

Multiple Exposures: Korean Bodies and the Transnational Imagination さまざまなさらし方——韓国の体型美志向と国境をこえる想像力

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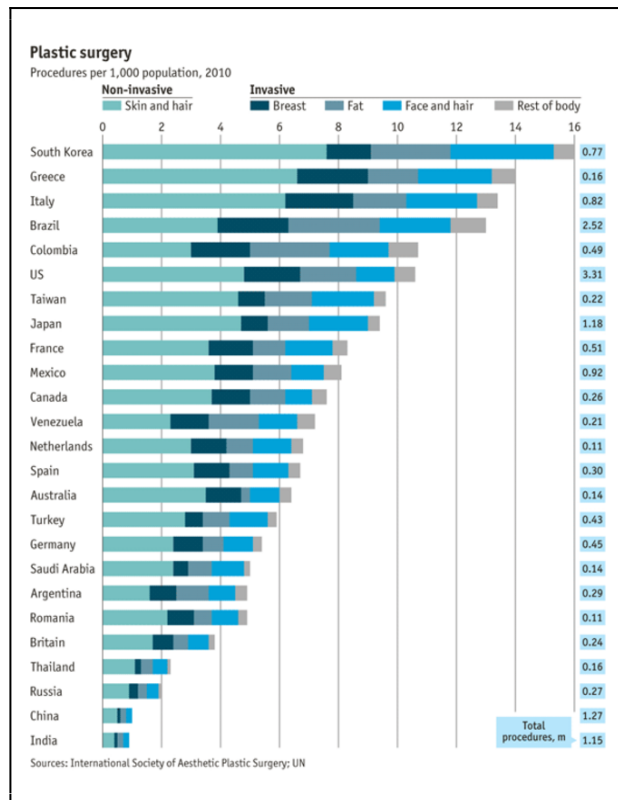
Since the turn of the millennium, emphasis on bodily perfection has become increasingly central to the media industries of South Korea (henceforth Korea), and a focus on ideal bodies has permeated popular discourse more generally.¹ Although views on physical appearance built on longstanding notions of its importance in announcing status continue to be informed by a patriarchal order, a palpably intensifying commodification of the body in Korea's media-saturated, consumer capitalist culture is giving rise to newer concepts of corporeal self-discipline and reconfiguring not only of how 'beauty', 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are represented, but how the modern national self is understood.

While Connell (2005) has argued that multiple "masculinities" are produced in relation to "femininities," she also asserts that mechanics of power create hegemonic versions of masculinity and femininity. Such paradigms of gender performance are disseminated in manifold modes from everyday discourse to literary and screen narrative, but in this article we focus on the "scopic regime" (Metz 1982) that creates ideal masculine and feminine body types through the reproduction of images in a variety of visual genres and texts. Further, following Debord (1995: 7) we examine social relations as mediated by images: in Korea transcultural, gendered practices of the body have intersected with the imperatives of a globally oriented nationalism, neoliberal policies emphasizing self-care (Rose 2001), and

widely acknowledged levels of social competitiveness to produce growing demands for physical perfection.² As the omnipresent circulation of images subjects individuals to scrutiny in comparison to media representations of ideal bodies, the notion that self-discipline and technological enhancement are increasingly expected has become a source of anxiety in Korea, and statistics suggest a significant recent acceleration in body dysphoria in the numbers of women who are underweight (Khang and Yun 2010) and men who seek plastic surgery to gain advantage in a competitive job market (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012).

In this paper we concentrate on two complementary phenomena that have surfaced in the last decade, a focus in popular media on both muscled male torsos and long, slender female legs in order to interrogate how changing social and institutional contexts are shaping new physical ideals in Korea, transforming meanings and practices of the body and inculcating technologies of the self that have come to function as a panoptic discipline. While other media-driven trends related to the body have also appeared, such as a growing interest in "average"-looking people who rise to fame through previously undiscovered talents in reality-show competitions, these alternative exemplars are inevitably measured against ideals shaped by celebrities. To what extent does the increasingly ubiquitous representation of these body ideals pressure individuals toward ever more normative yet rarefied standards of

beauty?



These changes in the cultural landscape have been impelled by Korea’s expanding transnational connections and in turn drive ongoing transformations in Korea’s understanding of itself within a globalized domain. The *hallyu* (Korean Wave) phenomenon has branded the nation’s celebrities around the region and beyond as models of physical attractiveness.³ Furthermore, Korea’s well-known and growing cosmetic surgery industry has highlighted the attention its citizens put on achieving collectively defined standards of “beauty” (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012).

The graph at the right, which recently appeared in [The Economist](#), details estimates on rates of cosmetic surgery in numerous countries, and reveals South Korea as having the highest national per capita involvement, if one takes into account both non-invasive (mole removal, Botox skin injections) and invasive procedures (blepharoplasty, breast augmentation, liposuction), as defined by the

International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Moreover, not only has Korea become an important destination for cosmetic surgery tourism, but clinics throughout the world, especially in Asia, now offer Korean-style procedures, frequently in imitation of popular celebrity looks.⁴ In light of this determination to enhance one’s appearance through strict regimes of diet and exercise as well as technological interventions, we ask what the increased emphasis on the nude male torso and exposed female legs reveals about ideologies of nation, gender, and sexuality in, and regarding, contemporary Korea.

