

WORLD

Beijing Journal; Beauty Contestant Fights for Right of Self-Improvement

By JIM YARDLEY JUNE 17, 2004

In the struggle for individual rights in China, a young woman named Yang Yuan is creating a new category of entitlement that falls somewhere down the list from freedom of speech and voting. She is fighting for her right to enter a beauty contest after having had plastic surgery.

"Is it not good to make society full of beautiful people?" she asked wistfully in her small apartment.

Ms. Yang's plight, not likely to inspire outrage among international human rights advocates, has titillated the Chinese media as she has become the latest in a growing parade of young women (and at least one man) who have become instant celebrities after undergoing extensive cosmetic surgery.

These so-called artificial beauties, rather than provoking public alarm or debate, seem to be regarded as worthy product upgrades. Plastic surgery clinics are popping up around the country. Even some of the poorest young women from the countryside are willing to spend months of earnings for a procedure that gives their eyes a more rounded, Western look.

Beauty pageants, once banned as bourgeois "spiritual pollution," are now held across the country, among them the Miss World pageant. Shopping malls now hold underwear fashion shows. And the cosmetics giant L'Oréal saw sales in China jump by 70 percent last year.

Hung Huang, chief executive of a media group that publishes Chinese lifestyle magazines, said Chinese women had always emphasized appearance and beauty. She said the loosening of social controls, along with rising incomes, had unleashed pent-up demand and fueled a consumer boom. One government estimate calculated the beauty industry in China at \$24 billion.

"In China, being well groomed is a wellness factor for women, and probably stronger than anything else," Ms. Hung said. "They feel good when they look good."

She added: "There is a huge consciousness and awareness of how beauty can help sell everything. But where there is not so much consciousness is about the cost of beauty. The concerns of women being objectified, there's no consciousness of that in China."

Nor does there seem to be much hesitation on the part of women to have cosmetic surgery, despite real risks. Government statistics reveal that more than 200,000 malpractice lawsuits have been filed during the past decade over botched operations, many of them conducted by surgeons with little oversight or training. In March, the state media reported that new government regulations were under review.

For many women, the decision to have cosmetic surgery is less about vanity than practicality, rooted in the belief that a more attractive appearance will help them find a better job or spouse in a more competitive society.

Ms. Yang, who is 19, was tall and striking before her surgery, and had started a modeling career after graduating from high school. But she was not satisfied with her face and said makeup artists had suggested plastic surgery. She also had entered a handful of beauty contests without success.

"I wanted to be equal to other beautiful women," Ms. Yang said. "That's why I had plastic surgery."

She read a newspaper article about a Beijing woman who was transformed by a plastic surgeon. Such tales are easy to find in China, as cosmetic surgery clinics have staged competitions to drum up publicity and business. One young woman, Hao Lulu, underwent a full body transformation to help promote a Beijing clinic. In all, she had 14 different procedures at a cost of more than \$30,000, a huge sum in China.

"Everybody wants natural beauty, but nobody is perfect," Ms. Hao wrote in a

diary entry carried by the Chinese press. "Everybody has flaws, but now we can have shortcuts to beauty."

Other artificial beauties have followed as newspapers have eagerly carried before and after photographs. Some hospitals have imported cosmetic surgeons from South Korea. Last month, a group of men competed to be selected by a clinic in Beijing. The winner is undergoing seven surgeries to become the first "artificially handsome man."

In February, Ms. Yang underwent a four-hour surgery in Beijing for her eyes, nose, mouth and chin. She timed the surgery so that she would be able to recuperate before the opening round of the Miss Intercontinental Beijing contest in May. It worked: she advanced from the opening round to become one of 30 finalists. But she was later disqualified after contest organizers learned about her surgery.

Ms. Yang was distraught. Her plastic surgery clinic had used her face in advertisements, and she made no attempt to conceal it. "I was speechless and really disappointed," she said. "I did the plastic surgery because of the pageant, and I was disqualified because of it."

She took her case to the news media and soon the Chinese press was carrying images of a tear rolling down her surgically improved face. Contest organizers made an overture to accept her back into the contest, but she said she felt insulted by how they had handled it. She has since filed a lawsuit on the grounds that her reputation was damaged and that her rights were violated because the contest rules made no mention of prohibiting plastic surgery.

In her apartment, she grimly envisioned a world where "artificial beauties" faced discrimination. "I just want to first get back my rights," Ms. Yang said. "I hope that in the future there will be a niche in society for me."

Not to worry: an entrepreneur has announced a new beauty contest scheduled for August. Only artificial beauties will be allowed to enter.