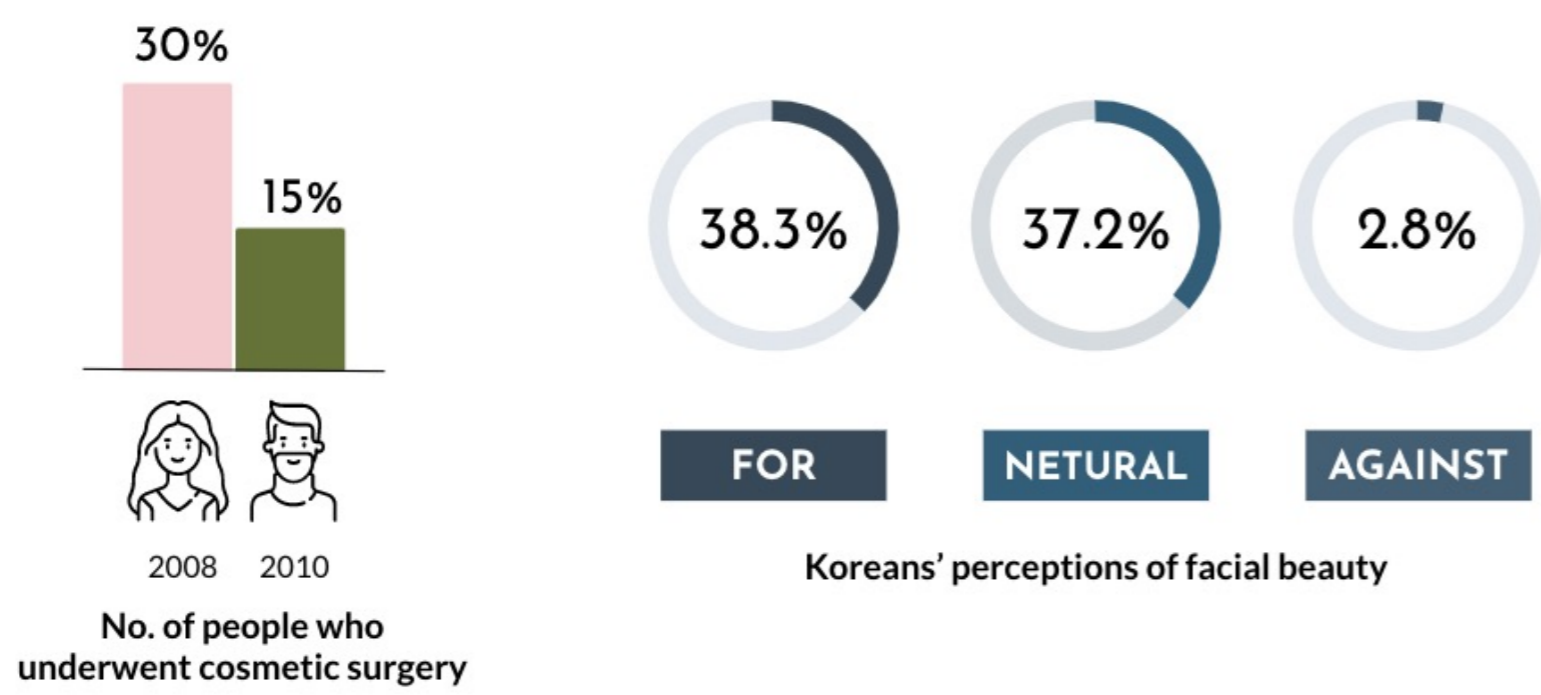


# Factors of Appearance-oriented Representation in South Korea from the 1990s to the Present Day

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## Introduction



The IMF Financial crisis led to economic shifts and increased employment competitiveness, which made appearance a focus in society in the late 1990s, and the Koreans' belief that *kwansang* (physiognomy) affects one's luck and success, and media advertising further contributed to the thriving plastic surgery industry in South Korea from the 2000s to the present day.

