *zainichi* as "the enemy" at home). While outright racism and hate speech against Japanese are relatively rare outside the extremist fringe in Korea, for the rest of society there is at best a sense of lost love with Japan. As for the respective minorities who hold favorable impressions of the other, what attracts them is not irrelevant. The joint surveyors found that over half of Japanese who view Korea favorably are influenced by its pop culture. The draw to Japan for Koreans, on the other hand, is its tourist attractions; but, while over half of Koreans expressed a desire to travel to Japan, it is predominantly the younger demographic below 30. The other half, then, represent a broadly aged range of adults—including those who lived through the decades of Japan's postcolonial "presence"—not a few of whom have probably already traveled to, but have become blasé toward, Japan. This multigenerational shift away from Japan is thus what I consider to be a result of its fading presence as a pop cultural hegemony in Asia, as replaced at home by the Korea Wave. By extension, this has also meant Japan's dissipation from the fixations of gay men in Korea.

Where state censorship of Japanese media had fallen short in its aim to construct a new Korean consciousness to replace all that had been erased by colonization, the Korean Wave seems to have made leaps and bounds. Korea's brand identity is stronger than ever, reaching every corner of the world, no less in a Korea that nonetheless maintains a constant inflow of cultural content from Japan. Japanese gay manga are now translated into Korean, and other series inspired by them are authored by Koreans and made available on online platforms such as "*Kkaman Bongji*" ("Black Bag"). While the site featured over 50 adult series and 80 fan submissions by the end of 2021, hardly any content was newly produced that year and the lull in

ryōkoku no hēsoku jōtai ni kaizen no kizashi wa mirareru ka," The Genron NPO (September 28, 2021).

activity has continued into 2022. Meanwhile, the once booming Japanese music industry had already lost its luster for Koreans in the 2000s, and has never managed to reclaim its position since. With the industry's myopic focus on a domestic fan base (coupled with its own form of self-censorship through copyright restrictions), Japanese idols can no longer meet the standards of the mainstream audience in Korea. Those with the talent instead try to break into the Korean Wave, where some of the most successful boy bands such as NCT and girl groups such as TWICE have Japanese and other Asian members for broader marketability across the region. The success of Korea's music industry has hoisted an army of Korean (or Koreanized) men and women onto sexual pedestals one after the other for new, Koreaphilic audiences in Japan and around the world. Bar H's bartender was keenly aware of this phenomenon, saying that while Koreans once looked up to Japan and its trends, the roles have since switched (Resp. 11).

Bar E's owner went further in his assessment, saying that while Japan and Japanese men were once subjects of infatuation, Korean gay men's tastes have since broadened beyond them (Resp. 7). Even Bar D's owner, described by his staff as a Japanophile (Resp. 6), was less turned on by Japanese men. He characterized them as typically thin, in what seemed to be a generalization based on an abundance of "herbivore men" (*sōshoku-kei danshi*) since the 2000s. Korean men, in contrast, are often muscular because of their tendency to work out (Resp. 5), with others aside from my interviewees in this study having attributed Koreans' build to their mandatory service in the military. With muscles above thinness on the hierarchy of gay desire, these comparisons carry an implicit bias by Korean gay men for other Koreans over Japanese.

A sense of Korean gay men's tastes can also be found in print media such as posters at the bars. Common ones at my fieldsites came from the Ivan Stop HIV/AIDS Project (ISHAP), promoting safer sex between gay men. Character illustrations seemed overtly Japanese in their

resemblance to those in gay manga, with husky bears and cubs with buzz cuts and stubble beards. While these types abound in Japan they are less popular in Korea, due to stigmas against body fat and facial hair. Yet, the scruffy men depicted on these posters sparked no connection to Japan or Japanese men for any of my respondents. Many of those with whom I communicated in Japanese coincidentally fit the description themselves, but none associated their look with Japaneseness. It was purported to be a type found across Asia (Resp. 2) or even one which is inherently Korean (Resp. 5). The only respondent who consciously self-identified with Japaneseness was the owner of Bar I, who boasted that he took inspiration from the iconic "goggle man" (*goguruman*) in Japanese gay porn (Resp. 12)—a recurring role normally played by an average [yet, still, "masculine"] man in his 30s or 40s who seduces the toned, athletic [and, often, straight] protagonist in his 20s. In all of my other discussions, Japanese men were not imagined as the figures of masculinity they once were in gay Korea.

Be it for goggle men or otherwise, the porn industry may be the one exception where Japanese content has maintained a semblance of gay desire for Japan in Korea. The blanket prohibition of porn has resulted in a sparsity of locally produced, commercially available content in Korea, and racial insularity in sexual preferences among gay men leave them with few alternatives besides what comes out of Japan.[60] Korean gay men's consumption of Japanese porn is thus largely a consequence of ample supply for a racialized demand. In this way, porn from Japan, as with Taiwan and [illegally] China, is consumed not so much for their subjects as Japanese or Taiwanese/Chinese as it is for them as [East] "Asians" (*dongyangin*). This has been observed in the Korean terms commonly entered in search of amateur or "DIY" gay porn on Tumblr, which—until its ban on adult content in 2018—indicated a strong demand for nationally

[60] Shawn Jones, "Jemok eopseum: the repurposing of Tumblr for gay South Korean DIY pornography," *Porn Studies* 7, no. 3 (2020): 309.

"domestic" (*guknae* or *guksan*) content in addition to that which was racially "Asian."[61] This desire for Korean gay porn is not limited to Koreans, with a surge in searches from other regions on other platforms as further testament to the global rise of the Korean man as a sexual object. In 2017, "Korean" launched 57 ranks to become the second most searched term on Pornhub Gay, further moving on to overtake "Japanese" in first place in 2018 and 2019. This is not only a reflection of tastes in the West, as Pornhub's annual *Year in Review* indicates that "Korean" has also trended in searches for straight porn in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines, and Kyrgyzstan.[62] While this may prove to be a passing phase contingent on the durability of the Korean Wave, there is no denying that Korean men have stolen much of the limelight from their counterparts in Japan, at home and abroad. With fewer sexual objects in Japan to sustain the gay gaze of Koreans, Japan as much as its men can only be relegated to the periphery of their desire.

Open Closet, New Horizons

In 1980, Korean workers had less than a quarter of the capital of their counterparts in Japan. Since then, however, IMF data shows that Korea's GDP growth rate has consistently outpaced Japan's; and, per capita, Korea has already surpassed Japan as of 2018. With this turning of the tide, Korean gay men find themselves in a reversed role, not only emboldened by the soft power of their pop culture but also enabled with purchasing power as members of a new cosmopolitan class in Asia. Coupled with demographic transition, gay men's need for safe haven abroad hardly has much basis anymore. With marriages at 65 percent and births at only 25 percent of what they were in 1970, Korean society and its expectations have been overhauled to where spouseless,

[61] Jones, "Jemok eopseum," 311.
[62] While "Japan," too, has represented a sizeable share of these searches, they have almost exclusively been made from locations in Japan.

childless lifestyles are no longer an anomaly.[63] Meanwhile, pride events branded as "queer culture festivals" and ranking among the largest in Asia have inundated the streets of Seoul, Busan, and over half a dozen other cities across the nation since 2000, forcing society to come to terms with the existence of sexual minorities and heralding a slow but sure incline in their acceptance. The doors to the national closet have been flung open, and walking in and out of it—with plenty of trendy outfits to choose from—is now the norm for the majority of gay men in Korea. This "open closet," as I see it, is a liminal space between confinement and liberation where the majority of Korean gay men now find themselves, as newly cosmopolitan subjects. They are better educated, richer, and more traveled than ever before, with obscured boundaries in their gay lives at home and the resources for self-development that is wholly independent from the push and pull of Japan.

Since the turn of the century, one conspicuous move has been the intraregional pivot by Korea and Koreans toward Southeast Asia. In a bid to deepen its strategic partnership with ASEAN, Korea concluded an FTA in 2007, established a diplomatic mission in 2012, and dedicated a year of cultural exchange in 2017. In 2020, Korea invested more in ASEAN than in any other nation or region besides the US, and travel by Koreans to ASEAN member states in the preceding year hit a record of over 10 million—twice as many as to Japan.[64] Japan as a safe haven in the imaginary of Korean gay men is now all but a distant memory. Today's Koreans are no longer gay migrants or refugees but gay tourists, choosing sexually liberal destinations southward to which they enjoy easy access with visa-free entry and an expansive selection of direct connections serviced by a range of budget airlines.

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[63] Statistics Korea, "Marriage and Divorce Statistics in 2021," Ministry of Economy and Finance (March 17, 2022), and Statistics Korea, "Preliminary Results of Birth and Death Statistics in 2021," Ministry of Economy and Finance (February 23, 2022).
[64] ASEAN-Korea Centre, "2021 ASEAN & Korea in Figures" (March 3, 2022), xvi.

While beach resorts in Vietnam and the Philippines have become typical getaways for others, gay men often head to the clubs and bars of Thailand and [albeit on the outskirts of Southeast Asia] Taiwan. A Taiwanese pride flag hung as a symbol of solidarity at Bar H. Bar C's bartender said that he had been to Japan, China, and Taiwan, but preferred Taiwan and wanted to see Thailand next—both for their tourist attractions and gay scenes (Resp. 4). Although their desire rarely extends to the men there (Resp. 4, 9, & 11—indeed, there is often hostility toward them, sexual racisms behind which deserve a study of their own), Korean gay men are forging intimate ties to these places, looking to them for not only respite but also retirement.[65] Even gay English instructors in Korea have started to relocate to Southeast Asia since the start of COVID-19, according to the owner of Bar D (Resp. 5). With the simultaneous decline of Japanese gayborhoods such as Tokyo's Shinjuku Ni-Chōme—which had already lost a third of its over 300 bars by 2010 due to gentrification and dating apps, not to mention how it will have fared by the end of the ongoing pandemic—Japan's image to Koreans as a gay getaway may soon be on the way out.[66]

'No Japan', No Japanese Men

In an IVANCITY poll in December 2007 with over 1,730 respondents, Tokyo was voted as the city Korean gay men most wanted to experience living in, only behind New York. Comments were directed less at the city than at the Japanese, with praise for what commenters characterized as their kindness, manners, nonconformism, and "gayishness" of even the straight men. A decade

[65] John Cho, "The Three Faces of South Korea's Male Homosexuality: Pogal, Iban, and Neoliberal Gay," in *Queer Korea*, ed. Todd Henry (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 158.
[66] While this decline was reported in an article in *Japan Times* (February 24, 2010), a more recent article in *Reuters* (December 3, 2020) that mentions a figure of 400 bars suggests that Ni-Chōme may have since made a comeback.

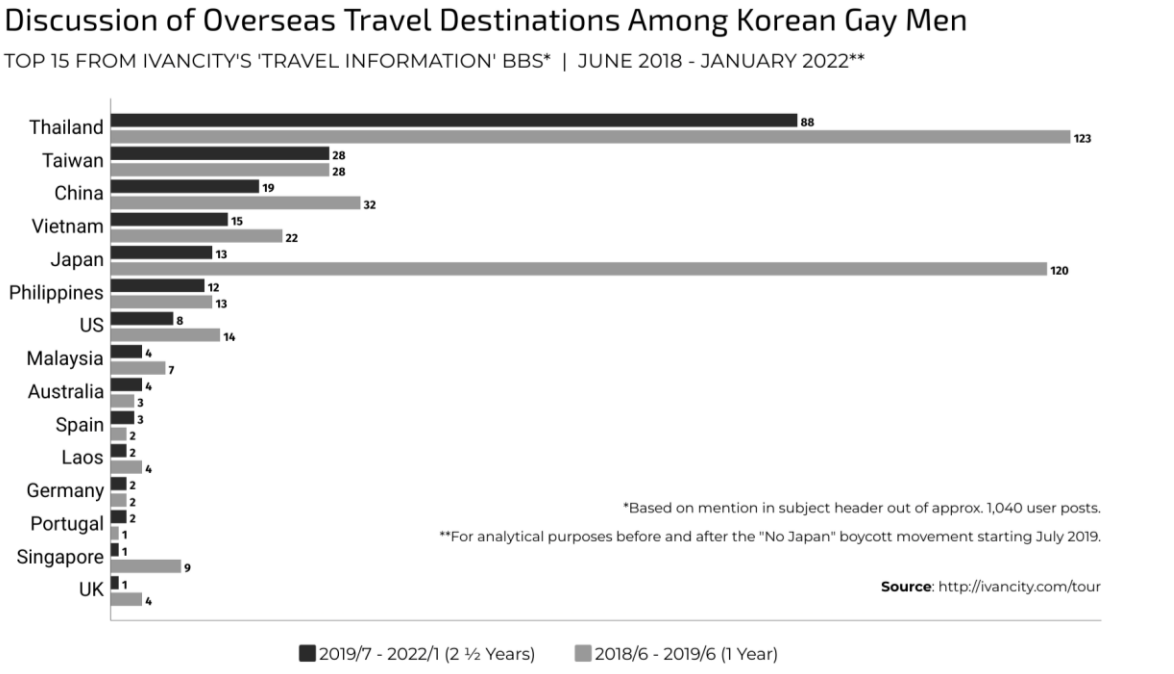
later on the portal from July 2018 to June 2019, Japan was the second most talked about overseas travel destination. Korea, along with others in Asia such as China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong had become the source of record numbers of tourists to Japan annually for the preceding several years due to relaxed visa requirements and a steeply plummeting yen.[67] In July 2019, however, the figures from Korea took a nosedive at the onset of a sudden movement that swept the nation, phrased succinctly as "No Japan" with the slogan, "[We] Do Not Go, [We] Do Not Buy" (*Gaji Ansseumnida, Saji Ansseumnida*). The fervor was kindled by Japan's removal of Korea from its white list of preferential trading partners shortly after a Korean ruling demanded compensation from Japanese firms for forced labor. The movement—in which Koreans pledged not to travel to, or buy products made in, Japan—had no adverse impact on incoming tourism from Japan. On the contrary, Japanese travelers to Korea kept a steady annual incline since 2015, nearly doubling as they surpassed 3 million in 2019.[68] With a few exceptions, Korean businesses including gay bars went on welcoming them as customers, excluding Japanese from their hostilities toward Japan (Resp. 11).

However, consumers were quick to shun businesses perceived as Japanese, even when many were owned and run by Koreans. Restaurants and bars were a common target, directly and indirectly. Beer was the hardest hit of commodities, Japanese imports of which halved by the end of 2019 and were slashed by a further 85 percent in 2020. In the span of only a few years, Japanese beer imports to Korea plummeted from USD 78 million in 2018 to USD 4 million as of August 2021; and, with its sustained decline, there is no signal that demand will recover anytime

[67] Japan National Tourism Organization, "*Nenbetsu kuni/chīki-goto no hōnichi gaikyakusū no suī*," Japan Tourism Agency (June 17, 2022).
[68] Korea Culture and Tourism Institute, "*2020 Oerae Gwangwanggaek Josa*: International Visitor Survey," Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (August 19, 2020).

soon.[69] While Japanese beer was not necessarily even on the menu at the few remaining Japanophilic gay bars in Jongno 3-Ga, these figures serve to illuminate the extent to which the public could so swiftly and drastically lose its desire to consume "Japan"—including its commodities which had never before been considered a threat.[70] Even if only by collateral damage, Korea's already dwindling "Japanese" gay bars began to quietly shutter in the aftermath of destruction, as further attested to in my interviews (Resp. 5).

There are also indicators of a spike in Japanophobia among Korean gay men as a result of "No Japan." Over the two and a half years and counting since its start—which, for some, has yet to end—user posts about Japan in a travel forum on IVANCITY have shrunk by 90 percent, replaced by discussions around Thailand, Taiwan, China, and Vietnam.



[69] Korea Customs Service, "*Wain, maekju jechigo juryu suip 1-wi chaji*," Ministry of Economy and Finance (August 30, 2021).
[70] Han, "Consuming the modern," 205.

One user post from August 2019 with the header, “Are there still soulless gays taking trips to Japan?” (*Ajikdo ilbon yeohaeng ganeun yeonghon eomneun geideuri gyesineun ga*.) sparked a heated argument over historical and political issues beyond the those related to the trade dispute. Those who responded in defense of Japan or in opposition to “No Japan” were far outnumbered by those who sympathized with the stance of the OP. The exchange demonstrates that while there are still Korean gay men with a keen interest in Japan, they are the outlier; and, while recent expressions of Japanophobia may have been induced by this trade dispute, the deeply ingrained sentiments behind them will not subside merely with the end of it or others to come. Only several months after the flare up of “No Japan,” COVID-19 struck the world with travel bans around the world and between Korea and Japan. Closed borders and social distancing rules have strained businesses across the board; but, they were the last blow to any Japanophilic bars still standing in Jongno 3-Ga, such as HANABI Episode 2 (Resp. 3). As these bars had almost exclusively consisted of tourists and regulars in their 50s and 60s, it is unlikely they will ever be replaced in the absence of a new “Japanese Wave.” Others that had once regularly been patronized by Japanese tourists before COVID-19—such as Bars A, B, D, G, H, and I—were savvy enough to have built from the start a customer base that did not rely on them, which has saved them from the fate of peers that staked everything on the permanence of Japan’s presence in Korea.

Japanophilia in the 2020s

Setting aside the despondent tone over Japan’s diminishment in gay Korea, its presence as it nonetheless remains deserves mention. On their own—sans any comparative analysis to bars outside this study, past and present—many random findings over the course of my fieldwork

could be considered rather Japanese. Lingering characteristics and customs with origins in, or otherwise connections to, Japan found at these bars, along with the mundane experiences of their owners and staff, are by no means invisible in the 2020s. In Jongno 3-Ga, Bar A's co-owners studied in Japan and traveled there annually until COVID-19 (Resp. 1). It could certainly be assumed that once borders reopen to tourism, they will be back as they had always been before. In Itaewon, Bar D occasionally played J-pop, even if those tracks were outnumbered by K-pop and the latest hits from the West. In Sillim, Bar E had a prize machine referred to in Korean by its Japanese term *gacha* and still associated with Japan—to which, as an intentional centerpiece of the space, it exposes its young clientele in their 20s.

Outside the gayborhoods of Seoul, Busan's Beomil—hardly 30 miles from the island of Tsushima in Japan—displayed even more traces of Japaneseness. Bar F—while its current owner is apathetic to Japan—maintains its original Japanese branding from its previous owner, who now runs a soju bar (a localized type of drinking establishment) in the area despite still having love for Japan (Resp. 8). Bar G, while its owner looks like a person one would find in Seoul's artsy, alternative youth district of Hongdae, has welcomed many Japanese tourists with whom he talks in Japanese (Resp. 9). Bar H, while filled with American symbols, also has mixed into its interior an Astro boy figurine, a daruma doll, and a "Nihon" (Japan) muddler the owner purchased in Tokyo. Bar I, while the majority of its customers are now Korean, has an owner who keeps in touch with his Japanese ex-boyfriend in Fukuoka and chose to hire a young bartender who is studying Japanese (Resp. 13). Ppoppo, another soju bar outside the selected fieldsites, has its name in katakana ("Popo") on its sign outside.

There were even indications of a tendency for gay men in both cities to see a closer resemblance between Beomil and Osaka's Dōyama as opposed to any of the gayborhoods in

Seoul (Resp. 5 and 12), along with Busanites' preference for Dōyama over anywhere in Seoul (Resp. 11). Gay Busanites' self-awareness as belonging to Korea's secondary city seems to play a role in their sense of relationality with Japan's secondary city of Osaka. This is in contrast to gay Seoulites and Tokyoites, who habitually frame their gayborhoods autonomously and as sole representatives of the gay bar scenes in Korea and Japan.[71] Bar H's bartender, who for a decade lived in Tokyo and worked at gay bars there, found Koreans and Japanese to be nationally similar but regionally different (Resp. 11)—a jolting reminder of the complications involved in trying to comparatively analyze gay space in the context of a binary "Korea" and "Japan."

Further complicating the landscape of gay space are the diasporic communities that exist within, and traverse between, this supposedly national binary. As Korean gay bars proliferate in Tokyo and Osaka, cross-border exchanges among Korean and Japanese gay men are becoming more multilateral, blurring the already blurred distinctions between them and what constitutes Koreanness and Japaneseness. Bar B's owner, who owned Ni-Chōme's now closed gay bar Korea City in the late 2000s, is an example of how gay Japan is infused with Koreanness and then repatriated to constitute a facet of gay Korea. So, too, is his protégé he campily referred to in Japanese as his "daughter" (*musume*) who worked for him as a bartender and now runs his own cocktail bar in Sillim (Resp. 3). The owner's conscientious decision to adopt the Japanese "bottle keep" (*botorukīpu*) system—in which customers purchase a bottle of alcohol and keep it at the bar for subsequent returns—at Bar B was based on his personal wish to bring the Japanese way of drinking to Korea (Resp. 3). In the absence of any organized representation in the gay community by the Japanese diaspora in Korea, these contact points among gay *zainichi*, Koreans

[71] For more on this center and periphery dynamic in Korea, see Joe Phillips and Joseph Yi, "Queer Communities and Activism in South Korea: Periphery-Center Currents," *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 14 (2020): 1948-1973.

in Japan, and Korean returnees from Japan, could foreseeably be what molds the future face of Japan in gay Korea.

While I have thus far endeavored to seclude the West from my discussion of Korean gay men and Japan, acknowledgment of a couple instances from my fieldwork that concern it will diversify the angles of my analysis in closing. Bar B's owner, despite a life limited to contact with Koreans and Japanese, was a self-described *yangbogal*, or a gay man attracted to Westerners. In relaying the history of the term *bogal* (which has been out of style since the 2000s) to his customers in their 30s, he mentioned other types such as *waebogal* for Japanese and *ttongbogal* (literally, "shit gays") for Chinese and other Koreans—a clue to a Korean gay racial hierarchy of desire that once placed themselves below both Japanese and Westerners.[72] The only reason he chose to work in Jongno 3-Ga rather than the "Westernized" area of Itaewon is because of his inability to communicate with customers in English (Resp. 3). Bar H's owner, a Japanophile who took monthly trips to Tokyo before COVID-19, also told me he preferred bars such as Arty Farty—the archetypal *gaisen* bar in Japan—because of his desire for white men, despite saying he has a taste for "wasabi" (in reference to Japanese men) and traveled to Japan to "experience its culture." Yet, he has also been to Australia, Germany, France, and Brazil; and his bucket list includes Canada, Sweden, Finland, and Switzerland because the men there, too, seem "delicious" (Resp. 10).

