

**Becoming ‘beautiful’:
Beauty practices and female beauty in contemporary China**

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This thesis investigates young women's motivations regarding beauty practices in contemporary China. It is based on 20 semi-structured interviews, 10 beauty diaries and 10 follow-up interviews with a sample of women aged 18–25. The research takes an interdisciplinary feminist approach to explore several themes in relation to the participants' negotiations of female beauty, including reasons for engaging in beauty practices, daily beauty routines and their understanding of what constitutes female beauty.

In terms of the interventions of the thesis, a key issue is that most work regarding beauty practices has come from Western feminist scholars and is thus based on the experience of Western women. Therefore, to what extent these ideas and discussions translate to non-Western national contexts has not been examined. In doing so, this thesis seeks to address several gaps and omissions in feminist work on beauty culture. In particular, it intervenes in ways that question whether postfeminism is a transnational cultural discourse by examining how young Chinese women discuss their engagement in beauty practices.

This analysis reveals that participants utilise postfeminist discourse regarding choice and pleasure when explaining their motivations. Furthermore, this thesis illustrates the importance of discourses of cultural specificity in beauty practices in so far as participants negotiate constructs of inner and outer beauty in ways which are shaped by a Chinese social and political context. This finding foregrounds the issues of cultural specificity within beauty culture studies.

As such, this thesis argues that postfeminism can be seen as transnational discourse to understand Chinese women's experience within a global context. However, postfeminism offers a particular conceptual lens emerging from the Western context. It is, therefore, useful to be coupled with other perspectives formed from local dominant discourse and concepts to facilitate a suitable framework for studying Chinese beauty culture.

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1.1 Research aims

What do we mean when we talk about beauty? The beauty of love, nature, or art – these are what human beings stay alive for and are passionate about. We are emotionally touched and moved by beauty in a myriad of complex ways. However, the beauty I want to talk about is something different, something hidden in women’s everyday life:

On a normal day, she wakes up and walks into the bathroom to get ready. Her reflection in the mirror allows her to check her face and body. ‘My face is a little bit dry today,’ she thinks. She pauses, asking herself ‘What’s my plan for today? Where am I going to go? Whom am I going to meet?’ While considering these questions, she starts her beauty routine. The answers will determine how she will dress and beautify herself.

The first step is cleansing. She uses a facial cleanser to clean her skin, getting rid of excess oil and dirt. She brushes her teeth to get rid of bad breath. Then, she uses many bottles containing different skincare lotions. Then, she adds makeup: foundation, facial bronzer, facial powder, highlighter, blusher, eyeliner, eyeshadow, eyebrow pencil, and lipstick. The combination of style and colour depends on her mood, how she feels and what she will wear that day. Next, it’s time to treat and style her hair. As Chinese people often say, hair is a woman’s second face – you cannot ignore it. She walks out of the bathroom and chooses her outfit from the wardrobe. She evaluates her body and clothes, thinking, ‘I’ve put on some weight recently. I better not wear jeans, or my legs will look fat. A skirt would be better to hide my legs’. Before she goes out, she looks in the mirror and is happy with her morning effort. Finally, she is ready. How much time has passed? Anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours.

She leaves her home and walks outside feeling confident and beautiful.

This type of ‘get ready with me’ video is popular on Chinese social media. The details in this morning routine sound so trivial, but many girls go through a similar routine every morning, as was described by most of the participants in this study. Why do women

engage in these beauty practices? What do they think female beauty is? These questions led me to start my research.

Although Chinese women have a long history of engaging in a variety of beauty practices, such as foot binding, 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 (Gilmartin, 1994; Ip, 2003). This abolition was believed to free women from objectification and empower them while introducing social equality (Croll, 1983; Roberts, 2010). However, after the Chinese economic reform in 1979, Chinese society experienced huge economic and social changes. Since then the importance of female beauty has been emphasised, and promoting beauty standards and ideals has become an essential means to sell beauty products and services (Xu and Feiner, 2007; Yang, 2011; Wen, 2013; Ma, 2022). According to mainstream beauty standards promoted by Chinese mass media, women should have a tall, thin body, big eyes, a V-shaped face and fair skin (Zhang, 2012).

The beauty industry has mushroomed, so much so that Garner (2005) suggests that in the near future, Chinese consumers will surpass United States (US) consumers' role in the growth of the global economy. Female Chinese consumers, therefore, play an important role in contributing towards the great Chinese consumption power, where clothing and cosmetics are the top categories on their shopping list (Ni, 2012). As a consequence, the importance of a woman's appearance is emphasised in China, and people refer to contemporary China as the *era of face-judging* (看脸时代; pinyin: *Kàn liǎn shí dài*) (Du, 2015). Indeed, there is significant evidence that women now pay more attention to their appearance and are encouraged to do so. Marketing surveys conducted in 2015 show that over 57% of women wear makeup daily and spend an average of 30.1 minutes a day applying cosmetics (The Nielsen Company, 2015). This statistic starkly contrasts to the era of socialist China, when most women rarely wore makeup (Ip, 2003). Furthermore, according to Baidu Marketing Centre (2020), 77% of cosmetic consumers are female, and only 23% are male. This statistic suggests that attention to beauty culture may be pervasive among Chinese women.

