

# Prettier Faces, Better Lives? The Impact of South Korean Facial Beauty Standards and Plastic Surgery on Women's Lives in Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face*

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## Abstract

With the rising popularity of South Korean worldwide culture (called *hallyu* or “the Korean wave”) which presents us with images of beautiful stars and k-beauty products, it is worth exploring the nature and impact of Korean facial beauty standards. The following article analyzes the depiction of South Korean appearance norms in the Korean American novel *If I Had Your Face* by Frances Cha. In the introduction, I familiarize the reader with the novel's author and plot. Next I give an overview of what South Korean beauty norms entail and explain whether they are inspired by Caucasian appearance standards. Finally, I analyze the novel in-depth with a focus on two characters who undergo plastic surgery, a popular practice in South Korea. Applying the concepts of beauty work, aesthetic labor and social capital, I argue that to Cha's characters the striving for fulfilling restrictive facial beauty norms represents: an employee's duty, a desire to escape stigma and social exclusion, and a hope to improve one's life circumstances. The article therefore approaches beauty as a specific discourse of inclusion and exclusion.

**Keywords:** k-beauty, Frances Cha, Korean American literature, South Korea, appearance

## 1. Introduction

When looking at the 21<sup>st</sup>-century global popular culture, it is hard to deny the ubiquitous influence of South Korea. Currently, many Korean forms of media enjoy popularity, such as dramas which amass millions of viewers (Kooima & Scheer-Erb, 2023) and k-pop groups who reach world-wide stardom (Sherman, 2021). Consuming South Korean media, television dramas, music videos and advertisements, it is not difficult to notice the uniform (Hu, 2023, Introduction) and strict (Peletz, 2007, p. 30) female beauty standards which they depict. This phenomenon is not surprising considering the fact that, over the years, South Korea has become the so-called “Beauty Capital of The World” (How, 2019). The country’s skincare and makeup products, similarly to Korean entertainment, have become internationally successful, attracting many consumers, especially among young women (Russon, 2018).

To date, Frances Cha’s *If I Had Your Face* (2020) has received little scholarly attention despite being a thematically rich work about Korean women and their experiences regarding appearance and beauty standards. In this article I aim to analyze the depiction of Korean facial appearance norms, its influence on young women, as well as motivations for and consequences of striving to fulfill it. My purpose is to demonstrate the impact both South Korean beauty standards and plastic surgery itself have on the characters of Cha’s work.

Frances Cha is a Korean American writer and lecturer at Columbia University. Previously, she worked for the CNN fulfilling the role of a “travel and culture editor” in the cities of Hong Kong and Seoul, South Korea. *If I Had Your Face* (2020) is Cha’s debut novel and remains her only work of adult fiction. This work has been received enthusiastically, with the BBC, *Time Magazine* and NPR naming it one of the best novels of the year. The author has followed her debut with a children’s book, *The Goblin Twins* (2023).

*If I Had Your Face* is a piece of literary fiction set in contemporary Seoul. The novel follows a cast of young women who live in the same building. Rather than having one over-arching storyline, the book is a collection of vignettes focusing on selected characters. The narration in *If I Had Your Face* is split between four first-person narrators. The characters telling their stories are: Ara, a hairdresser and k-pop fan with a speech disability, Kyuri, a beautiful room-salon girl<sup>1</sup>, Wanna, a young wife who is trying to conceive a child, and Miho, an artist who returns to South Korea from America. The fifth important character of the novel is Sujin, a young woman who strives to achieve beauty and seeks plastic

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<sup>1</sup> Room salons are South Korean establishments where hostesses entertain (usually) male guests with conversation and drinking alcoholic beverages together. These salons tend to have an underground character (Charlesworth, 2020).

surgery in order to become an attractive room-salon girl similarly to Kyuri. Due to the limited scope of this article, the analysis focuses mostly on the portrayal of Kyuri and Sujin.

