

## **The Gendered Comics Market in Korea: An Overview of Korean Girls' Comics, *Soonjung Manhwa***

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### **Brief History of Korean Girls' Comics**

The existence of Korean girls' comics, *soonjung manhwa*, has established gendered market value in comic readership since the 1950s. *Soonjung* refers to a pure heart and *manhwa* is a Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters meaning comics or cartoons.<sup>1</sup> During the 1950s, most Korean girls' comics dealt with stories of pure-hearted girls who overcame many difficulties (Son, 1998). Likewise, *soonjung manhwa* defined a certain kind of comics in its early stage.

The concept *soonjung manhwa* has since evolved, however, into a term for all comics targeting the female audience. Nowadays, topics of Korean girls' comics are not restricted to their literal definition, but extended to an infinite realm of romance, everyday life, sports, history, mystery, fantasy, horror, sci-fi, and homosexual. They are mainly produced and consumed by women, although some male writers and readers still exist. Girls' comics stories are mostly published through the specialized girls' or ladies' comics magazines, from which they are often collected into book form. Thus, *soonjung manhwa* is regarded as comics for women, by women, of women.

In the beginning, Korean girls' comics were chiefly drawn by male cartoonists. Nonetheless, they were differentiated from other comics in that girls appeared as heroines or main narrators (Park, 2000). They thrived among schoolgirls as a popular cultural trend in the post-Korean War era. From the middle of the 1960s, a group of women cartoonists, such as Uhm Heeja, Song Soonhee, Chang Eunju, and Min Aeni, emerged to create girls' comics (Baek, 1995).<sup>2</sup> For content, this first generation of women cartoonists created their own stories or dramatized Western novels; for form, they followed the drawing styles of Japanese girls' comics. Their works gained strong support from female readers.

During the 1970s, the Korean girls' comics market became stagnant because of severe government censorship (Park, 2000). After a seven to eight year vacuum, Korean girls' comics revived, thanks to the mega hit Japanese girls' comic, *Candy Candy* (**Figure 1**), aired via the nationwide television network (Kim, 1996). Pirated Japanese girls' comics (*shoujo manga*) were popularized in Korea, and some Korean girls' comics artists plagiarized works of famous Japanese artists. As a result, Korean comics readers grew up

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mistaking Japanese comics (*manga*) for Korean comics (*manhwa*). Therefore, Ahn (2001) argues that Japanese comics evoke from Korean adult audience groups a passionate nostalgia for their childhood.



Figure 1. Japanese girls' comics, *Candy Candy*, by Igarashi Yumino.

The 1980s marked the most significant era in the history of Korean girls' comics. It was when a number of Korean female artists, such as Hwang Mina (1980), Kim Hyerin (1983), Kim Jin (1983), Shin Eelsuk (1984), and Kang Gyungok (1986), debuted, bypassing stereotyped love stories of previous girls' comics and creating new masterpieces. According to Nahm (1997), they elaborated narratives, scrutinized histories, described the human nature, and discussed the contradictions in reality. Dealing with serious themes such as revolution, war, religion, and identity, they were enthusiastically welcomed by Korean comic fans over their Japanese counterparts. Some of their works are still venerated as classics of *soonjung manhwa*, one comics critic eulogizing their contributions to Korean girls' comics as auteurism (Park, 2000).

Based on this revolutionary development in Korean girls' comics and the strong loyalty of readership, the first girls' comics magazine, *Renaissance* (Figure 2), was launched in November 1988. Until the mid-1980s, the Korean comics market depended on the rental shop circulation system set up in the 1960s and still flourishing (Lent, 1998). In the 1990s, however, bookstore sales became activated and the rental shops took a slump. The emergence of comics magazines such as *Renaissance* encouraged readers to buy comics at retail bookstores and take them home to keep. During this time, many talented artists were recruited through contests of comics publishing companies, to

produce for the rapidly increased numbers of weekly, biweekly, and monthly magazines coming onto the scene.

Likewise, the comics magazine *Renaissance* inspired the renaissance of Korean girls' comics; however, the heyday did not last for long. After the Korean government lifted its half-century ban of Japanese cultural products and permitted the importation of *manga* on October 20, 1998 (Chung, 2002), *soonjung manhwa* struggled to compete with Japanese girls' comics in the globalized marketplace. In 2003, Japanese girls' comics seem to occupy a larger proportion of the Korean comics market, relying as they do on their overwhelming material advantage.



Figure 2. The first Korean girls' comics magazine, *Renaissance*.

### Japanese Girls' Comics in Korea

The history of Korean girls' comics cannot be free from that of *shoujo manga*, for the very founding of Korean girls' comics began with imitative copies or pirated reprints of Japanese works.

In 1999, when there was a hot debate on the opening up of legal sales of Japanese comics, I interviewed ten Korean girls' comic artists -- Min Aeni, Cha Sungjin, Kim Donghwa, Kim Jin, Kim Hyerin, Won Sooyoun, Lee Jungae,

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Lee Vin, Kwon Gyojung, and Kim Younghee. In face to face interviews with them, I sought to examine the relationship between Korean and Japanese girls' comics (Noh, 2000). All my interviewees agreed that there was a certain amount of influence from *shoujo manga*. They also said that imitations and plagiarism of Japanese girls' comics still play a part in the local comics industry.

My interviewees said they had read many Japanese girls' comics in their childhood and youth, and were unintentionally affected by their techniques and styles of creating characters, depicting human bodies, expressing moods, laying out pages, and transiting scenes. In addition, the grand themes introduced by the Japanese "Magnificent Twenty-Four-Year Group" or "forty niners"<sup>3</sup> in the 1970s stimulated Korean girls' comic artists of the 1980s, and as Japanese *manga* shifted to everyday life themes and school-based comics prevailed, Korean girls' comics tracked a similar route after the late 1980s.

Consequently, the tastes of Korean comics readers have been cultivated by *manga* for a long time, even while Japanese popular culture was banned by government policy. As a result of readily-available pirated, translated *manga* and the *anime* slightly modified for Korean television, Korean comics readers have gotten used to the Japanese grammars, narratives, and characters. It is no wonder that Korean girls enjoy reading *shoujo manga*, usually not discriminating them from local comics. Some critics denounce *shoujo manga*'s influence on Korean girls' comics based on the perspective of a dominant-subordinate relationship. Son (1998), in particular, contends that *soonjung manhwa* artists have not only copied small parts of Japanese comics, but reproduced whole texts over a long period of time, thus establishing the domestic trend.

My interviewees, however, asserted that once the author obtains her/his own originality, s/he would eventually come to gain a uniqueness relieved from *manga* influence. Besides, they indicated the manifest differences between Korean and Japanese comics, which will be discussed later, and stated they had confidence that Japanese comics would least likely intrude inherent Korean terrain, because of the gap in mentality and culture.

### **Korean Girls' Comics Creators**

*Soonjung manhwa* have a strong connection between old and new generation artists, for most of those who debuted in the 1980s have continued to publish their works. The number of female cartoonists has continued to grow, to more than 100 (Kwon, 1998a), and since 1997, they have had their own organization, Korean Women Cartoonists Association (KWCA, <http://www.kwca.or.kr>), which has organized exhibitions and published newsletters. All of this happened after the legalization of the Japanese comics, when major mass media noted the possibility of Korean girls' comics competing with

*manga*.

Lent (1998) observed that the Korean comics market had a multi-tiered structure, including two kinds of distribution -- rental and sales. The structure within the sales market is, again, complicated. First, the major comics companies, such as Seoul Cultural Publishers, Dai Won CI, Sigongsa, and Haksan Cultural Publishers, adopt and adapt to the publishing customs of Japan, issuing comics magazines to build up an audience for the comic books reprinted later. The head of Dai Won CI said comics companies cannot make profits from comics magazine and must depend on reprinting (Lent, 1998). Since the comics industry is now somewhat depressed, major companies have competitively reprinted the old comics of high quality. These publishers exemplify the conventional comics market in Korea.

Second, owing to the highly competitive education system in Korea, the genre of study comics has mushroomed, occupying about half of the industry. In the past, study comics were not recognized as "true" comics because of low quality, but since the recent involvement of girls' comics artists, the genre has been much improved.<sup>4</sup> Third, readers can access daily-based comic strips through daily mainstream and sports newspapers. Daily sports newspapers, mostly consumed by men, contain much sexual content as well as comics. Lim (1996) blasts such comics for distorting women. Fourth, most recently, the Internet has become a popular, alternative channel for comics. For instance, Kim Hyerin recently announced that she would publish her incomplete work, "Wilderness," through a website named *WE 6* launched with her cohorts (Chang, 2003). "Wilderness" from 1998 was serialized in a now defunct magazine, *White*. So-called essaytoons, reprinted books from online versions, became bestsellers (Nahm, 2003).

