

Colorism in East and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

In this chapter, we discuss colorism in East Asia and Southeast Asia. In psychological research, these two regions are often grouped together. However, East Asia and Southeast Asia are distinct with respect to their history with colonialism, trade, and international relations. These historical and modern sociocultural factors suggest that the origins and catalysts for colorism in East Asia and Southeast Asia may be distinct, developing into different consequences of colorism. In this chapter, we review research on colorism with a focus on East and Southeast Asia, and highlighting factors that may produce different forms of colorism between Southeast Asia and East Asia. We then discuss existing and potential psychological consequences (i.e., intergroup processes, social identity, life outcomes) of colorism in East and Southeast Asia.

Colorism in East and Southeast Asia

In a street interview conducted in Manila, Philippines, most Filipina correspondents acknowledged that having lighter skin, relative to having darker skin, was highly desirable. One such correspondent even mentioned how having light skin then becoming darker skinned elicits negative comments from others, but having dark skin then becoming lighter skinned elicits praise (Asian Boss, 2018). These correspondents acknowledged that there was a widespread societal perception of “white” or light skin equating to beauty, societal preference for light skin, and societal benefits that having light skin carries. These perceptions and consequences of light skin result from a skin-tone-based social system or hierarchy called colorism.

Colorism is related to, but distinct from, racism (Hunter, 2007), and the association between colorism and racism may depend on the sociocultural and historical contexts in which colorism develops. In the United States, a racially heterogeneous society, Black Americans with “white” or light skin may be perceived as more racially “White.” In South Korea, however, a racially homogeneous society, ethnic Koreans with “white” skin may be perceived to have greater socioeconomic status without any such perceived association to racial White-ness. It is therefore important to note that the term “white” skin does not necessarily refer to being racially “White” in many regions of the world (Saraswati, 2013).

Nevertheless, with ever-increasing contact with people from different regions through colonialism, trade, and globalization, skin tones in East and Southeast Asia have become associated with both socioeconomic status and proximity to different perceived racial groups. As such, a sociocultural and historical approach to studying colorism is necessary to understand the significance and consequences of colorism as found in East and Southeast Asia (Bettache, 2020). In psychological research, these two regions are often regarded as a singular region, with people

from these two regions often considered to be culturally similar due to their physical proximity and overlapping geopolitical and cultural history. The resulting psychological research often groups people from these two regions together to study generally shared cultural values and perceptions (e.g., social orientation; Vignoles et al., 2016). However, these two regions are also distinct with respect to their history with colonialism, trade, and international relations, which resulted in the development of greater economic power in East Asia relative to Southeast Asia (Weidenbaum & Hughes, 1996). This distinctiveness suggests that the origins and catalysts for colorism in East Asia and Southeast Asia may be different, developing into different manifestations and consequences of colorism.

We propose that lighter skin tone in East Asia (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea) and Southeast Asia (e.g., Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam) is perceived as a visible marker for proximity to higher power groups, but the definition of and associations with higher power groups may be different between East Asia and Southeast Asia. In East Asia, colorism may primarily function as a way to maintain social class inequality, with lighter skin representing higher social class. In Southeast Asia, colorism may be intertwined with both social class as well as race, such that lighter skin signals proximity to higher social class and to higher power racial groups such as Europeans and East Asians because of their historical colonial power, regional economic power, and more modern cultural power.

In this chapter, we first review research on colorism with a focus on East and Southeast Asia, highlighting the shared historical origins and modern manifestations of colorism in these two regions. Next, we discuss the unique historical conditions of Southeast Asia that influenced different associations with skin tone compared to East Asia. We then unpack the psychological

implications of colorism and how it shapes intergroup processes, social identity, and life outcomes.

Overview of Colorism

What is Colorism?

Once labeled by Hunter (2005) as a hidden or overlooked form of within-group discrimination, colorism is pervasive in most racial and cultural groups worldwide. Colorism refers to prejudices or biases that exist based on individuals' skin tone (Hall, 2022). Whereas concepts such as race are thought to be more abstract and socially constructed, skin color may be more concrete, focusing specifically on the amount of melanin in a person's skin (Hall, 2022). Historically, individuals whose skin tone is lighter or those who appear more racially White have been viewed as more desirable compared to those with darker skin tones (Dixon et al., 2017; Hunter, 2005). This bias has been built upon centuries of systemic prejudices and discrimination, namely White supremacy and White power movements which have positioned White individuals as being superior with darker skin tones representing "savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority" (Hunter, 2005, p. 2). Even within the same racial group, an individual who is lighter skinned may be more positively perceived and receive better treatment relative to an individual with darker skin (Hall, 1992). For example, Black Americans with lighter skin tones often have higher socioeconomic status and better mental health than Black Americans with darker skin tones (Hunter, 2005). Although colorism has existed throughout history, it has not been a focus of research or public discourse until relatively recently (Hall, 2022) compared to similar topics (i.e., racism).