## **2. Under The (Glass) Skin: South Korean Beauty Standards**

In order to discuss South Korean female beauty standards it is crucial to firstly establish what they usually entail. It is also important to remember that in Korea it is the face that is considered to be the defining body part in evaluating women's physical appearance (Lee et al., 2001, p. 146). While in most parts of the world certain trends are subject to change, a general preference for specific traits can be noticed in South Korea. Some of the most desirable features are a slender nose, a v-shaped jawline (Hu, 2023, Chapter 4), and big eyes with double eyelids (Goodwin, 2023). The Korean beauty standard also places importance on fair skin which should not have any blemishes (Goodwin, 2023). According to Elise Hu, Korean beauty emphasizes a "skinfirst" approach which manifests in complex, multiple step skincare routines. The preferred dewy look of the seemingly makeup-free skin is internationally known as "glass skin" (Hu, 2023, Chapter 4).

The preference for some of the features discussed above, such as double-lidded eyes, might raise questions whether Korean women desire to look Caucasian. According to scholars such as Jasmine Kwak (Kwak, 2021, p. 2) and Valérie Gelézeau (2015) this is not the case. Kwak acknowledges the influence of Western beauty ideals on the Korean canon of beauty which are mostly reflected in the preferences regarding the eyes and high nose bridges. However, she stresses that the motivation to comply with the beauty norms stems not from the desire for a Caucasian appearance but is rooted instead in old Korean notions regarding beauty. Moreover, in the critic's view, this partially westernized Korean beauty canon was initially a means of protest against Japan, Korea's former colonizer, and the aesthetic preferences of the Japanese (Kwak, 2021, p. 2). A similar view is expressed by Gelézeau who highlights that the interest in beauty and practices such as skin whitening are primarily rooted in the traditions of the Korean aristocracy. Historically in Korea, fair skin was considered desirable due to its association with belonging to a higher social stratum (Gelézeau, 2015).

The practice of plastic surgery can be considered to be relatively common in South Korea. Ruth Holliday and Joanna Elfving-Hwang claim that depending on the source, as cosmetic procedures are often not properly reported, between 20% and 30% of Korean women have undergone such surgery (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 59). Therefore, it can be said that such procedures are rather normalized within Korean society. An instance of this normalization can be found in the phenomenon of treating aesthetic procedures as a form of

a gift. According to Sharon Heijin Lee, many parents fund their child's plastic surgery to reward them for graduating from high school (Lee, 2015, p. 5).

The reasons for the popularity of plastic surgery in Korea are complex and have attracted scholarly attention. For the purpose of this article, I focus on the two most important factors pointed to by researchers (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 58; Lee, 2021, p. 2). The notion of "physiognomy," the belief that one's looks dictate their life trajectory, is considered to be influential on both the decision to seek cosmetic surgery and the type of procedures chosen by individuals in South Korea (Lee, 2021, p. 2). Another motivating factor for undergoing surgery is employment prospects. Lee claims that because South Korea has a high number of university educated citizens, potential employees need to distinguish themselves from others. Being physically beautiful is one of possible strategies to succeed in a competitive employment market (Lee, 2021, p. 2). As one can notice, both of these important reasons are not found in vanity, but instead in hopes for improving one's fate.

### 3. Kyuri—the Beauty Labourer

Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face* is a novel that, like its title suggests, deals with the problems connected to feminine facial appearance standards. "I would live your life so much better than you, if I had your face"—Kyuri, one of Cha's protagonists, thinks to herself upon seeing a beautiful woman in an early section of the novel (Cha, 2020, p. 31). Indeed, in the world of *If I Had Your Face* attractive appearance is seen as an invaluable asset that should be cherished in line with Rhoda K. Unger's theory of beauty as a source of interpersonal power for women (Unger, 1979, as cited in Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 178). Throughout the novel, the author familiarizes the reader with South Korean beauty standards. An evocative example of these standards can be found in one of the novel's first scenes where a meek hairdresser Ara admires her friend Kyuri's beauty. The woman's description entails "double eyelids", a tall nose, eyelash extensions, permanent eye makeup, fair skin, as well as cheekbones and jawline of desirable, slender shapes (2020, p. 4). Ara is aware that Kyuri's appearance is not natural, but instead created by surgical intervention and elaborate beauty rituals. However, this awareness does not have an impact on her admiration (2020, p. 4). It seems that through showcasing this awareness, Cha highlights the normalization of plastic surgery within South Korean society (see Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 59). This point is emphasized further by the author, when in the following scene Ara remembers how many girls in her school have undergone a blepharoplasty (2020: 5), which reflects a real-life phenomenon (see Lee, 2015, p. 5).

