Introduction

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Last September, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, after an extended run, closed the exhibit “China: Through the Looking Glass,” on the “impact of Chinese aesthetics on Western fashion.” This was not the museum’s first costume exhibit on Asia—Orientalism and fashion have been well-trod themes within the costume museum world—and we suspect will not be its last. But in this latest iteration, the museum has had a harder time figuring China as a ghostly specter haunting the European imagination of Yves Saint Laurent and other fashion cognoscenti. When the singer Rihanna stole the spotlight at the opening night gala wearing Gou Pei, one of the only Chinese designers shown that evening, critics and consumers worldwide, many from China, denounced the museum and the fashion establishment for its business-as-usual exclusions. The kerfuffle made clear that “China” can and does disrupt Western narratives about itself rather than quietly serving as their backdrop.

This most recent encounter between fashion and “the East” presents an occasion to think about how the geographies of fashion and beauty have shifted, particularly in the ways that Asia has emerged as a cultural and economic force in this story. The “China” exhibit became the Met’s most popular exhibition in its 145-year history (nearly 800,000 people saw it), driven in large part by international visitors (who accounted for 40% of the audience), but, most strikingly, primarily Chinese (14% in total, the Met’s largest single group of overseas visitors). The record-setting success of the exhibit came as a surprise even to its curators. After all, fashion has long been understood as the domain of the West, with Paris, Milan, and London as it epicenter (New York and to a certain extent Tokyo were only recently admitted into this exclusive club). In most studies of fashion, it is resolutely a product of Western modernity, birthed from the social and political transformations that it supposedly
inaugurated—industrialization, democratic revolution—and reliant on an ethos of “the new” that is supposedly anathema to those from tradition-bound non-Western cultures.² What was it that led an exhibit on China and fashion to garner such interest?

Despite prevailing narratives, China has had a long relationship with fashion, certainly as makers of clothing, but more recently as one of the most lucrative markets for Western fashion designers. (Vogue editor Anna Wintour’s recent tour of China gives some indication of its rising prominence.) This kind of attention to fashion is not limited to only China. Across Asia, luxury goods have found enthusiastic consumers in Shanghai, Mumbai, Seoul, and Saigon alike, prompting endless popular accounts of an ever-expanding world of happy shoppers. In fact, in mounting their China exhibit, the curators were accused by some critics of “a calculated move to capture some of that gold dust,” since Asia has become the “buzz of many conversations, in every sector from Hollywood to finance, travel to e-commerce.”³

This comment highlights the immense (and, to some, immensely threatening) shift in the political, cultural, and economic power of Asia, evidenced in part through the consumption of Western goods in the region. But that is only part of the story. A fuller picture would take into account Asia’s own flourishing culture industries—film, media, music, fashion, and beauty—which have also grown tremendously, vying for (and in many instances commanding) the markets in their local contexts. Korean and Japanese beauty products, for instance, are higher grossing than any European product in Asia—products that have long been the industry standard for luxury cosmetics across the region.⁴ China’s own fashion industries have expanded so vastly that Chinese entrepreneurs have now bought old Italian factories to reproduce and “preserve” the so-called Italian couture tradition, using the same machines and often employing experienced and aging Italian workers, only in China. There are more than 200 design schools in China (as opposed to just 53 in the United States), turning out fashion designers who will work in the sample rooms of factories making clothes for global design brands. Moreover, Chinese-owned manufacturing firms have been at the vanguard of seemingly “Western” concerns regarding fashion and “sustainability” on a mass scale, experimenting with zero-waste factory processes that produce fabrics without the use of water, while raising
labor standards and developing codes of social responsibility and conduct with American and European fashion brands.

As these brief examples reveal, “fashion and beauty” and “Asia” are intimately related, and have long been so. Think, for instance, about how the arrival of the Chinese manteaux in 1700s Paris set off a craze that launched a thousand couturiers. Or more recently, how the clothing industries in the United States and Europe became transformed by outsourcing to Asia throughout the 1970s and onward. And even before there was a fashion industry in the West, there was broad enchantment with the styles, goods, and images from the non-West. At the turn of the last century, elite women (and those aspiring to be so) routinely “embraced the East,” in Mari Yoshihara’s terms—dressing in rich silks, decorating their homes with porcelains—to demonstrate their class status. The production, consumption, and distribution of fashion and beauty, in other words, have never been located in defined and static geographies. Rather, they move in multiple directions, transforming and becoming transformed by their local contexts, and giving shape to globalization in the spaces that they engender and inhabit: in the nail salon and beauty counters; the museums and malls; the sidewalks and runways.

