



Patrick Thomsen

FROM SLEEPLESS IN
SEATTLE TO I SEOUL
YOU

Korean gay men and cross-cultural
encounters in transnational times

Queer and LGBT+ Studies

Collection Editor
PATRICK THOMSEN

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ABSTRACT

Queer worlds are often theorized using Western frameworks of knowledge systems and power. In this book, queer author and researcher Seuta'afili Patrick Thomsen brings diversity to the discourse by exploring the stories of Korean gay men in and between Seoul and Seattle. Drawn from lived experience and the author's use of *talanoa* (Pacific research methodology), the book centers transnational, migrant, and racialized realities – so contributing to the complication of West-centric ideas of gayness and coming out.

Looking at the intersections of race, globalization, diaspora, religion, and queer identity, these stories add richness and complexity to the field of queer and LGBT+ studies.

KEYWORDS

Queer; Seoul Korea; Seattle; diaspora; migration; gay; coming-out; talanoa; race; racism; racialization; transnationalism; globalization; decolonialization

This book is dedicated to all the Korean gay men and queer Koreans I encountered on this incredible journey. Without you, I am nothing as a researcher; without your stories, and your generosity in sharing them with me, this book and my academic career would not be possible. Your bravery and courage continue to inspire me every day. And to all my friends and family in Korea, your love sustained me throughout my entire decade living in your wondrous and heavy country. May all your dreams come true. And to my mum, for being my champion even in times of darkness.

This book was kindly reviewed by Dr Daniella Shaw, Birkbeck University.

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1

Beginnings

Every story has a beginning, and the research I share with you in the following pages begins on a fateful late Seoul summer night in 2013. At the time, I was happily living in a two-bedroom villa in the Itaewon¹ district, set within the heart of the foreigner district. I was a 27-year-old Samoan kid from South Auckland who had found themselves in the Korean² megacity through a series of fortunate coincidences. That night, I was waiting for my boyfriend outside Dongsan subway station with a sense of dread and anxiety coursing through my veins. In recent days, after a weekend away at his family's home outside Seoul, his messages had turned suddenly cryptic.

Before he left, we were in high spirits, joking around with our usual ease and sharing passionate and hidden kisses. As a gay couple in Seoul, and an interracial one at that, we knew it best not to be visible in a society we both understood would struggle to understand us. I hadn't seen him since he had returned, and I could sense something was wrong. His messages became labored with effort and evasive in their lack of frequency. Phone calls went unanswered and were subsequently unreturned. Although it had only been a couple of weeks since we had seen each other, it was clear to me that something was seriously wrong.

When he arrived that night, with head and eyes lowered under the cap he always wore out of his work clothes, I knew my instincts hadn't failed me. Without so much as a hello, slowly, he opened his mouth and said the words I knew were coming: "I think we should break up."

I went numb and felt the air grow heavy around me. My center, or what we call in Samoan my *moa*, became unsteady and queasy. My fight mode activated, and my lack of experience in dealing with very public break ups shone through as I struggled to make sense of what was happening. I could feel a mixture of rage and grief welling in my throat.

"Why?" I shouted back furiously. "We haven't even had a single argument, and you know I love you, and you always say that you love me. This doesn't make sense to me. Are you not happy with me? What have I done?" During my emotional outburst, he continued to remain silent and somber, standing directly in my firing line without flinching. When my extensive verbal barrage finally subsided, he said, in a quiet and strained voice: "I think we should break up."

Exasperated at this point, I pressed again, not understanding the heaviness he was carrying with him as his eyes began to gently water.

Bewildered by what was happening in front of me, I made such a scene that the endless streams of people floating about us seemed to take notice, and I could sense their secondhand embarrassment for me as they scurried away, trying not to make eye contact. Many were hurriedly getting on and off trains mere meters from where we stood and could easily hear what was going on. I didn't care.

I felt like my world was falling apart right in front of me and I was prepared to fight for it, or for my dignity at the very least. "If you want us to break up, you better give me a good reason. If you've found someone else, just say that, so I can move on and know that you were a complete waste of time."

Those words seemed to break the spell, and he responded firmly this time, but I couldn't be sure of his exact words. My entire being froze as I was forced into stunned silence. "It's not anything you've done," he said. "We need to break up because I have to find someone to marry. This society will never accept us, not now, not in the future, and I'm the eldest son, it's my duty to my family."

I truly felt like I was in some sort of K-drama at this point. Wounded beyond recovery, my head began to spin, and I knew I had been defeated.