“Legs, Legs and More Legs”

In January 2011, Razor TV, a video outlet operated by Singapore’s Straits Times and self-described as stressing “hyper-local content,” uploaded a clip titled “Cleavage Out, Legs In?” Using a *mélange* of markedly Singaporean English and Mandarin, the clip focuses on the current attention to exposed female legs in Korean popular culture, opening with the following words:

Legs, legs and more legs. From Girls’ Generation to After School, 4Minute and Miss-A, it seems that no shorts or skirt is too tiny for these Korean girl groups. You can see them flaunting their long, flawless legs in music videos, concerts and TV performances, and even the cold winter didn’t deter them from doing so at these award ceremonies. These trend [sic] can also be seen in your favorite Korean dramas like ‘Swallow the Sun’ and ‘Personal Taste’, prompting a blogger to comment ‘Is anybody else concerned that this woman isn’t wearing pants?’ So what is this K-pop obsession with long legs all about? Find out on today’s Razor

Pop.⁵

With the term “trend,” the video references changing sensibilities in the intersection of appropriate bodily display and fashion, as well as the controversies that such transformations can invite. It is worth recalling, for example, that when singer Yoon Bok-hee popularized mini-skirts in the socially conservative atmosphere of 1960s Korea, governmental concerns with a potentially corrosive effect on public morals led to an ordinance banning skirts that rose more than ten centimeters above the knee (Chung 2012). Moreover, attention to a Korean trend from a Singaporean source that titles it an “obsession” reminds us that what constitutes noteworthy exposure of skin can vary significantly even in societies with relatively lax attitudes in this area, as highlighted by the humorous cartoon in the figure below showing differences in Korean and Western notions of transgressive dress. (The term *yahada* in the Korean woman’s thought balloon might idiomatically be translated as “How over the top” or “How trashy”).⁶ Indeed, the video clip’s title itself also betrays an underlying but misleading assumption on the part of its producers about Korean standards of bodily display: the revelation of cleavage has never (until, arguably, very recently) been “in”:



The RazorTV clip, of course, draws its key inspiration from the remarkable rise of K-pop idol bands internationally in the last few years. In particular, we should note the successes of the genre in East and Southeast Asia, and especially Japan, with the noteworthy debuts of KARA and Girls’ Generation (*Sonyō Shidae*) there in 2010, which have precipitated striking instances of Korean media triumphalism.⁷ As Razor TV remarks, the association of K-pop girl groups specifically with long legs and bare thighs derived an especial boost from the choreography and costuming of Girls’ Generation in their 2009 music video “Tell Me Your Wish” (*Sowōnŭl mal hae bwa*), a.k.a “Genie.” Their military-styled outfits with hot pants, led to the ensemble earning in Japan the sobriquet “The Beautiful Legs Group.” The clip goes on to argue that from this point on the display of slender legs has become obligatory for K-pop girl groups, and while this assertion deserves qualification, there is little doubt that Korea’s entertainment conglomerates are managing the transnational image of their products and catering to an increasingly global scope of consumption, as a feedback loop has been created: Korean exporters of cultural productions such as music videos, television

serials, live performances, and advertisements, aware of a feature that has helped achieve brand differentiation, specifically play to it. One of our primary arguments, then, is that as a phenomenon, the Korean Wave is becoming progressively more invested with not only the emotional resonance often cited to account for the international success of its dramas, but corporeal qualities, through spectacular images of exposed flesh.

“Chocolate Abs”

This circulation of imagery via the *hallyu* culture industries is concurrently fostering new ideals for Korean physiques. In the case of males, this paragon is best symbolized by a muscular nude torso, featuring well-oiled skin that is smooth and firm, bulging pectorals, highly defined abdominal muscles, and chiseled arms; Korea’s growing sporting success on the international stage has also played a role in encouraging this look as an aspirational model for men. Actors, singers, and athletes who boast these torsos appear in such varied media as undressing scenes in films and dramatic serials, musical performances, promotional pin-ups, and advertisements. While images of highly eroticized and built male bodies have been popular in the West since the late 1970s with the mainstreaming of pornography (Williams 1989), and we can readily discern global progenitors in Korea’s appropriation of this toned physique (e.g. the R&B masculinity of Usher, the athletic superstardom of David Beckham, iconic film stars like Brad Pitt), only recently has such a body type become a dominant statement of male desirability in Korea.



In the last decade, the exposed nude torso has become a near requisite for male “talents”—not only relative unknowns attempting to promote themselves in commercial media through their looks, but also well-known male stars hoping to maintain their *momgap* (literally, “body price”). The rapid emergence of this physique derives in large measure from new strategies among Korea’s media industries in shaping consumer desires by foregrounding male sexuality. In a manner akin to pornographic imagery, the haptic visuality of the torso and other exposed body parts elicits a desire to touch.

A 2009 television commercial for Market O’s *riōl pūrauni* (“real brownie”) well exemplifies the visceral effect of such images. Two young women carrying a box of brownies encounter a life-size billboard in a subway arcade featuring shirtless members of the K-pop band 2PM. The women have a debate about whether their

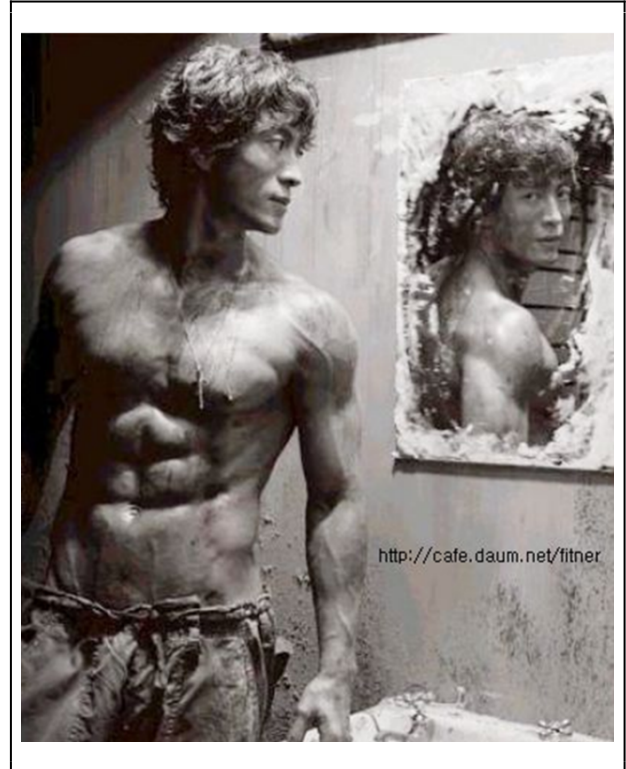
impressively contoured abdominal muscles are real, and the skeptical one reaches to touch the pictured flesh of band member Nichkhun.⁸ As her finger presses into the abs that she so admires, Nichkhun comes alive and states, *chintcha majayo* (“They are real”), and all five band members leap out of the billboard and onto the sidewalk next to the girls.

