THE WORLD'S HIGHEST LEVELS OF PLASTIC SURGERY

Hello Seoul, capital of the Republic of Korea which has seen an amazing boom since the end of the war that followed the country's division in 1948. Now enjoying Asia's fourth largest economy, South Korea's citizens have a high standard of life but success has brought other pressures, including the world's highest per capita levels of plastic surgery.

LOOKING GOOD

by Karen Glaser

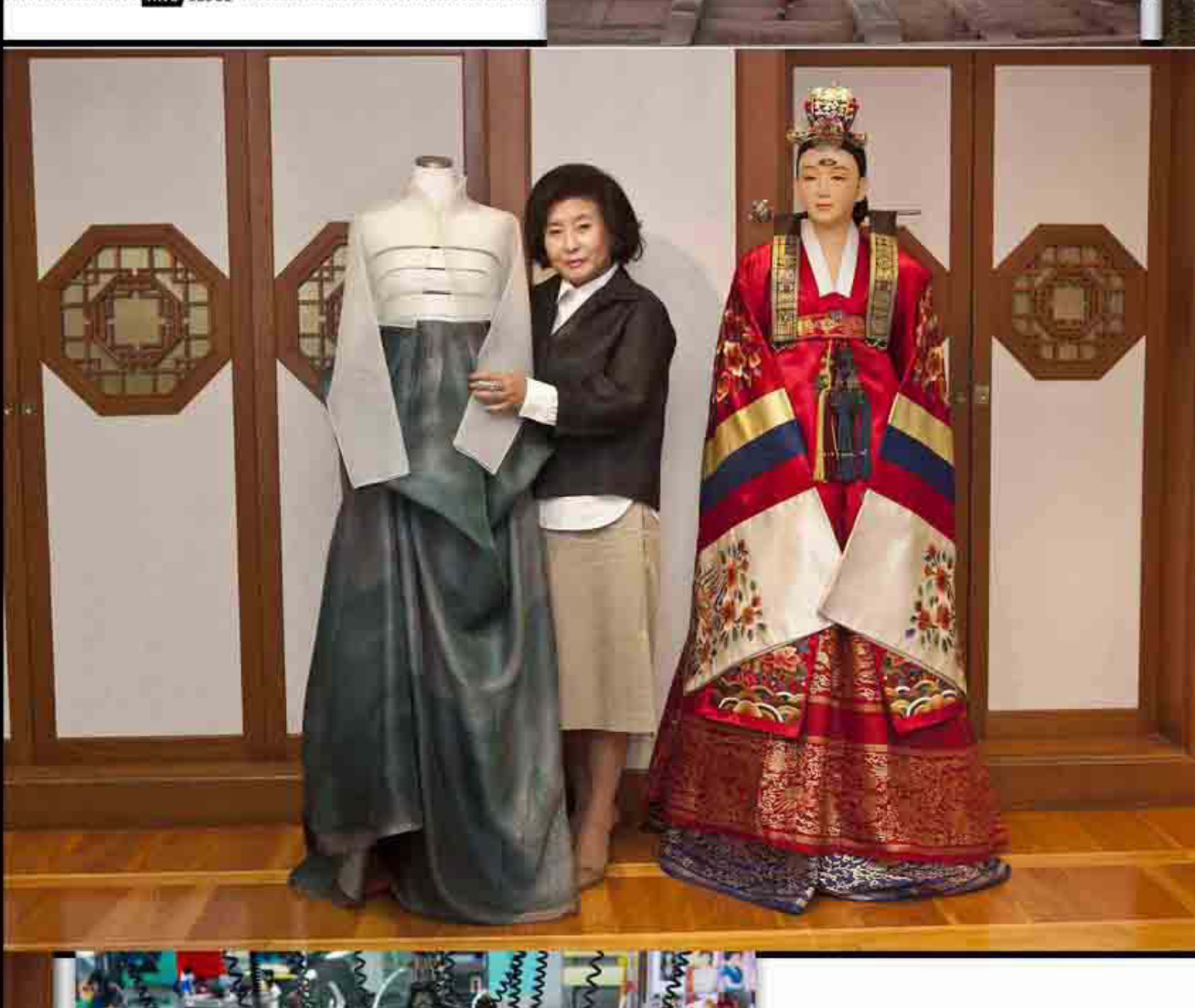
"My English name is Eileen, but my friends say it sounds like alien. Can you think of another name for me? But it shouldn't be a cute name because I am not a cute girl." The girl I have just met while waiting for a bus giggles. She is actually rather pretty but, like many young women in Seoul, obviously insecure about her looks. When I tell her that I think she is pretty, she is quick to point out why I am wrong. "My nose is too wide, and my eyes are too small and narrow. And I have spots," she says.

