

FACELESS THINGS:  
SOUTH KOREAN GAY MEN, INTERNET, AND SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an investigation of the two very different pathways that the Internet was offering Korean gay men, primarily in their 30s and 40s, in terms of exercising their sexual freedom and being gay at a moment of neoliberal reforms in South Korea when an increased emphasis on individual productivity and efficiency, especially through the use of information communication technologies such as the Internet, was competing with the renewed valorization of the ideology of “family as nation” or “heteronormative familism.” While the former was seen as necessary for the country to transition from a state-directed, manufacturing-based, late-developmental economy to a global, finance-based one, the latter was seen as necessary to reproduce the nation, particularly after the IMF Crisis, when precipitously low birth rates, declining marriage rates, and rising divorce rates have stoked widespread fears about the social and biological reproduction of the nation.

One pathway, offered by Ivancity, South Korea’s most popular gay portal, seemed to be offering Korean gay men with unlimited individual freedom and consumer choice to fulfill their romantic and sexual desires. Without the broader constraints of either the family or gay community, however, such interactions deteriorate into the “chaos” of uncontrolled individual desire. The other pathway offered by gay groups on Daum, a mainstream portal, on the other hand, seemed to be providing gay men with more limited choice and constrained individual freedom in terms of pursuing their sexual and romantic desires but also with a greater sense of social and emotional stability. Yet, even as these two groups present two very different models of Internet-mediated gay sociality and sexual freedom, neither of them can provide gay men with the kind of economic security that Koreans often derive from their biological families. Indeed, with deepening neoliberal reforms, as the family becomes the primary and often the sole source

of economic security for individuals cast adrift on the turbulent waves of capitalism, single gay men from both Ivancity and gay Daum clubs—without the perceived security of their wives and children in their old age—retreat and even retire from the gay community so that they can focus on their careers and secure their economic futures.

In focusing on the so-called “first generation” of Korean gay men who are forestalling marriage to women and using the Internet to lead their gay lives, this dissertation contributes to two main bodies of literature: (queer) globalization and Internet Studies. In terms of the first, it argues that liberal individualism that underpins globalizing notions of Westernised gay identity, movement, and culture is a contradictory phenomenon in South Korea, competing with the valorization of family as nation. In terms of the second, it argues that the Internet, as a space of autonomous individualism, promises new forms of pleasure and erotics while filtering and governing them through disciplinary norms around family, nation, consumption, and body. Together, such contradictions create a hybridized gay culture in South Korea that challenges and reworks the tropes of the “closet” and “coming out” that have traditionally defined Westernised gay culture.

*To my mother*

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*There is nothing that the human heart more irresistibly seeks than an object to which to attach itself.*

William Goldwin<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In December 2007, I caught a cab outside the Lotte Department Store in Myong-dong to my office-tel in Gwanghwamun.<sup>2</sup> A short five-minute ride, we had to snake around Lotte Hotel, go past Chosun Hotel, then up two blocks before making a left turn before Cheonggye Stream to emerge in the bustling Gwanghwamun intersection where my office-tel was diagonally located.

On this blustery, snowy day, however, instead of making a left on the street before Cheonggye Stream, which was blocked by construction, the cabdriver did a U-turn at Chosun Hotel, merging directly with the traffic that went around City Hall to emerge on the other side of the Gwanghwamun intersection. Jokingly, I asked the driver, “That was an illegal turn, wasn’t it?” He replied, “The man about to move into that house over yonder with the blue tiles taught me that.” It took me a second to figure out that he was referring to Lee Myung-bak about to be elected as South Korea’s 17<sup>th</sup> president and to the presidential suites of the “Blue House.” “What do you mean?” I asked the cab driver, who replied: “He taught us that what’s important is not the *process* but the *results*. We’re now living in a ‘results-oriented’ society.”

During my field research, I had many conversations like this one with cab drivers.<sup>3</sup> With cabs almost as cheap and plentiful as buses for short trips, I often took them for my short jaunts

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Mary Evans’ *Love: An Unromantic Discussion* (2003: 1).

<sup>2</sup> I follow the Korean local system rather than the McCune-Reischauer Korean romantization system for local places.

<sup>3</sup> All I had to do was to step out of my office-tel onto the sidewalk for two or three cabs to charge down the street like bulls looking to pick me up. Other times, they circled the streets like sharks looking for passengers. To me, these men came to represent the predatory and sometimes

between my office-tel in Gwanghwamun and the gay bars/businesses in Jongro—a quick 5-minute ride. During these trips, many cab drivers—often men in their 30s-50s who had lost their jobs and/or businesses after the Asian financial crisis in 1997/8—railed against the rich and powerful. One cab driver, for instance, spoke angrily about how the rich—instead of taking care of the poor—were simply grabbing more for themselves. Within the deregulated environment of post-Asian financial crisis society (aka “IMF Crisis” in South Korea), when the paternalistic late-developmental state had given way to a “Do It Yourself” capitalism, greed and havoc seemed to rule the land.

Taking place at the height of the 2007/8 presidential election, this particular conversation seemed to highlight a central dilemma that Koreans were faced with during that election: the choice between a process-oriented democracy and a productive but potentially chaotic capitalism. While the previous 10 years of liberal government by the Millennium Democratic Party were seen to have effected popular democratic reforms, they were also seen to have driven the country into further recession and material hardship. In fact, with the growing gap between the rich and the poor and life made more precarious for many, many were writing off those years of liberal government under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun as the “Lost Decade.”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, the conservative government of the Grand National Party seemed to represent a different set of issues and dilemmas. Even as they promised to revitalize the flagging economy and—capitalizing on a resurgence of nostalgia for the Park Chung-hee era of military

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reckless ways in which the “New Poor” had to hustle in order to survive as irregular/contractual workers in the post-IMF era.

<sup>4</sup> The tenure of South Korea’s 16<sup>th</sup> presidency by Roh Moo-hyun was riddled with charges of incompetency and controversy, including over his pursuit of a free trade agreement with United States despite opposition from his leftist constituency, who denounced it as “neoliberal.” This was especially controversial since Roh and many of his staff members were part of the “386” Generation (people in their 30s, who had attended college in the 1980s, and who were born in the 1960s), who had been active in the pro-democracy and anti-imperialist movements in the 1980s.

dictatorship—turn back time to a simpler era when life was supposedly more difficult but hard work brought tangible results, they represented the potential chaos and a/immorality of an uncontrolled capitalism. Meanwhile, no better embodying this dilemma was the conservative Grand National Party’s presidential candidate, Lee Myung-bak. Even as he promised to harness the forces of free market capitalism through neoliberal principles of “pragmatism” (*siryongjuŭi*) and “resultism” (*kyŏlgwajuŭi*) to power a 7% annual growth in GDP, \$40,000 USD per capita, and the world's seventh largest economy,<sup>5</sup> his campaign was dogged by accusations of unsavory business practices, including stock fraud. The cab driver thus seemed to indexing this tension between the previous 10 years of liberal government that had introduced “democratic process” but failed to produce “economic results” and the incoming government that promised to bring economic results but also potential chaos, immorality, and social disorder. So, I thought.

Yet, as we passed the Admiral Yi Sun-sin’s statue in front of the Sejong Cultural Center<sup>6</sup> and he waited—this time—to make a perfectly legal U-turn in front of Gwanghwamun Palace behind which was the Blue House, the cab driver complicated this seemingly classic dilemma within Korean society between fragile democracy and excesses of capitalism. When I asked him, “Do you really believe what you just told me?” he replied, “No, of course not. I was just kidding.”

Imagine if my parents had me without going through the proper ritual of marriage. Say that my mother worked in a bar and my father was a day laborer and they met one night and had me as part of a one-night stand. How do you think I would have turned out? I would be *abnormal*.

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<sup>5</sup> This was known as Lee Myung-bak’s “747” plan.

<sup>6</sup> Known for his naval victories against the Japanese during the Imjin War in the Chosun Dynasty with his turtle ships, the statue of Admiral Yi (1545-1598) anchored a square that was replete with symbols of state power and that became the focus of intense political conflict, including the “Candle Light” protests, in 2008.

Thus, in one fell swoop, the cab driver seemed to overturn everything that I had believed him to be telling me. The process that he was referring to was NOT the democratic process of rule following and turn taking that ensured the proper functioning of the economic system (and the prevention of chaos on Seoul's crowded roads). No, it referred to the orderly process of getting married. The orderly process of getting married, producing children, and creating a family—and NOT the strengthening of civil society and its democratic institutions and procedures—was what was thought to be necessary to prevent the potential social chaos and immorality of untrammelled individual greed that accompanied South Korea's neoliberal reforms. It was also, equally importantly, what prevented abnormality or, conversely, produced normality, naturally raising the following questions: If gay men could not marry, were they forever doomed to a life of instability? Were their sexual/romantic relations forever doomed to be *immoral*?

It is at this historical juncture of “neoliberalism” and “heteronormative familism” when issues of “individual freedom versus familial/social constraint”; “democratic process versus capitalistic excess”; and “market efficiency and productivity versus familial morality and normality” were at the heart of Korean social debates and politics that I analyze the two very different pathways that the Internet was offering Korean gay men in terms of exercising their sexual freedom and being gay. By “neoliberalism,” I mean the increased emphasis on individual productivity and efficiency, especially through the use of information communication technologies such as the Internet in all facets of social and economic life, in order to promote the wealth and prosperity of the nation. By “heteronormative familism,” I mean—following Jesook Song—the renewed valorization of the ideology of “family as nation,” particularly after the IMF Crisis, with the precipitously low birth rates, declining marriage rates, and the rising divorce rates, that have all both provoked widespread fears about the biological and social reproduction

of the nation and introduced new modes of bio-political and neoliberal governance. As Song writes, “1998 and 1999 were historic years when a revived conservative, collectivistic family ideology superseded a decade-long feminist contest between women’s independence and privatization in domestic spheres” (2009: 65).

One pathway, offered by Ivancity, South Korea’s most popular gay portal, seemed to be providing Korean gay men with unlimited individual freedom and consumer choice to fulfill their romantic and sexual desires. Through Ivancity, they could not only meet thousands of other men relatively quickly and anonymously—away from the social and moral constraints of not only their families and the state but also other gay men—they could also *specify* the type of men whom they wanted to meet, hailing their “ideal man.” Yet, in providing almost unlimited individual freedom without any larger structure of social control or moral restraint, gay men are also inevitably plagued with a great sense of instability and disorder, especially as they fail to find a stable, long-term relationship in the maelstrom of short-term, offline meetings, called *põngaes* (“lightning meetings”) oriented either towards “speed-dating,” or *põnseksũ* (“lightning sex” aka “hookups”).

The other pathway offered by gay groups on Daum, a mainstream portal, on the other hand, seemed to be providing gay men with a more limited choice and constrained individual freedom in terms of pursuing their sexual and romantic desires but also with a greater sense of social and emotional stability. Through engaging in small, face-to-face weekly meetings, oriented around a common interest or hobby, such as swimming or skiing, they try to create a stable environment where gay men can both enjoy a collective sense of social recognition and emotional stability based on friendship, and the ability to slowly choose other men as romantic partners. In doing so, they not only disprove the cab driver’s assertion that social/emotional

stability, morality, and normality follow only from engaging in the “proper” process of marriage and belonging to a heterosexual family, they also create a sense of gay family (Lehr 1999; Weston 1991) and, by extension, a sense of “queer future.” As Jose Munoz writes, “Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present” (2009: 1). Drawing upon the affective ghosts of public sex and memories of queer activism, he argues that it is possible to see beyond the “quagmire of the present” shaped by short-sighted accommodationalist politics of pragmatism shaped by neoliberal thought and insist on the “potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” embodied in “queer utopia” (2009: 1).

Yet, as I argue, while these two groups both present, in their own ways, two very different models of Internet-mediated gay sociality, gay freedom, and queer utopian imaginings, they also share the fact that they are hidden from the mainstream society and that neither of them can provide gay men with the kind of economic security that Koreans often derive from their biological families. Indeed, with deepening neoliberal reforms, as the family becomes the primary and often the sole source of economic security for individuals cast adrift on the turbulent waves of capitalism, single gay men from both Ivancity and gay Daum clubs—without the perceived security of their wives and children in their old age—retreat and even retire from the gay community so that they can focus on their careers and secure their economic futures, seemingly resigning themselves to the “prison house” of the here and now that Munoz asserts “naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity” (2009: 12).

In examining the lives of single gay men—mostly in their 30s and 40s—who came of age during the liberalizing atmosphere of the mid-1990s when globalization and democratization introduced unprecedented opportunities for Koreans to experiment with their gender and sexual

identities, this dissertation thus addresses the central topics of “queer temporality” (Freeman 2010) and “queer futurity” (Ahmed 2006; Halberstam 2005; Munoz 2009).

In more concrete terms, a central question for the so-called “first generation” of gay men is whether they can resist marriage to women and the normative state-mandated path of reproduction, children, and family to construct single, independent gay lifestyles. If so, what shape and pattern will this “single, independent gay lifestyle” take in the context of South Korea’s neoliberal reforms and heteronormative-familial pressures? And what new models of Internet-based sociality and collectivity do they offer other social groups suffering from similarly disintegrating forces of neoliberalism and normalizing pressures of South Korea’s heteronormative familism?

As I reveal in the conclusion of the dissertation, my feelings are less than optimistic. Though single gay men in their 30s and 40s are resisting the normative life path of marriage, reproduction, and family, either through sexual hookups on Ivancity or small gay families in gay Daum clubs, they do not overtly challenge South Korea’s neoliberal or neo-familial cultures through a collective social movement. Instead, in engaging in highly individualistic strategies of accommodation and reconciliation, where they try to be gay without exiting the family, it is highly likely that Korean gay culture will continue to lack a center and be all but invisible to the mainstream Korean society. Furthermore, as more gay Koreans escape to foreign countries such as Thailand, especially on national holidays such as Korean Thanksgiving, to be “gay”—effectively turning South Korea into a “national closet”—it is expected that the Korean gay culture will be further “hollowed out” and rendered formless. Indeed, just as single gay men are retreating and retiring from the gay community, we are seeing the rise of “bats” (“married gay men” who are considered neither bird nor fowl) as a powerful new constituency within gay

culture. Enjoying the security of their own families, they are able to enjoy the “luxury of love” that many single gay men had to abandon to concentrate on their careers and self-development. Of course, this is not to discount the power of Korean gay men “passive” withdrawal from South Korea’s heteronormative system, anchored in the patriarchal family. Indeed, in refusing to marry and reproduce, many are, in fact, quietly “hollowing out” this system, effecting radical changes in their own right that are not visible to the larger public.

This Introduction is divided into five sections. In **Section 1**, I present a literature review of the two main bodies of literature that this dissertation draws upon and contributes to: i) anthropology of sexuality; and ii) anthropology of Internet; In **Section 2**, “South Korea’s Hypermasculine Developmentalist State, Militarized Modernity, and Proto-Gay Individualism,” I examine the first stirrings of “gay” consciousness on the part of men trapped within the restrictive fold of the heterosexual family. In being rendered invisible within the history of South Korea’s militarized modernity, such proto-gay individuals have only a vague collective awareness of themselves as “affective aliens” (Ahmed 2006) estranged from the heteronormative temporality of marriage and children mandated by South Korea’s “chronobiopolitics” (Luciano 2006). Focusing on the biography of the South Korea’s first “proto-gay” individual, *Even Scarecrows Need Practice Living* (1993) by Kim Kyung-min, I outline many of the salient issues of “freedom” vs. “security” in Korean gay culture that would become exacerbated with the rise of neoliberalism and Internet. In **Section 3**, “From “Sexual Fugitives” to ‘Weekend Gays,’” I examine how these proto-gay individuals, under the thawing influences of globalization and democratization in the mid- to late-1990s, come to be interpellated as modern gay individuals by the gay and lesbian movement, the Westernised gay consumer spaces, such as gay bars and dance-clubs, in Itaewon, and gay BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) groups. Through the discursive

resources provided by this movement, the socio-cultural and material infrastructure of the gay consumer culture, and the social networks of the gay BBS groups, Korean gay men come to increasingly view themselves as “gay men.” Nonetheless, in continuing to publicly identify themselves as filial sons and national subjects, they perform these gay identities in spatially and temporally delimited ways as “weekend gays” in Itaewon in the mid- to late-1990s, where they also come to create a sense of “gay family.” In **Section 4**, “Methodology,” I reflect upon the methods that I used to recruit informants and conduct research in an Internet-based “sexual field” (Kulick and Willson 1995). In **Section 5**, “Chapter Outlines,” I present a breakdown of the four chapters and their main arguments.

## **I. LITERATURE REVIEW/THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

In examining the Internet-based sociality of Korean gay men in Ivancity and Daum, this dissertation draws upon and contributes to two main bodies of literature. First, it makes a contribution to the anthropology of love and sexuality, specifically literature on queer globalization and “Queer Asia.” Second, it makes a contribution to anthropology of the Internet.

### *A. Anthropology of Love and Sexuality*

#### *i. Liberalism, Individualism, and Love*

As Anthony Giddens writes, “Modern society is characterized by profound processes of the reorganization of time and space, coupled to the expansion of disembedding mechanisms—mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide-space distances” (1991: 2). This process of “time-space distancing” and “disembedding” which lift out social relations from the face-to-face interactions of pre-modern

societies and rearrange them across indefinite spans of time-space with “absent others,” places an inordinate stress and responsibility on individuals that are alien to pre-modern culture. It is within this context of modernity and heightened “reflective individualism” that we can locate the growing importance of love and sexuality, along with marriage and family, as means by which moderns give meaning and significance to their “personal” and “private” lives.

As Wendy Brown (1995) and Stuart Hall (1992) have noted, liberal notions of individualism, along with equality and freedom, emerged in seventeenth-century Europe out of the breakup of feudal economic and monarchical political arrangements alongside the formation of nation-states and modern market economies. As Brown notes, “New forms of property, modes of production, and attendant subject formation generated a need for new political institutions that permitted the free circulation of capital and property, and articulated the formal liberal and equality of relatively abstract human beings in incipient mass society.” (1995: 143). Positing society as emerging out of the voluntary contract of individuals pursuing their own-self interest, liberal theorists such as John Locke imagined individuals to be in a state of nature or what Robert Bellah et al. (1985) has termed a state of “ontological individualism”—that is, being alone.

According to Elizabeth Povinelli, key in creating this fictional liberal individual who is imagined as the origin and basis of true freedom—that she refers to as the “foundational event”—is role of “love”:

The subject-in-love is like the self-governing subject insofar as both are ideologically oriented to the fantasy of the foundational event...Both self-sovereignty and intimacy recognition establish a new subject out of the husk of the old and reset the clock of the subject at zero...But the foundational event of the subject-in-love is thought to happen through a relay with another subject, who is likewise oriented to sovereignty as a contractually driven foundation event...In your gaze I become a new person, as do you in mine...Its happening made *us*; it made one out of two (note that it does not make one out of three or four or out of an unknown number. (2006: 188)

In other words, the “foundational event,” where the self-enclosed sovereignty of the liberal individual is simultaneously accompanied and effected by the “intimate event,” ensures that this ontologically alone individual does not remain isolated forever.

For Jurgen Habermas too, the humanist subject was similarly constructed through “transforming socially thick people into purely human subjects”—a process that Povinelli refers to as “social defoliation”—which, in turn, formed the basis of the modern nation. “For Habermas, the relay of intimate recognition stripped the social attributes from a person even as it locked this socially de-racinated self into a higher-order couplet and, vis-à-vis such couplets, into still higher orders of abstract collectivity such as the democratic state,” writes Povinelli (2006: 190). As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner note:

Habermas shows that the institutions and forms of domestic intimacy made private people private, members of the public sphere of private society rather than the market or the state...Intimacy grounded abstract, disembodied citizens in a sense of universal humanity. (2002: 200)

According to these two scholars, the relay of intimate recognition whereby liberal subjects create the couple form not only forms the basis of the abstract collectivity of the nation but also forms the imaginary “home base of prepolitical humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return in the (always imaginary) future after political conflict” (1998: 193). In other words, conjugal intimacy is what makes private citizens private.

Nonetheless, if domestic intimacy is what made private people private, it also impaled an anxiety in the heart of these newly liberated subjects: the specter of social isolation and loneliness: “Will I be isolated if this [intimate] event does not strike me?” (Povinelli 2006: 194). According to Povinelli, “A good sign that the intimate event has occurred is the collapse of the

sex object and intimate subject...Where this collapse has not occurred, love is qualified” (ibid, 188) and the progression of this couplet onto the next stage of forming a family is endangered.

According to Valerie Lehr, the family, in being symbolically opposed to work and business, is the area where people’s deepest feelings and desires of love and happiness are supposedly located,

[If]...the market..[is]...where we sell our labor and negotiate contract relations of business, that we associate with competitive, temporary, contingent relations that must be buttressed by law and legal sanctions...the family, according to the dominant ideology, is a realm in which we build permanent and caring relations, rather than fleeting and competitive relations. (1999: 19)

In failing to fall in love, individuals are thus denied entrance into this affective realm of permanent and caring relations that are seen to constitute the basis of personal humanity and national belonging (Berlant & Warner 1998) and left exposed to the fleeting and competitive relations of the capitalist market.

## ii. Disciplinary Society, Biopolitics, and Normalization

As a story of liberal individualism, this is a story of supposedly free individuals forming intimate ties on the basis of personal merit and fate or chance. Yet, as Foucault (1979; 1980) has outlined, underlying liberalism and its system of free individuals forming social/intimate ties on the basis of contracts was an entire disciplinary apparatus that divided the population into those categories of “make live and let die” that constituted the sovereignty of the state and the basis of a “disciplinary society.” By fixing, mobilizing, and making productive its population as part of “biopolitics,” modern nation-states, Povinelli asserts, result in “the uneven distribution of the flesh—the creation of life-worlds, death-worlds, and rotting worlds” (2006: 8).

Indeed, contesting the “repression hypothesis” that the disappearance of torture as a public spectacle in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries spelled human progress and a more humane application of power, Foucault argues that such overt displays of power of the sovereign to kill were replaced by seemingly more benign yet more insidious forms of power that sought to infuse the members of a population with power to make them docile and useful as both individual bodies and collective subjects. In other words, they were “made to live.” This “make live,” in turn, was composed of two elements: the control of the individual body and the control of the collective body.

According to Foucault, the first procedure of power, which originated from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “centered on the [individual] body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls” (1980). The second, “formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary” (ibid, 139). In both instances, sex played a crucial role, he writes, as it became “a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species” (ibid, 146). In other words, from being something that “one simply judged,” sex became a thing “one administered” in order to maximize the individual and collective forces of the population (ibid, 24).

Indeed, towards the beginning of the eighteenth century, Europe, Foucault writes, saw a discursive explosion in sex, with political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex. Disciplines such as psychiatry and medicine began measuring, classifying, and hierarchizing individuals in relation to one another in order to normalize and distribute individuals in terms of

their value and utility. As many scholars have noted, one of the ironic effects of this discursive normalization of the population was the creation of the figure of the “homosexual.” When medicine made a forceful entry into the realm of sexuality, classifying bodies into the categories of normal and abnormal, aberrant practices such as sodomy became infused with a sense of interiority and soul. As Foucault famously remarked, “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (1980: 43). In contrast, the heterosexual couple became subject to a stricter but more discreet existence.

Once again, however, as Povinelli notes, Foucault’s interest in sex was not “to study discourses of sexuality, for example, for the sake of knowing sexuality but for the sake of investigating power and the discursive matrixes that underpinned it” (2006: 10). “Similarly, the aspiration was not merely to know how power disciplined sexuality, sexual expression, or sexual identity, but to understand how all of these were the means by which power in a robust sense—power over life and death, power to cripple and rot certain worlds while over-investing others with wealth and hope—is produced, reproduced, and distributed...” (ibid, 10).

Such disciplinary practices of normalization were, in turn, carried out through impersonal and ever-present forms of visibility and surveillance embodied in the “Panopticon.” A tower located in the center of an outer building with windows that allowed light to pierce through and highlight the bodies incarcerated within, such Panopticon turned these rooms into cells and made the bodies within them constantly visible whether or not someone was actually looking into them. As such, visibility became a trap for these separated and isolated individuals.

As a metaphor, however, the Panopticon was less an architectural model than an optical system of political technology that subjected potentially disorderly crowds to the constant self-surveillance and self-order of an impersonal power. As Foucault writes, “He who is subjected to

a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (1979: 202-203). In other words, as Povinelli writes, following Michel Foucault, “the price Europeans paid to free themselves from the external social constraints of familial, aristocratic, and religious power was to assume their own self-management, and to constitute the government as its disciplinary apparatus” (2006: 185). Yet, if this is the model through which sexuality as a modern disciplinary formation has been theorized in the “West,” what relevance does it have in non-Western locales such as Asia, without a history of such disciplinary knowledges? What other forms of discipline and subjection, other than juridico-medical, might exist?

### iii. Globalization, Asian Liberalism, and Queer Asia

In recent years, the topic of globalization has become an intense focus of attention of scholars around the world. Theorized as the latest phase of uneven development within capitalism by Marxist scholars such as David Harvey (1991) and Neil Smith (2005), it has been viewed as the “end game” of United State’s quest for world hegemony: dominated by multinational companies and buttressed by the liberalism of John Locke and Adam Smith.

In contrast, anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai (1996) have viewed globalization as a much more decentered and de-territorializing process, replacing older images of order, stability, and systematicness with flows, uncertainty, and chaos. Moreover, contrary to Neil Smith’s view of nation-state as a passive victim of globalization, Aihwa Ong (1999) sees nation-states in Asia playing an active role in promoting globalization. For instance, Ong argues that: “Asian tiger states have evolved by aggressively seeking global capital while securing their own economic

interests and the regulation of their populations” (1999: 21). As such, globalization has been generally viewed, initially at least, more positively in Asia than in Europe and United States where it has been viewed as a threat to the economy and the cultural identity of their people.

Yet, until recently, ignored in this literature of globalization has been the topic of sexuality (Binnie 2004). This is despite the fact that “globalization is affecting lives everywhere, and it is certainly having an effect on how people perceive their own and others’ sexual selves, and on how our intimate relationships form, flourish, or founder” (Babb 2004: 225). According to Florence Babb, some of the conveyers of local and global meanings that contribute to new sexual identities and practices include social movements, television programming, and health campaigns (2004: 226).

Indeed, in the last 15 years, postcolonial nations around the world have been the site of vigorous new LGBT movements that mimic and reproduce Euro-American models of identity, sexuality, and citizenship (Povinelli & Chauncey 1999). Dubbed “queer globalization,” this phenomenon has provoked debates over whether or not these Westernised projects herald an accelerated Americanization, homogeneity of gay culture, and the rise of the “global gay” (Altman 2001). Critiquing Dennis Altman, scholars such as Jon Binnie (2004) and Lisa Rofel (1999) have argued against the notion of “the global gay” as an expansion of an existing Western category. Within this formula, Lisa Rofel argues, is both an unquestioned assumption of global capitalism as a one-way street driving globalization and an equally un-theorized use of colonial binaries such as “tradition/modern” and “East/West” that place “Asian gays forever in the place of deferred arrival” (1999: 455).

Certainly, remarkable about the flows of queer globalization has been their transnational nature that defies any notion of center or origins. For this reason, scholars such as Inderpal

Grewal have suggested the use of the term, “transnational,” which keeps an eye on the heterogeneity and unevenness of these global flows and connectivities that have produced the term “global.” Disaggregating the diverse and uneven phenomena called global, she suggests, involves uncovering their genealogies in earlier periods and being mindful of their incomplete nature. In examining “the discourses that travel through these networks,” we need to examine “how some get translated and transcoded, how some are unevenly connected, others strongly connected, and still others incommensurable and untranslatable,” she writes (2005: 23).

Indeed, defying this thesis of queer globalization as Westernization, the world has recently seen the explosion of gay identities, cultures, and movements in Asia (Boellstorff 2005; Rofel 2007; Wilson 2004) that seem inherently transnational in nature. For instance, Fran Martin notes how the everyday life practices of *tongzhi* [queer] in Taiwan are shaped as much by queer flows from Euro-America as they are shaped by intra-Asian cultures. Homoerotic stories of “beautiful boys” in Japanese *manga* [comics] that are translated into Chinese are popular in Taiwan as they are in Hong Kong and China, indicating “a queer triangulation between Japanese, Honk Kong and Taiwanese youth cultures...” (2003: 30).

If the formation of a common queer regional imaginary seems to be taking place in tandem with the rise of certain Asian states as economic, cultural, and technological powers, it also seems to be taking place through the spread of liberal ideologies of freedom that have, in promoting free markets and free trade, also inevitably promoted ideals of liberal individualism and (sexual) autonomy. Scholars such as Petrus Liu (2007), however, cautions against using liberal categories such as “human rights” to understand these new epistemes of body, desire, identity, and self that have led to a profound destabilization of established beliefs, relationships, and hierarchies in Asia. That is because, understood in terms of “the nation, the local, or the

disembodied and decontextualized subject of rights” (Povinelli & Chauncey 1999), these emergent queer cultures tend to be understood as part of the “natural unfolding of the ‘new Asian liberalism’” that has accompanied the democratization of former military dictatorships not just in Taiwan but also in other Asian countries such as South Korea under the twin impact of democratization and globalization (Liu 2007: 527).

Indeed, it is only recently that feminist and scholar scholars have begun to unravel how really “queer” liberal individualism is in East Asia where homosexuality is understood less in terms of homophobia or moral outrage than a fundamental challenge to the foundation of the Asian patriarchal nation. “Of course they [gay men and lesbians] are also seen as antithetical to conservative versions of ‘family values’ in the West, but in East Asia, where the family as lineage is a more pressing reality, eschewing reproductive, marital relationships has more devastating consequences,” write Steve Jackson et al. (2008: 24).

For this reason, scholarship on Queer Asia has tended to follow the trend of addressing Queer Asian sexuality in terms of two themes: one, the reconfiguration of the changing family form through queer intimacy. Once again, as Jackson et al. note, “To live as a gay man is to renege on the paramount filial duty of continuing the family line and ensuring parents’ future status as ancestors; to live as a lesbian refuses women’s part in this project, brings shame on the family, and flies in the face of feminine virtue” (ibid, 24).

Central to this dilemma has been the metaphor of the “face” that challenges the central role given to the post-Stonewall Anglo-Saxon tropes of the “closet” and “coming out” that construct gay identity as something that involves coming out of the blood family and joining other, alternative communities (Berry 2001; Manalansan 1995). For instance, in order to engage in a Westernised politics of “coming out,” queer Asian activists have had to engage in inventive

strategies of collective versus individual coming out. For instance, in South Korea, while activists often prevent the mainstream media from taking photos of the faces of the protesters as the seat of their familial and social identity, Taiwanese queer activists have gone one step further, literally donning Chinese opera masks in front of the media that situate their queer identity in a space somewhere in-between being both “in” and “out” of the closet (Erni & Spires 2001). Literalizing the discourses of social shame and status that prevent queers from coming out, such masks also show how queer individualism remains highly problematic in East Asia.

Another has been the formation of queer urban cultures that lies in tension with a familial moral economy saturating even public spaces, thus producing a homosexuality in Asia that is lived through a series of highly differentiated urban social spaces, such as cheap motels, video arcades, and gay saunas, where gay sexuality is compartmentalized and shielded from the gaze of the family, even as it remains linked to circuits of global cultural flows (Martin 2003). Both trends, in turn, show how queers in Asia remain caught between family and the state, casting doubt on whether the newly democratized orders of this region will include a space for them or not.

### *B. Anthropology of Internet*

In addition to the anthropology of sexuality, this dissertation also draws upon and contributes to the anthropology of the Internet.

Like globalization, the rapid spread of information communication technologies (in particular, the Internet) has drawn the attention of thousands of researchers worldwide from a wide range of disciplines and academic, nonprofit, and commercial contexts (Dyer-Witthford 1999; Flew & McElhinney 2002). There has been much debate about how to theorize these

explosive changes that hit advanced societies in the late 1970s and early 1980s with theorists using terms such as “post-industrial society” (Bell 1973) and “network society” (Castells 1996) to describe the social, political, economic and cultural changes caused by the spread of networked, digital information and communications technologies and the transition from an older form of industrial manufacturing society to “a new kind of economy and society organized around the production, consumption, and global circulation of knowledge and information” (Barry & Slater 2005: 2).

As implied by Manuel Castell’s term, “network society,” a key characteristic of this “information society” is the spread of networks that link people, institutions, and countries and permit the conduct of capitalistic activity in real time without the inhibition of time and space (Graham 2001). Constituting spaces of regulated flows that operate “not just in relation to spaces defined and demarcated by geographical or territorial boundaries but in relation to zones formed through the circulation of technical practices and devices” (Barry 2001: 3), such networks are seen to herald a shift towards a “flexible economic order [which] emerges spontaneously from the chaos of free markets” (Robins & Webster 1999: 67). Along with this shift has been “the expectation that citizens and consumers should be knowledgeable about scientific objects and technical devices: their uses, consequences and effects” as part of a dawning “techno-citizenship” (Barry 2001: 29).

If many of the world’s governments have pumped billions of dollars into the development of information infrastructures and technologies through research grants and subsidies to the private sector in regarding high technology “as an automatic and instant panacea for all manner of economic ills” (Burnett & Marshall 2003: 135), then the World Wide Web—more popularly just referred to as the Internet—has been undoubtedly sold to the public as a

liberal public sphere of individual freedom where all physical and social differences, such as race, gender, and sexuality, are erased (Chun 2008; Nakamura 2007).

Indeed, a central trope underpinning the idea of Internet as liberal, democratic spaces has been the “disembodiment” of its users. Because the bodies of the users are not directly visible to the users whose interactions are mediated by the computer screen, there has been the assumption that users can be anything they want online and that the Internet is “a utopian space for identity play, community building, and gift economies” (Nakamura 2007: 3). This disembodiment can, in turn, be viewed as part of the broader understanding of the Internet as a liberal public sphere of autonomous individuals where social differences of class, education, and background do not matter.

Yet, as Nakamura (2007) writes, despite the discourse of disembodiment, the Internet is replete with digital images of the body that help to construct the racial, gender, and sexual identity of its users. Employing the “language of the new media” (Manovich 2001), the images of such digital bodies often take the form of what Nakamura (2007) refers to as “cybertypes”—raced and gendered bodies that are available as ready-made and interchangeable parts in menus of categories, boxes, and links. According to Nakamura, such categories, boxes, and links that support the construction of socially differentially online visual bodies, not only contribute to the reification and fetishization of these raced and gendered bodies, they also constitute a “digital visual capital” that, in turn, contributes to determining access and connections of the offline users.

Indeed, the limited language of freedom and autonomy used to discuss the Internet has tended to obscure—rather than illuminate—how connections get made or unmade online and what wider social, economic, and political repercussions these online interactions have on the

identities and everyday lives of the users and on broader socio-economic and political formations. In a dynamic space of heightened and unrestrained individualism among users who are spatially dispersed, how do users create social bond and trust? In particular, how do they create social bond and trust without recourse to their body as a resource using static and objectified information conveyed through reified text-based profiles, two dimensional images, and short text messages? And how do larger collectivities emerge or not emerge within such a space that has been explicitly positioned as a space of liberal individual autonomy?

