Homosocial Spheres in Korea and Japan:
A Deep Dive Into Literature and Cinema

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INTRODUCTION

The idea that percolates deep within Asian culture and society is that of 'collectivism': the idea that our human existence is deeply intertwined with one another. The enshrinement of the democratic ideals in Asian countries such as individual liberty has been combined with a rising emphasis on the ideal of harmony and cooperation within the nation as a whole. Culturally, Asian collectivism talks of 'relationship, group norms and group identity' and the prioritisation of group goals over individual goals. Scholars in Asia talk about the occurrence of two divergent phenomena coming into being: the first being of the suppression of individual expression caused by the overbearance of group identity; and the second being the argument that individual satisfaction in Asian society is achieved through the inculcation of collectivistic values since the conception of the individual. The Asian person is 'socialised to define themself in such a way that the self is inseparable from their relationships with others and their in-group identification.'1, which brings us to the idea of homosocial spaces.

In Sohn Won-pyung's 'Almond', what I found was a curiosity about spaces that were filled not with people of different genders, but people belonging to the same one: their interactions, their interconnecting relationships, and how they exist in our world as every human being does. There has been enough exploration and fascination around heterosocial spaces: primarily because of one gender's fascination with the other, and the difference in ideas and perspectives between them. Homosociality in Asia–especially when it comes down to cinema and literature—is something that is taken for granted, as a part of the wider collectivistic context of Asia mentioned above. In actuality, homosocial spaces are worlds of control, of representation, of comfort, and of freedom and empowerment, all at the same time.

This paper aims at unpacking and understanding homosocial spaces in the varied contexts they arrive in: as spaces of social control, of unfettered expression, of surveillance of bodies, and of power. For this purpose I shall be referring to both theories of power and culture and various works of literature and cinema as representations of these spaces. I will also be examining comedy as a device of reclaiming masculinity in Asian men in Western spaces through Japanese animation, popularly known as 'anime'. The aim of this research paper is to prove, to show and to portray the inherent and hidden power of the homosocial space, and how it uses literature and cinema to subvert the very structures in place meant to disempower them.

WHAT IS HOMOSOCIALITY?

American academic scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her book 'Between Men', defines homosociality as the following:

> "Homosocial is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it defines social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual', and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual.2'" The term 'homosociality' is often used in reference to the formation of relationships within groups of men in society; which is "characterised by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality.3". For women, the feminist need and calling for sisterhood between them results in feminine homosocial spaces being more on the lines of a continuum and less disruptive in nature. They are also less likely to be perceived as particularly 'homosexual' since the rhetoric of 'women loving-women' and 'women-promoting-the-interests-of-women' permeates not only the social, but the cultural, the domestic, and the erotic.

However, male homosocial spaces—charged with deep-rooted homophobia—are much more disruptive in nature. Recent studies on patriarchal structures show that men are victims of 'compulsory' or 'obligatory' heterosexuality built into kinship systems, and that homophobia is a necessary consequence of patriarchal marriage. Male homosociality in a patriarchy is completely detached from, and shames the idea of homosexuality as a part of the human sexual experience and therefore, as is quoted from Gayle Robin, "is a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women.4" Hegemonic masculinity demands of men to use women as a 'currency' to own their masculinity; several findings reveal that men, to their male friends, discuss sexual exploits and therefore establish their status as 'men'. Male homosociality is a triangular structure where women act as conduits between relationships of men and how they proceed.

For female homosocial spaces, as mentioned above, relationships are often perceived to be in a continuum. But Katherine Binhammer notes in 'Female Homosociality and The Exchange of Men', that although this particular nature of female friendships is idyllic in nature, it is also a naive view of women's relationships5. Women's bonds are considered to be a part of the sexual economy since they are the currency for men to prove their masculinity in society. These accepted relations are also highly policed in nature, with Christine Griffin arguing that every woman has the fear of being called a 'lesbian' in a patriarchal society, where heterosexual marriage is the end goal for both men and women. Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen also argues the same, stating that "the interference between girls' homosocial and heterosexual relations is often conflict-ridden [...] because the heterosexual imaginary is often a part of what constitutes a homosocial bond between women.6"

All of the cited works conclude that a patriarchal society frames homosocial bonds in the context of heterosexual relationships. Patriarchy comes with the expectation of the heterosexual end: of becoming a part of heteronormativity, as a result of which fear of homosexuality, and homophobia in homosocial spaces arises. In the Asian context, the adoption of Americanized 'bro culture' (as represented in many sitcoms such as 'Friends' and movies in the West) idealise the presentation of hypermasculine ways of male bonding; this often leads to the othering, ostracization and more often than not feminization of the East Asian man.