These accounts of desire for the West and Westerners—while outliers, as I have cautioned at the outset—are examples of how, despite otherwise proximity to, and intimacy with, Japan, desire does not necessarily extend to Japanese men. They hint at an albeit less conventional imaginary of Japan as a gateway to a more distant yet desirable "West" (*seoyang*),

[72] For more on the connection between this term and that as inverted for prostitutes (*galbo*), see Cho, "The Three Faces of South Korea's Male Homosexuality," 272.

however the term may be racialized. With no shortage of "Western" bars, clubs, and cruising spaces in Seoul, this then prompts the question of why Korean gay men who seek the West do not do so in Korea but might choose to in Japan. Such inquiry requires a look at divergences in how expat communities are imagined at home versus abroad along with Korean consumptions of Japan as Western in place of the West.

Conclusion

While gay Korea may be the closest it has ever been to the threshold of Japanlessness, it will never reach a stage where it is completely devoid of Japan. At the same time, it is highly improbable that Japan will ever return to the peak of its influence over gay Korea. In moving their relationship forward as equals, this could surely be for the better. In the meantime, as I try to construe this relationship, Japan can best be labeled with what it means in the imaginary of Korean gay men today—a role I would lightly term *sseomnara*. Geopolitically, Japan is often characterized as an "island nation" (*seomnara*). *Sseom*, on the other hand, is slang for an ambiguous relationship between two people where there seems to be "something." That there is still this something between Korean gay men and Japan is perhaps a more constructive way to summarize the rise and fall of Japan than with "Japanlessness."

The ambiguity of this relationship on the path ahead also demands further research into questions that could not be properly covered in this study. Transnational studies of Queer Asia duly require an inward look at the intraregional and interregional dimensions at play. For this study, it means honing in on alternatively organized subgroups of the gay community, to determine the axes of tension they have with one another in assembling and dismantling the national boundary of gay space in Korea. With the diminishment of Japan (and, I would also

argue, the West) in gay Korea, a new interwoven fabric of regionalisms—area-based representations of gay identity—pervades the bar scene and beckons as the next topic for study on gay space and place in Korea. Korean gay men are reinventing spatial identities by cities, districts, and neighborhoods, and fracturing the boundaries of center and periphery that could change the dynamic altogether with Japan.

For now, with no more gay bars relying on them, Japanese men searching for the spotlight will in any case not find it shining over them when they return to Korea. As Japanese tourists start to trickle back into their once acquainted gayborhoods in Seoul and Busan, they will find themselves in a new space without a clear sense of place. Much rarer will it be for one to hear enka being sung on the karaoke as there was at Goguma, or to see Koreans sitting in wait for Japanese as there were at HANABI Episode 2, in contrast to what was once upon a time reported on Gclick. In its increasing Japanlessness, Korea's gay bar scene becomes ever more inward-looking, self-seeking, and reflective of a gay community which is diversifying within its own localized context.

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CHAPTER 4

Chapter Four zooms out once again, this time to survey the national landscape of bars and other establishments that constitute the thriving gay scene across Korea. As the discursive exclusion of communities beyond Seoul and Busan has resulted in an incomplete picture of gay life in Korea, the chapter discusses formations of gay identity intraregionally within Seoul and interregionally among cities and provinces outside Seoul. In analyzing regionally based attitudes and behaviors toward self and other within the gay community as dispersed around Korea, it seeks to identify representations of gay life as it exists across a kaleidoscope of contrasting centers and peripheries. Out of this pursuit, a set of overarching conclusions is made about regionalism and gay men in Korea. First, regionalism is alive, complex, and witnessing a transformation by a new online generation. Second, Korean gay men—with both regional identities and sexually oriented lifestyles—through their own practice of regionalism contribute to the construction of this subregionalism influenced by consumer culture and sexual imaginaries, not limited to perceptions of masculinity that establish subtle (not always concurrent) hierarchies of desire. In the broader landscape, homoregionalism is shown to function as a regionalizing means of classifying gay space, place, and identity in Korea.

In with the New:
Homoregionalism of Gay Men in Korea*

*Graves, Albert. "In with the New: Homoregionalism of Gay Men in Korea."
European Journal of Korean Studies 22, no. 3 (2023).

Introduction

With anywhere from 500 to 600 gay bars, cruising spaces, motels, massage parlors, waxing salons, and other dedicated establishments, there is a thriving gay scene in Korea.[1] Yet, while less than 40 per cent of these businesses are in the capital Seoul, the body of research on the Korean gay community and its commercial spaces has been confined to this presumed center along with its own purported centers of Chongno 3-Ga and It'aewŏn. Phillips and Yi comparatively analyzed Seoul against its periphery, but only to the extent of the next largest city of Pusan.[2] Over 20 other cities representing more than a third of the nation's population remain invisible in scholarly literature. This is despite the existence of gay establishments that serve their communities, communities in surrounding areas, and transients from communities farther afield. The discursive disregard of the people in these communities can only result in a biased and incomplete picture of Queer Korea.

Elsewhere in East Asia, Benkhart has responded to the need to investigate rural sexualities along with the real and imagined boundaries that separate them from their urban counterparts in Japan.[3] Others such as Gong and Liu[4] and Luo[5] have looked at rural sexualities within the urban with their analysis of rural-urban gay migrants in China. Such studies have revealed complex worlds of gay life within or deriving from regions, advancing scholarship on gay men not only subnationally but also supranationally.[6] Even so, it is not easy to make clear distinctions between urban and rural gay communities in East Asia. The rural is entrenched with

urbanity in Japan, while the rurality of urban transplants is overshadowed by ethnicity and class in China. Korea's gay communities, spread across cities but also the provinces surrounding them and the districts and neighborhoods within them, also sit above any urban-rural divide. Their study from the angle of "regions" (*chiyŏk*)—with attention to regionally based practices of discrimination known as "regionalism" (*chiyŏk chuŭi*)—can lend new insight to a broader transregional discourse in Queer Asia.

Korea has a tense relationship with its history of regionalism, popularly believed to have been weaved into its sociocultural fabric in ancient times. Its contemporary form arose during rapid urbanization from the 1960s, which caused considerable depopulation in rural areas along with regional inequities that only began to stabilize with industrial restructuring and decentralization in the late 1980s.[7] Even with decades of policies to decompose the urban-rural divide through "balanced national development," regional disparities in income and employment opportunities have persisted, causing mutual resentment from many directions. Imbalances have nonetheless started to flatten in recent years and the regionalism of earlier decades has been fading away. It would be hasty to conclude that regionalism is over, however. On the contrary, other dynamic forms have arisen within newly organized communities through newly developed modes of communication.

No study has examined how regional disadvantages may disproportionately impact sexual minorities in Korea—a nationally marginalized group with no anti-discriminatory laws for LGBT before the 2000s. Yet, they seem to face no additional regional hostilities, akin to those of rural America that sparked its "Great Gay Migration" during the 1970s and 1980s.[8] What is clear, however, is that gay life—with the establishments and consumers who sustain them—can be found in each of the eight provinces of Korea. As the nation has developed, cities

of all sizes have become more autonomous through interurban competition, which has lessened their provincialization by Seoul. With the expansion of Seoul, too, the capital's own administrative areas have become cities within the city, each with distinct identities. These distinctions among area-based, or regional, counterparts have in turn sculpted regional subgroupings within the gay community. As the tensions between these regions diversify through changing forms of regionalism, the ways in which regional and gay identities clash and intersect become a topic for exploration.

It should be acknowledged from the outset that bigger does not necessarily mean better, and more populous, urbanized regions do not guarantee a higher quality of gay life. In advocating for the study of rural formations of gay identity, Corber pushes back against assumptions that gay life can only survive away from family in the urban, with revelations of how alike these identities can be despite historical and cultural disparities.[9] Wienke and Hill even argue that urban settings can be detrimental to the quality of gay life.[10] Conversely, for urban formations of gay identity, Mattson emphasizes the role of bar districts and neighborhoods as not only providers of gay space but also incubators of subcultures and new networks.[11] These contrasting yet complementary perspectives couple to form a necessary lens for the examination of what I consider "subregionalisms," or regionalism distinctly practiced by a subset of society. I will introduce "homoregionalism": regionalism within the gay community molded by spatial tensions in gay life and representing a homogenizing imaginary of regionalized gay men, often reinforced by heteronormative constructs.

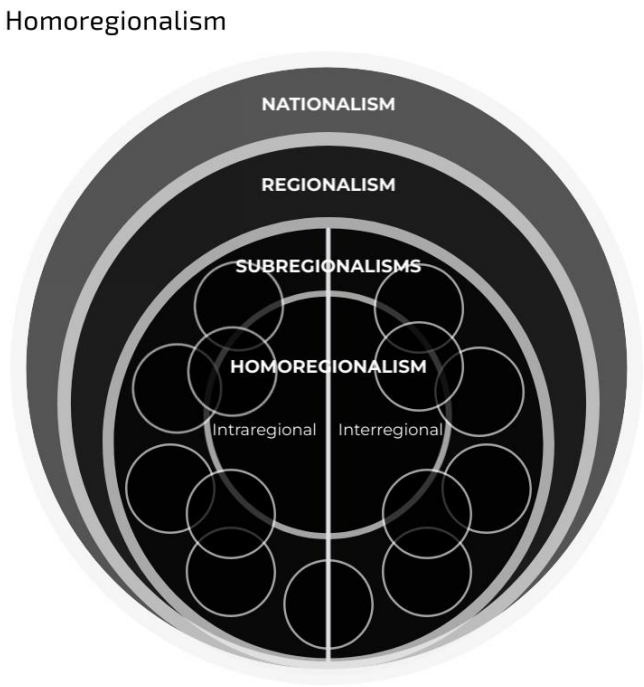

TABLE 1 – This illustrates the placement of homoregionalism as among many subregionalisms, along with its own inner distinctions between homoregionalism as expressed intra- and interregionally.

To avoid another center-periphery discourse where all roads lead back to Seoul, I separate my discussion of homoregionalism by the imaginaries of competing spheres formed "intraregionally" (districts and neighborhoods within Seoul) and "interregionally" (provinces and cities excluding Seoul). Another reason for this subcategorization is that, despite their overlaps in socioeconomic and political divides, intra- and interregionalisms are otherwise hard to compare. While intraregionalisms are largely characterized by a mix of age and cultural variations, interregionalisms share the deeper historical and dialectal dimensions of broader regionalism. In this way, intraregionalisms observed in this study tend to be relatively superficial and based around the contemporary stylistic tastes of men, whereas interregionalisms are largely fixed in traditionally ingrained perceptions of masculinity.

In analyzing regionally based attitudes and behaviors toward self and other within

Korea's dispersed gay community, I seek to identify representations of gay life as it exists across a kaleidoscope of contrasting centers and peripheries. Out of this pursuit, a set of overarching conclusions is made about regionalism and gay men in Korea.

First, regionalism is alive, complex, and witnessing a transformation by a new online generation. Second, Korean gay men—with both regional identities and sexually oriented lifestyles—through their practice of regionalism contribute to the construction of homoregionalism, as a subregionalism influenced by the regionalized communities with which they associate. In the sphere of gay life, this means that homoregionalism is carved from consumer culture and sexual imaginaries. Alongside homoregionalism's overlaps with regionalism such as perceptions of masculinity, it also has discrepancies in subtle (not always concurrent) hierarchies of desire. In the broader landscape, homoregionalism functions as a regionalizing means of classifying gay space, place, and identity in Korea.

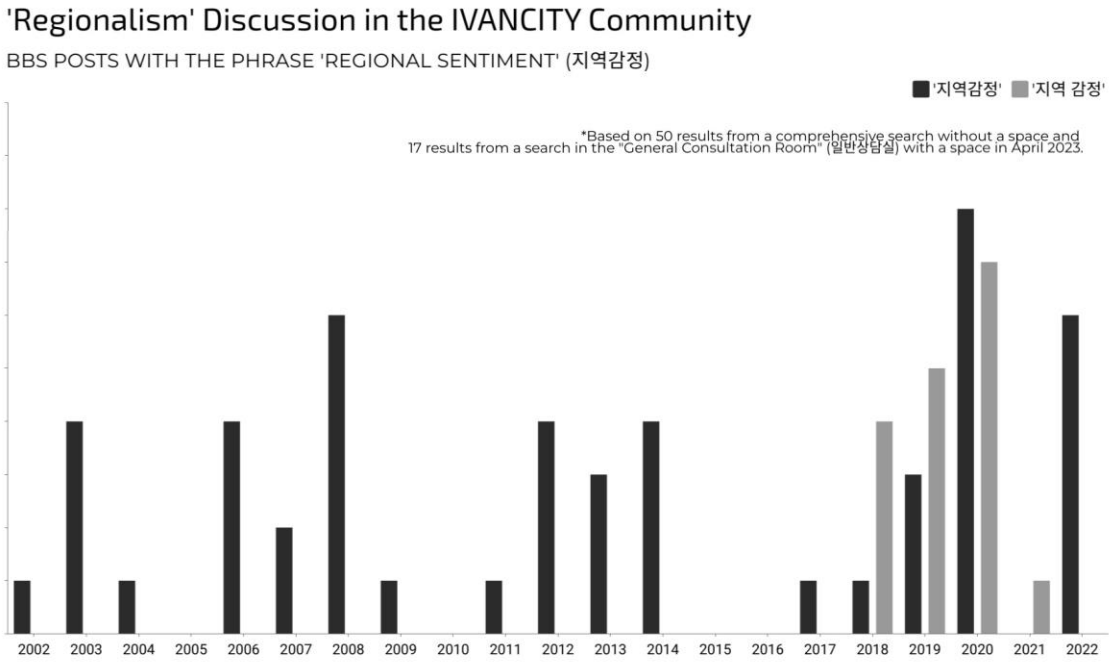

TABLE 2 – This shows the frequency of posts with the term "regionalism" (as "*chiyŏkchuŭi*" or "*chiyŏk chuŭi*" [with and without a space] in Korean) on IVANCITY between 2002 and 2022,

demonstrating a steady, if not increased, discourse on the topic among gay men in Korea.

A driving force behind the visibility of homoregionalism in recent years has been COVID-19. As elsewhere around the world, Korea's physical distancing measures sent nearly the whole society to online platforms for socialization. For those active in the gay community, these took the form of gay apps and portals such as IVANCITY. Established by the organization LGBT KOREA in May 2000, IVANCITY is the representative social network of Korea's gay community often referred to as *iban* ("IVAN"), with a host of resources on coming out, legal rights and protections, and gay establishments across the nation. A core feature is its expansive bulletin board system (BBS), where members can ask and answer questions, take part in debates and polls, and search for friends, dates, or partners. While it claims to serve the broader community of sexual minorities, IVANCITY is predominantly by and for gay men—a targeted subset of 'consumers' (*k'ŏnsyumŏ*) described as "fashion-conscious and success-oriented men" who are early adopters, inquisitive, educated, proactive, and investors in their image and quality of life.[12]

The framing of gay men as consumers is relevant, considering that the homoregionalism analyzed in this study was observed during these instances of consumption as bargoers or active members of IVANCITY. COVID-19 not only temporarily relocated consumption (by gay men and otherwise) from physical to online spaces. As domestic travel became the only feasible escape for many trapped at home, COVID-19 pulled consumption inward from abroad and pushed it outward to regions. For gay men in their wandering and search for intimate connections, this could include gay tourism and the search for not only the normativity of gay bars but also the non-normativity of such as regionally distinct extensions of the gay community in Korea. In this way, homoregionalism can be seen as both a motive for and a byproduct of gay

men's consumerism.

This study branches out from my ongoing research on the relationship between Korean gay men and the nation, people, and imaginary of Japan. In surveying this supposed binary, I have confronted a complicated national landscape that is gay Japan. This inevitably traces back to not only gay Korea but also its regional landscapes, each with subtle connections to regions within Japan. The relationality of these interconnected parts of separate wholes traverses and transcends conventional ideas of center and periphery in Korea, disrupting the narrative of a spatially contained world of gay life monopolized by Seoul. On the subject of their identity, Korean gay men in my analysis are perceived not through a global queer or nativist lens but as products of past interactions with the West and Japan and present reinventions through new, localized identities. These localities span from coast to coast, beyond the confines that researchers such as Berry and Martin[13] and Cho[14] have found with Seoul's Chongno 3-Ga and It'aewŏn, or Phillips and Yi[15] with Pusan's Pŏmil.

While I do not explore the theoretical applicability of homoregionalism to other national contexts outside Korea, there are prospects for scholars to develop the concept much further. In that homoregionalism is presented as a consequence of the interplay between space, consumerism, and sexuality, it is in a way a regionalized take on homonationalism as rethought by its conceptual originator, Puar.[16] Yet, while homoregionalism can be seen as a consolidation of regional identity, it is not borne of racially, religiously, or politically exclusionary ideologies that homonationalism often is with national identity. Homoregionalism, to the extent observed in this study, does not perceive others as existential threats but as objects along the spectrum of desire. Gay racism and xenophobia may influence the structure of this hierarchy; but, with a state that rarely so much as recognizes its gay community, there is hardly an alignment between them

for any prevalence of homonationalism in Korea. If anything, this discourse on homoregionalism could build on that of homonationalism through alternative angles for consideration, including subnational forces at play, space as an enabler, and repercussions for desire.

Methodology

Interviews and participant observation were conducted with around 20 owners, 20 staff, and over 100 customers ranging from their 20s to 60s at gay bars between November 2021 and February 2022. Interviews took place covertly as a customer, so as not to jeopardize my welcome or respondents—many of whom are in the closet and do not want to be outed through surveys of them as gay men. Out of respect for their confidentiality, they along with the gay bars of this study have been anonymized for the purpose of this article. Questions touched on a range of areas, from self-descriptions and ideal types to regional origin and reasons for staying or relocating; impressions of gay men in one's own and other regions; thoughts on or experiences with regionalism; and observations of change in the gay scene over time. Participation observation involved watching the interactions, or listening in on the conversations, of owners, staff, and customers with one another. This included those taking place irrespective of my presence along with those spurred by it (as a Korean-American, descendant of Chŏlla, traveler from Seoul, student in Japan, or otherwise) or the discussions I initiated.

Field sites included 25 gay establishments across the capital and 6 metropolitan cities of South Korea. Together they covered every major gayborhood, including districts and neighborhoods of Seoul's Chongno 3-Ga, It'aewŏn, and Shillim; Pusan's Pŏmil; Inch'ŏn's Pup'yŏng; Taegu's Shinch'ŏn; Kwangju's Taein; Taejŏn's Taehŭng; and Ulsan's Sŏngnam.[17] As an extension of the Seoul Capital Area, field sites were also included from the cities of Ansan

and Puch'ŏn.[18] These cities comprehensively represent four of the nation's five regions, which have for centuries been administratively delineated and possess dialectally and culturally distinct identities: Kyŏnggi, Ch'ungch'ŏng, Chŏlla, and Kyŏngsang. Each of these regions has a north and south province (*to*), except for the province of Kyŏnggi. No field sites were established in Kangwŏn or the island of Cheju—its own province since the end of Japanese rule in Korea but historically integrated with Chŏlla—due to the sparsity of their gay communities and relative distance from the focuses of regionalism.[19] They are, however, nonetheless discussed in the study where touched on in other referenced material.

Sample of Gay Bars in Korea

BAR	TYPE	AREA	CITY	STATUS	REGION
A-1	Shot Bar	Chongno 3-Ga	Seoul	Special Metropolitan City	Capital
A-2	Shot Bar	Chongno 3-Ga	Seoul	Special Metropolitan City	Capital
B-1	Shot Bar	It'aewŏn	Seoul	Special Metropolitan City	Capital
B-2	Shot Bar	It'aewŏn	Seoul	Special Metropolitan City	Capital
B-3	Club	It'aewŏn	Seoul	Special Metropolitan City	Capital
C-1	Karaoke	Shillim	Seoul	Special Metropolitan City	Capital
C-2	Soju Bar	Shillim	Seoul	Special Metropolitan City	Capital
C-3	Soju Bar	Shillim	Seoul	Special Metropolitan City	Capital
D-1	Shot Bar	Pŏmil	Pusan	Metropolitan City	Kyŏngsang
D-2	Shot Bar	Pŏmil	Pusan	Metropolitan City	Kyŏngsang
D-3	Shot Bar	Pŏmil	Pusan	Metropolitan City	Kyŏngsang
D-4	Shot Bar	Pŏmil	Pusan	Metropolitan City	Kyŏngsang
E-1	Soju Bar	Pup'yŏng	Inch'ŏn	Metropolitan City	Kyŏnggi
E-2	Shot Bar	Pup'yŏng	Inch'ŏn	Metropolitan City	Kyŏnggi
F-1	Shot Bar	Shinch'ŏn	Taegu	Metropolitan City	Kyŏngsang
F-2	Shot Bar	Shinch'ŏn	Taegu	Metropolitan City	Kyŏngsang
F-3	Soju Bar	Shinch'ŏn	Taegu	Metropolitan City	Kyŏngsang
G-1	Shot Bar	Taein	Kwangju	Metropolitan City	Chŏlla
G-2	Soju Bar	Taein	Kwangju	Metropolitan City	Chŏlla
H-1	Shot Bar	Taehŭng	Taejŏn	Metropolitan City	Ch'ungch'ŏng
H-2	Soju Bar	Taehŭng	Taejŏn	Metropolitan City	Ch'ungch'ŏng
H-3	Shot Bar	Taehŭng	Taejŏn	Metropolitan City	Ch'ungch'ŏng
I-1	Karaoke	Sŏngnam	Ulsan	Metropolitan City	Kyŏngsang
J-1	Karaoke	Kojan	Ansan	City	Kyŏnggi
K-1	Karaoke	Shimgok	Puch'ŏn	City	Kyŏnggi

*For fieldwork carried out between November 2021 and February 2022.