Though highly interrelated, color and colorism are distinct phenomena from race and racism (Dixon et al., 2017; Hall, 2022). This distinction is particularly true within the United

States and other English-speaking countries where there seems to be a linguistic difference between “*race*”, meaning the socially constructed category of people who share phenotypic and cultural similarities (e.g., Black, White, Asian), versus “*color*”, which refer to gradations of skin tone from lighter to darker within or between racial groups (Dixon et al., 2017; Hunter, 2007). For example, while an individual may refer to their *race* as “Black”, there are many different skin tone variations even within the racial category of Black that go into *color*. The same Black individual with a darker skin tone could experience both racism from non-Black individuals showing prejudice towards Black individuals broadly and colorism from other Black individuals who view them as too dark or not dark enough (Hunter, 2007). Although not used consistently, these distinct definitions between *race* and *color* do seem to be intelligible within an American context, due at least in part to the racially diverse nature of the United States (Dixon et al., 2017). Outside of the United States, the separation of colorism from racism is less clear and can sometimes be used interchangeably (Dixon et al., 2017), but within the United States, colorism may be a byproduct of centuries of institutionalized racism (Hunter, 2005). Semantic differences aside, colorism is pervasive throughout history and worldwide (Hall, 2022). Though most of the research on colorism within psychology has been conducted in the Americas, colorism is important to understand within other regions, namely East and Southeast Asia.

Historical Origins of Colorism Shared Across East and Southeast Asia

As in many societies around the world, there is a deep history of colorism within East and Southeast Asia. While often assumed to have originated after making contact with Europeans, East Asia in particular has had a long history of colorism that predated contact with Europe.

As early as 690 CE, having lighter skin in parts of Asia, for example Japan, was seen as preferable and even an indication of nobility or royalty (Bettache, 2020; Dixon & Telles, 2017).

The roots of colorism throughout Asia are often thought to be a combination of class hierarchies and aesthetic preferences (Dixon & Telles, 2017). In terms of social class, the preference toward lighter skin was related at least in part to occupation. Individuals who had to work in less preferable, outdoor settings in the sun for long hours developed darker skin tones and were considered lower class, whereas higher class individuals and royalty could work indoors or not have to work at all. Thus, darker skin was associated with lower class individuals while whiter or paler skin was associated with higher class individuals (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Glenn, 2008; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007).

This class hierarchy is in addition to the view across many East Asian countries at the time that light skin was synonymous with femininity and beauty standards (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Wagatsuma (1967) illustrates this point using the Japanese proverb, “white skin makes up for seven defects”, meaning that a woman having lighter skin means she can have physical defects in other areas and still be considered attractive (Hall, 2022; Wagatsuma, 1967). In Japan specifically, the ideal woman was thought to be lighter skinned, and Japanese women would strive to use good water to steam their faces in an effort to make the skin both smoother and whiter (Wagatsuma, 1967). As early as the 700s, both men and women, particularly those in higher classes, wore makeup or powder to lighten their skin, particularly for ceremonies or special events (Wagatsuma, 1967; Glenn, 2008). Both historically and in modern times in East and Southeast Asia, white or lighter skin was seen as a form of symbolic capital, especially for women being considered for marriage, due to the association between light skin and higher social status.

Throughout East Asia, whiteness has been used to illustrate and describe the skin tones of East Asian individuals through both artistic depictions (e.g., Japanese art depicting Japanese

people as White and European people as gray; Dixon & Telles, 2017) and language descriptions (e.g., Japanese using the word *white* (白い or *shiroi*) for lighter skinned Japanese people; Wagatsuma, 1967). This preference towards whiteness is not specific to historical East and Southeast Asia but has rather persisted throughout many regions of modern-day Asia.

Modern Manifestations of Colorism in East and Southeast Asia

The preference for whiteness, derived from classism and beauty standards, has been perpetuated throughout history within East and Southeast Asian countries. As Rondilla and Spickard (2007) note, across almost all Asian countries, major celebrities or movie stars are often lighter skinned than the general public within those countries. This reflects the modern-day manifestation of the relationship between whiteness and social hierarchy, where whiteness is associated with higher status.

While quantitative research on colorism in East and Southeast Asia has been relatively limited (Chen & Francis-Tan, 2022), qualitative research has given rich descriptions of colorism in Asia. In their sociological interviews of East and Southeast Asian Americans, Rondilla and Spickard (2007) note their participants' experiences with being told that whiteness was related to the social hierarchy in Asia. While interviews were conducted with Asian Americans rather than individuals living in East or Southeast Asia, the values and experiences reflect those passed down generationally from family members who were raised within an East or Southeast Asian context. As one participant noted, "[being white] was a characteristic of rich, learned, and educated people who did not need to labor outside and toil in the sun" (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007, p. 17). Another of their participants reflected on how this hierarchy was reinforced even within her own family, "My father used to call me "Snow White" while he would call my sister "Dark Princess." Even though, according to him, we were both princesses, we knew there was a

hierarchy. Somehow, as little children, we understood that being lighter was better” (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007, p. 19). In addition to considering lighter skin to be a marker of social class, participants of Rondilla and Spickard (2007) noted that lighter skin is thought of as being pure or clean compared to darker skin (p. 54). As one participant notes, her older family members seem to “associate lighter skin as being purer, someone [with] darker skin not being pure, I guess kind of dirty” (p. 58). This emphasis on lighter skin being thought of as good and pure and darker skin being considered dirty also relates to the idea that blackness is often associated with immorality while whiteness is associated with morality (Sherman & Clore, 2009). Many of Rondilla & Spickard’s (2007) participants recounted skin tone hierarchies maintained within their families and society both as unwritten rules and explicit statements.

