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**From King Hyegong to Suh Dongjin:
the evolution of LGBT and homosexual rights
in the Korean community, according
to historiographical texts**

Aleksandra MÜLLER, M.A.,

aleksandra.mu98@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1900-3680>

Abstract: Even though homosexuality and other sexual minorities have never been considered illegal by the Korean government, people identifying as non-heteronormative were and are still vastly ostracised. Furthermore, the LGBT community was and is still facing social stigmatism. What cultural conditions influenced the way non-heteronormative minorities are perceived by most South Korean society? How has the LGBT minority developed over the centuries? When did the attitudes of South Koreans change for the better? The following article covers the answers to the above-stated questions based on a particular query of texts related to the topic based on historiographic records. In the first section, the influence of the Confucian ideas of Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues (三綱五倫, 삼강오륜 [*samgangoryun*]) on the image of ‘correct relationship’ and the Taoist division of gender roles based on energy adversity (yin (陰, 음 [*eum*]) and yang (陽, 양 [*yang*])) will be explained. This will serve as a basis for understanding cultural opposition to

same-sex relationships. The following subchapter consists of a chronological overview of the most important historical records regarding same-sex relationships. The third subchapter presents the sexual minority groups formed in the 1990s, such as *Chodong Society* (초동회 [chodonghoe]), *Between Friends* (친구사이 [chingu sai]) and *Maeum 001* (마음 001 [maeum gongongil]), which had the most significant impact on the development of the contemporary LGBT movement in South Korea. The last section presents current changes and problems that the South Korean LGBT society faces.

Keywords: Korean society; sexual minorities; LGBTQ; historical analysis of attitudinal changes; queer identification.

혜공왕에서부터 서동진까지: 역사적 기록들을 바탕으로 살펴본 한국사회에서의 LGBT 성소수자들의 권리 발전 동향

초록: 동성애와 기타 다른 성소수자들이 한국정부에 의해 불법으로 간주된 적은 없지만, 그들은 예전에도 그랬고 지금도 여전히 사회에서 배척되고 있다. 특히 LGBT 공동체는 현재도 사회적 오명에 직면해 있다. 어떤 문화적 요소들이 한국사회 대다수 사람들이 갖고 있는 성소수자들에 대한 인식에 영향을 미쳤는가? LGBT 성소수자 그룹은 수세기에 걸쳐 어떻게 발전해 왔는가? 그들에 대한 한국인들의 태도와 인식은 언제 보다 나아질 것인가? 본 논문은 역사적 기록들을 바탕으로 하여 위에 언급한 질문들에 대한 답을 찾고자 한다. 제 1 장에서는 유교의 기본 이념인 ‘삼강오륜’이 ‘올바른 인간관계’에 미치는 영향 그리고 도교의 ‘음양’이론에 따른 성역할의 구분에 대해 논한다. 이것은 동성애 혹은 다른 성수자들에 대한 문화적 반감을 이해하는 데 초석이 된다. 제 2 장에서는 동성애와 관련된 역사적 기록들에서 대표적인 것들을 연대순으로 살펴본다. 제 3 장은 한국에서 ‘성소수자운동’의 발전에 큰 동력이 된 1990 년대에 구성된 성소수자 단체들인 ‘초동회’, ‘친구사이’ 그리고 ‘마음 001’의 활동들을 소개한다. 마지막 장에서는 현재 한국사회에서 LGBT 성소수자 단체들의 변화양상과 그들이 직면하고 있는 문제들에 대해 논한다.

핵심어: 한국사회; 성소수자; LGBT; 태보 변화의 역사적 분석; 역사적 분석; 퀴어동일함.

Od króla Hyegonga do Suh Dongjina: ewolucja osób LGBT i ich praw w społeczności koreańskiej na podstawie tekstów historiograficznych

Abstrakt: Pomimo faktu, że homoseksualizm i inne mniejszości seksualne nigdy nie zostały uznane przez koreański rząd za nielegalne, osoby identyfikujące się jako nieheteronormatywne były i nadal są poddawane ogromnemu ostracyzmowi. Co więcej, społeczność LGBT była i nadal jest

narażona na stygmatyzm społeczny. Jakie uwarunkowania kulturowe wpłynęły na sposób postrzegania mniejszości nieheteronormatywnych przez większość społeczeństwa Korei Południowej? Jak mniejszość LGBT rozwijała się na przestrzeni wieków? Kiedy nastawienie Koreańczyków z Południa zmieniło się na lepsze? Poniższy artykuł zawiera odpowiedzi na powyższe pytania, oparte na wnikliwej kwerendzie tekstów związanych z tematem, opartych na źródłach historiograficznych. W pierwszej części omówiono wpływ konfucjańskich idei Trzech Podstawowych Węzi i Pięciu Niezmiennych Cnót (三綱五倫, 삼강오륜 [*samgang oryun*]) na obraz ‘właściwego związku’ i taoistyczny podział ról płciowych oparty na przeciwnościach energetycznych (yin (陰, 음 [*eum*]) i yang (陽, 양 [*yang*])) zostaną wyjaśnione. Posłuży to jako podstawa do zrozumienia kulturowego sprzeciwu wobec związków osób tej samej płci. Poniższy podrozdział zawiera chronologiczny przegląd najważniejszych zapisów historycznych dotyczących związków osób tej samej płci. W trzecim podrozdziale przedstawiono utworzone w latach 90 grupy mniejszości seksualnych, takie jak *Chodong Society* (초동회 [*chodonghoe*]), *Between Friends* (친구사이 [*chingusai*]) i *Maeum 001* (마음 001 [*maeum gongongil*]), które wywarły największy wpływ o rozwoju współczesnego ruchu LGBT w Korei Południowej. W ostatniej części przedstawiono aktualne zmiany i problemy, z jakimi boryka się południowokoreańskie społeczeństwo LGBT.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczeństwo koreańskie; mniejszości seksualne; LGBTQ; analiza historyczna; queer.

