

The Ideology of Feminine Beauty in Twenty-first Century China

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Critical Asian Humanities
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the mediation of Chinese females with ideals of feminine beauty in twenty-first century China, including cosmetics, cosmetic surgeries and beauty cameras. Through analyzing the generalized social phenomena of feminine beauty, the TV series *Hear Her* (*tingjian tashuo*, 2020), the film *The Truth About Beauty* (*zhengrong riji*, 2014) and the documentary *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall* (*zhengxing yisheng*, 2020), I examine how consumer culture facilitates the attempts of Chinese females to attain ideals of feminine beauty in cosmetic and medical aesthetics markets and how Chinese women endeavor to match beauty standards through the posting of edited lifestyle photographs, particularly selfies, on social media.

I argue that the ideology of feminine beauty becomes unconsciously acceptable because of the desires of consumption stimulated by strategies of fragmentation, comparison and inadequacy and the transformation of the relationship between the object and the subject. Yet women, as the subject of power, are still free beings who can resist power to some extent, even if new ideals of feminine beauty are created in this process. These unrealistic feminine beauty ideals might also be recognized as a form of cruel optimism, in which women are driven to achieve the idealized beauty by the hope provided both consciously and unconsciously through cosmetics and medical aesthetics, believing in the fantasy of feminine beauty in the future tense. Beauty cameras, another

form of technology, function in a more unconscious manner, in which a mixed reality of photography and ultimately simulation is entailed to users' serial repetition of usage. The ideology of feminine beauty hence becomes even more inescapable.

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beauty as capital, the normalization of physical beauty standards, the targets that women compare themselves to and the mediation of these ideals with cosmetics, cosmetic surgeries and beauty cameras.

The significance of beauty is somewhat axiomatic, tracing back to its definition. Beauty, according to contemporary English dictionaries, means “the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit,” “especially to look at.”³ Such a definition suggests a tendency toward positiveness and goodness within. The classical Greek adjective of “beauty,” καλός (kâlos), even directly conveys the meaning of “good.” Yet, presumably because of the straightforwardness of human beauty, beauty is primarily reduced to the attractiveness of physical appearance, in which, according to John Berger, females hold a historical position of being surveyed.⁴ The comprehensive meanings of “beauty” can even be simplified to “a beautiful woman.”⁵ Correspondingly, in the Chinese context, the word *shenmei* shares an analogous circumstance. *Shenmei*, for which “aesthetics” is an inadequate translation, is defined in *The Modern Chinese Dictionary* as “appreciating the

³ “Definition of ‘beauty’ in Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Cambridge Dictionary.” Accessed February 8, 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beauty>;
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/beauty>.

⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 49.

⁵ “Definition of ‘beauty’ in Merriam-Webster Dictionary.” Accessed February 8, 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beauty>.

beauty of things including arts, architecture and nature.”⁶ In Chinese popular culture, *shenmei* is specifically used to describe the appreciation of feminine beauty.

Not only is beauty in general commonly simplified to that of females, it has also been understood as what females must acquire, akin to Yan Hairong’s arguments on *suzhi* (quality), an elusive product as a new valuation and abstraction of subjectivity, especially of the female worker.⁷ As Susan Brownell suggests, *suzhi* includes health and strength for sportswomen and presentation style and aesthetic awareness for models.⁸ In that sense, for Chinese females, *shenmei* appears to be incorporated into *suzhi*, serving as the criteria for their values. The sensibility of an individual’s value can be expressed in the form of capital, with the acquisition of beauty compared to the accumulation thereof. Based on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital, beauty may be primarily regarded as a form of cultural capital in the embodied state that can be converted into economic capital conditionally.⁹ The term “physical capital” is adopted to specifically describe

⁶ “Definition of ‘shenmei’ in Chinese dictionaries.” Accessed February 8, 2021.

<http://www.guoxuedashi.com/hydcd/130823p.html>.

⁷ Hairong Yan. “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing *suzhi*/value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks.” *Cultural Anthropology* 18.4 (2003), 493-523.

⁸ Susan Brownell, “The Body and the Beautiful in Chinese Nationalism-Sportswomen and Fashion Models in the Reform Era”, *China Information* 13(2-3)(1998), 48.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital.” In John Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 243.

cultural capital embodied through physical attributes, including beauty.¹⁰ Chris Shilling develops the idea of physical capital into a form of capital in its own right, with the definition of the value attached to the size, shape and appearance of the body.¹¹ According to Bourdieu, the body is “the most indisputable materialization of class taste” with “the seemingly most natural features of the body”.¹² It reveals “a universe of class bodies...(and) the social structure.”¹³ In that sense, the body is an arena of social politics in which ideals of beauty and methods of conforming to these ideals are shaped by power relations and marked by class-based habitus, with the legitimization of social inequality ensuing in the meantime. On the other hand, beauty is classified as a form of erotic capital or sexual capital. James Farrer offers a general definition of sexual capital, referring to it as one’s “resources, competencies and endowments that provide status as sexual agents within a field.”¹⁴ Adam Isaiah Green specifies erotic capital as the quality and quantity of attributes one possesses that would elicit an erotic response in the other, including physical traits, affective presentations and eroticized sociocultural styles.

¹⁰ Richard Light, “The Body in the Social World and the Social World in the Body: Applying Bourdieu’s Work to Analyses of Physical Activity in School.” Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference, December 2–6, 2001.

¹¹ Chris Shilling, “Physical Capital and Situated Action: A New Direction for Corporeal Sociology”, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25(4) (2004): 474.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste* (London, Routledge, 1984), 190 in Chris Shilling, “Physical Capital and Situated Action: A New Direction for Corporeal Sociology”, 475.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*, 193 in Chris Shilling, “Physical Capital and Situated Action: A New Direction for Corporeal Sociology”, 475.

¹⁴ James Farrer, “A Foreign Adventurer’s Paradise? Interracial Sexuality and Alien Sexual Capital in Reform Era Shanghai”, *Sexualities* 13.1 (2010): 75.

These characteristics can be further divided into the natural and the attainable. For those who can be acquired, the interconvertibility of capital is often highly recognized.¹⁵ A more provocative understanding of erotic capital is expanded by Catherine Hakim, who views it as the fourth personal asset beyond economic, cultural and social capital. In her theory, beauty is central to erotic capital, along with sexual attractiveness, social presentation and emotional labor, among other factors.¹⁶ Outside of the sociological scope, erotic capital can be defined economically based on the human capital theory of Gary Becker and Grossman's concept of health capital. Although Robert T. Michael acknowledges the infeasibility of determining the value of the stock of the constitutive skills and capabilities of an individual's sexual resources, sexual capital is still emphasized as an embedded stock that is inherited but could be produced through the expenditure of resources, effort and strategy.¹⁷ Individuals could invest in sexual capital rationally, especially with a higher rate of return.¹⁸ This statement is further bolstered by Daniel Hamermesh's study indicating that attractive workers earn slightly more than

¹⁵ Adam Isaiah Green, "The Social Organization of Desire: The Sexual Fields Approach." *Sociological Theory* 26 (2008): 29.

¹⁶ Catherine Hakim, "Erotic Capital." *European Sociological Review* 26(5)(2010): 500-501.

For more information about beauty as capital, see Wen Hua, *Buying Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 80-82.

¹⁷ Robert T. Michael, "Sexual Capital: An Extension of Grossman's Concept of Health Capital", *Journal of Health Economics* 23(4) (2004): 644-45.

¹⁸ James Farrer, "A Foreign Adventurer's Paradise? Interracial Sexuality and Alien Sexual Capital in Reform Era Shanghai", 75.

unattractive ones, demonstrating how beauty as capital could be parlayed into economic capital.¹⁹

The valuation of beauty as capital requires the formulation of relative standards regarding physical appearance to provide measures of capital and its interconvertibility. As the protagonist of *Hear Her's* first episode questions after spending hours putting on makeup, "What is beauty? What is ugliness? Who establishes these standards? To whom are these standards set for?" Beauty is naturally solidified into numerous limited principles via slogans in which complicated, experiential, whole and conceptual beauty recedes. For instance, A4 Waist (*A4 yao*), iPhone Knees (*iPhone tui*), Balancing Coins on the Collarbone (*suogu fang yingbi*) and Touching the Belly Button While Reaching the Hand around the Back (*fanshou mo duqi*) have become online crazes on Chinese social media despite their unrealisticness and body-shaming nature. These challenges reflect the aesthetic judgment of extreme thinness in female bodies, particularly as they are mainly imposed on women. Although subjectivity does exist in the dissemination, formation and even absolutization of these standards—an involvement that the protagonist of *Hear Her* acknowledges in the first episode, consumer culture makes a substantial contribution to these processes. Constructed ideals of feminine beauty pervade the media, reinforcing the masses' beliefs of the beauty myth. What, then, are

¹⁹ Daniel Hamermesh, *Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People are More Successful* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2011), 114.

these feminine beauty ideals? As Bourdieu notes, “the principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit.”²⁰ It is challenging to identify distinct standards of feminine beauty. Yet, through an examination of women’s behaviors to align themselves with such ideals, a general picture of feminine beauty ideals in China can be presented, as will be done in the third chapter. It should be noted that there is no single hegemonic form of idealized feminine beauty. As Shilling states, orientation to the body is finely differentiated.²¹ Additionally, from an economic perspective, currencies of erotic capital are variable for highly specialized groups.²² Such diverse ideals of beauty leave room for inclusivity, which will be covered in the second chapter.

Historical context is helpful to comprehend the current ideal of feminine beauty in China. Since ancient periods, standards of feminine beauty have changed considerably. The portraits of women by literati went beyond mere representations and expressed aesthetic qualities.²³ From the late Qing period, the bodies of Chinese women

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 94 in Richard Light, “The Body in the Social World and the Social World in the Body: Applying Bourdieu’s Work to Analyses of Physical Activity in School”.

²¹ Chris Shilling, “Physical Capital and Situated Action: A New Direction for Corporeal Sociology”, 476.

²² Adam Isaiah Green, “The Social Organization of Desire: The Sexual Fields Approach,” 30.

²³ Eva Man, *Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2016), 149.

have been the object of nationalist reform. Sporadic bans and regulations on female attire were imposed by local governments.²⁴ Chinese women who wore *qipao* were slender, docile and graceful in magazines, film posters and advertisements, with an emphasis on the feminine curves of their bodies. In the “enlightening period” from 1919 to 1949, health beauty (*jianmei*) was promoted, emphasizing the contours of the body with bare legs and feet over facial makeup and general physical mobility over passivity.²⁵ Particularly during the New Life Movement, the female body was molded into the conceptions of the ideal female Chinese citizen: women were to participate in athletic activities to enhance their health beauty; they were to have natural feet but not expose them or wear revealing clothing; they were not to lose themselves in the consumption of foreign fashion.²⁶ In this period, women’s strong physiques represented national strength and pride.

