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治療醜陋？從 Frances Cha 的《If I Had Your Face》探討女性  
失能及整容文化

**Curing Ugliness? Feminist Disability and Cosmetic Surgery  
in Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face***

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# Committee Certification




## 國立臺灣大學碩士學位論文 口試委員會審定書

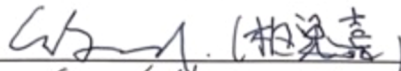
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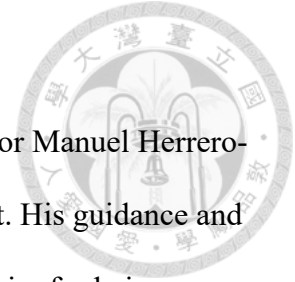
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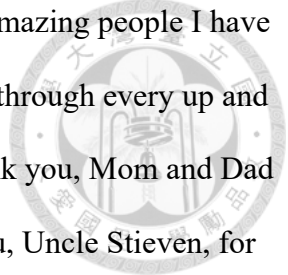
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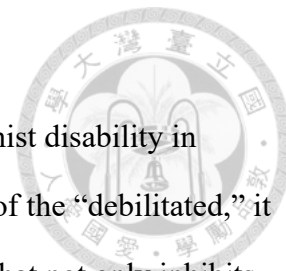
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## Abstract



This thesis aims to engage in the discourse over the representation of feminist disability in Frances Cha's novel *If I Had Your Face*. Drawing on Jasbir Puar's notion of the "debilitated," it suggests that Cha's novel engages in an array of "debilitating" conditions that not only inhibits the individual from obtaining access to additional resources, but also conditions the individual to pursue a process of "bettering" to achieve optimal productivity. This leads the reader to take a closer look at how "ugliness" is viewed as a debilitating state that demands to be cured, alongside other conditions such as muteness, pregnancy, and poverty. To take cosmetic surgery as an example, while the practice remains widely accepted in South Korea, a closer examination of how medical intervention of the female body sheds light on how ugliness is perceived as a form of disability that demands to be cured. In addition to recognizing various forms of physical disability and conditional debility, this thesis explores how post-surgical female subjects who seek cure explore various aspects of female desire through ornamental gestures. The first chapter of this thesis focuses on how disability and debility are interpreted through the women in Cha's novel, and the reason behind these women's choice to either pursue or reject cure. The second chapter extends the discussion of cosmetic surgery by adapting Anne Anlin Cheng's notion of "ornamentalism" to interpret the post-surgical subjects through both the peripherality and synthetic nature they embody. Furthermore, I suggest that the ornamentalist nature of these women play into the tendency for them to marvel, gaze, and yearn for specific forms of aesthetic and feminine appearances, along with particular bonds and emotions that are exclusive to female relationships. Thus, the novel offers an alternative way of addressing the impact of cosmetic surgery in contemporary South Korean culture.

Key words: Frances Cha, disability, cosmetic surgery, South Korea, Asian American literature

## Chinese Abstract

### 中文摘要



本論文意欲由 Frances Cha 的小說《If I Had Your Face (如果我能擁有你的臉)》探討女性失能的論述。經由普爾 (Jasbir Puar) 所提出的「失能 (debility)」概念，我認為 Cha 小說中的女性人物各個均受生理甚至環境影響而被迫接受失能的狀態。這種狀態不僅迫使個體在社會中無法順利取得所需的資源，甚至必須持續的優化自己以追求能供給社會的最高產能。由此推論，讀者便可以試圖以失能的角度閱讀小說中南韓文化對於「醜陋」的態度。以至於在探討醜陋、身心障礙、懷孕及貧窮等由社會建構的生理、心理及狀態性失能在南韓社會中如何以「治癒」的需求體現。以整容文化為例，雖然南韓社會對整容的文化接受度很廣，但若重探整容過程所賦予醫療行為改變女性生理外貌所代表的意義，便可推論相貌「醜陋」在某一種程度上如同「失能」必須被治癒的概念。除了探討各種先天及後天的生理失能和由環境導致的狀態失能，本論文希望能延伸探討整容手術後的女性透過「裝飾 (ornamental)」的行為探索不同面向的女性情慾。第一章聚焦於如何從書中的女性人物閱讀失能的各種面貌，並深入討論各個角色選擇追尋、接受、或者抗拒至於的過程。第二章延續對整容文化的探討，並透過鄭安玲 (Anne Anlin Cheng) 所提出的「裝飾論」，重新探討術後對象所代表的邊緣性 (peripherality) 及整容時與人工填充物「合成」後的合成性 (synthetic nature)。除此之外，我認為由裝飾論閱讀女性主題之間對於亞裔身分所代表的亞裔女性化 (Asian Femininity) 論述，能協助讀者更深入的理解女性之間的情感及情慾。由裝飾論所延伸的女性探討或許能為南韓與女性失能之間的關係，尋找失能與被迫治癒之間其他存在之可能性。

關鍵字：Frances Cha、失能、整容手術、南韓、亞裔美國文學

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## Introduction:

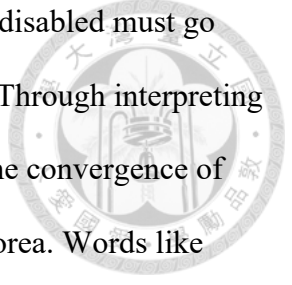
### **Korean American Literature, South Korea, Disability, and Frances Cha**

Disability is a covert theme, often skillfully and subtly dissected in the fabric of Korean American literature. Immigrants and third-culture individuals who are still processing their cultural ancestry write from an uncanny distance that encompasses the precarity of the matter in the liminal space between assimilating their Korean heritage and embracing American individualism. The root cause of this passive engagement with disability, arguably stems from South Korea's post-war history, as it has proven to drag itself from the drenches of a mendicant pawn of western powers amidst Cold War politics. This urge to become "better" is an unceasing goal and stems from internalized shame and angst that drive South Koreans to pursue decolonization. However, the reality of decolonizing offers no space for disability because disability hinders productivity, profit, and growth for the nation state.

Frances Cha's 2020 debut novel, *If I Had Your Face*, addresses the ableist notions that urge women to pursuit cosmetic surgery and their relationship with beauty. The novel offers a gripping account of how five women bond and maneuver their way through an ableist society by contesting the status quo. *If I Had Your Face* is a tale about both engaging with and rejecting the notion of "cure" as well as underprivileged South Korean women's need to succumb to neoliberal ideals. Therefore, this thesis explores the relationship between cure, disability, cosmetic surgery, and Asian female representation in *If I Had Your Face*. By examining female narratives through the lens of disability studies in Cha's novel, I wish to investigate alternative ways of interpreting Asian femininity and desire in the twenty-first century.

By delving into Cha's narrative, readers are offered a front-row seat to how "unproductiveness" impedes the female individual's chances of surviving in society. While those

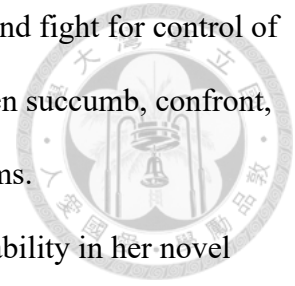




who are beautiful are granted more merit, those who are ugly or physically disabled must go through a process of “bettering” themselves in order to be deemed worthy. Through interpreting ugliness as a disability, one is introduced to a broader lexicon concerning the convergence of cosmetic surgery, disability, and cure for women in contemporary South Korea. Words like “tapered,” “stitch,” and “shaved” are used to address surgical interventions for women to pursuit ideals of beauty, while terms like “protruding too much,” “asymmetrical,” “slanted,” and “too square” describe women who require more work to become beautiful. In other words, the women in Cha’s novel remain in perpetual need of “improvement” or “enhancement” to prove their worth. When women are not beautiful enough, the chances of them getting hired are dialed down. When women are physically impaired, the merit of their labor is tainted by their lack of normative bodily functions. Disability studies offers readers a vantage point to comprehend how ugliness, physical impairment, and being a woman serve as factors that reject the female individual’s value in South Korean society.

While disability offers a framework for the reader to acknowledge and critique neoliberal values that prevent many women from obtaining monetary gains, Cha’s novel further depicts how these women react to such circumstances. *If I Had Your Face* illustrates varying responses to disability. Whether by “curing” their disability or embracing it, each character comes forth with alternative perspectives that help portray a three-dimensional image of what it means to be a woman in South Korea. This is rather evident in how Cha orchestrates the “function” of their roles among their tight-knit social group, their respective workplaces, and familial duties. Disability, whether it relates to ugliness, deafness, and/or poverty becomes a defining factor that helps these women move forward with their lives. Cha’s novel is not a utopian tale where social welfare and anti-ableist notions become accepted in contemporary South Korea. Rather, *If I Had*

*Your Face* is a grim depiction of how women are pushed to react, accept, and fight for control of their lives. By pursuing a chance to take charge of their future, these women succumb, confront, and adhere to the status quo, while navigating a range of coping mechanisms.



In addition to acknowledging how Cha's characters experience disability in her novel through the lens of disability studies, it is equally important to track Cha's reconceptualization of Asiatic<sup>1</sup> femininity. By means of engaging in the language used to illustrate the post-surgical Asian female, one may allude to the ornamental nature of Cha's female characters. Moreover, the way women are referred to as objects helps facilitate a more thorough understanding of how Asiatic femininity is aligned with objecthood. The women who engage with cosmetic surgery in *If I Had Your Face* and those who pursuit other forms of beauty experience a form of personhood that encapsulates both the demure and decorative nature of Asiatic femininity. Furthermore, these alternatives unfold outside the male gaze, as Cha has her female characters gaze upon each other. These gazes help develop a form of femininity that pertains to how Asian women perceive, critique, and admire female qualities despite the hardships they face on both psychological and social fronts.

South Korea's economic prowess has been considered a miracle, based partly on its current market influence over cosmetic products and cosmetic surgery, along with the rising

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to Colleen Lye's notion of the "Asiatic racial form," specifically about how the 'historical emergence of Asiatic racial form can be read as the appearance of the otherness of Western modernity to itself (Lye 76).


popularity of K-Pop<sup>2</sup> and K-Drama.<sup>3</sup> Based on a 2019 survey by the International Society of Plastic Surgery, which consulted more than 2,500 practicing plastic surgeons in the nation, South Korea has the fifth-highest number of plastic surgeons in the world. The country holds a higher number on a per capita basis compared to the United States and Brazil (Kim and Denyer). Apart from cosmetic surgery, the scale of the country's beauty market also says a lot about South Korea's relationship with beauty. According to the International Trade Administration, from the US Department of Commerce, South Korea was reportedly one of the top ten beauty markets in the world between 2016-2019. The nation's cosmetic industry represents nearly 2.8 percent of the global market.

The association between South Korea's massive beauty industry and its huge demand for "beauty-improving" procedures that range from excessive beauty regimes to surgical interventions stems from the nation's yearning to heal from its colonial past. After its close-to-two-decades reign under the authoritarian government led by Park Chug Hee (박정희), the

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<sup>2</sup> K-Pop has been an emblem of the Hallyu 2.0 for the past decade. The term Hallyu (한류) refers to the "Korean Wave", describing the popularity of South Korean culture. The phenomenon started around "the early 90's after South Korea entered into diplomatic relations with China, in 1992" (Haugland 2020). Hallyu 2.0 is seen as the "New Korean Wave", and is often used to refer to the growing social media presence of Korean culture, the astronomical success of popularized K-Drama, and the revived K-Pop industry, starting with BTS's international popularity. According to Jin Dal Young, in the preface of the book *New Korean Wave*, differences between the first Korean Wave and Hallyu 2.0 mainly lie in the following aspects: engagement with social media, geography (1<sup>st</sup> Korean Wave: East Asia, 2<sup>nd</sup> Korean Wave: Europe, North America, and Asia), and primary consumer age (1<sup>st</sup> Korean Wave: 30s-40s, 2<sup>nd</sup> Korean Wave: teens-20s). However, regardless of South Korea's attempt to reject colonialism, the nation's contemporary pop culture scene reveals a diverse fusion of foreign elements. While South Korea's entertainment industry aims to commodify South Korean culture globally, its brand of contemporary popular culture comes from "a process of emulating, often forcibly, nations thought to be more advanced and more powerful (Pilzer 111)." It has not gone unnoticed that the beginnings of South Korea's popular music scene were heavily influenced by both Japan and the United States. (Kim 307-08). It is also very interesting to factor in how contemporary K-Pop, in its own unique style, frequently embodies mixed genres. Both PBS's *Soundfield* and VOX's *Explained* (Netflix) have contributed individual episodes that address K-Pop's diverse music structure and "genre mash-up" in single tracks.

<sup>3</sup> According to a survey by Statista between 2020-2021, 49.4% of 8500 worldwide respondents believed that South Korean dramas were "very popular." FlixPatrol, another website that provides statistics on how shows are performing on streaming platforms confirmed that, in 2021, the most watched Netflix television show was the Korean Drama *Squid Game* (2021).



nation took drastic and strategic measures to revive its economy through military mobilization. Park's ambitions to strengthen the nation instigated a culture that stressed "improving" and "bettering" themselves. As a result of this robust urge to fix a state allegedly broken by Japanese colonization, South Korea embraced an urgent need to become a greater country as a way to compensate the humiliation experienced during postcolonial times. As Eunjung Kim contends in *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*, the necessity for "cure" or "rehabilitation of the disabled nation" (3) has driven South Koreans on a quest for constant enhancement of power for the state and its individuals. This was crucial during the second half of the twentieth century, as the South Korean nation, under an authoritarian regime, shifted the mentality of "cure" towards people with disabilities "as beneficiaries of the already-rehabilitated nation" (Kim 4).

In addition to South Korea's aggressive need to mend its past and strengthen its present, a close examination of South Korea's relationship with women in the past offers chilling insight on how women were relegated to a peripheral zone. Women are now confronting gendered policies that originated during Park's military mobilization period as well as prevalent attitudes against women who step outside domestic domains to walk into cosmopolitan spheres. South Korea places their female citizens in a conflicting position between the past and the present. Women are expected to choose between the modernized and enlightened feminist, or the socially compliant family woman that mothers the husband, the children, and the nation's sexist mentality. Women were seen as "reproducers" and were, along with men, expected to contribute to the welfare of the nation (Moon 175). Furthermore, as Moon states, the "lack of the distinct boundary between public and private" contributed to the nationalist call for women to manage their households as a service to the state (175). The result of South Korea's authoritarian

gendered policies has led to the political exclusion of women, limiting their access to full citizenship and economically marginalizing them over the past few decades (Moon 176-77).

*If I Had Your Face* delivers an account of how South Korean women perceive and engage with cosmetic surgery in Seoul, the “world capital of plastic surgery.”<sup>4</sup> For ugly women like Sujin, becoming beautiful is a beacon of hope; for women like Kyuri, it entails a vicious cycle of surmounting debts and insecurity; and for naturally beautiful women like Miho, it threatens her birthright as an aesthetically appealing woman. Furthermore, the quest for beauty sheds light on the hypocrisy South Korean beauty standards strive for, as women are expected to look “perfect” yet “natural,” despite obtaining artificially constructed looks. Each individual has a reason to accept, embrace, or reject the artificial notion of beauty that is popular in South Korea. Yet, beyond the novel’s close examination of why and how women surgically alter their bodies lies a detailed rendition of South Korea’s longstanding relationship with its female populations or any citizen who fails to live up to the nation’s neoliberal mindset. Discussions of K-Beauty, cosmetic surgery, disability, and gender discrimination permeate the lives of Ara, Sujin, Miho, Kyuri, and Wonna. Cha situates women at the cusp of cultural, generational, and historical crossroads, without directly referring to the nation’s longstanding history of decolonization, military mobilization, and gender policies. The five women confront gender discrimination in the workplace, endowed with filial responsibilities, and bearing the cross of “unproductivity” due to preexisting disadvantages or duties they were born into. In other words, at the beginning of the novel, not only are most female characters born without the privilege of beauty, they are also born without financial entitlements or have a physical disability. Unlike

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<sup>4</sup>According to articles from *The New Yorker* and *Business Insider*, Seoul is widely referred to as the “world capital” of cosmetic/plastic surgery. Patricia Marx writes in a 2015 article that South Korea has the “highest rate of plastic surgery per capita in the world.” Gangnam, as Drake Baer writes for *Business Insider* in the article “Why South Korea is the plastic surgery capital of the world.” reportedly has 500 aesthetic centers alone in one neighborhood.

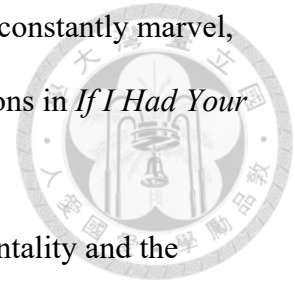
middle class women who have achieved class mobility outside of gendered hierarchies, working-class women such as Cha's characters continue to struggle against economic marginalization. However, such hardships are not directly attributed to the nation's decolonization process in *If I Had Your Face*. Instead, Cha directs the reader's attention to present affairs in modern-day Seoul. Rather than dwelling on the nation's history, Cha offers an opportunity for the reader to comprehend what the future looks like for women, should they choose to embrace or reject cure and assimilate to the norm.

Cha thus represents an emerging generation of Korean American writers open to narratives beyond first-generation immigrant dilemmas. Many Korean American authors from the Korean diaspora engage in South Korean culture by conveying immigrant narratives, historical accounts of South Korea's former authoritarian government, or root-searching journeys that bring Korean Americans back in touch with the "homeland."<sup>5</sup> Authors An Na, Min Jin Lee, Jung Yun, Chang-Rae Lee, and David Yoon, to name a few, depict immigrant narratives and the intertwined cultural factors between South Korea and the foreign nations they settle in. For example, in *Everything Belongs to Us*, Yoojin Grace Wuertz offers a direct take on the tension between the nation and the proletariat during Park Chung Hee's (박정희) presidency. While Yoojin's novel markets itself (as noted on her official website) as a story of two young women who come from opposite social classes in Park's pre-democratic South Korea, there is a heavy emphasis on the male perspective or even the "male gaze" during this period. Cha's novel,

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to clarify that I am referring to Korean American novelists and do not claim to speak for Korean American poets. This is specifically because prominent works in the Korean American poetry canon are often experimental and intersectional with the media and themes addressed. Therefore, although Korean American poets touch on topics such as South Korean nationalism and immigration, the sheer nature of their works calls for a much more integrated approach prior to analyzing or assessing them. For example, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1982) addresses not only an array of topics, but also a wide range of narrative styles, languages, and images. These subjects expand far beyond Korean American immigrant mentalities. Similarly, a more recent collection of works by Cathy Park Hong, *Engine Empire* (2012), touches on themes such as the old west, California, love, and China.

on the other hand, sets the parameters of a “female gaze,” as these women constantly marvel, admire, worry, and nit-pick over both their physical and emotional conditions in *If I Had Your Face*.



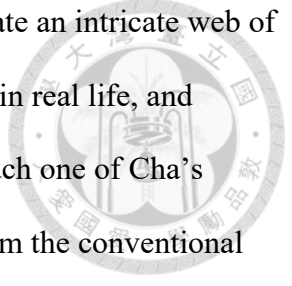
As for contemporary narratives situated between the immigrant mentality and the beckoning of the “homeland,” Eugenia Kim’s 2018 novel *The Kinship of Secrets* (based on a true story) and Soon Wiley’s 2022 novel *When We Fell Apart* each exemplify the clash and conflict between Eastern and Western cultures for the Korean immigrant. Both novels feature connections, experiences, and emotions that occur when a Korean American sets foot on South Korean soil. I would like to point out that many pre-2010 Korean American novels heavily focus on the immigrant experience and the dissonance between Korean and North American cultures. Cathy Park Hong associates these aspects of Korean American angst with the term “*Han*” in her book *Minor Feelings*. This term refers to “a combination of bitterness, wistfulness, shame, melancholy, and vengefulness, accumulated from years of brutal colonialism, war, and U.S.-supported dictatorships that have never been politically redressed” (Hong 164).

