

Standards of Femininity in Traditional and Contemporary China: Stereotypes and Beliefs on Women's Appearance, Roles and their Cultural Influences

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Abstract:

Technological advancements have advanced patriarchal society. Modern society is bombarded with media, which introduces new styles and trends daily. These new fashion standards often have negative effects and reinforce social norms and stereotypes. Female roles and fashion trends are stereotyped worldwide, but they are rarely rigid. However, many in Eastern Asia, especially China, are concerned about this issue because cultural and media influences shape many stereotypes and perceptions about women's physical appearances and social roles. People used to embrace their own beauty standards. However, modern society has adopted a standardised ideal, leading many to undergo extensive plastic surgery procedures like nose bridge enhancement, V-shaped face, skin lightening, and double eyelids. It seems like everyone is identical and can be easily replicated. Without inner beauty and values, outer beauty is just a decorative vase. Beauty, like anything else, is harmful in excess. Self-improvement and personal values should be prioritised before cosmetic enhancement. Through impact of social media, Chinese people set beauty standards and keep them for female generations .

Keywords: patriarchal society; stereotype; social media.

1. Introduction

China has an extremely established and rich background. Ever since the Han dynasty, China has had a strict beauty standard. The white and pale skin phenomenon is widespread in Chinese culture, it is assumed that people who have white skin are of a different class, they are rich and well taken care of. People with darker skin are considered poor because being tan will assume they work outside in the fields. Not only the skin, but body sizes were also very important, however, it has been shown that in different dynasties, there were different body standards [1]. In the Tang dynasty and early 1949, people liked women who had rounder and fuller bodies, they didn't like figures that were too thin because they thought if someone was skinny, it meant they were poor and had not been eating well [2]. However, in the Sung dynasty, women always looked very slim and they ate less than the Tang dynasty [2].

This standard of a petite body figure was also implicated in women's feet. In the tenth century AD, small feet were considered a beauty standard. "Three Inch Golden Lotus" was the term for bound feet in Chinese women, young

girls' feet were forcibly compressed in bandages at a very young age, and they had to retighten them every day so they could keep their feet small [3]. Having a three-inch golden lotus was also essential for girls to marry a wealthy family and have high social status [3]. This process of foot binding was very painful, later in the practice, from the second toe to the fifth toe will be folded under the sole, toes were brought close to the heel to shorten the length of the foot as much as possible [4]. As scholars have noticed that literal tradition uses, poems and novels to advocate this practice, usually praising the beauty of foot-bound women, often described as "slender" or "bowed", shaped like lotuses or water chestnuts [5].

This article will analyse the psychological stress and anxiety experienced by traditional and modern women in patriarchal societies, focusing on the influence of women's beauty and moral standards as discussed by scholars. The study will first examine the historical portrayal of women in literature, then focus on the unique challenges faced by modern women in East Asian societies. Finally, it will explore how cultural and media influences, including social media, shape women's appearance and social roles.

2. Women's Appearances Influenced by Media

The current society and media have been portraying unrealistic beauty and trends. Some of the traditional beauty standards are also implied in today's society like being pale and skinny. However, as time passes by, Chinese women have been wanting to become more and more skinny to an unhealthy extent. Social media Chinese influencers on platforms like Douyin and RED have also been constructing aesthetic norms of Chinese women. They often construct beauty standards in women like staying playful, young and innocent, while many other social media influencers construct an aesthetic standard mainly through its emphasis on body beauty, like the "thin waist", "butterfly back", "right-angled shoulders", "arm line" and "waist-to-hip ratio" are all expressions of thinness [6].

Through various posts, these influencers also display their trim waist, fat-free butterfly back, and attractively toned arm muscles as well as instructing viewers on how to get a similar desirable body type [6]. These influencers claim that exercise and dieting—without even consuming any staple meals for the first year—were the keys to their success in losing weight and achieving the body they have today after three years of dieting. When people see these kinds of words combined with the remarkable visual impact of these influencers' bodies, they are likely to associate them with the idea that they can get the same body with simple diet and physical activity [6]. In early 2016, a trend called the A4 waist challenge started with an advertisement for tea seed oil that featured a young woman passing the A4 challenge. This trend involved women uploading photos of themselves comparing their waist measurements to a vertical piece of A4 paper, which is only 21cm wide. This advertisement promoted a narrow beauty standard, where it would only be considered healthy if you passed this A4 waist challenge, soon later many Chinese actresses and models began this challenge on social media. This challenge soon raised concerns and debates among the population, a study that was done in 2021 showed that after this trend was promoted, more than 2000 Chinese undergraduate students began the action to lose weight. This study also showed that women with lower BMI are more aware and likely to take this challenge than women with higher BMI which means they may avoid attention from such depictions to protect self-esteem and reduce discomfort induced by comparing their appearance to that of thinner women [7]. Even though the advertisement showed the concept that having a skinny waist is healthy, findings showed that lower BMI and small waist circumference can actually raise risk for certain illnesses

like hip fractures, lung cancer, and mortality in some subgroups of women as well as serious medical consequences of unhealthy weight loss behaviours that can be caused by the thin ideal.

