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Selling beauty in digital China: gender, platform, and economy

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Selling Beauty in Digital China: Gender, Platform, and Economy

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To my parents, Li Yan and Guan Xiangang

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Preface

I still remember the scene. One day in early June 2014, our school, all the graduates-to-be in the School of Communication at East China Normal University gathered for a collective graduation photo. It was not easy to get all of the seniors together at once because students in their fourth year were busy with job interviews, internships, and graduation trips. Most of the attendees were girls, which is fairly common for schools of communication and journalism. Seniors were chatting or taking selfies with classmates while waiting for the photographer. I was surprised to see that most of the girls wore makeup; their mascara, lipstick, and foundation was readily apparent. Some girls borrowed lipstick from their friends. The longer I observed this, the more surprised I felt. There seemed to have been a secret, unspoken deal among these female graduates-to-be, stipulating that all should apply makeup. This conflicted starkly with my perspective on makeup. People may not understand my astonishment at this moment if they have little experience of China before the 2010s.

Standing at the site of the impending photograph, my thoughts went back to earlier times, when it was not common for girls to wear makeup. In the first year of our degree, I remember that all of the students in our school were required to take the course “Introduction to Communication Studies” together. I rarely saw girls doing different majors wearing makeup in everyday life, except those majoring in Broadcasting and Hosting, who were always ready for the camera. Even boys from the Broadcasting and Hosting program wore makeup on a day-to-day basis. For the rest of us, it was neither necessary nor common to apply makeup as part of our daily routine.

Going back earlier, to when I was in middle and high school (2003-2010), makeup was strictly forbidden at school. My middle and high schools’ student guidance clearly stated that makeup and strange clothes were not allowed. Students in my middle school were required to wear unisex school uniforms. Teachers asked us to focus on our studies rather than our appearance, impressing on us that only bad girls wore makeup and that they would not end up with a successful life.

After remembering my school days, I refocused on to the scene in front of me. I could not link up my memories with the sight of these female college students wearing makeup. Actually, I had witnessed some female classmates using cosmetics before the day of the group photograph, but I always took it as the occasional practice of a few individuals. When more than a hundred girls stood before wearing makeup, though, it was clear that there had been a structural change. Since when had makeup become free from its previous associations with moral corruption? How does makeup enter into ordinary girls' everyday lives? The astonishment that I felt that day sparked my interest in how the norms for beauty spread. Eventually, it led to my doctoral research project on Chinese beauty blogs.

Tales of women frantically pursuing beauty constitutes an entrenched narrative genre; we need only think of the Evil Queen in *Snow White*, who repeatedly asks the magic mirror for the name of the fairest woman. Nowadays, women have a digital mirror in the form of beauty blogs. In spending a lot of time reading beauty blogs, Chinese women, like the Queen, seek an answer about beauty from a mirror. However, whereas *Snow White* recounts the Queen's unhappy ending, it is unclear as to what happens to the magic mirror in the end. Going beyond the classic story, China provides us with one possible fate awaiting the magic mirror: namely, that it sells particularly well. People often blame the Queen for letting vanity drive her to cruelty, but is the mirror not responsible for the whole drama? Does not the mirror boost the Queen's desire to be the fairest? And, if so, who makes this mirror? I give my answers to these questions in this dissertation.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Beauty Blogging in China

I just want to live up to the look I like.

Zhang Mofan (Beauty blogger, May 1, 2017)

On November 30, 2017, Fan Bingbing, one of the highest-paid Chinese actresses, opened her account on Red (*xiaohongshu*), a user-generated content (UGC) platform specializing in beauty and fashion. Imitating beauty bloggers, Fan shared her beauty hacks through self-made pictures and videos. Fan's activities on Red surprised many users, for there used to be a line between stars (*mingxing*) and beauty bloggers. Whereas stars were seen as "showbiz celebrities across TV, cinema, and pop music" (G. Zhang & de Seta, 2018, p. 58), beauty bloggers were *wanghongs* (internet celebrities), grassroots social media users who have become famous online. To ordinary people, stars were considered unapproachable. *Wanghongs*, in contrast, were down to earth people to which ordinary people could aspire. Stars were associated with formal media outlets such as magazines, TV, and so on, whereas *wanghongs* were (and could only be) active on social media platforms. In the hierarchy of fame, people tend to accept that beauty bloggers imitate stars such as Fan Bingbing, not the other way around. In transgressing these distinctions, Fan Bingbing's sharing on social media captured the press's attention, earning her the new title of "beauty blogger Fan Bingbing", which contains an inherent sense of conflict (Achim, 2019; CNB Data, 2018; Y. Tang, 2018; C. Ye, 2018).

Fan Bingbing was not the only star to do beauty blogging. Actually, quite a lot of Chinese female stars have launched beauty blogs, one after another. This happened after 2016, when beauty bloggers' economic success was publicly recognized. A top beauty blogger named Zhang Mofan, for example, made ¥120 million from her beauty brand in 2016 alone (Yong Zhang, 2018). Mass media-based stars imitating beauty bloggers on

“grassroots” UGC platforms was unprecedented in China at this time. Stars’ entrance into the field marked a turning point for beauty blogging. Culturally, beauty blogging had become so cool that female stars—who already had resources of the mass media at their disposal—could not overlook it. Economically, it had become so lucrative that even stars began coveting the benefits of beauty blogging.

Since their emergence in China in the early-to-mid-2000s, beauty bloggers and blogging had never yet attained such prominence. For instance, in 2011, Jiujiumeimei (who was then a highly popular beauty blogger) was invited to appear on a TV program, *woshi dameiren* (I am a beautiful woman), which was run by the Hunan TV station. After shooting the first episode, she posted an article about her guest experience on her blog, revealing her excitement at being invited and seeing famous hosts from the TV station (Jiujiumeimei, 2011). At that time, beauty blogging could not be compared with TV programs, given that its audiences were niche, its influence was limited and income was seemingly nonexistent. In the hierarchy of media outlets, social media accounts were not deemed influential. It was only natural, therefore, for a beauty blogger to be excited about being a guest on a TV show, for the latter represented a higher-ranked media outlet. In this media context, Fan Bingbing and other stars would not have become interested in beauty blogging.

Beauty bloggers (*meizhuangbozhu*) are social media users who share content about beauty and thus accumulate fan bases online. Chinese beauty bloggers first emerged in the early 2000s and developed in the mid-2000s, when blog sites were popularized in China (People’s Daily, 2005). Beauty amateurs gradually clustered on blogging sites, such as OnlyLady (2002-), Sina Blog (2005-), and NetEase Blog (2006-2018). Given beauty amateurs’ strong ties with blogging and microblogging at an early stage, they were given the title of “beauty blogger” (*meizhuangbozhu*). In the early 2010s, beauty bloggers attracted more public attention and were more economically successful, resulting in the spectacle of Chinese female stars vying to be beauty bloggers. Along with other *wanghongs*, beauty bloggers led—and are still leading—trends in the *wanghong jingji* (internet celebrity economy), which has been described as “the vitality of China’s economy and the huge potential of Chinese market” (Junfeng Yang, 2020). Among all kind of *wanghongs*, beauty bloggers are considered as the most lucrative ones. From

2017 to 2020, Sina Weibo, one of the largest social media platforms in China, awarded the title of “influencers with the most commercial value” (*zuiju shangye jiazhi hongren*) to 218 influencers in total. Beauty influencers are the largest group among all prize winners in every single year (see Table 1.1). This leads to the key question posed in my dissertation: how did beauty blogging gain its cultural and economic success in China in the 2010s? Secondly, given the global prevalence of internet celebrities, what is the winning feature of Chinese beauty blogging or the Chinese *wanghong* economy?

My approach focuses on beauty blogging’s expanding reach in China over the past two decades. It does not take the development of beauty blogs as a natural and predetermined process, nor as a necessary accompaniment to China’s economic development or the spread of information technology. Instead, I problematize the rapid growth of beauty blogs, investigating how this process has been shaped and accelerated by gender discourses, platform labor, and the beauty industry, each of which is rooted in the broader context of China’s social transformation.

Table 1.1*Categories of “influencers with the most commercial value”*

Categories	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	Percentage
Beauty	23	18	3	5	49	22,48%
Comedy	20	18	1	0	39	17,89%
Fashion	18	11	2	1	32	14,68%
Beauty & Fashion	11	5	0	1	17	7,80%
Food	1	7	3	1	12	5,50%
Cartoon	6	5	0	0	11	5,05%
Pet	3	5	1	0	9	4,13%
Video	3	6	0	0	9	4,13%
Relationship	2	6	0	0	8	3,67%
Game	0	6	0	0	6	2,75%
Music	2	3	0	0	5	2,29%
Astrology	1	3	0	0	4	1,83%
Business	3	0	0	0	3	1,38%
Sports	1	1	0	0	2	0,92%
Photography	1	1	0	0	2	0,92%
Auto	1	1	0	0	2	0,92%
English	2	0	0	0	2	0,92%
Travel	0	2	0	0	2	0,92%
Movie	1	0	0	0	1	0,46%
Dubbing	1	0	0	0	1	0,46%
Kid	0	1	0	0	1	0,46%
Animation	0	1	0	0	1	0,46%

Note. Data are collected from the official account of Weibo Hongrenjie.

1.1 Contexts: Gender, Technology, and the Economy

Many people equate beauty with vanity and treat it as the most superficial part of everyday life. This easily-made assumption stops people from noticing the subtle and complicated dynamics at work in who can claim beauty, what is considered beautiful, and how beauty circulates. In my view, beauty is an outcome of certain cultural customs and practices, which always “bind us to the social order, a social order that is marked by the enormous inequalities of wealth, status, and power” (Storey, 2009, pp. 4–5). In combining gender, technology, and economics, beauty blogging undoubtedly provides us with an appealing vantage point from which we can observe and reflect how social orders are constructed or reconstructed in contemporary China.

In the context of China, beauty blogging emerged in the early 2000s before becoming an ever-growing trend in the mid-2010s. As it has grown, beauty blogging has been taken as a means by which people might reap fame and fortune overnight. As such, beauty blogging has become one of the best-known illustrations of the lucrative *wanghong* lifestyle. Given the phenomenal visibility of beauty bloggers and other *wanghongs* in the mid-2010s, 2016 was named “year one of the *wanghong*” (*wanghong yuannian*) (Han, 2020; Jian Ye & You, 2016; X. Zhang & Su, 2016). Throughout this period, the *wanghong* economy continued expanding in China; in 2018 this market was estimated to reach around ¥2,000 billion (around \$285.4) (Z. Sun, 2018). It has kept growing even during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which an unexpected drop in consumer flow and supply shortage have disrupted a wide range of sectors. Despite these challenges, beauty blogs still make up a large part of beauty consumption (Yicai, 2020). A close examination of Chinese beauty blogging can provide us with a timely understanding of the sudden boom of the *wanghong* economy. My examination begins by denaturalizing the development of beauty blogging in contemporary China and presenting the historical contingencies surrounding beauty blogging with respect to gender, technology, and the economy.

Most beauty bloggers and their audiences are socially assigned females and identify as girls and women. Together they build a digital space in which they share makeup application skills and discuss beauty consumption. The notion of female beauty stands at the center of this online circle for both beauty bloggers and audiences seek thousands of ways to define and perform female beauty. The craze of female beauty is surprising,

for glancing at China's recent history, it appears that the pursuit of gendered beauty and heavy beauty consumption are profoundly uncharacteristic of this society. Chinese women rarely discussed makeup application skills and beauty consumption in the second half of the twentieth century, for beauty that involved techniques for enhancing one's physical appearance was neither appreciated by nor accessible to most women in China.

Although beauty bloggers tend to claim that it is necessary that women apply beauty products as part of their everyday lives, the habit was established only recently among Chinese women. In the Socialist Era (1949-78), gendered beauty was condemned for being politically backward, something that true proletariats should therefore abandon. In 1965, the *People's Daily*, the largest newspaper in China, published an article by the working-class writer Hu Wanchun. It pointed out that a novel released in 1963 featured a female protagonist with "a beautiful face, shiny hair, and soft hands" (Hu, 1965). These features were probably the result of self-care for beauty purposes. For Hu Wanchun, these physical attributes signaled a body that lacked experience of labor and a bourgeois understanding of beauty. Taking the character to represent an ugly and indecent form of femininity, Hu stressed that "it is necessary to change our values and aesthetics" and advocated a "break away from the old world." This article reflected what was then the mainstream attitude toward gendered beauty. This was a time in which women's participation in the socialist revolution and production was prioritized and their physical appearance highly politicalized.

If beauty was not appreciated in the cultural sphere, it was not supported by China's economic system either. There had been a market for beauty products during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican Era. It involved importing beauty items from Europe, as well as selling products from local factories (Jones, 2010; Xin Xie & Ching, 2018). A wide range of beauty goods emerged in the Minguo Era (1912-49), including not only basics such as soap and toothpaste, but also blush, face powder, lipstick, and so on (Gongshangyuebao, 1947). This beauty market was reigned in when the Communist Party of China (CPC) came to power with the aim of building a socialist country. In socialist China's planned economy, the production of beauty products did not feature on the agenda, for bourgeois aesthetics were fiercely denounced. Beauty firms were expropriated and their operations were limited to making basic hygiene

products. “Cosmetics production was suppressed,” especially in the 1970s (Jones, 2010, p. 201). Even when there was demand for cosmetics, ordinary consumers could not find them given the restricted supply.¹

For much of China’s Socialist Era, the cultural and economic environment gave ordinary women little incentive to pursue beauty consumption. Why, then, are Chinese women crazy about beauty consumption today? Why did beauty bloggers and blogging become popular in the early twenty-first century? What triggered the transition from the condemnation of female beauty to the current fever for trying to attain female beauty ideals?

Seen in relation to technological development, the emergence of beauty blogging depends on the prevalence of information technology. At the end of the twentieth century, when the internet was not yet popular in China, very few people could have anticipated the rise of the beauty blogger.

In comparison with Western countries, China was left behind in terms of internet access during the 1990s (Figure 1.1). In 1999, only a low percentage of China’s general population were internet users (0.7%) (R. Feng, 2000; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001a). By contrast, 35.8% of the American population and 39.2% of the Dutch population had access to the Internet in the same year (World Bank, 2020b). As these statistics indicate, China did not have a strong basis of internet use on the eve of the twenty-first century. Despite this, the *wanghong* economy is a buzzword in China today. Notably, the internet celebrity economy is not as prominent in regions with a more solid foundation of internet use, such as North American, Western Europe, and countries neighboring China, South Korea and Japan.

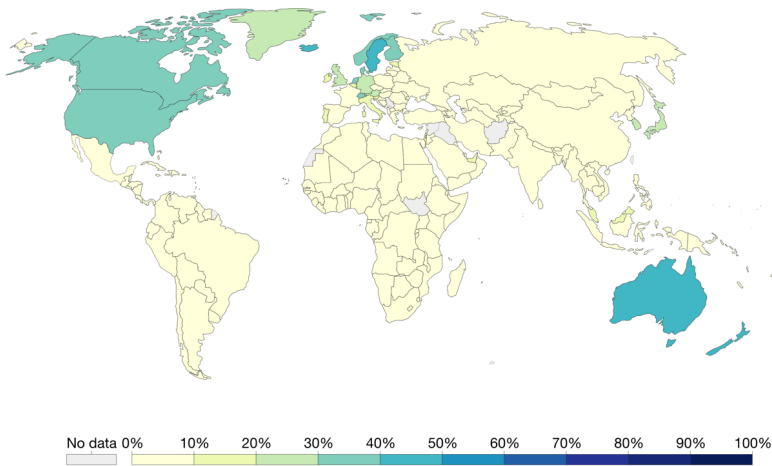
As one might imagine, the earliest internet users in China belonged to the well-educated elite (J. Pan & Wu, 2020). Another dimension of users’ background, though,

¹ Cosmetics did not completely disappear during the Socialist Era. A small number of cosmetics were kept for stage and film performers. I found a Chinese brochure, *Zenyang huazhuang* (How To Apply Makeup), which was published in 1952. Applying makeup, it claims, has two goals. The main aim is that of “helping actors show the characteristics of roles”, the second that of “reducing the reflection of light on stage” (Zhejiangrenminchubanshe, 1952, p. 1). Makeup is applied, then, to draw attention to stage effects—a far cry from beauty bloggers’ purpose of improving people’s personal charm in everyday life. Still, the use of cosmetics was not common among ordinary people in the Socialist Era.

is usually neglected. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), male internet users made up 79% in 1999 (CNNIC, 2000). This means that the majority of early internet users in China had little interest in feminine beauty skills and makeup consumption. In this sense, there was nothing to suggest that beauty blogging would become so prominent in China.

Figure 1.1

Share of the population using the internet in 1999



Note. Retrieved on May 12, 2021, from <https://ourworldindata.org/internet>

China's poor technological development and a male-dominated user base at the end of the 1990s prompts us to ask: How did beauty blogging find its way to today's prosperity, a mere two decades later? How does a country with a relatively weak internet foundation develop such a strong internet celebrity economy? How has female beauty blogging developed amid a predominantly male environment?

Another aspect of the emergence of beauty blogging and the *wanghong* economy is the economic transformation. China is well-known for being the world's factory, focusing on downstream manufacturing and assembly in the context of global capitalism. By the end of the 1990s, China had established a strong export system and

ran outsourced business for global brands (Q. Yu, 1998). But how does the world's factory develop a *wanghong* economy?

Since 1978, China—a self-proclaimed socialist state—has conducted an economic transformation, moving from being a centrally planned economy to a market economy. The most salient achievement of this transformation is that China has become the world's factory by adopting an export-led growth model (Frieden, 2007; Xue, 1995). A large number of factories were built in China. Drawing on the country's massive supply of cheap labor, they manufacture for the world market. Like other Asian countries adopting export-oriented economic strategies, China has seen national output grow and living standards improve rapidly. Its GDP per capita grew from \$982.3 in 1990 to \$2920.5 in 2000 (World Bank, 2020a). Not every export-led economy goes on to develop a *wanghong* economy, however. Countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia all took this route and transformed their agrarian economies into export-led industrialization in the second half of the twentieth century. Though beauty blogging and influencer marketing do exist in these countries, they are not of the same scale and intensity as China's *wanghong* economy. From a macroeconomic perspective, how have beauty blogging and the *wanghong* economy grown so strongly in China, as opposed to other economies?

By looking back at contexts that precede beauty blogging, this dissertation aims to denaturalize the beauty blogging boom; identify the rupture between the recent enthusiasm for beauty bloggers and what came before; and thus reflect on the celebration of the *wanghong* economy in China. Whereas news reports prefer to eulogize successful beauty bloggers as heroines, as if their newly gained fame and fortune were solely a result of individual effort or luck, I seek to investigate their success amid structural changes in Chinese society. To achieve this, in this chapter I lay out the foundation of the dialogue I will conduct throughout the dissertation between the fields of global political economy, gender studies, and media studies. By connecting beauty bloggers' growth with broader cultural, technological, and economic development, this chapter presents the rise of their influence as a dynamic complex that reflects new changes in global capitalism in contemporary China.

1.2 Terminology

To adequately present the landscape of Chinese beauty blogging and the *wanghong* economy, it is necessary to define three key terms that recur in this chapter and the wider dissertation.

The first is the term “beauty blogger,” which is translated directly from *meizhuang bozhu* (美妆博主). I define *meizhuang bozhu* as social media users who regularly post content (including text, pictures, videos, and livestreams) and accumulate online fan basis. Although I use the term “*bozhu*” (blogger), their practice is not restricted to blogging and microblogging platforms. In the Chinese context, beauty amateurs preceded blogs; these forerunners used bulletin board systems (BBS) and online forums. However, beauty amateurs multiplied in the late 2000s, when blogging and microblogging sites were the most widespread social media platforms in China. In this specific environment, the tie between beauty amateurs and blogging was established and the term *meizhuang bozhu* gained ground. Various social media platforms (including picture sharing, short video, and livestreaming platforms) became popular in China in the 2010s. Instead of sticking to their blogs, beauty bloggers have proactively taken up these platforms. And yet they are still recognized as *meizhuang bozhu* by the Chinese public. A salient example is Zhang Kaiyi, who shares beauty-related content on Douyin (a short video and livestreaming platform). Despite the fact that she uses this camera-based media, the Chinese press and public identify Zhang as a *meizhuang bozhu* (Z. Lan, 2020; Yuan, 2019).

When looking at Western contexts, it is readily apparent that equivalent beauty blogger practitioners are usually based on YouTube or Instagram (Bishop, 2018b; García-Rapp, 2016; Hou, 2018). They are identified as “beauty vloggers,” “beauty gurus,” or “beauty Instagrammers.” The more general “beauty influencers” is used as an umbrella term to cover different categories. In this dissertation, the term beauty bloggers performs a roughly equivalent function, although it exceeds the Anglophone concept of beauty influencers in certain respects. By using the term *meizhuang bozhu*, I would like to emphasize that China’s beauty bloggers have emerged in a specific techno-cultural context. Having once been strongly associated with the specific media forms of blog

and microblog, they have outgrown these two media and are expanding their influence across various social media platforms.

The second is the term *wanghong*, which is short for *wangluo hongren* (popular people on the internet). This concept overlaps significantly with the English terms “influencers,” “internet celebrities,” and “microcelebrities” in that all of these refer to social media users who accumulate a fan base and whose celebrity is native to the internet (Abidin, 2016, 2018; Senft, 2008). Some Chinese media scholars use *wanghong*, internet celebrity, and influencers interchangeably (A. K. Li, 2019; S. Wang, 2020c; G. Zhang & de Seta, 2018). The connotations of the term *wanghong*, however, evolves in the Chinese context, especially after internet giants such as Alibaba have boosted the “*wanghong* economy” from the mid-2010s onward (Han, 2020). In the 2000s *wanghong* referred to all kinds of people garnering fame online, such as Furong Jiejie, who gained a notorious reputation for her boastful performances (G. Zhang & de Seta, 2018, p. 61). Since 2015, however, the idea of being a *wanghong* has usually been taken as a business model and strongly suggests monetization drawing on specific sources, especially e-commerce. Widely spread stories of successful *wanghongs*, such as Zhang Mofan, Li Jiaqi, and Zhang Dayi, all feature their influence in promoting e-commerce and drawing in cash flows in short periods (Junfeng Yang, 2020; Jian Ye & You, 2016; X. Zhang & Su, 2016). Although e-commerce is not *wanghongs*’ only source of financial reward, the strong connection between *wanghongs* and e-commerce has come to constitute an underlying meaning of the Chinese term *wanghong*. This connection has been lost in translated words, such as influencer and internet celebrity. What is more, in the Chinese context *wanghong* is a strongly gendered word. Salient examples of *wanghongs* are usually beauty and fashion influencers, female livestreamers, or pretty vloggers (A. K. Li, 2019; G. Zhang & Hjorth, 2017). To be sure, not all *wanghongs* are women. As Shuaishuai Wang’s research indicates, there are quite a number of gay *wanghongs* on apps targeting gay men (S. Wang, 2020c). Nonetheless, given the administrative and cultural censorship of homosexual content in Chinese media outlets (S. Wang, 2019), heterosexual women are more visible on mainstream social media platforms. There might be *wanghongs* of all genders, but in most cases they are women. Given its entrenched connotations of

lucrative-ness and gender in the vernacular context, I intentionally use *wanghong* rather than internet celebrity, microcelebrity, or influencer.

The third is the *wanghong* economy. Although internet celebrities are found everywhere, the internet celebrity economy is not so prominent in most societies as it is in China. The phenomenon of the *wanghong* economy is still not deeply entrenched in China. The term was coined in 2015 by the e-commerce company Alibaba (Han, 2020), which claimed that Taobao stores run by *wanghongs* on Weibo had considerable sales and thus represented a “new business model” (Yi, 2015). One year later, more media outlets reported *wanghongs*’ economic success and branded 2016 as “year one of wanghong”, impacting how *wanghongs* are interpreted in the Chinese context (Han, 2020; J. Ye & You, 2016; X. Zhang & Su, 2016). The concept of the *wanghong* economy has circulated widely in business reports and mainstream media outlets even since. The prominence of the *wanghong* economy only strengthens *wanghong*’s associations with profitability; at the same time, it leads people to the misunderstanding that *wanghong*-related activities emerged only recently, in year one of *wanghong*. As my analysis of beauty bloggers in the following chapters shows, *wanghongs* and their economic practices existed before 2016. The only difference represented by 2016 is that this is when the mainstream media recognized *wanghongs*’ economic influence, following a promotional push on the part of internet giants.

Far from being a clearly defined term, the concept of the *wanghong* economy is expanding. Though it initially referred to *wanghong*-related e-commerce, it has gradually come to encompass all kinds of economic activity around *wanghongs*. Livestreamers receiving virtual gifts and tips from their fans and famous *wanghongs* making huge profits from advertising, to give just two examples, are now also considered a part of *wanghong* economy (A. K. Li, 2019; S. Wang, 2020c; G. Zhang & Hjorth, 2017). In fact, the more widely that the concept circulates, a wider and wider circle of actors participate in it and attach new meanings to the term. Although in the past most *wanghongs* were independent social media users, they have faced increasingly strong tendencies toward institutionalization and professionalization in the 2010s (Guan, 2020; Han, 2020; S. Wang, 2020b). Multi-network channels, corporations in traditional manufacturing sectors, newly emerging social media platforms, e-commerce platforms, and so on have

each proactively engaged with the *wanghong* economy and vie for a share of it. These actors and their practices are defining what the *wanghong* economy is and how it operates. I am fully aware that beauty bloggers were widely thought to embody the *wanghong* economy in the 2010s. Still, they cannot cover all aspects of this ever-expanding phenomenon. Put more strongly, no single group or body of practices could monopolize the meaning of the *wanghong* economy, for this phenomenon is diverse and is still unsettling.

The premise of my argument is that beauty bloggers' prevalence and success has not just arisen as a result of individual efforts. Rather, their practices are embedded in and shaped by societal structures of gender, labor, and industrial economy. Conversely, they reshape the contours of gender norms, platform labor, and industrial economy in contemporary China. In the following sections of this introduction, I present a fuller picture of these structural forces and resituate Chinese beauty bloggers in their specific historical and cultural contexts. First, I present the macroeconomic background to this study: namely, China's economic transformation. As part of this broad economic shift, China has rapidly developed a domestic market and consumer base. Second, I take up the theme of beauty, discussing three beauty ideals that prevailed in China during the twentieth century. The transitions between these beauty ideals established the ground in which beauty blogging took root. Third, I analyze the ways in which beauty blogging, as a new mode of cultural production, is bound up with the revolution of media technology. Taken together, the economic, gender, and technological changes undergone Chinese society have assembled the space in which beauty blogging emerged. Still, this assemblage does not have a fixed, indeed predestined route. Rather, connections and fractures among diverse players shape the development of beauty blogging and the *wanghong* economy in China.

1.3 China's Economic Transformations

To trace the emergence of beauty bloggers, I now anchor beauty blogging's development in relation to broader conversations in political economy, particularly China's economic transformation over the past four decades. In presenting China's enormous economic experiment in this period, I adopt a two-tier historical lens. The first involves China's

reform and opening-up since 1978, which initiated the privatization and marketization of what had been the socialist state's planned economy. The second lens concentrates on China's more recent economic strategies in the post-2008 context, which represents the latest chapter in its long-term, ongoing reforms. Only after grasping these two, especially impactful periods in China's economic transformation can we ascertain why beauty bloggers and the *wanghong* economy are possible in "socialist" China.

China's economic reform since 1978 represents a grand transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. It follows a three-decade-long socialist experiment (1949-1978), which was pursued especially strongly during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), that put China in a difficult financial position. In the Reform Era, the CCP's ambitious leadership proactively explored ways of rejuvenating China's economic vitality, including loosening state control of the market, allowing the private sector to grow, and embracing global capitalism (Chow, 2015; Coase & Wang, 2012). China's economy grew rapidly in the following decades. Given that China has a relatively weak industrial foundation, this growth was not driven by technological innovation. Rather, it was precipitated by foreign capital investment, cheap labor, and lax regulations (Coase & Wang, 2012, pp. 149–150). With its manufacturing sector booming, China had soon become the world's factory, exporting products on the global market. After three decades of development, China has overtaken the United States and become the world's leading country in terms of volume of exports since 2009 (Atkins & Dyer, 2010). This period of economic reform has undoubtedly proven fruitful: it has transferred China from the thirtieth largest economy in the world in 1978 to the top trading nation in 2009 (Coase & Wang, 2012, p. 150).

The great transformation has had far-reaching impacts on Chinese society. First, it has cultivated a considerable consumer base in China. A considerable body of research shows how China's role of the world's factory is shaping the lives of ordinary Chinese in the Reform Era. This work includes Pun Ngai's research on women workers in manufacturing plants, Jack Qiu's investigation into workers in Foxconn, and Cara Wallis's analysis of migrant women in the service industries. These studies highlight how the Chinese working classes have been integrated into global capitalism. The strong association between China and labour in the scholarship sometimes implies a framework

in which Western consumers are set against non-Western workers. In fact, China's economic progress has led to the emergence of new consumers *within* the nation. In 1976, China's GDP per capita was below \$200, but this figure reached more than \$4,500 in 2010 (Coase & Wang, 2012; World Bank, 2020a). Through this shift, China has moved from being a low-income to a middle-income country (Naughton, 2007, p. 227). This general increase in income has allowed Chinese to consume beauty products, paving the way for the emergence of beauty bloggers and their followers. It crucial to note, though, the purchasing power is not evenly distributed. In 2010, urban households' disposable income per capita reached ¥19,109 (around \$2,823) whereas for rural households this figure was a mere ¥5,919 (around \$874) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). Owing to this income disparity, beauty consumption and beauty blogging are a more urban phenomenon.

Second, China's macroeconomic transformation has built a strong supply chain, on the basis of which the *wanghong* economy has taken shape. Consumers across the globe are familiar with the label "made in China." This is because China has an enormous number of factories, which take orders from a wide range of countries and then make and deliver goods to overseas markets. This growth model has established a strong manufacturing foundation in China, which is now able to supply beauty products to consumers on a large scale.

The fact that economic development has been relatively smooth over the past decades does not mean that China does not face challenges. Despite the rapid growth that marked the early Reform Era, the Chinese economy has structural flaws. On the one hand, China relies heavily on overseas markets. During periods of instability, which are common in global markets, plants in China might be badly affected. On the other hand, China might fail to attain an "upstream" position in global capitalism, given its "downstream" manufacturing role in the global value chain. Global value chain is a framework invented by sociologist Gary Gereffi. This framework breaks down the global production system into design, branding, marketing, manufacturing, and distributions of products and analyzes how value is distributed in each segment (Gereffi & Frederick, 2010; Gereffi, Humphrey, & Sturgeon, 2005). Usually, segments like design, branding, and marketing reap more values while manufacturing makes less. In a

context of globalization, these segments usually are scattered in various countries, but not in a random order. According to the framework of global value chains, a feature of the contemporary global capitalism is that transnational corporations (usually based in developed countries) “focus on innovation and product strategy, marketing, and the highest value-added segments of manufacturing and services, while reducing their direct ownership over ‘non-core’ functions such as generic services and volume production” (Gereffi et al., 2005, p. 79). The global value chain framework points out the imbalance of the world economy: while developed countries can gain more value from participating in the high value-added segments like design and branding, developing countries are constrained to low value-added segments like offering raw material or manufacturing. China’s role of the world’s factory is a manifestation of the global value chain: multinational corporations move the manufacturing segment to China for the cheap labor there while keeping the core, high value-added segments in their original countries. Despite China’s growing industrial capacity, it has much weaker control over core and high value-added sectors than it does over large-scale production. “As late as 2009,” economists explain, “the United States still manufactured more goods (\$1.7 trillion in manufacturing value-added) than China (\$1.3 trillion)” (Coase & Wang, 2012, p. 190). Therefore, “the growth of domestic capacity in manufacturing in China is far less impressive than the name, the ‘workshop of the world’, might suggest” (Coase & Wang, 2012, p. 190).

These structural flaws came clearly into view during the 2008 global financial crisis, leading to a restructuring of the Chinese economy in its aftermath. The sudden decline of global export markets during the crisis put acute pressure on China, which relied on exports more than any other country. In the face of the choppy waters of global capitalism, China had to address its weaknesses. It started by transforming its “export- and investment-driven growth” into “a consumption-based and innovation-driven economy” and turning its low value-added businesses into high value-added businesses in the global distribution of value (Yu Hong, 2017, p. 3). Accordingly, China has pledged to expand the domestic market and boost innovation and entrepreneurship. It is against this backdrop that beauty consumption, and especially beauty e-commerce, has established a place in China. In terms of national policy, the state encourages beauty

consumption, for it makes a huge contribution to China's market economy (G. Xu & Feiner, 2007). What is more, as a part of the information and communication technology (ICT) industry, e-commerce platforms are supported at multiple levels of government in China. By way of well-connected e-commerce networks, beauty products can be distributed to areas in which beauty retailing has not previously been strong. As a result, beauty products are more accessible in China now than ever before. This particular context endows beauty bloggers' advocacy of a consumption-based lifestyle with new meanings: this phenomenon is not only about individual women buying cosmetics; it reflects with national economic restructuring processes too. The reality here, surely, it is not that women automatically open their wallets and pay for cosmetics when the state needs domestic consumption and innovation. Economic restructuring is more sophisticated than that, requiring constant cultural pervasion and material support, as I discuss in detail in chapters 1 and 3 respectively.

Large-scale beauty consumption has been made possible and important by China's long-term economic transformation since 1978 and the economic restructuring that followed the 2008 global financial crisis. By looking back at China's past economic transformations, we can embed the recent phenomenon of beauty blogging up in China's history and understand why large-scale beauty consumption has emerged in the country. That said, the advent of domestic consumers and supply chains alone cannot explain the rise of beauty blogging. Although beauty blogging centrally involves beauty consumption, it is more than an economic function. Consumers are not puppets in the hands of the state or market players. They are drawn to beauty consumption rather than other spheres consumption, drawn to beauty blogging, rather than other blogospheres. To understand why Chinese women enthusiastically engage with beauty blogging, it is necessary to reflect on why and in what ways beauty matters for them. This is the theme of the next section.

1.4 “Everyone Has a Heart for Beauty”

During my fieldwork, I saw that in explaining why they apply makeup, run beauty blogs, or follow beauty bloggers, beauty bloggers and their loyal audiences often referred to a Chinese saying, *aimei zhibixin renjie youzhi* (everyone has a heart for beauty). The saying circulates widely in China today, implying it is now accepted that humans pursue beauty. Upon reflection, though, it becomes apparent that the phrase entails certain fallacies: whereas it assumes that all humans desire beauty, in reality, the phrase is most often used by women. Not every man has a heart for beauty, apparently. The phrase also assumes that beauty is a constant quantity that is always desired, irrespective of context. In fact, definitions of beauty have changed dramatically across history and geopolitics and there is no universal beauty that can win the heart of anyone, anywhere.

In this section, I draw inspiration from critical accounts of the concept of beauty in gender studies and investigate shifting historical constructions of female beauty in China. I will present three beauty ideals that have been applied to and enacted by Chinese women in the twentieth century, including women with small feet, iron girls, and modern women. In so doing, I show that the instability of beauty comes to the fore when it is set in a long timeline. As bodily discourses and practices that aim to enhance female charm, the three ideals in question here illustrate shifting yet continuous interactions between women’s bodies and ideologies. At the same time, the retrospective perspective advanced here allows me to explore the historical context in which beauty blogging developed and trace the specific conception of beauty that contemporary beauty bloggers both inherit and reject.

Golden Lotus

Xie Bingying (1906-2000) was a writer who became famous in China in the middle of the twentieth century. When she turned ten years old, her mother used bandages to bound her feet extremely tightly. Due to the pain, Xie resisted the footbinding, so her mother asked her sister-in-law to pin Xie’s hands down while she forcibly finished binding Xie’s feet. Xie’s body was soon numb and walking hurt badly. From then on, she could only sit by the stove and spin yarn or stroll slowly through the living room (B. Xie, 2001, pp. 15–16). At that time the traditional custom of footbinding was prevalent

among women; in the Confucian social climate, small feet equaled beauty and propriety in womanhood. The practice is as cruel as it seems, breaking the arches of young women's feet, keeping their soles around four-inches long, and thus severely limiting women's mobility. Women's tiny feet confined them to the domestic sphere, in which they spun, wove, and did the household and other forms of labor associated with social and family reproduction (Gates, 2014).

Footbinding aims to bend young girls' feet, such that they resemble the crescent shape of a new moon (Chang, 1997, p. 20). To be specific, a pair of perfect female feet were expected to meet seven standards: they were to be small, slim, pointed, arched, fragrant, soft, and straight (P. Wang, 2000). To ensure that bound feet retain the desired shape, binding usually goes on over several years. The practice is highly risky and painful in that it involves breaking the arches and bones of girls' feet, sometimes leading to infection, disability, paralysis, and even death (Gates, 2014; Little, 1899; Mackie, 1996). The history of footbinding in China can be traced as far back as the Southern T'ang Kingdom (937-975) (Mackie, 1996). Despite being cruel and risky, the process of footbinding was considered a "necessary" part of Han Chinese women's lives. This was mainly because bound feet were seen as proper and graceful in women in traditional Confucian culture. In the Chinese language, small feet were addressed by way of a euphonious term, namely "golden lotus." A large number of articles and poems praised lotus feet. Su Shi (苏轼, 1036-1101), one of the best-known intellectuals in the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), wrote the following poem:

Anointed with fragrance, she takes lotus steps.
 Though often sad, she walks with swift lightness.
 She dances like the wind,
 Leaving no physical trace.
 —Su Shi (as cited in Levy, 1992)

By emphasizing the beauty of lotus feet, ancient Chinese intellectuals successfully connected footbinding and femininity. This connection was still influential and seen as

valid in the first half of the twentieth century in China. In general, the aesthetic discourse around footbinding legitimized the cruel custom in China's society.

In 1911, the Nationalist Revolution led by Kuomintang (KMT, also known as Guomindang and the Chinese Nationalist Party) overthrew the Qing, China's last imperial dynasty (1616-1911), and established the Republic of China. This revolution is a key milestone in the history of China's modernization, marking the end of two millennia of imperial rule and the beginning of China's Republican Era (Xiaobing Li, 2007, pp. 26–27). The modernization of the political system altered Chinese society enormously. Nevertheless, some traditional customs lived on, including footbinding. Although the KMT banned footbinding in 1912, the tradition did not disappear. From the 1920s onward, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also tried to ban footbinding in its jurisdiction, but failed to erase it. In the troubled years between 1900 and 1949, footbinding could still be found in many areas in China, for small-feet were appreciated as a part of female beauty. In the second half of the twentieth century, though, footbinding disappeared in China (Gates, 2014).

People usually understand beauty as beautiful bodily features. In fact, it is a set of discourses and practices of bodily and spiritual modification. For women with bound feet, footbinding was not just a means to attain beauty, but also a constant practice of training obedience. Despite having lasted for a thousand years, footbinding is now no longer seen as a way to achieve beauty due to modernization movements in China. Its extinction shows that there is neither an essential Chinese concept of beauty nor a stable standard of beauty as such.

Iron Girls and Socialist Production

In 1963, an “Iron Girl Brigade” came into being in Dazhai village, Shanxi Province in northern China. The brigade, which consisted of 23 women aged between 13 and 17, formed naturally through its members participating in agricultural production every day. Because they worked very hard in the fields, local people began to call them “iron girls” (Y. Yao, 2014). Iron symbolizes toughness and indestructibility; in underdeveloped China in that period, it also connoted modernization. The iron girls wore braids or short hair; with their broad shoulders and thick waists, they did physical work such as carrying

stones or hoes in the field, as men did (B. Liu, 2014). The term iron girl conjures up images of powerful women, which challenge traditional Chinese gender norms, such as the association of footbinding with femininity. Official media outlets widely disseminated stories and pictures of iron girls, who were held up as models of socialist production by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). For Chinese people, whether living in the first half of the twentieth century or the Post-Maoist Era (1977-), the image of Dazhai iron girls has hardly ever been associated with beautiful women. Indeed, in the 1960s and '70s the sayings “men and women are the same” circulated widely in China and many women modeled themselves on the iron girls and proactively imitated them in diverse regions and sectors of the economy.

Although iron girls are considered an iconic image of Chinese women during the Maoist Era (1949-1976), they were not idealized throughout the whole period. During the first years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), there was not a clear socialist beauty model of this kind. The CCP-led socialist revolution against imperialism, feudalism, and capitalism allowed women to reject traditional and bourgeois femininities. Still, enduring wartime, China's economic poverty, and limited quality of life meant that beauty was not an urgent issue for women. When peace was restored after 1949, though, beauty and fashion were no longer taboo in China's newborn socialist state. In a speech of 1956, Mao Zedong said that “in the post-revolution time, women spending no time on their appearances signifies the change of atmospheres, which is revolutionary and good. But this shouldn't last long. It is better to have diversity” (Bai, 1987, p. 15, as cited in X. Tang, 2012, p.50). Yet diversity did not come. Instead, the country fell into frenzied class struggle, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). As political fanaticism increased, the Chinese government and populace proscribed beauty and fashion on the grounds that they represent bourgeois habits (X. Tang, 2012, pp. 50–51).

Figure 1.2

Dazhai Iron girl and other villagers working in the field in the 1960s



Note. Retrieved on August 2018, from
<https://news.sohu.com/20081130/n260936379.shtml>

Against the backdrop of the socialist revolution and class struggle, iron girls became the image of ideal women. They had abandoned not only feudal femininity (epitomized by women with bound feet) but also bourgeois femininity (illustrated by calendar girls in Western dress and makeup). Whereas bourgeois women presented some “female” characteristics, such as fair skin, shiny hair, slim figures, and small feet, iron girls had tanned skins (due to outdoor labor, not as the mark of a Western, middle-class holiday), strong figures, and big feet. What is more, they usually wore trousers, which were more convenient for work and movement. With this look, they embodied women’s ability to be as productive as men in the workplace. Manly looks and dedication to work were the main features of iron girls. Echoing these ideal types, many women, whether living in rural or urban areas, dressed like men during the Cultural Revolution. “To be revolutionary, critics suggest, one had to act like a man; to behave [like] a woman risked being labeled a ‘backward element’” (Honig, 2002, p. 266).

To reiterate an earlier point, beauty practices associated with iron girls were not just about women’s appearance. By minimizing the attention that they paid to seem feminine, iron girls maximized their participation in the labor of building a socialist society; this comes across strongly in the active roles that they played in agricultural and industrial production (Jin, 2006). Women demonstrated their beauty by supplying productive bodies to the grand socialist project. This greatly excited Chinese women—especially rural women, who faced the deeply entrenched assumption that “men and women can’t be the same” (Jin, 2006, p. 624). For instance, many women grappled with the taboo on women doing outdoor chores. The ideal of the iron girl offered these women a weapon with which to challenge conservative mindsets and establish a role in social, economic, and political activities. According to Jin Yihong’s research (Jin, 2006), members of the iron girl brigades claimed that participation brought them respect and the sense of having a high social status. Membership of the iron girl brigades even offered them better opportunities for romantic relationships, since “back then men appreciated hard-working and diligent women, unlike today when men only care for prettiness” (Jin, 2006). Iron girls’ boyish looks and industriousness did not reduce their charm; rather, women were able to participate in the labor force and be recognized for their contribution.

Despite allowing women to dispense with feudal discipline in patriarchal families and step into the public sphere, the iron girls campaign still had its limits. Without dismissing the progressiveness of the iron girls' beauty, I would like to point out that the ideal of the iron girl did not offer an inclusive construction of femininity. On the one hand, only bodies that could demonstrate female power and contribute to building socialism were admired. As a result, women "were pressured to dress and act like men, but not the vice versa" (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002, p. 251). Although the abandonment of feudal and bourgeois femininity was progressive, the "masculinization" that came in its place was problematic (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002, p. 251). It replaced a received form of misogyny with a new, hidden misogyny that still saw feminine looks and behaviors as inferior and masculine looks and behaviors as superior. Accordingly, many women might not have given up their femininities voluntarily, which laid a foundation for the resurgence of femininity in the Post-Maoist Era. On the other hand, the emergence of iron girls relied heavily on the state's intervention. The newborn state frequently sought to mobilize women politically, beginning in the 1950s and continuing into the 1970s. During this period, issues concerning gender were discussed in terms of political struggles; women were either "revolutionary" or "unrevolutionary" (Jin, 2006, p. 177). In the context of political mobilization, iron girl brigades were rarely organized voluntarily. More often than not, they were facilitated by administrative organizations. Iron girl brigades therefore tended to cluster in state-owned sectors, in which mobilization could be organized effectively. To some extent, this led to a certain uniformity and passivity in iron girl practices, which was severely criticized in the Post-Maoist Era.

Only when we recognize this period of history can we understand why contemporary Chinese women no longer appreciate the feudal ideal of femininity. Undoubtedly, the iron girls movement eliminated the appeal of women with bound feet, who had no place in the public sphere. That said, this movement distinguished China from Western societies in terms of beauty practices. In Euro-American societies, the soaring consumption of beauty products after World War Two paved the way for the gendered beauty practices that are pervasive today (Jones, 2010). China does not share this history. In China five decades ago, the ideal woman had nothing to do with skincare

and makeup products. This makes the current craze around beauty consumption all the more unexpected and questionable. Only when we acknowledge how beauty can take a totally different form can we see that the beauty ideals promoted by beauty bloggers—which usually feature fair skin, youth, and slimness—are social constructs. Further, the sharp contrast between iron girls and beauty bloggers urges us to address two queries. How do transitions between beauty ideals take place in China? What happened after iron girls and before beauty bloggers? Bearing these questions in mind, I now turn to the early stage of the Reform Era and examine the societal changes that paved the way for beauty blogging.

