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# The body, cosmetics and aesthetics in South Korea The emergence of a field of research

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## ABSTRACT

Based on a scholarly literature review in French, English, and Korean, the paper discusses the South Korean infatuation with luxury goods and cosmetic surgery. How did the transition to modernity transform the relationship of Korean women (and men) to their bodies and faces? What are the implications of these changes in the way society regards the use of cosmetics and luxury goods?

The paper first takes stock of the obsession with aesthetic enhancement that characterizes Korean society today, before discussing the relationship of Korean women and their bodies within the cultural context of Korea, extremely competitive and organized by male dominance. It then looks at the catalysts of modernity and innovation in the relationship South Koreans maintain with the aesthetic/cosmetic complex. Finally, it discusses the deeply entrenched idea of the harmony of body, heart and spirit, where physical appearance becomes a matter of social etiquette, and moral duty.

# The body, cosmetics and aesthetics in South Korea

## The emergence of a field of research

Valérie Gelézeau (EHESS/CNRS)



L'ECOLE  
DES HAUTES  
ETUDES EN  
SCIENCES  
SOCIALES



# THE BODY, COSMETICS AND AESTHETICS IN SOUTH KOREA

## THE EMERGENCE OF A FIELD OF RESEARCH

VALÉRIE GELÉZEAU

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South Korea, aesthetics, body, cosmetic surgery, luxury goods, women, health

### AUTHOR'S RECENT PUBLICATIONS

On the topic

- "Les passions esthétiques sud-coréennes", *Korea Analysis*, n°3, juin 2014, p. 44-51. En dépôt sur HAL-SHS : <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01140516>

On other topics

- "Voyager en ignorance, voisiner en connivence. Le terrain d'une géographe française en Corée", *Croisements. Revue francophone de sciences humaines d'Asie de l'Est*, n°4, p. 110-127. [<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01140510>]
- "햇볕정책(1998-2008)이 남북한 접경지역 변화에 미친 영향 - 문화지리학적 관점에서Haetpyöt chŏngch'aek (1998-2008)-i Nam-Puk'an chŏpkyŏng chiyŏk pyŏnhwa-e mich'in yŏnggyang - munhwa chiri hakchŏk kwanjŏm-esŏ" (The effect of the Sunshine Policy (1998-2008) on the inter-Korean border zone - the perspective of cultural geography), *민족문화연구Minjok munhwa yŏn'gu* (*Korean Cultural Studies*) n°63, juin 2014, p. 247-278.
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- Séoul, 2011, collection "Mégapoles", Paris, Autrement. 88 p.
- *Ap'at'ũ Konghwaguk*. P'ũlangŭ chirihakcha-ga pon han'guk-ũ ap'at'ũ (La République des Appartements. Regards d'une géographe française sur les grands-ensembles sud-coréens), 2007, Séoul, Humanitas. Traduction de Kil Haiyon. 269 p.
- "Séoul, ville géante, cités radieuses" Paris, CNRS Editions, collection *Asie Orientale*, 2003. Free access at : [<http://books.openedition.org/editions-cnrs/3760>]

Discussions on the South Korean social networks, the hub of a new and important political arena in the best connected country in the world, are today buzzing with curious neologisms which have no equivalent in French or English (save the invention of awkward paraphrases): you have to be *momjjang*<sup>1</sup> or *öljjang* (i.e., "have perfect body/face"<sup>2</sup>) if you want to succeed in life. Being just the opposite, i.e., *momkkwang* or *ölkkwang*, will poison your future. Discussions about the need to resort to *kyörhon sönghyöng* (plastic surgery to assure a successful marriage) are as prevalent as those about *chigöp sönghyöng* (plastic surgery to secure a good job) – and if women are more concerned by the first option and men the second, both imperatives concern both sexes.

In short, whether you are a man or a woman, if you are not *mi-in* ("a beautiful person"), you belong to a *miyöng hawui kyegüp* ("a cosmetic underclass"), in other words a lumpenproletariat class of beauty, and your social wellbeing may be at risk.

It is fair to say that the physical appearance of the body and the face are crucial factors in social life in South Korea.

And yet, these well-known facts are surprising when one considers that one of the cardinal laws of the traditional relationship between a person and his/her body is based on pre-modern Korean culture, influenced by the Confucian philosophy of *sinch'e palbu*, i.e., the absolute integrity of the whole: body (*sinch'e*) - hair (*pal*) - skin (*pu*).

### How can this paradox be explained?

How did the transition to modernity over the course of the second half of the twentieth century so profoundly transform the relationship of Korean women (and men) to their bodies and faces? What are the implications of these changes in the way society regards the use of cosmetics and luxury goods?

It is, indeed, the question of the body in the largest sense of the term (the body and all its trappings) - and especially the relationship South Korean women have with their bodies (and their faces) - that seems to be the key to answering these questions. Thus, it is the South Korean woman who provides a natural entry point into the matter, but we will see that this

<sup>1</sup> In this text I use McCune-Reischauer's transcriptions for common nouns; for proper names (people or brands) I use the official transcriptions or the ones chosen by the persons concerned, if I know them, otherwise, McCune; for the place names in South Korea I use the South Korean transcriptions.

