

Out with the Old: ‘Japanlessness’ in Gay Korea

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Introduction

Japanophilia and Koreaphilia fueled by mutual desires based on national imaginaries have been constant fixtures in the gay subcultures of Korea and Japan.¹ In recent years, however, the once adored monolith of “Japan” has been on the decline in gay Korea.² As of 2023, only one exclusively Japanophilic gay bar remains in Korea. In contrast, there are around a dozen Koreaphilic gay bars—often, run by Koreans for Koreans and their Japanese admirers—in Tokyo and Osaka. In this research note, I outline the current status of Japan and the Japanese man as imaginaries for Korean gay men, in the aftermath of Korea’s and Korean men’s transition from subaltern to superior in their own imaginary against Japan. I examine the factors that have since distanced Korean gay men from Japan as a result of the seizure of Japan’s soft power hegemony through the ongoing Korean Wave, a prosperous Korea repositioned in the gaze of Southeast Asia, and disruptive tides such as the “No Japan” boycott and COVID-19. The demise of gay bars in Korea targeted at Japanese tourists is explained through testimony from my interviews with other bar owners and staff who themselves have or have had ties with, and customers from, Japan.

Owing to its intraregional scope, this study responds to advocacy for the

1 “Korea,” “Korean,” and “Koreans” in this research note are in reference to the South Korean nation, culture, or “race” unless otherwise indicated or implied (for example, when referring to Korea[ns] before the Korean War), while “Koreaphilia” and “Koreaphobia” express sentiments of obsession or animosity toward all things Korean (North or South).

2 “Japan” and “the Japanese man” are often referred to here, not only as the nation proper and the men therein but also as the myriad constructs of such among gay men in Korea. “Japanophilia” and “Japanophobia” express sentiments of obsession or animosity toward these or other things associated with Japan.

study of Queer Asia as comparatively transregional, global, and inter-Asian, rather than that which is inextricably bounded with the West.³ In doing so, it disrupts the recurrent narrative of Queer Korea's inherent desire for white Western men and the West. While researchers such as Patrick Thomsen have contributed to the study of Korean gay men in an intercultural context, their samples are often limited to young, cosmopolitan subjects who communicate with them in English.⁴ Focus on such respondents—representative of merely a fraction of the community—often skews the racialized hierarchy of desire in Asia toward the gaze of white Westerners, which is not the case in largely homogeneous and racially autosexual Korea (or elsewhere, as Lisa Rofel and Dredge Kang have argued with respect to China and Thailand).⁵ For the rest of the community, a researcher's positionality of racial otherness can become a barrier of access. The present study, while relying on a modest sample size, turns to this broader group through my racial "privilege" and fieldsites which chiefly cater to a local (as opposed to foreign, Anglophone) clientele base.

My research sets out to advance area and queer studies from transnational and intersectional angles, along "ethnosexual frontiers" termed by Joane Nagel.⁶ It discursively looks at Korean gay men not by nativist or global queer assertions, but as a group with an intraregional relationality with Japan. As a Korean-American, my own positionality in this dual relationship was conflicted. On the one hand, I was accepted as a *gyopo*⁷—a member of the diaspora—and, to a degree, respected for my origination in the US as opposed to the criminally associated China, Russia, or Central Asia. As an American *gyopo*, I established trust from those who otherwise avoid contact with "foreigners." On the other hand, my foreign way of thinking and communicating can impede that trust,

3 Howard Chiang and Alvin Wong, "Asia is burning: Queer Asia as critique," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 123.

4 Patrick Thomsen, "Transnational Interest Convergence and Global Korea at the Edge of Race and Queer Experiences: A Talanoa with Gay Men in Seoul," *Du Bois Review* 17, no. 2 (2020): 411-428.

5 Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), and Dredge Kang, "Eastern orientations: Thai middle-class gay desire for 'white Asians,'" *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 182-208.

6 Joane Nagel, "Ethnicity and Sexuality," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 107-133.

7 Korean transliterations in this research note are in accordance with the system of Revised Romanization rather than what I consider to be an outdated (and convoluted to many outside academia) McCune-Reischauer.

barring me from the typical bargoing groups (*moim*) in which some exclusively take part in the scene. Consequently, only individuals—as bar owners, staff, or lone customers—became interviewees for this study.