Within such a multi-tiered, complicated comics market, *soonjung manhwa* occupy a relatively small niche, but their significance is major. First of all, they are a part of conventional comics sales market, which occupies less than half of the entire market, and they account for almost 25 percent of the rental market (KOCCA, 2003). Lim (1996) argues that the existence of girls' comics itself is worthwhile in that space is provided to publish women's autonomous voices. Except for comics, there is no other place for women to communicate so lively with one another. Thorn, a cultural anthropologist, acknowledged this role as a "good thing that women artists have a forum for talking to girls, young women and other women, [for] this is a very rare thing in the world" (Kishinami, 1999).

*Soonjung manhwa* have some unique characteristics parallel with Japanese girls' comics. First of all, they are differentiated by the fact that they have a gender-specific market, i.e., women producers and consumers. The girls' comics magazine *Renaissance* has established a gender-bisected comics market in Korea since 1988. Park (2000) regards the artisan spirit of creators and the consistent loyalty of readers as the most significant factors in girls'

comics. More specifically, Hong (1996) emphasizes that the majority of the girls' comics audience is made up teenagers. Cartoonist Won Sooyoun (1999) defines girls' comics as "particular comics to represent the most sensitive emotions of adolescent girls." Thus, she added, "Men cannot fully understand girls' comics, for they don't read them with emotions that girls have experienced at certain moments."

According to Lent (1998), until the mid-1980s, all comic book activity in Korea was limited to the master cartoonist studio and the comics rental shop system. In these studios, a master cartoonist writes and draws comics with his student apprentices; thus, he can easily produce many comics for a short term. During the same 1980s, however, girls' comics artists created a relatively small number of works with their own efforts. Even though some of them also had one or two student apprentices, they restricted their assists within minor parts. Therefore, girls' comics are described as "an artist's individual expression" (Kishinami, 1999). Since women write and draw comics for women, Korean girls' comics well represent and reflect the female readers' experiences, feelings, thoughts, values, and desires. It seems natural for most female readers to be initiated to comic books through girls' comics and prefer them to boys' comics.

Nonetheless, women show more flexibility in both producing and consuming boys' comics. It is often claimed that gender division in the comics market has been weakened since the 1980s (Kim, 1995). Such a change seems to take place, because female readers are more open to boys' comics. According to Kwak's (2001) survey, female readers become interested in boys' comics when they are influenced by their brothers or when lacking girls' comics to read. On the contrary, the majority of male readers still hesitate to read girls' comics. Some even say that it is shameful for them to rent or buy girls' comics in public places. In production, the number of women cartoonists who publish their works through boys' comics magazines has been remarkably increased (Uh, 1999). They do not draw girls' comics; rather they follow the drawing styles of boys' comics. It is observed, however, that the aesthetic tastes of girls' comics have influenced an evolution of characters in boys' comics. This is closely related to the second characteristic of girls' comics.

*Soonjung manhwa* can be easily classified by their visual form and their extremely delicate and beautiful characters. Park (2000) emphasizes that aesthetic characters are a distinctive aspect of girls' comics, which Thorn (1995a) characterizes as "the unparalleled level of sophistication." Heroines and heroes of girls' comics are often idealized as paragons of beauty, unattainable in reality. They have tall and slender bodies, beautiful faces with big, starry eyes and shapely noses, and long, wavy, blond hair. Such visual representation is often accused of instilling racial prejudice into adolescent girls, for it follows the Western standard of beauty. It must be regarded, however, as feminine, rather than western, in comparison with describing



Lee Jungae (1999) considers it an unavoidable phenomenon that girls enjoy dreamy romances for they have been socialized in that way. She asserts, however, that “such frame can be expanded to dealing with people, their love stories, psychologies, self-examinations, and growth in their spirits.” Thorn (1995a) sees girls’ comics focusing on a “slicked-up version of reality” overlapped with the lives of readers. Thus, they intrigue their readers to be absorbed in them. From the beginning of this article, I maintained that the topics of *soonjung manhwa* are not limited to its denotation any more; girls’ comics are in the course of subdivision into more and more diverse fields.

