I know of no literature on the Asian model minority stereotype that exclusively examines, in a South Korean context, how Korean culture perpetuates the stereotype through a specific, troubling practice: Korean women, responding to idealized Western beauty standards, internalize racism by undergoing body enhancement surgery.\(^1\) This essay therefore acknowledges that there are two gaps in the South Korean model minority stereotype literature. The first gap is the shortage of research conducted within the borders of South Korea and/or published in South Korean journals.\(^2\) The second gap is the lack of literature that examines how South Koreans have themselves contributed to the Asian model minority stereotype by undergoing body enhancement surgical procedures. This last gap, Korean complicity in perpetuating the stereotype, is the primary focus of this essay. It is, I believe, interrelated with the phenomenon of body enhancement among South Koreans, although not identical.\(^3\)

\(^1\) While this article focuses on the fact that Korean women undergo body enhancement surgery, it acknowledges that Korean men also undergo similar procedures. See http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2012/10/09/more-men-opt-for-plastic-surgery/

\(^2\) One exception is Choi, H. (2002). Asian-Americans as a Model Minority: Myth of Reality. Review of International and Area Studies, 11(4), 127-143. Note: This article is from the Korean journal Kukche, Chiyok Yon’gu. (The English words for this title are Review of International and Area Studies). Unfortunately, this article was never published in English: full articles are published in Korean with article titles and abstracts published in English.

Studies on Asia

I first review the literature on the Asian model minority stereotype outside of the United States. Next, I share photographs that illustrate how mainstream heterosexual Korean culture has internalized Western idealized forms of beauty standards (larger breasts, whiter skin, and wider eyes). One unintended consequence of this perception is that an Asian model minority becomes constructed in the public square. I argue that this publicly accepted construction leaves Western visitors (mainly tourists) to Korea believing in a Eurocentric form of exotified “Korean” women.

Photographic evidence obtained from posters and advertisements in the Seoul, Korean subway is presented to theorize a conceptual framework that can be used to better understand internalized racism from a South Korean geopolitical and geospatial perspective. Not only does this essay fill two lacunae in the Asian model minority stereotype literature, it also creates new knowledge by arguing that the Asian stereotype exists in countries outside the United States (where much of the model minority stereotype literature is concentrated).4

Review of the Literature
In previous work I have cataloged over 480 pieces of model minority stereotype literature.5 Much of this literature is noticeably written by scholars and intellectuals who live and work in North America, and who approach the topic from a North American perspective. Contradistinctively, a much smaller amount of model minority stereotype research has been conducted in Asian countries.

4 The stereotype has also been documented in Jewish (Freedman, 2005) and German/Polish (Dolowy-Rybinska, 2011; Kamphoefner, 1996) societies.

5 “Model Minority Stereotype Project.”


Notable exceptions include Chung and Walkey, Ip and Pang, and Hannis, who have all researched the Chinese as model minorities in New Zealand, and Fang, the only academic to research Koreans as model minorities in China. All in all, there are only 11 pieces of model minority stereotype literature that fall outside of a North American geopolitical or geospatial context—the nine citations mentioned previously being among them. A thorough read of this literature reveals that little-to-no attention has been paid by researchers to how the Asian model minority stereotype functions within the Republic of Korea, especially with regard to how it is perpetuated by South Korean culture and behavior, which exacerbates Korean women’s internalized oppression by altering female beauty standards in deference to Western images of sexuality and attractiveness.

The “Forgotten” War (1950-1953)
During the Korean War, which lasted from 1950-1953, many Korean women married United States soldiers. South Korea was fighting against North Korea, and the United States came to its defense. According to Yu, during and immediately following the Korean War,
6,423 Korean women married United States military servicemen. Historians refer to the Korean War as the “forgotten war” because it has been overshadowed by other Wars and military conflicts. Part of this forgetfulness relates to Korean comfort women—women who slept with American soldiers. These interracial marriages and interracial sexual relations resulted in many biracial children being born in Korea immediately following the Korean War. And many of these bi-racial children would later be persecuted by their full-blooded Korean peers who saw them as “less-than,” scoffing at and scorning their mixed-race identity and heritage. I believe that this history of South Korean interracial antagonism can form a somewhat useful socio-historical, socio-cultural, and socio-political backdrop for present day South Korean culture. For instance, the importance of Korean bloodlines and purity of blood continues today, evidenced in South Korean governmental documents/forms that request an individual’s blood type. I feel it is vital to acknowledge that the land of the “Morning Calm,” as Korea is referred to, has historically looked down upon blackness (in a racial sense) while revering whiteness (in a racial sense). It is also important we not forget about South Korean comfort women, and the Korean War in general.

Photographic Evidence from Present Day South Korea
When I visited Seoul recently for a conference on international education, I commuted on the city’s subway system. Many Koreans in Seoul travel via subway in order to avoid congested streets above ground. As of 2012, South Korea is the tenth most densely populated country in the world. While commuting via Seoul’s first-class subway system I could not help but notice the prevalence of products and physicians that seemed to support the idea that South Korean women should undergo cosmetic and bodily surgery, something I

have written about elsewhere. This underground advertising is especially effective for the simple fact that subway riders are, literally, a captive audience. On average, Koreans spend an hour or more on the subway at any given time, which ultimately amounts to a lot of exposure to posters, advertisements, and videos. I snapped the photographs below (Figures 1-5) during my trip in November of 2013.

![Figure 1: Plastic Surgery Center](image)

Figure 2: Reasonable Confidence

Figure 3: Jewelry Plastic Surgery
It is worth noting that iterations of this trend can be observed in other Asian countries such as the Philippines, China, and Taiwan,
and doesn’t necessarily reflect a uniquely South Korean culture. Although a broader consideration of the Westernization of cultural beauty standards falls outside the boundaries of the present essay, I have included an advertisement below that a colleague emailed me after learning I was conducting research into this topic (see Figure 6 below). It is from the Philippines, but it would fit right in with the ads plastering the Seoul subways.

![Figure 6: White Perfect](image)

Judging by this advertising and its effectiveness in influencing behavior, a significant number of mainstream heterosexual Korean women have internalized Western idealized forms of beauty standards. Conformity to these standards visually reinforces the public construction of a “model minority.” Incidentally, I qualify this demographic as heterosexual because homosexuality is looked down upon in Korean society.12

Despite the fact that South Korean society attempts to appear conservative—for instance, pornography is banned—South Korean

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culture remains highly sexualized. Although the national government censors sexual images on the Internet, South Korea’s citizens spend 26 billion dollars per year on pornography—second only to China, where porn generates 27 billion in annual revenue from a significantly larger population. Meanwhile, in ways comparable to Hollywood in the United States, the Gangnam District of Seoul is a bustling metropolis of female K-pop stars who appear to have “perfect(ed)” bodies and sell their products in overly-sexualized fashion. Gangnam, like Beverly Hills, is rife with plastic surgery clinics, where many of these famous K-Pop stars have had their bodies surgically altered to attain an artificial standard of beauty.

The Most Cosmetically Enhanced People in the World
Cain notes that Gangnam is “a neighborhood that amounts to the Beverly Hills of Seoul” (para 9), adding that “[p]lastic surgery is a lucrative trade in South Korea, with citizens edging out Greece, Italy and the US as the most cosmetically enhanced people in the world” (para 5). The photographs I have shared here attest to how Korean culture encourages advertisements for products and procedures that will make their female clients more attractive. All of the models in Figures 1-5 are women. The products and procedures target such features as breast size, skin tone/color, and facial features like nose shape, capitalizing on potential clients’ insecurity about these aspects of their physical appearance. As a Korean university student said,

13 Korea’s 26 billion dwarfs the United States’ 13 billion, despite the fact it is legal in the United States; see D’Orlando, 2011, p. 54.

14 One in five South Korean women has had some form of cosmetic surgery, compared to around one in 20 in the United States; see Stone, 2013.

“To be Korean is to get plastic surgery. You must do it, or young people will think you’re weird.”\textsuperscript{16}

I believe that Korean women who undergo these procedures cause onlookers to evaluate their beauty and Korean identity in ways that are compatible with the Asian model minority stereotype. I also believe that this model minority stereotype construction causes Westerners (mainly tourists) who visit the country to leave believing in a form of “Korean” womanhood that is inauthentic and ahistorical. The historical reality is that Korean women were often treated as sex objects for the pleasure of male GIs. If Korean women have historically been treated as “less-than,” and currently they are undergoing procedures to alter their bodies, what does this say about Korean contemporary society?

The 2012 Miss Korea Pageant contest provides a textbook case study of what I am arguing. Some observers described the contestants as “clones” because they all looked alike. Plastic surgery was a culprit, and many in the South Korean media pointed to the similarities in the facial features of the women. Indeed, the model minority stereotype serves to erase physical differences and homogenize them instead. The result is an archetype for female beauty perfection. The problem is that these beauty standards, which compel—through venues like the beauty pageant—South Korean women to undergo cosmetic surgery, are that they are unattainable. The result is that the Korean woman internalizes feelings of inadequacy, perhaps driving her to undergo even more surgical procedures to again try to perfect her body. This is highly cyclical and oppressive.

Figure 7 below shares a conceptual framework for understanding Korean women who internalize Western beauty standards, a form of internalized racism.

\textsuperscript{16} As cited in Cain, 2013, para 24.
Inside the rectangle you can see the 2012 Miss Korea Pageant contained in a circle. Surrounding the circle is the model minority stereotype, which leads to the homogenization of beauty standards. Unattainable beauty standards result in Korean women internalizing racism, which results in more plastic surgeries. The framework points out how problematic this phenomenon is because the standards of beauty are a moving target.

**Conclusion**
The culture of South Korea is perpetuating the Asian model minority stereotype. K-pop artists and Korean athletes like Yuna Kim (a world class figure skater) are buying into white standards of beauty. Making
matters worse, they are spreading it further through their music videos, promotional materials, and product advertisements (see Figure 8). Websites like Asian White Skin (http://www.asianwhiteskin.com/about.php) point to the need for more critiques of the model minority stereotype in Asian countries. Yuna Kim’s Smoothie King poster, “Be White,” is yet one more example of why more scholarship needs to be carried out that complicates the model minority stereotype in Asian countries.

Figure 8: Yuna Kim, “Be White”
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