

Book Review**Kwon, J. (2018). *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies*. University of Iowa Press.****Chyun Oh¹**

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Received

3 December 2021

Revised

23 December 2021

Accepted

24 December 2021

Dr. Jungmin Kwon's *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies* (University of Iowa Press, 2018) is the first of its kind, which contextualizes and historicizes straight Korean women's gay male fantasy. In the framework of what Dr. Kwon theorizes as "FANTasy" culture, the book discusses heterosexual women's erotica and consumption of romanticizing gay male bodies in media, such as fan fiction (fan fic), comic books, television dramas, and films. She capitalizes "FAN" to highlight the female fans' subjectivity and cultural and consumer power—what fans can do (p. 11). By providing a new framework, FANTasy culture, the book situates Korean fanfic in the genealogy of gay-themed media products for straight women. She discussed the text-based media, such as Japanese yaoi and "boys' love" manga since the 70s, American slash fiction since the 80s, the formation of Korean fanfic and queer manhwa (comic books) in the 90s, such as *Let Die* (1995), and the popularity of U.S. gay-themed dramas in the 2000s. The book employs feminist media criticism, critical cultural theories, and (auto)ethnographic interviews on Korean women in their twenties to early forties who are producers and consumers of gay-themed media. The author's background in critical feminist media studies, Korean pop culture and film studies provides invaluable insight to this understudied group that needs much theorization.

The book is richly grounded in Korean history, social movements, and its impact on media fandom. The book offers a useful framework on how historic moments, such as democratization in the 80s, the import of the U.S. film and cable dramas in the 90s along with Korean government's open policy toward foreign media, Hollywoodization of Korean cinema in the 2000s, and the popularity of "Alpha girls" and local Korean dramas in the 2010s, directly shape media landscape for women. The book's strong historical analysis will appeal to academics and students in the fields of Korean pop culture and film, Korean history, media fandom, and social movements.

A unique aspect of this book is the author's autobiographical embodied experience. When she was a teenager, she was a fan of the first generation of K-pop idols, such as H.O.T. and its fan fic culture, which led to her journey as an "aca-fan" in the future. The introduction shares an anecdote of a Western gay male friend who told her that "I know *you girls* believe all gay men are like Kang Dong-won [Kang Tong-wŏn] or Lee Joon-ki [I Chun-ki]" (p. 1, emphasis in original) naming popular Korean actors known for their stylish and feminine looks. "That underappreciation leads me to the coinage 'FANtasy' [...] this analysis—this story—is hers" (p. 4). As FANtasy culture empowers women with its financial interruption of the patriarchal industry by altering gender representations, the author aims to empower the readers/fans through her theoretical interventions. As such, the book contains invaluable autobiographical reflections as a consumer and critic of FANtasy culture.

It is the author's position that adds strength to her analysis. I think her friend's comment reveals that he makes the same assumption, like the female fans who he disapproves, and generalizes and simplifies female fans as "you girls." In addition to homogenizing female fans, the comment tends to negate women as superficial and frivolous, if not immature, implied by the word choice "girls." It would be unusual to call a male university professor a boy. But this could happen to an Asian female professor, suddenly being called a girl, regardless of her age, job career, or education. Korean straight female fans consuming gay male fantasy is privileged as heterosexual. In the same vein, the author's position as a heterosexual woman might appear as a structural limitation, as she speaks about representations of gay male romance. However, the author's experience reveals not only limitations but also possibilities of fan activism. As follows, the book illuminates intersectionality across race, gender, nationality, and postcolonial history, and how Korean female fans consuming

queer subculture under the postcolonial influences negotiate their marginalization and privileges.

