

Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea

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Abstract

This article explores the unusually high levels of cosmetic surgery in South Korea – for both women and men. We argue that existing explanations, which draw on feminist and postcolonial positions, presenting cosmetic surgery as pertinent only to female and non-western bodies found lacking by patriarchal and racist/imperialist economies, miss important cultural influences. In particular, focus on western cultural hegemony misses the influence in Korea of national identity discourses and traditional Korean beliefs and practices such as physiognomy. We show how these beliefs provide a more ‘gendered’ as opposed to feminist analysis, which allows space for discussion of men’s surgeries. Finally, we critique the accepted notion of the ‘western body’, especially its position in some literature as a more unobtainable ideal for non-western than for western women. We argue that this body has little in common with *actual* western women’s bodies, and more in common with a globalized image, embodying idealized elements from many different cultures.

Keywords

cosmetic surgery, gender, globalization, Korea, physiognomy

South Koreans’ alleged ‘obsession’ with cosmetic surgery regularly hits headlines both in Asia and the ‘West’ because of its reportedly high take-up rate by both women and men. While statistics on the numbers of people who undergo aesthetic surgery in Korea are not entirely reliable – since most surgeries take place at private clinics and the industry in Korea (as elsewhere) is poorly regulated – the

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numbers seem significant (Yang, 2007). The most recent ‘official’ statistics put the percentage of Koreans undergoing cosmetic surgery in 2008 at around 20 percent.¹ However, the actual number is likely to be considerably higher as only a fraction of surgeries are actually recorded. Clinics offering discounts for cash transactions, though common, are rarely documented. Moreover, other surveys consistently estimate significantly higher rates, and in 2008 alone, around 30 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 50 underwent some form of more or less invasive cosmetic treatment (Fackler, 2009). Cosmetic surgery and skin treatment clinics are now commonplace in urban shopping malls, viewed much like nail and beauty salons in the UK, and providing procedures such as laser removal of blemishes to ‘walk-in’ customers.

While aesthetic surgery continues to be generally understood as a ‘feminine’ practice, Korean men are also having aesthetic surgery in increasingly significant numbers. The Korean Association for Plastic Surgeons estimates this number to stand at around 15 percent of men in 2010, and a recent survey conducted by a Korean employment website found that 44 percent of male college students were contemplating some form of aesthetic surgery (Kang and Cho, 2009). Again, these numbers are estimates, but give some idea of the scale of men’s participation (similar estimates in the UK and US, for example, quote men as less than 10 percent of clients, although statistics for men are particularly unreliable in the West – see Holliday and Cairnie, 2007). Cosmetic surgery, then, is a significant social issue, and one that perplexes both academics and policy makers in Korea – not to mention the media, who generate many column inches of sensational stories on this issue.

Existing research in Korea frames cosmetic surgery primarily in two ways – either as an undesired effect of western cultural influence or as a feminized issue evidencing women’s continued subjection to patriarchy. However, our research questions these simplistic explanations. We will show that the meanings and practices of aesthetic surgery represent a process of negotiation between multiple discourses concerning national identity, globalized and regionalized standards of beauty, official and non-official religion, traditional beliefs and practices (in some instances historically imported from some other place), as well as the symbolic practices of coming of age, caring for the self, marking social status and seeking success. All

these considerations frequently intersect with and occasionally contradict each other. We argue that foregrounding cosmetic surgery as only a *feminine* or *culturally imperialist* practice is a key weakness of the existing literature and produces only partial accounts of national cosmetic practices. The data on which this article is based have been ‘scavenged’ (see Halberstam, 1998) from newspaper and magazine articles, cosmetic surgery websites (both clinic advertisements and discussion sites), official (government and professional bodies) statistics, and from conversations and personal experiences as well as from the existing literature.

Types of Surgery

The term cosmetic *surgery* (*sŏnghyŏng susul*) is used in Korea to refer to invasive practices, rather than common ‘quick fixes’ such as laser removal of facial blemishes or Botox injections to reduce wrinkles or to shrink the jaw muscle, creating a desirable ‘V’-shaped face (Jin, 2005). The most popular cosmetic surgeries in South Korea are eyelid surgeries (blepharoplasties) and ‘nose jobs’ (rhinoplasties), although jaw reshaping – performed using oscillating saws to reduce the angular prominence of the mandible (J.-G. Lee, 2007) – is becoming increasingly popular (and affordable). Blepharoplasty refers to the creation of a visible palpebral fold to the eyelid where one is not already visible (Sheng, 2000), but also more generally to the widening of the eye or ‘lifting’ of the eyelid. There are three main surgical techniques to create a double-lid appearance: the suture, the partial-incision and the full-incision technique (Lam and Kim, 2003). The aim of the procedure is to give more prominence to the upper eyelid, or a ‘wider’ gaze, without making the eye appear ‘unnatural’. Rhinoplasty typically involves implanting silicone, or autogenous cartilages or bone harvested from the septum or rib, to augment the tip and dorsum of the nose, constructing a desirable ‘pointy’ (as opposed to wide and flat) tip of the nose (Jin and Won, 2009). Breast augmentations and liposuction are also common.

