

# Chinese facial physiognomy and modern day aesthetic practice

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## Abstract

**Background:** Physiognomy is still practiced in China and is a factor influencing the cosmetic procedures offered by aesthetic practitioners, and treatments requested by patients.

**Objective:** The aim of this study was to assess the prevalence of belief in physiognomy in China and its effect on cosmetic treatments requested and offered by aesthetic practitioners.

**Methods and materials:** This study consisted of a survey given to the general public (online) and Chinese aesthetic practitioners (face to face).

**Results:** A total of 1816 responses (1070 general public, 746 aesthetic practitioners) were collected. About 63% of the general population and 86.3% of the aesthetic practitioners stated they believed in facial physiognomy. A majority of the general population surveyed believed that facial appearance can determine various aspects of their life. However, the majority believed changing their facial features would not affect factors believed to be determined by physiognomy. A total of 73.9% of the aesthetic practitioners thought their belief in physiognomy affected the treatments they suggest and most believed belief in physiognomy influences treatments requested.

**Conclusion:** The belief in facial physiognomy has a direct impact and needs to be taken into consideration during patient consultation.

## KEYWORDS

aesthetic practitioners, beauty consultants, consultants, face reading, physiognomy

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Your face, my thane, is as a book where Men may read strange matters

—Macbeth, William Shakespeare

Physiognomy, also referred to as “the art of facial reading,” has been practiced worldwide for thousands of years, from the time of Ancient Greek philosophers to the modern day.<sup>1</sup> Face reading practitioners in various parts of the world not only offer to reveal the characteristics and “true personality” of a person, their past, and future but also claim to be able to help people with conflict resolution, business decisions, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> Vedic face reading is based on Vedic literature that relates various facial features to the nature, character,

personality, destiny, and consciousness of a person.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Chinese Face Reading (Figure S1) is an ancient practice and is based on numerous fortune-telling theories (Ying-Yang, Five Elements, and Pa Kua), Chinese medicine, and religious ideologies (Taoism and Buddhism).<sup>4,5</sup> In many Chinese societies and social groups, physiognomy which was also taught at universities has played an important role in cultural development. People in these societies are strongly affected by these traditional beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Today, there are practicing Asian and Chinese plastic surgeons who are “leading Chinese face reading masters” or have a deep knowledge of this practice, mainly passed through generations to them.<sup>7,8</sup>

Physiognomy also has a long history in Western culture and was once used in the field of criminology. During the mid-19th century, Lombroso claimed that criminals could be identified by physical

defects, for example, murderers had “big hawk-like noses,” and rapists had “jug ears,” and that criminality was an inherited trait.<sup>9,10</sup> Furthermore, the writers and authors, in literary fiction, use character design, facial appearance, and characteristics in order to communicate various aspects of a character's personality. For example, Disney villains and villainesses have certain facial characteristics that make them look “evil.”<sup>11,12</sup> This is true in art, culture, and media. Traditionally and unfairly, dermatologic disease on the face and scalp have been used in media to indicate immoral characters.<sup>13</sup>

The credibility of face reading has varied from time to time and in various parts of the world, and there is no scientific basis for face reading. Despite a lack of scientific basis and evidence, facial physiognomy is still widely accepted and practiced in China and certainly has an influence on many Chinese people's thought processes. The influence of facial physiognomy among Chinese aesthetic professionals was brought to the attention of the author while attending conferences and scientific meetings in China at which there were often talks involving Chinese facial physiognomy experts alongside plastic surgeons and medical aesthetic experts. Some cosmetic hospitals in China provide a “face reading expert” as part of the consultation process for the customers.<sup>8</sup>

As China's medical aesthetic industry is one of the largest in the world and is currently growing rapidly, it is important to understand the factors influencing treatment decisions and trends. This understanding also has relevance outside of China as many Chinese choose to travel abroad for cosmetic treatments. Furthermore, there is a growing Chinese diaspora which has resulted in a greater number of Chinese patients attending cosmetic clinics and hospitals outside of China.<sup>14,15</sup> Given this situation, the aim of this study was to assess the prevalence of belief in physiognomy in China and its effect on cosmetic treatments requested by patients and treatment options offered to clients by aesthetic clinicians.

