

Ethan Pineda

Professor Shalani Shankar

ASIAN_AM 303: Asian Persuasion - Advertising and Consumption

March 16th, 2025

Beauty, Wellness, and Power: A Retreat into Global Consumption

Asian and Asian American beauty and wellness standards and traditions have become deeply embedded within Western markets. The historical and cultural significance of traditions and customs have become repackaged into billion-dollar industries whose goals are to celebrate and commodify these cultural practices concurrently. Ayurveda and yoga, alongside K-Beauty and skin-lightening products, are framed by producers as being both ancient and modern materials goods. Goods that are accessible and yet, exotic offer Western consumers a curated experience of what it means to practice self-care while largely obscuring the histories of racialization, labor, and power that shape the nature of these products and services. As these traditions continue to maintain growth in mainstream media, they consider us to beg urgent questions regarding authenticity, racialized desirability, and the capitalist forces that dictate both beauty and wellness standards. In this paper, I introduce Luminara, a fictional weekend wellness retreat offered in the suburbs of Chicago. Luminara's focus is to provide its members with an immersive experience in Asian and Asian American beauty and wellness traditions while also making participants critically engage with their commodification of the historical and cultural roots of day-to-day activities. The goal of Luminara is not just to be a place for relaxation, it's meant to serve as a function to push guests to interrogate and move beyond surface-level engagement with how the beauty and wellness industries construct their ideas of what it considers to be authentic, desirable, and cultural ownership. This paper argues that wellness is

not a neutral or universally accessible space. Rather, it is a contested site where racial, economic, and cultural hierarchies shape which traditions are valued, who profits from them, and how they are consumed. By examining the events and framework of Luminara, I highlight how beauty and wellness function not just as industries but as spaces shaped by historical and market forces.

Wellness, especially in the Western world, has often been framed and positioned as an individual pursuit. In this context, wellness is frequently considered separate from its cultural and spiritual roots. Eastern practices such as Ayurveda and yoga have been heavily commodified for mass consumption, often at the expense of their original meanings and significance. As Hareem Khan discusses, Ayurveda's transition into the United States wellness industry operates through racialized narratives that portray it as both "ancient" and "universal," making it accessible to a broader audience while simultaneously detaching it from its historical and spiritual contexts. Khan writes that Ayurveda, as a cultural commodity, "activates unique forms of authenticity such that Ayurveda gets located to a racialized tradition while simultaneously deeming itself an inclusive ideology" (Khan 2022:20). This process masks the complex histories of casteism, colonialism, and South Asian social hierarchies embedded in these practices.

Thus, during our first night on Friday at Lumivera, at 6:00 PM, guests will enter a softly lit-up room that is scented with jasmine. There, they will find delicate teacups and handwritten scrolls that are waiting for them. The Tea and Identity Ceremony is designed to offer a space for reflection on how wellness practices have been repackaged as "trends." Before sipping their tea, guests will participate in our Reclaiming Ritual activity, where they will write down a wellness practice they currently engage in such as yoga, skincare, or meditation and reflect on the origins of that practice. This exercise asks participants to confront how personal rituals may be products of global commodification.

The evening will continue at 7:30 PM with an opening discussion on: The Globalization of Wellness. Drawing on Andrea Jain's analysis of yoga's commercialization, this conversation will push guests to consider how yoga, like Ayurveda, has been systematically rebranded to fit Western ideals of self-improvement. Jain makes the case that yoga has undergone a systematic and intentional "rebranding" process to make it more marketable and appealing as a universal product for global consumption. She writes, "the second half of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of sundry yoga brands into the marketplace. Entrepreneurs began to brand yoga in the same ways other products and services are branded, by 'giving it a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or services as distinct from those of other sellers.'" (Jain 2014:78). This shift in branding led to the rise of what Jain calls "postural yoga brands," whose goals are to be widely consumed and globalized, positioning yoga as a "universal and scientific system that anyone can adopt as part of his or her larger worldview and practice" (Jain 2015:76). Because of how stripped it has become from its philosophical roots, yoga has essentially been repackaged and exported to align with Western ideals of physical fitness and self-improvement. In essence, yoga has transformed into a "diversified global market" where it is sold as a tool for "self-development through physical and psychological transformation" (Jain 2015:80). This shift reflects broader consumer culture trends, where ancient spiritual traditions are detached from their cultural contexts and repurposed into personalized products and services. Such reimaginings distance these practices from their original meanings, reducing them to commodities shaped by Western capitalist consumption.

