

Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies

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INTRODUCTION

ON AN OTHERWISE ordinary bright and sunny spring afternoon not too long ago, I experienced a moment of both intellectual and interpersonal enlightenment. A friend and I were walking down the street and enjoying the sunshine when he announced—out of the blue, though with some hesitation—that he was gay. Although caught off guard, I did my best not to show the surprise I felt, which came from two sources. First, up until that moment I had never met an out gay man. Second, he didn't fit the mold of a gay man that I imagined; in fact, he was quite the opposite of that. He must have sensed how disconcerted I was. Pointedly, he asked me, "You are surprised because I don't look like a gay man, aren't you?" Not knowing how to respond, I kept my silence. He continued, "I know *you girls* believe all gay men are like Kang Dong-won [Kang Tong-wŏn] or Lee Joon-ki [Lee Chun-ki]," referring to well-known Korean actors. His point was right on the mark. I *did* assume that all gay men were pretty, skinny, stylish, and somewhat feminine looking—whatever that meant. My friend, on the other hand, was short, overweight, and unshaven; he paid no attention to fashion. He was anything but my preconceived mental image of how gay men looked and situated themselves in the world. But, of course, as I came very quickly to realize that day and would later appreciate rationally through study, gay men are as diverse as any other misleadingly stereotyped group. That night I felt ashamed. Despite being a media researcher, I found myself uncritically bound by media representation. I found myself blaming the media for (re)producing stereotyped images of gay people. Then I realized that the mental image I was harboring took its traits from a handful of portrayals like Lee Joon-ki's gender-ambiguous clown in the film *The King and the Clown* (*Wangŭi Namcha*, 2005), and indeed from a variety of characters featured in fan-produced texts, especially those in Korean and Japanese, that are penned by (of all people!) women.

The incident with my dear friend on that spring day propelled me to pay attention to the dynamics that would come to form the basis of this book. I started by unearthing the substance and origin of my fantasy: my notions about the gay male body came first and foremost from being a *fan*. My career as a fan can be traced to my high school days, when I avidly adored one boy band in particular: H.O.T. (High-five of Teenagers). I was (and perhaps still am) a so-called *ppasuni*. “Ppasuni” is a self-mocking term for young female fans who fervently follow celebrities. It originates in *oppa*, an appellation that women use for addressing older men in Korea. *Sunni* is a common women’s name, like Jane in the United States, now more often used as a suffix. For example, *chipsunni* means a woman who loves staying at *chip* (home). I purchased every album by H.O.T. and listened to their songs at home, at school, and at the library until the cassette tapes were completely warped. I video-recorded every single TV show on which the band made an appearance and watched them repeatedly, memorizing the band members’ facial expressions, movements, and stage banter. They were the one and only streak of light for a teenager tired of the heartless high school life born of Korea’s very tough system of college entrance exams.

Soon after falling in love with H.O.T., I was introduced to online fan communities using the Bulletin Board System (BBS) via dial-up internet connections. The fan forums were full of treasures: H.O.T.’s daily schedule, pictures I couldn’t find anywhere else, personal information about the band members, and fans’ personal stories related to the singing group. What captured my attention most among them was a *paeng* (room) dedicated to fanfic: fiction written by fans. In their original stories, members of the cybercommunity let their homoerotic imagination about H.O.T. members unfold. The genre portraying my beloved stars in beautiful yet sensual love stories opened a door to a whole new world for me, one in which I was encountering (imagined) gay identity for the first time. These texts were effectively sculpting the gay male body in my imagination, triggering what has become a longstanding interest in gay-themed writing. I became a fan of other types of gay romance narratives and sought media commodities that included gay themes or characters, whether produced in Korea or elsewhere. My consumption of images of gay people, mediated by several degrees of separation, instilled in me some admittedly unrealistic but very vivid imaginary frameworks.

While investigating this woman-written, gay-male fantasy world, I discovered that many of my female peers shared my imagination about gay men—this may be the cohort whom my gay friend referred to as “you girls.” Some

of these women and girls became fans of some celebrity or another and found themselves bumping into fanfic; their trajectories parallel my own. Others were introduced to *yaoi* or boys’ love (BL), a Japanese genre of homoerotic *manga* (comic books), and were inspired to create their own versions based on their fantasies about the gay male body. Still others started enjoying Western television programs such as *Will & Grace* (1998–2006, 2017–) or *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) that featured gay lead characters. Korea’s opening up of cultural avenues with Japan and Western countries and the development of new media technology, which will be examined throughout this book, allowed these fan-nish activities to proliferate. In 1998, the ban on Japanese cultural exports was lifted, resulting in the increased circulation of *yaoi* in Korea. The earlier launch of the cable industry in 1995 had been another watershed allowing Korean women to encounter gay representations as never before. Many cable channels introduced a large number of inexpensive US dramas, some of which featured gay characters or themes—elements hardly ever found in Korean-made programs at that time. Digital media accelerated this trend toward increased access: the propagation of the high speed internet for which South Korea is famous eased not only access to global gay-themed media but also the production, distribution, and consumption of local fan-produced texts on queer themes.

Over time, Korean society began recognizing a pattern of women fans working out in writing their curiosity about gayness and the gay male body. News reports have portrayed such women as being sensorially enthusiastic about consuming and producing homoerotic romance narratives. Whenever gay-themed films are released or TV dramas air, articles in the academy and the media make this point about straight women fantasizing about, or alongside, gay men. This dynamic is now a kind of consensus reality, something the average Korean news consumer would simply take as read. But I, as an academic and a fan or “aca-fan,” wanted to know more: more about fanfic, other gay-themed cultural artworks, my generation of women, gay men’s realities, and ultimately the intertwining relationships produced among these entities. Where does the women’s fantasy ultimately lead us?

To answer that question, this book looks at ardent Korean female fans of gay male representation in the media: their status in contemporary Korean society, their relationship with other groups such as the gay population, and, above all, their contribution to reshaping the media’s portrayal of gay people and the public’s perspective on sexually marginalized groups. In due course, we will find that female enthusiasm for portrayals of gay men in diverse

productions has enabled the emerging visibility of the gay male body in mainstream Korean media, and that women's fandom has contributed to changing what has historically been the harsh reality of nonheterosexually identified life. In Korea, this fan subculture started forming around text-based media, such as yaoi and gay-themed dramas and has been influenced by diverse social, cultural, political, economic, and global conditions. We see as defining trends the democratization of Korea, its more open policy toward overseas media and cultural products, the diffusion of consumerism, government investment in culture, the Hollywoodization of the Korean film industry, technological advances, and the popularity of Korean culture abroad. Much scholarly attention has been paid to female fandom for homoeroticizing existing cultural texts in many countries; however, I find some aspects of the subculture have been relatively neglected and insufficiently charted. We have not fully appreciated its location in and influence on society at large. That underappreciation leads me to the coinage "FANtasy," fantasy that a straight woman fan of gay romance creates and actualizes. Ultimately, this analysis—this story—is hers.

The Gay Male Body as FANtasy

Korean women's fandom for male-male romance revolves around their fantasies about the gay male body. In fanfic, straight women pop-culture enthusiasts often construct erotic relationships between male characters, a practice that is at core a reflection—and materialization—of fantasies about gay men's identities and relationships with which the straight women authors and their audiences have limited real-life experience. Nonetheless, society outside of marginal fan communities has gradually come to recognize the beautified and romanticized gay people in fan-produced fiction—that is, in FANtasy texts—as touchstones in major media markets. Regardless of how ordinary gay bodies would (and do) read this niche culture, its growing recognition secures FANtasy a space in contemporary popular culture.

In fact, homoerotic imagination within marginal pop-cultural texts is not an exclusively Korean female preserve at all: it has a pedigree spanning several decades both in the West and outside it. Among the many configurations such genre writing can assume, the most spotlighted and researched forms are slash fiction and yaoi. Slash fiction's genesis has been traced to the world of science fiction—in particular, to the prolific fans of *Star Trek*, the popular television show that began in the 1960s and boasts its share of *official* spinoff materials. While ostensibly professional, the deep friendship and commitment between

the two main male protagonists, Captain Kirk and First Officer Spock, motivated female fans to imagine an erotic relationship between the characters. The term "slash"—which can be used as a noun, a verb, or an adjective—comes from the fans' use of a virgule, commonly known as a slash, to join the names of Kirk and Spock, as in K/S. The unorthodox narrative tweaking initially encountered opposition from mainstream fans of the show; however, slash fiction gradually gained its own fandom, establishing itself as an important, if derivative, literary genre. *Star Trek's* Kirk and Spock have become mainstays of slash fiction, as have *Star Wars* and *Hunch*'s titular characters and many others.