While fieldwork for this study was limited to Seoul and Busan, gayborhoods exist in all of the five metropolitan cities while other cities without one have gay bars nonetheless.⁸ Gay men in outlying regional, provincial, and rural spaces are no less representative of the gay community in Korea; and bars, too, are only one example of gay space amid the 500 to 600 establishments that include clubs, theaters, karaoke rooms, cruising spaces, and others. Furthermore, much as with scholarship on gay men in Japan, this research note cannot extend its conclusions to lesbians and other sexual minorities—often segregated in the bar scene, consequently and by choice. Lastly, although the study of Korean gay men in Japan includes the North Korean diaspora, such access is almost impossible in South Korea. *Zainichi* North Koreans are born and raised in Japan, whereas North Koreans in South Korea are predominantly defectors, only one of whom is publicly known to have come out as gay and has since relocated to the US.⁹

Methodology

In preparation for fieldwork, online searches were conducted to locate gay bars in Korea that advertise to, or have been reviewed by or with reference to, Japanese. Sources included homepages and social media (Facebook and Instagram) managed by the establishments, along with directories in Japanese (Gaytobu and Gclick) and English (Kiss My Kimchi and TravelGay). Based on the content available, datasets were compiled on owners; customer base by age and body type; limitations to foreigners and women; and other descriptions,

8 “Gayborhood” in this research note means any area—which, in Korea, is almost always identified by neighborhood (*dong*)—with a cluster of gay establishments. No area is exclusively gay (indeed, straights who come to them may not even be aware of this co-existence), and the purpose they serve is for play—not as places to live and work as a community. As such, they should not be conflated with gayborhoods in, for example, the US and Canada.

9 For more on this gay defector, see the article that brought his story to light in *Hankyoreh* (April 16, 2015).

including features of the interior such as karaoke.¹⁰ Ten establishments were shortlisted as fieldsites, four of which were later found to have gone out of business and were subsequently replaced during the course of fieldwork. The study relies on my findings from these resulting ten gay bars distributed across four gayborhoods in Seoul and Busan: Seoul's Jongno 3-Ga (2), Itaewon (2), and Sillim (1); and Busan's Beomil (5).

Gay bars have often been bypassed as fieldsites for the study of gay space and place in Korea, and the few exceptions have looked at them solely from the perspective of their customers. A survey in the 1990s managed to measure a sizeable sample of Korean gay bargoers' involvement in queer culture and secrecy around sexual identity, in a study by Chris and Berry.¹¹ However, its distribution was confined to Seoul's international or "Westernized" district of Itaewon, thereby limiting respondents to the same highly educated, globally minded demographic that pervaded the study by Thomsen. My choice of interviews over a survey for the present study is partly the result of limited access to—and, thus, sample size of—customers. Business at the bars at the time of fieldwork was slow as many headed directly to the clubs, which had only days before reopened after months of closure due to COVID-19. Even when the bars are busy, the majority of customers assemble in their own social circles which rarely interact with one another, let alone a random stranger. Conducting surveys requires intrusions into each of these personal zones, which can put the surveyor's welcome at the bar and ability to conduct interviews at risk. There is warranted suspicion toward researchers at gay bars in Korea, where the research aim has often been to pry into the sexual lives of gay men.¹²

The subjects of focus for my interviews were correspondingly owners and staff rather than customers. As gatekeepers of the gayborhood, they have exclusive insights on not only their own bars and customers but also others around them—past and present, making them archivists of a history that

10 Explicit refusal of entry to foreigners and women is not as common for gay bars in Korea as they are in Japan, and as such no such rules were indicated by or for any in this study.

11 Chris Berry and Fran Martin, "Syncretism and Synchronicity: Queer'n'Asian Cyberspace in 1990s Taiwan and Korea," in *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, ed. Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue (Duke University Press, 2003), 87-114.

