



Old, down and out? Appearance, body work and positive ageing among elderly South Korean women

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an as yet unexplored dimension of our current understanding of the ageing body in the context of contemporary South Korea. Drawing on interviews with twenty elderly women living in the greater Seoul metropolitan area, this article explores the role of appearance, body work, and the presentation of self in the women's everyday lived experiences. Existing research on the ageing female body in South Korea has primarily focused on the so-called *noin munjae* ('the elderly issue') discourse, within which the ageing body is framed as passive, undesirable, or out-of-control. Contrary to this, the elderly women's own narratives of everyday beauty practices suggest that the act of sustaining well-ordered appearance in later life allows for the enforcing of positive selves in the context of personal beauty and body work. Maintaining a positive appearance was shown to play an important part of their everyday lives, and functioned as a ritual of not only presenting an appearance that signified control over the ageing body, but to continue to enjoy it. The carefully calculated engagement with various non-surgical and surgical beauty practices also emerged as an embodied practice of mediating intersubjective social encounters through which self-esteem was engendered by evidencing the self's efforts to show respect to others. The findings of this study challenge dominant discourses in the west which present body work on the ageing female body as primarily self-indulgent, or driven by anxiety about the body's inability to fit within existing youthful beauty ideals.

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Background

Existing academic literature on ageing in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) has highlighted a number of growing shifts in how the elderly feature in public discourses about ageing. These include social policy and concerns about public health care provision and services integration (Kim, Shin, & Kim, 2012; Kwon, 2008; Seok, 2010), high rates of poverty among the elderly (Hong & Kim, 2012; Midgley & Tang, 2009; Yun, 2010), perceived disintegration of traditional values such as filial piety (*hyo*) and how this is increasingly placing stress on the family-centred welfare system (Hong, 2014; Sung, 2007), as well as clinical interventions to curb worryingly high levels of depression and above-average OECD rates of suicide (Inoue

et al., 2010; Jung, Muntaner, & Choi, 2010; Kim et al., 2011; Lee, 2014b). In these discourses, elderly Koreans are depicted as passive, isolated, and within the discourse of the so-called 'elderly problem' (*noin munjae*), as a growing drain on the state's resources, and as a problem that is in need of an urgent solution. Moreover, the ageing bodies of elderly persons are rarely represented as anything other than passive objects of care, a burden to the national economy or to families and grownup children whose filial duty it is to take care of the elderly as the government does not yet have the means to do so.¹

¹ It should be noted that this is by no means unique to Korea, as much of the feminist critique of current social gerontology is concerned with the way in which elderly women's bodies in particular are reduced to objectified bodies in need of care and assistance (see Twigg, 2004).

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The way in which the elderly are framed in these studies denies older persons' creative agency which, as critical gerontological research conducted in western settings has shown, is used in such diverse settings as citizen's activism, voluntary and paid work after retirement age, leisure activities, life-long learning through college courses and continuous self-study. While Hong (2014) has explored the positive ways in which Confucian teachings have presented the ageing body, noting that in Eastern (as opposed to contemporary Western) societies the ageing body signifies safety and honour, rather than shame and insecurity (52), less explored to date are the ways in which Koreans in their later years engage with physiology in positive ways, or resist sweeping assumptions made about their bodies as objects of pity in public media through engaging in everyday (and sometimes surgical) beauty work in their everyday lives.

This research focuses on elderly women's own narratives of their bodies and how each body is experienced and performed through everyday beauty work. Drawing on findings from interviews with 20 elderly Korean women in the Seoul metropolitan area where participants were invited to reflect on beauty practices and appearance, this article will discuss how elderly Korean women relate to and utilise beauty work in social contexts in which the ageing body is increasingly perceived as non-normative, and perhaps seen as no longer worthy of investment. This article discusses how in everyday lived situations, physical appearance and beauty work among the participants of this study were utilised as a relationally affirming and affective practice in the context of between-women sociality, in personalised and often highly self-satisfying ways. Moreover, I will suggest that these findings challenge existing assumptions about the ageing female body as passive, burdensome, and out of control.

Theoretical considerations: Existing research on appearance and ageing

The analyses presented in this paper build on previous research on appearance and cosmetic surgery in Korea. Existing literature has sought to explore motivations behind the cultural narrative that emphasises the social importance of beauty and appearance in contemporary Korea. One of the key arguments takes 'lookism' as evidence of how patriarchal sociocultural pressures appear to compel many young and middle-aged Korean women to engage with highly time-consuming and occasionally painful beauty practices (Kim, 2003, 2009; Park, 2007; Woo, 2004). Others have argued that given the high consumption of cosmetics and cosmetic surgery among both women and men in Korea, attractive appearance intersects with positive notions of success and signifiers of social status (Davies & Han, 2011; Elfving-Hwang, 2013; Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012). However, very limited research exists on the way in which beauty work (such as cosmetic surgery, anti-ageing treatments, and diets) is utilised and experienced by elderly women in Korea.

While there is a growing body of research into the meanings that women in later years of life attach to beauty work, cosmetic surgery, and appearance in the West (see for example Garnham, 2013; Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Paulson, 2008; Smirnova, 2012; Twigg, 2004; Twigg & Majima, 2014; Ward, Campbell, & Keady, 2014; Winterich, 2007), such studies do not yet exist in

Korea in any meaningful numbers. One of the few relevant studies to address this area is that of D. Lee (2014). Lee argues that Korean society imposes unrealistic beauty ideals on elderly women by presenting young (female) bodies as the somatic-aesthetic norm for female beauty. She hypothesises that this can be said to explain (presumed) high levels of depression in elderly women, as youth-focused beauty ideals are highly damaging to the mental well-being of elderly women who feel unable to emulate norms promoted in the media. Similar claims have also been made in some of the existing body of literature on elderly women in the West, which assert that much of the body dissatisfaction among the elderly corresponds closely to discourses of body dissatisfaction among the younger demographic in terms of weight concerns and weight-related behaviours (Baker & Gringart, 2009; Hurd Clarke, 2002; Roy & Payette, 2012). Some studies have also expressed concerns about perceived 'anomalies'/non-normative features in appearance observed in the elderly when normative and youthful beauty ideals are applied to self-evaluating ageing bodies (Grippio & Hill, 2008; Hurd Clarke, 2000; Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2007). Moreover, studies conducted among the elderly in the US and the UK suggest that as a person ages (particularly in the case of women), maintaining beauty ideals and sexual attractiveness becomes less of a concern as body competence and health become more central to women (Deeny & Kirk-Smith, 2000; Roy & Payette, 2012).

However, a significant number of studies have also attempted to show that ageing is not necessarily a disempowering and negative process and that many existing studies 'fail to recognise the positive strengths of female old age, projecting onto old age, wide culture's own negativity about the subject' (Gibson, 1998; quoted in Twigg, 2004: 64). Beauty cultures can provide significant way in which agency can be exercised, and which, as Garnham (2013) and Furman (1997) have noted, provide contexts for social connections and embodied practices that are alternatives to the dominant depictions of ageing bodies as passive, burdensome, and no longer a source of pride or pleasure. An important addition to existing literature is an Australian study by Garnham, who seeks to contest the assumption that older people engage with cosmetic surgery in order to 'deny ageing' (2013, 38). Instead, Garnham found that 'older people who undergo cosmetic surgery are designing "older" rather than denying ageing,' (39) and noted that these practices were often seen as positive, rather than negative forms of engagement with the ageing body.

Following Garnham, this article aims to move away from concentrating on describing a simple 'attitudinal dimension of women's body image' (one of the weaknesses of the current corpus of research identified by Roy & Payette, 2012: 518). I situate elderly women's beauty practices within their culturally and socially specific contexts in order to gain a better understanding of the social significance that appearance and beauty work hold for individual women in every lived context. Maintaining an attractive and appropriate physical appearance is extremely important in contemporary Korea as it links with the more abstract notion of 'face' (*chaemyeon*). The 'face' in this context refers to the way in which individuals present themselves to the outside world in ways that are culturally and socially acceptable. In one sense, the 'face' refers to one's reputation; however, it is a complex cultural construct that relies on the presentation of self in socio-

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