

Skin Deep in Erroneous Asian Beauty Ideals

Sujin Oh
PUFY 1011 D02
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Beauty and affluence are deeply rooted in Asian values. Since the earliest times having power and affluence for men and women were widely associated with how someone looked. If someone had pale skin or big eyes it was associated with affluence and socioeconomic standing. Not only was it important during the dynastic periods of many Asian countries, it is still prevalent today. Common “stereotypes” of Asians including slanted-eyes, protruding cheekbones, thin eyebrows and hair, were considered “unattractive”. Physical appearance to certain people hold more importance than those who do not take appearance into consideration. In some cultures physical appearance such as a person's skin color, body shape, height, and muscularity determined one's position in society. In Asian cultures, a person’s skin color determined their financial status. Contrary to modern ideals of body image, in Asia being skinny was associated with malnutrition and poverty. Certain beauty ideals remained the same despite the change in modernisation in many Asian countries. Due to these fixed idealisations of what is considered beautiful in Asia many women today struggle to find themselves happy and therefore turn to ways that require expensive procedures and sometimes health risks.

Using cosmetics date back to the ancient times in Asian countries. Makeup was used as a method of protection against the environment¹ as well as a method to show socioeconomic standing. Women and men used natural dyes on their faces and bodies. It was said that in ancient Korea, good outward appearance could affect one's inner self.² Hygiene and outward appearance was extremely important for aristocrats as well as the lower class. Due to the low supply of nutritious foods, many women wore makeup to appear healthier than they were. Ancient facial

¹ Ah Young, Chung . *"Tracing history of cosmetics."* *Koreatimes*. January 31, 2013. Accessed March 06, 2018. <http://www.ktimes.com/www/common/printpreview.asp?categoryCode=203&newsIdx=129776>

² Ibid.

scrubs, lotions, creams and oils were all made from nature. Natural ingredients such as mung beans, juice extracts from plants, seeds and nuts were largely used. They were grounded or mixed with other natural plants, to create different cosmetics. Skincare nowadays has broadened the use of ingredients in order to suit the consumer's needs. South Korea and other Asian brands are known for selling the leading skincare products in the world.³

Many Asian skincare brands make products that also focus on “brightening” and “whitening” of the skin. Many beauty products were made specifically to whiten skin. It was said that during ancient times, maintaining “white” or “pale” skin meant that one was wealthy and indoors more which meant that they did not have to work out in the fields. In China, the idolisation of “whiter” skin is still prevalent today. Chinese people have coined the word, “Bai Fu Mei,” a toxic phrase meaning white, rich and beautiful. In early days Chinese alchemists ground pearls from seashells, and people who could afford the concoction swallowed the powder in hopes to achieve whiter skin.⁴ A research led by Chinese scientists found that there was a genetic mutation among the Han (majority of China's population are Han), more than 15000 years ago. During prehistoric times in northern China, fairer skin was said to have an advantage in absorbing more vitamin D.⁵ Many Asian women, in order to maintain their white skin go through extreme measures to achieve a flawed beauty ideal.

Despite the increase of whitening beauty products and surgeries there are also risks and dangers to the products and procedures. Milky white skin is highly favored in Asia and therefore

³ Ibid.

⁴ Yonden, Lhatoo. "China's Love of White Skin Is Cosmetic Conceit with Possible Genetic Roots." South China Morning Post. February 23, 2016. Accessed April 20, 2018. <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1901102/chinas-love-white-skin-cosmetic-conceit-possible-genetic>

⁵ Ibid.

many Asian women use products with high doses of SPF and many other chemicals. Often this obsession with appearing fairer comes with side effects like the outbreak of skin poisoning in Hong Kong. In 2002 in Hong Kong, around 1,262 people had to visit the Hong Kong health department after two whitening creams, Rosedew and La Rose Blanche, reported that their mercury levels were 9,000 and 65,000 times the recommended dose.⁶ Around 435 people were called back to be tested again for poisoning and a 31 year old women had to be admitted to the hospital and 13 others had to be hold for further check-ups.⁷ In December of 2000, Lam and Prince of Wales Hospital doctor Michael Chan tested 36 different whitening creams made by cosmetics companies around the world. Out of the 36 tested, around eight exceeded the U.S FDA safety limits for Mercury.⁸ Many years ago, mercury was said to be effective in skin whitening, however excessive amounts can harm the central nervous system, kidney and the development of the brain in fetuses and young children.⁹ These are the risks women are taking in order to have fairer skin.