While the characters of *If I Had Your Face* see beauty as an admirable quality and a form of currency, ugliness, in turn, is seen as a mark of deviancy. Such views on beauty and ugliness are of course not novel. Instead, they reflect a tendency which has been ingrained in various cultures, for example, as Marcia R. Lieberman argues, in fairy tales (Lieberman, 1972, p. 385). Kyuri, an attractive woman, does not understand why her employer refuses to have her face, which the protagonist deems ugly and “toad-like” (2020, p. 20), surgically altered. The character wonders whether the salon’s Madam is immoral and unintelligent, assigning negative qualities of character solely on the basis of her noncompliance with beauty standards. The views expressed by the character are rather extreme, extending even to thinking that it is better to be dead than to live as an ugly person (Cha, 2020, p. 13). Another apparatus through which Kyuri’s condemnation of the guest’s and the Madam’s lack of care regarding her looks can be understood is the notion of beautification as a ‘civilizing’ force. According to Giseline Kuipers, since the 20<sup>th</sup> century engaging in beautifying practices emerged as a mark of “self-control and social worth” (2022, p. 6). As a result, from this standpoint, women such as those assessed as unattractive in the novel, can be seen as inferior and uncultured.

However, being ugly, as in the above example of the salon’s owner, is portrayed in *If I Had Your Face* as an option only available to people with a significant financial advantage over others. This is confirmed by the incident when a rich young woman visits the salon. Kyuri judges her face that does not meet the beauty standard very harshly. The protagonist seems almost disgusted by the woman’s flat nose and monolid eyes. However, she quickly remembers that people from higher social strata do not need to be beautiful to be granted new opportunities as they already possess them (2020, p. 19). In turn, as Mia Åberg explains (2015, p. 5), less wealthy South Koreans often try to improve their quality of life by seeking surgical enhancement,

Cha’s novel calls into question whether decisions to strive to achieve the beauty ideal are a matter of free choice. In *If I Had Your Face* it is continuously highlighted that there is only one type of appearance that is socially rewarded, one that embodies the South Korean standard. Those deemed unattractive are judged harshly by the novel’s characters, which the author illustrates numerous times (2020, pp. 4, 13, 19, 20, 26, 57, 261). Moreover, women who work in places such room salons, like Kyuri, are stripped off agency regarding their looks. Various aspects of their appearance are not chosen by themselves. Instead, it is the establishment’s owner who decides what each employee will look like during a given season (2020, p. 12). As Heather Widdows argues, the moment a practice becomes required either explicitly or implicitly, it is difficult to consider it a matter of choice (2021, p. 258). In this case, the decision to comply with the prescribed looks is a way to fulfill one of the necessary job requirements. This phenomenon is depicted in a scene where Kyuri is at the hairdresser’s and expresses her delight at being prescribed a hair style that is

popular with customers. Here, it is implied that lack of compliance with the look selected by the salon's madam would be met with negative consequences, possibly such as a cessation of employment (2020, p. 12). This is an important element of what Ashley Mears refers to as aesthetic labor, a type of labor where employees receive compensation "for their own body's looks and affect" (2014, p. 1332). In such positions the worker, arguably, becomes a part of the object or service that is paid for by the client (Mears, 2014, p. 1332). In order to become an aesthetic laborer and maintain their position, a person has to engage in various type of beauty work, such as makeup and plastic surgery.

By exploring Kyuri's choices, *If I Had Your Face* offers a compelling portrayal of beauty work and the experience of plastic surgery. Kyuri is a woman who has already had a number of cosmetic procedures done and now works in a room salon. Although Kyuri struggles with personal problems and debt, she is considered by her friends to be a successful person as the salon she works in is an exclusive one. In the portrayal of Kyuri, Cha offers a realistic depiction of a room salon employee who has to implement a significant amount of beauty work in order to remain employed as an aesthetic laborer. The author describes her character's weekly beautifying rituals which involve daily hairdressing visits, as well as a 10-step skincare routine implemented both in the morning and at night (2020, p. 57). These measures seem absurd to the protagonist's friend, Miho. However, Kyuri performs them without a question and tries to encourage other women to do the same (2020, p. 57). It is not surprising, considering the fact that the woman's employment depends on her face and hair looking attractive. Her job can be considered a precarious one, similarly to that of fashion models (Mears, 2017, p. 156), and loss of beauty would result in the loss of work opportunities.

