Whew… I’m Not Gay: 
Gender Policing and Heteronormativity in Asian Genderbending Television Dramas

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Abstract

Crossdressing as a popular form of entertainment, via print, film, or theater has been a mainstay attraction in East Asian countries for centuries. In contemporary popular culture it can be seen in manga, anime, live-action movies, Asian dramas, and even in music. Crossdressing and gender performativity carry an enigmatic fascination that entraps the curiosity of audiences. Several Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese television shows feature a genderbending female lead. Unfortunately, these shows often fail to undermine heteronormative society. To examine how gender, sexuality, and romance is portrayed within the context of gender-swapping, this paper examines the following shows: Coffee Prince (2007), You’re Beautiful (2009), To the Beautiful You (2012), and Bromance (2015-2016). Although these dramas vary in the presentation of gender and sexuality, they all support patriarchal, heteronormative standards. This paper explores East Asian dramas where one of the main characters is an identified female who disguises themselves as a male, and looks at dynamics of representation of soft masculinity in conjuncture with homosocial/homoerotic/homosexual relationships. Ultimately, although these forms of masculinity may seem more progressive in terms of gender identity, it still reinforces patriarchy and heteronormativity.

Keywords: heteronormativity, soft masculinity, patriarchy, Asian dramas, textual analysis

Introduction

It would be hard to find someone who does not know the story of Mulan. The tale of the daughter who disguised herself as a man to take her father’s place in the army is one that resonates with people across the world. Chinese people grew up hearing the folktale, and practically everyone else saw the Disney movie. However, what is not universally shared is the interpretation of Mulan’s crossdressing. Is she an exemplar of filial piety? A feminist hero? A symbol of nationalism? A gender roles transgressor? Depending on the version being told, Mulan can mean any of these things (Jing, 2011). No matter which interpretation, something is always said about crossdressing/genderbending and the nature of gender. More significantly, even the earliest version of the story, The Ballad of Hua Mulan, implies that gender is a social construct (He, 2014). The very nature of crossdressing reflects a culture’s ideas about what gender is and what is expected of these genders. This does not always mean that these crossdressing stories criticize conservative ideas about gender. In fact, in some texts genderbending is used to reinforce principles of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Although Mulan’s story is an inspiring one, the different versions of Mulan usually stop at revealing the performative nature of gender and there is little subversion of heteronormative society.

1 The terms crossdressing, genderbending, and gender-swapping all connote how a person who identifies as one gender swaps/disguises as another gender and thus will be used synonymously throughout.
Crossdressing can be defined as when someone impersonates a gender that they do not identify as. This impersonation is often within the limits of the gender binary. It is commonly thought of as a man dressing up as a woman or vice-versa; not as a person dressing up as a genderqueer or non-binary individual. On another note, it is also important to clarify that crossdressing is not an indication of sexuality or gender identity. Drag shows are a cultural component of the queer community, but not representative of all forms of genderbending.

Crossdressing as a popular form of entertainment, via print, film, or theater has been a mainstay attraction in East Asian countries for centuries. For example, Chinese and Japanese performance history has seen both men and women using gender as a performative act in various forms of traditional theater (Li, 2003; Jiang, 2011; Kornfield, 2011; Wu, 2012). It is also common in contemporary popular culture and can be seen in manga, anime, live-action movies, Asian dramas, and even in music (Kornfield, 2011). The idea of genderbending and gender performativity has been present in contemporary East Asian society since the inception of manga by Tezuka Osamu in the 1940s. Princess Knight (Ribon no kishi), a genderbender manga, and one of Tezuka’s early works, is often considered the progenitor of the gender-swapping genre (Kornfield, 2011). If it is not accepted as progenitor, then it is at least acknowledged as a very influential predecessor. For Princess Knight, Tezuka was highly influenced by the Takarazuka Revue, an all-female musical theater troupe (Kornfield, 2011). The influence from Japanese theater can also be seen in the genres, the characters, and even in the art of contemporary manga, anime, and Asian dramas.

Crossdressing and gender performativity carry an enigmatic fascination that entraps the curiosity of audiences. The cultural tradition of the temporary crossdressing heroine can still be found in East Asian cultures today. For example, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan have produced a number of television shows that feature a genderbending female lead. Unfortunately, like the many versions of Mulan, these shows often fail to undermine heteronormative society. In order to examine how gender, sexuality, and romance is portrayed within the context of gender-swapping, this paper examines the following shows: Coffee Prince (2007), You’re Beautiful (2009), To the Beautiful You (2012), and Bromance (2015-2016). Although these dramas vary in the presentation of gender and sexuality, they all support patriarchal, heteronormative standards. This paper will explore East Asian dramas where one of the main characters is an identified female who disguises themselves as a male and will look at the dynamics of representation of soft masculinity in conjuncture with homosocial/homoerotic/homosexual relationships. Ultimately, although newer forms of masculinity may seem more progressive in terms of gender identity, it still reinforces patriarchy and heteronormativity through: 1) the illusion of progressive gender portrayals; 2) the silencing of possible gay storylines; and 3) the assurance and reassurance of straight identity of the main male characters in the midst of their sexual crisis/questionings. Before delving into these ideas, it is important to first establish how the inception of soft masculinity across East Asia influences notions of gender identity. Also, background information on how crossdressing reveals the constructive nature of gender and how this relates to heteronormativity will be provided.

Soft Masculinity, Metrosexuals, and East Asia Flower Boys

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2 Although there are multiple adaptations of Coffee Prince, You’re Beautiful, and To the Beautiful You, the author will be using the Korean adaptations for consistency of character naming. Since Bromance is currently only in Taiwanese, the characters names and language referral will be with the series language of origin.
Termed metrosexual in Western nations by Simpson (2002), he described this form of new masculinity 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 modeling, 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. (p. 3)

The metrosexual trend has become a global phenomenon confluent with the trend the Flower Boy (Ahn, 2013). The term “flower boy” is common across East Asia, spanning China and Taiwan (hua-mei-nan), Korea (kkot-mi-nam “flower beauty boy”) and Japan (hana-bi-dan). Flower boys may also be referred as the “cream of the crop”, “pretty boys”, “flower knights”, or “metrosexuals.” The flower boy is defined as good-looking men who are concerned with their looks and have a more “feminine” demeanor physically and personality wise (Miyose & Engstrom, 2015). The trend became famous when East Asian countries were undergoing major economic struggle (Marta, 2013). Transformation of the media, beauty, and entertainment industries in 1990s resulted in this craze, and its inception is believed to be started in Korea (Ahn, 2013). The movement is known for the changing values and norms of aesthetics in Korea, which demanded a softer form of masculinity from men (Ahn, 2013). It is imperative to note one major difference between different global regions’ understandings of soft masculinity. For many in Western nations, gender identity and sexual orientation are collapsed on top of each other. So, if one were to be categorized as being metrosexual, they would likely be assumed to be gay as well. In Korea and other East Asian countries, soft masculinity or the flower boy is assumed to be heterosexual (Miyose & Engstrom, 2015).

Korea was a country with Confucian values where men needed to be brave, active, wise, confident, energetic and a supplier of capital life for his family (Diniejko-Wąs, 2014). Before the 1990s, Korea was known as a patriarchal society and men were the head and provider to the family—They were defined as strong and dominant (Marta, 2013). The financial crisis of 1997 drowned the entire country in depression and aroused the need for an economic reserve from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Once Korea understood the flow of investments and returns, they involved themselves heavily in the world market selling copious amounts of entertainment products predominantly across East Asia. All these changes within the media, people, and culture, saw the inception of the Hallyu (Korean Wave), a phenomenon beginning in the 1990s where Korean dramas, series, and films had become popular in Asia (Hae-Joang, 2005; Lee, 2012).

During the financial crisis of 1997, many women lost their jobs due to downsizing, creating a frustration in women and gender dynamics within the country. They felt so disappointed that they started to look for men who can better understand the nature of being a woman, of being female. As women became conscious in selecting a man, it pressured men to be conscious of their

3 The author acknowledges the distinction between South Korea and North Korea as separate nations, though still connected through a historically common original culture prior to the separation into two countries. For reference purposes here, the term “Korea” refers to South Korea.
looks, to have a soft personality, and to be charming (Miyose & Engstrom, 2015). The financial crisis influenced Korean society in many ways, one of the most evolutionary changes being the development and acceptance of soft masculinity (Diniejko-Wąs, 2014; Miyose & Engstrom, 2015). The Hallyu has been the biggest disseminator of not only Korea’s “soft power” and values, but also of the image of the flower boy. The Korean wave’s circulation around East Asia, including boy bands and other stars, mediated and still distributes East Asian aesthetics for male identity, creating a transnational ideal of soft masculinity (Ahn, 2013). For example, scholars Tam and Yip (2010) argue that South Korean actor Lee Jun Ki, portraying the main character in South Korean film The King and the Clown (2005), “has a prettier face than any woman does... His looks had introduced a new trend of ‘feminine man’ and became an icon of kkonminam (flower boy)” (p. 23). Before Lee, Korean actor Bae Yong Joon, who starred in the series Winter Sonata (2002), captured the hearts of many Japanese women with his soft, elegant and feminine-like appearance, to the point where he was nicknamed Yonsama a Japanese term denoting royalty—thus making him the “prince charming” of Asia (Tam & Yip, 2010; Miyose & Engstrom, 2015).

Korean popular music (K-pop) has played a vital role in spreading soft masculinity worldwide. The most popular male music groups Super Junior, Infinite, Big Bang, and BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan) have members with similar characteristics regarding their looks—They all are thin, beautiful-looking men with sharp features and big eyes, delicate looks that resemble women. They all are well groomed, well maintained, and pleasantly dressed in a slight essence of an effeminate type of beauty (Diniejko-Wąs, 2014). The flower boy trend has become famous with young women in East Asian countries, as they have become major consumers of dramas and other cultural products (Ahn, 2013).

