

White and Beautiful: An Examination of Skin Whitening Practices and Female Empowerment in China

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Abstract:

In recent years, the prevalence of skin whitening products has increased tremendously among Asian women. The cultural desire for pale skin can be attributed to the phenomenon of colorism, the “discriminatory treatment of individuals falling within the same ‘racial’ group on the basis of skin color” (Herring, 2002). Although social stratification based on skin tone is not a novel concept in China, it has taken on a new dimension in recent decades due to the rise of commercialization and consumerism. As a result, cosmetic companies have capitalized on this opportunity to provide beauty products for women. Although the claims that these products can reduce the darkness of one’s are rather dubiousness, East Asian women have expressed increased interest in skin whiteners (Glenn, 2008). Thus, there seems to be a correlation between colorism and consumerism. The ability to purchase these products provides women the illusion of privilege, agency, and social mobility (Saraswati, 2010). This article examines the role of colorism in contemporary China and the perception of privilege that cosmetic whitening products generate for Chinese women. By analyzing the historical and sociological contexts specific to Chinese society, this article will explicate the ways in which pale skin has become a popularized social desire as well as the perceived agency of Chinese women by consuming and purchasing skin whiteners.

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1. Introduction

Walking down the aisles of Shanghai's department stores and shopping malls, one can notice that a particular cosmetic product dominates the Chinese market: the skin whitener. Pale and unblemished skin has become a central aspect of femininity and social identity among urban Chinese women. The desire for light skin, however, is not exclusively a modern phenomenon, and in fact predates contemporary influences of popular culture and Western aesthetics of beauty. The value of pale skin is historically constructed and influenced by various sociopolitical factors.

Though the yearning for the pale aesthetic is not new, the practice of skin whitening has become more complex in modern China due to the recent surge in consumerism and increasing product availability. Since the implementation of the Open Door Policy in 1978, China has seen tremendous growth in its consumer market. In particular, the Chinese cosmetics market is now the second largest in the globe, generating \$25 billion just in 2013 (Ren, 2014). Skin whiteners play a significant role in this market, accounting for one-third of all facial skincare products sold in China (Chatterjee, 2009). The high revenue generated from skin whitening products indicates that pale skin remains a highly sought-after aesthetic among consumers. Despite its prevalence, however, the implications of this practice often go unexamined by its practitioners. The increasing popularity of skin whitening cosmetics and their rising costs further reinforce the social perception of dark skin as a trait that must be corrected. Women who purchase these products are not only reshaping ideas regarding modern Chinese femininity, but their newfound ability to consume also constructs varying ideas of agency and female empowerment within the new neoliberal state.

2. Historical Prevalence of Skin Whitening in China

The cultural desire for pale skin has been prevalent throughout Chinese history, though its significance was contested in varying time periods. In ancient China, pale skin was indicative of one's elite status. Because farmers and laborers devoted long hours to outdoor labor, they experienced long exposure to the sun, resulting in darker skin tones. The elite, on the other hand, did not face such necessity for manual labor and remained indoors. As a result, individuals in the upper social classes had fair-colored skin (Mak, 2007; Zhang, 2012). Skin tone thus became a signifier of class, with pale skin dominating the top of the hierarchy. Just as clothing and jewelry could differentiate individuals' economic standing, the shade of one's skin also became an essential aspect of one's identity.

Furthermore, the emphasis on a fair complexion can be found in ancient proverbs and writings. In ancient Chinese literature, attractive women were often described by likening their skin to that of "snow," "ice," or "jade." These analogies demonstrated "qualities of transparency, delicacy, smoothness, and whiteness" (Zhang, 2012, p. 440). Moreover, ancient Chinese proverbs also reiterate the concept of whiteness as perfection. For instance, a popular proverb claims that "a white complexion can hide several flaws." These literary connections between beauty and whiteness suggest that the shade of one's skin has played a historically significant role in Chinese society. Moreover, the frequent use of these analogies in ancient literature promotes the idea that white skin is the ideal physical aesthetic, as it has been embedded in traditional culture for centuries.