With the exception of breast augmentation, all these ‘enhancements’ are consumed both by women and men. Currently, young men in their twenties seek a ‘softer’ image, mimicking the image of boy-heroes in popular Korean *manhwa* and Japanese *manga* cartoons and *anime*. This look has become increasingly prevalent since the late 1990s when

popular boy bands began to sport the *bishōnen* look already popular in Japan (see Maliangkay, 2010). These so-called *kkonminam* (literally, ‘beautiful flower boys’) looks are epitomized in the highly popular TV drama series *Boys Over Flowers* (*Kkot-poda namja*, broadcast on KBS, 2009). The ‘soft’ image, for these men, includes a less angular jaw, double eyelids and a prominent nose tip, while augmenting pectoral and bicep muscles to give their bodies ‘definition’. The aim is therefore to create a muscular but smooth (hairless) body with boyish facial features. For men in their thirties and forties, ‘noble (sometimes called ‘royal’) cosmetics’ are more popular. Under this umbrella undesirable facial features, such as sunken foreheads, are ‘corrected’ by inserting implants to the front and back of the skull (M.-A. Lee, 2007).

Attitudes towards Cosmetic Surgery in Korea

While the global financial crisis recently hit the cosmetic surgery industry in Korea, the government sought to protect this important source of GDP by temporarily allowing its citizens to claim tax credit for the cost of cosmetic surgery (*Digital Chosun Ilbo*, 2007). The decision was undoubtedly partly motivated by a desire to gauge the income sources of medical institutions, but is equally indicative of the value of the aesthetic surgery market to the ‘national interest’. This was even more evident in 2008 when £642 million was invested in advertising Korea as a leading destination for aesthetic surgery tourism (Fifield, 2008). Ara Wilson (2011: 135) argues that in Thailand medical tourism is similarly valued as a national(ist) asset, as ‘transnational movements of bodies securing exported medical services in Thailand reconstitute the nation as the territorial locus for patients and economy’. In 2007 the late President Roh Moo-hyun had double eyelid surgery (albeit claiming it was for ‘medical reasons’). However, despite a recent tax levy on ‘non-essential’ cosmetic surgeries (Suh and Jung, 2010), the industry continues, by and large, to be unregulated.²

While the government seems undecided on the benefits of cosmetic surgery, and the women’s rights movements in Korea are very clear about its negative implications, public attitudes to aesthetic surgery in Korea have become increasingly positive. In general, cosmetic surgery is perceived as a worthwhile and understandable investment in the body, rather than a sign of vanity (as it

is often understood in the West). A recent survey found that seven out of ten people do not object to cosmetic surgery, with an even higher percentage indicating they would have surgery if money was no obstacle (Yang, 2007). However, new distinctions are also being drawn between 'natural' and 'surgical' beauty, so that surgically created beauty must erase its processes of construction to emulate natural, 'non made-up beauty' (*ssaeng'ot*), which is still recognized as superior (Kim, 2009). For example, South Korean celebrities tend to deny they have had surgery, yet their features have shown subtle 'enhancing' changes over time. Successful surgery with no expense spared should look 'natural', where natural is importantly defined as enhancing *Korean* features. Interestingly, unsuccessful surgeries are often defined as producing an unnaturally 'Western' appearance – or, of course, marking the traces of their interventions. Only the well-off can afford the services of the best clinics, hence the 'natural (Korean) look' emerges as a sign of affluence and middle-class status.

While there is broad acknowledgement in both media reporting and clinical research that surgery is a painful practice, clinic websites play down the negative after-effects, and play up the positive benefits with 'before and after' photos. Typically, cosmetic surgery procedures are marketed much like a visit to a health spa in the UK; customers are encouraged to book a day having double-eyelid surgery with a friend. Sanitized and entertaining representations of cosmetic surgery in films such as *The 200 Pound Beauty* (*Minyo-nun kwer-owŏ*; Kim, 2006) and comedy drama series *Before and After Cosmetic Surgery Clinic* (*Bip'o & aep'ut'ŏ sŏnghyŏng we'gwa*; MBC, 2008) serve to romanticize the practice with extremely rare references to procedures gone wrong or the painful recoveries, although the devastating effects of bad surgeries are occasionally reported in the media. In fact, feminist organizations represent practically the only opposition to cosmetic surgery in Korea, but their opposition has in practice been limited to prosecuting cosmetic surgery clinics for illegal advertising in women's magazines.³