With this clear preference for lighter skin and its connection to social hierarchies, participants also noted advice from their parents to achieve lighter skin and thus be considered more attractive. A Cambodian American woman reflected on being told by her parents, “Don’t stay out in the sun too long! You’ll get dark and never find a husband” (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007, p. 17). Another participant remarked that after spending a lot of time in the sun and becoming tanned her mother yelled at her, disgusted, saying, “Look how dark you are! You are becoming black,” noting that her mother “didn’t want to have a dark daughter who would be ‘ugly’” (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007, p. 17). Echoing Rondilla and Spickard’s (2007) findings, Bettache (2020) notes that while most individuals will outwardly state they do not agree with colorist beliefs, they themselves have internalized the preference for whiteness and admitted to avoiding the sun.

In addition to behaviors like avoiding the sun, other common methods include using skin lightening products. For example, Glenn (2009) describes websites in the Philippines specifically

dedicated to helping young Filipina women learn what products they should use to lighten their skin, underarms, elbows, and knees (Glenn, 2009). Additionally, Saraswati (2010) describes prominent skin lightening advertisements in Indonesian magazines referring to light or white skin as “the skin of innocence” (Saraswati, 2010, p. 16). These skin lightening products are prominent in Southeast Asia as well as within Japanese and Korean beauty product markets available at most local cosmetic counters and stores (Glenn, 2009; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Rondilla and Spickard’s (2007) participants not only noted being aware of the skin lightening and bleaching products, but some explicitly discussed their use of these products. One participant noted she would “go to the store and get a skin lightening to get more of an even tone. But I would like to be lighter. I think it looks better. You see the pretty girls on the karaoke videos and the magazines and they’re all so much lighter” (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007, p. 65). The advertisements for these products reference lighter skin being better and boast the ability to get rid of discoloration or dark spots (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Although skin lightening and bleaching products may have been born out of the historic and cultural preference for lighter skin, the preference to use these products may now, at least in part, be explicitly perpetuated by the beauty industry. Companies may be motivated to maintain beauty standards of light skin and perpetuate the idea that white is better to keep their industry successful, lucrative, and growing.

While the majority of the literature on colorism in psychology has been conducted within the Americas focusing on Black and Latino/a populations, there is increasing evidence that studying colorism is particularly important within East and Southeast Asia. Although colorism in Asia has been theorized and investigated qualitatively, Chen and Francis-Tan (2022) examined skin-tone bias quantitatively. In their initial study, they analyzed Implicit Associations Test

(IAT) data from the Project Implicit Skin Tone IAT¹. The Skin Tone IAT measures the strength of mental associations participants have between light skin tone and positive concepts (e.g., lovely, terrific, joyful), and between dark skin tone and negative concepts (e.g., hate, ugly, dirty; see Chen & Francis-Tan, 2022 for a full description of the Skin Tone IAT and how IAT scores are calculated). Scores from the IAT represent how strong a mental association is between light skin and goodness, and dark skin and badness, for an individual (Chen & Francis-Tan, 2022; Greenwald et al., 2003). A higher score does not necessarily reflect prejudice towards a particular group, but it does indicate a stronger association between two categories (e.g., light skin tones and positive words). By analyzing the implicit associations (using IAT scores) of Skin Tone bias for participants worldwide the researchers found that participants in East and Southeast Asia showed higher levels of implicit bias for skin tone (i.e., associating lighter skin tones with positive words while associating darker skin tones with negative words) than any other region, including North America and most South Asian (e.g., India) countries². Chen and Francis-Tan (2022) also examined these biases experimentally to directly assess attitudes towards skin tone. Singaporean participants evaluated profiles of job applicants whose photo had been experimentally manipulated to have dark, medium, or light skin tone. Between studies, researchers varied the specific field of the job the applicant was applying for and how qualified the applicant was for the job. Each participant was asked to rate each profile for how attractive, friendly, hard-working, intelligent, and qualified for the job they believed the applicant to be. Across three studies, many of their results pointed to participants rating dark and medium skinned applicants as less qualified and less attractive than the lighter skinned applicants. This

¹ The full Skin Tone IAT can be viewed and completed at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/Study?tid=-1>

² The following countries were listed in their results as being the most to least biased though all were still more biased than North Americans: Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Korea, Mainland China, Indonesia, Philippines, and Japan.

was particularly true for ratings completed by female participants of female applicants, who may internalize the preference for whiteness even if they do not consciously endorse it. These studies provide quantitative insight on colorism in East and Southeast Asia and open the discussion on gender differences in colorism when considering competence and attractiveness of individuals with varying skin tones. The researchers noted that while this can begin the conversation surrounding colorism in Asia, there is still more research needed (Chen & Francis-Tan, 2022).

Culturally Distinct Colorism Between Southeast Asia and East Asia

Although the oldest origins of colorism in East and Southeast Asia may appear to be historical class–color associations, we provide an overview of three potential historical and modern sociocultural factors that may have uniquely shaped colorism in Southeast Asia relative to East Asia. The first factor is the history of colonialism. Colorism in Southeast Asia may predate colonial histories in the region, but colonial relations with Europe and East Asia (e.g., Spain, Netherlands, Japan) may have reinforced and transformed the meaning and signaling function of lighter vs. darker skin. The second factor is the relationship between China and Southeast Asia through both historical trade and transnational economic networks (e.g., Chinese ‘bamboo network’). The third factor is the globalization and influence of Japanese and Korean popular culture. Below, we discuss how these factors may have transformed colorism in Southeast Asia to be about both class and proximity to European and East Asian ancestry and culture.

