On September 24, 2007 at Columbia University, when Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed that there are no gays in Iran, it was to “laughter and cries of disbelief” from the audience—indeed, from the rest of the world.\(^1\) However, not too long ago, (and perhaps still occurring in rural pockets of the country,) it was not uncommon to hear South Koreans make the exact same claim for their country. South Korea is well known for its conservative, Confucian history. Discussions of sexuality, much less homosexuality, are generally considered taboo, and it was not until 1990 that the first college textbook on sexuality was even published.\(^2\) And when Korean television actor Hong Seok-chun\(^3\) came out of the closet in 2000—the first celebrity in South Korea to do so—he lost his job.\(^4\)

Yet, in spite of this, South Korean cinema has increasingly included homosexuality as an indirect theme or even as the direct focus of recent films, culminating in the recent blockbuster *Wang üi namja* (*The King and the Clown*),\(^5\) and continuing with the hit television drama series *K’ôp’i p’ûrinsû 1-hojôm* (*Coffee Prince*) in 2007.\(^6\) The increased presence and visibility of gay characters or themes in Korean

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3. Korean names will be romanized as the person prefers, if known; otherwise, McCune-Reischauer romanization will be used. Surnames will be listed first for Korean and Chinese names unless being used in formatted citations that dictates otherwise.
5. *Wang üi namja*, DVD, dir. Chun-ik Yi, 2005 (Seoul: KOFIC, 2006). Korean films often have English titles that are not directly translated from the Korean. Unless otherwise noted, all English titles of Korean films are the titles that were released with the film rather than a translation of the Korean.
film and television begs the question of how such an increase translates into reflections of change in societal attitudes towards homosexuality. Many observers have noted the increased discourse on the topic of homosexuality and assume that “Korean society is attaining a somewhat ‘better’ or ‘correct’ understanding of homosexuality,” but this is not necessarily the case. Does this increased discourse really suggest a growing acceptance of “non-traditional” lifestyles in Korea, or is it merely a passing cinematic fad in which directors and producers attempt to shock their audience with “edgy” themes? In reality it is a complex blend of both. Korean society is slowly becoming more aware of, and, even more slowly, accepting of male homosexuality, in part thanks to the increased profile of gay characters in Korean film. On the other hand, the films that do deal honestly and directly with the subject tend to be independent, low budget, artsy flicks designed more for film festival rather than blockbuster recognition. As we will see, Korean films that were domestic blockbuster hits tend to approach homosexuality from indirect or subtle angles, avoiding overtly sexual themes in same-sex relationships in order to prevent the loss of ticket sales at the box office.

There has not yet been any research that has comprehensively addressed the growing numbers of gay themes or characters in South Korean television and film. This paper is an attempt to make sense of both the growing numbers of portrayals of homosexuality on the screen and to catalog the films that have already addressed themes or issues of homosexuality.

**Homosexuality in Ancient Korea**

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Unlike China or Taiwan, Korea has no “long, rich, and varied history of same-sex cultural activities and traditions.” Nevertheless, there are a handful of instances in Korean history in which homosexual behavior is purported to have been present. The first mention of homosexuality in Korean history may be the record of King Hyejong (765-780 CE), the son of King Kyŏngdŏk (742-765), who is said to have been born with a “female spirit.” He preferred the company of men and was assassinated due to his “femininity.”

The next purported mention is that of a Buddhist monk, Myojong, who lived during the reign of King Wŏnsŏng (785-798) during Silla times, and was courted by both Silla male aristocrats and a Tang dynasty emperor. The legend of Myojong exists in the *Samguk Yusa*, which recounts a story in which a turtle living near Myojong coughs up a jewel. After catching it, Myojong began to carry the jewel with him wherever he went, causing everyone who met him to become infatuated with him. There are no direct homosexual references in the text, but it is possible to speculate that there were some sort of same-sex relations between Myojong and other men.

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11. Ilyon, *Samguk Yusa: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*, trans. Tae-Hung Ha and Grafton Mintz (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1972), 119. The pertinent text from *Samguk Yusa* is as follows: “From that day forward every man who saw him became deeply attached to Myojong, while women fell passionately in love with him. When King Wŏnsŏng heard of this phenomenon he summoned the monk to court. He at once conceived an affection for him as deep as that for his own son, and all the court including the princes and princesses were similarly affected.

“Just at this time a diplomatic mission was about to start for China. The ambassador, who was attracted like everyone else, secured royal permission to include Myojong in his party. No sooner had the Chinese Emperor beheld him than he too was charmed, and all the nobles of his court. In this fashion the young Silla monk enjoyed the imperial favor for many days and nights in the company of the Chinese princes and princesses, as if he were a prince of the blood himself.”
Perhaps the most well known account of homosexual practices in South Korea is that of the Silla dynasty hwarang warriors, a militarily elite group of young men known for their loyalty, morals and looks. Being a widely studied subject, the issue of whether or not the hwarang were a “homoerotic military elite” is controversial.12

In the Koryô dynasty, male same-sex relationships were “very common” in the aristocracy and were referred to as yongyang-chi-ch’ong.13 King Mokchong (997-1009) was known to have same-sex relations, and King Ch’ungsôn (1275-1325) was thought to have had a “long-term relationship” with another man named Wônchung.14 A more substantiated historical claim is that of King Kongmin (1352-1374), who was known for his attraction to other men and went so far as to form his own unit of guards, known as chajewi, with whom he had sexual relations.15

With the rise of the Chosôn dynasty came neo-Confucian thought, which condemned same-sex relationships. In spite of this, male same-sex relationships were said to continue among Buddhist monks and the aristocracy. There has also been speculation that one of King Sejong’s (1418-1450) daughter-in-laws had a sexual

13. According to Kim and Hahn, yongyang-chi-ch’ong refers to “the dragon and the sun, implying the coming together of two male symbols.” Kim and Hahn, “Homosexuality in Ancient and Modern Korea,” 62. However, Rutt’s version of the origin of the phrase is more convincing: “The word used to describe homosexual activity in the Koryô Sa in this connection is the Chinese literary expression lung-yang-chih-ch’ung (龍陽之寵, Korean pronunciation yongyang-chi-ch’ong), which does not have the expected reference to the two male symbols, the dragon and the sun, but refers to a favourite of the feudal lord of Wei (魏) who was known as Lung-yang.” Rutt, Flower Boys of Silla, 57.
relationship with her female servant, and the rumors regarding this caused Sejong to meet with his cabinet on October 24, 1436. He was advised to remove his daughter-in-law’s status of nobility.\textsuperscript{16}

Finally, the \textit{namsadang}, a troupe made up of men that existed until the colonial period, were known for their homosexual relations. Members of the \textit{namsadang} were divided into “butch” (\textit{sutdongmo}) and “queen” (\textit{yŏdongmo}), with the “queen” members of the troupe playing the female characters in performances, and ostensibly, the “passive” role in sexual relations. Young boys who initially joined the troupe were referred to as \textit{midong} or \textit{ppiri}. It has also been speculated that senior “butch” members allowed their lovers to act as male prostitutes in the villages where they performed. Although it was common knowledge that the \textit{namsadang} practiced homosexuality, there is no evidence that this bothered their audience, who were commoners.\textsuperscript{17} Traveling male prostitutes were also frequent from the middle half of the Chosŏn dynasty.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Homosexuality in Modern Korea}

Unlike most Western nations, homosexuality has never been prohibited or restricted in Korea’s legal code. However, the lack of laws banning homosexuality are not a sign of acceptance in Korean society or that homosexuality is viewed as “equal” to heterosexuality in the eyes of the law. Rather, homosexuality has a “non-status,” as it

\textsuperscript{16} Choi et al., “South Korea.”
\textsuperscript{18} Kim and Hahn, “Homosexuality in Ancient and Modern Korea,” 62. For more information about the presence of homosexuality on the Korean peninsula from the Silla dynasty through the end of the Chosŏn dynasty, see Rutt, \textit{Flower Boys of Silla}, 57-66.
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were—it’s very existence has been ignored. This brings about the obvious rhetorical question: How do you defend your identity, indeed, your existence, when it is acknowledged neither in society nor in your country’s legal code? In addition, Martin and Berry note that “same-sex sexual behavior has had little public recognition… making those who wish to engage in it liable to prosecution under laws regulating ‘public obscenity,’ loitering, hooliganism, and so forth.” Thus, the lack of a legal definition allowing or prohibiting homosexuality is just as problematic as the presence of one.¹⁹

In addition to the lack of legal strictures, traditional conventions make the practice of homosexuality difficult in Korean society. An emphasis on family makes the continuation of the family line a priority in Korean society, and reproduction is viewed as a “filial obligation” to one’s family. Martin and Berry comment that “other sexual behaviors may be tolerated, but often as an additional indulgence, provided this obligation is fulfilled rather than as an alternative to it.”²⁰ Thus, regardless of whether a man has same-sex relations or not, he will still be expected to marry and have children. If his family is aware of his same-sex sexual exploits, they will tend to ignore them as though they never occurred rather than bring them to light as long as offspring are produced.

