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, could have been neither common nor socially accepted.

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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 (flower; man = 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 distinctive-ness 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 define 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 distinctive-ness 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.

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 effeminate features. They often engage in homosexual relationships, and are idealised as sensitive, soft and sensitive. Meto Hagie’s They Were Eleven (1975) provides an early example. In the comic’s sadistic storyline, ten cats 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.’

Man 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.’ Thus, while the male reader takes a traditional masculine form, for example, dressing in male clothing, the characters’ beauty is femininity. Tsuhihiko 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.

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 it is necessary to consider the fact that ‘Kikonminam is anachronistic, preferring to attribute changes in the appearance of the idealised Korean man to the shift in marr-ried women’s attitudes toward the traditional gender divide.
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 kikonminam 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 from the enormous burning resentments over their longstanding secondary status. While the softer male image was therefore partly born out of this phenomenon, it also had the potential to make the opposite sex acting too girly.

While the softer male image was therefore partly born out of this phenomenon, it also had the potential to make the opposite sex acting too girly. The star may have played the role of a man who is as effeminate as she, or whose sexual orientation was 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 long-standing 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 this difference will become somewhat opaque.

The kikonminam 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 women’s disillusionment with traditional male roles and that today’s young girls prefer a softer, less masculine figure, these can hardly be seen as triumphs for women. Kikonminam 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.

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