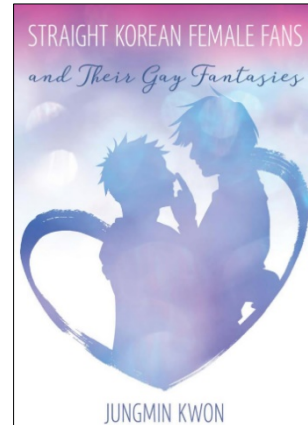


Jungmin Kwon, **Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies**, Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2019, 236 pp., \$65.00 (paperback).

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Over the past several years, the popular culture of South Korea has become increasingly influential around the globe, with young women fans particularly coming to appreciate the “idol” K-pop music and cinema produced by Korean entertainment companies. Central to this popular culture are—to quote the title of Jungmin Kwon’s timely book—***Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies***. In a book that will be of interest to a broad range of scholars working within the fields of media and film studies, Korean studies, and fan studies, Kwon explores the historical emergence and impact of heterosexual female Korean consumers’ intense attraction to imagined romantic and sexual relationships between men on South Korea’s popular culture landscape. Investigating what she calls “FANTasy,” a term that both signals “female fans’ interest in and desire for gay male erotic relationships” and “the subjectivity and cultural power of these enthusiastic media consumers” (p. 11), Kwon draws upon feminist and queer media theories to argue that Korea’s entertainment industries have been transformed by young women’s consumption. Across seven chapters, Kwon carefully historicizes the emergence of media that centers erotic relationships between men within the context of the neoliberalization of the South Korean economy, revealing how media companies have responded to the growing economic clout of young women through their incorporation of gay “FANTasy.” Throughout, Kwon responds to important debates in media studies concerning issues of queer representation, visibility politics, and the agency of women, bringing her South Korean case study into dialogue with disciplinary discussions that have typically privileged North American examples.



The book can be informally divided into three broad sections, reflecting the mix of methodologies that Kwon has deployed within her project. The first section, containing chapters 1 and 2, focuses on the historical development of young women’s fantasies of gay relationships through a discussion of K-pop idol fanfiction. The second section, containing chapters 3 and 4, focuses on the roles that young women consumers have played in mainstreaming queer representation in South Korean cinema. The final section, corresponding to chapter 5, explores how gay Korean men view the rise of FANTasy culture and reflects on issues concerning appropriation of representation. These analyses are preceded by a theoretical introduction that brings Kwon’s case studies into dialogue with the considerable prior scholarship on fandom for homoerotic content among women within Anglophone and Japanese contexts. In responding to the previous literature on “slash” and “yaoi,” Kwon provides an important entry point to her argument, introducing readers unfamiliar with the global phenomenon of women’s consumption of male-male erotica to the world of FANTasy. The introduction also provides important background information on Korean society, including the marginal status of both women and gay men and the changes brought about to Korea’s popular culture landscape by the neoliberalization of the Korean economy in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

With a remarkable economy of words and clarity of expression, Kwon succeeds in providing the reader with all the information necessary to understand her case studies.

The first informal section of the book draws upon Kwon's long-term observation and participation within K-pop idol fandom to reveal what motivates straight Korean women to fantasize about gay relationships and how these fans are situated within Korea's heteropatriarchal society. Chapter 1 specifically focusses on the emergence of FANTasy through a historical discussion of the development of fanfic in the late 1990s as an offshoot of the fandom for Korean idol groups. Through interviews with fanfic authors and readers, Kwon argues that such fans represent "queer girls" who challenged heteropatriarchal notions concerning women's lack of sexual agency through the repurposing of idols via homoerotic fantasy. In many ways, chapter 1 reveals that the emergence of FANTasy culture in South Korea mirrored the earlier emergence of *yaoi* culture in Japan, and I was left wondering what was specific or unique to the South Korean context. Chapter 2 moves from the investigation of this predominantly subcultural phenomenon to examine how FANTasy became increasingly mainstream within South Korean society. Kwon provides a lengthy and sophisticated discussion of South Korean neoliberalism and heteropatriarchy to argue that, as young women became the primary consumers of media, Korean entertainment industries were increasingly required to adapt their content to cater to this audience. Responding to debates over postfeminism's role in "incorporat[ing] women fully into capitalism by depoliticizing feminism under the guise of personal choice" (p. 70), Kwon suggests that, within the Korean context where women are denied sexual agency, the incorporation of gay FANTasy within mainstream media culture has both empowered women and provided much needed queer visibility.