1. Etymological and cultural background to LGBT matters in South Korea

1.1. Etymological introduction to the topic

According to Rutt (1961: 57–58), homosexual practices were regarded with disgust during the Joseon era. However, the number of terms used to describe gay and lesbian people and their relationships could indicate that they had an appreciable place in the culture.

One of the most popular terms that were used for homosexual practices was *the dragon and the sun* (龙阳之宠, 용양지충 [*yongyang chichong*]). The dragon and the sun are classified as signs that carry *yang* (陽, 양) energy. The principles of *yin* and *yang* will be explained in more detail in the following subchapter. However, it is crucial to

emphasize that the term implies the coming together of the two male symbols and was thus often used to describe homosexual relations between men in the ruling class of the Goryeo dynasty.

화랑년 [*hwaryangnom*] means a slut or prostitute (Rutt 1961: 8). Modern *hwarang* or ‘players’ are also perceived as a homosexually oriented group (Arnold 2016: 36). As Arnold (2016: 36) puts it, „they all glance by homosexual practice, almost as though they were circling the issue without ever naming it explicitly”.

There are also terms derived from theatre culture. The first is the word *Midong-aji* (美童아지 (미동아지)) derived from the *Kkoktu Kaksi* (꼭두각시) ‘puppet theatre’. In the play, an older yangban falls in love with a boy he names *Midongaji*. Over time, the word became synonymous with handsome boys who had sex with other boys. There was also a shorter version of the word – *Midong* (美童, 미동) – meaning attractive boy, often in women’s clothing and makeup, and who was a passive sexual partner (Rutt 1961: 61). What’s more, „It is used thus in Korean translations of the bible to translate the Hebrew *qadesh* or male prostitute” (Rutt 1961: 61).

Another term stemming from theatre culture is *namsadang* (남사당). Traveling troupes recruited anyone willing to join them into what Murray (2000: 169) describes as „appearingly a homosexual community”. These communities consisted of performers who divided into groups of *sutdongmo* (숫동모, which Murray translates into ‘butch’) and *yongdongmo* (영동모, which he translates into ‘queens’). These translations seem similar to the modern slang used in LGBTQ communities when describing masculine (butch) or feminine (queen) presenting gays or lesbians.

Furthermore, Rutt also introduces the words *tojangi* (툫장이), *biyeok* (비역) as well as *namsaek* (남색). The first two supposedly have more of a literal meaning, where the first is used to describe a catamite, while the second is used to refer to same-sex intercourse or sodomy (Rutt 1961: 57-58). The third one is synonymous with the second, yet it is used in a more modern way and usually appears in a figurative sense.

In contemporary Korean, the most neutral way to describe same-sex love is *dong song ae* (동성애, 同性愛). This can be translated into ‘same-sex love’ (Naaranoja 2016: 15). Chen (2020: 124) further emphasizes the importance of this word – or instead naming relationships in this way – as it has been used more and more since the 1930s. Terms derived from the English language, such as *gay* (게이

[*gei*]), *lesbian* (레즈비안 [*lejeubian*]), and *queer* (퀴어 [*kwieo*]) are also widely used. According to Hilton (2008: 12 in Naaranoja 2016: 15), the latter is commonly used in public events such as the Seoul Queer Culture Festival (서울퀴어문화축제 [*seoul kwieo manhwa chukjae*]) or cinematography, like in Korean Queer Film Festival (한국퀴어영화축제 [*hanguk kwieo yeonghwa chukjae*]). Another commonly used term would be *seongsosuja* (성소수자 [*seongsosuja*]), which translates into ‘sexual minority’. However, there is also the term *iban* (이반 [*iban*]), which gay and lesbian activists commonly use. The term can be translated into ‘second-class’, which stands in opposition to ‘first-class’ (*ilban* (일반 [*ilban*]), which can be considered normal or general (Suh 2001: 69–70).

To avoid misunderstandings, I would like to explain the use of some of the terms that appear most often in the article. When I use the acronym LGBT, I mean people who include the extension of the abbreviation (Parent, DeBlaere, Moradi 2013), i.e., lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans people. I use ‘homosexual’ as a synonym for both ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ – naturally, the distinction will be apparent from the context. I applied a similar synonym to the term *homosexual relationship*.

1.2. Confucian and Taoist ideology as cultural background

Speaking of LGBT, it is impossible not to mention the community’s cultural background, which significantly affects the perception of sexualities other than hetero. In the case of Korea, the perception was most influenced by the philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism originating in China. It should be remembered, however, that I will only discuss part of both philosophies because more than just one subchapter could be written about them in volume. I will focus on the essential elements that, according to the researchers, will help to understand why LGBT issues were addressed in the way they did.

I will first discuss the influence of Taoism, focusing on homosexual relationships. While Taoism does not explicitly condemn same-sex relationships in any of its scriptures, its teachings indirectly convey that relationships should flourish between men and women.

This is due to the idea of combining two cosmological energies, thus creating harmony. Of course, we are talking about *yin* (陰, 음 [eum]) and *yang* (陽, 양 [yang]).

