

## An Introduction to Korean Manhwa

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*Special Note: Romanization of Korean is a tricky business, and the Koreans themselves do not stick to any one system. For ease of reference, I have chosen to romanize Hangeul, the Korean alphabet, in accordance to the system recently adopted by the Korean government. As such, you will find that I have written common Korean last names Kim, Lee, and Park as "Gim," "I," and "Bak" respectively.*

I left them all behind when I moved to Korea. My thousands of Japanese manga, artbooks, and doujinshi, that is, neatly packed into innumerable cardboard boxes and placed in storage. Friends and family wonder how I could have done it: "Don't you miss them?" "What will you do without a manga for every occasion?" "I feel so sorry for you." Little do those left behind in the United States know that, in fact, I have moved to a manga paradise second only to Japan! So, as a service to those poor, deprived people who are not in Korea now, allow me to help illuminate the heretofore-hidden corners of this fascinating and exhilarating world of Korean manhwa.

The Korean commercial comics industry, despite its relative infancy, is enormous, encompassing both impressive and rapid translations of a mind-boggling number of Japanese releases and a ballooning domestic creative sphere. In the past, Japanese manga were published and sold in Korea illegally and unlicensed, with mangaka uncredited. Those furtive days are largely gone, however, and I have never even seen one of these bootleg volumes. Even the prestigious Kyobo Bookstore in Seoul carries Japanese manga, both Korean-translated and import.

Actually, most Korean manhwa are fifteen years old or less, and in the genres for girls where the majority of Korean artists predominate, on eyeball approximation Korean manhwa represent between 30-40% of the total comic book volume (the remaining books are of course Korean translations of shoujo manga). Most books older than three years are out of print because manhwa *bangs*, where you can go to read or borrow titles for a nominal fee, are everywhere, so the turnover is frighteningly rapid. The shelves of any one bookstore represent the tip of the iceberg of total Korean production. Of course, there are nationalistic impulses at work here, and Koreans take profound, almost perverse pleasure in noting how only their comic book and animation industries rival Japan's.

Unfortunately, most Western manga fans are completely ignorant of Korea's contributions to the international world of comic books. Tokyopop, in an aggressive and speculative move, has pre-empted any grass roots growth of a Korean manhwa fan base and begun releasing select titles to English-speaking audiences. (Comics One was actually the first to publish a Korean manhwa title for US release, but *Redmoon* was cancelled by that publisher before completing its run.) Other companies such as Central Park Media are scrambling to the tune set by Tokyopop's example. Nonetheless, though undoubtedly many have read *Demon Diary* or *Under the Glass Moon*, popular knowledge of Korean manhwa in general is sadly lacking.

Therefore, any exposition on Korean manhwa must necessarily begin at the very beginning: a basic look at the manhwa themselves.



## General Preliminaries

Korean manhwa, like American comic books, are read left to right, up to down. In this they are the opposite of Japanese manga, though the right to left layout is preserved when manga are translated for Korean release. Sound effects are rendered in Hangeul, as of course is the text and dialogue. Titles may be in Roman characters, Hancha (Chinese characters), or, most commonly, Hangeul. Because Hangeul is written horizontally from left to right, text bubbles are far less vertical than is common in Japanese manga.

The standard monochrome Korean manhwa is soft cover and A5 size (cost range 3500-4000 won = 3.00-3.40 USD). These books usually have dust jackets, and various bonuses such as color pages, fold-out posters, postcards, sticker sheets, etc. included. More rare are A5 size hardcover books reprinting classic titles (cost range 8000-9000 won/ \$6.80-7.50). Without exception, these lavish hard cover volumes are Korean manhwa; Korean publishers do not deign to print Japanese manga in such a fashion.

Somewhat common are full color Korean manhwa, which are usually B5 size (cost range 9000 won). Intended for a younger audience, these manhwa are best-understood as an extension of children's picture books. Many are animation comics, though some are adaptations of classic literature, mythology, and fairytales. (Raise your hand if you've ever envisioned Hamlet as an emerald-eyed silver-haired bishounen while studying Shakespeare in high school.) Some artists who work primarily in monochrome occasionally cross over to work in full color. In Korea, unlike Japan, the color comics industry is a thriving one, albeit small.

On the other hand, nearly all translated Japanese manga and a few select Korean manhwa for boys are published in B6 and NPB size (cost range 3000-3500 won / \$2.50-3.00). In general, Korean publishers prefer to preserve the size and formatting of Japanese imports, though they do translate and replace sound effects. Interestingly, the Japanese aesthetic of 'small' is not shared in Korea, as domestic productions are invariably published in a larger format than they would be in Japan. Koreans like their comic books *big*.