Joann Lee, in her article, points this phenomena to the fact that Asian actors didn't really fit the romanticised image of Hollywood that people had. Hollywood actors, especially in the early decades of the 20th century, characterised white, American ideals for the public to aspire and uphold to; and therefore Asian actors were always relegated to the peripheral roles in cinema, often connected with their race.7 This relegation is often connected, as Khadija Mbowe says in their video 'East-Asian Stereotypes, the China Doll, Dragon Lady, and the Model Minority', with 'Yellow Peril': the fear within Western societies (particularly the USA, which saw a lot of migrants arriving from Japan and China) that East Asians pose a substantial threat to the majority white population of the West. This resulted in the practice of 'yellowface': where white actors and actresses would be 'costumed to look Asian' (such as Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu).8

Edward W. Said talks of constructing Asians in his 1979 book 'Orientalism' defines the 'Orient' as the "Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient10". While the term in itself has negative connotations, it is relevant that this understanding of Southeast Asia, along with the need to control and dominate the Asians living in the USA through the widespread representation of stereotypical culture. As Khadija Mbowe mentions, the hegemonic structures set in place by the West "led to a sort of voyeuristic studying of the Orient in academic spaces and on display in museums.11" The stereotypes present in Western film is a direct example of this particular statement, where the fear of Asians has resulted in the construction of cultural stereotypes through the European hegemonic eye.

The kind of roles that Asians, especially women, received can be perfectly summarised by this quote by Joey Lee in her paper 'East Asian China Doll or Dragon Lady?':
"The Orient was almost a European invention, becoming a distant land of romance, danger and criminal experiences, and essentially a place in which white people were privileged with entering and exiting to escape their burdens.12" Western film, in representing Asian women, adopts the lens of a voyeur: while forming a racialized image through stereotyping, the Western eye also creates a hypersexualized image of the Asian woman. Works like Miss Saigon (1989) formulate an inherent contradiction in the identity of the Asian character: she is considered innocent (similar to a white woman), but that innocence becomes perverse when her role in the film is also of a prostitute13. Asian women, according to Joey Lee and subsequently, Khadija Mbowe, are represented as either a woman ready to die for her white lover and to do anything for him, or as this hypersexualised image, dangerous and daring, ready to trap the white, male hero into her seduction.14 For this, Joey Lee mentions that "the Yellow Peril is eased by the apparent objectification of East Asian women, so that the formerly threatening people are transformed into tools supporting white imperial supremacy."15

Asian men, as Shaw and Tan describe in their paper "Race and masculinity: A comparison of Asian and western models in Men's lifestyle magazine advertisements," are created to be 'mute, passive, charming, decadent, hypersensitive, and androgynous'16 . They either fit in the "model minority" trope (the Asian boy who is a nerd and is socially awkward) or the hypersexualised 'himbo' who is decadent, promiscuous and charms all women. But the dimension of androgyny added to the construction of the Asian male is an attempt at claiming the space of masculinity to the white man: the Asian man is a feminised, androgynous extension of a white man, and will never be able to achieve the status of masculinity that a white man holds. The West constructs the Asian man in such a way that it not only allows him to have a sliver of masculinity (especially through martial arts films) but also signifies him as a feminised entity.

SOCIAL CONTROL IN HOMOSOCIAL SPACES: MASCULINITY

Michel Foucault, in his book ‘Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison’, writes the following: “Hence the major effect of the Panoptican: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. [...] in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation where they themselves are the bearers.17” Foucalt, with the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the ‘Panopticon’, describes a power structure where the ideas and views of the dominant classes create a system of constant surveillance, which the subservient classes cannot escape from. The subservient classes therefore have a ‘Panopticon’ within themselves, which keeps them at the periphery of society and power relations. The Marxist culture thinker Raymond Williams takes Foucault's idea further by stating that “it [hegemony] is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world.18” The internalisation of hegemonic values and traditions results in groups (both homosocial and heterosocial) exercising means of social control within each other. Especially when talking in the context of gender and the patriarchy, social control is an omnipresent effect within groups of men and women.

