

Beauty Capital of the World: A Synthetic Analysis of the Historical Evolution of Cosmetic Surgery in South Korea

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.08.04

Abstract

Plastic surgery, a practice that has evolved significantly over time, holds a unique place in South Korea and plays a significant role in earning its crown as “the beauty capital of the world.” From its roots in traditional Confucian beliefs that deemed the body sacred and inviolable to its present status as a global hub for cosmetic enhancement, South Korea’s journey with plastic surgery is both intricate and fascinating. My interest in cosmetic surgery stemmed from my constant exposure to pop culture and entertainment. Growing up in a rapidly globalizing world, I observed how media and pop culture played significant roles in defining beauty standards, particularly in East Asia, and later spread to the West. The rise of K-pop and Korean dramas not only captivated global audiences but also propagated specific ideals of physical appearance, creating a ripple effect that influenced beauty trends worldwide. This cultural phenomenon intrigued me and led me to research the way people have used to actively change their appearance in order to fit into certain beauty ideals: cosmetic surgery. As the “cosmetic surgery capital of the world,” I investigated South Korea’s history of cosmetic surgery in hopes of finding the social roots that shaped the cosmetic surgery industry and constructed the beauty ideals we now perceive. This paper will explore the historical milestones, cultural shifts, and socio-economic factors that have shaped the practice and perception of plastic surgery and beauty in South Korea.

Keywords: plastic surgery, South Korea, cosmetic surgery, history

1. Methodology

This paper is a comprehensive literature review aimed at understanding the historical and socioeconomic factors that have shaped the cosmetic surgery industry in South Korea. With close attention paid to historical context, economic forces, shifts in social values, and technological advancements, this paper reviews the literature covering relevant topics from 1910 to the present South Korean society. In addition,

to obtain a more thorough understanding, this paper will use a variety of databases, including Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Scopus. This paper also makes the conscious selection of resources that are more accountable, with a combination of peer-reviewed journals and articles supported by more evidence.

2. Analysis

2.1 Pre-Cosmetic Surgery

The historical context of body modification in Korea is deeply rooted in its cultural and political history. Confucianism was the leading philosophy in Korea for almost 500 years, particularly during the Joseon Dynasty, which firmly rejected body modification and deemed it sacred and inviolable. Interestingly, the Japanese occupation gave rise to a complex relationship with body modification. Some scholars argue that procedures such as double eyelid surgeries, which create a fold in the upper eyelid to make the eyes appear larger, and the adoption of Western features became acts of resistance against Japanese cultural domination. Additionally, the period of modernization saw an increasing number of Koreans adopting Western clothing and hairstyles, symbolizing status and wealth. The ability to wear Western-style garments and hairstyles became a statement of socio-economic progress and modernization. These historical factors are deeply interwoven and set the stage for the later development of cosmetic surgery.

2.2 1950s — *Origin*

In the 1950s, plastic surgery began to emerge as a significant field in South Korea, notably during the Korean War. Interestingly, Dr. David Ralph Millard, an American plastic surgeon stationed in Korea during the conflict, performed the country's first documented plastic surgery. Initially, surgical procedures were primarily reconstructive, focusing on treating injured soldiers. However, Millard's work soon expanded beyond purely medical applications. While reconstructing the eyebrows of burn victims, Millard developed an interest in altering eye appearances from what he termed "oriental to occidental". His first such procedure was performed on a Korean translator who requested to be "made into a round-eye", believing his "slanted eyes" hindered Americans' trust in him. Millard acknowledged the translator's concern and agreed to perform the surgery. Following this, Millard continued to perform the surgery on women, mainly sex workers, who wished to appeal to American soldiers. Millard's influence extended beyond his personal practice: Millard also trained local doctors to continue his work after his departure. The fact that an American was the first to perform cosmetic surgery in South Korea, along with the purpose of procedures at that time, triggered the argument that cosmetic surgery industries are modeled after Western beauty

standards. Indeed, the common cosmetic surgery procedures in South Korea today, double-eyelid surgery and rhinoplasty, result in features mostly associated with Westerners. This sparked an ongoing discussion about cultural identity, beauty standards, and a complex interplay of domestic and international influences.

2.3 1960s — *Legitimization*

The 1960s was a time of social/legal legitimization of cosmetic surgery. In 1969, a group of plastic surgeons urged the government to officially recognize plastic surgery as a legitimate medical discipline. They argued that plastic surgery would help "ill women," as the following statement indicates: "How long will the government hide quacks in the field of orthopedics who take full charge of plastic surgery and avoid women's illness to want to look beautiful?" This period witnessed the legal and social legitimization of plastic surgery as medicine, which was based on the pathological model of bodies. Surgeons attempted to combat the severe criticisms of plastic surgery as a shallow aesthetic practice by advancing claims about the true identity of plastic surgery as therapeutic medicine. Plastic surgery patients were portrayed as suffering from psychological problems and abnormal concerns about their physical appearance.

2.4 1990s — *Popularization*

In the 1990s, plastic surgery in South Korea saw a significant surge in popularity, driven by various socio-economic and cultural factors. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 led to a sudden rise in unemployment rates, intensifying competition in the job market. In this climate, plastic surgery emerged as a strategic way for individuals to gain a competitive edge. For women, in particular, physical attractiveness became not just an asset but a necessity for success. The belief that physical attractiveness could yield numerous benefits permeated society, making the right look advantageous for job hunting. Concurrently, the Hallyu Wave, or the Korean Wave, began to take hold. This surge in international popularity of South Korean pop culture brought Korean celebrity culture to the forefront, with celebrities and pop stars becoming highly visible in advertisements and media. This hypervisibility of the idealized images in everyday life further reinforced the perceived importance of conforming to specific

beauty standards,

2.5 2000s — Global Expansion

The trend of cosmetic surgery continued to rise significantly from the 1990s into the 2000s, paralleling the growth of K-pop culture. Idols and celebrities played a crucial role in propagating specific beauty standards, such as being thin, having V-shaped faces, small noses, and double eyelids. The global popularity of K-pop not only solidified these beauty ideals within South Korea but also attracted cosmetic tourism, as people from around the world sought to emulate the looks of their favorite stars. The proliferation of “before and after” pictures showcasing the transformations of celebrities further fueled the desire for cosmetic surgery. As a result, South Korea earned the moniker “beauty capital,” becoming a premier destination for those seeking aesthetic enhancement. This also created the effect known as “cosmetic tourism,” where individuals would come to South Korea specifically to seek feature-enhancing procedures. This era marked a significant shift in the perception and practice of plastic surgery.

3. Conclusion

Slowly, cosmetic surgery in South Korea shifted from simple feature-enhancing procedures to a necessity in life under the pressure for appearances. This transformation was driven by a societal emphasis on physical beauty as a determinant of personal and professional success. In a highly competitive environment where first impressions make all the difference, improving one’s appearance through surgery became a strategic move to secure better job opportunities, social acceptance, and even romantic success. The increase in media portrayals and the idolization of flawless celebrities further reinforced these beauty ideals, making cosmetic enhancements seem not only desirable but almost essential in life.

As the beauty industry grew, the normalization of cosmetic surgery permeated various aspects of South Korean culture. Young people, especially young women, began to see these procedures as a rite of passage, often receiving them as graduation gifts or preparing for job interviews. The societal pressure to conform to certain beauty standards created an environment where undergoing cosmetic surgery was no longer viewed as a vanity project but necessary for one’s future. While

acknowledging the economic benefits brought by cosmetic surgery, this paper contends that it is essential to investigate the social roots lurking behind this phenomenon and critically question the long-term societal impacts in South Korea and beyond.

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