

What is “Asian” beauty? Chinese and South Korean racialized appearances in the Mexican and Peruvian makeup industries¹

O que é a beleza “asiática”? Aparências racializadas chinesas e sul-coreanas nas indústrias de maquiagem mexicana e peruana

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[abstract] This article will try to answer, what is understood by “Asian” beauty in Latin America and how race, history and politics have decanted to the almost opposite reception of Chinese and South Korean aesthetics and corporalities. It is based on my research on beauty and the role of makeup in the negotiated construction of appearances. Firstly, I will explore the concepts of beauty and race brought by colonial imposition to the territories that would become Peru and Mexico. I will then explore how these were employed strategically to reinforce the oppression and discriminatory treatment of indigenous populations. In addition, I will focus on the current cosmetic offer from South Korea to the Mexican market, and the reception its versions of beauty have had within the past decade. Online trends helped to generate local demand of *K-beauty* makeup, one of the many South Korean industries involved in “soft power” politics.. Convergent definitions about health and youth are symbolic motors of its success; the racial bias applied to slim, light-skinned and traditionally feminine-looking bodies helps sell “Asian” beauty as inspirational. Afterwards, I will explore what informants identified as “Chinese”, whether they were referring to products or aesthetic presentations, and their distance from class and racial desirability. My argument follows the complicated treatment Chinese-descended people still encounter in Peru and in Mexico; including the ways my own body has been addressed and altered with makeup as a Chinese–Peruvian.

[keywords] **Beauty, cosmetics, body, Asianness, K-beauty, Latin America**

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[resumo] Este artigo tentará responder o que se entende por beleza “asiática” na América Latina e como raça, história e política têm decantado para a recepção quase oposta das estéticas e corporalidades chinesas e sul-coreanas. O texto baseia-se em minha pesquisa sobre beleza e o rol da maquiagem na construção negociada das aparências. Primeiramente, explorarei os conceitos de beleza e raça trazidos pela imposição colonial aos territórios que se tornariam Peru e México. Eu continuarei explorando como eles foram empregados estrategicamente para reforçar a opressão e o tratamento discriminatório das populações indígenas. Além disso, focarei na atual oferta cosmética da Coreia do Sul no mercado mexicano e na recepção que suas versões de beleza tiveram ao longo de uma década. As tendências online ajudaram a gerar demanda local de maquiagem *K-beauty*, uma das muitas indústrias sul-coreanas envolvidas na estratégia política “soft power”. Definições convergentes sobre saúde e juventude são motores simbólicos de seu sucesso; o viés racial aplicado a corpos magros, de peles claras e tradicionalmente femininas ajuda a vender a beleza “asiática” como inspiradora. Em seguida, explorarei o que os informantes identificaram como “chineses”; sejam produtos ou apresentações estéticas, e sua distância da deseabilidade em função à classe e raça. Meu argumento segue o tratamento complicado que os descendentes de chineses ainda encontram no Peru e no México; incluindo as maneiras como meu próprio corpo foi tratado e alterado com maquiagem como uma chinesa-peruana.

[palavras-chave] **Beleza, cosméticos, corpo, Asianicidade, K-beauty, América Latina**

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Introduction

The relationships between Latin America and Asia have a long and complicated history, deeply affected by European colonialism and expansionism; and the consequent imposition of racist ideologies that denied the humanity of non-White “Others” (RODRÍGUEZ PASTOR, 2000; CINCO, 2017). The concepts of beauty and race were brought by colonial imposition to the territories that would become Peru and Mexico. These were employed strategically to reinforce the oppression of indigenous populations, and later as bodily standards to “evaluate” slave and free migrants from Asia. During the 19th and 20th century, their settlement on the American continent was marked by discrimination (LA TORRE, 1992; SUÁREZ; SUAZO, 2005) while Peruvian and Mexican national identities were being defined and contested. It is the same time frame during which cosmetics production became industrialized, and later globalized.

This paper will try to answer, what is understood by “Asian” beauty in Peru and in Mexico, and how race, history and politics have decanted to the almost opposite reception of Chinese and South Korean aesthetics and corporalities. The findings I present come from evidence gathered during previous anthropological research about notions of beauty and its corporeal performances in the makeup industry in Mexico City and in Lima. Consequently, I presuppose that “Asian” beauty in both countries is defined partially by the past underestimation of Asian migrants. Their bodily aspect, or rather certain body features that became their collective identifiers, do not correlate with how local cosmetic offer in both cities represent beauty. At the same time, South Korea’s “soft power” joins the motivations for embodying aesthetic ideals such as a whiter skin tone, which also takes into account social class positions: consuming beauty products became a way to demonstrate success according to capitalist standards (KIM, 2003).

I will first present the theoretical framework and historical background that will guide the subsequent analysis on beauty, race and body, followed by a short section about methodology. The next section focuses on the current cosmetic offer from South Korea in the Mexican market, and the reception its versions of beauty have had for the past decade. The following part is about the convergence between “Asian” beauty, race, and body in Mexico and Peru; and how whiteness manifests itself through the materiality and corporality of makeup. Then, I proceed to compare the racial and political undertones of Chinese diasporas in both countries, delving into how my own recognition as a Chinese-Peruvian marked my research. In the concluding remarks, I will attempt to address what “Asian” beauty tells us about national and racialized identities in Peru and in Mexico.

Key concepts and a brief history of cosmetics in Mexico and in Peru

Aesthetics describe the set of values considered appropriate to determine the perception of beauty. Aesthetics enter all spheres of contemporary life, with strong links to individuality and responsibility (FRANKENBERGER, 2008). What is considered beautiful is a way of positioning the individual in class, racial, and gender hierarchies. As consumer goods,

the possession of beauty directs our way of participating in a system of aesthetic stratification, where beauty results in a dominant and shared experience, emotionally and subjectively mediated. Cosmetics are the discursive and symbolic field under which the presentation of the subject is altered to make him or her embody beauty. The term comes from the Greek word *kosmos*: in accordance with the classical Greek view, grooming represented order linking beauty to morality (POWER, 2010). This definition influenced the interpretation of beauty as a symbol of status and sexual selection during the Renaissance, and ugliness became stigmatized and associated with racialized traits (SYNNOTT, 1989).

Consequently, all valuations and practices related to the beauty and bodies of the American populations became branded as inferior with the arrival of Spanish colonizers. After the Spanish conquest, Europeans were deemed beautiful in America, and their Creole descendants aimed to keep their corporeality as far removed as possible from non-White appearances. In this context, imported cosmetics arrived in America. They coincided with the hygienist ideal and the obsession of the colonial system to categorize skin clarity, which is why whitening lotions and lip colorants were highly consumed in the viceroyalty of Peru, irrespective of their mercury or arsenic contents (DEL ÁGUILA, 2003). In the viceroyalty of New Spain, scented powders were also applied: by means of smell and color elites and colonized peoples were differentiated between (SOLÍS, 2012).

Shaped by colonialism, race is a fixed and closed category which has been used to justify social and political hierarchies on the basis of biological and mental differences. However, those hierarchies are completely unsubstantiated. Racism refers to the rejection of certain collective identities, assuming the existence of naturalized alterities that threaten hierarchical ways of being (WIEVIORKA, 2003). Race is reflected in bio-politics, as phrased by Mbembe “identifying parts of the human body become the cornerstone of unprecedented systems of identification, surveillance and repression” (2016 [2013], p. 58). By the 19th century, cosmetics came to signal their porters’ luxury of leisure, and hence a necessity to distance oneself from poverty. The shared aesthetic standards of producers and cosmetic users also coincided with the eugenic currents of the 19th and 20th centuries, where beauty was associated with a higher eugenic scale (JARRÍN, 2010) and miscegenation a tool to “perfect” the body. In the early 20th century beauty companies turned their attention to Latin America’s elites. To these consumers, beauty already embodied social differentiation and was an achievable goal (SOLÍS, 2012), while already personifying whiteness.

However, what “white” implies here is more complicated: it involves *blancura* as the carnality linked to the European, Western and colonizing phenotype in American territories; and *blanquitud* as the subjectivity that comes with assuming the values identified with said phenotype: capitalism, rationality, Catholicism... According to Navarrete Linares both have been formed historically, serving as an instrument of domination, but he emphasizes that since that time, there was no strict delimitation of what whiteness was. *Blanquitud* implied and implies “an elastic notion of the “quality” of people” (2022, p. 133) that could be modified if people adopted pre-established – and unequal – norms of social integration, and *blancura* could also be approached by modifying the appearance through clothing, hairstyle,

cosmetics, body posture, and more. The spectrum of differentiations between racialized populations multiplied, within a regime of discrimination after the wars of Independence that still persists, pursuing subjective and corporal whitening. Whiteness is a practice that self-reifies, that knows itself to be privileged (ALEXANDER; RAIMONDI, 2021) and that shapes the methods people use to escape social and material marginalization, one of them being beauty practices.

During the 20th century, cosmetics were sold in mass scale, promising better aesthetic assessments from proximity to racial parameters and the display of nonessential consumption. This is related to ethnicity, which is a fluid concept that contrary to race it is not subsumed to characteristics attributed to the ancestry or the bodily features of an individual. In Latin America, individuals attempt to circumvent racial prejudices through miscegenation, education, migration to urban areas, and other strategies linked to ethnicity, which do not stop the reproduction of racial hierarchies (MORENO; SALDÍVAR, 2016). It is also linked to class, as a social group determined primarily by their position in relation with the means of production and access to economic, political and cultural resources; as well as for its identification and subsequent qualification within the society in which it operates (ROJAS, 2011). Latin American societies are not unambiguously subordinated to dominant classes and cultures, but rather interrelate under unequal conditions (MICELI, 1972). Therefore, it is not a closed classification but they are rather groups differentiated by relations of distribution and power dispute, and which influence processes of subjectivity (QUIJANO, 2014).

The ‘whitened’ profiles of women in cosmetic advertising are discussed since the sixties, yet, with few exceptions, the industry has not moved towards a significantly more ethnically diverse representation. Centuries of perpetuating the mentioned interpretation of beauty culminate in the ‘intuitive’ (if imagined) assignation of physical, social and moral attributes in Peru and Mexico to whiteness and to specific bodily traits close to colonial beauty ideals, and from globalized aesthetic models. This is materialized through active intervention on the bodies of consumers and the workers of the cosmetic industry themselves. Following Whitehead (2015 [1978]), I approach the body as the first identity reference and a figure that is never completely “done”: it is constantly affected and undone. In the data collected with makeup workers and sellers, the body is understood mostly as instrumental and separate from the subject. Interviewees in Mexico and in Peru argued that the body is capable of being categorized and adjusted to mass standards of beauty; according to specific knowledge and measurements of the body and especially of the face where otherness is highlighted. The latter for Taussig (1999) is a space of the singularity and ownership of the subject within individualistic societies: it transmits their evidence and implies that body appearance depends on each person that “owns” it.