12 Berry and Martin, "Syncretism and Synchronicity," 112.

beyond their memory fades with the passing of each night. They further chart the direction of the gayborhood's constant redevelopment in the ways they choose to represent their bars, interact with their customers, and respond to change. In their role of conversing with customers, owners and staff become informants by default when the researcher takes on the role of a customer. While I did manage to talk with isolated customers at a few bars intermittently with my interviewees, these conversations were often integrated into the discussion with owners and staff and rather served to support or expand on their responses. Participant observation and interviews enabled me to extract thicker descriptions from and about my subjects, interrogate new questions along the way, and, consequently, obtain broader context for my findings.

Respondents from Gay Bars in Seoul & Busan

RESPONDENT	SEX	SEXUAL ORIENTATION	AGE	JAPANESE ABILITY	ROLE	BAR	AREA	CITY
1	M	Gay	30s	○	Co-Owner	A	Jongno 3-Ga	Seoul
2	M	Gay	30s	○	Co-Owner	A	Jongno 3-Ga	Seoul
3	M	Gay	40s	○	Owner	B	Jongno 3-Ga	Seoul
4	M	Gay	30s	✕	Staff	C	Itaewon	Seoul
5	M	Gay	30s	○	Owner	D	Itaewon	Seoul
6	F	Straight	30s	✕	Staff	D	Itaewon	Seoul
7	M	Gay	30s	✕	Owner	E	Sillim	Seoul
8	M	Gay	30s	✕	Owner	F	Beomil	Busan
9	M	Gay	40s	○	Owner	G	Beomil	Busan
10	M	Gay	50s	○	Owner	H	Beomil	Busan
11	M	Gay	30s	○	Staff	H	Beomil	Busan
12	M	Gay	40s	○	Owner	I	Beomil	Busan
13	M	Gay	20s	○	Staff	I	Beomil	Busan

*For fieldwork carried out in November 2021.

In total, 13 interviewees working as owners (9) and staff (4) were interviewed over the course of several nights in November 2021. Conversations were in Korean or Japanese, as preferred by the respondent. Six out of the ten bars in the study had owners—two of which additionally had staff—who could speak Japanese, an ability which is directly related to their exposure to (but, not necessarily, love for) Japan. The presence of these owners and staff serves as a further indicator that their bars have been regularly patronized by Japanese customers, who as tourists normally do not speak Korean or English. As bars were preselected on the basis of their marketing toward, or commentary from

or about, Japanese, all of those still in business expectably had owners and staff conversant in Japanese. What was, perhaps, less expected was that none of the bars outside this preselection had anyone who knew Japanese. As no other bars in my search advertised by or for Japanese, this suggests with high probability that the absence of Japanese ability—and, accordingly, close contact with Japan and Japanese customers—is also the case for the majority of the 150 or so gay bars across Korea.

Case Study

Today, Japanese men are nowhere to be found in the gay bars of Seoul or Busan. Japan, now commonly associated with the socially and culturally outdated, along with the Japanese man as an object of desire, seem to have diminished in the imaginary of gay men in Korea. Just as soon as Korea started to officially open to the flow of Japanese cultural content, the Korean wave flooded out in the opposite direction and has yet to subside. There is now what I see as an increasing “Japanlessness”—in the loosening of, and disintegration from, Japan—in gay Korea, triggered by three ongoing factors: (1) Japan’s declining soft power against the global rise of Korean pop culture and Koreaphilia—and, consequently, a new autosexual desire of self-seeking Koreans; (2) Korea’s demographic transition that has discarded the need for safe haven—with Korean gay men’s complacency in what I consider to have become an “open closet”—and established a class of gay tourists to emerging markets in Southeast Asia; and, (3) Korean gay bars’ loss of Japanophiles amid the “No Japan” boycott and dearth of Japanese tourists due to COVID-19.

Falling Japan, Rising Korea

On the surface, Koreans and Japanese in recent years may seem to share a mutual disdain, their nations deadlocked at one of the lowest points in recent memory. Since 2013, annually conducted joint surveys have successively confirmed that these sentiments are indeed represented by the majority in Korea and Japan, even if directed at the other’s government more so than its people.¹³ Still, a series of diplomatic spats sparked by recurrent disputes over

13 Yasushi Kudo, “*Nichikan no kokumin kanjō wa yaya ochitsuita ga, izen hiekonda jōkyō: ryōkoku no hēsoku jōtai ni kaizen no kizashi wa mirareru ka.*” The Genron NPO (September 28, 2021).

history, territory, and trade have only fanned the incessant flames of Japanophobia in Korea and Koreaphobia in Japan (including against *zainichi* as “the enemy” at home). While outright racism and hate speech against Japanese are relatively rare outside the extremist fringe in Korea, for the rest of society there is at best a sense of lost love with Japan. As for the respective minorities who hold favorable impressions of the other, what attracts them is not irrelevant. The joint surveyors found that over half of Japanese who view Korea favorably are influenced by its pop culture. The draw to Japan for Koreans, on the other hand, is its tourist attractions; but, while over half of Koreans expressed a desire to travel to Japan, it is predominantly the younger demographic below 30. The other half, then, represent a broadly aged range of adults—including those who lived through the decades of Japan’s postcolonial “presence”—not a few of whom have probably already traveled to, but have become blasé toward, Japan. This multigenerational shift away from Japan is thus what I consider to be a result of its fading presence as a pop cultural hegemony in Asia, as replaced at home by the Korea Wave. By extension, this has also meant Japan’s dissipation from the fixations of gay men in Korea.

Where state censorship of Japanese media had fallen short in its aim to construct a new Korean consciousness to replace all that had been erased by colonization, the Korea Wave seems to have made leaps and bounds. Korea’s brand identity is stronger than ever, reaching every corner of the world, no less in a Korea that nonetheless maintains a constant inflow of cultural content from Japan. Japanese gay manga are now translated into Korean, and other series inspired by them are authored by Koreans and made available on online platforms such as “*Kkaman Bongji*” (“Black Bag”). While the site featured over 50 adult series and 80 fan submissions by the end of 2021, hardly any content was newly produced that year and the lull in activity has continued into 2022. Meanwhile, the once booming Japanese music industry had already lost its luster for Koreans in the 2000s, and has never managed to reclaim its position since. With the industry’s myopic focus on a domestic fan base (coupled with its own form of self-censorship through copyright restrictions), Japanese idols can no longer meet the standards of the mainstream audience in Korea. Those with the talent instead try to break into the Korea Wave, where some of the most successful boy bands such as NCT and girl groups such as TWICE have Japanese and other Asian members for broader marketability across the region.

The success of Korea's music industry has hoisted an army of Korean (or Koreanized) men and women onto sexual pedestals one after the other for new, Koreaphilic audiences in Japan and around the world. Bar H's bartender was keenly aware of this phenomenon, saying that while Koreans once looked up to Japan and its trends, the roles have since switched (Resp. 11).

Bar E's owner went further in his assessment, saying that while Japan and Japanese men were once subjects of infatuation, Korean gay men's tastes have since broadened beyond them (Resp. 7). Even Bar D's owner, described by his staff as a Japanophile (Resp. 6), was less turned on by Japanese men. He characterized them as typically thin, in what seemed to be a generalization based on an abundance of "herbivore men" (*sōshoku-kei danshi*) since the 2000s. Korean men, in contrast, are often muscular because of their tendency to work out (Resp. 5), with others aside from my interviewees in this study having attributed Koreans' build to their mandatory service in the military. With muscles above thinness on the hierarchy of gay desire, these comparisons carry an implicit bias by Korean gay men for other Koreans over Japanese.

A sense of Korean gay men's tastes can also be found in print media such as posters at the bars. Common ones at my fieldsites came from the Ivan Stop HIV/AIDS Project (ISHAP), promoting safer sex between gay men. Character illustrations seemed overtly Japanese in their resemblance to those in gay manga, with husky bears and cubs with buzz cuts and stubble beards. While these types abound in Japan they are less popular in Korea, due to stigmas against body fat and facial hair. Yet, the scruffy men depicted on these posters sparked no connection to Japan or Japanese men for any of my respondents. Many of those with whom I communicated in Japanese coincidentally fit the description themselves, but none associated their look with Japaneseness. It was purported to be a type found across Asia (Resp. 2) or even one which is inherently Korean (Resp. 5). The only respondent who consciously self-identified with Japaneseness was the owner of Bar I, who boasted that he took inspiration from the iconic "goggle man" (*goguruman*) in Japanese gay porn (Resp. 12)—a recurring role normally played by an average [yet, still, "masculine"] man in his 30s or 40s who seduces the toned, athletic [and, often, straight] protagonist in his 20s. In all of my other discussions, Japanese men were not imagined as the figures of masculinity they once were in gay Korea.

