

## The Complex Relationship between National Identity and Plastic Surgery in South Korea

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### Intro:

Hello everyone! Welcome to our class! Today, I want to talk about "body". I believe that in our daily lives, our bodies are often affected by various factors. For example, you may change your dressing style or pay attention to your walking posture in pursuit of mainstream aesthetics influenced by social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu or Instagram. But have you ever thought about how our bodies can be shaped by national identity? Today, I will use plastic surgery in South Korea to help you understand how the body embodies the national identity.

With a focus on how contemporary South Korean beauty standards are implicitly linked to historical quests for national identity in South Korean reconstruction after World War II, I will draw on social media discussions of plastic surgery among South Koreans and historical records to show that South Korea's plastic surgery practices are rooted in complex nationalist and historical influences.

### Interaction:

Apart from K-pop, plastic surgery has become synonymous with South Korea, which has earned the title of the "cosmetic surgery capital of the world" due to its remarkably high rates of plastic surgery procedures. According to various estimates, anywhere from one-third to over 50% of South Korean women between the ages of 19 and 29 have undergone plastic surgery. Furthermore, according to the latest report released by Gallup Korea Research Institute on April 9, 2020, 80% of women in the 19-59 age group are willing to undergo plastic surgery, while the percentage of men, although less than that of women, is also 65%, and this trend has been increasing every year since 1994 (換日線 2022).

What are the most popular plastic surgery procedures in South Korea? I would like to invite you to take a look at the plastic surgery trends for 2022, as revealed by some famous cosmetic surgeons in the two articles below. After that, could you tell me what kinds of plastic surgery features you observed?

Link 1: <http://bitly.ws/Dw9I> (香港 01 2022)

Link 2: <http://bitly.ws/Dw9K> (yahoo! Sports 2022)

**Side A:** Western-oriented features in plastic surgery:

Thank you for your response. From these two articles, we can see that there are Western-oriented features present in the plastic surgery trends, such as a high nose bridge, a slightly upturned nose tip, and double eyelid surgery to create larger eyes, which are also some of the most popular plastic surgery procedures in South Korea today.

On Naver, a popular website for young Koreans, a post asked why cosmetic surgery for double eyelids and nose is prevalent in South Korea, and some Korean netizens replied, "To make my flat face look more three-dimensional, which is more attractive," while others replied, "(Because) this is in line with Korean aesthetics, I (had my nose done) just to look more like a Korean beauty" (naver 2018). In a survey of 290 young Korean men and women in 2015, Kim Tae Hee, who is regarded as the representative of "natural beauty" by the Korean public, was the most representative of the "Korean face" in the eyes of the respondents, with her big eyes, slim face and high nose becoming the characteristics of South Korea's beauty. "I think Kim Tae Hee is not only a Korean beauty, but also a top ranker in Asia in terms of appearance," said a respondent. Plastic surgeon Kwon Seung-taik also claims that Kim Tae-hee's features are the most frequently requested by plastic surgery patients from all over the world, saying that "this kind of face, which has both western features and eastern sweetness, is very popular among surgery patients." (Jin 2020)

However, if we simply assume that the preference for Western features in plastic surgery is due to a desire to look like Westerners or that it reflects a belief that Western features are superior, it would be difficult to find evidence to support these views in South Korea's society. In a discussion about cosmetic surgery on South Korea's internet forum theqoo, many Korean netizens expressed their dissatisfaction with the idea that modifying faces with big eyes or high noses is meant to make the West look like the ideal beauty. Some comments said that "many (K-pop) idols have beautiful big eyes, but they are all Korean", and some even directly said, "This is Korean; what does it have to do with western or not western? What nonsense are you talking about?" (theqoo 2021)

From these discussions, we can see that Korean public aesthetics rejects the "not good enough" features of traditional Asian faces; moreover, Western features have long been internalized as part of the standard "Korean face", and even think that big eyes and high noses have nothing to do with the West but are themselves the embodiment of Korean beauty. So, what has led to this situation? We can look at the history of South Korea before and after the colonization to find clues.

New Korean identity after decolonization:

**Side B:** When it comes to South Korea's national identity, the Japanese colonial period in Korea (1910-45) is a time period that can never be bypassed. During the Japanese colonial period, There were two schools of thought among Japanese anatomists regarding the racial discourse between Japan and Korea. One group, led by Ueda, focused on similarities between Koreans and Japanese in order to support Japan's assimilation policy. The other group, represented by Kubo, emphasized the differences between the two races to strengthen Japan's racial superiority, even as an "Asian model." Regardless of their main objectives, both schools aimed to rationalize Japan's rule and consolidate its position in the colony (Kim 2016: 457).

**Side C:** Predictably, after Korea gained independence in 1945, significant effort was focused on emphasizing the distinct Korean identity by highlighting its differences from Japan (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012: 69). Thus, nationalist discussions of the time used the West to reject the racial theories of colonial Japan in an attempt to create an ethnically superior image of the Korean nation, best evidenced by descriptions of the features of the Korean people from Na Se-jin, who was considered as the proverbial founding father of anatomy and physical anthropology in postcolonial Korea. His book called *Physical Characteristics of Korean Nation* in 1964 distinguishes the Korean from the Japanese (Kim 2016: 470). Na Se-jin writes that:

The Korean is of medium to tall height, among many races of the world. The neck is thin and long, and because of the superior development of the Korean's body and muscular structure, the posture is straight and erect. The calf is long, and since every part of the body's measurements are very even, the Korean resembles the well-proportioned stature of the Europeans and Americans. (quoted in Holliday & Elfving-Hwan 2012: 69)

In this passage, we can see Na Se-jin's description of the Korean body and muscles to prove that Koreans have a physical advantage among many races, and that such a physical advantage is even consistent with European beauty, meaning that Koreans are superior to Japanese. Here, the Western body was utilized as a means of resisting Japanese beauty standards, serving as an anti-colonial message.

The rejection of specific characteristics of the traditional Asian face served as the foundation for South Korea's rejection of both the cruel Japanese colonial impact and general foreign influence. In order to revive the "Korean look" as the distinctive identity of the newly independent Korea, Korea sought out Western features after colonial authority ended. Thus, the new "Korean look" distinguished itself from conventional East Asian faces reminiscent of Korean invaders by drawing on characteristics of features with a Western orientation and molding them into Korean faces (Jin 2020).

**Side D:** Conclusion:

The body and national identity are intertwined in South Korea, where plastic surgery is synonymous with Korea's standard beauty. Popular plastic surgery procedures, such as double eyelid surgery and nose jobs, reflect a preference for Western-oriented features like a high nose bridge and larger eyes. However, debates about the meaning of these features reveal a complex relationship between current Korean's beauty standards which are internalized Western features and national identity. This relationship can be traced back to Korea's past.

In colonial period, Koreans are portrayed as an inferior race. Therefore, post-colonial Korea sought to differentiate itself from Japan by emphasizing its distinct Korean identity, including physical characteristics that were seen as similar to Western beauty standards. Rejecting traditional Asian features and drawing on Western features to create a "Korean look" helped to establish a new identity unique to post-independence Korea. Overall, the body serves as a site of contestation and negotiation for Korean national identity, reflecting the complex and often contradictory relationship with the current beauty standards in South Korea incorporate internalized Western features.

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## Western-oriented features in plastic surgery



High nose bridge  
Slightly upturned nose tip  
Double eyelid surgery to create larger eyes

## How do Korean people respond to Western-oriented features?

Naver: “To make my flat face look more three-dimensional, which is more attractive.”

“(Because) this is in line with Korean aesthetics, I (had my nose done) just to look more like a Korean beauty.”

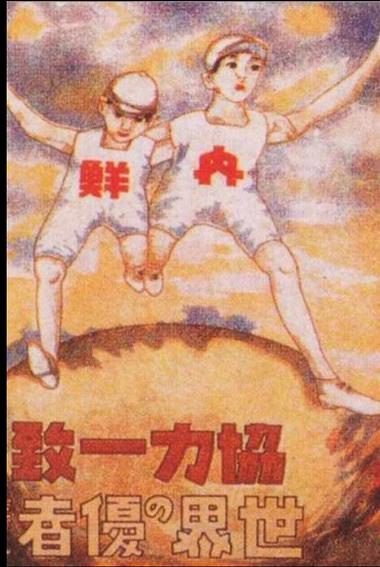
A survey of 290 young Korean in 2015, Kim Tae Hee was the most representative of the “Korean face”.

theqoo: “many (K-pop) idols have beautiful big eyes, but they are all Korean.”

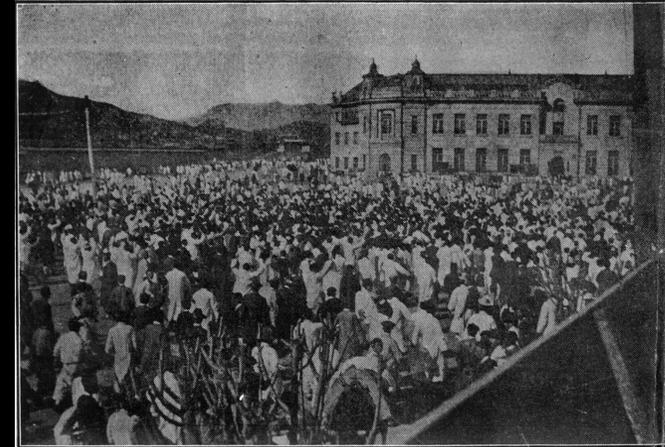
“This is Korean; what does it have to do with western or not western?”



Korean beauty standards reject traditional Asian features and embrace internalized Western features as the embodiment of Korean beauty.



Ueda: focused on similarities between Koreans and Japanese in order to support Japan's assimilation policy



Kubo, emphasized the differences between the two races to strengthen Japan's racial superiority

**Colonial period in Korea: Sameness or inferior race comparing Japan**

**Aimed to rationalize Japan's rule and consolidate its position in the colony.**

## Post-colonial period in Korea: Using “West” to create racial advantage

Significant effort was focused on emphasizing the distinct Korean identity by highlighting its differences from Japan.

Anatomist and physical anthropologist Na Se-jin, 1964 *Physical Characteristics of Korean Nation*:

**The Korean is of medium to tall height, among many races of the world.** The neck is thin and long, and because of the superior development of the Korean’s body and muscular structure, the posture is straight and erect. The calf is long, and since every part of the body’s measurements are very even, **the Korean resembles the well-proportioned stature of the Europeans and Americans.**

→ Western body was utilized as a means of resisting Japanese beauty standards, serving as an anti-colonial message.



After gaining independence, South Korea incorporated Western features to **create a unique "Korean look"** that distinguishes itself from traditional East Asian faces reminiscent of Korean colonizers——Japan.

## Conclusion

- Plastic surgery is synonymous with South Korea's standard of beauty, **reflecting a preference for Western-oriented features**.
- The relationship between **current Korean beauty standards and national identity** is complex and can be traced back to Korea's past during the colonial period.
- Post-colonial Korea sought to differentiate itself from Japan by emphasizing its **distinct Korean identity, including physical characteristics similar to Western beauty standards**.
- **The body serves as a site of contestation and negotiation for Korean national identity**, reflecting the complex and often contradictory relationship with the current beauty standards that incorporate internalized Western features.