Yet, because ideas surrounding beauty vary throughout history, the cultural desire for paleness was not always central to Chinese society. In response to the Mukden Incident and Japan's subsequent invasion of China in 1931, the Nationalist government sought to strengthen the citizenry's physicality to defend against further foreign attacks. Under the banner of civic obligation and patriotism, the government enacted a series of actions to pursue a more athletic physique for women, who were deemed to be the weaker sex. In June of 1936, the government outlawed fashionable

clothing and permed hair. Violators were instructed to return home and change their attire. Those who resisted were often fined and jailed (Gao, 2006). As governmental enforcement of the athletic body ensued, popular culture also promoted an austere aesthetic for women. In the Shanghai women's magazine *Linglong*, writers condemned the use of makeup by deeming it "deceptive and temporary" and asserted that the maintenance of a robust physique was more viable because it was "self-cultivated and will last until old age" (Gao, 2006, p. 559). In addition to the rejection of cosmetic products, the qualifying elements of a fit physique also included "healthy skin color and lively gestures" attained through rigorous exercise (Gao, 2006, p. 559). Healthy skin tone, in this era of athletic bodies, was attained through outdoor exercise rather than temporary cosmetic products. Exposure to the outdoors meant the darkening of one's skin. Hence, one can assume that the definition of a "healthy skin tone" in this era was defined by a tan complexion. As a result, self-adornment and emphasis on maintaining a pale complexion were abandoned in favor of sporting athletic bodies for the purposes of patriotism and nationalism. The regulation of women's complexion was thus closely tied to political motives created by the male-dominated government. This form of biopolitical control would later heighten in times of cultural, political, and economic upheaval under the Maoist regime.

Though the Nationalist government in the 1930s transitioned feminine beauty from the pale aesthetic to robust athletic bodies, the Maoist regime further intensified the austerity of women's appearances. In fact, the Communist state often demonstrated preference for androgynous and ascetic appearances. As the regime was concerned with societal equality and the elimination of economic disparity, the government perceived women's self-beautification as a symbol of gender oppression and inequality. By reducing bodily differences between men and women, authorities believed that women's ascetic appearances would eradicate the patriarchal system of private property, and women would thus become liberated (Ip, 2003). Moreover, physical appeals of femininity were considered a sign of a "petit bourgeois," an individual from the property-owning lower middle class (Ip, 2003, p. 330). In an attempt to abolish economic differences, the state fiercely condemned any emphasis

on feminine beauty, especially beautification attained through material means. Beauty was thus eradicated as a form of identification. Moreover, the pursuit of self-adornment was condemned not only because it represented disparity among individuals but also because it distracted citizens from their devotion to political progress. The Maoist state discouraged all forms of bodily modification and urged citizens to deemphasize their physical differences in an attempt to render their identity and economic standing equal.

Despite the Maoist state's control of physical expressions, individual women found the space to resist these notions of nationalist femininity. For instance, urban women wore perfume, while rural women often tied colored ribbons to their hair (Ip, 2003). These forms of resistance may be subtle but served to provide a sense of individuality and empowerment for these women. Moreover, the wives of municipal government officials also participated in this resistance against the state-governed appearance. During special political occasions, they would dress in elegant traditional qipao, tightfitting Chinese gowns that were made popular by upper class Shanghai women in the 1920s (Ip, 2003). Although it was a clear demonstration of self-adornment and indulgence, this method of resistance was acceptable because it was justified as promotion of the state's prosperity.

In addition to the persistence of self-adornment practices, Communist propagandists also continued to utilize beauty as a method of publicizing the country's success. Stories of heroic nationalist women did not focus on critiquing women's infatuation with their physical appearances; rather, these patriotic narratives were accompanied by images of attractive females (Ip, 2003). Despite state mandates on ascetic lifestyles, the Communists continued to apply feminine beauty to the pragmatic political propaganda. Images of self-adornment thus began to permeate the public sphere, changing the public discourse on individualized beauty within an austere political environment.

By the 1980s, social attitudes regarding the use of cosmetic products had begun to undergo rapid change. The conclusion of the Maoist regime allowed Deng Xiaoping's government to implement various socioeconomic reforms, leading the

emergence of new discourses on women's issues. In particular, modification of one's physical body was no longer perceived as "an expression of bourgeois lifestyle," but rather as an "indication of the flourishing development of socialist production" (Honig & Hershatter, 1988, p. 49). Even authorities such as Tan Fuyun, chairperson for the Shanghai Women's Federation, publicly praised the power of cosmetics and noted that she and her delegates were often held in higher regard when adorned with light makeup (Honig & Hershatter, 1998). Thus, the government gradually accepted women's self-modification, as cosmetics became a sign of efficiency and highlighted the eminence of Communist China. Moreover, this concluding resistance to self-adornment demonstrated that beauty could indeed coexist with ideas of communism in a socialist state.

