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# **The Plastic Surgery Obsession in South Korea**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors

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Honors Capstone Project in Broadcast Journalism

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## Abstract

### Brief Summary of Capstone Project

My Capstone Project is a short film documentary exploring the plastic surgery obsession in South Korea. The focus is on the double eyelid surgery, a controversial and intriguing procedure that creates a crease on the upper eyelid to make small eyes bigger and rounder. The infatuation with the double eyelid surgery is a social and cultural phenomenon that is changing the South Korean people. The documentary attempts to discuss various factors that influence the decisions people make to go under the knife and the social and cultural implications and consequences that result from it.

### Statement of Concept

The concept of this creative piece was to tell a story, and share insight on an issue that is affecting the people of South Korea at an alarming rate and reach. The visual storytelling engages the audience and successfully delivers a message that most people are not aware of. Most importantly, the documentary is able to connect to the audience in ways that verbal or written presentations cannot. The purpose of the documentary is not only to educate the audience, but also to provoke individual questions about what it means to be beautiful and the extent people will go to justify it in their hearts.

### Context of the work

The documentary is not a creative piece in that no new ideas were generated to form a conscious theory regarding the double eyelid surgery. The research was mostly academic, in addition to personal experiences, interviews, and news.

### Discussion of the medium/processes used in the project's creation

Basic filming devices, including digital cameras, were used to record and document interviews and footage. The Macbook iMovie HD program was used to edit the material alongside Adobe Photoshop. Original interviews were conducted in Seoul, South Korea. The editing was done at Syracuse University.

### Conclusion

The obsession with plastic surgery in South Korea encourages us to reevaluate beauty and societal norms. It also challenges people to consider how this epidemic affects the global community and evolving ideas.

## Reflective Essay

South Korea is a highly controversial and unique place in modern society.

As the "plastic nation" of the world, South Korea is fascinating and at times morbidly appalling the international community with its furious obsession for aesthetic surgery. BBC News described the syndrome as "South Korea in a grip of a beauty craze." The nation's growing infatuation with aesthetic surgery is a cultural phenomenon that is changing the country in radical ways. Not only are faces undergoing metamorphosis, the underlying attitudes toward plastic surgery are revolutionizing the country in social and cultural contexts. No longer is it a social stigma or a shameful act to go under the knife purely for aesthetic purposes. This documentary project is a glimpse of South Korea's madness rush for plastic surgery with a focus on the double eyelid surgery, the most widespread procedure South Koreans receive. It was a huge motivation for me to document this ongoing anomaly because of its direct impact on society and daily life for many South Koreans. Evolving interactions stemming from innuendos and emphasis on outer appearances affects socially cultivated norms. There was a conscious theory when developing this thesis: the plastic surgery epidemic was a result of various interwoven factors; most notably growing capitalism, development of democracy and a pervasive mass media influence that directs public sentiment to a degree so extreme that it influences life choices. The number of people altering their natural faces, especially by receiving the double eyelid surgery, has risen so sharply that the South Koreans are undergoing an ethnic facelift. Rounder, bigger eyes, with double eyelids are replacing the smaller, single eyelids characteristic of the Korean people. Simply inured to the

implications of permanent altercations, and giddy about receiving praise, adoration and jealousy from surrounding people, more and more South Koreans are cutting, sewing, and boasting their newly formed eyes.

When producing this documentary, there was an immediate recognition that the audience, not native to Korea, would be unfamiliar with the double eyelid procedure. The double eyelid surgery or blepharoplasty, is a procedure that changes the appearance of the upper eyelid. About 50% of all Koreans are born without a fold, and the single eyelid is what causes the eyes to look what many people consider “Asian” or slanted, almond shaped, sleepy, and small. The double eyelid surgery creates a crease to give the eyes a rounder, brighter, and larger appearance. The surgical process is relatively simple: an incision is made over the eyelid and excess fat, muscle, and skin is removed. Then, the two sides of the incision are sutured, creating a crease on the upper eyelid that was not there before. The procedure only takes about 30 minutes with an anticipated recovery time of only one week. After the first week, the sutures are removed, creating a permanent crease. Because the procedure is not a structural change of the face unlike a nose reconstruction surgery, the procedure has almost no complications or side effects.

