

“Beauty Will Save You”: The Myth and Ritual of Dieting in Korean Society

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Abstract

This paper will examine the dieting that takes place in Korean society today from the perspective of myth and ritual of beauty in contemporary society. The beauty myth prevalent in contemporary society is in fact not a new one; it is just a variation of the “old story” that has long relegated women to passivity and obedience. Focusing on the fundamental ideas of beauty myth, this paper will first examine the story of the bear-woman, which appears in the Dangun myth. Next, it will describe how this logic of bodily transformation is reconstructed in Korea today. Finally, this paper will explore how transformation of the body results in encouraging women to be passive and dependent on others.

Keywords: bodily transformation, dieting, myth, ritual, patriarchy, consumer culture, Confucianism, Dangun myth

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Running on Empty

Korean society is like a furnace of desire for slim bodies. Just as metal can be melted over a hot fire and cast into desired shapes, Korean society harbors a burning desire to pressure and drive the bodily transformation of women. According to an article in a daily newspaper, among 22 countries surveyed, Korean college women were the most zealous about dieting, despite being the slimmest;¹ in addition, the results of a research paper revealed that the beauty industry accounts for a sizeable portion of the domestic market in Korea, with 5.5 trillion won in cosmetics, 0.5 trillion won in plastic surgery, and one trillion won in dieting.² These findings clearly demonstrate the cultural implications dieting have for Korean society. Given the tremendous scale of the industry related to the transformation of bodies, as indicated by these numbers, it is necessary to examine the significance of dieting in Korean society and the social and cultural devices that are driving forward the transformation of bodies.

Studies of dieting in Korea have been mainly carried out from the perspectives of consumer culture, discipline and government of the body, and feminism. These perspectives indicate that the body has become a primary resource for the construction of self-identity, based on the social acceptance of desire with the advent of consumer culture. The transformation of the body is a strategic act of capitalizing the body, which enables women to gain social recognition in a gender-biased society. It also means that today's women are trapped in a net of patriarchal power relations that constantly forces them to train their bodies to maintain their intrinsic femininity. Dieting not only concerns women's bodies. As medical science has begun to define

1. A joint survey conducted by the University of London and the University of Bristol, which covered 18,512 male and female college students in 22 countries, revealed that Korean college women had the lowest body mass index (BMI) among the 22 countries, but 77% of them replied that they were attempting weight loss, topping the list. *Chosun Ilbo*, May 17, 2006.

2. Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI) (2002, 12).

obesity as a disease, men as well cannot help but join the wave of dieting that requires them to struggle against their own flesh. As symbolized by the so-called "flower boys" or handsome poster boys (*kkonminam*), men are increasingly expected to also have supple and firm bodies in order to achieve social success. Nevertheless, the meaning of and strategy behind men's bodily transformations are necessarily different from that of women. Given the fact that most dieters are women, and their main goal is to increase their physical beauty, another perspective is required to understand the practice of dieting. In Korean society, men are automatically granted positions as full members of society without the need to transform their bodies. In contrast, women's striving for bodily transformation can be interpreted as an attempt to confirm the value of their existence by acquiring full status in a society where consumer culture and patriarchal social structure are combined. That is why women's struggles for bodily transformation are said to carry an existential implication that cannot simply be boiled down to an act of vanity and extravagance. The problem is that the pursuit of bodily transformation can end in failure with no such existential significance, leaving the dieter running on empty. As feminist analyses of bodily transformation have pointed out, even in a social environment where sexual liberation and fulfillment of sexual desire are socially allowed, female transformation is still mired in the patriarchal power network that is saturated with consumer culture.

This paper will examine the dieting that takes place in Korean society today from the perspective of myth and ritual of beauty in contemporary society. Throughout the ages, beauty myths have been mainly created and led by men. Even today, the myths and rituals of beauty cannot be separated from patriarchy. For this reason, this paper focuses on women rather than men. In fact, the ideology implicit in the contemporary myth of beauty exerts more influence on women than on men. If a society encourages its members to view the artificial transformation of women's physical characteristics as not artificial at all, but rather natural, then this ideology, which distorts the artificial as natural, must be dismantled via a variety of critical

perspectives.

The process of dismantling the beauty myth should start from analyzing the fundamental ideas of that myth. The beauty myth prevalent in contemporary society is in fact not a new one; it is just a variation of the “old story” that has long relegated women to passivity and obedience. Using this approach, this paper will first examine the story of the bear-woman, which appears in the Dangun myth. Next, it will describe how this logic of bodily transformation is reconstructed in Korea today. Finally, this paper will explore how transformation of the body results in encouraging women to be passive and dependent on others.

From Bear to Human

In the *Old Book* it is written, “In ancient times, Hwan-in (Heavenly King, Jeseok or *Sakrodeveendra*) had a young son whose name was Hwanung. The boy wished to descend from heaven and live in the human world. His father, after examining three great mountains, chose Taebaeksan mountain as a suitable place for his heavenly son to bring happiness to human beings. He gave Hwanung three heavenly treasures, and commanded him to rule over his people.

With three thousand of his loyal subjects Hwanung descended from heaven and appeared under a sandalwood tree on Taebaeksan mountain. He named the place *sinsi* (city of god) and assumed the title of Hwanung Cheonhwang. . . .

In those days there lived a she-bear and a tigress in the same cave. They prayed to Sinung [another name for Hwanung] to be blessed with incarnation as human beings. The king took pity on them and gave them each a bunch of mugwort and twenty pieces of garlic, saying, “If you eat this holy food and do not see the sunlight for one hundred days, you will become human beings.”

The she-bear and the tigress took the food and ate it, and retired into the cave. In twenty-one days the bear, who had faithfully observed the king’s instructions, became a woman. But the tigress, who had disobeyed, remained in her original form.

But the bear-woman could find no husband, so she prayed

under the sandalwood tree to be blessed with a child. Hwanung heard her prayers and married her. She conceived and bore a son who was called Dangun Wanggeom, the King of Sandalwood.³

This passage from *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), written by Iryeon in the Goryeo period, relates the origin myth of the Korean nation. Hwanung, and Hwanin, who are heavenly gods, and Dangun, the son born between a heavenly god and an earthly being, constitute national symbols that stress the uniqueness and superiority of Korean people. Accordingly, the Dangun myth has mostly been discussed in terms of promoting Korean superiority. However, like narratives, myths allow for various interpretations. They can persist beyond time and space only when they provide the subjects of interpretation with various meanings.

The story of the bear that transformed into a human being suggests many explanations for the popularity of dieting in contemporary Korean society. The bear is of great importance in the Dangun myth. Without the existence of the bear-woman, Dangun could not have been born, and consequently Korean people would not exist today. However, the greater importance of the bear, which was transformed into a human being, lies in the fact that the bear, or bear-woman, acts as an archetype of Korean women. According to a paper, “Since the bear-woman was the first human being, who was admitted into the civilized world that Hwanung had created, she can be seen as a primitive model of a civilized human being. The union between this bear-woman and Hwanung signifies the entry of the terrestrial world into the stage of complete civilization, and further the final completion of a new civilization.”⁴ However, despite the importance of the bear in the origin myth of the Korean nation, the image of the bear-woman is usually limited to that of a passive woman. This image of passivity was actually created by a social structure that

3. *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) (1972, 32-33). This translation is much indebted to Ha Tae-Hung and Grafton Mints, except for the romanization of Koreans that follows the new system.

4. Oh (2004, 48).

renders as passive the active desire to become a human being and to give birth to offspring through marriage with a human being.

The bear had to suffer the pains of a rite of passage in order to move out of animality and transform into a human being, in other words, in order to bring itself out of nature into civilization. The bear finally became a human being after undergoing the difficult process of eating only mugwort and garlic and avoiding the sun to free itself from animality. In this myth, mugwort and garlic are media that transform animality (nature) into humanity (civilization), and the bear is forbidden to contact the civilized world before transforming into a human being through that media. Therefore, the transformation of the bear into a human being signifies its acquisition of human nature as well as its entry into the world of civilization. However, the civilized world that awaits the bear-woman is just a patriarchal world that imposes fixed roles on women. The bear-woman represents women who are assigned the role of reproduction for the maintenance of the male-centered state community.⁵ The pain that the bear-woman must suffer in order to break out of animality and become a human being was increased when the role of reproduction, associated with animality, was imposed upon her. That is why it can be said that the bear-woman in the Dangun myth symbolizes the place and role of women in Korean history.

Also notable is that, though many generations have passed, the destiny of the bear-woman in the Dangun myth remains the destiny of Korean women. Just as the bear in the myth had to overcome the pain of staying in a dark cave and eating only mugwort and garlic in order to become a human being, today's bear-women must undergo the pain of dieting and plastic surgery in order to become beautiful women with bodies that are considered normal and socially acceptable. Susan Bordo characterizes the human body, symbolized by the bear, as one of "animality" possessed by natural instincts and primitive needs.⁶ The bear, which is driven by animal instincts and

5. Moon (1999, 121).

6. Bordo (2003, 13).

desires, symbolizes the natural instincts and desires of the body. Given that the most basic method of dieting is starvation, that is, depriving the body of nutrition, it can be interpreted as the same method used by the bear-woman in the Dangun myth to transform into a human being, that is, by suppressing her animal nature and desire by subsisting only on mugwort and garlic. The bear-woman's ascetic practices are being represented by today's women who willingly endure hunger pangs in order to become perfect women.

Who are the models of perfect, beautiful womanhood for today's bear-women? Let us return to the Dangun myth. Before Hwanung descended to earth, there was already an established human world on earth. However, the human world was primitive and uncivilized. It was for the purpose of bringing order to the chaotic world of humans that Hwanung descended to earth. Therefore, the union of Hwanung and the bear-woman was a natural step for the establishment of a "pure" civilized world. Hwanung could not have found a suitable match among the humans who were "contaminated" with animal instincts. In order for Dangun, the ruler of the new civilized world, to be born, the bear-woman, who came out of animality into perfect humanity, was needed. Paradoxically, this is how the bear-woman, who aspired to become a human being through contact with the "contaminated" human world, has been established as an archetype of womanhood. Here it should be noted that it is not the bear-woman herself but Hwanung who established her as such an archetype. Hwanung took advantage of the bear-woman's desire and gave her the status of an archetype for the purpose of building a new civilized world.