In the 1990s, slash fiction was actively researched by prescient scholars like Camille Bacon-Smith, Constance Penley, Roberta Pearson, Henry Jenkins, and John Tullioch. They found that slash's authors and readers were mostly heterosexual women¹—not only in the United States but also in Britain, Canada, and Australia—communicating through amateur magazines (fanzines or "zines"). Academic welcomed "slashers," believing that these fan practices disrupt the heteronormative hierarchy and reconstruct gender roles beyond the dichotomized categories of masculinity and femininity, thereby fulfilling a distinctively female egalitarian dream. Slash narratives were appreciated as early as the mid-1980s as a form of female pornography or erotica appropriating two male bodies.² Marginalized for a time, such subcultural fan activities have broadened their own territory within fan culture. The development of digital media technology in particular made lay production more accessible, widened slash fiction's circulation, and augmented the discussions going on in fan circles. Now, fan writers slash not only science fiction series but also other mainstream media texts, regardless of genre; *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003), *Harry Potter* (2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *The Twilight Saga* (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012), *The X-Files* (1993–), *Supernatural* (2005–), *CSI* (2000–2013), *Lost* (2004–2010), and *Heroes* (2006–2010) have all inspired vibrant slash communities.

Slash fiction's counterpart in non-Western cultural regions is yaoi. It does have a sizable fan base in Europe and North America, yet its biggest audience base is in its home country, Japan, and neighboring countries such as Korea, China, and Taiwan. Yaoi is an acronym taken from the words *yama-nashi* (no climax), *ochi-nashi* (no point), and *imi-nashi* (no meaning). A yaoi narrative will typically take an existing heterosexual manga story and use its characters to retell the story with queer elements. Like slash fiction, these rewritten homosexual romances are normally produced and consumed by female fans.

These stories originated in *shōnen-ai* (boy love) in the 1970s; one of many Japanese manga genres, and are now widely referred to as BL (boys' love) or yaoi. Some scholars distinguish between the two, defining yaoi as secondary, amateur, fan-written literature and BL as commercialized, professional publications;³ however, the usage patterns of the two terms are not perfectly discrete because the works' orientations and narratives remain similar. Although BL is increasingly often used as a blanket term for the whole genre, I use yaoi here in consideration of its historical usage and popularity in Korea in the period of my study. In Japan, yaoi began in the late 1970s, when printing and photocopying machines enabled manga enthusiasts to create and share their own publications easily. An amateur fan manga magazine is called *dōjinshi*, which is equivalent to fanzine in Western cultures. Finally, in 1978, *June*, the first full-fledged shōnen-ai commercial magazine, was published.

In the mid-1980s, yaoi appeared as a genre similar to shōnen-ai. At that time, a group of young Japanese women artists had started portraying same-sex love between two young male protagonists in the popular boys' soccer manga *Captain Tsubasa*. Despite their original, textual masculinity, these characters are usually feminized to some extent in yaoi texts. James Welker, a cultural anthropologist specializing in Japanese women, has described a yaoi character as an "androgynous and sexually ambiguous figure with twinkling eyes whose femininity allowed readers to identify with him and escape to his distant world, most often a romanticized and historic Europe."⁴ According to Mark McLelland, a sociologist who studies Japanese male homosexuality, androgynous characters allow the female reader to leave "the sexist roles assigned to her by the family system."⁵ A story about these androgynous males progresses in the trope of the *seme/uke* pairing: the "seme" (Japanese for "attack," the one who penetrates or is on top) leads a relationship, and the "uke" ("receive," the one who is penetrated or is on the bottom) follows. These notions often reflect corresponding gendered roles: "uke are usually shorter (the 'height rule'), prettier, and more vulnerable than seme; in other words, presenting physical and emotional attributes socially constructed as feminine or female."⁶ Generally, this kind of same-sex but differently gendered love story is fantasized and romanticized. In many cases, however, yaoi stories include overtly graphic depictions of same-sex male intercourse and sexual violence such as rape or incest. Furthermore, with androgynous characters, yaoi authors attempt diverse gender-bending plot points such as male pregnancy. The two genres, slash fiction and yaoi, are very similar: they are fan-written texts featuring gay male romance and erotica that are produced and consumed

by women. Of course, there are certain dissimilarities.⁷ For example, the extent of their social acceptance is different. Yaoi is a relatively mainstream form of popular culture available in Japanese big bookstores, and its fans publicly enjoy reading it. By contrast, slash fiction is somewhat marginalized, its fandom underground and closeted. It is also true that characterizing male protagonists and building viable stories are tasks far easier for creators of yaoi than for those writing slash fiction. Indeed, the latter genre uses established characters and "refers to a rich storyworld and character history"—so complex that readers unfamiliar with the original texts' intricacies may effectively be discouraged from creating new narratives.⁸ Notwithstanding content differences, both slash fiction and yaoi basically provide producers and consumers very similar pleasures—"shifting point of view/multiple identifications, androgynous protagonists, egalitarian love relationships, and graphic depictions of sexual activities."⁹ In fact, the two genres have influenced each other: two out of three yaoi readers (68 percent) have reported that they read slash as well, and a large number of yaoi fans reside in North America and Europe.¹⁰ Put simply, communications technology is making the interplay between yaoi and slash fiction extremely feasible and therefore more robust than ever. Female authors and readers are now able to share their sexual fantasies with their counterparts around the world.

Many have sought to explain why FANtasy as crystallized in slash fiction and yaoi is constantly not only written but also eagerly received by a reading audience. Explanations vary. One holds that the motivation for writing and reading these genres stems from discontent with the existing heterosexual romance genre. Referring to Ann Snitow, a feminist theorist and activist, the yaoi researcher Tan Ban Kee argues that heterosexual novels have limitations, such as the hackneyed love-marriage cycle and the passive female character who fears losing her virginity.¹¹ In yaoi, male same-sex lovers are free of the concerns that entangle heterosexual couples—there is no fabled deflowering before marriage, no wedding to plan, and no taking care of a baby. Still, gay couples have their own hardships to endure, struggles that may be refreshing to female readers, such as two men's ambivalent relationship between friendship and love. The main characters, as males, are on something of an even playing field; their relationship reflects no gendered imbalance of power, which inheres in both reality and heterosexual romance novels.

Also, women can turn the tables by enjoying the male body with their female gaze;¹² they can even objectify two beautiful male bodies at the same time. Moreover, they are free to control and manipulate those bodies,

Correlationally, slash fiction and yaoi function as pornography for women, in particular "a type of amateur porn" that can substitute "for real romantic and sexual relationships."¹³ By and large, the existing culture of pornography is centered around heterosexual men and their sexual desires, usually making the female body an object. Writing their own gay erotica is one way for straight women to manifest their desires and express—and enjoy—underattended aspects of their sexuality.