Millions of people, mostly women, are undergoing this procedure. 50% of all women in her 20s have received the double eyelid surgery. To understand the extent of its pervasiveness in society, the documentary points to former president of South Korea, Roh Mu Hyun who received the procedure in

2006. He publicly stated that it was for medical purposes to improve his eyesight, but the fact that the First Lady also received the surgery at the same time left many people in disbelief. It was a clear indication to the world that South Korea was experiencing an epidemic that was affecting all echelons of society, transcending boundaries of age, gender, status, and even power. According to Dr. Lee Sang-Eun, President Roh's actions incited many hesitant men to opt for surgery as well. Former president Roh's decision was an embarrassing and quite alarming testimony to the plastic surgery obsession in South Korea. It was also a huge leap over the generation gap regarding social attitudes toward bigger eyes and standards of appearance. Even the older generation, with survivors of the Korean War and post-Japanese colonization, are beginning to change perception on the conservative traditions and values. Former President Roh, at age 60, represents how far and deep social pressures push as to permanently change appearances. Many speculate that he believed rounder eyes would make him look more charismatic, thus aiding in diplomacy and forming good relations with others. As the elected leader of a country, his decision was a direct manifestation of the extremities and extent of plastic surgery in Korea, especially the double eyelid surgery.

Another indicator of drastically changing social perceptions was reflected in the Miss Universe competition, in which Miss Korea proudly declared her synthetic beauty. Her photos as an adolescent revealed that her current face was not natural. She was not born with the double eyelid, but after several procedures she emerged as a glamorous representative of Korean beauty. It sent a message to

the world as well as people in Korea that plastic surgery was not only attainable, but also immensely rewarding. Miss Korea received adulation for making it to the top 4 in the Miss Universe Competition, again reiterating the idea that plastic surgery is condoned and highly idealized. Who else receives this surgery?

Recently, a famous pop star named Hwan Hee confidently and openly admitted to receiving plastic surgery, including the double eyelid surgery. As a major pop star with an A-list male celebrity status, many people saw it as another step in the degradation of the social stigma associated with men changing their faces. It sent a strong impression that people are more comfortable than ever about plastic surgery. He also served as a testimony that there is no shame associated with the procedure, motivating many people to receive it. The documentary also touches upon the diverse range of people who receive the double eyelid surgery.

Although public figures receive more attention than an average person, it is actually the general public that is fervently pursuing plastic surgery. For example, people in South Korea spend 30% of income on enhancing their looks. 50% of women have received surgery. South Korea also has the highest ratio of cosmetic surgeons to citizens. (Plastic, Reconstructive, and Cosmetic Surgery, 2006)

Interestingly, this is a radical departure from historical, cultural and traditional values. South Korea is deeply rooted to Confucian traditions, which says that tampering with one's physical features is disrespectful to one's ancestors, and potentially damaging to oneself and one's descendants. (Lee, 2006) Also, plastic surgery has only been around for about 50 years. The introduction of plastic surgery began around 1945 after Korea gained independence from Japan's



colonial rule. Prior to that time, there were no plastic surgery techniques available in Korea. That year took a new turn for medicine in Korea with the entry of Western doctors into Korea. Korean doctors became able to access Western journals and different medicines such as penicillin. The Korean War in 1950 also led to growth of medicine as medical personnel from the U.S. and UN began active treatment of injured patients in Korea. Korean and foreign doctors collaborated in attempting various plastic surgery techniques including reconstruction. Many women during this time first started to receive the double eyelid surgery to appeal to American G.I.s. They believed that rounder eyes would make them more attractive to the men. After the end of the Korean War in 1953, the nation was in ruins. The South Korean economy rose up and progressed through three stages of development. In the first stage, 1954-1957, the primary attempt was made to rehabilitate the war-torn economy with massive American aid. During this stage of reconstruction, plastic surgery commenced slowly as Western culture became more exposed to Korea. In years 1958-1961, the Seoul government made substantial efforts to control inflation by high tax policies, reduced capital spending, a tight money policy, and a balanced budget. These measures produced a degree of stabilization. This led to more developments in plastic surgery in the mid 1950s when doctors learned advanced medicine abroad, including Europe and America and began practicing in Korea. From 1962 to the present, South Korea underwent a stage of rapid development. Foreign exports recorded unprecedented increases of an average \$44 per annum, and the attainment of a completely independent economic structure led to quick capital