Later in the study, it was found that women who completed the A4 challenge reported fewer anxieties about being overweight and less pressure to lose weight from Chinese and Asian media, and fewer overall eating disorder symptoms than the women who didn't pass the challenge. This supports the study that when people feel like they don't match up to the thin body ideal promoted by society, they feel more pressure about their appearance and have more worries about how they look [8]. This concept of the thin ideal is not healthy and should not be heavily concerned by this many Chinese women. Studies have shown that this pressure to lose weight comes from both social norms and social networks, with one's social networks composed of family, friends, and acquaintances, as well as teasing and criticisms from social networks are especially crucial in creating negative emotions about one's body image and promoting dieting [9]. Therefore, they will need to develop powerful health messaging to lessen body image dissatisfaction and stop unhealthy weight-control practices among young women in China in order to normalize body images. Some researchers state that many of the thin ideal images and beauty standards in China come from western communities [10]. It has been predicted that exposure to Western media causes people to take on Western standards of beauty, which take priority over previously valued body ideals like plumpness in China. Assuming that these reports are true, Western appearance media could be considered a primary cause or risk factor for the rise in body image disorders among young Chinese women. Therefore, to prevent and minimize such concerns, treatments should focus on the media's portrayals of Western appearance.

There have also been several cases in China about women's serious health cases due to slimming obsession. There are news reported that a social media influencer in China, named Cuihua, posted her weight loss journey on Douyin, a Chinese version of TikTok. She signed up for several weight-loss programs in several locations to reach her goal of dropping 100 kg; but, in the two months that she trained, she died as a result of her intense schedule, which caused her to lose more than 27 kg (60 pounds) in a short amount of time. Specialists in eating disorders and sports nutrition suggest that when driven by a negative body image and carried to extremes, even seemingly beneficial habits like increasing exercise and dieting can be hazardous. In severe situations, the resulting problems may extend beyond mental health and result in serious physiological disorders affecting the kidneys, liver, heart, brain, and

other organs. Weight loss should not be taken that far to extend, it should maintain a healthy amount that the body can take. People in China should normalize healthy beauty standards and the normal weight for a body. Appropriate amounts of exercise and diet can lead to a healthy lifestyle, but excessive amounts can lead to side effects. Not only do the citizens have a thin ideal mindset, the fashion industry also does. In the recent years of reports, Chinese citizens have confessed that the clothing sizes have been getting smaller and smaller each year. This caused a huge wave online, since a woman who is on a strict diet and personal trainer can not even fit into large-sized clothing. In recent years, a noticeable trend has emerged in the fashion industry, particularly in women's clothing, where sizes are shrinking at unprecedented rates, popular fashion brands like Uniqlo, Gap, and Nike have also begun introducing a considerable number of extra-petite women's clothing items. Another beauty standard for women in China is also staying youthful, innocent and young. Women will not only stay young by getting injections and surgeries, but also using beauty filters. Photoshopping is very popular among girls who often post their pictures on social media. In the famous photoshop apps' behaviors research report have shown that the most popular features are face slimming, skin smoothening, eyes brightening, the addition of under-eyes furrows and face-shrinking, as well as stickers like kitten ears, bunny ears and kitten faces were most preferred among all types of stickers [11]. In The 2019 Meitu Annual Selfie Trend Data Report, 36.3 percent of users decided to change the contour of their face, 31.8 percent their nose, and 20 percent their eyes, it was shown in the report that they wanted to pursue naturalness and youthfulness [11]. It's known in China that appearance and beauty are very important because sometimes people get easily judged and discriminated against based on how they look. In the movie *The Truth About Beauty*, an unattractive girl named Vivi uses Photoshop to alter her ID photo so that she can apply for jobs even though her appearance would make her rejected otherwise. She drastically reduces the size of her face and enlarges her eyes, giving her a deformed, alien-like face. Undoubtedly, such a Photoshopped image is likewise rejected. In the end, Vivi only has a condition called body dysmorphic disorder after she sold her parents' Beijing quadrangle courtyard to pay for full-body cosmetic procedures. Even with its over-the-top narration, the movie nevertheless captures the popularity of little faces, large eyes, and naturalness [11].