The South Korean capital seems to play on her insecurity; this bus shelter on one of this mega-city's multi-lane highways is plastered with a huge poster advertising plastic surgery. During my stay, I see the same poster on many more bus shelters and writ large on scores of giant billboards scattered across the sprawling metropolis.

Eileen, 23, is doing an MA in journalism and mass communications and one day, she says, would like to write for The Korea Herald, an English-language broadsheet published in Seoul. Maybe this is why she strikes up a conversation with me. Although Seoulites are certainly polite, they are not generally puppy dog-friendly to foreigners: it is easy to melt unnoticed into these bustling streets, to walk without getting, or making, any direct eye contact. As a would-be journalist, Eileen appears more extrovert and less poised than most of her compatriots, but she still has the coy diffidence often associated with traditional Asian women.

A BLEND OF OLD AND NEW

The same blend of old and new can be found in the architecture of this furious 24-hour city where endless glass and concrete skyscrapers, huge malls and neon-saturated streets sit side by side with the palaces, temples and royal tombs that declare Seoul's status as a former



seat of royal power from 1392, when the Korean Peninsula was united by the kings of the Josean dynasty, until the Japanese invasion in 1910. Elsewhere in Seoul, Korea's last remaining traditional wooden Hanok houses squat next to imperious colonial structures from the city's 35 years of Japanese occupation; and also next to knots of sky-scratching tower blocks with words such as "Harmony" and "Happy Home" adorning their facades.

It is hard to credit now but none of these skyscrapers existed before the 1970s. When the Korean War between the communist North and the capitalist South ended with an Armistice (they are still officially at war) in 1953 – the

ONE OF THE RICHEST CITIES IN THE WORLD

same year the highly regarded Korean Herald was founded – South Korea was a flattened wasteland and poorer than Zimbabwe. Just two generations on, its capital is one of the richest cities in the world, the fourth largest metropolitan economy after Tokyo, New York and LA, and just ahead of London. This so-called "Miracle on the Han River" is now home to 10.5million people, or more than 25million, if you include the city's ever-expanding urban outskirts, while the country as a whole has a per-capita income that surpasses the EU average of $30,000.

However, this economic miracle has come at a cost and, for a sizeable percentage of the female population, the growing phenomenon of cosmetic surgery is a big part of that. Almost one in 80 South Koreans have had a cosmetic procedure and, in Seoul, 20 per cent of women under 50 admit to having plastic surgery, including Miss Korea 2012, Kim Yu-Mi. Even men are now becoming swept up the pressure to look good, with "Gangnam Style" star Psy asked by his music company to have a facelift.

Eileen's friend Hang-Cho, waiting for a bus with her, tries to explain. "Appearance is almost everything to girls in this city," he says. "It determines who will accept you, who will be your boyfriend, even who will be nice to you. As a result, plastic surgery has become so normal that vouchers for it are handed out at competitions and parties. I understand why some girls might feel they need it, but I don't think it's a good trend."

The most popular procedure is an eyelid lift that gives Asian eyes the double eyelid more commonly found in Western faces, although its

vimeo
Patrick Lydon

Enjoy a walk down a Seoul alleyway – with music.

major appeal is to make the eyes look larger in accordance with Asian standards of beauty. However, it is remarkable how many young women in Seoul seem prepared to have surgery on their faces, while the most popular procedures in the US involve areas of the body that are normally hidden, such as breast augmentation or stomach liposuction.

Later that day, I meet 52-year-old Sooyong in the peaceful oasis of the palace district where she works as a guide to the five-bowed-roof royal residences that are, to my eye, rather florid. As we stroll around, she tells me that, although cosmetic surgery is increasingly common, it is very much the preserve of the city's young.

