

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

A Matter of Beauty

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Destination: Showa Joshi University, Tokyo, Japan

This is a stylistically engaging account of a friendship, between the protagonist and a young Japanese woman studying English at a university in Tokyo, who thinks that she (the Italian protagonist), and all other Western women, are 'amazingly beautiful'. The conversation develops into a five month mobility-long dialogue on the canons of beauty, and how they shift across cultures. The brief extracts which are taken in isolation from the ongoing dialogue are penetrating and effective, inviting reflection on the size of noses and the colour of eyes. Beauty, the protagonist says, 'was a fil-rouge during my entire stay in Japan'. But the mysteries of changing aesthetics are transcended by the lasting friendship which has formed by the end of the mobility, when Minako accompanies the protagonist to the airport not because of her eyes, 'but because I want to remember forever our friendship'.

– When I'm talking to you, why don't look at me in the eyes? –, I said laughing.

– Oh, it's nothing. I'm just shy. And I think you're very beautiful –, she replied to me.

After few seconds of pause, – I'm so jealous... I mean, you, and all the other Western women are amazingly beautiful –. Silence.

I was freezed. This was one of our very first conversation. She was little, thin, introvert, with long black hair, so straight and bright that I could reflect myself there. She was studying English at Showa University in Tōkyō but more than anything Minako was my first friend in Japan.

Even if my Japanese back then was not perfect at all, we had many discussions about our lives, our futures, our attitudes about lots of issues, and when my Japanese was not sufficient, our hands and faces talked for us.

In particular, that evening of March, after that brief dialogue, we talked about beauty and what was in our opinion the inherent meaning of this word that nowadays we see and overhear almost everywhere.

– Models are usually Western women, they have gigantic brown or blue eyes, small faces, big noses. They are perfect and cute, aren't they?

While she was speaking, I was sitting there, thinking about how in the entire world my gigantic nose would be considered perfect by someone else and how my small face with my pronounced cheekbones would be treated as cute.

– Japanese girls are clumsy and they don't feel pretty at all. That's why I am afraid of looking at you, because I feel inferior, you know –.

Looking at her now was different. How can someone think of being inferior just because there is a global standard of beauty which is very western influenced?

This first conversation perfectly represents my trip to Japan, riddled with strangers asking me a picture just because I have big brown eyes.

Minako was just expressing a discomfort that probably lots of Japanese girls feel; seeing Western girls in reality or in television programs that advertise a standard without any rational basis or any attention not to hurt the feelings of the young public, is stressful. Obviously, it is not surprising to see various fashion products or make-up ones to make Japanese girls similar to Westerns, such as lens to make the pupils bigger or to make the eye-colour change. Before coming to Japan, I read several articles about the so called 'economy of sameness', yoking all cultures to the same idea of beauty which is linked to assimilating all countries into the same economic model.

– Minako, what are you saying? Come on, it's ridiculous. You are beautiful because you are unique. There is nobody in the world like you, right?

I tried to convince her that everyone is beautiful just being original and natural, not trying to be similar to everyone else.

But her face was not persuaded at all.

– Listen, then why just skinny-perfect models have success in life? Isn't it already an answer?

I sincerely didn't know what to say. She was looking at me with her hopeful eyes, waiting for a word or an expression that could make her feel better.

But I was just hesitating, something not that typical of me.

The days after and generally during my five months in Tōkyō, I often thought about this; while I was at the shopping mall with my Japanese friends searching for eye-lenses, while I was at the University with all the girls staring at me during lunch time, while I was at Starbuck's with some 40-year-old man asking me for a picture with him just because 'I was looking just like a model'.

Beauty was a *fil-rouge* during my entire staying in Japan, an issue that I didn't really considered seriously since my arrival and the encounter with my first friend. I thought how strange it is not to consider himself beautiful just because you have not the typical features of a Western woman, how strange it is to think you are inferior just because you are not similar to everybody else, instead of thinking that your value is by being different and not standardized.

At the end of August, I had to go home. Minako came with me to the airport and when we had to say goodbye, she thanked me for being so kind and polite with her, even if she was clumsy, and she apologized to me if sometimes she was too shy and not too friendly.

I hugged her - something that is not so common between Japanese people - and I wished her the best for her life and her studies.

Just a minute before the control gate, she stopped me and asked me a picture with her. Laughing, she said - I am not asking you because of your eyes, I am asking you because I want to remember forever our friendship -.

