

Young Women's Perceptions of Traditional and Contemporary Female Beauty Ideals in China

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This study examined cultural standards of the female ideal beauty as perceived by young women in China using a qualitative approach. Twenty-three female Chinese students enrolled in Donghua University in Shanghai were recruited for focus groups. Being fat and a round face were mentioned as traditional characteristics of female beauty, while contemporary characteristics included a slim body and a small face. Women in contemporary China seem to endorse many Western standards for the female beauty ideal. These standards have been pervasive in media images in the context of rapid and disruptive social change, in particular for changing gender roles for women.

Keywords: *women; ideal beauty; China; culture*

In contemporary societies in this digital age, individual visual representation has become increasingly more important as images play an important role in marketing, entertainment, fashion, and beauty industries as well as in personal and corporate social media. Because physical appearance is still considered an important part of feminine identity, more women than men are pressured to assume the cultural standards of the ideal beauty for their feminine identity and social functioning (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2012; Levine & Chapman, 2011). While most women understand that it is difficult to obtain the cultural standards of the ideal beauty, many women tend to change their appearance on a daily basis through the use of beauty products such as cosmetics and accessories. Some women engage in extreme measures such as invasive or noninvasive cosmetic surgeries in an effort to obtain a desired image.

The beauty industry is thriving in many societies, but this is especially so in China due to rapidly rising consumer income levels and consumer interest for beauty products. The total volume of retail sales of cosmetics has continued to show rapid growth in China from 162.5 billion yuan (\$26 billion) in 2013 to 222.2 billion yuan (\$35 billion) in 2016 (Investigation of China's Current Cosmetics Market, 2017). According to the Chemical Inspection and Regulation Service report, China has surpassed Japan and China has become the world's second largest market in the total consumption of cosmetics products following the United States (Investigation of China's Current Cosmetics Market, 2017).

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China is expected to become the largest market of cosmetics products in 2020 ("Investigation of China's Current Cosmetics Market"). Also, the Chinese peoples' interest in physical beauty is supported by a booming plastic surgery industry. According to China's Association of Plastics and Aesthetics, China is set to become the third largest plastic surgery market in the world behind the United States and Brazil. About 7 million Chinese people received procedures in 2014 (Beauty and the East, 2016). It is expected that Chinese people will spend 800 billion yuan (\$127 billion) for cosmetic enhancement procedures by 2019; this has doubled in size since 2014 (Guanzon, 2016).

As one of the fastest growing economies in the world, China has become a powerful player in the world's economies as global brands and lifestyles are widely spread throughout contemporary Chinese society. The implementation of the open-door policy in late 1978 and economic reform in the 1980s (Chin, 1996) brought enormous economic, social, and cultural transformations to Chinese society. Many Chinese have adapted Western lifestyles and consumerism due to greater exposure to movies, television dramas, music videos, and advertising from foreign countries, including other Asian countries.

Despite changing sociocultural environments and the enormous market size and demand for the pursuit of physical beauty, little research has been done to understand Chinese cultural concepts of the female beauty from traditional and contemporary perspectives. It is believed that a study will provide insight on this topic since women's perceptions toward cultural ideals of beauty are not isolated from the cultural environments in which they live. As China has undergone major transformations of society through the country's economic reform in the 1980s, it is presumed that there have been changes in women's roles and perceptions of the ideal appearance. For example, how do Chinese women of the millennial generation perceive the "appearance" of females depicted in contemporary magazines? What is their understanding about the traditional cultural ideals of female beauty and how are the contemporary beauty ideals different from the traditional beauty ideals in Chinese society? It could be helpful to understand whether traditional views of female beauty remain in contemporary China and also how young women feel about the differences between traditional and contemporary ideals of beauty in China.

Furthermore, it will be interesting to learn whether young women in China are under pressure to pursue contemporary standards of ideal beauty since increasing body image concerns such as eating disorders and weight and shape concerns have been reported in Asia (e.g., Pike & Dunne, 2015). The purpose of this study was to examine how young Chinese women define the cultural standards of female ideal beauty in contemporary China and how they compare these standards to the traditional standards of ideal female beauty.

In this study, college-aged Chinese women living in Shanghai were interviewed in focus group settings for their views about traditional and contemporary cultural ideals of female beauty. With a growing concern about body image issues and the pressure to meet the cultural standards in contemporary societies, this study could provide an insight into feminine identity which might be influenced by changing gender roles and the transformation of female ideal beauty in the context of socioeconomic, political, and cultural changes.

Understanding cultural definitions of female beauty from both traditional and contemporary perspectives will provide an opportunity to identify the culture's

unique definition of female beauty and to better understand Chinese society as a whole, including changing gender roles. Following the Chinese economic reform, Chinese consumers became more influenced by international advertising (Liu, 2002) as China has evolved into a nation with a neoliberal economic system that advocates individualism and consumerism (Zhang, 2012). While Western influences can be found in many different countries, the meaning, significance, and influence of modernization and Western values are strongly influenced by the cultural context in which they appear. Thus, it is important to examine concepts of beauty through the characteristics of a national culture. It is believed that this is the first attempt to understand both traditional and contemporary cultural definitions of female beauty ideals among young Chinese women.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Economic Reform and Sociocultural Changes in China

China's market-driven economy in postsocialist society coupled with a consumer culture that has encouraged commercialization of consumer products and Western lifestyles has resulted in drastic expansion of international women's magazines in China (Feng & Frith, 2008). Contemporary Chinese media is greatly influenced by Western media and the entertainment industry from other Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan (Latham, 2007). A study found that China's Generation Y population appears to be more interested in and involved in media consumption than previous generations in this postsocialist environment (Sima & Pugsley, 2010). The transformation of Chinese society has also shown increased individual consumerism culture in the posteconomic reform which has brought more attention to individual success and awareness of their bodies (Johansson, 1998).

Chinese beauty industries have shown substantial growth propelled by China's mass media and consumerism. Women's fashion and beauty magazines are particularly important since the most advertised products in women's fashion and beauty magazines in China are beauty and personal care products (Feng & Frith, 2008). According to Zhang (2012), women's internalized conceptions of body image and feminine beauty are strongly influenced by mass media. Contemporary Chinese mass media is believed to be a major outlet for communicating Western standards of the ideal beauty through advertisements of products and services (Zhang, 2012). Given that the thin-idealized female beauty is ubiquitously communicated in contemporary media throughout Westernized societies (Levine & Chapman, 2011), the thin-idealized female beauty is also prevalent in contemporary Chinese media. Feng and Frith (2008) found that international women's magazines in China are more commercialized in content than local Chinese magazines and that Caucasian models dominated the advertising in international magazines.

In addition to the Western media influences for fashion and beauty, China has become an important market for the Korean fashion and beauty industries due to the popularity of Korean television dramas, pop music, and entertainment, known as the "K-Wave" (Korean Wave) phenomenon (Tai, 2017). Korean youth culture driven by K-pop music, K-dramas, and K-pop celebrities

became important influences for fashion and beauty trends in China and are widespread through Chinese social media and broadcast platforms (Tai, 2017). This has created a more competitive beauty industry in China as beauty products from Korea or Korean-inspired beauty offerings, K-beauty products, have become highly popular among Chinese consumers. According to an article published by *Jing Daily*, Korean cosmetics exports to China accounted for almost one-fourth of all China's imported cosmetics causing a decline in Western brands' (e.g., French brands) market share of foreign beauty products in China (Why Korean Brands Are Gaining, 2016). Popularity of "all things from Korea" influenced by the Korean wave has also extended to more permanent beautification procedures such as cosmetic surgeries. South Korea is also known to be a destination for cosmetic surgery for Chinese consumers with the increase in demands for medical tourism (Guanzon, 2016). The demand for beauty industries in China, including products and services inspired by Korean entertainment industries, indicates the importance of physical beauty and the pressure to maintain feminine identities among Chinese women.

Confucian Philosophy and Gender Roles

China has evolved into a nation where traditional Confucian philosophy and collectivism exists alongside a neoliberal economic system that advocates individual consumerism. Traditionally, China (similar to other East Asian countries) was shaped by the values drawn from Confucian philosophy, including women's roles, opportunities, and privileges. Confucian philosophy emphasizes women's subordination and submissiveness to men and gave women little power or influence beyond domestic activities. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese Communist party made a commitment to gender equality (Hsiung & Wong, 1998). However, this was diminished during the Cultural Revolution and by the adoption of a modified market economy (Zheng, 2005).

The transformation of Chinese society from a traditional planned economy into a market economy has brought enormous changes in social roles and opportunities, particularly for women (Xi, Sun, & Xiao, 2006). With increasing economic power and opportunities for women in contemporary Chinese society, women have found greater freedom and desire to achieve cultural standards of ideal beauty pervasive in contemporary media such as magazine advertising images. While magazine advertisements are used to influence consumer purchasing behavior, magazine advertisements can have a significant impact on society for transmitting cultural messages that contribute to socialization processes, including socialization of gender roles (Goffman, 1979; Lindsey, 1997). Thus, advertising images not only contribute to cultural attitudes toward women's definition of beauty but they also contribute to cultural attitudes about gender roles in society.

Traditionally, women's physical beauty has been important in China as part of feminine identities (Xu & Feiner, 2007). Traditional East Asian body ideals have included round faces and mildly plump bodies (Han, 2003). East Asian beauty standards tend to place more emphasis on facial features than on body shape (Jung & Lee, 2006). According to Xu and Feiner (2007), however, contemporary Chinese society expects women to possess physical beauty according to an Anglo-European standard, as well as traditional Chinese virtues

(e.g., submissive, nurturing). If this is true, greater pressure would be placed on women in contemporary China for obtaining feminine identities, which include physical standards that are based on Western influences and that can negatively affect women's body image.

Increasing Body Image Issues in China

While there may have been enhanced economic status of women and diversity of women's roles in contemporary China since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 (Xi, 2011), women might have had pressure to obtain new definitions of female beauty standards since reports show a significant rise in eating disorders in China (Meyers, 2016; Pike & Dunne, 2015). Before 1990, Japan, the first Asian country to undergo modern economic transformation, was the only Asian country to report eating disorders (Gordon, 2001).

After 1990, other countries in Asia began to report eating disorders; the countries include Hong Kong and mainland China, South Korea, and Singapore (Gordon, 2001). Eating disorder reports in Asia suggest that body image issues are relevant to the dynamics of the country's economy and cultural transformation across cultures. Increasing body image issues such as eating disorders are also related to the emergence of thin body ideals permeated in the media (Jung & Lee, 2006). It is known that advertising models can negatively influence self-image of audiences by elevating their personal standards for physical appearance (Hatoum & Belle, 2004; Kozar & Damhorst, 2009).

According to feminist theorists, such as Bartky (1990) and Bordo (1993), increased opportunities for women have threatened the established patriarchal social structure. In response to this threat, women's appearance standards seem to be increasingly unrealistic and pressure to attain them has become more intense (Bordo, 1993). From this feminist perspective, appearance standards are vehicles for the oppression (Jeffreys, 2005) because any challenge to gender equality will be countered by increasingly unrealistic appearance standards and increasing pressure to achieve them. According to Zhang (2012), "younger generations of Chinese women are becoming increasingly more aware of their bodies and open to the idea of 'beautification' compared to their mothers and grandmothers who spent much of their lives in economic hardship and political turmoil" (p. 438).

Furthermore, according to a report from HSBC mentioned in the Wall Street Journal, China's social media and selfie obsessions are creating a market for cosmetic surgery (Beauty and the East, 2016). With greater disposable incomes boosted by China's growing economy and consumption culture encouraged by beauty industries, women now have a means to obtain new concepts of female beauty being endorsed in contemporary society. In fact, there seems to be competition among hospitals and suppliers in China's cosmetic surgery industry, as cosmetic surgery is becoming more socially accepted according to the report by the South China Morning Post (He, 2017).

Women from East Asian societies were assumed to be at very low risk of the development of body dissatisfaction, pathological weight concerns, and disordered eating until the empirical evidence showed that this is not the case (Gordon, 2001; Lee & Lee, 2000). It is believed that growing concerns with body image dissatisfaction and disturbance (e.g., eating disorders) in East Asian societies, including China, are associated with changing definitions of gender

roles, women's identity, and social pressures placed on women's physical appearance. According to feminist theories (see Bordo, 1993; Jeffreys, 2005), increased pressure to conform to cultural appearance standards could result in increased body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms as a backlash against women's increased economic power and meaningful steps toward gender equality. In fact, a series of empirical studies (e.g., Jung & Forbes, 2007) revealed that women in South Korea and China showed greater body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms than their counterparts in the United States. These findings and sociocultural changes suggest that contemporary female beauty ideals might be different from the views of traditional female beauty ideals in China.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Among the sociocultural influences on female beauty, the cultural standards of the ideal beauty and the impact of media are considered particularly important in defining concepts of female beauty. The cultural standards of the ideal beauty are important as individuals often use the cultural standards to assess the attractiveness of others as well as themselves. Images of the cultural ideals are prevalent in the media, particularly in advertising images in magazines. This study focused on concepts of female beauty in China from both traditional views and contemporary preferences and perceptions prevalent in fashion magazines by interviewing college-aged women in China in focus group settings.

The questions were organized as follows:

- Do Chinese women believe that contemporary cultural standards of ideal female beauty are different from the traditional concepts of female beauty?
- Do Chinese women aspire to have physical characteristics of the female images in magazines and other media outlets such as television and movies?
- Do Chinese women feel pressure from significant others such as friends, partners, and parents to have ideal physical characteristics as shown in the media?

METHODS

Sample

Most empirical research conducted in national cultural contexts has relied on quantitative data and analyses which have included limited options for participant responses. As a strategy to obtain more insightful and personal opinions from participants, this study employed an in-depth focus-group interview strategy in the local cultural context. Focus groups were conducted between November 2, 2016, and November 6, 2016, in Shanghai, China. College women (ages between 20 and 22) enrolled in Donghua University in Shanghai were recruited for the study. Donghua is a public university in the Shanghai metropolitan area. It was presumed that the college students were exposed to advertising images and that they were aware of contemporary appearance standards in China.

A total of 23 female college students who were enrolled in various majors participated in the study. The students were majoring in Fashion Design and

Engineering (nine students); Management Information System (eight students); Textile Design (two students); Logistics (two students); Electronic Business (one student); and Finance and Economics (one student). All participants were of Chinese ethnicity; the participants were from various provinces and cities in China such as Fuzhou in Fujian province, Suzhou in Jiangsu province, Huainan in Anhui province, Taizhou in Zhejiang province, and Xiushan in Chongqing municipality. Only three of the participants were from Shanghai. All of the students were from urban areas of the cities where their families live.

A total of four focus groups were conducted by the researcher with a set of questions about perceptions of female beauty in Chinese society from both traditional preferences and contemporary ideals. The researcher also assessed the impact of the media for transmitting contemporary female beauty ideals and pressures to obtain ideal physical characteristics from other media and significant others. The number of participants ranged from 5 to 7 for each of the four focus groups.

Data Collection

Focus groups were arranged by a local contact, a faculty member at Donghua University who is bilingual with Chinese and English. All focus groups were conducted late in the afternoon through early evening hours in a conference room at the Donghua University campus since participants had to attend classes or work part-time during the day. All participants were upper level college students who had high levels of proficiency with English, as recruited by the local contact. Some of them were accepted by universities in the United States or the United Kingdom to study for advanced degrees. Each participant was provided with a list of questions (a total of 15 items) that were numbered to assist with their understanding as the researcher preceded each item. Participants were asked to review each question and respond freely. The researcher then proceeded with each question with each focus group until no additional comments were made for the same question.

A semistructured interview guide was used in the interviews since the participants were encouraged to talk about specifics and were asked to elaborate on their responses as necessary. This was considered to be a useful strategy since Chinese culture is known to be reserved and participants might feel that they were being rude if they gave too much of a response to each question. Participants were asked to be honest with their opinions and not to give too much thought as to whether their responses are right or wrong. They were also informed that an audio recorder would be used to record their responses. It is believed that all participants had time to respond for each question since there was no time restriction for their responses. Each focus group lasted approximately 60–75 min.

Questionnaire Items

The questionnaire items were developed and organized into three areas: (i) Items focused on cultural understanding of female beauty ideals from both traditional and contemporary definitions; (ii) items focused on representation of female beauty ideals in fashion magazines and their influence; (iii) items focused

on pressure to have ideal bodies from other media and significant others such as peers, romantic partners, and parents.

The first set of questions focusing on cultural understanding of female beauty ideals from both traditional and contemporary perspectives included questions such as the following: "What is the traditional preference of female ideal beauty in China?" "Do you feel the traditional ideas about female beauty have changed in China?" "What do you think is the definition of Chinese female ideal beauty in China today?" And "What aspects of traditional beauty do you still like?"

The second set of questions focused on representation of female beauty ideals in fashion magazines. Prior to asking if items focused on representation of female beauty ideals in fashion magazines, the researcher circulated a few of the latest issues of popular fashion magazines in China (e.g., *Vogue*, *Elle*) to each focus group to stimulate their thoughts about models seen in the magazines. The goal was to bring out interest on this subject. Participants were asked some background information related to the subject such as whether they subscribe to fashion magazines and whether they read hard copies of fashion magazines or read online. They were also asked which fashion magazine they enjoyed reading the most. The items focused on representation of female beauty ideals in fashion magazines included questions such as the following: "What are the most important characteristics of female images in fashion magazines?" "Do you think magazines are important for shaping women's beauty ideals?" "Would you like to look like magazine images?" "Do you compare yourself to female images in magazines?" And "Do you feel pressure to look like the magazine images of women?"

The last set of questions focused on social pressures that the participants might feel from other media outlets and significant others. These questions included the following: "Do you feel pressure from your friends or a romantic partner to have a thin body or attractive physical characteristics?" "Do you feel pressure from your parents to have a thin body or attractive physical characteristics?" "Do you feel pressure to look like television actresses or movie stars?" "Do you compare your appearance to appearance of television actresses or movie stars?" And "Would you like to look like television actresses or movie stars?"

RESULTS

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method was used for data analysis to generate meaningful categories by systematically exploring and investigating the phenomenon (Strauss, 1987). The two coders, the principal investigator and a trained graduate research assistant, transcribed the data by independently listening to the audio-recorded responses multiple times until all responses were made available for comparisons. Topic codes driven by the responses to the questions were created using Microsoft Excel. To establish coding consistency, intercoder reliability between the two coders was calculated with the simple proportion method, the number of agreed codes (i.e., the same text coding) over the total number of codes (the number of agreements and disagreements

combined) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The intercoder reliability was found to be 60–70% for the initial coding using a few questions at random.

The two coders reexamined the codebook and made adjustments by narrowing the definitions of some codes and adding new codes, which is known as negotiated agreement approach (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). Additional modifications were made to the codebook by reconciling the coding differences between the two coders. The final codes of the transcripts revealed 80–90% intercoder reliability. When the same data code appears multiple times, the number of responses was recorded in parentheses to observe frequencies. When participants responded with yes or no as the initial response, the frequencies of these responses were also counted and used for providing percentiles in the findings. During the data analysis, the participants were given pseudonyms for their responses.

Four main themes were used for organizing the questions and for assessing the data: (i) The traditional preference of female ideal beauty in China; (ii) the female ideal beauty definition in contemporary China; (iii) fashion magazine influences on the female ideal beauty; and (iv) influences of other media and significant others on the female ideal beauty. Supportive quotes for the main themes were chosen by the two coders and used in the findings.

Perceptions of Traditional Female Ideal Beauty

Participants were asked for their understanding of the traditional preference of female ideal beauty in China and whether they felt the traditional ideas about female beauty have changed based on their understanding. Participants described the traditional ideal of female beauty with a number of physical characteristics using both nouns and adjectives, such as round face, healthy, white skin, small lips, small eyes, long black hair, and small feet. The most frequently mentioned word for the traditional beauty ideal was (being) fat (74.6%), followed by round face (some mentioned it as baby face) (21.7%).

I think our traditional beauty ideals...are different types of round from different dynasty. During Tang dynasty, we like women that have big boobs and big breasts. They also weigh a lot and men like those kind of bodies. And in Sung dynasty...Women always look very slim and they eat less than Tang dynasty so that's very different. (Yu)

When the researcher asked whether there have been any periods of history that preferred women to be as slim or thin as today's women, all responses indicated that compared to Ancient China, women are slimmer in contemporary Chinese society.

Women tend to be slimmer and slimmer in our modern society. (Ming)
Different dynasties in Ancient China preferred different bodies for feminine beauty. Slenderness was considered ideal feminine beauty during the Han Dynasty, while the Tang Dynasty preferred plump-shaped women for ideal beauty, but they mostly [most dynasties] preferred not so thin bodies. (Chan)

When the researcher asked about other traditionally idealized physical characteristics besides body size, some elaborated on characteristics of face, which was the second most frequently mentioned physical attribute that were considered beautiful in the past.

Talk about the face, we Chinese always like women who have face...um...they like, women have the face who don't have many angles. Yeah, round face, yes. They think the round face is really cute. (Wei)
 Traditionally they [Chinese people] love round face cause round means perfect, round means family reunion and everything. Traditional China believed round face can bring you good luck and good fortune. (Jin)

With the participants' responses regarding traditional views of the female ideal beauty in China, the researcher then directed to the question about their perceptions of the contemporary female ideal beauty.

