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## **Skin Lightening and Beauty in Four Asian Cultures**

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# Skin Lightening and Beauty in Four Asian Cultures

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## ABSTRACT

“Whiteness” or having white skin is considered an important element in constructing female beauty in Asian cultures. A dramatic growth of skin whitening and lightening products has occurred in Asian markets. Contemporary meanings of whiteness are influenced by Western ideologies as well as traditional Asian values and beliefs. In this study, we analyze print advertisements for skin whitening and lightening products in four Asian societies—India, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea. We compare the verbal messages and visual images for both global brands and local brands and across countries. We find that whiteness in these Asian cultures is both empowering and disempowering as well as both global and local in character.

## INTRODUCTION

“White skin” has emerged as a central desideratum of consumer culture in affluent Asia. Not only does skin lightness affect perceptions of a woman’s beauty, it also affects her marital prospects, job prospects, social status, and earning potential (Ashikari 2003b; Goon and Craven 2003; Leslie 2004). The beauty ideal of white skin in Asia predates colonialism and the introduction of Western notions of beauty (e.g., Wagatsuma 1967). Contemporary meanings of white skin combine Western mass-mediated ideologies and traditional Asian cultural values. The popularity of Caucasian and Eurasian models reflects the postcolonial structure of commoditization and consumerism and is still influenced by a colonial past (Goon and Craven 2003). Western-centrism and cultural hegemony interact with Asian ideologies like Confucianism in strengthening the ideal of whiteness (Russell 1996).

Asian countries have long histories of utilizing white skin as a key criterion of personal beauty. In Korea, flawless skin like white jade and an absence of freckles and scars have been preferred since the first dynasty in Korean history (the *Gojoseon Era*, 2333-108 B.C.E.). Various methods of lightening the skin have long been used in Korea, such as applying *miansoo* lotion and dregs of honey (Jeon, 1987). In Japan, applying white powder to the face has been considered a woman’s moral duty since the *Edo* period (Ashikari 2003a; 2003b; 2005). In India, white skin is considered as a mark of class and caste as well as an asset (Leistikow 2003). Historically, women (especially married women) in South India bathed with turmeric. Apart from the health benefits involved, it also has skin lightening and anti-inflammatory properties. In China, “milk-white” skin is a symbol of beauty and some Chinese women used to swallow powdered pearls in the hopes of becoming whiter (*China Daily* 2006). Although there are cultural variations, the desire for light skin is universal (Isa and Kramer 2003; Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992).

“Whiteness” remains an important element in contemporary postcolonial Asian understandings of beauty and has become a commodity in the marketplace (Goon and Craven 2003). Skin lightening products are popular not only in Asian cultures, but in other non-white cultures as well (e.g., Burke 1996; Del Giudice 2002; Duany 1998; Hall 1995; Lovell and Wood 1993). Fueled by increasing Asian wealth and growing consumer cultures, skin

whitening and lightening products have recorded dramatic growth in Asia during the past several decades (Ashikari 2005). Mass media and the fashion industry play important roles in reinforcing the yearning for white skin. Advertisements also play important roles in shaping ideal self images for consumers (Belk and Pollay 1985), and are the focus of our research.

We studied how advertisers portray skin color to women in Asian cultures. Content analysis and semiotic analysis were used in exploring the notion of white skin in four Asian societies (India, Japan, Korea and Hong Kong). We compared the cultural similarities and differences in advertising skin whitening and lightening products by both global brands and domestic brands. We also studied the metaphors used in advertisements in order to understand the process of constructing the meanings of “whiteness” in different Asian cultures.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

### Globalizing Notions of Beauty

In India, the words for fair and beautiful are synonymous (Franklin 1968; Hall 1995). In one view “whiteness” and “paleness” are distinct but related concepts, “signifying both distinction between, and collusion with, the historical myths of paleness associated with feminine discourses of beauty, and ‘whiteness’ as an imperialist, racialized value of superiority” (Goon and Craven 2003). Although, as we have already noted, ideals of whiteness embedded in Asian notions of female beauty predate colonialism and other forms of contact with the West, the prevalence of Caucasian models in many Asian advertisements for beauty products raises the possibility that beauty ideals are or are becoming global. According to a study of the Human Relations Area Files more than 20 years ago, of 312 different cultures, 51 used skin color as a criterion of beauty, and in all but four of these lighter skin was preferred (Van den Berge and Frost 1986). Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) note that while white is associated with purity, righteousness, decency, and auspiciousness, black is associated with wickedness, villainy, menace, and illegality. In Asia, skin lightening as well as cosmetic surgeries that provide a more Western appearance (e.g., Kaw 1993; Miller 2003) have been taken by some as evidence of the global appeal of Western and Caucasian standards of beauty (Goon and Craven 2003; Isa and Kramer 2003). But others reject this conclusion, pointing for example to the desire of white Western men for the dark exotic “Other” (e.g., Hunter 2005). This is a weak argument however in that the transgressive desire for Otherness may offer an element of perceived danger and excitement but has hardly brought about the homogenization of skin pigmentation through widespread intermarriage of dark skinned and light skinned people.

During the colonial era, and arguably before and after as well, rather than a homogenizing blending of skin color, there has instead been an attempt to distinguish the dark Other as “primitive” and inferior, thereby supporting the mission of the light skinned colonialist to conquer and control the natives of Africa, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Polynesia (Torgovnick 1990). A

part of this project has entailed equating dark skin color with dirt, filth, and defilement (Spurr 1993). When Charles Darwin (1839) encountered the natives of Tierra del Fuego, he described them as “stunted in their growth, their hideous faces bedaubed with white paint, their skins filthy and greasy, their voices discordant, their gestures violent and without dignity.” As Torgovnick analyzes William Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan series, she finds that “As the series develops, it increasingly affirms existing hierarchies, including the hierarchy of male over female, white over black, West over rest” (1990, 46). And McClintock (1995) shows how advertisements for Pears soap depict its ability to magically cleanse the body of a black child and make it white, vividly illustrating the association of darkness with dirt. At the same time, advertisements suggest that the colonial mission of “civilizing” native populations necessarily involves imposing a global standard of Caucasian beauty.

### Cultural Meanings of Whiteness

In Japan, the Tokugawa government effectively sealed off the country from Western influence in 1639. It was not until 1853 that Commodore Perry and his American “black ships” forced Japan to reopen its ports. During the subsequent period of the Meiji Restoration, both Japanese men and women began to self-consciously imitate the clothing, hairstyles, and appearance of Westerners (Wagatsuma 1967). While early paintings of Western sailors show the men with dark tans (note too the image of black ships), Western women were shown as pale and white. By the 1920s, anything Western was regarded as modern and desirable (Wagatsuma 1967; Kinmonth 1981). This was also the case during and following World War I and World War II (Kato 1965). Wagatsuma (1967) reports a survey of Japanese men that found that they valued white skin as a significant element in judging the beauty of Japanese women and associated it with femininity, chastity, purity, moral virtue, and motherhood. In addition he found that the quality of *mochi-hada* (“skin like pounded rice”) had sexual connotations for many of these men. However, this is a beauty ideal that is not the same as the Western use of cosmetics to enhance or change appearance. Instead it is a uniform fitting-in that has only become somewhat less severe than the use of lead-based face whitening in the Meiji era (Ashikari 2003b). More than 90 percent of middle-class Japanese women adopt this face in public and even those who tan their bodies avoid tanning their faces and use the standard color of foundation makeup (Ashikari 2003b). Japanese whiteness is thus about Japanese racial identity and according to Ashikari (2005) it is seen as quite different from and even superior to Western whiteness. Caucasian women are regarded as beautiful in Japan, although Caucasian men are more likely to be described as big-nosed “hairy barbarians.” Still, they are regarded more positively than blacks who are described by some Japanese as bestial and animal-like (Russell 1996; Wagatsuma 1967).

