

The Search for Beautiful Women in China and Japan: Aesthetics and Power 美女とは何か—日中美人の文化史

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Translated by Kyoko Selden

An oblique tooth is viewed in the States as requiring straightening, but in Japan it may be thought of as emblematic of a young woman's charm. While a slim body is a prerequisite for beauty today, plump women were considered beautiful in Tang Dynasty China and Heian period Japan. Starting from around the twelfth century in China, bound feet symbolized the attractiveness of women. But Japan, which received sundry influences from China, never adopted foot-binding. Instead, shaving eyebrows and blackening teeth became markers of feminine beauty. Before modern times, neither Japanese nor Chinese paid much attention to double eyelids, but in the course of the long twentieth century they became a standard for distinguishing beautiful from plain women. Thus, criteria of beauty greatly differ by era and culture, and therein lie many riddles.

Focusing on changing representations of beauty in Chinese and Japanese cultures, Cho Kyo, in The Search for the Beautiful Woman, attempts to clarify such riddles from the angle of comparative cultural history. Before modern times, Japanese culture was profoundly shaped by Chinese culture, and representations of feminine beauty too received continental influences. In considering Japanese representations of feminine beauty, the author examines literary and artistic sources scattered across historical materials and classical literary works.

Are There Universal Criteria for Beauty?

What constitutes a beautiful woman? Intrinsically, criteria vary greatly depending upon peoples and cultures. A woman thought of as a beauty in one culture may be considered plain in another. This is not normally in our consciousness. Rather, images of beauty are thought to be universal across all cultures. Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn gain worldwide fame as beauties, not simply in American eyes but in Asian and African eyes. But on what criteria?



Princess Shokushi from *One Hundred Poets* by Katsukawa Shunshō, Tokugawa, private collection.



Niimura Nobu, consort of Tokugawa Yoshinobu, the last Shogun.

In the possession of Ibaraki Prefecural Museum of History. Pola Research institute of Beauty and Culture (ed.), *Bakumatsu-Meiji bijinchō* (Shin Jinbutsu Ōraisha, 2002). p. 18.

Have universal standards for determining beauty emerged with the global reach of consumer culture and of the media? As products of multinational enterprises transcend national boundaries to spread worldwide, people of different races and nations have come to use the same cosmetics, and people of different skin colors and facial and bodily features have come to don similar fashions. As a result, the fact that different cultures have different standards of beauty was forgotten before we realized it.

In earlier epochs, different cultures shared no common conception of beauty. In ancient times, each culture held a different image of beautiful women. This was naturally so when cultures were widely different, say, between Western Europe and East Asia, but images were not

identical even between closely connected cultures.

Both Chinese and Japanese are Mongoloid. Moreover, in pre-modern times China and Japan shared Confucian culture. Despite the fact that cultural ties between the two countries were extremely close, however, images of beauty in Edo Japan (1600-1868) and Qing China (1644-1911) were strikingly different. For example, while bound feet were a condition for female beauty in China, in Japan blackened teeth were considered beautiful.

At present, with the advance of globalization, the same commodities are not only distributed throughout the world but information easily transcends cultural walls. Boundary crossings represented by satellite television, film and the internet have greatly changed values and aesthetics of the non-Western world, but also of the Western world . . . such that the very categories of East and West, and perhaps North and South, are problematized. As American visual culture is being consumed at the global level, the Western sense of beauty inevitably penetrates today's developing countries. But Chinese and Japanese conceptions of beauty have also, at various times, made their way across the globe through art, literature, film, commodities and communications.

Despite the rapidly advancing standardization of aesthetic sensibility, however, criteria of beauty have not necessarily become uniform. In Sichuan province, a young medical student from the Republic of Mali became acquainted with a Chinese woman. They fell in love and eventually married, the bridegroom staying on in China and becoming a doctor. A *People's Daily* reporter who interviewed him asked: "Would you let us know the secret for winning a beauty like your wife?" "We Mali people have a completely different sense of beauty from yours. A person you regard as a beauty isn't necessarily always beautiful in our eyes," he

said by way of preface before answering the reporter's question.

