

The Social Portrayal of Cosmetic Surgery Phenomenon in Chinese Movies

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Abstract. Nowadays, in China, there is a new word “beauty economy, it is an essential part of cosmetology, the beauty industry and the cosmetic industry, which increase progressively 20% every year, and total value of 1.8% China GDP. This paper describes The Social Portrayal of Cosmetic Surgery Phenomenon in Chinese Movies such as *The Reign of Assassins* (2010), *Painted Skin: Resurrection* (2013) and *The Truth About Beauty* (2014) and the latter movie become author’s most research object. *The Truth About Beauty* (2014) has raised the cosmetic surgery as a social phenomenon in China. Through these movies, we understand why women undergo cosmetic surgery, what kind of benefit or harm is caused by doing cosmetic surgery, what kind of influence affected their psychology after the surgery. Job and marriage become the main reason why women in China willing to do cosmetic surgery. Despite that, we also see that although many Chinese people still could not accept cosmetic surgery, cosmetic surgery gradually become a huge industry, and the social phenomenon in China is unstoppable.

Keyword : Social Portrayal, Psychology, Cosmetic Surgery.

1 Introduction

Female appearance commonly became an important standard for society to judge female aesthetic standard, but this standard is not changeless. It said in ancient China that “King of *Chu* fond of small hip, the palace maid starving to death” and “*Yang Yuhuan* (one of the most beautiful women in ancient China) was plump and *Zhao Feiyan* was skinny”. It is obvious that female body must accept the inquest different society for female “perfect body” standard, and this society standard is never wrong. Those society standards drawn females do various methods to forge their bodies to adapt the social existence in thousand years. (1) quotes Dworkin who said none of a woman’s body is left untouched, unaltered. Hair is dyed, lacquered, straightened permanented; eyebrows are plucked, dyed; eyes are lined, mascaraed, shadowed; lashes are curled, or false — from head toe, every feature of a woman’s face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration. We can see standards of beauty affect female physically, and relationship between physical freedom and psychological development actually is difficult to separate it. Beauty practice affects the reality being a woman, creates a woman in order to represent the “difference” between man and woman. Along with the changes of the time and the development of economic, cosmetology and lose weight are highly pursued and become a trend. From movie stars to ordinary people, none are

not affected by the beauty practice, and with the technology development, cosmetic surgery also become one of the trend, even have not graduated students start to do cosmetic surgery as one of a way to “win competition” for surviving in modern society. Nowadays in China, there is new word “beauty economic, it is an important part of cosmetology, beauty industry and cosmetic industry which increase progressively, (2) the cosmetic surgery market in China reached 256 billion yuan (\$ 36.71 billion), the report estimated the Chinese cosmetic surgery market will hit 1 trillion Yuan in 2025.

Even though surgery cosmetic become a popular trend at China lately, but only few Chinese movies were related with cosmetic surgery phenomenon such *The Reign of Assassins* (2010), *Painted Skin: Resurrection* (2013) and *The Truth About Beauty* (2014) but until the latter film, the cosmetic surgery just has not been raised as a social phenomenon. *The Reign of Assassins* was directed by *Su Chaopin*, is story about an assassin who tried to return to a normal life after had being taught by a monk. She went to a famous surgeon who changed her appearance and she assumed the identity of *Zeng Jing*, a common cloth merchant. After saving her husband and herself from robbers, she attracted the attention of her former assassin gang. *Painted Skin: Resurrection* was directed by *Wu Ershan*, is a story about the fox demon, *Xiao Wei*, embarked on a diabolical quest to become human after escaping an icy prison. *Xiao Wei* should find a human who offer her or his heart willingly to make her mortal, breaking free of the underworld and experiencing living among the living. During the searching, *Xiao Wei* became bound with Princess *Jing* who seek the love of a noble guard for her kingdom. Princess *Jing* hide her deep facial scars under a mask of pure gold, the scars that always haunted the relationship between Princess *Jing* and the guard whom she loved. And *The Truth About Beauty* was directed by *Lin Aihua*, tells about graduated student, *Guo Jing*, because she was ugly, she had been dumped by her boyfriend, and could not find a job, so she planned to do cosmetic surgery. For starter, she made double-fold eyelids, afterwards she did more and more. Her life after the surgery became complicated. Her best friend, *Wei Wei* who is also “ugly” follows her step and step on a path where there is no turning back from the cosmetic surgery’s addiction. These three movies are the portrayals of the development of cosmetic surgery become a popular culture in China. The movies are not only show why women are willing to undergo cosmetic surgery, and how cosmetic surgery affects their life physically and psychologically, but also want to give a critique to both man and woman generally and society in particularly, indirectly reflect the thoughts of Chinese society about cosmetic surgery.