In the “degradation period” from 1949 to 1978, femininity advocated toughness and iron-like strength, deviating from the idea of health beauty. Genderless norms of a working-class culture included short hair and revolutionary outfits, substituting the idealized feminine beauty. Inner qualities, including moral and political purity, were

²⁴ Hsiao-pei Yen, “Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation: The Modern Girl and the New Life Movement,” *Asian Studies Review* 29, No. 2 (2005): 171-72.

²⁵ Hsiao-pei Yen, “Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation: The Modern Girl and the New Life Movement,” 179-80.

²⁶ Hsiao-pei Yen, “Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation: The Modern Girl and the New Life Movement,” 171-72, 179-80.

also valued.²⁷ It was not until the “awakening period” started in the late 1970s that gender neutrality was set aside.²⁸ In this period—at least in television advertising in China—the dominant images of women were the “sexy young thing” and the “Good Wife, Wise Mother,” a fusion of Confucian ideology and Western modernity.²⁹ The ideals of feminine beauty in twenty-first century China will be discussed in the third chapter.

Approaches Chinese females take to conform to beauty standards largely include the use of cosmetics, cosmetic surgeries and beauty cameras because they can alter physical characteristics briefly, permanently, or virtually. These three techniques guarantee the prosperity of the beauty industry in China. China has now become the second-largest cosmetics market in the world, following the United States. The cosmetic retail trade revenue in China increased to approximately 300 billion yuan in 2019 and is anticipated to surpass 400 billion yuan by 2023.³⁰ Although the medical aesthetics market in China appears to be smaller than that of cosmetics, cosmetic surgery as an industry is increasing at a faster pace with a 177 billion yuan market scale in 2019 and

²⁷ Eva Man, *Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*, 143-44.

²⁸ The periodization of feminine beauty in China is based on the work of Guo Haiwen. See Guo Haiwen “The Cultural Explanation on Evolution of Chinese Women’s Beauty in the 20th Century,” *Chinese Women College Journal* 1 (2008), 107–111 in Eva Man, *Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*, 140.

²⁹ Beth Notar, “Of Labor and Liberation: Images of Women in Current Chinese Television Advertising,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 10, No. 2 (1994): 30.

³⁰ Agne Blazyte, “Cosmetics market in China - statistics & facts,” *Statista*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.statista.com/topics/1897/cosmetics-in-china/>.

300 billion yuan expected by 2023.³¹ Accompanying the lucrative market is the proliferation of illegal procedures and, more unconsciously, the normalization of mediation technologies, for which beauty cameras can serve as an exemplar.

Ever since the release of the first Beauty Camera by Meitu Inc. in 2013, it has become natural for Chinese people, especially young females, to use beauty cameras when taking selfies. Indeed, selfies have become equated with beauty cameras in China, with a shockingly large number of users: prior to December 2019, there had been 1.88 billion users of Meitu, the first and most popular beauty camera, with 308 million active users in June 2019.³² A relatively large group of people never take selfies without using beauty effects, with over 70 percent of females and 50 percent of males choosing Beauty Camera as their main photography tool rather than the built-in camera.³³ Sensing the broad market of beauty cameras, Chinese cellphone companies such as Huawei, Vivo, Oppo and Nubia have released new phones with built-in beauty cameras.

³¹ Lai Lin Thomala, "Medical aesthetics market size in China 2012-2023," *Statista*, October 19, 2020.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1089021/china-medical-aesthetics-industry-market-size/>.

³² "The 2020 Meitu Female Plog Behaviors Research Report (2020 美图女性 plog 行为研究报告)." Accessed April 20, 2020. <http://www.199it.com/archives/1002893.html>.

³³ "The 2020 Meitu Female Plog Behaviors Research Report (2020 美图女性 plog 行为研究报告)." The figure for males using BeautyCam is not considerably low compared to that of females for several reasons. For instance, the data comes from the big data platform of Meitu and other third-party data sources, and these respondents are users of Meitu. Additionally, since taking pictures for a partner ranks third in men's photographing behaviors, it is possible that certain men use BeautyCam to help their partners to take photos.

By the same token, cosmetic surgeries have entered the everyday life of the middle-class and the younger generation in first- and second-tier cities, with those aged twenty to twenty-nine making up 63 percent of medical aesthetics consumers.³⁴ In today's China, where "artificial beauty" is no longer a news headline because of its commonality, cosmetic surgeries are more accessible and even simplified as "fast food" or "lunchtime cosmetic surgery", meaning women can undergo complete cosmetic procedures over lunch and go back to work directly afterward without recovery time. Such a phrase also implies the ease of deciding to undertake cosmetic surgeries. The user interface of SoYoung, the most popular medical aesthetics software in China and the first Internet-based medical cosmetology stock listed on Nasdaq, is specially designed as an e-commerce platform with discounts, last-minute deals and livestreaming shopping. In this online shopping mall of cosmetic surgeries, consumers can select and book various cosmetic surgeries at a bargain price as if ordering food online, allowing them to undergo these procedures without difficulty. This phenomenon is portrayed in the documentary film *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall* (*zhengxing yisheng*, 2020) directed by Sascha Schoeberl. The documentary's protagonist, Han Xiao—a successful cosmetic surgeon and self-proclaimed performance artist—livestreams breast augmentation surgeries to show not only that there is no pain in breast implantation, but

³⁴ "The 2020 Medical Aesthetics Market White Paper (2020 医美行业白皮书)." Accessed February 10, 2020. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/NXP3IE3rnCM8X4A1ihT_Cg.

also to capture the public's attention. He is constantly concerned about viewers, gifts and followers while livestreaming surgeries. The potential risks and complications of breast augmentation are minimized and even dismissed, reduced to the mere promotion of an act of consumption.

Although the majority of discussions about beauty remain among women, it is worth noting that Chinese men also experience such appearance anxiety. Still, it could be argued that women are more constrained in the acquisition of beauty and *shenmei*. As reported by Ipsos in *Global Attitudes towards Beauty*, on the global average, facial appearance ranks 9th among important attributes in what makes a woman beautiful, and 12th for a man (46% and 39% respectively). Chinese respondents are significantly more likely to consider physical traits such as facial appearance (67%), appearance of skin (67%), youthfulness (65%) and body weight and shape (64%) important to female beauty, with a ranking from 6th to 9th. For male beauty, youthfulness (64%), body weight and shape (62%) and facial appearance (52%) only rank from 11th to 13th in China.³⁵ This report suggests that physical beauty is stressed more in the evaluation of females than males, especially in China. Even if personality traits such as happiness, confidence and dignity are the top three most crucial attributes in what makes an

³⁵ "Global Attitudes towards Beauty." Accessed February 10, 2020.
<https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-08/global-advisor-beauty-august-2019.pdf>.

individual beautiful, the first episode of *Hear Her* nonetheless proposes a divergent opinion. When the surgeon states how confident girls are the most beautiful, the protagonist asks rhetorically, “Doctor, aren’t beautiful girls the most confident?” Such appearance anxiety, along with the statistics shown above, indicates the burgeoning market of beauty in China, saturated with the ideology of feminine beauty. Indeed, the overemphasis on feminine beauty has existed in China for a long time. The female bodily ideals in Chinese history can be traced back to *The Books of Songs (shijing)*, which contains musical pieces and poems from the West Zhou period to the late Warring States period.³⁶ The female body has served as a signifier of power relations from the Chinese feudal society to the present.

Still, the significance of feminine beauty has not been stressed throughout Chinese history in a linear manner. In Mao’s era, caring about physical appearance was recognized as bourgeois, morally bankrupt and deleterious to society. What followed such a political judgment on beauty was the gender erasure particularly present during the Cultural Revolution, which induced a lack of feminine beauty among Chinese women after the reform and opening up a lack of quality in the Chinese laboring masses similar to *suzhi*.³⁷ As Jean Baudrillard explains in *The System of Objects*, consumption is

³⁶ Eva Man, *Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*, 46.

³⁷ Hairong Yan. “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing *suzhi*/value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks”, 493-523.

irrepressible neither because of psychological determinism nor the desire for prestige, but rather, a deficiency: a “disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life.” In this, the consumption of signifiers of feminine beauty must multiply to make up for the constant absence in reality.³⁸ Baudrillard’s argument explains the craze for feminine beauty in China in the modern era.

After the 1980s, physical beauty entailing femininity and masculinity was reclaimed as a part of popular consciousness by the state, and the beauty industry began to flourish. The rapid economic development occurring ever since, along with the prevalence of consumerism, allow Chinese females to regard physical appearance highly and increases the affordability of consumption regarding aesthetics. It is no coincidence that the opening scenes of *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall* and *The Truth About Beauty* (*Zhengrong riji*, 2014) are both urban landscapes. The gleaming skyscrapers, clean streets and wide roads with numerous racing cars all demonstrate modernity, technological advancement and the emphasis on appearance. It is in such scenarios that transnational encounters with Japanese and, in particular, South Korean popular culture have taken place. The Korean Wave that brought South Korean idols, music and entertainment to China also introduced alternate ideals of feminine beauty and the newest technologies

³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Bennedict (London: Verso Books, 1996), 204-205.

concerning physical appearance, especially cosmetics and cosmetic surgeries, generating such ideologies around feminine beauty.

Overall, my thesis intends to focus on the mediation of Chinese females with ideals of feminine beauty in twenty-first century China, including through the use of cosmetics, cosmetic surgeries and beauty cameras. My discussion over feminine beauty remains within the range of the physical beauty of women. “Feminine” is used instead of “female” to emphasize feminine beauty in femininity, or, more specifically, how femininity is now defined as “a bodily property” in which females become active sexual subjects rather than being simply objectified under the sexualization of society, especially in the twenty-first century.³⁹ It also implies that feminine beauty is not restricted to females, although such a topic will not be thoroughly discussed in this thesis due to length limitations. The second chapter will examine how consumer culture facilitates Chinese females’ attempts to attain ideals of feminine beauty in the cosmetics and medical aesthetics markets. Through consumer culture, a transformation from objectification to subjectification rationalizes the gaze of dominant groups and internalizes the beauty standards which binds to females. In the third chapter, I will explore how Chinese females align themselves with beauty ideals through posting lifestyle photographs, particularly selfies, on social media. Through the medium of

³⁹ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.2 (2007), 149.

beauty cameras, a simulation is generated in which the ideology of feminine beauty becomes more inescapable.

2. The Construction and Acceptance of Feminine Beauty Ideals in the Beauty Industry

As the aforementioned statistics indicate, the beauty industry, particularly the cosmetic and medical aesthetics markets, is experiencing exuberant growth in China. Such a fact cannot be attributed merely to economic development and is the result of a complex combination of forces in which consumer culture is pivotal. Indeed, the continuous buying behaviors of Chinese women in makeup and medical aesthetics are, to some extent, manipulated by the consumer culture. The simple logic that assumes renewed appearance—and, thereby, a better self and improved quality-of-life automatically brought about by these transformative technologies—appears to prevail over rationality.⁴⁰ Hence, it is natural to question how this phenomenon has become possible.

