

## **Homoeroticism and Homosexuality in Korean Confucian Culture**

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**Abstract** This article explores how the merging of the contemporary Western concept of homosexuality and the traditional Confucian ideology of gender and sex has shaped the discourse of homosexuality in Korean society. This merger seems to have produced ambivalent attitudes toward homosexuality among Korean people in general, both homosexual and heterosexual. Pastoral psychotherapists' cultural competence is crucial in assisting those in sexual identity therapy to sort out their thoughts and feelings about and reactions to the culturally sensitive issue of homosexuality in the Asian, particularly Korean, Confucian context.

**Keywords** Homosexuality, Korean Confucianism, gender, culture

As part of my research, I watched Korean YouTube videos<sup>2</sup> that featured male celebrities' homoerotic and homosexual behaviors in public. They kissed (actually they only made gestures of kissing), touched, and hugged each other in exactly the same ways that romantic heterosexual lovers would do in private. Their behaviors were bold enough to get attention from the viewers. Western viewers responded to the video by writing on the blog, "Many of their touchy feely actions went beyond just simple bromance!" They were as stunned by what they saw, as I was. What was more interesting was that fans, mostly young girls, cheered on such public celebrity

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Korean+Skinship>. Accessed on April. 12, 2015.

homoerotic behaviors. When a Westerner asked them, however, if they thought the celebrities might be homosexual, the fans got upset and even angry. The fans' reactions were, "What's wrong with you? Where did you get that idea?" Some Westerners on the blog were puzzled by such an obvious contradiction.

It is true that Korean people in general are surprisingly tolerant of such homoerotic behavior but tend to maintain a "brutally" strong resistance to homosexuality, as one of the Westerners wrote on the blog. This visible contradiction also puzzled me and drove me to ask, "How can this contradiction be understood and explained? Is there anything that outsiders may not understand?" These questions have confirmed my belief that homosexuality is not just a psychological or dogmatic problem but also a cultural issue that only insiders may understand.

This paper is an attempt to answer those questions from a cultural and historical perspective of the unique Korean context, one that is relevant both to Korean people back in mainland and those in the U.S., I believe.<sup>3</sup> I hope that this paper will help both Korean/Korean-American and North American pastoral psychotherapists understand the culturally imbedded struggle in the discourse of homosexuality in the Korean context. I often notice that there is mutual animosity between the two cultural groups of conservative Koreans/Korean-Americans and liberal North Americans on the issue of homosexuality. With understanding the culturally unique struggle, Western psychotherapists can effectively assist Korean/Korean-Americans in need to sort out their thoughts and feelings about and reactions to the sensitive issue of homosexuality in their own cultural context. I hope that this paper can provide a way to critically

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<sup>3</sup> Certainly, there is a difference between the attitudes of Koreans and those of Korean-Americans because of the influence of American culture. We may assume that Korean-Americans are more open toward and accepting of homosexuality. However, my experience says that, in general, there is a strong resistance to homosexuality among Korean-Americans, especially Christians.

engage these two groups, conservative Korean/Korean-Americans and liberal North Americans, in a constructive dialogue.

In the following, I begin by briefly discussing the Confucian concept of sexuality itself. Then, I examine the intimate male relationship, as prescribed in Confucian ethics, as an essential social fabric of patriarchal power. I proceed to explore why Korean people tend to be ambivalent toward the contemporary understanding of homosexuality influenced by Western culture, specifically North American. My exploration is limited to male relationships because Confucianism does not mention much about female homoerotic relationship: why this is so might be an interesting topic for another researcher.

### **Confucian sexuality**

Sexuality in the Confucian tradition is mostly discussed from a male perspective. It warned against active sexual lives for the sake of self-cultivation. Confucius said, "The gentleman should guard against it in youth when the bold and *chi* [flow of life force] are still unsettled; he should guard against attraction of feminine beauty" (*Analects of Confucius*, 16:7).<sup>4</sup> The tradition regarded an active sexual life as depleting a man's limited vital essence and therefore exhorted men not to waste their creative bodily resources.