2 Methodology

This article is to give description about social phenomenon in Chinese movies about cosmetic surgery, the methods we used was topic based analysis and textual based analysis, through the movie’s narrative and conversation about cosmetic surgery we analyse why women in China willing to do cosmetic surgery, what happen after the surgery, how society accept the surgery. We watch the movies, collect the data from books journals and news about cosmetic surgery case in China that can complement each other to give us full picture about the cosmetic surgery phenomenon in Chinese society which portrayed in the movies.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 The Portrayal of Women Undergo Cosmetic Surgery in Chinese Movies

Reign of Assassin, *Xi Yu* was a female assassin who decided to change how she looks after she met a monk, *Lu Zu*. *Lu Zu* taught her for months and tried to stop her for killing more people. *Xi Yu* did not want to listen to him, so he sacrificed himself by letting *Xi Yu* killed him, hoped that he was the last person she had killed, and before his death, *Lu Zu* told her the words of Buddha. Those words let her finally understand and want to leave the path of being an assassin. She went to surgeon to change her face, she only wanted to get ordinary face so she could have ordinary life. *Painted Skin: The Resurrection* showed us, Princess *Jing* willing to change her face after was persuaded by fox demon. Princess *Jing* tried to end her life after *Huo Xin* told her that even though he had dreamt to be with her before but now he could not accept her because he only remembered her face before she had been attacked by black bear. Princess *Jing*'s scar also reminded his failure to protect the princess years prior. *Xiao Wei*, the fox demon saved her and convinced princess *Jing* that by changing her face, *Huo Xin* will love her again. The first she did not believe the demon's words, she believed that *Huo Xin* was a good man but after she had been convinced by *Xiao Wei* she changed her face into *Xiao Wei*'s face, *Huo Xin* who was under fox demon spell spent night with her, proved that men only love woman's beauty.

The Truth About Beauty showed us, *Guo Jing* broke up with her boyfriend because she was ugly, her boyfriend only used her as a sex partner. After she graduated from university, she barely found a job is also because of her look. When she asked to fill the job application form, the officer rejected her and said: "our company has high demand on worker's appearance, and it is only wasted for you." When she went to ovum donation centre try to earn money from donating her ovum, she had participated in twenty-five selections, but none succeed, people prefer to choose high school graduated with beautiful look rather than high educated with ugly face. It also happened to *Guo Jing*'s friend *Wei Wei*, she put her job application online, many companies read her application, but none asked her for interview, that's also because of her appearance. Later, *Guo Jing* got some scholarship money from her university and she used it for making double-fold eyelids and wore a contact lens. After her first surgery, she had been called for interview and accepted to work at CBD. Each story and character have their own reasons why they had to "change how they looked" but all of them have similarity, their experiences with environment or others. They all have self-discrepancies, and to remove discrepancies they have to change their behavior to match an important standard. *Xi Yu* killed many people, after understand *Lu Zu* advice, she feel shame, guilty and self-contempt, she did not want to see her old face again so she hoped that by changing her face, she will have a new life, a normal ordinary and peace life. Princess *Jing*, *Guo Jing* and *Wei Wei* feel disappointed, dissatisfaction, shame, fear or feeling threatened because of the interpretation of their past painful experiences, they feel rejected by others because of their looks.

