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Blepharoplasty as Domestication of the Asian: Constructing Korean Identities by White Hands

By Angela Kim

Introduction

The American cultural mindset tends to regard cosmetic surgery as an act of vanity. In the United States, we think of it as aging beauty queens desperately trying to cling to their youth or a means to increase sex appeal; it is a procedure of individuation. Although it is the result of societal pressures, it is performed by individuals. In Korea, it is done by the masses. Cosmetic surgery is viewed not as a way to stand out, but to conform. A popular cosmetic surgery procedure in South Korea is blepharoplasty, also known as double eyelid surgery. The procedure reconstructs the phenotypical trait of the monolid to create an upper crease in the eyelid. There exists a widespread cosmetic surgery culture that normalizes blepharoplasty, where celebrities undergo the procedure themselves and regularly endorse cosmetic surgery clinics. Families advocate for blepharoplasty to their children as a tradition or rite of passage.

However, there is a seldom noticed truth that the double eyelid is a categorically white phenotypical facial feature. All white people are naturally born with double eyelids while half of Korean people exhibit this trait. In this thesis, I trace the historical origins and popularization of blepharoplasty to demonstrate that the procedure is fundamentally rooted in white supremacist ideology. Dr. Millard, the white WWII Navy veteran who originated and performed blepharoplasty in Korea, made the Korean face aesthetic an issue of military and colonial conquest. This militarized aesthetic was imported from the Korean War front to the United States home front once US occupation of Korea ended. Over time, the motives behind receiving blepharoplasty transformed into a global impulse towards conforming to a hegemonic identity characterized by cosmopolitan whiteness.

Cosmetic Surgery in South Korea

“Hello! I congratulate Cinderella Clinic’s new opening. Cinderella’s Dr. Jeong is famous, very friendly, and skilled in surgery. I encourage many people to come, and I hope you will become more beautiful!”

- G.Na, K-pop star

This quote is one of many from a promotional video in which 134 K-pop stars and Korean celebrities endorse the Cinderella Plastic Surgery and Dental Clinic in Seoul, Korea. In each separate segment of the advertisement, these celebrities or K-pop groups profess eerily similar messages that encourage the audience to cosmetically alter their faces or bodies in order to “become more beautiful!” Advertisements like these are prolific throughout Korea – on the bus, in the subway, on television, on billboards, in malls, etc. The bombardment of these messages make cosmetic surgery synonymous with beauty in the minds of the Korean consumer. These messages are already compounded with economic, familial, and social influences; when consumers see their favorite Korean celebrities endorsing cosmetic surgery, they are imbued with the desire to get the procedure too. Celebrity endorsements normalize cosmetic surgery as the standard method of improving beauty.

This could explain why one in five women in South Korea have undergone cosmetic surgery compared to one in twenty women in America, according to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons. Gangnam has 500 cosmetic surgery clinics alone. South Korea has the most plastic surgery per capita in the world since 2009, with over 980,000 recorded operations in 2014 alone. That is 20 procedures per 1,000 people compared to 13 per 1,000 people in the United States. This is not to emphasize that South Korea outcompetes every other country in cosmetic surgery, rather that Korea possesses the majority of the transnational circulation and represents a mecca for the procedure; people (primarily women) travel transnationally to Korea to receive cosmetic surgery. Korean consumer culture has influenced

Korean women to equate beauty with success in the professional, economic, and social realm that it is practically sine qua non. Beauty has become the standard way to distinguish oneself in Korea's hypercompetitive culture. The pursuit of the perfect appearance is taken so seriously in Korea that it has become a multi-billion-dollar industry. Thousands of people overseas from America, China, and Taiwan travel to Korea in order to receive cosmetic surgery from the best surgeons in the world. Women interested in undergoing cosmetic surgery are driven by one standard of beauty: large, round eyes, high and pointed nose, a V-shaped chin, and a slim jaw.