In male homosocial spaces, Scott Fabius Kiesling argues, the expression of homoerotic desire in a heterosexist environment is linguistic and indirect in nature.19 Therefore, groups of men often emphasise upon a hypermasculine presentation in society; an evidence of internalised social control. In a white-supremacist, western hegemonic society, Asian men are marginalised under their own society’s patriarchy and further under a white-male dominant patriarchy as well; and with this effect, they are also ‘feminised’. In his study of gay Asian drag queens, researcher Han Chong-suk states that this feminisation is a result of the “historical gendering of Asian men necessitated by global domination and conquest.20”. Wong Kar-Wai’s “Happy Together” is the perfect example of this: Po-Wing’s multiple romances with white men are mere transactions of his sexuality (similar to women in a sexual economy); while Po-Wing and Fai create meaning through their romance as two emasculated entities in love — by the denial of their masculinity through their non-whiteness and their homosexuality.

In Asian homosociality, there are two ways where the Asian man redeems his masculinity: remasculinization and vulnerability. The term ‘remasculinization’, according to author Sabrina Qiong Yu, “describes the process by which individuals reclaim masculinity thought to have been previously lost.21” This is evident in many early Korean movies like ‘Tazza’, with the representation of gangs and the mafia conjoining action with the Asian man: bombastic, dramatic, and after all, aligning with the view of patriarchal masculinity. The other form is vulnerability i.e. the subversion of hegemonic masculinity with a kind that is in touch with the humanity of the man themselves. This is evident with the rise of K-Dramas like ‘She Was Pretty’, where the expression of vulnerability in male homosocial spaces has formed into an alternative structure for men who do not fit into hegemonic masculinity.

For this, I will be comparing two South-Korean dramas: ‘DP’ and ‘Hwarang’. Based upon the abuses during the compulsory military service for men in South Korea, The units of ‘DP’–with their turbulent relationship with senior officers–are representative of how conventional masculinity finds its way in male bonding by establishing a ‘pecking order’: there are scenes that depict violent physical abuse. DP is the visual representation of toxic masculinity, and therefore social control through ‘hazing—as the BBC reports, “hazing was once common among US troops, [...] recruits suffering humiliating ‘initiation’ ritual22”, similar to Korea when in DP, one military junior is pushed so hard his head drives into a nail on the wall. The lives of those serving in the military for those two years are strictly dictated by seniors—abusing the

respect that the juniors give (and are expected to give) by dehumanising them in order to make them into 'stronger men'.

In stark contrast, the 2016 historical drama 'Hwarang' describes the relationship between seven 'hwarangs' or warriors to protect the king. While there is conflict between all the seven warriors and there is an attempt to establish a pecking-order, it subverts all essential forms of toxic masculinity. Through the close friendship of Moo-Myung (Park Seo-joon) and Han-sung (Kim Tae-hyung), it reveals how caring and fruitful a bond between men can be. There are scenes where they share food, looking out for each other, and displaying open affection for one another; which showcases how redeeming and comforting men can be to each other, through a display of vulnerability; showing toxic masculinity finally leaves all men lonely, and that vulnerability is a way to claim their masculinity, and their humanity back.

REPRESENTATION OF BODIES: FEMALE HOMOSOCIALITY

Mieko Kawakami, in her 2008 Japanese novel 'Breasts and Eggs', writes this while describing a scene between Natsuko, Makiko and her daughter Midoriko:

"Makiko could gush forever about the ins and outs of getting implants, and share her every thought and observation, but I couldn't seem to connect Makiko with breasts, let alone breast augmentation.23"

The first part of the novel is a revelation into the fractured view women have of their bodies, evident through media representation of women in film. Laura Mulvey states that the primary existence of women in traditional film is not only for the enjoyment of her male admirer, but also for the visual pleasure of the audience watching the film (called 'scopophilia')24. Adding onto this, Khadija Mbowe mentions in their video 'The Feminine Urge to Internalise The Male Gaze, Unpacking Desirability' that "there's this idealisation of the power of a woman's body"25; and therefore it is evident that the patriarchy curbs this supposed 'power' through means of social control: controlling how women behave, dress, act through patriarchal norms and shaming those who don't.

The fragmenting of a woman's body—and the subsequent policing of it is seen in Frances Cha's 'If I Had Your Face'. 'If I Had Your Face' tracks the journey of six women in South Korea; one of whom, Kyuri, is obsessed with plastic surgery. She is poor, but has access to clinics that do cosmetic surgery. The plastic surgery culture in South Korea has been an essential part of pop culture, and Kyuri represents this fragmentation of her body, the reduction of her face to mere parts to be altered. This culture is so prevalent that it has redefined the "glow-up" trope, where women both abuse other women for being naturally unable to attain the conventions of beauty, and pick apart women who have attained the standard artificially—becoming a part of this surveillance of the line between natural and constructed beauty. Here, homosociality acts as a device for surveillance for the upliftment of traditional femininity: the six women are joint in the way beauty affects their lives, and how they are instrumental in ensuring all of the women around them uphold norms of femininity.

