

DUKE UNIVERSITY
Durham, North Carolina

Beautiful White: An Illumination of Asian Skin-Whitening Culture

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April 2013

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& Visual and Media Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation with Distinction

Program in Visual and Media Studies & International Comparative Studies
Trinity College of Arts and Sciences

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Abstract

This paper uses Taiwanese and Chinese skin-whitening beauty products as a lens through which to study how globalization and the Japanese post-colonial context has influenced the nuanced East and West hybridization of skin-whitening beauty practices in primarily Culturally Chinese cosmopolitan cities such as Taipei, Taiwan. Applying Koichi Iwabuchi's notion of transculturation, I examine the exchanges between producers of skin-whitening cosmetics and their consumers. In particular, I analyze Taiwanese and Chinese fashion and beauty magazines to examine how ads for skin-whitening cosmetics align with the local, historical context of East Asia and appeal to members of the "Culturally Chinese" diaspora. Multinational cosmetic brands advertise their skin-whitening product lines to the "Culturally Chinese" consumer market in multiple ways. I investigate some common skin-whitening marketing motifs to see how marketers renegotiate common symbols and their conventionally signified meanings to create new sign circuits that influence female consumers and redefine Culturally Chinese ideals of beauty.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following institutes and programs which provided me with funding for research travel: the Asian/Pacific Studies Institute at Duke University, which awarded me a Janet Chiang Grant; and the ICS Program's Scott Lee Stephenson Memorial Fund. These awards enabled me to travel to Taipei, Taiwan, and Beijing, China in Mid-October to interview marketing experts, conduct research focus groups, and procure magazines and other advertisement materials for my thesis. I would also like to recognize Gennifer Weisenfeld, my Visual and Media Studies honors thesis advisor, and Cheri Ross, my International Comparative Studies thesis capstone professor, for their insightful guidance and immense support throughout my thesis-writing process.

I would also like to thank Theresa Chao and Stella Tung for being my main contacts in Beijing and Taipei, respectively. Thank you so much for your warm hospitality and selfless acts to help me establish connections with my research subjects and marketing experts.

Lastly, I would like to recognize my family – in particular, my mother, Eugenia Wu Pan, for their everlasting love and support for me to pursue my aspirations and life goals. Thank you for assisting me with Chinese translations, being my sounding board, and helping me develop the agency to challenge myself with confidence.

Introduction

In the United States, young women go to great lengths to achieve a sun-kissed glow all over their bodies. They apply tanning oils while on the beach to absorb more of the sun's rays, dust bronzer over areas of the body which would "naturally" get more tan, and even subject themselves to the dangerous rays emitted by tanning beds to achieve a relatively new Western ideal of beauty that equates tanned skin with healthfulness and an active outdoor lifestyle.

Across the Pacific, another type of beauty ideal captivates young East Asian women. These women obsessively protect themselves from the sun, doing everything from using umbrellas "with UV300 protection" on sunny days to wearing gloves in the summertime, in order to maintain a pale skin color on their hands. Their cosmetic product of choice? Sunblock and skin-whitening creams and therapies. Walk into any grocery store or pharmacy and over 80% of the lotion and cream products will have some chemicals that, when applied on the skin as a daily regimen, will not only protect your skin from sun damage, but physically lighten the skin tone as well. Some of these women's faces are so devoid of their skin's naturally colored pigmentation to the point that it is noticeably unnatural looking, especially in conjunction with their made-up wide eyes and highlighted and bleached hair.



Figure 1. Woman in the Yashow Market elevator, Beijing, China, October 19, 2013.
Source: photograph by author.

White skin has traditionally been associated with higher social status and wealth in Asia – women of higher class did not have to work outside in the fields and be subjected to the sun’s harsh rays, preserving the natural paleness of their skin. Modern East Asian women are constantly battered with an array of messages to “get white.” Nearly all facial and body lotions sold in China and Taiwan contain chemicals that lighten the skin. These skin-whitening creams, known as 美白 (pin ying: *mei bai*), are popular cosmetic products used by “Culturally Chinese” women to achieve the socially constructed notion of beauty.

My thesis focuses on the demographic of East Asian women, particularly those who live in Taiwan or identify as Taiwanese and consider themselves a part of “Cultural China.”¹ Katherine Tolland Frith notes that Tu Wei-ming, an author in her edited volume *Advertising in Asia*, emphasizes the difference between the terms “Greater China” and “Cultural China.” Tu uses “Greater China” to refer to the geographic region consisting of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and “Cultural China” to describe individuals in the Chinese diaspora, a “geographically diverse group” sharing a common set of cultural values.² I believe this terminology most fittingly encompasses the unique psychographics that tie this large demographic of East Asian skin-whitening users together. I also use some statistics and analysis of the mainland Chinese beauty market. The Chinese and Taiwanese markets are not one in the same, yet they are inextricably linked. I use these statistics to emphasize the scale of this burgeoning market in the area as a whole.

Arriving in Taiwan, I quickly realized how evolved the skin-whitening industry has become. Skin-whitening products are not only their own skincare regimen (with corresponding cleanser, exfoliator, and cream), but are now incorporated into many emerging makeup regimens as well, including anti-aging and UV protection products for more “comprehensive” skincare. When I was interviewing focus group participants, they immediately asked, “What do you mean by skin-whitening? How do you define it?” In my thesis, I am concerned only with products that explicitly utilize the term “美白” (*mei bai*, skin-whitening) in either the product name or product description.³ Within these parameters,

¹ Katherine Toland Frith, ed. *Advertising in Asia: Communication, Culture, and Consumption*. (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1996), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ It is commonplace for cosmetic companies to make a skincare line that specifically focuses on skin-whitening. Though the product name itself is (for example) Shiseido White Lucent Facial Cleanser and does not specifically have 美白 in its name, it is still part of the Shiseido White Lucent skin-whitening line. This skincare line information is often found in product descriptions.

there are skin-whitening products and skincare regimens that include ingestible pills, injections, intravenous treatment, creams, and cosmetics. This thesis will focus predominantly on the latter type of skin-whitening practice, creams and cosmetics, and the ways in which these products are marketed to consumers. While I was originally planning to focus my research on both Taiwan and mainland China, during a research trip, I have found more relevant and globalized developments in the Taiwanese cosmetics industry and society in general, due to unique economic, political, and geographic factors. Many Taiwanese Culturally Chinese women now view the practice of putting on makeup and skin-whitening creams as an easy way to improve their bodily image, and as a result, their self-identity and destiny. Taiwan's continuation and proliferation of skin-whitening stems from a confluence of historical East Asian beauty aesthetics, object symbolism, influences stemming from Japanese colonial rule, and a freer, capitalistic economy.

Since the Chinese economic boom started in the new millennium, the region's beauty industry has skyrocketed. In 2004, *The Economist* stated, "fading social controls and cultural traditions combined with rising urban incomes are fuelling a boom in China's beauty business."⁴ In 2008, total cosmetic sales in China were about 96 billion yuan, or about 12 billion U.S. dollars.⁵ There were approximately 100 million cosmetic users in China in 2010, and the number is expected to grow rapidly.⁶ Bernstein Research published a 2010 report on the China beauty market that noted its current worth of \$12.5 billion (7% share of the global beauty market). Skincare was found to be the largest subcategory,

⁴ The Economist. "China's beauty business: Saving face." *The Economist*. <http://www.economist.com/node/2910161> (accessed March 16, 2013).

⁵ Karen A. Newman. "Rebuilding in Double Time." *GCIMagazine.com*. <http://www.gcimagazine.com/business/management/27907734.html?page=4> (accessed March 16, 2013).

⁶ Institute for International Studies and Training. "Road to Success and the Shiseido Approach." *IIST WORLD FORUM*. http://www.iist.or.jp/wf/magazine/0762/0762_E.html (accessed March 16, 2013).

accounting for approximately 70% of the total value of the market.⁷ These staggering figures show that from an economic perspective, the skin-whitening industry in East Asia is a market to be taken seriously.

Global cosmetic companies that have launched skin-whitening products in Greater China have created a nuanced paradigm shift of the beauty ideals in Cultural China: instead of simply striving to maintain their natural skin tone by shielding themselves from the sun's rays, Culturally Chinese women now continually consume and subscribe to a *mei bai* lifestyle to cosmetically and physically alter their skin to a lighter, whiter skin tone. This shift is seen in the way these companies market their products to Culturally Chinese consumers through culturally specific semiotic messaging and the proliferation of do-it-yourself skin-whitening YouTube videos as well as magazine and blog articles on attaining unnatural, whiter skin.

Society has now normalized the modified body. This normalization has profound implications that beckon academic study. However, the beauty industry is often portrayed in scholarly circles in two very polarizing representations. Some academics view it as a type of capitalistic waste that is superficial, exuberant, and unworthy of scholarly research. Another faction critiques the lack of female agency in the reception and interpretation of the industry messages, seeing all cosmetics consumers as living in a "false consciousness" cycle of continual lack and desire. The beauty industry, particularly in East Asian markets such as Taiwan, is still an understudied area in Western academia. For over two years, I have done extensive research, looking at Chinese and Taiwanese publications specifically pertaining to Chinese and Taiwanese beauty, femininity, and skin-whitening culture, and I have found

⁷ Katie Nichol. "P&G and Estée Lauder will outperform Avon in China." *Cosmetics Design North America*. <http://www.cosmeticsdesign.com/Business-Financial/P-G-and-Estee-Lauder-will-outperform-Avon-in-China-report> (accessed March 16, 2013).

few relevant secondary sources. By examining their skin-whitening beauty practices, I seek to illuminate how Culturally Chinese females subscribe to a larger body modification trend to become “white,” or “with Caucasian features.”

Studies of the beauty industry and culture generally reduce arguments to two categories: the feminist critique of the male gaze (Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 1991) or some variation of the Western imperialism argument that generally utilizes a top-down worldview where predominantly developed, Western nations impose their economic will and culture on less developed nations.⁸ Literature on this topic in the past has also often focused on women living in Western cultures, such as Black Americans or the female homemaker (Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 1998).⁹ Mark Tungate’s 2011 *Branded Beauty* is a relatively new book that looks closely at the history of beauty practices, the rise of consumer cosmetics, and the marketing approaches cosmetic companies use to advertise their products to specific clientele. He touches briefly on how companies are trying to cultivate Asia’s beauty culture and cosmetic consumption practices. However, I believe more is at work in the case of Culturally Chinese skin-whitening practices and seek to show the different facets that I believe are influencing the phenomena.

There is an established academic field on Japanese beauty aesthetics and beauty culture that I have turned to for inspiration, similarities, and best practices, especially because the Culturally Chinese beauty culture is very much influenced by its Japanese counterpart. I base my analysis on Bryan Turner and Zheng Yangwen’s introduction to their edited book, *The Body in Asia* and Laura Miller’s *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary*

⁸ See Wallerstein (1974), Young (2001), and Saïd (1978).

⁹ Kathy Peiss’s 1998 seminal American beauty culture book *Hope in a Jar* examines how minority women in America use cosmetics to appear more “American.” Her work informs my emphasis on the role cosmetics has had on defining and marking social classes.

Japanese Body Aesthetics to explain the overarching East Asian beliefs and beauty practices. Junko Ishiguro's article, "Westernized Body or Japanized Western Body: The Desirable Female Body in Contemporary Japanese Women's Magazines" in *The Body in Asia* provides a valuable consideration of what elements have carried over from Japan to the more recent Culturally Chinese beauty culture.

I also rely on many newspaper and online news reports from sources such as *The New York Times*, ChinaDaily.com.cn, and *BusinessWeek* for the latest reports and statistics on the trend. Elodie Pakosz's 2008 film *Beauty in China* and Films Media Group's 2004 *Taboo: Body Perfect* also helped me contextualize skin-whitening practices within the much larger and complex beauty practice of body modification. Aside from these recent feature stories and documentaries on East Asian skin-whitening practices, there is relatively little Western research on Culturally Chinese beauty practices. This is where I hope to contribute to the field.

I will apply a range of critical theories to analyze this cultural phenomenon, including semiotic theory and how society can impose its values onto a signified, thus making the signifier a cultural byproduct; Adorno's thoughts on the culture industry; and Tungate's argument on how marketing changes the way we view ourselves. I also include marketing theory and strategies in my analysis of how cosmetic companies are able to create and capture the desire of the Chinese in my discussion on globalization and its effects on identity construction. I would like to create a dialogue between these theories and Chinese history, thought, and culture to understand the evolution of normalized ideals of feminine beauty throughout Chinese history. By viewing the Chinese use of skin-whitening creams through this lens, a newer, more relevant negotiated reading of these various theories shows how global ideals and commodities are adapted in local contexts.

In this thesis, I explore the Taiwanese skin-whitening phenomena in three parts based on the way skin-whitening creams are produced and consumed. In the first chapter, I contextualize modern day skin-whitening culture within the larger, Culturally Chinese beauty culture history. Then, I discuss in depth the current skin-whitening and beauty industry economies in Taiwan and show how the history of Japanese colonialism has set the foundation for Taiwanese success in the global marketplace. Japanese occupation has culturally influenced Taiwanese people well into the post-colonial period, especially in regard to reinforcing a widespread inter-Asian belief that there is differentiation not only between Asians and Caucasians, but also between different Asian ethnicities. Citizen consumers compare themselves to an Asian ethnicity color spectrum and purchase products that associate them with “whiter” and more advanced East Asian countries. I will show the widespread appeal of Japanese skin-whitening products in other pan-Asian markets by using Iwabuchi’s concepts of “transculturation,” “cultural odorlessness,” and “cultural discount.” Further countering established concepts, I will describe how Asian skin-whitening challenges traditional understandings of “looking,” such as the male gaze and fetishism.

Chapter Two focuses on the common symbolism and techniques used by marketers to sell skin-whitening products. This repertoire includes the creation of the faux-science of cosmetology, reconfiguring what is “normal” and “natural,” and creating new sign circuits for many common objects and concepts such as pearls, milk, snow, white and lightness. I will incorporate a multiplicity of skin-whitening advertisements and illuminate for readers how marketers manipulate consumers through print media advertising. This section unequivocally demonstrates how marketers are able to hide behind the safety of commodity fetishism to sell these products to consumers.

Lastly, the third chapter emphasizes the varying levels of agency women exert through the practice of beauty culture. In this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which multimedia environments such as cosmetic company websites and self-made YouTube Do-It-Yourself (DIY) tutorials evoke varying levels of intimacy to support consumer-viewers during their beauty transformation process. I also examine how some skin whitening users are subjected to fake skin-whitening products and the growing movement, both corporate and grassroots, for Culturally Chinese women to appreciate their own natural bodies.

For my thesis research, I traveled to Taipei, Taiwan and Beijing, China from October 12, 2012 to October 21, 2012, where I conducted field research. I first went to Taipei, Taiwan and met with cosmetics company marketing executives and employees to discuss the business side of the skin-whitening industry; I also interviewed younger consumers of skin-whitening products. I talked to many beauty consultants to learn the scripts they use to sell to potential customers, and to hear their general observations of their clientele, all within my IRB Protocol parameters.¹⁰ During the Beijing leg of my trip, I hosted a gathering of sixteen, predominantly Taiwanese, expatriate women and some of their husbands for a focus group discussion. These focus group subjects were affiliated with the International School of Beijing, where a contact of mine worked. I questioned the women on their overall historical perceptions of Chinese/Taiwanese beauty and their perception of cosmetics companies. The female subjects all identified themselves as users of some sort of skin-whitening product in their beauty regimen. After dinner, I asked the six husbands in

¹⁰ All research subjects consented to the interview process, either by filling out a physical consent form sheet and a corresponding photo release form or by typing out their name and date in the first page of the online survey before proceeding to the set of questions, as written in my Duke University IRB Protocol [B0102] *From Pale to White: Chinese Female Use of Skin-whitening Creams*. I will be incorporating these subject interviews into my thesis in the form of anecdotes to support my arguments.

attendance to ask their perception of skin-whitening and what attributes men considered to be beautiful and desirable in a woman.

Cumulatively, I gathered over forty beauty and fashion magazines, cosmetic pamphlets and books with specific sections related to skin-whitening creams and practices. These rich, recent visual and cultural primary sources are my main source for visual analysis of skin-whitening advertisements and marketing. I deconstruct these visual objects to show how they attempt to influence the consumer's psyche. The inherent symbolism and framing of these visual elements not only about skin-whitening products, but also the way society constructs and represents itself. These analyses predominate in my second chapter. Using beauty and fashion magazines is a legitimate medium for analysis because they provide a visible marker of economic transactions between consumers and producers, crafted to appeal to a large, specific segment of the market that producers believe will purchase their products.