The absence of universal standards for physical beauty was recognized early on along with the discovery of "the intercultural." Ever since Darwin stated that "It is certainly not true that there is in the mind of man any universal standard of beauty with respect to the human body,"¹ many researchers have made the same point. Claude Lévi-Strauss, who observed the body drawings of the Caduveo tribe in Brazil and described them in *Tristes Tropiques*, conjectured as to why many men belonging to other tribes came to settle and marry Caduveo women at Nalike: "Perhaps the facial and body paintings explain the attraction; at all events, they strengthen and symbolize it. The delicate and subtle markings, which are as sensitive as the lines of the face, and sometimes accentuate them, sometimes run counter to them, make the women delightfully alluring."⁽²⁾ When he wrote this, the aesthetics that greatly differed from Western sense of beauty did not shock his readers. In their daily lives, however, most people still believe that essential physical beauty exists universally.



Utagawa Kunimasa, "Young Woman and a Cat at a Kotatsu"

Tokyo National Museum. *Ukiyo-e, Nihon bijutsu zenshū*, Tokugawa, (Comprehensive Collection of Japanese Art) vol. 20 (Kōdansha, 1991), p. 34.



Kitagawa Utamaro, "Array of Supreme Beauties of the Present Day: Takikawa", Tokugawa, Tokyo National Museum. *Ukiyo-e*, p. 23.



Figure 0-1 Portrait of Empress Xiao Xianchun in Formal Court Attire. Qing. National Palace Museum (Beijing). Source: Qi Gongzhu, ed. *Select Chinese Paintings of Successive Dynasties*, vol. 6 (*Zhongguo lidai huihua jingpin*). Shangdong Meishu Publishing House, 2003, figure 248.

How Foreign Races Were Regarded

It was in the twentieth century that images of beauty became homogenized from the West to Asia and Africa. Before then, aesthetics of facial features not only differed, but, with some exceptions, different peoples thought one another ugly. The Portuguese Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz (1520-1570), who visited China in the mid-sixteenth century, portrayed Chinese people, in his *South China in the Sixteenth Century*, as having "small eyes, low noses, large faces."⁽³⁾ Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), the Italian Jesuit priest who stayed in China from

1552 to 1616, wrote, “Men’s beards are thin and meager and at times they have none at all. Their hair is rough and straight. . . . The narrow, elliptical eyes are noticeably black. The nose is small and flat. . . .”⁽⁴⁾ While neither missionary directly says Chinese are ugly, discomfort lurks between the lines.

Japanese faces looked the same way to Westerners’ eyes. The German doctor Philipp Franz Balthasar von Siebold (1796-1866), who resided in Japan in 1823-29 and 1858-62, states of people of inland Kyūshū, “their faces are flat and wide, with small and wide noses, large mouths, and thick lips,” “wings of the nose pressed deep, eyes wide apart, cheek bones protruding.”⁽⁵⁾ Swedish botanist Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828), who visited Japan in 1775, says: “[Japanese people’s eyes] are oblong, small, and are sunk deeper in the head, in the consequence of which these people have almost the appearance of being pink-eyed. In other respects their eyes are dark-brown, or rather black. . . . The eyebrows are also placed somewhat higher. Their heads are in general large and their necks short; their hair black, thick, and shining from the use they make of oils. Their noses although not flat, are yet rather thick and short.”⁽⁶⁾ As time passed, exaggerated portrayals of ugliness became fewer, but eyes directed toward Mongoloids did not change much from the cases of Gaspar da Cruz and Matteo Ricci.

Westerners similarly appeared ugly or grotesque in Asian eyes. Yan Shigu (581-645) of the Tang period writes in an annotation in “Traditions of the Western Regions,” fascicle 96 of *The Book of the Former Han*, “The Wusun [tribe] have the strangest features among the various peoples of the Western Regions.”⁽⁷⁾ The reason that today’s Hu people [ethnic groups in northern and western regions], with their blue eyes and red beards, resemble monkeys in countenance is that they derive from the same ancestors as the Wusun.” When Tang people saw blue (or jasper-green) eyes and red beards,

they reflexively thought of animals. Of course, peoples of the Western Regions are not Westerners. But to Tang Chinese, deep sculpted faces of the Caucasoid type appeared ugly.

