The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 11, Issue 24, No. 2, June 17, 2013.

Cosmetic Surgery and Embodying the Moral Self in South Korean Popular Makeover Culture 韓国のイメージチェンジ文化における整形手術と道徳的主体の体現

Joanna Elfving-Hwang

Send to Kindle

You only have to spend a day in Seoul to realize that appearances do matter in contemporary South Korean society. Advertisements for various cosmetic surgeries are conspicuous everywhere—from taxis (*fig. 1*) to public transport and underground stations (*figs. 2* and *3*), all evidence that the industry is booming.

Figure 1. Cosmetic Surgery QR code advertisement at the back of a Seoul taxi (centre) (photo: author)

In their worldwide survey of cosmetic procedures performed in 2011 by board certified cosmetic surgeons, the International Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) placed Korea in seventh place in terms of numbers of surgical procedures. That said, Korea's 250,000 recorded surgeries were easily outstripped by US and Brazil which topped the list with numbers close to the 1 million mark.[1] Nevertheless, Korea tops the list in the number of procedures per capita.[2] (This is borne out by a more recent report based on the ISAPS's figures published in the *Economist*.)

Even so, the actual figures are likely much higher since a significant number of surgeries go unrecorded: not only is the cosmetic surgery industry badly regulated (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012) but the clinical data included in the ISAPS's figures only takes into account surgeries performed by accredited surgeons who form a minority of medical or medical-related staff who perform surgeries. Many beauty salons and 'health clinics' offer smaller cosmetic procedures such as facial fillers (e.g. Botox® or Retylin®), blepharoplasty and mole removal laser surgery, which are not recorded as surgical procedures and are thus not included in the statistics quoted above.

While research concerned with the representation of cosmetic surgery in popular culture and media in the West tends to prioritize gender or neoliberal consumerist desires as the main explanation for individual subjects' apparent non-resistance and malleability to conform to popular beauty discourses (see more on this in Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012), this essay focuses on South Korean popular discourses on cosmetic surgery to show that there are additional categories, ideologies and even moral principles that go beyond simplistic notions of the body as an investment for individual, personal gain in the context of neoliberal capitalist society. In particular, in contemporary South Korean discourses of beauty, care of self and cosmetic surgery increasingly link notions of 'correct' or 'appropriate' appearance with performing adequately in society as a social subject.

Figure 2.

These embodied ideas of performing one's social status through appearance are certainly not new to Korea. In many ways, contemporary practices can be said to build on premodern Chosŏn-era practice of displaying social status through class-appropriate clothing and decorum, and the ways in which they are interpolated in neoliberal discourses of self-improvement and class mobility are evident in the ways in which cosmopolitan subjectivity is embodied through cosmetic surgery as a sign of a desired class, social or gendered identity (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). In some ways the engagement with surgical practices can be seen as a 'democratizing' practice, and the rate of uptake in quite complex surgeries, such as the chin and mandibular angle reduction surgery ('V-line surgery'), also suggest something of the trivialization of associated risks in popular discourses about cosmetic surgery in South Korea and focuses on the possibilities that it portends.

In this essay, I will analyze the narrative structure of a popular cable television makeover programme, *Let Me In,* so as to outline the kinds of social and cultural narratives the popular media (and possibly the cosmetic surgery industry) put forward to justify performing potentially life-threatening surgeries on otherwise healthy bodies. Through a narrative analysis of the reality TV show, I will illustrate how contemporary Korean subjects are effectively interpellated into a set of moral discourses of self-discipline, and even filial piety, to justify the presumed necessity for radical corporeal changes. These discourses coalesce to promote the practice not as an instance of vanity, but as evidence of moral fibre and responsibility that one 'owes' not only to oneself, but also to one's parents or children as an expression of filial piety or parental duty. Within this context, I argue that these discourses embedded in the narrative structure of programmes such as *Let Me In* can be read as symptomatic of the ways in which global beauty discourses can effect potentially highly disciplinary (in a Foucauldian sense) practices in culturally localized ways.

Cosmetic Surgery and Middle Class Identity

In

Figure 3. Advertisement at a Seoul underground station, with before and after images of rhinoplasty (photo: author)

order to contextualise the narrative presented in *Let Me In*, it is useful to draw attention to the fact that cosmetic surgery is, by and large, represented either positively or neutrally in South Korean popular culture and media (with some notable exceptions, mainly initiated by feminist activist groups). While the factors involved in individual subjects electing to undergo cosmetic surgery vary and can rarely be pinned down to one specific reason (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012), the perceived necessity to display the markers of *kwit'i* (cultured appearance) as a sign of consumer middle class identity, emerges as a highly affective force encouraging individuals to perceive aesthetic surgical intervention as a practical and normative option for self-improvement. Within this context, it is telling that the physical evidence of surgical enhancement (rather than hiding it) in itself is becoming a marker of social status and wealth, further emphasizing the instrumental way in which cosmetic surgery is presented in popular media and makeover programmes in particular.[3] Given that the cosmetic surgery industry is promoting and actively selling a practice that performs potentially life-threatening surgeries (such as facial contouring, or calf muscle thinning that can potentially cripple the patient for life) on bodies that are not in any conceivable way 'ill' or 'diseased', it should be a hard sell. This way of thinking about cosmetic surgery is re-enforced in advertising as well, where 'minor' surgeries, such as blepharoplasty (double eye-lid surgery), tend to carry similar health warnings as ear piercing which emphasize the importance of proper hygiene and care of self after procedures, thus placing the burden of responsibility for successful surgery on the patient.[4] Tellingly, while the Korean Consumer Agency reports growing numbers of cases of consumer complaints filed against clinics (even if the number of successful claims is still relatively small, around 70 per year), the Korean Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery plays down potential risks of surgery, and stresses the importance of choosing a registered hospital (*sŏnghyŏng woegwa ŭiwŏn*) for procedures.[5] The onus here is entirely on the patient to do their research well and to accept the responsibility for any mistakes made in selecting a surgeon. Rather than recognizing that any surgical procedure carries very real risks of side effects that range from (but are not limited to) excessive scarring or lasting numbness, heavy bleeding that requires blood transfusions, haematomas (blood clots), secondary infections or necrosis (tissue death) to life-threatening complications such as heart attacks or pulmonary embolism that can lead to strokes,[6] the emphasis is put on choosing one's surgeon carefully..