TABLE 3 – A total of 25 gay bars in Seoul (and the surrounding Kyŏnggi), Pusan, Inch'ŏn, Taegu, Kwangju, Taejŏn, and Ulsan were included as fieldsites between November 2021 and February 2022.

Each field site represented one of several categories of business: (1) one-shot bars (*wŏnsyatpa*)—cocktail bars where solo customers tend to be more common (though, less so in

Seoul) and orders are by the drink; (2) soju bars (*sojuba*[*ng*])—pubs where customers typically in groups are separated by tables and order alcohol with the compulsory *anju*, which has traditionally been a fruit platter or dried fish but in recent years features trendy and inventive dishes by younger owners; (3) karaoke bars (*karaok'e*)—moderately more expensive soju bars with a stage and karaoke system managed by owners and staff; and, (4) nightclubs (*k'ŭllŏp*), at which VIP tables can often be reserved for parties and are rare outside Seoul's It'aewŏn. Field sites were initially identified on the "pink map" of IVANCITY or, in cases where they were found to have no longer existed, by recommendation or walk in. Their selection took into consideration a set of factors: (1) the probability for close interaction with owners, staff, and customers, for the purpose of interviews and participant observation; (2) a balance of age ranges, for comparative analysis along the generational divide; and, (3) an insular, "local" preferred over open, "foreigner" inclusive customer base, as regionalism declines with interregional, interpersonal contacts,[20] and to avoid mixing expressions of, or perspectives on, this regionalism by others besides Koreans. Regional representation of interviewees was determined by not only their location but also their origin and self-identification, as distinguished in the course of conversation.

With 198 million hits since 2020—60,000 to 70,000 a day—and close to 380,000 members as of May 2023, IVANCITY's community has expanded by over 10 per cent in less than a year, demonstrating its continued use by Korean gay men beyond COVID-19.[21] While its pink map is infamously outdated (alas, 8 of my preselected field sites had already been out of business for years), there is no competitor with as expansive a directory. For seemingly as many out of its 540 or so advertised establishments that shutter, others not advertised can be found in their place. Bars constitute over 80 per cent of these establishments, which is no surprise when

Korean gay men spend more on alcohol than on anything else including restaurants and even rent, according to a poll of around 3,300 respondents on IVANCITY.[22] With consistent demand and few other options for socialization in a prescribed setting, bars become prime field sites for the study of gay men in Korea.

Korea is also among the world's most connected nations with smartphone ownership and internet penetration, which presents online spaces as invaluable extensions of the field. The internet is a limitless zone for self-expression and has shown to be a hotbed of regionalism displayed in the posts, comments, and memes that abound. Gens Y and Z carry out much of their social lives via smartphones and represent the majority of the nearly half of Korean gay men whose first gay encounter was online, according to another poll of over 4,500 respondents on IVANCITY.[23] In his study of Japanese gay men, McLelland admits that for researchers as outsiders, much of gay culture is more accessible on the internet than at gay bars.[24] Given the limitations of bar ethnographies also in Korea, on-site fieldwork for this study is supplemented by monitored interactions among Korean gay men on IVANCITY BBS forums but also Twitter, gay apps such as Jack'd, community app BAND, and group chats (*tant'okpang*) on messenger app KakaoTalk. To situate their contexts amid parallel discussions around regionalism and sexuality among Korean straight men and members of the diaspora (gay, straight, or otherwise), I also scanned forums such as Ilbe—known for its saturation with regionally and sexually bigoted commentary—and Quora.

Regionalism and its Problematics in Korea

A Sentimental Past and Present

In the decades of authoritarian rule after the Korean War, rapid industrialization was marred by a

systemic imbalance in power and resource distribution fueled by biases for and against select regions. Regionalism in state policy inflicted political, economic, and social scars that have festered beneath attitudes and behaviors as "regional sentiments" (*chiyŏk kamjŏng*). Since 1987, democratization, decentralization, and strengthened local governance have worked to depolarize society with considerable strides, though there is still work to be done. Behind outward scorn as the bane of national solidarity, regionalism peeks out from the disparities that persist—real and imagined. Paradoxically, regional identities, traditions, and products are simultaneously being restored, refashioned, and marketed in a type of branded regionalism, sanctioned by the state in a bid to preserve the local in the face of globalization.[25]

With blurring boundaries of regions and regionalism through development and commercialization, Korea's regionalism is today a floating discourse that traverses overlapping dichotomies of capital area with outlying regions, province with province, and urban to rural. Seoul's consistently declining [Korean][26] residents over the past decade has diminished the city's prowess over the rest of the nation once characterized as its "internal colony."[27] Coupled with a comparatively steady foreigner population and a sizeable proportion of residents born or relocated from elsewhere, Seoul hardly manifests a cohesive identity in the framework of regionalism beyond its waning status as the nation's control hub.[28] It is nonetheless noteworthy that many of the city's residents consider it home regardless of their origin.[29] This speaks to the fluidity of regional identity and its accompanying attitudes and behaviors—a mark of assimilation regularly observed with interregional relocation in Korea.[30]

Yet, while this may be the case in general, it is less commonly so with transplants from Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang. Facing each other in the southwest and southeast, the tensions between these regions have been conspicuous throughout history and are often speculated to trace back as

far as the warring Paekche and Shilla Kingdoms. Over the course of several centuries, Shilla in the southeast conquered Paekche in the southwest and was later absorbed into the Koryŏ Dynasty, which established the provinces of Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang. The administrative areas carried over to the Chosŏn Dynasty, whose records show some of the earliest examples of regional animus in Korea. Chŏlla people were portrayed as manipulative, superstitious, and immoral, with its governor labeling them as rebels, rapists, and murderers.[31] Even in historical dramas produced today, slaves, farmers, and other characters of lower caste are almost exclusively assigned the dialect from Chŏlla.[32] Given its connotations, speakers of this dialect often conceal it in job interviews with prospective employers outside the region, despite absence of any disdain of their own or even a preference for it over standard Korean.[33]

Dialect is overall an accurate marker of regional origin in Korea, as it is neatly contained within provincial boundaries in contrast to the US and Japan, where it tends to bleed across states or prefectures.[34] While fictional depictions of dialect can be seen as mere caricatures, associations in the real world are connected to real inequities. In 2015, 12 of the 20 cities, counties, and districts with the highest—and none among those with the lowest—poverty rates nationwide were in Chŏlla.[35] Chŏlla transplants to Seoul are also disproportionately concentrated in poorer areas.[36] Though the majority of Koreans consider vertical inequalities in income and wealth distribution to be a rampant problem, horizontal inequalities in access to resources by gender and region are less recognized despite being harsher realities.[37]

Kyŏngsang, in contrast, received much of the spoils of development over the postwar decades of military dictatorship. Political power and representation by leaders hailing from the region funneled a disproportionate amount of support and investment in its industries, infrastructure, and education—to the expense of less politically influential regions such as

Chŏlla. This has formed the basis for much of the regional animus against people from Kyŏngsang; but it has not necessarily translated into a sense of superiority on the other end. As far as dialect is concerned, Kyŏngsang exhibits what has been described as an inferiority complex, with fewer people than in any other region expressing pride in theirs.[38] With the exception of the desirably "masculine" dialect of regional capital Pusan, Kyŏngsang's dialect is broadly self-evaluated as boorish.[39] Yet, while other dialects are seen as more pleasant, Chŏlla's is rarely among them.[40] People in Kyŏngsang surveyed by Kang and Kim reported feeling even disgusted, sickened, or infuriated by it, with or without reason.[41]

Behind each dialect is commonly believed to be a regional temperament, which has much to do with the sentiments harbored toward its speakers. Kyŏngsang people consider themselves to be conservative, patriotic, and loyal[42]—representations that place them in direct opposition to the imaginary of Chŏlla and its people as radical, democratic, and resistant.[43] Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang share the fact that more of their people carry a sense of pride than shame for this contrasting identity. While not necessarily concerted acts of regional solidarity, fractures caused by polarized ideologies along regional borders have consistently resurfaced in every national election since 1987. The starkness of this enduring divide was laid bare in the nation's tightest ever race for president in 2022, with over 80 per cent of Chŏlla voting 'liberal' and 60 per cent of Kyŏngsang voting 'conservative' according to the National Election Commission.

As party systems, coalitions, and other factors influence these patterns beyond merely being 'liberal' or 'conservative,' Jhee cautions against measuring regionalism by these metrics alone.[44] Indeed, "liberals" have advocated for human rights while keeping a conciliatory tone toward repressive North Korea and China. In the latest election, the progressive third-party candidate received her lowest share of votes from liberal stronghold Chŏlla, where one quarter of

residents (twice as many as in Kyŏngsang[45]) are Protestant Christian—a religious group at the forefront against the queer rights movement in Korea. Meanwhile, "conservatives" have courted misogyny and homophobia while leaning toward the democratic US. Then candidate Yoon Suk Yeol of the People Power Party is a prime example of one who actively capitalized on the anti-feminist hostilities of young men disgruntled with changing gender dynamics and social alienation. In these respects, it is thus hard to fit Korea's liberal and conservative platforms into the left- and right-wing boxes of the West; and, it convolutes any analysis of regionalism as organized around these camps.

Regionalisms of a New Generation

This section has thus far touched on the contradictory ways in which regionalism manifests and the consequent complexity of its examination as a phenomenon. As if that were not enough, regionalism has been taking on new faces with the internet and social media generation. Since their advent, online forums and chat rooms have functioned as spaces where young people seamlessly interact with one another nationwide regardless of their location. This, along with the standardization of the Seoul dialect through the educational system and entertainment industry, has established a conformity of speech among these youth—and, as such, the removal of communicative barriers between them. Budget airlines, high-speed trains, and express buses have also made interregional travel faster and more accessible than ever before, further contributing to the regularity of direct exposure to others across regions.

On their darker side, online spaces have become incubators for the incitement of hatred and bigotry. Imageboards where anybody can anonymously share content and discuss topics have accorded free rein to the inflammatory and derogatory material that floods the threads of

those such as the controversial Ilbe. Biased or exaggerated reports about scandals and other incidents along with conspiracy theories published by less than credible sources abound and serve as ammunition for against people of targeted regions. While the communities on such platforms are extremist and fringe, the commotion they drum up feeds into a divisive social climate that makes it all but impossible to stamp out regionalism. In preface to the discussion of my findings on homoregionalism at gay bars, I will present examples of these new expressions of regionalism found online in recent years. They serve to demonstrate how regionalism is as much in the present as it was in the past, if not more so—still roused by historical incidents and politics, but now also stoked by current events and media.

Depending on whom is asked, regionalism is a persistent, declining, or even resolved problem.[46] Many agree that social cleavages of generation, class, and ideology have overtaken it.[47] Studies by Hankook Research on public perceptions of group conflict show that the political divide—between ruling and opposition parties as well as between liberals and conservatives—is seen as the deepest source of division among Koreans, further deepened with the election of President Yoon; but, over recent years, they have recorded a sharp incline in those who see discord between the capital area and outlying regions as well as between Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang.[48] Hahn et al. found that Koreans' political inclinations are swayed more by region than by gender or income, and that young people exhibit the strongest regionalism of all age groups in Chŏlla.[49] While these studies do not answer what influence regionalism might have on other social cleavages, they do reveal an interconnectedness and a presence that cannot be plausibly denied.

In a discussion on IVANCITY, "Patastlc"—a gay man in his 20s—expresses the following (in Korean):

> I don't know if this is the place to post this… Anyway. Why do Chŏlla people hate Kyŏngsang people so much! I can't understand it. I know elderly Kyŏngsang people also hate Chŏlla people, but… I thought this wasn't the case these days with people in their 20s, but a few days ago I remember one saying, 'I'm from Chŏlla, so I can't stand Kyŏngsang.' Is it because Kyŏngsang people in their 20s these days are ignorant, or is it that Chŏlla people are totally brainwashed since childhood even though there's no issue between Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang! To think that even now there's regional sentiment among people in their 20s... So, why is there regional sentiment and why are people still this way? What could it be?[50]

Over a dozen other gay men responded with their own perspectives, ranging from shared consternation to accusations of generalization and accounts of reverse discrimination by people from Kyŏngsang. Others blamed the historical marginalization of Chŏlla and divisive rhetoric by politicians, or played down the issue altogether as rare in Korea or common elsewhere such as in Japan's regions of Kanto and Kansai. There were also overt displays of regional animus from commenters themselves, in one's slur for Kyŏngsang and in another's disparaging remark about its dialect.

Comment sections are awash with novel articulations that weaponize and strike at regional identities, in an attempt to assert one group's superiority or another's inferiority. Since the 2000s, Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang have each amassed a couple dozen (more than any other region) derogatory terms assigned to them that play with dialect.[51] Common examples include *kkaengkkaengi* (a mockery of the *-ngkk*[*a*]*e* suffix)[51] for people from in Chŏlla and *porimundi* (lit. "barley leper"—a portmanteau and pun implying a barren land of lowly "idiots" [*mundungi*])[52] for people from Kyŏngsang. Cities representative of their regions are also made targets, with labels that interblend history with pop culture. "Raccoon Kwangju" (as recusants to be suppressed, from the film *Resident Evil*) is one for Chŏlla, while "Gangs of Pusan" (as a base for organized criminals, from *Gangs of New York*) and "Gotham Taegu" (as riddled with bizarre incidents, from *Batman*) are others for Kyŏngsang.[54]

Other terms are harsher, ironically resembling the dehumanizing or accusatory slurs made against Koreans by the Japanese and military dictatorships in Korea. *Hongŏ* (fermented skate)—a regional dish from Chŏlla—insultingly correlates people from the region with the fermented stench of the dish, in the way *kimuchi* (kimchi) in Japanese has served to characterize the 'race' of Koreans (including *zainichi* or Korean-Japanese). *Ppalgaengi* (reds) and *twit'ongsu* (backstabbers) revive associations of Chŏlla people as communist agitators and enemies of the state, arousing painful memories of massacres such as that during the Kwangju Uprising. During COVID-19, one of the earliest cluster infections in Korea was in Taegu, which also led to the stigmatization of people from the surrounding area. Panic around the pandemic coupled with suspicion toward the religious group at the source of the domestic outbreak caused Taegu—and, by extension, Kyŏngsang—to be made synonymous with disease and cults, and even signs could be seen (including at gay establishments) prohibiting entry to those who had been to the region. These examples foment sentiments of revulsion and shame; and, when employed by gay men against one another, homoregionalism can further become a means of sexual and other forms of exclusion.

While largely limited to straight couples, the regional stigmas that present themselves in relationships should be mentioned. In her comparison of surveys conducted by research institutes over the years, Jhee shows a trend of outright aversion to the idea of spouses from Chŏlla[55] (for decades, even more so than from North Korea[56]). While this prejudice has roughly halved since 1988, prospective partners of the opposite sex from the region are still seen in a poor light as of 2018. Around twice as many people from Chŏlla are shunned as partners compared to their counterparts from Kyŏngsang, and over 30 times as much as those from Seoul.[57] It is, of course, questionable what insights findings on spousal selection can provide as far as relationship

choices among gay men are concerned. Reasons for these regional stigmas could presumably be reduced to concerns over financial stability rather than sexual desirability. In the next section, I will focus on the latter and its relationality to regions, showing how the homoregionalism of gay men is characterized by consumer cultures and sexual imaginaries as aspirational ideals in gay life.

Homoregionalism in Korea

As Koreans, Korean gay men can and do take part in the regionalism discussed thus far; but, as gay men—with gay lives influenced by gay culture in gay communities within their regions—regional identity has many layers. In their consumption of gay scenes at home and in other regions, they compare and contrast through their interpersonal and interspatial exchanges in a process of homoregionalism. Regional stereotypes of masculinity become homoregional objectifications; and, as this section will reveal, Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang are once again the protagonists, with Seoul in the periphery of its own center.

This starts with the necessary assertion that gay men are also regional and regionalizing subjects. Analysis of IVANCITY's community shows a strong tendency of gay men to identify with hometowns across the nation, proportionally to their populations.[58]

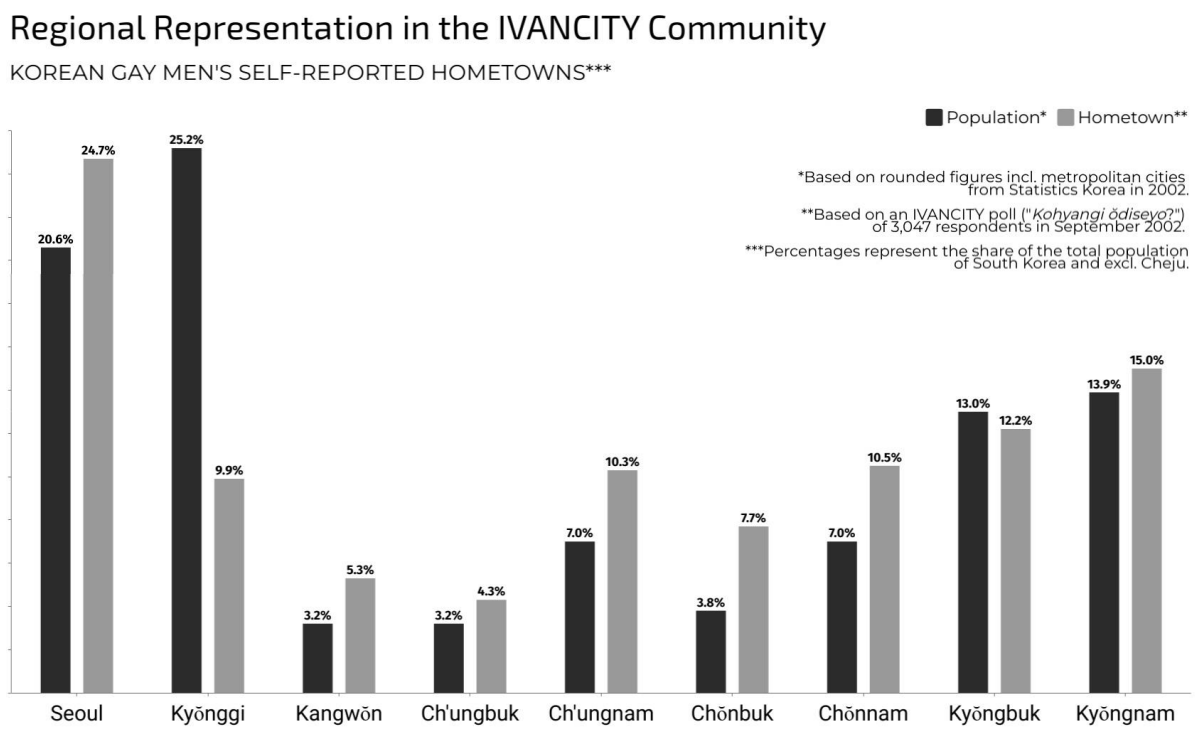

TABLE 4 – This shows the distribution of regional origin as self-reported by 3,047 respondents to a poll on IVANCITY in September 2002. The results are largely proportionate to the population and thus indicate a balanced representation of gay men nationwide.

Only in Kyŏnggi and Kyŏngbuk (North Kyŏngsang) is this representation lower. The low identification with Kyŏnggi can be explained by the fact that its delineation with Seoul is often ambiguous being the outer province of the Seoul Capital Area. These regions can therefore be better read as one. As for Kyŏngbuk, its percentages could be due to its reputation as the most conservative (and, thus [though, not necessarily], less tolerant) province in Korea; but, it is only marginally lower and still comparatively high against other regions.

Demonstrating the taboos around regionalism that still exist, several responses to the hometown poll conveyed annoyance or suspicion over its premise. The majority, however, enthusiastically contributed to the discussion in a collective display of homoregionalism. "Soman" from Ch'ungbuk (North Ch'ungch'ŏng) invoked the saying *namnam pungnyŏ*

(southern men, northern women) that regionally idealizes Koreans,[59] reasoning that "even though there are also 'thugs' (*saengyangach'i*)" in Chŏlla, the men are always sleek (*pŏnjirŭrŭhada*).[60] One user pitched for Kyŏngsang men with exclamation and a delighted face "~!!!*^.^*," while "Parao" declared in the Kyŏngsang dialect that "real men" (*sanai*) come from Kyŏngsang.[61] Another user, typing in the aforementioned *-ngkke* suffix in association with Chŏlla, also said with inflection and a blushing face "~ ^ ^;;" that whenever he leaves Seoul (presumably, as a transplant there) he heads to Taejŏn or Kyŏngsang, where the men are abundant (*namjadŏri manŭngkke*).[62]

While other regions were mentioned—for example, one user who announced he would always be from Kangwŏn—sexualizing comments were made for only Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang. Cutesy text is one way to express campness, and can be an indicator of how self and other are sexually imagined in the context of dominant tops and submissive bottoms. In Korea, the labels of top (active) and bottom (passive) denote more than sexual roles; they are often markers of the social role partners are expected to play in a relationship, in ways mimicking the traditional gender roles for men and women. Tops, as with cisgender "men," may be expected to be older, taller, and more built, while bottoms, as with cisgender "women," should be younger, shorter, and slimmer—though, as with straight couples, there are obviously plenty of exceptions. In any case, these idealizations can be read as regional hypermasculinizations of Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang by their seekers from other, implicitly less masculine, regions including Seoul. While these are only isolated examples, they contribute to the breadth of the spectrum that is homoregionalism.