Contents of girls’ comics are not uniform but varied. Then, how can we categorize them as a certain genre of comics? It may be more helpful to emphasize their narratives rather than their stories. No matter what girls’ comics artists deal with, they try to “capture the feelings of characters, the complexity of relationships, [and] the turmoil of human drama” (Thorn, 1995b). Therefore, if you open a page of a girls’ comic book, you will feel it is passive and static, by contrast with boys’ comics that are active and dynamic. Such narratives give readers more room to deeply appreciate an individual author’s mentality and philosophy. For this reason, girls’ comics are often perceived as sentimental and melodramatic. Thus, they not only present interesting stories but also arouse readers’ emotions and empathies. Owing to such a characteristic, Korean girls’ comics are able to maintain a superior position to Japanese girls’ comics in the local market.

Only one or two Japanese girls’ comics are serialized per Korean girls’ comics magazine, while boys’ magazines devote more than half their space to Japanese comics. Moreover, there are more comics magazines for women -- *Mink*, *Wink*, *Sugar* (Seoul Cultural Publishers), *Party* (Haksan Cultural Publishers), *Bijou*, *Owho* (Sigongsa), and *Issue* (Dai Won CI), than there are for men -- *IQ Jump* (Seoul Cultural Publishers), *Chance*, *Booking* (Haksan Cultural Publishers), *Comic Champ*, *Young Champ*, and *Pang Pang* (Dai Won CI). Seoul Cultural Publishers ceased publishing most of their men’s comics magazines, except for *IQ Jump*; however, the company recently created a girls’ comics magazine, *Sugar*, in addition to publishing *Mink* and *Wink*. Sigongsa also issued a new quarterly magazine, *Owho*, in 2003. It demonstrates that Korean girls’ comics are regarded as more profitable than boys’ comics in sales market.

### **Audience Reaction to Korean Girls’ Comics**

The female demand for girls’ comics had always been steady. Even through the 1960s to the early 1970s, which presented a blank period of seven or eight years, and also when the Japanese comics imitations overwhelmed the Korean girls’ comics market, the latent desire of female readers was

paramount. Before the first girls' comics magazine *Renaissance* was issued in 1988, girls could read only one or two girls' comics in children's magazines. Nevertheless, they showed a preference for girls' over boys' comics through readers' cards of magazines.<sup>6</sup> In the interview with me, Cha Sungjin (1999) recollects that "girls meticulously wrote about their favorite comics, interesting comics in their cards and sent them, while boys didn't." After *Renaissance* proved the potential of the market, the girls' comics magazines became specialized into biweekly/monthly or adults/teens/kids magazines. What is more, girls' comics readers have formed a sort of interpretative community through online fan clubs and amateur artists' groups. In this manner, girls' comics took a hold on Korean society as an obvious cultural space for young females.

Nah (1999) maintains that the competitive power of Korean comics against those of Japan relies on girls' comics. In fact, Japanese girls' comics have become more popular among Korean teenagers in the rental shops. It is said that beginners enter the world of girls' comics through Japanese *shoujo manga*. Once they become accustomed to them, however, some readers seek different stories for which they can feel more sympathy. It is then that they turn to Korean girls' comics and, furthermore, read some classics of the 1980s. The number of Korean girls' comics published a year is much fewer than Japanese comics. Fans must wait for a relatively long time to get a Korean girls' comic book, as the stories are published first in the magazines and then reprinted as a book. Some Korean girls' comics are sold out immediately and ranked top on the sales list. Thus, active fans show a strong loyalty to Korean girls' comics by buying, rather than renting, them.

Statistics show the remarkable records of girls' comics. The first biweekly girls' comics magazine *Daengi* (established 1991) once sold 150,000 copies (Kim, 1999). Chun Kyeyoung, the most famous girls' comics author of the 1990s, had more than 300,000 copies of her *Unplugged Boy* and 100,000 copies of *Audition* per volume purchased (Kim, 2001). Main characters in *Unplugged Boy* were produced as fancy merchandise, their sales totaling about 8 billion won (approximately US\$ 6.7 million), and she earned 300 million won (approximately US\$ 250,000) in a year (Lee, 1999). Lee Vin (1999), one of my interviewees, believes that such audience appeal is possible because girls' comics have a longer-standing charisma than comics for boys. She says, for example, "Girls' comic fans are very enthusiastic. They adhere to an author and have fidelity to the author. I think that the authors' brand has been recognized. If a work is 'made in' Shin Eelsuk, many of her fans will espouse it."

