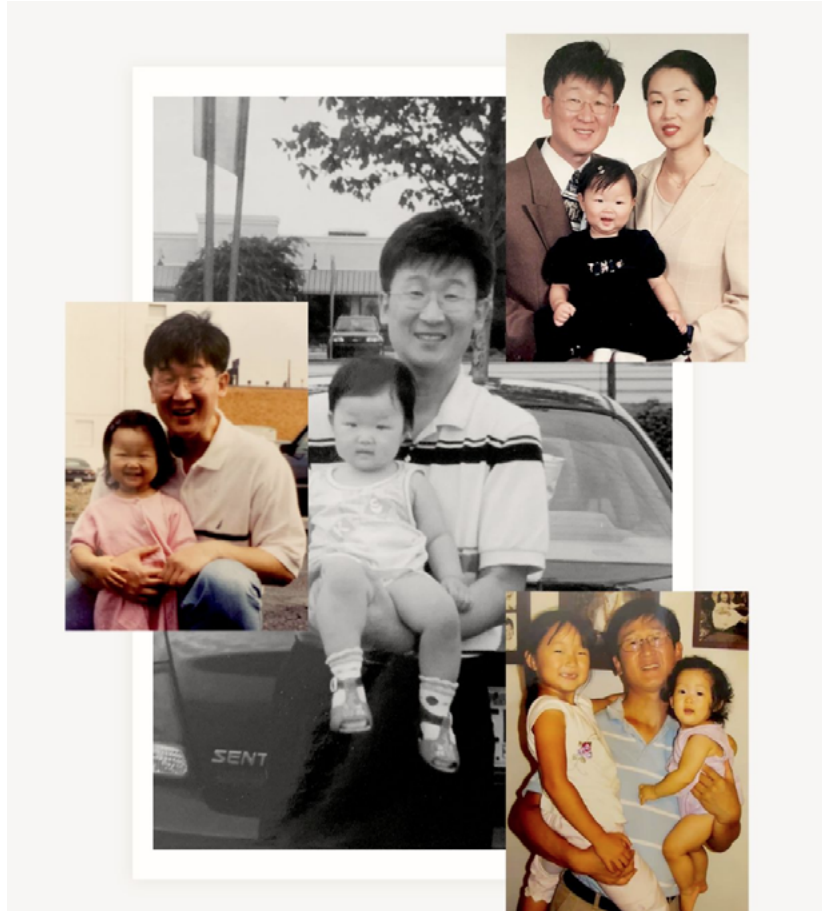


# ELLE

## Korean Beauty Standards Made Me Hate My Face. My Father Helped Me Love It.

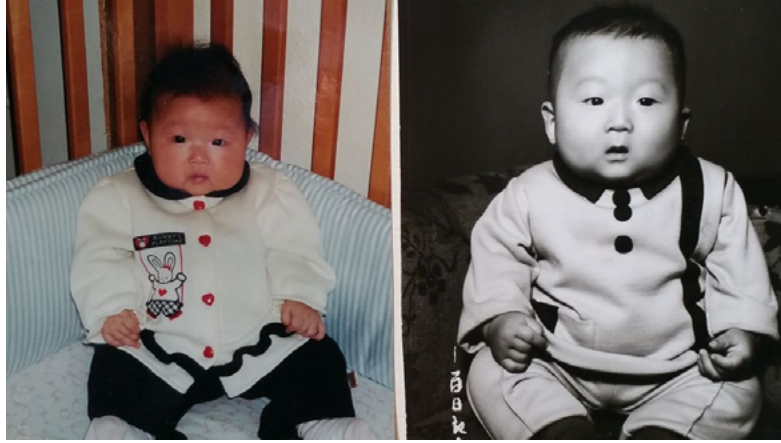
Carol Lee | May 24, 2024



DESIGN BY YOUSRA ATTIA, PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAROL LEE

I was eight years old when my grandmother first told me I should get plastic surgery. Or rather, she told my mother, “I think Carol should get a nose job.” My mother laughed it off. I pretended I wasn’t listening, but I took away two lessons: Even my loved ones saw flaws in me, and I could alter those features if I wanted.

I never ended up allowing a surgeon near my nose, but a visit from the sister of a family friend when I was in elementary school kicked off a lifelong obsession with another feature. She was a famous Korean author, and several of her books had been turned into well-received K-dramas. If there was anyone I trusted at the time to know what made an actress beautiful, it was her. As she said goodbye before her flight back to South Korea, she kneeled down to look at my younger sister. “Look at her V-line!” she exclaimed. “Do you know how many celebrities want this face shape?” She then turned to me. “Oh, you’re pretty too,” she said offhandedly. Later, I looked at my face in the mirror. It sure didn’t look like my sister’s, with its slim profile and chin that sloped down into a definitive point. My face was wider, rounder, like my father’s. If everybody wanted to look like a celebrity, and no celebrity wanted to look like me, I thought I must not be very pretty. It was all my face shape’s fault. I resented my father for giving it to me.



**COURTESY OF CAROL LEE**

Left: The author as a baby. Right: The author's father, Ji Hoon Lee as a baby.

I started to check how wide or slim my face shape appeared to be in every picture taken of me and bemoaned my reflection in the mirror or my phone's front camera. During my formative years, I observed how every celebrity hailed as a great beauty in South Korea, from actresses Song Hye-kyo and Kim Tae-hee to singers IU and Lee Hyori, possessed face shapes that resembled my sister's rather than mine.



**COURTESY OF CAROL LEE**

The author's father holding her and her sister, Tracy Lee, as children.

That was not an accident—the ideal face shape in South Korea has long been a slender and delicate oval one, with a V-shaped chin. Visible cheekbones are also eschewed; the ultimate goal is to have a smooth outline without any obvious angles to mar it. A face that resembles a chicken egg is believed to be more photogenic and pleasing to the eye. In a society where absolute perfection is lionized—whether that be poreless, freckle-free skin or flawless grades and resumes—cheek or jaw bones that jut out and ruin an otherwise sleek silhouette are not to be tolerated.

“Early on, it was the wide cheekbones that were not desired at all,” says Dr. Charles S. Lee, a Korean board-certified plastic surgeon based in Beverly Hills, California. “So that was the first surgical area that was focused on in Korea that’s unique to East Asia, especially as a cheekbone reduction was developed in the 1980s and ’90s. Along with that, there’s a corresponding wideness of the jaw angle area that’s really not desired in East Asia. So that surgery was big in the ’90s. In the 2000s, the service got more perfected and moved into narrowing the chin area.”

It’s no secret that South Korea is one of the foremost plastic surgery capitals of the world. According to Dr. Lee, the country experienced early exposure to modern Western plastic surgery due to World War II. “In the 1950s, during the Korean War, [the U.S.] brought along its military reconstructive surgeons to treat the soldiers,” he explains. Dr. Lee trained under Dr. D. Ralph Millard, one of those Korean surgeons and the doctor who performed the first-ever recorded Asian double eyelid surgery in South Korea in the early 1950s—one of the most popular operations in the country today.

In the decades since, the country has developed and refined surgeries at lightning speed to sculpt the faces of Koreans and international visitors into idealized versions of themselves, sometimes to an unrecognizable degree. Surgical alterations became so accessible and normalized that they evolved from a social taboo into something a grandmother could flippantly suggest to her grandchild. She meant no ill will—in South Korea, where a headshot is often required in the hiring process, your perceived attractiveness could open more doors in your career. She simply wanted to maximize my chances of flourishing. I, too, absorbed that attitude, which is why I researched ways to adjust the shape of my face throughout my teenage years.

I found that surgeons in South Korea often utilize noninvasive methods—like Botox to diminish the masseter muscles, Thermage to tighten the skin, and thread lifts to hoist up the skin around the jaw—when attempting to manufacture that slimmer appearance in wider-faced patients. But the most potent and permanent of all of the jaw- and cheekbone-reducing procedures is, of course, surgery that alters the structure of the bones themselves. When it comes to the jaw, shaving is the way. “When you look at the mandible, or the bone that shapes the jawline and the chin, oftentimes it’s a little bit flatter at the bottom, and there’s sometimes a little bit of a ridge right in the middle,” explains [Dr. Kimberly J. Lee](#), another Korean board-certified plastic surgeon based in Beverly Hills, California. “So when we do surgery, we actually shave down that bone, and we’re really contouring it to give it more of that V look, where it’s coming more to a point.”