“Modern Women” in the 1990s

Although stories of gender-neutral iron girls were common in the Maoist Era, they became less prominent in mainstream media during the Post-Maoist Era, which is also known as the Reform Era. Along with the overall withdrawal of the socialist ideology, debates about beauty and a yearning for femininity proliferated. During the early Reform Era, an important ideal of femininity was the ideal of “modern women” (*xiandai nǚxing*), which conjured up images of “enticing, beautified and fashionable young women” (Johansson, 2001, p. 99).

From 1978 onward, China has shifted its focus from the socialist revolution to economic development. This has hugely influenced people’s understanding of beauty. The 1980s saw social attitudes as to what is beautiful and what should be avoided diverge sharply from those of the 1960s and ‘70s. Beauty was no longer considered a bourgeois (and thus taboo) notion. Debates about beauty took off from the very beginning of the Reform Era, signaling a newly relaxed ideological approach to beauty and bodies. In 1979, an editorial on beauty was published in *China Youth*, the Communist Youth League of China’s official journal. “The goal of the CCP-led revolution,” the article claims, “is to raise people’s living standards. It is reasonable for people to pay more attention to personal looks once living standards go up” (X. Liu, 1979, p. 46, as cited in X. Tang, 2012, p. 51). The title of this editorial is telling with regard to the change in the political atmosphere: “Is it a Bourgeois Idea to Pay Attention to One’s Clothing?” As the editorial argues, devoting attention to one’s looks is totally acceptable and should not be deemed

bourgeois. This article ignited a series of debates about beauty. In 1980, this magazine set up a new column, “Communication about Aesthetics” (*meixue tongxun*), which focused on issues of beauty. From that time onward, the connection between beauty and bourgeois ideology has been broken and people have become more tolerant of notions of beauty in political as well as societal realms (X. Tang, 2012, p. 52). Although official discourses still advocated “inner beauty” over “outside beauty” in the 1980s, personal appearance was no longer seen as having a bearing on the socialist revolution or proletarian aesthetics, allowing new beauty ideals to grow (X. Tang, 2012, pp. 53–54).

This recognition of beauty, however, has come with the repudiation of the Socialist Era’s revolutionary aesthetics. Indeed, the press has accused fanatical socialists (particularly those of the Cultural Revolution) of ruining all beautiful things (which is not limited to female beauty). For instance, a periodical titled *Meiyu* (Aesthetic Education) was established in 1981 in the wake of the new debates over beauty. In the first issue’s opening statement, editors claimed that beauty (*mei*) had been destroyed and aesthetic education abandoned during the Cultural Revolution. They were launching this periodical, they wrote, to repair these harms and cultivate well-rounded socialist new people (*shehui zhuyi xinren*) (Meiyu, 1981, p. 3, as cited in Yin, 2006, p. 32). As part of the overall denunciation of the Cultural Revolution’s aesthetic practices, received women’s aesthetic practices were firmly refuted too. These sharp critiques leveled against iron girls exemplify shifting perspectives on beauty. In 1985, A female scientist said that:

Eastern women have a tradition of gentleness, capacity for deep love, and dignity. I feel that this is not a shortcoming, but a kind of beauty. I do not hope that all women bare their fangs, brandish their claws, and become short-tempered “Iron Girls.” (J. Xu, 1985, as cited in Honig & Hershatter, 1988, p. 25)

The once honorable iron girls, who had represented gender equality, were now mercilessly degraded as raging animals. Simultaneously, the tradition of female gentleness and dependency enjoyed a partial resurgence. The scientist’s repudiation of

iron girls was widely reflected in the popular culture of the 1980s (Honig & Hershat, 1988, pp. 25–26).

With the fall of the socialist beauty ideal in the 1980s, Chinese women were eager to reimagine how women should be. This gave rise to the notion of modern women in the 1990s. In 1991, *Chinese Women* (zhongguo funü), an official periodical of the All-China Women's Federation, published an article named *What is the Beauty of Modern Women?* (shenme shi xiandai nüxing mei). In broaching a question that “bothers many women” (Zhongguo funü, 1991, p. 4), the editorial referred to a comment made by a male Chinese-American scholar, to the effect that there were no real women in mainland China. The editors argued that although this comment did not apply to all aspects of Chinese women, it did inspire them to argue that “Chinese women should rethink their gender characteristics and consciousness and modern Chinese women should fully perform their female beauty” (Zhongguo funü, 1991, p. 4). *Chinese Women* was distributed widely in mainland China in the 1990s. Wielding this considerable cultural influence, this editorial generated a broad enthusiasm for modern women. Many audiences wrote to the magazine to express their views and pose questions about modern women.

Soon, other periodicals targeting female readerships joined the discussion (Johansson, 2001). In September 1991, *Chinese Women* published another article, *My Thoughts about the Beauty of Modern Women* (xiandai nüxing mei zhi wujian). This article began by accusing the socialist past of being a time “without self and sex” (Xiao, 1991, p. 22), before arguing that, for modern women, beauty should involve self and sex. While the former notion is taken to suggest that modern women should have careers to ensure their independence, the latter is interpreted as meaning that women should “be aware of” their “sex role all the time” (Xiao, 1991, p. 23). The author further explained that “the beauty of modern women can be realized only in men’s recognition”, “first through inner beauty then through external beauty” (Xiao, 1991, p. 23). The article exhibits a hybrid interpretation of femininity. At one level, the author’s emphasis on women having careers and being independent indicates the lingering influence of discourses of gender equality from the Socialist Era (though it should be said that the author might not have appreciated this connection, given her aversion to that period). At another, the

stress that she places on women's "sex role" suggests a return of traditional gender norms, which demand that women be morally compliant and physically attractive. Ironically, here the traditional gender norms are considered essential to "modern" women. This suggests a backlash against iron girls and other Maoist Era de-feminization practices. Alongside precipitating a search for the modern woman, *Chinese Women* changed the style of its cover images. Whereas its covers used to feature "serious-looking working-class heroines in dirty overalls, old Party women in blue Mao Jackets or young female soldiers in aggressive poses" (Johansson, 2001, p. 98), in the 1990s these images gave way to "enticing, beautified and fashionable young women" (Johansson, 2001, p. 99). Crucially, this heated discussion about modern women in mainstream media outlets actually signified the state's efforts to refeminize and depoliticize women's bodies in the 1990s.

This shift in official ideology paved the way for the expansion of the beauty market. Echoing *Chinese Women's* concern about the lack of femininity in contemporary China, the beauty industry proactively provided new templates for modern women. As Perry Johansson's (1998) research on Chinese beauty advertisements of the 1990s shows, white skin and large breasts were taken as the signs of modernity. This imagined modernity contains conflicting ingredients: while fair skin, which derived from the Chinese traditional class-based aesthetics, relates to gentleness and reservedness, large breasts, which was influenced by Western culture, have associations with seductiveness and abandon. The contradictory aspects of modern women's beauty, Johansson argues (1998), reflect "ambiguities of the Chinese modernization process and the conflicting ideas about what role women should play in the process" (p. 78).

Following the combined effort of the state and beauty industry, China's beauty market rapidly expanded in the early Reform Era (Hooper, 1994). Having previously been celebrated for holding up half of the sky in the Socialist Era, women became targeted consumers in the reformed environment.² Increasingly women were expected

² "Women can hold up half the sky" (*funü nengding banbiantian*) was a popular phrase during the Socialist Era. People usually assumed that it was a quote from Mao Zedong, but there is no clear evidence showing this phrase was directly from Mao Zedong (X. Zhong, 2010).

to pay to ensure that they displayed a seemingly necessary femininity and contribute to the national economy.

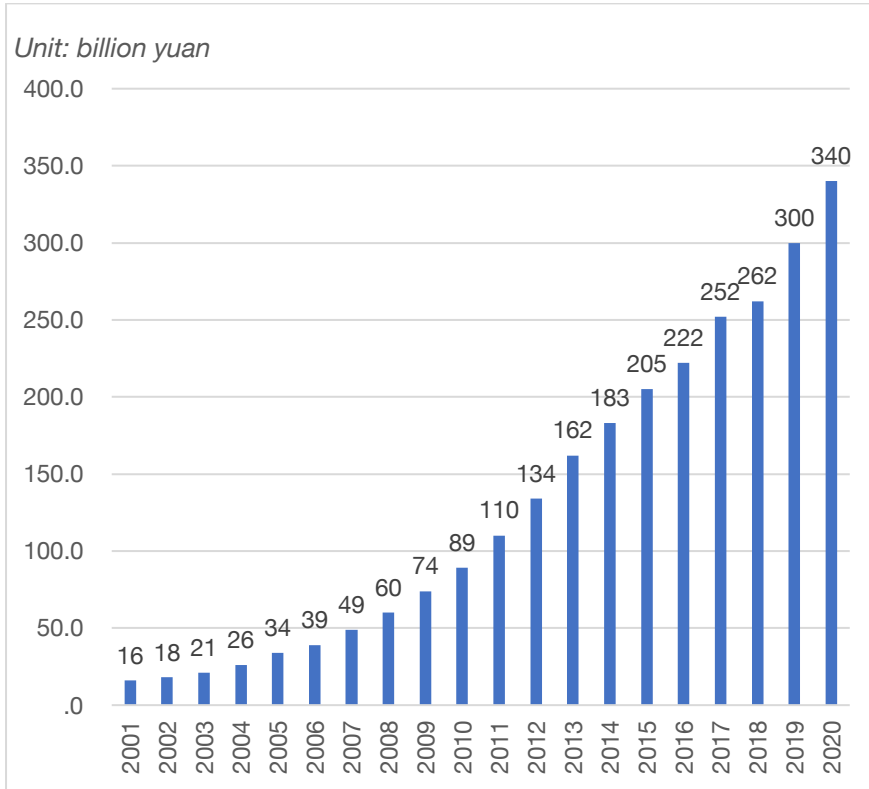
Looking back at the inception of modern women in the early Reform Era, it is easy to identify a historical rupture in conceptions of beauty. Politically, the post-Maoist Communist leadership needed to legitimize themselves by proclaiming a new modernity and new forms of beauty (G. Xu & Feiner, 2007). The feminine ideal of the Maoist Era, along with the wider radical ideology that characterized the Socialist Era, was ruthlessly discarded by the CCP-led mainstream media. Meanwhile, the Reform Era's "economy first" ideology allowed beauty enterprises to advocate "modern women" and address every part of women's bodies through the beauty market. The debates about modern women signaled a sharp turn from defeminization to refeminization, from beauty enrolled in production to beauty secured through consumption. This allows us to understand how beauty bloggers became possible in socialist China. Modern women of the 1990s share some qualities with beauty bloggers today. Both appreciate fair skin, advocate the use of beauty products, and admire femininity. The way in which twenty-first-century Chinese beauty bloggers understand beauty has not come from nowhere: they inherit many of the beauty standards that prevailed in the 1990s. In this sense, beauty bloggers are historically linked to forms of beauty that circulated before blogs.

That said, there is a rupture between contemporary beauty blogging and beauty practices of the early Reform Era. Despite the downfall of the socialist ideologies, the socialist legacy has not been entirely overtaken by the capitalist transformation of the state. On the one hand, China's capitalist economy in the early Reform Era only did so well. As fast as the Chinese beauty market grew in the 1990s, it was still relatively small at the end of the 1990s. In terms of purchasing power, urban households' annual income per capita was ¥5,854 (around \$839), whereas for rural households that figure was ¥2,210 (around \$317) in 1999 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001b). China was a low-income country until 2009. Accordingly, beauty practices were not affordable for the vast majority of the Chinese population. This is not to deny that there were consumers who could afford cosmetics. Indeed, a "middle-class" and "new rich" emerged in China as part of the economic reform (Goodman, 1992). These people, who accounted for a small proportion of the Chinese population, had more access to beauty

consumption than the majority. Because of this income disparity, mainstream cosmetic brands operated their distribution channels only in the relatively developed areas, such as first-tier cities (F. Wang, 2005). In the light of China's unbalanced economy in the 1990s, beauty consumption does little to intervene most people's everyday lives.

On the other hand, there is a gap between media representations and people's lived experience. Much of the research on Chinese beauty standards and consumerism during the 1990s is based on media representation (Hooper, 1994; Johansson, 1998, 1999, 2001; Zha, 1995). This work shows that fashionable women wearing makeup featured prominently in Chinese media in the 1990s. Although this definitely provides valuable perspectives on beauty issues in China, it should not be assumed that most Chinese women took to using cosmetics in the 1990s. As statistics show, the beauty market of China expanded rapidly after the 1990s (see Table 1.2). In 1982, the very beginning of China's economic reform, the overall sales of China's cosmetics industry was less than ¥200 million (Li, 1999). This figure reached ¥1.54 billion in 2001. This figure grew hugely in the following two decades, reaching ¥340 billion in 2020 (see Table 1.2). Even in the troubled year of 2020, during which Chinese people stayed in for several months, it increased by 9.5% in comparison with the year before.

In terms of my personal experience, I also experienced great changes of cosmetics usage in daily life. Born in 1993, I grew up in a third-tier city in inland China. Even in the late 2000s, when I was in high school, our school regulations clearly stated that students were not allowed to use cosmetics. Based on my personal experience, girls using cosmetics were considered “bad” and makeup was rarely appreciated by peers and parents. The sociologist Amy Hanser encountered a similar atmosphere in northeast China at the beginning of the 2000s (Hanser, 2005, pp. 590–591). One can recognize a trace of socialism in this “common sense” idea, namely that using cosmetics signifies moral degradation instead of being fashionable. When I entered college in Shanghai in 2010, my female classmates did not wear cosmetics, whether they came from big cities, small cities, or villages situated all over China. This shows that the socialist legacy quietly persisted in women's everyday life and that consumerist ideas, which already existed in the 1980s and '90s, have not entirely won out against the socialist conception of beauty

Table 1.2*Annual Sales of China's Cosmetics Industry (2001-2020)*

Note. Data are from National Bureau of Statistics and I make this table.

in every corner of China in the twenty-first century. By the time I graduated from college in 2014, however, the situation had changed dramatically. Almost all of my female classmates wore cosmetics and had craftily learnt beauty hacks on social media. What had happened to my peers? How had consumerism transformed these young urban women into cosmetics consumers? What role have beauty blogs played in this process? Guided by these questions, in this dissertation I examine beauty practices around beauty blogs. In so doing, I avoid a media-centric lens. The media representations produced by beauty bloggers are essential for this research, to be sure, but I also take the additional step of showing how media representations translate into audiences' lived experiences. After all, beauty consumption requires constant audience mobilization. This comes to the fore particularly in chapter 1, in which I show how beauty bloggers and loyal blog audiences engage in the discursive space.

To understand how beauty blogging mobilizes audiences, it is important to attend to the role of media technologies, which separate beauty blogs from previous beauty media. In the following section, I elaborate on why communication technology is indispensable for grasping beauty practices in contemporary China.

1.5 Communication Technology and Beauty Media in Post-Maoist China

The 1990s witnessed the growing influence of femininity- and consumption-based notions of beauty in Chinese mass media, such as magazines, newspapers, and television. These media played an important role in establishing the new beauty standards. The most influential media outlets, it is important to note, are not static. Instead, they change in tandem with new technologies and business models, absorbing ideas of beauty from diverse sources and interacting with audiences in distinct ways. I divide beauty media in Reform Era into three categories: editor-centric legacy media, editor-centric internet media, and UGC media.

Editor-centric legacy media comprises magazines, newspapers, and television. These media, which are usually defined as “traditional media,” are run by professional organizations and full-time content producers, such as journalists, editors, and directors. In China, these media organizations are licensed by the government and subject to interventions from the CCP's leadership. Meanwhile, they are financially dependent on

advertising revenue. Media scholar Yuezhi Zhao (1998) has defined China's media system as the propagandist/commercial model of journalism, which allows audience participation, but only in limited doses. Consider *Chinese Women*, which allows readers to express themselves by printing their letters in its columns pages. In the discussion concerning modern women's beauty, *Chinese Women's* editors invited readers to voice their opinions. Although some readers' letters were published, the editors chose which would appear and how the content would be presented. In China, editors are selected through strict examinations, meaning that professional editors are largely well-educated urban professionals. Legacy media usually charge consumers, who must subscribe to newspapers, buy magazines at newsstands, or pay to watch television networks. Before the internet, the editor-centric media constituted the main channel through which beauty was represented for ordinary people. The editor-led conventional media still produce beauty-related content, though they are now less vocal in the field than they have been in the past.

With the development of information communication technologies in China, the internet has become an alternative means by which audiences can access ideas of beauty. At the beginning of Chinese internet, editor-centric portal websites were influential in the spreading of ideas about beauty. These websites emerged in the mid-1990s; given the limited internet services at that time, these websites were almost synonymous with the internet in China (Fang & Zhong, 2019). Between the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the popularity of portal websites peaked in China, attracting their users through their principal functions, namely the provision of news, e-mail, and search engines. During this period, Sohu, Sina, and NetEase were the biggest portal websites in China (Fang & Zhong, 2019, p. 5). Although these websites presented news as their main service, the "news" they provided was broader than the news conveyed through legacy media. They collected and presented diverse information, which included—but was not limited to—stories relating to politics, finance, the military, and education. In the light of the increasing number of female users, Sohu, Sina, and NetEase each launched blocks targeted at women in their information board, providing stories about fashion and beauty. Sohu, for example, first launched its sub-block aimed at women in 1999. Named Sohu Women (Sohu *nüren*), it led the trend for portal websites to offer

women's channels (Baidu baike, 2020). Sohu Women purveys news about fashion, beauty, romance, marriage, and so on. Soon after its release, the two other main portal websites started women's channels of their own.

These portal websites were run by internet companies, which were not yet deemed serious media. Accordingly, these companies did not invest much in creating original content. Instead they hired professional editors to adapt content from legacy media (Zhu & Yue, 2017). The process of creating content for these websites resembled that of the traditional media in that it relied on editors, just with less capability for independent creation. Unlike traditional media, portal websites are free. As long as users have access to the internet, they can use portal websites without subscription or having to make one-off payments. In comparison with the internet that we are familiar with today, early portal websites did not allow for audiences participation. Although they could supply a huge volume of information and continuously update content, they did not significantly challenge traditional media. Their influence on beauty media might not have outgrown that of the legacy media, for the latter kept making new forays into niche markets targeting women and beauty. World-famous glossy magazines, for example, launched Chinese versions in the 1990s and 2000s (E. Chen, 2016). Overall, the golden age of portal websites in China was brief. Lacking original content and users' participation, they declined in the mid-2000s (Fang & Zhong, 2019).

Although editor-centric portal websites did not revolutionize beauty media, they built a foundation for UGC media. With the advent of Web 2.0 technology, which allows user participation and interaction (O'reilly, 2007), user-centric social media became the cutting-edge channel for information communication. Previously popular portal websites sought to capture this fast-growing market and Sohu, Sina, and NetEase rolled out blog sites one after another around 2005. Web 2.0 technology induced a wave of enthusiasm among Chinese internet users. By July 2008, blog sites and online forums ranked among the top 10 most used internet services and 42.3% of Chinese internet users had blogs (CNNIC, 2008, p. 7). Bourgeoning blog sites attracted a considerable number of female users. Although the male-to-female ratio of Chinese internet users as a whole was 55:45 in 2007, the figure for Chinese blog users was 43:57 in that same year (CNNIC, 2017, p. 24). This relatively high proportion of female bloggers produced

communities in which women could share and exchange information concerning everyday life. Topics included, but were not limited to, beauty, fashion, and romance. According to the CNNIC, the majority of bloggers were relatively highly educated, being either students or professionals. This also suggests that most bloggers were based in cities at that time. Beauty bloggers emerged from among this constellation of users.

The advent of UGC media challenged editor-centric content production and stimulated ordinary users' creativity. In terms of beauty, the fashion trends were no longer in the hands of legacy media alone. Ordinary women, who had few means of voicing their views through mainstream media, became opinion leaders in online communities. Unlike beauty editors working at *ELLE* or actresses on television shows, these beauty amateurs using blog sites attracted audiences by way of their "authenticity": "an invaluable, yet ineffable quality" that differentiates these bloggers from mainstream media personalities (Marwick, 2013). On the one hand, domestic blog sites allowed beauty bloggers to flourish. On the other, the emergence of the global beauty guru culture had effects in Chinese cyberspace. Despite the country's ban on foreign Web 2.0 sites such as YouTube and Twitter, China has never been immune to foreign influence online. Two pioneering figures catalyzed China's budding beauty blogging culture: one is the American beauty guru Michelle Phan, the other the Korean beauty guru Pony Park. Michelle Phan had her blog on makeup instruction in 2005 and began posting videos on YouTube from 2007. Before 2009, her makeup tutorial videos, having initially been released on YouTube, were uploaded to China's video website YouKu by Chinese fans. Pony Park, who started her Korean blog in 2008, soon gained a reputation in the Chinese internet in 2009. Chinese fans provided Chinese subtitles for Phan and Park's videos spontaneously. Domestic technological development, the growing female user base, and the penetration of global pop culture into everyday life all contributed to the atmosphere in which Chinese beauty blogging could surge in the late 2000s. As these developments aligned, beauty amateurs rushed to social media to search, share, and exchange information about beauty.

Improvements in China's internet penetration, particularly in mobile communication and smartphone use, have brought Web 2.0 technologies to more and more people, accelerating beauty blogging's expansion. In the first decade of the twenty-

first century, China was much slower to adopt the latest mobile communication technology than advanced countries. For example, Japan undertook a massive roll-out of third generation (3G) wireless services in 2001 (BBC, 2001) and European countries launched 3G services from 2003 onwards (BBC, 2003). In comparison, China opened its 3G networks in 2009, which is relatively late (X. Feng & Huang, 2009). After the 2008 financial crisis, China's government was displeased that it was lagging behind in the global race to update communication technologies. Accordingly, it speeded up its plans to adopt cutting-edge communication networks (Yu Hong, 2017, pp. 79–80). Only four years later, China started running its fourth generation (4G) networks. By 2019, more than half of the world's 4G base stations were in China and China had far more 4G base stations per capita than the United States (C. Zhang, 2019). While there is mobile internet signal in every corner of China, the spread smartphone penetration has provided a hardware foundation for internet adoption. In 2013, smartphone shipments to China reached 350 million, exceeding those to North America and Europe and making China the biggest smartphone market in the world (Shan, 2014). The combination of high-speed mobile internet and the wide uptake of smartphones has ensured a broad user base for beauty blogs, enabling users to access social media 24/7.

If traditional media could be confident in their authority in the 1990s and 2000s, they could hardly compete with social media in the 2010s in terms of audience base. *Chinese Women*, as I have mentioned, was once an influential magazine, with a monthly circulation of 550,000 in 1995 (Johansson, 2001, p. 96). Two decades later, the micro-blogging platform Weibo had 236 million active users per month in 2015 (Weibo, 2016). Although not all of these users followed beauty bloggers, they had free access to Weibo's many beauty bloggers as long as they can use the internet. When readers of *Chinese Women* do not subscribe the printed copies, they have no access to the content at all. The center of media, including beauty media, has migrated from traditional to social media. The ways in which beauty advertisers have responded to this shift is strong proof of its significance. In 2014, L'Oréal (China), the largest advertiser in the Chinese beauty industry, reduced the number of advertisements it placed in printed media by 19.4% in comparison with the previous year; meanwhile, its advertisements on internet media increased by 30.7% on 2013 (Meihua.info, 2014).

Although social media's user base and technological infrastructure had been much strengthened by the end of the 2000s, beauty blogging was not yet a stable mode of cultural production. Web 2.0 technology can guarantee that people can create content freely, but not the quality of created content. The fact that hundreds of thousands of beauty amateurs began sharing their experiences on social media does not necessarily mean an explosion of quality content. Without professional editors, the spontaneous production of discrete users can be quite chaotic, unstable, and unpopular. This, in fact, was the situation of beauty blogging at the beginning of the 2010s, when beauty amateurs were marginal on Chinese social media. By the mid-2010s, however, the scene was very different.

If the center of beauty media has moved from traditional media to digital media, how has this transition unfolded? Despite the hype surrounding the Web 2.0, user-led content can be a nightmare when it comes to cultural production, for it involves mass cooperation in creative processes that can be disorganized, unpredictable, and unstable. Quality outcomes are not guaranteed. How do social media giants tackle these tricky production problems? Does Web 2.0 technology address all of these problems, allowing for a successful transition to UGC? Guided by these questions, in chapter 2 I explore how social media stole traditional media's thunder to become a highly influential site for promoting and profiting from beauty. My discussion proceeds by taking the perspective of digital labor, focusing on how beauty bloggers contribute by constantly updating content, as well as data, on social media platforms.

1.6 Influencers Outside China as Key References

Although my investigation originates from social changes in contemporary China, my interpretation of Chinese beauty bloggers draws inspiration from influencer studies focusing on social media outside China. These studies have presented diverse aspects of influencers, ranging from how they exercise self-branding strategies and formulate entrepreneurial subjectivities (Abidin, 2016; B. E. Duffy et al., 2015; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016), how they build affective connections with followers through immaterial labor (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Marwick, 2013; Tolson, 2013),

how they negotiate with platforms' technological power (Bishop, 2018b, 2019; Cotter, 2019), and so on.

The growing body of influencer studies has provided me with important references to interpret the evolution of beauty bloggers in China. In terms of influencer genre, beauty influencers also are active groups on international social media³. They can be found not only on globally popular platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram (Abidin, 2016; Cotter, 2019; García-Rapp, 2016; Hou, 2018; Marwick, 2015), but also on local internet platforms (Limkangvanmongkol & Abidin, 2018). The literature on beauty influencers, on the one hand, presents beauty influencers as a global phenomenon; on the other hand, it compels me to think about the similarities and differences between Chinese beauty bloggers and non-Chinese beauty influencers.

Apparently, Chinese beauty bloggers share the common background of Web 2.0 technology with influencers based in other societies. The wide application of participatory internet service is the premise of global beauty influencers. Despite China's ban on foreign social media, Chinese internet users are not isolated from global popular cultures: as I pointed earlier in the Introduction, American beauty influencer Michel Phan and Korean influencer Pony inspired many Chinese beauty amateurs to share content in the 2000s. Regarding the daily use of social media, Chinese beauty bloggers are not fully different from their counterparts in other social contexts. To give an example, while Western influencers carefully perform "authenticity", which is "an invaluable, yet ineffable quality" differentiating influencers from mainstream media counterparts (Marwick, 2013), to attract followers, Chinese beauty bloggers do so as well. Beauty gurus on YouTube strategically play the role of "big sister" or "friend", strengthening their fan basis through intimacy (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). So do Chinese beauty bloggers, who call their fans "sister" (*jiemei*) and "baby" (*baobei*) all the time. Neither of Chinese and non-Chinese beauty influencers are traditional celebrities, so they do not have mass media outlets like TV programs or films to capture public

³ Sometimes beauty influencers are mixed with fashion or lifestyle influencers in research because of the blurry boundary and the overlapping content, e.g. Crystal Abidin's research on Singaporean influencers.

attention. Sharing similar positions in media industries, building affective connections with fans becomes a common choice among them.

However, it is also problematic to equal Chinese beauty bloggers with a general concept of beauty influencers, for Chinese beauty bloggers grow in a specific environment: they are not based on internationally dominant platforms like YouTube or Instagram, they do not share changes of gender norms with their foreign counterparts, they build their influence on China's particular commercial resources, and they are taken as a strong economic drive in China's wanghong economy while beauty influencers from other contexts are not necessarily linked to such a role.

Comparing Chinese beauty bloggers with international beauty influencers will enrich my research, but my goal is to interpret Chinese beauty bloggers, rather than a comparative analysis. Because of my research goal, I take the existing influencer studies outside China as an important thread throughout this dissertation, which is a parallel with the line of China's local history. This thread helps me denaturalize the development of Chinese beauty bloggers, pushes me to excavate unique resources in China, and reminds me of seeing the essence of the global beauty influencer phenomenon through diverse, local cases.

1.7 Methodology

To answer my research questions comprehensively, I have collected information through diverse methods, including online participant observation, in-depth interviews, visits to China's three beauty industry expos, and consulting archival and industry documents.

Work on the rise of influencers and internet celebrities usually involves collecting data either through online observation (Bishop, 2018a; Cotter, 2019; S. Wang, 2020b) or conducting in-depth interviews with influencers (Abidin, 2016; Bishop, 2019; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Observing and interviewing influencers doubtlessly provides research with key information on how influencers emerge. Nevertheless, these modes of data collection confine one's research scope to influencers' online presence and the tactics that they adopt to gain online fame. These methods cannot reveal the bigger picture that I seek to examine in this dissertation: to wit, the fact that beauty bloggers are shaped by

Chinese society, in which multiple players proactively participate in the business of beauty blogging, including audiences, social media platforms, and the beauty industry. These players might not be as prominent online as beauty bloggers themselves, yet they can significantly influence the development of beauty bloggers. Only when these different agents are visible can their influence be analyzed. In choosing research methods, I must therefore ensure that they do not unduly cut down the scope of this research.

Scholars working in internet studies frequently use digital ethnography to get first-hand information, for it provides “an immersive form of research focused on knowing through close and sustained proximity and interaction” (Hine, 2016, p. 22). Given diverse aspects of digital media, researchers can practice digital ethnography in many ways. My approach is that of “connective ethnography” (Ardèvol & Gómez-Cruz, 2012), which does not see the internet as an independent space, sequestered from other areas of social practice. Instead, the internet is “exactly the place where the online and offline meet. Its study should mean keeping the vision on both sides at the same time, especially because very occasionally Internet is only a bridge between one offline and another” (Bakardjieva, 2008, p. 54). Although beauty blogging comes to presence through digital media, it is deeply bound up with China’s national economy, the beauty industry, consumer culture, and so on. These relationships do not necessarily reveal themselves online. I cannot reach my goal of unpacking how beauty blogging has emerged in contemporary Chinese society by focusing on the digital representation of beauty bloggers alone. I have therefore chosen connective ethnography, which allows me to think beauty blogging in terms of a play of online and offline actors, a composition of digital and non-digital practices.

My first source of data is online participant observation. I chose Weibo, also known as Sina, as a field site at which to observe actors and activities around beauty blogging. This is because in 2016, when I started my research, it was one of the most influential social media platforms in China, with 297 million active users per month (Weibo, 2017a). Given the platform’s popularity, a large number of beauty bloggers clustered on Weibo. I started by following a few beauty bloggers and then found more and more through a snowball effect: beauty bloggers frequently reposted or liked each other’s posts, so I

could easily find more bloggers after following one blogger. I did not follow every account that got reposts or likes, however. Sometimes beauty bloggers reposted or liked non-beauty related content or posts from some of their followers. Before following an account, I checked whether it met the following criteria: (1) it had to be posting beauty-related content, including makeup tutorials, beauty product reviews, or beauty hacks; (2) it should post the aforementioned content at least once every week; and (3) it should have been posting this content over the previous three months. I followed accounts that met all three criteria, considering them beauty bloggers regardless of how many followers they had. By December 2016, I had found 147 accounts. I then logged into my Weibo account and checked the status of these accounts on a daily basis. However, neither beauty blogging nor beauty bloggers are stable. New bloggers sprung up rapidly, especially after 2016, when a few top beauty bloggers had proven that beauty blogging could be successful. Although I did not follow them using my snowballing method, successful bloggers were highly visible on Weibo. They showed up in the Trendy Topics (*reson*) and Recommendation (*tuijian*) blocks. To stay abreast of the latest changes in the field, I followed a few more accounts that were highly visible on the Trendy Topics and Recommendation blocks. By September 2020, I had followed 160 beauty bloggers, who have between 20,000 and 10,000,000 followers. In observing these beauty bloggers, I attended to the ways in which they presented ideas of beauty, used Weibo's affordances, and interacted with their followers and other users; I left comments below bloggers' posts and sometimes received replies from them. To best grasp how they interacted with followers and sought opportunities outside Weibo, I joined a blogger's fan group on WeChat in December 2017.

As sociologist Christine Hine (2016) has written, "reflexivity was a powerful part of the online ethnographer's toolkit, as a corrective to the tendency to assume that what we could know in advance what being online was like" (p. 26). Having chosen Weibo as the site for my online ethnography at the beginning of this research, halfway through the project I realized that it was not enough: new platforms kept emerging and Weibo became less dominant in the field of beauty blogging and consumption. In 2018, more than three interviewees told me that Weibo was no longer the only important platform for beauty bloggers and advertisers. Official accounts on Red, Douyin, and WeChat were

frequently mentioned during interviews. Other less well-known platforms also came up (though usually only once). To take account of recent changes in the field of beauty blogging, I set up official accounts on Red, Douyin, and WeChat. Retaining Weibo as my primary site, I approached these other platforms as complementary sites. My observation on Weibo continued and, I started observing Red, Douyin, Bilibili, and WeChat on a monthly basis from August 2018. I also checked all of the other platforms that my informants mentioned, such as Taobao Livestream, Wangyi Kaola, Guodao, and Xiaomi Youpin, although I did not check them so frequently. After correcting my original plan, I found that beauty bloggers sought to expand their influence on new social media platforms and that new social media platforms sought to develop their business by integrating beauty bloggers that were already established on major social media platforms.

Alongside online participant observation, I also conducted in-depth interviews with 38 informants who are deeply involved in the beauty blogging business. My interviewees contain three clusters: audiences of beauty blogs (nine loyal followers), beauty bloggers (sixteen bloggers), and thirteen experts working with beauty bloggers in the wanghong economy (six managers working for multi-channel networks and marketing agencies, three managers working for cosmetic companies, three marketing directors working for Weibo, Alibaba and JD separately, and one industry analyst working for an investment company that just invested money on a wanghong agency). These interviewees were either beauty bloggers or interacted closely with beauty bloggers in their daily work or practice. My interviews with these informants focused on why and how they participated in the beauty blogging business. Given my informants' diverse backgrounds, I could not ask them the same questions. Accordingly, I conducted open-ended interviews with them. The interviews ranged in length from one to eight hours; most lasted for around one or two hours. Given that beauty bloggers are located around the world and the need to protect their privacy, face-to-face interviews were not always possible for me or acceptable to them. I used WeChat, telephone calls, Weibo private messages, and face-to-face discussions in my interviews with beauty bloggers. For most of other informants, I managed to conduct face-to-face interviews in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Utrecht (a marketing agent was based in both the Netherlands and China). All

informants are assigned pseudonyms in my dissertation for privacy protection and their pseudonyms start with A, B, and E based on their cluster background, signifying they are audiences, bloggers, or experts (e.g. A01 is an audience of beauty blogs, B01 is an beauty blogger, while E01 is an expert working in the beauty blogger business). Pseudonyms and interview time will be listed in Appendix.

Although online participant observation and in-depth interviews yielded rich insights into how beauty blogging functions as a cultural and economic ecology, I still felt that I was unfamiliar with how the beauty industry, especially cosmetic manufacturers in China, interacts with beauty blogging and the *wanghong* economy. Although I interviewed three managers from cosmetic companies, they all worked on digital marketing and market analysis. They had little concern for the manufacture of cosmetics in China. This is a result, in large part, of cosmetic companies intense focus on marketing (as I elaborate in chapter 3). To learn more about the role of China's factories in the *wanghong* economy, I visited three beauty expos in China, including the 25th Shanghai International Beauty, Hairdressing, and Cosmetics Expo (Shanghai, March 19-31, 2018), Yiwu Beauty Fair (Yiwu, April 1-3, 2018), and the China International Beauty Expo (Guangzhou, September 2-4, 2018). Suppliers of cosmetics, cosmetic tools, and packages cluster in the Yangtze Delta and Pearl Delta: the top three cosmetic industrial concentrations are located in Guangdong, Shanghai, and Zhejiang (G. Li, 2020). Visiting three beauty expos in these two deltas, therefore, might give me a vivid picture of what is happening in the beauty manufacturing sector. Indeed, through these trips I learned about the region's thousands of manufacturing plants, which were eager for orders.

I have also studied the secondary sources in both Chinese and English. These include statistical reports compiled by governments, platforms, and consulting agencies, and editorials about Chinese beauty bloggers and the *wanghong* economy. These sources enable me not only to trace changing tendencies in Chinese cyberspace, but also to see the complicated ecology of actors and interests that lie behind individualist narratives of successful *wanghongs*.

1.8 Chapter Breakdown

The overall goal of my dissertation is to investigate how beauty blogging has arisen in China in the first two decades of the millennium. I investigate three dimensions of beauty blogging's emergence: the change in gender norms, dynamics of cultural production, and shifting modes of political economy. These three dimensions guide the following three chapters.

Chapter 1 focuses on how beauty blogging, as a site of gender pedagogy, secured a fan base of urban young women. The blogger-audience relationship is extremely important in understanding beauty blogging's popularity. With the fall of socialist ideology and the national transformation into a market economy, Chinese popular culture needed to erase the marks of socialist attitudes, such as the anti-consumption, anti-feminine image of women that prevailed in the 1960s and '70s. As a key site in the forgetting of Maoist gender practices, Beauty blogs provided templates of ideal women, which featured fair skin, slim figures, and an infantilized appearance. Beauty blogs provide an aesthetic education for audience members who might not gain such knowledge from parents who grew up in a de-feminized environment. On the other hand, beauty blogs allow audience members to forge affective connections, who are very likely to be single children (having been raised under the one-child policy). Indeed, the prospect of aesthetic and affective bonding appeals to urban young women, who eagerly display their class and gender identities. Without follower bases made up of urban young women, beauty blogs could hardly realize their cultural and economic influence in China. Beauty blogs may look open, but they are not as inclusive as they claim. People who can be beauty bloggers must have the capacity for consumption and cultural capital; people who follow beauty blogs have buying power and leisure time. Although some beauty gurus try to sell their makeover skill as a way of empowering women living under more marginal social-economic conditions (such as middle-aged rural women), they fail to address the fundamental political-economic structures affecting women's lives. Rather, beauty pedagogy actually increases the economic burdens placed on women and widens class inequalities.

Chapter 2 reflects on beauty blogging as a mode of user creation and examines the ways in which spontaneous and unpredictable amateur production stabilized and

expanded on Weibo. Whereas social media platforms allow beauty amateurs to share content online, they do not ensure that beauty amateurs across the world continually share content. The case study of Weibo shows how a platform can benefit from crafting policies and algorithms to transform the previously subcultural group of beauty amateurs (along with other amateur groups) into regular content producers. Beauty bloggers' digital labor has become a source of user activities and data for UGC platforms. If benefitting from beauty bloggers content creation and sharing practices is already exploitative, Weibo indicates how exploitation can go further, namely by charging beauty bloggers with its algorithmic dominance. This is illustrated by *fensi toutiao* (followers' headline). Founded on the blogger-platform relationship, the rise of beauty bloggers has involved spontaneous creators being systematically organized and exploited by social media platforms. It signifies a transformation from a centralized, professional mode of cultural production to an algorithm-aided mode of user production. This shift has precarized content creators.

Whereas chapters 1 and 2 seek answers by drawing on work in media studies, in the final chapter I expand my analytical framework to encompass scholarship in political economy. In so doing, I put forward two original claims: first, the rise of beauty bloggers, a seemingly sophisticated new occupation in the digital economy, relies on the crude old business of non-digital capitalism; second, the *wanghong* economy is a result of China's changing role in the global system of value distribution. In chapter 3 I analyze the close but usually neglected relationship between beauty blogging and the beauty industry, explaining the emergence of beauty blogging from a political economic perspective. The beauty manufacturing industry's high profits and large marketing budgets are important driving factors behind beauty blogging: for centuries, the beauty industry has relied heavily on marketing while putting less and less effort into technological innovation and manufacturing. This is true of global beauty brands, be they famous across the world or locally influential. Beauty corporations' high expenditures on marketing result in the lucrateness of beauty blogging for beauty blogging becomes a major channel of marketing in the digital age. Relying on beauty influencers becomes the shared feature of beauty brands in the present day. Accordingly, beauty influencing becomes an

entrenched genre because of the constant sponsorship it receives, both in China and the West.

Another driver behind Chinese beauty bloggers is the newly developed distribution system for beauty products, which has grown hand-in-hand with beauty bloggers. China used to have a weaker distribution system as compared to Western societies, where the distribution networks used by the beauty industry have been developed over more than a century. The formation of China's distribution networks began after the reform and opening-up policy was initiated in 1978 and the infrastructure remained weak even into the early 2000s. However, Chinese e-commerce platforms—latecomers to distribution networks—grew at lightning speed in the 2010s. Noticing the scale of beauty bloggers' influence on sales, these e-commerce platforms proactively integrated social media platforms into their business chains, providing diverse services for the followers/consumers of beauty blogs. It was thanks to this investment that beauty blogging developed fast in the 2010s. Now that e-commerce has become the largest distribution channel for beauty products, beauty blogs (as an essential part of Chinese e-commerce) are well supported by e-commerce platforms. This has led to a close collaboration between Chinese beauty bloggers and e-commerce platforms. In this respect, Chinese beauty bloggers differ from Western beauty influencers. The critical role of e-commerce platforms in the *wanghong* economy is rooted in China's economic transformation, in that e-commerce platforms connect China's manufacturing plants to Chinese consumers. The growth of Chinese beauty brands in the *wanghong* economy reveals China's new place in the global capitalist system: by expanding its domestic market, China is seeking to go beyond the role of being the world's factory and secure a greater share of high-value sectors of the global beauty industry. The rise of beauty blogging and the *wanghong* economy in China, therefore, is founded on established supply chains (factories), recently developed distribution channels (e-commerce platforms), media channels (social media platforms), and consumer/audience bases with increasing buying power. In economic terms, these factors allow China to stand out amid the global prevalence of influencers.

The title of my dissertation, *Selling Beauty*, speaks to the core of my understanding of the emergence of beauty blogging: namely, that it is a social institution nurtured by

contemporary capitalism. To me, beauty is not just sold by beauty companies. As a gender discourse, it is sold by entrepreneurial beauty bloggers; as a mode of cultural production, it is promoted by social media platforms; and as a business model, it is advocated by e-commerce platforms and the state. All of these actors, be they visible or invisible to ordinary audiences, strengthen the naturalness and extravagance of beauty. Given these complex systems, beauty is hardly a simple issue of vanity or individual choice.

Chapter 2

Making Everyone Beautiful:

Aesthetic Labor, Media Pedagogy, and Class

Human cannot leave makeup and photoshop.

Dalaotianer (Beauty blogger, October 9, 2019)

When I flew to Shanghai to undertake fieldwork at the end of March 2018, a young Chinese woman sat next to me on the airplane. Two hours before we were due to land, she started grooming herself. The process began with a face mask, which was then followed by a series of steps involving skincare and makeup. After forty minutes, her grooming process still showed no signs of coming to an end. I could not help but chat to her about it. “Wow, you do know self-care!” I remarked. “I have to!” she replied. “I am already a *lao’ayi* [old aunt, 老阿姨]. Have to be careful with my face.” The way in which the woman narrated her personal appearance immediately reminded me of a number of beauty blogs to which I had subscribed. Not long into our conversation, I realized that, far from being a *lao’ayi*, she was a 21-year-old college student. Crucially, it became clear that she read beauty blogs frequently. “Everyone around me reads beauty blogs,” she told me. “Maybe not every day, but quite frequently. My best friend and I exchange the information [that we learn from blogs] when we want to buy new stuff.” It would seem that I was not the only one interested in beauty blogs. The young woman’s beauty practice presents a vivid example of how the female body is interpreted in contemporary China. The female body is seen as in crisis: lacking youthfulness and charm, it requires particular remedies. However, the connection between the female body and *lao’ayi* is discursively constructed, not an absolute reality. The problem, then, is who has the discursive power to define and judge the female body.

Michel Foucault stated that “in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict power, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, and obligations” (Foucault, 1995,

p. 136). Specifically, he pointed out how the army and school developed as institutions in which bodies were disciplined (Foucault, 1995). Foucault's descriptions of the operations of power on bodies through these institutions often have a gender bias: the bodies regulated in the spaces and regimes associated with the army and school are usually male. Although militaries and education systems are open to women in most countries today, they still tend to cultivate masculinities rather than femininities and propagate a phallogocentric culture. This does not mean that female bodies are not disciplined. In fact, many disciplinary regimes primarily target girls' and women's bodies, which are shaped by the application of makeup, weight loss, plastic surgery, and other interventions (Bordo, 1993; Davis, 2013; Glenn, McGannon, & Spence, 2013; Wen, 2013). These exercises of body discipline define what a good female body is and what a bad female body is. In so doing, they impact women's daily lives, sometimes in harmful ways. For instance, many women's health suffers following weight loss or plastic surgery—some even die (Glenn et al., 2013; Wen, 2013). Applying makeup and often beauty practices are less painful and physically difficult than weight loss and plastic surgery. Accordingly, scholars and the press often neglect the former and pay more attention to the latter. It is important to point out, though, that the harmlessness of applying makeup has allowed it to become a common feature of women's daily lives. Makeup becomes a vital practice, defining how women should transform their bodies and perform femininity.