Such questions seem especially pertinent for queers at a moment of heightened neoliberalism when the earlier image of Internet as a utopian space of identity play and online communities has given way to “a more privatized, profit-driven model, one in which the Internet came to function as a ‘commodity-delivery system for vastly expanded media companies’” (Nakamura 2008: 3). As a number of scholars have noted, queers have been among the earliest and most active users of online technologies to connect with other men and women who are spatially dispersed and hidden (O’Riordan & Phillips 2007). Owners of gay electronic companies have also been too happy to take advantage of this technology, which puts them on an “equal footing with the big players,” in serving the large and underserved gay market (ibid, 2007).

Yet, much of this online activity has taken place under the aegis of the “closet.” As one advertisement in *The Advocate*, a nationally distributed gay magazine in the U.S. proclaimed, “There are no closets in Cyberspace” [Wakeford 1997 (2000)]. Such pronouncements not only depict the online as a “risk-free” space but also presume that cyberspace is an autonomous zone, separate from and independent of the moral economies of familism and heteronormativity that might characterize offline spaces. Moreover, under the wave of liberalization accompanying neoliberal changes, these companies too have become “a multimedia, multimillion-dollar,

twenty-for-hour-a-day, goods-and-services- and information-and-interaction-providing conglomerate” (Gamson 2003: 256) that have subdivided cyberspace into segmented market niches and are less answerable to the gay and lesbian movement which spawned it than to its advertisers (Gamson 2003; O’Riordan & Phillips 2007). How gay men create and not create connections and communities online will be the subject of the rest of the dissertation. But first, a brief history of the Korean gay and lesbian community.

## **II. SOUTH KOREA’S “HYPERMASCULINE DEVELOPMENTALIST STATE,” MILITARIZED MODERNITY, AND PROTO-GAY INDIVIDUALISM**

According to Jungwoo Han and H.M. Ling (1998), South Korea is considered the prototypical “hypermasculine developmentalist state.” Following Ashis Nandy (1983), hypermasculinity refers to the “psychological and reaction response to the masculine process of colonialism.”

Post-colonial Asian states resort to hypermasculinity to counter their historical feminization by the West by simultaneously denigrating anything smacking of the ‘feminine’ (Ling 1997) and thereby mimicking the masculine process of colonization” (quoted in Kim 2001).

During South Korea’s rapid industrial modernization, the military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee can be said to have used this hypermasculinity to exclude women from politics and to redefine the country as a patriarchal nation composed of a homosocial bonding of men in order to pursue its late-developmental economic path of development that included mobilizing the population and building a prosperous and militarily powerful Korean nation.

Pursuing such nationalist goals, which involved generating a clear sense of collective identity, however, constituted a dilemma for Park Chung-hee. As Seungsook Moon writes,

Although he subscribed to the idea of “modernization” to “build a prosperous and strong Korean nation,” he was suspicious of such Western values as liberal democracy and individualism...Like many nationalist elites, he tended to believe that the unchecked influx of Western values and the indiscreet imitation of Western institutions...led to not only social disorder but also the weakening of Korean national consciousness. (1998: 37)

One strategy to address this paradox was adopting the principle of *tongdo sogi* (“Eastern morality and Western technology.” Originally the hallmark of “elite nationalism that emphasized social reforms toward the end of the Choson Dynasty” (1392-1897), this principle emphasized the adoption of Western system of capital, technology, and market to power its economic development while rejecting its liberal values that threatened to upset the traditional neo-Confucian order.

According to Moon, a key instrument of the military regime in instilling this type of national consciousness was through education. School textbooks incorporated not only anti-Communist teaching but also subjects such as “national ethics” and “right living,” which emphasized Confucian social relations as part of the Korean collective psyche (1998: 48). Particularly important were the values of *ch’ung* (loyalty to the state) and *hyo* (filial piety to the parents), which identified being filial to one’s parents with being loyal to the state. Indeed, during the period of South Korea’s rapid industrialization during the 1970s and 80s, the state remodeled its relation with society according to a familial model in which “the state became the father/husband, corporations its first son, society the mother/wife, and factory workers its filial daughters” so as to better mobilize and control the population (Kim 2011: 57). Within such a context, South Korea became, as Cho Hae-joang puts it, a nation of “only grand state power and patriarchal family, but no citizens or autonomous individuals” (2000: 22).

### Homosexuality during South Korea’s Militarized Modernity

With the Korean military government exploiting Confucian family ideology to mobilize the population for industrialization and militarization, it is not a surprise that homosexuality became heavily stigmatized. According to Suh Dong-jin, one of South Korea's first gay activists,

In Korea, homosexuality does not have any social existence... That is to say, in public discourse aimed at forming the laws and regulations governing Korean society, homosexual is not mentioned" (2001: 66).<sup>7</sup>

Rather than reflecting the liberal tolerance of the Korean state, however, he attributes this absence of legal laws against homosexuality to the powerlessness of homosexuals as a group.

To the contrary, it is because they [homosexuals] are not seen as representing members of the society who can exercise the power to effect social changes... In other words their existence is ignored (2003: 66-67).

Up until the mid-1990s, when the term, "gay," was used, it referred not to gay men but to "women-like men" (i.e., "transsexuals") or men who had sex changes (i.e., "transgenders") (Suh 2001). With homosexuality considered a product of West's deviant and decadent culture and completely absent in South Korea, the terms, "homo" (*homo*) and *dongsung-eun-eja* (*tongsŏngyŏnaeja*) were more commonly used. While the first was used as a sexual slur, the second—meaning "same-sex lover"—considered homosexuality a perverted behavior that anyone could be potentially seduced into.

### *"Chronobiopolitics" and Gay Men as "Affective Aliens"*

With the heavy-handed censorship of the Korean state and widespread ignorance about issues of sexuality, it also became no surprise that most Korean gay men got caught up in the

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of his writing, there was *Practice is Needed to be a Scarecrow in Winter* (1994), by Kim Kyung-min, *Volume I: No Longer Sad or Ashamed* (1995), a collection of articles by members of gay rights organization Ch'in'gusai, and his own *Who's Afraid of Sexual Politics: Sexualities, Politics and Cultural Studies* (1996).

“chronobiopolitics” of state-mandated time. If “biopolitics,” according to Michel Foucault (1978), refers to the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations in order to build the power and wealth of a nation, then “chronobiopolitics” can be seen to refer to the “sexual arrangement of the time of life of entire populations” (Luciano 2007). This “time of life,” in turn, can be seen to be composed of “family time,” “reproductive time,” and “normative lifelines.”

According to Judith Halberstam, “family time” refers to the “normative scheduling of everyday life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing” (2005: 5) while “reproductive time” refers to time “ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples” (2005: 5). Normative lifelines, meanwhile, might be characterized by “the lines that are given at our point of arrival into familial and social space” (i.e., “inheritance”) and the “demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line” (i.e., “reproduction”) (Ahmed 2006: 21). Indeed, as Sara Ahmed writes, “For a life to count as good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course” (2006: 21)—such as getting married, having children, and starting a family.

For gay men, both caught up in and affectively estranged from this state-mandated time of chronobiopolitics, they could not but constitute what Sara Ahmed terms, “affective aliens.” As opposed to the term, “illegal aliens,” used in contemporary United States to refer to undocumented foreigners, the term, “affective aliens” refers to queers who, in being attracted to “wrong objects,” become estranged from conventional routes of happiness (Ahmed 2010: 110). Unlike foreign migrant workers who are currently seen to threaten the supposed ethnic and racial homogeneity of the South Korean nation founded on the ideology of “one blood, one nation,” the

concept of affective aliens might also refer to a strain of sexual alterity that has existed within the Korean nation since its founding. Indeed, in constituting a powerful strain of potential sexual deviance and non-conformity, the desires of these men had to be “straightened out” in order for chronobiopolitics to work and for Korean society to properly function as a late-developmental nation. Indeed, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that the majority of proto-gay, now above 45 years of age, are probably married to women, have children, and lead ostensibly straight lives. Nor is it an exaggeration to say that, despite the huge and growing population of gay men, there are only a handful of out gay, lesbian, and transgender. As one lesbian put it, “In South Korea, you have to be an orphan to come out.”

#### *Gay Men as “Sexual Fugitives” in the 1970s-90s*

The invisibility and ignorance of homosexuality within South Korea’s public culture did not mean that gay men did not exist. Rather, it simply means that most of them, if they were aware of their sexuality, hid it from their families and friends within high walls of secrecy. As Kim Kyung-min, the author of the first autobiography of a gay man, which I will discuss below, wrote,

I have never suffered once because I’m a *pogal*<sup>8</sup>...Of course, in order not to suffer, I’ve had to build a careful wall of defense around my secrecy and live hiding behind that wall...Through a carefully maintained double life, I’ve had to tolerate pain enough to chill your bones...and live hidden like a fugitive (1993: 24).

Living “double lives” behind high walls of secrecy recalls the popular Euro-American trope of the “closet,” which according to Eve Sedgwick, is “the defining structure of gay oppression this century” (1990: 71). A spatial metaphor, the closet, along with its associated term, “coming out,”

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<sup>8</sup> *Pogal*—a reverse spelling of the term, *kalbo* (“prostitute”)—was a popular term used by gay men to refer to themselves up until the mid-1990s.

signifies the simultaneous presence of sexual alterity within the family *and* its denial, concealment and erasure (Brown 2000).

Yet, what this familial metaphor of the closet both reveals and conceals, along with the associated concept of “coming out,” is its limited applicability within the East Asian context (Boellstorff 2007). First of all, with few gay men in East Asia intending to come out, the closet is not a central trope within their personal narratives. Second, as noted above, this familial metaphor obfuscates the more abstract compartmentalization of space through which concealment of homosexuality takes place in Asia. Belying the familial basis of the closet metaphor, Korean gay men’s social and sexual activities are seen to usually take place within commercial urban spaces, just like their counterparts in Taiwan, where the family space is considered “the sanctuary of well-established traditional values, including filial expectations and roles.” Third, the trope of enclosure obfuscates the dynamic practices of cultivated risk taking and contingency through which the gay men’s compartmentalization of homosexuality from the rest of their lives is constantly breached in order to open up everyday spaces that seem closed and pre-defined to modes of queer activity.

Despite the widespread ignorance of homosexuality within Korean culture, subterranean gay subcultures also existed in large metropolitan areas, such as Seoul and Pusan, at least since the 1970s and probably much earlier, where gay men could find a modicum of sexual and emotional relief. As Suh writes,

I believe that Korea’s present lesbian and gay subculture began around fifteen years ago. This is not to say that there weren’t chance contacts between homosexuals before this time, but these were nothing more than individual events (2001: 68).

Estranged from the private realm of the home, many gay men sought out public spaces such as parks, theaters, and saunas, where small groups of men congregated, to seek out sexual partners.

According to Lee He-il (1997), one of the most popular spaces for men to gather from the 1970s to early 90s was the “gay” theater. During the 1970s, a number of these gay theaters dotted the Seoul urban landscape, with coded names, such as “C-Theater” in Chungmuro, “S” Theater in Myungdong, and “P” Theater in Jongro. Indeed, the infamous “P” (Pagoda) theater in Jongro became the anchor for a number of gay businesses starting in the 1970s. Around Pagoda Theater and Pagoda Park (now called, “Tapgol Park”), a patchwork of gay saunas, *tchokpang* (rooms about a square foot in size where men had sex), and gay bars began to form in the narrow alleyways of the Nakwon-dong neighborhood. Patterned after Japanese gay bars with karaoke machines and gay “madams” who served the obligatory bottles of beer accompanied by expensive side dishes, these bars, once again, seemed to show the contemporaneous and intra-Asian influence of transnational gay culture during this period.

According to one gay man, Chaplin, whom I interviewed in 2002 for my master’s thesis on gay consumer spaces in Seoul (Cho 2003), there was a “sad atmosphere” within Pagoda Theater when gay men circled around inside looking for sexual partners while it rained outside. He had “debuted” (come out) into the community in 1978 at the age of 15. In fact, given the propensity of these men to stand in the back of the theater and cruise, rather than focus on the movie playing on the screen, there was even a café called “Standing People” across the theater as well as a poem of the same name.

According to Chaplin, many gay foreigners intermingled with native Koreans in the 1970s. “Long time ago, 20 out of 100 guys in the theater were foreigners, businessmen and tourists from Japan, the Philippines, and Hong Kong,” he said. There were also U.S. servicemen: “Those [Koreans] who liked them have already gone abroad with them.” Though this community was small and invisible to the outside world, people’s hearts were warm back then, he said. “I

used to skip rope in front of the Pagoda Theater and yakuza in the neighborhood were friendly and supported us. They thought of us as comedians or gagmen.”

It was within this neighborhood that many of the contemporary notions of homosexuality and homosexual culture seemed to coalesce, including terms, such as *itchoksegye* (“this side of the world”),<sup>9</sup> *pogal*, and *iban*. While the term, *ijok segye*, referred to a “gay” world completely separated from a “straight” world without necessarily identifying the nature of this world, the term, *pogal* was a backward reading of the word *kalbo* (“the most vulgar term for prostitute in Korea” [Suh 2001]). The emergence of such a term in a neighborhood such as Nakwon-dong, which was at the time a red-light district, where gay men regularly rubbed shoulders with prostitutes and gangsters, is not a surprise. Indeed, during this period, homosexuality can be seen to have been part of the “perverse culture” when a variety of sexual acts and practices were “bundled together,” which Mark McLelland identifies as being part of Japan queer culture in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, the popular term, *iban*, seemed to encompass both terms of *itchoksegye* and *pogal*, depending on how the Chinese character, “i,” in “*iban*” was interpreted. For instance, interpreted to mean “difference,” *iban* referred to gay men as a “particular” class of people, as opposed to the “general” class of heterosexuals (referred to as *ilban*). Interpreted to mean “second,” however, it referred to gay men as a “second-class” of courtesans, harkening back to the tradition of female concubinage during the Chosun Dynasty (interview with Lee Jung-woo 2002). Together, these terms, according to Suh, indicated “a new consciousness of the

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<sup>9</sup> This term not only draws a sharp division between the “gay” and “straight” worlds, it also avoids naming this world. As such, the “gay” world takes on the qualities of not a fixed and mappable territory but an imaginary heterotopia.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1970s, this perverse culture, Mark McLelland writes, gave way to “more ontological states, such as homosexuality” (2005: 12), thus showing a “temporal lag” between the two countries of Japan and South Korea.

homosexual community as a social group only vaguely differentiated from heterosexuals” (2001: 69).

*“Sik,” “Falling into this World,” and Other Terms*

Nonetheless, if gay neighborhoods like Nakwon-dong provided a place where gay men could congregate, it was not necessarily a place that many gay men consciously sought out. Rather, it was a world that gay men “slipped” or “fell into” (*ppajida*)—terms that both the mainstream media and gay men used to refer to their first exposure to or entrance into this world.

As Lee He-il points out, both terms, “slip” or “fall into,” indicate an action that occurs irrespective of or against the will of gay men. This non- or anti-volitional character attributed to debuting may be partially attributed to the accidental way in which many gay men, in fact, first discovered this world. It might have occurred through finding a note scrawled on the walls of toilet stalls in public restrooms or being cruised by another man in the dark resting areas of the numerous saunas that dotted the Seoul urban landscape. Irrespective of how gay men were “pulled into” this world, it was considered either a misfortune or something that occurred irrespective of the gay men’s will given the path of deviation it represented from the normative lifeline of heterosexual marriage and children.

Still, if there was one thing that compelled gay men like Kim Kyung-min hidden behind the walls of their rooms to seek out this forbidden world, it was the need to meet other men—or find their *sik*. Derived from the word, *siksǒng* (“taste in food”), it literally referred to other men as one’s “sexual food.” Even though it was a somewhat controversial term up until the mid-1990s in the way in which it sexually objectified other men, it has now become widely accepted. In drawing a connection between sexual and gastronomical appetites, this term seem to consider both to be *natural* appetites that had to be satisfied in order for the gay men to survive. In fact,

when Korean gay men went without sex for too long, they often stated that they had been starving (*kulmōtta*).

As Kim writes, this need for intimate contact with other men was what drove many gay men, regardless of the danger and risk that this world posed to their social identity, to seek out this world:

What is I was late to work? What if I had to skip it? What did either of those things matter when my *sik* was right in front of my eyes? That is the precise weakness of a *pogal*...A weakness that makes a *pogal* throw away his body, money, heart, and his *ch'emyōn* ["social face" of "dignity"]. (1993: 120).

Counterposed to social face or dignity that constitutes the basis of human recognition and social belonging in South Korea, *sik* is thus figured sex as a sexual need that goes beyond the notion of sexual desire. Indeed, as Elizabeth Grosz notes, following Alphonso Lingis, the idea of sex as bodily needs and satisfactions can be distinguished from lust or erotic desire: "Corporeal gratification, functioning in the register of need, takes what it can get, lives in a world of means and ends, obtaining satisfaction from what is at hand" (1995 194). In other words, isolated and estranged from sources of sexual intimacy and emotional support, many gay men became willing to endure high risks and dangers to their social face in order to satisfy their desperate longings for emotional intimacy and corporeal needs.

If the need for sex compelled gay men to breach the walls of secrecy that they had established around themselves, then it also seemed to be the method whereby the corporeal and psychic walls *between* the men were transgressed and sometimes broken. In Kim's account of his sexual encounters, the metaphor of sex as food regularly punctuates his description of his sexual encounters. For instance, he describes one sexual encounter where the other man says to him, "Let's go eat," making Kim wonder, "Did this man suddenly go hungry looking at me? Of

course, if you're hungry, you eat and when you're starving for sex, you would try to eat me” (1993: 74). And indeed,

As expected and as promised, he devoured me for the entire night. He devoured me again and again just like a man who had been starving for 10 years might devour a splendid banquet laid out before his eyes” (1993: 74).

Kim recounts how, at those points, he became possessed by a “pleasure from hell” similar to a drug that seemed to erase the bodily and psychics boundaries between the two men as “eater” and “eaten,” indeed leading to a temporary dissolution of the dichotomy of the self and Other.

In Kim's case, the mutual satisfaction of need through the perverse act of gay sex is seen to lead even to the collapse of class boundaries between the gay men. After seducing a gay man in his large, luxurious apartment, Kim comments,

Ah, it appears as if the sense of superiority that you feel driving a Fiat and living elegantly in a 50 *p'yǒng* apartment all by yourself is of little use in front of my clump of body... You are also nothing more than a homo... What is a homo, if not a species who are unable to live without a man?... No matter how well you live, you and I are the same. There is nothing different. (2003: 74)

In other words, in Kim's eyes at least, the abjection of gay men as affective aliens and sexual fugitives is seen to overshadow all other social differences, including class, leading to a common negative identity as *iban*. As we shall see, this is in marked contrast to the Korean gay culture after the Asian financial crisis, when class, with the possible exception of body, becomes the primary mark of social difference between gay men.

Yet, if such gay urban subcultures showed cracks within the edifice of the homogeneous nation constructed by the hypermasculine developmentalist state and provided a modicum of sexual relief for gay men suffocating under the blanket of heteronormativity, they seemed to have not escaped the clutches of its moralism. Striking in Kim and other gay men's accounts of their sexual escapades is not only the discourse of need that drives their sexual consumption but

also moral anguish and conflict. Following this and other sexual encounters, Kim is often consumed with self-disgust and remorse bordering on the obsessive: “I showered and washed and rewashed every part of my body slowly and carefully, wanting to erase all traces of the men from my body” (1993: 19). So powerful is the taint of sexual abjection that it is seen to leave physical traces on his body that he must scrub to erase.

Indeed, with this moralism acting powerfully as social glue that binds the gay men to a familial-based national affective order, the contradictions of being an affective alien and sexual fugitive manifest themselves in the splintered and fractured subjectivities of proto gay men who struggle to lead “ordinary” lives. Wishing “to escape the label of being a *pogal*,” Kim, at one point, even attempts suicide. And, he finds that the more he struggles, the more entangled he becomes in its contradictions. “It was torture trying to live like an ordinary person,” Kim writes. “The more that I gasped for air trying to live like an ordinary person, the more glamorous was my career as a *pogal*” (1993: 25). In order to escape the sense of loneliness and desperation that he finds in being estranged from others, Kim often finds himself driven to Jongro to satisfy his hunger for other men. “In order to try to escape the whirlpool (*soyongdori*) of emotions that I couldn’t withstand, from morning, I went to Jongro,” he writes (1993: 107).

At those moments, Kim finds that the only source of respite from this whirlpool of emotions is in the arms of another man. “The place where I could most comfortably rest was in a man’s embrace,” writes Kim. “To me, a man’s body was comparable to life’s lubricant, and him a resting place (1993: 25). Thus, the body of another man comes to substitute for the shared object of orientation for heterosexuals and the Korean nation: the family. As Ahmed notes, “groups are formed through their shared orientation toward an object” (2006: 73). By putting one’s family in place of one’s ego ideal, the family is formed. That is, “through identification

with or desire for the mother and father, which are then displaced onto other social forms,” “family [becomes] the primary and intimate space in which libidinal energies are shaped,” “which are then displaced onto other social forms” (Ahmed 2006: 73).

Kim finds, however, that as powerful as the joy of being embraced by another man is the abjection of being abandoned: “Even though I inhaled and exhaled hot breaths of pleasure every time that I was in their embrace, they were always like the wind” (1993: 96). The metaphors of “wind” or “water” that Kim uses to describe the transience of queer moments can be attributed to the contingency of queer life in general. As opposed to the domestic intimacy of the heterosexual couple, institutionalized within the family through the life narrative that is writ large as the future of the nation, queer moments, as we saw above, occur in the cracks and crevices of the heteronormative edifice. As such, they constitute the “minor intimacies” of minoritized subjects developed through “glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon” (Berlant 1998: 285).

While such mobile attachments have been lauded by Euro-American queer scholars for potentially opening up life narratives and everyday acts of freedom (Ahmed 2006; Halberstam 2005), Korean gay men seemed to associate these transient and contingent practices that contravene the sacred processes of ritual, as especially embodied in courtship and marriage, primarily with immorality and instability. As Suh writes, “Korean gays, denied access to traditional wedding vows or the norms of romantic love, are forced to resort to repeated chance sexual encounters” (2001: 69). In fact, as I show in Chapter 2, it is in failing to overcome this view that the monogamous, private couple is the only means through which sexual and social stability can be established that gay men become caught in a vicious cycle of sexual deprivation and satiation.

*South Korea's First "Proto Gay Individual"?*

After experiencing the trials and tribulations of being a “sexual refugee,” outside the state-mandated chronobiopolitical time of the family, Kim ends his autobiography by admonishing himself to be more independent and less needy. “Don’t go around like a fool, don’t be too caught up with the past,” he scolds himself. “Don’t fall in love and flounder and flail around like a fool...You are alone. Just you yourself” (1993: 103). Estranged from enduring forms of emotional support in the family and experiencing only fleeting sexual encounters with other men who pass him by like “water” or “wind” in the gay subculture, Kim finds that he has to become independent and self-reliant, thereby perhaps presenting a prototype of the enterprising individualism that South Korean would embrace as the motor of its development after the IMF Crisis in 1997.

Indeed, at the end of his lonely journey, when he is diagnosed with HIV/AIDS on August 31, 1992, Kim makes peace with his sexuality and identity that have made him an outcast and sexual fugitive in his own land. Not only does he come to accept his stigmatized sexuality, he also comes to view Jongro as his “hometown,” perhaps presaging a different form of identity and community, based not in blood, region, or school, but in homosexual desire and affect.

With my face sold on the Jongro floor as much as it could be sold, whispers of being a *nul-ja* [“an oldtimer”], one day, reached my ears...None of that, however, mattered. The only place I could relax was Jongro. Whenever I came to Jongro, my windpipes opened up—like I had returned to my hometown” (1993: 25).

Looking back over his “foolish” years of floundering and gasping with his sexual identity, he looks to the future, promising to be reborn as a strong and brave gay man.

My life until now was a practice. I have been reborn. Until now, I have lived a winter. In that winter, I have lived as a scarecrow. However, that scarecrow was so foolish and weak as to need practice. If I were to be reborn, Kim Kyung-min would not be like that. Just wait and see!" (1993: 217).

Thus ended the autobiography of perhaps South Korea's first proto-gay individual.

### **III. FROM "SEXUAL FUGITIVES" TO "WEEKEND GAYS"**

If the 1970s and 80s were a period when Korean gay culture was, so to speak, in a "deep freeze," with proto-gay individuals locked in their rooms and behind their walls of secrecy, then the mid-1990s represented the "thawing" of this culture. As Suh Dong-jin writes, "It is as if the intellectual climate concerning homosexuality has turned to spring, and with the thawing forces of spring, a torrent of discussions concerning homosexuals has appeared" (2001: 65).

Perhaps not surprisingly, much of this thawing would take place within the context of larger geo-political shifts that included the end of Cold War that produced an accelerated circulation of people, ideas, and commodities throughout the world that we now term "globalization" (Appadurai 1993). It would also come from the democratization of Korean society after two decades of Pro-Democracy movement that would create an environment receptive to both global flows of culture generated by globalization and social issues surrounding gender and sexuality, for instance, that were previously elided under the anti-dictatorship and anti-imperialist struggles. In short, through the interplay of these external and domestic factors, the sexual alterity that had lied largely dormant within national Korean consciousness would become activated, producing a new hybridized transnational Korean gay culture and movement.

Korean Gay and Lesbian Movement, Itaewon's Gay Consumer Scene, and Gay BBS Groups

According to Arjun Appadurai (1996), the “global flows” that signify the deterritorialized and decentered world of multiple centers are composed of many “scapes” including ethnoscaples, ideoscapes, and mediascapes. These variegated aspects of globalization can be seen to have played different roles in different stages of South Korea’s queer globalization, with the first coming through the return migration of one Korean-American by the name of Chang Gene-suk.

In 1993, Chang, who worked for ILGA (International Gay and Lesbian Association) dropped by Seoul on his way home to United States from Tokyo, where he had been visiting Japan’s gay group OCCUR. Inspired by the situation of Korean gay men and lesbians, he engaged in AIDS prevention activism and helped to form South Korea’s first Korean gay and lesbian organization, Ch’odonghoe. Although the group soon split up due to internal conflicts between the gay men and lesbians over issues of gendered power, it resulted in the formation of the Korean gay men’s group, *Ch’in’gusai* (“Between Friends” in January 1994) and the lesbian group, *Kirikkiri* (“Amongst Ourselves” in November 1994).<sup>11</sup>

Also quickly following the formation of these groups was the coming out of gay and lesbian activists, including Suh Dong-jin, Lee Jung-woo, and Lee Hye-sol who put faces to the ghostly figure of the homosexual and helped to kick-start the Korean gay and lesbian movement on college campuses in Seoul and around the country (Bong 2008; Suh 2001). Together, these two groups helped to spearhead a civic movement on two fronts. While *Ch’in’gusai* focused on “internal community development,” which meant trying to “clean up” the gay subculture in Nakwon-dong, signified by “casual sexual contacts between gays in bars, saunas, and theaters” (Suh 2001: 72), and turn it into a respectable gay neighborhood, the out gay activists tried to

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<sup>11</sup> For a fuller account of this history, see my and Hyun-young Kwon Kim’s, “The History of the Korean Gay and Lesbian Movement 1993-2008” in P. Chang and G.W. Shin’s *From Democracy to Civil Society* (Routledge 2011).

mobilize Korean gay men and lesbians and combat distorted portrayals of homosexuality in school textbooks and mass media (Bong 2008).

In particular, using the discourse of human rights that had become popular in South Korea through its democratization and globalization, these groups tried to interpellate proto-gay men and lesbians, and counter the widespread homophobia and heterosexism within Korean culture. Suh, a former democratic rights activist and Marxist, also helped to launch “sexual politics” on Korean campuses through his book, *Who’s Afraid of Sexual Politics* (1996), which provided a Foucauldian—as opposed to a Marxian—analysis of queer politics (interviews with Lee Jung-woo and “Gay Munhak” in 2002). In mimicking and reproducing Euro-American forms of sexual identity, subjectivity, and citizenship and seeking the universal rights attached to this fictive subject, however, such movement may have done as much to obfuscate as well as illuminate the specific forms of subjectification and oppression that Korean gay men experienced in South Korea’s particular postcolonial context.

In tandem with the emergence of the gay and lesbian movement, a Westernized gay consumer scene, catering mostly to youth, also began to form in Itaewon, a neighborhood near the U.S. military in Yongsan. Already a foreign space within the Korean popular imagination with its diverse mix of tourists, foreign residents, Yankee soldiers, and Korean and foreign prostitutes, Itaewon proved to be a congenial place for gay Koreans, who had once lived abroad, to set up—often with the help of their Western partners—gay businesses. While such businesses as Westernized gay bars and dance clubs initially catered mostly to gay foreigners, including the growing influx of foreign English teachers who came to South Korea as part of its English boom,

they also started attracting a growing number of young gay Koreans who became aware of Itaewon through gay BBS (Bulletin Board Service) groups.<sup>12</sup>

Precursors to the English-based platform of the Internet, which was hard for Koreans to use, BBSs consisted of simple Korean text-based features and discussion boards connected through a telephone modem. Nonetheless, according to Joong-jun, one of its members, BBSs were a “godsend,” enabling gay men who were hiding and suffering alone a collective spot to gather. Through its bulleting boards, gay men could not only access information about their sexuality, they could communicate openly with other gay men without having to meet them face-to-face. “It was so precious for them to be able to sit sober in front of a computer and talk about all sorts of things,” said Joong-jun. Three of the most famous gay BBS groups that sprung up on the servers of mainstream servers included Chollian’s “Queernet,” Hitel’s Tto Hana ũi Sarang (“Another Love”), and Nownuri’s “Rainbow” (Suh 2001).

Under the leadership of a new generation of gay and lesbian activists, such as Han Chae-yoon and Kim Hyun-gu, the gay BBS groups also helped to raise the self-awareness of young gay men and lesbians and organize them as a political movement. For instance, Hitel’s “Another Love” not only published a gay newsletter, it also held regular offline meetings called *chōngmo* (“regular meetings”) in places like Namsam Mountain in downtown Seoul. These meetings helped to bridge the on- and offline divide, educate the young gay men about issues of gay rights and HIV/AIDS, and overcome the geographical limits of Seoul-based gay and lesbian

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<sup>12</sup> For a fuller account of this history, see my master’s dissertation (in Korean), “Korean Gay Consumer Spaces and Body Politics of Korean Gay Men” (Yonsei 2003).

organizations.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the Korean gay and lesbian community expanded and diversified rapidly.

*Take-off of Itaewon, “Weekend Gays,” and “Itaewon Family”*

Through the synergistic play of these three forces—the Korean gay and lesbian movement, the Itaewon gay consumer market, and the gay BBS groups, Itaewon, in turn, began to takeoff as a “gay neighborhood” in the mid- to late-1990s. By “gay neighborhood,” I mean less a combined gay residential/business area that we see in Western countries, such as the Castro neighborhood in San Francisco, but more a commercial area that gay men, as students and youth who still lived at home, visited on the weekends.

Initially, gay activists, such as Suh Dong-jin, who were influenced by Marxism, strongly objected to this consumer and sex-oriented gay consumer culture (Cho 2003). Undoubtedly, part of this reticence arose from the image of student activists as a “force of conscience” in Korean society, who had to display proper moral conduct.<sup>14</sup> Without gay community centers to speak of, however, the gay activists had little choice but to rely on gay businesses to provide them with spaces and funding to hold community events.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in return for donations to community events such as “Gay Human Rights Camps,” gay organizations provided these gay businesses with the patronage of its members.

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<sup>13</sup> The telephone answering service of “103,” where gay men left each other self-introductions and messages, can be said to have performed the same function for gay men in provincial and rural areas.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Chaplin criticized some activists for being “vulgar” in not displaying the proper moral qualities of leaders: “I participated in protests organized by the *ibans* in universities. But when I saw them drink, get drunk, and act in a rowdy/vulgar manner, walking down the street like a woman while holding the [rainbow] flag, I thought it was better that they didn’t engage in activism at all. I thought it was better that they lived quietly like me.”

<sup>15</sup> Other spaces included the Nam Mountain in the middle of Seoul, which was also a famous cruising ground at night.

It was the same with many gay BBS groups, which often held their *chǒngmos* in Itaewon.

As one gay man stated,

In some ways, Itaewon really took off because of the PC groups' regular meetings. When we had them, it was usually in Itaewon since that was the only place with large bars. For many of our members, our regular meetings were the first time that they were introduced to a gay bar. When 100 guys gathered, 20 or 30 of them would say, "This is my first time in a gay bar."

Through the synergy of these three forces, Itaewon started to become a mecca for young gay Koreans in the mid- to late-1990s, just like Jongro was, at the time, for older married gay men, contributing to the phenomenon of "weekend gays." First coined by queer film scholar Chris Berry, "weekend gays" refers to the lifestyles of Korean gay men and lesbians who divide their weekday lives as students and sons from their weekend activities as gay men.<sup>16</sup> Taking place in the back-alleys of Itaewon late at night, these weekend activities in gay bars and clubs, in turn, helped to create, by the late 1990s, a sense of "gay community."<sup>17</sup> As one gay man who was active in the gay scene back then put it,

It was really fun back then. It felt like a big family. You quickly got to know everyone in a bar after a couple of times of going to it. The owner of the bar would counsel customers about their personal problems. He would also act as a matchmaker by laying down a

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Halberstam also speaks about how urban gay men substitute the time and money that heterosexuals spend on "shuttling back and forth between the weddings of friends and family" with "intense weekend clubbing, playing in small music bands...etc." (2005: 173). For Korean gay men, however, this stark contrast between heterosexuals and homosexuals may be overdrawn. Taking place late at night, usually only after their obligations to their straight friends and families had already been fulfilled, these weekend gay activities may be considered *supplemental* rather *substitutive* activities for gay men. That is, rather than replacing the social ties, duties, and obligations to their heterosexual families, friends, and colleagues, these weekend activities can be said to have been added to them.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in sharp contrast to the "old days" when gay men skulked around alone in the back-alleys of Jongro, it was possible, by the late-1990s, to spot roving parties of gay men descend on Itaewon on the weekends to meet and hang out with their friends. But, as one gay man commented, "Now, with the decline of the BBS groups and the rise of the Internet, you have, once again, either individuals or small groups of gay men roaming around."

“ladder” between the customers so I wouldn’t get rejected. For instance, he would find out whether the other guy that I was interested in had a boyfriend and, if not, whether he wanted to be introduced to me.

According to this man, gay men were able to bond easily because of their shared secret and need for social support.

People got close very quickly because there weren’t many places where they could meet other gay men and many people to whom they could tell things that they couldn’t tell their own families or friends. For instance, if I told one of my straight friends that I had broken up with a “male friend,” he would say, “What’s the big deal?” In other words, to whom would I tell these things?