Making a transnational connection, Japan also has super androgynous stars, similar to that of the metrosexual and the kkonminam. Japan is well known for creating a culture of cuteness known as “kawaii” (cute) culture demonstrated in anime and manga (Tan, 2008). The image of pretty boys is popularized in Japanese manga by female writers who created a fantasy world by romancing the homosexual or homoerotic bonds between men, this genre otherwise known as Yaoi (boys love) (Louie, 2012). In the 1990s, Japanese popular culture had become famous on an international scale, birthing the subculture of visual-Kie (Visual type). The inception of visual kie is related to the movement in J-Rock (Japanese rock), which focuses more on visuals than the music. Band members use cosmetics and wear cross-genre clothes (Hashimoto, 2007). Another influence is the bishōnen (beautiful boys) trend. In the 1990s, the bishōnen, became famous in anime, manga, and drama series. They are defined as handsome young men who do not follow the traditional attributes associated with masculinity (Louie, 2012). The origin and craze of beautiful boys can be traced back to the mid-1990s with Kimura Takuyu in the series Long Vacation (1996), and Love Generation (1997) which has spread the idea of a “feminine man” to the world (Tam & Yip, 2010).

A more recent development in Japan, but still very much so related to the kkonminam and the bishōnen is the inception of the “herbivore man” (sōshokuieDanshi in Japanese meaning grass-eating type men). Herbivore men grew out of the flower boy tradition. Because of the internationally infamous drama Hana Yori Dango (Boys Over Flowers), the flower boy was already a well-known term. The herbivore man flourished in all sorts of media, including television, the Internet, newspapers and magazines, and could even occasionally be heard in
everyday conversation. As it became more popular its original meaning was diversified, and people began to use it with a variety of different nuances (Morioka, 2013).

Coined by Fukusawa Maki in 2006, he initially used the phrase to describe young men who are heterosexual but are not assertive in trying to pursue women, however, the discourse on sōshokukei danshi has varied over time (Morioka, 2013). While, at first, it was only concerned about young men’s attitudes toward love, relationships, and sex, it quickly came to encompass entire lifestyles. Commentators discussed working life, appearance, values and relationships. Deacon (2013), a men’s studies researcher, has summarized the characteristics of sōshokukei danshi as being uncompetitively minded about jobs; being fashion conscious, enjoying shopping; being uninterested in dating, relationships, or sex; and being thrifty with money. In 2008, the Japanese magazine DIME interviewed Magumi Ushikubo, a marketing researcher, who provided a list of features that might label one as an herbivore male. Ushikubo’s list consisted of the following: a) don’t understand the appeal of sports; b) when drinking out with friends they often don’t drink alcohol; c) enjoyment in reading comics for young women; d) even when staying at a woman’s place they do not initiate in anything sexual; e) have an affinity for sweets; and d) talks to their parents at least once a week (Nicolae, 2014). The aforementioned characteristics reference personalities traits, whereas in 2009 reporter Yomiuri Shinbun offers physical attributes of a sōshokukei danshi stating that they are slim, do not eat much, is enthusiastic about ecology, and is fashion conscious (Nicolae, 2014).

Scholars Chen and Charlebois see Herbivore masculinity as a direct post-bubble-era rejection of traditional hegemonic salaryman masculinity. Chen (2012), for example, sees herbivore men as a “funky youth culture” that emerged while “the salaryman’s mode of life was questioned” (p. 295). Charlebois (2013) also goes in depth regarding the causes for the development of herbivore masculinity. He argues that:

Permanent employment is not always a contextually available masculine resource. From this perspective, more leisure-oriented herbivore masculinity does not represent authentic transgression per se, but simply follows broader sociocultural patterns. As a result, herbivore masculinity is constructed from alternative gender practices such as narcissistic body management, a primacy of consumption, and the formation of intimate opposite-sex friendships. (p. 94)

Both Chen and Charlebois present the herbivore man as an emerging form of “new man,” as opposed to the outdated salaryman. One other very important part of herbivore masculinity as argued by Chen and Charlebois, is a high focus on aesthetics, and sporting effeminate looks, even using makeup. According to Chen (2012) they “develop a feminized body that is distinguished from the salaryman. By adopting male beauty practices and gender-ambiguous fashion, they… transgress oppressive gender norms” (p. 303).

As Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) argue, “Hegemonic masculinities… came into existence in specific circumstances and were open to historical change. More precisely, there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be changed by new ones” (Connell & Messerschmidt, p. 832-833). Examples of this are observed in the aforementioned cases of Korea and Japan. When the economic recession hit, so too did one of the primary pillars
macho-masculine identity. Entering into the 1990s and 2000s many young men in East Asia now reject older archetypes of masculinity in favor of alternative lifestyles, but the real question is to what extent are these new identities still heteronormative and patriarchal? In order to make an argument for either side of this debate, an understanding of heteronormativity must first be provided.

**Heteronormativity**

Coined by Michael Warner and Steven Seidman, heteronormativity is the notion that everyone is a heterosexual, cisgender person (Goodrich, 2017). It is the belief that, “one’s biological sex, gender, and gender expression should align and that one’s sexual orientation should be heterosexual,” (Goodrich, 2017, p. 841). In accordance with a person’s assigned gender, there are also certain behaviors and manners of dress that people are expected to follow. Thus, heteronormativity is a regime that organizes sex, gender, and sexuality in order to match heterosexual norms. Unsurprisingly, under heteronormativity, homosexuality is considered inferior and often bisexual, transgender, and intersex people are assumed to not exist (Jeppesen, 2016). As Seidman (1991) contends:

The social productivity of identity is purchased at the price of a logic of hierarchy, normalization, and exclusion. Furthermore, gay identity constructions reinforce the dominant hetero/homo sexual code with its heteronormativity. If homosexuality and heterosexuality are a coupling in which each presupposes the other, each being present in the invocation of the other, and in which this coupling assumes hierarchical forms, then the epistemic and political project of identifying a gay subject reinforces and reproduces this hierarchical figure. (p. 130)

