



Traditional and Contemporary Female Beauty Ideals in China: Focus Group Interviews with  
Young Chinese Women

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**Introduction.** The implementation of the open-door policy in late 1978 and economic reform in the 1980s (Chin, 1996) brought enormous economic, social, and cultural transformations to Chinese society. The beauty industry is booming in China due to rapidly rising consumer income levels and consumerism with greater exposure to entertainment media. The total volumes of retail sales of cosmetics continue showing rapid growth in China from \$26 billion in 2013 to \$35 billion in 2016 as the world's 2nd largest market following the U.S. ("Investigation of China's Current Cosmetics Market," 2017). China is expected to become the largest market of cosmetics products in 2020. Chinese people's interest in physical beauty is also evident in booming plastic surgery industry. Chinese people will spend \$127 billion for cosmetic enhancement procedures by 2019 (Guanzon, 2016). Thus, the current study was aimed to examine how young Chinese women define the cultural standards of female ideal beauty in contemporary China as well as traditional concepts of female beauty using a qualitative research approach.

**Literature Review.** Among the sociocultural influences on female beauty, the impact of media is considered particularly important in defining concepts of female beauty. According to Zhang (2012), women's internalized conceptions of body image and feminine beauty are strongly influenced by mass media. According to feminist theories (e.g., Bordo, 1993), women's appearance standards become increasingly unrealistic and pressure to attain them becomes more intense as women gain increased opportunities in society. Enhanced economic status of women in China seems to be parallel with increasing body image issues with significant rise in eating disorders (Pike & Dunne, 2015). Interview questions were centered on the following research questions: 1) Do Chinese women view that contemporary cultural standards of female ideal beauty are different from the traditional concepts of female beauty?; 2) Do Chinese women aspire to have physical characteristics of female images in magazines and other media outlets (e.g., TV, movies)?; 3) Do Chinese women feel pressure to have ideal physical characteristics by the media and significant others (e.g., friends, partners, parents)?

**Method.** The present study employed an in-depth focus-group interview strategy. A total of 23 female Chinese students (ages between 20 and 22) enrolled in Donghua University in Shanghai were recruited through a local contact and interviewed between November 2 and November 6, 2016. All interviewees were upper level students who have high levels of proficiency with English. A total of four focus-group interviews (ranging from 5 to 7 for each interview) were conducted by the researcher at the Donghua University campus. A semi-structured interview guide was used in the interviews since the interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on their responses as necessary. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes.

**Results and Discussion.** The constant comparative method was used for data analysis to generate meaningful categories by systematically exploring and investigating the phenomenon (Strauss, 1987). The two coders, the principal investigator and a trained graduate research assistant, transcribed the data by independently listening to the audio recorded responses multiple times until all responses were made available for comparisons. The final codes were discussed and agreed upon by the two coders. The respondents were given pseudonyms for some exemplary quotes. Four main themes were used for organizing qualitative data in the study: 1) The traditional preference of female ideal beauty in China; 2) the female beauty ideal in contemporary China; 3) fashion magazine influences on the female beauty ideal; 4) influences of other media and significant others on the female beauty ideal. The most frequently mentioned word for the traditional female beauty ideal was (being) fat, followed by a round face (baby face) and small lips. When the researcher asked whether there have been any historic periods that preferred women to be as slim or thin as today's women, the interviewees responded that compared to Ancient China, women are slimmer in contemporary Chinese society. One person said being skinny in the traditional society meant being poor. When asked about female beauty ideals in contemporary China, a "slim body" was the most frequent response (65.4%), followed by a "small face (33%)." Other responses included "Don't eat as much food" and "Diet." *I think I totally like the contemporary bodies...like supermodels. Being slim is very important* (Yan). *We all want to be slim and have small face. And a lot of us, we want to, we want our face to have sort of pointy chin* (Zhang). A few interviewees mentioned that a pointy chin wasn't a desired physical feature according to the traditional concepts of beauty. *Old China thought people with a pointy chin is just like foxes. The foxes will seduce their husbands. It's not a good luck for her family, especially for her husband* (Lee). When interviewees were asked about characteristics of female images in magazines, being "thin" was characterized the most, followed by being "sexy" and "Western-like" images. When the researcher asked whether magazines are important for shaping female beauty ideals, the large majority responded "yes" (82.6%). *Sometimes TV programs can show a real body shape or what they will look like but magazines always show more beautiful side of them [models]. So I think magazines are more important to shape...to show beauty* (Wu). While many of the interviewees said they would like to look like magazine images (mostly answering sometimes and yes), the majority of interviewees said they do not compare themselves to female images in magazines (78.2%). *I want to look like them [magazine images], but I don't compare because that it would make me unhappy* (Dong). Almost everyone (all but one) said they don't feel pressure to look like magazine images. Since most of the respondents desire to look like magazine images, they seem to intentionally avoid making comparisons to those images with a fear for negative consequences. For questions whether interviewees feel pressure from other media outlets and significant others, a few mentioned feeling pressures from significant others such as friends and romantic partners.

**Conclusion.** Despite the limited sample size due to the nature of qualitative approach, women in contemporary China seem to endorse much of the Western standards for female beauty ideals pervasive in media images. With a growing concern about body image issues in China, the outcome of this research should be a unique contribution to the literature since traditional concepts of female beauty seem to have changed in the context of rapid and disruptive social change, particularly changing gender roles for women. It suggests that women's internalized conceptions of feminine beauty are not isolated from cultural environments where they live.

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