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Global Politics Extended Essay

Cultural globalization under economic globalization in China

How resistant have Chinese standards of feminine beauty been under globalization in the last decade (2009-2019)?

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Introduction

This essay explores whether it is possible to stop cultural globalization without stopping or reducing economic globalization, and the cultural globalization will be investigated from the resistance of beauty standard. Based on the knowledge that there is an attempt to stop cultural globalization in China. In the past decade, different parts of the world become more and more connected both in terms of economics and cultures, which leads to globalization, causing more diversities to emerge in many countries around the world, including China. As the standards of feminine beauty in different countries mutually influence each other's, the aesthetic ideology in a lot of countries enlarges since it is more diverse and tolerant. This essay aims to explore different perspectives from which we can assess the changes of standards of feminine beauty in China. Also, I will assess the standards of feminine beauty from aspects like skin color, dressings, cosmetic products, and body shape. The assessments will be based on a wide range of sources, such as articles, essays, and social media.

The research question is related to the subject of global politics since global politics has the unit of globalization. I will extend the unit of globalization and investigate its impact on Chinese standard of beauty – to what extent has globalization changed the Chinese standard of beauty. It is very likely that the largest shift in Chinese standard of feminine beauty happened before the last decade, but in order to make the essay more focused and allow me to have more access to relative information in research, the time period of the last decade is chosen. There are various aspects to examine this research question, such as from the cultural level and the political level, and also there are

different types of sources, such as official reports by the government and the social media. Thus, the answer may not be definite; rather, it can be complicated. I will make the investigation as comprehensive as possible by taking different aspects into account. My approach to answer the question is based on research, because I believe that researching on different perspectives can allow me to reach a comprehensive conclusion. Other methods can be asking my parents, or doing surveys and interviews on older generations on the street, and record on the appearances of adults on the street. These methods allow me to understand the topic with more clarity and more directly, but they do not necessarily provide me more accurate results since I do not have the ability to have a sample that is large enough or to produce completely random samples. Also, other methods will make my process of investigation more practical, whereas my method is research-based.

Methodology

Since my investigation for this essay is based on primary research, my methodology is around researching. I use a range of resources, from blogs to articles to essays, and I usually choose the results that appear at the top of the website page, which are the relevant and popular ones. The essay written by Geoffrey Jones which this paper bases on is selected as there was a limited amount of resources that are valid, academic, and relevant to my topic. I chose this paper as it is the best option among all and there was not a lot of choices.

Theoretical Basis for Beauty as representative of Globalization

I will first refer to significant resources directly related to the topic of my essay to introduce the idea of globalization and beauty standards. To begin with, the paper “Globalization and Beauty: A Historical and Firm Perspective” written by Geoffrey Jones, a student of Harvard University, investigates the impact that globalization has on worldwide beauty ideals in the very long run by assessing the changes in the beauty industry. In the paper, Jones writes, “When the first wave of modern globalization struck in the nineteenth century, a homogenization of global beauty ideals began – one which has, to some extent, continued until the present day (*Jones, 885*).” Thus, basically, his argument is that globalization causes homogenization in beauty ideals. Also, he explains why the spread of beauty ideals was “globalization” but not “westernization” (*Jones, 911*). I appreciate his discrimination between the two words as it shows that he has taken the possible arguments against his into regard, making his essay more reliable and holistic.

The documentary “The illusionists”, made by Elena Rossini in 2017, is also about the globalization of beauty ideals. The film pinpoints on the idea that social media has made the world “a global village” that takes the western body as the globalized culture. Furthermore, it compares the beauty ideals in the past and today by offering the interviewers’ perspectives, demonstrating that beauty ideals today have become more of a pressure on women (*Kleinman*). In other words, under globalization, beauty ideals have larger impacts on women nowadays, which also supports the view that globalization has changed beauty standards.

