

SHORT REPORT

Homosexuality in ancient and modern Korea

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Abstract

This paper examines Korean views on the subject of male homosexuality. Using historical and contemporary sources, it seeks to explain elements of new cultural openness towards homosexuality in modern Korea. Korean people's understanding and knowledge of male homosexuality is ambiguous and limited. In the absence of knowledge and open communication, most Korean people imagine that male homosexuality is an abnormal and impure modern phenomenon. Prejudice and confusion lead most Korean male homosexuals to be estranged from their families, religious communities and non-homosexual peers. Moreover, they are often viewed as the 'carriers' of AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). The purpose of this paper is to examine current Korean perspectives on male homosexuality by exploring both the ancient history of the practice of male homosexuality and current thinking about homosexual life among Koreans, which has played an important part in the formation of contemporary attitudes toward homosexuality.

Résumé

Cet article examine les opinions sur la question de l'homosexualité masculine en Corée. En utilisant des sources historiques et contemporaines, il cherche à expliquer les éléments d'une nouvelle ouverture culturelle vis à vis de l'homosexualité dans la Corée moderne.

Les connaissances et la compréhension de l'homosexualité masculine par le peuple coréen sont ambiguës et limitées. En l'absence de connaissances et de communication ouverte, la plupart des coréens imaginent que l'homosexualité masculine est un phénomène moderne, anormal et impur. Les préjugés et la confusion font que la plupart des hommes homosexuels coréens sont séparés de leurs familles, de leurs communautés religieuses et de leurs pairs non homosexuels. De plus, ils sont souvent considérés comme les « porteurs » du sida et des infections sexuellement transmissibles (IST).

L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner les perspectives actuelles sur l'homosexualité masculine en explorant à la fois l'histoire ancienne des pratiques homosexuelles et les opinions communes sur la vie homosexuelle chez les coréens, qui ont joué un rôle important dans l'émergence des attitudes contemporaines vis à vis de l'homosexualité.

Resumen

En este documento se analizan los puntos de vista de Corea sobre el tema de la homosexualidad masculina. Con ayuda de fuentes históricas y contemporáneas pretendemos explicar los elementos de la nueva apertura cultural hacia la homosexualidad en la Corea moderna. La comprensión y los conocimientos de los coreanos sobre la homosexualidad masculina son ambiguos y limitados. A falta de conocimientos y una actitud abierta de comunicación, la mayoría de los coreanos se imaginan que la homosexualidad masculina es un fenómeno moderno anormal e impuro. Los prejuicios y la

confusión llevan a que la mayoría de homosexuales coreanos pierdan los vínculos con sus familias, comunidades religiosas y compañeros no homosexuales. Además, a menudo son vistos como “portadores” del sida y enfermedades de transmisión sexual. La finalidad de este documento es analizar las perspectivas actuales de los coreanos sobre la homosexualidad masculina estudiando la historia antigua de los métodos de los homosexuales y su opinión actual sobre la vida homosexual entre los coreanos, que ha desempeñado una parte importante en la formación de las actitudes contemporáneas hacia la homosexualidad.

Keywords: *Homosexuality, heterosexuality, hwarang, Shamanism, filial piety*

Korean people’s belief and family system

Korean culture is greatly influenced by Confucianism – a system of education, ceremony, and civil administration. The *Sam-Kang-Oh-Ryun* (The Three Fundamental and Five Moral Laws) has dominated Korean socio-political life for much of the country’s history and has influenced family systems as well as ways of thinking, philosophy and lifestyles. The Three Fundamental and Five Laws are:

The king is the mainstay of the state (*Kun-Yi-Shin-Kang*)

The father is mainstay of the son (*Bu-Yi-Ja-Kang*)

The husband is the mainstay of the wife (*Bu-Yi-Bu-Kang*)

Between father and son it requires *chin* (friendship)

Between king and courtier, *eui* (righteousness)

Between husband and wife, *pyul* (deference)

Between old and young, *saw* (degree)

Between friends, *shin* (faith)¹

Together, these different elements e.g., vertical relationships, family-patriarchal/conservatism, a reluctance to accept change, and family-centeredness have exerted a strong influence on every field of life. They have, moreover, constituted heterosexuality as a key social and ethical norm in Korea.

For Korean people, the family is not only an emotional and a physical unit but the prototype of social structure and life. The function of family relates closely to social harmony.

