

# PLASTIC SURGERY PHENOMENON AMONG SOUTH KOREAN WOMEN. THE INSTRUMENTAL BODY IN A RITE OF PASSAGE TO THE NORMATIVE “INNOCENT GLAMOUR”

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## ABSTRACT

The study explores the plastic surgery phenomenon among young South Korean women and aims to depict the motivations of women as agentic subjects and social pressures that lead them to undergo facial modification. The research consisted of direct observation between 2008–2009, in Daegu (South Korea) and continued in Bucharest (Romania) in 2011, with a group interview followed by individual structured interviews with four South Korean students. The study additionally includes mass-media and pop culture analysis, secondary statistical analysis, and literature review. This research suggests that their motivations are derived from a pragmatic, instrumentalist view of the body as a vehicle for success in life, with two main goals: professional and personal. It is also argued that the social pressures of a collectivistic, competitive, consumer society that upholds a very strict and almost singular standard of beauty, has a normalization force on women's bodies. I want to depart from the view that the change is done towards a Caucasian ideal and argue that modern South Korea has given birth to its own blend of a beautiful body, a “V-line”, “Innocent Glamour” that mixes Caucasian and local aesthetic physical traits. This blend's characteristic is that South Korean standard of beauty converges to an innocent look. The women undergoing surgery are embodied selves in transition, they are preparing their personal narrative of success and transformation, performing this practice at key moments in their lives, as a rite of passage to maturity. Plastic surgery can be viewed as an expression of the right to beauty that, in the South Korean context, can be equated to the right to succeed.

**Keywords:** *plastic surgery, South Korea, racial discourse, rite of passage, standards of beauty.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Statistics regarding the number of people undergoing plastic surgery in South Korea rely mainly on surveys due to the fact that the majority of the procedures take place in private clinics from which records are not easily available and the market is poorly regulated. However, the surveys capture the same fact: the worldwide leading position the country holds at the number of cosmetic surgeries per capita. To cite only a few such data: in 2010, there were 361,988 cosmetic procedures performed in South Korea, with one in five women from Seoul opting for plastic surgeries; furthermore, a study from 2009 surveying 2041 female university students indicated that 1 in 4 had had eyelid surgery with a percentage of 80% showing “their willingness to undergo cosmetic surgery in the future” (Moon, 2015, p. 102). A BBC poll estimated that, in Seoul, at least 50% of women in their twenties had altered their body using these practices, while the men “make up fifteen per cent of the market, including a former President of the country, who underwent double-eyelid surgery while in office” (Marx, 2015). According to the information released in 2011 by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (ISAPS) and published by Seoul TouchUp (a government-approved medical tourism agency in Korea), 13 out of 1000 Koreans have undergone plastic surgery (South Korea, SeoulTouchUp, 2014). To put it into a global context, South Korea was on the 4<sup>th</sup> place regarding total surgical procedures performed in 2015, after USA, Brazil, and Mexico (ISAPS, 2016) and on the third place at the number of face and head procedures after Brazil and USA (ISAPS, 2016); facial interventions being the most popular in South Korea as we will also see further. There are no statistics released by ISAPS regarding the ranking based on the number of plastic surgeries per capita, but what can be easily noticed is that all countries with higher number of procedures have a population at least double that of South Korea.

Drawing on scientific literature ranging from diverse fields of knowledge such as sociology, anthropology, history, or feminist studies and dating back especially from the past 40 years since the body started getting its long awaited place in the academy, I explore the motivations and social pressures behind young Korean women’s decisions to undergo, in such high numbers, cosmetic surgery for facial modification. I suggest that their motivations are derived from a pragmatic, instrumentalist view of the body as plastic, an easily alterable possession and a vehicle for success in life, with the two main goals being professional (securing a good job) and personal (fulfillment through a happy marriage). Suggestive of this is the split between “marriage cosmetic surgery” and “employment cosmetic surgery” in Korea (Holliday and Elfvig-Hwang, 2012, p. 74), a distinction that emphasizes the two main goals for which the body is modified. Placing this instrumental view of the body in the debate regarding agency versus structure in body modification, the women’s motivations position them as agentic subjects in