Likewise when they directly described Europeans. “Biographies” 213 in fascicle 325 of *The History of the Ming* (1368-1644) characterizes the Dutch as having “deep set eyes and a long nose, with the hair, eyebrows, and beard equally red.” Seemingly an objective depiction of physical characteristics, the passage employs the words “deep set eyes and long noses” with a clearly derogatory nuance. The term “red hair” (*hongmao*) as a disparaging alias for Westerners began to be used around then. Likewise, “red hair, jasper eyes” (*hongmao biyan*) was a negative expression. As in Tang China (618-684, 705-907), red hair (or gold hair) and blue eyes were directly connected to the image of wild animals. Such a view finally reversed itself in modern times.

Following the Opium War (1840-1842), China and the West experienced a reversal of power, and Chinese views of Westerners gradually changed. In 1866, the Qing official Bin Chun (1827-1910) was sent as the first formal representative to observe Europe. European women had come to look beautiful in his eyes.⁽⁸⁾ Interestingly, his memoir called *Occasional Jottings Aboard a Raft* (Chengcha biji) makes no reference at all to the color of hair and eyes.

When looking at people of a different race or ethnicity, whether the observation is of the same gender can affect aesthetic judgments. There are many examples in which, in the eyes of male observers, foreigners of the same gender look ugly yet women look beautiful. Siebold and Thunberg mentioned above, as well as the German physician and naturalist Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716), write in their travelogues that Japanese women are quite lovely. Likewise, even if Western women looked

attractive to a Qing government official, he may not necessarily have similarly assessed Western men.



Ascribed to Gu Kaizhi, “Instructress Writes a Letter of Advice” Eastern Jin. British Museum. Liu Changluo et al. (ed.), *Zhonghua guwenmin datuji* (Collection of ancient Chinese culture), People’s Daily et al., 1992, part 7 (Customs and Manners), p. 7.



Leng Mei, “Out in the Garden on a Moonlit Night” Qing. National Palace Museum (Taipei). *Glimpses*, p. 45.

In China, too, once it was recognized that the West had overwhelming power, “red hair” and “jasper eyes” became gradually less ugly. Indeed, in the twentieth century they were transformed into a symbol of beauty. Western fiction in translation exerted great influence on the reversal of the image. Along with that, approaches to the portrayal of Westerners also changed. In Chinese fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, “red hair” changed to “golden hair” (*jinfā*) and “jasper eyes” to “indigo pupils” (*lan yanjing*).

A similar trend was common in Japan as well. There seem to be two stereotypical depictions of Westerners in modern Japanese fiction: extremely ugly or exceedingly beautiful. When portrayed as ugly, physical characteristics suggestive of non-humans such as a bear-like huge body, intense body odor, and uncanny blue eyes are heavily emphasized.⁽⁹⁾

Whether or not people of a different race appear beautiful is less a matter of judgment based on looks and styles than a product of one’s evaluation of that race’s culture. From the start, it is meaningless to try to determine whether Caucasians or Mongoloids are more beautiful. To compare the appearances of races that differ in eye color, hair, and skull structure, is like comparing chow and bulldog, as it were, and judging which animal is more aesthetically appealing. In this sense, the Miss World competition can hardly be expected to have any “fair criteria of judgment.” The interracial comparison is predicated on a myth that humans are all the same.

Aesthetics and Power Relations Among Cultures

Judging comparative beauty of two human groups invariably involves a perception of hierarchy, or power relations, between them. Aesthetic judgment about racial and ethnic groups involves power relations between cultures. Stated simply, a people whose civilization is regarded as highly developed is

likely to be viewed as physically appealing, whereas an ethnic group deemed “backward” is considered ugly. So long as the “backward” culture remains unaware of its backwardness, members do not think of themselves as ugly. But once hierarchical consciousness is established, the aesthetic of physical features rapidly changes.

This is the reason that, today, Westerners are considered beautiful. It is not just Westerners themselves who think this, people in developing countries also do. Such aesthetic sense perfectly corresponds with ideologies pertaining to “the West” and “the East,” and “advanced” and “backward” countries.

The point also can be illustrated by reverse examples. Those who consider Westerners more beautiful than Japanese do not necessarily think that Russians, belonging to the same Caucasoid race, are better looking than Japanese. Some Iranians have looks that can hardly be distinguished from those of Westerners. But when it is known in advance that they are Iranians, few Japanese would feel physically inferior to them.

Take for example the minority Uyghur in Xinjiang, China. Their features divide into two types, one that is close to Mongoloids and another to Caucasoids. The latter, with deep sculpted faces, resemble Westerners. Uyghur men who used to come to large cities like Shanghai before economic opening were shy about their tall noses. They tried to hide them as much as possible by pulling down their hats.

Other factors can of course shape judgments about beauty. In recent years, young Japanese men and women with darkly tanned faces, pierced ears, and Afro hair can be spotted in Japanese cities. They identify with African-American culture, which grew out of slavery and oppression, for a variety of reasons: these include the attraction of rebellion or difference from the American or Japanese mainstream, or identification with the music and art associated

with American blacks. On the other hand, African blacks have not become a target of imitation or emulation by Japanese.

The Foundation for Acceptance of a View of Female Beauty

In present-day Japan, an oval face with a tall nose is favored. This is not entirely due to Western influence. The forensic anthropologist Suzuki Hisashi once conducted detailed research on the skeletons of the Tokugawa family and their women. In the early years of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868), political considerations often dominated the choice of formal wives, but from the third generation on, that was no longer necessary, making it possible to factor appearance into selection. In choosing consorts, moreover, there were no political constraints from the beginning. Many of them came of commoner families and most were chosen for their beauty. The physical characteristics of Tokugawa women should provide insight into Tokugawa conceptions of female beauty.

According to the bone anthropologist Suzuki Hisashi's investigation, many Tokugawa women had narrower faces and relatively tall noses. For example, Tenshin-In (1823-48), the formal wife of Tokugawa Iesada, the thirteenth Shōgun, is described as having “an oval face with large eyes and a straight nose that was not too tall. . . and is assumed to have been a representative beauty of the Edo period.”⁽¹⁰⁾ A long, narrow face and a tall nose were standards for beauty in the Edo period as they are in modern times. Suzuki suggests that the features of Shogun consorts were similar to those of women portrayed in Edo period *ukiyo-e*, a genre of woodblock prints and paintings depicting landscapes, tales, the theatre, and the pleasure quarters.



From Li Gonglin, “Beautiful Women’s Outing”

Song. National Palace Museum (Taipei, Taiwan). *Glimpses into the Hidden Quarters: Paintings of Women from the Middle Kingdom*, p. 14.



Takehisa Yumeji, “Nostalgia for Hirado”
Sansai, Special Issues, no. 242 (Sansaisha,

1969), Meiji, p. 9.



Zhou Fang, “Courtiers Playing Backgammon” Tang. National Palace Museum (Taipei, Taiwan). *Glimpses*, p. 10.



“Gold and Jewels Fill the House” Qing. Tianjin Art Museum. *Tianjin Art Museum*, fig. 258.

Needless to say, the skull bones alone do not determine facial appearances. Weight, skin

color and so forth greatly influence looks. Nevertheless, judgments about beauty draw heavily on the face. Delicate differences in the size of the mouth and the shape of lips and eyes affect the balance of the face. Whether the eyelids are double or single also greatly affects the appearance, aside from the fundamental question of which was favored in the given age. What can be conjectured from skeletal bones is naturally limited. It is nevertheless possible to estimate Edo taste in facial features.

No similar research on the Chinese imperial household has been conducted, but paintings and photographs portraying court women of the Qing dynasty remain. Those portraits show that women chosen to be Empresses and high-ranking consorts are far from unattractive even by today’s standards. Empress Xiao Xianchun (1712-1748), empress of Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799), has such a well-balanced face that she can still be called a beauty today (figure 0-1). Why such aesthetics formed has not yet been clarified. What is certain is that there were at least some points of contact between Western and Chinese or Japanese aesthetics. That laid a foundation in its own way for the Western image of beauty to be accepted and rapidly established in modern times.

Beauty and Charm

What are the requirements for a beautiful woman? Different people envision different images such as a slender build, bright eyes, a tall nose, smooth skin. People tend to speak impressionistically about a lovely mouth, clear eyes, and so forth. Cosmetologists and cosmetic surgeons try to understand beauty objectively. Yet, even among professionals, opinion divides over standards of beauty.

What sort of bodily shape appeals as beautiful is a relatively simple question. As a Japanese expression *hattōshin bijin*, a beautiful shape with the head occupying one-eighth of the entire height, suggests, balance can be expressed in terms of height, weight, head-to-

body proportion and so forth. We should not forget, however, that there is no scientific ground for such criteria and that they are just conventions. The three sizes of bust, waist and hips, in particular, is a standard of measurement that is formed in relation to *eros*, and its essence is an illusion even as it pretends to be objective.

