

April 1, 1994 (Vol. 9, no. 15)

Dear Colleague:

A recent article in Nature, reported in the NY Times (March 21, 1994), dealt another blow to what "egalitarians like to think." It appears that beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, at least not human facial beauty. A study shows that men and women in different cultures consider the same type of female face--large eyes, high cheekbones, and narrow jaw--enormously attractive. Indeed, there is evidence in art to suggest that on the question of facial beauty not much has changed in the last few thousand years: editors of Vogue even today will gladly put Queen Nefertiti on the magazine's cover. I am struck by the idea that égalité may not be compatible with fraternité. If we all have different ideas on beauty, we shan't be able to communicate on this important subject; and without some sort of communication and agreement, where is the fraternité? On the other hand, if we do agree that a hierarchy of beauty exists, we shall have communication and agreement--the basis of fraternité --but égalité goes out of the window.

In our time, the pressure to affirm equality is so great that we are quite willing to sacrifice fraternity. With each of us firmly locked into our own set of values, we can agree only on the obvious and trivial fact that we are different--our faces are different, our cultures are different. Instead of fraternity, united by our common view on beauty and goodness, we have isolation (individual and ethnic islands) and solipsism. Of course, we haven't quite reached total equality yet, so we still have some fraternity. For instance, "human rights," defined in a certain way, are now widely considered universal, and the Chinese can't wriggle out of comparative judgment by saying, "Our view on human rights is just different from yours and everybody else's, not worse or even better." And you can hear the Chinese adding, self-righteously, "We will all be better off--more equal--if we recognize and act on that fact."

Now, since I don't have large eyes and high cheekbones myself, I am inclined to favor egalitarianism over fraternity.

Best wishes,

*Yi-Fu*