In 2016, there were a variety of so-called beauty challenges targeting women that went viral online. These challenges were based on cultural constructs of the definition of beauty, which are potentially questionable and certainly controversial, as many feminists would be critical of these conceptions of beauty (Wolf, 1990; Bordo, 2003) and would likely frown upon women being measured according to her looks. It became popular when a picture of Chinese celebrity Shanshan Yuan was posted online, where she held an A4 sheet of paper in front of her waist. This sparked the beauty challenge called A4 Waist, where women who could hide their waist behind an A4-size paper (21 cm) were proud to post their photos on social media as a way to prove their beauty (Wilson, 2016). There have been other challenges, such as women putting coins above their collarbones to prove how slim they are. If they had low body fat, their collarbone would protrude enough to leave a hollow to place coins. These online beauty challenges reinforce rigid beauty standards and intensify the pressure on Chinese women. It is clear that Chinese women are immersed in beauty culture and that there are gendered rules of appearance, so it is crucial to analyse women's experiences regarding their engagement in beauty practices.

To investigate contemporary Chinese women's engagement in beauty practices, this project sampled 20 Chinese women aged 18–25, utilising semi-structured interviews, beauty diaries and follow-up interviews to understand women's motivations, attitudes and beliefs towards and engagement in beauty practices. An explanation of beauty practices and what they include is described in Section 1.3. Unlike most of the existing academic literature on beauty culture, which tends to focus on one specific form of beauty practice, my research is based on qualitative interviews and considers any beauty practices addressed by participants. Furthermore, rather than using a preconceived idea of what female beauty is, this study encourages participants to express how they define it. The analysis of this thesis is discussed in relation to feminist theory and the debate on women's agency in terms of freedom and choice. Theorising female agency is a central focus of recent feminist work from a Western postfeminist context (Duits and Van Zoonen, 2006; Clarke and Griffin, 2007; Gill, 2007a; Chambers, 2008; Braun, 2009; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011; Riley and Scharff, 2013; Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Crann *et al.*, 2017; Widdows, 2018; Terry *et al.*, 2018).

A key issue is that the vast majority of work regarding female beauty has come from Western feminist scholars and, as such, is based on the experience of Western media and

women. Consequently, it has not been examined to what extent these ideas, research and discussions translate to non-Western contexts. In China, the development of feminist discourse is less clear. As a result, the concept of postfeminism has yet to be well addressed in China, especially from an academic standpoint. There are only a few studies that investigate and discuss postfeminism in China, and these are based on media studies (Thornham and Pengpeng, 2010; Chang and Ren, 2016; Dippner, 2018b; Liao, 2019; Li, 2020; Yang, 2020) and literature studies (Kung, 2014). Therefore, in this study, I made the crucial intervention of examining whether postfeminism is a transnational cultural discourse by examining how young Chinese women discuss their engagement in beauty practices.

It is clear that the academic and cultural context of postfeminism has shaped discourses on beauty culture. I refer to postfeminism as a cultural discourse where women are defined by individuality, choice and agency (Gill, 2007b). Since the 1990s, some scholars have adopted what might be seen as a postfeminist position on beauty. They argue that women are not passive victims and that beauty practices can be perceived as empowering and pleasurable (Davis, 1991; Frost, 1999). However, in line with broader critics of postfeminism, some feminist scholars suggest that postfeminism overstates women's agency and ignores the continuing constraints of the patriarchal structure (Bartky, 1997; Bordo, 2003). For example, Bordo adopts Foucault's (1979) model of normalising power when analysing the female body. She illustrates how women's personal choices are shaped by the beauty industry through self-discipline. As a result, a third position in the debate has developed: Rather than just asking whether patriarchal power oppresses women or whether they have a choice, many feminists additionally pay attention to the discursive framework of beauty practices. They explore how women's choices are constructed and consider the extent to which they might be limited (Braun, 2009; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011; Crann *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, this notion of 'choice' has been central to the ideologies of postfeminism and feminist critiques of this terrain (Tasker and Negra, 2007). In China, few studies have investigated Chinese women's engagement in beauty practices from a feminist perspective which is why this study will be of great value to interdisciplinary feminist scholars.

