Korea’s Makeover
From Dull to Hip
Changes Face of Asia

Popularity of Country’s Stars
Spurs Plastic Surgery;
Seeking a Prominent Nose

BY GORDON FAIRCLOUGH

SEOUL, South Korea—Cate Siu is from Hong Kong, but she’s a fan of South Korean television shows and keeps up with gossip about Korean celebrities on the Internet. Her favorite is a beautiful soap-opera star, Song Hye Kyo, whose bee-stung lips and feminine features she admires.

“Korean actresses have prominent and elegant noses,” says Ms. Siu, a 25-year-old aspiring actress. “They look so pretty.”

So, when Ms. Siu decided she’d have a better shot at breaking into the entertainment business after improving her looks with a surgical makeover, she flew to a clinic here for operations to raise the bridge of her nose, make her eyes appear larger and sharpen her chin.

“Across Asia, South Korea is cool. From fashion to music to film, the country of 45 million people is redefining style. And as notions of Korean beauty become popularized by the country’s exploding cultural exports, women from around the region—and some men, too—are flocking to Seoul to have their faces remodeled,” says Dr. Chung Pung, a surgeon who runs the Cinderella Plastic Surgery Clinic in a fashionable Seoul neighborhood.

Dr. Chung estimates that just under 10% of his customers come from overseas; the rest are locals. Most of the foreign visitors come from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, he says. Jung

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Dong Hak, a surgeon who specializes in rhinoplasty, or nose jobs, at another clinic, says roughly 15% of his patients are foreign. That number has been rising in the past few years. “The increase has been very big since the Korean Wave started,” he says.

The trend says a lot about Korea’s own image makeover. Not long ago, many people saw the country as a decidedly uncool industrial park pumping out cheap cars and appliances. But that started to change in the late 1990, when the Korean government decided that entertainment could be an export industry. The film business in particular benefited from government help and a big influx of private capital.

Now, countries from Japan to Singapore are flooded with South Korean hip-hop and pop acts, melodramatic soap operas and movies from horror flicks to romantic comedies.

The final episode of “Jewel in the Palace,” a dramatic series about the court intrigue during Korea’s Choson Dynasty, starring Korean beauty Lee Young Ae, this year became the most-watched television show in Hong Kong history. More than 40% of the city tuned in. Korean pop singer BoA outsells Britney Spears in Japan.

In 2004, Chinese television stations carried more than 100 Korean shows.

The popularity of Korean stars is establishing Korean ethnic features as a standard of beauty across the region. Some sociologists see a subtext in the craze: a rebellion by Asian people against the images of Caucasian good looks that dominate much of the international media.

Others see danger. Wang Simei, vice general affairs director of the All-China Women’s Federation, says the focus on beauty could result in long-term psychological damage for women who are banking too much on their looks. “Korean culture is something worth studying,” Ms. Wang says. “But we might have paid too much attention to their soap operas and pretty actresses.”

Critics also point out that what appeals to many about Korean looks are exactly those features that make them look more Western. Koreans, related to the Mongols who once ruled the Central Asian steppe, tend to have more prominent noses and, often, lighter skin than other Asians, the country’s plastic surgeons say. In physical terms, the Korean ideal is a relatively small, oval face with a high-bridged nose and large eyes with Western-style eyelids. Caucasians and many other ethnic groups have eyelids with a fold that allows them to retract. Many northeast Asians lack the fold, making their eyes appear smaller.

Complicating the issue further, some Korean actresses have spoken openly about their own plastic surgeries. This has led to widespread speculation in Asia that nearly all Korean stars have gone under the knife. The purport before-and-after photos of Korean celebrities are widely available on the Internet.

Lee Bingbing, a woman from Foshan in southern China who visited Dr. Jung’s clinic last year, says many of the Korean features she admires may be the result of a surgeon’s skill. “I think Korean actresses are pretty. Because of Korean plastic-surgery techniques, they have a very soft, graceful style,” Ms. Lee says. “If you have the money and the resources, you should try to look as good as possible.”

Just how common these procedures have become is hard to track but the number of surgeons performing image-enhancing work such as nose jobs and eye lifts has increased sharply. The Korean Society of Aesthetic and Plastic Surgery, a professional group, says its membership has risen 65% to 960 since 2000. Another group, the Korean Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, lists 1,300 members. (California, with a population of 34 million, has 864 plastic surgeons, according to the state medical board.)

“All the buzz and atmosphere makes young people today think [surgery] is common,” says Lee Yihsin, who runs the Taipei office of International Plastic Surgery, which matches up foreign patients with Korean surgeons. “Korean pop culture has made plastic surgery fashionable.”

Ms. Lee says business is “growing amazingly.” The company arranges for 15 to 20 foreigners to visit South Korea for operations every month, with clients coming from Taiwan, China and Hong Kong. The 21-year-old Ms. Lee had a nose job in Seoul herself earlier this year as part of a makeover ahead of her wedding.

Korean surgeons are coy about their celebrity patients. In Dr. Chung’s consulting room at the Cinderella clinic, under the glass top on the coffee table, are dozens of autographed Polaroid pictures of stylish pop musicians, actors and actresses posing with Dr. Chung. The doctor describes the stars as friends and won’t disclose which of them also are patients.

But Dr. Chung says that beliefs about the power of surgery to transform appearances can be a mixed blessing.

“People come with before-and-after pictures of celebrities,” Dr. Chung says. “People expect a lot because of those kinds of pictures. But it’s not realistic. We’ll tell people they will look better, but not like the stars in the pictures.”

—Lena Yoon in Seoul, Chiu Filling in Taipei, Taiwan, and Oh Chong in Beijing contributed to this article.