Methodology

This paper employs three datasets from Mexico and Peru, doing a comparative analysis between both countries. It is mainly based on my (author’s work), focused on the concept

of beauty and the role of makeup in the construction of corporalities in Mexico City. My key informants worked directly with clients in the sale and application of makeup. I conducted seven semi-open in-depth interviews from July 2017 to July 2018 with workers who fit this profile; six of them worked in companies that distributed and/or produced makeup, and one was an independent makeup artist. I also carried out nine open participant observations of events and services organized by these and other companies. These include store anniversaries, paid application services, open workshops, and an international congress of makeup artists. In each ethnographic intervention, audio-visual recording, audio recordings and collection of printed material were made (GÓMEZ, 2020). These methods were chosen according to the availability and the convenience of the participants, as well as the intention of registering commercial exchanges and bodily interventions without interrupting the employees' work or discouraging customers from purchasing. Interviewees were recruited by contacting the companies that employed them and asking for their consent, and other informants were asked to participate in the covered events. This is the most recent data collected.

As a supplementary source, I consult ethnographic data and previous analysis from (author's work), both on lipstick and its use in the embodiment of femininities in Lima. The former (author's work)'s fieldwork was carried out between 2010 and 2011, interviewing 8 women who were using make-up frequently and women who were not; 5 people involved in the industry such as catalogue sellers, professional makeup artists, makeup teachers and hairstylists; and 5 people who instrumentalized cosmetic knowledge in their own work environments: managers, personnel managers and business workers. Likewise, 12 participant observations were made in formal and informal makeup sales venues, as well as I participated in cosmetic workshops and training (GÓMEZ, 2012). Both methods were selected by the same criteria used for the first dataset, including group interviews which allowed for comparison and deliberation between participants through makeup application. Consumer interviewees were contacted through word-of-mouth and were asked for their consent. Experts and insiders were interviewed after contacting them directly through business representatives, social media and after attending an event or a workshop they organized. Other informants were asked to participate in the covered events.

For the latter, the fieldwork was held within an exhibition specially designed for the (author's work), which took place in 2013 in Lima. Consequently, the methodology was focused on surveys (74 filled by exhibition attendees) and material production of the visitors of the sample (GÓMEZ, 2014). This is the only dataset where (author's institutional affiliation) demanded the researcher to go through an ethics commission: they revised the signed consent forms, the materials and written content placed in the exhibition, and the design of the installation. Informants arrived to the exhibition gallery through word-of-mouth, online promotion of the exhibition, and guided tours provided by the researcher.

FIGURE 1 – DATASETS UTILIZED

	Data collection method	Number of participants	Site of fieldwork	Year
Dataset 1	Semi-open interviews	7	Mexico City	2017-2018
	Participant observations	9		
Dataset 2	Semi-open interviews	18	Lima	2010-2011
	Participant observations	12		
Dataset 3	Surveys	74	Lima	2013
	Material production of visitors	70		

SOURCE: Prepared by the author.

Adoption of South Korean cosmetics and whiteness

In recent times, industries from other countries have established themselves in Latin America, such as South Korea. In order to understand its aesthetic influence in the region, we have to consider the background for the formation of the South Korean cosmetic industry.

Historically, where neo-Confucianism was installed with greater force such as Japan, China, Korea, Vietnam and Singapore, the vision that the place of women was within the home prevailed. Neo-Confucianism praised fair skin as a desired body feature, as it represented respect for its principles. It was combined with previous ideas about skin color and social status born from feudal systems (BENETATOS, 2014). These are long-held precepts: in China from the Han dynasty culminating in the 3rd century and then the Tang, Song and Ming dynasties until the 15th century and in Korea in the Joseon dynasty from the 14th to the 19th century (ELMAN; DUNCAN; OOMS, 2002). After World War II, the Korean War and the reconstruction enterprise that followed, patriotism joins the motivations for embodying aesthetic ideals such as a whiter skin tone, which also takes into account social class positions.

Since the 2010s, online trends and the “soft power” strategy from South Korea have helped to generate local demand of *K-beauty* makeup, a subdivision of the cosmetic industry born in South Korea, as part of the Hallyu or the Korean wave of cultural diffusion³. There is a nationalist push from this country where the state endorses the internationalization of cultural icons. South Korean industry’ influence has been so significant that several non-Asian companies produce makeup items emulating their formulas and presentations. In Mexico I conducted interviews and observations with customer service workers from a South Korean cosmetics company⁴, present in Mexico City for more than 15 years now. Interviewed workers highlighted facial care because its products are the way to get what *K-beauty* is most

³ The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) refers to the global popularity of South Korea’s cultural economy exporting pop culture, entertainment, music, TV dramas and movies.