## 2 | METHODS

This research had two phases. The aim of phase 1 was to examine potential belief in facial physiognomy among aesthetic practitioners and most frequently requested treatments in their cosmetic hospitals. A questionnaire was given to aesthetic practitioners in various cities and provinces in China by the author. The surveys were completed in the presence of the author and collected on the same day. Each participant was given one questionnaire only. The first section of the questionnaire contained questions regarding belief in facial physiognomy (Figure S2). In the second section, participants were asked about the most popular nonsurgical treatment requests from their patients and were asked to rate from 1 to 9 based on priority. The options included square jaw/masseter reduction, nose enhancement, forehead enhancement, temple enhancement, lip enhancement, cheek enhancement, chin enhancement, nasolabial fold treatment, and reduction of lines and wrinkles. The options were randomly arranged to avoid selection bias.

In phase 2, a questionnaire was carried out using a Chinese online platform designed for surveys (www.wjx.cn) with the target being the general public (Figure S3). The survey was also distributed by the author via WeChat (a Chinese social media application). Both of these platforms are in Chinese language and are widely known and popular among the Chinese population. The target population for the survey was men and women aged  $\geq 18$  years from all provinces of China. Respondents were selected randomly, and no incentives were offered for completing the survey. If both “yes” and “no” answers were provided to the same question, the results were excluded from the analysis.

The surveys were designed to elicit truly representative responses from the sample populations while minimizing bias. The survey questions were designed to yield accurate and valid information regarding the population being studied. The development of such questions began by clearly identifying the goals of the project (understanding the belief in facial physiognomy in modern China, its effect on people's lives, its effect on opting for nonsurgical, or surgical facial alterations) and the data which needed to be collected (age, sex, education, ethnicity). Close ended questions were used for the majority of the questionnaire. Two open-ended questions were included (asking the participants where in China they are from and what their ethnicity is). All collected data were tabulated and analyzed using Microsoft Excel®. Participation was voluntary, and any surveys that were not completed were excluded from the analysis. The analysis also excluded questionnaires that were nonreadable, included answers such as “just so so” or “a little” to binary yes/no questions, repeating numbers used, using two numbers for one answer, or using a number that was beyond the range provided in the question.

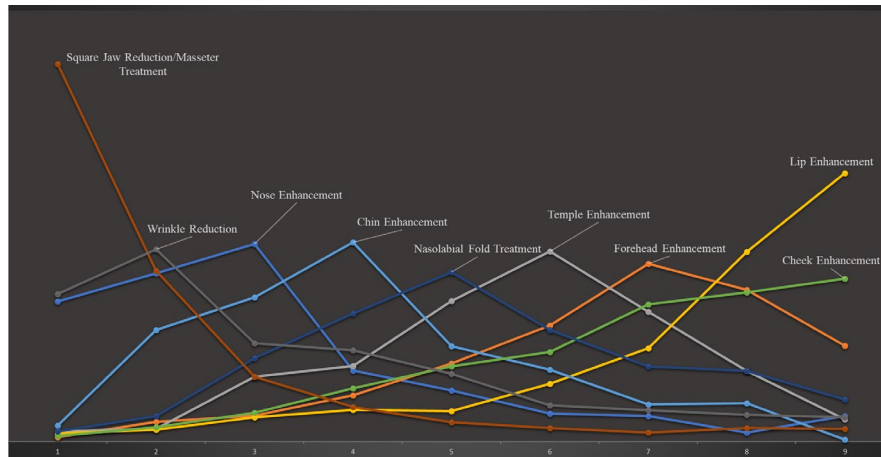
## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Aesthetic practitioners

A total of 746 surveys were collected and included in the study. A majority (86.3%) of the respondents reported to believe in facial physiognomy, and 73.9% said their belief in facial physiognomy affects the treatments they suggest to their clients/patients. In the opinion of aesthetic practitioners, in 75.9% of cases, belief in facial physiognomy affects the treatments requested by patients. According to the survey results, the most requested treatment by patients was square jaw/masseter reduction. This was followed by line and wrinkle reductions, nose enhancement, chin enhancement, treatment of nasolabial folds, temple enhancement, forehead enhancement, and lip enhancement. Cheek enhancement was the least requested procedure (Figure 1).