Through interviews with female viewers of gay pornography, the social psychologists Jessica McCutcheon and CJ Bishop unearthed three reasons why women enjoy this genre.¹⁴ First, the respondents were open to new genres: they were tired of straight porn, so they moved to other types. Second, if they particularly preferred gay content, it was because they discovered more intimacy between gay characters than between male and female actors in straight pornography. This finding was related to the third reason: the authors believe that the male-oriented hierarchy underlying heterosexual pornography leads it to objectify and subjugate the female body. In gay porn, the relationship between characters is more egalitarian because they are the same gender, and they are more interactive during their precoital play. Gay pornography gives its sexual scenes a greater sense of authenticity than male-centered straight content in which female characters look like they are acting for money, not actually enjoying themselves. In this vein, a BL researcher, Rio Otomo, suggested that reading and writing gay erotic content create a liberating space in which women can express their sexual desire without implicating their own bodies, which are almost always the object of the patriarchal male gaze—in brief, without "the ghost of patriarchy."¹⁵ In imagining different power relations, FANtasy fans redefine masculinity and femininity, sexual desire, and relationships based on intimacy, caring, and mutuality instead of dominant heteronormative sex and gender roles.¹⁶

All of this amounts to an explanation of why the object of FANtasy is primarily the gay male body, not the lesbian body. Of course, female-female erotic narratives created by fans do exist: femslash, saffie (a portmanteau word combining "sapphic" and "fiction"), and altfic in slash fandom and *yuri* (lily in Japanese) and girls' love (*shojo-ai*) in yaoi fandom. Their smaller authorship and readership numbers, however, correlate to less attention in academic circles. As to why lesbian themes are less popular among female fans, Henry Jenkins suggested that their day-to-day experiences already include a degree of same-sex relationality. An interviewee of his, a slash writer, informed Jenkins that

most women in fandom have longstanding female friendships. . . . If we want to see strong female-female relationships, all we have to do is look in our own lives. To us that's mundane. . . . Slash is something way out there—a total fantasy. Not many of us know men who incorporate this ideal bonding into their relationships, and that's what we want to see.¹⁷

Generally, women, regardless of sexual orientation, are believed to express their intimacy and affection more than men do. Hence, homosocial significs such as a light touch, whispering, a warm hug, or holding hands frequently occur among female friends and are widely accepted—homosexual potential does not immediately come to mind. However, this is not so much the case for men: the same homosocial behaviors rarely happen between them and thus are read differently. In such a social milieu, women may fantasize about the novel—the *taboo*—male-male relationship. We should on some level see heterosexual women's preference for gay male eroticism as commonsensical—they are interested in male bodies and experience plenty of homosocial interaction with other women in their day-to-day lives.

The fact that women imagine a utopian space wherein male-male romance is free from social or physical constraints led early theorists of FANtasy culture to believe that the genre subverts the mainstream system of binary sex and hierarchical gender roles. This conceptualization has had an immense impact on research that followed. Yet some demurred at this course of research. They averred that resistance to established gender and sexuality structures, in fact, would have no effect in the long run and would instead end up marginalizing women and sexual minorities.¹⁸ Recently, more researchers are joining this school of thought. Not only do they remain opposed to attributing resistive potential to yaoi and slash, but they also reject the uniqueness of such fan texts as a literary genre. Christine Scodari, a feminist media studies scholar, raised the question of how such genres' ignoring and boycotting of female characters could be considered emancipatory in the context of gender hierarchy.¹⁹ Prior to that Elizabeth Woldedge, a *Star Trek* fan and fan studies researcher, had already claimed that most elements of slash narratives already exist in other romance genres and a male-male coupling does not deviate from the structure of heterosexual relationships.²⁰ I believe these critiques are reasonable in general, although I will argue with their assertions in chapter 1. Some FANtasy practices can be read as less than forthrightly rebellious. To be frank, criticism like Scodari's and Woldedge's inevitably emerges when the

framework of gender and sexuality politics is applied to the FANtasy subculture, which only emerged out of women's desire for more pleasure from the consumption of popular culture.²¹ Nonetheless, I still believe that FANtasy culture has resistant aspects that we discover when we consider the genre in a context larger than gender and sexuality. Even if the initial motives behind or narratives of FANtasy culture have limitations, it is worth examining the resistive influences FANtasy culture has had on female fans' everyday lives and society; an examination scholars have been relatively reticent to do.

Korean FANtasy culture does share many affinities with slash and yaoi and is not exempt from the critiques; however, their dissimilarity, which I attribute to the Korean appropriation of global texts, suggests the counterhegemonic potential of FANtasy culture in broad terms. When I met with FANtasy fans and other involved groups, such as nonfan women, media industry professionals, and gay men, and realized the complexity of their experiences, I was struck by some changes that FANtasy culture has been making in contemporary heteronormative Korean culture. The ubiquitous "flower-boy (*kkoch minnam*) syndrome" in Korean culture is an example. The syndrome calls for some background information about how the gay male body is understood in Korea. As I have argued elsewhere, Korean people posit that a man who is a eunuch or fond of another man does not have enough masculinity and is thus feminine.²² Gay men's apparent femininity in Korea is different from what one sees in Western cultures. The traits associated with femininity are primarily being reserved, quiet, and delicate—put simply, not manly, while the strong stereotype that Western people have of gay men is that they are flamboyant or buffoonish. Hence, performing outside expected gender roles, a Korean gay man's physical body is considered feminine looking, and people make sexual jokes about him such as, "Don't you have a penis?" Eunuchs, regardless of sexuality, ultimately connote gayness: if you don't have a penis, you are not a man in a heteronormative sense. In this way, Korean heteropatriarchy constructs hierarchy not only between men and women but also between nongay or manly men and gay or nonmanly men. Thus, a man's physical or emotional femininity is usually associated with gayness in Korean culture. Accordingly, the gay body is stereotyped as pretty (not handsome), slim, and androgynous, and gay men as interested in fashion, beauty, caring, and nurturing, which are traditionally considered women's pursuits in Korea.

The gay body is romanticized by Korean FANtasy fans (and, by extension, by Korean women) because gay men are believed to have features that straight men do not. In other words, Korean women tired of strong, manly,

and patriarchal Korean men project their male fantasy—a soft appearance and sweet personality, responsiveness to female desire, and egalitarianism—onto the gay body. FANtasy texts camouflage heterosexual female desires as gayness. In the late 1990s, the preference for such male types was combined with soft masculinity and metrosexuality and led to the emergence of the flower-boy syndrome.²³ Flower boys are basically in-between men and women in body and affect. Physically they are pretty, not handsome, and emotionally they are soft, not macho. That is, the flower boy represents a new type of ideal man based on FANtasy culture's gay imagery. This incarnation of the female fantasy spread through contemporary popular culture, and the entertainment industry nimbly incorporated the trend by employing flower-boy type singers and actors. Indeed, many A-list celebrities who gained popularity in the early twenty-first century, such as Bae Yong-joon and Kang Dong-won, look pretty and have delicate personalities instead of being conventionally handsome, and are being strongly masculine. Also, *Hallyu* (Korean wave) singing groups popular across the world, such as Big Bang, TVXQ, Super Junior, and EXO, include many flower-boy members. In brief, FANtasy culture's gay imagination contributed to demolishing the standard of manliness and complicating the ideal male image in Korean society.

In this book, I collectively refer to all female fans' interest in and desire for gay male erotic relationships as FANtasy. The syllable "fan" is capitalized intentionally to highlight the subjectivity and cultural power of these enthusiastic media consumers in imagining and realizing their fantasy. These fans may be longtime fans of yaoi, BL, or slash fiction; ardent watchers of global gay-themed programming; repeat viewers of mainstream gay-themed movies; and readers and authors of Korean fanfic. It is difficult to define this subculture because it is a manifestation of diverse tastes and aspirations for gay identity and love among (heterosexual) women across the world. One clear common denominator is that FANtasy fans consume a gay male body that they themselves create based on their own fantasies, not a real-world gay male body. However, as the flower-boy syndrome demonstrates, these fantasies are leading to real societal changes. FANtasy's intervention in reality evokes Judith Butler's discussion about the relationship between fantasy and the real.²⁴ Drawing on psychoanalytic theories, she criticizes antipornography feminist positions that disallow homoerotic fantasy, and she argues that fantasy is always related to the real and, as a psychic reality, establishes one dimension of the real. The potential of fantasy to constitute the real is indeed constantly discussed and attested to throughout this book, which examines the ways in

which female Korean fans' FANtasy affects their sexual identity and their relationships with the entertainment industry and sexual minorities.

Fans of FANtasy in Korea

If we examine FANtasy enthusiasts' status in Korean society, we can identify the cultural, social, economic, and political contexts in which the female fans are able to crave the gay male body. When it comes to discussing life in Korea, Confucianism has to be part of the picture. Confucian values have historically dominated Korean society as a whole since the tradition was transmitted to the country at the beginning of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). Its male-, family-, and community-centered ideas have subordinated women. Following Youna Kim, a feminist scholar specializing in Korean women's media consumption, we can point to five important features of Confucianism that have systematically affected Korean women's lives: (1) the limitation of women's role to housewifery and their relegation to domestic space, (2) the incorporation of women into the patrilineal family structure via arranged marriages, (3) the pressure to give birth to as many sons as possible and to be the ideal mother, (4) the requirement to perform filial duty to parents-in-law, and (5) the stress on chastity, with the related ban on remarriage.²⁵ These fundamentals have been constantly fed to members of society, and women in Korea long took for granted that they should sacrifice themselves for men and family. Even after modernization and democratization began—and these transitions are still underway in some sense—the Confucian heritage did not recede. These values were instead reinforced under the military leadership that governed between the 1960s and the 1980s and have coexisted with modern Western values in Korean society, thereby causing younger generations to experience competing and colliding identities. In the current stage in Korea's history, Confucianism's grip is loosening, but that worldview still has a strong impact on women's lives.