Gendering (Western) Cosmetic Surgery

A number of studies have attempted to explain the high incidence of aesthetic surgery in Korea by emphasizing 'traditional' patriarchal culture. In doing so, they often draw heavily on key feminist writers

from the West (but in so doing frequently ignore the specific characteristics of *Korean* cosmetic surgery – and men’s surgeries). While this feminist work tends to disagree on whether women strive to achieve ‘beautiful’ bodies (Bordo, 1993, 1997) or ‘normal’ bodies (Davis, 1995, 2003), there is general agreement that aesthetic surgery exists within a misogynistic (beauty) culture, and only really affects women, and exceptionally a small proportion of deviant (feminized) men. Drawing on ‘official’ statistics in the West claiming just 10 percent of patients are men, Kathy Davis (2003) argues that men will never be aesthetic surgery patients in significant numbers due to gendered assumptions (active male surgeon and passive female patient). Morgan (1991: 30) produces a higher figure of male clients (30–40 percent), but still omits men from her discussion. Locating cosmetic surgery in normalization, then, Davis worries that ‘anyone’ is a potential candidate for surgery (since no one is ‘normal’), and that surgery becomes a choice rather than a ‘need’. Unlike Bordo (1997), she emphasizes women’s choice and agency in improving their bodies/lives. However, in linking such choices to pain – the psychic pain of having the ‘wrong body’ and the physical pain of surgery – while she counters the construction of women as ‘selfish’ consumers, she repositions them as ‘victims’. Here we see a repetition of the structure–agency dichotomy used in public health care (in which Davis’ research was conducted), where those who represent themselves as ‘agents’ are characterized as misguided, apolitical and selfish, and those who admit to being victims are considered deserving of surgery. However, for Bordo, all choices are ultimately produced by the beauty industry itself:

the rhetoric of choice and self-determination and the breezy analogies comparing cosmetic surgery to fashion accessorizing ... efface not only the inequalities of privilege, money, and time that prohibit most people from indulging in these practices, but also the desperation that characterizes the lives of those who do. (1997: 337)

More recently, young women in the private health care market have been characterized as highly demanding consumers of cosmetic surgery. These ‘clients’ decentre the role of the surgeon in making both technical and aesthetic judgements, albeit positioned as part of a ‘makeover culture’ in which *becoming* has become significantly more important than the end result (Jones, 2008). Middle-class

women in the US position cosmetic surgery as a reward for hard work and thrift, as well as looking after one's body through healthy diet and exercise. Thus, cosmetic surgery facilitates the manifestation of the carefully tended body in which other significant investments have also been made (Gimlin, 2007). To paraphrase Margrit Shildrick (2008), the makeover does not just simply represent alteration to the body but also improvement to the self, such that the subject of the surgical makeover both stands back and comments on the new appearance of her old self and claims to be a different person, brought into being by the surgical cut.

Men's procedures are still rarely mentioned in the cosmetic surgery literature, perhaps because 'official' statistics in the UK and US continue to hide men's treatments by excluding cosmetic dentistry and hair transplants. Figures on breast reductions – the second most popular surgery in the UK and US – are frequently assumed to apply only to women, despite Miller's (2005) claim that over 80 percent of these surgeries are actually performed on men. The few articles specifically on men's cosmetic surgeries position them as either part of the 'crisis of masculinity' (Atkinson, 2008) or the 'metrosexual' consumer-subject (Miller, 2005). Holliday and Cairnie (2007) have argued that while there is little evidence that masculinity precludes men from engaging in cosmetic surgery – since surgeries can provide significant body capital for men in the areas of both employment and relationships – some do offer more instrumental explanations than women; looking younger at work to remain competitive, for instance (see also Elliott, 2008).

A further concern for Davis (2003: 7) is that 'one ideal – a white, Western model – becomes the norm to which everyone, explicitly or implicitly, aspires'. While research into aesthetic surgery on the white western body has tended to prioritize gender as an explanatory category, studies of aesthetic surgery on the non-white body can largely be characterized as gender-neutral investigations of 'ethnic' cosmetic surgery (Davis, 2003; Gilman, 2000; Kaw, 1997). 'Ethnic' cosmetic surgery usually portrays minority ethnic populations in western 'host' nations as subject to racism, and frames aesthetic surgery, as Eugenia Kaw (1997: 75) does, as 'an attempt to escape persisting racial prejudice that correlates to their stereotyped genetic physical features' (despite strong insistence from Kaw's own respondents that they were not trying to look western, but to avoid looking

'sleepy'). Thus, 'white' cosmetic surgery has emerged as (only) a gender issue, excluding the theoretical intervention of 'race', while 'non-white' cosmetic surgery has frequently failed to engage with gendered experiences. Whiteness is thereby constituted as a 'natural' category for all white people against which all non-white people unfavourably compare.

