

**The Racializing of Beauty: The Rise of Western Beauty Norms and Self-Esteem
Among Asian Women**

By Melody Chen

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Western influence on Skin Lightening cosmetics in Asia.....	5
Western influence on Eyelid Procedures in Asia	7
Western influence on Rhinoplasties in Asia	10
Conclusion and Implications of Western Beauty Ideals in Asian Countries.....	12
References	14

Abstract

The influence of Western fashion and beauty standards are affecting cultural norms and threatening the autonomy of culturally based standards of beauty that are aligned to a given society. Today, Western beauty ideals have assimilated into Asian countries (i.e. China, Japan, Korea) where the standard of beauty prior to Western influence had been congruous with features indigenous to the ethnicity. Given the prominence of Western media worldwide, the adoption of these Western ideals has racialized beauty at the expense of validating the aesthetic value of other ethnic groups. This paper examines the cultural repercussions, as well as economic effects of Westernization on Asian beauty standards through three modes: skin-whitening, eyelid alterations, and rhinoplasties. The discussion highlights the economic impact on women and the effect of external beauty standards on female confidence and self-esteem. The paper concludes with an assessment of the holistic impact on cultural dynamics as a result of Western beauty standards.

Introduction

Beauty culture refers to the normative standards for women's appearance as well as awareness of, interaction with, and responses to these norms (Cox et al., 2005). The pervasiveness of beauty culture is readily apparent. Mass media depicts attractive individuals as more charming, trustworthy, and inspirational (Solomon, Ashmore, and Longo, 1992), reflecting and reinforcing mainstream culture's fixation with beauty (Chung & Bissell, 2009). Hence, in a beauty-obsessed society, women strive to attain attributes that can be fashioned with assistance but may also be unattainable. The result is consistent self-judgment and potential for eroded self-esteem.

Largely a byproduct of globalization, Western media has penetrated cultures and societies worldwide, creating a global beauty and appearance ideal in Western and non-Western societies. Although beauty "has always been a locally indigenous evaluation" (Isa & Kramer, 2003, p. 41), current Western beauty standards, which consist of high eyebrows, large eyes, high cheekbones, a small nose, and a narrow face, are dominating localized standards (Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, & Wu, 1995). These Westernized beauty ideals have assimilated into Asian countries (i.e., China, Japan, Korea) where the standard of beauty prior to Western influence had been congruous with features indigenous to the ethnicity.

As a result, Asian women are obsessed with skin-whitening via skin-whitening cosmetics, with some even attempting surgery to achieve a lighter skin tone. Although skin-lightening is not necessarily a Western beauty ideal, fair skin emulates the natural look of white Caucasian women. Other Western standards have also eroded Asian beauty ideals, such as high noses, round eyes, and narrow faces. That these features have become favored is evident in the Eastern models highlighted in Asian magazines. Models reflect the Western beauty ideal in nuances of their appearance, makeup, and gestures of body poses.

Thus, the influence of Western fashion and beauty standards are affecting cultural norms and threatening the autonomy of culturally based standards of beauty that are aligned to a given society. The adoption of Western ideals has racialized beauty at the expense of validating the aesthetic value of other ethnic groups. The potential loss of cultural identity may pressure non-Western females, whose ethnic features do not match Western standards, to augment their appearance. Due to this cultural phenomenon, I attempt to examine the potential effects of Westernization on Asian beauty standards, particularly through three modes inclusive of cosmetic surgery and beauty products: skin-whitening, eyelid alterations, and rhinoplasties.

Western influence on Skin Lightening cosmetics in Asia

Whiteness, or having white skin, has always been regarded as a crucial element in constructing female beauty in Asian cultures. In Chinese culture, being fair was associated with higher social status. At the same time, darker-colored skin was considered less desirable as lower-class individuals were usually exposed to more manual labor in the sun. In classic Chinese poems, the skin of Chinese women has also been compared to objects such as "snow," "ice," or "jade" to indicate attributes such as transparency, delicacy, smoothness, and whiteness, suggesting that the ideal physical aesthetic of whiteness has been fixed in traditional Chinese culture for centuries (Zhang, 2012).