In addition to categorizing these authors for the narrative perspectives their novels deliver, it is interesting to note, too, that An Na wrote a novel on the relationship between cosmetic surgery and the Korean American teenage girl. Her 2008 novel *The Fold*, however, is heavily saturated with American cultural markers—a realm where individuality and self-worth are prioritized over the communal sense of belonging, fitting in, and earning the appraisal of elderly family members. In other words, *The Fold* disagrees with the normalization of cosmetic surgery in South Korean culture, regardless of its presence among both South Korean citizens and the Korean diaspora in the United States. The female protagonist, Joyce Park, is set to find “self-love” and “self-acceptance” as a response to the perpetual need to “become better” in

Korean society. Although *The Fold* naïvely presumes that North American culture is safe from neoliberal-feminist notions of self-governance and “bettering,” it serves as a bridge for second-generation immigrants to find acceptance in North American culture. Whether this optimistic idea of assimilating North American values addresses the dissonance between clashing cultural identities most of the Korean diaspora grapples with, Na’s tale operates as preliminary response to Cha’s *If I Had Your Face* on Korean beauty standards in the twenty-first century.

Cha’s novel essays a different approach. *If I Had Your Face* is set in contemporary South Korea. It does not attempt to bridge the gap between immigrants and native South Koreans, neither does it strive to regurgitate the painful process and aftermath of the nation’s colonial and authoritarian past. This is probably due to Cha’s own third-culture upbringing and her previous work as a culture journalist in Seoul for CNN. As a constant “house-guest” in places like Seoul, Hong Kong, and the United States, Cha has escaped the dichotomous “immigrant mentality” that leaves immigrants struggling between two sides of the East-versus-West cultural pendulum. By harnessing her observations and experiences, Cha offers a close-up of the unnerving reality of South Korea’s past and current relationship with women, beauty, and disability. The novel also sheds light on how women creatively respond to these challenges. *If I Had Your Face* features Sujin as an orphan hell-bent on “fixing” her unappealing appearance, Ara as a mute hairdresser secluded in her unvoiced opinions and passions, Kyuri as a filial daughter trapped in her role as a prostitute, Miho as a naturally beautiful artist hindered by her lack of capital, and finally, Wanna, an office lady undergoing one miscarriage after another yet hoping motherhood will heal her childhood trauma. Each of them responds to economical needs, social expectations, and their own desires by either embracing or rejecting the notion of cure imposed on them not only by men, but elderly women such as their mothers or stepmothers, culpable of perpetrating South

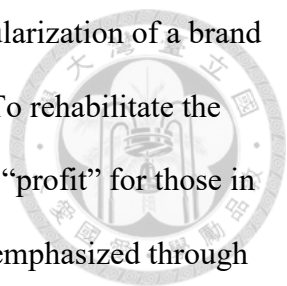




Korean culture's longstanding misogyny. Their intertwined trajectories create an intricate web of causes and effects, miraculously withstanding the challenges that they face in real life, and delivering a fresh take of liberation and rebellion against societal norms. Each one of Cha's characters, in the end, is reconciled with a newfound reality that derives from the conventional trajectory expected of them. *If I Had Your Face* depicts snapshots of female narratives that are the product of South Korea's obsession with cure. Moreover, it is a both a testimony to how women persevere and develop alternative modes of existence in the face of ableist limitations. Such obsessions stem from multiple layers regarding South Korea's historical, political, economic, and cultural developments in the past fifty-years. Whether it is curing their national identity from a mendicant position, colonial trauma, or the disabled individual, the quest for rehabilitation serves as both a mobilizing incentive for economic success and a curse for "unproductive" South Koreans.

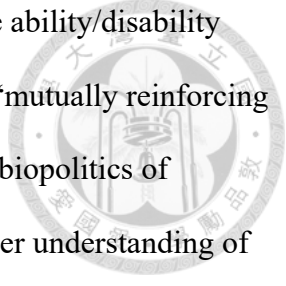
### **Disability, Debility, Cure**

Prior to examining how Cha's characters engage with disability, debility, ableism, and gender discrimination, it is important to clarify some key terms in disability studies and their applicability to the practice of cosmetic surgery as well as the beauty and femininity ideals it fosters. Lennard J. Davis discusses at length how "disability" and "normalcy" come hand in hand as part of the same set of "social, historical, economic, and cultural processes that regulate and control the way we think about and think through the body" (2). In other words, disability is a concept used to segregate those who do not conform to normalcy, while the notion of normalcy depends heavily on how embedded powers "govern" the rest of the population. To put it differently, for those who hold economic power and advantages, the urge to exploit and profit



from not only “normalcy” but also “optimal productivity” justifies the popularization of a brand of normalcy that is lucrative for the elite yet detrimental to the proletariat. To rehabilitate the “abnormal” serves the ultimate cause to churn out more “productivity” and “profit” for those in power. This aligns with the notion of “cure” that South Korean society, as emphasized through Kim’s concept of “curative violence,” frequently imposes on its citizens. Yet the problem behind the urge to cure and normalize the “abnormal” creates a discourse that situates variations of disability towards either accepting modifications or remaining stagnantly abnormal and disabled. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder point out how neoliberal attitudes enable the state to interfere in the lives of disabled people by insisting that cure and improvement are the ultimate prerequisites to establishing a successful life. Mitchell and Snyder shed light on how neoliberalism situates all bodies as “debilitated and in need of market commodities to shore up their beleaguered cognitive, physical, affective, and aesthetic shortcomings.” The individual body is now a canvas awaiting “perpetual improvement.” These individual bodies comprise what Mitchell and Snyder name “the able-disabled,” as their quest for cure earns them a chance to join the capitalist economy. The “abled-disabled” are those who “exceed their disability limitations through forms of administrative ‘creaming’ or hyper-prostheticization but leave the vast majority of disabled people behind” (12). By alluding to Mitchell and Snyder’s concept of the “abled-disabled” and Lennard J. Davis’s perception of “normalcy,” conditions such as deafness, ugliness, pregnancy, gendered bias, and insufficient access to capital and other resources create a form of incapacity for the women in Cha’s novel. Moreover, these women are stuck in a vicious cycle, or a fluid form of “incapacity,” as Mitchell and Snyder would put it.

In addition to understanding the “able-disabled” and the relational factors that set aside the normal and abnormal, it is pivotal to examine the “debilitating” state these women undergo in



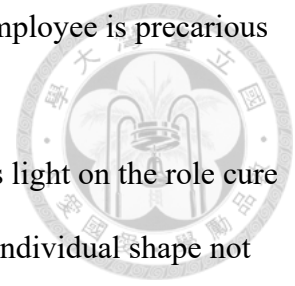
Cha's novel. Jasbir Puar proposes the term "debility" as "triangulat[ing] the ability/disability binary" (xv). Puar argues that "debility, disability, and capacity" exist in a "mutually reinforcing constellation." Puar's *The Right to Maim* builds on Mitchell and Snyder's "biopolitics of disability" and Lauren Berlant's notion of "slow death." Puar offers a sharper understanding of how, by being in a "debilitated" state, individuals are vulnerable to structural and material disadvantages that hinder their capacity as time and life extends. Berlant defines "slow death" as an "ongoingness, getting by, and living on, where the structural inequalities are dispersed... often in phenomena not prone to capture by a consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact" (759).

These observations align with Cha's characters, as each one experiences an ongoing reality of "incapacity." In particular, the quest for beauty through surgical interventions constitutes a constant battle against debility. Women start from casting off relatively unappealing physical attributes and enter thus a cycle of constant "touching up." This constant need to improve one's appearance stems from the pressure to keep up with beauty standards and defy aging in order to maintain one's aesthetic value. The struggle is continuous. Regardless of their efforts, women in this scenario are perpetually at the brink of obtaining capacity by acknowledging the fluctuating gaps of incapacity they are expected to overcome. By curing their ugliness through cosmetic surgery, women become eternal works-in-progress always encouraged to try harder in order to feel included. The women in Cha's novel suffer from discrepant versions of debilitation, disability, and discrimination. They are either physically or mentally impaired to the point that their incapacity is not limited to their ability to generate capital. The sheer nature of their social standing puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing certain resources. In developing a connection between cosmetic surgery, disability, and women's role in South

Korean society, one can observe how the neoliberal mindset inhibits these categories and delivers varying readings on how these women respond to their ongoing crisis of incapacity.

In *Curative Violence*, Eunjung Kim contributes to our understanding of “normalcy” by explaining the role of “curative science” in making “visible the assumption that normative functioning is the precondition of social inclusion” (2). Kim contends that “to cure is to govern the body and its social relations” (3). In discussing the concept of cure, Kim alludes to its Sino-Korean roots by examining the word *Ch’iyu* (治癒). The word *Chì* (治) or *zhì* (in Chinese pinyin) refers to the Mandarin character “govern” (治理 *zhìlǐ*、治國 *zhì guó*、統治 *tǒngzhì*). Much like Davis’s observations on how the body is “regulated” and “controlled,” similar phenomena on how illness and disability are addressed in the East can be observed through the pairing of *chì* with the word *yù* (癒). Kim points out South Korea’s cultural tendency to seek and celebrate the nation’s capacity to cure. South Korean’s identity shift, according to Kim, has gone from relying on foreign aid to developing the ability to govern, cure, and improve not only the nation, but also its disabled citizens (4). A common phenomenon throughout the course of improving disability has been that every aspect of the disabled person’s life was riddled with the notion of cure. In other words, every action is framed within the dynamics of treatment or therapy. Kim mentions “rehabilitation therapy,” “music therapy,” “theater therapy,” and “art therapy” (5). How can women resist the policing of their bodies? Every choice they make is not only to prove that they are “normal” human beings, but also to prove that they are “ideal” women. Those who are ugly must prove that they can become feminine and beautiful, while those who lack capital and social standing must prove that their talent compensates for their poverty, hopefully making them “wife-material.” Characters like Kyuri, Miho, and Sujin stand in

these intersecting positions where to exist as a woman, a daughter, or an employee is precarious and contradictory.



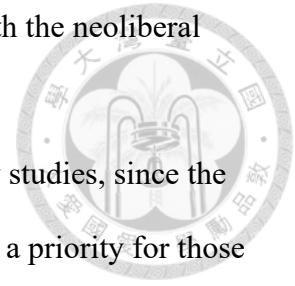
A closer look at these interlocking mechanisms of oppression sheds light on the role cure plays and, especially, on how cosmetic surgery and the debilitated female individual shape not only the physical bodies but also the lives of South Korean women. Robert McRuer contests that “the focus on cure prevents people from having conversations about the systems of power and about everyone’s complicity in them” (231).<sup>6</sup> A common example disability scholars refer to is Christopher Reeve’s relationship with his disability, mainly his stance on supporting the search for a “cure.” As the original “Superman,” the contrast between an almighty super-human and a physically challenged man invites scrutiny of both his disabled condition and the privilege associated to his celebrity status. Reeve is often criticized for perpetrating a system that only tolerates abled bodies because it is much more convenient for able-bodied people to design the world around dominant values of “normalcy.” By being a world-famous celebrity on a “quest for cure,” Reeve becomes the poster-boy hero who pursues cure as an attempt to defeat his disability. Reeve’s narrative is problematic because the impact of his fame insinuates a normalization of “cure” rather than a normalization of being disabled. Reeve embodies the supercrip narrative by pushing for a miracle cure that eliminates his disabled status. In looking at how the women in Cha’s novel respond to disability, whether manifested as ugliness, poverty, womanhood, or muteness, the reality of their situation seems to not only confront an existing form of societal oppression, but also serves as an urge to choose disability and reject cure in

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<sup>6</sup> McRuer expresses this concept by alluding to society’s relationship with AIDS patients: “A focus on ‘cure’ of the spinal cord injury thoroughly solidifies that ‘cure’ is the only way to think about AIDS and contributes to the ongoing two-decades-long blockage of conversations activists have tried to advance—conversations about how HIV positive and HIV negative, disabled and nondisabled, people are all implicated in the epidemic and the systems of power that sustain it, about how people with AIDS are not passive observers who are simply waiting for a cure, and important conversations about the range of sexual and drug-using practices individuals and communities (again, HIV positive or negative) engage in” (231).

order to challenge the imperatives of “normalcy” and “capacity,” along with the neoliberal notion of “fulfillment” and “content” they promise.

Ableism has been a universal concern within the scope of disability studies, since the inherent need to compete, rake profit, and increase capital has always been a priority for those who are in power. In the case of Cha’s *If I Had Your Face*, those who have power refer to the South Korean government along with the business enterprises that work closely with it. These ruling institutions create a structured a model in which the culture of “improvement,” “bettering,” “curing,” and “healing” are the only paths for an individual to earn inclusion. However, by putting South Korea’s journey from decolonization to a neoliberal economy and state into context, the intensity of the nation’s rapid advancements and transformation has mutated the relationship between the individual, the state, and dominant gender roles. With pre-twentieth-century cultures and history and post-war politics clashing, fusing, and contradicting each other throughout the past half-century, South Korea is now challenged to negotiate what it means to be Asian. Furthermore, as the nation becomes one of the leading Asian countries today, it is crucial to question the neoliberal culture that permeates its society, the beauty standards it proposes, and a gendered hierarchy that inevitably encourages misogyny. By examining Cha’s narrative, one is tempted to suggest that the answer to finding the balance between being Asian and Korean in neoliberal Seoul lies in examining how women at various disadvantaged positions harness both their femininity and tenacity to go against the system.



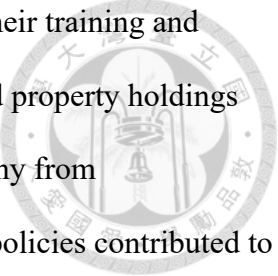
## South Korean Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism

In order to understand how ableism came to infiltrate the mindset of contemporary South Korean culture, it is important to recognize how the country's colonial and authoritarian past has shaped both its economic success and cultural influence today. After obtaining independence in 1945, a process also known as South Korea's repatriation from Japanese colonization, South Korea then endured four years of US-military rule, from 1945 to 1948. The post-repatriation state was left with the main areas of agricultural production, while the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, also known as North Korea), under administration from the Soviet Union, inherited most of the industry, mining, and electric power grid. With a growing population, refugees from North Korea pouring in, and the loss of their main market for agricultural exports (Japan) along with ongoing political turmoil, South Korea struggled as one of the poorest states during the late 1940s (Seth, "[South Korea's Economic Development](#)" 1).

After South Korea regained autonomy over its government, the nation had a plethora of problems that stalled its economy from 1948 to 1960. This included the Korean War (1950-53), in which the ROK (South Korea) and the DPRK (North Korean) served as proxies for the Cold War between the United States and the USSR (Chae 181). In addition to the Korean War, overdependence on foreign aid (mainly from the United States)<sup>7</sup> and crony capitalism enabled by the government also weakened the nation's autonomy. Under the governance of President Syngman Rhee (이승만, 1948-1960), South Korea entered an era of corruption and economic stagnation. However, despite Rhee's inability to resuscitate South Korea's economy, his government managed to expand education (Seth, *A Concise History* 151-59). Domestic school

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<sup>7</sup> According to Barbara Stallings and Eun Mee Kim, South Korea was a recipient of foreign aid from the United States during 1945-1948, while the US governed the southern part of the Korean peninsula (Stallings and Kim 83).



enrollment increased and more South Koreans were sent abroad to further their training and skills (Seth, *A Concise History* 395-96). Moreover, land reforms that limited property holdings by the rich paved the way for the government to avoid any family or company from monopolizing the country's resources (Seth, *A Concise History* 383). Both policies contributed to South Korea's post-1960s economic boom, as the country went through strict military rule under General Park Chung-hee (박정희, 1961-79). The significance of Park's military regime is pivotal to understanding today's brand of nationalism and competitive culture, along with the government's relationship not only with the private sector, but with its citizens. Park's policy brought not only prosperity to the nation, but also an economic model that granted both military government and the democratic government that came later notable influence over industry and the economy. Park rallied his people to follow this model in the name of national pride.

During the years of Park's presidency until his assassination in 1979, Park was able to implement a stronghanded "economic nationalism" to drag the country out of poverty and dependence on foreign aid. Moreover, he reinforced the government's partnership with the entrepreneurial elite, working closely with large, family-owned conglomerates known as *chaeböls* (재벌) (Kim 51). The state provided exemptions and special rates for utilities as long as these families' business plans aligned with the state's development plans (Woo 149). However, the state did not offer their support without securing results; in exchange of the special treatment these conglomerates received, the state monitored their performance and productivity, and actively encouraged similar industries to compete with each other in order to keep companies efficient and prevent any *chaeböl* from achieving monopoly over any industry.

Throughout the years of Park's time as president, the importance of "freeing the nation" and making the country "strong and independent through economic development" (Seth, *A*

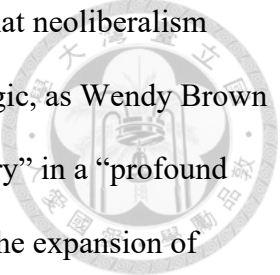


*Concise History* 373) became a matter of “national pride,” as South Korea was eager to cast off its role as America’s “economic ward” while struggling to compete with North Korea’s expanding industrial sector. Park was reluctant to close off imports to support the growth of local industries. Yet, during the 1960s, he started to lift restrictions and accept direct foreign investment to further improve basic infrastructures, once the country’s economy had exceeded significant growth. However, tighter restrictions on foreign investment were implemented as the state shifted to invest more in heavy industry, along with a growing desire to become economically self-reliant. Park’s government would eventually play a bigger role to aid and guide industrial development in South Korea, where the beginnings of now-famous conglomerates like Samsung and LG first received aid and support from the government in the early 1970s (Seth, “[South Korea’s Economic Development](#)” 8).


Under Park’s rule, South Korea achieved seemingly impossible prosperity via authoritarian government propaganda that ensured the nation and its people would not stop until shedding off its colonial roots. In the process of investing and aiding domestic industries to compete and achieve promising results, the government exercised its role as a “big parent,” instilling both faith and control in its people as they transformed the country from a mendicant ally of western powers into an economic and nationalist powerhouse. The sense of nationalism and pride weaved into the fabric of post-World War II South Korean society, even if subject to various criticisms today, still propels society with the same entrenched mentality of survival. Michael J. Seth points out how this was “in part a legacy of the colonial economic experience”, something that both Koreas and Japan experienced by implementing a sense of “ethnic-racial nationalism” to its citizens (Seth, *A Concise History* 273). Notions of extreme competitiveness, nationalism, and a strong urge to claim an identity untainted by dominant western values are still

heavily embedded in today's democratic South Korea. In addition to the nation's response and survival mentality evoked through colonial trauma, the current democratic South Korean government continues to extend its power over various industries and tech sectors as well as K-Pop (Lie 114) and K-Beauty power houses, supporting and controlling them in order to commodify any aspect deemed Korean and cultivate an image of unbridled economic success in direct competition with the West.