The book consists of five chapters in addition to Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter titled "Girl Fans Queered" contextualizes gay-themed cultural productions across the U.S., Japan, and Korea largely since the 1980s. Chapter two, "Fans Empowered" explains why straight women are fascinated by gay-themed media by providing statistical and theoretical evidence from feminism movements and gender inequality in Korea. Chapter three, "FANtasy Mainstreamed" traces the development of queer cinema from pioneering movies that were unsuccessful to "the golden age of female eroticism in Korean cinema" (p. 96) with notable examples, such as *The King and the Clown* (2005). Chapter four, "FANtasy Cinematized," provides a textual analysis of popular gay-themed films concerning the female gaze, such as *Broken Branches* (1995), *Bungee Jumping of Their Own* (2001), *Road Movie* (2002), *No Regret* (2006), and more. Chapter five, "FANtasy Bridged" is a critical reflection of her auto-ethnographic fieldwork as a heterosexual woman and contributions and limitations of an academic and activist.

The book specifically situates gay romance film and fanfic in two historical moments: feminism movements and LGBTQ rights. First, feminist movements in Korea can be traced from the suffrage right in 1948, upper class educated in the 60s, factory workers in the 70s, and academics with the emergence of women's studies in the 80s, the "post" discourse and liberation along with the democratization of the society in general in the 90s. The author argues that postfeminism today has potential as it enables women to share their voices in the mainstream industry with their consumer power. FANtasy fans are in the continuum of feminist movements. They are not a fan of heterosexual marriage. Instead of subordinating themselves to the traditional gender roles, they use their time and resources for themselves, such as

watching films or performances, and travel, shop, socializing, which lead to consumerism-driven activism. Referring to the consumer power of women in their twenties and thirties, the author points out that “No wonder the film industry started monetizing FANTasy culture: it knew it had robust viewership in that age group” (p. 82).

While the book appears all about heterosexual female spectatorship, it is also about the history of LGBTQ rights movements. According to the author, same-sex partners were not taboo until the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897). However, during the Dynasty, Confucianism highlighted values of carrying on family lines as essential duties. Later, the influence of conservative Christianity set the norms for the treatment of sexual minorities in modern Korea (p. 21). Until the 90s, homosexuality remained nearly invisible, but the rise of social activism began to popularize the terms “queer” and “Iban” (p. 26). According to *Welcome, Room 305* (2011–2015), the first straightforward queer Korean webtoon, “It is not about ‘boy’s love’ but about advocating diverse sexual orientations of all” (p. 36). The book shows the delicate and intricate connection and balance between queer and women’s rights. As if anti-slavery movements contributed to the rising feminist movements, and vice versa in the early 19th century in the U.S., socially marginalized groups often shape, support, and share a collective identity to move forward.

The author argues that the driving force of FANTasy is that it provides alternative perspectives unavailable in the mainstream media. Cyberspace is no exception, as demonstrated by sexist and ethnically derogatory terms on Korean women, such as “toenchangnyö” and “gold miss,” that mock women’s Westernized consumerism habits. While fanfic often reproduces the heterosexual binary (more feminine vs. more masculine gay male), it provides visually attractive, androgynous protagonists and their romantic or sexually provocative relations. Without implicating their own bodies, female fans can fulfill “a distinctively female egalitarian dream” (p. 5) against patriarchal

gender roles and obligations.

Female fans romanticize gay males because they believe straight men do not have traits, such as “soft appearance and sweet personality, responsiveness to female desire, and egalitarianism” (p. 11). “FANTasy texts camouflage heterosexual female desires as gayness,” she wrote (p. 11). Romanticizing gay male bodies is one of the few ways heterosexual female fans can liberate and as follow, empower themselves. It serves as a catalyst to ameliorate gendered hierarchy in reality. Although the fanfic figures’ sexual orientations are gay, their bodies are still male, thus opening up for sexual fantasy. Female fans can objectify and enjoy beautiful male bodies, controlling and manipulating those bodies in the fanfic. Yet, unlike the male gaze that often objectifies women as nothing but naked objects, this female gaze is less threatening because men wish women to want and look at their bodies (p. 124).