2.1 Constructing Idealized Feminine Beauty in Media

In the early twentieth century, new media established a solid foundation for consumer culture.⁴¹ Since then, photographic images of young, beautiful women have been pervasive in magazines, billboards, television, cinema and the Internet. Such an obsession with feminine beauty extends beyond the scope of the beauty and fashion industries into other sectors, convincing the public of the pleasure and necessity of

⁴⁰ It should be noted that such a logic is not absolutely irrational but not as rational as it seems.

⁴¹ Mike Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture", *Theory, Culture & Society* 1, No. 2 (1982): 19.

consumption. Concurrently, the significance of physical appearance and the idealized feminine beauty are projected to a broader audience. These ideals of feminine beauty are primarily depicted through the calculated use of photographic images of attractive celebrities and models. As Laura Mulvey observes regarding Josef von Sternberg's films, "the beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look."⁴² Here, the perfect beauty of the woman occupies the screen despite the "flatness" it offers, instead of "the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative."⁴³ Such an ideal of beauty, according to Mike Featherstone, is "an acceptable still façade of the face and body" related to imagination, meaning "what one imagines one should be and strives to construct".⁴⁴ Applying Bourdieu's comparison of photography and allegory, these images of appealing women can also be regarded as a symbol of feminine or even generalized beauty, "allegory" here referring to the use of a concrete form to represent the unrepresentable.⁴⁵ In other words, ideals of feminine beauty are constructed through

⁴² Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 841.

⁴³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 838.

⁴⁴ Mike Featherstone, "Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture", *Body & Society* 16, No. 1 (2010): 197-98.

⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Definition of Photography" in Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Dominique Schnapper, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 91-92.

media and inherently unattainable due to the nature of imagination and allegory.

Additionally, this unattainability could be ascribed to Mulvey's argument of fetishistic scopophilia as a method to overcome male castration anxiety. According to Mulvey, the represented figure is transformed into a fetish object with over-valued physical beauty to be reassuring rather than dangerous. The pleasing objectification allows the male unconscious to escape from this anxiety.⁴⁶ Still, two questions emerge at this juncture: by whom are ideals of feminine beauty constructed, and why do these ideals appear to be achievable?

Stemming from Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, it has become commonplace for media, as a part of the ideological state apparatus, to contribute to the natural maintenance of the dominant statuses of society. Hence, a general response to the first question raised above would be that it is the dominant group that decides how ideals of feminine beauty will be portrayed through media. Yet, a hegemonic representation of the idealized feminine beauty does not exist, the diversity and flexibility of such ideals resulting from a variety of determining forces, including men, women, consumerism and the state. One typifying example brought up by Martin Roberts is lifestyle television such as *What Not to Wear*, which advances the naturalization of middle-class tastes and the transformation of

⁴⁶ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 840.

petit-bourgeois subjects and audiences. On the other hand, traditional class and racial hierarchies are concealed in these shows with the use of slang in working-class language and, more importantly, the unique tastes of the hosts that judge appearance regardless of social status and promote working-class styles.⁴⁷ Comparable tendencies are perceptible in recent advertisements that celebrate the inclusiveness of beauty, which will be discussed later.

2.2 Three Strategies in Advertising

Still, how the idealized feminine beauty becomes a misleading mirage is questionable. It is helpful to turn to advertising, the intersection of feminine beauty and consumer culture that catalyzes the consumption of transformative technologies, particularly cosmetics and medical aesthetics. Advertising as a whole generally presents a comfortable and socially acceptable lifestyle as the product of an assembly of goods and experiences. Three strategies are commonly employed by beauty advertising to construct an inner narrative of what one believes they should and can be through the purchase of particular products: fragmentation, comparison and inadequacy. These strategies are particularly effective in television advertising, partially due to the nature of moving images. As Walter Benjamin's comparison to the painting in *The Work of Art*

⁴⁷ Martin Roberts, "The Fashion Police: Governing the Self in What Not to Wear" in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 232-243.

in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction indicates, moving images interrupt the spectator's thought process with constant, sudden changes, constituting the shock effect.⁴⁸ The audience unconsciously accepts the ideology of feminine beauty, presumably due to this effect.

Fragmentation of the body is frequently found in media about women. Indeed, advertising in general usually presents how a comfortable and socially acceptable lifestyle is an assembly of goods and experiences. Furthermore, such fragmentation is deeply rooted in gender, both psychologically and culturally. As Mei Mei Rado's argument regarding the lady's fan in Republican China, a small fragment such as hair, the lips or the legs is often viewed as a symbol of the body in its entirety and ultimate femininity.⁴⁹ In the example of lips, Freudian theory recognizes lips as the fetish object that compensates for a psychological deficit, inevitably carrying sexual allure along with them. On the other hand, from the perspective of gender theory, lips are the object of expression that perform the female identity. In the actual practice of fragmentation in media, close-ups are employed to present the fragmented body parts to show women as spectacles. The stress on certain body parts can also serve as indispensable elements of

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007): 238.

⁴⁹ Mei Mei Rado, "The Lady's Fan: Fashion Accessories and Modern Femininity in Republican China" in *Fashion, Identity, and Power in Modern Asia*, eds. Kyunghee Pyun and Aida Yuen Wong (Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 193-230.

the suture in sensual or sexual scenes. Through the representation of joyful, carefree, beautiful females as constituted by images of various perfect body parts, advertisements capture the attention of the audience and imply to women that—using the promoted products—they could be as attractive, pleasing and contented as the models. Although these models are converted into sexless and functional objects, as stated by Baudrillard—the fragmentation of the body in the process of sublimation denies the body in its evocation, such an implication instills ideals of feminine beauty in the unconscious mind of the audience, resulting in the further purchase of cosmetics and other products.⁵⁰

Comparison is the fundamental strategy used in advertising to arouse desires and justify the rationality of a purchase. Two types of comparisons are made in this process: that of the consumers' physical appearance with the presented photographic images of models and that of the body, self and life before and after the use of the product. In the former, images of feminine beauty presented in the dominant visual media stimulate an individual's consciousness of their appearance, furthering the comparison with models. The latter is generally seen as the before-and-after shots proving the effectiveness of a product and the value of time, money and energy spent in

⁵⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myth & Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 133-34.

its use. In reality, before-and-after shots are frequently combined with fragmentation—that is, the Problem-Solution pattern identified by Helen Ringrow.⁵¹

Although this pattern can also be found in other fields of consumption, it is particularly notable when concerning the beauty industry. The problems referenced are designed, or even invented, to increase appearance anxiety, facilitating buying decision-making. The thorough fragmentation of body parts in cosmetics and medical aesthetics as if taxonomy creates more problems and may even encourage repeat purchases. The problem normally has multiple layers, with multiple products as the corresponding solutions. Skincare problems, for example, may include dryness, expression lines, wrinkles or blackheads, and makeup problems, foundation, eyebrows, eyelashes, eyeliner or cheeks. In order to solve these problems, consumers must purchase from various categories of specialized products. For instance, under the generalized problem of dry skin, facial creams, body lotions, hand creams, lip balms and eye creams are marketed targeted to different body parts. In the promotion of these products, close-up shots or particular camera angles are used to emphasize certain body parts.⁵² The relationship between such fragmentation and its manifestation is reciprocal in the sense that the fragmentation could be attributed at least in part to the gaze leading to these

⁵¹ Helen Ringrow, *The Language of Cosmetics* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 38.

⁵² Helen Ringrow, *The Language of Cosmetics*, 40.

close-up shots, which maximize even the most trivial flaws, create anxiety and encourage consumption.

What lies behind the pattern of problem and solution is the unconscious that treats the body as a target for censorship. The body becomes a menacing object with various problems in need of solving to attain beauty, referred to by Baudrillard as “repressive solicitude” in the contexts of hygiene and dieting.⁵³ His observations of sexuality also apply here to feminine beauty. In sexuality, Baudrillard notes, censorship is not socially instituted. Rather, it is internalized and ingrained in the individual unconscious.⁵⁴ By the same token, Berger mentions the split between the surveyor and the surveyed within a woman’s identity. Berger believes that the appearance of a woman determines how men treat her and that she must contain and interiorize such a process to gain control over it. Such self-treatment constitutes a woman’s presence, which is dependent upon herself or even her physicality. Therefore, a woman must constantly surveil herself, in Berger’s words, “continually accompanied by her own image of herself.”⁵⁵ In this process of surveying, a woman transforms herself into an object, particularly to be seen. Aware of being looked at and the potential presence of a

⁵³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myth & Structures*, 141-42.

⁵⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myth & Structures*, 145.

⁵⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

spectator, the woman may respond to an actual or imagined audience with “calculated charm.”⁵⁶

Feminine beauty has been censored continually and internally as a function of everyday life. For Baudrillard, such censorship functions symbolically in advertising as fantasies, cultivating the desire for consumption. He describes consumer buying processes under a “strategy of desire”: “first at the level of the ‘reading’ of symbols, then by the acquisition of the goods designated by those symbols and supporting those ‘fantasies.’”⁵⁷ Such stimulation of desire is associated with the strategy of inadequacy, which can also be identified in the Problem-Solution pattern. The strategy of inadequacy refers to the ideals of beauty being unattainable, and the efforts to reach these ideals never adequate. Consumers must keep purchasing these products to maintain the problem being “solved” or “to be solved” and address other problems to meet beauty standards, trapped in the illusion that the unattainable can be achieved through attainable products.

Such an inadequacy is closely related to the insatiable aspirations which arise from media. Here, it is useful to mention what Louisa Schein refers to in her article on Chinese consumerism as “imagined cosmopolitanism.” She begins her discussion on this concept with cargo cults. As Schein explains, cargo cults “have been characterized as

⁵⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 49.

⁵⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myth & Structures*, 145-47.

comprising the desire for wealth, some sort of collective behavior, and the use of supernatural means to achieve collective ends” among indigenous peoples encountering white people.⁵⁸ To Schein, the central point of cargo cults is not just the economic inequality between indigenous peoples and whites, but how “these external agents were transforming indigenous economies into forms that even further highlighted the irrationality of decidedly unequal modes of production and distribution.”⁵⁹ These cargo cults are more concerned with the indigenization of European products. In a Chinese context, imagined cosmopolitanism surmounts “the spatial constraint of locality, about entering onto the global stage by means that circumvent geographic mobility.”⁶⁰ The notion of imagining stresses the spatial separation of people, which is achieved through media, while that of the community would suggest horizontal unity without distinctive differences. As Schein states, “the moment in which even Chinese who cannot afford to travel or purchase foreign goods are striving for membership in global consumption cultural is one that emerges from the presence of global mediation and satellite broadcasting and of the mobility of meanings that circulate through these channels.”⁶¹ She argues that “this fledgling culture industry tutors Chinese consumers-in-training to

⁵⁸ Louisa Schein, “Chinese Consumerism and the Politics of Envy: Cargo in the 1990s?” In *Whither China: Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Xudong Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 293.