Regulated market expansion and a high level of state interference have left Park's stronghanded policies open to criticism. Recent scholars have credited Park's authoritarian government with both generating economic miracles while ushering in neoliberalism in the twenty-first century. Prior to making the connection with South Korea's historical and economic development after the Japanese repatriation in 1945, it is crucial to retrace the roots of neoliberal ideology and theory. According to David Harvey, neoliberalism proposes that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills with in an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2). David R. Shumway addresses the term "neoliberalism," a term people use when they are trying to refer to "capitalism." Shumway clarifies that we are living through a "neoliberal stage of capitalism" (1). Harvey further explains how neoliberalism encourages to "bring all human action into the domain of the market" (3). While neoliberalism and capitalism are often confusingly (mis)used interchangeably, the nuance that defines their differences helps clarify how post-war South Korea is more-likely associated with "neoliberalism". The term "neoliberalism" is often associated with licensing capital, leashing labor, demonizing the social state and the political, attacking equality, and promulgating freedom (Brown 2). Prior to Brown's observations, Harvey emphasizes that neoliberal pushes for the "assumption that individual



freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market” (7). Shumway argues that neoliberalism started out not as a political program, but an ideology (1). The neoliberal logic, as Wendy Brown explains, permeates our everyday lives, as it has “shaped recent world history” in a “profound sense” (17). While neoliberalism offers an approach to obtaining freedom, the expansion of capitalism and its ongoing influence over the global market did not initially lead to more freedom, but ushered a deepening of state control, where socialist alternatives during the post-war period facilitated compromise between capital and labor (Harvey 16). Such socialist advancements served as a threat to the economic elites and ruling classes, and as Harvey concludes: “neoliberalism was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power” (16). By considering how neoliberalism encourages a system that favors the elite, one might recognize how anti-democratic neoliberalism becomes and the similarities it shares with authoritarianism. Jini Kim Watson, in *Cold War Reckonings: Authoritarianism and the Genres of Decolonization*, points out how neoliberal pursuits played an instrumental role in enabling authoritarianism to take place in East Asia. As previously mentioned, the South Korean state had definite control and incentive to support and partner with business conglomerates, therefore containing both resources and power to the authoritarian state and private industries. In order to guarantee productive economic outcomes and decolonize the nation, the state’s power expanded tremendously (Watson 25). Simply put, in order to “protect” and enable a “free economy,” state intervention was invited to guarantee both decolonization and the power of a free market. Countries like Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea were only capable of becoming neoliberal economies by allowing the authoritarian state to facilitate decolonization. This echoes Brown’s contention of the antidemocratic perils of a neoliberal government and Linda Weiss’s take on the “The Myth of the Neoliberal State,” where she contends that the state’s “power” was



never out of business (27). John Gray responds on a similar note to Raymond Plant's *The Neoliberal State* and clarifies the nature of neoliberalist practices by arguing that the necessity for invasive measures taken by the government automatically creates an increase in state power (qtd. in Weiss 28). Through an attempt to exorcize Japanese and American influences after World War II, Park's government created a fertile environment for neoliberalist policies to blossom, as the nation strived to bring about economic success. In addition to market expansion policies that exploit laborers, an innate need to shed all forms of "incapacity" pervades the neoliberal mindset. This is essential to understanding how curative violence occurs and how cosmetic surgery becomes a medium to further perpetrate the mentality to constantly improve and self-govern in South Korean society.

The military mobilization Park implemented during his time as president and his contribution to turning South Korea into a neoliberal state deeply affected South Korean women. Citizenship in South Korea was, as Seungsook Moon states, gendered. Prior to the state's heavy industrialization during the 1970s and 1980s, South Korean women contributed significantly to the economy during the 1960s. Women who were economically active in the manufacturing industries grew from 28.6 percent to 43.5 percent between the 1960s and 1980s. However, despite rising educational levels for women and an increase demand for women in the service industry, women's participation in the economy faced resistance after the mid-1980s (Moon 70). During military rule, the aim to build a "modern industrial economy" brought forth policies that marginalized women, "producers" now turned into "reproducers." According to the state, family planning was crucial to economic development. Women were excluded from the industrial sector and vocational training programs taught them to be responsible for managing their households. Moreover, the gap between women's ability to generate capital and profit in society has widened,

making it impossible for them to pay taxes and remain valued citizens, which in turn also prevented them from obtaining agency over their individual identities.

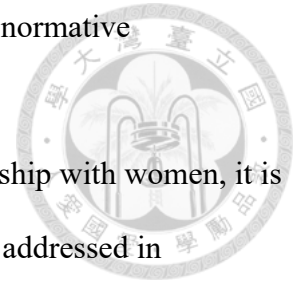


Although middle-class Korean women have managed to retain economic independence through educational outlets, their membership in society has undergone numerous renegotiations over the years. This includes the abolishment of the “military extra-points system” after the 1997 economic crisis (Moon 162). Prior to its abolishment, the military-points system earned men who had served in the military privileges and served to exclude women from the labor market. However, despite the fact that South Korean women eventually earned better opportunities to renegotiate their value as members of society as the role of the military and authoritarian state became less prominent, the outcomes of an expanding free market in a post-democratized South Korea have made it specifically dire for working-class women, whose rights as members of society have been eroded by market expansion and economic restructuring. This is mainly due to the fact that South Korean society still struggles to enforce boundaries between private and public spheres, which ultimately situates women as domesticated subjects. By denying women equal standing in the labor force, economic marginalization continues to affect women. A lack of access to capital and equal opportunities continues to disengage women from both social and political spheres, thus undermining their needs in South Korean society. When working in the labor force no longer guarantees any chance to achieve upward mobility, other measures are taken as a response to the policies of the past and the present market. Ruth Holiday and Joanna Elfving-Hwang point out how South Korean women adapt the pursuit of beauty as a means to divorce themselves from their maternal body by taking on features that suggest overt sexuality more than fecundity (72).

## Cosmetic Surgery and the Beauty Myth

The quest for aesthetic improvement in physical appearance exists in numerous forms. However, as Kathy Davis contends, it did not intend to come forth as an “intervention to femininity” as it has unfolded internationally today (5). In fact, as Iris Marion Young puts it, it meant a “scaling of bodies” where “[a]ll bodies can be located on a single scale whose apex is the strong and beautiful youth and whose nadir is the degenerate” (224). Sandra Gilman, in *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*, explains how early forms of cosmetic surgery in early-twentieth-century Europe and the United States served to eradicate racial attributes. These practices helped certain ethnicities “pass” as acceptable human beings (27). Consequently, cosmetic surgery assisted in perpetrating a racist culture, as preventative criminal screenings relied on identifying the physiognomy of nonwhite men (and later, women). In addition to Gilman’s take on how pursuing “good” or eliminating association with “criminality” offers relative control to what is seen as “bad” or “unpredictable,” scholars like Widdows mention something similar to how the effort to become better looking proves that one is a better person who has taken the agency to improve oneself (28). This echoes Lauren Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism,” as in many capitalist societies, the incentive to “improve” is fueled by a desire to change, and the promise of a fruitful outcome. However, in many cases, this outcome is an illusion that serves to manipulate those at a disadvantage to succumb to hierarchal inequalities. What makes Cha’s novel interesting is that it illustrates how women navigate through the illusion of cruel optimism. This is especially prominent through Ara’s and Wonna’s roles, as the former chooses to remain mute—therefore debilitated—and finds solace through sisterhood and K-Pop fandom, while the latter pursues motherhood as a mode of self-fulfillment, rather than a career in a misogynistic society. Through realigning the definition of happiness outside the neoliberal area

of influence, both Ara and Wonna embrace lifestyles that go against heteronormative conventions yet suffice to redefine happiness and success for them.



Prior to delving into the history of cosmetic surgery and its relationship with women, it is important to address how the “surgical act of altering one’s appearance” is addressed in contemporary culture. The terms “plastic” surgery and “cosmetic” or “aesthetic” surgery are two entirely different practices often used interchangeably today. According to the American Board of Cosmetic Surgery (ABCS), the term “cosmetic surgery” refers to surgical practices that improve or aim to perfect the aesthetic appeal of the individual’s physical appearance, whereas “plastic surgery” refers to reconstructive surgery treating bodily defects due to birth disorders, trauma, burns, and disease. The misuse of this terminology invites a more critical look at the notion of surgical approaches meant to alter one’s appearance. For instance, although surgery aimed towards improving one’s physical appearance is officially acknowledged as “cosmetic surgery” in Korea, Cha refers to the practice as “plastic” surgery in both the novel and an interview with the *New York Times* (Seligson, “Author Frances Cha on Achieving the Feminine Ideal”). Interestingly, the *Times* does not make the same mistake, as the interviewer’s questions err on the phrase “cosmetic surgery.” This is worthy of inspection mainly because it sheds light on how cosmetic surgery holds a different connotation in the way society views these procedures.

However, in the last couple of years, in the course of the growing popularity and normalization of cosmetic surgery, discourses concerning the faults and merits of cosmetic surgeries invite analyses that go beyond endorsement and disapproval. The use of “cosmetic,” “plastic,” or “reconstructive” surgery to describe the use of surgical methods to alter one’s physical appearance blurs the lines between surgery for medical purposes and the pursuit of



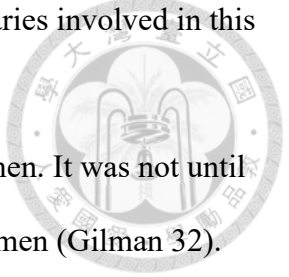
aesthetic appeal. As mentioned earlier, Cha herself uses “cosmetic surgery” to address the phenomenon. In Korean, although there are technical distinctions between the application of surgery to achieve cosmetic or “reconstructive” means, the colloquial and popular use remains “cosmetic surgery.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in Mandarin—I refer to Mandarin because Korean language and culture have Sino-Chinese roots—the terms are also ambiguous, tending to confound aesthetic preference and medical necessity. For example, cosmetic surgery is most likely referred to as *zhěng xíng* (整形), which translates as “fixing,” “managing,” or “(re)-organizing” the “form.” At first glance, the terms seem to refer to “reconstructive surgery,” which, like the English term, originally referred to surgery aimed to cure pathologized impairments, not aesthetic flaws. *Zhěng xíng* (整形) is continuously used in colloquial Chinese for any form of body-altering surgical intervention, while the cosmetic surgery industry has been pushing for umbrella terms like *yixué měiróng* (醫學美容) in recent years. *Yixué měiróng* translates roughly as “beautification” (*měiróng* 美容) through medical intervention (*yixué* 醫學 refers to medicine). However, *yixué měiróng* (醫學美容) often refers to smaller interventions that subtly improve someone’s face (Botox, fillers, and laser facial treatments, to name a few). As cosmetic surgery becomes normalized across nations, society morphs from being judgmental towards every single individual who undergoes cosmetic surgery to looking for positive outlooks and alternative ways

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<sup>8</sup> Cosmetic surgery is often referred to as 성형수술 (Cosmetic/ plastic). However, according to Samsung Hospital’s official website, the technical difference is noted by adding either 미용 (beauty) for cosmetic surgery aimed to enhance physical appeal, or 재건 (reconstruction) to refer to “reconstructive surgery”. In colloquial Korean, people usually do not point out the difference between “beauty” surgery and “reconstructive” surgery. Any type of cosmetic/plastic surgery is commonly referred to as 성형수술 among native speakers. Unlike in English, what makes something “plastic” or “cosmetic” is often lost in translation, yet it is simultaneously interesting to observe this fluid transition between “plastic” and “cosmetic” while contextualizing the sense of normalcy surrounding cosmetic surgery in South Korea.




to comprehend, accept, and remain critical of the cultural and moral boundaries involved in this practice.



Most aesthetic surgery patients in the late nineteenth century were men. It was not until the 1990s that aesthetic surgery become predominantly oriented toward women (Gilman 32). However, based on Gilman’s findings, social acceptance of men undergoing aesthetic surgery has been much higher than for women. Prior to acknowledging the percentage of male patients participating in cosmetic surgery, scholars have long debated whether aesthetic surgery delivered agency or imposed control over the female body. As Gilman writes: “A history of aesthetic surgery solely from the perspective of gender would distort the role and definition of the patient as well as the surgeon” (31). Kimberly Ellena Bergman argues that, when women started to seek aesthetic surgery more frequently, they shouldered heavier scrutiny over why they were “unhappy” with their physical features, thus marking the start of the shunning of female aesthetic surgery pursuits since the late 1990s (qtd. in Gilman 33). The scrutiny of women who obtain cosmetic surgery situates the discussion over the merits and shortcomings of aesthetic surgery along with the technological advancements that accompany it into a gendered debate. From the moment female happiness was called into question, the discourse concerning women’s relationship with aesthetic surgery became a power struggle between women and the patriarchy.

While many condemn the structural power dynamics that entice women to fix their aesthetic deficiencies, post-millennium scholarship has questioned the lack of account for the perspectives and experiences of “real women.” In her book *Dubious Equalities & Embodied Differences*, Kathy Davis emphasizes not the need to condone cosmetic surgery, but the choice to find a “balancing act” that helps scholars understand “why women might view cosmetic surgery as their best—and, in some cases—only option” (4). Susan Bordo and other feminist scholars



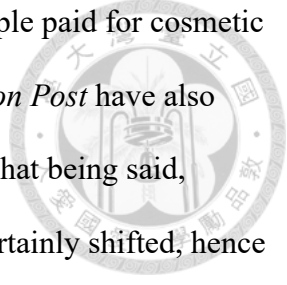
have pointed out Davis's failure to acknowledge systemic inequalities manifest in women's choices to obtain cosmetic surgery (qtd. in Davis 10). Moreover, plenty of the discourse around cosmetic surgery points out problems concerning the manipulation of body images through consumer culture (Hua 146), or how the act of surgically altering one's "natural" appearance demonstrates and untruthful representation of oneself (Pitts-Taylor 17). The focus on the implications of popularizing or even normalizing cosmetic surgery have often been associated with women in early feminist scholarship (Alsop and Lennon 97), situating women as the primary victims of both patriarchal power dynamics and toxic consumerism. However, as Davis writes again in *Cosmetic Surgery: A Feminist Primer*, "[w]e simply cannot afford the comfort of the correct line" (42). Davis goes on to argue that feminist scholars should keep the conversation open in order to explore what makes cosmetic surgery both popular and problematic.

Davis's observations situate cosmetic surgery as a pathway to acquire normalcy while acknowledging how the intersectionality of culture, class, and race influence the individual's decision to obtain surgery. Aesthetic surgery today is even more normalized, and with rapid technological and medical advancements in both Eastern and Western medicine, the surgical aspect of these procedures becomes less and less prominent. Furthermore, the burgeoning popularity of aesthetic surgery creates a new form of "normalcy" that singles out those who do not obtain it. Virginia Blum states that "any of us will decide to have surgery just to keep up. With the surgeries of others" (109). Gagne and McGaughey have pointed out that "it is through looking that we are constituted as subjects and objects" (816). This resonates with the notion that women only alter the way they look to fit the normalcy of the social gaze. From a disability studies perspective, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains this phenomenon as "staring," which

offers an “occasion to rethink the status quo. Who we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not” (6).

While the normalization of cosmetic surgery still pushes for deeper conversations and empathy on both sides of the debate, agency, as Anthony Giddens contends, has become a term easily targeted because the individual is incapable of making decisions without basing them on his or her “knowledges of society” (qtd. in Davis 40). Davis refers to Giddens’s argument and further suggests that scholars who simply categorize women as “cultural dopes” take the easier route to comprehend the phenomenon. Instead, by viewing these women as “competent actors” with an “intimate knowledge of society,” Davis contends that the reason behind why cosmetic surgery is both the problem and the solution becomes understandable (40). Cressida Heyes and Meredith Jones state that aesthetic surgery is “increasingly marketed as an everyday option for ordinary women (and men), and its recipients cross lines of class, age, occupation, and national context” (8). Yet, despite the fact that more contemporary works across both cultural and media disciplines have started to indicate that women who undergo plastic surgery see it as a form of agency where they take control over the narrative, the surgeon still monopolizes the process and its methodology. How can we approach agency for the patient when the procedures undertaken are mostly manipulated by the surgeon performing it?

In a similar vein, Cha’s novel contributes a third way of looking at what cosmetic surgery means to those women who obtain it in South Korea today. Nearly a decade ago, cosmetic surgery seemed overtly practiced in South Korea, which, based on the International Survey on Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures Performed in 2011, counted around 650,000 cosmetic procedures performed in a year (ISAP 2011). Yet, it is now widely normalized in America as well. Although Seoul still holds its reputation as the capital of cosmetic surgery, according to the latest available

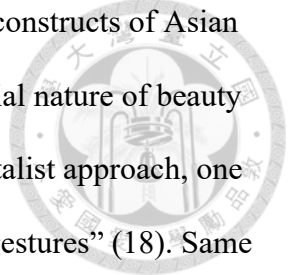


ISAP report, since 2018, United States and Brazil have had 2.8 million people paid for cosmetic surgery. Prominent media outlets like the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* have also addressed the growing popularity of cosmetic and plastic surgery (Giles). That being said, attitudes toward cosmetic surgery from a consumer's point of view have certainly shifted, hence the imperative to disentangle the underlying cultural and socio-economic nuances from the reasons behind obtaining cosmetic surgery, prior to directing more criticism towards it. This project builds on and expands these attempts to not only explore reasons behind both how and why cosmetic surgery is becoming more popular, but also whether there is space for a meaningful reading of the practice in the context of contemporary South Korean culture.

### **Ornamentalism and the Female Gaze**

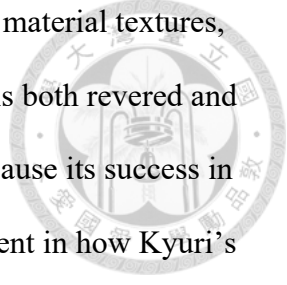
The relationship between disability, cosmetic surgery, and South Korean women is a complex web intertwined with history, politics, and culture. While the neoliberal mindset aims to improve and cure both the nation and the disabled/debilitated individual, the female relationship with beauty and cosmetic surgery becomes a subject of fixation for women and those who perpetuate the patriarchal gaze. This is due to the problematic nature of medical intervention in an ableist society and the various ways in which women perceive physical beauty. Whether it is to integrate, prove one's productivity, or for the sole purpose of self-fulfillment, women have many reasons to undergo cosmetic surgery, reasons resulting from personal as well as cultural and historical factors. Alternative modes of reading the relationship between cosmetic surgery and women should not be limited to either validating or rejecting this practice.

In the novel, while Ara marvels at how close to “natural” Kyuri's post-surgical face looks, Kyuri's roommate finds it “painfully plastic” (Cha 53). Anne Anlin Cheng, in her book



*Ornamentalism*, offers an insight into the “synthetic personhood” latent in constructs of Asian femininity, providing groundwork for the reader to acknowledge the artificial nature of beauty and femaleness. By examining Asian femininity through Cheng’s ornamentalist approach, one can perceive that “personhood is named or conceived through ornamental gestures” (18). Same way in which the women in *If I Had Your Face* refer to the “Cinderella Clinic” for cosmetic surgery as the “Pretty Factory,” the female body and identity are cemented as an object waiting to be adorned and serve itself as an embellishment to both their personal agendas and societal expectations. Furthermore, the female body is purposed to be functional, especially when it is aesthetically constructed. “What is the point of having a beautiful face if you don’t know how to use it?”—says Kyuri’s concerned mother (Cha 30). Here, Kyuri’s identity as the *hyo-nyeo* or “filial daughter” is not limited to neo-Confucianist interpretations, but rather conceived through her functional beauty as she uses it to bring in capital for her mother. Cheng’s framework fits seamlessly with Cha’s choice to deliver her narrative through women who are constantly observing each other. Each frame captures both the ornamental and decorative aspects of Asiatic femininity. *If I Had Your Face* is built on gazing, weaving a tapestry of women gazing, yearning, judging, and marveling at one another.