The second informal section of the book shifts the focus from fanfiction and fans of K-pop to consider the mainstreaming of gay romance in Korean film. Throughout this section, Kwon sensitively interrogates the development of both independent and mainstream queer cinema in South Korea to reveal the centrality of young female audiences to the economic success and expansion of films centering explicit gay romances. Chapter 3 explores the reception of 2005's ground-breaking film *The King and the Clown* (*Wangŭi Namcha*)—as well as other films with gay romantic themes starring handsome young idol stars—among women as an example of the process through which FANTasy became central to South Korean young women's consumer culture. While the chapter also contains a lengthy literature review concerning the globalization of Korean cinema that I found somewhat out of place, in chapter 3 Kwon successfully exposes how young Korean women's fandom produced a space for queer representation within mainstream cinema. The central argument that Kwon develops is that Korean production companies, pressured to find new markets within the context of an economic slowdown at the turn of the century, responded to the success of *The King and the Clown* by producing films that catered to young women's FANTasy culture. Chapter 4 expands this analysis to account for FANTasy culture's impacts on South Korean queer cinema more broadly. Throughout this chapter, Kwon shows how the conservatism of South Korean society that had traditionally censured cinematic representations of same-sex-desiring people gave way to explicit celebration. Importantly, Kwon argues for the significance of visibility politics in South Korea, persuasively demonstrating how young straight women's fantasies for gay romance have led to more nuanced depictions of queer sexuality within Korean cinema specifically and Korean popular culture more broadly.

Chapter 5 represents the third and final informal section of the book, with Kwon turning her attention to the objects of straight Korean female consumers' FANTasy gaze—gay men. Kwon rightfully recognizes that no study of young Korean women's desires for gay romance can be complete without thinking through the lived experiences of gay Korean men. This is especially true since the previous scholarship on what Kwon would term FANTasy culture in Anglophone and Japanese contexts has revealed a certain discomfort on behalf of queer communities concerning the "appropriation" of gay men's representation for the purposes of heterosexual women's sexual exploration. In chapter 5, Kwon draws upon interviews with a small sample of gay Korean men to respond to recent scholarly work on Japanese *yaoi*, which has revealed that gay-identified men do indeed read and enjoy FANTasy texts. Kwon argues that while some gay Korean men do find FANTasy culture problematic, they ultimately appreciate the growing visibility given to queer sexuality within South Korean society as a result of FANTasy culture's mainstream status. Within the growing scholarship on heterosexual women's consumption of homoerotic media, there is a surprising lack of attention given to the gay men these media typically depict. Kwon's contribution to this debate is thus timely and important.

The book concludes by reflecting on the future of FANTasy culture in South Korea. Kwon persuasively expresses her overall argument that fans represent important cultural actors within the Korean popular culture landscape, arguing that scholars need to take their experiences seriously by refusing to dismiss their agency. While this is an important point that has often been emphasized within the previous fan studies literature, many readers who are unfamiliar with this emerging field of study will find this conclusion extremely fruitful in pushing forward their own understandings of Korean popular culture consumption. My one minor disappointment with the book is its failure to adequately consider the role of FANTasy culture within the globalization of Korean pop culture fandom (known as the Korean Wave). I understand, however, that books can only do so much and appreciate that Kwon's decision to focus solely on the South Korean context stems from a political commitment to South Korean feminist debates. It is my belief that Kwon's book will become necessary reading for all scholars seeking to chart the increasingly globalized appeal of Korean popular culture. Kwon has expertly opened up new avenues of enquiry within the study of the Korean Wave as well as fan studies more broadly.