The concept of *yin* and *yang* focuses on the complementary idea of opposite forces. *Yin* is commonly identified with passiveness and submissiveness, while *yang* is recognized with activeness and dominance. The *yin* and *yang* within Tao create a complementary relationship (Chang 1986 in LeBlanc 2015: 153) in which the two complementary elements become one. This signifies the interconnection and interdependence of natural forces, in which one cannot exist without the other. Thus, the ‘natural’ relationship for humans, both sexually and in marriage, would be that of a man and a woman. Through a connection like this, they will be able to „embrace and share (...) life through their utilization of their dominant *yang* and *yin*, respectively” (LeBlanc 2015: 153). This would also help „achieve a healthy, dynamic balance between these two energies” (Francoeur 1992: 3).

After the fall of the Goryeo dynasty in 1392 (Rurarz 2009: 407–408), the Joseon dynasty adopted Confucianism as a governing ideology to confirm their dynasty as totally different from Goryeo (Rurarz 2009: 311). Even though Confucianism had negative attitudes about same-sex relationships, there were still male-to-male relationships among Buddhists and the rural ruling class. Lesbian relationships, however, were not treated with the same acceptance revealed in the palace chronicles of the Joseon dynasty (Yi 2004: 947).

As one of the leading influences that came to Korea from China, Confucianism stands at the very base of Korean society. Being the dominant belief system in the country, it has impacted the worldview of Koreans significantly and for centuries. Even now, Korean Confucianism appears in ethics textbooks. As Chung (2015: 73) says, „many of the core Confucian values (e.g., filial piety, respect, righteousness, propriety, etc.) are taught there. There is considerable attention to the inseparability of morality, society, politics, and the harmony of self, family, and community”.

The Three Fundamental Bonds and the Five Constant Virtues (三綱五倫, 삼강오륜 [samgang oryun]) (Thacker 2013: 660) are two of the essential concepts that shine a light on the premonitions of non-heteronormativity. According to Kim and Hahn (2006: 60), they have constituted heterosexuality as „a key social and ethical norm in Korea”. The Five Constant Virtues (五倫, 오륜 [oryun]) consist of:

- a) 仁 [ren] (인 [in]) *benevolence*
- b) 義 [yi] (의 [yi]) *righteousness*
- c) 禮 [li] (예 [ye]) *propriety*
- d) 智 [zhi] (지 [ji]) *wisdom*
- e) 信 [xin] (신 [sin]) *trustworthiness* (Knapp 2009: 2254).

Among these, the most crucial Virtue to grasp would have to be the concept of propriety (禮 [li] (예 [ye])). Obedience to authority, conformity to social order, and fulfilling one's responsibilities lay at the root of the concept. One of those responsibilities is filial piety, which is included in the Three Fundamental Bonds (三綱, 삼강 [samgang]), which will be further discussed below. According to Hahn and Kim (2006: 60), the duty of filial piety was

„considered as a means of earning continuity in the family lineage and the ancestral cult. (...) The heterosexually oriented family system is thus an ethical virtue as well as a basic element of social norms in Korean Confucian society”.

Furthermore, the attachment to Confucian tradition causes Korean society to be more punitive towards unconventional behavior (Adamczyk, Cheng 2014: 3).

The Three Fundamental Bonds (三綱, 삼강 [samgang]) are a set of three relationships in which the cosmological principles of the Taoistic idea of *yin* (陰, 음 [eum]) and *yang* (陽, 양 [yang]) are naturally being expressed. The concept of those opposite forces is most evident in one of the Three Fundamental Bonds (三綱, 삼강 [samgang]), namely the bond between the husband and the wife, as explained above. The relationship between the husband and the wife leads to the most natural exchange of energies, which brings balance and harmony.

According to Lim and Johnson (2001: 547) suggest that homosexuality was never ‘officially’ disparaged for religious or ethical reasons, but due to the Confucian society model, which accentuates the importance of duties and obligations, it simply disturbs the moral order. It can also be seen as rejecting traditional gender roles (Lim, Johnson 2001: 547). Helkama (2009: 50 in Naaranoja, 2016: 13) furthermore suggests that in societies that hold tradition and conformity values close to their heart, morality becomes a „social responsibility” rather than a personal choice. Interpreted in this way, homosexual relationships

become a threat not only to the value system but the ancestral cult as well.

2. Records of same-sex relationships during the Goryeo and Joseon dynasty

Though researchers have said that Korea, unlike other East Asian countries, does not have a long history of homosexual cultural activities (Martin, Berry 2003: 91), some records suggest otherwise.

One of the first records of same-sex attraction in early Korean culture is the story of monk Myojeong (妙正, (묘정 [*myojeong*])), which has been prevalent in Korean folklore tales. Myojeong was a young Buddhist monk who lived during King Wonseong's (원성왕 [*weonseong-wang*]) reign. His beauty bewitched not only the nobility of Silla but also an Emperor from the Tang Dynasty¹.