Most PhD journeys don't begin as tumultuously and dramatically as mine did. And although the hand of fate would intervene many more times before I finished my doctorate in 2018, I can honestly say that the work I share in the pages of this book can trace its beginnings to that painful and fateful night under a bridge in the western part of Seoul's subway network. I was a graduate student then, studying toward my Master's in International Studies degree at Seoul National University. I had been in Korea for about five years and had some sense of the difficulties faced by gay men in Seoul, as I, too, had encountered the pressures of a heterosexist Korean mainstream on the decisions I had made around my own sexuality and the levels of visibility I chose to share.

At that stage of my life, I felt like I lived in two completely unrelated Korean worlds. I was a well-respected teacher and high-achieving

graduate student by day, and a raging homosexual frequenting the bars of Itaewon's homo hill by night. There was an uneasy balance I felt in living a life moving seamlessly (and dangerously) between different publics. And I began to realize that in this precariously exciting liminality I had come to enjoy, I had neglected to develop my own understanding of what it could possibly mean to be gay for Korean men in Korea. As an outsider, I could never *really* know an experience that I did not embody, but I realize now that, at times, I had somehow forgotten that I also carried the privilege of having acceptance within my own family and culture; a privilege that wasn't afforded to the men I met, loved, and ultimately fell into relationships with.

Following my cringeworthy public break up debut, and once the dust had settled a bit, I became intensely interested in understanding more deeply the world I was living in as a gay Samoan; as a spectator-participant, beginning to seek out explanations to unanswered questions that emerged after that night. The journey from that heated evening outside Dongsan station to this doctoral work took many twists and turns before I left Auckland via San Francisco to begin the story of this research in the twilight of the 2015 Seattle summer.

Drawing on my own lived experiences of living in South Korea for seven years before I arrived in Seattle, and as a transnational Samoan engaging in and trying to make sense of a complex form of my own transnational mobility, this work began with a simple question. I wanted to know: what were the factors that impacted Korean gay men's decisions around sexual visibility? How did these factors come together and were any factors more pertinent than others? Put another way, what was it that made

it difficult for many of the men I had encountered to come out? Further, did this calculation change when they moved countries, considering the increasingly global nature of queer mobilities? In many ways, it was my attempt to work out how I could get to a closer understanding of the men whom I encountered during my time in Korea and the US, who struggled with coming out and claiming a gay identity or subjectivity in a public space.

Many explanations I found in the literature I studied gestured to things one would expect to find. Often, cultural pressures, including the omnipresent power of Confucian social, political, and familial norms, had constructed a heterosexist society and heterosexist state formations that marginalized any expressions of queerness or gender and sexual non-normativity in Korea (Chase, 2012; Cho, 2009, 2011). Christianity also appeared to exert a strong influence over the way that all these factors moved with and against each other. Unique among the big three (China, Korea, Japan) in the northeast corner of the Asian continent, South Korea bore the hallmarks of a long entanglement with Christian missionaries that had been seen by many as a modernizing force (Clark, 1986; König, 2000).

Reducing the complexity of the processes of marginalization to cultural factors and Korea's specific version of Confucianism, I found, is an unsurprisingly simplistic explanation. As Dongjin Seo (2001) notes in their essay *Mapping the Vicissitudes of Homosexual Identities in South Korea*, homosexuality in Korea had been eternally deferred; a term without a reverent and subjected to Orientalization from within. Exploration of homosexuality in Korea had been caught up in the suffocating pace of change affecting Korean society. Homosexuality is intertwined with

the complex historical context of Korean sexuality, which itself has not been the subject of widespread conscious exploration and reflection. In other words, sexuality in Korea as a whole has been under-studied in reference to the wider social shifts that accompanied Korea's rapid move toward industrialization during the Park Chunghee dictatorship and the push for greater globalization in the 1990s.

