The Evolution of Chinese Beauty

Leah Cashin

*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate](https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate)

Part of the *English Language and Literature Commons*

**Recommended Citation**

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol29/iss1/6](https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol29/iss1/6)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.
The Evolution of Chinese Beauty

Leah Cashin

... 

It is no coincidence that Gillette, one of the most popular razor producers in America, has marketed their products for women under the name of Venus, otherwise known as the goddess of beauty and love, Aphrodite. In addition to Gillette’s Venus line, many other beauty products today have been influenced by ancient goddesses from different cultures around the world. In China, for instance, many cosmetic brands have adopted the names of Chinese goddesses in order to promote messages of traditional beauty. Nüwa Beauty advertises its products using the image of the Chinese mother goddess, Nüwa, to sell their Four Beauties Traditional Lipstick and Blush. Similarly, Ashà Beauty brands itself under the name of Yang Asha, the Chinese goddess of beauty. Sabbatical Beauty also sells a skin serum called Chang E’s Silver Moon Pearl Serum, designed after the Chinese goddess of the moon, Chang’e. World views on femininity and female beauty have largely been shaped by the advertising and entertainment industries. China is no exception and with the growth of technology, Western ideals have been allowed to spread towards Asia with greater ease and speed.

I aim to examine the traditional beauty standards that female characters in Chinese folktales have created or contributed to. I will be comparing these traditional beauty standards with contemporary ideals in order to better understand the ways in which such perceptions have
changed over time. The westernization of Chinese beauty standards has negatively impacted the body image of Chinese women, leading to body dissatisfaction, plastic surgery, and eating disorders. Beauty through a Western lens is defined by European features, many of which are unattainable and inaccessible for Chinese women. The spread of such beauty standards contributes to the mass culture replacement of regional folklore. In order to establish the traditional beauty standards in China, I will be drawing from four different Chinese folktales and two articles concerning the representation of ancient Chinese female figures. To compare the traditional with the contemporary, I will be examining a study of Chinese female college students and an article about the effects of contemporary beauty standards. These sources will allow me to present the relevance of the issue of westernization and its implications for Chinese women in particular.

It is helpful to first begin with an overview of the Four Great Beauties of China. These women are present in a multitude of Chinese folktales and modern media. Most notably, they have inspired the creation of various idioms to express a person’s beauty. First, there is Wang Zhaojun who is said to have been “so beautiful that birds would forget to flap their wings and fall out of the sky” (“Mingbai” 1). Her story begins in the emperor’s court where she served as a concubine. Unlike the other concubines, however, Zhaojun did not bribe the portrait painter. As a result, her portrait failed to reflect her stunning beauty and the emperor mistakenly sent her away as a political bride for Xiongnu, King of the North. Continuing with the nature motif, another Great Beauty, Yang Guifei, was said to have “made all the flowers hide away in embarrassment when she walked by” (“Mingbai” 1). Guifei was originally betrothed to the emperor’s son, but once the emperor gazed upon her face, he wanted her for himself. The emperor ordered that Guifei become a nun and afterwards, secretly married her himself.
The next Great Beauty is Xi Shi who “was so beautiful that when fish saw her reflection in the water, they would forget how to swim and sink to the bottom of the lake” (“Mingbai” 1). It is said that Xi Shi’s effect on fish was seen by the King of Yue who upon seeing her, arranged her marriage with his enemy, the King of Wu. In the end, his plan proved successful as the King of Wu became so attached to Xi Shi that his kingdom fell apart from a lack of attention to governing. Finally, there is Diao Chan who “was so radiant that the moon itself would hide away in shame upon seeing her” (“Mingbai” 1). Diao Chan is most well known through the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. She was promised to marry both the tyrant Dong Zhuo and the warrior Lü Bu. Lü Bu eventually defeated Dong Zhuo in order to win Diao Chan’s hand in marriage. These Four Great Beauties of China are common knowledge in Chinese households and continue to inspire new generations of film and literature alike. The legacy of traditional beauty that they have left, however, is now being challenged by westernization.