I acknowledge that this analysis is a selective view of a particular moment in time, but it does represent a larger phenomenon. The number of magazine cover photos, content, advertisements, skin-whitening brand websites, short commercials, and do-it-yourself videos that have the term skin-whitening (美白 *mei bai*) associated with them are seemingly endless. These store brochures, magazines, billboards and other multimedia materials reveal narratives and concepts that provide a foundation for broader analysis and further study. With these observations and possible future examinations of other facets of beauty culture, one must remember that consumers have and exert agency in their purchasing decisions. The same care and understanding must be applied to statements made by interviewed consumers as well.

Cosmetic use highlights the important role transnational corporations and mass media have in creating and spreading dominant global ideologies. I use skin-whitening as a case study to look at how globalization and the post-colonial context have “glocalized” Asian beauty culture in Taiwan. Even as “Culturally Chinese” societies have become more modern and advanced with women working in office jobs, chatting on cell phones, and enjoying more expendable income to purchase commodities in an increasingly capitalistic society, certain traditional ideals remain. Grubow asserts that China’s modern culture is fascinating because “today, particularly in the cities, [China] is hurtling toward modernity, but China’s ancient culture is interwoven into its steps forward.”¹¹ Interweaving and negotiation are reflected throughout modern Chinese society—and for my purposes, clearly evident in contemporary ideals of Asian beauty.

¹¹ Liz Grubow. "Marketing Matters: Chinese Culture and its Effect on Skin Care Trends in China." *GCIMagazine.com*. <http://www.gcimagazine.com/marketstrends/regions/asiapacific/27912439.html> (accessed March 16, 2013).

Chapter One: The Dissemination of a Globalized Beauty Culture

Throughout history, skin tone has consistently been seen as a physical marker of difference, of distinction. The female beauty ideal of pale skin is canonical throughout many different world cultures. Greek female skin was expected to have “surpassing pallor” and uniform complexion. Romans utilized ceruse, white lead, on their faces to achieve this beauty ideal, even though they understood the pigment to be toxic: it literally gave them a deathly pallor. Portraits of women during the Middle Ages depict the “realistic ravages of lead poisoning” to which women subjected themselves in order to maintain the white ideal.¹² The ideal of pale skin continues today, even among women with dark complexions. Some African-American women have their own special “skin lightening” practices, betraying ideals that the “Black is Beautiful” cultural movement tried to reframe in the minds of young African-American women. These efforts seem ironic in the face of the contemporary culture where Caucasian women, who are considered to be the dominant, hegemonic females of the world, covet darker skin and use spray tans and tanning booths to become tanner.

These skin-recoloring practices—whether they involve lightening or darkening—share an underlying premise: women’s desire for higher social status. Women’s skin color can be seen as a physical marker of economic status. If a woman has social and economic agency, she is able to conform more closely to her culture’s beauty ideals. This is a general truth. However, unique historical, economic and political forces create nuanced differences in every society’s beauty culture.

¹² Mark Tungate. *Branded Beauty: How Marketing Changed the Way We Look*. (Philadelphia, PA: Kogan Page, 2011), 14.

Context is particularly important in considering the longstanding and continual skin-whitening practices of the “Culturally Chinese” Taiwanese female demographic. The demographic must negotiate among historically Chinese beauty norms compounded by Japanese imperialist influences in a capitalist economy where Taiwanese trade is highly coveted by Western companies. Skin-whitening presents an illuminating case study of the ways globalization and post-colonialism have “glocalized” Culturally Chinese beauty culture. This chapter will examine the historical, economic and political forces that have reinvigorated the skin-whitening culture in Culturally Chinese societies.

Historical Notions of Beauty in Chinese Culture

In Eastern Asia, the longstanding dominant belief is that pale, white skin indicates success and high status. “Dating back to ancient culture, pale, even skin implied a dainty and fragile quality that was associated with beauty, as well as the implication of a higher social stature” for the Chinese.¹³ Why? Until thirty years ago, China was a strictly agrarian society with the vast majority of its large population working in the fields. The ruling class stayed indoors conducting business and enjoying leisure, and thus was less exposed to the sun’s darkening rays. One’s skin tone became an indicator of status within the Chinese empire, and the ruling class’s light skin has been coveted ever since. Paintings from the period confirm the skin-tone distinction the Chinese made between commoners and the elite. In a portrait of Empress Wu Zetian, the only female ever to hold the Imperial Court’s throne, her face is represented as pale as the white pearls that adorn her headdress (Figure Two).

¹³ Grubow, “Marketing Matters.”



Figure 2. Portrait of Empress Wu.

Source: National Museum of Chinese History, comp., A Journey into China's Antiquity, vol. 3 (Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers, 1997), 50.

The unknown painter purposefully used white paint to detail Empress Wu's face to ensure that his illustration of her beauty and status would stand the test of time, since the painter knew that the medium, either rice paper or silk, would darken over time.

Though Wu Zetian's reign from 690-705 A.D. was much earlier than the first major contact the Chinese had with Westerners, in artistic representations the imperial family and intellectuals were already portrayed with incredibly pale skin. Later phases of Chinese history intensified this ancient appreciation of pale skin. According to Fuller, the Chinese were fascinated by the novelty of "lighter-skinned conquerors, from the Mongols from Central Asia to later traders and colonizers from Europe" and Japan.¹⁴ Over time, these interactions have naturalized the association of more developed societies with

¹⁴ Thomas Fuller. "A Vision of Pale Beauty Carries Risks for Asia's Women." *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/world/asia/14thailand.html> (accessed March 16, 2013)..

“Westernization” to the Culturally Chinese. The Chinese marveled at these foreigners who came to trade and in some cases, aggressively attempted to conquer the Middle Kingdom. Contrary to the West’s current dominant hegemonic belief that tan is the sign of health and youth, the Chinese have inherited from their history an admiration for the pallor of Europeans visitors who tried to exert their influence on the Middle Kingdom.

Chinese women face another outside factor that reinforces the indigenous ideal of pale skin: modern Western culture. Over recent years, media reports have emphasized the rise in China and Taiwan’s economic power and the Western belief that these nations are only able to imitate, not innovate. Such a belief endorses the West’s cultural power, which many believe the Culturally Chinese would like to emulate. According to Asian American studies scholar Glen Mimura, skin-whitening “seems tied primarily to colonial history, a fascination with whiteness.”¹⁵ The indigenous standard for attractiveness was overhauled, according to Fuller, by “waves of lighter-skinned conquerors, the Mongols from Central Asia and colonizers from Europe.”¹⁶

This Chinese projection onto the pale-skinned outsiders who came to visit their country is a type of curious Occidentalism where Western bodies were fetishized. This fascination with the foreign and unfamiliar maps onto another familiar perception linked to economic and social status. According to anthropologist Nestor Castro, “There is a universal pattern in humanity that says that the more different you are from the common, the more you are beautiful.”¹⁷ Members of the Imperial Court, of course, were a small fraction of the Chinese population who the everyday Chinese woman would not have

¹⁵ Jia-Rui Chong. "Beauty and the Bleach." *Los Angeles Times*. <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/la-me-beautybleach26jul26,0,1505432.story> (accessed March 16, 2013).

¹⁶ Fuller. "A Vision of Pale Beauty Carries Risks for Asia's Women."

¹⁷ "Asia's Obsession with White Skin Leaves a Black Mark." *Asian Pacific Post*.

www.asianpacificpost.com/portal2/ff8080810b1faf95010b2498f44a01b7_Asian_white_skin.do.html (accessed November 18, 2010).

normally encountered. So too were the foreigners who came into the secluded Middle Kingdom. The general population considered lighter, whiter-skinned people, whether nobles or Europeans, were considered a fascinating novelty because of their minimal encounters. In modern times, everyday Taiwanese women still do not encounter “different” looking “outsiders” (外国人, *wai guo ren*) everyday. These physically different looking people are still considered a novelty that companies knowingly use to attract customers’ attention.

Eastern and Western-based cosmetic companies are able to morph their brands and advertisements to be easily adapt racial and ethnic markers, highlighting these associations to appeal to customers. Multinational cosmetic companies may choose to use Caucasian models, who have become commodified in Culturally Chinese advertisements at large to sell high-end luxury goods because of this historical fascination with Otherness and the “exotic West.” Companies may also choose to use specific East Asian celebrities or models to better “relate” to consumers. Other scholars and I have observed that East Asians believe that there is a sort of inherent ethnic differentiation that impacts a group’s perceived attractiveness, successfulness, and ultimately, position in the pan-Asian social hierarchy.¹⁸ Solomon Leong, professor of English at the City University of Hong Kong, surveyed educated people from Hong Kong and asked them about their thoughts on skin-whitening advertisements. He found that skin tone is perceived as a normalized, non-problematic form of social classification.¹⁹ His focus groups, similar to mine, were able to clearly establish a type of “Scale of Whiteness” that matches the different class and status of “different ‘races’ to their skin colours and tones.”²⁰ On this whiteness “scale,” “Japanese and Northern

¹⁸ Solomon Leong, “Who’s the fairest of them all? Television ads for skin-whitening cosmetics in Hong Kong.” *Asia Ethnicity*, 7:2, 167-181.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Chinese women generally have the ‘whitest’ skin and enjoy high status. Other Asian women, such as Filipinas and Indonesians, were described as ‘coarse’ and ‘not elegant enough’ because they have darker skin.”²¹ Leong’s subjects, similar to my focus group participants, placed Southeast Asian women lower on the scale than Northern Asian women, based on their perceptions of “darker people” predominantly from the media.²² Therefore, when Asian models are used in skin-whitening advertisements, they are pale in complexion and most likely widely known celebrities or models of “Northern Asian” descent. Bryan Turner and Zheng Yanwen, the editors of *The Body in Asia*, posit that “the process of globalization changes cultural values – possibly bringing about a certain standardization of cultures – then the different forms of embodiment are weakened and national distinctiveness is eroded.”²³ Though the models found in Culturally Chinese skin-whitening advertisements are a hybrid mix of both Caucasian and Asian females, these Asian models have specific features that have been adopted from Caucasian beauty culture and superimposed onto Asian bodies as the beauty ideal such as large eyes with eyelid folds, straight white teeth and matte skin. These features are further enhanced with post-photographic production imaging software like Adobe Photoshop. Specific examples of how companies utilize country of origin, ethnicity, and celebrity will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

Though traditionally women utilize cosmetics to be more attractive to male suitors, the male subjects that I interviewed (husbands of the Beijing focus group women) strongly believe that women utilize skin-whitening creams purely for themselves and their egos. For the interviewed Chinese and Taiwanese men, they claim to not immediately look at a woman’s facial complexion and depending on its fairness to determine whether she is

²¹ Leong, “Who’s the fairest of them all?,” 172.

²² Ibid., 175.

²³ Bryan Turner and Zheng Yangwen, ed. “Introduction,” *The Body in Asia*. Asia Pacific Studies, vol. 3. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009),14.

attractive or not. They insist that they take the female's overall figure and her personality into consideration when judging beauty. Mr. Xihua Zhao proposed that since women were self-selecting these beauty practices and making it sort of a competition among themselves to have white skin, that more attractive women would practice skin-whitening regimens and have lighter skin. There is a correlation between pale-skinned women and male attraction, but according to Mr. Zhao, male attraction is not the cause of women utilizing skin-whitening creams.

Mr. Zhao's insights suggest that though the gaze has traditionally been constructed to be from the viewpoint of the dominant male, skin-whitening beauty advertisements in Taiwan and China may have a different form of gaze at work. Laura Mulvey describes scopophilia as the derived pleasure from the mere act of looking.²⁴ Since the cosmetics advertisements are geared to the female consumer, a type of "intra-gender" gaze is at work where females are looking at female subjects in these types of advertisements and identify themselves in relation to that female in a non-sexual manner. Though the intra-gender gaze encourages the viewer to be a type of voyeur, the viewer does not see the other woman in a sexual, homoerotic way. Western, Caucasian models are the only distinguishable Other seen in Chinese advertisements.²⁵ This statement holds especially true for advertisements made by the country's beauty and fashion industry. The Chinese have culturally stereotyped the Western woman as successful and independent. In China, the Caucasian Other's presence in advertisements signifies prestige and quality. Therefore, the Chinese viewer appropriates the cosmetic products that are hyper-connected and related to the visual representations of the Caucasian models to buy consumer goods that aid the model to

²⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

²⁵ Perry Johansson. "Consuming the Other: The Fetish of the Western Woman in Chinese Advertising and Popular Culture." *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy* 2, no. 3 (1999): 377-388. <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/10.1080/13688799989661> (accessed March 16, 2013).

become successful. Based on the cultural contexts of Taiwan and China that emphasize modesty and respect, as well as my interviews with consumer subjects, female adoption of the traditional male gaze does not apply in this unique context of a female cosmetics consumer.

Admiration for the pale skin ideal is thus a deeply embedded feature of Chinese culture. The Chinese have even come up with common phrases that describe how white skin is the ideal, and how bad dark skin is perceived to be. When I asked men and women in my focus group settings what are some common characteristics or phrases to describe beautiful women, they would all start off with some specific physical features, like “bright eyes” and “white skin” before saying, “you know, like that term, ‘white, fortuitous, beautiful! That is the standard for female beauty” (白富美, *bai fu mei*.) Another common phrase is, “一白遮百丑” (*yi bai zhe bai chou*) which translates to “one white can cover up a hundred uglinesses.” This means that being pale can easily cover up personality faults or social mishaps. This phrase is commonly used, and it has led many females to believe that if they have white skin, they will be considered pretty and coveted by males. Pale skin has turned into an aspect of the female anatomy that women try to perfect for the male gaze. This desire is not to be confused with the concept of the intra-gender gaze, which women use to view themselves against other women. Here, women view themselves in an objective manner, as they believe (a dominant male) society views them. White skin not only makes other physical “deficiencies” seemingly invisible, but also covers up many character flaws as well. White skin provides a woman with more privilege than darker skin.

Today, in Culturally Chinese society, many females believe that if they have dark skin, they have failed.²⁶ Their negative self-perceptions are exacerbated by interaction with society, evidenced by less praise and acknowledgement by others and an increase in derogatory terms. Dark-skinned females are sometimes called “dark fried rice” or “little piece of coal.”²⁷ As translated from a blog post on Baidu.com titled, “Who says a white covers a hundred ugly,” commenter Hao Jian writes how when he was in school, “If the girls got in trouble [and they had] black skin, we would give the girls a bunch of indecent nicknames, such as: small briquettes, soy sauce, fried rice and the like, sounds like the name for this type of pigmentation is very powerful.”²⁸ These girls were considered “the Other” in Chinese society. The Other, in visual studies, is described as the symbolic binary opposite of the dominant subject category in a distinct culture. In this context, the Other is disempowered and viewed as being “marked.” In China, the Other is physically marked as being inferior by their visible dark skin. This distinction can be clearly seen through numerous autobiographical accounts. In Lijia Zang’s *Socialism is Great*, she writes:

I have often been called a ‘peasant girl.’ Even my sister sometimes calls me a peasant girl. I don’t think my father liked me very much because I was not a pretty child. I was dark, and I remember he said to me repeatedly that I was not their natural daughter. They picked me up from a coal dump, which was why my skin was so dark.²⁹

²⁶ Yao, Yuan. Interview by author. Personal interview. Duke University, November 3, 2010.

²⁷ Hao, Jian. “Who says white can cover a hundred uglinesses?,” Hao Jian Baidu, entry posted November 23, 2005, <http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=zh-CN&tl=en&u=http%3A%2F%2Ftieba.baidu.com%2Ff%3Fkz%3D67288959> (accessed March 16, 2013).

²⁸ Hao, “Who says white can cover a hundred uglinesses?”

²⁹ Public Radio International. “Skin-whitening big business in Asia.” *PRI: Public Radio International*. <http://www.pri.org/world/asia/skin-whitening-big-business-asia.html> (accessed March 16, 2013).

Zang's tanned skin is associated with the darkness of a lump of coal. She is perceived to be part of the working class, though her family is literate and well educated. She is thus associated with a disempowered member of Chinese society. Similarly, Nelly Wong's poem, "When I Was Growing Up," states, "when I was growing up, my sisters with fair skin got praised/for their beauty."³⁰ Wong describes how looking at her life retrospectively, she always desired to be white, both physically and socially. She lacked a sense of belonging and confidence that those with paler skin were privileged to have.

This constant negative reinforcement has made some Chinese women push to extremes. In an attempt to look "literate, educated, cultured, refined"³¹ ("斯斯文文" *si si wen wen*), women have established meticulous, often overzealous beauty routines to maintain and "enhance" their appearances to unnatural levels leads not only to bodily harm but also emotional dependency on cosmetics.

Normalizing Consumerism

Multinational companies are extremely interested in penetrating the formerly reclusive East Asian markets where many Culturally Chinese are eagerly trying to show off their new purchasing power. Over the past few decades, these multinational companies have cultivated a refined, thriving, and socially embraced beauty culture in an area where fifty years ago, practicing beauty regimens was seen as vain and decadent.

Now, it is commonplace for women to spend a significant amount of their time and income to treat themselves to beauty products and regimens, even if it takes away a significant portion of their monthly salary. The price of the so-called "essentials" for a skin-

³⁰ Nellie Wong, "When I Was Growing Up." In *The Oxford Book of Women's Writing in the United States*, eds. Linda Martin and Cathy N. Davidson. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1995), 297-295.

³¹ Yao, personal interview.

whitening regimen sold by a luxury brand averages from New Taiwan dollars (NT\$) 14,000 – 28,000 dollars (around US\$300) for a two- or three-month supply. Thus, in about one year, a Taiwanese skin-whitening consumer spends over one thousand US dollars on just one component of her beauty practices. What motivates her to continue buying goods? The culture industry and commodity fetishism. The culture industry is a critical theoretical term coined by German social critic Theodor Adorno that describes how mass media are used to make society not only passive and docile, but also susceptible to false psychological desires that can only be “satisfied” by consuming commodities.³² These commodities are emptied of the meaning of their production and filled instead with abstract meaning through advertising, a process of mystification between what things are and how they appear.³³ For the modern Taiwanese woman, “searching for a style of self-expression is not only a desire, but a routine necessity to maintain status.”³⁴

The rise of beauty culture and cosmetic consumption is a sign of a region’s economic growth. The whitening cosmetics industry is booming in East Asia as countries are earning higher wages and having more disposable income to spend on commodities. According to a 2007 Nielsen consumer report entitled “Health, Beauty and Personal Grooming” that surveyed forty-six markets, 85% of the global populace do not invest in skin lightening, but the rest that do are highly concentrated in Asia, where 30% of Chinese use skin lightening products either daily or weekly, followed by 20% of Taiwanese, and 18% of Japanese and

³² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception." In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 120-167. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972. Put first name, last name.

³³ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001),

³⁴ James Tsao. "Advertising in Taiwan: Sociopolitical Changes and Multinational Impact." In *Advertising in Asia: Communication, Culture, and Consumption*, ed. Katherine T. Frith, 103-124 (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1996), 107.

Hong Kong consumers.³⁵ Furthermore, a 2004 international market research report conducted by Industry Canada states that “In Taiwan, whitening products accounted for as much as thirty-five percent of cosmetic store sales.”³⁶ This is such a lucrative industry that there are over sixty global companies competing for a piece of Asia’s market, an estimated value of \$18 billion dollars.³⁷ In 2006, sixty-two skin-whitening products were introduced in supermarkets or pharmacies across the Asia-Pacific region (*Asian Pacific Post*), accelerating a trend that has seen an average of 56 new products introduced annually over the past four years.³⁸ The availability of so many “quick” remedies that can potentially transform an everyday Culturally Chinese woman into a woman of worth has reinvigorated the traditional practice of skin-whitening.

Taiwan is considered the “center of the action” in the “Greater China” advertising field.³⁹ Even as Taiwan was recovering from the worldwide recession, it was projected that the Taiwanese cosmetic market was expected to grow 10% to NT\$110 billion (US\$3.67 billion) in 2011.⁴⁰ According to James Tsao, the chair of the advertising department at Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Public Communications, Taiwan has unique social, political, and economical factors that make it a lucrative place to do business.⁴¹ From 1895 to 1945, Japan ruled over a colonized Taiwan. During the 1920s, Taiwanese society

³⁵ Johanna Poblete. "For the Fairest." *BusinessWorld Weekender*, www.bworldonline.com/Weekender080108/main.php?id=focus2 (accessed November 18, 2010).

³⁶ Katherine Reedy. "Ads Pressure Hong Kong Women to Whiten Up." *Women's eNews*. <http://www.womensenews.org/story/cultural-trendspopular-culture/090212/ads-pressure-hong-kong-women-whiten> (accessed March 16, 2013).

³⁷ Public Radio International. "Skin-whitening big business in Asia."

³⁸ Fuller, "A Vision of Pale Beauty Carries Risks for Asia's Women."

³⁹ Tsao, "Advertising in Taiwan: Sociopolitical Changes and Multinational Impact," 103.

⁴⁰ Judy Li. "Value of Taiwan’s Cosmetic Market expected to Grow to NT\$110B." China Economic News Service. http://news.cens.com/cens/html/en/news/news_inner_36925.html (accessed April 9, 2013). It is interesting to see evidence that many of these consumers are actually Chinese women on leisure, now that Chinese citizens are able to easily travel to Taiwan starting in late 2011.

⁴¹ Tsao cites “improved living standards, deregulated media policy, Western marketing concepts, internationalized trading relations, dynamic cultural values and sophisticated consumer markets” as a few aspects of modern Taiwanese society that has made it an advertising forerunner. Tsao, “Advertising in Taiwan,” 103.

experienced “drastic changes” because of the Japanese government’s popularization of nationalism and democracy and standardization of Taiwanese currency to the Japanese Empire’s monetary system.⁴² The Japanese government also promoted the industrialization of Taiwan. These events helped modernize the Taiwanese economy to make it much more economically advanced than other Greater China states when the country was returned to the People’s Republic of China after World War Two. Over time, Taiwanese culture has produced a unique hybrid of Japanese colonial-imposed culture and traditional Chinese culture, resulting in today’s dynamic society.

Though Japan formally handed Taiwan back to the People’s Republic of China after World War Two, cultural diffusion still occurred between the two island-nations. After World War Two, Japanese society started “interpreting and then consuming a ‘white Western/American aesthetic’ image of women in a Japanese context,” which eventually led to the modern, hybridized Japanese woman that incorporates the “imaginary Western female body into the Japanese body.”⁴³ This hybridized Japanese female body consists of bodily features typically found on Caucasian women; long legs, hairless skin, enlarged breasts, big eyes, pale skin, but with a Japanese face.⁴⁴ Western features were “indigenized” into the Japanese body and then “naturalized” by magazines. Japanese beauty and fashion magazines are hot sellers at bookstores and magazine stands in Taiwan and many other areas where the Culturally Chinese inhabit. Thus, based on this extra step of transculturation and cultural diffusion, the Culturally Chinese are not only negotiating

⁴² "Historical Background—The Japanese Colonial Era (1895 AD-1945 AD)." Taiwan Government Entry Point. <http://www.taiwan.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=37235&CtNode=2232&mp=13> (accessed March 17, 2013).

⁴³ Junko Ishiguro, “Westernized Body or Japanized Western Body: The Desirable Female Body in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Magazines” in *The Body in Asia*, Bryan Turner and Zhang Yangwen, eds. Asian Pacific Studies, vol. 3. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 97. Cited examples include: (Cope, 2007; Martinez, 1998; Morton, 2003; Richie, 2005; Schilling; 1997).

⁴⁴ Laura Miller. *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

through their own interactions with the West and Japan, but also with Japan's synergetic relationship with the West as well.

Smith describes how Taiwanese cultural exchanges can be distinguished as either "accommodation" or "displacement."⁴⁵ Currently, the Taiwanese simultaneously "accommodate" Western and Japanese cultural practices such as consumption and communication while other Western practices "displace" traditional Taiwanese customs and values. This is especially true for the modern woman's role in Taiwanese family and society. In 1996, 45% of Taiwanese women were part of the workforce.⁴⁶ This trend is becoming normalized as more teenagers work part-time to earn spending money and in total, contributing US\$154 million to the Taiwanese consumer market just in 1996.⁴⁷ Advertising has created a zealous, image-conscious new generation of female Taiwanese consumers.

According to Sandy Cheng, Elizabeth Arden's Taiwan Branch Sales and Marketing Director, Taiwanese women are more willing to try new skin-whitening products and methods than mainland Chinese women.⁴⁸ Over fifty percent of Taiwanese females have encountered and utilized one type of skin-whitening product. Taiwan is a very competitive skin-whitening market. For cosmetic companies to gain exposure to the public, they invest heavily in television advertisements, printing, and newspaper/weekly advertisements. Cosmetic companies are also utilizing social media as a powerful tool to reinforce socially constructed beauty practices and consumer culture. Companies also utilize international and local celebrity figures to promote their skin-whitening products. One of the more

⁴⁵ Smith, 1992 in Tsao, "Advertising in Taiwan," 106.

⁴⁶ Tsao, "Advertising in Taiwan," 107.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁸ Sandy Cheng. Interview by author. Personal interview. Elizabeth Arden Taiwan HQ, Taipei, Taiwan, October 15, 2012.

popular and effective advertising approaches used by cosmetic companies to attract customers is by placing advertisements in beauty magazines. These print and online campaigns help draw consumers out to the department store cosmetic counters.

Skin-whitening products feature prominently in Taiwan's luxury cosmetics market. Foreign luxury brands are found all over high-end malls and shopping complexes in China and Taiwan's large cities. In Taipei, the Eslite Mall in the commercial Xinyi District is directly connected to the Taipei Metropolitan Rapid Transit System Taipei City Hall subway station. One cannot avoid commercialism even in transit. After emerging from the connection tunnel area filled with foreign eateries and specialty Japanese udon restaurants, one quickly sees the Eslite mall, structured like a flagship Macy's store in Manhattan. Large department stores in Taiwan and China all exhibit the same layout as those found in the West: most importantly, the whole first floor of these gigantic shopping complexes is strictly devoted to cosmetic counters. Inside, all of the well-known multi-national cosmetic companies are represented including Dior, Chanel, Shiseido, Shu Uemura, SK-II and Kanebo. Each of these counters has at least one skincare line specifically for skin-whitening.

The intensification of cosmetic consumption in Taiwan and China can be correlated directly with the rise in female income. Skin-whitening cosmetic consumption is another sign of Cultural China's emerging middle class and the social pressures faced by women trying to enter the professional work force. Initially, the start-up costs of purchasing these products may be considered relatively high for these new capitalistic consumers: young women who are not yet employed feel pressure to start lightening their skin in order to get a job. The competition for work is fierce: at career fairs, hundreds of women line up to apply for positions. Author Lijia Zang goes on to say, "So for some women, even those who don't think white is particularly beautiful, but in order to go far in a career, in order to attract a

good boyfriend, they try to put on whitening cream.”⁴⁹ The cosmetics industry has successfully created a need for its product. “There will always be a market for whitening. The mass market products are targeted to the aspirational customer whereas the premium products will market a privilege,” said Reena Rodrigo, marketing director of Mary Kay, Inc, Philippines.⁵⁰ Female cosmetic consumption is an economic marker of success, status and leisure. The practice highlights the important role transnational corporations and mass media play in creating and spreading dominant global ideologies.

A long-standing Culturally Chinese beauty ideal, pale skin, is transformed when it encounters Western consumer culture. Beauty ideologies are conflated, becoming a hybridized whole. Transculturation,⁵¹ a term coined by Japanese media and cultural studies professor Koichi Iwabuchi, recognizes that asymmetrical encounters occur between various cultures; this imbalance transforms the original artifact and creates a new adaptation. Skin-whitening beauty creams sold by Western cosmetic brands take their place alongside contact lenses and cosmetic applications to emulate “round eyes,” and even plastic surgeries to create eye folds, strong jaws, and longer legs: these are the technologies that display the transculturated adaptation of a beauty ideal. At the same time, and in the opposite direction, we see a refraction from the Asian beauty market: skin-whitening technology is now being integrated into Western beauty products such as anti-aging skin “correctors.”⁵²

Transculturation is further supported by Iwabuchi’s concept of cultural discount. Cultural discount describes a phenomenon where a product established and extremely

⁴⁹ Public Radio International. "Skin-whitening big business in Asia."

⁵⁰ Poblete, "For the Fairest."

⁵¹ Koichi Iwabuchi. "Taking "Japanization" seriously: Cultural globalization reconsidered." In *Recentring globalization: popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*, 23-50. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

⁵² “Correctors” mitigate dark age spots and uneven skin tone, using much of the same chemical composition as skin-whitening creams. However, they are packaged in smaller quantities and are used to correct small areas instead of the whole face.

saturated in its home cultural environment faces diminished appeal to people from other cultures due to differences in taste and values.⁵³ Cultural discount aptly describes the experience of some of the best-selling skincare lines sold by international cosmetic giants. These companies derive profit from products that help Western women, their primary market, achieve a golden, bronzed complexion. When these companies decided to enter the Chinese market, they quickly learned that local perceptions of beauty equated darker skin with ugliness. Their bronzing lines, were they to try to market them in Cultural China, would be subjected to a severe cultural discount. Companies such as Proctor & Gamble, Estée Lauder and Shiseido established research centers in mainland China to gain unique, contextual consumer insights, which led them to create skin-whitening products and other Culturally Chinese-relevant cosmetics. News releases by these companies suggest that their market competitors, through their own research centers in China, are also becoming aware of Chinese consumer preferences.

Cultural discount is also at work when Western-based beauty and fashion magazines have adapted their magazine content, structure and advertising to attract local Culturally Chinese preferences. Chinese and Taiwanese women are attuned to the latest looks from European runways, in part because of beauty and fashion magazine saturation. Publications such as *Marie Claire*, *Vogue*, and *Elle* display these trends in their glossy pages, along with suggestions for lower priced and available alternatives to fit local markets. These magazines typically advertise and thereby derive profit from promoting products that help Western women, their primary market, achieve a golden, sun-kissed complexion. When Western magazine media conglomerates decided to enter the Chinese market, they quickly learned that local perceptions of beauty equated darker skin with ugliness. Their tanning

⁵³ Iwabuchi, "Taking "Japanization" seriously," 26-27.

and bronzing product placements and feature articles would be subject to a severe cultural discount. Following this glocalizing trend, international style magazines have adapted and publish articles and advertisements promoting global name-brand products with messaging and visual elements specifically designed to appeal to local markets. Cosmetic advertisers create complex malleable metaphoric systems to persuade women to buy skin-whitening products. Analyzing cosmetic ads in the context of the larger media, social, and cultural landscapes can help us understand how marketers aim to entice Chinese and Taiwanese women to buy their products to achieve the new white ideal.

Chapter Two: Crafting and Appealing to Local Cultural Preferences

Many Culturally Chinese beauty magazines now take on framing styles similar to Western beauty magazines. They feature a posed celebrity as the feature of an issue's main article, oftentimes superimposed in front of the magazine's name at the top, with special features framed along the outline of the celebrity's body. This formatting can only be done through the manipulation of the digital images on a computer. Design applications such as Adobe Photoshop also have the ability to radically alter the original image, and make the consumer public believe in a false "truth" that this is what the celebrity really looks like, thus creating a distorted perception of the healthy, natural Asian body. These magazine companies are inherently reinforcing the influential power of global cosmetic companies because these media sources generate most of their revenue from advertisement accounts.

It cannot be emphasized enough that there are monetary and temporal cost factors associated with launching these skin-whitening marketing campaigns. The creative directors in the advertising agencies that produce these marketing campaigns may not have enough time or resources to look critically at the way they craft their advertisements. They may not even care about the ethics of advertising because it is profitable. Simply put, they want to meet deadlines and bring a regular paycheck home.

In this chapter, I will examine the methods advertisers and brand managers utilize to compel viewers to become consumers of their specific product. I will examine five specific symbolic motifs: pearls, milk, snow, light, and the color white. Compared to linguistic metaphors, these non-textual visual symbols, embedded in advertisements found in Culturally Chinese beauty and fashion magazines, resonate with the viewer at a deeper,

more primal level of association. I will also present a set of cross-cultural corporate case studies of Japanese cosmetics giant Shiseido and the Western-based companies Proctor & Gamble and Estée Lauder to emphasize the long-lasting and forceful ways that Japanese colonialism has shaped Taiwanese beauty culture and purchasing practices. Ultimately, these analyses will illustrate the multidirectional approaches marketers use to coax viewers to become consumers.

