

They discuss, as others have, that the Confucian tradition, state control and market transformation have created a new hybrid or neo-family that consists of a commitment to a filial piety ethos, family co-dependency, sexuality constrained in marriage, a declining emphasis on male supremacy, adherence to a legal marriage and an increase in tolerance for variation in family formations.

Still, regional and class differences persist – rural women agree that marriage is more important than career and that the division of domestic labour is reasonable. College-educated women hold more egalitarian views. Although women pursued their self-interest and empowerment in the 1980s, the authors find that by the 2000s, college-educated women's pursuit of self-interest had substantially increased, with college-educated men in agreement with women's embrace of an egalitarian ethos (pp. 64–66).

The rise of white-collar occupations and the expansion of educational opportunities incentivized women to pursue higher education and paid employment. As a bundle of duties and responsibilities, marriage, as an ideal, has fallen out of favour among highly educated people who increasingly see marriage as being about more than childbearing and caring for children, doing housework and tending to in-laws. Increasingly, college-educated women want something more from their marriage.

One of their core findings is that better-educated individuals hold more influence in marriage, with college-educated women significantly shaping family life (p. 165). This cultural shift has resulted in an ethical paradox: urban-educated Chinese live in family systems that resemble Western formation while continuing to accept and embrace a Confucian moral system that prioritizes family responsibilities to both natal parents and in-laws.

The authors conclude their analysis by noting that a trend in Chinese studies to blend rural and urban research as a coherent whole tends to dilute the salient regional and social class distinctions. They point out that if the analytical focus is on family values and future expectations, then there continue to be two Chinas – a rural society that fully embraces a filial piety ethos that maintains sexual conservatism, with a pronounced son preference, and an urban culture that increasingly is open and accepts non-traditional ideas regarding women's social status, life-orientation and role in society, which is remarkably consistent with the second demographic transition thesis.

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## Modified Bodies, Material Selves: Beauty Ideals in Post-Reform Shanghai

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After arriving in Shanghai in 2011, anthropologist Julie Starr took her mundane social relationships with young, middle-class, college-educated Chinese and expat women as the basis for a broad comparison of how the “Chinese” and “Western” women conceived of the materiality of selfhood and embodied identities. The Chinese women were Han, mostly from provinces adjacent to Shanghai, and the expat women were “Western” women from the US, Australia, Britain and continental



Europe. *Modified Bodies, Material Selves* provides a good ethnographic sketch of middle-class, female expat life in Shanghai, a group rarely covered by anthropologists. Starr concludes that the Chinese women were “untroubled” (p. 4) by the pursuit of beauty and a host of related issues, such as “race” and “gender,” which the Western women viewed with a high level of critical awareness. Unlike the Western women, the Chinese women linked concepts of body and beauty with nationalism. Focusing on three beauty ideals shared by the Chinese women – thinness, big eyes and white skin – Starr weaves together a multitude of explanations for the differences between the two groups, including individualism, the connection between Chinese traditional medicine and food culture, the Western naturalization of beauty and biologization of race, the hegemony of Western beauty ideals, neoliberalism, capitalism and more. The book’s conclusion is that the Chinese women did not feel tension between the individual and society as the Western women did because, living in a non-democratic society, they did not assume that the individual has power over society.

In sum, Starr makes a very ambitious attempt to pull together wide-ranging interdisciplinary approaches – such as theories of embodiment, selfhood and gender, and feminist critiques of the politics of beauty – into a coherent conceptual framework and then to connect it with her fieldwork. The introduction is a competent review of the relevant concepts and theorists, which could be a nice reading for an upper-level undergraduate course on gender or the body. However, despite its well-written ethnographic anecdotes, the book tends to repeat the same conceptual assertions without developing them more deeply in the context of the actual fieldwork, so the arguments start to seem redundant after the introductory chapter.