3. Women's Role Influenced by Culture

In the traditional Chinese culture, the society was very

patriarchal, where men had more power than women and many people preferred sons over daughters. In old China, more than 90% of the women were illiterate, there was this old saying called that ignorance is a woman's virtue, which means that it is good if a woman doesn't have talent because it would mean that woman would be more obedient to men and less likely to protest [12]. Many marriages back then were completely arranged by their parents, husband and wife were only allowed to meet each other for the first time at the wedding, which caused many of them to not have a healthy marriage [12]. In the traditional Chinese society, women were considered submissive to men. In a multigenerational household, a typical Chinese patrilineal family carries out all-encompassing tasks to ensure food security, support the old and children, and, most importantly, carry on the male line. Regardless of the degree of intimacy between the husband and wife, the latter continued to feel alienated in her husband's parent's house, the wife remained an outsider in the home of her husband's parent. The division of labour in marriages is based on gender, where the wife works within the home and the husband works outside. Because of the male provider role and the male-dominated culture, men hold greater authority over financial resources and important family decisions than women [12]. Family patriarchy faced growing opposition in the early 20th century from feminist movements and several family reform initiatives, including numerous campaigns against foot binding, arranged marriage, and patriarchal cultures led by educated women and men, as well as the 1930 new-marriage codes that gave women equal rights to property, inheritance, and divorce. However, such an impact was minor and frequently restricted in the metropolitan region due to the absence of political, economic, and social backing from the greater society. The traditional family life for a Chinese woman meant suppressing her feelings, sacrificing all she could as well and listening to anything her husband would say. Back in the day, there was often this saying called *Zhongnan, Qingnv*, meaning that many people cared more about men and boys than girls and women, so often girls in households would be treated unequally compared to men and they always listen to their husband and mother-in-law. To restrict and tie women to the home and family life, women's education was also restricted by law, they couldn't go to school or work so they had to be very dependent on their husbands.

4. Women's Role Influenced by Modern Media

As society progresses, gender inequality among men and women starts to decline due to improved education and

technology. Women's main role isn't being able to pass down the family line and give birth anymore. As women got the education, they began to have their careers like men and were able to rely on themselves. Reports have shown that the fertility rate in China has been declining [13]. This may simply be due to that women are getting more and more independent; they don't need to rely on men anymore so they don't have to give birth to children. Many social media influencers on Chinese platforms like Douyin and RED have also explained why more and more women don't want kids anymore. First, women in modern society are more independent, and when taking care of children, it is always the women who do most of the work. Women in modern society pursue more independence, respect, equality, freedom, happiness, and personal values as well as different life experiences. Second, the standard of raising a child in modern society is different from the traditional way, it's not simply only getting food and clothing, but also education. Women believe that if you give birth to a child, you have to take responsibility for it, if he ends up wandering around the society that that would be very irresponsible. The process of raising a child is filled with challenges and uncertainties, under the pressure of modern society, many women aren't even sure about their futures so how can they be so sure they will successfully raise a child? Third, in modern society, men are usually more likely to be successful in workplaces than women, this is not because women are less intellectual or have less ability. It is because much of women are under the responsibility of giving birth, nurturing and giving education. If a woman has to raise a child, their ability to earn money would decrease since she has to put most of her time into raising a child. Men could help women financially and support the family, however, many men and women have different views of raising a child. Most men lean toward the idea of letting a child grow up naturally and let them experience themselves in society, become independent and strive in the future.

Different concepts of raising a child often cause a big problem in the family and may lead to divorce. When parents get divorced, the child often follows their mother, which gives the women more pressure. They have to earn money for their child and make sure their child has the education they need. Apart from that, family pressure is also something that women are scared of, many women in China often have to listen to their mothers-in-law and father-in-law. There have been a few cases where the mother-in-law would treat the women disrespectfully due to the traditional Chinese cultural preference over sons than daughters. Sons brought wives into the family home in traditional Chinese weddings, and daughters were married

off to live in the homes of their husbands. It was common for all women to share household responsibilities, and the husband's mother had complete authority over her daughter-in-law. Therefore, in modern society, women have the urge to marry and have a child because they've become independent and want more freedom. However, many women still face gender inequality issue in workplaces

5. Conclusion

According to the provided study, it argues that Chinese citizens should standardise body weights, types, and facial features. In Chinese culture, there exists a proverb that advises individuals to not dedicate excessive time to enhancing their appearance if they already possess sufficient beauty. In the past, individuals embraced their unique interpretations of beauty. However, contemporary society has witnessed a shift towards a standardised notion of beauty, leading many individuals to undergo extensive plastic surgery procedures in order to conform to this ideal. These procedures often involve alterations such as enhancing the nose bridge, achieving a V-shaped facial structure, attaining fair skin, and creating a double eyelid. There is a strong sense of uniformity where individuals appear indistinguishable, as if they have been replicated and duplicated. While external attractiveness holds significance, it becomes futile if devoid of inner beauty and values, rendering it akin to a mere decorative vase. An excessive pursuit of anything is always detrimental, and this applies to beauty as well. Individuals should prioritise self-improvement and the cultivation of their personal values before dedicating their remaining time and energy to enhancing their physical appearance. Chinese citizens have the potential to establish conventional beauty standards by means of films and social media.

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