

Modern Em(body)ments of the Model Minority in South Korea

Nicholas D. Hartlep
Illinois State University

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.

³ Ruth Holliday and Joanna Elfving-Hwang. "Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea." *Body & Society*, 18 no. 2 (2012): 58-81.

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.”

Nicholas Hartlep, *The Model Minority Stereotype: Demystifying Asian American Success* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2013).

Nicholas Hartlep, ed., *The Model Minority Stereotype Reader: Critical and Challenging Readings for the 21st Century* (San Diego, CA: Cognella Publishing, 2014b).

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,⁶ the only academic to research Koreans as model minorities in China.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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 See Fang 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b.

⁷ Scholarship on the model minority stereotype appears in Chinese academic journals and theses; however, most of this material is related to an Asian American conceptualization of the model minority stereotype (e.g., see Cheng, 2011; Huang, 2002; Liu & Yang, 2007; Qu, 2007; Sun, 2012; Yi, 2006).

⁸ Also see Dechamma 2012; Ha, 2011.

⁹ This essay does not examine males in South Korea mainly because, as in the United States, males in South Korea are in positions of power, while beauty is seen through a heteronormative lens. As Yu (1987b) points out, “Major institutions of [Korean] society work to perpetuate the notion of male superiority” (p. 24) and “The household registry (*hojeok*) system based on male lineage also helps perpetuate the long-held tradition of patriarchy in contemporary Korea” (p. 24).

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.¹⁰ 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

¹⁰ Maps of World, “Most Densely Populated Countries,” 2012.

have written about elsewhere.¹¹ 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

¹¹ Nicholas Hartlep, "Eyelid Surgery Among the Nacirema: Toward Asian American Understanding," in *The Impact of Social Factors on Health* (San Diego, CA: Cognella, 2014a), 139-154.



Figure 2: Reasonable Confidence



Figure 3: Jewelry Plastic Surgery

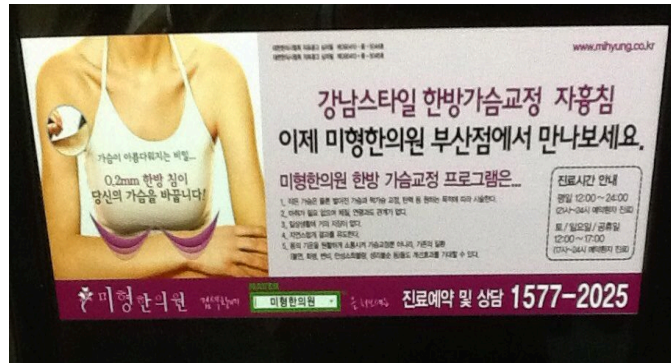


Figure 4: Breast Revisions “I Can Change Your Breasts”



Figure 5: No Incision Plastic Surgery to Make You Prettier

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

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

¹² Young-Gwan Kim and Sook-Ja Hahn. “Homosexuality in Ancient and Modern Korea.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 8 no. 1 (2006): 59-65.

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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).¹⁵ 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.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Cain, “Plastic Surgery ‘Gangnam-style.’” *Global Post*, last modified February 26, 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/south-korea/130221/plastic-surgery-gangnam-style-seoul>

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

¹⁶ As cited in Cain, 2013, para 24.

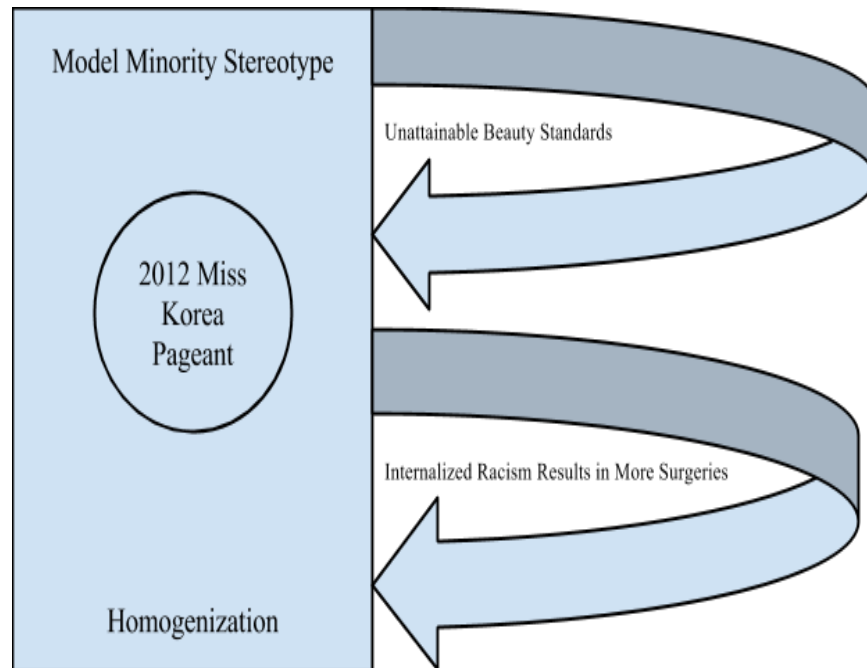


Figure 7: Conceptual Framework for Understanding Korean Women's Internalized Racism

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.asianwhite skin.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"

