

THE PHENOMENON OF SKIN LIGHTENING IN CHINESE CULTURE: PERCEPTIONS OF WHITE SKIN IN TAIWAN

BY LENNEKE STEGEMAN¹

ABSTRACT

Not only in ancient China was having white skin part of a beauty ideal, but also in today's Chinese culture the practice of skin lightening proves to be a widespread phenomenon. This article will zoom in on this phenomenon, aiming to reveal the concepts connected to the rationale behind skin lightening. Literature and own research in Taiwan will illustrate which aspects of having white skin serve as important incentives for the practice of skin lightening, and how these aspects have changed over time.

KEYWORDS: Skin lightening, Chinese culture, skin-whitening products, identity, beauty ideals.

INTRODUCTION

In fall 2013, I set off for a year of studying in Taipei, Taiwan. Not only was I intrigued by the amount of skin-whitening products the local drugstores offered, it was also hard to find skin care products that would not have a whitening effect on my skin. My own experiences in Taiwan led to the desire to find out more about this phenomenon, and to the following main questions

¹ The original paper was a bachelor thesis with the same title and subtitle at Leiden University, Chinastudies 2015-2016, part of the course "Shop till U drop, Buy till U die" by Prof.dr. Stefan Landsberger, date: 23/02/2016. Lenneke has recently finished her BA Chinastudies at Leiden University. Email: lenneke.stegeman@gmail.com.

for my research. Where does the desire to have white skin in Chinese culture come from? Which concepts are connected to culturally Chinese women's desire to have white skin? In what way does white skin shape a person's identity in Chinese culture?

METHODOLOGY

Since a lack of literature makes it impossible to focus on Taiwan only, I have chosen to focus on the situation regarding skin lightening in greater China and thus in Chinese culture. In this research greater China will include the area of mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan and women of these areas will be referred to as culturally Chinese. The existing literature on skin lightening in greater China brought forward different aspects connected to the desire to have white skin. Through a survey carried out in Taiwan, I aimed to map to which extent culturally Chinese women in Taiwan connect these aspects to having white skin. To create more depth I also interviewed three Taiwanese women, in different age groups and with different backgrounds.

SKIN LIGHTENING IN CHINESE CULTURE

As mentioned before, in this article the term greater China refers to mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. All over greater China, the preference for light skin is notably present. Elysia Pan (2013: 60) conducted a focus group of sixteen culturally Chinese women in Beijing, where one woman simply claimed that "being white is a good thing". The other Chinese women in the group all agreed by nodding or saying "yes". This interest in light skin can be put into practice by using skin-whitening products (*meibai chanpin* 美白产品). Skin-whitening products are intended to actually alter the skin from within, as opposed to colouring the skin white by using make-up. After China's economic reforms starting in 1978, these skin-whitening cosmetics started to enter the market. The skin-whitening industry has been growing ever since and is still growing today (Johansson 1998: 61).

From my own survey in Taiwan I found that 79.9 percent of all 577 respondents claim to have used skin-whitening products, as can be seen in figure one below. The majority of all respondents, 58.1 percent, uses skin-whitening products at least once a month (Stegeman 2016: Appendix A).

Have you ever used skin-whitening products?

Single choice, answers 577x, unanswered 0x



Figure 1. Have you ever used skin-whitening products?
Source: Stegeman 2016, Appendix A.

The survey also showed that the usage of skin-whitening products is remarkably evenly distributed among different age groups. For example, 59.2 percent of women in the age group 41-45 use skin-whitening products at least once a week, whereas this only covers 45.3 percent of women in the age group 18-25 (Stegeman 2016: Appendix A). These findings suggest that skin lightening is not something the younger generation of women in Taiwan predominantly engages in, but that it is a phenomenon among women of all ages in Taiwanese society.

Although it is indisputable that skin-whitening products are widely used in greater China, it is certainly questionable whether or not these products actually lighten the skin. First of all, there are no products that can change the skin's natural colour, says Wu Yan (Xi 2011), a dermatologist at the Chinese Medical Doctor Association. Skin that is darkened by sun exposure, however, can be lightened by skin-whitening products. It is remarkable that in the interviews I conducted, none of the women responded affirmatively to the question whether skin-whitening products work or not. Responses varied from “not necessarily”, to “there are some people who use all types of skin-whitening products and still don't see results” and “I think skin-whitening products are quite a waste of money” (Stegeman 2016: Appendix C, D and E). The fact that so many women use skin-whitening products, but also claim they are not effective, implies that using skin-whitening products is more done out of habit than out of the experience that it actually lightens the skin. The products therefore may have become an indispensable part of culturally Chinese women's daily routine, even though they might not prove to be effective.

WHITE SKIN IN CHINESE HISTORY

In China, fair skin has been praised since antiquity. Already before the Qin 秦 dynasty (221-206 BCE), people with light skin were seen as of higher status than those with dark skin. The difference in skin colour marked the metaphoric distance between the landlords, who could afford to stay out of the sun, and the darker-skinned peasants. Paintings of people from the ruling class in ancient China confirm the distinction made between social classes. In a portrait of Empress Wu Zetian, the Empress' face is painted as white as the pearls that serve as decoration of her headdress. In later periods of Chinese history and art, this preference for white skin seemed to only grow stronger (Pan 2013: 17).

In many classic Chinese poems, women's skin was referred to as having similarities with 'snow', 'jade' or 'ice' in order to express the elegance or fairness a woman with white skin was assumed to possess. The old Chinese expression *yi bai zhe bai chou* 一白遮百丑 can be translated as "one white part can cover up a hundred ugly parts", and depicts the great extent to which white skin is valued in Chinese culture (Zhang & Xie 2013). The expression conveys the idea that having white skin does not only make you more beautiful, but also covers up any other flaws regarding appearance or personality. Dating back to ancient Chinese society, the idiom is still valued today. When Richelle Gamlam (2012) conducted interviews in Xi'an and asked Chinese women why they preferred to have white skin, many simply quoted "one white part can cover up a hundred ugly parts", serving as a self-explanatory argument. In my survey question on whether or not Taiwanese women can identify with the expression, the answers are rather evenly divided. The majority of 45.6 percent against 35.2 percent can identify with the expression "one white part can cover up a hundred ugly parts" (Stegeman 2016: Appendix A). Interviewee Anqi Hong shares her view:

One time I stepped into an elevator with two of my friends from university. I thought I was prettier than them, haha. But the moment we were inside and I looked in the mirror, I suddenly discovered the friend with the lightest skin was the most beautiful! It was only then that I realised and experienced this ancient saying that is full of wisdom: one white part can cover up a hundred ugly parts. (Stegeman 2016: Appendix C).

Considering that the quest for a light complexion might also be a cultural understanding, my next survey question inquired whether the desire to have

light skin is seen as part of Taiwanese culture. As can be seen in figure two, no less than 82.5 percent of all respondents either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement that wanting white skin is part of Taiwanese culture (Stegeman 2016: Appendix A). This implies that cultural and thus historic views do play an important part in Taiwanese women’s desire to have light skin.

Wanting white skin is part of Taiwanese culture

Single choice, answers: 577x, unanswered: 0x

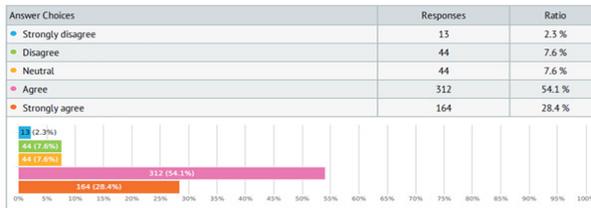


Figure 2. Wanting white skin is part of Taiwanese culture.

Source: Stegeman 2016, Appendix A.

Interviewees also explained that skin lightening today is inextricably connected to traditional Chinese values and culture. Yushu Huang commented: *“I think it is a phenomenon that has always existed. It is just that today’s technology causes skin-whitening products to become more diverse”* (Stegeman 2016: Appendix D). These findings prove and emphasise that, at least to culturally Chinese women in Taiwan, the desire to have white skin has been and still is an indispensable part of traditional Chinese culture.

WHITE SKIN IN ADVERTISING

From white faces in TV dramas to more obvious promoting of skin-whitening products in commercials, magazines, or on billboards—for women in greater China it is hard to avoid the message that white skin is something all women should desire. Women with dark skin are presented as plain, whereas after using skin-whitening products they turn into bright, light-skinned beauties. Research reveals that in advertising, white skin is often combined with symbols of luxury and status. This persistent marketing message inevitably leads to the shaping of a certain ideal image of a woman. Mak (2007: 145) examined the way images in advertisements for skin-whitening products

shape the view on white skin among urban Chinese females. She found that white skin is part of an ideal self-image that is being constructed in the consumer's' mind by marketing strategies. Women yearn for a lighter skin tone, because it would connect the connotations of beauty and purity in a product's advertising to their own identities. According to my own survey in Taiwan, a majority of 61.7 percent of the respondents also either 'agrees' or 'strongly agrees' with the statement that advertisements influence their idea of the ideal skin colour (Stegeman 2016: Appendix A).

WHITE SKIN TO CONSTRUCT AN IDENTITY

In Chinese culture, having white skin has always shaped a person's identity. From before the Qin dynasty when dark skin proved you worked on the fields to today, when white skin is depicted as beautiful and luxurious in advertisements. It is therefore important to look at how this identity has changed over time and what having white skin means for a person's identity today.