Incidentally, for today's bear-women, the model for bodily transformation is the Western female. With the modernization of Korean society, "the West" became a model of civilization as well as an object of envy. Korea pursued modernization in the spheres of hygiene, etiquette, housing, diet, and clothing, with Western society as its model, while Western standards of evaluation and judgment were regarded as rational and scientific. It was the same case with the evaluation of women's beauty. With the advent of modernized mentality, built atop a base of material modernization, Korean soci-

ety broke out of the previously dominant Confucian formula that restricted women's "virtue" to the concealment of their female characteristics and began to consider it acceptable for women to expose them instead. In fact, the efforts to create modern women through modernization aimed "to reveal, visualize, experience, and structure women's beauty, whether it be physical or spiritual."⁷ An article titled "Women's Beauty: Three Types of Physical Beauty," which appeared in the *Donga Ilbo* on August 10, 1939, reports the findings of Western studies of women's physical beauty. The article enumerates the standards of women's physical beauty: "According to Dr. So-and-So: First, measure the circumferences of the woman's breast, hips, and thighs, add them up, and multiply the sum by 100. Second, add half her height to the sum of the circumferences of her neck, waist, wrists, and ankles. The figure obtained by deducting the second number from the first demonstrates the ideal proportion for a woman's body." The article then states that a beautiful, balanced body is rare among Japanese and Korean women, and that they must stretch and exercise in order to have such a body.

A racist perspective is often implicit in the media's suggestions that the ideal Western body should be used as the standard for beautiful bodies. An article titled "Modern Women's Physical Beauty," which appeared in the *Donga Ilbo* on May 2, 1935, insists, "Today's modern woman should have a beautiful waistline as well as a beautiful leg line." The "beautiful waist line" mentioned here refers to a slim waist. Emphasizing the "beautiful waist line" as one of the elements of physical beauty that modern women should possess, this article states, "Generally, Korean women's waist are relatively thick. In other words, they don't have slim waist lines such as those of Western women because they usually stay home. . . . The hips of African American women are so big and thick that they don't look good." One thing to be noted here is that "Korean women have been constantly compared with Western women."⁸ It was the media, such

7. Kwon (1998, 71).

8. Kim M. (2005, 161).

as magazines and newspapers, that has made the Western standard of beauty so predominant in Korean society by constantly comparing Korean women with Western women, but it was men that spread the discourse of beautiful women formulated by the media. This male perspective shaped the perception of Western appearances as symbolizing "civilization" while considering African or Asian ones barbarous, "spreading racist views of African-Americans in Korean society."⁹

In this manner, with the modernization of Korean society, women's body became a subject of social discourse, and thus, in this discourse, Korean women have been constantly compared with Western women and encouraged to pursue the Western body shape. As the argument that Western civilization is superior to Eastern civilization began to gain strength and power in Korean society, Korean women were forced to attain a "modern" body shape and make themselves up just like modern Western women.¹⁰ The dichotomist perspective that divided Korean women into old- and new-fashioned women, or traditional and modern women, using Western women as a standard, contributed to creating modern women who were liberated from Confucian tradition. However, as Korean women were still forced to be chaste and modest as well as good wives and mothers, women's modernization in Korean society could not help but be limited to the pursuit of physical beauty.

Just like the bear-woman in the Dangun myth, today's bear-women pursue civilization. The bear-woman was a being that transformed herself in a social atmosphere in which the civilized world

9. Kim M. (2005, 160).

10. As long as Koreans train envious eyes on Western civilization, they will not be free from the colonized consciousness that makes them judge the beauty of Korean women by Western standards of beauty. A recent report on the average height and weight of those who participated in the Miss Korea Pageant, which selects a so-called "Korean beauty" to represent the nation, shows how predominant the Western standard of beauty has become in Korean society. The average height and weight of those who joined the pageant in the past were 156cm/47.6kg in 1962-1972, 166cm/50kg in 1979-1981, and 170cm/52kg 1982-1996, testifying that for the past 40 years, Koreans have been looking up to tall and slender Western models as an ideal image of beauty. For this, see Yun (1999, 24).

created by Hwanung was considered ideal. Likewise, today's bear-women seek to transform their bodies in a social atmosphere in which Western civilization is considered ideal. Hwanung promised to transform the bear into a human female if she waited in the darkness for 100 days eating only mugwort and garlic. The bear-woman endured the pain and became a human being as Hwanung promised. It was the bear who aspired to become a human being. It was because only human beings could build a civilized world that the bear aspired to transform into one. Just as the bear-woman's transformation meant her assimilation into the civilized world promised by Hwanung, the transformation of today's women aims to copy the ideal woman of Western culture. The bear who wanted to be a part of a civilized world became the human being she wished to be, and made her entry into the civilized world created by men. However, for what reason do today's bear-women aspire to transform their bodies? What promise is made to them?