Below the Surface: The Science of Skin-Whitening

Skin-whitening is the practice of using artificially created chemical substances to physically lighten one's skin tone by reducing the concentration of the primary determinant of skin color, melanin. The brown-black pigments are found in melanocytes, skin cells found on the bottom layer of the skin's epidermis. The pigments are derived from tyrosine, an amino acid that plays an integral role in the photosynthesis process to convert light energy into chemical energy for use within the body. Differences in skin color are due to the melanocyte's activity levels, which are regulated by the body's hormones. The common active ingredients found in skin-whitening creams are hydroquinone and kojic acid. These chemical compounds lighten the skin by prohibiting melanocyte activity. Many global beauty care and cosmetics companies outsource their chemical compound manufacturing processes to third-party contractors in China and East Asia, including the production of hydroquinone and kojic acid for skin-whitening creams. This outsourcing practice has helped stimulate the economy and increase consumer purchasing power.

There are two main approaches that global cosmetics companies utilize to advertise to their Taiwanese consumers: a scientific approach and a symbolic approach. The scientific approach is a modernist way of framing skin-whitening products to users, utilizing the

constructed field of “cosmetology” to “expertly” explain the physical mechanics of skin-whitening products. These types of advertisements extensively utilize simplistic, abstract computer generated shapes and images to convey the overly-simplified-turned-fake cosmetology “science” that describes how these products work underneath the skin to produce “beautiful” white skin. Skin pigments are not simply little black or dark brown dots that are stuck underneath the skin as represented in many skin-whitening product print information brochures. Melanin, the primary determinant of skin color, is a derivative of tyrosine, a natural amino acid. Melanogenesis, the process of increased melanin production due to primarily UVB exposure and damage, is actually a skin protectant mechanism that absorbs the harmful UV radiation and transforms it into energy within the body. When a salesperson at the cosmetics counter is asked to describe the science behind a skin-whitening product, s/he will most likely produce an informational brochure on the skincare line that includes images similar to this Shu Uemura Whiteefficient brochure image:

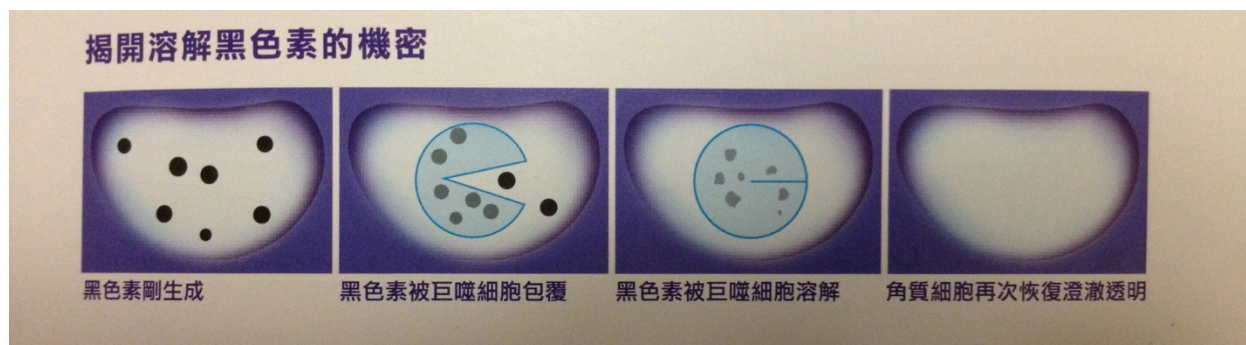


Figure 3. Diagram featured in skin-whitening line pamphlet.
Source: 2012 Shu Uemura Taiwan Whiteefficient pamphlet, p. 2.

Shu Uemura marketers have simplified a singular human cell to be a pinto-bean shaped blob with dark spots that represent the black pigmented melanin. Their Whiteefficient product is portrayed as a Pac-Man-like object that eats up the black particles, cleaning out the human skin cell.

Below is an actual microscope view of a biopsy of the human skin that the cosmetics salesperson does not present:

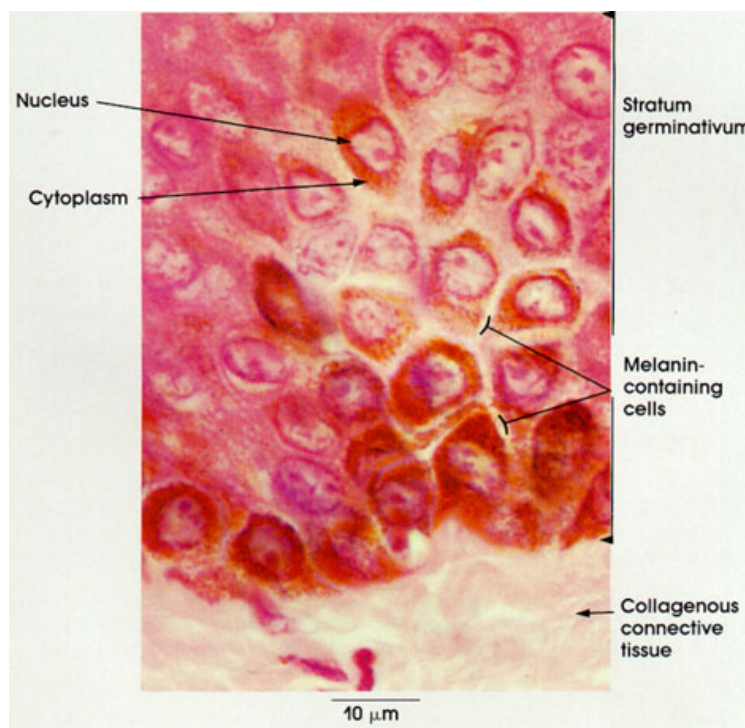


Figure 4. Enlarged plate sample of skin tissue layers.

Source: Ronald A. Bergman, Ph.D., Adel K. Afifi, M.D., Paul M. Heidger, Jr., Ph.D. "Plate 1.11: Melanin," *Anatomy Atlases*,

<http://www.anatomyatlases.org/MicroscopicAnatomy/Section01/Plate0111.shtml>

(accessed March 18, 2013).

This image shows how these melanin-containing cells are located in the bottom layer of the epidermis section of the skin, an anchoring point for the outer skin to the rest of the inner flesh. In order for topical skin-whitening creams to reach this layer, they must penetrate past the four outermost layers of skin. Each layer's thickness is equated to be roughly the thickness of a single sheet of paper. Though four sheets of paper stacked together seems relatively small to the human eye, viewing this on a microscopic level highlights the impressive journey that these chemical compounds take to make their attack against the melanin. It also shows what the Shu Uemura depiction lacks: how human skin cells comprise many different structures critical to healthy cell function. These skin-

whitening chemical compounds penetrate our body's largest natural defense mechanism, the skin: an excellent example of society's traumatic means of achieving aesthetic beauty ideals. However, the average consumer is not aware of this trauma's extent because of the ability of advertised symbols and messaging to spin the process in a positive light as a revitalizing, corrective practice.

The creation of the cosmetology field is one way to dissuade the consumer from these negative perceptions. Cosmetology, the "professional" skill of "beautifying" the face, hair and skin, appropriates the ideals of objectivity and scientificity to quantify, explain, and sell socially constructed ideals of beauty.⁵⁴ Empirical scientific research creates these complex, patent-protected formulas, which are all tested to pass governmental standards. These chemical compounds are often formulated first for other purposes and then appropriated for cosmetic purposes. Kojic acid, a derivative of a Japanese fungus, was originally used predominantly in the production of sake, Japanese rice wine, preventing enzymatic browning to preserve sake's desirable transparent coloring.⁵⁵ Cosmetic companies quickly adapted this chemical compound in skin-whitening formulas for its lucrative correcting properties. They do not emphasize that kojic acid is a preservative because consumers have a negative connotation of preservatives and the harmful effects of such chemicals. Instead, companies emphasize how kojic acid is "naturally" found in sake. Marketers are also able to simplify and spin the consumer's perspective of skin-whitening products with visuals that mystify the production process of skin-whitening products.

⁵⁴ Appropriation describes the purposeful "borrowing" of one cultural object to be used in another context without any regard to the original circumstances.

⁵⁵ George A. Burdock, Madhusudan G. Soni, Ioana G. Carabin, "Evaluation of Health Aspects of Kojic Acid in Food," *Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology*, Volume 33, Issue 1, February 2001, Pages 80-101, ISSN 0273-2300, 10.1006/rtph.2000.1442.

(<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0273230000914429>)

The amount of time and effort put into creating Chanel's Le Blanc skin-whitening line is hidden in their promotional skin-whitening line brochure. The fifth page describes the company's trademarked TXC skin-whitening method.

TXC™ (傳明酸十六烷基酯)
美白科技大突破

美白保養領域歷經九年革新研究成果。
抑制肌膚形成黑色素的一項重要科技突破。

香奈兒的美白機制

肌膚表皮的整體壓力

表皮層

角質細胞

黑色素細胞

刺激素

前列腺素E2

MSH

SCF

PGE2

ET1

幹細胞因子

內皮素

真皮層

主要調控因子

黑色素細胞

TXC™作用

黑色素顆粒體成熟週期

- 持續12小時的黑色素擊退效果*。
- 藉著啟動於肌膚裡的天然美白作用，使膚色均勻、亮澤。
- 精準地作用於造成黑色素過度生成的六種因子。
- 最佳的肌膚耐受度。

*體外測試

Figure 5. "Explanation" of the TXC™ ingredient.
Source: 2012 Chanel Le Blanc Taiwan pamphlet, p. 5.

This predominantly greyscale image shows a “sunbolt” striking and penetrating deep into the skin, where all of these skin cell bubbles are “activated.” Small white circular lines draw these MSH, SCF, PGE2, and ET1 compounds to the “most important deduction adjustment factor,” MITF. This is the site in the viewer’s underlying skin cells where a previously normal ivory oval bubble would turn into a dark oval bubble. This image obviously does not accurately show consumers the complex photochemical reactions that occur during melanogenesis. However, since the major barrier consumers face is getting information about products they intend to buy, advertisers and cosmetic companies have re-packaged science down to simple shapes as symbols and diagrams for consumers to “understand” and therefore, trust because they can easily grasp these watered down ideas.

Many Chinese also buy into the popular, globally normalized myth about the correlation of consuming symbolic objects that will result in physical, bodily changes. For example, pregnant women are advised not to drink too much chocolate milk, fearing that consumption of this drink will result in dark-skinned children.⁵⁶ This is mostly due to the nation’s tradition of using holistic therapies and herbal medicines in “miraculously” curing illnesses and diseases since the beginning of Chinese civilization. Even today, the Chinese will often try to use traditional herbal remedies before or in conjunction with Western medications. Therefore, blogs and magazine articles featuring at-home skin-whitening remedies with everyday natural objects with no scientific backing supporting their efficacy are all tempting Chinese women to try these methods. Multinational cosmetic companies adopt normalized mythical symbols from the realm of familiar objects in their advertising to help persuade Chinese consumers to select a company’s specific product over its competitors offering similar products. In the next section I will focus my analysis on five of

⁵⁶ Solomon Leong. "Who's the fairest of them all?," 167.

the common symbolic motifs presented in skin-whitening advertisements to show how marketers are able to manipulate the signifier and its signified meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure presents the concept of the signifier as the form of a sign and its signified as the signifier's meaning. Collectively, they are part of a sign circuit. Five symbolic motifs will be analyzed: pearls, milk, snow, light, and the color white.⁵⁷ These motifs not only have common universal symbolic significance, but also have Chinese and Asian culturally specific significance as well.

Pearls as Strength and Power

The pearl is a metaphor for perfection and enlightenment since dragons, the symbol for the emperor (also known as the Dragon King), are often seen in ancient visual culture chasing pearls.⁵⁸ Pearls, globally appreciated objects of beauty, are hard objects produced within the soft tissue of a living aquatic mollusk. Though pearls are seen to be “perfection,” the pearl is formed inside of the mollusk as a defensive mechanism to combat the violent trauma of having a foreign piece of material become lodged in the mollusk's delicate interior. When this object penetrates the interior, the mollusk coats the object with substances to create a protective barrier inside the mollusk to prevent any further damage. Over time, deposits build up around the foreign threat that creates the spherical, lustrous pearl. To harvest the pearl, one must go through a laborious process of collecting the mollusk and shucking the rough, barnacled shell that harbors the pure, luminous gem within. This process can be related to the object itself by creating a binary between the dirty, rough

⁵⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure presents the concept of the signifier as the form of a sign and its signified as the signifier's meaning. Collectively, they are part of a sign circuit.

⁵⁸ Scott Cunningham. *Cunningham's Encyclopedia of Crystal, Gem & Metal Magic*. St. Paul, MN, U.S.A.: Llewellyn Publications, 1988), 135. Leong, “Who's the fairest of them all?,” 167.

outside shell of the oyster, symbolizing imperfection, and the smooth, round pearl found on the mantle of the oyster, symbolizing perfection. This creation process can be seen as a parallel to the reconstruction of the Chinese female face using the skin-whitening cream product: transforming “dirty” skin from within with whitening agents that are able to trap and eliminate these skin-whitening particles.

The abstract use of white pearls strengthens the spectacular illusion that Chanel and other companies’ skin-whitening creams can transform one’s skin color. Abstract advertisement campaigns and websites such as the Chanel Le Blanc skin-whitening line tend to be a common signature for luxury and prestige brands. Since they target an audience that has greater purchasing power, they do not aim to sell only one product to the consumer. These high-end companies desire to sell a line, even a lifestyle. Thus, these outside cosmetic companies rely on larger, mystical, metaphoric systems in their advertisement campaigns to attract the consumer into buying their products, purposefully utilizing the power of emperor symbolism in Asian culture to express their dominance in the luxury consumer market. The pearl is one of the key symbols in Chanel’s Le Blanc skin-whitening line, signifying the prestige and power of their product, even though the product does not include pearl ingredients in its cosmetic formula.



Figure 6. Chanel Le Blanc “Brightening” Collection.

Source: “Chanel’s Le Blanc Brightening Collection Brings Softer Skincare,” JustLuxe Fashion, June 18, 2012, <http://www.justluxe.com/fine-living/health/feature-1784896.php> (accessed March 18, 2013).

A popular traditional Chinese myth claims that a small intake of pearl powder mixed with hot water will make one’s skin more radiant and can lighten one’s complexion.⁵⁹ Pearls are also believed to be very effective in treating indigestion and heartburn problems because of their high calcium content.⁶⁰ It is possible that the Chinese therefore associate pearls with also helping them absorb necessary nutrients that they cannot obtain otherwise. Having a healthy, wholesome body is necessary for overall well-being and the ability to be an attractive mate to the opposite sex, a promising and competent-looking worker, and a self-confident woman.

⁵⁹ Leong, “Who’s the Fairest of Them All?,” 167.

⁶⁰ Kay Jewelers. “Birthstone Legend & Lore.” *Kay Jewelers*. Web. 24 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.kay.com/guides/birthstone.html>>.

Milk as a Marker of Health

Milk is also another object that marketers utilize as a symbolic vehicle of whitening the skin and creating a healthy body. Calcium is a key mineral found in milk, which the Chinese generally cannot digest due to the absence of the lactase enzyme in their digestive tracts. Chinese consumers already have a physical lack of vitamin D and calcium minerals that they need to have in order to be “healthy.” People of Asian descent have a higher likelihood of suffering from bone injuries such as fractures and osteoporosis than other population groups that drink fresh milk. Marketers use this deficiency to their advantage in their advertisements for skin-whitening products. Some skin-whitening brands incorporate milk and imagery related to milk in their skin-whitening advertisements. Society conventionally believes that drinking milk is the only way one can receive milk’s benefits. By re-negotiating the sign circuit,⁶¹ advertisers try to convey to consumers that milk and all of its nutrients and whitening benefits can be absorbed through the skin as well with no harmful effects.

⁶¹ I again utilize Saussure’s signifier and signified sign definition in this context.



Figure 7. Biotherm Lait Corporel display in SOLANA Lifestyle Shopping Center Sephora store, Beijing, China, October 18, 2012.

Source: photograph by author.

At a Sephora store in the SOLANA Lifestyle Shopping Park in Beijing, a display featuring Biotherm Lait Corporel skincare line was visible on the third level shelf in the store. This purposeful product placement makes this advertisement easily visible at eye-level, one of the most coveted spots manufacturers fight for to gain exposure. This placement implies that Sephora anticipates Biotherm's Lait Corporel and Beurre Corporel to be high-selling products. Biotherm's Lait Corporel and Beurre Corporel are not skin-whitening products but instead moisturizing lotions. However, this in-store product advertisement is still worthy of discussion because it shows that marketers acknowledge the consumer appeal and desire to achieve health, and the powerful invocation of milk to achieve this effect.