Moreover, cultural preferences that date back to ancient times should not justify any discrimination towards “non-pale” Asians. There have been many cases of ads in Asia where there has been discrimination against darker skinned Asians. These ads are primarily prominent in southeast and southern Asia. Around 2016, a Thai advertisement for “skin-lightening” pills went viral on social media. The pill was supposedly going to help with “lightening ones skin”. The advertisement for the supplement pill called, “Snowz” was uploaded on to widely used

⁶ Marianne, Bray. "SKIN DEEP: Dying to Be White." *CNN*. May 15, 2002. Accessed March 28, 2018. <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/05/13/asia.whitening/>.

⁷ Marcal, Joanilho. "Skin-cream User in Hospital." *South China Morning Post*. May 11, 2002. <http://www.scmp.com/article/379412/skin-cream-user-hospital>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

social media platforms like Youtube and Facebook. The ad shows how the pills helped a Thai celebrity gain professional success due to her pale complexion. In the video, model and actress Cris Horwang says, “it’s not easy to stay at this point for a long time. If I stopped taking care of my body and white complexion, all that I have invested will be gone.”¹⁰ After the monologue her skin turned black and a reflection of herself appeared with lighter skin. She turns to the reflection with lighter skin with an envious look, and her reflection is smiling. The actress continued to say, “A newcomer will replace me and [I will] turn into a dark star”¹¹, a Thai idiom used to refer to her fading fame, if she had darker skin. This advertisement was met with criticisms and complaints that the company then had to take it down. Thailand like many other southeast Asian countries have had this mindset for a long time.

Technological advancements in the medical world also made plastic surgery more accessible, easy, and commonplace. More and more Asian women undergo plastic surgery to enhance their “oriental” features in order to look less “oriental.” South Korea has been known to be the world’s plastic surgery capital. The accessibility, affordability and success stories not only attracted local customers but also customers from all over the world. High concentrations of Asian women have come to South Korea to alter their faces. Common procedures include double eyelid surgeries, the injecting fat under the eyes to create faux eyebags (called “aegyo sal”, a popular procedure done by many Asian women to appear cuter), rhinoplasty and jawbone reduction. South Korea even has tour companies made to specifically guide women to different

¹⁰ Jake Alden-Falconer London. "*Racist' Thai Beauty Ad Sparks Outrage on Facebook after Promising 'white Makes You a Winner'.*" *The Independent*. January 08, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/thai-beauty-ad-sparks-outrage-with-racist-tagline-a6802106.html>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

hospitals for plastic surgery. South Korea's plastic surgery tourism has gained an exponential amount of money between 2009 and 2012 alone. Around \$453 million have been made through plastic surgery tours¹². Customers range from all ages and genders, coming from Russia, Taiwan and the Middle East. This type of tourism is new and has gained popularity over the years.

South Korea has the most plastic surgeries per capita. According to a Business Insider article, there are about 20 procedures per 1,000 people in South Korea, compared to the United States 13 procedures per 1,000 people¹³. Many people from different Asian countries flock to South Korea in order to receive procedures to alter their face. The cost of these procedures depends on the type of surgery. According to SeoulTouchUp, the cheapest procedure is an eyelid surgery costing from 2,000 USD to 4,000 USD¹⁴. Which ranges from the easiest to most difficult eyelid surgeries costing around 2.1 million to 4.3 million South Korean Won.

Rhinoplasty can cost from 4,000 USD to 6,000 USD (4.3 million to 6.4 million South Korean Won). The most expensive procedure would be an entire face makeover which can cost from 25,000 USD to 55,000 USD.. Although different surgeons offer different prices, it is still extremely pricey and sometimes errors can occur which can result in unsuccessful surgeries. No matter how skilled the hospital or the surgeon is, complications with the surgery can arise and sometimes cause more pain and require additional surgeries to fix the error. It is scary, and there

¹² Ana, Swanson. "Stunning Photos Show Why S. Korea Is the Plastic Surgery Capital of the World." *The Washington Post*. May 16, 2015. Accessed April 20, 2018.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/05/16/stunning-photos-show-why-south-korea-is-the-plastic-surgery-capital-of-the-world/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f6394680b900.

¹³ Drake, Baer. "Why South Korea Is the Plastic Surgery Capital of the World." *Business Insider*. September 22, 2015. Accessed April 15, 2018. <http://www.businessinsider.com/south-korea-is-the-plastic-surgery-capital-of-the-world-2015-9>.

¹⁴ "Korean Plastic Surgery Prices | Seoul TouchUp." Seoul TouchUp | Korean Plastic Surgery Clinics Trips. Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://www.seoultouchup.com/korean-plastic-surgery-cost/>.

have been cases where plastic surgery went horribly wrong. Therefore, before getting all these surgeries done, one should think whether or not it is worth the money and the risk. The most complicated procedures like facial contours (jaw reduction, cheekbone reduction or implantation and etc.) have the highest risk rates and cost around 5,000 USD to 7,000 USD (5.3 million to 7.5 million South Korean Won).¹⁵ These are only general prices, the prices further differ depending on where the patient gets the surgery. Some hospitals specialise in certain areas resulting in an imbalance in prices. Although it does not look like much in US Dollars, 4.3 million South Korean won is not cheap for many asians.