buildup concerning industry, infrastructure, and exports. (Rhee, 2006) With this rapid development, plastic surgery also took on a definitive role in medicine. In 1961 the first plastic surgery department at Yonsei University Severance Hospital was established. Then in 1985, the Korean Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery was founded. Currently with more than 990 members, KSAPS is at the forefront of innovation in plastic surgery in Korea. Despite its relative youth, plastic surgery developed significantly in only half a century and reached an internationally recognized level. (Introduction & Future Growth, 2006) The strong establishment of plastic surgery came side by side with the development of technology, democracy, and modernization of the South Korea. According to a 2007 prosperity index compiled by the Legatum Institute for Global Development, South Korea is ahead of the United States. (Harden, 2007) This prosperity and financial stability is contributing to the surgery boom as more people find money, leisure and time to pursue aesthetic surgery. This newfound wealth is a huge factor contributing to the double eyelid procedure. Frantically trying to keep up with the demand for clinics, plastic surgeons are opening doors left and right, and making lots of money in the process. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the number of plastic surgeons jumped from 45% between 2005 and 2009, from 1,400 to over 2,000 just in Seoul. These surgeons perform hundreds of surgeries a day, of which the double eye-lid surgery is highly demanded by South Koreans. Other than making the eyes bigger, the second most popular is the nose surgery. Many people opt to sculpt the nose to create a more chiseled appearance by implanting silicone or cartilage bridges in the nose.

It creates a more prominent appearance, and ultimately, a social standard of what is considered beautiful. It is important to note that these popular procedures are culturally significant. For example, in the United States, liposuction and breast augmentation account for the majority of aesthetic surgery. In South Korea, the double eyelid surgery and nose reconstruction are the most popular. The difference reflects what people value in each culture. In the United States, having a full figured body with big breasts, sexy curves and a full butt is considered desirable and having immense sex appeal. South Korea, the huge demand for the double eye-lid surgery and nose job shows an obsession with altering facial features and emphasis on the beauty of the face.

The documentary is mainly focused on discussing why South Korea is at its current state of a national epidemic gripping each individual so hard that it pushes them to receive plastic surgery. Simply, why are South Koreans obsessed?

The influence of the media and popular culture is immense in a homogenous country: ideas and opinions are distributed and spread quickly. Media holds a lot of power to impact people's decisions. According to Dr. Chul Woo Kim, a Ph.D in Mass Communications and Media, social conformity and competition is a defining characteristic of the Korean people. Peer pressure, and especially peer evaluation is held as a matter of pride for the Koreans. Dr. Kim says that the mentality goes, "If my neighbor has it, I have to have something better." There is also a saying that says Koreans are more competitive than they are conservative. This means that although traditional values are regarded as a

priority, competition will win over any conflicting internal struggles with tradition.

Also, Korea is a nation of Internet savvy users of the World Wide Web. According to statistics released by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, Korea ranks number one in broadband penetration of 90%, number two in average Internet access speed, and second lowest in Internet access cost among 30 OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries surveyed. (Correa, 2007) With this access, popular media is immediately transmitted through the Internet, and people are exposed to more mass media than ever before. Through the bombardment of Hollywood and satellite TV South Korea's aesthetic ideal has changed drastically. And some say that this change is inevitable. According to Harvard psychology professor Nancy Etcoff "beauty is evolutionary." (Cullen, 2006) Western images with looks with bigger, rounder eyes are more appealing to many Korean people. Big eyes are highly idealized. There is no glorification of dominant Asian features, such as small eyes or flatter noses, in mainstream media. For example, Korean celebrities emulate Western looks that are far from the dominant genetic features of the Korea people. Most significantly, many people place emphasis in rounder eyes as being more beautiful and attractive. The recent box office hit movie called "200 Pounds Beauty," is a clear reflection of the Korean sentiment toward the idealization of beauty. It also served as evidence that Korean celebrities and plastic surgery have a huge impact on the general public. In the movie, the main character transforms from an obese, ugly woman to a gorgeous superstar. She

undergoes major procedures, including the double eyelid surgery to attain the epitome of what South Koreans perceives to be beautiful: big eyes, a straight nose, and a thin body. Overwhelming ticket sales of over 3 million reflected Korean women's heightened yearning for a surgical metamorphosis. (2007) The continuing rage and demand of the movie alone indicates that South Koreans identify with the movie.