In traditional Chinese culture, the idiom “one white covers up three uglinesses” (Bray 2002) still has currency. Most of the portraits of goddesses and Buddha have white skin. But in China too there was an historical influence of Western notions of beauty and fashion during from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with strong similarities to contemporary China following the “open door” policies introduced in the late 1970s (Belk and Zhao 2003). Shanghai, along with four other Chinese “treaty port cities” and Hong Kong, was forced to open to the West after losing the Opium War in 1843. Western goods, fashions, films, and inventions flooded Shanghai as a result. This was a jarring development compared to previous periods when China regarded itself as the center of the universe and was largely impervious to attempts to import foreign goods. Women’s appearances became increasingly

Westernized in the 1930s and incorporated high heel shoes, furs, bobbed hair, and Western beauty products. Chinese women who adopted such fashions also became the target of an anti-foreign and anti-consumerist movement, the *Kuomintang* or New Life Movement. The Japanese invasion of China and World War II intervened, but this movement eventually led to civil war and the establishment of the communist party in China. Women’s looks and clothing became decidedly less consumerist and Western under communism until the late 1970s. The recent rise of consumerism in China has brought about a resurgence of Westernized fashions. But the legacy of foreign conquests and humiliations of China have also led to a simultaneous love/hate relationship with the global and foreign in contemporary China (Belk and Zhao 2003; Zhou and Belk 2004).

In the long tradition of Korean shamanism, a person with white skin is respected. The myth of the Buryat Mongols of South-Central Siberia, where Korean shamanism originated, tells that the first superhuman was born white. In Korea, people who have white skin have long been told that they look noble. In the upper class of the *Koryo* dynasty (918-1392), children washed their faces with peach flower water to make their skin clean, white, and transparent, and girls before marriage were desperate to have white skin. Even for men, the skin complexion of a noble man was almost always expressed as being like pale jade (Jeon 1987). After the opening of its seaports to the foreign Powers since 1876, Western clothing, accessories, hairstyles, and make-up were distributed in the cities of Korea. “New women,” who were also called modern girls, were very active in embracing Western standards of beauty. Names like *Marlene Dietrich*, and *Greta Garbo* were mentioned often describing beauty (Yoo 2001).

In Indian culture, “black” is associated with underprivileged people and is a symbol of “dark,” “dirty,” “wrong,” “hell,” and “unfairness” and is opposite to “good,” “bright,” and “well-being”. White skin is always associated with positive messages in Indian and Hindu culture. It is taken as a sign of “beauty,” “purity,” “cleanliness,” and “happiness,” and is a symbol of power and privilege (Arif 2004). In Hindu religion, *Kali*, a dark-skin goddess, is a symbol of ugliness, cruelty, and destruction (Arif 2004; Leeming 2001) and manifests the negative association of dark skinned women in Indian society.

In sum, “whiteness” is an important sign in presenting and constructing beauty in many non-white cultures. Also, whiteness is associated with perceptions of gender, virtue, and cultural identity. Desires for “whiteness,” under this chain of associations, is pursued for mixed reasons by women in everyday life. In the social context, white face and white skin can be identified as a form of performance (Goffman 1967, 1979), which presents and re-represents the beauty and virtue of an individual within the community.

### Classism and Racism: White Privilege

Differences in skin color are not only perceived as marking physical differences between and among groups of people, but also to mark social and cultural distinctions in terms of racial and historical background. Classism and racism develop socially rather than biologically, but markers may be artificially coded in terms of differences in skin colors. In color-ranking societies like America (Hall 1995), “double-consciousness” (DuBois 1969) and a dual perspective (Norton 1993) were common social phenomena in inter-ethnic interactions. The “light at the top” phenomenon spread over non-white cultures. Those with light skin and Caucasian-looking features have also enjoyed more respect in their communities (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). Euro-centric ideology took root in many cultures with the rise of colonialism in the eighteenth century and with the spread of mass media and consumer goods in

the twentieth century. White males occupied the top of the social hierarchy while non-white females, especially black females, were at the bottom. People from non-white cultures, like African Americans, “bleached” themselves (first with folk preparations and later with commercial skin lighteners) in an attempt to blend in the dominant society (Hall 1995).

As Banton (1967) observes, race and ethnicity become the signs that lead to the assignment of positions in the overall system of exploitation. Mass media and marketers have aided and abetted this phenomenon by portraying distinctions between races and ethnic groups. Hollywood movies and mass media in the West frequently portray darker skin people as lower class, dirty, and evil, while white or light skin people are depicted as morally purer, better educated, more intelligent, and cleaner. Even Spike Lee’s 1988 film *School Daze* emphasizes this prejudice. Dark skin continues to be associated with unpleasantness, dirt, crime, and disruption of society (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992; Hall 1995) as well as lower social status, while light or white skin is associated with purity and higher social class. This social stratification process exists in non-Western cultures as well. Dark skinned people in Japan are perceived as lower class (or farmers) since they work under the sun while light skinned people are more likely to have been sheltered indoors rather than working outside.

According to Lipsitz (1998, p. 3), “the power of whiteness depended not only on white hegemony over separate racialized groups, but also on manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another, to compete with each other for white approval, and to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense—literally—of other racialized populations”. Stereotypes among whites and non-whites spread from the inter-cultural arena to intra-cultural contexts. “Civilized White” and “Barbarous Black” (Russell 1996) ideologies became internalized in non-white cultures. Light and fair skin tone become the desired skin tone and was perceived as “sign” of prestige within the non-white cultures on each of the world’s continents.

## METHODOLOGY

### Data Collection

Advertisements for skin-related products are the focus of our analysis. As advertising is one of the important archival records for storing cultural images and texts (Belk and Pollay 1985), we sought to study how brands project ideologies and create or reinforce new standards via their images and messages. Six magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, a local high fashion magazine, a similar magazine for working women,<sup>1</sup> a movie magazine, and a bridal magazine) were collected from each of four Asian societies (India, Japan, Korea and Hong Kong) for a fixed time frame (March, June, September, and December issues in 2005). We focused on advertisements for cosmetics, skin care products, skin care services, foods and beverages claiming to improve skin quality, and other skin-related products and services. We did not include advertisements for shampoos, hair products, or plastic surgery. After removing duplicates, 620 advertisements were coded for comparison: 108 ads from India, 103 from Japan, 225 from Korea, and 184 from Hong Kong. Promotional articles, advice columns, and editorials were also examined, but are not analyzed here.

<sup>1</sup>A magazine for housewives was used instead in Korea because a prominent magazine for working women is not available.

### Data Analysis

Content analysis and semiotic analysis were used in this study. In the initial content analysis we recorded: information about (1) model’s identity (Caucasian or Asian; local or foreign), (2) background color, (3) skin color of the model(s), (4) slogan, (5) product depiction (present or not present), (6) brand and product name(s), (7) function of products, (8) technology/ingredient(s) claims, (9) language used, and (10) appearance of model(s) (posture, body parts included, hair-style, hair-color, accessories). Skin color was coded using a standardized color wheel and involved fourteen possible categories ranging from soft ivory to cocoa. Each advertisement was coded by a research team member from the country in which the ad appeared. We then met to present, compare, and discuss the results of the analysis. This led to more qualitative comparisons of the ads, cultural background discussions, and refinement of the codes employed.

In the subsequent semiotic analysis we focused on studying the metaphors invoked in the advertisement. Here we explored the implicit messages of the advertisements. We identified the signifiers and signifieds in the advertisements following Barthes (1964). We compared similarities and differences between global and local brands as well as cultural differences between ads from the four societies studied. The research team made these comparisons as a group following individual analyses of ads from each country.