Nevertheless, the essay “The globalization of beauty: how is ideal beauty influenced by globally published fashion and beauty magazines” provides a slightly different view. The essay is based on a research that analyzes female models in beauty and fashion magazines. The conclusion is “North American and European magazines dominated the beauty standards”, but “Asian countries were relatively independent particularly in terms of sexual frames and sexual model selections”. Therefore, the authors believe that most countries have been assimilated into the western norms of beauty, but Asian countries are less impacted, but only in terms of sexual beauty ideals (*Yan Yan & Kim Bissell*).

Defining Chinese Beauty Standards in 2009

In China’s traditional sense, there is a fixed set of features that are regarded as beauty, but nowadays, these features are becoming more diversified and inclusive. Since my essay focuses on the last decade (2009-2019), I will first explain the standard of feminine beauty at the start of the decade (around 2009). Based on several articles that explore the overall beauty ideals at the time such as the one on Sohu website, the standard of feminine beauty in China at the start of the decade that overlap in multiple articles is: **white skin, black hair, big eyes, and skinny body**. There are reasons behind the Chinese culture for feminine beauty, which are all established since ancient times. First, ancient beauties all had white skin and white skin used to symbolize status. Women needed to go out to farm, which make them have darker skin after long hours of exposing under the sunshine. Consequently, white skin would represent that they did

not need to go out into the sunshine and that they were wealthy (*Anla Qin*). The fact that Chinese preferred black hair is mostly based on evolution and genetics. At the start of the last decade, most Chinese are born with black hair, and black hair is a symbol for good health. Also, the reason why Chinese favored skinny body shapes can be explained from the historical perspective. At the ancient time, Chinese societies are patriarchal societies, and skinny females seemed weaker and thus less threatening to males, so men liked women to be skinny. This section does not include explanations on the standard of feminine beauty around the end of the last decade, and it will be further elaborated in future sections of the essay when the resistance of Chinese feminine beauty is being evaluated.

In addition, I would like to briefly introduce the reasons for the feminine beauty standards in some foreign countries in order to better evaluate the changes in feminine beauty standards in China under globalization. In the western world, people also find women who have bigger eyes more attractive, but they have a different explanation. They think bigger eyes is a characteristic of youth and thus will make women appear to be younger than they really are. When talking about skin color, many foreign countries have a preference towards tanned skin, and a good example is the United States. Whereas darker skin has a negative social meaning attached to it in Chinese culture, the Americans see a temporary tan as symbols for “health, leisure, and sexual attractiveness” (*Fish*). Last but not least, another aspect that I will take into consideration in the discussion of beauty standard is body shape. Different to Chinese culture, being skinny is not always ideal in American culture, and Americans have a

greater tolerance on different body shapes relatively, and so the definition of beauty in regard to body shape is wider (*Garner*).

The government and its attitude towards globalization and preserving Chinese culture

Before assessing the resistance of Chinese feminine beauty standard, we need to first ensure that there is resistance present. The way we prove this is by looking from a macro level – the government’s view – such as by comparing the dressings of the wife of Xijiping (the president of China), Pengliyuan. This is a valid way to find evidence of resistance of Chinese beauty standard because president’s wife represents China when she goes out to meet leader from other countries. When her dressings in 2013 are compared to her dressing in 2019 based on photos in news on official websites, no distinct differences can be spotted. For both of 2013 and 2019, Pengliyuan wore the same style of clothes that were similar to China’s traditional clothes chi-pao, with the same shape of collars; only the colors were different.

Actually, Chinese’s traditional culture, including Chinese’s traditional beauty standards, is crucial to China’s governing party, the Communist Party as it encompasses Marxist ideology. Furthermore, according to a news article on People Network, Xijiping, the president of China has asserted that China will be a culturally strong country and so **will stop western cultural hegemony and protect cultural diversity** (*Li*). From this, we can know that although China’s governments promote economic globalization to make the country to grow stronger, they still want to control the cultural

globalization. Thus, the governments are intentionally preserving Chinese traditional culture in ways like having the wife of the president showing a representative style of Chinese beauty. If we look into other members of Chinese governments, we can see more proofs on this. For example, the wearing of the wife of Likeqiang, the current Premier of the State Council of the Communist Party of China, also has not changed much between 2014 and 2019. Based on the photos in two news articles, Likeqiang's wife Chenghong wore a shirt and an over-knee skirt (conforms to Chinese's conservative beauty standard) in both 2014 and 2019 at foreign countries. Thus, the beauty standard of the female government Chenghong has also stayed traditional. As explained above, we can at least witness the preservations of Chinese feminine beauty standards even though it is on the political level, so the question now becomes how much is preserved and how much has changed.