As the documentary points out, the influence of mass media is the single most important factor that influences people's perceptions of beauty and their decisions to attain it. More specifically, TV dramas drastically shape opinions and social attitudes. These popular TV dramas depict relationships, define societal standards and serve as the guiding pillar of cultural perceptions. A character's mannerisms or words can become a cultural trademark and instant icon. For example, in the popular Korean drama titled "Stairway to Heaven," the male star calls out, "Love always comes back!" This phrase is now a catch phrase that everyone uses to describe a love that will ultimately return regardless of the circumstances. People can immediately recognize which drama it is from, and say it over and over again. In another drama titled, "My name is Kim Sam Soon," the main character comments that "memories have no power" to describe that the past has no stronghold over the present feelings of love. This phrase was embedded into the South Korean's attitude towards love. It is most fascinating that the TV dramas hold such a power over the viewers. Even the slightest detail can sway public opinion on important matters. One crucial thing to note is that plastic surgery is condoned in TV dramas and described as a positive trait. All the

stars on the dramas have big round eyes as well. It is rare to see the main star of a hit TV series without the double eyelid. The main star's face becomes everyone's dream look. The desires to receive surgery at most times are direct influence of the media. "You have to have demand, and these TV dramas provide demand," said Lim, Ee Seok, dermatologist. (Harden, 2007) Dr. Lim says that when people come in for plastic surgery, they usually bring along a photograph torn from a celebrity magazine, demanding the same look as their favorite stars. The face usually has wide eyes, sleek cheekbones and delicately upturned noses. The photos look numbingly alike, yet the cemented mentality of beauty drives people to actively seek plastic surgery clinics. Prime time television that airs romantic stories provides a world of escape. Many indulge in these fantasy worlds, often yearning for such relationships or lives. The luxurious and happy lives portrayed in the dramas places its cause on looking beautiful and being accepted in society as a high-class member. To achieve this status, many people are pushed over the edge to change some aspect of their lives, with the plastic surgery being most convenient. Plastic surgery clinics rely on the media knowing that the TV dramas provide an endless flow of patients eagerly awaiting metamorphosis.

As mentioned before, Korean dramas clearly portray changing social perceptions toward plastic surgery. There is little stigma or shame attached, many of the operations now seem routine to many Korean people. The double eyelid surgery is a simple and quick procedure so many working people can even pop in the surgeons clinics on a lunch break and emerge with a new set of eyes. Altering the eye shape for Korean people is now as easy as getting a haircut. In addition,

patients have attached positive attributes to surgery. Many say that self-perception and confidence improves, helping them feel better about themselves. Also, the public visibility of the face and the symbolic importance that links face to character is considered very important and can lead to boost in happiness and self-esteem.

Dr. Kim Sung Duk, head surgeon of Dream Medical Group, says that he considers himself a mental therapist, not a plastic surgeon. He says that it is not about the double eyelid surgery at all, but how people feel about themselves. “If the patients long for a certain facial characteristic, it is not actually about acquiring that feature that is important. It is about the satisfaction and happiness that comes from receiving the procedure that makes people receive plastic surgery.” He says that the social standard for beauty has always been for bigger rounder eyes and finds it hard to believe that the trend will change in the future.

Another major reason that people are opting for the double eyelid surgery is to be successful in the competitive job market. As the race for jobs becomes more intense, many believe that enhancing looks can give a cutting edge over rivals. Especially for businessmen and politicians, small eyes are seen as sneaky, not trustworthy, and less charismatic than people with big round eyes. To get ahead in the job market, secure job opportunities or have success in a career, many opt to enhance looks and get the double eyelid procedure. Even men feel the pressure to utilize their looks to upgrade their resumes. The already fading taboo for men receiving plastic surgery has been thrown out the window.

