

6 The Study

The effeminacy of male beauty in Korea

Whether on TV or on the cinema screen, on billboards or in a shop window in a South Korean downtown shopping district, over the past few years a new trend in the styling of Korean male models and mannequins has emerged: despite their often chiselled physiques, the men use foundation and lip gloss, pluck their eyebrows, wear longish, wavy hairstyles, combine white garments with brightly coloured accessories, and generally present themselves both verbally and non-verbally in a soft and gracious, arguably vain fashion that, until recently, would have been neither common nor socially accepted.

Roald Maliangkay



ANY WRITER'S (or, for that matter, reader's) judgement of what constitutes 'effeminacy' will, of course, be shaped by his or her culturally established views on gender roles. And, as is true for beauty, while one's notions of masculinity and femininity may be culturally proscribed, ultimately any judgement as to what is beautiful or what is effeminate will be made on the basis of not only one's surrounding culture or cultures but, subjectively, on the basis of complex internal factors, both conscious and unconscious. This writer claims no exception to this rule. Still, in Korea, where beautiful male pop icons are now commonly referred to as *kkonminam* (*kkot* = flower; *minam* = handsome man), Korean male beauty has, by any standard of judgement, taken on a distinctly effeminate quality.

Ambiguity surrounding notions of effeminacy hardly represents the only tricky issue here. Another involves the difficulty inherent in demarcating anything as the sole province of Korean popular culture. Because of the Internet and the ease of travel and communication, it has become increasingly difficult to define many aspects of popular culture as belonging to or originating in a single culture. Especially in the areas of design and styling, ideas are today shaped and redefined in ways that are increasingly homogenised and transnational. For the agencies of many Korean stars the lack of distinctiveness has become a deliberate factor in marketing their products overseas. Several popular boy and girl bands have one or more Chinese or Japanese members whose nationality cannot be easily identified based on their appearance alone. But they allow the inclusion of Chinese or Japanese lyrics, and they may guarantee an even larger foreign fan base, as well as more overseas support for actions against copyright infringement.

As a result of the homogenisation, a nation's popular culture, as a unique, freestanding entity, has become almost impossible to circumscribe. Even so, it remains inevitable that nationalism will bring itself to bear in some way on almost any cultural phenomenon, resulting in the promotion of products and ideas that reflect and suggest a country's historical pedigree. Thus, any cultural realm invariably acquires a national flavour. Korea's new standard of male beauty may be one such thing. (And, although few Koreans in their forties or older could be expected to proudly defend the phenomenon of *kkonminam* as something born in Korea, it's not hard to imagine that, with its growing status abroad, they might well become inclined to take ownership of it.)

A wave of Japanese culture?

The widespread effeminisation of male beauty can be traced to the rising of the so-called 'Korean Wave' (*hallyu*) in the late 1990s, when Korean pop acts first began to break through into broader East Asian markets. The blend of good looks and slick presentation, a repertoire made up of a mix of hip-hop and R&B, and a lack of profanity and sex, as befitting Confucian morals, have often been named as primary reasons for the widespread appeal of *hallyu*'s Korean pop artists. By the time



it hit Southeast Asia, and movies and TV dramas had been added to its repertoire, journalists in China and Taiwan began to argue that the Wave could significantly boost South Korea's 'soft power'—a notion immediately embraced by Korean policymakers.

Meanwhile, although a fair number of the actors appearing in the movies and TV dramas sold abroad were middle-aged, the Wave continued to be driven by young stars. Their often surgically 'improved' faces came to be used in ads for fashion and cosmetics-related products across Asia, with the biggest male stars also appearing on memorabilia of all kinds, including socks, jewellery and mugs. Few of these products were endorsed by the stars' production agencies, but it is likely that their lawyers were too preoccupied with the growing problem of illegal downloads and counterfeiting to pay much attention, for example, to the unauthorised appearance of their star's image on a key chain.

Four of the Wave's biggest stars to date, singer/actor Rain, actor Lee Byunghun, singer/actor Lee Jun Ki and actor Bae Yong-joon, are widely considered *kkonminam* icons. Rain often wears his hair tied up with a hair band and has, on occasion, worn very effeminate clothing and accessories, and Lee Byunghun, with his perfect white smile, recently pleased many of his fans when he wore eyeliner in the blockbuster film *The Good, The Bad, The Weird*. He does not appear very effeminate, but because of his good looks and sharp dress sense he is nevertheless considered an exemplar of the trend in Korea.