Itaewon’s gay bars thus seemed to have served a number of other important functions, including being a community center, a counseling clinic, and a social space—which, in turn, produced a resistant queer “way of life.” As Don Slater writes, “in consuming we do not—*ever*—simply reproduce our physical existence but also reproduce (sustain, evolve, defend, contest, imagine, reject) culturally specific, meaningful ways of life” (1997: 4).

Nonetheless, the fact that this gay culture was temporally/spatially segregated and, thereby, shielded from the gay men’s families, also demonstrated how this consumer economy—just like in Taiwan—was articulated against the moral economy of the home. As John Erni and Anthony Spires write, “In contrast with the economic life of gays and lesbians in the US...the development...of a labor force autonomous from the family sphere provides partial economic autonomy for [Taiwanese] queers without *cultural* autonomy from family responsibilities” (2005: 241). The way in which the Korean gay consumer scene provides only partial retrieve from a public sphere saturated with familial moralism is something that I will discuss further in the following chapters.

Meanwhile, the fact that Itaewon was still a consumer space, in which gay men were interpellated first and foremost as consumers, was demonstrated in the so-called “Spartacus Incident.”

*Spartacus Boycott and Emergence of “Gay Consumer Bloc”*

Owned by “Ted,” an older Korean gay man who had spent the early part of the 1990s traveling around South-east Asia and the world, Spartacus was the first Westernized gay dance club to open in Itaewon and South Korea. Despite its roaring success at first, it was shut down a few years later by a gay consumer boycott.

In 1998, Kim Hyun-gu, a volunteer at Buddy, the nation’s first publicly distributed gay and lesbian magazine, dropped by Spartacus to drop off the magazine for display and sale at the dance club that also doubled as a sports bar. According to Hyun-gu, Ted had already agreed to display the magazine in his club but changed his mind when Hyun-gu arrived saying that he “didn’t have enough staff to even sell cigarettes,”

When he said that to me, I got really mad. It’s his prerogative not to display our magazine. But then to have him compare our magazine to *cigarettes* and have me carry those heavy magazines to his bar only to be treated as an *ordinary salesman* made me really mad.

Significant in this description is how Hyun-gu takes offense at Ted in equating Buddy to a “commodity” and his own role to a “salesman”—which disembed both from the world of political activism and resituate them in a system structured by money and market relations.

In fact, Hyun-gu was no “ordinary salesman” but the head of Hitel’s gay BBS group. Nor was Buddy, run by Han Chae-yoon, an “ordinary magazine” but the nation’s first gay and lesbian magazine. In response, Hyun-gu said that he posted an account of the incident on Hitel’s bulletin

board using his personal ID. Still, the effect was electrifying. While other activists started copying and pasting his post onto other websites, ordinary gay men filed their own complaints and grievances against Ted and Spartacus about his unfriendly service and poor conditions in the dance-club. When a consumer boycott of Spartacus began to snowball, gay men stopped going to Spartacus and started going to its rival bar Zipper.

Remarkable about this incident was how one post by a gay BBS member/activist was able to precipitate an unorganized consumer boycott of Spartacus. This seemed to demonstrate the closely-knit character of the Itaewon gay community at the time. It also seemed to demonstrate the power of this collective not as a political constituency but as a consumer bloc. In other words, while the gay and lesbian movement may have begun to empower gay men as political subjects, what it seemed to have done is simply deliver a consumer market to gay entrepreneurs. As one gay man, Minho, put it, “Ten years, Suh Dong-jin set off the gay movement in South Korea. After IMF, this movement has become radically smaller, maintaining its character only in name.” In the next chapter, I will examine how, with the IMF Crisis, Korean gay men retreat from the public sphere into the private consumers of gay bathhouses and the Internet, becoming a consumer force in their own right. Rather than presenting a compelling image of consumer sovereignty as freedom, however, I will show how being a consumer involves a continuous process of self-creation through an inescapable dialectic of freedom and choice.

#### **IV. METHODOLOGY**

My research was conducted in the heart of the gay culture in South Korea: Seoul. In fact, living in an “officetel” (studio apartment) nestled among the glass and steel edifices that lined the

neighborhood behind the Sejong Cultural Arts Center in Gwanghwamun, which was 5 minutes by taxi from both the Sky House and Nakwon-dong, and 2 minutes by foot from City Square, where many of the candle-light protests (in their later incarnations as anti-American beef and anti-FTA street protests/celebrations) were held, I was, in many ways, literally in the heart of Seoul's social, political, and cultural life.

Many of my gay male informants were recruited in two ways. For Ivancity, they were first recruited online in its text-based "Java Chat" room where I then arranged to meet them offline, usually in a coffee shop or my officetel in Gwanghwamun.<sup>18</sup> Many of the gay men whom I met this way seemed to prefer this arrangement as they lived with their parents and Gwanghwamun subway was a central location. Unfortunately, I didn't realize until much later that it was central only in relation to the northern part of Seoul known as Gangbuk ("north of river") and not to its southern part, Gangnam ("south of river"). The two neighborhoods in the popular imagination and actual socio-economic indicators constitute the "two nations" of "20-80 society" that South Korea was becoming. Therefore, even though I met a wide range of gay men in their 30-40s (my age), who either lived or worked in Gangbuk, I met fewer from Gangnam. Given the prestige of a Gangnam address, however, it was difficult to assess who was *really* from Gangnam (i.e., whether they actually grew up or lived there or just simply worked there). Given the willingness to travel an important point of negotiation in online chats emphasizing quickness and efficiency, however, Gwanghwamun, all in all, proved an ideal location, as it caught many gay men traveling into Seoul from the outskirts on their way to the gay neighborhood of Jongro.

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<sup>18</sup> Given the nature of the "Internet" as an aggregation of different services, features, and spaces, my choice of Java Chat as my main online fieldsite was justified by the fact that it constituted the most popular service in Ivancity as well as the hub of gay online life in general.

Indeed, given the enduring and even heightened importance of space and place evidenced by its users despite the potential global reach of the Internet medium, Ivancity was still “nationalistic” in its orientation. Not only were most of the users, service platform, and contents in Korean, users also needed a Korean social security number in order to register for the site. Foreigners, on the other hand, had to fax its owners a copy of their foreign registration number—a cumbersome process.<sup>19</sup>

The similar calculation of space and time that motivated the users in their offline meetings also made me choose a methodological approach that I was able to reflect on and fully justify only later: that was recruiting informants online but reserving my full interviews with them only for offline meetings. This was justified by several considerations—all practical—that give lie to the notion that anthropologists enter the field with a full sense of the tools and methods they will use to recruit informants.<sup>20</sup> One major practical consideration was the fact that I was interacting within an online space that was geared mainly towards “hookups” (“one-night stands”). As such, I was part of a rapid flow of text- and image-mediated social life that was highly sexual in nature. Within such a space, announcing myself as an anthropologist would have been as disruptive of the field site as a having a non-gay person visibly present. Luckily, I was able to negotiate between being an interested anthropologist and a potential hook-up by exploiting the third space of a potential friend. The ability to exploit this third space was aided by the grammar of Korean language, the norms of Korean social life, and my own *kyop’o* (Korean with foreign nationality) status.

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, this story could have been somewhat different if Ivancity’s server was located elsewhere outside South Korea, and not subject to the governmental restrictions of the Korean state.

<sup>20</sup> Rather, anthropologists, like artisans, can be said to craft methods that work (sometimes testing the limits of what’s considered “ethical”) and only later do they then try to reason or justify them.

Unlike much of the gay cyberculture in the United States, which is sexually explicit, the interactions in Ivancity are very restrained, perhaps given its neo-Confucian norms of moral restraint especially in front of strangers, even when it comes to arranging hookups. Of course, the users are very explicit in their sexual preferences, both visually and linguistically, as I will describe in Chapter 1. Nonetheless, in instant-messaging, the users tended to be very polite, using the proper honorific and going through the mini ritual of a greeting, such as a “hi” or a “hello,” to initiate a conversation. In fact, one of the most contentious areas of online gay life was the lack of “manners” displayed by some members who did not bother going through the rituals of these greetings and, instead, directly displayed or demanded the others’ bodily measurements (i.e., age, weight, and sexual position). Such formality of Korean language and social etiquette saved me the need to be explicit about my non-sexual intentions.

Also helpful was my status as a *kyop’o* able to type fluently in Korean (except for minor typos which were covered by the sloppy nature of most writing in online chats), who, nonetheless, could reveal at strategic points that he was not “fully” Korean but a Korean with a Canadian nationality and Westernized background. This status of being *kyop’o*, who was linguistically, culturally, and phenotypically similar enough to my informants, was advantageous in that it made me similar enough not to be discomfoting or threatening yet different enough to be exotic. Being an English speaker doing his Ph.D. in an American university also made me prestigious enough in the eyes of many of my informants for them to want to meet me, even or especially when they found out that I was also doing research in this area. The *kyop’o* status also worked in my favor with many informants willing to reveal very personal elements of their lives that they might not reveal to a Korean researcher because of their conviction that I, with few social contacts and limited period of stay in South Korea, posed little threat to their safety as gay

men. In other words, I was the archetypal “stranger” that people became intimate with on a train, secure in their belief that they would never see them again.

Meeting my informants offline, I had to continue to negotiate these extremes of being a potential hookup and an anthropologist. Inviting them to a coffee shop, I often paid for the coffee; or, inviting them to my place, I served them cookies and tea, thus quickly establishing our roles as “guest” and “host.” For many of the men, it was their first time being invited into another gay man’s home (with most of the meetings for sexual hookups occurring in motels to protect the identity of both men) and they interpreted it as an act of friendship and intimacy.

Taking advantage of a face-to-face meeting, where trust can be more easily negotiated and established (Orgad 2005), I asked gay men when they said something interesting, after the start of our conversation, whether I could record their comments. All my 40 or so informants agreed with the exception of one man. He said he felt like a “guinea pig” and so I stopped. The rest had surprisingly well-rehearsed modules of their coming out experiences, hook-ups, personal problems and struggles as gay men, and overall observations of Korean society. One reason these stories seemed so well-rehearsed and fluid is possibly because of their past experience of narrating these stories to other gay men in the context of individual one-on-one *pŏngae* like ours or collective *pŏngae* for drinking, where the operator sometimes asked the members to share these stories of coming out or hardship like group therapy. Another possible reason is because many of the men, with one or two friends at most, simply had no one to talk to about their lives and welcomed this opportunity to share their experiences.

Despite the comment of one man who said he felt like a “guinea pig,” I used an open-ended dialogical approach with the gay men, where I let them talk about issues that they found interesting or useful. In other words, rather than me pumping them for information, I used my

training as an anthropologist and my own experiences as a gay man to create an intersubjective space where we could examine both our experiences critically. At times, my interviews thus came to resemble more a critical seminar or a consciousness-raising session. Through such an approach, I was able to get not only the basic facts of their lives, but, more importantly, their critical interpretations of them. After the interview, many of my informants expressed how they were happy that they had a chance to talk rather than engage in another “meaningless” sexual hookup and some expressed a wish to keep in touch. Most of the interviews were hand-written rather than tape-recorded with most gay men demonstrating a strong discomfort at the thought of leaving a permanent record of their voices in a stranger’s hands.

Finally, similar methods were carried out for my interviews with the members of the Daum gay ski and gay swim groups. After assimilating into these groups as a *kyop’o* visitor and researcher, I sought out the permission of the respective heads of these groups to approach the members for interviews. The heads were often enthusiastic of my research and the members quite willing to be interviewed, with many considering it to be part of their “public service” to the gay community.

## **V. CHAPTER OUTLINES**

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I examine how homosexual, as a social person and identity, was rendered unimaginable by the hypermasculine Korean state that used the ideology of “Confucian parental governance” during its period of rapid, compressed modernization to control its population. I also examine how gay and lesbian activists use the modern and Westernised discourses of gay identity and gay community to turn this invisible person into a social figure.

## CHAPTER 1: The “Mass Retreat” of Gay Men into Dark Sex Rooms and Online Spaces in Post-IMF Korea

In this chapter, I examine the post-IMF transformation of the Korean gay community after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 (aka “IMF Crisis” in South Korea). As I argue in this chapter, if the combined forces of globalization and democratization in the mid-1990s helped to promote the emergence of a gay and lesbian movement, community, and market in South Korea, then the abrupt change in character of globalization to neoliberal globalization after the Asian financial crisis has helped to boost gay consumption both on- and offline while contributing to the retreat of the Korean gay and lesbian movement and Korean gay men into both the dark consumer spaces of *tchimjilbangs*, where they experiment with their sexuality, and onto cyberspace, where they become ultimately subject, as atomized individuals, to the top-down control of Ivancity, South Korea’s most popular gay portal.

## CHAPTER 2: “Cool” Meetings and the “Cold” Internet: Condition-based Meetings in Ivancity

This chapter examines the contradictory effects of the Internet on the Korean gay community. On the one hand, it has created a new space for gay men to meet other gay men. Through its technology, they can not only relatively quickly, anonymously, and safely meet other men, they can also *specify* the type of men whom they want to meet, hailing their “ideal man.” On the other hand, in failing to challenge the gay predicament of having to “love in the dark,” their relationships become insecure and unstable and they have to continuously search for new partners. Despite the enhanced connectivity of the Internet, it may very be harder—rather than

easier—for gay men to meet each other offline, producing a widespread sense of isolation and loneliness

### Chapter 3: Queer Time and Place: Gay Friendship as a “Way of Life” in Ivancity and Daum Clubs

This chapter examines how gay Daum groups try to counteract the forces of isolation and atomization within the gay community by drawing gay men offline to embodied and collective interactions between gay men, oriented around a common interest such as sports and leisure activities. In doing something “healthy” and “non-vampiric” during the daytime, these Internet-based clubs try to recover the sense of emotional warmth and social stability that is sundered in the online spaces of “queer world making” (Berlant & Warner 1998). They also try to make homosexuality a more complete and integrated parts of gay men’s lives, transforming South Korea’s “weekend gays” into “fulltime gays.”

### CHAPTER 4: Post-IMF Anxieties: The “Luxury” of Love and the “Retreat/Retirement” of Single Gay Men

In this chapter, I examine how single gay men, under the pressures of neoliberal self-development and survival, are forced to retreat and even “retire” from the gay community. While some buckle down to study and secure their economic futures, now imagined as precarious without the support of their own families, others aspire to marry women, have children, and create “normal” families, so that they can have a taste of “normal” happiness before they die. Still, others actually engage in “contract marriages” with lesbians to escape the familial pressure to marry and achieve “normality” in the work place. While the forms of this “gay retirement” are

diverse, so are the ways in which gay men imagine their “queer futures,” depending primarily on the class position of the men.

#### CONCLUSION: Married Gay Elite and the “Rise of the Bats”

The conclusion reflects on the dynamics of neoliberalism and heteronormative familism that drive the Korean gay culture through the seemingly timeworn and anachronistic trope of the so-called “gay ghetto.” The Internet has created—albeit in different forms in Ivancity and gay Daum Groups—a cyber “gay ghetto.” Such invisibility protects the participants from homophobia but also makes them ineffective in the larger political arena, making them fragile to the open attacks against homosexuality being conducted by the conservative forces in South Korea. Enhancing the size of this ghetto are the transnational practices of Korean gay men who are now, in increasing numbers, traveling to nearby Asian countries for gay/sex tourism. Leaving town to be “gay,” they effectively turn South Korea into a “national closet.” Ironically, just as single gay men all but abandon the Korean gay community, married gay men are seen to rise as a new, powerfully visible gay constituency. Empowered by the same, heterosexual nuclear family that single gay men are excluded from, they can enjoy both the security of being part of a family *and* being (secretly) gay.

## CHAPTER 1

### The “Mass Retreat” of Gay Men into Dark Sex Rooms and Online Spaces in Post-IMF Korea

#### INTRODUCTION

On Oct. 7, 2008, the “Emergency Coalition of South Korea LGBT Rights Groups Against Homophobia and the Distorted Anti-Discrimination Bill” (hereafter “Emergency Coalition”), held a series of “lightning meetings” or *pōngaes*. In contrast to the popular use of the term, *pōngae*, to normally refer to offline drinking parties or one-on-one sexual encounters between gay men organized via the Internet, such politically oriented *pōngaes* were used by the Emergency Coalition to protest the recently revised “Anti Discrimination Bill.”

Introduced by President Roh Moo Hyun as part of his election promises, the bill had been intended to strengthen the National Rights Commission Act, “which bars discrimination on the basis of most categories, including sexual orientation” (Sōngsosuja Ch’abyōl Pandae Mujigae Haengdong 2008). Instead, in response to pressure from conservative Christian groups and the Korean business community, “sexual orientation,” along with six other items, including “military status,” “nationality,” “language,” “ideology,” “family type,” “criminal record,” and “educational background,” were excluded from the revised bill and protection against discrimination.

Remarkable about this first emergency meeting was the fervent response that it drew from the gay, lesbian, transgender, and feminist communities. Even though it was called on a short notice and on a weeknight, it was jam-packed with about 40-50 people. Also remarkable

was the number of queers present who were not members of LGBT organizations but Internet café or club members. As Chae Hyun-suk, the first openly lesbian candidate to run in the national election in Korean history in March 2008, noted, “Many of the people present in the meeting were not members of LGBT organizations but Internet café or club members. They came because they were simply interested.”

If the first emergency meeting drew a fervent response from queers who were not normally represented in these meetings, then a group that was made even more conspicuous by its absence was gay men. As Minho, a long-time participant of the gay community, noted, less than 20 percent of the participants were men. And, of that group, he said, most were familiar faces of gay activists that he already knew. Clicking his tongue in disapproval, he said, “It’s so typical. Even at a time like this, gay men are probably in *tchimjilbangs* having sex.”

If the Introduction examined how proto-gay individuals were interpellated by the gay and lesbian movement to modern notions of gay identity and community only to be subsequently re-interpellated as members a gay consumer bloc, then this chapter examines the further severing of these ordinary gay men, as a gay consumer bloc, from the gay and lesbian movement through their “mass retreat” into dark sex-oriented spaces, such as *tchimjilbangs*, and to online spaces, such as Exzone and Ivancity, after the IMF Crisis. As I argue, such “mass retreat” of gay men into these offline and online consumer spaces can be attributed to a number of factors, including the mass unemployment that befell South Korea after the IMF Crisis. Eschewing the individualism that had supported the growth of gay and lesbian as well as feminist movements in the mid-1990s, the Korean government redoubled its efforts towards rebuilding the family as a metonym for nation. Ironically, even as the gay and lesbian movement retreated, hidden gay consumer spaces, such as gay bathhouses, began to proliferate. Opened by unemployed gay men,

such cash-oriented businesses, requiring low capital and few skills, provided other men with cheap and anonymous spaces, where they could quickly and efficiently discharge their sexual desires. As such, they became a material embodiment and chief symbol of the ideology of “free sex,” that began to permeate South Korea after its liberalization in the mid-1990s. Ironically, if the ideology of “free sex” enabled gay men to have guilt-free sex outside the confines of love and relationships, it also forced them to develop their own ethics of self-control and self-conduct as “sexually free” liberal individuals. Otherwise, their “sexual freedom” as consumers threatened to deteriorate into the “addiction” of “unfree” individuals, ruled more by the bodily desires of animals than the will power of “free” human beings.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, in “IMF Crisis and the Neoliberal/Neofamilial Transformation of South Korea,” I examine how, with the mass layoff of male heads of middle-class households and the renewed valorization of “family as nation” after the IMF Crisis, the Korean gay and lesbian movement began to retreat. This retreat of the gay and lesbian movement becomes further reinforced with the so-called “1.17 Shock” (the country’s total fertility rate in 2002), which, along with rising divorce and falling marriage rates, provokes widespread fears about the collapse of the Korean family and, by extension, the nation. Second, in “Post-IMF Transformation of the Gay Community into a Sexual Market,” I examine how, even as the gay and lesbian movement retreated, hidden gay consumer spaces, such as gay bars and dance-clubs, began to proliferate. Within such dark, anonymous spaces as tchimjilbangs, gay men begin to experiment with their bodies and sexualities, learning the meaning of their “freedom” to mean, not the political freedom to be “out,” but the economic freedom to consume in hidden, consumer spaces. Third, in “Gay Internet and the Mass Exodus of Gay Men onto Cyberspace, I examine the further retreat of gay men from public space, this time onto

cyberspace. Through using the online platforms of Exzone and Ivancity to connect and interact with other similarly dispersed men from the respective terminals of their own computers, gay men started becoming members of a “privatized public.” Interacting as abstract symbols on the computer screen not only robs them of the ability to build affective ties that had formerly constituted the Itaewon gay community, it also further isolates and disempowers them as sexual citizens, reducing their idea of “freedom” to choosing among other men online but without the power to affect either the gay community or the world as a whole. These two trends, in turn, set up the context for examining the interaction of gay men as disembodied sexual consumers in Ivancity in Chapter 2.

## **I. IMF CRISIS AND THE NEOLIBERAL TRANSFORMATION OF KOREAN SOCIETY**

In 1997, with the collapse of the Thai bhat and the rapid spread of the financial contagion to other Asian countries, South Korea became the victim of the Asian financial crisis. The crisis not only saw a sharp rise in unemployment—with 1.1-million people losing their jobs immediately following the crisis—but also slumping currencies, devalued stock markets, and a precipitous rise in personal debt. In response, the Korean government has precipitated a wide-ranging set of political, economic, and social reforms that have indelibly changed the face of South Korean society.

Politically, as Jesook Song (2003) has elucidated, the Kim Dae-jung administration used the opportunity to transform itself into a neoliberal state. Taking power at the historical moment of the IMF Crisis, it formed a Tripartite Commission, comprising of state, capital, and labor, to make compromises and shepherd the nation through its worst economic crisis ever since the

Korean War. In particular, using its partnership with civil society, it began to infuse society with forms of neo/liberal reasoning based upon “free will” and “self-responsibility,” even as it tried to appear neutral and hands-off in order to reduce state dependence and state responsibility.

Economically, with the collapse of *chaebŏl* and mass unemployment, it tried to shift South Korea’s mode of economic development and capitalist accumulation from state-directed manufacturing-based economy to a finance-oriented economy able to better take advantages of the vagaries and opportunities of an increasingly interconnected global economy. Part of this shift necessarily entailed acting “on the decade-long, futuristic vision of saturating the nation with new technology and new markets for postindustrial capitalistic competition” (Song 2009: 6). Indeed, identifying the significance of the country’s IT industry in his inaugural speech, President Kim Dae-jung initiated a “variety of promotion policies such as creating ‘Internet Friendly Classrooms,’ ‘Ten Million Internet Education,’ and ‘Cyber Building Certificate Project,’” investing “a total of \$11 billion into broadband services” over the past four years until 2002 (Jin 2005: 317).

Ironically, even as Korean government engaged in all these efforts to revive the economy, it also retooled and advanced what had been a tool of state governmentality since the Chosun period, the pervasive metonym of “Korean family as nation.” For instance, with the mass layoff of male heads of middle-class households after the crisis, South Korea saw national campaigns to “revive the flagging spirits of men” and “save the collapsing family.” As the fears of collapsing family became magnified by the biopolitical crisis of reproduction with the falling fertility/marriage rates, the spiking divorces, and an ageing society (Uhn 2005), the ideology of heteronormative familism gained further traction. In 2003, against the protestations of feminists and queers, the Korean state passed the “Healthy Family Act” for the purpose of “the

maintenance and development of healthy families” (Uhn 2005: 9). Quickly superseding the abolition of the “family-head (*hoju*) system” in 2002, which had previously legalized “the patrilineal succession of the family name and family register, patrilocal marriage, and the representation of the families by the patriarch” (Yang 2002: 73), this new act redefined family along the conventional ideology of the nuclear family.

Needless to say, the effects of these reforms had devastating effects on the Korean gay and lesbian movement and community. In the face of these larger socio-economic and political transformations, the Korean gay and lesbian movement, along with the Korean women’s movement, visibly retreated and queers and women reprivatized into the private fold of the family. Yet, ironically, even as the gay and lesbian movement retreated, hidden gay consumer spaces of *tchimjilbangs* proliferated.

## **II. “FREE SEX” IDEOLOGY AND THE POST-IMF TRANSFORMATION OF THE GAY COMMUNITY INTO A SEXUAL MARKET**

As noted in the Introduction, there were many spaces of “public sex” (Berlant and Warner 2002) such as “gay” theaters, parks, and saunas scattered throughout Seoul. Starting in the late 1990s, however, such spaces of public sex began to be commodified as bona fide “gay” businesses, of which *tchimjilbangs* were considered the most representative. According to Minho, a main reason for their efflorescence was the mass post-IMF unemployment.

There are more of these gay businesses like *tchimjilbangs*, DVD theatres, and massage shops because the economy is getting harder. There’s nothing else for gay men to do since it’s too difficult for them to work in a straight company.

If the supply of these sex-oriented consumer spaces was provided by unemployed gay men, then the demand for them seemed to be fueled by the gay men’s desires to discharge their sexual

desires, without the traditional responsibilities or emotional entanglements. For instance, as one gay man, interviewed in Lee Hee-il's (1998) article about *tchimjilbangs*, put it, "What is wrong with 'free sex'? It provides a quick and forceful means of satisfaction. Because there are no after-effects (*twikkŭ ch'i ŏpta*), that is what I like."

### "Free Sex Ideology" and the Growth of Tchimjilbangs

In using this term, "free sex," this man was indexing a novel discourse of sexuality that had begun to emerge in the early to mid-1990s along with the gay and lesbian movement.

As one of the most forceful advocates of the "free sex" ideology, Prof. Gwang-su of Yonsei University, put it, one of the natural results of a country's economic development was the change in people's interest from appetite for "food" (*sikyok*) to appetites for "sex" (*sŏngyok*) and "honor" (*myŏngyok*): "The chief interest of a society that has overcome absolute poverty is 'sex'" (1994; 2008: 41), he says. In South Korea, however, that "natural" development, he asserts, has been retarded by outdated Confucian morals,

In our country, it is still difficult for people to easily satisfy their appetite for sex without going through the process of "marriage." In other words, it is a society where "free sex" is not permitted" (2008: 43).<sup>21</sup>

Despite queer and feminist critiques of this essentialized and depoliticized notions of sex that seemed to elide all other forms of "sexual politics," such discourse of "free sex" seemed to dovetail neatly with the gay community's equally essentialized and depoliticized notion of *sik* that I have examine in the Introduction, and contribute to the phenomenal growth of a mass consumer gay sexuality within *tchimjilbangs*.

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<sup>21</sup> Before being eventually reinstated, Prof. Mah Gwang-su was fired from his job for expressing these controversial views.

### *Tchimjilbangs as a Post-IMF Service Industry*

Originally a sauna with heated floors, *tchimjilbangs* were originally consumer spaces that catered mainly to middle-aged women in the mid-1990s. After the IMF Crisis, however, unemployed gay men started appropriating this gendered and age-differentiated image to provide gay men with a hidden space where they could have anonymous sex with other men.

For instance, Yakdol (“Medicine Stone”)— one of the first and most popular *tchimjilbangs* in Seoul—was opened by a gay man after he lost his job during the IMF Crisis. As he put it, he had come up from the provinces to work in the construction industry. When the company went bankrupt, however, he found that finding a job was like “picking a star from heaven.” Since “I needed to make money somehow, I jumped with both my feet into the *tchimjilbang* business,” he said, despite its morally and legally ambiguous status.

Almost immediately, Yakdol was a success. According to the owner,

Usually, it takes 3 months to turn a profit. But Yakdol did it in the first month. In the first week, I had 1-2 customers and in the second, 4-5. In the third week, I had more than 10. And by the fourth week, I had more than 20. And by the fifth week, 30 to 40. Now, on average, I have between 40-50 customers on weekdays, 60-70 on Fridays, 100-130 on Saturdays, and 40-50 on Sundays.

The intense demand for such spaces could be attributed to the severe degree to which homosexuality had been driven underground and repressed within South Korea during its period of military dictatorship. Soon, the tiny trickle of gay bathhouses turned into a veritable flood with a *tchimjilbang* in almost every neighborhood in Seoul. For instance, in 1999, Lee Hee-il, counted 30 *tchimjilbangs* in Seoul alone in 1999, including “P” and “M” *tchimjilbangs* in Jongro, “O” *tchimjilbang* in Sadang-dong, and “U” *tchimjilbang* in Bangbae-dong. If the gay and lesbian movement had provided many gay men with their first exposure to the gay consumer culture in

bars, then the *tchimjilbangs* seemed to have provided them with a crash lesson in being a self-governing “free” sexual consumer subject.

### *Tchimjilbangs as a “Laboratory in Sexual Experiment”*

Initially, many gay men went to *tchimjilbangs* with few expectations, after hearing gossip or through the introduction of friends. With no previous experience of *tchimjilbangs*, few knew what to expect. In 2002, I interviewed a group of gay men, including three Korean-Americans, about their *tchimjilbang* experiences. As one Korean-American gay man, Roy put it,

I’ve never been to a bathhouse so I didn’t know what to expect. I imagined it to be like a North American-style gay bathhouses where you walk in, get a towel, get a private room, walk around, and, if someone is interested, have sex. I was thus curious.

A “common denominator” of *tchimjilbangs*, said Neil, another Korean-American, was the fact that everyone was naked. “Once the clothes come off, everyone is reduced to their looks. Physical looks are the common denominator.”

Indeed, after entering the *tchimjilbang*, a common procedure for the customers was to undress, shower, change into a gown, and then enter one of the dark communal rooms where they then lied in the dark, waiting for someone to touch them. As Roy put it, “You lie there in the dark waiting for someone to touch you. When they do, you glance up to see if they’re your type. If they are, you often move onto sex.”<sup>22</sup> Given the fact that everyone was already naked, this move towards sex was usually fast and efficient. As Neil put it, “Nobody talks but sex is given freely. People experiment with different bodies.” From this perspective, *tchimjilbangs* can be

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<sup>22</sup> In “pretending” to be asleep, gay men could not only reserve for themselves the opportunity to *choose* in being first *chosen*, they could also disavow an active participation in the illicit act of sex, thus maintaining their sense of “moral purity.” As for the former, Minho said, “One thing that Korean gay men hate above all things, to the point of suicide, is being rejected.”

considered what Foucault has famously termed the gay bathhouses in San Francisco and New York in the 1970s: “laboratories of sexual experiment.”

Given the wide variety of men present in a *tchimjilbang* and their willingness to experiment sexually, *tchimjilbangs* thus became a site of intense physical and emotional experiences. As Roy put it,

What made it so tantalizing was going there and meeting someone whom you’re attracted to and who’s attracted to you. It was mutual attraction with men in their 20s who’re very virile.

Comparing the sex in *tchimjilbangs* to “riding a rollercoaster” or “flying,” he said that he “felt powerful, invincible, and forever young.”

### *Disappointments of Tchimjilbangs*

The more often gay men went to *tchimjilbangs*, however, the less satisfying they found them to be. Part of the reason was because many of them went there initially looking for not only sex but also love. As Neil put it, “I went there for sex. But in the back of my mind, I also thought it might be a place where I could meet someone for a relationship.” This was a common assumption to make given the difficulty of meeting gay men in bars, which were still communal rather than sexual cruising spaces, and the overall lack of venues to meet other men.

According to a Korean gay man, Sujung, men often “committed” themselves to each other—albeit briefly and provisionally—within the *tchimjilbang*.

During the sex, you briefly feel as if you’re not sexual partners but boyfriends. Just as you see men, who go to female prostitutes, commit themselves briefly to the women, it’s not “you and me” (*nŏ wa na*) but “thou and thou” (*chagi wa chagi*) during the sex. You

commit briefly. Before you climax, you use the word, “darling,” knowing full well that’s not really the case.<sup>23</sup>

After climaxing, however, the two men return to being “you and me” again, he said. “And when you see him move on and have sex with the next guy, you feel a sense of betrayal.”

This feeling of betrayal and alienation was probably heightened by the fact that gay men often drew a sharp line between the activities within the *tchimjilbang* and the everyday world outside. As one gay man, “Incense,” put it, “Men are wild and passionate inside the *tchimjilbang*. However, once they leave that space, they pretend not to even know you.” Due to this sharp divide between what he called the “closed” space of the *tchimjilbang* and the “open” space of mainstream society, gay men often found their *tchimjilbang* experiences to be dispiriting. “Initially, I went to *tchimjilbang* because I was in a long-distance relationship and lonely,” said Roy. “Instead, waking up the next morning alone, I felt *even* lonelier.”

#### *“Addiction” and the Ethics of Self-Control*

In order to deal with these issues of provisional intimacy and commitment, gay men had to learn and engage in practice of “ethics.” Following Michel Foucault, I define ethics as ‘the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rapport a soi*....which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as the moral subject of his own action (quoted in Hacking 1986: 235 by Slater 2000: 61). In this sense, as Foucault points out,

Power operates not only through policy and discourse/practice at the institutional level, but also through ‘ethical techniques of the self’....which permit individuals to effect by

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<sup>23</sup> Sujung attributed this desire for emotional commitment during sex mostly to gay men with “bottom-like” tendencies. “Bottoms,” he said, tended to be more communicative and touch-oriented than “tops,” who were considered to be less talkative and more intent on “putting on a show.” Therefore, bottoms, who connected more emotionally with their partners, tended to be more “hurt” by these transient interactions.

their own means... a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality” (quoted in Slater 2000: 61).

As we have already seen with Kim Kyung-min in the Introduction, such practices of self-conduct and self-control can be seen to be especially important for gay men. Estranged from the both the protective and restraining fold of their own families, the state, and even the gay community, it was imperative for them to develop their own rules of conduct in terms of exercising their “freedom.” Otherwise, there was the danger of succumbing to the “dangers” of unrestrained pleasure that threatened to consume the gay men, and transform the “free will” of gay men as human beings to the “slavish” desires of an animal.

For instance, the owner of Yakdol, spoke about the addictive quality of *tchimjilbangs*.

I knew that this business would succeed since sex is oppressed in South Korea. But even I was shocked at how easily people got addicted to sex. They get addicted to this culture. They become too focused on sex. As you know, *tchimjilbangs* have completely upturned the barrel of sex and made it widely available.

Many gay men seemed to agree. Initially, they found their experiences in *tchimjilbangs* to be deeply satisfying. As Sujung put it,

Before coming, my body floats and I signal to the other man. All the sensations in my entire body focus on that area and no other thought enters my mind. At that moment, all that should exist is that movement, that touch, and that feeling. I feel the same sense of ecstasy that one feels in Nirvana although, of course, in Buddhism that’s an eternal feeling.

After coming, he said that he felt a deep sense of “release, relief, and satisfaction”—a feeling that was initially intense enough for it to last several weeks.

Yet, the longer gay men went, the more intense they found that their experiences needed to be in order for them to derive the same level of satisfaction. “Whether it is in terms of a new

person or a new technique, you crave change,” said Sujung. “You cannot ejaculate using the same actions so you seek something ‘harder and harder’ (in English).”

Pursuing these “harder” experiences, however, meant not only “dulling” one’s senses but also “losing” one’s sense of humanity. As Sujung put it,

Knowing what the “end” would be even before I had sex with another man, I felt my skin become calloused and my feelings become insensitive. Coming out of the *tchimjilbang* and into my daily life, I also felt myself becoming further distanced from other people in my heart and my own daily life. I felt my humanity dying.