Be it for goggle men or otherwise, the porn industry may be the one

exception where Japanese content has maintained a semblance of gay desire for Japan in Korea. The blanket prohibition of porn has resulted in a sparsity of locally produced, commercially available content in Korea, and racial insularity in sexual preferences among gay men leave them with few alternatives besides what comes out of Japan.¹⁴ Korean gay men's consumption of Japanese porn is thus largely a consequence of ample supply for a racialized demand. In this way, porn from Japan, as with Taiwan and [illegally] China, is consumed not so much for their subjects as Japanese or Taiwanese/Chinese as it is for them as [East] "Asians" (*dongyangin*). This has been observed in the Korean terms commonly entered in search of amateur or "DIY" gay porn on Tumblr, which—until its ban on adult content in 2018—indicated a strong demand for nationally "domestic" (*guknae* or *guksan*) content in addition to that which was racially "Asian."¹⁵ This desire for Korean gay porn is not limited to Koreans, with a surge in searches from other regions on other platforms as further testament to the global rise of the Korean man as a sexual object. In 2017, "Korean" launched 57 ranks to become the second most searched term on Pornhub Gay, further moving on to overtake "Japanese" in first place in 2018 and 2019. This is not only a reflection of tastes in the West, as Pornhub's annual *Year in Review* indicates that "Korean" has also trended in searches for straight porn in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines, and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶ While this may prove to be a passing phase contingent on the durability of the Korean Wave, there is no denying that Korean men have stolen much of the limelight from their counterparts in Japan, at home and abroad. With fewer sexual objects in Japan to sustain the gay gaze of Koreans, Japan as much as its men can only be relegated to the periphery of their desire.

Open Closet, New Horizons

In 1980, Korean workers had less than a quarter of the capital of their counterparts in Japan. Since then, however, IMF data shows that Korea's GDP growth rate has consistently outpaced Japan's; and, per capita, Korea has

14 Shawn Jones, "Jemok eopseum: the repurposing of Tumblr for gay South Korean DIY pornography," *Porn Studies* 7, no. 3 (2020): 309.

15 Jones, "Jemok eopseum," 311.

16 While "Japan," too, has represented a sizeable share of these searches, they have almost exclusively been made from locations in Japan.

already surpassed Japan as of 2018. With this turning of the tide, Korean gay men find themselves in a reversed role, not only emboldened by the soft power of their pop culture but also enabled with purchasing power as members of a new cosmopolitan class in Asia. Coupled with demographic transition, gay men's need for safe haven abroad hardly has much basis anymore. With marriages at 65 percent and births at only 25 percent of what they were in 1970, Korean society and its expectations have been overhauled to where spouseless, childless lifestyles are no longer an anomaly.¹⁷ Meanwhile, pride events branded as “queer culture festivals” and ranking among the largest in Asia have inundated the streets of Seoul, Busan, and over half a dozen other cities across the nation since 2000, forcing society to come to terms with the existence of sexual minorities and heralding a slow but sure incline in their acceptance. The doors to the national closet have been flung open, and walking in and out of it—with plenty of trendy outfits to choose from—is now the norm for the majority of gay men in Korea. This “open closet,” as I see it, is a liminal space between confinement and liberation where the majority of Korean gay men now find themselves, as newly cosmopolitan subjects. They are better educated, richer, and more traveled than ever before, with obscured boundaries in their gay lives at home and the resources for self-development that is wholly independent from the push and pull of Japan.

Since the turn of the century, one conspicuous move has been the intraregional pivot by Korea and Koreans toward Southeast Asia. In a bid to deepen its strategic partnership with ASEAN, Korea concluded an FTA in 2007, established a diplomatic mission in 2012, and dedicated a year of cultural exchange in 2017. In 2020, Korea invested more in ASEAN than in any other nation or region besides the US, and travel by Koreans to ASEAN member states in the preceding year hit a record of over 10 million—twice as many as to Japan.¹⁸ Japan as a safe haven in the imaginary of Korean gay men is now all but a distant memory. Today's Koreans are no longer gay migrants or refugees but gay tourists, choosing sexually liberal destinations southward to which they enjoy easy access with visa-free entry and an expansive selection of direct

17 Statistics Korea, “Marriage and Divorce Statistics in 2021,” Ministry of Economy and Finance (March 17, 2022), and Statistics Korea, “Preliminary Results of Birth and Death Statistics in 2021,” Ministry of Economy and Finance (February 23, 2022).