In the premodern era, education was the preserve of men. Since the late nineteenth century, modern education theoretically has been open to women, but in the beginning it was not practical at all for many women. However, the Korean government's plan to enlighten its citizens increased female education from the 1960s onward. Now, almost all men and women receive primary and secondary education on an equal basis. Since 2009, more female high school graduates are enrolling in two- and four-year colleges than male graduates: 73.5 percent versus 66.3 percent in 2016, respectively.²⁶ These numbers suggest

that doubts about gender inequality in education may have been settled. However, Youna Kim is not optimistic, having exposed less quantifiable aspects of gender discrimination in education.²⁷ Indeed, in textbooks men are usually depicted in charge of nondomestic social roles, whereas women tend to be portrayed doing housework and childcare. Male students are generally believed to be superior in logical and active fields like math, science, and physical education, while women are identified with affective and artistic subjects such as literature or music. Traditional gender roles persist.

The housebound family woman who figures so prominently in the Korean educational imaginary reflects Confucian values. In that tradition, a central, if not the most central, concern is that a family requires the production of a male heir to carry on the family line. Therefore, wives and daughters are secondary and supposed to sacrifice themselves to maintain the family and support male relatives. Society has drilled the traditional concept of "a wise mother and good wife" (*byōnmomyangchō*) into women. Indeed, until recently, the life goal of many girls and single women was being that proverbial wise mother and good wife. After marriage, a woman belongs to her family-in-law and is disassociated from her family of birth, which means she should take care of her husband's family, but he is not obligated to do the same for hers. Even if she continues to work for wages, she is still wholly responsible for domestic chores and childcare and her husband is merely supposed to help. Indeed, according to a 2014 survey by the Korea Statistical Information Service (Hankuk Tongkye Chōngpo Sōpisi), a wife in a dual-income household spends three hours and thirteen minutes on housework a day while a husband does forty-one minutes.²⁸ Even though both wives and husbands work, the women also spend almost five times more time than their husbands taking care of the household.

The issue of childcare relates directly to women's career paths. In Korea, it is almost always the wife who stops working after a baby is born—not just to recuperate from the birthing process but to care for the child, responsibility for which is assumed to be solely hers. Given that ideological context, women are making a rational choice when they stay home and raise their children, because the social safety net and governmental support for working mothers are inadequate. Even if women resume their careers, they do not have many options save for taking part-time or less skilled positions. A new coinage bespeaks this phenomenon well: *kyōngyōshikambōhyō*, or *kyōngtanyō* for short. "Kyōngyōk" and "tanchōl" mean "career" and "discontinuity," respectively, and "nyō" is a suffix meaning women. Thus the term "kyōngtanyō" refers to a woman who

had to discontinue her paid work due to marriage or childcare; 20 percent of married women age fifteen to fifty-four fit that profile.²⁹ Many single Korean women are afraid of being *kyōngnanyō* after marriage or childbirth, and existing *kyōngnanyō* are already struggling to resume their careers.

This situation eventually—and artificially—makes women look inferior as far as the job market is concerned. Private companies and public sector employers alike prefer male candidates, who do not stop working after marriage or childbirth and later occupy managerial positions. And this reality in the end discourages women from continuing to work for wages. What a vicious circle in a sexist society! As a result, in 2016 73.1 percent of men and 51.4 percent of women were employed, owned businesses, or were otherwise active in the economy³⁰—this despite almost identical educational preparation for both genders. According to the World Economic Forum's 2015 Global Gender Gap Index (GGI), Korea ranks 15th among 136 nation-states.³¹ The World Bank reported the country's GDP per capita was \$25,977 between 2009 and 2013, an amount similar to that of Spain (\$29,118), which ranks twenty-fifth on the GGI index.³² Although Korea is a developed nation and a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the ratio of women to men in parliament and ministerial positions was very low and the income gap between genders was very wide, according to the GGI. Taken together, all this information suggests that a well-developed economic system has not necessarily mitigated gender inequality in Korea, where sexism based on Confucianism is pervasive.

Because they permeate society at large, these segregating structures are prompting women of the younger generations to take atypical paths, choices that gradually cause the traditional arrangements to wither. A 2013 survey targeting adolescents between the ages of thirteen and twenty-four asked them whether they should marry; 62.9 percent of men responded positively, whereas only 45.6 percent of women agreed.³³ Another inquiry discovered that 69.1 percent of women who don't want to marry pointed out the unfair obligations and gender roles in the Confucian-influenced family system.³⁴ As marriage becomes optional, the female age at marriage increased from 24.8 years in 1990 to 30.3 in 2015 and the divorce rate doubled, from approximately 45,700 cases in 1990 to about 109,200 in 2015.³⁵ Put another way, more and more women are disregarding Confucian ideals and paving their own paths in life. This tendency will eventually redefine the established, male-oriented family and marriage system and spark changes in women's status in the public sphere.

Accordingly, *whatsexuality means to women is in transformation*. Sex and sexuality have long been taboo topics in the Korean public sphere; women especially were not allowed to talk about them, much less act as sexual beings. In 1982, one newspaper reported that 78 percent of female college students thought they should not lose their virginity until marriage, while only 15 percent of male students felt the standard held for them, too.³⁶ After marriage, women had to conceal their sexual desire, which was reserved to meet only their husbands' needs. Extramarital affairs were permitted for husbands, but not for wives—the “wise mother and good wife” ideal was pervasive. However, women are no longer fettered with quite so unfair a sexual paradigm. In 2014, it was reported that most female college students have their first sexual experiences between twenty and twenty-three years of age—that is, during typical undergraduate years.³⁷ Compared to the results of the 1982 survey, this is a startling indicator showing the transformation of female attitudes about their own sexuality. These days, women do not hesitate to discuss sex and sexuality publicly. *Mich Hunt (Mangyo Sangung, 2013–2015)*, an adult-only cable television program aired by the broadcaster JTBC, broached every topic related to romantic relationships, including intercourse, in a humorous and pleasant way. The advice show was passionately well received by younger generations. Many female viewers sent letters about sexual issues and sought advice. They did not hesitate to participate in the show's person-on-the-street interviews and spoke about their sex lives. This participation means sexuality is less of a taboo topic for women, at least among the younger generations.

As egalitarian perspectives spread, changes in the gender order are budding. It seems that Korean women are straddling traditionalism and modernism, finding a spot that best accommodates their modern priorities. Korean media have reflected these transitions.³⁸ Until the 1970s, women in media were stereotyped as the wise mother and good wife who endured hardships and sacrificed herself for her family. Some representations of women displayed their sexuality as the objects of male lust, but the women were doomed to failure.³⁹ This way of constructing female images continued into the early 1990s. Women merely played a supporting and dependent roles as housewives or mothers who cared more about romance and family than about public activities.⁴⁰ After the mid-1990s, the emergence of popular feminism and the wider dissemination of popular culture changed media representations of women. For instance, topics such as working women, female sexuality, new types of masculinity, feminism, and gender conflicts made appearances in widely broadcast programming and popular cinema.⁴¹ Before the 1990s, any attempt

to depict those topics was meaningful yet tenuous. Most representations were still biased, showing women as passive, inactive, emotional, dependent, and family oriented, and thus poorly suited for professional careers.⁴²

In the early twenty-first century, the changes of the mid-1990s grew still more significant. Even though the typical depiction of gender roles still existed, the picture of womanhood did improve: power in heterosexual relationships was more balanced, media characters became freer from traditional masculinity and femininity, the number of shows featuring professional women was on the rise, and portrayals of women became more complex and realistic.⁴³ Around 2005, some dramas and films started depicting women in new, liberatory, and less stereotypical ways. Korea saw the release, for example, of *Singles* (*Singletchi*, 2003), *I Want a Wedding* (*Kyôhônako Sip'in Yôcha*, 2004), *My Lovely Sam-soon* (*Nae Ilmin Kimsansum*, 2005), and *Old Miss Diary* (*Olui Miss Taichi*, 2004–2005). In these cultural productions, female protagonists aged over thirty speak out as independent, active, and professional women. Mirroring such changes, male characters became understanding and responsive to female requests—they are now less sexist—and romantic relationships developed more equilibrium than before.