One of the most researched topics that connect with the topic of homosexual relationships in ancient Korean culture would have to be the Flowering Knights (화랑 [*hwarang*]), a so-called “homoerotic military elite” (Murray 2002: 168–171) of the Silla Dynasty (B.C 57 – A.D. 935). The *Hwarang* were a group of chosen sons of the Silla nobility that was to protect the kingdom. According to records from 1215 written down by Buddhist monk Kakhun (Lee, 2013), the first and foremost criterion to become a *Hwarang* was appearance – “It was handsome youths who powdered their faces, wore ornamented dresses, and were respected as *hwarang*”. The warriors existed in social groups and were known to meet and study all aspects of fine arts. The expression of same-sex longing is most prominent in vernacular poems such as *Song of Yearning for the Flower Boy Taemara* (慕竹旨郎歌, 모죽지랑가 [*mojukjirangga*]), *Song in Praise of the Flower Boy Kilbo* (讚耆婆郎歌, 찬기과랑가 [*changiparangga*]) and *Choyong's Song* (處容歌, 처용가 [*choyongga*]) (Kim, Hahn 2006: 61), which can be seen below:

¹ „그 뒤에 사신을 따라 당나라로 갔을 때 황제로부터 신하에 이르기까지 모두 묘정을 존경하고 좋아하였다” (Oh Hyeonggeun 오형근 1996).

Song of Yearning for the Flower Boy Taemara (慕竹旨郎歌, 모죽지랑가 [mojukjjirangga])

The whole world weeps, sadly.
For departing Spring.
Wrinkles lance
Your once handsome face.
For the space of a glance
May we meet again?
Fair lord, what hope for my burning heart?
How can I sleep in my alley hovel? (Rutt, 1961: 49)

Song in Praise of the Flower Boy Kilbo (讚耆婆郎歌, 찬기과랑가 [changiparangga])

Moon
Appearing fitfully
Trailing the white clouds,
Whither do you go?
The face of the Flower Boy Kilbo
It was reflected in the pale green water.
Here among the pebbles of the stream
I seek the bounds of the heart he bore.
Ah, ah! Flower Boy hero,
Noble pine that fears no frost! (Rutt, 1961: 51)

Chōyong's Song (處容歌, 처용가 [choyongga])

Playing in the moonlight of the capital
Till the morning comes,
I return home
To see four legs in my bed.
Two belong to me.
Whose are the other two?
But what was my own
Has been taken from me. What now? (Rutt 1961: 52).

Hahn and Kim give further examples, such as *Song of the Comet*, *Tusia Hymn*, and *Song for a Dead Sister*², that prove the homosexual eroticism of the *Hwarang* (2006: 64–65).

The earliest records of homosexuality that appear in royal Korean historical accounts are chronicled in the *Samguk*

² „(...) and Song for a Dead Sister, which was written for honour of a dead soul who died in battle”. Here, the ‘sister’ referred to is in fact a hwarang boy who adopted a passive role in homosexual acts” (Hahn, Kim 2006: 64–65).

Yusa (三國遺事). They tell the story of King Hyegong of Silla (혜공왕 [Hyegong-wang]). His father, King Gyeongdeok (경덕왕 [Gyeongdeok-wang]), was in dire need of a male successor, as his offspring was solely female. According to *Samguk Yusa*, the King begged and prayed to God to allow his wife to bear male offspring. Yet God insisted that King Gyeongdeok's destiny was to have daughters solely. God warned the King about the dangers of granting his wish, saying it would leave the country in disarray. However, King Gyeongdeok persisted. Eventually, God gave in, letting King Gyeongdeok's wife bear a son, yet according to *Samguk Yusa*, he purposefully put a female spirit into him (Yi 2004: 947). Though no official records specifically stating his sexuality exist, King Hyegong had often been described as a man by appearance and a woman by nature. The 13th-century chronicles of Il Yeon found in the *Samguk Yusa* may suggest that King Hyegong had homosexual or bisexual tendencies. Furthermore, fifteen years after his ascension to the throne, King Hyegong was killed by royal subordinates as „they were no longer able to tolerate his femininity” (Das Wilhelm 2004: 211). Some contemporary historians even contemplate that King Hyegong might have been a trans woman (Youn 1996: 3).

This, however, was not the only record of same-sex relationships among the ruling class, in Seong's historical analysis of *Hallimbyulgok* (翰林別曲 (한림별곡 [hallimbyeolgok])) (Yi 2004: 947), it is said that King Chungseon of Goryeo (高麗忠宣, 고려 충선 [Goryeo Chungseon]) had a long-time relationship with a male lover named Weonchung (Sohng, Icard 1996 in Hilton 2008: 4 in Naaranoja 2016: 11).

Similarly, King Gongmin of Goryeo (高麗恭愍, 고려 공민 [Goryeo Gongmin]) had not one but at least five young male attendants serving as sexual partners, whose names were recorded³. This kind of attendant even had their term – *chajaehwi* (子弟衛, 차재회) – which „suggests that the practice of taking passive male partners was hardly limited to King Gongmin alone” (Hahn 2006: 61 in Arnold 2016: 29).

Compared to records of gay homosexual relationships, forms of lesbian relationships are particularly scarce. According to Woo (2017: 5), this could be caused by factors such as the patriarchal system of Korean society, Confucian culture, and sexism. Naaranoja (2016: 17)

³ Their names were: Hong Yun (洪倫), Han An (韓安), Kwön Chin (權璿), Hong Kwan (洪寬) and No Sön (盧瑄) (Rutt 1961: 57).

further argues that lesbianism has always been viewed in a more negative light than male homosexuality. In connection to Confucian tradition, women uninterested in fulfilling the female duty of being a mother fail to uphold their societal responsibility.

The earliest records of lesbianism occur in the palace chronicles of the Joseon dynasty. Lesbianism was not a rare occurrence in royal facilities. Similarly to the *chajaewi*, lesbianism had its term. *Taesik* (태식), which meant sharing energy (Han 2004: 145), was prevalent in the royal palace to the extent that special penalties for women found guilty of lesbianism had to face were conceived. According to Han (2004: 145), the number of strokes with a cudgel was increased from 70 to 100 by Sejong the Great (세종대왕 [*Sejong daewang*]) himself.

