

Beauty Ideals in China: Reconfiguration of the Body Through the Prospect of Westernization and Modernization

To what extent are the beauty ideals of modern Chinese women westernized?

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Table of contents

Introduction.....	3
Research question.....	3
Methodology and ethical implications.....	4
Ethnographic context.....	4
Analytical framework.....	5
Analysis.....	7
Traditional ideals.....	7
Emergence of cosmetic surgeries.....	8
Beauty market in modernized China.....	10
Present ideals.....	13
Conclusion.....	15
Bibliography.....	18

Introduction

“What is beauty?” This simple yet intricate question is regarded as a “fundamental experience of human beings in any society, ancient or modern” (Konstan, 2014), eastern or western. Though defined by “A combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight” (oxford dictionary, “Beauty”), what has come to be perceived as an “aesthetically pleasing sight” remains unknown.

In this essay, I will explore the pattern behind Chinese women’s desire to “beautify” their facial features and what builds their standards of a “beautiful face”. By examining the evolution of manners toward commodified beauty, we will be able to see the overall progression of China on its way to modernization. I will first look into the traditional beauty ideals in late-imperial china, which are derived from ancient times; and transit to the Maoist era when individuals gave up their bodies and beauty for the state, followed by an introduction to cosmetic surgeries with its background information. This will then lead to my analysis on the modern beauty ideals and market in China with theoretical underpinnings, where the extent of westernization is examined.

Research question

The research question of this work is the following:

“To what extent are the beauty ideals of modern Chinese women westernized?”

For clarification, the term “westernized” used in the question is a term that generally refers to direct imitations of “European or American ideas, customs, technology, or fashions” (Hayford, 2009:73). This is often assumed to be equivalent to modernization, with modernity seen as a creation of the West. According to William A. Haviland, modernization is an ethnocentric term used to define the international process of developing societies in attempt to resemble attributes of the industrially developed societies, generally referring to the west (1999: 445). With the correlation between modernization and westernization kept in mind, I identify the alteration in the beauty ideals held by Chinese women whom are in relation to the social construction in post-Mao China as a developing society.

Methodology and ethical implications

Ethnographic context

The main theoretical basis of this essay is the ethnography *Buying Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery in China* by Wen Hua. This book is derived from her doctoral dissertation, which was presented to the Department of Anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2010. The fieldwork was carried out from August 2006 to July 2007 in Beijing, the capital and cultural center of China.

Fascinated by the transition “from wearing unisex grey Mao suits to purchasing a glamorous appearance through cosmetic surgery over just a few decades” (Wen, 4), Wen decided to look into

the role played by the market, state, and westernization in the process of Chinese women shaping their knowledge and practices of beauty. Her analysis surrounds the embodiment of the body and society where dramatic social transformation is marked by the physical alteration of the body. Contemporary social theories are incorporated here, suggesting the transformation of the body as a locus of self-identity in high, late, or post-modernity in progress. Beijing is epitomized as the site of modernity in her fieldwork, where I see it as an authentic representation of modern China as a whole. The symbolic significance of beautiful appearance and personal bodily practice presented in Wen's fieldwork is embodied by the rapidly developing market. In simpler terms, I pinpoint the Beijing market as an example and microcosm of China, a highly receptive and dynamic society, then phrase my inquiry and investigation in general terms. As a whole, I use Wen's collected data and materials as the foundation of my research, and make connections between my evaluated, extracted, and developed arguments with further anthropological concepts and theories.

Analytical framework

Alongside the ethnography, this essay is grounded in Arjun Appadurai's study on the theory of globalization, or specifically, his work *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Culture Economy*. Here, Appadurai discusses the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization, where the indigenization that emerges via forces from diverse metropolises is often disregarded when viewed empirically (1996:32). The disjunctures and differences that occur along global cultural flows and markets are presented through five dimensions: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples.

In contribution, I incorporate Eric Wolf's view from his most renowned book *Europe and the People Without History* for a more well-rounded approach. Throughout the book, Wolf stresses the importance of taking local contexts into consideration when studying global processes. This anthropological stance is present along his discussion on political economy and macro history where he historicizes local ethnographies in the context of global capitalism, colonialism, and the power of state.