In addition to historical standards, the current beauty culture of whiteness has also been influenced by Western colonization and its repercussions. After China lost the Opium War in 1843, Shanghai, along with four other "treaty port cities," and Hong Kong was forced to open doors to the West. Western commodities, such as fashion, film, and innovation, flooded into these cities. This was a significant development for China, as the country was predominantly a net-exporter.

The post-war period revealed a noticeable change in women's beauty and fashion as Chinese women began to emulate Western beauty standards. In the 1930s, Chinese women began wearing high-heeled shoes, fur, bobbed hair, and Western beauty products. Women who adopted Western fashion became targets of anti-foreign and anti-consumerist movements known as the Kuomintang or New Life Movement. Nevertheless, in the late 1970s, women's looks became seen as less consumerist and Western. Since the Chinese economic boom in the 1980s,

increasing purchasing power has allowed for the resurgence of consumerism in China, and the country has again seen a rise in Western influence.

Sales and advertising related to skin-whitening products have also increased in China and other Asian countries. Due to Chinese women's cultural desire for white skin, social stratification has occurred due to colorism. Discrimination, as a result, has had a resurgence based on skin tone (Yeung, 2015). Western cosmetic companies entering Chinese countries have capitalized on the beauty norm of whiteness by providing skin-whitening products. Companies such as Proctor & Gamble, Estee Lauder, and Shiseido have all established research institutions to obtain data on specific consumer tastes and preferences (Pan, 2013), which have led to the production of skin-whitening products and culturally relevant cosmetics. Western-based beauty and fashion magazines have also taken notes of culturally different beauty ideals and have consequently switched products for promotion and advertising, essentially reinforcing whiteness as a beauty standard (Pan, 2013).

Chinese women's inherent desire for whiteness has amplified the consumption of skin-whitening products, which suggests a correlation between colorism and consumerism. With increasing purchasing power, the ability to obtain skin-whiteners may provide an illusion of privilege, agency, and social mobility for Chinese women (Saraswati, 2010). On the other hand, Chinese women's ability to purchase these products also signifies a dramatic shift in female income attainment. Increasing skin-whitener consumption show the implications of China's emerging middle class, as well as the social stressors that women face when attempting to obtain a professional job. With fierce competition in the job market, women may appeal to the cultural norm of whiteness even if they disagree with it to increase their cultural capital (Pan, 2013). As Chinese Author Lijia Zang puts: "So for some women, even those who don't think white is

particularly beautiful, but in order to go far in a career, in order to attract a good boyfriend, they try to put on whitening cream."

Western influence on Eyelid Procedures in Asia

Whiteness is a relatively easy characteristic to attain; others such as eyelid and nose augmentation require surgery. Approximately half of East and Southeast Asian women are born without a prominent eyelid crease. A double eyelid crease, or medically known as the supratarsal eyelid crease, is one of the most common cosmetic procedures among women of Chinese ancestry.

The current double-eyelid procedure, also known as blepharoplasty, can be dated back to Japanese history. Mikamo, the father of cosmetic surgery in Japan in the late 19th century, was the first doctor to perform a double-eyelid procedure. Ironically, the patient who received the surgery had never been to the West. During Mikamo's time, Japan was still in isolation under the Tokugawa sovereign rule, which prohibited the exchange of ideas between the country and the outside world. It was only until the arrival of Matthew Perry, a U.S. Commodore, who crossed Japanese borders in 1853 that Japan became exposed to the West (Kim et al., 2015).

At the time, Mikamo was a doctor trained in Western medicine. He stated that the patient had solely a single natural eyelid, which led him to create the well-known supratarsal crease in the upper eyelid that many cosmetic surgeons practice today. Many have criticized Mikamo for "Westernizing" cosmetic surgery for Southeast Asian and Asian patients, but Mikamo argued that his technique intended to emulate the Japanese aesthetic characterized by the double eyelid or futae mubuta (Kim et al., 2015). To be more precise, the concept of the double eyelid can be a misleading term for the less-knowledgeable audience, as the addition of a supratarsal crease will

not create another eyelid. It is merely a phrase that translates to 雙眼皮, with the first character of the phrase meaning "double."