Restricted sexuality for the sake of the development of self-cultivation went along with the suppression of passionate love between heterosexual partners. Marriage was seen primarily as a family obligation and a means of procreation. A passionate, personal sex drive was regarded as a potentially dangerous force that might pull men away from a balanced life style of self-cultivation and filial responsibilities with parents, family, and the community, thus undermining

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Sayings of Confucius: The Harvard Classics, 1909–14*. Retrieved from [bartleby.com](http://bartleby.com). if this is the website please indicate access date.

the social order. In particular, Neo-Confucianists in the fourteenth century strictly adhered to this view of sexuality, and to this day this teaching dominates and controls Korean people's sexuality.

Matteo Ricci, a missionary to China in 1582, understood Confucianism as a kind of stoicism and thus tried to form a "Confucian Christianity" according to the model of a Stoic Christianity. Ricci actually called Confucius another Seneca and used the Stoic teaching on the virtue of man's control over himself including his sexual drive and passion.<sup>5</sup> This cultural adaptation left a strong Stoic influence on the interpretation of Confucian virtue ethics. Within this Stoic understanding of human sexuality and passions, an intimate same-sex relationship was encouraged as a safer and more nurturing means by which to achieve self-cultivation as a sage, which is the Confucian ideal self. At the same time, sexual expressions and behavior, other than for the purpose of procreation, were strictly banned. In this context, homosexuality was not tolerated because it was seen only as a relationship for passionate, sexual pleasure.

### **Korean Confucianism and homosexuality**

Though it was not culturally tolerated, homosexuality has not been totally new in the Korean Confucian society. Many Korean people, entrenched in Neo-Confucianism<sup>6</sup> of the past six centuries, tend to think of homosexuality as newly introduced by Western liberal, permissive culture. They thus have shown strong resistance against this allegedly decadent influence of Western lifestyles in contemporary Korean young people. Homoeroticism, however, especially

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<sup>5</sup> See Spalatin (1975) for detailed discussion on the Confucian and Stoical practice of virtue.

<sup>6</sup> Neo-Confucianism was a combination of the three major philosophies/religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) that it was popular and stood out to many followers. Neo-Confucianism was primarily developed during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), but which can be traced back to Han Yu and Li Ao (772-841 A.D.) in the Tang Dynasty. Most important of early Neo-Confucianists was the Chinese thinker Zhu Xi (1130-1200). It formed the basis of Confucian orthodoxy in the Qing Dynasty of China (1644-1912 A.D.).

an intimate male-on-male relationship, has always existed in Korean history and culture.<sup>7</sup> Korean historical texts include records of homoerotic male relationships, which to Westerners often imply homosexuality, as I discuss later in the article. How has Confucianism allowed such space for homoerotic relationships to exist?

Confucianism has been practiced as a strong patriarchal system.<sup>8</sup> It emphasizes differentiated role-ethics and prescribes culturally acceptable heterosexual relationships. For example, gender role differentiation prohibited persons of different sexes to be socialized with each other both in public and private in the Korean ancient society. Boys and girls, outside familial and kinship relationships, begin to be separated from each other when they reach the age of six. This strict role-ethics of gender has ironically provided a rich soil for socially, emotionally, and physically intimate same-sex relationships to flourish on a cultural level. In particular, intimate male bonding is highly encouraged and seen as a way of cultivating self to become an ideal Confucian person. In this cultural ethos, the emotional and sexual boundaries in the same-sex relationships are often blurred, and crossing over the boundaries are generally tolerated. Due to this culturally tolerant attitudes toward same-sex intimate relationships, many Korean people seem to show ambivalent, even contradictory, reactions to the contemporary discourse on homosexuality, especially of men. For me, Confucianism can be both the source of components that oppress male homosexuality and at the same time the source of liberating the discourse from a rigid, binary Western model of homosexuality. This duality itself of the Confucian talk about homosexuality might be the source of ambiguity and ambivalence in general. To explore this unique dynamic, I frame our talk within Korean history and discuss homosexuality "as a cultural system" (Cuncun, 2013, p.4).

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<sup>7</sup> See Y.G. Kim & S. J. Hahn (2006) for more information.