In recognizing the addictive danger of *tchimjilbangs*, the owner of Yakdol said that when he recognized men coming to the *tchimjilbang* for the first time, he actually turned them away.

#### *Tchimjilbang as a “Consumer” Activity*

In encountering these limits and dangers within *tchimjilbangs*, some men tried to curtail their *tchimjilbang*-going activities and focus on other pursuits. “I try to make a choice doing other things such as dating, hanging out with friends, or developing my career,” said Neil.

Others learned to separate love from sex. “One thing that I’ve learned is that you cannot have sex with someone you meet there,” said Roy. Dean, another Korean-American, agreed,

It’s definitely an experience of the moment. There’s the pretense of it being an experience between two people. But I consider it to be an almost animalistic thing. There are lots of guys hopping from mat to mat. Sometimes, you’re with a guy and you can see him check out who’s coming in.

Still others took on an attitude of a rational consumer, where they tried to calculate the benefits of going as opposing to saving time and money.

For instance, Neil, who said that he tried to curtail *tchimjilbang*-going activities for other more “productive” pursuits, said that, nonetheless, when the urge hit him, he still went to them.

“I sometimes say, ‘Why not? Let’s go.’ A man is a man. We have a libido. It’s not like that I’m

always going to be dating and I'm not into watching a porno and beating off." This meant considering various factors, including money and time.

There are times I go more often and times I go less. It depends on the convenience, schedule, need, mental state, ideology at the time, and money. It's like, "Do I need a haircut or can I wait?" In the U.S., a locker is \$10 and a room is \$15-20. In Korea, it's \$10. So money is a factor.

Or, as Dean put it,

I try to make sure that I have a good time. I try to get value for my money. Sometimes when I don't see anyone that I'm attracted or I have bad sex, I come back home feeling empty-handed and disappointed. I feel "in-frugal," as if I had wasted both time and money.

Thus, one could see the production of gay men as moral subjects, who had to develop an ethics of self-conduct not only in terms of "How much was enough sex?" in the absence of traditional checks and balances provided by the family or, even the gay community, but also a rational process of calculation that accompanied their strengthening identity as sexual consumers.

### *Moral Backlash Against Tchimjilbangs*

If *tchimjilbangs* provided a consumer space where more gay men were being sucked into the privatized pleasures of sex, then the gay and lesbian community seemed to be powerless to stop this growing tide of "free sex" practices. In 1996, the topic of *tchimjilbangs* became a topic of heated debate within the gay community.

In a discussion started by Lee Jung-woo on Hitel's Ttosamo website, many users expressed their moral distaste of *tchimjilbangs* and other similar spaces within Korean gay culture. One gay man said,

It's surprising to hear people call places like *tchimjilbangs*, saunas, theaters, parks, gay bars, public toilets, etc., our "subculture." If so, what is our "higher culture"? I would prefer not to call these things culture.

Another man worried about the impact that a public disclosure of these spaces would have on the Korean gay and lesbian movement.

Is it possible to allow all the things that we have fought so hard for the last seven years to collapse so easily? [When the mainstream society finds out about these spaces] we may need to start [our movement] over.

Yet, if these gay activists were highly critical of *tchimjilbangs*, they could not outright condemn them. After all, these sexual spaces, where gay men exercised their "free will" as consumers, were wedded to the same discourse of liberal individualism that had powered the Korean gay and lesbian movement. Indeed, without a proper critique of "sexual liberalism" as an exercise of unrestrained individual freedom, these members of the gay and lesbian movement seemed powerless to stem the powerful tidal wave of free sex ideology that was sweeping across the gay community.

#### *Tchimjilbangs as a "Necessary Evil"*

Just like the gay activists, gay consumers also acknowledged the practical necessity of *tchimjilbangs* even as they critiqued them. For instance, Roy described them as a "bankrupt institution."

In the long run, they are a bankrupt institution because they don't encourage bonding which is ultimately what makes us human. Finding other gay men and being supported by them is what makes us learn who we are and what our desires are.

But, in the same breath, he acknowledged their practical necessity.

It's a stress relief for gay men to have sex with other men. Even though it's not a good stress valve because it doesn't encourage gay men to socialize and reinforces unsafe sex, it still relieves their stress of being in the closet from their families, friends, and society.

Dean agreed.

They're really important in a society which is oppressive and closeted and where homosexuality is pushed underground. With people having to have sex no matter what, *tchimjilbangs* are better than public toilets or parks.

Thus, *tchimjilbangs* were considered a "necessary evil," a place where gay men could learn about their sexual desires, if not who they were as human beings.

### **III. GAY INTERNET AND MASS EXODUS OF GAY MEN TO ONLINE SPACE**

If *tchimjilbangs* seemed to contribute to the privatization of the gay community and the impoverishment of the gay and lesbian movement, then the gay Internet, in connecting the gay men through the main terminal of Exzone and Ivancity, the country's two main gay websites in the late 1990s, seemed to further disperse and isolate them as members of a "privatized public." By "privatized public," I mean gay users who are isolated, immobile, and geographically dispersed sitting behind their individual computer screens, often within their own bedrooms, even though they appear to constitute a dynamic and mobile online population on the computer screen.

#### Exzone: South Korea's First Gay Internet Site

As examined in the Introduction, gay and lesbian BBSs presented new possibilities for gay and lesbian organizing, community building, and discourse/cultural production. Gay BBS members, such as Joong-jun, however, were still disgruntled by the fact that these BBS server companies

prevented gay and lesbian users from posting personals or self-introductions online. He fumed, “Why is it that heterosexuals can ‘proudly’ (*ttöttöt’age*) introduce themselves and meet each other, whereas we can’t?” So, one day, he went ahead and posted his self-introduction on the *Hitel* bulletin board.

Fully aware that his action endangered not only his own membership in the *Hitel* discussion group but also the group itself, which could be cut from the mainstream server, he also opened South Korea’s first gay site, *Exzone*, the very next day on June 6, 1997.

“*Open Meetings*,” “*Exzone Family*”

Unlike the gay BBS groups, where the webmaster had a record of everyone’s real names and addresses that they had registered when they signed up for a BBS account, and where the members, themselves, often formed small gay families that met both on and offline, the Internet, in severing the line between the men’s on- and offline identities, afforded them much more opportunity to engage in anonymous sex.

Still, Joong-jun, who had come out of a history of BBS gay community involvement and activism, continued to embrace community ethos. For instance, he refused to accept advertising from the gay bars, saying, “Frankly, ads for bars or underwear had no appeal for me.”<sup>24</sup> Still, if a Korean conglomerate like Samsung had wanted to advertise in *Exzone*, he said that he would have gladly accepted,

I would have accepted if Samsung wanted to place an ad. No, not even Samsung but even a

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<sup>24</sup> Joong-jun said that he fronted most of the costs of running the site himself. “People think that it costs a lot of money to run a site. But it doesn’t. You just need to skip dinner one night.” He also relied on gay business owners to pay for the equipment needed to maintain the site “since they themselves had to expand the number of users.” Finally, when gay businesses kept pestering him to advertise on his site, he said that he relented and created a separate board just for commercial ads.

mid-sized Korean company. Why? Because they would have been a measure of social acceptance of homosexuality.

Thus, Joong-jun continued to embrace the “politics of recognition” pursued by the gay and lesbian movement, albeit on a slightly different commercial register, in aspiring to be recognized as a legitimate consumer market by Samsung, the most powerful conglomerate in South Korea.

Not only that, Joong-jun also embraced the idea of creating an Internet-based community through the two concepts of “Open Meetings” and “Exzone Family.” While the first principle emphasized open and honest communication between its members, the second principle conceived of *Exzone* as a “family.” Joong-jun said that he got the idea for the first principle from witnessing “petty acts” of crime against gay men by other gay men.

Because the process of meeting was hidden, it was impossible to know who had been hurt and how they have been hurt. So I said, “Let’s not be like that. Let’s reveal ourselves at least to each other.” It was a small form of “coming out.”

As for the idea of “Exzone Family,” he said that he got this idea from watching the family in South Korea.

With the growing individualization of South Korea and the expanding number of single people, I thought that our country could also support alternative families. I considered *Exzone* members to be a family since we could tell each other things that we couldn’t tell even our own mothers and siblings. I imagined gay men as “brothers” (*hyōngje*) who would wake up even in the middle of the night and run over to a gay man’s house with medicine if he was sick, sharing not only good times but also bad times.<sup>25</sup>

Through such family-like relations of care, Joong-jun said that he imagined a world “where being gay was no longer a reason to be unhappy; where gay men could be happy even without boyfriends, fathers, and mothers.”

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<sup>25</sup> Asked why he supported the idea of “family” as opposed to “community,” Joong-jun replied, “The term, ‘gay community,’ is too broad. You know, the ‘gay community’ is like a country. There are leaders, citizens, middle-class, the working poor, etc.”

### *Censorship by Korean Government*

On November 1, 2001, however, Exzone faced a crisis when the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC)'s Information and Communications Ethics Committee mandated the blockage of all gay and lesbian sites from youth.<sup>26</sup> Incensed by the government's move, which forced the site to deny access to minors in labeling all gay and lesbian sites "obscene," or be shut down, Joong-jun called for a nation-wide strike in South Korea with Ivancity and TG-Net. After Exzone, they were the two largest websites in the country, respectively serving the gay and lesbian populations.<sup>27</sup> With the help of the Lesbian and Gay Alliance Against Defamation (LGAAD) and the Lawyers for Democracy, he also launched a lawsuit against MIC for unconstitutional blockage on January 10, 2002.

To his great disappointment, the call for a nation-wide strike brought no support from the other two websites. When Ivancity's server company shut it down for being obscene, its owners promptly left for Thailand to recover from the shock and, when they came back, they reopened it as an adult site using their own server.

As for the lawsuit, Exzone lost its case in three lower court appeals before finally reaching the Constitutional Court in 2003. In two of these lower court appeals, the judges upheld the

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<sup>26</sup> The Exzone decision seemed to be historically significant in demonstrating how the surveillance infrastructure of the Internet in South Korea was initially constructed on the backs of Korean gay men. Through the regulation of pornography, with which gay culture was identified, the Korean government justified and expanded its Internet-based surveillance infrastructure. In other words, homosexuality became a test-bed for new surveillance technologies. These technologies of surveillance, in turn, also became a key site where individuals were taught, through self-surveillance and self-monitoring, to become self-governing "ethical subjects." I am indebted to William Leap for making these connections.

<sup>27</sup> There was also *Happy Iban*, the first business to be incorporated as a gay company. Even though it tried to provide the gay community with a diverse offering of gay and lesbian cultural products produced locally and abroad, it never really got off the ground and was later bought by Minho and turned into a gay porn site.

ensorship but still left open the possibility that MIC's action could be found contrary to the constitution. In the Constitutional Court, Joong-jun lost once again. Based on the opinions of the lower court judges, however, the Human Rights Commission recommended the removal of the offensive clause from the Youth Protection Act in 2003; and in 2004, it was deleted. Despite Joong-jun's loss of the lawsuit, the gay and lesbian community hailed the deletion of this clause as a victory in having sexual minorities recognized as legal entities for the first time in Korean history. But, by then, it was too late. Gay netizens had already jumped ship from Exzone to Ivancity, leaving the former high and dry.

#### Ivancity and the Transformation of Gay Men into Atomized Sexual Consumers

With the demise of Exzone, Ivancity quickly emerged to take over its number one spot. Started in 1999 by Kim Sung-ju, a former computer programmer, as a hobby, Ivancity provided a more liberal environment for gay men to enjoy their sexual desires. Unlike Exzone, they were no "principles" to restrain their sexual desires. If anything, Ivancity seemed to incite them through its three popular "Archives," "Power Dating," and "Chat" services. While Archives were a collection of pirated gay porn, Power Dating was an online dating service, and Chat an online chatting service.

#### *Archives and the Politics of Affect*

According to Kim, he added the "Archives" because there was no space on Korean sites at the time where the users could upload and share nude pictures. Indeed, with the growing popularization of the Internet, many gay Koreans' first exposure to gay sexuality came from these immaterial representations of gay consumer sexuality. Often looted from Japanese,

American, and European porn sites and divided into categories such as age, nationality, body type, they became the first means through which Korean gay men began to imagine their sexuality vis-à-vis gay men in other countries. Like *tchimjilbangs*, they also became the primary pivot around which gay culture became more of an “affective” culture.

By “affect,” I simply mean, following Jason Lim, “the capacity or power of bodies to affect other bodies and be affected by other bodies” (2007: 54). Distinguishable from the discursive “politics of recognition” (Fraser 1990) as practiced by the gay and lesbian movement, where particular identities are assumed to be already “staked out and recognized” (Lim 2007: 53), the “politics of affect” can be viewed in terms of “how bodies are able to forge new connections and new alliances, to forge new pleasures and new ways of being productive” (Lim 2007: 55). As such, they refer less to institutional politics channeled through the official discourses of “rights” and “freedom” than politics of everyday sociality achieved through bodies, emotions/feelings, and performances.

According to one gay man, Bryan, whom I will introduce further in Chapter 2, the mass dissemination of foreign gay porn had a profound effect on Korean gay men, encouraging them to adopt “grotesque” fantasies and become more “hard-core” in their own sexual practices:

If you ask the men in the chat rooms, they tell you what they want to do. They want do what they’ve seen in gay porn, such as putting “two dicks in one hole.” Or, if you look at Japanese porn, the receiver is treated like an animal. He either voluntarily eats or is forced piss or sperm while his jaws are held open. It appears as if such fantasies have also formed among Korean gay men.

Yet, just like *tchimjilbangs*, in being premised on the notion of sovereign individual, such porn and its effects, seemed to be immune from traditional political critiques. For instance, Bryan, himself, declined to pass a moral judgment on this gay porn and its effects, even though he felt free to “diagnose” its effects as a doctor.

I prefer to withhold my judgment. Looking at it from a medical standpoint, there are more negative than positive effects. For instance, let's examine the meaning of "stimulation." Let's say that your thigh itches and you scratch it. At first, it's refreshing but as time passes, you need to scratch it harder and harder. Later, even though you draw blood, you cannot stop. That is what "simulation" is...

As we shall see in Chapter 2, it is the pervasiveness of such "politics of affect" that pervade Ivancity, disrupting our traditional notion of politics of recognition and demanding a new critical attitude of bodies and what they can or cannot do in articulation with new technologies and age-old ideologies of gender and sexuality.

*Power Dating and the Intensification of Gay Men as Sexual Commodities/Consumers.*

If Archives encouraged Korean gay men to begin imagining themselves in new ways as sexualized subjects, then Power Dating seemed to offer them the technological means to both market and consumer others as romantic commodities.

Creating a Power Dating profile consisted of several steps. The first step involved answering an online questionnaire, which involved answering such questions as one's height, weight, age, the number of times that they had sex, their sexual position, etc. The results of this online questionnaire were then uploaded into one's personal profile called "My Pages." Based on the questionnaire, this profile consisted of various facets of one's personhood, such as one's "basic profile" (nickname, age, sexual identity, area of residence, type of partner one was looking for, marriage status, job, type of living arrangement, and education), "bodily profile" (height, weight, type of body, type of appearance, personality, blood type, whether one was a smoker or not, how often one drank, hairstyle, and whether one wore glasses or not), "additional profile" (hobby, pastime, type of sport one played, and interests), and "sex profile" (how often

one had sex per week, one's sexual position, one's preferred "sex style," whether one had a mustache, whether one was hairy or not, and the color of one's skin).

Through two search engines—"Fast Search" and "Detailed Search"—the members could then quickly and efficiently search the 42,728 profiles that constituted the database of Power Dating site. Such technologically-enhanced searches seemed to further subjectify the Ivancity users as not only romantic products with objectified and ultimately interchangeable attributes but also consumers with highly developed tastes and preferences that were now typologized and easily searchable via the Internet.

Despite the initial popularity of Ivancity's Power Dating, by the early 2000s, it was losing popularity. According to Minhø, it was because gay men started realizing that it was less a space to meet people but more a place to engage in a popularity contest. Above the gay men's profiles, there was a counter that kept track of the number of "hearts" that one received from other gay men. Though such hearts were meant to convey one's interest, in fact, many gay men sent hearts out of idle boredom, to reciprocate to someone else's heart, or to boost their own popularity. As such, Minhø commented on how even though he had thousands of "hearts" above his profile, he had, in fact, met only a few of these men who had sent these hearts to him offline.

#### *Ivancity Chat and the Virtualization of Gay Identity*

In losing interest in Power Dating as a viable method of meeting people, many gay men seemed to turn towards Ivancity's Chat, the only other venue on Ivancity for meeting gay men offline.

Ivancity's Chat was divided into three forms of chats: text-based "Java Chat," "Avatar Chat," and "Webcam-based Chat." Despite the popularity of the latter two on mainstream sites, they had little popularity for gay men, who neither wanted to waste their time decorating

fictional figures or “peel” (*kkada*; reveal) their faces. By far, the popular chat service was, therefore, Java Chat.

The chat rooms in Ivancity’s Chat were, in turn, divided into two categories of “one-on-one chats versus one-to-10 chats” and “closed versus open” rooms. While one-on-one chats allowed a maximum of two people into a room, one-to-10 chats allowed a maximum of 10. “Open rooms,” meanwhile, were rooms that were open and accessible to anyone as long as there was space in that room. “Closed rooms” (aka “blind rooms”), on the other hand, were those that were password-protected. To enter a closed room, a user had to first get the password from the room captain, who had created the room, or someone else in the room, using a “note” (*tchokchi*).

What was remarkable about these chat rooms, similarly divided like gay porn into various categories of age, location, body type, and interest, was how they seemed to be governed as tiny “fiefdoms” by their room captains. For instance, if a user’s body did not satisfy the standards of a room captain presiding over a room, designated as a “muscle room” (i.e., a room for muscular men), he could be arbitrarily kicked out without a warning. When that happened, there was no way for the offended party to protest or appeal the action as there was no larger structure of power within Ivancity to mediate such conflicts. Thus, Ivancity seemed to constitute less a gay community than a collection of atomized individuals, who were free to consume and interact with other men within Ivancity but not change its larger structure.

Also remarkable about the chat rooms in Ivancity’s Chat was their dynamic and evanescent nature. Just like the gay men’s online persons, which were performatively created through logging onto the chat site, the rooms were similarly created through the performative presence of the room captain. That is, these rooms only existed to the extent that there was the room captain “within them” to “perform” them. Once he left the room, the room similarly

“collapsed,” disappearing without a trace. In this sense, the chat rooms in Ivancity were what Slater (2000) calls “dynamic online spaces,” existing not only in “real time” but, also, *only* in the present time. Needless to say, within such an environment, it became harder to identify an ethico-legal subject with a unique and locatable body with an offline address, and enforce a collective social norm for the group, further isolating them as members of a privatized public.

### *Ivancity Chat’s “Sul Pǒngaes” and the Decentering of the Gay Community*

Around the late 1990s, a new form of Internet-based offline drinking parties called *sul pǒngaes* (술번개) also began to be popularized on Ivancity. Though such *pǒngaes* were by no mean new—having existed since the mid-1990s when BBS groups used them to introduce large groups of gay men to the offline gay scene—with the growing popularity of Internet in the late-1990s, they began to become even more popular.

For instance, by 2002—the height of the *sul pǒngae* phenomenon—one to three *pǒngaes* would open on average every night in different neighborhoods in Seoul, including Gangnam, Apgujong, Hongik, Shinchon, and Jongro. With banners, such as “Jongro Drink 11 pm/10,000 won/Just before closing!/At present, 18 guys/SK Chǒngsu,”<sup>28</sup> in Ivancity Chat—they would blanket the city like starships getting ready to descend and whisk away their passengers.

According to Minhø, who had organized a total of 15 *pǒngaes* between spring of 2002 and winter of 2004, one reason for *sul pǒngaes*’ popularity was their group-oriented nature and efficiency. Anywhere from 15-20 guys or 35-50 men would gather between 10 pm and 1 am on weeknights or weekends to converge in a bar or restaurant to drink and party. As such, *sul pǒngaes* provided an efficient way for gay men to meet large groups of other men in one setting.

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<sup>28</sup> This meant that a *sul pǒngae*, hosted by *pǒngae* captain, “SK Chǒngsu,” was to be held in Jongro at 11 pm with 18 guys currently signed up and accounted for.

As Minho said, “Because Seoul is large, it takes a lot of time to meet guys one-on-one. But in *sul pŏngaes*, you can meet many of them all at once.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet, if *sul pŏngaes* provided efficient means for gay men to meet large groups of other men offline and stimulate the sexual economy, they also helped to de-territorialize the gay community. As one gay man put it,

Now, when most people meet, they go to regular bars, not gay bars. For instance, when they have *pŏngaes*, they don’t come to Itaewon but go to Gangnam where there are no gay bars. Or if they go to Jongro, they go to P’imakkol [a long alley of bars that ran parallel to the main Jongro thoroughfare]. So bars in Itaewon do really badly especially on weekdays.

In other words, just like their namesake, “lightning meetings” were making the meetings between gay men as random, rapid, and unpredictable as a force of nature, further weakening the basis for them to create stable social relationships.

#### *Ivancity as “Terminal” and the Commercialization of “Korean” Gay Culture*

If the three popular services of Archives, Power Dating, and Chat, “seduced” Korean gay men to progressively view themselves as sexual products and consumers in Ivancity who began to engage in increasingly erratic and unstable forms of Internet-based meetings, then the shut down of Exzone and the rise of Ivancity as the main terminal of the gay community seemed to further subject the gay community—now virtualized as a floating gay community—to its top-down commercialization efforts. By “terminal,” I mean the central position occupied by Ivancity in mediating the social and commercial relations in the gay community. As one gay man, “Director,” who worked for the competitor gay site, Happy Eban, put it,

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<sup>29</sup> *Sul pŏngaes* usually consisted of three stages: drinking/games in the first stage, more drinking in the second, and karaoke or dance-clubs in the third.

Right now, Ivancity is the main terminal in the Korean gay community. It is its center. This means that people have to go through Ivancity whether they want to meet other men, advertise their businesses, or organize a political event.

Ivancity's commercialization of its features seemed to occur in ways both large and small, by making its users, for instance, pay for features in Power Dating that were previously free, such as finding out who had sent them a "heart." As Minhó put it, charging a small fee for this "privilege" of viewing one's hearts was an ingenious business item since it capitalized on gay men's innate curiosity and need to meet other men: "You can't help it. Once your membership expires in Power Dating, you have to automatically renew it. You're dying to know who has sent you the hearts."

This commercialization also occurred through Ivancity's commercialization of Korean gay men's online cultural production, known as "UCCs" ("User Created Contents"). Just like Exzone's former bulletin boards, Ivancity's were also popular. Unlike Exzone's bulletin boards, however, which often focused on issues of community interest, such as HIV/AIDS, Ivancity's "news" tended to be lighter and more frivolous with titles such as "Health Counter Guy."

According to Minhó,

Really, all it says is, "I went to the health club to register. However, I wasn't quite sure whether I would register until I saw the hot guy working behind the counter. At that moment, without further hesitation, I signed up."

Despite the "triviality" of these posts, they still get 300-400 hits, said Minhó.

[That is because] compared to hundreds of news outlets for heterosexuals, there's only one news source for 5-million gays in South Korea. Therefore, even though it is really about nothing other than an issue of "man and sex," it [this type of post] still draws hundreds of hits.

These hits, in turn, helped to boost the online traffic within Ivancity and boost its profits. As Minhó put it, “When people drop by Ivancity to read the news, they end up buying a subscription to Power Dating, inquiring about the ads in Ivancity, etc.” Director agreed,

Ivancity is very active because of its community. Businesses like a site that has a large membership with members who visit the site everyday and who stay for a long time when they visit. Ivancity also gets a lot of ads after being South Korea’s #1 gay site by one Internet ranking company. It can charge \$700 a month for one small banner ad.

Thus, Ivancity seemed to profit handsomely as the main terminal of the Korean gay community in which gay men were increasingly viewed, not as members of a gay community, but as a population of consumers, who, in sharing their affective experiences, also boosted the overall value of the Ivancity portal.

#### *Ivancity as “Business”*

If Ivancity was profiting handsomely from the gay men’s online activities, it did not bother denying its commercial nature. In 2009, when I asked Park Sung-june, partner and boyfriend of Ivancity’s founder, Kim Sung-ju, whether Ivancity was a community portal or a business, he said that it was a business.

Of course, we’re a company. We may have started out as a community site and, for marketing purposes, we still say that we’re a community but we are a company.

Even so Park Sung-june was very frank with me about the nature of Ivancity as a “wolf in a sheep’s clothing,” so to speak, he was also careful not to too openly advertise that fact.

As you know, Koreans are very hostile to a company that “smells” too much like a company. So, even though we are a company, we tell people that we are a community that represents Korean gays.

Part of the reason was because the consumer boycott of Spartacus that I had described in the

Introduction was still fresh in the minds of many community members, including Ivancity's two owners. "Do you remember the consumer boycott against Spartacus?" Sung-june asked me.

If we were to make a similar mistake, there might also be users who would engage in an "anti-Ivancity" protest. Right now, we have over 150,000 members and not all of them bless or are thankful of what we do.

In fact, during my research, I encountered many gay men who were highly critical of Ivancity.

For instance, one man, Tony, said,

Even though I shouldn't say this, they [Ivancity owners] have taken people on this side of the world and made money from them. In order to meet people I have no choice but to use their services but I don't want to go to the extent of paying for it.

Yet, even while he was critical, he was also discreet in his criticism.

No one dares to openly criticize it because there is no similar site in South Korea. As you know, there are many gay sites in foreign countries, just like there are many gay communities. But in South Korea, there is only Ivancity. Since it is a monopoly, there's nothing to be gained from criticizing them. They would simply say, "If you don't like our service, just stop using it."

Thus, Ivancity's users really seemed to feel like consumers, with no power to change or even criticize the site for fear of reprisal.

Meanwhile, another reason for Ivancity's support of the gay community, in deed if not always in spirit, was its continuing need for the gay and lesbian movement. For instance, when I ran into Sung-june at the Emergency Meetings, I asked him whether his participation in these meetings was also part of Ivancity's marketing. He replied, "No, I'm part of this coalition since I'm also gay and gay rights in South Korea have to improve for Ivancity's business environment to also improve."

Indeed, by late 2007, with the deletion of the item, "sexual orientation" from the revised bill and the imminent election of Lee Myung-bak as South Korea's next president, there was a palpable air of anxiety and fear within the gay community, especially among the gay business

owners and activists. With rumors swirling about how Lee Myung-bak had promised to clean Jongro of gay businesses and reclaim Seoul as “City of God,” they could not but be worried. For instance, Park Sung-june said, “If the community becomes more subdued with fear, our business cannot but also suffer.”

### Daum Cafes and “Warm” Society

While the gay community was becoming increasingly massified as a collection of atomized consumers through Ivancity, a new center of Internet sociality seemed to be emerging and gaining power in the early 2000s on gay Daum cafes.

Founded in 1995 by Lee Jae-woong, the aim of Daum, a mainstream company, famous for its email and “café” (online community) services, was to create “a democracy by our users.”

As Suk Jong-hoon, one of its CEOs, put it,

Before, it was very difficult to exchange diverse opinions and thoughts. Through the Internet platform, where we could easily and cheaply share information, we hoped to create a democracy created by our users. We also hoped to create a society that was just, richer, and warmer.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, these goals were embodied in the very name of “Daum,” which either meant “next” (i.e., “next” generation) or “diverse voices.” According to Suk, through the exchange of diverse opinions, Daum hoped to open up a future world of democratic and warm relations among diverse people.

### *“Night Life” of Ivancity vs. the “Day Life” of Daum Cafes*

Indeed, in striking contrast to the one-on-one or one-to-10 interactions on Ivancity that usually

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<sup>30</sup> Suk spoke at the “Knowledge Information Society” lecture organized by Yonsei University, entitled, “Alternative Media and Grassroots Journalism” on Oct. 17, 2007.

occurred anonymously and at night, the interactions in gay Daum cafes were mostly geared towards face-to-face meetings within small groups during the daytime. As such, according to one Korean lesbian, Paula, Daum cafes represented the “day life” of Korean gay men as opposed to their “night life” on Ivancity:

Daum cafés are more community oriented and build more personal and deeper friendships. That’s because people use only one ID in Daum cafés and they meet during the day. The meetings on Ivancity, on the other hand, are lighter and more anonymous. That’s because they’re more individualized and occur at night. Thus, if Ivancity represents gay men’s “night life,” the Daum cafes represent their “day life.” Of course, both are ultimately necessary.

By the late 2000s, it appeared as if many gay men were increasingly embracing Daum’s “day life.” Doing a key word search of my own in Daum in August 2011, I found 949 Daum cafes under the word “same-sex love”; 268 under “homosexual,” 1,591 under “gay,” and 3,586 under “eban.” According to Minho.

They are over 5 gay basketball groups in Seoul alone. When they have a tournament, over 200 gay men show up. It is the same for gay bowling groups where over 100 gay men gather for tournament.

Most of them, he said, were popular with gay men “who hope to escape solo-hood (솔로 타출).”

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I have examined the “mass retreat” of gay men into the dark sex-oriented spaces of tchimjilbangs and the anonymous online spaces of cyberspace following the IMF Crisis in South Korea. Both accompanying and exacerbating the retreat of the gay and lesbian movement, they can be left the Korean gay and lesbian movement curiously bereft of the presence of gay men. Indeed, as Minho noted, this was a sharp contrast from 10-15 years when gay men were the main figureheads of the movement.

Even 10-15 years ago, gay men were leading activists. We “protected” the lesbians when they came to gay organizations for fear that they would leave or that they would call a “strike” (i.e., refuse to participate in the meetings). For instance, if they was an 8:1 ratio gay men to lesbians, they demanded 50 percent representation. If we didn’t treat them well, they threatened to walk out of the meeting.

Though it is a matter of debate whether gay men really “protected” the lesbians, the basic point that they are all but absent in the present movement still seems salient. If so, where are these gay men? Can they all be in *tchimjilbangs* and chat rooms? If so, how do they engage in the online interactions where identities are evanescent and connections are as precarious as they are speedy and furious? That will be the subject of my next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### “Cool” Meetings and the “Cold” Internet:

#### Condition-based Meetings in Ivancity

### INTRODUCTION

During my field research in South Korea, many of my informants bemoaned *pŏnseksŭ*. Literally meaning “lightning sex,” it referred to sexual encounters or hookups between Korean gay men arranged through the Internet. Despite the fact that such hookups—also known as “condition-based” meetings, in attaching conditions to an offline meeting—were as prevalent within the heterosexual population, many gay men took them to be indicative of the very moral depravity of gay culture.<sup>31</sup>

For instance, one night in July 2008, I sat outside on the patio of a gay bar in Itaewon with a group of gay men, including Damon, who was complaining about gay men’s seemingly insatiable appetite for “new flesh.”

Gay men don’t have a concept of a soul mate. They mature not even in their 30s but in their late 30s or 40s. Therefore, you can’t believe in their love. Since they get tired of one person easily, it always changes. They always want a new partner, a new body, new flesh.

In response, another gay man, Robin, said,

I don’t think it’s because they’re gay but because they are men. It’s also the problem of the system. Unlike straight couples who can introduce their partners to their family and friends, gay men don’t receive social recognition. So it’s not because they’re “immoral” but because they have to “love in the dark” that their partners can leave them easily and they break up so quickly. What gays need is not condemnation but support for their love.

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<sup>31</sup> Though as prevalent, *pŏnseksŭ* was still considered slower within the heterosexual population because it was a meeting between a man and woman rather than a meeting between two men.

In the previous chapters, I have examined how issues of morality and normativity have always been at the heart of Korean gay men's experience of their sexuality. In deviating from the normative path of marrying women, having children, and creating families, Korean gay men have been labeled abnormal and deviant within Korean society.

Yet, as I argue in this chapter, though Robin is to correct to point out that gay men's seemingly insatiable appetite for "new flesh" partly arises from their stigmatized position within mainstream society that makes them and their relationships invisible and precarious, that is only part of the story. As I have shown in the previous chapter, it is also in being further dispersed and isolated as members of a "privatized public" on the Internet that gay men become both more dependent and less able to create stable relationships. Indeed, in being unable to find stable, long-term relationships, many turn towards so-called "cool meetings," that separate sex from all feelings of love or commitment. Ironically, while such meetings are designed to protect the men from the hopes and disappointments of love, they simply end up turning the gay community into a "cold" marketplace of short-term sexual exchanges, where all gay men become "doomed" to keep "feeding" their seemingly insatiable hunger for human love and connection.

This chapter is divided into three sections: First, in "Condition-Based Meetings and the Loss of 'Pure Love,'" I examine the view of one gay man that condition-based meetings are a natural process of being exposed to gay culture. If so, then condition-based meetings cannot but be seen to grow in scope and popularity when more men are exposed to the gay culture via the Internet. Second, in "The Gay Interview," I examine how, with declining popularity of *sul pŏngaes* that I have discussed in the previous chapter, many gay men turn towards condition-based meetings on the Internet to search for their partners. Whereas *sul pŏngaes* occurred mostly offline in bars and restaurants, the condition-based meetings occur mostly online, with gay men

attaching conditions to meeting someone offline. More often than not, however, such meetings, involving a paucity of information that is unreliable to boot, end up in disappointment. Third, in “No Future? ‘Cool’ Meetings and the ‘Cold’ Internet,” I examine how gay men respond to the continued failure and disappointment of finding a stable relationship online. In giving up the possibility of “eternal love,” many gay men turn to “cool meetings” or sex-oriented meetings bereft of all expectations of love and support. Though such meetings are aimed at shielding the gay men from further hopes and disappointments of love, they paradoxically end up further instrumentalizing the relations between gay men so that they end up experiencing the Internet as a “cold space,” lacking in all human warmth.

## **I. CONDITION-BASED MEETINGS AND THE LOSS OF “PURE LOVE”**

As I have described in Chapter 1, one of the new forms of Internet-based meetings to develop with the growing popularization of the Internet was *sul pŏngae*. Geared towards short-term, offline drinking parties, they were considered a fun and efficient way for gay men to meet large groups of other men. Yet, by 2002, they seemed to have peaked in popularity. According to Minho, the reason for their sharp decline was the lack of new faces.

The problem is that the pool of new faces has now almost hit rock bottom. When the *pŏngae* participants come out and look around the table just once, they know. There are almost no new faces.<sup>32</sup>

One of the most famous *pŏngae panjangs*, “Juicy,” agreed,

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<sup>32</sup> The limited number of partners within the gay community to choose from was a common complaint among gay men even in the early 2000s. For instance, Byung-do, whom I will further introduce in Chapter 3, said, “It’s really difficult to meet someone on this ‘floor’ (*padak*). The ones who come out always come out while those who are hidden always stay hidden. Right now, it’s like looking for someone in a small pool of people. You see the same people over and over again so that you get tired of them. I would like to find someone in a bigger field.”

Before, I could gather 30-40 guys in an hour with an average of 30 guys for a *pŏngae*. Now it's difficult to gather 20 guys together even after 4 hours." When that happens, I get rid of the room and cancel the *pŏngae*. I tell the guys whom I had already recruited that something came up and that I have to cancel.

