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

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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.

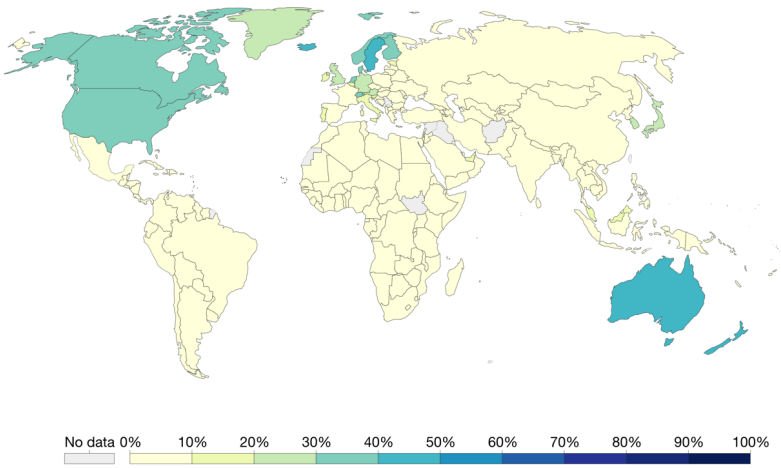
As one might imagine, the earliest internet users in China belonged to the well-educated elite (J. Pan & Wu, 2020). Another dimension of users' background, though,

[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 liverstreamers, 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

lucrativeness 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 *wanghong*s' 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 unsetting.

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 zhixin 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 forcedly 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 l 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 Guomingdang 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 nüxing*), 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 & Hershatter, 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 wojian*). 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

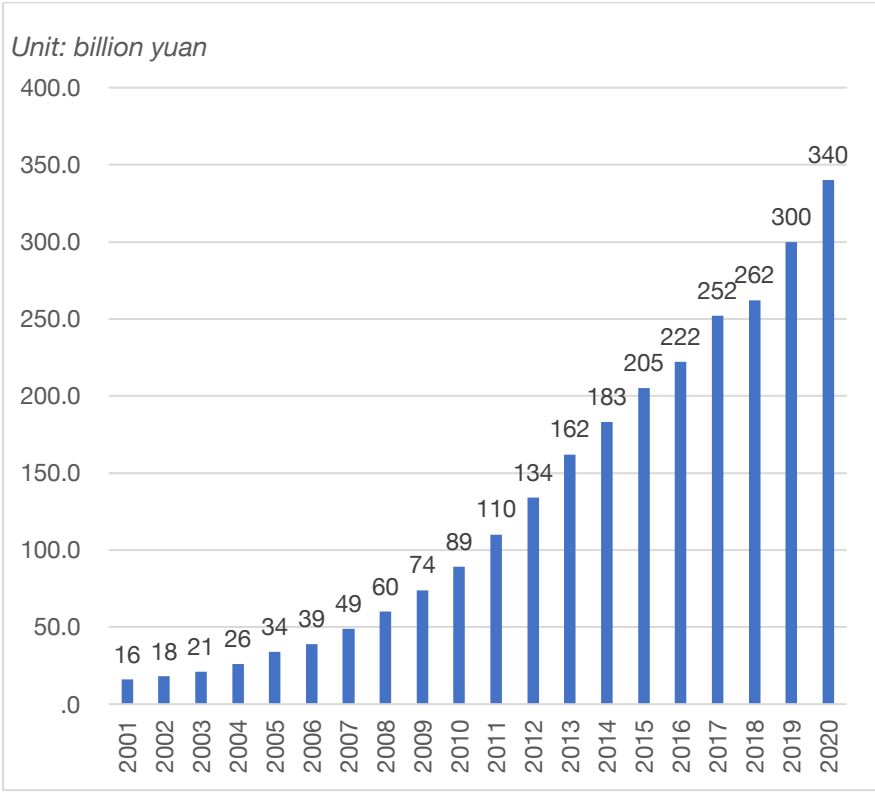
consumption than the majority. Because of this income disparity, mainstream cosmetic brands operated their distribution channels only in the relatively developed areas, such as first-tier cities (F. Wang, 2005). In the light of China's unbalanced economy in the 1990s, beauty consumption does little to 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 media[3]. 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 (*resou*) 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 lucrativeness 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.