Alongside the two introductory theories as the premises, I incorporate the symbolic theory by Mary Douglas and Pierre Bourdieu's habitus theory regarding the different forms of capital. In Douglas' book *Natural Symbol*, she introduces two bodies: physical (individual) and social (cultural) and their universal correlation. To make social norms concur with individuals, body regulation is indispensable. I associate this proposition with *The Forms of Capital*, where the society is in turn argued to be structured objectively for capital accumulation to thrive (Bourdieu, 241). Yet the structured society imposes limits upon the community in accessing capitals and opportunities.

The concepts of change, belief and knowledge, and materiality are applied into my study: I evaluate the degree of the society's dynamic in social elements, both internally and externally; the cultural experiences underpin the conviction of what is known as beautiful; and the discussion on the materiality of the body, represented through the beauty industry.

Analysis

Traditional ideals

Throughout the different eras, beauty ideals in China have gone through various drastic reforms. A general conception of the “traditional oriental beauty” stems from both the conventional Taoist and Confucian values, one where external sexual is valued, and the other with internal virtue emphasized, respectively (Wen, 11). According to Man Kit Wah, ideal beauty in women is a particular “cultural, social, and historical construction” (Man, 2000: 189). The regional insularity throughout all dynasties limits the impact of foreign influences in the historical context of China, yet the attitudes toward female beauty in different dynasties is dynamic with dramatic differences.

A famous Chinese idiom illustrates the acknowledgement of varying standards: “buxom Huan, slinky Yan” (*Huan fei Yan shou*). Huan refers to Yang Yuhuan, a famous concubine of emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty, which ruled from 618 AD to 907 AD. She was renowned as one of the Four Beauties with her specially favored and idolized plumpness. In contrast, “slinky Yan”, Zhao Feiyan, is a symbolic representation of the exact opposite in terms of physical attributes. Her beauty was identified with her exceptional slender form and exquisite dancing skills, which was widely aspired in the Han dynasty around 202 BC to 220 AD. Alongside this idiom, “the graceful portraits from the Song dynasty (960–1279), and the effeminate and frail types portrayed in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties” (Wen, 168) reveal the alternating beauty ideals and perceptions in females over time. In present terms, as how Thomas Hylland Eriksen considers the heterogenization as: “Where you stand depends on where you sit” (1995:286). Essentially, according

to one's perspective, every social and cultural phenomenon can be interpreted in varying magnitude. The ambiguity of judgements regarding what is beautiful coexists unparallelly in their time.

This ironically almost "liberal" acceptance of diversity was revoked in Maoist China from 1949 to 1976, however. The ideoscape (Appadurai, 1996) was completely disjointed and reconstructed, not only politically, but also socially when the Confucian frail feminine beauty was rejected. The concept of a "New Age Woman" was promoted, as one should be able to resist the lure of fashion and self-beautification while demonstrating "traditional virtues". "The pursuit of beauty was against the puritanical ethics of communist ideology and was condemned as a sign of bourgeoisie" (Wen, 38). Instead, images of masculinized females were promoted as the model of beauty, emphasizing sameness and equality, claiming that the dismissal and forsaking of adornments signified women's dignity and liberation from the male-dominated society. With above said, the Maoist reformation portrayed a form of indigenization where the flow of ideas is limited with the restraint of nationalization.

Despite its approach and undertake to modernization where bodies are moderated to comply with a new set of preferences, there is a very low extent of westernization exhibited. This lack of international interplay is due to the isolation through border control and restrictions on idea flows of foreign "initiative".