In addition, feminist approaches to cosmetic surgery and accounts of 'ethnic cosmetic surgery' tend to foreground different surgical procedures. While accounts of 'white' cosmetic surgery tend to focus on breast augmentations, tummy tucks and anti-ageing facial surgery as attempts to normalize women's bodies to unrealistic feminine ideals, 'ethnic' cosmetic surgery studies highlight (gender-neutral) double-eyelid surgeries, nose re-shaping and skin lightening as attempts to approach a 'white' norm and avoid racism. Interestingly, then, two sets of studies emerge focused on differently gendered populations, with 'ethnic' cosmetic surgery studies including men (but not a gendered analysis) and 'feminist' cosmetic surgery studies excluding men (and a 'raced' analysis).⁴ Each approach draws on particular surgeries while ignoring others, such that practices like tanning, collagen enhanced lips and buttock augmentations – popular procedures which cannot be explained through 'whitening' or idealized femininity discourses – are rarely discussed (except see Holliday and Sanchez Taylor, 2006).

Another problem with 'ethnic' cosmetic surgery approaches is that they have tended to present minority ethnic populations as static, existing only in relation to a 'host' culture. Such studies have ignored the distinct cosmetic surgery procedures popular in different national contexts, as well as patterns of migration and ongoing connections with cultures of origin through cross-national connections facilitated by cheap airfares, the internet and cable and satellite TV (for more on this see *Body & Society's* 2011 special issue on medical migrations – Roberts et al., 2011). This means that many expatriate communities are routinely in contact with the culture of their 'country of origin' – even if they have never actually visited it – and it therefore seems likely that aesthetic preferences are drawn as much from these connections as from a 'host' nation's aesthetic ideals. In researching cosmetic surgery in Korea, a further problem of 'ethnic' cosmetic surgery studies which focus on Asian-Americans is that their results have been generalized to apply to 'countries of origin'; that is,

Koreans *in Korea*. Accordingly, what are seen as ‘whitening’ practices in the West are also presented as ‘westernizing’ practices in the East without much consideration of *localized* discourses that intersect with more globalized practices of cosmetic surgery. Explanation of Korean cosmetic surgery only in terms of westernization seems unlikely given Korea’s strong sense of nationalism, as well as its national relationship with other regional powers, for example Japan (we will return to this later). Presently, then, the same procedure may be explained differently for different ethnic groups. A breast augmentation for an ethnically Korean woman can be (and has been) explained as ‘whitening’ or westernizing (depending on where she is located), the popularity of breast augmentation implying that Koreans have naturally smaller breasts than white women; whereas the same procedure on a white woman is routinely explained as feminizing and not related to ‘race’. However, since breast augmentation is the most popular procedure in the West does that not, by the same logic, imply that white women must also have naturally small breasts? If Korean women are ‘whitening’, why not white women? Or, if we reject the hypothesis that all non-western surgeries imply perceived ‘racial deficiency’ in comparison with the ‘white’ body, how do we explain procedures like calf trimming or cheekbone shaving, extremely popular in Korea but not in other places? We will now briefly review the work of key writers on cosmetic surgery in Korea specifically, enquiring whether this work can help to answer these (and other) questions.

Gendering and Westernizing Cosmetic Surgery in Korea

Studies in Korea typically position cosmetic surgery as conformity to patriarchal versions of femininity in order to maximize women’s chances of success in marriage and the economy. Some see women’s desire for aesthetic surgery as a continuation of pre-modern ‘virtuous femininity’ that required (upper-class) women to adhere to a strict Neo-Confucian decorum. Under Neo-Confucianism, men were expected to transcend their bodies (learning, philosophy) to become ‘superior’, while women’s success, bound to the intimate and the domestic, was rooted in their ability to mimic a concealed and deferential ideal, defined by virginity or maternity. Taeyon Kim (2003), for example, argues that Neo-Confucian ethics continues to inform

rigid gender scripts positioning men as subjects and women as 'subjectless bodies' in need of control and protection.⁵ She asserts that under consumer capitalism Korean women's bodies have entered the public sphere, no longer hidden away but now available for scrutiny and consumption. Thus, visibility produces women as 'object[s] for alteration' (2003: 106) evidenced in Korea's high rates of cosmetic surgery. Kim locates cosmetic surgery in the Neo-Confucian 'culture of conformity', where the unity of the whole is more important than the individuality of the one, producing beauty as a new 'requirement of decorum' for women (2003: 106–7); Woo (2004: 53) notes that in this climate women are 'obsessed with their appearance'.

