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Inner and outer beauty: exploring female beauty in contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

Based on 20 semi-structured interviews, this qualitative study explores young Chinese women's understandings of female beauty. It reveals that participants' understandings of female beauty are not limited to outer beauty (waizamei, 外在美), but rather foreground the importance of 'inner beauty' (neizamei, 内在美). The data found that these concepts have a symbiotic relationship whereby each affects the other. According to the findings, the concepts of inner and outer beauty are not oppositional but are both important for participants to gain 'empowerment'. Yet participants placed a higher value on inner beauty which was seen as enabling them to resist the pressures of outer beauty standards. The article argues, however, that discourses of inner beauty are not value free and are influenced by a variety of dominant discourses such as state interest and the beauty industry. In this regard, inner beauty needs interrogation and cannot simply be perceived as a tool for women's empowerment. The discussion sheds light on the young Chinese women's understanding of beauty in relation to gender and feminism in a Chinese context. The article provides a culturally grounded approach to beauty in China and adds to feminist understandings about beauty.

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Introduction

The year 2016 saw a variety of beauty challenges circulating on Chinese social media aimed at women. One of the challenges was coined the '#A4waist challenge' where women compared their waist size to the width of a standard A4 sheet of paper. Women who could hide their waist behind a sheet of A4 size paper (21 cm wide) were encouraged to post their photos on social media as a way to 'prove' their beauty. This online beauty challenge reinforced rigid beauty standards for Chinese women – a set of ideologies which have a long history.

When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the Communist Party encouraged women to abolish beauty practices to achieve women's liberation which was one of their revolutionary goals. This abolition was believed to free women from objectification and empower them whilst also introducing social equality (Gilmartin, 1994). Following the economic reform in 1979, the development of the beauty industry impacted on gender politics which scholars have interpreted as turning Chinese women into objects through the male gaze (Xu & Feiner, 2007). The importance of female appearance is emphasized in China, and people refer to contemporary China as 'the era of face-judging' (kanlianshidai, 看脸时代) (Du, 2015). Compared to socialist China where most women rarely wore makeup (Ip, 2003), recent marketing surveys conducted in 2015 show that over 57% of females wear makeup daily, and spend an average of 30.1 minutes a day applying cosmetics (The

Nielsen Company, 2015). Furthermore, according to Baidu Marketing Centre (2020), p. 77% of cosmetic consumers are female compared to 23% male. This data suggests that attention to beauty culture may be pervasive for Chinese women.

In response to this context and drawing on qualitative data from 20 in-depth interviews with young Chinese women who are living in Beijing, this study examines how female beauty is constructed and understood by the participants through a discussion of their beliefs, experiences, and motivations regarding their engagement with beauty practices. Therefore, the crucial intervention of this article is to offer a culturally grounded perspective on empirical understandings of female beauty that includes the concepts of inner and outer beauty. This article addresses the following questions from a feminist perspective: How is female inner and outer beauty understood in the experiences of young Chinese women aged between 18–25 years and does this beauty discourse have any social or political implications? What is the relationship between the concepts of inner and outer beauty and how do participants negotiate these concepts to gain empowerment?

Literature review

Beauty culture and feminism

Western feminists have a long history of studying beauty culture reaching back to the 1970s. A major aspect of the debate on beauty practices has centred around the dualism of oppression and liberation. On the one hand, some feminists argue that female bodies are oppressed by patriarchal power and that beauty practices function as a means of patriarchal control (Chapkis, 1986; Dworkin, 1974; Orbach, 1978). On the other hand, some feminists believe that women engage with beauty practices to embrace their 'femininity' as a way of liberating themselves from patriarchy whilst gaining empowerment and pleasure (Arthurs & Grimshaw, 1999; Cahill, 2003; Davis, 1991; Frost, 1999). What is actually meant by 'empowerment' here however is often not fully elaborated, and it is acknowledged that this discourse is highly complex. This is particularly so in relation to debates about postfeminism. Feminist media scholars critique of women's empowerment is largely related to commercial discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2015; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007). For example, advertising uses the term and ideas of 'empowerment' to promote beauty products yet has no intention to empower individual customers in other environments such as politics and work (Whelehan, 2000). Therefore, the term empowerment has multiple interpretations which are socially constructed. Within the context of this paper, empowerment is understood as a means women can exercise political power, utilize resources to achieve their own goals and improve the quality of their lives (Adams, 2008). So, although women may 'feel' empowered through gaining personal and social benefits, this paper makes the case that this is limited because it doesn't improve their political power nor change their position within Chinese patriarchal society. This paper therefore remains critical of the ways in which the young Chinese women in this study use the concept of 'empowerment' in relation to beauty culture.

