

THE PORTRAYAL OF QUEERNESS  
IN LEE-SONG HEE-IL'S FILMS  
THROUGH INTERSECTIONAL LENS



A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Korean Studies (Interdisciplinary Program)

Inter-Department of Korean Studies

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Chulalongkorn University

Academic Year 2022

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ภาพสะท้อนความเป็นเครือรีในภาพยนตร์ของ อีซงฮีอีล  
ผ่านมุมมองปฏิกษาคภวระ



วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต  
สาขาวิชาเกาหลีศึกษา (สหสาขาวิชา) สหสาขาวิชาเกาหลีศึกษา  
บัณฑิตวิทยาลัย จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย  
ปีการศึกษา 2565  
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Thesis Title THE PORTRAYAL OF QUEERNESS IN LEE-SONG HEE-IL'S  
FILMS THROUGH INTERSECTIONAL LENS  
By Mr. Tanin Sangpetch  
Field of Study Korean Studies (Interdisciplinary Program)  
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ชานินทร์ แสงเพชร : ภาพสะท้อนความเป็นควีร์ในภาพยนตร์ของ อีซงฮีล ผ่าน  
มุมมองปฏิภาคภาวะ. ( THE PORTRAYAL OF QUEERNESS IN LEE-SONG HEE-IL'S  
FILMS THROUGH INTERSECTIONAL LENS) อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก : รศ. ดร.จักรกริช สัม  
ขมณี

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาการนำเสนอความเป็นควีร์ (Queerness) และศึกษาว่าองค์ประกอบ  
ทางสังคมที่แตกต่างกันของแต่ละบุคคลนั้นทำให้ควีร์ประสบปัญหาแตกต่างกันอย่างไร ผ่าน  
แนวคิดปฏิภาคภาวะ (Intersectionality) การวิจัยนี้ได้วิเคราะห์ภาพยนตร์เรื่อง *No Regret*,  
*White Night* และ *Night Flight* โดยการวิเคราะห์ประกอบด้วย 2 หัวข้อหลัก คือ 1) ความรุนแรง  
และการล่วงละเมิดควีร์ และ 2) การนำเสนอและการแสดงออกทางเพศสภาพและเพศวิถี  
การศึกษาดังกล่าวมีความพยายามที่จะทำความเข้าใจว่าองค์ประกอบที่ทับซ้อนกันถูกนำเสนอผ่าน  
หัวข้อดังกล่าวอย่างไร ผลการศึกษาพบว่าควีร์ที่มีผลการศึกษาที่น่าพึงพอใจหรือมีสถานะทาง  
เศรษฐกิจและสังคมในระดับสูงจะแบกรับแรงกดดันและความคาดหวังในระดับสูง เพื่อรักษา  
สภาพของตนหรือยกระดับสถานะทางสังคมของตนให้สูงขึ้น ดังนั้นจึงเป็นเรื่องยากสำหรับพวก  
เขาที่จะแสดงออกถึงตัวตนได้อย่างเสรี เพราะความเป็นควีร์ขัดกับบรรทัดฐานทางเพศแบบดั้งเดิม  
ของสังคมเกาหลี นอกจากนี้ ควีร์ที่มีลักษณะของความเป็นชายน้อยกว่าจะตกเป็นเหยื่อของการ  
ล่วงละเมิดทางเพศ สิ่งนี้นำไปสู่ความยากลำบากในการแสดงออกถึงตัวตนของควีร์ และบางคน  
ต้องแสดงออกให้แตกต่างจากที่เป็นอยู่ เพื่อหลีกเลี่ยงการตกเป็นเหยื่อของการลดทอนความเป็น  
มนุษย์ โดยสรุป การศึกษานี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าสถานะทางสังคมและอำนาจของความเป็นชายนำไปสู่ระดับ  
ของการไม่ยอมรับควีร์ที่แตกต่างกันในบริบทของสังคมเกาหลี

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# # 6488018220 : MAJOR KOREAN STUDIES (INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAM)

KEYWORD: Intersectionality, Queerness, Lee-Song Hee-Il, Korea

Tanin Sangpetch : THE PORTRAYAL OF QUEERNESS IN LEE-SONG HEE-IL'S FILMS THROUGH INTERSECTIONAL LENS. Advisor: Assoc. Prof. JAKKRIT SANGKHAMANEE, Ph.D.

This research investigates the representation of queerness and how individuals' different social identities produce different kinds of tensions among queer people through the concept of intersectionality. The research analyzes the film *No Regret*, *White Night* and *Night Flight*. The analysis includes two themes: 1) The Violence and Harassment against Queer and 2) The Representation of Gender and Sexuality. The study seeks to understand how intersecting components are represented along with the two themes. The result of the study reveals that queers who have a good academic performance or high SES seem to bear much pressure and high expectation to maintain their status or achieve upward social mobility, so it is difficult for them to express their identities freely, because queerness is in conflict with Korea's traditional gender norms. Besides, queers who are considered as less masculine are targeted to be sexual assault victim. This leads to the difficulty of identity expression among queers and some of them have to act differently from who they are, to avoid being victims of dehumanization. In conclusion, this study argues that social status and hegemonic masculinity lead to different levels of intolerance of queerness in the context of Korean society.

Field of Study: Korean Studies

(Interdisciplinary Program)

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Academic Year: 2022

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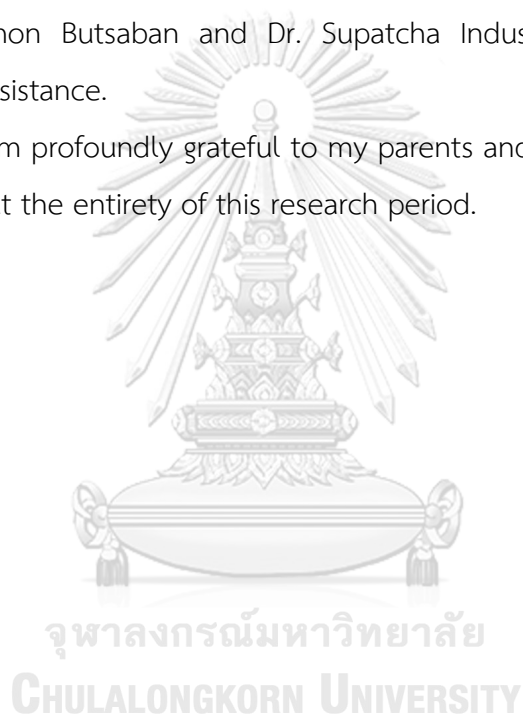
## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my thesis advisor, Associate Professor Dr. Jakkrit Sangkhamanee for his invaluable assistance and encouragement throughout my research journey. I am immensely thankful for his guidance and advice. Without the constant support I have received from him, I would not have come this far, and this thesis would not have been successfully completed.

Furthermore, I express my appreciation to the committees, namely Assistant Professor Dr. Kamon Butsaban and Dr. Supatcha Indusobhana, for their valuable suggestions and assistance.

Lastly, I am profoundly grateful to my parents and friends for their unwavering support throughout the entirety of this research period.

Tanin Sangpetch



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Significance of the Study

South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) is an Asian country, which has successfully transformed itself to a high-income economy since it had shown a promising performance on the world's economy. In common, most of the countries that succeed in economic development place a strong emphasis on self-expression values; meaning that there is a high level of awareness about social issues, including gender issues, among the citizens. According to the article *Value Change and the Persistence of Cultural Traditions*, Korea had experienced the postindustrial phase of modernization with higher incomes, higher education, and higher ratio of jobs in the service sector, which can imply that Korea might demonstrate a high level of self-expression values, but Korea fails in this point. In other words, Korean society is still less aware of some social issues at both the national level and the individual level. From outsiders' perspectives, one of the most obvious problems underlying in Korea is the harassment and discrimination against sexual minorities.

To solve this problem, there are groups of people who actively proceed with various campaigns to raise awareness about the existence of sexual minorities and call for the laws to protect them from discrimination and harassment in Korea. Moreover, there are some people who use another tool to inform the publics that there is gender inequality that negatively affects a particular group of people in the society as well.

Among various methods of representing the problem, utilizing film as the tool for illustrating keeps increasing and it gains a lot of attention from the publics. Lee-Song Hee-il is a Korean film director who is openly queer, and he was praised as the person who makes queer issues become more mainstream in Korea where the

existence of non-heterosexual identities is quite unclear and it is somewhat not able to be discussed openly in the society. For this reason, he is considered as the Korea's most prominent queer filmmaker. Most of his works were produced during 2000-2020 and the backgrounds on each film were set around 2010s, thus the messages he had embedded in his works can be interpreted as the reflection of the reality of queer living in Korean society and the hardship that many Korean queers have been facing at the specific time.

*No Regret*, *White Night* and *Night Flight* are the movies written and directed by Lee-Song Hee-Il, which portray the reality and queer-related issues in the particular time depended on each film. *No Regret* (2006) is the story of obsessive love and desire between two queers who are at opposite ends of the economic and social scale, which gets hatred from society. *White Night* (2012) is the story that occurs in one night, but that occurrence leaves a deep impression and an affection in each other's heart, however, the protagonist does not want to go back and stay in Korea because he was a victim of homophobia, publicly humiliated and outed, and disowned by his father. *Night Flight* (2014) is the story of love between two queers. Both of protagonists have to cope with social class oppression, school pressures and politics, homophobia, and extreme bullying in Korean society.