The emergence of cosmetic surgeries

An evident disjuncture occurred between the domination unisex grey cotton uniforms and the flourishing of cosmetic surgery industry over just a few decades. The sudden alteration in the stance

on beautification, once known to be exhibiting depravity, is a result of both internal and external dynamics of a society. During this period of chaotic and consecutive political reformations in the twentieth century, plastic surgery was acquainted through the West and adopted into China's social and political settings. The peculiarity introduced as a form of technoscape was driven by the "increasingly complex relationships among money flows, political possibilities, and the availability of both un- and highly skilled labor" (Appadurai, 1996:34). The first generation of trained surgeons, either studied in the United States or trained by Western surgeons between the 1920s and 1940s, was influenced by the concept of modernity and uprising nationalism under the belief of "the rejuvenation of the once-great China" (*zhong hua fu xing*) (Wen, 29). The acceptance and emergence of plastic surgery was not only a collision between Western and Chinese medical technologies, but also a constituent to the construction of "modern" China over transnational grounds as the elites and intellectuals recognized the configuration as an agency to strengthen the country. In the book *Natural Symbol*, Mary Douglas argues that social body is depicted by physical body as a prime site (1996). The parallel embodiment of the "two bodies" endorses reflection on the correlation between surgically transfigured female body and China's revolutionary social changes.

Along with the mechanical and scientific knowledge from the West, the cultural flow suggested a new perception of female body and beauty. Wen mentions the emancipation since the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 that revolted the monarchical rule and ended the Qing dynasty, a period of time when females are accustomed to bind their feet at a very young age for maintenance or improvement of their social prospect (31). By the termination of the extreme gender inequality, female bodies are turned into "a site on which patriarchy, party politics and consumer capitalism are played out [simultaneously]" (Li 1998: 86–87).

Beauty market in modernized China

The flourishing of the industry of cosmetic surgery, where the materiality of the body is emphasized, is a product of a complex unification of forces, “which are both individual and sociocultural, micro and macro, and national and transnational” (Wen, 22). Audiences of this complicated discourse are provided with complex repertoires of profoundly mixed commodities and politics, known as mediascape (Appadurai, 35). The overflow of western ideas, fashions, customs, and films already in the early twentieth century and the pre-Communist era is ascribed to the developing intercourse with the West. As a result, a form of advertising poster called Yuefenpai (calendar posters) became popular in Shanghai, one of the earliest cradle of Western consumer culture (Wen, 33). The modernity exhibited in this combination of beautiful female images, commodities, and calendar employs a multitude of Western fashion and bourgeois lifestyle. In the 1930s and 1940s, images of sexy women with expressive eyes and buxom figures are openly depicted in the posters; outdoor leisure activities are also suggested for women to engage in. Yuefenpai is not treated only as an advertising calendar poster and a fashionable commodity, but moreover it initiates a capitalist and feminist discourse on the sexual and social construct in Western context.

In Appadurai’s words, “...they help to constitute narrative of the Other and protonarratives of possible lives, fantasies that could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement” (1996:36). The presentation of prosperity and modernity incited by western cultures prompted the belief and knowledge of “xiaokang shehui” and was inculcated in the local and solitary settings. This Chinese term, meaning “moderately prosperous society”, originates from Confucianism and promotes the ideology of a society composed of moderate middle-class, later exalted as the “Chinese

Dream". Under this pragmatic ideology, the party-state sets up a new form of surveillance by restraining the body through consumerism. The pursuit of "bourgeois" beauty, which was once ideologically and politically incorrect, has now become a prospering industry which highlights the rapid economic growth and consumption that support the legitimacy and authority of the Chinese Communist Party's new dogma in reform-era (Wen, 150). Wen argues that the idea of a xiaokang society is invoked by Chinese officials as a reference to the progression of the beauty industry where a rich and civilized society is indicated by attractive images. "The beautiful female body thus turns into a catalyst for the beauty industry and a marker of universal modernity" (Wen, 151), which in turns has become subtly allocated as a part of China's nationalist scheme.

The open discussion on beauty ideals is materialized by and incarnated as the consumption of beauty practices. This extended materialization as a consequence ought to be looked at from a broader scale regarding the reconfiguration of state power and market forces based on the socialist doctrine suggested by the proposal of "xiaokang society". Despite the contradiction, consumer capitalism is promoted to some extent where women are open to pursue an expensive and precious commodity, beauty. Eric Wolf adds to the debate by suggesting: any form of political economy must be evaluated in terms of both local and global histories (2010). An introduction of capitalist social relations does not equate to a fixed series of social or cultural changes in a local population. Such that the infiltration of Western propositions does not lead to the conviction of capitalism as the "truth" in the local culture, instead the dynamic is given by the variation in forms and guises of capital accumulation and labor power (Wolf, 2010: xxiii). In this sense, global civilizational processes can be traced from Europe emerging as a global power, and the growth of capitalism can consequentially

lead to transfiguration in these global networks, then penetrate other cultures that receive selectively.