How does makeup, as a bodily discipline, spread among women? It can be easily imagined that mothers pass on beauty skills to their daughters in the home, which is a much more private space than the military barracks or school. This seemingly reasonable assumption might not apply to contemporary China, however. During my fieldwork in China, most of the beauty bloggers and followers of beauty blogs rarely learnt makeup skills from their mothers, who belong to the generation growing up with the revolution-oriented female images. Rather, my informants suggest that, during their childhood, beauty skills were seen as unwelcome both at school and in the home. They acquired knowledge of female beauty from the media—especially social media such as beauty blogs—during their leisure time. Given that makeup has not traditionally been a necessary part of Chinese women's everyday lives, the younger generation's makeup

practices signify a major shift in gender norms. Despite being an informal sector generating public knowledge, beauty blogs can be studied as an important site of disciplining and policing women's bodies in contemporary China.

Identifying with one's own female body is not natural. Rather, having a female body requires consistent work, through which the body is made female. This produces a female subject. The work of improving one's physical appearance, constructing and maintaining female subjectivity, could be understood in terms of aesthetic labor (A. S. Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Warhurst, Nickson, Witz, & Marie Cullen, 2000). The concept of aesthetic labor does not concern individuals' aesthetic preferences. Instead, it concentrates on group preferences: the common ways in which staff in the service industry, for example, manage their physical appearances (Warhurst et al., 2000). By drawing attention to how social groups perform certain aesthetics, this concept allows scholars to explore how beauty operates in specific social contexts. In relation to Chinese beauty blogs, the concept of aesthetic labor pushes us to think through how beauty blogs form a shared idea of female beauty and how they naturalize practices of enhancing women's physical appearance, presenting them as a necessary part of everyday life.

This chapter concentrates on the kinds of blog content that beauty bloggers create and how the knowledge they produce impacts on female audiences' daily lives. By analyzing what beauty bloggers do before and behind the camera, in this chapter I provide an understanding of how beauty blogs shape women's bodies through the production and reproduction of aesthetic labor. Further, I analyze how followers of beauty bloggers respond to beauty blogs. In so doing, I introduce the premise of the account of the *wanghong* economy that I put forward in the wider dissertation: namely, that without a large group of female audiences, there would not be a boom in China's *wanghong* economy. The ways in which female audiences receive aesthetic labor and the social contexts in which such labor matters to them, therefore, represent key pieces in the larger puzzle of the *wanghong* economy.

The chapter is divided into six sections. First, I introduce the key concept, aesthetic labor, and return to the historical context of the emergence of blogs in China. Locally, this context is post-socialist; globally it is post-feminist. In this environment, social

media and beauty blogging sprung up like a mushroom. In the following section, I address the aesthetic labor that beauty bloggers perform both backstage and frontstage of their blogs. In the third, I analyze the reproduction of aesthetic labor, focusing mainly on the content of beauty blogs. In the fourth, I analyze the monetization of bloggers' aesthetic labor and in the fifth I examine their followers' views. In the concluding section, I argue that beauty blogs are sites at which aesthetic labor is produced and reproduced in contemporary China. Beauty blog broadcasts management techniques for shaping the female body and subject, preparing a base of mass consumers for China's internet celebrity economy. This body of consumers to which it appeals is constructed in highly biased ways: it excludes women without consumption power, despite the prominence that it accords to empowering statement such as "everyone can be beautiful."

2.1 Concepts and Contexts

2.1.1 Understanding Aesthetic Labor

The term "aesthetic labor" was first used by sociologists of work and employment Chris Warhurst and his colleagues to describe the embodied attributes of service industry employees (Warhurst et al., 2000). They found that these employees, beyond simply having technical skills, have to make an additional effort to produce "favourable interaction with the customer" (Warhurst et al., 2000, p. 5). They define such efforts as aesthetic labor, "a supply of embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment", revealing how workers must use and display their bodies in certain ways (Warhurst et al., 2000, p. 5). The importance of aesthetic labor grows in the wider industrial transformation: since the second half of the 20th century, the center of industries in Europe and North America has moved from manufacturing industries towards service industries; accordingly, immaterial labor, that focuses on producing information, service, and affect, increasingly impacts people's daily lives while material labor concentrating on material production is not the only crucial form of labor (Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp. 289–294).

Feminist scholars Ana Ellis and her colleagues have borrowed and developed this concept of aesthetic labor, in attending to diverse gendered labor, which are not limited

to employment or workplaces and not necessarily commodified (A. S. Elias et al., 2017). Indeed, they use the term aesthetic labor to signify the ways in which beauty practices themselves constitute kinds of work. Highlighting “the different forms of work that are involved in presenting the self”, they develop existing ideas of embodied beauty “beyond their application to particular kinds of aestheticised cultural work and instead argue that they are wider-scale processes that have relevance across social life” (A. S. Elias et al., 2017, p. 5). Two features of aesthetic labor from the feminist perspective warrant attention here. First, scholars using the term aesthetic labor attend not only to work devoted to the corporeal body, but also the labor exerted on mediated representations of the body, including those on social media. Indeed, aesthetic labor works “on both body and image” (Wissinger, 2015, p. 3). In a mediated society, representations of bodies are as ubiquitous as corporal bodies. Aesthetic labor on representational bodies is therefore pervasive too. Second, alongside a focus on physical and representational bodies, scholarship on aesthetic labor also considers the inner self. Aesthetic labor targets not only one’s physical appearance, but also the psychological aspects of feelings and identification. This is crucial, for affect and emotion are widely mobilized in the operation of aesthetic labor. For example, aesthetic labor does not occupy people’s daily lives by force. Rather, proper aesthetic labor is associated with confidence while not doing aesthetic labor or improperly doing aesthetic labor is assigned to shame. The seemingly personal feelings are the channel and product of aesthetic labor (Favaro, 2017; Tate, 2013; Tyler, 2008).

The concept of aesthetic labor partly explains diverse beauty blogging practices (both online and offline), including the content produced by beauty bloggers, the emotional connection between bloggers and followers, and followers’ activities. The concept of aesthetic labor, though useful, is not a universal mechanism for explaining how and why people work to transform their physical and mental appearance. To better understand how aesthetic labor works around beauty blogs, it is necessary to grasp the geographical and historical context in which Chinese beauty blogging arose.

2.1.2 Chinese Women and Postfeminism

Beauty has long been a prominent topic in gender and media studies. Decades before the boom in social media, magazines, books, adverts, films, and media events have been devoted to the promotion of female attractiveness. In 1970, the British Women's Liberation Movement rallied against the Miss World pageant to contest its perceived objectification of women and evaluating of women on the basis of only their physical appearance (A. S. Elias et al., 2017, p. 6). Despite intense debates among feminist scholars and activists as to how beauty actually functions in women's daily lives, they criticized the celebration of beauty as the product of patriarchal hegemony. At the same time, China was experiencing second-wave feminism. Although it took on a distinct form in China as compared with feminisms in Western countries, this movement shared their critique of beauty ideals and emphasis on collective change. In fact, it was more radical than its Western counterparts in that China's powerful state ideology took up the defeminized worker as the ideal image of womanhood, as I argued in the Introduction.

Toward the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, beauty returns to women's lives as a postfeminist discourse took hold of developed countries (A. S. Elias et al., 2017), as well as in China (G. Xu & Feiner, 2007). In the Western, this postfeminist discourse has taken the form of an "entanglement of feminism and antifeminism," including:

femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference (Gill, 2007b, p. 149).

The features that Gill enumerates here capture key changes in popular discourses in the aftermath of second-wave feminism. They underline the fact that popular discourses around women and gender have multiple, often contradictory facets, which neither necessarily undermine nor promote gender equality.

Given the transnational communication facilitated by mass media, China was not isolated from postfeminist discourse. As Simidele Dosekun argues, postfeminism should be understood as “a transnationally circulating culture” (Dosekun, 2015, p. 960). In China, the transnational flow of postfeminist discourse can be illustrated by the inroads made by globally distributed magazines targeting women. In 1988, the French magazine *Elle* published its first Chinese issue with Shanghai Century Publishing. In the following decades, glossy magazines originating in the West, such as *Cosmopolitan* (1998), *Harper’s BAZAAR* (2001), *Marie Claire* (2002), and so on, entered China and met with considerable successes. More regionally, Japanese and Korean magazines also participated in this trend, through which their popular culture was also delivered to China. For instance, the Japanese magazine *Rayli* entered the Chinese market in 1995, as did the South Korean *Ceci* in 2008. These glossies delivered postfeminist narratives about women’s fashion, beauty, and love in developed countries (especially Western countries) to post-socialist China (E. Chen, 2016; Thornham & Feng, 2010). Postfeminism suggests that women’s empowerment can be realized through individual choices (usually having to do with consumption). It presents women as desiring and empowered subjects, appeals to individual pleasures, and thereby privileges individuals over any collective actions against traditional gender division or inequalities (Gill, 2007a, pp. 82–97; Gill & Scharff, 2013, p. 4; McRobbie, 2009). With the influx of transnational pop culture and media products, Chinese women cannot but be exposed to this politico-cultural wave. Often, they accept the narratives from Euro-American countries and developed East Asian countries without resistance.

The effortless adoption of globalized post-feminist trends dovetails with a domestic shift in gender discourses. Beauty’s return to China is bound with the waning of socialist feminism in the Post-Maoist Era. In line with the abandonment of socialist ideology, socialist feminism is little appreciated in contemporary China. According to Evans (2007, p. 16), Post-Maoist China has seen the emergence of “a new discourse of an essential gender difference” which has

progressively eclipsed [the] public attention given to ‘male-female equality’; the idea that women could ‘do the same as men’ effectively disappeared from its

privileged place in dominant discourse, replaced by a new equation between women's emancipation and the individual capacity to capitalize on the individual benefits of participating in the private market.

The Maoist-Era image of iron girls—women who participate in public production and work hard—is largely rejected by the current generation of young Chinese women because it lacks “female essence” (*nüxing qizhi*)—a quality that women possess essentially (Meng & Huang, 2017, p. 6). Although Socialist-Era iron girls are understood as liberated “from the oppression of feudalism and capitalist patriarchy,” to women born after the Cultural Revolution they signify “state control and over-politicized daily life” (Meng & Huang, 2017, p. 6). Contemporary Chinese women, therefore, see the recovery of femininity as “the crucial step in reasserting their individuality and towards redefining their gendered subjectivity” (Meng & Huang, 2017, p. 6), even at the cost of essentializing gender difference. The rejection of socialist models of hardworking and defeminized women has been accompanied by the abandonment of the socialist critique of traditional femininity as a tool of social oppression. New ideals of womanhood, which present essentialized visions of femininity, predominate in popular culture and even official media outlets.⁴ In a backlash against socialist feminism, younger women are eager to revive femininity; at the same time, the wave of global postfeminism has washed across China. Generally, a variety of global and local factors have nurtured women's acceptance of, and desire for, feminized beauty, preparing the ground for beauty blogging to emerge with digitization in China.

⁴ For example, on January 17, 2011, the Chinese government released a promotional video putting forward their national image in New York's Time Square. The 60-second video started with a section named “Stunning Chinese Beauty,” during which five female stars smiled at the camera while presenting their female charms. They had slim figures and wore heavy makeup and exquisite dresses. This state-sponsored video praised the beauty of femininity without any mention of the previously influential images of hard-working, defeminized women.

2.1.3 Contextualizing Female Beauty in China

Along with the spread of the blog in the mid-2000s, Chinese beauty amateurs gathered in digital spaces, where they formed interest groups associated with beauty blogging. With the growing influence of beauty bloggers, social media platforms (not limited to blogs) become key sites in the production of beauty discourses.

Beauty is a highly gendered topic: women make up the vast majority of their participants and female beauty is their dominant theme. If we define femininity as a set of attributes and behaviors associated with women, female beauty can be understood as aesthetic qualities associated with women. Most of the time, female beauty is seen as a pleasing, aesthetic expression of femininity. Since the 1980s in China, there has been a strong resurgence of the naturalized idea that there is a link between biological sex and femininity. In this discourse, “women naturally pursuing beauty and being aware of self-charm” is considered to be a key aspect of female consciousness (Z. Wang, 2004, p. 27).

There is no fixed definition of female beauty; it is always grasped contextually. In the Reform Era, during which socialist iron girls lost their charm, notions of beauty featuring female characteristics became prominent. As I showed in the Introduction, in China during the 1990s, ideal female beauty combined traditional Chinese aesthetic characteristics (such as women being demure and reserved) and imagined Western aesthetic characteristics (such as women being wild and sexy) (Johansson, 1998, 1999). Whereas in the former conception, the ideal woman is usually presented as having fair skin and a skinny figure, in the latter the ideal woman has big eyes (with double eyelids) and breasts. These two sources of female beauty are still influential in China, for fair skin, big eyes, and the “Euro-American style” (*oumei feng*) often feature in Chinese beauty blogs. However, traditional Chinese and Western aesthetic styles do not entirely cover new beauty trends in China. Indeed, various Chinese bloggers imitate the looks of Japanese actresses, Korean singers, or Taiwanese celebrities. These trends cannot be attributed to either Western or traditional Chinese aesthetics. Another, third source of popular aesthetics must be added: regional popular cultures, especially that of East Asia.

Since the late twentieth century, popular cultures stemming from East Asian countries including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, have also circulated in China (Nakano, 2002; M. Sun & Liew, 2019; E. J. Zhao, 2016). Regional popular cultures have

also shaped Chinese aesthetics and established new points of references for female beauty. The introduction of the internet in the first two decades of the twenty-first century has meant that cultural products from these areas—such as comics, music, and celebrity television programs—have spread more widely in China, where they participate in Chinese aesthetics and beauty blogging trends. This East Asian strain in contemporary Chinese culture should be conflated with neither traditional Chinese culture nor Western popular culture. Together, these three cultural sources shape the mainstream idea of beauty in China.

By contextualizing beauty in China, I have sought to avoid working with an essentialized conception of beauty. As the Introduction shows, in China the concept of beauty is not fixed. Rather, beauty standards change in tandem with gender norms. We can best understand contemporary beauty as a hybrid that draws inspiration from diverse Chinese, Western, and East Asian cultural elements. This hybridity leads to a rich variety of formulations of beauty. Beauty has no single template, but embodies and combines diverse elements.⁵

Tracing the sources of beauty also raises this question: How do Chinese beauty bloggers process these sources? What mainstream conception of beauty do they build using these elements?

⁵ The diverse elements of beauty are emphasized because of a misunderstanding of Chinese beauty bloggers. In 2018 I joined a reading workshop in Amsterdam and shared this chapter about Chinese beauty bloggers. One participant asked me whether Chinese beauty bloggers look wild, like Cardi B. I realized that Chinese beauty bloggers are commonly misunderstood as having some essentialized Chinese look, featuring sweetness and reservedness. Bloggers' beauty practices are not monolithic: their makeup regimes absorb elements from American female singers, Chinese history dramas, as well as Korean or Japanese entertainment shows. If they put on American makeup today, they might choose a Japanese style tomorrow. While some prefer one style over others, some like a broad range of styles. That said, bloggers' beauty practices are diverse. On the other hand, there is still a mainstream beauty aesthetic in China, which incorporates global elements and transforms them into a local style. Chinese internet users term this aesthetic *bai you shou*, meaning fair-skinned, infantized, and slim. For example, when many Chinese bloggers put on Euro-American style makeup (*oumei zhuang*), they often copy the eyeshadow used by Western celebrities but ignore their tanned skin tone. Indeed, whereas most Chinese beauty bloggers care about having fair skin, Western celebrities do not, given the racial diversity and cultural trends of their societies.

2.2 Beauty Bloggers' Aesthetic Labor: Producing Online Images

The major part of a beauty blogger's work is the production of content, which might include text, image, and video. Attractive pictures and videos are the foundation of an online career. Creating these cultural products differs hugely from factory production: for factory workers standing at assembly lines, production is highly standardized, whereas for beauty bloggers it is highly irregular. Whereas factory production is not based on factory workers' embodied attributes and personal taste, beauty blogging relies heavily on them. These differences urge us to go beyond traditional understandings of labor and analyze beauty bloggers from the feminist perspective of aesthetic labor.

The first step in my analysis is to observe what beauty bloggers do in their job. Beauty bloggers usually create pictures, videos, and small amounts of text. Through these pictures and videos, they use their bodies to explain makeup application and skincare techniques. This seemingly easy work entails more than simply recording what bloggers see. Rather, it has to do with remaking embodied attributes. Bloggers do not have face-to-face contact with others, especially in the context of social media. Instead, they rely on mediated communication and therefore pay an enormous amount of attention to presenting bodily features online through editing.

The practice of swatching is a good illustration of how bodily attributes are edited. In the context of beauty blogs, a swatch (*shise*, 试色) means a test or trial, in which bloggers put cosmetic products on their skin (usually on their faces, eyes, lips, or wrists) and show their audience the color and texture of certain products. Beauty blogger Jiemosedemiao released two articles about how to take photographs of lipstick swatches. In her narrative, making a lipstick swatch requires good light, the source of which should be parallel with one's face, else it will cast uneven shadows. With the proper light, whether that be artificial or otherwise, lipstick should shine naturally on one's lips. Before taking photographs, one should adjust one's face so as to find the best angle and avoid what she calls the disaster. Although Jiemosedemiao does not specify what this disaster is, by implication it involves exposing one's facial imperfections. Editing comes after photographs have been taken. In editing a photograph of a face, one should first smoothen the skin so that it appears poreless, especially around the lips. Then one's skin

tone should be whitened. Finally, the shape of one's lips should be modified. "Reshape the parts of lips which you are unsatisfied with," Jiemosedemiao writes in her blog. In remaking reality, the image editor must preserve a sense of naturalness. As Jiemosedemiao points out in her tutorial, smoothening skin too much makes a face seem unnatural. After describing all of the steps, Jiemosedemiao presents the original photograph alongside the edited, desired version (see Figure 2.1). In the edited photo, the shape of lips, color of the lipstick used, and tone and texture of her facial skin have all been altered. The editing emphasizes embodied attributes: Jiemosedemiao's fair, poreless skin, deep, defined cupid bow; and plump, sexy lips. In fact, the skin is too fair to be real: real humans hardly ever have skin like this.

Like Jiemosedemiao, most beauty bloggers pay an enormous amount of attention to these embodied traits. I selected the case of Jiemosedemiao because she reveals the backstage editing process that goes into a swatch tutorial, whereas most bloggers display only the edited results. Indeed, most bloggers emphasize their fair skin and youthful, slim face and body. Chinese social media users encapsulate the popular aesthetics of femininity, according to which women are ideally *bai, you, shou* (白幼瘦, fair, infantilized, slim)⁶. One can identify these three features in millions of pictures and videos made by Chinese beauty bloggers. Instead of presenting their real bodily features through social media, beauty bloggers reinvent their embodied attributes through editing and present these attributes as points of reference for their female audience.

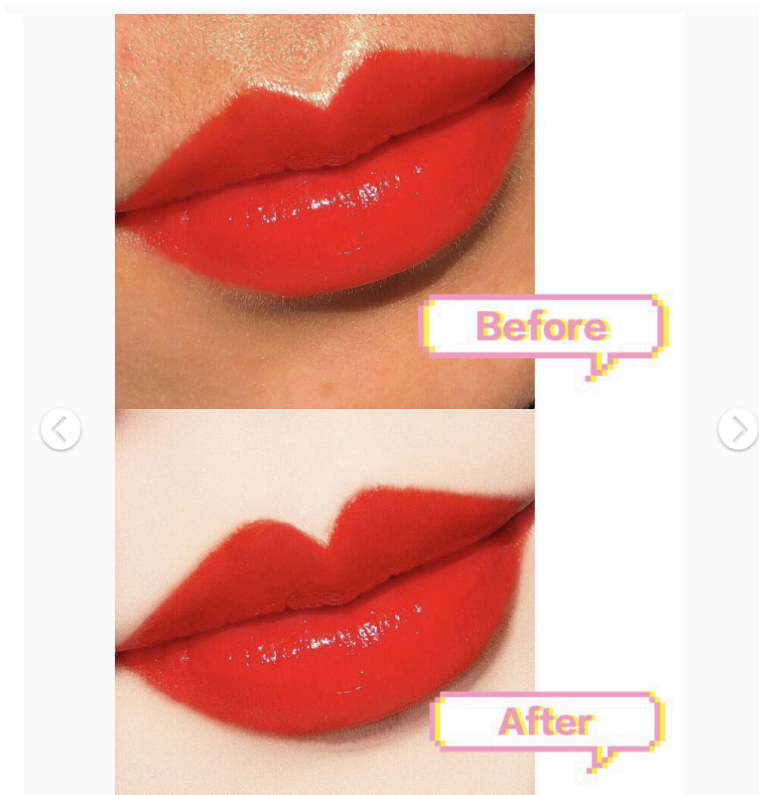
Editing is used widely by the group of beauty bloggers to which I attend in this study. On a Saturday in January 2018, I visited the Beijing home of Xiaojia, who had been a part-time beauty blogger since 2013. She generously agreed to show me how she worked. Given that she only works as a beauty blogger part time, most of her beauty tutorials were born in her bedroom, which was also her workplace. She made several photographs of her skincare routines and then selected the best of these. In the next step, she used multiple editing applications to improve the photographs. She spent much longer editing than taking photographs. When I asked why she took the trouble to spend so much time

⁶ Another common summary is *bai, mei, shou* (白美瘦, fair, pretty, slim).

editing the photographs if the originals were already good, she replied: “Editing is indispensable. It makes a huge difference.” The huge difference mentioned here reflects contains not only the kind of before-and-after contrast presented by Jiemosedemiao above, but also increased audience views. Heavily edited photographs attract larger audiences than plain photos. Fair skin, youthfulness, and slimness existed in China before the digital age, but it would seem that now common digital technologies such as smartphones and photo-editing software have entrenched and even exaggerated this aesthetic.

Figure 2.1

How to make photographs of a lipstick swatch



Note. Jiemosedemiao’s article on Red, retrieved from <http://xhslink.com/4ZFxqc>

Besides remaking their embodied attributes, beauty bloggers try to attract audiences in other ways, including displaying one's desirable tastes. Although beauty bloggers usually focus on producing beauty content, they do not do so exclusively.

When I was watching Xiaojia at work in her apartment, I found not only cosmetic products but also some exquisite dresses, English magazines, yellowed English newspapers, dried flowers, and so on. She said that these dresses looked nice and were worth posting on social media. The two dresses did not fit her, she added, and she would therefore return them after she photographed them. I then found the English magazines were “fake” magazines—they were not real magazines, but well-designed glossy brochures featuring some sweet but themeless texts with headlines such as “dear you” or “think happy.” In terms of size, the English newspapers were A5, much smaller than the regular newspaper.

All of these items, it appeared, were photography props. Xiaojia had bought them recently, for she wanted to improve the *zhiban* of her photographs. The notion of *zhiban* equates roughly to a combination of quality and taste. To improve her photographs' *zhiban*, she studied and imitated well-made photographs of Western influencers on Instagram, a photo-sharing app that is internationally popular but banned in China. (Again, Xiaojia use of Instagram shows that China's social media are not isolated from global popular culture.) The ban on Instagram actually creates an artificial “jet lag,” whereby Chinese audiences are largely unfamiliar with popular trends on Instagram while bloggers such as Xiaojia follow them quite closely. Xiaojia analyzed how Western influencers take photographs and tried to imitate their approach. The above-mentioned props—including English brochures and newspapers, and dried flowers—were brought after she had analyzed Instagram influencers. Through the English brochure and newspaper in particular, she formed an image of a knowledgeable, romantic woman with good taste. Xiaojia's project of improving her photograph's *zhiban* went well. After a few weeks of practice, her photographs garnered praise from her followers again and again and even drew compliments from some fellow bloggers.

Xiaojia's arrangement of dresses, English magazines, and dried flowers in her photographs did not represent the central content of her beauty blogs. Although this labor might seem irrelevant, it was not in vain. According to Xiaojia, photographs of

these props elicited reactions from her audiences. Indeed, these posts were more viewed, commented on, and reposted than other posts. In the long run, such photographs shaped Xiaojia's online personality, earning her a reputation for having good taste. Photographs of non-cosmetic objects helped her establish an image of having a desirable and middle-class lifestyle. In turn, this made Xiaojia's choice of makeup and skincare techniques all the more convincing.

The importance accorded to editing, including the editing of bodily attributes and personal images, does not mean that bloggers do not care for their corporeal bodies in their offline lives. They are passionate about having beautiful bodies before posting online. The point is rather that they cannot present corporeal bodies through social media, on which their presence is always mediated. Unlike sales personnel working in shopping malls or beauty salon workers, each of whom focuses on embodied aesthetics, beauty bloggers' aesthetic labor revolves around mediated embodied aesthetics.

Beauty bloggers also have a different work ethic than other aesthetic laborers. Aesthetic labor, Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson (2007) propose, refers to "the employment of workers with certain embodied capacities and attributes that favorably appeal to customers"(p.104). Warhurst and his colleagues (Warhurst et al., 2000) locate aesthetic labor "at the point of entry into employment"(p.4). This definition emerged from their observations about the service industry in the UK, which still has a clear and conventional employment process. Beauty bloggers' aesthetic labor is not usually performed under conditions of employment, let alone the point of entry into employment. Instead, it operates in a competitive attention economy: performing aesthetic labor serves to attract audiences' attention, which can then be leveraged to realize certain rewards. Though, aesthetic labor does not guarantee these rewards.

Whereas aesthetic labor in the service and fashion industries is organizationally trained, mobilized, developed, and commodified (Hochschild, 2012; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007, p. 104; Wissinger, 2015; Jie Yang, 2017), beauty bloggers' aesthetic labor is self-disciplined. As the examples of the bloggers whom I have mentioned previously suggest, no one demands that beauty bloggers manage their online images. Rather, they chose to perform aesthetic labor so as to attain a better position in the competition for

attention. Beauty bloggers' aesthetic labor represents an internalized form of neoliberal agency, which is defined by self-supervision and endless self-betterment.

Figure 2.2

Examples of a Zbiganless photo (above) and Zbiganful photograph (below) on beauty blogs.



Note. Photos were provided by Xiaojia

2.3 The Reproduction of Aesthetic Labor

As Banet-Weiser (2017) has pointed out, aesthetic labor is not only productive but reproductive too (p. 237). In taking care of their embodied capacities and personal images, beauty bloggers perform productive aesthetic labor; when they pass their knowledge of female beauty to audiences, they are reproducing aesthetic labor. The dissemination of knowledge of female beauty shapes how people understand and perform femininity. The reproduction of aesthetic labor has more of a social impact than its production: whereas the impact of productive aesthetic labor is restricted to bloggers themselves, its reproduction affects a much larger social group; whereas productive aesthetic labor only occupied bloggers' daily routines, its reproduction constitutes the prevailing common sense with regard to female beauty; whereas productive aesthetic labor defines how an individual should look, its reproduction defines how women as such should look. Given the significance of reproduction in this context, this section focuses on how gendered aesthetic labor is reproduced on social media.

2.3.1 Beauty Pedagogy in Post-Socialist China

As Michelle Lazar (2017) notes, “an integral aspect of heterosexual feminine identity labour in many cultures is beautification or the doing of beauty work. Women, as part of doing heterosexual femininity, are expected to undertake seriously aesthetic labour upon their bodies” (p. 51). Lazar (2017), then, argues that “femininity is work” (p.51). Indeed, it is constant work, performed according to strict gender norms. Far from being a one-off job, femininity requires persistent effort one day after another. Although the idea that beauty is labor is not new, it cannot fully represent heterosexual women's daily practices: the notion of beauty as such is too abstract to be performed. Women need to learn what beauty is and how to practice it before they are able to perform a beautified version of femininity. Were this not the case, beauty and femininity would remain empty concepts. The operationalization of femininity, therefore, plays an indispensable role in the maintenance of femininity.

In China, beauty blogging has become a vital site at which beauty pedagogy is provided. In fact, other sites scarcely work for this purpose, due to Chinese beauty

pedagogy's specific historical context. During my interviews, I asked beauty bloggers and loyal audience members where they turn to learn beauty skills. Most of my interviewees (who were born in the 1980s, 1990s, or 2000s) stated that they were not instructed in beauty at home. Their parents, who grew up in the Maoist Era, had little knowledge of how to practice beauty regimens. What is more, their parents were usually unhappy to see them applying makeup. For instance, beauty blogger B03 mentioned that her parents resisted strongly when they saw her using cosmetics (interview, December 2017); loyal follower of beauty blog A08 mentioned that they started to learn these things after leaving home to take up a job (interview, December 2018); and audience A09 had a similar experience after leaving home for graduate school (interview, March 2019). I take parents' unhappy reactions to seeing their children applying makeup as signaling a conflict between two generations: whereas people who grew up in the Socialist Era do not easily accept cosmetics-based appearances and intense femininity, those growing up in the Reform Era are much more used to them. This historical background suggests that the private space of the home is not a key channel in the dissemination of beauty knowledge. My interviewees also mentioned school as a site of socialization that actively rejected the wearing of makeup. Beauty blogger B13 told me that her high school imposed a strict prohibition on students applying makeup (interview, October 2018). Under China's competitive education system, the use of cosmetics is usually interpreted as indicating a student's distraction from their studies. On these grounds, it is discouraged. School here refers to primary, middle, and high schools, not university and college education. In practice, several of the bloggers and audience members whom I interviewed started using cosmetics in their college period, during which they enjoyed a degree of freedom from parents and teachers. When norms at home and school prevent young women from striving for cosmetics-based female beauty, media (especially beauty blogs) become their major source of beauty pedagogy.

Beauty blogs provide workable instructions for performing femininity and target women's needs. This can be illustrated by looking at the most common theme of beauty blogging, makeup tutorials.

The recurring story told in makeup tutorials is that of the makeover. In makeover stories, women dramatically alter themselves, going from ugly to beautiful, aged to

youthful, lacking female essence to possessing female essence. Below are the titles of some of the most viewed makeup tutorials on Chinese social media.⁷

From Middle-Aged Woman to First Love! You Should Have an Innocent-Girl Face on the First Day at School (Dangmei)

[Feitong is not Feitong] From Getting up to Going out | How to Switch Yourself from a Disgusting Male to Green Tea Bitch Surpassing Other Beauties (Huobengluantiaodefeitong)

Xiaozhujiejie! How to look like Ishihara Satomi! A Peachy Makeup (Xiaozhu jiejie)

It is easy to see strong contrasts in these titles. Indeed, contrasts are at the center of makeup tutorials. The bigger the change a blogger undergoes in a tutorial, the more persuasive it is. Makeovers assert what is beautiful, what is ugly, and that women have the power to change their bodies. In makeover stories, before the application of makeup women are presented as being either middle-aged or disgustingly masculine: in both cases, they lack female essence. The descriptions of makeup-free appearances are interesting. In fact, the videos frequently use the term *middle-aged woman*. In Dangmei's video, a 20-something blogger describes her naked face as that of a "middle-aged woman." Similarly, the 21-year-old woman whom I met on the airplane called herself *lao'ayi*, which also refers to middle-aged women in Chinese. Both of these words suggests that age is strongly discriminated against and that youth is seen as a key ingredient of female beauty.

Why do young people take middle-aged women, rather than another point of reference, as a figure through which to describe unappealing appearances? Who are the real middle-aged women at stake in these titles? They definitely do not refer to the two women in their twenties. One might interpret this age discrimination as forming part of

⁷ These tutorial videos were released both on Weibo and Bilibili. Whereas Bilibili shows each video's view number, Weibo does not. I have selected the most reviewed makeup tutorials in 2019, based on Bilibili's statistics.

a toxic culture that has grown up under a patriarchal gaze. In this culture, women's bodies are always seen as problematic. That said, I think that we can also explain much of this discrimination by looking to recent historical shifts in contemporary China: often, invocations of age actually refer to a different era's beauty standards. In the Chinese context, the term middle-aged is usually applied to people in their forties, fifties, and early sixties. Real middle-aged women in contemporary China were born in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s—roughly the Maoist Era. Women who were raised in a defeminized culture and knew little about beauty skills are now associated with unappealing and inferior looks. In this sense, online descriptions of beauty (and the lack of it) implicitly present a constructed hierarchy among women and put forward simplified history—all while focusing on seemingly harmless beauty skills.

In examining the online beauty tutorials, it is essential to reflect on that which “is blindly taken for granted in any system of teaching: the necessity of explication” and “why it shouldn't be taken for granted” (Rancière, 1991, p. 4). In the narrative presented on beauty blogs, online makeover tutorials are necessary because women who do not master beauty skills will be seen as inferior. According to gender norms in the Socialist Era, in contrast, being unfamiliar with beauty skills did not mean that one was inferior. In short, this inferiority is constructed, as is the necessity of makeover tutorials.

The results of makeover tutorials demonstrate the kind of appearances that women desire to have themselves. The innocent first love, charming woman, or sweet Japanese actress are key archetypical figures of this desire. Beauty bloggers offer diverse examples of charming women to their audience. Once a woman has mastered makeup skills, she can control her appearance. At this moment in history, women are not forced by the patriarchy to perform femininity. Rather, they are the subjects performing femininity. They can decide when to perform femininity and what kind of femininity they perform. “The makeover paradigm”, a major component of postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007b), provides a sense of empowerment. A magical makeover triggers women's desire for certain femininities. “Power works on the level of desire, but also on the level of knowledge,” writes Foucault (1980, p. 59). The desire to be attractive and identify with other women incited by beauty blogs, combined with knowledge of beauty, increases women's obsession with beauty.

Still, the empowerment fostered by makeover tutorials is suspicious. Today, notions of beauty are much less strict and monotonous than those that prevailed under socialist feminism, or at least people imagine. Seemingly, women now have more freedom to choose how they appear both in public and to their families, and more options to choose among. Nevertheless, all templates of beauty have fundamental limits. Although fairness, youthfulness, and slimness are repeated keywords in beauty blogs, they describe bodies that do not align with the majority of women. When beauty bloggers offer new examples of desirable appearances, they rarely challenge received standards of racialized fairness, age-discriminating youthfulness, and body-shaming slimness. The seemingly rich variety of beauty templates on offer conceals this notably restrained imaginary of beauty. Moreover, the sense of empowerment conjured by makeover tutorials is extremely vulnerable and cannot substantively empower women. The makeover paradigm, in all its manifestations, is presented as a solution rather than a problem. Closely examining the logic behind it, it becomes apparent that this paradigm assumes that women's bodies are always "flawed in some way" and thus in need of transformation (Gill, 2007b, p. 156). This solution produces rather than solves problems.

2.3.2 Micromanaging the Body

Beside the general idea of beauty, embodied as fairness, youthfulness, and slimness, beauty blogs provide detailed instruction on managing one's body. Consider the following extracts from a wide range of articles and videos:

For elderly people like us, how can we obtain the smooth skin of teenage girls, which is like the boiled egg? I think that there are two steps. The first is to apply concealer cream to the key areas. You should apply a small amount of concealer several times and do so gently. Second, foundation. Apply the foundation multiple times and with a very small amount each time. (Dangmei)

Make the eyeshadow zone as round as possible. Teen girls have innocent and adorable round eyes. (Dangmei)

Here I use foundation from Zelens. The Youth one [this is the name of a foundation product]. Using this foundation can make your skin look like Satomi's, very creamy, with nuanced gloss, very natural. (Xiaozhujiejie)

Dip in a small amount of loose powder, and tap it gently on your pimple. Look! it disappears immediately! (Xiaozhujiejie)

You can see that there are still marks of acne and freckles on my face. In terms of daily makeup, you don't need to conceal all the flaws. Only dark circles need to be covered. (Huobengluntiaodefeitong)

The last step in applying foundation is to put some on your neck. Many sisters don't apply foundation to necks. Wrong! (Dalaotianer)

Beginners, you should first apply eyebrow products to the middle of your eyebrows. (Dalaotianer)

The wrong way to draw eyeliner is to make it too wide. (Dalaotianer)

In the above cases, bloggers specify every small step that one takes when applying makeup. To achieve a certain look, someone using makeup is expected to take seriously every possible change that they could make to their face. When I interviewed beauty blogger B03, she said: "Makeup is like drawing on your own face. You can draw anything you want with the brushes in hand" (interview, December 2017). Beauty bloggers' actual practices are less creative and free than this blogger's statement suggests. There are detailed protocols for the application of makeup, like what you need to do for a chemical experiment in a laboratory. Beauty bloggers play a crucial role in informing their audience about these protocols. Although they might claim a certain freedom in how makeup can be applied, beauty bloggers are in control of every detail of the application process. In this sense, beauty blogs offer techniques of micromanaging the ways in which the corporeal body is expressed.

The beauty bloggers' job entails more than informing audiences about single protocols; indeed, there is no all-purpose approach to applying makeup. Instead, beauty bloggers suggest that people should choose the protocol that most suits their situation.

For instance, how should a student prepare for their first day at school? Backpack, stationery, books, and so forth. But how should a female student prepare for their first day at school? Beauty blogger Dangmei suggests that female students prepare a back-to-school makeup regime (*kaixuezhhuang*, 开学妆) in advance of the big day. Her video, “From Middle-Aged Woman to First Love! You Should Have an Innocent-Girl Face on the First Day at School,” provides very detailed techniques for completing a back-to-school makeup regime, generating 960,000 views within two months. Dangmei is hardly the only blogger to have tackled this theme. Indeed, videos and articles addressing back-to-school makeup flood social media around the beginning of September each year, resulting in a seasonal media landscape.

The core theme of Dangmei’s video is her back-to-school makeup regime, which is dedicated to a particular occasion in women’s lives. Beauty bloggers have produced videos and articles on the makeup appropriate to a range of other occasions, including dating makeup, interview makeup, graduation makeup, Halloween makeup, and Christmas makeup. Various colors, cosmetics, and female personalities are suggested in the tutorials. Whereas the dating makeup stresses sweetness and cuteness, the Halloween makeup emphasizes wildness and creativity. Producing new videos constantly, beauty bloggers generously provide their followers with seemingly infinite technical advice.

These occasion-based makeup regimes illustrate that the performance of femininity can never be realized once-for-all. In effect, by providing makeup regimes for such a range of social occasions, beauty bloggers create a classification system. Through makeup, women’s daily lives are divided into different occasions, each of which corresponds to an appropriate protocol for presenting one’s appearance. The notion of femininity is not abstract and empty any more, but splits into a multiplicity of small personal projects that call on women to manage themselves for each new social occasion. Femininity can be easily practiced and sustained through this taxonomized system.

Social occasions constitute a key aspect of the world of makeup tutorials. Proficiency is another. For example, one of the most widely circulated videos of Dalaotianer, a blogger with more than 400,000 followers on Weibo (as of April 2020), concerns how

beginners should apply makeup. This video is titled “What Mistakes do Makeup Beginners Make? Explaining the Steps Like a Babysitter | Dos VS Don’ts.” In this video, Dalaotianer shows how both beginners and advanced makeup users put on makeup. In so doing, it borrows the makeover logic, which foregrounds strong contrasts. This video presents two makeovers that make for two contrasts: before versus after and right versus wrong. These double makeovers and the dramatic contrasts that they put forward nudge the audience to endorse the “right” way of applying makeup, although the comparisons are drawn in a strong and indeed artificial manner. We can see that the blogger intentionally makes the “right” side of her face look good and the “wrong” side seem dubious (see Figure 2.3). This small trick increases the contrast between right and wrong, inciting the audience to affirm the right side. In terms of the video’s general effect, the contrast successfully establishes the blogger’s credibility.

Figure 2.3

The cover picture to Dalaotianer’s makeup tutorial



Note. From Dalaotianer’s channel on bilibili.com, retrieved from <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV15x41157K8>

Together, social occasions and proficiency impose an artificial structure on women's everyday lives. One might easily map a woman's position along the two axes of occasions and proficiency. Once her location is clear, there would be simple and straightforward guidance for her. These axes transform women's lives into various miniature management projects. In beauty bloggers' narratives, these small projects require only simple cosmetics, but greatly improve one's image. If makeover tutorials prompt women to perform femininity, the makeup application protocols that they put forward provide them with knowledge of how they should perform. Makeover stories not only incite a desire for beauty but also surveil the ways in which people manage beauty. Small projects of performing femininity combine to constantly supervise women's bodies. At every moment, a silent voice judges the appropriateness of women's looks. Makeover, makeup skills successfully disguise aesthetic labor as an instrumental, effective, and clever mode of appearance management. Through micromanagement techniques, beauty blogs successfully reproduce aesthetic labor and impose a constant surveillance over women's lives in a seemingly pleasant way.

Micromanaging oneself is doubtlessly one route to success on social media. The videos that I have mentioned have received thousands of positive comments and reposts, indicating their popularity among audiences. One may question why women embrace beauty surveillance if it brings them extra work and trouble. Women embrace beauty surveillance exactly because when aesthetic labor is not imposed by force but performed out of an individual's pursuit of self-betterment, the burden of labor is masked as the necessary acquisition of useful skills for oneself. It is the surveillance of axes that bears its "usefulness" for women. Beauty surveillance and useful beauty skills are the two sides of the same coin. Axes are built upon bloggers' close observation and examination of women's daily praxis. Makeover skills therefore match women's lived experiences and beauty ideals impact on women's lives in the mode of surveillance.

With the reproduction of aesthetic labor, beauty bloggers' personal experiences establish new dispositions, defining the appropriate ways in which women should present their bodies. Under these conditions, women's personal choices of beauty techniques are no longer personal, for they are impacted by publicly shaped conceptions of proper femininity. The axes of knowledge imposes a strict model for women and

defines people's expectations of women in daily life. Popular forms of beauty pedagogy formulate new norms of femininity in the post-Socialist Era, altering women's everyday looks on a large scale.

2.3.3 Micromanaging the Inner Self

The online beauty pedagogy is not compulsory education such as that purveyed in schools. Indeed, it has to find ways to holding the attention of its students, who can leave any time. In contemporary China, the secret of how beauty bloggers keep their followers hooked lies not only in the provision of useful instructions but also in the work of care that they devote to women's inner selves. As well as micromanaging the body, they also focus on the management of the inner self. They care about women's inner feelings and cultivate a sense of pleasure in body management.

"I am not a born beauty," blogger B03 told me. "The direct effect of using makeup is making me pretty. ... Wearing makeup brings me vitality. My mood is very good after finishing my makeup" (interview, December 2017). This kind of sentiment, which focuses on beauty skills' positive effect on one's mental state, appears widely in beauty blogs and their followers' stories. Another blogger, Xiaozhujiejie, posted a comment saying that "not makeup and not dressing up lead to a lack of elegance. Gradually, it makes one sloppy and impacts personal mood (at least, for me)" (see Figure 2.4).

One loyal follower of beauty blogger A01 even went so far as to say that "80% of people around me won't say that makeup can change my appearance dramatically. But I just feel good when I do makeup" (interview, March 2018). Here, she separated the mental effect of a makeover from its tangible effects. Beauty skills are deployed, it indicates, not just for the purpose of being physically pretty. The need to be pretty shaped her emotions profoundly.

Does applying makeup automatically lead to positive feelings and emotions? The causal relation is not so solid as women feel it to be. Subjects cannot experience the pleasure of having a good appearance without cultivating their looks. "My parents strongly opposed me applying makeup when I started," blogger B03 told me (interview, December 2017). Her parents, who were born in the 1960s and grew up in the Socialist Era, did not share the pleasure that she took in makeup. For them, beauty skills are not

linked to pleasure or self-confidence. The connection between beauty skills and pleasure is self-evident only for subjects who have grown up with intensive femininity.

Figure 2.4

Xiaozhujie's Post



Note. From Xiaozhujie's account on Weibo, retrieved from https://weibo.com/1810802952/HFp7DfIMV?from=page_1005051810802952_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1620871536786

The connection-building process is ubiquitous in beauty blogs. In makeover videos, beauty bloggers use verbal and facial expressions to emphasize how shy they feel before deploying beauty skills and how comfortable and confident they feel afterwards (see Figure 2.5). According to the online beauty pedagogy, using one's beauty skills lifts one's spirits, bringing confidence, self-gratification, and desire. Aesthetic labor makes one "look good" as well as "feel good" (Wood, 2017, p.317).

Figure 2.5

Facial expressions before and after a makeover



Note. From Dangmei's Channel on Bilibili, retrieved from
<https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV15W411977Z>

Online beauty pedagogy establishes templates for women, but this does not necessarily mean that it is rigid or unpleasant. The management of the body intentionally deploys pleasurable techniques and wins subjects' trust. It brings great pleasure and invites people to participate. The disciplinary power working on women's bodies does

not force women to perform beauty. It has a harmless face, recommending pleasing and smart ways in which one can be a woman. As Foucault (1980) argued, “what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted” is that “it induces pleasure” (p. 119). Mobilized by online beauty pedagogy, affect permeates subjectivity and significantly shapes subjects. As Ballaster and her colleagues argue (1991):

the construction and maintenance of any social order entails the construction and maintenance of certain pleasures that can secure consent and participation in that order. That any cultural form is pleasurable and ideological is, then, neither surprising nor worrying—what else could pleasure be? And how else could ideology work? (p. 162)

Here Ballaster and her colleagues refute the common assumption that ideology operates through oppression and thus that pleasure has nothing to do with ideology. They point out that ideology works well exactly because it works through pleasure. This also goes for beauty, which does not force women to perform it. Contemporary discourses of beauty lead women to believe that beauty skills bring them positivity and affection, strengthening the tie between beauty and subjectivity. When the micromanagement techniques put forward in beauty blogs reproduce beauty practices, they also reproduce the subjects of beauty.

