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Eyes on Chinese female models' faces: stereotypes, aesthetics, self-Orientalism, and the moral discourse of the CPC

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Abstract: The representation the model's face in advertisements is a controversial issue for the Chinese. This article investigates the features and the origin of stereotypical Chinese eyes throughout history, highlighting the naturalization of the slanting eyes in the Western context. Through a short summary of preferable eyes in physiognomy, traditional painting, and modern China, the essay demonstrates the variation in perception of the beauty of eyes that differ from and are influenced by the West in both positive and negative aspects. The essay critiques the Orientalist portrayal of Chinese models by comparing the stereotypical slanting eyes and the admired phoenix eyes and conducting a semiotic analysis of Chen Man's 2021 Dior photo. Furthermore, by adopting the Chinese concept of "face" (*lian*/*mianzi*) in the case of the Chinese brand Three Squirrels, the author proposes that the sensibility of the Chinese toward the model's face is not only a historic problem related to national emotions but also a moral issue linked with collectivism, particularly in self-Orientalist cases. The Communist Party of China plays an active role in the construction of the moral discourse regarding the perception of the beauty of eyes, which may become another response to Orientalism.

Keywords: collectivism; fashion advertisement; moral face (*lian*); perception of beauty; phoenix eyes; slanting eyes

1 Introduction

China is a critical player in the global trade market. However, multinational corporations, particularly those from the West, do not always achieve their desires when catering to Chinese consumers through their advertisements. In fact, such advertisements can provoke controversial reactions and cause significant harm to the brand. Controversial advertising "can elicit reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage from a segment of the population when presented" (Waller 2005). Although it may be an acceptable and effective marketing strategy

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(Bachnik and Nowacki 2018), it is more likely an unintentional result arising from misunderstandings in the context of cross-cultural communication between Western companies and the Chinese.

Barnes and Dotson (1990) differentiate controversial advertising into two dimensions: the controversial product/service itself and controversial advertising execution. Regarding Western controversial advertisements in China, most of the early research concentrated on the former. In recent years, study of the latter has begun to increase (Wang 2020a). Thanks to the attention and efforts of advertisers and researchers, the misunderstanding and misuse of Chinese cultural symbols are decreasing, while a more obscure problem has emerged and is being criticized by the Chinese netizen. The figure of the Chinese in advertisements, in particular the representation of Chinese female models' faces, has become a subject of controversy. Over the last five years, several international companies have been involved in this kind of controversy, from the fashion brand ZARA (February 2021) to the automobile company Benz (December 2021), from Dolce & Gabbana's commercial spots by Occidental creators (November 2018) to Dior's artist photo shot by Chinese photographer Chen Man (November 2021).

The importance of face is widely explained all over the world from the past to the present. The human face shapes one's identity and is linked to spirituality. Inspired by Aristotle, Dante states in his philosophical work *Convivio* that it is exactly in the face that the soul expresses itself the most (Leone 2019). In the classical work of Confucianism *Analects*, Confucius says "[Regarding filial piety] The difficulty is with the countenance" (*Analects* 2.8),[1] considering the face as a medium of spiritual activities and emphasizing the importance of facial expressions in filial piety (Zhao 2019: 126–127).

The facial expression of spirituality is largely implemented by the eyes in both Western and Chinese cultures. Mencius, described as the "second Sage" (second to Confucius) in Confucianism, views the eyes as the most effective way to understand a person's inner world:

> When observing someone there is nothing more telling than the pupil of the eye. In the pupil one's wickedness cannot be concealed. When one is correct within one's innermost being, the pupil will be clear. When one is not correct within one's innermost being, the pupil will be dull. If one listens to his words and observes the pupils of his eyes, what can a person hide? (*Mencius* 4A15)[2]

Similarly, Hegel argues that "the eye-glance is in fact that aspect which is most steeped in the soul; it is the concentration of the inward life and its subjective emotion" (Hegel 2017 [1920]: 146).

1 In this essay, references to the book of *Analects* are to Legge 1869.

2 In this essay, references to the book of *Mencius* are to Bloom 2009.

The crucial role of eyes in one's face is confirmed in language as well. From the view of cognitive linguistics, in both English and Chinese, people use the word "eye" to describe emotional and spiritual situations, and the eye is also the metaphor vehicle of "center" or "core" (Yu 2010).

In controversial Western advertisements, the representation of eyes is frequently the key object of criticism of the image of the Chinese female model. Why and how do the Chinese perceive the face and the representation of their compatriot models' eyes as insults? What are the elements influencing the Chinese aesthetics of eyes and how do they work? Furthermore, the attitude of the state media is against the case of Chen's Dior photo but in defense of ZARA's beauty campaign photos on social media. Why do the official media led by the Communist Party of China (CPC) interpret and evaluate the two cases in different ways?

To answer these questions, I will use Greimasian semiotics and Orientalism theory to examine the representation of slanting eyes, the most controversial content of the Chinese face, with special attention to the case of Chen's Dior photo. My analyses will be associated with the discussion of state media's commentary on self-Orientalism and the particular culture of the face (*lian* and *mianzi*) in China.

2 Chinese eye representation in the West

Given the offensive meaning associated with the words "slanty-eyed" or "slant-eyed" in the English language, the term "slanting eyes" is used in this article to describe typical forms of Chinese long, thin eyes, with the emphasis on the feature of identifiable palpebral slant, of which a line goes from the outer corner of the eye to the inner corner. It is important to note that slanting eyes are not a single form but rather a category encompassing at least four types of eyes, including phoenix eyes (eyes with a slight upward angle and upturned eye tail), lifting eyes (eyes with a high slant), pathological slanting eyes, and cartoon slanting eyes. The critical portrayal of individuals with slanting eyes in Western advertising is considered to be an Orientalist stereotype that naturalizes the high-slanting eye as the singular, discriminatory look from history referred to as "slanty eyes."

2.1 Discrimination in modern history

The slanty-eyed look is characterized by narrow and high oblique eyes, not always but often with small eyeballs. It has two origins. The first is the notion of "piggish-looking eyes," which both highlights the small size of Chinese eyes and alludes to the discriminatory thought that the Chinese are as stupid as pigs. This expression widely

spread in Caucasian media and works in the second half of the nineteenth century in the colonial period in China. One of the earliest documents is *The Middle Kingdom*, written in 1848. Samuel Wells Williams, the author and an American missionary, writes in the first version of his book: "The Chinese were on the whole an uninteresting, grotesque, and uncivilized 'pig-eyed' people, whom one run no risk in laughing at" (Roberts 1991: 142). Another origin is related to Down syndrome. It is named after British doctor John Langdon Down, who first described the disease in 1862 and used the term "mongoloid" because of the facial similarities with the Mongolian race, including upward-slanting eyes, wide ocular distance, and flat bridge of the nose. Since then, the description "slanty eyes" and the gesture of "narrowing eyes with fingers" have a strong racist meaning, an implication of intellectual disability to East Asians.

The discriminatory image of the Chinese was reinforced in the late nineteenth century with the "Yellow Peril" discourse. It could be separated into two levels. Firstly, China was seen as a military threat, tracing back to the fear of the Mongols in the Middle Ages. One of the representative products is the allegorical painting commissioned by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1895, which called for an Occidental alliance against the Chinese and Japanese threat to Christian civilization, making up the colonial invasion of China and the struggle for hegemony against Japan into self-defense against the Chinese army and hostility toward Eastern races and civilizations (Sun 2023). From this perspective, the Yellow Peril is a part of imperialist discourse to maintain the justifiability of colonization. Secondly, at that time, Chinese immigrants were considered warriors of the "Middle Kingdom," a virus of loathsome diseases, devils with opium and prostitutes, and thieves of local employment opportunities and higher wages (Lyman 2000). From this perspective, the concept of the Yellow Peril was a part of racist discourse among the masses, constructing and reinforcing the negative collective imagination of the Chinese.

Inspired by the perception of the Yellow Peril and shocked by the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, English author Sax Rohmer wrote a series of novels in which the fictitious character Dr. Fu Manchu became a classical symbol of the Yellow Peril and the competent but evil Chinese (Zhou 2003). The novels were published in installments for more than fifty years and were adapted into various media, such as films, TV series, radio programs, and comics. The cover of the novel *The Trail of Fu Manchu* in 1934 provides a perfect representation of the discriminatory Chinese face, with nearly invisible eyeballs, slit, and high-slanting eye shape, and oblique mouth, combining both the small "piggish-looking eyes" and Down syndrome's traits.

In general, between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the Western representation of slanty eyes was a derogatory depiction of the Chinese. It included small piggish eye, high-slanting eyes, and pathological slanting eyes, adopted by the imperialist and racist discourse. Served

as visual proof of the collective imagination of the "uncivilized" or "evil" Chinese, the slanty-eyed look was frequently present in Western books, newspapers, and painting manuals (Li 2016; Li and Zhao 2015).

2.2 Stereotypes in contemporary society

The representation of the Chinese eyes gradually changed after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. The Opening and Reform Policy in 1978 is a milestone of modern China. Since then, China has had a more friendly and open attitude toward the West, and more Chinese persons and companies are trying to establish cooperation with the Westerners. A symbolic successful case is the Disney animation movie *Mulan* in 1998. In the film, Mulan's eyes are neither small nor narrow as slanty eyes. The big eyes with highlights are the window of her strong self-will and courage, which correspond with the philosophical reflection of Mencius.

The pathological representation of Chinese eyes disappeared, while the feature of the palpebral slant is reinforced, as in Mulan's face. In cartoons, eyes are enlarged in the character's face to promote cuteness and show spirit, while in the representation of a real person, Chinese eyes are not so big, in particular in comparison with Western eyes.

The visuality of race marks one's identity, which "permeates our being in the world, our being-with-others, and our consciousness of our self as a being-for-others" (Alcoff 2005: 194), especially in Western immigrant societies. Accordingly, the representation of race features in the face is highly significant. In China, however, race is not a visual feature to be emphasized. On the one side, race "is not salient for the numeric majority, it does not make consumers distinct in the social environment" (Xu and Chen 2016). On the other side, the inclusiveness of the Chinese culture and collectivism accentuates the same identity of the nationality instead of placing emphasis on the difference among 56 ethnic groups.

Following the logic of racial difference, there is no denying that the slight degree of the palpebral slant is a common racial feature of the Chinese and that the openness of the Asian eyes is generally smaller than that of Caucasians. However, should the narrowness and the slant be emphasized together to represent the Han ethnic group, the majority of the population in China? There is no recognized standard for the classification of Chinese (Han ethnic group's) eye shape. In some Chinese studies on facial recognition technology (Li et al. 2016; Sun and Rong 2017; Shang and Bu 2019) and female facial makeup recommendation systems (Huang 2020; Li 2018), researchers selected four (or five) distinct features of eyes: length, width, inclination, ovality/curvature of eyelids (and ocular distance). They classified, in general, three typical groups of eye shape: long, thin eyes, oval/almond eyes, and round/big eyes (Figure 1).

