Experience Of Chinese American Woman

Introduction

In this essay, I will scrutinize my own subjectivity as a Chinese American woman, examining this by firstly deconstructing what this particular constellation of identity signifies before situating my subjectification within the disciplinary power of beauty/cosmetic culture that policies female bodies by emphasizing capital value obtained through the physical body. I will consider a sense of place through my status as the first in my family to be born in the United States and how my American citizenship creates tensions between home and host countries where I fail to embody the standards of neither China nor the U.S. In regards to beauty, I will consider Homi Bhadba's (1983) theories of stereotype as fetish to complicate conceptualizations of fetishization in strictly colonial discourse and how whiteness can perhaps be fetishized in predominantly non-white populations. I arrive at conclusions of the inherent instability of the subjectivities 'Chinese American' (or even 'Asian American') and 'woman' depending on temporality and locality.

Drawing inspiration from Evelyne Micollier's (2017) analysis of women's assigned roles throughout the life cycle as a girl, woman, and eventually mother, I would like to adapt these roles to recounting on noteworthy episodes in my life (girlhood, adolescence, and emerging womanhood) while alternating between lived experiences in the U.S. and China. I would like to problematize language treating the 'East' and 'West' as separate spheres of culture and identity in an increasingly globalized world, especially since I argue that such splintering is unproductive when discussing my personal experience as I experience them simultaneously in one body, reembodying Chinese and American markers, regardless of where I physically am. Furthermore, historical traditions paint the 'West' as more civilized and superior as it 'discovered' other realms and imposed its values on them in an inequitable narrative, but I do not conceive of China as lesser despite its censorship and absorption of trendy Western aesthetic. Using Wen Hua's (2013) research on the cosmetic surgery industry in China, I will favour a hybridization perspective in the formulation of a Euro-Asian ideal instead, relating how a pervasive panoptic gaze has impacted my own subjectification through a culture imbued by shame and perfectionism.

Girlhood: A little Chinese girl in America, A little American girl in China

My first birthday in Maryland kickstarted a process of Americanization as the nurse misspelt my name on my birth certificate. My parents had chosen the name Anyi for me, literally meaning 'peace and happiness,' as that was the kind of life they hoped the U.S. would provide for me, but the error stole my Chinese name from me, and from that point forward I was 'Annie Wang.' Similar to the pronouncement of a newborn as a 'boy' or 'girl' functions as a performative act of gender, my given name serves a naturalization ritual to declare my being as 'American.' Salih's analysis of Judith Butler's theories on performativity positions identity as a process of becoming through "an act or sequence of acts that is always and inevitably occurring," rejecting essentialist perspectives (Salih, 2002: 47). With this, there is nothing innate about any subjectivity. My 'Americanness' was called into being. I grew up responding to a name that did

not feel like mine, but I came to embody it, thus embodying American citizenship.

I grew up in Omaha, Nebraska where de facto segregation created a pattern of attending schools where I was often one of a handful of Asian students. I became accustomed to being treated like a specimen with classmates often mispronouncing my last name and asking me to parrot something in Chinese to prove I could. I travelled to China for the first time with my mother and sister in 2005. I relished being somewhere where everyone looked like me and everyone doted on me as an adorable little American girl. With only positive memories associated with that first visit, I was naturally eager to return in 2011. Unfortunately, that year marked the first time I was touched by the influence of the beauty industry.

I cannot even remember the face of the middle-aged woman I encountered in my grandparents' Beijing apartment complex, but the suggestion she made to my mother at that time for me to get cosmetic surgery has haunted me ever since. At an age when I had not even thought about 'being pretty' yet, my natural features were already deemed ugly. I felt offended that a stranger who knew nothing about me felt she had the right to make such a suggestion. Later on, I discovered that she was one of many within a culture of shame, but the eleven-year-old me treated this memory as an oddity. Now, as a twenty-year-old, I find myself reflecting on this encounter, wondering why this woman felt compelled to comment on my appearance. Foucault's panoptic gaze establishes governmentality on several levels where the state's power is "both individualizing and totalizing" where individuals survey others and engage in self-surveillance (Foucault, 1982: 782). In this instance, the woman's surveillance indicates a specific policing of the female body where a woman's value is inextricable from physical appearance and attractiveness guarantees greater access to resources such as romance, employment, and reproduction. The practice of cosmetic surgery implements capitalist power by taking control of the "most intimate sphere" of an individual's life through the body (Hua, 2013: 7). Between the woman's two daughters, one committed suicide by jumping off the roof because of her mother's repetitious disapproval of her boyfriends and the other does not speak to her anymore.

Panopticism is not merely an abstract atmosphere as its effects on individuals within society are experienced quite tangibly. In this case, the daughter that failed to conform censored herself and escaped from surveillance through an untimely death. Upon hearing this, my subjectivity was impacted as I came to closely associate beauty performance with unhappiness, and I came to reject the ideal standards altogether. Artificial body modification "precisely compares, contrasts[,] and hierarchizes individuals" (Blackman, L. et al., 2008: 9). I will not assert that I was completely immune to the normalizing power of the cosmetic industry but residing in the states as a little Chinese girl and American citizen protected me to a certain degree from an oversaturation of media images constructing conventional Asian beauty. Ironically, erasure exonerated me from American beauty, though it did not free me from performing Americanness.