The advertisement thus promotes the popularization of the term “chocolate abs” by equating the authenticity of the band’s muscles with that of the chocolate in its product.⁹ But the role of touch in the ad and YouTube user fan reaction also demonstrate the haptic eroticism of torsos and their powerful ability to evoke fantasies to caress and consume:

Epiikhiigh: “Oh my goodness, the abs, oh the abs!~;_ ♥ Haha, I wish I poked a picture of 2PM and they came alive, LMFAO._ Oh man, that would be pretty sweet :D,”

vanderwoodsen 90: “I want to eat those abs..Um I mean brownies,”

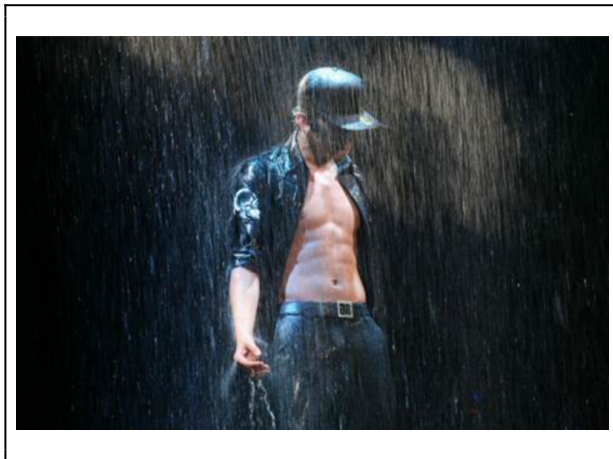
phydessa: “see, i wouldn't touch Nickhun's abs, i'll perfer [sic] to lick them....”



We may observe the incipient growth in influence of this physique in the disjuncture between the representation of former *hallyu* poster boy Bae Yong Joon’s “soft body” in *Winter Sonata* in 2002 with the shirtless Bae staring in the mirror two years later in the 2004 photo book *Ti imiji pollyum wŏn* (*The Image: Volume 1*) (see Jung, 2011: 70).

Bae’s transformation responds to the burst in popularity of images of the male torso during the World Cup year of 2002 and a contemporaneous rise in the discourse of *momtchang* (“a top-notch body”), which we discuss below. His metamorphosis further reflects shifting trends that underscore the commercial significance of explicitly erotic physicality for male celebrities in an era of transnational media. Richard Dyer (1982: 71) has argued that the male pin-up relies on the “natural seeming” aspects of the human body for its power. Bae’s surprisingly developed physique, however, highlights its own artificiality in suggesting the effort required to attain it through hours in the gym, professional trainers, and the use of supplements, including

perhaps steroids. In order to disguise the process of transformation, many stars go away to “boot camp” for several months and return to unveil their new brawn through pin-ups circulated in digital media or photo spreads for magazines such as the local editions of *Men’s Fitness* or *Muscle and Fitness*. The revelation of the now perfected body offers proof of virility, but the body makeovers of older stars like Bae and Lee Byung-hun characterized by steroidal, venous, and sinewy muscles expose their struggles to compete with the smooth, lean, and athletic proportions of younger celebrities such as Won Bin or the members of K-pop boy bands (2PM, 2AM, MBLAQ).



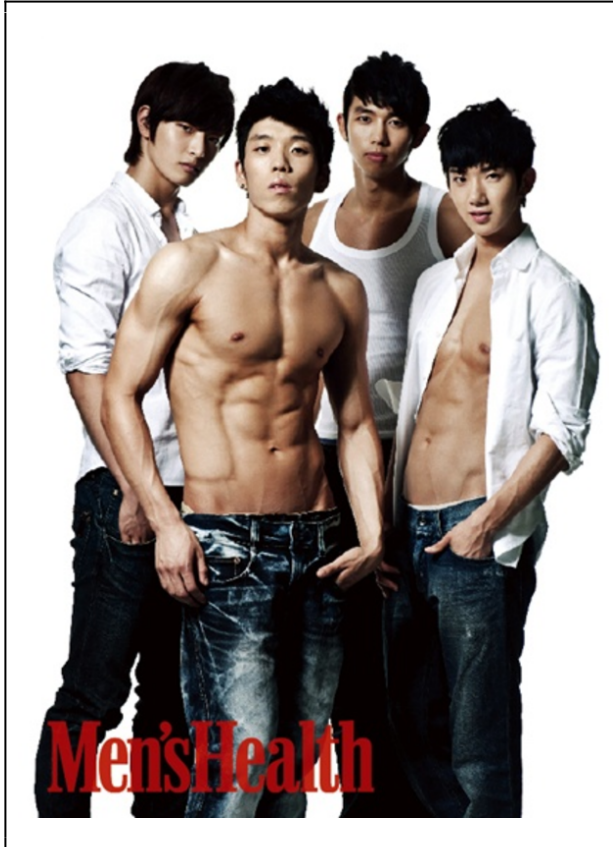
The trend for exposed torsos can also be linked with the rise to superstardom of K-pop performer Rain (*Bi*),¹⁰ whose image is intimately associated with the display of his naked abdomen, and whose physique played a role in propelling him to crossover success in dramas and film. At the climax of Rain’s concerts, the heavens appear to burst forth from above the stage, showers careening over him as he assumes an intense, broodingly heroic, and, to be sure, semi-nude posture.