18 ASEAN-Korea Centre, “2021 ASEAN & Korea in Figures” (March 3, 2022), xvi.

connections serviced by a range of budget airlines.

While beach resorts in Vietnam and the Philippines have become typical getaways for others, gay men often head to the clubs and bars of Thailand and [albeit on the outskirts of Southeast Asia] Taiwan. A Taiwanese pride flag hung as a symbol of solidarity at Bar H. Bar C's bartender said that he had been to Japan, China, and Taiwan, but preferred Taiwan and wanted to see Thailand next—both for their tourist attractions and gay scenes (Resp. 4). Although their desire rarely extends to the men there (Resp. 4, 9, & 11—indeed, there is often hostility toward them, sexual racisms behind which deserve a study of their own), Korean gay men are forging intimate ties to these places, looking to them for not only respite but also retirement.¹⁹ Even gay English instructors in Korea have started to relocate to Southeast Asia since the start of COVID-19, according to the owner of Bar D (Resp. 5). With the simultaneous decline of Japanese gayborhoods such as Tokyo's Shinjuku Ni-Chōme—which had already lost a third of its over 300 bars by 2010 due to gentrification and dating apps, not to mention how it will have fared by the end of the ongoing pandemic—Japan's image to Koreans as a gay getaway may soon be on the way out.²⁰

'No Japan', No Japanese Men

In an IVANCITY poll in December 2007 with over 1,730 respondents, Tokyo was voted as the city Korean gay men most wanted to experience living in, only behind New York. Comments were directed less at the city than at the Japanese, with praise for what commenters characterized as their kindness, manners, nonconformism, and “gayishness” of even the straight men. A decade later on the portal from July 2018 to June 2019, Japan was the second most talked about overseas travel destination. Korea, along with others in Asia such as China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong had become the source of record numbers of tourists to Japan annually for the preceding several years due to relaxed visa

19 John Cho, “The Three Faces of South Korea's Male Homosexuality: Pogal, Iban, and Neoliberal Gay,” in *Queer Korea*, ed. Todd Henry (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 158.

20 While this decline was reported in an article in *Japan Times* (February 24, 2010), a more recent article in *Reuters* (December 3, 2020) that mentions a figure of 400 bars suggests that Ni-Chōme may have since made a comeback.

requirements and a steeply plummeting yen.²¹ In July 2019, however, the figures from Korea took a nosedive at the onset of a sudden movement that swept the nation, phrased succinctly as “No Japan” with the slogan, “[We] Do Not Go, [We] Do Not Buy” (*Gaji Ansseumnida, Saji Ansseumnida*). The fervor was kindled by Japan’s removal of Korea from its white list of preferential trading partners shortly after a Korean ruling demanded compensation from Japanese firms for forced labor. The movement—in which Koreans pledged not to travel to, or buy products made in, Japan—had no adverse impact on incoming tourism from Japan. On the contrary, Japanese travelers to Korea kept a steady annual incline since 2015, nearly doubling as they surpassed 3 million in 2019.²² With a few exceptions, Korean businesses including gay bars went on welcoming them as customers, excluding Japanese from their hostilities toward Japan (Resp. 11).

However, consumers were quick to shun businesses perceived as Japanese, even when many were owned and run by Koreans. Restaurants and bars were a common target, directly and indirectly. Beer was the hardest hit of commodities, Japanese imports of which halved by the end of 2019 and were slashed by a further 85 percent in 2020. In the span of only a few years, Japanese beer imports to Korea plummeted from USD 78 million in 2018 to USD 4 million as of August 2021; and, with its sustained decline, there is no signal that demand will recover anytime soon.²³ While Japanese beer was not necessarily even on the menu at the few remaining Japanophilic gay bars in Jongno 3-Ga, these figures serve to illuminate the extent to which the public could so swiftly and drastically lose its desire to consume “Japan”—including its commodities which had never before been considered a threat.²⁴ Even if only by collateral damage, Korea’s already dwindling “Japanese” gay bars began to quietly shutter in the aftermath of destruction, as further attested to in my interviews (Resp. 5).