Promotional cosmetic surgery marketing material too typically points to the positive psychological effects of successful surgery on the recipient, and suggests that patients will feel more positive about themselves when some aspect of their bodies that they are not satisfied with is 'fixed' to reflect particular normative beauty ideals (Orbach, 2009; Blum, 2003; Davis, 2003), further emphasizing the transformative narrative put forth both in advertising and makeover programmes. [7]

Reflecting this, the question for cultural and feminist critics has revolved around whether cosmetic surgery is a constraining disciplinary discourse which produces docile bodies (Haiken, 1997; Bordo, 2003; Blood, 2005) or an empowering one. Both arguments are, from the outset, compelling. On the one hand, surgery can be perceived as an oppressive practice, implying that it is performed on individuals who are unable to resist the compelling force of prevailing beauty and health discourses. On the other hand, cosmetic surgery can be seen as an inherently empowering practice and, at least in part, one in which individuals take action and are willing to risk their lives to guarantee perceived success within their individual circumstances, where certain appearances may be considered as either a precursor or evidence of social success (Bordo, 2003; Davies, 1995; Heyes, 2007b; Jones, 2008; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012; Sanches Taylor, 2012). In contemporary South Korea, the latter cannot be dismissed off-hand, particularly since appearance is not seen simply as a practical or personal issue but also, at least to an extent, a matter of social etiquette.[8] For this reason, the aim is not necessarily to achieve beauty, but a look that is 'right' for a particular occupation or social position (see further on this in Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012).[9] Reflecting the wider recognition of cosmetic surgery practices as a matter of etiquette (*yewi*) and status, many popular celebrities in South Korea quite openly confess to having had surgery – and even endorse the services of a particular clinic that provided them with good service.[10] These examples suggest that cosmetic surgery is becoming increasingly accepted as a way of achieving an appropriate appearance, but that is considered as a

rational investment in one's appearance that is informed by very practical considerations (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). Consequently, in contemporary Korean society, the marketing of cosmetic surgery is driven by the transformative promise of the process of 'before-and-after', as a source of social capital and psychological well-being. In contrast to Western discourses, however, cosmetic surgery is not typically represented as an attempt to create an appearance more congruent to what is perceived as patients' 'true' inner selves and 'inner beauty' (Featherstone, 2010: 195; see also Heyes, 2006: 16).[11] In this sense, cosmetic surgery in Korean popular narratives relates more to 'doing' surgery for the sake of performing a certain social class or status (Sanchez Taylor, 2012; Jones, 2012), than it does to 'becoming' more the image that one holds of one's 'inner self' a result of having surgery .

Accordingly, the beauty industry in Korea markets a plethora of beauty treatments and practices as a way of not only fixing flaws and erasing evidence of aging, but also to *literally* embody the markers of middle class consumerist success. 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 – even if this necessitates turning to credit card companies to finance the desired look. Jung-ah Choi (2005) in her study of high school students' career aspirations in Korea observes that as 'class becomes a fragile category in a consumer-led postindustrial economy', class identity too emerges as a process rather than a predestined position. Choi notes that among the young people she interviewed, appearance is seen as essential for gaining employment in the customer-oriented work place (which is perceived as attractive for its association with consumer capitalism), in particular for students who do not consider themselves to be academically exceptional. Choi's research findings demonstrate that students have internalized a discourse whereby enhancing one's appearance through surgery is understood to promote a meritocratic belief that success (and potentially evidence of social standing) depends on willingness to invest in bringing one's appearance in line with prevailing (and often quite narrowly defined) beauty ideals.

Unsurprisingly, both the entertainment industry and the cosmetic surgery industry are tapping into this kind of globalized discourse in which bodies are seen and are represented as both objects of investment and of individual consumer desire. Yet an analysis of Korean popular media discourses reveals that ideas of self-improvement are not simply grounded in Western individualism. Quite the contrary, they are also necessitated by the affective, intersubjective gaze of a social group (whether it be the family or other group that the subject identifies with) which promotes a view that the individual subject's body is also representative of the collective body of that group (Elfving-Hwang, 2010). In this sense, the cosmetic surgery becomes a contemporary manifestation of *yewi*, which goes beyond and not simply a utilitarian notion of gaining access to a social group through imitating or assuming a certain look – whether that be one of a *kkotminam*[12] or a politician. Reflecting this, the narrative logic deployed in popular media and in TV makeover programmes assert that cosmetic surgery is not evidence of vanity, but quite the contrary, positive proof of willingness to invest in self in consideration of others. Within this context, somatic subjectivity obtained through engagement with surgery is seen as an expression of moral self, rather than suggesting lack thereof (Heyes, 2007b). Yet this constant focus on the moralizing, intersubjective gaze also creates a somatic system of disciplinary power of what Foucault refers to as 'compulsory visibility' (1991 [1975]: 187), heavily connected to ideas of legitimate membership of a social group. In other words, Foucault maintains that through a process of turning subjects into objects of 'infinite examination' in relation to how well they conform to discursively created norms within given disciplinary regimes, the regime itself is constantly refined, classified and fixed. Moreover, for each individual, success within a given somatic regime depends on visibility, on how well they fulfill the characteristics of, for example, 'a beautiful human being' as laid out in a particular beauty discourse. It is within this context of intersubjective examination of self and others that each individual is constituted, as Foucault points out, 'as effect and object of power' (192).