Colorist Hierarchies Shaped by Colonialism in Southeast Asia

Most scholars agree that colorism in East and Southeast Asia likely predates European colonialism, so it is unlikely to be the sole origin of colorism (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Glenn,

2008). However, unlike East Asia³, nearly all of Southeast Asia had been colonized by European countries. For instance, France colonized Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and Great Britain colonized Myanmar, Malaysia, and Singapore. Two countries in particular were subject to long-lasting and explicit colorist hierarchies shaped by race: Indonesia (by the Dutch) and the Philippines (by the Spanish and the United States), with both countries also subsequently occupied by the Japanese. It is therefore likely that European/American colonization and Japanese occupation may have both reinforced existing color-class associations and transformed color-class associations by including race as an additional association (Bettache, 2020; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007).

From the 17th to 19th century, the Dutch colonization of Indonesia resulted in an explicit colorist hierarchy. The Dutch positioned themselves at the top, and they distinguished their “superior” racially White skin from Chinese white skin, which they labeled as “yellow” (Saraswati, 2013; Wertheim, 1955). Therefore, Chinese, with “yellow” skin, formed an intermediate position, and indigenous, dark-skinned Indonesians were at the bottom (Bettache, 2020; Wertheim, 1955). Although the beginning of the 20th century began to see a disruption of these positions socially, the Dutch and Chinese still held an economic advantage over the Indonesians (Werheim, 1955). The association between high status groups (i.e., the Dutch and Chinese) and their light skin (relative to indigenous Indonesians) has likely persisted into modern day Indonesia, in which light skin is continuously valued as a marker of beauty and class (Saraswati, 2013).

Spanish colonization over the Philippines from the 16th to 19th century resulted in a similar colorist hierarchy, whereby the Spanish colonizers were the ruling class, and the

³ We acknowledge that European countries have colonized parts of, but not entire, East Asian countries (e.g., British colonization of Hong Kong and Shanghai).

indigenous Filipinos were at the lowest position of society. Intermarriage between the Spanish and Filipinos resulted in Mestizo, or mixed ancestry individuals who remain lower in status compared to Spanish, but higher than monoethnic Filipinos (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007), with those with greater Spanish ancestry typically having higher socioeconomic status than their counterparts with greater Filipino ancestry (Glenn, 2008; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Land grants given to Spanish settlers, and later, to mixed ancestry Mestizos, resulted in Europeans and Mestizos holding greater economic advantages via generational wealth, relative to the indigenous Filipinos, into the 20th century (Karnow, 1989).

Vestiges of the Spanish colorist hierarchy and associated economic inequality remained, and was potentially reinforced, during the United States' colonization of the Philippines in the 20th century. The American colonization of the Philippines was described as, by then-President McKinley, "benevolent assimilation", which referred to the explicit decision to not follow previous European-style exploitative conquering (Rafael, 2000). Instead, the Americans desired to "civilize" Filipinos by teaching them to embody American democratic "aspirations, sentiments, and ideals" (Rafael, 2000, p. 22), teaching English as the lingua franca, and highlighting the United States as an altruistic ally (Karknow, 1989; Rafael, 2000). Such Americanization of Filipino society may have reinforced the association of Western culture as modern, superior, and attractive, which may have downstream positive associations with white skin. One Filipino described to Karknow (1989) through a translator that American-controlled education taught Filipinos that Americans were their savior and brought democracy to the Philippines. As a child, he perceived Americans to have white skin like Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, and in contrast degraded Filipino people for their dark skin. Even after the independence of the Philippines, there remains a relatively positive impression of the United

States in the Philippines (Pew Research Center, 2023), and a prestige associated with speaking English (Rafael, 2000), so American colonization may have also reinforced the association between light skin and higher social class.

Europe was not the only domineering foreign presence in Southeast Asia. During World War II, Japan occupied most of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia and the Philippines, for the purpose of securing resources and in some cases, strategic self-serving protection from other invading foreign forces. For example, during World War Two the Spanish influence in the Philippines was slowly weakening and therefore vulnerable to invasion from foreign forces (Yu-Jose, 1996). The Japanese occupation of the Philippines was therefore a strategic decision to protect and control the region around Japan. Despite the relatively short period of Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia during World War II, the Japanese also promoted a colorist hierarchy that was explicitly related to race. The Japanese believed in and valued the purity of the Japanese race, manifested in their belief that Japanese white skin was distinct and superior to both European and Chinese white skin (Saraswati, 2013). The positive associations with Japanese white skin remains influential in Indonesia, in which Indonesian women report in interviews that they preferred Japanese white skin over European or Chinese white skin (Saraswati, 2013). Thus, Japan's occupation across Southeast Asia has likely encouraged the same color-class associations that European colonization did, such that light skin was associated with power and status.

Such examples of European/American colonization and Japanese occupation, and the resulting colorist hierarchies baked into Indonesian and Filipino society over hundreds of years, may have transformed existing color and class associations by adding an element of racism. Light skin is associated with both the ruling class and the racial groups who typically comprised

the ruling class, whereas dark skin is associated with both lower social class and the indigenous locals.