These circuits and geographies are only just emerging as important critical sites in scholarly discussions within the West. Scholars in the fields of ethnic studies and women and gender studies have for at least two decades been calling for a “transnational turn.” But such a turn has been incomplete, as the disciplinary boundaries, geographic foci, and theoretical questions have remained largely distinct among these fields. Building on the work that has come before, while also being attuned to the continuing gaps and absences, this collection hopes to contribute to ongoing efforts to think transnationally and interdisciplinarily by bringing together the fields of ethnic and gender studies with area studies and fashion and cultural studies.

With some important exceptions, the fields of area studies/Asian studies rarely treat fashion and beauty as central to the histories, economics, and politics of the region, generally focusing instead on cold war and colonial histories and politics and their transformations by more recent processes of development and modernization. Fashion and beauty figure as marginal, if not entirely inconsequential. And yet in places like Korea, beauty—in the form of cosmetics products and
cosmetic surgery—is one of its most profitable export industries, even economically outpacing its manufacturing and shipbuilding industries, the two industries upon which the Korean economy was first built. Beijing dominates the world's cotton prices, with China overtaking the United States as the largest dispenser of cotton subsidies and world's largest cotton importer. At the same time, cultural studies and fashion studies still continuously reference a primarily Euro-American history and mostly within the realm of dress and costume history, again with notable exceptions. In other words, the more recent acknowledgment that Asia has become an important new luxury market—even within ethnic studies, which tends to see Asia as a backdrop or context for migrating subjects—has not led to a more thorough engagement with its histories and politics (again, with some notable exceptions), except to reaffirm the trope of its frenzied luxury consumers, exploited workers, or maker of knockoffs or copies.

For the authors of this volume, however, these tropes are a thin veneer, giving shape to a social phenomenon but incapable of containing its many layers of meanings and contradictions. Training their eyes on sites as far-flung and varied and yet as intimate and intimately connected as Guangzhou and Los Angeles, Saigon and Seoul, New York and Toronto, the authors here map a set of transpacific connections made visible and, in some ways only possible, through fashion and beauty. Such a map reveals how global commodities have tied people together but have not fixed them into static positions. Rather, the transnational circuits and “cartographic imaginaries,” to use contributor Nellie Chu’s term, animated by fashion and beauty have allowed some to shift, however slightly, the seemingly immovable lines between producers and consumers; developed and developing; subjugated and free.

In order to make these connections clearer, we have chosen work that attends primarily to East Asia and Southeast Asia. We do so in order to show, first, how the forces of globalization have been remade by developments in East Asia, where, for instance, more millionaires now live than in Europe. How has the growth of Asia’s elite class and the rise in Asia’s luxury consumption altered its cultural and geopolitical landscape, and been shaped by changes in its economic development? Moreover, as the various industries in East Asia have expanded and have led to mass migrations of workers from rural to urban centers, what do the workers
in these locations buy with their industrial wages? In China alone, 14 million migrant workers have made their way to cities like Shanghai to work as nannies, caretakers, housemaids, and cooks for the growing middle and upper middle classes. What do we make of the consumption practices of these 99 percenters, whose purchasing power has also increased and whose access to “cheaper” “imitation” goods, often made in Asia, can also signal new horizons of possibility?

Our focus on East Asia also allows us to see how these “tiger economies” have shaped the region as well. As several chapters reveal, Seoul’s economic and cultural presence in Southeast Asia, for instance, has outpaced the influence of traditional global cultural centers like Paris and New York. What does it mean for newly industrializing nations in Southeast Asia to value and aspire to the cultural practices and economic positions of South Korea, Japan, and China? What does this shift enable and what does it demand? How does it reshape the long-standing divide between the modern and the traditional, the innovator and the imitator? What do these Southeast Asian regional dynamics—operating at times in place of “the West” and at times as its proxy—tell us about the shifting terrains of power under globalization?

Of course, similarly complex dynamics are also at work in South Asia, much of which falls outside of our focus. But rather than include this region in a cursory manner, we hope that this collection will provide a helpful comparative example to others working on South Asia. We also hope that our focus on the regional and transnational dimensions of East and Southeast Asia will not only fill a scholarly lacuna in the United States but will draw our attention to the social, cultural, and political forces that are reshaping these geographies (and our world) and the role of fashion and beauty as its conduit.

This collection, in other words, understands fashion and beauty less as objects and more as a set of narratives and practices that map forms of Asian modernity. Though fashion and beauty are often treated as distinct objects—with their own histories and fields—they are very much of a piece. They are both material and immaterial practices of self-presentation that are deeply informed by their social contexts, meaning they are embodied and individual expressions of community, nation, and region. As such, in this collection we understand fashion and beauty as indexes of the modern formations taking place in and through Asia.
We draw on concepts like “regional modernity”—the ways that trans- and inter-Asian connections have shaped processes of social, economic, and political development—to think through how notions of the beautiful and the fashionable have been produced outside of—but not unconnected to—dynamics in the West.11 This includes, of course, the region’s history of colonialism and imperialism and their lingering effects—histories that are fundamentally shaped by encounters with the West. Yet it also emphasizes the ways that this geography has produced its own visions of the beautiful, whether as practice, material culture, or aesthetics.

Such visions are of course gendered, given that labor relies so heavily on women’s work and consumption hinges so centrally on an imagined female user. In Asia, as elsewhere, femininity has been integral to the modernizing project. As transnational feminist scholars have shown, many “modern” ways of being—such as the professionalization of housewifery, the organization of kinship networks into nuclear families, or even women’s entrance into educational institutions—were coercive norms that subjected women to novel forms of control and discipline even as they perhaps subverted other forms of patriarchy.12 Beauty and fashion work are one of the modern techniques through which women have managed such deep transformations, including changing sexual and maternal roles.13 For example, South Korea’s modernity created major shifts in the practice of Korean womanhood. As a result, Korean women went from identifying themselves first as mothers, then primarily as wives, and now in the current era of consumer culture, as sexy individuals. As such, body enhancement and modification are a means of enhancing human capital that does not depend on “the womanly virtues of traditional ethics” such as motherhood “but on measurable and quantifiable factors such as height, weight, and BMI index.”14 In order to aid this transition from “citizens” to “consumers,” a plethora of self-help books, experts, and mass media have emerged in recent years to urge women to transform themselves into neoliberal entrepreneurs, prioritizing self-management through a disciplined body that can be achieved in part through plastic surgery, dieting, fashion, and adornment.

Because consumption has historically been gendered female, beauty and fashion continue to be framed as feminine genres even when beauty and fashion practices take up male bodies or subjects. Cosmetic
surgery, for instance, is still largely thought of as a woman’s domain because “official” statistics in the United Kingdom and United States exclude men’s treatments such as cosmetic dentistry and hair transplants. Moreover, despite the fact that 80 percent of breast reduction surgeries are performed on men, the procedure continues to be associated with women.¹⁵ The same is true in Asia where, despite the fact that South Korean men are the top per-capita consumers of skincare products among men globally, the cosmetics industry continues to be feminized.

In this collection, we explore the ways female labor is obscured and female pleasures have historically been marked as frivolous. And yet, we also show how both have become integral to the formation of the modern subject and to the social reproduction of the idea that commodities offer a step toward “the good life.” Analyzing what and who modern subjects look like, what they wear, how they work, move, eat, and shop offers us a view into the forms of modernity taking shape in Asia—the aspirations it expresses and the sensibilities it endorses.¹⁶ The chapters herein share the conviction that self-care, stylizing, and sartorial markers are the material and immaterial forms that embody and tell alternative histories and reshape traditional hierarchies. These are stories of emergence, aspiration, and imagination—in short, the lived experiences of modern life. Much of the work here seeks to capture the chaotic conditions of a modernity so thoroughly infused with the labors, desires, and imaginations that have come to define fashion and beauty. How do people narrate their own personal and national histories through these goods? Where do these narratives emerge, in what spaces and under what conditions? In answering these questions, centering Asia in the study of fashion and beauty sheds light on three critical thematics: time, creativity, and labor.