<sup>8</sup> I would rather say that Confucianism arose in a patriarchal culture and always has embraced patriarchal values, rather than saying that the initial form of Confucianism itself developed patriarchal values.

### **Male friendship as one of the cardinal "five relationships" in Confucianism**

Confucianism prescribes "five cardinal relationships as the rule of the social interactions" (Tu, 1998, p.124). Among the five is the relationship between friend and friend, meaning male friendship. The other four include the relationships between: 1) ruler and subject, 2) father and son, 3) older and younger persons, and 4) husband and wife. Each relationship refers to a different type of social relationship and is ascribed a different moral virtue. The relationship between ruler and subject refers to a public relationship founded on duty; that of father and son on intimate familial affection; older and younger, that of age difference on correct etiquette; that of husband and wife on gender role differentiation; and finally, that of friends on equality and mutual trust. In the Confucian hierarchy, friendship is the only relationship that is equal, making it a unique space for Korean men to nurture freely a deeper level of personal and social intimacy.

The Confucian classic, the *Analects*,<sup>9</sup> gives an exhortation about an ideal friendship from a Confucian perspective:

"Faithfully admonish your friend, and skillfully lead him on. If you find him impracticable, stop. Do not disgrace yourself." (Analects Chapter 12)

"There are three friendships which are advantageous, and three which are injurious. Friendship with the upright; friendship with the sincere; and friendship with the man of much observation: -- these are advantageous. Friendship with the man of specious airs; friendship with the insinuatingly soft; and friendship with the glib-tongued: -- these are injurious." (Analects Chapter 16)

Confucian friendship is founded on honesty, trust, and mutual exhortation. Free communication from a sincere heart and skillful knowledge is essential in such interpersonal interactions. That is

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<sup>9</sup> *The Analects*. Retrieved from <http://www.analects.org/analectschaptersixteen.php>. Accessed Oct. 12, 2015.

why Mencius in fourth century, BCE strongly emphasized male-bonding friendship as indispensable to the process of moral self-cultivation, which is the highest goal of the Confucian self. Mencius' followers have inherited this teaching and proclaimed that male-bonding friendship is superior to the relationship in marriage, which in the Confucian scheme mostly depends on hierarchical role differentiation and obligation. Besides, most women in those times were not well educated and therefore were not considered equal partners in the lifelong task of self-cultivation. This cultural structure seemed to make Confucian men seek personal intimacy more in male friendship than in the relationship with their wives.

This centrality of the intimate male-bonding relationship became an essential part of the social fabric of the Confucian patriarchal society. Friendship as having a "soul mate" became the ideal in the Confucian context. An example is Confucian literati or scholars, who as soul mates share their deepest emotions, personal and political desires and ambitions, and cultivated knowledge of literature and art. Such literati friendship often included deep intellectual, emotional, and spiritual intimacy, the kind of intimacy that contemporary Western people are used to expecting in a romantic love relationship between man and woman. Because of its depth, such male bonding was regarded as superior to hierarchical male-female relationship, thus fostering the cultural ethos of homosocial eroticism and potential homosexuality. Influenced by this cultural ethos and practice, many contemporary Koreans are tolerant of public homosocial and homoerotic expressions and behaviors among males.

### **Patriarchy and homosocial relationships**

As mentioned above, the Korean society has been a deeply Confucian society for more than six hundred years since the *Choson* dynasty took Neo-Confucianism as the national religion in 1392.

Founders of Chosen dynasty intended to build a new kingdom of social order and stability, free from the influence of a corrupted form of Buddhism and its superstitious beliefs prevalent in the later period of Koryo dynasty. Confucianism seemed to be a good choice to accomplish this purpose of maintaining social order because of its focus on the practical issues of this world, not the world beyond. As time passed, however, Confucianism also changed into a rigid form of hierarchical ideology and lost its initial impetus of reform and renewal. In particular, Confucianism was used to build a strong patriarchal ideology and began to drift away from the initial Confucian emphasis of reciprocal respect and responsibility in a gender relationship. A rigid form of patriarchal ideology dictated gender and sexual relationships, and its impact is still prevalent in the contemporary Korean society. North American feminist Heidi Hartmann and queer theory scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are helpful to understand the dynamics of patriarchy and homosocial/homosexual relationships.