References

- Cain, Geoffrey, "Plastic Surgery 'Gangnam-style,'" *Global Post*, last modified February 26, 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/south-korea/130221/plastic-surgery-gangnam-style-seoul>
- 亚裔美国人公众形象转变研究_陈澄
Cheng, C. "A Study on the Change of Asian American Public Image-from Yellow Peril to Model Minority." Unpublished thesis, East China Normal University, Shanghai, 2011.
- Dechamma, Sowmya. "The Model Minority: Problematizing the Representation of Kodavas in Kannada Cinema." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2012): 5-21.
- Dolowy-Rybinska, Nicole. "A Model Minority." *Insight Academia* 30, no. 2 (2011): 48-49. http://www.english.pan.pl/images/stories/pliki/publikacje/academia/2011/2_2011_30/48-49_dolowy.pdf
- D'Orlando, Fabio. "The Demand for Pornography." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 12, no. 1 (2011): 51-75, doi:10.1007/s10902-009-9175-0
- Fang, Gao. "What it Means to Be a Model Minority: Voices of Ethnic Koreans in Northeast China." *Asian Ethnicity* 9, no. 1 (2008): 55-67.
- Fang, Gao. "Challenges of Discourses on 'Model Minority' and 'South Korean Wind' for Ethnic Koreans' Schooling in Northeast China." *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 3, no. 2 (2009): 119-130.

- Fang, Gao. "A Comparative Analysis of the Meaning of Model Minority Among Ethnic Koreans in China and the United States." *Comparative Education* 46, no. 2 (2010a): 207-222.
- Freedman, Jonathan. "Transgressions of a Model Minority." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 23, no. 4 (2005): 69-97.
- Hannis, Grant. "From Yellow Peril to Model Minority? A Comparative Analysis of a Newspaper's Depiction of the Chinese in New Zealand at the 20th and 21st Centuries." *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 19 (2009): 85-98.
- Hartlep, Nicholas D. *The Model Minority Stereotype: Demystifying Asian American Success*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2013.
- Hartlep, Nicholas D. "Eyelid Surgery Among the Nacirema: Toward Asian American Understanding," in *The Impact of Social Factors on Health*, ed. Darron. T. Smith & Tasha E. Sabino (San Diego: Cognella, 2014a), 139-154.
- Hartlep, Nicholas D. (Ed.). *The Model Minority Stereotype Reader: Critical and Challenging Readings for the 21st Century*. San Diego: Cognella, 2014b.
- Holliday, Ruth and Joanna Elfving-Hwang. "Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea." *Body & Society* 18, no. 2 (2012): 58-81.
- Huang, J. "The Model Minority Thesis: Myth and Reality." *Journal of Northeast Normal University* 6, no. 200 (2002): 51-59.
- Ip, Manying and David Pang. "New Zealand Chinese Identity: Sojourners, Model Minority and Multiple Identities," in *New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations*, ed. Manying Ip

and David Pang (Victoria, New Zealand: Victoria University Press, 2005), 174-190.

Ja, Woo Keong. "The Beauty Complex and the Cosmetic Surgery Industry." *Korea Journal* 44, no.2 (2000): 52-82. http://www.ekoreajournal.net/sysLib/down.php?file=..%2FUPLOAD%2FT_articles%2FPDF4424

Kamphoefner, Walter D. "German Americans: Paradoxes of a 'Model Minority,'" in *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America*, ed. Silvia Pedraza & Ruben G. Rumbaut (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1996): 152-160.

Young-Gwan Kim and Sook-Ja Hahn. "Homosexuality in Ancient and Modern Korea." *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 8 no. 1 (2006): 59-65.

解读_模范少数族裔_理论和多元文化主义思想的内在联系刘卓
Liu, Zhuo and Da-wei Yang. Interpreting the Intrinsic Relationship Between Model Minority and Multiculturalism. *Journal of Liaoning University*, 5 (2007): 69-73.

Maps of World, "Most Densely Populated Countries," 2012
<http://www.mapsofworld.com/world-top-ten/world-top-ten-most-densely-populated-countries-map.html>

"Model Minority Stereotype Project." 2014. Last modified March 26, 2014. <http://my.ilstu.edu/blogs/ndhartl/>

模范少数族裔_形象对亚裔及其他少数族裔的负面影响_刘曲
Qu, L. "Model Minority Stereotype: A Disservice to Both

Asian Americans and Other Minority Groups in the U.S.”
Unpublished thesis, China Foreign Affairs University Beijing,
China, 2007.

Schenck, Andrew D. “Korea’s ‘Model Minority’: A case Study of an
American-Korean Bilingual Student’s Challenges Learning
English in South Korea.” *Journal of International Education and
Leadership* 13, no. 3 (2013): 1-15.

Stone, Zara. “The K-pop Plastic Surgery Obsession.” *The Atlantic*.
Last modified May 24, 2013. [http://www.theatlantic.com/
health /archive/2013/05/the-k-pop-plastic-surgery-obsess
ion/276215/](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/05/the-k-pop-plastic-surgery-obsession/276215/)

早期美国华裔文学作品中的_模范少数族裔_形象_孙冬苗
Sun, D. “‘Model Minority’ Image in Early America Chinese
Literature Works.” *Lovers of Literature* 4 (2012): 92-93.

Yi, S. “Asian American Stereotypes in Yellow Peril and Model
Minority Myth.” *Journal of Jiangsu Teachers University* 12, no.1
(2006): 25-30.

Yu, Eui-Young. “Korean-American Women: Demographic Profiles
and Family Roles,” in *Korean Women in Transition: At Home and
Abroad*, ed. Eui-Young Yu & Earl H. Phillips. (Los Angeles:
Center for Korean-American and Korean Studies, 1987a).
183-197.

Yu, Eui-Young. “Women in Traditional and Modern Korea,” in
Korean Women in Transition: At Home and Abroad, ed. E-Y. Yu
& E. H. Phillips. (Los Angeles: Center for Korean-American
and Korean Studies, 1987b), 183-197.