In a journal called, *Body Image and Asian American Women* a study was conducted about Asian American women and body image. Called the TIM (Tripartite Influence Model), researchers gathered responses from ten asian women. This study observed ten Asian American women with different demographics and how their peers, family and the media influenced the way they saw themselves. In the section for familial influence, it said that in an interview, therapists reported that in interviews many Asian American women who had eating disorders said they were under more pressure to be thin than other women.¹⁶ In the journal it was also said that, “this mindset was influenced by cultural values of filial piety, collectivism, conformity and gender role biases.”¹⁷ Therefore, many Asian American women who had to assimilate to western

¹⁵ "Korean Plastic Surgery Prices | Seoul TouchUp." Seoul TouchUp | Korean Plastic Surgery Clinics Trips. Accessed April 22, 2018.

¹⁶ D. S, Iyer & N. Haslam,(2003). Body Image and eating disturbance among south Asian-American women: The role of racial teasing. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 34, 142-147.

¹⁷ M. Liss, M.J, Erchull,& L. R Ramsey,(2011). Empowering or oppressing? Development and exploration of the Enjoyment of Sexualisation Scale. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37, 55-68.

cultures who were still heavily influenced by asian parents showed signs of increased risks of dissatisfaction with their body and face.

Social media and celebrities in Asia heavily influence women and men of all ages. On television we often see “ideal” Asian celebrities. They have pale and fair skin, luscious hair, and beautiful features. It is common for non-celebrities to assume that some of these celebrities underwent plastic surgery. This is especially true in South Korea where the entertainment industry is what the country is widely known for. Many “idols”, females and males have been trained from a very young age. They have been groomed and shaped by their managements to become singers, actors and entertainers. Many young Asians look to these celebrities and create unhealthy obsessions. The term, “hallyu” meaning the “Korean Wave” was coined when Korean pop culture was being recognized world-wide. Many Asian countries were influenced by Korean pop culture therefore tried to mimic the way South Koreans looked, dressed and acted. This drove many Asians to South Korea to receive plastic surgery to look like the “idols” they worshipped.

In an article in the journal *Body Image and Asian American Women*, social media was said to have heavily influenced cultural standards of beauty. It was said that, “Dominant American media routinely marginalize and objectify AAW [also known as Asian American Women] by portraying them either as a hypersexualized “dragon lady” or as a delicate, thin, subservient woman, thereby reinforcing power differences between sexes and between races”¹⁸. These portrayals of Asian women have increased with the depiction of Asians in popular culture. In a study of cultural objectification, it was said that “South Korean [college] women found that

¹⁸ M. Kim, & A.Y. Chung, (2005). Consuming orientalism; Images of Asian/American women in multicultural advertising. *Qualitative Sociology*, 28, 67-91.

exposure to American media appearance ideals indirectly influenced body shame and eating disorder symptoms via thin-ideal internalization, body surveillance, and face surveillance.”¹⁹

Meaning many women were influenced by foreign media about their bodies and how to achieve “thin-ness”. It is also said that peers and social comparisons amongst Asian women and men also decrease self-esteem.

Despite the extreme procedures and products, there are many Asian women who choose to undergo plastic surgery to change their lives. Many women get plastic surgery not only to look beautiful but to also cover scars, birth defects, and deformities. *The New Yorker* reported that in a plastic surgery questionnaire, prospective patients reported that they were receiving surgery because they are preparing for jobs, weddings or to just regain self-confidence.²⁰ Asian women should embrace their natural beauty. Going for these extreme methods to achieve perfection is an archaic thought. Ultimately, getting plastic surgery is a personal choice and no one should be ashamed of it. Skin whitening is absurd, but it is also a personal choice that should not be frowned upon. Getting plastic surgery is a personal choice and no one should be ashamed of it. However Asian women should embrace their natural beauty as well. Going for these extreme methods to achieve perfection is an archaic thought, and the notion of discriminating against Asians who are not “pale” is demeaning and discouraging.

¹⁹ S Y, Kim, Seo, Y., & K. Y., Baek, (2014). Face consciousness among South Korean women : A culture specific extension of objectification theory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 61 24-36.

²⁰ Patricia, Marx . "The World Capital of Plastic Surgery." *The New Yorker*. June 19, 2017. Accessed April 15, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/23/about-face>.

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