In the midst of border closures, quarantine rules, and other hindrances presented by COVID-19, holidaymakers had few choices but to turn their gaze away from gay getaways such as Thailand and Taiwan and into their backyard of Korea. Over the course of the outbreak,

IVANCITY's BBS saw a spike in requests to the community for recommendations on things to do in other cities and provinces along with announcements in search of domestic travel companions.[63]

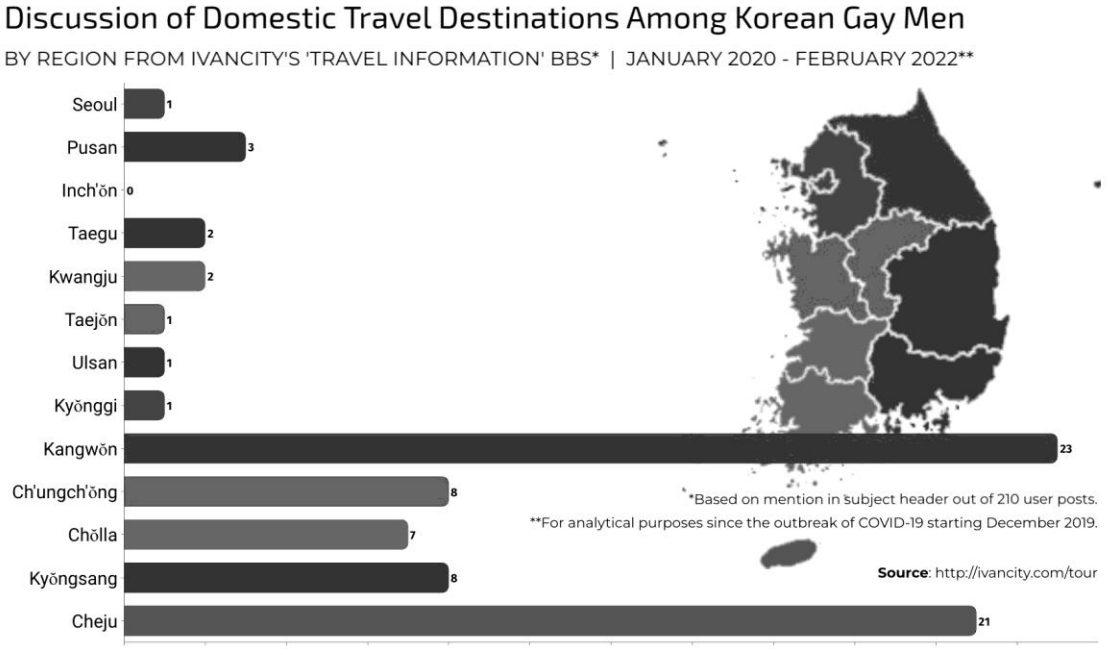

TABLE 5 – This relates to the number of user posts made on IVANCITY about domestic destinations for the purpose of travel, as identified by mention in the subject header in the BBS for "Travel Information" (*Yŏhaeng Chŏngbo*). 210 posts were analyzed, as posted between January 2020 and February 2022.

The preference for rural over urban destinations is clear from a review of these threads. The pandemic and accompanying stress immediately revived demand for staycations, wellness ("healing") retreats, road trips, camping, cycling, skiing, theme parks, and other activities, which many gay men seek through get-togethers termed *moim*. These informal groups are often arranged in private chatrooms on BAND and KakaoTalk, typically by any combination of age range, body type, and region. Regional and subregional identities within the gay community are being supported by these on- and offline groupings, and the intra- and interregional movement of

gay men has in turn supported the development of gay bar scenes across the nation.

The subsections below present the homoregionalism that has materialized between districts and neighborhoods within Seoul (intraregionalisms) and between cities and provinces outside Seoul (interregionalisms). Whereas the preceding section has made the case that regionalism pervades society in novel ways, the discussion now turns to gay men's repurposing of regionalism around the areas that physically enclose their recreational lives as gay men. It will illuminate how homoregionalism is manifested both intra- and interregionally, with cross-cutting characteristics shaped by the same social cleavages of generation, class, and ideology that are reshaping regionalism as a whole.

Intraregionalisms: Seoul Capital Area

Aside from the diversity of the gay community in Seoul, my analysis into the intraregionalisms of the city also suggests that its homoregionalism is predominantly homegrown. By this I mean that many of the symbols, practices, and other markers on which this homoregionalism is based tend to be homogeneously Korean. Korean faces outnumber others at bars and clubs, unlike at certain establishments packed with foreigners in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ni-Chome. Where decades ago it may have been English or Japanese and Madonna or Hamasaki Ayumi, it is now mostly Korean being spoken and K-pop playing on the speakers. The Korean gay scene does not seem to have to rely on outsiders for its survival (or, as will be shown in the subsection on interregionalisms, its demise); and this makes for an insular community that is conducive toward the precedence of regional over national distinctions of self and other.

In May 2021, "*Chich'an*" tweeted a series of images labeled with short headers in Korean: "1. Shillim Gays"; "2. Hongdae Gays"; "3. It'aewŏn Gays"; "4. Chongno Gays"; and,

"5. 'No Fems or Out Guys' Gays."[64] "Shillim Gays" is accompanied by pictures of cutesy stationery branded by KakaoTalk; characters from the RPG Cookie Run: Kingdom; young, gay content creator NAMGYU; and students splashed in pink at the amusement park Lotte World. "Hongdae Gays" shows Pepe the Frog snorting cocaine; posters of films by Hong Sang-su, infamous for his scenes with sex and alcohol; a FREITAG messenger made from recycled truck tarps; and a man in formal wear in the front and a bondage harness in the back. "It'aewŏn Gays" presents Yu A-in—an actor claimed to have been a former regular at gay bars in It'aewŏn—in a risqué pose; Aesop facial cosmetics; YouTube channel NEON MILK, which produces drag and other queer content; and a trendy cake from the dessert shop NUDAKE. "Chongno Gays" refers to the film poster for the short gay romantic comedy *My Personal Trainer*; and to "'No Fems or Out Guys' Gays," which is a MAXIM cover of millennial, conservative politician Lee Jun-seok in pajamas brushing his teeth and watching TV.

Intraregionalisms of Seoul

SHILLIM GAYS	HONGDAE GAYS	IT'AEWŎN GAYS	CHONGNO GAYS	'NO FEMS OR OUT GUYS' GAYS
KakaoTalk	Pepe the Frog	Yu A-in	*My Personal Trainer*	Lee Jun-seok
Cookie Run: Kingdom	Hong Sang-su	Aesop		
NAMGYU	FREITAG	NEON MILK		
Lotte World	Bondage	NUDAKE		

*According to text and images tweeted by Chich'an in May 2021.

TABLE 6 – In the absence of the actual posts with images by Twitter user *Chich'an* in May 2021,

this serves as an overview of the icons used to associate the regional character of gay areas in Seoul.

Retweeted over 1,250 times as of May 2023, the characterizations are considered by many as humorous and accurate depictions of reality. They and their reception exemplify the nuanced ways in which gay Seoulites categorize themselves and one another by the gay area with which they associate ("Shillim Gays" to "Chongno Gays") along with those who avoid the scene altogether ("'No Fems or Out Guys' Gays"). The memes succinctly reduce the community to a mélange of childish Shillim, deviant Hongdae, flamboyant It'aewŏn, and banal Chongno, contently existing alongside a self-excluding group of internalized homophobes (with the reference to Lee Jun-seok—a straight man—as possibly a tongue-in-cheek critique of his politics). The resulting mosaic exposes some of the features that divide the community—even if only lightheartedly—along with the diverse expressions of gay identity in Seoul. What is more revelatory is the indication that much of this personifying culture is locally produced rather than imported from abroad, despite early Japanese influence in Chongno and the "Westernized" air of It'aewŏn.[65] The majority of references in the tweets' representations are markedly Korean, with only a few from the West and none from Japan.

As humorously illustrated by the images but confirmed throughout my interviews with bar owners and staff or customers who selectively work or play in certain areas over others, Seoul's gay community is a patchwork of inwardly focused subcultural zones. With 25 districts—15 of which have gay establishments[66]—and many more neighborhoods, the city is an isolated microcosm with competing iterations of homoregionalism. These intraregionalisms are expressed through the subregional character of bars and other commercial businesses in their respective areas, which are constantly changing with spatial expansions and contractions.

Chongno 3-Ga and It'aewŏn are typically seen from the outside as the representative gayborhoods of Seoul and, by default, Korea. Yet, they are by no means exhaustive, and their hegemony is even in a current state of precarity.

Chongno 3-Ga is Seoul's oldest existing nightlife area for gay men, with more bars than any other in the city or across the nation; but, as a gayborhood, it is experiencing an identity crisis. Scanning its 20 or so street stalls (*p'och'a*) that a decade ago would have been saturated with gay men, one now sees throngs of young, straight couples and groups of women. The newcomers are here for the trendy restaurants and cafes that have sprouted on the gentrified side streets of the neighborhood known as Iksŏn. Occasionally, they encounter the reality of where they are with a rude awakening. I witnessed this when several women entered one of the otherwise empty bars I was in, only to promptly exit after surveying the space surrounding them. The owner explained that with all of the hypersexual cues, it does not take much time for outsiders to mentally process where they are.[67] Despite his welcome, they were not as prepared to mix with this world; and, he secretly did not want them to stay, anyway. While he acknowledged that the younger generation is increasingly tolerant of sexual minorities, he said that many are still strangers to them, which hinders their awareness of the community and maintains their fear or dislike toward it.

Meanwhile in It'aewŏn, Seoul's international gayborhood has had its identity cast into disarray with a sharp decline in foreign customers amid COVID-19. One bar owner explained that the bulk of Westerners in the area were English instructors, whose circumstances have forced many to move back home or onward to Southeast Asia.[68] According to him, over a third of It'aewŏn's commercial properties are now tenantless due to closures; but gay establishments are managing to scrape by with lower rents in their location on the outskirts. Pressure on their

survival was only exacerbated when the area (and the gay community) came under public scrutiny as the face of a cluster infection at several of its bars and clubs. With Korea's system of emergency alerts and media outlets' coverage of the outbreak, It'aewŏn's gayborhood was outed to the nation with the gay community now stigmatized as superspreaders. Contact tracing also put over 5,000 suspected patrons in the area at risk of outing to family and coworkers, prompting many in the community to avoid all gay establishments requiring their disclosure of personal data to enter.

Despite the encroachment of outsiders in Chongno 3-Ga and the dispersal of the community from It'aewŏn, Seoul's representative gayborhoods have found resiliency in adaptability. Chongno 3-Ga—once characterized by its older, Japanophilic clientele, which later became younger but domestic only—has become more cosmopolitan, with bar owners and customers who have been around the world and are inclusive of foreigners and women in their space. With the return to normalcy, It'aewŏn's bars and clubs are also back in full swing (at least, until the tragic crowd crush that killed nearly 160 people in October 2022). Fewer Westerners and less English have been substituted with more Koreans and Korean, a turn which one bar owner there explained had already started before the pandemic in other gentrifying areas of the neighborhood.[69]

A new generation of gay Seoulites in their 20s is also recentering the community around burgeoning neighborhoods away from the heart of the city, such as Shillim close to Seoul National University. In only a year or so since its birth in 2020, the gayborhood became host to around 25 bars featuring designer cocktails, inventive dishes, and other creative concepts. In the onslaught of the pandemic, young (and a few "older" in their 30s) bar owners took advantage of bargain properties and the downturn to curate experiential interiors and menus to indulge the

discerning tastes of young customers. One of the bars I went to turns into a club on weekends, which the owner claimed is always packed.[70] Before the advent of Shillim, Seoul's gay clubs could only be found in It'aewŏn. Yet, in contrast to the once "Japanese" Chongno 3-Ga and "Western" It'aewŏn, Shillim is wholly a product by and for Koreans. It is a tight-knit community, with bar owners who support one another as customers and regularly carry out joint marketing and events—a practice that is increasingly common in young gayborhoods not limited to Seoul, according to my informants at bars in Taegu and Taejŏn.[71]

Another example of this lies in the less known peripheral area of Inch'ŏn's Pup'yŏng. Intertwined with Burmese businesses in a quiet corner of the district, the gayborhood's handful of soju bars by and for young men in many ways mirror those of Shillim. Social media is used for cross-promotion, with discounts for customers bringing their receipts from other bars in the area. *Anju* of fruit platters and dried fish traditionally served at soju bars and karaoke parlors for older clientele (which also occupy the area, albeit separately) are renounced for experimental dishes targeted at those in their 20s and 30s. The owner of the newest bar in the area prided himself on his exclusively Korean menu of original recipes inspired by the matriarchs of his family, who he claimed are famous in Seoul.[72] While customers may have a preference of one bar over the others, they tend to patronize all of them depending on their craving and mood of the day. In this way, communal ties are formed not with any one establishment but with the gayborhood as a whole.

One area included in the tweet by "Chich'an" where there is no actual gayborhood is the bustling, artsy student neighborhood of Hongdae. The gay youth who congregate there nonetheless adopt and adapt its spatial identity, not only as gay subjects but also as members of an alternative scene. This traversal by gay men across gay and straight spatialized planes of

identification can also be seen with the desire of many to live in the plushy district of Kangnam,[73] further indicating that homoregionalism is not confined to explicitly "gay" pursuits. Gay or straight, young or old, Seoul or Inch'ŏn, districts and neighborhoods spatially and temporally identified with by gay men are not merely imagined communities—they are incubators for the development of gay culture and its subcultures. Whereas an extreme class, gender, or sexual deviation from the mainstream has resulted in the demise of gayborhoods elsewhere (such as with the once cross-cutting scene of San Francisco's Polk Gulch[74]), it is precisely this intraregional diversity that constitutes and enriches the mainstream of gay space, place, and identity in Seoul.

Interregionalisms: Pusan and Beyond

As my analysis moves out of the capital area and into outlying regions, the homoregional focus on types of gays starts to switch to types of men. In the provincial cities, gay areas are no less insular or self-sustaining than in Seoul; but the absence of internal variance leads their communities to look outward for the purpose of distinguishing themselves from others. With Seoul in the often distant periphery and other cities with gay areas closer by, they rarely have to look that far. Interregionalisms replay the regionalized tropes of masculinity espoused by regionalism in general; but there is also the "gay" factor dictating the types of masculinity desirable from the contrasting perspective of tops and bottoms. With this discourse, nationalized tropes of masculinity suddenly come into play, sparking cross-border regional couplings that result in interregionalisms with both domestic and international extensions.

"Masculinity" is a loaded term, but size almost always seems to matter. In the 1990s, [South] Chŏlla and Ch'ungch'ŏng entered the ranks with Kyŏngsang in provincial GDP per

capita above the national average, and Ch'ungch'ŏng—which, since 2007, has housed the nation's administrative capital of Sejong—is today more or less in parity with Seoul.[75] Provinces have become more self-governing, with strengthened autonomy from their own major cities whose authority over them (in many cases, as capitals) was removed in their redesignation as metropolitan cities. Industrialization has developed these cities and their suburban areas, thereby contributing to the spatial dispersion of wealth, urban-rural transport links, and diversification of regional identity. If independence, size, and mobility are any indicators of masculinity, then a host of cities can be considered 'young, hung, and ready for action.'

Korea's metropolitan cities have historically been seen as symbolic of their respective regions, and are where all the major gayborhoods in the provinces are to be found. While bargoers in the capital recognize many faces of gay life through their own districts and neighborhoods, gay life for those elsewhere is inextricably tied to their city and province as one cohesive identity. It is from this that interregionalisms are formed, as gay men seek to expand their encounters with others through interregional contacts. On trips outside their city or province, gay men often stop by other gayborhoods. This could be in search of an othered imaginary situated on a regionally subjective and objectified scale of masculinity;[76] or, it could be a curiosity to immerse oneself in the "regional colors" (*chiyŏk saek*) of another place within the scope of their desire.[77] In either case, regional identities become a frame for sexually oriented expectations in travel.

Homoregionalism of Korean Gay Men

SELF \ OTHER	KYŎNGGI (SEOUL · INCH'ŎN)	CH'UNGCH'ŎNG (TAEJŎN)	CHŎLLA (KWANGJU)	KYŎNGSANG (PUSAN · TAEGU · ULSAN)
KYŎNGGI (SEOUL · INCH'ŎN)	**Destination for Pusanites Noisy Seoul · Quiet Inch'ŏn**		Good Food	Destination for Seoulites Bad Food Pusan = Osaka
CH'UNGCH'ŎNG (TAEJŎN)		**Feminine Gossipy/Indirect/Slow-Spoken Prideful Alienating Age-Segregated**	Masculine Blunt Acquainted	
CHŎLLA (KWANGJU)			**Liberal Warm Prefer Older Trans-Inclusive**	Conservative Blunt Prefer Younger Open Pusan · Closed Taegu Stocky Pusanites · Average Taeguites
KYŎNGSANG (PUSAN · TAEGU · ULSAN)	Liberal Haughty Alienating Age-Segregated Seoul < Osaka	Kind/Indirect/Slow-Spoken	Soft/Feminine Kind/Affectionate/Talkative Trans-Inclusive	**Conservative Hard/Masculine Blunt/Abrasive/Bossy Acquainted Younger Pusanites · Mixed Taeguites · Older Ulsanians Trans-Exclusive**

*Based on generalizations by bar owners and staff in interviews conducted November 2021 - February 2022.
**Excl. Kangwŏn and Cheju, where no fieldwork was carried out in the absence of gayborhoods.

TABLE 7 – Based on interviews with gay men at 25 gay bars across Korea between November 2021 and February 2022, these are the regional representations of self and other as expressed in relation to the gay men who originate from or reside in those regions.

The only region in which the men of this study associated masculinity with their own was Kyŏngsang. It is a stereotype that extends beyond the gay community, and stems from assumed traits connected to the region's conservatism as a consequence of patriarchy and its abrasive dialect. The desirable association of the Pusan dialect (which marginally differs in intonation with that of Kyŏngsang) has been attributed to Pusanites' ancestry as sailors, whose blunt and direct speech couples with a wild and manly image.[78] The trope of masculine Kyŏngsang was echoed in Ch'ungch'ŏng, though this imaginary included Chŏlla as a southern region of men indistinguishable between its eastern and western flanks.[79] In Chŏlla, masculinity and femininity

were correlated not explicitly but implicitly through age preferences and body types thought to be prevalent there and in Kyŏngsang. The positioning of Chŏlla as a region of younger, "standard" (*sŭt'aen*) men seeking older, larger men, and Kyŏngsang as the opposite hinted at sexual overtones in the binary of a passive, bottom Chŏlla and an active, top Kyŏngsang. [80] A discussion in the BAND chatroom for a gay sauna in Seoul (3 February 2022) replayed part of this imaginary in believing Pusan to be a city with many tops.

This sexualization of regions has duly led to interregional pairings as sexually or romantically compatible, mutually attracted opposites—much as with the international pairing of Korea and Japan as "proximate opposites" witnessed at Korean gay bars in Tokyo.[81] Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang may be a surprising couple given their adversarial history and shared association with macho men (*sangnam*). True to form, respondents from these regions expressed liberal and conservative viewpoints that made it evident the political divide runs through even the gay community.[82] However, not everything is political or confrontational; and, in the straight world, imaginaries of Chŏlla women as nurturers and skilled cooks along with Kyŏngsang men as devotees to their families have already set the pretense for this interregional match. Gay men in Chŏlla and Kyŏngsang also agreed that Chŏlla's men are warm and talkative complements to the Kyŏngsang's cold and brusque men (even if such qualities may only be so on the surface).[83]

In this regard, men from Ch'ungch'ŏng (along with Kangwŏn and Cheju) find themselves a bit isolated. No one in Chŏlla had anything to say about the men there, and the one comment from Kyŏngsang was sexually ambiguous, describing them as indirect and slow-spoken—a dialectal quality that has resulted in the bias against them as less intelligent—but otherwise pleasant.[84] Those in Ch'ungch'ŏng were scathing in their self-description (even saying there are too many "queens" [*kki*]), translating this indirectness and slow speech as a matter of passive

aggression borne out of pride, selfishness, and dishonesty.[85] The gayborhood itself was seen as a testament to this alienating character (indeed, one owner declined to chat with me at all[86]), with no sense of community—in contrast to Chŏlla, where trans people are welcomed at gay bars,[87] and Kyŏngsang, where owners recommend newcomers to one another's bars and bars that turn away customers based on their age.[88]

As a region with three mutually accessible metropolitan cities and gayborhoods, Kyŏngsang's gay community to some degree has its own intraregionalisms. Pusan and Taegu are the second and fourth largest cities in Korea and also serve as transportation hubs for the region, whereas Ulsan—the last of the six metropolitan cities in size—is comparatively out of the way. For these reasons, Pusan and Taegu have younger and mixed crowds in contrast to older Ulsan.[89] Younger gay Ulsanians "Nrll" (27), "Uuup" (27), and "Venus" (30) whom I encountered on Jack'd (23 February 2022) did not even know there were gay bars in their city, with "Uuup" saying that everyone goes down to Pusan. Gay apps such as Jack'd are pervasive among gay men across Korea, and have all but replaced gay bars (and, to a lesser extent, saunas) for dates and sexual encounters. Many bars have consequently become places for group outings rather than solo stopovers; and, those not able to keep up with the competition are dying out—a trend that sadly seems to be the case in Ulsan.

Distinctions between gay Pusanians and Taeguites were also made in Chŏlla, masculinizing the former over the latter and comparing Taegu as a conservative, closed twin of Kwangju.[90] The juxtaposition had correlations to a sexual competitor for the companionship of open, "big brother" (*hyŏng*) Pusan. What can be summarized from this analysis of interregionalisms is that while they contain hierarchies of desire, the perceptions of masculinity that establish them are often inconsistent and subjective to the standpoint of a person's regional

identity and sexual role. When the endless range of "types" (for example, slim [*sŭllim*], muscular [*kŏnjang*], and chubby [*t'ong*])—along with their own respective connotations of masculinity—is added to the mix, it becomes next to impossible to outline any agreeable regional scale of masculinity.