Today, many Southeast Asians and Asians in the United States and Asia undergo a blepharoplasty as many patients believe the appearance of a single eyelid provides an unpleasant or sleepy look. However, the desire to alter a single-eyelid look has different implications for Asian women in Asia and Asian women in Western societies. As the suprapastarsal crease is believed to be an attractive characteristic in Western cultures, the desire to undergo a blepharoplasty has been considered mostly cultural. Many cosmetic surgeons in the United States have opinions that perpetuate notions of Asian facial features as being inadequate. As quoted by Doctor Smith from Kaw's paper on the medicalization of racial features:

"The social reasons for Asian Americans to want double eyelids are undoubtedly continued exposure to Western culture and the realization that the upper eyelid without a fold tends to give a sleepy appearance, and therefore a more dull look to the patient."

Another plastic surgeon, Dr. Gee, also quoted from Kaw's research, believes:

"I would say 90% of people look better with double eyelids. It makes the eye look more spiritually alive... With a single eyelid, frequently, they would have a little fat pad underneath which can bury the eye, so the eye looks small and unenergetic."

The opinions of medical professionals of Asian features correlating with negative personality traits can provide Asian American patients with disdain for their facial attributes. Thus, during

consultations, potential Asian American clients may be convinced of the necessity for a double-eyelid surgery by surgeons.

Additionally, there may be a relationship between cosmetic medicine and a consumerist society. The plastic surgery industry has benefitted from a transition to consumerism, as a consumerist culture promotes the idea of beauty being central to a woman's sense of self. Therefore, Asian American women are encouraged to undergo cosmetic surgery, such as a blepharoplasty, to fulfill the Western beauty ideal. Many doctors have also cited the practical advantage for the application of makeup after a double-eyelid surgery. Post-surgery, Asian American patients find an increased area for eye makeup application, allowing them to do “more dramatic things with eye-makeup” (Kaw, 1991). Other plastic surgeons also imply that Asian Americans have not achieved the full ideal of beauty with makeup. By marketing the concept that a beautiful woman is one who can apply makeup properly, the cosmetic and makeup industry further develops a standard of beauty to which Asian American women should adhere.

In Kaw's paper, “Medicalization of Racial Features”, she further proposes that American plastic surgeons have yet to realize that modern eyelid surgery techniques cater to the trend of larger eyes. These techniques usually involve increasing the number of millimeters above the eyes of Asian American clients. Consequently, Kaw believes the valuation attached to bigger, more prominent eyes may be a result of society's racial biases. For blepharoplasty to be a truly individual choice, there should likewise be several Asian Americans that request surgical alterations for eyes without a crease. Kaw's research paper proves that this has not been the case for Asian Americans in the United States, as no doctors have cited clients that desire the elimination of the crease in their eyes.

Western influence on Rhinoplasties in Asia

Due to cultural intermingling between the East and the West, Southeast Asians in regions such as Japan and Korea desired a Western look in the 1950s to 1970s. Ralph Millard, an American Plastic Surgeon for the U.S. Marine Corps during the Korean War, reported that the Asian clientele sought to "deorientalize" their facial features due to economic and religious motivations (Kim et al., 2015). For instance, a Korean interpreter requested a Western appearance in hopes of enhancing relations with the West. Post-surgery, the client appeared less Korean, older, which highlighted his midface and preorbital area (Kim et al., 2015). Additionally, Millard also noted that Korean women considered the post-surgical look to be fashionable and trendy. These Korean women believed the Westernization of their facial features would allow them to find American romantic partners. Eventually, this post-operative look expanded to other military bases in Asia, such as Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Kim et al., 2015). Nevertheless, today, Asians in Eastern and Western hemispheres demand an improved and more proportional facial appearance.

In 1964, renowned Singaporean plastic surgeon Dr. Khoo Boo-Chai described the technicalities of the first Asian rhinoplasty (Kim et al., 2015). Although a majority of Asians share similar ethnic backgrounds, there is still a great variety in shapes and sizes of nasal and facial appearance. However, in contrast to the stereotypical Western nose, some generalizations can be made about the typical Asian nose. Usually, Asian individuals have fuller skin and more fibrous tissue at the nasal tip. As a result, there is typically less projection and tip at the end of the nose.