Compared with bodily types, facial criteria are far more difficult to assess. Specialists have offered various hypotheses, all of which emphasize balance above all. One theory proposes that, dividing the length between the hairline and chin into three equal parts, the distance between the hairline and the eyebrows, that between the eyebrows and the nose, and that between the nose and the tip of the chin should each occupy one-third. Another finds beauty in a profile view in which the height of the nose is one-third of its length and the mouth is contained within the lines connecting the sides of the nose and the jaw.⁽¹¹⁾

Reducing a beautiful countenance to numerical values may give an impression that there are absolute, objective criteria to beauty, but it is highly doubtful that this is really the case. In the West, the attempt to try to explain beauty of the highest standard by expressing body proportions numerically goes back to the sixth century BCE.⁽¹²⁾ Yet no scientific analysis has demonstrated grounds for defining beauty.

In recent years, a survey employing computer technology concluded that female beauty in fact corresponds to an average face.⁽¹³⁾ The claim is that a montage photograph based on the mean from a number of computer-processed facial photographs produces a beautiful countenance.⁽¹⁴⁾ But then, the theory that beauty means average was suggested by Darwin early on, and it is hardly new.⁽¹⁵⁾ One may, however, venture to say that there is something new about staging artificial “selection” with the use of the computer.

But a number of counterarguments have already surfaced against the beauty=average theory. For faces that deviate from average values seem more attractive.⁽¹⁶⁾ At any rate, there are limits to scientific analyses of beautiful countenances and charms, which are in fact matters related to the heart and spirit. Humans are social animals. Whether or not a person looks beautiful profoundly relates to each observer’s human and social orientation.

To begin with, whether someone looks pretty is a matter of consciousness involving individual sentiments. A person who looks exceptionally beautiful to one viewer may not necessarily appear so to others. Evaluation of “charm” is greatly influenced by subjectivity. The expression *kawaii* in Japanese means charming, winning, or cute. It can be considered a typical aesthetic judgment that transcends objective measurement. Someone does not look pretty because of how many centimeters her eyes measure, or how many degrees wide her jaw is. The evaluation is based upon how “her looks speak to me.”

“A beautiful woman” is an image as a whole; it is an impression. As long as this is the case, relativity is what matters above all else. There are any number of cases in which a handsome man falls for a plain woman, or a beautiful woman loves an ugly man. Plain or ugly merely represents the judgment of viewers; the parties involved do not necessarily share the view. The distinction between “beauty” and “non-beauty” is a product of the relationship between the two individuals. The Japanese saying, “Pockmarks are dimples in the eyes of one in love” (*abata mo ekubo*), demonstrates the mystery of the gaze on a person. Starting with “Love is blind” in English and “In a lover’s eyes emerges a Xi Shi” in Chinese, the latter referring to an unsurpassed beauty of the sixth-century BCE, we find similar proverbs in almost every language. What is common to those sayings is that judgment of beauty, regardless of culture, is arbitrary and hard to be understood by

anyone other than the person concerned.

Particularly with a man and a woman, when something speaks to the heart the moment the one looks at the other, the other person looks most beautiful. Looks are one element, but they are never everything. Rather, the person's air as a whole sometimes gives a stronger impression.

As terms for estimating looks, expressions like "graceful" and "charming" carry an important meaning. They complement evaluation of a person's beauty. When one finds another "charming," behind that feeling is already a judgment that equates likeable to beautiful. One's understanding of beauty is also easily affected by psychological elements. Rather than saying that the beautiful woman really exists, we should say that she only exists within the imagination of individuals.

Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana each became a beauty representing an era, because, through film and media representations of them, an image of beauty as separate from them as individuals was created in people's minds—one that contains fragments of viewers' personal sentiment. The media-formed image evokes personal memories, experiences, and sentiments, and simultaneously functions as the target for emotional self-projection. Precisely for this reason, the status of a universal beauty was attained in these two examples.

Beauty as a Metaphor

Detailed inspection of changes in aesthetics from age to age clarifies that criteria for "beauty" are affected by elements other than beautiful looks. "Insiders" are beautiful, "outsiders" are ugly. "The noble" are beautiful, "the humble" are ugly. "The upper" are beautiful, "the lower" are ugly. "The affluent" are beautiful, "the poor" are ugly. "The holy" are beautiful, "the secular" are ugly. "The good" are beautiful, "the evil" are ugly. The more we go back to ancient times, the more

striking this tendency becomes.