表 3 不同眼型数据个数和眼睛形状示意图

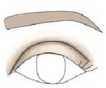
Category 眼形分类	Almond eyes 杏眼	Round eyes 圆眼	Long, thin eyes 细长眼
Illustration 眼型示意图			
Amount of data 个数	1023	679	870

Figure 1: Illustration of the three typical groups of Chinese female eyes and the amount of data (Li 2018: 10).

The representation of typical almond eyes and round eyes is nearly invisible in the West. The depiction of slanting eyes described in this paper is widespread. The homogenization of the Chinese female model's look with (natural or made-up) slanting eyes and single-fold eyelid in Western fashion magazines and model TV shows has already been criticized in China (Li 2020: 33–34). In this respect, identifiable slanting eyes became a stereotype instead of a single type of Chinese eyes, reducing the diversity of Chinese eyes, simplifying and ossifying itself as the exclusive standard Chinese eye shape in the Western context, in the sense of Hall's distinction between typing and stereotyping (Hall 1997: 258). To emphasize the "Chinese" palpebral slant, the makeup sometimes exaggerates the representation of normal slight slanting eyes, which could be classified as long, thin eyes, almond eyes, or round eyes, into high-slanting, long, thin eyes, which in Chinese aesthetics belongs to the offensive representation of slanty eyes and has a negative meaning. It is evidence of Orientalism: the representation and common perception of the Chinese facial image and female eyes are produced by the powerful Western imaginary of the Oriental in the multimedia world in discourses of naturalization and the generalization of stereotypical long, thin slanting eyes without concern for other classic types of Chinese eyes nor the possible racist implications caused by the slight but sensitive deformation of stereotypical eyes.

3 Eyes in Chinese aesthetics

In Chinese physiognomy, the long, thin eye is always highly praised. In *Sixteen chapters of physiognomy* (相法十六篇), one of the earliest physiognomic books in China, collected in Airusheng Chinese Ancient Books Resources Database, the author Xu Fu (许负), who was active at the end of the third century B.C. and the beginning of the second century and registered in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (Sima and

Han 2010), wrote: "Anyone who has long, delicate eyes must be a close servant of the King. Anyone who has dragon or phoenix eyes must be in a high post with matched salary. […] If the outer corner of the eye inclines toward the sky, it signifies endless well-being and fortune" (Xu 2017, my translation). Xu Fu did not distinguish the diverse inclinations of palpebral slant but appreciated long, thin eyes, which include the dragon/phoenix eye, featuring the upturned outer corner of the eyes. These statements can be found in sequent physiognomic manuals, as such *Mayi Shenxiang* (麻衣神相), the most representative physiognomic manual after the Song Dynasty. In Chinese traditional painting, not only are figures confined to the presentation of themselves, but their faces are represented with symbolic meaning from the physiognomy (Qiu 2020). In *The secrets of painting human figures* (写像密诀), the first extant Chinese treatise on portraits, the fourteenth-century author and painter Wang Yi writes that "whoever paints a portrait must be thoroughly familiar with the rules of physiognomy" (Tian 2008 [1547]).

The preference for long, thin eyes is influenced also by the understanding of femininity in the culture. In Chinese philosophy, both Confucianism and Taoism have a tendency to praise more about femininity, the nature of gentleness, receptiveness, tranquility, softness, and flexibility, which is related to the quality of *Yin*(阴). Water, a symbol of *Yin*, is appreciated in *Daodejing* (the most classic text of Taoism): "The highest excellence is like (that of) water. The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things, and in its occupying, without striving (to the contrary), the low place which all men dislike" (Legge 2008 [1891]: 19). Confucianism particularly respects hierarchy, and its name *Ru* (儒) "is derived from *Rou* [柔 (腬)], which means 'harmony and softness.' The essence of Confucianism is no more than this" (Yang and Ren 1989: 120, my translation). Long, thin eyes are supposed to be more expressive of a gentle and soft temperament than round eyes that open wide, and are favored by the traditional Chinese intellectuals, the main group of painters.

Among all forms of long, thin eyes, the well-loved phoenix eyes (丹凤眼) in East Asia should be mentioned. Unlike Western painting, Chinese painting is not concerned with perspective and there is no fixed standard or special attention to the slant of the eye. The phoenix eye, a theoretically long, thin eye with an upturned tail, may be exaggerated or simplified to look like a high-slanting eye, rather than emphasizing the curvature of the eye tail, to highlight positive meaning of immortals or sages in an artistic stile (Li and Yang 2014). As shown in Figure 2,[3] the phoenix eyes may be half-closed (the female celestial being) and exaggerated by a high palpebral slant (the male celestial being), looking downward from a high situation, which

3 *Eighty-Seven Celestials* (八十七神仙卷) is one of the most accomplished traditional paintings in the plain drawing (白描) style, depicting 87 Taoist godly figures descending from the heavens in a grand procession.

Figure 2: Detail of *Eighty-Seven Celestials*, Xu Beihong Memorial Hall[4] (CHCPPH ed. 1986: 5).

denotes dignity and creates a psychological distance between the possessor and the observers due to the sharpness of the outer corner of eyes.

The high-slanting eye is called "*Diao Yan*" (吊眼, 'lifting eye'), or 'fox eye' (especially in women) in general parlance. In literature and cartoons, a figure with this eye shape is considered to be treacherous and cunning. In modern China, the negative connotation of this eye shape has been weakened, but it is still considered less desirable on formal occasions and is expected to be modified, softened, and rounded with makeup (Li 2013: 92).

Different from high-slanting eyes, phoenix eyes can be more round in modern contexts, more like an almond rather than a slender slit, and combine with double-fold eyelids, while high-slanting eyes are always with single-fold eyelids and the eyes' outline is more linear, as shown in Figure 3. Phoenix eyes were widely used to describe female figures in the literature of the Ming and Qing Dynasties to show beautiful appearance and intelligence, valiance, and a bright personality (Hu and Yu 2020), while slanting eyes had a negative meaning related to stereotypes and slanty eyes. The representation in makeup also differs. In the case of Western high-slanting eyes, the eyeliner or eyeshadow used is dark or black, clearly outlining the length and palpebral slant (to some extent, the narrowness) of the eyes. The makeup for phoenix

4 According to CHCPPH (Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House), the painting reserved in Xu Beihong Memorial Hall is a copy of *Chaoyuan immortal guards of honor* (朝元仙仗图, my translation) in the early period of Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127). Instead, the artist and collector Xu Beihong considers his collection as *Eighty-Seven Celestials*, drawn by Wu Daozi in Tang Dynasty (618-907). *Eighty-Seven Celestials* and *Chaoyuan immortal guards of honor* are nearly same in size, content and drawing techniques. The author chose Xu's opinion to name the painting.

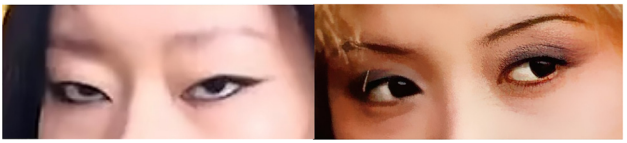


Figure 3: Comparison of eye representation in the Mercedes-Benz's commercial (December 2021) (Ibbetson 2021) and in the poster of Jie Deng (1987), who plays a classical literary figure, Xifeng Wang (Wang 2023).

eyes instead tries to create a tendency toward an eye tail by using a gradually lighter shade of eye shadow, which slightly enlarges the perception of the size of the eyes. The tips of the eyelashes are extended with heavy mascara, heavy eyeliner is applied to lengthen the eyes in a subtle way, and the slant is reinforced, mainly in the corners of the eyes, making the radian of the upper eyelid more visible. The preference for the curvature of the upper eyelids instead of the linear inclination of palpebral slant is part of curvaceous aesthetics in China, based on the understanding of implicit beauty in traditional philosophy, which appreciates curves and circular shapes like the symbol of Taiji (太极) and praises gentle curvature rather than straightness.

The rounded phoenix eye is a break from the traditional preference for long, thin eyes and reflects a contemporary aesthetical change where the Chinese female eye is expected to be large. This is influenced by multiple factors. In the early twentieth century, under the urgent questions of the nation's survival, Chinese intellectuals continually learned and applied to China the advanced model of Western ideology and cultural, political, and social systems, material civilization, and so on. They launched a fierce critique of the feudal dynasties and traditional culture during the New Culture Movement in the 1910s and 1920s, internalizing both the positive aspects of Western civilization and ethno-political hegemony. Images of curly-haired, wide-eyed, voluptuous Western beauties appeared on the covers and pages of women's magazines, were integrated into popular aesthetics, and became a symbol of modernity and fashion (Yang and Huang 2021). Inheriting the idea that eyes show the will of an individual, opposing the repression of women by feudal rituals, and absorbing the painting techniques of Western perspective, the self-portraits of some female artists in the first half of the twentieth century highlight large eyes, in contrast to soft, long, thin eyes and flat representations of ladies in Ming and Qing dynasty (Figure 4).

Large eyes not only attract attention in biological terms but also evoke the image of the baby's face with cuddly connotations. In contemporary China, large eyes in females appear in a variety of contexts, from cartoons to makeup recommendations, and are celebrated for expressing a girlish, soft, sweet style, which reflects the worship of youth and the patriarchal standard of cuteness for women. Slanting eyes appear to be slightly smaller due to the gradient of the slant and degree of curvature

Figure 4: Comparison of eye representation in *Beauties in history* (千秋绝艳图) in the Qing Dynasty (National Museum of China) and in the self-portrait of painter Feng Yu (Yu 1935).

of eyelids while Chinese young women prefer to enlarge their eyes in photos of themselves using the digital cosmetic application *Meitu*, whose algorithms demonstrate hegemonies of Western aesthetics (Leone 2020).

Overall, the aesthetic of female eye shapes and makeup in modern China is diversifying. Long, thin eyes or rounded phoenix eyes, almond eyes, round and downturned puppy-dog eyes, among others, – all of them are perceived as beautiful without just one standard or one style. The homogenization of slanting eyes neglects the diversity of eye shapes and the beauty of the eye in China. It may correspond with the preference for long, thin eyes in Ancient China, when people did not pay more attention to the slant but does not conform to contemporary Chinese aesthetics.

In Chinese, slanty eyes and slanting eyes are grouped together as “squinting eyes” (眯眯眼), which emphasizes the intentional narrowness of one’s eyes. To be clearer, I list the eye shapes mentioned above in Table 1 to show the classification and perception of different eye representations.

Table 1: Classification of slanty and slanting eyes.

Eye representation	Basic eye shape	Eyeball	Inclination (palpebral slant)	Width of eye	Curvature of eyelid	Perceived as
Lifting eyes (high-slanting eyes)	Long, thin eyes	Normal or small	High	Narrow	Small	Slanty eyes
Phoenix eyes	Long, thin eyes or almond eyes	Normal	Slight	Narrow or medium width	Large	Beautiful eyes
Homogeneous Western slanting eyes	Long, thin eyes	Normal or small	High	Narrow	Small	Slanting eyes
Cartoon slanting eyes	(Do not exist in the real world)	Big	High	Wide	Large	Beautiful and/or stereotypical

4 Self- and counter-Orientalism on Chinese eyes

In relation to the stereotypical depiction of Chinese female eyes in the West as slanting, it remains uncertain whether Chinese authors represent this aspect more authentically. This uncertainty is highlighted by popular Chinese fashion photographer Chen Man's artistic photograph, which depicts the theme of traveling back in time to the Ming and Qing dynasties. This work was positioned as the first picture of the Dior art exhibition propaganda on the Chinese social media platform, Xiaohongshu, which is similar to Instagram, and sparked a month-long discussion on the Westernized representation of Chinese eyes. In Section 4.1, a semiotic analysis is conducted to identify the self-Orientalized representation created by Chen Man's photo, as well as the methods used to create this image. The next two sections aim to explain the discourses and reasons underpinning the criticisms made by the general public against self-Orientalized products (4.2) and by the official media led by the CPC (4.3) amid the controversy triggered by Chen Man's photo.

4.1 Self-Orientalized Chen's photo

At the figurative level, Chen's 2021 photo is a reproduction of the discriminatory image of Chinese women in the nineteenth century. The long fingernail guards suggest that the model represents an imperial consort in the Qing dynasty. However, the model's greasy and tightly combed-up hair, the artificial flower hairpins on her head and the sparse bangs are highly related to the look introduced by British lawyer Henry Charles Sirr in 1849:

> A Chinaman's beau ideal of perfection in woman, consists […] in […] high cheek bones, small piggish-looking eyes, with pencilled eyebrows meeting over the nose, low brow, oblong ears, coarse black hair, which is invariably anointed with stinking pork fat, until it stands on end; then the hair must be drawn up from the face, to the top of the head, where it is dressed in a high knot, in which is stuck perpendicularly silver, or jade stone pins, and artificial flowers—the size of a small cabbage. (Sirr 1849: 61–62)

The model's fingers are slightly larger than the fingernail guards, making the thick knuckles and fleshy fingers more obese, linking to the image of a pig. In Chinese costume dramas set in the Qing dynasty, such as *Empresses in the Palace* (2011), the fingernail guards are perfectly fitted with the fingers of the actresses, making their hands look more slender and more elegant.

In particular, the makeup on the model's face reinforces the racist features. The heavy eye shadow elongates and upturns the corner of the model's original phoenix eyes, creating an unnatural and exaggerated slanting look reminiscent of slanty eyes.

In terms of skin color, the model's face is made up to be bronze-colored and so non-uniform that the edges of the face and lips show the model's original complexion. The Chinese have preferred a fair complexion for two thousand years. In *Dazhao* (大招), a poem created between 329 B.C. and 296 B.C. in the poetry collection *Chu Ci* (楚辞), the author describes beauties who "put white powder on the face and draw black eyebrows" (Zhou 1990: 1172). The "white powder and black eyebrows" (粉黛) is so important that it can be used to describe the action of putting on makeup in Chinese (施粉黛) and became the metonymy of female beauty in the narrative poem *Chang Hen Ge* (长恨歌), one of the most representative literary works of the Tang dynasty. Besides the color, the uneven skin tone makes the model's face appear dirty and rough with freckles uncovered by the dark foundation. Should an elegant imperial consort present herself with such a sense of "naturality"? In contrast to the delicate fingernail guards and flower hairpins, the makeup is a brutalization of the Chinese female face with an implication of shoddiness.

At the plastic level, the main dark colors in the picture tend to have strongly held associations of "sad" and "stale" across cultures (Madden et al. 2000), creating a gloomy and oppressive atmosphere. The depressive feeling exists in the chromatic dimension as well. The model's neck is covered by the collar, which forms a straight line downward with the shoulder, donating a sense of falling. With these elements, the traditional Chinese bilateral symmetry of the picture tends to have a negative meaning, corresponding to the Western stereotypical imagination: Eastern societies and cultures are stable, immobile, humanity-constrained, antiquated, and backward.

However, this does not fit an image of the time that saw the Chinese as a people that needed "to be saved"; it is evil and threatening. The sharp angles of the fingernail guards and the outer corner of the eyes, and the broken lines of the scalp create a sense of aggression. The model's gaze is in the center of her oval face and of the inverted triangle constructed by the hairline and collar. For the Chinese, the black eyeballs without highlights and the uninterpretable gaze of their compatriot suggest a sense of barely concealed malice, associated with "the traditional Western hostility to and fear of the Orient" (Said 1979: 237), like the Yellow Peril in the nineteenth century and the China threat theory today.

Chen's photo was originally shot in 2012 for Dior rather than the Chinese public, satisfying the client's imagination of the Chinese. As the title *Restrained Pride* (骄傲的矜持) demonstrates, the figure is interpreted as full of secrets and exotic, without concerning the distorted traditional symbols of imperial consort and offensive stereotypical facial representation. This is not the only case in which Chinese producers employ self-Orientalization to meet Western aesthetics (bronze-colored complexion, natural freckles, slanting eyes, etc.) and Orientalist stereotypies (image of Chinese beauty and culture in the nineteenth century). In the context of globalization, self-Orientalism is considered a negotiable strategy in advertising

(Cai et al. 2018; Dirlik 1996; Feighery 2012; Kobayashi et al. 2019). By using Orientalist discourse, native creators both play and convert the existent role of the "Other" to gain recognition, position attractiveness, and identification in the Western-dominated system. Even if in Chen's photo the representation of the model basically follows Western stereotypes, the photographer has slightly modified the "uglification" of the female Chinese image with real phoenix eyes, rather than the slanty eyes of history. The criticism of the picture from Chinese netizens and state media also shows the dialectical relations between confirming, supplementing, and opposing Orientalist discourse.

4.2 Moral denunciation from the general public

The controversy on the representation of Chinese eyes instigated by Chen's photo lasted for a month. The perception of slanting eyes went through two stages. The first was the denial phase. After Chen's photo was posted on *Xiaohongbook* on 12 November 2021, netizens intuitively thought that the artwork was "unbeautiful" and "not a representation of my eyes but an image of squinting eyes," criticizing the photographer for appealing to Western stereotypes. As the criticism grew, netizens began to debate what exactly "squinting eyes" were and became confused. Some believed that the Chinese themselves were oversensitive, using ancient representations of phoenix eyes or "not so beautiful" Chinese faces to prove that the image of the squinting eyes is traditional and not offensive; while others introduced more works that are considered self-Orientated to support the criticism.

Among these works, a series of posters of the Chinese nut brand Three Squirrels released on Weibo on 10 October 2019 requires particular attention. First, the posters are aimed at the domestic market, but deviate from the popular aesthetic and bear a greater resemblance to the Orientalized face with slanting eyes, wide ocular distance, and thick lips (Figure 5). Secondly, these posters did not cause much controversy when they were posted but were rediscovered and reinterpreted by netizens. On 26 December 2021, the hashtag "Three Squirrels Model" became one of the hottest trending topics on Weibo, a social media platform similar to Twitter, with over 15,000 tweets and 170 million views (JRJ 2021). Thirdly, the model in the photo, Cai Niangniang (菜孃孃), stirred up more controversy among netizens when she defended her face on the same day in the evening, saying "Don't I deserve to be Chinese despite my small eyes?"

In the studies of controversial Orientalist advertisements, researchers frequently attribute the causes to national sentiments, emphasizing the influence of racism, stereotypes, and nationalistic sentiments (Fam and Waller 2003; Wang 2020b). Cai's case provides new questions for the study: How does the Chinese model,

Figure 5: Face of a criticized poster of Cai Niangniang (Three Squirrels 2019).

gazed at in the public opinion storm, explain herself? What is the dynamic relationship between the model's face and the image of the Chinese face perceived by the public?

To answer this question, I utilize the face concept in Chinese collective culture. Hu (1944), the first Chinese scholar to analyze the meaning of the Chinese face, separates it into two concepts: *lian* (moral face) and *mianzi* (social face). Hwang continues the study in the Confucian social context and summarizes:

> In daily usage, *mianzi* represents the kind of social reputation that is highly valued by Chinese. It is the kind of status that has been deliberately accumulated by a person through effort and achievement and with pride during the course of life. […] *Lian* represents public trust in the individual's morality. Once lost, an individual cannot function as usual in the group. […] The relationship between *lian* and *mian* was just like the difference between personality and title as emphasized by Confucianism. (Hwang and Han 2010)

In the Three Squirrels case, Cai's response was to protect her own face, which is negatively valued as ugly and stereotypical in posters in the view of the public. "I didn't intentionally create any insulting image […]. My eyes are like this [representation in posters], even smaller than this in daily life. Does that mean that you should not be a model if your eyes are like this? You insult China on the day you were born?" Cai emphasizes the uniqueness and naturalness of her own face and thinks that her face is being criticized by netizens for their extreme sensitivity as a result of the nationalistic discourse around "insulting China" and the aesthetic hegemony of big eyes among the public. Her response has sense from an individual point of view but neglects the role of the face in the collective society.

Different from Westerners, whose faces emphasizes the subjectivity of an individual, the Chinese face focuses on the communal aspect (Mao 1994), tightly linked with relationships, both in interpersonal relationships and in the power structures and international political status (Hwang 2013). In this context, Cai's face is not only a personal face to show her singularity or her functional enacted role as a model, but a related face with her community, a part of the face of "greater self," namely the national face. From this perspective, the public should pay more attention to promoting "authentic" representations of the compatriot model's face. If the selected face is stereotypical in conventional sense, even though the face of the model is natural without heavy application of modifying makeup, the model loses her face and the Chinese, as a whole, lose their face.

For the general public, the use of offensive facial representation in Western-made advertisements undermines the social face (*mianzi*) of the Chinese. To protect their social image (as a Chinese consumers) and national image (as the whole of Chinese society), the "practice of using social capital [public opinion and boycott] to establish, protect, or gain symbolic capital [including *mianzi*] has been routinely used by Chinese citizens" (Huang and Janssens 2019). In the self-Orientalist advertisements, the Chinese lose neither *mianzi* nor *lian*, due to the immorality of the compatriot creators' self-Orientalized actions. *Lian* is more basic and important than *mianzi* in terms of losing face, with the significance of morality and personality (Cheng 1986; Hwang 2006). The fact that creators and models lose their *lian* in self-Orientalist works evokes a strong sense of shame of losing *lian* for the whole of the Chinese general public.

To save *lian*, the nationalist criticism is reinforced. In the Three Squirrels case, the netizens researched and revalued Cai's performance and words in the past on social media, interpreting her action of lifting her eyes out of the original context of dancing movements and of comic facial expressions as the strong immorality of the self-Orientalism. They widely posted and reposted the screenshots of her lifting eyes in her video without approval, harassed and abused her with private messages, and violated her basic rights to privacy and reputation as an individual in the name of

collective justice. The official Chinese media did not intervene directly in this violence. Two days later, however, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League (CCCYL) published an article that emphasizes that self-Orientalization is a product of Orientalism, drawing the tension among the people (between the masses and the model) into the tension between China and the West in Orientalist discourse.

4.3 Criticism and proposal from the CPC

The CPC positions itself as the leader of the nation and the Chinese culture, as Xi Jinping reported at the nineteenth CPC National Congress in 2017: "Since its founding, the Communist Party of China has actively guided and promoted China's advanced culture while keeping China's fine traditional culture alive and strong" (Xi 2017: 40). The issue of self-Orientalization requires the CPC to be active in a huge controversy, and to guide the public opinion without going in the wrong direction (ideology) or having worse impacts (reality).

As mentioned above, Chen's photo became the trigger for a discussion about squinting eyes that lasted for over a month. Past works were unearthed and reassessed, such as the Three Squirrels posters; and new controversy emerged for the new animated film *I Am What I Am*, in which the protagonists' faces reflect features that are similar to Down syndrome, such as high-slanting eyes and wide ocular distance. Netizens did not reach a consensus in the long-running debates. Their criticism was more like a subconscious defensive counterattack, a kind of sensitivity toward the portrayal of their national identity. It is directly related to national sentiments as a rebellious response to the powerful Orientalist discourse and to the painful history of semicolonization. It stems from a bottom-up collective morality of face, where their own face is connected with the national face, resulting in a nationalist blowing-off of steam.

The commentary published by the state media under the CPC is a conscious counterattack that targets the West's cultural hegemony. On 26 December 2021, the CCCYL posted an article on *Weixin* and *Weibo*, the principal social media platforms in China, which criticizes the racism and colonialism of Orientalism and self-Orientalism. The author explains the offensiveness of squinting eyes in history and points out that "Behind the right to define 'what is beauty', it is the dispute over the power of discourse on the international stage" (CCCYL 2021). By admitting the existence of a powerful Western-centric order and opposing self-Orientalization, the CCCYL also makes a clear division of "we" and "they," "China" and "the West," to emphasize the traditional Chinese aesthetics both in the domestic community (to save *lian* at the moral level) and in the outer group (to save *mianzi* at the international level).

But there are two problems with this anti-Orientalist discourse. First, by taking China as a whole, it represses the heterogeneous voices within the nation. The author takes Cai's video screenshots of lifting eyes as proof of her self-Orientalization, ignoring the objective existence of the model's own small, thin eyes and the value of her non-mainstream aesthetic in fashion pluralism. Second, when confirming the authenticity of Chinese aesthetics by denying Orientalism, the distinction is exclusive and confrontational. It erases the existence of ancient Chinese representations of slanting eyes, ignores the positive influence of modern Western culture on Chinese aesthetics, and neglects the commonality between Chinese and Western aesthetics. Cross-cultural researchers have found different perceptions of the mouth, the cheekbones, the nose, and the complexion (Zhan et al. 2020), but it is hard to confirm a distinct different preference for eye shape between China and the West. Frith demonstrates that "the forms of representation, particularly of women, can take on a globalized or transnational look" (Frith et al. 2005). It is necessary to be aware of cultural difference, while at the same time it cannot be simplified as the boundary of the aesthetic dichotomy of "China" and the "West." Otherwise, it becomes an Orientalist point of view, as Said defines that "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said 1979: 11–12).

These shortcomings are compensated for in the CPC's article with another discourse that emphasizes aesthetic pluralism. This perspective goes beyond the conflicting framework of "Orientalism" versus "anti-Orientalism" and attempts to answer the question "what are beautiful representations we can perceive" (plural, descriptive, flexible) rather than "what is authentic aesthetics on eye representation" (single, definitive, fixed). In fact, in the article, the author states: "Oriental beauty can have thousands of forms, but it can never pander to the imagination of the 'Orientalists'" (CCCYL 2021). The emphasis is on the subjectivity of the creator and the sense of not deliberately pandering to Orientalism, with the implication of moral criticism and exhortation.

The same moral concern of the CPC is also demonstrated in the case of ZARA. In February 2021, some Chinese netizens criticized ZARA's beauty campaign photos for supposedly insulting the Chinese due to the natural freckles on the model Li Jingwen's face. Two days after the publication of the photos, *Zhongqing Comment* (中青评论) (the news commentary department of *China Youth Daily*, one of the most important media outlets of the CPC) defended ZARA with the article *ZARA is accused of 'insulting China', but this concept should not be abused*, in which the author points out:

> Because they [the critics] subjectively think that the Chinese model's representation is "not beautiful enough," they conclude that it is "uglifying" the Chinese people, and this has led to controversy about "insulting China." […] The sensitivity to this advertisement is essentially the

> sensitivity to reality. With the flood of beautified photos with the excessive smoothing effect of the skin on the Internet, it is becoming more and more difficult for people to accept faces without digital modification, and to appreciate real but imperfect beauty. Some people can see Li Jingwen's unique beauty, while others interpret it as a "disgrace to China." This contrast begs a reflection our aesthetic system. (Yang 2019, my translation)

The article does not mention the possibility that the critics' sensitivity toward the Chinese model's face may be caused by their self-gazed position, in which they expect the Chinese image to be always positive and appreciated in a Westerner's view. It is more like a moral discourse, intended to guide people toward the proper appreciation of facial beauty.

The CPC's moral concern can be traced back to the Confucian political concern with ethics and virtue. Confucius says: "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they are led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good" (*Analects* 2.3). Morality has a gentler and more desirable effect than law in maintaining social order. Fanned by collectivist culture and nationalist sentiment, the critique of self-Orientalization can develop into perverse violence, such as the online abuse suffered by Cai. The moral discourse of the CPC instead, becomes a milder critique and guide. On the one hand, it asks creators to raise awareness of and vigilance toward Orientalism and self-Orientalization, emphasizing the rejuvenation of traditional aesthetics and aesthetic pluralism rather than stereotyping that appeals to the West. On the other hand, by participating in the face representation controversy which is not self-Orientalization but simply different from the mainstream aesthetics (ZARA's case), the CPC advocates self-reflection on mainstream aesthetics. Both the CCCYL and *Zhongqing Comment* advocate aesthetic diversity and inclusion rather than finding a certain standard or certain characteristics of authenticity to oppose or modify the Orientalist model, showing a possibility of self-expression beyond the Orientalist discourse. Except for squinting eyes, which are tightly related to racism and Orientalism in history, diverse styles of beauty in both traditional and contemporary mass aesthetics impacted by the West are considered acceptable in the Chinese beauty encyclopedia.

5 Conclusions

A semiotic square was used to illustrate diverse situations in the representation of Chinese eyes (Figure 6).

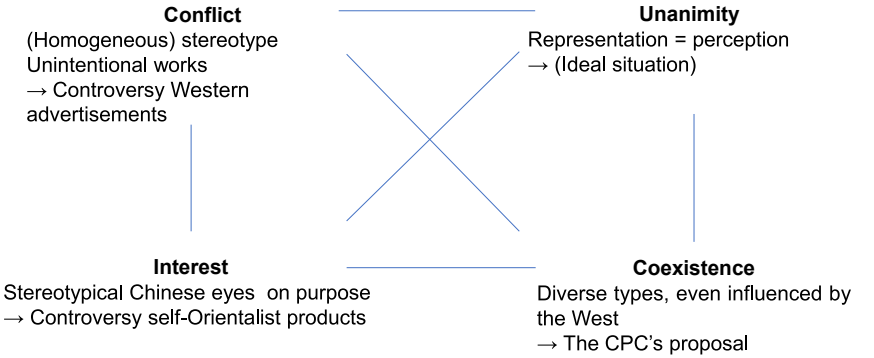


Figure 6: Different situations on the representation of Chinese eyes.

The upper right corner is the most ideal state, where the representation is perceived as the real reflection of beautiful Chinese eyes. The upper left corner refers to a situation where the Western representation conflicts with the Chinese perceived reality and beauty of eyes, as in the case of the Mercedes-Benz advertisement. As discussed in Section 2, there is a process of naturalization on Chinese slanting long, thin eyes. The centrality of eyes and the racist origins of slanting eyes make it more likely that this stereotype is perceived as offensive. Westerners, or the Chinese, should not cite the use of the long, thin eyes in traditional painting to defend this stereotype, because the colonial history happened after ancient China, and the implication of the subordinate and submissive status of women in ancient aesthetics is incompatible with present-day values. National sentiments and political discourse (for example, anti-Orientalist discourse) can exacerbate this kind of conflict, separating and identifying "we" (the Chinese) from "they" (the Westerners).

The lower left corner refers to situations where the representation made by the Chinese is inconsistent with the perception of the public for profit, such as Chen's artistic photos for Dolce & Gabbana, which intentionally create an exotic sense, and the Three Squirrels advertisement, in which the Western stereotype of the Chinese face is considered as a beautiful style to attract clients. This is the situation most criticized by Chinese people. It involves not only semi-colonic history issues related to the West, but also internal group morality, especially in the context of collectivist culture.

The lower right corner is a situation where representation and perception do not conflict and where multiple forms of beautiful representation coexist, including both the presentation of Chinese eyes influenced by Western aesthetics and the rediscovery of eye look in traditional aesthetics. This is what the CPC advocates.

Both situations on the left bring criticism and controversy, while the representations on the right are acceptable. The top two categories emphasize the differences between Chinese and Western perceptions and representations of the beauty of eyes and demand that Western creators should bring authentic representation in accord with Chinese aesthetics. The lower two categories emphasize how the Chinese should actively represent themselves, opposing Orientalism while also advocating cultural revival, aesthetic pluralism, and cultural inclusion.

The beauty of eyes and the classic Chinese eyes form in fact are plural. While Western logic emphasizes identity and singularity through difference, Chinese philosophy emphasizes "harmony in diversity," (和而不同) where difference is a part of the harmony, and the positioning of authenticity gives way to the general perception and wide acceptance, offering another possibility of interpretation against Orientalism out of binary conflicting frame. While beauty takes on different forms in different cultures, the Chinese believe that there exists a basic consensus and harmony of beauty in humanity. As Xiaotong Fei, pioneering Chinese sociologist and anthropologist, summarizes as a 16-character maxim: "Everyone appreciates their own beauty, appreciates the beauty of others, shares beauty with everyone [as "our" "whole" beauty], and here is the birth of great harmony under heaven" (各美其美, 美人之美, 美美与共, 天下大同) (Fei 2005).

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