What Time Is Now?

In many ways fashion and beauty travel through imaginations, aspirations, and experiences of time as much as they do through a specific geography. With the opening up of Asian markets, Western fashion and beauty companies have worked to understand “Asian style” and “Asian taste” in order to satisfy the “Asian consumer.” Such discourses posit a somehow knowable Asia, ready to be captured by market research, a
new “frontier” for profit. In order to push back against such essentialized understandings that are deeply entrenched in and informed by Cold War understandings of the region, we do not use an empirical framework that attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of an entity or continent called “Asia.”

A concept such as “Asian beauty” might suggest that such a monolith exists, ready to be capitalized upon both by corporate interests and Western fascinations. But as the “time of Asia” in the title of this collection suggests, fashion and beauty are the quotidian markers influenced by, experienced through, and produced in the temporalities induced by Asia’s recent history. On the one hand, parts of Asia have experienced a compressed modernity that has given way to a sense of quickness, urgency, and speed. For example, along with the other “industrial tigers” Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, South Korea is known for its “miracle economy,” which in just two generations went from agrarian poverty to modern powerhouse.

This rapid industrialization has been attributed to South Korea’s *bbali bbali* culture, a kind of impatient sensibility that favors speed in day-to-day matters and abhors waiting. Literally translating to “fast fast,” *bbali bbali* is an ethos and practice of hurrying, rushing, and getting it done as quickly as possible. At its best, the term has become synonymous with efficiency and is often described as evidence of South Korean exceptionalism—the result or reason, depending on how one looks at it, for South Koreans’ rapid developmental “success.” This need for speed, for instance, authorized the military regime to push young girls working in South Korea’s textile factories during 1970s to hurry up and make more goods for the national economy—in the name of efficiency. At its worst, *bbali bbali* is the kind of hastiness that led to the Sewol ferry disaster in 2014. The desire for speed in this case—the boat was carrying more than twice its proper weight in cargo in order to get more to the destination faster—resulted in the deaths of more than 300 passengers and crew, most of whom were high school students. This narrative today continues to underwrite the cosmetics industry, which prides itself on putting out hundreds of new beauty products a year, compared to Euro-American firms’ few dozens.

This sense of immediacy is heightened by new forms of media. South Korea is currently the most wired nation globally, with the highest
number of DSL connections per head worldwide, and these levels of connectivity are reflected in South Korean marketing, music, and business campaigns. Korean entertainment companies, for example, leverage their stars’ pop music on social media sites as their main platform for launching and sustaining their global popularity. Visuality, both in the sense of pop music’s tendency toward spectacle and in the emphasis on pop stars’ aesthetic appeal, has become a key factor in K-pop’s global production and distribution. This aesthetic appeal is then used to sell beauty products, cosmetics, fashion lines, and myriad other products, services, and goods domestically and internationally, most prominently in other parts of Asia, where the number of households with televisions and computers has also grown exponentially. In a spectacular example of technological “leapfrogging,” Asians who just a generation ago did not have telephones (or toilets) now own multiple smartphones, used to conduct business, connect with family, view latest trends, buy consumer goods, and produce their own media. As evidenced by Emily Raymundo’s chapter on beauty blogs, this global digital realm is allowing some to remake fashion hierarchies and even to rewrite seemingly settled narratives about race.

On the other hand, despite this speed, Asia is always painted as temporally behind, playing catchup to the West both figuratively and literally. As the United States’ hot wars in Asia evidence, the region has largely been constructed as in need of US intervention, whether to ward off communism or to establish, maintain, and catch up democratically (the Korean War, Vietnam War, American military bases and presence in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Guam, Thailand, Taiwan, Singapore, Australia are just a few examples). As such, Asian progress in history, economics, literature, media, and popular culture is typically measured in its approximations to the West. In contrast to the “Johnny-come-lately” stories told about Asia, this collection foregrounds the new alliances, affiliation, desires, and demands forged within East and Southeast Asia.