Seoul vs. Pusan: Contrasting Centers and Peripheries

My analysis has honed in on intra- and interregionalisms, but it would be incomplete not to mention the asserted rivalry between Seoul and Pusan—or, as I see it from my interactions, Seoul's less requited gaze toward Pusan. From their interviews of eight predominantly activist sexual minorities and allies in Pusan, Phillips and Yi set out to comparatively analyze gay Pusanians against gay Seoulites. [91] While their study reveals key interregional disparities within the community of rights activists, the picture it paints does not sync with my own observations in the bargoing community (which is much larger, albeit often disconnected from [or, even, resentful of] the activist community).[92] Phillips and Yi's findings characterize gay Pusanians as comparatively shy, passive people on the periphery of their confident counterparts in the capital as center. This seems to be a fairly weak generalization, not least for the activist community. As Phillips and Yi also acknowledge, Pusan's activists have carried out their city's own pride events since 2017, and these are connected to several social media accounts they manage with thousands of followers. These "queer culture festivals" (*k'wiŏ munhwa ch'ukche*) started in Seoul (2000) but besides Pusan have also been organized in Taegu (2009~), Cheju (2017~), Chŏnju (2018~), Inch'ŏn (2018~), Kwangju (2018~), Ch'angwŏn (2019~), and Ch'unch'ŏn (2021~), attesting to active involvement in the rights movement by cities of all sizes across Korea.[93]

As has been presented, my own interviews with gay Pusanians did not reach the

conclusion of Phillips and Yi; and, while gay Pusanians are self-aware of their location in relation to Seoul, gay Seoulites and their world are seen as the exception rather than the rule. In Seoul and Pusan, my interviewees had the tendency to discuss Pusan's gayborhood in juxtaposition not with anywhere in Seoul but with those in Japan's second largest city of Osaka—with which comparisons were drawn by those who have and have not been to one or the other alike.[94] In this shifted discourse, presumptions of center and periphery are dismantled with gay Pusanites' relative disregard for Seoul and gay Seoulites, at times demeaned as "princesses" (*kongju*) (a term also used by straight men about women in Seoul) who only manage to relax when they come to Pusan.[95] Pusan's gayborhood as "hidden," "secret," and "dark" under the monopoly of gay men in the accounts of Phillips and Yi's interviewees also seem to be impressions of (or on behalf of) those other than gay men, and reasonably so from their perspective.[96] However, these were not impressions that could be detected in the interregionalisms of my respondents anywhere. On the contrary, owners, staff, and customers freely talked with me more so than in Seoul—but, then again, I cannot know if my experience would have been otherwise had I been a woman.

In any case, segregation in other gayborhoods does not necessarily corroborate the "free" and "open" Seoul conversely deduced in Phillips and Yi.[97] This is evident not least with the segregation of age groups among bars across the capital area. While less prohibitive over gender, instances such as with the group of women who mistakenly entered the bar in Chongno 3-Ga show that Seoul's gayborhoods may be tolerant but not embracing of women. In the course of my fieldwork, I saw only one lone woman as a customer at a bar in Seoul. The bartenders did not seem to converse with her, and she exited after one drink.[98] There was also a [straight] woman bartender at another bar—and, in her case, despite working alone while waiting for the owner,

the one group of customers there was distant in its engagement with her.[99] So, while segregation—on and beneath the surface—by age and gender (and, while outside the scope of this article, "race") is prevalent in many gayborhoods, it has shown to be less consequential for gay men, their participation in gay life, and their practice of homoregionalism.

Conclusion

Centers and peripheries abound and are constantly being contested through the regional makings of space and place. Centers within "central" Seoul peripheralize one another along with the rest of Korea, while those within "peripheral" cities in the provinces in turn provincialize Seoul. The resulting subregionalisms of the gay community have cultivated a national landscape of gay space and place that accommodates new, localized iterations of gay identity. In this process, gay men can become typical of their regions, through the homoregionalizing experience of birth, residence, or other association (also with the agency to evolve the typicalities of these regions).[100] Their regions—be they inside or outside the capital—present them with comparable opportunities to live gay lives, which has enabled them to flourish independent of, yet nonetheless interconnected with, one another.

This study has examined how regionalism continues to pervade Korean society and how a new generation is reshaping what it means, for whom, and how it is expressed. Korean gay men—regionalized and regionalizing, sexualized and sexualizing—are an active part of this generation, as they construct a subregionalism influenced by the ways they produce and consume gay culture and live their sexually oriented lives. Their perceptions of masculinity, but also hierarchies of desire, shape a homoregionalism that serves to classify gay space, place, and identity in Korea. This process materializes through intra- and interregional exchanges with the

gay community at home and its extensions in other regions, where interpersonal and interspatial dynamics are compared and contrasted.

In its analyses, the study has found homoregionalism to operate within a sphere that is homogeneously Korean and self-sustaining, with a necessary insularity that enables not only national but also regional distinctions of self and other. While these configurations overlap, in Seoul, it observed a homoregional focus based more on types of gays by scene. In other cities, it saw this reconfigured more so to types of men by masculinity, factoring in competing notions of desire from the perspective of sexual roles. Through their cross-border overlaps with regions in Japan, the reach of homoregionalism is observable both domestically and internationally. Further research on such overseas linkages could imaginably reveal further insight through a diversity of cases.

The further extent of homoregionalism as it might play out in interracial or otherwise intercultural contacts arises as a question for further study. Regionalism and its subregionalisms have shown to narrow and broaden distances between groups of people based on real or imagined attributes. Further exploration of international, interregional intersections such as that intimated with Pusan and Osaka could lead to intriguing discoveries for both transnational and interregional studies of Queer Asia.

Also outside the scope of this study is the extent to which homoregionalism may be contributing to homonationalism—to the extent it may exist—in Korea. This question is not only in rights-based terms of the gay community's "domestication" by their gayborhoods, such as has been argued with Singapore's Chinatown.[101] It is also in terms of "race," which was not a topic of conversation with my informants in this study, given the study's focus on regionalism as a "raceless" issue along with the "racial" homogeneity (ethnically, linguistically, and otherwise) of

my fieldsites.[102] Yet, with sexual spaces barring foreigners (sometimes, selectively by national origin) from entry, along with talk of 'racial' invaders in group chats and other forums by and for the local gay community, it is an issue which cannot be overlooked.[103] In the process of diversifying desires through their homoregionalism, Korean gay men seem to have developed a preference for the nationalized self over racialized others. As "foreigners" (a term with many faces) are increasingly shunned at bars and saunas, on dating apps, and in other contact zones, Korea and the Korean risk becoming desired imaginaries of refuge for gay Koreans. If the discussion of homoregionalism in this study has managed to disentangle regional identity, perhaps it also holds promise to light the path forward on national identity.

Notes

1. Based on Korean gay portal IVANCITY's "pink map" as of August 2022. References to "Korea" and "Koreans" in this article pertain to South Korea and South Koreans.

2. Joe Phillips and Joseph Yi, "Queer Communities and Activism in South Korea: Periphery-Center Currents," *Journal of Homosexuality* 67 (14) (2020).

3. Alex Benkhart, "Rural Queer Associations: Metropolitan Homonormativity & Gay Communities in Rural Japan," *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 14 (1) (2014).

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13. Chris Berry and Fran Martin, “Syncretism and Synchronicity: Queer’n’Asian Cyberspace in 1990s Taiwan and Korea,” in *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, ed. Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue (Duke University Press, 2003).

14. John Cho, “The Three Faces of South Korea’s Male Homosexuality: Pogal, Iban, and Neoliberal Gay,” in *Queer Korea*, ed. Todd Henry (Duke University Press, 2020).

15. Phillips and Yi, “Queer Communities and Activism in South Korea,” 2020.

16. Jasbir Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2) (2013).

17. “Gayborhood” refers to an area with a cluster of bars and other gay establishments, as references to them are always based on the district or neighborhood of their location. These areas are interspersed with straight establishments, and many passersby may not even be aware of their existence. The term should thus not be confused with the often residential and politically charged gayborhoods in the West.

18. Seoul Capital Area consists of Seoul Special Metropolitan City, Inch’ŏn Metropolitan City, and Kyŏnggi Province. While it covers only an eighth of the nation’s landmass, it represents half of its population and GDP.

19. Even their largest cities of Wŏnju (Kangwŏn) and Cheju City (Cheju) compare to only half of the populations of Ansan and Puch’ŏn. The few gay establishments that exist predominantly cater to tourists and may themselves be run by transplants. Cheju, however, deserves mention of its comparative diversity and tolerance, with its own anti-discrimination policy for sexual minorities across the province.

20. So-yeong Yi and Chulhee Chung, “Traditional Values and Regional Discrimination in South Korea,” *Korean Journal of Sociology* 37 (5) (2003): 46.

21. IVANCITY, “K’ŏmyunit’i: T’onggye,” http://ivancity.com (accessed 30 August 2022).

22. IVANCITY, “Maeil kajang mani chich’urhanŭn hangmok ŭn?,” http://ivancity.com/page/poll?po_id=235 (accessed 1 March 2022).

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25. Wang-Bae Kim, “Regionalism: Its Origins and Substance with Competition and Exclusion,” *Korea Journal* 43 (2) (2003): 10.

26. Seoul Metropolitan Government, “Population,” http://english.seoul.go.kr/seoul-views/meaning-of-seoul/4-population (accessed 30 May 2023).

27. Kim, “Regionalism,” 2003, p. 27.

28. Seoul Metropolitan Government, “Sŏulshi Chumindŭngnok Chŏnipchibyŏl In'guidong (Ku←T’ajiyŏk) T’onggye” (2004-2022).

29. Seoul Metropolitan Government, “Sŏul Shimin Kohyang Inshikto” (2011-2014).

30. Kyu S. Hahn et al., “Is Regional Animus in Decline in Korea? A Test of the Generational Difference and Geographical Mobility Hypothesis,” *Pacific Affairs* 90 (3) (2017): 532.

31. Sallie Yea, “Maps of Resistance and Geographies of Dissent in the Chŏlla Region of South Korea,” *Korean Studies* 24 (2000): 73-74.

32. Yea, “Maps of Resistance,” 2000, p. 78.

33. Daniel Long and Young-Cheol Yim, “Perceptions of Regional Variation in Korean,” *Gengo Kenkyū* 117 (2000): 52.

34. Long and Yim, “Perceptions of Regional Variation,” 2000, p. 40.

35. Yoonhwan Park, “Determinants of Economic Segregation and Spatial Distribution of Poverty,” *Journal of Distribution Science* 17 (3) (2019): 26.

36. Yea, “Maps of Resistance,” 2000, pp. 78-79.

37. Aurel Croissant and Jung-eun Kim, “South Korea: A triple paradox of social cohesion,” in *Social Cohesion in Asia: Historical Origins, Contemporary Shapes, and Future Dynamics*, ed. Aurel Croissant and Peter Walkenhorst (Routledge, 2020), 87-88.

38. Long and Yim, “Perceptions of Regional Variation,” 2000, pp. 50-51.

39. Yoojin Kang and Deok-ho Kim, “Perceptual Dialectology and Language Attitudes: A View from Gyeongsang Dialect Speakers,” *Journal of Linguistic Science* 75 (2015): 9.

40. Long and Yim, “Perceptions of Regional Variation,” 2000, p. 56.

41. Kang and Kim, “Perceptual Dialectology and Language Attitudes,” 2015, p. 13.

42. Soon-Gap Yoon and Myeong-Ha Kim, “A study on the identity of Daegu-Kyungpook local resident,” *Journal of KNU Institute of East-West Thought* 3 (2007): 54-55.

43. Yea, “Maps of Resistance,” 2000, p. 88.

44. Byong-kuen Jhee, “Changing Regional Sentiment in South Korea,” in *The New Dynamics of Democracy in South Korea*, ed. Chae-Han Kim (Routledge, 2021), 8.

45. Statistics Korea, “In’gu Ch’ong Josa” (2015).

46. Bars F-1, F-3, and G-2, 22 and 24 February 2021.

47. Hahn et al., “Is Regional Animus in Decline in Korea?,” 2017, p. 506.

48. Hankook Research, “Han'guk Risŏch'i Chugan Rip'ot'ŭ (Che180-3Ho)” (2022).

49. Hahn et al., “Is Regional Animus in Decline in Korea?,” 2017, pp. 524, 527.

50. Patastlc, “Yojŭm do chiyŏk kamjŏng innayo?,” IVANCITY (5 October 2008), http://ivancity.com/forum/4832.

51. Jeong-bok Lee, “Expressions of Regional Discrimination in Social Network Services (SNS),” *Eomunhak* 120 (2013): 59-60.

52. As it replaces many endings in standard Korean, *-ngkk*[*a*]*e* is a commonly heard sound in the Chŏlla dialect. It does not carry any connotation on its own other than the impression listeners may have from hearing it.

53. Barley has traditionally been a staple crop in Kyŏngsang, though by no means its only one. Its reference as an insult is in a way a counter against Chŏlla’s own ridicule as a region of farmland while others such as Kyŏngsang were rapidly industrializing between the 1960s and 1990s.

54. Lee, “Expressions of Regional Discrimination,” 2013, p. 64. These references hit at such memories as the Kwangju Uprising in 1980, mass arrests of crime syndicate members in Pusan starting in the 1990s, and the discovery of the mysteriously murdered “frog boys” from Daegu in 2002.

55. Jhee, “Changing Regional Sentiment in South Korea,” 2021.

56. There is now, however, a rising hostility toward spouses from North Korea, demonstrating all the more that the problem of regionalism is complex and far from resolved.

57. Jhee, “Changing Regional Sentiment in South Korea,” 2021, p. 15.

58. IVANCITY, “Kohyang i ŏdiseyo?,” http://ivancity.com/page/poll?po_id=14 (accessed 1 March 2022). Obviously, not all Koreans were represented in the poll, which excluded Cheju (possibly removed later on, due to low representation—“K’aendi@Maen” expressed surprise over only nine people from Cheju (2002, September 3) and regions outside Korea.

59. The saying is an old adage that romanticizes the coupling of women from North Korea and men from South Korea, with the implication that women from the north are beautiful while men from the south are handsome.

60. IVANCITY, “Kohyang i ŏdiseyo?,” 2022.

61. IVANCITY, “Kohyang i ŏdiseyo?,” 2022. The text emoticon represents excitement with a delighted face.

62. IVANCITY, “Kohyang i ŏdiseyo?,” 2022. The text emoticon represents shyness with an embarrassed face.

63. IVANCITY, “Yŏhaeng Jŏngbo,” http://ivancity.com/tour (accessed 1 March 2022).

64. Chich’an (@heydjplayme), “Nae an e sojunghan honja man ŭi p’yŏn’gyŏn i issŏ 1. Shillim Kei 2. Hongdae Kei 3. Chongno Kei 4. It’aewŏn Kei,” Twitter (13 May 2021). The direct translation of the original text, “*kki kŭk’yŏm hwaltong hashinŭn pun shirŏyo kei*,” is “hate-*kki*s-dislike-guys-who-go-out Gays.” *Kki* and *hwaltong* are terms exclusive to the gay community which refer to men who “act gay” and socialize in openly gay spaces, respectively. As the phrases in this text are a taunt directed at the many internally homophobic men who indicate these intolerances on gay dating apps, I have chosen “fems” and “out” (even when openness with one’s sexuality can be, and often is, in limited situations such as at gay bars) as the closest substitutes seen in English.

65. Cho, “The Three Faces of South Korea’s Male Homosexuality,” 2020, p. 277.

66. IVANCITY, “Chŏnch’e Ŏpso,” http://ivancity.com/pinkmap (accessed 30 August 2022).

67. Bar A-2, 5 November 2021.

68. Bar B-2, 6 November 2021.

69. Bar B-2, 6 November 2021.

70. Bar C-3, 8 November 2021.

71. Bars F-1 and H-3, 24-25 February 2022.

72. Bar E-1, 2 February 2022.

73. IVANCITY, “Ibandŭri kajang salgi choŭn ku nŭn?,” http://ivancity.com/page/poll?po_id=234 (accessed 1 March 2022). In a total of 470 respondents, 60.5 per cent chose Kangnam over 8 other selectable districts (out of 25) in Seoul.

74. Gregor Mattson, “Bar districts as subcultural amenities,” *City, Culture and Society* 6 (2015): 3-4.

75. Statistics Korea, “Chiyŏk Sodŭk” (1985-2020).

76. Bar F-3, 24 February 2022.

77. Bar F-1, 24 February 2022.

78. Bar F-2, 24 February 2022.

79. Bar H-1, 25 February 2022.

80. Bar G-1, 22 February 2022.

81. Albert Graves, “Behind the Scene: Stories with the Master and Miseko of a Korean Gay Bar in Japan,” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 22 (1) (2022).

82. Bars F-1, F-2, G-1, and I-1, 22-24 February 2022.

83. Bars F-2 and G-2, 22 and 24 February 2022.

84. Bar F-2, 24 February 2022.

85. Bar H-1, 25 February 2022.

86. Bar H-2, 25 February 2022.

87. Men in Korea self-identifying as “cross-dressers” or “CD” (*shidi*) run their own “CD bars” in cities such as Kwangju.

88. Bars H-1 and H-3, 25 February 2022.

89. Bars F-1, F-3, and H-3, 24-25 February 2022.

90. Bar G-1, 22 February 2022.

91. Phillips and Yi, “Queer Communities and Activism in South Korea,” 2020.

92. Much anecdotal testimony over the years in my interactions with both bargoers and rights

activists—often, mutually exclusive communities—supports this claim. For how this has also been the case in Japan (including for Koreans in Japan), see Albert Graves, "Riding the Wave to Ni-Chōme: Tokyo's Korean Gay Bars in the 2000s." *Korean Studies* 47 (2023): 8.

93. Namuwiki, "K'wiŏ Munhwa Ch'ukche," http://namu.wiki/w/퀴어문화축제 (accessed 30 May 2023).

94. Bars B-2, D-3, and D-4, 6 and 12 November 2021.

95. Bar D-4, 12 November 2021.

96. Phillips and Yi, "Queer Communities and Activism in South Korea," 2020, p. 1955.

97. Phillips and Yi, "Queer Communities and Activism in South Korea," 2020, p. 1955.

98. Bar A-1, 5 November 2021.

99. Bar B-2, 6 November 2021.

100. Nicholas Syrett, "Mobility, Circulation, and Correspondence: Queer White Men in the Midcentury Midwest," *GLQ* 2 (2014): 79.

101. Chris Tan, "Rainbow belt: Singapore's gay Chinatown as a Lefebvrian space," *Urban Studies* 52 (12) (2015): 2214.

102. Syrett, "Mobility, Circulation, and Correspondence," 2014, p. 78.

103. One gay sauna in Seoul, for example, has a disclaimer of "Korean Only," while another for a time barred Filipinos and other Southeast Asians. Group chats on BAND associated with these establishments occasionally touch on *tongnama* (Southeast Asians) and their alleged behavior as customers, including incidents of secret filming which have caused patrons to react with racialized hostility.

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편견이 있어 1. 신림 게이 2. 홍대 게이 3. 종로 게이 4. 이태원 게이).” Twitter, May 13. http://twitter.com/heydjplayme/status/1392688296145289216.

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CHAPTER 5

Chapter Five travels beyond Korea and Japan to the broader "Koreasphere"—a borderless zone where Koreans are idealized as romantic and sexual partners by young Southeast Asian gay men, not merely as Koreans but as nexuses to the broader imaginary of Korea. It also examines young Korean gay men as members of a postmodern class with the cosmopolitan, queer mobility to openly explore and express their sexuality through tourism to the gay meccas of Southeast Asia. Yet, despite their increasing contacts with Southeast Asia as a "progressive Orient," their desire for and interactions with Southeast Asian men remain limited both locally and in Korea. The chapter interrogates the reasons behind this self-imposed ethnosexual barrier, tracing attitudes and practices toward *tongnama* (Southeast Asia[ns]) through their chance encounters at home and on trips abroad. Through fieldwork online and on site in Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia—Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—along with Taiwan, the study reveals a Korean gay lens that sees Southeast Asia as a racially inferior gateway to sexually superior zones of self-exploration. As a discourse, it reveals a complicated mosaic of gay space, place, and identity in the binary context of East and Southeast Asia, while contributing to an intraregional dialogue that advances translocal connections in the study of Queer Asia.

Darkness in the Light:
'Other' Asians in the Gay Koreasphere[1]

Introduction

The study of gay Asian men in scholarly literature has largely been confined to the scope of Asian-Americans, often as desexualized racial beings in the periphery of gay white men's desires. "No fats, fem(me)s, or Asians," an infamous disclaimer until only recently on gay dating apps in the US,[2] succinctly presents the [predominantly, East] Asian man as defaulted to a sexually inadmissible category in the whitewashed West. In Queer Asia, however, there is no monolith of "gay Asian men." In its place are colorisms, nationalisms, and regionalisms that converge in layered practices of sexual compartmentalization that intersect with the socioeconomic hierarchies delineating the myriad communities within Asia. As in the West, whiteness commands privilege for much of the consumerist class of this region; but, unlike the West, it is not white Westerners but "white Asians" like Koreans and Japanese who are often in the gay gaze of "other," darker Asians.[3] Coupled with the privilege of East Asians' whiteness is the power of their social and economic mobility in the broader region of Asia. For Koreans, soft power assets endowed by the Korean Wave compound their sexual currency in places where there is strong demand—and this is nowhere more so than in Southeast Asia.[4]

[1] The research for this chapter was supported by funding from the K. Matsushita Foundation (22-G35) and Support for Pioneering Research Initiated by the Next Generation (SPRING).
[2] The removal of "race" and "ethnicity" filters by gay apps such as Grindr and Jack'd in 2020 was both an acknowledgement of, and a countermeasure against, the rampancy of such overt expressions of racism on their platforms.
[3] "Korea(n)" in this chapter refers exclusively to South Korea(n), while "Koreans" may include the diaspora as associated with South Korea.
[4] While US and other Western audiences bring in the most revenue for the K-pop industry, YouTube viewership shows the strongest popularity in Southeast Asia. In 2019, a "global K-pop

With the regionwide desire for all things Korean, Korean men have come to be romanticized and sexualized not merely as Koreans but as nexuses to the broader imaginary of Korea. As Dennis Altman observed in Asian gay men's sexual contacts with Westerners as a means of entry into the West,[5] Southeast Asian gay men's gaze fixates onto white Asians for access to what is seen as a trendier, more developed East Asia. Korean gay men—who once looked to Japan as an escape[6]—are now members of a postmodern class seeking tourism as an opportunity to openly explore and express sexuality.[7] This cosmopolitan, queer mobility has come with direct passage into the rapidly developing cities of Southeast Asia, whose proximity of gay meccas has made the region a readily available marketplace for their consumption. Circuit parties, gogo bars, and massage parlors present new pathways for Korean (and Japanese) gay men to move beyond living gay lives to experiencing gay culture in ways they cannot at home.

