My K-pop (Korean Pop) “bias” Rain, the South Korean singer, dancer, and actor whose real name is Jung Ji-Hoon, recently released a new album called Rain Effect, which has rekindled my, uh-hum, “academic” interest in K-pop. In particular, I am fascinated with how K-pop is re-designing masculinity through the popularisation of what scholar, and former PhD graduate from Melbourne University, Sun Jung calls “Pan East-Asian soft masculinity”.

In 2011, National Geographic defined the most typical person in the world as a 28-year-old Han Chinese male, the target demographic within Pan East Asian soft masculinity. Given its global popularity, does K-pop offer alternative values, design, and experiences of masculinity? Or does it just remix old stereotypes about black and Asian masculinities?

**Hard masculinities: traditional Australian archetypes**

Before addressing the values of “soft masculinity,” I first want to describe the hard masculinity that K-pop male imagery complicates. Australia is a place where traditional images of hard masculinity dominate. Specifically, these images are coded white, rural, and non-intellectual. A quick Google images search of “Australian man” produces a range of physical types that fit this description.

Australian scholar, Dr. Robyn Morris describes the national image of the Australian masculinity as “archetypal and heroic, hyper-masculinised, white and heterosexual figures such as the stoic bushman, brash bushranger, or the fearless ANZAC soldier.” Dr. Linzi Murrie, an Australian expert of Australian men studies, provides details on the values of the iconic Australian male:

> Our man is practical rather than theoretical, he values physical prowess rather than intellectual capabilities, and he is good in a crisis but otherwise laid-back. He is common and earthy, so he is intolerant of affectation and cultural pretensions; he is no wowser, uninhibited in the pleasures of drinking, swearing and gambling; he is independent and egalitarian, and is a hater of authority and a ‘knocker’ of eminent people.

Hugh Jackman’s portrayal of Drover in Baz Luhrmann’s movie Australia is the embodiment of this ideal both physically and from the perspective of personality:

   Trailer from Australia Movie.

Today, images of Australian masculinity have been modified from that of the bushranger to that of the footy player. This includes black footy players although there is often a pathologising of their “bush” images and their questioning of authority is seen as a threat. There have also been some shifts in the values of Australian masculinity. Dr. Karina Butera argues that among 21st-Century Australian men, there is greater ambivalence towards the “tough, emotionally repressed, and stoic independence” of the traditional ideal man. Yet, Asian Australian men are still excluded from images of Australian masculinity. Perhaps, K-pop can change that.

**Soft masculinities: K-pop, Confucius, R&B, and guy-liner**

In her book Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption, Dr. Sun Jung defines the key aspects of what she calls East Asian soft masculinity:
In traditional South Korean seonbi and Chinese Confucius wen masculinity, the exemplary man is one of the culturally refined gentleman/scholar. His values could be described as the exact opposite of the traditional Australian male. He is theoretical, intellectual, culturally nuanced, self-restraining, and obedient to authority, especially that of the father and other elder men.

Rain personifies those seonbi/wen values first in terms of his personal motto – "Endless effort, endless humility, endless modesty" – and second by the completion of his music degree from Kyunghee University. Education is so important even in the K-pop world that most K-pop agencies require that their idols and trainees complete undergraduate degrees at the minimum and preferably complete a Masters degree.

Physically, the Japanese "pretty boy" phenomenon, which is mostly consumed by women, enables a play of gender possibilities by erasing the lines between male and female. Metrosexual grooming frees men to care about their physical appearance through the consumption of clothes, cosmetics and accessories.

All of which is present in the male images in K-pop. All K-pop men rock serious guy-liner. On the pretty boy spectrum, G-Dragon, the lead singer of the K-Pop group Big Bang, models for the make-up line The SAEM — becoming their first male endorser of red lipstick. On the metrosexual spectrum, Rain endorses the Metholatum grooming line.

Rain’s Most Metrosexual Video, 30 Sexy.

Not content to be just pretty faces, the men of K-pop also require what Sun Jung calls “beast-like masculinity,” which is defined by sculpted muscular bodies with rock-hard abdominals. This is literally embodied by Rain in his popular and highly parodied Love Song video.

Parodies of the “Abs Dance” from Rain’s Love Song video.

The “beast-like” masculinity represents the specifically African-American contribution to the visual image of masculinity in K-pop, which adds another layer of complication.

Sun Jung discusses in depth the strategy of Rain and Rain’s first manager and producer JYP to combine through his image and music that which is Korean with that which is globally popular, namely African-American R&B and Hip Hop music.

African-American rap and R&B figures such as Usher and 50 Cent all figure prominently as those most idolised by top K-pop artists. Sun Jung quotes Rain on his admission of being strongly influenced by Usher, who is known for going shirtless to display his sculpted abs in the majority of his videos and stage performances.

Usher Shirtless at the End of the Confessions Video.

East Asian beast-like masculinity serves as countermove against white Western feminisation of Asian men, especially as the cultural values are in opposition to hard masculinity. Yet if the East Asian beast-like masculinity is based “on the abs” of African American males, does it not continue the over-sexualisation and implied animalism of black bodies that is at the heart of the conflict between Black people and White structures of oppression?

Scholar Ben Carrington argues “the black male torso as object of visual desire is everywhere”. Does connecting the sculpted torso on an Asian face change the views of both Asians and Black men in regards to masculinity? Can it offer new possibilities of masculinity for all Australian men?

K-pop and Re-Designing 21st Century Masculinities
Karina Butera quotes from Terry Collins’s book, *Beyond Mateship*, which offers a challenge for men to be:

- Strong without hardness;
- Soft without fear;
- Powerful without oppression;
- Gentle without shame;
- Knowledgeable without arrogance;
- Nurturing;
- Led with humility and themselves with joy.

The soft masculinity, embodied by K-pop figures such as Rain, represents the dynamic play of masculine and feminine characteristics articulated in the challenge. At least among the K-pop netizens in the US and Australia whom I follow, it has changed the perception of Asian men as men potentially desirable in terms of the ideal of a gentle personality with a handsome face and a hot body.

As an African American, I remain conflicted by K-pop men’s relationship to Black male bodies. But, it is undeniable that K-pop offers alternative models of masculinity which are neither too hard or too soft.