Heteronormativity is what reinforces the dominant hetero/homo dichotomy which prioritizes and acknowledges one group over the other. Due to the existence of heteronormativity, society is built to privilege those who are heterosexual. This can be seen in media, the education system, religion, the government, and other institutions (Jeppesen, 2016). Furthermore, heteronormativity is also responsible for helping to maintain and support patriarchy and the gender binary (Goodrich et al., 2017). Heteronormativity is not simply the privileging of heterosexuality, it is the pervasive force in which norms are linked to social oppression. Thus, Warner (1991) calls social theorists to move from merely theorizing, to politicizing:

Social theory, moreover, must begin to do more than occasionally acknowledge the gay movement because so much of heterosexual privilege lies in heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as society. Even when coupled with a toleration of minority sexualities, heteronormativity has a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world. (p. 8)

Warner posits that heteronormativity is an invisible force that is inherent in heterosexual institutions and is something that should be challenged. Crossdressing disrupts heteronormativity by revealing that gender is a social construct. If gender is a social construct, then this means that peoples’ behaviors are not something dependent on their sex. Crossdressing also allows for a more
fluid reading of sexuality and gender expression, which further reveals heteronormativity as a falsehood. However, crossdressing does not always weaken the institution of heteronormativity. Both Warner and Seidman argue that contemporary gay and lesbian theories and politics should analyze the heter/o/homo divide to reveal the normalization and exclusion that exists within structures in society. In the case presented here, with East Asian television dramas, though the heterosexualized soft masculinity, and a genderbending women, may give the impression of a gender progressive narrative, they still operate within the confines of heteronormativity.

**Coffee Prince, You’re Beautiful, To the Beautiful You, and Bromance**

Coffee Prince (2007) is the first of five adaptations of the novel written by Lee Sun Mi. Go Eun Chan (Yoon Eun Hye), the 24-year-old working-class female protagonist, masquerades as a young man in order to get a job and earn better money than she could as a woman. The audience see her in the first episodes cobbling together a living from many part-time jobs. In one discussion in the first episode, her employer at the restaurant tells her he has hired a woman to save money. In fact, money is tight for Eun Chan. Various machinations ensue, and Eun Chan gets hired as a full-time male waiter at a café, run by the handsome 29-year-old Choe Han Gyeol (Gong Yoo). Han Gyeol is from a rich family that owns the café and the large Dongin Foods Company. This all would roll out as a typical Cinderella K-drama plot, except that Eun Chan and Han Gyeol become friends, with Han thinking the cute tomboy is really a man. They cavort together, and gradually fall in love, which causes Han Gyeol, who before this had thought of himself as heterosexual, great distress as he realizes he’s falling in love with someone he thinks is a man. The audience see his longing, his fun, his attraction, his fear, his anger. They also see his friends support him and urge him to adopt a positive attitude toward homosexuality. Meanwhile Eun Chan stays masqueraded and apparently tongue-tied on the subject of her gender, afraid to lose her job and her friendship with Han Gyeol if she speaks up. She doesn’t think she’s the kind of woman either in terms of class or femininity who would appeal to him. When Han Gyeol finds out that Eun Chan is a woman, he gets upset, but soon they make amends and fall in love again.

You’re Beautiful (2009) is the first of three adaptations, with a Japanese drama airing in 2011 and Taiwanese remake to follow in 2013. The K-drama follows a young nun novitiate, Go Mi Nyeo (Park Shin Hye), who joins the popular boy band A. N. JELL disguised as her twin brother to cover for him as he heals from cosmetic surgery. Initially hesitant to take on her brother, Go Mi Nam’s identity, Mi Nyeo nevertheless postpones her plans to become a nun to help her brother. This turns out to be easier said than done because the lead singer of the band, Hwan Tae Kyung (Jang Kuen Suk) does not want another member to join at all. Mi Nyeo must figure out how to protect her secret identity and appease Tae Kyung. At first, Tae Kyung is against Mi Nyeo’s (in the form of Mi Nam) addition and makes her life hard, while other band members Kang Shin Woo (Jung Yong Hwa) and Jeremy (Lee Hong Gi) are friendly to her. Eventually, Tae Kyung discovers that Min Nyeo is a girl and threatens to reveal it, but Min Nyeo manages to win him over. Through their interaction, all band members develop feelings for Mi Nyeo even though Shin Woo and Jeremy think that Mi Nam is a boy.

The 2012 drama Reumda-un Geudaeege, or To the Beautiful You, is an adaptation of the 1996-2004 Japanese manga, Hanazakari no Kimitachi e (For You in Full Blossom). It is the fourth television adaptation, with Taiwan having one variation, and Japan having two prior to the airing
of the Korean drama. When watching television one day, Goo Jae Hee (Sulli) is inspired and attracted by the high jumping skills of Kang Tae Joon (Choi Min Ho). Being a transfer student at a school in the United States, Jae Hee is bullied due to her looks. Hearing that Tae Joon had been injured, Jae Hee eventually transfers to attend the same school in Korea as her inspiration, Tae Joon, to cheer him on and help in any way in his recovery. The only problem is that he attends an all-boys academy. In order to get close to him and prove the existence of love, she crossdresses to attend the same school. Jae Hee proves to be fairly lucky and ends up as Tae Joon’s roommate. Hijinks ensue as Jae Hee attempts to hide her true gender; completely unaware that Tae Joon already has discovered her secret and lets her stay in the academy.