⁴ The names of the companies that participated in the data collected in this article are not disclosed, respecting the confidentiality agreements signed with them.

recognized for: a skin without “imperfections” (meaning supposedly undesired features: wrinkles, sun spots, acne scars were mentioned), with a healthy and youthful appearance. Throughout the fieldwork, the exalted assessment of health and youth as acquirable goods was notorious, which comes from the close link between cosmetics, anatomy and medicine. These sciences convey ways of understanding the body by dividing it and providing it with rules under which they would work. From there, the beauty industry gets vocabulary for body and facial parts, as well as parameters that make beauty calculable. Using expressions that sound scientific, workers in charge of the sale and application of makeup certify their role as counsellors. These notions are sold as aspirational values that require not only technologies on the body but socially recognizable actions that “work to align the body space with the social space” (AHMED, 2014 [2004], p. 115). These technologies are, in part, found through the materiality of *K-beauty* cosmetics. At the same company, the distinctive packaging is shown as an advanced factor: most foundations and concealers come in cushions that have a sponge soaked in the makeup fluid protected by a mesh, on which a puff is pressed so that the product comes out, to spend the smallest amount and protect the makeup. In trainings and demonstrations, vendors experience aesthetic and body practices that make the cosmetic offer even more exclusive and they in turn emphasize their particularity to the clientele. This singularity is constantly oriented towards the geopolitical origin of the brand they represent, and feeds the interest clients have on South Korean brands and culture, or their curiosity towards novelties among cosmetic products.

In addition to its emphasis on youth and health, scientific vocabulary, distinctive packaging and cosmetic application, South Korean beauty products are sought out because of Orientalist imaginary. It should be noted that “Oriental” is a word used to sell cosmetics at least since the 18th century, when it was directly linked to harem women, conveying newness, indulgence and personal pleasure (Martin, 2009). Nowadays, consumer expectations continue to be influenced by fictional and homogenized renderings of what Asia and, in this case, South Korea symbolizes, racializing the aesthetic result (Kang, 2003). During a personalized demonstration, one seller applied a soft peeling product because “Koreans recommend it twice a week, it is like polishing your skin” (Mexico City, July 2018) and it was not recommended to apply physical face scrub because in South Korea they do not use it, according to the saleswomen in charge. Workers talked about “the Koreans” as a homogeneous group. Their speech was anchored in the place of origin of the brand; which was praised for the exoticism of the Asian country as for the modern cosmetic industry that it possesses. It also reflects how little recognition the Korean diaspora has among the Mexican population: Koreans began migrating to this country in 1905 as workers for henequen haciendas in Yucatán, and kept arriving during the Japanese occupation, the Korean War, the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Mexico, and more recently after economic crisis in Asia, Argentina and Brazil. What’s more, this particular company had stores in *Zona Rosa*, an area in the Juárez municipality where Korean-owned businesses have been operating for decades (GALLARDO, 2015).

“Asian” beauty, race and body in Mexico and Peru

One of the recurring expressions I heard in Mexico City while doing participant observation was “Asian” beauty. As a Peruvian, it was confusing because I knew there were many other Asian diasporas in Mexico, but they were not evoked in reference to beauty nor aesthetics.

When asked about the goal of applying makeup, one employee said it was to get a “luminous” skin, and a face that shows visible signs of health and youth in Mexico and in South Korea: “The shades we bring are not for “Latin” skin colors but (...) its properties, its ingredients don’t change. (...) We tell clients that it is an ideology, it becomes a whole culture of care” (Mexico City, July 2018). It should be noted that she is exclusively talking about female clients. Application habits and selected items could bring the Mexican clientele closer to an idealized South Korean corporeity. In fact, another employee assumed the company’s portrayal of South Korean women as thin women with small faces without spots or scars and light-skinned as true. She declared that she used the goods sold by the store in her own beauty routine, assimilating what she learnt on her job to her own bodily practices. Ideological work is reflected in the female body within a neoliberal society and a nationalist identity that exports technologies of individuality that include *K-Beauty*, and consequently encode the resulting corporalities within scales of self-improvement (LEE, 2012).

A second company, a virtual shop that was established in 2016 and organizes physical sale events, participated in this research. It imports cosmetic products from mostly South Korea and in a lesser degree from Japan. The Asia-Pacific region was and continues to be an active market for skin whitening products, “with Western colonial incursions during the 18th and 19th century, the light skin of European colonizers became a marker of higher status, while the darker skin of Asians/Filipinos became a marker of colonial subjugation” (LIU, 2018). Darker skin tones are still linked to manual labor and class rejection; South Korea represents 18% of global sales for skin bleaching products (DIAZ, 2018). In the second company’s store, there were face masks and essences that “clarify the skin tone”: according to the sellers they work as fluids that clean in-depth and have some degree of sun protection. The final result is to progressively get a less dark skin color, but the question that they did not answer was why this would be desired. At the question, they smiled and turned around.

Therefore, *K-beauty* is also a desired commodity because of its proximity to Mexican bodily standards of whiteness and femininity. During fieldwork, recommendations were made about what colors would suit me: “Reddish tones are good for your skin color” (Mexico City, July 2017). Sellers and makeup artists used me as an example to say that golden shadows and highlighters went well “in shades like hers”. At no point during fieldwork did anyone describe what that expression meant, remaining implicit as if it were forbidden. But I knew what it was. At the events I attended there was no other person of my complexion or darker than me.