The most popular cosmetic procedure is blepharoplasty, commonly referred to as double-eyelid surgery. To understand this procedure, one needs to understand the ethnic variations of the eyelids' anatomy. Half of all Koreans are born with mono-lids, with minimal to no crease on the upper eyelid. According to surgeons, blepharoplasty reconstructs what is essentialized as the Asian mono-lid into double-eyelids by removing the excess skin, muscle, and fat to show more sclera, to make the eyes appear bigger and brighter (Kurek, 1). The cost of blepharoplasty ranges from \$1,500 to \$3,000 in South Korea. For people coming from overseas, this cost does not take into account travel expenses, housing accommodations, aftercare, and cleaning products. Blepharoplasty is considered more of a cosmetic treatment than cosmetic surgery, like getting a teeth cleaning as opposed to a root canal. It is generally thought of as so minimally invasive that students will plan to receive blepharoplasty over winter break and return fully healed.

The motives of receiving blepharoplasty are intertwined with consumption since attractiveness and beauty provide monetary benefits in the labor markets and marriage. Many Korean companies require a headshot attachment with a resume when applying for jobs, so cosmetic surgery can provide women greater chances at high paying jobs and economic stability if it makes them be considered more beautiful. Simply put, people who are considered more

beautiful get paid more. If cosmetic surgery can provide a person with a better position of choosing a spouse for marriage, then they may also enjoy additional monetary benefits from marrying a spouse with a higher earnings potential. If the ideal is to be beautiful, the innovations in cosmetic surgery promise women fulfillment of this impossible desire by allowing them to alter anything they wish; cosmetic surgery offers the perfect corrective. Ordinarily, social acceptance is predicated on factors that people cannot change about themselves, namely beauty. Cosmetic surgery provides people an avenue to social acceptance and economic mobility, which explains its simultaneous popularization and normalization. This normalization of blepharoplasty shows the Korean culture industry as transparent to the consumers inside; it is not a secret in Korean society that people will receive cosmetic surgery in order to advance their social and economic position. This leads to Korean society creating a replacement of one's identity with conformity.

Critics and Defenders

The prevalence of blepharoplasty in Korean culture has led to a sensitive question: Are Koreans seeking to westernize their Asian facial features? Cosmetic surgeons and scholars tread lightly around the matter because the discourse is hotly contested and complex. It is important to acknowledge that standards of beauty are both deeply personal and thoroughly entangled with dynamics of race politics and power. Blepharoplasty defenders argue that Western culture cannot claim big eyes as unique to its definition of beauty and that Korean women who undergo blepharoplasty are simply striving to look like their beloved K-pop idols, not white people.

Critics claim that there are racist undertones to the surgery in the first place, placing western opinion of Asian eyelids as more valued. According to Eugenia Kaw, an Anthropology professor at the University of California, Berkeley, western culture has generated the idea that

the Asian mono-lid facial feature is synonymous with a dull and emotionless face that presents a lack of sociability (Kaw, 75). In order to combat this negative image, Korean women buy into this racist ideology and pursue blepharoplasty to distance themselves from their Asian features and avoid being viewed as passive subjects. As racial minorities, Korean women are made to feel inadequate by Anglo-American influence that has historically excluded them and distorted images of them in such an emphatic way that Korean women themselves have come to associate those features stereotypically identified with their race with internalized racism.

Blepharoplasty defenders and critics argue strong points but there is no coherent answer that both sides can agree on. I believe it is important to trace the origins of blepharoplasty in Korean culture and analyze the increasing popularization of this procedure throughout history. I claim that the racist introduction of blepharoplasty to Korea during WWII by a white man, a military surgeon, formed the popularization of the cosmetic procedure in Korean culture. This ideology of “white-ifying” became normalized as Korean women adamantly pursued class and social mobility during the Korean War and as an American fear of foreigners grew during the Cold War. During the mid-to-late twentieth century, Korean women were motivated to undergo blepharoplasty as a means to gain access to the United States in pursuit of the so-called American Dream. However, I argue that in modern times, the motives behind blepharoplasty transformed from a desire for westernized whiteness to a desire for transnational, cosmopolitan whiteness. In contemporary K-pop and Korean culture, there exists a new, emerging beauty aesthetic that nods to western features, but does not replicate them.

Cosmopolitan Whiteness

Throughout history, various events shape and alter motives for undergoing blepharoplasty. In the present day, many may believe that it is dubious that Korean women would

want to undergo an expensive and painful surgery simply for the desire to resemble the white face. Although the origins and popularization of blepharoplasty show this correlation, and traces of supposedly antiquated racism and xenophobia remain today, motives have become more complex and multifaceted, due to increasing white dominance in transnational currents of ideology and consumption.

I build on L. Ayu Saraswati's definition of "cosmopolitan whiteness," which she develops in the context of skin whitening, to create my own notion in the context of blepharoplasty. Saraswati points out that the pressure on Indian women to whiten their skin does not necessarily reveal women's desire to be racially white; however, Indian popular culture considers it as a sign of (re)colonization and "selling-out" to white supremacy (16). Modifying the body to emulate whiteness exists in many ethnic, racial, and religious demographics: Koreans and blepharoplasty, Indians and skin whitening, African Americans and hairstyling, Jews and rhinoplasty, and the overall rise in trends of hair bleaching, wearing colored contacts and sleek blonde weaves.

Saraswati's clarification of the motivation behind Indian skin whitening makes us question if these are examples of intentional or subconscious performances of whiteness. From what do we base this whiteness ideal from? Cosmopolitan whiteness offers an answer to this question. Saraswati defines it as "a mode for rethinking whiteness beyond racial and ethnic categories and for thinking about race, skin color, and gender as [socially] constructed" (17). I build off of Saraswati's definition of cosmopolitan whiteness and add that it cannot exist without the racialized other, or non-white groups. As noted by scholars affiliated with the *Race Traitor* project, including Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, "[t]he white race is a historically constructed social formation. It consists of all those who partake of the privileges of white skin in this society. Its most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects, than that of the

most exalted persons excluded from it...” (313). They point out the emphasis in the distinction between white and non-white groups, where even the lowest privileged members of the white group are of a higher status than the most privileged members from the non-white group. It is a simplified but helpful way of talking about race; it divides it into a binary of white and non-white. Therefore, whiteness is socially constructed, and without the racialized other, the racial hierarchy would not exist since there is no “other” to subjugate. The concept of whiteness does not exist only in the U.S. and exists in many ethnic and national contexts around the world.

In the present, westernized whiteness is not necessarily the ideal; instead an international whiteness is idealized. Outside of the U.S. and in other countries, there exists hierarchies of skin color. Lighter skin is predominantly preferred throughout various countries, and this confluence of whiteness, superiority, and beauty exists all over the world. In contemporary times, the attainment of cosmopolitan whiteness is more valuable than westernized whiteness because it is valued globally instead of merely in Western countries.

Methodology

Is cosmopolitan whiteness a subtler rearticulation of racism towards the “foreign other”? How might we begin to understand the separation from westernized whiteness and the emergence of cosmopolitan whiteness in Korea? Does cosmopolitan whiteness equally motivate Korean women to undergo blepharoplasty? For my methodology, I choose to use historical analysis to address these questions by examining the popularization of blepharoplasty throughout historical events involving the U.S. and Korea, and how these events further developed the obsession with this procedure we see today in contemporary Korean culture. I analyze the white doctor, Dr. Ralph Millard, who performed the first blepharoplasty procedure in Korea after World War II, in order to trace the discourse from the mid to late 1940s. I explore how the white

supremacist ideologies imposed during the Korean War and the Cold War helped perpetuate the desire to look white and popularize blepharoplasty. Scholarship and academic discourse play a role in investigating the procedure as racially charged. I then connect back to contemporary K-pop culture and the rise in cosmopolitan whiteness and separation from a U.S. dominated western beauty ideal. I examine discourses and their underlying ideologies, and this thesis is strongly rooted in furthering an inquiry into the implications of understanding racism, illustrated by the long history of white supremacy and U.S. influence in Korean culture.

