

The Search for the Beautiful Woman: A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty

Cho Kyo

Translated and introduced by Kyoko Selden

Introduction to the Translation

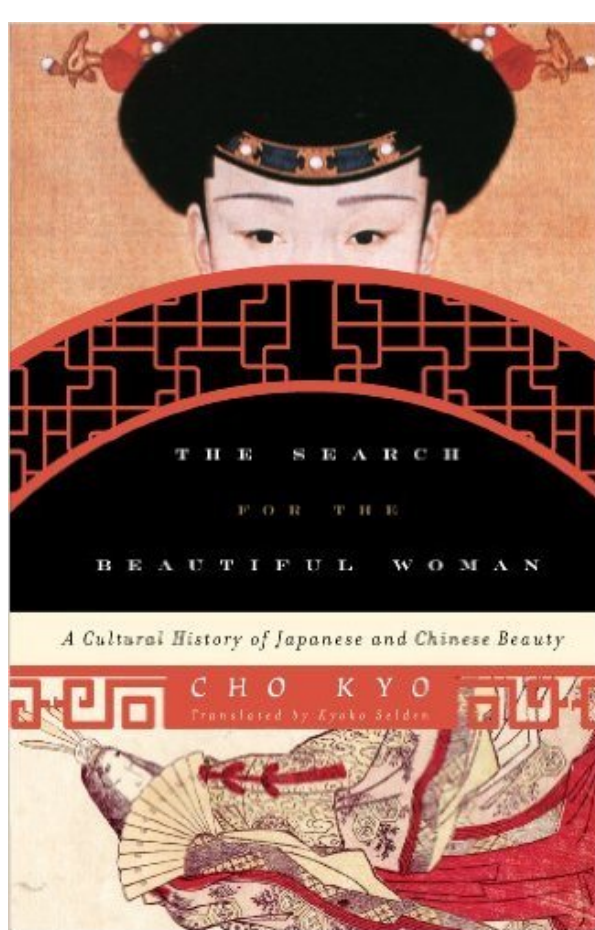
An oblique tooth is viewed in the United States as requiring straightening, but in Japan it may be thought of as emblematic of a young woman's charm. While a slim body is a prerequisite for beauty today East and West, plump women were considered beautiful in Tang dynasty (618-907) China and Heian (794-1185) 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 lies many riddles.

Focusing on changing representations of beauty in Chinese and Japanese cultures, Cho Kyo, in *The Search for the Beautiful Woman* (Bijo towa nanika: Nitchū bijin no bunkashi), 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.

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Are There Universal Criteria for Beauty?



***The Search for the Beautiful Woman: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives and Aesthetics*, trans. Kyoko Selden (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).**

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 cultures. Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn gain worldwide fame as beauties, not simply in American eyes but in Asian and African eyes. But on the basis of what criteria?

Have universal standards for determining beauty emerged with the global reach of

consumer culture and 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 distinctive 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, such as 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 also 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, "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* (1955), 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.



Kitagawa Utamaro, *The Courtesan Takikawa of the Ogiya Brothel Accompanied by her Kamuro*, 1801. Honolulu Museum of Art; [WikiCommons](#).

How Foreign Races Were Regarded

It was in the twentieth century that images of beauty became homogenized from the West to Asia and Africa. Earlier, aesthetics of facial features not only differed, but, with some exceptions, different peoples thought one another ugly. The Portuguese Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz (1520-70), who visited China in the mid-sixteenth century, portrayed the Chinese, 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 from 1823 to 1829 and 1858 to 1862, states of people of inland Kyushu, “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 [an ethnic group 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, red hair (or gold hair) and blue eyes were directly connected to the image of wild animals. Such a view was finally reversed in modern times.



Leng Mei, Leaves 24 and 25 from Collected Album of Paintings, 1677-1742. National Palace Museum, Taipei;

WikiCommons.

Following the Opium War (1840-42), 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 came 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 appraised Western men.

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” (*jinfa*) 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 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.



Takehisa Yumeji, Kurofuneya (Black Ship Inn), 1919. Takehisa Yumeji Ikaho

Memorial Museum; [WikiCommons](#).

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 appraise “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. 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.



Suzuki Harunobu, Princess Sannomiya (Third Princess from the *Tale of Genji*), circa 1766. Honolulu Museum of Art; [WikiCommons](#).

Among the Han themselves, descriptions of beauty and ugliness formed metaphors of vertical relations. The Chinese expression “talented men and fair women” (*cairen jieren*) by definition implies their class origin. The phrase “fair women” does not simply refer to women of lovely appearance but to those of literary families. In China, where Confucianism

was the official learning and the Imperial Examination System presided over entrance into the bureaucracy, literary ability was a crucial measure defining social standing. In fiction of Ming and Qing China, although women were not eligible to take the imperial examination or become officials, they were never described or depicted as “fair” unless they possessed 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 is 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.

Translated from Cho Kyo, Bijo towa nanika: Nitchū bijin no bunkashi (The Search for the Beautiful Woman) (Tokyo: Shōbunsha, 2001). Excerpted from The Search for the Beautiful Woman: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives and Aesthetics, trans. Kyoko Selden (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

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Kyoko Selden (1936-2013) taught Japanese language and literature as a senior lecturer at Cornell University until her retirement in 2008. Author, translator, artist and calligrapher, she was the translation coordinator of the Asia-Pacific Journal. Her major works as translator centered on Japanese women writers, the atomic bomb, the Ainu and the Okinawans. Her major translations included *Japanese Women Writers: Twentieth Century Short Fiction*, *More Stories By Japanese Women Writers, An Anthology*, Kayano Shigeru’s *Our Land Was a Forest*, Honda Katsuichi’s *Harukor: Ainu Woman’s Tale*, *The Atomic Bomb: Voices From Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, Shin’ichi Suzuki’s *Nurtured by Love*, and Cho Kyo’s *The Search for the Beautiful Woman, A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty*.

Notes

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

² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1974; reprinted by Penguin Books, 1992), 188.

³ Gaspar da Cruz, *Jūrokuseiki kanan jibutsushi* (South China in the Sixteenth Century), trans. Hino Hiroshi (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 1987), 293.

⁴ Louis J. Gallagher, trans., *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci: 1583-1610* (New York: Random House, 1953), 77.

⁵ Philipp Franz von Siebold, *Edo sanpu kikō* (Reise nach dem Hofe des Sjogun im Jahre) (Record of Court Journeys to Edo), trans. Saitō Makoto (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1967), 77.

⁶ Timon Screech, ed., *Japan Extolled and Decried: Carl Peter Thunberg and the Shogun's Realm, 1775-1796* (London: Routledge, 2005), 88. Cf.: Takahashi Fumi, trans., *Edo sanpu zuikōki* (Journey to the Shogun's Edo) (Heibonsha, 1994), 218-19.

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

⁸ Bin Chun, *Chengcha biji* (Occasional Jottings Aboard a Raft), in *Zhouxiang shijie congshu* (Toward the World Library), ed. Zhong Shuhe (Yuelu Publications, 1985), 101.

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