Surely, queer-related topic is the widely common topic for studying on marginalized people. Although queerness is not something that can be only found at a specific place, it has its own characteristics based on a particular society and Korean society also produces a uniqueness of queerness as well. What I mean about the uniqueness is that the experience and the reaction among Korean queers are unique and different from the West and other societies because of its distinctive culture and practice. Confucianism was introduced to Korea for a long time, but its impacts remain in numerous aspects of society, shaping the moral system, the way of life and social relations. It also produces an unequal status between male and female, which leads

to the superior power of male or hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, it also leads to the designated roles between men and women about which responsibility men must take and which responsibility female must take. Queers in Korean society who do not belong to any position due to the deeply-rooted unique practice and value in Korea end up with facing the struggles, which are different from the West and other societies. Besides, social components such as sexuality, hegemonic masculinity, socioeconomic status and ability/disability that are connected to the value and practice in Korea play unique roles in making Korean queers' struggles distinctive from other societies, at the same time, it is difficult to totally recognize the same phenomenon appeared on other societies. For example, in general, Korea queers who have good reputation in society, such as celebrities, rarely reveal or express their real identity or sexual orientation publicly because queerness is not related to the existing values and practices of gender and sexuality in Korea, and they are more likely to face a backlash from the public although they sincerely come out to state that queer people really exist and they are part of the society like male and female as well. This phenomenon is rarely found in the West, where freedom of identity expression is prevalent for everyone. This shows that unique and complex social components in the context of Korean society distinguish its queerness from other society, especially the West, when studying queerness with the concept of intersectionality.

Therefore, this research aims to explore and analyze how queerness is being expressed in these films by applying the concept of intersectionality to the analysis, since discussion on queer-related topic cannot be conducted by solely considering one component, so at the same time we can notice and deeply understand the struggles (harassment, violence and discrimination) that the queer characters experience in each film. In addition, it is necessary to understand what is the motivation behind Lee-Song Hee-Il's work; if each film aims to satirize Korean society for raising awareness from the publics, or illustrate the reality of queer in Korean society in the

specific time, or deliver the hardship from his direct experience, so it can claim that Lee-Song Hee-Il's selected works has a potential to be perceived as another tool for doing a study on queer topic in the context of Korean society.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

1. To investigate how queerness is reflected from *No Regret*, *White Night* and *Night Flight*.
2. To find out how queerness and intersectionality reflect the challenge and tension appeared in Korean society at a specific time.

## 1.3 Research Questions

1. How is queerness represented in *No Regret*, *White Night* and *Night Flight*?
2. How do queerness and intersectionality reflect the challenge or tension that appeared in Korean society at a specific time?

## 1.4 Research Methodology

This research will be conducted by qualitative approach, using *No Regret*, *White Night* and *Night Flight* as the main materials for analyzing how Lee-Song Hee-Il represented queerness in each film. It starts with depicting the phenomenon of queers' struggles from the films based on two themes: 1) The Violence and Harassment against Queer and 2) The Representation of Gender and Sexuality. After that, the concept of intersectionality will be applied for explaining how each character had experienced social struggles with the different levels and then the results will be compared to the real situation in Korean society to strengthen that intersectional lens allow us to gain a better understanding on queer-related issues that still appear in Korea without leaving marginalized people and some overlooked issues by forcing us to be aware of every aspect of individuals' backgrounds and social components. For the information

that will be drawn to make a comparison with the film, it will be collected from existing theory, published documentaries or queer-related news.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

#### Literature Review

##### 2.1 The Definition of Queerness in Korean Society Context

Before giving the definition of queerness in the context of Korean society, it would be better to look through “Queer Theory” to understand the common concept about queerness that many scholars widely accept, so that we can find the commonality and the difference between queerness in common scholars’ concept and queerness in Korean society’s context in order.

Queer Theory was first introduced during the conference hold by Teresa de Lauretis at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990 (Manning & Goldberg, 2016). Her work “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” indicates three main concepts that support her theory. The first is a refusal of using heteronormativity as the tool for establishing the knowledge of sexual formation. The second is an intention to decrease the belief that the gay and lesbian studies is one single entity. The last one is the correlation between race and sexual bias (this point will be mentioned with more details in the next session “Queer and Intersectionality”). In conclusion, queer theory aims to challenge the idea of heteronormativity which perceives heterosexuality as a normal mode of sexual orientation. Moreover, heteronormativity also has an invisible power to influence on many contexts of society, such as marriage, employment, and adoption rights, which not only put pressure on the people with non-heterosexuality, but also the people with heterosexuality (Berlant & Warner, 1998).

While the terminology like homosexuality is commonly used and widely accepted in western academic field, it is quite sensitive in Korea. The Korean word “Dong-Seong-Ae (동성애)” can be translated to “homosexuality” in English. However,



this word was originally derived from Chinese characters “同性愛”, which portrays the notion of sexual and physical affection between same-sex people. In addition, the sense of pursuing sexual desire among homosexual people can be implied from other Korean terms such as “Dong-Seong-E-Ja” and “Dong-Seong-Yoen-E-Ja”, which often leads to misunderstandings, prejudice, and wrong images towards homosexual people by their negative meanings (Ryu, 2021).

Thus, with the intention to throw the negative images away, the term “queer” is more utilized even in the political way since the word “Queer” includes all the LGBT-related terms, which expands the meaning beyond identity. “Queer” was used significantly in the Korean pride parade in 2014 since Korean LGBT members insisted “We are queer.” in the parade and the word “queer” was officially introduced in many medias to identify LGBT people. Although “queer” is still a very ambiguous definition (Jagose, 1996), at the same time, “queer” in Korea seems to be a universal homosexual concept that includes identity, culture, and politics (Ryu, 2021). Furthermore, English language seems to have a superior power, because of the obsessive use of English in Korea’s education due to the influence of globalization. Usage of the English term “queer” in Korea seems to be a good strategy because of its ambiguous meaning as a not settled concept (Ryu, 2021).

Although many Koreans use other Korean terminologies to identify themselves, but they recognize themselves as “queer” as well, which has the meaning of universal LGBT community.

For this reason, this thesis also aims to use the term “queer” which includes homosexuality and LGBT identity and its definition is beyond the norm of heterosexuality.

## 2.2 Queer and Intersectionality

When talking about queer and social issues such as discrimination and harassment, it is undeniable that addressing the issues while recognizing the concept of intersectionality is very important.

In the academic circles, it is widely accepted that the term “intersectionality” was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. She used it as the concept to explain how Black women were marginalized at the individual level, even in the feminist discourse. At the same time, Black women’s rights were not included in the antidiscrimination law (Carbado et al., 2013).

Through the intersectional lens, Kimberlé Crenshaw points out that, in the past, feminist discourse often solely highlighted the story of white women and failed to critique racism, thus causing a gap that pushed Black Women into the margins of many discourses. Moreover, Black Women were also neglected in the antiracist discourse because it only focused on Black Men’s racism experiences. This shows that Black women were blurred in many social discourses and their struggles were unnoticed because of their gender and their skin color at the basis (Harris & Patton, 2019).

This correlates with the concept of intersectionality, believing that people have their own unique features and different social components in everyone such as gender, race, class, physical ability, sexual orientation, etc. These differences consequently affect many minorities to experience discrimination and oppression from a particular society differently.

The core concept of intersectionality is that we must consider everything that can marginalize people, when we aim to study on people-based discourse with the manner of advancing a social justice agenda radically and comprehensively. To be more specific, as we all know that in history, women have experienced the social struggles due to the patriarchy system in almost societies in the world, however, white women and Black women were socially oppressed with different levels. The reason is

that white women experience the difficulties due to their gender as woman, whereas Black women experience more serious difficulties since they hold more than one identity of marginalized people, whether it be gender or race. Moreover, what makes Black women's voices more silent is that most movements in the past were led by scholars and activists who are mostly white. For this reason, it left some topics that they did not touch since they only focus and conduct their works from their white-dominant perspectives, accordingly failing to engage Black women in their discourses and causing the knowledges that they built and contributed to, are not empowering (Harris & Patton, 2019). Therefore, Kimberlé Crenshaw suggests that considering intersectionality is necessary when it comes to discuss on this kind of topic.

For its importance, intersectionality is considered as the useful tool for scholars in mainly three ways. The concept has inspired scholar-activists to realize the identities of people and the forms of subordination, which it was made socially invisible by heteronormativity, and then encourages scholar-activists to contribute and develop clear and critical understandings of social formations (Harris & Leonardo, 2018).

In the circle of legal scholarship, there are many cases of applying concept of intersectionality to other fields of knowledge in order to building more sophisticated knowledge. For example, the scholars apply CRT (Critical Race Theory) and feminist theory to create "LatCrit" (Latinx critical theory). At the same time, the lens of intersectionality contribute to consciousness of sexual minorities' natures and emerge various identity terms, such as "gay and lesbian", "LGBT", "LGBTQIA+" and beyond (Harris & Leonardo, 2018).

Beside using intersectional lens on feminist or sexual minorities' discourses, intersectionality is also applied to other discourses and works as well. For example, it was utilized in the field of public health. According to *The Problem with the Phrase Women and Minorities: Intersectionality—an Important Theoretical Framework for Public Health* written by Lisa Bowleg in 2012, Bowleg (2012) points out that

acknowledging the existence of multiple identities which intersect in each individual is the first step for understanding the complexities of health disparities that some people with multiple historically marginalized components had experienced. Intersectionality provides a critical framework for solving the problem of disparities and social inequality in public health. Bowleg (2012) provides more concrete example by talking about the case of infant mortality through the intersectional lens. The intersectionality shows the result of unfavorable health outcomes at the intersection of a high-status identity (middle-class socioeconomic status) with the race and the gender. In common, infant mortality is a widely recognized as an indicator of a population's health. What surprises us is that Non-Latino Black people in the United States had an infant mortality rate 2.4 times that of non-Latino White people in 2006. This is related to the history that the infant mortality rate of highly educated Black women has exceeded that of non-Latino White women with less education. This highlights the paradox of the intersection of SES (Socioeconomic Status), race, and gender for Black women in the United States (Bowleg, 2012).