The Rhetoric and Practice of Bodily Transformation

It is the economic system of consumer capitalism combined with the patriarchal system¹¹ that is instilling in today's "bear girls" the desire to transform themselves into beautiful women with perfect bodies, and above all, the main agitator of this trend is the mass media. Given this, it is necessary to explain what functions as the concrete driving force that triggers women to engage in transforming their

11. A representative example of patriarchy in Korean society is the family registration system. In this male-centered system, children must follow their father's family name, and in marriage, a woman becomes a family member with a different family name from her husband and children. Moreover, upon the birth of a child, she would be addressed as "someone's mother," with her own name being ignored. That is why, for women, marriage means being enlisted in her husband's clan. Although she and her husband have formed their own family independent of their parents, her life is supposed to be centered on her husband's family. Likewise, women are likely to be aliens in this male-centered family system.

bodies. The explanation can be found in the message of salvation implicit in the transformation of the body, that is, the strong declaration that "beauty will save you." This declaration carries a double message. The first message concerns worldly salvation, which means the salvation of women from social prejudice and oppression inflicted on women in a male-centered, patriarchal economic system. The second pertains to "limited salvation," which means that salvation is limited to beautiful women. This message of salvation conversely implies that unbeautiful women cannot be saved. Therefore, for those women who aspire to be saved by beauty, folds of fatty flesh are the source of shame that causes social prejudice and oppression. It is social success and recognition as well as the appreciation of beauty that women can acquire by being saved from the beastly flesh of the body. Contrary to this, such women who overcome their beastly appetites in order to meet the "standard of civilization" and keep their bodies slim and supple are given social recognition and success, and even receive admiration for their bodies.

In a social atmosphere represented by so-called "lookism," those who have a body shape that falls short of the social ideal do or may suffer discrimination or prejudice because of their appearances. Therefore, women's dissatisfaction with their own bodies often leads to dissatisfaction with their very existence (within such bodies). Diet ads use strategies that create and make use of the social environment to promote dieting or short-term weight loss. For example, diet ads compare before and after pictures of women who succeeded in dieting, highlighting their slimness and confidence. The image created by the ads suggests not only bodily transformation but the birth of a new self, like the birth of Venus. Recently, a foreign diet firm released a newspaper ad featuring the confident figure of a slim woman, with the strong message that "If your body changes, so will your life" (fig. 1). This message provides a concrete image of the compensation given through bodily transformation. Though the beautiful body is a result of transformation, it does not simply mean the transformation of the physical body, but the birth of a new being who is able to achieve social success as well as invite others' envy.



Fig. 1. "If your body changes, so will your life."

The message of diet ads that convince people that one can be freed from the fetters of the body becomes a kind of salvation myth. Michell Lelwica writes, "This soteriology (salvation myth) draws on and sustains a language and ethos through which female dieting makes sense."¹² Through advertising and promotions, mass media motivates women and instills them with a worldview that encourages them to mold their bodies into more beautiful and perfect ones. Hence, this message conveys a number of meanings to the women who see such ads: "A heavy woman is sup-

posed to be unhappy. She should liberate herself from the yoke of her heavy body to escape her unhappy life. A happy new life different from your present one will begin once you have a slim body." Many women know from direct and indirect experience in their everyday lives or through the media how slim and beautiful women are treated socially. Such experiences trigger them to accept the message of the ads as true. As a result, the beauty myth elaborated by Korean consumer culture leads to worship of beautiful bodies.

In Korean society, a beautiful body functions as a sacred symbol. A sacred symbol contains within itself the worldview and ethos of a culture.¹³ In this respect, the beautiful body as a sacred symbol tells us how the consumer culture of Korea perceives this world (worldview) and what ethical and aesthetic standards the culture has estab-

12. Lelwica (2000, 184).
13. Geertz (1973, 89-90).

lished (ethos). In a male-centered society, a beautiful body is considered a means of salvation that earns women social success and status as well as others' admiration and respect. The message that the beautiful body will free women from all constraints exerts practical power in the society, instilling in women a firm belief in salvation through the transformation of body.

Clifford Geertz argues that the criterion for distinguishing between religious and profane dimensions of something depends on whether it is symbolic of transcendental truths or not.¹⁴ For example, for those who passionately play golf every Sunday, the act of playing golf can be defined as a religious one. However, it is only so on the condition that such behavior has absolute meaning or transcendental truth that can lead to religiosity. According to this standard, dieting is not simply an exercise or a sport to lose weight, but implies religious meaning. This is because dieting is based on the belief that women can obtain social authority and power by controlling their own beastly desires and achieving an ideal body. The pursuit of a slim body through dieting leads women to have confidence in the power of a beautiful body and engage in a system of self-discipline to control one's desire, body, and even everyday life. In regard to this, Susan Bordo notes that dieting has "deep associations with autonomy, will, discipline, conquest of desire, enhanced spirituality, purity, and transcendence of the female body."¹⁵ Women want to be liberated from the weighty flesh that binds both body and mind and to be reborn into a slim, normal body approved by society.

However, the important point is that the distinction between sacred and profane is made not according to the intrinsic nature of the object, but to the system of order and classification that is set by the society. There exists no intrinsic difference between "sacred-clean" and "profane-unclean."¹⁶ Women's flesh and body fat are considered an anomaly that deviates from normal standards only within

14. Geertz (1973, 98).
15. Bordo (2003, 93).
16. Douglas (1966, 35-40).

the consumer culture and patriarchal system of Korea. When based on those standards, a fat, fleshy body is considered neither healthy nor beautiful, and a woman with such a body is not considered sexually attractive, and is even believed to lack a diligent attitude towards self-improvement, because such a body is considered unsuitable for sexual stimulation. For those women who are immersed in the myth of the slim and beautiful body and suffer eating disorders, food is a pollutant that threatens the maintenance of a slim body, and thus the natural desire for food is taboo. The mugwort and garlic that were allowed for the bear aspiring to break out of animality and to become a human being symbolizes suppression of the natural desire for food, and nature is considered as threatening the organized, orderly social system, in that it is chaotic and disordered.¹⁷ Patients with eating disorders perceive the act of giving in to natural desire as a violation of taboo, which results in fattening their bodies and inviting the risk of being stigmatized as abnormal. Fat women are usually considered not beautiful and are stigmatized as lazy and idle, becoming the target of social criticism and discrimination. This is how the Korean society immersed in the myth of beauty imprints its own image onto human flesh.¹⁸