Although the fieldwork done in Mexico was not delimited by urban areas, the events promoted by companies and the stores where business managers ended up citing me were referred to middle-class and upper-class municipalities. The cosmetic sector studied in

Mexico aims at the part of the population with the power to purchase luxury goods, escaping the majority (and lower price) consumption concentrated in catalogue sales (MARKETLINE, 2016). In contrast, In Lima I observed formal and informal makeup outlets. These establishments identified lower and middle-class customers as their target audience. I also conducted interviews with people involved in the industry, some of them being representatives of Multi-Level Marketing beauty companies; which at the time was the most popular and accessible medium of purchasing cosmetics in Peru (AMÉRICA ECONOMÍA, 2010).

In Lima, my body never stood out because I looked like the public in attendance to the places I visited. But in both countries, I did not look like the advertising material surrounding them or like the models used in makeup tutorials. And just like in Mexico, there was prevalence towards the acquisition and use of lighter skin shades. There were several stylists and makeup vendors who repeatedly commented that clients asked them to look “a certain way”. One stated: “I asked this lady not to wear a beige foundation because she had this tone (shows a medium brown foundation), but she insisted so I put it on her. (...) it looked like a costume and not like makeup.” But why is a whiter skin tone so desired? Besides the already discussed assimilation between beauty, health, youth and whiteness, this desire pursues *blancura*. Subsequently, the corporeal demonstrations of the attempts to achieve it are understood as an intentional work towards individual “bettering”, even if the results are not aesthetically approved.

Similarly, when I observed Peruvian makeup workers that performed makeup demonstrations outside informal outlets or at a cosmetology institute nearby, the foundation they applied was always lighter than the skin color, and the way they put blush and eyeshadows made the face looked shiny and rosy. The makeup artists and their clients assured me that these two characteristics represented beauty, whereas at a beauty salon in an upper-class neighborhood the most important thing was to give the face a “diamond” shape, and that certain face features seemed more angular. This was done to emphasize bone structure and make the customer look slimmer. At the time, makeup artists called the use of light and dark colors to “change” the angles and the shape of parts of the face and body “corrective” makeup, applying darker face powders below the cheekbones and between the clavicles. Among Peruvian cosmetic workers and customers there was an aesthetic model, and not conforming to it affected bodily presentation and the assessment of appearances.

This technique is currently more known as contouring and it was also found in Mexico City, where an oval face shape was an uncontested aesthetic rule. The consensus between the Mexican interviewees was: the cheeks, nose and the area under the jaw have to be made thinner and darker; while the cheekbones, the center of the forehead and the chin are highlighted. The workers explained the recurrence in the demand for this technique because it is trendy and used by global celebrities like Kim Kardashian and former Miss Universe Ximena Navarrete, as well as anatomical reasons without questioning the desirability of the face they paint out.

During one public makeup demonstration, I became the model. The makeup artist in charge put eyeshadow on me while commenting on my eyes; they were “tiny” and it was difficult for him to “shape” them. By that, he was referring to making my eyelid round. He added that once he had a client of Asian ancestry without a visible crease in the eyelid, so he

was “battling” with my monolid for an hour and a half until he had a result that satisfied him. In nine ethnographic interventions for my (anonymized) research, where workers have applied makeup on my face, five made comments about “opening” my eye. This interplay between race, ethnicity and beauty roamed around the interactions between the workers and others, including me (LIEBELT, 2016; GÓMEZ, 2020). The morphology of the face was one of the key points in the training of Mexican employees of beauty companies and of the students at the Peruvian cosmetology institute. Just like *K-beauty* merchandise and advertising, aesthetic schooling in both cities employs scientific language and references in order to justify and naturalize class and racial ascriptions; while encouraging the desire to generate representations of recognizable subjects from an exclusive standard of, among other values, beauty.

When (Asian) whiteness is rejected

The historical background previously mentioned generated politically and socially correct formulas that maintain racism on a daily basis in Mexico and in Peru, and dictate what foreign cosmetic products are accepted as “beautiful.” However, these models can be challenged and women rebelled against it. Another informant recounted that during her high school years girls wore only pink lipstick. She preferred a lipstick shade called “Hot Pepper”, which is a warm brown and when applied to her lips (which were purplish brown), they looked even darker. This was considered “ugly” and “unpleasant” among her schoolmates; she noticed that they used pink to look “whiter. But I am not White and I did not want to be White (...) so I said ah no, I’ll wear this (lipstick) every day. And I kept wearing it until college, and then it became fashionable and all those same girls started using it” (Lima, October 2011). In contrast, online trends like the “Instagram face” were sought out during fieldwork in Mexico City. This term refers to: drastically outlined and thick eyebrows, contour on the entire face, thick eyelashes and outlined lips to make them look fuller. It is a collage of features that continues to emulate a historically negotiated Western European phenotype, but now appears to be ambiguously ethnic (TOLENTINO, 2019) with specific characteristics that are now understood as desirable. Nevertheless, a continuous fact observed in both cities is that the techniques to achieve said facial features are not aimed at marginalized audiences that already possess them (LI, 2020a).

