

China's booming plastic surgery market fuels a shadow industry

Aw Cheng Wei

BEIJING - Xiaoran felt that she was fat and wanted bigger breasts.

The 33-year-old influencer in Zhejiang province in eastern China, who had 130,000 followers on microblogging platform Weibo, opted for plastic surgery, but died from multiple organ failures two months after undergoing the procedures to remove fat from her waist and belly as well as to enlarge her breasts.

China's fads and strict definition of beauty have fuelled the rise of a plastic surgery market, which made headlines in July following a spate of mishaps earlier this year.

Xiaoran's death prompted netizens to call for tougher regulations into the controversial industry and state media China Daily to warn the people about giving in to the pressures of looking good for the summer by resorting to cosmetic surgery.

"Summer is the time when some realise that the body that was hiding under bulky winter clothing is not as ready to come out as they would like," the newspaper said on July 16, three days after the influencer died.

"Unfortunately, some people may lose lives after undergoing such surgery in unqualified beauty treatment clinics."

[Having slim calves is the latest beauty fad](#) and this came shortly after pointed ears were the rage, with people believing that having elf-like ears would make their faces look slimmer and younger. Surgeons in China said that they could perform up to six such operations in a day.

The heavy emphasis on beauty in the country has also resulted in women being known to participate in body challenges such as holding eggs on their collarbones, [fitting into kid-sized clothing](#) and having waists slim enough that can be covered by an A4-sized piece of paper.

China is expected to surpass the United States to be the world's largest cosmetic surgery market within the next five years with estimates showing that it would be worth 300 billion yuan (\$62.6 billion) next year.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, the growing market has led to a rise in illegal clinics and controversial procedures.

[Actress Gao Liu suffered a botched nose job earlier this year](#) after surgery at a hospital which she later discovered was not qualified to perform rhinoplasty.

She posted pictures of her nose with its blackened end on social media in February, warning netizens to make sure that the clinics they choose are certified.

She said she had trusted a friend's recommendation and did not look more closely at the hospital.

Similarly, investigations showed that Xiaoran had come under the knife of an inexperienced surgeon even though the law required a more senior consultant to do the job.

Statistics from iResearch, a consulting group, has shown that China has 13,000 legal medical aesthetics clinics in 2019, but 15 per cent of them provided services beyond their level of certification. On top of this there are an estimated 80,000 beauty salons around the country which provide similar services illegally.

One reason for the prevalence of illegal clinics is the country's obsession with beauty fads, said Dr Meng Fanjun, a plastic surgeon at a public hospital in Inner Mongolia.

The latest fixation on women's calves has caused women to seek out illegal clinics or undergo dangerous procedures, driving the rise of a shadow industry, Dr Meng said. "And that's just one example," he said.

He said that "the concept of beauty is increasingly twisted, particularly in first-tier cities such as Beijing where there is more pressure to adhere to a very narrow definition of beauty" like fairer skin and tiny waists.

"Some patients are also keen on controversial procedures so that they can look 'current' like cutting off the nerves in their legs or having elf-like ears," he said, referring to this year's trends on the cosmetic surgery front.

The National Health Commission banned calf reduction surgeries on July 30 after patients complained that their legs had problems supporting their body weight after the procedure.

Undergraduate Bian Jiao, 20, visited an illegal clinic with her mother when she was 17 for double eyelid surgery because she was unwilling to pay the high charges of private clinics. She eventually paid 3,000 yuan for the procedure.

Public hospitals had earlier refused to entertain her, given that she was a minor.

Dr Xiang Biao, who studies social change in China and is director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Germany, said that Chinese citizens were not averse to cosmetic surgery because they were used to the concept of "staged beauty".

During the opening ceremony at the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, for example, a child singer mouthed along to a pre-recorded song by another child because the original singer was deemed "not cute enough".

"There isn't really a high value placed on authenticity in Chinese society," said Dr Xiang.

Like many others, Ms Bian has said that she is unlikely to give up on plastic surgery despite the horror stories because she considers nips and tucks as a way to get ahead in life.

"It is really common among my friends to get work done," she said.

"We all recognise that there is pressure to look good in China, where competition for jobs and romantic partners is stiff. We all want to stand out," she added.