It is, however, Lee Jun Ki and Bae Yong-joon who together epitomise the effeminisation of Korean male popular entertainment. Lee, who rose to fame in 2005, in the role of a feminine folk entertainer in the hit movie *Wang-üi namja* ('The King and the Clown'), has done much modelling in which his effeminacy is accentuated. Bae Yong-joon's popularity soared in July 2004, when the drama *Kyōul yōn'ga* ('Winter Sonata') began to be aired on Japan's terrestrial channel NHK. Many middle-aged women fell in love with Bae's character, allegedly because of his good looks, passion, sincerity and good manners. Some fans of the show took up studying Korean or joined clubs where they could share and exchange photographs of their idol and many went to Korea to visit sites where key scenes of the drama had

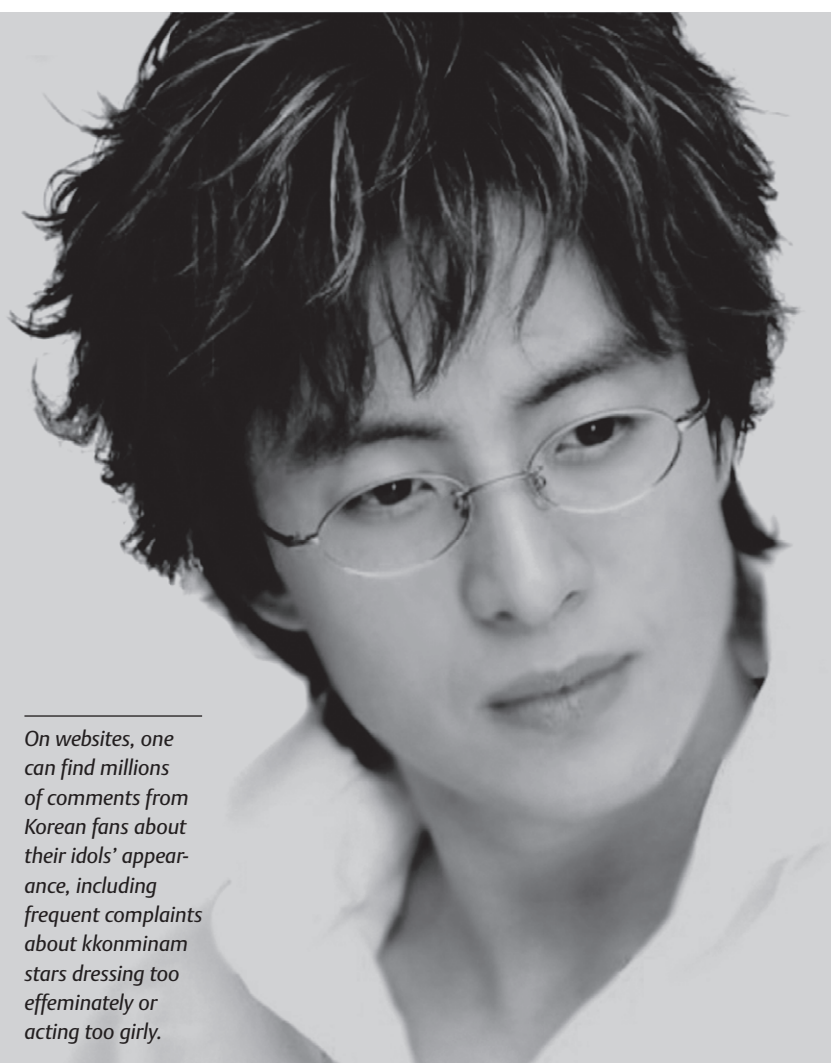
been shot. The Japanese devotion to the foreign star raised some concern inside Japan, however, and at one point some Japanese citizens launched an ultimately unsuccessful anti-Wave movement.¹ In Korea, Bae also enjoyed a great following among mostly somewhat older women who appeared to appreciate Bae for the same reasons as their Japanese counterparts. But not all Korean women were infatuated with the upcoming *kkonminam* icons and their dramas. A fair number, put off by the honest, respectful and openhearted ways of the characters, turned to Japanese dramas in which, in their eyes, romantic relationships are portrayed more realistically.

The emergence of *kkonminam* is frequently linked to the enormous rise in popularity in Korea of the *yaoi* genre of comics, following the lifting of the ban on Japanese popular culture in 1998. In the original Japanese *yaoi* comics, men are commonly depicted with somewhat elf-like features. They often engage in homosexual relationships, and are idealised as soft, sensitive and selfless. Moto Hagio's *They Were Eleven* (1975) provides an early example. In the comic's sci-fi storyline, ten cadets are left on an abandoned spaceship for 53 days to test their readiness. Two of the characters hail from a species whose gender remains undetermined until adulthood, when it is decided not by biology but by external social forces. One of the characters, Frol, who is undeniably feminine in appearance, is participating in a test that will entitle her to become male, a privilege otherwise granted only to a family's oldest child. In one intimate scene, Frol's male friend Tada tries to persuade Frol to become his wife instead: 'You can come to my planet. We're monogamous. Marry ME [...] you'll be beautiful'.²

