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MORE THAN CAUCASIAN COPYCATS: CULTURAL BEAUTY STANDARDS BEHIND SOUTH KOREAN COSMETIC SURGERY

Alice Herrmann

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The Seoul Metro subway system, which transports 2.9 billion passengers annually, plans to ban all plastic surgery advertisements by the year 2022. In the year 2015, 445,144 aesthetic procedures were performed in South Korea. What factors are responsible for this obsession, and how is it influenced by the West? Though much literature exists to examine the presence of Western beauty ideals in Asia, little has been written to analyze the existence of these standards in advertisements. I consider three Korean cosmetic surgery advertisements to determine whether they promote strictly Western appearances or are also rooted in Korean beauty ideals and marriage rhetoric. An advertisement for the Louivin Dental Clinic presents “before” and “after” pictures of a woman who does not appear more Caucasian after surgery, but is represented by colors and symbols to be happier and more feminine, and to have higher social and economic statuses. A second advertisement, for Grand Plastic Surgery, utilizes the Western symbol of an engagement ring, but promotes cosmetic surgery and improved appearance as necessary to finding one’s ideal spouse, a belief not specific to Western countries. Finally, another Grand Plastic Surgery advertisement incorporates the image of a sheet mask, a popular Korean skincare product, representing a mathematical, cookie-cutter approach to Korean beauty. I conclude that though some aspects of Korean plastic surgery, such as double eyelids and flattened cheeks, stem from a Western basis, the controversial subway advertisements do not emphasize a Western appearance as a prominent goal. Still, it is clear why many subway riders take issue with these posters, which target young women by presenting plastic surgery as necessary to represent one’s character and find a spouse. It remains to be seen whether banning the ads will stem the tide of desire for cosmetic surgery.