These tensions between authenticity and commodification are critical to understanding how the wellness industry handles traditional Asian practices. As Jain explains, "Yoga entrepreneurs and organizations seek to disseminate yoga to the general populace. To do that,

yoga needs to stand out in the marketplace among available products and services by being branded or 'packaged' in ways that make it seem valuable, accessible, and unique” (Jain 2015:95). For Luminara, this discussion will not merely introduce guests to global wellness trends but will ask them to critically examine whether the "authenticity" of these practices is truly preserved or has become part of a larger marketing strategy. By grounding our first evening in reflection and conversation, we hope to set the tone for the weekend, encouraging guests to interrogate the global beauty and wellness industries and their participation within them. Next, following our amazing and intellectual first night of activities, during the second Luminara will focus on the global phenomenon of Korean Beauty, or K-Beauty for short, and its impact on Asian American beauty standards. Each of our guests is to be invited to an introduction to a curated multi-step skincare routine ritual that will reflect not just self-care but also the commodification of beauty standards that are tied to racialized and global consumer patterns. Here, we base this activity on the research conducted by Suh, which showcases how Korean American women navigate conflicting beauty ideals that are shaped by both Western and Korean norms and expectations. One of the participants from Suh's ethnographic study revealed that "My mom always wanted me to do double eyelid surgery in Korean for that reason... I am also discouraged when I do personally put makeup in the same way as Americans do. Because of my different facial looks, I am not pretty and I put that style of makeup on my face" (Suh 2023:1102).

Thus, starting at 9:00 AM, guests at Luminara will partake in the K-Beauty Phenomena: Alive Skin Care Ritual demonstration followed by an activity called Instagram versus Reality. In this event, guests will be comparing the market campaigns of traditional beauty ideals, and learn how the Westernization of digital media reshapes traditional beauty standards. As we saw in

Suh's work in how young Korean American females were "actively generating global imagination and discourses on K-beauty and K-fashion... but their empowerment and enlightenment were achieved by consuming commodities to discipline their bodies" (Suh, 2023:1107). Visibility, then, often comes with its own set of constraints.

Following the early morning activity, later at 11:00 AM, the focus of the conversation shifts to a conversation on Social Media and the Attention Economy. Here, guests will begin to discuss how Asian beauty influencers negotiate their authenticity and commercial pressures as young women "willingly embraced consuming which made them constantly explore and purchase commodities to fulfill their desire" (Suh 2023:1107) highlighting just how empowerment and consumption are deeply woven with one another.

Finally, we conclude Saturday morning finishes a guided journaling session where participants are asked: "In what ways am I participating in these cycles of consumption? How do I distinguish between cultural appreciation and commodification in my beauty practices?". Through this, we hope that guests can encourage critical self-reflection.

Thus, through the Saturday morning rituals and events, we hope to showcase how beauty becomes a site of both adaptation as well as discipline. In this case, women are expected to not just follow high beauty standards but also be able to "code switch" between cultural codes of appearance depending on context and environment. Because of this, beauty is not only a ritual of self-expression and personal taste but also a performance of belonging and acceptability that is ultimately shaped by transnational media and market forces that demand constant surveillance and transformation of self. Beauty then is a kind of "soft power" that forces women to consume products that are supposed to promise empowerment where instead they promote racialized hierarchies and capitalism.

Lastly, to close off Saturday's activities, starting at 7:00 PM, our guests will participate in a sound bath healing event to cultivate stillness and reflection on colorism, self-perception, and beauty. As guests rest, they will be read the research conducted by Parameswaran which showcases how products such as Fair & Lovely market skin lightening as both a cure and transformation process that enables one to undergo "recovery purity" where their skin becomes fairer, marketing darker skin as an "accumulated poison" (Parameswaran 2011:68). The usage and language of detoxification and corrections feed off of insecurity, and as Parameswaran showcases, these products are "buying their consumers" because of "beauty's asymmetrical relation with differently raced bodies" (Parameswaran 2011:75). The idea behind these products and narratives do more than promise transformations, they are essentially teaching consumers that investing their labor and money earns a return on investment on their beauty (Parameswaran 2011:72). In this case, what is said to be "self-care" is just a projection and a structural hold on racial hierarchies.

The final morning of Luminara will invite our guests into one final quiet space of guided journaling and closing reflections. After a weekend of immersive discussions and critical engagements, participants will be asked to consider what beauty, wellness, and critical engagement with these topics and ideas ultimately mean moving forward. Guests will be reminded that these are not resolutions but rather, is a process that will leave them with different lingering questions regarding how global industries shape our perceptions of desirability and authenticity. Ultimately, our goal here at Luminara is not to simply be a retreat for education and indulgence. Instead, we hope that it is a journey and reflection of the very structures that shape both beauty and wellness in our lives. By guiding our guests through these experiences, we hope that their participation in our retreat leaves them with an understanding that their participation in

these markets carries both social and political weight that calls for a greater sense of mindfulness and responsibility.