

Prettiness as a Shield: The Romantic Perpetuation of Patriarchy through the Representation of Pretty Boy in Popular Korean Dramas in Malaysia

SOH WENG KHAI & JULIANA ABDUL WAHAB
School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia

The idea of being a pretty boy was hailed as a regional privileged male ideal in Asia after the booming of Korean wave in late 1990s that saw Korean drama featuring men that openly embrace both masculine and feminine traits. They were often described as tall, possessing a slim feminine face, fashionable and romantic. While the pretty boy image was seen as a form of 'new masculinity' that acknowledged women equally, however, critical qualitative content analysis of popular Korean dramas in Malaysia, *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) and *The Heirs* (2013) revealed that these Korean men were feminised through the use of constant fragmented and close-up shots, and also through the use of bright and colourful costume. Although they did not hide their emotions, however, this performance only took place in the private sphere. As much as the metrosexual tried hard to disassociate themselves with the notion of femininity and queerness, the idea of being a pretty boy showed similar disavowal-masculinity is maintained through high-ranked social position despite there is an acceptance of a more feminised appearance.

Keywords: Pretty boy, metrosexuality, masculinity, Korean drama, Korean wave

Deemed as the contemporary dominant incarnation of East Asian popular culture (Ainslie & Lim, 2015, p. 2), the Korean wave (or popularly known as *hallyu*) has showed no sign of shrinking after almost two decades since the release of *Winter Sonata* that start exporting Korean cultural phenomenon globally in 2002. Soon after, *A Jewel in the Palace* (2003) continued its hype and has pushed many Malaysians' interest in Korea to a high ground (Cho, 2010, p. 5). The immense celebration towards Korean cultural products by Malaysian is taken at two levels; first, the government signed various memorandums with Korea to boost their economic cooperation especially in IT industries and cultural content (ibid.) and at a civilian level, more Korean television channels are added by Astro (Malaysia's satellite television station) to cater to the high demand of Malaysian audiences towards South Korean television programmes (Sathiabalan, 2015). The craze towards Korean drama by Malaysians is so immense that the phenomenon is being described by Daily Express (2015) as a form of "unhealthy obsession" by Malaysians.

Besides the compelling storylines embedded in Korean dramas, one of the reasons that sustain the high consumption of watching Korean dramas (especially the females) lies in the male casts, who are commonly known as the *kkonminam*. The term *kkonminam* can be translated directly to mean 'beautiful man' or pretty man and according to Jung

Correspondence to: Soh Weng Khai, School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Gelugor, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. E-mail: s_wengkhai@yahoo.com

(2011, p. 58), the pretty boy can satisfy the complex human desire because they possess both the masculine and feminine traits. They have certain physical features i.e. tall, smooth skin, silky hair, and they are fashionable and romantic (Shuri, 2015, p. 87; Jung, 2011, p. 58). They are claimed to represent a new regional privileged male ideal in Asia (Jung, 2010) because these Korean men embrace soft masculinity, which is “a hybrid product constructed through the transcultural amalgamation of South Korea’s traditional *seonbi* masculinity (which is heavily influenced by Chinese Confucian *wen* masculinity), Japan’s *bishonen* (pretty boy) masculinity, and global metrosexual masculinity” that allows them to travel beyond nationalities (Jung, 2011, p. 39).

Metrosexuality in TV: A Feminine and Gay Affair

Simpson (2002) coined the term ‘metrosexuality’ in 1994 in *The Independent* initially, but the term gained its popularity when he revisited the term in 2002 for *Salon.com*, explaining the term as,

“...a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that’s where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference. Particular professions, such as modelling, waiting tables, media, pop music and, now-a-days, sport, seem to attract them but, truth be told, like male vanity products and herpes, they’re pretty much everywhere.” (Simpson, 2002)

Though Simpson (2002) describes that the sexual orientation of those who adopt this identity is irrelevant as ‘he has clearly taken himself as his own love object’, however, the operational definition of metrosexuality, as seen in television, is rooted in disavowing the femininity imbricated in the metrosexual identity. In other words, the concept is understood in the realm of heteronormativity and those (heterosexual) men who adopt this metrosexual masculinity have to constantly disassociate themselves with the notion of femininity or queerness through various coping mechanisms. This can be done either through buying high-end products as a way to re-establish their male privilege (Shugart, 2008, p. 288-289), or by understanding such make-over is purely for marriage proposal (Clarkson, 2005, p. 240) or to ignore the agendas in the beauty salon to prove their heterosexuality (Deepmala Baghel & Parthasarathy, n.d.).

The perpetuation of metrosexuality as homosexuality is best known through popular U.S. show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003) when the show manifests five gay men who are also a metrosexual, to transform the typical ungroomed heterosexual men to achieve “a higher fluency of culture, charm, and sophistication” (Clarkson, 2005, p. 236). The metrosexual identity is also employed in advertising to lift the gay consumer markets (Emirhan, 2013) as this identity is simply being perceived as living a “queer lifestyle” (Miller, 2005). The blurring of masculinity and femininity behaviour brought by them is simply relegated to femininity and queerness and is ridiculed in an U.S. advertisement that tries to reinstate the image that “real men don’t watch over their food choice” (Buerkle, 2009).