If dieting is a practice that pursues worldly salvation through transformation into slim bodies, the significance of the practice can be defined in terms of rituals, and the rituals of dieting can be traced back to the Taoist art of health preservation or early Christian ascetic practices from the medieval period. However, it is because the meanings and values of dieting differ from those of everyday behaviors that this paper considers them a kind of ritual. In this regard, the concept of “ritualization” set forth by Catherine Bell helps to reveal the character of such rituals. According to her, “intrinsic to ritualization are strategies for differentiating itself . . . from other ways of acting within any particular culture.”¹⁹ Therefore, in order to under-

17. Douglas (1966, 7-9).

18. Douglas (1966, 116).

19. Bell (1992, 90).

stand the rituals of dieting, it is necessary to identify what strategies and values these rituals have, and which makes them distinct from other social behaviors.

In Korean society, dieting rituals refer to a series of practices to achieve a body shape that is defined as ideal by society, and in these rituals are implicit such strategic practices to differentiate oneself from other women and thus acquire social prestige and power by achieving a slim body. In today’s Korean society, an ideal body means having a slim and supple body. Discourses about the ideal body, which were formed in Korea after the 2000s, testify to how much people pursue young, slim, supple bodies and small faces, as shown in such expressions as *eoljjang* (“face king,” a person with a handsome face), *momjjang* (“body king,” a person with a nice body), *saengeol* (a pretty face without any make-up), *dongan* (a young-looking face), *longdari* (slang term for “long legs”), *jjukjuk ppangppang* (“long, slim, and supple”), S-line (hourglass figure), V-line (slender face), etc. The so-called “long,

slim, and supple legs” are mythical symbols of the goal that average Korean women can hardly attain. The ideal body is, in other words, a perfect body, which is never attainable from the start. However, numerous diet products and ads seduce women with such modifiers as “easy, simple, quick, and effective,”²⁰ promising them that more than achieving an ideal body is possible. Although the authenticity of these advertised promises are unverified, the knowledge of experts such as



Fig. 2. The secret to an actress' slender, sexy legs.

20. Kim and Lennon (2006, 358).

doctors and nutritionists, diet success stories, and diet ads featuring famous stars have contributed to scattering doubts about authenticity. Figure 2 is a diet ad featuring a famous star. The picture of the star's long, sexy legs next to the ad copy, which states, "The line of your legs will change in only eight weeks," seems to prove its authenticity. The medical or scientific knowledge spread through the media disseminates the norms concerning the relationship between health and nutrition, or between health and exercise, the effectiveness of dieting, and differentiation between the normal and the abnormal, while inducing the members of society to live in accordance with those norms. However, this medical or scientific discourse made its entry into society through the media, without objective verification, and gained hegemony, thus being established as magical beliefs.²¹

Dieting can be considered a kind of "magical rite."²² As a method of action to achieve what one anticipates, magical rites have a transcendental conviction that a certain action will bring about a concrete result. Magical rites present the way to the desired goal and order those who want to achieve such goals to take concrete action. In essence, it can be said that magical rites start from a firm belief in the result of such actions. Likewise, diet ads or commercials explain in scientific and medical terms how dieting works to achieve results, and then order people to practice dieting in order to achieve the same satisfaction. Although explanations of the diet products or programs might be scientific in themselves, they are very likely to turn into magical ones in terms of relations with the people who are given the explanations. These people's interest lies not in the objectivity of the scientific explanations, but rather in the promised effects of the diet products or programs, which are validated by such scientific explanations. Just as people use drugs or cosmetics with the conviction that such things will bring the results they expect, those who participate in the ritual of dieting do so with the conviction that they can attain a

21. Kim E. (1997, 281).

22. Grimes (1995, 48-50).

slim body through dieting. It is the desire for the anticipated results that enables the ritual of dieting to exert its power as magical rites.

In the ritual of dieting, a body becomes an object that can be transformed through one's own efforts, rather than a destined one. In a society where a beautiful body is admired or worshipped, those who are fat despite having the ability to transform their bodies are considered to lack the will for self-control or are even believed to be mentally deficient.²³ And those who failed to obtain the desired result through dieting would come to think that it is because they did not earnestly carry out the ritual of dieting:

I worked out at a health club for 2 hours everyday without skipping a day for a month. I usually had a piece of toast for breakfast and then a moderate amount of rice for lunch. In the evening I dined off two boiled eggs. I drank more than 2 liters of green tea per day. Whenever I felt hungry, I drank green tea, especially before and after working out. The hardest part of dieting was overcoming the temptation not to work out; it was probably all the more so because I had to work out by myself. Whenever I didn't feel like working out, I looked at the brand-new extra small dress that I had bought to wear in case I got slim and pledged to myself, "I will work out until I am slim enough to wear that dress." Even at home, I stretched or moved at all spare moments. After dieting and exercising that way for a month, I actually lost weight. Now, when I go out, people seeing me from behind usually mistake me for a young girl. My husband admires me for the hard work I did. He also adds that he is so happy to be able to embrace me with one arm, like before we were married.²⁴

This passage came from an article published in a woman's magazine, which tells the story of a woman's diet experience. The article depicts the character of self-surveillance and self-training that accompanies the constant ritual of dieting. The regular workout and low-

23. Posch (2001, 10-109).

24. *Woman Sense*, June 2006.

calorie diet, as well as the future vision, which are mentioned in this article, reflect the semantic world inherent in the ritual of dieting. The illusion that they can control their own bodies and the psychology of compensation that says they will achieve social acceptance and recognition become a driving force that motivates them to work to achieve a slim body, which is presented as ideal in this society.