Dr. Ralph Millard

As someone who received blepharoplasty at age 18, I never questioned the origins of the procedure. There was no need to question it because it was simply a rite of passage for the women in my family. At that age, I had not been exposed to any Asian American or Woman's Studies classes so my consciousness and identity as an Asian American woman were not fully explored. I started to question my own motives for undergoing the procedure; did I merely say yes due to traditional and familial pressures? How much did media influence and beauty standards shape my decision? Why had I never questioned my own motives? It was as if saying "blepharoplasty is a rite of passage" was a way to escape confronting these questions. In the beginning stages of my research, the detail that immediately caught my attention was that the blepharoplasty procedure was originated and popularized by Dr. Ralph Millard, a white, World War II U.S. Navy Veteran. The American Association of Plastic Surgeons claim that before and during the Korean War, he served as the chief plastic surgeon for the US Marine Corps and his role was to treat Korean accident and burn victims. As he continued his service, post-war Korea provided Millard with no shortage of patients.

Dr. Millard was also practicing a new treatment surgery for cleft lip palates and practiced on Korean youth. In an August 1976 Time magazine article titled “Medicine. Cleft-Lip Craft”, the author claims that the new cleft lip palate procedure came to Dr. Millard in a mid-day reverie. He woke up excited and literally lassoed a passing Korean boy (without any informed consent); that boy became the first recipient of the revolutionary cleft lip palate treatment. I believe it is fruitful to highlight Dr. Millard’s exploitation and use of the bodies of young Korean boys and girls. The new techniques for the cleft palate procedure were perfected on the bodies of racialized others, as if to imply that these bodies were more expendable than white bodies in order to justify the misuse. His actions therefore exemplify white colonization of Asian bodies. Dr. Millard and his team of surgeons influenced the reasoning behind performing on youth; they explained to parents of patients that he was helping their children normalize their facial features and that parents should be grateful for his help. Dr. Millard perfected the procedure throughout the course of the Korean War and impressed all of America when he came back to the U.S. He went on to be considered one of the founders of modern reconstructive facial surgery and was nominated as one of the 10 plastic surgeons of the millennium for his groundbreaking cleft-palate surgery (American Association of Plastic Surgeons).

Dr. Millard’s recognition, success, and popularity reaffirmed his own subconscious white supremacy, specifically the permissibility of racializing Asians. This ideology facilitated his role in popularizing the blepharoplasty procedure during the Korean War. An essay titled “The Oriental Eyelid and its Surgical Revision” published in the American Journal of Ophthalmology by Dr. Millard in 1964, contains explicit associations of Asian facial features with dullness and passivity. Millard writes, “The absence of the palpebral fold produces a passive expression which seems to epitomize the stoical and unemotional manner of the Oriental” (Millard, 647). He

clearly states that the mono-lid allows for dull facial expressions, and in the same logic, the presence of the “palpebral fold” produces the opposite. By using words like “passive”, “epitomize”, and “the Oriental” in his description, he perpetuates the notion that the Asian monolid is a defect in the face. “Passive” suggests that the monolid serves as the example that proves the Asian’s “stoical and unemotional manner.” This is further exemplified by his use of the word “epitomize,” which means to be a perfect example of; he characterizes Asians as unemotional, simply based on the monolid facial feature, as if dullness is the defining characteristic in Asian faces. And the use of the term “the Orient” includes racist connotations since it is used as a blanket term to eliminate diversity by homogenizing distinct races, ethnicities, and heritages within Asia and eroticizing them.

The Fear of the Foreigner

Dr. Millard’s racist ideology continued to persist as Korean war brides surfaced and the Cold War ideology of the fear of the foreigner created deep anxieties over the influx of immigration to America. During the Korean War, Korean women were the first clientele of blepharoplasty because they were motivated to undergo the procedure to appease the white soldiers’ eyes. Korean war brides married US soldiers and migrated to America. War brides during the mid 1940s to 1950s were so popular that the Congress of the United States of America passed the War Brides Act of 1945 to “expedite the admission to the United States of alien spouses and alien minor children of citizen members of the United States Armed Forces” (79th Congress, pg. 659). Over 100,000 women and children migrated to the US until 1948 when it expired. The greatest majority of people who benefitted from the act were Asian women who came with their American military husbands. Since these war brides were entering with their American husbands, they were able to dodge paperwork that other immigrants struggled with.

