CULTURATOR

A Journal of Global Voices

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A MESSAGE
from our editor-in-chief

This publication of the first issue of *Culturator: A Journal of Global Voices* is a moment of great excitement for me, something that my team and I have been working on for months.

Growing up with the dual influences of my Chinese heritage and my experiences as an immigrant in the United States, I developed a natural proclivity for the social sciences. Yet, I found a significant gap in our education system: a stark lack of opportunities for high school students to explore social sciences as deeply as they could in fields like STEM and humanities, yet social sciences are incredibly important to understanding human behavior, society, and the systems that govern our world, especially in a globalizing world.

Building off the success of my first small business venture, Yuyujin, I began a grassroots initiative and onboarded several friends, soon leading to the birth of *Culturator: A Journal of Global Voices*. With this journal, we offer high school students the rare platform to explore the vast landscape of social sciences and partake in a global dialogue.

Our work at Culturator goes beyond publishing articles. Through workshops and community engagement, we strive to ignite a passion for understanding the complex systems that shape our world. In this endeavor, I am guided by a belief: Knowledge is the lamp by which we read the past, and dialogue is the light with which we illuminate the future.

Sincerely,
Victoria
Founder & Editor-in-Chief of Culturator

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Maggie Zhang is a sophomore at Mountain View High School. An avid reader and ballet performer, she is excited to share her experiences and opinions.

Yasmin Sudarsanam

Article: Invisible Hands

Yasmin Sudarsanam is a junior at The Harker School. A dancer and a reader, she is excited to share her passion for law and justice and explore how culture affects one's interpretation of justice.

Hannah Jiang

Article: The Global Village

Hannah Jiang is a freshman at The Harker School. An animal lover and dancer, she is excited to write about what she is interested in and share that with a bigger audience.

KALEIDOSCOPIC PERFECTION:

Cross-Cultural Beauty Standards in Pursuit of Authentic Self-Expression

Author: Maggie Zhang — Mountain View High School

"Maggie, you don't look much like your mother," my grandmother says as I scrutinize my reflection in the mirror.

I hesitate. "Why not?"

"Your mother has a narrow nose and face...but you do not."

This mere physiognomic observation echoes a far deeper complexity. This simple comparison to my mother is more than just a familial observation; it's our cultural beauty standards that shape my self-perception and identity.

Reflection. Illustration by Victoria Ma, 2023.

Our world is an ever-changing kaleidoscope. From the budding and wilting of forests, the rising and setting of the sun, the gentle ebb and flow of the sea, everything refuses to remain still. Much like these things, the concept of beauty is a narrative of continuous transformations, a story where the chapters are constantly rewritten by time and culture. Yet, in seeking to define beauty, we find ourselves more lost. What makes us beautiful?
and culture. Yet, in seeking to define beauty, we find ourselves more lost. What makes us beautiful?

Beauty standards emerge from the innate human desire to find order and meaning in the chaos of existence. In the beginning, beauty standards stem from the instincts of attraction for the purposes of survival, viewing traits more suited for reproduction as favorable and "beautiful." As societies evolved, these primal

instincts evolved parallel to the growing complexities of modern society. "What is considered a beautiful face is often influenced by what is going on in society," Bruce F. Norton, political science professor at American University, says: "and in recent centuries, societal factors of paramount importance include wealth, status, power, et cetera (1). Then, the advent of mass media has morphed beauty standards into a global phenomenon. Suddenly, images of beauty were not just confined to palaces and paintings but were broadcasted into homes.

As a Chinese American girl and a ballet dancer, I am influenced by the confluence of East Asian traditions, Western ideals in my pursuit of self-expression, and the unattainable goal of perfection that is the very core of ballet.. How do I become beautiful? And in whose eyes will I be beautiful? To navigate my self-identity in a globalizing world, I find it crucial to recognize the historical and cultural roots of these beauty standards and understand their impact on individual identity. Thereon, I can advocate for a shift towards embracing personal authenticity in defining beauty.

Fundamentally, I am caught between two cultures that call for distinctly different images of the ideal woman. The West paints pictures of sun-kissed skin and curvy silhouettes, with the likes of the Kardashians being viewed as the modern ideal for many. Yet on the flip side of the world, the portraits are different: porcelain skin, big black eyes and double eyelids, and slender figures. *Should I be tan or pale? Am I too skinny or not skinny enough?* Oftentimes, I ask myself these questions and find myself caught in this dichotomy that not only shapes perceptions of beauty but also influences my personal identity and self-esteem.

Growing older, I wrestled with these impositions, my self-image often clouded by the unsolicited comments about my appearance. Ballet, another realm I grew up in, only worsened these feelings and made me more self-conscious. This art form demands an exacting physicality: a svelte yet strong physique, neither too tall nor too short, with hyperextended knees, arched feet, and long, flexible limbs. The mirror, a constant companion, reflects a relentless quest for an unattainable perfection. The moments I spend in front of the mirror, carefully and repeatedly extending my leg, bending my knee, pointing my feet, not only did my limbs ache, but my heart more as I stare at myself. I see and feel never-ending dissatisfaction and longing for something I can never achieve.

But beauty transcends physical appearance. As Cho Kyo writes in *The Search for the Beautiful Woman*, beauty is often conflated with societal positions and moral judgments: the insider versus outsider, the noble versus the humble, the affluent versus the poor. In East Asia, for instance, colorism is tied to class — pale skin historically symbolized aristocracy, while tanned skin is now ironically coveted as a marker of leisure and affluence (2).

In China, physical appearance often takes center stage in social interactions. When I was seven, my aunt asked me to check if I have double eyelids. Double eyelids? I didn't even know until then that I needed double eyelids. It wasn't until

moments like these that I began to internalize certain beauty ideals, like the coveted double eyelid, a feature I hadn't realized was so significant. This preference, it's important to note, has been influenced by historical contexts and power dynamics. For instance, large, double-lidded eyes have not always been the epitome of beauty in East Asia. Historical records from Japan and China reveal a time when monolids and narrower eyes were celebrated. The rise of blepharoplasty (double eyelid surgery) in Korea, introduced by an American surgeon during the Korean War, marked a shift influenced by the perceived power and prestige of the West. This surgical trend, beyond being a mere beauty choice, symbolizes a deeper aspiration to emulate the characteristics considered 'superior' by a dominant culture. This phenomenon can be seen as a manifestation of the insidious impact of cultural imperialism and white supremacy. As Western ideals increasingly permeated East Asian societies, they brought with them a subtle yet pervasive message: that to be beautiful, one must align with Western standards.

Newform globalization has begun to blur the lines between East Asian and Western beauty ideals, leading to the emergence of a new, global aesthetic. This blending of cultural standards represents a move towards a more inclusive understanding of beauty, where diverse features are celebrated rather than marginalized. For someone like me, who identifies with two cultures, this hybridization is more than just a trend; it's a validation of my unique features that may not fit traditional standards.

However, the globalized beauty standard is not without its challenges. It can simultaneously empower and alienate, offering acceptance while also challenging deeply rooted cultural norms and stereotypes. For instance, the increasing popularity of Korean beauty standards globally reflects this shift. Korean skincare routines and cosmetic products have gained immense popularity, influencing beauty practices worldwide. This global embrace of East Asian beauty aspects signifies a changing landscape, where features unique to specific cultures gain international acceptance and admiration.

As I stand before the mirror, not just as a ballerina but as a young woman of dual heritage, I realize that my reflection embodies a unique story. It's a narrative that challenges conventional beauty norms, advocates for personal authenticity, and embraces the richness of a globalized aesthetic. Now, I understand that these standards I feel subjected to are false, and the only reality is how I feel inside, a being confined and weighed down by external judgements, or, one independent of cultural pressure and social commentary. In these realizations, I find comfort and strength, understanding that beauty, in its truest form, is not about conformity but about the celebration of my individuality and my courage to express it authentically.

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INVISIBLE HANDS:

The Case of the Central Park Five

Author: Yasmin Sudarsanam — The Harker School

Central Park at Night. Illustration by Victoria Ma, 2023.

In the early morning hours of April 20, 1989, a woman who would be known as the Central Park Jogger until she came forward in 2003 was brutally assaulted in New York City's Central Park. Trisha Meili, a 28-year-old Caucasian investment banker with a promising future, had been sexually assaulted and beaten to the point of being in a two-week long coma and suffering permanent memory loss of the traumatizing event itself. This horrifying crime outraged the public and led to calls for immediate justice.

Law enforcement quickly arrested five Black and Latino teenagers—Antron McCray, 15; Kevin Richardson, 15; Yusef Salaam, 15; Raymond Santana, 14; and Korey Wise, 16—who came to be known as the Central Park Five. In the media, the teens were described as "bloodthirsty," "animals," "savages," "human mutations," and less than human. Four of the five teens confessed on video after hours of unrelenting interrogation, but they later recanted, claiming that their confessions had been coerced as they had been deprived of food, drink, or sleep by law enforcement for over twenty-four hours before

confessing. However, they were convicted in their 1990 trial, and each spent between six and thirteen years behind bars.

However, in 2002, new DNA evidence and a confession placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of convicted rapist Matias Reyes. A New York City Supreme Court justice vacated the charges against all five men, and they were awarded a forty-one million dollar settlement for their emotional pain and time spent behind bars.

The story of the Central Park Five highlighted the racial tensions and stereotypes that existed in the city as well as the racial disparities and inequities behind the criminal justice system (1). With white individuals constituting over forty-three percent of New York City's population versus African Americans and individuals of Hispanic origin, coming in at twenty-five percent and twenty-four percent respectively, the dichotomy was evident (2). Given how the victim in this case was white and middle-class with a bright future while the suspects were Black, Latino, and from fractured homes, advocates for the criminal justice reform decried the boys' conviction despite a blatant lack of eyewitness testimony or DNA evidence tying them to the crime (1). Public outrage about the crime itself and the teens' subsequent convictions highlighted the cultural divide between the two sides of New York City: the traditional, wealthy, and white population and the nonwhite and poor minority.

And the driving force behind this distinction? A difference in one's view of and trust in law enforcement.

New York in Bird's Eye. Illustration by Victoria Ma, 2023

In the past few years alone, more and more individuals who have been convicted of serious crimes have been proven innocent afterwards, and two major factors in these wrongful convictions are racial and cultural disparities. In an analysis completed by the National Registry of Exonerations, a joint project of the University of California, Irvine, the University of Michigan Law School and Michigan State University College of Law, titled Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States 2022, Black Americans were found to be seven times more likely than white Americans to be falsely convicted of serious crimes. Furthermore, the Registry found that the likelihood of a wrongful conviction in crimes in which the victim was white is nearly twice that of crimes perpetrated against Black victims (3). These statistics grow more and more dismal for sexual assault and drug-related crimes. In terms of drug-related crimes, advocates for criminal justice and law enforcement reform point at an easy explanation: police officers are given the power to choose whom to search or investigate for drug-related offenses, which differentiates these from homicide or sexual assault cases (4).

53% of individuals convicted of crimes and later exonerated are Black despite Black people making up only 13.6% of the American population, emphasizing their misrepresentation in instances of miscarriages of criminal justice in relation to their population (5). Even after the conviction itself, the Registry found that Black people who have been wrongly convicted of a crime are more likely to spend longer periods of time in incarceration than white people who have been wrongly convicted as well (3).

And, at the root of many of these issues lies the matter of perception of law enforcement, which differs by one's race and one's cultural background due to the history and trauma between minority groups and law enforcement. The only way to even begin to address this obvious inequity is to eliminate or properly address instances of police misconduct, and across the nation, many police departments have begun to work towards this goal by creating units dedicated to reviewing questionable convictions. These departments have realized that in order to establish trust and confidence between themselves and the individuals within their jurisdiction, they must demonstrate a willingness to acknowledge their wrongdoings and work to address these errors. With headlines of wrongful convictions and police brutality being splashed across the news each week, the American justice system can seem hopeless at times, but equity in the criminal justice system is within reach if law enforcement and justice departments make strides towards holding themselves accountable for miscarriages of justice.

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THE GLOBAL VILLAGE:

Literacy in the Digital Age

Hannah Jiang — The Harker School

In the age of memes and viral tweets, it's easy to get lost in the sea of information, opinions, and cultural narratives. We navigate this digital ocean, often without realizing how superficial our understanding of the world can be. In this digital realm, the line between exploration and entrapment blurs, as we become inundated with an endless vortex of soundbites and slogans, losing sight of the profound human stories beneath the surface.

My earliest memories of the internet were filled with childish wonder. It was a place to connect with friends across the globe and share stories. I reveled in the thrill of connecting with people worldwide, sharing stories, jokes, and the nuances of our lives. Yet, as I matured, I recognized a stark reality: the internet often mirrors our deepest prejudices and misunderstandings, rather than dispelling them. This became painfully clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the raw, destructive power of digital misinformation and bias. As false narratives proliferated, they widened cultural chasms, exacerbating divisions rather than fostering understanding. I witnessed firsthand how these distortions vilified specific cultural groups, igniting anti-Chinese sentiments. No longer was I merely an explorer of the digital world's wonders; I found the media to be the epicenter of a storm of cultural misunderstanding and misinformation.

This digital echo chamber, where memes and banter can escalate into cultural insults, blurs the line between humor and insensitivity. The internet's mob mentality can lead to a false consensus, as seen in Reddit threads, where the majority's view, often loud and pervasive,

isn't necessarily the right one. This phenomenon echoes historical events, such as Galileo's heretical challenge to the geocentric model or the initial minority stance of movements for abolition, women's suffrage, and LGBTQ+ rights. These examples remind us that popular opinion isn't always synonymous with truth.

In this era, where everyone can voice their opinion, the challenge is discerning which narratives to believe and engage with. The question remains: do we succumb to the mob mentality of the digital age, or do we strive for thoughtful, objective analysis? On the internet, someone from one corner of the world can effortlessly connect with another across the globe, yet these interactions often lack depth and meaning. Instead of bridging cultural divides, the internet has become a space where superficial exchanges prevail, leaving the rich tapestry of our diverse human experiences unexplored. This irony is stark: the very tool designed to simplify communication has distanced us from the essence of being human, replacing meaningful connections with fleeting, surface-level engagements. The internet gave us a way to communicate with others with convenience. With this convenience, we lost what it meant to communicate, to be human. We became strangers, not just to each other, but to ourselves, treating the complexity of human stories as mere caricatures and labels. Though we seem to be more connected than ever, we become strangers to ourselves and to each other. In the digital age, we are more disconnected than we have ever been.

Thus, the call to action is more philosophical than technical. It is a call for a deeper engagement with the world, beyond the confines of our screens. It asks of us to be more than mere consumers of information, to be empathetic participants in the human story. We must cultivate cultural literacy, not as a personal asset, but as a collective responsibility. In doing so, we can hope to create a digital world where understanding triumphs over misinformation, where empathy breaks the barriers of ignorance.

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