

Kelli Beard
14 September 2010
Thesis Prospectus
Advisor: Dr. Cozad, 3rd Reader: Dr. Chang

“Have You Put on Weight?": A Study of the Effects of Certain Factors on the Increased
Presence of Eating Disorders in Modern Chinese Women

Research Question: “Have you put on weight?” was once a traditional Chinese greeting (*fa fu*, 发福); however, such a phrase might be considered offensive in modern day China.¹ How have certain factors such as the increased income and urbanization via Westernization, exportation of the “fast-food” culture, and China’s own Confucian roots affected the increase of eating disorders found in Chinese women?

- I. Introduction
 - a. Discussion of the research methodology
- II. Anorexia as the “Golden Girl” disease
 - a. Mostly well-off, well-educated young women have anorexia
 - b. The spread of Westernization in China
 - i. Westernization of mental illness
 - ii. Easy access to Western literature via websites
- III. Exportation of the “fast food culture”
 - a. Economic reforms leading to:
 - i. Increased availability of fast food/Western foods
 - ii. Pressure from peers to have popular Western snacks
- IV. China’s Confucian culture
 - a. Filial piety
 - i. Does the pressure from strict filial piety lead to eating disorders in Chinese females?
 - b. Male-dominated society

¹ Sing Lee and Antoinette M. Lee, Disordered Eating in Three Communities of China: A Comparative Study of Female High School Students in Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Rural Hunan, *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 27 June 1999, 323.

- i. Foot-binding, waist-binding
 - ii. The family name is carried on through men
- V. Discussion
 - a. Survey answers
 - i. Examination and discussion of survey answers
- VI. Conclusion
 - a. Summary
 - b. Conclusions

“Have you put on weight?” was once a traditional Chinese greeting (*fa fu*, 发福); however, such a phrase might be considered offensive in modern day China.² Illnesses such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, while having long been discussed in the West, are just beginning to come to the forefront in China. The augmentation of Western influence in China has led to increased income and urbanization; both these factors are usually present in anorexia, known as the “Golden Girl’s” disease in Western psychology. There has also been a steady influx of Western foods into China since Deng Xiaoping’s 改革开放 (*gai ge kai fang*, or “reform and opening up”) of China in the 1980s; this exportation of the West’s “fast food culture” has led to increased rates of obesity and subsequent unhealthy measures to lose weight.³ In addition to these factors, China’s own Confucian roots have also provided fertile ground for an increase in eating disorders among Chinese women.

The research methodology of this thesis will include questionnaires and analyzing social data; economic data and historical sources will also be examined. Much of the

² Sing Lee and Antoinette M. Lee, Disordered Eating in Three Communities of China: A Comparative Study of Female High School Students in Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Rural Hunan, *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 27 June 1999, 323.

³ Frederick Balfour, China’s weight-loss industry is gaining. msnbc.com, URL: www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37510165/ns/business-bloomberly_businessweek/ 8 June 2010

research will be from primary sources. The subjects of the questionnaire will be college aged (around 18-23 years of age) young women in Nanjing, China. The questionnaire will aim to delve into the body image of the average Chinese woman by trying to discover the perceptions that lead to abnormal eating habits (i.e., skipping meals, self-induced vomiting, and/or excessive exercise). The questionnaire will also try to discern the level of influence the “fast food culture” and the strive for perfectionism have on young women’s diets.

The Westernization of China has been relatively rapid if one considers the process beginning with 改革开放. Eating disorders are not an uncommon occurrence in Western culture; they are sometimes called “the price paid for Western civilization.”⁴ As Western literature and media became more and more readily available for the average urban Chinese individual, public views of anorexia and eating disorders in general shifted to center stage.⁵ This relatively sudden access to Western identifications of eating disorders caused a disregarding of the specifically Chinese aspects of the illnesses: Chinese women are not as eager to lose weight as they are to be considered equal to their Western counterparts.⁶ In addition, with increased Westernization came increased urbanization and income in China. This has allowed for an increase in cases of anorexia, known as the “golden girl’s” disease because it is usually found in well-educated and financially stable urban young women.

改革开放 also allowed for a sudden mass movement of Western investors in China, eager to sell their products to a brand new market. These investors included

⁴ J.R. Bemporad. Self-starvation through the ages: Reflections on the pre-history of anorexia nervosa. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 19,217-237.

⁵ Ethan Watters, The Americanization of Mental Illness. *The New York Times*. 8 January 2010.

⁶ Ibid.

prevalent fast food chains such as McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken; with this exportation of the West's fast food culture, China's childhood obesity rates have skyrocketed.⁷ In addition to the increased presence of these fast food restaurants, Chinese children face social pressures to have more expensive and more popular Western snacks that are often unhealthy with high calorie counts.⁸

Along this same line, the economic reforms of 改革开放 allowed for these Western companies to invest in China's fertile markets fanned the flames of modernization and urbanization. Anorexia, often known as the "Golden Girl's" illness due to the fact that most victims of the illness are well off, well educated urban women, may be a direct descendant of such urbanization and increase in wealth.

Another important factor when discussing the rise in eating disorders in China is the Confucian based culture found in the country. Confucian culture is not only dominated by males but also demands strict filial piety. Foot binding is perhaps the most famous manifestation of Confucian teachings of male-dominance, but waist binding was also a popular expression of female submission; this emphasizes how slimness has been valued throughout Chinese history.⁹ In a modern context, Confucian culture has had an inhibiting force on the traditional healing process of anorexia; many young women are afraid to describe their eating disorders to their therapists for fear of causing their parents

⁷ Frederick Balfour, China's weight-loss industry is gaining. msnbc.com, URL: www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37510165/ns/business-bloomberly_businessweek/ 8 June 2010

⁸ Guo Yuhua, Food and Family Relations: the Generation Gap at the Table

⁹ Freedom Leung, Sharon Lam, and Sherrien Sze. Culture Expectations of Thinness in Chinese Women, *Eating Disorders*, 346.

to 丢面子 (*diu mian zi*, or “lose face”).¹⁰ At present time, there has been less information found on the effects of Confucian culture on eating disorders in Chinese women.

Traditional Chinese society valued a round face and plump figure.¹¹ However, under the combined effects of urbanization and increased income, the exportation of the fast food culture and the strong presence of Confucian values in Chinese culture, modern Chinese women are falling victim to psychological illnesses that have long plagued Western societies.

¹⁰ Joyce L. C. Ma, Patients' Perspective on Family Therapy for Anorexia Nervosa: A Qualitative Inquiry in a Chinese Context, *Australia & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, vol. 29, #1 2008, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 340.

Bibliography

Balfour, Frederick. China's weight-loss industry is gaining. msnbc.com, URL: www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37510165/ns/business-bloomberg_businessweek/ 8 June 2010.

Bemporad, J.R. . Self-starvation through the ages: Reflections on the pre-history of anorexia nervosa. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 19.

Lee, Sing and Lee, Antoinette M.. Disordered Eating in Three Communities of China: A Comparative Study of Female High School Students in Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Rural Hunan, *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 27 June 1999.

Leung, Freedom; Lam, Sharon and Sze, Sherrien. Culture Expectations of Thinness in Chinese Women, *Eating Disorders*.

Ma, Joyce L. C. . Patients' Perspective on Family Therapy for Anorexia Nervosa: A Qualitative Inquiry in a Chinese Context, *Australia & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, vol. 29, #1 2008.

Yuhua, Guo. Food and Family Relations: the Generation Gap at the Table

Watters, Ethan, The Americanization of Mental Illness. *The New York Times*. 8 January 2010.