Moreover, through Kyuri, Cha also signals the financial difficulties that may be encountered by women who decide to have plastic surgery. While they might be inclined to seek cosmetic enhancement hoping to improve their financial situation, the reality often does not bring the desired profits, as documented in Soohyung Lee and Keunkwan Ryu's research (2012, p. 224). This is the case of Cha's protagonist, whose attractive looks require frequent upkeep, both in terms of hairstyling, makeup and skincare (Cha, 2020, pp. 5, 57), but also of additional plastic surgeries. While in the novel Kyuri does not undergo any surgical interventions, the author portrays her character being "sorely tempted" by them in an advertising brochure (2020, p. 262). This scene highlights that a beautiful woman's journey of appearance improvement is never finished and always requires new resources, such as time, energy, products, and perhaps most importantly, money. The character attempts to improve her finances (2020, p. 11) and limit her personal expenses (2020, p. 54) in order to help her mother (2020, p. 29). Other characters, such as Sujin and Ara, however, are not aware of Kyuri's financial problems. They assume she and other room salon employees waste money on men and entertainment (2020, p. 11). While

Cha does not depict Kyuri's work colleagues in more detail, one can hypothesize they invest significant resources into beauty work, required to keep and perform their jobs. In short, a job of a room salon employee which belongs to the category of aesthetic labor, is depicted by the author as difficult and demanding.

#### **4. Sujin—Beauty as Social Capital**

In Sujin's case, in contrast to Kyuri's, plastic surgery represents a hope for improving one's life situation. Interestingly, she is the only of the novel's main characters who is not granted the role of a narrator. Perhaps Cha intended to make a distinction between Kyuri, an 'insider', who already works in a room salon and whose unglamorous life is described throughout the novel, and Sujin, an 'outsider', who aspires to perform the same type of job and has an almost romantic view of the profession. This protagonist has grown up in an orphanage, and lacks education and beauty (Cha, 2020, pp. 4-5), which makes her more vulnerable and limits her life opportunities. Sujin, due to where she was brought up, is a character that can be described as afflicted with stigma, which Erving Goffman describes as circumstances where a person "is disqualified from full social acceptance" (1986, *Preface*). In the novel, the orphanage is said to be considered a place where "the disabled and deformed" reside (Cha, 2020, p. 8). It is not surprising then that Sujin worries about her looks, considers herself to be in need of fixing, and desires to escape unjust stigmatization by improving her appearance (2020, pp. 8-9, 14). According to Goffman, such strategies are frequently employed by stigmatized individuals (1986, pp. 7, 9).

Sujin is a character fascinated by the world of beauty. She spends her free time consuming TV programs about plastic surgery and enjoys dramatic transformations the participants go through (2020, pp. 13-14). While it is not explicitly stated, it seems that watching reality television has at least partially inspired the character to seek surgery. In the same scene where her favorite entertainment is described, she tells her friend Ara about her hopes regarding a cosmetic procedure. Sujin's views can seem quite naive as she believes surgery will drastically change her life, and bring her wealth and happiness (2020, p. 14). However, they also show the character's awareness that beauty could increase her social capital. While, as discussed above, some forms of beauty work do not always fully bring the desired benefits, being beautiful can be seen as a form of social capital. Kathleen M. O'Connor and Eric Gladstone state that attractive individuals worldwide are treated more kindly by others, enjoy more attention and popularity. Moreover, scholars point out that beauty is associated with the 'halo effect' which causes others to assume that a pretty person possesses various, admirable features of character (O'Connor & Gladstone, 2017, p. 2; Talamas et al., 2016). Most women are well-aware of these and many more social perks that are associated with being considered attractive. It is not surprising then

that, as Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts point out, they strive to comply with the appearance ideal in order to obtain those benefits or, at least, escape unjust treatment by others (1997, p. 180). Given the stigma that has marked her life, Sujin aspires to perfect beauty as an important social capital. Inspired by Kyuri, whom she deeply admires, the protagonist decides to undergo plastic surgery. Afterwards, she goes through a long recovery process to finally emerge as a beauty and begins her first, although much less glamorous than Kyuri's, room salon job.