In Asia, the concept of metrosexuality is often understood in the form of pretty boy (and is not scrutinised) and the phenomenon is viewed with much negative remarks although these males are seen the ideal in Japan (Jung, 2011), Thailand (Liew, 2015) and Vietnam (Ngo, 2015). While it is claimed to represent a regional privileged male ideal in

Asia (Jung, 2010), this feminised masculinity is perceived as not manly in Indonesia (Shuri, 2015, p. 89-91) and such ambiguity gender performances are seen as threatening or morally wrong in Malaysia (Zuhaili, 2010, p. 499; Hamka, 2016, p. 156). In Thailand, Liew (2015) also reveals how the local films restore Thai masculinity as not secondary to Korean's metrosexual and Thailand men are equally capable and caring as the Korean flower boys do. The perception of this metrosexual character or pretty boy as less masculine, or even gay, is further rooted when popular Korean films such as *The King and the Clown* (2005) and *No Regrets* (2006) feature the characters of gay pretty boys (Jung, 2010).

However, such hetero-defined concept of metrosexuality has engendered controversy from the feminist and queer critics for stereotyping the gay men (Shugart, 2008, p. 284) and McCormark (2010, p.112) contends that sexuality does form an important aspect in the experiences of young men and thus the current operational definition of metrosexuality is problematic. The multiple representations of metrosexuality in the media ranges from those who exhibit effeminacy to those who are more masculine (such as the spornosexual¹), and the constant construction and deconstruction of this image make metrosexuality a slippery concept and terms such as 'pretty boy', 'beautiful boy', 'flower boy' and 'metrosexual' are often conflated to refer to the same subject matter – male who blurs the distinction between masculinity and femininity, and heterosexuality and homosexuality (Buerkle, 2009, p. 79). The multi-faceted representations of metrosexual in the media is thus referred as providing a ground for men to (re)negotiate their gender role – in both positive and negative light (Pompper, 2010, p. 691).

Glocalisation of Metrosexuality: The Korean 'Soft Masculinity'

While the metrosexual is more readily identified by others and themselves through its high consumption activities (Clarkson, 2005; Miller, 2005; Shugart, 2008; Soh & Ngo, 2014), in South Korea, the concept of metrosexuality is deconstructed and reframed itself under the concept of 'soft masculinity' which is characterised as possessing a hybrid of traditional Chinese *wen* masculinity, Japan's pretty boy masculinity and a global metrosexual masculinity (Jung, 2011, p. 39).

As noted from above, metrosexuality is a slippery concept that does not point to a singular definition and representation. In fact, if one is to examine closely, the two different masculinity as theorised under soft masculinity–Chinese *wen* masculinity and pretty boy masculinity–are in fact, the discourses associated with metrosexuality. According to Louie (2002), the ideal Chinese masculinity embodies both the *wen* (cultural attainment) and *wu* (martial valour) masculinity, however, either one of the masculinity may precede its values depending on the particular political and social context. Both type of masculinity is considered manly but the *wen* masculinity has a supreme position than the *wu* masculinity because for the former, it is gained through civil service examination while the latter is gained through brute force (ibid.). Such cultured masculinity (the *wen* masculinity) is treated in the discourse of metrosexuality as well where the metrosexual uses "his kinder, gentler masculinity for the purpose of heterosexual conquest" (Buerkle, 2009, p. 79). In addition, metrosexual as the pretty boy is also often conflated to be the same (Pompper, 2010, p. 690; Yang, 2014, p. 396).

It should be cleared at this juncture that the 'soft masculinity' as theorised by Jung (2011) is in fact a glocalised version of the 'global' metrosexuality that constitutes not much differences within a wider discourse of metrosexuality, except that the 'soft masculinity' openly acknowledge the Eastern template of masculinity that cherishes a

rather soft-spoken and cultured male. Chen (2013) clearly delineates this phenomenon by finding that the Chinese literati is hailed in Chinese men's magazines to naturalise the consumption activity because they are seen as "the guardians of knowledge and high culture".

To this, scholars such as Soh and Ngo (2014), Liew (2015) and Ngo (2015) employ the term 'metrosexual masculinity' in describing the Korean male stars because the term covers a wider discourse of metrosexuality i.e. be it feminine, cultured or macho (as in spornosexual). The term 'soft masculinity' is declined in this research because it may project a false perception that all Korean male stars possess such soft masculinity which is clearly not true.

Moon Embracing the Sun and The Heirs

Both the Korean dramas *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) and *The Heirs* (2013) are well-celebrated by Malaysian audiences as it has been re-run on local television channels for three and two times, respectively. The king in *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), Lee Hwon, is claimed as the 'prettiest king ever' (MacDonald, 2013) and the male characters in *The Heirs* (2013) are described by Juliana (2015, p. 19) as "highly sophisticated, dressed in elegant and classy styles" which can be understood directly as proposing a metrosexual identity which, in the multi-faceted view of what a metrosexual is, can be identified by themselves and others through such high consumption activity (Shugart, 2008; Louie, 2012; Soh & Ngo, 2014) or in another way, fulfilling the pretty boy image through features described by Jung (2010) and Shuri (2015, p. 87) – one that has a feminine face, fashionable and romantic in character.

Moon Embracing the Sun (2012) is a historical drama that tells a love story between the king, Lee Hwon (played by Kim Soo-hyun) and Yeon-woo (played by Han Ga-in), who is later set up by Queen Dowager so that Yeon-woo will not be the Queen. Queen Dowager orders Shaman Jang to kill Yeon-woo through black magic but little did Queen Dowager know that Shaman Jang saves the life of Yeon-woo without anyone's knowledge. Yeon-woo lost her memories and lives her life as Shaman Wol but fate would have it that the King rediscovers Yeon-woo/Wol as she becomes the talisman for the ill king. The king then secretly commences an investigation of what was happening which then lead to a horrific discovery that involves Queen Dowager and the king's sister, Princess Min-hwa.

The drama *The Heirs* (2013) is an urban drama that centres on the life of a rich kid, Kim Tan (played by Lee Min-ho), who is also the potential heir to his family business – Jeguk Group. Behind the rich façade of his life, Kim Tan is a son to his father's mistress who lives most of her life in the house, and he is arranged to marry a girl for political reasons. However, things change when he falls in love with Cha Eun-sang (played by Park Shin-hye), the daughter of the house maid, that soon witnesses lot of conflicts between Kim Tan's and Eun-sang's family and friends.

Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is employed in studying the representation of metrosexual characters in the selected dramas because it allows us to unveil the relationship between media, culture and society through examining how "words, concepts, ideas, themes and issues" are structured within the drama through its "social practices, representations, assumptions and stories" (Brennen, 2013, p. 193-194). In other words, by using qualitative content analysis, the representation of metrosexual character in Korean dramas is analysed

through investigating how they are represented vis-à-vis elements such as camera work, costume colour, and their character in the dramas. According to Rayner, Wall & Kruger (2004), it is important to read the camera work and costume choice because it enhances the characterisation of the studied subject. In this study, it refers to the metrosexual characters in Korean dramas, which refer to Lee Hwon and Kim Tan, in *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) and *The Heirs* (2013), respectively.

Findings and Discussion

Fragmented and Close-up Camera Work and Colourful Costumes: Objectification of Korean Males

In *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), Lee Hwon is first introduced during an establishment shot of an apparently unknown place in the palace which can be made sense through its messy surrounding and unused furniture. Then, the audiences follow the fragmentation shots of his eyes and lips of the then Crown Prince or the young King Lee Hwon (played by Yeo Jin-goo). He is seen next changing into a pink and purple costume and is ready to sneak out from the palace. Before he makes his moves, he realises the scorching sun and says to himself, “I cannot get the sun onto my skin,” and hence, takes out a red umbrella and walks away. In that instance, Lee Hwon has constructed himself into, to borrow Mulvey’s (1975) word, an object, that the audiences can identify with and such objectification is constructed using fragmented shots that render Lee Hwon a passive and “to-be-looked-at” figure in *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) from the beginning (Soh & Ngo, 2014, p. 340). In addition, he is described by the palace servants as resembling a painting, clearly telling that the king is under the servants’ gaze as not only a king, but an object that is to be looked at due to his beautiful appearance.

The same mechanism is found in *The Heirs* (2013) as well. In *The Heirs* (2013), Kim Tan is introduced during the establishment shot of him surfing with his fellow foreign friends. He then parts with his fellow friends and gets himself showered before he sits in a café for a cup of coffee. The first three-minute of the drama provides a background of Kim Tan as coming from a wealthy family that manages to send him to the United States to study while at the same time, signposts him to be an object to be looked at from the beginning of the drama – this time, through one’s figure that is framed in a fragmented shot; Kim Tan’s figure is shot in a middle close-up shot to portray his upper naked body before the shot is cut to his silhouette that shows his fluffy hair and later, resumes to a middle close-up shot that re-portray his flawless and define face. His beautiful figure is acknowledged and identified by the others as “the hot and handsome one” that then works to naturalise the gaze showered upon him.

Not only using the fragmented camera works on Lee Hwon and Kim Tan, the objectification of Lee Hwon and Kim Tan is further perpetuated through the constant filming of the two of them in a close-up manner that works to reiterate their delicate facial features i.e. flawless skin, beautifully-drew eyebrows and their pointed nose. The objectification of Lee Hwon and Kim Tan is enhanced by matching them with the use of colourful costumes. Throughout *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), the choice of colours for Lee Hwon is none other than gold, red, pink and yellow. And for Kim Tan, his costume colours vary from red to purple, and from green to silver, and is flowery in design at times.