Bromance is a 2015-2016 Taiwanese drama that features Pi Yanuo (Megan Lai) as a woman that must hide her gender for the first twenty-six years of her life. After Pi Yanuo was born, her parents went to visit a fortune teller who told them that her fate would only be good if lived as a man, and that if she lived her life as a girl, then she would not make it to the age of twenty-six. It is not until she turns twenty-six, that she can reveal to the public (not counting her close friends and relatives) that she is a woman. The drama starts with only a hundred days left of Yanuo living as a man, but things become more complicated when she runs into triad leader and theme park president, Du Zifeng (Baron Chen). After helping Zifeng fight off some thugs and saving his younger sister from being run over, the two become sworn brothers. Yanuo ends up working for Zifeng as his personal assistant. They eventually fall in love, but Yanuo is anxious about what will happen when the hundred days are up, and she must reveal her true gender.

Throughout these dramas, heteronormativity and patriarchy are enforced via three themes: 1) the illusion of progressive gender portrayals; 2) the silencing of possible gay storylines; and, 3) the assurance and reassurance of straight identity of the main male characters in the midst of their sexual questionings.

The Illusion of Progressive Gender Portrayals

The Flower Boy persona is a form of counterhegemonic masculinity. Directly opposed to the Korean “tough guy” look, the flower boy image deconstructs the male/female dichotomy (Kim, 2003). Characteristics of the flower boy are able to satisfy both feminine and masculine qualities. The formula for a flower boy is as follows: (a) girl-like pretty looks; (b) toned and hairless body; (c) a vulnerable heart; and (d) an inconsiderate and immature personality (Jung, 2010). Showing that men can have the ability to be more feminine in nature, it resists the idea of hypermasculinity, or having a highly masculine persona. This idea expands the identity of masculinity and has the potential to expand the identity of femininity, which could possibly create more egalitarian gender roles (Miyose & Engstrom, 2015).

Flower boys within dramas attempt to expand masculine identity, as well as break down the strict feminine script. As Jung (2010) contends, the flower boy persona presents a complex cultural deconstruction of male and female. The growing popularity of the flower boy syndrome in popular culture seems to reflect a desire to break with earlier traditional hypermasculine and hyperfeminine roles (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). Though flower boys may seem to be counterhegemonic, I argue that it is indeed progressive on the surface level, but when analyzed in-
Heteronormative standards for what are deemed normal situates men and women in a hierarchal relationship that portrays masculinity as active and powerful, while femininity is illustrated as being subordinate to male sexuality (Jackson, 2006). Like gender, heteronormativity creates opposing structures of femininity and masculinity that support men’s greater power and status (Mahoney & Knudson-Martin, 2009). It reaffirms that all romantic relationships are supposed to be heterosexual, where the man loves and courts the woman. Though the flower boy expands men’s capabilities, such as being more emotionally expressive and caring more about their personal appearance, it disappointingly restricts female identity. This idea goes against the grain of the initial reason why the flower boy persona was created. The emergence of the flower boy image originated in the changing socio-political atmosphere in East Asia. Due to the International Monetary Fund’s crash in 1997, Asian countries began an era of economic depression and social dislocation (Kim, 2000). Women workers were quickly dismissed from the workforce. In almost all industries, rates of female layoffs were significantly higher than for males (Kim, 2000). The desire for a different masculine portrayal arose out of the anger many women felt over being the first to be laid off after the IMF crisis.

In all of the dramas examined, there is an unequal power balance between the male and female protagonist. To start, the male characters always occupy a higher social status, and have the ability to control the female characters’ access to work, school, and other structures. In Bromance, Zifeng is from an extremely wealthy triad family that owns an amusement park, and later offers Yanuo a job there as his assistant, a staunching metaphor to show the hierarchal relationship between the “master” and the “servant.” Zifeng being Yanuo’s boss means he has direct control over her income (and her father’s as well because he also works at the park). In You’re Beautiful, Hwang Tae Kyung is the leader of A.N.JELL, and frequently threatens to reveal Min Nyeo’s gender and kick her out of the band. He uses this threat constantly in the show to get her to go along with his bidding. As for To the Beautiful You, Tae Joon could easily tell the school officials Jae Hee’s gender and have her expelled. He never thinks of doing this in the drama, but it is in his power to do so. Lastly, in Coffee Prince, another direct line of subordination is seen when wealthy café owner Han Kyul makes decisions on how much Eun Chan makes. All of these men have the power to cut off these women from their access to the male world.

The female protagonists are fine with the power imbalance—they are even constantly being reminded of their place in society as less than their male counterparts. Take Jae Hee from To the Beautiful You for example. Whenever she is criticized or threatened by Tae Joon, she will immediately apologize and comply with his wishes. She does not show any frustration over her treatment or resentment towards Tae Joon for his behavior. The show even goes as far as to have Jae Hee fall in love with him, as if who he is, and his abilities, are traits that should be admired and wanted by all women.