Seungsook Moon (2005) would offer one of the most significant critiques in this vein following Dongjin Seo's important work. Moon's conceptualization and coining of the term "militarized modernity" made significant strides in bringing a gender critique to the history of Korea's rapid industrialization, also known as the Miracle on the Han. Moon argued that in producing and reproducing a heteronormative state formation under the Park Chunghee dictatorship, the Korean state weaponized and deployed a lens of crisis economics to construct Korean women as docile reproduction tools, while Korean men became militant citizens designed to protect the interests and integrity of the South Korean state against North Korea and outside forces. Therefore, any questions and explorations around gender, and by extension sexuality, were also repressed under a discourse of protecting the nation. This troublesome heteronormative form of statecraft and state building is what Todd Henry (2020) would refer to as survivalist epistemologies, where questions around gender and sexual diversity are constantly deferred to ensure the survival of the South Korean state amid a discursively formed shroud of foreign imperial and neocolonial forces. This shrewd discursive practice continues to govern and restrict calls for greater integration and protection for South Korea's gender-

and sexual-diverse populations. The militant strand embedded within the arm of the Korean state apparatus is draped heavily over the way Korean gay and queer communities can live out their lives in contemporary Seoul.

In this book, I use the term Korean familism and variations of it as a tool to mark out theories that exist around the shape and function of the Korean family institution. Many foreigners are familiar with Confucianism, and in the Korean context, the Confucian family tradition. This tradition centers on patrilineal succession, preserving rigid relationships between father and son; historically, it has proven to be most successful in maintaining strict social order. For example, the Family Register Law was established in 1960 to prescribe regulations on one's legal domicile and the head of the family and family members. Under this law, a patriarch as head of the family was recorded first, and following this were lineal ascendants of the head of the family, a spouse of the head of family, and then lineal descendants of the head of family and their spouses (Yang, 2013). Derived from a Confucian tradition that was established in the second half of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), this strict adherence to Confucian norms is often assigned as a key barrier to the integration of gay men and queer communities in South Korea (Bong, 2008; Seo, 2001).

Notably, though, Chang Kyung Sup (2011) advances the idea that as Korea experienced intense social and political turmoil over the past 200 years, major shifts also occurred in the Korean family. Through Japanese annexation, colonial subjugation, and the disastrous Korean War, Korea suffered from a dissolution of traditional order, leading to a disintegration of stable state

governance. As such, Koreans developed familial relationships and structures of reliance to fill the vacuum of security that a stable state apparatus could not provide through social welfare. This again would shift under new pressures placed on the Korean family unit following rapid industrialization, the military dictatorship and a new drive toward global competitiveness and cosmopolitanism.

Chang Kyung Sup tracks these changes through a pluralistic understanding of the Korean family that bears hallmarks of what he terms **instrumental familism**, **affectionate familism**, and **individual familism**. Instrumental familism describes how, due to perpetual state instability and the building of structures of Confucian familism, Korean families mobilized resources and kin networks for social, material, and political advancement out of necessity. In reference to affectionate familism, Chang adds that following Korea's large-scale industrialization, this form of familism emerged as a result of highly educated women remaining home after marriage and becoming more exposed to Western forms of family-making practices. Affectionate familism engenders stronger care bonds between parents and their children that can transgress the rigidity of prescribed roles that Confucian familism encourages. In this book and on this research journey, I found that bonds between participants and their parents became a central site of knowledge-making and understanding in relation to questions I sought answers to.

Following on from this, with a generation rising in South Korea from the mid-1990s with no recollection of the hardships of the military dictatorship or Korean War, there came a developing thirst for cosmopolitan credentials to increase individual competitiveness

within Korea's globalizing society, underpinned by neoliberal urgencies framed within meritocracy. There are now multiple generations, post-dictatorship era, that have been assaulted by glitzy advertising and an e-information highway via the Internet, raised and completely immersed in an ultra-competitive, consumerist society. Kim terms this "the emergence of individual familism," which can lead to friction between generations who often desire different things. This is related to what Abelmann and colleagues (2013) term **Chaggi Kwalli** or a desire to cultivate the individual self in order to make one's self more competitive in a globalizing Korea. In this sense, for my own research, the idea that Korean families are conservative and just too Confucian to accept a gay identity – and by extension Korean society – is a reductive notion facilitating a need to examine carefully the socio-historical context in which narratives shared here are constructed. And indeed, what I was to find in the stories of participants was a much more complex reading of the role their families played in their own lives and articulations of a gay or queer subjectivity that went beyond these reductive labels.

Another force with a complex and layered history on the Korean Peninsula, as alluded to earlier, is Christianity. The role of missionaries in Korean politics and social trajectory is significant to this work. Christianity was successful in infiltrating the religious practices and political trajectory of Korean society by aligning itself with political movements that positioned Christianity as a modernizing emancipatory force, decoupled from its colonial underpinnings. According to Clark (1986) and Baker (2016), unlike in other locations where Christianity became associated with colonizing forces, Christianity in Korea became associated