

Chapter Title: Beyond Whiteness: Perspectives on the rise of the Pan-Asian Beauty Ideal

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Abstract

Constructions of beauty are inherently racialized and also reflect the values of their particular contexts. In this chapter we explore the racial basis and implications of the Pan-Asian beauty ideal. This ideal refers to a look that places particular emphasis on the face, rather than the body, and a distinctly 'Asian' white skin tone with characteristic blending of Asian and European facial features. Pursuit of this ideal, and its promotion by fashion magazines, modelling agencies and advertising has given rise to a significant market for beauty and cosmetic products and services that include skin whitening and cosmetic surgery. Reflecting shifting responses to Western influence as well as relationships among countries in the region and their relative economic and political power, the Pan-Asian ideal circulates in an economy of image production as a marker of global integration and cosmopolitanism. This is not to mean cosmopolitanism via association with the West, but rather via the strategic incorporation of European elements with a predominantly Asian look for the sake of appearing worldly. We contend that there are nuanced motivations and outcomes at play, intersecting with marketplace dynamics, cultural flows and Asian modernity that scholars are yet to fully consider.

Overview of chapter coverage: key points

- A 'Pan-Asian' beauty ideal is increasingly used to represent the 'face of Asia' and incorporates Asian and Western characteristics.
- Fairer skin is preferred in many Asian countries through the use of products that seek to enhance a uniquely Asian form of white skin that is Northeast-Asian influenced.

- Pursuit of the Pan-Asian beauty ideal has driven growth in cosmetic surgery specializing in modifying distinctly Asian facial features.
- Pan-Asian beauty ideals are not imitation of Western norms but reflect economic and political development, Asian modernity and transnational relations within the region.
- While the Pan-Asian beauty ideal promotes a distinctly 'Asian' look, it also acts to homogenize racial difference within the region.

Index-able Terms

Beauty industry

Asian identity

Pan-Asian

Cosmopolitan striving

Asian modernity

Skin whitening

East Asian imperialism

Facial surgery

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INTRODUCTION

Constructions of beauty are inherently racialized and also reflect the values of their particular contexts. In this chapter we explore the racial basis and implications of the Pan-Asian beauty ideal. This ideal refers to a look that places particular emphasis on the face (rather than the body) and a distinctly ‘Asian’ white skin tone with characteristic blending of Asian and European/Western features¹ (Frith, Shaw and Cheng 2005). Reflecting shifting responses to Western influence as well as power relationships among countries in Asia, the Pan-Asian ideal serves as a marker of global integration and cosmopolitanism. Pursuit of this ideal, and its promotion by fashion magazines, modeling agencies, and advertising have given rise to a significant market for beauty products and services ranging from skin whitening to cosmetic surgery.

We explore this phenomenon by tracing its origins, its changing symbolic capital, and its effects on the racial representations of beauty. We begin by outlining the intersection between beauty, race and the Pan-Asian look. We then discuss the scale of the beauty industry in Asia, particularly relating to skin whitening. We explain how preference for fair skin shifted over time—reflecting economic and political developments as well as contact with the West. We then discuss the significance of the cosmetic surgery industry, which is targeted towards modifying characteristically Asian facial features in line with the Pan-Asian look. We conclude by contending that the Pan-Asian beauty ideal promotes a distinctly ‘Asian’ look, which engages with global economic and information flows but also acts to homogenize racial difference within the region and reinforces superiority of Northeast Asia over Southeast Asia.

BEAUTY, RACE AND RISE OF THE PAN-ASIAN LOOK

U.S sociologist Maxine Craig (2006) contends that beauty is inherently organized around racial hierarchies which categorize groups of individuals as more or less “beautiful” depending on their distance with the norm. Drawing upon this perspective, we view beauty standards as an expression of racial power relations in a given cultural context. In Asia, where “race” is bound up with migration, indigeneity, diaspora, (post-)colonialism, and nation-building (Rocha et al. 2018), we further argue that beauty standards must be appreciated in the light of economic developments and transnational flows happening in the regions. In other words, exploring ideals of beauty in Asia enhances our ability to understand racial dynamics between Asia and the West as well as within the Asian region.