## FINDINGS

### Notions of “Good Skin” and “Bad Skin”

Skin care advertisements in each country emphasized that “good skin” should be smooth, young, pore-less, line-free, bright, transparent, white, full, and fine. “Bad skin” is referenced in the ads as skin with fine lines, wrinkles, aging marks, pores, or yellow spots, and skin that is dark, scratchy, dry, dull, loose, or rough. The major causes of bad skin are presented as being aging, dryness, ultraviolet radiation (or exposure to strong sunlight), stress, air pollution, slow metabolism, lack of rest, overuse of cosmetics, and the formation of melanin.

### Functions/New Technology/New Ingredient

Product advertisements typically made multiple claims for their products. The main functions claimed for the skin care products in the advertisements are repairing skin, smoothing/removing wrinkles/lines/deep spots/yellow spots/black eyes/baggy eyes, itching/dullness/oil/grease/dirt, improving fairness of complexion, rejuvenating, brightening, cleansing, whitening, smoothing, or restoring skin, increasing moisture retention, maintaining elasticity, and preventing the formation of melanin. Statistics and survey results as well as government approval certifications were found in the skin color ads across the studied countries in order to suggest scientific proof of the efficacy of the products. Examples of these claims include the percentage of users who agreed that they had improved skin quality after using the product. Results of experiments were also cited to show effects, including increased moisture retention levels and reduced pore size. In Korea, although a few skin care advertisements included survey or lab test results, they were not emphasized as much as in the Hong Kong and Indian ads. Instead, acknowledgement of official approval of claims (e.g. wrinkle reduction, UV screening, and whitening) by the Korean Food and Drug Administration was common. Some of the ads emphasized formulation for Asian women’s skin specifically. Technologies referenced included the use of Nano-technology in extracting essences from natural materials, dissolution of dirt, UV protection, and the addition of a protective layer to the skin. At the

same time, there were frequent claims of natural ingredients and extracts or essences of natural ingredients in the ads. Emphasis was very commonly on “natural” beauty as opposed to “artificial” or “man-made” beauty.

#### A Lighter Shade of Pale

Caucasian models were most often used in ads for global brands like Estee Lauder and L’Oreal. Forty-four percent of Korean and fifty-four percent of Japanese ads used Caucasian models. Local models did not often appear in global brands’ ads in Korea, Hong Kong or Japan but eighty-two percent of the Indian ads used Indian models or celebrities. One reason for this may be the recent globalization of Indian beauty as affirmed by a number of Indian winners of such global beauty contests as Miss World and Miss Universe. From 1990-2006 Indian models won 11 of these titles. The dominance of Bollywood film in India also diminishes the impact of Hollywood ideologies in Indian culture. Indian celebrities appear to be the dominant body ideals for Indian women. Domestic and regional brands (including Asian brands like Shiseido) use more local models in each of the countries studied. In Japan, celebrities who participated in Hollywood movies, including Kaori Momoi from *Geisha* and Koyuki from *Last Samurai*, are used in ads for global brands (e.g., SK-II). In contrast to the global brands’ localization strategies (e.g., “for Asian skin”), here the Hollywood reference claims a more global status for local brands, playing on local pride. In other words, local models in Asian cultures are moving upwards towards the global standard—the western standard (Wilk 1995).

In the case of Japan, Korea and Hong Kong, the skin color of the model, whether Caucasian or local, is primarily soft ivory, classic ivory, and natural ivory. In the case of India, the skin color of models (who were predominantly Indian) tended to be more fair and Caucasian-looking. The skin color of models in advertisements that emphasize “natural” tended to be moderately light—either soft ivory or natural ivory. Models in these ads had minimal make-up, conveying a “natural beauty” look. The skin color of models for prestige brands, and ads emphasizing a somewhat older “classic” or “elegant” image, tended to be a lighter classic ivory. Thus, skin color is conflated with class and whiter skin costs more.

#### Globalized Products, Localized Slogans/Themes/Metaphors

Global brands like Estée Lauder and L’Oreal distribute the same product lines in each Asian market studied. Variations of their product lines occur, but are minor. But localized advertising messages are used. We focus on Chinese ads for illustration in this section. For example, advertisements referencing Chinese traditions found in the Hong Kong magazines included: inner-body/internal treatment, the power of white tea, claims of herbal ingredients, and combinations of herbal medicine and Western technologies.

Metaphors used in Hong Kong included collagen derived from sharks, presumably because shark fin soup is a luxury food served at Chinese banquets. Pandas were used to present the black eyes since “Panda’s eye” is commonly used to describe a person who lacks sleep or is in an exhausted and extremely tired condition. Internal treatments of blood and the importance of harmonizing the body internally were often emphasized. This relates to *Qi* and the balance of *yin* and *yang* as well as the basic elements in Chinese foods and medicines. Also, skin care advertisements sometimes claimed that they follow the traditional Chinese Imperial Palace secret formula. Pearls, gold, and platinum were used to emphasize luxuriousness in these ads, while water, clear sky, and natural environment were used to suggest naturalness. Symbols like gold, aristocrats, and luxury foods like sharks’ fins and birds’ nests were

found in the skin care advertisements in Hong Kong. Other ingredients like *Ling Zhi* and *Song-Yi* mushroom (*Matsutake tricoloma*), which were used traditionally by upper class families and emperors for retaining the skin whiteness are now touted in skin whitening ads (Onions 1998).

“Natural” was found repeatedly in advertisements of each country. In Hong Kong these appeals were also localized with natural ingredients like the essence of white tea (Origins), Chinese herbal medicine (like *Ling Zhi* and *Agaricus*), and minerals from volcanoes or hot-springs. Common slogans for skin lightening products and services included rejuvenating yourself, brightening and lightening your skin, stopping time (associated with aging), perfecting your skin, creating pearl-like (MaxFactor)/water-like/baby-like skin, climbing the peak of beauty, controlling your future (Olay), increasing confidence and attractiveness. For example, Missha’s “Illuminating Arbutin Skincare” collection emphasizes that the product can turn users’ skin as white as the snow. “Many messages ask for close attention to the deeper level of skin. Seemingly unproblematic skin turns out to be the problematic when it is seen from its roots. The detection of early symptoms of bad skin and the correction of defects as early as possible is emphasized. Technology also played an important role in these messages with frequent references to advanced technologies bringing in “new” methods to skin care and magical effects to the skin. For example, Sofina’s “Whitening Deep Science” emphasizes the newly developed technology that can avoid the formation of melanin. The appeal to advanced technology emphasizes belief and trust in science to minimize poor or declining skin quality.

## DISCUSSION

### “White Skin” as “Cultural Capital” in Asian Society

White Skin, in our findings, combines with other socio-cultural symbols such as the natural environment, fresh air, blue sky, and water, in order to emphasize purity and naturalness. Also, in Asian cultures, white skin is perceived as a sign of luxury and prestige. Asian celebrities with white/fair skin also link their success with whiteness/fairness. Altering skin color implies success in controlling the body and thereby achieving an ideal body image (Miller 2003).

Thompson (2004) introduced the Gnostic mythos, which refers to the “ideological wedding of technology and transcendence” (Noble 1999; Thompson 2004). A similar emphasis on technologies in skin care and whitening industry played an important role in building consumers’ expectations for the Cinderella-like transformative power of the products advertised. Natural ingredients or essences create a sense of natural health for consumers (Thompson and Troester 2002) and emphasize the natural beauty of the skin. Since ingredients were frequently touted as derived from naturally existing organisms (especially plants), it was also implied that our (consumers’) bodies can adapt to these components with minimal side-effects like allergies.

At a theoretical level, whiteness is a source of symbolic cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1986) that is associated with upper class images, luxury, prestige and success in Asian cultures (Rhada 2007). Also, a natural white skin is associated with advanced in technology, while at the same time claiming natural ingredients, and body control as discussed below.

### Body Control, Empowerment and Disempowerment of Asian Women

From our findings, white skin is always linked with naturalness. In “naturalizing” skin it is implied that this is the natural order of things from which we have departed. Women who have white and

fair skin were perceived as “normal” and others who fail to achieve a fair complexion are suggested as failing to manage and control their bodies. Internal factors that are accused of causing “bad skin” include aging, stress, inadequate relaxation, and abnormal body conditions, while external factors are suggested to include air pollution, dryness, humidity, and strong sunlight. In Thompson and Troester’s (2002) study, restoring the harmony of the body is one of the conceptual goals of natural health. Having a healthy skin, according to Crawford (1985), is a matter of self-control, self-discipline, self-denial, and will power. Skin care product advertisements frequently call consumers’ attention to tiny defects of skin or invisible sources of troubles and ask them to control these things in order to have good skin. In order to have good skin, consumers are required to apply the advertised products every day. This self-surveillance and internalization of skin care regimens underwrite most of the advertisements. Fear of the invisible enemies of the skin creates skin care disciplines and exemplifies strategies of modern governance (Foucault 1984, 1985). Skin care products are advertised as capable of improving skin quality as well as controlling the skin’s quality under extreme conditions. Naturalness is essential in the skin care context, and advertisements use words like “recover,” “rejuvenate,” “repair,” “prevent,” “refresh,” “retain,” and “revitalize” to emphasize that the product will help to regain and maintain the user’s skin rather than “change” and “alter” it like plastic surgery. “Flawless” skin is presented as the fundamental skin type of humans and any flaw is therefore unnatural. Success in controlling the human body and reversing the natural order is appealed to through controlling and altering skin color. It is the outward sign of inner beauty. The emphases on technological advancement and new ingredients promise to enhance this control by adopting Western technologies, but also celebrate the broader human control over nature.

Whitening and lightening skin has both empowering and disempowering functions for women. In Asian cultures, women were oppressed for long periods of time. In China, women were labeled as mere attachments to men. The Confucian Doctrine of Threefold Obedience (*san cong*) was established in *Li ji*, and held that women were subordinates to their fathers as girls, to their husbands as wives, and to their sons as widows (Raphals 1998). Likewise in Korea during the Choson dynasty (1392-1910) middle class women were sequestered within the center of the household and were not allowed to venture forth uncovered or on their own (Song-mi 2003). The ability of whitening and lightening skin to empower women lies in delivering power in controlling their own skin tone as well as bodies. This empowering action also liberates women from men’s control. Along with the increasing social status of women in contemporary Asian societies, women become important agents both at home and in the workplace. However, contemporary women are disempowered in the same manner. Women, even when empowered to control their bodies and skin tone, still follow the external control of a beauty standard. As noted above, they also succumb to a strategy of modern self-governance. In this sense, women are still following the social norm and are working hard to achieve social acceptance in order to secure their social status as well as accumulate social capital in society.

### CONCLUSION

Whitening and lightening skin products have recorded a dramatic growth in Asian markets over the past two decades and are the best-selling product categories in the Asian beauty industry. The long histories of the desire for white skin and fair skin has collided with technological developments and marketing forces. Skin whitening and lightening products not only promise to fulfill

the desire for white and fair skin as a route to higher status, but also empower women to control their own bodies and alter nature. On the other hand, whitening and lightening skin are a social norm that “forces” women to follow such trends and standards as well as marketplace mythologies (Thompson 2004). Failure in following this norm will result in low self-esteem and social status. In social interaction contexts, white and fair skins are social symbols and regimes. The notion of beauty is socially constructed and its meanings are changed and maintained by social forces.

The desire for white and fair skin is a global phenomenon especially in non-white cultures and is not limited to Asian contexts. African, South American and Middle-Eastern cultures also have their own traditions of skin whitening and lightening. This study explores how skin whitening and lightening products construct the contemporary notion of whiteness in Asian countries and interprets how this notion reinforces the embedded meanings of whiteness and beauty in Asia.

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