2.4 The Monetization of Bloggers' Aesthetic Labor

2.4.1 Exhibiting Beauty Products and Commodified Femininity

In addition to staging makeup tutorials, beauty blogs also pay a great deal of attention to product-themed content. Whereas the tutorials are about techniques of managing women's daily appearance, this product-themed content mainly concerns the tools used for applying makeup. Most bloggers talk about beauty products. There even are some who do not create makeup tutorials at all, but focus only on beauty products. Like makeup tutorials, talking about beauty products can effectively grab followers' attention. They produce a wide range of subcategories of product-themed content, including posts

devoted to their favorite products, products they regret buying, unboxing, and other forms of content focusing on beauty products. In many cases, the boundary between makeup tutorials and product-themed content is unclear. Indeed, the bulk of pictures and videos contain both.

Beauty bloggers' evaluation of beauty products goes far beyond simple assertions of good and bad. Beauty bloggers inject more meaning into beauty products. Below are some examples of beauty bloggers interpreting beauty products:

Color 34 is not a problem. It fits autumn and winter. Also, it's suitable for sisters with dark style. It looks graceful. It's dark red. Please remember it! (Zhang Mofan)

38 should be a super pretty color. Yes, it is a super pretty color. There is a tone of *yimahong* (period red, 姨妈红) in it. The saturation of this color is high and it could dye your lips evenly. It's even suitable for darker lips. (Zhang Mofan)

This color could frighten my grandpa away! This is the first option for bad girls. Color 39! (Zhang Mofan)

Simang babi fen (deadly Barbie pink, 死亡芭比粉) is coming! Color 66. If a man sends a *simang babi fen* lipstick to me, I'll definitely break up with him. (Zhang Mofan)

On lips, I use YSL's *zhannanse* (man-capturing color, 斩男色). (Huobengluantiaodefeitong)

Using this foundation can make your skin look like Satomi's [a Japanese actress], very creamy, with nuanced gloss, very natural. (Xiaozhujiejie)

78 is more unacceptable. My mother will use that color. It looks like this. Purple again. This is real purple, oh my god! [in a cynical tone] Why does there exist such color? (Zhang Mofan)

It is a must-buy color for wicked women. If one day Sun Hongliang [this blogger's boyfriend] cheated on me, I would put this color on and beat his lover. (Zhang Mofan)

The color 36 is bright pink. It does not match my skin color. If you put it on skin with a dark tone, it just makes your skin darker. Can you see the effect on my skin? It is so rustic! (Zhang Mofan)

As these extracts indicate, beauty bloggers' evaluations of cosmetics are not just about quality. They also care how the cosmetics function in the presentation of femininity. The comment that "this is the first option for bad girls," for instance, indicates that if one wants to play the role of a bad girl, certain lipsticks are needed. Beauty products construct an organic part of femininities, just like certain lipsticks naturally speak for certain female attributes. The evaluation of beauty products is an extension of bodily management techniques.

Beauty bloggers' narratives build up a system of jargon for discussing cosmetics. In this system, colors have different meanings. Whereas purple is for elderly women, bright pink is provincial and darker colors are for bad girls. Applying makeup cannot guarantee one a good look. Indeed, using the wrong product might make one look worse. Some of this vocabulary is strikingly new. The terms *yimabong* (period red, 姨妈红) and *siwang babi fen* (deadly Barbie pink, 死亡芭比粉), for example, were both coined by Chinese beauty bloggers. This first refers to a brownish red, which is interpreted as sexy, powerful, and expensive; the second refers to a bright pink and is considered as ill-suited for Chinese women's skin tones. If one does not stay up to date with trendy beauty blogs, one can easily be clueless in the new waves of appearance management. These jargons create a language for beauty lovers and outsiders can hardly understand. At one

time, Chinese social media users played a game, in which girls asked their boyfriends or male friends to guess the meaning of jargon terms such as *yimabong*. (The men's answers, of course, were always wrong.) The game's fun stems from the social implications of this jargon, which served to bind together a whole group of women around their knowledge of certain lipsticks and set up a boundary between the identities of women and men. The game reveals how little men know about beauty products while ignoring the fact that women do not possess this knowledge naturally and have only acquired it by following beauty blogs. In overlooking these factors, beauty bloggers' jargon reasserts and naturalizes gender differences between men and women.

If it appears that beauty bloggers help audiences understand trendy jargon surrounding cosmetics, in fact, they build the system of jargon themselves. In so doing, they turn themselves into authorities. They generously alert people to the fact that a range of traps lie in wait for them in the world of cosmetics. If the audience wants to avoid the traps, all that they need to do is follow beauty bloggers, who know where traps are. The tricky thing here is that these traps do not arise naturally, but are made and sustained by beauty bloggers. By building traps through their discourse, beauty bloggers legitimate their own practice, presenting themselves as useful and helpful to their audiences. Their advice on products is highly compatible with micromanagement techniques for applying cosmetics. Beauty blogs provide not only detailed instructions for how makeovers should be conducted, but also detailed specifications of which beauty commodities should be used. These two aspects of beauty blogs work together to catch female audience member's attention and narrow otherwise broad conceptions of femininity down to more specific, commodity-mediated femininities. All of the narratives put forward on beauty blogs pave the way for beauty consumption and ready their female followers to be consumers.

Figure 2.6

Period Red (top), Deadly Barbie Pink (middle), and Zhannanse (bottom).



Note. From Zhang Mofan and Feitong's accounts on Bilibili, retrieved from
<https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV16W411X7Gh> and
<https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Px411E7po>

2.4.2 Pointing the Way Toward Retailers

Beauty bloggers have become the highest-earning *wanghongs* by facilitating a smooth transition from shared knowledge to consumption. They clear obstructions that might inhibit consumption among their audiences. In the quotations that I posit below, it is clear that beauty bloggers direct their followers toward retailers.

103 in our store is perfect for dark and yellow skin. This is 73 [from Tom Ford]. I put 103 on my upper lip and put 73 on my lower lip. They look alike. Look, they are the same color. This color is suitable for dark and yellow skin. 73 from Tom Ford is the same as our 103 so you now have an affordable option. (Zhang Mofan)

I recommended the lip mask in an earlier video. It's from Tujiaxinifang [a Chinese skincare brand]. I have bought two bottles. The first one is empty now. (Huobengluantiaodefeitong)

If you want to have a natural look, you should use a foundation with a natural sense. This my favorite foundation recently, a foundation from BELL [a cosmetic brand]. (Shanzi)

Take Zhang Mofan's video as an example: in commenting on lipsticks from Tom Ford, she naturally mentions her e-commerce stores on Taobao, informing the audience about where they can buy such products. Although a considerable number of beauty bloggers have opened e-commerce stores, other beauty bloggers have not. Instead, they release commercials for other's stores or brands. Regardless of whether they own e-stores, beauty bloggers make a profit by combining forms of advertising with their regular content and directing their followers to retailers. Whereas some of them choose to advertise products implicitly, others provide links to shopping websites under their videos or articles.

In the beauty blogging business, audience members' responses matter. If a majority of viewers or readers were unsatisfied with the combination of advertisement and regular

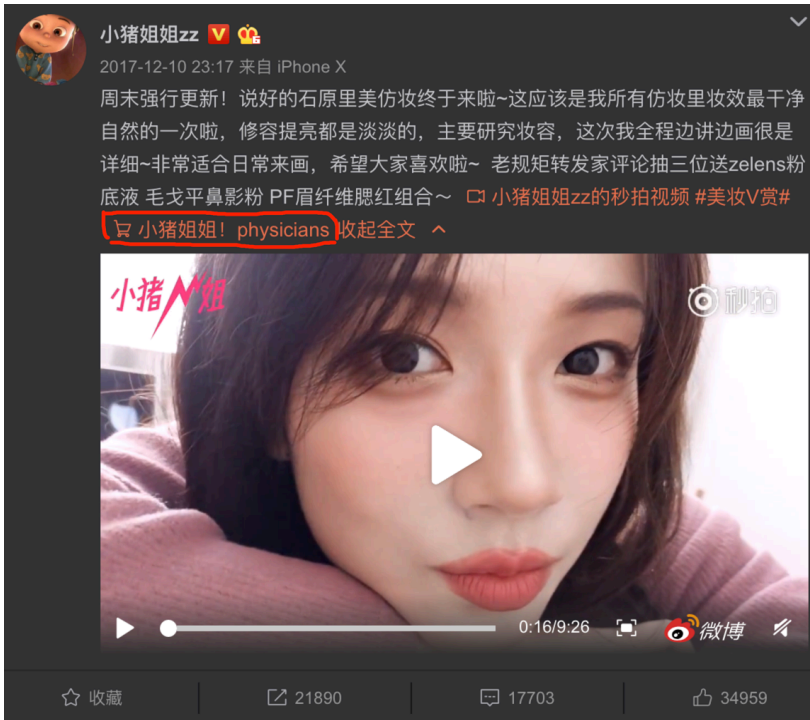
content, the beauty blogging business could not function. Audience responses to this combination changed dramatically between the mid-2000s and mid-2010s. In the early phase of beauty blogging, when beauty blogs provided a platform for anyone to share information equally, amateurs were uncomfortable when commercial information appeared in beauty blogs. Many beauty bloggers were criticized for posting subtle advertisements for a certain brand or certain products. In 2011, for example, beauty blogger Arora provoked controversy by releasing a series of articles about a Japanese luxury cosmetic brand, of which she was a loyal consumer. This elicited many harsh comments; amateur bloggers suspected that she was posting advertisements for the brand and thus ramping up the market price of its products, which would cost beauty consumers. The controversy was debated on Sina Blog, where she ran her account. Soon the debate broadened and spread to other popular social media sites such as Douban and Tianya Forum. In June 2016, Arora felt compelled to respond to critical comments that were too visible to ignore. She claimed that she had never participated in price inflation and that she has written her articles on the brand in questions on the basis of personal preference, not to turn a profit.⁸ This controversy revealed that, in the early days at least, the amateur beauty community was vigilant as to the danger that beauty blogging might be commercialized.

With the growing popularity of beauty blogs, critical voices on commercialization were overridden by its advocates. Diverse factors contributed to this shift: professionalized beauty bloggers had to be paid; social media platforms charge beauty bloggers visibility fees, leading bloggers to monetize their online reputation, which will be discussed in Chapter 2; and the audience became used to beauty tutorials and thus more tolerant of commercial content.

⁸ For her full clarification, see Arora (2011).

Figure 2.7

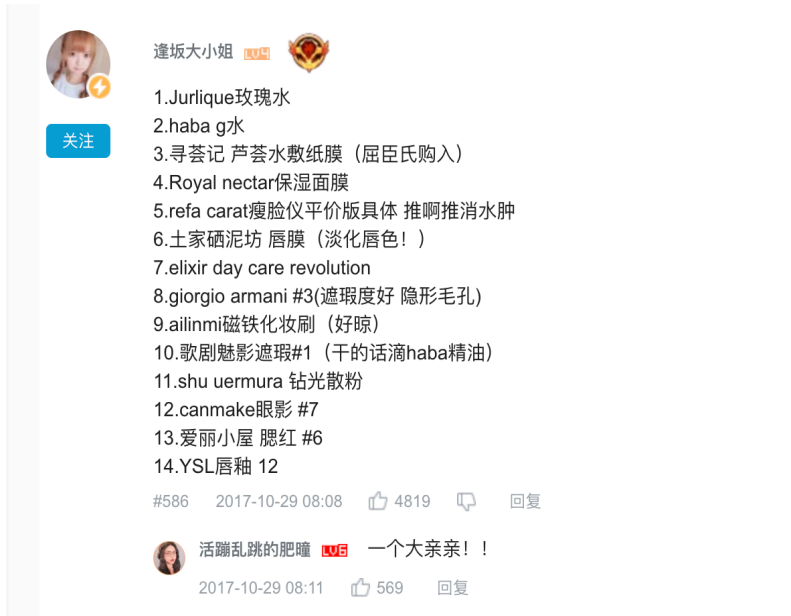
A screenshot from Xiaozhujie's video



Note. I have circled in red a link through which viewers can purchase products mentioned in the video. From Xiaozhujie's account on Weibo, retrieved from https://weibo.com/1810802952/Fz3sQurJU?from=page_1005051810802952_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment

Figure 2.8

The most liked comment under Huobengluantiaodefeitong's video



Note. Huobengluantiaodefeitong's channel on bilibili.com, retrieved from
<https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Px411E7po>

Controversies like Arora's became less frequent during the mid-2010s. Most audiences came to accept the commercialization of beauty blogs and stopped criticizing commercial content. Indeed, some viewers/readers ask bloggers to provide links to retailers selling beauty products, while other warmhearted followers even summarize shopping information in the comment section so that other viewers can go directly to certain products on shopping websites directly. Figure 2.8 presents the most liked comment posted under a video by the blogger Huobengluntiaodefeitong. One of her followers listed all of the beauty products mentioned in the video. "A big kiss!!" the blogger replied.

Support among followers fuels consumption and has triggered a boom in the internet celebrity economy, including the beauty blogging business. Consider the example of the beauty blogger Zhang Mofan, plenty of whose followers buy beauty products at her e-commerce stores. In the single year of 2017, her e-commerce stores (which sell cosmetic and skincare products) recorded sales of ¥150 million (over \$21 million) (Xiong, 2018). According to Zhang Mofan, 65% of her stores' traffic comes from Weibo, where she built her reputation as a beauty blogger. Because of the impressive performance of her business, Weibo awarded her "the most valuable account" in 2017. This is a classic story of China's *wanghong* economy, in which a beauty blogger—not a traditional celebrity, such as a film star—found enormous business success by producing content on social media.

The success of online cosmetic consumption should not be seen in separation from gender discourse. Indeed, it is a consequence of the construction of commodified femininity. In teaching women how to perform femininity, beauty blogs increase women's economic utility in the market economy. In short, beauty blogs train a large number of consumers for the *wanghong* economy.

2.5 Aesthetic Labor as a Female Need

Chinese women are not born to follow beauty blogs, nor are they waiting to be trained. As agents, they choose their own interests, rather than simply receiving information put out by others. Without female followers, Chinese beauty blogs could not have achieved the cultural and economic influence that they currently enjoy. It is necessary to address

the role of audiences in discussing the prominence of beauty blogs in China. However, given beauty blogging's audiences make up an anonymous and scattered mass, the voices of their members are rarely heard. Instead, they show up in the form of silent data and market reports produced by the social media or e-commerce industry, which largely neglect the ways in which women are drawn into following beauty blogs. Explaining beauty blogs' popularity without considering their followers' voices is likely to result in a determinist and simplistic account, which assumes that as long as influencers make an effort, then audiences will love them. It is not enough to look solely at influencers to explain why beauty blogs' audience base is expanding. To avoid the trap of determinism, my research engages with audience voices by investigating how they become loyal followers of beauty blogs. This qualitative research cannot provide a comprehensive account of beauty blogs' audiences, but it could provide snapshots and traces of their agency and put them back in the media ecology on which influencers depend.

A01 (born in 1993) had been a devoted follower of beauty bloggers for four years when I interviewed her in March 2018. Having grown up in a third-tier city in the province of Guangxi, she went to university in Beijing in 2010, whereupon she started using cosmetics. In the interview, Shi emphasized that before following these blogs, she only used one or two basic cosmetic products and knew little of cosmetics. Then, on several occasions in 2014, her Chinese roommate criticized mistakes she was making in applying foundation and suggested that she should learn the right methods from beauty bloggers. The peer pressure did not hurt her feelings. Rather, she immediately became obsessed with the fascinating world of beauty blogs. "Half a year later, I developed a huge interest in lipsticks and brought one after another. I had around forty lipsticks at that time" (interview, March 2018). Several months later, she "subscribed to more than 800 accounts [on Weibo]," a lot of which were run by beauty bloggers (interview, March 2018).

Unlike A01, A08 (born in Jiangsu in 1986) did not use cosmetics while at college in Shanghai (2003-2007). Indeed, she seldom saw other university students using cosmetics either. Having worked for a shipping company for three years, A08 began to use cosmetics when she noticed that many of her colleagues applied makeup. Since around 2010, using cosmetics seemed to have become an unwritten rule in the office. Although

a few abstained, most of her female colleagues wore makeup to the office on a daily basis. When they were to meet clients, female office workers felt compelled to wear makeup. “It is not like that you are required to wear makeup. But when you wear it, you look more proper at the office,” A08 told me (interview, December 2018). The overwhelming atmosphere around makeup at the office, combined with her consumption power, led A08 to beauty blogs. Soon she could handle the office look easily. Although she followed beauty blogs to hone this look, she also applied makeup outside the office. When I interviewed her, she had already quit her job and became a housewife, but she still kept the habit of applying makeup whenever she went out.

A07 (a civil servant born in Henan in 1993) began subscribing to beauty blogs in the 2015-16 job-seeking season. Before graduating from university, she felt an urgent need to arm herself with makeup. “During job interviews,” she told me, “makeup helps me leave a good impression on others and makes my look more formal”(interview, August 2018).

Although several interviewees—including beauty bloggers, followers, and cosmetic company staff—referred to the Chinese saying “everyone has a heart for beauty,” their stories suggested that they were not natural followers of beauty blogs. Beauty was not a central concern to them until those around them started nudging them towards what they saw as the right way or proper way of being a woman.

These stories reveal how audience members become engaged with beauty blogs: due to motivations that take hold outside the domain of beauty blogging, they choose to subscribe to beauty blogs. They do so not because beauty blogs need them as targeted audience members or potential consumers. On the contrary, they feel that they need beauty blogs. Accordingly, in choosing to follow beauty blogs, they exercise their agency as an audience.

Their felt need to turn to beauty blogs arises from peer pressure, unwritten rules in their workplaces, and competition for employment. This need only grows in a society in which expectations around women’s appearances are becoming more exacting. My interviewees require a solution for their real-world problems. Beauty blogs and cosmetics then show up and are only too obliging. Given audience members’ needs,

which are rooted in daily life, following beauty blogs and consuming the products that they recommend represent a logical step.

Another aspect of followers' agency has to do with their critical awareness and skepticism of beauty blogs. Although they like following beauty blogs and derive a great deal of pleasure from them, they do not buy into all beauty bloggers' stories. Followers are fully aware of the commercial mechanisms at play in beauty blogging and do not follow or trust beauty blogs all of the time.

A05 (a journalist born in Shandong in 1993) started following beauty blogs when she registered her Weibo account. "When I just created a new account on Weibo, I did not know what to follow," she told me. "I guess Weibo sent me some accounts based on my interest tags ... Gradually I found more bloggers I like" (interview, April 2018). A05 read beauty blogs only when she had extra money. "Once you watch them, you want to buy some fancy stuff. When I run out of money, I don't follow them" (interview, April 2018). A06 (a middle-school teacher born in 1991) starting follow beauty accounts on Weibo in 2012, when she was in college. "I unsubscribe beauty bloggers when they share too many commercials. You can tell when beauty bloggers are crazily posting commercials: when they say good things about every product and cannot identify any specific features of each product" (interview, August 2018). A01 (a graduate student born in 1993) also unsubscribed from half of the beauty bloggers she previously followed because they "mixed in too many ads" (interview, March 2018). A07 (born in 1993) said that after acquiring "enough knowledge of beauty and products," she felt that beauty blogs were "not interesting anymore" (interview, August 2018). A08 (born in 1986) told me that, "rationally speaking, [I care] whether it works for me, whether it fits my consumption capacity ... When I'm in need of necessary things, it is good to read beauty blogs; when I have no need, I just skip beauty blogs" (interview, December 2018).

According to my observations, however, their skepticism went only so far. Although A05 did not read beauty blogs when her budget was tight, she did not abandon the values and practices that she had derived from blogs. Given the increasing commercialization of beauty blogs, A01 and A05 can only pay less attention to overly commercial bloggers and more to implicitly commercial bloggers. A07 no longer followed beauty blogs, but kept applying makeup nonetheless. A08 clearly knew what

she needed, but the definition of “necessary things” is unstable and heavily affected by the knowledge circulated among beauty blogs. After all, ten years ago she did not think it was necessary to wear any cosmetics.

Followers’ agency serves to draw a line between beauty bloggers and themselves, endowing them with a degree of independence. Thanks to this demarcation, followers do not buy all of the content and products promoted by bloggers. As A01 pointed during my interview with her, “I am that type of follower who cannot be easily transformed into profit” (interview, March 2018). Beauty blogging audiences are not fooled by commercial tricks. Rather, the long-term and immersive experience of social media sharpens their perspective, allowing them to see the commercial game being played in beauty blogging. That said, the line between bloggers and followers is porous and permeable. Immersion in social media also cultivates their identification with commodity-based beauty. The techniques and aesthetics deployed by beauty bloggers can still reach across the divide and ensnare their audiences.

If we step back and examine followers’ agency from a larger perspective, the conditions of this agency come into view. As the stories of the followers I interviewed show, women’s agency is shaped by diverse elements, which together constitute a pervasive atmosphere in which women operate. They assert that they choose to follow beauty blogs, but it is important to stress that their choices are made in an ever-changing environment. Taking A08 as an example, it used to be that she rarely saw makeup in her daily life. Eventually, though, it became commonplace. This cultural climate itself is an outcome of the growth of beauty blogs, as well as the preexisting, long-term turn towards gender essentialism and the beauty economy. In the 1980s, before the emergence of beauty blogs, beauty pageants, fashion magazines, plastic surgery, beauty salons, and the modeling industry had already flooded China and shaped people’s perceptions of gendered beauty (Brownell, 1998; E. Chen, 2016; Wen, 2013; G. Xu & Feiner, 2007; Jie Yang, 2017). In the Reform Era, the switch in official ideology and expansion of capitalism worked together to prepare the public to accept gendered beauty. In this societal context, women’s agency readily led them toward beauty blogs. When beauty blogs reached the mass audience, the conditions were ripe for women to engage with them.

The followers whom I interviewed have different backgrounds: there is a graduate student, civil servant, teacher, and journalist, women working in the shipping industry, an advertising agency, and the investment industry. Despite this, they all subscribe to beauty blogs, indicating that aesthetic labor cuts across professional sectors. Aesthetic labor can overcome the barriers between industries, reaching a considerable number of people. Previous sociology of work and employment on aesthetic labor each tend to focus on one specific industry, whether that be the retail and hospitality, modeling, or beauty salon industry (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Wissinger, 2015; Jie Yang, 2017). Given this methodological design, these accounts do not grasp the ubiquity of aesthetic labor.

The fact that beauty blog audiences belong to various industries suggests that aesthetic labor is infective. Further, it poses the following questions: why do women in different contexts all practice aesthetic labor? What is the shared mechanism behind the different looks characteristic of different industries? Women do not undertake aesthetic labor because their employers require it of them. Rather, their own identities drive them to care about beauty and align themselves with the mainstream conception of femininity. Women “spontaneously” discipline their bodies in view of their knowledge of femininity. Women’s work on their own beautification can be understood as what Foucault (1988) called a “technology of the self”, which

permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 18)

As a technology of the self, beauty requires that women engage in “articulating, analyzing, monitoring and understanding the self” (Wood, 2017, p. 318). Beauty powerfully “hails” women to participate in aesthetic labor, which allows them to “take up a subject position and make it their own”—to “work on ourselves to make ourselves”

(A. Evans & Riley, 2015, p. 40). Although women work in different industries, they do not face different normative conceptions of “womanhood” and “beauty.” As a technology of the self, beauty cultivates similar subjects who desire attaining perfection through self-discipline.

2.6 Class and Aesthetic Labor

Beauty bloggers always claim that their beauty skills are so simple that each and every woman can handle them. In this way, they hope to attract the widest possible following of social media users. In fact, women perform aesthetic labor to drastically different degrees. Focusing solely on beauty bloggers and their followers would lead to the misunderstanding that aesthetic labor is very common in China. Rather, it must be recognized that class bears significantly on aesthetic performance in the reproduction of aesthetic labor.

The aesthetic labor undertaken around beauty blogging is markedly classed. Beauty bloggers, are usually urban, well-educated women with high incomes. Although I did not select beauty bloggers based on their places of residence, most of the bloggers whom I interviewed live in first- and second-tier cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Chengdu, and Dalian. The only one who does not live in one of these city has settled in the UK. All of these interviewees went to college. They usually come from better-off families with members in high-income jobs. According to blogger B04, “if I post new content every two days, it costs me around ¥20,000 per month to buy cosmetics” (interview, December 2017). These costs are too high for ordinary people to bear, given that the annual disposable income per capita in 2017 is a mere ¥25,974 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018). The blogger B08 worked in the financial industry; the blogger B10 ran a start-up company and was busy traveling between the UK and China. All of this background information implies that they enjoy good financial situations, meaning that it is not difficult for them to buy beauty products. The followers that I interviewed, in contrast, did not necessarily come from big cities. They lived in first-, second-, and third-tier cities, with one living overseas. A few of them grew up in rural areas, although none of them settled in the countryside. Not all followers of beauty blogs, then, have high incomes or come from well-off families. It is important to notice

that the financial situations of followers are more diverse than those of beauty bloggers. When asked why she is into beauty blogs, one follower, A04, explicitly pointed out that “most girls cannot afford Chanel handbags. Why not have a Chanel lipstick” (interview, August 2018)? This answer reveals that not all followers have high purchasing power. In comparison with luxury commodities, the cosmetics promoted by beauty blogs are not actually beyond the reach of many consumers. Therefore, a wide range of women, rather than a limited group of rich women, can engage with beauty blogs.

An example will help us understand beauty consumers’ position in the social hierarchy in contemporary China. In July 2019, the hashtag *#girls’ faces are made of money#* (*#nüsheng de lian shi qian zuode#*), circulated widely among beauty blogs on Weibo. A post by FanfanWannaBuy, a beauty blogger who then had 1.4 million followers, captured people’s attention with the hashtag (see Figure 2.9). She posted that her daily expenditure on cosmetics was around ¥25.9 (around \$3.76). Taking into consideration less frequent costs such as disposable contact lenses, manicures, hairdressing, and all kinds of medical aesthetic treatments, the total daily cost could be close to ¥100 (\$14.5). If a woman kept up aesthetic labor in line with these outgoings, the annual cost could be ¥36,500 (around \$5,311). The annual per-capita income of China in 2018, in contrast, was ¥28,228 (about \$4,107). Although beauty blogs seem accessible to everyone, there is an economic barrier that prohibits many from joining the aesthetic labor club. Whereas some Chinese people can afford the whole package of beauty techniques, more cannot.

Figure 2.9

FanfanWannaBuy's post


凡凡WannaBuy 🍷
 7-24 09:35 来自 iPhone客户端已编辑

#女生的脸是钱做的#

精致女孩💎 每天出门必备的：

防晒、眼影、粉底、遮瑕、粉饼、睫毛、眉笔、腮红、唇釉、鼻影、眼线、高光、修容...

总计：2597.9元

按这些化妆品平均能用100次算，每次的化妆成本就要25.9块钱

这还不算隐性开销的日抛、美瞳、美甲、卷头发，以及各种医美...

所以每天一卸妆，将近100块钱就飞走了

大家加话题#女生的脸是钱做的#发微，算算今天你的脸花了多少钱？

我算是知道钱是咋没了了😭

#求求了我的仙#



转发5582 评论7122 赞7.7万


小镇姑娘没故事
 会呼吸的人民币

凡凡WannaBuy回复@说谁自恋呢:是你吗  评论配图
 共105条回复 >

7-24 10:25 👍 8215

Note. From FanfanWannaBuy's Weibo account, retrieved from https://weibo.com/6035041939/HEX6q8xkL?from=page_1005056035041939_profile&cwvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1621048192487

Although it is necessary to see who is running and following beauty blogs, the questions of who is *not* running and following beauty blogs are significant too. Blog follower A07, a civil servant working in a third-tier city in central China, needed to go to villages as part of her daily life. At the time of interview, she was occupied by the work of “poverty alleviation”, which is a long-term governmental project aim to eliminate poverty in China before 2020 (Xinhua, 2020). Most people whom she contacted in villages were people that still suffer from poverty. She told me that she did not wear any makeup when visiting rural areas for work; however, when she returned to the city, and especially when she hung out with her friends, she usually put on makeup. “No one wears makeup, especially in my work environment,” she explained. “Applying makeup is so strange there. You just cannot fit in with makeup in that environment” (interview, August 2018). This reveals that aesthetic labor is not helpful all the time. A subject feels good about aesthetic labor only in contexts in which aesthetic labor is common and appreciated. It is not common sense to perform aesthetic labor in every social group. As Warhurst and Nickson (2007) point out, “these habitus are not only socially constructed, but socially differentiated and differentiating, denoting a class” (p. 116). A07’s experience reminds us that the habitus of applying cosmetics in China was only recently established among the urban middle class. For villagers, who are unfamiliar with beauty media and have limited consumption power, urban-style aesthetic labor is unnecessary.

Beauty blogs may target women, but not all women. Women who cannot access beauty blogs, perhaps because they have no access to a smartphone or the internet; who have no time for social media entertainment; or who do not have the requisite spending power, fall outside their target audience. My audience interviewees worked in different industries, but all had a relatively good income. None of them worked in fields or factories. During my field trip in Shanghai and Yiwu, I encountered some women working in factories and asked them for their opinions about beauty blogging. In response, they said that they had not heard the term *meizhuangboke* (beauty blog). Some low-paid young female employees in the service industry had smartphones and internet access, but nevertheless did not know what beauty blogs are. Loyal audience members avidly consume beauty blogs and cosmetics, but some of their female peers have never

heard about beauty blogging. Doubtlessly, women following beauty blogs and women that have never heard of beauty blogs show distinct bodily attributes in China.

Whereas Warhurst and Nickson (2007) find that aesthetic labor in the British service industry involves a “(re)location of skill formation” (p. 116), I propose that the reproduction of aesthetic labor on Chinese social media entails a (re)location of class formation. If economic situation and financial resources play an important role in forming class and distinguishing people with purchasing power from people without, aesthetic labor makes a cultural space where women having knowledge of aesthetic labor from women without. Although the reproduction of aesthetic labor does not solely determine the class formation, it shapes how people culturally identify themselves with a certain class and the cultural identification is surely classed. The aesthetic class formation per se is a crucial social change for contemporary China for it denotes that the middle class distinguishes themselves from others not only through their purchasing power but also through their aesthetic taste. Unlike developed societies, such as the US where a relatively clear, middle-class aesthetics has been established (cf. Williams & Connell, 2010), China had no clear taste distinction between middle class and other classes (Wang, 2008; Zhu, 2017). Because of the short history of Chinese middle class, they have not developed a clear Bourdieunian aesthetic “habitus” while accumulating more financial resources than the lower class in the Reform era (Wang, 2008). The story of beauty blogging tells about their recent change: China middle-class aesthetics is in the making.

If we understand beauty blogs as spaces in which middle-class women form their aesthetic habitus, then they should not be seen as equal to other aesthetic spaces. On beauty blogs, middle-class aesthetics are culturally dominant. This comes to the fore in one beauty blogger’s makeover project, which took place in a village. In July 2020, a beauty blogger based on Weibo named Juanzi offered makeovers to left-behind women in a village in Hunan province (Dami Video, 2020). As part of China’s economic reforms, a large number of villagers have been compelled to seek employment opportunities in cities. Not all of them have been able to migrate to cities successfully, however. In cases of couples being unable to live in the city together, a common strategy is that husbands stay on in the city to work while wives remain in the countryside.

Accordingly, there are a great number of left-behind women, who return to villages “due to marriage, child-bearing and their important role in family care and children’s education” (Jingzhong Ye et al., 2016, p. 2). Juanzi, who says that she wants left-behind women to draw more public attention, chose to provide free makeovers to female villagers who “had never worn makeup in their whole lives” (Dami Video, 2020). A media organization called this project *You Are More Beautiful Than You Imagined*, which went on to garner praise on social media (see Figure 2.10). Weibo users commented that the confidence of left-behind women increased after they had makeup applied to them. Although I do not mean to cast doubt on Juanzi’s goodwill, I find this project paradoxical in the extreme. It gives left-behind women prominence on social media, but only when adhering to an aesthetic that middle-class women appreciate. It aims to bring more people under the umbrella of beauty, but does not broaden the narrow conception of beauty that is based on cosmetics consumption and urban tastes.

This initiative to makeover left-behind women also demands that we think about the role of class—which in this case manifests as the urban-rural divide—in disciplining women’s bodies. It would seem that in the eyes of beauty bloggers, the existence of left-behind does not undermine their assumption that there is an essential connection between women and beauty. Instead, they see individuals whose bodies are heavily flawed and urgently need disciplining. In the previous section I suggested that beauty can be understood as a technology of the self, which produces female subjects. Despite being focused on the subject, a technology of the self cannot operate without “others.” As Foucault (2010) contends, the “art of oneself required a relationship to the other” (p. 42). Left-behind women are important others against which the contemporary subject of femininity is defined; they remind those in pursuit of personal beauty that they must filter out any trace of rurality in themselves and identify with the urban. Although the urban-rural divide itself does not change, it accelerates the project of disciplining the body. Despite Juanzi’s efforts to engage with lower-class women, this makeover project confirms that only urban middle-class women know how to perform self-care and that women from humble backgrounds can do nothing but accept the dominant form of beauty knowledge. If anything, this makeover project entrenches class inequality and widens the aesthetic gap between classes. If it does not address the underlying political

and economic factors that lead women to be left behind, the confidence that makeup brings them is doomed to be transitory. “maintaining and reproducing” the “inequality” between women (Gill & Orgad, 2015, p. 340). Indeed, left-behind women adopting the magic of makeup as part of their daily lives might lead to disaster, given cosmetics’ high cost in terms of both time and money.

Figure 2.10

Screenshot of a media report about Juanzi’s makeover project in a Hunan village



Note. From Damishipin’s Weibo account, retrieved from

https://weibo.com/2481441215/JfQ63hCyr?from=page_1002062481441215_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment

Granted, beauty blog cannot address the political and economic condition of left-behind women. Still, a more open and equal discourse of beauty might endow female

subjects with greater dignity, not least by recognizing that rural women do not have to derive their confidence from consuming cosmetics and adhering to urban tastes. It is not women who do without makeup that should be called into question, examined, and challenged, but the narrow yet dominant concept of beauty that castigates them.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that beauty blogs have become a vital space in the production and reproduction of gendered aesthetic labor in post-Maoist China. Beauty bloggers train themselves to present the ideal, beautiful woman, both inside and outside. In so doing, they also train women among the public to manage themselves, right down to the smallest details. The makeover paradigm and micromanagement skills put forward in beauty blogs can be understood in terms of what Foucault called “technologies of the self.” Recognizing the dissemination of beauty through blogs as such a technology, this chapter explains how Chinese women’s looks have changed in the early twenty-first century. Beauty blogs reflect a historical transition between gender discourses in post-socialist China. What is more, they facilitate the concept of femininity’s deep penetration of women’s daily lives. Beauty blogs may seem superficial or trivial to those who are not engaged with them. This impression may stem from the fact that aesthetic labor seems to operate at an individual level and does not directly present a general picture of societal change in China. However, when we stop seeing these little things as individual in character and connect them to Chinese history, it becomes clear that together these little things have shifted the pervasive understanding of how Chinese women should look. As such, they shape women’s lived experiences. Further, the cultural prevalence of beauty blogging readies a considerable fan/consumer base to play its part in the *wanghong* economy.

Although beauty bloggers do not prominently discuss class, it is an essential factor in interpreting beauty blogs. Only women from the upper and middle classes can afford to become beauty bloggers and their taste affects—if not determines—the kinds of aesthetic labor that are deemed worthy. Low-class women have no say in the aesthetic hierarchy and are always marginalized, even in the project discussed above, which explicitly targeted them. Acknowledging beauty blogs’ classed character makes it

possible to question the concept of beauty: if beauty blogging does not dignify women equally, is it a positive phenomenon? If it does nothing but entrench upper- and middle-class women's monopoly of knowledge in how everyday lives are lead, can it contribute to building a better world, defined by equality and inclusiveness? Beauty is neither natural nor fixed. Constantly reinforced by aspiring bloggers, it excludes a large group of women who are not vocal on social media. Chinese history reveals that both beauty and femininity are socially constructed. This actually offers hope for the future: should we not construct beauty in a more equal and inclusive direction?

This chapter has focused on women and femininity, which do not cover every aspect of beauty blogging. In fact, there are also male beauty bloggers in China (C. Zhong, 2020); although they do not constitute a majority of bloggers, some have become quite popular. In theory, the existence of male beauty bloggers challenges the assumption that there is a strong connection between women and beauty. In practice, though, male beauty bloggers present complicated gender identities. Some of them attract audiences by performing masculinities based around rationality, not least by deploying scientific discourses to analyze the ingredients of beauty products, such as beauty blogger “kenjijoe!” (Yuxiang Zhang, 2020). Some of them, however, wear female makeup and foreground their femininity, challenging the conventional notion that men must have masculine traits. Interestingly, in entering a space that was previously exclusively female, male beauty bloggers do not necessarily challenge the discipline imposed on women's bodies. For instance, Benny Dong Zichu—a popular male beauty blogger who usually wears heavy, girly makeup—loves to teach girls how to choose beauty products and apply female makeup. Male beauty bloggers present more complicated gender identities than heterosexual women applying makeup. Although I tried to interview male beauty bloggers, those whom I contacted rejected my request. This lack constitutes a limit to my analysis of Chinese beauty blogging in this dissertation. Male beauty bloggers' ambiguous position and attitude toward femininity deserve further investigation.

Chapter 3

Amateurs, Professionals, and *Wanghongs*:

Understanding Beauty Bloggers through the Lens of Platform Labor

Weibo allows every Internet user to have a microphone, to report, post, and share information. Everyone can be a broadcaster, voice his/her own opinion, and present the beauty and ugliness of this world.

Cao Guowei (CEO of Weibo, October 6, 2013).

Weibo is the No.1 platform of *wanghong* incubation.

Wang Gaofei (CEO of Weibo, June 6, 2016)

I had the ideal situation three years ago. At that time, I made little money [from my blog] ... And the [beauty blogger] industry had not yet arisen ... I hope I can run my Weibo account for my hobby, not for making money.

B08 (Beauty blogger whom I interviewed, January 7, 2018)

B08, who began her beauty blogging account in 2014, told me how the environment in which Chinese beauty bloggers are situated has changed. She initially began blogging out of her passion for beauty skills. At that time, she and other bloggers were carefree social media users, interested purely in sharing beauty knowledge. Blogging was so simple that anyone with a social media account could do it. Now, however, beauty bloggers are deemed *wanghongs* and B08 worries about a number of new issues that did not arise in the initial phase of beauty blogging: views, algorithms, competition, multi-channel networks (MCN), and so forth. This reversal of her subjective attitude toward beauty blogging is closely associated with the process of platformization, whereby digital

platforms penetrate the cultural, economic, and other aspects of societies (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). For beauty bloggers, platforms play an increasingly dominant role in their content production. B08's personal experience can be best understood by going beyond an individualistic focus and interrogating social media platforms' impacts on beauty bloggers.

This chapter focuses on how beauty bloggers produce content and their changing relationship with Weibo. Also known as Sina Weibo, Weibo is the largest Chinese microblogging platform. Launched in 2009, it had 497 million monthly active users in the third quarter of 2019. Being one of the most popular social media platforms in China, Weibo hosts many beauty bloggers and has participated proactively in their rise to prominence. How has Weibo contributed to this development, despite the fact that it does not employ beauty bloggers? What role has Weibo played in the flourishing of beauty bloggers? How do beauty bloggers respond to Weibo's involvement? By situating the emergence of beauty blogging in the context of the platformization of cultural production, this chapter attends to how beauty bloggers are transformed from amateurs into platform laborers.

3.1 Beauty Bloggers, *Wanghong* Economy, and Platforms

For users of Chinese social media, beauty bloggers are typical *wanghongs*. *Wanghong* is an abbreviation of *wangluo hongren*, which literally means “internet famous person/people.” Unlike conventional celebrities, *wanghongs* garner fame on the internet, especially UGC platforms. The term resembles the English concept of “micro-celebrities” coined by Theresa Senft, which refers to “people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites” (Senft, 2008, p. 25).

An umbrella term, *wanghong* applies to a broad spectrum of popular people on the Chinese internet. According to Angela Ke Li (2019), *wanghongs* can be roughly divided by media forms and content genres into three groups: (1) the young live-streamers performing “singing, dancing, playing games, or flirting with their fans” before a camera; (2) “fashionistas based on Weibo and Taobao” who share fashion products, reveal information about their private lives, and monetize their online fame by transforming their fans into buyers; and (3) producers of creative content (p. 3017). Although this

taxonomy suggests something of the diversity of *wangbongs*, it is not very accurate. For example, beauty bloggers might initially seem to approximate the second group defined here. However, it soon becomes clear that they exceed the bounds of this narrow definition. Beauty bloggers do not only use Weibo and Taobao; some also use live streaming platforms, meaning that they overlap with the first of Li's groups. Besides, one group of beauty bloggers also produce creative content without revealing anything about their private lives, thus overlapping with the third group. Some beauty bloggers only use Weibo but not Taobao. It should be noticed that these three categories do not exclude each other and that the boundaries between them are porous. Some beauty bloggers match more than one description. All of that said, this taxonomy still offers an overall framework in which to situate various types of *wangbongs*, given that we remember that *wangbongs'* practices, in reality, are too diverse or even messy that to fall neatly into these categories.

Although each of the three types of *wanghong* has drawn enormous attention in contemporary China, the second has been most prominent in the debates of the “*wanghong* economy” on account of the rapid profits they make on e-commerce platforms. The media hype surrounding the *wanghong* economy usually focuses on the success of certain fashion or beauty bloggers who combined their social media accounts with e-stores and made an enormous amount of money in a short period (Jing, 2016; Tsoi, 2016; Ye & You, 2016). For instance, the beauty blogger Zhang Mofan's e-stores were sold for ¥150 million (around €19 million) in 2017 (Yuhan Hong, 2018). Given the widespread coverage of successful bloggers, being a *wanghong* is perceived as a profitable profession. The publicity of *wangbongs*—especially successful ones—grew drastically in the mid-2010s. Indeed, the Chinese press named 2016 “year one of the *wanghong*” (*wanghong yuannian*) (Jian Ye & You, 2016; X. Zhang & Su, 2016).

Although beauty bloggers, as a subset of *wangbongs*, received an enormous amount of attention in the mid-2010s, beauty bloggers had already existed for 10 years and many do not run e-stores. Indeed, the first batch of beauty bloggers started running their social media accounts in the mid-2000s and attracted many followers. To understand why beauty bloggers are suddenly well-known today, it is necessary to look back and

investigate how they rose from being a group of unknown amateurs to *wangbongs* on social media.

As existing studies of Western influencers show, micro-celebrities' online fame stems from their purposeful performance and self-branding. Their strategies for capturing others' attention and expanding their fame, as well as the effort that they put into these endeavors, can be understood as "visibility labor" (Abidin, 2016). For micro-celebrities, visibility labor involves both affective and technological work. In terms of affect, micro-celebrities play the "authenticity" card to attract attention and bond with their audiences. As Marwick's study has shown, Western fashion bloggers skillfully present personal and relatable experiences, which distinguishes them from legacy media and conventional celebrities (Marwick, 2013). Beauty YouTubers foster their popularity on social media, García-Rapp (2016) has written, by portraying themselves as "interesting, trustworthy personalit[ies]." Technologically, micro-celebrities seek ways of ensuring their visibility on the internet. Beauty vloggers on YouTube, for instance, speak in distinctive ways so that their verbal expressions can be recognized by YouTube's auto-generated text closed captions. This ensures that their videos and channels are searchable on this platform (Bishop, 2018b). In China, beauty bloggers have taken similar steps to enhance their visibility and popularity. For example, Chinese beauty bloggers such as Zhang Mofan call their followers "sisters" or "wives" so as to construct intimate relationships with followers, leading to carefully maintained, affective bonding. Chinese beauty bloggers are also attentive to the technological affordances of social media platforms, which they try to put to their advantage (as I discuss later in this chapter).

Although the existing literature has accounted for the role of individual agency in the rise of micro-celebrities, it has paid little attention to the platforms on which micro-celebrities/*wangbongs* operate. Proactive individuals' visibility labor may have contributed to the popularity of online personalities, but this can hardly explain the mixed factors behind the *wanghong* phenomenon. As Zhang and de Seta (2018) have argued, the rise of *wangbongs* is "one example of the intra-actions between the agential power of platforms, the workings of infrastructure, and the participating individuals" (p. 61). That is to say, the rise of *wangbongs* must be examined with an eye to interactions among individuals, platforms, and infrastructure. According to Zhang and de Seta (2018), the infrastructural

base for the emergence of *wanghongs* on microblog sites in China was established in the late-2000s, with the prevalence of smartphones, tablets, and 3G mobile internet access (p. 63). Developing this argument, this chapter focuses on the under-explored interactions between individuals and platforms.

If we expand the lens through which we examine the rise of beauty bloggers, such that we do not focus solely on individual techniques and entrepreneurship, it becomes clear that their online fame is formed through the process of platformization, that is, “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystem” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). Social media platforms are key sites in the “platformization” of societies. Beauty bloggers, who establish their fame on social media platforms, are deeply involved in this cultural, economic, and societal process. They create and share content on these social media platforms. Abidin (2018) points out that:

Unlike the connotations of being a content creator in the Anglocentric parts of the world, a *wanghong* is premised on the acute ability to convert internet viewers traffic to money, relying less on content production than the ability to hold an audience’s attention visually (p. 3).