control of the body. However, at the same time, women also conform to structure (conceptualized here as social pressures) that holds a normalization force on women in the context of a collectivistic, yet very competitive society, which underwent a fast paced modernization; a society that still embeds neo-Confucianism traits and upholds a very strict and almost singular standard of beauty. As the majority of the Western (and even a large portion of Korean) discourse about plastic surgery implies the change is done towards a Caucasian ideal, I want to depart from this simplistic view and claim that modern Korea has given birth to its own blend of ideal beautiful body, a “V-line”, “Baby face” that mixes Caucasian traits (high nose, big eyes) and local aesthetic images, like a pointy chin, or “love bands” (under eye bags, aegyosal – 애교살). research I am in line with the findings presented by Holliday and Elfvig-Hwang (2012) who rebut the claim that Koreans alter their body to look more Occidental. Additionally, I stress that the Korean ideals of beauty converge towards a more innocent look, compared to the allegedly sexual image in the West. However, underneath all these there lies a strong teleological component: going through cosmetic surgery, the young Korean women are preparing for the next phase in their lives. The surgery is a rupture point between their old not so attractive, with its unaccomplished old self, unmarried and not yet professionally fulfilled; and the new embodied self adequately equipped for the new phase in life. The women opting for surgery therefore become embodied selves in transition; they are studied at key moments in their lives, preparing for the rite of passage to maturity and preparing their personal narrative of transformation and success. Here I draw on Schouten’s selves in transition theory which has analysed the consumption of plastic surgery in the context of identity construction and rites of passage (1991, p. 412). Following the tradition of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner but applied to a secular Western world, Schouten sees plastic surgery as a “self-imposed, personal rite of passage”, around a period of liminality (1991, p. 421). What differentiates my view is that I don’t see the process of body modification as a strict self-imposed, affirmation of the self, but one that also needs to conform to the structural pressures in the Korean collectivistic society. In the interviews I held and from the conversations with the college students, there was a general consensus that women, more than men, are required by society to look good in order to offset their career, to be more popular and therefore have better chances of finding a husband.

To a more macro level, the busy streets of Korean cities are mirrors of Korean society as whole, they bear the marks of the recent fast paced modernization, a hyper-consumerist reality that still incorporates aspects of their long lasting history and tradition. So as these streets are a synecdoche of the Korean society, so too the plastic body of Korean women (modified via cosmetic surgery) is a synecdoche of the highly transformational societal changes through which South Korea has passed in its journey from the hermit kingdom to modernization and onto the global stage.

### METHOD

The research started in 2008 and continued, for one year, during which time the investigator lived in Daegu (South Korea); information was gathered by direct observation framework. The majority of the data collected was based on conversations with college students (over twenty students, during the course of six months), the vast majority young women 18 to 30 years old studying tourism at Yeungjin college in Daegu. In addition to the daily conversations, a rich source of information was the “self-introduction notebooks” that each student had to present, as part of their course work, to the investigator, an English teacher’s assistant. These provided insight into the way they defined themselves and how much emphasis was put on physical appearance each notebook contained self-evaluations of their body and even of the family members. I want to note that the format of the notebooks and categories of information it contained selected by the students themselves; the fact that all included a physical traits’ description by their own choice comes to stress the point that the students I worked with put great value on appearance.

The second part of the research took place in 2011 and included a mixed gender group interview with four Korean students (20 to 30 years old; none, however, being subject to plastic surgery) studying in Bucharest that was followed up with four individual structured interviews. The group interview method as I wanted to also capture the social pressures derived from a collectivistic mindset that might appear when the subjects are discussing the topic with other people present. However, there was no influence on the patients group responses compared to the individual ones, the main reason being a general consensus regarding the motivations for undergoing plastic surgery (for career and personal life). Also, neither of the subjects voiced an intention to undergo plastic surgery in the future although most had acquaintances or friends who did. The selection of the subjects was done via convenience sample, introduced to me by a mutual acquaintance. The study additionally includes mass-media and pop culture analysis (news, blog posts, and comments to these materials; TV shows, and movies) and secondary statistical analysis, as well as literature review regarding racial discourse, Korean standards of beauty and mass-media influence on plastic surgery.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The modern body in David le Breton’s (2002) view is defined by the rupture between the subject and itself, the individual will possess the body, more than actually being a one (Breton, 2002, p. 5). He pinned the first significant blow to the holistic view of the body as one with nature, characteristic to the traditional societies, to the work of the anatomist Vesalius and his contribution on dissection;

the second breaking point was the Cartesian dualism doctrine, defined by superiority of mind over matter. The Cartesian dualism that separates the mind from the body and places the former in a dominant position had gathered an academic consensus and was until recently the dominant theoretical view on the body (Breton, 2002, p. 54; Corbin, Cortine, and Vigarello, 2009). Furthermore, as the mind breaks with its material embodiment, so do societies depart from their traditional frame and enter modernity.

In the twentieth century, however, the body as uncontested host of the soul and mind has been restored to its crucial role in understanding the world, and many voices from various fields in the academia started the Cartesian dualism. From Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work who viewed it as "our general medium for having a world", to Freud's "body-ego", Edmund Husserl's phenomenological body as "zero-point of orientation", and Marcel Mauss' techniques of the body, it is the last century that marks the theoretical invention of the body as Courtine describes it (2009, p. 5). If we add to the equation the advances in medicine, the consumer society, the state's ever growing interest in the health of its subjects, and the right to health inscribed in the Universal declaration of human rights, in modernity, social progress found its object in the body, more than in the social and political realm as it did in the past (Negrin, 2002; Hogle, 2005). Consequently, plastic surgery follows in the same lines:

"As Sander Gilman points out (1999: 19), with the development of cosmetic surgery at the end of the 19th century, the Enlightenment belief in the ability of individuals to transform themselves, which had originally been articulated as a social and political task, came to be redefined in biological and medical terms. This had the effect of shifting the locus of change from the transformation of social structures to transforming the body itself." (Negrin, 2002, p. 25) It is this transformational power of plastic surgeries and the promise of social and personal fulfillment that is transparent in the interviews and conversations I had with Korean women who choose these practice.

