



Chinese girls made their own decision about styles

CHAPTER II

MISS CHINA DISCOVERS HER LEGS

MY advertising agency in Shanghai placed the first lip-stick and vanishing cream advertising in Chinese papers about fifteen years ago, and since that time the advertising of cosmetics has been an important part of our business. We placed the first big toilet soap campaign about the same time. I did not expect to find any romance in the advertising agency business, but we ran into it early and it has since then been a part of our stock in trade. Thanks to our efforts and the liberal advertising appropriations of our clients, a good many Chinese girls have been taught to put on vanishing creams a base for powder and rouge and to use cold cream at night, rubbing it into the pores of the skin. We advise them that after a liberal use of soap the face should be washed with cold water. The only reason we have not told them anything about 'cosmetic skin' is because it is impossible to translate that term into Chinese. We induced all the Chinese moving-picture stars to use the toilet soap we advertised and they write us discreet but convincing testimonials which form the principal part of our advertising copy. It happens to be the same soap that is used by all the Hollywood stars, so, in our newspaper advertis-

ing, we picture one Hollywood and one Chinese star together, but we devote more space to the Chinese star. In our world, she is the more important, though the Hollywood star earns more in a week than she does in a year. In our copy, we have to go rather cautiously on the subject of unsightly pores, because the skin of Chinese women is of much finer texture than the skin of the foreign *memsahibs* and whatever pores she may have are no more unsightly than the pores in the skin of a baby. So we don't have to promise that the use of our cold cream and toilet soap will remove unsightly pores, but say that they will prevent them, which is a much safer proposition.

It must not be assumed that our first lip-stick and other cosmetic advertisements started Chinese girls on the cosmetic road to beauty. It would be very pleasant to harbour that thought but the facts do not justify it. Five thousand years ago, according to authentic Chinese history, Chinese girls were plucking useless hairs from their eyebrows, and putting rouge on their cheeks. It was probably an ancient custom even then. Old pictures show that, from century to century, there were changes in the style of applying rouge. Sometimes it was most prominent in the upper part of the cheek. At other time it was a vivid red circle marking the spot where the jaws are hinged. In some centuries it was used lavishly, sparingly in others, but it was always used. Dynasties have fallen and the country has been devastated by floods, famines and civil wars, but the cosmetic business has always flourished. When the savage hordes from the North overran China, as they did from time to time, the barbarian women at once copied the beauty methods of the Chinese, but in a coarse barbarian way. They covered their cheeks and sometimes their foreheads with the reddest rouge they could get. The surviving Manchu women, representatives of China's most recent invasion (1618), rouge their faces in a way that makes the Chinese woman shudder.

Japanese women also learned their first beauty lessons from the Chinese and do not appear to have added any refinement

of their own. They are more restrained than the Manchus in the use of rouge, but their prodigal application of rice powder often gives them the appearance of a cake that has been covered with icing. Chinese women do not think much of them. They know that without the allurements of the *kimona*, *obi*, *tabi* and *geta* the sex-appeal of the Japanese woman would become a negligible quantity and that no Japanese woman would dare to wear the revealing Chinese gown.

The oldest retail shop I have ever been able to discover in China is an establishment in Hangchow, which was the Chinese equivalent of a beauty shop centuries ago, and still does a thriving business in rouge, talcum and other aids to daintiness and beauty. A famous Hangchow poet, who, almost ten centuries ago, wrote sonnets in praise of the eyebrow pencil and the perfumed rouge of his lady love, may have been referring to the wares of this identical shop. I once tried to get them to sell some rouge we were advertising, but, after trying out a few samples, they said they had come to the conclusion that we could offer nothing superior to the brands which were popular in Hangchow when Columbus found a continent blocking his way on his route to China.

That, of course, was not the real reason, for you never get the real reason for anything in China except by earnest and expert research. They didn't want to stock our rouge because it was too expensive for middle-class customers. The high price of imported rouge does limit sales, but those who can afford to do so buy the brand we advertise, and the volume of business is satisfactory and growing.¹

The best Chinese customers for lip-stick, rouge, or any other beauty aids are the married women and not the debutantes. Chi-

1. China's annual purchases of perfumery, cosmetics, etc., amounts to about C\$2,000,000 or about £125,000. The United States leads with 30% of the business and France comes next with 22%. Great Britain's share is 14%. The United States now sells more perfumery than France, though the latter still leads in face powders. American brands are widely advertised and are rapidly gaining a dominant position in this field as well. There are more than 300 Chinese factories producing perfumery and cosmetics.



Chinese wives have much more leisure

nese wives discovered many centuries ago that, if they would make themselves attractive enough, their husbands would willingly employ servants to do the cooking and scrubbing. The result is that Chinese women are the most perfectly groomed in the world and, everything considered, enjoy the greatest measure of luxury. The wife of a clerk making the equivalent of £5 a month enjoys the convenience of a servant, usually a small slave who will do the rough work for her. If the husband's income is larger, there are more servants. Many British women think they are fortunate if they can have a single servant to wash the dishes and help with the sweeping and dusting. Her Chinese sister, whose husband enjoys the same income, will never turn a hand at the housework and will have her own personal maid whose sole duty is to brush her hair, manicure her nails, and take care of her clothing. The Chinese women undoubtedly spend — and have spent for many centuries — a greater proportion of the family income on cosmetics than is spent by any other national group. The wealthy buy the most expensive of perfumes and cosmetics and in liberal quantities. Those who cannot afford these extravagances buy cheaper brands and in smaller quantities, but every woman, rich or poor, has a beauty kit. The middle-aged wife of a ricksha coolie always has among her possessions a bit of talcum powder and some rouge. She may use it only once or twice a year — at wedding and festivals — but she always has the comforting assurance that she can make herself beautiful any time she

wants to take the trouble to do so. Only the aged widows deny themselves these vanities. The use of cosmetics might imply a desire to re-marry, which would be looked on as an indication of wantonness.

Before there had been any rouge or lip-stick advertising in China, Shanghai girls discovered an aid to beauty which their sisters in other countries had all overlooked. An importer of rubber goods noticed that there was a surprisingly large sale for the small hot water bags which will sometimes relieve the pains of toothache or neuralgia. As fast as he brought in a new shipment, all were sold out, and it seemed to him that a good part of Shanghai was suffering from toothache, until he found that Chinese girls were using them to make their cheeks rosy. Bags filled with hot water were concealed in their muffs and, by applying heat to the cheek, a natural rosy glow was produced which was all the more captivating because it had not been there a few moments before. It was the nearest approach to an artificial maidenly blush that one could imagine. Of course, this beauty aid was not entirely satisfactory, because it could only be used in cold weather. The next season muffs went out of style and so did the miniature hot water bags. It would be a difficult matter to find one in any Shanghai shop to-day.

Our clients got only a small part of the increased cosmetic business which eventually resulted from our advertising. When we start to exploit a new product in China, we can always be certain of one thing, and that is that if it is possible to do so some Chinese or Japanese manufacturer will start making a similar article and selling it at a cheaper price. This is what happened as soon as we began to advertise vanishing cream, rouge and lip-sticks. Most of the small cosmetic manufacturers rode along in the tail wind of our advertising, but a fair proportion of the others did some advertising of their own. One Chinese manufacturer was so encouraged by his early sales that he plunged on a whirlwind campaign which, to the surprise of everyone, proved successful, and he built up a big and prosperous business. In the

meantime our toilet soap advertising was appearing in big spaces in all the leading newspapers and magazines. The net result of all this publicity on the subject of beauty was to change the attitude and, to a certain extent the psychology, of the Chinese women. Before this all beauty aids had been a feminine mystery, like midwifery, but as soon as they were given publicity they became genteel and respectable. Chinese girls, for the first time, began to powder their noses in public with no sense of shame, and their horizons immediately broadened. They had been kept in seclusion for several thousand centuries, but as soon as they discovered that they could make up their faces in the presence of men and that the men thought it a graceful and intriguing gesture there was no holding them back. The Chinese woman has broken out of the inner courtyards of the Chinese home and nothing will ever put her back again.

The great revolution in woman's dress followed as a logical and unavoidable sequence. When I first came to China almost all the women wore trousers. They were not the baggy or scanty two-legged affairs which foreign ladies wore on the beach with an eye to their sex appeal, but trousers as decorous as any pair that a cabinet minister ever thrust his legs into. The most perfect picture of feminine respectability I have ever seen was provided by a trousered Chinese Sunday School teacher explaining Bible texts to her trousered girl pupils. I hadn't seen my old Sunday School teacher for a matter of fifteen years or more, and my recollection of her was rather hazy, but she had always been my ideal of respectability. I couldn't help comparing the two, and I am sorry I had to do it, for my dearly beloved and highly respectable old spinster with her billowy skirts, has, ever since then, presented a new picture to my mind. She is no longer the most respectable looking woman I ever knew, for the trousered Chinese lady has replaced her on my little private pedestal.