It is also important to note that the conservative nature of traditional Confucian values is compounded by the large percentage of the Korean population that is Christian. Christianity in Korea is generally derived from American Protestant fundamentalism, so Korean Christians have an additional moral dilemma blocking their acceptance of homosexuality.

Some Korean psychologists go so far as to view male same-sex attraction as a “natural” part of growing up.\textsuperscript{21} This allowance for men does not apply to women, however. Lesbianism is viewed in a much more negative light than male homosexuality in Korea.\textsuperscript{22} It is considered preposterous that a woman would want to “shun” her duty to marry and have children, which should be viewed as the greatest achievement of her life. Even in modern Korean society, traditional Confucian remnants stress the values of “motherhood, chastity, and virginity” for women.\textsuperscript{23}

This is in the contrast to the United States, for example, where the strong societal emphasis on male masculinity causes many heterosexual men to become squeamish or disgusted at even the mention of male homosexual behavior.\textsuperscript{24} Women in Western countries, including the United States, have historically been able to develop more “intimate” same-sex friendships, with physical contact and close confidences between women viewed as normal until the last few decades.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, the idea of surpassing a typical friendship and becoming physically intimate was perhaps not such a great leap for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Choi et al., “South Korea.”
\item \textsuperscript{23} Seo, “Mapping the Vicissitudes,” 75. It should be noted that female sexuality in general—regardless of orientation—is also looked down upon in neo-Confucian tradition.
\item \textsuperscript{24} One only has to consider the number of film clips in American cinema where two heterosexual men accidentally or erroneously physically touch each other—whether in a romantic manner or not—and immediately leap away, exceedingly disgusted, and proceed to do something “manly,” such as fight, or do something “comedic,” such as wash their mouths out with soap. An early example of this is the 1927 film, \textit{The Kid Brother}, in which some brothers pat the hand of a woman sleeping behind a curtain with increasing levels of boldness, only to discover that it is their effeminate younger brother, not a woman, who is sleeping there. They proceed to beat up their brother to compensate for their embarrassing mistake. Darker examples include the high-profile case of Matthew Shepard’s murder in 1998 by two men after being “hit on” by Shepard, as well as the recent murder of a gay 15-year-old boy named Lawrence King by a classmate after King asked the classmate to be his valentine. John Cloud, “Prosecuting the Gay Teen Murder,” \textit{Time}, February 18, 2008, US News Section, http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1714214,00.html. See also Vito Russo, \textit{The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies} (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987).
\item \textsuperscript{25} While it is still normal to see physical contact (such as hand-holding or kissing) between female acquaintances, friends or colleagues in Europe, in the United States, while still more acceptable than physical contact between men, it is uncommon to see American women hold hands, link arms, or kiss in public unless they are dating.
\end{itemize}
many Americans. Indeed, lesbians are largely viewed as “sexy” by American males imposing their own sexual fantasies of sleeping with two women onto the idea of lesbian relationships. “Real” lesbianism, like female sexuality in general, vanishes “behind a male vision of sex.”

Indeed, a study published in 2001 compared levels of homophobia between American and South Korean social work college students. Numerous studies of homophobia in the United States have found that certain “demographic variables… are strongly associated with levels of homophobia.” Males, along with older and less educated people also tend to be significantly more homophobic than females or younger and more educated people. Among American social work students and professionals, between one-third and half of the respondents were found to be homophobic, whereas nearly eighty percent of South Korean social work undergraduate and graduate student were found to be homophobic. In addition, there were no statistically significant gender differences in rates of homophobia in Korea. Notably, the most “homophobic” reactions were to questions involving how respondents would feel to discover that their sibling, child or spouse were homosexual. However, the survey also found that respondents who had previously discussed issues of homosexuality in the classroom were less homophobic than those who had not. This study demonstrates that discussions of homosexuality are still taboo and that strong Confucian traditions stressing the importance of family are one of the factors preventing acceptance of homosexuality in society, but that exposure to the idea of homosexuality was effective in lowering rates of homophobia.

26. For more information on portrayals of lesbianism in Western history, see Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet.
In spite of the difficulties of maintaining an actively gay lifestyle in Korea, some scholars argue that it is actually easier to be gay in Korea than elsewhere—up to a certain point. Unlike the United States, for example, it is not uncommon to see members of the same sex in close physical proximity, and such closeness is not an indication of a romantic or intimate relationship. Thus, Koreans who are gay might find it possible to live with their same-sex partner or lover without raising any suspicions regarding their sexuality while in college or even for several years after graduation. At some point, however, they will be pressured by their families to marry and will no longer be able to maintain the façade. At this point, most Koreans tend to marry rather than come out of the closet to their families.

Queer Korean Society and Activism

The first gay activist organization in Korea was formed in 1994. Before that, queer Korean society was underground and limited to large cities like Pusan and Seoul, and the only way to meet other gays was by “cruising” or going to gay bars. In particular, the areas around Nakwon-dong and Tapgol Park in central Seoul were known as “cruising areas” for gay men, and a handful of exclusively male gay bars also opened in Nakwon-dong. In order to identify each other, gay men would use “ostentatious mannerisms.”

28. This ranges from friends of the same gender holding hands in public to sitting on each other’s laps or sleeping in close proximity (particularly between secondary school students). See also Kim and Hahn, “Homosexuality in Ancient and Modern Korea,” 62-3, Sohng and Icard, “Korean Gay Man in the United States,” 119-20, and Lim and Johnson, “Korean Social Work Students’ Attitudes,” 549.
29. As mentioned previously, even coming out to one’s family might not lessen the pressure to marry.
30. This applies overwhelmingly to gay men. I have not yet learned of any lesbian bars or “cruising areas” that existed prior to the 1990s, although informal meetings did occur.
31. This is similar to the practice by Western gay men earlier in the century of using scarves or slang terminology to identify one another. For a visual example of such mannerisms, see Naeil ro hūrūn̄n̄ kang,
The first gay activist organization, *Ch’odonghoe*, was formed by a Korean student who had studied abroad in the United States. Shortly after its formation, *Ch’odonghoe* separated into two groups that are still active today, *Ch’in’gusai* and the lesbian rights group *Kkirikkiri*. In 1995, a gay student organization called Come Together was formed at Yonsei University, followed by a similar organization at Seoul National University called *Maum001*. After this, gay organizations began to slowly appear in all sectors of Korean society, with the first university lesbian rights organization being formed at Ewha Womans University in 2001. As gay activism has continued to grow since then, a divide can be observed between the younger generation of gays and lesbians and older gays who spent their twenties in the underground culture of Nakwon-dong. Gays over thirty tend to view sexuality as a “shameful desire” and tend to reject gay organizations or activist groups.

Gay “areas” of Seoul have also expanded since the 1990s, and queer society is no longer as hidden as it once was. An area of Itaewon, colloquially referred to as “Homo Hill,” boasts a number of gay bars. In addition, the areas of Sinch’on and Hongdae both have gay bars or cafés. A notable expansion of visible queer society is the growing presence of Korean lesbian culture. There are now at least two bars that cater exclusively

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32. The number “001” referred to the percentage of total human rights, out of one hundred, that gays and lesbians in Korea had. The organization was called *Maum003* at the time of the publication of Seo Dong-Jin’s article in 2001. Currently, the organization is called *Maum005*. Maum005, http://w1.hompy.com/snumaum/postmaum/a1.htm.


34. Seo, “Mapping the Vicissitudes,” 77.

35. These are the neighborhoods near Yonsei University and Hongik University, respectively. The area around Hongik University, in particular, is known for its “artsy” atmosphere, making it ostensibly more “gay-friendly” than many other parts of Seoul.
to lesbian clientele in the Hongdae area, and Sinch’on Park is known as a “hang-out” for young lesbians.

Current lesbian culture in Korean society is similar to the butch/femme underground culture that was ubiquitous in the United States during the 1940s and 50s in that Korean lesbians define themselves as belonging to a specific “gender,” the equivalent of “butch” or “femme.” When conversing with Korean lesbians in a bar in Seoul, one will inevitably asked to define her “gender,” and it is taboo for two “masculine” lesbians to date one another or for two “feminine” lesbians to date one another. This is similar to trends in Taiwan and China delineating between “P” and “T” gender roles, with “T” referring to “tomboy” and “P” referring to “princess” or “lao po,” although in China the gender roles are less strict than in Korea, and seeing two “P” lesbians date each other is not uncommon.