Along with these male characters’ superior social status, they are also presented as being more intelligent than the female characters. All women main characters are described as being stupid by the male characters. For example, in To the Beautiful You, Jae Hee is constantly being told how “dumb” she is by her roommate and love interest, Tae Joon. Because these men are
smarter and more capable than their female counterparts, they often take up the role of being a teacher. In one dumbfounding moment in You’re Beautiful, Mi Nyeo was completely unaware that the sun was a star. Tae Kyung, of course, then uses this opportunity to demeaningly show off his capability. A milder example of the teacher role occurs in Bromance. Zifeng is constantly teaching Yanuo how to do things. He teaches her how to cook, how to ride a motorcycle, and how to shoot a gun, among other things. There is nothing inherently wrong with teaching someone a new skill, but in this situation the role of teacher is never alternated. Yanuo never teaches Zifeng how to do something—she is never the teacher, but always in need of learning.

The men have everything in the dramas, lacking nothing, while the opposite can be said about the women in these dramas. Eun Chan, Mi Nyeo, Jae Hoon, and Yanuo have no money, are not smart, and are not “attractive” according to hyperfeminine beauty standards. Whenever they get into trouble, their partner uses his abilities to rescue them, suggesting that women cannot do anything by themselves, and always need a man to come to their rescue. While their male counterparts are away, they struggle to get by, and seem lost. Though the male characters get to be successful at whatever they decide to do, the female characters are constantly struggling to just make ends meet. Though the male characters do not need anyone to help them achieve their goals, without the help from the male character the female cannot succeed.

However, there is one area where the female characters are frequently presented as being superior at: “feelings” or displaying emotion. It is the women in these shows that help the men work through their emotional baggage. Yanuo helps Zifeng sort his feelings out on his amnesiac father and encourages him get to know his father again; Jae Hee encourages Tae Joon to overcome his high jump anxiety; Mi Nyeo is there for Tae Kyung when he is going through a rough patch with his birth mother; and it is Eun Chan who encourages Han Kyul to be honest with his father about not wanting to inherit the family business. Once again, discussing one’s feelings and being there for a significant other is not an inherently bad thing, but there is something to be said when it is only the women providing this emotional support.

Interestingly, though, when the female characters are emotionally distressed, it is always male-centered. For example, in Bromance, the only scenes where Yanuo breaks down is due to her being worried about Zifeng’s well-being. It is after he puts himself in harm’s way, that Zifeng will have to comfort a crying Yanuo. In this way, the male characters are often heroes in a physical manner. They will physically rescue the women, but the women will be the ones to emotionally rescue the men. The behavior of the characters aligns with traditional East Asian gender roles. Boys are encouraged to be more dominant and active, while girls are raised to be passive and adaptable (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). Despite the female lead being disguised as a man, she often falls into these traditional gender roles. Even when the male lead is unaware of her gender these conservative gender dynamics still make an appearance. A relationship being stereotypically traditional does not necessarily make it an unhealthy relationship, but it definitely does not push the boundary of gender roles. By having the female leads exemplify traditional gender roles, despite being disguised as a man, heteronormativity is upheld.

Another equally discouraging theme found within these dramas is how the woman transforms. Although throughout the process of the relationship, all male characters change to become “better” men because of the love of their counterparts. The women also change as their
relationships progress. Before being in a relationship, Eun Chan, Mi Nyeo, Jae Hoon, and Yanuo were independent, strong, and caring women. When they do get into a relationship, they slowly change from being independent to totally being reliant on their partner. In terms of gender roles within the genderbending dramas, all the male characters start off successful and as the drama progresses, they become even more successful at whatever they do. The main female characters are rarely shown being successful on their own accord; they are successful only when they get aid from their partner. Thus, while crossdressing East Asian dramas expand the identity and capabilities of men, it supports the hegemonic idea that women are to be inferior to men in every way possible. That men should not be shorter, weaker, younger, poorer, or less successful than women (Galician, 2004).

Silencing Possible Gay Storylines

The genderbending drama reinforces gender roles, but what is equally disturbing is that it also reinforces heteronormativity, all while seeming like it is progressive toward gay relationships. In Coffee Prince, when Han Gyeol and Eun Chan first meet, Han hires Eun and asks “him” to pretend that they are in a gay relationship so that Han’s grandmother would stop trying to match him with girls. I must note here that Han Gyeol is pretending to be gay at this moment in the drama and is actually straight. During these episodes the audience get the idea that Han Gyeol has no negative feelings toward same sex relationships and may even be open to the idea of being in one since he is paying someone to act like his “boyfriend.” This abrupt and dismal sign of optimism is quickly shut down when Han Gyeol makes it clear that he supports same sex relationships but is strictly acting like he and Eun Chan are going out so that his grandmother stops pestering him with potential girl suitors. Even after he tells his grandmother about his partner, she still attempts to introduce him with women as a means to police his sexual identity, clarifying that it is okay to be gay, but is it not okay for Han Gyeol to be gay.

