



An Insider View of Left-Identified Queer Activism

Queer Throughlines: Spaces of Queer Activism in South Korea and the Korean Diaspora.
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Until recently, questions of queerness have remained marginalized in Korean studies, especially for the era before South Korea's democratization and globalization (1987–present). Even today, such studies are scant and only infrequently reorient the gender-normative, sex-dimorphic, and heteropatriarchal assumptions that undergird scholarly work on the peninsula (and its overseas brethren). In this sense, Ju Hui Judy Han's *Queer Throughlines: Spaces of Queer Activism in South Korea and the Korean Diaspora* is a welcome contribution to the nascent field of Korean queer studies. As much an autobiographical account as an ethnographic narrative of leftist and feminist advocacy over the past 30 years, this study explores how (trans)national organizing has endeavored to expand androcentric and heteronormative family models, decriminalize conscientious objection and military homosexuality, and protect LGBTI citizens from religious queerphobia, among other progressive causes. From the viewpoint of activists, these increasingly visible but highly politicized efforts aim to improve the livelihoods of (South) Koreans and their precarious place in a demographically shrinking nation still formally at war with the North.

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The book emerges from the author's long-time participation in and first-hand observations of queer activist movements in South Korea and Southern California, two important sites of her research ('Korean diaspora' in the book's title is limited to the U.S. West Coast, leaving other sites for future scholars to explore). It makes use of Han's personal "archives of ephemera" (p. 43), including pamphlets, flyers, pictures, cartoons, newspaper articles, community magazines, internet websites, YouTube clips, and her own memories. She also cites 13 interviews with former and current activists and their published writings. The stated goal is to "provide an interpretive account of events that took place and [to] connect them to each other and other sociopolitical contexts" (p. 21). To do so, she explicitly spatializes the seemingly linear notion of throughlines, which frames four body chapters. In a lengthy introduction, Han draws on critical geographers (e.g., Doreen Massey), scholars of borderland studies (e.g., Robert R. Alvarez, Jr.), and queer feminists (e.g., Sara Ahmed) to define this networked concept. On the one hand, throughlines reflect her claim that LGBTI campaigns, primarily those of the left, were consciously linked to broader social movements, including those focused on democratic, anti-war, and anti-imperialist causes. On the other hand, this analytic underscores what Han theorizes as the non-linear and solidaristic nature of queer activism. Such qualities, she writes, "compel us to imagine both a plurality and simultaneity of stories and storytellers converging and assembling an ever-shifting constellation, changing in dynamic composition and shaping communities-in-the-making" (p. 14).

Chapter one utilizes throughlines as both a contextual reference to connections linking Korean America(ns) and South Korea(ns) and an activist modality pitting a combination of political homophobia and immigrant rights against formal democratization and LGBTI empowerment. It traces how, in response to four non-discrimination bills, religious conservatives in the diaspora launched a campaign to place the California Defense of Sexual Responsibility Act (CDSRA) on the ballot in 2000. Their aim was, as Korean-American media disclose, to control queer content (by denouncing it) in primary schools and ban on-campus advocacy

groups. While not ignoring the cultural conservatism of the first generation, Han stresses racially informed efforts to ensure immigrant rights in the white-dominated United States. To this end, she cites newspaper advertisements calling for cooperation among fellow people of color. Meanwhile, diasporic leaders expressed fundamentalist fears of “persecution” (for being forced to countenance discussions of queerness in religious schools) and secular concerns of “wrongful” prosecution (if landlords or merchants refused to offer services to LGBTI citizens). As a counterforce, the author examines Korean Americans for Civil Rights, of which she was a member. Connected to other Asian-American advocacy groups in Los Angeles, this local organization promoted a civil rights framework of legal equality and minority protections, liberal traditions that ultimately triumphed. Nevertheless, why the CDSRA struggled to collect the necessary signatures and what this failure signifies in terms of early fundamentalist activism remain unexplained (Han does note that church leaders managed to register 15,000 new voters, the basis for future campaigns of political homophobia).

Shifting gears to a discussion of South Korea’s queer left, chapter two offers an autoethnographic account of social organizing that targeted such forces as reproductive heterosexuality and gender conformity as well as anticommunist militarism and American neo-imperialism. Connecting these contemporary concerns to *minjung* politics of the 1980s, Han touches on recent efforts to decriminalize homosexuality in the military, end the random prosecution of gay recruits, and accommodate transgender soldiering. She also documents student groups that, since the 1990s, have pursued these goals. While noting previous splits between the dominant National Liberation (NL) and People’s Democracy (PD) factions, Han stresses the coalitional nature of contemporary left-identified queer activists. In addition to publicizing state censorship, religious homophobia, and a related spate of queer suicides, these activists have voiced support for labor laws and anti-war causes, while denouncing national security laws and mandatory military service. Although they outwardly align themselves with progressive politics, the underlying mechanisms of these coalitions appear superficial, primarily consisting of mutual event attendance. To her credit,

Han admits “the somewhat transactional characterization of building solidarity across difference” (p. 104). And yet, the text leaves room for a deeper, structural exploration of why these and other boundaries remain, an issue I discuss below in terms of neoliberal capitalism and social media.

Chapter three returns to religious politics, focusing on the heresy allegations of the “queerphilic” Reverend Lim Borah. In 2017, this female pastor was scapegoated by fundamentalist Christians for affirming the existence of LGBTI parishioners and opposing discrimination in the name of religious freedom. That she was a proponent of liberation theology made her a convenient target, much like LGBTI citizens who were indiscriminately labelled as North Korean sympathizers. To trace the controversy (i.e., crumbling church authority and membership), Han reveals how Lim’s expulsion worked to “solidify authority, define institutional boundaries, enhance group solidarity, and offer a ritual outlet for collective anxiety” (p. 115). While the chapter focuses on an undeniably reactionary campaign (and the emergence of congregations affirming gender/sexual minorities), radical organizations, including those Han examines, also adopt rigid ideological frames and thus bolster in-group cohesion. Given the polarization of body politics today, the uncanny mirroring of majoritarian right-wing and minoritarian left-wing forces merits further comparative analysis.

Returning to queer activism, chapter four analyzes temporalized contestations over the (dis)empowerment of LGBTI South Koreans. Criticizing the oppositional motto *sigi sangjo* (‘ahead of time’ or ‘too early for that’), Han shows how this strategy of denialism and deferral—one aimed at protecting heteropatriarchal familism and national security—led queer activists to demand the immediate enfranchisement of gender/sexual minorities. As noted above, this dynamic discloses how majoritarian-minoritarian politics mirror each other and how seemingly oppositional forces often engage in similarly uncompromising strategies. However, the author focuses on the radical position, as seen in pride festival slogans like “Right now! Not later!” and her treatment of public protests opposing the *sangjo* stance of former President Moon Jae-in. These efforts and others opposing authoritarianism, militarism, and environmental destruction

might have engendered “affective experiences and ‘modes of feeling’” (p. 144) among left-leaning activists, although the claim remains experiential rather than substantiated. What social change such sloganeering produced among potential allies is also unexamined, as is its ability to mobilize other activists—to say nothing of non-activists, LGBTI or not, who constitute the “majority of the minority.”

While Han succeeds in centering left-identified queer advocacy, her deep immersion within the movement limits the book’s analytical distance, resulting in prose that is more impressionistic than structural. What is the role and function of activism today? Who are its leaders, and how does their predominantly middle-class background influence strategies and campaigns? How do groups operate, fund themselves, recruit members, and engage with the leaders of other queer and non-queer organizations? These broader questions remain largely unanswered. Moreover, Han tends to assume, rather than interrogate, the inherent radicality of her informants. By locating their ideas in a genealogy of *minjung* politics, she consequently overemphasizes this imagined legacy, while downplaying the competitive logic of neoliberal capitalism and social media’s attention economy, both of which undeniably fuel today’s practices of self- and group validation. Relatedly, “the growing diversity of queer and trans activism in which there is simmering tension and friction” (p. 82), which she notes in passing, is never fully considered. Recall that Chongdonghoe, an early formation, quickly split into gay and lesbian subgroups. That a growing number of queer groups have come to compete for limited resources means that they must “sell their brand” to maintain public recognition, suggesting that solidarity may be more limited than she assumes. Meanwhile, none has managed to capture a significant constituency of LGBTI supporters. In reality, many potential allies—especially those of the working class, whom one may think leftist activists aim to represent—find themselves alienated by queer organizing. In this sense, the cadres Han has studied constitute a small segment of LGBTI citizens. To understand the promises and limits of social movements, their diverse, non-activist counterparts deserve equal scholarly attention.