South Korean serums and skin makeup which leave the skin “very” bright were almost not purchased at all in Mexico City. This would be a sign of beauty in South Korea, contrary to the Mexican public that according to interviewees would want a matte effect: “Here in Mexico, shiny skin is dirty skin” (Mexico City, October 2017). Cruz correlates this characteristic to the denial of indigenous beauty and its cosmetic practices. In Chiapas, Chamula women use oils on the skin, especially in arms and legs to highlight their muscles, in order to fit the image of a robust woman prepared for hard work. Cruz found that the self-identified mestizo women understood putting oil as “*a corrientada*” (here meaning ordinary, vulgar), it is a signal “of rejection and discrimination” (CRUZ, 2014, p. 110). In this context, having a shiny, very bright skin enters the repertoire of bodily features that differentiate racial and class groups. Although it is not possible to argue that this differentiation manifests itself in

an identical way in Mexico City, the predilection for whitened appearances in the metropolis is effectively joined by the aforementioned denial of colonized populations' beauty practices. In addition, this rejection is enacted because consumers are in a position to determine uses and tastes about makeup that are beyond what is proposed by the industry, through their ability to buy and their own class identification. In Mexico City, consumers reflected the demand of other values such as inclusion. This word, highly repeated in the field, appeared when clients I witnessed were very attentive to not buy lighter shades, and it was a reason argued to not buy South Korean makeup. This contrasts with the shopping experience. In certain events, almost all workers were light skinned and the physical location of the commercial spaces was in affluent areas of the city. During fieldwork, the upper and middle-class audience the companies had in mind was the one primarily present, but the final purchasers of their cosmetic offer did not necessarily embody *blancura* but *blanquitud*.

At the same time, employees at both companies covered in Mexico City were instructed to clearly delineate the merchandise available for Mexican consumers and the ones deemed too "foreign". Some makeup products were not promoted, like lip tints formulated not to adhere to the edges of the lips and make them look thinner; or eyeliners that highlight the *aegyosal* or fat deposits under the lower eyelids for a more tender and youthful image. At the second company, these cosmetics were pushed as markers of exotic and trendy appearances, which from the participant observations registered, attract a young feminine audience. Nevertheless, for most of the workers and consumers observed these aesthetic presentations are non-existent. What is distinctive about South Korean cosmetics is emphasis on skin, which includes skin color. Still at the first company, I was told not all types of makeup foundations were distributed to every physical store. Some were sold in a store in a specific neighborhood in very light tones and with low density because its clients are South Koreans or South Korean descendants. This kind of appearance with little emphasis on coloration and greater attention to skin condition reflects in the company's advertising, and is markedly differently from the preferences that other interviewees indicated as local and/or Mexican aesthetic preferences: high coverage in the skin and a bigger color range for eyes and lips but very intense application in the eyes, showing off the use of makeup. When Mexican clients purchased South Korean makeup and used it in the stores, they kept replicating this aesthetic style leaving behind cosmetic trends and practices proposed by the South Korean brand.

Although no participant is totally docile to what Molina-Guzmán calls symbolic colonization (2010) or the propagation of cultural productions that fix inherited hierarchies in racialized and gendered bodies; they make unstable and negotiable appraisals that involve identifications from the body. People are othered while incarnating different racialized origins and identities; where Asianness is opposed to the Orientalism portrayed in the previous section. Here, having any kind of non-White ancestry contradicts aesthetic aspirations and desired appearances, which cannot be romanticized and linked to foreign lands. As I will cover, Orientalism disarms itself in front of the proximity of the very real migrations that shaped Latin American history and citizenship, rendering its implicit (Oriental/Occidental) polarity unsuitable (WALLERSTEIN, 2001).

Chinese Diasporas: Outside (Asian) beauty

A large number of Peruvians have Chinese ancestry. More than 170 years ago, *coolí*⁵ workers came as cheap labor in a condition of semi-slavery to work on Peruvian agriculture, farming and industry. The extreme poverty experienced in and out of the hacienda regime was a characteristic of the diaspora; Chinese immigrants set up in Peru through the following generations and changed the face of the Peruvian population (RODRÍGUEZ PASTOR, 2000). The exploitation of the labor force of Chinese migrants and the accumulation of income that some of them achieved after the suspension of the traffic of *coolies* led to their entry into small businesses and their gradual migration to the cities (LA TORRE, 1992), but many were still property for the hacienda owners like my grandmother, her mother and her mother. It was not until 1973 with the Agrarian reform that these semi-serfs were free, or before that date if they succeeded in running away. Rejection of people of Asian and indigenous origins persists to this day; it can even be argued that a deep antagonism towards ethnic groups such as Chinese-Peruvians has historically been sustained (ESCOBEDO, 2013). In comparison, in Mexico this process was more overtly contentious. Between 1880 and 1900 thousands of Chinese people, mostly men, migrated to Mexico. The conformation of Chinese communities in the country occurred within the framework of the state colonization policies to ensure cheap labor and direct Mexico towards economic development. At the same time, in this historical period (the *Porfiriato*) the conceptualization of national subjects was formulated under racial aspects, seen as indispensable to achieve the whitening (referring to *blancura*) and beautification of the indigenous population; as well as cultural and economic aspects. In this *nosotros nacional*, Asians were not included. The resulting Sinophobia escalated to the mass killings in Torreón in 1911 and hate crimes during that decade, and later in the 1930s to the expulsions of Chinese residents and their Mexican families (CINCO, 2017).