The global popularity of Rain and his shirtless torso contributed to generating a new standard for K-pop’s male performers, transforming the body itself into the primary stage prop. Likewise, the performances of boy bands in music videos, as they expose their “chocolate abs,” often include choreographed stripping and abdominal waves or “popping” moves that direct the gaze to the torso in order to maximize and extend viewer excitement.¹¹ One may readily chart this change in K-pop by comparing the appearance of boy band H.O.T., reigning princes of the genre from the latter half of the 1990s until they broke up in 2001, with that of current favorites 2AM.

Whereas H.O.T.’s oversized shirts cover lithe torsos from which skinny arms protrude, 2AM releases pop confections that seem designed above all to showcase strutting shirtless bodies. A feature on the band in the October 2009 issue of *Men’s Health* details their workout regimen, which comes to be seen as a central aspect of their celebrity value.

In addition to Changmin, depicted to the right below, each of the group’s other members has had his torso featured on the cover of *Men’s Health* in the last few years, which indicates how the commercialized culture of stardom itself is becoming critical to defining the ideal male physical form.



These changing body ideals index changing socio-economic contexts in South Korea. Dyer (1982) has argued that the power of the body in the sporting realm represents economic might in demonstrating that people have more leisure and financial resources to care for the self.¹² Jesook Song (2009) connects a rising industry of concern for health (*welbing*, from the English “well-being”) in Korea to neoliberal transformations that encourage people to care for themselves rather than depend on the state or other institutions for protection. In film, the shift from the relatively hidden frame of Han Suk-kyu as security agent in *Shiri* (1999) to the gym-sculpted physique of the financial executive played by Lee Sung-jae in *Public Enemy* (2002) and Lee Jung-jae in the remake of *The Housemaid* (2010) underscores how economic changes are inscribed on the body. The narcissism of these film characters is based in an individualist ethos underscored by their careers as investment bankers and expressed visually through their chiseled physiques. This

emphasis on the molded torso represents a move from status conferred by rank to the possibility of status conferred by the hardness of the body.



National Erotics

The naked torso and exposed legs thus operate as consumer fetish, encouraging desires to both gaze at and possess the “perfect” body. These evolving notions of appropriate yet arresting bodily display are no longer confined to a domestic market, however, as we have seen, but are based in a transnational economy of erotic desire. They thus intertwine with the marketing of Korean celebrities for domestic and global consumption and raise questions about the process by which physical attributes come to symbolize a given genre and/or nation. In other words, how, and to what extent, have imaginaries of the body affected the transnational diffusion and reception of “Korea” in both the pop cultural and sporting

realm?

Global sport offers an important example of the connection between the sculpted torso and the nation, as the physique of the Korean athlete comes to serve as a metonym for the collective “body public.” The well-developed frames of Korean baseball players and swimmer Park Tae Hwan offer proof of physical supremacy on the putatively meritocratic field of global competition. These athletes not only put their bodily attributes on display, they are challenged to show dominance in international events through strength, skill, and endurance. Competitive sports are often thought to establish a “real,” “proven,” and “useful” masculinity as opposed to one achieved through steroid use, excessive gym time, photoshopped images, or stage paint. Representations of the hard male body therefore act as generative sites in the production of a “national erotics” (Mankekar and Schein 2004), by which we mean the way discourses of sexual attraction directed towards the bodies of athletic icons operate as allegories of desire for the nation. During the World Cup, female interest in players like Ahn Jung-hwan and Lee Chun-soo was understood as directing Korean women’s sexual desire to the “appropriate” national object (Kim 2004).

The current ideological force of this body also responds to a century’s worth of emasculating representations of Korean masculinity arising from Japanese colonial power and American military occupation. Having finally “caught up” to other nations, in terms of not merely economic, but also physical power, hard male musculature symbolizes Korean global might. During the build-up to the 2002 World Cup semi-final match against Germany, a height comparison of the teams revealed that the Koreans were nearly a foot shorter on average than the Germans. A jocular but heartfelt riposte to this discrepancy was “smaller peppers are spicier,” with a reference to the common Korean meaning of pepper (*koch’u*) as

penis. This compensatory statement demonstrates the ongoing importance placed on international comparisons of masculinity, as eugenic logic informs everyday discourses around the “evolution” of the Korean male body. Differences between men of various nationalities stand in for a hierarchy of phallic national power represented by men’s physicality.

In a country whose government and institutions have been focused on achieving status at a global level, the popularity of the nude masculine torso readily lends itself to interpretation within evolutionary discourses of economic development. As athletic Korean male bodies resemble counterparts from the “West,” the “Rest” serves to represent an earlier stage in Korea’s history.¹³ The muscled abdomen attests to the achievements of Korean masculinity within an era of international competition and thus conveys Korea’s global might. In appealing to local consumers, the toned Korean male physique generates excitement for the nation (see Joo 2012, Chapter 3; Kim 2004). Swimmer Park Tae Hwan’s gold medal performance in the 2008 Beijing Olympics intensified national excitement over his powerful physique not only because he won Korea’s first medal in the sport, but also because his exposed body offered visual proof that Korean men could compete equally in terms of size and strength with elite swimmers the world over.

What, then, of female legs? Whereas we have drawn on transnational explanations for the increased focus on the nude male torso within Korea, we now shift discussion towards reception outside Korea in looking at this “transnational economy of erotic desire,” for a nuanced view of these phenomena also urges consideration of how these changing ideals are perceived from locale to locale and audience to audience. Although the Razor TV clip discussed above goes on to state that K-pop girl groups’ long legs have “captured the hearts of male

and female fans alike all across Asia,” one may reasonably assume a varied response to bodily display according to such factors as national provenance, gender, age, religious background, sexual orientation, and so on.