A major contribution to the sociology of the body came from feminist studies and, especially pertaining to the cosmetic surgery phenomenon among young women, feminism was one of the richest sources of research. If we accept Shelley Budgeon's statement that women "have always been more embodied than men because of the association of the feminine with the body" (2003, p. 38), modernity marked an emancipatory moment for both women and the body, as Baudrillard concisely argues: "Now, just as women and bodies were bound together in servitude, the emancipation of woman and the emancipation of the body are logically and historically linked (for related reasons, the emancipation of the young is contemporaneous with them)" (2008, p. 177).

The works of Susan Bordo, Deborah Caslav Covino, Debra Gimlin, Cressida J. Heyes, Meredith Jones (Featherstone, 2010, p. 202), or Kathy Davis brought significant contributions to the study of cosmetic surgeries. Furthermore, this

subject sparked debate regarding how these bodily practices are actually empowering women as a sign of self-realization and agency as Davis (Koo, 2004, p. 45) had suggested; a vision criticized by Susan Bordo, among others, who had claimed that women are merely conforming to the existing cultural norms in a normative patriarchal society. In a later work, Kathy Davis (2003) argued that she was refusing to consider women undergoing surgery as “cultural dopes”, but rather to position “them as “competent actors”, with an “intimate and subtle knowledge of society,” including the “dominant discourse and practices of feminine beauty” (Davis, 2003, p. 13). I would however like to depart from this rather theoretical dispute about the definition of “agency”, and stand by Cressida J. Heyes’ moderate view, in which the cosmetic surgeries women choose to undergo “both constrains (by compelling compliance with the norm) at the same time as it enables (by making certain forms of subjectivity possible), and, indeed, these two functions cannot be clearly separated.” (2008, p. 55)

Besides the feminist ramification of the plastic surgery discussion, another area of research on plastic surgery is the racial discourse associated with it. We owe key contributions to this subject to Gilman, Kaw (1993), or Haiken (1997). That plastic surgery is intertwined with the racial discourse seems to be an uncontested fact as shown in the findings of Haiken (1999, p.18) who links the two from the beginning of this body technique in modernity, in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when American surgeons started experimenting on correcting the “Jewish nose”. The World War I reconstructive surgeons started using their experience from the battlefield in correcting physical features in times of peace. Another fact that helped the development of this practice in the U.S. were the waves of immigration from Europe (especially the eastern and southern parts) that brought to the surgical discourse other “abnormal” features carried by the migrating bodies of Italians, Armenians, Greeks, Iranians, and Lebanese, who became potential patients in a desire for “ethnic anonymity” (Haiken, 1999). It is no wonder that the United States with the diversity of races striving for assimilation in the dominant culture is the birth place of plastic surgery. The World War II and its economic boom marked the beginning of a constant growth in cosmetic surgeries, while the ever growing consumer society became the ideal frame to foster such practices.

The motivations of the Asian American women interviewed by Kaw (1991) in choosing plastic surgery confirm the racial component, as they subject themselves to bodily change to “escape racial prejudice that correlates their stereotyped genetic physical features (“small, slanty” eyes and a “flat” nose) with negative behavioral characteristics, such as passivity, dullness, and a lack of sociability” (1991, p. 75). Medicine, as the means through which the modification is done, is perpetuating and legitimizing these prejudices, a conclusion that is also among my findings, of course in a different macro context and with a similar concept replacing Kaw’s prejudices: social pressures.

The bulk of the literature I consulted comes from the Western academic environment and I must warn about the inadequacies that might appear when applying this framework to non-Western cultures such as Korea. However, in discussing the recent social and cultural realities regarding the cosmetic surgery phenomenon, I will try to shift the focus towards a predominantly Asian literature. To summarize, from the Western school of thought I take the modern view of the body from Turner as no longer the fixed object (cited in Gremillion, 2005, p. 14) from the traditional society; the body is no longer “a biological given whose organic integrity is inviolable” (Negrin, 2002, p. 29). The body, I argue, becomes a possession of the individual and it is instrumental in the affirmation of the self, but also holds a normative function used to conform to the social standard. We can find similarities between the modernization project in the West and that in Korea in regards to this particular view of the body, as ruptured from tradition. The fast paced modernization in Korea made the body plastic, an object at the disposal of the individual, who thanks to the hyper-consumer society possesses the means through which to modify it and eagerly does so to reflect the standards of a conformist, collectivistic Korean society. A difference to the western modern societies is the pervasive remnants of the traditional Korea (especially through neo-Confucian morals) that allowed the creation of its special blend of bodily images, different from the Western ones but still importing some essential occidental traits. As the passage to modernity changes the view on the body, so too individuals transform their bodies through plastic surgery as a rite of passage to the new socially conform, prepared for success self.