Pale, white skin remains a key ideal of beauty in China due to the history behind lighter skin as well as the representations of goddesses and female characters in Chinese folktales. In the earlier days of Chinese civilization, laborers who worked outside in the fields had darker skin as a result of being under the sun for most of their lives. Affluent people, on the other hand, were able to maintain pale skin since they did not have to go outside often. Thus, white skin became a desired trait because it signified the wealth and status of a person. Across various cultures, women’s beauty is often described as having similarities with the moon and this concept is particularly prevalent in Chinese culture. In the folktale “Cloak of Dreams”, Nai-Fe, the wife of Emperor Ming-Huang, is described as being “as beautiful as the moon in May” (Balázs 65). The moon has long been seen as a symbol for femininity due to the connection between the moon’s cycle and the
menstrual cycle. This connection between Chinese female beauty and the moon persists in several folktales as well as connections between beauty and other parts of the natural world. This is exemplified by the popular idioms used to describe the Four Great Beauties of China. Additionally, In “Weaving Fair Lady and Water Buffalo Boy”, Weaving Fair Lady’s disappearance causes the heavens to be “empty and no longer beautiful” (Moss 59). In the end, she becomes a star in the Milky Way, destined to meet her lover only once a year, on Qi Xi, the Chinese Valentine’s Day. The representation of Chinese women as stars or the moon contributes to the traditional ideal of white, radiant skin as being beautiful.

The traditionally desired body shape and size of Chinese women can be understood by looking at the perceptions of beauty present in Chinese folktales. The Tang Dynasty, also known as the Golden Age of China, brought forth a new ideal of beauty: plumpness. In previous dynasties, slender bodies were viewed as most beautiful, however that gradually changed as overweight and fat qualities began to symbolize wealth and power. Unlike in the modern era, fatness during the Tang Dynasty meant that a person was wealthy enough to afford food. In “The Parasols”, for example, Yang-Tsu goes in search of a parasol to please his wife so that she may stop crying. In the end, his wife, Yu-Nu, is described as no longer having “red eyes from crying”, but rather as being “well nourished and plump” (Balázs 79). This sudden change in her physical appearance reflects the idea that larger bodies were traditionally viewed as healthy and beautiful in Chinese culture. The main female character in another Chinese folktale called “The Clay Child” is also depicted as “strong and fat” (Balázs 145). This admiration of a plumper figure is embodied by Yang Guifei, previously mentioned Great Beauty, the most famous Chinese Court Lady, and consort of Emperor Xuanzong. Her rounder and more curvaceous features became the staple of beauty during the Tang
Dynasty and influenced other Chinese women of the time to follow the trends she set in regards to looser fitting clothing and more relaxed hairstyles (“The Importance of the Fat Lady”). The effects of Yang Guifei are evident in “The Parasols” and “The Clay Child” as plumpness is narrated in a positive light and seen as beautiful.

Chinese beauty standards have undergone significant changes with the transition from traditional to contemporary ideals and the spread of Western culture. Traditional beauty standards in East Asia have consisted of rounder bodies and faces as well as a greater emphasis on facial features rather than body shape. According to Jaehee Jung’s survey of twenty-three female students from Donghua University in Shanghai, traditional beauty expectations vary from dynasty to dynasty. Respondents noted that slenderness was preferred in the Sung Dynasty and the Han Dynasty whereas plumpness was preferred in the Tang Dynasty. Although, a round face remained a consistent ideal of beauty throughout the dynasties. This is because in Chinese culture, a round face with full, rosy cheeks is viewed as a bringer of good luck and good fortune. Many of these traditional views, however, have been left behind in favor of more modern values. For example, round faces are no longer as desirable as they once were. In Old China, a pointy chin was unappealing because it was similar in appearance to a fox’s face. Having a pointy chin in the past led people to believe that a woman was promiscuous and unfaithful to her husband due to the negative characteristics associated with foxes (Jung 1). In the modern era, a pointy chin is actually considered desirable as well as a defined jawline and a smaller face overall. Smaller bodies are also now the most common expectation for women’s appearance. One student pointed towards the modern standard of thinness, stating, “Women tend to be slimmer and slimmer in our modern society” (Jung 1). Fashion magazines and other Western media have had a great impact
on Chinese beauty standards. The supermodels depicted in such media are, for the most part, tall and slim-figured. There exists a stark contrast between the Tang Dynasty and now. Back then, plumpness symbolized wealth because people could afford to eat more food, but today, thinness symbolizes wealth because it means that people have the money and time to spend on gym memberships, dieting, healthier foods, and the like.