Furthermore, this study seeks to address the lack of research concerning the concepts of inner and outer beauty. Although researchers have identified and noted the established

relationship between inner and outer beauty (Man, 2000; Zhang, 2012; Luo, 2013; Lotti, 2018), few studies have explored their definition in detail and how they relate to one another. Man (2000) discusses the notion of female beauty in Confucian and Taoist teachings by analysing female beauty in courtesan culture. According to Man, having outer beauty, such as a pretty face, and inner beauty, such as intellectual talent, were both perceived to be necessary for female courtesans. Yet, Man (2000) also found that the traditional Chinese concepts of inner and outer beauty were less apparent in the media as more attention was given to women's fashion and looks, which might be attributed to the influence of Western beauty standards and the Western fashion industry. Luo (2013) discussed 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 moral practices such as chastity, obedience and filial piety to an emphasis on women's intelligence and education. In her empirical study, Zhang (2012) determined that inner beauty consists of personal qualities, good manners or posture, confidence and how a woman presents herself. The concept of inner beauty is rarely discussed in feminist literature, while within the Chinese context, the extant scholarship focuses on outer beauty and *marginalises* the significance of inner beauty – despite 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 yet to receive sustained attention in existing literature, particularly from an empirical point of view. This thesis seeks to address this omission, specifically the importance of inner beauty within the context of Chinese culture.

Within the dramatic social and economic changes in China, this study fills a gap in the existing academic literature and reveals the experiences of young Chinese women engaging with beauty practices whilst sharing these women's voices with the global feminist community. An important aspect of this study is to draw attention to postfeminist studies in China through interviewing Chinese women regarding their agency, choice and beauty practices. It therefore provides a case study which facilitates an understanding of whether postfeminism is transnational discourse. Thus, this research will contribute towards broadening our academic knowledge of beauty culture whilst also making a unique contribution to feminist and Chinese cultural studies.

1.2 The term *beauty practices*

Regarding the term *beauty practices*, it is notable to find that much of the academic literature does not clearly define this term, with existing work variously referring to self-adornment, self-beautification, body modification, beauty work, aesthetic labour and the beauty paradigm (Ip, 2003; Rubin, Nemeroff and Russo, 2004; Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Tazzyman, 2014). This study will use the broader and more encompassing term *beauty practices* to refer to any method women use to alter their appearance in the pursuit of becoming ‘beautiful’. Although the specific definitions of beauty practices listed above may have been useful for the purpose of investigation, they do not allow us to learn how women perceive and define female beauty for themselves, nor do they provide a broader context to understand how previous findings relate to one another. In contrast, I am interested in exploring Chinese women’s experiences and attitudes towards female beauty and beauty practices, so the meaning of female beauty and beauty practices is open for discussion. By asking participants questions such as, ‘What is female beauty?’ and ‘What methods do women/you use to make themselves/yourself beautiful?’, it is possible to discover how participants define and understand female beauty and beauty practices. Therefore, this study is different from previous research because it aims to understand how Chinese women perceive female beauty and allows them to describe the various methods, they use to achieve female beauty. This exploration may uncover female beauty ideals or standards that will facilitate a discussion regarding social constructs.

Within this thesis, the term *female beauty* is used to distinguish from *feminine beauty* to avoid connotations associated with traditional conceptions of femininity. Although, technically, *feminine* can be defined as ‘typically belonging or relating to, or characteristic of, a woman’, it can also refer to ‘having or reflecting qualities considered typical of a woman’ (Chambers, 1996, p. 481). Therefore, to minimise the potential of feminine beauty being value-laden with preconceptions associated with being feminine, this study aimed to instead discuss beauty in relation to women and girls and allow for participants to define and interpret it in their own way. Therefore, when the term ‘feminine’ is used, it is done so intentionally and refers to more traditional understandings or within the context of other academics’ research, whereas the use of ‘female beauty’ aims to refer to women and girls more neutrally and specifically.

Previous academic research on beauty practices has typically taken a segregated approach by focusing on a specific type of beauty practice, such as dieting, makeup, fashion, or cosmetic surgery. In contrast, I wanted this study to be less prescriptive and more inclusive of the different types of beauty practices and allow women to express what they do and what they think women do to make themselves beautiful. The intention of this was to allow me to examine and provide a framework for understanding the conceptualisation of female beauty and beauty practices. In addition, this study aimed to offer a new understanding of beauty culture in China by providing a feminist perspective and, more crucially, within a specific national context.