Adolescence: In the crosshairs between America and China

Physical attractiveness came to the forefront of my mind again with the start of puberty and my changing body. My experiences were greatly shaped by a constant tug-of-war between the country I resided in and my parents' country of origin. Immigrant bodies are regulated by "the gender norms of both home and host societies," where they have immersed in a novel culture whilst bringing the cultural values of their mother country (Micollier, 2017: 1801). The children of

immigrants, such as myself, embody a more complex lived experience where the lines between ‘host’ and ‘home’ are blurred from a lack of exclusive belonging to either society. Though I was not born in China, my parents instilled collectivist values in our Chinese household which alternated with the individualist lens I was indoctrinated with in American schooling. These values extended into all realms of life, including beauty, as demonstrated by a disagreement between my mother’s two sisters over my teeth. They had diverging perspectives on whether I should get braces from an aesthetic standpoint.

My aunt in Canada (my sanyi) advocated for straight pearly whites that were consistent with ‘Western’ beauty while my aunt in China (my eryi) was insistent that I keep my protruding canines that were a trend in Asia at the time (huya or ‘tiger teeth’). My orthodontist ultimately recommended that I straighten my teeth for optimal oral hygiene, though I would argue this demonstrates Kaw’s (1993) medicalization of features for economic gain. Cosmetic fields pose nonnormative traits as problems, backing their assertions with the privileged legitimacy of science. My eryi got an eyebrow lift because she disliked the accentuated squinty quality of her eyes with advanced age, and her surgeon bolstered her logic by problematizing the skin above her eyes as a health concern. Kaw centres her discussion on the influx of Asian American women seeking double eyelid surgery (and other procedures) as the result of “Western medicine[‘s] considerable social power in defining reality” in San Francisco, but my aunt demonstrates a more global panoptic gaze (Kaw, 1993: 81). ‘East’ and ‘West’ are not parsable planes of existence for Chinese women, regardless of whether they hold American or Chinese citizenship, due to the popularization of a Euro-Asian hybrid aesthetic. This beauty landscape complicated my own coming into being as an Asian-looking American as I did not neatly fit into either nation’s normalization with my physical body serving more of a mix-match of traits from both.

My ‘in-between’ existence necessitated that the social influences of host and home were continually at odds with each other in my adolescence, and my size was no exception. My subjectivity as a woman is predicated on my body as a “vehicle for becoming” (Blackman, L. et al., 2008: 19). I did not viscerally understand what my sister meant by a discomfort visiting China until I experienced the same differential treatment when I became ‘chubby.’ Rather than asking about studies, work, or any other aspect of life, Chinese relatives evaluate wellness based on the appearance of the body to comment on whether we have gained or lost weight. The unsolicited advice is a greeting norm, further enforced by Hua’s (2013) observation of the consumption of fashion and beauty products as a means to regulate personal identity. Rather than producing clothes to fit consumer bodies, women make themselves fit the mass-produced clothes. As a result, cultures become reliant on “endless self-fashioning,” motivating women to feel inadequate if they are not within normalized standards (Kaw, 1993: 87). A medium or large in China is closer to a small or extra small size in the U.S., so when I shop in a Chinese mall I am made to feel overweight while I am small or average in America.

I am too tan and too chubby to be beautiful in China, but my lived experience in the U.S. is entirely another story. Instead, my race fetishes my existence in which men ‘compliment’ my exotic appearance. Homi Bhabha attributes this othering to a productive ambivalence, creating “object[s] of desire and derision” and utilizing stereotype as fetish (Bhabha, 1983: 19). I have received suggestions in the past to take advantage of the dehumanizing behaviour exhibited by white men to gain sexual capital. These dialogues stem from an ignorance of how fetishism is a discourse of convenience to subject female bodies to further policing through fixed and false representations. The resurfacing of ‘yellow fever’ language to blame Asian people for the

COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates Foucault's relations of knowledge and power to fulfil "an urgent need at a given historical moment" (Bhabha, 1983: 26). In 2020, my 'fixed' identity as a Chinese woman emphasized my arrested position to be desirable or undesirable solely on the basis of the colour of my skin when temporally appropriate. My body continues to serve as a defining structure for my subjectivity, partially because of the literal changes it undergoes but mostly because of the contexts it travels through.

Emerging womanhood: Embracing 'Chinese American'

I spent last summer in Beijing and found my body under the constant scrutiny of relatives, passerby, and solicitors. I decided to get a haircut before starting my internship at an educational consulting company, and I could not help but notice the normalization of a particular look as I interacted with the staff. The man who cut my hair recommended that I get my eyebrows tattooed instead of drawing them so darkly, feeling as though he had the responsibility to help me become as beautiful as I could. My eyebrows became a consistent conversation starter throughout the summer as random strangers would come up to me, imploring that I let them 'fix' me at their salons. I politely refused every time despite their insistence, and they were surprised that I disliked the semi-permanence of eyebrow tattooing when I had tattoos. They eased up on the unsolicited advice when they found out I was American with their intrigue redirected at my nationality, releasing me from the pressure to conform to Chinese beauty standards. The inclination to govern, or "to structure the possible field of action of others," further exemplifies the pervasive nature of the panopticism of the beauty industry to regulate bodies through primarily insular population surveillance where people normalize each other and themselves (Foucault, 1982:790). This form of disciplinary power is reliant on perceived individual freedom and the active participation of subjects to engage in technologies of the self. The choice to obtain surgery functions as a fetish of 'empowerment,' as individuals take control of their bodies to better themselves.

