

Commentary

# Symbols and Rituals on the Grounds of Queer Culture Festivals by Cho Sumi

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In the past two decades, the field of transnational sexualities (Chauncey and Povinelli 1999) has come into its own, questioning “US-centered assumptions that protect Queer Studies from a critical reorientation toward the non-West and the global South” (Henry 2018: 10). Especially vigorous as participants in these debates have been scholars working Queer Asia (Jackson et al. 2008; Wilson 2006), a network of LGBTQ+ movements, identities, and genders/sexualities in East and Southeast Asia that mimic but also challenge the Westernized categories of “gay,” “lesbian,” and “queer.”

Somewhat of a mystery within the literature on Queer Asia is Queer Korea (Henry 2020). Like other late-developmental and post-authoritarian East Asian states, including Taiwan (Erni and Spiers 2005; Huang 2011) and Singapore (Yue 2007), South Korea shares certain historical and political-cultural conditions that have produced what Audrey Yue has termed the “illiberal politics” of non-liberal and communitarian societies. Historically, in these Confucian-based societies, male homosexuality was viewed as an indulgence that was tolerated so long as it did not interfere with the men’s primary duties of producing children and providing for their families (Chou 2000). Yet, beyond journal articles and master’s theses, comparatively very little literature exists on South Korea, suppressed by the “male- and elite-centered accounts that have overwhelmingly focused on the tribulations of a modernizing nation” (Henry 2020:

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9). Thus, the paradoxical situation in which queerness remains an “under-the-radar” presence (*ibid*), despite lacking laws explicitly prohibiting (or condoning) queerness. Moreover, despite South Korea’s international reputation as a successful case of democratic transition, the rights of gender non-conforming and sexual minorities have not kept up with the growing public acceptance of human rights for other groups, such as women, North Korean refugees, and migrant workers (Bong 2008).<sup>1</sup> As Youngshik Bong observes, this raises an interesting question of whether the post-authoritarian democracy of South Korea and sexual rights are interlinked, as many assume, or are, in fact, “discrepant and disconnected” (2008: 99). Finally, as seen in the case of the stalled anti-discrimination law, there has been a strong backlash by the Christian Right that seems disproportionate to the few advances that LGBTQ+ groups have made in South Korea. Such phenomena raise complex and important issues of what is particular about South Korea and its queer/LGBTQ+ politics that I wish Cho had more fully engaged with.

Certainly, there were many opportunities for Cho Sumi to engage with the issues addressed in contemporary literature on Queer Asia/Transnational Sexualities. For instance, when they talk about PFLAG’s “Free Hug” activity, they could have engaged with Amy Brainer’s work on queer kinship in Taiwan, where today’s Taiwanese parents are “as likely as their [LGBTQ+] children to initiate conversations about sexuality” (2019: 36). Such conversations, however, are also a way to intrude more deeply into their children’s lives and regulate them. Or, when Cho describes the “queer checkpoint” (Siu 2018) at the festival, where Pride Parade protesters are barred from entering, they could have similarly engaged with the work of Jason Ritchie (2008) about the checkpoints at gay bars in Israel, where queer Israeli Jews are “endowed with the power to inspect and then admit or deny queer Palestinians entry into the space of (Israeli) gayness” (568). By bringing their ethnography of Seoul’s Queer Culture Festival into engagement with these debates, Cho would be better to articulate 1) what’s particular about the Korean LGBTQ+ experience in a world where “queerness is now global” (Cruz-Malave and Manalansan: 2002), and 2) what that particularity reveals about the shaping of the queer experience within the non-

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<sup>1</sup> This discrepancy is especially striking when one considers the central role played by LGBTQ+ people in “Western debates over minority rights,” inspiring “much academic and demographic research” (Yi and Phillips 2015).

Western context of South Korea/East Asia, which can then contribute to the setting of a new political agenda beyond the Westernized projects of “gay rights” and “coming out” that scholars have typically understood as the model of lesbian and gay empowerment (Schroeder 2009).

Instead, in falling back on ready-made—and uninterrogated—tropes of (queer) liberalism such as “equality,” “freedom,” “closet,” and “coming out,” Cho potentially contributes to the strengthening of Western hegemony based on the selective experiences of white, Euro-American gays and lesbians. They also miss a valuable opportunity to articulate a queer political agenda for South Korea that would address the particular sociohistorical and cultural circumstances in which queerness has emerged and the challenges it now poses to both Korean LGBTQ+ people and the dominant heteronormative society. This elision is most evident when Cho cites but does not fully engage with Woori Han’s critique of the Seoul Pride Parade as an exemplary case of “queer developmental citizenship” and “homonationalism” (2018). Contrary to Westernized ideas of homosexuality as a sin, perversity, or crime (Foucault 1978), in South Korea, homosexuality remains primarily linked to ideas of national ruin and retardation of national development. Within such a postcolonial context, Euro-American embassies, including those of France and the United States, have taken advantage of the Seoul Queer Culture Festival to market their countries as a safe haven for “oppressed” Korean LGBTQ+ people escaping “hell Korea.” What these “homonational notions of global LGBTQ citizenship” ultimately do, Han argues, is ignore “imperial and racist limitations of queer liberal politics,” which position the West as both the origin of queerness and the future site of queer liberation (2018: 45). In other words, Korean LGBTQ+ people need to simply move to one of these Euro-American countries and/or become more Westernized to become liberated.

In order to avoid being complicit with such a homonationalist agenda, Cho, in my opinion, can do three things. Firstly, better articulate their own positionality with respect to their subject matter. Who is the author? How do they self-identify? What compelled them to research this topic? From what positions do they identify the key issues of Korean LGBTQ+ politics? Making those things explicit will invite a more situated and nuanced discussion. Second, avoid overly generalizing terms such as “rituals” and “symbols” that, decontextualized from concrete historical, social, or interpersonal contexts, tend to reify and homogenize queerness as a dead thing rather than an active and ongoing project of human liberation. Third,

more actively engage with the contemporary literature within Transnational Sexualities, Queer Asia, and Queer Korean Studies. That includes citing original sources, for instance, with respect to terms like “homonationalism” and “pinkwashing” (Puar 2007) to bring the article into a more direct conversation with not only important queer Korean scholarship but also transnational scholars working on the topic of queerness, nationalism, and capitalism. Meanwhile, it is only by positioning itself within these diverse bodies of literature that the piece can better identify both its main intervention and key contributions—in the service of building a “queer utopia” (Munoz 2009).

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