For instance, the formation of ASEAN nearly a decade ago helped to establish an economic bloc out of vastly divergent nations and histories. These alliances both made possible and were facilitated by the circulation of cultural goods—from K-pop to Japanese cosmetics—within the region, which culturally solidified relationships. As Thuy Linh Nguyen...
Tu shows in this volume, such exchanges are central to reshaping local ambitions and desires, from which skincare to buy and who to marry, to which nations make the most “suitable” political allies and trade partners. In this context, Asian capital and Asian bodies have become models and ideals for both intimate/personal and state-led/political investments that can rival and displace long-standing Euro-American notions of beauty and power.

Imitation, Innovation, and Other Myths of Creativity

In a competitive global economy, where time is literally money, *bbali* is a demand felt far beyond Asia. In the fashion industry, where technological innovation means that entire clothing lines can be produced in just six weeks, as in the case of “fast fashion,” this kind of lightning speed is only possible through much coordination and collaboration. It requires moment-to-moment decision-making in all aspects of the production process, from the sourcing of textiles to clothing assembly, even to the timing of when a product finds its way onto the container of a ship. Consumers today have access to new varieties and designs of clothing that is, in fact, only made possible through the cumulative knowledge of a complicated, cooperative, anonymous, creative, and market-driven production process. The fashion and beauty products that have emerged out of Asia within the last two decades are the result of large ecologies of shared resources and knowledge, interconnected across the region. It requires a lot of creativity to keep all of this going.

Creativity is an ephemeral quality, but one that has very tangible effects. In fact, according to influential thinkers like Richard Florida, creativity drives most things; it makes cities great and nations grow, it saves economies stagnating under deindustrialization and gives meaning to workers laboring without purpose. Everyone can tap into their creativity, boosterists say, as all passion projects can become economically productive enterprises. While Florida’s thesis has been challenged by many scholars who have asked what happens to the vast majority of people without the cultural, educational, and other forms of capital necessary to participate in the creative economy, in the fashion industry, these critiques have not stuck. There, creativity still reigns supreme and
exists only among the privileged few. Coveted positions at prominent fashion houses are still passed between a handful of mostly white male designers, who supposedly have earned these titles by dint of their innovative imagination, not because of their education or social networks and locations.

In this context, to be deemed creative is to have access to social and economic capital. Like most other coveted resources, this one too is limited. Creativity should be readily available since presumably all humans have imaginations, yet it is constructed as scarce, endemic to few people and nations. Consider, for instance, the narratives that accompanied contemporary Chinese artists’ entrance into the global art market in the 1990s. Stories of thousands of art students mindlessly copying master works or duplicating pop pieces for the international market sought to frame the innovations in contemporary Chinese art as no more than an extension of age-old Western aesthetics. More recently, K-pop’s global popularity has met with the ubiquitous criticism that its artists and their music are manufactured, implying that K-pop artists and producers lack not only talent but creativity and originality and, as such, are merely weak imitators of Western pop. In these accounts, artists from the non-West are rarely seen as innovators and instead are characterized as followers of forms and genres usually originating in the West.

This practice is common in fashion, where sartorial products from the non-West are still referred to as “clothes,” “costume,” “dress,” rather than “fashion,” defined in part as “the new.” Despite centuries of tailoring expertise, decades of manufacturing experience, and many lifetimes of aesthetic practice, clothing manufacturers in Asia are still accused of mimicking styles from Paris and Milan. More recently they have been excoriated for outright copying them. These accusations have launched a thousand investigations, cost (and raised) billions of dollars, and involved legal institutions across several continents. In all of these copyright fights, there is no mention of the ways Western designers have, since the emergence of the European couture system, “borrowed” or been “inspired” by the non-Western styles and materials. In settings like the Metropolitan Museum’s “China” exhibit, this practice is seen as little more than cultural exchange. In fact, Western designers are often portrayed less as “borrowing” than as “improving” on non-Western styles (for more on this, see Minh-Ha Pham’s contribution to this volume).
At this point in time, is it possible that we still need to argue for Asians’ capacity to create? Maybe, but for us such an argument cannot hinge on a claim to any definitive origin or ownership. Creativity in fashion and beauty is not the product of an individual genius. It is a collective affair. Every dress we put on, every style we pick up, and every lipstick we own is sourced, made, marketed, and sold through the work of thousands of hands and minds. Each brings one thing to the process—a stitch perfectly executed, a mistake that becomes a new style, and a host of other innovations that are mostly imperceptible. It is little wonder, then, that Chinese manufacturers making the most maligned, “cheap,” “copy” style see themselves, as Nellie Chu’s chapter reveals, as designers with a broad imagination of the world.