In Korean Confucianism, society is viewed as an extension of the family. More concretely, the family influences ethical decisions on the part of the individual in the context of ‘filial piety’, that is ‘the constancy of heaven, the righteousness of earth, and the practical duty of man’ (Legge 1899: 473). Filial piety is the criterion on which ethical moral status within the family system of affection, emotion, and tradition is judged. Within the patriarchal family, filial piety is an integrating and stabilizing influence to ensure the reproduction of values across generations.

Both heterosexual marriage and birth are related to the ancestral cult and the duty of filial piety. The former increases the number of descendants and the latter is considered as a means of earning continuity in the family lineage and the ancestral cult. For this reason, Korean people have been ‘...eager to have sons who are supposed to be successors of the family, take care of their elderly parents, and have responsibility for ancestor worship’ (Man-Gap Kim 1982: 174). The heterosexually oriented family system is thus an ethical virtue as well as a basic element of social norms in Korean Confucian society.

Homosexuality in ancient Korea

The *hwarang*² offers the clearest example of ancient homosexuality in Korea. They were leaders of a military group of the Silla Dynasty (B.C. 57– A.D. 935), chosen from the sons of the nobility by popular election. Hundreds of men reportedly belonged to *hwarang* bands. Their major role was to fight a common enemy or to advance the common welfare by increasing national power. The Five *Hwarang* Commandments – serve the king with loyalty, serve parents with piety, be faithful to friends, never retreat in battle, and preserve life when possible – were the basic principles alongside loyalty to the nation, righteousness and dauntlessness.

Beyond their function as élite warriors, *hwarang* concern for ecstasy and eroticism – *hyangga* – can be found in the vernacular poetry of Silla. In the *Sam-Guk-Yu-Sa*,³ for example, can be found verses such as:

*Song of Yearning for the Flower Boy Taemara*⁴

The whole world weeps sadly
The departing Spring.
Wrinkles lance
Your once handsome face,
For the space of a glance
May we meet again.
Fair Lord, what hope for my burning heart?
How can I sleep in my alley hovel?

*Song in Praise of the Flower Boy Kilbo*⁵

Moon
Appearing fitfully
Trailing the white clouds,
Whither do you go?

The face of the Flower Boy Kilbo
Was reflected in the pale green water,
Here among the pebbles of the stream
I seek the bounds of the heart he bore.

Ah, ah! Flower Boy here,
Noble pine that fears no frost!

*Ch'oyong's Song*⁶

Playing in the moonlight of the capital
Till the morning comes,
I return home
To see four legs in my bed.
Two belong to me.
Whose are the other two?
But what was my own
Has been taken from me, what now?⁷

In Korean society, the above songs have been traditionally seen as illustrating a *hwarang* penchant for sexual intercourse with same-sex partners. In colloquial usage, the term

hwarang has given rise to modern derivations such as *hwallyangi* or even *hwangangnom*, meaning a playboy and a lazy good-for-nothing, and also the word *hwaryangnyon*, or something outside the range of expected variations, meaning a slut or prostitute' (Rutt 1961: 8). Until the twentieth century, the word *hwarang* was also used to mean sorcery, laziness, laxity, and having the life of the mountebank (Rutt 1961: 10). Modern *hwarang* or 'players' are also perceived of as a homosexually oriented group.

One of the later Koryo Kings, Kongmin (A.D. 1352–1374), is well known both as a scholar-painter-calligrapher and for pederasty with royal catamites or *chajewi*. The names of five of these are recorded: Hong Yun, Han An, Kwon Chin, Hong Kwan, and No Son (see Hee-Dok Lee 1983 and Hi-Woon Kang 1964). In the Koryo Dynasty, homosexual practices were described as *yongyang-chi-chong*,⁸ the dragon and the sun, implying the coming together of the two male symbols.

In the later Choson Dynasty (A.D. 1392–1910) male homosexual came to be considered wicked by the Confucian upper-middle classes. Nevertheless, homosexual practices were reported as common among the upper-middle classes as well as the lower classes in rural communities (Rutt 1961).

