Osong City, the Beauty Capital of Korea

Osong in Chungcheongbuk-do Province is at the forefront of Korea’s cosmetic industry.

It’s hard to pinpoint exactly when people started using makeup, but early human remains and ancient documents suggest the history of cosmetics dates back all the way to the Stone Age. Scholars have different ideas as to why people decorated their faces; some say it was human instinct, while others say it served ceremonial purposes. Whatever the reason, accessories and bronze mirrors found on the peninsula provide sufficient evidence that Koreans have used makeup for a long period of time. The history of makeup is indeed as long as human history itself, and the quality of cosmetic products has improved dramatically with technological advancements. From ancient times to the modern era, natural ingredients such as plant dyes, animal fat, or stone powder were used to produce makeup. It was only during the late 19th century that cosmetic products became mass produced and commercialized.

As such, Korea first imported various creams, powder, soaps, perfumes and other items during the late Joseon Dynasty. ‘Bakgubun’, Korea’s first modern cosmetic product, made its debut in 1922. Afterwards, various beauty products, including sunscreen and whitening creams, were introduced to the world. Now, consumers are turning their attention to anti-aging cosmetics that have been developed through stem cell technologies.

Despite the global economic slowdown, the cosmetics market is maintaining a solid growth rate of more than 4 percent. The Korean market, in particular, is growing at an unprecedented rate, even being referred to as the country’s cash cow. According to data released by the Korea Cosmetic Association, the global cosmetic market size stood at approximately KRW 25.4 trillion (USD 21.8 billion) as of 2013 and is recording an annual growth of over 4 percent. The US, as the biggest player, takes up 14.3 percent of the market, followed by Japan (10.8 percent) and China (8.9 percent). Korea makes up 2.8 percent of the global market and the country is one of the world’s top 10 biggest markets. Notably, Korea’s cosmetic exports grew 18-fold in the past 15 years. In 2014, Korea emerged as the sixth largest exporter of cosmetic products following France, the US, Germany, the UK, and Italy.

Most arguably, the exponential growth of Korea’s cosmetic industry was backed by the 2013 Osong Cosmetics and Beauty World Expo held in Chungcheongbuk-do Province. Thanks to this expo—the first of its kind in Korea—and the region’s great infrastructure, the province quickly emerged as the epicenter of the country’s cosmetic and beauty industry. In addition, a number of big players, such as LG Household and Health Care, are located in this area. Major national health care institutions like the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety, along with 250 cosmetics, beauty and bio-science companies and laboratories also call this region home. The infrastructure for license issuance, research, production, and sales are well established. In addition, farms growing cosmetic ingredients like jujubes, ginseng and other medicinal herbs, are located within just 30 minutes from this area. Cosmetic manufacturing companies are part of this beauty cluster as well. Moreover, the beauty industry of Chungcheongbuk-do Province takes up 27 percent of total production. In this regard, it is only natural that Korea nurture this sector.

On this note, the third Osong Cosmetics and Beauty Industry Expo will be held at Osong KTX Station from October 4 to October 8. This event will be the perfect opportunity for the province to showcase itself as the mecca of Korea’s cosmetics and beauty industry. Last year’s expo attracted 163 cosmetic companies and more than 1000 buyers from home and abroad, recording more than KRW 840 billion (USD 721.6 million) in trade consultations and KRW 100 billion (USD 85.9 million) in contracts.

The beauty industry is at the heart of Korea’s growth. It is also a green industry that consumes less energy and emits less pollution when compared to the country’s other leading sectors. Furthermore, it has been significantly contributing to job creation. As the city continues to emerge as the center of the nation’s beauty industry, the world is paying close attention to how Osong will change the history of cosmetics in the future.

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