Furthermore, it is also clear that the academic and cultural context of postfeminism has shaped discourses on beauty culture. Although there are many definitions of postfeminism, I refer to postfeminism as a cultural discourse which suggests women are now defined by individuality, choice and agency (Gill, 2007). In line with broader critics of postfeminism, some feminist scholars suggest this argument, that women gain empowerment and pleasure from beauty practices, overstates women's agency and ignores the continuing constraints of patriarchal structure (Bartky, 1997; Bordo, 2003). They illustrate how women's personal choices are shaped by the beauty system through self-discipline and self-surveillance. Thus, many feminists pay attention to the discursive framework of beauty practices by exploring how women's choices are constructed and limited (Braun, 2009; Crann, Jenkins, Money, & O'Doherty, 2017; Stuart & Donaghue, 2011).

Currently, some Western feminists have sought to move beyond a focus on the female body by paying attention to women's interior and/or psychic life (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Gill & Orgad, 2015; Scharff, 2016). These feminists discuss how women can cultivate psychological strength to survive in a neoliberal society.

The majority of literature produced on beauty work is based on research within a Western context, so would benefit from the addition of more non-Western research. With the development of the beauty industry, globalization, and the media, beauty standards have arisen which have created social issues such as anxiety for women regarding their appearance on a global scale (Jha, 2016). Women from different countries, religions and races face similar issues (Craig, 2006; Listyani, Sadewo, & Legowo, 2018; Miller, 2006; Tate, 2007; Varghese, 2017). In this regard, there is a need for research which addresses the cultural and political specificities of beauty culture within particular national contexts.

Chinese context of beauty

The concept of inner and outer beauty in China can be traced back to ancient Chinese philosophy. Man (2000) found that the concept of female beauty within the ancient Chinese philosophical tradition of Daoism emphasizes female body and sexual attractiveness (characteristics fitting within the concept of outer beauty), whereas the female beauty within the philosophical teachings of Confucianism focuses more on a female's moral virtues (characteristics fitting with the concept of inner beauty). Although Daoism and Confucianism's emphasis on women's beauty may seem to be conflicting, Man (2000, p. 176) argues that they affect each other and maintain a 'super-stable equilibrium' in Chinese culture.

Only a small number of feminist studies have been conducted in relation to Chinese beauty culture. In this regard, scholars have mainly focused on the influence of the beauty industry (Harden & Chiung-Fang, 2014; Liu, 2017; Xu & Feiner, 2007; Yang, 2017); engaged with the debate regarding Western influence on Chinese beauty ideals (Xie & Zhang, 2013; Zhang 2012); and studied women's motivation to engage in beauty practices (especially cosmetic surgery) (Evans, 2001; Luo, 2012; Wen, 2013; Yang, 2011; Zhang, 2013). As part of this literature, researchers have identified and noted the established relationship between inner and outer beauty (Lotti, 2018; Luo, 2013; Man, 2000; Zhang, 2012). For instance, Man (2000) discusses the notion of female beauty in Confucian and Taoist teachings through analysing female beauty in courtesan culture. According to Man, having outer beauty such as a beautiful appearance and inner beauty such as an intellectual talent were both perceived as necessary for female courtesans. Yet Man (2000) also found that the traditional Chinese concepts of inner and outer beauty are less apparent in the mass media as more attention is given to fashion and looks for women which might be attributed to the influence of Western beauty standards and Western fashion industry. Furthermore, Luo (2013) discusses the complexities of inner and outer beauty in relation to consumerism and post-socialist gender politics in Contemporary China, and found that the notion of inner beauty has shifted from Confucian's moral practices such as chastity, obedience and filial piety to an emphasis on women's intelligence and education. Moreover, in her empirical study, Zhang (2012) found that inner beauty consists of characteristics such as personal qualities, good manners or posture, confidence and how a woman presents herself.