Yet, despite their desire for the Southeast Asian gay scene, Korean gay men generally seem less inclined to pursue Southeast Asian gay men. From the relative absence of Koreans at gay saunas in Bangkok to their silence on gay apps in Ho Chi Minh City, there is a glaring disparity between where Korean gay men want to be and whom they [do not] want to meet while in Southeast Asia. This is in stark contrast to the region's sex tourism practiced by Korean

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map" tracked more views from Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam than the US, trailed closely by the Philippines and Malaysia.

[5] Dennis Altman, "Global Gaze/Global Gays," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1997): 427-428.

[6] For more on Japan as a safe haven from familial and societal pressures to marry in the 1980s, see John Cho, "The Luxury of Love: Gay Men in Recessionary South Korea," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 158.

[7] Howard Hughes, "Holidays and homosexual identity," *Tourism Management* 18, no. 1 (1997): 6.

straight men[8] and other Asian gay men,[9] or to the case of Japan, where Korean gay men—tourists or otherwise—often seek local men, seeing them as compatible partners despite their opposing characteristics.[10] Even clearer is their public disdain for Southeast Asian men who work or study in Korea, observable through their explicit prohibition at gay saunas and in commentary found in group chats and other online forums for these private spaces.

This chapter bases on the premise that despite Korean gay men's increasing contacts with Southeast Asia as a "progressive Orient,"[11] their desire for and interactions with Southeast Asian men remain limited both locally and in Korea—a borderless zone I refer to as the "Koreasphere." It interrogates the reasons behind this self-imposed ethnosexual barrier, tracing attitudes and practices toward Southeast Asia[ns], or *tongnama* (an abbreviation of *tongnamasia*[*in*]), through their chance encounters at home and on trips abroad.[12] The study reveals a Korean gay lens that sees Southeast Asia as a racially inferior gateway to sexually superior zones of self-exploration. Beyond the racism that persists in Korean society toward Southeast Asians, Korean gay men's aversion to *tongnama* is compounded by the same soft power forces that instill desire toward Koreans among gay men in Southeast Asia. The Korean Wave has not only made Korean men

[8] See, for example, the case of Korean straight men in the Philippines, in Mari-Elina Ekoluoma, "Receiving a New Kind of Others: Korean Tourism in the Philippines," *Asian Studies* 56, no. 1 (2020): 1-19.
[9] See, for example, the case of Taiwanese gay men in Thailand, in Yo-Hsin Yang, "Sexuality on the move: gay transnational mobility embedded on racialised desire for 'white Asians'," *Gender, Place and Culture* 30, no. 6 (2023): 791-811.
[10] Albert Graves, "Riding the Wave to Ni-Chōme: Tokyo's Korean Gay Bars in the 2000s," *Korean Studies* 47 (2023): 387.
[11] This term is borrowed from Gilly Hartal and Orna Sasson-Levy, "The progressive Orient: Gay tourism to Tel Aviv and Israeli ethnicities," *Politics and Space* 39, no. 1 (2021): 11-29. The label describes an exotic yet pinkwashed space such as Tel Aviv, dislocated from the banality and heteronormativity of its surrounding region.
[12] These barriers—by which ethnicity and sexuality mutually influence experiences, desires, and identities—run along what Joane Nagel terms "ethnosexual frontiers." For more, see Joane Nagel, "Ethnicity and Sexuality," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 107-133.

more desirable for other Asians but has also made other Asians less desirable for Korean men, whose "aspirational" masculinities express whiteness as a means to transcend their relationship with a once backward state.[13] Koreaphilia is recalibrating the standards for desire in gay communities, which I further argue contribute to both racial autophilia in Korea and racial autophobia in Southeast Asia.[14]

Starting with an overview of the dual trends of Korea's orientalism of Southeast Asia coupled with Southeast Asian migration to Korea, the chapter seeks to contextualize the mutually shared racial desires and aversions among gay men in both regions, which works for Koreans and against Southeast Asians. In the case study, it then analyzes how Korean gay men are advantaged by a key set of privileges that sustain both their racial insularism and idealization, at home and in Southeast Asia. These include increased financial clout as consumers, brought on by Korea's development; elevated status as objects of desire, influenced by the Korean Wave; and racial dominance in Korea, along with compatriot networks that replace locals as contact points in Southeast Asia. So, beyond any sole factor of "race," the study looks at how the interracial barrier involves nuanced divisions caused by imbalances in class, language, soft power, and even sexual health.

With the scarcity of scholarly literature on Korean gay men and none on their relationship with Southeast Asia(ns), this study advances the comparatively transregional, global, and inter-

[13] Alex Jong-Seok Lee, "Manly Colors: Masculinity and Mobility among Globalizing Korean Men," *Kalfou* 6, no. 2 (2019): 199.

[14] "Race" in this chapter is discussed in reference to groupings based on the social constructs that coincide with (even if they contradict) any concept of ethnicity, nationality, and culture. Depending on the case, Koreans, for example, may racially identify as "Koreans" (*han'gugin*) "East Asians" (*tongyangin*, lit. "Easterners"—which may or may not include Southeast Asians), or "Asians" (*asiain*). Racial "autophilia" and "autophobia," then, means racially exclusive sexual desire or aversion as associated with the self in the context of one's own racial grouping. Such sentiments go beyond "self-love" or "self-hatred," as the desired self is placed in proximity to or distance from "race" (and are thus sentiments toward a group rather than any individual).

Asian examination of queer Asia, as advocated by Howard Chiang and Alvin Wong.[15] With a subregional focus, it delves into the "Eastern orientations" of Southeast Asian gay men introduced in the case of Thais by Dredge Kang,[16] while switching perspective to counterpropose what could possibly be considered the selective "Southeastern disorientations" of Korean gay men. As in many ways a subject of my own research as a Korean(-American) drawn to Southeast Asia and my informants (who met me out of mutual interest, not as a researcher), I embark on a "critical autoethnography" as termed by Gilbert Caluya.[17] While I do not subscribe to many of the sexual racisms disclosed by my informants, the study is nonetheless attentive to the lived experiences of the researcher as much as the researched along with the power imbalance that inevitably occurs in the conveyance of these stories by me alone.

Methodology

The methods for this study were employed online (digital ethnography) and on site in Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia—Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—along with Taiwan, through spatial analyses, participant observation, and semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Online research included monitored discussions on IVANCITY forums for gay tourism and in BAND group chats for gay saunas in Seoul, along with a survey of over 5,000 Korean, Japanese (including Korean-Japanese *zainichi*), and Southeast Asian gay men's profiles on location-based dating apps 9monsters, Grindr, Jack'd, and

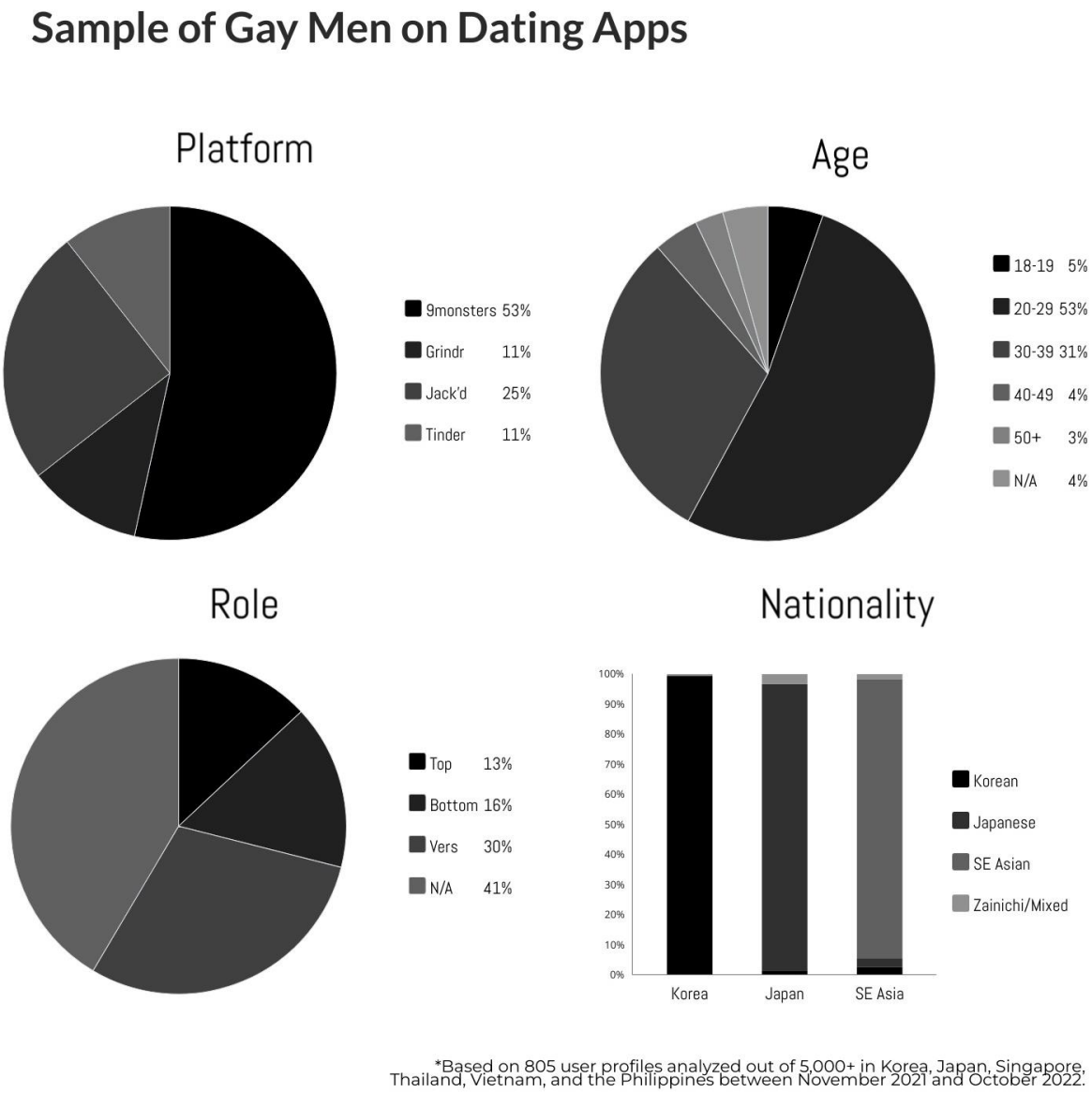
[15] Howard Chiang and Alvin Wong, "Asia is burning: Queer Asia as critique," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 123.
[16] Dredge Kang, "Eastern orientations: Thai middle-class gay desire for 'white Asians'," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 182-208.
[17] Gilbert Caluya, "The (Gay) Scene of Racism: Face, Shame and Gay Asian Males," *ACRAWSA E-Journal* 2, no. 2 (2006): 3.

Tinder. Such platforms' function in hosting gay men's self-representation as commodities for others' desires makes them indispensable fieldsites in identifying the currencies exchanged such as "race."[18] Ages ranged from 18 and above with 84% in their 20s and 30s, and sexual roles—which can factor into personal hierarchies of desire—were also noted where possible, constituting a balanced representation to the extent they were indicated. Data was amassed in the course of one year as an initial phase from November 2021 to September 2022, with over 670 profiles exhibiting sexual racisms and other positive and negative forms of discrimination

[18] Sharif Mowlabocus, *Gaydar Culture: Gay Men Technology and Embodiment in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 94.

recorded in a database.

On-site research was conducted intermittently throughout this term extending until September 2023, at gay bars, cruising spaces, and other meeting places in metropolitan areas where dense samples of respondents could be accessed at once. In Korea and Japan, targeted respondents included bar owners, staff, and customers, while cruising spaces were analyzed for their policies on foreigners and the practices of locals during their encounters with outsiders



(which, depending, could include me as a Korean-American). In Southeast Asia, respondents

were predominantly those who interacted with me as an object of their desire—a factor toward which was often credited to my Koreanness, light complexion, and "cuteness." Around 500 mutual contacts were made via apps alone in Southeast Asia and Taiwan, close to 190 of whom through our exchanges became informal interviewees. Of special focus when located were Southeast Asians in Korea and Japan as well as Koreans and Japanese in Southeast Asia, often there for work, study, or tourism. Their perspectives looking in from outside contributed to the depth and breadth of experiences in this study, balancing a narrative otherwise dictated through the stories of insiders looking out. As is customary for this type of research—whose topics of race and sexuality are deeply personal, highly contentious, and rarely chosen to be disclosed publicly—respondents' identities are anonymized out of respect for their privacy.

The methodology's shortcomings also deserve acknowledgement. The categorical analysis of Koreans as "white Asians" or even "East Asians" can be overly generalizing considering their diverse identities, not least for gay Koreans. Even more so, then, is the sheer impossibility to homogenize "Southeast Asians," who can hardly be limited by the metropolises covered in this study. As a region 45 times the size, with 13 times the population, of South Korea, Southeast Asia spans across five time zones from mainland to maritime and is home to a myriad of peoples with intersectional identities. This includes polar extremes of social and religious tolerance for gay people, who are everything from openly celebrated to harshly criminalized. In terms of communication, the reliance on Google Translate—while enabling access to more typically local, less globalized, respondents—always runs the risk of nuanced messages being lost in translation. Respondents' overall desire for me further placed me at a distance from any who might dislike Koreans, possibly skewing my interpretation of the study's conclusions as representative of a broader group of people. The absence of Korean respondents

in cities such as Phnom Penh and Vientiane also renders the sample incomplete—though, as is speculated in this chapter, such may be reflective of Korean gay men's active choice to bypass the perceived darker, poorer destinations of Southeast Asia.

The Southeast: White Asians' Orient

For much of its shared history, "Asia" has been the Oriental East to the Occidental West. has been seen through the as the Orient In contrast to the West's "queer orientalism" of the region through a pedophiliac homoeroticism,[19] Southeast Asia for Korea and Japan embodies a separate orientalism borne of their own postcolonial dyads. During their colonial expansion in Asia, Japanese as orientalized by the West set out to "de-orientalize" through their orientalization of other Asians including Koreans,[20] while Koreans as colonized by Japan replicated the colonialist perspective toward what they came to see as primitive yet racially interconnected Southeast Asians.[21] Kang argues that Koreans had recognized early on the modernity of civilizations in the region before the colonial narrative of "the South" (*nambang*)—from the term in Japanese (*nanpō*)—took over in their illusion as members of imperial Japan.[22] In their newly imperialistic mindset from the 1930s, Koreans saw the region through the lens of abundant resources belonging to the East and innocent people to be protected from the West.[23] The exotic imagery to which they were exposed through mass media further resulted in their sexualization of dark,

[19] Eng-Beng Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 9
[20] Shinji Yamashita, "Southeast Asian Tourism from a Japanese Perspective," in *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions*, ed. Michael Hitchcock, Victor King, and Mike Parnwell (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 191.
[21] Heejung Kang, "Another Form of Orientalism: Koreans' Consciousness of Southeast Asia during the Japanese Colonial Period," *Korea Journal* 54, no. 2 (2014): 36.
[22] Kang, "Another Form of Orientalism," 44.
[23] Kang, "Another Form of Orientalism," 45.

indigenous women as seductresses[24]—a desire that history often shows extends to men and boys.

Yet, while this infantilization of Southeast Asia accompanies a racist paternalism, it has not translated into a sexually predatory daddy-son dyad for the millennial gay men flying in from Korea. The Korean gay man in Bangkok is a white Asian but not a white savior—if anything, a white evader—with a transient presence and a focused search for the scene but elusive from the guys. As a gay destination, the region serves for the exploration of gay life but not gay desire. To be clear, this aversion to Southeast Asian men is not necessarily based on sweeping colorist or classist assumptions. Indeed, Southeast Asia has its own spectrum of whiteness and increasingly produces rich, gym-bodied, and global queer men in the modern capitalist context. Their normally better English secures them broader access to other gay men at home and abroad, making them more socially mobile than the Koreans traveling in linguistic isolation.

Korean Gay Tourism to Southeast Asia

Over the past decade, ASEAN has become one of Korea's largest trading partners and is now by far the destination of choice for Korean travelers, exceeding those to the much closer alternatives of Japan and China.[25] Passenger flights to and from Southeast Asia have been on a sharp incline, with over one-third of Korean travelers flying there by 2019.[26] This was disrupted only by COVID-19; but, even then, special entry for essential travel was arranged with select nations, sustaining interregional exchange through the pandemic.[27] Southeast Asia is also an international

[24] Kang, "Another Form of Orientalism," 49.
[25] ASEAN-Korea Centre, *2022 ASEAN & Korea in Figures* (Seoul: Information & Data Unit, 2022), x, xvi.
[26] ASEAN-Korea Centre, *2022 ASEAN & Korea in Figures*, x,144.
[27] ASEAN-Korea Centre, *2022 ASEAN & Korea in Figures*, xvi.

hotspot for gay tourism, with Bangkok considered one of Asia's original "gay capitals,"[28] targeting gay consumers through its commercial sectors since the 1990s.[29] While the city may be more infamous for its sex tourists from the West, Asian men are an overlooked yet deeply ingrained facet of its gay scene. Inter-Asian gay tourism has established what *Queer Bangkok*'s authors say is a regional(ist), Asianized network of traditionally less tolerant yet constantly expanding queer cultures.[30] With Korea's travel boom to Southeast Asia, Korean queer culture is increasingly being integrated into this network—influencing and influenced by it.

In the absence of official data on the sexual orientation of Korean outbound travelers, the prospect of conducting any quantitative analysis of Korean gay tourism on a national scale is limited. However, with so much Southeast Asian travel advice on gay portals such as IVANCITY and so many sightings of Koreans at gay establishments and on dating apps across Southeast Asia, it cannot be denied that gay men are a driving force behind the nation's tourism wave to the region.[31] Korea's advanced stage of development translates to more citizens of all sexual orientations and needs with the financial means and inclinations to travel abroad. Comparisons can be made to the Japanese overseas tourism that started in the 1960s, fueled by Japan's economic growth, strong yen, and change of leisure patterns.[32] No sooner than Korea's

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[28] Peter Jackson, "Capitalism and Global Queering: National Markets, Parallels among Sexual Cultures, and Multiple Queer Modernities," in *Queer Bangkok*, ed. Peter Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 366

[29] Peter Jackson, "Queer Bangkok after the Millennium: Beyond Twentieth-Century Paradigms," in *Queer Bangkok*, ed. Peter Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 9.

[30] Jackson, "Queer Bangkok after the Millennium," 11, 25.

[31] On IVANCITY's "travel information" forum from June 2018 to January 2022, 6 of the 15 most discussed overseas destinations were in Southeast Asia (in order, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Laos, and Singapore). IVANCITY, "Yŏhaeng Chŏngbo," http://ivancity.com/tour (accessed 1 March 2022).

[32] Shinji Yamashita, "Southeast Asian Tourism from a Japanese Perspective," in *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions*, ed. Michael Hitchcock, Victor King, and Mike Parnwell (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 190.

normalization of relations with Japan during that time did Japanese men start to flood into cities such as Seoul and Busan to patronize a sex trade that did not reach its peak—at least, with women entertainers known as *kisaeng*—until the 1970s. In the 1980s, Japan then became the destination for Korean gay tourists (and workers) escaping familial and societal pressures to marry,[33] thereby initiating an inter-[East]Asian exchange that co-developed the gay communities on both sides of the East Sea (Sea of Japan). With among other factors the later decline of Japanese pop cultural influence as replaced by the Korean Wave, Korean gay tourism to Japan, too, has since waned.

In recent decades, Southeast Asian cities have served as more practical, accessible, and inexpensive pathways for financially capable Korean and other gay men in conservative societies to explore their "latent" homosexuality than cities in Japan or the socially liberal West.[34] On IVANCITY, newcomers ask the community for travel recommendations and advice, while returnees boast of the "culture shock" experienced during their initiations into a gay world colored by foam parties and sex shows seen nowhere else.[35] At bars and clubs, Koreans can be found hopping from one to another every night of their stay,[36] even if they are rarely if ever customers of their own back home.[37] For many, this is out of curiosity for their novelty but also for the extended sense of home they present through that novel lens. K-pop—now a mainstream genre for young Southeast Asians—is played almost everywhere, which in turn functions as a

[33] Cho, "The Luxury of Love," 158.
[34] See, for example, the case of Singaporeans in Bangkok, in Alex Au, "Speaking of Bangkok: Thailand in the History of Gay Singapore," in *Queer Bangkok*, ed. Peter Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 182-183.
[35] *K'ŭrosŭmail*, "*T'aeguk pangk'ok kei k'ŭllŏp* / *sauna* / *kogoboisyo chŏngbo imnida*.," IVANCITY (December 10, 2014), http://ivancity.com/page/community.
[36] Fieldnotes, October 10 & 11, 2022.
[37] Fieldnotes, October 15, 2022.

pedestal for the idolization of Koreans.[38] They are both welcomed and wanted, and their common presence at select establishments brings home even closer to the many who seek it. Indeed, it is more typical to see them in groups rather than alone—and, from the perspective of locals from Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh City to Manila, always at a distance.[39] Such becomes a key observation that strikes at the heart of the tensions explored in this study.

Southeast Asian Gay Men and Korea

Before delving further into the contradictory relationship of Southeast Asia as a desired queer Orient and Southeast Asians as a shunned other for so many Korean gay men, it is necessary to examine the self and other imaginaries harbored by Koreans and Southeast Asians in both Korea and Southeast Asia. Whereas the previous section has portrayed Southeast Asia as a product for consumption by Korean gay men as consumerist "white Asians," the next sections turn to Southeast Asians painted as the "other," darker Asians, scrutinizing the racialized narratives hardly conflicting among—rather, largely shared by—gay men in Korea and Southeast Asia. Starting with the lookisms that dictate desirability in the inter-Asian gay community, this section focuses on Koreaphilias resulting from the Korean Wave along with their implications on social and sexual expectations and boundaries among young Southeast Asian gay men in what I term the "Koreasphere"—a borderless, cross-demographic zone within Korea's sphere of soft power influence—which today encompasses the younger, consumerist classes of Southeast Asia.

