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# The Search for the Beautiful Woman: A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty by Cho Kyo

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**Kyo, Cho. *The Search for the Beautiful Woman: A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty*. Translated by Kyoko Iriye Selden. Lanham, Maryland, Rowan and Littlefield, 2012. Xiii + 287 pages. Hardcover, \$49.95.**

This is an English translation of a work written in Japanese for a Japanese readership. It is evident that the author, intercultural relations specialist Cho Kyo, appreciates the process of translation on many levels. His credits to individuals and institutions for their work on the translation are more than perfunctory. Typical of the East Asian manner, the author says of the primary translator “I was deeply touched by her thoughtfulness and politeness” (p. xii). The author’s etiquette is matched by his scholarly thoroughness.

The histories of Japan and China are intimately intertwined. The modern Japanese are the ethnic descendants of Chinese who invaded the Japanese islands over two thousand years ago and pushed the decimated aboriginal population, the Ainu, into the far north of the archipelago. The foundations of Japanese culture, including the aesthetics of beauty, are Chinese. In 1839, European influence in East Asia reached an apogee with the British invasion known as the Opium Wars. From that point onward, the military, economic, political, and eventually the cultural power of the West has had enormous influence in Asia.

One historical difference that the present volume cites is that the standards of beauty in the West have remained quite constant from ancient Greece and Rome to the present, while the standards of beauty in China and Japan have changed dramatically. This affords scholars a dynamic tableau of data to apply to theories of what creates the cultural experience we call beauty. The Duchess of Windsor, Wallis Simpson, who married the abdicated King of England in 1937, is credited with saying “You cannot be too rich or too thin.” This is an enduring feature of the inextricability of Western standards of beauty and social standing. The present volume chronicles and categorizes the many ways that high social standing and its economic foundations in wealth and power have structured the standards of beauty in East Asia. Historically, the subjects of Chinese and Japanese artistic renderings were almost entirely aristocrats, so it is their images that capture the standards of beauty of their day. Powerful individuals such as empresses and ladies of the imperial courts were seen as models for the contemporary aesthetic. The aristocratic female exhibited specific features, such as skin tone, eye size and shape, eyebrows, lip color, hairstyle, leg length, body shape and even proportions of head-to-body. The oft-cited practice of foot binding shaped the female foot into a form that both pragmatically and symbolically signified her functional disqualification from labor.

Probably the most visible feature of the Western influence on East Asian standards of beauty is the fixation on the double eyelid. Atypical in East Asia, the double eyelid actually appeared as a desirable feature as evidenced in a painting titled *Female Immortals* from the Ming period, which ended in 1644 CE. Other examples include female slenderness, as opposed to more robust somatotypes. This trait was favored in China and Japan for ages before it was favored in the West, but when the slender “flapper” came into style in the West, it was quickly adopted in East Asia. The present volume contains a telling figure, an illustration from a *Ladies Pocket Notebook* from 1927, which depicts a woman in traditional kimono alongside a flapper and speaks to the acceptance of these parallel standards and even the interchangeability of these styles for Japanese women.

This volume is notable for its scholarly detail and fortuitously for Western readers, the many figures that graphically illustrate the elements of the standards of beauty under discussion. It affirms the idea that beauty is code for culture, including the values of established and rising

power. When power is established, such as the power the West has had in relatively recent history over the East, the standards of beauty of the latter reflected their vision of the former. What remains to be seen is whether the current economic shift of power from West to East will bring about a shift in Western standards of beauty.

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