⁵⁹ Louisa Schein, “Chinese Consumerism and the Politics of Envy: Cargo in the 1990s?”, 294.

⁶⁰ Louisa Schein, “Chinese Consumerism and the Politics of Envy: Cargo in the 1990s?”, 297.

⁶¹ Louisa Schein, “Chinese Consumerism and the Politics of Envy: Cargo in the 1990s?”, 296.

live in the space of ever-renewed desire” or, to be specific, trains women to be “consuming and desiring individuals...who are denied their personhood by being deployed as vehicles for sale.”⁶²

Although the circumstances of the beauty industry in China have changed since Schein’s article was published, with the thriving Chinese economy and emergence of domestic products (*guohuo*), the fundamental logic remains consistent. The Internet further creates the illusion of cosmopolitanism and presents the life of the upper-class as fulfilling, with desirable products refreshing and attracting the attention of the user. Among these, lipsticks seem to be the most attainable products of affordable prices, remarkable effect and good quality. While it takes a thousand yuan to purchase a miniature or outdated Chanel handbag, a Chanel lipstick used by celebrities costs less than four hundred. In addition, there are numerous colors and mattes of lipstick from various brands. Thus, it is unsurprising, with the insatiable desire created by media, that the sales of lipstick have surged. Another example in the Chinese context is livestream shopping in the Singles’ Day shopping holiday season. As most livestream shopping takes place at midnight, consumers must stay up late to find bargains, even on workdays. Such overnight activity and sleep deprivation could bring about dark circles under the eyes. In order to get rid of dark eye circles, special skincare and cosmetic

⁶² Louisa Schein, “Chinese Consumerism and the Politics of Envy: Cargo in the 1990s?”, 300, 302.

products are promoted in the market and used by consumers rather than their following a regular bedtime routine. Certain consumers might even purchase expensive eye creams and concealers to remove dark eye circles when they are up late to watch livestream shopping, suggesting how cosmetics stand in for the work and the overflow of consumerism. As Baudrillard proposes, the need for the object of social “demand” has replaced work, leading to a new understanding of workers. People do not merely work to create something valuable but to produce value to satisfy other demands.⁶³ In the case of livestream shopping, staying up late, watching livestream shopping and purchasing becomes the work of the consumers, who, in turn, create value for e-commerce platforms. By doing such work, the consumers satisfy their needs for the removal of dark circles under the eyes, which are partly attributable to that work.

With numerous variable signifiers, advertising is what Featherstone refers to as “a poetics of everyday life” with the transmutation of values. Based on a reading of Stuart Ewen, Featherstone further claims that “advertising thus [helps] to create a world in which individuals are made to become emotionally vulnerable, constantly monitoring themselves for bodily imperfections which could no longer be regarded as natural.”⁶⁴ Indeed, through the three mentioned strategies—fragmentation, comparison and

⁶³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotexte, 1983), 39.

⁶⁴ Mike Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture”, 20.

inadequacy—idealized feminine beauty has been adapted into an ingrained unconscious fascination and become the basic, imperative and absolute quality of women. Such a demand for feminine beauty then materializes as symbols and consumable objects similar to human faculties, Baudrillard develops on Marxist theory.⁶⁵ To achieve beauty ideals and receive social acceptance, women are left no choice but to use their bodies to their advantage through, in Baudrillard's term, narcissistic reinvestment.⁶⁶ As the representation of the subject's body is split into that of the body as capital and as fetish (or consumer object) under the current nature of production and consumption, the body needs to be deliberately invested in, both in the economic and physical senses.⁶⁷ An individual is, therefore, supposed to make a narcissistic investment in the body and transform it into a functional object for the outside world, rather than diving deep into the soul. Baudrillard names such a relation "managed narcissism" in which the body becomes "the finest of these psychically possessed, manipulated and consumed objects."⁶⁸ The individual also invests economically to produce and achieve capitalist objectives. The body is reappropriated as "a normative principle of enjoyment and hedonistic profitability... an enforced instrumentality that is indexed to the code and the

⁶⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso Books, 1996), 201.

⁶⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myth & Structures*, 132-33.

⁶⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myth & Structures*, 129.

⁶⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myth & Structures*, 131.

norms of a society of production and managed consumption.”⁶⁹ Baudrillard goes on to specify the homology between bodies and objects in which their significations are exchanged, meaning the rediscovery of the body initiates the drive to buy.⁷⁰ The body is then emancipated for rational exploitation.

2.3 A Case Study of the Lipstick

Among all forms of transformative technology products, the lipstick is exceptional not just because of its popularity, mentioned above, but also in the commonality of the continuous purchase of lipsticks with similar use-value. Indeed, at least on Chinese social media, it appears that women continuously purchase lipsticks with indistinguishable colors and mattes. In an episode of the Chinese version of *Queer Eye, You Are So Beautiful* (*ni zenme zheme haokan*, 2019), when the “Fab Five” equivalent group learns that a Ph.D. student they are making over does not own any lipstick, they look genuinely shocked. They go on to express their belief that women need to have at least one lipstick. Although their claim is, fundamentally, a stereotype, it does reflect the importance of lipstick in feminine beauty. Additionally, the career of well-known livestreamer Li Jiaqi, who brought about sales worth more than three thousand million yuan on Singles’ Day in 2020, started with lipstick: By putting lipstick on four models in

⁶⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myth & Structures*, 131.

⁷⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myth & Structures*, 134.

thirty seconds, he set a Guinness record for “the most lipstick applications to models in 30 seconds.” Furthermore, Li tried on three hundred and eighty lipsticks in one livestream and sold fifteen thousand lipsticks in five minutes on Taobao, the largest online retail platform in China. Since this occurred, he has been known as the “King of Lipstick.” Both the reality show and the case of Li Jiaqi as King of Lipstick suggest the significance of lipstick to feminine beauty.

Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects* may be particularly helpful in explaining the behavior of Chinese women purchasing multiple, similar lipsticks beyond their affordability. Based on the Marxist dichotomy of use-value and exchange-value, György Lukács’ and Theodor Adorno’s analyses indicate the growing dominance of exchange-value and the corresponding decreasing use-value.⁷¹ Baudrillard, on the other hand, proposes the theory of sign-value, defining beauty as a sign-value that reduces concrete values to a single functional exchange-value. Lipstick is recognized as a sign-value with a certain use-value, but barely any exchange-value. The use-value lipstick contains renders it part of a functional system, with both design and atmospheric values deriving from its colors and mattes. Yet, to Baudrillard, the functional system transcends the traditional one in the function of the object, the primary demands and the symbolic relationship between the two. Functionality is, then, defined as “the ability to become

⁷¹ Mike Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture”, 20.

integrated into an overall scheme."⁷² In that sense, the lipstick simply has a universal value as a signifier and assimilates into two types of totality—as mentioned in fragmentation—the private and the bodily. one, as it is mentioned above in fragmentation. The private totality is associated with the non-functional system, specifically, the marginal system of collection. The act of buying similar lipsticks corresponds to collecting, especially given these lipsticks may not be used frequently. Cosmetic brands also release lipstick collection sets, made for the convenience of collecting and gifting. As the private property of the owner, these lipstick collections convey a passion for beauty. In that sense, they become possessed as they are partially abstracted from the function and brought into the relationship with the subject, the owner.⁷³ In the process of collection, the owner elicits a sublimity from fanaticism. As Baudrillard explains, the feeling of possession is formed on “a confusion of the senses...an intimacy with the privileged object...searching, ordering, playing and assembling.”⁷⁴ For the owner, purchasing and collecting these lipsticks helps to overcome appearance anxiety. It is reassuring to be surrounded by successive, homologous objects. Additionally, since these lipsticks share comparable functions to tools, they inherently carry the hope of solving problems and, in reality, may mitigate

⁷² Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 63.

⁷³ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 86.

⁷⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 88.

the problem to some extent. Collecting lipstick could also serve as a rebellion against idealized feminine beauty. Baudrillard points out the fact that an owner can recognize herself in the object as “an absolutely singular being,” given their possession of the object.⁷⁵ Likewise, the owner of lipstick has a sense of control over the same lipstick as promoted in the media and used by these ideals, similar to how the wrist-watch enables the subject to master time. The partial omission of the actual function of lipstick, beautification, also suggests such rebellion.

Still, this collection behavior ultimately reinforces the ideology of feminine beauty by facilitating lipstick sales. The display of lipstick in a sales context is worth noting: lipstick counters are generally placed near the entrance on the first floor of department stores and shopping malls. Inside these counters the products are on display. Featherstone observes that the individual is likewise on display as far as her social acceptability to the salesperson, other consumers and consumer culture itself.⁷⁶

Featherstone summarizes how the idealization of feminine beauty is unconsciously ingrained in women, arguing that “individuals are somehow programmed to accept essentially false wants and needs...two broad levels on which consumer culture operates: (a) it provides a multiplicity of images designed to stimulate needs and desires, (b) It is based on and helps to change the material arrangements of

⁷⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 90.

⁷⁶ Mike Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture”, 19.

social space and hence the nature of social interactions."⁷⁷ Employing comparison, fragmentation and inadequacy, advertising ignites the desire and demand for feminine beauty using images. To satisfy such desires and demands, products in the beauty industry are consumed in the way that their relationship with the subject is altered. These two approaches render the ideology of feminine beauty acceptable to the individual.

2.4 The Participation of Individuals

It seems problematic to regard women who invest in transformative technologies as purely misguided or as deluded victims.⁷⁸ Zhou Xiaozheng, a sociologist from Renmin University, even claims that cosmetic surgery is contemporary foot-binding in women's submission to the male gaze.⁷⁹ Such a claim oversimplifies the diverse ideals of feminine beauty in China and their complex constructive forces, overlooking female agency in transformative technologies, particularly cosmetic surgeries and even, to an extent, foot-binding. As Dorothy Ko's analysis of foot-binding indicates, male desire and taste alone cannot lead to the longevity, geographical and social scope of foot-binding. Although females did not have free choice under the Confucian patriarchy, it is the

⁷⁷ Mike Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture", 30.

⁷⁸ See Jie Yang, "Nenu and Shunu: Gender, body politics, and the beauty economy in China", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 2 (2011): 333-357.