Much of the literature on beauty and race emphasizes how marketing representations of beauty privilege Western ideals of youth, slimness, and whiteness embodied in fair skin, eye color and hair texture (Hunter 2005). The historical domination of European and American brands in the

globalized beauty industry explains part of this phenomenon (Jones 2011). Increasingly, however, the economic power of Asian nations spearheaded through the advanced economies of Japan, South Korea and China (geographically referred to as Northeast Asia) has not only influenced the structure of the industry but also the way beauty ideals are marketed and visually represented.

In particular, much attention has been paid recently to people identified as mixed-race. Referred to as the “Pan-Asian look”, this trend values individuals who exhibit European features mixed with an Asian appearance:

“It’s called the pan-Asian face, and it usually means olive skin, black hair – and probably a Caucasian parent.” (Asian Sentinel 2007)

“Pan-Asian means Eurasian – models with a white ancestor in their family tree.” (The Straits Times 2012)

“The whole allure of pan-Asian faces has been the cross-over appeal. They have the Asian flavor with an international touch.” (China Daily 2007)

Transnational “Amerasian” actor and model Daniel Henney exemplifies this look (Ahn 2015). Born to an Irish American father and Korean American mother, Henney was featured on the cover of the Singapore publication *AugustMan* (March 2012) with the headline “*Daniel Henney Transcends Transnational Eastern and Western Boundaries and Roles.*” For media critics, his “exotic yet oriental look” embodies cosmopolitanism, elegance and high-class for Asian audiences (cited in Ahn 2015, p.940). Similarly, the organizers of 2012 Miss Singapore World prioritized the selection of Pan-Asian contestants. When asked about this decision, a spokesperson responded that this strategy aimed to increase their chance to find “*a girl who can win the international finals*” (The New Paper, 2012). Such a preference is also found amongst many brands, advertising and modeling agencies across the region. As stated by the head of Phantom, a leading Singaporean modeling agency: “*if [my clients] want to appear global then they use the Pan-Asian look*” (private interview). However, while he notes that this representation of cosmopolitanism undeniably incorporates European elements (“*sharper nose, slightly larger eyes*”), he insists on the fact that Pan-Asianism is not a mere imitation of Western ideals as Phantom’s Pan-Asian models are “*distinctly more Asian than Western.*”

Thus, over the past decade businesses and national institutions who participate in the economy of image production have reified and normalized the Pan-Asian look. What is less immediately discussed, however, is how this trend functions to conceal histories of marginalization and how it may in fact reproduce current inequalities among racial groups and countries within Asia (Matthews 2007). One of the Pan-Asian definitions above suggest a characteristic of olive skin which we note as a possibility of an acceptance of darker skin. However it is noteworthy that this occurs against a dominant skin whitening ideal rampant in both Northeast and Southeast Asia. While an olive skin suggests a yellow undertone, there is possibly also more than one meaning of olive depending on the cultural context similar to how ‘white’ is perceived in Asia. In the following sections, we discuss the valorization of fair or white skin and the minimization of distinctly ‘Asian’ facial features such as eyes and nose.

WHITE SKIN IN ASIA

“Reduce brown spots, reveal more brightness” Michelle Reis,² (L’Oréal White Perfect Deep Whitening Double Essence, 2011)

Skin is the “alpha and omega of racial difference” (Dixon Gottschild 2003, p. 190) and the most visible racial feature that signifies both ancestry and environment (Jablonski 2006). Modifications of the skin, then, seek to overtly or unconsciously alter racial elements. In formerly colonized Asian countries skin has become an important classifier of status and white skin, a marker of beauty (Hunter 2005, Mire 2001). This preference for lighter skin, also known as colorism, situates people along a social hierarchy organized around skin tone (Glenn 2008). White skin, accordingly, serves as a form of symbolic or racial capital that enhances a person’s life chances (Dhillon-Jamerson 2019, Vijaya 2019).

While beauty brands have capitalized on the high value placed on fair skin in most if not *all* Asian markets, skin whitening has become a ‘normal’ feature of many products ranging from facial washes to deodorants to body lotions. These products target the desire to preserve or enhance naturally fair skin as well as lightening darker or uneven skin tones. The skin whitening market is a multibillion-dollar industry with the largest size and growth in Asia (Tan 2012), especially Japan and China. It is the single largest product category within skincare and includes cleansers, toners, moisturizers, make up foundations, sunscreens, body lotions, even deodorants. The key players in this global market include Beiesdorf (Nivea), Unilever (Dove, Rexona, Vaseline, Ponds, Fair and Lovely), Shiseido, Procter & Gamble (Olay, SK-II), L’Oréal (L’Oréal, Garnier, Vichy, Lancôme, Skinceuticals), and Kao Corporation (Kanebo, Sensai). While these global players operate and market skin whitening products throughout Asia, local brands such as Wardah (Indonesia’s first halal skincare brand), Snowz (manufactured by a Thai company called Seoul Secret) and Laneige (owned by the South Korean AmorePacific Group) are gaining ground in various markets across the region. Simply put, almost *every* single brand of skincare operating in Asia regardless of region has a skin whitening range.