"I don't think I know anyone over the age of 35 who has had any," she says. "Today's young people are extremely competitive. They want to be best at school, to get the best jobs and to be the most beautiful. Even though plastic surgery is really expensive, if it means standing out in the crowd, the youngsters will somehow find the money. It is the same with clothes. Lots of

LOUIS VUITTON

ONE IN 80 SOUTH KOREANS HAVE HAD PLASTIC SURGERY

Do Something?

KOREAN FOOD HAS NOT YET ENTERED THE MAINSTREAM

young people spend all of their income on designer labels, and many are in debt because of this."

When Sooyong was young, this kind of personal gratification was a no-no, she says. "Our parents raised us to be community-minded. We socialized with our neighbours all the time, sharing our good moments and our tragedies with them. And we felt a shared responsibility to improve our country's standard of living; we wanted to be its ambassador to the world."

As a guide, Sooyong is taking this ambassadorial role very seriously and her pride, 27 years into the job, is touching. What is more, like her fellow palace guides, all of whom appear well into their middle and twilight years, she is not paid for showing her city's palatial treasures.

Conversely, Seoul's MTV generation is "greatly influenced by foreign culture, particularly American. Some of them don't even like kimchi. They say it is too spicy!" says Sooyong, shaking her head in disbelief.

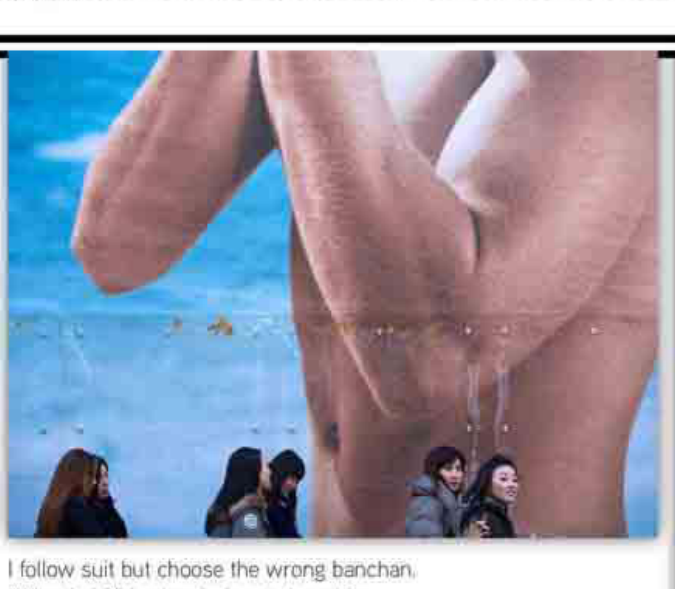
Kimchi – fermented, seasoned vegetables, most often cabbage, which features in every sit-down meal here – is Korea's national dish and arguably the only one widely known outside the country. We may chat on Samsung phones and drive Hyundai motors but, unlike the cuisines of nearby Japan and China, Korean food has not yet entered the Western culinary mainstream.

What an omission. From charcoal-roasted octopus tentacle and mung bean pancakes to julienned lotus root and mool naengmyun – cold noodle soup, served with a big pair of scissors to cut through the clumped al dente mass of

noodles – the range of this country's food is as exciting as it is vast. And best of all, you are unlikely to recognize many of the tastes between your metal chopsticks.

"They are metal because we eat so much red pepper paste," says 22-year-old student, Han. "The paste stains wooden chopsticks."

Han, his friend Bae, and I are having dinner in one of Seoul's many barbeque restaurants where customers cook their own meat and still-wriggling crustaceans on charcoal griddles set into the middle of a table. When his small chunk of steak is ready, Han rolls it in a sesame leaf, adds a couple of the copious side dishes called banchan crammed onto the table, and pops the whole thing in his mouth.