⁷⁹ China Daily, "China Braces for First Miss Plastic Surgery", 2004.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-12/17/content_401180.htm. Accessed August 21, 2009 in Wen Hua, *Buying Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery in China*, 66-67.

participation of women in footwear that contributed to the spread of foot-binding.⁸⁰ A similar argument can be made regarding cosmetic surgeries, which also involve bodily transformation. As beauty as capital is widely recognized, it is natural for women to undergo cosmetic surgeries to improve their appearance and gain more capital. In *The Truth About Beauty*, the protagonist's breakup with her boyfriend and the appearance discrimination she encounters when seeking a job are two primary catalysts for her undergoing cosmetic surgeries. In the cosmetic surgery clinics, her determination around beautification is invalidated by surgeons and nurses who talk endlessly about the significance of beauty and the successful cases of other patients. After the makeover, she does achieve happiness within a relationship and find employment. In *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall*, the process of receiving cosmetic surgery is illustrated in more detail. In the breast augmentation surgeries performed by the surgeon, Han Xiao, patients who choose to be livestreamed dream of becoming famous overnight through this opportunity. From the moment they walk into the clinic, several phone cameras rush in, recording or livestreaming every act. While nurses comfort the patients, Han Xiao guarantees the safety of breast implantation and responds as if it is unnecessary to be concerned about potential risks. The possibility of these patients earning fame, given the celebrities that received the same surgery, is implied repeatedly in their talks. With their

⁸⁰ Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2017), 228-29.

belief in improved physical appearance and subsequent fame, these patients sing songs while wearing delicate makeup, even when lying on the operating table and being operated upon. After the surgeries, these patients quickly upload Tik Tok dance videos to show their smooth and fast recovery, despite their exhaustion. In this case, although the patients are misled by the surgeon and nurses to some extent, they show their agency and make a rational choice to maximize their advantages under the ideology of feminine beauty. Their decisions glorify the inherent risks of cosmetic surgery and encourage more women to make such choices without much anxiety. Traditionally, the process of cosmetic surgery is related to “the grotesque,” the opposite of beauty, with blood and flesh serving as a symbol for disfigurement and death.⁸¹ Yet, the livestreaming of breast implantation downplays the seriousness of surgery, connecting it to entertainment and enjoyment. For these patients cooperating with the livestream, unlike females with bound feet, there is free choice despite their desire for beauty shaped by the constructed ideals of feminine beauty. As Featherstone points out, the ability to take charge and transform one’s body reflects the narratives of individualism, rational choice and market behavior—in a nutshell, the classic bourgeois ego.⁸²

In explaining the free choice of women in improving their physical appearance, especially using cosmetics and cosmetic surgeries, Michel Foucault’s analysis of power

⁸¹ Mike Featherstone, “Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture”, 205.

⁸² Mike Featherstone, “Body Image/Body without Image”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(2-3)(2006), 234.

may be helpful. For Foucault, the essence of power is action or conduct rather than consensus and violence. The exercise of power is, then, “a way in which certain actions modify others.”⁸³ He therefore eliminates the power-over model, focusing instead on power relations. A relationship of power is “a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others...[instead]...acts upon their actions.”⁸⁴ For the subject of power—although power relations can be described without particular subjects ascribed—Foucault states that freedom is the sine qua non. The relationship between power and freedom is not a face-to-face confrontation but a complicated interplay. As he points out, “at the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom.”⁸⁵ From David Couzens Hoy’s reading, such an interplay indicates that freedom is also the effect of power because the resistance encountered by the exercising of power manifests freedom.⁸⁶ Furthermore, Foucault agrees that power rises from the bottom, rather than reaching from the top down—although such top-bottom metaphor cannot be entirely accurate given that power is understood as more of a grid or network without an absolute top

⁸³ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power” in Hubert L. Dreyfus, Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 219.

⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, 220.

⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, 221-222.

⁸⁶ David Couzens Hoy, “Power, Repression, Progress: Foucault, Lukes, and the Frankfurt School” in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 139.

and bottom. Therefore, the study of power involves the everyday practices of individuals experiencing micro-power confronting and resisting impositions of power.⁸⁷

It is, then, clear that under the ideology of feminine beauty, females, as the subjects of power, are free beings as they have their own behaviors and reactions. In the exercising of power, their actions—along with their appearances, in this case—are altered as they accept the significance of the physical characteristics of idealized feminine beauty and achieve such ideals. It is in these daily practices of women putting on makeup, undertaking medical aesthetics and using beauty cameras, as will be discussed in the next chapter, to improve their attractiveness that micro-power is revealed.

2.5 The Resistance

What has been examined thus far seems not to include the resistance against the exercising of power, another manifestation of freedom. In actual practice, consumers have begun to reject brands that advocate traditional feminine beauty—primarily slim, young, flawless and heterosexual—in advertisements and pursue more natural looks. Faced with the rise of inclusivity in beauty, advertising captures such resistance through the use of diverse models and feminist slogans. Such a trend implies female empowerment, not just in the sense that women can choose the brand ambassadors or

⁸⁷ David Couzens Hoy, "Power, Repression, Progress: Foucault, Lukes, and the Frankfurt School", 142-143.

models they prefer, make their own decisions and buy themselves commodities, but also in that idealized feminine beauty appears to collapse. Yet, the logic of transformation still exists in this new advertising: previously, women would become young, sexy, beautiful females after the purchase of these beauty products. Now, they will transform from traditional females into independent and confident ones. In addition, consumer culture still lies underneath the pursuit of naturalness, enabling its targets to consume more and harsher standards of beauty, as “natural” beauty is still an ideal of beauty. Looking beautiful while being natural becomes a more unattainable ideal, especially when naturalness is merely referred to as harmless flaws. To achieve such a goal, women draw fake freckles over delicate makeup, use various products to get perfect, natural eyebrows and the like. More work must be done to become “effortless chic,” and more rules of feminine beauty are imposed.

The commodification of “naturalness” in feminine beauty appears to be prevalent in post-feminism, presumably because post-feminism is inherently contradictory. One crucial part of this contradiction is what Angela McRobbie calls the “double entanglement,” in which both neoconservative values and liberal ideas and both feminism and the repudiated attitude toward feminism coexist.⁸⁸ Another tendency

⁸⁸ Angela McRobbie, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime” in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 28.

in post-feminism is the fetishization of youth, valorizing youth and considering female adulthood as undesirable and boring. These two characteristics are interrelated: post-feminism's preoccupation with the temporary could, at least in part, be attributed to its complicated relationship with feminism—or, to put it bluntly, its inability to deal with the past harmoniously. As McRobbie argues, post-feminism suggests the achievement of equality, implying the obsolescence of feminism. Therefore, post-feminism conflicts with feminism and, thus, attempts to either supplant or supplement. Yet, post-feminism cannot bypass feminism without neglecting certain basic issues, leading to an inevitable contradiction.

Besides the inner contradictions within the commodification of natural beauty, feminist slogans also contain ambiguity. The collusion among the male gaze, consumer culture and so forth achieves deeper subjectification in the disguise of feminism using words such as “empowerment,” “freedom” and “choice,” according to Michelle M. Lazar's analysis on advertising.⁸⁹ Women are then converted into the docile bodies, in

⁸⁹ Michelle M. Lazar, “Discover the power of femininity! Analyzing global ‘power femininity’ in local advertising”, *Feminist Media Studies* 6, No. 4 (2006): 505-517.

Michelle M. Lazar, “The Right to be Beautiful: Postfeminist Identity and Consumer Beauty Advertising” In *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, eds. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 37-51.

Foucault's terminology, that are disciplined through self-regulation. Such a phenomenon reflects the "double entanglement" between neoliberalism and feminism or, more precisely, feminism as common sense and feminism as feared and hated.⁹⁰

As Lazar points out, the normative practices of beautification are now connected to feminism, particularly as an emancipated, powerful, free identity capable of making her own choices. Such a portrait of women remains problematic. Even when applying Foucault's analysis of power, the freedom of the subject disappears where power is exercised.⁹¹ Under this ideology, to be or to approach ideals of feminine beauty becomes a woman's only objective, never to be achieved, and beautification and self-regulation to such ideals demonstrate her femininity. Failure to practice such beautification and refusal of this ideology indicate that she is not only unattractive in the traditional sense but also unacceptable in the eyes of "feminists," as not pursuing the ideals of beauty suggests she is incapable of taking command of her own life and, thus, becoming an independent, powerful woman. One then becomes a failure in both masculinism and feminism. Indeed, in reality, women who lack "a fit body" are considered not to possess self-discipline. The ideals of women are subsequently essentialized into a more idealized

⁹⁰ Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility", *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, No. 2 (2007), 161.

⁹¹ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", 221.

figure: she must be successful at work, independent, powerful, and a good mother while ideologically beautiful.

Such unattainable feminine beauty ideals could also be recognized as a form of the cruel optimism proposed by Laura Berlant. Here, optimism is manifested by attachments, structures of relationality, and the desires to sustain them. Cruel optimism is thus defined as “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic.” The cruelty lies in the fact that even if the presence of an object endangers the subject’s well-being, losing such an object would be unbearable due to the loss of hope of “what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world,” regardless of the content of the attachment.⁹² Optimism becomes cruel when it is crystallized as a double-bind: “a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent.”⁹³ Berlant’s idea of cruel optimism focuses particularly on “the good life” as constituted by enduring reciprocity in families, upward mobility, job security and political and social equality.⁹⁴ Cruel optimism functions as a deictic for “the good life,” in which the conditions of attrition lead to the suspension of the cruelty of the current

⁹² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 13, 24.

⁹³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 51.

⁹⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2-3.

moment via a concept of the future. In this sense, cruel optimism points toward a lived immanence in which individuals choose familiar attachments or move toward normativity.⁹⁵ In the case of feminine beauty, idealized feminine beauty becomes an essential part of the fantasy of “the good life.” Women are driven to attain such ideals of beauty by both the conscious and unconscious hope provided by cosmetics, medical aesthetics and so on, believing in the fantasy of feminine beauty in the future tense. Although it is impossible for such a fantasy to be true, women assume it is suspended in the future and continue to wait for its realization. Even if this belief induces self-censorship and transformation of one’s body and anxiety over appearance, it still carries necessity due to the doubt of identity, especially gender identity, that could be instigated. This repetitive process explains the acceptance of the unattainable idealized feminine beauty.

⁹⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 27-28.

3. Selfies and Beauty Cameras: Feminine Beauty on Chinese Social Media

3.1 Digital Photography: Similarity in Difference

Ever since the early nineteenth century, photography has been evolving and developing into a major form of media. Today, photography can be roughly divided into two categories: traditional photography—namely classical film photography—and digital photography, with 1975, the year the digital camera was first invented, as the turning point. Although both film and digital cameras capture a certain amount of light in an image, their imaging devices are chemical and digital, respectively.