Not only comics maniacs but also randomly selected female readers prefer girls' comics. Korea Culture & Contents Agency (KOCCA, 2003) conducted a survey of 2,005 people to examine the comics consumer market. It was reported that 6.7 percent of women had experience in buying comics

while 5.6 percent of men did. It also found that the most preferred genre in comics was *soonjung* (21.6 percent), for 41.1 percent of women participants supported girls' comics.<sup>7</sup> As for nationality of author, informants answered that they like Korean authors (49.5 percent) more than Japanese authors (46.4 percent). Therefore, it is inferred that female readers more often want to read Korean girls' comics.

Korean girls' comics fans have been involved in multifarious activities. In 2002, some comics readers established a comics grand prize voluntarily awarded by readers (<http://www.comicreader.org>), as a criticism of other comics grand prizes by government and comics agencies. They have also actively participated in comics festivals sponsored by Amateur Comics Association (ACA, <http://www.aca2000.com>). The participants in such activities are not exclusively women; however, women have exhibited a more active fandom. In the first comics readers' grand prize, girls' comics artists received all the major awards such as grand prize (Seomun Dami), best long comic (Seomun Dami), best short comic (Han Heyeon), best reprinted comic (Won Sooyoun), and best rookie (Lee Ain). Most amateur comics clubs joining the ACA focus on girls' comics (Park, 2000).

Such Korean girls' comics seem to have a contradictory potential. On the one hand, there has been criticism that girls' comics reinforce gender stereotypes and roles. On the other hand, some regard girls' comics as revolutionary, even subversive against the patriarchy. For example, when I interviewed ten female fans who like to read *YAOI*, they answered that they gained some pleasure of subversion from such comics (Noh, 1998).<sup>8</sup> *YAOI* deals with homosexuality, a taboo under heterosexual custom, and thus has many beautiful male figures offered to please female readers. This phenomenon appears to be an evolution of male characters in the microscopic view, and in a broader sense, it seems to be a (passive) resistance of women to patriarchal orders. Taking men as objects of sexuality provides females with the excitement of subverting tradition.

Since the mid-1990s, master's theses written by women have also illuminated the subversive potential of girls' comics from a feminist view. Doing audience analysis, Chang (1998) suggests that reading the girls' comics "could provide a way to find an alternative femininity in the patriarchal society" (p.125). Interviewing women in their twenties who joined amateur comics club in the Daegu area, Chang found that they prefer women who refuse obedient femininity demanded by patriarchy. From her genre analysis, Won (2002) concludes that the desires of women have led the evolution of Korean girls' comics, though the women do not have some great rebellious intention. She investigated the works of Han Heyeon, which mainly deal with women's friendship, in this instance, implying lesbianism. Thus, Korean girls' comics are open to diverse experiment.

### Differences Between Korean and Japanese Girls' Comics

This article at times has referred to subtle, but significant differences between Korean and Japanese girls' comics. It is not easy to clarify them, for Korean girls' comics look quite similar to those of Japan. Especially for westerners not trained over a long period to read both, Korean comics might seem identical with their Japanese counterparts. Interestingly, however, both Koreans and Japanese pay attention to their differences rather than similarities. Sajima Akiko, a Japanese professor, is well known for her devotion to Korean comics, which she said "have deep thoughts that Japanese comics don't" (Kwon, 1998b). Likewise, Koreans also like to think there are differences between Korean and Japanese comics. Lent (1998) quoted an editor-in-chief of Seoul Cultural Publishers:

The shapes of Korean eye and faces are drawn more softly than Japanese; Korean comics have round lines while manga have sharper, straighter ones. Korean books are read front to back; Japanese from back to front, and Korean comics do not have the blatant violence and sex, bleeding scenes, amputations, and so on (p.34).

To categorize differences between Korean and Japanese comics, I give some comments from Korean girls' comic artists I interviewed (Noh, 2000). For the most part, they were more interested in communicating with readers through their present works and the positive potentials of Korean girls' comics in the future, rather than clinging to a past entangled with Japanese comics. They firmly believe that Korean girls' comics differ from Japanese ones to some degree and that the demand for Korean girls' comics will last. Lee Vin (1999) found in the East Asian Comic Contest that most comics markets in East Asian countries were already occupied by Japanese manga, and worried if the Korean market would have the same destiny. But, Korea still preserves its own comics market though the scale is small.

