Lei Zhang

Professor Varma

Writing 101

Western Beauty Ideals on the Asian Population

As globalization and Western media have increased their influence in East Asia in the past ten years, the plastic surgery and cosmetic products markets in these countries have sharply risen. Many Asian women increasingly strive to achieve features associated with Western beauty, such as round eyes, defined noses, double eyelids, and larger breasts. Focusing on the causes of this Western ideal of beauty, I examine Western imperialism, globalization, and classist divisions within Asian societies to uncover the historical basis of this standard. Western standards have become a form of structural violence, causing unique cultural characteristics to fade as people of color unconsciously conform to one idea of beauty. Although efforts to promote "natural Asian beauty" have surfaced, this Western ideal has become such a prevalent idea that it is deemed normal in today's society with "ethnic correctness" surgery. Asians claim that their motive for undergoing surgery is to appear more attractive overall and not to conform to white standards of beauty. However, an understanding of structural factors allows us to recognize that the white standard of beauty is indeed the global ideal to which Asian women unconsciously conform. I argue that this standard of beauty, unattainable for most women of color, leads to detrimental effects on women psychologically and can result in poor self-image and self-worth.

Key terms: Asia, beauty, cosmetics, surgery, globalization, body image.

Introduction

An advertisement starring Emma Watson for skin-whitening products was first thing I saw after stepping off a sixteen-hour flight into Beijing Capital International Airport. As someone who has visited China every other year, I have noticed the increasing influence of Western media on Chinese culture. China's economic growth has not been unheeded by other countries, which have seen in it a vast field of marketing opportunities. American superstars appear on the covers of Chinese magazines while advertisements for European designer brands are emblazoned on the billboards above major Chinese shopping districts. The images of Western faces appear everywhere in large Chinese cities. I counted at least twelve more advertisements depicting Western models before boarding my connecting flight.

The intermingling and intimacy of Eastern and Western cultures in Asia is seen in the use of Western models for distinctively unique Asian cosmetics products, such as skin-whitening enhancers. The message in these advertisements is clear: if you, as an Asian, use this company's products, you too can look like a Western model. These Western models, with their elongated noses, large eyes, and light colored skin, represent the white ideal of beauty, an ideal naturally and ethnically unattainable by the majority of Asian individuals. In a world in which appearance can determine job opportunities, young women across Asia pour their money into cosmetic products and alter their bodies with plastic surgery. Through globalization, the ingrained Asian cultural values of beauty converged with the universal "white/Western" ideal of beauty, which now serves as a form of structural violence by restricting the agency and opportunity of Asian women.

This paper will explore the causes and effects of the white/Western ideal of beauty in present-day Asian society. Initially, I will discuss the qualities that make beauty ideals a form of structural violence. By examining Western imperialism and ancient classist divisions, I will uncover the historical roots and examine the role of habitus in these beauty ideals. By investigating the implications of globalization, I will discuss the rise of the plastic surgery and cosmetics markets in Asia, which leads to controversy as women who undergo plastic surgery forego their unique ethnic features for more Western characteristics. Next, I will examine the responses of many activists to this white ideal of beauty and the movement to promote "natural Asian beauty." In the final section of my paper, I will investigate the psychological effects of the white beauty ideal on Asian women and discuss the effects of this ideal on my own struggles as an Asian-American who grew up in the United States.

Beauty Ideals as a Form of Structural Violence

In Asian countries, receiving a double-eyelid surgery as a birthday present is not uncommon. Lee Min Kyong, a twelve-year old girl, never asked for "Westernized eyes." When asked about her reasoning for the procedure, Jang Hyu-Hee, her mother, stated, "I think it'll help her. This is a society where you have to be pretty to get ahead" (Lah 2011). This sentiment is shared throughout East Asia. In China, Ms. Tong gave her daughter Xiao Juan, 18, a gift of double eyelid surgery as a reward for an outstanding performance on the Chinese National College Entrance Examination. Her reasoning echoed Jang Hyu-Hee's: "Society is so competitive… I know that appearance is absolutely an important element in the keen job market today… A pretty face is a worth-while long-term investment for my

daughter's future" (Hua 2012: 93). "A pretty face is a worth-while long-term investment" is the motto among many Asians across East Asia who believe that attractiveness, and thus conforming to the white ideal of beauty, will lead to better job opportunities and success in life.

The fact that Chinese women undergo plastic surgery at a much younger age than Western women demonstrates the white ideal of beauty as a form of structural violence (Hua 2012: 94). Lee Min Kyong's and Xiao Juan's stories illustrate the prevalent idea in Asian societies that being beautiful aids in obtaining success, an idea supported by research that consistently proved attractiveness to be an advantage for job-searching men and women (Heilman 1979: 1). Because the vast majority of Asians do not naturally have Western features such as double eyelids, the institutionalized white standard of beauty "constrict[s] the agency of its victims… tightening a physical noose around their necks… and [determining] the way in which resources are allocated" (Farmer 2004: 315). This ideal, which has long-standing historical roots, is not intentionally trying to hurt a specific population (Asians), but it is systematically oppresses them by affecting the way they are treated by society. As psychology has shown, "beautiful is good," and when you cannot naturally meet society's definition of beautiful, society may grant you fewer opportunities.

The Roots of Beauty

Certain aspects of the Western beauty ideal, such as having fair skin, predate Western colonialism and influence. A fair complexion has been historically valued in Chinese and Southeastern Asian societies due to classist divisions. Light skin is associated with wealth. Historically, the poor, constricted by poverty, were forced to perform manual

labor outside under the sun. Even today, poor people in these countries tend to have dark, tanned skin. Thus, Bray states that a "white complexion was seen as noble and aristocratic… Only those rich enough could afford to stay indoors" (Bray 2002). An ancient Japanese and Chinese saying goes, "White skin overrides three appearance flaws," emphasizing the importance of light-colored skin (Wagatsuma 1967: 407) (Bray 2002). Japanese men have long valued white skin as a "significant element in judging the beauty of Japanese women," associating light skin with "femininity, chastity, purity, moral virtue, and motherhood" (Li et al 2002: 2). As a result, women in Japan have been lightening their faces with lead-based products since the Meiji era (Li et al 2002: 2). Similarly, striving to be "respected" and to achieve a "noble" appearance, Korean children during the Koyro dynasty (918-1392) would "wash their faces with peach flower water to make their skin clean, white and transparent" (Li et al 2002: 2). Certain characteristics of the white standard of beauty have thus been culturally and historically ingrained into Asian societies long before Western imperialism and globalization exacerbated these ideals.

Colonialism and the rise of Western power had a dramatic impact on the global notion of beauty. In Dutch-occupied Indonesia, Prasetyaningsih says half-Indo half-Dutch children, due to their European features and lighter skin, were given favorable treatment, with these women later becoming the "most desirable marriage candidates for European men in the colonial Indies" (Prasetyaninsih 2007: 20). As Li states, "contemporary meanings of white skin combine Western mass-mediated ideologies and traditional Asian cultural values." Russell claims that "Western-centrism and cultural hegemony interact with Asian ideologies in strengthening the ideal of whiteness" (Russell 1996 in Li).

Biological and cultural processes have shaped the perceived attractiveness of certain Western characteristics. One major Western feature identified as beautiful in Asia is a fair skin. Soft, firm, and light skin is related to youth, and men find youthful characteristics attractive (Etcoff 2000: 12). Light-colored hair tends to accompany a light skin tone, making light-colored hair a facet of the white ideal of beauty. Culturally, light-colored hair and fair skin is also typically associated with youth and innocence – consider how in Disney's *Cinderella*, a fairy tale that has also been translated in Asia, Cinderella has blonde hair and blue eyes while her evil stepsisters are dark-haired (Etcoff 2000: 13). Studies have also shown that society also selects for light skin; light skin has been associated with higher wages in women of color. Skin color has become a form of social capital, working as a "stratifying agent for women on the dimensions of education, income, and spousal status" (Hunter 2002: 175). While biology predisposes people to certain features, society's depictions of these features further solidify the white ideal of beauty.

Globalization

Globalization has become a force that is shaping cultural views, such as the perception of beauty. The increased prevalence of Caucasian models in Asian advertisements "raises the possibility that beauty ideals are or are becoming global" (Li et al 2008: 1). Indeed, Western models have been proved to appear more frequently than Asian models in both Western magazines and in Asian magazines, further leading to the

rise of the "universal" view of the Western woman as the ideal symbol of beauty (Frith et al 2004: 55). A study showed that Chinese females ranked of Caucasian models of both genders as more attractive than their Chinese counterparts (Jankowiak et al 2008: 249). This may underlie the reason why so many young Asian women eventual choose plastic surgery. If most of them view Caucasian models as the ideal, then to become "beautiful" themselves, they must then have these Caucasian features. Chinese women based female attractiveness on "angular noses, wide and deep set eyes, and whiteness of skin," (Jankowiak et al 2008: 256) all traits associated with Caucasians and rarely with Asians.

The use of Caucasian models to promote Asian products, including the distinctively Asian skin-whitening cosmetics, forms the "universal beauty standard" we see today. While some may see a problem with using naturally light-skinned models to advertise for a skin-whitening product, these advertisements are omnipresent across Asia. Most Asians actually viewed the Western models as "brand representatives" (Tsai 2013). The prevalence and ready acceptance of these advertisements of Caucasian models in local Asian media "is an implicit understanding that Caucasian models are symbols of the Western, and by extension global, culture, thus constituting a universal beauty standard" (Tsai 2013). While Americans often fetishize and "admire the exotic image" of Asians by virtue of Asians being a minority in the United States, white American men ultimately "tend to prefer white American women physically," and thus "white female beauty still remains the standard" (Hall 1995: 11). If white beauty is the global standard of beauty, most women of color cannot naturally reach this standard. As a result, many will turn to cosmetic products or plastic surgery in hopes of achieving this white ideal of beauty.

Plastic Surgery and Cosmetics and the Issue of Identity

To achieve unattainable Western features, many Asian women choose to use cosmetic products that claim to give them Western features or to permanently alter their features through plastic surgery. As a result of Asia's economic boom, the Asian cosmetics and plastic surgery market have drastically grown as more women have the assets to spend on aesthetic purposes (Li et al 2004: 1). Skin-lightening products are intensely popular in Asia; the market for these products alone has exponentially grown in the past few decades (Ashikari 2005). Other products claiming to "Westernize Asian features" include "Nose-Shadow," a stick that is supposed to define your nose and make it appear longer, "eyelid glue/tape," which temporary causes double eyelids, "circle lens," a special type of contact lens designed to create the illusion of bigger eyes, and various "nose-narrower" devices, which claim to trim and squish-down wide noses (Hall 1995: 8). Plastic surgery still remains the most controversial method of appearance-alteration, as its effects are immediate, dramatic, and permanent.

While 80% of white female plastic surgery patients desired liposuction, breast augmentation, or the removal of wrinkles, 40%-46% of Asian American women undergoing surgery, wanted eyelid surgery (Hall 1995: 6). Another 15-23% of Asian American women undergoing surgery wanted a more defined nose. The surgeries for white patients "do not change the conventional markers of racial identity" (Hall 1995: 6), but for Asians, "the surgeries change 'stereotyped genetic physical features'" (Hall 1995: 6). While Kaw, a previous researcher, believes that this plastic surgery in Asian women reflects "self-and-group hate" (Hall 1995: 13) caused by "patriarchal (sexism) and hegemonic (racism)

oppression," (Hall 1995: 13) Asian American women believed that they were just simply making themselves more beautiful and thus raising their places in society, speaking to the unconsciousness of structural violence.

