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Not just 'tall, light and skinny' by Gary Boyle

Read the following story by AFP. Then, answer the questions that follow.



Photo by AFP

As a young black woman modelling in Hong Kong, Harmony Anne-Marie Ilunga rarely saw anyone who looked like her in the magazines. Now the 22-year-old is trying to change that, one model at a time.

While the Black Lives Matter movement fuels debate and change in the fashion worlds of the United States and parts of Europe, industry figures say

Asia's beauty and body expectations remain dominated by an ideal that is pale, skinny and unrepresentative of the region.

"I would walk into an agency and they told me that they prefer white models to black models," Ilunga, who moved to Hong Kong as a child refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, told AFP.

"I remember just being shattered. I was 17, it just broke my heart."

Again and again, she saw that models in the wealthy global finance hub -- home to roughly 600,000 people of non-Chinese descent -- were expected to be "tall, light and skinny". The same was true of the massive fashion market in mainland China.

"I started lightening my skin, using lightening products... Just so that I could fit into society's norms," Ilunga explained.

After rounds of rejections, in 2018 she opened her own small agency to champion models of all skin tones and sizes.

"Representation matters so much," she said, adding she believes fashion is an accessible way to change minds -- and prevent other young women from feeling they have to change.

TOO MUCH

Ilunga's agency now has 32 male and female models on its books from places such as Rwanda, Burundi, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Philippines. They have enjoyed some successes -- though she admits changing attitudes is hard. One of her most booked models, she said, is an 18-year-old Burundian.

"Most are not local brands, but they are brands that are trying to promote internationally -- that's the thing," she said of the kind of clients willing to look beyond white or Asian models.

Ilunga said she has found male black models are more sought after, seen as "cool, much more stylish". But there is still resistance to black women. She recalled a meeting with a client featuring a model of mixed black and Asian ethnicity.

"She looks Asian, her features, but she has curly hair -- and the client was like, 'she is too much for us'," Ilunga said. "When it comes to certain black girls... I can't categorise it, but I feel like it is still an issue of them being too strong."

SIZE MATTERS

The lack of diversity in Asia's fashion world is not just limited to pale skin tones. While the US and Europe's fashion industries are beginning to welcome campaigns featuring normal bodies -- and even ban some size-zero models on health grounds -- in much of Asia, skinny remains the expectation.

Chinese consumers expect brands to conform to their standards, with an emphasis on pale and slender body types, said Laurence Lim Dally of Cherry Blossoms Intercultural Branding, which helps international brands market to Chinese consumers.

"Being fat is seen as self-neglect," she said.

That pressure was experienced acutely by 31-year-old Eurasian model Mia Kang, who grew up in Hong Kong and was scouted as a teenager -- with her agencies expecting her to maintain the same youthful body. "I think the Asian market has barely even begun to expand its horizons and work towards diversity," Kang said.

Ilunga maintains some optimism. "At least there is a conversation," she said, describing how one parent thanked her for her work and the impact seeing a working young black model, had on her daughters.

"If I had had someone I could look up to when I was young then I would maybe not have lightened my skin."

Section 1: Write the correct answer in the space provided.

1. Where is Ilunga from?
2. China has 600,000 people of non-Chinese descent. True or false?
3. Where is one of Ilunga's most booked models from?
4. Male black models are more popular than females. True or false?
5. Size zero models can be banned in Europe. True or false?
6. China welcomes a diverse range of models. True or false?
7. Mia Kang felt pressure to stay thin. True or false?
8. Ilunga is positive about the future. True or false?

Section 2: Write the noun form of the following words in the space provided.

9. prefer
10. broke
11. opened
12. prevent
13. promote

Section 3: Read the following passage. Then, fill in the blanks with the correct words from the choices given.

She ...14... anorexia and bulimia and used drugs and supplements, doing "...15... I could do to be as thin as possible". While she acknowledges that modelling is ...16... all over the world, the demands made of models in Asia "were some of the ...17... I have experienced". In her book "Knockout", detailing her struggles and recovery with the ...18... of Muay Thai boxing, she speaks of being told she must ...19... weight.

- | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|----------------|
| 14. A. develops | __B. develop | __C. developed |
| 15. A. nothing | __B. anything | __C. thing |
| 16. A. tough | __B. though | __C. thorough |
| 17. A. strict | __B. stricter | __C. strictest |
| 18. A. help | __B. helping | __C. helped |
| 19. A. lose | __B. loose | __C. lost |

Section 4: Find words that match the following definitions.

20. light in colour or having little colour
21. a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war or natural disaster
22. extremely upset and tired
23. slim
24. the feeling of being hopeful for the future

For the answers, find the story online at www.bangkokpost.com/learning. If you have any questions or feedback, please contact the Editor at garyb@bangkokpost.co.th