What is remarkable about classical film photography is the three stages that convert photons into images: exposure, developing and fixing. After capturing an image on physical film, analog photography requires photographs to be developed chemically for a period of time. Such a process renders analog photographs indexical, according to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. Peirce identifies three types of signifiers: a symbol, an icon and an index. A symbol is the sound associated with an idea or a concept; an icon bears a visual resemblance to the object, which does not necessarily exist; and an index, as Peirce explains, is "a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if

there were no interpretant.”⁹⁶ It “forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it.”⁹⁷ He then uses a bullet hole, a sign of a shot, as an example of such indexicality. In classical film photography, the photograph is indexical to the causal process that produces it. It is the indexical signifier to the signified.

Such indexicality vanishes in digital photography. Borrowing Lev Manovich’s explanation, digital photography refers to photographs left in their native computer environment, including network storage systems or computer-enabled media devices such as cell phones.⁹⁸ In other words, the image in digital photography lies at the juncture of a photograph and a computer graphic, meaning that the formation of an image does not necessarily involve the practice of photographing, since the image can be created through programming. If the image is photographed rather than generated by a computer, it is captured in the sensor and transformed into a basic bitmap image—a grid of pixels or, fundamentally, numbers—in memory. Thus, the indexical relation cannot be identified in digital photography due to the multiple sources of image formation and the simplified digitalized photographing process.

What, then, can be identified in digital photography? To Manovich, a digital photograph offers abundant “affordances” to its users that its traditional predecessor

⁹⁶ Charles Sander Pierce, *Pierce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sander Pierce*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 519.

⁹⁷ Charles Sander Pierce, *Pierce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sander Pierce*, 322.

⁹⁸ Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 62.

could not, such as quick modification and sharing.⁹⁹ Although certain properties are shared by most types of media, some apply only to the medium of digital photographs, as they are essentially pixels represented as numbers. The numerical nature of digital photography allows for quick copying. The multiplicity of copies in digital photography leads to the disappearance of the original and ultimately, the loss of aura Benjamin identifies in the art of the age of mechanical reproduction. In classical film photography, the original still exists and is recorded in the film even if made for reproducibility. Digital photography, however, rejects such originals since even the first photograph taken is not present in the form of an image but as code. The absence of the original denies the concept of authenticity, as the presence of the original is, according to Benjamin, authenticity's prerequisite. With the data coming before the image, digital photography negates the authority of an object.

Yet, digital photography still remediates its predecessors, traditional photography, according to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin. Here, remediation is defined as "the representation of one medium in another". It is the "defining characteristic of the new digital media".¹⁰⁰ The essence of digital photography is still

⁹⁹ Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, 62.

¹⁰⁰ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 45.

either “an expression of the desire for immediacy or a representation of that desire” as it is in the past.¹⁰¹

Another fundamental quality of both traditional and digital photography is social politics. In *The Social Definition of Photography*, Bourdieu emphasizes photography’s social nature. Attitudes toward photography are largely attributed to social class: the popular aesthetic of the working-class, or what Bourdieu calls the “barbarous taste,” is about one’s relations to others and to the world, in which the image is subordinated to its social functions.¹⁰² A Kantian or intellectual aesthetic, on the other hand, maintains sole contemplation of aesthetic quality and remains disinterested in social norms. The new aesthetic of the twenty-first century, particularly the 2010s, appears to be a fusion of popular and Kantian aesthetics. The embodiment of social politics can still be detected in photography since the practice of sharing is still at its core.

A case study of BeautyCam (*meiyan xiangji*) by Meitu Inc., the most popular beauty camera application in China, can demonstrate the centrality of sharing in photography. On Meitu’s official website, there is one marked slogan: “Make every photo worth sharing.” The slogan foregrounds two central ideas behind BeautyCam

¹⁰¹ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 110.

¹⁰² Pierre Bourdieu, “The Social Definition of Photography” in Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Dominique Schnapper, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 77.

and, ultimately, photographs on social media—the act of sharing and the criteria of what is worth sharing. Indeed, posting photos on social media has been viewed as the granted “next step” in China when taking pictures with Beauty Camera. According to *The 2020 Meitu Female Plog Behaviors Research Report*, nearly 90 percent of Meitu users share photos from BeautyCam—portraits, most commonly.¹⁰³ These photographs shared on social media mainly belong to the genre of lifestyle photography. As the name suggests, this shows a particular lifestyle through capturing certain scenarios or portraits of people in those situations. Here, according to Mike Featherstone, lifestyle is a life project to “display individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions.”¹⁰⁴ Using Bourdieu’s arguments in *Division* and the concept of habitus, he then argues that the new petite-bourgeoisie, particularly in Britain, is constantly concerned about the expansion and legitimization of its lifestyles and unconscious dispositions.¹⁰⁵ Sharing lifestyle photographs appears to be an efficient and convenient method to achieve this goal on a global level.

The most prevalent lifestyle photograph in today’s world is the selfie. According to Oxford Dictionaries, the selfie is defined as “a photograph that one has taken of

¹⁰³ “The 2020 Meitu Female Plog Behaviors Research Report (2020 美图女性 plog 行为研究报告).” Accessed April 20, 2020. <http://www.199it.com/archives/1002893.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 84.

¹⁰⁵ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 82, 85-90.

oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.”¹⁰⁶ Yet, taking selfies only becomes possible with the invention of the front camera. Indeed, technology is the driving force behind the phenomenon of shooting and sharing lifestyle photographs. The development and popularization of smartphones and the reversed camera mode allow these practices to be possible, even commonplace. At the beginning of photography, cameras were resisted by people in China and Europe, who believed that such a strange machine would rob them of their spirits. This belief was attributed to the sense of aggression and intrusion caused by the camera. Although the later popularity of cameras alleviated people’s anxieties, the taking of photographs was still treated seriously, as evidenced from the frontal pose used in numerous photographs of the time. It was not until the invention of the phone camera that photography turned into a true everyday activity. The intrusion of a camera now seems imperceptible, and camera phones are taken even to private spaces such as bathrooms. The growing self-consciousness of contemporary times increases the attraction of selfies, as well.

On the other hand, photographs, especially those on social media, are appreciated aesthetically rather than judged by social norms. The aesthetic judgment can

¹⁰⁶ Oxford Dictionaries, 2013. See Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth, “The Selfie as Image (and) Practice: Approaching Digital Self-Photography” in *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*, ed. Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, Sabine Wirth (Gewerbestr. 10: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-23.

be illustrated by “the competitive photography” that Alise Tifentale and Manovich identify in photographs on Instagram. To Tifentale and Manovich, competitive photography occupies a liminal space between avant-garde art photography and amateur photography. Its main feature is likability by one’s peers, only secondarily by wider audiences.¹⁰⁷ What accompanies competitive photography is noncompetitive photography, which is essentially amateur, expressing emotions rather than aesthetic values.¹⁰⁸ Hence, it is obvious that lifestyle photographs, including selfies, primarily belong to the category of competitive photography.

3.2 Aestheticization in Photography

Before delving into the questions of what aesthetic is regarded as the principle of judgment on social media and how users moderate themselves to match such criteria, the reasons behind the aestheticization in photography should be discussed. The notion of beauty in photography is democratized, given that beauty now exists everywhere with photography. The goal of most amateur photographers, as Susan Sontag mentions, is to take idealized images that confer importance and beautify their subjects. It becomes possible for amateur photographers to achieve that objective and produce photographs of beauty, similar to those of professionals with the aforementioned technology

¹⁰⁷ Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich, “Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self” in *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*, 173.

¹⁰⁸ Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich, “Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self” in *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*, 178.

developments. In this process, the camera beautifies the world, photographs becoming “the standard of the beautiful.”¹⁰⁹ On one hand, this reveals a certain beauty to the world that only the camera can see, providing a new horizon of beauty to human beings. On the other hand, it leaves people to judge themselves photographically and have unrealistic fantasies of producing idealized images. Such fantasies are converted into feelings of anxiety when people face the camera as they fear its disapproval. It also leads to the additive acts of taking photographs and, eventually, the aesthetic consumerism Sontag criticizes: “poignant longings for beauty, for an end to probing below the surface, for a redemption and celebration of the body of the world—all these elements of erotic feeling are affirmed in the pleasure we take in photographs.”¹¹⁰ She later argues that photography transforms the world into a department store in which “every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for aesthetic appreciation.”¹¹¹ Through photography, emotions are detached from real experiences and the world becomes “an object of appraisal.”¹¹²

3.2.1 Lifestyle Photographs

Lifestyle photographs and selfies can demonstrate such a tendency toward aesthetic consumerism, calling for further analysis. Sontag’s and Berger’s theories of

¹⁰⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2005), 65.

¹¹⁰ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 18.

¹¹¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 85.

¹¹² Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 86.

photography can be helpful at this juncture. Sontag regards a photograph as “a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” because it connects to another unattainable reality and arouses reverie.¹¹³ In that sense, lifestyle photographs on social media give information as “a thin slice of space as well as time” and ultimately create daydreams about bourgeoisie lifestyles and beauty to the audience and vivid memories to bloggers.¹¹⁴ Such reveries are reified by Berger as publicity. As Berger states, “publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour... the happiness of being envied is glamour... being envied is a solitary form of reassurance.”¹¹⁵ In this sense, lifestyle photographs are presented with glamour to be enviable. Alternately, it could be argued that they inherently belong to the category of publicity. Through being envied, one can relieve anxiety, gain happiness from others and consolidate their own values. Thus, for bloggers, lifestyle photographs and the compliments thereof acknowledge and further beautify at least parts of their reality. Sontag maintains that such a fantasized reality could eventually lead to “a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce this one,” meaning that “only by looking at reality in the form of an object—through the fix of the photograph—is it really real, that

¹¹³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 12.

¹¹⁴ S Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 17.

¹¹⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 131-133.

is, surreal.”¹¹⁶ In other words, original reality appears to be humdrum and dissatisfying compared to the fanciful world inside photographs, leading to these bloggers’ desire to replace reality. In order to achieve this goal, these bloggers are left with no choice but to take photographs constantly, with a mentality that “looks at the world as a set of potential photographs.” This mentality converts the experience into images to mediate their dissatisfaction. Replacement of reality can also be detected in the manipulation of photographs, which will be discussed later. Sontag reaches the conclusion that photography does not help human beings understand the world but rather collects it. The same argument can be made of the aesthetic, since—through lifestyle photographs—the aesthetic is not defined but collected. What Mike Featherstone calls “the aestheticization of everyday life” ensues in this process, which refers to both the project of turning life into artwork and the pervasive, rapid flow of symbols and images.¹¹⁷ In other words, the aesthetic is accumulated through photographs that exhibit modern lifestyles and are created as pieces of artwork.

The audience, on the other hand, becomes dissatisfied with their current lives after seeing these images. The spectator could be immersed in the fantasy created by publicity in believing that through taking photographs in the same locations, using the same poses and filters, dressing in a similar manner and following the trends, their

¹¹⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 63.