1.3 Feminism and postfeminism in China

Before discussing the emergence of postfeminism in China, it is important to trace how feminism started. I refer to the term 'feminism' as a series of social and political movements. First-wave feminism in the West emerged in the 1900s and focused on achieving women's right to vote, divorce, have equal education and own property (Bryson, 1999, 2003). Second-wave feminism began in the 1960s, based on the foundations of first-wave feminism but addressed further issues of gender equality regarding women's sexuality, family role, reproductive rights and labour conditions (Bryson, 1999, 2003). The popular slogan 'the personal is political' indicated how women's struggle within the patriarchal structure is not only social but also personal – and that these spheres are intrinsically related. However, it has been argued that second-wave feminism mainly focused on white, middle-class, privileged women. Many feminist scholars, such as bell hooks and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, found that Western feminist theories did not reflect the needs of many women (Skeggs, 1997; hooks, 2000). In this regard, women of colour and non-heterosexual, non-middle-class women faced forms of exclusion from the movement.

The concept of postfeminism emerged in the 1990s in the West. Definitions of postfeminism can be varied, and the term is sometimes used interchangeably with new traditionalism and third-wave feminism (Genz and Brabon, 2009). Postfeminism has been understood as a cultural and political discourse, which suggests that gender equality has been achieved and that women no longer need feminism (McRobbie, 2007a, 2009; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Genz and Brabon, 2009). Gill (2007b) famously argued that

postfeminism could be best understood as a set of discourses within popular media texts. According to Gill's now-canonical intervention, these include femininity as bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; self-discipline and self-surveillance; individualism, choice and empowerment; the ascendancy of a make-over paradigm and the notion of natural sexual difference.

The same criticism of feminism also applies to postfeminism in that there is an emphasis on young, white, privileged middle-class women. However, postfeminism is also criticised for being a Western cultural phenomenon that excludes women of colour and other ethnicities (Butler, 2013). Dosekun (2015a, 2015b) is critical of postfeminism and proposes that it can be seen as a transnational culture and that postfeminism is not only for women in the West. She examined young, class-privileged women in Lagos and found that women perceive themselves as postfeminist subjects who are already empowered beyond the limitations and constraints of continued gender inequalities.

As the concepts of feminism and postfeminism are the central focus of my thesis, it is crucial to contextualise them within Chinese society. The devolvement of Chinese feminism has had a different path than Western feminism. The rise of Chinese feminism can be traced back to the latter part of the nineteenth century when Western countries invaded China. During this time, Western ideologies were perceived as *superior* and *more civilised* as their advancements had resulted in the power to dominate— although, in retrospect, one might question these values. Nevertheless, following China's defeat by Western countries, it was felt that to overcome this and regain power, they would have to become *Westernised* (Chen, 2011). With this came the adoption of Western ideologies, and Western feminism was introduced to China by Chinese male intellectuals such as Youwei Kang (1858–1927) and Qichao Liang (1873–1929) (Liu, Karl and Ko, 2013; Zheng, 2016). From the national level, introducing the concept of women's liberation was part of China's absorption of so-called advanced Western knowledge to rejuvenate the Chinese nation. From the perspective of Chinese male intellectuals, this development could be seen as a way for Chinese men to feel good about themselves and show how civilised and advanced they were, distinguishing themselves from traditional Chinese men (Liu, Karl and Ko, 2013).

Women's emancipation influenced many political activists from both the Nationalist and Communist parties to support the development of women's rights through campaigns such as the *May Fourth Movement* (五四运动; pinyin: *Wǔsī yùndòng*) (1915–1921). These campaigns addressed issues such as 'marriage reform; the abolition of polygamy, concubinage and prostitution; female employment in the public sector; and far-reaching legal reforms that would guarantee women's suffrage and property rights' (Gilmartin, 1994, p. 199). Therefore, rather than feminism rising from a social consciousness regarding gender inequality or concerns that emphasised women's liberation, Chinese feminism was strongly initiated by and linked to the national revolution. Given the significant political shifts that China has undergone over the last century, we can appreciate the complexity of Chinese feminism. For instance, Chinese feminism has gone through several phases: *Western-style feminism* in the 1920s, *revolutionary feminism* in the 1930s and *socialist state feminism*, which started in 1949 with the Chinese Communist Party takeover that also actively sought to discontinue the influence of Western feminism (Wang, 1999; Barlow, 2004; Chen, 2011; Liao, 2019).

However, after the Chinese economic reform in 1979, the influence of Western feminism returned to China. It is worth acknowledging that there is no singular *Western feminism*. Instead, there are *Western feminisms* – neoliberal feminism (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 2020), Black feminism (Crenshaw, 1990), popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), data feminism (D'ignazio and Klein, 2020) and cyberfeminism (Hall, 1996), to name a few, yet they all advocate for equality. In this vein, and with the spread of Western feminism in China, came a rising interest in Women's Studies because of global trade and the exchange of culture and knowledge. These developments led to the *Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace* (1995) being hosted in China. At the conference, governments from around the world came together to discuss and agree on global legal rights for achieving equality – an significant milestone in the development of Chinese feminism (Wang, 2004). This conference helped promote gender equality in mainstream Chinese media and benefitted Chinese feminist scholars by opening up communication with the global feminist community, which has contributed to the development of Chinese feminist theory. For example, Western feminist gender theory has provided a conceptual framework that has been influential for Chinese feminism (Li, 2005; X. Li, 2016).