Some time after the end of the War, the women in America and England began wearing short skirts; in a very short time the ladies' tailors in Shanghai were using only two-thirds of the ma-

terial they had formerly used and were charging the same prices. We weren't very happy over the new style, because one of our oldest and favourite accounts is a Manchester firm, which we could truthfully advertise as making the finest and most beautiful calico in the world. It was obvious that short skirts meant a reduced consumption of calico, therefore less sales, therefore less advertising. But when most of the foreign women living in Shanghai blossomed out in knee-length skirts, I felt a little more hopeful about the calico business. As the ladies with ugly legs outnumbered those with pretty legs by more than ten to one, it seemed logical to assume that, in the end, the style preferences of the owner of ugly legs would prevail and force their more fortunate sisters back into long skirts. That is what eventually happened, though the ultra-short skirts lasted one season longer than I thought they would.

However, the calico consumption of foreign women in China does not amount to very much. The important question, so far as we were concerned, was what the Chinese girls were going to do about these new styles. Most of the fashionable ones had already begun to wear skirts instead of trousers, that being one of the manifestations of modernity which followed the overthrow of the Manchus; but the more old-fashioned ones were still wearing trousers. We didn't have to wait very long for their decision after they had had a chance to see what other women looked like from the knees downward. They observed the passable legs of the French women, the generally unattractive legs of the British and American, the fat legs of the German and Scandinavian, the atrociously ugly legs of the Japanese, and came to a sudden though centuries belated realisation of the fact that here was an asset which had been overlooked. The naturally small feet and the beautiful hands of Chinese women have driven lovers to poetry and suicide. Lips, hair, eyes and teeth had been fittingly celebrated in the literature of forty centuries, but legs had never been mentioned. The girls decided that legs had been neglected entirely too long and that they would put them into circulation

without any further delay.

The logical thing for those who were wearing trousers to have done would have been to put themselves into short pants. A few tried it, but these looked excessively masculine and immodest. As the result of paternal governmental regulations, growing Middle School girls were already wearing knee-high skirts, which were constantly climbing up their thighs, so that style was out of the question. Then they hit on a very happy solution, a long skirt with the left side slit to a point above the knee so that every alternate step revealed the contours of a beautiful leg. Old-fashioned fathers and a few jealous husbands raised the very devil about this scandalous style, but the girls liked it so well that the next season they slit both sides of the skirt and, with minor alterations, that has remained the style ever since. Some add a touch reminiscent of the old trousered days by wearing, underneath the skirt, wide trousers of brocaded silk, but most of them just wear high-heeled shoes and silk stockings. A few of the foreign ladies of Shanghai have copied the Chinese style, but the result is not entirely successful.

For several years we had been discussing with our Manchester friends the idea of getting out a style book for Chinese women. This had been suggested to us by the fact that some of the small up-country papers sometimes borrowed the blocks and published our vanishing cream advertising free, because we always saw to it that the girls in the illustrations were dressed in the latest Shanghai styles, and smart up-country ladies gave these pictures to their tailors to copy. However, we weren't quite sure we could compile a complete style book and our clients were a little dubious about the whole project, so the matter was discussed from time to time and nothing done. Then, quite unexpectedly, we received instructions to go ahead with the style book, and were worrying about what we were going to put into it, when we got advance information about the slit skirts. We had to work fast, but before the spring demand for calico arrived we had published the first fashion book China had ever seen, in

which we showed how attractively the new style skirts would look when made up with our clients' calico. Because of its lucky timeliness the book was a great success. Some copies found their way to Java and Siam and there was such a demand for them in the large colonies of Chinese expatriates that we printed up extra editions for each of these places. For several years after that we published annual fashion books, and we always featured the slit skirt, sometimes introducing, on our own initiative, some novelty such as having the slit on one side a little higher than on the other. It was always great fun to check up and see how far our ideas were carried out. We were never entirely successful in getting our suggestions adopted, but, on the other hand, they were never entirely ignored. There are many Chinese fashion books now, most of them better than our pioneer productions, so we have gone out of the fashion book business. But I am rather proud of the fact that we brought out the first one and that we played our small part in revealing the most beautiful leg the world has ever seen.

About the time that Miss China discovered her legs, she also discovered that there was no reason why she should lace her slender body so tightly as to produce a flat-chested effect which was as unnatural in a way as the bound feet of past generations. For once science and fashion agreed, for Chinese doctors said that the women would be healthier if they allowed a natural bust development; so curves and legs enjoyed a simultaneous vogue which, it appears, will be permanent. The Chinese women like it, and the men are quite willing to let them have their own way. While the Chinese girl finds her new curves quite satisfactory she knows that anything can be carried to an extreme, and the result is that among the many beauties of China, there is no one who remotely resembles Mae West. They couldn't look like her, even with a blond wig. Every time there is a Mae West show in Shanghai, the Chinese girls flock to it, but they attend to marvel rather than to admire, and leave the performance with the comforting satisfaction that they are not as other women are. They

know that if there were any old maids in China they would be plump and generously curved.

A few months ago I received a letter from one of our associates in Australia, outlining the possibilities of a new advertising account we might get. It was a preparation which would make fat women thin. Enclosed were some cuttings of advertisements showing the copy which had made a financial success of this remedy in Australia and New Zealand. One of the pieces of copy which intrigued me very much included the picture and testimonial of a beautiful blonde lady voluptuously stream-lined, who, according to the testimonial, had lost the love of her husband and the admiration of her friends, had, in fact, become a virtual outcast in society because she had carelessly allowed herself to put on two stone in weight. Then she took a course of this marvellous medicine, lost not only the wicked two stone weight, but a few additional pounds and was again a slim blonde beauty, adored by her husband, the envy of her friends, and invited everywhere in Sydney.

Here was a remedy on which anyone in China could make a fortune except for the fact that there are no customers, because there are no fat women. There used to be a popular music hall refrain to the effect that nobody loved a fat man. What the wag had in his mind, but did not dare to say in those squeamish pre-War days, was that no one loves a fat woman, except the man who married one when she was slim and so cannot change his affection without some difficult emotional and sentimental adjustments. The Chinese husband is never faced by a problem of that sort, because his wife never allows herself to get fat. They never go on a diet or take reducing exercises to restore their girlish figures, because they never lose them. The mother of five or six husky children will usually be as slim as a schoolgirl.

With all of these changes in styles there is one fundamental attitude of the Chinese woman on the subject of clothes which has remained unchanged from the time of Cleopatra. She dresses to attract the admiration of men, and especially to hold the admi-

ration of her husband. The foreign woman dresses for the benefit of her sisters, hoping that her new ensemble will be admired by her friends and acquaintances, nor would it be a matter of great regret on her part, if some should be made miserable through the extremity of their jealousy and envy. Whether or not her husband is pleased is a matter of relatively small importance. He has to pay for the gown anyway. The point of view of the Chinese woman is just the reverse. She dresses with the idea of pleasing her husband. Her prettiest dresses are worn in her own home. If she is admired by other women, she accepts the compliment with all the greater pleasure because she has not striven for it. I suppose the foreign woman has a lot more fun and excitement in her endeavours to outdress and outbeautify her sisters, but I am sure the Chinese wife has a much easier time of it when it comes to the problem of getting her dress allowance increased.

These changing styles had repercussions in the business world of China which no one could have foreseen at the time. The silk weavers were the first to be hit. They had a more or less standardised product, and although one of them might produce a new pattern at uncertain intervals, when the fancy struck him, their shelves were pretty well filled with good old standard stuff which the Chinese women bought year after year without any idea of demanding something new until the old gown wore out. They would never have thought of a gown going out of style. Now the Chinese women demanded something new and began to find the old stock *passée*. The beautiful new patterns our Manchester friend offered each year added to, if they did not create, this feminine unrest. The silk weavers and dealers soon found that if they wanted to keep their business they would have to get out some new designs every season or stir up their dye pots so as to produce new colours on old patterns. In the meantime some of their old steady sellers began to move slowly and then came to a dead stop. Some pieces had to be shipped to remote parts of the country to find buyers among women who were still staidly old fashioned.

The pawnbrokers also got a jolt. Pawnbroking is an old and highly respectable business in China, and usually a very prosperous one.¹ While in other countries a visit to a pawnshop is supposed to imply a rather desperate need for funds, that is not the case here. Chinese can see no reason why they should bother to store their winter clothing during the summer months when the pawnshop proprietor will not only do this for them, but will lend them a small sum for the privilege. The result is that at each change of season, the pawnshops do a big business lending small sums on clothing and redeeming old garments. To the pawnbrokers a silk gown had always been a silk gown whose re-sale value could be accurately appraised. Then the changes in style began to come in, and he was confronted with the unprecedented situation that a gown of known value last spring was a totally unsaleable object this autumn. Much against his will, the pawnbroker now has to study ladies' styles and become a fashion expert. I wonder what he would think if he knew that he had been brought to this sorry state through New York lip-sticks and Manchester calico!

1. There are more than 300 pawnshops in the International Settlement of Shanghai with a population of approximately one million. They are much more numerous in purely Chinese municipalities where the licensing conditions are not so strict.