In abandoning *sul pŏngaes*, gay men seemed to embrace so-called "condition-based" meetings (*chogŏn mannam*). Though popularized by the Internet, condition-based meetings are not, in fact, new. For instance, one of my gay informants, Jeju, said that it occurred naturally through the experience of meeting other gay man.

### Condition-based Meetings

Jeju, whom I will discuss more in Chapter 4, said that he met his first boyfriend ten years ago while waiting for his bus in Jongro. Even though such practices of picking up a man on the street that gay men called "street-casting" was highly unusual, Jeju said that his boyfriend was able to work up the courage to approach him because Jeju was his "original"—a man who is 100 percent his type. For Jeju, on the other hand, this was his first exposure to the gay world and his first boyfriend. "Without an opportunity to see other guys, I came to date this guy." Thus, thinking there was no else in the world but him, Jeju said that he was able to engage in "pure love." Not only did he love his boyfriend unconditionally, he also expected their love to be "eternal."

Five years later, however, after making the round of gay bars and dance-clubs in Itaewon and Jongro with his boyfriend, things were very different. Jeju said that he found himself increasingly drawn to "chubby and smart-looking" guys. With experience, he had discovered his "type." So when he and his boyfriend broke up, Jeju said that he naturally started seeking out this type of men. This was when his "pure love" turned into "conditional love" and his "hard times in this world" began.

The trouble with love between a man and a man is that, unless they are totally each other's type, they do not fall for each other, he said. This was different from heterosexual relationships where "when a man loves a woman, she usually returns his love and thinks there's no one else but him."<sup>33</sup> From time to time, Jeju said that he would meet a man that he liked but the other guy would not like him. "Or the other guy would want to start something with me but I would have no feeling for him whatsoever." Given his loneliness, however, if the other guy was even a little bit his type, he said that he would sometimes propose, "Should we try dating?" But because the other guy was never fully his type to begin with, these relationships never lasted long, he said.

Moreover, as time passed, he said that he found his relationships getting shorter and shorter: "The first guy that I met, we dated for 5 years; the guy after that for 2 years; and the friend after that for a year. The more I dated, the shorter became my relationships." Not only that, in being unable to find a man who satisfied all his conditions, he also found himself loving other men at a "remove,"

For instance, you want someone with a Porsche and house that is at least 60 *p'yŏng*. You have someone who drives a Porsche but lives in a one-room apartment. If that's the case, that person cannot completely satisfy you. Accordingly, even though you date this guy because he drives a Porsche, you cannot fall in love with him deeply: you always love him at least one step removed.

Reflecting on these changes in his life, Jeju said, "That is the difference between someone who first came out in this world and someone with experience. Gay men with experience love others conditionally."

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<sup>33</sup> Other gay men said the same thing. For instance, according to one gay man, Sushi, "There's an expression, 'If a guy hits on a girl ten times, there's no girl who doesn't cave in (*yŏl pŏn tchikŏ an nŏmŏ onŭn yŏja ŏpta*).' Even if she says no at first, if he persists, she eventually caves in, even if to just acknowledge his efforts. With a gay man, however, it doesn't matter if you hit on him a hundred times or a thousand times. If you're not his type, he won't even bat an eyelash."

Yet, if this is a story that is now at least ten years old, then how has the Internet changed the ways in which condition-based meetings are conducted and experienced? Have the conditions become looser or more stringent? How are these conditions, implying some type of trust or legal contrast, fulfilled online where gay men are not only invisible but no larger structure of discipline exists to regulate people's online behavior? As I argue below, the Internet has not only radically sped up the pace of these condition-based meetings, they have also made them precarious despite the appearance of more rational and orderly process of information gathering and evaluation. In fact, one gay man, Leopard, referred to this online process of information gathering and evaluation of other men as an "interview."

## II. THE "GAY INTERVIEW"

Unlike the chats for *sul pōngaes*, which were conducted on the left side of the Ivancity Chat, the one-on-one meetings for condition-based meetings, including *pōnseksū* were conducted in its so-called "Waiting Room" (*taegisil*). Within this Waiting Room, the various attributes of the gay men either hanging out or lurking in Ivancity's Chat—including their "age," "location," "ID," and "Nickname," along with information about whether they had web-cams and mini-homepages—were displayed in eight columns. As such, they comprised a shorter and more abbreviated list of qualities than that found in the Power Dating.

Not only that, these eight columns could be ordered and reordered alphabetically or numerically, making it easier for the gay men to group and search for their partners within the various categories of age, location, IDs, Nicknames, etc. Finally, contact between the men in the Waiting Room was initiated just like in the chat rooms, through the passing of secret notes.

### *The “Numbers” Interview*

According to Leopard, the first stage was the “numbers interview,” which involved gay men evaluating each another as alphanumerically coded persons.

At first, I was puzzled by the bewildering sets of codes, such as “176, 78, *kõn*,” that I encountered in the Waiting Room and it took me a second to figure out what they all meant: such codes were an amalgamation of the men’s physical, sexual, and locational attributes. Thus, while “176” referred to a man’s height in centimeters, “78” referred to his weight in kilograms, and “gun” to his body type (*kõnjang*, “stocky”). According to gay men, they were several reasons for the use of these codes. First, they enabled the men to freely interact with other men in Ivancity’s Chat while remaining anonymous. Second, they allowed to men to enjoy “some kind of affective pleasure” while chatting with strangers. As one gay man put it, “The chatters don’t have much to share in terms of their everyday life. However, with the body intervening, they can enjoy some kind of pleasure.” Third, they enabled the men to quickly and efficiently but also systematically scan the columns for the type of man whom they were looking for. Thus as Leopard put it, “You know the figures that you want. So you scan someone’s figures and make your decision. It’s not considered rude—merely efficient.”

According to Leopard, the gay men were highly attuned to these codes, using their imagination to supplement the paucity of information. “I used to fail this stage of the interview because I used to be ‘180, 85’ and considered too fat,” said Leopard. “I’m now ‘180, 76.’”

### *The Photo Interview*

Passing the numbers interview, gay men moved onto the photo interview, which often involved shifting platforms from Ivancity’s Chat Site to MSN’s Instant Messenger (“IM”).

There were several reasons for this shift. One was the extreme instability of the Ivancity server where, due to the large number of men lurking and chatting in the Waiting Room, users often got bumped off the site in the middle of a chat. When this happened, it was almost impossible to track him down again, given the highly abstract and interchangeable codes that men used for their nicknames and the fast paced environment in which notes changed hands. Indeed, for this reason, there seemed to be a great emphasis on responding to the notes in a speedy and timely manner. If one responded to another man's note even a few seconds too late, the other man often assumed that one had been bumped off or lost interest and quickly moved on. Therefore, in order to prevent such mishaps, gay men moved as quickly as possible to MSN's Instant Messenger after the exchange of their MSN addresses.

Still, another important reason for shifting platforms to IM was because it allowed the men to flash a tiny photo of themselves next to their profiles, without having to send it as a separate email attachment. Not only did this cut out an additional unnecessary step in what was a speedy and efficient process, it also reduced the risk of the other man misappropriating one's photo. It was not uncommon for gay men, who wanted to engage in the pleasure of chatting but had no intention of meeting someone offline, to flash other men's photos as their own.

According to Minh, a common procedure for revealing one's photo in the Photo Interview was for gay men to log on to their MSN accounts, type "1, 2, 3," and then *Tchan!* (the sound of windows shutters being pulled back), reveal photos their faces simultaneously so that the images of the two men's faces popped up like a Jack-in-a-Box. While the simultaneity of this mutual exposure was designed to evenly distribute the risk of being outed, its near-instantaneity was designed to reduce the risk of being outed. Given the great sense of danger that gay men felt

in exposing their faces, however, this was a highly charged moment, akin to the “Prisoner’s Dilemma,”<sup>34</sup> in which the two men negotiated who would reveal their photos first.

As gay men were aware, despite the so-called “simultaneity” of the mutual exposure, there was always a time lag between one man’s click and another’s. This split-second time lag was something that one man could exploit to first view the other man’s photo to make sure, for instance, that he was not someone that he already knew or that it was someone that he was, in fact, interested in. If neither of those things, the other man sometimes exited IM without revealing his photo at all. As Leopard put it, “Sometimes, I show them my picture but they don’t show theirs. They leave the room without bothering to show theirs. In that case, you can see the other man’s character right away.” In that case, there was nothing that the gay men using Java Chat could do since there was no larger structure of power or authority within Ivancity—just like in its chat rooms—to regulate such unscrupulous behavior.

### *The Phone Interview*

Passing the photo interview, gay men proceeded onto the intermediary stage of the phone interview. This was an intermediary stage in the sense that many gay men often skipped this stage. Nonetheless, for the gay men who did engage in this interview, it was considered an important opportunity to further observe and assess the other man, especially in terms of his voice.

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<sup>34</sup> The “Prisoner’s Dilemma,” of course, is a fundamental problem in game theory where two prisoners, in possessing information that incriminates the other, have to decide whether they will cooperate by not revealing that information or reveal that information in order to try to save their own lives. Thus, this dilemma rests primarily on the question of trust between the two men. Though gay men are by no means criminals, they are, in a sense, prisoners, locked in their own walled rooms of secrecy that I have described in the Introduction. Within these rooms, they have to decide whether they will reveal themselves to others and, thus, “save” themselves or continue hiding, further impoverishing the gay community.

Given the fact that this was the men's first embodied—albeit mediated—contact with the other man, many gay men seemed to highly fetishize this moment. For instance, according to one gay man, Sushi,

From the tone of their voice and through communicating on the phone, you can tell how they think, the kind of environment in which they grew up, and whether or not you can trust them enough to meet them offline—that is, whether they're not bad people.

Other gay men like Brian disagreed: "You're right only about 10 percent of the time. Only 10 percent of the time can you get an accurate sense of the other person." Regardless of the "correct percentage," what seemed most striking about this phone interview was the fact that gay men had to even rely on someone's disembodied voice to try to gauge his socio-economic background, character, and upbringing, including the all-important question of whether he was someone that the gay men could trust. Thus, once again, it seemed to show the extreme paucity of information in the online condition-based meetings despite the use of the term, "interview."

*"Open, Closed, Open, Closed" or the Dilemmas of Online Choosing*

Given the paucity of this information, many gay men seemed to spend more time online trying to choose rather than meeting someone offline. As Leopard put it, "I often see men logged on at night and still logged on in the morning searching for their partner."

Also making it difficult for gay men to choose someone online was the seemingly inexhaustible number of gay men, one more dashing and attractive than the next. As Leopard put it,

You feel empty because you don't have a boyfriend. You want to fill your emptiness with a boyfriend. But when you consider your standards, you become pickier (*nun i nop'a chinda*, lit. "your eyes become higher"). You develop a sense of your ideal. Since you have a sense of your ideal, most ordinary guys don't even enter your field of vision. But as you know, the ideal is just that—an ideal.

In his typical fashion, Bryan provided a more striking example.

There's an American Indian parable. A chief told an Indian maiden at a marriageable age to go to the cornfield and bring back the biggest corn. Do you think she did that? No. When she picked up one corn, one a little further down looked bigger. But then when she picked that one up, the one that she had just left behind looked bigger. So she went back to get that one. The Internet is like that. People think, "If I don't meet this person, I can meet someone else." So even though we meet many nice guys, we don't become boyfriends.

Given the progressive refinement of taste produced by the Internet, Minho said, "Gay men go from open, closed, open, closed trying to find their [perfect] partner."

### *The Offline Interview*

The third stage of the interview was the offline meeting, which, according to Leopard, was the "real" interview. "It is when you find whether you live or die."

The term, "real," to refer to the offline meeting is interesting in that it implies that the numbers and photo interviews are somehow inauthentic. This sense of inauthenticity can be attributed to the various technologies (the data-based interface, Photo Shop, and even the webcam itself) that the gay men could exploit to not only hide but also package themselves. Thus, as Jeju put it,

I consider human conversation to be true only when two people are sitting *face-to-face*, gazing into each other's eyes. If you meet a man in person, you can tell what he is thinking and with what emotion he is chatting. Online, however, he is what you call "poker-faced." He wears a mask. He may be bawling inside but smiling on the outside.

Indeed, after passing the photo interview, some gay men launched entire rotating photo albums of themselves in MSN to better market themselves. Nonetheless, even as gay men relied upon these photos in order to make their decision about whether to meet the man offline or not, they

also remained highly skeptical and distrustful of them. That is because they knew what make-up, proper lighting, and, if worse came to worst, Photo Shop could do to improve one's visual appearance online. As Sushi put, "There are some pictures of myself where I think, 'Wow, I'm so handsome!' So I put little stock in my or other men's photos."

### *Disappointments of Offline Meeting*

Despite the time and energy that gay men invested in the online interview, many gay men seemed to be—more often than not—disappointed with the offline meetings. According to one 28-year-old gay man, Angel,

There was a guy whom I met offline whose self-description and actual appearance did not match at all. He described himself as incredibly masculine, pleasant-looking, with a muscular body and tough style. He was neither masculine nor muscular. He looked very "Sky-collar" [in English] with nothing in his head. People have a presence (*punwigi*). His looked cheap. After talking in his car, we parted ways.

Striking in Angel's evaluation of the other man is his use of the term "presence." According to Eva Illouch, who writes about how online dating has changed the modern notion of "love at first sight,"

Face-to-face encounters cannot be reducible to a set of attributes; rather, they are "holistic"... What we commonly call the "charm" or "charisma" or another person consists precisely in the ways in which various attributes are integrated with each other and contextually performed (2007: 90).

Indeed, in parsing the gay men into the various attributes and excluding until the final offline interview the very element that allows people to feel a sense of attraction—the other person as a physical presence—the interview seemed to generate more disappointment than love.

According to Leopard, the rejection of gay men in the final interview happened in various ways,

There are people who don't bother showing up. There are some people who check you out from afar and then leave. Then there are people who come up close to you and say, "I'm sorry...but you're not my type." Those are the ones with manners. Then there are those with whom you talk over a meal and tea. "Will they like me or not?" That is the final interview.

Failing this final interview, Leopard said that the gay men inevitably retreated to the Internet, "If you fail, you go back into Messenger. You say [to the other gay man], 'I'll see you in MSN.'"

### III. NO FUTURE? COOL MEETINGS AND THE COLD INTERNET

Talking to gay men about their online experiences, I was surprised to find out that gay men who failed these online interviews were not the only ones left unsatisfied with the entire Internet dating experience. Even the gay men who *did* manage to meet someone that they liked seemed to be left ultimately tired and jaded.

With *põnseksũ*, it was considered just that—a sexual hookup with no potential to develop into something more meaningful. Surprised by this comment, which seemed to foreclose the potential of *põnseksũ* to develop into more meaningful relationships, I asked the gay men why *põnseksũ* was doomed to sex. One gay man answered that it was because the other man lost all his sense of mystery. "Once I have sex with a guy, there's no longer a sense of mystery with that person. There is nothing else to see." Another more important is probably the sense of guilt and disgust that gay men experienced even as they engaged in them. As one married gay man put it,

After having *põnseksũ*, I would feel empty and disgusted. I would wonder, "What am I doing now? Is it alright to fulfill these desires through one night stands?" Especially, since I'm married, I would feel sorry for my wife. I would wonder, "Is it alright to deal treat my body so recklessly?"

Given this sense of guilt and disgust, gay men said they not only made a clear distinction between a meeting for *põnseksũ* and a meeting for romance, they also prepared themselves mentally for *põnseksũ*. According to Bryan, “I go out with a clear goal of whether the meeting is for *põnseksũ* or for a possible romance. If the former, no matter how attractive the other guy, that is where the meeting ends.”

Surprisingly, *põnseksũ* was not the only meeting considered to have “no future.” All Internet-based meetings—whether for sex or romance—were seen to have a short “expiry date.” According to Bryan, the relationships forged on the Internet lasted one week to three months, if short, and six to three years, if long. Six months were considered the average. “After six months, I would often see the guys who had disappeared come back online to look for a new boyfriend,” said Bryan.

According to Bryan, the reason for these short expiry dates was because gay men who met on the Internet continued to chat and, as they chatted, continued to have other one-night stands: “When the boyfriend finds out about the affair, they break up.” Indeed, during my field research, I heard many tales of cheating and betrayal among gay men. One gay man, Ichon, told me how he had caught his boyfriend of six months cheating on him just before Christmas Eve. A friend of his had invited him out to meet his new boyfriend. When Ichon arrived at the bar, he saw his own boyfriend sitting next to his friend. What amazed Ichon was the fact that his boyfriend was able to cheat on him even though they lived and spent all their weekends together. “I didn’t know how he found the time to two-time me,” he said.

### Cool Meetings and the Free Market in Gay Relations

According to Nick, a 30-year-old gay man, with the repeated disappointments and failures in their relationships, Korean gay men faced a terrible dilemma: whether to continue to pursue love or settle for sex: “Because it is difficult to find a boyfriend, they have to decide—boyfriend or sex? They stand tormented at the crossroads of this dilemma.”

By 2007, when I started doing my field research, many gay men seemed to have chosen sex, using the Internet to engage in *põnseksũ* that I have mentioned above. What most distinguished *põnseksũ* from other condition-based meetings was its separation of sex from love or other emotional commitments. As such, they were also referred to as “cool meetings” (*cool mannam*). According to Ichon,

It means “coolly” meeting someone for sex and then breaking up with them cleanly. It means meeting something without any loose ends (*twikkũt*). It’s better to have this kind of meeting than to break up with someone badly. It’s another word for *põnseksũ*.

Some gay men like Juho told me that they could not understand gay men’s attitude of cool meetings. “But then, I realized that it was their ‘best choice’ (*ch’oesõn ũi sõnt’aek*). They think, ‘I’m going to break up anyway so I might as well as minimize the pain.’” Or as Nick said, “After a 6- or 7-year relationship ends, what do you have left except for some pictures and beautiful memories? At least a woman gets a divorce settlement.”

In turn, this radical change in attitude towards cool meetings seemed to create a free market in sexual relations where gay men pursued short-term pleasure in place of expectations of long-term trust and intimacy. As Nick put it, “How do people respond to the dilemma of love versus sex? Let’s be grateful for the present moment and enjoy it. Even if I don’t have a boyfriend, let me enjoy my life.” Or, as a married gay man, Gangnam, put it,

In order for you to date someone everyday for 2, 3, or 6 years, you need to be compatible in terms of your personality, taste in food, lifestyle, etc. On the other hand, if you’re going to meet someone just once or twice, then superficial things such as money and

body are more important. Since it's a fleeting encounter, it's better to meet someone in a BMW, eat something delicious, and sleep with someone with a good body, and then end.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, many gay men spoke about how, with the rise of cool meetings, young men with handsome faces and good faces became the most powerful in the Korean gay community.

### *"Social Death" and the "Imploding" Gay Community*

If cool meetings created a free market in sexual relations, the effects of this market on the gay community seemed to be no better seen than in the MSN list of one gay man, Bundang, where, over two years of chatting, he had collected over 300 contacts.<sup>36</sup> According to Bundang, however, these men had no meaning for him whatsoever. Instead, they were what he called his *chagöpyong* ("contacts for sexual hunting").

We exchange pictures. If we are attracted by the "visual," then it's good. If not, we just maintain the contacts as they are; we don't even talk. So it's not like I actively maintain these contacts.

On weekends, the list went "wild" with 50 or 60 guys trying to hook up, he said. However, when the guys whom he was not attracted to kept hitting on him, he said that he sometimes blocked and deleted them.

When I come into MSN, the other guys look at the picture of my body and hit on me. However, if I don't like the visual of the guy who is hitting on me, I block him. If he keeps hitting on me, then I block *and* delete him from my list.

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<sup>35</sup> Gay men often used the metaphor of sports to express their "cool" attitude towards sex. For instance, Bryan said, "To me, sex is like a sport. You should have it as often as you want it with whomever you want. However, just like you want a compatible partner for tennis, you want a compatible partner for sex."

<sup>36</sup> Bundang had separate accounts for his gay friends versus his straight friends, family members, and colleagues. With varying degrees of access, they expressed the trust and intimacy of the relationships.

Thus, Bundang seemed to use his MSN as his own sexual “hunting ground” and “digital graveyard,” where any gay man, who did not meet his highly developed tastes and preferences and who offended his sensibilities, was permanently banished into the ethers of cyberspace.

### The Cold Internet

With the radical change in gay men’s attitude towards love and sex, a cold wind also seemed to blow through the Internet. One gay man asserted, “It’s becoming a society where people pursue only their satisfaction, where people only know how to look *upwards*. The sense of *chǒng* is rapidly disappearing.”

*Chǒng*, roughly translated as “love” or “affection,” is widely seen as a unique Korean quality found most fundamentally in the maternal bond between a mother and child, known as *mochǒng*, and, overall, within the family.<sup>37</sup> In asserting that the Internet was lacking in *chǒng*, gay men were, in effect, saying that it was lacking in human warmth and emotional ties. Thus, as Minhø put it,

Whenever I use the Internet, I feel that it lacks human warmth (*inganmi*) and strong human ties (*kkũnkkũnham*). I use the Internet to connect to someone and overcome my feelings of loneliness and confusion as a gay man. However, the more I use it, the emptier I feel.

Given how Ivancity’s Java Chat has been transformed into a sexual/romantic market of largely short-term exchanges, this feeling of loss of *chǒng* is not surprising. As Nancy Hartsock writes, within a market,

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<sup>37</sup> *Chǒng* is also often associated with a husband and wife, who, in enduring many trials and hardships, are said to develop *miunchǒng* (“hateful love”) and *kouchǒng* (“beautiful love”). In this case, the power of *chǒng* is seen to derive from a common history of suffering as well as shared joys.

Groups *may* form temporarily on the basis of the private and subjectively held preferences of individuals, but no intrinsic connections among persons should be sought” (1983: 102).

In a 2002 interview, Kim Sang-june, one the owners of Ivancity, also admitted to the weak ties on Ivancity, despite its large membership.

Even though the membership is reaching 20-30,000 members, there is no sense of belonging or strong sense of *chǒng*. Many members come in hoping to meet their type. If they don’t, they stop coming and that’s the end of it. So we are trying to create clubs, have offline meetings, and upgrade the site.

Ironically, as I discuss in the next chapter, much of the gay men’s to recover this sense of *chǒng* occurs not in the gay portal of Ivancity but in the mainstream portal of Daum Cafes.

### Love as Ethical Ideal

Even as gay men like Bundang and Bryan seemingly lost their faith in eternal love, they did not give it up. In a sense, how could they? After all, love is an “ethical ideal,” part and parcel of the modern rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and the normative development of the subject. In being thwarted from the fulfillment of this ideal, many gay men said that they felt “stuck.” As Incense, put it,

I think that there are several stages of experience and affect. Love is one. Straight men tend to experience an infatuation with love in their 20s. After that, this infatuation ends because they have other stages of life that they have to go through—such as having children and raising them in their 30s. Gay men, on the other hand, are not able to properly imagine and practice love so they are stuck repeating this stage. I think that’s the predicament of a weak minority that’s discriminated against.

Incense contrasted his own situation in South Korea with those of his friends in the U.S., whom he had made while studying abroad.

There was a gay couple that I knew in the U.S. When I visited them last time, they were a couple or boyfriends. However, when I visited them this time, they were parents. They had a different set of concerns. They were more interested in raising a child and had become experts in issues such as finding a good school for their child. In other words, their 30s had already ended and they were engaging in a new experience. *Meanwhile, there was me, wondering still when and how I will find my boyfriend.*

Importantly, Incense did not consider his situation to be unique but endemic to Korean gay men in general. As he put it, “In the U.S. there are couples who publicly own homes together and who have houses in both their names. That is something that is impossible to even imagine in South Korea.”

In being thwarted from achieving this ideal, many gay men seemed to be doomed to pursuing *põnseksũ*. As Leopard said, “You feel extremely empty. But that’s why the Internet is so active. People meet, separate, and then meet again.” To describe this seemingly insatiable search for sexual food or “human flesh,” he spoke of the vending machine,

Since there are hundreds of gays online when one logs on, that’s what the Internet has created—speedy one night stands. Just like you select a can of coffee from a vending machine, you insert your specs, look at the pictures, and select a person. The only difference is that it doesn’t cost any money.

As the ultimate symbol of modern fast food convenience, the vending machine seemed to brilliantly capture the cold and anonymous ways in which Korean gay men were consuming each other as sexual food on the Internet.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined the contradictory experiences of Korean gay men on the Internet. On the one hand, through its technology, they can quickly and easily interact with thousands of other men, hailing their “ideal man.” On the other hand, in interacting with each other as abstract symbols, bereft of human contact and emotion, such Internet-based meetings seemed to generate more feelings of disappointment than love.

Indeed, in failing to reconcile the issues of love and sex, body and emotion, as well as trust and fidelity within their lives, many gay men seemed to retreat even further into the online world, abandoning *põnseksũ* for cybersex. Striking about cybersex was how it seemed to help the gay men to further economize on their time and money. As one gay man put it, “Think about all the money that I spend on a meeting even in terms of cosmetics. Even though I don’t wear makeup, I still use a toner and lotion. And the stuff that I use is only the expensive stuff.” Cybersex thus seemed to represent the further economizing of gay men’s use of time, money, and emotions, and, thereby, become the sexual practice par excellence of neoliberal individuals. As Brian put it, “What’s the point of meeting someone offline when they don’t meet my standards either? I could just jerk off to them through a web-cam.”

Finally, even as the gay men raced ahead in their “anticipatory desire” to meet a new man, they still seemed to rely on the same “conditions” to make their choices in the online interview, which meant that they often ended up interacting with or meeting the same men whom they had earlier met, hooked up with, or rejected, often in the guise of another code. As one gay man put it, “Of course, because you’re chatting anonymously and you’re looking for similar conditions in terms of body and sexual position, you encounter the same person again. However, by then, they’ve usually forgotten who you are.” This fetishistic pursuit of standardized codes that represented the men as homogenized bodies thus seemed to couple with the near-instantaneous

erasure of memory to make the Internet a place of “pure consumption,” where nothing, save the closed loop of gay men’s desires, based on their reified desires, seemed to matter.

In failing to find their boyfriends through the one-on-one condition-based meetings in Ivancity, however, other gay men seemed to open themselves up to the possibility of other forms of gay relation, where sex was not involved. For instance, one gay man, Cool Bear, said that when he was younger, he had divided gay men into just two categories: boyfriends or strangers. “There was nothing-in-between,” he said. That was because if he found a man attractive, he wanted to date him. On the other hand, if he did not find him attractive, he wanted nothing to do with him at all as gay friends merely increased his chances of being outed. Starting in his 30s, however, he said that he started changing his mind. That was because all his straight friends started getting married one by one, leaving him increasingly isolated and lonely. Meanwhile, four prior relationships had shaken his faith in the permanency of gay relationships. That was when he started realizing his need for gay friends. Thus, if he had divided his life between his straight friends and his boyfriend in his 20s, with the first group providing him with the necessary social network and the second fulfilling his sexual and emotional needs, by his 30s, he was actively looking to make gay friends.

In the next chapter, I examine how the idea of “gay friendship” emerges as an alternative form of sociality within two friendship-based gay clubs, “Snow Dream” and “Tank Boys.” Through Snow Dream is an Ivancity-based gay club, such gay clubs or *tonghohoes*, as I have outlined in Chapter 1, are usually associated with the mainstream site of Daum cafes. Through small face-to-face meetings conducted weekly offline and regular online conduct during the week, Korean gay men, I argue, not only critique the sex- and consumer-oriented chats of

Ivancity, they also try to transform South Korea's "weekend gays" into Internet-based "full-time gays."

## CHAPTER 3

### Queer Time and Place: Gay Friendship as a “Way of Life” in Ivancity and Daum Clubs

#### INTRODUCTION

In December 2007, with the winter holidays fast approaching, I worried about a lonely Christmas in Seoul without my friends. I also needed to move on to the second phase of my research of studying the Internet-based gay friendship groups. So I looked online in Ivancity and found two skiing/snowboarding groups—Snow Dream and Snow Season. Although Snow Dream had only 90 members compared to Snow Season’s 400, it had a flashier graphic banner and more recent postings so that is the one I joined. After filling out a short questionnaire and posting a self-introduction, I waited to be upgraded from “visitor” to “member.” That Friday, I found a note in my mailbox from one of the organizers announcing a meeting the following night in Gangnam.

Looking at the subway packed with young partygoers on Saturday night, I felt nervous. What if everyone was young—in their 20s? What if everyone already knew each other? Would I fit in? Getting off at Gangnam Station, I went to #2 exit, called one of the organizers, and waited nervously. About ten minutes later, a tall, lanky guy in his 20s showed up. After identifying me, he got on his cell phone and tracked down another member who was also waiting at the entrance: a short man in his mid-30s.

Hustling us down the block and around the corner, we entered a bacon strips (*samgyŏpsal*) restaurant where the other members were waiting. Including the two organizers, Vista—the young man who had picked us up—and Purun, we were five in total. While Vista, 26, had just finished his military duty and was retaking his college entrance exams to enter a better

school, Purun, a 38-year-old married office worker, worked in Seoul while his wife and child lived in the United States. He was a “goose father” (*kirōgi appa*), part of a transnational split family where the mother accompanied the child for study abroad while the father stayed behind to support them.

Both Purun and Vista were former members of the other ski/snowboarding club, Snow Season. Purun said that he left that club when it started breaking up into small cliques and he “felt like a stranger” even to himself. Hanul—the guy who had been waiting at the subway entrance with me—turned out to be an elementary school teacher in Daejeon, a city two hours outside of Seoul. The fifth guy was a 20-year-old about to enter the army, whose name I failed to catch. I did not see him after the first meeting.

After my research in Ivancity, what struck me most about the first meeting of the gay ski group was the question posed to the participants by the organizers after the self-introduction. As opposed to “What is your type?” or “Are you a top or bottom?” in online chats, the first question here was, “Do you ski or snowboard?” “Ski,” I replied. That was my introduction to Snow Dream and to Internet-based gay leisure groups in general.

### *Gay Moims and Tonghohoe*

Although gay sports groups, known as *moims* or *tonghohoes*, are most often associated with the Internet—in particular, Daum Cafes—they are, in fact, not new. For instance, in 1987, just before the Seoul Olympics, a gay salary man started a basketball club called, “BBC” (*Pogal* Basketball Club). Spread mostly by word-of-mouth in gay bars, it quickly grew into a tight group of 30 plus gay men, who met weekly to play basketball on the courts by Han River. In 2002, the team had even planned to attend the Sixth Gay Olympics in Australia until the team’s sponsor—

a straight Korean-Australian businessman——pulled the funding (Interview 2002).<sup>38</sup> With a 23-year history, it is to my knowledge the oldest gay sports team in South Korea.

Nor are Internet-based gay leisure groups, including Snow Dream, particularly different from other Internet-based clubs that were popular in South Korea during my field research. As one gay man, LS, a 26-year-old student, stated,

The straight people have their nightclubs and bar culture. So do we. They have their travel agencies. So do we. It's the same thing with *tonghohoes*. It is a common way for straight people to meet each other in a warm-hearted way through a shared interest such as tennis or swimming—especially those things that are hard for you to do on your own. They have it “there” so we bring it over “here.” We just “benchmark” [in English] theirs.

In fact, many of the gay men whom I met at the two Internet-based clubs that I participated in from December 2007 to August 2008—Snow Dream and Tank Boys—mentioned how their clubs were no different from straight *tonghohoe* other than the fact that they were more “comfortable” for gay men.

Yet, as I argue in this chapter, the Internet-based gay leisure groups do more than provide a comfortable space for gay men to meet each other and enjoy themselves. They also consciously position themselves against the sex- and consumer-oriented culture of the gay bars in Itaewon and Jongro, which takes place mostly at night and involves drinking, and the online chats geared mostly towards *põnseksũ*. As Rick, a 40-year-old Korean-American in the swim club, put it,

It is really nice doing something “non-vampire”; the swim club shows there can be gay life during daylight. With the biggest difference between our swim club and gay bar culture being the fact that everyone is sober, it is also nice doing something healthy rather than damaging my body. It [swim club] feels *more complete and integrated*.

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<sup>38</sup> When asked by straight teams what the “B” in BBC stood for, BBC members said that it stood for “bear.”

Of course, that is not to say that these gay men in *tonghohoe* did not continue going out to clubs or hooking up on the Internet. However, given both the fear of gossip and the practical difficulty of coming out to gay Daum club activities on early Sunday afternoons after a night of clubbing, it was morally and practically difficult to engage in both the “night” and “day” activities of Ivancity and Daum, so to speak. Meanwhile, in doing something “healthy” and “non-vampiric,” these Internet-based clubs not only try to recover the sense of emotional warmth and social stability that is sundered in the online spaces of “queer world making” (Berlant & Warner 2002), they also try to make homosexuality a more complete and integrated part of single gay men’s lives, transforming South Korea’s “weekend gays” into “fulltime gays.”

My choice of these two clubs was happenstance, largely shaped by my own interests and circumstances. Nonetheless, they proved ideal sites for comparison. While Snow Dream was just starting up, Tank Boys—created by “Swim Guy” in May 5, 2001—was celebrating its 8<sup>th</sup> year anniversary. After *Ch'in'gusai*'s Marine Boys, it was the second oldest gay swim group in South Korea. With four to five guys sharing the work of monitoring the online posts, looking after new member registrations, and reserving restaurants for after-swim meals, it had a stable organizational structure and membership base. As such, these two clubs highlight the different challenges and successes of maintaining an Internet-based gay friendship group, which involves balancing the collective cohesion of the group with the individual desires of its members, in order to provide emotional and social stability for gay men.

## **I. QUEER TIME AND PLACE: MAKING (GAY) FRIENDSHIP A WAY OF LIFE**

In “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Foucault suggests that what disturbs many people about homosexuality is not the sexual act itself but the fact “that individuals are beginning to love one

another” (Rabinow 1994 (1981): 137). That is because love, in creating the basis of a same-sex coupling, also opens up the possibility of a “homosexual way of life” and “queer futures” that pose a deeper challenge to the normative life path of marriage and reproduction that I have mentioned in the Introduction. However, Foucault does admit that creating such a lifestyle is extraordinary difficult as it means inventing, “from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless...friendship.” As I shall argue, this is precisely the challenge that gay *tonghohoe* have set themselves up to accomplish: creating a gay way of life based on gay friendship.

After the first offline meeting, I got a call from Purun asking me whether I needed help buying my bus ticket and ski pass for our first ski trip to Yong-pyong, a ski resort about two hours outside of Seoul, that Saturday. Grateful for his help, I took down his name and bank account number so I could transfer him the funds (a common procedure in South Korea but an uncommon practice within gay culture as it meant revealing one’s “real” name to a gay stranger) for the ticket and pass.

Arriving at the slopes, I was immediately struck by the difference between the ski slopes and the online environment. Instead of two-dimensional texts, images, and icons on the computer screen, I was met by the wide expanse of snow-covered slopes and the crisp, cool mountain air. Instead of abstract numbers and photographs, I could also see fully talking and moving gay men! In being able to see each other in full daylight without the mediation of a computer screen, there was no need for us to ask for a description of our body types and images. Instead, we discussed the different textures of snow that made it harder or easier for the skis to grip the snow.