In wholesale markets across East and Southeast Asia, from Shanghai, Guangzhou, Seoul, and Bangkok, there are blouses, or shoes, that might vaguely resemble all of the logos and designs of Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Michael Kors, and Tory Burch—companies that all produce in Asia—yet designed into one hybrid object. These are often created in urban villages throughout Asia known for their “shanzhai cultures,” or “imitation cultures.” It is easier to write off these amalgamations as mere “copies” than to understand them as the accumulation of a myriad design decisions and relationships in different arrangements of labor and technology (for example, digital printing, hand-stitched embroidery, machine sequin-ning, and so on), all created out of collective and local knowledges spanning multiple cities in Asia—just as it is easier for us to see fast fashion as only cheap and imitative. As Nellie Chu, Christina Moon, and Minh-Ha Pham’s chapters in this collection reveal, what Asia shows us, perhaps more than any place in the world, is that the skills and ideas required for all these kinds of production are in fact creative. That they do not rely on a model of the individual author/genius and instead require forms of collectivity might challenge us to rethink how we define creativity.

Just as Asian producers are perceived as copycats, Asian consumers of fashion and beauty are likewise described as lacking in creativity and imagination. While these consumers are no doubt coveted for their economic value, their cultural value remains circumscribed. We have all heard about the growing middle class in China, India, and Vietnam, and routinely see media depictions of Chinese consumers waiting in line to get into the Beijing Chanel boutique or into famed Parisian stores like
Galleria Lafayette. These women, with money to burn and an insatiable appetite to boot, are the newly arrived belles of the ball. But despite their wealth, marketers working in so-called emerging markets have continually remarked that these new consumers have yet to learn good taste. As one editor at Elle Vietnam said about the elite class gobbling up luxury goods in Saigon’s shiny malls: “These women, they don’t really know how to have good style. They’ll wear Chanel head to toe, they have no idea how to do high-low. And let’s forget about ‘effortless chic’—that’s not a concept they get at all in Asia.”

We have heard this narrative about many consumers: Chinese, South Korean, Indian, Middle Eastern, and even Russian women, whose sudden rise to billionaire status has not come with good taste. There is an implicit telos to these accounts of global fashion. Consumers in recently developed economies are always framed as latecomers to fashion—much as they are latecomers to freedom and democracy. “They don’t have a feel for the game,” as Bourdieu would put it. Instead, these nations of consumers purportedly have to play catch up, have to learn the ways of a sport they didn’t invent and can only hope to master. This is not just a perception by outsiders. As Ann Marie Leshkowich’s chapter reveals, the issue of what Vietnamese women should wear has long been a concern of local elite and state interests. The approval of Western “experts”—their stamp of good taste and good style—has and continues to be of great cultural and economic significance.

In this way, narratives of shoppers in Saigon or Singapore are accounts not just of class but also of civilization. “Asian taste” becomes a way to map Asian-ness less in a geographic sense than in a temporal sense—as late, as behind, as progressing in a trajectory that unfolds from the West to the rest. Denise Cruz, along with Minh-Ha Pham and Christina Moon, show us in this volume how the language of creativity and imagination have become proxy for race and nation. They make clear how it helps to hold up the dividing lines between who designs and creates and who simply sews and manufactures; between who is a style leader and who is a style follower; and, ultimately, who deserves the economic and cultural capital that creativity can convey. It also helps to hold up the lines between the civilized and uncivilized, traditional and modern, past and future, even as those ideas are being challenged by a world under transformation. How else can we understand this
continued insistence on seeing Asia and Asians as always falling short or lacking in taste other than as an anxious scramble to maintain an order already beginning to fade? How else could Asia be at once a great hope and a great failure; the savior of fashion and its weakest pupil; the hapless imitator and the unruly consumer?

