'To my surprise, I found that Chinese women are even more dissatisfied with their body image than American women are,' UD Prof. Jaehee Jung said. 'So I wondered if these cultural changes in China were having an impact on traditional and contemporary views of ideal beauty.' Credit: University of Delaware/ Jeffrey Chase
Young women in China, living in a rapidly changing society with more personal independence, disposable income and exposure to Western media than ever before, are also altering their views of female beauty.

"The beauty industry is booming in China, and these young women I interviewed in focus groups are really endorsing the Anglo-European image of beauty," said Jaehee Jung, professor of fashion and apparel studies at the University of Delaware, whose research was recently published in the *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*.

"It's a combination of factors, not just the Westernization of the culture, but also changing gender roles and increased consumerism in the Chinese economy, which is growing so fast."

Jung presented her paper at the November conference of the International Textile and Apparel Association. The research grew out of earlier studies she conducted about women and body image, an area where misperceptions can lead to such behaviors as eating disorders.

"To my surprise, I found that Chinese women are even more dissatisfied with their body image than American women are," she said. "So I wondered if these cultural changes in China were having an impact on traditional and contemporary views of ideal beauty."

To explore that question, Jung conducted in-depth interviews with 23 women who were university students in Shanghai. She asked them their views of what Chinese society has traditionally considered to be ideal female beauty and how that compared to their own views.

While most of the women recognized that women with round faces and curvy bodies were the traditional ideals in China, most also said they preferred thin bodies and angular faces. The women generally cited fashion magazines as a place where they saw that type of thinner woman
"They all want to look like those models," Jung said, although most of the women she interviewed denied comparing themselves to images in the media. Fashion magazines in China feature Asian models who embody the American, European and Korean influences in appearance, she said.

This type of cultural change in views of beauty has occurred in other countries as well, but Jung said China is especially interesting because its economy has grown and adopted a consumer culture so rapidly. That's clearly reflected in the beauty industry, she said.

"China has become the world's second-largest market [after the United States] in the total consumption of cosmetic products," Jung said. "You also see other booming industries relevant to beauty, such as diet clinics and health clubs, even cosmetic surgery, which were all almost unheard-of in China just a short time ago."

Her article in Family and Consumer Sciences quotes some of the women she interviewed, including one who said that "losing weight is a trend in China."

Another woman mentioned the "perfect female images in fashion magazines," saying that the message is that everyone should look like those models. "So everyone will feel like, 'I'll never be skinny enough,'" she said.

Others also talked about the influence of the media and the prevalence in fashion and entertainment of "tall, slim women in Western countries," adding that in China, "we just changed our standard of beauty."

When gender roles change, as they have in China, women gain more
professional opportunities but also are subjected to more pressure to meet a higher standard of beauty, Jung said. Combined with having economic freedom and more control over their lives and bodies, that pressure can result in eating disorders and other problems, she said.

"The views of beauty have changed drastically," Jung said. "The standards in contemporary China seem to be unrealistic and remarkably similar to Western standards."

She hopes to conduct additional research in the future, possibly interviewing women of different ages about their views.


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