3. Skin Whitening Practices in Contemporary China

Within the contemporary context, the preoccupation with female beauty and indulgence in beauty products seems to adhere to Western and Caucasian aesthetics. Influenced by Western hegemonic beauty standards, the female aesthetic value in China has returned to its ancient preference for light skin. Some have argued that the global influence of white hegemony can be problematic, because it functions not only to reinforce the privilege of the Caucasian population but also to "[manipulate] racial outsiders to fight against one another [and] to compete with each other for white approval" (as qtd. in Li, Min, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008, p. 446). This Euro-centric perspective contends that the yearning for a pale complexion exists because of non-white populations' desire to physically mimic those who are in power. Thus, the current prominence of skin whitening products seems to be rooted in a historic yearning for a pale complexion, the influence of white hegemony, and most importantly, China's newfound ability to consume industrial products.

Though the preference for fair skin is not a new phenomenon in China, the practices of skin whitening have changed significantly over time. Before modern capitalism, Chinese women practiced skin whitening by traditional methods like

swallowing crushed pearl powder or applying chalk onto their skin (Li et al., 2008; Schwartz, 2011). However, with the rise of commercialization and industrialization, modern skin whitening techniques now rely on innovative technology and clever marketing. For example, whitening salons can be found throughout the streets of urban China. These salons carry laser-operated machines that claim to whiten one's "entire body... in just one hour" (Schwartz, 2011). Although these salons are widely available, the most popular option is to purchase skin-whitening cosmetics in beauty departments. These products are particularly popular because of their accessibility as over-the-counter cosmetics. Unlike whitening salons, these cosmetic goods do not require consumers to set aside a specific time for the procedure and allow consumers to apply the products at their convenience. Advertisers also emphasize the skin whitening properties in various staple skincare products, such as foundation and sunscreen. These products, as advertisers claim, not only lighten one's skin temporarily but can permanently alter one's skin tone gradually with continual and consistent use. Thus, skin-whitening products are accessible and affordable for the average Chinese consumer. By contrast, traditional apparatuses used in skin whitening were viable solely for the wealthy.

In addition to the availability of these products, the commodification of pale beauty has also been popularized through intensive marketing. Advertisements for whitening cosmetics frequently employ images of celebrities and ancient proverbs (Mak, 2007). These advertisements often feature half-Caucasian/half-Asian models to represent the image of ideal beauty. These models are chosen specifically so that consumers can find the models' Asian heritage relatable but also perceive their Caucasian features, especially their white skin, as a desirable goal to pursue (Rondilla, 2009). Moreover, marketing of skin whiteners often utilize ancient idioms to suggest whiteness as the proper aesthetic. Such marketing techniques are rather effective, as research (Mak, 2007) has found that individuals who hold popular proverbs, such as "a white complexion can hide several flaws," in higher regard also demonstrate a preference for lighter skin tones. Thus, these ancient proverbs are often applied to justify the act of skin modification, as proponents claim that this is a century-old

practice and aesthetic. Moreover, advertisers also manipulate consumers through phrases that denote an association between tradition and fair skin. One cosmetic company in Hong Kong claimed that their skin whitening product incorporated a "proven Traditional Chinese Imperial Palace secret formula" to enhance its effectiveness (Bray, 2002). The mention of the "Traditional Chinese Imperial Palace" suggests skin whitening as a practice rooted in the country's history, further convincing consumers that it is an established and ordinary practice. Hence, the intensity of marketing normalizes the practice of skin whitening and influences individuals' construction of feminine beauty.

Though the fierce marketing of skin whitening cosmetics has greatly influenced the beauty discourse in China, the actual practicality of the products seems dubious at best. In fact, skin-whitening users often report that they have observed little to no changes in their skin tone after continual use of the products (Rondilla, 2009). Research also demonstrates that consumers are often aware that the pursuit of pale skin is difficult in reality (Mak, 2007). Because skin whiteners frequently do not generate substantial results, consumers are conscious that the probability of attaining light skin is little to none.

