

Beauty in East Asia: Introduction

Anett Dippner & Eun-Jeung Lee

In recent years, reports about the new “beauty craze” in China and South Korea have been piling up in Western newspapers and media outlets. They reveal details about the Chinese high-school graduates who get a nose job first thing after graduation, about double eyelid surgery special offers for couples on Valentine’s Day, and about Korean girl bands who collectively have a makeover. They echo popular fake news stories in East Asian media, for instance the one about the husband who sued his wife over their ugly children after discovering she had cosmetic surgery, and gossip about bizarre incidences of medical tourism, like the one about two Chinese patients who were not allowed to pass border control when trying to reenter their native country because their facial features had changed so fundamentally after cosmetic surgery in South Korea that they could not be recognized from their passports. Of course, most of these stories are motivated by a sensationalist curiosity and do not dig deeper into these phenomena, how they could be interpreted from a sociological perspective, and what they might be able to tell us about current transformation processes occurring in relation to modernization, neoliberalization, and negotiations of gender relations, class affiliation, and individual subject positions in East Asian societies.

In fact, examining bodily practices and discourses on beauty can be a rich source of understanding vis-à-vis the ongoing societal changes unfolding in East Asia in recent decades. On the one hand, if we view beautification practices as a kind of skillful performance or practical intentionality then this can tell us a lot about incorporated and embodied structures of social knowledge and norms of action (Csordas 1994). On the other, we can identify underlying mechanisms behind the formation and stabilization of social orders through the human body — and thus identify the order itself. Thus the body, and its modification and beautification, act as a symbolic canvas on which social change and modernization processes are captured: through the prism of the body as both producing and being produced by social structures and norms, it hence exists as the literal embodiment of societal phenomena. An analysis of body representations, physical routines, and beauty practices can, then, help to capture and explain these very processes.

With the “body turn” in Social Science, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies since the 1990s, the category of the “body” has been systematically integrated into the

conceptualization of sociality. Subsequently it has been identified as both subject and object of social structures, institutional orders, and different kinds of technologies (see Schilling 1993, 2005; Newton 2003; Gugutzer 2006). Since then, the “social” and “communicative” body has been used as a symbol for the analysis of a broad range of social categories, classifications, relationships, and institutions. For example bodily representations and routines have been deconstructed in relation to: mechanisms of doing gender (Wolf 1990; Davies 1997); everyday performances and stagings of the body, with their preconditions as well as meanings having been investigated (namely by Goffman, in his groundbreaking and seminal work of 1959); the “political body,” identified with a symbolic-metaphorical use of the body for political purposes and as a potential source of resistance (Tambornino 2002; Huth and Krzeminski 2007); discourses about the “consumer body,” stigmatized as a result of new bodily-related needs created and satisfied by the consumer industry (Featherstone 1991; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Otnes and Tuncay-Zayer 2012; Nicholas 2015); “medicalized and measured bodies,” as symbolic of biomedical and biotechnological interventions in the course of biopolitical discourses (Turner 1992; Jakobus et al. 1990; Pugliese 2010; Repo 2016); and, (un)intentional experiences of the “affective body” — investigated in the interplay between emotions, hormones, and social performance (Featherstone 2010; Liljefors et al. 2012; Colombetti 2014).

Within this wide field of the sociology of the body, the politics of it remain, along with the concept of beauty, a key set of issues and debates — especially for feminist, postfeminist, and neoliberal studies (Brodo 1993; Faludi 1991; Coppock et al. 1995; McRobbie 2009; Gill and Scharff 2011, 2017; Negra 2012; Phipps 2014; Davies 2015; Jha 2016). However these discourses often seem too stuck in an impasse between polarized positions, stressing oppression by beauty norms versus pleasure, female agency versus cultural domination versus global beauty and media industrial strategies. As such, on the one side, we can notice an increasing global awareness of the leading role of East Asia in the popularization of beautification practices and the heightened societal role of sporting an attractive appearance, without this convincingly being captured theoretically at present however. On the other, we can also simultaneously observe a resurgence of interest in beauty studies in recent years in Western social science and gender studies without, however, empirically catching up with the global reach of this ongoing development. This seems to be the perfect time, then, to contribute to this discussion with new perspectives and fresh empirical avenues from the field of Area Studies.

For this reason, we invited international East Asia experts working on gender, popular and consumer culture, communication and media, and social theory to discuss the social implications of current body and beauty politics in East Asia during the DFG-funded conference “The Beautiful Face of Modernity: Beauty,

Beautification and Social Change in Transnational East Asia” held at Freie Universität Berlin in November 2016. The conference focused on discourses and practices of beauty in China, South Korea, and Japan. Its core aim was to reveal, through comparative analysis, how body images, beauty practices, and imagined ideals of attractiveness are entangled with processes of social change and reflexive modernization in East Asia.

The findings from the conference are investigated in detail in the respective contributions to this special issue. We have selected three articles and a Research Note — focusing on China, South Korea, and Japan — that discuss the topics at hand from contrasting theoretical, methodical, and empirical perspectives, in order to show the broad spectrum of research in the field. We have also deliberately opted for quite explorative papers, ones with innovative and controversial theoretical or empirical approaches, so as to initiate the desired further discussion.