Lookism, by which physical features become metrics in the ranking of people's attractiveness, is deeply ingrained in Korean society and features heavily in the public

[38] Fieldnotes, February 3, 2022.
[39] Fieldnotes, October 11, 2022.

perceptions toward others by Koreans. In a survey from 2021 conducted by the ASEAN-Korea Centre (AKC), young Koreans chose to describe Southeast Asians by their looks almost thrice as often as their personalities. Dark complexion, short stature, and thin build were the predominant descriptors on one hand, over concurring impressions of kindness, friendliness, and personability on the other.[40] While the sentiments behind these physical descriptions were not explicitly interpreted or translated by the surveyors or surveyed, the traits are in direct contravention of the beauty standards for men that prevail in today's Korea. Fewer respondents' reported impressions regarding personality were derogatory but did surface nonetheless, with associations of these dark, short, and thin people as dirty, scary, and criminal—narratives that derive from an imaginary of a developing Southeast Asia and impoverished Southeast Asians.[41]

However, lookism was equally if not more conspicuous among the young Southeast Asians surveyed, who described Koreans not only with opposing descriptions to those made of them but also—and, more than anything else—aspirational terms of attractiveness.

[40] ASEAN-Korea Centre, *2021 Survey on Mutual Perceptions*, 13.
[41] ASEAN-Korea Centre, *2021 Survey on Mutual Perceptions of ASEAN and Korean Youths* (Seoul: Information and Data Unit, 2022), 13.

Mutual Lookisms of Koreans & Southeast Asians

KOREANS	NO.*	SOUTHEAST ASIANS	NO.**
Pretty / Beautiful / Attractive (*Yeppŭda / Arŭmdaun / Chalsaenggim*)	574	-	-
White (*Hŭinp'ibu*)	248	**Black / Dark / Yellow** (*Kŏmŭnp'ibu / Ŏduunp'ibu / Hwangsaekp'ibu*)	194
Plastic (*Sŏnghyŏng*)	87	-	-
Tall (*K'igak'ŭn*)	37	**Short** (*Chakŭn*)	95
-	-	**Thin** (*Marŭn*)	33

SOURCE: ASEAN-Korea Centre
"Top 10 Impressions of Korean and ASEAN People"
2021 Survey on the Mutual Perceptions of ASEAN and Korean Youths

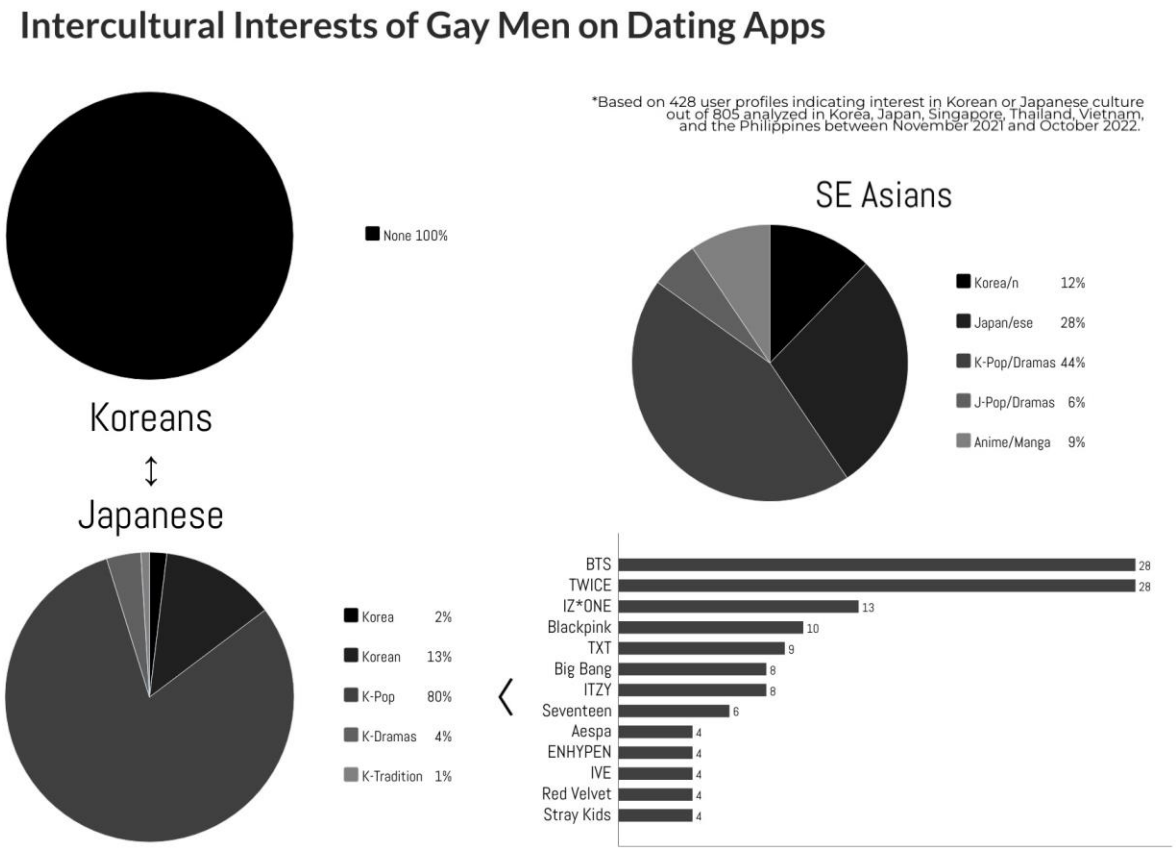
*Out of 2,319 Southeast Asians surveyed on their impressions of Koreans.
**Out of 1,000 Koreans surveyed on their impressions of Southeast Asians.

The overwhelming consensus of Koreans as light, tall, and attractive (even if assisted by plastic surgery) is an implication of Southeast Asians' lesser-than status, feeding into an overarching narrative that places Koreans above them on a lookist hierarchy of racialized desire. The findings demonstrate how Kang's "Eastern orientations" are not limited to one nation or sexual orientation but are instead a phenomenon that pervades throughout the extraterritorial reaches of the Koreasphere. Conversely, it also reveals the "auto-Orientalism" of young Southeast Asians through their disparaging self-perception based on the terms articulated by the colonizing force of the Korean Wave (much as with colonized Koreans a century ago in relation to the "civilized" West[42]).

[42] Yong-Hwa Chung, "The Modern Transformation of Korean Identity: Enlightenment and Orientalism," *Korea Journal* 46, no. 1 (2006): 130.

Koreaphilia and Racial Autophobia

The beauty standards inherent in the iterations of lookism mutually expressed by young Koreans and Southeast Asians are a direct consequence of the Korean Wave. Outside Korea, subscribers to Koreacentric normativities aspire to embody "white Asianness"—if not by looks, then through their proximity to Korea and consumption of everything Korean. Dating apps are a convenient way to monitor these Koreaphilic sentiments among gay men, which can be seen across Japan and Southeast Asia.



In Japan, "[South] Korea" (*kankoku*) is its own category of interest with a range of subcategories self-advertised by young men in their teens, 20s, and 30s. The majority of these interests

surround K-pop, with users professing their fandom around boy bands and girl groups alongside other likes and dislikes, typically in search of others with whom they can relate. Photos used on these profiles often reflected these interests, as superimposed onto the fan through complexion whitening and smoothing filters, trendy outfits and hairstyles, and backdrops in Korea or at Korean establishments in Japan.[43]

Farther afield in Singapore, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, and Manila, young men's expressed interests more broadly—yet, still, to a lesser extent—include Japan, with its soft power exports anime and manga, alongside Korea and products of the Korean Wave. Blurred into this blended infatuation with Korea and Japan is an explicit desire for Koreans and Japanese. Out of my 190 or so interviewees in Southeast Asia (and Taiwan), every one of them admitted an attraction to Koreans, Japanese, or "white Asians"—even if they had never met one in person—with many indifferent to or actively excluding Chinese. This deserves mention as [Han] Chinese are, in a colorized and racialized sense, indisputably white and Asian. Yet, with far less soft power influence behind China, their whiteness in any other context can become questioned. In this way, Koreaphilia (and Japanophilia) and the desire for Koreans (and Japanese) is predicated on not merely complexion but also composition. That is, the desire for Koreans is not only because they are white Asians, but because they are white Asians with the special currency that is white Asianness. Korea is inextricable from the Korean, and it is a mandatory nexus for the desire around him as a Korean.

This Koreaphilia can also carry with it an aversion to anything other including the self. If

[43] For more on how smooth, white skin is a common indicator of physical attractiveness among gay men in Thailand, see Ronnapoom Samakkeekarom and Pimpawun Boonmongkon, "Cyberspace, Power Structures, and Gay Sexual Health: The Sexuality of Thai Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) in the Camfrog On-line Web-cam Chat Rooms," in *Queer Bangkok*, ed. Peter Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 130.

Koreans are the exemplars of whiteness, then others are by comparison less or not white. In the heterogeneous, polychromatic region that is Southeast Asia, sexual discrimination by color is so common that it is commonplace.[44] None of my informants expressed a preference for darker guys, and many actively avoided them. One Filipino explained to me how the lowest caste of gay men in the Philippines is known as "shit gays," recognizable by their dark complexion and long, dry hair.[45] Colorist exclusion came in a broad range of light-dark couplings by "race," from Sino-Thais with Thais[46] to Thais with Indians,[47] Vietnamese with Filipinos,[48] and Khmers and Laotians with Africans.[49] Any mention of black men was repeatedly met with immediate and outright disgust or surprise that desire for them could even be considered. So, while these self-other comparisons clearly construct a hierarchy of desire along the spectrum of imagined whiteness, they simultaneously show how Southeast Asians categorize one another and rank themselves against the imaginary of even darker, less desirable men in South Asia and Africa.

The above tendencies toward racial ordering demonstrate how colorism is not black and white—but, it is also not limited to shades of brown. Colorism is entrenched in classism, and the socioeconomic status of "poorer" nations trickles down contributing to images of "darker" citizens. Thais from the Northeastern province of Isaan, for example, may be lighter in complexion but are often seen as poorer than other Thais. Coupled with this is the stereotype that they are also less educated, less cultured, and, consequently, less desirable. Farther north is the Lao capital of Vientiane, where Laotians—who share a border and cultural ties with Isaan—are

[44] See, for example, the case of gay men in Bangkok, in Nikos Dacanay, "Encounters in the Sauna: Exploring Gay Identity and Power Structures in Gay Places in Bangkok," in *Queer Bangkok*, ed. Peter Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 100.
[45] Fieldnotes, October 1, 2022.
[46] Fieldnotes, October 10 & 13, 2022.
[47] Fieldnotes, October 11, 2022 and August 29, 2023.
[48] Fieldnotes, October 1 & 4, 2022 and August 31, 2023.
[49] Fieldnotes, August 27 & 31, 2023.

subjected to the same marginalization by Thais, not precluding those from Isaan.[50] With high inflation, a plummeting currency, and hardly any gay scene of their own, Lao gay men may be quick to agree with their national characterization, looking to Thailand or Vietnam as an escape—and those with the means will often do so, as the only options within reach. Others yet turn to these destinations for cosmetic procedures, as the next best choice for "whitening" (of color or class) to an out-of-reach Korea.[51] For many Southeast Asians, Korea is seen as inaccessible due to not only their financial incapacity or distance but also entry restrictions selectively imposed on those coming from the less developed nations of the region (even relatively developed Thailand).

Cambodia is another example where colorist disadvantage is compounded by class inequity, articulated by a couple of my informants in terms of hygiene and promiscuity. One Khmer who knows English and owns a business and a car—indicators of education and wealth that were rare among my contacts in Phnom Penh—disclosed to me that he avoids other Khmer men because they often have a body odor.[52] By coincidence, an antithetical person I met (who knows no English and works at a massage parlor) did have an ammoniacal odor, which I can only ascribe to his deprived circumstances. A Vietnamese Cambodian whose family immigrated from Tay Ninh across the border echoed the other informant's observation about malodor, coupled with the claim that many Khmer men are only out for quick sexual encounters at dirty motels.[53] Shame around these purported provincialisms of Khmerness seemed to be cause for so many Khmer gay men I saw on dating apps to disassociate themselves from their assigned identity through the appropriation of [white Asian] models' photos and Sinicized aliases (such as

[50] Fieldnotes, October 10, 2022 and August 30, 2023.
[51] Fieldnotes, September 4, 2023.
[52] Fieldnotes, August 29, 2023.
[53] Fieldnotes, August 27, 2023.

"Wei" or "Ming Jin"). Despite that the strategy of these distancing acts is to manage stigmas, the regrettable fact is that they only perpetuate that stigmatization.[54]

Comparable practices of cloaking are also exhibited by Southeast Asians in Korea. As those living there have indicated in the aforementioned survey by AKC, the immersive experience in Korean society tends to result in a markedly less rosy impression of Koreans' open-mindedness and respect for foreign culture and people.[55] Korea's gay community is no exception, a topic reserved for discussion in the last section of this chapter. As racial minorities, Southeast Asian gay men in Korea are cognizant of gay desire's racialization to their disadvantage, in the same way Chong-suk Han and Kyung-Hee Choi have demonstrated for gay men of color in the US.[56] As such, in physical and online gay spaces they often resort to tactics of self-masking, be it through Korean script or photo filtering to "pass" as Korean, or, in person, by covering their faces (as personally witnessed at gay saunas in Seoul). Southeast Asian gay men in Korea—racially classified in a class stratification that diminishes "migrant laborers"[57]—carry a sense of color, class and, thus, masculinity that is in constant flux with their transnational mobility. In coming to Korea to elevate their status, they spatially and temporally "lose" their manhood as members of this lowest caste. With the prevalence of what I consider to be selective "Southeastern disorientations" among Korean gay men, this manhood inevitably requires return

[54] Chong-suk Han, Kristopher Proctor, and Kyung-Hee Choi, "I Know a Lot of Gay Asian Men who Are Actually Tops: Managing and Negotiating Gay Racial Stigma," *Sexuality & Culture* 18: 227-228.
[55] ASEAN-Korea Centre, *2021 Survey on Mutual Perceptions*, 12.
[56] Chong-suk Han and Kyung-Hee Choi, "Very Few People Say 'No Whites': Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Desire," *Sociological Spectrum* 38, no. 3 (2018).
[57] Hanhee Hahm, "Migrant Laborers As Social Race In The Interplay Of Capitalism, Nationalism, and Multiculturalism: A Korean Case," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 43, no. 4 (2014): 380-381.

trips to the homeland to be "restored"[58]—for it is only there where migrants' elevated status resulting from their "Eastern orientations" is materialized.

Southeastern Disorientations in Gay Korea

This last section hones in on perceptions within the Korean gay community toward Southeast Asians, be they migrants in Korea or locals in Southeast Asia. In the 1990s, Korea saw an influx of mostly male Southeast Asians immigrating in response to labor shortages in its manufacturing and construction industries. By the 2000s, as many as 80% of migrant workers (not limited to Southeast Asians) were residing there illegally,[59] having entered as trainees or overstaying as tourists to circumvent a set of controls that limited their income.[60] The resulting image of Southeast Asian men was thus that of low skills and desperation, which by extension became synonymous with criminality. Systemic patterns of employer abuse that ensued soon became publicized, forcing society to reckon with a nationalistic identity that—despite having once liberated the nation—now presented a barrier to its diversity and inclusivity.[61] Civil society representing but also including the migrants themselves, along with mass media and academia, have since played a key role in replacing ethnocentrism with a national identity that increasingly

[58] See, for example, the case of Vietnamese migrants to the US, in Hung Cam Thai, "Low-wage Vietnamese immigrants, social class and masculinity in the homeland," in *Men and Masculinities in Southeast Asia*, ed. Michele Ford and Lenore Lyons (New York: Routledge, 2012), 62.
[59] Yoonkyung Lee, "Migration, Migrants, and Contested Ethno-Nationalism in Korea," *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2009): 369.
[60] Katharine Moon, "Strangers in the Midst of Globalization: Migrant Workers and Korean Nationalism," in *Korea's Globalization*, ed. Samuel Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 148.
[61] Lee, "Migration, Migrants, and Contested Ethno-Nationalism," 376.

recognizes the belonging of migrants (even if limited to those considered an asset to society[62]). Today, still lured by the prospect of higher pay, Southeast Asian men continue to migrate in droves for work; but, with the Korean Wave, they are also now increasingly young students. By 2021, there were over 72,500 Southeast Asians studying in Korea (9 of every 10 coming from Vietnam[63]), constituting its largest share of students with overseas origin.[64]

Despite—or, owing to—the trendy, cosmopolitan inclinations among many of these young people, Southeast Asians in Korea face and contribute to a new form of othering through their lookism examined earlier in this study. In addition, "mixed bloods" (*honhyŏl*) have become a common sight on dating apps, candid about their dual identity but more often than not brushing over their "other" side while selectively performing Koreanness. One Chinese Filipino who preferred to communicate with me in Korean initially identified only as *honhyŏl* and seemed hesitant to come out as not Korean, explaining that guys are "so hot and handsome" in Korea while none are in the Philippines.[65] In his case, the hierarchy is clear: Korean→Chinese→ Filipino. In the broader scope of white Asianness, this was also the case with a "half" Japanese (*hāfu*) I encountered in Europe, who readily advertised his Japaneseness but became angry and defensive when asked about the rest of his background (which from his photo looked Southeast Asian).[66] As with the Chinese Filipino, a self-advertised "Taiwanese Korean"—who was born and raised in Taiwan but recently went "back" to Korea for a few years—also found Koreans to

[62] Intolerance toward groups such as refugees is an issue where the society is much further behind, as seen with the moral panic and protests against the presence of Yemeni asylum seekers in Jeju.
[63] Statistics Korea, "2020 Survey on Immigrants' Living Conditions and Labour Force," Ministry of Economy and Finance (March 17, 2022).
[64] ASEAN-Korea Centre, *2022 ASEAN & Korea in Figures*, xix.
[65] Fieldnotes, September 26, 2022.
[66] Fieldnotes, June 25, 2023.

be more handsome than Taiwanese. With his facial features, hairstyle, and brow shape typically seen in Korea, it came as no surprise when he denied having trouble meeting Korean men in Korea or in Taiwan.[67]

In their inter-Asian exchange, Southeast Asian gay men as juxtaposed with white Asians are relegated to the invisible yet lesser category "gay men of color." Stuck on the outer edges of the Koreasphere, they employ these practices of "disidentification"[68] with their Southeast Asianness, seemingly as a way to contend with the hegemony of white Asianness. Even when they are part of the racial majority at home, they may experience "racial melancholia"[69] in the shadow of Koreans and other white Asians, who meet a contrasting experience as a result of their privilege despite being the racial minority in Southeast Asia. While Alex Au has argued that inter-Asian exchange within the gay community is reorienting desire from the "foreign" [white] West to the "indigenous" East and Southeast Asia,[70] these orientations are often asymmetrical and one-sided. The subsections below discuss this from separate angles looking inward and outward from the perspective of Korean gay men: the racial autophilia brought about by their centrality in the Koreasphere, and the ethnosexual panics around racial others peripheralized as *tongnama*—put succinctly, the sexual racisms of "only Koreans" and "no foreigners."

Korean Gay Men and Racial Autophilia

As much as my earlier table shows the Koreaphilias of Japanese and Southeast Asian gay men on dating apps, it also insinuates a marked absence of intercultural interests among Koreans. In my

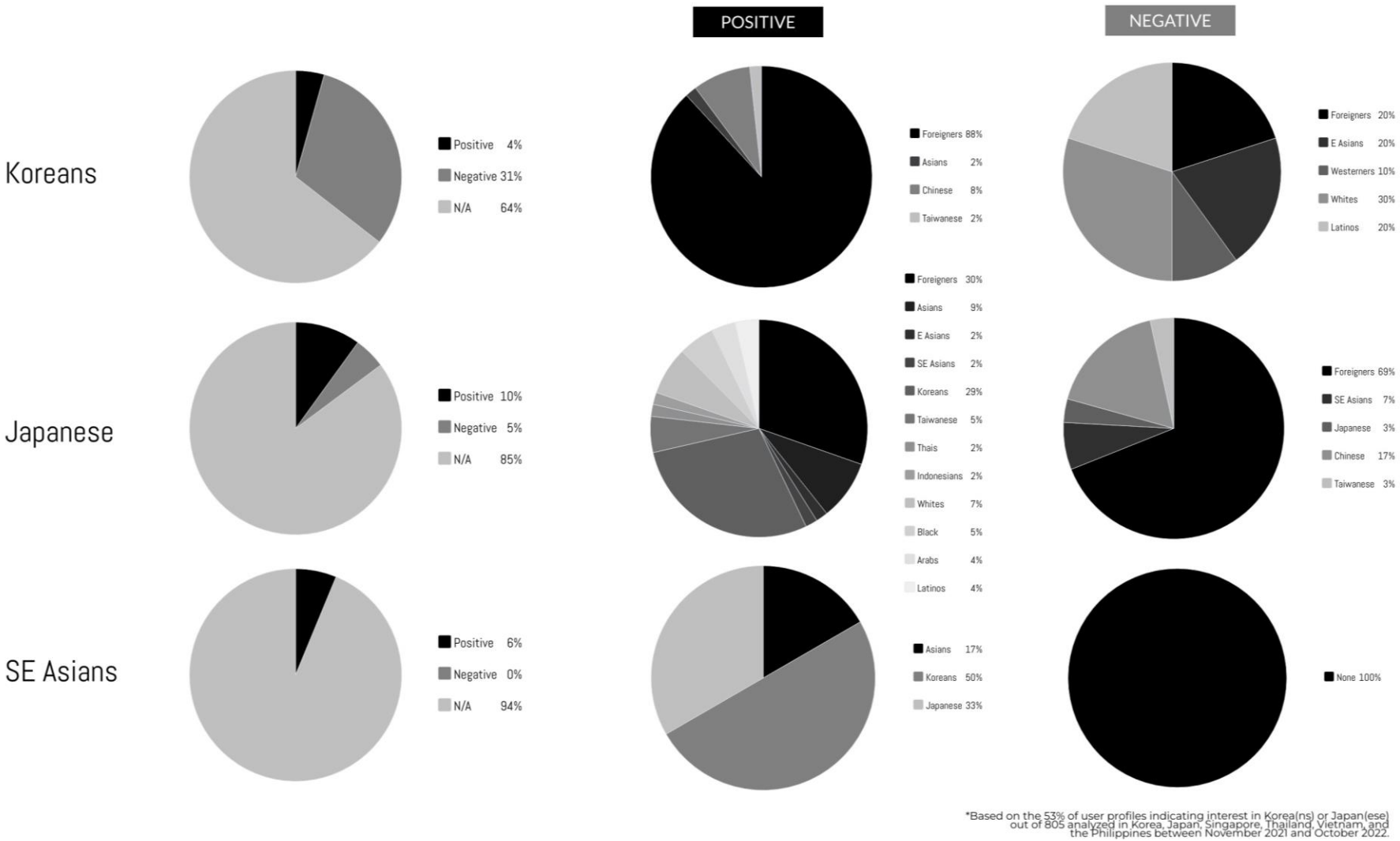
[67] Fieldnotes, March 18, 2023.
[68] Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[69] David Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
[70] Au, "Speaking of Bangkok," 189.

190 documented profiles of Korean gay men in Korea, Japan, and Thailand containing one or more racial indicators or sexual preferences (beyond "top" or "bottom"), none displayed any orientation toward the soft power assets of others. This includes over a dozen self-indicated *zainichi*, several of whom instead divulged their shortcomings regarding Korean physical and linguistic attributes with disclaimers such as "[I have] zero [South] Korean characteristics" (*kankoku yōso zero desu*) or on their inability to speak Korean.[71] One *zainichi* indicated his preference for "salt faces" (*shiogao*)—a type in Japan commonly associated with Korean men's features, as opposed to the prototypical Japanese man's "soy sauce face" (*shōyugao*).[72]

"Fats" (*ttung*) (along with "chubs" [*t'ong*]) and "fem[me]s" (*kki*) were the most recurrent dislikes among Koreans (66%), with many others explicitly excluding foreigners (30%). This was often typed in English—as if to keep Koreaspheric extraterrestrials furthest at bay—with phrases ranging from "only Korean[s]" to "no foreigner[s]]," "Foreigner ×," and even "HATE FOREIGNER," along with warnings such as "I refuse to talk to foreigners" and "foreigners don't send messages." Low English skills were a salient feature from the poor grammar often exhibited, hinting at a possible language phobia connected to this avoidance. For many, "foreigner"—in English, Korean (*oegugin*), or Japanese (*gai*[*koku*]*jin*)—denotes a racially, culturally, and linguistically ambiguous category of others irrespective of nationality, and can include those of mixed heritage (*honhyŏl* or *hāfu*) and the overseas diaspora (*kyop'o* or *nikkējin*). One user also set his alias to "Only Korean," suggesting both the critical importance of race to him and the regularity to which he is contacted by non-Koreans.

[71] In Japanese, "Korea" is commonly expressed with an indication of North ([*kita*]*chōsen*) or South (*kankoku*), with the latter being the normative default outside geopolitical contexts.
[72] There is a series of other condiments such as "sugar," "vinegar," "miso," "sauce," "ketchup," "mayonnaise," and others to classify features that deviate from the prototype.

Sexual Racisms of Gay Men on Dating Apps



*Based on the 53% of user profiles indicating interest in Korea(ns) or Japan(ese) out of 805 analyzed in Korea, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines between November 2021 and October 2022.

ISO codes, flag icons, scripts, and other indicators are often incorporated in aliases and elsewhere as chosen markers of national or racial identity on dating apps. I saw this done by every nationality of my fieldsites—but, to serve exclusionary purposes, only by Koreans and Japanese. “KOR” is an example of a Korean in Japan who put his identity at the forefront, turning to the body to declare exclusive interest in “East Asians.” “*Namja* [KR Flag]” and “*Gen Gen* [JP Flag]” combined hangul or katakana and kanji along with national flags, with English reserved in the bodies to say, “Only Korean” and “My target is Japanese gay ONLY. Sorry, foreigners are NOT eligible.” “*Shūto* (JPN Only!!)” supplemented his alias’s exclamation with the inserted hashtag “#japanese,” possibly with the intent to filter himself to other users and vice-versa. The self-advertising of white Asianness, by nationality or race, can be a means to attract others on the assumption of a normative philia or to repel them in furtherance of one’s autophilia. Even one Korean exclusively looking for white Westerners inferred the shared sense of an “Asian” racial bond with the explanation, “Asians are like my brothers. Don’t feel any sexually from them sorry.”

Despite Korean gay men’s omission of intercultural interests on dating apps, it would be hasty to conclude that they have none or even fewer than others. Their regular consumption of cultural products and experiences through overseas travel suggests that they merely limit their narration on dating apps to the physical attributes of themselves and of those to whom they advertise. The “positive” sexual racisms found in the chart above, while comparatively few against the “negative” and those of Japanese and Southeast Asians, also prove that there are exceptional fetishes among them for certain groups other than Koreans (though, none explicitly for Southeast Asians). However, their patronization of gay establishments in Southeast Asia for the K-pop but not for the local men is a testament to not only a racial but also a cultural

autophilia contained within the Koreasphere.

The propensity to stick closely to other Koreans at these bars and clubs is due partly to communicative barriers but also to fears over crime. Even other Koreans working or studying in Southeast Asia are seen as possibly dangerous, with cases of human trafficking and extortion by convicts on the run known to many.[73] Southeast Asians' run ins with abusive tourists and business owners, too, has also tarnished any impressions from the Korean Wave, further contributing to the crimes against Koreans in Southeast Asia.[74] Korean gay men's inability to confidently speak English or the local language can be a safety risk and cause for self-isolation, as also recognized by locals who come across (but rarely in contact with) them.[75] This is in contrast to other gay tourists including prosperous Asians such as Singaporeans, who make friends and find sexual partners at these places and even relocate to live with boyfriends, learn the language, and start businesses.[76] Such inter-Asian contacts are common occurrences in the gay community, with gay saunas being the typical destination of tourists from Southeast Asia.[77] For Korean gay men in Southeast Asia, intimacy with locals is rare outside massage parlors; and, even there, contact is passively received with typically limited to no reciprocation.[78] While commodified sex at gay saunas massage parlors brings about a sense of (homo)sexual liberation for others,[79] Korean gay men seem to be less conspicuous as active consumers, instead liberating

[73] Ekoluoma, "Receiving a New Kind of Others," 9 and *Ssoulmeit'ŭ*, "*P'illip'insŏ han'gugin mannamyŏn choshim haeyadoegessŏyot* ~~!!," IVANCITY (January 23, 2013), http://ivancity.com/page/community.
[74] Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "A Fading Wave, Sinking Tide? A Southeast Asian Perspective on the Korean Wave," in *Korea's Changing Roles in Southeast Asia: Expanding Influence and Relations*, ed. David Steinberg (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010), 259-260.
[75] Fieldnotes, January 1, September 28, October 7 & 15, 2022.
[76] Au, "Speaking of Bangkok," 185.
[77] Dacanay, "Encounters in the Sauna," 109.
[78] *Magumagu* 25, "*Erot'ik'an masajiro t'aeguk yŏhaeng mamuri haessŏyo*.," IVANCITY (July 29, 2018), http://ivancity.com/page/community and Fieldnotes, September 29, 2022.
[79] Au, "Speaking of Bangkok," 184.

themselves within the safe space of the Koreasphere.

Although the autophilic sentiments put on open display in online profiles represented only the minority of my sample, they surfaced recurrently in group chats and other forums I monitored, suggesting a silent practice among the majority that may be immeasurable yet is broadly palpable and thus cause for concern. Normalized, such autophilia risks materializing into institutionalized practices of nationalism and xenophobia in the gay community. The tying of national symbols to messages of racial "preference"[80] is a possible indication of users' racial exclusion as ideologically connected to their national identity. Such question of Korean (or Japanese) "homonationalism" is outside the scope of this chapter but may certainly warrant further inquiry.[81] For now, I will bring attention to the ethnosexual panics beneath the pervasive phobias toward the subjects of the homogenizing term *tongnama*, established among Korean gay men in reference to the hybridized periphery of Southeast Asia(ns).

'Tongnama' and Ethnosexual Panics

Southeast Asians' ranking of themselves and one another along the scale of whiteness is inconsequential to the homogeneous, monochromatic category in which they are lumped and discounted as a whole by white Asians. Despite Koreans' increasing travel to and even residence in Southeast Asia, they have less exposure to and interest in Southeast Asians. This was revealed in AKC's survey[82] and can be witnessed in the self-isolating enclaves set up by Koreans in wealthier areas such as Bangkok's Sukhumvit, Ho Chi Minh City's District 7, and Manila's

[80] As with anywhere else in the world, Asian gay men's sexual racism is commonly rationalized as personal preference. Fieldnotes, August 29, October 4 & 11, 2022.
[81] For more on the original concept of homonationalism, see Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
[82] ASEAN-Korea Centre, *2021 Survey on Mutual Perceptions*, 77.

Malate. The "white privilege" they experience in their limited inter-Asian exchanges is akin to that for white Westerners, and sexual racisms borne out of this privilege have the segregating consequences against and within minoritized groups discussed thus far in this chapter. While Southeast Asian men are imagined on the one hand as physically endowed,[83] this can translate on the other to associations of hypersexuality, indiscretion, and STDs (as it can in the imaginary of black men for both East and Southeast Asians[84] and of subgroupings such as darker Thais for "clean and safe" Sino-Thais[85]).

Any remaining doubt over the assumptions made about Korean gay men's racial exclusion can be put to rest by the overly candid inter-Korean exchanges that take place on IVANCITY forums and community app BAND. In one group chat for a popular gay [and racially exclusive[86]] sauna in Seoul, conversations of race and racial invaders are on constant replay. Comments about "cute" Japanese (despite their tacky hairstyles) and the [comparatively, among others] "best" Taiwanese sharply contrast with cautionary tales about predatory, contagious "Shiteast Asians" (*ttongnama*, lit. "shit south Asia[ns]).[87] In one discussion, "*Nambongi*" wonders where there are any hot guys among so many manual laboring Southeast Asians. "*Ŏrini*" responds with Korean boy band 2PM's [Sino-]Thai[-American] member Nichkhun as an exceptional case, insinuating that Southeast Asians can be attractive so long as they are Koreanized.[88] "*Chilp'ŏk* 75 63 26 B" says he has yet to see an attractive *tongnama*,

[83] *Magumagu* 25, "*Erot'ik'an masajiro t'aeguk yŏhaeng mamuri haessŏyo*.," *Magumagu* 25, "*T'aeguk tchimbang* gay fucking show *hugi*," IVANCITY (July 26, 2018), http://ivancity.com/page/community, and Fieldnotes, October 7, 2022 and October 23, 2023.
[84] Fieldnotes, October 4, 2022.
[85] Dacanay, "Encounters in the Sauna," 110-111.
[86] As of June 2023, a sign at the entrance says in English, "Only Korean can enter here."
[87] Fieldnotes, November 16, 2021 and February 3, 2022.
[88] Fieldnotes, January 16, 2022.

while “Kyle” laments that their brains are not as big as their dicks.[89] Despite being read by over 490 members, not one person intervened with any criticism of the racist insults or in defense of Southeast Asians.

The more incendiary remarks were made in response to a conversation around isolated incidents involving Southeast Asians in Korea who secretly filmed at gay saunas and published the clips on YouTube. A few establishments have barred foreigners as a result, with the one in this infamous case in question targeting their ban on Filipinos (which, in practice, became a blanket prohibition of outwardly discernible Southeast Asians).[90] In the group chat for that gay sauna, ethnosexual panics are starker with rumors of repeat behavior by *tongnama* at other establishments along with accounts of their tactics. “Just a Feeling” infers from the latest perpetrator’s channel content that he is Vietnamese, to which “*Shinsadapkehaengdonghae*” launches into racial slurs such as “Viet Congs” and “rice-noodle-eating ‘things’ [*kŏt*]” that should take lessons from “rice-eating ‘people’ [*minjok*],” while analogizing their phone camera “guerilla warfare” with the US’s loss in the Vietnam War.[91] “*Yaksadori*” compares these culprits to Koreans, who he says would ask permission to film and hide faces with mosaics when publishing—considerations foreigners do not have.[92] “176 74 42 AT” thinks foreigners should be charged more for entry as a deterrent,[93] while “*Heŭŭng*” now avoids gay saunas altogether out of fear of everyone from overseas—people he once believed had better manners. He takes a step further to insist that foreigners should not even be let into Korea, after having brought in the Omicron variant of COVID-19.[94]

[89] Fieldnotes, February 3, 2022.
[90] Fieldnotes, February 3, 2022.
[91] Fieldnotes, February 4, 2022.
[92] Fieldnotes, February 3, 2022.
[93] Fieldnotes, February 5, 2022.
[94] Fieldnotes, February 3, 2022.

As touched on several times in this chapter, anxieties over filth, stench, and disease are persistent racial concerns that descend into ethnosexual panics. While the association of foreigners with coronavirus is a recent and temporary one, what has endured for decades is their correlation with AIDS. In 2008, "*P'ŭrik'wŏnsi*" took to IVANCITY's forums for advice after having anonymous sex with a Singaporean. He explains the symptoms he experienced soon after, expressing his regret and asking what he should do. Several comments quickly diagnose AIDS (not even HIV), blaming sex with an "international gay" (*gukchejŏk iban*), advising that condoms always be used with foreigners, and assuring that it could alternatively be a skin disease—which, apparently, are commonly transmitted by Southeast Asians.[95] In another thread from 2012, "*Chungjangnyŏn'gwaŭiinyŏn*" is about to meet a Singaporean at his hotel but is now afraid and asks what to do. Here, too, commenters question the safety of meeting a foreigner who could be a murderer and carry AIDS.[96] To this day, the topic of AIDS resurfaces in discussions around Southeast Asia(ns), with other examples in the context of sex parties in Bangkok;[97] gay nightlife in Ho Chi Minh City;[98] and one-night stands in Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia.[99]

The last type of ethnosexual panic I discuss here is perhaps the most concerning, as it is the most illusory and tied to a trend that may only intensify—that is, the assumption that almost every foreigner encountered online is a scammer. Over the past several years, "romance scams"

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[95] *P'ŭrik'wŏnsi*, "*Eijŭ kŏllin kŏn'gayo*?," IVANCITY (January 24, 2008), http://ivancity.com/page/community.
[96] *Chungjangnyŏn'gwaŭiinyŏn*, "*Naeil oegugin mannaryŏnŭndeyo*.," IVANCITY (February 16, 2012), http://ivancity.com/page/community.
[97] *Magumagu* 25, "*T'aeguk tchimbang gay fucking show hugi*."
[98] *K'ijakchalsaeng*, "*Hoch'iman wannŭnde mŏl ŏttŭk'ae*?!," IVANCITY (December 25, 2019), http://ivancity.com/page/community.
[99] Jjjka5298, "*Mannabon kukchŏk chung*.," IVANCITY (January 26, 2020), http://ivancity.com/page/community.

have exploded on dating apps to the extent where many find it hard to distinguish between real and fake profiles. In Korea, scammers manipulate Korean gay men's autophilic desires through photos of baby-faced, muscular white Asians while legitimizing their strange expressions (which are a result of automated translation) by claiming to be mixed Koreans or other Asians. As many are based in China, common choices of claimed racial or national origin are the [richer] Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia, as they can then easily switch to Mandarin, if necessary.[100] With the problem also rampant in Japan (where many claim to hail from Korea), Japanese gay dating app 9monsters even started warning against contacts from foreigners, though this was later revised to messages "in English or beginner Japanese." By now, Korean gay men are generally aware of the scourge—but not the true faces behind the mask, sidestepping scammers' stories of authenticity while buying into the national origins they present.[101] It further turns them away from English and anyone who uses it, as many cannot discern the credibility of the speaker due to their own limited ability. As AI develops and scammers' strategies become more sophisticated, it remains to be seen what implications this will have on the Southeastern disorientations in gay Korea.

Conclusion

In the post-pandemic travel boom, Korean and Southeast Asian cross-community contacts have returned to an accelerated pace. As this spurs new and developed inter-Asian exchanges within the gay community, bars, clubs, cruising spaces, and other gay establishments' business models and practices continue to meld with one another shaping an expansive regional community that is

[100] Fieldnotes, September 24, 2022.
[101] Fieldnotes, April 3 & June 2, 2021 and June 17, 2022.

ever more manifestly pan-Asian. At the same time, colorist, nationalist, and regionalist sentiments coupled with the sexually autophilic and autophobic tendencies arising from them remain a threat to the interpersonal cohesion of this community. Moving forward, the imbalance of power that sustains these inequities will without a doubt be impacted by changes to the stability of the Koreasphere. In the short term, Southeast Asian tourists are already feeling of sense of disenfranchisement with Korea for its entry barriers selectively applied against them.[102] Southeast Asia's own rise—now far more rapid than Korea's—also threatens to disrupt the status quo in the long term.

In its focus on the mutually shared racial desires and aversions among Korean and Southeast Asian gay men, this chapter has made insights about the former's "white Asian" privilege at home and in Southeast Asia, along with the nuanced divisions caused by socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural and other imbalances that construct both the latter's relationship with gay Korea as well as the Southeastern disorientations that confine them to the periphery of a hegemonic Koreasphere. Seeking answers to the disparity between Korean gay men's desires for and against *tongnama* on the one hand and Southeast Asian gay men's desires for white Asians and against one another on the other, the study has sparked new questions on both homonationalism in Korea and "homoregionalism" in Southeast Asia.[103]

Besides the hierarchy of desire on a light-dark scale, national and regional top-bottom binaries tied to conservative-liberal subcultures abound in the imaginary of Southeast Asia(ns): Cambodia(ns)-Lao(tian)s, Hanoi(ans)-Saigon(ese)—couplings with resemblance to other inter-

[102] Soo-ki Lee, "*Han'guk oryŏda ilbon kanda… tongnama kwan'gwanggaek mangnŭn 'K-ETA' nollan*," *Korea Daily*, October 10, 2023, http://news.koreadaily.com/2023/10/09/economy/economygeneral/20231009080324644.html.
[103] For more on my concept of homoregionalism in Korea, see Albert Graves, "In with the New: Homoregionalisms of Gay Men in Korea," *European Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 3 (2023).

Asian top-bottom tropes such as Korea(ns)-Japan(ese)[104] and Chengdu(nese)-Chongqing(ers).[105] Further inquiry can be made into the connections of these relationships with Asian gay identity, masculinity (cisgenderism), and the politics of "outness." There is also much to be revealed about the dynamics by which national and regional tensions divide and unite gay East and Southeast Asians, to explore possible ways to break down the ethnosexual barriers among them. By extension, this requires not only zooming out but also honing in on subnational contexts as they play out through the urban-rural divides that reconstruct both nation and region, along with the gay community as a whole.[106]

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[104] Graves, "Riding the Wave to Ni-Chōme," 392-393.
[105] Fieldnotes, August 27, 2023.
[106] Jackson, "Capitalism, LGBT Activism, and Queer Autonomy," 197.

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CONCLUSION

If there is one overarching takeaway from this body of work, it is that Korean gay space, place, and identity span far beyond the confines of what has been studied by scholars thus far. It is Korean but also Japanese; national but also regional; centered but also peripheralized; racial but also ideological; sexual but also cultural; commodified but also consuming; colonized but also hegemonic; and, "oriented" but also "disorienting." In the context of self and other, there is both North and South; homeland and diaspora; Japanless and Japanophilic; urban and rural; top and bottom; masculine and feminine; tall and short; light and dark—everything from proximately opposite to sexually autophilic. In its wanderlust across Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia, this study has found a plethora of binaries characterized by complementarities and contradictions.

Its answers to the questions asked from the outset seem clear yet incomplete: *Where exactly is "Korea?"* It's in Korea, but it's also in subnational regions within Korea, in Korean communities outside Korea, and in the borderless zone of the Koreasphere. *Who are the "Koreans?"* They're the people associated with Korea by "race" or nationality, but they're also the ones excluded from it by language and ideology. *What does it mean to "be" Korean?* A person can "be" by looking, acting, or thinking in conformity with normative standards of the Koreasphere, but a place can also "be" by serving or otherwise representing Koreans. *Do gay men have the agency to reshape Koreanness?* They're already reshaping it in myriad ways and on diverse platforms, but how it in turn reshapes them throughout its process of constant change may never be knowable.

With these answers comes a series of new questions yet to be explored: Are homoregionalisms contributing to a homonationalism in Korea? Is Korean gay space and place in Japan threatened by its increasing appropriation through "K-pop bars?" What further

discoveries can be made about Korean gay identity from diasporic communities elsewhere in Asia (for example, *chosŏnjok* in China or *koryo-saram* in Central Asia)? What are the spatial and temporal limitations of the Koreasphere? How will Koreanness and the performance of such change with the decline of the Korean Wave? Will Eastern orientations and Southeastern disorientations switch places once Southeast Asia—with its trajectory of strong growth, creative industries, and young populations—inevitably becomes tomorrow's trendsetter in Asia? To what extent will this shift in the balance of soft power rewrite the narrative of white Asianness?

For now, the Korean Wave continues to set the normativities of race, sexuality, and masculinity for the younger generations of Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. As this happens, imaginaries of desire among gay men in this region will remain under the cultural influence of the Koreasphere, with Korean gay men's ongoing capitalization on their hegemony over this racialized hierarchy. In the coming years, new generations of consumers and consumption patterns will result in the further reinvention of not only Korean gay space but also Korean gay place and identity in Asia. The study of these communities will be imperative to advance scholarship on Queer Asia; and, if my own study here has achieved anything, I could wish for no more than it to be a catalyst for better understanding and social harmony through deconstruction of the interracial/interethnic, intercultural, and intergenerational barriers that still manage to divide Koreans from Koreans, Koreans from Japanese, and Koreans from the rest of Asia.