But with emerging Cold War ideology such as xenophobia, blepharoplasty was sought out by not only war brides, but also Korean women who wished to migrate to America in search of the American dream for class and social mobility.

Xenophobic ideologies can be analyzed in Dr. Millard's essay "Oriental Peregrinations" published in the *Journal of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* in 1955, in which he writes,

"We Americans are naïve babes in the Asian wood never knowing whether we are feeding the mouths of friends or loading the guns of communists. Yet we can be relatively certain that after each deformity was corrected or improved [through blepharoplasty] and Korean returned home, America had won the heart of the patient, his family and possibly even a part of his village" (Millard, 319).

It is important to emphasize how language shapes our cultural mindset. In dissecting the specific diction and terminology of Dr. Millard's discourse, his words are clearly attached to ideas of white supremacy and xenophobia: "feeding the mouths" implies a subordinate nature of Korean people, that they are reliant on the benevolence of America to survive. It infantilizes Asians while portraying Americans as the savior and nurturer of the non-white savages. "Mouths" as a synecdoche for the rhetorical depiction of an Asian dehumanizes them and reduces their existence as rational, holistic beings. Yet they carry the burden of a paradoxical perception: "loading the guns of communists" suggests that Koreans can only be seen as dependent babies or a threat to political stability and life in general. The use of the word "Asian" removes distinctions between nationalities and cultures, epitomizing the Western ethnocentric lens of homogeneity: all Asians are the same, converging in this "wood," which lacks the structure and morality of western society. "Village" further emphasizes his judgment of Asians and Koreans as primitive and somehow "less than" industrial American society.

Dr. Millard refers to the mono-lid as a “deformity,” insinuating that Western features are the model of a perfect face and because Asians lack this Western feature, Asian features necessitate correction. His white supremacist, colonial ideology is further demonstrated with the triumphant phrasing: “America winning the heart of the patient and family.” This implies that America deserves the gratitude and love of Koreans who have undergone the procedure for making them “objectively” beautiful, according to Western standards. Yet he phrases the transaction of receiving blepharoplasty through the lens of militarism; America has “won” a part of the village. “Won” connotes military conquest, specifically a conquest of a primitive village, which invokes a history of colonialism. His diction implies that the coexistence of the US and Korea is an inevitable conflict, a non-zero-sum game.

Altogether, Dr. Millard views the military intervention and occupation of Korea as a positive force because of his perception of himself and the US as a collective white savior to the Korean people. However, he does not consider how the presence of the US military impacts the people living in those areas. Koreans, through physical and cultural proximity, were inevitably affected by the ideology of white supremacy inherent in the military industrial complex that deemed it vital to provide military intervention for South Korea. Korea’s status as a developing, non-westernized country makes its population especially vulnerable to cultural influence; the occupation of Korea during and after the Korean War was the introduction of westernization to the country, which was previously occupied by Japan. Korea did not want to be westernized necessarily, but had no choice but to accept the military occupation and US authority in order to combat Communist North Korea and remain an autonomous country. In other words, Korea asked for military assistance in 1950, but not the cultural imposition on its people that was an intrinsic consequence to Western intervention and occupation.

Dr. Millard places Americans as the passive victim and Koreans as the malicious threat who would take advantage of the Americans' naivety. He claims that after each "deformity" (which refers to the monolid) was altered into a double eyelid, Americans could somewhat rest their fears and the Korean could become trustworthy now that they were closer to the white, western norm. Although, his use of the words "relatively certain" hints at the slight doubt that the Korean would remain a threat to American democracy and social order, even after receiving blepharoplasty. This shows that the American fear could not be completely quelled by a quick cosmetic procedure to fix the subordinate facial feature and that it was fundamentally the fact that the Korean is a foreigner - an "other" - and for that reason, cannot be fully trusted. Surgically-altered, slanted eyes became the mark of the good and trustworthy Asian; the "modification" of the face towards appearing whiter provided a comforting relief that the Asian was pliable by white hands.

