

# Chinese Men and Women in the United States and Hong Kong: Body and Self-Esteem Ratings as a Prelude to Dieting and Exercise

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**Abstract:** **Objective:** The present study compared the body and weight satisfaction, self-esteem, and depression of Chinese male and female university students in Hong Kong and the United States and assessed the impact of these ratings on compensatory behavior such as dieting and exercise. **Method:** Self-report measures were administered to 501 Chinese participants in the language of their university's locale. **Results:** Females reported significantly more body dissatisfaction and depression, and males reported greater weight dissatisfaction (the majority of men wishing to be larger). Overall, Chinese subjects in Hong Kong reported significantly more body and weight dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, higher depression, more dieting, and less exercise as compared to their counterparts in the United States. **Discussion:** Asian students in this study mirrored gendered patterns previously reported in Caucasian samples with respect to the relation of body image, self-esteem, and mood. For both sexes, there appeared to be a caricatured mimicking of the bodies perceived to be associated with the dominant culture—men wanted to be larger while the women wanted to be even more petite. © 1998 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. *Int J Eat Disord* 23: 99–102, 1998.

**Key words:** Chinese men; Chinese women; Hong Kong; United States

## INTRODUCTION

Writing over 60 years ago, the Chinese scholar Yutang Lin stated, "I can say with prophetic conviction that in the immediate future, Chinese women will be having their morning ten minutes of kicking their legs up and down in order to please their husbands or themselves" (Lin, 1977). That interest in Asian behavior relative to practices in Western countries continues today. A number of studies have examined the eating attitudes and appearance concerns of Asian women exposed to Western ideals in their own country

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(e.g., Mumford, Whitehouse, & Choudry, 1992) or recently acculturated to a Western lifestyle as the result of emigration (e.g., Furnham & Alibhai, 1983). However these studies of Asian women have primarily focused on women of Indian descent and/or excluded a comparison group in the country of origin (Davis & Yager, 1992).

Although Dr. Lee and colleagues have been amassing data on the eating behaviors of Chinese women (e.g., Lee, Ho, & Hsu, 1993), none of their studies have included a comparison group of Chinese women in a Western country. Recent reports have suggested that eating problems may be a growing concern in the East and that body image issues may be present for both Chinese men and women (Davis & Katzman, 1997). It is unclear whether Chinese individuals will be more greatly impacted in their own culture or when exposed to Western cultures. The goal of the present study was to examine body and weight satisfaction, self-esteem, depression, and compensatory behaviors of dieting and exercise among Chinese students in Hong Kong and to compare this to Chinese counterparts in the United States.

## METHODS

### Participants

Participants included 309 Chinese students in Hong Kong (186 females and 123 males) and 192 in the United States (89 females and 103 males). All participants were single, undergraduate, Chinese students with a mean age of 19.96 ( $SD = 1.52$ ). Participants in Hong Kong had resided in their home country a minimum of 10 years. Ninety percent of the U.S. participants were born in Hong Kong and over one half (53%) of the participants resided in the United States for less than 5 years.

### Procedures and Measures

A self-report questionnaire was administered to participants in the language of their university's locale which included demographic data and the following standardized instruments: the Body Esteem Scale (BES; Franzoi & Shield, 1984), the Center for Epidemiologic Studies of Depression (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), and the Index of Self-Esteem (ISE; Hudson, 1982). Dieting behaviors were assessed using the Drive for Thinness subscale of Eating Disorders Inventory (EDI; Garner, Olmsted, & Garfinkel, 1983) and exercise behavior was assessed by a self-report questionnaire. Weight satisfaction was determined by the absolute values of the discrepancy between body mass index ( $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ ) and ideal body mass index (IBMI; ideal  $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ ).

The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of first-year classes at a university in Hong Kong and to a sample of Hong Kong Chinese students from student associations at the five universities throughout California. The samples were matched on ethnicity, age, and marital status. All respondents voluntarily participated in the study.

## RESULTS

Weight data among females in Hong Kong and the United States revealed a similar BMI of 19.56 ( $SD = 2.48$ ) and 19.42 ( $SD = 1.96$ ), respectively ( $t = .50$ ), and a similar IBMI of 18.46 ( $SD = 1.51$ ) and 18.77 ( $SD = 1.25$ ), respectively ( $t = -1.64$ ). Males in Hong Kong reported a significantly lower BMI than males in the United States, 20.30 ( $SD = 2.37$ ) and 21.51 ( $SD$

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= 2.84), respectively, ( $t = -3.42, p < .001$ ). However, males in Hong Kong and the United States reported a similar BMI of 21.10 ( $SD = 2.86$ ) and 21.55 ( $SD = 2.24$ ), respectively ( $t = -1.25$ ).

Pearson correlations revealed that for females, increased dieting was associated with lower body ( $r = -.18, p < .01$ ) and self-esteem ( $r = .13, p < .05$ ) and greater weight dissatisfaction ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ). For males, increased exercise was associated with higher body ( $r = .28, p < .001$ ) and self-esteem ( $r = -.21, p < .01$ ) and lower depression ( $r = -.17, p < .01$ ).

A multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) 2 (gender: male, female)  $\times$  2 (residence: Hong Kong, United States) design was conducted to determine the effects of gender and country of residence on body esteem, weight dissatisfaction, self-esteem, depression, dieting, and exercise (see Table 1). Findings revealed a main effect of sex [ $F(6,417) = 14.79; p < .001$ ] and a main effect of country of residency [ $F(6,417) = 7.52; p < .001$ ], but no significant interaction effects of sex and country of residence [ $F(6,417) = 1.53$ ]. Females were found to have significantly lower body esteem [ $F(1,422) = 23.08; p < .001$ ], more depression [ $F(1,422) = 8.37; p < .01$ ], and more dieting behavior [ $F(1,422) = 30.46; p < .001$ ] when compared to males. However, males revealed significantly greater weight dissatisfaction [ $F(1,422) = 4.30; p < .05$ ] and more exercise [ $F(1,422) = 7.42; p < .01$ ] when compared to females.

Chinese participants in Hong Kong were found to have significantly lower body [ $F(1,422) = 23.08; p < .001$ ] and self-esteem [ $F(1,422) = 15.69; p < .001$ ], higher depression [ $F(1,422) = 8.19; p < .01$ ], greater weight dissatisfaction [ $F(1,422) = 4.36; p < .05$ ], and more dieting behavior [ $F(1,422) = 13.30, p < .001$ ] as compared to participants in the United States. Chinese participants in the United States reported significantly more exercise [ $F(1,422) = 9.14; p < .01$ ] as compared to participants in Hong Kong.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for weight dissatisfaction, body esteem, self-esteem, depression, dieting, and exercise by gender and country (Hong Kong or United States) of residence

	Males		Females		F Value
	HK (N = 123)	USA (N = 103)	HK (N = 186)	USA (N = 89)	
Weight dissatisfaction	1.86 (1.75)	1.43 (1.25)	1.45 (1.40)	1.28 (1.17)	a = 4.30* b = 4.36* c = .80
Body esteem	108.63 (16.28)	116.02 (23.10)	100.39 (11.48)	112.39 (20.96)	a = 23.08*** b = 23.09*** c = .09
Self-esteem	49.26 (11.27)	45.73 (12.31)	49.54 (11.84)	43.37 (10.64)	a = .55 b = 15.69*** c = 1.30
Depression	19.17 (9.39)	17.18 (8.70)	22.54 (9.41)	19.75 (10.45)	a = 8.37** b = 8.19** c = .23
Dieting	3.16 (2.36)	2.60 (3.36)	6.23 (5.25)	4.05 (3.73)	a = 30.46*** b = 13.30*** c = 4.43
Exercise	1.45 (1.63)	1.81 (1.95)	.89 (1.20)	1.50 (2.08)	a = 7.43*** b = 9.14** c = .63

Note: a = main effect of sex; b = main effect of country; c = interaction effect of sex  $\times$  country.  
\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

## DISCUSSION

In this study, significantly more women than men reported body dissatisfaction and depression, although males reported greater weight dissatisfaction as compared to females (the majority of men wished to be larger). While no significant difference was found in self-esteem between the sexes, women reported significantly more dieting and men reported significantly more exercise. On the whole, Chinese students in Hong Kong reported significantly more body and weight dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, higher depression, more dieting, and less exercise as compared to their cohorts in the United States.

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Women's dislike of their bodies seemed to lead to a greater interest in dieting behavior in the absence of any overt adiposity, whereas male body esteem appeared to be protected by increased exercise. The finding that Hong Kong residents related greater distress overall may reflect a bias in sampling or response style. Alternatively, it may reflect the stress experienced by the new generation in a rapidly developing country (Katzman & Lee, in press). Anthropological and historical accounts of women's position in the Chinese culture portray constraints of movement well beyond those engendered by food binding (Koo, 1985).

For both sexes, there appeared to be a caricatured mimicking of the bodies perceived to be associated with the Western culture—men wanted to be larger while the women wanted to be even more petite. The behaviors and beliefs noted in the current study may trumpet the unfolding of eating disorders in Asian women. In addition, they also suggest avenues for future exploration as affinities with the West may herald questions about body form as well as social freedoms.

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