Terminology used to refer to gays and lesbians has also evolved over the last two decades. During the “subculture” era, the terms pogal and iban were commonly used. Pogal was a reverse of the word kalbo, a vulgar term for “prostitute.” This term was used as a self-degrading reference because of the limits of gay life at that time, which essentially consisted of furtive sexual encounters and nothing more. This term is no longer in use. Iban came into use after pogal and is a play on the word ilban, which can

37. A humorous example of the nature of this sort of identification is the experience of an American friend at a lesbian bar in Sinch’on who had caught the eye of a Korean woman identifying as “masculine.” As it was unclear based on her appearance, the Korean lesbian asked the American whether she identified as “masculine” or “feminine.” When the American replied that she had never identified as either, the Korean looked at her critically, and, deciding that she liked the American too much to end the conversation, nodded decisively and said, “I think you’re a femme,” settling the technicality of the situation if not the reality.
mean either “first-class” or “universal;” thus, *iban* could alternately imply the “second-class” or the, so to speak, “non-universal” nature of homosexuality. The term is still commonly used today, particularly by activist organizations and young lesbians.\(^3\)\(^9\) Other terms that have been used include *homo* and *kei* (“gay”), taken from their corresponding English terms. The term *homo* was generally used by heterosexuals to refer pejoratively to the sexual aspects of homosexuality. Ironically, *kei* was originally used to refer to transgenders who had or were planning to undergo a sex change operation, and is now used to refer to effeminate gay men.\(^4\)\(^0\) It is also common to hear the term *tongsŏngyŏnaeja*, which literally means “same sex lover,” but this is used solely in reference to “erotic desires.”

Perhaps more common is the term *tongsŏngae*, or “same sex love,” which is a more neutral term.\(^4\)\(^1\) In the field of queer studies in Korea, the word “queer” (*k’wiŏ*) has been co-opted, and this term is frequently also used to refer to cinema, festivals, etc. For women, the term “lesbian” (*lejūbiŏn*) is generally used or “lez” (*lejū*) for short, but *yŏsong tongsŏngae* will also be heard at times. In addition, although this does not seem to be common in Korea anymore, a term that was formerly used by female secondary school students to refer to lesbianism was “S” relations, which seems to have been derived from Japanese.\(^4\)\(^2\)


\(^4\)\(^0\) It should also be noted that the transgender scene in Korea tends to remain separate from the gay and lesbian scene. Seo, “Mapping the Vicissitudes,” 69-70.

\(^4\)\(^1\) This is also the most common translation for “homosexuality” in Korean-English dictionaries.

\(^4\)\(^2\) I learned of this during a conversation with Hwasook Nam on February 11, 2008. I have not yet been able to substantiate it in the existing literature on the subject but did locate a reference to the usage in Japan after the Meiji Restoration. The term “‘S’ relations” was used in Japan to refer to “schoolgirl crushes,” which were considered innocuous until a number of double suicides began to draw public attention to the relationships. “S” refers to *shojo*, or girl, but also indicates “sister” or “sex.” For more information, see Saskia Wieringa, “Silence, Sin, and the System: Women’s Same-Sex Practices in Japan,” in *Women’s
The Opening of Korean Cinema

After World War II, South Korean cinema was primarily involved in the importation and distribution of American Hollywood movies, as well as Hong Kong gangster films that mimicked Hollywood-style movies. Thus, the “Americanization” of South Korean moviegoer tastes affected the development of the Korean film industry.43

Additionally, Korean film has never been free of “ideological” control by the South Korean government. In 1962, the Korean Motion Picture Act ( Yönghwabŏp) forbade films that might “offend the moral standards of the public,” but was really a method to “restrict and control” the film industry. In addition to censoring movies through a Public Ethics Committee with unlimited censorship powers, the Korean Motion Picture Act limited imports and deliberately drove smaller film production companies out of business. Until the 1990s, directors ran the risk of arrest or even being banned from the industry if their films were judged to violate national security or sympathize with Communism. As Paquet notes, however, the reasons that films were censored or edited was not always clear, with “seemingly innocuous” material being edited out and more “risqué” material being allowed through the censors at times.44 Film censorship was particularly strict between 1972 and 1986, and this period was viewed as the “most depressed” in Korean cinematic history.45

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The revisions of the Motion Picture Act in 1963, 1966, 1970 and 1973 did not change the function of the law but, rather, affected “lower-level regulations,” causing “considerable chaos” in the industry. The fifth revision of the law in late 1984 brought about significant changes that resulted in a proliferation of smaller film production companies and allowed for greater production freedom. The sixth revision of the law in 1986 was the result of pressure from the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA) and a subsequent Korea-US Film Agreement, which abolished film import quotas and the import tax of 100 million won, and allowed foreign-owned film production companies to “operate on Korean soil.” After this revision of the Motion Picture Act, the number of foreign imported films in Korea increased nearly tenfold, and a number of Hollywood film studios set up offices in Korea.46

The increase in the number of foreign films in the Korean market, along with the presence of Hollywood studio offices in Korea, caused a number of problems for the domestic Korean film industry. First, the traditional film distribution method, which was regionally based, was upset as Hollywood studios bypassed regional distributors used by domestic film companies and distributed films nationally themselves. Second, audience interest in domestic films dropped as Hollywood films increased in number and availability.47

The drop in domestic film popularity, however, galvanized Korean film directors and producers to “revitalize” the Korean film industry by upgrading both the technical and artistic qualities of domestic films.48 In addition, many Korean companies were able to focus on the production of domestic films rather than dividing their time between

47. Paquet, “Korean Film Industry,” 36.
domestic film production and foreign film distribution, which allowed a number of new directors a chance to bring “fresh spirit” into the field. This became known as the “Korean New Wave.”

Around the same time, Korean conglomerates, or chaebŏl, became heavily involved in the production of films. The first chaebŏl to begin working in the film industry was Samsung, quickly followed by others. With the increased competition from the larger numbers of Hollywood films being shown in Korea, prices also increased, which at times made the price of Korean film rights higher than the cost of film production. Considering that chaebŏl such as Samsung, Daewoo, and LG all manufactured VCRs and ran video divisions, their investment in film production was a logical step, for by investing in the production of film, the chaebŏl found that they could purchase film rights at lower prices.

By the mid-1990s, chaebŏl had begun to completely finance films in exchange for all film rights. They also exerted great influence over the actual filmmaking process. One of the long-term effects of the chaebŏl’s involvement in production was a rise in film budgets, an emphasis on accounting, and the rising profile of domestic movie stars. The chaebŏl set up a film infrastructure that would “put a check on the growth of the Hollywood branch offices,” which gave domestic films an edge in the box office. Chaebŏl also thought that limiting films to specific genres would increase the film’s success at the box office. Thus, under the chaebŏl, films tended to be predictable and repetitive, and while budgets may have swelled, diversity in filmmaking styles did not.

51. Ibid., 38-40.
The chaebol left the film industry after the 1997 financial crisis in South Korea, and their position was partially filled by venture-capital companies. However, these venture-capital companies tended to spread their investments over a number of films rather than funding a film completely. Thus, they were less inclined to become involved in the film production process, and film producers and directors found that they had more artistic freedom than they had had when financed by the chaebol. This coincided with the “boom period” of Korean cinema from 1999 on, and the rising success of Korean film meant that investors were more willing to take cinematic risks, which caused the scope of Korean films to diversify, with new genres and ideas being tested. In addition, film censorship was ruled unconstitutional in 1996, and the Public Performance Ethics Committee that oversaw film censorship was replaced by the Public Performance Promotion Association in 1997, giving producers and directors “unprecedented” freedom in making “edgier” or more “daring” films. This opened the door for the production of queer film in Korea. Before discussing this, however, it is necessary to look at the overall history of queer cinema, which laid the foundation for Korean films portraying homosexuality.

52. Paquet argues that many of the chaebol were looking to exit the industry even before the crisis because they did not make as much money as they had hoped for when entering the film industry. She views their conveniently timed exit as an excuse rather than as having been caused by the crisis itself. Paquet, “Korean Film Industry,” 42-43.
53. Ibid., 43-44.
The History of Queer Cinema

Like other Western nations, German laws prohibited homosexuality in the late 1800s in the form of Paragraph 175, enacted in 1871 after German unification.\(^{55}\) In one of the first pleas in history to end persecution of gays and lesbians, a Berlin physician by the name of Magnus Hirschfeld unsuccessfully petitioned the Reichstag to abolish Paragraph 175 in 1897. Despite his failure to achieve the law’s abolishment, Germany continued to become “the most dynamic country in Europe.” With this new status arrived a multitude of social movements, which created an atmosphere of “openness to new ideas,” including a gay rights movement, and urban, gay subcultures began to increase in both size and number. After World War I, the Weimar Republic brought with it an even more liberal atmosphere, and Berlin became the “gayest” city in Europe.\(^{56}\)