Therefore, much as we engage with a legacy of emasculating representations of Korean males, let us also consider a parallel fascination with the legs of Girls' Generation (*Sonyō Shidae*, or SNSD) in their 2010 debut in Japan. Given Korea's fraught colonial history with Japan, and the presence of such hot-button issues as ongoing Japanese sex tourism in Korea and the unresolved matter of compensation for comfort women (see, e.g., [Dudden and Mizoguchi 2007](#)), the sexualized representation of Korean women in a Japanese context becomes almost *ipso facto* problematic. Indeed, the adulation that Girls' Generation experienced in Japan as icons of desirable femininity appears at first glance to resuscitate sexualized (neo)colonial images of Korea, yet a closer look suggests instead, we would argue, shifting relationships of power in Northeast Asia's cultural marketplace.

Translations of Japanese tweets that were uploaded on [the popular English-language website allkpop.com](#) immediately after the Tokyo debut of Girls' Generation in August 2010 made it clear that many among the Japanese audience were extremely impressed with the performance in itself, albeit often from a position of self-confessed prior ignorance (cf. [Yamanaka 2010](#)): “This morning I was shocked by the high quality of the Korean idol group SNSD. They have a whole different presence”, wrote one user, while another asked very simply, “Is kpop this amazing?” At the same time, viewers noted repeatedly the long legs of *Sonyō Shidae*, and spoke of the group as “seductive.” The language of the comments regularly eroticizes, e.g., “Tired—this morning on TV SNSD was on, and I was shocked by their amazingly beautiful legs. The dance was as if dolls were dancing and it was wondrous” and “I

was transfixed watching SNSD for the first time, and I am falling for them--. They're cute, long legs, sings [sic] great, even as a female I can see they are wonderful.”

As made evident by this latter comment, though, and another that states “as u read here, most of their fans are girls—so that that [sic] haterz~”, this transnational sexual attraction is rendered complex. Contrary to the expectations of SM Entertainment, whose CEO Lee Soo-man has gone on record as saying that they targeted men in their thirties and forties in marketing the group,¹⁴ SNSD's predominant fan base in Japan has been females in their teens and early twenties. The Korean media have been particularly keen to report on both Japanese media accounts of Korean girl group success within Japan generally and to note this latter unanticipated feature in particular: a [Sports Seoul](#) piece details not only the rivalry among Japanese press outlets to cover the showcase debut of Girls' Generation, carefully enumerating several of the major players involved, but the overwhelming prevalence of young females in the event's audience, accompanying the article with shots of numerous fans clad as members of Girls' Generation, frequently wearing the group's signature hot pants.



(From *Sports Seoul: Japanese fans emulate Girls' Generation*)

In a similar piece of self-reflexive reportage, the *Ashia Kyōngje* cheerily recapitulates a 5-minute NHK segment on the phenomenon of Japanese girls imitating the dress and style of the group. The headlines of such articles frame the language in terms of a quasi-magnetic force that creates followers out of Korea's erstwhile colonizer: these two pieces are titled, respectively, "Girls' Generation, a Hit in Japan...What Special Attraction Melted the Archipelago?" and "NHK Runs Special Feature on Japan's Korean Girl Group 'Wannabes'."

The celebration of Korean girl groups' success in Japan extends from the more tabloid-oriented publications of the above paragraph to state-sponsored channels such as KBS. These outlets frequently cite Japanese sources from industry professionals to fans themselves to support the notion that Korea offers a more polished and adult image than Japan's homegrown version of idol groups. A story entitled "K-pop Going Global" (Kim Hee Sung 2010) that appeared on [Korea.net](#), the official digital public relations wing of the government, provides a typical quote: "The Korean girl group members look like models, and have amazing performance skills for the stage", said Tower Records when launching their Korean music campaign. 'It differentiates them from Japanese idol groups who rely more on having a cute image.'" Scholars have added similar assertions. In a recent piece for *The Journal of Gender Studies*, Kim Yeran (2011: 339) writes, "in comparison to their Japanese counterparts, the visual image of Korean girl idols yet appears saliently mature and sensual in spite of their branding as 'girls'." (Indeed, one need only contrast, e.g., KARA's Japanese version of their hugely successful video for "[Mister](#)" with the even more successful and far more notorious video for the Japanese idol band AKB48's "[Heavy Rotation](#)" to understand

whence this discourse arises.) In other words, as the differences between men of varied nations are constructed within a hierarchy of national power, so too have Korea's girl groups become implicated in a discourse of Korean feminine desirability that reveals the nation's growing strength and maturity in a competitive world.¹⁵

Of course, it is hardly astonishing that Korean girl groups' upper thigh exposure may thus also fuel prurient fantasies, and one can find business interests in the Japanese market happy to capitalize on them, as in a local adult video entitled "Beautiful Legs Legend" which plays off of Girls' Generation's nickname and outfits for "Genie", and whose PG-13 rated opening sequence is available on [YouTube](#). It remains unclear, however, to what extent or in what combinations the inspiration for the more risqué activity that follows in the film draws on a fetishization of a formerly colonized nation's women, the eye-catching uniforms worn by Girls' Generation in the music video, legs as an erotic body part, or simply Japan's common faux-celebrity pornographic genre. An epigone of the notorious 2005 *Kenkanryu* ["Hating the Korean Wave"] *manga* ([Allen and Sakamoto 2007](#)) suggested that performances on the casting couch had brought Korean girl group members to their current popular status. Unsurprisingly, anger was a common reaction among the Korean media and public, especially to this latter affront, all the more so in that an ongoing feature of Korean popular discourse about Japan ([Epstein 2010](#)) involves scandalized reactions to its "debased" sexual culture and a concomitant expression of national moral superiority. A message arises that not only are the nation's girls sexier and more attractive, they also are more wholesome; in this contradictory moralizing discourse, colonial haunting becomes manifest.