<sup>2</sup> Jjang is a superlative ("the most... the best..."); mom means "body" and öl "face"

approach has its limitations and does not suffice to explain this point in Korea, where gender differences that can be observed elsewhere in the domain of aesthetics and cosmetics are less well-defined.

To answer these questions, and to set up foundations in the social sciences for further research on the subject, this working paper proposes to examine an inventory of the relevant research. The paper is organised in five sections (including the conclusion), corresponding to the main themes the author encountered over the course of her reading.

The first section, *The South Korean infatuation with aesthetics*, takes stock of the different aspects of the obsession with aesthetic enhancement (luxury goods, cosmetics or plastic surgery, for example) that characterise Korean society today, especially in comparison with other examples worldwide. The second part is entitled *The Korean woman and the "global body"*. "Global body" is used in the same sense as "global health" and refers to the body as seen from a worldwide perspective. This section provides a synthesis of the research that has been done on the relationship of Korean women and their bodies within the specific cultural context of Korea, a context that is extremely competitive and strongly characterised by male dominance. It then examines the evolution of this relationship throughout the modern period and the expression, or influence, of general (worldwide) trends that define the relationship between a woman and her body – for example, the perceived necessity of conforming to specific canons of beauty (and which ones) or the transformation of the body into an object of luxury (and the resulting investments). The third section, *The Korean State and the "national body (or bodies)"* will look at the specifically Korean catalysts of modernity and innovation in the relationship South Koreans maintain with the aesthetic/cosmetic complex that deals with the body; the heavy-handed modalities of the authoritarian development of the 1960s and 70s, which brought about the intrusion of the State into what we might call "the social body, or bodies", in both the physical and figurative sense), can explain some of the characteristics of the aesthetics/cosmetics complex in South Korea. Likewise, the specificities of social change are related to certain specificities in the strategies of social distinction, where physical appearance plays a strong role. Finally, the fourth section, *Ethics, harmony and cosmetics in South Korea*, will discuss a corpus of recent work about the relationships between people and the body in Korea, and how these relationships are changing. The deeply entrenched tendencies of the relationship with the body and the self, which refer back to the idea of a harmony of body, heart and spirit, where physical appearance becomes a question of social etiquette, even of moral duty, are in full mutation. In what way, and to what extent, is the transformation of the self an

expression of these values that are so deeply rooted in the Korean mentality? How does social change cause these values to evolve?

## 1. SOUTH KOREA – THE INFATUATION WITH AESTHETIC APPEARANCE (LUXURY GOODS AND COSMETICS)

Excess and an apparently self assured relationship with their physical appearance are today the characteristics of Korean women's (and men's) passion for everything that is related to aesthetics of the body and its trappings. This aesthetic quest is often analysed, quite rightly, as a desire to conform to the group in a society that is characterised as "holistic" (*i.e.*, the group takes precedence over the individual).

In 2010, the police in Seoul found themselves involved in a strange case: more than 1500 pairs of shoes were stolen from the city's restaurants while their owners (who had taken off their shoes, according to the custom of all traditional establishments) were enjoying their meals. After a successful investigation, the pairs of shoes were found at the home of the culprit, a man in his thirties, and the police set to work returning the shoes to their rightful owners, who had to supply information about their shoe size and give a detailed description of their shoes. Returning the shoes turned out to be much more difficult than expected, however, because the vast majority of the shoes were not only the same make, but even the same model by Salvatore Ferragamo.

This amusing affair of the shoes, which highlights the Korean passion for luxury items (the Ferragamo brand is a symbol of luxury in Korea) even in the choice of a crime and the obsession of a poor fetishist psychopath, is emblematic of the infatuation with aesthetics that characterises South Korean society today, and concerns women and men alike (thus the choice of this anecdote), even if the gendered manifestations of this sort of behaviour are obviously different.

This infatuation with aesthetics is manifest, first of all, in the high consumption (compared with Asia and the rest of the world) of luxury accessories (in 2013, Korea was the third market for luxury goods in Asia<sup>3</sup>): according to a 2011 inquiry carried out in the three South Korean department stores known as the "Meccas of luxury" (*sic*), *i.e.*, Lotte, Shinsegae and Hyundai, sales of Western luxury brands rose by 7 to 14%, with highs of 20% for some (Prada). The lowest increases were around 3 to 4% (Tiffany and Gucci, according to the article). This passion is also shown in the attention devoted to the appearance of the body

<sup>3</sup> See all the references on this subject in the bibliography, especially McKinsey's analyses in English (2011 and 2010)

and the face, especially for women: remember that in South Korea women are the number one consumers of cosmetic items in the world, and spend six times longer performing beauty rituals as French women. They apply between 5 and 9 beauty products to their skin every morning and evening (as opposed to 1 to 3 products for French women).

Those who have lived long enough in Korea to make close friends with whom they go to the public baths or saunas (the more modern and luxurious version of the baths) will know that one's body will be amicably scrutinised and that well-intentioned observations about physical flaws and attributes will not be lacking. In the same vein, pointing out to a friend that that he/she has gained weight, or that he/she is looking terrible, is not considered impolite; on the contrary, it is a duty that must be performed to help the friend in question to do something to improve his/her physical appearance.