Now, let's move onto issues of style, which is both vital to any basic understanding of Korean manhwa and the most controversial of any manhwa-related topic. To the casual as well as interested and informed observer, Korean manhwa look like a slavish imitation of Japanese manga. For starters, like Japanese manga, Korean manhwa sport a basic genre division by gender. Moving on, both are characterized by leisurely pacing, where an entire page may represent no more than a second of "real" time. Panel layouts tend toward the asymmetrical and abstract. Characters are often saucer-eyed and androgynous, with "Western" features, even when they are supposed to be of Asian descent. Improbable eye and hair colors abound. And as for plot, well, the weirder the better. To put it bluntly, short of the practical differences outlined in previous paragraphs, it is near-impossible to distinguish Korean manhwa from Japanese manga without being familiar with individual artists or titles in question.

The reasons for this are undoubtedly manifold. Like their Japanese counterparts these Korean manhwa artists have grown up with Japanese manga. Their experiences with manga set the standard by which they create their own. Moreover, the two countries share an awful lot of history that one side or the other would gladly wish away. Korea would like to wish away multiple Japanese invasions, particularly the most recent one during WWII, along with the forced labor and prostitution that



accompanied the occupation. Japan would much like to wish away the fact that its people, including the royal family, are actually Korean, albeit a couple of millennia removed. The fact remains that Japan and Korea are inexorably intertwined and more like each other than they are any other culture in the world. Even their languages are linguistically closer to each other than to any other known language. (Makes translation of Japanese manga into Korean mercifully easy.) Of course, to top all that off, everything Japanese is much *en vogue* with the youth of Korea, who naturally do not care a whit about the disapproval of their elders.

Of course, many Koreans themselves look with disdain upon their own comics industry. One young woman happily informed me that she only reads Japanese manga: look at how beautifully they illustrate their comics! However, I maintain that Japanese manga as a whole have no greater inherent value than Korean manhwa as a whole. Some titles are really good; most are completely forgettable. This statement readily applies to the comics of both countries.

Moreover, I prefer to think of it this way: The comic book is the medium and Japanese manga the framework. There is a common visual and conventional "language" existing between Japanese manga and Korean manhwa which Koreans acquired from the Japanese. But in the same fashion the moviemakers of the world acquired a set of basic conventions for film-making narration from Hollywood, and no one with any pretensions to intelligence says with a straight face that non-American films have no inherent value or even *less* inherent value for that reason. It's all about what the creator does *within* the given framework.



As an interesting aside, different contemporary Korean manhwa artists seem inspired by different Japanese manga artists from wildly different time periods. For example, Gang Gyeong-Ok draws in a style reminiscent of the shounen ai masters of the 70's, Ikeda Riyoko, Takemiya Keiko, and Hagio Moto. Prominent Korean artist I Mi-Ra seems most deeply inspired by the masters of the 80's and early 90's, Narita Minako and Itsuki Natsumi, though at times her characters flash Takahashi Rumiko-esque expressions. However, most (Kara is an excellent example) seem to take their cues from former doujinshika like CLAMP and Sugisaki Yukiru and mangaka hailing from magazines like *Asuka*, *Petit Flower*, and *Wings*. With such influences as the *hana no nijuyonengumi* (the '49ers) and CLAMP, is it any surprise that many female Korean artists adore male homoeroticism? Gender confusion, significant stares, and other categories of subtext embroider many Korean manhwa for girls like lace on a handkerchief. Actual boy's love with a love relationship between two males as the centerpiece of the story, on the other hand, is far more rare. Still, after some digging, I have found, to my delight, a few examples of a nascent commercial boy's love culture in Korea.

## Korean Boy's Love

The volume of Japanese boy's love manga that has been translated into Korean is enormous; nowadays most of it appears in Korea only a few months after the initial Japanese release. However, Koreans do not necessarily interpret boy's love and other sexually explicit manga as harmless fantasy for girls of any reasonable age; boy's love manga are adults only in Korea. Moreover, perhaps because of the stigmatization of homosexuality in Korea, Korean production of boy's love has lagged depressingly behind the output of translated Japanese titles. Nonetheless, a special treat has appeared on the shelves:

A two-volume set that has thus far been published once a year, the *Youth* series are oversized volumes of six short stories each by six different artists, with a total of eleven artists represented between both books. The stores average 30-40 pages and in content remind me very much of the yomikiri that pervade boy's love anthologies and magazines in Japan: these tales, unlike any other Korean manhwa that I've seen, have been drawn first and foremost for the sex. All of the artists have been previously published in Korea, mostly drawing the usual brand of schoolgirl romance comics equivalent to mainstream shoujo manga in Japan. However, they are not your obscure artists of the day; these are big names, and four of them have already been or will be published later this year in the United States. Which ones, you ask? I Bin (*One*), I So-Yeong (*Model*), Choe Gyeong-A (*Snowdrop*), and Go Ya-Seong (*Under the Glass Moon*).