In the scene of the protagonist's meeting with a plastic surgeon, Cha depicts an aspect of the beauty industry which can be seen as predatory. According to Widdows, those creating or maintaining beauty standards can invent flaws and methods to fix them for their own financial gain (2021, p. 259). The novel seems to contain such an example as when Sujin visits the office, she is initially mostly interested in blepharoplasty (eyelid surgery). The surgeon, however, claims that the protagonist "desperately" needs two types of jaw surgery and recommends additional surgeries for her cheekbones and chin. The doctor also uses persuasive language characterized by negative connotations, "such a masculine-looking jawline" and, at first, is unwilling to specify how much time post-surgical recovery would require (Cha, 2020, p. 15). All of the above suggest that this untrustworthy character serves as an example of a practitioner exploiting his client.

Through Sujin Cha also highlights the unpleasantness of recovery after plastic surgery. During the process Sujin's face is swollen, and her jaw does not move properly making it hard to speak (2020, p. 90) and producing disturbing noises (2020, p. 145). The character expresses her disappointment as her progress does not mirror what she saw on social media (2020, p. 145). For a long time, the protagonist has difficulties with eating, due to the misalignment of her teeth, and struggles with extreme self-consciousness when her face is exposed. Kyuri describes her as looking "like a sad, old balloon" (2020, p. 175), whereas Ara thinks her friend appears "toothless" (2020, p. 145). As Pamela K. Stone has argued, many beautifying practices are characterized by limiting women's abilities, either temporarily or permanently (2020, pp. 40, 52). This phenomenon can be observed in the depictions of Sujin's struggles. The protagonist is not only limited by the aforementioned side effects of the surgery but also by recovery rules. For instance, she cannot accompany her friend to saunas due to health hazards (Cha, 2020, p. 146)<sup>2</sup>. The character's discomfort, similarly to that of many women in real life (see Stone, 2020, p. 52), remains invisible to others.

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<sup>2</sup> Sujin is not the only character suffering from the procedure's consequences. The apparently recovered Kyuri struggles as the numbness in parts of her jaw never disappears (2020, p. 251).



### 3. Conclusion

Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face* is a novel offering a realistic and compelling portrayal of South Korean women's experiences regarding facial beauty norms. In the world of Cha's book, the impact of facial beauty on women's lives is not to be underestimated. As the author shows throughout her novel, those more privileged can opt out of following beauty standards. Unfortunately, those from the lower social strata do not have such a choice and fear they might be forever excluded from a glamorous life unless they invest in their appearance. Cha chronicles the journeys both her characters go through, engaging with the issues of aesthetic labor and beauty capital. For Kyuri plastic surgery and other types of beauty work, such as hair-styling and skincare, constitute a part of her usual work-related duties as her room salon job is a form of aesthetic labor. For Sujin, however, striving for beauty symbolizes a social capital and reveals her (perhaps unrealistic) hope for a better future where she is free from multiple forms of exclusion caused by childhood stigma. When Sujin recovers from most side effects, "beauty [...] emerge[s] dramatically from her face" (Cha, 2020, p. 251). Kyuri admires the character's transformation facilitated by the cosmetic procedure as well as treatments which she herself recommended. Sujin is delighted with the final results (2020, p. 251) and overwhelmed with happiness stemming from being attractive. These feelings cause the protagonist to ignore Kyuri's suggestions regarding the drawbacks of room salon jobs (2020, p. 254). Indeed, it is hard not to notice the overt optimism in Sujin's views. Cha's protagonists still see appearance norms as something worth struggling for, even though beauty work might not necessarily result in a life resembling a fairy tale or, perhaps more accurately, a romantic k-drama. While on the surface, it might seem the future can hold great opportunities for the character Cha created, the reality might be much less fortunate. Considering the struggles of room salon women known from Kyuri's story (2020, p. 185), it is difficult to reach an optimistic conclusion. Perhaps, beauty is rarely a source of freedom—more often, it can replace one type of struggle with another, creating an illusion of happiness and inclusion.

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