This is the same decade in which the Mexican Society of Eugenics for the Improvement of the Race was created and in which it proposed to whiten the Mexican population by limiting the arrival of African and Asian immigrants (JONES, 2018), following “positive eugenics” or measures focused on the next generation of Mexicans in order to “improve the qualities of their descendants” (SUÁREZ; SUAZO, 2005, p. 114). It is important to note that the legacy of eugenics is also found in Peru: the pioneer of “social medicine” in the country, Carlos Enrique Paz Soldán declared that “Peru’s ethnic identity was so fragile that it required some kind of exclusion of the different ‘foreign’ races” (STEPAN, 1991, p. 180). Going further back, between the 16th and 17th centuries the name *chino* or “Chinese” in Spanish served to call the slaves brought in the *nao de China* or the Manila Galleon, and it became generalized to slaves arriving from the territories that are now the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia. By the 18th century, *chino* had become an expression directed at individuals of mixed origin who did not fit the description of the African body according to the Vice-royal caste

⁵ *Coolí*, *culí* and *coolie* were names used in North America, Latin America and the Caribbean for low-wage and usually impoverished laborers from Asia, generally from India, China, Japan, the Philippines, and more during the 19th and 20th centuries (RODRÍGUEZ PASTOR, 2000; SEIJAS, 2014). Even though this word had a pejorative meaning, it is nowadays reclaimed by these laborers’ descendants and employed to remember the violence and discrimination they went through, which is why it is used in this article.

system, and those who occupied the work of servants (SEIJAS, 2014). The populations subjugated by the Spanish were amalgamated into undifferentiated masses that ended up classified according to what was most convenient to sustain the colonial system, setting it as the foundation of social and racial organization (CUMES, 2014).

In Mexico, “Asian” beauty comprises corporeal ideals that conform to a colonial and racialized aesthetic heritage; *K-beauty* has fitted perfectly within them. Then, what about Chinese cosmetics and beauty presentations? One worker during an open demonstration stated while putting eyeshadow on his model: “I like to take the shadow out (of the eye socket) a lot so that the eye looks as elongated as possible, but always keeping a balance in the lower eyelid, if not it will give a very Asian effect” (Mexico City, June 2018). His goal was to avoid an “Asian” eye or one linked to the phenotype identified with Asia outside that continent. The reason for avoiding such corporeity was not clarified, nor was it explained how an “Asian” eye is recognized. The obviousness of these comments is due to the fact that: “The observable differences in the bodies keep semantic records linked to (...) with a set of specific racial types that are shared as referents to establish the terms of belonging and difference” (NIEVES; GARCÍA; LÓPEZ, 2017, p. 316). The daily evaluation of the body continues in the cosmetic space, where the tacit agreement on the appearance of different “races” qualifies it and assigns it different resources in order to modify them to aesthetic norms.

There is so many Asian and predominantly Chinese presence in the Peruvian population, that I was one of many people with that heritage. This aspect distinguishes this diaspora from those in other Latin American countries: miscegenation between Chinese immigrants and Peruvians occurred in all regions to where they arrived, and contrary to what happened in Mexico the antagonism they faced did not prohibit or interrupt the formation of mixed families (LAUSENT-HERRERA, 2006). Moreover, among the Andean and Amazonian indigenous populations of Peru, it is common to find elongated eye shapes, and even monolids. During fieldwork in Lima, my *muchik*⁶ origin was not pointed out since it is one more among dozens of indigenous groups in Peru, and especially since having mixed-race ancestry did not associate me to a circumscribed ethnic group. When I moved to Mexico City however, my body and the features that relate to my Chinese-Peruvian origin were singled out. During fieldwork, those bodily traits became distant to the prevailing aesthetic models. I was granted an otherness which I was not familiar with, and which is not absolute: my foreign status was notorious in the upper and upper-middle class commercial spaces where I researched without it being so in other areas of the city.

In Lima, I visited the Santa Catalina Galleries, located in Lima center. There, the products are still mostly brought illegally from China and those who sell them are wholesalers. They buy all varieties of makeup without any aesthetic preference, and privilege products like red lipstick and black eyeliner, which they believe will always be bought. Half of them at the time of fieldwork were owners of bodegas and pharmacies where they resell the cosmetics, or they were distributors to small businesses outside Lima. Sometimes, the sellers

⁶ The *muchik*, moche o mochica were a pre-Inca civilisation on the north coast of Peru. Part of their descendants from said region continued to name themselves under these terms during the Viceroyalty of Peru and the republican period of Peru’s history, in which oligarchic estates were established and used them as labourers and/or in semi-slavery condition.

would guide them or not depending on the volume of the goods bought. In Mexico City, I was able to visit establishments owned by informal distributors, kiosks located in the street and in “*tianguis*” or public markets. Since the transaction is fast and most consumers have previously determined what they are going to acquire, interviewed sellers felt that they had no interaction with clients other than the payment. They all agreed that they do not have authority before their clients, and that they cannot guide them entirely in their purchase.

