

South Korea: More Than Just the "Beauty-Obsessed" Capital of the World

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We need to understand both modern and traditional culture in their entirety,
not just through a myopic lens.

["Sweep away the pillars of this once patriarchal society."](#) ["South Korea loves plastic surgery and makeup."](#) ["... deeply patriarchal culture ..."](#) These were some phrases I recently encountered when reading *BBC* and *New York Times* articles covering a recent feminist movement boiling in South Korea: The Anti-Corset Movement, named to symbolize Korean women fighting to break free of a misogynistic society.

As a young Korean-American woman, I was excited to hear about a feminist movement starting in Korea—girl power was spreading across the globe. But the information I found within the articles I read left me angered at a culture, rather than empowered by a new female force.

What I found almost always started with an emphasis on Koreans' love of plastic surgery and makeup and their obsession with beauty and pretty faces, and ended by blaming their current patriarchal society on this supposedly "beauty-obsessed" culture.

But when I would talk about this topic with my mom, a graduate of UCLA with a degree in East Asian studies, she'd point out some flaws in this portrayal of Korean culture.

Yes, South Korea is known to be a place where fitting rigid beauty standards is vital to thrive in society. Women are expected to act and look "feminine"—leading to the pressures of wearing heavy makeup and undergoing plastic surgery. Often, people will mistake this as Koreans, specifically Korean women, being too superficial and too concerned about their outward appearances. What many fail to realize, however, is that their livelihood can rely on such factors.

South Korea is a highly educated country, consisting of both men and women who are equally qualified for a limited number of jobs. However, men are often favored over women in this competitive job market, forcing women to rely on beauty as a determining factor in separating them from other job applicants.

Consequently, the expectation instilled upon women to fit this societal mold has fed, and justified, the idea of male supremacy, thus allowing one of the largest gender wage gaps in the world to go unchallenged and causing sexual misconduct against women to proliferate.

This is how modern South Korean society has been functioning, leading to the common perception in western cultures that this is how South Korea has *always* functioned.

Contrary to popular belief, however, Korea was not always a patriarchy, nor was it always misogynistic. Before the Yi dynasty and the rise of Neo-Confucianism, Korea was largely a matriarchal society where inheritances were passed on from mothers to daughters and husbands moved into the homes of their wives' families.

In fact, modern Korea almost seemed to be circling back to these roots when, in February of 2013, Park Geun-Hye was elected as South Korea's first woman president—an event yet to take place in the United States. However, her subsequent charges of bribery, abuse of power, and her lack of action following the tragic Sewol Ferry drowning in 2014 ultimately cost her her presidency; she was impeached in March of 2017.

Her impeachment was an event I followed on *MBC News*, a Korean news channel I'd sometimes watch with my parents and grandparents.

"That woman is no good," my grandfather would say to me, pointing his finger at her as if he were one of the thousands of protestors that flooded the screen.

I'd then flip the channel to *CNN*, only to find an almost parallel story. But instead of Park Geun-Hye's face plaguing protest posters, it was the face of popular film mogul Harvey Weinstein next to the words "#MeToo."

In 2017, the #MeToo Movement started after a flood of sexual misconduct allegations against Weinstein shook America to its core. The movement unfolded within the same year of Park Geun-Hye's impeachment, and around the same time I started seeing dolled-up faces of Korean pop singers plastered on magazine covers at my local Barnes and Noble.

I was living in a strange new world. Coming from a small, predominantly Caucasian town in New Jersey, I have grown up with the assumption that South Korea was unfamiliar or unknown to non-Asian Americans. So when I heard Jimmy Fallon's familiar voice merge into the exciting sound of Korean pop music from my downstairs TV room earlier this year, I was both shocked and excited. South Korea was now on the global stage.

As Korean pop culture began to cross over into America's mainstream, Korean society similarly took note on what was happening in America. Rather than pop culture, however, they looked to the feminist rise in America. #MeToo didn't just awaken Americans from their political slumber: it also sparked the Anti-Corset Movement in Korea. A movement led by strong women with bare faces and short hair; a movement to say that women should no longer have to live in fear of men.

Unfortunately, Anti-Corset has been off to a rocky and relatively stagnant start. This is largely because discussing issues such as sexual misconduct is taboo in South Korea, and the association with feminism is stigmatized—a stigma amplified after Park Geun-Hye's impeachment.

But what I am frustrated with is not the seemingly static start to feminism in Korea; radical change always starts slow. What I am frustrated by are the articles, often by American writers, which superficially label South Korea as a beauty-obsessed nation, or blame Korea's current political climate on a "deeply-rooted" cultural problem, without knowing the culture in its entirety or addressing *why* misogyny may still exist. Korea's long-lasting patriarchy before the rise of Neo-Confucianism, Park Geun-Hye's presidency, and competition within the job market, are all factors to consider before judging the country's society as a whole.

All this is not said to justify misogyny in Korea, nor deny that *modern* Korean culture yearns for change, but rather to emphasize the need for people to ensure that they understand and reveal the entire story.

As South Korean influence comes out of its insular shell and spills more into the western media, I urge writers reporting on Korea, or any foreign country, to understand both modern and traditional culture in their entirety, not just through a myopic lens.

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