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

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Chapter 2

Making Everyone Beautiful:
Aesthetic Labor, Media Pedagogy, and Class

Human cannot leave makeup and photoshop.

Dalaotianer (Beauty blogger, October 9, 2019)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.1 Concepts and Contexts

2.1.1 Understanding Aesthetic Labor

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

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

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

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

2.1.2 Chinese Women and Postfeminism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.1.3 Contextualizing Female Beauty in China

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2 Beauty Bloggers' Aesthetic Labor: Producing Online Images

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

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

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

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

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

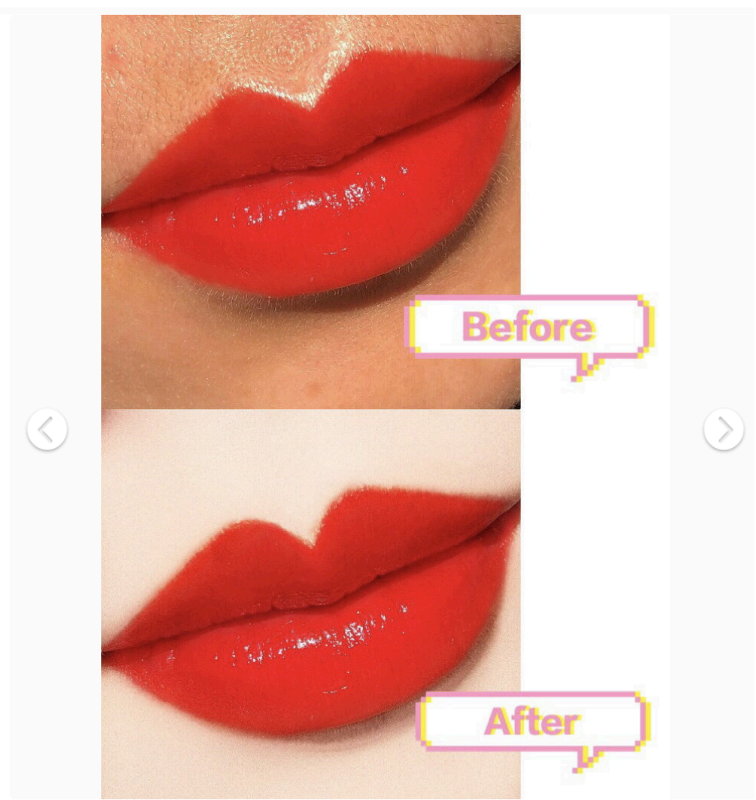
Editing is used widely by the group of beauty bloggers to which I attend in this study. On a Saturday in January 2018, I visited the Beijing home of Xiaojia, who had been a part-time beauty blogger since 2013. She generously agreed to show me how she worked. Given that she only works as a beauty blogger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

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

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

Figure 2.1

How to make photographs of a lipstick swatch



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 2.2

Examples of a Zhiganless photo (above) and Zhiganful photograph (below) on beauty blogs.

Note. Photos were provided by Xiaojia

2.3 The Reproduction of Aesthetic Labor

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

2.3.1 Beauty Pedagogy in Post-Socialist China

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

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

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

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

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

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

> From Middle-Aged Woman to First Love! You Should Have an Innocent-Girl Face on the First Day at School (Dangmei)
>
> [Feitong is not Feitong] From Getting up to Going out | How to Switch Yourself from a Disgusting Male to Green Tea Bitch Surpassing Other Beauties (Huobengluantiaodefeitong)
>
> Xiaozhujiejie! How to look like Ishihara Satomi! A Peachy Makeup (Xiaozhu jiejie)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.3.2 Micromanaging the Body