Social Media trends

As mentioned previously, the major features of traditional feminine beauty standard include white skin, big eyes, black hair, and slim body shape. Thus, I researched on Chinese's preference on these aspects that constitute the definition of beauty at the end of the last decade (in recent years), to examine the resistance of Chinese standard of feminine beauty. Weibo is a microblogging website that is one of the biggest social media platform in China, with over 445 million monthly active users. On this representative social media, the top three celebrities with the most followers are Xiena, Yangmi, and Angelababy, and they all have big eyes, white skin, and black hair.

This again conforms to the old Chinese feminine beauty standard, conveying a relatively strong resistance of feminine beauty standard under the globalization in China. However, the reason for these celebrities to have the most followers may not be their appearance. For example, Xiena may be popular for her humorous and talkative personality, and Yangmi may be liked for her good communication skill. Despite the fact that we cannot say that the overall trend at the end of the last decade is entirely due to the appearances of these celebrities, we can still reach the argument that the mainstream beauty standard is not very different from that at the start of the last decade.

In addition, the celebrities with the top popularity based on Baidu search engine include Gulnazha and Bingbing Fan. Gulnazha has a height of 172cm and weighs 50kg, and Bingbing Fan has a height of 168cm and weighs 56kg. Both of them are relatively slim, so we can imply that Chinese still have the feminine beauty standard of skinny body. Thus, the traditional feminine beauty standard is largely preserved in China.

The penetration of foreign media and the extent of its influence on Chinese media

In this section, I will address how much access Chinese have to foreign/western media in order to see how much influence foreign beauty standards can possibly have. I will explore several aspects including internet usage, magazines, and television.

Many foreign websites are banned in China, and if people living in China wants to gain access to these websites, they need VPN. Thus, the data on the number of users of VPN throughout the last ten years can give us a hint about the rate of globalization in

China. Yet, since VPN is illegal in China, there isn't much data or information to be found that can show us any trends in the users of VPN. The only information I found was that the users of VPN meets 90 million in numbers in 2017. The data for other years are not available, which will be a limitation of my research.

Moreover, although there is a very limited number of relevant results for the amount of foreign magazines sold in China, there are still articles explaining the issue. In one article titled as "China clamps down on foreign magazines", the author points out that China imposes limits on the number of foreign magazines sold and does not want to "enter into any further partnerships with foreign publishers" (*Day*). This supports the argument that Chinese government is trying prevent or slow down cultural globalization and so is attempting to reduce the penetration of foreign media. According to the article "Chinese censors are clamping down on foreign TV shows, videos" on South China Morning Post, published in 2018, Chinese governments are releasing a draft that "television stations and online video platforms will be allowed to allocate no more than 30 percent of their daily screen time to programs produced overseas" (*Yan*). This article also demonstrates how governments are minimizing the influence of foreign media on Chinese media. Yet, there is one thing that we need to take into regard, which is the political stance of these two articles. Since both of the Guardian and the South China Morning Post are left wing media, there will be some level of political bias with the article, but it still does not undermine the fact the exposure to foreign media is limited in China under governments' control.

The demand for foreign goods

In the essay “Globalization and beauty: A Historical and Firm Perspective” written by Geoffrey Jones, which I have mentioned previously, the author argues that globalization has changed beauty ideals across the world, which happens through firms turning “cultural ideals into aspirational brands” and spreading their brands by “using their marketing skills to make them appear locally relevant” (*Jones*). I regard this explanation as valid and quite reasonable since he has used many examples of brands to support his argument and he has also provided charts, one of which shows that BRICS countries’ beauty industry expanded dramatically around 2008, bringing the US’ brands to their countries, which causes influences on beauty ideals. I will apply this theory of Jones in my research on the topic.