Nevertheless, there are multiple versions or tones of whiteness and its meaning varies greatly depending on context. More specifically, we argue that in Asia, the promotion of a particular white skin tone as part of the Pan-Asian ideal privileges some racial sub-groups (people of Northeast Asian origin encompassing Japan, South Korea and China) over others (people from South East Asia). In other words, while this trend signifies racial distinctiveness from a European white person, it also homogenizes and represses racial difference within Asia.

Although the current popularity of “white skin” is certainly influenced by market and cultural flows between Asia and the West, it is important to note that the white skin beauty ideal was present in Asia prior to Western colonization (Wagatsuma 1967). For example, in pre-modern Japan (prior to the 1860s) the nobility of both genders would use white lead powder on their faces. From the Meiji Restoration³ onwards (Ravina 2017), Japanese men and women started to imitate Western styles of dress and hairstyles (Wagatsuma 1967) so that by the early

twentieth century, the white face (still produced by white lead powder) and traditional attire became associated with special occasions, rather than everyday wear (Ashikari 2003, 2005; Li et al. 2008). Urban middle-class women started wearing lighter more translucent makeup but there were limits on the extent to which they could copy Western styles of dress, hairstyle, and make-up and still convey a gendered Japanese respectability. For instance, Japanese magazines contained advice aimed at helping women make fashion choices that clearly communicated their virtue and conformity to gender ideals in order to differentiate them from women of ‘dubious moral character’ who worked in bars or clubs (Ashikari 2003). Thus, while Western trends certainly influenced Japanese beauty ideals, it was far from straightforward imitation—rather Western ideals were adapted in such a way to express Japanese middle-class respectability, particularly for women.

The Japanese ideal of whiteness has long been “ivory-like skin that is ‘like a boiled egg’ – soft, white and smooth on the surface” (Market research firm Intage cited in Glenn 2008, p.293). Social Anthropologist Mikiko Ashikari (2003, 2005) shows how this version of whiteness expresses gendered and cultural values as well as racial identity. Studying the meanings that Japanese women attribute to skin tone, their skin care, and make-up practices, Ashikari’s results illustrate the marked preference for lighter, whiter skin, associated with northern Japan’s higher economic and social status. Those born with naturally lighter skin were seen as very fortunate. Yet whatever the shade, the objective is to preserve and enhance lightness through clothing (to protect the skin from the sun) and skin care. In particular, she notes that the wearing of foundation has a particular cultural significance. Foundation is not necessarily matching the natural skin tone of the individual. Rather it is applied to make the skin’s appearance reflect the right shade of Japanese whiteness and display ‘respect’ for others, including men. Furthermore, Ashikari demonstrates that the ideal of Japanese whiteness is clearly differentiated from both Southeast Asian darker skin tones and Western ‘whiteness.’ Japanese light skin is seen as far superior in both color and quality: it is fine, smooth, and unwrinkled, as opposed to European blotchiness, coarseness, and hairiness. As such, she argues that this ideal skin tone expresses a distinctly Japanese racial identity.

As a result, Japanese brands, notably Shiseido, have been at the forefront of the development of the skin whitening industry in Asia from the early 1990s. Later, European and American skincare companies such as Estee Lauder and L’Oréal entered the market. However, Japanese brands had a number of advantages in Asia. First, they could claim that their products were targeted at the ‘unique’ needs of Asian skin. Second, their products were associated with sophistication, success, and scientific legitimacy due to Japan’s historical economical domination in the region. Third, Japanese women’s centrality within the ideal Asian beauty fostered phenomenal growth and demand for Japanese products, especially amongst former Japanese colonies (e.g. China and South Korea) which had adopted similar beauty ideals to Japan. Nevertheless, the growing influence of South Korea has slightly shifted the power dynamics related to beauty standards and this is particularly evident in the second aspect of the Pan-Asian beauty ideal – the modification of racialized facial features.