In summary, within the Chinese context, the extant scholarship focuses on outer beauty and *marginalizes* the significance of inner beauty – despite scholars identifying that inner beauty is just as important and sometimes more important than outer beauty for Chinese women. Therefore, the relationship between inner and outer beauty has not received sustained attention in existing literature, particularly from an empirical point of view. This article seeks to address this omission, specifically by analysing the discourse of inner and outer beauty within the context of Chinese culture whilst addressing how young women negotiate beauty discourse.

Methodology

Twenty Chinese females aged between 18–25 years were then recruited to participate in this study. This age group was selected because of data collected by the China Medical Beauty Consultation White Paper which suggested that this is the age group where engagement with beauty practices is most sustained (Yin, 2019). Ethical approval was obtained from [University name omitted to protect anonymity] in September 2019. I used a snowballing sample that started via recruitment posts on my social media account. Due to the age group I was targeting, some of the women were at university. I thus used an existing educational contact at a university in Beijing to help facilitate the recruitment process. Participants were given the choice as to whether to meet in person or online. Sixteen interviews took place in coffee shops in Beijing, and 4 participants were interviewed online. All my participants have a higher education background, either they were university students or graduated from university.

I was raised and studied in Beijing where this research was conducted. As such, I purposely chose a group of women with whom I shared a similar cultural background as it allowed me to use my partial 'insider' status to gain access to interviewees. According to Oakley (1981), this insider status can decrease the imbalance of power and authority between researcher and participant, although it does not eradicate it (Hesse-Biber, 2014). For example, Tang (2002) found that a PhD student is perceived as a successful achiever in China, so my 'status' of being a bilingual PhD student who has lived in the UK for many years could potentially alienate some participants. In consideration of this I tried to create a welcoming and accepting atmosphere by being friendly and approachable. I hoped that by conveying my genuine interest in my participants opinions through attentively listening to them, it would allow them to realize that their opinions were of value and worth sharing.

The interview schedule was semi-structured and designed to encourage participants to discuss three key themes, which included: 1) perceptions of female beauty ideals 2) whether female beauty/female appearance is considered to be important 3) attitudes towards and engagement with female beauty practices. Each participant was given a pseudonym, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. As my participants are Chinese, the interview questions, answers and discussions were in Chinese. I therefore believed it necessary to code and analyse the data in Chinese. The language contains cultural subtleties which could be lost if the data was translated before coding and analysis, as such, the data was translated only after coding and analysis. The data was analysed following Willig's (2008) six steps for Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) which focuses on identifying the available discourses within a culture, economy and its implication for people who live within it. FDA enabled me to identify the main themes and topics within the interviews, which emerged as: 1) inner and outer beauty are inseparable; 2) outer beauty matters; 3) inner beauty is more important than outer beauty; 4) the discourse of inner beauty. I analysed each theme in detail and selected extracts to represent these themes.

Findings

Inner and outer beauty are inseparable

This study began by allowing participants to describe female beauty from their own perspective. Although, it is recognized here that such descriptions are inevitably shaped by wider social constructions and discourses, there is also value in giving voice to women to hear and learn from their thoughts and experiences. Most of the participants repeatedly discussed the discourse of outer and inner beauty despite there being no prompt to address inner beauty during the different stages of the interview. Within 15 of the 20 interviews, inner and outer beauty were frequently discussed and often articulated as fundamentally interlinked. For example, even when a question was designed to discuss an aspect of outer beauty, e.g. 'Can you tell me if female appearance is important?', the participants would often move on to foreground the importance of inner beauty:

I think female's outer appearance is surely important, definitely important. . . . Inner beauty is surely important as well, because any beauty without inner beauty is just skin without a soul. (Wenwen, postgraduate student)

Wenwen's feels that discussing outer beauty without inner beauty would be inadequate to understand the concept of beauty. This quotation illustrates a common theme in the interviews: that inner and outer beauty are inseparable. For instance, when participants were asked to describe their female beauty ideal some participants told me directly that inner and outer beauty were connected. For example, after participant Ping reflected on my question she replied, 'female beauty is not only the physical appearance but also the inner beauty'. In comparison, other participants indirectly conveyed how these concepts were seen as inextricably linked such as when some participants seemed a little confused at the vagueness of my question and asked me to clarify whether I wanted to talk about inner or outer beauty:

Researcher: Could you describe your female beauty ideal?

Sherry: My ideal beauty. Do you mean ideal outer appearance or ideal personal state? (Sherry, office worker)

Sherry's understanding of the female beauty ideal comprises both outer beauty and inner beauty. Although she did not use these specific terms, she clearly defined and distinguished between these two concepts using the words 'ideal outer appearance' and 'ideal personal state'. These findings suggest that many of the participants are influenced by, or in the very least uphold beliefs that are in line with pervious findings regarding female beauty which have an emphasis on both inner and outer beauty (Ip, 2003; Man, 2000).

Outer beauty matters

The term outer beauty in this study refers to women's physical attractiveness according to mainstream beauty standards. Through engaging with beauty practices women achieve normalized outer beauty standards that can enhance their attractiveness. In line with previous research (Zhang, 2012, 2013), this study found that these beauty standards are relatively explicit and comprise of key facial features characterized as having: a watermelon seed shaped face; a sharp chin; a tiny face; big eyes; double eyelids; a tall nose; and physical features characterized as being tall and slim. The rise of microcelebrity (wanghong, 网红) culture normalized these beauty standards (Peng, 2021), so participants refer to women who fit into this beauty standard as having a microcelebrity face. When participants discuss the discourse of outer beauty, they often focus on the importance of women's appearance and potential social benefits they can gain from meeting outer beauty standards. Previous research shows that beauty matters in society, regardless of age, class, and ethnicity (Jha, 2016). Female beauty can be perceived a form of currency and power (Chapkis, 1986; Wen, 2013; Wolf, 1990). Thus, conforming to mainstream beauty standards regarding attractiveness is the most common way for women to gain power (Weitz, 2001). Most of my participants believed women who fit into or get close to these mainstream outer beauty standards are more likely to gain power and many other benefits related to dating, and a large variety of social interactions. For instance, attractive women can gain help and attention from men that will result in being rewarded:

I think if you look beautiful, it is easier for you to do things. For example, some trivialised things you could ask help from others, especially men. If you ask help from them, and you look beautiful, it seems very convenient. I feel beautiful girls around me are always so lucky. (Sensen, bank cashier)

Sensen believes that attractive women can get things done more easily by asking help from men. In other words, men will help women they consider attractive. She also felt that beautiful girls are often so lucky, which indicates that in her mind, she considers that attractive women gain more social power that enables them to gain numerous benefits. Moreover, Sensen later explains why these beautiful girls are lucky, they can more easily find jobs even though they may have average ability, because they look so adorable, people like them more, so job interviews will become easy for them.

Sensen believes that attractive women not only benefit from receiving help concerning trivial matters, but also gain advantage in important social events such as in job interviews. Moreover, there are many other forms of power that can be gained. For example, heterosexual women gain social power in the dating or marriage market through being attractive or engaging with beauty practices:

Appearance is very important for women, especially from a man's perspective. Men think it is very important . . . When they think of a girl, the first thing they consider is, "you [girl] have to make me think you are good-looking, so that I will give you the possibility of [a romantic relationship] development with you, and then I will make friends with you" (Deer, office worker).

Deer thought that heterosexual women who have an attractive appearance will be rewarded with more easily being able to secure romantic partners. Deer explained that when men think of dating a girl, the first thing they pay attention to is women's outer beauty. This idea of men evaluating women's qualities according to women's appearance is a viewpoint commonly shared by many participants. These extracts also reveal the power dynamic between men and women whereby engaging in beauty practices enables women to gain help from men, as well as 'succeed' in the dating market. Furthermore, participant Xiaohui felt that the reason why she cannot attract any men is because her appearance is not good-looking. Xiaohui believed that her physical appearance is not very attractive, and later explained that one of her motivations to engage with beauty practices is to improve her looks, and thus to increase her chance to find a boyfriend. She explained how she wants to engage with beauty practices to improve her outer beauty by using makeup, dressing up, working on her facial expressions and posture. Her idea that women who engage with beauty practices can become attractive thereby gaining power in society fits well with feminist ideas of 'empowerment' which focus on individuals' feelings. For instance, many feminists argue that women are not passive victims and that beauty practices can be empowering (Arthurs & Grimshaw, 1999; Davis, 1991; Frost, 1999), because women can solve their life problems and take control of their life by becoming attractive through engaging with beauty practices. My findings confirm Davis (1991) criticism of the 'cultural dupe' approach to feminine beauty; she argues that women who are willing to engage in beauty practices such as cosmetic surgery may be aware of the oppression of normalized feminine beauty yet may consciously choose this behaviour as a solution to the personal problems associated with women's appearance. For instance, by engaging with beauty practices, their altered appearance enables them to fit into patriarchal beauty ideologies and gain 'power'. I acknowledge my participants' 'feeling' of empowerment. Yet arguably, the act of conforming to patriarchal values would actually be disempowering.

Most participants expressed an awareness of social expectations regarding women's appearance and beauty norms in current Chinese society. They actively choose to engage with beauty practices as a way of gaining social benefits and 'empowerment' therefore accommodating outer beauty standards. Although it might be argued that women are 'empowered' through engaging with outer beauty practices, this interpretation is limiting. Improving outer beauty is like a double edged sword, although women can seek power through these strategies, women who pay too much attention to their appearance could be perceived as utilizing beauty practices that are 'time wasting, expensive and painful to self-esteem' which also limits a women's physical and psychosocial freedom (Jeffreys, 2015, p. 6). The 'empowerment' gained through outer beauty strategies are not reliable as they rely mostly on male's help and attention to get some benefit. Participants were also critical of outer beauty standards and the benefits derived from conforming to them which will be discussed later in this article.

Moreover, it might also be argued that women are empowered through choice, whether to engage with outer beauty practices or not, women exert their personal autonomy. However we cannot overstate women's agency by focussing on their choice, as their choices are constructed by the social and cultural environment where maybe they 'choose to conform' (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Indeed, in terms of the Chinese context, with the rapid development of the beauty industry

which followed the economic reform, social attitudes towards beauty have changed. The naturalized gender ideology in Mao's era (1949–1979) has been replaced with beauty standards that are aligned with state interest such as developing the economy and growth of the beauty industry where promoting beauty ideals has become an important means to sell commodities (Johansson, 1998). As Xu and Feiner (2007) argue, the beauty industry encourages the objectification of women, and it promotes Anglo-European aesthetics which is a way to develop neoliberalism. Female Chinese consumers therefore play an important role in contributing to the economic growth where clothing and cosmetics are at the top of their shopping lists (Ni, 2012). This social construction of beauty culture is the combination of business logic, state policy and media influence. As a result, "The individual female body has become the site of extracting value and entrepreneurial capital, and an infrastructure for sustaining the neoliberal economy and social stability (Yang, 2017, p. 130).

Importantly, the emphasis on outer beauty strategy is not very sustainable for women due to ageing, for as women age it becomes more difficult to conform to beauty standards. This may, in part explain why many participants believed that cultivating inner beauty is more important. They realize that in contrast to the 'power' of outer beauty, inner beauty does not fade and instead can continually be developed whilst ageing. Next, I will discuss some of the reasons why participants value inner beauty more and how although inner beauty discourse may combat women's issues such as sexual objectification, it might also be perceived as another way to discipline women.

Inner beauty is more important than outer beauty

Through focusing on participants' discourse of inner beauty, my analysis revealed a complex relationship between inner and outer dimensions here. Most of my participants expressed a preference towards inner beauty over outer beauty especially if there was a perceived disjuncture between the two. Although participants place a higher value on inner beauty, they do not feel that inner and outer beauty are in polarized position. Instead, they are both seen as necessary in order to be completely 'beautiful':

For the mainstream beauty standards, it may be that there is a template for this beauty. Every woman can come close to this template, but in fact it is not really beautiful. Because this is the beauty on the outside, there is no beauty on the inside, so I think the most important thing is the inner beauty, and their inner does not match the outer beauty (Xiaole, postgraduate student).

Xiaole is clearly aware here of the pervasive nature of mainstream outer beauty standards, but she criticizes such constructions and questions their value. She thinks that women can more easily adjust or enhance their outer beauty to come close to fitting the beauty standard template. Although women can alter their outer beauty, this does not necessarily render them 'beautiful'. She also articulates that inner and outer beauty should 'match' each other. In doing so she is expressing how each should be 'balanced': both need to be developed equally because if a woman only develops outer beauty without inner beauty, or inner beauty without outer beauty, she is not completely 'beautiful'.

Many of the women in this study expressed that inner beauty was more important to them than outer beauty which hasn't been discussed much in previous academic literature. It is possible that these findings are a result of interview performativity. The opinions participants expressed during the interviews could be different to what they actually believe or how they behave outside of the context of these interviews. It may also be possible that their responses are based on a feeling that they don't want to be perceived as being 'shallow' and 'superficial' which is why they emphasize the importance of inner beauty. However, this study wanted to focus on their self-reported thoughts and opinions.

The emphasis participants put on inner beauty might be attributed to the fact that this sample comprised of highly educated women. As a consequence of their higher education, they may have developed an insight, awareness, and critical thoughts regarding beauty culture. Moreover, during

the interviews, many participants mentioned feminist-related issues in China. It was evident that the rise of feminism has had an impact on educated young women's understanding of beauty. For example, according to objectification theory, women tend to internalize an observer's view to evaluate their physical selves as 'women's bodies are looked at, evaluated, and always potentially objectified' (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 175). But my participants were aware of male's preference towards women's appearance, yet they attempt to develop the notion of inner beauty to resist how males define women's attractiveness. Most participants avoided purely focussing on outer beauty when judging another women's appearance, however they did judge each other within the context of inner and outer beauty.

There were two main factors that contributed to their opinion that inner beauty was more important. Firstly, these participants had a critical awareness of the beauty industry and media, so it could be argued that they develop inner beauty is a way to resist the dominant media discourse on female outer beauty. Since the economic reform, the beauty industry in China has rapidly increased and contributes significantly to China's economic development. It is therefore in the media's interest to align itself with political agendas whilst gaining financial benefit. As such, promoting beauty ideals have become an important means to develop the beauty industry and to sell beauty related commodities through media (Johansson, 1998; Xu & Feiner, 2007). Given this, it is therefore unsurprising that Zhang's (2012) study found that the Chinese media tends to focus on female celebrities who meet outer beauty standards. Nevertheless, my participants expressed critical opinions towards outer beauty standards in the media which they believed overemphasized outer beauty. They were consciously aware that the Chinese media tends to focus on women's physical appearance, however they were not 'passive' receivers. They actively voiced their opinions and rejected these beauty standards in the media, and at same time emphasized the importance for women to develop qualities they associate with inner beauty:

I have to admit Chaoyue Yang [Chinese female celebrity] is very pretty . . . If you do not listen to her talking, you will think she is pretty to look at, but once she started talking, I had to fast forward, I did not want to listen to her, her image has a huge discount [deduction] in my mind. How can many fans like her? Is she beautiful? I think she is not beautiful at all when these kinds of words come out of her mouth, I think she is not beautiful at all. The way she talks is a very poor quality. (Simona, postgraduate student)

This quote shows that Simona recognized how Chaoyue represents a mainstream beauty standard in the media, but she does not think Chaoyue is beautiful because she lacks inner beauty. She uses the Chinese words *dazhe* [打折] which can be directly translated into English as a form of 'discount'. This word *dazhe* is used interestingly in this context because it can be understood that women's beauty can be quantified and given a value that is measured by a number: that is why it can be discounted so that the overall value is diminished. It also shows that a lack of inner beauty is problematic for women because if they only look good or pretty without 'good' personal qualities, their outer beauty may be nullified. This is in line with existing research that found similar sentiments expressed by women in Japan. Darling-Wolf's (2004) found that Japanese women often criticized the media's focus on women's appearance rather than inner beauty regarding beauty standards represented in the media. Moreover, Simona uses inner beauty to measure and judge other women shows that inner beauty has become a tool to discipline and regulate women.

Secondly, many participants had the foresight to realize that their outer beauty will fade overtime and they were aware of how the beauty system works. To develop inner beauty is a way to combat patriarchal values on female beauty which tend to focus on outer beauty and enable them to feel 'beautiful' even when they are ageing. Although my participants all identified that having outer beauty could enable them to gain power, they also realize that this power isn't stable and is fragile because this form of power is gained mostly from men's favour. The power they gained through outer beauty strategies can also be considered as a form of subordination within patriarchal society (Dworkin, 1974; Jeffreys, 2015). On the one hand, they gain power through engaging with beauty practices to conform to mainstream beauty standards yet on the other hand, they are aware how this form of power is

temporary and will fade as they age. For example, participant Deer expressed young women's situation regarding beauty, that when they age, they will lose their 'gender and age bonus' (xingbie he nianling hongli, 性别和年龄红利). She is referring here to the idea that when women are younger, they can gain more social power and benefits by being or looking youthful and beautiful, but this becomes harder and diminishes as women age. These benefits are very relevant to mating opportunities, and more specifically, heterosexual women finding a male partner. However, when women inevitably age, they will become stigmatized as no longer being valuable or physically attractive and beautiful. Thus, outer beauty strategies have a limited duration for women and create more stress, especially for women over 30 years old. For instance, Participants Deer explains her feeling towards being young and beautiful:

If a person who praises me says that you are so beautiful today. I will feel that it is a burden, and it rests on me which keeps me going. But I have a baggage that I cannot put up with, which makes me feel this way. So, I was thinking that many girls were given such a compliment when they were young, and it should be said that such a compliment is like sugar water. After they drink too much, they will be thirsty for more and more. You will always feel that you are not putting enough effort into your appearance and live a more and more twisted life. I think it may not be a good thing to continue thinking like this ... If you lose the age bonus and the gender bonus, you may come back and see it as a poison (Deer, office worker).

Deer used the word 'poison' as way to suggest that society's encouragement of young women to focus on their outer beauty is unhealthy, as women will eventually get old and therefore become unattractive according to mainstream beauty standards. Then, all their hard work on their appearance and efforts to master beauty practices will be gone without any recognition. She realizes that ageing is something she cannot control, but developing inner beauty is something that she can take control of, and which can improve as she ages. Later, she explains her regret that she could have used her time to develop inner beauty which is more useful and long lasting instead of having engaged with outer beauty practices.

Moreover, many participants want to pursue developing their inner beauty which will enable them to feel beautiful even when they are getting older. For example, Simona expressed an admiration towards her female professor who is in her 50s saying that she thinks the professor has *qizhi* (气质) so is very beautiful, even in her old age. Simona is inspired to improve her inner beauty, so as she ages, she is still able to feel 'beautiful'. *Qizhi* is a term that predominantly applies only to females not males and embodies both inner and outer beauty qualities. Zhang (2013) defined *qizhi* through three themes: firstly, *qizhi* could be understood as a positive impression that women give others; secondly, *qizhi* is not only linked with positive personality traits such as confidence, being cultured, and dignified but also with elegant postures; and thirdly, *qizhi* can be conveyed through one's outer appearance. As Butler (1990) famously argues, gender is socially constructed and fluid: it can be learnt and performed through social activities. In this regard, *qizhi* is closely linked with gender identity and performance of being a 'woman'.

Overall, from the participants' perspective they feel that cultivating inner beauty is empowering and liberating, however it might be a trap for these young women. The discourse of inner beauty could not be pinned down and was not value free. This vagueness of inner beauty could mean that it can be manipulated by the dominant discourses of the beauty industry, state interest and patriarchal values which is discussed in the next section.

The discourse on inner beauty

Unlike inner beauty in traditional Confucian teachings that emphasized chastity, obedience and filial piety, this study found the discourse of inner beauty was individualistic and sometimes vague so there is no unified answer about what inner beauty is. Many participants referred to personal qualities and characteristics when talking about inner beauty:

When it comes to beauty, it is easy for people to think of outer beauty. If I do my hair or put on makeup, these can all be counted as improving beauty. In fact, what I want to improve more is my inner beauty, the feeling I give to others, specifically the feeling of my image to others. For example, if I go to help some people, such as adopting or donating stray cats ... (Xiaokong, insurance saleswoman)

Furthermore, through analysing participants narrative it was found that inner beauty discourse is not value free and reflects complex ideologies that are a combination of traditional Chinese patriarchal social values and contemporary neoliberalist values. On the one hand, some participants feel the obligation to be a *xianqilianmu* (a virtuous wife and good mother), this term is linked with women who desire to be 'gentle, considerate, playful and who took care of everything' (Evans, 2002). On the other hand, they are eager to pursue their career and to be financially independent modern women. For example, Huanhuan expresses an inner beauty dilemma of what women should be:

Now the public opinion is very divided, saying either that a women's career is particularly strong, and she doesn't need a family, or like many other people say that you are a little woman (*xiaonvren*, 小女人) who pays attention to the family (Huanhuan, postgraduate).

The term 'little woman' is linked with feminine women who are gentle and soft. Huanhuan's narrative shows how young women are now living in an era where different ideals exist in society in the name of inner beauty. In order to become 'beautiful', many participants desire to achieve both standards. For example, participant Xiaojie is grappling with the idea that she can be both, she still alludes to the difficulties of doing so. She is faced with the dilemma that if she focuses on her career, she will be criticized for not paying enough attention to her family and/or be perceived as a 'leftover' woman, but if she pays a lot of attention to her family she will be regarded as not being successful, not being independent, and weak because of her reliance on men. The inner beauty discourse illustrates state interest, by turning young women into 'successful' neoliberal subjects who are financially independent, whilst also maintaining a patriarchal structure to keep women in traditional gender roles in society. The finding shows that inner beauty discourse can be manipulated according to state and economic interest, which might explain why the discourse of inner beauty cannot be pinned down – so it is malleable enough to change according to state or market needs. As a result, inner beauty can be seen as a tool to discipline Chinese young women. Although my participants value inner beauty more, as way to empower themselves, due to the complexity of inner beauty discourse it does not necessarily function to liberate and empower young women.

Conclusion

There are limitations to this study in so far as the sample was relatively small and the demography of the group quite homogenous: all were heterosexual, and of a similar age, socioeconomic status and were all highly educated. Nevertheless, this study offers significant findings that gain an in-depth understanding of how this group of young Chinese women understand and define female beauty. According to this data, inner and outer beauty are inseparable concepts within Chinese beauty culture. Participants seek power through developing their inner and outer beauty. Outer beauty strategies involve accommodating beauty standards and gender norms to gain power. However, as participants recognized that outer beauty and the social benefits gained by it lessens with age, they also seek empowerment through developing inner beauty. It is worth noting that the concepts of inner and outer beauty are not polarized: instead, women are able to adopt both inner and outer beauty strategies simultaneously. They should be balanced as lacking in one could negatively affect the overall perception of 'complete' beauty. Therefore, this study reveals that most participants believe that women should develop both their inner and outer beauty to be 'completely' beautiful. It was also shown how these young Chinese women have to negotiate beauty discourse that impacts their lives. Although participants believe inner and outer beauty are both important, they value the former more. There are two major reasons that can explain why they put an emphasis on inner beauty: firstly, it is a way to reject the mainstream focus on women's outer beauty standards and

resists male's dominant discourse on female beauty and secondly, it is a way for women to continue being 'beautiful' as they age, and aspects of their outer beauty diminishes. However, inner beauty discourse is complex and is mixed with traditional gender ideology and neoliberalist values, thus, cannot be simply interpreted as empowering for young women. The vagueness of inner beauty potentially allows for it to be manipulated and influenced according to state interest, beauty industry and other dominant discourses. Lastly, this study sheds new light on young Chinese women's attitudes towards female beauty and provides a culturally grounded approach to beauty in China whilst adding to feminist understanding and debate regarding beauty culture.

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