It was similar at the first meeting at Tank Boys, which I started attending one Sunday afternoon in January 2008. This time, instead of young partygoers, the subway was packed with families in their Sunday best, coming back from church. Later, walking onto the pool deck, I saw

many individuals but no large groups in the swim lanes. Approaching one guy who was swimming, I asked him whether he was part of a Daum club. “No, I came alone,” he replied. Approaching another swimmer who looked gay, I asked the same question. He said that it was probably the guys in the first and third lanes. Approaching a guy in the third lane, I asked him whether he was part of Tank Boys. “No,” he replied. He was part of another gay swim club. At least three gay swim groups shared this pool! As I stood scanning the other swimmers, one guy in the second lane poked his head out of the water and asked whether I had come for the Daum group. “Yes,” I said. It turned out to be Ray, the head of Tank Boys.

When I asked Ray how it was that three gay swim groups shared the same pool, he replied, “The water is good.” It was a double entendre speaking to both the quality of water and the quality of men in the swim group. “They add salt to the pool water so the body feels lighter and becomes more buoyant,” Ray explained. This, along with the sauna and hot and cold tubs in the wet area, made this sports center extremely popular with the gay sports groups, including the gay volleyball and basketball clubs.

### Forging a Rope to Tie Gay Men Together

According to Ray, a distinguishing feature of gay *tonghohoes*, as opposed to Internet-based *põngaes*, was their regular offline meetings, which provided the gay men with a sense of continuity and stability as well as strong social ties. As Ray put it,

The thing about *põngaes* is they are only sex-oriented meetings where human caring is completely absent. You have to pay a fee to meet someone. If you end up meeting someone, it’s good; but if you don’t, you return home feeling empty. Not only that, there’s no pledge (*kayak*) to meet them again at the same place, so there’s no sense of bonding.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Judging by the over-representation of gay men from the surrounding rural/provincial areas in attendance at the first overnight meeting, it seemed as if this need for an Internet-based

Purun agreed. In our first overnight meeting at Yong-pyong, as we sat around in a circle, he asked us this question,

As you guys know, everyone wants friends or younger/older brothers to hang out, people with whom they can have a drink or share a meal once in a while. But how many of you guys have someone like that in your lives?

Most of us shook our heads to indicate no, so Purun continued.

Maybe you had someone like that in a company. However, once you quit that company, it's very difficult to keep meeting that person, no matter how close you are. What this group does is to provide that "rope" to tie people together.

If gay *tonghohoe* provided a "rope" to tie people together, this rope seemed to consist of several strands. First was the matter of having a clear objective for the group.

According to Ditzzy, one of the things that he liked the most about the gay ski group was its clear objective: "When there is a clear objective, there is something that you can talk about. You can become closer to people since they share similar interests. You can also learn from each other." He contrasted the goal-oriented *tonghohoe* with the "meaningless" conversations that gay men conducted on Ivancity where people often wasted a lot of time trying to figure what they or others were looking for.

Still another difference of gay *tonghohoe* from the online gay culture was their efforts to actively welcome new members and create a supportive environment for them once they came out. On the bus to our first ski trip in Yong-pyong, I asked Purun what he thought was the most important quality of an organizer. "The ability to accept and embrace others (*p'oyongnyöök*)," he

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community was especially strong among men outside of Seoul. By "provinces," I mean both small villages and towns as well as medium-sized cities such as Daejon, where gay men found it hard to carry out anonymous gay lives due to the smaller population density.

answered. “The most important thing for a gay man is to first step into this world. However, it gets easier when there is a sense of ‘giving and receiving’ or being ‘pulled into’ this world.” Through this comment, Purun seemed to be actively trying to counteract the individualistic nature of Korean gay life, where many men avoided debuting into the gay community both because it was stigmatized and because there was no one to welcome them.

In order to describe his first introduction to *tonghohoe* through a straight inline skating group and the importance of welcoming new members, Purun pointed to the rows of skiers on the bus heading to Yong-pyong

Just like the people on this bus, there were 50 people—men and women—in the group. Heading to the front of the bus, you had to introduce yourself to them. After you introduced yourself, about five people would come up to you and introduce themselves to you in turn. You needed those five people because they were the “hill” that you could lean on.

Arriving at the slopes, I saw Purun put these principles to work in the way he embraced the new members. Sacrificing his own time on the slopes, for instance, he took the early part of the morning off to teach Ditzzy and Secret how to snowboard. “The point is to get everyone up to speed,” he said, “so that we can enjoy the sport together.” He also took time off greeting everyone and putting everyone at ease. As Ditzzy, a somewhat taciturn, music student, who spent upwards of 10 hours a day alone practicing the piano, later remarked, “I was new here so I was really glad that everyone spoke to me at least once or twice that first day: that made all the difference in making me feel comfortable.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> According to Purun, “To approach someone new and say even one word, such as ‘Hi,’ is the duty of one human being to another (*saram i saram ege hal tori*).” Once again, this contrasted with the online culture in Ivancity where men, if they were not interested in the other man’s “stats” or profile, did not even bother responding to a greeting.

It was the same with Ray. When I jumped into the pool, one of the first questions that he asked me was, what strokes did I know how to do? When I said the front crawl, he volunteered to watch and give me pointers. After watching me swim, he told me that my head was too high when I came up to breathe and that I should pull the water with stronger strokes.

### Gay Male Bonding

Through these measures, the gay ski and swim groups sought to attract new members and provide a “queer time and space” where gay men could bond. Following Judith Halberstam, I define “queer time and space” as alternative relations to time and space that “develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (2005: 1). Inhabiting this queer time and space not only enables gay men to develop alternative modes of “queer world-making” (Berlant & Warner 2002), it also potentially “open[s] up new life narratives” that Halberstam suggests “has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so” (2005: 2).

Given the individualistic nature of skiing and swimming, however, this gay male bonding took place in particular ways.<sup>41</sup> For the ski group, it occurred mostly during the coffee and cigarette breaks, the one-hour lunches, and the ski lifts. For the gay swim group, it occurred between laps and the meals that were taken together after the swim.

### *Being Discreetly Gay on the Ski Lifts*

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<sup>41</sup> Skiing and swimming can be contrasted with more team-oriented sports such as badminton or basketball, which requires a comparable level of skill between the players. As such, they can be considered much more difficult for new members to break into.

To make sure that our gay ski group members could sit together on the 2-person “couple seats” or the 5-person lifts, which took 3-5 minutes to whisk the skiers from the bottom of the slope to the top, we angled our wait, edging in front of other skiers or letting them go ahead of us. Lift rides were an important downtime for the members to get to know each other. Since our first offline meeting, three new members had joined us: Sky, a 31-year-old office worker, Sool-chul, a bio-physicist from Daejeon, and Secret, a 32-year-old company worker. A schoolteacher from a small town, who did not ski and whose name I did not catch, also joined us in the evening. With the exception of Sky, Ditzzy, Purun, and myself, they were all from outside of Seoul. As Ditzzy said, “The ski lifts were when we could ask basic questions about our profiles—for example, our jobs and where we lived.”

As the sense of camaraderie between us grew, I noticed that the topics became more candid and sexual. Sky, for example, commented on the cute ski lift operators and instructors, many of whom majored in physical education in college. Purun, Sool-chul, and I cracked up over signs instructing skiers to be quiet as the chipmunks were hibernating. “We were joking that they were probably either pregnant or having sex,” Purun later told the other members who were not with us on the ski lifts.

Indeed, the lift time became a time for the ski group members to bond by being discreetly gay in public. As Sky put it, “At work, the guys always talk about the female stars. In fact, I’m also really curious about the male stars but I can never talk about them.” This ability to have their sexuality publicly acknowledged by friends, family, and coworkers is what Sky said that he envied most about straight people.

That’s what I envy about straights—public acknowledgment of their sexuality. For instance, when you introduce someone to your parents as your girlfriend and they give you their blessing, basically, they’re saying, “Go ahead and have sex.” I think it’s the

same thing with marriage. When you get married, they're saying, "You can go ahead and have sex with that person everyday."

Through exercising a right that heterosexuals often took for granted—being discreetly public about their sexuality—the ski lifts gave the Snow Dream members a chance to bond as gay men.

### *"Shooting the Breeze" Between Laps*

Swimming had its particular mode and tempo of social interaction. According to Trainer, a 25-year-old student and personal trainer, Tank Boys had two main objectives—to provide a space where gay men could enjoy swimming *and* interact with other gay men. In his professional opinion, however, Tank Boys was more about "shooting the breeze" (*suda ttölgí*) than swimming.

It's a chat group. But the flavor is different depending on where you chat. Chatting face-to-face in a coffee shop is different from chatting for brief spurts between laps. Between laps, you ask brief questions such as, "What did you do this weekend?" and "What were you doing before you came here?" Or "What are you doing later tonight?"

In fact, after his comment, I began to notice that most gay men in Tank Boys spent as much time, if not more time, standing around and chatting at the end of each lane as they were swimming.

"We were a chatting group!" But then, according to the Trainer, this made perfect sense.

Frankly, if swimming is really what you're after, there's no point coming to this group. You can just go to a straight swim group and swim laps, non-stop. Rather, the point of this swim group is this: to relax our bodies and exchange some pleasantries. That way, you enjoy both exercise *and* conversation.

Gay ski and swim groups thus provided gay men with a comfortable setting in which to get to know other members as *gay men* while engaging in a collective social activity.

### Collective Social Recognition

In turn, this gay male bonding on the ski slopes and in swimming pools was based on a very different form of social recognition from that granted in gay bars, dance-clubs, or online spaces. According to Jinsu, a 31-year-old high school teacher and one of the swim club members, “Itaewon’s the number one spot for judging people according to their appearances. You have to be pretty to meet anyone there. If you’re not, there’s nothing for you to do in Itaewon.”

He contrasted this type of social recognition with that received by gay men in the swim club. “There is the recognition that one receives as an individual in being sold as a pretty face in places like Itaewon,” he said. “Then, there is the collective recognition that one receives from complex, overlapping relationships in places like this swim group.” The “complex, overlapping” forms of social recognition that Tank Boys members derived from their peers, he said, was stronger in helping to foster an ethics of individual self-restraint and responsibility.

For instance, Jinsu spoke about how the swim group had helped to strengthen his own relationship with his boyfriend, Jeon, by providing a strong sense of collective social recognition.

If it’s just the two of you and you get sick of each other or have a fight, you can easily break up. Once you break up, that’s the end. But when a relationship goes public, it becomes more complicated and there is a greater sense of responsibility. Say we have a fight. We have many opportunities to think things over at least once. Why? Because my boyfriend and I are now close to many of the swim club members.

He call this form of social affirmation, “social pushing.”

When the other swim club members tell us, “You guys need to be together for a long time so that I can follow your example,” it becomes—what would you call it?—a form of “social pushing” [in English]. Becoming a role model for so many friends and younger brothers, I cannot so easily follow my own feelings and break up.

This sense of being a role model for other gay men seemed especially important for Chǒngsu and Jinsu, who were, in fact, the first gay couple to join the swim group in its eight-year history.

## **II. TONGHOHOES' TENSION: BALANCING GAY COHESION WITH INDIVIDUAL (SEXUAL) DESIRE**

If gay *tonghohoe* provided gay men with a stable source of social recognition and identity as friends, they did so only provided they did three things. First, they had to balance the number of “new faces” (i.e., new members) with “OBs” (lit. “Old Boys” or members who had been part of the swim group for a long time). Second, the members had to respect the “major” versus the “minor” goals of the group. Third, they had to balance the individual rights of the group’s members with its collective cohesion.

### Balancing “New Faces” with “Old Boys”

As aforementioned, Tank Boys was a well-established swim group with an eight-year history. Still, when Ray took over the group three months before I joined, the group was in a funk. On average, only 4-5 guys showed up per week. Once, only one member showed up. This member ended up swimming by himself. “Of course, this was in the winter time,” said Ray. “Still, I think it happened because the members were all OBs who thought, ‘Well, if I don’t see the other members, I can still see them next week.’”

To change this entrenched attitude of complacency and boost membership, Ray adopted what he called a “flexible” style of management.<sup>42</sup> For starters, it involved actively welcoming new members. “When new members came in, the old members did not welcome them,” he said. “There was the perception that if they were too welcoming, the new member would think it was because he was good-looking and become arrogant.” In Ray’s opinion, however, this made it

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<sup>42</sup> Broadly speaking, this “flexibility” can be seen as one response to the increased organizational complexity of the new economy, which demands adaptability more than loyalty on the part of workers.

very difficult for the new members to infiltrate the tight bonds of friendship already shared by the OBs. “As you know, many people in this gay world are very passive and introverted. If someone doesn’t encourage them, they don’t do things on their own,” he said.<sup>43</sup> According to Ray, both the continued participation of OBs and the supply of “new faces” were crucial to the success of the group. While the OBs provided the swim group with its identity and stability, the new faces provided the members with the excitement of a “new meeting” and the hope of meeting one’s boyfriend. Meanwhile, the importance of maintaining a balance between the two was illustrated in Trainer’s own experience.

Before joining the swim group, Trainer had belonged to two *tonghohoes*: a gay bowling group and a club for muscled men and their admirers. Eventually, however, he stopped going out to both: the bowling group because the average age of its members—40—was too high, and the club for muscled men because the “water” kept changing. Of the 3,000 registered online members of the muscle group, about 30 men showed up for the offline meetings, he said. However, they were always a new group of men, which made the club a good place to drink and meet new guys but not a good place to make friends. In contrast, the swim group, with its “regular members plus or minus five new members, makes it a good group for making friends with a diverse group of people,” he said.

#### “Main” vs “Minor” Goals and The “Secret” of Gay *Tonghohoes*

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<sup>43</sup> This discourse of gay “passivity” is something that comes up again and again in my interviews. Rather than viewing this as an inherent gay quality, however, I view it as partly reflecting Korean gay men’s ambivalent attitude towards gay culture, portrayed as both alluring and immoral.

In addition to balancing the number of OBs with new faces, the members of *tonghohoe* also had to respect what Sky termed the “main” goal (*chumokchōk*) of the group—the sport or group activity—as opposed to its “minor” goal—pursuit of individual sexual or romantic satisfaction.

According to Sky, the main goal of the members in coming out to the group should be to ski rather than to “look at the water” or to “check out the guys” (i.e., the minor goal). In fact, many guys came to these groups to look for their destined love (*inyōn*). “But I don’t think that’s good,” he said. “Because if they don’t find someone that they like, they’re bound to leave.” In other words, the pursuit of individual sexual or romantic goals was seen to inhibit the formation of a collective social life. In turn, the gay men described the act of disrespecting the main goal of the group as “muddying the water (*mul ūl hūrīda*).”

In contrast to Ditzzy and Sky, who drew a sharp line between the main and minor goals of the group, the members of the swim group seemed more lackadaisical about mixing sex/romance with friendship, perhaps due to their more established status. If anything, Ray said that he encouraged in-group romances, “Actually, if two guys like each other, I encourage them. I try to hook them up since dating is also important.” In fact, Ray referred to the ability of Tank Boys to provide a stable environment, where gay men could swim, make friends, *and* meet other men for sex and romance, as the “secret” of gay leisure clubs.

The difference between group *pōngaes* and our swim group is that in the former, you can see the desire of the participants. “I came here to meet someone. I want to have sex with somebody. Or I want to create a boyfriend.” So the atmosphere is dignified (*chosuk*) and people are well behaved (*yamchōn*) at the same time that it is awkward. In this awkward atmosphere, people can’t speak their minds easily. Even when they converse, they always think in the back of their heads, “You’re here in front of me because you either want to have sex with someone or find a boyfriend.” With those thoughts in their heads, do you think that people can have open and honest conversations?

In contrast, in a swim group, whether the men have those motivations or not, they are hidden. *They are below the surface*. You can therefore converse comfortably. Through talking about swimming or the club, you can slowly figure out their motivations as well.

That is, even though you may have a desire to meet another man, you can express yourself *without appearing sexual/carnal*. That's the secret of *tonghohoe* and why they've become so active. You get to know the other person very *comfortably*.

Ray's comments echoed other gay men's comment about the ability of gay *tonghohoe* to provide a setting where they could meet other gay men *comfortably*. However, this sense of comfort is not generated automatically by the virtue of gay men getting together without the presence of heterosexuals. Rather, it arises from separating the open display of sexual desire from gay sociality so that the gay swim club members have a chance to observe another man for a longer period of time before making their decision.<sup>44</sup> In other words, by hiding their sexual desire behind the cloak of gay sociality and by slowing down the speed of sexual interactions, gay men could enjoy the possibility of both sex/romance and gay friendship.

Ray was well positioned to play the role of matchmaker since he, alone, knew the phone numbers of all the members. He still exercised discretion, he said. If a member asked for the number of a new member, Ray said that he would provide it. However, if this member asked for the phone number of *every* new member, he would not. Not only that, if the "other man also expressed interest and asked me about this person, I would also hint at what kind of person he is," he said. In other words, the social network of Tank Boys, where every member was granted a social face, functioned to restrain individual (sexual) desires and instill individual responsibility.

In fact, due to the collective nature of the swim club, where everyone knew each other and gossip spread quickly, gay men became very cautious of having sex with or dating other men. As Jinsu said,

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<sup>44</sup> This comment seemed to point to the problem of collapsing sex and sociality in many gay spaces in South Korea, such as Ivancity's Java Chat. By collapsing the two, the performance of other forms of gay sociality, such as "gay romance" or "gay friendship," which require a delay or non-consummation of the gay men's sexual desires, seemed to be inhibited.

For sure, everyone has one or two guys that they like within this swim group. If they were to have met them one-on-one outside, it's likely that they would have slept with each other. But here, they cannot do that. They have to be more careful. They have to have—what would you call it?—more respectful relationships. That's the ironic thing. They meet more guys in this swim club but they are less able to date them because they are so careful.

In fact, when couples within a swim group broke up, usually one or both men ended up leaving the group. “Two guys can end their relationship amicably but they still don't want to view other's faces,” said Ray. “So what do they do? One or both members of the couple leave the group.” In other words, by attaching social action to social face, the gay swim group helped to restrain the gay men's individual desires, making them think twice about the impact of their actions on their social status within the group.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, in order to maintain this group, the gay *tonghohoe* had to balance the interests of diverse individuals with the collective goals of the group.

### Balancing Individual Rights with Collective Cohesion

Two things distinguished gay *tonghohoe* from more traditional forms of socializing and groups. One was their strictly voluntary nature. As LS put it, “there's no sense of obligation/control (*kusoknyöök*). If you don't like the members, you just don't have to show up.” In fact, reflecting these flexible social ties, it was not uncommon for members to not show up for one or two

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<sup>45</sup> Gay men's relationships, where they become “mortal enemies” after they break up, can be contrasted with lesbian relationships, where the women, after breaking up, still often remain friends and form, what one lesbian called “dog bloodlines”—that is, “small families” that might consist of their ex-girlfriend as well as their current girlfriend. This difference may lie in the smaller population of lesbians and, therefore, their inability to form cliques as easily. Meanwhile, gay men, who walked around after a breakup pretending that nothing had happened, were described as wearing “tin masks.”

months for work or personal reasons and still be welcomed back. “They just say, ‘Hey! Welcome back,’” said LS. “That’s flexibility.”<sup>46</sup>

Another was their more democratic social relations. For LS, these egalitarian social relations were reflected in the use of honorifics. For instance, in age- and seniority-based college relations, the use of the honorific “older brother” (*hyǒng*) for addressing those older or more senior than themselves was *de riguer*. In contrast, the gay men in the swim group used this honorific only for those to whom they felt really close. “The moment you call someone *hyung* is the moment that you consider yourself close to them,” said LS. “If we’re not close, our generation just says, ‘Mr. So-and-so’ (*nugunugu ssi*).” As a result of these flexible and more democratic social relations, LS said that he found the swim group more “free and comfortable.”

Despite their greater flexibility and democracy, gay *tonghohoe* still needed to balance individual rights and preferences (especially in sexual matters) with collective cohesion. And, perhaps not surprisingly, in order to do, Ray, who had been a military officer before working as a civilian reporter, applied what he called military-style collectivism. “It’s natural for me to apply the collective rules of military life to our swim group since I’m from the military,” said Ray. This military-style collectivism was manifested in many of Tank Boys’ activities, most notably in the meals that were taken together after the swim.

### The “Strange Familiarity” of Tank Boys’ Social Rituals

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<sup>46</sup> LS contrasted the open, flexible structure of gay *tonghohoe* with the more hierarchical and homogeneous gatherings of college “clubs” or “circles.” “Communities at school tend to be more homogeneous than those in the general community,” he said. “They also tend to be more tightly knit. That’s because they have ‘senior/junior’ (*sǒnbae/hubae*) relationships, where, even if you don’t like someone, you still have to greet them and ‘be nice’ [in English] to them.”

After swimming from 1-3 pm, Tank Boys' members always gathered in a nearby restaurant to eat before heading to Insa-dong to drink tea or coffee. Once in a while, the members would also go bowling and drinking. The rarity of these activities, however, once again highlighted the non-“vampiric” and “healthy” nature of Tank Boys. As Ray explained, the meals and tea/coffee breaks were important opportunities for the members to get to know each other in what was, after all, a very individualistic sport.

In order to meet the 3 pm deadline outside the sports center, it was always a mad dash to shower, dry off, and change. This was because 20-40 guys, not just from Tank Boys but also from the other two or three gay swim groups, plus the regular patrons, had to compete for the limited number of hair dryers and spots in front of the mirrors to apply their face lotions, sun blocks, and hair waxes. During this moment, when 20-40 gay men primed and preened in front of the mirrors for their debut outside, a sense of nervous electricity crackled in the air, especially among the younger members. They knew that Ray would rip into them if they were late. As Ray put it, “If someone comes late out of the change room, I always ask them, ‘What’s more valuable? The one minute that you took for yourself or the 30 minutes that you took in making 30 guys wait for you?’”

### *Military-Style Collectivism and “Nipping the Bud” of Youth Privilege*

According to Ray, the choice of restaurants after the swim was also done “autocratically” in order to increase the efficiency of the group.

Let’s say, 30 guys are eating together. The democratic method would be to go around one by one and ask everyone for their opinions. But how do I do it? I ask the opinions of one or two guys and then say, “Ok, let’s go here.” To ask each person would take at least 30 minutes. To ask one or two guys and then have me decide takes only five.

Interestingly, however, even though Ray imposed military-style collectivism, his scolding seemed to be directed only at the younger members of the group. Once I heard from Paul, a mixed Korean-American in the swim group, about how Ray had scolded one of the younger members for disappearing after dinner without telling anyone and then showing up unannounced for drinks after the bowling. “When he showed up at the bar, Ray chewed him out in front of everyone for a good 10 minutes,” said Paul. “Significantly, what he said was, ‘People *on this side* (*chok saramdŭl*) especially have a problem with group mentality.’” Later in an interview, Ray told me that his autocratic method was designed to counteract the extreme individualism of gay culture.

Yes, group membership is something that I purposely stress. In this culture, since people are guaranteed a degree of anonymity, there are no sanctions for their behavior and they act as they please.

He also acknowledged that he scolded only the younger members of the group.

Within this culture, no matter how high your social position, it’s doesn’t have much purchase. No matter whether you’re a lawyer or prosecutor, in this world, if you’re not good looking, you have no value. The ones who have power are the young, pretty kids. When they go out to *pŏngaes*, they’re popular. Many treat them well and they come to expect that. I hate that kind of culture in which you receive social recognition for your appearance.

In order to counteract these two negative trends within the gay community, Ray employed various techniques. One included purposely making the young guys run errands, such as scouting out restaurants for empty seats and fetching jugs of water for the table. In exchange, the younger members earned some privileges. For instance, if there was money left over from a meal, they sometimes got exempted from paying for tea or coffee in the next round of socializing.

In imposing this style of military collectivism, Ray noted how gay men probably felt a sense of “strange familiarity”: strangeness because the age and status-ranked forms of collective

life were, in fact, highly unusual in the individualistic gay culture *and* familiarity because they were, at the same time, part of mainstream culture.

While the swim club prospered under Ray's management, the ski group did not fare so well: it imploded. As I shall argue next, while some of this failure can be attributed to the inexperience of its organizers, most of it can be blamed on the "inflexibility" of the members themselves in accepting individual differences—the cornerstone of these voluntary and non-familial forms of association.

### **III. THE INFLEXIBILITY AND IMPLOSION OF SNOW DREAM**

For our first overnight trip, we had rented a small villa for the night in Yong-pyong. Such an overnight trip was a way for the group not only to extend its ski time but also for its members to get closer. And by all accounts, it was a success. According to Purun, "It was a harmonious atmosphere, a sweet atmosphere, in which everyone enjoyed themselves. There was a lot of discussion about our personal lives—something I personally really enjoy." In the small kitchen of the rather dilapidated villa that we rented, we cooked and, in the living room with its laminated flooring, we introduced ourselves, drank, and played games. Getting to know the other men as "human beings" rather than sexual objects, Purun seemed to capture the general feeling of the group when he said, "It is regrettable that the *iban* community is becoming so sex-oriented. It's not like it's a sex community. It should be a people community." With the first overnight trip ending on a high note, everyone looked forward to the second one in Muju. "I want our ski club to remain forever one with no factions or cliques," said Purun.

Starting with the warm weather, however, which made the snow slushy on the lower slopes and icy on the higher ones, the signs for the second overnight trip to Muju were

inauspicious. In the morning, one of the new members, Rich, a 41-year-old music producer, even got sideswiped by a snowboarder, spraining his ankle so that he had to wait on the sidelines for the rest of the day, waiting for us to finish skiing. After the much-anticipated dinner and drinking in the evening, things got even worse. As the different backgrounds and sensibilities of its members emerged and clashed openly, the group split into different factions: Purun's warnings had been well founded.

### *Competing Sensibilities and the Eruption of Individual Differences*

After a simple but tasty dinner of bacon strips, fish sticks, and various side-dishes, prepared by True, who had previously owned a restaurant, and Secret, who worked for an online food site, we sat down to drink and play. At Yong-pyong, we had played such games as "Image Game" in which, the gay men were asked, for example, to point to someone in the group whom they thought looked most likely to go to a *tchimjilbang*. In Muju, the games were much racier; they forced the losers not only to drink but also perform sexualized acts such as depicting their favorite sexual position. Many of these games were suggested by the two new members of the group—Rich, the member who had sprained his ankle and Gunhee, a gay man in his 30s, who had just shown up out of the Sky to ski—and Hanul, who surprised everybody by turning from a seemingly mild-mannered elementary school teacher into a loud-mouthed, screechy gay man who egged others on.

As the games progressed, I could see both Vista and Sool-chul becoming increasingly uncomfortable and, in fact, during the round of self-introductions, Sool-chul dropped a bombshell. In answer to one of the questions, "How has your experience of this group been thus far like?" he answered, "Actually, it's been difficult and, in fact, sometimes tortuous for me to

adapt to this new environment (*chŏgŭng hagi ka himdŭlgo koeropki to haetta*).” While his announcement was instantly chilling and Purun, Vista, and Sky rushed to comfort him, Hanul and Rich paid him no mind and continued drinking and talking loudly amongst themselves. When both Sky and Vista tried, with no success, to get them to heed the conversation, Purun spoke up,

As many people who were at the last meeting would agree, the atmosphere there was very different. It was very sincere (*chinji hada*). Even though it’s good for an atmosphere to be sincere and it’s good for an atmosphere to be light (*kabyŏpta*), I think the best atmosphere is one where one can be light while being sincere and sincere while also being light.

At his words, I could see both Hanul and Rich finally sober up and their faces turn dark. Then

Rich spoke,

Well, if you’re saying that the last meeting was good and this meeting isn’t, you’re basically saying that’s the fault of the new members. It’s like saying, “We don’t want you to come back.”

Hanul added,

I think one thing that you should take into consideration is people’s backgrounds. I debuted at a time when it took 7 months to meet someone. Now it takes 10 minutes. People have very different backgrounds. I think you need to respect that fact even if you don’t respect the people themselves.

In later commenting on the situation, Ditzzy said,

The problem was all three of them. Gunhee just came to check out the water. When they come to view the water, it’s not like they come and then leave quietly. They cause waves—big or small—and so destroy the good atmosphere. Then you had Hanul and Rich who controlled the atmosphere too much and made it overly sexual. With no one old enough to restrain Rich, the leaders lost control of the situation.

In other words, according to Ditzzy, the leaders in, allowing these three individuals to overpower the “major” goal of the group—group harmony—with its “minor” goal—the sexual enjoyment of the individuals—the group became chaotic and disorderly.

True, however, offered a different interpretation.

Sool-chul shouldn't have said what he'd said. This is not his family (*sikku ka anida*). You can't tell people in these groups, who all come from a different background, what to do. You should just accept them.

In other words, even though the ski club was *like* a family, when it came down to it, it really was not. Like the swim club, it was still a loosely affiliated group of individuals who came and left voluntarily in order to enjoy themselves. As such, their different sensibilities and ways of enjoyment should have been accepted by Sool-chul. In other words, the real problem was Sool-chul and his *inflexible* attitude.

After this rupture in communication and group relations, while Rich, Hanul, and Gunhee continued to drink, other members, including Sool-chul, went to bed. The next morning, we were woken by Sool-chul frantically searching for Purun in our room: his father had suddenly collapsed and he had to take a taxi to Daejon, which was two hours away. After that, nobody heard from Sool-chul. “Nobody is able to contact Sool-chul,” said Purun. “I know his father is sick but he could still send us a text message at least; it appears as if he's ended his relationship with our group.” Nor was it certain whether Hanul and Rich would continue participating either. Thus, despite Purun's best efforts, the upstart ski group seemed to have met the same problems of cliques and infighting as his previous gay ski/snowboard group due to the inflexibility of its members and the inexperience of its leaders.

#### **IV. FROM WEEKEND GAYS TO FULL TIME GAYS**

While the ski club imploded, Tank Boys continued to prosper. With the introduction of monthly events, such as trips to the beach in the summer, the number of Tank Boys members jumped from 500-600 to 880 members. This was *after* the organizers had gotten rid of its “ghost members” (those who had registered but were inactive for the past three years).<sup>47</sup>

Yet, even if Tank Boys was successful in expanding the number of its members, its power as a friendship group—designed to support the lives of its “weekend gay” members—still seemed to be heavily constrained by their busy schedules at work and school that allowed them to meet offline only once a week. These constraints of over-work and over-study in South Korea’s highly competitive environment especially after the IMF Crisis, which made Internet chats and *tonghohoe* so popular in the first place, were made clear to me when Trainer’s cell-phone alarm went off during the middle of our evening interview. When I asked him about the alarm, Trainer replied that he set it to ensure that he got up from an hour nap that he took between 7 and 8 pm every evening. Asking him about this nap not only took me into the details of his daily schedule, it also revealed to me how really precious the gay swim group was in these gay men’s lives.

#### The Online World of *Tonghohoe* within Gay Men’s Busy Schedules

According to Trainer, he usually went to bed at 5 am and got up at 7 am to go to school. After getting home around 6:30 pm, he spent about half an hour organizing his books before taking a nap between 7 pm and 8 pm. From 8 pm to 9pm, he helped out in his family’s convenience store, minding the cash register. After that, from 9 pm to midnight, he went to the gym to work as a

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<sup>47</sup> Ray took pride in the increase in membership. “To me, it’s like playing Monopoly,” he said. “It’s not like I make real money. But through building hotels and buying up land, I feel a sense of satisfaction. That’s the feeling that I get from expanding our group’s membership.”

personal trainer and to work out. From midnight to 3 am, he then went back to work at his family's convenience store.

Astounded by his tight schedule, I asked Trainer whether this schedule did not interfere with his personal life. "It's true that I can't sleep and I can't meet my friends," he said. "But I do this because my parents are older—in their 60s—and their health is suffering." Meanwhile, it took him almost two hours to attend the weekly offline meetings in Seoul from his home in Suwon. So, in order to keep in touch with the swim group members during the week, he used the Internet. However, in contrast to the uses of the Internet that we saw in Ivancity in Chapter 2, Trainer's online practices seemed to be aimed at forging a sense of "gay friendship" as a way of life.

### *"Checking In"*

One of Trainer's favorite features in the group's online café was the "One Line Memo Pad," which enabled the users to write one-liners about their lives. While some guys used their 30-100 characters to post greetings, such as "The weather is beautiful today," others used them to post messages such as, "I moved today," which kept others abreast of their daily lives. "It's way of providing a summary of your life," said Trainer. Interestingly, both the members of Tank Boys and Snow Dream spoke of the One Line Memo Pad in terms of "taking attendance" (*ch'ulsök ch'ek'ũ*). Trainer, for example, said that it was like taking attendance at school since "it shows that you've logged on." Sky, from the ski club, also said, "I always try to leave something whenever I visit our group's website so that other people know that I've visited."

Comparing the leaving of messages in One Line Memo Pad to taking attendance at school gives an act that is strictly voluntary an air of obligation and duty. It also contrasts sharply

with the “de-evidentiary” nature of Internet usage, which I will examine in the Conclusion, where gay men actively erase all traces of their gay Internet usage in order to minimize the risk of being outed. In turn, the leaving of such digital traces or footprints seemed to be aimed at counteracting the anonymity of gay culture, in general, and online gay culture, in particular, in order to build gay social relations. Thus, as Sky noted, “What’s more scary than a nasty reply (*akp’il*) is no reply (*mup’il*).” Indeed, on the data based platform of the Internet where people were invisible, it was impossible, without some type of response, to know whether anyone was behind the screen.

Moreover, Sky strived to not only post replies but also post replies that were creative and non-formulaic (*pihyöngsikchökin*). Such efforts seemed to be aimed at not only further imbuing these one-liners with a greater sense of humanity and sociality but also opposing the effects of standardization and objectification, driven by the ethos of anonymity and efficiency, found in sex-oriented chats.

### *Navigating Risk in Online Photo Albums*

Another feature that Trainer regularly used was the “Photo Album.” During a post-swim outing to a place such as Kyongbuk Palace, some of the members would take pictures with their digital cameras that they would then upload onto the group’s homepage, creating a lasting image of the group.

However, as we saw in Chapter 2, cameras and their uses were often a sensitive point for gay men as they provided the most lasting, easily distributed, and damning evidence of their homosexuality. For this reason, some gay men avoided these photo opportunities. For instance, during one of our ski trips, when one man called the others to take a commemorative photo at the

top of the ski slope, one of the members refused, saying, “I don’t take pictures so there is no evidence.”

To manage the problem of risk that plagued the uploading of photos displaying the members’ faces, Tank Boys used its membership system. One of the reasons for Daum Café’s popularity among gay groups was its well-developed and easy-to-use membership system that divided the members into “associate members” when they first registered in the Daum café; “regular members” when they posted their self-introductions; and “special members” when they diligently attended the offline meetings. Only the last group was allowed to view the online photo albums. According to LS, this was based on the logic of mutually distributed risk:

If someone wants to take peek at something of mine, they should reveal something of theirs. That’s only fair since they will then have access to each other’s “Achilles’ Heel.”