Park Sang Un's (2007) essay on dieting and embodiment instead deploys the Korean foundation myth to show how contemporary discourses of women's value continue to emphasize self-sacrifice. Park argues that Korean femininity promotes suffering for the greater good, evidenced in women's willingness to endure pain for beauty:

Just as the [she-]bear in the [Korean foundation] myth had to overcome the pain of staying in a dark cave and eating only mugwort and garlic in order to become a human being, today's bear-women must undergo the pain of dieting and plastic surgery in order to become beautiful women with bodies that are considered normal and socially acceptable. (Park, 2007: 46)

Park also points out, linking patriarchal national culture with western-influenced globalization, that today's 'bear-woman is the Western female' (2007: 47) – something the 'average Korean women can hardly attain' (2007: 55). Kim (2003) also positions 'Eurasian' beauty as the Korean ideal since a 1994 legal change permitting the use of non-Korean models in Korean advertising. For Cho (2009), technology conspires with patriarchal aesthetic standards and neoliberal consumer capitalism to increase women's human capital in the marriage market and workplace.

Unlike the rather passive figures presented by Kim, Park and Cho, however, Woo's (2004) women emerge as highly informed, active agents in their engagements with cosmetic surgeons. Cosmetic surgery is positioned in tandem with significant gains for Korean women in education and careers. Woo shows how women's bodies have moved from a limited maternal role to an active, pleasure-seeking one, and

how beauty brings not only gratification but also a degree of status in contemporary Korean society. She is careful to point out that women's aesthetic surgeries are voluntary and empowering. However, she sees this empowerment ultimately as a trap, the benefits of one surgical procedure creating desire for another, producing women as surgery 'addicts': having internalized patriarchal and westernized beauty standards, they 'helplessly accept the logic of technological capital that makes women constantly examine their bodies in a negative and pathological light' (2004: 78–9):

As a non-white race, Korean women's bodies were branded as inferior and flawed and the images of white women conveyed through mass media in such forums as Miss Universe competitions and Hollywood movies presented a beauty ideal that Korean women felt obliged to pursue. (2004: 60)

Woo shows how many employers try to enforce specific height and weight restrictions for women graduates and how women's bodies are used to sell products and symbolize desire within Korean consumer capitalism. However, in supporting these claims she draws mainly on highly gendered, classed and embodied occupations such as *tōumi* (young women who sell products in department stores and in the street), and flight attendants. There is much in Woo's article that adds to the discussion of aesthetic surgery in Korea (and elsewhere); however, despite mentioning the increase in men's cosmetic surgery and alluding in a footnote to the significance of physiognomy, her analysis remains rooted narrowly in patriarchal and western systems of beauty and neoliberalism. In grounding their arguments only in patriarchies – be they Neo-Confucian, western or technological – all these writers fail to adequately explain not only men's cosmetic surgeries, but *all* Korean cosmetic surgeries, since gender is clearly not the only cultural mechanism at work here.

Other Colonizations

National identity politics in South Korea are complex, and cannot be understood without reference to the Japanese colonial period (1910–45). This period witnessed the imposition of western-style modernization in Korea via a colonizing Japanese culture, which emphasized its own superiority over 'backward' Korea (Pai, 2000). Predictably, then, since liberation in 1945, much effort has gone into highlighting

the ‘un-Japaneseness’ of the Korean people. In particular, immediately after the colonial period, nationalistic discourses mobilized the West as a way of rejecting Japan as the self-declared bearer of civilization. For example Na Se-jin, writing in 1964, distinguishes the Korean from the Japanese thus:

The Korean is of medium to tall height, among many races of the world. The neck is thin and long, and because of the superior development of the Korean’s body and muscular structure, the posture is straight and erect. The calf is long, and since every part of the body’s measurements are very even, the Korean resembles the well-proportioned stature of the Europeans and Americans [rather than the Japanese]. (quoted in Pai, 2000: 260)

The western body, then, was mobilized in defiance of Japanese standards of beauty – as anti-colonial discourse. While in contemporary Korea particular forms of Japanese popular culture are embraced and emulated (sometimes themselves imported from elsewhere), the postwar situation highlights how appearances – faces and bodies – have been deployed in political and local struggles through complex interplays of sameness and difference.

Following liberation in 1945, the Korean War and Korea’s subsequent division in 1953, South Korea endured a series of dictatorships and rapid industrialization, quickly transforming from an agrarian to an industrialized nation with an insatiable need for labour. During this period, official discourses made sense of a divided (South) Korean national identity by emphasizing the ‘traditional’, pre-colonial national culture of the elite pre-colonial *yangban* class (and the Chosŏn dynasty in particular). These values were generalized to represent ‘authentic Koreanness’ for all (Elfving-Hwang, 2010). Predictably, this precipitated a return to traditional gender discourses that associated women with the nurturing maternal body. Here again, the body emerges as a site for negotiating and reinforcing national identity.