Older Korean vocabularies contain many terms referring to male homosexuality, including *kkoktu kaksi*,⁹ *midongaji*¹⁰ and *namsadang* (Choe 1961). The term *namsadang*, especially, was used in relation to theatrical or dramatic performers (Young Ja Kim 1981) whose most important purpose was to make money by means of homosexual prostitution. Traveling male prostitutes were a feature of rural Korean life from the middle of the Chosun Dynasty onwards (Rutt 1961). *Namsadang* were also involved in shamanistic practices. As Rutt (1961: 59–60) describes it:

Very occasionally one can still meet them performing *Kosa*¹¹ and other religious ceremonies in the Korean countryside, where the boys have a specific role in the dancing. The connection of Shamanism with homosexuality is a little obscure. Transvestitism¹² is a common and well attested practice for Shamans of both sexes, although in the recent periods transvestitism among Korean adult male Shamans does not seem to have been normal. Homosexuals among the Shamans of Siberia are attested by various writers but modern Korean Shamanism has diverged in many respects from the forms found in the more primitive cultures of north-east Asia, and it would be rash, without further evidence, to suggest too close a relation between Shamanism and homosexuality in this country.

Interestingly, modern Koreans do not often appreciate the link between the *namsadang* and shamanism as an ancient form of homosexuality. The *namsadang* are instead seen as a group that practiced both heterosexuality and homosexuality among themselves.

Modern homosexual life in Korea

In modern Korean society, homosexuality is often described as a disease, a mental disorder and a sin. In the early 1980s, homosexual men were misunderstood as both HIV/AIDS 'carriers' and the carriers of social disease. They were figures of fear, seen as preying on normal people. It was and still is common for all male homosexuals to be understood as feminine or transvestites.

Contemporary Korean attitudes toward homosexuality are a complicated mixture of the modern and traditional. Publicly, sexual conduct is held to be governed by strict standards of decorum that make sex legitimate only within monogamous heterosexual marriage. Yet at the same time, there are many opportunities for Korean men and women to have social

and non-sexual physical contact with members of the same-sex both in their school days and afterwards. In this regard, most Koreans enjoy close emotional friendships with members of their own sex.

Homosexuality in general is characterized as a perversion because of insufficient knowledge about both the causes and variety of forms of homosexual expression. Some Korean people see homosexuality as a genetic disorder; others see it as a psychological imbalance. Probably most common is the perception that homosexuality is a perverse behaviour that people choose and can therefore stop at will.

Beliefs about homosexuality in Korea are strongly influenced by the term *byuntae* (abnormal, anomalism, or deviant), a category that which embraces all forms of sexual behaviour and identity that do not conform to traditional heterosexuality. People not only use the word *byuntae* to describe both modern gay men and lesbians, but also use it to refer to any man who takes on the traditional feminine role in a homosexual relationship. To this day, the word 'gay' is not commonly used in Korea. Most Korean people are more familiar with the term *homo* to describe both male and female homosexuals.

Attempts have been made by gay rights activists to reclaim and redefine the term homosexuality. For example, Dong Nam Sue, a graduate school student from Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea, who identified himself as a homosexual by advertising in a university newspaper for the purpose of organizing 'a gay and lesbian club' called *Come Together* (Chung 1996), published a magazine called, *Kirikiri*,¹³ meaning, literally 'birds of a feather flock together'. Subsequently in December 1995, Dong Nam Sue and four *Come Together* members agreed to appear on a television talk show (Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) 1995: 15 December) to discuss discrimination and rejection towards homosexuals, as well as their distorted image as AIDS carriers. They asserted that

Most self-identified gay and lesbians experience a great deal of fear about coming out to family members or in a wider social environment. Korea is not only a much more conservative place in terms of attitudes towards homosexuality, but also a difficult place to establish a public identity outside stereotypical functions. The overwhelming social pressures, which force people to marry and procreate child play as obstacles for gay men and lesbians to come out and form distinctive social organizations. The more gay men and lesbians must defend their respective lifestyle and demand the kinds of social services that have long been neglected and prohibited by an authoritarian state (KBS 1995: 15 December).

One positive effect of their discussion on a TV talk show is that it is now more acceptable to talk about the issue of homosexuality in Korea. More recently, two gay and lesbian organizations – *Maemun 001* (Same Mind) at Seoul National University and *Saram & Saram* (Person with Person) at Korea University, have been established. Their main activity has been to gain public support for homosexual orientation as a 'third sex'. They assert: 'there are many colours, many genders, many foundations for sexuality, and many other perspectives' (KBS 1995: 15 December).

A number of homosexual-themed films have been made by the Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS). Perhaps the best known are *Jazz* and *Roommate*. These two films portray Korean attitudes towards homosexuality more positively, and they have been followed by other homosexually-oriented television dramas and films that have been accepted without severe criticism. Despite this, the dominant perception remains that homosexuality is psychologically deviant, sociologically detrimental and morally corrupt.