The most extreme incident relating to lesbianism was that of Crown Princess Sun (순빈 봉씨 [*Sunbin bongssi*]) and her handmaiden So-Ssang (소쌍 [*Sossang*]). Crown Princess Sun, King Munjong of Joseon's (朝鮮文宗, 조선 문종 [*Joseon Munjong*]) second wife and Sejong the Great's daughter-in-law, was rumored to have had the same-sex intercourse with her handmaiden. What was almost just as unspeakable was the class difference between the two women. After all, Crown Princess Sun was part of royalty, and Sossang was a mere enslaved person. However, the rumor was proven true during a testimonial, which had been chronicled in the Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty (朝鮮王朝實錄, 조선왕조실록 [*Joseon wangjo sillok*]). According to it, Crown Princess Sun

„[she] demanded that I lay with her, but I refused. She then forcibly tore about half my clothing off and pulled me behind the folding screen; she took off the rest of my clothes and forced me down. Then, just like a man, she trifled with me” (*Sejong Sillok* 75, 7b–9b in Arnold, 2016: 32).

However, Sossang was not the only enslaved woman with whom the Crown Princess had been intimate. The Crown Princess was deposed in 1436, years before King Munjong's ascension to the throne, and banished from Joseon in 1454. Despite the previously quoted records, the Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty state that the dismissal of the Crown Princess was caused by her sending palace supplies to her hometown and inviting visitors without King Munjong's knowledge (Das Wilhelm 2004: 211). Sossang and the other handmaiden had been executed (Han 2004: 145).

In addition, there are also academic records of lesbian relationships. One of them is the 2008 musical *Gongchilpal Saesamnyuk* (공칠팔 새삼륙), inspired by a real story from 1931. Hong Okim and Kim Yongju, two 20-year-olds, fall in love with each other. Their feelings for each other were dismissed by both families, which led the two women to flee and eventually commit suicide together. Such suicide pacts (also known as ‘same-sex love double suicides’, 동성애 정사 [*dongseongae jeongsa*]) among lesbians were not a rare occurrence. According to Chen (2020: 132), the media would often report on the phenomenon, and the term mentioned earlier would circulate and soon become known in the 1920s society.

Another academic record of such relationships is Park Taewon’s (朴泰遠, 박태원) *Portrait of a Beauty* (美女圖, 미녀도 [*minyodo*]), which was serialized in the *Morning Light* (朝光, 조광 [*jogwang*]) in 1939. The novel describes the ambivalent customs that were cultivated in schools for girls. On the one hand, it was customary for girls’ schools in the years of the Japanese occupation (1920) to bring up a good wife and mother. On the other hand, it tells the custom of same-sex love between girl students, which took place in the inner quarters of girls’ schools (Ha 2020: 146).

Ten years later, Hwang Sindeok (황신덕) published the article “Stories of Same-Sex Love of Female Celebrities” (여류명사의 동성연애기 [*yeoryumyeongsa-ui dongseonyeonaegi*]) in the newspaper *Another World* (별건곤 [*byeolgeongon*]), which somewhat confirmed the events occurring in schools. However, the author stated that same-sex relations were a ‘trend’ among school-aged girls, with most marrying and having children after leaving school (Ha 2020: 147). The love that blossomed between girls was „condoned as a transient emotion that would easily and rapidly dissipate” (Ha 2020: 147).

What is also worth noting is the fact that homosexuality was well-known in rural society as well. According to Rutt (1961: 58), it was a common occurrence among *chibang yangban* (地方兩班, 지방양반), yet those involved „practices of the lower classes” (Rutt 1961: 58), among those – paederasty. Such instances were also included in literary works. One of them is the collection of anecdotes *Myongyeop Chihae* (冥葉志譜, 명엽지해) that were written by Hong Manjong (洪萬宗, 홍만중), who has lived during the reign of Sukchong (1675 – 1721). Another example would be Yuk Yong-jeong’s (1842-1917) *Lee Seong-seon* (이성선) — this novel depicts the infatuation between a widower and a neighbor’s young man (Kim 2014).

3. Same-sex love in times of war, military dictatorship, and the beginning of democracy

When the subject of homosexual relationships and love was first addressed during colonial times, they were “pathologized” (Chen 2020: 124). In her essay, Jeong Seoktae states that the only normalized form of lust and love is between heterosexuals – homosexuals should be treated. Similarly, Kim Yunkyeong said that same-sex desire was a perversion that led to sexual disease and death (Chen 2020: 124). This view of homosexuality as a disease that can be cured will be ingrained in Korean society for many years.

Modern attitudes towards homosexuality in Korea were created by combining Confucian traditions and the fear of the foreign and unknown (Naaranoja 2016: 14). As mentioned in the first subchapter, heterosexual relationships and heterosexuality was seen as fulfilling one's obligation to society. On the other hand, homosexual relationships opposed what was already known to Koreans. This is particularly evident in the relationship between Kim Oki and Kim Yongju, cited in the previous section. Let me quote the words of Ha (2020: 150):

„Through same-sex relationships, young women could maintain ties to modern cultures and lifestyles that they had been exposed to within the institutional space of girls' schools. (...) Meanwhile, journalistic descriptions of their suicide betray a keen interest in certain details of their death scene: the image of a fast-approaching train and their Western-style skirts billowing behind them as they jumped. This shows that the same way the two women staged their deaths was a statement of their strong self-identification with modernity”.