First, my interviewees mentioned the differences in comics themselves. Japanese comics tend to be highly planned and specialized in various genres such as food, politics, industry, medicine, animal, and so on. Therefore, as Lent (1998) explains, "in cases where Korean comics have not filled voids in genres, those of Japan have been used" (p.33). Kwon Gyojung (1999) confesses that elaborated Japanese comics often make a deep impression on her, for they are better at dramaturgy. Some interviewees argue, however, that they are getting tired of patterned and stereotyped Japanese comics. Won Sooyoun (1999) criticizes that "most of Japanese comics end tediously by decorating their climax with humanity, and then compel readers to feel the catharsis." Lee Vin (1999) also complains that she cannot discriminate some Japanese comics from others, for they imitate one another. Kim Hyerin (1999, **Figure 4**), who received the best author prize of the Korean Animators

Association given at the SICAF (Seoul International Cartoon and Animation Festival) in 2003, appraised Japanese comics:

Japanese comics look elaborate at a first sight. I don't mean their content but certain constitution like drawing...or design will be ok, too. (Question: how about plots?) I don't really exclaim over them. They seem like operating some mathematical formulas. [...] They show a certain degree of sophistication and some interesting stuffs. Yet I don't become interested in such formulas, which is too standardized.



Figure 4. Korean girls' comics, *Sword of Fire*, by Kim Hyerin.

Second, girls' comics artists consider the differences in publication systems, feeling Japanese publishing companies are more commercialized. In Japan, editors plan stories and discuss scripts with authors. They also hire script assistants to help authors with data collection. Therefore, they can present better commodities to readers. But Lee Jungae (1999) showed her antipathy against such complete commercialism. She wonders if an auteuristic work, which conveys the author's spirit and originality, is able to come out of such a system. Hwang Mina, who published her works -- *Yuni* and *Mr. Lee's Family Story* -- through the Japanese magazine, *Morning*, gave her opinion on the Japanese system serializing comics for magazines ("No More Worries," 2003):

There are differences between Korean and Japanese comic magazines. First of all, I can start drawing comics only after I show my scripts to editors and get their approvals. In a positive way, editors 'consult' with authors; in a negative way, however, they 'ordered' us. I worried if I lost my ability of creation if I worked there for a long time. I think the Korean system is better than that.

On the contrary, although Korean comics artists have more autonomy, they are less compensated for their time and efforts. In 1998, Lent reported that new cartoonists in Korea get 30,000 won (US\$ 38), middle range artists 50,000 won (US\$ 64), and the most famous 80,000 won (US\$ 100) per page. He estimated that a beginning cartoonist could earn up to US\$ 2,400 monthly, if he meets a quota of 16 pages a week; a star, up to US\$ 8,000. But this is a story of male creators. Women are paid less and spend more time to elaborately draw a page, for the girls' comics market is small. In Japan, however, a few famous cartoonists, for example, the author of *Sailor Moon*, became millionaires.

Some of my informants envy Japanese artists for they have more freedom of expression thanks to less censorship on violence and sex. Japanese "ladies' comics" for adult women freely deal with sexual taboos such as "Lolita Complex," sadomasochism, rape, and so on (Shigematsu, 1999). In Korea, however, the time is not quite mature for such topics, for the adult women's comics market is not established yet. So far, every attempt to initiate adult comics magazines for women, such as *To You*, *Silhouette*, *White*, *Mine*, *Nine*, and so forth, has ended in failure. The target audience of girls' comics magazines is even getting younger and younger, with primary school girls as the biggest consumers in this market. Therefore, many girls' comics magazines aim at girls in their low-teens and make the greatest profits among comics magazines.

Ultimately, the interviewees indicated that Korean and Japanese nationalities and cultures are different. With different customs and national sentiment than Japan, Korean fans do not feel comfortable with excessive expression of sex and violence. Kim Younghee (1999) criticizes Japanese comics

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for pursuing extreme aesthetics and even justifying taboos such as incest by describing them as beautiful. Different cultures have different reactions to the same content. When Hwang Mina drew “Mr. Lee’s Family Story” for a Japanese magazine, the youngest daughter in the story kissed her date; other family members who saw this were surprised and angry. Japanese readers asked why they were upset and why they did not applaud her, but these are never questions for Korean readers.