Future prospects

Negative attitudes towards homosexuality are central to Korean norms governing sexual behaviour. For most Koreans, sexual behaviour is best located within heterosexual marriage and the obligations of family relationships. For these reasons, the existence of homosexuals in Korea has been continuously denied throughout history. Same-sex preference is seen as a peculiar form of sexual activity.

As a result, most Korean homosexual men and women keep their identities hidden from families and friends. Korean homosexuals in more conservative families also have to struggle with intense social and cultural pressures to marry, to reproduce the family line and not to bring disgrace to the family name. Refusal to marry and raise a family represents a denial of future unborn generations and one's place in the familial continuum. Since both heterosexual marriage and the raising of a family confer social respectability, an individual is forced to marry in order not to give up his/her rightful place as a mature member of adult society.

Despite such pressures, there are growing opportunities for Korean homosexual men and women to talk about their feelings and identities and to obtain counselling and sex education. There are a few hotlines and organizations in which a homosexual teenager or adult can discuss his/her sexuality, and which can help them come to terms with it. Gay or lesbian networks also play an important role in providing young people with social and psychological support. Such support can help alleviate hopelessness, isolation and depression and provides opportunities for friendship and socialization.

Several religious organizations also provide sex education programmes to homosexual men and women in Korea. These focus on counselling and psychological therapy, and human sexuality with specific attention being given to homosexuality and gender identity. Their primary role is not only to help the Koreans recognize that the homosexuals can be part of their own community members, but also to teach homosexual men and women to live with themselves in a society which punishes their activities and scorns their sexual morality.

In modern Korea, the issue of homosexuality remains controversial. Both heterosexuals and homosexuals in Korea must strive to understand each other's sexual orientation and accept their differences.

Notes

1. Later in the Chosun Dynasty (A.D. 1392–1905), there developed the notion that the king, teachers and parents were all co-equal in authority and honour.
2. The term *hwarang* literally means 'Flower of Youth' and appears in the name of a youth corps and an army officers' training school. The word is also the name of a high military decoration, the name of a bar in an Hotel, and the professional name of a popular musician. It carries with it the ring of romance and chivalry and conjures up images of masculinity and grace.
3. The *Sam-Guk-Yu-Sa* (A.D. 1206–1289) is a traditional book detailing early Korean history. It contains copious reference to the *hwarang*.
4. This song was written by the senior *hwarang*, Taemara, during the reign of King Hyoso (A.D. 692–702).
5. This song dates from the same reign and was written by the monk Chungdam. It praises one of the *hwarang* bands.
6. This last song is possibly the most famous of all in terms of its direct description of homosexual practices. It dates from the time of King Hongang (A.D. 875–886).
7. The following songs also represent *hwarang* boys' homosexual eroticism: the Buddhist monk Yungchon's *Song of the Comet*, which offers a metaphorical description of sexual desire among *hwarang* boys; Wolmyong's *Tusita Hymn*, written in the *hwarang* style during the reign of King Kyongdok (A.D. 742–765), a devout song in honor of Maitreya known as a handsome *hwarang* boy; and *Song for a Dead Sister*, which was written for in

honour of a dead soul who died in battle. Here, the 'sister' referred to is in fact a *hwarang* boy who adopted a passive role in homosexual acts.

8. In modern expression, this term can be represented as *namsaek* or *kyegan*, which means an abnormal sexual practice with same-sex partners.
9. This term refers to a traditional play of ancient Korea. During the reign of the King Sukchong (A.D. 1675–1721) Pak Chomji, wrote a number of plays on homosexual themes. These included some interesting collections of a one-act dramas such as the *Myongayop Chihae* of *Hong Man Jong*.
10. The term describes a good-looking boy who commonly engaged in the pederasty. The term *midong* was normally used to describe boy catamites who were dressed attractively, often in girl's clothes.
11. This is a traditional form of Korean religious ceremony or sacrifice to the gods.
12. The term refers to a person, especially a man, who dresses in the clothing of the opposite sex for psychological reasons.
13. This magazine was published in 1996 without the permission of the Department of Culture and Publication. The Department, which is responsible for licensing, censorship and import restrictions forced the publication to close on the grounds of importing pornography. A key component of the magazine is the personal advertisements section in which tens of people advertise to contact other gay or lesbian people. The motives of the advertisers vary from those who are looking for casual sex to people trying to find love. More recently, telephone dating has become popular and gay computer chat rooms began operation in late 1995.

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