Economic Influence of China

China has a complicated history within Southeast Asia. From as early as the 10th century, Chinese merchants and tradesmen emigrated to Southeast Asia to conduct business and they were often positioned as the intermediate group, lower than European colonizers but somewhat higher than the local Southeast Asians (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007; Wertheim, 1955), reinforcing a hierarchy based on skin tone. Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia (i.e., first and later generation immigrants from China permanently residing in Southeast Asia) have been characterized by both the European colonizers and local Southeast Asians as necessary for business but derogated as an outsider ethnic group (Karknow, 1989; Saraswati, 2013). Despite historical policies existing to restrict Chinese business activity in many of these countries, overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia have built what is currently an economically strong “bamboo network”: a network of businesses owned by ethnic Chinese that spanned between China and all Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (Chuah et al., 2016). Overseas Chinese currently control the overwhelming majority of Southeast Asian economy despite only making up less than a tenth of the population (Chuah et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2003), marking the Chinese as a “market-dominant” minority⁴ (Chua, 2003).

Given the long-term historical involvement of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asian economies, descendants of overseas Chinese tend to be more economically well off than descendants of local counterparts. Despite their greater economic status, local resentment of the

⁴ Singapore is the exception because ethnic Chinese makeup the ethnic majority in Singapore.

Chinese economic dominance and prejudice against Chinese ethnicity has been documented in nearly all Southeast Asian countries. However, the growth of China's economy (and Chinese associated states, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore with its ethnic Chinese majority) over the 20th and 21st century has now opened up the potential for overseas Chinese from Southeast Asia to highlight proximity to a high-status group. This is even more apparent when the overseas Chinese and mixed ancestry Chinese in Southeast Asia have light skin; they may highlight their lighter skin as a signal for proximity to Chinese-ness, and by association, higher socioeconomic status (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Southeast Asians of Chinese ancestry may enjoy more light skin privilege than non-mixed locals with typically darker skin.

Rise of Japanese and Korean Popular Culture

Similar to China, Japan and South Korea have also experienced an intense economic growth in the 20th and 21st century, but relative to China, the influence of Japan and South Korea on Southeast Asia has primarily been through cultural exports in the 21st century. Importantly, cultural exports were immensely facilitated by the internet because it increased the ability to access popular culture from overseas. The popularity of Japanese cultural exports (e.g., Japanese animation, video games, fashion) rapidly changed the global construal of Japan, from its previous war and imperialism-associated image to positive associations of technological advances and pop culture (e.g., “kawaii”, or cuteness culture, popularized through Japanese animation and fashion; Kato, 2001; Wang, 2022). Similarly, the global popularity of Korean pop music, (i.e., K-Pop), Korean television shows, and Korean beauty culture through the 21st century has also increased the global relevance of Korean culture (Adams, 2022).

The popularity and influence of Japan and Korea, especially with K-Pop culture, can be observed in Southeast Asia. The global popularity of Korean beauty culture, bolstered by K-Pop,

directly impacts women's beauty standards in East and Southeast Asia. In both East and Southeast Asia, the Korean (or Japanese) "look" is often considered the beauty standard, and implicit in this beauty standard is that light skin is highly desirable (Glenn, 2008; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007; Saraswati, 2013). For example, in a YouTube video in which women from East and Southeast Asia have to guess each other's nationality, remarks about some women appearing Korean or Japanese are implicitly received as compliments, whereas guesses of other nationalities, such as Vietnamese and Indonesian, are not (World Friends, 2023). The beauty standard of having light skin, especially for Asians, may itself be a cultural export from Japan and Korea, which is manifest in the exportation of Japanese and Korean skin bleaching or whitening products (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2017).

Cultural Differences in Associations Between Skin Tone and Race

Although skin tone bias in Southeast Asia has historically been shaped by race through contact with higher status Europeans, Americans, and East Asians with lighter skin tones, it is important to note that ongoing globalization may introduce new associations with skin tone. This may be particularly true for people from East Asia. Modern globalization through technologies and greater international contact (via tourism) may have increased opportunities for East Asians to be exposed to different skin tones from different racial groups. Through globalization, it is possible that East Asians have also associated skin tone with race.

There is a key difference, however, between East and Southeast Asians in their associations with skin tone and race. For East Asians, they associate light skin tones with themselves, and darker skin tones with other racial groups, allowing East Asians to position themselves at the top of the skin tone hierarchy. Reflecting this, Kim (2020) posited that in South Korea, a system of racial hierarchy is occurring according to skin tone, in which the hierarchy

favors ethnic Koreans, then light-skinned racial groups (e.g., non-Korean East Asian and White), with dark skinned racial groups at the bottom of the hierarchy. This is in contrast with Southeast Asians, who associate light skin with other racial groups (e.g., White Europeans and East Asians), positioning themselves as lower on the skin tone hierarchy. With respect to these two regions in relation to one another, East Asians may perceive themselves to have lighter skin than, and thus hold a “skin tone advantage” over, Southeast Asians.

Overall, people from East and Southeast Asia have likely acquired an association of skin tone with both class and race. However, there may be differences between East and Southeast Asians in their association between skin tone, class, and race because of their historical differences and power inequality. For example, the strength of association between skin tone and race may exist among both East and Southeast Asians, but more strongly among the latter due to a longer history of having explicit colorist and racist hierarchies in their society. However, it could also be the case that highlighting an international context may encourage a similar association between skin tone and race among both East and Southeast Asians. Such potential similarities and differences among East and Southeast Asians in their association between skin tone, class, and race have yet to be empirically tested. We hope that the overview of potential historical and modern sociocultural factors within Southeast Asia provides researchers a starting point for theorizing and testing similarities and differences in colorism between East Asians and Southeast Asians, as well as potential psychological consequences.