Within the larger Asian region one may observe further differentiated reception of and, indeed, contestation over the spread of Korean bodily

ideals. The statistical maps displaying audience distribution to be found on YouTube clips suggest that K-pop has taken an especially firm foothold in Thailand. The genre's immense popularity there has caused the state to become involved in suppressing fashion it disapproves of, albeit in a different manner from the more active policing described above that occurred under Park Chung Hee during the 1960s and 1970s. Thai government and media forces have expressed concern that Thai women increased the incidence of dengue fever by adopting Korean-style hot pants and exposing more flesh to mosquitoes, and have tried to dissuade local citizens from imitation. These campaigns have been picked up in turn by Korean media for rebroadcast as noteworthy pieces that implicitly validate growing Korean soft power, as in an MBC news story on the issue, and its propagation in turn by the . In other words, one could argue that the Thai case, in its attempt to ward off the penetration of Korean representations of feminine desirability, reveals the confrontation of regional media flows and externally directed brand nationalism with local assertions of patriarchal control. Women's legs become a showpiece item for the propagation of a triumphant discourse of Korean physical beauty and commercial power that, within the interpretation of the nation's media, inspires mimicry. Reports by Korean media and commentators then regularly resurface about how the Korean Wave, via the attractive magnetism of its stars, is taking the world "by storm" (Chung 2011). Such articles are especially keen to grasp examples of Korean girl group success in the West, as in the following piece from *The Australian* which looks to the reception of K-pop in its antipodean opposite:

"The K-pop assault on European shores was trumpeted by a front-page story in the culture sections of the left-of-centre *Le Monde* and

the right-wing *Le Figaro*. The latter made much of the 'interminable legs' and 'mini-mini' skirts of Girls' Generation and, in less frivolous mode, said they signalled a kind of "total" pop: an impeccably executed mixture of relentless rhythms, choreography and fashion. (Slattery 2012)

Just as the hard male body conveys ideas of a "global and powerful Korea," so too then have "interminable" bare female legs become a marketing tool and branding technique for an enticingly toned and "impeccably executed" Korea. The varied responses outlined above in the dissemination and reinterpretation of Korea's national erotic power—triumph conjoined with anger at perceived slights in the context of Japan, a sense of superior liberalism vis-à-vis Thailand, and pride over Western acceptance that welcomes Korea to the company of advanced nations (*sŏnjin'guk*)—indicate the shifting comparative ideologies of moral and sexual standards that work in the service of proving Korea's talent in multiple spheres.

The Narcissistic Turn

Nonetheless, such enthusiastic focus on physical form as a demonstration of national power has consequences. As the media concentration on the fashioning of Korean stars into icons of internationally desirable femininity indexes changing ideals of the body under the influence of capitalist consumerism, so too does it pressure individual females to manufacture themselves into objects of desirability within a competitive environment. Likewise, the bombardment of images of muscled male torsos in conjunction with underlying discourses of comparative economic development urges men toward emulation.

Because of the gendering of the public gaze, however, the pressures inculcated by the

pervasive portrayal of these bodies in a media-saturated society have worked in rather different directions. Certainly for female stars themselves, display of attractive legs transmutes from a selling point to a point of constant surveillance.¹⁶ Calculated display and “showing off” for the international gaze become repeated tropes and we encounter a “dollification” of idol groups: consider, for example, two articles on the English-language koreaboo fan website titled, respectively, “Girls’ Generation Yuri shows off her beautiful legs” and “Girls’ Generation’s Tiffany shows off her doll-like legs.”¹⁷ Top-down promotion may inspire consumer pride within the nation’s boundaries but it also resonates with interactive fandom cultures in the Web 2.0 era to produce sites focusing obsessively on the bodily attributes of K-pop stars,¹⁸ and Yuri has complained in public about the Japanese media’s focus on their legs and the pressure it placed on the group to maintain them in flawless condition.¹⁹ Such hegemonic structures in combination with an increasingly omnipresent media gaze enhance a panoptic situation that invites peers and the group’s fans to become complicit in enforcing media ideals; individual members become subject to scrutiny and comparison among themselves.²⁰

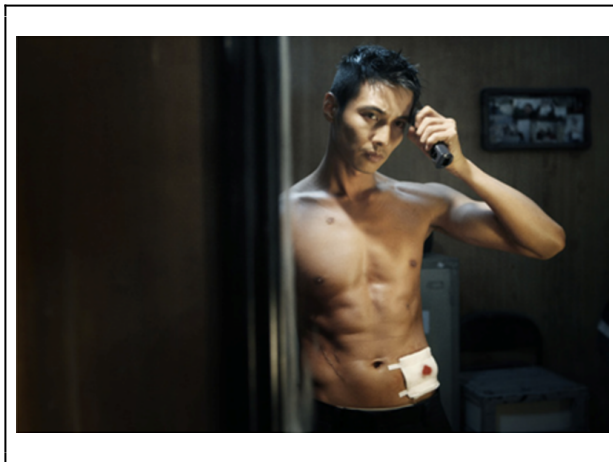
Furthermore, when curious fans and casual consumers are given “special” insight by commercial media into how the members of girl groups maintain their striking legs, and “magic ratios” for beautiful legs are disseminated (5:3:2, in which the numbers indicate the thickest part of the thigh: thickest part of the calf: ankles), problematic issues readily arise.²¹ A corollary effect of corporeal discipline and these sorts of pseudo-scientific but demanding requirements, then, as they trickle down from stars to fans who wish to emulate them is the simultaneous production of narcissism and insecurity and the fostering of industries that cater to assuaging these insecurities, including invasive cosmetic surgery to shape calf muscles. Notably, while an English language

search even on google.co.kr, for “Girls’ Generation” and “legs” largely turns up admiring fan sites devoted to flattering photos, a complementary search in Korean for *Sonyō Shidae* and *tari* (legs) or the popular term *kaksōnmi* (beautiful leg contours) brings up, above all, discussions of how to achieve a similar look to the group with an emphasis on the refashioning of the self.²²

The Daum café site [momtchang mandŭlgi](#) [“Making a Great Body”], which had 4.7 million members as of February 2012, well exemplifies the current popularity of *momtchang* and the stress on personal achievement of defined physical standards.²³ Many blogs, glossy magazines, and television shows also feature working out and body building. Such websites and magazines thrive on transformation stories, and demonstrate for “average” Koreans, especially men, not only the mainstreaming of the *momtchang* physique as an ideal but detail how with time, dedication, effort, and money a process of body building can remake the self.

Nonetheless, Korea’s current interest in the built male body and the remaking of the self should be seen within the context of shifting gender roles: the last two decades have witnessed increased rates of higher education and rising consumer power for females, as well as a legal dismantling of gender discrimination with significant changes in family law. One might compare the earlier mainstreaming of competitive body building in the United States as marked by *Pumping Iron* (1977) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, which took place on the heels of the feminist movement, U.S. defeat in Vietnam, and an extended recession—a time when hegemonic American male masculinity was being challenged in unprecedented fashion (Klein 1993). In Korea, the emerging images of the male nude torso may likewise be read in part as compensating for declining masculine social and economic power (see Moon 2002) during a period of neoliberal transformations and changing gender relations: in addition to

the factors cited above, one might also note increased female labor force participation, falling fertility rates, and ideological shifts in ideas of gender appropriate behavior as treated comically in such films as 2001's *My Sassy Girl* and *My Wife Is a Gangster*. The current popularity of the built male body highlights essential differences between male and female physiques, and demonstrates the seemingly natural strength of men over women. Dyer argues that images of male muscularity act as an ostensibly biological “sign of power—natural, achieved, phallic” (68) and that in their “natural seeming” quality “male power and domination are legitimized” (71). In presenting such images, however, men are also now reminded that they have to “work harder” to sell themselves as commodities to women who are postponing marriage or foregoing it altogether in greater numbers: the muscularity can suggest a position of both strength and vulnerability.²⁴



Indeed, female consumers are now clearly a significant media target group, and women’s sexual desire is assumed in the marketing of fantasy and desire through the haptic image of the shirtless torso. Sex scenes in Korean films increasingly foreground the male body. For example, in the remake of *The Housemaid* referred to earlier, the pregnant wife fellates her husband, and while her body remains covered, his naked body is fully on display as her head covers his genitals. When he has

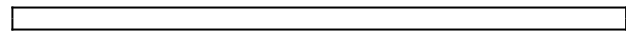
intercourse with the title character, his nude figure (sans penis) serves as the focus while the housemaid’s nudity is minimized: the primarily eroticized part of her body is her back. In such scenes, female sexual longings are equated with a wish to be dominated and to service the object of desire: the exposed male represents phallic power.

Many current films, images, and videos feature the shirtless male body as both the object of narcissistic desire and a sign of individual accomplishment. *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* (2008), contains a memorable scene in which the villain, played by Lee Byung-hun, takes off his shirt before a mirror to admire his own nefariousness before he embarks on his mission to steal and kill. In *Ajōssi (The Man from Nowhere, 2010)*, the protagonist emerges from a period of quasi-gothic hibernation with a toned, tanned torso that externalizes concealed power. Revealing his muscularity, the character, played by Korean heartthrob Won Bin, stands shirtless, likewise in front of a mirror, the dim light of the shabby room exaggerating the contours of his flesh.

This glorification of narcissism in images of men preening for themselves has troubling implications for both individual emotional development and gender relations more broadly. The DSM-IV (2005) asserts that essential features of Narcissistic Personality Disorder are an exaggerated sense of self-importance, need for admiration, and lack of empathy.²⁵ Much discourse about the Korean nude torso suggests precisely these traits. A studied ambivalence toward the viewer appears in these images. The men convey the impression that posing before their reflections offers them visceral pleasure and that they care little whether they are being observed but will accept admiration as natural and deserved. Unlike the representations of female pop-stars, manhood, it seems, doesn’t require an external gaze, just self-satisfied awareness of physical prowess.

How Healthy Are Those Legs, Anyway?

To conclude, let us consider briefly, in contrast, a video broadcast on Arirang, Korea's international public relations cable channel, which became notorious in chastising certain female *hallyu* stars for having "healthy legs".



The clip consists of an excerpted translation of a piece that appeared on Korea's network Y-Star in its tabloid entertainment show "[Ranking High 5](#)." The original segment discussed five top actresses and girl group members whose striking facial and upper body beauty is paired with lower halves that in the network's view do not conform to the current domestic ideal, and thereby suggested that bodies deviating from the prescribed norm were unsightly. The Arirang video went further and infuriated viewers via clumsy inattention to linguistic nuance. In translating *kōn'ganghae poinŭn tari*, which literally means "healthy-looking legs," but whose connotations might make the rendering "stocky" or "solid legs" more apt, as "healthy legs," the channel created cognitive estrangement with its insinuation that women should strive for anorexic thinness instead of health. No less problematic was the description of then 16-year-old Sulli of the group f(x) as "the ideal lady of all Korean men," conjoined with shaming her as also having the "fatal fault!" of "thick ankles and calf muscles," as the camera angle simultaneously appeared to try to peek up her dress. The notion that healthily developed musculature detracts from a woman's attractiveness and the fierce resistance it received from a global online audience suggests that Korea's highly prescriptive regimes of the body scarcely meet with universal approval. Due to the outcry over this segment, Arirang made the video private on its YouTube channel, but never took the clip down or offered an apology.