Chinese dynastic histories invariably depict foreign peoples negatively. That is also the case with portrayals of diplomatic emissaries in paintings. This is not limited to foreigners. In writings portraying conflicts, be they historical accounts or fiction, friends tend to have beautiful countenances while foes, both leaders and soldiers, look ferocious. The aesthetics that holds "insiders" as beautiful and "outsiders" as ugly also applies to women. Commoner women rarely appear in literature of ancient times. Nearly without exception, those depicted in poetry and fiction are court women or noble women. As in literary works like "The Goddess of the Luo" (Luoshui-shen fu) by the poet and statesman Cao Zhi (192-232), descriptions of glamorous clothing convey feminine beauty (see figure 3-19 in chapter 3 for a pictorial representation of the poem). Because sartorial splendor was among the requirements for a beauty, women who could not hope for such garb were eliminated as objects of depiction.

That beauty and ugliness are metaphors of vertical relationships is readily apparent in representations of rank among states and races. As mentioned above, in pre-modern China foreigners, including those such as Mongols, Tibetans and Uyghurs living on China's borders, and Europeans, were deemed ugly not only because they were regarded as "outsiders" but because they were "people of lower standing" than the Chinese.

Among the Han themselves, descriptions of beauty and ugliness formed metaphors of vertical relations. The Chinese expression "talented men and fair women" (*cairen jia ren*) by definition implies their class origin. The phrase "fair women" does not simply refer to women of lovely appearance but of literary families. In China, where Confucianism was the official learning and the Imperial Examination System processed entrance into the bureaucracy, literary ability was a crucial

measure defining social standing. In fiction of Ming and Qing China (1368-1644, 1644-1911), although women were not eligible to take the imperial examination or become officials, they are never described or depicted as “fair” unless they possess literary talent.

The metaphor most frequently employed presumes “holy” to be beautiful and “secular” to be ugly. In every culture, goddesses are without exception depicted as beautiful. Alongside this, the entrance of a beautiful woman into a scene is often portrayed in the same way as the descent of a goddess to the earth. An unparalleled beauty frequently shines dazzlingly as if clad in a halo. Such metaphor, or interchangeable relationship between a beautiful human and a god or goddess, can be observed in Buddhist images as well.

That “good” is beautiful and “evil” is ugly is a metaphor that has recurred since the oldest days. In literature of all ages and regions, a good woman is almost always beautiful, and a bad woman ugly. We cannot laugh this away as a paradigm in old fiction. In fact, the same pattern is repeated today in Hollywood movies. Yet, the audience does not find it uncomfortable. The metaphor assuming “justice” to be beautiful and “vice” ugly is generally accepted across history.

Narrating Stories of Beauties

“A beauty” is not merely “a beautiful-looking woman” but an indicator of culture that contains multiple meanings. From standards for beauty, we can not only observe the character of each culture but can also study intercultural relationships. Moreover, within the same culture, we note different images of the beautiful woman at different historical moments. From them we can glimpse transitions of customs and aesthetics from age to age. It is also possible to start out with changes in images of feminine beauty to explore intercultural crossings.



Suzuki Harunobu, “An Insect Cage and a Little Child”

Harunobu—botsugo 200-nen kinen, fig. 218. Tokugawa.



From Zhou Fang, “Court Ladies with Floral Hair Ornaments,” Tang. Museume of

Liaoning Province.

Discourse on beautiful women also serves as an indicator, so to speak, of a culture's level of maturity. In general, praise of feminine beauty or descriptions of beautiful women go back to ancient times, but theories of feminine beauty come later. In China, something like a theory of beauty appeared only in late Ming to early Qing. The "Voice and Appearance" chapter of *Occasional Contemplations* (Jianqing ouji) by the seventeenth century playwright and novelist Li Yu (1610-1680) of the Qing period can be called the first Chinese theory of feminine beauty. As you will see in chapter 1, the author discussed in detail the requirements for a beauty from the aspects of appearance, gesture, makeup, and so forth.