It was in this atmosphere that the first films portraying homosexuality were produced. The first gay film in the world, *Anders als die Anderen (Different from the Others)*, released in 1919,\(^{57}\) openly advocated for tolerance of homosexuality and the repeal of Paragraph 175 through the pleadings of Magnus Hirschfeld, who had a cameo in the film. *Anders als die Anderen* was followed by a number of others, including a remake of the film called *Gesetze der Liebe (The Laws of Love)* and released in 1927.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{55}\) Laws banning homosexual acts were abolished in Bavaria in 1813 and in Hanover in 1840, but were established nationwide after the unification of Germany under Prussian law. It should be noted that Paragraph 175 did not mention same-sex sexual relations between women. See Miller’s chapter entitled “Germany’s Golden Age,” in *Out of the Past*, 103-122.  
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 102-114.  
\(^{57}\) This film was subsequently banned in a number of German cities, which illustrates the increasing polarization of “Left” and “Right” politics within Germany. Ironically, this political polarization—the very thing that provided the atmosphere in which films like *Anders als die Anderen* could be produced—would end up being the very thing that would allow the Nazi Party to gain power. Ibid., 120-122.  
\(^{58}\) *Gesetze der Liebe* and *Anders als die Anderen* were both destroyed by the Nazis. A partial version of *Anders als die Anderen* was discovered in Ukraine in 1979 and was restored, but no complete version exists.
The first film portraying a lesbian character was released in 1929 and entitled *Die Büchse der Pandora (Pandora’s Box)*. This was followed by the better-known 1931 film, *Mädchen in Uniform (Girls in Uniform)*. Although a direct reference to male homosexuality in the United States had occurred by 1923 in the film, *The Soilers*, the same level of honesty portrayed in German gay films would not be reached in other film industries until much later in the twentieth century.\(^{59}\)

Germany’s liberal film industry of the early twentieth century was the exception rather than the rule, and in other countries, one of the earliest forms of “homosexuality” in film was the use of male actors dressed as females, or vice versa, as a comedic device with which to alter traditional male and female roles. The first example of this is in a 1915 American film entitled *Miss Fatty’s Seaside Lovers*, in which Fatty Arbuckle plays the daughter of a wealthy man and is wooed by other men during a seaside outing. A more famous example is the 1959 film, *Some Like It Hot*, where Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis’s characters dress as women to escape a Chicago gang. They both fall for Marilyn Monroe’s character and vie for her attention while attempting to maintain their disguises. This form of film never addresses any issues of homosexuality or sexual identity, and any inadvertent attraction to a character in drag is explained away with the removal of a wig or a change of clothes.\(^{60}\)

Another category of “homosexuality” in film could be called “implied” or “asexualized” homosexuality. In these films, audiences could read between the lines of the plot and deduce same-sex attraction between characters—or not. The characters’

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60. For other examples, see Rosso’s chapter entitled “Who’s a Sissy?” Rosso, *Celluloid Closet*, 4-16.
interactions are nothing but platonic and any sexual attraction between them would be subtle at best. An example of this type of film is *Queen Christina*, released in 1933, in which Greta Garbo’s character, the presumably heterosexual yet tomboyish queen of Sweden, falls in love with a Spanish envoy played by John Gilbert. Rosso notes, however, that it is the scenes between Garbo and Elizabeth Young that are sexually charged rather than any scenes between Garbo and Gilbert, and that Garbo’s character only falls in love with Gilbert’s after being betrayed by Young’s character. *Queen Christina* was filmed as a heterosexual romance, but implied same-sex attraction is obvious—if one chooses to see it.61 There are also numerous examples where male characters of movies are effeminate “sissies,” and while they are not necessarily labeled as “homosexual,” it is implied by their lack of masculinity.62

A third category with respect to portrayals of homosexuality is the portrayal of homosexuals as deviants or of homosexuality as perverse. In the 1948 film by Alfred Hitchcock, *Rope*, two “pretentious homosexual lovers” murder a former classmate simply because they can.63 In the 1962 film, *The Children’s Hour* a child spreads a rumor that her two female teachers are having an affair in order to get out of trouble, ruining the teachers’ lives and livelihoods. Shirley MacLaine’s character later realizes that the child had inadvertently told the truth and recognizes her attraction to Audrey Hepburn’s character. The solution to this realization? Suicide. MacLaine’s character is so disgusted with herself that she finds no other recourse.64

61. For other examples, see Rosso’s chapter entitled “The Way We Weren’t.” Ibid., 63-66.
62. An amusing example is the effeminate mouse character Gus-Gus in the 1950 animated film, *Cinderella*. Ibid., 75.
63. The same-sex “lovers” in this film were not explicitly labeled as homosexual, but the screenwriter commented that he found the characters’ sexuality “apparent.” Ibid., 92-94.
64. For other examples, see Rosso’s chapters entitled “Frightening the Horses” and “Struggle.” Shirley MacLaine’s suicide is neither the first (*Anders als die Anderen* holds that dubious honor) nor the last in a
It is only in the last few decades that movies have begun to portray homosexuality as something other than stereotypical or deviant, and while it is still common to see an effeminate gay man prance stereotypically around the screen, it is nearly as common to see gay characters treated in, at the very least, a neutral light. The most recent example of this is the blockbuster hit, *Brokeback Mountain*, which details the relationship between two cowboys.65

Another development in queer cinema over the last two decades is the entrance of high-quality, internationally distributed Asian films onto the scene. Perhaps the most famous of these is the 1993 international blockbuster, *Bawang bie ji (Farewell My Concubine)*.66 While Sean Metzger notes that *Bawang bie ji* glossed over or even omitted some of the more direct references to homosexuality that are present in the novel on which the film was based,67 *Bawang bie ji* breached a divide and became one of the first films in cinematic history to address not just the issues of homosexuality, but issues of Asian homosexuality. Whether deliberate or not, the Korean film *Wang üi namja*, (which will be discussed later,) draws on the success of *Bawang bie ji* in its motif of using gender roles defined by a traditional art as a stage upon which same-sex attraction is played out.

Interestingly, while Xi yan was released in South Korea without being censored, four years later Chun guang zha xie was banned. Chun guang zha xie is more sexually explicit than Xi yan, and the sexuality of the film’s two male protagonists, Ho and Lai, is never an issue in the film. The other people living in Lai’s apartment building appear to neither question nor judge his sexual identity or his on-again, off-again relationship with Ho. Chun guang zha xie is not political, and the audience is also given no opportunity to question or judge the protagonists’ sexuality—it’s just the way the characters are.

On the other hand, while Ang Lee’s Xi yan may avoid gay sex scenes and lacks, for example, the sensuality that is evident in Chun guang zha xie when, for example, Ho and Lai dance together in the grungy kitchen of Lai’s flat, it is political where Chun guang zha xie is simply human, and the resolution of Xi yan expresses an open challenge to the standing traditions of Confucianism. Xi yan’s main character, Wai-Tung Gao is a gay Taiwanese immigrant living with his American partner, Simon, in New York City. In order to placate his parents and help one of his tenants get a green card, however, Wai-Tung agrees to marry Wei-Wei, a Chinese woman from the mainland. When Wai-Tung’s parents unexpectedly arrive to throw a wedding banquet, Wai-Tung, Simon and Wei-Wei must maintain the farce in which Wai-Tung and Wei-Wei pretend to be a heterosexual couple and Simon pretends to simply be Wai-Tung’s flatmate.

The portrayal of homosexuality in Xi yan starkly contrasts with Chun guang zha xie in that it is very sterile. Both Wai-Tung and Simon are successful and settled, and have built up their lives together to the point of storybook normalcy. Ang Lee’s deliberate attempt to “sell” homosexuality as something positive is a political statement.

When Wai-Tung’s perceptive father discovers the truth and accepts Simon into his family as his son-in-law by offering him the hongbao⁷⁰ that he had originally offered to Wei-Wei, he is simultaneously subverting old traditions and replacing them with new, contemporary ones.

It is striking that the Korean censorship board did not find problems with a political film questioning the morality of traditional Confucian values and promoting the “normalcy” of homosexuality, but four years later, did take issue with an apolitical film whose two main characters happen to be gay. The questionable decision of the Public Performance Ethics Committee to ban Chun guang zha xie—aft...
film that hinted at a theme of homosexuality was *Hwabun (The Pollen of Flowers)*, which was released in 1972 and directed by Ha Kil-chong. Based on a 1939 novel, this film would fit into the aforementioned “implied homosexuality” category. The two male characters both have heterosexual love interests, but the same-sex sexual attraction is obvious if one chooses to see it.\(^{72}\)

With the exception of *Hwabun*, however, few Korean films operate on the idea of “implied homosexuality.” Part of this may stem from the fact that ideas of masculinity are significantly different in Korea than in the United States. As previously mentioned, same-sex physical contact is not as taboo in Korea as in the United States, so actions such as a hand placed on a friend’s shoulder a tad too long would not carry the same connotation in Korea, and an audience member would be less likely to question whether a character’s actions intentionally “implied” same-sex physical attraction.

Korean films portraying homosexuality can be divided into two main categories. The first, which encompasses virtually every film ever made in Korea that addresses homosexuality, could be loosely described as the “perpetuation of homosexual stereotypes.” Within this category are three major sub-categories involving stereotypes of homosexuality, which are the use of “gender roles” within gay relationships, the use of gay characters to act as the best friend or confidante of the female, heterosexual protagonist, and finally, the use of same-sex sexual relationships to illustrate characters in light of their sexual activity, particularly in films that have explicit sexual themes as a major plot line. Naturally, there is often overlap between these sub-categories. The second major category is much smaller and entails the use of “false” homosexuality as a method to discuss a taboo subject while reassuring the audience that, in fact, no such

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 278-279.
taboo is actually being broken. Beyond this, there is the growing genre of independent or “art house” films that do not fit neatly into any of the above categories. In addition, there is also the portrayal of lesbianism in Korean film, which is treated as a separate category simply because there are so few films that even address the issue of female homosexuality.