In the newly formed market society, where “pursuing modernity became the pursuing of material things” (Zeng, 34), consumption is the only ground for the aspirations of the symbolic meanings embodied in beautiful appearance and individual bodily practice to take place. Purchases of beauty, youth, and femininity becomes a discourse of liberation and subjugation where boundaries of age, sex, and appearance have been transcended (Wen, 6). Furthermore, Man exemplifies fashion and looks as the essential emblem of one’s identity and classification as consumption becomes the key to a modernized profile (2000: 190). This eventually leads to the profound “consumer revolution” in which the body plays an important role in the demonstration of one’s purchasing power, personal taste and social status.

Employing the symbolic theory of Mary Douglas, the bewildering and unsettling nature of the society is reflected through the body as a microcosm (1996). In the ethnographic context, the shift from Communist nationalism to consumerist nationalism (1980s-1990s) promotes autonomy of body alteration as a way of constructing one’s own identity. However, in a blooming consumerist society, the liberation of the body through the pursuit of beauty and self-fulfillment simultaneously leads to both exploitation and manipulation. Vice versa, it is also the exploitation and manipulation that resulted in the flourishing beauty industry along the profound socio-cultural and political implications.

Present Ideals

According to Statista's data, the size of China's medical aesthetics market has raised to 177 billion yuan in 2019 with a 22 percent growth from the previous year, and is expected to exceed 300 billion yuan by 2023 (Thomala, 2020); the market is now positioned in second place in the total consumption of cosmetic products, just following the US (CIRS, 2017). The key drive behind this "consumer revolution" is the creation of desire. On the basis of the established consensus that a beautiful face and youthful figure can be easily purchased and operated, the media produces and promotes ideal beauty images. Whenever we open the TV, stream on YouTube, or watch any form of fashion-related media, an analogous beauty ideal is advertised, one which all women are expected to attain. Comparisons are then inevitably made between "Hollywood-based beauty" and one self, constantly triggering body dissatisfaction and a stigmatised identity. Like so, the ideas of body alteration and pursuit of the beauty, predominantly internalized white beauty ideals, are ingrained in "modern" Chinese women's way of living. Through unpacking the measures women take to "correct" their flaws in facial features, we can see what the majority in China holds as an "ideal image".

One of Wen Hua's informants, Gao Lin, in *Buying Beauty* gives a clear illustration of how gender expectations for women are applied in today's China. She talked about her ex-boyfriends who complained about her lack of femininity, and instead preferred and married "the same type of 'little woman'", or "feminine girls" with a small face, big eyes, pale skin, and straight long hair (Wen, 96). The informant, anxious to find a spouse, chose to undergo cosmetic surgery to cut off her lower jawbone to acquire a small face.

Gao's attempt in erasing the "un-feminine" features can be viewed as an investment to gain "beauty capital" in response to gender norms and cultural ideology that are embodied in body images. In *The Forms of Capital*, Pierre Bourdieu introduces the notion of "capital" that comes in different dimensions. To clarify, a capitalist society is structured in a way that lends itself to capital accumulation (Bourdieu, 241). Yet, despite its socialist foundation, China has started to embrace tenets of capitalism in terms of property rights, profits and free market competition. In respect of capitalism, Bourdieu further develops the notion of capital from its economic dimension to other forms of capital, including cultural, symbolic, and social capital (242).

Wen explains women's body image as an embodied site of cultural ideology, gender expectations, and social inequality in modern China (98). Despite the rapid development and transition in China's economic and social landscape, some traditional gender roles remain unexpectedly unchanged. Women's physical appearance and virtue are still emphasized instead of their ability. This physical capital, or "erotic capital" is presented as a personal asset alongside economic and social capital; triggered by gender inequality and discrimination in job recruitment and matchmaking that values feminine beauty excessively, physical body become an accessible asset to ensure their social and career mobility to success. Gao, for example, has altered her body as a physical capital for marriage as a social capital.