Trend of body is a cultural phenomenon and once is highly praised by specific group, it will become important society standard to judge a person. And once there if a person does not fit with the standard, he or she will place in "different species" group and the person will feel lonely and alienated, feel anxious about her or his self-identity. In *All About Beauty*, it criticized how "specific groups" become a standard to judge a person. In the movie, *Guo Jing*'s company used "theatrical test" to eliminate ugly, short, fat that did not fit with society standards. The workers especially female workers were not allowed to wear same outfit for two days, they have to prepare two clothes for a day. Moreover, workers working place were placed according to their "looks": "the office is similar as Beijing city layout, the most beautiful were placed at the third ring, the third ring is the nearest to the centre of power, still

developing at the fourth ring, the ugliest were at the outer of sixth ring.” After the recruitment and join the internship, they will choose the beautiful one to stay. *Guo Jing* was placed at the outer of sixth ring. (3) women had been motivated to undertake cosmetic surgery by the feeling that the targeted body part was socially unacceptable and abnormal. *Guo Jing* said “Like me and *Wei Wei*, we were defeated long since we were in the womb, if we do not work harder, our life destined sink forever, so I have to earn more to do cosmetic surgery. It confirms that (4) being “good looking” is capital.

Guo Jing can pass the internship because she asked a colleague for advice and help, and as returns she bought her some new clothes. She got the job and got promoted. When *Wei Wei* saw the changes of *Guo Jing* she said: “You moved from my house at fourth ring and now to third ring and from third ring to second ring, and now you are assistant operation, maybe next time you will have company share, do you ride a rocket?” When company held an anniversary party, one of *Guo Jing* colleague, *Xiao Dong* who is also ugly, but when she showed up, she was surrounded by man, it made *Guo Jing* realized that women could have nothing but must have beautiful breasts. She decided to do more surgery before she accepted *Lei Meng* (her manager) invitation to watch a concert together. Three days after the surgery, *Wei Wei* visited her and found out that *Guo Jing* willing to suffer just only for the guy like *Lei Meng*, it means that they were very ugly. (3) Although women may feel that they are making a free and informed choice, they are not really free to make a genuine choice because of patriarchal cultural pressures on them; that, although women may say that they are creating a new identity for themselves, they are really conforming to traditional (male-dominated) ideologies of how women’s bodies should look. It made *Wei Wei* also want to do cosmetic surgery and follow *Guo Jing*. (5) When beauty become crucial on women’s value and make women get their value of life, who can resist the temptation? When women can choose what kind of life they want to have, cosmetic surgery become one of the ways to take control over their bodies. The cosmetic surgery almost like a “green card” for *Guo Jing*. In the movie, we are not only can find positive outcome from cosmetic surgery, but it also showed us the worse side of cosmetic surgery. In painted Skin II, Princess *Jing* even willing to trade her heart with *Xiao Wei* and become a demon to be with *Huo Xin* even only for one night. In *The Truth About Beauty*, there was a sixty years old lady, but looked like under thirty, she did a lot of surgeries, from head to toe, all had been turned to the scalpel. And *Wei Wei* even worse, she sold the house which her parents gave her, did needle beauty therapy, upper eyelid wrinkle therapy, grind bone surgery and made her cheeks bone into necklace to memorize her new life. Doctor found that she had body dysmorphic disorder, doctor’s explanation was there was a gap between what people felt about her and how she felt about herself, she always felt she is ugly, no matter people think how beautiful she is, she felt uncomfortable about herself. She asked doctor to shrink her navel, and had been rejected, she moved to underground clinic to do whole body liposuction and had to take half year to get full recovery.

3.2 Cosmetic Surgery Become Popular Phenomenon in China

Plastic surgery is hot business and becoming something of a cool personal choice for Chinese females along with an occasional male[6]. In this delightful study, Wen Hua provides a useful overview of the social and psychological factors that are influencing women to modify their physical appearance by creating something of a blend of European and East Asian phenotypical features. Chinese people prefer to do simple surgery, for those who are involved big and complicated surgery, a lot of people still do not want to do it, because they afraid that others will know their surgery. In the movie, when *Guo Jing* first did cosmetic