The popularity of plastic surgery is one of the most significant symptoms of the interest in the body in South Korean contemporary society. Omnipresent in public advertising in Seoul (on the public transports, in taxis and in underground stations), as well as in other large South Korean cities, plastic surgery is a growing industry in the country (Kim Eun-shil 2009, Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012, Elfving-Hwang 2013, Epstein and Joo 2013, Woo Keong Ja 2004). It appears that 20% of Korean women choose to have plastic surgery (one out of three according to an 2008 survey quoted by R. Holliday and J. Elfving-Hwang 2012) and what is unusual on a worldwide scale is that plastic surgery is also a choice for 15% of Korean men (as opposed to less than half this percentage in the US, a country where women, on the other hand, resort to plastic surgery to such an extent that some get into debt in order to do so). The statistics of the ISAPS (International Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery) places South Korea in 7th position for the total number of procedures: 250 000 per year, compared with 1 million in Brazil and in the US, the two countries where this industry is the most thriving. Most importantly, Korea is the country with the highest number of procedures per person.

However, there is some indication, when one studies the ranking of the most common interventions of this sort in South Korea, that the statistics still largely under-estimate the phenomenon: for example, blepharoplasty (eyelid surgery) is listed in 4th and last place, when it is well known that, along with skin lightening, it is one of the two most common procedures. There are two reasons for this under-estimation<sup>4</sup>. First, plastic surgery in Korea is, as

<sup>4</sup> In descending order: liposuction, breast augmentation, rhinoplasty (nose surgery) and blepharoplasty. Woo Keong Ja (2004) claims that the true figures may be as much as two to three time higher.

elsewhere in the world, still poorly regulated; secondly, a certain number of procedures are not considered to be surgical acts in South Korea: this is the case, in fact, for skin lightening and blepharoplasty. In South Korea, simple "beauty salons" and "spas", which are in no respect plastic surgery clinics, offer simple procedures such as eyelid surgery and Botox facial remodelling, or procedures for skin lightening that are not counted in the ISAPS statistics and are, for that matter, considered to be rather banal corporal procedures. In fact, it is not unusual for parents to offer their daughter an eyelid operation as a gift to celebrate her entrance into university.

In short, in terms of body care, plastic surgery in South Korean society is more to be associated with Nail Bars in the US, or orthodontics in France, than with the heavy surgery carried out in these two countries. Changing the body to make it more beautiful is a simple act of initiation into society, to the point that, as Leem Seo Yeon analyses it in her recent book (2014), Koreans do not mind living "as a cyborg in the age of science and technology".

In Seoul, the Apgujeong area is the symbol of this obsession with aesthetics: here one finds a glut of plastic surgery clinics in "*Sŏnghyŏng kŏri*" (the "plastic surgery street"), as well as, further on, *flagship* stores for the Seoul branches of the top foreign luxury brands. Apgujeong, in the heart of Gangnam (an area popularised by the worldwide success of the clip "Gangnam Style") is the neighbourhood that specialises in appearance, beauty and luxury. In terms of tourism, it is one of the most visited areas in the city.

This phenomenon is just one of the many signs of what is today considered to be a form of "soft power" in South Korea, for the South Korean infatuation with aesthetics, which we have described in this first section, is not limited to the peninsula, and has spread throughout East Asia and even beyond. In the domain of personal grooming, the "South Korean tidal wave" (*Hallyu*: the diffusion of items of popular culture, television programmes and pop music throughout Asia, from the beginning of the years 2000) has largely contributed to the spread of beauty standards that point to South Korea as a transnational reference for aesthetics (Epstein and Joo 2013, Elfvig-Hwang 2013). Thus, it is not only the South Korean standards of beauty that have spread to Japan, China and South East Asia (especially Vietnam), but the specific acts and the techniques as well. For example, in Japan there are now clinics which offer "special Korean treatments". South Korea has also become a popular destination in Asia for wellness tourism (beauty care and plastic surgery).

Another well-known example of this diffusion of aesthetic norms (which is also linked to the extensive practice of plastic surgery in South Korea) is the

success of the BB creams in cosmetology the world over, including Europe and the US. These creams were originally labelled "Blemish Balm" and were skin repair creams designed precisely to cover up the red spots and small bruises occasioned by "light" procedures such as peelings and small injections of Botox.

The love of luxury, the importance of skin care and makeup and the massive recourse to plastic surgery, all of which (as we shall see) primarily concern women from the wide spectrum of the middle classes in South Korea, are significant expressions of the relationship to the body (whether on its own or with all its trappings). What does this infatuation with aesthetics tell us about the way in which this relationship has evolved? The following two sections will attempt to take stock of the situation in terms of global trends and local factors that may provide explanations.

## 2. THE KOREAN WOMAN AND THE "GLOBAL BODY"

First of all, we must remember that the traditional position of the woman in Confucian society<sup>5</sup>, one that has been very well analysed by the social sciences in general, is that of the "person inside": the term "wife" is translated "*chip saram*", which literally means "the person inside the house", in other words, confined to an interior space, while the public space is reserved for the man.