The Biotherm brand decided it was important to physically manifest its Lait Corporel product as a milk carton to reinforce the product's milk-like properties and benefits. After their own market research, Biotherm decided that this depiction would be most appealing to consumers. The Lait Corporel milk carton with a blue bendy-straw stands to the right of a simulated picnic arrangement of the Beurre Corporel that is placed on top of a piece of bread that sits on top of a red checkered-cloth covered wooden board. The products are placed on a glass backlit shelf, providing an enhanced, backlit effect on the products to highlight their newness as indicated by the red pop-up. The most striking feature of the display is how there is another pop-up sign that says "Do not eat" with a cross over a spoon that has some type of white substance on top of it, implying that that substance is food. Biotherm has utilized these references for milk and its derivatives (the milk carton, bread that needs to be buttered) and little placards to show consumers that their products are so close to the real milk product, that they can be deceptive. In this case, imitating food is a good thing because it means that the product is natural and nourishing.

Biotherm also utilizes the symbolic power of the French and English language to persuade consumers to purchase their products. The company utilizes the French terms *lait corporel* (translated as "body milk") and *beurre corporel* ("body butter") because the French language itself is a signifier for high fashion and luxury. English is also used in many luxury products because Biotherm's target audience, middle to upper-class educated women, would most likely have a high command of the English language because they have gone through higher levels of schooling where English is learned as a mandatory second language. Having descriptions and disclaimers in English enable Biotherm to self-select its customers. Incorporating both of these Western written languages in its packaging and advertising adds more emphasis on the "exotic" Western-ness of the cosmetic company. Marketers

sometimes purposefully emphasize these differences and lack to make their products more alluring for consumers.

The Symbolic Power of Snow

The “purity” and whiteness of snow are popular motifs that are also used for skin-whitening advertisements. Derived from the sky, these frozen flakes of “pure” water are seemingly harmless because of their delicate nature. Water is the essence of life. By using this basic fact, marketers reassure consumers that their product is safe.

Cosmetic companies also incorporate the symbolism of snow in their advertisements to create another imaginary environment for some Taiwanese consumers who may have limited to no contact with snow.⁶² Cosmetic companies, such as Chcédo (in their advertisement below), incorporate these snowy backgrounds in their advertisement and product motifs.

⁶² Snow can be found in Taiwan, but only in the high mountainous regions that is not easily accessible for everyday encounters.



Figure 8. Chcedo advertisement featuring snow-covered mountains.

Source: “Chcedo Natural Snow-Covered Essence Moisturizing Facial Skincare Set,” Cunan.com, <http://www.cunan.com/chcedo/product/2340.html> (accessed March 18, 2013).

Chcedo, a Shanghai-based cosmetic company, constructs this all-white mountain range as a backdrop for its skin-whitening product line advertisement. Their representation of the mountain range is an unrealistic portrayal of how true mountain ranges look. Real mountain ranges are subjected to global environmental forces that are making their glaciers melt so the underlying rock formations poke through. The artistic rendering of a mountain range signifies to consumers that “pure” snow is plentiful, and these skin-whitening products can be produced with no adverse effects to nature.

Dior also has a line of skin whiteners named “Dior Snow,” that utilizes the “pure” aspects of snow and ice. A snowflake relief is revealed to consumers when they open the platinum colored makeup case. The full-page magazine spread features the profile of a washed-out blonde haired blue eyed woman dressed in white with a semi-opaque white material covering half of her face on the left page, with her gaze directing towards the makeup that was unfrozen from its encapsulating, frozen snowflake surroundings that acts

as a background for the entire advertisement. The tagline states that the makeup is made from 100% “snow river water,” “100% skin-whitening makeup through snow.” Dior creates the illusion that their makeup is created with the purest, most natural snow from the European Alps, a possible origin of the Aryan-looking Caucasian model.



Figure 9. Anglo model for Diorsnow.

Source: Dior. “Anna Jagodzinska for Diorsnow” advertisement, *Vogue China*, May 2012, 45-46.

However, no matter what type of cosmetic product a Chinese consumer uses, she cannot permanently turn her skin into the pallor of a typical Aryan Caucasian model's. First, she fundamentally cannot alter her innate DNA composition. Second, models in the media are undoubtedly stylized and edited in some form of post-production. Therefore, skin-whitening creams become their own simulated representation of reality, or simulacrum.⁶³

The critical term *simulacrum*, coined by French social theorist Jean Baudrillard, posits that

⁶³ Jean Baudrillard. "Simulacra and Simulations." In *Simulations*, 166-184. New York City, N.Y., U.S.A.: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983.

modern society is devoid of any real “truth” because everything that consumers interact with is “signs of the real instead of the real.”⁶⁴ The power of advertisements lies in their ability to create desire through their skewed representations of the real.

In 2011, Dior used the stardom of South Korean pop group Sonyeo Shidae (SNSD) as another way to market their Dior Snow skin-whitening line to the Culturally Chinese consumer (Figure 10).

⁶⁴ Baudrillard, “*Simulacra and Simulations*,” 167.



Figure 10. SNSD for Dior Snow television commercial stills.

Source: Sunnehh. "SNSD Reveals CF for 'Dior Snow'" Wordpress Blog, February 28, 2011.

<http://sunflowerbunss.wordpress.com/2011/02/28/snsd-reveals-cf-for-dior-snow/> (accessed March 18, 2013).

The incorporation of SNSD into Dior's Asian-Pacific Dior Snow advertising campaign is an example of the adoption of local celebrities, utilizing their iconic⁶⁵ power to draw sales and appeal to a larger demographic (SNSD fans) that may not be exposed to Dior products

⁶⁵ I follow Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright's definition of icon in this context. They describe an icon as "an image (or person) that refers to something beyond its individual components... [that] acquires symbolic significance" (*Practices of Looking*, 445). In this example SNSD represents fame, wealth, and success because of their music's popularity across all of Asia.

otherwise. By establishing this celebrity endorsement, Dior creates a way for consumers to practice and consume skin-whitening products that celebrities use, allowing them to feel connected to their idols. This is an example of Dior using the free form appropriation of starpower in Asia. The company is freeriding on the pan-Asian K-pop movement that has transcended its South Korean roots to be embraced by other Asian communities. Dior uses SNSD to make a marketing campaign that can easily travel between East Asian demographics and psychographics.

Illuminating Properties of Light and the Color White

Lighting effects are always incorporated in skin-whitening advertisements to enhance the “whiteness” and “brightness” of models. Oftentimes, skin-whitening models are photographed with “harsh” lighting where the light source is high above them, casting a distinct sharp shadow below their chin. Their faces are also sometimes “washed out,” further depleting the models’ already pale skin tone and enhancing their “whiteness.”



Figure 11. Shiseido Perfect UV Protector store advertisement, Taipei 101, Taipei, Taiwan, October 15, 2013.

Source: photograph by author.

An advertisement for Shiseido's Perfect SPF 50+ sunscreen (Figure 11) was photographed hanging inside the Eslite Shopping Center in Taipei, Taiwan. Sunscreen is an essential product in a skin-whitening regimen. This advertisement is a side-angle shot of an extremely pale Asian model gazing off into the distance with bursts of light framing her cheeks. Light is a powerful symbol to incorporate in advertisement messaging because of its illuminating qualities. In the Shiseido advertisement, the harsh lighting and bursts of light could be indexes⁶⁶ of a runway spotlight and paparazzi flashes, emphasizing the ability of

⁶⁶ An indexical sign, as defined by semiotics philosopher Charles Peirce, is a sensory feature that correlates with and therefore implies the presence of an unseen. One common example is smoke from a chimney. The smoke is an indexical sign that viewers can use to infer that a fire is also present somewhere inside the house.

the model to get noticed by others. Light has the ability to make things visible that would otherwise be unnoticed. Marketers purposefully use light to artificially make skin-whitening models even paler than what they would look like in “natural” light.

All skin-whitening product advertisements and product packaging include the color white in the symbolic motifs they utilize. Historically, in Chinese culture, white has always been a color associated with death. Chinese brides would traditionally wear red *qipaos* on their wedding day because red was seen as a symbol of good luck and blessing. However, these days many young brides wear white princess gowns on their wedding day as a result of fashion interactions with the West. Now, more emphasis is placed on the other associated meanings of the color white, particularly purity. Originally, purity was predominantly associated with death and the color white because it was believed that the soul was cleansed and purified when it moved into the afterlife. Not as much emphasis was placed on the more predominate use of the color white in Western cultures, such as the color that marks the virginal bride. Nowadays, however, it is commonplace for Culturally Chinese weddings to be all white in color scheme – white dress, white roses, white place settings, and white table settings. White’s powerful symbolic associations with purity and virginity is believed to “rub off” on its consumers.

All skin-whitening brands utilize these symbolic motifs in a well-coordinated campaign to grab the attention of potential customers. However, a brand’s equity is equally important in the consumer decision-making process. Awareness and a sense of alignment with a cosmetic company’s origins and values are crucial for a company to close a sale, something that Japanese cosmetic companies have perfected in the Taiwanese market.

The Pervasiveness of Japanese Cultural Odorlessness

Japanese multinational cosmetic companies position themselves in the Chinese and Taiwanese markets as being familiar with the “unique” Asian body while having the advanced scientific research and development skills of Western companies. Culturally Chinese consumers readily accept this corporate image. Based on my focus group interviews, Chinese and Taiwanese female consumers have a definite preference for Japanese products over Western-based companies. This preference is confirmed by the top five skin-whitening company market shareholders in Taiwan as of October 2012: the top three, according to Avon Taiwan’s head marketing manager Isabelle Chung, are invariably Japanese cosmetic companies Shiseido, Kanebo, and SK-II (currently a Proctor and Gamble company but with Japanese origins). It is ironic that female consumer-citizens of the colonized Taiwan and captured mainland China trust Japanese cosmetic products more than those made by companies from Western liberator nations. When it comes to consumer goods, the Taiwanese and Chinese do not hold a grudge against “high-quality,” “effective” Japanese products.

These consumers strongly believe in the Japanese branding efforts; since the Japanese are also Asian, they have a much better understanding of Asian skin, bone structure, and beauty norms. Focus group participants also claimed that the Japanese have much more stringent scientific practices and are “cleaner” – thus are safer to use. These Japanese companies have garnered the trust of Chinese and Taiwanese consumers because of their similar cultural norms and the seemingly lack of origin, or “cultural odorlessness” of Japanese cosmetic products. Iwabuchi’s basic theory of “cultural odorlessness” is that many Japanese products are so successful in the global market because Japanese products have “erased” any references to their “Japaneseness,” therefore making it easier for outside

cultures and markets to easily adopt and consume products from an Other-ed place.⁶⁷ This has been the case for the success of Japanese cosmetic brands – Japanese products often use English in their advertising and product packaging and use many abstract, global symbolic motifs in their advertising to make the product more easily adaptable in the global markets in which they are sold. When Japanese cosmetic companies do include Asian models in their advertising campaigns, the model's ethnic origins are hard to distinguish, thereby preventing any type of cross-Asian ethnic stereotyping that would deter any potential Asian consumer from purchasing their products.

The Chinese and Japanese have traditionally believed that beauty came from within – virtues were what mattered, not necessarily physical features. (Inner beauty was also manifested through outer beauty, but only to a degree.) However, literature, proverbs, and now advertisements have “unconsciously reversed the physiognomic equation, submerging individuals to types and reducing moral attributes to physical ones” so that skin now stands as a referent for one's inner virtues.⁶⁸ Modern society now bases femininity on visible, tangible practices such as applying makeup and consuming goods.

Both Chinese and Japanese cultures believe in a holistic approach to healing and renewal. Common Eastern, holistic practices include massage therapy, acupuncture, and herbal remedies. For holistic treatment, these “remedies” are supposed to treat the underlying, systemic problem that causes all of one's physical symptoms. Generally, these methods are not used to treat specific diseases in the way Western society views health-related problems, but rather as metaphoric, spirit-related issues. This healing perspective focuses on treating the body holistically, not just alleviating the visible symptoms.

⁶⁷ Iwabuchi, "Taking "Japanization" seriously: Cultural globalization reconsidered." 24-29.

⁶⁸ Kathy Lee Peiss. *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 24.

Sharing cultural similarities and “uniquely Asian” body problems has proven to be a winning strategy that Japan’s Shiseido Company, Ltd. uses in its Culturally Chinese marketing campaigns. Shiseido Company, Ltd., is currently the fourth largest cosmetics company in the world. Founded in 1872, it was Japan’s first Western-style pharmacy. The Shiseido company website states that the company’s name originated from the Chinese classic *Yi Jing (I-Ching)*, and further notes that the company name expresses an “Eastern spirit, Western science” approach to a new fusion business culture based on Western medicine inspired by Eastern philosophy.⁶⁹ In a 2010 interview conducted by the Institute for International Studies and Training with Rika Takahashi, the director of the Shiseido Company’s Global Planning Office, Technical Division asserts that “Shiseido is highly trusted in China because the Chinese appreciate Japanese culture and Shiseido’s own unique culture” and how “this appreciation has fostered trust.” The Chinese consumers believe and value Shiseido’s Five Principles,⁷⁰ and view Japanese culture as one that is similar to their own. Furthermore, Shiseido prides itself on being very knowledgeable about the variety of Asian skin types Asians and considers itself to be “the Asian skin experts.”⁷¹ By addressing “troubling skin problems” (ie: bruises, white spots, and birthmarks) with their products and services, Shiseido believes that they will “enhance women’s quality of life and make them feel happier.”⁷² This projected image of the company is attractive to a Culturally Chinese consumer because Shiseido markets itself as being familiar with Asian skin types and following larger pan-Asian ideals.

⁶⁹ "About Shiseido." Shiseido. <http://www.asia.shiseido.com/about/story/origins/01.htm> (accessed March 17, 2013).

⁷⁰ Shiseido’s Five Principles are: 1. Quality First, 2. Co-existence and Co-prosperity, 3. Respect for Retailers, 4. Corporate Stability, and 5. Sincerity.

⁷¹ Institute for International Studies and Training, "Road to Success and the Shiseido Approach."

⁷² Shiseido Group. "Three Year Plan." PDF Web.

http://group.shiseido.com/ir/strategy/pdf/08_10mgt_e.pdf (April 12, 2012), slide 48.

Shiseido and other Japanese cosmetic companies leverage their status as being exotic, yet familiar in the Asian markets. Holistic healing has a ritual-like quality associated with the Shiseido product's consumption. Traditional Asian therapies immerse the body and mind into a state of relaxation in order for the therapies to restore the body as a whole.⁷³ Haptic qualities are emphasized by Shiseido's focus on maintaining and enhancing the "Japanese spirit of *Omotenashi*"⁷⁴ at department store counters, exoticizing a common Asian healing practice.⁷⁵ At these counters, Shiseido creates a type of ambiance that puts the consumer at ease with its excellent customer service, makeup tutorials, and store aesthetics. Though both Japanese and Chinese consumers expect these regimens to take time before results become evident, Shiseido is actively researching "ways that customers can perceive the effectiveness of a product, such as through a product's feel, as a means of creating items with natural appeal."⁷⁶ This goal was specifically outlined in the company's "Three Year Plan" slideshow, reinforcing the emphasis on tactile qualities that are highly regarded in Asian culture.

In November 2005, Shiseido opened the China Research Center in Beijing. Though the Center was first set to research and integrate unique Chinese products into Shiseido cosmetics, the company decided to shift the research center's focus to developing products specifically for the Chinese market after China's economic boom in the early 2000s.⁷⁷ The company hopes that the new China Research Center will act as a portal for creating a scientific network with Chinese research institutes and universities to facilitate research on traditional Chinese medicine while conveying new beauty values to the world through the

⁷³ Bryan Turner and Zheng Yangwen, ed. "Introduction," *The Body in Asia*, 8.

⁷⁴ *Omotenashi* is translated as "hospitality" in Japanese.

⁷⁵ Shiseido Group. "Three Year Plan," slide 12.

⁷⁶ Shiseido Group. "Three Year Plan," slide 40.

⁷⁷ Institute for International Studies and Training. "Road to Success and the Shiseido Approach."

development of cosmetics and health and beauty care products based on traditional Chinese medicine.”⁷⁸ This center would also be a place where they could research Chinese skin and hair composition as well as their makeup practices for Chinese-specific product development. It is only possible to conduct such research inside the target country. Having the Chinese Research Center firmly established in China gives Shiseido the advantage of having continual, site-specific research being done to address consumer needs.

