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Does everyone just want to be white?

A recent documentary on cosmetic surgery in South Korea raises questions about the ‘face’ of today’s Australia.

By Joanna Elfving-Hwang and Jane Chi Hyun Park

South Korea seems to be getting an unduly bad press these days. Dubbed the ‘cosmetic surgery Mecca’ by some, we are being told that Korea is now a nation of cultural dupes and doll-like beautiful clones, a place where you simply cannot exist without turning to the help of a money-grabbing cosmetic surgeon.

And if the small hype surrounding the recent SBS, ‘Change my race’ documentary broadcast in December 2013 is to be believed, at least, it seems that this menace is now reaching our shores too.

While raising some very timely and interesting questions about the face of Australia by pointing out the continuing perception that tall blond white Australians embody the national norm, the scriptwriters follow a now well-established narrative path of gaping at the cosmetic surgery obsession in South Korea, implying that this obsession exemplifies the desire of people of East Asian descent specifically and non-white people more generally to be ‘white’.

It is telling that the documentary’s scriptwriters completely ignored the key issue they perhaps should have been tackling; namely, why there is such a denial of the real face of Australia when the average face of an Australian is increasingly not Anglo-Celtic but racially and ethnically diverse. Instead, the program makers chose to focus on creating nothing short of a moral panic about Asian Australians turning to extreme surgery in order to ‘change their race’.

The effect is to express their (and, by extension, the white Australian viewers’) moral superiority over the ‘poor Asian girls’ who, unable to resist the media’s panoptic gaze, have no choice but to mutilate their own bodies even though ‘they’ll still clearly look Asian even after that’.

Along with its ideological bias—and the lack of agency given to the Asian Australian subjects and the Asian countries to which they travel—the program made these generalisations based on a very small sample: one family of Vietnamese origin and a young woman of ethnic Thai origin seeking a breast augmentation in Thailand to make herself feel more feminine. No reference was made to the construction of native Vietnamese beauty ideals—which are more likely to draw on regional, pan-Asian beauty ideals than images of Caucasian women in Vogue—nor to the thousands of Caucasian Australians who travel to South-East Asia every year with exactly the same aim as the young Asian-Australian woman—to look more ‘feminine’.

In other words, the program works to recognise and define Asian beauty only against categories of Caucasian beauty. By doing so, it succeeds in reproducing racial ideologies that reconstruct western bodies as the norm even in non-western contexts where constantly shifting beauty ideals cannot be reduced to simplistic desires to be ‘white’—a racial category that is, in itself, extremely fluid, multiple and diverse based on cultural and national contexts.

The consistent need to emphasise race as the determining factor to explain Asian women’s desire to
undergo surgery (and often completely eliding that of their male counterparts) not only reveals the solipsistic tendency in the West to relate ‘others’ to itself, but also highlights the importance of contextualising cultural discourses of Korean as well as other non-western ideals of beauty, and how they are reported in western media.

When thinking about the discourses of power that interpellate subjects to partake in practices that include technologies of the body, we must understand that any statement locating cosmetic surgery practices only as westernising practices in Korea is both reductionist and orientalist in that it disconnects technologies of the body from other everyday social practices and social institutions that shape the choices of individuals in Korea and elsewhere. In fact, there is no direct benefit in looking western or indeed being western in Korea (as the authors of this article, a white European woman with a Korean husband and a Korean–American woman can attest).

While certain signifiers of whiteness may provide people with particular forms of cultural capital (and this can include non-bodily assets such as the English-language skill or a western education), otherness in the Korean cultural context can also create distance that makes it difficult for one to move beyond being viewed as an exotic other who will always and necessarily remain on the outside.

Western women in particular who wish to integrate into Korean society can equally be called to ‘Koreanise’ themselves by following fashion trends popular in Korea—or even to dye their hair darker as was the case with one of the authors of this article. Diasporic Koreans, meanwhile, are expected to know the mores and manners of native Koreans based on their ethnic appearance—to exhibit the ‘best’ of East and West—even if they grew up in the latter and have had little to no contact with the former.

The questions raised by the documentary are important, especially for Asian Australians who, like many diasporic Asian subjects living in western multicultural nations, have internalised certain bodily norms that characterise white subjects.

However, the experiences of these individuals cannot and should not be reduced to a melancholic narrative of lack which has characterised the representation of migrants in Australia—as people who enhance the cosmetic multiculturalism of the nation but lack the will or agency to change its dominant cultural and institutional structures. Nor should they be conflated with the experiences of Asian people in Asia who choose to modify their bodies for as many different kinds of reasons as do people anywhere else in the world. To do so is quite simply racist.

Other links:

News.com.au, SBS uncovers the Australians who want to change their race.

The Telegraph News, Asian women are turning to plastic surgery to look more Caucasian.

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