The patriarchal domination of traditional society also implies a complete subordination of the woman's body to the man, which is expressed in concrete terms in the requirement for a woman to remain a virgin until married, bear children and to devote her life to the care of her children, especially the oldest son (Holliday & Elfvig-Hwang 2013). Let us point out two things, however: first, this description corresponds more to a typical ideal of the relationships that should characterise a certain status and therefore to an ideological model to which society must conform, than to the reality of concrete situations. For example, amongst the commoners, women have had more freedom, especially as they have been obliged to work in the fields. Secondly, this ideal/ideological division of roles is not without its contradictions: in this scheme of things, it is true that the woman is deprived of public space, but it is she who detains the power within the domestic space, and this gives her considerable economic power. This situation is reflected in the engagement of South Korean mothers in the education of their children

<sup>5</sup> See Martina Deuchler for the way in which Confucian rituals and norms were diffused within the aristocratic classes between the 16th and 18th centuries during the Chosŏn period (Yi dynasty).

(which implies a considerable investment of time and money). It is also seen in the way women have, for a long time, and even up to the present time, managed the household money. They therefore controlled the husband's salary, allotting him a portion of it for his personal expenses. It was also the women who, up to the end of the 1990s, took the decisions concerning the family's housing strategies and residential planning, both of primary importance when we consider that the construction of large groups of apartment buildings has contributed to the "making of the middle classes and urban bourgeoisie" (Gelézeau 2003a).

This behaviour is changing amongst the younger generations, and the spectrum of different situations is very wide today in South Korea. Indeed, this is a characteristic of societies in transition, where women's roles, in particular, are evolving. Finally, let us point out that the social image of women (especially working women, who are not valued in Korea), which reflects the traditional invisibility of women in public spaces we mentioned before, is a crucial factor for explaining the very low birth rate in South Korea today (the fertility rate was less than 1.25 in 2012, as opposed to 2 in France).

What are the consequences of this cultural heritage in terms of the South Korean woman's relationship with her body?

Here again, the examples of cosmetics and plastic surgery provide useful tools for interpreting and understanding how global trends (the "global body") affect this relationship in a local context. The analysis of the pursuit of beauty that I described in the preceding section requires a dual interpretation, and is also open to more general interpretations; for, this infatuation with aesthetics, despite its intensity in Korea, also reflects worldwide trends, whose consequences in terms of plastic surgery are well described in the recent book by Jean-Claude Kaufman, *La guerre des fesses (The War of the Buttocks)*

A first interpretation of this pursuit of beauty involves a notion that is aptly expressed in the English term "empowerment". In other words, for a woman, the care she takes with her body, face, clothes and accessories is, in fact, a sign that she has entered the public domain, has acquired social power and, as a result, enjoys more freedom. This specific movement of women towards the public domain is accompanied by a more general process which has been analysed by many Korean and Western researchers, within a Foucauldian conceptual framework, in terms of "bio-power" (Kim Eun Shil 2009, Cho Joo hyun 2009, Epstein and Joo 2012). In Korean society, as in all societies, the development of body care, cosmetics and aesthetics characterises the passage from legal forms of managing the people through the power of the State to the control of the body

(and of reproduction) by the people themselves. In South Korea, as elsewhere, the flourishing industries of well-being therefore reflect the mutations of a neoliberal society where the need to take care of oneself and to protect oneself is shifting from the State to the individual. The specific manifestations of this phenomenon in Korea are the result of the intense social competitiveness that engenders increasing demands for physical perfection. (I will return to this point later.)

South Korean society falls clearly within the context of all these familiar explanations, in terms of both empowerment and the new relations between the State and "the social body" (in both a figurative and concrete sense).

However, many analyses stress that the power of male domination and certain specific aspects of South Korean neo-liberalism contribute to the relative excesses that I described in the first section, and that the idea of empowerment is debatable.

Choo Joo-huyn (2009) thus stresses that it is necessary to place these general frameworks of analysis within a specifically South Korean and gendered context if we wish to study the new practices carried out by Korean women on their bodies (from drastic weight-reducing diets to plastic surgery). To do this, he suggests that we must focus on the pivotal moment of the Asian crisis, which struck South Korea in the winter of 1998 and revealed profound social disruptions in the Korean model of development. In this especially uncertain economic and social context, women who were part of the generation of young adults at the time, even though they were as well educated as men, were at a particular disadvantage in the labour force, and practically invisible politically – the present President is an exception which should not disguise the rule. The body became an essential attribute for increasing social - and even economic - capital.

In 2004, an essay entitled *Yōja-ūi modūn insaeng-ūn isiptae-e kyōljōng toenda (In the life of a woman, everything is played out in her twenties)*, was a bestseller that revealed the social insecurity of women in South Korea. The essay, in fact, listed the rules that a young woman should follow at this time of her life in order to succeed: develop high society consumer tastes (see further), create a beautiful body and organise a perfect marriage (*i.e.*, with someone from a higher social class; a wealthy man).

Thus, within the context of a burdensome social tendency, namely the extremely heavy male dominance in Korea that has been strongly criticised by Choo Joo-hyun (2009), other authors underline the ambiguity of the idea of empowerment gained by the

capacity to act upon one's own body (Epstein and Joo 2012). First of all, the obsession with self discipline (diets, perfect makeup, etc.) and with improving the body through technology (plastic surgery) tends to be a major source of anxiety in South Korea (to be compared with the debts run up by Americans to pay for plastic surgery). This is reflected in several examples of social ills, such as a high rate of suicide, pathologies of the skin and allergies (referred to by the generic term *at'op'i*), which are particularly severe and widespread in South Korea. Next (and this concerns both men and women in South Korea), the accent placed on physical appearance refers to biological attributes that correspond more and more to a caricature (*cf.* the analysis of the muscled torsos of the men and sportsmen vs. the long, slender legs of the models and *Kpop girls* – Epstein and Joo 2012) and does not contribute to freeing individuals and giving them empowerment, but instead imprisons them inside persistent gender inequalities, where male domination is still very strong, even if we might interpret the growing importance of the representation of the masculine body and its objectification as a sign of a certain insecurity and decline in male power.