The rise of beauty culture as a shared “set of practices at once physical, individual, social, and commercial” is relatively new in China.⁷⁹ In our increasingly visual world, advertisements and social media platforms visibly create virtual “imagined communities”⁸⁰ with which viewers can identify and belong, producing desire to join. These multimedia realms help reinforce globalized constructions of beauty.

⁷⁸ Shiseido Group. "Shiseido Co., Ltd. Expands China Research Center and Strengthens R&D in China." PDF Web. www.shiseido.co.jp/releimg/1269-e.pdf (accessed April 29, 2012).

⁷⁹ Paula Black. *The Beauty Industry: Gender, Culture, Pleasure*. (London: Routledge, 2004), 19.

⁸⁰ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006.

Chapter Three: Refashioning the Self, Redefining Societal Relations

Taiwanese teenager Hilda Chu tells reporters, “If my skin is lighter, I think I will be more happier.”⁸¹ “I know I cannot get there, but always, Nicole Kidman is my idol,” says another young Chinese woman, Lin-Ching.⁸² Though Hilda understands that she cannot physically achieve such light skin, Lin-Ching “always” wishes that she will have the opportunity to transform herself. Lin-Ching’s desires are not an anomaly in East Asia. A study prepared for L’Oréal Philippines in May 2006 regarding skin care and makeup ascertained that “Nearly half or 44% of the 15-50 female respondents in Metro Manila ... – 59% of whom were fair-complexioned, 31% with a middling skin tone and 11% dark – admitted to wanting to be fairer complexion in a study on usage and attitudes on skin care and makeup.”⁸³ One of the women in my focus group introduced the phrase, “being white is a good thing” (白是好事, *bai shi hao si*) and other females in the room immediately nodded their heads in agreement or said “yes” (是的, *shi de*.) Patricia Liu added, that the Culturally Chinese collective were just “brainwashed that way consciously or subconsciously due to their upbringing and society.” Mrs. Liu, like many other Culturally Chinese women, rarely critiques the collective judgment – she passively accepts what society tells her is right or wrong.

According to Isabel Cheng, the general manager of Avon Taiwan, a woman can create herself through her beauty practices (做自己, *zuo zi ji*.) She cites three common and

⁸¹ Public Radio International. "Skin-whitening big business in Asia."

⁸² Chong, “Beauty and the Bleach.”

⁸³ Poblete, “For the Fairest.”

longstanding ways Culturally Chinese society has explained how to achieve skin-whitening success by 1. eating skin-whitening foods (such as apples, ginko, and lemons), 2. undergoing microsurgery, and 3. using skin-whitening cosmetics. Isabel believes that if you actively monitor and regulate yourself with a skin-whitening regimen, you will naturally believe that your energy and nutrition will improve. This was a shared sentiment among many of the women I interviewed. Real beauty comes from within and can be revealed with perseverance.

Lisa Nakamura, professor of American Culture at the University of Michigan asserts that gender and race, “both of which are embodied states of being,” are now viewed as “optional items that can be altered at will.”⁸⁴ According to Perry Johansson, professor of Oriental Languages at Stockholm University, the use of skin-whitening creams, a global consumer product, threatens Culturally Chinese self-identity.⁸⁵ Cosmetic companies advertise makeup as a physical leveler that obscures preexisting class distinctions that mark feminine appearance.⁸⁶ The individual Culturally Chinese woman’s goal to be successful in the life is dependent on her conformity to societal beauty standards. She uses skin-whitening products that provide “ultimate transparency”⁸⁷ in order for her to stand out and be noticed.

Women’s bodies are “recognized as a fundamental unifying category of human existence in all its senses and levels”⁸⁸ in critical and social theory. This connection makes the body a contested space that is turned into a commodity and testing site by other

⁸⁴ Nakamura, “Race and Identity in Digital Media.”

⁸⁵ This is based on his analysis of Chinese skin-whitening cream and skin-care product advertisements. Perry Johansson. “White Skin, Large Breasts: Chinese Beauty Product Advertising as Cultural Discourse.” *China Information* 13.2-3 (1998): 59-84. <http://cin.sagepub.com/content/13/2-3/59.citation> (accessed March 16, 2013).

⁸⁶ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 145.

⁸⁷ Quote from a Dior snow commercial advertisement featuring Mylene Jampanoi, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuViXSpz7xc>

⁸⁸ Turner (1995, 143), in Yang, “*Nennu* and *Shunu*,” 338.

regimes.⁸⁹ Young Chinese women turn to new digital media platforms such as blogs and video sharing sites to foster virtual communities to appropriate and adopt new beauty techniques and identities. Varying levels of intimacy are created in these new digital media spaces. In these spaces, individual public success or failure is directly correlated to oneself rather than to systemic societal conditions.⁹⁰ These women turn to official cosmetic company's websites, such as Chanel's Chinese Le Blanc website, to learn more about beauty products that can transform them into Cinderellas by their individual use of White Essentiel+ skin-whitening products. These websites force viewers to view well-constructed, beautiful media that provides viewers at a faux "behind-the-scenes" glance at how make-up is applied on the model which was clearly staged. In contrast, the online videos made by Hong Kong do-it-yourself beauty queen and YouTube sensation, Queenie Chan bare it all to the viewer. Though Nakamura asserts that the Web is an anonymous, disembodied space where gender and race cannot be seen, this feature does not fully apply to the YouTube platform, as seen by Queenie Chan's videos. Queenie has created her own cult-following because of her more "amateur"-like presence on the Internet. Her web interactions are perceived to be more intimate than those found on official websites, thereby making her videos memorable to viewers. The profound and potentially traumatic impact that these messages for East Asian women to "get white" can most easily be seen through the permanent scarring that Panya Boonchun received by using counterfeit skin-whitening cream and by

⁸⁹ "being sexualized by a masculine business and entertainment culture" (Yang 1999, 11 in Yang, "*Nenu* and *Shunu*," 338); "Liberating women's bodies from labor leaves the body available to be freely adorned and exploited and then to be used as a commodity to sell (to be sold or to sell other products)" (ibid., 340-341); and "Women's bodies then become testing grounds for both innovative technologies and new consumption patterns" (ibid.).

⁹⁰ Harvey (2005) describes, "The neoliberal position maintains that social disadvantage is a result of an individual's failure to 'make themselves' correctly, and that inequality is due to this poor personal choice rather than other people's prejudices against particular races, genders, sexualities, or class positions. Thus, neoliberalism is a "color-blind" ideology, one that discounts race as a factor in life choices." Lisa Nakamura. "Race and Identity in Digital Media." In *Mass media and society*, eds. Michael Gurevitch and James Curran. PDF published excerpt. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1991.

the multiple efforts by the Dove “Real Beauty” campaign to help East Asian women learn to embrace their “natural” bodies.

Using the Internet to Create an Idealized Imaginary Lifestyle

In our increasingly visual world, multimedia advertisements and social media platforms are creating “imagined communities.”⁹¹ where viewers can identify with and join. Cosmetic companies exploit the use of the malleable, adaptable form of the Internet to further promote the imaginary, abstract and “perfect” lifestyle that these brands aim to project surrounding their product. This is a new, relatively passive method of selling that persuades potential consumers, via symbolic power resources, to desire what the company offers. Companies use these methods to influence viewers-cum-consumers to adopt the now socially normalized practice of using skin whitening creams. This very carefully crafted approach enables skin-whitening users to participate in a multisensory experience of the imaginary, perfect world that cosmetic companies have made for their skin-whitening product. Chanel’s China Skin Whitening Le Blanc White Essentiel+ website is

Chanel has an online website to promote its skin whitening product, White Essentiel+ and to engage with potential or existing customers.⁹² This additional resource prompts viewers of Chanel’s print advertisements, as well as current Chanel consumers, to “discover more” about White Essentiel+ and, once at the site, it offers the consumer an escape from the real world and a journey into a constructed world of Chanel. At the site, users can learn more about the skincare line, garner makeup application tips, and more. The cost of creating and maintaining the Le Blanc site is negligible compared to the future return

⁹¹ Anderson. *Imagined Communities*.

⁹² Chanel. “Whitening – CHANEL Universe.” http://www.chanel.com/zh_CN/%E9%A6%99%E6%B0%B4%E5%8C%96%E5%A6%86%E5%93%81/Universe-Le-Blanc-121314/?WT.srch=1 (accessed April 10, 2013).

Chanel anticipates: current users will not only purchase Chanel Le Blanc again, but also, through sharing the website, recommend Chanel products to their friends.

Cosmetic companies establish and perpetuate “a tradition of beauty culture, which claim[s] women [will] find a lifetime of beauty by adopting daily rituals of skin and hair care that [require] coordinated products and techniques.”⁹³ Chanel’s White Essentiel+ Chinese website offers a glimpse into a constructed “tradition of beauty culture.” The website consists of approximately six subpages linked via a menu bar from the main page.

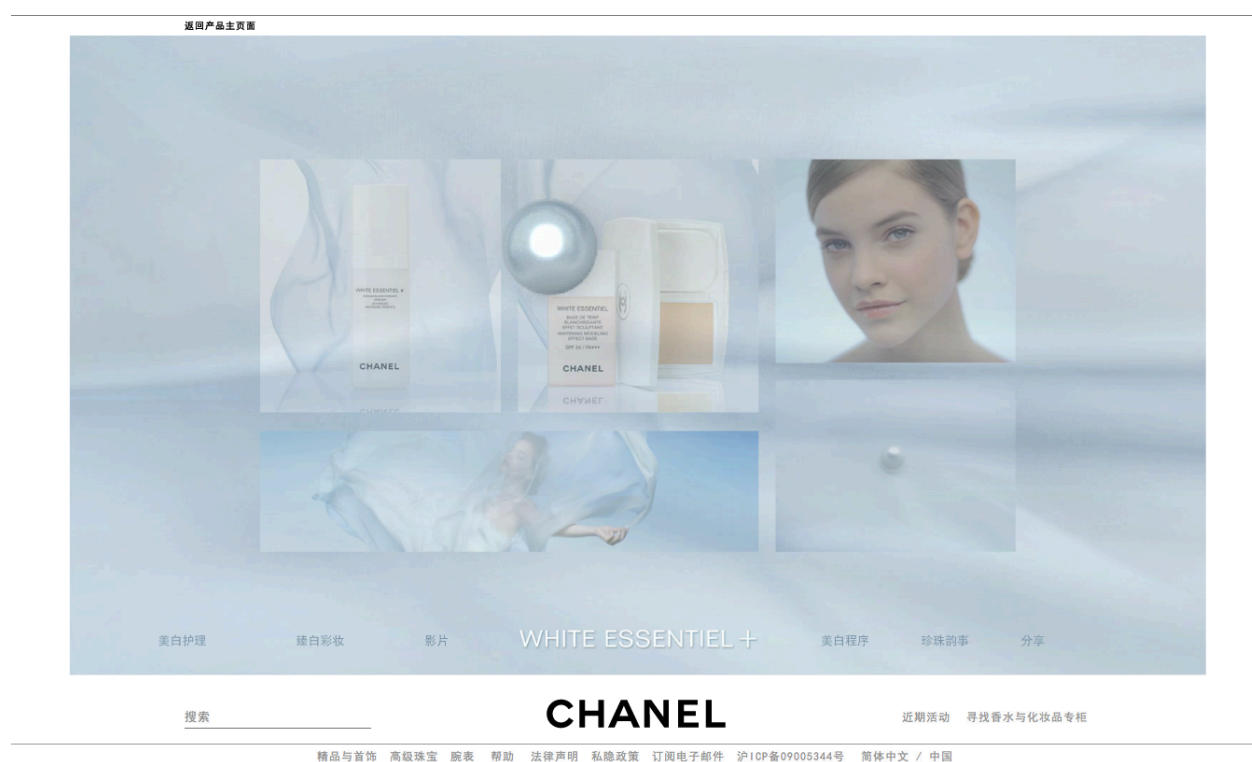


Figure 12. Screenshot of Chanel Le Blanc China website's homepage.

Source: Chanel. “Whitening – CHANEL Universe,” http://www.chanel.com/zh_CN/%E9%A6%99%E6%B0%B4-%E5%8C%96%E5%A6%86%E5%93%81/Universe-Le-Blanc-121314/?WT.srch=1 (accessed April 12, 2013).

All pages have a white background; a consistent menu bar is at the bottom of each page, with the six subpage hyperlinks evenly distributed on both sides of the Chanel brand logo. Advertisers for Chanel incorporate into this website many white symbolic elements

⁹³ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 95.

discussed in Chapter Two. In Scott's Reception Theory, "the sender ... crafts the message in anticipation of the audience's probable response, using shared knowledge of various vocabularies and conventions, as well as common experiences."⁹⁴ In addition to the "shared knowledge" reflected by these symbolic motifs, the website includes other specific features to help users "troubleshoot" common makeup application problems—creating an interactive experience reflecting the image of the Chanel Le Blanc brand: high-class, beautiful, clean, and luxurious. This interactivity helps embed Chanel Le Blanc skin whitening users in a community of skin whitening cream consumers. These other consumer-viewers are invisible; navigating the site on their own terms with no relation to individual user.

The top left image presents White Essentiel+ "Advanced Whitening Essence," with three corresponding pages discussing the White Essentiel+ cosmetic line as a whole. The middle image on the top row portrays White Essentiel+ Whitening Modeling Effect Base in a liquid and powder form. This subsection briefly and abstractly describes the specific cosmetology features in the White Essentiel+ formula. The top right image is of a blue-eyed Caucasian female model with a pale complexion, serenely gazing at the viewer. She is positioned in front of a light blue background. When this link is clicked, the viewer is directed to thirteen short videos that show the "proper" way of using the Le Blanc makeup line, using all Chanel products on the Caucasian model. Through Chanel's Culturally Chinese focused White Essentiel+ skin whitening line's website, consumers are visually taught how to use their cosmetic products by the company, which shares its "beauty secrets" by offering viewers a subpage of makeup video tutorials taught by Chanel makeup experts, thereby creating

⁹⁴ Linda M. Scott, "Images in Advertising: The Need for a Theory of Visual Rhetoric," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 21, no. 2 (Sept. 1994): 1.

customer and brand loyalty because the company shares the exact techniques they use on the model for customers to emulate.⁹⁵ This multimedia feature provides a unique way for Chanel to show to consumers that the company seems to care about them and their individual, “unique” beauty needs because using the Internet and computer is a personal experience.

The bottom-left elongated rectangle is a cropped picture of the same Caucasian model in a white silk gown, which gracefully glides over her face in an upward motion. Clicking the photograph shows a promotional video clip.⁹⁶ The model stands in front of a light blue gradient background on surreal, desert or snow-like silk “dunes” with the silk sheet gliding all over her body. She peers through the semi-translucent fabric to the viewer before casting her eyes down. The vantage point then switches to a frame that highlights her pearl ring-adorned hand lightly pinching the silk fabric as it coasts through the air as the model throws her hands up in the air, evoking the scene in Disney’s *Cinderella* when the Fairy Godmother transforms Cinderella’s ripped working dress into the beautiful, white ball gown as Cinderella lifts her hands up in the air during the process. Chanel also visually reinforces the brand’s high-end status by having the model wear pearl jewelry. The next shot is of the Chanel double C logo on a semi-translucent silk sheet fluttering in front of a close-up of the model’s face with her gaze directed at the viewer. The frame then switches to a stationary shot of the makeup itself before showing one last intimate clip of the model, whose face is slowly revealed from the billowing silk sheets to be perfectly pale, with eyes and lips made up. The last frame reveals the words “LE BLANC” in white. The advertisement is produced in a cinematic style, with smooth transitions and panned shots

⁹⁵ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 8.

⁹⁶ To view the embedded Chanel Le Blanc advertisement video, click on the bottom left image box that has a woman’s body in a white dress. (Accessed in April 10, 2013).

intermingled with model and product close-ups. In the Chanel advertisement, the model is transformed, à la Cinderella, from ordinary (using farther away camera angles, full body shots that make it hard to notice the details of the model's face, making it more anonymous) to beautiful (using zoom-in shots specifically of the model's face which enables viewers to see its perfection) through the use of Le Blanc White Essentiel+ products.

Throughout the video, there are light chimes playing a tune that sounds like it could be a segment from the Sugar Plum Fairy dance in Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. A Chinese female voice narrates the video in Mandarin. She describes the model as luminous, beautiful, and ethereal. She asks, "Who would like to have these qualities? Chanel, Le Blanc skin whitening products."