Through these gazes and long introspective flows, Cha addresses women’s relationship with beauty, ugliness, and cosmetic surgery. This intricate net of intertwined spectatorships evokes multiple senses of “otherness” as it bounces on and off the female protagonists. For example, Kyuri positions “ugly people” as the “other,” and those who are “ugly,” “rich,” and “lack effort” as deviant, despite embodying a prosthetic category of beauty herself that aims to pass as “natural.” Yet, at the same time, Kyuri is shunned as the “other” in “normal society” because of her plastic beauty and occupation as a salon girl. A post-surgical subject, Kyuri



transcends into the realm of the non-human. Her beauty is a culmination of material textures, deeming her a piece of “art” rather than a person (Cha 92). Kyuri’s beauty is both revered and degraded not only because it indexes a prosthetic amelioration, but also because its success in emulating human beauty threatens existing power hierarchies.<sup>9</sup> This is evident in how Kyuri’s naturally beautiful roommate, Miho, judges her condescendingly. In addition to Kyuri’s specific position regarding beauty and otherness, Sujin, Ara, and Miho all struggle with their backgrounds from an orphanage that housed “the disabled and deformed” (Cha 8), while Wanna tackles her past as the unwanted child in a dysfunctional family. The five women gaze, project, and live off both the yearning and inspection of their female companions, while reflecting on their own emotions and motives, slowly holding on to different modes of desires that help them cope with their positions as “freaks” in South Korean society.

These gazes convey a form of “queer desire” that operates outside heteronormative or erotic understandings of “desire.” The phrase “queer desires” invokes Elizabeth Grosz’s notion of an “exuberant, expansive fullness in perpetual movement and transformation” (qtd. in Farina 93). Teresa de Lauretis contends that “a queer text carries the inscription of sexuality as something more than sex” (de Lauretis 244). In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz contends that “[q]ueerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present” (1). While the women in Cha’s novel each struggle with pain, discrimination, and exclusion, it is their bond with each other that facilitates female longing propelling them onward to pursue their goals and dreams. In certain cases, they are urged to look

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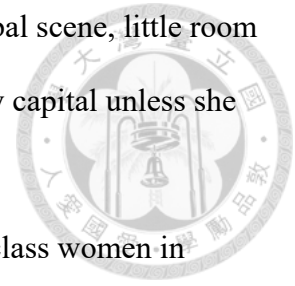
<sup>9</sup> In South Korean films like *200 Pounds Beauty* (2006) and the more recent television series *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* (2018), post-surgical women are seen as “monsters,” no longer “real women.” Interestingly, male protagonists make a noticeable effort to emphasize that the aesthetically “lacking,” pre-surgical female protagonists were “beautiful” or “talented” by merit, yet the “romantic” aspect of their relationships are only instigated after the female protagonists transform into breathtakingly beautiful women. It is also important to note that these narratives also feature female antagonists that despise post-surgery “beauties” because they conveniently “pass” as beautiful, therefore reaping the benefits beautiful women receive in society.

out for each other, while, in other cases, the sorority that they've created helps fuel their creative work. Specifically, the way Miho engages with Ruby and Kyuri is purely based on an obsession with the excessive beauty they embody. This obsession propels her creativity and artistic endeavors further throughout the novel. In engaging with Cheng's ornamentalist theories and viewing them through the different gazes between Cha's characters, additional modes of Asian femininity beyond their stereotypical understanding (i.e., compliant and passive) are offered a platform to be addressed and acknowledged.

## **Chapter Design**

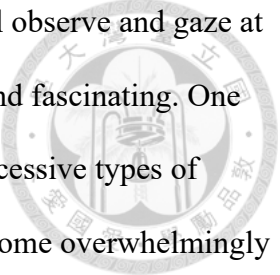
In the first chapter of this thesis, I address how disability is portrayed in Cha's novel by taking a closer look at how disability is embraced while facilitating women's agency in an ableist society such as South Korea. Although cosmetic surgery inspired the exploration of this thesis topic, it also led to an in-depth search on how disability and ableism are reflected through the intertwined character arcs in Cha's narrative. As an attempt to expand our understanding of how Cha chooses to portray women under misogynyny and in various positions of debility, I look into how Ara, Sujin, and Wanna address their own encounters with disability. Sujin's ugliness is a disability conditioned through societal structures. These societal structures and values reject the lack of productivity that comes with an aesthetically displeasing face. Without a pretty face, Sujin has no advantage at any line of work because her looks do not facilitate positive connections with potential clients or employers. For those like Sujin, an aesthetically displeasing face is seen as a form of disability by South Korean society because it debilitates her from creating profit in a short period of time. Working-class women like Sujin are affected by the constructed debilitation within the context of South Korean post-war economic development. Due to the nation's

desperate need to generate profit and obtain economic influence in the global scene, little room for unproductivity is tolerated, making it impossible for Sujin to obtain any capital unless she cures her ugliness.



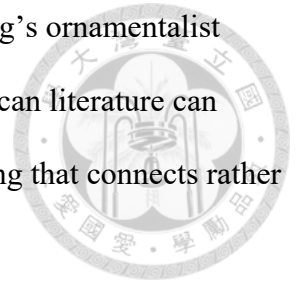
However, beauty is not the only criteria that leaves these working-class women in debilitated states. Cha's two other characters pursue neither beauty nor a cure. Instead, they voluntarily position themselves in a conventionally vulnerable position as a way to reclaim control over their lives, desires, and needs. I draw a connection between South Korea's gendered citizenship and its effect on younger women by examining how Cha's characters utilize disability as a way to respond to their gendered and discriminated status. Ara's own traumatic incident leaves her (oddly arbitrarily, as Cha leaves it for the reader to piece together what might have happened) perpetually mute. Yet, rather than seeking ways to regain her speech, Ara cocoons herself in her mute bubble, and through Cha's purposely planned narrative structure, becomes the voice of clarity and nuance in the group. Lastly, although Wanna is relatively well-off and financially stable in comparison to Ara and Sujin, and well aware of the misogyny that dominates her workplace, she still chooses to pursue pregnancy as a means to compensate for the emotional turmoil she went through during her childhood. Wanna actively seeks to become the discriminated woman who retreats back to her domestic role as a caregiver because it offers her a choice to embrace and accept something that she can call her own. These women and their respective choices to go beyond "accepting" an already disabled physical state or position in society, rather they proactively intensify their disabled status as a means to retain control, or fight back against a status quo that trivializes women's experiences and the trauma imposed on them as children or adolescents in South Korea.





In the second chapter, I focus on how the five women in Cha's novel observe and gaze at each other while yearning for opposing qualities that they either desire or find fascinating. One of the key components that drives these modes of gazing is related to the excessive types of beauty created by cosmetic surgery. As a practice, cosmetic surgery has become overwhelmingly normalized in most developed nations. With more capital invested in and increased access to the latest medical technology, it is essential to explore options outside of blind support or one-sided criticism on the matter. I borrow Anne Anlin Cheng's notion of "ornamentalism" and delve into the topic from a post-human perspective. Disability studies has a longstanding history with associating synthetic forms of humanity with disabled individuals who seek cure. What ornamentalism offers is a way to revisit both the "decorative" and "synthetic" nature of Asian women through history, culture, literature, and art. Cheng proposes that the peripheral nature of Asian women as adornments of mainstream culture and feminism defines their femininity as object-human hybrids that surpass conventional understandings of what it means to be a female, Asian human being. By applying Cheng's concept to the reading of Cha's characters, Kyuri and Miho, we discern a form of female gazing, desire, and admiration that strengthens the sisterly bonds between these women. I start by understanding how cosmetic surgery is perceived and understood in Korean culture, as an attempt to investigate how these women navigate their sense of self, normalcy and identity in modern-day Seoul. South Korean women's pursuit of an ideal physical appearance promotes ableism and perpetrates the exploitation of the working class. South Korea's post-colonial and post-war history invites a deeper understanding of a culture so prone to obtaining cosmetic surgery. In other words, considering the state's relationship to its citizens and the timeline of events after the Korean War, the trajectory of South Korea's economic development and the manifestation of cultural norms are in many ways unique to the

nation's historical and geopolitical conditions. Lastly, by factoring in Cheng's ornamentalist concept, I will further explore how contemporary women in Korean American literature can redirect their pursuit of beauty and social and self-acceptance into something that connects rather than divides.



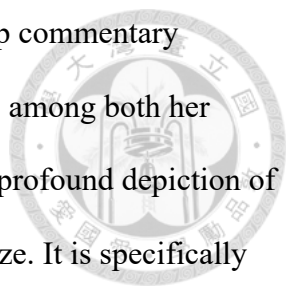
## Chapter One:

### Disability, Cosmetic Surgery, and Women



Cha's novel portrays women who engage with disabilities and the need for a cure from varying perspectives. Whether it is pursuing the cure that allows the individual to attain capital, embracing one's existing disability, or voluntarily seeking out a debilitating condition, three of Cha's seemingly less fortunate characters provide the reader with a closer look at how women in South Korean society respond to disability. It is curious to explore disability as represented through these characters, because none of them fall into the dichotomy of, on the one hand, the "disabled hero" (what Eli Clare calls "supercrip narratives [2]) and, on the other, the stereotypical, pitiful "impaired in need."

The first character, Sujin, represents a woman trying to shed her ugliness by seeking a cure. Her trajectory exemplifies how cure is desired and needed for the individual to be part of South Korean society. Curiously, Sujin's quest to overcome her disability—that being ugliness—is not particularly revered or affirmed by her peers. In fact, she is pitied and ridiculed for her choice to pursue a cure. Moreover, Sujin, while gravitating among the women in the novel, does not have any chapter told from her own perspective. Whereas Ara, Kyuri, Miho, and Wanna each alternate between chapters to provide their points of view on the ongoing events, Sujin only exists as a recollection of their experiences and memory. This, however, emphasizes the significance of her role and the function of her character precisely because her voice is not heard directly from her own perspective. Cha's choice to only allow third-person accounts of Sujin while positioning her as the facilitator who helps her friends achieve their goals invites the reader to examine her character arc.



The second character, Ara, is a mute hairdresser that delivers a sharp commentary through her silent observations. Although she does not have an active voice among both her peers and inner circle, Ara's point of view through the novel brings forth a profound depiction of what the world looks like and how reality is amplified through her silent gaze. It is specifically because Ara chooses a passive role as the mute hairdresser whose communication perpetually falls one step behind, that her active observations resonate loudly despite her silence. Due to the fact that Ara does not need to waste additional energy to verbally communicate, she is offered a more flexible amount of time to both experience her disabled condition and address the way society reacts to her muteness. It is also worth noticing that Ara does not seek to artificially change her appearance, rather engages in a profession that is based on artificially altering one's appearance. Ara aims to enhance the appearance of one's hair, and the criteria she uses to assess the appeal of one's hair rejects the natural condition of "raw" untouched hair. Rather than being fixed, Ara fixes others. Rather than being taken care of, Ara chooses to be independent. The paradox between her passive physical state and her active mindset magnifies her point of view in the novel.

Lastly, the third character in this chapter is Wonna, an observant neighbor whose past and present demons urge her to obsess over the need to conceive a child. Wonna's role allows us to glimpse at the harsh realities women face in a neoliberal society. However, Wonna's choice to seemingly regress back into the maternal aspects of her femininity and the debilitating state it situates her in, offers a progressive and bold outlook on how rejecting an ableist system can be much more satisfying for the individual.

Cha's account on women in South Korea is a direct response to the nation's longstanding history of mobilizing women to help attain economic goals, yet keeping them at the periphery of

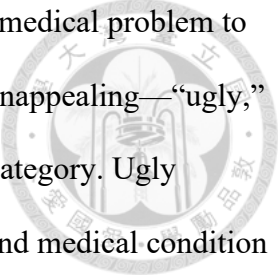
the power dynamics that propel the nation's current dominance in global markets. The combination of womanhood and disability in this chapter subordinates the narrative to the vantage point of marginalized others, where the interstitial nature of their condition and desires opens up alternative modes of achieving self-actualization and self-fulfillment. Ara, Sujin, and Wanna each represent a type of peripheral existence. Unlike Kyuri and Miho, these women do not live their lives under the limelight. The trauma, violence, and neglect they experience on a daily basis is heavily associated with their gender, their debility, and their socio-economic status. By taking a closer look at these women's responses to the curative violence that is expected of them via South Korean constructions of disability, this chapter focus on the histographies of the relationship women share with capitalism, ableism, disability, cure, and cosmetic surgery, while also inviting alternative readings that aim to initiate positive interpretations of illness and disability.

### **Capitalism, Disability, Able-mindedness, and Cosmetic Surgery**

The relationship between disability and cosmetic surgery resides in a liminal space that is often the product of an ableist mindset. Traditionally speaking, disability is commonly associated with being handicapped, a condition in which a distinctive impairment (mental or physical) prevents the individual from contributing the expected minimum to a functioning labor market.<sup>10</sup> For those who choose to acquire varying forms of cosmetic surgery to improve their appearance, to be aesthetically lacking in physical attributes becomes a deficiency from an economic perspective. If disability is a condition, as Marta Russel and Ravi Malhotra state, “conventionally

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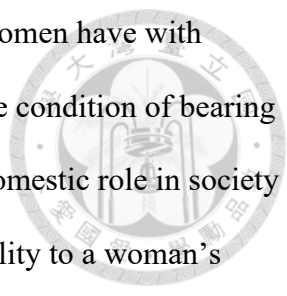
<sup>10</sup> According to Richard Jenkins, both terms are neither mutually exclusive nor mutually inclusive. Jenkins points out that “not all disability produces handicaps.” The use of “handicap” in this article refers mostly to “economic handicap” (Jenkins 563), a status whose divergence from normality hinders the individual's ability to join the labor force.



regarded as a personal tragedy which the individual must overcome, or as a medical problem to which the individual must become adjusted” (15), then being aesthetically unappealing—“ugly,” in laymen’s terms—situates South Korean women closer to the “disabled” category. Ugly women are expected to change their appearance to overcome both tragedy and medical condition in the real world, for their appearance is seen as a hindrance to their performance and value in society. Inadvertently, the type of “inability” that comes from those who are labeled “ugly” is situated between the extremes of visibility and invisibility. N. Ann Davis sheds light on the term “invisibly disabled,”<sup>11</sup> as a condition where the individual’s medical condition is severe enough to affect their ability to comply with social norms, yet not visible enough for them to secure assistance in a timely matter (154). Individuals who obtain surgery in order to “cure their ugliness,” display conditions that are eerily visible and invisible. They are visible enough to be seen as an aesthetic anomaly, severe enough to seek both medical and surgical intervention, yet invisible in the sense that such practices are not seen as legitimate “medical needs,” therefore the condition of being “unproductively ugly” is often ignored, and at many times disapproved as a legitimate condition. Unlike most medical conditions, the road towards cure and the path of healing is hardly celebrated in the realm of cosmetic surgery. Both the lack of action in overcoming a tragically unappealing body, and the gesture of adjusting to conventional beauty standards, leave women who undertake cosmetic surgery in conjunction with perpetual scrutiny as a constant Other.

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<sup>11</sup> Although Davis refers to those who are “invisibly disabled” as individuals who are denied immediate or timely medical attention due to their conditions or symptoms being relatively discrete, I would like to borrow her term and point out that those who are aesthetically unappealing (based on societal standards and norms regarding physical appearance) are situated in an area where their disability (ugliness) is both visible and invisible precisely because their need for medical interference is often misconstrued as trivial, vain, and unnecessary. As Davis also points out, appearance-based stigmatization towards visible disabilities is also an issue. While being physically lacking in beauty, the individual’s disability is both invisible and visible as it bears both the stigma of a dysfunctional appearance, but also the lack of validation for the engagement in medical assistance.

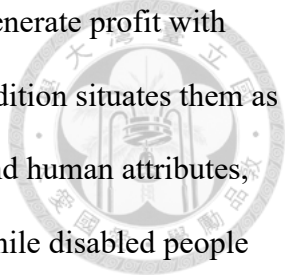


Another example of being “invisibly disabled” lies in the relation women have with patriarchal systems. This is particularly evident when it comes to the female condition of bearing the reproductive responsibility to sustain a capitalist economy. Women’s domestic role in society has long been seen as a necessity to the economy yet simultaneously a liability to a woman’s professional development. Seungsook Moon states that women in the 1970s (and still today) were cast as “breeders” and “housewives.”<sup>12</sup> The very essence of their gender has made South Korean women both vessels to help fuel the nation’s economic gains, but also to sustain the growth and quality of the country’s population. In other words, marginalized women are exploited and commodified as perpetual “others,” regardless of their actual significance to a burgeoning society. Yet, unlike those with medical conditions diagnosed as forms of mental or physical disabilities, a woman’s relationship with her uterus is not recognized as a disadvantage that deserves assistance, let alone “cure.” In fact, the notion of cure for gender discrimination is for the woman to cure her “unproductive femininity” and overcome it by adopting masculine qualities at the work place. However, even after adopting these masculine qualities, women are still expected to deliver more to the table than men. This means that, even after the woman is cured and has morphed into a masculine-like state, she is still rejected and exploited by society.

Marginalized individuals whose physical, mental and even social impairments are overlooked by society end up becoming vessels for both public and private organizations to reap profit from their disabled condition, even when they are acknowledged as people in need. Participants of cosmetic surgery are inevitably commodified (Russel & Malhotra 16) by being *both* physically impaired and physically repaired. The former condition labels them as

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<sup>12</sup> Seungsook Moon explains how South Korean “family planning” (a euphemism for population control) policies were implemented in the 1970s as an attempt to confine women to the “domestic sphere.” Prior to these policies, women were very much mobilized with men to work in factories while the government was trying for the state to accomplish military modernity (69).



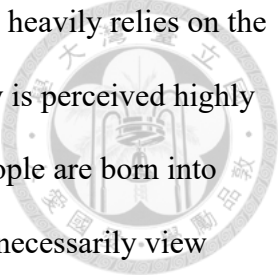
unproductive individuals in a capitalist economy, due to their inability to generate profit with physical attributes that fit the concept of normalcy in society; the latter condition situates them as artificial “monsters” that symbolize both deceit and a hybrid of synthetic and human attributes, therefore positioning them as threats and outcasts to the “natural” order. While disabled people are denied the resources to achieve financial gain in a capitalist economy, they are unfortunately capitalized through institutionalized care centers to generate more value by profiting from the support of public financing (Russel & Malhotra 20). Cosmetic surgery works in the same way, as clinics thrive in cities like Seoul, creating a massive market that facilitates not only a lucrative medical industry, but also a blooming medical tourism industry, with customers visiting South Korea for both entertainment and medical purposes.

On top of being commodified prior to their surgical transformation, individuals are also ridiculed in order to fuel media content by internet-famous plastic surgeons on YouTube, influencers experienced with cosmetic surgery, and television shows that criticize post-surgical bodies. The need to either reject these artificially tailored faces from the norm or dismantle their visage of perfected looks, proves to nurture ratings on internet platforms. Needless to say, regardless of either identity these post-surgical subjects develop, these individuals are subject to ridicule and commodification by ableist parties.