surgery, she afraid people will know, she thought: "My double eyelids, did anyone notice? Keep some distance, no one should notice." She tried to keep distance with the mirror to comfort herself. Later, she went to the office for interview, she thought: "Will anyone discover?" She was very nervous and when met *Wei Wei*, she also asked "You see my eyes are very obvious or not?" And when *Lei Meng* asked her help at the office, she keep distance from him, when he walked near her, she moved one step back, and thought: "I am afraid that if he stood closer, he will see my face." And when he invited her for dinner, *Guo Jing* deliberately planned to choose the restaurant with the dim light, because she has just done the cosmetic surgery, her face was still swelling, she was afraid that he will find out. *Guo Jing* even had bad dream after the surgery. And when everyone knew she had surgery, they made fun of her, even she put the mask in the advertisement, but everyone recognized her. She went to her hometown because she was afraid of everyone's reaction. When her father saw her for the first time after the surgery, he barely recognized her. Her parents were so angry, all the relatives knew how she looked before, and they felt embarrassed. But her hometown neighbours had different reactions, *Guo Jing* became famous, her mother soon afterwards could accept her. Chinese people adopted Confucius's teaching about filial piety, that body, skin, hair came from the parents, it was not allowed to destroy it and we had to value it, this is the basic of the filial piety. Most of Chinese people behavior still unconsciously influenced by Confucius's thoughts even in the 21st century. With the acceptance of the neighbours means that some Chinese society maybe start to accept if other people did cosmetic surgery but still hardly accept if the person is family member. The Truth about Beauty portrayed exactly how Chinese society especially men think about cosmetic surgery. After *Lei Meng* find out *Guo Jing* did the cosmetic surgery, he thought that she had bad intention and women should not do such thing. And when *Lei Meng* wanted to talk with her, she ran, she thought: "I do not understand why I have to run, but I am afraid that he will be the one who decide, if he did not choose me, I will feel upset, but if he choose me, do I have to change into my original appearance?"

In the movie, there was a dialog, when *Lei Meng* found that *Guo Jing* did cosmetic surgery, he said: "If you understand man, you will not think about cosmetic surgery, there is no man like to see his woman undergone cosmetic surgery." And *Guo Jing* asked him: "If I did not go to surgery, will you like me? tell the truth." *Lei Meng* answered: "I will not." *Guo Jing* also said: "Who told us to differentiate ugly and beautiful, now us who have to accept all the blaming. Men can prefer inner beauty than beautiful face is only countered with ATM. When each person has rights to express oneself?" Through *Lei Meng* and *Guo Jing*'s dialog and narration, it showed how society perspective towards "beauty" especially women. This phenomenon is not only in some places, but it become global issues, competitive culture to find jobs and marriage become the most factors why women always worry about their looks. That is why there is secret quote that all women knew "Looks like million dollars is more important than you have millions dollar." Women were forced to have beautiful looks but society on other sides gave "bad" images who gain beauty from surgery. In the movie, *Lei Meng* because had a car accident so was forced to do cosmetic surgery, the last scene of the movie *Lei Meng* and *Guo Jing* got married, they worried about how their children will look like and have to let the child do cosmetic surgery as well. This scene also criticized that people can change their look by cosmetic surgery, but no one can change who they really are.

4 Conclusion

Cosmetology usually is linked to medical terms, but there are many different meanings as social phenomenon. Cosmetic surgery for accident patients and who want to seek confidence because of small breast, each has different perspective. Chinese movies such as *The Reign of Assassins* (2010), *Painted Skin: Resurrection* (2013) showed through cosmetic surgery they can have new identity, new life and in *The Truth About Beauty* (2014), it showed more details about cosmetic surgery as social phenomenon. Undeniable, a large number of cosmetic surgeries connected to gender. How women with their looks survived in society, and how cosmetic surgery influence their relationship with men, their self-esteem, their self-confidence, their psychology changes was portrayed more in the latter movie.

The latter movie portrayed why Chinese people especially women had to undergone cosmetic surgery, cosmetic surgery rapidly become a huge industry, job and marriage, society with competitive culture for getting better life are the main reason people are willing to take the risk on surgery table. Most Chinese people still could not accept the cosmetic surgery but Chinese people gradually become the biggest consumer for cosmetic surgery in the world and one day China also could become one of the popular destination for medical tourism in cosmetology, in that time maybe most people were forced to accept the reality. Cosmetology or plastic surgery certainly become a social phenomenon, and everyone has right to make themselves more beautiful, but through these Chinese movie, we were reminded that everyone is easily to trap in the “beauty myth”, we have to consider about the risk, psychology and health of our own before doing cosmetic surgery because in final everyone expects to live happily, but some were just gotten the opposite to what their wishes.

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