21 Japan National Tourism Organization, “*Nenbetsu kuni/chiki-goto no hōnichi gaikyakusū no sui*,” Japan Tourism Agency (June 17, 2022).

22 Korea Culture and Tourism Institute, “*2020 Oerae Gwangwangaek Josa: International Visitor Survey*,” Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (August 19, 2020).

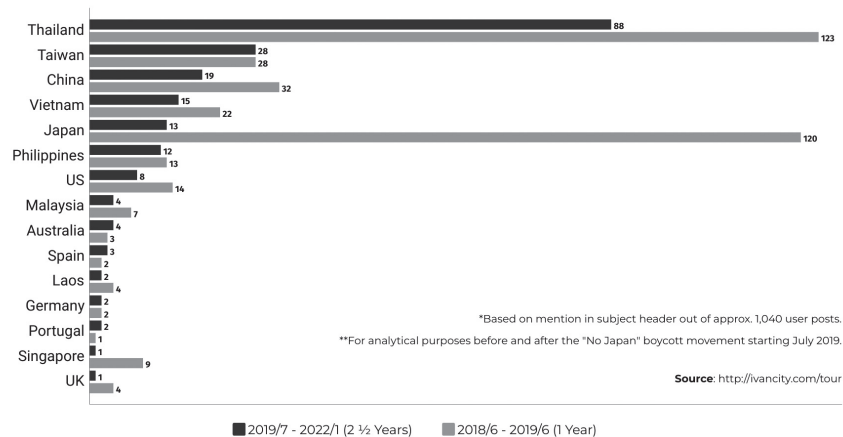
23 Korea Customs Service, “*Wain, maekju jechigo juryu suip 1-wi chaji*,” Ministry of Economy and Finance (August 30, 2021).

24 Seung-Mi Han, “Consuming the modern: Globalization, things Japanese, and the politics of cultural identity in Korea,” in *Globalizing Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese Presence in Asia, Europe, and America*, eds. Harumi Befu and Sylvie Guichard-Anguis (London: Routledge, 2001), 205.

There are also indicators of a spike in Japanophobia among Korean gay men as a result of “No Japan.” Over the two and a half years and counting since its start—which, for some, has yet to end—user posts about Japan in a travel forum on IVANCITY have shrunk by 90 percent, replaced by discussions around Thailand, Taiwan, China, and Vietnam.

Discussion of Overseas Travel Destinations Among Korean Gay Men

TOP 15 FROM IVANCITY'S 'TRAVEL INFORMATION' BBS* | JUNE 2018 - JANUARY 2022**



One user post from August 2019 with the header, “Are there still soulless gays taking trips to Japan?” (*Ajikdo ilbon yeohaeng ganeun yeonghon eomneun geideuri gyesineun ga.*) sparked a heated argument over historical and political issues beyond the those related to the trade dispute. Those who responded in defense of Japan or in opposition to “No Japan” were far outnumbered by those who sympathized with the stance of the OP. The exchange demonstrates that while there are still Korean gay men with a keen interest in Japan, they are the outlier; and, while recent expressions of Japanophobia may have been induced by this trade dispute, the deeply ingrained sentiments behind them will not subside merely with the end of it or others to come.

Only several months after the flare up of “No Japan,” COVID-19 struck the world with travel bans around the world and between Korea and Japan. Closed borders and social distancing rules have strained businesses across the board; but, they were the last blow to any Japanophilic bars still standing in Jongno 3-Ga, such as HANABI Episode 2 (Resp. 3). As these bars had almost exclusively consisted of tourists and regulars in their 50s and 60s, it is unlikely they will

ever be replaced in the absence of a new “Japanese Wave.” Others that had once regularly been patronized by Japanese tourists before COVID-19—such as Bars A, B, D, G, H, and I—were savvy enough to have built from the start a customer base that did not rely on them, which has saved them from the fate of peers that staked everything on the permanence of Japan’s presence in Korea.