This kind of surveillance, however, is broken by the South Korean K-Drama, 'Thirty Nine': where three women (Chan-young, Mi-jo, and Joo-Hee) while having successful love lives, come together for Chan-young, so that she can cope with stage four pancreatic cancer. In one of the episodes, the three women sit in an old restaurant and celebrate Chan-young's birthday, even when they know she's close to dying. What ties the women together is not the surveillance of beauty or femininity, but their long friendship. In a patriarchal economy, the three women, who are in their early forties, will be seen as 'less valuable' as they have not actively attempted to perform the sexual exchange of their bodies—and therefore

they make their own meanings through their friendships and their support. They represent friendships that are inherently fulfilling, and something that women require and need: female homosocial bonds where love is not lost.

ANIME AND COMEDY: SUBVERSION OF WESTERNISED NOTIONS

It has been evident through academia that gender, as postulated by Judith Butler, is a 'construct': based upon the social perception of a person's presentation of their gender, a 'performance'. Alok Vaid-Menon, a trans South Asian performance artist, states that Western cultural hegemony is apparent by creating Asians as a 'desexualised' category, along with the aesthetics of pitting Asian men as 'feminine'25 and therefore 'lesser' category. This is especially seen in Japan's notorious version of the patriarchy; where conformity and collectivism are considered the main values to be upheld.

In this context of Japan, 'anime' (a short form for Japanese animation, distinct from American) is a freeing space. Mainstream anime–dubbed 'Shounen anime' as they were adapted from mangas (Japanese comics) from 'Shounen Jump–' has characters that conform to both traditional and Western notions of masculinity. Main characters like 'Naruto' (Naruto Shippuden), 'Natsu' ('Fairy Tail'), Levi ('Attack on Titan') are characterised as reckless, powerful, loud, and arrogant: all traits enshrined by hegemonic masculinity, and they can easily be compared to characters in American animation like Johnny Bravo. But what differentiates them is using comedic relief as a way of breaking through the Western mould of masculinity, and using implied queerness as a way to subvert their own feminisation.

Since Japan is a very conservative country when it comes to LGBTQIA+ representation, anime relies on 'implied queerness'. Youtube creator James Somerton, in his video 'The Aesthetic of Gay Nuance', talks about how anime would imply that two characters are gay through subtle nuances present in an anime26: in the anime he refers to, 'Yuri On Ice!'Viktor hugs Yuri after a performance where his arm masterfully hides their mouths, implying that they kissed. In the article, 'On Queer Representation in Anime', the anonymous writer talks about how "queer-coded subtext is valuable because it is an outlet for queer people to express themselves without getting outed.27" The Western camera views the Asian men in anime–even the Russian Viktor in 'Yuri On Ice!" as a feminised entity, having the same place, aesthetically, as a woman or a femme.

'Ouran Sakura High School Host Club' employs the comic relief that the Western eye gets through perceiving male Asian homosocial groups as emasculated. The boys of the Host Club engage in what would be considered 'homosexual behaviour–' such as skinship, hugging, praising, behaviours that do not fit in the 'bro-codes' of masculine culture— and appropriate this behaviour in comedic situations in order to mock this stereotype that the West holds of Asians. As mentioned above, the idea that Asian men can easily "pass" as women in the West is critiqued subtly in the anime, where evidently aesthetically "Western" looking people (affirmed through blond hair and blue eyes in many characters, and names) are drawn with traditionally Japanese ways of creating 'manga' and putting them in comedic situations where their homosociality is presented in the Asian way regardless of their aesthetic features is a small way of critiquing notions of masculine culture through comedy.

CONCLUSION

Literature and cinema has gone from having no homosocial spaces in the Asian context to using these spaces as modes of power and expressing an alternate kind of living, of life. While you could critique these spaces that they breed groupthink and can potentially suppress any kind of individuality, it is in this collective existence that

enables people, in groups, to predict, imagine and create alternative sets of realities that can empower them in the global scene, where the Asian is often 'othered' in representation. Homosocial spaces, through their widespread representation, have proven to be both places of control and places to create beautiful humans, through their little vulnerabilities, and the small lives that circle around freeing each other.

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