In other words, by making the special members “earn” the right to view each other’s photos, the swim group solved the problem of reciprocity that could not be enforced within the non-institutionalized one-to-one chats in Ivancity.

### *Gay Tonghohoe as Family?*

For gay men like Trainer, who had joined the swim group a couple of months after me in March, Tank Boys’s regular weekly meetings were considered a life tonic. “It’s become a really valuable source of energy (*hwallyōkso*),” he said. “I live diligently for the entire work so I can play on Sunday.”

For others like Seung-hyun, one of the OBs who had joined Tank Boys seven years ago just one year after he had debuted at the age of 29, it even felt like a “family.” When asked what the swim group meant to him during the 8<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the swim group, held in a fancy

residence hotel in Seodaemoon, he replied, “I was happy to be able to meet family-like members and have a family-like group.” Asked to elaborate on what he meant by “family,” he said,

Whether you’re gay or straight, everyone gets old. Still, even though everyone is born alone and dies alone, people, in general, have families. In gay men’s case, however, once their family and relatives around them pass away, they will arrive at a point when they will lack those things that were once satisfied within those bonds. I am hoping that these sports groups will provide us with a sense of intimacy that will last till the ends of our lives.

In contrast to the short, contractually based relationships in Ivancity, based on a vision of human autonomy and freedom, where individuals stood outside relations of dependency, these “family-like” relationships within Daum cafes seemed to be based on an alternative vision of human inter/dependence. As such, they constitute what Eva Kittay calls “dependency critique”:

The dependency critique is a feminist critique that asserts: A conception of society viewed as an association of equals masks inequitable dependencies, those of infancy and childhood, old age, illness and disability (1999: xii).

Having said that, these “family-like” relations cannot, at least in the gay swim group’s case or in the case of gay *tonghohoe* in general, be viewed as a replacement for biological families. As one married gay man from another gay Internet club, Chöngsu, explained,

When gay men say that gay *tonghohoe* are “family-like,” they don’t mean that they have the same status as one’s biological family. Rather, they mean that they feel warm like one’s family and that there’s a culture of being there for each other during a time of need.

Thus, this support seemed to be mostly social and emotional, rather than, say, financial or economic. Still, by meeting offline once a week and providing regular online contact during the week, gay *tonghohoes*, such as Tank Boys, seemed to provide a sense of emotional/social stability as well as hope for a collective gay future, sundered in the sex- and consumer-oriented culture of gay bars, dance-clubs, and online chats.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined two Internet-based gay sports clubs in Seoul. Though there are many types of gay Internet clubs, organized according to age, occupation, schools, hobbies, etc., gay sports groups are among the most popular and representative of gay *tonghohoe* in general.

As I have demonstrated, these leisure-based gay groups provide an alternative to the sex/drinking-oriented gay consumer culture occurring at night. In bringing together gay men at least once a week during the full light of day and providing them with a collective form of social recognition, they help to counteract the anonymity of online spaces and create a stable sense of community.

Despite their positive effects, however, I could not shake a nagging sense of discomfort with their use of the metaphor “family” to describe their bonds of intimacy. In relying on the normative model of family to describe these non-familial bonds of intimacy, they seemed to ignore the many hierarchies of class, education, and bodily capital that existed between the gay *tonghohoe* and within the gay community. For instance, I was consistently mystified by the limited interaction between the three swim groups that used the same pool at the sports center in Jongro every week. As Chris also noted,

Once Rick recognized someone from another club and thought, “Oh, they’re swimming in the same pool today.” But then, he realized, “Oh, no. They’ve been swimming in the same pool every week.” It’s just that they never say hi to each other. If someone knows someone from another club, they just quickly say, “Hi,” and that’s it.

One day, spotting an old acquaintance from *Ch’in’gusai*, I swam under the floating divider and asked him why people from the different swim groups did not speak to each other. His answer was revealing:

Well, I guess it's because the guys in your group are, on average, younger and have better bodies. We, on the other hand, are in our 30s and 40s and have diverse bodies. It's not that we don't want to join you guys for dinner or drinks once in a while after we finish swimming. But I don't think your group would like it.

Indeed, the members of Tank Boys not only prided themselves on being younger and good-looking, on average, they were also, by all appearances, highly privileged. Many of them were current students or former graduates of one of the three elite VISTA universities, spoke fluent English, and were living or had lived abroad. They thus constituted, as Paul put it, "the upper 25 percent of the Korean population in terms of lifestyle and money."

In such a manner, the gay sports groups seemed to "mirror" the mainstream society in terms of class, lifestyle, money, appearance, etc. As Incense stated, "To me, the *moimdŭl* are like a mirror. They mirror back the social order rather than challenge it in any significant way." In particular, how these "family-like" relations that are not "really" a family impact individual gay men's responses to the deepening pressures of self-development and survival under neoliberalism will be the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### Post-IMF Anxieties:

#### The “Luxury” of Love and the “Retreat/Retirement” of Single Gay Men

##### INTRODUCTION

In February 2008, I attended a seminar entitled, “Poverty and I,” hosted by Ura, a lesbian activist at Unninet,<sup>48</sup> as part of the “LGBTQ Activists Camp.” Held in Gapsa, a town a few hours outside of Seoul, the camp was held as part of the new “Rainbow Coalition” that was formed after the fourth and final Emergency Meeting on January 29, 2008. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, these political *pōngaes* were held to protest the deletion of “sexual orientation” from the revised Anti-Discrimination Bill. With a declining sense of urgency, however, the last *pōngae* drew only a tepid response from the community. As such, the leaders of the Emergency Coalition felt that it was time to form the “Rainbow Coalition” that would continue to address issues of sexual politics in a neoliberal and neo-conservative political environment in which homosexuality was now a direct object of organized political attack.

Being an “activist camp,” I had expected much of the seminar to talk about the plight of poor gays and lesbians. But no, it was about the survival of the activists themselves as single, independent individuals. Singling out one gay activist, Jeong-yeol, Ura asked him how much money he made. When he answered that he made \$1,800 a month working for a donut company—a job that he had taken despite its lack of job security because it gave him the flexibility to carry on activist work—Uri proceeded to break it down into his monthly expenses, including \$200 a month for rent, \$280 for insurance, \$150 for general expenses (including cell

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<sup>48</sup> Unninet is a progressive women’s group that, among other things, organizes around issues of independence for single women.

phone and transportation), and \$150 for heat, water, and electricity. It also included \$300 for his parents' monthly allowance and \$180 for donations to activist organizations. Going through his expenses, Ura then suggested ways that he could cut back on his expenses, by, for example, reducing unnecessary benefits in his insurance plan.<sup>49</sup> She then proceeded to suggest ways that he could use his increased savings to invest in stocks and land. Were Jeong-yeol not to have the option of keeping his funds in long-term investments, she suggested that he could also lend the money to his friends and collect interest. "Some may worry that the relationship between the two of you might suffer. However, money is just money. It's not because of money that your relationship suffers," she said.

In this chapter, I examine the discourses of self-development and economic survival that began to pervade the lives of gay men in South Korea after the IMF Crisis. As I have examined in Introduction and Chapter 1, if the 1990s were a time of great sexual and romantic experimentation, then the contemporary period of deepening neoliberal reforms can be seen as an era self-development and economic survival for singly gay men. Viewing a bleak economic future without the support of their own wives and children, many regret the time that they spent pursuing love and sex in the 1990s rather than studying. In order to secure their economic future, many retreat and some even retire from the gay community, considering love a luxury. While such retreat and retirement of single gay men from the gay community can be simply viewed as the wake-up call of any person who, in reaching their 30s and 40s, finds that he has nothing to show for all those years, in the gay men's case, I argue that the mood of nostalgia and regret also reflects the failure of the gay and lesbian movement to significantly challenge the Korean gay society and create alternative queer futures. Thus, in absence of supportive gay communities and

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<sup>49</sup> Uri suggested that Jeong-yeol needed to be concerned about preparing for old age after turning 60 but not about dying since he, as a gay man, wouldn't have children.

social networks and under the onslaught of neoliberal reforms, gay men are forced to retreat and develop themselves.

This chapter is divided into four sections: First, in “Luxury of Life and Post-IMF Feelings of Anxiety and Fear,” I examine the sense of fear, anxiety, and regret that succeeded the election of President Lee Myung-bak. Though these post-IMF anxieties were by no means limited to gay men, they took on particular hues and meanings within the gay culture: specifically a sense of regret over the sexual and consumer “excesses” of the mid-1990s to 2000s when gay youth emerged as a political constituency and consumer bloc. With the global financial meltdown and increased economic precarity, however, love becomes a “luxury” that can no longer be afforded. Second, in “New Discourses of Self-control, Diligence, and Self-development and the ‘Neoliberal Gay Man,’” I examine how new discourses of self-development come to replace the atmosphere of sexual and romantic experimentation between the mid- to late-1990s. Once again, while these discourses were not particular to Korean gay men, they did take on special meanings for them as queer subjects who were expelled from the safety net of the “family fence.” As single men operating outside this fence, gay men had enjoyed unparalleled freedom as sexual and consumer subjects in the 1990s. But in the 2000s, they face the bleak prospect of old age alone without the support of either the state or their own wives and children. Not only that, in the face of continuing pressure to marry, some gays and lesbians even choose marriages of convenience with lesbians. Third, in “Diverse Futures: Imagining Gay Retirement,” I examine how single gay men adopt diverse strategies of survival and accommodation, shaped largely by class. While some imagine retiring with gay friends to the Korean countryside to avoid the sex- and consumer-oriented gay culture in Seoul, others imagine “early retirement” to countries like Argentina, where they can live “freely” as out gay men.

## I. THE “LUXURY” OF LOVE AND POST-IMF FEELINGS OF ANXIETY AND REGRET

As I have described above, the mid-1990s were a period of great sexual and cultural experimentation for gay men. Many of them debuted into the gay community and experimented with their bodies, desires, and emotions in consumer spaces such as gay bars, dance clubs, and *tchimjilbangs*, as well as on the Internet. By 2008, however, the mood was radically different. Rather than an adventurous sense of “sexual” and “romantic” liberalism, there was a quiet sense of anxiety, fear, and regret.

As one gay man put it, “There’s no future security. Even though we are contributing to our national pension, it is almost bankrupt. When it comes to withdrawing our pension, it is unlikely that we will be able to do so.” Minho also chimed in. “I’m instinctively afraid of getting old. The health care system in South Korea is incredibly well-equipped for small illnesses such as headaches, colds, and shoulder pains but not for big diseases such as cancer.” During my field research, I was struck by the number of insurance policies that gay men held against the potential calamities of illness, disease, and unemployment. Many gay men held 3-4 types of insurance to cover everything from cancer to auto accidents. Many also worked out in gyms and ran in marathons—less out a sense of vanity than for their health.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, gay men generally held insurance policies that covered their loss of income should they have an accident, fall ill, or catch a disease. In contrast, married men tended to hold life insurance that covered their “dependents” (i.e., their wives and children). As such, notions of risk and insurance are different for gay men than straight men who marry.

In this climate of fear and anxiety, many gay men also spoke with nostalgia and regret about the 1990s, seemingly mirroring the conservative discourse of the “Lost Decade” that I have mentioned in the Introduction. For instance, one gay man, Jin, now 27, said,

I regret the time that I spent going out and drinking. It was a waste of energy. When I wanted to go out, I went out. When I didn’t, I didn’t. As much as I played, I did not prepare for my future. I should have studied more.

Like many young gay men debuting in Itaewon in the mid-1990s, Jin said that he had met his gay friends in an Internet-based gay, “Monkey Town,” a gay film club that met at least once a month for its regular meeting and sometimes more during the week for drinking, dancing, and “checking out the water” in Itaewon.<sup>51</sup> Also exemplifying this mood of anxiety, fear, and regret was Peter, a 32-year-old man whom I met in a birthday/slumber party for the gay swim group’s chief, Ray, in a hotel, once again, in Seodaemun.

#### *The Luxury of Love and New Times of Insecurity*

When I saw Peter, I failed to recognize him even though we had both been part of the emerging gay political, social, and consumer scene in the mid-1990s and seen each other several times at community functions, including the “Gay Human Rights” retreats. So when he approached me and asked, “Don’t I know you from somewhere?” it took Minh, who was also at the party, to act as a bridge to our fragmented memories. “Of course, you do,” he said. “You two were both part of the gay scene in the 1990s.”

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<sup>51</sup> In response to my question whether gay men’s youth was spent much differently from their straight counterparts, Jin said, “I’m not sure. “Though our minds may be different, our ways of playing seemed to be the same: drinking, going on blind dates such as *sogaet’ing*, and engaging in *circle* activities.”

Like me, Peter had been active in the community, even volunteering for the gay organization Tonginryōn. Unlike me, however, he had also dated many guys. “When I was young, I did not go for three months without a boyfriend,” he said. “No matter how difficult and sad the relationship, a new boyfriend would always appear in my twenties.” When I asked him what he was looking for through these relationships, he said, “I’m not sure really. I think I was trying to find a sense of stability. As you know, dating is fundamentally about emotion. So I tried to find that stability through the other’s emotion.” But by 2008, he was deeply regretful of the time and energy that he had spent on dating and romance. “I don’t really know why I bet on that [dating and relationships],” he said.

For one thing, in March of 2008, due to the economic restructuring and fears about job security, Peter, like many Koreans, was in the midst of changing jobs. Starting off as an architect, he was now in medical school studying to become a doctor. “It’s difficult to remain in a job nowadays,” he said. “Many people are getting laid off in their 40s. That’s why I decided to become a doctor so that I could work as long as I want.” It was in this context of securing his financial future that Peter considered his past 10 years in the gay community a waste of time and love a luxury.

“It’s not like I have engaged in a lot of romances,” he said, “but once you have dated not just once or twice but five or six times and the same pattern of dating then breaking up, dating then breaking up emerges, then you don’t put much faith in romance to guarantee a sense of stability.” This “pattern,” Peter said, was partly attributable to the mutability of gay men’s feelings. “When many guys have become tired of the other guy and break up just because they have experienced a change in their feelings and you, yourself, can’t even trust your own feelings, isn’t it funny to invest your trust in their feelings?” he commented.

These frequent breakups between gay men were also attributable to the low priority of gay relationships in gay men's lives, especially in relation to their relationship with their families. "Even though everyone talks about how precious their partners are, they are always the last in the list of priorities," said Peter. "When things get difficult, who or what do you give up first? Your job? Your family? No, gay men give up their boyfriends. That's always the order (*sunwi*)."

Looking back, Peter said he deeply regretted this time and felt, as he says below, "short-changed." "I don't know why I invested all that time and emotion in dating and in believing in love," he said. "You know, time is very important. Not only that, passion is also very important. If I had not spent those things on love, I would surely have spent them on other things." Indeed, by using such terms as "bet" and "investment," one can see that Peter considered his emotional investment in another person in search of emotional stability through love as a form of wager—a wager that did not end up paying off.

Ironically for Peter, this sense of regret about time and energy wasted involved not only love but also activism. For instance, he had volunteered in gay organizations in South Korea and also Australia when he went there for language study. However, when it came time to applying for jobs, he could not put any of this gay-related community activity on his resume. "When I apply to schools or hand in my resume for jobs, they ask me whether I have volunteer experience. It's not like I don't but I can't include any of it. So there is a blank in my resume and I have nothing to talk about. I feel like I have been *shortchanged*." In a cultural atmosphere where the cultural experiences of youth were being repackaged as cultural capital for a new finance economy based on individual creativity and initiative, Peter's inability to package his

experience in the 15 years of gay history seemed to illustrate how this history was being re-commodified and, in failing to be commodified, written off as a “blank.”

Meanwhile, in not providing a sufficient return on his investment, love became a “luxury” or “extravagance” (*sach'i*) that now had to be redirected to other more worthwhile investments, such as getting a job or being filial to his family. “It seems as if I no longer have a fantasy about dating,” he said. “I don’t think [gay] identity or love are all that important anymore.” This indifference to love thus formed a strong contrast to the “mood for love” that I described in the Introduction as part of South Korea’s globalizing and liberalizing atmosphere in the mid-1990s.

## **II. NEW DISCOURSES OF SELF-CONTROL, DILIGENCE, AND SELF-DEVELOPMENT AND THE “NEOLIBERAL GAY MAN”**

In this atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and regret, new discourses of self-control, diligence, and self-development also began to appear.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, self-control was an important quality that Koreans had to develop as part of their task of becoming “free” liberal subjects. That is, in becoming self-governing liberal individuals who were free insofar as they were responsible, they had to develop self-control as part and parcel of that freedom. Meanwhile, as I have also argued, in being one of the first groups to be driven outside of the fold of the family by the force of their need to meet other men, Korean gay men (especially gay youth) became the first subjects to historically deal with their freedom, especially as consumer subjects, in gay consumer spaces. For instance, in *tchimjilbangs*, gay men had to determine for themselves, “How much pleasure was enough pleasure and how much was too much?” Without the traditional norms of family, state, or even

community to restrain them, they were forced to answer these questions for themselves. For instance, in reply to one of my questions about how he had the time to carry out the leadership activities for the ski group, Purun replied, “It’s not like I’m young and have no self-control.” In other words, he was mature enough to be immune to the “temptations” of gay consumer life that was central to being a liberal gay subject.

*Discourses of Diligence and Self-Development and the “Neoliberal Gay Man”*

In the new mood of fear and anxiety about their economic futures, gay men seemed to be redirecting their sense of self-control towards diligence and self-development.

During my research, I was struck by the number of gay men who were in the midst of either studying or looking for new work. For instance, in addition to Peter, True from the gay ski club was also in the midst of switching careers. From being the division head (*pujang*) of his import/export company, he was looking to attend a one-year program to gain a foothold in the medical tourism market.

Once again, True’s drastic move late in his career was greatly motivated by the turbulent job market in South Korea where the traditional notion of lifetime employment was giving way to a series of performance-related contract positions. For gay men, in particular, however, this job insecurity was heightened by their single status, which made them, in the eyes of their employers, highly suspicious and untrustworthy. As True put it

Our company is very conservative like lawyers. When they talk to me, I think they sense it. “Why isn’t this guy married?” “What can’t he get married?” I think they think that at least once or twice. “We can give him the position of a *pujang* since he works well but not a director.” They’ll promote someone who has a child and who they think is, therefore, responsible.

Asked how he was so certain about this hidden discrimination, he answered, “I know this because I would think the same way if I was a director.” Like some of the comments by gay men about the “immorality” of gay culture that I describe in Chapter 3, this comment seemed to reflect the powerful ideological hold that neo-familial ideals had over even gay men within Korean society in the absence of effective queer counter-discourses.

Also worrisome for gay men was their imagined future as single men without partners or families. As Byung-do, a 38-year-old gay man, put it, “We have no ‘fence’ [of the family]. It’s not like we have a family or children when we get older. And it’s not like the state will protect us.” The term, “fence” (*t’eduri*, was a term that Koreans often employed to describe the family as an exclusive group of belonging that both morally restrained and protected its members from outside dangers and risks. Absent such a “fence,” Korean gay men seemingly put their faith in the only fence that they could trust—money. As Jin put it,

In this community, there are no restraints (*kusok*). Even though one might call someone one’s boyfriend, there’s no legal commitment. No matter how much you might like the other person, the relationship can break up anytime, leading to a potential crisis. If the relationship breaks up, who can you believe? The money that you have saved is the only thing you can believe. In any case, because you are a minority, the world is unfair. Money can “supplement” some of the things you seek. It can help to “alleviate” some of the social injustice.

True concurred, saying money was the ultimate reason that he was changing jobs.

Of course, it’s all about money. You change jobs to make more money, not for self-satisfaction. Since I don’t have a family, I have to do this when I’m young. When you’re young and healthy, you can do anything. But when you get older, you have almost no opportunities to do anything. By 50-55, you have to have enough money. I’m just working hard until then. That’s all.

In fact, 40s was considered the mandatory retirement age in South Korea’s hyper-competitive job market, making this task of building a “fence” especially urgent for Korean gay men in their 30s and 40s. “Forty is the retirement age in South Korea,” said Byung-do. “What we need is money.

We need to make a lot of money before that.” This belief in money as the only form of “security” in the absence of faith in human relationships is what I have termed the creation of the “neoliberal gay man.” Considering how the same factors of lack of family and other social support networks that made gay youth one of the first social groups in South Korea to liberalize in the mid-1990s continue to operate, this intense self-reliance and self-development of gay men as well as their over-reliance on money to secure their sense of survival and well being in the post-IMF era is not surprising.

### *Taking Risks*

If the pressure to make “a lot of money” forced many gay men to make midlife career switches, it also encouraged some to take unwise risks. When I met Byung-do in the late-1990s, he had seemed like a confident, even cocky, happy-go-lucky guy on top of his game. Other than the fact that he was gay, he also seemed like an ordinary guy in his outlook and demeanor saying that he had planned to marry and have children before discovering that he was gay.

However, when I met him again in 2007, he was a different man: still energetic and talkative but greatly humbled. I did not realize after I left South Korea in 2003 and until I met him again in 2007 that he had quit his job as a computer programmer and started investing in stocks. This was during the boom in South Korea’s stock market. Unfortunately, when the market bottomed out, he lost his shirt and he was now trying to make his money back by working as a day trader in a cramped bedroom equipped with a bank of computers inside his mother’s house.

When I asked Byung-do what had compelled him to engage in this foolhardy venture, he answered, “money” and “overconfidence.” As he had explained above, he felt that he needed to

make a “lot of money” before 40. So in 2003, when the computer design firm that he worked for went bankrupt, he started looking around for another job and, from reading the autobiographies of rich people, hit upon the idea of investing in stocks.

Until then, I had a very negative attitude towards stocks. I thought of them as nothing less than speculation and gambling. But strangely enough, all rich people engaged in stocks. In stocks, I saw the possibility of making a lot of money. So I jumped into the stock market and lost everything. I lost all the money that I had saved up till then.

Greatly humbled, he said that he now has no choice but to try to make that money back. “If I don’t succeed here, there is really nowhere else for me to turn,” he said.

The gap between myself and other computer programmers has grown too large. My sense of “touch” has gotten dulled. Since I have blown all the money that I had saved, I can’t even start a business. It’s now become a situation where I have no choice but to pull myself up by my own bootstraps.

For Byung-do, “pulling himself up by his own bootstraps” entailed locking himself in his room for weeks at a time, not meeting anyone nor doing anything but playing the stock market. It also meant all but abandoning his gay life. “Since I have no money, my gay life has suffered. I have enough money just to live. Because of my investment activities, I’ve almost given up on this life.” Indeed, in withdrawing from the gay community, Byung-do mirrored the decision of one of our mutual gay friends, who had also given up his gay life and job at LG (a Korean conglomerate) to literally pursue a life as a priest within a seminary. Unlike Byung-do, however, this friend had given up his gay life because it had become too emotionally taxing with its ups and downs.

Another gay man whose desire to make a lot of money before “it was too late” spurred on radical changes in their lifestyle was Jeju, whom I introduced in Chapter 2. Like Byung-do, he too came from a middle-class family and lacked for nothing growing up. Unlike Byung-do,

however, Jeju grew up in an ultra-conservative Confucianist household where “my parents would say over dinner, ‘You have the blood of *yangban* (“Confucian elite”) flowing in you. Since you are a *yangban*, you should act like one.’” Given his family’s strong Confucian background, Jeju suffered especially harshly when he was outed to his family in his early 30s.

As I had mentioned in Chapter 2, Jeju first became aware of the gay world when he was cruised by a gay man while for the bus in Jongro. From there, he went on a whirlwind tour of the gay world in Itaewon and Jongro until his mother, suspicious of his late-night phone calls with his new boyfriend, had his straight friend tail him. Though his friend did not realize that the bars that he was entering in Itaewon were gay, his mother did and confronted him.

Having grown up as a good boy, Jeju naively confessed to everything and was promptly kicked out of the house. “I kneeled for hours outside the steps of my parent’s home in freezing winter to beg for their forgiveness,” he said. Finally, the next-door *ajumma* [“middle-aged woman”] took pity on him and carried him back into her house, he said. By then, his knees were half-frozen. After that, he remained estranged from his family who refused contact until they finally moved to Los Angeles, leaving him behind in South Korea.

Experiencing economic hardship for the first time in his life in being kicked out of his parent’s home, Jeju, with a master’s degree in public administration, worked as a part-time lecturer and researcher. Even though neither job paid well, he said that he enjoyed hearing the title of “professor.” After hitting 40, however, he said that he realized that he needed to save money for retirement.

When I was growing up, our family had many misfortunes. For instance, our family lost our home after my father signed to be someone’s guarantor. After that, the concept of “fortune” slowly formed in my mind as did the idea that one needed money to be treated as a human being. So upon receiving a good job offer, I decided to abandon “honor”

(*myōngye*) for “wealth” (*chaesan*), as well as the 40 years of life that I had lived in Seoul, and go to Jeju Island.

I met Jeju on one of his infrequent trips to Seoul to satisfy his “thirst” for gay men. Living on an island where the neighbors proverbially knew the number of chopsticks kept in his kitchen drawers, Jeju avoided gay life on the island for fear of being outed and retired to a quiet life.

### **III. GAY MEN’S “RETIREMENT” AND “RETREAT” INTO THE HETEROSEXUAL FAMILY**

If gay men’s need to concentrate on their careers compelled men like Byung-do and Jeju to all but abandon their gay lives, other gay men took even more drastic steps of retiring from the gay community and retreating into the heterosexual family.

Among them was Peter whom I have introduced above. Having participated in the gay community and been exposed to modern ideas of homosexuality as an identity and community, he had at first scoffed at the idea of gay men marrying women to hide their sexuality. “But nowadays, my thinking has changed,” he said. “If you take the ‘sex’ part out of marriage, then the possibility of marrying opens up for me. That is to say, before, I thought that I would never get married [to a woman]. But now, I don’t see a particular reason why I shouldn’t.” Still, if Peter, in using the double negative, “I don’t see a particular reason why I shouldn’t,” was still hesitant about marrying a woman without telling her that he was gay, “Gain,” a 42-year-old gay man whom I met in the office of Happy Iban, seemed to be unabashedly gung-ho about marrying a woman.

*Gay Men, “Straight” Marriage, and “Retiring” from Gay Community*

“Gain,” whose name I later discovered was derived from the English word “Cain”—i.e., “Cain and Abel”—first debuted in the gay community in the late 1980s just around the time of the ’88 Seoul Olympics. This was a time when terms, such as *pogal* and *homo*, were more popular than *gay* or *iban*. Like many gay men whom I spoke to, he was—despite being the eldest son (he had an older sister and younger brother)—shy and reserved at home and school. His gay life, however, was an entirely different matter. In gay bars, with his soft, feminine demeanor and youth, he attracted instant attention from other gay men to the point that he said that he thought that he was the “best” (*ch’oego*).

Both at home and in school, I was quiet and reserved—one of those children whose heads the teachers just counted during roll call and, otherwise, paid little attention to. In gay bars, however, I was completely different. The student to whom no one paid any attention in school became an object of attention in the bars. While the madams bought me drinks so I would visit their bars often, the men offered me spending money. From being an extra in a movie, I had become its star.<sup>52</sup>

With Jongro only 30 minutes from his home, Gain said that he soon became immersed in the world of gay bars. Arriving home just before midnight when the last bus stopped running, he would either knock on his younger brother’s window or he would quietly climb into his bedroom window using a garbage bin and then go to bed.

One night, however, he was caught red-handed getting home late. Confronted by his parents, he lashed out blaming them for his truant ways while “in my heart, I knew that I was blaming them to protect my secret of being gay.” Moreover, after a fight with his boyfriend, he grew more disillusioned with the gay world and sought to abandon it. “For a time, I forgot that I

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<sup>52</sup> This comment about a glamorous gay “alter-ego” was one that I heard frequently from gay men. On one hand, it spoke to an “alternate universe” where the gay men were finally free to unleash all their desires that had been bottled up within their restricted heterosexual selves. On the other hand, it spoke to the fantastical imaginary nature of this gay world that existed only within the imaginations and collective subcultural practices of gay men in a confined time and space.

was gay,” he said and hung out his straight classmates and friends. He even had a girlfriend. But one day, when a straight male friend seduced and then dumped her, he also grew disillusioned with the straight world and went back to the gay world. This time, however, he accepted that he was gay.

Before, I had hated the gay life. But now I changed my mind. I realized that it was my innate nature (*ch'ōnsōng*) to be born gay. The more I tried to escape this fact, the more it arose in my mind. I decided that I no longer needed to try to escape this fate. All I needed to do was to try to accept it with a pure heart.

After his moment of self-acceptance, he still experienced one personal crisis after another, including falling in love with a handsome graduate student who, after losing his family fortune, disappeared from the gay world only to re-appear, unbeknownst to Gain, as a shaman dating one of his best friends. “I experienced too many of these incidents,” he said. “I hated it. I’m not a bad person. Why was I experiencing them? Everything became bothersome. I couldn’t place much faith in the gay world.”

Approaching 40, Gain also felt, like Jeju and Peter, increasingly insecure about his future,

There are probably many gay men who share my thoughts. I’m the eldest son in my family. As I watch my parents get older and people around me—both gay and straight—get married, I wonder whether there is anything that I have done properly. There is nothing. Even though I think that I have worked hard, there is nothing left.

In the “blink of an eye,” Gain said that he had become what he had once despised and dreaded—an older gay man.

Before, I could not understand *ajōssi* (“middle-aged men”) who offered me spending money in order to be with me. But, in the blink of an eye, I’d also become older. What will happen if I continue being alone like this? My forties will quickly pass followed by my fifties. At least my parents are still alive now. But I don’t think I can keep living the way that I’ve been living now.

With his greatest fear that of becoming a “pathetic (*ch’orahada*) white-haired grandfather who chased after young men,” Gain said that his biggest goal right now was to get married so that he would have a wife to look after him in his old age. He said that he also wanted the “fun” of raising children: “With only one life to live, I would feel bitter (*ōgulahada*) if I died without having lived an *ordinary life* like other people.”

This desire to be “ordinary” (*p’yōngbōmhada*) was one that I heard frequently expressed by gay men. For instance, many gay men expressed the desire to be with men who were “ordinary” in appearance (*p’yōngbōmhan oemo*), with “easy-going” personalities (*munanhan sōnggyōk*) and “ordinary” jobs” (*p’yōngbōmhan chigōp*), with whom they could lead “quiet lives” (*choyonghan sam*). While these values represented the great emphasis on obedience and conformity within the collectivist Korean society, they also reflected the sharply felt desires for acceptance and belonging by a sexual minority who were discriminated against by virtue of their sexuality.

Indeed, Gain’s desires to “live an ordinary life like other people” may be considered “aspirational normativity.” According to Lauren Berlant, “aspirational normativity” is the “desire to feel normal and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being invented” (2007: 28). For those excluded from the “tattered family”—the most potent and “only institution of fantasy *remaining* for fantasy to attach itself to” (2007: 278)—this aspirational normativity works, Berlant argues, by creating “a position not within the normative institutions of intimacy but something proximate to them” (2007: 285).

*“Contract Marriages” Between Gays and Lesbians*

If some gay men like Gain dreamt of marrying a woman, having children, and having a taste of “normal life” before they passed away, other middle-class gay men actively pursued this dream of normality through so-called “contract marriages” or “marriages of convenience” with lesbians. As opposed to Gain’s desire for “aspirational normativity,” however, such contract marriages—at least among the couples whom I interviewed—seemed to be most motivated by the desire to be “filial” and to fulfill their parents’ long-held dreams to see their children “happily wedded” so they could die peacefully.

As I wrote in a journal article in *Anthropological Quarterly* (2009), “contract marriages” are very different from the more common practice in South Korea where gays and lesbians marry heterosexual partners without revealing their sexual orientation in order to “pass” as straight. However, they are not new. Han Chae-yoon, an activist and editor of *Buddy*, a South Korean gay and lesbian magazine, for instance, remembers reading an article in a *Hitel* newsletter about a Korean gay and lesbian couple, now in their sixties, who had entered a contract marriage in the 1980s. Though these contract marriages are still rare, carried out by a minority of only really “desperate” gays and lesbians, their small number is belied by the widely shared *fantasy of* engaging in them to escape the familial and social pressure to marry.

With the growing popularity of Internet, two Internet sites devoted to such marriages opened in the 2000s, including “Our Wedding” (now defunct). Based on interviews that I conducted with the participants of that site, I discovered that what characterized contract marriages was the desire to construct the façade of a heterosexual couple through a “contract,” which, more often than not, was simply an implicit agreement between the contract marriage couple that each person will do his or her best to secure the other’s privacy, and fulfill the familial and social obligations necessary to maintain the façade. Such arrangements deflect the

pressure to marry, but paradoxically only by conforming to it. In so doing, they expose the couple to other risks: including the gendered subordination of the female partner and the co-optation of the gay and lesbian couple into the heteronormative institution of marriage with its class and material capital conflicts.

### III. DIVERSE FUTURES: IMAGINING GAY RETIREMENT

If gay men like Gain and contract marriage couples tried to assimilate into or appropriate the familial structure of marriage, most gay men seemed to resign themselves to leading discreet lives as “weekend gays” until their parents passed away, after which they planned to come out and become “full time gays.” In the meantime, as if to assuage their guilt towards their parents for not marrying, they seemed to be more “filial” than even their straight married siblings.

For instance, Damon, whom I introduced in Chapter 2, said that he had come back to South Korea after living many years in the United States in order to support his parents in their old age. “I’m no *hyoja* (“filial son”) but since they had no economic support, I had to come back to South Korea to support and take care of them.” When asked whether he enjoyed living with his parents, he replied, “I can never say ‘enjoy.’ I care about them but I’m not close to them. It’s simply my *destiny*.” Thus, in contrast to the liberal discourse of “enjoyment,” which gay men often attached to sex, they attached the discourse of “destiny” to their moral duties and obligations as sons, once again illustrating the sharp contrast between “individual gay freedom” versus “family/social constraint” that animated their lives.

Ironically, these “gay filial practices” were, in turn, enabled by the gay men’s single status. As one member of the “Dog Group” (a club for gay men born in the “Year of the Dog”), a doctor, put it, “Well, we’re being filial because we don’t have our own families. Do you think

that if I had my own wife and children that I would spend money on my parents? Wouldn't I spend it on my own family first?" In fact, he talked about how one member of this group, B.S., had personally paid for the two funeral plots of his parents even though he had an older brother and sister. Another member, Dong-suk, had also bought his parents a house and set his younger unemployed brother up with a Paris Croissant bakery business (in excess of \$100,000), leaving him with little savings of his own. "But they don't recognize that," said the doctor. "They take the money but they still pressure you to get married."

Thus, despite their newfound confidence and economic independence as grown-up gay men, few men seemed willing to betray their families and come out, in the process detonating what one man termed the "nuclear bomb" of an exclusive gay sexuality. As Nick put it, "Being gay is a nuclear bomb. It's an extremely heavy issue. It's not an easy issue—the relationships with one's family, friend, and colleagues." As I describe below, what gay men imagined instead was a *deferred* gay future where they would come out and live their lives openly as gay men *once* their parents had passed away. For example, according to Bryan,

I'm waiting for my parents to pass away. I have a younger sister. In her case, she won't care. I'm not only her older brother but she'll have a more objective perspective and consider it my life. My parents, on the other hand, will think it's their fault that I turned out this way. So I don't want to come out to them, which is ok for now since I spend so time traveling abroad for my work.