Laboring for Pleasure, and the Hard Work of Buying

Continuously circumscribed as coming late to the table, and lacking creativity and imagination, Asia in fashion and beauty is also routinely framed solely within the realm of labor. There is perhaps no more iconic image of this than the figure of a garment worker, head down, toiling away and feeding cloth into her sewing machine. The story of fashion is the story of global labor—growing and extracting cotton, spinning thread, cutting cloth, and sewing of garments, all these forms of production have long been global. From the 1970s onward, and particularly beginning in the 1990s, however, this global story has taken place in Asia.19

Whether on the assembly floors of production or as temporary technical designers in corporate design offices on Seventh Avenue, fashion’s cultural workers have increasingly emerged from Asia. The Asian, female “docile” body was ushered into fashion production both by transnational corporations eager for cheap labor and from Asian states eager to put her “surplus labor” to work.20 Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, this female worker, typically found in emerging Export Processing Zones of South China, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, was just old enough to make money for her family before she would have to return to her village to marry.21 But as much as she desired a wage, she also desired her autonomy and the glamour and cosmopolitan life of the burgeoning cities, formed in part by migrations of women like her. She would likely leave behind her birth-land registration, making her ineligible for healthcare and other social benefits of citizenship. She would live inside a worker’s dormitory, where both state and private enterprises would supervise and survey her life at work and at home. The little money she earned she would send home.

Increasingly, this figure of the suffering garment worker has been brought to the public’s attention with films like The True Cost (2015), or books like Elizabeth Cline’s Overdressed and Lucy Siegle’s To Die For.22
As Miliann Kang’s chapter addresses, recent news coverage of the manicurist toiling in toxic working conditions has become another representation of Asian beauty labor. Though these representations bring much needed awareness to the plight of exploited workers, they also depict workers as victims who can only be saved by the heroes of capitalist consumption—privileged women of the West who either design fashions under more “sustainable” and environmentally favorable conditions or consume and shop more “ethically.” New ad campaigns among fashion companies now promote “truthful and honest labor” that reference “nature” and authentic “ethnic” expressions of practice and making (from hand-sewing, mending, knitting, and weaving). This “transparency,” captured in image and film, is used in their marketing, evidencing clean factories, smiling faces and worker empowerment, and certificates of corporate responsibility and social responsibility (from institutions like the International Labor Organization).

Critics of the fashion industry and “ethically minded” fashion companies suggest that mass production in places like Asia are the root of evil in global capitalism, where “Made in China” stands for cheaply made, copied, and despised things. The victims are Western consumers unaware of these exploitative conditions and of their own exposure to China’s use of toxic products. The heroes are also Western consumers, the most agentive actors against these exploitative practices, the bearers of good conscience qua good consumption. Denise Cruz’s analysis of VINTA, a Filipino Canadian business specializing in couture ternos (traditional Filipina dresses), offers an alternative site, where the hallmarks of what we now deem “ethical practice” have been going on for years, unnoticed by most Western observers. VINTA’s diasporic attempt at slow and ethical fashion goes against the easy consumption of Filipina labor and illuminates the unease and unevenness with which such endeavors are met.

In all of these popular depictions, we learn little about who actually works and what the work of fashion and beauty is. What does life look like and how is it experienced on and off the assembly line? How can we see fashion and beauty as part of the motivations and dreams for migrating, the enactment of the modest choices one has in this life? A movie, new fashions, a pair of shoes, a tube of lipstick, a new hairstyle or skin cream—how may these represent, as Jessamyn Hatcher puts it in her chapter, “little freedoms”? 
And yet, how might these “modest wish fulfillments” also be understood as important political spaces and sites for culture and its aesthetics in an understanding of lived experience? In South Korea, cosmetic surgery is a form of “body work” that encapsulates both work performed on the body through surgeries, and the work that the altered body is readied to perform (or perform better) in a national market economy. While some “body work” is performed in a doctor’s office or on a surgical table, Emily Raymundo shows us that such labors are also performed in the privacy of one’s bedroom through the consumption of YouTube video tutorials that instruct consumers on the proper forms of makeup application. These chapters bring new light to how we think about who the “worker” is in fashion and beauty and the very nature of her work.