The last image on the main page is that of a pearl lying on a silk sheet. This link takes you to a page where you can download a free Windows or Mac desktop background that has the same image as the background with "LE BLANC" in white and "Chanel" in black directly underneath the cosmetic line name on the left-hand side of the desktop image. There is one more menu sub header that does not have a corresponding image with it. This sub header, the last one on the right, allows viewers to share the webpage on Internet forums or blogs.

The Web can easily distribute media to mass audiences while still individually "touching" a consumer. Scott notes that "visual perception [is] often been characterized as passive and automatic, as a natural capability based in biology rather than in culture."⁹⁷ By contrast, a website actively engages its viewers in receiving these advertisements and images. "Viewing" the Chanel website involves at least three senses: sight, sound, and touch.

⁹⁷ Scott, "Images in Advertising: The Need for a Theory of Visual Rhetoric," 260.

Beyond the consumption of words, images, narration, and soundtrack, the website requires a haptic investment: one must navigate through the website physically tracking a computer mouse. Advertisers hope that the physical and sensory investments websites demand will positively correlate with an emotional connection with the website's content.

Chanel specifically omits some things in the cinematic scopic regime presented in this website. The absence of the product in the background interactive content and videos reflects the company's desire to sell an imaginary, intangible lifestyle to the consumer. Chanel also omits showing the physical product in the interactive video-content to maintain the mystical qualities of makeup. What viewers experience instead is seeing someone put makeup on the solemn model, with nothing but the chimes as the audio track. This representation creates the illusion of a transcendental religious ritual, a type of exoticized spiritualism.

Chanel also uses a novel approach to connect its customers with its web interface. A viewer can share the Chanel website on social media sites and with online friends. This sharing feature draws on the interconnectivity of the hyperreal environment, enabling Chanel to do less work promoting its product. The person who shares the Chanel link automatically identifies herself as someone impressed by Chanel's reputation and products. Seeing a friend or a "beautiful" Chinese woman endorse White Essential+ line helps ease the fear that new customers may have about using or switching to Chanel's product. Viewing these online tutorials on how to apply makeup on the Chanel website also reduces the "riskiness" of using these cosmetics. All of these features help foster brand loyalty for the luxury cosmetic brand. The website also provides a link to download a Chanel desktop wallpaper, extending grassroots consumer promotion of company products. Every time a

Chanel user sees her desktop screen, the image of the pearl resting on a gentle sheet of silk fabric reinforces the notion that Chanel's White Essential+ products are holistically and haptically helping her physically express her inner beauty. When other people see the desktop screen, they identify the owner as a Chanel product user, and they potentially become interested in learning more about the product.

The Chanel White Essentiel+ website is a built entertainment environment that interacts with other advertising platforms to entrench consumers in a regimented lifestyle of body modification. This website is a novel way of promoting a skin whitening cream line because of its integration of video and social media, which immerses the viewer in a more integrated sensory experience. An image, according to Mulvey, "constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the 'I' of subjectivity."⁹⁸ The website platform expands and complicates Mulvey's matrix of the imaginary to implement visual rhetoric shifting a viewer into a purchaser. In our spectacular society, this hyperreal approach represents a new and popular direction in advertising. Because of the Web's interconnectedness to virtual communities and "real" life, it is extremely important for brands to be consistent in maintaining a public image across all mediums.

⁹⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 4.

Queenie Chan: Individual Expression and Self-Promotion

Women's bodies are "recognized as a fundamental unifying category of human existence in all its senses and levels"⁹⁹ in social and cultural theories. This connection makes the body a contested space that is turned into a commodity and testing site by other regimes.¹⁰⁰ Young Chinese women turn to new digital media platforms such as blogs and video sharing sites to foster virtual communities to appropriate and adopt new beauty techniques and identities. In these spaces, individual public success or failure is directly correlated to oneself rather than to systemic societal conditions.¹⁰¹ Though Nakamura asserts that the Web is an anonymous, disembodied space where gender and race cannot be seen, this feature does not fully apply to the YouTube and online blog platform.

YouTube has created a type of virtual community where "these sites and worlds are becoming part of a public sphere, where ideas and intimacies are exchanged, relationships formed and maintained and identities are constructed."¹⁰² This community-building is exemplified by Queenie Chan's YouTube video channel¹⁰³ and corresponding blog.¹⁰⁴ 40-year-old Queenie Chan, 陳莉敏, describes herself as an unrestricted beauty (美麗無限制).

She is from Hong Kong, and has been an active user of YouTube since April 2009; she also

⁹⁹ Turner (1995, 143) in Jie Yang, "Nenu and Shunu: Gender, Body Politics, and the Beauty Economy in China," in *Signs*, vol. 36, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 338. Accessed on April 15, 2013. doi: 10.1086/655913.

¹⁰⁰ "being sexualized by a masculine business and entertainment culture" (Yang 1999, 11) in Yang, "Nenu and Shunu," 338); "Liberating women's bodies from labor leaves the body available to be freely adorned and exploited and then to be used as a commodity to sell (to be sold or to sell other products)" (ibid., 340-341); and "Women's bodies then become testing grounds for both innovative technologies and new consumption patterns" (ibid., 341).

¹⁰¹ Harvey (2005) describes, "The neoliberal position maintains that social disadvantage is a result of an individual's failure to 'make themselves' correctly, and that inequality is due to this poor personal choice rather than other people's prejudices against particular races, genders, sexualities, or class positions. Thus, neoliberalism is a "color-blind" ideology, one that discounts race as a factor in life choices" (Nakamura, "Race and Identity in Digital Media.")

¹⁰² Nakamura, "Race and Identity in Digital Media," 2.

¹⁰³ BEAUTYQQ (Queenie Chan.) "美麗無限制---QUEENIE CHAN 陳莉敏 - YouTube." YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/user/BEAUTYQQ> (accessed March 17, 2013).

¹⁰⁴ Queenie Chan. "Queenie Chan's Weibo," last modified April 15, 2013, <http://www.weibo.com/tvb8queenie>. Accessed April 15, 2013.

uses Facebook, Weibo, and Yahoo blog platforms to connect with her followers. She has more than 138,000 subscribers, and her videos have had over 37.28 million views. Chan has uploaded 233 videos to date (February 13, 2013) under her YouTube username BEAUTYQQ. She is the everywoman turned into a YouTube celebrity by sharing her skin whitening and beauty techniques with the broader public. Video bloggers represent “themselves” to the Internet audience. This new visual technology, in Peiss’s opinion, has further standardized the female appearance, which is reinforced by professional beauties-cum-celebrities whom other females strive to emulate.¹⁰⁵

Modern society is a commodity culture, and the citizen-actor is always conscious of her audience, the consumers of the media produced.¹⁰⁶ Queenie offers “[her] whole self, [her] heart and soul” for her audience to attain beauty, happiness, love. The Chinese now view “the face not as a transparent window into inner beauty, but as an image of their own making, an integral part of their own daily performances” in a global culture that is continually oriented towards “display, spectatorship, and consumption.”¹⁰⁷ Queenie’s videos focusing on facial makeup application and beauty techniques reflect this belief. She reaches out to her viewers to reveal to them ways to remedy “disabling features” through “unnatural” makeovers by subjecting her own body to a plethora of skin-whitening treatments. These viewers are the ultimate voyeurs – consuming videos of Queenie while rarely revealing their true identity behind their username.

¹⁰⁵ “Their novel self-presentation ... inspired ... women to emulate them” Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 48.

¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, “A fundamental and far-reaching change was taking place: the heightened importance of image making and performance in everyday life” (ibid., 49).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 44 and 39.

The Internet is viewed as a neoliberal “utopia” where the user interacts in a raceless, genderless, disembodied space to shape his/her identity.¹⁰⁸ The explosion and adoption of new media technologies have altered the way humans conduct social interactions. These platforms have displaced real time and face-to-face interaction, resulting in a social need for an imagined community of displaced “friends” on Web 2.0 platforms. Increasingly, individuals are taking part in virtual communities, where their presence is distributed across different media platforms and engages in different digital media practice styles.¹⁰⁹ Nakamura describes how the Internet creates a type of self-consciousness that seemingly transcends the divisive characteristics of nation, race and gender. However, this does not mean that concepts of nation, race, and gender are not discussed and reflected through the use of the medium.

With Web 3.0 platforms that emphasize interconnectivity and enhanced user experience, there is a new paradigm shift in perception where there is a “sense of the universal equality of things.”¹¹⁰ This shift contributes to a democratic way of viewing works spanning a variety of topics that exhibit differing degrees of history and “authentic” markers used to legitimize the “original.” YouTube’s public and embedded comments space beneath the video, and the ability to create dialogue between users, reinstate the belief that an “aura” is existent in digital multimedia.

In Queenie’s videos, she narrates what is going on, and the videos are edited post-production to include English translations for English-speaking audience viewers. This translation broadens her reach to a large skin-whitening community that may not fit within

¹⁰⁸ YouTube is “becoming part of a public sphere, where ideas and intimacies are exchanges, relationships formed and maintained, and identities are constructed and sometimes policed” (Chun, 2005 in Nakamura, “Race and Identity in Digital Media,” 2).

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, 1991 in Nakamura, “Race and Identity in Digital Media,” 2.

¹¹⁰ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 223.

the “Culturally Chinese” psychographic. She applies her knowledge of current digital media platforms and their audiences in post-production editing. Queenie understands that YouTube users are predominantly English speaking. Integrating English subtitles helps her maximize her global reach. Her expanded fan-base enables her to not only help other women look beautiful and love themselves, but also to gain more perceived status.

The way Queenie posts these YouTube video blogs and addresses her viewers in them establishes a “unique” connection perceived to be meaningful in our spectacular society. She posts a new video up on her BEAUTYQQ handle approximately once every two weeks, if not more, to continuously perform for her viewers – the only way these online video bloggers can really “engage” with their viewers. This norm constructs imaginary obstacles and goals that video bloggers must overcome to win their diasporic audience’s attention.¹¹¹ One such obstacle is the “feeling of strangeness” that overcomes the video blogger as she becomes more invested in producing video diary and tutorial entries for others to watch.¹¹² Queenie not only uses YouTube, but also Chinese Weibo, Facebook, and Yahoo Hong Kong platforms to help artificially build up “personality” and authenticity.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Queenie does this by post-editing her videos with Brazilian background music, showing clips of her Chihuahua, Fergie, doing tricks for soup noodles, and creating staged endorsements that introduce her videos. Such material is included in the films to create entertainment value for viewers before they delve into the educational make-up tutorial session.

¹¹² “The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera, as Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one’s own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable” and transportable for the public viewership (Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 230). The video blogger questions the extent to which their “true selves” are being shown on the media that they produce and utilize narrative features to create additional narratives for viewers in areas where they believe the moment lacks clarity and truthfulness.

¹¹³ Though “personality” and authenticity are seemingly in opposition, they work together in creating a trusted Internet presence. Internet viewers look for consistency in the way Queenie presents herself across all of her social platforms. The common use of pictures, videos, and vernacular slang that builds up Queenie’s online persona are all observed by viewers and compared against other representations of herself on the Internet. If everything matches up, she is trusted as a “real” person.

This “phony commodity” of the video blogger is created to lure people in to continue to buy into the spectacle of society.¹¹⁴

One of Queenie’s videos, entitled “美白針 SKIN WHITENING INJECTION,” was uploaded on October 3, 2009.¹¹⁵ She shows viewers the procedure as she undergoes treatment, ever conscious that she is on display and filming the video for a world of “spectators and voyeurs.”¹¹⁶ She flips the video recording away from her face so her viewers can see her hooked up to IVs and her immediate surroundings in the salon facilities which facilitates “the audience’s identification with the actor.”¹¹⁷ Since the audience identifies with the actor through the lens of the recording device, the way the scene is captured and framed has extreme importance for the validation of its authenticity and its ability to make a faux-aura claim. Therefore, more “authentic” footage is shot in one take and “rough” qualities of the video are emphasized, including shots where the subject is not necessarily in focus, where there are shaky transitions and not ideal lighting conditions. These features are exhibited in the “Skin Whitening Injection” YouTube video. This style of capturing “what had once been” is original, thereby making it possible to give the work some type of “aura.” Culturally Chinese viewers are better able to identify with Queenie than the models and actors used in skin whitening creams. She is identifiably a Culturally Chinese woman through her use of Chinese when blogging and her fluency in Cantonese and Mandarin in her videos. Furthermore, she uses technology that everyday consumers also have access to –

¹¹⁴ “for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 229).

¹¹⁵ BEAUTYQQ (Queenie Chan). “美白針 SKIN WHITENING INJECTION.” YouTube, October 3, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSws8I0Li4M&feature=results_main&playnext=1&list=PL2E21E60724A6E25B (accessed March 17, 2013).

¹¹⁶ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 142.

¹¹⁷ “The audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera, taking its position” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 228).

a camera, video camera, computer, and camera phone – to produce her work and share with others. Queenie is not specially trained and a very “familiar” person. Therefore, viewers feel comfortable believing her advice and cultivating “hominess.”

Many of Queenie’s commenters argue that she is pale or white enough already.¹¹⁸ However, she does not stop subjecting herself to “new” and “effective” skin whitening regimens – she is fully immersed in consumer fetishism. Queenie videotapes her skin whitening injection session in a Taipei salon and helps narrate to English-speaking viewers what is going on through pop-up bubbles that she puts in place at key moments of the video.¹¹⁹ In these pop-up bubbles, she even directly describes her rationale behind undergoing this treatment – she was partially influenced by “lots of TV stars and Models [sic] claim it’s effective...”¹²⁰ Though advertisements, editorials, and subjects in video blogs warn their viewers to exercise caution with whitening creams, “the models depicted have extremely white faces” and reinforce the pressure to achieve an unnatural white ideal.¹²¹ She uses this piece as a type of confessional – she talks to the camera and her perceived audience and answers anticipated questions about her participation to make her viewers emotionally connect with her. Queenie is masked, and it may make this video blog more effective in reaching out and impressing viewers. Peiss describes how assessments of female beauty have “often unconsciously reversed the physiognomic equation, submerging individuals to types and reducing moral attributes to physical ones. Hair, skin, and eye color frequently

¹¹⁸ See comments in her “DIY Skin Whitening” YouTube video.

¹¹⁹ BEAUTYQQ (Queenie Chan). “美白針 SKIN WHITENING INJECTION.”

¹²⁰ Ibid., 0:26 second.

¹²¹ The quote is from Johansson, “White Skin, Large Breasts,” 65. Queenie states in her video via two pop-up bubbles at 1:06 and 1:08 how safe whitening drip/injections are. “Glutathione is a strong anti-oxidant for treating cancer and AIDS and it may be lethal if OVERUSED.. [sic]” She states, “Also, too much tranexamic acid will cause liver failure...” from BEAUTYQQ (Queenie Chan), “美白針 SKIN WHITENING INJECTION.”

stood as signs of women's inner virtue.¹²² By obscuring her physical features and describing how she is undergoing this treatment to find out whether this treatment works or not (as much for her audience as for herself, a martyr-like act), Queenie encourages viewers to identify with her. The outcome may be the creation of a psychological need to experiment with these treatments. Another video Queenie posted features her wearing a facial paper mask on the plane back to Hong Kong.¹²³ This mask also obscures her face and makes it easier for viewers to imagine themselves as a well-to-do female who travels all over the world to obtain beauty.¹²⁴ By viewing Queenie's media, viewers are subjected to reiterations of how physical beauty directly correlates with inner virtues and characteristics, how money gives you access to many things, and how critical skin whitening practices are to being young, beautiful, and relevant.¹²⁵

Corporeal Damage from Media Mystification

While the majority of high-end skin-whitening creams, when applied as directed, are safe, the high prices can be too steep for some women. The luxury brand products often use mulberry extract, licorice extract, and kojic acid, all found to inhibit melanin naturally. Unfortunately, "natural" is not always within a "normal" price range for many aspirational women. The most effective skin-whitening agents – comprised of mercury-based ingredients or hydroquinone – are also the least expensive. The cheap prices for basic skin-whitening

¹²² Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 24.

¹²³ This is on her "MsQueenieChan" channel, which she describes as her "supermarket channel, which means I will try to share my daily life with you guys...my thought, my laughs [sic], my non-sex life, my crazy ideas... blah blah blah..." on her channel homepage.

BEAUTYQQ (Queenie Chan). "Phantom Of The Plane★空中見鬼★." YouTube, 15 Oct. 2010.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OfUo9tGZcI> (accessed on March 17, 2013).

¹²⁴ This video is for the majority filmed by her friend who accompanied her on the trip on the airplane.

