

SportingLife

# Pin Xiu, the cosmetics star: What a beautiful notion



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**If we wish to exist in a grown-up world, then prejudice needs to be dismantled and inclusion has to be demonstrated. Piece by piece, act by act. When Nike recently signed Justin Gallegos, the runner who has cerebral palsy and who finished a half-marathon in 2hr 3min, it sent us a message: Sport belongs to everybody and talent lives in every body.**

The champion arrived at my office in a Grab taxi. She sat in the back seat, her wheelchair was in the boot. The driver stopped, she retrieved the chair, slid into it and rolled into the lobby. She was beautifully unselfconscious.

We were writing a book together last year for children, her grand young life narrated in rhyme, and she had come to examine one of the earlier drafts. In this version the second stanza of this long poem was about her disability and the third about her Paralympic achievements.

She read unhurriedly and then softly but firmly told me: "Can you please reverse those two paragraphs because I am an athlete first and a disabled person second." This was her life and this was the order in which she defined herself.

This is the beauty of Yip Pin Xiu. Beauty is also found in her ferocity in water, in the clarity of her opinions, in her medal collection which could fill three cupboards. Once, on request, she sent me her list of medals and I stopped counting at 2011 by which time she had 25.

Beauty is the subject at hand because Yip is helping redefine it with Lancome. Beauty, after all, is Lancome's business and by signing a disabled swimmer, this maker of cosmetics is suggesting that even brands can help us expand traditional boundaries.

It's not that Yip isn't pretty for she fits into traditional notions of what is attractive, but her allure also lies in her poise and feats, in her effort and drive, in her ambition and persistence. Now people who deal with perfect complexions are saluting her sweaty deeds and it is ironic, amusing and telling. Lancome style is meeting Yip substance.

Is this real change, a gimmick, or

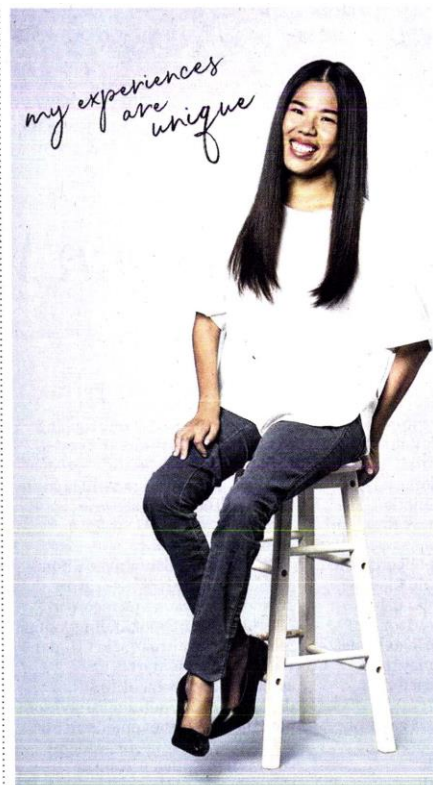
is it at least the opening of a series of valuable conversations? First, on the widening definition of beauty. It can be lipstick, perspiration and muscles, it could be a woman on a catwalk and one in a wheelchair, it might be the perfect nose, courage and the shine of success. Perhaps it's all about what we care to see in each other.

Yip might also see herself as a "girlie girl" who enjoys make-up, but she's proud of the advertisement and the signal it sends. "It looks within, it sees someone as a person." She is beautiful proof of what the campaign encourages, which is a life - in her case in water and on land - lived to its fullest.

Second, perhaps this advertisement will provoke discussion on role models, on those we wish to admire in a society and hold up as worth emulating. In sport the classical hero who uses his sculpted body to overcome rivals will always endure, but there is a growing space for the classy hero who overcomes her body to sculpt success.

Bullies, crutches, a wheelchair, travel, faulty technique, defeat, a disobedient body, Yip has found a way through everything. She's not perfect but she devotedly chases her own athletic perfection and in doing so makes us reconsider our idealised notions of heroism. Her struggle is too beautiful even for Lancome to ignore.

Third, if we wish to exist in a grown-up world, then prejudice needs to be dismantled and inclusion has to be demonstrated. Piece by piece, act by act. When Nike recently signed Justin Gallegos, the runner who has cerebral palsy and who finished a half-marathon in 2hr 3min, it sent us a message: Sport belongs to everybody and talent lives in every



body.

Diversity has to go beyond just being a good idea and perhaps millennials are nudging us harder in that direction. Yip believes they are "more open-minded" and adds that "people want to hear real stories". Like hers, where the facts to her tale are more dramatic than most books of fiction.

In older generations, especially in Asia, disabled people were rarely seen, hidden like a family tragedy. Even when she grew up, says Yip, "I never saw people like me on TV. I thought I was alone." And yet here she is, in a cosmetics advertisement, hair perfectly combed, the model athlete for all to see. It is a moment for a nation as rare as it is fine. It is, you see, beautiful progress.

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Paralympian Yip Pin Xiu is the latest face of French cosmetics house Lancome. The 26-year-old swimmer, a Nominated Member of Parliament, has three golds and a silver from the Beijing and Rio Games.

PHOTO: LANCOME