**Perpetuating the Stereotype of Feminine and Masculine Gender Roles**

One of the stereotypes with respect to gay men is the use of gender roles within a relationship. In Korea, gay men are seen as having a “different masculinity” than straight men.73 This is visible in the following films, and in each film, there are clearly defined genders to be played by the respective “effeminate” and “masculine” characters. The “effeminate” characters are visibly more feminine than their masculine partners, but they also adopt the “role” of the woman in their relationships. They also “bottom” in sexual activities. The “masculine” characters, on the other hand, might seem more “effeminate” than their heterosexual counterparts, but they will still appear more masculine than their feminine partners. They are often emotionally closed off from others, preferring to “suffer in silence.” They predictably “top” in sexual activities. In two of the four movies that will be mentioned below, *Rodŭ mubi (Road Movie)* and *Nae saengae kajang arŭndaun ilchuil (My Beautiful Week)*, the “masculine” characters have also previously gotten married and fathered a son, thus fulfilling their Confucian (and “manly”) duty to carrying on their family lines.

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73. Seo, “Mapping the Vicissitudes,” 70.
The earliest film in this sub-category is *Naeil ro hūrūnūn kang* (*Broken Branches*), a 1996 film directed by Pak Chae-ho. *Naeil ro hūrūnūn kang* does not fit neatly into this sub-category, but some of the gender roles stereotypes that are visible here will be “passed down” to later films, so the nature of the characters should be addressed. The film is broken into three chapters entitled “Father,” “Hope,” and “Family,” respectively. The first chapter addresses the clashes between the narrator Chungmin’s older brother and sister and their father, and the second chapter addresses the deaths of the narrator’s father and Park Chung-hee. In the final chapter, the audience learns of the narrator’s sexuality. Chungmin, who has since moved to Seoul, meets an older man in a Nakwon-dong gay bar, and the two begin a relationship. His lover, who is married with children, wishes to remain closeted, while Chungmin does not. Meanwhile, his lover’s wife, who assumes Chungmin is a platonic friend, attempts to play matchmaker to find Chungmin a wife. At the end of the film, Chungmin introduces his lover to his family as such, and claims that this should help reconcile the differences between the generations.

The stereotypes visible in this film are interesting in that they portray a version of Korean gay society that is nearly gone. The exaggerated mannerisms that were utilized by gay men in Nakwon-dong bars are visible, particularly with Chungmin’s lover. The characterizations of both Chungmin and his lover are also interesting because both characters display a combination of both “effeminate” and “masculine” characteristics. In practically all logistical aspects of their relationship, Chungmin’s lover is the more “masculine” of the two. He is married with children, is older than Chungmin, and seems

to control the activities of the two. However, his appearance is much more physically effeminate than Chungmin, and his mannerisms much more ostentatious. However, this is probably due to the fact that he has been around the Nakwon-dong “scene” much longer than Chungmin and has effectively adopted the exaggeratedly feminine mannerisms that were ubiquitous among gay men at the time. At one point in the film, he dresses in drag and goes to a café where Chungmin is meeting a woman on a blind date—set up by his wife—and proceeds to pretend to be an ex-girlfriend of Chungmin’s, interrupts the date to yell at Chungmin for impregnating him, and drives away the blind date.

Chungmin’s appearance is more physically masculine than his lover, but he expresses no desire or inclination to marry, and he does not seem to mind being bossed around. He is also more emotionally attached to his lover than vice versa, and regularly “borrows” a work colleague’s mobile (during a period when mobile phones were still far from being omnipresent) to call his lover during the day. However, his lover seems to have a greater proclivity towards jealousy. In addition, during a brief hiatus in their relationship, Chungmin sleeps with a man that could be characterized as more masculine than he is. Thus, Chungmin’s character does not fit neatly into either an “effeminate” or a “masculine” category. Nevertheless, this film is one of the first in Korean cinematic history to directly portray homosexual relationships, and was released only shortly after the gay rights movement in Korea began, so it should not be overlooked when addressing queer Korean film.

The second movie in this sub-category is the 2002 independent film directed by Kim In-sik, Rodū Mubi (Road Movie),76 in which the male protagonist, Tae-sik, fits the stereotype of a “masculine” gay man perfectly. Kim In-sik successfully formulated this

movie, however, to demonstrate the most obvious stereotypes about homosexuality, only to render them insignificant later in light of the humanity of his characters. The film opens with a graphic sex scene between two men, one of whom is the main protagonist.77

Upon bidding farewell to each other on a platform of Seoul Station after this one-night stand, Tae-sik’s sexual partner, an effeminate college student, begs Tae-sik to see him again, but Tae-sik simply shoves the student onto the waiting train, turns and walks away. Thus, within the first five minutes of the movie, the audience learns that Tae-sik undoubtedly plays the “masculine” role. He is not only the sexual “top,” he is also emotionally closed off from others, and his muscular, shaggy appearance clearly places him in a stereotype of “masculinity.”

As the audience learns throughout the course of the film, Tae-sik is a homeless man who mainly lives in Seoul Station. Although he is unfriendly and rarely speaks, he is an obvious leader of the other homeless living in the station, both commanding them and ignoring them. He is a loner and often camps along the tracks leading out from the station. Through his interactions with others, the audience learns that he was once a famous mountain climber who has, for some reason they are not privy to, chosen to be homeless rather than continue his career, and that he was also married and has a son.

In the meantime, a businessman who lost his job during the financial crisis and is now homeless, Sŏk-won, begins to stay in Seoul Station, and for some inexplicable reason, Tae-sik is drawn to him. He saves Sŏk-won after an attempted suicide and allows

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77. In an interview about the movie, the director commented that the sex scene in the beginning of the film was deliberately filmed in a graphic manner in order to “reflect in the very beginning how straight people usually see or imagine gay sex. This is sort of a strategy meant to subsequently start the process of gradually discovering the real nature of gay people, voided of prejudices and stereotypes.” Kim, In-sik, An Interview with Kim In-sik, interview by Paolo Bertolin, Koreanfilm.org, February 2003, http://koreanfilm.org/kiminsik.html. This film would probably fit better under the category of “art” flicks below, but because of the director’s deliberate use of stereotypes, I wanted to first include it here.
Sŏk-won to travel with him through the country to the coast. Tae-sik, who until now has only had illicit, emotionless sexual encounters, gradually realizes that he is in love with Sŏk-won, who is heterosexual. Although their relationship never progresses past friendship, Tae-sik repeatedly protects Sŏk-won, who is physically weaker and emotionally fragile. Through this unrequited love for Sŏk-won, the audience’s recognition of Tae-sik’s vulnerability, in spite of his inability to express himself, grows even as Sŏk-won rejects Tae-sik after learning of his sexuality.

Finally, during the film’s climax, Sŏk-won also recognizes this vulnerability and tries to save Tae-sik, reaching him just after he has attempted suicide and is unconscious. In a reversal of roles, Sŏk-won becomes the caretaker, and, in an effort to physically demonstrate his acceptance of both Tae-sik’s sexuality and love, lies naked beside Tae-sik as Tae-sik dies. Sŏk-won’s efforts are too late, however, and neither he nor the audience ever learn whether Tae-sik died with any knowledge of Sŏk-won’s acceptance.

The third film in this category is the 2005 box office hit, Nae saengae kajang arūndaun ilchuil (My Lovely Week), which was referred to as the Love Actually of Korea when it was released because of its similar structure. The film is made up of a number of seemingly unrelated stories about six different couples, and as each story progresses, the audience learns how the characters from the different stories are interconnected.

In one of the film’s stories, a single, divorced, gay father advertises for a maid that a young, effeminate man responds to. The father is a stingy, emotionally stunted businessman who was divorced by his wife because of his sexuality. Like Tae-sik in

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Rodū Mubi, the father in this film has fulfilled his obligation to marry and, after producing a son, divorced. As the film progresses, the effeminate maid’s gentle, unwavering kindness and offer of friendship essentially teaches the father that it is acceptable to not only have emotions, but also to care for others around him. As a result, the father becomes a better businessman, a better father to his son, and a better person, in general.

Nae saengae demonstrates a clear gender role delineation between the father and the maid. The father, emotionally closed off from everyone around him, including his son, fits the profile of a “masculine” gay character. The maid, who takes on the traditional role of the housewife and mother and is able to “thaw” the father’s coldness, fits the profile of the “feminine” counterpart. While the relationship between the father and the maid is only implied and appears to just begin at the end of the movie, the credits of the film roll over a “storybook” scene of this new, unconventional family, which shows the father and son laughing and joking in the foreground, while the maid, in apron, looks on, smiling maternally, while preparing food in the kitchen behind them. The very nature of this film prevents the audience from dealing with its portrayal of homosexuality in any way that is not superficial, so it is no surprise that imposed gender roles remain intact throughout the film.

The 2005 film Wang ǜi namja (The King and the Clown)\textsuperscript{79} would probably fit better in a class of its own as its release brought about a number of “firsts.” Wang ǜi namja was the first domestic blockbuster in Korea to deal explicitly with homosexuality with gay main characters. While it lacks the infamous sex scenes from Brokeback

\textsuperscript{79} Wang ǜi namja, DVD, dir. Chun-ik Yi, 2005 (Seoul: KOFIC, 2006).
“Mountain,” released around the same time, even the title, *Wang ūi namja*, addresses the true nature of the relationship between Chosŏn Dynasty King Yŏnsan, and the feminine member of a *namsadang* troupe, or the “clown” being referred to in the international title, Konggil. While *The King and the Clown* may be the international title of the film, a direct translation of *Wang ūi namja* would actually be “The King’s Man.” The title itself is a play on words, for in Korean, a “king’s woman” would be an obvious reference to a king’s lover; thus, “The King’s Man” not so subtly implies the exact same relationship. Even the movie posters for *Wang ūi namja* demonstrate this relationship. In the poster, Konggil stands close behind King Yŏnsan with one hand placed possessively on the king’s shoulder, both of them completely serious. Changsaeng, Konggil’s masculine acting partner, stands off to the side in isolation, his smirk an imitation of the facial expression on the mask in his hand. In addition, the king’s position between the two jesters foreshadows the estrangement that develops in Konggil and Changsaeng’s relationship once they begin to work in the palace.

The gender roles prescribed to the characters in this film are perhaps less stereotypical than those visible in the previously mentioned movies. During the time period of the film, which is set in the early sixteenth-century, only men would perform in entertaining troupes; thus, Konggil performs the role of females and would have been hired based on his effeminate looks and ability to convincingly portray women. His acting partner, Changsaeng, plays the male roles opposite him. The nature of the relationship between Konggil and Changsaeng is never explicitly stated to be romantic; however, it is implied, particularly as King Yŏnsan demands more time and attention

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80. There is but one kiss in the film, between the clown Konggil and King Yŏnsan.
from Konggil, that Changsaeng’s jealousy is beyond the level that might originate from a mere friendship and is derived from seeing the king co-opt the time of his lover.

As the movie progresses, King Yōnsan, who is considered one of the more corrupt and perhaps insane kings in Korean history, increasingly loses touch with reality, and as Konggil observes this both in public and in private, he begins to sympathize and even feel for King Yōnsan, dividing his loyalties between the king and Changsaeng. When Changsaeng, who has become more and more alienated from the troupe in his loneliness from missing Konggil, finally approaches Konggil to say that he wants them to leave the palace, both out of jealousy and due to the progressively erratic behavior of King Yōnsan, Konggil agrees, but only if they can perform one last time for the king.

_Wang ūi namja_ was not expected to be as spectacularly successful at the box office as it was, particularly with such strong themes of same-sex attraction, so it was a surprise when it broke previous records set by the 2003 and 2004 respective domestic films, _Silmido_ and _T’aegukki Hwinallimyō (Brotherhood of War)_ , in spite of being shown in fewer theatres nationwide.81 Thus, the success of _Wang ūi namja_ in the domestic box office can be considered the first time that a film directly portraying homosexuality has been viewed by such a wide audience in Korea.

**Perpetuating the Stereotype of the Gay Man as Best Friend or Confidante**

In the same vein as American hits like the television sitcom that aired from 1998-2006, _Will and Grace_ , or the 1995 teen romantic comedy, _Clueless_ , the stereotype that gay men make great best friends or confidantes for heterosexual, female protagonists is

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also visible in two Korean movies, the 2001 drama, *Wani wa Chunha (Wanee and Junah)*,\(^{82}\) and the 2004 romantic comedy, *S daiôri (S Diary)*.\(^{83}\) In both of these films, the gay best friend or confidante is a supporting character and appears only briefly. In addition, the gay friends in both movies fit the effeminate stereotypes described previously.

*Wani wa Chunha* is a love story between the characters of Wani and Chunha. When Wani’s first love, her stepbrother, returns to visit, Wani is confronted with memories of her past. Through this, a gay male *sônbae*, or co-worker, gives her advice. Wani’s colleague only appears a handful of times in the film, but in this short period, the audience is given a chance to observe the problems that Wani’s colleague is having in his own life, which humanizes the colleague’s character in spite of his stereotypical role.

The audience discovers that Wani’s colleague is gay well after observing this colleague provide Wani with advice about her life, although his boyfriend Hyôn-su is introduced earlier in the film. During a lunch break at their company when many of the employees are outside, in the background we see Wani’s colleague fight with Hyôn-su, shouting at him as Hyôn-su gets into his police cruiser and drives away. This fight gives Wani the opportunity to return the favor to her normally steadfast colleague, and the audience learns in this manner that the Hyôn-su’s family has insisted that he get married, and that he has agreed and wants to stop seeing Wani’s colleague.

While Wani’s colleague is not particularly effeminate looking, the juxtaposition of him next to Hyôn-su shows us that the stereotypically female and male gender roles are present in this relationship. Hyôn-su’s job as a police officer instantly places him in a

\(^{82}\) *Wani wa Chunha*, DVD, dir. Yong-gyun Kim, 2001 (Seoul: Ent’ô Wôn, 2002).

more “masculine” career than Wani’s colleague’s position as an office worker. Hyŏn-su is also physically taller than Wani’s colleague, and his agreement to marry demonstrates his acceptance of his “masculine” duty to carry on the family line.

After fighting, Hyŏn-su chooses to drive off rather than stay and discuss the situation, and it is Wani’s colleague rather than Hyŏn-su who is raising his voice, indicating that, were the audience given the opportunity to look more closely at their relationship, they might discover that Hyŏn-su also fits the stereotype of being emotionally closed off. The willingness that Wani’s colleague has to both listen to and advise Wani on personal matters and to be listened to and advised by Wani demonstrates that he has a “softer” side than Hyŏn-su. Indeed, the fact that Wani and her colleague have such an apparently close friendship is an anomaly in Korea, where friendships are frequently demarcated between gender lines rather than across them, and the fact that this is not problematic implies that Wani’s colleague has a “feminine” side.

The second Korean movie in which a gay character is assigned the role of best friend or confidante is the 2004 romantic comedy, S daiōri, which details three unsuccessful relationships of the female protagonist, Chi-ni, in which her respective boyfriends all treat her poorly. Compared to Wani wa Chunha, the portrayal of Chi-ni’s best friend is even briefer and more stereotypical. Chi-ni’s friend and his boyfriend, Chong-kwan, own a café filled with kitsch, flowery designs. The portrayal of Chi-ni’s friend and his boyfriend are uniquely stereotypical in comparison to the other films that have been discussed here because they are both equally effeminate. The feminine lilt of Chi-ni’s friend’s voice is strikingly deliberate, and it would have been no surprise to see his character emphasize his points with a flip of the wrist (a talent that all exaggeratedly
effeminate gay characters have historically possessed). Indeed, it seems that the reason for the presence of Chong-kwan’s character in the film—he never speaks—is purely to assure the audience that the friend with whom Chi-ni seeks solace is indeed gay and thus certified to give her advice or console her.

**Perpetuating the Stereotype of Homosexuality as an Aspect of Sexual Perversion**

There is a sub-genre of film in which same-sex sexual activity is used as a device to demonstrate the sexual perversion, “loose” morality, or simply the sexual nature of characters, often in dark films with highly sexual themes or sub-plots. A famous example of this type of film is the 1992 blockbuster, *Basic Instinct*, in which Sharon Stone’s character, who is bisexual, seduces men and then murders them. Two particular films in Korea fit into this category, *Yongmang (Desire)* and *Chuhong kůlssi (The Scarlet Letter)*, both released in 2004. Neither of these films has explicit homosexual sex scenes, but both have multiple, graphic, heterosexual sex scenes and deal with themes of adultery.

*Yongmang* portrays an estranged married couple, and both the husband and wife have affairs with the same man. *Chuhong kůlssi* focuses on an adulterous man, and the audience later learns that his mistress and his wife are having an affair with each other behind his back even as he thinks he is hiding his own betrayal from them. Neither of these films is particularly noteworthy other than to illustrate the stereotype that same-sex sexual attraction is simply a result of being “over-sexed” or somehow “lacking” in morals. In both of these films, the presence of same-sex attraction is almost a side-note on the

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part of the directors, merely intended to demonstrate the disaffected nature of the characters in the story.

**Portrayals of “False” Homosexuality**

The movies listed above can be counted on two hands, which, considering the proliferation of Korean film in recent years, is not very many. This is not surprising considering that discussions of homosexuality in society are still considerably taboo. Thus, one method that directors have used to edge around this taboo, as well as avoiding censorship or loss of viewership, is by using a theme of “false” homosexuality, in which protagonists are put into a situation where they begin to question their heterosexuality. This has been successful in putting the issue of homosexuality on the table while not actually dealing with its implications. In addition, while films explicitly portraying homosexuality such as *Rodū mubi* have bombed at the box office in Korea, the following film and television show have been quite successful.86

The first film with a false representation of same-sex attraction is the 2001 film, *Bōnji jōmp’ŭ rŭl hada* (*Bungee Jumping of Their Own*).87 The film begins in 1983 with the fated meeting of In-u and T’ae-hūi, who fall in love at first sight. Shortly before In-u is to leave to complete his military service requirement, he and T’ae-hūi schedule to meet each other at Yongsan Station in Seoul. T’ae-hūi never shows up (the audience later learns that she died en route to Yongsan Station), and the film cuts to the year 2000, by which point In-u is married with a child and is teaching high school Korean.