This interpretation reflects common understandings of *wanghongs*, but it is not fully applicable to beauty bloggers, whose fame is built and maintained by their continuous production of content. In producing content, beauty bloggers draw traffic to both themselves and social media platforms, such as Weibo. Their “voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” labor significantly benefits and boosts social media platforms (Terranova, 2000, p. 36). In this sense, beauty blogging should be understood as platform labor.

The growing body of research on Chinese platforms points out that the process of platformization is reconfiguring models of labor. Didi, the transportation platform, has increased its technological power by “reinforcing inequalities facing informally employed taxi drivers prior to the emergence of ride-hailing apps” (J. Y. Chen, 2018, p. 2691); food delivery platforms use algorithms to intervene in couriers’ labor (P. Sun,

2019). Studies show how platforms' technological features penetrate and intervene in the routines of platform workers and these studies note that platform workers, such as drivers and couriers, are usually males from the middle and lower classes. Lin and de Kloet's (2019) research explain how Kuaishou, the UGC video and live streaming platform, absorbs "uneducated young Chinese from small cities and rural areas," using a marketing strategy and algorithm that platformizes this "unlikely creative class" in digital cultural production (2019, p. 2). These studies have foregrounded the social status of labor under platforms' surveillance and investigated how platformization influences social practices. Scarce attention has been paid to the diverse sources of platform labor. It is not only those lacking employment opportunities who are increasingly reliant on digital platforms; people of relatively higher social standing are also deeply entangled in the process of platformization. These include beauty bloggers, who are mainly urban, middle- and upper-class women in their twenties and thirties. How do these urban middle-class women participate in the platformization of cultural production? What role do platforms play in ensuring beauty bloggers' prosperity? What are the dynamics between the middle-class workforce and social media platforms?

To address these questions, I now analyze the case of Weibo, examining the changing relationship between Chinese beauty bloggers and platforms, which construct the media ecology in which beauty bloggers take root and grow. Whereas the previous chapter locates beauty bloggers in the cultural landscape, this chapter situates them in the platform economy, in which beauty amateurs are mobilized to contribute platform labor.

3.2 UGC, the 1% Rule, and the Crisis of Weibo

Web 2.0 technologies afford internet users the chance to express and brand themselves. This is demonstrated by the spread of UGC social media. When UGC platforms allow more participation, usability, and interoperability, they induce a considerable number of users to create and share homemade content (O'reilly, 2007). Users of social media both produce and consume content. As such, they can be understood as "prosumers" (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Users' roles become proactive and significant in social media, cutting against the notion of the "passive couch potato" of legacy media (van Dijck,

2009). In the early 2010s, when it first became fashionable the common narrative about Weibo in the Chinese press was that it empowered users by allowing them to participate in public discussions (H. Cao, 2013; Xinzhou Xie, Tian, & Liu, 2013; G. Yu, 2011). Given that legacy media was strictly controlled in China, participatory Weibo was expected to be an “important channel of information expression and circulation” (Zhou, 2011).

When users express and brand themselves on social media, they also generate enormous volumes of data for profit-driven operators. It is difficult to use social media without generating data: users input profile data when they register their names, genders, ages, and occupations; users also provide behavioral data (such as user activities and IP addresses) when they use social media (van Dijck, 2009; S. Wang, 2020a). These data can be utilized in multiple ways, ranging from targeted advertisements to serving data analysis, allowing platforms to make a profit (Srnicsek, 2017). The boundary between public participation and commercial data mining is blurred. Accordingly, UGC has a range of complex connotations. Like its counterparts in the West, Weibo seeks ways of expanding its user data and monetizing these data. Indeed, on 30 October 2013, Xu Zhiliang, the co-president and CTO of Sina, Weibo’s parent company, revealed that “[w]e hope to process and mine all the raw data, push the Chinese mobile internet to another climax with partners and third parties, and develop Weibo into an efficient and social platform of information and service” (N. Zhang, 2013).

Although social media platforms can utilize user participation for data extraction, social media have to lure users in to create data. This is not easy, for many users do not actively generate content on social media. It had already been observed in the mid-2000s that “if you get a group of 100 people online then one will create content, 10 will ‘interact’ with it (commenting or offering improvements) and the other 89 will just view it” (Arthur, 2006). For example, “there are 100 million downloads and 65,000 uploads” on YouTube; the most active 1,000 users of Wikipedia—“0.003% of its users”—make around two-thirds of the edits on the site (Arthur, 2006; Nielsen, 2006). Users on UGC platforms, then, do not participate equally, with only a small percentage of users making major contributions to content creation. Weibo has come across this phenomenon, which is known as the “1% rule” (Arthur, 2006). Although Weibo had accumulated

more than 10 million users in its first year, not all of its users actively created content (Lu, 2011). Cao Zenghui, Weibo's vice president, claimed that "the mechanism of content consumption on Weibo is like this: a small part of people contribute content or service while the vast majority consume content/service and engage" (Z. Cao, 2017).

The 1% rule actually poses a great challenge to UGC platforms in that they have to find the crucial 1% of users who will continuously contribute content. As Cao Zenghui put it, "the central function [of Weibo] is managing content contributors" (Z. Cao, 2017). In practice, UGC platforms do not always manage to secure crucial content contributors. This is what happened during Weibo's crisis of 2012-13.

Before 2012, Weibo expanded so rapidly in the Chinese market that it easily surpassed other microblog platforms. In the beginning, Weibo invited a number of celebrities, including actors, singers, and journalists, to create accounts on its platform, successfully attracting millions of users (Ming Jing & Yang, 2014). These influential Weibo account holders—also known as big Vs—actively participated in public debates and played important roles in mobilizing public opinion (Jia & Han, 2020; Nip & Fu, 2016; Schneider, 2017). These celebrity users and their online activities made Weibo an important outlet for news and reportage. What is more, as crucial users they also contributed considerable flows of information to the platform. However, as the attraction of celebrities gradually weakened and government censorship tightened around the expressiveness of the big Vs, Weibo's content could not retain users (G. Wang & Liu, 2014). Indeed, Cao Zenghui claimed that Weibo was experiencing a "void of content," explaining that "while a big part of the old content is removed, the new content is not supplied" (Z. Cao, 2017). As a result, after a three-year expansion of its user base, Weibo began losing users. The statistics show that the number of Weibo active users had decreased by 40% in the fourth quarter of 2012 in comparison with its peak in the second quarter of 2012 (X. Lan, 2013). The situation became even worse in 2013, when over 80% of Weibo's registered users did not log in and the number of users that were active daily dropped from 60 to 25 million between the middle of 2013 and the end of the year (Wang & Liu, 2014). Amid this crisis, Weibo turned to grassroots micro-celebrities such as beauty amateurs.

3.3 The Rise of Amateurs

Beautybloggers existed before Weibo, which was launched in August 2009. In the early days of social media beauty bloggers were seen not as *wangbongs*, but as beauty amateurs. The development of the beauty economy in China from the 1980s onward had, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, nurtured groups of cosmetic consumers. Beauty amateurs gathered on blog sites around the mid-2000. By this time, Web 2.0 media such as NetEase Blog, Sina Blog, and OnlyLady Blog, enabled cosmetic consumers to create and exchange information online. A number of urban female consumers joined these online communities.

At the outset, beauty amateurs did not expect fame or celebrity. They were just ordinary users who liked to spend their leisure time sharing their experiences and posting content concerning beauty. To them, beauty blogging was nothing more than a hobby. B06, who started blogging from 2007 while working as a public relations manager in an advertising agency, told me that she began blogging out of her love of makeup products. Posting articles on her blog was fun and connected her to many people who shared her hobby (interview, January 2018). B07, another informant, said that she started posting beauty content because “it is interesting” (interview, December 2017). Indeed, most informants claimed that they began blogging because it was “interesting” or “fun.” Interestingness and fun, here, derived from two aspects of beauty blogging. First, it allowed them to exchange beauty skills. For instance, B10 said that she started her Weibo account because she “like these things”—“these” here meaning topics and products related to beauty (interview, January 2018). Second, it made it possible for them to communicate with people who enjoy the same hobby and be recognized by others. Unlike other beauty bloggers whom I interviewed, B04 is a professional makeup artist. She started blogging by accident: a serious waist injury confined her to the home. Finding this “so boring,” she began posting beauty content and communicating with people interested in beauty skills on Weibo (interview, December 2017). Her content became popular, so she has continued blogging ever since. These two aspects of fun are usually intertwined.

Unlike ride-hailing and food-delivery platforms, which allow one to work with a driving or health license, there is no clear threshold that one has to meet in order to

enter the world of beauty blogging. There is an invisible threshold, however, in that beauty blogs require voluntary investment during the early phase of their development. “Among the beauty bloggers I know,” one beauty blogger commented, “70 to 80% of them are from well-off families. Cause being a beauty blogger requires a big investment at the early stage. One needs to pay for skincare products, cosmetics, a single-lens reflex camera, and so forth” (Huaxidushibao, 2018). According to blogger B04, being a beauty blogger consumed a good deal of money. When she was posting original articles every two days, she incurred monthly costs for cosmetics of about ¥20,000 (around \$3108). Such investment does not always pay off. Another blogger, B06, had been investing in her Weibo account for a year, yet made no money from her blog in 2017. The long-term investments with uncertain rewards that are required if one wants to try to be a beauty blogger turn a lot of people off the idea.

When their primary intention is to share beauty information and skills and connect with others, bloggers’ online reputations tend to grow gradually. Although the majority of beauty amateurs remain unknown, certain outstanding amateurs become famous on social media websites. Those with the most followers or who contributed popular content are called *meizhuang bozhu* (beauty bloggers) among amateur beauty communities. It is important to notice that there is no clear boundary between beauty bloggers and those aspiring to be beauty bloggers. Some beauty bloggers have tens of thousands of followers; others have tens of millions of followers, if not more. As Sophie Bishop (2018b) remarks, the “question of how many followers makes a microcelebrity is one that has no easy answer” (p. 24). As Marwick and boyd (2011) have observed, on social media platforms “celebrity practices [are] a continuum that can be practiced across the spectrum of fame rather than a schism” (p. 141).

Beauty bloggers first became famous among beauty amateurs. Their content was circulated through web portals and e-commerce platforms. Gradually, the cosmetic products they recommended sold much faster than before. After a popular beauty blogger, Xiaoman, recommended a certain Taiwanese brand’s eyeliner pencils on her blog, for instance, the pencils went viral on Taobao, the largest customer-to-customer shopping website in China, owned by Alibaba. Being aware of Xiaoman’s influence, a large number of retailing stores on Taobao used her blog articles to demonstrate the

merits of using these eyeliner pencils, which they labeled “*Xiaoman tongkuan*” (same choice as Xiaoman). Thereafter, in the early 2010s, several products that Xiaoman recommended became bestsellers, with many cosmetic stores on Taobao even adding new collections named *Xiaoman tongkuan* to their inventories. The previously unknown Taiwanese brand entered China’s mainland market in 2009, achieving great success in a short period of time. Alan Huang, the brand’s general manager, said that the “development of the internet brings us many opportunities. I’m grateful to the fact that, from 2009, many bloggers spontaneously write articles about our new products” (L. Lin, 2015). In this way, beauty bloggers have demonstrated how they can influence consumption, which only strengthens their reputation in China’s increasingly consumption-orientated society.

As influential as they are, many beauty bloggers have remained amateurs. This is not to say that their beauty skills are not honed, only that they are not responsible for regularly producing attractive content. One of my interviewees, B03, stopped posting content for one year because she was unhappy about some malicious comments. “At that moment I graduated from university and just started my career. I was busy with overwhelming things, so I just quit blogging [temporarily]” (interview, December 2017). B13, who started to run her accounts while she was in high school, did not post frequently because cosmetics were prohibited at her school. As a consequence of this, she said, “I only play [at] these things during holidays” (interview, October 2018). When she was just setting out, B10, a beauty blogger majoring in Chemistry, valued her personal preference above the imperative to appeal to audiences. “Because my major is Chemistry, I like to do chemical analysis of beauty products. This kind of content is not easy to understand, so I had few audience members at the beginning” (interview, January 2018).

As amateurs, they did not have to create articles regularly; they did not have to appeal to followers or potential followers; they were not subject to performance assessment; and they could quit whenever they wanted. Remaining amateur allows beauty bloggers to run blog accounts in a carefree way.

Whereas beauty amateurs could be carefree, though, Weibo could not. After the crisis of 2012-13, Weibo had to find ways of retaining users. When the big Vs could not

help, Weibo turned to the grassroots producers, such as beauty bloggers (Z. Cao, 2017). Although these grassroots producers were not as famous as celebrities, they had generated considerable data, which was embodied in new content and intense user engagement. However, grassroots creators do not necessarily benefit Weibo: if they were to continue operating as amateurs, without regularly creating quality content, then they could not have filled Weibo's vacuum of content.

3.4 The Making of Content Producers and *Wanghongs*

3.4.1 The Semi-Professionalization of Amateur Producers

Beauty bloggers could create content, but from Weibo's perspective they were not ideal content producers. For platforms, content producers should ideally create a steady flow of quality content, which attracts stable users and traffic to Weibo. To exploit the potential of various kinds of *wanghongs*, Weibo launched the Weibo WeMedia Project in 2014.

At the beginning of this venture, Weibo invited 1,000 accounts, associated with diverse fields, to participate in this project. These accounts were selected on the grounds that they "have creation ability and influence" (Weibo WeMedia, 2014). More specifically, the project engaged those who could generate more than three million views monthly but had fewer than five million followers. These accounts, which would be recognized as "Weibo WeMedia," would get "more followers and payment" (Weibo WeMedia, 2014). The project vaguely claimed that more views would bring Weibo WeMedia more rewards without specifying how this would be calculated in detail. This move separated grassroots micro-celebrities from not only conventional celebrities (whose followers easily surpassed five million) but also ordinary users (who cannot generate three million views monthly). In this way, Weibo targeted those crucial users who could generate content and traffic.

Later, in May 2015, Weibo adjusted the WeMedia project by dividing the invited accounts into two levels: WeMedia accounts and signed WeMedia accounts. Whereas the former refers to accounts that generate original articles, videos, and audios, the latter refers to those with personal brands and a greater influence among Weibo WeMedia accounts. Weibo signed WeMedia is only open to accounts that meet the following

requirements: (1) generating over one million monthly views; (2) having more than three high-quality, original articles, videos, or audio recordings; and (3) verified personal accounts (not verified institutional accounts).⁹ Both levels of WeMedia were to receive support from Weibo, but signed WeMedia accounts would receive more visibility and rewards, and better copyright protection (Weibo WeMedia, 2015). The upgraded WeMedia project engaged more content producers and built a hierarchy among them, motivating producers to create more original content and pursue more views.

The bonuses that accompanied that status of a signed WeMedia account were attractive. Many beauty bloggers' accounts became WeMedia accounts as part of this venture; indeed, some became signed WeMedia accounts. The WeMedia Project further promoted the visibility of beauty bloggers, allowing users outside the small sub-cultural circle to know beauty bloggers. At the same time, the project aimed to transform amateur producers into predictable, productive workers. According to Weibo's regulations, each WeMedia account had to produce five or more original articles or videos every month. If a WeMedia account failed to meet the standard for two months, its title and the privileges of being a WeMedia account were removed (Weibo WeMedia, 2016). As a result, beauty bloggers who aspired to win and keep hold of this title and its accompanying privileges needed to create original content regularly. Although beauty bloggers are not employed by Weibo, their work can still be supervised by Weibo's WeMedia Project. In this sense, beauty bloggers are not just amateurs. Within the WeMedia project, they become professional content producers whose work needs to meet Weibo's standards.

Some beauty bloggers, however, were disappointed after securing the "signed WeMedia" title. They might be accorded more visibility by Weibo's algorithms, but they were not rewarded as Weibo had promised. "I have been a signed WeMedia for a while, but I never received a reward from Weibo," said B06, a blogger whom I interviewed (interview, January 2018). Another blogger, B03, claimed that "those who are verified as

⁹ Since the middle of 2014, many grassroots *wangbongs*, including beauty bloggers, have acquired verified accounts. This was once a privilege accorded only to conventional celebrities (indeed, that is why they were called big Vs). Thus, Weibo titled many beauty amateurs' pages "Beauty Blogger." In this way, it distinguished productive, influential users from ordinary users.

Weibo signed WeMedia are supposed to get rewards from Weibo, but the reward was too little to count” (interview, December 2017).

Although the WeMedia Project may not satisfy beauty bloggers’ expectations, it promotes their production of original content and transforms their spontaneous productions into regular, predictable production. This has led to the professionalization of beauty bloggers.

3.4.2 The Verticalization of Content and Producers

Although beauty bloggers tend to produce content that has to do with beauty, they also venture into a wide range of topics, including food, travel, and lifestyle. This also applies to other *wanghongs*, whose celebrity practices are not necessarily confined to a certain field. For instance, Luyisi, a beauty blogger on Weibo, loves to create content about beauty, food, and travel, yet her profile page, verified by Weibo, indicates that she is a “beauty blogger.” Many fashion, lifestyle, and health bloggers occasionally post content on beauty skills and products, but Weibo does not label them “beauty bloggers.” The boundary between beauty bloggers and other types of *wanghongs*, then, is not fixed and usually unclear. Would it be possible simply to do without these subcategories and just call these producers *wanghongs*? Weibo’s answer is no. On the contrary, Weibo proactively divides *wanghongs* into diverse groups based on “vertical fields” (*chuízhi lǐngyǔ*) so as to fill the void of content and increase user engagement.

Vertical fields refer to specializations. Since 2014, Weibo has subdivided content and content producers into diverse vertical fields, such as beauty, travel, fashion, stock, and so forth. There were 55 vertical fields on Weibo in 2016 (Y. Liu, 2016). Between 2009 and 2012, the news was the most visible content on Weibo, which was targeting the general public. Although niche markets like beauty were not championed by big Vs, Weibo did not pay much attention to “middle and small Vs” (Y. Liu, 2016). When the big Vs’ influence had declined after 2012, Weibo started to strategically use middle and small Vs operating in vertical fields to attract users.

Categorizing content into vertical fields has helped Weibo detect users’ interests of users and appeal to users easily. “We keep observing what kind of groups are popular, then we follow up and make them more popular. By this means we can attract users

relatively easily,” said E07, a manager from Weibo (interview, 2018). Accordingly, Weibo identified *wanghongs* as “beauty bloggers,” “fashion bloggers,” or “food bloggers.” In this way, a heterogeneous group of *wanghongs* was subdivided into several relatively homogeneous groups.

At the same time, the development of Weibo’s vertical beauty field draws beauty bloggers from other platforms, concentrating beauty bloggers on Weibo. Before moving to Weibo, a beauty blogger named B07 used an online forum called Baidu Tieba to post beauty content. She described the transition to Weibo in the following way:

At the beginning, I posted things on Tieba, exchanged information with others, and found it interesting. ... [After a while,] Tieba could not satisfy my need for communication. I realized that there were many excellent beauty bloggers on Weibo, so I moved to Weibo ... in the autumn of 2014. (interview, December 2017)

In tandem with the growth of the beauty market, Weibo became a major platform for beauty bloggers in the mid-2010s. “From a cosmetic company, I learn that a vast majority of beauty bloggers [in China] gain visibility from Weibo nowadays,” said B03, a beauty blogger (interview, December 2017). Weibo, it would seem, has secured a large number of content producers.

The verticalization of content and producers is an effective way of boosting not only content creation, but also data screening and targeted advertising. Weibo Advertising’s website indicates that one of Weibo’s core advertising techniques is that of “targeting the followers of designated accounts” (WeiboAdvertising, 2019). This is “Weibo’s unique method of audience screening, based on the data of real social ties, with the tag of designated accounts, generating followers as the target group” (WeiboAdvertising, 2019). The website further explains that “Weibo has millions of stars, IPs, and KOLs for advertisers to choose.” KOL is short for key opinion leader, referring to a person who can influence others’ consumption behavior through marketing. In the Chinese context, KOLs overlap with *wanghongs* to a very large extent, especially *wanghongs* whose content bears closely on consumption, such as beauty and fashion bloggers. For Weibo, verticalized content producers such as beauty bloggers become data filters. When they

create specialized content and attract followers, they unconsciously help Weibo target these followers as potential audiences for beauty advertisements. This advertising technique has effects on every Weibo user. Every time I use Weibo, for example, I see advertisements for plastic surgery and beauty products in my newsfeed. This is probably because I follow 160 beauty bloggers using my own account. Although scholars had argued that Weibo is an advertising agency rather than a communication platform for a number of years, the role of content producers such as beauty bloggers in its advertising has remained under-explored (Fuchs, 2016; Na, 2015). Examining beauty bloggers on Weibo provides key data on this issue. Although Weibo claims that its targeted advertising can “automatically select, aggregate, and recommend accounts through the technology of artificial intelligence,” its mysterious technology is based on exploiting verticalized content producers such as beauty bloggers (WeiboAdvertising, 2019).

Moreover, the commercial value of verticalized beauty bloggers is not confined to targeted advertising. Given their considerable influence on beauty consumption, many beauty bloggers get involved in the e-commerce business. Whereas some of them choose to sell beauty products directly on Alibaba’s platforms, others choose to produce advertisements for e-stores and brands. Content creation in vertical fields boosts business on relevant e-commerce stores. For instance, beauty bloggers can directly promote beauty products on e-commerce platforms. After noticing the influence of KOLs on Weibo, the e-commerce giant Alibaba acquired an 18% stake in Weibo in 2013 (Ghosh & Ramakrishnan, 2013). Alibaba continued to increase its stake in Weibo over the following years. Indeed, by the first quarter of 2019, Alibaba owned 30% of the company and was thus Weibo’s second-largest stakeholder after Sina, its parent company (Y. Wu, 2019). Weibo’s vice president, Cao Zenghui, claimed that *wanghong*s in specialist fields not only bring in “targeted traffic,” but also realize “large-scale and sustainable monetization” on e-commerce platforms. Weibo hosts many diverse vertical fields, but they did not direct equal flows of traffic and revenue from Weibo to e-commerce platforms. In short, clothing and beauty bloggers make larger contributions than other bloggers. As Cao Zenghui has put it, “Weibo has successfully developed two vertical fields, clothing and beauty, among all types of *wanghong*s” (Z. Cao, 2017). Following the success of beauty and clothing bloggers, Weibo began exploiting the

commercial potential of maternal/family bloggers in 2017 (Z. Cao, 2017). Overall, verticalized content producers were bound to the vertical fields of e-commerce business. Beauty bloggers contribute enormous commercial value to the Weibo-Alibaba complex while also creating attractive content and generating data for Weibo.

Figure 3.1

Screenshot from Weibo Advertising's website



Note. I have provided translations, which are indicated in red. Retrieved on December 26, 2019, from <https://tui.weibo.com/platform/topfans>

In general, the subdivision of content and content producers effectively makes beauty bloggers and other specialized bloggers, not *wanghong*s, which is a more ambiguous term. The verticalization of content brings Weibo a big team of specialized producers and makes content creation a more prosperous enterprise. What is more, it provides Weibo with a handy instrument of data screening: verticalization works in tandem with specialized fields on e-commerce platforms, taking advantage of beauty bloggers' role as bridges between the two.

3.4.3 The Institutionalization of Content Producers

Beauty blogger B08 told me that, whenever Weibo launched new functions or services in 2014 and 2015, she had been contacted by Weibo staff (interview, January 2018). Blogger B03 had a similar experience with Weibo. Given that there was a large group of beauty bloggers, communicating with each of them would have been time-consuming for Weibo. Similarly, it is difficult for Weibo to control the quality of content because there is such a diverse multitude of content creators. The growing number content creators compelled Weibo to find an efficient way of managing both content and producers.

Many problems emerged when Weibo first implemented its strategy of verticalization in 2014. “Every vertical field has its specialty and unique ecology and we ran all the vertical fields on our own. Today we focus on comics, tomorrow we focus on travel, the day after tomorrow we focus on food. I find that we failed to ran all the fields ourselves,” Weibo’s vice president said (Z. Cao, 2017). In dealing with its difficulties, Weibo turned to successful UGC platforms outside China.

To better manage a considerable number of video producers, YouTube has chosen to work with multichannel networks (MCNs) since the 2000s (Hou, 2018; Lobato, 2016; Vonderau, 2016). Multichannel networks are intermediary companies that bridge individual content producers and platforms such as YouTube. In the media ecology around YouTube, MCNs sell advertising, cross-promote affiliated YouTube channels, develop video brands, and sometimes train vloggers (Lobato, 2016; Vonderau, 2016). With MCNs operating across its global market, YouTube has achieved sustainable content output and stable profits. Following YouTube, Weibo has worked with Chinese MCNs to manage content producers efficiently from 2015 onward.

Cao Zenghui (2017) describes their approach in the following passage:

We select one resourceful team in each vertical field, which has a deep understanding of the industry and collaborate with the team. We support these teams with our knowledge of operations. These teams make rules, directions, and goals for each vertical field. ... In 2015 when Weibo promoted videos, we implemented our MCN plan and opened up vertical fields. We set a principle:

Weibo will not contact big Vs anymore. All the work in business development and operation is taken over by MCNs which work collaboratively with us.

In the past, Weibo aggregated hundreds of thousands of content producers; after the change of strategies in 2015, it aggregates diverse MCNs who in turn aggregate content producers.

In 2017, Weibo launched a project called Weibo-vertical MCNs Collaboration (*weibo chuiqibhi MCN hezuojibhua*), in which Weibo invited MCNs specializing in certain fields to collaborate with it. Weibo would assign more traffic and resources to the selected MCNs, which, in return, would “properly use the resources of Weibo, expand their account matrix (*zhanghao juzhen*)¹⁰, and increase high-quality content output” (Weibo Xiaomishu, 2017).

Weibo’s change of strategies has had long-term effects on beauty bloggers. When I first met blogger B02 in 2017, she had been running her beauty blog on Weibo for five years. She told me that she was invited to join MCNs on several occasions. She had rejected these offers, though, because she enjoyed the freedom of being a beauty amateur and joining an MCN might lead to many restrictions being imposed on her. Besides, she had concerns about the MCNs’ motivations. From her perspective, MCNs just took money from beauty bloggers without contributing to their development. Several MCNs even sent her invitations on Weibo multiple times, but she never replied to them. Her attitude toward MCNs changed drastically, however, when I interviewed her again in 2019. By then, she had signed a contract with an MCN working in the vertical field of beauty and fashion. She said:

YS [the MCN that she joined] is a really good company, so I decided to sign a contract with it. It has been around half a year since I began to work with YS and I still think it was the right decision. ... YS and I boost each other’s development. ... For instance, my most-viewed post [when I worked on my own]. I devoted a great deal of time and energy, spent

¹⁰ The term “account matrix” (*zhanghao juzhen*) refers to a set of accounts run by the same institution. These accounts interact so as to draw and share traffic among each other.

between ¥500 and ¥600 on sending giveaways, and created very high-quality content. I could make one post like this every few years. The final view number of that post was 800,000. But now, I just follow the topics. Sometimes I am featured among Weibo's topics. With the help of official resources, good content can generate more than one million views easily. For average ones [posts] that I make with little effort, I can get hundreds of thousands of views. ... I just want to stand in a position where people can see me. (interview, November 2019)

When asked what the official resources that she mentioned were, B02 explained:

Our MCN gives us the topics, which are hashtags and campaigns initiated by Sina [Weibo] ... Our MCN has a resource exchange with Sina [Weibo]. Regarding the content we make every day, after receiving information about future moves of diverse platforms, our MCN will inform affiliated bloggers immediately, including big Vs and middle-to-small Vs, like me. Sina [Weibo] does not contact individual content producers anymore. It, of course, collaborates with institutions. (interview, November 2019)

To better control the quality of blogger-made content and improve the efficiency of content production, B02's MCN established a video team, which helped affiliated bloggers make their videos. The seemingly homemade vlogs on B02's blog are actually made by a professional team. The aggregation of affiliated bloggers, such as B02, provides Weibo with a stable stream of high-quality content and high user engagement. The number of active users and volume of user activities are the foundation of platforms' profit-making activities, whether they be selling advertisements or trading on financial markets (Fuchs, 2016).

MCNs not only sign contracts with established beauty bloggers; they also make beauty bloggers work in an industrial way. Ruhnn, one of the top pan-fashion MCNs in China, claims that it is "an MCN of *wanghong* incubation and marketing." The company signs contracts with ordinary girls, trains them, makes plans for content creation, and

promotes them as *wanghongs* —the whole process is called incubating a *wanghong*. With Ruhnn’s help, “an ordinary girl can gain from 800,000 to 1,000,000 followers in half a year in the fastest case” (Deng & Zhong, 2019). As the examples of B02 and Ruhnn show, beauty bloggers can easily be made with support from MCNs: ordinary beauty amateurs can grow into small Vs or middle Vs, and middle Vs can grow into big Vs.

The collaboration between Weibo and MCNs has significantly altered the content creation game. The number of MCNs in China has increased from 160 in 2015 to 6,500 in 2019; by 2019, over 90% of top *wanghongs* were affiliated with MCNs (Kang, 2019). MCNs’ influence is not limited to those beauty bloggers who are affiliated with them. The participation of MCNs intensifies the competition for visibility, with independent bloggers increasingly struggling to get attention. Those who are not affiliated with a MCN have fewer opportunities, given that the resources required to secure visibility are mainly controlled by Weibo and MCNs. B13, an independent beauty blogger, updated her Weibo account every day, although no MCN asked her to do so. “Most beauty bloggers post new things every two days. You have to have new content, otherwise, why would audiences follow you?” she told me (interview, October 2018). This comment partially reflects the fierce competition over visibility. Beauty bloggers lose their fame quickly if they cannot be seen. Updating her blog on a daily basis, B13 is now worlds away from the situation in which she began blogging as a high-school beauty amateur, when she posted only during holidays. The process of creating content has changed, turning from something spontaneous, irregular, and entertaining to something necessary, regular, and competitive. Accordingly, beauty bloggers are not only made through “a set of affiliative, representational, and celebrification techniques, but also by engaging in meticulous entrepreneurial calculation” (Hou, 2018, p. 1).

The participation of MCNs has led to the institutionalization of previously amateur beauty bloggers’ content production, whether the bloggers work with or independently of MCNs. Through this process, flows of content are normalized and standardized. Beauty bloggers may still be motivated to create content out of their personal interests, but what they do is no longer simply individual behavior. For Weibo, the involvement of MCNs doubtlessly boosts content production and strengthens its user base.

Figure 3.2

Top ten beauty bloggers on 2017 Super Internet Celebrity Festival



Note. From KuameizhuangBeautyQ's Weibo account, retrieved on May 12, 2019, from https://weibo.com/5324616226/F8h7k2Gcw?type=comment#_rnd1621089199560

To fill the void in its content and successfully weather the crisis that followed its loss of users in 2012-13, Weibo has implemented three strategies, including the professionalization, verticalization, and institutionalization of amateur producers. These strategies successfully stimulated content production and user engagement on Weibo, as well as *wanghongs'* prestige. In the post-crisis period, beauty bloggers have stepped out from their hobbyist circles to engage with broader audiences and win bigger reputations. Active users of Weibo steadily increased from 2014 onward. In 2017, Weibo's monthly active users outnumbered those of Twitter and its revenues reached new heights (She, 2017). Sina termed this "Weibo's revival" (Sina, 2016). Cao Zenghui, claimed that *wanghongs* were a key factor in this revival (Z. Cao, 2017). To further raise *wanghongs'* visibility, Weibo has held a "Super Internet Celebrity Festival" (*chaoji hongren jie*) annually since 2016. What is more, it presents top beauty and other bloggers with awards (see Figure 3.2). Overall, Weibo's three strategies feature beauty bloggers as content

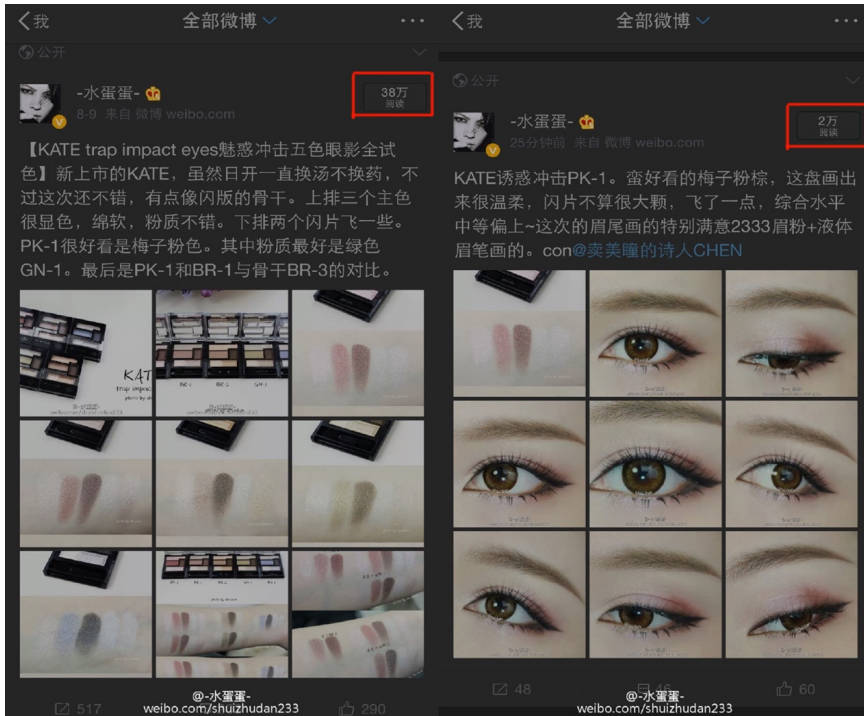
providers and have enhanced beauty amateurs' publicity, contributing to Chinese beauty bloggers' prosperity in the mid-2010s. From the outset of these strategies, Weibo developed cooperative working relationships with beauty bloggers.

3.5 Profit Extraction in the Rise of Beauty Bloggers

Weibo's post-crisis strategies brought the platform many content producers and helped it recover quickly from its dearth of content and user decline. In securing more users, Weibo established a quasi-monopoly in the field of *wanghongs*. According to the beauty blogger B03, by the middle of the 2010s Weibo hosted most beauty bloggers—certainly more than other platforms (interview, December 2017). Weibo's role in the rise of beauty bloggers was not simply to increase content production. As a profit-making company, Weibo seeks ways of maximizing the revenue earned from beauty bloggers, indirectly or directly, while encouraging them to produce content. An example that demonstrates Weibo's complex role in this process is its use of algorithms to intervene in beauty bloggers' visibility.

From 2015 onward, beauty bloggers complained that Weibo was blocking their posts, for they saw a dramatic decline in their view numbers. Shuidandan, a well-known blogger in the beauty community, complained that the number of views of her posts declined precipitously in August 2015. According to Shuidandan, views of her posts on cosmetic products and beauty tutorials, which are usually popular in the beauty community, dropped off sharply. She posted screenshots of her account's behind-the-scenes dashboard, which show each post's view number. This indicated that her posts' view numbers had diminished markedly (Shuidandan, 2015). Whereas it used to be that a single post might generate 380,000 views, the number of views accrued by a recent post had declined to 20,000 (see Figure 3.3). Beauty bloggers termed this drastic decline in view numbers “blockage” (*pingbi*, which bloggers abbreviated as “pb”); Weibo called it “traffic restriction” (*xianlin*).

Figure 3.3

Screenshots of view numbers

Note. From Shuidandan's Weibo account, retrieved on May 12, 2019, from https://weibo.com/2125224720/CvmhX6hTS?from=page_1005052125224720_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1621090111207

Blockage involves more than a decline in views. It also can make a post totally invisible. More specifically, Weibo could delete beauty bloggers' posts, the reason given for deletion usually being that the posts contained commercial information. The technology of deletion was upgraded shortly afterward. A deletion might remain invisible to beauty bloggers. For example, after Shuidandan found that the views of her posts had declined notably, she also saw that some of her posts showed up as "deleted" to her followers. She did not delete these posts herself and could still see them through her Weibo account (Shuidandan, 2016).

Beauty Blogger B08 told me that one of her blogger friends had her posts deleted on several occasions. At first, the deletions targeted those of her posts that “contained commercial information” (interview, January 2018). In fact, this verdict was vague and not instructive. The boundary between commercial and non-commercial information is unclear and porous, especially when it comes to beauty blogs, which almost always concern cosmetics from certain brands or stores. Soon afterward she stopped posting things about cosmetics and switched to posting pictures on travel and daily life. Nevertheless, her posts were deleted. “She was watched ... She was extremely anxious during that time”, B08 said (interview, January 2018).

Blockage heavily affected beauty bloggers’ visibility, making them anxious. As beauty blogger B08 put it:

The biggest change in my blogger life is the traffic restriction of recent years. It damages the confidence of content producers, like us. You create content, but only a few people can see the content. Sometimes I’m upset. It really affects me. Now the average views of my posts are lower than one-third of the number before. It’s crazy. (interview, January 2018)

The decline of view numbers directly affects beauty bloggers’ reputation and income. As beauty blogger B03 told me, advertisers pick beauty bloggers according to the measures of “follower number” and “view number” (interview, December 2017).

Although bloggers find their limited visibility on Weibo annoying, they can overcome the issue if they buy *fensi toutiao* (Followers’ Headline). *Fensi toutiao* is a paid service that can make a certain post appear at the top of followers’ newsfeeds on Weibo for 24 or 48 hours. (From October 2015, this feature was expanded so that bloggers could use it to reach users who were not yet their followers.) When one buys *fensi toutiao* for a post, a blogger can choose the size of the audience that they would like to reach (see Figure 3.4). The greater the audience one wants, the more money one pays.

The *Fensi toutiao* feature can markedly increase one’s visibility on Weibo in a short time. As beauty blogger B13 said, “if I buy a ¥100 (around \$15.5) *fensi toutiao*, the views

of one post could reach 40,000 within three hours; without it, the views could be around 20,000 within the same timeframe” (interview, November 2019).

Despite *fensi toutiao*’s usefulness, beauty bloggers did not buy it frequently. B13 explained that “it is quite expensive for me, because it only lasts for a couple of hours” (interview, November 2019). Indeed, the fee paid covers only one post. On average, B13 posts five times a day. If she were to buy *fensi toutiao* for each post, this would add up to a considerable amount of money. A tricky characteristic of *fensi toutiao* is that its price is not fixed, but rather varies from account to account and at different times. For instance, an account with 322,000 followers needs to pay ¥4,057 (¥1.259 per 100 followers), whereas another account with 1,000,000 followers needs to pay ¥14,400 (¥1.44 per 100 followers) in December 2017 (Zhang, 2017). One beauty blogger, B03, told me that she had to pay ¥521.64 to cover 69,000 followers (¥0.756 per 100 followers) in the same month. The price of *fensi toutiao* is calculated by Weibo’s algorithm, which remains opaque to consumers.

E07, a manager from Weibo, offered a different narrative about the blockage, which partially rejected beauty bloggers’ complaints. “Some people just imagine that they are victims,” he said. “We only focus on the top 10% of *wanghongs*. There are too many small *wanghongs* to watch. One big V condemned us for traffic restriction because of the low view number. There is no traffic restriction at all. It is his/her content that is unattractive” (interview, August 2018). Here E07 suggests that, in most cases, Weibo did not cause view numbers to drop.

One thing that he did not mention, though, is the visibility algorithm behind Weibo’s newsfeed. The newsfeed is the primary feature of most social media platforms. Found on users’ home pages, it aggregates updates to accounts to which they subscribe. The newsfeed is controlled by algorithms and decides the kind of content that can be seen and how updates are seen. Updates on Weibo’s newsfeed were originally listed chronologically. This was the case until 2013, when Weibo launched a smart newsfeed that displayed updates and advertisements without adhering to chronological order. Initially, the smart newsfeed did not dramatically alter the chronological updates.

Figure 3.4

The interface for fensi toutiao

上头条，阅读量暴涨! **Use fensi toutiao, and content views surge!**

推广给我的粉丝 **Broadcast to my followers**

我的粉丝 **My followers** 0元

推广给更多用户 **Broadcast to more users**

潜在粉丝 **Potential followers** 0元

指定账号粉丝的相似用户 **Followers of designated accounts** 0元

兴趣用户 **Users with specific interests** 0元

绑定资质 选择资质 [资质管理](#)

Estimated audience: Estimated hour:
 预计覆盖人数: 0+人 预计投放时长: 0小时 ☒ 同意《服务协议》及《审核规范》

☒ 微博钱包(支持支付宝) ☐ 广告账户 **0.00元** 去支付

Note. I have provided English translations, which are indicated in red. I didn't choose the number of targeted audiences, so the price was zero. Retrieved on December 8, 2019, from weibo.com (This interface does not have an independent link, so I cannot put a link here. This interface will pop out when one clicks the “*tuiguang*” (promotion) button under each post)

A major change came in December 2014, when Weibo announced that its smart newsfeed would be optimized, aiming to “ensure user experience and protect the interest of multiple sides” (Weibo, 2014). The “optimized” newsfeed was to display users' and

advertisements selectively. According to Weibo, the optimized newsfeed would restrict traffic to four types of content: content that was highly visible (in terms of view numbers) but not especially interactive (in terms of reposts, comments, and likes); misleading commercial content; repeating content; and overloads of content stemming from the same type of accounts (Weibo, 2014).¹¹ Although the detail of the algorithm behind the newsfeed remains opaque, the algorithm had the impact of decreasing beauty bloggers' visibility, leading them to complain about blockage. Shuidandan—whose post was deleted because it “contained commercial information”—ran into trouble after the advanced newsfeed was launched.

As I have noted above, whereas beauty bloggers termed their declining visibility blockage, Weibo referred to it as traffic restriction. The former term implies that beauty bloggers' visibility is totally diminished, reflecting their deep fear of Weibo's unpredictable algorithms; the latter betrays Weibo's technical expertise and shrewd calculation. Indeed, although Weibo restricts traffic, it would not block it, for the platform still benefits from traffic. As a profit-driven platform, Weibo is constantly concerned with finding ways of maximizing its benefit from the traffic.

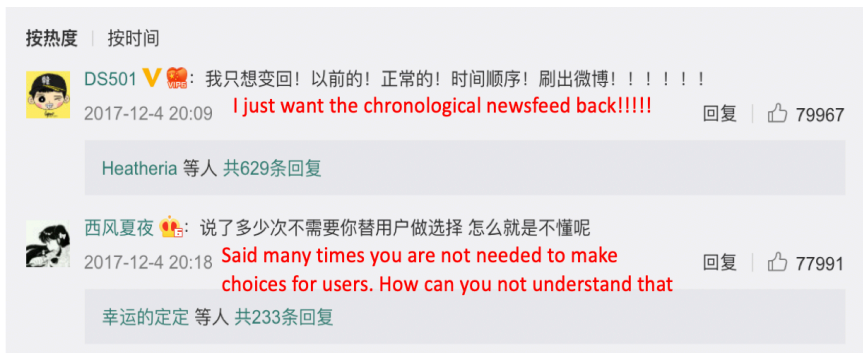
In the same announcement as it promulgated the optimization of its newsfeed, Weibo added that posts using its market tools (including *fensi toutiao*) would not be restricted by the recent algorithmic change. Taken together, the added information and traffic restriction policy reveal the highly biased design of Weibo's newsfeed, which accords those who pay for its serves greater visibility. Through its technological interference, the platform turned visibility into an even more scarce quality than it had been before and then started selling it to content producers. Because of Weibo's interventions, it has become difficult for beauty bloggers to garner visibility with original content alone. They have a better chance if they buy algorithmic preferences from Weibo.

¹¹ Sina Weibo divided accounts into different types, including orange V (for producers of content in certain genres, such as beauty bloggers); blue V (official accounts of organizations, institutions, and projects); content accounts (productive accounts without verified accounts); and ordinary accounts (average users). Traffic restriction ensured that the number of different account types that appeared in one's newsfeed should be in proportion to the number of account types to which one has subscribed.

The change to the newsfeed influences not only beauty bloggers but Weibo's general users too. In the second half of 2017, a lot of users complained that they could only partially see posts from accounts to which they subscribed and that Weibo displayed many accounts in which they had no interest (Zhang, 2017). At the same time, bloggers were dissatisfied by the fact that their communication with followers depended heavily on *fensi toutiao*. In terms of traffic restriction, in a media interview a representative from Weibo stated that the platform never guaranteed that a big V's posts could be seen by all of their followers (Zhang, 2017). User dissatisfaction and negative comments were so widespread that on 4 December 2017 Weibo released a statement defending itself. It claimed that it only changed the order of updates and had done so without introducing "blockage and exposure restriction." It also advised users to post more content about a particular vertical field, because Weibo displayed more vertical content (Weibo, 2017b). Angry comments from users were soon posted under the statement. The most-liked comment stated simply that "I just want the chronological newsfeed back!"; the second-most-liked comment ran: "Said many times you are not needed to make choices for users. How can you not understand that?" (see Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5

Users' angry comments on Weibo's clarification of traffic restriction



Note. I have provided English translations, which are indicated in red. Retrieved on August 1, 2019, from https://weibo.com/2016713117/Fy7DKg91y?from=page_1006062016713117_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment

Although *fensi toutiao* and the disordered newsfeed caused dissatisfaction, they also brought Weibo huge profits. A MCN spent more than ¥16 million on *fensi toutiao* and another similar tool for affiliated influencers in a single year (Mi, 2020). In the second quarter of 2016, Weibo's newsfeed advertisements accounted for 53% of its total advertisements; small and medium enterprises and individuals brought the most newsfeed advertisements (Liu, 2016).