### 3. THE STATE AND THE "SOCIAL BODY (OR BODIES)" IN SOUTH KOREA

Here we must take an historical look at the question of this transition in order to explain and better understand what, in terms of the body in its broadest sense, points to specifically Korean catalysts of development and modernity. We do not intend, here, to go back over the familiar accounts of what has sometimes been called the South Korean "miracle" (wrongly so, for everything can be explained and there was no miracle, but rather a set of factors that were, indeed, able to set Korea up as a model). Here we shall instead highlight the elements of this model that are significant from our perspective (that of the body).

Let us first point out that this South Korean "miracle" occurred within a civilisation that is both very ancient and highly sophisticated on the political, social and cultural level. On this point, it must be said that the Japanese colonial ideology that was diffused throughout the international community from the beginning of the 20th century was in part responsible for constructing an image of Korea as a society that was lagging behind, even backward, at the time. This vision (and therefore, by extension, that of the "miracle") is a product of a kind of logic of representation that might be qualified as post-colonial.

In fact, Korean society is one which has long been developing techniques and sophisticated practices related to the body, whether in the field of aesthetics

or of health, especially amongst the aristocratic classes. In his analysis of the *Tongŭi Pogam*<sup>6</sup>, the historian Shin Dongwon (2010) even explains how, between the mid-seventeenth century and the mid nineteenth century, a traditional health complex based on the practices of the *Tongŭi Pogam*, which respected the body and included innovations that appeared only much later in Western medical science, spread throughout the whole population (in average sized cities and amongst the common people). This revolutionary knowledge did not, therefore, remain exclusively in the possession of an isolated elite in the country's capital or in the provincial capitals. Early on, Korea acquired medical practices that were both natural and rational, and that were effective for all, *i.e.* the "social body".

As for body care and aesthetics, here again the practices of the pre-modern aristocracy expressed the sophistication and the taste for luxury that we find in China and Japan in similar guises (Bouissou *et al.* 2013). The circulation of luxury products in East Asia, from China to Japan and vice-versa, passing through Korea, which provided a natural bridge for this movement, was a fundamental element of economic trade in this part of the world, regulated by the Chinese. Indeed, tributary trade, a characteristic of the relations between Korea and China, was founded on commercial/diplomatic delegations, where luxury items were important tributes: according to a system that consisted of giving and receiving gifts, China had to give back to Korea more than it had received.

Luxuries and the use of luxury products, body care (from the spice baths of the ladies at court to the application of various preparations to lighten the skin and/or blacken the teeth) were all part and parcel of the very sophisticated traditional culture of the members of the Korean aristocracy.

Thus, the infatuation with aesthetics that I described in the first section is *also*, or rather *above all*, part of a particularly Korean history in terms of the body, aesthetics and luxury. We should note here that the interpretation of the quest for lighter skin as simply a desire to look more Western is challenged (as the researchers who have studied this matter have pointed out) by certain facts: a lighter skin was a sign of social superiority compared with the great mass of peasants and common people who worked outdoors in the fields. We should also note that in this respect Korea is again aligned with the general tendencies that have been analysed in a number of countries, in particular in 16th century France (Lanoë 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Compiled by Heo Jun, the doctor for the Korean royal household at the beginning of the 18th century, the *Tongŭi Pogam* is considered to be the basis of traditional Korean medicine and an important reference for Eastern medicine in general.



Therefore, even though social development and change in South Korea was woven into the fabric of a great Asian civilisation (even if that civilisation was dominated politically other powerful nations such as China or Japan), at the same time its cornerstone was laid upon the massive destructive forces of the first half of the 20th century : 1) the ambiguity of Japanese colonisation, which, although it launched development and modernisation, at the same time defined the terms that despoiled the very economy that had thus been built in order to profit the Japanese Empire and 2) the huge destruction brought about by the division of the country and the Korean War, an on-going situation with economic and social costs that are incalculable even today.

The transition, over a period of about 50 years (from 1953 to the end of the 1990s) of a rural and agrarian country, as economically poor as an African country, such as Ghana in 1955, to an urban and industrial country (one might even say post-industrial), as wealthy as some European countries and very much a part of the international economic and cultural scene, points, however, to certain well-analysed processes where the "developer State" (in the dictatorial form that was characteristic of Korean politics between 1961 and 1987) has played a fundamental role.

