



# Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women's Bodies in Korea's Consumer Society

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This century has seen Korea undergo a rapid and extreme change of its identity and near eradication of its culture. The swiftness of change in this once sheltered nation has left many Koreans feeling insecure about their culture, society and identity as Koreans. The world as Koreans once knew it was shattered as Korea was forced to make a radical transition to a new world-view with new standards, ideals and goals. The consuming struggle for economic success according to capitalist standards became the new ideal for South Koreans, giving them direction just as the shock of the Second World War and the collapse of the old political and social order were making them feel displaced from their past and no longer anchored by their traditional references.

Within this arena of shifting identities and realities, Korean women, according to Diane M. Hoffman, were important as anchors of traditional culture, ideology and self-identity, and stood as symbols of resistance to foreign incursions (Hoffman, 1995: 118). These 'symbols of resistance' have now become the most visible symbols of foreign influence, their bodies adorned with the emblems of capitalist consumption and altered to more closely resemble the foreign

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construction of beauty. A comparison with Japan, whose pop cultural trends often precede Korea's by a couple of years, can be illuminating. Nancy Rosenberger's study of Japanese women's magazines explains:

A young woman can literally embody signs of global status by buying brand name international goods that affect her 'atmosphere': her appearance, her smell, the feel of her skin. Communication occurs through the adorned body embedded in the international circuit of commodity signs. (Rosenberger, 1995: 151)

A woman's body itself becomes a site of global culture, signifying her elite status as a member of the cosmopolitan – and overwhelmingly Western – global community by participating in the main activity of global culture: consumption of global products (Rosenberger, 1995: 148–9).

Korea has become a post-industrial consumer society, and women's bodies appear to have taken on new meaning as consumer bodies. Nonetheless, important Neo-Confucian<sup>1</sup> body techniques play a significant part in the continuing control of women's bodies. This article will attempt to demonstrate how Neo-Confucian methods of body discipline function on women's bodies in Korea's consumer society by analysing Neo-Confucian techniques of governmentality from the past and in the present. Governmentality is used here according to Nikolas Rose's (1996) definition of 'political rationalities, or mentalities of rule, where rule becomes a matter of the calculated management of the affairs of each and of all in order to achieve desirable objectives' (Rose, 1996: 29). The specific techniques of governmentality that this article is interested in are those pertaining to the body and self, or 'body techniques' which reveal 'the ways in which corporeal regimes have been devised and implanted in rationalised attempts to produce a particular relation to the self and to others' (Rose, 1996: 30–1), and which produce intelligible bodies.<sup>2</sup>

### The Neo-Confucian Body

For 500 years, Korea adopted Neo-Confucianism as its official ideology and strove to create a Neo-Confucian state by following its precepts as closely as possible.<sup>3</sup> Neo-Confucians believed the body was sacred. Since it was bequeathed by one's parents, in accordance with filial piety, the body had to be respected and remain unaltered (DeBary et al., 1960: 469; Fairbanks, 1992: 175; Lee, 1993: 606–7). The Korean aversion to manipulation of the body seems to have been a long-standing cultural principle – only whole-heartedly abandoned in the last few years of proliferating plastic surgeries and various other manipulations of the body. Why has what appears to have been such a strong cultural value been so suddenly and completely abandoned?

*The Neo-Confucian Self and Body*

To understand the Neo-Confucian body, it is essential to understand the concept of *ki*. A *material force* which links the body and mind into one system, *ki* flows through all things, giving them form and vitality. Since *ki* is in everything, from the whole universe to the tiniest dust particle, ‘the many are ultimately One’ (DeBary et al., 1960: 457). There is no distinction between the self and the universe. Neo-Confucian men were encouraged to let go of ego and become *selfless*, that is to have no consciousness of an individual and separate self apart from others. This ideal of selfless subjectivity was nurtured through rigid Neo-Confucian techniques of self-cultivation, which involved study of the Confucian classics, adherence to strict codes of proper conduct and interpersonal relations, and observance of ancestor worship rituals, all of which reinforced a sense of self whose substance was a *ki* which was concretely joined with others. *Ki* was passed from parent to child throughout the generations, acting as a material link between ancestors and descendants (Lee, 1993: 606). Kwōn Kūn (1352–1409), a major Korean Neo-Confucian scholar, explains, ‘this *ki*, though it belongs to heaven and earth, is also entirely founded upon the bodies of my ancestors and passed on to me; so although my ancestors have already passed away, their *ki* is in me and has never ceased’ (trans. in Lee, 1993: 606–7). The family composed a unified body through *ki*, and the identity of self and family was continuous and undifferentiated.