The top market brands in China can also provide us with insights on the current Chinese standards of beauty under the globalization. With this in mind, the first platform I went to was a Chinese app – Xiaohongshu (little red book). It is a platform about lifestyle that is largely focused on makeup with the top number of users in China – more than two hundred million. Two of the most popular posts about makeup brands introduce brands from Japan, Thailand, Korea, the United States, and France. Also, none of the brands that appeared were Chinese’s local brands. According to the official report from Xiaohongshu, 70% of its users are born after the year 2000, so it implies that the makeup brands from other countries are more popular among the younger generations.

In addition, we can also research on Baidu, another source that is representative of

the overall Chinese beauty standard. Comparing to Xiaohongshu, Baidu's posts on makeup brands are more dominated by middle aged people, and the website is less international and less opinionated. The top search result on makeup brands is a link with 175862 number of clicks. The page 's title is "10 top brands of skin care products in 2019". In the list, none of the ten brands is Chinese's local brand. That the brands that win the most appraisals are foreign brands even on Chinese local website is quite surprising. From this, we can imply that globalization has not only influenced the beauty industry's younger consumers but also on the older one.

However, brands of skin care products are different from the brands of makeup products as skin care is not directly related to changing one's appearance. Consumers buy makeup for the effect it creates on their appearances, but they buy skin care products for the qualities as they are used to improve the condition of skin. Thus, the preference for foreign brands in the beauty industry can be accounted for from two aspects: there is a preference for foreign makeup brands due to the change in beauty standard in China; besides beauty standard, consumers may have a higher level of trust on foreign brands' superior quality, but this is not as important in this discussion of change in Chinese feminine beauty standard.

Evaluating the changes by 2019

Summarizing what I have explored so far, Chinese governments are successfully controlling the access to foreign cultures and exposure to foreign beauty standards, and so Chinese feminine beauty standard is largely preserved so far, especially among the

older generations. There is evidence in changes of beauty standards in younger generations as foreign brands are more popular in the beauty industry. However, we know feminine beauty standards has been quite resistant because we can explain that while many Chinese prefer using foreign brands in the beauty industry, foreign makeup products have catered to Chinese traditional beauty standard in order to be well accepted in the new market, so although Chinese are using the foreign brands, they still have a similar feminine beauty standard as in the past. This resistance in feminine beauty standard in the past ten years can be explained from multiple points of view. First, since the older generations still hold the traditional beauty standard, their education on the younger ones will keep their beauty standards similar to the traditional one; the traditional values is so entrenched within the older generations that it is still a part of Chinese culture today. Also, Chinese governments have been controlling the cultural globalization well enough that the traditional feminine beauty standard is not diminishing quickly in China.

Evaluation

During my process of investigation, the biggest challenge I faced was that the beauty standard is a very opinionated and sometimes even personal subject matter, so most of the information I got from my research was either theory-based, which does not always specifically support my case of feminine beauty standard in China during the last decade, or very generalized summaries on the beauty standards.

One limitation or possible error in the essay is that I may hold a covertly biased

view towards the changed feminine beauty standard, since as a teenager in this generation, my own feminine beauty standard is already quite different from the traditional one, although I try my best to be neutral and comprehensive in analyzing the obtained information.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the impact of globalization on Chinese feminine beauty standards. The process of globalization is indeed a strong force in China, shown through economic globalization and cultural globalization. While beauty industry's products of foreign brands signify the change regarding beauty ideals, China still remains largely resistant in its fundamental beauty standards, perhaps partly due to government's control. Thus, it is possible to prevent or slow down cultural globalization without reducing economic globalization since the Chinese governments have done this well. Eventually, feminine beauty standard is a part of the globalization, and it is crucial for all women to be aware of.

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