A recent book clearly and precisely explains the application of this model to the biomedical complex and shows how these traits can be associated with the question of the body in South Korean society today (DiMoia 2013). The book first shows how South Korean biomedical practices are completely hybrid; until the 1940s, they were characterised by the (sometimes conflicting) coexistence of traditional practices and Western practices introduced either by foreign missionaries or by Japanese colonisation (which introduced German medicine). These practices were then enriched by the introduction of a great number of medical techniques from America (USAMGIK<sup>7</sup> in South Korea from 1948) and the international community (reconstruction aid after the Korean War). In this context of hybrid techniques, and in the interest of development, Park Chung-hee's South Korean government mobilised massive resources and biomedical technology, not only to support economic development (by helping, for example, to accelerate the demographic transition), but also to develop and consolidate the image of a modern and progressive nation. The book gives a detailed account of the way this biomedical complex was mobilised during two campaigns that have profoundly marked Korean society at *every level and in every part of the country*: the campaigns to promote birth control (carried out from 1964 to the beginning of the 1980s) and the anti-parasite campaign (from 1969 to the beginning of the 1980s). These two major

campaigns "educated" the South Koreans - the hard way - about body health and hygiene in a modern nation.

The massive circulation of vans serving as mobile birth control clinics and the heavy-handed encouragement of radical methods of birth control for women *and* for men (vasectomy) are perhaps reasons (along with the feminine conditions described earlier) for the very low birth rate in South Korea. Most of all, they illustrate the massive invasion of the State in matters concerning the individual body.

Thus, the importance of the biomedical sector in Korea in general, and that of plastic surgery in particular, can also be interpreted as one of the consequences of the penetration of this health complex far beyond the establishments created by the health campaigns to which it is usually limited (*i.e.* hospital, clinics and medical surgeries).

The heavy-handed and inescapable presence of the South Korean State in the dynamics of development is reinforced by several factors that are linked to the mechanisms of social change.

This increasing infatuation with aesthetics is linked to the dynamics of the creation of the middle classes in Korea and the ways in which they differentiate themselves. Economic growth has had the effect, on the one hand, of hugely expanding the great mass of the middle classes in South Korea, while at the same time bringing about the emergence of an urban bourgeoisie with its own social habitus: endogamy, frequenting certain places (grand hotels and clubs; see Gelézeau 2003b), choosing certain ways of living (in collective buildings of high standing), certain types of behaviour (a passion for luxury), education in the top universities, etc. And so, in a society where, ever since the 1990s financial crisis, the middle classes have been worrying about their position and have been fearful of a reduction of their status, being able to imitate the higher social categories has become a prime objective. To some extent, this infatuation with aesthetics (whether in the form of ostentatious acquisition of luxury items or massive recourse to plastic surgery) is, indeed, an indication of this desire to maintain or increase one's social status in the hope of acquiring social distinction. In fact, it is the same impetus as that which motivates people to invest massively in private tutoring for their children. Education is an essential element of social distinction in Korea, a fact which finds its roots in the long history of a society dominated by the lettered aristocracy, the *yangban*.

Within this context, Westernisation has some influence on the visible signs of wealth. However, in the areas of beauty and cosmetics it is interesting

<sup>7</sup> United States Army Military Government in Korea: the American occupation forces that governed the southern part of Korea between 1945 and 1948.

to note that adopting certain norms has actually contributed to the creation of specific criteria of beauty that some observers call "hybrid", but which, in the Asian context, are considered to be of Korean origin. These well-defined criteria are particularly coded for women, who must present a face that is as regular and symmetrical as possible, with a "narrower lower face, large eyes, a small mouth and a fine, oval jaw line" (Rhee Seung Chul cited by Elfvig-Hwang 2013). As for the body, the norm is long slender legs. These norms are relatively recent and not just the result of the authorisation, after 1994, to use Western fashion models in Korean advertising (which was banned up to this time, or at any rate, strictly controlled by the State). In Korea, the promotion of Western standards of beauty is part of the auto-definition of Korean beauty, especially in comparison with Japanese notions of aesthetics, from which a distance must be kept (or at least this is what is said in Korea).

The South Korean infatuation or aesthetics must be understood within the framework of certain important explanatory factors, i.e. the complex combinations of transformational processes that occurred throughout the twentieth century: there was, on the one hand, the construction of a modern nation by a powerful State and, on the other hand, the emergence of the middle classes, with their strategies for social distinction inspired by the traditions of aristocratic culture (a result of the elevation of this culture in the nationalist dialogue). Thus, for the South Koreans, bodily beauty symbolises a successful nation (Leem Seo Yeon 2014, Epstein and Joo<sup>8</sup>, DiMoia, etc.), while behaviour relating to the body contributes both to the conspicuous consumerism and a sort of "Roaring Twenties" syndrome. (We must not forget that Korea is permanently at war.)

As Leem Seo Yeon's research (2014) very well shows, though it is linked to the "global body" ideal, the South Korean infatuation for aesthetics is therefore as much an expression of nationalism as it is of what might be called "compressed modernity" (which refers to the rapidity of the social changes that have occurred).

#### 4. AESTHETICS, HARMONY AND COSMETICS IN SOUTH KOREA

To further explore and elucidate the South Koreans' infatuation with aesthetics, let us look again at some reminders provided by Cho Joo-hyun (2009). In

<sup>8</sup> Epstein and Joo (2012) go so far as to link the diffusion of images of Korean masculinity and feminine beauty (in particular by means of the Hallyu products) to a "revenge" for the years of "colonial" representations of Korean masculinity and beauty (referring to Japanese colonial power, followed by the masculinity of American military personnel). South Korea has overtaken these two countries not only in political and economic terms, but also in terms of culture and the corporal beauty of its members as a nation.