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

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

> Here I use foundation from Zelens. The Youth one [this is the name of a foundation product]. Using this foundation can make your skin look like Satomi's, very creamy, with nuancedgloss,verynatural.(Xiaozhujiejie)
>
> Dip in a small amount of loose powder, and tap it gently on your pimple. Look! it disappears immediately! (Xiaozhujiejie)
>
> You can see that there are still marks of acne and freckles on my face. In terms of daily makeup, you don't need to conceal all the flaws. Only dark circles need to be covered. (Huobengluantiaodefeitong)
>
> The last step in applying foundation is to put some on your neck. Many sisters don't apply foundation to necks. Wrong! (Dalaotianer)
>
> Beginners, you should first apply eyebrow products to the middle of your eyebrows. (Dalaotianer)
>
> The wrong way to draw eyeliner is to make it too wide. (Dalaotianer)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 2.3

The cover picture to Dalaotianer's makeup tutorial

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

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

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

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

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

2.3.3 Micromanaging the Inner Self

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 2.4

Xiaozhujiejie's Post

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

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

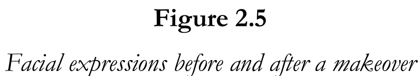


Figure 2.5

Facial expressions before and after a makeover

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

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

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

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

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

2.4 The Monetization of Bloggers' Aesthetic Labor

2.4.1 Exhibiting Beauty Products and Commodified Femininity

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

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

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

> Color 34 is not a problem. It fits autumn and winter. Also, it's suitable for sisters with dark style. It looks graceful. It's dark red. Please remember it! (Zhang Mofan)
>
> 38 should be a super pretty color. Yes, it is a super pretty color. There is a tone of *yimahong* (period red, 姨妈红) in it. The saturation of this color is high and it could dye your lips evenly. It's even suitable for darker lips. (Zhang Mofan)
>
> This color could frighten my grandpa away! This is the first option for bad girls. Color 39! (Zhang Mofan)
>
> *Siwang babi fen* (deadly Barbie pink, 死亡芭比粉) is coming! Color 66. If a man sends a *siwang babi fen* lipstick to me, I'll definitely break up with him. (Zhang Mofan)
>
> On lips, I use YSL's *zhannanse* (man-capturing color, 斩男色). (Huobengluantiaodefeitong)
>
> Using this foundation can make your skin look like Satomi's [a Japanese actress], very creamy, with nuanced gloss, very natural. (Xiaozhujiejie)

> 78 is more unacceptable. My mother will use that color. It looks like this. Purple again. This is real purple, oh my god! [in a cynical tone] Why does there exist such color? (Zhang Mofan)
>
> It is a must-buy color for wicked women. If one day Sun Hongliang [this blogger's boyfriend] cheated on me, I would put this color on and beat his lover. (Zhang Mofan)
>
> The color 36 is bright pink. It does not match my skin color. If you put it on skin with a dark tone, it just makes your skin darker. Can you see the effect on my skin? It is so rustic! (Zhang Mofan)

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

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

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

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

Figure 2.6

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

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

2.4.2 Pointing the Way Toward Retailers

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

> 103 in our store is perfect for dark and yellow skin. This is 73 [from Tom Ford]. I put 103 on my upper lip and put 73 on my lower lip. They look alike. Look, they are the same color. This color is suitable for dark and yellow skin. 73 from Tom Ford is the same as our 103 so you now have an affordable option. (Zhang Mofan)
>
> I recommended the lip mask in an earlier video. It's from Tujiaxinifang [a Chinese skincare brand]. I have bought two bottles. The first one is empty now. (Huobengluantiaodefeitong)
>
> If you want to have a natural look, you should use a foundation with a natural sense. This my favorite foundation recently, a foundation from BELL [a cosmetic brand]. (Shanzi)