This motive to resemble feminine features can also be evaluated through the most popular type of cosmetic surgery, double-eyelid surgery. It is a consensus among Wen's informants that have undergone cosmetic surgeries that big eyes are a "universal benchmark" of beauty (167). While some Chinese women who are born with single-eyelids choose to attain a permanent surgical crease to form double-eyelids, other uses eyelid glue or eyelid tapes to create a temporary crease. As the saying

goes, “eyes are the windows to your soul”, a similar idea was resembled in the Confucian belief by the philosopher Mencius, implying that it is the eyes’ impression received by the viewer that matters. The old Chinese phrase “lucent irises, lustrous teeth” (mingmou haochi) was an articulation for beautiful women, basically meaning clear eyes and well-aligned, white teeth (Kyo, 15). Instead of the size or shape of the eyes, the clarity and expressiveness of eyes seems to be prioritized. This could be due to the lack of variety, diversity, and comparison between the majority of Chinese population, so that slim and slanted eyes are still the mainstream ideal that exhibits tender nature. However, since the post-Mao era, the traditionally preferred form of “expressiveness” has been modified to conform to the modern standard. Instead of clarity, one’s expressiveness is indeed emphasized by the size and shape of the eyes. With this in mind, it is easier to pursue enlarged eyes with the advanced technology to create a deep-folded eyelid. This idea of “expressiveness” can also be seen in the fixation of a prominent, or high-bridged, nose and augmented breasts.

Conclusion

In answer to the research question, to a limited extent are China’s beauty ideals westernized. Undeniably, under the global penetration of Western culture with a superficially homogenous female beauty ideal, the entire world is undergoing some form of homogenization, however there is heterogenization in action as well in the process of globalization. While selective Western beauty

standards are internalized as the “universal benchmark”, such as the obsession in double-eyelids, Chinese women have re-defined the perceptions in their local context. As I have exemplified above, the size of eyes are taken into consideration in modern days, but rather as an extension from the traditional belief and knowledge of “expressiveness” that is valued. Furthermore, in retrospect, the internalized and reconfigured beauty ideals are combined with conventional gender norms, which in turn triggers the pursuit of capital in social and economic dimensions through bodily alterations. Moreover, the indigenization exists in the historical and political context: both capitalist ideologies and Western media coverage are adapted and reconfigured into the local context to achieve a nationalist objective in the light of modernization.

From the analysis of my study, we can see how beauty ideals in China have exhibited various reforms in different time being. The distinctions are a perfect explication of the versatility and ambiguity of what is perceived as beautiful.

Already in imperial eras has a certain level of heterogenization been exhibited with cultural diversity, which was then revoked by communist idioms to conform to another set of beauty standards. Though the encouraged unisex identity in Maoist China under modernization retreated from present embodiment, but the consumerist nationalism it led to has a long-lasting effect. Generated by the mundane lifestyle under the suppression and prohibition of any forms of self-beautification, consumption became the only ground for liberation and subjugation. This is not only part of the nationalist project where body is projected as a site for surveillance, but also a result of the intrusion of massive Western media and beliefs. With the theory of Mary Douglas, we can see how the exploitation of the physical body through consumerism reflects the social and political upheaval in the process of modernization.

In terms of this study's limitations, it is important to note that although this essay focuses on women's pursuit of beauty, it does not mean men are excluded from the industry. It is merely due to the fact that women in China have always been and currently still are the majority concerned with bodily beautification. However, biased perspectives are potentially given when exemplifying gender expectations as I'm claiming discriminations and justifying females' utilization of their physical capital.

Additionally, I provide a restrained reference towards Chinese solely based on my generalization. China being the fourth biggest country in the world holds a population of 1.4 billion people, in which 56 ethnicities with distinct cultures coexist (NBS, 2011). By identifying my focused group as "Chinese women", it can easily lead to assumptions and miscategorization of individuals' identities and standpoints. Thereby I attempted particularizing the denotation of "modern" to address East Asian women in China who were or are active participants during and after the reconstruction and revolution in the Chinese consumerist beauty market.

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