By combining the bright visual colours with the frequent fragmented and close-up shots of Lee Hwon and Kim Tan, it skilfully and unconsciously reinforces the identification

and objectification of the male characters, assembling both Lee Hwon and Kim Tan as essentially the feminine one – one that challenges the voyeuristic male gaze as popularised by Mulvey (1975). This is evident when both the characters also show narcissism that directly confronts the male gaze of heterosexuality. In *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), Lee Hwon praises himself as good-looking and teases Wol (who is Yeon-woo whom has lost her memories) not to keep looking at him. In *The Heirs* (2013), in a scene where Kim Tan returns from the United States and continues his studies in Jeguk High School, the following dialogues between him and his friend Lee Hyo-shin (played by Kang Ha-neul) in the broadcasting room present the narcissism Kim Tan have of himself;

Hyo-shin: "Would you like to take this test and be a Program Director?"

Kim Tan: "My face is too good looking for that."

Both Lee Hwon and Kim Tan are constructed as an object through cinema apparatus vis-à-vis tight camera framing and colourful costumes, and also the characterisation of the characters, which will be discussed next.

Feminised and Queered Subjectivity: Construction of a Feminised Masculinity through One's Character

Besides the use of vibrant colours for the costumes and a constant use of close-up shot in configuring the metrosexual characters in the two dramas, the characterisation of Lee Hwon and Kim Tan is equally feminised and queered at most time.

In *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), Lee Hwon cries intensely throughout the drama; it starts with the death of Yeon-woo, then during his forced marriage with Yoon Bo-kyung (played by Kim So-hyun as the young Bo-kyung and by Kim Min-seo as the adult Bo-kyung), to even when he has crowned as a king, he sheds tears whenever he thinks of the dead Yeon-woo. When he discovers his sister, Princess Min Hwa is involved in the death of Yeon-woo, he loses control and cries hysterically and orders his sister to be taken away of her status as a princess. In addition, he often acts based on his own temperament which then causes a political uprising against him at the end of the drama, though to no avails. He is emasculated as he is emotionally driven, often scolded by his father, King Sungjo (played by Ahn Nae-sang) for his reckless behaviours that might put him into an unfavourable political situation.

In addition, Lee Hwon blurs his subjectivity by proposing homosexuality at times. For example, he requests his personal body guard, Kim Jae-woon (played by Song Jae-rim) to share a bath tub with him, right in front of other female servants that are shocked to listen to the king's request. In fact, Lee Hwon provides a ground for the others to question his sexual orientation because he is known by everyone to be having a non-friendly relationship with the queen, and only orders Jae-woon to be with him most of the time. Lee Hwon also teases his assistant, Hyung-sun (played by Jung Eun-pyo), by holding his hands and put it against the king's chest for warmth when Hyung-sun blames the king for wanting him to build a snowman in the winter.

In *The Heirs* (2013), Kim Tan shows a similar character as Lee Hwon in *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) – both are not afraid to express their pain through crying and both queer their subjectivity at times. At the beginning of *The Heirs* (2013), Kim Tan's brother, Kim Won (played by Choi Jin-hyuk) confronts Kim Tan for showing up in a business party. Kim Won is not pleased with his presence at the party because Kim Won does not want Kim Tan to have a single chance to involve in the family's business as he may threaten Kim

Won's status as the heir. Feeling heartbroken (because two of them have not met up each other for three years), Kim Tan is in tears and is then approached by Eun-sang that offers her concern of Kim Tan's feeling. Besides that, Kim Tan cries when he reveals to Eun-sang that he is the second son of Jeguk Group and in scene where he confesses to Eun-sang that he likes her. The femininity of Kim Tan's character is made even apparent when he cries in front of his father for creating all the unfortunate events in his life—that his efforts in bridging the gap between him and his brother can never be realised due to his status as one of the potential heirs of Jeguk Group.

Kim Tan's femininity turns queer when he proposes homosexual vibe at times throughout *The Heirs* (2013). Kim Tan's homosexual gaze is prominent whenever he meets his brother, Kim Won. In a scene where Kim Won decides to stay out from the house to avoid seeing Kim Tan, Kim Won goes to the cellar to pack some wines and it is at this moment that Kim Tan appears and apologises to his brother and hugs him out of a sudden, saying;

"I am not going to fight you. Because I will lose. How could I win when I don't mean it?"

During a confrontation between Kim Tan and Kim Won over the incident of Kim Tan becoming the major shareholder of Jeguk Group (which is manipulated by their father), Kim Tan tells off Kim Won for his long-assumption that Kim Tan wants to take over Kim Won's place;

"I can deal with you hating me, being mean to me, and looking down on me. But how could you abandon me again? How could you tell me to never come back?"