4. Social Meanings of Pale Skin

Despite the ineffectiveness, production and consumption of skin whiteners continue to rise. The popularity of skin modification products may be attributed to the socioeconomic value of female beauty. Within a male-dominated society, women's appearance functions as a form of "currency" (Wolf, 1991, p.12). Because women's worth is dependent on their physical appearance, a lack of physical beauty can thus jeopardize one's success. A study of Chinese female college students found that physical beauty, which often includes having pale skin, is essential and advantageous when meeting employers and potential dating partners. One participant even claims, "women are still facing a lot of limitations when it comes to employment. Many companies still won't hire women, and when they do, they want to hire someone with

good physical appearance" (Zhang, 2012, p. 48). An attractive physical appearance is pursued not only because of one's aesthetic desires, but also because it is a significant factor for women's opportunities. Since skin whiteners promise to alter one's appearance, these products thus represent a chance for upward socioeconomic mobility.

Not only does the consumption of skin whiteners increase one's chance at success, the sole act of purchasing these products can be a display of wealth and independence. Because cosmetics are considered luxury items, the ability to dedicate one's income to makeup can demonstrate an individual's potential wealth (Rondilla, 2009). The ability to consume, in the context of neoliberal and capitalist China, thus manifests itself as not only a privilege but also as a form of power over one's body. Being able to purchase skin-whitening commodities, regardless of their actual functionality, implies that there are abundant choices available. Thus, individuals are not limited in their agency. Women have to option to choose the color of their skin and subsequently determine their own social and financial success. As a result, dark skin is frowned upon not only because it does not comply with cultural feminine aesthetics, but also because it represents a failure to control one's body and social status despite unrestricted agency.

5. Empowerment and Disempowerment of Chinese Women

Skin whiteners' promise to alter one's body can give female consumers the perception of personal agency. A survey of female college students in China indicated that the participants did not find cosmetic modification of the body as repulsive or unnatural. Rather, they rejoiced in the availability of cosmetic products and services for increasing their life opportunities (Zhang, 2012). Moreover, traditional Confucian concepts of loyalty assert that "women [are] subordinates to their fathers as girls, to their husbands as wives, and to their sons as widows" (as qtd. in Li et al., 2008, p. 448). The introduction of commercial skin whiteners, however, makes it possible to empower women by physically reclaiming their own bodies. Scholars (Li et al., 2008)

have noted that self-beautification can liberate women from patriarchal constraints. The altering of women's skin according to their own desires is a physical manifestation of defiance and resistance against patriarchal control over the female body. Moreover, the physical reclaiming of the body not only restructures social power dynamics between men and women, but the consumption of cosmetic products also demonstrates women's newfound purchasing power. Chadha and Husband's analysis (2010) suggests that the Confucian emphasis on the family means that adorning oneself with luxury goods can illustrate not only an individual's success but also their ability to provide for their family. Thus, an individual's success often reflects the family's wealth. The purchase of skin whiteners can signify women's individual financial power as well as their potential to provide for the family, a responsibility that traditionally reserved for the male members of the family. Skin whitening products are a visual symbol for possible socioeconomic success and liberation from patriarchal norms.

Yet, contemporary Chinese women are also confined by the same elements that have served to empower them. Utilizing women's physical appearance as a form of capital is ultimately problematic. Employing female beauty as a source of social currency binds society's attention solely to female appearances, rendering women's academic and professional accomplishments less valuable. Moreover, the association between beauty and an individual's worth is especially troublesome in an age of intensified materialism. The continual use of cosmetic products may empower individual women, but ultimately serves as a form of restrictive self-surveillance. The regimen of cosmetics that women undergo on a daily basis is determined according to social standards of beauty. Applying these cosmetics in order to gain society's approval requires women to exert a significant amount of discipline onto their bodies (King, 2004; Li et al., 2008). Thus, societal approval of cosmetics serves as a method of governance and control of women's bodies, ultimately subjugating women to arbitrary social conventions of beauty.

6. Conclusion

Historically, women's bodies have been constructed and deconstructed to embody various meanings specific to the sociopolitical atmosphere and time period. Although the preference for a fair complexion has fluctuated throughout the centuries in China, contemporary social desire for pale skin seems prevalent and is deeply tied to the newfound consumer culture. The rise of commercialization makes skin whitening practices easily accessible to consumers, creating a perception of agency among women. Moreover, the ability to consume these skin whitening products proposes a duality between empowerment and disempowerment for Chinese women. Though some women perceive self-modification procedures as emancipatory, they are ultimately still confined within the constraints of societal approval and conventions of beauty. Thus, not only does the phenomenon of white over dark skin indicate a problematic hierarchy embedded in Chinese society, but the intensification of this phenomenon through consumerism also signifies an on-going contested construction of femininity and female power.

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