Fensi toutiao provides a new way for Weibo to exploit beauty bloggers. Although the bloggers did not foresee this, it is nothing new for platform capitalism. The “growth-before-profit” model is common among digital platforms and Weibo is no exception (Srnicsek, 2017). During its honeymoon period with respect to beauty bloggers (2013-14), Weibo's aim was not solely that of making beauty bloggers visible. Rather, it focused on rapidly expanding Weibo's share of the ultra-competitive social media market. When Weibo engaged in fierce competition, it swiftly abandoned its close cooperation with bloggers and started to profit from their labor through its control over visibility.

The shifting dynamic between Weibo and beauty bloggers is ultimately an issue of platform labor. Scholars working in the growing research area of Chinese platform studies have noticed that the rapid expansion of digital platforms reconfigures labor models and generates new labor problems (de Kloet, Poell, Zeng, & Chow, 2019). Research on Chinese UGC platforms has pointed out that users, as producers, have stimulated the production of an enormous volume of data, which indirectly contributes to platforms' profits (J. Lin & de Kloet, 2019; S. Wang, 2020b). The case of Weibo complicates UGC platforms' labor model: whereas platforms can profit indirectly from users' production, they can also exploit profits directly by manipulating algorithms. “Digital labor,” therefore, is not limited to social media users' creations (Fuchs, 2015). It also encompasses their financial contributions to UGC platforms. Weibo's contribution to the prosperity of beauty bloggers began with content augmentation, but does not end there.

3.6 Beauty Bloggers' Negotiations

Social media platforms have the power to define and regulate user behavior through both their written terms of use and hidden algorithms (Beer, 2009; Bishop, 2019; Cotter,

2019; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Nevertheless, platforms cannot manipulate the entire “visibility game” because users, algorithms, and platform owners “all play a role in how users use a platform” (Cotter, 2019, title). As users with agency, beauty bloggers do not necessarily squeeze themselves into the framework that Weibo prescribes. While I recognize platform owners’ considerable power in the visibility game, in discussing the interaction between beauty bloggers and Weibo in this chapter, I am keen to avoid falling into the trap of algorithmic determinism.

Weibo’s algorithm-mediated visibility has direct effects on beauty bloggers, who cannot communicate with followers as effectively as before and whose revenue, which is based on their visibility, has been reduced. A beauty blogger, B04, said that “the content you create painstakingly receives few views, reposts, and comments. I just lose motivation. Besides, advertisers do not want to cooperate with you when they see the poor numbers [of your account]” (interview, December 2017). Given the required monthly spending on beauty products around of ¥20,000 (which equates to around \$3096), the high price of *fensi toutiao* and dearth of commercial opportunities made it difficult for her to sustain her blogging.

As Weibo’s policies and algorithms have imposed hardships on beauty bloggers, they have proactively explored possibilities to garner increased visibility. Individually, they try to attract more attention by making novel content. Some attempt to improve the quality of their content. “Despite the traffic restriction, I do my best to create good content. As long as my content can be seen by others, even a few, there is still a chance to be broadcasted,” said B03 (interview, December 2017). Some try to send free gifts. A number of beauty bloggers stage giveaways to users who comment, like, or repost, so as to raise their visibility on the newsfeed without buying *fensi toutiao*. “A lot of followers are attracted by giveaways, so I send giveaways in each of my posts,” said B13 (interview, October 2018). Some bloggers build fan groups on other platforms to avoid Weibo’s traffic restriction. By December 2017 one interviewed blogger, B02, had built eight WeChat groups for her fans. During my interview with her, she kept checking the latest messages in her WeChat fan groups and responded to her followers immediately. Afterward, I joined one of her fan groups on WeChat and saw that she regularly reminded her followers to check her new posts on Weibo. Some beauty bloggers seek

mutual help from one another. As B03 told me, “to avoid traffic restriction, many beauty bloggers request reposts from other beauty bloggers through comments or private messages” (interview, December 2017). In practice, not all of these mitigation strategies work. Because of the weak connections between beauty bloggers, B03 disliked reposting content for bloggers who are strangers to her and seldom answered requests that she do so. For B02, the WeChat fan groups did not really overcome traffic restriction. After a longstanding struggle, B02 joined a MCN and achieved more visibility on Weibo than she could hope for.

That said, these endeavors demonstrate beauty bloggers’ acute observation skills and proven ability to negotiate with Weibo. Weibo’s algorithms encourage beauty bloggers to buy *fensi toutiao*, but do not decide that they must. Like couriers on food delivery platforms and drivers on ride-hailing platforms, beauty bloggers use their knowledge of the technological applications to creatively manage the algorithmic system (J. Y. Chen, 2018; P. Sun, 2019). The dynamics between Weibo and beauty bloggers, then, cannot be reduced to Weibo exerting control over beauty bloggers. Rather, there is a negotiation between a platform with technological advantages and workers with agency.

Weibo responds quickly to beauty bloggers’ strategies. After giveaways became a popular way of capturing users’ attention, for example, in 2017 Weibo imposed strict regulations on this approach. Under these new rules, users can send giveaways to lucky audience members only through Weibo’s algorithmic tool, which resembles a lucky draw machine. The catch, though, is that they need to pay to use it. If they do not send out gifts through Weibo’s tool, then their posts featuring giveaways are likely to be deleted for violating the regulation. Despite the strict regulation, many beauty bloggers find ways of bypassing Weibo proscriptions, in order to reduce the cost of buying the right to send giveaways. To avoid Weibo’s keyword censorship on the disallowed word “giveaway,” beauty bloggers have learned from the previous anti-censorship techniques in online dissent and use homophones of keywords (Yuntao Zhang & Tomlinson, 2012). For instance, B13, a beauty blogger, replaced “福利” (*fúli*, which literally means bonus) with “浮力” (*fúli*, which literally means buoyancy) and replaced “评” (*píng*, which literally

means comment) with “平”(ping, which literally means flat). Her posts are usually titled something like “Buoyancy! Close, curl, and like. I will chitter a cute follower!” This actually means “Bonus! Follow, repost, and like. I will draw a cute follower!” This example illustrates the two sides’ approach to their mutual negotiation. Armed with its technological superiority, Weibo keeps inventing new ways of disciplining beauty bloggers; despite their technological inferiority, beauty bloggers accumulate knowledge and skillful ways of finding opportunities in the visibility game, resisting Weibo’s dominance. Given the consistent efforts undertaken by both sides, the visibility game is not a one-off battle, but an enduring war. This struggle requires long-term, knowledge-based, and cautious engagement on the part of platform labor.

In acknowledging beauty bloggers’ agency and resistance, I do not mean to celebrate how they subvert Weibo’s power in an overly optimistic manner. Indeed, it is crucial to stress that beauty bloggers’ tactics did not seriously challenge *fensi toutiao* and Weibo’s giveaway regulation. Weibo still plays its rule-making role and extracts profits from beauty bloggers. The platform owner still has significant power over platform laborers, including beauty bloggers.

It is also important to note that beauty bloggers do not negotiate with Weibo from equal positions. Those affiliated with influential MCNs and those working independently face different circumstances given that Weibo strategically cooperates with MCNs. Beauty bloggers with more than 10 million followers have a greater capacity to negotiate with Weibo than those with 10,000 followers. This diversity among the niche group of beauty bloggers means that their negotiations with Weibo takes various forms and produces various results.

In negotiating with platforms, beauty bloggers engaged in the visibility game present a markedly different aspect of platform labor to workers on taxi booking platforms or food delivery workers (J. Y. Chen, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Although beauty bloggers, like taxi drivers and food delivery staff, are under pressure from the platform on which they work, beauty bloggers’ visibility allows them to access more revenue streams. When beauty bloggers find themselves in situations in which they cannot get Weibo to pay them for producing content, they can still use their visibility to make

decent profits. For instance, many beauty bloggers run their e-stores on Taobao and some make considerable profits. This is hardly possible for taxi drivers and food delivery staff. Some beauty bloggers still run their blogs as a hobby rather than a way of making a living. For example, beauty blogger B10, who ran a start-up company at the time I interviewed her, said that “I’m not anxious about the traffic restriction. Maybe because I do not count on Weibo for my living. Traffic is not that important to me. I just focus on my articles” (interview, January 2018). Although beauty bloggers share the general context of platform labor with other platform workers, they are also distinct on account of their social status and rewards. After all, top beauty bloggers can make more than ¥100 million a year while it is not possible for top taxi drivers or food couriers. To understand platform labor comprehensively, we need to see beauty bloggers’ relatively disadvantaged positions in comparison with that of Weibo. At the same time, we need to see their relatively advantaged positions in comparison with those of platform workers from the lower classes. In highlighting the heterogeneity of platform labor, my research on beauty bloggers makes an important contribution to this research area.

3.7 Conclusion

Unlike taxi drivers and food delivery staff on digital platforms, beauty bloggers from urban middle- or upper-class backgrounds participate in the platformization of cultural production as part of pursuing personal interests and hobbies. At the outset, they did not produce content to meet their urgent needs. Indeed, their blogging was sustained by their relatively high economic status. Gradually, they accrue influence and fan bases in the niche field of beauty commerce. The fact that beauty blogging rests on the spontaneous expression of personal consumption preferences and requires long-term investment constructs an invisible threshold that prohibits people from the lower classes from entering the field in advance.

Although the rise of beauty bloggers seems to be the result of individual performance and aspiration, these factors cannot be separated from the wider environment of platform capitalism. As the case of beauty bloggers on Weibo shows, their prosperity derives partially from Weibo’s strategic regeneration. Indeed, Weibo accelerated the celebrification of beauty amateurs as part of its drive to find new content providers and

data stimulators following the crisis of 2012-13, when its user base diminished. Through professionalization, verticalization, and institutionalization, Weibo has turned beauty amateurs into regular content providers and connected them with a broad range of audiences. While promoting beauty bloggers, Weibo actively maximizes the profits that it makes from them, whether through user engagement, targeted advertising, and algorithmic preferences. For Weibo, the process of making beauty bloggers or *wangbongs* is also a process of making platform labor. A cultural consequence of the platformization of beauty amateurs is that the circulation of beauty discourse is no longer confined to communities of upper- and middle-class women. Through platform-led institutionalization, beauty has become an entrenched genre on Chinese social media and drawn a wider female public into ongoing shifts in gender norms.

That beauty bloggers are platform labor does not mean that Weibo totally controls them. Instead, they continually negotiate with Weibo, whether by gaming its algorithms or seeking resources outside Weibo. Although Weibo reaps revenues from beauty bloggers, they reject its controlling tendencies. Like couriers on food delivery apps and drivers on ride-hailing apps, beauty bloggers creatively facilitate their visibility through “algorithm remaking,” which resists the platform’s objectives (Sun, 2019).

Although in this chapter I have analyzed the role of platforms in beauty blogging by way of the case of Weibo, Weibo is not the only platform to have shaped the construction of *wangbongs*. Following Weibo’s success, other social media platforms in China have mobilized active users and turned them into predictable creators. For instance, Bilibili launched its “chuangzuo jili jihua” (Creation Stimulation Project) in 2018 (Bilibili, 2018); Douyin launched its “*chuanguozhe chengzhang* jihua” (Creator Development Project) in 2019 (Y. Pan, 2019); and Red launched its “chuangzuozhe 123 jihua” (Creator 123 Project) in 2019 (ChinaDaily, 2019). All these initiatives target users who can create content, aiming to induce them to do so in a steady and stable fashion. As with Weibo’s strategies, these initiatives neither frame user creation as platform labor nor use terms such as employment. Like Weibo, many social media platforms also develop paid visibility services once they have built firm user bases: Douyin launched its paid visibility-increase service as “Dou+” in 2018 (Douyin, 2021); Red launched a similar tool *Shutiao* in 2019 (ChinaDaily, 2019). What beauty bloggers encounter on Weibo is

commonly found on other platforms too. This urges us to interpret interactions between Weibo and beauty bloggers in terms of a structural relationship between platform and platform labor as such, rather than an adventitious story concerning a single company.

Explaining the rise of beauty bloggers from a perspective informed by the notion of platform labor highlights platforms' important role in the formation of *wangbongs*. Whereas beauty bloggers have contributed to the platforms' expansion, in return platforms—as the dominant side in the relationship—shape *wangbongs* and their practices. High-profile *wangbongs* have captured public attention and enticed the young to join the trend. As a 2017 survey shows, 54% of informants born after 1995 selected *wanghong* as especially desirable among diverse new occupations (Cui, 2017). My close examination of beauty bloggers thus far leaves us with a question: Does the *wanghong* provide an ideal labor model for everyone, given that it is premised upon an invisible class threshold and long-standing platform exploitation

Chapter 4

Materializing the *Wanghong* Economy:

Beauty Bloggers and the Beauty Industry's Global Value Chain

Wanghongs are the outstanding phenomenon in the new economy: individuals bridge commodities and consumers, attract followers, and gain commercial opportunities.

Zhang Yong (CEO of Alibaba, September 21, 2016)

That's the secret of Alibaba's success: even today, more than 60% of shoppers on Alibaba are women.

Jack Ma (Founder of Alibaba, on October 18, 2019)

In attempting to explain how beauty bloggers establish cultural and economic influence, commentators usually attribute their success to their skill in the field of either beauty or blogging, signifying that gender discourses and media technology are often seen as separate from one another. Academic research on beauty bloggers has highlighted how they perform certain gender images or practicing certain techniques of using platforms (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2017; Bishop, 2019; Cotter, 2019). Consequently, beauty blogging has largely been approached as an immaterial phenomenon, which takes place on the intangible internet, is produced by bloggers' immaterial labor, and generates information and services rather than material products. Although this focus on immateriality presents an important aspect of beauty bloggers, it unfairly neglects the materiality of their practice. Indeed, the core theme of their content is beauty products, which are solid and cannot be accounted for by the concept of immaterial labor. Do beauty products not matter for beauty bloggers? As beauty bloggers become increasingly culturally and economically influential, will beauty industry corporations such as L'Oréal simply look on and not collaborate with them? If they are involved in the development of beauty blogging, what is their role? To answer these questions, we must break out of the limits of immaterial approach and focus instead on materiality.

My analysis adopts a combination of approaches in investigating the driving forces behind beauty blogging. Immateriality remains crucial to unpack beauty bloggers' popularity, as I have shown in chapters 1 and 2. That said, I have added a focus on materiality so as to examine actors that cannot be properly addressed in the immaterial framework, which I expand in this chapter. This material approach does not deny the importance of immaterial forces such as aesthetic labor and visibility labor, but aims to present a fuller picture of beauty bloggers. Through this material approach, I reinsert beauty bloggers in the beauty industry, rather than the internet industry, and explore the ways in which their popularity is intertwined with the whole beauty industry. To unpack the beauty industry and its relationship with beauty bloggers, I borrow a framework from international political economy that addresses global value chains (GVCs). This framework dissects global capitalist production into sets of activities scattered across diverse countries, analyzing how value is distributed in each activity and the different roles played by different countries in globalized production (Gereffi & Frederick, 2010; Gereffi et al., 2005). This GVC framework allows us to understand which activities in the beauty industry connect with beauty bloggers and how the specific context of China shapes Chinese beauty bloggers.

4.1 The Non-digital, Non-virtual, and Non-abstract Side of Beauty Influencers

Internet celebrities are a global phenomenon and can be seen as one result of the prevalence of social media around the world. Among various kinds of internet celebrities, beauty influencers are widely studied in diverse societies, ranging from the United States and United Kingdom, through Singapore and Thailand, to China (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2017; Bishop, 2018a, 2019; García-Rapp, 2016; Hou, 2018; Limkangvanmongkol & Abidin, 2018). This research usually approaches beauty influencers through one of three frames.

The first focuses on gender discourse and the feminized conception of beauty that beauty influencers advocate. The highly gendered nature of beauty is the crucial theme in the world of beauty influencers, be they from the West or East (Banet-Weiser, 2017; Limkangvanmongkol & Abidin, 2018). As part of the consumerist culture, beauty

influencers promote ideas of “self-love, self-image, and body positivity” through make-up tutorials (Banet-Weiser, 2017, p. 280). In the name of boosting women’s confidence, these tutorials frame physical beauty as a channel through which women can develop better selves and fulfill their desire for self-management skills.

The second frame addresses the tension between technological power and influencer agency on social media platforms. This lens positions platforms and beauty influencers as opposing sides within a symbiotic system: each side has its own interests and they cannot always cooperate with one another. Platforms functionalities mainly serve their own goal of accumulating profit while allowing users activity—in other words, allow users to generate data. Given this technological environment, beauty influencers keep a watchful eye on the affordances of social media. Taking advantage of these affordances, they try to maximize their visibility, for example through hashtags on Twitter (Abidin, 2016; Page, 2012), using closed captions on YouTube (Bishop, 2018b), or algorithmic gossip (Bishop, 2019).

The third frame casts beauty influencers as new subjects of labor who are compelled to work without employment contracts in a media industry that used to close its doors to grassroots producers but now integrates them into content creation. The future-motivated production is termed as “aspirational labor”, signifying a “gendered, forward-looking and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity” under the regimes of neoliberal governance (Brooke Erin Duffy, 2016, p. 453). Beauty influencers’ mode of work and the ethical norms surrounding it have shifted “risks from central organization onto individuals” (Brooke Erin Duffy, 2016, p. 453), leading to more precarious working conditions as compared with those of workers in traditional media, such as journalists and editors.

These three frames reveal the diverse actors and tensions involved in the practices of beauty influencers. My own research on Chinese beauty bloggers has benefited significantly from work adopting these frames, as is abundantly clear in the foregoing chapters. That accepted, I would like to point out that these frames focus mainly on the immaterial aspects of the beauty influencer business and especially on immaterial labor, defined as “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 290). The production of

gender discourses, forms of technological negotiation between platforms and influencers, and aspirational labor are all embodiments of the immaterial labor involved in the emergence of beauty influencers. The scholarship on influencers tends to present them as a digital, virtual, and abstract phenomenon. A possible reason for this immaterialization of the beauty influencer is that scholars see them as part of the media system that generates communication, produces meanings, and provides services but does not necessarily involve material production or consumption.

Whereas existing research addresses the immaterial aspects of beauty influencer's work extensively, its material aspects are largely forgotten. It is worth redressing this, for beauty influencers rely heavily on material objects. The content they create using featured products, the consumption of the products they promote, and the rewards they receive for using particular products in their vlogs are all rooted in actual, material beauty products, which cannot be encompassed by the term "immaterial labor." Beauty products, which lie at the heart of beauty blogs, are non-digital, non-virtual, and non-abstract. Accordingly, the development of Chinese beauty bloggers cannot be solely explained as a result of immaterial labor involving communication, services, and the production of meaning.

Research that detaches the study of beauty bloggers from product placement, its material basis, risks misunderstanding the influencer business as being purely intangible and virtual. It also erases the significance of certain actors, such as beauty manufacturers and distributors, which are not prominent on social media.

When we say the wanghong economy is lucrative, we should ask how it is lucrative and what commodities are making profits. If we ask this question with the language of political economy, then it will be where value comes in the wanghong economy. Do wanghongs like beauty bloggers produce value so they are making profits? Political economy of communication scholar Christian Fuchs (2015) argues that digital labor, such as social media users' content creation, produces value so that social media platforms can make profits by monetizing users' production. Disagreeing with Fuchs, scholars Jakob Rigi and Robert Prey (2015) argue that, users' activities and affective relations on social media "do not produce new value but instead transfer value from some commodities to others" (p. 393). They note that social media platforms do not

make profits by directly selling users' creation, therefore, users' creation does not produce value in economic terms. Rigi and Prey make a convincing point for even Fuchs (2016) agrees that social media platforms make their main profits from advertisements, rather than selling users' creation. If Rigi and Prey are right, how does value transfer from commodities to social media platforms? Everyone knows that the wanghong economy brings huge profits, but where do profits come from? Only when tracking how value transfers can we understand where profits are from in China's wanghong economy and beauty blogs provide us a wonderful case for beauty products as commodities are clearly traceable.

The disparity in the prominence accorded to the immaterial and material aspects of beauty influencer's practices is a consequence of a longstanding bias in research on information technologies and related phenomena. Indeed, it is commonly assumed that "information is immaterial" (Y. Chen, 2015, p. 32). Accordingly, activities in and around the information industry, especially the internet, are deemed formless and bodiless. Although critical media scholars have already challenged these ideas (Y. Chen, 2015, pp. 32–35; Qiu, 2016, pp. 11–14; Terranova, 2004, pp. 3–6), the ongoing bias against materiality in internet celebrity studies suggest that further efforts are required to counteract it. This is why I feel it necessary to examine the materiality at stake in the work of beauty influencers.

To develop the scholarly discussion in this area in the direction of materiality, this chapter situates the boom of Chinese beauty blogging in relation to global value chains (GVCs). This allows me to investigate how value is made in the beauty blogger business and the role of this process in beauty bloggers' rise to prominence. GVC studies represents a vital subfield of international political economics, which interrogates the forms that global capitalism takes in the contemporary world. Seeing globalized capitalist production in terms of value chains, the GVC framework dissects the production system into strings of activities, including the design, manufacturing, branding, marketing, and distribution of products (Gereffi & Frederick, 2010; Gereffi et al., 2005). By breaking down the production system into chains, scholars are able to gauge how value is distributed in each activity. Put it simply, scholars can check where money goes in industries. In analyzing the globalized production and distribution, the GVC framework

transcends national boundaries. This is necessary, for the chain of production activities is scattered across a variety of countries. For example: while the design of a product might take place in a certain country, it might be manufactured in another country or other countries. Adopting critical perspectives on global capitalism, GVC scholars have pointed out how global production networks do not distribute value among countries fairly. Whereas greater value is apportioned to the design, branding, and marketing sectors, less is accorded to raw material providers and the manufacturing sector. In terms of geography, high-value sectors are usually located in the Global North, whereas the raw material production and manufacturing sectors tend to be located in the Global South (Bair, 2005; Gereffi, 1994; Gereffi & Kaplinsky, 2001). Multinational corporations, which are usually based in the Global North, present salient examples of the unequal distribution of value. These multinational corporations usually establish their headquarters in developed countries, where they concentrate high value-added activities such as design, branding, and marketing while outsourcing low-value-added manufacturing to developing countries (Gereffi, 1994; Gereffi et al., 2005). Consequently, developed and developing countries do not accumulate the same amount of value from the international production system. The idea that China is the world's factory is one result of this globalized production system: multinational corporations outsource the manufacturing segment of their production chain to China's factories, taking advantage of cheap Chinese labor. Despite China's strong manufacturing capacity, its design, brand, and market sectors are still relatively weak in many industries. As such, it has remained downstream in the global value chain.

To counterbalance the inequalities inherent in the global capitalist system, scholars in GVC studies seek "possibilities for firms in developing countries to enhance their positions in global markets" (Gereffi et al., 2005, p. 79). Some of these possibilities involve developing countries participating in the high value-added sectors.

This GVC framework is helpful when it comes to dissecting the beauty industry and clarifying China's position in this globalized sector. Although all kinds of countries participate in global production networks, Western Europe and the United States enjoy considerable leads over the rest of the world: they can sell high value-added beauty products to other areas, rather than the other way around (Jones, 2010). Although China

has been part of the global beauty industry since the 1980s, the world factory did not have an advantageous position in the GVC: at the end of the 1990s, China imported expensive beauty products while exporting cheap products; the value gap between importation and exportation was huge when it came to perfume, cosmetics, and skincare products (Y. Wang, 2002). For example, during 1996-2001 whereas exported cosmetics were valued at \$4.95 per kilogram, imported cosmetics can to \$8.59 per kilogram (Y. Wang, 2002, p. 14). This background on the global beauty industry raises a question. What kind of products do Chinese beauty bloggers consume in making money from beauty consumption—made-in-China or imported from abroad? How do they relate to the global beauty industry and China's specific role in the GVC?

GVC theory provides a clear framework for analyzing the circulation of products. Following GVC scholars, I divide the beauty industry GVC into four segments: design; manufacturing; branding and marketing; and distribution. Beauty bloggers are not closely involved with all of these segments: by and large, their role is in branding, marketing, and distribution. This chapter does not focus on how the beauty industry's GVC is built at a transnational level. As such, it deviated from much GVC scholarship, which typically looks at products' transnational circulation and analyzes how value is distributed internationally. Instead, this chapter continues my focus on the Chinese context (which is a part of the GVC) and the interaction among beauty bloggers, beauty corporations, and distributors. I have maintained my focus because my goal in this research is to explain how beauty bloggers become popular specifically in China.

Situating beauty bloggers in relation to the beauty industry allows us to interpret their practice at the broad level of global capitalism. Since the nineteenth century, long before the emergence of the internet, the beauty industry has had markets across the globe and been an active force in global capitalism (Jones, 2010). China has presented transnational cosmetic manufacturers with a desirable market since the 1980s. Although today cosmetics manufacturing is globally integrated and synchronized, domestic distribution channels can be hugely unsynchronized. For instance, China only opened its market to global beauty products very recently, from the end of the 1980s, meaning that its distribution channels have been built in a mere few decades (Yixin Gao, 2020). Because of China's economic weakness in the 1980s and '90s, its distribution channels

were led by multinational corporations from the Global North (Jones, 2010). Distribution channels in European and North American markets, by contrast, have been established for hundreds of years. My questions are as follows. Do China's particular conditions and role in the GVC influence the ways in which the beauty industry and beauty influencers interact? And, if so, how?

By examining interactions between beauty bloggers and two key actors in the global beauty industry—namely beauty corporations and distributors—this chapter explores how beauty bloggers proliferate in tandem with the growth of the beauty industry. Further, I ask whether Chinese beauty bloggers at all alter, if not subvert, this value chain. Within a GVC framework, in this chapter I also probe similarities and differences between Chinese beauty bloggers and Western beauty influencers.

In addressing these issues, this chapter divides into four sections. The first compares aspects of the global cosmetic industry with other manufacturing industries, attending specifically at its high returns on investment, low cost of manufacturing, and high expenditure on branding and marketing. These features explain why this industry can sponsor so many beauty influencers across the world, as well as the fundamental similarities between Chinese beauty bloggers and Western beauty influencers for both of them rely on the high profits of the cosmetic industry. Following on from this discussion, the second section concentrates on China's specific resources, examining how brick-and-mortar beauty manufacturing plants have shaped the growth of beauty blogging in China, the world's factory. In so doing, I show how local manufacturing conditions in China affect Chinese beauty influencers. The third section shows how e-commerce platforms have become key distributors in light of the fact that traditional distribution channels for beauty products were built unevenly in China: traditional distribution channels developed strongly in first tier cities and coastal areas but not others. This unevenness explains why e-commerce platforms have such a powerful influence on Chinese beauty bloggers for they fill the void of beauty retailers in less developed areas. The fourth section examines how e-commerce platforms integrate *wangbongs* into their social commerce ecosystem and participate in the development of beauty bloggers. It also discusses how the coming together of e-commerce and beauty bloggers has increased Chinese brands' share of the beauty market, helping China

enhance its position in the GVC. Together, the third and fourth sections explain the close links between Chinese beauty bloggers and e-commerce platforms, identifying a major difference between Chinese beauty bloggers and their Western counterparts. In concluding the chapter, I offer an overall interpretation of the significance of the *wanghong* economy.

4.2 “Why You Should Think About Investing in Beauty Instead of Bitcoin”

In his 2014 article in *Forbes* magazine, “Why You Should Think About Investing in Beauty Instead of Bitcoin,” Ryan Caldbeck writes that “[i]nvestors, particularly those focused on tech, tend to have a lot of misconceptions about consumer products in general. They assume profit margins are low, pay back is slow and growth is stagnant.” Caldbeck’s judgment here partially reflects a widespread idea, namely that in terms of profit traditional manufacturing industries cannot compete with the newly established and fast-growing information communication technology (ICT) industry. Although ICT sparked a “global gold rush” in the early twenty-first century, returns on investment offered in the beauty industry are largely underestimated.

The production of beauty commodities was profitable long before the advent of ICTs. In the mid-nineteenth century, trade in perfume and skincare products grew dramatically in Europe (Jones, 2010, p. 22). This was further boosted by the industrial revolution, which rapidly increased productivity in the beauty industry toward the end of the nineteenth century in Europe and North America. Development continued throughout the twentieth century—even the disruption caused by the two world wars did not stop the beauty industry from functioning. During World War Two, British beauty firms even invented lipsticks “equipped with emergency flashlights in case of blackout” (Jones, 2010, p. 134). After the war, with the return of peace and (for some) prosperity, manufacturers in Europe and the United States began an ambitious expansion into the international markets. By the end of the twentieth century, major multinationals in the beauty industry such as L’Oréal and Protector & Gamble, which were usually based in the Global North, had branches in five continents. Today, the global beauty market was worth \$507.8 billion by 2018 and is expected to grow to \$758.4 billion in 2025 (Shahbandeh, 2019).

China has been a part of the global beauty industry since the nineteenth century. In the middle of that century, China was already importing perfumes from Britain (Rimmel, 1867, p. 234). The end of the century saw the mechanical production of beauty commodities; soon afterward local Chinese brands emerged. For instance, the first Chinese cosmetics manufacturer, Kwong Sang Hong Limited, was established in 1898 (Xin Xie & Ching, 2018, p. 191). Yet China's industrial foundations were not strong at that time, meaning that it was primarily a market for global beauty manufacturers' products. Brands from Germany, Japan, and the United States sold their products in big cities such as Shanghai. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Chinese were still cast in the role of consumers, rather than producers, in the global beauty chain.

Beauty commerce slowed significantly after the CCP came to power in 1949. This is because the ruling party took the use of beauty products to signify bourgeois decadence. From the 1960s to the '70s, China's beauty industry was reduced to producing the basics for bodily hygiene, which were mainly distributed through state channels (Jones, 2010, p. 201). In this period a state-owned firm might supply an entire region, so there was no need for marketing. After lying dormant for three decades, the Chinese beauty market revived in the 1980s when the CCP implemented the reform and opening-up policy and destigmatized the pursuit of physical beauty (X. Tang, 2012, pp. 50–55). From then on, China has been revitalized as a marketplace for diverse beauty brands. An increasing number of cosmetic factories have been established in China, a number of which function as original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) that produce components for other companies (K. Zhang, 2019). This growing group of cosmetic factories notwithstanding, there are few competitive brands from China. By contrast, foreign brands, mainly from the Global North, have a strong presence in China, controlling more than 80% of the Chinese market during the early Reform Era (Rähse, 2020, p. 38). The first two decades of the twenty-first have seen Chinese brands develop, but foreign brands remain the most powerful players in China. In 2018, the 10 largest beauty firms in China are Protector & Gamble, L'Oréal, Shiseido, Estée Lauder, Unilever, Amorepacific, Chicmax, Colgate-Palmolive, Pechoin, and Jala (J. Sun & Shu, 2019). None of the top five are from China and seven of the top 10 are from Western Europe, the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Overall, the Chinese beauty market

continued expanding during the Reform Era. It now yields more than ¥410 billion (around \$62.4 billion) annually and still has significant potential for future growth (D. Li, 2019).

In comparison with other manufacturing industries, the beauty industry not only has a significant market volume but is also very profitable. A common indicator of profitability in the business world is the gross margin, defined as the “revenue from sales of product” minus “cost of goods sold” (COGS for short) (Bean-Mellinger, 2018). The gross margin is usually expressed as a percentage, the formula for which is “(revenue – COGS)/revenue” (Bean-Mellinger, 2018). A high gross margin signifies lucrativeness. Using the gross margin as an indicator, it is possible to compare the profitability of diverse products, companies, and industries. Taking Apple Inc. as an example, the gross margin of this world-leading high-tech company was between 38% and 39% in 2019 (Apple, 2020). By contrast, L’Oréal, the largest cosmetic corporation in the world, had a gross margin of 72.94% in 2019—nearly double Apple’s (Gurufocus, 2020). Although the price of an iPhone is much higher than that of a L’Oréal lipstick, the latter returns a greater profit on the same investment.

Beauty manufacturers’ high profitability mainly derives from the cost structure of beauty products. The manufacturing cost of beauty products is much lower than the final prices. Business researcher Wilfried Rähse (2020) compared leading companies in five related manufacturing industries: the cosmetic, chemistry, consumer goods, food, and pharma industries. He finds that L’Oréal’s percentage of the manufacturing cost in sales is much lower than that of the other four industries (see Figure 4.1). The cost of research and development is also much lower in the cosmetic industry than in other industries. These relatively low costs make the high profitability of cosmetic manufacturers possible. Although people obsessed with digital technologies think that the manufacturing industries are old-fashioned and homogenous, this comparison among industries reveals that they are quite different and that the beauty industry stands out for its low manufacturing costs and high profitability.

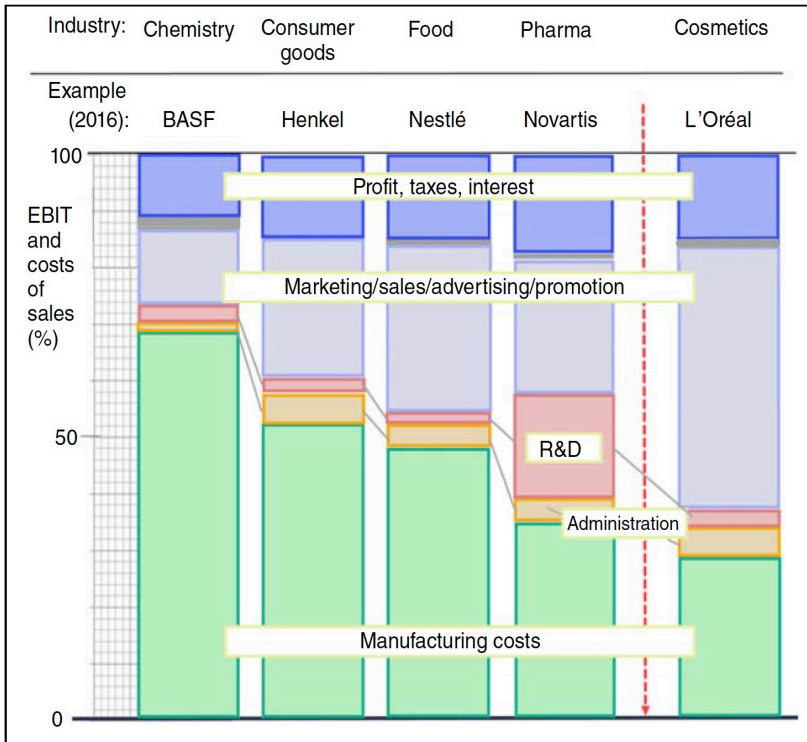
Although cosmetic manufacturers spend relatively little on production, they spend much more on branding and marketing. This also distinguishes the beauty industry from other industries. Addressing the case of L’Oréal, Rähse (2020) writes that “the very

respectable values for marketing and sales are around 45%. This is 1.6 times the cost of manufacturing. No other industry spends so much money on marketing and sales” (p. 59). This heavy investment in marketing stems from the distinct character of the beauty industry, whose consumers pay for the hope of beauty rather than actual changes that beauty products might bring about. “Hope, not efficacy, was the mantra of beauty” (Jones, 2010, p. 243). Keeping consumers’ hopes alive requires constantly building and maintaining consumers’ desire for beauty. This leads to substantial investments in marketing. As their record to date indicates, cosmetics firms operate marketing campaigns using diverse media, including newspapers, billboards, magazines, television, and so forth. To persuade consumers, they make wide use of celebrities in their marketing campaigns (Jones, 2010; Peiss, 2011). A cosmetics industry analyst has summarized this pithily: “It is marketing that sells products, not a breakthrough in lipstick technology” (Shapiro, 1989). When social media and beauty bloggers emerged, beauty manufacturers swiftly sensed their potential for marketing and began to integrate them into their marketing campaigns. In fact, using beauty bloggers or social media for marketing was nothing new. What we see, then, is a continuity in the beauty industry’s heavy focus on marketing.

Overall, the beauty industry has not been left behind by ICT industries in terms of profitability. Rather, its vitality is evident in its high margins, high marketing costs, and growing market volume. The following section discusses how these features have impacted the development of Chinese beauty bloggers.

Figure 4.1

Comparison of the largest manufacturers in different industries in 2016, based on the cost breakdown of net sales



Note. Retrieved from Wilfried Rähse, *Cosmetic Creams: Development and Formulation of Effective Skin Care Products*, Dusseldorf: Wiley-VCH, p.87.

4.3 The Beauty Industry and Beauty Bloggers

The distinct qualities of the beauty industry, including low manufacturing costs, high profitability, and heavy reliance on marketing, provide fertile grounds for beauty bloggers. First, heavy investment in marketing allows beauty bloggers to earn advertising fees. A number of beauty bloggers make money by posting advertisements for cosmetic brands. The revenue for this comes out of beauty manufacturers' marketing budgets.

For example, interviewee E03 worked for the Chinese branch of a French cosmetic corporation, which spent a lot of money on beauty bloggers. She said:

A beauty blogger based on WeChat charged ¥400,000 for posting an advertisement for our brand. Our boss complained that how could it be so expensive ... Afterward, I saw this blogger posted an ad for our products. My boss compromised eventually. My boss kept complaining about the price, though. (interview, March 2020)

Although E03 and her company were surprised at the increasingly high prices that beauty bloggers charged, in this case they chose to accept the fee proposal and collaborate. As this example shows, payments from cosmetic manufacturers provide the flow of finance on which beauty bloggers depend. Hence, many beauty bloggers can make considerable amounts of money and continue producing content full- or part-time.

With the increasing influence of social media and beauty bloggers, cosmetic firms have further increased their investment in digital marketing. E03 explained that although “we and other brands in our corporation still spend money on traditional advertisements, like buying advertisements in shopping malls or mass media ... it [online marketing] is growing” (interview, March 2018). Their approach was echoed by the industry leader’s “digital-first” strategy. Indeed, L’Oréal’s global chief digital officer stated that of overall media spending, outlays on digital formats increased from 17% in 2014 to 38% in 2017 (Weinstein, 2018). Constantly rising marketing budgets provide beauty bloggers with a significant flow of finance, inciting more and more people to join the beauty influencer business.

Second, the cosmetic business’s high margins attract a large number of beauty bloggers to sell cosmetics through retailers. It is not only beauty firms that enjoy high margins, but retailers too. Although retailers cannot make as much money as firms, who control the whole value chain, they can still make significant profits by exploiting the gap between low wholesale prices (decided by manufacturing costs) and high retail prices.

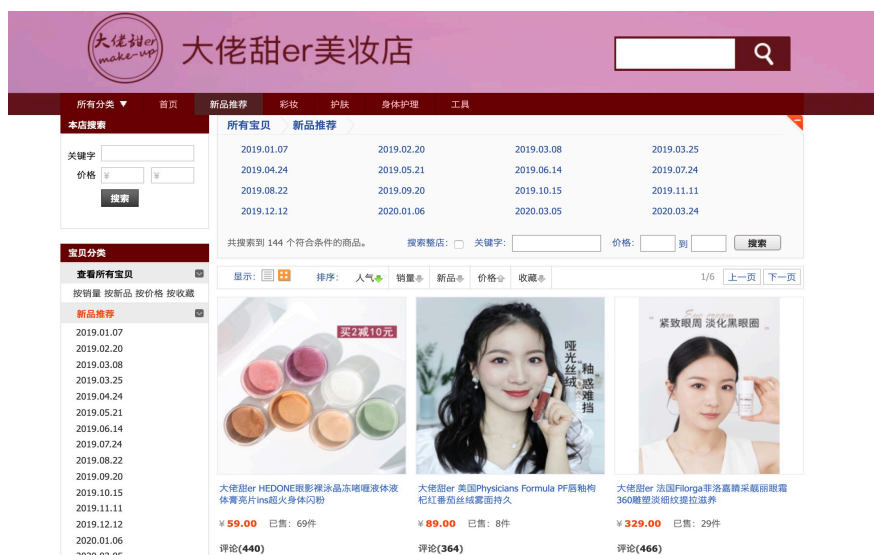
Many Chinese beauty bloggers choose to sell cosmetics online. In comparison with its Western counterparts, China has a more participatory e-commerce ecosystem. This is encapsulated by Taobao, a consumer-to-consumer (C2C) retail platform under Alibaba that launched in 2003. It allows sellers to run e-stores for free¹² (L. Zhang, 2020). Given the low bar that Taobao sets for participation, running an online retailing account is fairly easy for non-professionals. Dalaotianer, a famous beauty blogger with four million followers on Weibo and one million followers on Bilibili (as of April 2020), has operated an e-commerce store on Taobao since August 2018, when she accumulated a considerable fan base. Retailing skincare and cosmetic products to fans brought her sales of around ¥4 million in her first year of trading (Su, 2019).

The high margins that accompany the retailing of beauty products even affects the trajectories of bloggers in other vertical fields. In April 2019, a friend introduced me to a travel blogger, B14. My friend did not know that my research mainly focuses on beauty bloggers and thus thought that any kind of *wanghongs* (internet celebrities) might serve as an interviewee. Encouraged by my friend's kindness, I met this *wanghong*, though with low expectations. However, this blogger's practice taught me a lesson: do not make simple assumptions as to who is or is not a beauty blogger. Back in 2019, B14 had accumulated more than 300,000 followers on Weibo having produced content on travel for several years. Despite her claim that she is a travel blogger, she started to create content about beauty. Since October 2018, she has operated a store on Taobao, where she sells Japanese cosmetic products. Why does a self-proclaimed travel influencer post beauty content and sell beauty products?

¹² It is worth noting that running stores “for free” could still require costs. Sellers can open stores on Taobao without paying any fee, but they need to pay a minimum *baozhengjin* (保证金, deposit) to insert commodities in their Taobao stores nowadays. The amount of minimum deposit varies according to the categories of commodities. The deposit requirement is not fixed in Taobao's short history: there was no deposit in Taobao's early stage. Taobao released the deposit requirement after it became the largest e-commerce platform. Along with the growing power of Alibaba in the e-commerce field, Taobao rose the minimum deposit step by step in the following years: in 2014, the minimum deposit for cosmetic products was ¥1000; in 2021, it rose to ¥3000 (see <http://www.amaomb.com/a/taobaodaxue/taobaozixun/2014/0717/6409.html>; https://helpcenter.taobao.com/servicehall/knowledge_detail?spm=service_hall.20224364.0.0.4c8a3f35LrWZ25&knowledgeId=20072364). Thank Florian Schneider for pointing out the “free” yet “paid” property of Taobao stores.

Figure 4.2

A screenshot of Dalaoitianer's store on Taobao



Note. Retrieved on April 4, 2020, from

<https://shop311084632.taobao.com/?spm=a230r.7195193.1997079397.2.6a622818JI>

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E07, a manager from Weibo, explained the difference between diverse bloggers on the platform in this manner:

Food and travel bloggers ... parenting bloggers ... and beauty bloggers are all welcome for users ... [but they have different] conversion rates. The conversion rate of beauty bloggers is high. They can wholesale beauty products at a low price and retail at a high price. They work well with e-commerce. However, it is hard for food and travel bloggers to convert their content into profits. First of all, it is not easy to sell travel products. The prices of flights and hotels are well regulated and quite transparent. Bloggers can make little money out of these products. (Interview, August 2018)

E07's narrative partially explains why B14 started to sell cosmetic products online. Although travel bloggers can accumulate followers by creating content, the industry on which they rely cannot provide an efficient and viable channel for monetization. Being a beauty blogger, by contrast, offers an imitable and accessible business model, which combines content creation and product retail. Unlike the first batch of beauty amateurs in the mid-2000s, bloggers in the mid-2010s did not produce content solely out of passion. Motivated by profits, diverse bloggers can easily cross boundaries between vertical fields and integrate beauty blogging into their business.

Though retailing cosmetics can yield decent profits, some ambitious and able bloggers go further, moving upstream in the beauty industry's value chain. They establish their own brands, taking over each of the various stages in which products are involved, from design to distribution. Their start-up companies do not usually build factories to manufacture products, for they have no need to do so: China has a large number of original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and a wealth of experience providing outsourced manufacturing for multinational corporations (Tony Wu et al., 2008). Beauty bloggers can hire OEMs directly to produce cosmetics for their own brands. That is not to say any blogger can hire an OEM. Unlike ordering from stores, in which one can buy one or two things, orders from factories must exceed a minimum quantity of products, which is much greater than an individual can consume. Hiring OEMs requires intensive start-up capital, storage space, and sophisticated supply chain management. While bloggers with less capital and weak management teams cannot afford to hire OEMs, top bloggers can.

One of my interviewees, E01, worked for a top Chinese *wanghong*—let's call her Casey—for more than three years. This top influencer had more than 10 million overall followers on diverse Chinese social media and was judged to be one of the top *wanghongs* in terms of income and popularity. She began her career as a fashion blogger and now operates an apparel brand, making use of her considerable fan base.¹³ E01 used to

¹³ Fashion bloggers were the earliest winners in China's *wanghong* economy, for they were able to cooperate with China's clothing factories to build their own brands earlier than beauty bloggers.

manage the supply chain of the clothing brand for this fashion blogger. In 2015, Casey decided to integrate beauty into her business by operating a new cosmetic brand while retaining her apparel brand. E01 was appointed to establish the new brand and manage its online marketing campaign.