### 3.2 | Laypersons

A total of 1070 replies from the Chinese general public were collected with 55.0% of the respondents being female and a majority (76.2%) in the 20-40 age group. Respondents were well

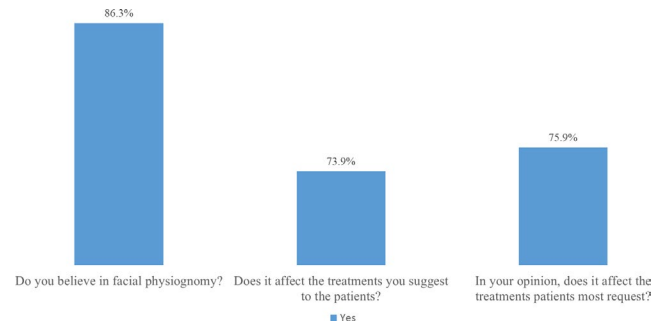


**FIGURE 1** Survey results without responses were eliminated. Each peak represents the order in which each treatment is most requested. For example, the first peak is representing the request for lower face width reduction that is the most requested treatment for 44% of the responders. For the nasolabial fold treatment, although it has the most amount of variants (the lowest peak), it is the fifth most requested treatment

distributed across most of China's 23 provinces, 4 municipalities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Chongqing), 5 autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Ningxia, Xinjiang) and Hong Kong. When asked if they believed in facial physiognomy, 63.6% of the participants replied yes, and 53.8% believed that facial appearance can determine their fate, marriage prospects, wealth, and other aspects of their life (Figure 2). When asked if they thought changing their facial features surgically or nonsurgically would change their fate, marriage, wealth, and other attributes, 70.4% replied no. The majority (64.9%) replied "no" to changing their facial features to align better with what is believed in facial physiognomy to be "good" facial features. Of the respondents, 81.8% would not consider undergoing facial surgery; however, if given the option 89.8% indicated they would choose nonsurgical options (Figure 3).

#### 4 | DISCUSSION

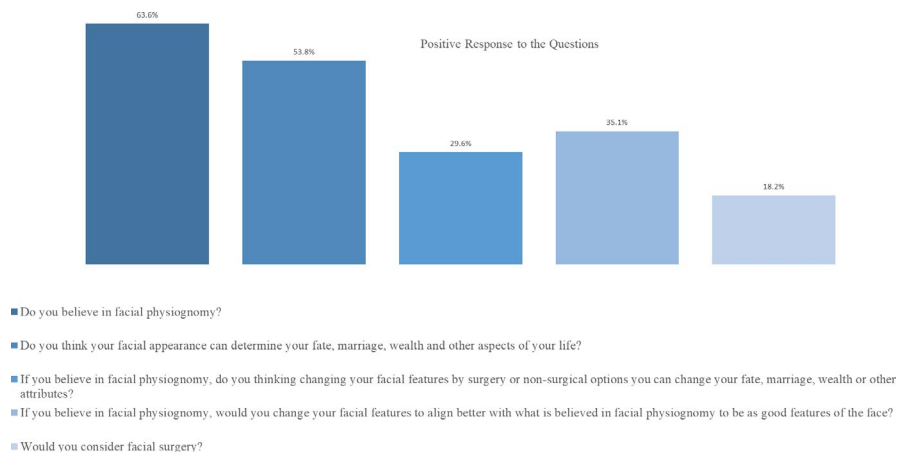
This study is the first to explore the prevalence of belief in facial physiognomy (face reading) in China among both aesthetic practitioners and the general public, and its influence on facial aesthetic treatments offered and requested. In particular, the belief in facial physiognomy and its effect on surgical and nonsurgical facial aesthetics has not been explored thus far. The results of this research revealed that a clear majority of Chinese aesthetic practitioners believe in facial physiognomy and that this affects the treatments they suggest to their clients/patients. Furthermore, a majority of the aesthetic professionals surveyed also believed that facial physiognomy influences the treatments requested by their patients. Similar to findings of a previous study by the author, aesthetic practitioners' preferences may differ from those of their patients and this needs to be discussed and addressed during the consultation.<sup>16</sup> Wong et al discussed "Implications of



**FIGURE 2** Results from the survey given to aesthetic practitioners

Chinese Face Reading on the Aesthetic Sense." They reported that changing characteristics that signify a negative past, characteristics, or future according to the principles of Chinese face reading could lead to "a better family life and better overall health."<sup>7</sup> In this study, the majority of the respondents did not believe that changing facial features surgically or nonsurgically would help align better with what is believed to be "good" facial features in Chinese face reading.