South Korea, the magnitude of the plastic surgery phenomenon is indicative of a very high degree of social competition: care in choosing clothes and hairstyles is no longer sufficient for improving the appearance and so it is now necessary to work on improving the body – something that, more and more, also applies to men. The sociologist reminds us in his article of the powerful social belief that appearance is a decisive factor on the labour market. The facts do not support this belief, as several studies have shown that other criteria are much more important (studies and economic and social capital, for example). In the sphere of matrimonial relations, the body is an asset on the same level as economic and social capital : Cho Joo-hyun gives the example of the match making agency *Sunoo*, which (and this is not an isolated example) draws up its clients' profiles according to three complex indicators : the *social capability index* (this "measures" the economic capacities and the potential of the person and is linked, amongst other factors, to his/her level of education) ; the *family environment index* (the social and family capital) ; and finally, the *body index* (which is much more important for women than for men). More generally, he and others (Elfvig-Hwang 2013, Choi Sang-Chin and Kim Kibum 2004) point out that more than 50% of Koreans think that one can "read" a person's character on the face. They also point out the importance in Korean history of practices such as divination by interpreting physiognomy or facial features. (It is therefore felt that there are "auspicious" or "non-auspicious" faces)<sup>9</sup>. All these traditional beliefs assume that by altering one's appearance it is possible to alter one's destiny, or that of one's descendants. On this matter, J. Elfvig-Hwang (2013) recounts the surprising story that is told about the mother of Chun Do-hwan, the former president of South Korea (1980-1988), who is said to have changed her appearance, especially her teeth, in order to ensure an exceptional destiny for her son.

In fact, despite the explanatory factors that were discussed in the preceding sections, it is difficult to understand society's fixation on appearance in South Korea without looking again at the longstanding and deeply ingrained socio-cultural trends.

First of all, let us remember that it is less a "war of the buttocks" than a "war of the faces" (*ōlgul* or *myōn*), which has broken out in South Korea. It is therefore important to remember that the notion of the "social face", *ch'emyōn* (Cho Yong-jin 2004, Choi Sang-Chin and Kim Kibum 2004), which has been a fundamental element of society both in the past and today, means "BODY" (ch'e 體) + "FACE" (myōn 面).

<sup>9</sup> Cho Yong-jin's article in the *Korea Journal* 2004 is in itself an illustration of this and is contemporary to these beliefs.

Thus, the term *chemyŏn* does not refer simply to the "soft" matter of social face (implying, according to culturalist assumptions, that, for example, Asians must not be put in a situation where they will "lose face"), but goes much further and can be interpreted, according to the context by "honour" and "prestige". The body and the face are therefore keys to social status.

All of this is not new in Korea and goes all the way back to pre-modern practices, where a person ostensibly exposed their social status with certain types of clothing, accessories and decorum, and this is how plastic surgery has become one of the contemporary means of declaring one's social status.

However, one can go further and show how, in South Korea, the debate about beauty, personal wellbeing and body care is related to notions that are almost "moral principles": maintaining a correct appearance that is appropriate and in keeping with the rules of etiquette (*yewi*) required by the social status one has obtained is a moral obligation. Awareness of these notions, which have been well explained by several researchers (J. Elfving-Hwang among others), notably in an enlightening article of synthesis by Lee Seung-Hwan (2004), helps us gauge the distance between the Korean conception of the connection between the body and the spirit and our Western (and in particular, French and Judeo-Christian) conceptions. In France there is a saying, "the habit does not make the monk" (*i.e.*, "don't judge a book by its cover"), and another one that suggests that "one must not trust appearances". The same logic that assumes there is a gap between the appearance and the individual (the body and the spirit) today encourages women to "reveal their inner self" through body care, makeup and plastic surgery. It is *exactly the opposite* in South Korea, where an appropriate appearance is not only a question of etiquette and respect for others, but also the expression of an inner state that could even be called a moral and spiritual state. The alliance between the body, the heart and the spirit, and the fact that the body is considered to be the primary interface between the group and the self, gives the face and the physical appearance such crucial importance. The analysis of a widely popular television programme that shows the transformations brought about by plastic surgery (J. Elfving-Hwang, 2013) highlights the fact that the *pyŏnsin*, *i.e.*, the visible changes in the participants' bodies (undertaken in order to conform to the aesthetic norms described above), go hand in hand with a moral transformation, a "moral and psychological renaissance" (*tasi t'aëonagi* in the show that was analysed by Elfving-Hwang).

In South Korea, therefore, beauty is a sort of moral imperative, which today can potentially concern men as well as women. As a consequence, the pursuit of beauty is not just the superficial indication of a desire to "appear to be", but is a necessity in order to

function properly within society according to one's status and moral values. On the other hand, an ugly appearance is a great disadvantage in society and the children's beauty (along with their education) is seen as the parents' (moral) responsibility. According to some researchers, the use of plastic surgery can be placed within the framework of filial piety, which dictates the traditional relationship between parents and children; it is a somatic sign that demonstrates filial piety, whether on the part of the children or the parents (Elfving-Hwang 2013). We can easily see how these mental and ideological schemes can be interpreted (if we adopt the conceptual framework of M. Foucault, for example) as a disciplinary constraint that is exercised within the social and family framework.