The shift in China from traditional to more Western beauty standards has proven harmful in a variety of ways. From plastic surgery to eating disorders, the body dissatisfaction due to changing beauty standards has caused many to go to great lengths to achieve their ideal of beauty. Online challenges to measure thinness have gone viral in China as well as in other Asian countries. The collarbone challenge that emerged in 2015 on Weibo, one of China’s largest social media platforms, measured how many coins could balance inside of a person’s collarbone. The theory was that the more pronounced a person’s collarbone was, the thinner they were. Another challenge, the A4 waist challenge, involves placing a standard sheet of A4 paper length wise in front of the torso. If the paper covers the person’s waist then they are deemed to have the ideal body type. These types of challenges encourage Chinese women to alter their bodies to fit often unachievable standards of thinness.

The level of slimness that is now desired in modern Chinese society is near impossible to achieve through healthy practices. This has created a larger market for plastic surgery and has encouraged disordered eating. China and South Korea are each believed to have now surpassed the United States in terms of rates of body dissatisfaction and eating disorder rates (Jung 1). The thin body that is desired by many Chinese women cannot be attained through exercise and diet alone. Thus, the Chinese Language Institute reports that “as of 2018, the Chinese plastic surgery market is worth 70 billion USD"
(Yeromiyan 1). More and more people are seeking cosmetic surgery procedures due to the influence of South Korea and social media. Each year, millions of Chinese tourists visit South Korea to undergo operations to alter the shape of their nose in addition to double eyelid surgery, chin shaving surgery, and glutathione injections (Yeromiyan 1). Though glutathione injections which slow the pigmentation of skin, thus ensuring a paler, white complexion are more unique to Asian countries and have remained unchanged for the most part, the other most common surgeries performed in China and South Korea are a direct result of the spread of Western ideals.

Most Chinese women tend to have wide, flat noses and over half have monolids, an eyelid shape wherein the skin of the upper eyelid is covered and there is no fold that divides the lid into two parts. With the growth of social media, Chinese beauty standards have been altered in favor of European features. Instead of a wide, flat nose, many Chinese women desire to have a tall and narrow nose bridge and instead of monolids, they covet the double eyelids that the majority of Westerners already have. A round face shape is also no longer considered as beautiful in Chinese culture as it once was in more traditional settings. The defined jawline and pointy chin that can be seen in Western countries is now the ideal face shape and has led to the popularity of mentoplasty, or chin surgery (Yeromiyan 1). These Western standards, now Chinese standards, are reflected through the beauty filters that are most commonly used. Most Chinese beauty filters whiten the skin, enlarge the eyes, narrow the nose, and define the jaw of those who use them. Beauty filters such as these have become increasingly popular in China and other Asian countries, so much so that it is difficult to find a social media post that remains unfiltered.

The impact of Chinese female folktale characters and goddesses has been greatly reduced by the contemporary Western standards that have taken precedence over traditional perceptions of beauty. In the
digital age, the spread of information has become much more immediate and accessible. As a result, Chinese beauty standards have been westernized greatly and led to increased rates of body dissatisfaction and therefore eating disorders as well as plastic surgery. Many inherently East Asian features are no longer considered beautiful as European features have dominated social media platforms around the world. Although some Chinese beauty standards have remained the same such as white skin, a large number have completely flipped and are now the opposite of what was once considered traditionally beautiful. This mass culture standardization of beauty contributes to a larger problem. Though a number of companies today still reflect traditional, folkloristic standards of beauty, the effect of globalization has become clear. Chinese goddesses and other female figures continue to influence Chinese culture today, however when it comes to beauty, several of the traditional concepts present in ancient Chinese folklore have been swapped out in favor of contemporary views originating from the West.

Works Cited