Physiognomy

Related to this, many Koreans re-embraced traditional forms of divination, such as astrology and physiognomy, which were seen as ‘authentic’ elements of Korean culture (Kim, 2005). This enduring belief is exemplified in the widely discussed case of President Chun

Doo Hwan (1980–8) whose mother had prayed for 100 days for a son before conceiving. It is said that she met a wandering monk who told her she had the face of a mother who would give birth to a successful son – if only she had less protruding teeth. She promptly smashed her teeth out with a rock, her son subsequently becoming president.⁶ The story undoubtedly underlines the importance of non-official religious practices in Korea, explaining how Chun Doo Hwan's mother altered the fate of her son by altering her own appearance. Indigenous folk religions and practices have undergone a revival during the past three decades and physiognomy, as a prominent form of 'Korean' divination, has been enthusiastically embraced. Around half of all Koreans believe that one can 'read' a person's character by looking at their face (Kim, 2005). With the growing affluence of Korean society, the 'inauspicious' face, previously having doomed its bearer to a lifetime of bad luck, can now be fixed.

Although it has traditionally been considered disrespectful to one's ancestors (who bequeath one's body) to alter physical appearance (Kim, 2009; Shin, 2002), 'physiognomic surgery' (*gwansang susul*) is gaining popularity as Korean customers seek auspicious faces in addition to beautiful ones (Im, 2009). Many who consider undergoing aesthetic surgery consult a physiognomist beforehand, and aesthetic surgeons and physiognomists work closely together making mutual recommendations to clients (Jeffreys, 2007). This practice has little to do with enhancing the subject's appearance in line with accepted (western) beauty models. For example, a common procedure removes moles or blemishes from under the eyes, since these are seen to resemble tears – a sign of sorrows to come (Lee, 2006). While not everyone believes in physiognomy, having a 'lucky face', 'right face' or 'best face' reduces the 'risk' of leaving an unfavourable impression and can be of great importance in many practical ways.

Many young men and women seek to attain an *oljjang* (literally: 'best face'). The common practice of seeking approval from strangers of the results of surgical procedures highlights the importance of having the 'right face'. Individuals post before and after photos on internet chatroom sites⁷ soliciting evaluations from other members. As Featherstone (2010) explains, writing about the West, the portrait photograph, posed and then, perhaps, Photoshopped, cannot be separated from the *imago*. The image is related to the imagination

and represents not what is there, but what one imagines one could or should be. The photographic portrait, then, is never individual but embodies cultural ideals. Cosmetic surgery enables these cultural ideals to become (to a certain extent) a reality. This raises questions about whether Korean aesthetic surgery is simply a desire to ‘westernize’, or whether it represents a continuation of older traditions of altering appearance for success or, more probably, some negotiation between these two.

Blepharoplasty in particular has often been explained in terms of ‘westernization’. However, it is worth remembering that while many Koreans already have a double eyelid, many westerners undergo blepharoplasties too. Wider eyes signal youth, energy and alertness. Korean women have used temporary eyelid tapes and glues for decades, most usually justified as easing the application of make-up. Eye surgery is seen as a more convenient permanent fix (the surgery takes 10 to 20 minutes depending on technique) which saves time and allows greater participation in sports and swimming, for example. Blepharoplasties (like breast augmentations) appear to have originated in Japan (the first performed by a surgeon named Mikamo in 1896) and were originally used to treat children born with one single and one double eyelid (Miller, 2006). East Asians tend to have more adipose fat in the eyelid than Caucasians, and men and women who have too much fat removed are seen negatively as artificially western. Wider eyes may be desirable, but they must be wider *Korean* eyes, not western ones. The most important aim of cosmetic surgery is to create a natural look that ‘enhances’ the body without losing the ‘Koreanness’ of the subject who undergoes surgery.

However, ‘Koreanness’ in the context of blepharoplasty is also in a state of flux, and wide eyes also have another, more gendered meaning. Some of the features most commonly sought through aesthetic surgery today would have been considered undesirable in the past. For instance, Korean physiognomy has traditionally characterized round eyes for women as suggesting lasciviousness, yet round eyes are currently desirable, while a large ‘moon face’ has historically connoted fertility and therefore value for women, yet women are now having their faces narrowed. Under consumer capitalism, huge shifts have occurred in Korean women’s roles, for the urban middle classes at least. Most young, educated women are now working, delaying marriage and having only one child in order to preserve their careers.

For Bordo (1993), writing in and about the West in the early 1990s, similar shifts resulted in a 'hard' (muscular, toned) body as the ideal for women. Rather than positioning this body as an attempt to simply emulate advertising, Bordo shows how the hard body connotes strength and independence, making women's bodies unremarkable in the masculine workplace. She also shows how the battle against fat on hips and breasts signified a hatred of the material body that represented a purely maternal, domestic destiny. Holliday and Sanchez Taylor (2006) have shown that the surgically 'enhanced' – particularly breast-augmented – body connotes sexual self-determination for women who reject the necessity to masculinize their bodies to fit male norms. In the same way, Korean women seem to be divorcing themselves from this maternal body – the moon face traditionally so associated with fecundity – and embracing signs of overt sexuality, such as wide eyes, thereby rejecting patriarchal models of propriety. Thus, while beliefs informed by physiognomy clearly have some part to play, the definition of what is and is not auspicious appears to be in flux and open to contestation. Unlike Woo, then, we do not see Korean cosmetic surgery as a westernizing trap, but as a way of expressing sexual (and marriage) self-determination and occupation of the public sphere.