The book illuminates specificities of Korean FANTasy culture. As there is little attention paid to Korean FANTasy female fans, so does Korean FANTasy culture. Compared to Japanese or U.S. products, Korean fanfic’s romanticized gay male body reflects East Asian sentiment and masculinity: androgynous, slim, delicate, beautiful young men, represented by “soft-masculinity” and *Söngpi*, Confucian scholars of premodern Korea. This image continues as “flower boys” in K-pop idols. Korean gayness is associated with emotional and physical femininity, such as “being reserved, quiet, and delicate” with his pretty, slim, androgynous look. Contrarily, Western stereotypes of gay men are “flamboyant or buffoonish” (p. 10). In addition to its different masculinity from Western gayness, Korean fanfic is largely based on real idols and celebrities, while yaoi highlights imaginary characters and sexually provocative scenes.

The author more fully explains the imagery of beautified, romanticized gay bodies that serve as “pornography for women” (p. 8) and “pseudoqueer” (p. 98) through a case study on the

commercially successful gay film *The King and the Clown* (2005). The film marked an unprecedented success of queer films. Although it is gay male romance, it was so successful that a heterosexual female fan confessed that she watched it forty-five times (p. 108). The main character Lee Joon-ki's androgynous beauty, slim body, sophisticated face, and ambiguous gender, resembles "the dreamy gay character of FANTasy literature" (p. 108).

There are both limitations and possibilities in media representation. As Peggy Phelan (2003) wrote, increased visibility is not the same with increased power to those who have been already marginalized because visibility can simply reproduce existing stereotypes (pp. 2, 5). The author is fully aware of such danger. Echoing with Helene Shugart, she said that increased media representation and visibility of gay and lesbians in the mainstream media "does not necessarily confer social legitimacy" (p. 157). Yet, visibility also means that there could be more changes and channels that make the marginalized voices heard, albeit indirectly and mediated. Referring to Judith Butler's notion of fantasy, she argues that although fanfic is an image created "based on their own fantasies, not a real-world gay male body" (p. 11), this can lead to a social change, because fantasy creates psychic reality, which is one dimension of reality. Fanfic can open the possibility of "thinking with" gay people, albeit fantastically (p. 53).

The book provides a fresh perspective on Korean women's use of postfeminism, departing from the Marxism-driven approach to capitalism in the U.S. The author argues that Korean female fans' financial power should not be ignored in a capitalist society, as their interests in gay fantasy enable growing visibility of gay-themed products in the Korean mainstream media. Although consumerism-driven postfeminism today "camouflages" the actual freedom as "*what they buy*" (p. 70 emphasis in original), it can disrupt the male-dominated capitalist structure and gender roles. Women's financial independence and advocacy in gender equality and political issues have changed the media

industry toward a more diverse representation of sexuality—including gay male fantasy. For example, the mainstream film benefits from FANTasy fans who are already "accustomed to gay sex scenes that are so explicit they could be labeled pornography" (p. 137) with increased ticket sales.

Addressing ethics of ethnographic fieldwork, Dwight Conquergood (1985) suggested "dialogical performance." Unlike skeptical disinterest or superficial fascination, dialogical performance is a way of speaking with, not for, Other. While resisting an ending, it opens up multiple possibilities via continuous conversation with the community. The book's approach resonates with Conquergood's model of dialogical performance with its ongoing, self-reflective and critical analysis of Other concerning the self as a member of FANTasy. Among many others, the beauty of this book lies at the transformative power of an aca-fan's activism that illuminates Other (gay men) by examining it through the gaze of Other (heterosexual Korean woman).

The author concludes the book by returning to her gay male friend, whose appellation "you girls" (p. 1) drove her to "write about who 'you girls' are and what they do" (p. 181). The author finishes the book by encouraging fans so that they know what they do is valuable, confessing that academic endeavors from the field to the page can dispel the "guilt they may feel from enjoying guilty media pleasures" (p. 181). If FANTasy fans can change the world, as the book's last word, I believe that it is not only because they have economic power, or they are feminists or academics. It is also because they have love inside their hearts for their idols and each other, even if the affection can fade away like the shiny stars they admire, only existing in the imagination. An action is more precious than disinterest because only in action, we can move forward.

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