A pressing concern is the view that "Westernization surgeries" are a form of "cultural imperialism" in which one standard of beauty (the West's) is imposed on people of all cultures and the resulting fear that over time, unique ethnic characteristics will be lost as society selects for one appearance type. While Asians who undergo plastic surgery may claim that they are not purposely trying to look white, they are still "making a statement about their own race" (Lah 2011). They may not be "explicating saying that they think they are inferior looking or ugly," but that is the "message they are giving nonetheless" (Lah 2011). Perhaps they are not consciously striving to look Caucasian, but by modifying the features that are characteristically associated with their ethnicity, to some, they are "selling out" their unique racial features in an effort to look white and conform to the white standard of beauty.

Movement to Promote "Natural Asian Beauty"

The rise of the perspective that white people are the epitome of beauty is a shared experience that the people of Asia can see in things such as advertisements and cosmetic products. As a response, Asian have begun to speak out against conforming to the Western standard of beauty as a form of "worldbuilding," a process that involves employing creativity to positively cope with structural violence (Nordstrom 1997: 15). They have started blogs or found other outlets to praise native Asian beauty, criticize aesthetic plastic

surgery, and discuss the dangers of skin bleaching products. Companies have also been involved in this process of promoting "natural Asian beauty." Dove's Real Beauty Asia Campaign features real Asian women (not models) with captions that address specific Asian beauty problems, such as dark spots, aging, androgyny, single versus double eyelids, and skin lightness (Tsai 2013). An example caption asks, "When surgery adds an eyelid, does it remove your identity?" Dove's message is that unique cultural features are beautiful in their own unique respect and questions the need for Asian women to conform to the light-skinned, smooth skinned, and double eyelid ideal of beauty.

Beauty Standards on Individual Self-Esteem

As a result of not being able to achieve the white beauty standard, some Asian women carry negative views of their body images and display poor self-esteem. Asian women significantly express more dissatisfaction with their bodies than their Western counterparts (Hall 1993: 11). In the pursuit for thinness, they also tend to misperceive their weight as being higher than it actually is (Hall 1993: 12). The "standards of beauty primarily based on Caucasian-European-American ideals" (Hall 1995: 1) that flood the media can cause "psychological effects of low self-esteem, poor body image, and eating disorders," particularly in women of color (Hall 1995: 1). Women, as women of color, are oppressed by the structural violence of sexism and racism, as "beauty for women is considered far more important than beauty in men," (Hall 1995: 3) and "the concept of beauty is based on racially discriminatory criteria" (Hall 1995: 3). The larger exposure to Western models over Asian models already associates Caucasians features as beautiful, and

the higher depictions of Western models as “sexy” (versus Asian women being depicted more as “cute”) can cause Asians to feel that they are not adequately sexy by virtue of not being white (Frith et al 2004: 57). By having a standard of beauty that most women of color cannot naturally attain, this white ideal of beauty lingers over women of color, staggering their opportunities and possibly inflicting psychological trauma.

Tie back in that wetern beauty standards are a form of structural violence and this is a form of why that is constricting

My Struggle

In a culture in which there is no hesitation to call out physical flaws, habitus has caused me to be hyperaware of my body. I was born as a chubby baby and retained my chubbiness for a large portion of my childhood. My mother and her Asian friends often remarked on my weight, making me sensitive to weight ideals from a young age. Advertisements depicting only slender models, the vast majority being Caucasian, also shaped my perception of beauty. I associate beauty with a heart-shaped face, large, round eyes, and light skin – all features matching the white ideal of beauty. While I, like many Asians who choose plastic surgery, do not consciously wish to look Western, my distaste for racial features commonly associated with the Asian race echo the white standard of beauty as a form of structural violence. Even now, I struggle with my small eyes, tiny nose, and wide jawline because unconsciously, I know that they do not conform to the white, or global, ideal of beauty.

(I'm not 100% sure how to close this paper or how to lead this topic into a solid conclusion. I would like to set up a meeting to discuss possibilities because I do want a conclusion that corresponds this section but also sums up previous points nicely.)

bring idea of creativity - recognize as structural violence – use creativity to work through the ending.

Resources

(Everything is listed in Refworks, but I'm having a hard time getting it to generate the bibliography in the way that I want. I am planning to talk with a librarian to make sure my references are generated correctly.)