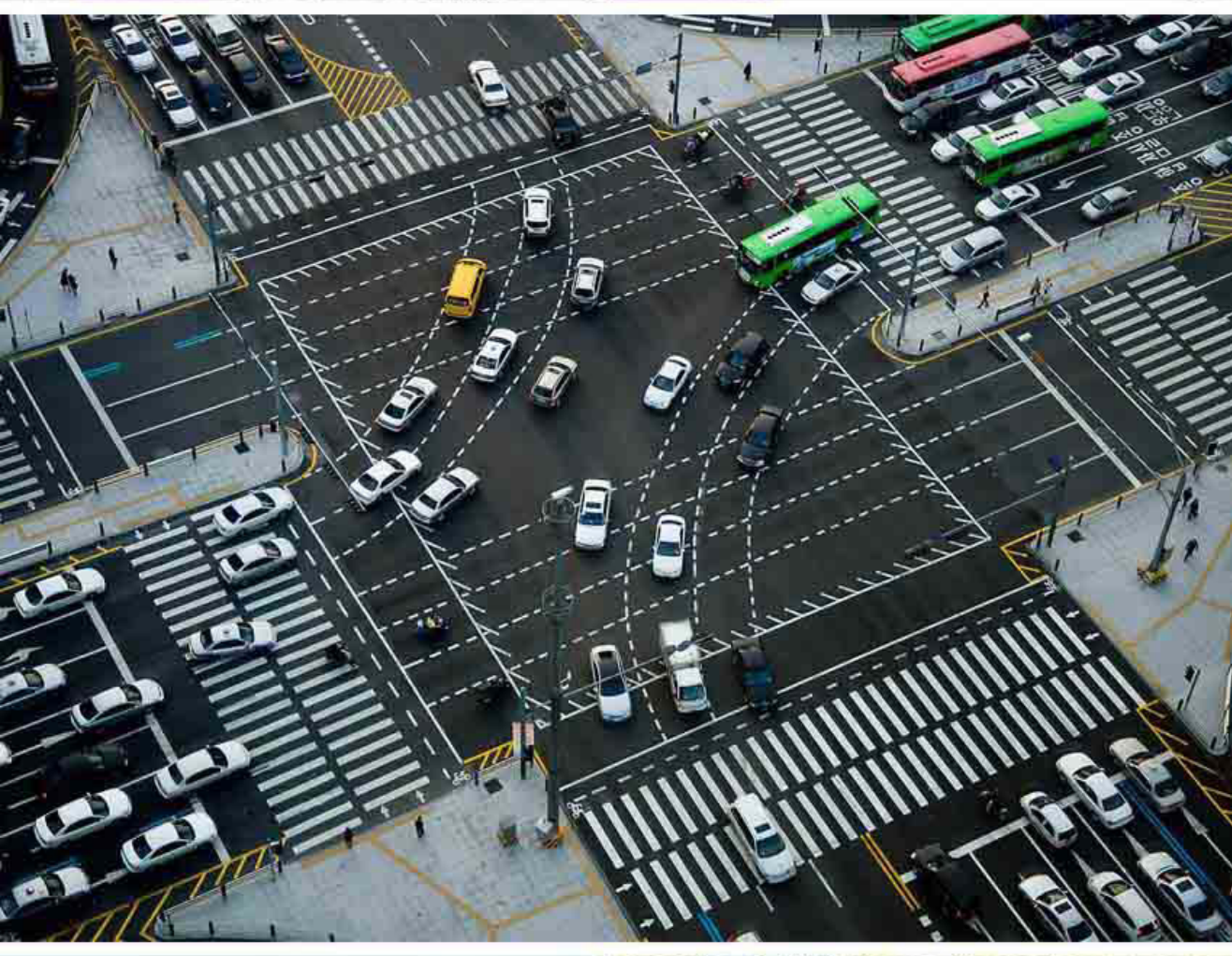


I follow suit but choose the wrong banchan. "What is it?" I ask pointing to the white substance, while trying to swallow my bitter portion with a shot of soju, Korea's national tipple. "Mountain root, you've eaten mountain root," says Han. Doraji is similar to ginseng but has a much sourer taste. My turn to smile demurely like Eileen.

THE BUZZ OF INDIE MUSIC AND CLUBS

We step out into the after-hours bustle of Hongdae district in the west of the city near Hongik University, known for its indie music culture and underground clubs. Opposite us, a

THE MOST COMMON PROCEDURE IS FOR DOUBLE EYELIDS



young artist sporting a tight tartan miniskirt and blood-red hair is painting directly onto the pavement. A man who looks well into his 30s skateboards past me.