From the standpoint of parents, plastic surgery is a way to prove their support for their children. With so many young people having themselves remade, parents are afraid their children will fall behind, not just academically, but aesthetically. "Parents make their kids get plastic surgery," says Dr. Shim Hyung Bo, a plastic surgeon in Seoul, "just like they make them study. They realize looks are important for success." Parents give double eyelid surgery as a graduation present, or encourage their children to undergo the surgical process in the hopes that it will help them in the long run. Because the double eyelid surgery is considered a very safe procedure, many parents are optimistic about their children receiving it early.

For many women, dating and marriage are another factor that motivates them to go under the knife. Getting married to a financially stable man is one of the highest priorities for Korean women. In a fiercely patriarchal society in which women are expected to stay home, clean, cook and raise kids, the worth of the woman comes down to their looks when husbands-to-be search for their wives. Getting ahead of the pack of women desperately hoping for an easy life with a husband who will provide and take care of them is a top concern. Women of marriageable age are under intense pressure to look their best at all times. For example, certain dating agencies will not accept members who are not considered above average in terms of looks to keep their clientele list high quality. One of the consequences has been an explosion in plastic surgery. All in all, it is considered a sensible investment for women to look beautiful at all costs, even if it means permanently changing their facial features.



Also, the availability and affordable cost of plastic surgery tempt people. Compared to the techniques of the plastic surgeons, the price is affordable. Seoul is a plastic-surgery boomtown because of the reasonable prices. Double-eye lid surgery in Korea costs about 80,000 Won, which is equal to about 800 dollars. National Statistical Office showed that the average monthly income of office workers was 2.98 million won. Compared to the annual income of an average salary worker, the cost is relatively cheap. Also, there are thousands of clinics available where patients can go. Apkujong, a section of Seoul with over 600 clinics, even a busy avenue nicknamed "Plastic Surgery Street." People are more inclined to undergo the procedure if they are exposed to the availability constantly. Because of the competition among clinics, customer service is of the highest quality. Many people are treated like kings and queens at the clinics, providing more incentive for people to revisit or recommend the place to others. Word of mouth is a valuable marketing tool for the clinics, and surgeons depend on it to keep the business thriving.

South Korea's wealth has been another reason for the boom in plastic surgery. This is true especially because with its recent recession, South Koreans are spending less on plastic surgery, reflecting the fact that it was a luxury pastime many indulged in before the economic recession. Interestingly however, South Korea's plunge toward recession is bringing in high-spending tourists by the planeload in search of bargains and beauty. Foreign tourists, mainly from Japan and China, have been pouring into South Korea to receive plastic surgery. The national currency, the Won, that has fallen in the past year by 40% against

the Japanese yen alone. Asia's fourth largest economy has become cheap for foreigners. According to Kim Byung-gun, the head surgeon at BK Dong Yang Plastic Surgery Clinic in Seoul, costs for plastic surgery is now half of what it costs in the United States. When foreign exchange rates apply, the price becomes less than one third of what it used to cost.

Kim Byung-gun says foreign patients have doubled, and sees an infinite growth potential in the market for foreigners. According to KTO, the Korea Tourism Organization, the number of foreign visitors in the first two months of this year jumped 25.5% from a year ago. Tourists from Japan surged more than 64% and from China 16%. The “shopping & surgery” packages for visitors mount to over 27,000. Even amidst the recession that is forcing South Koreans to cut back, the huge tourism boom is fueling plastic surgery despite complete depletion of all other businesses. The Korean government is implementing policies that will allow clinics to hire marketing agencies to attract overseas customers train more interpreters for foreign patients. The director from the Korea Tourism Organization says tourists receiving plastic surgery usually spend three to 10 times more than other foreign visitors. This recent trend shows how reputable and credible South Korea’s plastic surgery industry is. As notorious as it is, South Korean plastic surgeons are just plain good at what they do.

What are the social implications and consequences of plastic surgery and more specifically the double eyelid surgery?

Many argue that plastic surgery in Korea is leading to an 'ethnic facelift.' Double eyelids, a high straight nose, a slightly wide and protruding forehead, sufficient cheekbones are pursuits of Western features not common in Korean people.

