Constructing an Asian Look:
Beauty Ideals and Cosmetic Surgery in Malaysia

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How do beauty ideals spread transnationally? This talk discusses beauty ideals in cosmetic surgery in the multicultural country of Malaysia. I argue that Malaysian cosmetic surgeons balance and mediate between transnational beauty ideals and national tastes, producing embodied cosmetic surgery looks for individual patients. Challenging scholarship identifying the primacy of a white beauty ideal in cosmetic surgery, I find that Malaysian cosmetic surgeons draw a strong symbolic boundary between “Caucasian” and “Asian” beauty ideals. Malaysian cosmetic surgeons facilitate the spread of regional cultural forms in selectively drawing on circulating beauty ideals in constructing different “looks” for their patients.

Alka Menon is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Yale University, where she is also a research fellow at the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies. Her research examines the effects of globalization and medical consumerism on physician authority and healthcare. Currently, she is working on a book project on cosmetic surgery in transnational perspective, focusing on the multiethnic cases of the U.S. and Malaysia. Her work has received support from the National Science Foundation and the Social Science Research Council. Alka received her PhD in Sociology from Northwestern University in 2018.

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Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue