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Beauty Is in the Eye of the Beholder, and the Beholder Is a White Man: The 1875 Page Act, Eugenics, and Beauty Standards for Chinese versus American Women

Beginning in the 1850s, masses of Chinese immigrants arrived on American shores, forever changing the ethnic and cultural makeup of the American population. Eager to escape the socioeconomic crises of their homeland post–Opium War, Chinese laborers were drawn to the tantalizing prospects of gold on the West Coast and the lure of an “American dream” that promised a better life. Over time, Chinese immigrants were able to garner success for themselves by building railroads, effectively becoming a cheap, reliable labor source for the United States. However, as the number of Chinese immigrants increased, so did the strength of discrimination and anti-Chinese sentiment. Although both American and Chinese beauty standards for an ideal woman were similar—born out of similar existing gender roles—American society could not overlook the cultural differences between the two and tended to hypersexualize Asian women. By the same beauty standards, Chinese men were considered too feminine and were desexualized. Simultaneously, 1850s pseudoscience and scientific racism were used to declare people of color as inherently inferior, which allowed beauty standards to evolve to differentiate white women as superior at the cost of degrading Chinese women. As social ostracization escalated to permanent legal action against Chinese women, the 1875 Page Act disproportionately targeted and outcasted Chinese women—rather than Chinese men—due to what was seen as a threat to white racial purity.

The question of what it means to be beautiful is historically difficult to answer. In 2023, Dimitre Dimitrov and George Kroumpouzos published a journal article exploring how human beings naturally gravitate toward beauty, referring to beauty as “an integrated part of humanity.” The article is able to name several physical characteristics of attractiveness according to Western beauty ideals: “narrow-shaped faces with round eyes and small noses and lips, but with a high zygomatic bone combined with a slim figure and white skin complexion.” Yet the article notes that beauty is subjective dependent on the viewer. For instance, traits such as fair skin and skin homogeneity are regarded as attractive by some cultures, while others favor darker and textured skin. Furthermore, the article mentions that one’s perception of beauty is heavily shaped by the environment they are raised in, influencing their ideas about, for example, what constitutes a “normal” body weight or an attractive body figure. A universal definition of beauty does not apply to everyone, contradicting the idea of a one-size-fits-all beauty standard.

Moreover, beauty standards inherently favor some groups at the expense of others. Not only are people of color excluded from this Western beauty ideal—the one that specifies “white skin complexion” to be attractive—they are also profited off of. A *Smithsonian* article on the historical progression of makeup explains how in the early twentieth century, the growing ethnic diversity of the United States inspired “trendy, exotic” makeup that encouraged white customers to play with temporary identities they could wash off at will, while African Americans did not have this luxury (“Makeup”).

Dimitrov and Kroumpouzos assert the advantages of being beautiful, citing social and psychological studies ascertaining a “correlation between beauty and happiness, economic advantage, trustworthiness, and confidence.” Beauty plays a huge role in a “successful” social

life: beautiful people are considered more successful and more intelligent and have a greater “well-being.” Pressingly, those who fit within the beauty standard as previously described—light-skinned, symmetrical, and so on—are allowed tangible benefits in life: beautiful individuals tend to marry beautiful individuals, are more frequently hired with higher incomes, and are less likely to be found guilty in legal verdicts. Those who are more beautiful are more privileged, while those who do not fit within the definition of beauty suffer from this exclusion, foreshadowing the conflict between society’s views of Chinese and American women during the nineteenth century.

Firstly, beauty standards for American women reflected the emerging gender roles that limited women to the domestic sphere, idealizing them as submissive and inferior. During the mid-nineteenth century, America saw the rise of an ideology of feminine behavior and womanliness explored by historian Barbara Welter in her influential 1966 article, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860.” With arguments of the inherent biological and mental inferiority of women being used to justify their exclusion from politics, commerce, and public service, women were instead expected to remain at home and carry out their dutiful roles as wives and mothers (Lavender). Welter defined a woman’s value in that society based on her ability to abide by a specific set of virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. This idea of an “ideal” woman was spread by *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the most widely circulated magazine devoted to women’s issues with its short novels, fashion tips, and recipe pages (“Godey’s Lady’s Book”). A January 1831 issue of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* included “Picture of a Female,” an excerpt from a romance, where Mrs. Shelley offered a short description of an ideal woman of the time, the fictional Monina De Faro:

Monina De Faro was, even in childhood, a being to worship and to love. There was a dreamy sweetness in her countenance—a mystery in the profound sensibility of her nature. . . . Her countenance . . . seemed widened at the forehead, to give space for her large long eyes . . . her skin was delicate, somewhat pale, except when emotion diffused it with a deep pink. In person she was not tall but softly rounded; and her taper, rosy tipped fingers, and little feet, bespoke the delicate proportion that moulded her form to a beauty, whose every motion awakened admiration and love.

The value of submissiveness from the cult of domesticity appears in Shelley's descriptions: Monina as "a being to worship and to love" who "awakened admiration and love" reinforces how women were seen as mere objects of affection. The intentional usage of phrases such as "delicate" and "somewhat pale" skin, "large long eyes," "softly rounded," and "little feet" all paint the image of a demure, childlike woman, supporting the value of purity. Although Shelley notes Monina's "profound sensibility of . . . nature," only her physical appearance is elaborated upon, rather than any other personality traits, which exemplifies the correlation between beauty and a woman's ability to fit the mold of an ideal woman. Societal expectations of an ideal woman manifested in the physical beauty standards of an ideal woman, all to appease the male gaze.

Asian women followed the same gender roles as American women, resulting in Asian women abiding by the same beauty standards. Analogous to the cult of domesticity were Asian countries' Confucian ideals, which promoted the importance of filial piety and maintaining the familial hierarchy (Montague). Social order would only be maintained if each member of the family played their respective part; for women, it was the role of submissive wife and housekeeper. Beauty standards were a commitment to following filial piety, valuing not just

innocent-acting women but innocent-looking ones. Japanese painter Utagawa Sadakage, a specialist in the theme of “graceful women,” highlights the features of an Asian “beauty” in his 1840 painting titled *Beauty Looking at Her Image in a Mirror* according to Asian beauty standards: pale skin, narrow eyes, a straight nose, and small lips (fig. 1). Pale skin was particularly valued, as it was a sign of social status, with the implication that the owner did not need to participate in manual labor or even leave the house, paralleling the American ideal of pale, delicate skin and the virtue of domesticity (Montague). Additionally, the subject of the painting is focused on viewing her image in a mirror, commenting on how women recognized the need to pay attention to their appearance since beauty was the only guaranteed method of social mobility through marriage into a wealthier family. Another work by Sadakage, titled *A Collection of Beautiful Women: The Pride of Edo*, focuses on three Asian women participating in domestic chores. The woman in the left corner is shown to be breastfeeding her child, linking “beautiful” women with their roles as housewives and mothers. Once again, to be beautiful meant not only abiding by gender roles but also having the necessary physical attributes.



Fig. 1. Utagawa Sadakage, *Beauty Looking at Her Image in a Mirror*.

Simultaneously, eugenics and scientific racism exacerbated the perception of threat from nonwhite people toward the racial purity of white Americans. Herbert Spencer, an English philosopher, would coin the term “survival of the fittest” in relation to Darwin’s theory of evolution (“Breeding”). In volume 1 of his *Principles of Biology*, published in 1864, he would famously state, “This survival of the fittest, which I have here sought to express in mechanical terms, is that which Mr. Darwin has called ‘natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life’” (Spencer 531). Darwin’s work claimed that the individual best suited to their environment, or the “fittest,” would survive and produce offspring, while the weak, or the nonfavored, would die out in a process he dubbed “natural selection.” Some readers of Spencer believed that the white race was “favoured” in comparison to other races and should therefore beat out all other races. Some, too, were eugenicists, or believers that the white race “must be protected from ‘threat,’ often defined as mixing with other allegedly inferior races” (“Breeding”). Eugenicists’ fears foreshadowed the legal action white society would take to ensure the “preservation of favoured races.”

Contrastingly to Chinese women, Chinese men were not viewed as a threat to white racial purity due to the asexual narrative placed upon them. Chinese men were often ridiculed as overly feminine or childlike because of their appearance and manner of dress—robes and long hair; along with their pale skin, Chinese men aligned with female beauty standards more than with stereotypically masculine traits (“Asian”). An 1869 page of the political magazine *Harper’s Weekly* titled “John Chinaman in San Francisco” printed several images of a racialized caricature of a Chinese laborer with feminizing captions and a stereotypical hair queue. Sample captions include “They make excellent Nurses” and “Are good Ironers and Laundry-men” below caricatures of the laborer performing the aforementioned domestic chores (“John Chinaman”).

The willingness of Chinese men to work in traditionally female positions, such as in laundromats or restaurants, or as house servants, led white society to mock them, deeming them unmanly and asexual (“Asian”). Masculinity was centered around being the very opposite of femininity, domesticity, and purity. The combination of a nonmasculine appearance and nonmasculine behavior established Chinese men as not attractive and therefore nonthreatening to Americans and the American identity, since their alleged asexuality and inability to have sex would not be able to corrupt the white race with procreation.

The cultural differences between Chinese and American women resulted in the social ostracization of Chinese women, ensuring that they were seen as undesirable. Although both Chinese and American women emphasized submissiveness and pale skin to construct a desirable appearance, cultural differences existed between the two that could not be overlooked, which were best exemplified by Afong Moy, the first Chinese woman in America. Dehumanized and used as a marketing ploy, the nineteen-year-old would be placed on display along with other Chinese goods at exhibits and promoted as a commodity, enticing American viewers who had never seen a Chinese woman before. Observers could gawk freely at the beautiful woman, with her “Chinese costume” and exotic physical features. Yet Moy’s most written-about feature was, of all things, her feet. In 1835, eight Philadelphia physicians measured and certified that Moy’s feet were $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches long. *Parley’s Magazine*, a children’s periodical, wrote, “You have heard of Miss Afong Moy, the Chinese lady who has lately been showing herself and her small stunted feet, in some of our cities,” while illustrating Moy’s feet, both naked and in shoes (“Remembering”). Beyond the physical exploitation of Moy, how she was treated was culturally appalling, since feet were especially revered in Chinese culture. The tradition of foot binding, or

the gradual breaking of a girl's feet to restrict their growth and make their feet as small as possible, required binding the toes tightly with cloth strips and bending them under the sole so that the foot would grow into an exaggerated high curve, ideally only three to four inches in length (Cartwright). Although it was an extremely painful process to achieve these "lotus feet," foot binding was a source of pride, as it distinguished a higher social class. Daughters with bound feet were not able to perform any sort of manual labor, indicating wealth and privilege; thus, these girls were more likely to marry well.

Depictions of Afong Moy's feet "would have been pornographic images in China regardless [of] the source" ("Remembering"). While in China a woman's bound feet represented a cultural tradition meant to show off social class, Americans used bound feet as a means to exoticize Chinese women, making them undesirable. Afong Moy was acknowledged as beautiful by Americans, as Chinese and American women followed the same physical standards of beauty; Americans felt threatened by the possibility of Chinese women reproducing with American men, so they compensated by using their cultural differences to paint them as undesirable.

Eugenicist ideas escalated social ostracization against Chinese women to legal action to protect American identity. As the first federal law that excluded one specific group of immigrants, predating the more widely known Chinese Exclusion Act, the Page Act of 1875 aimed to prohibit the entry of Chinese laborers under the guise of preventing human trafficking and forced prostitution ("Chinese Women"). It stated:

That in determining whether the immigration of any subject of China, Japan, or any Oriental country, to the United States, is free and voluntary . . . it shall be the duty of the consul-general or consul of the United States . . . to ascertain whether such immigrant has

entered into a contract or agreement for a term of service within the United States, for lewd and immoral purposes . . . (United States)

The Page Act of 1875 implied that any Chinese woman might be a prostitute entering the United States for “lewd and immoral purposes,” perpetuating sexualized stereotypes toward Chinese women. This law also gave immigration officials full permission to subjectively determine if an Asian woman was being trafficked; anyone who was deemed undesirable, a prostitute who could threaten white racial purity, would not be allowed into the United States simply due to a hypersexualized narrative. This promiscuous reputation derived from the differing views toward matrimony between Chinese and American people. White Americans who believed in the cult of domesticity valued a monogamous relationship between husband and wife. On the other hand, nineteenth-century China allowed Chinese men to have concubines and Chinese women to have multiple partners, all as a means to protect the family, as more partners meant more members of society to perform labor for their country amid a socioeconomic crisis (Guilford). The common perception of this system in the United States characterized Chinese women as sexual beings who could corrupt the purity of the white race at any given moment yet portrayed Chinese men as asexual as opposed to hypersexual. Only legal action, such as the Page Act, could ensure that the population of Chinese women decreased, protecting American identity by protecting social institutions—namely, marriage. This obstacle to immigration by Chinese women made Chinese men more reluctant to settle in the United States without their mothers and wives. In reducing immigration, the act had served its intended purpose.

Similar gender roles for Chinese and American women, modeled on the submissive housewife, manifested in similar beauty standards, valuing pale skin and features that suggested docility. Chinese men were labeled as too feminine, and thus asexual, due to wrongfully fitting in

with these beauty standards for women, and Chinese women were exoticized and socially ostracized them. Eugenics and scientific racism catalyzed exoticization to legal exclusion of Chinese women through the Page Act of 1875, which targeted Chinese women, viewing their beauty and ability to reproduce with white people as a risk to their idea of racial purity. Near the end of the nineteenth century, anti-Chinese sentiments would climax with the rise of “yellow peril,” the Western fear that Chinese people would disrupt Western values. The constant fear from the American people reveals the fragility of American identity. Much like how beauty standards depended on the exclusion of nonwhite features to elevate the value of Eurocentric features, white society continued to define American identity by ostracizing and excluding others.

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