Gendering Korean Cosmetic Surgery

While studies on Korea deploy both feminist and postcolonial approaches, they still fail to *gender* cosmetic surgery, accounting for men's practices. This is particularly significant given the large numbers of men in South Korea engaging with cosmetic surgery, and demonstrates feminism's hegemony in accounts of aesthetic surgery and popular discourses which situate it as a 'woman's issue' (see Fraser, 2003). Feminist assertions like Kim's (2005), about the subjectivity of men and subjectlessness of women, are extremely problematic from a Foucauldian perspective, which asserts that we are all – men and women alike – subjects not of ourselves, but of discourses. Neither women nor men can stand outside language and culture and the power relations that produce our understandings of the world and our positions within it; men are just differently positioned within it (Grosz, 1994). It seems, then, that Korean men are also easily interpellated by the cosmetic surgery industry through discourses like physiognomy that, while producing differently gendered

associations, apply equally to women and men. In Korea, two differently gendered constructions of cosmetic surgery exist: *kyōrhon sōnghyōng* ('marriage cosmetic surgery') and *chig'ōp sōnghyōng* ('employment cosmetic surgery'). Having the 'right face' can be crucial in 'marrying well'. The 'right face' can also be a determining factor in gaining employment in a Korean job market where nearly 80 percent of young people now attend further education college or university, and this is an issue of great importance for both men and women. The 'right face' is one with no inauspicious features and one that connotes youth, vitality and upper-class looks. Since a photograph is a requirement of all job applications, and physiognomy is often used to evaluate candidates where qualifications and experience are equal, an employee with 'friendly' (*insang'i choun*) facial features will always be preferred, given the importance of social bonding in the workplace. Cosmetic surgery is thus a practical issue in an extremely competitive (and in some occupations ageist) job market, *chig'ōp sōnghyōng* making the difference between success and failure in getting a job. Recruitment agency JobKorea found that 80 percent of recruitment executives considered the physical appearance of a candidate 'important', and a 2006 study found that there was a perception among high school students that appearance would often be considered of greater importance than abilities and skills in hiring decisions (Jung and Lee, 2006). While this pressure is inevitably greater for women than for men, physiognomy and the extreme emphasis put on appearance means that men cannot escape it altogether.

However, there is also some evidence to suggest that since the late 1990s, *beauty* ideals for women and men are also converging in what Sun Jung (2010) describes as a complex cultural deconstruction of male and female, embodied by the feminine-looking *kkonminam* men. According to Jung, the *kkonminam* are thought to be able to satisfy complex human (especially female) desires because they possess both feminine and masculine attributes. The growing popularity of the *kkonminam* in popular culture certainly seems to reflect a desire to break with earlier idealized masculinities which relied on traditional militarized images. Korean women's increasing economic self-sufficiency and reluctance to marry early, as well as a skewed gender ratio are perhaps making women more choosy when selecting a partner. Young men appear to be acquiescing in feminine desire for

a more caring and not 'hard' masculinity. The beautiful *kkonminam*'s 'softer' features signify a break from the cool, detached businessman – men who are more interested in satisfying their colleagues than their partners and whose self-worth is associated with long working hours (Korean men work some of the longest hours in the developed world). The *kkonminam* look thus emerges as part of a wider anxiety about normative masculinity in contemporary Korea, and, importantly, does not carry the connotations of gay sexuality that it does in the West. As a result, Korean men in their twenties and thirties are more predisposed to cosmetic surgery than Western men, particularly since good looks are so equated with success, because the fast pace of contemporary Korean urban life demands quick fixes to any perceived 'problems' with one's body, and because 'feminization' through cosmetic surgery does not carry the same 'risks' to sexual identity that it does in the West. This is evidenced in the prevalence of walk-in cosmetic surgery clinics in large shopping malls, as well as the affordability and ease of obtaining minor operations, such as mole and skin blemish removals. Moreover, cosmetic treatments and caring for one's appearance are becoming increasingly associated with a new kind of contemporary masculinity that is gaining in value across East Asia, popularized by boy bands and popular actors with apan-Asian fan base.