In addition, Kim Tan likes to queer himself to blackmail Eun-sang. For example, in a scene where Kim Tan wants to get Yoon Chan-young (played by Kang Min-hyuk)'s number whom is the best friend of Eun-sang, Kim Tan uses the tactic of queering himself to achieve his motive;

Kim Tan: "Give me Yoon Chan-young's number in Korea."

Eun-sang: "Why?"

Kim Tan: "I am interested."

Eun-sang: "So why?"

Kim Tan: "Why wouldn't I be interested? Because he's pretty. I just can't keep him out of head.

It's killing me."

However, in both *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) and *The Heirs* (2013), the element of homosexuality that is proposed by Lee Hwon and Kim Tan respectively, is taken for granted for the sake of humour as both the dramas follow the narrative of a heterosexual loving couple, Lee Hwon and Yeon-woo/ Wol in *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), and Kim Tan and Eun-sang in *The Heirs* (2013). Therefore, whenever Lee Hwon propose homosexual vibe in their dialogues, Lee Hwon will do it in a cheeky way, or along with some cheerful background music to notify the audiences that the scene should not to be treated seriously. For Kim Tan, it is understood that his "homosexual vibe" is built out of his longing for his brother's love.

Feminine in the Private Sphere; Masculine in the Public Sphere

The 'feminised masculinity' as embraced by Lee Hwon and Kim Tan is acceptable not because the queered subjectivity does not form a significant aspect to be examined since it is employed as a form of humour (the issue of sexuality is not treated in this article, but it does not contend that the potential of homosexual gaze is absent in these dramas), but such feminised masculinity is sympathised by most if not all, the female protagonist in the drama, and most importantly, such feminised masculinity is intended to only manifest itself in the private sphere of both Lee Hwon and Kim Tan's life.

In *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), Lee Hwon is sympathised because he is made victimised under the corrupted political institution that results in him losing Yeon-woo. When Wol regains her memories of who she is – the supposed dead Yeon-woo – she tells Shaman Jang to not tell the truth to Lee Hwon so as the king will not go through the pain once again. When Lee Hwon finally unearths and gets to know that his sister, Princess Min-hwa is involved in the death of Yeon-woo but nothing can be done in the name of family, Lee Hwon feels guilty towards the destiny of Yeon-woo – though Yeon-woo has regained her memories – and cries in his chamber with Yeon-woo. Lee Hwon often expresses his intimate feelings such as crying (when he receives the letter that Yeon-woo wrote for him from Yeon-woo's brother) and confessing his love in his chamber, or if he ever cries in the public sphere of the palace, he will be seen crying only in the presence of people that he is close to, such as Yeon-woo, Prince Yang-myung (his elder half-brother) or his trusted personal body guard, Jae-woon – those that are usually seen with him in his chamber as well. Lee Hwon does cry in the public (with many people around), but that takes place during incidents such as when Yeon-woo passes away (though he cries during the marriage ceremony between him and Bo-kyung) or when Prince Yang-myung, is killed during the uprising – again, these are the people that Lee Hwon treasures.

Except the use of colourful costumes and fragmented and close-up shot that openly feminise the character of Lee Hwon, Lee Hwon is personalised and feminised behind his room. In the public, as a king, Lee Hwon must live up the expectation of being a king – one that acts with rationale and not based on emotions. At the end of *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), Lee Hwon orders his grandmother, Queen Dowager Jung-hui, the mastermind of the planned murder of Yeon-woo, to live away from the palace and he punishes his sister, Princess Min-hwa by taking away her status as a princess and to serve as a servant away from the palace so as to compensate for what had happened to Yeon-woo.

The character of Kim Tan in *The Heirs* (2013) shows a similar attitude as Lee Hwon in *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) where expressing one's intimate feelings only takes place in the private sphere. Born as a rich kid and the potential heir of Jeguk Group, Kim Tan is expected to behave like one under the public gaze. This is prominent whenever Kim Tan wants to pick a fight with Choi Young-do (played by Kim Woo-bin), who falls in love with Eun-sang as well. Young-do would blackmail Kim Tan not to behave in an unpleasant manner – whether it is in a form of verbal and physical – by reminding him about his family secret i.e. Kim Tan is the son of his father's mistress and no one in the school knows about it except Young-do. Kim Tan has to acknowledge Madam Jeong (played by Park Joon-geum) – his father's second and registered wife – as his mother for legitimate purpose and he blames his father for such inhumane experience for Kim Tan's biological mother who has to live her life within the household while Kim Tan is not allowed to register any feelings about this in the public. In a scene where Kim Tan is unexpectedly the major shareholder of Jeguk Group, Kim Tan confronts his father after Kim Won and Kim Tan's fragile brotherhood becomes even worst;

Kim Tan: "Thanks to you, I lost my family today. I am no longer my brother's family. I am his enemy. Now he will never become my mum's family. And mum was never your family. And now... You are no longer my family."