#### **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE EVOLUTION OF KOREAN BEAUTY STANDARDS**

That modern day Korea is a highly competitive society is an uncontested fact; young people and their parents are preparing them to succeed, not only by investing in education, but also by trying to improve other aspects that might influence a person’s success in life. In Korea people are judged based on their physical appearance and this becomes a key factor in building a career. A survey lead by a 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)” (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 74). Korea is not only a competitive environment, it is also a collectivistic society, and the toll taken on how young women need to present themselves is therefore significantly higher. Among the findings of my research I already indicated that it is more important for women to look good than for men. If

everyone is trying to look as good as they can to have the best chances, the collectivistic pressures make women need to conform to the very high standard of beauty in order not to stand out in an inferior way. A cross-cultural study analyzing the importance of physical appearance for women in South Korea and U.S. indicated that “appearance is considered highly important for the evaluation of the self and others for women in a collectivistic culture. Women are often evaluated by their physical appearances rather than by their abilities or skills they have” (Jung and Lee, 2006, p. 363).

It is necessary at this point to give a short historical overview of how the modern body image is rooted in Korea’s past. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the “hermit kingdom” entered the global stage, Korean bodies became acquainted with non-Asian corporeal images and, through this mirror, they began re-assessing their own body. The traditional standard of beauty for women was “moderately plump with fair skin, cultivated mannerisms and modesty, with a cultural emphasis on inner-beauty” (Jung and Lee, 2009, p. 283). If in the 1890s the “westerners’ `big bright eyes, high nose, large ears and thick lips’ were a cause of fear to Koreans and brought about of their being cannibals (Naw, 1898)” (Yoo, 2001, p. 431), during the colonial period the facial beauty standard started incorporating western traits:

“Criteria for a beautiful face, `wide forehead, short lashes and moderate nose’ before, now became those of a western beauty, `shallow forehead, double eyelid, long lashes and high nose’. For a beautiful body, too, while it was `slender waist, small feet and small hands’ that counted in the past, it was now `large hands and feet, tall height and sporty body’ (Dong-A Ilbo 11 April 1926). This was how a newspaper came to run an article on medical surgery for creating double eyelids, under the title, `Ways to make ugly eyes beautiful’ (Dong-A Ilbo 25 February 1927)” (Yoo, 2001, p. 431).

Korea’s encounter with the Western world was also a moment of realizing their society’s backwardness and U.S., in particular, became the standard of a flourishing, rich, modern nation. The western cultural superiority can also be traced to the work of the missionaries who were the first to bring modern education and western medicine to Korea (Yoo, 2001, p. 427), (Park, 2006). The Korean “modern boys” and “modern girls” that started mimicking, at bodily level the Occidental fashion and customs, became the drivers of modernization, what the Korean intellectuals described as “Americanism” (Yoo, 2001, p. 423).

These changes are, however, not limited to adopting western fashion and hair styles, they are representative of a shift in how Koreans perceive the body. From the Neo-Confucian traditional view of the body as sacred (Kim, 2003, p. 98), young Koreans in the colonial period now used it as a sign of showing their willingness to modernize. The rupture that starts taking place in Korea, is an equivalent of what the Cartesian dualism was for the western world. As Yoo claims, the modernization of the body was “carried out on three levels: to replace



the traditional aesthetics, to westernize the appearance, to liberate the bodily movements closely regulated by the Confucian norms.” (2001, p. 425-426) It is however, a change that did not come from within, but from the outside, from a culturally dominant society - the U.S. - and this might be one of the reasons for the mix of Caucasian traits found in the standards of beauty in today’s Korea.

Kim (2008) and Haiken (1999) see the Korean War as another breaking point for the integration of western images in the Korean view of the body. The work of surgeon David Ralph Millard, Jr., who had been stationed in Korea, opened the way for “normalizing” the “Oriental eye”. He wrote in his journal: “The absence of the palpebral fold produces a passive expression which seems to epitomize the stoical and unemotional manner of the Oriental” (Millard, 1964, p. 647).” (Kaw, 1991, p. 82). He was subjected to criticism, especially from the leftist movements, but legitimized his practices with the fact that they were requested by the patients themselves for socioeconomic reasons, local beliefs and superstitions and that Asian surgeons were also performing it (Haiken, 1999, p. 47). Decades before the boom of the plastic surgery phenomenon in Korea, the body was an instrument in women’s desire for a good job and a husband.