However, as can be seen from articles such as Hong Sandeok's “Stories of Same-Sex Love of Female Celebrities” cited above or Kim Yojo's (김요조) “Same-Sex Love” (동성애 [*dongsongae*]) published in 1939, there were instances of negative views towards same-sex relations. This view deepened with the beginning of the Korean War (1950–1953), where the primary role of women was to „produce a new generation of fighters for the nation”⁴ (Ha 2020: 149). This means that love between two men or two women was utterly useless to the country,

⁴ „여성의 군대, 군대의 여성” (Kim 1937: 57 in Ha 2020: 151).

which main aim was to rebuild itself and strengthen its military power because it did not result in reproduction (Chen 2020: 124).

The aversion towards people with non-heteronormative sexualities was further deepened during the rule of postcolonial governments, which stigmatized all non-normative individuals who could not adapt to social norms as pro-Japanese collaborators (Todd 2020: 10). Again, individuality was urged aside to rebuild strong Korean nation with ideas such as Park Chung Hee's 'Confucian Parental Governance'. In this, Western ideologies, such as freedom of speech and individual rights, were disregarded, and society was pushed to fulfill the hierarchal metaphor of familial relationships (Cho 2020: 268). Furthermore, according to Cho (2020: 268), „official information about non-normative sexualities such as homosexuality was restricted during the developmental period of South Korean history”, which would explain the lack of information about the situation of homosexuals during that time. A big part of the history of homosexuality is still being excavated (Todd 2020: 10).

The beginning of the modern era of the LGBT community in South Korea can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s, during which gay subculture began to emerge around the areas of Tapgol Park (탑골 공원 [*Tapgol gongweon*]) and Jongno (종로 [*Jongno*]) (Yi 2004: 947). Given the conditions mentioned above imposed by governments, acceptance of same-sex relationships and homosexuals was low. According to the *World Values Survey* of 1982 (Inglehart et al. 2014), in which almost 76% of the interviewees agreed that homosexuality was not justifiable under no circumstance. However, Cho (2020: 270) suggests that so-called 'outlets' for homoerotic experimentation did exist in the form of military institutions and contacts with foreigners such as American soldiers or gay Japanese men and women, who had a different understanding of homosexuality as most Western societies have undergone the 'sexual revolution' during the 1960s, according to which erotic life should be considered part of one's daily life and not repressed, especially not by sexual morality nor religion. This change began in Korea almost thirty years later, in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. What further deepened the perception of homosexuals being dirty and immoral was the spread of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s (Cho 2020: 269).

It wasn't until the democratization of South Korea back in 1987 and the start of its globalization, which started in 1993, that the perception of homosexuality began to change (Cho 2020: 274).

Homosexual people slowly stopped being perceived as perverse and maladjusted to society but began accepting them as community members. It should be emphasized, however, that it was a very long process that continues to this day.

The mid-1990s were also when the first gay and lesbian organizations began to emerge, mirroring the development in Taiwan (Cho 2020: 274). This happened thanks to the rapid growth and increasing access to the Internet (Kim, Shin Young 2010: 18). One of the first groups that began emerging were: *Sappho*, *Chodong Society* (초동회 [Chodong-hoe]), *Between Friends* (친구사이 [chingu sai]), and *Among Ourselves* (끼리끼리 [kkirikiri]), as well as Yonsei University's group *Come Together*.

The first formal Korean gay rights organization was named *Chodong Society* (초동회 [chodong-hoe]) in 1994. However, it soon broke up due to fights between the organization's members. *Between Friends* (친구사이 [chingu sai]) was created in the same year, in the wake of *Chodong Society*'s breakup (Youn 1996: 4). Defining their organization as a „friendship group that was based on dignified relationships between homosexuals” (Suh 2001: 72), they aimed to create a more wholesome gay culture (Kwon Kim, Cho 2011: 211).

Sappho, named after a Greek poet⁵, was the first lesbian organization established in South Korea. Created by an African-American soldier named Toni, the organization began growing as it allowed foreign gays and lesbians to meet (Youn 1996: 4; Kwon Kim, Cho 2011: 210–211).

Among Ourselves (끼리끼리 [kkirikiri]) was the lesbian counterpart of the ex-*Chodong Society* group. Unlike *Between Friends*, who were able to form their group within a month after the breakup, *Among Ourselves* needed almost a year to recruit members and establish the organization. According to Suh (2001), this was due to the patriarchal ideology of Korean society. The main goal of *Kiri Kiri* was to create a network with various Korean women's organizations to strengthen their political and social bases (Kwon Kim, Cho 2011: 211).

Yet it wasn't only these organizations that spearheaded the pro-LGBT in South Korea. Many gay and lesbian university groups

⁵ Sappho (ca. 630 BC—ca. 570 BC) is known for her lyrics poetry. A symbol of love and desire between women, ‘with the English words sapphic and lesbian being derived from her name and her home island respectively’ (Rayor, Lardinois 2014: 2–9).

appeared on campuses (i.e., *Come Together* at Yonsei University or *Maum 001* (마음 001 [*maeum kongkongil*] at Seoul National University). Among the organizers of these groups, Lee Jungwoo (이정우) and Suh Dongjin (서동진) became the representatives of the movement. They also became co-organizers of the Sexual Politics Festival (성정치 문화제 [*seongjeonchi munhwaje*]) at Yonsei University in 1995.

What undoubtedly helped the Korean LGBT community to grow and raise self-awareness were discussion groups on central Internet servers. Thanks to those, many Korean gays and lesbians rediscovered their “dark secrets” of homosexuality (Cho 2020: 271). However, these soon ended up being banned, as materials that contained homosexual content were classified as ‘harmful’ and ‘obscene’ and blocked on all public computer facilities by the Ministry of Information and Communication (Kwon Kim, Cho, 2011: 213, 216).

4. LGBT community in contemporary South Korea: the hardships of the fight for a more inclusive future

Since 2003, homosexuality has been no longer classified as harmful and obscene (Bicker, 2019). However, despite an increase in acceptance of LGBT individuals, South Korea still has a very low *Rainbow Index*⁶, ILGA Europe’s analysis of LGBT rights in countries, and discrimination against sexual minorities is still widespread. As of 2016, South Korea was among the countries with grossly low indices, scoring only 13% out of 100% possible (*SOGILAW* 2016: 17–19). According to the 2018 Stonewall Global Workplace Equality Index, 79% of South Koreans still insist that there are no people with a non-heterosexual orientation around them (*Stonewall* 2018: 2). Furthermore, according to The Korea Social Integration Survey quoted by Bicker (2019), almost half of Koreans would not like to have a homosexual neighbor, friend or even a colleague at work. What further confirms the lack of social acceptance is the coming-out of the celebrity Hong Seokcheon (홍석천), who in 2003 publicly admitted to his sexuality (Han 2000).

⁶ <https://www.ilga-europe.org/rainboweurope/2020> . Accessed 27.03.2022.

As a result, his acting and modeling careers took a hit, and Hong was not welcome on television for several years.

The biggest issue faced by the LGBT minority in South Korea is the lack of laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. While citizens' rights are generally respected, according to *Human Rights Watch* (2022), there are still concerns about their human rights. For example, a comprehensive law protecting LGBT people from discrimination has been discussed in congress several times. Yet, it has never passed the discussion phase (*Stonewall* 2018: 2). According to Todd (2020: 2), the absence of such rights is supported by Korean Christian conservatives who argue that "anal sex is not a human right"⁷. Protestant Christians are the largest group opposing the anti-discrimination law. Introduced in the early 2000s, the "homosexual agenda" remains one of the most important arguments of protest by Protestants to this day (Kim 2022: 4).

This creates an unsafe environment for most LGBT individuals, as coming out to co-workers might end with them losing their job or being bullied and mobbed by their colleagues. This lack of anti-discrimination policies is more striking, as globally LGBT-friendly employers do not show this same friendliness in South Korea (*Stonewall* 2018: 2).

As of May 2021, the Ministry of Education had yet to introduce any guidelines on the topic of LGBT representation in school textbooks, as well as the integration of conversations about these topics in the official school curricula (*Human Rights Watch* 2021: 44). What is more, alike in the case of equality in the workplace, there are no guidelines for anti-discrimination policies that would protect LGBT students from bullying regarding their sexual orientation or their gender identity (*Human Rights Watch* 2021: 73).

Furthermore, LGBT individuals frequently face challenges dealing with mental health and the South Korean healthcare system. According to Bicker (2019), "a survey of under-18's in the LGBTQ community discovered that almost half – around 45% – have tried to commit suicide". As mental health issues are still stigmatised by a considerable part of society, the concern about being criticised or refused mental health services by the providers once they learn of the sexual orientation or gender identity of their patients, LGBT South Koreans are faced with a double burden (*Human Rights Watch* 2021:

⁷ '항문섹스 인권이 아니다'.

38). This also raises the question of patient confidentiality. What further deepens the problem is that very few mental health providers are competent enough to work with LGBT people, as they are not legally required to undergo training on these issues (*Human Rights Watch* 2021: 38).

Another issue is the case of institutionalised homophobia in the military. According to article 92.6 in the 1962 Military Criminal Act, sexual acts among soldiers are punished with up to two years in prison. This, allegedly, is supposed to maintain discipline in the military. However, this article openly violates South Korea's international human rights obligations. Reid, the LGBT rights director at *Human Rights Watch*, even mentions that criminalising consensual intercourse between adults should have no place in Korean society, especially since this law only applies to military service (2019). However, last April, South Korea's Supreme Court overturned the conviction of two men prosecuted under article 92.6 of the Military Criminal Act. Military authorities had accused the two men of engaging in sexual activities while off duty, convicting them of two-year-long prison sentences (Thoreson 2022). The Supreme Court said that „the authorities' 'use of article 92.6 to punish consensual sex outside of military settings jeopardises the autonomy, equality, and dignity of soldiers” (Thoreson 2022).

However, the movement for equal rights for the LGBT minority in South Korea grew significantly over the years. In over 20 years since the start, back in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, South Korean society grew more accepting of the minority, and LGBT-friendly groups and communities like *HaengSeongIn* (행성인), *the Korea Sexual Minority Culture and Rights Center* (한국 성적 소수자 문화 인권 센터, *hanguk seongjeok sosuja munhwa ingwon senteo*) and the well-known *Chingusai* (친구사이) have provided support for LGBT individuals.

What is also worth noting is the growing representation of LGBT individuals in media, especially in movies. In their article on queer cinema, Singer and Kim (2011) break down the history of Korean queer cinema into three chronological periods and how queer content is displayed. The periods are the Invisible Age (1976–1998), the Camouflage Age (1998–2005), and the Blockbuster Age (2005–present).