¹²⁵ "Aesthetic dimensions of racism – gradations of skin color, textures of hair – shaped work opportunities, marriage chances, and social life, giving advantages to those with lighter complexions and straighter locks" (Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 42).

ingredients and high demand/high mark-up for the final product make skin-whitening creams a prime product for counterfeiting in the black market. Black markets selling dangerous knockoffs exist alongside the Eslite shopping malls in the East Asian world. This type of unregulated consumerism, compounded with increased messages for women to be whiter, can lead to disastrous results to the female body resulting in permanent damage and social ostracism.

Hydroquinone, a popular ingredient in many skin-whitening products, inhibits melanin while increasing one's risk of getting leukemia and leukodemia – the loss of one's ability to produce pigment.¹²⁶ In the United States, hydroquinone is sold as an over-the-counter topical drug whose concentration cannot exceed 2%. The drug is completely banned from the European Union because medical research has swayed governmental regulators to feel that the dangerous side effects of the drug outweigh its benefits.

Under a thatched roof in Thailand, Panya Boonchun gazes off to the distance while other villagers sneer at her in disgust. Her appearance is shocking: light pink splotches are splattered all over her face and neck, contrasting with her natural, tanned skin tone (Figure 13).

¹²⁶ Fuller. "A Vision of Pale Beauty Carries Risks for Asia's Women."



Figure 13. Panya Boochun, Thai skin-whitening cosmetic user.

Source: Thomas Fuller, "A Vision of Pale Beauty Carries Risks for Asia's Women," *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/world/asia/14thailand.html> (accessed November 24, 2010).

The other villagers, especially the men, subject her to a critical gaze and see her as ugly –the younger boy can't even bring his eyes to focus on Boonchun. Through clenched jaw and averted gaze, she tries to mask her emotions. Boochun used a one-dollar cream called "3 Days" to whiten her skin. Though she initially got great results, her skin soon became itchy and blotchy, a sign of leukodermia from concentrated hydroquinone use. Children now yell, "Ghost!" as she passes, and strangers gawk at her whenever she steps into the public sphere.¹²⁷ She was fired from her job as a singer at a restaurant due to her unsightly appearance.¹²⁸ For the sake of being perceived as beautiful in East Asian society, Boonchun chemically burned parts of her face due to the lack of proper education, social pressures, and self-confidence.

¹²⁷ Fuller, "A Vision of Pale Beauty."

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Cheaper versions of skin-whitening products may also use mercurous chloride. Mercurous chloride is a toxic chemical that can result in hydrargyria through repetitive exposure to mercury. Hydrargyria damages the central nervous system, endocrine system, and brain, which may ultimately lead to death. This chemical is banned for topical use in many countries such as the United States and Thailand. However, there is a market for it in much of East Asia, where counterfeit whitening creams are sold to the masses. The fakes emulate the packaging and color schemes of brand names to fool consumers into buying an inferior product that may not meet government standards. Thus, the uneducated consumer basing her purchases on false signifiers, ends up with products more detrimental than simply being dark-skinned. In 2002, more than thirty women in Hong Kong were hospitalized for mercury poisoning caused by three brands of whitening cream.¹²⁹

The medium used to share Queenie Chan's beauty tips is also a space to sell bootlegged versions of skin-whitening creams. Alibaba.cn (阿里巴巴, *ali baba*), the Chinese website of the Alibaba Group, is a privately owned Chinese Internet-based shopping search engine more popular in China and much of East Asia than its American competitor eBay.com. A search on February 12, 2013 on the Chinese alibaba.cn website for the term skin-whitening (美白, *mei bai*), resulted in over 181,408 results. This set included soaps, facial masks, and even pills sold from vaguely identified distributors and sketchy suppliers. Counterfeit versions of skin-whitening products often do not list the ingredients or their concentrations on the packaging; they seldom give clear application directions. As more brands and counterfeits come into the market to meet the demands for paleness, China and other East Asian countries face the possibility of more tragic or fatal incidents.

¹²⁹ Chong, "Beauty and the Bleach."

Redefining “Real Beauty”

There has been some resistance to the “severe” standards that the global beauty industry has set for women – even in China. Dove, the personal care brand owned by Unilever, started a global “Campaign for Real Beauty” in 2004 to “celebrate the natural physical variation embodied by all women and inspire them to have the confidence to be comfortable with themselves.”¹³⁰ The main aim is to target “negative advertising” and to “reeducate” women to embrace their bodies for what they are. Economic motivations for constructing advertisements sometimes makes these creative directors seem to execute advertisements “haphazardly.” Though extensive analysis has been done on the marketing tactics that multinational corporations use to attract consumers to buy their product, the creative directors do not think about every detail. Unintended consequences for their marketing campaigns occur. Even these incongruences highlight how much power marketing and advertising sway in constructing our reality, as seen in the way Dove revamped their Real Beauty campaign approach to appeal to the Chinese market.

In early years of the worldwide campaign, Chinese consumers were asked whether the “everyday” women featured in Dove’s ads (such as Figure 14) were “fat or fabulous.” The surveyed Chinese women “almost always checked the ‘fat’ box – and for good measure they would add ‘and ugly.’”¹³¹

¹³⁰ Dove. “Real Beauty Comes to Pakistan,” 2011, <http://www.dove.pk/NewsAndEvents/Default.aspx> (accessed April 16, 2013).

¹³¹ Michael Bush. “Festival of Media Case Study: Dove in China's 'Ugly Betty.'” *Advertising Age*. <http://adage.com/article/media/festival-media-case-study-dove-china-s-ugly-betty/136902/> (accessed March 17, 2013).



Figure 14. Dove “Real Beauty” campaign ad.

Source: Burt Helm, “Surprise! Dove’s ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ ads actually kind of fake,” *Businessweek*, May 7, 2008, http://www.businessweek.com/the_thread/brandnewday/archives/2008/05/surprise_doves.html (accessed April 14, 2013).

The survey showed that many Chinese women still strongly valued being skinny, pale, and wide eyed (瘦白美, shou bai mei.) Dove then introduced billboards such as the one in Figure 14 found in Shanghai: the ad features five “real” Chinese women wearing nothing but white sports bras and high-waisted boyshorts, each holding an article of clothing. This campaign wasn’t effective either. Unilever finally realized that the successful campaign strategies they used in the United States and Europe were not successful in the Culturally Chinese market. The standard skinny, airbrushed and Photoshopped models featured in mass media did not offend culturally Chinese women.



Figure 15. Dove “Real Beauty” campaign billboard, Shanghai, China, 2006.

Source: “Shanghai Dispatch: Dove Reaches Out to China’s Heavy Gals” Banterist.com, April 18, 2006, <http://www.banterist.com/archivefiles/000346.html> (accessed March 18, 2013).

According to Unilever’s Asia regional brand development manager for Dove, Mike Bryce, the brand found that Chinese women believed that they could achieve the beauty and good

looks of a model on a billboard if they worked hard at it.¹³² These Culturally Chinese female consumers believe “you are your own enemy.” Dove found out that for this unique demographic, the women felt more internal pressure than social pressure to be thin, white, and large-eyed.

In 2009, Dove decided to spread its “healthy” beauty message (while improving sales and consumption of their own beauty care products) to the Chinese consumers en masse by partnering with the Chinese version of “Ugly Betty,” “Ugly Wudi” (丑女无敌, *chou nu wu di*). This partnership proved an effective and innovative way to message Chinese consumers. Television is one of the highest-viewed mass media outlets in many countries with a large constituency of Culturally Chinese consumer citizens. Furthermore, China’s “hottest” satellite network, Hunan broadcasts “Ugly Wudi.”¹³³ By partnering with this television show, in which Wudi, the protagonist, is an “ugly” girl working in an advertising agency, Dove not only skirted exorbitant television commercial costs, but also integrated “Real Beauty” campaign messaging directly into the show’s scripts. This strategy, implemented by Dove’s media agency, Mindshare, was recognized in the 2009 Festival of Media as the Best Use of Content in the media industry. *AdvertisingAge* did a case study on Mindshare’s success with the Dove Real Beauty “Ugly Wudi” television product placement campaign in China. According to Mateo Eaton, a partner in Mindshare, two factors made the campaign resonate with the targeted demographic: China’s high tolerance for branded programming and the alignment of “Ugly Wudi” storylines and Dove’s messaging.

Some Culturally Chinese women also simply choose not to use skin-whitening creams at all without Dove’s re-education; rather, they actively avoid the sun by applying

¹³² Geoffrey Fowler. "Unilever Gives 'Ugly Betty' a Product-Plug Makeover in China." *Wall Street Journal*. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123051038411338387.html> (accessed March 16, 2013).

¹³³ Bush, “Festival of Media Case Study: Dove in China’s ‘Ugly Betty.’”

sunscreen on their faces and using a UV-blocking umbrella when they are outdoors. Liberty, a young Taiwanese woman who works at the American-founded skincare company NuSkin, told me she simply wants to protect and maintain her natural skin tone and appearance (保养皮肤, *bao yang pi fu*.) Some women are born with lighter skin, so they do not need to do much to maintain a pale complexion. However, even these paler skinned females are constantly given compliments of “How white you are!” or “[how] white and supple [your] skin [is]” (白白嫩嫩, *bai bai nen nen*) to positively reinforce that they stay that way. The women and men that I interviewed all agreed that Culturally Chinese skin-whitening culture will never “end” because it is so ingrained in Chinese culture. It constantly adapts to meet the needs and desires of the ever-changing landscape of global capitalism. With the rise in female expendable income, media consumption and interactivity, the rich and complex Culturally Chinese skin-whitening culture will only grow.

Conclusion

Striving for the white skin ideal has persisted throughout the ages. Business analyst and CEO of China Pacific Partners, Virginia Pan, insists that skin-whitening and its association with beauty “are cultural trends that are not going to shift overnight. It’s only new if you haven’t been in Asia before.”¹³⁴

This thesis has revealed the nuanced nature of Culturally Chinese skin-whitening beauty culture. With skin-whitening remedies, previously known deficits and deformities of the physical body can be erased and whitened. Solomon Leong argues “skin colour operates as a visual agent in defining the boundaries of cultural identity, and in identifying a person’s place in a local social hierarchy, if not an increasingly global one.”¹³⁵ Skin color, a physical marker, illuminates otherwise hard-to-distinguish relationships the individual has with her surroundings. According to Paula Black, the rise of the beauty industry reflects the underlying “political, social, economic, and cultural processes” that female consumers seem to passively accept and practice.¹³⁶ Examining the beauty industry sheds light on the realities young Culturally Chinese women face in the workforce, dating scene, and home life.

The image is seen as a “re-presentation” of the lived experience.¹³⁷ In advertising, the carefully constructed signifier and signified circuit of the image helps convey and emphasize certain attributes of the product that producer wants to emphasize. Ultimately we must realize that all these marketing campaigns, inclusions and omissions, are business decisions. Everything is driven economically. Somewhere in the chain of command, creative directors

¹³⁴ Reedy. "Ads Pressure Hong Kong Women to Whiten Up."

¹³⁵ Leong, “Who’s the fairest of them all?,” 1.

¹³⁶ Black, *The Beauty Industry*. 21.

¹³⁷ Roland Barthes. “The Rhetoric of the Image” in *Image – Music – Text*, 152-163. Trans. Stephen Heath. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 152.

have to make quick decisions about what compels a consumer to buy in order to make sure the ad or spot gets produced in time.

Skin-whitening is only one facet of a larger, rapidly growing industry in East Asia for female body modification practices that physically alter Asian bodies to better emulate Western features. These practices include eyelid surgeries where a woman's eyelid crease is cut to create an eyelid fold (making one's eyes appear bigger, rounder, and more Western looking), breast enhancements, hair dye treatments that turn naturally brown or black Asian hair platinum blonde, and even leg elongation surgery.¹³⁸ This type of bodywork is considered the norm, even a "rite of passage" for not only some younger generation East Asians but also other coming-of-age young adults around the world. These women and their families invest significant portions of their income to help fund a Cinderella project. The new desire to undergo the violent trauma of bodywork is becoming popularized at a younger and younger age. It is even more of a contested space because these young adults, even children, may not fully understand the implications of their actions or be critical of consumer culture. The marketization of bodily enhancement is booming, lucrative, and dangerous. This topic would, however, require an entirely separate thesis.

Pharmaceutical companies around the world are also investing heavily in producing memorable advertisement campaigns to make consumer-patients more aware of brand-name medications that help "fix" health problems they may not have. The natural, human body is regulated and controlled by media-glorified medicines to "correct" and "protect" it from irregularities. Many of these medicines are regularly being prescribed and used for

¹³⁸ *Beauty in China*. Film. Directed by Elodie Pakosz. Filmmakers Library Online. New York, NY: Filmmakers Library, 2008.

Taboo: Body Perfect. Films Media Group, 2004. Films on Demand. H.264, <http://digital.films.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?aid=4058&xtid=40830>. (accessed March 17, 2013).

unintended purposes to enable people to feel “healthy” and “normal.” In America, Viagra and other male erectile dysfunction medications are prescribed and regularly abused to help the everyday, “normal” male “improve” their sexual performance. The commercials for these products use “macho men” imagery of cowboys riding bareback in the Wild West or some tanned, middle-aged men catching some waves on a sunny beach. More and more adolescent girls are being put on contraceptive medication at the young age of thirteen or fourteen not because they are sexually active; they are trying to deal with “uncontrollable” acne breakouts that ostracize them in the middle school lunch room. These contraceptives help “get rid” of acne because they regulate the young girl’s fluctuating hormones. Adderall is sometimes distributed between students to help non-Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder students concentrate and perform better during testing. The misuse of these drugs has led to many documented unintended permanent deformities and deaths. Thousands of these cases may even be misdiagnosed post-mortem, so the true implications of the rise of the medicated individual will never be truly known. The body is now expected to be modified and medicated in order to fit into society.

Media outlets have glorified another lifestyle trend, “fitness and well-being,” as the key to a happy, healthy, longer life. Americans spend hundreds of dollars a month for gym memberships, post-workout protein smoothies, deep-tissue massages, and the latest dry-wicking compression spandex pants. Every other publication, fitness magazine articles and medical studies “debunk” existing fitness “myths” regarding the benefits of stretching before working out, whether or not strength training “bulks” women up, or how to ward off cancer. Americans eagerly read the fitness regimens their favorite celebrities use to keep them in shape to the extent that we bestow the title of “celebrity trainer” to the person who just yells motivational quotes with a stopwatch in hand at someone famous. These trainers, similar to

Queenie, are trying to take advantage of their relationship within a larger phenomenon (fitness and skin-whitening, respectively) to stand out. In East Asia, tai chi has been practiced for centuries to maintain a holistically “centered” body. Tai chi was commonly practiced in a public park en masse. Other forms of fitness were practiced privately indoors. Now, more Culturally Chinese people are exercising outside in public. Younger generations are going to city parks to play basketball afterschool and you can see the long ponytails of Chinese girls swinging as they go on brisk walks outside. This outward practice of exercise is a new trend that exists vis-à-vis the increasing ability for Culturally Chinese to purchase Nike shoes that were once produced in sweatshops within the region only exported for Western consumption. East Asia wants to show off its new position within the global order as both a top producer and consumer.

Though skin-whitening is one segment of the global cosmetics market that may seem frivolous, the implications are vast – indicating deep, seismic shifts in consumerism, identity formation, self-fashioning practices, while revealing deep-rooted ethnic differentiation and “racial” hierarchies still existent. This thesis’s mission has been to analyze and to track the evolution of the literal translation of the term that describes skin-whitening, 美白, *mei bai*. The Mandarin term for “beautiful white” has changed over time to become the name for a burgeoning consumer product category. Skin-whitening culture visually shows the huge economic stakes for Culturally Chinese women to stand out in a competitive job and marriage market. These women have grander aspirations and are leveraging the commodity market to find ways out of an otherwise “paralyzing” established social system by rejecting the “natural” body. The new Culturally Chinese woman who practices skin-whitening – affluent, cosmopolitan, Westernized, and increasingly obsessed with her appearance – is the current model of global consumerism.

Appendix: Accompanying Thesis Website

I welcome readers to continue examining multinational corporations' influence on skin-whitening culture in Cultural China by going online to my thesis website at www.thesis.elysiapan.com. This companion website is a collection of all of the images I collected during my trip, gathered in a database-like site that enables viewers to see for themselves the diverse, nuanced variations of common themes I have discussed. Each individual ad, pamphlet, skin-whitening-related magazine article, commercial, and YouTube video that I use in my thesis analysis is uploaded on the website. It is compiled by individual advertisements and viewers may examine all the data and look at images that have specific qualities with the “keywords” or “tag” function. This website database helps to visually support my claims.

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