

# The Stereotypes About Women's Appearance Throughout the History of China

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## ABSTRACT

Nowadays, women's rights are improved to some degree in China. However, there are still many stereotypes about women's appearance in China. In addition, the history of these stereotypes about Chinese women's appearance can go back to ancient China. Like slender waist and foot binding in the past, today, people tend to find fault with women's appearance according to a morbid unitary aesthetic. These stereotypes imprison Chinese women's bodies and minds. In order to seek out some solutions to change this serious situation, this topic is chosen to analyze the formation reasons of these stereotypes throughout the history of China. This paper is divided into two parts: stereotypes about women's appearance in ancient China and modern China. The feminist problems hiding behind these stereotypes will be mainly focused on. Some typical examples will be showed and analyzed. Besides, the finding of this paper shows that many of the stereotypes about women's appearance are made by men and the stereotypes do harm to women's bodies and minds. Because of the stereotypes, some women suffer from some physical and psychological diseases and lose their confidence. This is a serious situation. In order to solve it, many efforts are needed. Not only the government and the social media but also all of the people should make their own efforts to win the equal rights of women.

**Keywords:** Stereotype, Women, Anxiety, Appearance, History.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In ancient China, the standard of female beauty has always been the product of men's aesthetic activity, for example, the foot binding and slender waist. These stereotypes were made by the beauty standard at that time. The beauty standard made it easier to control and limit women's rights. Based on the production mode of "men ploughing and women weaving" and the traditional thought that man is superior to woman, Zhao Ban in Han Dynasty in "Women Commandments Jing Shen" said, "To men, strength is beauty. While, to women, the weakness is beauty [1]." This is a negative stereotype towards Chinese women made by the men of the ruling class. As a result of this, strong women were seen as symbols of ugliness and unluckiness in ancient China. The representative stereotype of slender waist reflects the harm and imprisonment that feudal patriarchal culture in ancient China did to women. According to historical records of ancient China, in Spring and Autumn Period, people in Chu State love slender waist. "History as a Mirror" said, "King Zhuang of Chu loves fine waist, many people starved to death in the palace [2]." As it can be seen, the stereotype made by males imprisoned

female's bodies and minds in ancient China.

Another representative stereotype about Chinese women's appearance in ancient China is bound feet. The specific original time of bound feet cannot be sure. Opinions are widely divided in academia. There are two opinions being accepted by most people. The first says the history of bound feet goes back to Sui Dynasty. The other says that feet binding began in the Five Dynasties. In short, the atmosphere of foot binding rose in the palace of ancient China, and then spread to the folk. It was widely spread in the Northern Song Dynasty and reached a peak in the Ming Dynasty. The size of women's feet was used to be an important criterion, or even the only standard, to judge beauty and ugliness. However, foot binding does a lot of harm to women's bodies and minds. It could break young women's bones and make them unable to walk and run like normal people. What is more, it was unacceptable for them to refuse the foot binding by themselves. Their parents took away their rights to choose. The foot binding hurt young girls' hearts. Guanying Zheng once wrote in his book: "women foot binding... or four or five, or seven or eight years old, strict words fierce face, must make bones broken... [3]" This

ancient stereotype of foot binding was mainly attributed to the oppression of women by men in the patriarchal society.

The strict standard for female appearance continues in today's society, which can be observed from various perspectives. Appearance anxiety is common in the Chinese female group. Because some of them are not confident of their appearance and develop a sense of anxiety. Nowadays, the stereotypes of females: "Internet celebrity", "A4 waist", "chopstick legs" and "white, young and thin" have got popular on the Internet. People's aesthetics tend to be similar and unitary. With the ideal stereotypes' population, excessive dieting and exercising are destroying women's bodies and minds, which is not detrimental to not only the female's mentality but also their physical health. The academic definition of social physical anxiety refers to the psychological response of individuals. Because they are worried about the negative evaluation of their shape. While the word "Appearance anxiety", as a word in the environment of web celebrity economy, has not had an accurate definition. The appearance anxiety mentioned here refers to the expansion of social physical anxiety.

This paper aims at finding out the formation reasons and negative impacts of these stereotypes about women's appearance throughout the history of China. In doing this, the possible solutions are expected to be founded. Besides, the feminist problem hiding behind these stereotypes needs to be explored. It will be helpful for people to figure out the harm the stereotypes about women brought about. What is more, it can also remind people of the significance of eliminating the stereotypes about women.

## 2. STEREOTYPES ABOUT WOMEN'S APPEARANCE IN CHINA

In China, the problem of the stereotypes about women's appearance has a long history. In addition, the beginning of the stereotypes could go back to ancient China. These negative stereotypes imprison women's bodies and minds to a serious degree. In this paper, bound feet and slender waist will be introduced as two examples of the stereotypes about women's appearance in ancient China. Nowadays, although the rights of women in China have been improved a lot. There are still many negative stereotypes about women's appearance. These stereotypes mainly come from the comments of social media and the outside environment of the women. Besides, the stereotypes have caused some physical and psychological diseases. In this paper, the stereotypes caused by the single aesthetic will be mentioned to analyze the harm that the stereotypes due to the women in modern China.