The fact that the myth and ritual of transformation are based on such magical beliefs or convictions contributes to strengthening women's selflessness. Incantation in contemporary society is not based on unscientific explanations of certain causes and effects, but rather on an aura of authority that emanates from excessive scientific pretensions. This aura emits the light of authenticity in diet ads, which become more plausible, supported by images of diet models and diet success stories. For those women who are only interested in getting slim, the explanatory system of dieting is nothing but a rhetoric of magic. Women possessed by such magical belief diet without seriously thinking about what made them want to and why they should obtain a beautiful body.

The Waning Moon

The waning of the moon symbolizes the dependent status of women in society. The moon always repeats its cycle, and because of this periodicity, it is considered a celestial body with a cyclical life. The moon controls the elements of nature, governed by the natural law of periodicity, such as water, rain, plants, etc., and such controlling power leads to the creation of various symbols, which can be understood with regard to the moon. For example, the bear, which vanishes in winter and reappears in spring, belongs to the chain of symbols relating to the moon. In addition, in that the moon affects the cycle of menstruation, women are believed to be controlled by the moon; with regard to this force of the moon, women are sometimes represented as the goddess of birth and fertility.²⁵

Given this symbolism, the meaning implicit in the merging of

bear and woman in the Dangun myth can be understood in terms of the relationship between the moon and women. The bear kills its own animality in the darkness and gets reborn as a human being. This means a "ritual death" to be reborn.²⁶ However, the body that the bear was allowed to have was that of a woman. Both the bear and women belong to the chain of moon symbols and possess the attributes of the moon. Among these attributes, one that can be applied to women is "birth." The female menstrual cycle premises the conception of a new life through union with a man. It was not the logic of myth, but the logic of reality controlled by men, that restricted the role of the bear-woman to giving birth to Dangun. In other words, it was the logic of men.

The dieting of today's bear-women can also be considered a "ritual death" to be reborn. They suppress their natural desire and strenuously train their bodies in order to be reborn as women with slim and beautiful bodies. Although the medical science of dieting as well as the business of it is providing diverse diet foods and drugs to alleviate the pain that accompanies the process, such foods and drugs are merely synonymous with the garlic and mugwort given to the bear-woman in the Dangun myth. They are media that quicken the extinction or death of animality, aiming at entry into the civilized world through transformation.

Women's attempts to transform themselves by going through a ritual death are carried out in two respects. First, insofar as women are allowed little social space for their activity or participation, their bodies are perceived as targets that can be controlled. According to Kim, "In order to survive in a patriarchal society, women are forced to be both physically and intellectually attractive as a kind of *raison d'être*."²⁷ Reality invests the ritual of dieting with cause and meaning. Second, such transformation makes a woman feel that she is a human being distinct from others. A logic of distinction therefore can

25. Eliade (1997, 225-245).

26. Eliade (1997, 251).

27. Kim J. (2006, 37).

be found in dieting, through which a woman tries to prove she is special by relying on the slimness of her body.

In a society where a woman's value is determined by how physically attractive she is, it is a matter of course that women strive to control their bodies through dieting or plastic surgery. According to a survey taken of 438 college women in Seoul and the metropolitan area,²⁸ 78 percent replied that attractive women are more likely to have a spouse with better economic prospects, and 87.8 percent replied that such women have an advantage in finding a job. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents said that improving their appearance is an investment for the future. These responses, which can be boiled down to "making themselves look more attractive to members of the opposite sex" and "achieving social success," show that women's dieting is a reflection of their efforts to secure a social status within the patriarchal social system through the capitalization of the body. Women's body-shaping efforts are in fact based on the logic that "If a woman's appearance and sexual attractiveness become the object of male desire in a patriarchal society, a beautiful appearance that catches the eyes of men becomes a kind of power. In order to get a beautiful woman, men will be obedient to her, and in this way she will control men with her beauty."²⁹ In medieval European society, dieting was an ascetic Christian practice of self-cultivation aimed at the purification of the soul, while today they have been reversed into a means of expressing sensuality and sexuality.³⁰ The purpose and role of dieting in Korean society are not different from those in Western society. The motive of gaining social recognition and power by using the silhouette of a slim, beautiful body lies behind women's dieting. Women's body shaping can be explained not simply as narcissistic behavior, but as "an active practice to increase the exchange value of the body, which is considered a pathway of pleasure and desire, by getting closer to the body image that has been idealized in

28. Lim (2004, 179-180).

29. Kim J. (2006, 51).

30. Turner (2002, 64).

the context of the consumer culture of Korean society."³¹ Slimness, which is "geared to the narcissistic ends of personal happiness, social success, and social acceptability,"³² can be ascribed to a type of calculative hedonism prevalent in post-capitalist society.