Cold War Domestication of the Asian

Considering how this became prevalent during the time when the Cold War was engulfing politics and society, the war between Communist North Korea and democratic South Korea was coming to an end in 1953, and China would become a communist nation in 1949, there is no doubt that suspicion of subversion would fall on many East Asians. Certain Asian features, like the monolid, were seen as unemotional and difficult to read, which added to the untrustworthy stereotype (Kaw, 80). Blepharoplasty reduced these anxieties because it illustrated how the United States had great dominion and influence over other countries and that the Asian could be malleable. Therefore, by reconstructing their monolid, Korean war brides and Korean women immigrants became less racially threatening and suggested that Koreans could easily assimilate to American culture. But nothing could erase the perception of them as an "other."

Due to the political climate, the Cold War militarization produced the Asian as an uncertain threat that needed to be contained and domesticated, from the orient to the occident.

Blepharoplasty represented containment and domestication of the Asian.

Regardless of marriage to American soldiers or successful entry into America, Korean women were met with a plethora of judgments that blepharoplasty could not sustain; the anti-miscegenation laws that enforced racial segregation at the level of marriage by criminalizing interracial marriage did not lighten the judgment. According to Deenesh Sohoni, a Sociology professor specializing in immigration and Asian American Studies, the anti-miscegenation laws were inherently racist. He states, “In the initial period of industrial development on the West Coast, Asians were viewed as a vital and welcome part of the labor force, but once white workers saw Chinese as a threat to their wages, both political parties competed to vilify their presence” (588).

As the United States noticed Asian men competing with white men for jobs and income, the Asian became viewed as a socioeconomic “threat” to the American and needed to be “vilified.” Asians were negatively represented in media and various laws were created to bar more Asians from migrating to the United States. Viewing the same pattern more socially than economically, Korean immigrant women bore the threat of foreignizing their American husbands and children unless properly Westernized, further impacting the posterity of wholesome white America. But the Korean women who migrated to America represented a new image of Asian women in America that challenged the existing notion of the white, American housewife of the 1950s. These women were incredibly resilient as they navigated their way through a new culture, new country, and new place to call home.

K-pop Culture

Fast-forward six decades to our modern day – the burgeoning phenomenon of Korean pop (K-pop) culture is another area where blepharoplasty is highly valued. Korea has created a multibillion dollar music industry during the past two and a half decades. The popularity of K-pop idols is largely based on their impressive vocal range, mesmerizing stage presence, well choreographed dance performances, and striking beauty – characteristics all carefully cultivated and perfected by the producers of the music companies. While the idols may look confident and charismatic on stage, their performances are the result of many years of hard work and personal engineering, not necessarily innate talent. This has led to an increasing interest in K-pop music groups and the groups' members. With the development of social networking sources and online video sharing platforms, such as Youtube, people from all over the world can easily access K-pop music videos, which has led to the spread of the Hallyu wave. The Hallyu wave is a term used to describe the Korean wave of entertainment and popular culture that has swept across various regions of the world. South Korea has become the Hollywood of the East, churning out entertainment coveted by millions of fans stretching from Japan to Indonesia to France (Farrar, 1).

The K-pop music industry is especially hard on women. In an NPR episode hosted by Capital Public Radio, Park Boram, a member of the famous K-pop girl group 2NE1, speaks about her experience in K-pop and the representation of herself as a poster child for the K-pop ideal. Park states that “entertainment conglomerates groom modern K-pop groups and singers by spending years scouting, training, producing, and marketing them, so there is immense pressure to perform well, look good, and keep their managers happy” (Hu, 1). She began her four-year intensive training process to become an idol as a teenager. In her contract, it stated that she must

modify her appearance, depending on what her managers decided was best for her. Throughout her training, Park dyed her hair, modified her face through surgery, and lost 66 pounds of body weight. Her new semi-autobiographical single titled “I Became Pretty” includes lyrics about eating only a banana and an egg each day.

With the fast paced wave of Hallyu, fans, scholars, economists, and record companies have been trying to figure out Korea’s key to success. Is it the years and years of training that create mega superstar idols? Or is it all marketing techniques? As a Korean American who grew up admiring K-pop idols, going to multiple K-pop concerts, and vacationing in Korea during my summers, I had my own hypothesis about the different facets that make K-pop so trendy: these K-pop stars embody the definition of beautiful. We look to them as idols and strive to emulate and become infatuated with their God-crafted, chiseled beauty. Year after year, management agencies churn out girl groups that look alike and exemplify a girly, doe-eyed innocence. Many young female fans endeavor to be like the idols – fans ask their hair stylists for haircuts similar to their favorite K-pop idols or memorize their favorite K-pop groups’ dance choreography and dance along during concerts. K-pop auditions have become global, where record companies travel to find new talent from places all over the world. Thousands of fans audition with hopes of becoming the new K-pop sensation and entering into a world they only ever dreamed of.

Therefore, when hundreds of K-pop idols who frequently endorse cosmetic surgery clinics and undergo the procedure themselves, their fan base easily buys into the idea that they too must go under the knife to be considered truly beautiful by Korean society. Juxtaposing the rise of K-pop during the Hallyu wave and the messages that Korean music companies send to female fans, K-pop culture has assisted the popularization of blepharoplasty.

Internalized Racism or Human Capital?

K-pop stars and Korean celebrities continue to influence the younger generation. K-pop culture displays how blepharoplasty is synonymous with success – K-pop idols are walking examples of it. When fans look at the before and after photos of K-pop idols, they see that they become more beautiful (or what is considered beautiful in Korean culture). When fans see this change, they want to become more beautiful as well and will buy into the notion that undergoing blepharoplasty may bring them one step closer to desirable beauty. It teaches society that if you are unhappy with your natural looks, you can buy beauty. Before, I mentioned how cosmetic surgery allows people to gain social acceptance and economic mobility by changing something they normally could not change – beauty. A Korean woman can undergo multiple cosmetic procedures to achieve whatever level of beauty she desires. She can choose to fix her monolids to double eye-lids, her flat nose to a high, pointy nose, or her wide set jaw to a slimming jaw line, but she cannot change one of the most fundamental aspects of herself – her Asian appearance. Cosmetic surgery may be a means to come closer to achieving the whiteness she yearns for, by achieving white-like features that distance her from her prominent Asian features. This internalized racism presents her with a conflict of wanting to not identify as Asian, yet not being able to escape it, no matter how unconscious that desire is.

Motives of the procedure revolve around internalized racial inferiority – but to what degree? Eugenia Kaw examines how cultural and institutional forces motivate Asian women to surgically alter the shape of their eyes since their decision to undergo cosmetic surgery is an attempt to escape persistent racial prejudice that correlates their stereotyped genetic physical features. This can be seen in the contrast of cosmetic procedures white women and Asian women receive. White women opt for liposuction, breast augmentation, or wrinkle removal procedures whereas Asian women most often request blepharoplasty or rhinoplasty (75). The features that

white women seek to alter (breasts, excess fat, or wrinkles) do not correspond to conventional markers of racial identity whereas Asian women choose procedures that are conventional markers of racial identity and racially specific. However, I argue that white women do not opt for blepharoplasty simply because all white people are naturally born with double eye-lids. In my personal experience when explaining the double eye-lid to white people, they do not seem to understand what it is because double eye-lids are naturalized as the phenotypical norm. I argue instead that since all white people have double eye-lids, Korean women strive for this norm due to the desire to be considered a part of the norm. These associations that Asian women make between their features stem from stereotypes created by Western society, which historically has wielded the most power and hegemonic influence. However, it is worthwhile to note the distinction in whiteness in the broad sense, and not necessarily a Westernized whiteness that Korean women strive to achieve. Korean cosmetic surgery may have at one point in history emulated a Western aesthetic, but as cosmopolitan whiteness explains, it strays farther from this Western aesthetic into a transnational, global whiteness; big eyes are universally considered appealing and pale skin connotes affluence in many countries.