The force of *ki* constituted one’s sense of the body and self more than the corporeal body. It follows that the family body, within which flows the same *ki*, was considered the essential self more than one’s own physical body. Neo-Confucian texts are filled with innumerable exhortations to lose consciousness of the self and to enter a state of *selflessness* where the self becomes subsumed into the family, the community and, finally, the universe, thereby achieving the ultimate goal of sagehood (DeBary et al., 1960: 465, 469, 497–8; Chan, 1967: 124–125; DeBary and Haboush, 1985: 21). The Neo-Confucian body did not refer just to the corporeal, nor did it act as a reference to an individual self. The emphasis on non-distinction between self and others produced a sense of self that was non-individuated and fluid, with no boundaries to determine a distinction between one’s family and one’s self. This understanding of self is by no means a thing of the past. It still informs the way people relate to each other and consider their bodies, their selves, and others, as evidenced in recent studies of Korean subjectivity.

In her examination of gender relations in Korea, Hoffman comes to the somewhat surprising conclusion that men and women in Korea share an intimacy that goes deeper than aloof appearances would at first suggest. One might assume

that male–female relations in a highly Neo-Confucian society – where gender discrimination is still sanctioned by certain laws (Choi, 1992: 105–8) – might be at best distant. A cursory glance would certainly confirm this. However, Hoffman’s close inspection has brought to light a very different reading of Korean gender relations. Her study concludes that husbands and wives are so intimately linked, the distinction between male and female, self and other, is erased (Hoffman, 1995: 123). This, she believes, is a result of ‘[t]he socially embedded, fluid self as the dominant model of and pattern for the experience of self in Korea’ (Hoffman, 1995: 128–9).

*The Neo-Confucian Female Self and Body*

Neo-Confucian techniques of self-cultivation of the mind and body applied only to men. Women in the Neo-Confucian view were incapable of achieving sagehood and therefore had neither the need nor the ability to strive for transcendence of the self and body. While men produced their selves through the mind (study of the classics) and body (maintenance of the family body through ancestor worship), women were occupied with maintaining and reproducing the family body through the corporeal bodies of the family. The triumvirate of body-mind-*ki* was a Neo-Confucian concept of the male body. Neo-Confucianism emphasized the corporeal for the female body, the very aspect men were supposed to transcend.

Neo-Confucian scholars considered women to have inferior *ki* to that of men. This notion continues to be held today. One study of a village in Korea found that women were believed to be inferior to men because they did not carry the life-giving force (*ki*) that men did (Yoon, 1990: 9). Women were believed to be passive receptacles of the life which men implanted in them; they played no active part in *creating* life (Yoon, 1990: 10). Such incubation was perhaps the most important role of a woman’s body in Korea. Her body was a vessel through which the male line and *ki* could be perpetuated. As such, the most important physical traits for a woman were features that revealed her potential to bear children – particularly boys. ‘During the Yi [Chosŏn] Dynasty, the attribute valued above all others in a prospective bride was her potential capacity to bear sons. Compared to this, her beauty and wealth were secondary’ (Cha et al., 1979: 120).

As the features of a woman’s body were important to show her ability to have sons, the actions and maintenance of her body during pregnancy were also vital. A woman was not a passive carrier of life. Her body was the environment in which the future child grew. As such, her behaviour and thoughts were strictly regulated during pregnancy through prenatal education known as *t’aegyo*:

She was expected to behave with the strictest decorum in the smallest minutiae of her conduct; she was not to think evil thoughts or to utter evil words; she was to recite poetry at night and to speak of proper things. (DeBary and Haboush, 1985: 169)

Women's bodies were meticulously disciplined for the sake of the potential child within them. *T'aegyo* advances the idea of women as bodies more than subjects. Their conduct and thoughts were for the sake of the *other* abiding in their bodies, and they were valued mostly for the children and labour that their bodies could produce. Women were regarded as *subjectless bodies*.

Korean women were deeply embedded in the body, both the family body (through their reproductive role in continuing it), the individual bodies within the family (by clothing, feeding, curing and cleansing them), and their own bodies (as the main object of value). Female subjectlessness was different from the Neo-Confucian male's selfless subjectivity. While the latter aimed to transcend the body, women could never do so – their bodies were too valuable. A man's mind and *ki* were considered to be more valuable than his corporeal limbs while a woman was most valued for her body and its reproductive labour. As a result, efforts were made to maintain sole control over women's bodies, subjecting them to a protection and concealment that practically rendered their bodies invisible. The beginning of the Chosŏn Dynasty was marked by rigorous efforts by Neo-Confucian officials to keep women indoors and out of sight as much as possible (Deuchler, 1992: 260). Women were mostly bodies, but these bodies were mostly invisible.

The effort to hide women's bodies away from the eyes of strangers is evident in the clothing:

Confucian legislators agreed that the female figure had to be clothed in such a way that no unauthorized eyes could catch a glimpse of it. They especially insisted that when primary wives<sup>4</sup> went outside the house, they had to wear a veil or 'screen-hat' (*yŏmmo*) that covered the face completely and was not to be lifted. (Deuchler, 1992: 261)

Because of the edict that women should never expose any part of their bodies to others, they piled on layers and layers of clothing, which assured that not only was a woman's flesh invisible, the very shape of her body was rendered imperceptible.

Neo-Confucian techniques of governmentality that constituted the self were significantly different for women than for men. While men engaged in rituals and techniques of self-cultivation to develop a transcendent self – or the 'selfless' self which erased boundaries between self and others – women were engaged in everyday practices of family and body reproduction within a Neo-Confucian system that considered women subjectless bodies. Women's daily techniques of body management, which included concealment and seclusion of the body,

cultivation of the body for the sake of unborn children, and labour and toil for the maintenance of the family body, reinforced the concept of their selves as primarily physical bodies. Since Neo-Confucian body and self were essentially defined by *ki*, and since this *ki* was considered deficient or unimportant in women, women were reduced to the corporeal and considered to be primarily subjectless bodies. Neo-Confucian society maintained strict control over women's bodies through techniques of concealment and by the demanding standards of propriety, selflessness and devotion to the family body, thereby ensuring family 'monopoly' ownership over women's bodies and their reproductive labour.

### Neo-Confucian Bodies in a Consumer Society

The beginning of the 20th century found Korea confronted with a series of disorienting changes. The end of the Chosŏn Dynasty was marked by 35 years of Japanese colonization, the end of which was swiftly followed by a civil war, national division, a series of dictatorships, rapid industrialization and, finally, the development of a liberal democracy. Enforced modernization was begun under the Japanese, transforming Korea from a traditional agrarian kingdom into an industrial, modern nation. Women were first brought out of the inner sanctums of the home and into schools and factories during this time. This trend accelerated, after liberation and the Korean War, under the military dictator Park Chunghee's policies of rapid modernization and industrialization during the 1960s and 1970s. Women became a vital part of the burgeoning work force. Their bodies were pulled out of the domestic sphere and into the public sphere, and the labour produced by their bodies was important now for nation building, both as workers in the factory and as mothers in the home. Finally, with the advent of a post-industrial, consumer capitalist society in the 1980s, women became more important as consumers than as factory workers, shifting the utility of their bodies from national labour production to national consumption, becoming, in effect, what Bryan S. Turner (1996) calls the capitalist body.<sup>5</sup>

In the process of modernization, Neo-Confucianism was simultaneously expanded and supplanted. The search for national identity became essential to Korea's postcolonial and post-war project for national reconstruction. Neo-Confucianism came to stand for essential 'Koreanness' and was quickly embraced as the authentic culture of Korea – so much so that challenges to Neo-Confucian principles were branded as threats to national integrity (Moon, 1998: 54). Neo-Confucianism also maintained its gloss as part of the elite culture, and as more and more Koreans were becoming upwardly mobile, many strove to identify

themselves with the former *yangban*, making what was originally an ideology and culture of the elite minority into a culture of all Koreans. Yet, at the same time that Neo-Confucianism was coming to be equated with Korean culture, it was being replaced by capitalism and democracy (in principle if not in practice) as the dominant state ideology. Neo-Confucianism was gaining importance as Korea's cultural and national identity but losing ground as Korea's dominant ideology. Control of women's bodies moved from Neo-Confucian state edicts to capitalist consumer models, but the understanding of the body remained Neo-Confucian.<sup>6</sup>

Women are no longer ruled by the Neo-Confucian command to be invisible, to protect their bodies from both sight and touch, to avoid any kind of alterations to the body. Instead, Korea appears to be in the midst of a celebration of the female form. Women have become extraordinarily visible in Korea, free to be observed and appreciated in any public space. Beauty has become the new standard of a woman's value, and Korean women have gone to great lengths to enhance or create this beauty by reshaping their physical bodies. What does this change mean in relation to the Neo-Confucian body discussed above? Is it an erasure of the Neo-Confucian body? And is the change really as complete as it appears to be? Before answering these questions, I would like to look at what this 'celebration of beauty' is, and how it exists in Korea.

Korean women's magazines and journals provide an illuminating insight into the modern Korean woman's preoccupation with the body. Beauty instructions range from massaging away wrinkles to shaving away facial hair. A casual browser of Korean women's magazines might observe that many of the models or settings in the advertisements are Euro-American or look Euro-American. This image has become ever more pervasive. In June 1994, changes in laws allowed the Korean advertising industry to use foreign models and celebrities (Byun, 1997: 32–3), which quickly led to a sharp increase in the use of foreign models to sell domestic wares. No longer were only foreign products sold to Koreans with a foreign face, now even domestic products were marketed to Koreans by the likes of Cindy Crawford, Meg Ryan and Claudia Schiffer. While there does seem to have been a gradual increase in recent years of Korean models in domestic advertisements, these Korean models nearly all have features that have already been reconstructed to meet the prevailing standards of beauty which, if not totally white, are at least a melding of Asian and Western features, the ideal encapsulated by the increasingly popular 'Eurasian' look. Many of the articles and beauty tips in these magazines function on the assumption that the Korean body is flawed while the white body is the standard norm.

One article from a popular Korean women's journal, *Saemi kip'un mul* (Deep Spring Water), reveals how the traditional notion of women as subjectless bodies

still prevails in contemporary discourse on Korean women, and contributes to the treatment of the body as an object for alteration. The journalist attempts to criticize the way Korean women dress themselves today. Her opening paragraph seems to promise an article promoting liberation from the edicts of fashion, and self-expression over blind conformity. What she actually does, however, is set up an even more exacting guideline of what to wear, when, how and why. She berates women for wearing colours that do not flatter their skin tone, and cuts of clothing that do not conceal what she considers to be typical defects of the Korean woman's body (Wön, 1995: 120–5). You should not follow fashion according to fashion magazines, she claims, but according to *my* tastes and style. She argues that lack of subjecthood causes people to conform to fashion without thought of individual style. What she fails to recognize is that her attempt to impose her individual tastes on the entire population does the same thing. What is right for her must be right for everyone else, for there is a blurry distinction between herself and others, a legacy of the *subjectlessness* of the Korean woman.

The article presents what it considers to be particular features of Korean women – short legs, big face, yellow skin – as *problem* features that can be corrected by certain types of clothing and colours: 'For Korean women the best look is the formal tailored suit with padded shoulders. This square shaped suit helps make big faces look smaller and *puts the entire body in order*' (Wön, 1995: 124, italics added). She implies that the imperfect Korean body is *disordered* but can be put back in order through the tricks of fashion. The body is something to be rearranged so its apparent flaws are concealed or eliminated. These flaws themselves stand out as imperfections because they are features peculiar to Koreans and absent in white models. All three elements, the Neo-Confucian woman's subjectlessness, the perception of Korean bodies as imperfect, and fashion's function to re-order the disordered Korean bodies, make Korean women's bodies particularly prone to alterations, rearrangements and re-creations of the body.

Beauty now occupies a level of unprecedented social significance in Korea, and its development has been dependent upon the growth of consumer culture and media images. Korea's beauty industry is thriving and pervasive. According to studies in 1989, 20–30 percent of unmarried women in their 20s underwent cosmetic surgery of some kind (*Chugan chungang* [The Weekly Centre] 1989, as cited in Hart, 1990: 25), that same year a magazine found that in a Seoul high school, about ten girls in each class (classes typically range from 30–60 students) had experienced surgery (*Yösöng chungang* [The Woman's Centre] September 1989, as cited in Hart, 1990: 25). In 1997, a study by the Korea Institute of Health and Society found that about 40 percent of women in their late teens and early

20s had gone on a diet (Kim, 1997: 13). An article in *Saemi kip'un mul* notes that 90 percent of students in a particular hairstyling class had dyed hair (Yi, 1995: 167).

This trend is partly attributable to the general acceptance or approval of physical alterations, including those involving major surgery. A poll conducted by a Korean daily in October 2000 shows that 60 percent of respondents approve of plastic surgery as a means to improve one's prospects (Pyon, 2000). The high rate of young people undergoing cosmetic surgery – up to 70 percent of plastic surgery patients are high school students (Sohn, 2001) – indicates a high level of parental consent or support. One mother, whose daughter is in 11th grade, explained:

We [parents] exchange information on cosmetic surgery when we get together. . . . Double eyelid surgery is so simple. I will let my daughter undergo surgery come this winter vacation. She has been begging me to pay for that because she thinks all of her friends with that kind of surgery look better. (Sohn, 2001)

The practice of high school students receiving double eyelid surgery as a graduation present is so common that it has been likened to a rite of passage (Kaw, 1994: 255; Zane, 1998: 171, 172).

Another distinct feature of the Korean beauty industry is the level of conformity. One young Korean-American woman, Jennifer, justified her choice to have double eyelid surgery as part of Korea's culture of conformity:

When I go back to Korea, everybody dresses the same. Once something is fashionable, everyone follows; that's the way of life. Over here [America], everyone has an independent style. Over there, if heavy makeup is popular, then everyone follows the fashion. We think of it [cosmetic surgery] more as a fashion thing. It's like wearing a miniskirt; if you follow the trend you do it. (Inoue, 1996)

While many women in America have justified their choice to have cosmetic surgery in terms of individual empowerment, justice, entitlement, ownership of one's body and personal assertion of one's individual choice (Davis, 1993), Jennifer's explanation is strikingly different in that it attributes her choice to conformity rather than individuality. The statistics support her observation of Korea's higher level of conformity as compared with America's: Korea's rate of cosmetic surgery usage is 13 percent of the general public while America's is less than 3 percent, according to an article in the *Korea Herald* (Pyon, 2000). The rate would probably be higher if finances were not an obstacle: according to an article in the *Korea Times*, nearly 80 percent of women in their 20s said they would have cosmetic surgery if they could afford it (Park, 2001). Part of this is due in part, no doubt, to the pressures of living up to a beauty standard that is constructed on Euro-American models. A large part, however, is also due to the continuing

function of the Neo-Confucian body, particularly the subjectless body, where the unity of the whole is more important than the individuality of the one.

Mi-ün Kang's critique of Korean women's conformity supports Jennifer's observations of a conformity culture and also begs an explanation, 'Wouldn't the American think it strange to see that Korean women have similar makeup, similar hairstyles, and wear the same platform shoes to give them similar height? Why do they look so similar?' (Kang, 1995: 113). The reason, Kang speculates, is because women follow fashion as a representation of the multitude rather than the self (Kang, 1995: 113). She sees the subjectlessness of the traditional woman continue here in the form of contemporary Korean women's unfamiliarity with the popular Western notion of fashion as an expression of an individual self. Journalist Byöng-Hüi Kim agrees that the high level of uniformity in fashion is due to lack of subjecthood (Kim, 1995: 123), which can also account for its widespread pervasiveness.

The function of the body in representing the self was introduced to Korea through the capitalist culture of individuated selves. For Korean women who were represented not through their individual bodies but through their male kin, their bodies have taken on a new role. The body now represents her self, but even this *self* is an unaccustomed self. Because women were traditionally considered subjectless, and because the Korean self was defined through the *ki* and family body, the idea of self as an individual whose physical limits are defined by the corporeal body was an unfamiliar concept. According to scholars Hyungsook Yoon and Diane Hoffman, the female self in Korea is still a relational, undifferentiated and subjectless self, traditionally drawing its identity from the family body (Yoon, 1990: 4; Hoffman, 1995: 127–8). However, the role and dynamics of the family have changed due to urban migration and separation; the rituals and daily interactions that once reinforced it as a solid body have made way for nuclear units separated from extended families. This fragmentation has weakened the family body and its role as a person's primary body and identity.<sup>7</sup>

Following Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, where each class has tastes and dispositions that are materialized on the body (Featherstone, 1991: 90), one can identify a Neo-Confucian habitus where the stress on propriety, harmony with others and self-cultivation compels women to be extra vigilant about the propriety of their bodies. The pressure under Neo-Confucianism to follow closely the rules of propriety concerning the body translates in consumer society into a rigorous demand to follow the new rules of fashion. According to Dennis Hart's (2000) research on Korean women and media advertisement, a new important source of identity for Korean women is now the media. Media represent the new codes of proper body management and presentation, and are as

meticulously followed as Neo-Confucian codes used to be. The result is that the female bodies seen in the streets of Korea are nearly identical to the bodies depicted in media portrayals. Few or no personal modifications are added to the ensemble to give the look an individual touch. Individual expression is not the main purpose here, following the rules is.

Hart notes this compulsory quality of Korea's beauty industry in his study of advertising and femininity in Korea. 'Housewives . . . would not think of leaving home without first applying some makeup. . . . The uses to which makeup is put extends beyond vanity, and now stretches into the realm of propriety' (Hart, 1990: 21). Beauty in Korea has become a *requirement* of decorum for women rather than a vanity. The cultural pressure to harmonize as one – the ideal of *subjectlessness* – means that fashion tends to compel conformity rather than individuality. The Neo-Confucian values of harmonizing as one, proper behaviour and self-cultivation, re-emerge in the guise of conformity, propriety and self-improvement.

Contemporary women have re-channelled the Neo-Confucian drive for self-cultivation into a new form of self-improvement that centres on the physical body and is achieved through 'proper' consumption practices. While women may have been excluded from the male Neo-Confucian practice of self-cultivation, they were encouraged to engage in improving their family's body through the daily routines of their own physical bodies – as in the case of *t'aegyo*. This has resulted in two techniques of 'self'-improvement: one which engages the family body 'self', the other the corporeal body 'self'. The practice of managing the family body can be seen in contemporary consumer society as women secure or advance their family's status through proper consumption practices. Women have been notable in Korean consumer society as the primary manager of their family's class and social mobility, a fact that has attracted considerable media and scholarly attention (Nelson, 2000: 146; Abelman, 2002: 31–3; Kendall, 2002: 8). They successfully negotiate a new social terrain of consumption to continue their role as cultivators of the family body. More striking is the way in which women have continued the tradition of self-improvement through the management of their corporeal bodies. Neo-Confucian improvement of self for men entailed training of the mind and body, resulting in the transcendence of the individual self. Since women, however, were regarded as subjectless bodies, their main means of self-improvement centred on the body and resulted in perfection of and through the body. Women consider their bodies as the primary means towards self-improvement.

The Neo-Confucian techniques of body management that compelled women to adhere to strict body rules continue today as women are pushed to reformulate

their bodies to follow the new codes of proper body management, and the stakes are high. The current emphasis on appearance over abilities means that women who fit the beauty norm are more apt to succeed in work and marriage<sup>8</sup> (Kendall, 1996: 94, 110, 111; Pyon, 2000; Sohn, 2001): 'I had an operation for double-eyelids. . . . During a job interview, my changed looks helped' ('Korean Faces . . .', 2001). The more beautiful a woman is, the more her value increases in both the marriage and employment market: 'Korea, in particular, has rewarded beautiful people with well-paying jobs, improved marriage prospects and respect' (Pyon, 2000). In such an environment, choosing to alter one's body is a necessity rather than an option. Again, beauty is compulsory. One woman asserts that cosmetic surgery is a means of self-improvement as well as conformity, 'Everything is conforming as I see it. It's just a matter of recognizing it. . . . I'm definitely for self-improvement. So if you don't like a certain part of your body, there's no reason not to change it' (Kaw, 1994: 260). She also sees such bodily self-improvement as essential to economic success, 'Especially if you go into business . . . you kind of have to have a Western facial type. . . . So you can see that [the surgery] is an investment in your future' (Kaw, 1994: 254). If the body is managed and improved properly into the 'Western facial type', women can acquire status, power and value.

The codes defining a desirable woman have changed. She is no longer valued primarily for her body's ability to bear sons or to produce domestic labour, but through her physical beauty, which is vital in her ability to land a good marriage, career or both. While this may look like a complete change in the Korean woman's body from invisible, labouring, unalterable body to visible, beautified, altered body, this is actually a continuation of the embodied, subjectless woman, and the techniques of Neo-Confucian governmentality which maintain that women are subjectless bodies whose primary means of improvement are through the body. The woman as subjectless body continues to manifest itself in the way women are pressured to make their bodies conform to media and social codes as to the proper woman's body. Society reinforces this by applying real sanctions and rewards to women who do or do not manage their bodies appropriately. While the codes may have changed, the impulse to comply with the codes remains as a legacy of the woman as subjectless body.

## Conclusion

Unsure of its own place in this new world, Korea had to abandon old assumptions and forge a new identity to survive in a world where success is measured along capitalist lines and culture is dictated by and expressed through

consumption. Jacques Ellul has described the prime conditions for vulnerability to outside influence as '[t]he permanent uncertainty, the social mobility, the absence of sociological protection and of traditional frames of reference' (Ellul, 1965: 92), an apt description of Korea in the last century. This feeling of being uprooted made (and makes) Korea particularly vulnerable to the manipulations of mass media, which have become an important source of identity. Media images, especially from advertising, promote a construction of beauty and lifestyle based on a Euro-American model of capitalist consumption, signified by the White body. Women are given an ideal of beauty constructed through consumption of beauty industry products and services. This creates a flourishing beauty industry whose business is not merely enhancing women's appearances, but re-creating them to match the desirable body promoted by media images of White or Eurasian models. This is a sharp reversal of the previous Korean stance towards the woman's invisible body.

The abandonment of traditional attitudes towards women's bodies – highly protected and invisible, vessels valued for bearing sons, not to be mutilated or reshaped – does not mean that Neo-Confucian notions have been completely cast aside. Korean women's responses to consumer culture reflect Neo-Confucian techniques of governmentality in a consumer society context. Korea spent 500 years disciplining women's bodies to conform to strict rules – rules which protected and hid their bodies. In contrast to men and the Neo-Confucian ideal, women were regarded as subjectless bodies – that is, their corporeal body was not their own but belonged to the family and was to be devoted to the reproduction, maintenance and improvement of the family body. A woman's primary means of improvement was through the body and for the family. These body techniques and concept of the self encounter today's new guidelines based on capitalist consumption, which tell women that their bodies are fluid and plastic objects that can be transformed and recreated to adhere with the appearances and shapes that are culturally recognized as desirable. These messages create a new *capitalist body*. As capitalist culture proliferates in Korea, these guidelines become increasingly the guidelines for the Korean body – both male and female.<sup>9</sup> This capitalist body is created following the body techniques of Neo-Confucian governmentality, and adhering to the Neo-Confucian concept of self. The Neo-Confucian pressure to follow directions concerning the body compels women to conform to what is prescribed through fashion.

The Korean woman's role as subjectless body and the practice of strictly following rules pertaining to the body mean that media images tend to have an extremely normalizing influence on women. The idea that their bodies are not their own makes fashion and beautification an act of obeying the new rules of

propriety and fashion. On the most obvious level, Korean women's body presentation and manipulation today seems to be quite simply a result of Westernization supplanting Korea's Neo-Confucian norms. On closer inspection, it seems to be a consequence not just of Western cultural influence, but of the highly developed consumer culture in Korea. On yet a closer inspection, it becomes clear that it is not, as some might speculate, the eradication of Korean Neo-Confucian cultural notions, but an expression of them through the new medium of global consumerism.

## Notes

1. Neo-Confucianism was Korea's primary philosophy, which governed its politics, religion, social system and private relations for over 500 years.

2. For more on governmentality and techniques of the self, see Nikolas Rose's *Governing the Soul* (1990) and *Inventing Our Selves* (1996); Luther H. Martin et al. *Technologies of the Self* (1988); and Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller's *The Foucault Effect* (1991).

3. Most of what is known about Korea during its last dynasty (Chosŏn Dynasty) comes from written records, which were mostly by and about the scholar-bureaucratic class known as the *yangban* (the aristocracy). The understanding of 'traditional' Korea is therefore largely limited to what is known about this *yangban* class. The discussion in this article about the Neo-Confucian body and the traditional Korean woman's body is likewise limited to the *yangban* class. The early part of this article is therefore class-specific and does not encompass the 'whole' of the Chosŏn Dynasty's peoples or cultures.

4. *Yangban* commonly had more than one wife. The wives were ranked into primary and secondary categories.

5. Some of this would concur with Bryan S. Turner's theories on the capitalist body. The body moves from a reproductive body in pre-industrial society, to a labouring body in the industrial period, and finally to a consuming body in the post-industrial stage (Turner, 1996: 2–6, 56).

6. The changes to the Korean body during these years are extremely interesting and worthy of study in themselves. However, for the purposes of this article, I can only provide a short summary. First, the Korean body was 'colonized' and 'modernized' during the Japanese colonial period. Striking examples of this are the systematic cropping of men's top-knots, which provoked riots and protests throughout the country; and the recruitment of men, women and children to labour in factories, mines and – in the case of thousands of women – sexual slavery during the Second World War. As noted in the body of this article, it was during the colonial period that women's bodies were given an institutional role outside the private home, in schools, factories and churches. Civil war and national division of the country created a splitting of the national body and a separate development of the 'modern' body in the North (proletarian) and the South (capitalist). During the rapid industrialization of the 1960s and 1970s in South Korea, women's bodies were utilized for public, national labour needs.

7. I would like to distinguish here between 'family' and 'family body'. The *family* in Korea is changing and adapting to new social circumstances. The *family body*, on the other hand, is disintegrating in that it no longer serves its previous role as the primary unit of identity and body. Nonetheless, it continues to function as a source of identity, if not the sole or primary one.

8. For a study of the new importance of beauty in marriage, see Laurel Kendall's *Getting Married in Korea: Of Gender, Morality and Modernity* (1996).

9. Clearly the capitalist body applies to both men and women. The fact that the male Neo-Confucian body is viewed so differently from women's bodies, however, would lead us to believe

that the male capitalist body would also be quite different from that of women. This would be an interesting topic for further research.

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