The fieldwork largely consisted of noting spontaneous statements about beauty while eating, shopping, attending yoga class, patronizing beauty and nail salons, and hanging out with the two categories of women, and occasionally engaging in deeper conversations. Starr provides a good programmatic description of her method, which she calls “situated comparison” – comparisons that highlight the different orientations of subjects to their locally meaningful cultural contexts (p. 26). She also utilizes the related notion of “situated feminisms” to criticize much feminist theorizing about beauty practices, asserting that her ethnographic research method will reveal material bodies and social practices as culturally informed and dependent on local contexts, avoiding the fallacies of universalistic claims about the entanglement of body, nature and power, which tend to be generated by philosophical methods.

Starr’s proposed methodology combines the traditional anthropological emphasis on culture and the comparative method with a more up-to-date awareness of postmodern and feminist critiques of reified categories, such as her two main categories (“Chinese” and “Western”). Nevertheless, the research would have benefitted from more of the traditional approach, because not enough “culturally informed” context is provided to fully situate the ethnographic descriptions, and much of the comparison with the “West” seems to be based on her own status as a “Westerner” rather than systematic research. One area where more cultural background would be helpful is in the discussion of the Chinese women’s beliefs about food, where Starr argues that concepts grounded in traditional Chinese medicine and cosmology (e.g. hot/cold or seasonal foods) shaped the women’s understanding of the effect of food on their bodies and their beauty. However, their underlying cosmology is not described in detail. Another intriguing argument is that the Chinese concept of race is not grounded in biology as is the Western concept, but her argument is not illustrated by the research solidly enough to be convincing. This would have required more systematic interview techniques: for example, given the historical importance of fears of racial miscegenation in the West due to the “one drop of blood” theory of blackness, it would have been interesting to ask the Chinese women their opinion about mixed-race marriages, and whether they thought race was passed down to the children in the form of “genes,” “blood” or some other construct. However, it appears that Starr rarely pushed to get more depth from her acquaintances than she obtained from their social outings.

The main descriptive evidence comes from the realm of discourse. Beauty, gender and race are three fields in which translation between Chinese and English can be very difficult because the underlying worldviews are so different. Several translations of English “race” (*minzu*, *zhongzu*, *renzhong*) are offered in the summary of Frank Dikötter’s *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford University Press, 1992), but it is not clear whether Starr’s research subjects used any of them to organize their own thoughts. Little background is provided about the women – some or all of whom may be composites in order to protect the identities of the real women – so the book lacks an in-depth analysis of the real social structures underpinning their lives, and the reader does not get a thorough picture of the power relations that motivate their beauty practices.

*Modified Bodies, Material Selves* contains readable overviews of key topics in Chinese gender and beauty in the reform era, with sections appropriate for undergraduates. As a work of research, the book falls short of the methodological promise raised in the introduction: it does not provide a satisfying and convincing depth of local, cultural background for the practices examined. In the end, the research methodology was not up to the task of supporting the ambitious conceptual framework that Starr put forward.

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## Home Beyond the House: Transformation of Life, Place, and Tradition in Rural China

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All over the world, people are compelled to sever their connections with their hometowns due to employment, warfare, urban planning and other reasons. In China, millions of peasants are abandoning their old courtyard homes, moving into high-rise flats or being relocated to new villages in order to adapt to the advance of urbanization or the grandiose programme called “the new socialist countryside.” Wei Zhao, the author of *Home Beyond the House*, is deeply concerned about this process. As an architect engaged in the study of traditional dwellings, she is a cultural preservationist, worried that this brutal destruction of old houses for development not only ruins landscapes, but also decapitates cultural traditions and destroys rural lifestyles.

From the author’s perspective, the absurdity of the relocation process lies in the lack of attention given to the rural architectural environment and established ways of lives. Modern residences, which are disconnected from the local landscape and incompatible with rural living practices, are likely to fall short of rural inhabitants’ expectations of satisfactory living spaces (p. 298). In other words, they may not provide a proper sense of home. The author sets out to address the following questions: what is “home” for those dwelling within traditional built environments? And what elements contribute to the feeling of belonging to a hometown?

To answer these questions, Zhao uses an ethnographic approach to trace the origins and developments of a village called Yanxia situated in the mountainous regions of Zhejiang. Yanxia is a typical