Not only do these dramas display a quasi-support for same sex relationships, with its wishy-washy stance on the matter, but it also silences possible gay narratives which confirms their false support. In To the Beautiful You, supporting character, Song Jong Min (Hwang Kwang Hee), is one of the boys who lives in the same dormitory as Jae Hee, Tae Joon, and Eun Gyeol. Though the series is not explicit about his sexual orientation, the show alludes that he is gay. He is always wanting to hangout one-on-one with Eun Gyeol, and constantly attempts to ask him to do things with him (ie: go to the movies, practice soccer, get food), as if he was asking him out on dates, but he is always rejected. When Eun Gyeol starts to spend more time with Jae Hee, Jong Min gets extremely jealous, and is continually competing with Jae Hee for Eun Gyeol’s attention. For example, in one scene everyone is gathered for lunch and Eun Gyeol feeds Jae Hee because she had hurt her hand. Eun Gyeol happily feeds her. Jong Min attempts to do the very same thing and is only fed rice by Eun Gyeol. Out of anger, Kong Min yells and foods spits out of his mouth. Eun Gyeol responds by saying that he was “disgusting”. This scene is seen as comedic, but also holds powerful subliminal renderings. First, the use of the word disgusting to describe Kong Min’s actions could also be read deeper as a way to describe same sex relationships—that it should be considered “disgusting”. By adding comedy to his constant denial from Eun Gyeol, it is casually shunning such actions and lifestyle. Second, the fact that Eun Gyeol is infatuated with someone who he thinks is a boy, but latter finds out is a girl, corrects his deviant homosexual thoughts, while at the same time Jong Min is further silenced and not given a second thought to his storyline. There
is no closure provided for this character, and his role in the show meets an abrupt end, as the audience does not even recognize that he is no longer in the show, a form a symbolic annihilation. To the Beautiful You’s refusal to fully embrace homosexuality, let alone use it as a comedic element, staunchly and subliminally reifies heteronormativity. This drama, as well as the others, capitalizes on various cultural trends in the perception and practice of gender and sexuality. The representation of being gay deploys substantial cultural capital that has already achieved local currency in the forms of soft/feminine masculinity throughout East Asia. In Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan where homosexuality is still controversial, the kkonminam or bishōnen offer an alternative to the patriarchal mainstream culture that confines sexuality to the biological function of reproduction within marriage and chastises anyone in pursuit of sexual pleasure outside such sanctioned boundaries. As Matsui (1993) contends, homosexuality and androgyny of the beautiful male are an alternative, and faux freedom, representing young women’s resistance to the commodification of their own sexualized bodies on screen. However, subverting sexism for women in the form of genderbending also reaffirms heteronormativity for the LGBT community.

**Reassurance of Straight Identity**

In all four dramas, there is a male character that experiences enormous stress because of his sudden homosexual attraction to the crossdressed female lead. This sexuality crisis is used as a comedic element. Because the audience knows that he is in fact experiencing heterosexual attraction, his anxiety and efforts to prove his masculinity, and disprove his homosexuality, are presented as funny. The implications of someone thinking they are gay being treated as comedy, however, suggests that being gay is an undesirable thing. For example, Cha Eun Gyeol, the second male lead of To the Beautiful You, sees being gay as an abnormal thing that makes it so he cannot be a real man. When faced with his own sexual questionings over his attraction to Jae Hee he is tormented. When he later discovers that he was experiencing heterosexual attraction all along it is met with enthusiasm and relief. This positivity about not being gay, only connotes the idea that being gay is undesirable and destructive. The presentation of homosexuality as abnormal and inferior corresponds with the notion of heteronormativity.

A similar storyline can be viewed in You’re Beautiful, with supporting character and bandmate, Jeremy. He is often times shown to be the bright and optimistic member of the band, but when he suddenly becomes attracted to Mi Nyeo, he questions his whole identity. He struggles with understanding that his infatuation with Mi Nyeo is uncommon for him, yet no matter what he does, he can’t stop thinking of her (remembering that he does not know that she is really a woman dressed as a man). His sudden optimism for the world is taken away and replaced with torment and confusion. At the climax of this self-confrontation, he finally admits that he is in love with her and confesses his feelings to Mi Nyeo. It is at this point that Mi Nyeo is forced to tell Jeremy the truth, and he is filled with and relief that he is not gay. Within a few short minutes of Mi Nyeo’s confession, the bright and optimistic Jeremy is back, now competing with the other band members to be Mi Nyeo’s suitor. His recovery to his “normal” self was remarkably swift, as if the show is covertly policing the deviant actions of the characters, thus representing East Asian society in general. Jeremy’s reassurance of his straight identity is showcased as optimistic, another concealed message enforced by this medium—that one can only find true happiness when they conform to normative gender and sexual scripts.
These dramas also try to discourage a queer reading of the characters' sexual questioning and curiosity by suggesting that his homosexual attraction was due to the undisguisable femininity of the crossdressing character. There is the idea that these men were subconsciously responding to the biological sex of the female lead (Kornfield, 2011). This is shown during a scene in To the Beautiful You, where Jae Hee is discussing with the school doctor about the guilt she feels for causing Eun Gyeol to think he is gay:

Doctor: Cha Eun Gyeol is utterly and completely a heterosexual. The reason that he fell for you is probably because he found some feminine characteristics that you couldn’t hide. This is what you would call basic instincts, a natural reaction.

The explanation that the crossdressing lead was simply too feminine is also used outside of explaining the predicament. The very fact that the character playing the doctor explains this idea shows a form of “ethos”, as if his assessment is medically grounded. Even in Bromance, when confronting his attraction for Yanuo, Zifeng assumes that it must have begun because “he” is so feminine. In these scenes, the dramas go to a great effort to make the homosexual attraction appear heterosexual.