In her article, Joo-hyun Cho presents a new theoretical approach to the analysis of body practices. She deplores the prevailing trend in Korean social sciences to consider body and beauty practices either as the result of a media-induced global phenomenon or as a specific culturally and historically conditioned development. In Cho’s opinion, these approaches do not take into account the possibilities of female agency, empowerment, and imaginatively recreated social practices expressed now through the body. In order to close this perception gap, Cho proposes a modified version of practice theory. Her version of it, which she calls the “theory of symbolic complex adaptive systems,” consists of three main components: social practice theory, philosophical pragmatism, and theories of complex adaptive systems. As an illustration of her theoretical approach, the author explores the creative and empowering potential of beauty practices for young Korean women in late modern Korean society. At the same time, however, she also shows how these advances are partly being transformed into retroactive mechanisms of inequality — and hence have been undermining the achievements of Korea’s hard-won gender policy and the women’s movement of recent decades.

In the second paper, Anett Dippner uses the case study of internet celebrities (*Wanghong*) in China to analyze how a new awareness of “aesthetic vigilance” is being constructed through the self-presentation of young women within the newly established social media culture. In their striving for an attractive social media performance, internet celebrities rely mostly on good looks and therefore subject themselves to a mixture of, on the one side, empowering and useful and, on the other, gender and age discriminating and disciplining techniques of the self. The utilization of “body capital” and aesthetic labor has stoked the public discourse about *yanzhi* (face value) in China’s status-conscious society, and led to a society-wide discussion about new beauty ideals and the growing popularity of cosmetic surgery, the objectification and commercialization of the body, as well as the increasing importance of presenting an appropriate appearance for social and

economic success since the turn of the millenium. With an analysis of this prevalent internet celebrity phenomenon, the paper looks behind the sparkling social media façade and reveals the social and economic conditions that have led to the new ideology of “beauty as capital” in China. Dippner furthermore shows how social media representations simultaneously both utilize and also complicate the construction of a “postfeminist” neoliberal femininity.

In the third article, Masafumi Monden deals with representations of the male body in Japan. Men often have a sense of their bodies as compared to some culturally predefined ideal. The imagining of masculine beauty in Japan, as embodied predominantly by the country’s male actors and models, differs from the Western muscular ideal: attributes such as *shōnen* (boyish) and *kawaii* (sweet) are in the foreground here. This kind of *kawaii* masculinity is omnipresent in contemporary Japanese culture, from advertising to television programs, from magazines to fashion media, thus articulating its potential to significantly influence contemporary Japanese men. According to Monden, the boyish stylization refers to a kind of masculinity that lies in a limited space between boyhood and masculinity, which can be extended at will. He investigates the significance of this beauty concept within that liminal space, specifically by examining the intersections between masculinity, the body, and self-development. He argues that the significance of such a male beauty lies in the possibility that representations of “masculinity” embodied by these men might both reflect and shape certain ideals and ideas of gender then consumed by men in Japan. With his analysis he shows how the beauty and fashion discourse, as produced through media texts like fashion magazines and advertisements, are themselves shaped by and dependent on wider social forces as well as their relations with other social fields.

In her Research Note, Valeria Lotti takes a closer look at the ideals of beauty that are currently widespread in Chinese society and highlights specifically their cultural and social influences. She analyzes popular cosmetic surgery trends and how the images of (female) artificially modified bodies are communicated and discussed in Chinese society, and then investigates what effects these body images unfold on the construction of modern individuals. Nowadays, advertisements for cosmetic treatment are ubiquitous in Chinese cities. They all depict desirable bodily representations with the following characteristics: thin figure, oval face with pointed chin, slim cheeks, high-bridged nose, big eyes, and fair skin. These features are discursively linked to the construction of the “modern beautiful woman.” Lotti traces the evolution of these standards of beauty, which are, to a certain extent, the result of globalization and individualization. With the reform era, the gradual diffusion of Western culture in China had an impact on traditional notions of beauty there and thereby created new global as well as local standards. Women then choose to pursue these as a way to affirm their individual identity.

The contributors to this special issue reflect in their respective articles on different theoretical and empirical approaches to the topic of beauty, and illustrate the manifold facets of its study. Though arguing with different approaches, and thus focusing on their research topic via a particular lens, they all try to work out the entanglements between beauty ideals and body practices, gender and social change. This enmeshment result from social and economic modernization processes and neoliberal governance strategies, studies here form a transnational East Asian perspective. The four contributions are only a small and maybe quite controversial selection from the overall conference outcomes, and provide but a snapshot of the current research emerging in the field of Beauty Studies in East Asia. There are, of course, various other aspects and issues to beauty and gender studies in East Asia that are not covered in this special issue, but that still certainly require more scholarly attention. Therefore, this issue should be seen as giving impetus to the continuation and deepening of the discussion within this growing field of study.

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