The state led economic development programs in post war Korea have been accompanied by the expansion of the middle class, which, in turn, has acted as the main agent of social and political modernization (Koo, 1999). In order to modernize, consumption became a goal for each citizen and, as Baudrillard (2008) argues, in a consumer society, the body took the role of the main vessel for it. According to Heffner, the new urban middle class is the embodiment of the ideal “modern citizenry that would realize the economic prosperity of South Korea’s capitalist structural changes” (2015, p. 34) and Park Chung-hee’s regime legitimized the role of the middle class in the national reconstruction (2015, p. 31). As Hogle states: “The body became a project through which self-identity was constructed, particularly, the identity as a good, productive citizen.” (2005, p. 702). Pertaining to body modification, “middle-class participation in plastic surgery increased to achieve a more “Western” look, which from a neoliberal perspective, makes such individuals more appealing to global capital.” (Heffner, 2015, p. 39). Therefore, the body becomes instrumental in two ways: as a vehicle for economic development and as a reflection of the western look. During Korea’s economic boom, women’s bodies, in particular, have been transformed into “consumer bodies” (Kim, 2003, p. 98). Yoon (2006) and Heffner (2015) both place women and young people at the center of the consumer society.

The 1997 financial crisis marked a turning point in Korean national identity project, where global pressures were held partially responsible for the economic decline, but at the same time, so were key characteristics of Korean identity, such as neo-Confucian morals. The West is no longer the ideal modern world, as Park notices, “we, therefore, observe the dualistic directions of national identity reformation as a specific outcome of the interplay between the strong *globalness*

and strong *localness*.” (Park, 2007, p. 337). I believe this is also representative of the Korean standard of beauty, the surgically altered bodies will bear the signs of the long lasting Western influence presented previously but, also, breaking away from this influence, they create their own ideal local physical traits that will be detailed later in the new standard of beauty sought after through plastic surgery.

Key for the local view on body modification is neo-Confucianism and the view that men were destined to transcend, women were essential for their bodies as bearers of (ideally male) children (Kim, 2003, p. 100). Women are, therefore, central to the reproduction of the family, but their role is a passive one, men being the active part (Yoon, 1990, p. 10; Kim, 2003, p. 100). Furthermore, women’s bodies were traditionally invisible, especially that of *yangban* members who were meant to be confined to the grounds of their household. It is with the progress of the consumer society and economic development that “women have become extraordinarily visible in Korea, free to be observed and appreciated in any public space” (Kim, 2003, p. 103). Becoming visible through modernization, the normative gaze of others and the competitive society increased the pressure to conform, at a time when they started having the means to do so thanks to the economic boom.

As indicated so far, the changes in how the body is treated, viewed, and transformed are linked to key moments in Korea’s transition to modernity. Women’s bodily practices in these periods are symbolic of ideas about progress, modernization, economic roles and conformity to evolving beauty standards.

#### **RITE OF PASSAGE IN A MODERN COLLECTIVISTIC SOCIETY: AN INSTRUMENTALIST VIEW ON TRANSFORMATION**

Choosing to undergo plastic surgery transforms the women into agentic subjects and help them build their personal narrative of success. The “before and after” pictures that dominate the advertisements for plastic surgery clinics and patients’ testimonies can be translated into what the American culture coined as “rags to riches” or “the self-made man”. It is the same promise of self-improvement, of deep transformation that women were given during Korea’s economic miracle and their key role as consumers. However this agentic transformation is made, approved, and endorsed also by the collectivistic society. It is therefore not only the agency of the “I”, the individual, but also the *woori*, the “we” who sanction the change and validate the conformity to the collectively shared standard of beauty.

The right to health that twentieth century marked as universal for each individual, can be taken further in Korea as “the right to beauty”, the same phenomenon Edmonds (2007) revealed as characteristic for the women in Brazil, another leading country at the number of plastic surgeries per capita. Indicative of

this is the protest Korean civic groups and surgeons initiated in 2011 when the government wanted to increase 10% the tax on the five most popular plastic surgeries, claiming this “discriminated against women and the poor” (Choe, 2011). This *right to beauty* can be further translated into *the right to succeed* in life. In the discussions I had with Korean students, as well as the mass-media content analysed, the pragmatic benefit from having plastic surgery is omnipresent. Young women talked about preparing for maturity, by undergoing plastic surgery as a rite of passage. The collectivistic Korean society sanctions this practice especially through the financial help families give to young women for having their faces altered. In the TV show “Let me in” that depicts young women’s and, in smaller percent, men’s transformation through cosmetic surgery, the parents are supportive of the decision and sometimes take initiative, like the case of a young man being brought on the show by his parents for radical face and body surgery (Korean Makeover TV Show, 2014). The collectivistic pressures for a beautiful face are not only visible in parent – daughter interactions but also among peers. One student was eager to, during one class, to that she had had plastic surgery, even showing me her old ID card to prove it. Her colleagues and friends who were present were all supportive of her decision and acknowledged how positive the change was. She admitted that having surgery not only made her more beautiful but also more popular with her colleagues. Another girl I interviewed gave an example of a friend of hers who after undergoing surgery she became more confided and “more boys started to talk to her”.