### **Embracing and Desiring Disability: Rejecting Cure and Voluntary Amputation**

Prior to delving into how disability is represented and portrayed in Cha’s novel, it is crucial to address the controversial aspects of disability as approached in contemporary society. After all, each woman in Cha’s novel confronts a different type of ableism that hinders their ability to be accepted by society. Surprisingly, each one of them responds to disability in different ways.





Disability, at once a medical condition, emotional state, and social standing, heavily relies on the circumstances the subject is in relation to. The controversy of how disability is perceived highly depends on how normalcy—its opposite—is acknowledged. While most people are born into accepting and expecting to be part of the norm, there are others who do not necessarily view normalcy as a desirable option. The notion to reject normalcy can be seen through acts like rejecting cure, or, in much more extreme cases, voluntary amputation. For the former, the action stems from not only accepting disability as both condition and lifestyle, but also actively identifying with it and reaping the positive outcomes that come with identifying as disabled. A more common aspect of the positive attributes that come with identifying as disabled included heightened functions in other physical aspects, becoming part of a community that fits the individual's needs, developing different outlooks toward how life can be lived. However, for the latter, where the individual actively seeks to surgically remove parts of their body to align it with what they perceive as acceptable, the conversation over how to address these desires and actions becomes hard to untangle.

I would like to draw attention toward the notion of voluntary amputation. The condition is often associated with subjects who identify as having Body Integrity Identity Disorder, or apotemnophilia. These individuals are diagnosed with a psychological condition that believes that their understanding of a healthy body image can only be reached through amputation. Due to the seemingly destructive nature of amputating body parts, this phenomenon remains controversial. The discourse over whether voluntary amputation should be allowed very much reflects how disability is perceived in an ableist society. Christine Wieseler argues that a phenomenological approach towards the issue provides a deeper understanding of how society operates through ableist lens, and how voluntary amputees react to such societal norms (84). A

key argument to the practicality of supporting an amputee's decision, inevitably, and rather unfortunately, centers around how resources are allocated in society and who deserves them. As already mentioned, the costs that come with providing a friendly environment for disabled members to work or participate in are seen as additional costs at odds with a capitalist model that prioritizes productivity and efficiency. Therefore, the choice to actively become a cost to society is heavily scrutinized by those who are against medical professionals assisting voluntary amputation.

In addition to remaining critical of how society decides the allocation of resources, it is also crucial to approach voluntary amputation as a reflection of an individual's identity and not an illness that demands to be cured. Alexandre Baril engages with the phenomenon by labeling it "transability,"<sup>13</sup> rather than simply apotemnophilia.<sup>14</sup> Baril compares transability to transsexuality and further emphasizes that conventional approaches from disability studies remain limited by "rendering transabled bodies invisible (37). Psychological conditions associated with these choices are often labeled "disorders."<sup>15</sup> Slatman and Widdershoven argue that it is ethically justified to endorse the needs and desires of the amputee because "[s]omeone suffering from BIID may have the feeling that his or her experiences are not integrated in a meaningful unity" (49). Transabled individuals deserve the right to cultivate and pursue meaningful relationships with their bodies, rather than being pathologized for not accepting bodily norms imposed by society. Through contending that the individual is experiencing a form of mental illness, those who are against voluntary amputation believe that the individual does not

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<sup>13</sup> The term "transability" was first coined by Sean O'Connor (pseudonym), a man who claims to identify with this condition in 2009 (qtd. in Wieseler 91).

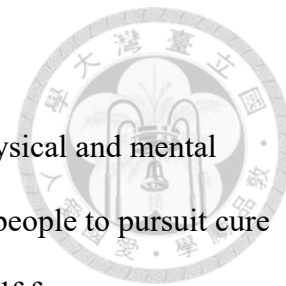
<sup>14</sup> Since the term "apotemnophilia," suggests a deviation from the norm with negative connotations, I will proceed to address "voluntary amputation" as "transability" for those who reject normative understandings of the body and would like to embrace what they perceive as ideal.

<sup>15</sup> Wieseler quotes Nikki Sullivan's claim on the problems of labeling BIID as a "disorder." According to Sullivan, "wannabes" suffer from living a life that is "out of place" (qtd. in Wiesler 99).

have the right mindset to arrive at an autonomous decision. Concerns about individuals who actively seek to pursue their own notion of bodily wholeness often stem from the assumption that apotemnophiliacs have addictive mental disorders. Such assumptions perpetrate ableist notions towards the human body. Furthermore, denying these subjects the autonomy they have themselves is a violation against the patient's own rights over their lives. If patients are granted the right to decide what types of medication to accept or avoid during their treatment (or whether to be treated at all), then individuals who have an innate need to alter their physical appearance and embrace disability should also be granted the same rights.

In the case of *If I Had Your Face*, we have characters like Sujin, who actively seeks for a cure, falling into the neoliberal trap of seeking improvement towards one's impairments. Yet for characters like Ara, rejecting cure becomes an act of defiance. Lastly, for Wonna, regressing into the traditional role of motherhood for women, albeit a stable career trajectory, signifies as an active choice to embrace the debilitating state of femininity in South Korean society. This is not to claim that being pregnant becomes physically impairing, but both the labor that comes with the pregnancy and the time-consuming job of motherhood hinders a woman's productivity in society. In other words, not only does pregnancy return women to their role as reproductive vessels, it also denies them the right to contribute to society outside their role as mothers. Given South Korea's gendered policies during its military mobilization period, Wonna's choice to revisit the role of the mother and what motherhood signifies for the South Korean woman becomes a voluntary choice to embrace her own notion of personhood, regardless of it being debilitating for her as a woman in South Korea.

## Curative Violence, Disability, and the Nurturing Feminine



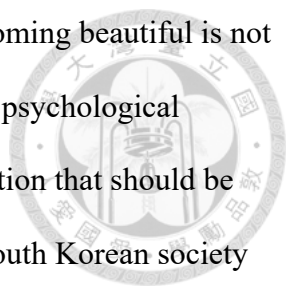
The curative violence that occurs in cosmetic surgery manifests in both physical and mental spheres for the participating individual. Yet the act of constantly enabling people to pursue cure stems from the nation's own colonial past. As South Korea had to drag itself from a disadvantaged state, the nation went through drastic and arguably controversial, successful stages or five-year plans that promoted industrialization and militarization. Moreover, as mentioned in the introduction, the nation struggled with an urgent need to improve and become a better nation as a way to compensate for the humiliation they experienced during postcolonial times. This cultural phenomenon does not come directly from the nation's pre-colonial past, but rather as an instigated response through Park Chung Hee's strategic attempts to push the country toward economic success.

Apart from the literal interference with the body's physical state, women experience varying degrees of scrutiny from South Korean society prior to their decision to obtain surgery and after completing their surgical procedures. The action of engaging in cosmetic surgery is driven by a plethora of factors such as socio-economic class, gendered policies in the workplace, Asian approaches towards physiognomy, and so forth. Though it can be argued that the act of taking charge of one's own appearance and destiny is a form of neoliberal self-empowerment, such approaches ignore the socio-economic factors that lead to the need to "improve" one's appearance to either survive, fit in, or feel happy. To accept self-empowerment through cosmetic surgery insinuates an insufficient understanding of the intertwined relationship between aesthetics, disability, cosmetic surgery, and capitalism. Yet as one treads through the complex factors that lead to the choice of engaging in cosmetic surgery, oversimplified statements to either support or condemn the practice fail to help both readers and scholars understand the

incentive that drives masses of the female population to pursue the practice. While it is crucial to remain critical towards the neoliberal notion to encourage the bettering of one's productivity and maximizing the individual's contributions to society, it is equally essential to examine both the limitations and potential cosmetic surgery brings to how women navigate their relationship with their bodies.

Sujin is the textbook example of a woman whose physical attributes place her unfavorably as a “disabled” individual, not only because of her identity as an orphan but also because she lacks the physical or aesthetic capital to be considered “useful” or “capable” in South Korean society. Sujin's face is “too square to be considered pretty in the true Korean sense” (Cha 4). Every part of her upbringing, mannerisms and appearance denotes her working-class upbringing and the disadvantages she has endured in life. Her social standing is so inferior that even her first attempt to “cure” or “fix” her appearance fails. As Ara, her best friend, puts it in the novel: “the fold on her right eyelid has been stitched just a little too high, giving her a sly, slanted look” (Cha 4). Sujin's previous endeavors to cure herself are, as she herself states, “a waste of money,” because the gap between the abnormal standard of beauty and Sujin's reality still situates her as the disabled other, regardless of her efforts.

Sujin suffers from appearances that devalue her productivity in society. Rather than attempting jobs that esteem labor and effort over physical attributes, as Ara has chosen to do, Sujin hurls herself into a job with only one defining requirement—beauty. Sujin is “hellbent on becoming a room salon girl” (Cha 3), states Ara at the beginning of the novel. Sujin's dream of raking in the profits of beauty signals an overreaching stretch from both her physical and economic standing. Yet, like many women from the orphanage she was raised in, both medically verified disabilities and aesthetically “displeasing” attributes she has been inevitably marked as



perpetually and irrevocably “disabled.” For Sujin, the intention behind becoming beautiful is not only driven by an emotional need to feel “good,” but also a combination of psychological distress and medical necessity. Although ugliness is technically not a condition that should be pathologized, the ubiquitous nature of cosmetic surgery in contemporary South Korean society medicalizes the practice as a cure for ugliness. As mentioned in my introduction, ugliness becomes a debilitating condition constructed by South Korean society. The extreme practice of lookism becomes a source of stress for those who are not blessed with appealing physical attributes, and beauty becomes a handy currency in South Korean society. When Sujin revisits old memories between her time with Sujin and Miho at the orphanage, she points out how Miho earned more affection for being both talented and “pretty” (Cha 149). In the same passage, she further emphasizes how Yunmi, another fellow peer at the Loring Center was liked because “she was so beautiful and she could sing”(149).<sup>16</sup> Both Miho and Yunmi received scholarships and additional support from the Loring Center because of their innate talents and, as Sujin coyly emphasizes, their physical beauty. Sujin believes that by becoming beautiful she is cured from the physical limitations that hinder her chances on becoming worthy of capital gain. According to Ara, Sujin is “obsessed with her looks” because the orphanage she grew up in is known for harboring the “disabled and deformed” (Cha 8). The Loring Center kids were also associated with “abandonment” and “delinquency.” The type of debilitation constructed by the society Ara, Miho, and Suji inhabited also pathologized their condition by claiming their misfortune to be “contagious” (Cha 138). These social markers made it necessary, as Miho depicts, for Sujin to “leave at the first chance she could” (Cha 139). By crawling out of poverty and reconfiguring the

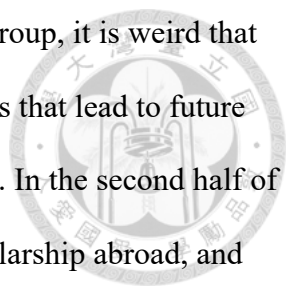
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<sup>16</sup> The Loring Center is the orphanage where Miho, Sujin, and Ara grew up.

pathological condition of her physical appearance, Sujin will not only be accepted as a woman worthy of affection in society, but also worthy of capital.

Sujin falls into the trap as the disabled “other” on account of her own actions, because she believes the cruel optimism, to borrow Berlant’s term, that neoliberal notions promise. Sujin is dead-set on changing her fate as an orphan by pursuing cosmetic surgery and becoming beautiful. By moving to Seoul, albeit lacking privilege, Sujin “carved out a life in Seoul, sliver by sliver, reporting back to the rest of us (her friends) that the word ‘Loring’ meant nothing to people there” (Cha 139). However, Cha’s choice to drive her character arc through the perspectives of other women accentuates the “lack” of understanding we truly have on Sujin’s emotions and intentions. Furthermore, it only serves to underscore the abject nature of Sujin’s position in relation to society. By depicting Sujin’s character from the lens of others, Sujin is deprived of any agency over her narrative, thus directly negating her free will. Sujin is portrayed as inadequate in every dimension, and only rewarded for constantly “trying,” her loyalty to her friends, and her demonstration of courage and determination in the face of adversity. In other words, Sujin is not only seen, but processed internally by both her friends and the reader as an individual whose only choice is to follow the neoliberal conundrum of “hustling” and “faking it till making it.” Sujin is both an example and a warning of what disadvantaged women both represent and become in a society that favors the myth of hard-earned success over being critical of systemic flaws that perpetrate inequality and an uneven distribution of resources.

However, while Sujin embodies the neoliberal conundrum of hustling, upward mobility, and systemic inequality, she also functions as a catalyst that enables both form and force of “progression” for her immediate circle of friends. In other words, Sujin is the one actively facilitating change for her friends through vigorous networking. While it is not clear whether



Cha intentionally orchestrates Sujin's role as the internal facilitator of the group, it is weird that Sujin is the one pulling the strings behind the scenes, secretly planting seeds that lead to future successes or progress for both her disabled/ugly and abled/beautiful friends. In the second half of the novel, we learn that it was Sujin who encouraged Miho to obtain a scholarship abroad, and that Sujin was the one who utilized her only connections to get both herself and Ara jobs in Seoul. Later on, she also returns Kyuri's favor for helping her receive treatment at the Cinderella Clinic<sup>17</sup> by recommending her as a consultant to the clinic. This gesture helps Kyuri move forward from her role as a salon girl, and step into a role that stations her as part of society, rather than remain an outcast. While one may argue against the ethics of pressuring women to pursue inclusion and an arguably perpetuated idea of "normalcy" societal norms enable, it is peculiar that Sujin becomes the secret ingredient that propels her community to become improved versions of themselves.<sup>18</sup> Cha's narrative does not aim to avoid criticism towards neoliberal expectations imposed on less appealing or underprivileged women in South Korean society, but rather attempts to prove that, despite their debilitated state, women like Sujin still remain valuable and meaningful to society.

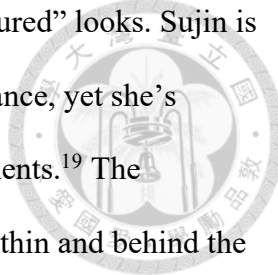
Sujin is guilty of fostering the neoliberal mindset, not because she has an alternative way out, but because she is merely forced to. However, she does prove the system wrong by offering

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<sup>17</sup> The Cinderella Clinic is a fictional clinic in the novel that specializes in cosmetic surgery. It is known for its success rate in transforming women into ideally beautiful beings. Sujin spends the first half of the novel begging Kyuri to reference her to the clinic's top surgeon for both a spot (in a long waiting line) and a discount. Eventually, Kyuri agrees to help, and Sujin secures an opportunity to receive a much more successful surgery, which, ultimately helps her become a room salon girl with newly improved looks.

<sup>18</sup> The debate over whether to encourage the neoliberal notion further to improve oneself consistently. The observations made towards the drive behind Sujin's role as group facilitator do not deny the need to critically examine and question the need for any individual to constantly pursue self-improvement as a positive outlook and approach towards life. However, the purpose of this thesis is to engage in extended conversations that aim to consider both the faults and merits of how women engage in the bandwagon of "hustling" and "improving" one's "imperfect" conditions. I want to focus on the function of Sujin's role and its implications for those suffering from an ableist setback.





support to her immediate circle of friends without needing to rely on her “cured” looks. Sujin is cast as an outsider through both narrative mechanisms and physical appearance, yet she’s handling the “inside job” of everyone’s personal and professional advancements.<sup>19</sup> The juxtaposition of her as both outsider and the person working things from within and behind the scenes is a refreshing reminder of how her disability—ugliness—and her lack of social standing—orphanhood—empowers her to become even more (if not productive) significant in setting positive change in motion for those around her. It is the very nature of “lack” that gives Sujin no option but to dive into “survival mode” and take initiative. Sujin does not have the luxury to critique the deficiencies of societal systems. This is a job for Cha, disability scholars, and the reader. While it is unfortunate that Sujin needs to try harder to survive without privilege, her character arc proves that her worth and contributions to society are not based on looks, but because she is genuinely a capable and giving person. The merit in Cha’s narrative is not to agree with the neoliberal mindset, but to offer another dimension to the debilitated subject. This is not to disagree with the problematic mindset of constantly pushing for “improvement,” but to acknowledge that Cha, by placing Sujin at the crux of both abject and miracle-worker,<sup>20</sup> helps us see how Sujin defies what disability limits the individual to accept and acknowledge. We must note that Cha neither agrees nor condemns Sujin’s quest towards beauty. In fact, through Ara’s and Kyru’s storylines, it is known that both of them pity Sujin for naively pursuing beauty and

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<sup>19</sup> By referring to Sujin as the person doing the “inside job,” I allude to her ability (intentional or not) to both orchestrate and instigate the necessary mechanisms required to help her friends progress. On top of that, the idea of “inside” also refers to the fact that very few people acknowledge or understand the gravity of her influence, which often misguides her role in the group as more peripheral rather than central. Sujin’s effect on the group is covert and works under the misunderstanding of who she is, what her intentions are and what she is actually capable of doing as a relatively “disabled” or person with a “disadvantage.”

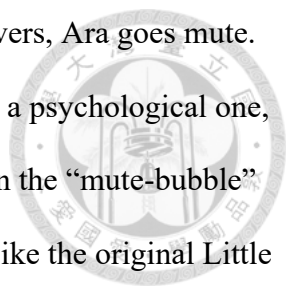
<sup>20</sup> The use of the term “miracle worker” serves as an attempt to point out how Sujin defies conventional expectations towards people with multiple disadvantages (in Sujin’s case, her lack of physical appeal and her lower social ranking). Not only does she propel herself towards her aspiration (albeit it being worthy of critical examination), Sujin also helps her friends create miracles and opportunities that otherwise, in a flawed capitalist system, would never occur without careful planning and bold strides.

the lifestyle of a salon girl. Yet, Sujin is hardly “naïve”, as it is shown at the end of the novel through Kyuri’s perspective. When asked about Miho’s current plan to dismantle her boyfriend’s life for cheating on her, Sujin comes up with shrewd and calculated suggestions that contrast with her usual image (Cha 255). Sujin’s awareness of her condition and the conditions of her friends is revealed when she points out how she helped Kyuri obtain her art scholarship. Sujin understands that society doesn’t favor the unfortunate: “The adults never think ahead about our future –to be fair, they’re busy putting out fires, with girls like me—but that’s why those of us out here are constantly looking for information for the younger ones” (256).

Sujin’s merit and her existence comes not from chasing a cure, and neither does Cha nor the reader place value in her post-surgical self. Rather, Sujin’s worth comes from the loyalty and solidarity she demonstrates with her women friends. When the perspective toward those who suffer from ableist attitudes and systems in our society today shifts, as Cha carefully crafts and depicts, they are no longer defined by their debilitation. Through acknowledging the merit and contribution these “imperfect” or “abnormal” individuals are capable of bringing to the table, can lift the “other” from being “rejected” to becoming “respected” and celebrated for a different type of “value” that they bring to both their lives and the lives of others.