The name for the Invisible Age was created due to the invisibility of homosexual-themed movies. Though the directors tried to bring them to the front, the social pressures made it impossible

(Singer, Kim 2011). For lesbian love, the first film was *Ascetic: Women and Women* (금욕: 여자와 여자 [geumyok: yeoja-wa yeoja]), directed by Kim Suh Yong (김수형). Filmed in 1976, it tells the story of Yeonghwi and Miae, which ends with Yonghwi's unhappy marriage and Miae's suicide. The film received awards, but remained unknown. One of the first films to feature same-sex love between men was *Broken Branches* (내일로 흐르는 강 [naeillo heureuneun kang]) by Park Jaeho (박재호) in 1995. Divided into three parts, the film tells the story of a family. In the third, the fate of two closeted men, Jeongmin and his lover, Seonggeol, are presented.

Thanks to the popularity of Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1996), Korean directors increasingly undermined freedom of expression as the new liberal government helped bring a more sympathetic policy to the LGBT community and relax 'ethical' standards for films and other artistic works, which characterises the Camouflage Age (Singer, Kim 2011). These were especially popular among art house and independent filmmakers, who often presented their works at festivals like the 'Rainbow' Queer Culture Festival. During this time, movies like *Memento Mori* (여고괴담 두번째 이야기 [yeogogwidam dubeonjjae iyagi]), *Bungee Jumping of Their Own* (번지점프를 하다 [beonjjeompeureul hada]) and *Road Movie* (로드무비 [rodeu mubi]) were made. Whether the themes of homosexuality were camouflaged in the movies or not, the increasing LGBT presence in Korean cinema gave the impression that an openly 'homosexual movie' would soon make a splash at the mainstream box office (Singer, Kim 2011).

After around 2005, the themes of homosexual love became a sort of "spicing up" of the usual heteronormative plot lines (Hong 2008 in Singer, Kim 2011). At this time modern classics like *The First Shop of Coffee Prince* (커피 프린스 일호점 [keopi peurinseu ilhojeom]), *Personal Taste* (개인의 취향 [gaein-ui chwhiyang]) and *Life is Beautiful* (인생은 아름다워 [insaengeun areumdawo]) were created. Some of the more modern movies that talk about homosexual love are *A Frozen Flower* (쌍화점 [ssanghwajeom]), *Two Weddings and a Funeral* (두 번의 결혼식과 한 번의 장례식 [du beon-ui kyeolhonsik-gwa han beon-ui jangryesik]), *The Handmaiden* (아가씨 [ahgassi]) and *Our Love Story* (연애담 [yeonaedam]).

Moreover, it should also be emphasised that the LGBT community is also increasingly appearing on social media and is openly endorsed by celebrities. As an example, mention Hong Seokcheon,

mentioned earlier, has recently started to reappear on TV shows and give interviews. Another almost legendary figure is Harisu, the first transgender celebrity performing on stage since the early 2000s. You can also think of drag artists like Nana or Hurricane Kimchi, who fight for LGBT rights through their performances (Williams 2023). Support for the LGBT community is also shown at the recently popular k-pop concerts, where idols run around the stage holding the rainbow flag – the hallmark of LGBT.

However, despite the increased representation of gay people and their relationships in the media and growing acceptance, there are still issues that need to be resolved for members of the LGBT community to feel safe in their workplace, school, and other public spaces and for them to become truly equal members of society.

5. Conclusions

When talking about the subject of LGBT minorities in any country, it is impossible not to mention the cultural realities that most strongly influence the perception of society on this subject. In the case of South Korea, this cultural background is the philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism and the ideas contained in them. It was through the concept of *yin* (陰, 음 [eum]) and *yang* (陽, 양 [yang]) and The Three Fundamental Bonds and the Five Constant Virtues (三綱五倫, 삼강오륜 [samgang oryun]), that heteronormativity was constituted as a social norm that, despite the absence of official opposition, became the duty of every man and woman. It is worth noting that increased hostility towards same-sex love came with the introduction of Christianity. The negative perception is also reflected in the language – in it, terms for gay, lesbian, and same-sex relationships are often synonymous with perversion or some sexual anomaly.

However, it should be remembered that despite the hostility towards homosexual people, this does not mean that all individuals hide their sexuality. Cases of more or less open admission of one's 'true self' have been immortalised in the pages of history, including *Samguk Yusa* (三國遺事), the *Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty* (朝鮮王朝實錄, 조선왕조실록 [Joseon wangjo sillok]) and *Hallimbuilgok* (翰林別曲, 한림별곡 [hallimbyeolgok]), being a confirmation that

homosexuality is not a modern invention. Kings, princesses, and ordinary people were part of what we now call the LGBT community. Contemporary attitudes have shifted from somewhat hostile indifference (or tolerance) towards LGBT people to negative and sometimes even demonising.

However, it should be remembered that despite the hostility of some social groups towards the LGBT community, support and acceptance for them is growing each year. Non-heteronormative individuals more and more often appear in the public spotlight or are presented in films, series, or books, which means that they are no longer a foreign concept and theory and have “become people of flesh and blood”. As an example, it is enough to mention characters such as Hong Seokcheon or Harisu in a popular reality show based on a Korean series in which the topic of homosexual attraction appeared.

Although over time, more and more scientists have dealt with LGBT topics and their stories hidden in the pages of history, it should be emphasised that this research is still scarce. It will be a long time until the investigation is satisfactory. Still, it is hoped that from year to year, we will learn much more about LGBT representatives and the realities of their life in antiquity, modernity, and the present day.

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