Another explanation is also provided to excuse the sexuality crisis and the male’s attraction to their female disguised as male character: logic, an innately “masculine” trait. In all these shows, the female leads are in situations where it would make no sense to question someone’s gender, nor would it be a huge concern. Jae Hee attends an all-boys school, why would a girl be a student at an all-boys school? Mi Nyeo joins a boyband, why would a girl be in a boyband? The situations these characters are in would make it illogical to assume that they were anything other than a man. That’s why in To the Beautiful You and You’re Beautiful when characters that are not aware of this logic come across the female lead, they immediately recognize her as a woman. In these shows, her femininity is too great that the clothes cannot disguise her alone. Using this train of thought, the males’ mistaken homosexual attraction can be forgiven because logically what else would they have thought. These characters had no reason not to believe in the crossdresser’s disguise. It also helps that the men who do fall for this attraction are the “stupid” male characters, as the other characters already figured out that she was disguised as a man and know that their attraction to her is heterosexual. In this way, the male in angst did not purposely have gay feelings, he was just not smart enough to figure out the truth.

Bromance is to only show that lacks the “sexuality crisis” trope. Some may argue that this may be a sign of growing acceptance of LGBT issues in East Asian societies. The exclusion of this trope within Bromance however is, again, an illusion of progress. Yes, Zifeng actually comes to terms with his attraction to Yanuo, and Zifeng accepts that he loves Yanuo. This should be a moment to celebrate, as an attractive male is admitting being in love with another “man,” and actually carries through with being in a relationship with them. HOWEVER, in the very last episode of this series, Zifeng asks for Yanuo’s hand in marriage in front of his and her family. It is at this moment where, Yanuo is finally 26 years-old and is able to admit to Zifeng that she was disguising as a man the whole time. Surprisingly, viewers find out that Zifeng already knew, when he overheard her talking to her family about her secret months before (the second episode in the series). The feeling of awe in embracing a gay narrative, is replaced by a revelation—That love is
not indeed blind, but rather it is stuck on a gender line. If someone crosses that line, they will be ridiculed and corrected, thus progress is an illusion and heteronormativity is reaffirmed.

**Conclusion**

How different would the genderbending drama be if there were more egalitarian gender roles? What if the focus was not on crossdressing, but instead characters who identified as transgender, who were working through their transition? What would it be like if there was a gay main story arc? In the case of contemporary East Asian dramas, the crossdresser represents someone relatable to the audience. Her imperfections are what allow the viewers on the other side of the screen to picture themselves in her shoes. Not to mention, that she is able to date the romantic male protagonist, despite her disguise being an obstacle. The socially average, crossdressed female lead allows the viewers to fantasize about being in her place. Her genderbended body also turns the male lead into the “ideal” boyfriend. He falls in love with the female protagonist despite her male disguise, thus proving the sincerity and intensity of romantic feelings. These dramas are designed to please the heterosexual gaze, not the LGBT one. Aforementioned above, East Asian popular culture in the form of “Cool Japan” and the Hallyu is widely consumed not only within Asia, but worldwide. This poses the questions: Do these texts assume a different meaning when viewed by a Western audience? Are these dramas a reconceptualization of an eroticized orientalism?

From my own Asian American perspective, I think of these desires for viewing cultural productions from regions other than one’s own as opening or re-opening imaginaries of erotic desire in the self that could be linked to orientalism. I can also see desires for these cultural products as a means of self-escapism from repressive hierarchies of one’s own home culture. Here, media critic Jenkins’ (2006) definition of pop cosmopolitan is a useful term, as he argues, “someone whose embrace of global popular media represents an escape route of the parochialism of her [sic] local community… a growing proportion of the popular culture that Americans consume comes from elsewhere, especially Asia” (p. 152). Being global consumers Jenkins (2006) is hopeful that “cosmopolitans embrace cultural difference, seeking to escape the gravitational pull of their local communities in order to enter a broader sphere of cultural experience” (pp. 154-155). In terms of gender and sexual identities, one can wonder if this cultural consumption can fuel imaginings outside of localized hierarchies. This is a possible next step in understanding the genderbending drama, but for now my current appraisal of the texts themselves are pessimistic. Yes, they may be an attempt to queer what is known of normative gender and sexuality, but only superficially.

Not all is lost, however, because these shows have the potential to ease in homophobic viewers to queer images. Like Peter Chan Ho Sun’s He’s a Woman, She’s a Man (1994), these dramas are made for the heterosexual gaze, but have the potential to open viewer’s minds to different ideas about sexuality and gender (Stokes, 2012). Coffee Prince, You’re Beautiful, To the Beautiful You, and Bromance, allow a place for a conservative audience to explore ideas about gender and sexuality without being challenged on their views too much. Nonetheless, the four dramas analyzed still do promote a heteronormative view of society. The shows do not question the legitimacy of gender roles, go to a great extent to eliminate nonheterosexual readings, and
promote the authenticity of the gender binary. The current state of crossdressing in East Asian dramas, makes it more acceptable to appropriate queer imagery, instead of celebrating and acknowledging the world beyond heteronormativity. Alas, what is thought of as dramas that portrayed progressive gender ideas in a woman disguised as a man, were really heteronormativity disguised as progress.

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