Moreover, the Asian nose usually has a broader and larger alar base. Finally, there is also small and thinner cartilage. The natural qualities of Asian noses thus presented a new set of challenges for cosmetic surgeons, raising a need to devise a novel rhinoplasty method over that of the Western rhinoplasty. Nowadays, rhinoplasty has become the second most popular surgical procedure (Cohen, 2019), and the traditional beauty ideal of a beautiful nose has now transitioned into a "fusion" concept. Currently, a desirable nose in Asian regions consists of nasal dorsum and tip that are slightly accentuated; cosmetic surgeons thus attempt to achieve dorsal and tip augmentation for their Asian clientele.

However, it is essential to highlight that interest in rhinoplasty is related to real discrimination. Asians tend to be victimized by Westerners through racial stereotypes. They tend to refer to Asians "as people with thick yellow skin, black hair, a wide nose with a low dorsum, and narrow puffy eyes" (Ishii, 2014). More specifically, as noted in the discussion of eyelid procedures, stereotypes are surrounding Asian facial features, where a flat nose is associated with adverse behavioral characteristics, such as passivity, dullness, and lack of sociability (Kaw, 1991).

Medical journals also indicate negative opinions of the flat Asian nose:

"However, given an appreciation of the physical diversity of the Asian population, certain facial features do form a distinct basis for surgical intervention...A small-flattened nose with poor lobular definition" (McCurdy, 1990, pg. 1).

Although the doctor does not directly associate flat noses with negative traits, the doctor still describes Asian noses as abnormal. Without a doubt, plastic surgeons may loosely incorporate

"both metaphors of abnormality and the association of Asian features with negative characteristics into medical discourse" (Kaw, 1991), which could significantly impact the Asian clients being served.

Similar to blepharoplasties, rhinoplasties can also be argued as socially coerced surgeries rather than reflective of individual choice. Since there are no records of Asians who want to flatten their noses, it is difficult to say that the specific shape of their nose bridge comes from a matter of personal style and individual choices (Kaw, 1991). Although the desire for a more Westernized nose comes from the Korean war period, similar beauty ideals continue to perpetuate throughout global society. To prevent the possibility of being racially stereotyped or attributed to adverse characteristics, Asians' preference for a Western nose may continue to persist.

Conclusion and Implications of Western Beauty Ideals in Asian Countries

Asia's growing economic clout has increased people's purchasing power and disposable income. At the same time, women's earning power and status have also become greater than ever, enabling females to further pursue the concept of beauty. As a result, a woman's ability to purchase beauty products or undergo cosmetic surgery does not only enhance their outer beauty but also provides an illusion of privilege, agency, and social mobility (Saraswati, 2010). In some regions, this illusion may be a reality. For instance, in China, utilizing beauty products or getting plastic surgery can help women differentiate themselves in a tight, competitive job market.

The Chinese also have a booming beauty industry, otherwise known as *meinu jingji* (beauty economy), which has caused social concerns over the new cultural focus on beauty (Xu and Feiner, 2007). With this novel cultural norm of a beauty economy, it can be implied that

Chinese women have become victims of gender-based pricing, otherwise known as Pink Tax. Even with more financial power, women have encountered an additional obstacle. International cosmetic brands and plastic surgery clinics disproportionately market their products to women to capitalize on the novel beauty culture.

Presently, there is an expectation for Chinese women to possess traditional Chinese virtues, such as physical beauty, along with having qualities of being submissive and nurturing. A paradigm shift has occurred in the communist ideal of a woman as a producer into a neo-liberal image of a woman as a consumer (Marchetti et al., 2018). The pursuit of beauty is no longer classified as a luxury good as it was in the pre-reform era; instead, beauty is now considered an essential aspect of Chinese women's lives.

With the prevalence of consumerism and commercialization in modern Asian societies, it is crucial to consider beauty norms, inclusive of products and use of surgery, in the context of gender-based pricing. In a beauty-obsessed community, women are regularly encouraged to pursue beauty, as the attainment of more beauty can increase a woman's cultural capital.