¹¹⁷ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 64-66.

reverie could be satisfied to some extent. They could live the same life the bloggers do and feel as if they belong to a higher social class. As Berger explains, “she is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself...the publicity image steals her love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product.”¹¹⁸ This process also reveals how publicity offers a promise of the future that is continually deferred since what one attempts to acquire can never be attained. Thus, publicity only shows the state of “awaiting acquisition,” becoming future perfect in tense.¹¹⁹

3.2.2 Selfies

Selfies provide what seems to be most easily attainable of all varieties of lifestyle photographs. The experience of taking a selfie shares similarities with looking in a mirror. According to Jacques Lacan, an infant can identify its external specular image in a mirror at the age of six months, a crucial moment in its self-identification. However, such a process is inherently “the méconnaissances” (the misrecognition) because the infant still lacks sufficient consciousness and is only under the illusion of autonomy either physically or psychologically. As Carlos Rojas states in his reading of Lacan’s mirror stage model of subject formation, “the mirror stage...is predicated not on a

¹¹⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 134.

¹¹⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 153.

process of straightforward identification, but rather on a strategic misidentification that then provides a catalyst for the retrospective constitution of the equivalence of self and image."¹²⁰ In reality, such correspondence between self and image is widely acknowledged. For the bourgeoisie, the mirror enables indulgence in their own image and feeds their narcissism. Thus, according to Baudrillard, it is "a symbolic object which not only reflects the characteristics of the individual but also echoes in its expansion the historical expansion of individual consciousness."¹²¹

To Chinese females in the twenty-first century, this equivalent relationship appears to be unquestionable and faithfully represents one's appearance. At the beginning of the first episode of *Hear Her*, the protagonist raises the question: "How much time do you spend in looking at the mirror every day? I mean purely staring at the mirror, seriously." She then answers this question: "Two hours and thirty-seven minutes...Most of the time I feel disappointed rather than surprised. I am not blaming the mirror. What is the mirror's fault? The mirror is honest. The mirror is innocent. I am getting disappointed at myself. Because I know, I am not good-looking." The same statement is also made later in the episode. The mentality of the protagonist here suggests, firstly, that being physically attractive is of great significance, and secondly

¹²⁰ Carlos Rojas, "Of Canons and Cannibalism: A Psycho-Immunological Reading of 'Diary of a Madman'", *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 23.1 (2011): 52-53.

¹²¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 24.

that a mirror is merely an object that shows one's image accurately. Thus, if the image in the mirror is not ideal, it is the onlooker rather than the mirror that is to blame. What is presented in the mirror is not the Ideal-I, but the I that is never perfect and demands "decoration" (*zhuangxiu*). As the protagonist remarks, she spends all these hours in front of the mirror to "decorate" herself. Through this process, she accomplishes self-objectification and transforms herself into the idealized self-image. This objectification and transformation illustrate the magic of the mirror in the sense that the mirror reveals one's desire to be the ideal of beauty and, ultimately, the Ideal-I in the present perfect tense.

Although more subjects are involved in the actual practice of photography, it could be argued that only two subjects are present in selfies, as with staring in a mirror. As Roland Barthes points out, four image-repertoires intersect in the process of portrait photography: "the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art."¹²² Why are "the one the photographer thinks I am" and "the one he makes use of to exhibit his art" so crucial here? When describing practicing the active transformation of oneself for an image in advance, Barthes writes, "I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I

¹²² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 13-14.

instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image...I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice." In the process of posing, existence is metaphorically derived from the photographer, leaving the subject with "the anguish of an uncertain filiation" since their "image will be generated."¹²³ It is such anguish of uncertainty that empowers the photographer to give direction. However, in selfies, since the photographer is the target, the four image-repertoires blend together. "The one I think I am" is correspondent to "the one the photographer thinks I am," and "the one I want others to think I am," which matches the ideals of beauty, becomes "the one he makes use of to exhibit his art." In this sense, posing and the transformation of oneself in advance of an image becomes more self-conscious, and the uncertainty about the image generated is, to some extent, reduced.

On the other hand, the gender differences Berger emphasizes can also be applied to selfies in terms of the subject(s). Berger identifies the split inside a woman's self-being as is mentioned above: for a man, the presence is determined by the promise of power he embodies, but a woman's presence is dependent upon herself, or even her physical emanation. To Berger, women believe that the appearance of a woman determines how

¹²³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 10-11.

men will treat her, and the woman must contain and interiorize this process in order to gain control over it. Such self-treatment constitutes a woman's presence. Therefore, a woman has to constantly watch herself with the surveyor and the surveyed coexisting inside the identity of "woman," transforming herself into an object of vision.¹²⁴ Berger then uses the examples of women in certain paintings and photographs to illustrate how they are aware of being looked at and the presence of a spectator.¹²⁵ Consequently, they respond with "calculated charm" to the artist or camera and the imagined men looking at them. Although Berger's arguments are somewhat reductive, his analysis could still be applied to the case of selfies. Selfies demonstrate a similar pattern of the split inside one's identity and the intertwining roles of the photographer and the target/model. With surveying/being surveyed, the photographer-target actively poses to show their beauty in a way that matches the idealized beauty to an imagined audience. Yet, it is precisely such "calculated charm" that diminishes contingency, the essence of photography according to Barthes. To me, such contingencies are the "lifelike" effects the photographer struggles to produce in order to prevent the micro-version of death that takes place when the target consciously becomes a subject in the practice of photography.¹²⁶ In selfies, where the photographer is also the target, the production of

¹²⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

¹²⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 49.

¹²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 13-14.

such “lifelike” effects becomes more challenging. The active calculation of beauty also weakens contingency in selfies, leaving unnatural effects.

3.3 The Ideals of Feminine Beauty and Beauty Cameras as Mediation

3.3.1 The Ideals of Feminine Beauty

Returning to the judgment of aesthetics on social media and the practices of users fulfilling such criteria—as the main feature of lifestyle photography is to display the portrait in certain scenarios—I will primarily discuss the ideals of feminine beauty, as they are central to understanding the aesthetics of social media in China. *The 2020 Meitu Female Plog Behaviors Research Report* published by Meitu Inc. offers a general picture of the typical feminine beauty displayed on Chinese social media. The top five functions in BeautyCam in 2019 were face slimming, skin smoothening, eyes brightening, the addition of under-eyes furrows or suborbital hypertrophic orbicularis (the under-eye muscles regarded as attractive and young in East Asia), and face-shrinking. “Cute” augmented reality stickers of kitten ears, bunny ears and kitten faces were most preferred among all types of stickers. As for filters, users tended to choose natural, pure and energetic (*yuanqi*) types of filters, using keywords such as no-makeup, creamy,

watery (skin), white or not-a-girl-not-yet-a-woman (*banshu*).¹²⁷ In the report published a year earlier, *The 2019 Meitu Annual Selfie Trend Data Report*, 36.3 percent of users chose to adjust their face shape, 31.8 percent their nose and 20 percent their eyes. In addition, the pursuit of naturalness was valued: nearly 70 percent of female users pursued natural effects when changing their skin tone and the size of their eyes, while over 50 percent kept some original features of their skin, such as freckles or moles.¹²⁸

Descriptions of beauty camera applications in the app store also illustrate the ideals of beauty. Faceu explains “beauty filters” (*meiyan lvjing*) in five phrases: one-touch beautification of the body, AI beautification of the face, enlarging the eyes while shining the cheeks, watery perfect skin and elegant makeup. Meanwhile, Ulike briefly brings about the delicate facial features one can achieve after using it, stressing the watery, creamy skin rich in collagen.

Similar observations can be made in works on the Chinese screen. In *Hear Her*, the protagonist asks desperately: “Must I have a small face? Must I have a perfect body? Must I have Greek feet? Must I have skinny legs? Must I be tall? Must I be slim? Must I be fair? Must I have a beautiful bust while being skinny?” What she is questioning is the

¹²⁷ Yuanqi, or 元气 in Chinese, is an adjective specifically used to describe energetic, lively teenage girls. Banshu, or 半熟 in Chinese, refers to the status in which the female is not a girl, not yet a woman.

“The 2020 Meitu Female Plog Behaviors Research Report (2020 美图女性 plog 行为研究报告).” Accessed April 20, 2020. <http://www.199it.com/archives/1002893.html>.

¹²⁸ “The 2019 Meitu Annual Selfie Trend Data Report (2019 美图年度自拍趋势数据报告).” Accessed April 20th, 2020. <https://www.geekpark.net/news/254711>.

traditional feminine beauty displayed on Chinese social media, in which slimness and fairness are highly appreciated. Yet, naturalness should also be considered in this set of value judgments. In the film *The Truth About Beauty*, an unappealing girl named Vivi uses Photoshop to edit her identification photo for job interviews because otherwise, she would be rejected for her appearance: she enlarges her eyes and slims her face to an extreme, leaving an alien-like, distorted face. Such an artificial photo undoubtedly also receives rejection. In the end, Vivi sells her parents' quadrangle courtyard in Beijing for full-body cosmetic surgeries but only suffers from body dysmorphic disorder. Although the film is narrated in an exaggerated manner, it still reflects the preferences for small faces, big eyes and naturalness.

Based on information from reports, advertisements and screen-works, it is possible to determine the general representation of femininity on Chinese social media.¹²⁹ As Rosalind Gill observes, cosmetics advertising provides a limiting and exclusive representation of females as those in "possession of a young, able-bodied, heterosexual, 'sexy' body," demonstrating bodily characteristics as contrasting with traditional, historical, behavioral ones, such as mothering skills.¹³⁰ In the context of

¹²⁹ Although there also exists other ideals of feminine beauty, the type I concluded here is probably the most dominant one. The justification for such dominance under the diverse cultural and social background is that as Daniel Hamermesh points out in *Beauty Pays*, there is a substantial agreement about facial beauty, and most people view beauty similarly.

¹³⁰ Rosalind Gill, "Gender and the Media" in Helen Ringrow, *The Language of Cosmetics*, 19.

Chinese social media, such bodily characteristics include small faces, flawless and fair skin, sparkly and relatively big eyes and straight noses, all symbols of beauty for young Chinese females and Chinese people as a whole, as 90 percent of photos taken in Beauty Camera would be shared eventually. Slimness, a feature accompanied by small faces, is also appreciated. "Slim," "natural," "young," "cute" and "lively" are characteristics young Chinese young females pursue, and photos presenting such a figure are regarded as worth sharing. Although the tendency toward naturalness shows the inclusiveness of beauty in China today, the use of beauty cameras themselves suggests a simple binary between what is and is not beautiful, as they are inherently a process of direct beautification of all, regardless of their unique facial features.