### **Arbitrary Muteness, Conscience, and Embracing Disability**

While Sujin represents the individual who strives toward a cure, Ara finds peace with her disability. In fact, her muteness, although triggered psychologically, contributes more agency than her previous self. Ara, like Sujin and Miho, comes from the Loring Center, a place that collects “rejection” as it is a place for the disabled and “retarded” (Cha 139). However, unlike many of her peers at the Loring Center, Ara is not physically disabled to begin with. Yet after an



arbitrarily portrayed accident, a narrative choice that Cha intentionally delivers, Ara goes mute. It is unclear whether the muteness is conditioned by a physical condition or a psychological one, but Ara shows no intention to seek for a cure. Instead, she seems to thrive in the “mute-bubble” she has created around her. Ara’s muteness, despite taking away her voice like the original Little Mermaid(Cha 6), becomes her biggest advantage to self-fulfillment.<sup>21</sup> Her presence seems demure and reserved, yet Cha delivers the character with perhaps the sharpest and most profound voice in the novel. Unlike Sujin, whom Cha depicts through third person narratives from the other four characters, Ara has her own chapters, solely dedicated to her perspective toward the plot and the other women in the novel. Ara carefully dissects every single encounter she has with her friends, her clients at work, and her emotional attachment to her favorite K-Pop star, Taemin. Ara communicates in short notes from her notebook with others, but in the back of her mind, she assesses, justifies, and ruminates what she perceives as the truth behind everyone’s intentions. Ara’s entanglement and struggle with her position in South Korean society lies within internal struggles, while her relationship with those around her serve as both narration and analysis of the idiosyncrasies of what society looks like from the lens of a disabled individual. Moreover, Ara’s own understanding of her disability frees her from Sujin’s neoliberal mindset of careful self-governing and relentless self-improvement in order to be successful. Ara alludes to the original version of the little mermaid and emphasizes a form of self-love that other characters in the novel struggle to obtain. Like the mermaid’s bold attempt to find love, Ara directs her romantic

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<sup>21</sup> Sujin’s pet name for Ara is “ineogongju (인어공주)” or “little mermaid.” Sujin claims that it is because the little mermaid “lost her voice but got it back later and lived happily ever after” (Cha 6). However, what Ara identifies with is the original version of the fairy tale, where the little mermaid commits suicide. For Ara, the original story offers closure for the self rather than the material understanding of closure that comes through the completion or success of an action. For Ara, the little mermaid makes a specific choice to pursue her heart’s desire, and is content even if things do not work out for her.

aspirations towards K-Pop singers and identifies as a fan.<sup>22</sup> While many contemporary members of K-Pop fandom today<sup>23</sup> quite openly express a specific brand of loyalty and affection that is very much a projection of an alternative form of desire and romance, they are well aware that this particular pursuit is more or less a queer form of love and desire, rather than a path toward a conventional romantic union.

Ara is a spokesperson for this specific phenomenon and, by identifying with the little mermaid, she accepts the nature of her desires and needs. In the beginning of the novel, it is pointed out that Sujin calls Ara “ineogongju, or little mermaid,” because the little mermaid lost her voice but got it back later and lived happily ever after” in the American cartoon version (Cha 7). Yet for Ara, the resonating factor from the Little Mermaid metaphor lies in the fact that the little mermaid kills herself in the original version. Since Ara does not seek cure or a heteronormative lifestyle despite her family members’ intentions to see her settled, she is free from the normative and ableist expectations from society. Ara achieves self-fulfillment through disability and embracing the disadvantages of her condition. This is crucial to both understanding the validity of her perceptions of the society around her, and developing a more inclusive mindset towards abnormal bodies that are often rejected. Ara doesn’t want a cure, and by rejecting cure as well as external means of “improvement”, she is capable of being emotionally

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<sup>22</sup> Female K-Pop fandom is known as a diverse community where gender norms are erased and various forms of queer desire invited. For Ara’s case, by fantasizing a romance with a younger, more feminine-looking man (as most K-Pop stars go for androgynous looks), she enters a realm where patriarchal notions of relationship dynamics are overturned. A good example would be to examine the K-Pop vidders phenomenon, as described by Chuyun Oh, who states: “The ways the female fans represent K-pop male performers are transgressive, for they challenge the binary of masculinized gaze versus feminized object and reposition their sexuality in an uncategoryable realm” (74).

<sup>23</sup>According to the *Korea Herald*, Hallyu (Korean Wave) fans have increased 17-fold in the past decade. The same article shows that, according to the Korean Foundation, “the number of Korean Wave fans recorded 156.6 million as of December last year (2021).” See Kim Hae-yeon.

self-sustainable and resilient as well as offering positive impacts towards herself and those around her.

Cha purposely has Ara execute a stoic narrative of the women around her. Her muteness permeates each chapter with both clarity and force. The tone and affect remind the reader of another familiar narrator, Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. But what separates Ara from the likes of Carraway is that she does not obsess or yearn for more intimacy with her subjects. In fact, she does not yearn for closure with any of her acquaintances. Ara's disability acts like a safety net; it shields her from the messiness and drama that comes with entanglement and intervening in the lives of others. Disability, while operating as the kryptonite for any individual that feels vulnerable in an ableist society, becomes the magical ingredient Ara needs to achieve emotional independence and self-satisfaction. What comes out of Ara's detachment is a dimension of truth that seeps through the interconnected web between the five women in the story.

Upon examining the insight Ara provides through the lens of a disabled woman, her ability to dissect the impact of disability and misfortune provides her the clarity and strength she needs. Ara understands that the abled version of her youth resulted as petty angst as she "terrorized the streets" and "knew no fear of money and future" (Cha 80). Ara criticizes the sense of insolence she has been displaying as a teenager, due to her inability to see her abled body handle the stress of misfortune. Based on Ara's perspective, her able self did not know how to cope with her underprivileged condition. Ara chooses disability because it offers her solace and focus. Ara does not need to prove more of her worth and she is safe to stay where she is—quiet, mute, and wrapped in her own desires and thoughts. As a matter of fact, Ara's acceptance and the peace she has made with her post-traumatic muteness provides her with the boldness to

observe, judge, attack, and forgive.<sup>24</sup> The type of clarity that Ara achieves grants her the luxury<sup>25</sup> to tread boldly through both observation and justification of the phenomena surrounding her. For example, her insight on the difference between Kyuri and Sujin, and her innate reaction towards the female celebrities that receive attention from both the public and the idols toward whom she projects her feelings offers a sobering truth on how women who do not follow a heteronormative track towards romance, desire, and partnership articulate their desires and achieve a balance with societal doctrines. In one of Ara's sections, she professes her disdain and confusion over Taien's (the celebrity whom she idolizes) choice to be romantically linked to a female celebrity that fits the criteria of a threatening woman.<sup>26</sup> The value of Ara's insight and reaction toward the events or reality she is confronted with provides a sobering understanding of how female desire, envy, and self-validating satisfaction unravel in her psyche.

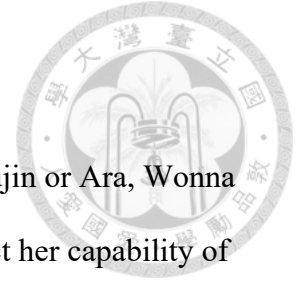
By acknowledging Ara's role among her friends, the reader is presented with a multi-dimensional understanding of how disability both benefits and hinders the individual's quest towards self-acceptance. Furthermore, Ara's understanding and acceptance of her role as a passive fan allows her to develop the emotional maturity and self-understanding crucial to defying societal norms of happiness and self-fulfillment.

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<sup>24</sup> Ara's narrative demonstrates her ability and potential to retaliate toward hostile situations. While Ara's youth instigated attacks against those who were weak (making her a bully), the adult and disabled version of herself deploys the force of retaliation as a mechanism to set boundaries and demonstrate self-care and self-protection. Ara's tactics are far from docile, which is why I chose the word "attack" as an index of vigorous self-assurance, rather than ill-intended actions meant to belittle others.

<sup>25</sup> The use of the word "luxury" refers to the space and agency Ara obtains through her disabled condition. Due to the fact that Ara has nothing to be sorry for, her observations toward the individuals around her are genuine and relatively unbiased. This is a peculiar luxury that Ara manages to enjoy by not only embracing the nature of her disability, but also by choosing to refrain from limiting her self-worth as a result of societal assumptions. In other words, Ara is (rather unconventionally) awarded the luxury of discerning or identifying a reality that is closest to the truth.

<sup>26</sup> Candy is seen as so "insolently beautiful that's offensive" (Cha 80), according to Ara. Therefore, the very nature of an artificially induced desirability (which the average men, according to the novel, find worth connecting with) positions Candy as a threat to all women.



## **Pregnancy Brings Closure**

Wonna takes a more active role in handling ableist expectations. Unlike Sujin or Ara, Wonna does not have any form of physical disadvantage that would directly impact her capability of surviving South Korean society. The psychological aspects of her past and present are as complicated and traumatic as the ones each of the characters have gone through. Although Wonna fits the profile of an individual with an invisible disability, she handles her adulthood relatively well, with fewer setbacks when compared to Sujin and Ara. However, what Wonna truly wants is not the neoliberal brand of feminism that comes with having a career and being financially stable. Since she is alleviated from the need to satisfy basic material and financial needs and has already secured herself a husband to fit into the conventional trajectory of womanhood in South Korea, Wonna is given the chance to look into what she truly needs to feel fulfilled. It turns out that Wonna's passive role as a child, along with the toxic relationships that shaped her worldview, have cultivated a need to hold on to something tangible to stay in control. As a result, she chooses a husband with no additional family members so she does not have to factor in their influence as variable. Wonna's admiration of and interest in her neighbors—Miho, Ara, Sujin, and Kyuri—along with the queer, familial intimacy they share, suggests that she also yearns for affection and acceptance from another human being. By projecting her needs onto the four other women in the office-tel, Wonna confronts her desire to love and be needed unconditionally. This is something that she is incapable of obtaining from her partner because her choice did not come from love, but from pragmatic calculations catered to the bare minimum requirements of her own needs and societal expectations. This leads Wonna to yearn for a child, and, despite fully knowing the impact this child will have on her professional life, Wonna

decides to bear the burden of pregnancy to obtain a peculiar form of co-dependence and love that she believes she deserves.

Wonna treads down this road with multiple setbacks. On the physical level, having a child simultaneously weakens her because of the constant miscarriages (within months), yet, if we look at the emotional and mental aspects of Wonna's condition, her determination only strengthens over each debilitating loss. Internally, Wonna's obsession over having a child overshadows a multitude of concerns women face in a society that only tolerates the ability to be productive and reproductive. On the external level, Wonna observes the career-driven women around her and rejects their chosen lifestyle constantly. This is due to the fact that Wonna projects her childhood abandonment issues onto these career-driven women. From her perspective, the misery caused by her mother's abandonment is the product of her mother's ambitions. Wonna is determined that, only by being bound to a child can she restore the intimacy denied to her as a child, regardless of its ongoing damage of her body, but also because of how detrimental it can be for her career. In other words, Wonna chooses to embrace a form of debilitation in a society that prioritizes productivity at the cost of exploitation. For starters, Wonna is constantly burdening her body with aggressive attempts to get pregnant, only to go through constant miscarriages. Rather than follow a traditional track to keep her body healthy enough to bear a child, Wonna weakens it with her obsessive quest to become a mother. At first glance, Wonna's actions can be seen as an attempt to replace one injury with another. By choosing miscarriage and eventually rejection from her job, Wonna can satisfy the mental and emotional pains that she has yet to address. Nevertheless, what Wonna is also rejecting is not just the chance to obtain financial security—something that she has already secured in her youth and



through her marriage to another man<sup>27</sup>—but also a condition where the individual surrenders to an exploitative system. Wonna actively decides to reject a reality that is fundamentally ableist. She does not need to prove that she is productive, mentally dissatisfied, psychologically troubled, or physically defeated, Wonna’s self-worth is fundamentally a condition that she is independently responsible for. Through her vigorous pursuit of the “unproductive circumstances” of motherhood, Wonna treads beyond deploying a disabling situation as a means to replace hurt with pain, rather, Wonna utilizes disability as a mechanism that expands her potential to achieve self-fulfillment and surpass societal limitations that confine her pursuit of happiness and self-satisfaction.

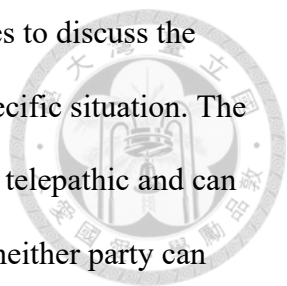
## Conclusion

Ara, Sujin, and Wonna represent a different outlook on understanding disability and the potential satisfactions and merits that come with those who engage with it. To refer to Zhuangzi’s “Happy Fish” passage, where Huizi question’s Zhuang’s claim to “know whether the fish is happy,” where, as Lea Cantor states, is an attempt to “advance a form of relativism which precludes

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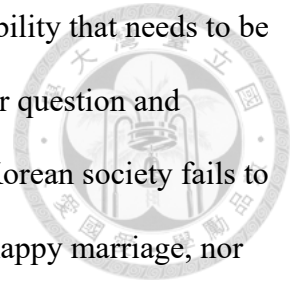
<sup>27</sup> Wonna represents another perspective in gender and women’s studies (Glenn, Ross, and Tully 684) where she utilizes marriage as a way to promote upward mobility or instigate a change in her previous social standing. A similar point is made through studies (Panttaja 102) where Cinderella’s choice to wed prince charming is more or less an entrepreneurial move, rather than succumbing to the patriarchy. Given the context of the historic and culture background of the origins of the fairytale, Cinderella’s only two options were to remain a slave to a woman who was internally misogynistic towards her beauty and talents, or to obtain a higher social ranking or form a new contract with another party to legally free her from her stepmother’s control. Therefore, to say that Cinderella allowed a man to save her is more or less an oversimplification of her marriage with the prince.

A more feminist reading of Cinderella’s options would be to contextualize both the legal and historical frameworks of the fairy tale and its origins, and consider the fact that Cinderella was well aware of societal doctrines and married a prince as strategic choice to secure social standing, relative freedom from a toxic guardian, and to obtain financial capital. Despite Cha’s novel being a product of contemporary American literature, the workplace culture in South Korea is far from shedding its misogynistic and patriarchal roots. South Korean society continues to enable policies and engage with cultural norms that devalue a woman’s worth and her rights as a human being in society. Therefore, Wonna’s choice to utilize marriage as means to secure both her emotional (despite them being fragmented and partial aspects of her own needs) and financial needs, can be interpreted as a way to negotiate more agency and control over her life, so as to facilitate more space for her to address additional or deeper needs.



objectivity” (1). Zhuang’s claim is often used as prompt for opposing parties to discuss the validity of imposing one’s assumptions, or notions of the “norm” onto a specific situation. The fish may be devastated, or it may be elated, but unless Zhuangzi or Huizi is telepathic and can communicate effectively to confirm the fish’s true feelings and intentions, neither party can claim that they know for sure what the reality is like for the fish. The same logic follows when addressing whether the individual can be satisfied with their choice to either cure, embrace, or pursue a form of debilitation. One cannot impose normative standards of happiness and wellbeing onto the individual because no one can assume to know the individual’s truth. I would like to follow Weiseler’s arguments on the “missing phenomenological accounts” on how voluntary amputees are perceived and often misunderstood under ableist mindsets. Weiseler’s main argument fixates on the lack of understanding towards those who experience or desire disability, and argues that it is precisely the result of ableist attitudes where the bodies are objectively judged and, by default, seen as an anomaly. I contend that the relational knowledge of what able-minded people think disabled people or “wannabees” feel, is highly improbable to any form of reality that they experience. The discrepancy between the two is often neglected, or even silenced, and Cha’s choice to offer alternative forms of agency and autonomy to the women experiencing debilitation from ableist notions in society. The significance of Cha’s narrative lies in her intention to not only portray disability as it is—it is a curse due to societal construct but is not limited to simply being a state of debilitation. In Ara’s case, her choice to remain mute, isolated, and disabled proves that disability is a condition that creates a queer sense of belonging. Ara’s life is not significantly improved because she chooses to be mute, but neither does it despair her. In fact, by seeking alternative modes of emotional support, Ara becomes more comfortable with herself by being mute. Wanna takes a more extreme stance against the

neoliberal concept of optimizing productivity. Wonna does not have a disability that needs to be cured, but she pursues a debilitating condition that those of the same gender question and struggle with. Wonna seek for emotional intimacy and control that South Korean society fails to deliver, therefore she goes against the heteronormative notion to stay in a happy marriage, nor become an independent businesswoman without the burden of motherhood. Wonna leaves her marriage, keeps her identity as a mother, and adopts a debilitating identity that offers her peace rather than the turmoil society expects her to undergo. Sujin spends most of her energy obsessing over improvement and cure of her ugliness, but what Cha reveals in the end is that her true value lies outside of her physical appeal. *If I Have Your Face* dives into the cracks of an ableist South Korean society at its core, illustrating how disability is a struggle for many, but still a happier way to find emotional fulfillment for those who reject normative notions of how life must be lived and experienced.



## Chapter Two:

### Ornamentalism, Cosmetic Surgery, Precarious Freaks, and the Female Gaze

Two of Cha's five characters experience beauty from the perspective of an idolized, even sexualized, stance. Kyuri is a post-surgical beauty who earns her living as a sexualized object in a room salon. Kyuri's status is what Sujin aspires to achieve despite being completely artificial and in constant need of maintenance. Miho, on the other hand, is born beautiful. While men around her praise her for the raw beauty that satisfies the male gaze, she herself yearns for an excessive form of beauty embodied by Ruby—a former friend—and Kyuri. In fact, both women become the subject of Kyuri's artistic endeavors, as she articulates her obsession with them through her paintings and sculptures. While the first chapter dissects women who are relegated to the periphery of South Korean society, this chapter examines how women who receive recognition and privilege for being beautiful reflect on the state of owning or acquiring beauty—also the artificial aspects of Korean beauty. Instead of viewing “natural vs. artificial” in opposing positions that demonstrate binary understandings toward diverse forms of beauty, this chapter acknowledges how artificial beauty constructs help define contemporary notions of Asian femininity. By delving into how characters in *If I Had Your Face* assess and interact with the construct of beauty, I explore the satisfying and frustrating aspects of women's relationship with beauty. Yet, the way Miho and Kyuri observe beauty from both natural and artificial aspects offer alternative modes in understanding the relationship between cosmetic surgery and women beyond the neoliberal construct of “bettering” Asian women.

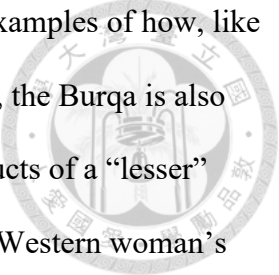
In examining how South Korea's decolonization process led to its unique brand of nationalism and neoliberal societal structures, the pursuit of cosmetic surgery can be observed as a means to further perpetrate ableist propaganda. While this critique offers insight on how radical

systemic change can instigate change in how beauty is seen as a form of currency in neoliberal societies, it fails to address the plethora of reasons and incentives that drive women to partake in surgical practices to enhance their physical appearance. Specifically speaking, South Korea's relationship with cosmetic surgery is, as mentioned in previous chapters, associated with complex social, historical, and economic factors.