Mari Kotani associates the alteration of male bodies in *yaoi* fiction with 'the desire of women to appropriate the idealised masculine images constructed by male-centered ideologies for themselves'.³ Thus, while the men take a traditional masculine form, for example, dressing in male clothing, the characters' beauty is feminine. Toshihiko Sagawa, a former publisher of *June* (1978-), a magazine for a female readership featuring romantic stories between males, notes that 'the characters are really an imagined ideal that combine assumed or desired attitudes of both males and females. Thus the heroes can be beautiful and gentle, like females, but without the jealousy and other negative qualities that women sometimes associate with themselves'. Sagawa points out that because men are considered to experience fewer constraints both socially and sexually, many of the readers idealise the friendship and bonding between men as one ultimately based on love.⁴

Writing on his fascinating website 'The Grand Narrative', James Turnbull argues that the prominence of Japanese scholars in East Asian cultural studies has led researchers studying the Korean phenomenon to place too much emphasis on the influence of *yaoi* fiction. He believes to do so in relationship to *kkonminam* is anachronistic, preferring to attribute changes in the appearance of the idealised Korean man to the shift in married women's attitudes toward the traditional gender divide

Above:
Singer/actor Rain.
Cutout: A give-away pack of tissues from a restaurant in Seoul specialising in 'woman's style hot sun chicken' (presumably referring to a kind of roasted chicken that contains very little fat) shows a *kkonminam* carrying a bunch of flowers (October 2009).



On websites, one can find millions of comments from Korean fans about their idols' appearance, including frequent complaints about *kkonminam* stars dressing too effeminately or acting too girly.

that occurred rather suddenly in the mid 1990s, when modern literature and film began to question the roles assigned to men and women in traditional Confucian society. To many, issues of gender equality had for too long had to take a back seat to the wider aims of democratisation.⁵

Although one could argue that Japanese comics and animation were widely available in South Korea before the ban on Japanese popular culture was lifted, it is in fact difficult to find signs of the *kkonminam* trend prior to 1998. Turnbull posits that, in addition to growing female disillusionment with the traditional roles of Korean men in the private and public spheres, the desire for a different ideal male figure also arose out of anger many women felt over being the first to be laid off after the so-called 'IMF crisis' hit in July of 1997. Indeed, although the role of a woman working in public had never been perceived very positively in Korean traditional culture, the crisis laid bare one of the rapidly developing democracy's major lacunas. Decades of significant gender inequality in the workplace thus combined with sexist attitudes to fuel women's burning resentments over their longstanding secondary status. While the softer male image was therefore partly born out of criticism, it also had the potential to make the opposite sex look more powerful.

Although Turnbull's perceptions of the influence of Korean women on the effeminisation of the Korean male icon carry some persuasive weight in explaining the disparity between the rather macho-like Korean concept of male beauty leading up to the mid 1990s and what we have seen since then, there are still other possible factors to consider. One concerns the enormous popularity of Korean pop entertainment among teenage girls.

Machos are so passé

In Korea, popular music can be divided into two general categories: that marketed primarily to middle school, high school, and university students and that directed to adult consumers. Although artists performing for each of these markets may share a predominant use of heavy make-up and accessories, the two categories are very different in

terms of both the music itself and the manner in which it is performed. Where music for adults often entails single performers singing in a dramatic, traditional style with relatively little movement, music for students is quite the opposite. Apart from its energetic performance style and prolific use of electronic media, the youth formula generally entails a mix of romantic R&B-type ballads and rap. Audiences appear to be predominantly made up of girls who spend a lot of time and money on popular entertainment, have some idea of developments in popular culture in other areas of East Asia, and are likely to favour artists who they perceive would not treat them as sexual objects of attraction but as equals.

Today's students, after all, are less likely to find much appeal in the macho type that for decades dominated in popular entertainment. Those tough men usually had no chance of going to university and/or of leading normal, quiet lives. Instead, they were forced to show their grit as soldiers, gangsters, or policemen, often sorting out differences through violent means, while appearing fragile only in their inability to express their feelings in words. Although they were able to protect and financially support their love interests, they could not care less about the myriad social pressures exerted on women. While the brutish tough guy image may not jive with a male population that over the past few decades has attended college in high numbers when compared to other nations, since the 1960s that image had reflected accurately traits inherent in a legacy of two long-lasting military administrations and their cultural policies and a mandatory military service of up to three years. Especially considering that national service is still in place, albeit in reduced form, psychological remnants of Korea's military years continue to affect how many men express their feelings and deal with issues of conflict or stress.