E01 told me that “it is so difficult to run a cosmetic brand,” for “we know nothing about cosmetic manufacturing despite our rich experience of managing the supply chain of a clothing brand” (interview, January 2018). E01 compared running the supply chain for a beauty brand to that of a clothing brand:

The bar for running clothes brands is not high. The minimum order quantity [from factories], the effort, and the start-up capital can be easily handled ... *Wanghongs* with small fan bases can ask factories to manufacture hundreds of pieces and retail them. But beauty products are different. The minimum order quantity for one lipstick is 5,000. For ordinary fashion bloggers and beauty bloggers, this order is too big to retail ... Many factories can't even understand why *wanghongs* choose to manufacture cosmetics. Most *wanghongs* can barely reach the minimum order quantity ... In the beginning, plants were not willing to take our order at all. (Interview, January 2018)

However, these great challenges did not stop E01 and Casey. E01 continued:

It [owning a cosmetic brand] can bring huge profits. In spite of these difficulties, profits are too considerable [to be ignored]. The profits are much higher [than those for making clothes]. For example, if I produce 10,000 lipsticks, selling 40% of the goods can roughly cover all costs. But selling clothes is a different story. When you sell clothes, you tend to have excess inventory, which is quite worrisome. Cosmetic products are much

There are fewer obstacles to face when running clothing brands and hiring clothing OEMs than when developing cosmetics brands. Although the margins involved in retailing clothes are lower than those involved in selling beauty products, taking control of the whole value chain allows fashion bloggers to make considerable profits through e-commerce.

better. The shelf life of cosmetic products is three years and they don't go out of date in a short time. Clothes go out of date quickly ... For cosmetics, you can just post content about them, deploy the marketing and seed [*zhongcao*],¹⁴ which are quite effective in running the beauty business. (interview, January 2018)

Doubtlessly, the possibility of making high profits by running cosmetic brands is luring newcomers to join the game. Still, they have to prepare for fierce competition with global giants. They might be top *wanghongs* on social media, but when compared to the traditional beauty giants such as Protector & Gamble and L'Oréal, *wanghongs'* capital, resources, and experience stand for little in the business battle. Even though, E01 felt confident about their brand, she said that:

We respond to the market more quickly. For instance, when we launch new collections, we can receive the feedback within two days, three days, or one week [from social media and e-commerce stores]. I think that this is a great advantage. In a very short time you know the flaws of your products and the preferences of your customers, which will benefit new product development. We make decisions on new products in minutes. In comparison, traditional firms need rounds of discussion, meetings, and debates. The process is cumbersome there. (interview, January 2018)

The beauty brand that E01 and Casey operated has no offline counters or stores. It is a purely e-commerce-based brand. The brand's sales surpassed ¥1 million in the first 40 seconds after its store was officially launched on Tmall. The orders were already packed and sent out early in the morning that day. This scene differs markedly from the way in which big beauty firms launch new brands. The latter launches usually take place in fancy shopping malls and feature invited celebrities. This apparently requires a greater amount

¹⁴ *Zhongcao* (seed) is Chinese internet slang meaning the act of sharing a certain product and inciting others' desire to buy it. The term is widely used in beauty blogs.

of capital and more preparation time than beauty bloggers need when launching brands on e-commerce platforms.

E01 experience is not exceptional. An increasingly large group of *wanghongs*, many of whom may not have started out as beauty bloggers, are now testing the waters ahead of establishing their own beauty brands. Inspired by beauty bloggers' successes, some internet firms that own online platforms have also established e-commerce-based beauty brands. These firms include NetEase and Xiaomi. The beauty industry's high margins attract more and more people to generate content about beauty and share in the spoils.

As these examples indicate, the beauty industry's high margins and heavy reliance on marketing have played a large part in the flourishing of beauty bloggers in China. On the one hand, large marketing budgets provide beauty bloggers with substantial cash flows, motivating them to continuously create content. On the other hand, high margins lure new players from diverse backgrounds to enter the ring, leading to an increase in the number of beauty bloggers.

The supporting industries--manufacturing and marketing--do influence *wanghongs* in important ways, but their roles are sometimes less significant than that of the beauty industry. This comes into focus by way of a comparison with a counterexample: even though content about travel is popular, the travel industry does not provide viable ways in which internet celebrities can monetize their content. For this reason, some travel and other bloggers choose to integrate beauty blogging into their content creation, resulting in the number of beauty bloggers growing.

Internet celebrities are not the only group to covet the value that can be accrued by selling beauty products. Major players in the beauty industry such as L'Oréal have sensed beauty blogging's power, despite the fact that it has emerged only recently. They therefore take great interest in this business model too. Given their huge advantages in terms of capital, resources, and supply chains, they seem very capable of playing the beauty blogging game. Beauty corporations have also joined the trend. The case of a beauty blogger named Li Jiaqi shows how a beauty company has contributed to the growth of beauty influencers.

As part of an Alibaba-initiated shopping festival on 11 November 2019, beauty blogger Li Jiaqi performed livestreaming on Taobao. He had attracted more than 36.2

million viewers in the first two hours and eventually generated more than sales worth ¥1 billion in a single day (Di, 2019; Y. Lv, 2020). In 2020, Li Jiaqi became a household name in China because of his phenomenal influence on beauty product promotion. Back in 2016, however, he was just an ordinary behind-the-counter beauty adviser for Maybelline in Nanchang, a second-tier city in a landlocked province. He made ¥3,000 a month, which “could not even buy a quarter of a square meter” in Nanchang (M. Liu, 2019). Later, a project initiated by L’Oréal (Maybelline’s parent company) changed his life permanently.

Having noticed beauty bloggers’ promotion power in China, L’Oréal planned to cultivate beauty bloggers using its human and product resources. In late 2016, the Chinese branch of L’Oréal collaborated with MeiOne, a start-up MCN in which Alibaba had invested. Together, they launched a project, *BA wanghonghua* (*wanghong*ization of beauty advisers) (Cheng, 2019; C. Wu, 2018). This project selected 200 beauty advisers within the L’Oréal corporation and cultivated them into beauty *wanghongs* on Taobao Livestream. Embedded in the platform of Taobao, Taobao Livestream is designed to bridge social media (livestream) and e-commerce (Taobao). In the model held up by L’Oréal and MeiOne’s project, beauty advisers, who only serve one or two customers offline at a time, can serve thousands of consumers simultaneously on a digital platform. Qi Qiaoen, CEO of MeiOne, made the following comparison: beauty advisers “have good physical appearances, a deeper understanding of products, and better sales skills than ordinary *wanghongs*. Speaking specifically, what we are doing now is taking advantage of online technology. Through livestreaming, beauty advisors can break the offline barriers and connect products and consumers” (Eunji, 2017). Li Jiaqi was one of the selected beauty advisers who signed with MeiOne to be full-time beauty influencers. According to MeiOne, one signed beauty adviser generated tens of millions of orders within six months (Eunji, 2017). As a result, this project won the 2017 Next Innovation Award, for which it competed with L’Oréal’s other branches around the world.

By 2020, Li Jiaqi had “a net worth of between \$1 million and \$5 million”, and “made it onto the Hurun China Under the 30s To Watch 2019 list” (A. Huang, 2020). However, coverage of him usually concentrates on his overnight fame and fortune as a *wanghong* while neglecting how Li entered the field of beauty blogging. L’Oréal’s role is widely

underestimated in Li Jiaqi's wanghongization. As a powerful and resourceful corporation, L'Oréal can intervene proactively in the game of beauty blogging and cultivate beauty bloggers using its human, financial, media, and commercial resources. L'Oréal's investment, much more than immaterial labor, was decisive in making this particular influencer. Though low-profile, such commercial investment has been a crucial driving force behind the rise of beauty bloggers, undermining the idea that beauty influencers are merely a media phenomenon. L'Oréal's participation in this field has had two notable impacts. First, it has led to the appearance of more beauty bloggers. Second, beauty bloggers received more exposure in the press, as Li Jiaqi did. In important ways, identifying the role played by beauty corporations nuances the academic debate of how beauty bloggers have become a contemporary social phenomenon.

L'Oréal is not alone in transforming its employees into beauty influencers. This comes across in the case of E03, who worked for another French cosmetics corporation, whose boss encouraged her to post beauty content on Red, a female-dominated social media platform. However, this company put much less effort into nurturing beauty bloggers than L'Oréal. The encouragement that E03 and her colleagues received was informal and their company did not really expect them to be professional beauty influencers. As she explained, cultivating internet celebrities costs too much money and time. In practice, even investments made by specialized influencer incubators have a failure rate of no less than 95% (CGTV, 2016). For E03's company, collaborating with existing internet celebrities is more cost-and time-efficient. Most working beauty bloggers are not backed by beauty companies, despite the latter's advantages in human and material resources. This is because these companies are neither specialized in content production nor necessarily willing to become so. Moreover, beauty influencers' success also relies on their immaterial labor, such as performing authenticity (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Marwick, 2013); such success cannot be assured solely by having rich resources in capital, peoples, and products. Even MeiOne, which concentrates on transforming beauty advisers into beauty influencers, has signed many beauty bloggers, none of which have become high-profile beauty bloggers like Li Jiaqi in the increasingly competitive market (G. Liu & Lan, 2019).

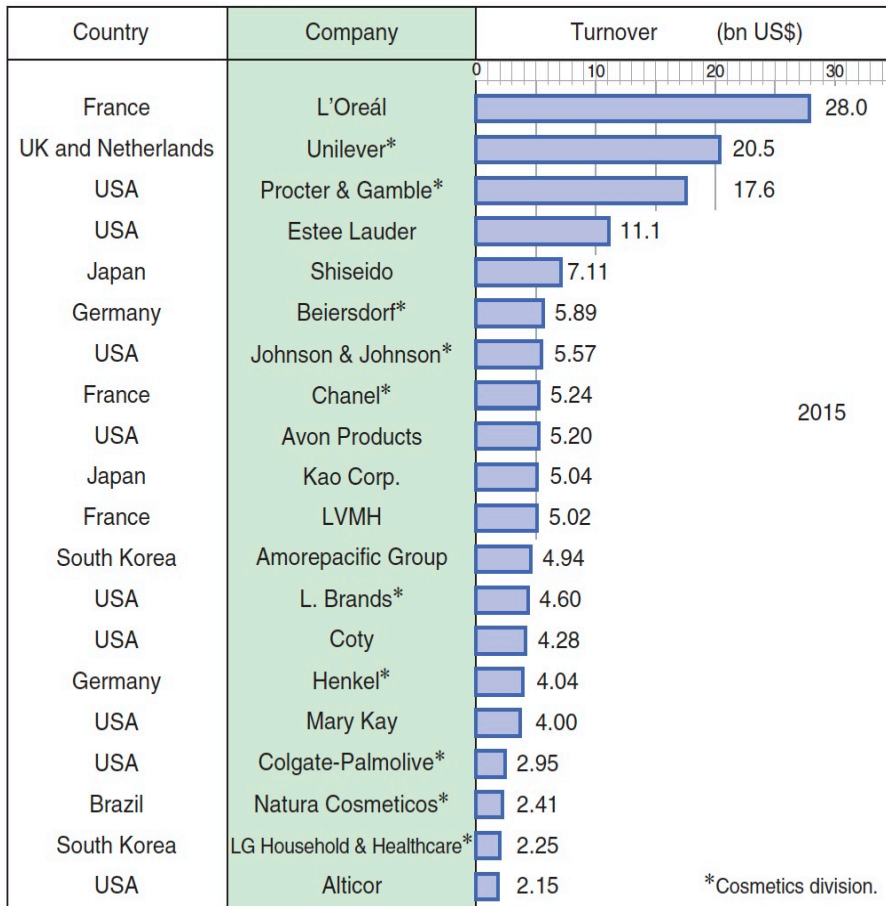
This section has discussed how cosmetic firms, especially their marketing sector in the value chain, contribute to the growth of beauty bloggers. Beauty firms' high marketing budgets allow beauty bloggers to make a living by creating beauty-related content and the beauty business's high margins attract diverse entrepreneurs to share in the spoils. Beauty firms sometimes even produce beauty bloggers. Beauty firms' investments should be understood as a material foundation, which involves money, human resources, and mass production. Without material investments, beauty bloggers would be significantly less numerous, influential, and prosperous. What is more, recognizing the role that beauty firms have played in the boom in beauty blogging helps explain why there are so many genres of *wanghongs* posting articles, blogging, vlogging, and livestreaming, for all kinds of industries need branding and marketing outlets on social media. Various *wanghongs* may share the same social media platforms, but they do not share the same industrial foundations/value chains, just like beauty bloggers and travel bloggers have different revenue streams. As such, they occupy differentiated positions in the *wanghong* economy. Therefore, by taking a close look at a specific group of *wanghongs* rather than discussing the generalized concept of *wanghongs* as such, in this chapter I reveal key nuances to the *wanghong* economy.

Assessed from a broad perspective, it would appear that some features of cosmetic firms are not exclusive to the Chinese context. In fact, cosmetic production is both highly globalized and concentrated at the same time. The world's top 20 cosmetics corporations generates around 65% of the cosmetics products used across the world (Rähse, 2020, p. 47); Europe and the United States dominate cosmetic production for global markets (see Figure 4.3). For these multinational giants, manufacturing and marketing, far from being limited to one or two countries, are implemented globally. These cosmetic corporations not only contribute to the boom in Chinese beauty blogging, but support beauty influencers wherever cosmetics are sold and social media are widely used. For instance, for L'Oréal, hiring beauty influencers is a global strategy, which is not just reserved for China (Ya Gao, 2017; Weinstein, 2018). From the vantage point of the global beauty industry, we can better understand why beauty influencers are found in such diverse societies as China, Thailand, the United States, and France, for they all rely on the marketing segment of the global beauty industry. Recognizing beauty

influencers' dependence on the beauty industry helps look beyond the specific society in question and map the structural conditions that global beauty influencers share. Granted, beauty influencers from diverse countries do not face exactly the same local contexts. After all, each society has its own industrial environment, which presents beauty influencers with particular resources and challenges. In the next section, I examine how beauty bloggers grow in the context of China's specific industrial constitution.

Figure 4.3

Comparison of the turnover of the top 20 manufacturers of cosmetics in the world



Note. The manufacturers are presented here along with the country/region in which their headquarters are based. From Rähse, W. (2020). *Cosmetic Creams: Development, Manufacture and Marketing of Effective Skin Care Products*. John Wiley & Sons, p.46.

4.4 Dark Horses in the Game of Distribution

Chinese beauty bloggers are like their Western counterparts in that they are structurally reliant on the beauty industry. One visible difference, though, is that beauty influencers in Western societies are much less dependent on e-commerce than Chinese beauty bloggers (Abidin & Ots, 2015; Bishop, 2019; García-Rapp, 2016). Their income mainly comprises advertising fees from cosmetic manufacturers and view-based advertisement revenues from social media platforms such as YouTube. For Chinese beauty bloggers, in contrast, e-commerce represents their largest source of revenue. Indeed, the best-known Chinese beauty bloggers, from Zhang Mofan to Li Jiaqi, were swept to prominence on the back of e-commerce. This visible difference between Chinese beauty bloggers and Western beauty influencers derives from a “key aspect of the beauty industry” (Jones, 2010, p. 359): namely, distribution channels, which determine how beauty products are sold and how their value is realized. If beauty products cannot be distributed effectively, then beauty products’ value cannot be realized. Thus, in this circumstance beauty bloggers would be unable to derive revenue from beauty firms. Understanding the role of distribution emphasizes that the *wanghong* economy is not purely digital but depends on the circulation of beauty products. Again, the circulation of beauty products requires solid material foundations, involving human and non-human actors.

Producing beauty products is not the same as making value. Beauty firms must ensure that consumers can reach their products easily. Distribution channels are therefore a crucial part of the value chain. However, while cosmetic manufacturing is well developed across a range of global contexts, distribution is not. From the mid-eighteenth century onward, beauty companies in the West started to build national and international distribution outlets, including beauty and hair salons, specialty stores, shopping malls, and so forth (Jones, 2010; Peiss, 2011). These outlets still play an essential role in Western markets today. Unlike its Western counterparts, “China’s consumption of beauty products was close to zero” at the beginning of the 1980s (Jones, 2010, p. 318). National distribution networks scarcely existed in China at that time. The beauty industry’s high margins would not be possible if it could not reach its consumers.

It is necessary to build distribution channels for beauty products, in other words, for the beauty business to develop and expand.

In the 1980s and '90s, multinational beauty manufacturers were the main contributors to building distribution channels. In the early 1980s, foreign brands arrived in China seeking effective channels for getting their products into stores and thus making them available to customers. In the beginning, "large state-owned department stores were the main sales channel for cosmetics, especially high-grade cosmetic products" (Fernandez-Stembridge & Fernandez, 2007, p. 94). This single channel could only sell products to "high-income segments" on a limited scale, impeding beauty firms' attempts to reach potential consumers over wide areas (Jones, 2010, p. 322). To expand the Chinese market, big names in the global beauty industry attempted to build their own distribution networks, beginning in large cities on the coast. For instance, in 1988 Procter & Gamble built its Chinese branch in Guangzhou, a big city close to Hong Kong and with a fast-growing economy. Through setting levels of regional distributors (e.g. region-province-city distributors), Procter & Gamble sold its shampoo outside state-owned stores and enjoyed great success in the Chinese market (Jones, 2010, p. 323; F. Wang, 2005). Following Procter & Gamble's precedent, cosmetic companies sought ways of building distribution channels, leading to the rapid expansion of the Chinese beauty market. Indeed, the Chinese cosmetic market's value grew from \$25 million in 1994 to \$7.9 billion in 2004 (Li and Fung Research, 2005; Tao, 2005, as cited in Tony Wu et al., 2008).

By the mid-2000s, five major distribution channels had been constructed: department stores; hypermarkets; specialty stores; pharmacies and personal care stores; and direct sales (Tony Wu et al., 2008). The geographical distribution of these distribution channels, however, was uneven. Distribution channels built by multinational corporations favored areas with better economies. For example, in the 1990s Procter & Gamble preferred to work with major chain hypermarkets and paid little attention to rural markets and smaller distributors (F. Wang, 2005); Walmart, a key distribution channel for beauty brands, opened more than one-third of its Chinese stores in first- and second-tier cities, which represent only a small part of China in terms of geography

(Jingai Xu & Li, 2016). Interviewee E02, who worked for L'Oréal for years, emphasized the huge geographical imbalances of distribution channels in China:

The differences between regional markets are huge. The market in East China is similar to developed countries, which is very mature. It has all kinds of distribution channels for the retail business. In terms of hypermarkets, while East China had well-developed sales outlets in 2012 and 2013, there were few hypermarkets, such as RT-mart and Walmart in Central China at that time. Let alone West China. Even today, West China may not have all kinds of distribution channels. (interview, August 2018)

In addition to the imbalances between regions, notable differences also exist within the city-tier system. As E02 further explained:

First- and second-tier cities have better infrastructures and highly effective sales channels, including department stores and others. Consumers have easy access to commodities. ... For instance, Shiseido [a Japanese beauty brand] already has many stores offline, so customers do not need to buy its products online. ... You may find a Shiseido store every 500 meters or one kilometer in first-tier cities. However, that is not the case for second-, third-, and fourth-tier cities. Not every city has Shiseido stores. Probably none of the third-tier cities and below have Shiseido stores. (interview, August 2018)

Although the distribution channels described above brought multinational corporations notable success in the Chinese market, they largely neglected the regions and the majority of the Chinese population, who live in rural and non-coastal areas or third- and fourth-tier cities. This neglect presented new players such as e-commerce platforms with a

potential pathway into the market.¹⁵ These dark horses, especially the e-commerce platform Alibaba, began targeting all areas of the country and moving much faster than established beauty giants. In this way, e-commerce platforms became an increasingly important driving force behind the expansion of the beauty market.

Before introducing e-commerce platforms' role in this context, I must first provide some general background on China's economy, which has grown strongly in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. From a macroeconomic perspective, the buying power of the Chinese population generally rose during this period. Despite regional imbalances, China's GDP per capita has increased from ¥7,942 in 2000 to ¥70,892 in 2019 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001b, 2020). Given this, Chinese consumers are able to afford more beauty products than they could in the past. Influenced by popular culture and social media, they are also more willing to buy beauty products. A key question at this historical juncture is how many Chinese consumers can reach beauty products given that distribution channels are largely clustered in the big cities. E-commerce platforms, especially Alibaba, offered solutions to this problem.

Founded in 1999, Alibaba was initially an exportation outlet for Chinese factories. Four years later, it launched a customer-to-customer e-commerce platform, Taobao, targeting the domestic market. The key historical context here is the fact that export-oriented factories in China were seeking new markets in the 2000s, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, which led to a sharp decline in exports (L. Zhang, 2020). Against this backdrop, Chinese factories sought opportunities within China, as did e-commerce platforms. The international e-commerce platform eBay also entered China in this period, implementing its global model of charging sellers "insertion fees, final-value fees, and feature fees" (Bloomberg, 2004; L. Zhang, 2020, p. 122). Unlike eBay, Taobao does not charge sellers fees and allows both sellers and consumers to communicate through

¹⁵ The situation changed slightly in the late 2000s when growth in developed areas in China slowed. Accordingly, beauty giants started paying attention to marginalized areas in China. For example, since the late 2000s, Procter & Gamble, Shiseido, and L'Oréal implemented market penetration strategies, seeking to open up markets in second, third, and fourth-tier cities (J. Lv & Chen, 2010; W. Yu, 2017). These giants, however, were much slower than e-commerce platforms, those newcomers in the distribution game.

the platform using its instant message function. Its commercial and technical designs “not only helped establish ‘swift trust’ in an unfamiliar virtual market perceived by many Chinese at that time as risky,” but also “functioned to improve the platform’s ‘stickiness’” (L. Zhang, 2020, p. 122). Taobao rapidly won out in its competition with eBay, becoming the largest e-commerce platform in China in 2006. In 2011, it was divided into two parts, Taobao and Taobaoshangcheng (known as Tmall from 2012). Whereas Taobao serves small sellers for free, Tmall serves bigger sellers but charges them registration fees.¹⁶ Taobao and Tmall form a highly integrated system. Indeed, a customer can log into both sites through one account.¹⁷ The number of their users grew from 30 million in 2006 to 785 million in 2019 (iteye_7787, 2014; Q. Sun, 2019). Given China’s population of 1.43 billion people, Taobao and Tmall are used relatively widely. Because of Taobao and Tmall’s popularity, accessibility, and ubiquity, Chinese beauty bloggers can easily operate stores and retail on these platforms, even with only small amounts of start-up capital. For beauty influencers in most Western societies, in contrast, running e-stores is inconvenient.

Broadly speaking, Taobao offers a new distribution channel, not just to beauty bloggers but to all retailers. Unlike brick-and-mortar stores, which rely heavily on good locations, Taobao circumvents this geographical limitation. Through Chinese delivery networks, Taobao can penetrate farther and deeper than other channels, reaching consumers wherever they are. E-commerce presents new opportunities for cosmetic brands. E02, a former manager from L’Oréal, told me that “[s]o far, users of smartphones in China have exceeded 700 million. Technically speaking, there is no blind spot for the internet in China, so there is no blind spot for e-commerce.” He believes that “e-commerce is the best distribution channel” for beauty brands that have no foundation in third-tier cities and below (interview, August 2018).

In fact, in the 2000s e-commerce in China did not greatly benefit multinational corporations, which already had successful models for global markets and were trying

¹⁶ Whereas small beauty bloggers prefer to retail selected products from multiple (foreign) brands on Taobao, big beauty bloggers are prone to launching their own brands on Tmall.

¹⁷ Although Taobao and Tmall have different sites and applications, they share the same user data and supporting infrastructure, like different companies using the same logistics system. As a result, in the Chinese context references to Taobao or Tmall often signify the Taobao-Tmall complex.

to replicate these in China. They did not see e-commerce's great potential for the beauty industry. At the global level, cosmetic companies did not pay much attention to online sales in the 2000s, although they conducted online marketing on the internet. "[T]he internet, although the iconic symbol of a flat world, continued to be used more as a marketing tool than as a retail channel. It is difficult to purchase make-up online because of the challenge of accurately choosing proper colors, and impossible to choose fragrances" (Jones, 2010, p. 339). Obviously, business experts did not foresee that beauty bloggers would be such an asset when it came to choosing colors and fragrances online. In China, business management experts treated e-commerce as a weak distribution channel of cosmetics for the following reasons:

First, most premium products sold online are counterfeited, smuggled, or bootleg products. Second, consumers are not fully protected from online fraud, even though all online sales websites are subject to government approval. Third, the logistics service industry is not well developed to support the pick-up and delivery services for online customers. As such, few known brands offer online sales services directly to customers. (Tony Wu et al., 2008, p. 216).

While the multinational cosmetic corporations adopted a conservative attitude toward online sales, beauty retail became very common and popular on e-commerce sites, especially Taobao. From the mid-2000s when middle- and upper-class beauty bloggers began recommending foreign beauty products to their audiences, they invoked the public demand for beauty products. Some of the recommended products had official sales channels in China, but they are usually more expensive than that might be in foreign sales channels, given the high duties that China levies on imported cosmetics. The duties, including a tariff, VAT, and consumption tax, amounted to 20% and 40% for ordinary and high-end cosmetics respectively (W. Wang, Wang, Hu, & Lin, 2018). The other recommended cosmetics had no distribution channels in China at all. Whereas beauty bloggers brought them overseas, it would seem that shopping abroad is not a convenient option for most blog followers desiring luxury cosmetics. The asymmetry between the

huge market demand for beauty products in China and limited, expensive supply has led to a special e-commerce genre, *daigou* (L. Zhang, 2017). Literally “substitute shopping” in Chinese, *daigou* refers to both people who buy things for others and the practices of buying things for others. Beauty *daigous* usually buy beauty products overseas and resell them in China through e-commerce sites such as Taobao. Most *daigous* circumvent customs so as to provide beauty products at lower prices than formal distribution channels. Beauty *daigous* are active on social media. Indeed, their inventories are usually decided by popular trends among beauty bloggers and on social media *daigous* can directly communicate with consumers regarding their needs. A considerable number of beauty bloggers are also beauty *daigous*. For instance, between 2008 and 2010, the top beauty blogger Zhang Mofan resold Australian essential oils on Taobao while her influencer career got going on social media (S. Sun, 2018). Retailers such as *daigous* on Taobao accounted for a large proportion of the beauty business from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. It is important to notice that *daigous*’ popularity results from high and rapidly increasing demand and limited supply channels. This disparity between supply and demand distinguishes China from mature markets in places such as Western Europe, North America, or China’s neighbor Japan, where longstanding distribution systems provide customers with adequate supply even without online sales. Since the mid-2010s, e-commerce platforms, having grown significantly from the proliferation of small retailers, have also begun importing foreign products. In 2014, Tmall launched *Tianmao guoji* (Tmall International) within the Tmall site, inviting big importers to resell overseas products through this channel; in 2015, JD, an e-commerce platform that resembles Amazon, launched *Jingdong quanqigou* (JD Global Shopping), encouraging retailers to sell imported products (W. Wang et al., 2018). These sites make imported cosmetics more accessible to consumers and facilitate the consumption of beauty products in China.

Multinational corporations’ conservative attitude toward online sales left an opening that e-commerce platforms exploited, allowing the latter to build its distribution channels in a loose environment. It also presented an opportunity for domestic brands, which had no advantages when using traditional distribution channels. These previously marginalized brands unhesitatingly launched their stores on e-commerce platforms and

closely cooperated with beauty bloggers, leading to a rise in their market share. Following a decade of development in e-commerce, local beauty brands' share of the Chinese market surpassed 50% in 2016 for the first time (Rähse, 2020, p. 38). This is a remarkable turnaround, for foreign brands had dominated China's beauty market since the 1980s.

By 2018, e-commerce had become the largest distribution channel for beauty products in China (K. Xu, 2019). Despite being a newcomer, it has surpassed all other channels that have been developing over four decades. In so doing, it had made beauty products accessible to many more consumers in China that could access them before. On the one hand, the accessibility of beauty products entrenches beauty bloggers' role, for their online content serves consumers who have no or limited access to offline stores. Their recommendations regarding beauty products are key to converting online browsing into real orders. For this reason, e-commerce platforms need them. On the other hand, the accessibility of diverse beauty products allows more consumers to develop into beauty bloggers. Against this backdrop, we can understand why beauty bloggers are so popular in China and why their influence keeps increasing. When beauty bloggers help the distribution sector sell commodities, distributors give them their full support (including payments and the latest beauty products). Yet again, this indicates the importance of considering materiality in analyzing beauty blogging: distribution networks, which stimulate the growth of beauty bloggers, are not fully accounted for by the concept of immaterial labor. Distribution networks, especially e-commerce platforms, send Chinese consumers beauty products from around the world. Immaterial labor is involved in the building and operation of distribution networks, not least when it comes to ICT and services. But distribution networks rely heavily on tangible actors and infrastructures, including the transportation system, organizations, and distributors. This underscores the importance of material networks for selling beauty products. From the vantage point of the beauty business, the strong tie between beauty bloggers and distributors hastens the bloggers' integration into e-commerce platforms, which I will analyze in the next section.

4.5 The Social Commerce Model

The 2000s saw not only the boom of e-commerce but the advent of *wanghongs* too. The latter had demonstrated their strong influence in the former. Having observed internet celebrities' enormous and direct ability to increase online sales, e-commerce platforms began proactively cooperating with or integrating social media platforms into their operations. For instance, at the beginning of the 2010s, Taobao received a significant flow of traffic from Weibo (Y. Lv, 2019). *Wanghongs*, who were active mainly on Weibo at this time, brought content to social media and users, user activities, and online sales to Taobao. Connected by *wanghongs* in this way, Alibaba and Weibo began cooperating. In 2013, Alibaba spent \$569 million acquiring an 18% stake in Weibo, becoming the second-largest stakeholder in the company from then on (Ghosh & Ramakrishnan, 2013). The cooperation between Alibaba and Weibo has reinvented social media and e-commerce, creating a community of shared interests and a business ecosystem. This ecosystem, which was been termed "social commerce" (*shejiao dianshang*), has great advantages in terms of technology, data, finance, and logistics (H. Xu, 2019). Involving both immaterial and material factors, it provides a solid infrastructure for the circulation of beauty products and reproduction of beauty bloggers.

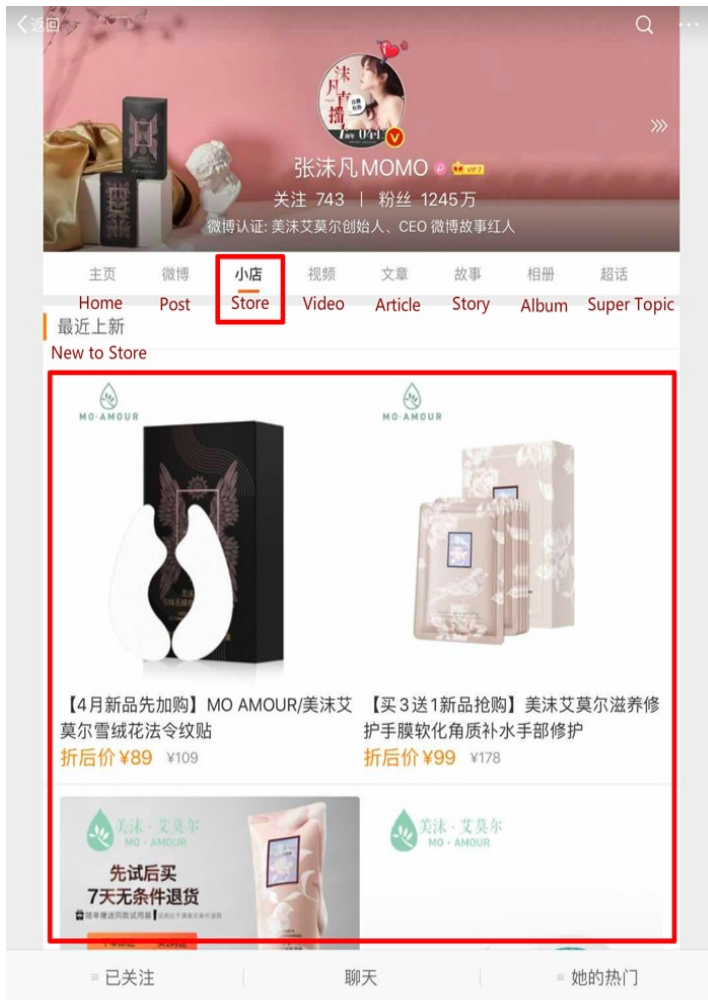
At the technological level, Alibaba and Weibo remove inter-platform barriers and ensure that users can smoothly move from Weibo to Taobao/Tmall. For example, beauty bloggers can present their inventories in Taobao/Tmall stores on Weibo. What is more, ordinary users can bind their Weibo and Taobao accounts. When users read beauty bloggers' posts on Weibo, they can easily add the products mentioned in them to their Taobao shopping carts or jump to the products' pages on Taobao. The integration of social media and e-commerce platforms allows these platforms to maximize their profits from an enlarged user pool.

For instance, when users go to beauty blogger Zhang Mofan's profile page on Weibo, they can also see her store (Figure 4.4). After clicking "Store," users can see products in Zhang Mofan's Tmall store. When users click on a certain product, the store page will automatically jump to the product's page on Weibo (see Figure 4.5). At the bottom of this page (as I indicate with the red box at the bottom of Figure 4.5), users can choose to either add this product to Taobao shopping cart and continue browsing

on Weibo or click “product detail,” which automatically opens the Taobao application and lands users on the product’s Taobao page (see Figure 4.6). There will be a Weibo icon on this page (see the red box to the left on Figure 4.6), allowing users to return to Weibo with an easy tap.

Figure 4.4

The screenshot of Zhang Mofan’s Weibo profile



Note. Retrieved on April 13, 2020, from Zhang Mofan’s account on Weibo. For this screenshot did not have an independent link, I could not put its link here.

Figure 4.5

A product's page on Weibo



Note. Retrieved on April 13, 2020, from Zhang Mofan's account on Weibo. For this screenshot did not have an independent link, I could not put its link here.

Figure 4.6

Screenshot of a product's page on Taobao



Note. Retrieved on April 13, 2020, from Zhang Mofan's store on Taobao. For this page did not have an independent link, I could not put its link here.

This interface design ensures that users can move freely between Weibo and Taobao. Through this technological connection, Weibo and Taobao can accurately monitor data flows between the two platforms, thus revealing patterns of consumer behavior as well

as beauty blogger's influence on them. It turns out that the social commerce complex, consisting of beauty bloggers, social media platforms, and e-commerce platforms, is effective and efficient: with the technical convenience between Taobao and Weibo, the gross merchandise value of one blogger's beauty store reached ¥50 million in one year (Y. Lv, 2019). Investing in Weibo has helped Alibaba reap more profit, diversify its business, and expand its territory. After the success of the Weibo-Taobao coalition, Alibaba has continued to integrate social media platforms into its business empire. In 2016, it launched Taobao Livestream, on which Li Jiaqi became famous. In 2018, Alibaba collaborated with Douyin, an emerging video-sharing platform, so as to allow users to embed links to Taobao/Tmall in their videos.

The mutual connections among *wanghong*s, social media, and e-commerce platforms are not exclusive to Weibo and Taobao. This circuit establishes a productive, profitable, and closed loop that uses internet celebrities efficiently to transform social media users into e-commerce consumers. This is a digital equivalent to a convergence of newspapers and supermarkets, but much more integrated than a simple addition of one to the other. Returning to the beauty industry's value chain, the convergence of social media and e-commerce actually integrates the marketing and distribution sectors, forming a new way of producing value. Smartphones largely collapse the spatial and temporal distance between a marketing outlet and distribution channel. When consumers of newspapers read advertisements, they are not necessarily able to go shopping immediately for the advertised commodities in brick-and-mortar stores. Using smartphones, though, they can jump straight from social media platforms to sales channels with one or two clicks. Besides, the data generated by users on both social media and e-commerce platforms provide platform owners with refined information with which they can predict user behaviors. As a result, the technical and business marriage between social media and e-commerce platforms "increases the efficiency of the marketing," "cultures new brands," and "expands consumption markets" (H. Xu, 2019). Economics commentators have presented this social commerce system, involving activities of "share, content production, and retail," as a new form of "platform economy" that is expected to "grow strong" (H. Xu, 2019).

Following Alibaba's model, other Chinese internet giants have put effort into building social-commerce loops. In 2015, NetEase Inc. launched an app named Wangyi Kaola, which features both an online forum and e-commerce. Xiaomi, a company famous for its smart devices, launched an e-commerce platform, Xiaomi YouPin, in 2017. A social-commerce circuit embedded in this smartphone application hosts an online community, in which users can share content. According to interviewee E08, who worked for JD, JD launched a content block about beauty on its shopping application so as to stoke consumers' desire for beauty consumption (interview, August 2018).

Besides technological bridges with social media and data monitoring, e-commerce giants also deploy financial tools to expand beauty markets. This is in marked contrast with beauty corporations, which rarely acquire and use financial tools. E02, who moved to an e-commerce company after working for L'Oréal for years, told me that the financial tools enrolled by e-commerce platforms largely serve to boost sales of beauty products:

[There is] a La Mer's flagship store on Tmall. A facial cream from La Mer sells for ¥1,800 (\$279) there. To our surprise, we see a high portion of below-24-year-old consumers while analyzing consumer information. How high is it? It is over 30% for the flagship store. What's more, according to our data, the majority of La Mer consumers are below 30. Young customers have an extremely strong buying power and they buy beauty products which are more high-end. One of the reasons is the popularity of online loan platforms ... such as Huabei,¹⁸ which allows you to pay online shopping bills in monthly installments. It eases your burden. (interview, March 2018)

The second-largest e-commerce platform in China, JD features the internet credit product JD Baitiao, which is similar to Huabei. Launched in 2014, JD Baitiao "offers users the option to 'buy now, pay later'" (Fan, 2017). In September 2018, I visited

¹⁸ *Huabei* is a consumer credit product launched by Ant Financial, which is affiliated with Alibaba.

China's International Beauty Expo, the largest beauty industry exhibition in the country. I saw JD staff promoting their platform to beauty manufacturers. A manager from JD Finance gave a speech about JD Baitiao, which, he said, "can be understood as an online credit card":

The users of JD Baitiao make orders much more frequently than ordinary JD users. ... In the JD Beauty Department, the per-customer transaction of Baitiao users is higher than ordinary JD users. During our campaign, it has brought more than 1,200 consumers for one brand per day. It can effectively shorten the time lag between two orders, at most by 47%. We mounted a promotional campaign before. Companies who participated in this campaign saw an increase in the total order number by 33%, a rise of UV¹⁹ by 10% during the campaign. (public speech, September 2018)

As we can see in the cases of Tmall and JD, online credit products from e-commerce platforms have boosted the consumption of beauty products. Beauty companies do not usually use online credit products as a part of their business, for it would not fit the strategy of integration (whether vertical or horizontal). As a result, beauty companies, even the global giants who have abundant resources and diversified business, have rarely stepped into the field of credit products. Chinese e-commerce platforms, by contrast, have proactively built online financial platforms and launched credit products. On the one hand, financial products allow these e-commerce platforms to develop their own payment channels and ensure the smooth operation of e-commerce; on the other, China's flawed and cumbersome financial infrastructure and institutions, including banks, means that Chinese e-commerce giants have been able to make an impact on the underdeveloped financial products market and build their user bases (Y. Chen, Mao, & Qiu, 2018; Chong, 2019; Plantin & de Seta, 2019). For these reasons, e-commerce platforms have used credit products whereas beauty companies have not. These credit products create an environment in which beauty bloggers' followers can move smoothly

¹⁹ UV is short for unique visitor, used here to refer to the number of IP addresses accessing one site.

from being audience members to consumers, even when they lack adequate purchasing power.

Some may wonder how these intangible factors—inter-platform integration, big data, and online credit products—provide a material base for beauty bloggers. In response, I would stress, first, that we must overcome the misunderstanding that digital products are purely immaterial. In analyzing data as a form of asset, scholar Yujie Chen (2015) argues that “[d]ata production has to be bound up with institutions also because it takes time, expertise, money, and cooperative competence” (p. 13). Her argument also applies to inter-platform integration, big data, and online credit products, all of which rely on tangible institutions and are bound up with their particular purposes. Staff, devices, capital assets, and so on each constitute material elements in institutions, which make online practices possible. Second, inter-platform integration, big data, and online credit products facilitate the material circulation of beauty products. The goal of these activities is not to build an immaterial world. Rather, they form a part of the general distribution network and work toward commerce in tangible products. To see these phenomena as purely immaterial, without understanding their role in distribution networks, is to “not see the wood for the trees.” It would also be mistaken to take them as purely material. Instead, it is necessary to see how these activities and sectors operate in both immaterial and material ways.

While the material contributions made inter-platform integration, big data, and financial systems are implicit and indirect, the material role of national logistics networks is more explicit and visible in that they lay a solid foundation for the circulation of beauty products. Interviewee A07 is a dedicated follower of beauty blogs. When I interviewed her, she lived in a small town in Central China, where there was no store or counter for renowned cosmetic brands or even drug-store brands such as Maybelline. However, she consumes imported cosmetics from Japan and France, which she can easily have delivered to her door. The scenario would have been impossible two decades ago, when Chinese logistics networks were weak and restrained.

A07's personal experience is a small footnote to China's fast-growing logistics networks. Driven by the rapid development of e-commerce, the delivery industry has penetrated further than ever before over the past two decades, going beyond major cities

to reach small cities and villages (Dianzishangwuyanjiuzhongxin, 2017; Xinping Li, 2019). Statistics illustrate that China's delivery industry sent out 1.2 billion packages in 2007 (State Post Bureau of The People's Republic of China, 2008); this number rose to 63.5 billion in 2019 (State Post Bureau of The People's Republic of China, 2021). Although e-commerce may not be the driving force behind the logistics industry in Western societies, where such networks developed long before e-commerce emerged, it plays two major roles in China. First, the e-commerce business directly increases the demand for third-party logistics companies such as the *sitongyida* group, which encompasses five private express companies: STO, YTO, ZTO, BEST, and Yunda. Established around 2000, these companies deliver a large portion of China's e-commerce orders. Given their strong presence in Chinese e-commerce, they are recognized as "typical e-commerce logistics entities" (Y. Huang, 2019). Second, e-commerce giants also strengthen the logistics infrastructure by directly building their own national logistics systems. For instance, in 2013 Alibaba launched a logistics company, Cainiao, in collaboration with four express companies and other investors. Cainiao offers logistics services at both the national and global levels. Since then, Alibaba has increased its stake in Cainiao from 41% in 2013 to 63% in 2019 (X. Chen, 2019). Through these actions, Alibaba has been able to secure not only its e-commerce business, but also a large share of the growing logistics industry. Alibaba's rival JD has also developed its logistics network. Establishing warehouses and delivery stations across China, it has built "the largest smart e-commerce logistics network in Asia" (X. Xu, 2019). Like blood vessels, these widely distributed logistics channels send beauty products to consumers in cities and villages and sustain the social commerce complex.

Cosmetics corporations and e-commerce platforms are two forces driving the ever-greater distribution of beauty products. The former has achieved huge success by developing offline distribution channels; with its powerful engine, the latter expands online beauty markets. These two forces are not necessarily in conflict, for they both seek to maximize their profits. From the mid-2010s, multinational beauty giants have begun to pay attention to online retailing in China. One after another, high-end brands have launched flagship stores on Tmall (Tingrong Wu, 2015). Renowned global brands used to see online retailing as a channel for counterfeits. However, e-commerce

platforms' wide reach, especially those under Alibaba, has enticed these big names to drop their outdated prejudice against online retailing. Further, setting up e-stores on Tmall or JD not only means one more distribution channel but also brings these beauty companies into the social commerce complex, a highly integrated business ecology that beauty manufacturers would hardly be able to build on their own. Accordingly, many beauty brands that have long operated in China, such as Estée Lauder and Lancôme, launched Tmall stores in the mid-2010s. Foreign brands such as Nars and Iope, which had not officially entered China but whose products nevertheless circulated in China through *daigous*, also seized the opportunity and launched Tmall stores.

According to informant E05, who is a manager at Tmall, "Tmall has won Grand Slam events. Basically, all the beauty brands you know have settled down with Tmall" (interview, August 2018). Thanks to beauty bloggers and *daigous*, beauty brands have been able to enter the online market smoothly. As E02, who worked for L'Oréal and e-commerce firms, commented, "a lot of *daigous* have sold these things on Taobao before. These *daigou* stores have built a good consumer base, so it is quite easy for these brands to officially enter the (China) market" (interview, March 2018).

In becoming the biggest sales channel for beauty products, e-commerce has brought beauty bloggers further opportunities and fueled *wangbongs*' development. The Weibo-based beauty blogger B02 was once invited to share content on the new social commerce platform Wangyi Kaola. To motivate B02, the platform's editors promised that B02's account and content would be featured on the Wangyi Kaola forum, which could bring greater visibility (interview, August 2018). Xiaomi YouPin platform invited beauty blogger B15, who initially established her fan base on Red, to share content in its online community (interview, August 2019). She also received a similar invitation from a new social-e-commerce platform, Guodao. E08, a manager at JD, told me that JD had signed contracts with MCNs and asked beauty bloggers affiliated with these MCNs to regularly provide content about beauty. In this way, JD can stoke users' desire for consumption and facilitate its business (interview, August 2018). As these examples indicate, e-commerce platforms are eager to collaborate with beauty bloggers to boost the circulation of beauty commodities. It turns out that the social commerce model works

well in China. Between 2015 and 2020, the Chinese social-commerce market grew by 60% and reached more than 500 million consumers (H. Xu, 2019).