Conclusion

While gay Korea may be the closest it has ever been to the threshold of Japanlessness, it will never reach a stage where it is completely devoid of Japan. At the same time, it is highly improbable that Japan will ever return to the peak of its influence over gay Korea. In moving their relationship forward as equals, this could surely be for the better. In the meantime, as I try to construe this relationship, Japan can best be labeled with what it means in the imaginary of Korean gay men today—a role I would lightly term *sseomnara*. Geopolitically, Japan is often characterized as an “island nation” (*seomnara*). *Sseom*, on the other hand, is slang for an ambiguous relationship between two people where there seems to be “something.” That there is still this something between Korean gay men and Japan is perhaps a more constructive way to summarize the rise and fall of Japan than with “Japanlessness.”

The ambiguity of this relationship on the path ahead also demands further research into questions that could not be properly covered in this study. Transnational studies of Queer Asia duly require an inward look at the intraregional and interregional dimensions at play. For this study, it means honing in on alternatively organized subgroups of the gay community, to determine the axes of tension they have with one another in assembling and dismantling the national boundary of gay space in Korea. With the diminishment of Japan (and, I would also argue, the West) in gay Korea, a new interwoven fabric of regionalisms—area-based representations of gay identity—pervades the bar scene and beckons as the next topic for study on gay space and place in Korea. Korean gay men are reinventing spatial identities by cities, districts, and neighborhoods, and fracturing the boundaries of center and periphery that could change the dynamic altogether with Japan.

For now, with no more gay bars relying on them, Japanese men searching for the spotlight will in any case not find it shining over them when they return to

Korea. As Japanese tourists start to trickle back into their once acquainted gayborhoods in Seoul and Busan, they will find themselves in a new space without a clear sense of place. Much rarer will it be for one to hear enka being sung on the karaoke as there was at Goguma, or to see Koreans sitting in wait for Japanese as there were at HANABI Episode 2, in contrast to what was once upon a time reported on Gclick. In its increasing Japanlessness, Korea's gay bar scene becomes ever more inward-looking, self-seeking, and reflective of a gay community which is diversifying within its own localized context.

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Abstract

Out with the Old: ‘Japanlessness’ in Gay Korea

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Japanophilia and Koreaphilia fueled by mutual desires based on national imaginaries have been constant fixtures in the gay subcultures of Korea and Japan. In recent years, however, the once adored monolith of “Japan” has been on the decline in gay Korea. As of 2023, only one exclusively Japanophilic gay bar remains in Korea while around a dozen Koreaphilic gay bars—often, run by Koreans for Koreans and their Japanese admirers—can be found in Tokyo and Osaka. Japanese characteristics and customs are fading away from the gay scenes of Seoul and Busan, yet the story of their origin has remained obscure. Japan, along with the Japanese man, have been peripheralized in the consciousness and desires of gay men in Korea. With gay issues and Japanophilia as taboo topics in a relatively conservative, nationalistic Korea, scholarly discourse on the subject altogether is almost nonexistent. This research note presents findings in support of the researcher’s theory that Korean gay space is founded in an early intimacy with Japan. The case study—based on interviews conducted with the owners and staff of ten gay bars in Seoul and Busan—outlines the current status of Japan and the Japanese man as imaginaries for Korean gay men, in the aftermath of Korea’s and Korean men’s transition from subaltern to superior in their own imaginary against Japan. It examines the factors that have since distanced Korean gay men from Japan as a result of the seizure of Japan’s soft power hegemony through the ongoing Korean Wave, a prosperous Korea repositioned in the gaze of Southeast Asia, and disruptive tides such as the “No Japan” boycott and COVID-19. With its binary focus, the study aims to relocate the discussion of Queer Korea into Queer Asia, taking it beyond the confines of its relationship with the West. Owing to its intraregional scope, this research note responds to advocacy for the study of Queer Asia as comparatively transregional, global, and inter-Asian, rather than that which is inextricably bounded with the West. In doing so, it disrupts the recurrent narrative of Queer Korea’s inherent desire for white

Western men and the West. Advancing queer studies from transnational and intersectional angles, it discursively looks at Korean gay men not by nativist or global queer assertions, but as a group with an intraregional relationality with Japan.