Conclusion: Locating Korean Cosmetic Surgery

Cosmetic surgery in South Korea is typically equated in both media discourses and academic writing with a desire to appear 'western'. On the surface it does appear that Koreans prefer 'western' features like wider, 'double-eyelid' eyes, more prominent noses and bigger breasts. While undoubtedly influenced by globalized beauty ideals, we argue, attempts to 'improve' the Asian subject do not erase ethnicity (McCurdy and Lam, 2005). 'Westernphilia' initially seems to have constituted as much a rejection of Japanese colonial influence as an embrace of western beauty norms. Explanations that rely on women's surgeries as responses to a male preference for Caucasian physical features are simplistic, positioning women as objects in a patriarchal economy. More sophisticated approaches position women as negotiating with beauty discourses to gain agency (Cho, 2009; Woo, 2004). The modern Korean woman is said to have

exchanged 'virtuous' (maternal, domestic) femininity for a slim, well-toned body and beautiful face which offers clear gains in both work and marriage (Kim, 2003; Park, 2007). However, critics ultimately argue that aesthetic surgery is a trap, making profits by promoting western beauty that requires surgery for Koreans to achieve (Woo, 2004). Yet cosmetic surgery is also a consumption practice generating meaning for people who engage in it that is not adequately explained by these writers.

We would suggest that many instances of apparent westernization can be related to a strong sense of indigenous identity. The existing literature has a tendency to reify globally mediatized bodies as western, but the globalized body is already 'mixed' and bears little resemblance to *actual* women in either the West or the East. Rather, the 'western' body links to idealized (and, of course, exceptional) characteristics in many countries. Paler (than average) skin, for instance, in almost every country, has historically signified distance from (agricultural) labour, representing high-class status. Western bodies now mark status through tanning associated with leisure time and foreign holidays. Positioning blepharoplasty as westernization ignores the fact that wide eyes have local significations such as youthfulness and active desire, and that western women also routinely undertake similar surgeries. Claiming Korean women want to look western denies the constructed nature of western beauty and that western beauty has been valued because it entered Korea fitting *pre-existing* notions of class and status. Such claims position western cultural borrowings as appropriation and non-western ones as colonization while ignoring the fact that all modern nations actively appropriate, reject, hybridize or acquiesce in elements of transcultural influences that circulate through the globalized media, cheap travel and migrations. Taking on a 'bit of the other' signifies access to these resources, a cosmopolitan identity informed by global, not just local knowledge. To deny this grants westerners agency and creativity in their identities while fixing non-westerners to traditional 'authentic' identities (a similar point is made by Miller, 2006, about Japan).

Neo-Confucian ethics in Korea advocated conformity as a virtue that measured social success by approximation to an elite class image (Deuchler, 1992), which can still be seen in the extremely limited range of beauty ideals promoted in the media. This may explain the desirability of the look which celebrates smooth features and the

extreme popularity of the 'BB' ('blemish blocker') cream, which is used to smooth and whiten the skin. In addition, the belief that character can be 'read' from facial features has a very real influence on social and career success, with physiognomy often indistinguishable from 'employment cosmetics'. Young men and women seem equally subject to these beliefs and practices.

Feminist constructions of men as subjects and women as subjectless objects can only endure if we ignore men's cosmetic surgeries. Feminist positions fail to account for the impact of feminine desire in an economy where middle-class women now hold considerable economic power and are increasingly reluctant to marry. Neo-Confucianism may have addressed women as subjectless bodies but consumer capitalism addresses women and men as subjects, albeit subjects of consumerism. Neo-Confucianism also emphasizes care of men's bodies as well as their minds (far from the 'rational' disembodied men of the West), which may explain Korean men's predisposition to aesthetic surgery. The emergence of the *kkonminam* men (via Japan) offers men a new way to care for the self, their reworked bodies alluding to a new flexibility within relationships which acknowledges feminine desire.

What emerges from this discussion is a complicated picture of Korean cosmetic surgery where *negotiation* between globalized and national standards of beauty, official and non-official religious and traditional discourses and practices and national identity, as well as symbolic practices of coming of age, caring for the self, marking social status and seeking success, all play a part. In reality, then, aesthetic surgery in Korea is influenced by a number of different, sometimes contradictory yet often intersecting factors, implicated in both the (often cited) prevalence of surgery and the (rarely discussed) types of surgeries practised, and resists explanations that rely only on feminist or postcolonial readings.

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Notes

1. See: www.nationmaster.com
2. In Korea there is no single body regulating medical malpractice. Citizens may file a civil lawsuit under the Rules of Civil Procedure. Medical malpractice cases can also be reported to the Korea Consumer Agency or to Consolidation for Medical Consumers. However, the first successful case against a cosmetic surgery clinic was not until 2007 (Bae, 2007).
3. It is actually against the law to advertise surgical procedures through the use of images in Korea for other than 'education purposes'.
4. Except research on vaginal surgeries (labiaplasties and vaginal tightening), which tends to compare the surgeries of white women in the West with those of black women undergoing FGM (female genital mutilation) in countries in the global South and Africa.
5. Neo-Confucianism was the official philosophy of Korea for more than five centuries during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910).
6. Chun Doo Hwan turned out to be a violent and repressive leader, perhaps as a result of the violent conditions under which his fortune was made!
7. Such as www.café.daum.net

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