In short, important mental and cultural schemes allow us to better understand the question of the body in South Korean society today. To sum up the question, it is important to mention the following two essential elements:

- Appearance (and especially an appearance that has been created by working to improve the body by means of makeup, diets or plastic surgery) is a matter of etiquette (*yewi*), expressing a social status; today plastic surgery is, like the use of luxury products and attending clubs in hotels of standing, a means of advertising one's social status, *i.e.*, the fact that one belongs to the (upper) middle class, which is an up and coming class in today's consumer society.
- Body care must be the expression of a transformation of the moral self (and not of the inner self) and, as a consequence, is a question of conforming to moral imperatives.

10

## CONCLUSION – AESTHETICS AND COSMETICS IN KOREA

We can see how the logics of the "global body" concept, described in the second section, interact with the specific political, economic and social aspects of South Korean development to reactivate, while at the same time reformulating traditional social norms; and this to such an extent that another traditional ideal, which was mentioned in the introduction, has been shattered: *sinch'e palbu*, *i.e.*, the duty to respect the body – hair – skin. In traditional culture it is considered a lack of respect towards one's ancestors, and even towards society as a whole, to alter the body, which is seen as an inalienable gift. The specific phenomena that today characterise South Korean culture, where the body is concerned, illustrate how complex are the dynamics of social and cultural change in the country: some aspects of the culture

have been reactivated and reformulated, while others have been shattered – and nothing is permanent.

There is one area, which we shall look at in conclusion to this study, where change is occurring at a very rapid pace. This is the question of ethics.

In 2005, the scandal of the falsified results of the researcher Hwang Woo Suk concerning the development of stem cells, led to much debate, in particular amongst feminist groups, about ethical questions and the liberating (or not) power of biomedical acts on the body. I have already mentioned the traditional invisibility of women in the public arena: in the opinion of some researchers, despite the social changes, this invisibility has persisted, except in the biomedical sphere. The campaigns for birth control did indeed place the question of women, their bodies and reproduction in a very visible public place, although in a violent and restrictive manner (see also, DiMoia 2013). We have also seen how much the surge in plastic surgery owes to the intervention of the biomedical complex. Leem and Park (2008) point out that the scandal over Hwang's falsified results largely ignored the fact that many of the women who worked in the laboratory involved were said to have voluntarily participated in the experiment by donating eggs.

Nevertheless, the question of ethics is, for the moment, largely neglected in South Korea, as all the authors who have written on this subject, both South Korean and Western, have pointed out, especially as concerns the question of plastic surgery. All the authors stress that, at the present time, the profession of plastic surgeon enjoys an unprecedented degree of power in South Korean society. In the context of the television show that was analysed by J. Elfving-Hwang (2013), there was never any reference to the possible health risks involved in certain body change operations, such as operations on the calves or the thighs. Likewise, the explicit and radical transformation of the famous *Hallyu actor*, Bae Yong-joon (the hero in *Winter Sonata*) appears to be the visible result of a sort of auto-sacrifice (ranging from drastic diets to the evident consumption of anabolic steroids). This example is relevant to the discussions surrounding the "national body" which we mentioned earlier, without even touching on the ethical questions involved.

How far can we go in carrying out changes on ourselves?

If we consider the debates about the stakes involved and the relationship between ethics and cosmetics (in the widest sense), the situation is anything but stable in Korea, as a recent collective article in the review EASTS (*East Asian Sciences, Technology and Society*) has shown: for the moment, there is no consensus on the question of ethics in the biomedical

field, which no doubt goes some way to explaining the deregulation that we have observed in this domain in South Korean society.

What is more, as Cho Byung-hee (2009) pointed out, all the medical professions are today being redefined. Taking the example of acupuncture, he shows that traditional medicine is booming at the moment. Acupuncturists, who ever since the 1960s have refused to become professionals and submit to the ensuing rigidity (*i.e.*, Westernisation) of their practice, are now developing health care techniques that are very effective and highly esteemed, and they are passing on their knowledge to non-doctors. Ma Eun Jeong (2010) confirms that after having been marginalised in the 1970s, certain types of traditional medicine (acupuncture, herbalism, etc.) are making a huge come-back today.

We must look at these trends from a wider angle than just the medical point of view. We must consider them in the light of the hyper-technology that characterises South Korean society as a whole and try to imagine the redefinition of future practices in the field of body care within the framework of a society that is still in a phase of transition.

In fact the cursor that indicates what is "artificial" and what is "natural" is also fluctuating. I suggested earlier that, according to the present pattern, advertising the fact that a person has worked to improve the body is not considered in a negative light. This conclusion is drawn from the analyses made by many authors: they point to such examples as the stars of *Kpop*, who make no secret of the fact that they have undergone plastic surgery. However, R. Holliday and J. Elfving-Hwang draw attention to the fact that the greatest esteem is reserved for natural beauty (of the face): *ssaengŏl*. The need to intervene is linked to the social imperatives for change which we have discussed in this study. This is why today the new *Kpop* stars (unlike Bae Yong-joon, who publicised the violent and radical transformation carried out on his body) are more and more inclined to deny having had plastic surgery, even when their faces have subtly improved over time.

In the cultural context that I described earlier, where the body is considered to be coherent with the heart and spirit, health and beauty are matters of daily practice that hark back to the deeply ingrained ancient medical traditions in South Korea. All these phenomena are opening up large areas of research in numerous fields of the social sciences, from cultural studies to anthropology, to geography of the human body and the history of medical sciences and cosmetics.

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