The quality of both artwork and story appear to be quite decent, particularly in the second volume. There is a healthy variety of types of stories as well, ranging from salaryman characters to schoolboy characters to fantasy characters and back again. Still, I appreciate



Go Ya-Seong's offering in volume two the most, hands down. A pseudo-historical piece with a healthy dose of sexualized slapstick comedy, it revolves around two Joseon period brothers who, at the opening of the story, are battling a female ghost that looks suspiciously like a fox spirit. Though they try to dispel her, she confounds their efforts and possesses the body of the younger brother. Desperate to save his sibling, the elder brother carries him to the home of a decidedly lecherous (but handsome) shaman, who concludes that the spirit needs to be fucked, literally, out of the boy. Unfortunately, the spirit proves too much for the shaman, and the elder brother has to take over. Of course, he does an admirable job at taking his love for his little brother to a whole new level, and the spirit departs happily.

Though the *Youth* books appear to be the only actual boy's love comics in Korea, homoeroticism is everywhere and done with impressive aesthetic style. The *Youth* artist with the most obvious storytelling potential is Han Seung-Hui, an intriguing creator whose artwork and visual narrative style is so similar to Sakai Kunie (Kunieda Saika) that if it weren't for the Korean name attributed to the work, I would have indeed thought it was Sakai herself. Han Seung-Hui's latest offering *Step* features three stories, all with male homoerotic themes. The final story is a reprint of her contribution to *Youth*, but the best off the three is definitely the second, about a boy grappling with a stalled relationship involving a female classmate and unrealized, unrequited lust for his own gay brother. The ending is bittersweet.

## Martin & Jhon



Bittersweet or downright tragic endings between male lovers appear to be popular, and it goes for *Martin & Jhon* (no, that is not a typo) by Bak Hui-



Jeong as well. Two tormented lovers sleep both with each other and with the same woman. By the end, John has taken to the snowy streets in despair, and Martin, driving a truck, loses control of his vehicle and hits John. The final vignette of the book is priceless, tragic, and largely silent; while burning a photograph of the two men kissing, Martin recalls an intimate moment with John: John in the bathtub with Martin washing his hair and kissing him afterward.

Undoubtedly the most baffling of the titles that I have picked up is *the Closer* by Yu Si-Jin. It looks, before all the world I swear, like it was drawn by a *Mirage of Blaze* doujinshika and even has Naoe x Takaya-esque interactions between the two male characters. One, a handsome man with white hair, is raising a boy who, as the story unfolds and the boy grows up, appears to have some unpleasant shared history with his guardian. In one fascinating sequence, the boy-turned-young-man recalls (possibly in a previous life) falling in love with an angel. The white-haired man, apparently jealous, breaks the angel's wings with his bare hands and then kills her. By the end of this two-volume story, the men sit together on the beach, make love (implicit), hold each other awhile, and then disappear. End of story, leaving me bitterly frustrated that I can't read it.

Happily, awaiting the day when I can understand Korean is made so much easier by series such as *The Tarot Café* by Bak Sang-Seon (who has also illustrated the forthcoming *Les Bijoux* from Tokyopop), an exquisitely articulated series that is comprehensible without language and also includes significant male homoeroticism. The stories included all revolve around a mysterious tarot card reader and the respective life histories of her very interesting and supernatural clients. Highlights include a boyish werewolf who once upon a time was loved by the lord of werewolves, and a tortured relationship between an Arab prince and one of his retainers. Virtually all of the male characters are either in love/lust with another male character or an object of that love/lust. Best of all, *The Tarot Café* is drawn in an enchanting, baroque style reminiscent of *Alichino* by Shurei Kouyu.



And this is just the beginning! I will be living in Korea for at least the entirety of 2004, and I fully intend to continue exploring this brave new world of Korean manhwa. I love what I have seen thus far and sincerely hope that other intrepid manga fans will join me in this exciting exploration.

**Publication information for the titles discussed above:**

*the Closer* by Yu Si-Jin  
Publisher: (Ju)Seoul Munhwasa  
Imprint: Nine Books  
Vol.1: ISBN 89-7099-248-0  
Vol.2: ISBN 89-7099-249-9

*Martin & Jhon* by Bak Hui-Jeong  
Publisher: (Ju)Seoul Munhwasa  
Imprint: Nine Books  
Vol.1: ISBN 89-7099-995-7

*Step* by Han Seung-Hui  
Publisher: (Ju)Seoul Munhwasa  
Imprint: Haru Plus  
Vol.1: ISBN 89-532-4383-1

*The Tarot Café* by Bak Sang-Seon

Publisher: Sigongsa

Imprint: Bijou

Vol.1: ISBN 89-527-2706-1

Vol.2: ISBN 89-527-2813-0

Vol.3: ISBN 89-527-2969-2

Vol.4: ISBN 89-527-3364-9

*Youth* by various

Publisher: Taewon Ssiai

Vol.1: ISBN 89-528-3668-5

Vol.2: ISBN 89-528-5346-6

**Online Resources for Korean Manhwa in English:**

[JanimeS](#)

[Shoujo Info Factory](#)

[Tokyopop](#)

**Online Bookstores (in Korean only):**

[Aladdin](#)

[Kyobo Book Center](#)

[Young Poong Books](#)

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