Women's "practice to increase the exchange value of the body" or self-management means they endeavor to normalize the body to make it fit current social standards.³³ In the beauty myth, which is concerned with the ideal of beauty presented by society, a fat body is an object of abhorrence. In a comparative survey of college women in Korea and the United States,³⁴ Korean college women showed lower scores for personal satisfaction with physical appearance, body shape, and body weight as well as self-respect. In particular, despite the fact that 77.9% of the Korean participants were in the underweight range, most of them expressed greater dissatisfaction with their body images than their U.S. counterparts. The results of the survey reflect the fact that Korean college women have negative and erroneous perceptions of their physical appearances and personalities because they constantly compare their own bodies with the ideal body shape presented by Korean society.

The recently released movie *200 Pounds Beauty* (*Minyeo-neun goerowo*) tells the story of Hanna, an obese girl who transforms herself into a beautiful girl by undergoing head-to-toe plastic surgery. This story shows what perspective Korean society has on beauty. Hanna dreams of being like the girl in the song, "Maria," and realizes that dream by undergoing a "ritual death." Before then, Hanna had to sing unseen while a famous pop star lip synced, because of her weight despite having an amazing voice and outstanding talent. After the surgery, however, she is finally able to sing "Maria" on stage: "I will start again. Start getting hot bit by bit. / Don't be afraid. / Before wide open eyes, the sun is shining. / Don't ever stop. / Maria,

31. Mun (2003, 7).

32. Turner (2002, 360).

33. Kim E. (1997, 340).

34. Lee and Lee (2006, 358-360).

Ave Maria, fly to that cloud. / Maria, Ave Maria, despite the big waves.” Hanna sings confidently in front of the audience, and walks lightly down the street. Her beautiful body eliminates the threats she experienced before her transformation. Only upon seeing her, people get excited and feel moved to imitate and own her. Hanna, who has been reborn into a beauty, becomes the envy of all women and the object of longing for all men. This story shows why many Korean women become possessed by the desire to undergo a ritual death, so as to obtain social success as well as praise and admiration from other people through transformations like Hanna’s.

An important thing to note here is that dieting as a strategy for surviving in a male-dominated society and dieting as a way of distinguishing oneself from others are inseparably linked. Such distinction, in fact, focuses on making oneself look a lot better than others. In



Fig. 3. 200 Pounds Beauty (2006)

Korean society, which highly values physical appearance, the body as an asset to make oneself stand out from others signifies a kind of physical capital, that is, a social property that guarantees women social success in a male-dominated society.

Another thing that should be considered in the relationship between the capitalization of the body and distinction through the body is the collective culture. The survey results for Korean women, who live in a collective culture,³⁵ that showed they were more dissatisfied with their physical appearances than American

women, who live in an individualistic culture, reflects the fact that the discourse and gaze on women’s bodies in a collective culture are stronger and more uniform than in other cultures. The city is the main space where collective culture is formed. In Korean cities, where overly abundant populations are densely clustered in small spaces, women’s bodies are placed in the center of comparison and competition. Those who diet are mostly college women, working women, and middle-class housewives living in the city. This implies that dieting is an urban behavior that aims to achieve social authority. Investment in the body is possible because women perceive their bodies as important symbols that distinguish themselves from others. From clothing, shoes, accessories, and hair styles, to methods of bodily transformation such as plastic surgery or dieting, these forms of consumption implies the desire of the contemporary masses who try to build their identities through consumption of the body, and their perception of the body as a most profitable object of investment.

The capitalization of the body through dieting, or distinguishing oneself through the body may seem to be voluntary actions on the one hand, and such voluntariness also implies women’s degradation into a status controlled and regulated by a patriarchal social system as well as consumer culture. In particular, women can differentiate themselves from others and get closer to achieving social success than other women by making their bodies slim through dieting, but the space of women with slim, supple bodies cannot help but be constrained by the voyeuristic male gaze and the patriarchal social frame. This is because, in patriarchal societies, the slim female body and its ensuing sexuality are defined as essential elements of femininity, and therefore, dieting is perceived as a natural and self-directed act to secure their intrinsic femininity.

That is why it can be said that the Confucian order of Joseon dynasty, which established the patriarchal system in Korean society, is still alive. Except for a minority of women who have achieved social success, although it is not certain whether it is possible to make an exception of such women, most Korean women are still affected by the Confucian tradition handed down from Joseon

35. Lee and Lee (2006, 361-363).

dynasty. In the Confucian society of the past, “virtuous woman” was the best eulogy that could be given to a woman. However, the concept of a “virtuous woman,” which is contrasted with that of a “sage gentleman” representing the ideal type of men, is nothing but an expression of respect to such women who “faithfully realize Confucian ideals in their daily lives, which women are required to live within the frame of family relations,” in compliance with patriarchal Confucian norms.³⁶ While men’s sphere of activities extends beyond family into society and nation, women’s is limited within a scope that does not go beyond the frame of patriarchal order. Given this, the meaning of “self-cultivation” cannot but be different between men and women. For men, “self-cultivation” means the embodiment of humanity, which includes eliminating self-interest and embracing others and the world. In contrast, for women, the purpose of “self-cultivation” is to cultivate female virtues that are limited to home and family, and thus this is just a non-self-directed cultivation, manipulated and judged by the male gaze.³⁷ In Korean society that is still influenced by Confucian norms, women’s act of self-cultivation centered on dieting is nothing more than a form of body management done not just for the sake of family and home but also for the sake of being accommodated into the male-centered society.

In this respect, an argument is raised that the pursuit of a beautiful body through dieting cannot be explained only in terms of consumer culture but should be examined in terms of the Confucian patriarchal order, which still remains in our society and controls the discipline of women.³⁸ Although achievement of a beautiful body through dieting might bring women social status and power in the short term, it can also cause the ultimate waning of the moon since it usually results in a feast of beautiful bodies only for men.

36. Kim E. (2006, 225).

37. Kim T. (2003, 101-102).

38. Kim T. (2003, 97-98).

Scars

Have today’s bear-women completely overcome the status and roles that were assigned to the bear-woman in the Dangun myth? At least, for those women who are immersed in the world of myth, which whispers “beauty will save you,” the bear-woman’s destiny becomes their own. Dieting has two meanings for women. First, it is a woman’s survival strategy, in which she uses her own body as capital to ensure social recognition and success in a society dominated by patriarchy as well as collective and consumer culture. As part of this strategy, women modify their appearances in order to make themselves look pretty and stand out from others. Second, the capitalization of the body and distinguishing oneself through dieting necessarily entails the degradation of women into passive and submissive beings.

The waning moon evidently signifies the death of women but at the same time implies their resurrection, just as the moon goes through a temporary death to be reborn. As long as such resurrection signifies her transformation into a woman with a beautiful body, and is based on the belief that a beautiful body itself will save her, it ends as nothing more than a mythical story. The waning of the moon also symbolizes the actual downfall of women in patriarchal society, because in a patriarchal social system a woman’s rebirth after dying, though a temporary death presupposing resurrection, is limited to the modification of the body confined within the gaze of the Other. However, in a society dominated by patriarchy as well as consumer capitalism, women’s death does not only have negative results for women. Men cannot help being bound by the spell of beauty as long as they confine women in the myth of beauty, have predilections for slim and beautiful bodies, and harbor the desire for unions with such bodies.

The beauty myth in contemporary society, being based on the dichotomy between “youth= health= beauty= immortality” and “aging= sickness= ugliness= death,” leads to the formation of an unbalanced worldview and social system, in which the former expel

the latter from society. This pursuit of transformation reflects the age-old Taoist ideal of “eternal youth and longevity.” However, in the past, the ultimate goal of Taoist practice was to become eternally free through union with the Way of the universe. Taoist methods of health preservation for perpetual youth and longevity were just the result of a compromise between religious ideals and worldly pleasures. Likewise, no matter how much medicine and science promise the realization of “eternal youth and longevity,” it is impossible to sustain the biological body indefinitely. At the same time, it is impossible to maintain a stable social system in a narcissistic culture devoid of understanding of and care for the aging, the sick, and the dying; this is because, in a narcissistic culture, people are supposed to pursue one’s own world that excludes the Other, inevitably giving rise to resistance from the Other.

The affirmation of one’s own self is affirmation as well as acceptance of one’s own limits, and this develops into affirmation of others with the same limits. Additionally, the affirmation of the “self as it is” starts from the affirmation of one’s own living body as it is. Many scars are left on the human body. Scars are not merely physical faults, but traces of remembrance and recollection. Scars invite the man or woman with the scars to remember the time, space, and people related to those injuries. In this way, a living body represents the “self,” which is formed through relations with others. Given this, the transformation into a woman with a slender body and smooth skin, or the imitation of a represented image is an act that obliterates the history of one’s body, that is, one’s own history. As a result, those women who pursue such transformation lose their origin and degrade into an abstract being without ontological meaning or a kind of plaything not to be taken seriously.

The message of salvation that “beauty will save you” is just a myth. Roland Barthes insists that today’s myth is found in the anonymous statements formed by the media, advertisements, large consumer groups, etc., and that such myth is a reflection of society. He also observed that myth “turns culture into nature or at least turns the social, the cultural, the ideological, and the historical into

the natural.”³⁹ Therefore, we need to be on guard against the myth elaborated by the mass media, consumer industry, and the patriarchal social system, which present a slim and beautiful body as culturally desirable and normal, and at the same time, cause us to recognize the act pursuing that kind of body as natural.

Therefore all things go through one and the same experience. (Life) is accounted beautiful because it is spirit-like and wonderful, and death is accounted ugly because of its fetor and putridity. But the fetid and putrid is transformed again into the spirit-like and wonderful, and the spirit-like and wonderful is transformed again into the fetid and putrid. Hence it is said, “Under the sky, there is one breath of life, and therefore the sages prized that unity.”⁴⁰

There exists no qualitative difference between beautiful and ugly. Differentiation between slim and fat is also nothing more than a distinction based on a subjective yardstick. The standards for judging between beautiful and ugly, or between slim and fat, have been altered according to the times or cultures. Evaluations of and discourses on “slimness and beauty” in today’s Korean society are just temporary and subjective ones that Korean society’s consumer capitalism and patriarchal system have spread through the mass media and advertisements. Hence, the wisdom and effort to uncover the false consciousness implied in the beauty myth, which is free of neither temporal limits nor subjective prejudices, are required on the part of both men and women.

39. Barthes (1995, 237).

40. “Zhibeiyou” 知北遊 (Knowledge Rambling in the North) in *Zhuangzi*.

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