As such, contrary to the Western notion of the "closet," Korean gay men imagined their "closet" as only a temporary holding pad, from which they would emerge to become full time gays once their parents passed away. As for these gay futures, they seemed to be imagined very differently depending on the class backgrounds and social imaginaries of the gay men.

*Gay Imaginary of Retiring to the Countryside*

In 2007, I interviewed a 42-year-old gay man in “Coffee Bean,” a coffee shop in Insa-dong. Located just under the Hollywood Theater in Jongro, it bordered the boundaries of Insa-dong, a tourist area, with coffee shops and art galleries, and Nakwon-dong. Due to its popular outdoor patio and convenient location, it attracted many gay men, even earning the title, “Gay Bean,” within the gay community.

This gay man, Lee, whom I had met in Ivancity’s Java Chat, acknowledged that there was pressure from his parents, who lived in the countryside, for him to marry. “Of course, there is pressure. All parents want their children to marry, have children, and live well.” However, he refused, saying that his life was his own and that carrying on the “double life” of a married gay man was too inconvenient.

My life is my own. I can’t live my life for my parents. Moreover, what is there to be gained from getting married? It’s hard enough to have a double-life as a single person. If you get married, then you’ll also have your wife and children to deceive so your life will be twice or three times as difficult.

But neither did he plan to come out to his parents or to the rest of the world. “Do you think that’ll pass muster in South Korea?” he asked me.

Because it’s a family-centered society, that will not work. You will become an outsider. For instance, one of my older gay friends had a friend. They had gone to middle school and high school together. They had also spent 7 years living together before his friend entered Samsung. When my friend came out, however, his friend immediately packed his bags and left.

In South Korea, you should live like everyone else, appropriate to that era. If you uproot yourself from that era, your life cannot but become difficult. Imagine taking a boat to Jeju Island when you can fly there. It’s difficult. It’ll be even more difficult if you try to swim there. In other words, there’s no reason to lag behind or race ahead of everyone else. It’ll be lonely. You should live “smoothly” (*tunggŭldunggŭlhage*) with everyone.

Comparing the difficulty of living openly as a homosexual to swimming or taking a boat to Jeju Island when one could be flying, or having “milk when everyone was having coffee,” Lee thus

considered it a virtue to “live quietly” as a gay man. Part of “living quietly,” it seemed, involved keeping his sexuality a secret from everyone else until he retired quietly to the countryside with his gay friends.

My partner of 10 years currently lives with his parents who are in their late 70s. I live near him in Seoul. When they pass away, we plan to sell their apartment and buy a house in the countryside. While my friends prefer Jeju Island and Yang-pyung, I prefer Haenam even though the transportation there is inconvenient. For \$400,000, we can buy a nice place. If our friends join us and contribute their share, we can buy a huge place that we can then divide into separate bedrooms.

Asked why he wanted to retire to the countryside, he said, “First, the air is clean. You can fish, go hiking etc. Otherwise, what will you do when you’re older?” Another important reason, he said, was to avoid the sex- and consumer-oriented gay culture in Seoul.

In Jongro, there’s a *tchimjilbang* called *Munhwa*. Many men in their 50s and 60s go there. They go there because there’s this [gay sex] culture. Because there’s supply, there’s also demand. If you go to the countryside, there’s no culture like that. So you don’t have to slink around (*sōsōnggōrida*) places like *tchimjilbangs*.

Thus, in sharp contrast to the modern Western “gay imaginary” of gay men migrating to the big cities en masse, especially after the two World Wars, in order to be “gay” (Weston 2000), Korean gay men seemed to be dreaming about retiring to the “healthy” countryside in order to get away from the sex-oriented urban gay culture. Until then, Lee said that he, his boyfriend, and his friends will work hard to save money. “Everyone is now busy making a living. Since none of us plan to marry, we will do it when are 60 and toothless.”

If gay men like Lee were imagining a gay retirement to the Korean countryside, then other gay couples of higher socio-economic status seemed to be imagining an “early retirement” in a foreign country.

*“Early Retirement” in a Foreign Country*

During the 1970s, many gay Koreans emigrated to foreign countries, especially to Japan. For instance, in his autobiography, *Even Scarecrows Need Practice Living* (1993), Kim Kyung-Min writes about a gay friend, who was planning to move to Japan to live and work after being discharged from the army,

After finishing his military service, he told me that he would work on Jeju Island where he would save money to go to Japan to live. That in Japan, people like him could live properly as human beings. That he want to meet a man, love him, and live happily ever after (1993: 137).

According to Kim, “many Korean *pogal* aspire to dating Japanese *pogal* and, in order to make that dream come true, go to Japan.”

If Japan formed the locus of this modern gay imaginary for Koreans in 1970s and 80s, it seemed as if the whole world was now the oyster of well-heeled, internationalist gay couples whom I interviewed during my field research. In January 2008, I spoke to Sang-do, 39, a friend of my friend, Dong-suk, who had introduced Sang-do, a manager at a multinational computer company, to his boyfriend of 5 years, Chae-sun, also 39, and a banker. When he heard that our friend, Dong-suk, was at my place, he dropped by my office-tel to chat.

Last time that I spoke to Sang-do, he and his boyfriend had just bought an apartment in the northern part of Seoul so I asked him about that. “Actually, we just moved to a new place,” he said. “We’re renting the old one out.” In Seoul, where housing prices were astronomical, he and his partner were already the owners of two apartments. Being on the fringes of Gangnam, however, the prices of both places had neither risen nor fallen too much, following the bursting of the housing bubble in the 2000s.

Talking to Sang-do, it became quite clear how the life trajectory of established and professional gay couples was very different from that of single gay men in Ivancity and gay Daum clubs. No longer were they feverishly pursuing a partner or scrambling to secure their economic futures; rather, they were planning the next stage of their lives: an “early retirement” in a foreign country.

Asked why he wanted to retire to a foreign country, Sang-do said, “First, there’s the matter of crowds and pollution in Seoul. Then, there’s the issue of being gay.” Sang-do said that he and his boyfriend have now lived for five years together as “roommates.” But during those five years, they have moved three times: once almost every two years. Part of the reason for these moves was because they got bored of living in one section of the city. A bigger reason was to avoid neighborhood gossip. In Seoul, even though it was common to see young men rooming together when they were students from the countryside or provincial areas, it was more unusual to see two middle-aged men, especially of Sang-do and his boyfriend’s socio-economic background, living together. In order to avoid gossip, Sang-do said that he and Chae-sun sometimes even took separate elevators up to the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor apartment of their 24-story building.

As for their parents, both of Chae-sun’s parents had passed away. Though Sang-do’s own parents lived in Seoul, they rarely visited their apartment. Still, if they visited them now, “It would be a disaster,” he said. “There are too many that Chae-sun and I own together. It would be impossible to pretend that we are just roommates.” For this reason, Sang-do said that he suggested to Chae-sun that they either get a two-story apartment or a foreign roommate. In terms of the latter option, “We can then all appear to be just ‘roommates,’” he said.

His boyfriend, who was part of the “cocoon tribe,” was, however, resistant to the idea, said Sang-do. “He just likes staying at home with his DVD collection.” In fact, due to their fear

of gossip from not just their neighbors but also from their work colleagues, they spent most of their free time in their apartment.

We don't go out much. Whenever we go out, we always run into someone that I know from my office. It doesn't matter whether we're in the Coex Mall in Samsung-dong, Chongdam-dong in Gangnam, or Myong-dong in Gangbuk. For this reason, we've stopped going out.

Instead, Sang-do said that they usually stayed at home, having wine and beef during the weekdays and "champagne breakfasts" (champagne, toast, and bacon) on Sundays.

Curious to know where all the money that would normally go towards raising children within heterosexual families went, I asked him. "The bank," said Sang-do. In fact, he and Chae-sun were planning an early retirement in a foreign country.

We're thinking of Argentina. As you know, it used to be quite a prosperous place so the infrastructure is still very good. Moreover, both wine and beef are plentiful and cheap. Thailand, on the other hand, is too hot. We're also thinking of United States or Canada. However, I've been to New York City and I don't like it very much. Canada might be a better choice with its good social welfare system.

Asked how much money they needed for an early retirement, he answered, "I say about \$1-million dollars but Chae-sun thinks that we need at least \$3-million." At this point, Dong-suk, who had been listening to our conversation, chimed in and said, "Yes, it's harder to make money now that the economy has slowed down." Still, according to Sang-do,

When you have \$100,000, it's easy to make \$200,000. And when you have \$500,000, it's easy to make \$1-million. If we go to Canada, we plan to buy about five houses, rent them out, and live off the rent.

With that money, Sang-do said that he planned to "garden, exercise, and travel." Until then, he and his boyfriend were saving their money.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have described how, after 15 years of gay community building and gay and lesbian activism in South Korea, single gay men are retreating and even retiring into the folds of work and family. This retreat has taken many forms: expressing regret for time wasted on sex and partying in the 1990s and considering love and romance to be a “luxury” that can be ill-afforded in a time of economic insecurity. Facing a bleak future without the security of their own wives and children, many single gay men are thus being re-disciplined into the world of work, self-discipline, and self-development as well as belonging to family.

Depending upon the class backgrounds and social imaginaries of the gay men, however, I have also argued that this gay retirement can take on very different shapes. While some men, such as Byung-do and Jeju “retire” to their rooms and out-of-the-way places, such as Jeju Island, to secure their economic futures, others, such as a Sang-do and Chae-sun, already secure in their jobs, imagined an early retirement to a foreign country like Canada, Argentina, or the United States. As such, they seemed to reveal the diverse imaginaries of gay future under neoliberalism, when money has become *the* primary factor defining and distinguishing the gay men from each other.

If so, what implications do these diverse classed forms of retreat and retirement of single gay men have for the Korean gay and lesbian movement? When I spoke to Joong-jun, the founder of Exzone, in 2002, he said,

Right now, there is no center of power in terms of a community. Everyone just plays separately. When organizations want to engage in political campaign, there’s no one to carry them out.

This lack of a “community without a center” seemed to be even truer now than then. It also seemed to be no better embodied than in Ivancity, which did not permit outside searches of its databases. As Director explained,

Right now, both Ivancity and Happy Eban block outside searches of their databases. Otherwise, the online posts of the members can leak outside and they can be outed. The offline identity of the writer can also be tracked through his IP address. So right now, what these two sites do is block their doors so that they open in but not out. In other words, information flows in but not out.

Thus, to all intents and purposes, Ivancity, along with Happy Eban, appeared to be a “private membership club,” which was invisible to the other world. Put differently, in contrast to the popular assertion that “there are no closets in cyberspace” (Brien 1996), it appeared as if Ivancity and the entire online gay world that it supported was just one big “cyber-closet.” Of course, the same can be said for gay Daum cafes and their “discreet” use of public space.

Ironically, if the Korean gay community was being turned into a giant cyber-closet through the invisibility of both Ivancity and Daum-centered gay worlds within mainstream discourses, then it seemed to be becoming further hollowed out through the transnational activities of Korean gay men as Asian gay/sex tourists. As Minho put it,

It is no longer a matter of “Let’s go to Itaewon.” Nowadays, with the information they get on the Internet, Korean gay men are travelling all over the world. In particular, during Korean holidays, such as Thanksgiving and New Year’s, they escape to countries such as Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Vietnam, and even Laos and Mongolia. That way, they don’t have to hear the nagging of their parents about why they’re still not married. They can also express their sexual desires that they keep bottled up in Seoul.

Remarkable about this transnationalization of Korean gay culture was how it seemed to extend the sharp segregation of their weekend gay lives to the international stage. In other words, in leaving town to be gay, these practices of Korean gay men as “transnational (Asian) gays” seemed to effectively turn South Korea into a “national closet.”

Also remarkable was how quickly such changes were taking place. As Minho put it, “In contrast to Japanese gay men, who became ‘globalized gays’ ‘step by step,’ Korean gay men have become global within the space of 2-3 years.” Given the force of these trends, where Korean gay men indulged in foreign gay/sexual escapades while they remained closeted from their parents in South Korea, it appeared as if the Korean community would, at least for the foreseeable future, continue to be “center-less” and have an “indefinite shape” (*aemaemohohan sangt’ae*).

## CONCLUSION

### Married Gay Elite and the “Rise of the Bats”

#### INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters, I have examined how, during this historical juncture of “neoliberalism” and what I term, “neo-familism,” when issues of “individual freedom versus familial/social constraint”; “democratic process versus capitalistic excess”; and “market efficiency/productivity versus familial morality/normality” were at the heart of Korean social debates and politics, that the Internet was offering gay men two very different pathways to addressing these tensions. While Ivancity was offering a pathway that was almost entirely individual and results-oriented, therefore producing a sense of Internet as a cold space, gay Daum cafes, were offering a pathway that was more group and process-oriented and, thereby, creating a “warmer” and more “humane” gay culture.

Having said that, I have also argued that gay Daum clubs, in being “small gay families” for the generally young, good-looking, and well off, are limited in creating a larger vision of a gay community. Not only did, in being “discreet” just like Ivancity, they are also limited in challenging the trends of neoliberalism that were, by the late 2000s, forcing many single gay men to retreat and even retire from the gay community. With the further transnationalization of Korean gay community, the gay community seemed to be becoming even more “hollowed out,” with no one to do the work of building the community anymore.

Ironically, as single gay men were retreating and even retiring from the gay community, married gay men, who were all but invisible during the community-building phase of the gay and lesbian movement in the 1990s, seemed to be rising as a powerful new constituency within the

gay community. Married gay men were a source of much moral opprobrium and suspicion as well as curiosity and fascination within the gay community. That is because, just like the category of “gay,” which transcended clear categories, memberships, and allegiances, they occupied an ambiguous position within both the mainstream and gay societies that were sharply divided, as we saw earlier, into “this” versus “that” side of the world.

For this reason, married gay men were often called “bats”—neither fowl nor animal. As I argue, what allows the “rise of the bats” is precisely the same reason that force many single men to retreat/retire: their family. Being married allows them to enjoy the “luxury” of gay love from the security of their own families. Yet, in order to enjoy both worlds, they must, like single gay men, engage in “closet” and “de-evidentiary” practices so that these two parallel worlds do not collide and clash. Finally, the people who may be paying the highest practices for their double-lives may not be their single gay male partners but their wives, who become roped in as unwitting accomplices to secure the married gay men’s sense of emotional security and social face.

This Conclusion ends by examining the “rise of the bats” and the closet and de-evidentiary practices that they, along with single gay men, must engage in, in order to enjoy the “luxury of love” within an Internet-based Korean gay community, careening into the future without a clear sense of direction or collective gay future.

## **I. MARRIED GAY ELITE AND THE “RISE OF THE BATS”**

Growing up in the 1970s and 80s when information about homosexuality was highly limited or negative, many married gay men either failed to “recognize” or violently suppressed their desires. As one married gay man, YS, put it,

Before marriage, I had no idea about homosexuality. Even though I engaged in *skinship* (“affectionately touching other men”) with other men, I didn’t realize that I was erotically attracted to other men. All I thought was, “Oh, he seems like a nice guy.” That was the extent of my understanding of my desires.

In fact, like single gay men, many married gay men received their first flash of recognition about their sexuality from media reports about homosexuality that began to crowd the airwaves in the 1990s. For instance, according to YS,

Watching SBS’s a television newsmagazine show, “Kügöt i Algo Sipta” (“I Want to Know About That”), I felt a jolt of electricity run through my body. For 36 years, I had kept this “thing” close to my heart as a secret. I had forgotten about it while I studied hard and worked diligently. Sometimes, when there was a good person, the thought entered my mind. But then I would just brush it away. “Why do I like this guy?” “Am I not an idiot?”

By 2008, however, there were many Internet-based clubs for married gay men. For instance, “Daddy Club,” a Daum Café, held regular dinners, karaokes, and bar crawls for married gay men and their admirers. When I took one Hong Kong gay researcher to this club, he was shocked by the large number of married gay men who showed up. On that particular night, there were upwards of 45 members in the karaoke bar that had reserved for the occasion.

### Rising Divorce Rates, Collapsing “Dams/Fences” and “Active Love”

There were several reasons for the “ascent of the bats.” One was the rising number of divorces. For instance, one divorced gay man said, “Things changed 360 degrees after my divorce. With no one to nag me about coming home and being freer and lonelier, I began to turn my gaze towards this part of the world.” Another was the changing shape of the Korean family with the emergence of transnational “split” families and the “goose father” phenomenon that I have spoken about earlier. For instance, one gay goose father, Han, whose wife was in the United

States with their son said, “With my wife gone and no one to regulate me, my schedule became relaxed and just as a dam would collapse, my life collapsed. This culture started being sucked into my life.”

In turn, the married gay men began to engage in an “active” form of love. According to one married gay man, Jeong-su,

Before, I engaged in really passive love. Because my partner was single while I was married, I felt that I couldn’t be responsible for him unless I abandoned my family. Therefore, I curbed my desires and didn’t fully express myself. Should a better guy appear, I felt that I should be ready to send him off to be with the other guy.

After a couple of breakups, however, Jeong-su said that he changed his mind. That is because he realized that his partners left him, not because he was married, but because he was reticent in expressing his love. “Since they already knew that I was married before we started dating, they understood my situation. What was driving them off was not the fact that I was married but that I wasn’t expressing my love for them properly.” With this realization came a change of heart. “Now if I were to meet a new person, I will be aggressive and engage in more active (*nŭngdongchŏkin*) love,” he said.

#### Double Lives, Closet Practices, and “De-evidentiary Practices”

In order to engage in their hidden love, however, married gay men had to engage in what Steven Seidman dubs “closet practices”: “intensive and extensive strategies of sexual self-management that created a protected space that allowed individuals to fashion gay selves and to navigate between straight and gay world” (2001: 429).

For both single and married gay men, these closet practices were an enduring and taxing part of their everyday lives. It involved everything from watching for slips of tongue in using the

pronouns, “he” and “she,” when talking about their boyfriends, to being hyper-conscious of their bodily gestures and movements. For instance, one gay man, Sushi, who owned a sushi restaurant in Gangnam, was playing with a video camera when he caught himself looking “a bit feminine” as he poured himself a glass of water from a jug in the fridge. Distressed by how he might look gay, he taught himself to pour water in a properly “masculine” manner.<sup>53</sup>

For married gay men, however, these closet practices of self-surveillance and self-management went even further. According to Gangnam, there were three reasons why gay men got married. One was to continue the family line.

The number one reason is parents. It’s an animalistic reason. You need to reproduce the species. This is especially true in South Korea where there’s a preference for sons and the family follows the man’s surname. If the eldest son doesn’t get married, the line ends with him.

Another was to gain social recognition and status that came with being a “family man” that I have described above. A third reason, he said, was to commit the “perfect crime.”

A third reason is to commit the “perfect crime.” For instance, there’s a guy who looks gay. No matter how you put it, he displays the behavioral characteristics peculiar to gay men. When walking on the street, he looks at other men. Ordinary men look at women. You’re drinking coffee in an open café with your work colleagues. You turn around to check out what he’s looking at. He’s looking at a man. You subtly catch his gaze. You think, “He must be gay.” But then, you look at his wedding band and think, “I must be mistaken. He’s married.”

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<sup>53</sup> “Femininity” was an ever-present concern of the gay men whom I interviewed. For instance, Sushi, hailing from Kyongsang-do, the eastern part of the Korean peninsula, known for its tough, conservative men, boasted about his masculinity: “You can ‘smell’ that I’m from Kyongsang-do. While people consider people from Seoul to be either very “pretty” (*yeppūchānghage saenggyōtta*) or “sly” (*yamch’e katta*), they considered people from Kyongsang-do to be tough and ignorant. As you can see I’m a bit coarse here and there. So even though I don’t have much to boast about, one strength that I do have is that I don’t have much *kki* (‘feminine spirit’).” But Sushi acknowledged that even he had a bit of *kki* in him since he was gay: “That’s not to say that I don’t have it at all,” he said. “There’s still a certain amount of femininity in me.” This is what he caught on video and tried to erase through his practice of self-surveillance and self-censorship.

According to Gangnam, it was easy for gay men to “pass” when Koreans once believed that there were “no homosexuals” in South Korea. Now, with mass media depictions of homosexuality becoming more common and more people aware of homosexuality, there was more risk of being outed.<sup>54</sup>

In this situation, gay men had to be hyper-vigilant in appearing “straight-acting” and “straight looking.” For instance, one gay man, Sono, said, “At work, I’m really careful of how I act and what I say. Even though some people don’t appear interested, they’re really curious of what kind of person I’m and observe me even when they pretend not to. Therefore, I don’t take any personal calls at work.”<sup>55</sup> However, even if more Koreans were aware of gay men in their midst, “What most straights still can’t imagine,” said Gangnam, “is the possibility of gay men being married [to women].”

In order to carry out their “double lives,” both married and single gay men had to carry out “de-evidentiary” practices. Like “closet practices,” “de-evidentiary practices can be considered practices to maintain the “closet.” Unlike closet practices, however, they can be considered less to do with bodily management than with the management of physical or electronic traces of their sexual practices. During the 1990s, while these traces might have been a

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<sup>54</sup> In fact, this was the reason why many gay men, including many married men, opposed the coming out of the first Korean gay activist, Suh Dong-jin. In creating a media blitz around homosexuality, he posed more risk of outing for closeted married gay men like themselves.

<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, this practice of surveillance occurred not only within mainstream society but also among gay men themselves. Sono, for instance, talked about a colleague of his, whose photo he had found in a Power Dating profile. Though he wasn’t quite sure whether it was him because “people look different from their online photos,” after observing his work colleague for a couple of days, he became certain. “While he acts tough, he’s really soft-hearted,” said Sono. “Moreover, from chatting with him in Java Chat and his profile, I know that he likes tough guys. At work, many of my seniors take care of the juniors regardless of whether they are tall or short, skinny or fat. However, he takes care of only tough, young, junior males.” For this reason, Sono did not have a photo in his *Ivancity* profile nor participate in any film festivals, gay organizations, or gay clubs. He also had just two gay friends. He was so suspicious that when we met, he even checked my bag to make sure I didn’t have a hidden tape recorder.

forgotten business card of a gay bar in a jacket pocket or a porn rag hidden under the mattress, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they were increasingly technological evidence of their sexual activities left on their cell phones and computers that were part and parcel of South Korea's rapid transition to a techno-culture. For instance, as I have mentioned in Chapter 3, during one of my gay ski trips, some members refused to take a commemorative group photo at the top of a mountain in wanting to avoid photographic evidence of their involvement in this group.<sup>56</sup>

Jeong-su also spoke of the double bind of technologies such as computers and cell phones, which made carrying out his double-life as a married gay man both easier and riskier. Easier because it made participation in married gay men's groups, such as "Daddy Group," much easier since he got their notices about *chǒngmos* through an email. But also riskier since it was that much easier to get caught. For instance, Jeong-su spoke about how he once put a lock on his cell phone in order to protect his privacy after starting to participate in the Daddy Group. "But then my wife protested," he said. "Among Korean couples, it's a cause for suspicion. They wonder, 'Is he cheating on me? Otherwise, why does he have a lock on his phone?' So I unlocked it again." Now, he erases all his text messages before going home. "I erase them right away after I read them," he said.

Further examples of de-evidentiary culture involved avoiding particular desktops. For instance, Brian told me about his experience of chatting with one of his Malaysian friends:

There was a Malaysian guy who I was chatting with who said that he liked me. As a joke, I asked him whether he wanted to see one of my pictures. He replied that he already had pictures of me: it turned out that his computer had taken pictures of me while we were chatting via a web-cam. Searching my computer, it turned out that it had done the same: keep a record of our online interactions.

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<sup>56</sup> Along the same vein, many of my informants agreed to allow me to take notes with a pen and paper but were extremely reluctant to allow me to record our interviews. Bundang expressed his discomfort in terms of an "uneasy" feeling (*tchiptchiphada*) in leaving such hard "evidence."

For this reason, Brian said that he avoided using the Google Desktop at work: “The Google Desktop reads and saves everything. It automatically uploads all my favorites, searches, pictures and writing. It keeps a history of my online activities, which the company can easily find.” For this reason, he also made sure to erase all traces of his online activities: “I engage in careful measures to maintain my online security. I erase all records of my online visits, erase my temporary files, and delete my wastebasket. That’s because someone can enter my computer without me knowing.”

#### The “Big 4”: Parceling Space/Time and Prioritizing Relationships

Engaging in these closet and de-evidentiary practices was especially challenging for married gay men who had to juggle what Minho termed the “Big 4.”

According to Minho, comprising the “Big 4” of Korean social life were: “family life,” “job,” “‘Happy Hour’ for enjoying oneself,” and “a boyfriend or girlfriend.” “However, on top of these things, married gay men [also] have their wives, boyfriends, children, straight friends, etc,” said Minho. Wondering aloud whether there was any group in the entire world who had as complicated a nexus of social relationships as married gay men, he said, “I’m really curious about their lives. How do they manage all these relations in terms of time management and division of economic and other resources?”

In order to juggle the “Big 4,” plus their overlapping gay and straight social relations, married gay men typically engaged in a stringent practice of prioritizing their relations and demarcating them temporally and spatially. They did this through setting some basic ground rules with their gay male partners.

According to Gangnam, “The most important thing in my life is my family. After that is my work. The third is people on this ‘side of the world.’” This seemed to confirm Peter’s complaint about gay relations always being last in the list of gay men’s priorities. This meant that while Gangnam and his boyfriend could exchange phone calls and text messages during their work hours, once he got home, he was strictly off limits. “I call him when I get off work. After that, he doesn’t call me or send me text messages. Then, I call him again when I go to work the next morning,” said Gangnam. Weekends, meanwhile, were strictly demarcated as “family time” when there were no phone calls or text messages exchanged between him and his partner. “On weekends, he never calls,” said Gangnam, even though he still had the option of texting or calling his partner.

This compartmentalization of his sexuality also extended to space. Typically, married gay men were reluctant to venture offline to gay spaces such as bars where large groups of gay men congregated. (An exception was the members of gay married men’s clubs such as “Daddy Club,” which, as we saw above, also rented out entire bars for their events). This was partly due to their wider social network. As the owner of his own company, Gangnam, for instance, had 30 people working for him but came into regular contact with 200-300 business associates. Once, walking by a table in a gay bar in Jongro, his gaze slid across that of another man: a work associate. When the two of them saw each other at work the next day, neither of them acknowledged the previous night’s meeting and pretended that nothing had happened.

### *Married Gay Men’s “Selfishness”*

For their ability to rationally divide their time, money, and *chǒng*, married gay men were typically viewed as “selfish” by other gay men. For instance, a cardinal rule among married men

in Korean culture (straight or gay) was that the husband could not spend the night outside. Called *oebak*, this was typically viewed as a pretext for cheating.

Married gay men typically agreed with this rule and some went so far as to call it their “homing instinct.” “Because I love that person, I want to be with him,” said Jeong-su. “But from the married man’s perspective, he has to naturally go home. There’s the ‘homing instinct’ (*kwisokponnŭng*).” This “homing instinct” also seemed to include the impulse to protect the family no matter what. As I had earlier mentioned in Chapter 1, married gay men, in particular, tended to be intensely passionate inside *tchimjilbangs* but cold and anonymous outside. As Incense put it, “Due to the Confucian moral upbringing, married men typically idealized their families. Even though many go to room salons and have ‘second wives,’ they try not to be responsible for them.” Considering their gay partners to be like their “second” or “third” wives, married gay men also seemed to snap back like a turtle into their shells when their single gay male partners threatened their families. “At a certain moment, they pull back and become selfish so that their partners get hurt,” said Incense.

Some gay men partly rationalized their actions saying that they had to be happy in order for their families to be happy. For instance, Jeong-su said, “I have to live as well. Because life is hard for me, I have to find a way to relieve my stress even if it is done secretly. Otherwise, the stress will bring about changes in my body, including illness.” Gangnam agreed. “It is better for me to relieve this desire rather than take that stress out on other people.”

They also rationalized their relationships with their often-single male partners on the pretext that they “knew” what they were getting themselves into. “It’s not like I lie to them,” said Gangnam. “They know before we enter the relationship that I’m married.” Single gay men, on the other hand, were often attracted to these married gay men for their image of emotional,

social, and financial security. For instance, as Minho pointed out, married gay men, on the whole, tended to be more financially secure than their single partners. “In South Korea, if you have a good job and good background, there’s nothing that stands in the way of getting married,” he said. “In fact, it would be considered strange if you were not to get married.” Gangnam agreed: “In order for younger gay men to enjoy ‘high culture’ without spending their own money, they need to meet married men.” In fact, “there are those who very openly seek out older men who can ‘help’ them,” he said.

Even these married gay men, however, ultimately acknowledged that they were “selfish.” As Gangnam put it, “I think married gay men have a lot of desire and are selfish. They are unwilling to give up anything.” But then, it was uncertain whether there was anything that they *could* give up. “Of course, I cannot give up anything. What would it be? My family? My work? Or this life?” asked Gangnam rhetorically. Giving up work or family was considered impossible as they ensured the gay men’s social lives. As one married gay man put it, “I need my family in order to be active in society; I cannot divorce.” But neither could they give up their gay sexuality because it was “instinct.” “It’s impossible to give up on this life because it’s instinct,” said Gangnam. By instinct, he meant a desire that seemed to move independently of his free will, constituting its own unruly vector of sociality. For instance, when we met on one Thursday night, he said, “I woke up at 7 and I put in a full day of work. It’s 10:30 pm now. I should be at home resting. However, here I am talking to you. That’s because my mind and body move separately.” In order to juggle his multiple commitments and affections, Gangnam said that he did what many people seemed to do more of during neoliberal times to get by: sleep less. As Gangnam put it,

I’m very busy. I teach, work in my office, and go on trips with my kids on the weekend. Once in a while, when I have time, I meet my gay friends. In order to manage my schedule, I divide my time into chunks. But there is still one way I manage to do everything—sleep less.

Gangnam said that he normally got by on five hours of sleep on weekdays and seven hours on the weekends.

*“Good Husbands,” “Dutiful Lovers,” and “Gentle Fathers”*

If gay men were often considered selfish both by themselves and the gay community, they were also—perhaps surprisingly—often considered, both by themselves and others, as “kind husbands,” “generous” fathers,” and “dutiful lovers.”

First of all, they were considered “good husbands” in being seemingly kind-hearted, understanding, and faithful to their wives. For instance, Han had met his future wife in college. More like best friends than lovers, they preferred long intimate talks to sex. With no experience in sex, he and his future wife decided to take a trip and sleep together before marriage. “Through that experience, I discovered, ‘Ah, I don’t necessarily feel a sense of distaste with my wife’s lower parts. I can still perform,’” he said. “So I came to view this as my ‘homework.’”

Working as a fund manager, he made a good living for his family. “Parents on both sides of the family tell my wife that she is extremely lucky (*pok ūl chabatda ko handa*),” he said. “Not only do I love the kids to death and take care of the housework, I also bring home a fat pay check.” He also tried to “consciously perform well” when he had sex with his wife dutifully at least once a month. “Rather than concentrating on my needs, I focus on satisfying hers,” he said. Indeed, many married gay men made it their “homework” to try to perform well, satisfying their lovers’ desires.

When his children wanted to study abroad, Han and his wife also made the ultimate sacrifice, “splitting up” their family. That is when, as we saw him comment above, “Just as a

dam would collapse, my life collapsed [and] this culture started being sucked into my life.” With his wife and two daughters living abroad, Han said that he spent most of his time exercising and preparing for marathons. This was in order to keep healthy now that there was no one to take care of him should he get sick. It was also to take his mind off the gay life that now waited enticingly to be taken up now that he did not have the “fence” of his family to rein him in. “Nowadays, whenever my parents-in-law call me to invite me over to their place for dinner, I’m exercising,” he said. “They think I’m an extremely faithful and good husband.”<sup>57</sup>

In addition to being considered good husbands and dutiful lovers, married gay men were also considered “gentle” fathers. “After knowing about this world, I think I became a much more understanding husband and father,” said Jeong-su. “Before, I used to say everything that I wanted to say. Now, if possible, I try to listen to and understand the other person’s opinion.” Asked what had brought about this change, he said it was because he was “sorry.” “Just like straight men who cheat are kinder to their wives, I’m kinder to my family.” During my research, I met many married gay “geese fathers” who, like Han, lived in one-room office-tels or apartments while their wives and children lived in the United States.

## CONCLUSION

In this Conclusion, I have examined how, with the retreat and retirement of single gay men from the gay community, married gay men, who were previously all but invisible during the mid- to late-1990s, have risen to the fore as a powerful new constituency. Considered “selfish” and “bat-like” in their blurring of sexual, monetary, and affective boundaries that constitute their multiple

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<sup>57</sup> According to one feminist scholar, “The thing is you cannot criticize these men. The gay men who are married are too ‘elegant’ (*chasanghada*). When they have sex, it appears as a form of generosity from a partner who is self-sufficient.”

gay and heterosexual social ties, their rise indicates the breakdown of the traditional model of family through rising divorce rates as well as transnational family structures such as the geese father phenomenon. In the process, we are seeing the loosening and the dismantling of the fence that had once protected the family.

Nonetheless, even as we are seeing the loosening and dismantling of this fence, we are also seeing efforts to prop it up through closet and de-evidentiary practices. Rather than seeing the total dissolution of the institution of the heterosexual nuclear family, we are seeing its reworking where heterosexual relationships are being prioritized in order to make room for gay social relations. This is a paradoxical development in that “prioritizing” would imply the greater importance of familial relations. But the necessity for this prioritizing indicates that gay desires are not being rejected outright but being incorporated into married gay men’s lives. Indeed, in making a “special time and place” for gay lovers and boyfriends among their “Big 4,” married gay men are, just like single gay men as “weekend gays,” providing a time and space for their otherwise tabooed and outlawed desires. As such, these closet practices signal an incorporation, rather than outright rejection, of homosexuality into Korean social life.

Moreover, this partial incorporation of homosexuality into gay men’s lives (both married and single) can be seen to entail both high emotional and political costs. There are high emotional costs for both married gay men and their male partners in terms of the further demarcation and segmentation of their gay identities and subjectivities as well as the further development of techniques of self-management and self-censorship to escape surveillance and detection.

However, these costs seemed to be borne no more highly than by those figures who are almost entirely absent in these gay men’s narratives: the women behind the scenes who help the

gay men maintain their social face and secure their sense of emotional stability. Depicted as “desexualized wives” and “good mothers,” they perform their emotional, reproductive, and social labor in scripts created by gay men. In mobilizing and exploiting these women in order to try to fit into the Korean nation as a homosocial bonding of men, gay men become complicit with the Korean state’s patriarchal management of these women to prop up the marriage and fertility rates during a biopolitical crisis of reproduction. In order to critique this complicity, however, we may need to first start off by first critically examining rather than sharing the post-IMF anxieties of these gay men that underlie and motivate this complicity.

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