

Eyelid surgery stigma fades among Asian-Americans

Fewer see it as rejection of ethnicity

By ERIC HSU
STAFF WRITER

Hana Lee's mother had the surgery. Many of her friends did, too. So Lee had few qualms about going to an Englewood Cliffs plastic surgeon for a procedure that widened her eyes and added a tiny fold in the skin of her upper eyelid, a feature most East Asians lack naturally.

Lee, a sophomore at New York

University, said it never occurred to her that the surgery might conflict with her ethnic identity.

"I don't have any regrets over doing it," said Lee, who grew up in Oradell. "I'm definitely very proud of my heritage. I can't deny who I am."

Lee is the new face of blepharoplasty, or eyelid surgery, the most-requested and most controversial cosmetic procedure among Asian-

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Before, left, and after views of a patient who has undergone blepharoplasty, or eyelid surgery, the most requested and most controversial cosmetic procedure among Asian-Americans.

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Americans. The procedure, sometimes known as "double-eyelid surgery" was once derided by some Asians as a literal rejection of their ethnicity, but a new generation is embracing the surgery, while doctors, eager to meet a growing market, have worked to soften the operation's stigma.

Many patients and doctors say the decision to get the surgery is more likely to revolve around family dynamics and personal preferences than racial or cultural issues.

"Asians want to get it done to make [their] eyes wider and more aesthetically pleasing, not to change their ethnicity," said Dr. Jeffrey Ahn, one of a half-dozen plastic surgeons who have recently opened practices in such towns as Fort Lee and Englewood Cliffs to cater to growing Asian communities.

Pioneered in 19th-century Japan, double-eyelid surgery has appealed to Asians by promising to make their eyes larger and more defined. The numbers of Asian-Americans seeking the surgery has climbed steadily, which they get at a far higher rate than any other ethnic group, according to surveys by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. Since 2002, the increase in Asians seeking cosmetic surgery has also outpaced Caucasians, according to figures from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

The surgery's relative ease has probably boosted its popularity. It costs about \$2,500 to \$5,000, and takes about an hour.

Doctors use tiny incisions and stitches to reshape the eyelid. Stitches come out within a week, and most people are close to healed within months.

The Western look

The surgery has always had a controversial undercurrent, having been described in surgery textbooks and among critics as a procedure to "Westernize" eyelids. Detractors have likened it to other cosmetic procedures designed to hide ethnic traits, such as skin-lightening techniques for African Americans, said Elizabeth Haiken, author of "Venus Envy," a history of plastic surgery.

"People say they just want to look prettier, but what does pretty mean?" Haiken said. "There's always an implied standard, and I think the standard that is really embedded in us is actually Western."

Cindy Yuk, a high school sophomore in Fair Lawn, is among the ranks of those who oppose the surgery on principle.

"It just looks better when you stay

with what you were born with," Yuk said. "My grandfather despises it; he says it changes you completely."

Despite the debate, the surgery has flourished in Asia and among East Asians in the United States and is being sought by ever-younger patients. In fact, for many patients the first suggestion about getting the surgery comes from their parents and relatives.

That's common among immigrants from Korea, where the surgery is even more widespread, and where doctors estimate that only 15 percent to 25 percent of people are born with double eyelids, said Dr. Edmund Kwan, who has performed eyelid surgery for more than 12 years.

Kwan, who practices in New York and New Jersey, said that while in the past patients were older, his typical eyelid patients are teen or college-age young women accompanied by their mothers. Even if the patient is ambivalent, Kwan said the mother is often convinced of the surgery's benefits.

"It's ingrained in their mind that an eyelid fold will look better, will help their daughter get a better husband."

DR. EDMUND KWAN,
SPEAKING OF THE MOTHERS
OF PATIENTS

"It's ingrained in their mind that an eyelid fold will look better, will help their daughter get a better husband," Kwan said.

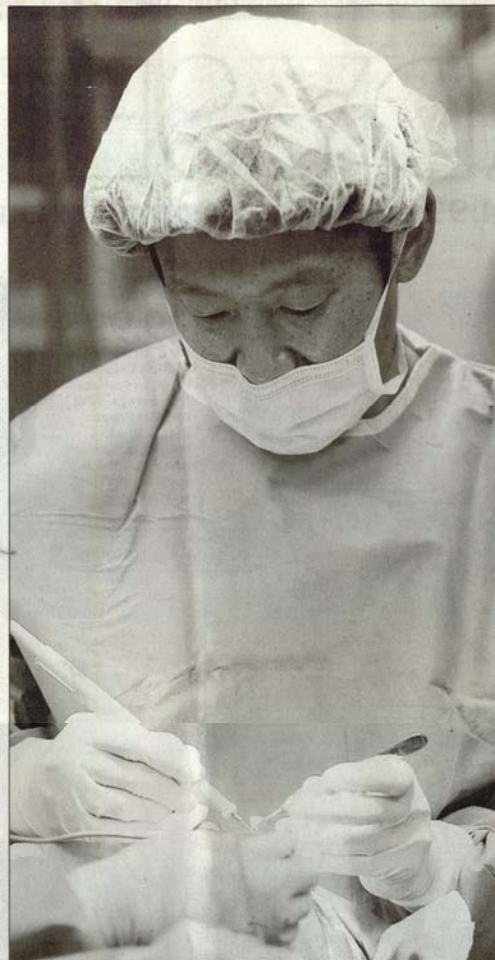
Monica Cho, 30, an attorney in Hackensack, said she has never sought the surgery because her eyes are already relatively large, but said the practice is ubiquitous among her Korean friends and relatives.

"If my eyes had been smaller there's no question about it, I would have done it," Cho said. "Double-eyelid surgery is not even considered surgery; that's how common it is. It's what every Korean girl does."

The procedure is also changing. As late as the 1980s, many doctors were performing surgeries that created a high crease that mimicked the proportions of a Caucasian eye. But since then, surgeons have become more conscious of creating smaller folds that they say are contoured to the proportions of an Asian face. Ahn, who performs as many as 200 Asian eyelid surgeries a year in New York and New Jersey, said the new goal is to duplicate the look of a naturally occurring Asian double-eyelid, blunting the notion that features have been "Westernized."

Many Asians seeking the surgery no longer are constrained by its controversial past, and many say they want it to make their eyes less "sleepy" or for more basic cosmetic reasons.

Melissa Cho, a dentist from Long Island who had the surgery done four months ago in Fort Lee, said the procedure has made her eyelid larger and allowed her eyelashes to project more, which she said saves her time applying cosmetics and helps



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. Edmund Kwan performing eyelid surgery, the most common plastic surgery requested by Asians. College-age women are his typical patients.

makeup stand out. She says she never saw it as a repudiation of her Asian heritage.

"It's a girl thing. It's more difficult to wear makeup ... when you don't have a crease in the eye," Cho said. "I wasn't unsatisfied with my looks."

As popular as the surgery is, some wonder if it may be reaching a limit. Kwan, who does about 75 surgeries a year, thinks the percentage of Asians getting it may be plateauing with the rise of more multicultural icons, including Korean-Americans such as actress Sandra Oh and comedian Margaret Cho, whose single eyelids haven't been surgically altered.

Michelle Choi, a high school senior in Cresskill who has single eyelids, agreed.

"Growing up [in the United States], you realize there are a lot of

different eyes and noses, and you don't really feel pressure, you kind of want to embrace your own ethnicity, what you represent," said Choi, who is of Korean descent. "When there's so many different [cultures], it's easier to be different."

But for now, there is no shortage of people pleased to have gotten the surgery.

Yejee Chang, a high school senior in Fort Lee, had it done this summer with one of her good friends. She said she already had slight double eyelids, and mainly wanted to enlarge her eyes.

"A lot of people think I did it to look more Caucasian. I know there's a debate," Chang said, "[but] it's just how I want to look."

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