



Examining Chinese Beauty Behind the Controversy of the Chinese Brand “The Three Squirrels”: Racism, Slanted Eyes, and Beauty

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Abstract. As a matter of subjective perception, the concept of beauty has been continuously defined and redefined by the times and its people. Along with globalization, beauty standards all over the world are shared under the intense information diffusion through communicative media platforms. While this exchange of beauty cultures and ideas has diversified people’s understanding of beauty and led to unique social trends, certain beauty elements and traits hold solemn meanings and interpretations beyond their superficial appearance—The association of cultural sensitivity and beauty still stand today. This study focuses on the racism-related controversy behind the Chinese snacks brand Three Squirrel’s advertisement poster due to its incorporation of the element of slanted eyes and analyzes the sensitivity of Chinese beauty regarding slanted eyes today through the lens of social media. The study focuses on Chinese social media users and their role and reaction to the controversy and pays particular attention to users active on “Sina Weibo,” one of China’s biggest social media platforms. The study will also account for the gender stereotypes’ attribution to the controversy, collecting its information on public opinions and critical analysis directly from the Chinese social media platforms “Weibo,” “Zhihu,” and related published articles. Ultimately, the study concludes the incorporation of sensitive elements by the Three Squirrels is intended to offend the public while admitting it caters to a stereotypical western image of Chinese beauty.

Keywords: Chinese social media · beauty standards · culture · public opinion · stereotypes

1 Introduction

Beauty itself is undefined, and as the public strived for beauty diversification and inclusiveness, beauty is developing beyond the unlimited. Nevertheless, enforcing a characterization of on a particular population through physical traits could give rise to stereotypes and define what is “ugly.” This has a directly associated “link between fashion and politics [in determining] beauty standards.” [1]. Indeed, tracing back to the origin of stereotyping Chinese appearance, the exclusive discrimination of Chinese immigrants

as outsiders in the late 19th century United States in fear of “asianizing” American culture gave rise to stereotypes and hostility expressed in the media to portray Chinese as racially and culturally inferior figures. In the claim of the creation of universal truth and grand narratives [2], Hollywood and American media corporations have enforced racial separation and characterization of Asians in the entertainment industry, whose production portrayals had been uglified by presenting unitary figures of skinny individuals with unhealthy yellow complexion, and slanted eyes with single-folded eyelids. On the other hand, the enforcement of beauty stereotypes also triggered a repulsive response from the vilified populations and their society [3]. In the eyes of the Chinese, slanted eyes was a western-style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient, and they therefore strongly rejected appreciating this beauty typology for the meanings and history behind. Today, these aesthetic elements and typology are still sensitive and unappreciated by the Chinese community and are directly related to racist insult to China. Although research studies on the development of Chinese beauty standards have been adequate, little research has been found related to the Chinese’s reaction to sensitive beauty elements today. In this study, a clear depiction of the Chinese’s attitude and public critics are explored, centering around a clear focus on a recently debated controversy over the Chinese food brand The Three Squirrels’s advertisement design with a model of slanted eyes and various disturbing elements. The study is conducted upon literature review and information collection from the mass media platforms. Specifically, the research answers the question of “How to balance the history and the current right to favor beauty?” And “Does reject slanted eyes as a beauty typology show lack of cultural confidence among Chinese?” Ultimately, the research hopes to illustrate the current situation realistically, thereby addressing the cultural significance of certain beauty elements and their inclusion as a part of beauty diversity.

2 Chinese Beauty Under the Western Gaze

2.1 The Three Squirrels Case Controversy

The controversy originated on December 26, 2021, when a Weibo user posted a poster for the snack brand “Three Squirrels”, whose model’s slanted eyes look offended some netizens, who considered the design to be deliberately scandalizing the image of the nation. The controversy soon sparked debates, discussions, and condemnations online. On the same day, the three squirrels’s official Weibo account withdrew the advertisement and apologized, explaining that the advertisement was designed and released in 2019, and the makeup was also influenced by the aesthetic trend at the time. On the evening of the same day, the model in the poster spoke out, saying that the styling was decided according to the model’s own characteristics without any intention to uglify anything, and threw out the question “should small eyes be denounced for what it is? Can I not be Chinese for my small eyes?”.

Although sincerely apologized, the Three Squirrels could not quiet down the crowd for more intense debates around the lines of the model. While many sympathized the model and defended her for her traits, most Chinese media users persisted the idea that small eyes are acceptable, but deliberately portrayed a weird look where the eyes are squeezed small and hanging upwards at the outer corners of the eyes is intentionally

catering to the stereotypes. On a voting poll on Weibo, 820 out of the 1146 participants chose that they believe the Three Squirrels included the slanted eyes on purpose, constituting the leading opinion contributed by 71.6% of the voters. As revealed by one Zhihu critic Mr. Li, slanted eyes in the modern context are not by any somehow more tolerable than the past, it is “the unbridled contempt of the west as a whole against the Chinese, and an important manifestation of the mainstream rejection of ethnic Chinese in Western society, the erasure of Chinese social values, and the devaluation of the social status of ethnic Chinese [4].