### 2.1. Stereotypes about Women's Appearance in ancient China

In ancient China, agriculture was the fundamental of the society. The production mode of "men plowed the fields and women wove cloth" provided men with absolute power, causing women's economic dependence to men [4]. As a result of this situation, women's body and mind were imprisoned by the stereotypes about their appearance made by men. In this part, two representative stereotypes, "slender waist" and "bound feet", are chosen to show the further formation reasons and negative impacts of these stereotypes.

#### 2.1.1. Slender Waist

As a representative stereotype, slender waist in ancient China reflects females' beauty in weakness [4]. While this beauty standard was made by patriarchal culture. Just as Jidao Yan said in his poem "In Chu State, females' waists are more important than their cheeks [5]." From this poem, the significance of following the stereotypes about women's appearance can be seen. Because of the king of Chu's love for fine waist, people in Chu State made fine waist the beauty standard [5]. As it can be seen that in that period the stereotypes about women's appearance were made by the man who owns the absolute power. In addition, women had no choice to refuse the stereotypes about their appearance but to obey it in ancient China.

In China, the word "slim" is always connected with the word "weak". To pursue the fine waist, a strict diet should be put into practice. Although, there is no record of the pain and disaster the stereotype brought to women in ancient China. However, it can be found in Mr. Tao Lai's article "On the relationship of clothing shape and the human body [6]". As this article said: "In the 13th century, the west emphasized the beauty of female's slender waist. The medieval appeared in the mid-13th century. In the 16th century, corset had a fixed shape and practice, the iron corset even appeared, it was invented in the 16th century. At that time, advocating slender waist, women began to go on a diet since childhood, with wide cloth tightening their waist, breathless. It gradually influenced the normal development of the body, making the waist into 30-33 cm, catering to the fashion. But the pressure made visceral displacement, the ribs and other bones deformation, muscle atrophy. It made women lose the normal natural survival ability... During the Meiji era of Japan, the kimono belt deformed the woman's liver [6]." Although, different country has a different culture. The structures of human's body are alike. From this article, the serious harm the stereotype "slender waist" made by men brought to women's body in ancient China can be seen.

### 2.1.2. Bound Feet

In ancient China, the traditional definition of female beauty has always been related to the words “soft, weak, delicate”. As a result of this, men believed the feet of women should also reflect the beauty of women’s “small and weak” [7]. So that bound feet appeared and got popular among women in ancient China. Besides, this stereotype did harm to women’s body and mind. In ancient China, men could have three or four wives, but women had to keep faithful forever [8]. This is an unequal situation in marriage. However, men were afraid of being betrayed by their wives. When women are wrapped in small feet, they can’t even stand without other’s help. So that foot binding prevented women from going out and reduced the possibility of betraying their husbands. As a result of this, they made the stereotypes. Many men only wanted marry women wrapped in small feet in ancient China [8].

The elders have a catchphrase: “A pair of bound feet is the tears of the girls; the three-inch golden lotus is the suffering of the girls [9].” As Mr. Zhong told a story of a ninety-year-old lady in his article: When she began to wrap her feet, afraid of death during the day, often scared to wake up during the night... When walking, it was too painful for her to walk with the heel of the feet... When the weather is hot, the fever and pain in the feet become worse and worse, and it was difficult to sleep. At night, she often woke up in pain. When she untied the bandage, the festering part and the bandage were tightly glued to each other, barely torn off, only a piece of flesh and blood. Sometimes the pain was so unbearable that she secretly untied the foot-binding cloth, but if it was found by her parents, she would be beaten. Then, they would bind her feet tightly. Some girls had ulcerated toes that were not be treated for years and ended up disabled [9].” The serious pain that the bound feet brought to women in ancient China can be seen.

Many women lost themselves in ancient times. They only wanted to be a man’s woman, but not themselves. They bound their feet, just because this behavior may win men’s love. What is more, they demanded their daughters and granddaughters to do the same thing in order to be a “slave” of men. Not only their feet were bound, but their minds were also bound too. They were too busy with binding their feet to figure out the serious harm hiding behind it. So that they were imprisoned by the stereotypes made by men.

## 2.2. Stereotypes about Women’s Appearance in modern China

In modern China, with the development of social media, the voice of female groups has been strengthened. But the social media also spread some negative stereotypes about women’s appearance. Therefore, the problem of stereotypes about women’s appearance

remains unsolved and even has a growing tendency in the new media environment.