As mentioned earlier, in ancient China fair skin was associated with beauty and high social status. White skin was thus also an important part of someone's identity. In 1998, Johansson (1998: 61) stated that in light of the rapid urbanisation in China, the aversion people living in the city felt for working outdoors could be seen as fear of losing the high status they acquired by moving to the city. Therefore, tanned skin continued to have negative connotations, but now because it showed that you were a migrant labourer that recently moved to the city. To see whether or not this connection between skin tone and different working classes in Chinese culture also lives in Taiwan today, one of the survey questions stated that "light skin shows a person has a good job". The majority of all respondents of 87.5 percent either 'strongly disagrees' or 'disagrees', proving that this ancient notion definitely is not prevalent in Taiwan anymore today (Stegeman 2016: Appendix A). In my interviews, women also responded that the argument of skin colour indicating a person's profession is very outdated. Anqi Hong even expressed her frustration over this misconception:

[...] this idea is to a certain extent a superficial and outdated assumption. When I lived in Europe, I was very surprised that Europeans think that was the only reason Asian people wanted to have white skin. It made me very

angry that even though for Asian people being white is a form of beauty, Europeans assume that it is because of some kind of superficial and vulgar view. This is very disrespectful. (Stegeman 2016: Appendix C).

Although the idea of skin tone being a dividing mechanism for which class a person belongs to is no longer applicable today, white skin is still a very important tool to help construct a person's identity. If women are not influenced by advertising on the ideal skin tone, they can still be confronted with skin-whitening practices, for example through their social surroundings. Interviewee Mrs Hong elaborates on why white skin is better altogether, and says: "*I want to have white skin, clothes go better with white skin. You also look younger with white skin*" (Stegeman 2016: Appendix E). My own survey revealed that the main reason most Taiwanese women claim to want white skin is "to look younger" (Stegeman 2016: Appendix A). This outcome is rather unforeseen, since few sources mention this rationale and it is only briefly brought up in more recent online publications. This suggests that skin lightening in order to look younger could be a phenomenon of recent years, but more importantly that having white skin plays an important role in the image they carry out. Moreover, according to my survey results the vast majority of Taiwanese women (82.7 percent) believes men prefer women with light skin. The greater part of 46.5 percent of respondents even agrees with the statement that white skin increases the chances of finding a partner (Stegeman 2016: Appendix A). These combined findings suggest that the desire to have white skin is indeed related to the attempt to live up to the image of the ideal woman, which in turn might increase the chance of finding a partner. It seems inevitable to state that for culturally Chinese women, white skin is an essential feature of their ideal appearance of appearing young, trendy and beautiful.

CONCLUSION

Firstly, it is indisputable that skin lightening is a popular phenomenon that is practised by many women throughout greater China. The ancient idea of light-skinned people having high positions versus dark-skinned people working on the fields and being poor is brought up as an important factor in literature. Literature also reveals that skin-whitening practices have much to do with the fact that there now is such a vast amount of lightening products

available, and the conspicuous way in which they are being advertised.

My own survey and interviews in Taiwan proved that the desire to have white skin is indeed strongly connected to Chinese history and culture. With a firm root in Chinese history, skin lightening practices today are also a result of the marketing strategies behind advertisements. Advertising causes culturally Chinese women to subconsciously connect white skin to all sorts of positive features, which in turn can cause light skin to positively influence a woman's self-image.

Whereas in ancient Chinese society dark skin was considered ugly, today this view seems to be replaced by the positive aspects white skin would entail. The emphasis seems to have shifted from avoiding having dark skin to striving to attain light skin. Most importantly, the phenomenon of skin lightening, whether it proves effective or not, still serves as an excellent tool for women to improve their appearance and their identity as a result. It is in part also a trend; something you can attain by buying into advertising and consuming the necessary products. It adds something if achieved, but it is not directly considered negative if not achieved. Although in recent times advertising and media have fuelled the hype of skin lightening in greater China, the desire of light skin above all remains something intrinsically Chinese; white skin as a beauty ideal has always had firm roots in Chinese culture and is not bound to fade.

REFERENCES

- GAMLAM, R. 14 August 2012. "Bai Fu Mei: An In Depth Look at the Chinese Quest for Whiter Skin." <http://www.adventuresaroundasia.com/2012/08/14/bai-fu-mei-an-in-depth-look-at-the-chinese-quest-for-lighter-brighter-and-whiter-skin>. Accessed 15 October 2015.
- JOHANSSON, P. 1998. "White skin, Large breasts: Chinese Beauty Product Advertising as Cultural Discourse." *China Information* 13.2/3: 59-84.
- MAK, A. K. Y. 2007. "Advertising Whiteness: An Assessment of Skin Color Preferences among Urban Chinese." *Visual Communication Quarterly* 14.3: 144-157.
- PAN, E. 2013. "Beautiful White: An Illumination of Asian Skin-Whitening Culture." Honors thesis, Visual and Media Studies & International Comparative Studies, Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.
- STEGEMAN, L. 2016. "The Phenomenon of Skin Lightening in Chinese Culture: Perceptions of White Skin in Taiwan." BA thesis, Chinastudies, Leiden University.
- XI, Z. 2011. *China Daily*. "A Lighter Shade of Pale". http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2011-09/23/content_13775846.htm. Accessed 19 September 2015.
- XIE, Q., ZHANG, M. 2013. "White or Tan? A Cross-cultural Analysis of Skin Beauty Advertisements between China and the United States." *Asian Journal of Communication* 23.5: 538-554.