While all of the criticisms undoubtedly found the Three Squirrels to be guilty of insulting the Chinese through the sensitive use of elements, was this done on purpose? For a vicious and deliberate insult to be established, the promoter needs to hold a clear targeted subject, a clear motive, and explicit malice.

In the Three Squirrels’s apology, it stated, “We apologize for the feedback that the model’s makeup does not meet the public aesthetics and resulted in discomfort emotions... the model is Chinese... the Three Squirrels is a national brand and a local company, dedicated to serving the society....” By clarifying its obligation to society and its pure intentions behind designing the advertisement, the Three Squirrels expresses its respect for the customer’s demand while rejecting to be defined as deliberately insulting the Chinese. In other words, the Three Squirrels, as a business dependent upon the customers, have no motivation to disgust its customers by insulting their history and culture with discomforting sensitive beauty elements. As a result, what was perceived as an insult may have been imagined solely by a sensitive audience who misread and over-interpreted its positive intentions.

2.2 The Western Perception of Chinese Beauty

Despite causing unintended results and overwhelming criticisms, the Three Squirrels are found innocent of potential motives to insult the Chinese. However, its advertisement still undeniably followed the western stereotypes toward Chinese beauty.

“Race is not biological or written into human DNA. It is socio-politically constructed and assigned usually by those in power.” The previous dominant portrayal of Chinese in media productions, particularly in the late nineteenth century as a result of hostility toward Chinese immigrants in the United States, was exaggerated and discriminatory. Asian actors “are victims of Orientalism, or the othering of Asia and the Middle East as exotic entities viewed through a colonialist and imperialist perspective.” [6] Thereby “portraying one-dimensional stereotypes that fed into and strengthened public perceptions of what Asians and Asian-Americans were like” [5]. From Fu Manchu to many more celebrities or minor characters, the smear image of thin slanted eyes, unhealthy yellow skin tone, boney body shape, and many more characteristics were fully demonstrated through media productions as the most direct medium to convey racial discrimination and hostility.

However, the standing beauty standards regarding Chinese and Asians in the West today may not be a continuity of the malice standard a few centuries ago, but rather a biased, one-sided interpretation of Chinese beauty without spite but respect for beauty diversity. The inclusion of different ethnicity and cultural models in the magazine covers shows the current trend of Aesthetic Diversity today. In 2018, Vogue magazine presented

models of different ethnicities, and body types dressed in neutral colors that speak much more to this topic [6]. The promotion of Aesthetic Diversity aims to explore the characteristics and beauty of each ethnic group on its own, but the implementation process is essential, and inevitably, based on stereotypes and subjective recognition of each group. The American perception of Chinese BEAUTY may not correlate with today's Chinese perception of beauty. A Chinese woman considered beautiful in the West will not necessarily be viewed that way in China, and the reverse goes for those women viewed as beautiful in China [7]. Take famous Chinese model Lu Yan who is renowned for her stunning features in the West, but is regarded in China as rather unusual looking and certainly not a perfect example of Chinese beauty [7]. The most famous Chinese international supermodels today, Liu Wen, Jennifer Du, Xiao Wen Ju, appreciated by the world fashion, all hold some characteristics that meet the western standard of Chinese beauty. Liu Wen once confessed, "when I first came to New York, all the people were saying "You look so Asian, because you have a different eye shape [8]."" Liu Wen believed that the people did not really understand the trendy Chinese beauty today because they did not really see that many Asian models, which will make them know that she does not have the most popular and representative look in Chinese society.

The current Chinese beauty, as popularized on all mass media platforms, is about "pale skin, being thin, having large eyes with double-fold eyelids and a "goose egg" shaped face [7]." This suggests a difference between the Western perception of real Chinese beauty and the Chinese definition of beauty today, which raises the question of which form is the real beauty, embracing the traditional or accepting the modern?

3 The Authentic Chinese Beauty

While the Chinese media users accused the Three Squirrels of insulting the Chinese culture and beauty, and disapproved the western appreciation of Chinese beauty, what is the true essence of Chinese beauty after all?

The same accusation has been experienced by the director of the Chinese anime movie *I Am What I Am*, Miao Zhang, who responded to criticisms over the uglification of characters with thin eyes with the following:

"For the first time, we tried to experiment with realistic methods to portray the images of our childhood friends, the cats, and dogs we remember, on the screen of anime. We expected that there might be audience discomfort, because the cool and handsome of American manga, the cuteness of Japanese manga, have long washed over the audience's aesthetic."