The segment also highlights an important contrast in the propagation of these images:

while both are coercive, men are largely urged to an additional empowerment through strengthening their physical selves, but women, even extremely attractive ones, find that not meeting extraordinarily exacting standards exposes them to public censure. Furthermore, whereas both six-pack abs and long, slender legs are each outwardly directed as symbols of national attractiveness, lingering patriarchal structures allow nude torsos to convey individual phallic power, whereas feminine beauty, though meant to entice, becomes the property of the national collective. As a member of Super Junior teases SM Entertainment stablemates Girls' Generation on the boy band's talk show "Kiss The Radio," "SNSD can't get hurt without permission. Their bodies aren't their own. They're treasures of the nation."²⁶

Although in the last decade Korean citizens have clearly been subjected to accelerating regimes of corporeal discipline with the heavily mediated penetration of self-commodification into daily life, these images of male torsos and female legs ultimately offer a variety of interpretive possibilities. (Perhaps most notably absent here are queer readings, especially given the highly homoerotic nature of much boy band imagery.) We have highlighted how these images contribute to the shaping of everyday practices and ideas around ideal bodies. In intertwining nation, gender, and sexuality, this shaping can also be understood in relation to a further triad of history, power, and inequality. Although bodily accomplishment can instill pride and self-confidence, those who fall short of prevailing standards can experience public shaming and feelings of self-recrimination; if these images offer Korea global status as a nation full of charismatic strong men and sexy confident women, do those who fail to meet these changing standards then fail as national subjects?

These images undeniably offer visual pleasure

for their audiences and in doing so can promote greater openness about sexuality more generally. Nonetheless, the enjoyable play of imagination still takes place within a context of power relations as the terms are primarily set by commercial interests. Even as much recent discussion of women's images has suggested (an admittedly problematic) empowerment through sexuality, the discourses we analyze above treat distinctions between men and women as a binary opposition rooted in biology, exacerbating differences and allowing them to continue as a basis for arguments that justify gender inequality. The potentially regressive social effects of such images urge a tempering note of caution for any who might rush to celebrate them as an empowering expression of individual self-making.

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Notes

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² The increased rise in *welbing* ("well-being") products and services, exercise-for-all initiatives, and everyday environmentalism further demonstrate the rise of self-care industries as costs for health care rise and state guarantees for public welfare diminish (Song 2009).

³ See this February 2012 post from popular English-language K-pop website allkpop.com for anecdotal evidence about the relationship between *hallyu* and Korea's beauty industry. All websites referred to in this article were accessed on 10 May, 2012.

⁴ Not only are so-called "Korean nose lifts" widely advertised in Vietnam and Thailand, a

website for the plastic surgery clinic, [SP Cosmetic Surgery](#) based in Bangkok, Thailand, offers “Facial extreme makeover as you’ve seen in Korea.” The site is translated into seven different languages and accepts major credit cards.

⁵ The clip is available at both [here](#) and [here](#).

⁶ Reproduced with permission from the original source: [here](#). An amusing counterpart to this cartoon may be found at 4:20ff of the YouTube clip [how to attract a Korean boyfriend](#).

⁷ For a particularly egregious example, see Kang (2010).

⁸ The presence of Nichkhun, a Thai-American, offers an example of how several K-pop groups are including non-Korean members to appeal to a broader audience. Such international members are equally subjected to, and propagate, the bodily ideas we describe in this paper.

⁹ “Pretty Boys with Abs” posted on 26 December, 2010, another segment of the Razor TV series on K-pop’s changing standards of physical attractiveness, focuses on Korean male celebrities: See [here](#).

¹⁰ Several Korean hip hop groups had members who showed off their torsos prior to Rain, but they never achieved the latter’s iconic status in a domestic or international arena.

¹¹ While the term “chocolate abs” refers primarily to the resemblance of the abdominal muscles to the scored sections of a chocolate bar, a racial subtext invoking black male muscularity appears present, all the more so given that many male K-pop groups draw from the aesthetic choices of African-American hip-hop stars for their fashion sense, comportment and movement, as well as their singing and speech.

¹² Kim (1997) and Spielvogel (2003) have

written, respectively, about Korean and Japanese fitness clubs and their connections with local practices of consumption, attitudes toward the body and gender, and economic development.

¹³ Fabian (1983) refers to this evolutionary charting of culture as allochrony—the practice of situating contemporaneously existing nations, races, and/or groups on a scale of comparative development. See also Iwabuchi (1999) for discussion of how these notions manifest themselves within Japanese views of its Asian neighbors.

¹⁴ “[Who is the Real Midas in Korean Showbiz?](#)”, *The ChosunIlbo*,

¹⁵ Indeed, the bare legs, costuming and choreography of Korean idol groups appear to have, very literally, “engendered” different consumer responses in Japan from the latter’s domestic counterparts. YouTube view count statistics indicates that the popularity of AKB48, Japan’s top idol girl group, remains overwhelmingly domestic and that their music video viewers are males in, respectively, the 45-54, 35-44 and 25-34 age brackets. Although Kim Yeran herself takes a critical feminist view of Korea’s growing move towards creating an “idol republic” with its concomitant commercialization of girls’ bodies, Korean netizens have taken AKB48 to task for its greater sexual commodification and its appearance in “shocking” (*chunggyokchogin*) commercials, such as a recent ad for Puccho candy which has the school uniform-clad members passing the candy from one to the next by mouth such that they appear to linger in lesbian kisses.

¹⁶ See [here](#).

¹⁷ See [here](#); [here](#). The dollification of the group is made particularly explicit in their most popular music video “Gee,” where they are mannequins brought to life. See also Puzar 2011.

¹⁸ E.g. [Here](#) and [here](#).

¹⁹ See [here](#).

²⁰ E.g. [here](#); [here](#).

²¹ See [here](#).

²² E.g. [Here](#); [here](#); [here](#).

²³ See [here](#).

²⁴ We thank Maud Lavin for drawing this point to our attention.

²⁵ See [here](#).

²⁶ See youtube video [here](#). The remark occurs at 21:30 of the clip.

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