From the perspective of gender theory, Chinese scholars have turned their attention to gender differences and focused on the influence of social organisations and social culture. Moreover, some Western feminist scholars' books, such as Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* were translated and imported to China in the 1990s. However, the term 'feminism' poses linguistic and conceptual issues. There are two common translations of the term. Feminism as *nuquan zhuyi* (女权主义; pinyin: *Nǚquán zhǔyì*) (women's rights or power-ism) connotes rights and benefits that are linked with gender equality and power relations. This translation is often stereotyped as having a man-hating attitude and a hunger for power – discourses not unfamiliar in the West (Bryson, 2003). The second translation is *nuxing zhuyi* (女性主义; pinyin: *Nǚxìng zhǔyì*) (female or feminine-ism) which replaces the morpheme *-quan* (power) with *-xing* (sexuality). This translation emphasises biological differences between genders and has gained more popularity among Chinese scholars due to its semantic flexibility.

Although Western feminism has influenced Chinese feminism, postfeminism has seldom attracted attention from Chinese scholars despite its potential relevance. I, therefore, want to discuss factors that made postfeminist 'sensibility' (Gill, 2007b) visible in Chinese society and how China has developed its own characteristics within postfeminism. In support of this idea, I will discuss three distinct aspects of Western postfeminism that are mirrored in Chinese society concerning backlash, media influence and the economy.

Backlash against Maoist gender ideology

In the West, postfeminism is seen as a *backlash* against feminism, a symbol of anti-feminism driven by the media via the rejection of feminist goals and an attempt to turn the clock back to pre-feminist times from the early to mid-1990s (Faludi, 1991). According to Faludi (1991), the term *backlash* refers to conservative reactions to the feminist movement that retract the achievement and progress of women's liberation. *Backlash* has also become a term used in academic feminist discourse to critique the issues of women's representation in popular culture. For example, Wolf (1990) argued that there was a backlash against feminists' ideology of beauty, criticised as being detrimental to women's advancement as well as controlling women.

The *backlash* critique is also utilised to understand media-supported political discourse that criticises the achievements of feminism during the Thatcher–Reagan era in the United Kingdom (UK) and US (Litosseliti, Gill and Favaro, 2019). For example, in the US, the political environment of women’s rights shifted from an ascendancy of the new right to a more conservative direction. This political environment resulted in media discourse that ‘blame[d] feminism for a series of female illnesses and troubles, from burnout and infertility to depression and mental health problems’ (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 51). During the 1990s, the media portrayed career women as ‘abject and deficient, selfish and emotionally stunted, and ultimately regretful about neglecting their essential roles as wives and mothers’ (Genz and Brabon, 2009, p. 51). Another backlash was the notion of *new traditionalism*, which shifted the connotation of the domestic sphere for women from toil and confinement to autonomy and independence (Leslie, 1993). The attack on feminist core beliefs and the politics of the women’s movement led to a re-emphasis on conventional versions of femininity and domesticity.

These types of discourses on revaluing women’s roles were also found in Chinese society. During the Maoist era, Chinese women’s liberation was a priority within the political agenda of the Communist Party of China, so women’s status improved dramatically (Croll, 1978, 1983). Chinese women were pushed into the public space by participating in similar vocations as men to achieve political and economic equality (Gilmartin, 1994; Brownell and Wasserstrom, 2002). After the economic reform in 1979, China not only changed its mode of economy, but the cultural discourse shifted. There was a period of great criticism of Mao Zedong’s thoughts, which included criticism of the socialist feminist discourse on women’s liberation. During the 1980s to 90s, the concept of gender was reconstructed, promoting the concept of masculinity and femininity (Wang, 2004). For example, the emphasis on men and women being the same in Maoist times was replaced by an emphasis on the perceived differences between men and women. Chinese male intellectuals criticised what they perceived as the masculinisation of women during Mao’s period, claiming it was turning women into men. They advocated for what they considered the restoration of women’s ‘nature’ and asserted particular constructs of femininity that emphasised the ‘natural’ differences between men and women. They also suggested that women should once again be women, meaning that women should prioritise their role in the family as a mother and wife. This popular discourse was centred around women returning to the family rather than being career women (Zheng, 2015b). For example,

Chinese sociologist Yefu Zheng stated that, ‘the women’s liberation movement sent men back to their families as “housewives” and drove women into society to become “strong men”, thus eventually men lost their masculinity and women lost their warmth and became “neutral” and “de-gendered”’ (Zheng, 2015b, p. 301). At the same time, the media stigmatised career women, which meant that Chinese women faced the dilemma of prioritising their families or careers. This period can be seen as a backlash against Chinese feminism.