TV Narratives of Transformation

While a significant literature on makeover programmes sees this moral stance as related to the individual, *Let Me In* quite intentionally draws not only on contemporary discourses of beauty, health and fitness, but also on Neo-Confucian ethical principles of filial piety. While I am not suggesting that cosmetic surgery is in any way linked to Neo-Confucianism *per se* (especially given that the principle of *sinch'ebalbu* (body, hair, and skin) prohibited any alteration of the body and because care-of-self and preserving the body were seen as important expressions of filial piety), an analysis of this programme reveals a contradictory logic in which surgery is presented as evidence of filial piety. The relation between individual bodies and the constant reminder of having to visually display and perform a certain appropriate appearance is a useful reminder of the level of how the construction of self-subjectivity is informed by considerations of compulsory visibility and how success relies on how individuals position themselves within these beauty regimes both as objects and effects of disciplinary power.

Let Me In, which was first aired on commercial cable network StoryOn in December 2011, follows the well-established format of Western versions of this type of heavily edited TV 'reality' show. In its narrative structure and visual effects, it draws heavily on popular Western makeover shows such as *Extreme Makeover* (ABC, 2002-2007) and *The Swan* (Fox, 2004) in the US, and *Ten Years Younger* (Channel 4, 2004-present) in the UK. Sponsored by a major cosmetic surgery clinic based in Seoul, it was advertised as a 'responsible' makeover reality TV programme that aimed to 'help' contestants by offering them free surgery and makeovers.[13] Reflecting this presumably egalitarian ethos, the surgery hopefuls are typically selected from working class backgrounds[14] and thus are unable to bear the considerable financial cost that major surgeries and enrolling in fitness and health programmes entail.[15] Aside from providing the programme makers with a platform that will invariably yield positive results to the contestant, it also makes visually compelling viewing. Overplaying of the contestants' visual markers of relative poverty means that the outcome of the process of *pyŏnsin* – the visually marked metamorphosis of the participant's body – makes for all the more dramatic viewing, emphasizing physical appearance as a vehicle for complete psychological, physical and, ultimately, social change.[16]

Each episode opens with a section in which the surgery hopefuls seek to convince the programme hosts – the actress Hwang Shin Hye and a number of celebrity makeover artists and medical and beauty specialists (who are at this point concealed from view behind a screen) – of their need to be transformed into a *'mi-in'* (literally: a beautiful person) (*Fig. 4*). As the camera moves from the sympathetic faces of the presenters to reveal only the back of the contestant, the contestant is invited to explain why she should be selected for a makeover.[17] At this point the camera angle is used effectively to exaggerate the presumed physical 'hideousness' of the candidate by initially hiding, and then very slowly revealing the full 'monstrosity' the presumably offensive facial feature, which in the majority of cases is a severe cross-bite or a prominent, square jawline, occasionally accentuated by the contestant's overweight condition. The contestants are then invited to explain how their appearance affects their everyday lives.

In most cases the audience is introduced to women who struggle with being overweight and feel isolated and disadvantaged in a society in which ostensibly 'everyone else' appears slender and beautiful.[18] The contestants are also invariably given a derogatory 'nickname' that describes the source of their distress, such as *k'ŭn pawi ŏlgul* ('the large stone face'; Season 1, Episode 3), *p'ŭrangk'ensyut'ain ŭl talm'ŭn kŭnyŏ* ('the girl who looks like Frankenstein'; Season 2, Episode 2), *kwemul yŏ* ('the monster woman'; Season 1, Episode 7), and *utji mot hanŭn yŏja* ('the woman who cannot laugh'; Season 2, Episode 8). While this TV genre frequently utilizes direct cruelty to emphasize the necessity for surgery (Featherstone, 2012), the programme takes this to the extreme in order to position the contestants within the 'cosmetic underclass' (*miyong hawui kyegŭp*) of those who are considered unable to succeed because of their appearance and lack of means to fix their perceived flaws.[19]

The contestants' initial plea for surgical help is followed by a montage of a background narrative in which audiences are invited to witness the difficulties that contestants face because of their appearance. In the majority of episodes this involves scenes in which the contestant lives in self-imposed isolation or is bullied by others.[20] In one of the earlier episodes (Ep. 3, Season 1), for example, the cameras follow a young student who is overweight, and who has become a social recluse because of insecurities about her face or weight. Scenes in which the candidate is shown to stand outside a university classroom without the courage to go in and partake in seminars are utilised to emphasize the real distress that her appearance causes her (*Fig. 4*). Back in the studio, the contestants' self-narratives emphasize that they are not vain, but simply unable to function in society 'like other people' because of their presumably offending appearance. The contestants declare that

Figure 4. "She wants to go in and live a normal life like that but..." (A still from Episode 3, Season 1)

'I wish to live like other people', 'not to become beautiful, just to be normal' (Ep. 3, Season 1);

'Compared to normal people, my face is huge' (Ep. 13, Season 2)

'Just for once, I'd like to live like a human being' (Episode 13, Season 2)

Rather than questioning the logic behind this cultural over-determination of the gaze that almost invariably seems to relegate the contestants to a *persona non grata*, both the medical experts and presenters subject the contestant to an examination of her physical appearance that affirms her position within an aesthetic underclass, so that the medical discussion about surgery becomes 'an instrument that combines hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment.' (Heyes, 2007b: 30) Tellingly, no reference is made in this context to the potential health risks associated with being overweight so that all consultations and discussions remain at the level of beauty aesthetics. As the contestants' bodies are examined against accepted beauty norms, they are interpellated within semi-scientific discourses that produce uncontested 'truths' about somatic-aesthetic normativity vis-à-vis their bodies. These 'truths' in turn are used, in the narrative of the programme, to classify and pathologise the contestants' presumably non-standard appearance as a legitimate index of social exclusion.