## The Korean Economy

Since the Asian Financial Crisis (1997-2001):

- Considerable increases in the **importation of foreign goods**
- **Relaxation of social sanctions** against the consumption of foreign luxury goods
- South Korea became fully incorporated into the **economically globalized, neoliberal world order** (Kwon 2019, 142)

## IMF Crisis (1997-2001)

- South Korea becomes globally visible for its **beauty culture** since the 2000s
- President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) implemented the **Presidential Proclamation on Culture** → Born of the brand of Korea, **Hallyu (Korean Wave)** (Wang 2015, 38)



- Since the IMF Crisis had led to **massive shutdowns of companies** and a **skyrocketing unemployment rate**, the **job market** became **more competitive** afterward (Wang 2015, 29).
- The national bankruptcy brought about a fundamental change in the **perception of plastic surgery from a manifestation of excess and affluence to a tool for self-realization and sustenance**. While the Kim Dae-jung government claimed to guarantee a minimum living standard for all Koreans, it focused on neoliberal measures such as **employability, rehabilitation capacity, self-sufficiency, flexibility, and self-entrepreneurship**. It encouraged the establishment of the neoliberal social ethos that requires every member in society to be an entrepreneur of himself or herself, to be **solely accountable for the successes and failures of one's life** (Lee 2020, 107).

## Competitive Job Market

- For highly classed, gendered, and embodied occupations such as flight attendants and narrator models, employers impose **particular height and weight standards for women**, and women are being judged based on their outer appearance (Woo 2004, 57). Although women face greater pressure of appearance-oriented representation than men, men cannot avoid it entirely due to the extreme emphasis on appearance in South Korea (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012, 73).
- The **fierce competition in the job market** normalizes **one's individual body capital as part of one's CV**, and the practice of including a space for photography, **"ID photograph here"**, on **every job application sheet** has made cosmetic surgery practical for **both genders** (Lee 2020, 107).
- Both men and women undergo **chig'öp sönghyöng (employment cosmetic surgery)** as they believe that with similar academic backgrounds, an employee with **"friendly" facial features** is preferred due to **the significance of social bonding in the working environment** (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012, 73).

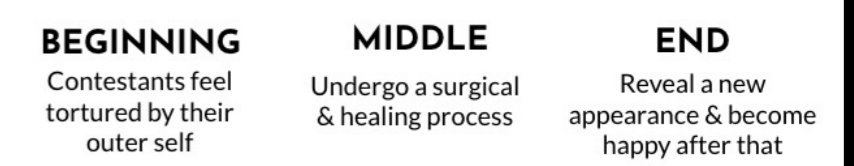
## The Belief of a "Right Face"

- **Kwansang**: Koreans consider facial features to be a **direct representation** of a person's **inner virtue** and they are **directly connected** to one's **luck and success** (Wang 2015, 32).
- **Spoon Class Theory: Kūmsujö → Ŭnsujö → Hūksujö**; Undergoing **body modifications** as a means to **pass from one social group to another** to gain acceptance and to distance themselves from negative stereotypes (Albrecht 2016, 47).



## Media Culture

- **Large-scale Media Advertising**: Korea had a **national broadband penetration rate of 97%** in 2011 (Davies and Han 2011, 147) e.g. cosmetic surgery's **"before" & "after" photos, celebrities' flawless facial features, and slim body shapes** in **subways, billboards, and TV commercials** (Wang 2015, 41).
- **TV shows**: Showing cosmetic surgery as a **simple, efficient, and painless** method to alter one's body (Carter et al. 2014, 354-5) → Creates **over-optimism** among audiences
- They share a similar flow of:



- **The Pan-Asian success of Let Me In**: Most popular Korean reality show in **China** in 2014; **Thailand** purchased the show format and aired **Let Me In: Thailand** in 2016.



## Medical Tourism (Since 2016)

### VAT-Refund Program

- To **attract foreigners** to come to Korea and receive cosmetic surgery
- Korean government-sponsored medical **technologies, tourism, spas, and beauty services**.
- Three **Medical Tourism Information Centers** were set up in Seoul, Incheon, and Busan to facilitate medical treatment, visas, transportation, translation, and tours (Kwon 2019, 151).  
→ convenience, cheap price



## Conclusion

Cosmetic surgery has become a tool for Koreans to...



Explore the possibilities in life



Pursue the life they desire

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