In her analysis of TV show, Joanna Elfving-Hwang claims that “Let me in” is intentionally drawing its narrative among others on filial piety, mentioning “the scenes in which parents repeatedly thank their children for their hard work, effectively reaffirming the process of cosmetic rebirth as an action that embodies filial piety through acknowledging their children’s willingness to submit to physical pain as an act that erases the physical evidence of the parents’ inability to ensure their children’s future success.” (Elfving-Hwang, 2013). As the participants of the show are mostly selected from families that cannot afford such surgeries, what Elfving-Hwang calls the “cosmetic underclass”, the show seems to re-establish equality, affirming their “right to beauty” by offering contestants their much desired transformation, their success story. The participation of the parents in the transformation extends the personal fulfillment to the entire family, to the *woori* group, symbolic of a collectivistic society with strong Neo-Confucianism influences. In these conditions, for families that can afford them, paying for a child’s surgery has become a usual high school present from parents. Reverting to the pragmatic economic motivation behind this practice, it appears to be socially accepted in such a large extent that Lee and Ryu (2012) choose to analyze the “return on investment” among people who had had plastic surgery. It is not important that this investment does not pay off in the end, an aspect that the authors signaled, but that it is socially considered an investment into a person’s future career.

The following excerpt from a questionnaire for new patients visiting plastic surgery clinics offers an insight into the motivations to undergo these procedures. The first two alternatives confirm the practice as instrumental and as a rite of passage to maturity, while the next two indicate the conformist pressure from society and the great value Koreans place on physical appearance.

- “Reason you want surgery?”
- Preparing for job
  - Wedding
  - Regaining self-confidence
  - Suggestions from people” (Marx, 2015)

The South Korea entertainment industry has produced its own versions of the American reality shows like “Extreme Makeover”, “The Swan”: “Let Me In”, and “Miss Agent”. In the testimonies of young women and men being subjected to plastic surgeries on the TV show “Let me in”, the motivations and post-surgical benefits are finding a boyfriend/girlfriend, having better chances in starting a career and gaining confidence. This is in line with the show’s own presentation: “A miracle, a life changing experience for women who are suffering because of their physical appearance. We aim to change lives and open doors of opportunities for women who are robbed of their confidence due to their physical appearance” (Korean Makeover TV Show, 2014). One of the participants looking to start a career has admitted the need for physical improvement due to the competitive environment: “people my age are looking for a job and I really feel that having a soft image is important for finding a job since it is so competitive these days” (Id hospital korea plastic surgery, 2014). For another participant, one of the few males on the show, the first thing he planned to do after the surgery was to find a girlfriend and go on a date, his wish being intermediated on the show, by another former contestant who arranged a blind date for him. Herself, one of the most popular participants of “Let me in”, has admitted that after the surgery she has succeeded in finding a boyfriend (Korean Makeover TV Show, 2014). Like the on screen coverage of the date, another participant has received, in front of the audience, a job offer from a doctor who helped perform the surgery (Id hospital korea plastic surgery, 2013). With these two examples, the shows aim to prove the immediate fulfillment of the participants’ needs through surgery, causally linking the medical technique with personal success. Achieving the transformation, the “rags to riches” dream is also exemplified on the show in the case of the young man who was evaluated by the presenters as having evolved through surgery from “country boy to celebrity” (Korean Makeover TV Show, 2014). Like Joanna Elfving-Hwang also pointed out, one of quintessential aspects of plastic surgeries is success in the consumer society. According to her, “contemporary cosmetic surgery advertising taps into the discourse of consumer identity, promising a

celebrity look that signifies success to practically anyone who can afford it.” (Elfving-Hwang, 2013)

With a couple of exceptions, most of the participants taking part in “Let me in” or “Miss Agent” (a similar plastic surgery TV show) are young women in their early 20s, marking their transition to adulthood through the age corresponding landmarks (finding a job or a partner). In an in-depth article published by *the New Yorker*, the journalist found that, unless done at the right time in a person’s life, he/she can become too old to undergo the transformation (Marx, 2015); another proof that this rite of passage practice is subjected to a strict temporality. This is a special feature of Korean plastic surgery phenomenon, as opposed to the West where a high percentage of surgeries are done to reduce the effects of aging.

As carriers of societal pressures in a highly visual and technologically developed environment the entertainers have helped legitimate the practice by removing the stigma associated with it, but at the same time they are also subjected to a similar surgical rite of passage. Tait’s analysis on Western reality TV shows about plastic surgery shows that they “domesticate cosmetic surgery by publicising its practice, and in so doing, authorising synthetic beauty ideals. (...)The imperative to conceal surgery as a mark of inauthenticity dissipates as transformation is celebrated as self-actualisation.” (Tait, 2007, p. 131). A study that analyses how media influences the demand for cosmetic surgery in South Korea, by checking related news content collected from Naver search portal news archive, from 2007 to 2013, shows “that the number of news articles about plastic surgery has increased every year, and the tone of most of the news that relates to plastic surgery has turned positive; negatively toned news is gradually disappearing” (Moon, 2005, p. 110). Although being identified as carriers of the normative beauty standards and legitimating agents, the celebrities themselves need to pass through their own rite of passage. There are accounts of record labels trying to force débutées go through surgery in order to improve their looks. In an *Elle* interview, CL, a singer in the girls’ band 2NE1, herself subject of speculation whether or not she went through surgery (Netizenbuzz, 2013) offered an account of her experience:

“YG [2NE1's record label] told me to. They told me to get plastic surgery before my debut. I stood up for myself and said "No, I'm not doing it." Like I said before, I love CL, but I still want to be Chaerin. And if I felt like I had to change I would. But I love the natural way I look. I said no and I'm not planning to.” (Yi, 2013)

The plastic surgery subject has also been represented in Korean cinema, the blockbuster “200 pounds of beauty” being one of the most relevant. The star of the latter film, Kim Ah-jung, is an interesting case as she portrays a young singer aspiring to celebrity and reaching success only going through a total body make-over by means of plastic surgery; in the end, she realizes that inner beauty is what matters. In real life, the successful actress herself underwent cosmetic surgeries. To subject oneself to cosmetic surgery does not only take from the celebrities the

legitimizing factor, but also standard. Looking like a celebrity becomes the ideal, the norm. The contestants of “Let me in” and „Miss agent” are often evaluated and praised for the surgeries results with exclamations like “as beautiful as a celebrity”, “just like a star”, „more beautiful than a star”. One girl I interviewed confirmed the influence of celebrities by the fact that “several years ago, when somebody wanted a surgery but didn’t know anything, they were bringing pictures of celebrities and asked the doctors to make them look like that”.

In the domestication process of plastic surgeries, a key role is reserved for the surgeons, who are, as celebrities, carriers of the social pressures put on young women’s bodies but with a further legitimating advantage: that of a medical expert. The doctors are regular active participants on the cosmetic surgeries TV shows and their role is to medically present the transformation. The experts are becoming celebrities themselves and medical jargon is popularized and integrated into everyday life discourse about beauty. The surgeons’ presentation of the medical interventions abounds with detailed medical vocabulary but, at the same time, their jargon borrows popularized expressions, for example, all interventions pertaining to jaw line are commonly referred to as “V-line surgery”. Moreover, the celebrity expert will not remain confined to medical analysis but, in assessing the surgeries results on participants, the surgeon will proceed to also evaluate the post-surgery beauty: “For a more masculine appeal, a straighter crease line was created for a sassy celebrity-like look” (Korean Makeover TV Show, 2014).

The last scene from the movie „200 pounds of beauty” is suggestive of the normative function plastic surgeons play. The surgeon introduces himself to a potential patient as follows: “I am the famous doctor Lee, also known as “the hands of God”. I could even win the next Nobel Prize. What do you want me to fix?” Using the term to fix already suggests the abnormality of not falling into the standard of beauty, and describing himself “the hands of God” he is meant to surgically restoring the new accepted standard of normality.

The role of the plastic surgeons in consolidating the popularly shared standards of beauty and, with their participation in TV shows, further popularizing the medical jargon is reminiscent of Kaw’s criticisms, in Foucault’s and Gramsci’s tradition, of the role the “expert” knowledge has, through plastic surgeons in this case, in defining common sense reality (Kaw, 1993, p. 78).

#### **INNOCENT GLAMOUR – THE TRULY KOREAN BEAUTIFUL BODY**

A small face, pointy chin, high nose, visible forehead, under eye bags also known as “love bands”, and fair skin depict the Korean beauty standard. Briefly put, it is an innocent, non-sexual, “V-line”, “Baby face” look. This facial ideal shares the big eye, high nose and white skin with the Caucasian physical traits (with the exception of the alternative tanned skin popular in Western countries).

Besides the historical factors I presented so far, some researchers find as cause for this westernization of features the fact that Korean advertising industry used Caucasian models since 1994 when it was legally permitted (Kim in Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012:67).

“The imbalance in model ethnicity in both U.S. and Korean magazines was particularly interesting, with Caucasian models being used predominantly in both countries. The majority of models represented in the ads in Korea, including the publications of Korean origin, were Caucasian, which indicated the heavy Western influence there.” (Jung and Lee, 2009:283)

However, present day Koreans are not simply mimicking Caucasian features; if we look at the facial criteria for a beautiful face, there are several local traits. The “love bands” or under eye bags are considered a flaw for western women and the plastic surgery Koreans go through to enhance them is called “Youthlites” which is suggestive of the young, innocent look it aims to reproduce. The pointy chin is also an indigenously idealized feature and one that is represented in the “V-line” ideal. Furthermore, the most popular plastic surgeries in Korea are those aiming to modify the face, whereas in the Western countries, breast enhancement is among the most sought after practices. This, as well, is in line with the non-sexual look Korean women try to attain. There was a general consensus among the Korean women and men I talked to while living in Korea that showing cleavage was not considered socially acceptable even when compared to, for example, very short skirts, or pants. The main reason for this was that it creates a too sexual image compared to the Korean beauty standard.