In Asia, certain features of the face are believed to bring about luck or good fortune and *vice versa*.<sup>[10]</sup> For example, the mandibular angle is very important in female facial shape as "a woman who has a wide and square face is thought to bring unhappiness to her husband."<sup>17,18</sup> A square jaw makes the lower face look wider, disturbs the desired oval appearance of the face, and hence is "aesthetically displeasing."<sup>19-23</sup> In addition, cultural beliefs mean that a person with a square jawline can be thought of as "stubborn or even ill fated."<sup>18</sup> Park et al reported that patients in the age group 20-40 years most commonly request facial contouring procedures to reduce the lower face width.<sup>19</sup> This aligns with the findings of this study that the most requested treatment as reported by the aesthetic practitioners was square jaw/masseter reduction (Figure 1).



**FIGURE 3** Results from the survey given to the general population



**FIGURE 4** Characteristics of an Asian face: Wide, flat forehead that is slanted backward, wide midface and lower face, flat short nose, a retruded columella and broad nasal width, concave midface and recession of the perioral area, protrusion of the perioral area, and a returned chin.<sup>21,24,28</sup>

Furthermore, the second most requested treatment was wrinkle reduction; this is understandable as youthful skin (clear, flawless) is highly regarded and praised across Asia.<sup>24</sup> Skin discolouration, scarring, or dull/dry skin carry negative connotations. A clear skin and complexion signifies “a good life.”<sup>25</sup>

The third most requested treatment was nose enhancement. The characteristics of the Asian nose include a flat bridge, wide nasal tip, short columella, and being smaller than Caucasian noses.<sup>26-28</sup> This study’s findings support previous studies that reported nasal enhancement and improvement being frequently requested treatments for Asians, in particular in China and South Korea. Asian patients often seek to enhance the nasal bridge height, increase tip projection, and improve profile and nasolabial angle.<sup>26,28</sup> Nose height has different interpretation for men and women.<sup>7,29</sup> A “short and flat” nose is believed to be indicative of “weakness, inquisitiveness, and dependant nature” and also determine luck with regard to career and wealth.<sup>8,29</sup>

Chin enhancement was the fourth commonly requested procedure. A retrognathic chin in Chinese face reading philosophy is referred to as “poor man’s chin,” signifying a “lack of male hormones,” and also a lack of “ambition and life goals.”<sup>7</sup> It has also been referred to as a “weak chin,” and hence carries negative connotations.<sup>30,31</sup> Asian skulls tend to lack anterior projection and present with a retrognathic chin (Figure 4).<sup>24,32,33</sup> It has been established via previous studies that a straight facial profile is the most preferred among various nations and ethnicities including Chinese laypersons and aesthetic practitioners.<sup>16,34-37</sup>

Asian women usually prefer a full temple and convex that transitions smoothly from the forehead without any depressions (Figure 5). Depressed forehead and temples disrupt the desired oval shape of the face and three-dimensional projection, but also make the face look less youthful, unhealthy.<sup>21</sup> The desire for having full temples and convex forehead also links back to physiognomy beliefs.

The key limitation of this study was the use of survey data, which have inherent limitations including a lack of longitudinal data and





**FIGURE 5** Depressed forehead and temples make the face look less three-dimensional, less youthful, and disturb the oval shape of the face. Asian women prefer slightly convex temples and forehead with a smooth transition to the forehead, temporal hairline, and the periorbital area

the potential for differences between respondents' answers on a questionnaire versus how they would behave in real clinical practice. However, survey research is a frequently used research tool for gathering opinions in different fields and it is a common methodology as advances in technology have facilitated the ease of development, distribution, and participation in surveys.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This study showed that belief in physiognomy is prevalent among both Chinese aesthetic practitioners and the general public. Furthermore, the results showed that Chinese aesthetic practitioners believe physiognomy is an influencing factor on cosmetic treatments requested by patients. Popular treatments correlate with common facial physiognomy interpretations. The general population did not believe changing their facial characteristics would change the physiognomy interpretations. This highlights the difference in the opinion of patients and aesthetic practitioners and the need for an in-depth consultation and understanding of patients' expectations.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no financial interest to declare in relation to the content of this article.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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