Since these media representations are (re)producing or disrupting the existing gender hierarchy and have influenced ordinary women's lives, we might then ask in what ways women have taken advantage of media. What changes have they been able to effect in cultural production? When modern media technologies that we now take for granted—radio, television, and cinema—were just emerging, women did not necessarily have the ability to engage in media production. Few media tools were communal and hardly any were handed to women. The media sector was dominated by male professionals. The Korean media industry was no exception: it was very male centered and women tended not to be involved in decision-making processes. But even when they were largely excluded from production, women shared limited cultural texts with one another and enjoyed consuming the media. In their own way, they created fantasy spaces separate from the male-oriented elements in the Confucian and patriarchal society surrounding them. And then digital media detonated women's accrued potential as media producers and consumers. Women fans were able to disclose their cultural preferences, triggering changes in society. Korean female fans of FANtasy texts come out of a culture that long subordinated women to men, but in their creative efforts they have become subjects boldly desiring male bodies. This book unpacks and follows

their stories of collectively becoming a major force in Korean culture and creating solidarity with their counterparts around the world to transform transnational orientations toward media and sexuality.

Gender and Sexual Minorities in Neoliberal Asia

Yaoi culture in Japan has evolved over several decades and established itself as one of the main manga genres and subcultures. As touched upon previously, its transmission to other regions in the world is particularly noticeable. The recent dizzying progress in media and communication technologies contributed to the dissemination of yaoi beyond physical, cultural, and linguistic barriers and, accordingly, to the formation of yaoi fandom among "a global and multilingual population of writers and readers."⁴⁴ As an example, the sales of BL manga in Germany are proportionally larger than they are in its country of origin.⁴⁵ For this reason, the popularity of yaoi across the world led some scholars to insist on the necessity of transnational studies and diverse, interdisciplinary approaches to this cross-cultural trend and its regional specificities. As a result, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, an open-access academic journal dedicated to fan studies, published a special issue articulating a need for transnational BL fan studies.⁴⁶

The justifiability of this argument is strongly evident in Asia, especially Korea, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Japan's neighboring countries, including Korea, China, and Taiwan, have witnessed the growth of a vigorous yaoi fandom. In the late 1970s, yaoi filtered into Taiwan, and it proliferated in Hong Kong during the 1990s. In both places, the yaoi and BL fandoms are called *tongweni* (boys' love) culture. Online media also helped younger Chinese people to become fans of the genre, which is known as *dannei* in that country. Equivalent to BL in Japan and fanfic in Korea, *dannei* is predominantly written and read by Chinese schoolgirls. *Dannei* includes both fictional characters borrowed from mainstream media or existing literature and actual celebrities; that is, when it comes to the object of fantasy in *dannei*, the genre is a combination of yaoi, slash fiction, and fanfic. Its popularity is believed to stem from China's repressive educational system, conservative sex education at schools, and suppressed youth sexuality.⁴⁷ Its rapid dissemination and burgeoning popularity disconnected the Chinese government, which cracked down on "harmful content" on the internet in 2014, just as the Korean administration did in the early twenty-first

century, and even censored and banned *dannaei* drama for its homosexuality.⁴⁸ Yet digitally savvy Chinese FANtasy fans know sneaky ways to circumvent the regulations and access *dannaei* and other similar texts from Japan and Korea. The censorship is unlikely to squelch their passion.

As for the widespread circulation of FANtasy culture in the region, Sun Jung, a Korean popular culture scholar, frames the aforementioned soft masculinity as a pan-East Asian trend.⁴⁹ According to her, the diffusion of Japanese yaoi culture throughout Asia since the late 1970s spawned straight women's desire for soft masculine men, who are strongly associated with gay stereotypes in the region. The fascination for FANtasy texts affected the ways in which entertainment industry molded their aspiring celebrities—for instance, J-pop and K-pop male singers' visual styles. Indeed, the stars' soft masculinity and feminine aesthetics are fervently celebrated in East Asia and, as a result, do influence real-life men. As an example, Laura Miller, an anthropologist specializing in Japan, unveiled ordinary Japanese men's propensity to regularly visit male beauty shops in order to receive treatments such as body hair removal and facial care and purchase weight-loss products because Japanese women preferred feminized male faces.⁵⁰ With the boom of flower-boy culture, Korean men also began beautifying their bodies and embracing soft masculinity. In the early twenty-first century, Kam Louie, who studies Chinese literature and philosophy, historicized and conceptualized soft masculinity in China.⁵¹ Traditionally, masculinity there was divided into two major types: *wen* and *wu*. "Wen" represented the man of civility and culture—in short, the scholar—whereas "wu" described warriors or soldiers and emphasized physical, martial prowess. Under the strong influence of Confucianism, wen's dominance over wu was taken for granted. The "hyper-sensitive youngster with pale face and narrow shoulders"⁵² had high social status and was considered an ideal lover for the upper-class woman. *Sōnpi*, the Confucian scholars of premodern Korea, shared affinities with wen. As a well-educated son of a noble family and a high-ranking official, a *sōnpi* was also a dreamy man. Interestingly, the wen and *sōnpi* masculinity associated with Confucian culture seems quite similar to the soft masculinity of contemporary East Asian cultures. Supposedly, the traditional, Confucian-based ideal masculinity in East Asia underlies the popularity of soft masculinity, even though, ironically, Confucianism demonizes gayness, the practice in which FANtasy fans began to identify soft masculinity.

The circulation of FANtasy culture, gay identity, and soft masculinity unsurprisingly has a close relationship with late capitalism, which always awaits

an opportunity to expand and diversify its markets. For instance, as soon as yaoi became popular, Japanese manga, publishers incorporated it, thereby creating a BL market over and against the underground yaoi culture. The "gay boom" (*geibumaru*) in the 1990s that will be examined in chapters 1 and 5 was absolutely the commodification of gay identity and FANtasy culture, through which the Japanese media industry aimed to cultivate female and gay male consumership. The rise of the *fujoshi* market in the twenty-first century was another media strategy for carving out a FANtasy fan market. *Fujoshi* (rotten girls in Japanese) means fans who enjoy yaoi or BL—that is, FANtasy content. The term is widely used among female fans who self-identify as yaoi or BL enthusiasts. It is argued that the high visibility of this term in early twenty-first-century Japan resulted from the decline of the *otaku* (a Japanese term primarily used for male anime and manga fans⁵³) market, which is more male centered.⁵⁴ In other words, Japanese media marketers insinuated themselves into *fujoshi* cultures and opened markets to replace the receding *otaku* cultures. FANtasy cultures in other countries are not immune to the process of commodification. As gradually unveiled in this book, Korean entertainment companies have an extraordinarily keen sense of how FANtasy culture and their co-optation of it contribute to the global fandom for Korean popular culture.

How then can we evaluate capitalist incursions into gender and sexuality subcultures? Is the market always detrimental to such communities? Literary scholar Carole Veldman-Genz argues that the commodification of male homosexuality for women and, accordingly, female sexuality helped publicize the needs of female consumers and elevated their status in late capitalist society.⁵⁵ As sexual consumers, women have more visibility in the market now—and more options for gratifying their desires for gay erotica, which ultimately challenges the male-oriented heteroeconomy. Likewise, gay populations get to have more choices. During the gay boom in Japan, Japanese publishers translated Western gay novels, which attracted many heterosexual women readers, leading to the importing of more such works. In brief, the market's commodification of gay identity and straight women's sexual desire nurtured the gay market, which benefited gay readers. A gay interviewee who is discussed in chapter 5 confirms these knock-on effects—he welcomed Korean FANtasy fans' expansion of the gay media market. We might cautiously posit, then, a direct positive relationship between this market and the queer population. In his edited volume about how Thai capitalism has spurred the development of a queer market, Peter Jackson, a cultural historian of Thailand, writes that "capitalism can become a vehicle for enhancing queer autonomy in politically

authoritarian Asian states that are nonetheless committed to market-based economies"—unlike in the West, where the strong impact of Marxism brings more attention to the exploitative aspects of capitalism.⁵⁶ By making this argument, he accentuates the local specificities of Asian queer cultures and demands approaches beyond Western frameworks. I will examine the positive functions of commodification in more depth in chapters 3 and 5, but here I would like to briefly point out that—limited though they may be due to heteronormativity and patriarchy—neoliberal makers in East Asia have the potential to create spaces for the heterogeneous tastes of gender and sexual minorities, which have already been attested to in the region.

