

A Thing Called Beauty

We have all heard the saying that “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder,” that “You shouldn’t judge a book by its cover.” But what would happen if the beholder saw no beauty – if the ugly cover became the book’s value, and perfection, a new obsession? Modern-day China has become such a beholder; its people, slaves to the very thing their “covers” strive after – Beauty. In the name of Beauty, young girls are taught that Barbie is ultimate perfection (Ling). In the name of Beauty, thousands of teens and grandmothers undergo plastic surgery (Ling). In the name of Beauty, professional men and women break their legs and stretch them out, in hopes of growing a little taller (Ling). If I were a correspondent to a foreign country, I would travel to China. My assignment: China’s Beauty Boom.

Throughout history, the Chinese have tried hard to preserve their ancient culture by rejecting foreign influences, and in 1966, the Cultural Revolution “banned the pursuit of beauty” in an attempt to keep China from becoming “westernized” (Ling). But after the ban was lifted in 1976, beauty became an obsession, and the “western look” became the new goal (Ling). And as one thing leads to another, after the make-up and designer clothes, the people of China began to hunger for more; they became discontent with the things they thought they couldn’t change, like their eyes and height and weight. So when the ban on cosmetic surgery was lifted as well, the number of surgeries sky rocketed, as countless patients flocked to the knife (Ling).

Today, the most popular plastic surgery performed in China is the “eyelid reshaping surgery,” in which a double-eyelid is cut to reshape the smaller “Asian eyelid” into a larger “Western eyelid” (Ling). Though this surgery costs only about \$300 in U.S. currency, many other cosmetic surgery procedures are performed daily, that cost up in the thousands, as

people find they need this and that to be “nipped and tucked” (Ling and Hays). As a correspondent, I would ask patients if reshaping their bodies really makes them happy. Does this store-bought happiness really rid them of all discontentments? What is really cut away on that table, and what is really gained? The sad thing is, that most of those patients would, without hesitation, tell me that the pain and money were worth the result, 100% of the way, because most importantly, they have gained *opportunity* (Ling). How and why, our sheltered minds ask? Because in China, the influences of Beauty have been twisted, and penetrate so deep, that even success in life requires submission to its demands.

To land a good job in China today, a candidate must be smart, hardworking, amiable, and, oh yes, a minimum of 5'2" (Ling). Twisted as it is, such height requirements are not uncommon in China for jobs, colleges, and even for getting a date (Ling and Hays). Here, the cover has literally become the book's value, and as if plastic surgery were not enough, even more drastic measures have been taken to meet Beauty's standards. In recent years, the controversial surgical procedure of leg lengthening has become popular in Shanghai (Ling). Patients are rewarded after the six to twelve month recovery period, with an added four to twelve inches of height, but some would say the process and pain border on “horrifying,” thus, the controversy (Ling and Hays). During the procedure, a patient's leg bone is literally sawed in half under the knee, and the two halves are stretched apart by a brace, which is held in place by screws that are drilled into the leg bone (Ling and Hays). Over the extremely painful recovery period, new bone is supposed to grow in between the two severed halves, thus increasing the patient's height (Ling and Hays). And if asked the same questions about the connection between beauty and happiness, these patients would also

say that they had no regrets because of the opportunity they gained, despite the fact most live in ashamed seclusion until their legs are fully healed (Ling).

We as Americans hear about these standards of Beauty taken to such extremes, and feel horror and disgust. But that is where we turn the blind eye and become hypocritical. Our own culture is just as much in slavery to Beauty as China – our models die of anorexia, the price tags on clothes buy kids friends and respect, our tanning beds cause skin cancer, and we too play with plastic surgery and Botox injections. Being of Chinese decent myself, I am greatly saddened by the changes occurring in my country today, but am also overwhelmed by the worldwide submission to this thing called Beauty. I find myself asking, what are we as people really after, in our pursuit of Beauty? Acceptance? Love? In China, success and opportunity? What does it mean to be truly successful, anyway? If we stop for a moment in our busy lives, we realize that Beauty has become a pandemic, infecting everyone and everything. Our human nature longs for a happiness that the store-bought and superficial cannot give, but if we as humans instead took the time to look past the cover and open the book, we would discover the deeper, truer gifts and treasures of each other, that make each of us unique.

All in all, if I were a foreign correspondent to China, reporting on the “Beauty Boom,” I would not simply be learning about a twisted cultural revolution. I would be delving into the darker side of our human nature, and finding out how the beholder has been so deceived, by a thing called Beauty.

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