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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.