### 2.2.1. Web celebrity Aesthetic

In the web celebrity economic environment, the current aesthetic culture has a significant change. The web celebrity economy has “kidnapped” aesthetic culture to some extent. The current perfect image of the web celebrity on the Internet should be a young woman with big eyes, double eyelids, a high-bridged nose, a sharp chin and a slender figure [9]. Nowadays, the web celebrity aesthetic has been enriched. “Internet celebrities” beauties are divided into cute type, pure type, and sexy type [11]. The aesthetic of people tends to be similar and alike. Because of these stereotypes, women are imprisoned. With the development of medical cosmetology, unlike women in ancient China, today’s women can not only see their own image accurately but also use plastic surgery to make themselves closer to the stereotypes made by others. The words such as “no makeup is impolite” and “female stars should be white, young and thin” have become hot topics on the Internet [12]. In addition, these negative topics create an atmosphere of “appearance first” [12]. This bad atmosphere makes the problem of stereotypes about women’s appearance worse and worse. As a result of this, it causes the anxiety about appearance of women.

The word “appearance anxiety” has got popular in today’s China [13]. One of the factors is that people’s aesthetic is easy to be influenced and changed by the public opinions and the network environment. People are used to criticizing others’ appearance according to the ideal beauty standard, in order to satisfy their vanity or blame others. In this atmosphere, even those women who are thought to be pretty by others tend to be experiencing appearance anxiety. Because some part of their appearance is still not matching the mainstream aesthetic. People who are judged to be plain looking and do not meet the standards of beauty gradually lose their confidence and develop appearance anxiety.

The appearance anxiety influences peoples’ normal study and life a lot. As Meng Li said in her article: “She suffered from malnutrition and anxiety, and both physical and psychological pain tortured her. Until one day, she was terrified that neither good foundation could brighten her dim complexion and no valuable eye shadow could modify the exhaustion of her eyes. Her emotions have finally collapsed ... [14]” When experiencing appearance anxiety, the body and mind of the patient both will be harmed to a large extent. A close relationship between anxiety and eating disorders has been found by researchers [15]. The appearance anxiety can cause some psychological and physical diseases, like anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, depression and so on. It really does harm to people’s health.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the diachronic analysis above, the unreasonable appearance requirement for the female always exists. They were threaded by the rule of feudal patriarchy. The reason for this is different because of time and economic development. In ancient times, the reason is always related to the beauty standard set by the men who own the absolute power to own male's love, ancient Chinese women were used to following the stereotypes about their appearance. Many of them lose themselves, causing a more serious situation for their daughters. While, in modern China, social media and the outside environment should take the responsibility to spread a single aesthetic. Some women are afraid of those negative comments about their appearance from the outside environment. So that they go on an unhealthy diet to follow the stereotypes blindly and lose their confidence in normal life.

Given the fact that appearance anxiety can bring a lot of harm to women's bodies and minds, releasing the appearance anxiety caused by stereotypes about women's appearance must be paid attention to by people. First, in order to solve the problem related to women, the internal determinants are women themselves. It is of great significance for women to set themselves free from the stereotypes about their appearance. Accepting the imperfection of their appearance is necessary for women to be free. Insisting on being themselves can also make sense to set up their confidence about their appearance. In addition, refusing to judge people's appearance by stereotypes is also of much significance. It is important for them to realize that not doing what they do not want others do to themselves to others. Making full use of social media platform to defend against the negative voice about women is necessary. In addition, social media should take action. Because of their negative reports about women's appearance, the stereotypes about women's appearance have been deepened. Therefore, it is the social media's duty to stand out to clear the name of women. The reports should be written by the principle of equality between men and women. The words about the stereotypes about women's appearance should not appear in the reports. It is important for them to realize that women are not attached to men. Besides, promoting diversified aesthetics should be paid attention to.

### 4. CONCLUSION

The stereotypes about women's appearance imprison women and reflect the male's aesthetic throughout the history of China. The feminist problem hiding behind the stereotypes is so serious. The stereotypes about women's appearance sometimes will cause women to lose themselves and hurt their body and mind. The rights and the health of women's bodies and mind are put in danger by these stereotypes. In addition, it causes many physical and psychological diseases. More attention should be paid to it.

To solve this problem, more education about women's equal rights is needed. Firstly, education about gender equality should be started at a young age. It is of much significance for children to learn how to show respect for others' appearance. What is more, the parents are supposed to make positive models. Social media should advertise multi-aesthetic instead of the single aesthetic. Women's achievements in all kinds of fields should be advertised more frequently. More female models should be set according to their contribution, instead of their appearance. Besides, the government is supposed to make free psychological counseling available to people. Because the price of psychological counseling is too high in China. In addition, some people even look down on the people who go psychological counseling. The government should take action to give people with psychological problems the chance and the courage to seek outside help. Besides, a healthy dietary habit and a healthy exercise habit both make sense to a confident life. The government should advocate for people to live a healthy life, instead of paying attention to their appearance too much. Beauty is on the inside. It is important for people to set up their confidence about their appearance.

### AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Yi Tang contributed to the whole paper.

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