

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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*Arts and Social
Sciences Journal,
Vol. 2012: ASSJ-43*

Western Media Meets Eastern Tradition: Examining The Views Of Chinese-American Women On Beauty

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Accepted: March 12, 2012; Published: March 14, 2012

Abstract

This study utilized in-depth interviews with 11 Chinese-American women, prompted by mass media images of both Chinese and Western celebrities, in order to better understand their perspectives and views on beauty. Five major themes emerged: Health/Energy, Natural, Comfort/Closeness, Personality/Wholesomeness, and Chinese and Western Appearance Differences. Analysis indicated that although Western media images have an impact on the way Chinese-American women view beauty, the traditional Chinese attitudes on beauty remain highly influential.

Keywords: Chinese; Beauty; Media effects; Culture; Women.

1. Introduction

Different cultures may interpret female beauty in different ways. One culture may value a particular characteristic, while another culture may find that characteristic undesirable. As the world becomes a global marketplace – with beauty products, cosmetic surgery, and the like being available to women around the world – the depiction of beauty through the mass media becomes ever more important as it reaches more and more people. Although researchers have probed the effects of mass media on girls and women from Western cultures, less research has been done on the effects of Western media on women from other parts of the world. Yet it is likely that these women see many of the same images and share the same ideals of beauty as do Western women. George Gerbner's work on cultivation theory suggests that individuals who watch more television may perceive the world differently than do individuals who watch less television, and may experience mainstreaming, or points of view which tend to move toward the majority viewpoint which is depicted in the media. Although cultivation theory often deals with violence, the main point of the theory is to demonstrate the influence of media, particularly television [1]. Therefore, beauty ideals, particularly of minority individuals, fit into the theory as well. Television is the main focus of cultivation theory, but any medium could lead to altered perceptions [2], particularly if exposure is frequent.

The research that has been published on beauty ideals has been mainly quantitative, describing the status of female imagery in the mass media. The present study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by using qualitative methodologies to examine the views of Asian-American women about beauty. Due to the often wide cultural differences between individual Asian countries, this study focuses on women that grew up in one single Asian country – China. Chinese-Americans were chosen as participants for two main reasons: 1) the results of a report commissioned by Dove showed that Chinese women were more likely than some other Asian women to report themselves as being beautiful [3], and 2) it would be interesting to see how China's one-child policy, and historical preference for male offspring would affect the views and opinions of the participants. Since the one-child policy began in 1979, the rate of females has been decreasing as many Chinese parents opt out of parenting girls, to focus on the valuable male child [4]. With fewer females and more males, will beauty ideals be altered in some way?

The effects of mass media consumption on individual and societal perceptions of beauty have been studied in a

number of contexts, most of them quantitative in nature. A study in which photos were digitally manipulated to alter body size, skin color, and leg length [5] found that the participants (the majority of whom were Caucasian) preferred the non-digitized photos, which they saw as more realistic. A qualitative, open-ended portion of this study revealed that some participants were even offended by the manipulation that takes place in media images.

Other studies have focused on multicultural aspects of beauty ideals, and have attempted to discern differences in beauty ideals among participants from different ethnic backgrounds. For example, a survey of Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White students in the United States [6] found an extremely high correlation among attractiveness ratings, regardless of the participant's ethnicity. That study found that, across all ethnicities, the most important determinants of beauty were large eyes, small noses, and large smiles. The researchers could not, however, find a relationship between increased exposure to Western culture and higher ratings of Western appearances – that is, participants who had not lived in the United States gave very similar ratings to those who had lived in the United States for at least a few months. What could be causing this inter-cultural consistency in beauty ratings? Is there an innate sense of beauty that all humans share? Or has the mass media granted certain appearance types more airtime, thereby normalizing those appearances and making them the worldwide standard of beauty? This issue is especially important considering the heavy reliance on Western media usage across the world, which is due both to popularity and cost effectiveness [7].

Many studies on culture and beauty have chosen to focus on advertising as a means of looking into how beauty is interpreted in a given society. A content analysis of magazines from the United States and two Asian countries with a history of Confucianism – Singapore and Taiwan – showed that women are depicted differently in Western and Asian advertising [8]. In the United States, Singapore and Taiwan, Caucasian models appeared more frequently than did Chinese, Malay, Indian, Pan-Asian, or mixed race models. Only in the United States were any African-American models depicted. Chinese models appeared relatively frequently in Taiwanese advertising due to the large Chinese population in Taiwan. When the ads were analyzed through seven of the eight types of beauty identified by English, Solomon & Ashmore [9], differences between the three countries surfaced. Although the most common form of beauty shown across the three countries was the "Classic" type, the "Sensual/Sex kitten" type was found much more frequently in American advertising than in Singapore or Taiwan, and the "Cute/Girl next door" type was found more frequently in the Taiwanese ads. Caucasian models were also more likely to be placed in the "Sensual/Sex kitten" role than were Chinese models, which were frequently placed in the "Cute/Girl next door" model roles.

Another study analyzed images of Asian-American women in print advertisements and argued that Asian-American women were depicted as foreign, as outsiders and as the "Other" in order to maintain the position of white male as normal [10]. This study addresses the following questions:

- 1) How do Chinese-American women describe beauty in themselves and others?
- 2) How do Chinese-American women decide what makes a person beautiful?

2. Methods

To find answers to the research questions, this study employed a qualitative method of in-depth interviews and auto-driving, a technique in which photos, texts, or other materials are used to help facilitate discussion with the participant.

2.1. Participant selection

Eleven participants were obtained in a snowball-sampling approach through two Chinese-American former classmates of the author. All participants were graduate students who had spent their formative years in China before relocating to the United States for graduate school. They ranged in age from 27 to 36 years. Participants were given \$10 for their time.

2.2. Interview procedure

Interviews were conducted over a two-week period. Participants were contacted and, after agreeing to participate, they were asked where and when they would like to be interviewed. Most participants chose to be interviewed in their on-campus offices. One interview took place outside on campus, as per the participant's request. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was tape-recorded with approval from the participant. Participants were assured of their anonymity, and they were informed that the tape recordings would be listened to only by the author, and only for transcription purposes.

The interviews commenced with some unrecorded chatter in order to put the participants at ease. Once the participant felt comfortable with the author and the surroundings, the participant was notified that the interview would begin. The participants were first asked, "Have you lived in China, and if so, for how long, and when did you come to the United States?" This starter question was intended to give the participants time to acclimate to the interview procedure, and also to ensure that the selection criteria were met. Participants were also asked about their communication habits with friends and family still living in China. The interview then shifted to focus on what it was like as a girl growing up in China and what characteristics the participant would use to describe herself. The participants were then asked to recall a photo of themselves that they thought was a particularly good photo, and they were asked to describe that photo.

After these questions, the auto-driving portion of the interview was initiated by introducing ten headshot photos of celebrities, from both the United States and China, depicting different ethnicities. Photos of the Chinese celebrities were obtained through the assistance of one of the author's Chinese-American classmates, and photos of the American celebrities were obtained from the internet, after consulting with several women as to whom they thought to be beautiful celebrities from the United States. Headshots rather than full-length shots were used in order to keep the discussion focused on facial features rather than body shape and size. Although body shape and size are important factors in self-image and beauty ideals, they were not the focus of the present study.

The auto-driving portion began when the researcher asked the participant to select a photo and talk about whether the person pictured was beautiful or not, and why. Other discussion questions included: What makes someone beautiful? What makes someone not beautiful? Do you think you are influenced by portrayals of women in the media? and "Do you think the one-child policy in China will influence ideals of beauty in China?"

2.3. Analysis

The author personally transcribed the interview tapes in order to re-experience the interviews. After the transcription process was completed, the data was analyzed to look for main themes by unitizing and categorizing each piece of information, pursuant to the method of data analysis used by Lincoln & Guba [11].

2.4. Member check

After the interviews were transcribed and the analysis completed, the author returned to each participant to ask if the analysis accurately represented her thoughts and feelings on the topic of beauty as she had expressed during the interview. All participants agreed that they could "see themselves" in the completed analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

Five main themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts: Health/Energy, Natural, Comfort/Closeness, Personality/Wholesomeness, and Chinese and Western Appearance Differences. Each theme is discussed in depth below.

3.1. Health/Energy

When asked to select a celebrity photo to talk about, one of the first characteristics mentioned by participants was perceived healthiness. One participant, a 27-year-old married woman, said, "I don't like models a lot, because

they are too skinny. [I] look at them and think maybe they are sick, [they] need more food.” Another participant, a 28 year old, also mentioned sickly-looking models: “I don’t know, I think a lot of people around me don’t like models too much. They [are] like, sick or something. I guess they just try to keep their career, so they just go on fast a lot, go on diets a lot.” Other photos were described as showing healthy women, and some characteristics the interviewees identified as healthy were young, tight skin, clear and bright eyes (“[I] just feel her eyes are clear and bright”).

One participant, a 36-year-old physician, commented negatively on a photo of Kate Moss, which she saw as depicting an unhealthy individual: “I think this is bad hair, messy.... because I think some drug addiction... maybe I’m a doctor and I may just [see] some other person’s smoke addiction, drug addiction, looks like... the hair, the eyes, the expression, face expression.” The same participant seemed disturbed by a photo of Kirsten Dunst with tousled hair and a blank expression: “Don’t like this one—it is like she is deprived, just a little... I think from the whole expression, my feeling is not good.” The who didn’t seem troubled by the Kirsten Dunst photo thought that Kate Moss “doesn’t really look very healthy to me in mind and body”. Health was mentioned several other times during the interviews, such as when a 28-year-old communication student said, “She looks to me like... you know, healthy, being healthy”.

Youth, like health, was mentioned by several participants as a desirable quality: the 36-year-old physician stated, “I admire those women who, they are in their forties, and they look so young.” A 30-year-old education student said, “I think when...for [a] teenager, or when they are young, they don’t need makeup. Being young is beautiful, [to] have young skin, [you] don’t have to worry about too much of life; [it] will make people feel that kind of glowing beauty. When we get older, I would choose those things, like, to make me feel, look younger, at least to cover some of my not-that-good features.” One participant, a 34-year-old married mother of one child, commented about why she thought people follow the lives of celebrities: “If you have confidence, you’re healthy, you’re happy – that’s what matters, I think. Yeah, I think maybe that’s why people like look at stars. Like when you look at stars, you feel [the] good side of life. They look so perfect”.

3.2. Natural

Having natural qualities was also an important characteristic to the participants in this study, both for themselves and for the celebrities of whom they viewed photos:

28-year-old psychology student: I think the more important thing in the picture is not how beautiful you are, the impression the picture give you, it’s...more from the expression on the face.

Interviewer: So you think...the best kind of picture would make the person looking at it feel what?

28-year-old psychology student: Natural. Yes, for some, it’s impossible for the people [who are] beautiful, but sometimes you really like the picture of one person because you think it’s a real natural one, not that fabulous one.

For both celebrities and everyday citizens alike, participants indicated that being natural was more important than being perfect. A 32-year-old research lab assistant explained, “If you try to hide your teeth, not so good”. Another, a 31-year-old communication student, mentioned that she respected the photo of a Chinese actress whose mouth is not the typically desired “small mouth” in Chinese culture: “You see, her mouth is very maybe thick[er] than another person’s. She is natural. She don’t change her mouth...I think [this] keeps nature.” Speaking of the same actress, a 28-year-old education student said, “Sometimes she, ...since she knows she has a big mouth, she does not try to make it smaller, but use the makeup to emphasize it.” Yet another participant, the 36-year-old physician, also mentioned that “being natural is one [type of beauty]. I don’t like putting much cosmetics on one’s face, like putting too red lips, or very dark eye shadow, that make one feel – looks like going on to a stage or something. It’s not natural”.

A 27-year-old science student focused particularly on using small amounts of makeup:

I think the makeup should make you look like, I know you put some makeup on, but it looks just so good on you. I don't want to feel like, oh, you look good because you put a lot of makeup. ... You look good with just a little makeup. Even you, probably at home, you probably did a lot of work to put a foundation, or powder on your face. But you look like you and still look very natural. But I have to say that this makeup [points to the red background photo] I feel very good...because I feel like it's very natural, right? So, that's it. I don't like a lot of makeup, [it] makes you look like you're a makeup model. ... In other words, I know you put a lot of makeup on, but I still [should be] able to see your skin.

Another participant, the 32-year-old research lab assistant, brought up the idea of multiple definitions of beauty. When this individual was asked to choose the photo of the most beautiful woman, she replied: "They are all beautiful in their own way. It's hard to say which one is more beautiful than the other. Unless you can quantify this, those things – for example, like five centimeter eyes".

3.3. Comfort/Closeness

The participants also mentioned a feeling of comfort as one of the factors in deciding whether a woman in a photograph was beautiful. The 27-year-old married woman said, "I think the comfortable, feeling of comfort is the most important thing, when I say whether she is beautiful or not... [If] I look at a picture and feel comfortable, then I think she's beautiful...if it doesn't look comfort to me, I won't say that she's beautiful." She was asked to clarify her statement:

Interviewer: So, if you don't feel comfortable looking at the picture...like this one, didn't you say you didn't feel comfortable?

27-year-old married woman: Mm-hmm. I mean, yeah. She's trying to be sexy. ... In this way, I don't feel comfortable.

Upon viewing the photo with the red background, the 30-year-old education student, stated: "It [gives] me a brighter feeling, [gives] me a happier feeling when I look at her." This particularly photo did tend to make participants feel happy and comfortable, although when asked about whether she would want the red background photo woman for a friend, the 28-year-old education student answered, "I wouldn't have a friend that's so, as beautiful as an actress. That's not, you know, comfortable. I wouldn't feel comfortable. I'm not a beautiful girl." This implies that not only are feelings of comfort important in determining beauty, but so are feelings of closeness to the subject. This participant tended to choose photos of women in natural, unstaged settings, explaining, "Now hers is like, just like one [picture] taken from a class album. And I feel, like, closer to her. And also for this one, looks like a picture taken during her life."

Another participant, the 28-year-old psychology student, tended to mention feelings of pleasure and happiness rather than "comfort" when looking at beautiful women: "So, I like her... her movie, and so her face, her eyes I think is very, very good, gives me a pleasure feeling." As to another picture: "So it makes me a brighter feeling, make me a happier feeling when I look at her." This participant mentioned that she'd want to avoid women like Penelope Cruz, based on her facial expression in the photos as well as a prior knowledge of Cruz's romantic affairs: "When I look at her, I want to keep my distance from her. Yeah. Kind of unfriendly, but maybe when we speak personally, it's different. For the stars, she is not one of the stars that I like. Maybe also because of so many affairs of hers." This leads into the next theme found throughout the interviews – the participants valued morality and quality of character in the celebrities, and in women generally.

3.4. Personality/Wholesomeness

Participants emphasized the notion that beauty is multi-faceted, in the sense that a person can be beautiful in looks but not in personality, or vice versa. The 27-year-old married woman said:

"We always say that, when you judge a person, if she [is] pretty – a beautiful person, you have to judge from both inside and outside. And we pay attention – the Chinese tradition is they pay a lot of attention

inside a person. Like [if] you are a pretty person but you treat people badly, nobody will think you are beautiful. But if you're not pretty and you're a very nice person, and after several months or weeks, I will probably change my mind."

The 28-year-old education student expressed a similar opinion: "I think when I judge whether they are beautiful, the moral part, the moral things [are] always a part of that. If their personality, their moral level isn't very good...that will impair my impression [of] them." The 31-year-old communications student chose Chinese actress Do Shi as being beautiful, but explained her choice thusly: "She always do something that she want to do, that she thought was right, [she] don't care what anybody thought. That is not easy for a woman in China. That is the reason I like her. I like her for two reasons. First, she is serious about her work; and she has that personality." Success of a Chinese actress in Western films is also a signifier of beauty for one participant, the 28-year-old communications student: "Because she acted in some movies that are popular in Western society, so people think she's beautiful. At the time that her movies came out, there are not many Chinese movie actors in Western film."

Negative news and information about a celebrity can also strongly influence their image. The 27-year-old science student reported that she actually does research on an unknown celebrity's character before deciding whether to become a fan: "Maybe that's why I don't like, choose blindly, the way the person look is the only reason that I like her. Actually, some time I watch TV, just some interview with the stars, after I watch the show I suddenly feel strongly for star because I saw nice part of him or her. So I think, 'Wow, this guy is like this?' and I go online and try to find out, and so that's a way that I determine people. It makes the distance between [me] and the stars closer, [to] know more about them."

The 28-year-old psychology student mentioned celebrities by name that she had heard negative things about: "Is that Kate? The model? I think there was very negative news on her. She did drugs, right? After that I didn't really like her. I heard the news that she did the drug thing, and then – I have to say she does have very nice bone structure, but I don't like people to do drugs, or even drink a lot, and smoke. I don't really like it." The same participant showed disdain for Jessica Simpson: "I heard some story about her, the way she talk when people interview her, the way she talk and the way she dress up, the way she treat her relationship. I just feel like, oh my God, that's a girl that's so annoying. I don't like her. Her face and the way she behaves. Maybe I was wrong but the news just influenced me a lot."

The 36-year-old physician expressed a similar sentiment: "The most important is the way you dress and the way you behave. The way you walk. And the way you handle things and the way you talk to people. The whole picture will make you elegant. If you have [an] elegant face, but if I see you just talk to people very rude, I will not think you are elegant people." The 27-year-old science student mentioned her father's influence on how she determines a person's character:

I don't really have an idol. If I have [an] idol, maybe that's my father. Because I talk with my father a lot, and my father show me a lot of his wisdom. Maybe that's also why I don't really chase stars. But I know a lot of my friends, they do... after I talk to my father, I know how to determine person like around you. If they have good qualities or if they have some qualities you don't want to follow, things like that. Maybe that's why I determine a person – if he or she is my favorite because of the character, the character matters to me more.

When asked if the woman in the red-background photo was the most beautiful, she replied:

Most beautiful maybe not, but her character is the kind I like the most. Very important, inside is beautiful. I saw an interview with her, and the way she talks, I feel she has very good character. She answers every question very friendly and frankly so she is a good person. I think that part matters. Maybe that's also why she became one of my favorite persons.

3.5. Chinese/Western appearance differences

Many of the participants admired certain characteristics that may be rare in Asian women, such as large eyes and white, straight teeth. The 27-year-old married woman explained why white teeth are rare in China, while also reiterating that personality is important in how the world views a woman:

Before she did this, this teeth brace, some tooth came out so that makes her look less pretty. Most women do not have good teeth – it's hard. For some child[ren] in China, before [my husband, age 31] was born, maybe 2 or 3 years older than him, the... kids of that generation, almost all of them who got cold when they were young got bad teeth because they ate some kind of medicine that actually will destroy the teeth. So their teeth turned black and brown and the color will never change. ... If you can have good teeth, try. But if you don't, I think showing your good personality and show people that you are confident, that part is very important, the way you look at someone. That person makes you feel... friendly, feel happy, that's a very good person I think. It's not necessary for every one to look beautiful. It's impossible. [Laughter]

When asked to describe what beautiful teeth look like, the 36-year-old physician responded:

Let me see if I can find one here. [Chooses photo with red background] I think she has pretty teeth. Well, I think the teeth will be like white, but not like the striking white. Match your skin tone, natural white. ... Actually I feel bad about Chinese – they don't do the braces.

The 32-year-old research lab assistant displayed particular surprise at the sight of Kate Moss' uneven teeth, especially after learning that she is a Western model. "I mean, for Western girl, I had thought that all Western people have very clean, I mean, straight teeth. Because you care about teeth." Another praised the photo with the red background, saying, "I really admire those that have white teeth. They can smile – give you brilliant smile."

Eye size was also frequently mentioned as a desirable characteristic in women: "I like her. I like her eyes. I like those big, deep eyes. Probably it's different from ours. Because it's different, so I think it's more attractive." The 27-year-old married woman mentioned that her husband preferred larger eyes: "My husband always says beautiful girls always have big eyes. I ask him, what you think a beauty is like? He says a beauty has to have big eyes." However, this participant didn't seem too concerned about her husband's thoughts on beauty, judging by the following exchange:

27-year-old married woman: I think it's like very different view that, between my husband and me, we look very differently at how beautiful people are.

Interviewer: Do you think you try to be... more of what he thinks is beautiful?

27-year-old married woman: No. I don't really take care too much of myself, because when we met, I was always like this. He also never gives me some suggestions like to do this, and do that. It's not really appearance. I also don't care about that. Don't care, care about other things. Like issues that we discuss and decide together, this kind of thing. Never really care about when looking at each other and never talk about that.

The 28-year-old education student said, "I know some people who get the surgery for bigger eyes, like Western eyes. ... And also love their lashes. Long lashes, their eyelashes. I think Western people have longer lashes than Eastern people. Because myself, [I] don't have long lashes. Curly, long lashes. [She] looks to me like... healthy, being healthy."

The 34-year-old married woman also mentioned the different poses featured by the American and Chinese celebrities, pointing out that one of the Chinese women was pictured in a pouting pose where she was "trying to

look innocent." She said that "in China, some boys like girls to be this way because they make them look lonely, and some kind of naïve."

4. Conclusion

The women who participated in this study frequently mentioned the need for a person to be healthy in order to appear beautiful. Health and energy were major considerations in their determinations of beauty, and even just a hint or speculation of unhealthy behaviors such as drug use were enough to dissuade the participants from having positive feelings toward a celebrity's beauty. The participants also reported feeling like they needed to "know" and feel comfortable with or close to the celebrity, before they could judge whether she was beautiful. One participant stated that she conducts internet research on celebrities to learn about their inner qualities; others let the information come to them in the form of tabloids, interviews, and news stories, which usually tell stories of a negative nature. Other participants took cues from the celebrity such as a smile, or a clean and tidy appearance, to determine whether they felt close to her.

Another overriding theme that surfaced during the interviews was personality, which also ties into the preceding theme of comfort/closeness. All of the participants mentioned that a woman needed to possess a nice, friendly personality in order to be beautiful, or at least needed such a personality to complement her beauty.

Differences in Chinese and Western perceptions of beauty were mentioned often during the interviews, especially with respect to straight, white teeth and large eyes. Several participants mentioned that they find attractive certain characteristics which are different from themselves.

The participants in this study did not necessarily mention that they themselves were influenced by media portrayals of women, either Western or non-Western. This may be due to their age – between 26 and 37 years – and due to the fact that most women are more focused on career and school-related tasks and less concerned with the lives of celebrities. A few of the women were already married, which may also help to explain why they did not have the time or interest in following celebrities. For the most part, the participants in this study were familiar with the Chinese celebrities but were typically unable to identify the Western celebrities, by name or by occupation. However, despite reporting that they did not try to emulate celebrities, the women did mention "novel" Western characteristics such as large eyes and straight, white teeth as being desirable both in a celebrity and for themselves, due to the rarity of these characteristics in the Chinese population.

Although the participants did show some preferences for Western appearance traits, such as large eyes and white, straight teeth, these women emphasized the need for good personality and character as a key component of beauty. This may be a result of traditional Confucianism in China, which has historically viewed beauty as unnecessary and frivolous [12]. The comments of these participants demonstrate a merging of Western ideals with traditional Chinese preferences, with respect to beauty. This situation is probably markedly different from that of ten years ago, and in another ten years it will likely be different again. For example, China has begun having state-endorsed beauty pageants, which often reward Western beauty characteristics [13]. This is of particular concern since a study by Evans and McConnell [14] showed that after exposure to mainstream, Western model photos, Asian women were more likely than Black women to be critical of their bodies, to evaluate themselves negatively, and to prefer majority (Western) beauty ideals, similar to White women.

China and other Asian countries have historically had a preference for male offspring [12, 15, 16]. Sons are valued for their contributions to the family, both before and after marriage, whereas daughters leave the family to join the family of their husband at the age when they are most helpful to the family. When the one-child policy was initiated in China in 1979, baby girls would often be aborted, adopted out, have their births not reported, or even be killed so that the parents could try again for the preferred male child [4]. Banister [17] argued that the shortage of girls in China comes mostly from pre-birth gender selection abortion, infanticide, and maltreatment of young girls. Whatever the case, in the next generation there will almost certainly be many fewer women than men in China.

Considering the obviously profound effect of the one-child policy upon Chinese culture and society, it was reasonable to believe that the policy might have a significant impact on the way beauty is described by Chinese women. For example, one could hypothesize that the Chinese ideas on what constitutes beauty might be somewhat altered due to the impending scarcity of women in the society. However, judging by the comments of some of the participants on the one-child policy, this does not appear to be the case. It is clear that the ideas about beauty that are most deeply held – that beauty must come from the inside and that a beautiful woman should have good morals and character – are the traditional values derived from Confucianism. The fact that this is a society where it will soon become difficult for a man to find a wife, due to the overabundance of males in the population, did not seem to be a factor.

One of the participants did recognize that the next generation will face a huge problem – too many men and not enough women – but she also said that, if anything, the impact of the one-child policy will most likely have a lowering effect on beauty standards in China. This is because, for an only child who gets all the attention of the parents and grandparents, they will not need to work for their attention as they might have to if they had siblings. This participant hypothesized that the female children of this new generation might be less concerned with the ideals of beauty, since they would receive so much attention regardless of appearance, both from family and from the far more numerous men.

This research has some important limitations that should be noted. First, the women I talked to had all been wanted and cared for as children, and they had been successful in their schooling. They were all highly educated, each being in graduate school or beyond, and each had lived in the United States for at least six months. Different beauty ideals might be found in those women who are still in China, or in rural parts of China, who might not have had as much exposure to Western media.

The language barrier between the author and the participants was another limitation of the research. There were several instances where the participants could not find the right word in English. Since the author does not know any Chinese, the opportunity for some additional information may have been lost.

Future research with other Asian populations, and with Chinese-American women of different ages, would shed much light onto how beauty is perceived in China. All of the women interviewed for this study had siblings, and were too old to have been subject to the one-child policy; it would be interesting to speak with younger Asian women, who the participants suggested might be more interested in “chasing stars” and who would be less likely to have a sibling. A focus group of Chinese-American women, rather than individual interviews, would also provide an interesting angle from which to study the concept of beauty. Lastly, to more fully understand how media and culture shape perceptions of beauty, it would be vital to talk to men about the perceptions of beauty of women, and to speak to both women and men about perceptions of attractiveness for men as well.

Competing Interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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