We can see the similarity between Chinese and Western societies; they both experienced similar media discourse on defining a woman’s role. Western society faced a backlash against feminism, while Chinese society experienced a backlash against Maoist ideologies of gender equality- Chinese State Feminism. These media discourses had similar ideas that encouraged women to return to the private sphere, re-emphasising a woman’s femininity and family role, as it differed from a man’s role.

Media influence

In the West, another key aspect of postfeminism was its aim towards empowering the younger generation of females, often promoted in the media through the concept of *Girl Power*. Girl Power’s defining characteristic is a re-appraisal of femininity as a means of female empowerment and agency (Hains, 2009). Girl Power has been criticised as promoting objectification and commodification of women, which encourages women to buy into patriarchal stereotypes of female appearance and neo-liberal individualist principles (Genz and Brabon, 2009; Negra, 2009). At the same time, Girl Power could be seen as a complex, contradictory discourse that provided a new articulation of young femininity. As Genz and Brabon (2009, p. 78) stated, ‘The central tenet of Girl Power is that femininity is powerful and empowering, providing women/girls with the agency to negotiate the possibilities of their gender role’. These postfeminist discourses have been reflected in popular culture as *chick lit*, female-oriented fiction that celebrates the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual romance (Ferriss and Young, 2006). Many scholars found that Chinese fiction, such as *Shanghai Baby* (上海宝贝; pinyin: *Shànghǎi Bǎobèi*) (1999) and *A Story of Du Lala’s Promotion* (杜拉拉升职记; pinyin: *Dù Lālā shēngzhí jì*) (2007), reflected Western chick lit ideologies that celebrate women’s

empowerment in the form of female sexual and economic independence (Weber, 2001; Zhong, 2006; Chen, 2009, 2012, 2013).

Regarding other forms of postfeminist media content, there are many successful programmes (e.g. *Sex and the City*, 1998–2004; *Ally McBeal*, 1997–2002) that illustrate how television series can centre around the postfeminist themes of women's empowerment, choice and makeovers within neoliberalism (Moseley and Read, 2002; Adriaens and Van Bauwel, 2014). According to Ferriss and Young (2006), 'chick flick' is a film genre regarding love and romance, targeting female audiences and illustrating cultural characteristics associated with postfeminist sensibilities. However, in relation to television, there are many Chinese texts produced within this genre, such as *Pink Ladies* (粉红女郎; pinyin: *Fěnhóng nǚláng*) (2002) and *Hero of the Year* (好想好想谈恋爱; pinyin: *Hǎo xiǎng hǎo xiǎng tán liàn'ài*) (2004). These television dramas incorporate postfeminist ideas, such as female empowerment, individual freedom, personal choice and (hetero)sexual pleasure (Chen, 2009), where characters are portrayed as women who are financially and emotionally independent and sexually conscious. As Western postfeminism is largely constructed through the lens of consumerism (Tasker and Negra, 2007), the neoliberalist themes developing in Chinese television programmes also demonstrate the increasing influence of Western consumerism and capitalism in China, especially in larger cities such as Beijing and Shanghai (Ferry, 2003). Financial empowerment is an important theme and can be associated with capitalist relations of production. Yang (2020) found that Chinese chick flicks, such as *I Do* (我愿意; pinyin: *Wǒ yuànyì*) (2012) and *Suddenly Seventeen* (二十八岁未成年; pinyin: *Èrshíbā suì wèi chéngnián*) (2016), reflect the theme of freedom of choice regarding women's career development, marriage and reproduction.

Fast-growing economy

Postfeminism emphasises women's femininity and sexual attractiveness. According to this discourse, beauty practices can be perceived as empowering and pleasurable (Frost, 1999; Cahill, 2003). Women have the choice of embracing their femininity, so there is a shift from objectification to self-objectification (Gill, 2007b). These ideas are in line with Chinese society, where female beauty and fashion are portrayed as a way of empowering women through consumerism (Yang, 2020). With a fast-growing economy resulting in increased consumerism, female beauty ideals have been reconstructed in the media as an

important means to promote the beauty industry, which increases the sale of beauty products and services (Xu and Feiner, 2007). The importance of appearance is heavily emphasised in contemporary China. There is significant evidence showing that Chinese women pay much attention to their appearance. Cosmetic sales in China increased from ¥140 billion (CNY) (£16 billion) in 2007 to ¥3,332 billion (CNY) (£300 billion) in 2016. Within a decade, this figure increased by 138% (Li and Zhang, 2017), and China became the second-largest consumer of cosmetics in the world (Spencer, 2017).