As mentioned, narratives of girls’ comics are mainly developed by emotions, so, if readers feel alienated from Japanese comics, they look for intimate Korean comics. Lim Bum, a newspaper critic, asserts that Korean cartoonists “have to draw with a sense of familiarity and originality and touch Korean feeling” (Lent, 1998:34). Korean girls’ comics are in a phase where they must be concerned about Koreanization. Kwon Gyojung (1999), who made her debut in the late 1990s, maintained that she tries to make her school-based comics very realistic, for she believed that her comics are quite Korean. She explained, “I feel, when I draw comics, this will appeal to Koreans very well...but Japanese cannot understand it at all. I create comics with such feelings. I do it only for Koreans.” Kim Donghwa (1999), a male girls’ comics cartoonist, also said that Koreans can write the best girls’ comics for Koreans, because they deal with inner feelings like love and conflict, rather than outer events. Thus, Korean comics have their own justification for existence buttressed by faithful readers, though they are not globally, but regionally, accepted.

## Conclusion

Korean girls’ comics, *soonjung manhwa*, have about 50 years of history. They were initiated by plagiarizing or imitating Japanese girls’ comics and have followed their development pattern at intervals of about ten years. Finally, however, Korean comics have established their own terrain, not encroached upon by manga even after the Korean government opened the popular culture market to the Japanese. Some creators of girls’ comics, for example, Kim Hyerin and Kim Jin, are admired by comics critics for their deep and serious worldviews, but more frequently *soonjung manhwa* are belittled by male critics as tripe.

In spite of their diversity, *soonjung manhwa* are collectively categorized as girls’ comics and regarded as a mere genre, because women cartoonists chiefly produce and women readers mainly consume them. Actually, girls’ comics have subgenres such as history, school-based, horror, romance, sci-fi, and so on.

Comics fans of online communities have suggested the alternative terms, e.g., women’s comics or emotional comics, for the word *soonjung* has a limited meaning. The term women’s comics conveys gender identities of women both

in forms and contents. Emotional comics originate from girls' comics' focus on human feelings rather than events. In Japan, comics are largely categorized into girls' comics (*shoujo manga*) and boys' comics (*shounen manga*). Such designations show that the Japanese comics market is bisected by gender and both comics are equally handled. In Korea, however, the counterpart of boys' comics is just called comics without being attached by any gender-specific modifier. Why is only the term for Korean girls' comics accompanied by a gender label? Girls' comics fans argue that girls' comics should be treated equally with boys' comics; therefore, some divide comics into *soonjung* and *non-soonjung*.

Korean female audiences show a strong loyalty to other media, such as women's magazines, romance novels, and soap operas. Girls' comics, however, have formed a very unique popular culture led by women both in the realm of production and consumption. Girls' comics do not require much production investment; their creation is not a group effort with many staffs but an individual process. Thus, girls' comics give more publicity to women's own gaze for women's gratification.

From a global view, girls' comics have boomed only in East Asia. Their concentration in this region can be interpreted as an economical invasion of Japanese popular culture, but economic reasons cannot fully explain why girls' comics are fervently welcomed by female readers in Asia. That these countries' principles and values are strongly based on a conservative, male dominant tradition of Confucianism, certainly helps explain their popularity among women.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lent (1995) explains that the term *manhwa* was imported from Japan and applied to cartoons during the 1920s. A Japanese pronunciation of the same Chinese characters is *manga*.

<sup>2</sup> Korean names in this article follow the traditional Korean order, last name preceding first name.

<sup>3</sup> They were born after World War II (1949).

<sup>4</sup> Hwang Mina, praised as a godmother of Korean girls' comics, published a sex education comic book for girls ("No More Worries," 2003). Usijin and Kim Younghee dramatized famous Western classic novels.

<sup>5</sup> In an animation, *Shoujo Gakumei Utena* (Girls' Revolution Utena), a male character often appears with innumerable flowers in a sarcastic manner to show that he is the *oji sama* (prince) of girls.

<sup>6</sup> Korean children's magazines insert readers' cards, a sort of postcard, to allow readers to send feedback to publishers.

<sup>7</sup> It leaves room for doubt if it is proper to consider girls' comics as a genre.

According to such category, girls' comics are perceived as a series of uniform and typical works. I talk about this more deeply in the conclusion.

<sup>8</sup>The term YAOI consists of three Japanese words: *yamanashi* (without climax), *ochinashi* (without ending), and *iminashi* (without meaning). YAOI was first used to refer to amateur comic artists' works (parodies of professional comics), because they had neither climax, ending, nor meaning. As more and more amateur artists focused on male homosexuality, however, the concept of YAOI evolved. This term now covers a sort of genre of male homosexuality that is rooted in girls' comics (Ogi, 2001).

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