This statement rejects the criticism over the production's insult to Chinese culture and beauty. Instead, he also claims that the figures presented in the movie are the original and native Chinese culture and beauty. Moreover, Zhang points out that the current Chinese beauty standard and related trends are subjected to the Japanese, European and American aesthetics while forgetting their ancestors and cultural essence. Therefore, using the western beauty standard to define Chinese beauty and criticize traditional Chinese beauty is betraying China and catering to western beauty.

Director Zhang's point is valid and supported by historical records. By examining the ancient frescoes and portraits of people, such as the Dunhuang Flying Apsaras created

between 220 and 589 B.C.E. and General Guan Yu during the Three Kingdom period, all appeared to be portrayed as having thin and flat eyes. Moreover, the portraits of court ladies in the Tang Dynasty and the paintings in the Song Dynasty all depict beauties who held traditional characteristics such as thin and small eyes as a prevalent beauty trait back then. What has been honored became what is despised today. The rejection of small or slanted eyes may present a shift in power balance and confidence. As proposed by Chen Su, “The Chinese have been proud [of their beauty characters] for thousands of years, and have never taken western aesthetics as the mainstream [...] but in the last century, their confidence has been destroyed by the West, and they started blindly accepting western culture. Not only is aesthetics affected by economic development, essentially everything is affected by economic development [9].” As a result, values and discourse are all westernized, so did beauty standards.

Regardless, traditions are no longer favored and replaced what came later: “Bai Fu Mei,” as known as Ms. Perfect, meaning to be white in complexion, rich, and pretty, and “Yi Bai Zhe Bai Chou,” meaning white skin covers all flaws in appearance, dominate Chinese beauty for years and still does today.

As Dr. Luwei Rose Luqiu from Hong Kong Baptist University pointed out, “Rejecting ‘slanted eyes’ is a very dangerous phenomenon, because it is the rejection of aesthetic pluralism, and it is stifling beauty that does not meet a certain standard [10].” People should think about how to strike a balance between accepting slanted eyes as a beauty typology that everyone can appreciate and remembering them as a symbol of racism and discrimination in history. The past and the present require compromise.

4 Discussion

The outburst of the Three Squirrels incident would not be the end to disputes over the definition of Chinese beauty and the insult to Chinese culture. As previously examined, the line that separates Chinese beauty from western standards is ambiguous, while insults and appreciation about a specific trait could co-exist. The complexity and paradox behind the Chinese media users lie in the clearly demonstrated polarity in extreme opinions while showing the subjective matter, beauty, could only be interpreted repeatedly as the representation of individuals, communities, and cultural groups.

Over the course of the controversy, the public shifted its attention from the primary debate over the poster elements to cyberbullying the model, the brand, and other media users. For the model who expressed her grievance: “should small eyes be denounced for what it is? Can I not be Chinese for my small eyes?” Many media users fiercely attacked her for modeling for an “Anti-China” brand and even started searching for her background and private information, finding her old pictures and threatening her safety. On the other hand, the brand is also severely rejected by the customers and the market. In one radical Weibo user’s post during the debate, he said that “We should all resist the Three Squirrels and destroy the brand. We need to make all of its workers lose their job, they aren’t squirrels but nasty rats.” This reflects the public’s power to destroy a business and an entire workforce under anger and impulse. Similar words have been expressed to resist all bloggers who spoke up for the brand and the over-sensitivity of the public. Under the blogger “Po Po de Qiao’s” video exploring the event and pointing out the public’s

overreaction through a comprehensive and logical analysis, his comment section was flooded with fierce personal attacks on his look and users who rejected his idea saying things completely irrelevant. As one user from the comment section pointed out, “It is so pathetic that such clear logical analysis could still have little effect persuading those who never used their brain,” while another followed, “when normal voices like this are sealed, but those who provoke national extremism, disorders and hostilities are widely praised... what is happening right now is worth examining....” More reflections and studies in this area are required, and the public must stop allowing their irrational anger to destroy their reasoning and consciousness.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, the national brand Three Squirrels and its use of Chinese models for advertisement have no motive, no targeted population for insult, and no malice. Therefore, its advertisement poster, other than being a complete market design failure, could not be considered as holding anti-China sentiments or potential insults to the Chinese history and culture of beauty. However, the design did follow a stereotypical depiction of Chinese beauty under the current western perspective and understanding of Chinese culture. Notably, under the global dominance of western beauty standards and cultures, the current Chinese public’s most favoring beauty trends are influenced by outside ideas that mismatch particular essence in the traditional beauty figures, and this lead to more questions about how presenting an offensive yet possibly true and traditional view could be worse than adopting new western beauty standards as a society. The current public needs more tolerance toward beauty diversity while solemnly preserving their cultural dignity by remembering the past and still respecting it in the future. As the research study is mainly based on literature review and gathering public opinions through mass media platforms, more in-depth research should be conducted in the future by making detailed and historical analysis to validate the research’s argument and theories. To mark the end of this study, I selected an inspiring comment from blogger “Po Po de Qiao”: “Without an ethos of tolerance, it is impossible to create a new, truly national style of its own.”

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