During the 2010s, China had the highest beauty market growth rate in the world (CBNData, 2019). This rapid expansion occurred largely—though not solely—thanks to the social commerce ecology. This ecology allows for the circulation of beauty products. In this context, beauty bloggers demonstrate their value by boosting sales. Outside China, the global beauty industry badly needs a fast-growing market, for mature markets in the West have little potential for fast growth. Whereas cosmetics sales grew slightly in the United States and United Kingdom between 2009 and 2018, they declined in other markets, such as Japan, France, and Italy (X. Wu, 2019). Against that backdrop, not only Alibaba, but global beauty giants are eager to see beauty products circulating more widely in China. With the global beauty industry seeking a new market, Chinese beauty bloggers are urgently needed.

Overall, I have demonstrated that beauty bloggers have not sprung up in such massive numbers in an ahistorical vacuum. This section has emphasized how the increase of beauty bloggers has been stimulated by the social commerce complex. From the perspective of value chains, the social commerce complex entails the convergence of marketing and distribution. Beauty bloggers are important in both sectors. The social commerce complex has a material basis: human resources that build inter-platform infrastructures and analyze big data; entities that set up online credit platforms; transport networks and delivery people that operate logistics networks; and the material circulation of beauty products. These human and non-human actors never show up in beauty bloggers' tutorials but play a crucial role in maintaining and facilitating beauty commerce, upon which beauty bloggers rely. Looking beyond the immaterial labor of beauty bloggers, we see that they are closely bound up with the global circulation of beauty products. Behind them stand beauty firms, both large and small, as well as powerful distribution networks. Beauty bloggers can make revenue from the beauty industry because they facilitate the convergence of marketing and distribution, and boost the circulation of beauty products. Because of beauty bloggers' influence, the beauty industry is willing to engage an increasing number of beauty bloggers in their business,

further stimulating the development of beauty blogging. Beauty bloggers and the beauty industry mutually facilitate each other.

Beauty bloggers have also participated in a shift in China's role in the beauty industry: at the beginning of the twenty-first century, foreign corporations dominated China's market and domestic manufacturing firms were constrained; by the end of the 2010s, domestic firms make up half of the market. That said, China has enhanced its position in the GVC for it participates more in high value-added sectors, like branding and marketing, than before. Although it would be too much to conclude that beauty bloggers have precipitated this shift, it is fair to say that they have contributed to it by promoting a lifestyle that involves consuming beauty products and establishing domestic brands. Although the *wanghong* economy has not fundamentally transformed China from being the world's factory into a branding or marketing center, it has undoubtedly complicated China's role in the GVC.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the material underpinnings and historical foundations of the recent boom of Chinese beauty blogging by examining the beauty industry's value chain. I have stressed beauty bloggers' influence in promoting cosmetics and how corporations and distributors have driven and facilitated the proliferation of Chinese beauty bloggers in the first two decades of their growing role in the industry. In emphasizing beauty bloggers' material contributions I do not aim to reject the importance of immaterial labor. Rather, in this chapter I have meant to explain this social media phenomenon by situating it in a long history of global capitalism. Beauty bloggers help beauty firms and distributors reap more values from the beauty trade; in return, they are encouraged and supported by beauty firms and distributors. Posting personal consumption experiences online is not profitable in itself. Beauty blogging becomes lucrative only when it boosts the beauty industry's capacity to realize value. This perspective helps us understand how and why the beauty industry has taken pains to further the proliferation of beauty bloggers.

Seen in relation to the GVC, the *wanghong* economy is not solely about internet celebrities. Although it involves sales of beauty products from the Global North, it also

entails the growth of domestic firms. I have found that through beauty bloggers and e-commerce, domestic firms are able to leverage the extent system and participate in high value-added sectors. In their received account of the global production system, Hopkins and Wallerstein (1977) conclude that “unequal exchange operating through a set of mechanisms ... continually reproduces the basic core-periphery division of labor itself” (p.117). In contrast, I have indicated that actually China has not continually reproduced its periphery position in the GVC. Beauty bloggers and Chinese firms are taking steps toward positioning themselves in the high value-added segment of the chain, such as building local brands and marketing. The increasing market share of domestic beauty brands is proof of this: China can go beyond the role of the world’s factory, participate in high value-added sectors in the beauty industry, and gain a greater share of the value system. Still, Western Europe, the United States, and Japan remain central in the global beauty industry, for Chinese firms have only increased their share of China’s domestic market, not the global market. But the case of China still shows that a peripheral country in the GVC can avoid being stuck in the perpetual loop of peripherality and improve its position in the global production system.

The commercial success of beauty bloggers provides us with one place to start unpacking the *wanghong* economy in China. This chapter has emphasized that the high margins of beauty products has allowed beauty bloggers to achieve early and salient successes in the *wanghong* economy. This does not mean they are the only beneficiaries in the *wanghong* economy. Other types of *wanghong* are also proactively seeking opportunities in the market. Although travel and food bloggers were not considered profitable by social media platforms, they explore alternative approaches to monetization. One Chinese food blogger, for example, has shared recipes since 2010, but this has brought her audiences rather than profits. In 2016, she launched a Taobao store selling kitchenware. Besides selling selected products from multiple brands, she has established her own kitchenware brand, for which she orders customized products from Chinese factories. This suggests that, by building brands, food bloggers, as well as other bloggers, can participate in the growth of the *wanghong* economy. Although not all *wanghongs* can take part in the highly lucrative beauty industry, they do share the benefits of China being the world’s factory and can target Chinese consumers. A wide range of

wanghongs are therefore able to integrate brand-making and supply chain management into their influencer business. The *wanghong* economy should not be understood solely as a result of the prosperity of Chinese social media. Indeed, it is supported by domestic factories, which are bound up with China's long-term role in the global production system. The *wanghong* economy integrates diverse domestic actors, including *wanghongs*, e-commerce platforms, and factories, and expands the domestic market. It allows China to explore high value-added sectors rather than limit itself to value-added manufacturing. Above all, as an ongoing process, the *wanghong* economy is giving China a new meaning, whereby it is no longer been seen as merely the world's factory.

The economics of internet celebrities unfold differently in different societies, whether developed or developing. The *wanghong* economy is the outgrowth of particular conditions in China. To be sure, I would not essentialize the *wanghong* economy as a Chinese phenomenon. Rather than being an outgrowth of an essential Chinese culture, it is driven by the widespread use of social media, enormously popular influencers, growing consumer markets, and sufficient suppliers. Based on my research, I contend the *wanghong* economy has developed successfully in China because all of these factors have been present there in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

In identifying the material foundation of beauty blogging, I have also noticed a material challenge: although beauty bloggers reap profits from the circulation of beauty products, this also creates problems. Specifically, it leads to damage being done to the natural environment. Indeed, the beauty industry uses toxic ingredients. Scientists have found that benzophenone-2 (BP-2), which is commonly used as a sunscreen additive, can pollute seawater through human activity on coastlines and eventually endanger coral reefs (Downs et al., 2014). BP-2 is used widely, appearing in "over 380 different product lines of soap, laundry detergents, cosmetics and body fragrances" (Udasin, 2014). Plastic microbeads are commonly used in rise-off facewash and shower gel. Through household drains, they make their way into rivers, lakes, and oceans, where they harm marine life from zooplankton to whales (Browne et al., 2011; Dauvergne, 2018; Desforges, Galbraith, & Ross, 2015). Another of the beauty industry's problems is waste packaging. The beauty industry pays huge attention to producing exquisite bottles and packaging, which are associated with quality and thus lure consumers to pay. Globally, the

packaging industry for beauty and personal care products, makes \$25 billion in sales (Borunda, 2019). However, the main material used in packaging, namely plastic, is unrecyclable. Most plastic packaging ends up in landfill sites. The beauty industry's devastating effects on nature go beyond toxicity and waste: consider its overdependence on palm oil, a raw material that is widely used in cosmetic manufacturing, leads to massive deforestation, destruction of wildlife habitats, and carbon emissions (Tullis, 2019), or use of volatile organic compounds in hair products, which contribute to air pollution in urban areas (Coggon, 2018). For all the beauty industry's glowing rhetoric and visual culture, its material effects on the environment are far from beautiful.

From a perspective informed by GVCs, it is certainly worth growing China's beauty industry, for it has great potential for this developing country. Given its ecological effects, though, does the growth of China's beauty industry (and indeed the global beauty industry) benefit humans in the long run? Should the *wanghong* economy consider not only the business ecology it creates but also its impact on the environment? Actors in the *wanghong* economy rarely put these questions on the table, let alone offer satisfying answers. Only when we see the materiality at stake in beauty blogging and the *wanghong* economy can we identify their footprints in the material world and address these material problems as part of the academic discussion in this field.

Overall, in adopting a material approach I have mapped beauty bloggers' position in the global beauty industry's value chain, examined beauty bloggers at both the transnational level and in the particular context of China, and revealing the complex relations among beauty bloggers, manufacturers, and distributors. Ultimately, my aim in this chapter has been to show how the social media phenomenon of beauty blogging functions as part of the entrenched capitalist system.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Beauty, Economy, and the Future

The dissertation has shown how beauty blogging has become influential in China. As a space for gender performance, beauty blogging attracts post-socialist entrepreneurial individuals and produces knowledge regarding how to be a proper, charming woman in everyday life. As a mechanism of content production, it is exploited by social media platforms to mobilize beauty amateurs and has become an institution for managing platform labor. What is more, it has played a vital part in restructuring the Chinese beauty economy, connecting Chinese consumers to the beauty manufacturing industry's supply chains. Although my analysis has attended to the three themes of gender, platformization, and the industrial economy, I have not offered three independent stories. Indeed, the transformation of gender norms, platformization of beauty blogging, and restructuring of China's beauty industry intertwine with and facilitate each other. Together, they have made beauty blogging an influential model in China's *wanghong* economy.

Along with the development of beauty blogging, beauty per se has shifted from being a niche, middle-class concern at the beginning of the twenty-first century to being an established theme on internet platforms by the end of the 2010s. The multiple aspects of beauty blogging reveal how beauty is circulated in a digital yet material, cultural yet economic, personalized yet institutionalized assemblage. Beauty blogs come into focus as a key site of convergence at which diverse actors benefit from the sale of beauty. Ultimately, the rise of beauty blogging tells a story of China's economic and societal restructuring through new media. After presenting the dynamics of Chinese beauty blogging, I would like to highlight three points to conclude my dissertation.

First of all, the state has played a hidden but significant role in stimulating connections among the players involved in the Chinese beauty blogging business and paved the way for the rise of beauty blogging and the *wanghong* economy. Although the

previous chapters focus on individuals, social media, the beauty industry, and e-commerce platforms, this does not mean that the state has had no role in this field.

On one hand, the state has established concrete technological infrastructures—these have provided the foundation upon which digital platforms have grown. Wide-ranging internet access and the rapidly updating mobile internet have allowed millions of users to connect with online platforms. These overlooked infrastructures provide “a basis or framework for other, more immediately noticeable technologies to work upon” (Hine, 2016, p. 23). Although beauty bloggers or platform owners rarely mention this fast-developing technological basis, its invisible infrastructures determine whether beauty blogging can enter into people’s daily lives. Accordingly, I would suggest that when we talk about the *wanghong* economy, we put too much emphasis on *wanghongs*. Actually, it is the massive number of social media users that make this economic sector work. And the key precondition of there being massive numbers of users is an internet that accessible to all, which is the state’s achievement. In the absence of the state’s investment in the communication infrastructure, there is no other actor capable of building a national, public information network serving all individuals and entities regardless of their civil or commercial purposes. The state’s role in building infrastructure has been irreplaceable, then, but yet this is seldom reflected in scholarship on beauty blogging and the *wanghong* economy.

On the other hand, the state has made strategic attempts to boost and integrate China’s communication and manufacturing industries. In 2000 China had included the ICT industry in its “state strongly encouraged sectors,”²⁰ which cover “hardware manufacturing, network operation and management, and digital media” (Yu Hong, 2017, p. 8). Since then, the State Council has released a series of long-term development strategies for the industry.²¹ The Chinese state considers the ICT industry crucial to its efforts to ingrate China into the global economy and gain more control over the country’s economic development (Yu Hong, 2017, pp. 7–11). Given that ICT is a

²⁰ See the catalog released by the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China (2005).

²¹ See the documents released by the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China (2009).

strategic sector for China, the prevalence of blogging and social media becomes less surprising. This is not just one specific media format becoming popular, but the result of the structural evolution of China's ICT industry. This industry, however, cannot rebalance the Chinese economy on its own. China has a rich legacy in the form of its traditional manufacturing industries. These used to be at the forefront of China's export-oriented economy in the 1990s and still have strong foundations today. It is for this reason, that the idea of integrating the ICT industry, particularly the internet, with the manufacturing industries has taken off. In 2015, Premier Li Keqiang announced the "Internet Plus" blueprint, which aims to combine the information industry with traditional industries and thus mutually upgrade them. Beauty blogging is doubtlessly part of this broad picture. It connects the cosmetics industry with the internet and profoundly influences both sectors. On one side, beauty has become an entrenched content genre on the internet. On the other, digital platforms have altered China's cosmetics industry in terms of both manufacturing and distribution, as I have argued in the foregoing chapters.

In 2020, the world was unexpectedly hit by a pandemic, leading to economic stagnation and fluctuations in the China-US trade war, signifying a deepening rift between the two states. Against this backdrop, China unveiled the "internal circulation" strategy of economic development (K. Yao, 2020), which aims at reducing China's dependence on global consumption and gaining more independence through reorienting industry towards domestic consumption. Here again, the state prioritizes domestic consumption. Beauty blogging and the wider *wanghong* economy function well in relation to internal circulation well. Accordingly, they are likely to receive support through China's macroeconomic policies and further expand in the coming years.

By emphasizing the role of the state, I argue that the explosive development of beauty blogging in China is neither merely individual nor solely cultural. Rather, it is a result of connections and cooperation among heterogeneous actors at a specific historical conjuncture. The state's continuous efforts make all of these social, cultural, and commercial interactions possible, despite its low-key role in the otherwise hectic *wanghong* economy. Taking the state into account also stands to enrich our understanding of influencers in other societies.

Second, the popularity of beauty blogging suggests that beauty has played an indispensable role in China's economic reform in that the former has driven and strengthened the latter and vice versa. The revival of gender essentialism in the Post-Maoist Era and importation of Western-influenced femininity have accelerated the collapse of revolution-oriented gender norms, clearing the way of ideological obstacles for beauty consumption and the market economy. Also, the expanding beauty market has propelled discourses of female bodily beauty, speeding up the marginalization of revolutionary female icons and intensifying women's pursuit of fair skin, youth, and skinniness.

Statistics on China's beauty market provide solid proof of beauty's increasing importance in China. In 2001, the Chinese beauty market made up a mere ¥1.64 billion in sales. By 2020, these had increased to ¥340 billion. The beauty economy fuels domestic consumption and furthers China's economic transformation. One cannot overemphasize women's role in China's economic development: they are the beauty market's target consumers and the principal advocates of highly gendered beauty discourses. Through social media, such as blogs and microblogs, ordinary women are able to participate in the production of beauty knowledge and spread their ideas among social media users in an intimate manner. Unlike elite-led traditional media outlets, their beauty pedagogy is always personal, amiable, and relatable for audiences, allowing them to enter into women's lives without causing alarm. And unlike traditional celebrities, the pedagogy that these bloggers provide is always down to earth and is easy to follow. Exactly the pursuit of gendered beauty generates a sense of urgency around beauty consumption, inciting women into the economy and boosting domestic consumption in the world's factory.

Beauty consumption certainly offers Chinese women easy pleasures: unlike involvement in the anti-domestic violence movement, political participation, or other activities aiming at confronting structural issues by way of direct struggle, buying cosmetics represents an easy way of changing one's perception of oneself. And some women gain fame and fortune through buying cosmetics and therefore becoming beauty bloggers. However, this raises a problematic question: does this benefit 99% of women? Most women do not correspond to the ideal female image put forward in beauty blogs,

according to which women should have fair skin and infantilized, slim features. This ideal figure only devalues women. Relying on heavy consumption, beauty blogging excludes lower-class women. By defining how beautiful women should look in daily life, women with cultural capital accrue greater power; women with a lot of purchasing power can make more money through beauty blogging. This system shows no intention of inviting women from the bottom of societies to participate in shaping its future: culturally, the beauty hierarchy needs an Other through which it can distinguish the beautiful from the ugly, the proper from the improper, the higher class from the lower. It can be risky for lower-class women to imitate beauty bloggers' routines, which requires shouldering financial burdens rather than bringing opportunities. Generally speaking, unlike beauty bloggers, manufacturers, and the state, a large number of women do not gain much from the *wanghong* economy.

As scholars Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser (2019) have put it, “[f]eminism shouldn’t start—or stop—with the drive to have women represented at the top” (p. preface). Beauty should not either. If beauty serves only to divide classes in the most visible possible way, its absence would not be a huge loss for a society concerned to establish equality. Ironically, it is hard for China to imagine the end of beauty, for this country—which still claims to be socialist—relies heavily on capitalism. Nevertheless, we need to go beyond beauty’s entanglements with capitalism and expand our imaginary. Culturally, the ideal construction of beauty should offer participation and create space for 99% of people—not just women and not just people with purchasing power. Economically it should shorten the class gap rather than widen the gap.

Beauty blogging is still influential in China in 2021. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has forced people to spend more time online than ever, the appealing looks presented by beauty bloggers, constant beauty content circulating on news feeds on social media, and promotional campaigns on social commerce complex are still penetrating women’s daily lives. I have no intention of fixing beauty blogging as a purely consumerist space manipulated by the commercial world. Rather, it is a dynamic sphere that actors are constantly defining. In creatively exploring new directions for beauty—some which are not only inclusive and accessible to the majority but also vigilant against the reassertion of patriarchal gender norms—bloggers and their audiences can liberate

Chinese women from endless consumption and the anxiety-inducing image of the ideal “fair, infantilized, slim” girl. For the public, this journey can start by reactivating the memory of Socialist-Era beauty practices and reflecting on how beauty might challenge, rather than serve, capitalism.

From the vantage point of internet studies, beauty blogging firmly demonstrates the hybrid nature of China’s digital evolution. Unlike an abstract space that invites generic users, this digital space develops along the dimension of gender, providing various groups with totally different experiences. Forgetting the gendered aspect would only marginalize female users, who constitute the majority of *wangbongs* and consumers. If the key participants of the digital economy are usually imagined as male engineers or programmers, the digital *wangbong* economy is based on users who have a medium level of technological skill but use digital platforms very frequently. Rather than depend on a single platform, whose codes operate in black boxes, this digital activity moves across diverse platforms, calling for coordinated sequences among entities. This digital circuit does not run in a purely virtual world, but proceeds on basis of materiality. Indeed, it has considerable effects on various physical phenomena, including but not limited to human bodies, systems of mass production, and the environment. My analysis of beauty blogging has shown multiple aspects of digital platforms and the forces behind them. What is more, it has also called for an integrated perspective able to identify the non-abstract, non-digital, and non-technological elements in and around digital technologies.

Third, the rise of beauty blogging in China is an embodiment of global capitalism, which has strong ties with the beauty industry’s pre-digital system of mass production. Noticing this makes it possible to compare Chinese beauty bloggers with their Western counterparts. From my point of view, Chinese beauty bloggers differ from Western beauty influencers in how they operate, but they both share the same fundamental logic.

Going back to the question that I posed in the Introduction, how should we understand Chinese beauty bloggers in light of the global prevalence of beauty influencers? The foregoing chapters have explained that Chinese beauty bloggers have emerged in a culturally, technologically, and technologically specific context. Accordingly, they rely on or are bound up with gender discourses, social media platforms, and monetization channels that are rooted in China. All of these distinct

factors have shaped and driven the rise of beauty blogging in China, which should not be reduced to a universal template for understanding influencers. The common ground between Chinese beauty bloggers and Western beauty influencers should not be overlooked, either. After all, both groups rely on social media platforms, build their reputations on the basis of heavy beauty consumption, and monetize their reputations on social media. The reason that they are able to monetize their online reputation is that social media allows cosmetic manufacturers to increase their profits enormously; profits made by beauty influencers and social media derive from the surplus-value accrued by the beauty industry. Both beauty consumption and social media serve the same profit-driven, value-maximizing mechanism, namely capitalism. In that sense, nearly all beauty influencers perform the same function of selling beauty as part of the capitalist system, be they Chinese and American.

This shared role leads to a shared problem. Beauty consumption is having harmful effects on the vulnerable global environment. Chemicals in sunscreen are killing coral reefs; luxurious bottles become plastic waste; the raw materials used in beauty products result in deforestation... When the beauty industry damages the environment, no one can say whether it is US or Chinese beauty influencers that should be held responsible for the disappearance of forests or death of coral reefs. This is because the production and circulation of beauty products operate at a global level. The leviathan of capitalism stands behind each specific consumer. Endless beauty consumption brings transient pleasures while inflicting long-lasting damage on the Earth; the infinite circulation of beauty products only advances capital accumulation while harming humans' shared home. Only when we step outside our social media bubbles can we identify capitalism's gigantic and far-reaching effects; only when we grasp its hidden but powerful implications can we go beyond diverse local contexts and put our shared problems on the table. Above all, we need to reflect on how beauty works in our world presently and how it should work in the future.

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Appendix

No.	Pseudonyms	Role	Residence Place	Interview Time
1	A01	Loyal follower	Beijing	2018.03.05
2	A02	Loyal follower	Shanghai	2018.03.28
3	A03	Loyal follower	Shanghai	2018.03.31
4	A04	Loyal follower	Shanghai	2018.04.08
5	A05	Loyal follower	Shanghai	2018.04.10
6	A06	Loyal follower	Puyang	2018.08.07
7	A07	Loyal follower	Puyang	2018.08.08
8	A08	Loyal follower	Leiden	2018.12.15
9	A09	Loyal follower	Beijing	2019.03.17
10	B01	Beauty blogger	Shanghai	2017.12.07
11	B02	Beauty blogger	Beijing	2017.12.17 2019.11.26
12	B03	Beauty blogger	Tianjin	2017.12.19
13	B04	Beauty blogger	Tianjin	2017.12.21
14	B05	Beauty blogger	Hangzhou	2017.12.24
15	B06	Beauty blogger	Beijing	2017.12.25
16	B07	Beauty blogger	Unknown	2017.12.30
17	B08	Beauty blogger	Chengdu	2018.01.03
18	B09	Beauty blogger	Dalian	2018.01.03
19	B10	Beauty blogger	Cambridge/Shanghai	2018.01.03

20	B11	Beauty blogger	Shanghai	2018.01.07
21	B12	Beauty blogger	Beijing	2018.01.08
22	B13	Beauty blogger	Shenzhen	2018.10.01 2019.11.26
23	B14	Beauty blogger	Tokyo	2019.04.30
24	B15	Beauty blogger	Shanghai	2019.08.13
25	B16	Beauty blogger	Beijing	2020.03.04
26	E01	Agent of a top wanghong	Hangzhou	2018.01.08
27	E02	Manager of L'Oréal marketing department	Shanghai	2018.03.30
28	E03	Marketing manager of a cosmetic company	Shanghai	2018.03.31
29	E04	Marketing manager of a cosmetic company	Shanghai	2018.04.29
30	E05	Marketing manager of Tmall	Hangzhou	2018.08.18
31	E06	Sales manager of a beauty company	Chengdu	2018.08.19
32	E07	Manager of Weibo market department	Beijing	2018.08.22
33	E08	Manager of JD beauty department	Beijing	2018.08.26
34	E09	Founder of a MCN	Hong Kong	2018.08.28
35	E10	Industry analyst of an investment company	Guangzhou	2018.09.03
36	E11	Director of a marketing company	Utrecht	2019.01.21
37	E12	Founder of a MCN	Shanghai	2019.04.18
38	E13	Founder of an advertising agency	Shanghai	2020.05.29

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Summary

Beauty bloggers (*meizhuangbozhu*) are social media users who share content about beauty and thus accumulate fan bases online. In the context of China, beauty blogging emerged in the early 2000s before becoming an ever-growing trend in the mid-2010s. Beauty bloggers were merely marginalized sub-cultural groups on social media, with limited reach on mainstream media at the beginning. As it has grown, beauty blogging has been taken as a means by which people might reap fame and fortune overnight. As such, beauty blogging has become one of the best-known illustrations of the lucrative *wanghong* (internet celebrity) lifestyle at the end of 2010s. Together with other internet celebrities, they are leading China's *wanghong* (internet celebrity) economy. This leads to the key question posed in my dissertation: how did beauty blogging gain its cultural and economic success in China in the past two decades? Secondly, given the global prevalence of internet celebrities, what is the winning feature of Chinese beauty blogging or the Chinese *wanghong* economy?

My approach focuses on beauty blogging's expanding reach in China over the past two decades. It does not take the development of beauty blogs as a natural and predetermined process, nor as a necessary accompaniment to China's economic development or the spread of information technology. Instead, I problematize the rapid growth of beauty blogs, investigating how this process has been shaped and accelerated by gender discourses, platform labor, and the beauty industry, each of which is rooted in the broader context of China's social transformation in the reform era (1978-). I will explicate these three aspects one by one.

Gender is the most visible feature of Chinese beauty blogging: most beauty bloggers and their audiences are socially assigned females and identify as girls and women. My question is how gendered beauty is so powerful that it can gather a considerable number of women to build a digital space of beauty consumption. The craze of gendered beauty is recent since applying cosmetics was still considered moral degradation for some urban

Chinese. To investigate the reason why beauty blogs are popular, it is crucial to map out how gendered beauty mattered in the past two decades.

Platform labor is another important dimension to unpack the development of beauty bloggers in the past two decades. Platform labor refers to labor forces that work on platforms and contribute to platforms, although not necessarily hired by platforms. In that sense, beauty bloggers can be deemed as platform labor for they generate content and bring active users to social media platforms, and they are not hired by social media platforms. The urgent question is how they become platform labor since they are not necessarily at the stance of platforms. Thus, it is crucial to investigate the process of how beauty bloggers are tightly bound to platforms and serve as platform labor.

It would be unfair to investigate Chinese beauty bloggers without taking the beauty industry into account, for the former heavily relies on the latter. There existed no strong beauty market and industry in the late 20th century in China, so it is not unsurprising that beauty bloggers can lead the beauty consumption trend in upcoming years. More interestingly, the beauty blogger fever not only emerges in China, but also in other countries with well-developed beauty industries. From a global scale, how does the beauty industry connect with the increase of worldwide beauty bloggers? From a local scale, how does the Chinese beauty industry affect the development of beauty bloggers? Only when we explore the effects of the beauty industry, can we identify the role of beauty bloggers in a wider political economy frame.

Introduction situates the whole research in China's cultural, technical, and economic transformations and contextualizes my research questions in the broad social changes and local histories in China. This chapter travels back to the end of the 20th century and presents a sketch of China at that time, where cosmetic consumption was not appreciated by people, internet usage was limited to certain male elite users, and the GDP per capita was humble. All of these showed no signal of the popularity of beauty bloggers in upcoming years and urge us to denaturalize the prosperity of beauty bloggers in the 2010s.

Chapter 1 focuses on how beauty blogging, as a site of gender pedagogy, secured a fan base of urban young women. The blogger-audience relationship is extremely important in understanding beauty blogging's popularity. With the fall of socialist

ideology and the national transformation into a market economy, Chinese popular culture needed to erase the marks of socialist attitudes, such as the anti-consumption, anti-feminine image of women that prevailed in the 1960s and '70s. As a key site in the forgetting of Maoist gender practices, beauty blogs provided templates of ideal women, which featured fair skin, slim figures, and an infantilized appearance. Beauty blogs provide an aesthetic education for audience members who might not gain such knowledge from parents who grew up in a de-feminized environment. On the other hand, beauty blogs allow audience members to forge affective connections, who are very likely to be single children (having been raised under the one-child policy). Indeed, the prospect of aesthetic and affective bonding appeals to urban young women, who eagerly display their class and gender identities. Without follower bases made up of urban young women, beauty blogs could hardly realize their cultural and economic influence in China. Beauty blogs may look open, but they are not as inclusive as they claim. People who can be beauty bloggers must have the capacity for consumption and cultural capital; people who follow beauty blogs have buying power and leisure time. Although some beauty gurus try to sell their makeover skills as a way of empowering women living under more marginal social-economic conditions (such as middle-aged rural women), they fail to address the fundamental political-economic structures affecting women's lives. Rather, beauty pedagogy actually increases the economic burdens placed on women and widens class inequalities.

Chapter 2 reflects on beauty blogging as a mode of user creation and examines the ways in which spontaneous and unpredictable amateur production stabilized and expanded on Weibo. Whereas social media platforms allow beauty amateurs to share content online, they do not ensure that beauty amateurs across the world continually share content. The case study of Weibo shows how a platform can benefit from crafting policies and algorithms to transform the previously subcultural group of beauty amateurs (along with other amateur groups) into regular content producers. Beauty bloggers' digital labor has become a source of user activities and data for UGC platforms. If benefitting from beauty bloggers' content creation and sharing practices is already exploitative, Weibo indicates how exploitation can go further, namely by charging beauty bloggers with its algorithmic dominance. This is illustrated by fensi toutiao (followers'

headline). Founded on the blogger-platform relationship, the rise of beauty bloggers has involved spontaneous creators being systematically organized and exploited by social media platforms. It signifies a transformation from a centralized, professional mode of cultural production to an algorithm-aided mode of user production. This shift has precarized content creators.

Chapter 3 expands my analytical framework to encompass scholarship in political economy. In so doing, I put forward two original claims: first, the rise of beauty bloggers, a seemingly sophisticated new occupation in the digital economy, relies on the crude old business of non-digital capitalism; second, the wanghong economy is a result of China's changing role in the global system of value distribution. Beauty corporations' high expenditures on marketing result in the lucrativeness of beauty blogging for beauty blogs become a major channel of marketing in the digital age. Relying on beauty influencers becomes the shared feature of beauty brands in the present day. Accordingly, beauty influencing becomes an entrenched genre because of the constant sponsorship it receives, both in China and the West. Another driver behind Chinese beauty bloggers is the newly developed distribution system for beauty products, which has grown hand-in-hand with beauty bloggers. Chinese e-commerce platforms—latecomers to distribution networks—grew at lightning speed in the 2010s. Now that e-commerce has become the largest distribution channel for beauty products, beauty blogs (as an essential part of Chinese e-commerce) are well supported by e-commerce platforms. This has led to a close collaboration between Chinese beauty bloggers and e-commerce platforms. In this respect, Chinese beauty bloggers differ from Western beauty influencers.

Conclusion offers an integral frame to understand the drivers and effects of beauty bloggers and the wanghong economy in China. First, it emphasizes the hidden but significant role in stimulating the connections between players in the beauty blogging business and the wanghong economy, exemplified as state-led technological infrastructures and national strategies of integrating communication and manufacturing industries. By emphasizing the role of the state, I argue that the explosive development of beauty blogging in China is neither merely individual nor solely cultural. Rather, it is a result of connections and cooperation among heterogeneous actors at a specific historical conjuncture. Second, beauty has played an indispensable role in China's

economic reform in that the former has driven and strengthened the latter and vice versa. One cannot overemphasize women's role in China's economic development: they are the beauty market's target consumers and the principal advocates of highly gendered beauty discourses. Third, the rise of beauty blogging in China is an embodiment of global capitalism, which has strong ties with the beauty industry's pre-digital system of mass production. The flourishing beauty economy, be it in China or Europe, cannot conceal the destructive effects of capitalism on the environment. We need to reflect on how beauty works in our world presently and how it should work in the future.

Samenvatting

Beautybloggers (*meizhuangbozhu*) zijn gebruikers van sociale media die inhoud en informatie over schoonheid delen en zo online fanbases verzamelen. In de context van China ontstond begin jaren 2000 het beautybloggen en daarna werd het in het midden van de jaren 2010 een steeds meer groeiende trend. In het begin waren Beautybloggers slechts gemarginaliseerde subculturele groepen op sociale media, met een beperkt bereik binnen de reguliere media. Naarmate het groeide, werd beautybloggen gebruikt als een middel waarmee mensen ineens roem en fortuin konden oogsten. Als zodanig is beautybloggen aan het eind van de jaren 10 van de huidige eeuw, een van de bekendste illustraties geworden van de lucratieve levensstijl van *wanghong* (internetberoemdheden). Samen met andere internetberoemdheden, leiden ze de Chinese *wanghong*-economie (internetberoemdheid). Dit leidt tot de centrale vraag die in mijn proefschrift wordt gesteld: hoe heeft beautybloggen in de afgelopen twee decennia zijn culturele en economische succes in China behaald? Ten tweede, gezien de wereldwijde schare aan internetberoemdheden, wat is het winnende kenmerk van het Chinese beautybloggen of de Chinese Wanghong-economie?

Mijn aanpak is gericht op het groeiende bereik van beautyblogs in China in de afgelopen twee decennia. Het beschouwt de ontwikkeling van beautyblogs niet als een natuurlijk en vooraf bepaald proces, noch als een noodzakelijke aanvulling op de economische ontwikkeling van China, of de verspreiding van informatietechnologie. In plaats daarvan problematiseer ik de snelle groei van beautyblogs, en onderzoek ik hoe dit proces is gevormd en versneld door genderdiscoursen, platformarbeid en de schoonheidsindustrie, die allemaal geworteld zijn in de bredere context van China's sociale transformatie in het hervormingstijdperk (1978-). Ik zal deze drie aspecten één voor één toelichten.

Geslacht is het meest zichtbare kenmerk van Chinees beautybloggen: de meeste beautybloggers en hun publiek zijn van het vrouwelijk geslacht en identificeren zich als

meisjes en vrouwen. Mijn vraag is hoe gender gerelateerde schoonheid zo krachtig is dat het een aanzienlijk aantal vrouwen kan verzamelen om een digitale ruimte voor schoonheidsconsumptie op te bouwen. De rage van gender gerelateerde schoonheid is recent, aangezien het aanbrengen van cosmetica door sommige stedelijke Chinezen niet lang geleden als morele degradatie werd beschouwd. Om de reden te onderzoeken waarom beautyblogs populair zijn, is het cruciaal om in kaart te brengen hoe gender gerelateerde schoonheid er de afgelopen twee decennia toe deed.

Platformarbeid is een andere belangrijke dimensie voor de ontwikkeling van beautybloggers in de afgelopen twee decennia. Platformarbeid verwijst naar arbeidskrachten die op platforms werken en bijdragen aan platforms, hoewel niet noodzakelijkerwijs ingehuurd door platforms. In die zin kunnen beautybloggers worden beschouwd als platformarbeiders omdat ze inhoud genereren en actieve gebruikers naar sociale-mediaplatforms brengen, en ze worden niet ingehuurd door sociale-mediaplatforms. De urgente vraag is hoe ze platformarbeiders worden, aangezien ze niet per se als arbeider op de positie van de platforms staan. Het is dus cruciaal om het proces te onderzoeken van hoe beautybloggers nauw verbonden zijn met platforms en dienen als platformarbeid.

Het zou onterecht zijn Chinese beautybloggers te onderzoeken zonder rekening te houden met de schoonheidsindustrie, want de eerste is sterk afhankelijk van de laatste. Er bestond aan het einde van de 20e eeuw geen sterke schoonheidsmarkt en -industrie in China, dus het is niet verwonderlijk dat beautybloggers de komende jaren de trend van schoonheidsconsumptie kunnen leiden. Interessanter is dat de beautyblogger-koorts niet alleen naar voren komt in China, maar ook in andere landen met een goed ontwikkelde schoonheidsindustrie. Hoe verhoudt de schoonheidsindustrie zich wereldwijd tot de toename van wereldwijde beautybloggers? Welke invloed heeft de Chinese schoonheidsindustrie op lokale schaal op de ontwikkeling van beautybloggers? Alleen wanneer we de effecten van de schoonheidsindustrie onderzoeken, kunnen we de rol van beautybloggers in een breder politiek-economekader identificeren.

De Inleiding situeert het hele onderzoek in China's culturele, technische en economische transformaties en het contextualiseert mijn onderzoeksvragen in de brede sociale veranderingen en lokale geschiedenissen in China. Dit hoofdstuk gaat terug naar

het einde van de 20e eeuw en geeft een schets van China in die tijd, waar cosmetische consumptie niet werd gewaardeerd door mensen, internetgebruik beperkt was tot bepaalde mannelijke elitegebruikers en het GDP per capita nederig was. Dit alles toonde geen signaal van de stijgende populariteit van beautybloggers in de komende jaren en spoort ons aan om de voorspoed van beautybloggers in de jaren 2010 te denaturaliseren.

Hoofdstuk 1 richt zich op hoe beautybloggen, als een site voor genderpedagogiek, een schare fans van stedelijke jonge vrouwen heeft aangetrokken. De relatie tussen een blogger en diens publiek is uiterst belangrijk om de populariteit van beautybloggen te begrijpen. Met de val van de socialistische ideologie en de nationale transformatie in een markteconomie, moest de Chinese populaire cultuur de kenmerken van socialistische attitudes uitwissen. De kenmerken zijn onder andere de anticonsumptie-, en het anti-vrouwelijke beeld van vrouwen dat in de jaren zestig en zeventig de overhand had. Als een belangrijk onderdeel in het vergeten van maoïstische genderpraktijken, boden schoonheidsblogs sjablonen van ideale vrouwen, met een lichte huid, slanke figuren en een jong uiterlijk. Schoonheidsblogs bieden een esthetische opleiding voor leden van het publiek die dergelijke kennis misschien niet in staat zijn om op te doen. Dit doordat hun ouders zijn opgegroeid in een niet gefeminiseerde omgeving. Aan de andere kant stellen de beautyblogs het publiek, waarvan een aanzienlijk deel enig kind is (opgegroeid onder het een-kind-beleid), in staat om affectieve connecties te smeden. Inderdaad, het vooruitzicht van esthetische en affectieve binding spreekt jonge stadsvrouwen aan, die gretig hun klasse- en genderidentiteit tentoonspreiden. Zonder volgers, bestaande uit stedelijke jonge vrouwen, zouden beautyblogs hun culturele en economische invloed in China nauwelijks kunnen realiseren. Beautyblogs zien er misschien als open uit, maar ze zijn niet zo inclusief als ze beweren. Mensen die beautybloggers kunnen zijn, moeten de capaciteit hebben voor consumptie en cultureel kapitaal; mensen die beautyblogs volgen hebben koopkracht en vrije tijd. Hoewel sommige schoonheidsgoeroes hun make-over vaardigheden proberen te verkopen als een manier om vrouwen, die onder meer marginale sociaaleconomische omstandigheden leven (zoals plattelandsvrouwen van middelbare leeftijd), zo sterker te maken. Echter ze slagen er niet in de fundamentele politiek-economische structuren aan te pakken die het leven van vrouwen beïnvloeden.

Schoonheidspedagogiek vergroot juist de economische lasten voor vrouwen en vergroot de klassenongelijkheid.

Hoofdstuk 2 reflecteert op beautybloggen als een manier om gebruikers te creëren en onderzoekt de manieren waarop spontane en onvoorspelbare amateurproductie zich stabiliseerde en uitbreidde op Weibo. Terwijl social-mediaplatforms schoonheidsamateurs toestaan om online inhoud te delen, zorgen ze er niet voor dat schoonheidsamateurs over de hele wereld voortdurend inhoud delen. De casestudy van Weibo laat zien hoe een platform kan profiteren van het opstellen van beleid en algoritmen om de voorheen subculturele groep schoonheidsamateurs (samen met andere amateurgroepen) om te vormen tot reguliere contentproducenten. De digitale arbeid van beautybloggers is een bron van gebruikersactiviteiten en gegevens voor UGC-platforms geworden. Als profiteren van de praktijken van beautybloggers voor het maken en delen van content al uitbuitend is, geeft Weibo aan hoe uitbuiting verder kan gaan, namelijk door beautybloggers te belasten met zijn algoritmische dominantie. Dit wordt geïllustreerd door fensi toutiao (aantal volgers). Gebaseerd op de relatie tussen blogger en platform, heeft de opkomst van beautybloggers ertoe geleid dat spontane makers systematisch werden georganiseerd en uitgebuit door sociale-mediaplatforms. Het betekent een transformatie van een gecentraliseerde, professionele manier van culturele productie naar een door algoritmen ondersteunde manier van gebruikersproductie. Deze verschuiving heeft de positie van de makers van inhoud precar gemaakt.

Hoofdstuk 3 breidt mijn analytisch kader verder uit om de wetenschap in de politieke economie te omvatten. Daarbij heb ik twee originele beweringen voorop gezet: ten eerste, de opkomst van beautybloggers, een schijnbaar geavanceerde nieuwe bezigheid in de digitale economie, steunt op de ruwe oude zaken van het niet-digitale kapitalisme; ten tweede is de Wanghong-economie het resultaat van de veranderende rol van China in het mondiale systeem van waarde verdeling. De hoge marketinguitgaven van schoonheidsbedrijven resulteren in de lucratieve waarde van beautybloggen voor beautyblogs die in het digitale tijdperk een belangrijk marketingkanaal worden. Vertrouwen op beauty influencers wordt tegenwoordig het gedeelde kenmerk van beautymerken. Dienovereenkomstig wordt schoonheidsbeïnvloeding een diep geworteld

onderdeel van de digitale economie vanwege de constante sponsoring die het ontvangt, zowel in China als in het Westen. Een andere drijfveer achter Chinese beautybloggers is het nieuw ontwikkelde distributiesysteem voor schoonheidsproducten, dat hand in hand is gegroeid met de beautybloggers. Chinese e-commerceplatforms – laatkomers in het groeiend aantal distributienetwerken – groeiden in de jaren 10 van de huidige eeuw razendsnel. Nu e-commerce het grootste distributiekanaal voor schoonheidsproducten is geworden, worden beautyblogs (als essentieel onderdeel van Chinese e-commerce) goed ondersteund door e-commerceplatforms. Dit heeft geleid tot een nauwe samenwerking tussen Chinese beautybloggers en e-commerceplatforms. In dit opzicht verschillen Chinese beautybloggers van westerse beauty-influencers.

De Conclusie biedt een integraal kader om de drijfveren en effecten van beautybloggers en de wanghong-economie in China te begrijpen. Ten eerste benadrukt het de verborgen maar belangrijke rol bij het stimuleren van de connecties tussen spelers in de beautyblog-business en de Wanghong-economie, geïllustreerd als door de staat geleide technologische infrastructuur en nationale strategieën voor de integratie van communicatie- en productie-industrieën. Door de rol van de staat te benadrukken, beargumenteer ik dat de explosieve ontwikkeling van beautybloggen in China niet louter individueel, en ook niet louter cultureel is. Het is eerder het resultaat van verbindingen en samenwerking tussen heterogene actoren in een specifieke historische conjunctuur. Ten tweede heeft schoonheid een onmisbare rol gespeeld in de economische hervorming van China, omdat de eerste de laatste heeft gedreven en versterkt en vice versa. De rol van vrouwen in de economische ontwikkeling van China kan niet genoeg worden benadrukt: zij zijn de doelconsumenten van de schoonheidsmarkt en de belangrijkste pleitbezorgers van gender gerelateerde schoonheidsdiscoursen. Ten derde is de opkomst van beautybloggen in China een belichaming van het wereldwijde kapitalisme, dat sterke banden heeft met het pre-digitale systeem van massaproductie van de schoonheidsindustrie. De bloeiende schoonheidseconomie, of het nu in China of Europa is, kan de destructieve effecten van het kapitalisme op het milieu niet verbergen. We moeten nadenken over hoe schoonheid momenteel in onze wereld werkt en hoe het in de toekomst zou moeten werken.

Curriculum Vitae

Zexu Guan was born on May 29, 1993 in Puyang, China. She received her bachelor degree in Editing and Publishing from East China Normal University in 2014. Then she got her master degree in Mass Communication from Peking University. Her master dissertation received the honor of excellent master dissertation. Life at Peking University sparked her interest in academic research, so she decided to pursue a PhD. Being awarded the CSC-Leiden University scholarship, she came to Leiden University and started her PhD research about China's wanghong economy in October 2016. During her doctoral project, she attended the spring school of Università degli Studi di Perugia and the Fudan-Havard Yenching Institute Training Workshop. She participated in academic conferences and delivered presentations in Shanghai, Brussels, Leicester, Stirling, Copenhagen, and Leiden. At the 2019 Critical Communication Annual Conference in Shanghai, she was awarded the travel grant for young scholars. At the 2019 UK-China Media and Cultural Studies Associations Biannual Conference in Leicester, her paper won the best paper award. Her research has been published in *Celebrity Studies* and *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication*. Her book review appeared in *Chinese Journal of Communication*. Deeply knowing the importance of community for PhDs, she joined the PhD Council and contributed to the community building within Leiden University Centre for Arts in Society (LUCAS) from 2019 to 2020; she was also the representative of Leiden University at the Research School of Media Studies (RMeS) from 2019 to 2021.