In the same salon encounter, I had a brief conversation with a blonde-haired 19-year-old apprentice who wanted double eyelid surgery. My immediate gut response was to ask why he wanted the procedure, but I was more shocked at how off-handedly he mentioned it. I noticed this pattern over the course of the next three months where people talked about double-eyelid surgery without batting an eye and favoured a more Euro-Asian look. Kaw describes the move to perform a less stereotypically Asian appearance as a Foucauldian disciplinary practice that "normalizes the subject as a double encounter" to conform to both patriarchal ideals of femininity and Caucasian beauty standards (Kaw, 1993:78). As the 'Chinese' beauty standard has come to embody double eyelids, the applicability of Kaw's rhetoric visualizes a rapid global exchange. I expected to be faced with negativity for my tattoos when I returned to China in 2019 but was instead met with a new trendy aesthetic favouring tattoos and brightly coloured hair that the traditionally more conservative culture condoned in the past, likely accelerated by the influence of 'Western' and Kpop culture. I scoffed at an onslaught of advertisements featuring white women to promote eyeshadows that could only be methodologically applied on double eyelids. Again, I witnessed the media's blatant role in creating the desire to buy an ideal beauty, making beauty consumption a "way of life" (Hua, 2013:22). Though I did not tattoo my eyebrows, I neutralized my brows and cutout eyeliner in my daily makeup routine to adhere to a more 'natural' (or ziran) aesthetic in order to circumvent as much unsolicited shaming as possible. Internally, I was bitter that others around me refused to let me express myself the way I wanted and were bewildered when I said I was happy with my body. Outwardly, I was grateful

to have more peaceful walks through shopping malls.

I returned to the U.S. with reassurance in my subjectivity as a Chinese American woman with a body existing in between the planes of ‘Chinese’ and ‘American,’ refusing to actively perform fetishes of ‘Americanness’ or ‘Asianness’ in either space. My sister and I watched 200 Pounds Beauty (2006), a South Korean romantic comedy following the story of a singer who undergoes a drastic cosmetic transformation in order to pursue her love and career, with confused affective feelings, unsure of the film’s stance that seemed to promote self-love while simultaneously communicating that only beautiful people can become objects of desire. My sister felt the story would have been more compelling if her transformation had been obtained more organically through exercise and dieting rather than artificial modification while I argued that the issue itself lied in the need to change her appearance at all. Sophie talked about her own beauty performance as an act of pursuing perfectionism in all aspects of herself and not necessarily being preoccupied with the evaluations with others, but I remember her spending hours prepping her face to ‘look presentable’ when we went out. Performing beauty provides a mask to access the privileges of the outside world. Heyes discusses the normalization and commodification of the female body through reliance on proactive and energetic consumers (Heyes, 2007). The narrative of becoming pretty, allowing the beauty inside to come out and into being is essential to police the female body. My sister’s dedication to presentation influenced my own beauty performance as I learned the importance of physical attractiveness to perform femininity.

Conclusions: A woman of time and space

As I contemplate the role of the clash between ‘Chinese’ and ‘American,’ in my subjectification, I consider how my sense of self would differ if I had been born and raised in China. ‘Woman’ is the product of “endlessly reproduced historicized social relations” (Liu, L. et al., 2013: 10). Consequently, the practice of subjectification for women is dependent on the cultures of power they exist within, so while China and the U.S. may share a commonality of policing female bodies to come into being through beauty, the nuances and incubation within each require particular performances of femininity by participants. The lines of distinction in aesthetic embodiments of each culture have become increasingly blurred with global interconnectivity, but Chinese American immigrant women such as myself already embodied markers of both home and host, if those places are even separable. Being told at such a young age that I should pursue cosmetic surgery while continuing to be surveyed with bodily expectations severely impacted my consideration of self. Though I may concede that I have some attractive features, I am still largely unable to closely associate my appearance with the words ‘beautiful,’ ‘pretty,’ or ‘gorgeous.’ This is not a necessarily negative self-view, but this tension contributes to my inability to perform conventional femininity, and therefore, an inability to perform woman. ‘East’ and ‘West’ further complicate what this woman role constitutes as I am unable to perpetuate stereotypic fetishes of the Chinese woman in America and the American woman in China. The predicament of performing ‘woman’ arrests bodies with the exhaustion of continual embodiment and re-embodiment as appropriate. One cannot simply exist as an unmarked body in order to participate in society, so instead individuals must put on identities such as ‘Chinese,’ ‘American,’ and ‘Chinese American’ and call themselves into being.