In addition to South Korea's recent rise and dominance in the entertainment, cosmetic, medical tourism, and electronics industries, the nation's modernization and expansion in these areas has posed a threat to western powers. As Sharon Heijin Lee contends, it is important to pay close attention to the West's increasing anxieties towards the rise of South Korea and its internalized brand of neoliberalism. Lee refers to Womenlink ( a Korean feminist nonprofit organization, Yösöng Minuhoe 한국여성민우회, known in English as "Korean Womenlink") as an example. After launching a campaign called "Love Your Body" in 2003, Womenlink attributed South Korea's relationship with plastic surgery to "lookism" and neoliberal ideals. While white-centric feminism attempts to "police" South Korean women into succumbing to an "individualist logic" and discipline them into practicing "proper modes of consumption," the neoliberalist mindset pushes South Korean women to self-govern their appearance through "self-love" in order to obtain feminist empowerment.<sup>28</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen contends that "a politics of comparison constructs Western women as ethical and free and as saviors of oppressed women around the world" (371). In addition to Nguyen's observations of the imperialist mindset

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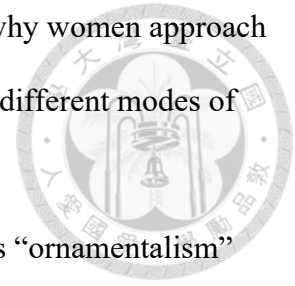
<sup>28</sup> In the same article from *Frontiers*, Lee professes that "self-love" is a form of "self-governance" that inherently aids women in South Korea obtain success through a capitalist system (23). Susan Bordo argues that the problem with cosmetic surgery does not lie in the existence of "individual choice," but instead the institutionalized systems and values that are deemed problematic (2004). This was in response to Kathy Davis's assertion that cosmetic surgery, in certain cases, can be seen as liberating because it offers the individual a "choice" to seek a more livable life.



western-centric feminism imposes on persons of color, Lee also discusses examples of how, like the perceived problematic nature of South Korea's cosmetic surgery culture, the Burqa is also viewed as a symbol of oppression for Middle Eastern women. These constructs of a "lesser" version of feminist politics in transnational contexts sheds light on how the Western woman's own feminist experiences are, as Lee asserts, the "telos of feminist modernity" (9). What Lee's research brings to the controversy over the spread of South Korean Beauty ideals is to put a stop to pathologizing South Korea's cosmetic-surgery culture, while also confronting the neoliberal mindset imbued in the nation's determination to decolonize itself from western interference.

While most western critiques aim to alert and condemn the problematic mindset of neoliberal feminism and its relationship with women's pursuit of cosmetic surgery, perspectives such as Lee's offer insight on how both neoliberal constructs from a post-colonial South Korea and an imbalanced expectation of western-centric assumptions towards modern feminism play shape the reality of cosmetic surgery among South Korean women. Furthermore, as Mitchell and Snyder contend, the struggle to address "what crip/queer bodies bring to the table of imagining the value of alternative lives, particularly lives that exist at the fraught intersections of marginalized identities" (6) makes it a trickier task to pinpoint the exact factors that facilitate the many mechanisms that sculpt and shape the reality of cosmetic surgery among South Korean women. Jasbir Puar also emphasizes how the able/disabled binary "traverses social, geographic and political spaces" (xiv). South Korea's relationship with cosmetic surgery has, in Puar's terms, gone beyond a situation where physically unappealing women are marginalized, but have become a "massification" instead of an identity (xvii). Moreover, by situating these women as debilitated, cosmetic surgery is normalized in South Korean society. Both vantage points offer valuable understandings of these phenomena, yet by attempting to discern right from wrong,


better or worse, such discourses limit the way one comprehends how and why women approach cosmetic surgery, and how, through the pursuit of beauty, women develop different modes of femininity and female desire.



This chapter proceeds by adapting what Anne Anlin Cheng coins as “ornamentalism” (2019). The term is a combination of two words, two concepts heavily involved in the shaping of Asian femininity in modernist and contemporary culture: orientalism and ornament. Based on Cheng’s observations in her book *Ornamentalism*, Asian women have often been relegated to peripheral spaces where they serve as decorative objects. While the beginnings of critical race theory owe its understanding of the female flesh and body to African American notions of physicality and bodily features, Asian women do not necessarily share the same attributes as African American women when it comes to how their bodies and their femininity are expressed through art.<sup>29</sup> Cheng specifically identifies the characteristics of Asian femininity, or conceptions of “the yellow woman,” with terms such as “perihumanity” and “body ornament.” Cheng contends that the Asian woman flirts with the idea of being human, but eventually “circles and is excluded from humanity” (2). Moreover, Cheng pinpoints how Asian women lurk, evolve, and exist in “interstitial” spaces by noting the yellow woman’s proximity to objecthood rather than animal life. Cheng’s attempt to depict the yellow woman as interstitial can be traced back to Homi Bhabha, for whom to be “interstitial” refers to the “passage between fixed identifications “that up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (qtd. in Bow 4). Anthropologist Victor Turner also associates the concept of “interstitial populations” with liminality, or “liminal personae,” whose cultural ambiguity is

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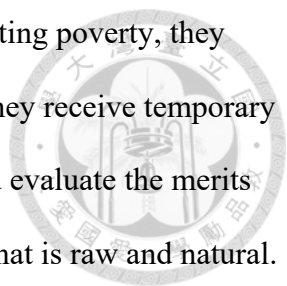
<sup>29</sup> According to Cheng, the models applied to understanding “racialized gender” are pre-dominantly influenced by African origins (6). What Cheng proposes through her account is to incorporate the notion of “objecthood” fused with “personhood” in her rendition of Asiatic Femininity and its ornamental characteristics.



often perceived among these groups of people (qtd. in Bow 11). Leslie Bow thinks of exploring the “in-between” spaces of race in *Partly Colored*, and emphasizes the importance of thinking interstitially to further “envision alternative connections and affiliations that complicate black and white” (5). Cheng renders Asian women peripheral, interstitial, and intimately associated with objecthood, therefore, offering an unconventional approach towards understanding how Asian femininity is redefined and yearned for in Cha’s *If I Had Your Face*. For starters, the idea of extending female personhood for Asian women towards prosthetic, or even synthetic interferences offers both upper-class and working-class women in Cha’s novel a chance to define womanhood through decorative approaches that range from luxurious clothing and accessories to cosmetically enhanced features.

A closer look at Cha’s novel reveals that much of these decorative terms that allow female subjects to be associated with ornaments are formed through intense, detailed gazes from one woman to another. These gazes meticulously document various versions of female desire that stretch beyond heteronormative expectations of sexual yearning. In addition to identifying varying degrees of femininity and female desire through the lens of ornamentalism, I discuss the underlying and growing precarity that evolves in the act of gazing. In exploring the synthetic and prosthetic nature of femininity, the women in Cha’s novel live in close habitation due to the structure of the office-tel, being thus conditioned to observe, listen, and cohabitate. Such living arrangements facilitate a panopticon-like relation, allowing the women to gaze at each other in multiple directions. With four of the five female characters in Cha’s novel actively engaging, interacting, assessing, longing, and judging various versions of artificial and prosthetic forms of beauty, the spatial dynamics amplifies the meta-commentary and observations through Cha’s narrative. While these women process multiple versions of otherness: disability, overt sexuality,





artificial beauty, natural beauty, decorative beauty, overt wealth, or debilitating poverty, they develop fluctuating moments of superiority and insecurity. As spectators, they receive temporary moments of power while asserting their gaze, they are allowed to judge and evaluate the merits and shortcomings of beauty that is adorned, artificial, synthetic, or beauty that is raw and natural. For example, Ara critiques Miho's prized natural locks as "raw", while Miho judges Kyuri for the excessive labor she does to artificially achieve a "natural-looking" form of beauty. Kyuri on the other hand admits spiteful thoughts towards Miho reaping the benefits of being born beautiful. Each woman is judged and envied by one another, regardless of their position as spectator or subject of someone else's gaze. Yet, at the same time these women perform or receive spectatorship from one another, they lose control over how their own otherness is perceived. This otherness places these women as abnormal, further solidifying their place as "freaks" in South Korean society.<sup>30</sup> As these women oscillate in a liminal space between ornament, person, woman, and freak, a sense of precarity emerges as they navigate these roles and the affective states that come with them. Whether it is the synthetic and decorative characteristics of beauty that come with excessive accessorizing or surgical intervention, the struggle to pursuit normalcy, the metamorphosed variants of desire through gazing and projecting on one another, illustrates an anxious, interstitial female being that Asian women embody throughout Cha's novel.

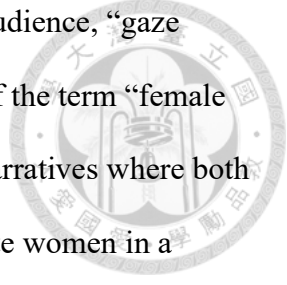
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<sup>30</sup> In South Korean films like *200 Pounds Beauty* (2006) and the more recent television series *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* (2018), it is referenced that post-surgical women are seen as "monsters" and not "real women." Interestingly, the male protagonists make a noticeable effort to emphasize that the aesthetically "lacking," pre-surgical female protagonists were "beautiful" or "talented" by merit, yet the "romantic" aspect of their relationships are only instigated after the female protagonists transform into breathtakingly beautiful women. It is also important to note that these narratives also feature female antagonists who despise post-surgery "beauties" because they "pass" as beautiful, therefore reaping the benefits beautiful women usually receive.

## The Ornamentalist Woman and the Female Gaze

“I would live your life so much better than you, if I had your face” (Cha 31)—Kyuri says to herself as she stares at Candy, a female K-Pop idol who is getting touch-ups at the same cosmetic surgery clinic that Kyuri goes to. In almost every chapter, apart from self-introspection and expositional trips down memory lane to address past traumatic experiences, most of the narrative revolves around women gazing at each other. Upon each attempt to gaze, stare, or “watch,” the female individual reveals a deep yearning that she refuses to admit. For Kyuri, it is the chance to lead a better life that offers more choices. In the same chapter, Kyuri reveals that her post-surgery face was modeled after Candy’s face. Each character observes and dissects the other through fragmented observations merged together like collages. These moments of gazing result from Cha’s choice to deliver the narrative through the perspectives of four characters: Wonna, Miho, Kyuri, and Ara. Each character takes on a strand of the linear timeline, while diving into scraps of memories. In other words, rather than having a concrete storyline from a single narrative, the reader navigates and pieces together the time and space that occurs by merging the thoughts and experiences of the four women. To circle back to the panopticon spatial metaphor, because these women are situated in close proximity, they are inevitably positioned in a place to not only see, but stare at each other. Furthermore, the drive that motivates these stares comes from the innate urge to “assess” the association between happiness and physical looks. Cha’s narrative offers them space to retreat to their staring when they are not conversing with one another, moreover, these acts of gazing are accompanied with emotions between admiration, sisterhood, and moments of envy toward each other.

The “female gaze” derives from film theorist Laura Mulvey’s famous term, the “male gaze,” in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Whereas Mulvey sought out

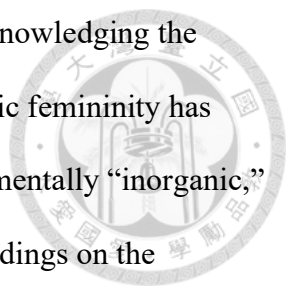


to interpret how motion “pictures” provided a viewing experience for the audience, “gaze theory” eventually found its way into literary studies.<sup>31</sup> While the origins of the term “female gaze” are still rooted in film studies, the term has been utilized to look at narratives where both narrator and reader read the female. These readings essentially aim to situate women in a position of power, where they obtain agency and control over how the narrative is told and perceived. Cha’s novel provides the experience of the female gaze, as it is a novel about how women perceive their relationship with beauty, cosmetic surgery, and sisterhood. But what makes her pentagon-esque narrative even more compelling is that, through these female gazes, new forms of desire, otherness, and objectification emerge as they play into the yearnings and needs these women profess and explore. In particular, these prolonged stares reveal the way these women assess each other’s physical appearance before delving into personality and characteristic quirks.

An interesting approach to how these gazes form invites and borrows Cheng’s take on the ornamentalist nature of Asiatic femininity. While Mulvey’s female gaze offers the “action” that engages with South Korea’s opposing constructs of artificial vs. natural beauty, incorporating Cheng’s ornamentalist concept helps us experiment with alternative ways to approach “artificial beauty.” The relationship between artificial and natural concepts of beauty in South Korea is rather peculiar, because the nation’s cosmetic surgery culture encourages excessive labor and intervention to obtain beauty. Yet, the beauty they strive for must create a version of “naturalness.” In other words, the synthetic, posthuman Korean woman must go through fluctuating transitions via surgery in order to achieve an enhanced personhood. Cheng’s insight on the “synthetic personhood” that exists within Asiatic femininity provides groundwork that

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<sup>31</sup> The concept of “gazing” or “seeing” was first described by John Berger in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1970).



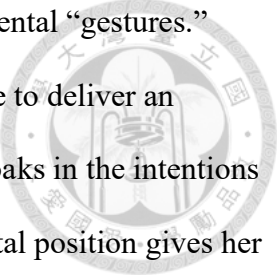
allows the reader to revisit Asian women and their feminine essence by acknowledging the artificial nature of their beauty and femaleness. Cheng contends that “Asiatic femininity has always been prosthetic,” and that the essence of the Asian woman is fundamentally “inorganic,” deeming the Asian female the “original cyborg” (131). Cheng bases her readings on the incorporeal aspects of Asian femininity through science fiction, specifically by dissecting the synthetic fleshliness of Scarlett Johansson’s role in Rupert Sanders’s film *Ghost in The Shell* (2017). Although Cha’s novel dabbles not in science fiction, the concept of an artificially “enhanced” feminine form, along with the decorative gestures that South Korean women adopt to create a prosthetic extension of beauty and femininity echoes Cheng’s observations seamlessly. If we pay attention to the “curative” language mentioned in the earlier sections, the same vocabulary also hints to both synthetic and sartorial objecthood whenever the women in the novel describe the effects of plastic surgery. Descriptions such as “electrically,” beautiful, eyelids that are “stitched,” jawlines “shaved,” eyelashes “planted” (4), and skin that “gleams like pure glass” (57) are constantly brought up as women witness a cosmetically improved female “other.”

The beauty-related lexicon is filled with words that insinuate not only artificial interference, but also a sense of futuristic machinery. In addition to illustrating feminine features with words that associate womanhood with material connotations, these “fixes” that enhance the female subject also aim to look as natural as possible. Unlike the Kardashian-esque beauty ideals of a post-surgical look that more commonly featured in western media today, Korean beauty professes the importance of looking natural. Kyuri emphasizes this aspect of the beauty ideal when she says “everything is so chic and subtle, and the goal of every surgery is to look as natural as possible” (Cha 93). According to Kyuri, those who go for “unnaturally” enhanced

looks are cringeworthy and invite embarrassment rather than appeal. Cheng observes that such an intersection between human and object for Asian people suggests a union of both object and organic personhood, making the female subject a hybrid being: Asiatic, other, and even alien (137). Like Johansson's portrayal of the Major in *Ghost in the Shell*, the women who go through cosmetic surgery in Cha's novel are placed as the "other" because they are created at the intersection of the human and the posthuman

Kyuri's otherness rests on her objectified personhood obtained through cosmetic surgery, and her job as a salon girl. Kyuri's job requires her to constitute an ornamental and decorative presence in the room salons, as her job is simply to furnish the room with feminine beauty. One of her clients even declines sexual intercourse and prefers to marvel at her naked physique while referring to it as "art" (Cha 93). The client who offers these comments is also investing money in her, hoping to drag her out of her debts. The financial investment eventually goes towards Kyuri's additional surgeries to "touch up" or "maintain" her appearance. The monetary relationship, along with the peculiar sexual interaction between Kyuri and this client further positions her as an "object" that requires "maintenance." Despite her client's good intentions in attempting to save her from a vicious cycle of financial debt, the very nature of their dynamic continuously places her as an object rather than a human being, regardless of the client's emotional attachment toward her.

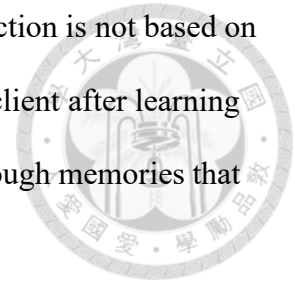
The role and function of the salon girl is posthuman to the point where this collective is not allowed to eat the food ordered by the clients. Kyuri's job mainly requires her to listen and observe. By fixating closely on each frame that occurs in the room, Kyuri extends her ornamental nature and delivers a sharp depiction of how the world views her, and how she sees through the power dynamics that dominate the world around her. What Kyuri achieves beyond



the objecthood defined through her prosthetic body is to live through ornamental “gestures.” Through her role as the salon girl Kyuri extends both function and substance to deliver an assertive female gaze that completes her character. Like a wallflower that soaks in the intentions people try to hide, Kyuri’s detachment from her clients due to her ornamental position gives her the power to understand the dynamics between individuals with clarity. In many cases, in spite of her complex relationship with her mother due to her filial responsibilities, Kyuri’s ornamentalist femininity, beauty, and the objecthood she defines reconfigures her humanity, and offers her moments of clarity when it comes to human and societal relations. By detaching from a pre-surgical human self, Kyuri has the option to judge and assess the world as it is, instead of how she hopes it to be. Kyuri ascends to another dimension when she assumes her role as “object,” and transforms from filial daughter or escort to sharpened shreds of truth and understanding of the world around her. Without her ornamentalist femininity, Kyuri’s gaze cannot exist the way it does, neither does it offer her the agency to reject and yearn for the capital, resources, and relationship she sees and observes.

Kyuri’s gaze reaches the women around her. An important factor of her personhood is also entrenched in her role as a filial daughter. Kyuri craves her mother’s approval and wellbeing so much that she is willing to become an ornament to society in order to generate capital for her mother. It is interesting that Kyuri’s mother is gullible towards the source of her daughter’s income, and continues to live in the fantasy of two well-off daughters. Apart from her mother’s happiness, Kyuri develops a keen fondness toward the sisterhood, companionship, and comfort that Ara and Sujin share. There is a strong hint of a queer yearning for female approval and acceptance that Kyuri professes while she looks at the women around her. In relations beyond her own with her mother, Kyuri does not seek romantic or sexual pleasure. Rather, she seeks

comfort and acceptance. Even when Kyuri tampers with romance, her affection is not based on sexual desire, but rather comfort. In an episode where she stalks a regular client after learning that he is to be betrothed to someone else, she reminisces her affection through memories that signify “comfort” rather than “sexual tension” (Cha 101).



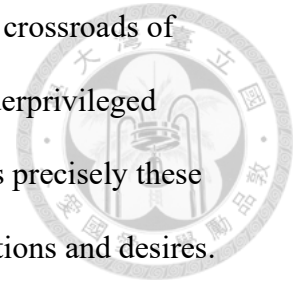
Cheng’s ornamentalism centers on the decorative nature of Asiatic femininity. The most detailed engagement with the decorative feminine nature comes from the female character closest to heteronormativity in the novel. That is, before she applies self-actualization and takes on the role as the ornamentalist femme fatale at the end of the story. Miho, with her luscious yet “raw” hair and organically beautiful features, places herself at the center of female gazing as she covets and obsesses over the women who pass through her life. Miho is constantly fixated on the decorative Asiatic woman as she contrasts her celebrated natural beauty. After moving to New York to study art, Miho finds shelter and companionship with Ruby, the daughter of a Korean mogul. Every inch of Ruby’s existence flows through Miho’s consciousness and her memories in a glamorous textures.<sup>32</sup> Whenever Miho dwells on her time spent with Ruby, screenshots of Ruby’s exquisite embellishments set up the scene before the reader is allowed to glimpse scraps and pieces of Ruby’s aloof and pensive demeanor.