Kim Tan's father: "That's the weight of the crown you wear. Bear it."

Due to his status as an illegitimate son, Kim Tan is sympathised by Eun-sang and therefore, this provides a sensible ground for Kim Tan to express his intimate feelings. Similar to Lee Hwon in *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), Kim Tan only cries in front of the female protagonist or in the presence of his family. Throughout the *The Heirs* (2013), whenever Kim Tan cries, he either cries in the house (during the confrontation with his father or when he finds out that Eun-sang has left Korea upon Kim Tan's father's order), or if he cries in the public, he will only cry in the presence of Eun-sang such as in the scene where after Kim Tan breaks the engagement with his fiancée, Rachel and he cries in front of Eun-sang on the street.

In *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012), while Lee Hwon can't be blamed for being hard-hearted towards the pathetic ending of Queen Dowager and Princess Min-hwa for Lee Hwon is victimised under the plan, however, at the end of the day, the fact that he is a king will still grant him the absolute power of doing so; whether Lee Hwon is victimised or not, Lee Hwon still holds the highest social position in the public sphere. In fact, Lee Hwon is sympathised over the lost of Yeon-woo and such victimisation naturalises his masculine position i.e. the king to rectify and to restore all the conflicts that had taken place in the drama. In *The Heirs* (2013), the emasculation of Kim Tan due to his status as an illegitimate son provides the others a sensible reason to sympathise over his destiny, and this in turn, normalises his position as the heir – that he deserves and is entitled to such position to compensate for his previous frugal lifestyle as an illegitimate kid. Moreover, it is Kim Tan who brings a better life to Eun-sang (who comes from a poor family) and his biological mother at the end of the day – Eun-sang gets to date with Kim Tan officially due to Kim Tan's bravery to oppose his father and Kim Tan's mother, Madam Han (played by Kim Sung-ryung) gets to live a life with her own freedom. Kim Tan is seen photographed by his friend at the new semester of the school for the reason that "You have the face of a man who had just overcome an obstacle in life."

Both *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) and *The Heirs* (2013) demonstrate that the subjectivity of the dramas is reserved for men; men are needed to resolve the conflicts developed throughout the narrative and who takes control of a situation. Both the dramas legitimise Lee Hwon's and Kim Tan's social position by rendering the female protagonists the sympathiser, allowing Lee Hwon and Kim Tan to regain their masculinity and hence, naturalise their masculine position as a king and an heir respectively. In other words, the feminised masculinity that is possessed by Lee Hwon and Kim Tan is manifested in two forms; their appearance and their emotion. However, their emotion will only take place in the private sphere as compared to their brightly coloured costumes and their delicate facial features. Such paradigm allows Lee Hwon and Kim Tan to negate their femininity (not all feminine elements are displayed in the public) and thus successfully maintain and regain their masculinity in the public sphere.

Pretty Boy: Masculine Identity at its Core

Although the term 'metrosexual masculinity' is a politically correct term in describing the Korean male stars as compared to Jung (2011)'s concept of 'soft masculinity' as the fluidity of metrosexual masculinity occupies a wider discourse of non-conventional masculinities, 306

however, a critical qualitative content analysis of the dramas *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) and *The Heirs* (2013) shows that the concept of metrosexual masculinity is contested in Korean dramas and it is more readily and visibly identified as the pretty boy.

While the concept of metrosexuality is perceived by Pompper (2010, p. 690)'s man participants as the "pretty boy" and by Louie (2012, p. 932) and Yang (2014, p. 396) as the "beautiful man" and "flower boy" respectively, but the data in this study reveals that there are differences between metrosexuality and pretty/beautiful/flower boy. The concept of metrosexuality connotes homosexuality which needs to be disavowed or ignored (Clarkson, 2005, p. 241) by one constantly to reaffirm one's masculinity. In Buerkle (2009)'s studies, metrosexuality is not perceived as hetero-masculinity as "true" man doesn't watch over their food choice. Shugart (2008, p. 294) scrutinises that gay men are essential in the concept of metrosexuality as they "acknowledge, rhetorically organise, and manage homosociality as the foundation of commercial masculinity" and such stereotypical image of gay men as the essential feminine one functions to mark a clear distinction between metrosexuality (effeminate) and homosexuality (feminine).

However, in Korean dramas, homosexual elements are either employed to poke fun of or are used to express an intimate relationship i.e. between siblings or friends, and is often understood as a form of brotherly love. Declining discussing homosexual-themed dramas, homosexuality is not a concern in Korean dramas as the dramas follow the narrative of solving the conflicts between the couples as seen in *Moon Embracing the Sun* (2012) and *The Heirs* (2013). In fact, there is no need for Lee Hwon and Kim Tan to buttress their heterosexuality. They are only feminised via first, the often fragmented and close-up shots that highlight their smooth skin, silky hair and curly eyelashes (Shuri, 2015, p. 87; Jung, 2011, p. 58) and second, as this study finds out, they are feminised through their frequent use of vivid and brightly-coloured costumes. In addition, the 'metrosexual' characters are also feminised through their characterisation which is rich in expressing their emotions such as intense crying. But such performance takes place in the private sphere of their life; one that is seen only by their closely related persons such as their beloved girl or their family members. Such personalisation then leads to especially the female protagonist (usually a poor or unfortunate girl) to sympathise over the male characters and it is in this way that the men's social position – often high positions e.g. a king or an heir – goes unquestioned.