Being a Gay Man in Korea

Unlike their counterparts in EANTasy fiction, gay people in real-life Korean society do not necessarily lead blissful, ecstatic lives. But in ancient Korea, same-sex cultures were not always considered as objectionable as they are today. Many songs and poems from the Silla Dynasty (Sinla Wangcho, 57 B.C.–A.D. 935) make clear that *hwalang* bands, male military elites who served the dynasty's king, enjoyed intercourse with same-sex partners. Also, a king of the Goryeo Dynasty (Koryŏ Wangcho, 918–1392), Kong-min (1330–1393), kept a retinue of bodyguards comprised of handsome young boys with whom he had sexual relations. The film *A Frozen Flower* (*Sanghwauchon*, 2008), which will be analyzed in chapter 4, dramatizes this story. The following kingdom, however, did not retain its predecessors' generous treatment of homosexuality.

With the Joseon Dynasty (Chosŏn Wangcho, 1392–1897), when Confucian ideas were imported from China, a long history of disregarding and discriminating against the group began. Grounded in a heterosexual and hierarchical family system, Confucianism's high regard for male heirs was dominant for centuries and to a large extent is still operative in much of East Asia. Generating males to carry on family lines was thought to be essential to the crucial work of maintaining a family, which was "not only an emotional and a physical unit but the prototype of social structure and life."⁵⁷ Heterosexual marriage and the births resulting from it were taken for granted as unqualified societal goods. In brief, Confucianism has been oppressing nonheterosexual people as well as female members of Korean society for centuries. Christianity as well as Confucianism has played an enormous role in patterning the national and societal perceptions of oppressed sexual identities in Korea. Western missionaries helped Christianity penetrate Korean society in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by building schools and hospitals and preaching Christian ideology, including its prohibition of homosexuality. Combined with Confucianism and conservatism, Christianity set the norms for the treatment of sexual minorities in modern Korea, a topic on which this book elaborates in conclusion.

Even with the advent of democracy in the 1940s, relatively little has changed in Korea with regard to public, mainstream sentiment about homosexuality. Confucian ideology has remained deeply rooted. Society's patriarchal structure has only further legitimated the high status of and expectations for heterosexual marriage and has made having a male successor mandatory. The authoritarian military governments in control from the 1960s through the 1980s forcefully implemented this Confucian ideology in order to maintain the military and to promote industrialization, which in turn has reinforced heteronormative values in Korea.⁵⁸ As a result, until the 1990s most Koreans were not even aware of the concept of homosexuality as a way of being. Thus, the meaning of the word was not distinguished from other concepts such as transgender, bisexual, and transvestite. In brief, Korean society was largely ignorant of same-sex relationships. Indeed, so marginalized were these populations and these orientations that, until recently, official mention of their existence can rarely be found in government records. Hence, although the Korean government enforced little explicit legal discrimination, Korean gay and lesbian people ironically have had little opportunity to produce counter-discourses; their populations have simply been considered to be nonexistent. There is actually an official line in the military criminal code that bans homosexuality; it was applied to a real case for the first time in 2018. This event will be unpacked in the conclusion of this book in more detail.

In the mid-1990s, Korean LGBTQ populations started witnessing some changes in society. Beginning in the late 1980s, Korean society was being liberated from longstanding military regimes and, accordingly, waves of democratization and liberalization were sweeping the country. Prosperity was embraced by the economic and sociocultural sectors. Fortunately, the period created a rosy climate for isolated identities: feeble though they may have been, communities for sexual minorities were emerging in public spaces. Their social movement grew; a politics of sexuality was spreading throughout academia. In fact, a lesbian community called the Female Taxi Drivers' Association (Yŏcha Taksŏi Unhŏnŏsa Hyŏphoe or Yŏnhoe for short) in the 1970s was organized among nonstraight female cab drivers in order to encourage communal bonding and support economic independence; it lasted a decade. In addition, other

types of social circles spontaneously showed up in gay and lesbian spaces. But these, including Yöunhoe, were devoid of political activism.

In 1993 the first official gay rights organization, Ch'otonghoe ("like knows like" in English), was created in Korea. After one month, the organization was divided into the gay men's rights organization Ch'inkusai (between friends) and the lesbian rights organization K'illikkil (birds of a feather flock together). Furthermore, communities for gay men and lesbians in colleges surfaced: in 1995, Yonsei University's Come Together (K'öm T'yuketo) and Seoul National University's Maum ooi were founded. Mass media examined the emergence of these groups and relevant political and social issues, and thus the organizations and communities gained public attention. The gay activist Seo Dong-jin, who founded Come Together, commented on the changes in media: "For the first time, there were social mentions of homosexual identity and attempts to look at this identity from the standpoint of human rights."⁵⁹ Furthermore, the development of media technology played a role: Offering a safe place where anonymous users gradually came out and provided information about their lives, dial-up services and the internet are said to have contributed to the mass uncloseting of same-sex desire since the mid-1990s. For example, online LGBTQ communities like Queer Net (K'wiones), Rainbow (Leinpou), and Tosamo were created in 1995, and their offline meetings drew more than one thousand members.⁶⁰ To put another way, the virtual spaces encouraged people with closeted identities to come out. Therefore, the discussion of sexual politics and the formation of sexual minority communities began to increase in Korean society.

The organizations strove to promote gay rights in various sectors. For example, they petitioned for the equal treatment of gay soldiers in the military, pursued the modification of biased school texts and stereotypical media representations, contacted politicians and political parties to inform them about LGBTQ realities and to band together, and published LGBTQ-targeted magazines such as *Buddy* (*Pöni*). Cognizant of the power of popular culture, these groups undertook many cultural activities. As an example, encouraged by the budding LGBTQ movements, they planned to hold a film festival about LGBTQ identities in 1997 at a private university in Seoul. Unfortunately, it was cancelled right before it was scheduled to start because the university withdrew its approval for the venue. After the censorship, the rights groups endeavored to gain governmental cooperation and make what they called the Seoul Queer Film and Video Festival official. As a result, it was successfully launched the next year at Art Sonje Hall, a small private art museum in Seoul.

It has continued as Korea's representative LGBTQ movie celebration under the new name of Korea Queer Film Festival.

Accordingly, gay film professionals emerged on the scene. Affiliated with Ch'inkusai, I-Song Hui-il and Kim-Cho Kwang-soo were the most active and famous individuals in gay film production. I-Song debuted and came out with his short titled *Everyday Is Like Sunday* (*Öndena Iyoi Kai-i*) in 1997; it was screened at the Seoul Queer Film and Video Festival in 1998. He steadily released independent films, including *Sugar Hill* (*Syuhahil*, 2000), *Camellia* (*Tongjaekkeok*, 2004), *No Regret* (*Huhobach*, *Anha*, 2006), *White Night* (*Paekya*, 2012), and *Night Flight* (*Takan Pihang*, 2014), which all dig into gay identities and love in Korean society. Many of his movies, whether about gay subjects or not, were recognized in domestic and international film festivals. Kim-Cho started his cinema career as a founder of film production company named Ch'öngnyön Film (Young People Film), which actually began with nonqueer mainstream films such as *Happy End* (*Haep'i Enit*, 1999) and *Manee and Junald* (*Maniwa Chunha*, 2001) that enjoyed commercial success in mainstream theaters. He was a producer for I-Song's *No Regret* and created his own gay-themed shorts, such as *Boy Meets Boy* (*Soryön, Soryönül Mannata*, 2008) and *Just Friends?* (*Ch'inkusai*, 2009), and a mainstream feature film, *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (*Tu Pönü Kyölbonsieku Han pönü Changy-sik*, 2012). Without a doubt, filmmakers other than the two prominent players directed gay movies, for instance, Kim Öng-su's *Desire* (*Tokwang*, 2004), Kim Hyön-p'il's *Wonderful Day* (*Wönüp'ul Tei*, 2003), and Hwang Chong-wön's *Military Tango* (*Millitöli T'aengö*, 2003), mostly independent short films that did not receive much attention at the time. However, these artifacts contributed to rallying the base for next generations. In the late aughts and early 2010s, openly gay filmmakers actively introduced several gay-themed films that were critically reviewed, such as I Hyök-sang's *Minde on Jongno Street* (*Chongdoni Kichök*, 2010), Song Il-sök's *Our Happy Ending* (*Salang Euihlongüi Naeksöng*, 2010), So Chun-mun's *REC* (*Allisi*, 2011), Kim Kyöng-muk's *Stateless Things* (*Chul'aktongsi*, 2011), and Paek In-kyu's *Queer Film 20* (*K'wido Yonghwa 20*, 2013). Although most gay film directors belong to the independent film sector and their films are not usually as popular as mainstream products, their attempts have been constant since the mid-1990s and have been receiving more and more attention in film circles and markets. One thing I should clarify is that even though this book mainly discusses mainstream cinema and industry and emphasizes how they set the popular cultural trend with EANNasy fans, it never underestimates the accomplishments of gay

independent filmmakers in Korea. Their activities and works absolutely play an indispensable role in changing the industry perspective toward queer cinema directly and indirectly.