The Asian beauty ideal has undergone a myriad of Western influences in countries such as China, Japan, and Korea. Asian beauty standards today represent historical and cultural stories as well as the dominance of particular Western ideologies. They also affect perceptions of self-esteem and self-image, which appear as issues resulting from increased commercialization and consumerism, highlighting the adverse nature of culturally biased standards. The examples noted in this discussion surface the implicit trade-off between profit and social well-being as it relates to an often-unobserved racial bias. This highlights an alternative significance for inclusivity to promote the acceptance of diversity.

References

- Bissell, K. L., & Chung, J. Y. (2009). Americanized beauty? Predictors of perceived attractiveness from US and South Korean participants based on media exposure, ethnicity, and socio-cultural attitudes toward ideal beauty. *Asian Journal of Communication, 19*(2), 227–247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980902827144>
- Cohen, W. (2019, May 9). *Popular Facial Plastic Surgery Procedures and Trends - Placentia, CA*. Advanced ENT and Facial Plastic Surgery. <https://www.cohendoc.com/blog/2019/05/27/most-popular-facial-plastic-surgery-198379>
- Cunningham, M. R., Roberts, A. R., Barbee, A. P., Druen, P. B., & Wu, C.-H. (1995). “Their ideas of beauty are, on the whole, the same as ours”: Consistency and variability in the cross-cultural perception of female physical attractiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68*(2), 261–279. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.68.2.261>
- Fakhro, A., Wagner, R., Kim, Y., & Nguyen, A. (2015). Milestones of Asian Rhinoplasty. *Seminars in Plastic Surgery, 29*(04), 213–218. <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0035-1564821>
- Gosselink, C. A., Cox, D. L., McClure, S. J., & De Jong, M. L. G. (2008). Ravishing or Ravaged: Women’s Relationships with Women in the Context of Aging and Western Beauty Culture. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 66*(4), 307–327. <https://doi.org/10.2190/ag.66.4.c>
- Hwang, H. S., & Spiegel, J. H. (2014). The Effect of “Single” vs “Double” Eyelids on the Perceived Attractiveness of Chinese Women. *Aesthetic Surgery Journal, 34*(3), 374–382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090820x14523020>

Isa, M., & Kramer, E. M. (2003). *Adopting the Caucasian “look”: Reorganizing the minority face*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Ishii, C. H. (2014). Current Update in Asian Rhinoplasty. *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Global Open*, 2(4), e133. <https://doi.org/10.1097/gox.0000000000000081>

Kaw, E. (1993). Medicalization of Racial Features: Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 7(1), 74–89.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.1993.7.1.02a00050>

Kim, Y., Fakhro, A., Yim, H., & Nguyen, A. (2015). The Evolution of Looks and Expectations of Asian Eyelid and Eye Appearance. *Seminars in Plastic Surgery*, 29(03), 135–144.
<https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0035-1556847>

Magnan-Park, A. H. J., Marchetti, G., & Tan, S. K. (2018). *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema* (1st ed. 2018 ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

McCurdy, J. A., & Lam, S. M. (2005). *Cosmetic Surgery of the Asian Face* (2nd edition). Thieme.

Pan, E. (2013). Beautiful White: An Illumination of Asian Skin-Whitening Culture. *Beautiful White: An Illumination of Asian Skin-Whitening Culture*, 1–90.
<https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/7559/Elysia%20Pan,%20Beautiful%20White.pdf?sequence=1>

Saraswati, L. A. (2010). Cosmopolitan Whiteness. *Meridians*, 10(2), 15–41.
<https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.2010.10.2.15>

- Solomon, M. R., Ashmore, R. D., & Longo, L. C. (1992). The Beauty Match-Up Hypothesis: Congruence between Types of Beauty and Product Images in Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 21(4), 23–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1992.10673383>
- Xu, G., & Feiner, S. (2007). Meinü Jingji/China's beauty economy: Buying looks, shifting value, and changing place. *Feminist Economics*, 13(3–4), 307–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545700701439499>
- Yeung, E. (2015). White and Beautiful: An Examination of Skin Whitening Practices and Female Empowerment in China. *On Our Terms: The Undergraduate Journal of the Athena Center for Leadership Studies at Barnard College*, 3(1), 35–47. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D82N51DW>
- Zhang, M. (2012). A Chinese beauty story: how college women in China negotiate beauty, body image, and mass media. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 5(4), 437–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348857.2012.708888>