Hartmann (1976) sees male homosocial bonding as an essential element of a patriarchal system. She thus defines patriarchy as "an ensemble of social relationships between men...which establishes...some links of interdependence and solidarity which enable them to dominate women" (p.138). Queer theory scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) also explains the homosocial bonding between men as the carefully managed social constructs of patriarchy. Both Hartmann and Sedgwick theorize that intimate male relationships are socially and psychologically embedded in a patriarchal system like a Confucian society.

On the other hand, Sedgwick argues, it is strong heterosexual marriages that maintain the patriarchal power structure (1985, p.5). In such a structure, she continues to argue, heterosexuality is obligatory and often built into the male-dominated familial and kinship system. Homophobia is a natural consequence of this social structure. Indeed, Sedgwick cannot



imagine a form of patriarchy that is not homophobic (p. 3). Interestingly enough, therefore, "the suppression of the homosexual component of sexuality is a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women" (G. Rubin, quoted in Sedgwick, p.3). Sedgwick interweaves together the paradoxical relationship between homophobia and oppression of women in a patriarchal system. For her, homophobia is "not arbitrary or gratuitous, but tightly knit into the texture of family, gender, age, class, and race relations" (Sedgwick, p.3). She continues:

In any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence. For historical reasons, this special relationship may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structure combination of the two. (p.25)

According to Sedgwick, this odd combination of ideological homophobia and homosexuality produces ambivalent and ambiguous attitudes toward homoerotic and homosexual men in a patriarchal system. The Korean Confucian society is no exception. In the Neo-Confucian society of Choson dynasty, marriage and procreation were viewed as the primary social and familial duties; passionate love relationships between men and women in general were not encouraged. Boys and girls were separated once they reached the age of six, structurally making it difficult to develop intimate relationships with the other sex from the early years of life, except within the boundaries of family and kinship.

For these reasons, Confucian patriarchal values of intimate same-sex relationships have provided a rich soil for male homosocial, homoerotic, and potentially homosexual bonding among men. Yet, Confucian ethical values strongly oppose homosexual relationships which

violate its patriarchal gender roles, emphasis on patrilineal procreation, and family-oriented role ethics. Many of my Western friends mention that Korean society is extremely homophobic, and yet they are puzzled by the rampant male homoerotic and homosexual expressions and behaviors. Sedgwick's theory of a homosocial-homosexual continuum and the disruption of the continuum in the contemporary discourse of homosexuality may partly explain this discrepancy, which I discuss in the following.

### **A homosocial-homosexual continuum**

Sedgwick (1985) views male-male relationships as “a continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual” (p.1) rather than simply as a binary of straight/gay. “Homosocial” is a neologism that distinguishes it from “homosexual” and refers to any social bonds between persons of the same sex. Homoeroticism or homosocial “desire” marks the erotic or romantic emphasis in this same-sex bonding. Sedgwick's understanding is that homosocial desire is analogous to the psychoanalytic libido. It is “not for a particular affective state or emotion, but for the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship” (Sedgwick, p.2). However, how far this force is properly sexual is an active question for Sedgwick, considering the complex interdependence among physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual involvement that is part of human intimacy.<sup>10</sup>

In his writing on Greek homosexuality, James Davidson (2007) argues for the subtle interdependence among those physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual realms in Greek love. According to him, the spiritual elements of the Greek affection towards the boys were

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<sup>10</sup> Also see Katz, J. N. (2007). Katz challenges the common notion that the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality has been a timeless one.

always mixed with a powerfully sensual element, the pleasure which had its origin in the physical beauty of the loved one. The boundaries between sexual and spiritual are viewed as fluid rather than fixed. American historian of human sexuality Jonathan Ned Katz (2001) presents stories of male intimacy during the nineteenth century in North America in a similar way. He describes intimate male friendships and the ways in which men struggle to name, define, and defend their sexual feelings for one another. He states that in a world before "gay" and "straight" referred to sexuality, men in intimate relationships with the same sex had to navigate the uncharted territory of male-male desire (p.3-44). The subtle line between the homosocial and the homosexual has made people suspect that there is an unbroken continuum between the two. Sedgwick's (1985) hypothesis of the continuum is based on social constructionism that all sexual understandings are constructed within and mediated by cultural understandings" (p.42). I relate Sedgwick's continuum to the Korean cultural understanding of sex and gender.

Gender is a profound determinant of power in Korean Confucian culture. Once a homosocial bond becomes homosexual, the borderline between them is transgressed and disrupted. Such a transgression is considered a disruption in the Confucian society because of the influence of the Confucian heterosexual gender inequality reflected on the continuum. Thus the transition from the homosocial to the homosexual in an intimate male relationship could be seen quite drastic and disruptive, given that male equal relationship becomes hierarchical in terms of Confucian sexual role differentiation. When a homosocial relationship becomes homosexual, a role is assigned to each participant, and the role assignment is typically arranged within the Confucian cultural framework: One takes a more active, penetrating, masculine role and the other a more dependent, feminine, penetrated role. In Confucian patriarchal society

where femininity is regarded as inferior and not manly, such a feminine role for a man tends to be condemned as deviant from the social norm and thus perverted or *byuntae* (in Korean). Thus the continuum between homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual should stay clearly discontinuous, and the Western binary model of sexuality further reinforces this separation by distinguishing between sexual and non-sexual relationships.

### **The influence of a western concept of homosexuality**

German psychologist Karoly Maria Benkert coined the term "homosexuality" in the late nineteenth century (Pickett, 2001). The neologism signaled a paradigm shift in thinking about intimate same-sex relationships and gave rise to a new concept, the "homosexual." This term turned behavior into identity, and it was discussed mainly in the domains of medicine and psychology. An essentialist approach was developed, and the contemporary dichotomy of heterosexual and homosexual was born as a sexual identity and orientation.<sup>11</sup> According to essentialism, sexual preference is biologically fixed and usually does not change: It is a part of one's permanent personal identity.

One of the criticisms of this view is that, by accepting such a fixed heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, essentialism unintentionally concedes that heterosexuality is the norm and thus deems homosexuals abnormal and a permanent minority (Pickett, 2001). In reaction to this, a theory of social constructionism was developed that argues that people are not born with a fixed sexual identity or orientation but instead specific social and cultural constructs produce sexual ways of being. In other words, there is no given sexual identity independent of culture. Homi Bhaba (2004) is one of the prominent figures that advocate for this view. For those

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<sup>11</sup> See Louis Crompton (2006) for the history of homosexuality in Europe and parts of Asia from Homer to the 18th century.

advocates, the range of sexual diversity and the fluidity of human possibility is simply too varied to be captured by any one conceptual schema.

In the thirteenth century, this essentialist view was merged with natural law ethics, particularly thanks to the influence of Thomas Aquinas's natural law approach that emphasizes certain human goods.<sup>12</sup> Among the human goods are marriage and procreation. Natural law ethicists thus oppose homosexual behaviors as morally wrong because they do not lead to procreation. This merging of essentialism and natural law ethics has been a crucial factor contributing towards increased intolerance and condemnation of homosexuals.

Influenced by this line of the Western discourse of homosexuality in modern times, Korean people in general reconsidered and became intolerant of their culturally specific homosocial and homoerotic behaviors and expressions which had been long permitted as intimate male bonding in the Korean Confucian society. As a consequence, Korean people clearly marked the distinction between the homoerotic and the homosexual and thus split the continuum between them: they accept the former as a positive cultural heritage and condemn the latter as a form of sexual pathology. Thus is born a rigid binary thinking about human sexuality along with the corresponding social condemnation. This raises a question, "How far can homoeroticism go and be permitted without being condemned as homosexual in Korean society?" In fact there are no clear, socially agreed upon guidelines for this decision, but there is a widespread understanding that homoerotic relationships turn into homosexual ones when there is a genital sexual intercourse between the two same sex persons. This distinction, however, blurs in the Korean context when we consider that there are same-sex couples who suppress their homosexual expressions and behaviors in order to remain within the cultural bounds. In this

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<sup>12</sup> See G. Alexandre Lenferna (2010) for the argument that many of the arguments claiming homosexuality to be immoral do not sit well with the natural law ethics position.

case, the couple is obviously homosexual but suppress the desire of homosexual intercourse and does not come out in public. Instead, they try to fit into the culturally permissible category of homosocial and homoerotic relationships of male intimacy. Many homosexual people in Korea are trapped in this ambivalent categorization.