In the past two decades, Koreans have witnessed the rise of gay activism, public discussion of gay rights issues, the public coming out of some brave gay men, and increased media representation of gay identity and love. However, these changes were limited; many nonheterosexual people lament the fact that revealing their sexual orientation to their families and society is still difficult. CH Inksuai published a report titled *South Korean LGBT Community Social Needs Assessment Survey* (*Hankuk LGBT Community, Sachobok Yokuchosa Choeobong Pokosoi*, 2014) in commemoration of its twentieth anniversary. According to this paper, most respondents feel that their marginalized sexual orientations make them the object of hatred, discrimination, and violence in public spaces and media. Discouraged, many make the understandable choice to pass, cloaking their sexual orientations. This book will disclose the ambivalent realities for LGBTQ citizens in more depth in the conclusion.

So how have these hidden and oppressed identities been named in Korean history? As Korean sexual minorities have mostly concealed their identities and have not been not widely studied, discussed, or understood in the broader society, there is no fixed, official, or widely agreed-upon name for the group. Lacking secure standing, these populations have been called many names over time. Derogatory terms were once pervasive—"homo" from the English "homosexual," or *tongsŏng/yŏnsechu* (homosexual)—and surely some members still get called pejorative insults. These words represent the idea that homosexuality is pathological and sexually perverted. But, as social recognition of homosexuals began to change, terms like "homosexual," "gay," and "lesbian" were substituted for the earlier offensive and degrading vocabulary. Recently, particularly in popular culture, "queer" (*k'win*) is being used without any translation into Korean as an umbrella word for most sexual minorities such as gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, and genderqueer individuals. The usage is not at all intended to imply any negative or derogatory meaning; it is essentially considered neutral, a foreign word imported praxeologically into the Korean language.

Korean sexual minorities do have their own names for themselves: *p'okkal* and *iban* (*ipwan*).⁶¹ "P'okkal" is an inversion of the phonemes that make up the Korean word *kalpa*, which is the most vulgar slur for a prostitute in premodern Korea. Seo Dong-jin, the aforementioned gay activist, has explained why Korean homosexuals use this self-denigrating term since they are outside the

sphere of society-sanctioned romantic relationships, their intercourse is illegitimate, as far as the state is concerned.⁶² "Kalpo" signals an awareness of this illegitimate status, but Seo notes that its usage is all but passé, as it is laden with hate. Rather, most gay Koreans use "iban" when they identify themselves. "Iban" is a neologism produced within specifically gay community contexts, communities that appeared in the open political climate of the mid-1990s. The term connotes something very similar to "queer" in the United States. Presumably, the term originates from the word *iban* (*ilpan*), which means "normal" in Korean. *Il* (pronounced "el") means "number one" or "the first"; ("ce") means "number two" or "the second." By using "i," Korean sexual minorities distinguish themselves from the *ilban*, or ordinary group, and challenge normative heterosexuality. In short, "queer" is a relatively popular term among heterosexuals, while "iban" is the term preferred among nonheterosexuals. For instance, the biggest online gay community is Ivan City (in Korean, "ivan" has the same pronunciation as "iban"). But when communities of sexual minorities have festivals aiming to publicize themselves, they use "queer," as in the Korean Queer Culture Festival, the biggest and oldest event for and by sexually marginalized members of Korean society.

I will unpack my methodological approach in the following section in more depth, but I believe a short introduction would be beneficial here to help readers understand how related terms for sexual minorities circulate in Korea. To investigate the complicated and dynamic relationships around FANtasy culture in Korea, I conducted interviews with FANtasy fans, young women, media professionals, and gay men in Korea. When I created questions for the last group, I was careful with terms. Aware of the nuances noted in the previous paragraph, I crafted my interview questionnaires using only the term "same-sex" (*tongsŏng*), which is relatively less associated with any value or ideology in the Korean context. Interestingly, my gay informants often applied "queer" to media content but referred to homosexual people as "ibans." I reviewed how academic research and media articles on Korean sexual minorities have used the terms "homosexual," "queer," and "iban." When referring to gay or lesbian people and homosexuality, Korean researchers use the terms "homosexual" and "homosexuality" (*tongsŏngae*). But when they point to related media content, they often mix their use of "homosexual" and "queer." To demonstrate, I present several titles from the literature (emphasis added):

Homosexuality, *Expected Controversy?*⁶³
*Mapping the Visibilities of Homosexual Identities in South Korea*⁶⁴

*Shooting a Star: Homosexuals, Biscuits, Transgenders . . . The Current Stage of Korean Queer Film*⁶⁵

*Three Periods of Korean Queer Cinema: Invisible, Camouflage, and Blackbuts*⁶⁶

*Remembered Branches: Towards a Future of Korean Homosexual Film*⁶⁷

It seems that "homosexual" and "homosexuality" are more general terms, and "queer" is frequently associated with cultural products or public events in Korea.

In consideration of all the historical and sociocultural usages of these different terms in Korea as well as their common usage in US contexts, in this book I mostly use a specific term, "gay," for individuals and media content because most homosexuals and queer media themes related to fan works and fantasies of young Korean women invoke *male* gayness. In the cases where I need a collective term for LGBTQ people or entities, I use the words "homosexual," "same-sex," "nonstraight," "nonheteronormative," "queer," "sexual minorities," and other contextually accurate labels. In a few cases, I intentionally employ the term "queer" as follows: (1) when I mention foreign cultural artifacts widely regarded and referred to as queer; (2) when I talk about an academic discipline like queer studies; and (3) when the term has a specific meaning in the Korean context—for instance, with queer manhwa (the Korean version of manga), queer fanfic, or queer film—implying that a text pays attention to identity issues or addresses political or economic hardships for sexual minorities.

What Lies Ahead

Female fans of gay eroticism, their fantasies, and the current popularity of gay spectacles in the Korean media call for research employing multidirectional approaches that delves into seemingly independent but deeply related social, cultural, political, and economic phenomena. Realizing that the existing academic literature and media discourse provide only piecemeal research and observations about fandom, I solicited firsthand reflections from the fans themselves. Meeting with fans and having full and complex discussions with individuals and groups make it possible to dig into Korean FANtasy's historical background and assess the position of the fans and their subculture in the larger society, the fans' relationship with others, and fandom's direction. My informants include fanfic writers and readers, Korean women in their twenties to early forties, film directors and marketers of gay-themed media, and

gay men. All parties were candid and committed to telling me about their experiences, which surprised, inspired, and resonated with me. No previous research has attempted to collect these stories; the findings of this research are unique and chart the development and dimensions of a distinctly twenty-first century subculture that will only become more pronounced in coming years. I closely reviewed the interview transcripts several times in order to accurately identify and represent interviewees' intentions, and I translated direct quotations into English and had them reviewed a few times by academics who are native English speakers.