It feels good to be somewhere slightly edgy. Plastic surgery isn't the only disquieting consequence of Seoul's phenomenal economic growth. Prosperity seems to have disfigured the face of Seoul, too: with its endless shopping strips selling international labels and new-fangled gadgets, and its ubiquitous, always busy, American-style coffee shops, large stretches of this Asian tiger look anodyne and disappointingly familiar.

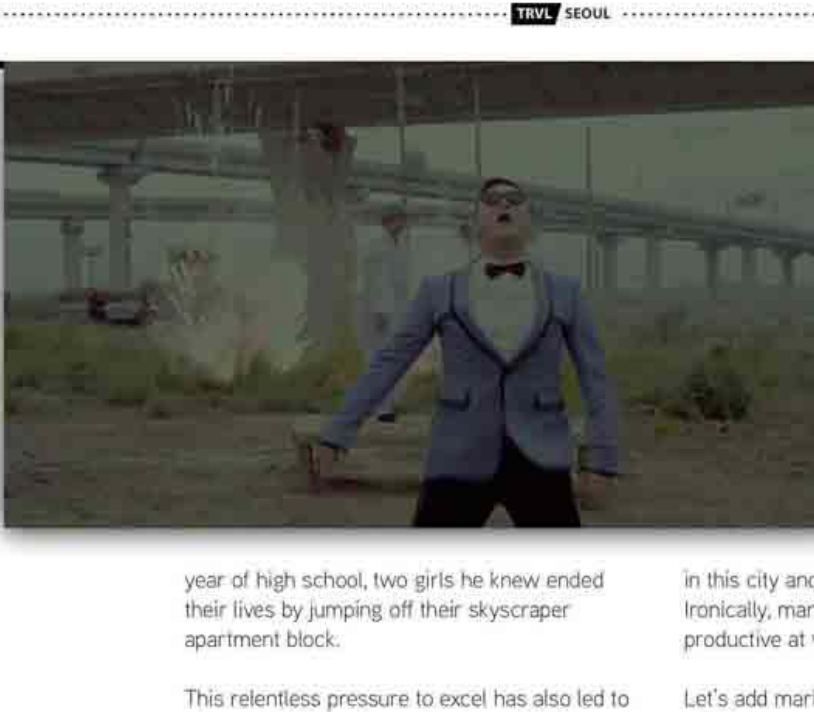
FIRST IMPRESSIONS REALLY COUNT HERE

"It is what more and more people want. Young people are still stirred by traditional Korean culture, they have a sense of history, but their desire to be modern and Western is stronger," says Han. "We spend almost all of our free time socializing. So people want to do this, and to be seen, in Seoul's trendiest bars and restaurants. You see this isn't a slow city, everything happens quickly, so first impressions really count."

Which is surely the main, if not the only, reason increasing numbers of them are going under the knife. Not that Seoulites actually have much free time to parade their remodelled features. Ignoring labour laws, many South Koreans work a six-day week and (unofficially) endure the longest working hours in the developed world, often starting work at 6.30am and leaving at 11pm and later. Several people tell me that those who do not conform will miss out on promotion or be bullied. What's more, this long hours culture begins well before adulthood. "My sister is at high school and she averages five hours of sleep a night. It was the same for me," says Han. "After school finishes, there are hours of homework. And seven out of ten school pupils here have private tuition to improve their grades. The pressure to do well is relentless."

"We are often asked to achieve greater results than we can," adds Bae with some understatement.

All of which has contributed to South Koreans having one of the highest suicide rates in the world, and the highest among the OECD countries (see mini feature). More than 40 people take their own lives every day, five times as many as did in 1989. Bae tells me that in his final



Gangnam style and a mambo beat? You know you'll like it!

year of high school, two girls he knew ended their lives by jumping off their skyscraper apartment block.

This relentless pressure to excel has also led to a heavy drinking culture. Smoky rock joints; iridescent "Chicken and Beer" shops; subterranean cocktail bars in upscale hotels; brash karaoke rooms: Seoul's throbbing streets are full to overflowing with places to get sozzled. "Alcohol is our main release," says Han. "We go out straight after work and often party all night. It helps us cope with the stress of life in this city and we sacrifice our sleep for it. Ironically, many of us are probably not that productive at work the next morning."

Let's add markets to the city's long list of drinking venues. It is 4am and Han, Bae and I have left Hongdae and moved on to Dongdaemun Market, a colossal 24-hour establishment comprising shopping districts and stretching across several city blocks, where you can buy anything from ginseng roots to knock-off Armani sunglasses. But we are here to buy neither. Nor, indeed, the pet monkeys chattering

in a stall to our left. We are savoring the last few hours before Han and Bae are back at their desks with a glass of makgeolli, a fizzy milky rice-wine – and, gulp, a carton of braised silkworms. "People always find something to eat with their drink in this city," says Han.

I wonder whether Seoul's proximity to North Korea partly explains what could be reasonably described as this city's neurosis? After all, just a few kilometres from the wooded mountains that look down on Seoul, Kim Jong-un rules with a nuclear-armed fist and North Korean children die because they don't have enough rice to fill their bellies. Indeed, if you ever needed to be convinced of the

WE SACRIFICED A LOT TO GIVE OUR CHILDREN BETTER LIVES

case for capitalism, visit the Korean Peninsula – not that you would find it easy to obtain a visa to visit its northern part. So, is all this hard work a sort of defense, a barrier against a warmongering dictator who constantly threatens to destroy this nation?

Bae isn't sure. "I am not convinced young Seoulites think about North Korea very much at all. Yes, we are scared that they have nothing to lose and this makes us fear them, but it is quite a vague fear. We don't think about them on a daily basis."

When I had put the same question to Sooyong, she says I might be onto something: "Our neighbors have always invaded us and we have been through many conflicts, and we are still at war with North Korea. With that, we are living on a tiny peninsula with almost no resources. So the only way for us to get rich, and we have always been eager to be rich, is to study and work very hard. During the 1960s and 70s we sacrificed a lot to give our children better lives than ours. We managed and now there is a fever among our young people to achieve more

A GROWING ARMY OF 'GOLDEN LADIES'

and more. Many of them succeed and live very luxurious lives."

She could be talking about Chun Hei. The 32-year-old is a Seoul National University graduate, has an MA from the Yale School of Management and works in HR at a senior level. She is, in short, one of Seoul's growing army of so-called "golden ladies": single women in their 30s with good jobs, who, as tradition demands, still live with their parents and consequently have lots of money to spend on the designer clothes so desired in this city. Today, Chun Hei is wearing a sharp black Prada jacket and red Tod's wedge sandals. A heather grey Mandarina Duck bag hangs from her right hand and her thick, glossy hair is pulled back into a tight bun. She looks very metro chic.

SURGERY STILL CARRIES SOME STIGMA

And also entirely at home in Jongno. The sprawling northern part of Seoul's centre is home to four of the city's five palaces, a theatre district and several historic neighborhoods, one of which we are strolling around on a sun-dappled Sunday morning. The steep, narrow streets are a mix of traditional one-story houses and unsympathetic, clunky modern extensions. A tangled web of electrical wires hangs from the clay-tiled roofs. "Lots of them are artists' second homes," Chun Hei says, which might explain the rather messy aesthetic.

The residents, however, are well dressed and polished. Any artist who can afford a second home can also afford beautiful clothes – and plastic surgery. A young woman with a classically elfin Asian figure and an incongruous Caucasian nose emerges from behind a metal grilled door. It is, of course, possible that she is mixed race but, given that 98 per cent of Koreans are indigenous, it is more likely to be the result of rhinoplasty. I approach her to ask her if I am right but she does not want to be interviewed. In fact, I can find no one who wants to talk about their personal experience of cosmetic surgery. It might be a growing phenomenon but, for the individual who has gone under the knife, the procedure still apparently carries some stigma. Or maybe poised Seoulites like to keep their private lives just that?

A few moments later, a middle-aged man, hair swinging in a pony tail, steps out onto the pinched, dusty street. Chun Hei goes over and greets him. He is an architect and last week she went to his house party, she tells me. Over the course of the next few hours, she bumps into four more friends. Watching her chat, it strikes me that while Seoul may be a fiercely competitive city, it is also a decidedly sociable one.

What a pity, then, that a growing number of Eileens believe they are not "cute" enough to enjoy their city's gregarious delights, both traditional and contemporary, to the full.

THEY BELIEVE THEY ARE NOT CUTE ENOUGH