A user’s comment on an online forum is representative of Koreans’ rejection of the claim that they are merely importing Caucasian features: “There is something you don’t get. Asians don’t do plastic surgery to look white. They do plastic surgery to look wide-eyed-Asians. But they don’t do it to look white. Just check their standards. They’re so different from white people’s” (Guest, 2014). From my findings, in the interviews, the informal discussions, or blog posts, Koreans reject the claim that the change was done towards a Caucasian ideal and, sometimes, take offence in the question. I have not yet found a Korean admitting to having had surgery to look Western, but that they do to look beautiful, even if that entails some traits are shared with Caucasian features. Holliday and Elfving-Hwang claim that this blend of Korean beauty image is more than just westernization, but a more “globalized image, embodying idealized elements from many different cultures” (2012, p. 58).

The success of the Korean beauty standard in being replicated through plastic surgery is not only due to its popular standard mixing both universal and culturally specific features but also due to its singularity and this we can link to the social context and social pressures. The centripetal force of the collectivistic society, where people shouldn’t stand out has taken its toll on the standards of beauty leading to an almost singular ideal face. As Wegenstein and Ruck show, this is

characteristic of the culture industry that “propagates only limited models of beauty to conform to or, as Egginton (2009, p. 188) puts it: ‘what is unlimited by technology, however, is finally limited by the models and templates society provides’” (2011, p. 50).

To sum up, the ideal body image Korean women embrace is that of an innocent, non-sexual, soft and delicate beauty, often associated, as noticed in the plastic surgery reality shows, with doll or Barbie like appearances. This standard goes around under different names ranging from “Bagel girl” (a girl with a glamorous body and a baby face), “innocent glamour”, or “baby face”. The roots of how this standard was built appear to be irrelevant for young women and the claim of one of the presenters on the reality show “Miss Agent” that “the small and delicate face already became the world beauty standard” is highly suggestive of its normative force (Id hospital Korea plastic surgery, 2013). Transforming their face to look more Western doesn’t appear to be any longer a theme in the discourse about surgery, moreover the standard appears to spread its normative force even outside its borders.

An aspect of this research which must be highlighted is the correlative assumptions that there is a societal expectation that women must be attractive and that women subject themselves to societal roles and assumptions more frequently than men. In my conversations with students and the interviews I took there was an almost overwhelming agreement that women need to be more preoccupied with their bodies. As one girl I interviewed admitted: “of course girls are having more [surgeries] because for boys this aspect is not that important, but for girls it is important how they look. I mean boys need to be smear and girls need to be beautiful and pretty. I think this is how our society is now”.

This rigid normative standard in the context of a collectivistic, highly conformist society has a troubling potential. Due to the large percentage of people who undergo plastic surgery, the common people (those not having such surgery) are no longer perceived as common, but rather as abnormal.

## CONCLUSION

The earliest encounter with Western bodies, the colonial period, the Korean War, the economic boom, and to present day Korea, I showed how women’s views of their bodies and social context has led to the surge in plastic surgeries and how they are altering their faces to meet a locally created blend of facial features that combines both Western influences, and indigenous specificities. The “Baby face”, “Innocent Glamour” standard is suggestive of the innocent look they intend to reproduce that differs from the stereotypical sexual image of Western women they want to depart from. Furthermore, I conclude that Koreans modify their bodies, not to look more Caucasian, but to conform to the highly rigid beauty standard that has



emerged in this collectivistic society, a standard that has already been interiorized as genuinely Korean by young women and which begins to assert itself as such even across borders, especially in the Asian space. It is perhaps such developments that come to show the successful modernization project of Korea that, in this respect, transformed itself from a country where the local body was normalized towards the foreign Western standard, if we think of the work of doctor Millard, into a country that is starting to impose its ideal to other nations.

The body going through surgery is also instrumental to young women's success in life. While choosing this practice, they show agency; it is a sign of self-realization. The moments they go through these bodily modification techniques are key points in their lives: before starting a career or finding a husband. Plastic surgery, therefore, has the role of a rite of passage; it is a moment of the self in transition and a promise of success. It also became an expression of a *right to beauty* and consequently a *right to success*; for those going through plastic surgery it is a key aspect in creating their personal narrative of transformation.

However, besides being symbolic of the affirmation of the self, plastic surgeries are also representative of how women conform to the social pressures of a collectivistic society. They are supported and even advised by their parents to alter their bodies (e.g. receiving the surgery as a gift for graduation) to increase their chances of success that is consequently extended to the family as part of the collectivistic dynamic. As previously shown, the conformist pressures also came from celebrities who helped legitimize these medical practices. Looking like a celebrity becomes an epitome of Korean standard of beauty although the actors in the entertainment industry are themselves subjected to the same dynamic, in which the pressure to conform and to succeed makes surgeries a rite of passage from the debutant status to a successful entertainer. Besides the celebrities, surgeons are also carriers of the social pressures to standardize and normalize the body, their influence being made from the vantage point of their medical and expert superiority.

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