Family members are also given a narrative function in the structure of the programme to reinforce and legitimate the discourse of exclusion based on appearance. The contestants' parents are shown to apologize to their children for passing on 'faulty' genes to their daughters ('*pumo-rŭl jal mot manassŏ*'), and also for lacking the funds to 'fix' these 'faults' through surgery (again enforcing the idea of the existence of a 'cosmetic underclass' of those who cannot afford to fix their flaws). Within this context, appearance is constructed as the key source of domestic discord, fueled both by the contestants' lack of self-discipline to diet or self-confidence to function properly in their everyday lives and parents' guilt about not being able to do anything to put it right. (*Fig. 5*).

The central place of the family in this part of the programme reveals an interesting gap in existing research on cosmetic surgery in the West, suggesting that in Korea an individual's desire to have cosmetic surgery cannot be understood simply as an attempt to overcome a conflict between the 'outer self' and an idealized image of a 'true inner self' (see for example Heyes, 2007a). The way in which surgery is presented as external to self, yet at least in part justified as a somatic sign of filial duty to one's parents through a process of 'correcting' inherited flaws through medical technology, appears to both contradict the Neo-Confucian idea of *sinch'ebalbu* while simultaneously reaffirming its principle through the almost filial act of improving the genetic material inherited from one's ancestors. This emphasis on the interplay between the desirability of a 'surgical rebirth' as a way for an individual to succeed

Figure 5 "Why don't we just die together?" (A still from Episode 3, Season 1)

in modern society and the implied imperative for parents to ensure that their children can choose to do so certainly suggests an additional dimension to somatic subjectivities within the popular narratives of cosmetic surgery practices in Korea to those seen in the Western version of the genre where such suggestions of parental guilt are much less of an issue.

Dissecting Beauty

The somatic subjectivity that is expressed in terms of acceptable appearance and not simply through conventional beauty, is reinforced in the following part of the programme where the medical specialists (*takdŏsŭ,* 'the Doctors') discuss both the limits of surgical intervention and whether the patient will psychologically benefit from the proposed surgery. As the contestants' appearance is pathologised and medicalised through labeling the body part that causes them concern as a deformity, the 'necessity' of medical (surgical) intervention is established. The panel consists of cosmetic surgeons, psychologists, a dental surgeon and a dermatologist, who proceed to debate whether to operate on a contestant. While they offer ostensibly value-free and judgment-free opinions ('the clinical perspective'), the focus of their deliberations is emphatically not on whether the patient 'needs' surgery (after all, she is not medically ill), but on whether she will be a good (enough) patient to ensure a desirable outcome. At this narrative juncture, the audiences – both in the studio and at home – are drawn into judgment-making about the extent to which each contestant compares with the normative somatic-aesthetic standards put forward in the programme. On one hand the, audience is being educated to deploy a cosmetic gaze in assessing the contestant's 'worthiness' to be operated on (as well as to undoubtedly reflect on one's own 'worthiness'), based on her material and physical need (judged visually), and psychological need (demonstrated social ill-effects of her current appearance). Effectively then, the audiences learn to assess the surgery hopefuls (and themselves) from the surgeon's perspective, which focuses on what kinds of patients make 'good' candidates for surgery.

The logic used by cosmetic surgeons in assessing patients in this programme dictates that everyone is a potential candidate for surgery and thus 'deserves' it (if they have the means to pay for it). It also suggests that there are good patients (who have reasonable expectations; can take pain and have willpower) and bad patients (who are likely to be unhappy with the results; who expect to have it 'easy' or have no willpower to stick with the after care and fitness regime required of a good patient, or even worse, who sue the surgeon).[21] This logic also shifts the onus for success to the patient, as it is for the contestants to prove that they are both worth the proposed makeover by not only demonstrating a 'need' for surgery, but also faith in the positive outcome of the

surgery. Thus the burden of responsibility for defining successful outcomes is effectively shifted to the patient through managing their expectations. This gives the surgeons a power mandate that any other kind of medical professional can only dream of.

The final decision is revealed with the full visual drama where the dark 'consultation room' divides into two: the thick screen separating the two studios is literally torn asunder and the successful contestant is physically 'let in' (in an intentional reference to the title of the programme) as she physically moves into the brightly lit back studio where the delighted studio audience and the panel of professionals are waiting to begin the business of grafting the body of the contestant into something more acceptable. The visual vocabulary in these scenes (in particular in Season 1), which draws the viewer to make a symbolic connection to Roman Catholic iconography on the last judgement, purgatory and heaven,[22] clearly emphasises the power invested in medical intervention: the contestant is literally transported from the purgatory of pre-operative self to the biomedical technology heaven of surgical knowledge and expertise (*Fig. 6*).

Figure 6. The backstage opens to a brightly lit back studio (Episode 3, Season 1)

What follows is a short section in which the surgeons inform the patient of what kind of surgery she is to receive (*Fig. 8*). (The absolute mandate given to the surgeons in this programme is again quite breath-taking, and in many ways emphasises the impression that the programme is very much about cultivating perfect patients who submit to the surgeons' moral and scientific mandate in recommending surgeries most 'beneficial' to them).

Yet for the viewing audiences this moment is presented as evidence of surgery as egalitarian practice, because it presumably rescues the contestant from social exclusion. This principle is constantly reinforced in the narrative, and as the successful contestants begin an intensive three-month fitness, diet, surgery and beauty treatment regime away from their families and in confinement, the editing of the programme ensures that audiences are constantly reminded that the moral responsibility for transformation (*pyŏnsin*) rests solely on the contestants. The surgeons, dermatologists, fitness trainers and programme presenters function simply as 'sovereign experts' (Bordo, 2003: 26), and scenes of actual surgeries and the physical pain associated with the recovery period are minimized, as are scenes in which contestants are styled for the final show. Scenes where the contestants go through physical discomfort as part of their fitness and dieting regime function as constant reminders of the necessity to cultivate a desirable mental attitude toward the process of transformation (*pyŏnsin*), and underpin the 'progressionist narrative' (Heyes, 2007a: 72) that positions surgery as a means to achieve 'normalization'. The process itself is inherently panoptic, and subject to constant surveillance of the approving or chastising gaze of the TV cameras, which witness any slip in self-discipline, training the contestants to expect and perform for the cosmetic gaze of the real and imagined audiences.

Figure 7. Consultation (Still from Episode 3, Season 1)

Before and After: Rebirth through Surgery

The pivotal moment in the programme comes of course when the contestant returns to the studio after three of months of surgery, recovery, dieting, fitness training and styling – all of which is presented as evidence of her heroic battle to cultivate a strong will and attitude to bear the inevitable pain of the transformation. Visual vocabulary throughout the programme is used to highlight the dramatic before and after images, and what is striking about this particular programme is that there is never a suggestion in this narrative that the *pyŏnsin* is about the surgically enhanced body being, as is suggested in Western literature on the topic, 'a site of truth reflecting the self within' (Heyes, 2007b: 5) where the transformed body is presented as an outcome of a process where the authentic and beautiful self is externalized and made visible. Heyes notes that while 'many cosmetic surgery recipients want to become (more) attractive, many (both qualitative research and popular representations suggest) want to better embody the kind of person they believe themselves, characterologically speaking, to be.' (Heyes, 2007a: 18). In *Let Me In*, there is very little reference to any notion of any pre-existing 'inner beauty'. Instead, contestants are quite literally presented as having been 'born again' (*tasi t'aeŏnagi*) into a new subjectivity embodied in the postoperative body. Within this narrative, then, cosmetic surgery is not simply conceived as being a corrective practice, but conceptualized as the starting point of a new identity altogether.[23]

Figure 8. The moment of 'rebirth' (A still from Episode 3, Season 1)

The visual vocabulary point is highly evocative of an actual physical (and psychological) rebirth, particularly in Season 1. Each contestant emerges from a womb-like silo positioned at the back of the studio, from which she walks with confident gait to the brightly-lit front of the stage (*Fig. 8*). The camera lingers on the body of the contestant, almost revealing her face, only to rewind back again to show the transformed body from a different angle. The contestant then steps onto a catwalk to reveal what the host calls a 'rebirth' (*tasi t'aeŏnagi*) of the previously 'hideous' self into a *mi-in* (a beautiful person). The contestant is then allowed to see her newly styled and professionally made over look for the first time in the mirror as the audiences are given a voyeuristic once-over of her entire body in slow-motion. And again, the viewer is invited to a dialogic agreement with the programme hosts and studio audience, whose gasps of disbelief are played on a loop to emphasize the presumed sense of awe that we are invited to witness and participate in, through the shared deployment of the cosmetic gaze which insists on the notion of subjectivity as essentially captured within this somatic sign. The 'before and after' images of the contestants, displayed behind the contestant in full view of the studio audience and transposed next to the altered image of the contestant, are presented as visual proof of this possibility of a new subjectivity (*Fig. 9*).

Finally, the contestant is tearfully reunited with her parents (or occasionally a sister), and in this scene we can see how the

Figure 9. Before and after images of a contestant (Episode 1, Season 2)

moralizing discourse of the process of the *pyŏnsin* takes its full effect (*Fig. 10*). The time away from parents is presented as both a sobering experience for the young contestant, and a moment of joy (and occasional bewilderment) to the parents who are shown as visibly proud of their children's courage to withstand the pain associated with the period of recovery. This is intriguing, as the surgery here is presented not only as a physical improvement, but a way to restore harmony within the parent/child relationship through somatic 'rebirth'. The previously offensive appearance (caused by lack of fortune) is projected as not only visually displeasing but also a photographic reminder of the contestants' moral deficiency, whereas the process of *pyŏnsin* comes to signify respect toward one's parents, gained through hard work and pain, all of which are evidenced in the – often quite spectacular – after image of the *pyŏnsin*.[24] The parents' approval and delight at the outcome of the surgery emphasises a much wider, socially accepted idea that a non-standard appearance (as defined above) is a serious disadvantage in increasingly competitive society and one that parents have a responsibility to deal with much as they invest in their children's education. The narrative of *Let Me In* emphasises this filial dimension through scenes in which parents repeatedly thank their children for their hard work (*'kosaeng-i manatta'*), 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.[25]

Figure 10. 'Reunion' with parents (Episode 3, Season 1)

Conclusion

As every episode ends in cheerful clapping and admiring gasps from studio audiences while contestants and their families shed tears of joy, one might be tempted to ask what exactly is the harm in assisting underprivileged members of society to function more effectively in society – even if it all is produced for the purpose of commercial gain and presented in the form of light entertainment. Certainly, the contestants are shown to be overwhelmed by the results of their often quite spectacular transformation, and the surgeries are shown to have produced a makeover that leads the individuals concerned to better opportunities in life than they would have had without the surgery. Yet this idea of comprehensive rebirth of the self through surgery is clearly problematic, even if it appears to promise transcendence of birth, lineage, family background, nationality and social class. While advances in biomedical sciences and surgical techniques seem to offer almost unlimited possibilities for somatic transformation, the unproblematic way in which these narratives suggest that success is linked to a set of narrowly defined visual signifiers should certainly be cause for concern. As the narrative of *pyŏnsin* analyzed in this essay shows, beauty is not presented as vanity, but as a form of cultural citizenship and social capital (Edmonds, 2010). What is more, an uncomfortable contrast is made here between 'performers' and 'non-performers': performers being those who work on their bodies, are employed or study, and are socially active; whereas non-performers are those who are overweight, do not look after their appearance and are unemployed/withdrawn from education or socially reclusive. [26]

In the context of discussing British teenage girls' cosmetic surgery, Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor notes that while cosmetic surgery can be understood 'as a strategic act on the part of women who are rational, intelligent agents,' she also calls for the necessity to 'remain critical of the structural context in which this form of consumption represents either the only or the best strategy through which to attain their goals.' (2012: 460) Similarly, although most of the contestants would undoubtedly agree that they had benefited from taking part in the programme in one way or another (some of the contestants having even become minor internet celebrities),[27] the unproblematic presentation of the process of *pyŏnsin* as a way out of the 'cosmetic underclass' raises questions about the increasingly central position that appearance is perceived to occupy by many (and popular media in particular) as a marker of social capital and moral fibre in contemporary Korean society. I argue that because the practice of cosmetic surgery in these programmes is inherently connected to much wider discourses of acceptable appearance (and often *kwit'i* rather than beauty), it represents evidence of morality, as opposed to a lack thereof. In the context of contemporary Korean society, cosmetic surgery increasingly signifies not only investment in self, but also the embodiment of moral will. As contestants in *Let Me In* become visually acceptable, yet not necessarily out-of-this-world beautiful, this signifies that within such narrowly defined and intensely panoptic cosmetic culture, only those who are able to achieve and perform a certain standard of normative beauty are entitled to legitimate membership in civil society. Moreover, in this sense artificial beauty is alarmingly shown to evidence a certain degree of 'authenticity' of character which those who have let themselves and those around them down (by failing to achieve these standards) have not reached.

To conclude, the narrative logic that informs *Let Me In* and other programmes like it (and increasingly in representations of cosmetic surgery in popular culture in general) goes far beyond simplistic notions of beauty and submitting to fitness and health regimes as a personal choice. Moreover, while the pressure to achieve beauty and perfection is in many ways not so different from the way in which cosmetic surgery is becoming accepted practice in many other post-industrial consumer societies (such as the US and Australia), the importance that family is shown to play in decisions to undergo surgery certainly suggests an added pressure, and one that is readily utilised by the cosmetic surgery industry and the media. All these intersecting discourses work to normalize narrowly defined, artificially enhanced beauty ideals which work toward a somatically performed moral norm which is shown to require surgical intervention. This suggests that we may soon have a situation in which patients routinely approach the surgeon in order to perform *adequately* in society, rather than wanting to undergo surgery in order to become something extraordinary. As Shildrick (2008) points out, this in turn may also lead to intolerance of other kinds of difference such as those linked to disabilities and gender. If normativity is then increasingly measured not by the degree to which the body has been surgically modified, but rather by how well it conforms to the visual (and moral) norms of the current makeover culture, then perhaps we need to start thinking about cultural discourses of cosmetic surgery as a sign of a much more profound shift in emerging epistemological discourses of the self in relation to the other in contemporary Korean society.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof Mark Selden, Dr Rumi Sakamoto and Dr Laura Dales for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper,

which is based on a presentation I gave at the Association of Asian Studies Conference in Toronto in March 2012. I am grateful to the audience and panel participants (Dr Roald Maliangkay, Dr Stephen Epstein, Dr John Franklin and Sun-Ha Hong) for their feedback. I would also like to thank the enthusiastic group of MA students at Frankfurt Goethe University who enrolled in my "Theories of Power" course in Summer Semester 2012. Their insightful observations opened up some very lively discussions on cosmetic cultures in Korea, and I hope that this paper answers at least some of the thorny questions raised in our seminars.

Jo Elfving-Hwang (PhD, Sheffield University) is an Associate Professor of Korean Studies at the University of Western Australia. Previous to her current appointment she was Junior Professor of Korean Culture and Society and Director of Korean Studies at Frankfurt University (Germany), and has also worked at the University of Sheffield, Leeds University and Sheffield Hallam University. Her current research and teaching interests include cultural representations of cosmetic cultures in South Korea, masculinities in South Korean popular culture, and South Korean cultural diplomacy and models of overseas development in Africa. Recent publications include a monograph titled *Representations of Femininity in Contemporary South Korean Women's Literature* (Dorset: Brill/Global Oriental, 2010); 'Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea' (with Ruth Holliday), *Body and Society* 18(2) (2012): 58-81; and a book chapter 'Cross-border representations in North and South Korean Cold War Literatures', in *Global Cold War Literatures: Western, Eastern and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Andrew Hammond (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 44-57. Email: joanna.elfving-hwang@uwa.edu.au

Recommended citation: Joanna Elfving-Hwang, "Cosmetic Surgery and Embodying the Moral Self in South Korean Popular Makeover Culture," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 11, Issue 24, No. 2, June 17, 2013.

REFERENCES

Bae Chŏng-hŭi, `"*Ret mi in 2*" *yŏt'a meik'ŭ obŏ syo-wa tarŭn iyu*' ['Let Me In 2' and the Different Rationale Compared to othr Makeover Shows], *TV Daily*, September 5, 2012. Available at: http://tvdaily.mk.co.kr/read.php3?aid=1346834901382499019 [last accessed 18.02.2013]

Bordo, Susan (2003). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press)

Blood, Sylvia (2005). *Body Works: The Social Construction of Women's Body Image* (Hove and New York: Routledge).

Blum, Virginia (2003). *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press).

Cho Ok-hŭi, '"Ret mi in" Hŏ Ye-ŭn panjŏn woemo-e kŭkjang kwangek-dŭl kamt'an' ['Let Me In' Hŏ Yen-ŭn's Transformation Amazes Movie-going Audiences], *Hanguk Ilbo*, February 18, 2013. Available at: http://sports.hankooki.com/lpage/life/201302/sp2013021814315710 9530.htm [accessed 20.02.2013]

Choi Jung-ah (2005), 'New Generations' Career Aspirations and New Ways of Marginalization in a Postindustrial Economy,' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 26(2): 269-283

Davis, Kathy (1995), *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (London: Routledge)

Davis, Kathy (2003), *Dubious Equalities and Embodied Differences: Cultural Studies on Cosmetic Surgery* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield)

Edmonds, Alexander (2010), *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil* (Durham and London: Duke University Press)

Elliot, Anthony (2008), *Making the Cut* (London: Reaktion Books)

Epstein, Stephen J. and Joo, Rachael M. (2012), 'Multiple Exposures: Korean Bodies and the Transnational Imagination,' The Asia-Pacific Journal 10(33), No. 1. Available at: http://japanfocus.org/-Rachael_M_-Joo/3807

Featherstone, Mike (2010), 'Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture', *Body & Society* 16(1): 193-221.

Foucault, Michel (1991), *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books; first published in 1975 under the title *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*)

Grazer, F.M. and de Jong, R.H. (2000), 'Fatal outcomes from liposuction: census survey of cosmetic surgeons,' *Plastic Reconstructive Surgery* 105(1): 436-46

Haiken, Elizabeth (1997), *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press)

Heyes, Cressida (2007a), 'Cosmetic Surgery and the Televisual Makeover', *Feminist Media Studies* 7(1): 17-32

Heyes, Cressida (2007b), *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Holliday, Ruth and Elfving-Hwang, Joanna (2012), 'Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea', *Body & Society* 18(2): 58-81

Jones, Meredith (2008), *Skintights: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery* (Oxford and New York: Berg)

Jones, Meredith (2012), 'Cosmetic Surgery and the Fashionable Face,' *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 16(2): 192-210.

Morgan, Kathryn Pauly (2009),'Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies', in *Cosmetic Surgery: A Feminist Primer, eds.* Cressida J. Heyes and Meredith Jones (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate): pp. 49-77

Orbach, Susan (2009), *Bodies* (New York: Picador)

Rhee Seung Chul, Dhong, Eun Sang and Yoon, Eul Sik (2009), 'Photogrammetric Facial Analysis of Attractive Korean Entertainers', *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* 33: 167-174

Sanchez Taylor, Jacqueline (2012), 'Fake Breasts and Power: Gender, Class and Cosmetic Surgery', *Women's Studies International Forum* 35: 458-466

Shildrick, Margrit (2008), 'Corporeal Cuts: Surgery and the Psycho-social Body', *Body and Society*, 14(1): 31-46

Sŏ, Chŏnghŭi (2008), *Sŏnghyŏng sobi munhwa* [Cosmetic Consumer Culture] (Seoul: Naeha ch'ulp'ansa)

Suissa, Amnon Jacob (2008), "Addiction to Cosmetic Surgery: Representations and Medicalization of the Body," *International Journal of Mental Health Addiction* 6: 619–630

Wegenstein, Bernadette and Ruck, Nora (2011), 'Physiognomy, Reality Television and the Cosmetic Gaze', *Body & Society* 17(4): 27-55

NOTES

[1] See ISAPS Global Statistics 2011, available at: link (last accessed 15.2.2013)

[2] See: link (last accessed 15.2.2013)

[3] For discussion on this in the Western context see: Meredith Jones (2012), 'Cosmetic Surgery and the Fashionable Face', *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 16(2): 192-210.

[4] In a recent article published in AlterNet (alternet.com), one young female interviewee likened cosmetic surgery to a simple application of appearance-enhancing non-surgical cosmetics, such as lipstick or foundation cream. While this opinion is by no means representative of the whole population, it is indicative of the way in which many cosmetic surgery recipients distance themselves from the risks associated with any invasive surgical procedure: link (Last accessed January 7, 2013)

[5] link

[6] See the Australasian Foundation for Plastic Surgery for a list of associated risks for different kinds of surgeries: link. While it is difficult to estimate an exact number of deaths per year that result directly from aesthetic surgical procedures, a US study compares the mortality rate for liposuction alone with traffic accident related deaths in the US (1 in 5000) (F.M. Grazer and R.H. de Jong (2000), 'Fatal outcomes from liposuction: census survey of cosmetic surgeons,' *Plastic Reconstructive Surgery* 105(1): 436-46.

[7] According to current medical law in South Korea, it is illegal to use' before and after' images in advertising any medical services because they may be construed as misleading (See #5 in *Kukka bŏmryŏng chŏngbo sent'ŏ*: link. Enforcing this law, however, has been fraught with difficulty, as the Korean National Council for Consumer Organization's efforts to clamp down on illegal practices in advertising demonstrate (See for example: Korean National Council for Consumer Organizations report on the widespread use of 'before and after' images in cosmetic surgery industry: link (Last accessed 15.2.2013)

[8] Laura Miller has discussed the relation between linking the necessity to engage in everyday beauty work with 'creating acceptable appearance' and beauty as 'an expression of social manners' in Japan. Within this context, she argues that 'beauty therefore is not simply a personal issue but a problem of public etiquette' (*Beauty Up*, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2006: 100-102).

[9] Even politicians in high-powered positions may find it difficult to evade such a compelling, subjectivising gaze: former President Lee Myung-bak (2007-2012) reportedly disappeared from the public eye for a week in 2012 to recover from the after effects of a major hair transplant. Grand National Party chairman Hong Joon-pyo had his eyebrows tattooed in the run up to the April 2012 National Assembly elections, reportedly because his natural eyebrows were not considered 'imposing enough' for a serious political leader.

[10] For example, actress Shin Eun-kyun signed an advertising contract in 2011 with a cosmetic surgery clinic that carried out mandibular angle reduction (jawline) surgery for her (*Chosŏn Ilbo*, November 2, 2011: link).

[11] Heyes points out that a number of popular discourses that relate to the care of self 'assiduously cultivate the notion that there is an inner authenticity to which each individual must be loyal.' (2006: 16)

[12] Literally 'flower-like beautiful man', which is a term used to describe a generation of 'metrosexual' young men (generally in their late teens and twenties) who take significant interest in personal grooming, fashion and appearance in general. The beauty and fashion practices the *kkonminam* engage in resemble very closely those that the *aimei nanren* (love beauty men) in China and Taiwan and *bishōnen* (beautiful young men) in Japan practice, suggesting a pan-Asian 'transnational body aesthetics' discussed in Miller, 2006: 5).

[13] 'Makeovers to Be Normal, Not Beautiful', *Korea Times*, link. See previews of Season 1 here: link, and Season 2 here: link

[14] One episode in Season 2 also features two contestants from outside South Korea: an ethnic Korean from China, and a North Korean refugee, both of whom expressed a desire to succeed in South Korea, yet felt unable to do so because of their 'non-normative' appearance. The episode is titled 'Foreigners who find it difficult to adjust to life in Korea because of their appearance' (*Woemo ttaemun-e hangug-e chŏngj'ak hagi himdŭn ibang indŭl*). In fact, the Chinese contestant felt she was unable to succeed as a pop-singer because of her appearance rather than simply having difficulties in functioning in everyday situations, as was the case with many other contestants featured in this programme. See outline of the episode at *Let Me In* website: link

[15] The kinds of full-body makeovers that the contestants undergo (rhinoplasty, jaw reshaping, breast augmentation, cosmetic dentistry treatment, liposuction, appointments with personal trainers and dermatologists) can be expected to cost between US$40,000-45,000. The most expensive makeover in Season 2 (episode 10) was worth US$80,000.

[16] In the run-up to Season 2, the programme makers emphasized that the programme was not simply about beauty through cosmetic surgery, but about holistic treatment of contestants who had an 'appearance complex' so that they could 'go out and live in society'. Bae Chŏng-hŭi, '"*Ret mi in 2"yŏt'a meik'ŭ obŏ syo-wa tarŭn iyu*', *TV Daily*, September 5, 2012. Available at: link [last accessed 18.02.2013]

[17] Although the cosmetic surgery industry in Korea increasingly serves men as well as women (see further on this in Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012), the fact that most of the contestants in this programme are women (with the exception of one male-to-female transgender woman) indicates that at least in public, the visual spectacle of men engaging with surgery may be, at least for the time being, considered as too much of a 'feminine practice' to attract big enough audiences.

[18] In South Korea, ideal feminine beauty tends to be very narrowly defined, and cosmetic surgery operations aim to achieve facial

features that are as symmetrical and balanced as possible: an ideal beautiful face has 'shorter lower face, larger eyes, smaller lips, and a more slender and oval shaped mandibular soft tissue contour [jawline].' (Seung Chul Rhee *et. al.* (2009), 'Photogrammetric Facial Analysis of Attractive Korean Entertainers', *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* 33: 167-174 (167). This beauty ideal that seeks uniformity is perhaps best illustrated in the recent discussion about near-identical looks of the contestants in the Miss Korea 2013 beauty pageant: link.

[19] Sŏ Chŏnghŭi, *Sŏnghyŏng sobi munhwa* (Seoul: Naeha ch'ulp'ansa, 2008), p. 20.

[20] These scenes can occasionally be quite startling. For example, in Episode 7 (Season 1), the contestant is shown being shunned by her own son because of her overweight. While the scene is obviously staged in this occasion, it is used to highlight the ill-effects of the contestant's appearance, but without any reference to disapproving the clearly inappropriate behaviour of her son.

[21] See Heyes (2009), pp. 73-7.

[22] Open-access examples of such can be found for example at: link and link

[23] This message is also reinforced in the first words that appear on the screen at the beginning of Episode 1 of Season 1: 'When your appearance changes, your life changes' (*woemoga pakkwi-myŏn insaeng-i pakkwinta*)

[24] In some ways this represents a discourse which is in line with both older discourses of interpersonal gaze as a way of gaining affirmation of one's identity within a given social context, whilst suggesting fragmentation of any reliable dogma about the self beyond notions of somatic subjectivity.

[25] In some episodes this aspect is somewhat played down where contestants have either lost contact with their parents (Season 2, episode 13) or they disapprove of surgery for non-aesthetic reasons, as in the case of a transgender contestant whose mother disapproves of her decision (Season 2, episode 3)

[26] See Amnon Jacob Suissa, "Addiction to Cosmetic Surgery: Representations and Medicalization of the Body," *International Journal of Mental Health Addiction* 6 (2008): 619–630 (p. 623)

[27] *Hanguk ilbo* recently reported that Hŏ Ye-ŭn, who appeared in Episode 6 (Season 2), has also benefited financially from her transformation, as she recently featured in a cinema advertisement for the clinic that performed her surgery: link (accessed 20.02.2013).