In conjunction with the growth of the beauty industry, emphasis is placed on women's physical appearance in contemporary China. Women's physical attractiveness is commonly used as an indicator to measure their worth, as society values their appearance more than their personal development (Cheng, 1997; Harden and Chiung-Fang, 2014). In contrast, there are many factors to prove a man's success, such as wealth, social status, personal qualities and personality (Huang, 2009). Moreover, economic success is a strong indicator of a person's power and social status in China, so women's empowerment has largely come from their financial status and ability to consume (Wen, 2013). This concept of empowerment is closely linked with neoliberalism, where women are seen as empowered consumers. *Neoliberalism* refers to the political and economic ideas related to a free-market system that offers economic freedom to individuals (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism has become a hegemonic discourse, influencing people's understanding of the world. As Xu and Feiner (2007) have argued, the promotion of female beauty developed China's neoliberal politics, which also encouraged women to purchase beauty products. Furthermore, the rise of internet celebrities who sell beauty products also reflects the existence of postfeminism in the Chinese context through the transnationality of consumerism and neoliberalism (Liao, 2019).

Overall, we can see that a postfeminist sensibility in Chinese society can be traced back to 1979, when China adopted a neoliberalist economic model. Some scholars argue that Western postfeminism is not a result of feminism because some countries that did not have a feminist movement yet still exhibited some postfeminist sensibilities (Dosekun, 2015b). With regard to China, postfeminism is both the result of developing neoliberalism and a backlash against Chinese state feminism. I argue that some postfeminist sensibilities have existed since the economic reform in 1979 as a result of adopting neoliberalism along with the appropriation of gender politics and a backlash against Chinese state feminism.

Within this social context, this study addresses three main areas of enquiry:

1. How is female beauty understood and defined in the experiences of young Chinese women (aged 18–25), and what insight does this offer regarding shifts in the constructs of femininity and beauty culture since the economic reform?
2. How do women articulate their reasons for engaging in beauty practices, and how can this be understood in relation to feminist work on postfeminism and ‘choice’?
3. Continuing from the above, to what extent do Western theories of feminism apply to Chinese women’s relationship with beauty practices?

1.4 Thesis structure

In Chapter 2, I review relevant literature regarding beauty practices and feminism. I contextualise beauty practices within feminist theoretical debates and previous empirical work. Then, I critically review existing literature from a Chinese context by presenting the literature in chronological order, covering the main historical periods of China. I highlight the research gaps and how my research can fit into the existing scholarly debate regarding beauty practices.

In Chapter 3, I discuss my feminist methodological approach to this study, including research design, process and data analysis. I also discuss my positionality and feminist reflectivity within the research process.

The analysis of my empirical data is divided into the next four chapters. In Chapter 4, I explore young Chinese women’s motivation to engage in beauty practices regarding postfeminist discourse of choice and pleasure. It reveals that many participants perceive themselves as freely choosing subjects, gaining pleasure and empowerment through their engagement in beauty practices.

In Chapter 5, I seek to understand young Chinese women’s initial and early engagement in beauty practices. It reveals the social constructs of beauty practices and how they have become normalised as a result of peer influence, heteronormative beauty standards and

efforts to fit in with Chinese beauty culture. Participants developed a strong motivation to engage in beauty practices at university due to changing social expectations and the desire to find a boyfriend. Moreover, the score measurement system and the social stigma of being makeup-free reinforce the normalisation of beauty practices.

In Chapter 6, I utilise the data from the diary–interview method to illustrate how gender norms are propagated through normalised daily beauty practices. It is also observed how the diary interviews support and reinforce what was found in the initial interviews.

In Chapter 7, I explore participants' understanding of female beauty. I found that the concepts of inner and outer beauty are inseparable; participants perceived they are both important in gaining social power, which illustrates the Chinese cultural specificity within beauty culture studies.

In the final chapter, I bring all my findings and discussions together and draw conclusions. I also discuss this thesis' methodological and empirical contribution.

2.1 Introduction

Beauty practices and female beauty are studied by a range of different academic disciplines – from medical, phenomenological, anthropological and psychological perspectives (Edmonds, 2008; Edmonds and van der Geest, 2009; Coleman and Figueroa, 2010; Vandenberg, 2018; Widdows and MacCallum, 2018). This thesis adopts a gender studies feminist approach focused on gender issues, such as whether beauty practices are oppressive or empowering and the key debate regarding agency. In order to help us explore and understand female beauty and beauty practices in China from a feminist perspective, this literature review consists of three parts. First, I will examine research regarding the conceptualisation of beauty practices within a Western and global context. I will review how feminists conceptualise the female body and the major debates central to beauty practices. Then, I will illustrate how the feminist debate regarding female beauty and beauty practices has developed outside of the Western context to encompass different countries, religions and cultures on the global stage. This will facilitate and contextualise a discussion regarding female beauty and beauty practices in China, which will lead into the third section, where I will review and discuss existing academic literature regarding female beauty and beauty practices in China. To facilitate this, it will be presented in chronological order, covering the main historical periods of China. It will also discuss how Chinese women's perception of female beauty is constructed within the cultural discourse.