### **Homosexual cases in Korean historical records**

Korean historical records show cases of intimate male-on-male bonding among elite members of society. An example can be found in the records of *Hwarang*, a group of elite youth in the ancient *Sylla* Dynasty (57 BCE - 935 AD).<sup>13</sup> The term, *Hwarang* literally means "Flower of Youth." The royal government selected and trained talented young men to serve the country. They were taught the five cardinal Confucian principles of human relations, the six arts (etiquette, music, archery, horsemanship, writing, and mathematics), skills of the three scholarly occupations (royal tutor, instructor, and teacher), and the six ways to serve the government (as holy minister, good minister, loyal minister, wise minister, virtuous minister, and honest minister). Together, loyalty to the king, filial piety, literary excellence in poetry and music, and military excellence in martial arts were the virtues of *Hwarang*. Along with those virtues, physical beauty and the cultivation of friendship were associated with the group.<sup>14</sup> For contemporary Koreans, the term *Hwarang* therefore "carries with it the ring of romance and chivalry and conjures up images of masculinity and grace" (Kim & Hahn, 2006, p.64). The ideal of *Hwarang* still influences Korean people's concept of masculinity, which is to include: literary/artistic skills and sensibility, intellectual ability, chivalry/bravery, and physical beauty.

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<sup>13</sup> The *Sylla* Dynasty was founded mostly on Buddhism rather than Confucianism. However, the society was profoundly multi-religious under the influence of Taoism, Confucianism, Shamanism, and Buddhism. The *Hwarang* system adopted all of those religious teachings to educate and train the elites for the best service to the country and the government.

<sup>14</sup> See Ilyon (2008) for detailed information about *Hwarang* and its training and education.

Young-Gwan Kim and Sook-Ja Hahn (2006) argue that the *Hwarang* offers the clearest example of ancient homosexuality in Korea. As evidences, they present the following poems as some of the examples included in *Sam-Guk-Yu-Sa*, which is a collection of legends, folktales, and historical accounts relating to the Three Kingdoms of Korea in the period between 57 B.C.E and 668 B.C.E.<sup>15</sup>

Song of Yearning for the Flower Boy *Taemara*<sup>16</sup>

The whole world weeps sadly

The 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?

Song in Praise of the Flower Boy *Kilbo*<sup>17</sup>

Moon

Appearing fitfully

Trailing the white clouds, Whither do you go?

The face of the Flower Boy *Kilbo*

Was reflected in the pale green water,

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<sup>15</sup> This book is a collection of legends, folktales, and historical accounts relating to the Three Kingdoms of Korea in the period between 57 B.C.E and 668 B.C.E. The Buddhist monk Il-yeon compiled it at the end of the thirteenth century. See Ilyon (2008).

<sup>16</sup> This song was written by the senior *hwarang*, *Taemara*, during the reign of King Hyoso (A.D. 692–702).

<sup>17</sup> This song dates from the same reign and was written by the monk *Chungdam*. It praises one of the *hwarang* bands.

Here among the pebbles of the stream

I seek the bounds of the heart he bore.

Ah, ah! Flower Boy here,

Noble pine that fears no frost!

Ch'oyong's Song<sup>18</sup>

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?

Traditionally, the above songs have been interpreted as illustrating a *hwarang* penchant for erotic and sexual desires toward persons of the same sex. We can see the songs full of romantic, erotic, and sexual images. We have more examples of such *hwarangs'* homosexual eroticism. Among them are the Buddhist monk Yungchon's *Song of the Comet* which offers a metaphorical description of sexual desire among *hwarang* boys; Wolmyong's *Tusita Hymn*, written in the *hwarang* style during the reign of King Kyongdok (A.D. 742–765), which is a devout song in honor of Maitreya known as a handsome *hwarang* boy; and the *Song for a Dead Sister*, which

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<sup>18</sup> This last song is possibly the most famous of all in terms of its direct description of homosexual practices. It dates from the time of King Hongang (A.D. 875–886).



was written in honor of a dead soul who died in battle. Here, the "sister" is in fact a *hwarang* boy who adopted a feminine role in homosexual acts.<sup>19</sup>

*Hwarang* intimacy started on equal friendship. When the intimacy turned into homosexual desire and behaviors, however, the friendship often changed to be unequal. One of the pair tended to take an active gender role and the other a passive role, as prescribed in the Confucian role ethics of gender. This unequal sexually intimate male relationships were often seen in the relationships between a king and a royal clown, as shown in the records about King *Kongmin* (A.D. 1352-1374) in the *Koryo* dynasty. King *Kongmin* was a "scholar-painter-calligrapher" and known for pederasty with royal catamites. The names of five royal catamites are recorded: *Hong Yun, Han An, Kwon Chin, Hong Kwan, and No Son* (Kim & Hahn, 2006, p. 62). This kind of unequal, homosexual relationship was the replica of the gender roles of the contemporary Confucian culture.<sup>20</sup> The power imbalance is clear in this homosexual relationship, and the imbalance is dramatically manifested in their different social statuses.

To prevent an intimate male relationship from degenerating into an allegedly unequal, perverted expression of sexual desire, the line between homosocial expressions and homosexual behaviors must be strictly maintained. This binary understanding of human eroticism and sexuality resonates with the contemporary idea of human sexuality, which divides the sexual domain in two—the heterosexual and the homosexual—and dictates that heterosexuals cannot respond sexually to their own sex. In Korea in general, the split continuum seems to have become a norm and indeed is considered to protect society from the disruption of role differentiation as taught in Confucian role ethics. Males and females should not transgress the prescribed role boundaries. The continuum must remain strictly discontinuous. Especially, males

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<sup>19</sup> For further information, see Y. K. Kim & S. J. Hahn (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Another example comes from the record in the *Annals of the Choson Dynasty* that describes a royal clown named *Konggil* and his relationship with King *Yonsan* (1476-1506, r. 1494-1506).

who take female roles in relationship are often severely ridiculed and condemned in the Confucian society.

### **Conclusion**

I began this paper with the question, "Why is Korean Confucian culture permissive toward male homoeroticism while on the other hand it harshly condemns homosexuality?" An accompanying question was, "How has this clear distinction between the homoerotic and the homosexual influenced and shaped the discourse of homosexuality in Korea?" I used Sedgwick's social constructionist theory of a continuum to argue for the subtle line between the homosocial, homoerotic, and the homosexual, which is considered fluid rather than fixed. Based on the continuum, I explained the subtly overlapping intersection of homosocial/homoerotic/homosexual behavior and expressions, which have existed throughout Korean history. However, influenced by contemporary, Western, binary thinking of human sexuality (sexual/nonsexual) on the one hand and homosexuality (homo/hetero) on the other, Korean people have come to set more strict boundaries on the continuum. This merging of the contemporary Western concept of homosexuality and the traditional Confucian ideology of gender and sex has shaped the discourse of homosexuality in Korean society. In general, this merger has produced ambivalent and ambiguous attitudes toward homosexuality and thus has become a source of great psychological and social stress for both Korean homosexual and heterosexual people. Some people from different cultures, Western for example, may easily condemn such "rigid" and uncompromisingly "conservative" reactions of some, or most, Korean people in the discourse of homosexuality. The rigid attitudes to the contemporary discourse of homosexuality, however, can be a reaction to their ambivalent and ambiguous feelings which

may produce lots of anxiety. Crossing the boundaries existing in the continuum of homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual relations is now strictly prohibited, and Korean people are fearful about violating this newly set cultural code of ethics. Understanding this cultural dynamic related to homosexuality is essential for pastoral psychotherapists to assist those in need to become aware, explore, and sort out their thoughts and feelings about and reactions to the anxiety-provoking, sensitive issue of homosexuality in the Korean/Korean-American context.

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