Historicizing a subculture like FANtasy is particularly crucial in studying a postcolonial space such as Korea, which has a long history of having been politically, economically, and culturally impacted by Western countries as well as contiguous nations. This situation at times leads to a presumption that the outside influences were unilateral and erased local subjects from the discursive center. Yes, the colonizing powers have had impact; however, history demonstrates that Korean people did respond to and intervene in the foreign globalizing pressure at least since the 1980s. Indeed, young Korean female fans of the gay male body have appropriated relevantly themed media from the United States and Japan in their local contexts and created their own counterpart. Observing global patterns and globalization's effect on the Korean media industry, the national government and production companies swiftly and nimbly reacted in their decision-making processes. Eventually, all of these local practices taken together contributed to the ability of young women to visualize their gay male fantasies. Only an intensive historical study of female fans' fan behaviors and governmental and industrial practices since 1980 can illuminate this complicated interaction between global and local powers in Korea. Not only historical review but also textual analysis is employed to reveal the ways in which the mainstream Korean media mirror the fantasies of young female fans. In order to understand that dynamic interplay, I undertake textual analysis of Korean gay-themed media and look carefully at texts, characters, meanings, narrative, and so forth.

The fan subculture of young Korean women has received less attention than that of Western and Japanese women, but it has a texture all its own, and that is where this study begins. Like fan fiction communities in other countries, Korean fans have consumed global gay cultural artifacts, such as yaoi and US programs with gay themes, and, influenced by their consumption, created their own local texts about homoerotic love. Some Korean women criticize, appropriate, and modify global gay popular culture, a culture of mere

pleasure-seeking, and look to change the direction of gay representation in the media, to make fanfic what they consider politically right and meaning oriented. The girls' self-criticism for having objectified and sexualized the gay body and their desire to behave ethically toward sexual minorities deserve attention because they have been found and studied less in other cultures. My interviews with fanfic authors and readers, which I detail in chapter 1, reveal that their fanfannish practices ultimately affect the fans themselves and the attitude they form about other media genres of gay representation. The subculture contributes to forming positive, or at least nonnegative, views of gay people and of other gay cultural products among young women—the implication being that these approaches ultimately factor into the production of gay-themed cinema in the Korean mainstream.

Why has the mainstream Korean media industry suddenly started paying attention to fandom for gay romance narratives—a culture that had gone unnoticed for a few decades? As one of the reasons, I attribute the attention to the rising socioeconomic power of women, which sheds light on the changes in the lives and status of the young women who were or are fans of gay popular culture. Since the mid-aughts, there has been a surge in new (mostly satiric) appellations for and media portrayals of women's lifestyles, particularly their consumerism. For some time, the topic of so-called postfeminism—the idea that the women's movement has succeeded and is therefore no longer necessary for the equality of the genders—has been percolating on the global scene. My interviews with young women show that they could be said to share that postfeminist critique in some ways, but they are not depoliticized. Chapter 2 connects this newly recognized political awareness among the young female generation to their pursuit of the meaning-oriented fan fiction addressed in chapter 1.

The media industry has noticed the emerging interest of the female fan population in gay love and has monetized FANtasy subculture, which introduces a question: what ambient factors and commercial avenues contributed to industry's decision to profit from homosexuality—long taboo in Korea? Chapter 3 proffers the globalization of media as one answer. Since the 1990s, the Korean government has actively opened the country's doors to the world. Korean film corporations adopted the Hollywood production style—in which, instead of a director thinking just one step ahead during filming, all the casting and shooting locations are planned in advance—and swiftly became highly capitalized. This intensely commercialized film industry then began to pay attention to the fan activities of an emerging market segment:

young women in their twenties and thirties, a group made salient by the great success of *The King and the Clown*. Ultimately, the mainstream film market divided into gay themes to appeal to the female fan communities—a segment of the population with increasingly significant economic resources. Here, I argue that, despite the commodification of their subculture, young women as active cultural agents continually maintain and expand their interests in the consumption and production of gay-themed media.

After sketching the FANtasy community, its relationship with media industries, and its members' social, political, and economic positionality in Korean society, I connect FANtasy fans to the object of their imagination: gay men. And what can FANtasy culture offer to gay groups, other sexually marginalized people, and by extension to society at large? These questions guide the investigation of the multifarious and multilayered FANtasy culture that accelerates in chapter 4. After 2003, when the movie *The King and the Clown* achieved box-office success, many gay-themed movies were released to capitalize on the wave of female interest. Interestingly, films since then have tended to represent homosexuality in a new way that differs from the pre-2003 lens, so to speak. Comparing four movies released after 2003 with four others released before that time lays bare the industrial gimmicks deployed to play to female fanfancies and desires for gay men, desires that are projected onto the subculture of global and local homoerotic texts.

The female subculture centered on gay eroticism combined with the gimmicks of the Korean film industry to create the growing media representation of gay men, but where are Korean gay subjects situated in this dynamic? Regrettably scant analysis has been devoted to how gay people themselves view fan-created homoerotic novels, female fandom, and the resulting representations of same-sex relationships in mainstream media. Contrary to the impression one might take from media discourse or academic gestures toward this topic, my gay interviewees appreciate the female subculture and its contribution to making gay topics visible in mainstream media. Still, my interview subjects were not without ambivalence: They recognized and worried about the chasm between representation and reality. However, they conceded the necessity and importance of their own participation in the commodification process to rectify the current situation. Chapter 5 connects these candid, first-person reflections to conversations with female fans about redirecting the FANtasy culture toward "politically correct" homoerotic media content. Additionally, I hope for gay men's active participation in the process of commercializing gay culture, following what young female fans do, and suggest

solidarity between gay men and women, who are both discriminated against in a heteropatriarchal structure.

As a FANtasy fan myself, I appreciate the possibilities and the limitations of this kind of cultural production. This subculture is changing Korean society and, by extension, influencing the world as part of the Korean Wave, a global circulation of Korean popular culture. As a community, it reflects the complex relationship among female subcultural practices, the elevation of women's standing in a contemporary society, globalization, and the production of gay-themed media commodities and their circulation. By blending approaches based on critical and cultural studies and the political economy of media and communications studies, this book traces the current visibility of the gay body in the mainstream Korean media to the empowerment of subcultural practices among women in everyday life. I hope that locating female fan culture within larger societal shifts and investigating its relationship with other diverse groups contributes to understanding of women in the postfeminist and neoliberal era—if indeed we can call it that—and complicates postfeminist media discourse. Fandom in Japan and Western countries has been expertly unearthed, and it should continue to receive that attention. But the field of inquiry benefits from expanding to include expressions of similar cultural impulses elsewhere. What we see in young Korean women's enthusiastic appreciation for gay male culture—however much it is initially divorced from the lived experiences of gay men—is that it has the power, through various unexpected commercial and sociopolitical phenomena, to make qualitative differences in the lives of a completely distinct segment of society. That complex and surprising interrelationship is peculiar to Korea, but it is emblematic of how change happens in our globalized, technologically connected, and capitalist world. Because this interrelationship reflects real dynamics that often go unidentified and therefore are underleveraged, the story of Korean female fans is worth fathoming.

CHAPTER ONE

Girl Fans Queered

IN JUNE 2014, *Star Story* (2014), a new program about celebrities and their fans, debuted on Korea's MBC television channel. Its Korean title was *Pyöl Palaki*; “pyöl” means “star,” and “palaki” indicates a person who trains her eyes on a certain object. Put simply, “pyöl palaki” signifies one who is a fan. The program was a television-studio talk show wherein a few stars and their most long-standing or especially zealous fans told secret stories about their experiences with the celebrity-follower relationship and shared intimate feelings with each other. *Pyöl Palaki* was unique in its single-minded devotion to celebrities and their devotees, but many television programs had found success by featuring, at least at times, fans and their stories. For instance, a cable drama titled *Reply 1997* (*Üngtaphala*, 2012), which I will discuss at further length in the conclusion, was based on one girl's fervent fandom for H.O.T. (High-five of Teenagers) in the 1990s—this is the same boy band that captured my imagination and eventually, circuitously, led to my interest in this broader cultural phenomenon. The series garnered its own fandom strong enough to spawn a spinoff, *Reply 1994* (2013), whose main character admired a basketball player.

The *Reply* programs speak to a global zeitgeist: these days, almost all media formats seem oriented toward acquiring and retaining fans. The status of the fan in the contemporary entertainment business is robust. Celebrities have regular fan meetings, they (or their retinues) post messages in online fan communities dedicated to them, and many successful entertainers mention their fan clubs—think of Justin Bieber's Beliebers, Lady Gaga's Little Monsters, or Beyoncé's Beyhive—in their award-acceptance speeches. Fans are no longer “the most duped and ignorant of the already co-opted audiences of Culture Industry spectacles”;¹ they are one of the most influential forces operating in