Perceptions of Contemporary Female Ideal Beauty

When asked about the definition of female beauty ideals in contemporary China, a "slim body" was the most frequent response (65.4%), followed by a "small face (33%)." One person commented as "don't eat as much food" and another said "diet" for this question. Similar responses were indicated when asked whether they felt traditional ideals about female beauty have changed in China. All participants said there have been changes and gave examples of such changes. One person said being skinny in the traditional Chinese society meant being poor. The majority of participants mentioned the changes in the facial and body shape as the most notable changes in that slim bodies are considered more beautiful than fat bodies and sharper faces are considered more attractive than rounder faces.

We all want to be slim and have small face. And a lot of us, we want to, we want our face to have sort of pointy chin. (Zhang)

A few participants mentioned that a pointy chin was not a desired physical feature according to the traditional concepts of female beauty and elaborated on why having a pointy chin in the traditional society was not a good thing for women, particularly for their husbands.

It's not a good look for her family. Especially for her husband. (Lan)
 Old China thought people with a pointy chin is like just like foxes. The foxes will seduce their husbands. It's not a very lucky... (Lee)

When the researcher asked whether it is still considered not a good thing to have a pointy chin, all participants said it is considered a good thing now with a smile. One area of female beauty ideals that has not changed from the traditional to contemporary society is having "white skin." Having white skin was mentioned for both traditional and contemporary definitions of female beauty. When asked whether the participants see major differences between the traditional concepts of beauty and contemporary beauty ideals, all agreed (either by a verbal response or by nodding) that they see differences as they have discussed changes in physical attributes. Examples included round to sharper face, fat or curvy to thin bodies, small to big eyes, skin color being from white to tan, and larger size feet.

When the participants were asked about their own version of a female ideal beauty, there were some mixed comments. While the large majority said being slim is very important, others do not like being too slim. One person said being healthy is the most important.

I think I totally like the contemporary bodies. . .like supermodels. Being slim is very important.
(Yan)

Fashion Magazine Influence on Female Ideal Beauty

Participants were asked whether they subscribe to fashion magazines and the large majority of them said "no." In fact, only four out of 23 participants said "yes" to this question (17.4%). While the majority of them do not read print copies of these magazines by subscribing, many of the participants responded that they read fashion magazines online (78.3%) that are free of charge to keep up with style trends. The magazines that the participants read included both local and international fashion and lifestyle magazines such as *Vivi*, *Vogue*, *Mina*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vision*, and *Teen* magazine. When participants were asked about the most important characteristic of female images in fashion magazines, being "thin" was characterized the most (68.9%), followed by being "sexy" (22.8%) and "Western-like" images (8.3%). When the researcher asked, "do you think magazines are important for shaping women's beauty ideals?" the large majority of the participants responded "yes" (82.6%) besides a few who did not respond to the question (17.4%).

Yes, they really, and often we have their shops we can make the body of the models and actors more beautiful than themselves. So we may think they are just like this so we want to be like this, we keep fit and we do. . .sometimes do plastic surgeries or we will make up just to be like them.
(Bao)

Sometimes TV programs can show a real body shape or what they will look like but magazines always show more beautiful side of them. So I think magazines are more important to shape. . .to show beauty.
(Wu)

Then, the researcher asked whether they would prefer to look like the models in the magazine images and whether they compare themselves to female images in magazines. Interestingly, while the majority said that they do not compare themselves to female images in magazines (78.2%), the two most frequent responses for whether they would like to look like magazines images were split between "sometimes" and "yes." The researcher noticed that some of the participants were somewhat hesitant to respond to the question whether they would want to look like magazines images. Perhaps being in the presence of others made them feel uncomfortable to respond to this question. Some acknowledged comparing themselves to magazines images (21.7%) even though they might find themselves different from those images. Among the majority who responded as not comparing themselves to magazine images, at least some of them seem to intentionally avoid comparing themselves to these images due to the negative consequences by indicating that comparing to magazine images would make them feel unhappy or feel bad about themselves. This would be a coping strategy for women to be able to maintain positive body image. A couple of direct quotes from the responses regarding comparisons to magazine images are as follows:

I want to look like them (magazine images), but I don't compare because that it would make me unhappy.
(Chen)

I don't want to compare to magazine images because that would break my heart.
(Lin)

When participants were asked, "do you feel pressure to look like magazine images of women," everyone said "no" except one person. However, participants' comments seem to indicate that they may not want to admit feeling pressure from models in magazines, or perhaps it is difficult to assess the extent to which they feel pressure from magazine images since they may be immune to idealized images of women in magazines. One woman said that she tries not to compare so that she doesn't feel pressure to look like those images. Another said that there are too many differences between herself (her own image) and the models in the magazine images.

Young Chinese women seem to acknowledge that magazines play a major role in shaping the female beauty ideal in contemporary Chinese society. While most of them believe they should not compare themselves to magazine images in order to prevent having negative feelings about themselves, they indicated that they would want to look like those images.

Influences of Other Media and Significant Others

Participants were asked whether they feel pressure from other media (television actresses, movie stars) to look like those appearing in other media outlets. They were also asked whether they feel pressure from significant others (peers, parents, romantic partners) to have an ideal body or attractive physical characteristics. The large majority of responses were "no" to each of these sources for feeling pressure to have an ideal body or attractive physical characteristics. Only one mentioned feeling pressure from her father, two mentioned feeling pressure from friends, and two mentioned feeling pressure from romantic partners.

My friend always looks better than me. I'm not so confident because of my... what's this called? (pointed to her face) ... Yeah freckles. I don't like it on my face. (Zhou)

One woman who mentioned about feeling pressure from her father turned out that she feels pressure to eat more during mealtime. While many participants indicated as not having pressure from their friends or romantic partners initially, a greater number of participants started mentioning the word "self-pressure" as a source of influence. This was not a source initially the researcher asked the participants, but they started discussing how much they themselves put pressure to have a thin body or attractive physical characteristics. This was a somewhat surprising source of influence since China is considered a collectivistic culture where opinions of others and collective goals matter more over individual goals or views. With the transformation of Chinese society, perhaps individuals place a greater pressure on themselves to achieve objectives that they consider important by referencing cultural environments, including the cultural standards of the female ideal beauty.

Similarly, participants were asked whether they compare their appearance to appearances of television actresses or movie stars, and the great majority responded "no" (86.9%), while one said "yes," and two others said "a little." When they were asked whether they would rather look like television actresses or movie stars, while "no" was the most frequent response (60.9%), this was closely followed by "some aspects" (21.7%) and then followed by "yes" (17.3%). A few of the women who mentioned that they want to look like

television actresses provided names (both Chinese and English) of famous actresses such as Angela Yeung Wing, also known as Angelababy. Many women got excited when they heard her name, and it was clear that they seem to admire her physical appearance. Similar to responses assessing the magazine influence, while the participants may want to look like celebrities on television or movies to some extent, they do not feel that they should compare their appearance to the appearance of celebrities. One woman distinguished importance between a body shape and face.

I'm more affected by models not actors. Because models have good shapes and actors have good faces... that's a huge difference. I think having a good body shape is more important. (Liu)

While many participants did not elaborate why they do not compare to female celebrities on television or movies, they seem to worry about the negative consequences from making comparisons as was the case for not comparing to magazine models.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

China has been dominated by Confucian beliefs and mannerisms, and women's beauty ideals were also subject to this traditional concept. While there have been some variations of body sizes and facial features for traditional Chinese preferences, the predominant preferences included "round faces" and "plump bodies" that could show women's wealth and status. According to the young Chinese women being interviewed, the contemporary ideals of the female beauty seem to endorse the thin body ideal and sharper faces with a pointy chin. These contemporary images are easily seen as the researcher informally observed encountering them from many street kiosks to convenience chain stores (e.g., 7-Eleven) to waiting lounges of banks and hotels while visiting Shanghai for the study. According to Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, China is a society of high power distance that respects people with authority or social and economic power. This is evident that celebrity-endorsed products and brands, including fashion and beauty products, are well-perceived in China as many people like to imitate the lifestyles of celebrities or public figures (Tai, 2017). For the question whether the participants would compare themselves to TV actresses or movie stars, a large majority of women indicated that they do not compare themselves to these celebrities. If maintaining power distance is still important in China, then young Chinese women may feel that it is almost unnatural for them to compare to celebrities of social and economic power since they may not feel that they can measure up to celebrities' appearance standards.

After all the focus groups were completed, the researcher added one informal question for the participants to see what they think might have caused the changes they see in the standards of female ideal beauty from the traditional to the contemporary ones. Various opinions were raised including the impacts of media, Westernization, and lifestyle changes. While their insights might not represent all of the influences that shaped changing concepts of the female ideal beauty, they provided some interesting opinions in regards to such changes and relevant subjects as follows:

I think maybe because for one thing we are affected by Western countries and we like supermodels and we like tall women, slim women in Western countries. So we just changed our standard of beauty. (Xi)

I think it's the media. They put those perfect female images in fashion magazines. Like tell everyone this is the beauty, you should look like that. If you don't look like that, we won't like you. So everyone will feel like I'll never be skinny enough, I should be skinny. (Lei)

In the past a skinny body means poor, but now fat means poor... because they can't afford to go to gym or diet places. (Zhong)

A few women emphasized the importance of being fit to equate with a healthy image or healthy lifestyle.

I think Western influence is big. And for another thing, we just get more aware of our fitness. We just think we should live healthier and the lifestyle should be healthier and we should exercise more to keep fit. And this caused us to have a slimmer body so we just want to look slimmer to show we have a healthy lifestyle. (Huang)

I think in China the status of women has changed. Yes, and the women nowadays they are more independent and have their own minds and jobs. They like to be healthier images. (Yang)

Additional discussions about the thin body ideal led to Chinese women's understanding about eating disorders. When the researcher asked whether they understand what eating disorders meant, they all indicated that they understood. One participant mentioned "losing weight is a trend in China." Another said "losing weight should be easy and if people are not losing weight, that's because they are lazy." With major changes occurring in the perceptions of the ideal female body from the traditional view, this also indicated possible social prejudice for not having fit or thin bodies in Contemporary Chinese society. Overall comments from the focus groups participants suggested that women in contemporary China feel a sense of freedom over their own bodies and that they feel a need to improve their physical appearance for social acceptance or healthy images. According to the participants, healthy images were being referred to as having thin bodies. The findings of this study suggest that women's increased economic and social power as well as individual consumerism in contemporary Chinese society led to changes in the perceptions of the female ideal beauty among young Chinese women. The standards of the female ideal beauty in contemporary China seem to be unrealistic and remarkably similar to the Western standards, which is the predicted pattern according to the feminist perspective (e.g., Jeffreys, 2005) for countries with greater gender equality. While it was not clear to what extent young women feel the social pressure to obtain contemporary standards of the female ideal beauty, increased consumption of beauty products and competitive cosmetic surgery, and blooming diet industries in China indicate that women may be pressured to conform to new appearance standards in contemporary China.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings should be interpreted with caution not to generalize to all young women in China since the study is limited for the sample size. The study was conducted in a major city among young women attending a major university.

Future research may include Chinese women of a wider range of ages and social backgrounds for a more complete picture of the Chinese perceptions of beauty. This study intentionally focused on a more homogenous group of women with age and educational backgrounds so that it minimized confounding effects resulting from differences in demographic profiles of the participants. Also, while all participants showed a high level of proficiency with English and they were provided with written interview questions, their understanding of the questions could have been somewhat different from how counterparts in the United States might have understood. Finally, some participants may have been hesitant to express their opinions due to their personalities or cultural characteristics of not being direct with their expressions, particularly in a group setting. It is believed that a semistructured interview guide employed in this study was useful since the participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses by the researcher.

The findings suggested that contemporary cultural standards of the female ideal beauty are different from the traditional preference and view. These new standards including thin bodies and Western-influenced facial features (e.g., sharp face) are widely shown in the media, which include online magazines through which women obtain the latest fashion and beauty trends. According to young Chinese women, fashion magazines play an important role for shaping contemporary cultural standards of the female ideal beauty.

Some women indicated that making comparisons to idealized media images would make them develop negative feelings about their appearance. In fact, a large number of studies show the effects of social comparisons to media images as harmful to individuals (e.g., Kozar & Damhorst, 2009). Perhaps some Chinese women identify with not comparing to magazine models or idealized images of other media outlets as a protective mechanism to maintain their positive body image. Still, Western-influenced appearance standards seem to be prevailing in contemporary China and it would be difficult to avoid internalization of contemporary appearance standards that young women observe from changing cultural environments. Additional research is needed to understand Chinese women's internalization of contemporary appearance standards and its relationship to increasing body image issues in China.

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