Beautiful women were not always glorified in history. While they were praised as objects of male monopoly in historical and literary works, beautiful looks were also portrayed as masks worn by evil women with destructive power. Beauties were not always associated with status, wealth, and good fortune, but came to be feared as the source of death, downfall, national ruin, loss, and collapse. How such contradictory image were formed, what they meant, and how they functioned are questions to be explored below.

This book reflects on issues of beautiful women and beautiful countenances from the angle of comparative cultural history with the above issues in mind. For pre-modern times, I will focus on cultural intersections within East Asia. I explore the criteria for feminine beauty, and consider when and how changes occurred across history. Changes in aesthetics are often influenced by contact with foreign culture. Examination of the image of a beautiful woman inevitably faces the question of intercultural encounters.

Even within East Asia, things differ greatly between the Han people and diverse ethnic

groups, and between the continent and Japan. How do Chinese images of beauty differ from those in Japan, and what are the reasons? These will also be considered.

When exploring ancient images of feminine beauty, written documents are powerful clues as are works of art. But art and literature do not serve as simple historical evidence. Representations, whether in art or literature, may or may not gibe with images in life. Thus, while examining female images in paintings, we will also observe how beautiful women were portrayed in history books, poetry, fiction, and essays.

In modern times, Western images of beautiful women came to exert overwhelming influence in the East. In particular, I will explore how beautiful women came to be portrayed in China and Japan, and how literary style, vocabulary, and rhetoric changed.

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Notes

¹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (John Murray, 1871), vol. 2, p. 383.

² John and Doreen Weightman (trs.), *Tristes Tropiques* (first published by Atheneum Publishers, 1974; Penguin Books, 1992), p. 188.

³ Gaspar da Cruz, *South China in the Sixteenth Century*. Translated into Japanese by Hino Hiroshi as *Jūrokuseiki kanan jibutsushi* (Akashi Shoten, 1987), p. 293.

⁴ Louis J. Gallagher, S. J. (tr.), *The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1671* (Random House, 1953), p. 77.

⁵ Philipp Franz von Siebold, *Reise nach dem Hofe des Sjogun im Jahre 1826*. Translated by Saitō Makoto as *Edo sanpu kikō* (Heibonsha, 1967), p. 77.

⁶ Timon Screech (editor and annotator), *Japan Extolled and Decried: Carl Peter Thunberg and the Shogun's Realm, 1775-1796* (Routledge, 2005), p. 88. Cf.: Takahashi Fumi (tr.), *Edo sanpu zuikōki* (Heibonsha, 1994), pp. 218-219.

⁷ Also called *Book of Former Han*, it was composed by Ban Biao, Ban Gu, and Ban Zhao and completed in 111 CE. It covers the history of China under the Western Han from 206 BCE to 25 CE.

⁸ Bin Chun, *Occasional Jottings Aboard a Raft*. In Zhong Shuhe (editor in chief), *Toward the World Library* (Zouxiang Shijie Congshu) (Yuelu Publications, 1985), p. 101.

⁹ Tsuruta Kin'ya, *Modern Japanese Literature that Boundary-Crossers Read* (Ekkyōsha ga yonda Nihon bungaku) (Shin'yōsha, 1999), pp. 10-22.

¹⁰ Suzuki Hisashi, *The Bones Tell Their Stories: People of the Tokugawa Shogunate and Daimyō Families* (Hone wa kataru: Tokugawa Shōgun, daimyōke no hitobito) (The University of Tokyo Press, 1985), p. 113.

¹¹ *Da Capo*, vol. 19, issue 12, no. 423 (Magazine House, 1999), p. 6.

¹² Francette Pacteau. *The Symptom of Beauty (Essays in Art and Culture)*. Translated into Japanese by Hamana Emi as *Bijin* (Kenkyūsha, 1996), p. 99.

¹³ Karl Grammer, *Signale der Liebe: Die biologischen Gesetze der Partnerschaft*. Translated into Japanese by Koizumi Mineko under the supervision of Hidaka Toshitaka as *Ai no Kaibōgaku* (Kinokuniya Shoten, 1997), pp.168-169.

¹⁴ Shioya Nobuyuki, *The Truth of Cosmetic Surgery: Can the Surgical Knife Heal the Heart?* (Biyō geka no shinjitsu: mesu de kokoro wa naoseru ka) (Kōdansha, 2000), pp. 50-51.

¹⁵ Karl Grammer, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.