In this volume, the work of fashion and beauty takes on less clear parameters, finding itself in places like nail salons in New York, K-pop videos in the city of Seoul, and the spas and air-conditioned shopping malls of Saigon, where the distinctions between work life and home life and leisureed life begin to blur. In fact, in many examples throughout this book, the labor of fashion and beauty occurs continuously, beyond the space of the workplace, and among many agents. Throughout are examples of the innumerable ways that paid work depends on the realm of unpaid labor, including the care and socialization of children, their grooming, cultivation, and presentation, as demonstrations of a family or household to a community, as investments for better futures. One is reminded of Terence Turner’s “The Social Skin,” wherein he describes Kayapo women who submit their children to standing still for hours on end, while painting intricate and idiosyncratic geometrical designs on their bodies. They adorn children with accessories and cosmetics to reflect on the relationship between the painter and the child, and the child’s relationship to the household, village, and community.24

More recent accounts of such maternal preening take on neoliberal dimensions in South Korea, where mothers act as self-entrepreneurs who model, mold, and shape their children toward market demands. As teens and adults, this grooming becomes reciprocal, with both parties shaping and shopping. Take, for instance, Etude House’s 2013 “Mother and Me Healing Day” promoted by its global Facebook page. The page suggests a GOBACK Intensive Mask Sheet for mother and a Cherry Lip Gel Patch for daughter “to have a healing day with your mom.” Such
marketing not only presumes beauty work as women’s work but as labor to be shared between mothers and daughters and thus passed off as imperatives masked as pleasure and bonding. Moreover, while the page suggests an intensive wrinkle-reducing mask for mom that will help her “GOBACK” to a presumably more youthful and thus more preferable appearance, it suggests a lip patch for “soft, luscious, kissable lips” for daughter, highlighting how differently aged bodies “need” different products in accordance with their sexual viability. In these ways, the surface of the body is a space of modernizing labor in and of itself, a site where buying and selling, loving and coercing, freedom and power all coalesce.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume highlight the ways that fashion or beauty can serve as the means for realizing all kinds of aspirations and possibilities, as a modest reward or investment, an opportunity or mobilization, an economic niche or cosmopolitan cultural formation. Fashion and beauty, whether commodity, practice, or imagination, evidence the mottled and heterogeneous experiences of modern life, and of the inter-Asian connections that have made new paths possible. As ethnographers, visual analysts, historians, and firsthand witnesses collaborating alongside nail salon workers, make up vloggers and designers, fast-fashion entrepreneurs, entertainment and beauty workers and others, contributors to this volume document fashion and beauty in its innumerable material and immaterial forms—a photo of a pose, an image on the bottle of skin cream, a $20 dress bought from the neighborhood shop, a plastic surgery GIF, the color of a nail polish. These objects are actually documentations of daily life, capturing fleeting moments and encounters that shape a world lived far beyond things. As such, they demand that we approach them as more than objects collected and archived behind glass, but instead as narratives and practices of those who make, wear, use, and imagine fashion and beauty. Only in doing so can we begin to see more clearly the alternative histories that we have come to think of as the time of Asia.

NOTES
3 Friedman, “Exhibition on China and Fashion Proves Golden for Met.”

13 See Edmonds, *Pretty Modern*, for an excellent account of beauty’s contradictory roles in Brazilian modernity.


20 See the work of Chin Kwan Lee in *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) who explains how the breakdown of the communist workers unit that lead to massive rural to urban migratory flows also culminated in the introduction of the hukou registration status of Chinese citizens, a social control system which stratified Chinese society into an urban class with social welfare and full citizenship and a class of peasants, tied to the land for agricultural surplus for industrialization.


23 Here we are reminded of the work of cultural and social historians Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth*