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

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Chapter 5

Conclusion: Beauty, Economy, and the Future

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