Ngo (2015, p. 151) discovers that the reason why Korean dramas can satisfy the audiences' contradictory expectations of men, women and romance lies in the hybrid representations of both man and woman character who contain both traditional qualities and new qualities of gender roles. Ngo (ibid.) explains that such ideal representations manifest particularly in the context of a romantic relationship because there is a deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity at the same time. But Ngo (ibid.) points out that man is expected to retain their supportive and protective position in a relationship. This article expands Ngo (2015)'s findings by unearthing that whether the male character(s) is in a relationship or not, the male character in Korean dramas maintain their traditional gender role by possessing and dominating the high social position (which is always reserved for them). In other words, Lee Hwon and Kim Tan are high achiever in the patriarchal framework.

Therefore, in the context of Korean dramas, the 'metrosexual' characters are not only visibly contested into the image of the pretty boy (with flawless skin and pointed nose), but they are also technically being defined by it: pretty + boy – both feminine (costumes and emotions) and masculine (social status) at the same time. According to Elfving-Hwang (2011, p. 17), the *kkonminam* (the flower boy) in Korean dramas has "very little deviation

from existing patriarchal gender norms...no matter how fictional and illusionary that itself may be". In other words, the feminised masculinity that is embedded in the pretty boy can't be equated with queerness, but in Miller (2005, p. 112)'s words;

"an indication of the degree to which queer difference is a new commodity of pleasure that is safely distant from, but compatible with, heteronormativity."

And this is in a stark different from the Western metrosexual concept which is heavily associated and defined in a sexual framework.

Conclusion

While metrosexual masculinity is treated as a form of 'new masculinity' that is needed to refresh the "old-fashioned (re)productive, repressed, unmoisturized heterosexuality" (Simpson, 2002), this study reveals that the concept of metrosexuality is contested and redefined in the context of Korean dramas as the "pretty boy"—both visually and technically. For the former, the visual appearance of a pretty boy is noted by scholars such as Jung (2011) and Shuri (2015) as possessing a slim and feminine face, a fair skin, a silky hair and is fashionable. This study contributes to the former aspect by noting that it is through the use of fragmented and close-up shots that reiterate and highlight such features.

For the latter, this study demonstrates that the male characters in Korean drama exhibit both feminine and masculine traits as in the term 'pretty boy'. The femininity traits manifest itself through the male character's brightly-coloured costumes and their behaviour of intense crying. However, the expression and the desire for intimacy is a threat to their masculinity (Fiske, 2011, p. 206) and this study validates the statement by showing that the performance of such takes place behind the doors and with their beloved. In the public sphere, the man holds high social positions and this is romanticised and naturalised through the female protagonist – the sympathiser – over the man's hurdles in life.

As compared to the Western understanding of metrosexuality, the concept of metrosexuality in South Korea is debunk and is more readily to be understood in the form of "pretty boy" which significantly negates the sexual notion that is embedded in metrosexuality. Through analysis of the portrayal of Lee Hwon and Kim Tan, the concept of "pretty boy"—in two levels as explained above—demonstrates so. More importantly, it points to the patriarchal framework that is still deeply rooted in governing gender differences, which in this study reveals, the social position of a man is always higher than a woman. The feminisation of the pretty boy is limited to his appearance and his emotions, and even so, the expression will only take place in the private sphere. Thus, the pretty boy is feminised, and is not feminine as compared to metrosexuality that is made believed as no difference from femininity.

Note

¹In 2014, Simpson coined the term 'spornosexual' in describing a second-generation metrosexuality that is less defined by clothes but their bodies that form a new commodity.