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86. Thus, the stereotypes discussed above are not applicable to the characters in this category due to the fact that they are not actually gay.
In-u finds himself inexplicably drawn to one of his male students, Hyŏn-bin, and begins to question his own sexuality, to the extent of even going to the doctor to see if there is something medically wrong with him. The doctor reassures In-u—as well as the audience—that In-u is not gay; in fact, he seems to be inordinately proud of his heterosexuality. Nevertheless, In-u’s obsession with Hyŏn-bin grows and a series of “coincidences” in Hyŏn-bin’s behavior convinces In-u that Hyŏn-bin is the reincarnation of T’ae-hŭi.

The director also goes out of his way to convince us of Hyŏn-bin’s heterosexuality within the first few minutes of his character’s appearance onscreen by demonstrating his physical attraction for his girlfriend Hae-ju. Hyŏn-bin’s heterosexuality does not prevent him from the claws of fate, however, and he likewise finds himself drawn to his teacher, In-u, and begins to lose interest in his girlfriend. The physical attraction between Hyŏn-bin and In-u is also juxtaposed with flashbacks of In-u and T’ae-hŭi in order to “heterosexualize” it, thus removing the implications of same-sex attraction.

As the film progresses, rumors begin circulating around the school that In-u and Hyŏn-bin are having an affair, and In-u ends up losing his job over the allegations.  

Hyŏn-bin, meanwhile, who is initially furious with In-u for somehow “causing” this mutual attraction, begins to have “flashbacks” of events from T’ae-hŭi’s life. In the climax of the film, In-u wanders back to Yongsan Station where he had waited for T’ae-hŭi seventeen years before, and Hyŏn-bin eventually finds him. The two travel to New Zealand together just as T’ae-hŭi had always wanted and the film ends with the two

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88. Ironically, it is the implication that In-u is having an affair with a member of the same sex rather than an affair with a seventeen-year-old student who is half his age that causes the school administration to fire In-u.
bungee-jumping together—sans bungee cord—with the intention of being reincarnated at the same time in order to be able to fall in love in the next life as a heterosexual couple. Light-hearted conversation between the voice of T’ae-hŭi and In-u is heard as the film ends, and when In-u asks what will happen if they’re both reincarnated as women, T’ae-hŭi replies, “Then I guess I’ll have to love you again.”89

This implies that the love between T’ae-hŭi and In-u is so fated that it overrides boundaries delineated by sexuality, such that the two will simply have to “deal” with the prospect of being same-sex lovers should they be reincarnated “incorrectly.” Still, it is no mistake that the “original” couple was heterosexual, and the audience is saved from the brief discomfort of imagining a same-sex relationship between In-u and Hyŏn-bin when T’ae-hŭi’s voice returns as the spiritual embodiment of In-u’s love.90

Robert Cagle argues that Bŏnji jŏmp’ŭ rŭl hada breaks down stereotypes associating male homosexuality with femininity, but the stereotyped “gender roles” mentioned in previous sections cannot be applied to the main characters in Bŏnji jŏmp’ŭ rŭl hada because the characters of In-u and Hyŏn-bin do not—even after acknowledging their mutual attraction for one another—identify as homosexual. In fact, the director goes out of his way to reassure the audience that neither In-u nor Hyŏn-bin have ever harbored

89 “Kŭrome tto saranghaeyaji mwol.” In the English subtitles, however, T’ae-hŭi’s reply is, “I guess I’ll wait again,” implying that the two would have to commit suicide continually until they are reincarnated as a heterosexual couple.

90. Andrew Grossman and Jooran Lee unconvincingly argue that In-u and Hyŏn-bin jump without a bungee cord in order to feign their suicide such that they will be able to live in peace, free of the restraints of conservative Korean society. However, had they been able to survive their fall, the people standing on the bridge would not have screamed and run to the edge like they did, and T’ae-hŭi’s voice would not have returned as the spirit now freed from the restraints of Hyŏn-bin’s male body because Hyŏn-bin would still have been alive. Andrew Grossman and Jooran Lee, “Memento Mori and Other Ghostly Sexualities,” in New Korean Cinema, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 180-192.
homosexual desires and the only reason they are even remotely attracted to one another is due to the interferences of fate.91

Korean audiences are familiar with themes of fate or destiny defining or limiting love, and Bŏnji jŏmp’ũ rŭl hada followed in the footsteps of the 2000 film, Tonggam (Ditto), in which a man and woman contact one another across the boundaries of time, only to discover that the man is the unborn son of the woman’s love interest and her best friend, meaning that she must give up her love in order for the man with whom she is speaking to come into existence. Shortly after, the hit 2003 film K’ŭllaesik (The Classic) demonstrated, albeit less supernaturally, the power of fate to reach across generational lines, ensuring, after a couple in love during the 1970s cannot end up together, that their respective children meet and fall in love. Thus, while Bŏnji jŏmp’ũ rŭl hada’s theme is not particularly original, its inclusion of the idea that love, knowing no boundaries, is not restricted by gender or sexual identity, brings to the table a new perspective that had not yet been considered in Korean film and perhaps makes the idea of homosexual love more tenable to the typically conservative South Korean audience.

In 2007, a new television drama entitled K’ŏp’i p’ūrinsũ 1-hojôm (Coffee Prince)92 shot to the top of the charts in Korea. The premise of the show is that a young tomboyish girl, Ko Ŭn-ch’an, falls for a spoiled, rich playboy, Ch’oe Han’gyŏl, who mistakes her for a man. Han’gyŏl takes over a failing coffee shop and begins to hire handsome young men as a gimmick in order to attract women to the café, and in the process, hires Ŭn-ch’an, thinking she is actually a man. Over the course of the show,
Han’gyŏl becomes increasingly attracted to Ŭn-ch’an, and begins to question his own sexuality. Han’gyŏl eventually comes to terms with the fact that he is in love with Ŭn-ch’an and must therefore be gay, but soon after discovers that Ŭn-ch’an is actually a woman, at which point the series progresses like a typical, if quirky, heterosexual drama.

The themes of K’ôp’i p’ûrinsû l-hojŏm are not as complex as Bônji jôm’p’u rûl hada, but the “false” homosexuality is still present. Nevertheless, the audience is always aware of the Ŭn-ch’an’s gender, so, even as Han’gyŏl is personally struggling through the implications of being gay, the audience—wink, wink, nudge, nudge—can sit back, relax, and enjoy the farce at Han’gyŏl’s expense. Like the characters in Bônji jôm’p’u rûl hada, there is never a doubt in the audience’s mind that Han’gyŏl is heterosexual.

In addition, even seven years earlier, the implications of being gay in Bônji jôm’p’u rûl hada were far greater than they are in K’ôp’i p’ûrinsû l-hojŏm. While Han’gyŏl still faces extreme pressure from his family to marry, the consequences—had he actually turned out to be gay—would have been far less significant than those In-u or even Hyŏn-bin would have had to face had they truly been gay.

**Homosexual Representations in Art Flicks: A Class of Their Own**

As the film industry has liberalized in Korea, more independent films outside of mainstream cinema have been produced. Such films have an opportunity to take chances and explore territory that mainstream films cannot safely do without risking the loss of their profits. One such movie was described above, Rodũ mubi. As noted in footnote 77, the classification of Rodũ mubi as a film perpetuating gay “gender roles” was a decision based on the fact that the director deliberately attempted to portray the main character as a stereotypically gay figure in order to later break down those very stereotypes and
challenge the audience to view Tae-sik as more than “just” gay. Rodū mubi bombed at the box office in Korea and is an art house film. The use of color in the film is similar to Wong Kar-Wai’s use of color in Chun guang zha xie, which was discussed earlier. Like Chun guang zha xie, the audience is able to sympathize with Tae-sik’s character in Rodū mubi, and is touched by his humanity.

Another “art” film is Huhoehaji ana (No Regret), which was released in 2006. This film made more of an impression in international film festivals than it did domestically in South Korea, but it set a domestic record among independent film ticket sales, and like Rodū mubi, the audience is left with a clear view of the characters’ humanity despite stereotypes about their appearance and behavior (and the strange nature of the film). The male protagonist, Su-min, is an orphan who goes to Seoul to find work. After a series of difficulties, he ends up working as a male prostitute in a gay bar. He fits the stereotype of an effeminate gay character, and catches the eye of Chae-min, a rich businessman who falls conveniently into the stereotype of a “masculine” counterpart for Su-min. Although Su-min initially rejects Chae-min’s advances, the two eventually fall in love. Nevertheless, Chae-min’s family refuses to accept his sexuality and insist that he marry. The relationship between Chae-min and Su-min becomes more complex, and the movie ends after a series of tragic events.