Through conducting informal interviews, Kaw discovers that the decision to undergo cosmetic surgery is never purely for aesthetic purposes, but almost always for improving social statuses as women who are racial minorities (78). However, in her findings, the women she interviewed explained that they are all proud to be Asian and that they do not want to look white.

Rather the standard of beauty they admire and strive for is a face with larger eyes and a more prominent nose. Fifty percent of Koreans naturally have a double-eyelid, and thus it can be argued that Korean women who undergo blepharoplasty are intending to look like the other half of the population, a desire separate from any racial ties or historical discrimination based off of

those facial features. Even though Korean women may internalize stereotypes of the Asian race and Asian features, it is arguable that blepharoplasty is not a Westernization of the Korean face, and instead a way to feel more a part of their Korean community and look like the other Koreans with double-eyelids in their community and country.

Interestingly, blepharoplasty may be a means for Korean women to revolt against U.S. domination of beauty standards and a strong way to reclaim Korean bodies. Historically, Koreans have been subject to U.S. militarism, colonization, and occupation in their home country, been treated as threats to Americans and faced discrimination as they migrated to their new home country, and have struggled to formulate Korean pride and comfort in their own bodies and skin. Knowing the racist historical roots of the procedure and wanting to further Korean capital in the world, Korean women may undergo blepharoplasty as a means of accumulating social and human capital. Whether it be seen as empowering to reclaiming bodies or unfortunate by further confirming the undesirability of stereotypical Asian features, Korean women are still striving for a face with large, double-lidded eyes, a prominent nose, and an overall beautiful aesthetic. Whether it be a Westernized whiteness or a cosmopolitan whiteness they yearn for, the historical origins of the procedure show that it is still a type of *whiteness* they aspire to.

Path to Cosmopolitan Whiteness

For Koreans, undergoing blepharoplasty is the path to obtain cosmopolitan whiteness since it is a way to compete in a globalized world. As Bruce Robbins, a humanities professor at Columbia University, states, “the word cosmopolitan . . . evokes the image of a privileged person: someone who can claim to be a ‘citizen of the world’ by virtue of independent means, expensive tastes, and a globe-trotting lifestyle” (Robbins 1998, 248). Robbins’ definition of cosmopolitan as an ideal seems to transcend race as if it is equally attainable for every “citizen of

the world.” However, this simple definition ignores the disparity in social status that racism inevitably imposes on non-white people. White people have innately easier access to cosmopolitan identities since whiteness is universally valued. The only thing inhibiting white people from having a cosmopolitan, global standing is their ability to afford international travel and lavish lifestyles. Since white people have innate access to cosmopolitanism, it has become virtually synonymous with whiteness. Therefore, cosmopolitanism cannot exist without a racialized other, or else everyone would be cosmopolitan; in order for it to exist, there must be a division from other groups. Building off of Robbins’ definition (specifically, the implications of the classification of “privileged”), the world is divided into cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan; white people are categorically more likely to fit the former while others are relegated to the latter due to their race.

In modern times, the development of blepharoplasty allows Koreans to transcend, to a certain degree, the limitations of their race that excludes them from cosmopolitanism. Blepharoplasty facilitates the assimilation by adopting white features, and due to the expensive nature of the surgery, class is not a restriction either for Korean women who decide to receive blepharoplasty. The history of the procedure and the very idolization of cosmopolitan whiteness (although it masquerades as pure cosmopolitanism, independent of race) is clearly steeped in racism.

I argue that blepharoplasty will always be racially charged. It can be argued that Korean women are merely emulating other Korean women or K-pop stars, but even these celebrities buy into this racist ideology – their fans and emulators are, in actuality, conforming to it vicariously through these stars and other women. Overall, as a racialized other, one is at an automatic

disadvantage, so it is understandable if one does whatever they can to get ahead. For the racialized other, striving for whiteness is survival in a world that values cosmopolitan whiteness.

In conclusion, I argue that understanding and acknowledging the racist history of the development and normalization of blepharoplasty by white people is more important than trying to ignore it. It is more empowering to know the history of blepharoplasty than wanting to erase it. We should not be criticizing the racialized others for striving to be white, we should be indicting the white supremacist system that creates and proliferates that desire.

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