3.3.2 Photoshop and Beauty Cameras

It , then, axiomatic that such a typical ideal of beauty can be achieved through Photoshop or beauty cameras. In the case of Chinese social media, beauty cameras appear to have overtaken Photoshop in the sense that the emergence of beauty camera applications democratized Photoshop, allowing amateurs to edit their photos with all complicated functions simplified and automated by the algorithms of beauty cameras. Such photo manipulation software follows the principle of likability. As Berger observes, publicity images would sometimes use sculptures or paintings to increase their allure

and authority.¹³¹ Tifentale and Manovich also trace the historical roots of how one must follow rules to make likable pictures. These could be as clear as conscious posing, which—as Tifentale and Manovich point out—“intertextually and intermediary expands the body into already existing—usually well-known—images and poses...the materiality of the body is reconfirmed through the existing image.”¹³² Additionally, they could simply be producing similar faces using the automatic parameters and beautification of beauty cameras.

Beauty cameras can accomplish such automatic beautification because, as mentioned, computer images work on the basic level of pixels, or numbers. Through the convolutional neural network, the small matrix of pixels called “filters” that constitute an image are involved in the repetitive process of convolution and subsampling with a large amount of labeled training data. In the end, the computer can recognize the image through repetitive comparison. After recognition, the generative adversarial network is applied to the computer in which the image will be adjusted to match the desired attributes (the ideal of beauty previously identified). Throughout the process, repetition, fragmentation and comparison—as partially identified in advertising—are implemented, constituting three fundamental elements in the ideology of feminine

¹³¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 135.

¹³² Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich, “Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self” in *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*, 106.

beauty. It is only through comparison, an inherently self-other dialectic, that one can identify problems and learn how to mediate oneself to the ideals of beauty. Such comparison is facilitated by fragmentation, a common strategy in the cosmetic and beauty industry and even in Photoshop—particularly in the use of layers, of which Manovich offers a detailed analysis. He identifies how the introduction of layers to Photoshop allowed users to regard an image as a collection of separate elements: “s/he can play with these elements, deleting, creating, importing and modifying them, until s/he is satisfied with the final composition—or a set of possible compositions that can be defined using Layer Groups. And since the contents and the settings of all layers are saved in an image file, s/he can always come back to this image to generate new versions or to use its elements in new compositions.”¹³³ An image is therefore redefined as “a provisional composite of both content elements and various modification operations that are conceptually separate from these elements.”¹³⁴ Such redefinition of an image is especially precise in beauty cameras, in which specific treatments are applied to certain central parts of the face, such as the eyes or cheeks. The fragmentation of the body essentially follows the logic of digital photography, in which the image is broken down into pixels. Both the comparison and the fragmentation are repeated. If Baudrillard’s theory of the three orders of simulacra is employed here, it could be argued that through

¹³³ Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, 142.

¹³⁴ Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, 142-143.

such repetition, beauty cameras essentially entail the third-order simulacra, in which the serial repetition is neither “the counterfeit of the original as in the first-order,” nor “the pure series as in the second,” but the modulation followed by the models.¹³⁵ Indeed, such repetition can also be detected in user interactions with beauty cameras, a fundamental difference from Photoshop. In Photoshop, the high self-reflexivity allows users to be highly aware of the fact that they are using software. Yet, beauty cameras are designed for users to be immersed in the created world, continually taking and editing photographs. Such a design can be perceived from the intentional lack of self-reflexivity in beauty cameras. Their interfaces look the same as that of the ordinary camera, and it automatically beautifies users once they open the application. Users can switch filters simply by swiping their fingers without bringing up any extra column. It, therefore, provides users with the illusion that they look the same as the beautified figures on the screen as if they are looking at themselves through a normal camera or even a mirror. Additionally, the parameters of different facial features are hidden in a corner so that they are extremely difficult for those who have little experience with beauty cameras to find, while experienced users can easily personalize them according to their needs to maximize the effects of beautification. Through these design features, users may not realize that they are using beauty cameras and tend to take multiple selfies at a time.

¹³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotexte, 1983), 78.

3.3.3 Simulations

Such repetitive use of beauty cameras implies a mixed reality that challenges photorealism. At this juncture, a short review of this intellectual discussion may be beneficial. For Barthes, authentication should be stressed in the photograph rather than representation. The noeme of photography to Barthes is “that-has-been” or the intractable, “that someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of objects) in flesh and blood, or again in person.”¹³⁶ Yet, the noeme of the photograph is not equivalent to the analogy, but the evidentiality or its function as the testimony in history, with Barthes’ skepticism toward likeness. In that sense, the photograph’s essence is not to represent but “to ratify what it represents.”¹³⁷ Unlike Barthes, who values the evidentiality of the photograph, Sontag identifies the struggle between beautification and truth-telling driving the history of photography, focusing on its “narrowly selective transparency” or the intertwining of beautification and truth-telling.¹³⁸ To Sontag, the image/copy and the thing depicted/the original do not bear a sharp distinction in photography. This observation can be made in the sense that notions of reality and image are essentially complementary, as reality is not static but could change with the

¹³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 79.

¹³⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 85.

¹³⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 4.

image.¹³⁹ The photograph has already become part of the subject, or even of reality. Here, the real world is present tense, and no one knows the future, but the image-world is present perfect tense, and the future will continue to follow what it is. Therefore, people are less likely to have positive feelings when they are in the real world compared to when in the image-world that has already revealed everything. Moving beyond binaries, Sontag continues to argue that photography recycles the real and, through photographic images, “things and events are put to new uses, assigned new meanings, which go beyond the distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly, the true and the false, the useful and the useless, good taste and bad.”¹⁴⁰ In that sense, photographs redefine ordinary experiences and become part of the extension of the subject.

To Baudrillard, such mixed reality in photography indicates a hyperreal. In the case of beauty cameras, although the beautified selfies are essentially not real, they have become more real than the real and what is supposed to be real is real no longer. Excessive users of beauty cameras ignore reality and are immersed in the created fantasy of beauty. Netizens, even those who do not use beauty cameras, assume after seeing all these pictures that this ideal of feminine beauty is the reality and, thus, apply stricter criteria when judging others on the Internet, particularly female celebrities. Thus, the simulation overtakes reality, regardless of the use of beauty cameras. Here, simulation

¹³⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 125.

¹⁴⁰ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 136.

means “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal”¹⁴¹ and is achieved through the medium of beauty cameras, a “genetic code which controls the mutation of the real into the hyperreal.”¹⁴² This phenomenon also demonstrates the tendency toward the total aestheticization of everyday life, in which the only reality available is artifice.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 2.

¹⁴² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 46.

¹⁴³ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 69.

4. Conclusion

This thesis focuses on the physical beauty of females in twenty-first century China and examines the ways in which women approach the ideals of feminine beauty, particularly through cosmetics, cosmetic surgeries and beauty cameras. New media, as part of the ideological state apparatus, contributes to the construction of idealized feminine beauty by dominant groups. Still, the acceptance of such feminine beauty ideals is complicated. Three strategies--fragmentation, comparison and inadequacy—are employed in advertising to articulate an inner narrative of what one thinks one should and could be through the purchase of advertised products. Fragmentation can present how a comfortable lifestyle is an assembly of goods and experiences and how ideals of feminine beauty are constituted by various perfect and desired body parts. A trivial fragment of the body is then recognized as the symbol of the whole body and, ultimately, femininity. The fundamental strategy of comparison, on the other hand, arouses desires for consumption and justifies the rationality behind purchases. When watching advertisements, consumers compare their physical appearance to the presented photographic images of models, as well as of their body, self and life before and after the use of these promoted products. The combination of fragmentation and comparison leads to the Problem-Solution pattern, which maximizes even the most trivial flaws, creates anxiety and encourages consumption of more varieties of products.

What lies underneath such a pattern is the unconscious mindset that treats the body as a target for censorship. The body is converted into a menacing object demanding continuous and internal daily censorship, with problems that need to be solved to achieve feminine beauty. This is what Baudrillard calls “repressive solicitude,” or what Berger identifies as the split between the surveyor and the surveyed inside the identity of a woman. Furthermore, a strategy of inadequacy is applied in the pattern of problem and solution. Consumers must keep buying these advertised products to maintain the status of the problem as “solved” or “to be solved” and address more problems to meet standards of beauty, trapped in the illusion that the unattainable can be achieved through the attainable. In this process, Chinese consumers are trained to be consumptive, desiring individuals to whom demands have become a substitute for work.

A short case study of lipstick is given because of its popularity and the commonality of its continuous purchase. Using Baudrillard’s theory in *The System of Objects*, it could be argued that lipstick has a universal value as signs, and is assimilated into two forms of totality, the private and the bodily one. In the private totality, the act of buying similar lipsticks corresponds to collecting, in which the collection is the private property and the passion of the owner. These lipsticks are then partially

abstracted from the function and brought into the relationship with the subject, the owner, who collects to overcome the appearance anxiety.

To analyze the individual within such an ideology of feminine beauty in more detail, Michel Foucault's analysis of power is applied to maintain that even under the ideology of feminine beauty, women, as the subjects of power, are free beings. In the exercising of power, females' actions and even their physical appearances are modified. Still, consumers may reject brands that endorse traditional feminine beauty, pursuing more natural looks as a form of resistance to power. Yet, such behavior is futile insofar as it still creates new ideals of feminine beauty. Such unrealistic feminine beauty ideals can be seen as a form of cruel optimism in which females are driven to match standards of feminine beauty by the hope provided both consciously and unconsciously through cosmetics and medical aesthetics, believing in the fantasy of feminine beauty in the future tense.

Regarding beauty cameras, digital photography is first distinguished from traditional photography, also known as classical film photography. Digital photography lacks the indexicality of traditional photography and offers new affordances to its users. Still, digital photography remediates traditional photography to some extent and is of an essentially social nature. On Chinese social media, lifestyle photographs are taken largely for the purpose of sharing, leading to the tendency toward the aestheticization of

everyday life in photography. Lifestyle photographs and selfies, the dominant class of lifestyle photographs, were respectively analyzed. Using Sontag's, Berger's and Featherstone's theories, it is argued that as publicity images, lifestyle photographs create reverie and leave both bloggers and audiences dissatisfied with reality, chasing the unattainable within. The practice of taking selfies is then compared to looking in a mirror. According to Lacan, although the mirror stage is ultimately a misrecognition, the equivalence between the self and the image is still acknowledged in reality—not just in the mirror but also in the camera. Thus, in selfies, a split inside one's identity can be identified: the surveyed/target and the surveyor/photographer, the latter applying the ideals of feminine beauty to the former. As summarized from an examination of reports published by Meitu, the advertising languages of beauty camera applications and two screen-works, the typical ideals of feminine beauty on Chinese social media include features such as small faces, fair skin, eyes that sparkle and are relatively big compared to other facial features, and naturalness, youth and cuteness. To match such ideals of feminine beauty, as with Photoshop, Beauty Camera is used as the medium in which repetition, fragmentation and comparison are employed. Here, user interactions with Beauty Camera also involve a serial repetition, entailing a mixed reality of photography and, ultimately, simulation, making the ideology of feminine beauty even more inescapable.

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