THE PAN-ASIAN IDEAL AND FACIAL SURGERY

“...there is a Pan [Southeast] Asian beauty standard, which is white skin, big nose and non-oriental eyes even though almost no naturally born [Southeast] Asian that I know of would possess all of these without some sort of plastic surgery. (Comment posted on Quora, 2017)

The focus of the Pan-Asian look on the face extends to facial features. This idealization has stimulated growth in cosmetic surgery all over Asia, especially in South Korea. South Korea is often claimed to be the world’s leading country with regards to body and face modifications—although the largest market by consumption is still the United States (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012). Korean popular culture has been increasingly influential throughout Southeast Asia since the early 2000s. This began with the spread of Korean dramas, music, and associated celebrities through what is labeled as the ‘Korean wave’ or Hallyu (Shim 2006). The nascent boom of Korean cultural products from this period—in particular Korean drama series and later on K-pop music—made enormous inroads in both Northeast Asia (especially China) and Southeast Asia’s media outlets. Always featuring highly “attractive” actors and actresses, this wave diffused to all parts of Asia where the transnational influences can be observed in make-up trends, skincare practices, and cosmetic facial surgeries.

Cosmetic surgery is not unique to any part of Asia. However, the marketing of these surgical procedures is directed towards both highlighting and rectifying particular facial features that are commonly connected to Asian racial phenotypes. Beauty work that involves surgical procedures correcting ‘racial features’ includes blepharoplasty (double eyelid surgery) and rhinoplasty (nose surgery).

Pioneered in Japan, blepharoplasty has since spread to other Asian countries including China where it is now extremely common. Northeast Asian people do not typically have very ‘big eyes’ and surgeons in China claim the so-called ‘European’ style, characterized by a wide fold on the eyelid, was popular when the procedure first became known in China in the 1990s. It was later overtaken by the Korean style—“a natural-looking thin crease that is less noticeable” (Zhou 2017). Such a transition reflects the expanding influence of the Korean beauty industry on other markets.

In Southeast Asia though, European faces and bodies are often featured in the websites advertising plastic surgery practices. For example, a cosmetic surgery clinic in Indonesia, refers to the noses of ‘white people’ as the standard to emulate in relation to rhinoplasty:

According to experts in aesthetic surgery, the size of the ideal nose is proportional and in harmony with the shape and structure of each person’s face. Therefore, the desired nose of each person is not the same. Many want to enlarge or shrink it. But in general, until now a prominent nose common to white people is still used as a reference nose, so the races of Asia and Africa want more sharp nose surgery. (“Cosmetic Plastic Surgery” n.d.—emphasis added)

Another surgical advertisement in Singapore highlights the specific needs of Asian customers/patients:

The most common complaints in Asian patients are a flat nasal bridge, a round and bulbous tip, and a short, wide nose. Dr Huang uses advanced open rhinoplasty techniques involving the use of cartilage grafts for the nasal tip and silicone or Medpor

implants of the nasal bridge to create enhanced but natural looking noses (Asian Rhinoplasty n.d.)

In these contexts, certain typically Asian facial features (such as small eyes and a flat nose) are constructed as a racial deficit which can be corrected through surgery. As with skin whitening, the claim that Asian needs are unique creates the need for brands and experts that specialize in understanding and meeting these needs. While this can be interpreted as catering to an ‘ethnic market’ with specific needs, it can also be read as a form of racial engineering where facial features are corrected according to a seemingly Western and increasingly ‘Korean’ beauty ideal. This correction creates a new Pan-Asian norm that incorporates both European facial features and North-eastern Asian ideals of white skin.

This resonates with sociologist Kimberley Kay Hoang’s (2014) study on the beauty practices of Vietnam’s sex workers. These women, who are significant consumers in the beauty economy, engage in cosmetic surgery and other techniques of bodily alteration to achieve the Pan-Asian appearance. While the Pan-Asian face refers to the blend of European and Asian features, the focus and flavor always lies in “a specific East Asian ideal – round face, thinness and even, un-tanned skin tone”. In the words of one of Hoang’s (2014, p.522) informants: “In the past, everyone wanted to look Western, but that is old. Now, the new modern is Asian.”