The same goes for Miho’s intimate gazing of her roommate Kyuri. Cha portrays Miho in four dimensional spheres, the first two spheres being her heteronormative sexual orientation versus her passion for artificially adorned female subjects, the other two being her advantages from being naturally beautiful and the disadvantages of her orphan childhood. She has it all but

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<sup>32</sup> Like Sujin, Ruby’s story is told completely through Miho’s perspective. Even if holding a lesser significance and connection with the four other characters, the narrative choice to iterate Ruby’s impact on Miho is an interesting choice on Cha’s behalf. On the one hand, it sets up the evolving relationship Miho shares with Kyuri (which is her roommate at the moment), one other hand, like Sujin’s character arc, it offers the weaker counterpart of the friendship (In Sujin and Ara’s case, Ara becomes the weaker one because her disability physically hinders her from becoming more efficient at work; in Miho and Ruby’s case, Ruby is the rich and influential socialite, while Miho is the orphan who tends to her beck and call) a sense of control and dominance over how the relationship is perceived.

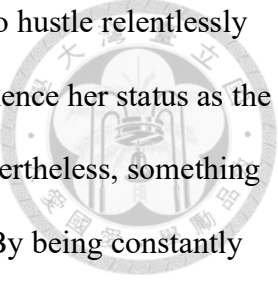
does not; she seems like she fits into the norm, but does not. Miho is at the crossroads of opposing attributes—artificial vs. beauty, privileged physical looks vs. underprivileged upbringing, being loved by men vs. being obsessed with women— and it is precisely these attributes that contribute to the multiple folds that define her complex emotions and desires.




Miho is placed at the cusp of the divide between heteronormativity and queerness. She is organically beautiful, but lacks material wealth and a heteronormative upbringing. Miho is the only one of the four women who shares strong, romantic feelings for another heterosexual male, yet the real passion that fuels her art is propelled by her obsession with women. She is born with advantages but born into disadvantages; she has the most conventional romantic relationship but secretly yearns for something that is queer and arbitrary. Throughout the first half of the novel, Miho lies the closest to organic personhood among the five women. She embodies a mythical portrait of organic beauty and naïveté hypocritically celebrated in neoliberal cultures. Miho has proven that, with the right advantages and a willingness to work hard, an underprivileged orphan has a chance to move up the social ranks and “make it work.” Blessed with naturally appealing looks, Miho utilizes her advantage and her artistic talent to make a living as an artist. Her lack of privilege does not exclude her from New York’s elites; instead, it invigorates her as she beguiles the miserably rich “chaebols” with her raw and unsullied sense of “instinct.” “Rich people are fascinated by happiness,” says Ruby to Miho (Cha 59), as she reveals how her wealthy cohort find happiness “maddening.” Miho is singled as odd not because she has learned to find happiness from her upbringing as an orphan, but because she sticks to a nostalgic version of organic personhood that people yearn to grasp.

Miho’s oddness and otherness is celebrated because she denies the notion that prosthetic intervention enhances the profits one can reap from a capitalistic culture. She is born beautiful,





so she does not need to buy beauty; she is talented, and thus does not need to hustle relentlessly to obtain capital. Miho operates through “instincts” that work in her favor, hence her status as the manifestation of the neoliberal myth despite her unfortunate childhood. Nevertheless, something brews in Miho and casts her aside from a heteronormative path of success. By being constantly labeled as “unique” and “different,” Miho struggles to find comfort in the individualism she is encouraged to celebrate. Moreover, being naturally beautiful does not guarantee Miho a solid spot in the cult of “organic personhood.” Rather, she is still treated as an object to be “protected,” specifically because of her natural femininity. The director refers to Miho as the department “mascot” (Cha 199), while her rich boyfriend Hanbin speaks to Miho’s hair “tenderly” as if it were a “threatened child,” and assures the department head that he will not let her cut it (Cha 55). It is clear that Miho’s natural beauty does little for her; she finds solace through gazing and yearning for the “freakishly” beautiful woman. Miho intimately gazes and observes Ruby, and later on Kyuri, as they encapsulate two different forms of decorative and artificial forms of aestheticism. Ruby is adorned with lavish furs and fabrics, while Kyuri incarnates both the human and nonhuman through her perfectly “shaved” and “stitched” features (Cha 4). In contrast to Miho and her “natural beauty,” revered by her director at the art department and wealthy peers in New York City, Ruby and Kyuri possess what Cheng coins as the making of a “modern personhood,” as seen in popular constructions of synthetic Asiatic femininity (4). This form of Asiatic femininity is often associated with “ornamental excess,” seen through decorative forms and gestures. Miho carefully processes both Ruby and Kyuri’s beauty and their sorrow, being desperate to live vicariously through their liminal states of adorned, sartorial, and tragically “othered” existences. The female desire Miho thirsts for is completed through a fluctuating process of gazing and yearning. Miho longs for the ornamentalist other and actualizes her desire



for these women through another form of aesthetic objecthood: art. It is through this process that Miho can tap into her own Asiatic femininity via ornamentalist personhood, where her creation of artifacts inspired by the synthetic personhood of Kyuri and Ruby help her achieve new dimensions of personhood beyond her physical appearance, past, and talent. At the end of the novel, Miho's self-actualization transgresses the material form of art. Upon learning that her doting, rich boyfriend Hanbin is not only cheating on her but also ready to be engaged to the daughter of another rich conglomerate, Miho "cuts" herself loose from her natural beauty, chops off her prized locks of untouched hair and plans to dye it "electric" blue. Miho embraces the ornamental and artificial femininity that she pursues through her art as her gestures to live through her art manifest into actions that place her in a newfound position of power. Miho decides that she will not come out of this relationship with nothing and expects to manipulate Hanbin for her personal gain. Miho learns, through reflecting and gazing at the women around her, something crucial about her position in South Korean society, and rejects heteronormative assumptions that come with her blessed looks. She acknowledges that her romantic relationship with Hanbin is entangled with a deep obsession for Ruby, and embodies "Kyuri's philosophies on men" (Cha 214) as she decides to take everything that she can from him. Miho gazes at ornamental women while being an odd ornament herself, and eventually finds power in her otherness, emerging as the novel's femme fatale.

### **The Freak and Spectator: Precarious Gazing and Projection of the Self**

While the female gaze offers a medium for women to live through each other and recognize the ornamentalist femininity that comprises their Asiatic womanhood, it also creates an echo-chamber that allows feminine freaks to stare and gaze at each other. Their "corporeal alterity"

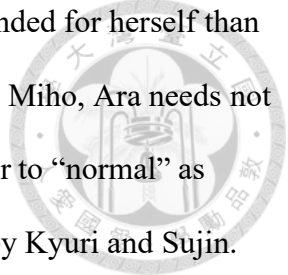
(Adams 9) makes them ornamental freaks on display, but the queering panopticon they are positioned in creates a space of “identification” for these women. As mentioned in the previous section, the “ugly” female is rendered disabled and in need of curative gestures to achieve the artificially constructed beauty-ideal. Yet, whether these women are physically disabled, ugly, naturally beautiful, or surgically enhanced, the sheer essence of their Asiatic femininity sets them in a peripheral position.

I refer to “freaks” by alluding to Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s notion of the “display of freaks” within the context of disability studies. Thomson suggests that, “[b]y its very presence, the exceptional body seems to compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation” (1). The very act of obtaining cosmetic surgery affirms the way ugliness is perceived as “exceptional.” Moreover, the very nature of Cha’s narrative serves as an endeavor to “inspire representation” for the exceptionally ugly woman. While the ugly, beautified, naturally beautiful, or disabled women each gaze at each other, the dynamics of this panopticon-like staring incite emotions that are paradoxical. Only here, we see freaks that reject and yearn for the eccentricity and queerness facilitated through sisterhood and objecthood. Miho, the naturally beautiful woman prides the privilege that comes with her beauty, critiques the artificially adorned posthuman beauty, yet obsesses over them at the same time. Kyuri, the artificially constructed beauty and poster-child for a successful post-surgical synthetic person, envies Miho but also develops protective feelings towards her. Moreover, Kyuri is hesitant towards helping Sujin become a prosthetic beauty, not because of jealousy or competition, but because she secretly yearns for the intimacy Sujin and the mute Ara share as women with “exceptional bodies.” Thomson also contends, in *Staring: How We Look*, that medical intervention and surgery eliminate the would-be freaks (164). Yet within South Korea’s specific context, as mentioned in

the introduction, the post-surgical beauty is bestowed with a different variation of abnormality, thus situating the artificially constructed beauty as freakish: an anomaly for people to stare at. As spectators, these women, as Rachel Adams writes in *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*, “project their own most hidden and perverse fantasies onto the freak and discovers them mirrored back in the freak’s gaze” (8). This phenomenon is most evidently seen through the women’s relationship with Sujin, the only character in the novel who lacks a voice.

Sujin is the fifth major character in Cha’s novel, yet her agency is often filtered through Kyuri, Ara, and Miho. Interestingly, it is Sujin who conducts the most distinct version of agency and determination throughout the novel. Furthermore, it is revealed in the end that she was the one, and still is the one friend pulling strings behind the scenes, fighting to lift her female friends up by nudging them towards opportunities that offer upward mobility from the orphanage. Yet, despite the determination Sujin demonstrates, and the results she delivers, Sujin is still seen as the odd other often questioned by her friends. When Kyuri grapples with Sujin’s optimistic understanding of the life of a salon girl, she sees a troubled version of herself lurking in the shadows. To put it more accurately, Kyuri projects her insecurities and hardships as the othered, prosthetic freak and, in her own way, tries to shelter Sujin from becoming the freak that she herself has become.

Another example occurs when Kyuri interacts with Namin. Namin’s appearance itself is the definition of freak. Kyuri describes her post-cosmetic surgery style as “grotesque” because of the proportions of her breasts. Yet Kyuri finds herself trying to “take care” of Namin, regardless of Namin’s actual needs and desires, because Kyuri also projects her understanding of what is successful for a salon girl and tries to “shelter” Namin from it. Conversely, we have Ara, who is mute, and traumatized by the accident that caused her muteness. Ara gawks at both Sujin and

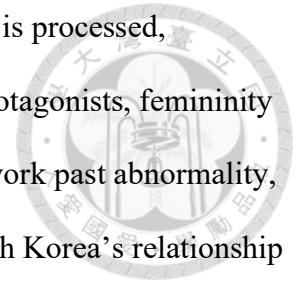


Kyuri, filtering their narratives with excessive compassion more likely intended for herself than them. It is not gone unnoticed that for the relatively “natural” and “normal” Miho, Ara needs not offer too much compassion because the beauty that Miho embodies is closer to “normal” as opposed to excessive ugliness or excessive and artificial beauty displayed by Kyuri and Sujin. The aforementioned Miho also gazes at Kyuri, and Kyuri gazes back. As mentioned in previous sections, Miho judges yet absorbs all the chaos and beauty in Kyuri’s life. She criticizes the synthetic nature of Kyuri’s appearance and the choices she makes, yet cannot help but obsess over her as well. Kyuri also observes Miho’s lifestyle and behavior, secretly judging her for being ridiculously naïve while also finding it hard to ignore her instinct to protect or care for her. Both Kyuri and Miho take turns as spectator and performer, each piling on projections of their own judgements, insecurities, and aspirations onto one another. They are both threatened by extreme modes of beauty: artificial and natural. Yet, at the same time, their drastically different lifestyles instigate precarity, passion and obsession with each other. Kyuri’s day starts at night and is littered with rude men, alcoholism, and vanity, while Miho’s shuttles between her art studio and spending time with her rich boyfriend. Miho is fascinated by Kyuri’s complex and exhausting lifestyle, while Kyuri envies the advantages Miho enjoys as a naturally beautiful woman—in a seemingly effortless manner—she also develops affection and care for Miho, too. The women in the novel offer incentives to bounce off these anxious emotions, expectations, and judgements on and off one another. The mirroring gaze provided through a panopticon-like structure provides introspection on all receiving ends of the narrative.

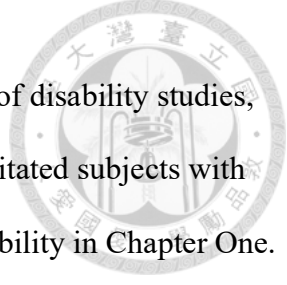
## Conclusion

I conclude this chapter by re-addressing the sense of female anxiety and precarity mentioned in the first section. In addition to the freakish projections delivered from one another through the female “gazing” practiced by Cha’s characters, this sense of anxiety comes from a developing a position of power, and the realization of queer desire and affection manifested through mirroring gazes from one female to another. Cha’s women are Asian, feminine, and freakish, yet in an ableist society trying to shed colonial shame through neoliberal approaches, Cha’s female-oriented narrative offers a different way to look at the beauty ideal and its relationship with female desire. By recognizing these women as freaks, and identifying their ornamentalist femininity, these women develop a new position at the intersection of neoliberalism, objecthood, disability, and ethnic personhood. Each character holds on to a strand of faith, a belief system that sustains their struggle in an intensely competitive society. While they cling on to the mentality that helps them survive the chaos they encounter, they engage with and contradict the thoughts and behaviors of the women around them. In an equally liminal space such as the office-tel, the position of the Asian woman is equally fluid and interstitial. Like the living spaces nested amongst office buildings in a modernized metropolis, Kyuri, Sujin, Ara, Miho, and Wonna represent fused identities that overlap. A combination of filial piety, sisterhood, romance, and motherhood helps readers interpret and attempt to define how these women grapple with different identities, while struggling to make ends meet in a fast-paced city like Seoul. This is an anxious position to be in, indeed, as femininity and female desire not only expand beyond the heteronormative gaze, but encompass a fused identity that is free to yearn, and live as feminine and as freak.

It is immensely important to address and recognize how femininity is processed, regurgitated in the neoliberal society typical of Seoul. For Cha's female protagonists, femininity becomes a vessel that satisfies the male gaze and the neoliberal notion to work past abnormality, propel through debility, and cure disability. Yet, within the context of South Korea's relationship with the post-surgical female, the artificial nature and obsessive need to look natural and effortless presents a paradox that further situates the post-surgical woman into the category of abnormality as well. While both the ugly female and the artificially enhanced female gaze at each other in awe and curiosity, they acknowledge an alternative understanding of how femininity is constructed through decorative and ornamental gestures. Cha's characters, despite having a difficult time going "against" a flawed system, offer a glimpse on how their struggles, hardships, and combination of multiple feminine characteristics, allow them to encapsulate what modern Asian femininity looks like and how it has evolved throughout decades of modernization in the East.



## Conclusion



I have approached Cha's *If I Had Your Face* not only from the perspective of disability studies, but also exploring alternative readings that reach beyond stereotyping debilitated subjects with limited worth as human beings. I contend that there are three modes of disability in Chapter One. These varying degrees of disability are based on both physical impairments and the debilitating conditions imposed by South Korea's post-colonial and neoliberal tendencies in the twenty-first century. The first mode of disability is represented by Ara's muteness, the second mode of disability is represented by Sujin's ugliness, and the third mode of disability is represented by Wanna's need to become pregnant and the physical burden (miscarriages) she undergoes in her pursuit of motherhood. This thesis started out by discussing how ugliness is seen as a debilitating state, due to the lookism that permeates South Korea's competitive work force from all fronts. Sujin's lack of physical appeal makes her a victim of cruel optimism, as she is expected to obtain a cure that would increase her value as a human being. Ara, on the other hand, is physically impaired due to a psychological trauma. However, unlike Sujin, she seeks comfort in her disability. Her muteness is contrasted by Cha's narrative choice to have her observe and critique the world around her. Wanna's stance as a metaphorically debilitated subject stems from South Korea's longstanding gendered policies from the nation's military mobilization period. Her aggressive and obsessive attempt to achieve emotional fulfillment through motherhood situates her in a constructed state of debilitation, for it hinders her prospects as a career woman and it creates actual pain in her body. Each of the three characters practice a lifestyle that is queer and against heteronormative assumptions of a productive life. Rather than seeking a cure, Ara embraces her disability; rather than building a family, Wanna only wants the child and leaves her husband to become a single mother; rather than becoming beautiful to either get a job less



scandalous than working at a salon, Sujin chooses to lead a life of promiscuity and builds a sorority through aggressive networking and manipulating the loopholes in a neoliberal system. Cha's narrative acknowledges the problematic nature of society's need for normality but also sheds insight on how the debilitated subject finds value and meaning in life through nonnormative measures.

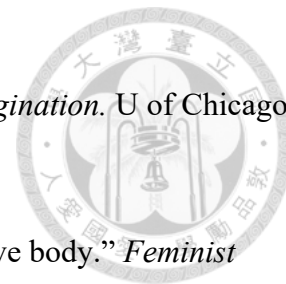
In Chapter Two, I borrow Ann Anlin Cheng's concept of "ornamentalism" to look for alternative modes of value and meaning for the debilitated subject. By examining the relationships between the five characters and their approaches towards both natural and artificial modes of beauty, I contend that both the evolving presence of adorned, ornamental, and prosthetic aspects of beauty, along with the intense starring and gazing these women bestow upon one another, introduces another way to redefine Asiatic femininity. The ornamentalist approach of Asiatic femininity aims to combine the ornamentalist and ultimately futuristic aspects of femininity found in South Korean women who practice cosmetic surgery. In addition to addressing the South Korean's female in relation to objecthood and her role as the ultimate prosthetic posthuman, gazes and stares between the five characters reveal the precarity of selfhood and emerging aspects of femininity in relation to decorative and ornamental gestures. Moreover, the conundrum of reconstructing natural beauty through artificial interference intensifies the paradox of cure and posthumanism—in other words, these women seek cure only to become newfound versions of nonnormative freaks.

I acknowledge that this thesis leaves several questions up for further debate, regarding the attitudes towards South Koreans' neoliberal tendencies and the brand of feminism that demands the individual to self-govern and improve her productivity. In addition to finding an approach that does not seek to agree with neoliberal exploitation of the proletariat, the quest to shed light

and positive value on voluntary or existing debilitation demands a deeper and thorough discussion that does not glorify the supercrip or neglect the struggles and hardships neoliberal society denies disabled subjects. My goal is to explore alternative approaches that aim to acknowledge debilitation as a historical and cultural product of South Korea, and to suggest additional ways to understand the incentive to invite or reject cure. On top of that, by acknowledging the merit of one's choice to embrace debilitating abnormalities, or to morph into a prosthetic posthuman on the other side of the spectrum of normality, I encourage an approach that refrains from both oversimplifying the notion of pathologizing abnormality and the tendency to hold the least resourceful people responsible for systemic flaws caused by those who have power.

The discussion over how we struggle to accept, respect, and acknowledge disability as neither a mutation that thrives from going against the status quo nor a pathological death sentence that feeds on victimization remains an ongoing process for literary and disability studies scholars. This thesis has addressed cultural nuances and dissonances that stem from postcolonial trauma for Asian nations and blanketing assumptions of modernity and feminism insinuated from western ideologies prior to reading texts that address beauty, disability, lookism, and neoliberalism. While ugliness and other disabilities are usually expected to be cured, *If I Have Your Face* delivers alternative outcomes. From the perspective of debilitated gender, to the debilitated individual struggling to not only move forward, but to exist with pain, responsibilities, and hardship, Cha curates a mixture of narratives that bond and support each other in the face of a world fixated on producing capital in society rather than inscribing value on it.

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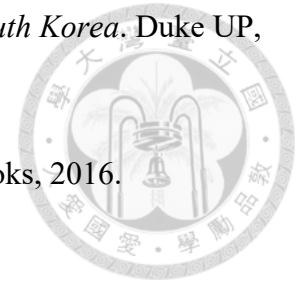
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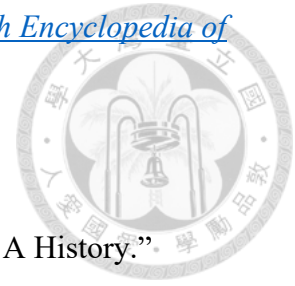
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