Psychological Consequences of Colorism

In this section, we review existing psychological work examining three broad consequences of colorism—intergroup processes, social identity, life outcomes—and propose how might these consequences for East and Southeast Asians be similar or different. Alongside

the historical and modern cultural factors reviewed in the last section, the modern-day economic inequality between East and Southeast Asia may have encouraged particular migration patterns such that it is far more likely that East Asian countries receive immigrants from Southeast Asia that are seeking lower skilled positions than vice versa (Fong & Shibuya, 2020; Lee, 2008). Given the context of this economic inequality, there may be unique psychological consequences of colorism between East Asians and Southeast Asians.

Intergroup Processes

Within the East and Southeast Asia Context

Given that people from East Asia, on average, tend to have lighter skin tones than people from Southeast Asia, skin tones may cue different national groups (and by association, different perceived races). People from both East and Southeast Asia may perceive that dark skinned individuals are from Southeast Asia, and light skinned individuals are from East Asia (for an example, see YouTube video from World Friends, 2023). This inference of nationality and perceived race from skin tone has implications for intergroup processes, which are engaged when people think in terms of ingroup versus outgroup membership. In a Japanese context, for example, a Japanese person may perceive an individual with light skin tone as an ingroup member, but they may perceive an individual with darker skin tone as an outgroup member. Accordingly, they may favor light skinned people over dark skinned people, conferring trust and social resources to inferred ingroup members and denying them to inferred outgroup members (Tajfel, 1969; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Furthermore, if skin tone is perceived to cue different races, then this suggests that the presence of people with different skin tones may also cue intergroup contexts. In other words, a Japanese person entering a room that has people with dark skin and people with light skin might infer that it is an international (and intergroup)

context. Salient intergroup contexts can activate relevant social identities (Chen et al., 2023; Turner et al., 1994), for example a national identity.

Developmental research suggests that skin tone may be the earliest perceptual feature children use to make race-based categorization decisions, and therefore skin tone may be a visual property of individuals that can cue ingroup or outgroup related cognitive processes (Dunham et al., 2014), such as the own-race bias. The own-race bias refers to the finding that people are better at recognizing faces from their own vs. other races (Hugenberg et al., 2007; Hugenberg et al., 2010; Meissner & Brigham, 2001; Vingilis-Jaremko et al., 2020). This bias extends to other complex cognitive processes that are more deliberative, such as identifying emotional and mental states on own-race faces (Adams et al., 2010; Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Friesen et al., 2019; Lo & Mar, 2022), and cognitive processes that are more automatic, such as shifting visual attention in response to another's directed gaze (i.e., gaze cueing effect; Friesen & Kingstone, 1998), the effect of which is observed to be stronger when the gaze comes from one's own vs. other race face (Pavan et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2021; Weisbuch et al., 2017). Although other physical features (e.g., eyes, nose) are used to make race-based categorization decisions, these may not be shared across cultures and are often locally shaped by historical policies and institutions about race and ancestral-based classifications (Chen et al., 2017). Accordingly, skin tone might be one of the most focal cues to group membership across cultures and beginning in early development.

However, skin tone may not function as a particularly accurate cue for groups with a lot of skin tone variability, such as within a Southeast Asian context. Southeast Asians self-report a diversity of skin tones, ranging from "light" to "light brown" to "dark brown or black" skin tone (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2017). Relative to Southeast Asia, East Asian skin tones may, on average, be

lighter and with less skin tone variability (Xiao et al., 2017). Thus, there may be differences between the way East Asians and Southeast Asians use skin tone and other physical traits to infer ingroup membership. East Asians observing an ambiguously East or Southeast Asian face may more strongly weigh skin tone (vs. other physical traits) for categorizing that face as belonging to their ingroup (i.e., as East Asian) because light skin tone may be a more reliable cue for being East Asian. For East Asians, then, the observation of darker skin tones on other faces may cue different races and trigger subsequent intergroup cognitive processes that are typically engaged when interacting with outgroup members. Southeast Asians, however, may not as strongly rely on skin tone to categorize an ambiguously East or Southeast Asian face as belonging to an ingroup member (i.e., as Southeast Asian). For Southeast Asians, then, it is unclear whether lighter or darker skin tones may cue different races to the same extent that it does for East Asians. This asymmetry between East and Southeast Asians justifies studying the intergroup processes of these two groups as distinct cultural groups with their own unique histories and experiences, especially when it comes to skin tone bias and its role in social cognitive processes.

Within the North American Context

Within East and Southeast Asia, skin tone may serve to cue different races, but outside Asia, East and Southeast Asians are often perceived by outgroup members as a homogenous group with similar appearances, behaviors, and cultural values (see Judd & Park, 1988). For example, Southeast Asians may also be discriminated against alongside East Asians by outgroup members in other countries, such as in the United States. Stereotypes about East Asians in the United States, such as the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” stereotypes, are often applied to Southeast Asians in the United States (Nadal et al., 2012; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Rodriguez-Operana et al., 2017; Sue et al., 2007; Tang & Kao, 2012). During the SARS and

COVID-19 pandemic, both Chinese and non-Chinese East and Southeast Asians (e.g., Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino) in North America experienced lower well-being and discrimination from being perceived as a “health hazard” (Leung, 2008; Lo et al., 2022). These results suggest that outgroup members tend to perceive East and Southeast Asians as a monolithic group (Sue et al., 2007). It is therefore unclear and currently untested whether outgroup members use skin tone to distinguish East Asians from Southeast Asians at all, and if they do, whether they treat East and Southeast Asians differently from another.

East and Southeast Asians living in North America may not hold the same preconceived associations of skin tone as their counterparts living in Asia due to acculturation to North American culture and values. Having tanned skin is a popular beauty standard in North America, so acculturation to North American culture may decrease colorism values among East and Southeast Asian Americans and Canadians (Khanna, 2020; McIlhargey, 2022; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). As such, an interesting prediction to put forth could be that East and Southeast Asians living in North America may not depend on skin tone to distinguish between East and Southeast Asians relative to their counterparts living in Asia because skin tone is not as reliable of a cue for national origin or descent, or perceived race.

On the other hand, there may be differences between the lived experiences of East Asians and Southeast Asians in North America that distinguish their attitudes toward skin tones. Some East Asians in North America may perceive themselves as “honorary white” and position themselves near White North Americans (Bonilla-Silva, 2004), and self-endorse the “model minority” stereotype of being a quiet, hardworking minority group, prescribed to them by American media (Lin et al., 2005; Wu, 2014). In contrast, Southeast Asian immigrants in North America are often associated with war-torn countries (e.g., Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) from

which they arrived to North America as refugees, and tend to have lower socioeconomic status at baseline with lower rates of educational attainment and income levels relative to East Asian immigrants (Dorais, 2000; Gordon, 1987; Lee et al., 2017). Given the association of Southeast Asians as a racial minority group that is less well-off, East Asians may perceive Southeast Asians as part of the “collective black”, adjacent to Black Americans who are positioned at the lowest end of the racial hierarchy in North America (Bonilla-Silva, 2004). Distinctions that favor East Asians over Southeast Asians have even appeared in the media. Ali Wong, a well-known Asian American comedian who is half Chinese, half Vietnamese, joked about the differences between “fancy Asians” vs. “jungle Asians.” She explained that “fancy Asians” were East Asians, who were capable of doing fancy things such as host the Olympics, whereas “jungle Asians” were Southeast Asians, who only host diseases (Tomas, 2020). This example corroborates Southeast Asians’ experiences of feeling looked down upon by East Asians for their lower socioeconomic status and being perceived as part of a more “barbaric” cultural group (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). These examples suggest that East Asians are motivated to distinguish themselves from Southeast Asians.

To ensure that they are not identified as Southeast Asian, East Asians in North America may maintain light skin favored by their East Asian family and community, despite North American beauty standards favoring tanned skin. Southeast Asians in North America, on the other hand, may feel motivated to endorse North American beauty standards to feel better about having a darker skin tone. For example, a Filipina American interview participant in Rondilla and Spickard (2007) noted the difference between her and her mother’s beauty standards, saying, “I don’t understand why my mother tries so hard to be light. She uses tons of skin bleaching products from the Asian grocery store, while I’m here trying to get a decent tan” (p. 93).

Although not tested as of yet, one could hypothesize that Southeast Asians in North America are more likely to endorse North American beauty standards over Asian beauty standards. Given that East vs. Southeast Asians may have different experiences with colorism, it is important to begin theorizing and hypothesizing about how different intergroup processes occur between these two groups, both within and outside of Asia.

Social Identity

Skin tone has implications for social identity, for both the self and perceivers. Given that skin tone is used as a cue for group membership, skin tone can shape external perceptions of one's social identity. These external perceptions can, in turn, shape one's self-identification (Reece, 2019). For example, a mixed Chinese-Filipino individual who is light skinned may be more often perceived by others as racially East Asian relative to Southeast Asian by perceivers, which may foster that individual's connection to their social identity as more strongly Chinese than Filipino. How skin tone is perceived in the social context may shape individuals' social identities.

Skin tone may also be perceived to be linked to the strength of one's social identity. This perception may be more relevant in multicultural societies in which individuals are often aware that individuals can have different social identities of varying strength of identification. When presented with photographs of three ambiguously East or Southeast Asia women with light, medium, and dark skin tones, other East and Southeast Asians Americans tended to believe that the women with darker skin tone were more connected to their culture, and more recently arrived to the United States than the lighter skinned women (Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). Conversely, light skin tone may also be perceived to be associated with lower identification, potentially leading to ingroup rejection. For example, the light skinned women in the aforementioned study

were perceived by East and Southeast Asians as “Westernized” or “White-washed.” The invalidation of one’s social identity may be more common and received more poorly from ingroup members (Franco & Franco, 2016). The perception of skin tone being linked to cultural identity may reflect a common lay intuition that skin tone is physical evidence of cultural background through folk biological essences such as genetics or ancestry (Lo & Sasaki, 2023). It could be the case that for certain ethnoracial groups, those who are darker skinned may be seen as undeniably authentic members of their cultural group, as evidenced by their perceived genetic or ancestral connection, whereas light skinned individuals may be required to prove their cultural authenticity (Root, 1998). However, if provided clear ethnicity-related information about the photographs, participants may have used the skin tone differently to evaluate social identity and cultural connectedness. For example, people may have different social identity expectations for a Chinese American with light skin, vs. a Filipino American with light skin. If Filipino people are assumed to have darker skin tones on average than Chinese people, then a light skinned Filipino American may have their social identity called into question to a greater extent than a light skinned Chinese American. Given the lack of differentiation between East and Southeast Asians in past work on skin tone and social identity, these are predictions that can be tested in future work.

Altogether, skin tone can shape the perception of others’ social identities and shape one’s own social identity. This is particularly relevant in multicultural societies in which people are more typically aware that individuals can have multiple levels of social identities at various strengths. It may be the case that for East and Southeast Asians, the effect of colorism on social identities may be shaped in a similar manner, but this has yet to be empirically tested. Given that skin tone is determined by genetics (Naik & Farrukh, 2022), and that genetics are perceived to be

associated with race and culture (Lo & Sasaki, 2023), there are interesting and important ways to understand how people may construe social identity (e.g., ethnicity, nationality) of themselves, or of others, from skin tone.

Life Outcomes

Life outcomes diverge along skin tones, with worse outcomes associated with having darker vs. lighter skin tone. Research in the United States documents a host of domains in which skin tone is influential for Black Americans' experiences. For example, Black Americans who have darker skin tone tend to have unfavorable employment outcomes (Monk, 2019) and socioeconomic status (Hill, 2000; Keith & Herring, 1991), relative to their light skinned peers. Black Americans are also more likely to be perceived as prototypical of Black American stereotypes, such as being perceived as a criminal, if they have darker vs. lighter skin tone (Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Maddox & Gray, 2002); as such, darker vs. lighter skinned Black Americans are also more likely to be stopped and arrested by the police (White, 2015) and given the death sentence (Eberhardt et al., 2006). Similarly, darker skin tone is also associated with worse outcomes for Latino/a Americans, and those residing in Latin America, such as poorer health (Perreira & Telles, 2014) and lower educational attainment and socioeconomic status (Hunter, 2002; Villareal, 2010). On average, then, darker skin tone is associated with worse life outcomes across different cultural contexts. This may be due to darker skin increasing racial phenotypicality, which is associated with being treated more negatively by perceivers (Maddox, 2004).

Such evidence is also similarly observed within Southeast Asia. Across three experiments, Chen and Francis-Tan (2022) observed that Singaporeans rated prospective employee photos with medium and dark skin tone as less competent, relative to photos with light

skin tone. However, they also observed that the influence of skin tone bias was weaker when there were clear and unambiguous cues to evaluate the prospective employee's ability (e.g., strong GPA, past work experience). These results communicate that skin tone may be used to evaluate individuals, but do not necessarily override other important information used to evaluate capacity.

Critically, if stereotypes about certain racial groups or nationalities are cues for competence, then perhaps the effect of darker skin tone bias is exacerbated for those of a racial group or national origin stereotyped to be not competent, relative to a group stereotyped to be competent. In the context of East and Southeast Asia, such competency stereotypes may be applied to those of East Asian racial and national origin (and likely towards White Europeans), and less so towards those of Southeast Asians racial and national origin. As such, the life outcomes of skin tone bias may be worse for Southeast Asians than it is for East Asians, the latter of whom are already presumed to be competent.

Real world examples in the labor market are apparent that skin tone may matter more for Southeast Asians than for East Asians. In the Korean entertainment industry, for example, foreign entertainers are often from East Asia (e.g., Japan, China) because of the need to maintain Korean beauty standards, such as light skin. Sometimes foreign entertainers come from Southeast Asia, but appearance standards for Southeast Asians are more strict, and those who do not have the "Korean look" may not be as successful (SeoulSpace, 2023). For example, Filipino actor Christian Lagahit, who played a Filipino migrant worker in the popular Korean television show "Squid Game," described experiences of discrimination that he and other Filipino migrant workers experienced in South Korea (Asian Boss, 2021; Martinus, 2021). Christian also described how foreign actors are always type casted in Korean media productions as either

working class factory workers or criminals, making clear that foreign workers are perceived negatively in South Korea (Asian Boss, 2021). However, actors of Southeast Asian descent are more readily accepted if they are light skinned and appear Korean-looking (SeoulSpace, 2023). Prominent examples include Hanni, a Vietnamese singer from the K-Pop group New Jeans, who has been praised for having the ideal Korean “look”, and to a lesser extent, Lisa, a Thai singer from the K-Pop group Blackpink, who is known for her “porcelain” skin , but is not as popular in Korea due to her looking more clearly Thai than Korean (Cherie, 2023; Kachroo, 2022). This suggests that although skin tone penalties occur for both East and Southeast Asians, Southeast Asians likely receive more of a penalty for darker skin tone relative to East Asians.

Conclusion

While colorism is prominent in both East and Southeast Asia, the origins and expressions of colorism biases differ between the two regions. Specifically, these two regions’ unique histories and racial and ethnic compositions may shape the way skin tone is perceived, with implications for the perception and experiences of people of different skin tones. Existing qualitative and limited quantitative evidence suggests that there is a stronger preference for lighter skin than darker skin among people in both East and Southeast Asia. The desire to appear lighter skinned, marry into lighter-skinned families, or change behaviors to actively lighten one’s skin seem to be shared beliefs and practices that uphold colorism for people in East Asian and Southeast Asian cultures. Yet there may be a potentially stronger association between skin tone with both class and race in Southeast Asia compared to mostly class in East Asia for historical reasons, setting the stage for future investigations that disentangle how these unique contexts matter for entrenched biases dependent on skin tone. The impact of colorism for intergroup

processes, social identity, and life outcomes in East and Southeast Asia is significant and requires further empirical research.

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