In both cases, the origin of their merchandise is Chinese and it has not gone through official procedures to be sold to the public. About this, in both countries it was assumed that Chinese goods are cheap and do not have the best quality. There was a preeminent connotation that, if the product was Chinese, it was for lower class consumers. One vendor told me: “Even if they are poor, people want to look pretty” (Lima, May 2011). Following Miceli, social reproduction does not obey an immutable structure: the habitus ascribed is sufficiently flexible (1982) In Latin America there are different types of economic and symbolic production, and there is not a single hegemonic class that imposes its networks of meaning (MICELI, 1972), and it also usually converges with ethnicity, as they share constituent indicators as place of origin and educational level. It is not possible to speak of a cosmetics industry that simply imposes aesthetic models to imitate. Various incarnated aspects – and interpretations of beauty circulate in the aesthetic market, whether they are valued by actors in the industry or not. The companies and merchandising geographical origin is in turn classified under this criterion.

Chinese goods are seen as belonging to lower classes because of the nature of the migration that arrived in Peru and in Mexico. They still sell beauty and they are still cosmetics; but they are undervalued if compared to South Korean products. However, they are also devalued because Chinese brands are assumed to be directed towards poorer consumers and to sell inexpensive products with less quality, which is a generalized perception even in China, known as “平替” (*píngtì*), cheap substitutes for famous-brand products, especially international ones (NAN, 2021; LI, 2021). This judgment still has not been successfully contested by China’s rebranding as a world-power nation of exports (JHA, 2016). Class appears here as an identifying marker for objects and for people. At the same time, the appearances created with Chinese makeup are not much different from the ones painted with South Korean products. Cheaper cosmetics are used to draw in bodily features desired according to aesthetic stratification and colonial heritage; neither Chinese people nor Chinese goods embody beauty. Along with indigenous and African ancestry, Asian origins are literally erased from the face and the body. Both reflect the “appropriate” limit, the otherness that represents the legacy of differences long mediated by imbalances of power (BHABHA, 2007 [1994]).

Concluding remarks

Makeup is a globalized tool that allows sculpting the face and the body. The industry imposed a clear message: through the use of cosmetics, the person differentiates him or herself by demonstrating that he or she wants to “improve” his appearance (TUNGATE, 2011). The forms painted on them are still specific and mercantile versions with a strong influence of the West as a geopolitical and colonial reference, where the body is functionally

determined by the (re)denial of differences against racialized aesthetic models (BHABHA, 2007 [1994]). Cosmetic sellers in Peru and in Mexico respect local aesthetic preferences that are mostly related to the mestizo population. Their beauty practices are differentiated by corporeal factions, urban lifestyles and class ascription along with a westernized taste (CRUZ, 2014). Indigenous, African and Asian corporalities are conceptualized in a situation of lack opposing whiteness - both *blancura* and *blanquitud*, modernity and beauty (GARCÍA BRAVO, 2018), marginalizing some and normalizing others.

In Mexico and in Peru, racialized and colonial bodily standards were systematically used to “evaluate” slave and free migrants from Asia, whose settlement on the American continent was marked by discrimination. The first waves of Asian and Chinese diasporas were associated with semi-enslaved living conditions and lower class affiliation, without a clear differentiation between their place of provenance and grouping them indifferently as “*chinos*” or Chinese in Spanish. Throughout this article, I argue that this structural marginalization excluded them from being considered beautiful. Skin color is one of the main triggers for this categorization, but it is not the only body trait used for this purpose as we have shown by the popularity of contouring and the rejection of “shiny” skin. On Peruvian and Mexican faces, Orientalism is painted as a foreign locus, as a point of corporeal and creative elicitation that is not founded in the lived experiences of Asian migrants in Latin America, who endure racism, eugenic policies and constant xenophobia. This is why those who seem more “foreign”, their brands and their cosmetic offer are labelled as beautiful; they are still thought as distant enough to not reveal what lies behind that assessment. The “fox eye” trend, meaning the reproduction of a slanted eye and straight brows, is a recent example of “another instance of mainstream beauty standards plagiarizing from other cultures when it conveniences them” (LI, 2020b). Nonetheless, Peruvian and Mexican customers question racialized standards of beauty through the use of cosmetics that escape aesthetic models and the reproduction of whitened appearances, such as the application of brown lipstick and the rejection of foundation shades lighter than the clients’ actual skin color.

The symbolic content South Korean makeup companies bring to Mexican society coincides and does not clash with the racist idealization of beauty still found in the local supply and cosmetic demand. South Korean beauty became synonym with “Asian” beauty, because it helps to conceal the contentious process behind Asian presence in the contemporary Mexican population. Far away from the complex and difficult realities lived by those with Asian ancestry in Latin America, they elevate their merchandise and services by signaling modernization and technology through differentiated materiality. In addition, the bodies made up in their advertising coalesce with domestic gender biases, highlighting slim, light-skinned and traditionally feminine-looking appearances. In sum, *K-beauty* and its corporalities become Orientalized as they already represent aspirational and whitened hierarchies, becoming exotic and non-political references. However, Chinese products and corporeal referents are, and according to the historical background shared with Mexico and Peru, ignored and undesired, undervalued and associated with those who are on the lower tiers of national aesthetic, class and racial hierarchies. Through aesthetic arrangement, as

Cruz states, “a complex form of transit is navigated (...). Being beautiful is the culmination of a process of cultural incarnation” (2014, p. 13). When alluding to an “Asian” beauty in Peru and in Mexico, it never includes Chinese people and there was no reference of Chinese beautified archetypes as happened with the South Korean offer. China and their diasporas in both countries seem too ostracized to be Orientalized.

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