



Korean-American discovers country's problematic beauty ideals during visit

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I visited Korea this summer and felt really, really ugly. Although my family was generally welcoming and lovely to me, some of my relatives ganged up on me every now and then, casually noting that I wore an excessive amount of makeup which made me look like a “nalali,” which is basically a trashy, cigarette-smoking, high-school dropout. Or mentioning that my arms are freakishly long and I’m so gangly I look like an orangutan. Or telling me that my knees look like knobby crayons. Or that my eyebrows are super sparse and bizarre looking.

At first, I assumed the thoughts applied only to these particular relatives, so I didn’t care very much, but the judgment of physical characteristics unfortunately didn’t lie solely within my family. On subways, at restaurants, or at malls, I often felt uncomfortable under the fixated and judgmental glances and sometimes straight-up stares of Korean women. It was a culture shock. Some forms of close-mindedness (sexism, racism, homophobia, and stress on physical conformity) are still considered acceptable in Korea.

Even knowing this, after one particularly brutal night of backhanded compli-

ments and rude comments, I got in a heated argument with one of my aunts and ended up heading outside the apartment and crying in frustration and righteous fury. In retrospect, I acknowledge that my relatives do genuinely love me and care about me. But for better or for worse, Korean culture has consistently centered on bluntness over politeness. At times, they loved me the only way they know how, harshly and honestly. Rather than spreading a supportive type of love to me, they attempted to better me by unknowingly stabbing at the very heart of my insecurities. But this wasn’t the first time.

I went to a lot of Korean dinner parties when I was younger. I recall going to several and having a bunch of older Korean women evaluate my current state of physical appeal while I listened submissively, embarrassed and uncomfortable. “You would look a lot better without that acne.” I felt like I was essentially expected to be thankful for their advice and remarks about my skin or the shape of my features. Instead of asking about my interests, my passions or even how I was doing, some

adults who barely knew me made hurtful comments regarding my appearance, nodding or smiling sweetly, as though they were doing me a huge favor by telling me I looked bad. Only now do I realize that these judgments are mostly founded on societal manipulation.

It breaks my heart that so many Korean women (1 out of 5) go under the knife to appease these conformist voices. Undergoing cosmetic surgery has been added to

the already lengthy list of things women must do to be socially accepted, like shaving body hair. Not that there’s anything wrong with someone choosing to do

these things; people should do what makes them happy. But the reality is, the decisions many Korean women are making regarding cosmetic surgery aren’t founded on personal happiness. They are founded on insecurities and self loathing. Something is deeply messed up when a country basically has a bullet-point list of traits that make people beautiful.

Korea’s culture has many beautiful aspects: respect of elders, conservation of temples and natural resources, safety and

religious tolerance, for example. But there’s nevertheless a problem pervasive in the society. It’s not so much the people, but the crisis of internalized-racism, xenophobia and general superficiality that lies at the core of the country’s ideals. An epidemic on “beauty” has completely swept this nation. People’s views are twisted and an already pretty homogenous culture is currently being shoved into an even tinier box of standardized beauty.

I would be lying if I claimed that I’m now completely satisfied with who I am. I guess that might sound superficial and unsatisfying, especially when there are people facing so much worse than I am, but it’s the truth. And I can’t keep belittling how I feel. I think with patience though, I can continue to overcome at least some of my bad thoughts about myself. I challenge anyone who also faces feelings of insecurity to remember something pretty cheesy: anyone can look at you and make a judgment concerning your physical appearance. Anyone can see the flesh. Only those who love you will see your heart.

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