References

- Ainslie, M. J., & Lim, J. B. Y. (Eds.). (2015). *The Korean Wave in Southeast Asia: Consumption and Cultural Production*. Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- Brennen, B. S. (2013). *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Buerkle, C. W. (2009). Metrosexuality can stuff it: Beef consumption as (heteromale) fortification. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 29(1), 77-93.
- Chen, S. (2013). *Consumerist masculinity with cultural codes-representation of male literati in Chinese men's lifestyle magazines*. Paper presented at the Femininities and Masculinities: A Gender and Sexuality Project, 21-24 May 2013, Prague, Czech Republic. pp. 1-9.
- Cho, C. H. (2010). Korean Wave in Malaysia and changes of the Korea-Malaysia relations. *Malaysian Journal of Media Studies*, 12(1), 1-14.
- Clarkson, J. (2005). Contesting masculinity's makeover: Queer eye, consumer masculinity, and "straight-acting" gays. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 29(3), 235-255.
- Daily Express. (2015). M'sians capitalise on the K-drama craze. Retrieved March 17, 2016, from <http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news.cfm?NewsID=102485>
- Deepmala Baghel, & Parthasarathy. (n.d.). Pursuing body beautiful: Men's beauty aesthetics within the space of the beauty parlor. Retrieved May 10, 2015, from <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issues/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/baghelbeapaper.pdf>
- Elfving-Hwang, J. (2011). *Not so soft after all: Kkonminam masculinities in contemporary South Korean popular culture*. Paper presented at the 7th KSA Biennial Conference, 16-18 November 2011, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. pp. 1-21.
- Emirhan, K. (2013). *Male homoeroticism in the advertising campaigns of Dolce & Gabbana, Calvin Klein and Abercrombie & Fitch*. Paper presented at the 3rd Global Conference, 13-15 September 2013, Harris Manchester College, Oxford, United Kingdom. pp. 1-10.
- Fiske, J. (2011). *Television Culture* (2nd ed.). Oxon: Routledge.
- Hamka, K. (2016). *Aku, Almond London dan Gay*. Bangi: DuBook.
- Juliana, A. W. (2015). Extravaganza and cosmopolitan lifestyle: Trends and approaches in Asian drama production. *Asian Journal of Journalism and Media Studies*(Transnational Media and Communication in Asia), 1-27.
- Jung, S. (2010). *Chogukjeok* pan-East Asian soft masculinity: Reading *Boys Over Flowers*, *Coffee Prince* and *Shinhwa Fan Fiction*. In D. Black, S. Epstein & A. Tokita (Eds.), *Complicated currents: Media flows, soft power and East Asia*. Australia: Monash University ePress.
- Jung, S. (2011). *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Liew, K. K. (2015). Into the heart of the Korean Wave in Banjong Pisanthanakun's *Hello Stranger* and PojArnon's *Sorry, Sarangheyo*. In M. J. Ainslie & J. B. Y. Lim (Eds.), *The Korean Wave in Southeast Asia: Consumption and cultural production* (pp. 115-132). Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- Louie, K. (2002). *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Louie, K. (2012). Popular culture and masculinity ideals in East Asia, with special reference to China. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 71(4), 929-943.

- MacDonald, J. (2013). The seven prettiest flower boy actors. *KDrama Stars*. Retrieved September 10, 2015, from www.kdramastars.com/articles/10210/20130820/seven-prettiest-flower-boy-actors.htm
- Miller, T. (2005). A metrosexual eye on queer guy. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11(1), 112-117.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18.
- Ngo, T. H. (2015). Korean masculinity in TV dramas and local fantasies: A case study of *Full House* and its Vietnamese remake *Ngôi Nhà Hạnh Phúc*. In M. J. Ainslie & J. B. Y. Lim (Eds.), *The Korean Wave in Southeast Asia: Consumption and cultural production* (pp. 133-154). Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- Pompper, D. (2010). Masculinities, the metrosexual, and media images: Across dimensions of age and ethnicity. *Sex Roles*, 63, 682-696.
- Rayner, P., Wall, P., & Kruger, S. (2004). *Media Studies: The Essential Resource*. London: Routledge.
- Sathiabalan, S. I. (2015). Two Korean-language channels launched on Astro. *The Sun Daily*. Retrieved June 2, 2015, from <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/1329508>
- Shugart, H. (2008). Managing masculinities: The metrosexual moment. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 5(3), 280-300.
- Shuri, M. G. T. (2015). Imaginary 'Asia': Indonesian audience's reflexivity on K-dramas. In M. J. Ainslie & J. B. Y. Lim (Eds.), *The Korean Wave in Southeast Asia: Consumption and cultural production* (pp. 75-94). Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- Simpson, M. (2002). Meet the metrosexual. Retrieved March 17, 2016, from <http://www.marksimpson.com/meet-the-metrosexual/>
- Soh, W.-K., & Ngo, S.-S. (2014). I am pretty and I know it: Redefining masculinities in *The King and the Clown*. *Journal of Media Watch*, 5(3), 333-344.
- Yang, H.-C. (2014). Flower boys on campus: Performing and practicing masculinity. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(4), 391-408.
- Zuhaili, A. I. (2010). *Malaysian masculinity identity representation through men's editorial*. Paper presented at the 2010 IEEE International Conference on Education and Management Technology, 2-4 November 2010, Cairo, Egypt. pp. 496-499.

Soh Weng Khai is a PhD candidate at the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. His research interests are gender and media studies, specifically in the context of Korean films and dramas. He is the Champion of Malaysia 3 Minute Thesis Competition 2017 for social science category.

Juliana Abdul Wahab is a senior lecturer at the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her research interests cover media studies and popular culture, television studies, audience studies, gender and ethnicity and qualitative research method.