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

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

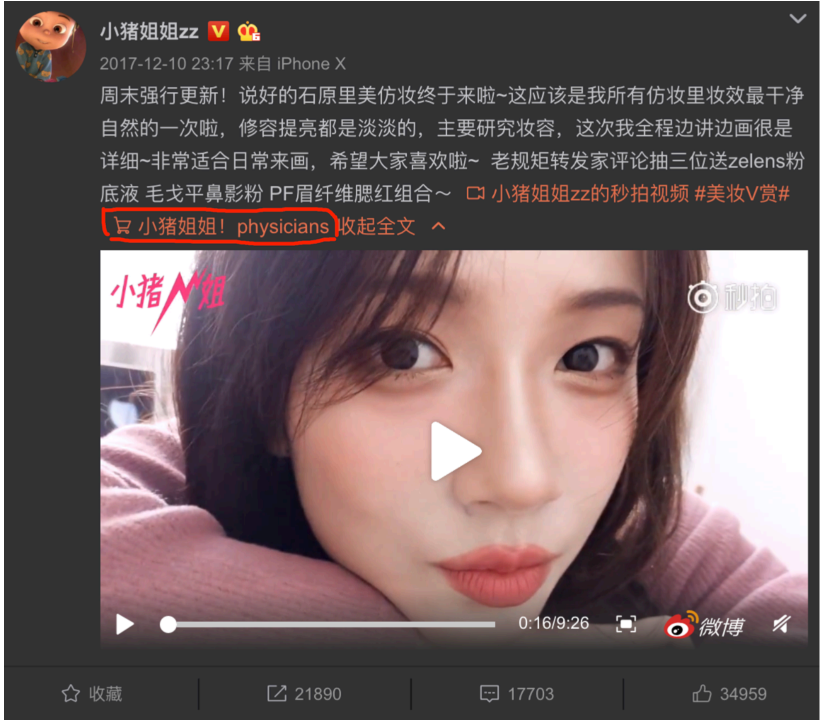
content, the beauty blogging business could not function. Audience responses to this combination changed dramatically between the mid-2000s and mid-2010s. In the early phase of beauty blogging, when beauty blogs provided a platform for anyone to share information equally, amateurs were uncomfortable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

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

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

Figure 2.7

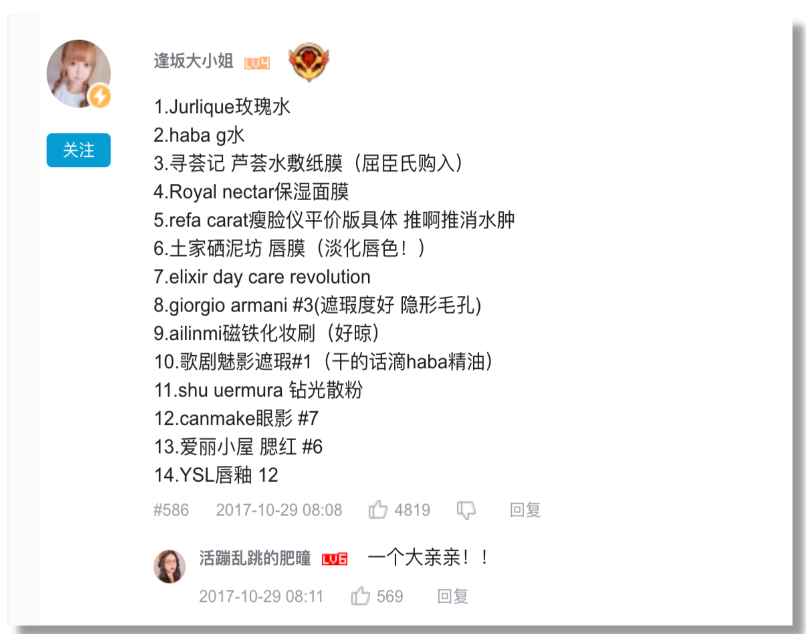
A screenshot from Xiaozhujiejie's video



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

Figure 2.8

The most liked comment under Huobengluantiaodefeitong's video



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

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

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

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

2.5 Aesthetic Labor as a Female Need

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.6 Class and Aesthetic Labor

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

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

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

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

Figure 2.9

FanfanWannaBuy's post

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 2.10

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

Note. From Damishipin's Weibo account, retrieved from https://weibo.com/2481441215/JfQ63hCyr?from=page_1002062481441215_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment

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

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

2.7 Conclusion

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

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

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

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