Surgeons sometimes shave the cheekbones too, although the more common approach is to physically nudge the cheekbone away from the perimeter of the face. “The cheekbone is a hollow structure,” Dr. Charles Lee says. “There’s air behind this bone.” Doctors will create two cracks in the bone and push it inward before attaching two ball plates to ensure that the bone stays in place. Despite how invasive these surgeries are, the downtime is usually less than a month; Dr. Charles Lee reports the pain level to be less than that of a breast augmentation, which almost makes it feel approachable.

One could argue that I should not have felt the weight of the peninsula’s plastic surgery obsession because I grew up in the U.S., where angular face shapes like Angelina Jolie’s are celebrated. But I know now that my struggle to remain connected to my Korean roots contributed to my infatuation with what I believed Koreans to find desirable. I took pride in reading, writing, and speaking fluent Korean. I loved the Korean food my mother fed me every day. I delighted in Korean folk tales, dramas, and pop music. But as a *gyopo*, or a member of the Korean diaspora, who was born and raised in the States, I inevitably felt a sharp disconnect with the motherland. My education and socialization all happened here. No matter how much Korean media I consumed, I would never have as intuitive a handle on Korean slang, mannerisms, and culture as someone who grew up there.

I grasped at any thread that might strengthen what I felt was a tenuous bond with Korea—and if that thread was attempting to adhere to Korean beauty standards, so be it. Rejecting Korean ideals and embracing my prominent cheekbones and wider face almost felt like betraying the place my parents emigrated from. And perhaps if I aspired toward the Korean idea of a perfect profile, it would bring me that much closer to being a perfect Korean.



**COURTESY OF CAROL LEE**  
Ji Hoon, Carol, and Carol’s mother Juyoung Yoo.

I imagine that if I had grown up in South Korea, I would have gone under the knife. I wonder how I might have allowed surgeons to architect my features, transforming my face into one my parents could not claim as their own creation. I don’t blame anyone who has done so. However, perhaps because of where I grew up, plastic surgery felt more like an abstract idea than a viable solution to my woes. That didn’t mean my aesthetic anxieties and the distance I felt from my parents’ home country magically dispersed on their own. I simply lived with the constant murmur of discontent that buzzed in the back of my head.

But a few months ago, I came across an article from 2014 about a study by the Korea Face Institute. The research center simulated the average South Korean face in 12,000 B.C., in the present day, and in 2100. What interested me most was what the researchers approximated to be the average female Korean face today—its undoctored shape was round, with a wider jaw and visible cheekbones. Just like mine.

I felt more connected to Korea than I ever had before. Average does not mean all, and narrower, egg-shaped faces do occur naturally in some Koreans, like my sister. But the image assured me that my Korean identity is written in my genes. My “Korean-ness” is not contingent on what beauty ideals I subscribe to or reject. I gave myself permission to accept that spurning Korean standards and finding beauty in the features I was born with does not translate into a rejection of my heritage. Instead, it is an act of embracing it.

There is an unattributed quote that has floated through the internet for years that reads: “Your existence is proof that generations of your face have been loved.” That’s true, isn’t it? For thousands of years, Korean mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, sisters, brothers, daughters, sons, and everyone in between have cherished someone with my face shape. My face’s particular lines and contours are a physical manifestation of that unwavering chain of love. They are my inheritance, a gift from ancestors I never knew.

However, I don’t even have to peer into generations past to witness that love. My face is loved here and now by friends and family members I can see and touch; my father has unabashedly loved it from the day I was born. When I recently confessed my insecurities to my father, he seemed confused. “To me, you were always just beautiful,” he said. “I never once thought your face was abnormal.” During our conversation, my father told me, “When you smile, I realize how much you take after my side of the family. You’re similar to my sisters, and you’re similar to my cousin. And you don’t think they’re ugly, do you?” “Of course not,” I replied. “Then of course you’re pretty,” he said.



COURTESY OF CAROL LEE  
Carol with her father.

Although I habitually assess the width of my face in the mirror and in every picture taken of me, I no longer despair when it appears wider than I once wished it to be. Beauty is besides the point. Instead, I smile, and I see my father. I am reminded that one of the people dearest to me is with me wherever I am. I don’t ever want to let that go.

<https://www.elle.com/beauty/a60779014/korean-american-identity-plastic-surgery/>