Although relatively few sports stars have acquired *kkonminam* icon status, soccer star Ahn Jung-Hwan has undoubtedly helped propel the trend. After scoring an historic goal against Italy that sent Korea through to the World Cup quarterfinals, Ahn—one of an unprecedented number of young university students to represent Korea at a World Cup—ran toward the audience kissing his wedding ring. The idea that at his moment of becoming a national hero Ahn would so openly express his love for his wife was uncommon. Although the act was not particularly noteworthy in itself, Ahn, with his very fair skin and longish, wavy hair was already, before the match, regarded as the pretty boy of the team. The goal and the team's celebration were replayed over and over again in Korea, where it earned Ahn the nickname 'Lord of the Ring'.

We may not know if Ahn wore his hair long because he was asked to by his wife, or because he knew that women in general would like it, or if he was simply following the advice of a male or female hairdresser. Nevertheless, his and others' behaviour does raise the possibility that the trend was started, or at least is supported, by men. Although good looks may now have become a marker of social success, as former president's Roh

Moo-hyun's eyelid surgery in 2005 possibly attests, longstanding pressures on men to be successful in society and provide for their families did not ease much after the economic crisis.

To this day, however friendly and good-looking a man may be, he is still judged by the degree to which he provides for his family's well-being and what is printed on his business card. This may help explain why, in 2006, the suicide rate of Korean men was more than double that of women. I surmise that Korea's *kkonminam* provide a hint that men, experiencing disillusionment with their traditional personas (for reasons similar to women's disillusionment) are reacting, to a degree, by shunning conformity and embracing a style that makes them feel better about themselves. Yet if the trend continues, the pressure on men to conform to the new standard of beauty will increase and arguably add to their predicament.

Recent studies show that, in 2007, more than 40 per cent of Korean teenagers harboured a desire for plastic surgery and that even some young Korean males were choosing to go under the knife in the hope of improving their chances of finding a better job. The ever-increasing pressure on young women to conform to an ideal, surgically enhanced beauty may also lead some of them to turn away from the traditional male role model, towards a man who now understands, and may even to some extent share, the beauty burden. Still, today's young woman is very unlikely to be looking for a man who is as effeminate as she, or whose sexual orientation is in question.

On websites, one can find millions of comments from Korean fans about their idols' appearance, including frequent complaints about *kkonminam* stars dressing too effeminately or acting too girly. The star may have played the role of a gay protagonist in a movie or drama, but those stories rarely contest traditional gender roles. It was only ten years ago that a Korean celebrity came out in public for the first time. When VJ Hong S kch' n one day admitted that he was gay, he found himself laid off by his TV network. Not until after a massive public petition effort was in full swing was he offered another contract. Few men have publicly come out since. For some time, Hong's name could often be heard mentioned alongside the names of male-to-female transgender stars Harisu and Park Yuri, even though he's a guy, and even though he's gay, whereas these women are neither. The three were viewed collectively solely on the basis of what they are not: models of traditional Korean male identity.

Today's South Korea is a vibrant democracy, but its longstanding ideas about love, relationships and people's roles in society have not changed much and remain topics of debate. However many movies, dramas, and songs discuss the issue of homosexuality or gender equality, there remains a big difference between this art realm and reality. With time, however, and with the increasing influence of the Internet and its social networks, I expect that that difference will become somewhat opaque.

The *kkonminam* phenomenon was born out of a combination of many factors, many of which are still active today. Whatever led to its emergence, it has now come to reflect both a male and a female ideal. It is ironic that even though the phenomenon may have arisen at least partially out of working women's disillusionment with traditional male roles and that today's young girls prefer a softer, less sexist male figure, these can hardly be seen as triumphs for women. *Kkonminam* have been unable to ease the pressure on women to conform to a beauty ideal either. While couples may increasingly share the beauty burden, this modern-day shift has little to do with the underlying predicament of the many men and women who remain disillusioned with the social roles assigned to them. For those roles to change, much more is needed than a cosmetic make-over.

Roald Maliangkay
Australian National University
 Roald.Maliangkay@anu.edu.au

Notes

1. See Maliangkay, Roald. 'When the Korean Wave Ripples', *IAS Newsletter* 42 (Oct. 2006), p. 15.
2. Keiki Nishi, Moto Hagio and Shio Sato, *Four Shōjo Stories*. Translations by Matt Thorn. San Francisco: Viz Communications Inc., 1996, p. 166.
3. Bolton, Christopher, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. and Takayuki Tatsumi. 2007. *Robot ghosts and wired dreams: Japanese science fiction from origins to anime*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 49.
4. Schodt, Frederik L. 1996. *Dreamland Japan: writings on modern manga*. Berkeley, Stone Bridge Press, p. 122.
5. See Turnbull, James, "Korea's `Flower Men': Where's the Beef?", *The Grand Narrative*, 6/4/09 (weblog posting, <http://thegrandnarrative.com>).

Above:
 Actor Bae Yong-joon.
 Below:
 Underground Billboard
 at Ch'ŏnggye'ch'ŏn,
 Seoul (Oct. 2009).