Another such film is Tongbaek kkot (Camellia Project: Three Queer Stories at Bogil Island), released in 2004. Tongbaek kkot is a compilation of three contemporary stories about homosexuality on Pogil Island. While neither Rodū mubi, Huhoehaji ana,
nor *Tongbaek kkot* reached particularly wide audiences in Korea, their presence in the independent film scene is significant simply because they portray homosexuality in very *human* characters. Unlike *Nae saengae kajang arūmdaun ilchuil* or Ang Lee’s *Xiyan*, the audience is shown the characters’ flaws from the beginning and is allowed to harbor no illusions as to the characters’ sexuality, which is neither hidden nor emphasized, but simply a part of who the characters are. This method of forcing the audience to recognize the characters’ sexuality through an honest portrayal of the their lives humanizes the characters and makes the concept of homosexuality less alien by virtue of the stark nature of the films.

### Portrayals of Lesbianism in South Korean Cinema

To date, there seem to have only been two films made in Korean cinematic history that portray lesbianism. The first is a 1976 film, *Kūmyok: yōjawa yōja* (*Ascetic: Woman and Woman*), directed by Kim Su-hyŏng. *Kūmyok* was not originally viewed as a “lesbian” flick, and Kim Su-hyŏng initially claimed that he had intended it to be viewed as a “feminist” rather than a “lesbian” film, and it was only later that critics took a second look at the film from the perspective of a lesbian film. The film focuses on Yŏng-hŭi, a model, who is gang-raped at the age of nineteen. An artist, Mi-ae, who was abused by her husband, sympathizes with and thus employs Yŏng-hŭi as her model. The two fall in love until a male fashion designer, Chun, asks Yŏng-hŭi to model on his catwalk. Yŏng-hŭi agrees in spite of Mi-ae’s pleas that she stay with her, and falls in love with Chun in the process. After being subsequently betrayed by Chin, Yŏng-hŭi returns to Mi-

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96. Kim Su-hyŏng was later quoted as saying he “did not mind” if *Kūmyok* was viewed as “feminist or lesbian.” Lee, “Remembered Branches,” 276.
ae, who has already killed herself. Despite the “implicit” rather than “explicit” nature of the relationship between Yŏng-hŭi and Mi-ae, risqué scenes such as one in which Mi-ae paints on Yŏng-hŭi’s naked body “shocked” the audience, and it was surprising that such scenes were not censored.  

The only other portrayal of lesbianism in Korean cinema seems to be the 1999 horror flick *Memento Mori*. The two main characters, Si-ŭn and Hyo-sin are high schools students in an all-girl school. It is common knowledge that they are in a relationship, but Hyo-sin commits suicide on their shared birthday by jumping off of the roof of the school. Not surprisingly, Hyo-sin and Si-ŭn fit into specific gender roles: Si-ŭn is a tall, student athlete with short hair, whereas Hyo-sin is a feminine musician. The audience later learns that Hyo-sin slept with one of the school’s teachers and may have been pregnant. One aspect of Hyo-sin and Si-ŭn’s relationship is their ability to communicate telepathically. In the meantime, another student, Min-a, finds the shared diary of Hyo-sin and Si-ŭn, discovering the secrets of both their romance and their subsequent estrangement after Hyo-sin’s betrayal.

Hyo-sin’s spirit begins to haunt the school after her suicide, terrifying the student body and wreaking havoc on the minds of the teacher with whom she had slept (who is found dead with his wrists slit at the end of the movie) and on a particularly mean girl who had made homophobic comments regarding Hyo-sin’s sexuality. Hyo-sin’s spirit also jealously torments Min-a, who has been steadfastly defending Si-ŭn from speculation that she had been on the roof with Hyo-sin. By the end of the film, Min-a has

97. Ibid., 274-275. This is more telling about the perceived sexuality—or lack thereof—of women during this time than anything. Painting another woman’s naked body is a famous (or infamous) motif in the 1999 American independent lesbian film, *Better Than Chocolate*.  
“inherited” the ability to communicate telepathically with Si-ŭn, an implication that Hyo-sin’s spirit has at least partially inhabited Min-a and that Min-a will continue their relationship. In the final scene of the movie, Min-a follows Si-ŭn onto the roof of the vacated school and is greeted with flashbacks of the “happy times” between Hyo-sin and Si-ŭn. *Memento Mori* is neither complex nor particularly well-made, but, by being the only Korean film in recent history to even consider female same-sex attraction, it deserves at the very least, a mention in passing.

**The Future of Queer Korean Film and Beyond**

Of the films discussed above, the vast majority were released after 2003, and in the last five years, a renaissance of sorts has occurred in Korean cinema. When Kim In-sik cast the main roles of *Rodŭ mubi*, he had to hire unknowns because no established actors were willing to take the risk of portraying a gay character. Since then, however, particularly with the success of films like *Wang ŭi namja*, famous actors have found that they need not risk their careers in order to take on roles of gay characters. Shortly after the release of *Wang ŭi namja*, the Korean film star, Jo Seung-woo took on the lead role of transgender character Hedwig in the Korean version of the cult classic musical, “Hedwig and the Angry Inch.” Every single showing of the play sold out. Naturally, this was due to the stardom of Jo Seung-woo more than anything, but Jo’s popularity exposed thousands of Koreans to a story dealing with themes of both homosexuality and transgenderism.

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99. With the dubious exception of *Chuhong kâlssi*, that is.
100. Kim, In-sik, *Interview with Kim In-sik*.
In addition, it was recently announced that two well-known young actors, Kim Hye-sông and Lee Hyôn-jin will star in a new gay movie entitled *So’nyôn, so’nyôn ül mannada* (*Boy Meets Boy*), which begins filming this March.\(^\text{102}\) The proliferation of films portraying homosexuality over the past few years has demonstrated that the concept of male homosexuality is no longer taboo—at least on screen. Koreans should expect to see more gay characters in both supporting and lead roles, in television shows, mainstream cinema, and in independent film.

However, lesbian themes are still taboo, as evidenced by the utter lack of films outside of the two mentioned earlier and the mention of bisexuality in *Chuhong külssi*. The 2007 Seoul LGBT Film Festival did feature a number of Korean short films about lesbians,\(^\text{103}\) but these films were not publicly released and only reached a small target audience.

In 2007, the Korea Queer Cultural Festival (*K’wiö munhwa ch’ukje*)’s annual gay pride parade moved to Ch’ônggyech’on for increased visibility and had the largest turnout ever. In spite of the increasingly higher profile of gay pride events in Seoul or even Pusan, outside of these two metropolitan areas, homosexuality is, for all intents and purposes, still invisible. Indeed, when a group of Korean middle school students in rural Ch’ungbuk province were asked whether they knew any gay people, not a single student replied in the affirmative, with the exception of one who had met a gay student visiting from Australia.\(^\text{104}\)

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\(^{104}\) This question was posed to each ninth-grade homeroom class at Miho Middle School in Ch’ôngwon County in 2004 by the author. While it is possible and even probable that a number of students were too
The increasing number of films portraying homosexuality does not seem to be derived from any change in societal attitudes as a whole. The desire of the general public to see *Chun guang zha xie* in 1997 was not because of the film’s gay themes, but in spite of them—the desire to see the film resulted from its high profile after having won an award in Cannes. Likewise, *Wang ūi namja* did not become a box office sensation because of the film’s same-sex love triangle, but rather because of the film’s stunning cinematography and its accurate depictions of palace life and class differences during the Chosŏn dynasty in Korea.  

Thus, predictably, traits such as star power or international success are alluring enough to draw Koreans to the theatre and override any disgust or hesitation caused by gay themes.

Regardless of the reasons that Koreans are going to see movies with portrayals of homosexuality, however, the bottom line is that they are still going to see movies with portrayals of homosexuality. The man who goes to watch *Wang ūi namja* out of a desire to see what palace life during the Chosŏn dynasty was like is the same man in the theatre when Konggil and King Yŏnsan kiss, and more than twelve million South Koreans—twenty-five percent of the population—have also seen that kiss, not to mention the sexual innuendos throughout the movie. Likewise, the inclusion and equal representation of the (albeit stereotypical) gay couple as one of the six couples portrayed in *Nae saengae kajang arūndaun ilchuil* provides the audience with food for thought and presents the idea that a same-sex couple is as valid as a straight couple. The struggles of *K’ŏp’i p’ūrinsũ 1-hojŏm*’s Ch’oe Han’gyŏl as he tries to come to terms with his attraction to

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another man, while false and almost insultingly farcical, nevertheless force the audience to consider how difficult such a process might be for someone who really is gay. This sort of audience exposure, however subtle or limited, is nonetheless opening Koreans to the idea that (male) homosexuality is simply an alternate sexual identity, and as a result, independent films like *Huhoehaji ana* are reaching wider audiences than previously expected. In addition, the success of *Wang-ui namja* has shown directors that they can include “alternative” characters in their films without risking their films’ success. The increasing presence of homosexual themes on screen is not a reflection of changing societal attitudes about homosexuality, but such a presence may very well be the impetus for it.
Bibliography


