

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

*Cherry Cecilia*

### **The Modern Terracotta Army**

#### **THE EAST IS STARTING AN ARMY.**

Don't be alarmed, it's not going to be violent. Although blood may be spilt, we work hard to keep the casualty at minimum, nobody has to get hurt.

This is the modern day Terracotta Army. Like the ancient one in Xi'An, rows and rows of soldiers are standing in vaults waiting to be discovered. Though each of them is in a different posture holding a different weapon, you could barely see the variance because their facial features are the almost identical.

This is what I see every single day on TV. The concept of Asian beauty is so standardized that everyone is going towards one direction: fair skin, big eyes, straight nose, heart-shape face, full lips, long lashes...Actresses, regardless of their age, have the same kind of make-up; the color of their costumes is the only clue that allows us to understand "who is who". If you fail to find that key, distinguishing the heroines on screen is the ultimate mission impossible.

The arsenal? We call them beauty hospitals.

I went to Shandong in the summer of 2012, a region in north China close to Korea. Under strong influence of the neighboring country which is famous for fabricating beauties and redefining Asian fashion standards, naturally, beauty hospitals are everywhere in Shandong. The competition was so tough that their ads were seen even at the airport. The first thing I saw after getting off the plane in Jinan was a pink banner-- "Whatever God owes you, Han's Beauty Hospital restores." (Han is a surname in Chinese. It can also mean Korea). If you are not happy with your face, don't be angry at your mom, blame God. No, don't blame God, beat God. It carried the same arrogance men had when the tower of Babel was being built.

Let me tell you how this works. After long hours in the air, you feel tired and the air con on the plane has drained every single drop of energy and water out of you. You rush to the restroom and freshen up but all make-up products do not work because the quality of your skin is temporarily damaged under extreme conditions. You curse, frantically rubbing the powder cake with a brush and smearing the rouge all over your lips; your hands shake angrily and you cannot put the fake lashes on their rightful place.

You look at the mirror and find three eyelines on your face: the original one, untouched, the one of the fake eyelashes, stuck because of the super glue and the one in between, a deep, gothic black line. This does not say sexy, not at all, this says banshee.

The moment you walk out of the toilet, you see the slogan-- "Whatever God owes you, we restore." THIS IS THE ANSWER! Yes! It is a debt long overdue since the day you were born.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

You are given a second chance to choose how you look like, your destiny is now fully in your hands because you can be whoever you want to be. This is the new creed of being a woman in Asia.

The business is so hot here that there is a myth saying all doctors who got into medical business initially want to be plastic surgeons. Not every girl can have a heart attack but everyone sure wants a pretty face and a desirable body.

In Hong Kong, one of the places heavily influenced by the Korean invasion, girls are under a spell that they all want to look like *that*: large eyes in different colors, full glossy lips, straight nose and long umbrella-like fake lashes that come in handy on rainy days.

The Army has been recruiting members that factories rise one after another. The popularity of cosmetic surgery attracts medical practitioners to join the market. The question of the qualification of beauticians-turned-surgeons in performing risky treatments like the injection of Botox made newspaper headlines. Some girls even hired overseas surgeons to enhance their looks in a hotel room illegally and it often ended in a hospital. More and more debates of this new medical aspect emerge in the Legislative Council because of the increasing demand of protective measures after a few accidents and deaths. Like I said, we tried to keep the casualty at minimum but it is inevitable when it comes to building an army.

Log on Sino Weibo, the Tweeter of the East, you will find millions of selfies, girls trying to look like stars for a few seconds. It is the age of images, if you can put a picture online that attracted a million likes and comments, you are the beauty queen. Blogs sprang up, everyone suddenly has an opinion about beauty products; how they work and how they fail to provide. Beauty talk shows are scheduled in the evening: the traditional time slot for TV series. In the past, information about skincare and the likes was for housewives and the relevant programs were usually included in afternoon specials for homemaking. Now we have the professionals arriving home at 7pm so they can catch up with the latest trends and beauty tips at 8pm. What do they want to learn? Well, Asian girls have two lifelong goals in terms of beautification:

The first task is to make their faces as white as possible. They will do anything to bleach their skin. In Cantonese, we have a saying, "if you are white, you can conceal at least three shortcomings of yourself."

The obsession is beyond your imagination; when Twilight franchise hit Asia, magazines in Japan had tutorials on how to look like the vampire Bella Swan because the dark circles round the eyes would make your face look paler and it wasn't even a Halloween special feature.

Whitening products almost only happen in Asia because in the West, it is better to be healthy bronze than sickly pale. What is even more interesting is that most whitening product advertisements in Asia use Caucasian models, usually international superstars. I feel very uncomfortable when Emma Watson and Lilly Collins with their magnified eyes and extended lashes look at me every time I walk by the two-floor high billboards along the corridors in metropolitan stations. Sometimes I wonder how convincing these pictures are to Asian women. First of all, these pictures are airbrushed (it's so obvious); second, these models are westerners who

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

carried a different skin tones which requires another kind of attention. We Asians are born dissimilar. You will never look like them because you are not Caucasian. The same logic applies when local magazines use Eastern European models for their make-up columns. I normally flip over because there is no way the colors will look good on me.

The second task is to make their eyes look as big as possible. In contrast to what the West appreciates — the “almond eyes” or the “phoenix eyes”, we don’t really like them. We like watery big eyes because “dolly eyes tell stories” or so they say.

We invest so much for the two windows of our soul -- eyeliner, eye shadow, fake lashes, colored contact lens and surgery. It is common to cut the eyelids so that you can have folds.

As for the latest gimmick? Artificial bags under the eyes. They even have a fancy name for this, the “lying silkworm”. Perhaps not so fancy thinking about two worms lying on your face. It is a way to make your eyes look bigger. Girls with the silkworms are supposed to be beautiful according to the ancient practice of Face reading. The lying worms, not only you can draw it with a pencil and some eye shadow, you can also pay somebody to cut and make a permanent wound. I once watched a Taiwan news program explaining the silkworm cut, the kickass plastic surgeon even figured out the perfect formula for the bags, “if they are too large, they will look like the common bags you have after a hard night’s sleep. So they have to be just the right size.”

To become a good soldier, you need intensive training with a lot of patience and sacrifice.

For me, if a makeup can be done under 15 minutes is good, all I need is foundation, eyeliner, maybe a little mascara and gloss. I tried fake lashes but I figured it was too much trouble. I watch tutorials on youtube too; learning new tricks never hurts. When I thought I was a girl who spent too much time on these...

I once went on an island vacation with my BFF who inspired this piece of writing. She told me that she needed to wake up 45 minutes earlier just to get the right look, her morning ritual included:

1. Cleansing
2. Whitening
3. Face
  - 3.1 Foundation /BB cream application
  - 3.2 Powder
4. Eyes
  - 4.1 Eye Foundation
  - 4.2 Eye line
  - 4.3 Eye shadow
  - 4.4 Fake lashes – partial (the plastic ones)
  - 4.5 Eye line (again)

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

- 4.6 Fake lashes – partial (draw fine lines directly on the skin)
- 4.7 Mascara base
- 4.8 Mascara
- 4.9 Touch up with an eyelash curler
5. Lips
  - 5.1 Line the lip
  - 5.2 Lipstick
  - 5.3 Powder (Yes again, around the lip area)
6. Final check

45 minutes and counting, I saw it with my own eyes one morning before we headed out.

Her reason to be an early bird that drew the worms under her eyes on workdays -- “If I don’t have make up on, I feel like my colleagues won’t be able to recognize me.”

At first, I thought there was a competition in the office but when I asked if anyone else in the office wore make-up, she said no.

Later on, she expressed her curiosity in trying colored contact lens with glassless frames since spectacles were expensive and she couldn’t afford so many pairs with degreed glasses included. I asked if she was afraid of being blind in the end because of the lack of oxygen contact. She shrugged and said, “Listen, I just want to make my eyes bigger, I don’t care what the price is.”

So, the girls are certainly aware of the risks these augmentations bring: infections are common in all surgeries, the drugs/ the technology they use are new that nobody can tell the aftermath, colored contact lens will blind you, sooner or later. Nonetheless, they are still willing to take these risks just to better themselves, or from what I see, to look like *that*.

Some may take on the risk-free ride. There are applications on cell phones that make you look like a diva in no time with functions like widening your eyes, slimming your faces, another augmented reality in a parallel, virtual world. My BFF has a lot of beauty apps on her phone. She plays with them whenever she feels that there are imperfections in her selfies. Most of the time she deals with the two main issues, the skin color and the eyes, over and over. I have seen the magic; she once touched up my picture and showed me my2.0. To be honest, she airbrushed me was another girl and she was nothing like me.

The more I come across the pictures on Weibo and Asian beauty magazines, the scarier I feel. Every face I come across looks exactly like the airbrushed me. The unison is uncanny. Every single girl is going for *that*.

Questions start to spin in my head.

What about individuality?

What about identity?

What about honesty?

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Beauty from now on is not about elegance, it is a look-a-like competition.

I have talked to a few boys about this secret Army. One Hong Konger told me that he could wipe the make-up in his mind when he saw a girl. When we were watching Korean TV, he told me that every member in Girls Generation, a popular Korean girl group, was different. He also claimed that he could identify each of them.

"How are they different? I mean they look all the same, big eyes, heart-shaped face, long legs..."

"Their hair is different, the color, the length..." he pointed out.

Ah! Their hairstyle is different.

Another guy from Italy, now living in Taipei, was a diehard fan of Girls Generation. We used to talk a lot about plastic surgery. He was aware that some of his flings had undergone augmentations and he was fine with it. "If a girl needs to go through a few surgeries just to feel good, I don't see why not."

My argument was that plastic surgery was unnatural and unnecessary for the sake of being "beautiful," "You feel good because of who you are, not because of who you want to be." His rebuttal: he was happy that his future wife could stay pretty to entertain him. His opinion would send feminism back to Stone age.

After the conversation, I could even hear Gloria Steinem whispering in my ears that fishes didn't have to beautify themselves for bicycles.

This current trend of copying a certain prototype alarms me. It is an endless marathon chasing after the impossible. It originates, in my humble opinion, in the pursuit of being "Western". We are all jealous about the features that we are not born with, the eye-folds, the fair complex and so on. Chinese want to look Caucasian while the Western world admires the exoticism of the ladies in Far East; when the others are dreaming the wildest dreams, the Asians are trying hard to copy at best they can which results in an assembly line of plastic Barbie dolls on the shelf in a toy store.

The Modern Terracotta Army is having more and more members by the day. What the soldiers do not understand is that each of them will soon lose their individuality to a collective command of the trendsetters, their identity to their own shifty minds and their honesty to a fake reality in their head to complete this great funerary art of the ever-changing fashion.