From aforementioned situation, we can observe that intersectionality has been widely applied to many fields of studies and it allows us to gain a better understanding on a specific discourse comprehensively without leaving marginalized people behind by forcing us to be aware of every aspect of individuals' backgrounds and social components.

Queer identity can be discussed with the intersectional lens as well because many queers face various aspects of discrimination whether they are judged by genders, races or social classes (Rosenblum, 1994). For this reason, the topic of discrimination and harassment that many queers face must be discussed with the lens beyond just anti-lesbian or anti-gay discrimination.

From *"I Think It's Very Much Placed on Us": Black Queer Men Laboring to Forge Community at a Predominantly White and (Hetero) Cisnormative Research*

*Institution*, Reginald Blockett (2017) used both intersectional and queer theoretical frameworks to analyze the experiences of Black queer men (BQM). The study reveals that BQM must endure in order to build network with one another, and the findings suggest a separated formation from the network of the larger and predominantly White queer community. Participants mentioned that they have to rely on each other, not just to survive homophobia, heterosexism, but they also have to endure with racism, cisnormativity, and homonormativity in the queer community (Blockett, 2017). This shows the potential of intersectionality to contribute to an understanding of how intersecting social components shape the experiences of queer individual differently (Duran et al., 2020).

Applying the intersectionality of queer identity allows us to discover and address the queer-related issues without neglecting the unique way in which women, people of color, poor people, sexually subversive people, cross-gendered people, etc (Rosenblum, 1994).

Moreover, studying the issues with realizing the concept of intersectionality might be useful in encouraging already established privileged-queer community to be aware of other aspects of queer-related issues and extend the scope of interest in this topic.

### **2.3 The Depiction of Queerness in Film**

In western, “Queerness” was presented with undesirable images, such as being humorous, pitiful, and scary. The situation was worse when the Catholic Church established “The National Legion of Decency” in 1933 with the aim to against a representation of same-sex affection on film. Moreover, this encourages the creation of “the Production Code Administration (PCA)” in 1934 which decides what could be appeared and removed from Hollywood movies (Hagstedt, 2020).

However, queerness still appeared in many films, but the depiction was far worse than in the past, since in the 1960s, it reflects self-hating from queer characters, which means that being queer was unpleasant and everyone must avoid (Hagstedt, 2020).

Fortunately, the depiction of queerness on films became more positive when some low-budget independent film production houses presented a new Queer identity, which led to what the academic B. Ruby Rich referred to as “New Queer Cinema” in 1992 (Hagstedt, 2020).

“New Queer Cinema” is often related to the modern works which aimed to challenge and push further debates about gender and sexuality, while exposing the limitations of non-New Queer Cinema, presenting human identity and sexuality as socially constructed, fluid and changeable, rather than fixed (Hagstedt, 2020).

#### **2.4 The Purpose of Queer Filmmaking in Korea**

Korean society often judges queer people with the distorted image of sexual perversion because of lack of understanding about queerness, leading to the absence of queer-related law.

Queer film was first initiated and depicted in Korea with this reason. The representation of queer in movies aims to deliver the message that queers are like other people in society. Due to the lack of discussion about queerness in the public and the term ‘queer’ is unknown in Korean society, thus, depicting the existence of queer is a political challenge to confront many prejudices (Ryu, 2021).

Queer filmmaking involves politics and points out the problem of gendered power by hyper-masculinity. In the same way that feminists utilized the hostess genre to make films for criticizing hyper-masculinity in Korea, queer filmmaking also uses politics to reveal a power relation between heteronormativity and hyper-masculinity

for criticizing queer ignorance. With the political manner, queer filmmaking might aim to provide knowledge about queer to Korean society through queer representation in the films (Ryu, 2021).

Furthermore, queer films also have an impact on Korean society, since they encourage the emergence of many queer-related events in Korea, such as queer film festivals, pride parades and queer academic studies. With increasing interest in queer through queer filmmaking, queer people in Korea can gradually reveal their existence and start to speak out about discrimination and prejudice that they had experienced (Ryu, 2021).

## 2.5 The Notion of Coming-out in Korea

Jonathan Kim (2012) states that most Koreans were indoctrinated into thinking that the queer is a legacy from the west, which Korea got after the Korean War, as well as the concept of “coming-out”. For this reason, the Park and Chun administrations who solidified Confucian socio-political ideologies spread the thoughts of perceiving queerness as non-Korean value to the public.

Jonathan Kim (2012) also points out why “coming-out” can be more harmful to queers in Korean society, rather than pleasant when compared to the west. It is because coming-out is an individually based experience and there is a high rate of rejection from the family or society due to the perception of queer and coming-out as the non-Korean value. Consequently, this rejection spreads more ignorance and intolerance toward queer people.

In other words, queerness was perceived as a taboo subject because it disrupts social harmony by breaking the family continuum, which is the value derived from Confucianism. In the past, military governments have exploited and reproduced Korean values to mobilize the Korean populace. For this reason, when coming out as queer is less aware, queerness is rejected by the society. Moreover, some myths about queer

are the factors that harm queer people trying to come out as well. One of the first myths that emerged in the early 1990s among Koreans regarding queer people was that AIDS is the plague of queers (Kim, 2012).

## 2.6 Queer and Discrimination in Korea

Existing research on queer issues in Korea reveals that many Korean queers experience and suffer from social discrimination and prejudice with the high degree (Choi & Oh, 2021). This social discrimination, prejudice, and homophobia negatively affect self-esteem, personal relations, social activities, and career choices of Korean queers (Yoon & Sung, 2011). Many researchers state that social stigma toward non-heterosexual identities might negatively affect the coming out experience of sexual minorities and might lead to a low level of life satisfaction (Choi & Oh, 2021).

Moreover, according to Choi's survey in 2021, participants expressed that Korean society puts a strong emphasis on the traditional beliefs. The most common belief is that people should follow the previously established gender roles, which means heterosexuality. In general, Korean society realize heterosexuality as the only sexual norm, and many Koreans believe that only opposite-sex marriage should be acknowledged. Thus, many queers in Korea have experienced the struggles caused by heteronormativity and heterosexism, and there are the absence of legal protection for queer people and the lack of sexual diversity education in Korea (Choi & Oh, 2021).

For the empirical evidence, Yun-Suk (lesbian, 20 years old) who is one of the survey's participants referred to an interesting point "invisible violence" by saying, "The biggest problem in our society is the belief that love only exists between a man and a woman... The bigger issue is not just the obvious and physical violence, but also covert and invisible violence, such as discrimination and hatred.". This emphasizes that being queer in Korean society not only experiences physical assault because they are



not correlated to heteronormativity but they also have mental health problem, led by social discrimination towards queer people (Choi & Oh, 2021).

In a 2014 NHRCK survey, 44.8 percent of sexual minorities reported discrimination, exclusion, or sexual harassment. Queers in the survey stated that they were told to resign or were dismissed because of their sexual orientation and identity. The commission's 2017 poll found that queers were most exposed to 'hate speech' (94.6 percent, online; 92.2 percent, offline). Furthermore, in a 2017 Gallup poll of the Korean public, 58 percent of respondents opposed same-sex marriage, and 34 percent supported it (W. Lee et al., 2019).

## 2.7 Confucianism and the Intolerance of Queerness

Confucianism is one of the belief systems that cause the intolerance of queerness. Alfian (2022) states that Confucianism does not accept queerness because there is no same-sex marriage in its practice. This intolerance derives from the notion of harmonized family which must constitute only male and female as husband and wife, and then give birth. This kind of marriage has a relation with Wu Lun, a main value of Confucianism. It regulates the hierarchical relation as follows (1) the relationship between leader and subordinate; (2) the husband-and-wife relationship; (3) the parent-child relationship; (4) the brother and sister relationship and (5) the relationship of friends and friends (Zhang et al., 2005). Again, the intolerance of queerness is caused by Confucian principles that prioritize respect for hierarchical power structures, a strong focus on community, and an emphasis on family values (Alfian, 2022).

In many Confucian societies, people highlight the specific roles assigned to men and women (Yang & Yen, 2011). For example, men are expected to take on leadership and decision-making responsibilities within the household, while women are typically responsible for managing household chores and caring for children (Raymo & Ono, 2007; Xu & Lai, 2004). The division of gender roles in accordance with heteronormative

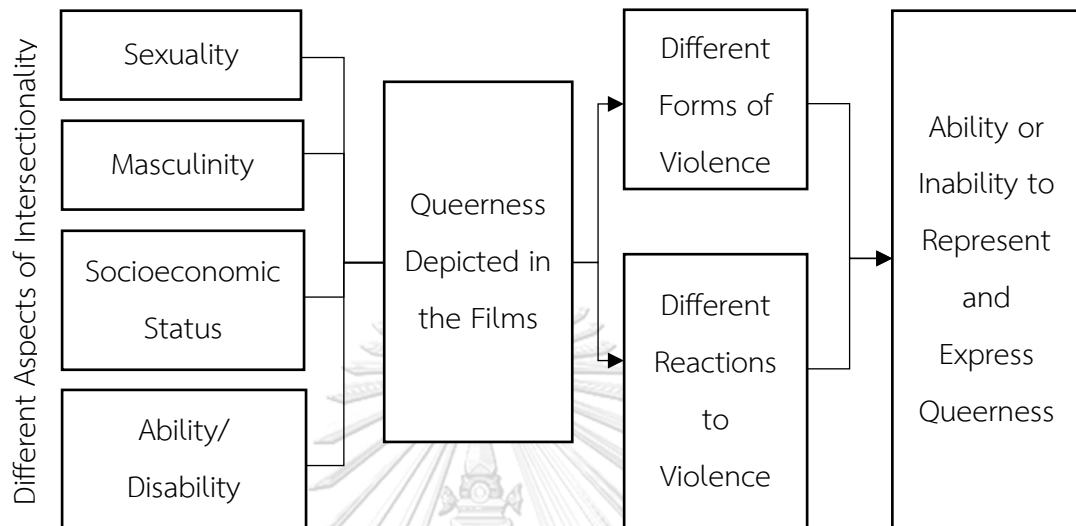
norms within Confucian society contributes to the intolerance of queerness (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009).

As Kim (2012) also mentioned in his work that queerness has traditionally been considered as a taboo in Korea, due to the value of Confucianism, believing that it disrupts social harmony by challenging the continuity of the family structure. This illustrates that Confucianism influences people's perceptions of queerness, at the same time, its core value also shows an unequal status of individual in the society. Consequently, it means that more marginalized components you possess, more struggles you are likely to face, especially if you are queer who is not even categorized in previous hierarchy at all.



## Conceptual Framework

After reviewing the existing literature, the conceptual framework of the study is as follows:



According to the framework, there are different kinds of people in Korean society who hold different kinds of intersectionality. Thus, I decide to focus on these four main aspects of intersectionality and examine how they intersect with queerness as illustrated in the films. At the same time, I pay attention to different forms of violence being done to intersectional queers and how they react to such violence differently as well. Moreover, I also link the scenes in the films with the larger context and condition of the society. After that, the study follows with the discussion on how the characters in the films cope with the violence and whether queer individuals are able to represent or express queerness or not in the films as well.

Queerness is considered as unacceptable identity and behavior which does not correlate with the norm in the society. It was initiated from sexuality but covering wide ranges of aspects. However, in these three films, queerness is mostly related to gender, sexuality and the way of life, illustrating that people with queerness often encounter different kinds of violence and they often have different attitudes towards injustice against queers because of different aspects of intersectionality they hold.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SYNOPSES OF THE FILMS

#### 3.1 No Regret (2006)

Su-Min has to leave the orphanage and moves to Seoul for work, after turning 18. At first, he does various jobs, such as being a worker in a factory and a driver for drunk people, but he ends up with being a sex worker at a queer bar named *X Large*.

One day, Jae-Min, the son of the boss at Su-Min's old workplace, enters the bar, so he finds out that Su-Min works here. Su-Min initially rejects Jae-Min's advances and even threatens to kill Jae-Min if he meets Jae-Min again, but after few weeks, they start an affectionate relationship together.

Unfortunately, their relationship is interrupted when Jae-Min's mother finds out Jae-Min's queerness. Thus, she forces him to marry a woman whom he has been engaged with. Su-Min is furious because he misunderstands that Jae-Min cheats on him, thus, he wants to get revenge on him with the help from his peer at the host bar. Su-Min and his peer kidnap Jae-min and take him to a grave in the forest. However, after watching his peer try to bury Jae-Min, Su-Min eventually tries to stop the revenge plan. In the scuffle scene with the peer, Su-Min is hit with a shovel, and he is left in the grave with Jae-Min. Nonetheless, in the end, both eventually regain consciousness and silently reconcile.

### 3.2 White Night (2012)

The story centers around Won-Gyu, a flight attendant who comes back to Korea for one night after being away for two years. At a cafe, he meets up with his ex-partner, who suffers from homophobic assault incident with him. Unlike Won-Gyu, the partner prefers not to recall that event again, so they had a little quarrel before separating from each other.

Later in the evening, Won-Gyu meets Tae-Jun, a courier driver whom he knows from the internet, and they head to a bar after some discussion. Won-Gyu recognizes a man in the bar and chases after him, with Tae-Jun following behind. It is revealed that Won-Gyu was stabbed in a homophobic attack, which led him to leave Korea. They head to a pool hall and confront another man who stabbed Won-Gyu.

Afterwards, Won-Gyu and Tae-Jun head to a park and discuss their pasts. Before returning to work in the morning, they finally exchanged contact addresses and got to know each other's names at the end.

### 3.3 Night Flight (2014)

During high school, a trio of teenage boys who used to be close friends begin to separate their ways. Yong-Ju keeps his true gender identity hidden, Gi-Woong becomes the leader of a gang at school and begins to hang out with Seong-Jin, whose parents are influential, and Gi-Taek becomes obsessed with manga and was bullied by Seong-Jin because he finds that Gi-Taek is an eccentric manhwa fan.

While Yong-Ju tries to help Gi-Taek by reporting this to teachers, the teachers merely ignore and tell him to focus on his own business such as university entrance, and Gi-Woong who is in the same gang with Seong-Jin does not give Gi-Taek any help. However, Yong-Ju and Gi-Woong begin to have an affectionate relationship with each other.

After enduring constant bullying from Gi-Woong's gang, to ostracizing Gi-Woong from the gang, Gi-Taek eventually gets revenge on Gi-Woong by revealing that Gi-Woong and Yong-Ju have been secretly in love with each other. Yong-Ju faces sexual harassment from male colleagues, following by other catastrophic situations. At the end, Yong-Ju tells Gi-Woong that he will move to a school located in the mountains. After hearing this news, Gi-Woong holds Yong-Ju's hand and pleads with Yong-Ju not to leave him, then two of them weeping together on a hospital bed.



## CHAPTER IV

### QUEERNESS AND KOREAN SOCIETY

Korea has been well-known for its entertainment industries and its popularity widely spreads around the world whether it be music or drama. This can prove the statement that considering this fever as the Korea's soft power, a tool for enhancing its position and showing its competitive power on the global stage, although Korea once used to be the poorest country in the world. However, many people, especially outsiders, might not know that there are many groups of Koreans who also utilize media as the tool to ask for the rights and raise the problems that many minorities in the society have been experiencing. In this context, I am talking about "the film" and "queerness" in Korean society.

Lee-Song Hee-Il, a Korean openly-queer filmmaker, could be exemplified as a person who visibilizes the existence and the struggle of queer through the films. When he was a high school student, he used to skip classes to go to movie theaters with the passion for the cinema. However, there was a moment that he decided to not pay attention to cinema after entering Chonbuk National University because there was a belief among activists that cinema or film was the medium for middle-class people, but he changed his thoughts and realize the film as the method for studying cultural theory, instead of viewing it as just a self-contained artistic form (Hyeseung Ch., & David Scott, D., 2021). After graduation, due to difficulties in his life, it forced him to go back to his hometown. Nonetheless, two years later, he turned back to Seoul and assumed leadership in Chingusai which is the first Korean gay male organization and this organization contributed to "the normalization of queerness", stated by Phil Ho Kim and C. Collin Singer (Hyeseung Ch., & David Scott, D., 2021).

Lee-Song Hee-Il began producing and releasing films dealing with queer issues since 2000, but his first full-length film that was praised among film critics and audiences is *No Regret*, which was released in 2006. The film depicts the difference of socioeconomic status between two queer characters with its melodrama plot. Throughout the film, it allows audience to realize how queers live their lives and how they suffer from the norm that the majority established and queers can be in a difficult situation if they do not conform to the norm.

The uniqueness that makes Lee-Song Hee-Il's films outstanding and able to grasp audience's attention is that he does not present the story in polite manner, but he adds the real elements such as the fear of coming-out and the violence against queer in his works, and represents them straightforwardly. Therefore, it enables audiences to feel relatable to the films and also encourages many queers in Korea to accept their real identities and become an inspiration for them to stand up and hold various social events for raising awareness and increasing the social acceptance of queer people.

Among his works, *No Regret*, *White Night* and *Night Flight* are excellent in playing with dark-tone scene for strengthening queers' vague existence and directly presenting the struggles such as the intolerance of queerness and the violence that queers have been facing. For this reason, I would like to explain how queerness is represented in the films with two themes (1. The Violence and Harassment against Queer and 2. The Representation and Expression of Queerness) to show that the violence, caused by the hatred of queer, is a significance reason that forces queers to suppress the expression of queerness. Moreover, throughout the analyses, we will learn that different social components play important roles in shaping individuals' struggles differently by applying the intersectional lens for explanation.



#### 4.1 The Violence and Harassment against Queer

For the movie *White Night* and *Night Flight*, it can be said that the depiction of violence is what the director Lee-Song Hee-Il primarily wanted to deliver to the audience. Throughout the films, it allows audience to realize that the victims of violence tend to be people who are socially labelled as "weak" or "marginalized" such as queer people. The violence appeared on the films consequently reflects the problem of homophobia in Korean society as well.

Bullying and harassment are the pervasive forms of violence. These kinds of violence encompass a range of aggressive behaviors involving both those who bully and those who are victimized. Many scholars give the definition of bullying in the same direction. According to Farrington (1993), bullying is the chronic oppression of a less powerful individual, whether it be physical or psychological, by someone who holds more power, and Smith and Sharp (1994) describe bullying as the exploitation of authority to harm or dominate others (Koo et al., 2008).

Typically, school violence is carried out by students who attempt to assert their power and control over others, with the aim of causing emotional and/or physical harm to the victim. The result of the survey conducted by the Foundation of Preventing Youth Violence (FPYV) about school violence found that Korean students experience verbal and physical bullying, and the number of those facing sexual harassment is gradually rising (Kwak & Lee, 2016). Unfortunately, there is a prevalent belief that school bullying is a harmless and customary aspect of growing up and going through adolescence. However, contrary to popular belief, scientific studies suggest that being a victim or perpetrator of school bullying is linked to various issues in behavior, emotions, and social problems. Additionally, bullying can have severe mental and physical consequences (Kim et al., 2004).

In Korea, although the societal attitudes toward queer are more positive since 1994, Korea still have the lowest level of tolerance of queer, compared to all other

high-income countries (H. Lee et al., 2019). The cause of hatred against queer in Korea is inevitable due to the influence of Confucianism that has been deeply rooted in the society for a long time, which influences the formation of patriarchy. In addition, Korea has also been influenced by traditional beliefs from China in explaining everything with a characteristic of Yin-Yang. Yin-Yang is the nature of the opposite relation. This causes the notion that perceives gender in a cisgender binary opposition (male-female), and considers other forms of sexuality as strange and abnormal. Therefore, this becomes reasonable enough for some people who hold dominant power to exploit this idea for dehumanizing others who are queers.

#### 4.1.1 The Fear of Violence against Queer

Yi et al. (2022) draw a survey, published in 2014, to highlight the violence that Korean queers have been experiencing at their school. The result shows that some students drop their studies and even had suicide attempts. Besides, 92% of Korean students with queerness conceal their actual sexual orientations or gender identities because they are afraid of being subjected to harassment or assault by their peers.

In *Night Flight*, Yong-Ju is a good representative of closeted queers who are afraid his queerness to be caught. Yong-Ju can express his real identity with his queer friend at the rooftop of an abandoned bar only, and they even check if there are other queers around them through a queer-specific application, as in Figure 1. Although in the application, it only shows that there is no queer besides them, in reality, there might be more than two or a large number of queer people, but it is possible that those queer people hesitate to express themselves even in the queer-specific space, because they are afraid of being caught and facing various forms of violence based on homophobia.



*Figure 1 Yong-Ju and his queer friend at the rooftop on an abandoned bar.*

The fear of queerness being revealed is once again illustrated and this time it shows a severe reaction. Once there is a rumor that there is a queer in the school, Yong-Ju was so depressed that he rushed out to vomit outside the school building and try to not being seen by others, because he is afraid of being dehumanized by other male colleagues who laughed and insulted when they were informed that there is a queer in the school.

#### **4.1.2 The Factors and the Forms of Violence**

It seems that not every queer is subject to or suffers the same form of violence. Gi-Woong's queer identity is simultaneously revealed with Yong-Ju after Gi-Taek leaked this rumor for getting revenge on him, but besides the sarcasm, Gi-Woong does not face any physical violence as Gi-Taek, or face sexual abuse as Yong-Ju from other male classmates.

This interesting phenomenon can be understood through the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (2005) points out there is the phenomenon which power differentials even exists among cisgender male, based on manhood characteristics in each individual. It, therefore, creates the relation between male with superior position and male with subordinate position (Buschmeyer & Lengersdorf, 2016). In common, the characteristics of manhood include strength, competitiveness,

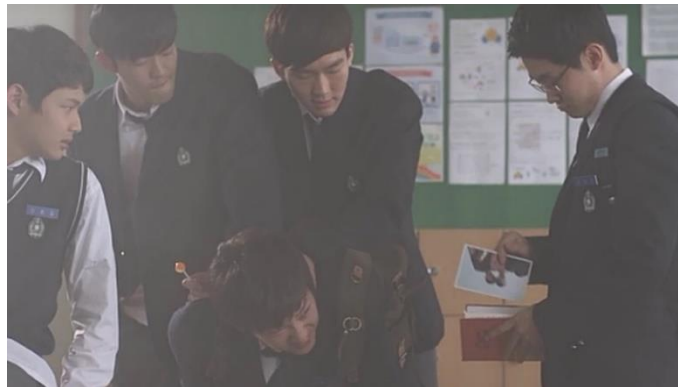
assertiveness, confidence and independence. From the perspectives of hegemonic masculinity, other characteristics are perceived as weak, powerless, and can be dominated by more masculine male implicitly.

Gi-Woong is the leader of influential gang in school. Throughout the film, we can realize that he portrays the image which is highly labelled as hegemonic masculinity in heteronormative society by considering his untalkative character, scruffy appearance and his powerful strength and aggressiveness, as in Figure 2 that even other cisgender males in the group were afraid of and couldn't compare to him. These factors put him in higher position in the hierarchical structure and protect him from being sexually abused.



*Figure 2 Gi-Woong expresses his anger after being scolded by the teacher.*

In contrast, Yong-Ju who is perceived as less masculine by his well-groomed appearance and humble manner is more inclined to be a victim of violence like Gi-Taek, who was bullied because of the character of eccentric manhwa fan. However, what makes Yong-Ju face more serious violence than Gi-Taek and Gi-Woong is that Yong-Ju is perceived as a weakling who has “queerness”, a disgusting identity in the perspectives of Korean society. For this reason, Yong-Ju begins to face harassment after his queer identity is leaked by Gi-Taek. Some male colleagues start to tease Young-Ju by calling him “Hey, homo!”, while he is about to leave the classroom, as in Figure 3.



*Figure 3 Yong-Ju faces verbal harassment by male students.*

Then, other male students aggressively make verbal sexual harassment to him by telling him to use his mouth to please them and ending the sentence with the term “homo”. This reflects the cultural myth that non-heterosexual affection merely fills with sexual desire and the prevalent myth misunderstood among people until nowadays that AIDs is originated from people with queerness through their unnaturally sexual desires. This produces the perception of queer identity and relationship between queer people as undesirable and illegitimate, leading to justify the behavior of dehumanizing queers in preserving a peaceful society based on the traditional norm. Yong-Ju’s case is not different from what Kim et al. (2004) state about the severe consequence of being bullied. At the end of the film, we can observe the scene that Yong-Ju attempts to commit suicide at the abandoned bar after he was sexually abused by male colleagues and got blackmailed by them, as in Figure 4.



*Figure 4 Yong-Ju is sexually abused and gets blackmailed.*

In reality, we can also observe from the news that people who suffer from bullying have a high possibility of making suicide decision. At the end, Yong-Ju does not commit suicide, but he has to endure life in a society that perceives queerness as unnatural and ostracizes people with queerness to the margin like many Korean queers in reality.

Nonetheless, it does not mean that Gi-Woong does not face any form of violence just because he possesses the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. After queerness being exposed, Gi-Woong was teased by Seong-Jin, a member of the influential gang who has less power than Gi-Woong and formerly respected Gi-Woong's leader position, as in Figure 5. This implies that being queer is not appropriate for being a leader who holds the superior position, correlated with the practice of hegemonic masculinity that perceives female and other gender identities are subordinate to male with manhood. Unlike Yong-Ju, Gi-Woong, therefore, is merely subjected to sarcasm in his identity.



Figure 5 Seong-Jin teases Gi-Woong after knowing he is queer.

#### 4.1.3 The Factors and the Reaction to Violence

Beyond the school border, the violence against queer is equally serious in the social scale as well. As mentioned before, queer people attempt to create campaigns and events like Pride Parade, taking to the streets to call for equality for queers, but during a queer festival, also referred to as pride parade, in a major city in Korea in 2018, the parade route was obstructed and festival attendees were attacked by anti-queer protesters. A survey conducted a week after the festival with 305 attendees showed that almost all of them (97.7%) heard negative comments about being queer. Moreover, 32.5% reported experiencing physical violence like hitting or pinching, and 51.8% reported experiencing sexual assault or harassment (H. Lee et al., 2019).

In 2022, an openly-queer Korean artist Holland was subjected to violence victimization while he was out with his friend and manager in Itaewon, a safe space for queer people and hotspot of queer nightlife. He was cursed for being queer first and then the attacker continued to come at Holland, hitting him twice before running away. This points out that we also find the intolerance and violence of queer even in the space that caters to queer people specifically. To present the problem that has been deeply rooted in society for a long time, Lee-Song Hee-Il was inspired by a real case of homophobic street assault in Jongno and add this element in his film *White Night*.

Lee-Song Hee-Il purposely inserts the news about homophobic street assault in Jongno in the scene where Tae-Jun learns that Won-Gyu is a victim of the incident. According to the daily newspaper *Dong-a ilbo*, Go & Cho (2011) report that a queer couple was cursed “Fucking gay!” and then they were hit in the face by a group of three male while they were walking on Jongno street. Besides, there are many cases like this taken place in Jongno, so queer people inform each other on the online community to be careful with “homophobia at Jongno”. Moreover, in the news, it also attaches the picture of Lee-Song Hee-Il expressing his attitude on this incident through online platform Twitter. He states that this incident proves that the hate crime against queer is rising in Korea and he suggests that this kind of hate crime should be discussed and the campaign to secure Jongno area should be established at the same time. For this reason, it is not surprising that Lee-Song Hee-Il decides to deliver this incident in his film *White Night* in the following year.

The actual case of random street assault by a homophobe in Jongno is represented through Won-Gyu and Do-Yoon, an ex-partner of Won-Gyu. Both of them experience physical assault and are threatened with harm while they hang out in the neighborhood of Jongno. However, after this incident, both of them show different attitudes towards the homophobic street assault.



Figure 6 Do-Yoon and Won-Gyu meet together after two years.



Do-Yoon's legs are hurt during the incident but he decides to continue his normal life and does not want to raise it to be discussed again, whereas Won-Gyu decides to take his revenge on the culprits after leaving Korea for two years with the state of suffering from being bugged by police, his identity is disclosed by reporters, and he was disowned by his father. Their different reactions can be interpreted by their different backgrounds.

Won-Gyu is a flight attendant of a German airline. To be a flight attendant, it is certain that that person must complete higher education, and a person who is a flight attendant often is a person with a high socioeconomic status (SES). Besides, Won-Gyu insists that he will not return to Korea again. These backgrounds give him a secure feeling to challenge what the society believes as normal; revenge on those culprits who conform to hegemonic masculinity, even though he could be punished or arrested later, as in Figure 7.



*Figure 7 Won-Gyu chases and revenges those who assaulted him.*

Hecht (2011) presents an interesting concept that support the relation between SES and individual's enthusiasm for challenging the distorted norms. Hecht (2011) states that the impact of socio-demographic factors on promoting activism should also be acknowledged. According to research, socioeconomic status (SES) is a significant predictor of participation in social movements. Those with high SES have access to

resources like time and finances, which increase their likelihood of involvement in activism and political activity (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Corrigan-Brown forthcoming). As a result, individuals with higher SES are more inclined to engage with social movement organizations and participate in activism (Leighley and Nagler 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). In addition to SES, a person's educational background can also indicate their potential involvement in activism. Research has suggested that higher education levels have a positive correlation with activism (Croizat 1998; Dalton 2008). For this reason, this can explain why Won-Gyu, who has high SES with financial security and higher education, dares to get revenge on those homophobia culprits, as we can see in the end of the film that after he had achieved his goal, he got back to work without fear.

In contrast, Do-Yoon whose SES and physical ability are inferior to Won-Gyu has a different reaction about the homophobic assault incident. Twenge and Campbell (2002) point out from their findings that people who have a higher socioeconomic status generally show high levels of self-esteem. This means that those with lower socioeconomic status tend to prioritize survival values such as security, conformity, and tradition. Thus, this supports the reaction of Do-Yoon who does not want to recall that event and it is better for him to live his life as if nothing had happened before, as in Figure 8, because of his marginalized components such as his sexual orientation and his socioeconomic status.



*Figure 8 Do-Yoon expresses that he does not want to recall homophobic attack.*

Tae-Jun's reaction towards the revenge on those homophobic culprits is relatively similar to Do-Yoon. Once Tae-Jun understands why Won-Gyu returns to Korea, he tries to stop Won-Gyu, as in Figure 9. This reaction can be read by considering his background. Like Do-Yoon, Tae-Jun does not have high SES as Won-Gyu since he works as a courier driver after graduating from high school. Thus, he inclines to give priority to his livelihood, which he repeatedly shows his attitude on survival values in the last scene of the film, telling Won-Gyu that he plans to earn money for renting his own house and will live with happiness in Korea. For this reason, in order to live without any problem in Korea as he desires, he has to conform to the society-established norms and this is why he expresses an opposing attitude towards Won-Gyu who attempts to challenge hegemonic masculine power because Tae-Jun thinks that it is harmful for Won-Gyu and it would have more severe result if queer identity were exposed to the public again through Won-Gyu's commitment of revenge on those culprits.



*Figure 9 Tae-Jun tries to stop Won-Gyu fighting back.*

Moreover, Tae-Jun also shows the conformity of hegemonic masculinity. Tae-Jun tries to stop Won-Gyu to fight with those homophobic male culprits, because he finds that Won-Gyu's figure is inferior when compared to the standard of masculinity by saying "A softy like you will get beaten up like a dog again.". Besides, Tae-Jun also expresses hopelessness of Won-Gyu's decision by saying that "I remember the case (homophobic street assault), too. But what can we do now?". This reinforces the notion that manhood is the hegemonic power and perceives others (female or queer) are inferior to them, so it suppresses self-esteem among queer people that they cannot beat or get justice from the society where hegemonic masculinity is strong.

In short, the reason why Won-Gyu wanted to take revenge on those people was because he had suffered from that incident. Since Kim et al (2004) state that bullying can have severe mental and physical consequences, and Moon et al. (2012) indicate that people who were targets of bullying (being physically attacked is also considered as physical bullying.) may turn into bullies as a way of defending themselves or reducing the distress caused by being bullied, it is understandable for Won-Gyu trying to get revenge on those culprits because he was severely affected both physically and mentally, whether from being physically abused, being forced to reveal his sexuality, and the worst of all is being rejected by his father, at the same time, we can observe Won-Gyu's trembling expression throughout the film, which

might have an effect from the homophobic street assault incident. However, to be able to think and plan to get revenge on those people, it is necessary for one to have the feeling that he was in a safe and secure state first. In this context, Won-Gyu represents high-SES queers who already have financial security. Therefore, unlike Do-Yoon and Tae-Jun, he does not have to worry as much about how he has to survive each day. At least, he was able to flee to another place after getting his revenge, as he fled to Germany before. In contrast, the other two characters, Do-Yoon and Tae-Jun who have lower SES were unable to escape and have no place to go except Korea. Therefore, they could only conform to behave within the norm set by society in order to avoid any form of confrontation with violence they may encounter due to being queer, and so that they can live in Korean society peacefully.

#### **4.1.4 Social Classification and the Violence against Queer**

In *No Regret*, the violence is also depicted in the film, but how queer individual experiences the violence and reacts to the violence differently is not highlighted as much as two previous films. However, the film still repeats the perspectives of heterosexuals who try to rationalize the violence against queer again.

After Jung-Tae, Su-Min's co-worker at X-Large Bar, had learnt that Su-Min had been cheated by Jae-Min, he volunteered to plot a revenge plan on Jae-Min and even suggested Su-Min to kidnap Jae-Min into the deep forest and bury him, as in Figure 10. Before the incident, Jung-Tae was furious with his two-time girlfriend who made off with his credit card. It is strange that instead of his two-time girlfriend, Jung-Tae appears more eager to use violence against Jae-Min, who is queer and not even involved in any relationship with him.



*Figure 10 Jung-Tae eagerly offers help in taking revenge.*

This correlates with the relation between the violence and the classification of “human”. Butler (2004) argues that there is classification of who and what is considered as real or unreal, based on the definition or value set by a particular society. In Korean society where it has historically been patriarchal and influenced by Confucianism, “heterosexual privilege” is an outcome of this social phenomenon, and it legitimates heterosexuality as the original and the norm of human beings, according to Butler (1993). Queerness, which is not related to the heteronormativity, does not fit the social classification of human, thus, dehumanization and physical violence against queer occur (Paralik, 2017).

Jung-Tae expresses his reason from the beginning that he chooses to work at this queer bar because he wants to earn money to treat his girlfriend. Thus, he is so angry when he learns that he was cheated by his girlfriend. However, it seems easier for him to express his anger by using violence against Jae-Min, instead of his ex-girlfriend and adulterer. Since society indoctrinates the hatred of queer, it allows us to understand why Jung-Tae does not hesitate to use violence against Jae-Min, perceiving Jae-Min is inferior to him in terms of having stigmatized identity, and there is still no queer anti-discrimination laws at that time, which can protect queer people from discrimination and any form of violence.

There have been recent efforts to introduce such legislation. In 2020, an anti-discrimination bill was submitted to the National Assembly of South Korea, which would offer hope and safety to the queer community. Additionally, a coalition of queer NGOs in Korea has set a goal to make 2021 the first year with an anti-discrimination law in the country. In August 2021, lawmakers in South Korea were urged to pass a landmark anti-discrimination act which would provide comprehensive protection against discrimination for all citizens, including the queer community. However, currently, South Korea does not have comprehensive anti-discrimination laws protecting the rights of the queer community. Thus, the violence and the discrimination against queer still remains in Korea until nowadays, whether in the school or in the society level.

This is why many queers hide their identities and decide not to come out otherwise they might face and suffer from dehumanization. It is related to the result of study, stating that queers might conceal their sexual orientation and, moreover, in some cases, they even contribute to the mistreatment of other queers to maintain their perceived masculinity when surrounded by heterosexual men (Reed, 2018). This reinforces the power of manhood that can prevent or, at least, lessen the severe level of violence against queers. The phenomenon of concealing one's identity or creating a new identity among queers will be further discussed next.

#### **4.2 The Representation and Expression of Gender and Sexuality**

As mentioned before, in Korea, the Confucian legacy that remains today continues to hold heteronormativity as the central idea in its way of understanding the world, reinforcing cisgender binary opposition and marginalizing other forms of identities as stigma. The practice of hegemonic masculinity makes it even worsen because people often exploit it for justifying the behavior of dehumanization against those who have weak characteristics, mostly feminine and queerness. To avoid being

subjected to any form of violence, it is inevitable for queer people to hide their queerness and represent the identity that “society expects” instead.

#### 4.2.1 Value and Expectation from Society

At this moment, I would like you to imagine yourself as a queer person who has been praised for the character or the personality that always meets social expectation. After considering this factor, it is difficult for you to think or behave against social norms in public, because you are now like the spotlight that everyone is monitoring and expects you to keep that character on. For this reason, expressing yourself as a queer seems not healthy for queer individual, because queerness is perceived as something that violates the normal mode of sexuality and undesirable in Korea, thus you would think that it is better for you to just suppress your queer identity, keep it in silence and behave with the conformity to social expectation instead, in order to protect yourself from society’s negative effect.

The same phenomenon goes for Yong-Ju. Yong-Ju has a character that we might be able to call him as a typical student at school; having a promising performance on study and behave in polite manner, and he was admired among teachers as well. However, under his perfection that society expects and admires, he has one thing that cannot be expressed or revealed, which is his queer identity. Obviously, queerness is the identity that many people in society are against and they do not want to see. In fact, the ability or inability to express queerness is much more deliberated that we thought.

Students are expected to meet the values set by the society. Peña-López (2017) shows the result of the survey on student’s expectation of further education, one of the values that most societies emphasize. According to the survey, it states that in Korea, students who are expected to complete higher education are over 75%, and top-performing students have a greater expectation of higher education, compared to



low-performing student. Accessing and completing higher education is a pathway for gaining more various opportunities in the society. This can imply that students who performed well academically are more inclined to face the pressure to follow the values set by society strictly. For this reason, it is also hard for top-performing students to express queerness, in case they have, which is perceived as undesirable in Korea.



*Figure 11 Yong-Ju is told to focus on university entrance after his queerness is revealed.*

As previously noted, the legacy of Confucianism in Korea reinforces the idea of heteronormativity, perpetuating a binary view of gender (male and female), so it excludes queerness to other which is perceived as stigmatized identity, and it is difficult for queer people to disclose their true identity.

Yong-Ju does not reveal his true identity in school at all. On the other hand, he only expresses his queerness, chatting with queer slang with his queer friend from the other school on the rooftop of an abandoned bar. This is associated with the pressure that dedicated students bear the greater pressure and expectation from others to behave well and should not do anything that is opposed to the beliefs or the way of life that society considers to be good. For this reason, Yong-Ju's character is not different from people with high position in the society who refuse to express their real identities; reluctant to come out, or even forge their identities in order to avoid dehumanization.

In 2000, Hong Seok-chon, a Korean celebrity, publicly came out and he was censored by the media as a result. He was also boycotted by the public for being the first Korean celebrity to come out and faced significant discrimination from Korean society. This made it difficult for other closeted queer actors and actresses to follow his footsteps (Kim, 2012). This affirms that it might be better for people in high position who are more prone to be a target of social impact to forge their identities and do not express their real identities. For this reason, throughout the film *Night Flight*, we do not find Gi-Woong struggles to represent his identity.

The representation of Gi-Woong's aggressive personality is not associated with avoiding homophobia. Throughout the film, we can see from the scene that Gi-Woong was bullied in the middle school because he is weak and his father is arrested to the jail, as in Figure 12. This is why he changed his personality to be more aggressive when he entered high school and joined the school gang, to ensure that he will not be a victim of bullying again, at the same time, he does not stop gang members bully Gi-Taek, his old friend. A study of school bullying in South Korea also found that teenagers who were bullied and have conflicts with their parents often tend to engage in bullying behavior, especially, when they have the opportunity to get involved with a group of friends who are notorious. Students who were bullied before often show bullying behavior to others to protect oneself and to release the pressure that has accumulated from being a victim (Moon et al., 2012).



*Figure 12 Gi-Woong was bullied in middle school because of his weak character.*

#### 4.2.2 Value and Expectation from Family

Besides the expectation on top-performing students which forces them to conform to Korea's social norm which impedes the expression of queerness, the parental expectation among wealthy family is also represented in Lee-Song Hee-Il's films implicitly, which illustrates why people from affluent family cannot express their queerness and what undesirable effect will follow if their queerness was exposed. Cashman and Twaite (2009) suggest another interesting concept "Toxic Wealth" which it can be used to point out and explain the identity concealment which is reflected from Won-Gyu and Jae-Min.

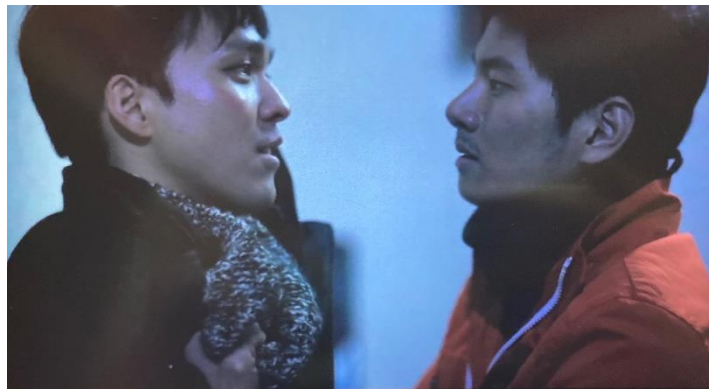
According to Cashman and Twaite (2009), the affluent, whose family have high socioeconomic status (SES), experience a pressure from their parents. These parents have high expectation of their children having successful careers which leads to social success. Another research which investigates how sexual orientation affects stress, depression and other struggles in Korea also found that about 80% of respondents agreed that queers have faced disrespect and discrimination in employment compared to others (Cho & Sohn, 2016), thus, this forces people with queerness to conform to societal norms of sexuality and identity if they aim to achieving lucrative careers and high social position, and the primary cause of pressure originates from the family, with

parents being the most significant source, leading to identity concealment among queers (Wang et al., 2020).

This time, I would like you to do something as we did before, imagining yourself as a queer person, but this time we will focus the condition involving family aspects to investigate how family and what kind of family plays an important role in controlling and influencing on the expression of queerness. Now, let's imagine ourselves as a queer born with a silver spoon in the mouth with a completed higher education. Obviously, until a person graduates from an educational institution respected by society and earns a stable and socially acceptable job, the family also invested a lot in children's education because the family also wants children to have or keep the continuation of prominent status in society. Thus, we wouldn't dare reveal ourselves as queer because queerness goes against the norm as mentioned throughout the paper. What if we were born into a rich family owning a big business? Being born into a family that already runs a business, naturally you have a tendency to be a successor to that business. In standing on that position, indeed, we ourselves are carrying the expectation of our families to conform to societal norms to be able to stand there without any shame and suspicion. Again, the queerness cannot be revealed. In addition, we may also be forced to marry with the hope of inheriting and honoring the family to let people around you appreciate it too.

In *White Night*, the pressure from wealthy family is reflected from the character Won-Gyu. In the scene where Tae-Jun tries to stop Won-Gyu taking revenge on homophobia culprits, Tae-Jun argues that what makes Won-Gyu leave Korea is Won-Gyu's decision himself. Won-Gyu responds with his anger as in Figure 13 that "The police keep bothering me. The reporters keep following me. My father still hangs up when I call him". This shows that Won-Gyu had to hide his queerness before, and when he was revealed to be queer, Won-Gyu, who is like the hope of his family because of his relatively good career and social position, was suddenly cut off by his

father since Korean society is one of the societies that value heterosexuality as the normal mode of sexual orientation. Queerness becomes socially unacceptable as something strange, unnatural and shameful. This is why his father, who lived in a society that shaped such ideas, cut ties with Won-Gyu immediately after he learns that Won-Gyu is queer.



*Figure 13 Won-Gyu tells that he was cut off by his father after being known as queer.*

According to the survey on coming-out experience among Korean queer by Phillips and Yi (2020), the respondents typically choose to reveal their queerness to close friend or people who are not conservative, as one of the respondents said that “I’ve come out to some friends, siblings, and a roommate but haven’t come out to parents and many acquaintances who are not close with me, or I think are conservative”. Jae-Min from the film *No Regret* is not different from Won-Gyu. In Jae-Min’s case, he seems to have significant limitations that prevent him expressing his queer identity. Firstly, Jae-Min’s socioeconomic status is relatively high since he is a son of a factory owner. This implies that Jae-Min is inevitable to bear the pressure from the family who expects him to succeed the business, which correlates with the toxic wealth introduced by Cashman and Twaite (2009). To be a businessman who is accepted by the society, he has to behave and conform to societal norm and avoid doing anything that can destroy the commonly expected image, so unquestioningly

he cannot express his queerness. Another factor is that he completes higher education. This also correlates with Peña-López (2017)'s argument, stating that people who have a great performance of study experience much suffers from the parental expectation. The last one, in order to succeed the family's business, Jae-Min's family arranges for him to marry a woman. In Korean society, Confucianism has had a significant impact on family values, where the family is seen as the foundation of society, and individuality is less valued than the collective well-being of the family. This emphasis on family has shaped the values and lifestyles of family members, with the ideal of a "normal family" consisting of a heterosexual couple being highly valued, so other forms of affective relationships are not acceptable, thus, the existence of queer conflicts with the norm in Korean society unquestionably. These backgrounds depict that Jae-Min carries a great burden and high expectation from surrounding people throughout the film, so it is hard for him to express his identity and his sexual orientation, moreover, he pretends to have other characters in front of other people. In the film, as in Figure 14, there is a scene that Jae-Min has to sleep with his fiancée after having sex with Su-Min and a scene that Jae-Min uncomfortably sits and just go with the flow in a conversation with his fiancée and his mother.



*Figure 14 Jae-Min sleeps with his fiancée after having sex with Su-Min.*

Unfortunately, once Jae-Min's family and fiancée realize queer identity of Jae-Min, it is no doubt that they express intolerance towards him and force him to hurry up the wedding, as in Figure 15. Forced marriage is one of the ways that people in some societies use when they suspect that their family members are not heterosexuals. Samad (2010) highlights that the forced marriage is a kind of violence since it violates human rights and it is a form of gender-based violence. Jain (2008) also adds that forced marriage is one of the most severe forms of depriving a person of their freedom, leading to long-term mental and physical suffering. For this reason, we can observe that Jae-Min's identity expression seems uncomfortable throughout the film and this reinforces that people with high SES and promising backgrounds are often expected to conform to heteronormativity; if your gender is male, you must have manhood.



Figure 15 Jae-Min's family urges him to hurry up the wedding after knowing he is queer.

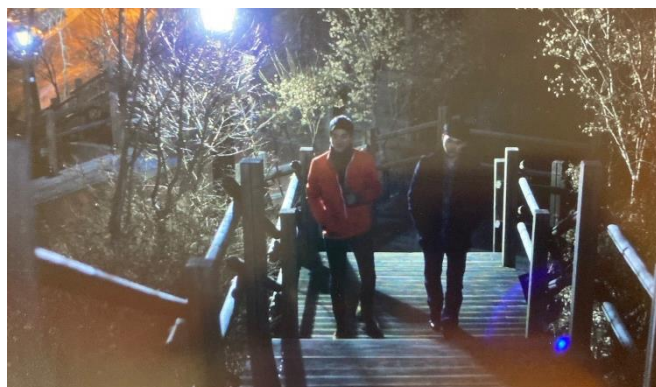
Thus, in contrast, Su-Min from *No Regret* and Tae-Jun from *White Night* express their identities freely without pretending to have other characters that are not them. When we apply the same approach to Su-Min and Tae-Jun's case, we can see that Su-Min and Tae-Jun do not have high SES and family expectation, so they rarely have limitation of identity expression. Besides, their characters are associated with hegemonic masculinity. In *No Regret*, Su-Min portrays the hegemonic masculinity in

the scene where he plays sport with other male peers during the break in the workplace, as in Figure 16. Playing sport enables people to express aggression, competitiveness and strength, commonly associated with masculinity.



*Figure 16 Su-Min normally does activities with other male colleagues.*

In *Night Flight*, Tae-Jun has the appearance that correlates with the hegemonic masculinity by his scruffy look, moreover, as in Figure 17, Tae-Jun also mentions that there is no big conflict with his family, unlike Won-Gyu, when his queerness was revealed. Thus, Su-Min and Tae-Jun do not need to suppress the way of identity expression and they do not face violence or discrimination from other people, especially from other male characters since their characters are recognizable within the category of manhood.



*Figure 17 Tae-Jun tells that he does not face any big conflict with his family although his queerness is revealed.*



People's identities are shaped by various factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and family structure (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). These identities have social meaning and impact one's self-perception (Chung & Son, 2022). When a particular identity is seen as problematic or different from social norms, that identity can become stigmatized by society and viewed negatively (Goffman, 1963; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). This can result in devaluation and negative stereotyping of individuals who hold that identity. Stigma is often characterized by negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discriminatory treatment towards individuals with certain identities (Dovidio et al., 2000; Martin et al., 2009). Goffman (1963) proposed that people often conceal their stigmatized identity to avoid stigma and to appear normal.

Queerness conflicts with Korean traditional perception of gender and sexuality, so it is labeled as “deviance” by the society and becomes “the disgusting enemy”, which the public is not hesitant to make queer people seem like objects rather than human beings by various forms of violence. *No Regret*, *White Night* and *Night Flight* represent such queerness and queers' struggles through the characters and their unique stories ingeniously. *White Night* and *Night Flight* allow us to realize that the different level of masculinity influence queers' experience of violence differently and individuals' socioeconomic status plays a role in shaping queers' notion and reaction to violence differently, while *No Regret* strengthens the public attitudes toward queer that often justifies the violence against queer because they perceive that queer is inferior to them and violates social norms. This is why queers in the films and the reality inevitably decide to hide their queerness. As many critics praise, it is true that Lee-Song Hee-Il's films really capture queers' struggles with characters who hold different and unique dimensions of social components ingeniously, so the films portray the existence and the identity of queerness based on Korean society extensively, and

they are so touching that each audience who has different backgrounds can feel relatable to the films easily.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Intersectionality is a concept that highlights the interconnected nature of various social identities and systems of oppression. It recognizes that individuals can experience overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalization based on factors such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and more. When it comes to the queer community, understanding and embracing intersectionality is crucial for several reasons.

Firstly, intersectionality allows us to recognize the diverse experiences within the queer community. Queer individuals come from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, and their identities intersect with other marginalized aspects of their lives. For example, queers of color often face unique challenges and forms of discrimination that are distinct from those faced by white queer individuals. Recognizing these intersecting identities and experiences is essential for fostering inclusivity and addressing the specific needs and concerns of all queer individuals.

In addition, intersectionality highlights the importance of inclusive activism and advocacy within the queer community. It reminds us that the fight for queer rights and equality must encompass the experiences and needs of all individuals, particularly those who are more marginalized within the community. This means centering the voices and experiences of queers of color, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, individuals with disabilities, and those from other intersecting marginalized groups. Inclusive activism acknowledges the unique challenges faced by these individuals and works towards addressing the intersecting forms of discrimination they encounter.

As intersectionality is applied for the public health work by Bowleg (2012), it surprises us that although Black women complete high education, the infant mortality rate has still exceeded that of White women who have less education. This suggests that if we want to identify and solve the problems, we cannot just focus on one component. It is necessary for us to consider every potential point and understand the history or the background that shapes individuals' experience differently when we study on people-based topic. Thus, although Korean people share the same race, there are other aspects worth studying as well because Korea also has unique culture and values that are different from other societies, especially the West, in shaping queers' experiences differently. While race is one aspect of identity, it is not the sole determinant of an individual's experiences or the challenges they encounter.

Lee-Song Hee-Il captures and represents queerness and Korean society in his works ingeniously, and we also can find the different experience and how queer individuals react and behave differently in the same setting from the films *No Regret*, *White Night* and *Night Flight*. The films portray the characters with the same race as Korean, but the components such as sexuality, hegemonic masculinity, socioeconomic status and ability/disability are worth further studying how they still play significant roles in shaping different struggles on each queer individual in the aspects of 1) the violence and harassment against queer and 2) the representation and expression of gender and sexuality. From the films, they reflect the superior power of hegemonic masculinity in Korean society. Although queers are always stigmatized and belittled by society, queers who are able to show or exercise masculinity intensely are less inclined to face violence in a form of sexual abuse, contrary to less-masculine queer who face both verbal harassment and sexual harassment because this group of queers are perceived inferior by their weakness and their queer identity. For this reason, queers who are not associated with the characteristics of manhood cannot express their queerness and consequently forge their identities instead. Creating a new identity that

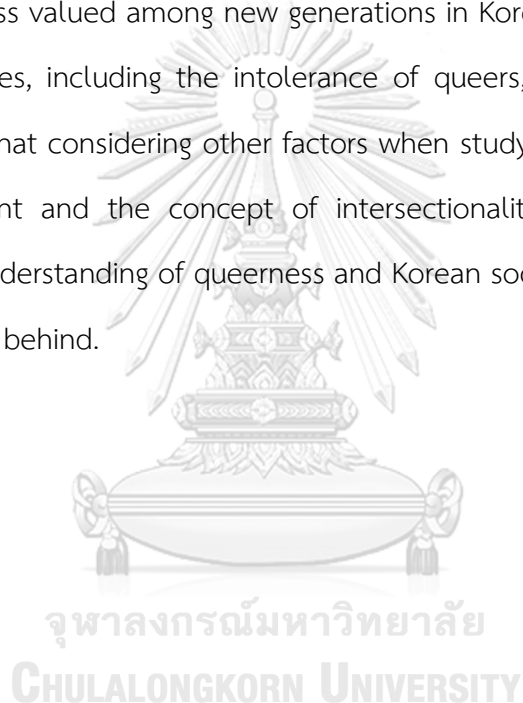
is not real or changing oneself to have a personality that meets what society expects really corresponds to the phenomenon that occurs in Korean society. As we can see from many Koreans, it is difficult to come out in society and there is a high risk of being banned or being insulted by their acquaintances and society, which partly derives from the parental expectation among family whose socioeconomic status or social status is in a higher position. This also shows how the value or norm that society has created hurts the marginalized group, especially queer. However, it can be assumed from the films that high-SES queers seem to be eager in the process of claiming justice if they experience the harassment and violence since they already feel secured in their resources or finance and have high levels of self-esteem, unlike lower-SES and disability queers who inevitably conform to the social norm and have to close their eyes on the injustice they experience. Because of their insecurity in physical and financial conditions, if they were arrested, they would more inclined to get in difficulties than those high-SES queers.

If we do not consider or analyze other factors, it may be easy to conclude that all Korean queers encounters the same problems. But, when we consider the intersectionality, it is still true that all queers face the problems, but the important point is that they face problems differently and they deal with those problems differently as individuals.

Moreover, this study suggests that the social components appeared on the films allow us to realize that queerness is not totally universal as Korea society embrace the belief and the norm that are different from the West, strengthening that the way of queerness expression among Korean queers is inseparably based on queer individuals' different positions.

At the same time, we can realize that the idea of queerness is closely related to the practices and the values that have been deeply rooted in Korean society for a long time. Although *No Regret*, *White Night* and *Night Flight* were released at the

different time, queerness portrayed in the films is still perceived as taboo and the struggles that queers have been experiencing have not changed at all, making queers to hide their queerness in order to avoid the violence. This is not different from the real situation in Korea. Although the situation of queers in Korea seems more positive when compared to the past, it does not mean that the violence against queer completely disappears and it does not mean that the position of queer people is as equal as heterosexuals in Korea. It is often said that the practice and the notion of Confucianism is less valued among new generations in Korea, but as we can see, the queer-related issues, including the intolerance of queers, are still serious. For this reason, it means that considering other factors when studying queer-related issues is relatively important and the concept of intersectionality is useful for making a comprehensive understanding of queerness and Korean society without leaving some overlooked points behind.



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