Many feel that Koreans are conforming to a racial ideology and that they associate their natural features with dullness. Features such as small narrow eyes are often associated with negative connotations. Thus, people are sculpting faces to fit a societal or media norm. There is severe criticism that South Koreans are internalizing an image produced by the media and culture of racial ideology. □Dr. Kim of Dream Medical Group disagrees. He says that despite the alteration in the eye shape, Koreans will always look Korean. “Although Koreans may get bigger eyes, they will not be mistaken for Caucasians or Africans or any other race. It is simply an enhancement, not a racial facelift.” He also says that bigger eyes do not mean the loss of ethnic or cultural identity because in the end, the person is still the same internally. The procedures are not so much to look Western but to refine features to attain facial harmony. However, if the types of cosmetic surgery people opt for are truly individual choices, some may want smaller eyes or more Asian features they find pretty. But doctors cannot refer to cases in which people wanted to get rid of the double eyelids to make it smaller.

Many argue that plastic surgery is not an ethical issue at all. They that the freedom of choice is the utmost importance claiming that plastic surgery is a personal, conscious decision that can enhance quality of life. Every person has a basic human right to pursue happiness.

However one must consider the implications of permanently altering physical

features. In today's age one's life has become something- raw material- that people expect to do something with. Modern society arrived at the view of the body as something to shape and life as a project of shaping. This conscious distortion of the body may seem inhumane, almost a masochistic degradation of natural beauty. In addition, some people's discovery of choices that they find liberating will force others to confront choices they would rather not have recognized in the first place. For example, if parents undergo cosmetic surgery, their children will be affected no matter if they want to be or not. One individual choice- not only what is chosen, but also being in a position to choose- affects others. The energy of modernity is always toward more: the cultural impetus is to expand what it is legitimate to crave. The double eyelid surgery is a clear manifestation of satisfying human desires without any restraints or system of checks and balances. It is apparent that at times this is needed, as seen with cases of plastic surgery addiction. A famous case in Korea cites a woman who became addicted to surgery and started to inject toxic material in her face to make it more beautiful. Her face later became so grotesque and bloated that people call her the "fan lady," with a face as large as a circular fan.

Plastic surgery is not a yes or no issue. However, there are aspects of the surgery that one should keep in mind. First of all, the speed of economic development is so great that South Korea is modernizing at a pace that is fracturing traditional values. Attitudes and social behaviors are changing. Contributing to the surgery boom is growing democracy, and strong presence of Western ideas. As the documentary points out, the influence of mass media is the

single most important factor in the plastic surgery obsession in South Korea.

In this contemporary society where personal choice is regarded as top priority, the ethical implications may be obscure. However, patients often desire to alter their looks for Western features, such as the double eyelid, heightened nose, chiseled chin and narrow face. Many people are concerned that this emerging trend is an 'ethnic facelift.' From a collective standpoint, the South Korean surgery boom has more serious consequences: a perpetuation of a racial ideology and conformity to social expectancy. Also the cultural identity for Korean people may get lost in the pursuit of the idealized beauty. The alteration and manipulation also have implications for the younger generation of South Korea. Their future of cultural identity is amidst a frenzy of racial conformity: the result could be desensitization, a view of plastic surgery as a rite of passage, and loss of personal opinion of what it means to be beautiful.

This documentary has been produced in the hopes that it will spark discussion as to widen the understanding and room for consideration, not to strictly define what plastic surgery is or isn't. To contribute a personal opinion, I do believe in the following:

People should have the freedom to seek the kind of life and the quality of lifestyle as they see fit. But one must remember that we are responsible for the choices we make with the knowledge that what we decide may affect others. We must choose carefully, because as we choose for ourselves, we also confront others with choice. It calls attention to connections: connections between people, breaking

down the idea that any decision can be strictly individual especially within a family or an intimate relationship. Ultimately, beauty is fluid, unique to an individual, and timeless. The journey to realizing beauty is a personal experience shaped by various factors of life. In this time, in this life, this documentary shares the journey of South Korean people in their reach for realizing what beauty means for them.

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