
‘Buying Beauty. Cosmetic Surgery in China’ focuses on the current cosmetic surgery boom in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Until now, English language scholarship on China had devoted only marginal attention to this phenomenon that is otherwise very visible to most foreign observers in China. Since the 1980s, and increasingly during the 1990s and the 2000s, the popularisation of specific models of physical beauty has been accompanied by the fast development of a large beauty industry in urban China. This sector includes beauty parlours and salons which have been mushrooming in Chinese cities and towns since the 1980s, as well as cosmetic surgery hospitals and clinics, large and small, public and private.

The rapid pace of China’s cosmetic surgery boom in itself makes the book an interesting and much-needed contribution to research on urban China. The book is divided into four parts, plus an introduction and a short conclusion. Each part is divided into two chapters. The first part provides a partial historical background to cosmetic surgery practices in the PRC. According to the author, the arrival of cosmetic surgery in China was intimately linked to the import of invasive surgery technologies from the West in the context of colonial encounters. Wen Hua describes the alternate fortunes of cosmetic surgery practices and knowledge during the twentieth century, and then introduces Hao Lulu, China’s first ‘artificial beauty’.

In the second part, “’Beauty capital’ in social transition’, the author introduces different informants in order to show how a certain kind of beauty is nowadays conceptualised as another of the features that the job seeker must exhibit in order to succeed on the job market. This is relevant not only to white collar workers but, the author argues, to other categories as well, including low-end labourers of rural origin. Wen Hua mentions that for most of her female interviewees, the choice of undergoing cosmetic interventions was a ‘pragmatic’ one, taken in order to get or keep a good job or enjoy better marriage prospects. In the following section, ‘The Beauty economy and “Beauty diplomacy”’, Wen Hua shifts her focus to explaining the rise of a new ideology of the body in the post-Mao era, which happened hand in hand with the marketization of the economy and the commodification of everyday life. In this section she looks at men’s interest in cosmetic surgery, which is still limited but on the rise, as well as at high-profile public events that have popularised the connection between the idea of the nation and that of a particular model of female beauty (e.g. the Beijing Olympics of 2008 as well as beauty pageants).
In the fourth part of the book, ‘Globalization and the changing nature of beauty’, the author looks at how certain models of female beauty have been renegotiated through and mediated by specific exotic tropes. Among those Wen Hua introduces the American ‘Barbie’ doll as a symbol of ‘Western’ beauty and the ‘Korean look’ that is nowadays predominant in many fields of fashion consumption in the PRC. The author then focuses on particular features that are considered desirable by many cosmetic surgery patients, like double eye lids and white skin, and analyses the role that the corresponding surgical interventions play in the negotiation of specific ethnic myths. As the author rightly notes, however, in the PRC, features like white skin are not necessarily understood racially, but are more readily related to myths of wealth and privilege. At the same time, while the entry of China into the globalised economy has exposed Chinese consumer masses to ever-present models of Western beauty, the nationalist sentiments vocally expressed by Chinese citizens are often at odds with the beauty standards that many women pursue through cosmetic surgery.

The author’s concern with showing the novelty and radical changes connected with the cosmetic surgery boom in China, however, often prevents her from paying careful attention to the historical continuities that link present-day cosmetic surgery with ancient practices of bodily manipulation. In fact, although certain invasive techniques of bodily manipulation – like for example cutting – were imported from the West in the context of colonial encounters, in pre-colonial China intensive manipulation of the body, especially the female body, constituted an important part of social life. Accordingly, while the author contends that the attention and the value accorded to physical beauty underwent a fundamental change between the Maoist and the post-Mao era, one may argue that the body constituted instead a primary site for Maoist politics to create a different ideal of beauty, a different domain of values, and with those, a different society. In addition, the study would have gained from a more in-depth engagement with third-generation feminist debates on subject formation. Although the author does mention some of these, her analysis often limits itself to an assessment of social actors’ autonomy in decision-making. While the author’s desire to portray women’s agency is more than understandable, this focus tends to reduce informants to little more than rational actors, and reinserts Wen Hua’s analysis within the limits of the structure/agency binary.

Despite these relative weaknesses, ‘Buying beauty’ is certainly a stimulating read for those interested in the booming beauty industry in the PRC, as well as for those interested in body politics in the contemporary world. Readers interested in marketization, commodification and consumerism will also find in the book a wealth of ethnographic
episodes showing how global market forces can transform social practices and society at large, while at the same time must inscribe themselves in specific and already present local contexts. The book should certainly be recommended to all scholars and students interested in gender and the body in contemporary urban China.

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