This modern Asian face seems to be increasingly defined by a Korean beauty standard, with Vietnamese women looking towards Korea for the latest and most advanced beauty products, many sharing Anh Minh’s (one of the plastic surgeons cited in Hoang 2014, p.525) opinion that South Korea “has become the new France.” In Singapore too, the head of the modeling agency Phantom commented that the ‘Korean look’, with its “big round eyes” and “high bridged noses” are emulated by Singaporean women as a beauty ideal. This aspiration towards a Korean aesthetic, incorporate surgical modifications that reduce distinctly Asian features. A Pan-Asian face thus is a “distinct but indeterminate Asian look with some Caucasian-looking features, but the Asian heritage is more distinct than Caucasian” (Frith, Shaw and Cheng 2005, p.13). In summary, the Pan-Asian face which selectively mixes European traits and specific Northeast Asian features acts as a means by which a hegemonic beauty ideal is asserted that homogenizes racial differences within Asia.

CONCLUSION

Asia is neither homogenous geographically nor culturally. Asia’s development intersects with European and British colonialism as well as with Japanese occupation, modernity, and cultural flows. The diverse settings and races that make up ‘Asia’ are therefore complex with uneven economic, political, and cultural developments. Discussing ‘Asian beauty’ is therefore equally complex—as this singular designation undermines the diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and geographical contexts that vary between, for example, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. What is consistent in these contexts is the centralization and idolatry of white skin. This fascination with white skin, we argue, is not so much an emulation of the whiteness associated with European skin but rather a Pan-Asian ideal achieved and facilitated through skin whitening products. This formulation normalizes and privileges some Asian “races” (namely Northeast Asians) who are fairer than, for example, counterparts in Southeast Asia such as Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. This implies an inferiority of those Southeast

Asian “races” with darker skin, and entrenches a long-standing tradition of ‘developmental racism’ in Asia (Yue 2006), whereby the aesthetics of the Pan-Asian image are used and consumed at the expense (via occlusion) of the subaltern (darker) Asians in the region. Indeed, the aforementioned use of the Pan-Asian look acts to reinforce an entrenched racial hierarchy that places Northeast Asia at the top and Southeast Asia at the bottom. This complexity leads us to argue that Pan-Asian beauty ideals are increasingly used to deracialize differences among regions and diverse Asian ethnicities, which has both a homogenizing and a privileging effect on racial representations that circulate in the marketplace.

Our review of the literature shows the complex cultural background of the fair-skinned Pan-Asian ideal and how it encapsulates aspirations for modernization and upward mobility among less developed countries in the region. The evolution of a Pan-Asian beauty ideal has been influenced by Western norms yet is a distinct and preferred aesthetic that denotes a modern, globally focused Asia. While previous authors have argued that Western beauty norms have created a homogenized look that colonizes other cultures, here we have shown how the influence of the West is more nuanced and contested. Asian white skin is considered far superior to that of Europeans and a Pan-Asian look is the desired ideal. It is not that Western norms are entirely absent but rather that they have been interpreted and incorporated into a new aesthetic that reflects the Asian region. By tracing the evolution of the Pan-Asian look, and how preferences for skin tone and physical features have shifted over time, we have been able to shed light on some of the dynamics inherent in the relationships between race and beauty. There are many methods by which individuals, businesses, and nations can signal to others that they are globally integrated. One of them is through the types of faces and bodies used in visual representations. The Pan-Asian look is used by certain institutions as a living marker of global integration—emphasizing beauty-ideals anchored in certain racial phenotypes. The sense of cosmopolitanism visually represented by the Pan-Asian look, however, is not solely via association with the West but rather via the strategic incorporation of European elements with a predominantly Asian look for the sake of appearing worldly—in other words, as a flexible citizen (Ong 1999).

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¹ Terms such as Asia, Europe, the West, or the East are admittedly inadequate notions – especially when referring to a unitary racial feature or identity. We do not claim that there are homogeneous contexts or racial categories. Using these terms, our aim is to designate imaginary racialized and gendered constructs in formation.

² Michelle Reis is a Hong Kong actress of a Portuguese and Shanghainese descent, with a distinctively Pan-Asian look.

³ The Meiji Restoration refers to a period when military rule was ended by restoring Emperors to the throne. This occurred in response to Japan's first contact with the West after many centuries of being closed-off to foreigners.