

Mind & Body

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On a knife-edge Shanghai East Hospital's Professor Song has seen a boom in cosmetic surgery patients in recent years, but less reputable clinics are still rife.

Losing face

China's cosmetic surgery industry is booming, but malpractice and botched treatments are widespread. **Selena Schleh** and **Lydia Chow** report on a worrying new wave of budget beauty parlours

Last year's survey by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons placed China as the third biggest market for cosmetic surgery in the world, just behind the USA and Brazil. It came as no surprise to Professor Song Jianxing, director of surgery at Shanghai East Hospital. The city's second largest cosmetic surgery clinic, according to Song, Shanghai East has seen the number of patients increase at a steady rate of 20-30 per cent year on year since it opened in 2009. In its first year, 1,200 surgical procedures were carried out. Last year the figure was 2,000. Yet these numbers pale in significance next to Shanghai's leading public hospital, People's Ninth, where more than 25,000 people a year pass under its surgeons' scalpels.

Yet Chinese attitudes to cosmetic surgery might not match its casual acceptance in South Korea. There, 'sweet 16' surgery parties and parents rewarding hard-working under-grads with nose jobs are common. But there are certainly signs China is following that trend. Iris Zhang, a 27-year-old PR executive who recently underwent Asian blepharoplasty – otherwise known as a 'double eyelid tuck' (see box, right) and the most popular cosmetic procedure in China, says

that within her social circle such treatments have become 'as common as going for a facial at a spa.'

While Zhang began to ask her parents for the operation while in high school, she ended up going under the knife fairly late by comparison to her friends, who were all in their early to mid-twenties when they had their operations. Shanghai East's records suggest that the average age of eye and nose patients is 25, but Prof Song has been approached by students as young as 16 (the legal age is currently 18), who, he says, 'want a brand new appearance before entering university.'

Zhang's own reason for surgery was simply to 'feel more beautiful, for myself,' she told us. But an equally common motivation is to enhance employment prospects in Shanghai's increasingly competitive job market. 'At a job interview, they're always going to give the position to the best-looking person,' she says frankly.

It's not just locals who are contributing to the new boom, either: Nip & Tuck Tours and Medical Tours China, who tout specialist cosmetic surgery packages at Ren'ai and People's Ninth hospitals respectively, are among a rising number of international medical tour operators organising trips to China.

According to Prof Song, it's a complete reversal of the situation ten years ago. Then, Chinese patients would head overseas to countries such as South Korea and Japan for surgery. 'Now we have more advanced technology, better methods and cheaper prices,' he says. 'So a lot of Koreans and Japanese are choosing to come to China.'

This booming trade is a far cry from the dark days of the 2006 *Ao Mei Ding* or 'Amazing Gel' scandal, when it emerged that an estimated 300,000 Chinese

women who'd received breast-enlarging injections of hydrophilic polyacrylamide (the so-called 'Amazing Gel') were suffering serious side-effects. These ranged from chronic, persistent aches right up to necrosis (rotting) of the breast tissue, necessitating, in severe cases, complete removal of the breast. Prof Song recalls performing mastectomies and skin grafts on girls as young as 16. Although the government moved swiftly to ban the substance in the wake of the crisis, the cosmetic surgery industry at large

remained widely unregulated. That is, until a second, highly publicised disaster in 2010 involving the death of reality TV star Wang Bei.

Twenty-four-year-old Wang died in Wuhan, Hubei province during a 'facial bone-grinding' procedure to achieve the delicately curved, oval face popularised by Korean film stars. Besides the knock-on effect on the popularity of the operation – Shanghai East carried out just 16 jaw reductions in 2011, compared with 380 double eyelid tucks and 350 nose augmentations – the tragedy also spurred the authorities into tightening the legal requirements for surgery. Although still relatively lax by Western standards, Prof Song says the new regime, which forbids surgeons from non-cosmetic surgery fields from carrying out procedures such as bone chiseling and breast augmentation, has 'significantly diminished' the number of botched operations in the country.

High-profile scandals still persist, however. According to a recent *Global Times* article, a more insidious problem, in the form of cosmetic injections, is taking hold. Procedures such as face-slimming injections – where Botox is injected into the masseter muscles (used for chewing), causing them to weaken and shrink, producing the effect of a thinner, longer face – are widely touted as more affordable, safer alternatives to surgery.

However, according to Prof Song, these 'non-surgical' alternatives should not be regarded as risk-free.

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A double eyelid tuck is as common as going for a facial in a spa

'That's why they are legally classed as medical procedures, and can only be administered in a licensed clinic.'

Despite this, soaring demand has created a sprawling black market of beauty salons offering cosmetics injections throughout Shanghai. Not only is there a risk of being given fake products, but the *Global Times* article quoted several beauticians who regularly swap Botox for cheaper alternatives, including the now-banned Amazing Gel. Given that even authentic treatments can be harmful if administered by someone lacking proper medical knowledge, the use of banned and black market-produced substances is a worrying trend.

The situation has become so critical that one Shanghai hospital, Tian Da Aesthetic Hospital, has set up a designated hotline offering specialist advice to victims of botched injections. They're currently receiving at least one call per day, and claim 90 per cent of the callers end up coming in for remedial work.

There is also a growing 'grey market' of beauty parlours who hire doctors specifically for injections, thereby exploiting customers' ignorance of the finer details of the law. Technically, the cosmetic injection license attaches to the hospital and not the doctor, so even qualified doctors would be breaking the law if they administered an injection outside their own clinic. Given the likelihood that these 'doctors' may not be competent or experienced, it's an even more concerning scenario than the backstreet beauticians, as prospective customers are more likely to be persuaded by a veneer of legitimacy.

Posing as a prospective client, we visited three beauty salons in Xujiahui and Pudong, all of whom offered to arrange face-slimming treatments with their visiting physicians. Only one provided us with contact details of the doctor's 'day-job' hospital so we could cross-check his credentials.

For 'Momo', a 27-year-old window decorator, eschewing an established clinic turned out to be a false economy. He received a cut-price hyaluronic acid (dermal filler) injection to 'volumise' his brow and balance his wider jaw at a private clinic in Xuhui (which he refused to name). It cost him 1,000RMB, significantly less than the going rate of 6,000RMB at Shanghai East. 'It was meant to last up to five months, but the effect disappeared after a month,' he says. 'I wouldn't do it again.' He was luckier than a friend, though: 'After having the jab, one side of her face swelled up more than the other, and she had to go to a public hospital to have it corrected. Even then, it was still slightly uneven.'

So what can be done? The Ministry of Health ran a three-month campaign last year to crack down on illegal or incompetent practitioners, and gather data on the size of the industry – ostensibly with a view to overhauling the law, though new regulations are yet to emerge. In the meantime, the only solution is to educate consumers, says Prof Song. 'People think [a cosmetic injection] is just a beauty thing and therefore it can be carried out in a beauty parlour. But it's a medical procedure that requires proper clinical training and a sterile environment.'

* Spotlight Energy Spa



Housed in a nondescript residential block on Zhaojiaabang Lu, this six month-old alternative spa's owners have maintained a low-key presence to preserve its self-billed 'exclusive therapeutic environment' (booking essential, no walk-ins allowed). Resident TCM specialist Fred Ward says rather than providing purely 'beautifying' services, the idea is to offer therapeutic, health-based treatments but in a more luxe setting than the average TCM hospital.

The eight 'treatment packages' on offer (450-575RMB; trial offer 150RMB) combine TCM technology with natural supplements, such as Taiwanese green propolis and CoQ10, or beauty products like body sculpting gel, bust-enhancing serum and moisturising facial masks.

An integral part of each treatment is a stint on one of the slightly dated-looking TCM machines: the 'Hothouse', a dry sauna emitting circulation-boosting infrared rays; the 'Chi machine', which rotates your lower body in a figure-of-eight 'goldfish' motion (supposed to unblock qi flow and re-establish your natural spinal curve); and the 'E-power machine', a negative ion generator that allegedly speeds up the metabolism and burns fat.

On our visit, we opt for a combination of 'Energy Boost' and 'Back Boost' to fix our tension-riddled shoulders and overcome general tiredness. The three-step process begins with a glass of bee pollen

solution to increase energy levels, followed by a 50-minute stint in the Hothouse, coupled with 30 minutes on the chi machine.

While the sauna's warmth is pleasantly relaxing, the rhythmic motions of the machine are violent and unsettling, as if we're being done over by a ham-fisted physiotherapist. The second treatment room is easier-going, where we lie face-down on a couch with the E-power belt running underneath, while the therapist performs 'E-guasha'. We're initially dubious when she shows us the 'scraping fork' – metal-tipped to conduct the electrical charge – but the process is actually gentler than traditional guasha, with just an occasional slight prickling feeling.

We move on to 'acu-pen' therapy, where a blunt metal 'pen' is pressed on various acupressure points on the face to stimulate circulation and decrease wrinkles. Here the prickling sensation becomes unpleasant and we ask for the current to be reduced.

At the end of the treatment, we do feel more energised and less stressed, although it's hard to tell whether it's the result of lying down for almost two hours or the magic of the machines. Though the 'science' behind the service is a tad plinky-plunky, a bargain introductory price of 150RMB/treatment might just be enough to win over the sceptics.

Selena Schleh

See Listings for address details.

China's most popular beauty treatments

Before



Asian blepharoplasty

What is it? Operation to create a fold in a 'single' (creaseless) eyelid more commonly known as 'double eyelid surgery' (pictured).

What happens? Options include 'open', 'closed' and 'partial incision'. The first involves a surgical incision in the upper eyelid to remove skin (sometimes with fat or muscle), the second uses permanent sutures concealed under the skin, and the third is a hybrid method requiring two to three very small (2mm) incisions together with sutures. All procedures are carried out under local anaesthetic and a mild sedative.

How long does it take? 30-45 minutes

Side effects? Swelling and bruising of the eyelids (increased with open and partial incision); eventual loss of crease or uneven effect due to suture breakage (closed and partial incision).

Cost 6,000-15,000RMB

Augmentation rhinoplasty

What is it? Operation to raise the bridge of the

After



nose, creating a more aquiline profile.

What happens? Under local anaesthetic, a custom-carved silicon or Gore-Tex implant is inserted under the skin of the nose, just above the nasal cartilage via an incision in the nostril.

How long does it take? 30 minutes

Side effects? Swelling and bruising of the nose for several days after treatment.

Cost 8,000-18,000RMB

Mandible resculpting

What is it? Operation to reduce a prominent jaw and create a narrower, more oval-shaped face.

What happens? A hidden incision is made inside the mouth, through which the surgeon detaches the patient's mandible (lower jaw bone) before shaving and smoothing it down to the desired effect using a metal burr.

How long does it take? One-six hours

Side effects? Risk of nerve damage to lower lips and teeth; risk of death through inhaling large amounts of blood.

Cost 40,000-50,000RMB

Event watch Mind, Bottle & Soul

Organised by popular health and wellbeing initiative The Wellness Works, this cocktail party-cum-workshop promises to offer insight into the chemical nasties lurking in your shampoo, shower gel and household cleaning products via an 'experiential' hallway installation. Wellness professionals will show you how to detox your bathroom

cabinets and choose better, healthier and more eco-friendly beauty products. A host of natural brands, such as myLOHAS, Delicious! and Eco & More will also showcase their alternative beauty products.



Mind, Bottle & Soul will take place at Kathleen's 5 on **Wednesday 11**. See **Around Town, Listings**, page 44, for details.