2.2 Feminist approaches to the body and gender

The concept of *body* has been framed in opposition to the mind in the West for a long time, and the mind/body dualism – referred to as Cartesian dualism – has been associated with the opposition between male and female. As Grosz (1994, p. 14) stated, 'women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men'. The mind was seen as superior to the body. As Bordo (1995, p. 3) points out, in Western philosophy, the body is commonly perceived as something that is separate from the mind; 'as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul'. Thus, women were associated with the body, which was considered a lower pursuit to develop than the mind. Hence, the concept of women's bodies was arguably considered by those in power too *trivial* a matter to attract any attention from academia before the 1960s. In order to understand the *trivialised* body,

it is necessary to look into the Western history of gender. In the eighteenth century, Western culture moved towards a *two-sex model* that led to women being defined by their biology. Many scholars in the nineteenth century claimed that biology determined physical and mental differences between men and women. For example, one of the influential biologists, Brooks (1883, p. 243), pointed out that ‘If there is this fundamental difference in the sociological influence of the sexes, its origin must be sought in the physiological differences between them’. He formed his conclusions by drawing on a comparison between men’s and women’s brains, suggesting that women follow the rules, whereas men could be creative. These so-called scientific observations were meant to clearly show that the fact of these biological differences ‘proved’ women’s intellectual inferiority. This argument coincides with Moi’s (2005) claim that the scientific understanding of the body from a biological perspective has become a tool to service the patriarchal ideology which keeps women ‘in their place’.

In order to tackle this controversial ideology of physical and mental differences that are ‘determined’ by biology, feminists introduced a distinction between biology and social norms, which produced the conception of a sex/gender distinction. In the 1960s, Robert Stoller first defined a concept of *gender identity*, which only focused on a person’s psychological experience regarding which sex they feel a belonging to. Later, Stoller expanded further:

I prefer to restrict the term *sex* to a biological connotation. Thus, with few exceptions, there are two sexes, male and female ... *Gender* is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are “male” and “female”, the corresponding terms for gender are “masculine” and “feminine”; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex. (1994. p.9)

In this sense, Stoller’s idea of sex is a category which needs scientific description and belongs to the discipline of science, biology and medicine. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, Western feminists appropriated Stoller’s concept of the distinction between sex and gender, and the word ‘sex’ has simply been used to refer to a person being a man or woman. Gayle Rubin, one of the most influential feminists, elaborated on Stoller’s concept to develop a *sex/gender system* which is ‘the set of arrangements by which a society

transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which there transformed sexual needs are satisfied' (1975, p. 159). In Rubin's opinion, the *sex/gender system* is a tool which explains why women's oppression was maintained in various cultures. Rubin sees sex as a biological difference and gender as oppressive social norms. She focuses on gender rather than sex and thinks gender is the oppressive result of a social production process. Rubin's ideology of the *sex/gender system* has inspired many feminists in the US to justify their ideas that women are victims of male power.

Feminists widely accept the concept of gender being socially constructed, but the concept of whether sex is socially constructed or not is still open for discussion (Butler, 1990). In this thesis, I will not engage with the argument of whether sex is socially constructed, but I will adopt the concept that gender is socially constructed. This concept of gender provides a crucial foundation for approaching Chinese women's beauty practices in my research, as beauty practices are strongly associated with women's femininity. To be a so-called proper woman, they must meet these gender and cultural norms regarding their appearance and psychological being.

Furthermore, Candace West's and Don H. Zimmerman's idea of 'doing gender' offers valuable insight when they propose 'gender as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction' (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 125). Judith Butler's (1990, 1997) work is crucial to understand Chinese women's beautification experiences because it helped me understand how beauty practices are part of gender performativity. Butler's (1990) work is on the notion of gender being performative, which highlights how the repetition of social norms discursively constructs the differences between masculinity and femininity. In *Gender Trouble*, she argues that gender is socially constructed. Gender identity is fluid, and it can be learned and performed through social activities. When people perform gendered behaviours, they are actively constructing gender in society. Furthermore, the binary category approach to understanding gender perpetuates normative heterosexuality in society.

I am aware that much literature examines homosexual and bisexual beauty culture, such as lesbian beauty discourse (Beren *et al.*, 1997; Cogan, 1999; Hammidi and Kaiser, 1999; Lyle, Jones and Drakes, 1999). However, this thesis focuses on heteronormative women's beauty practices and tries to understand heteronormative beauty norms, as the 20

participants in this study were heterosexual. This was not an intended target sample but a reflection that heterosexuality is more common in China. In China, heterosexual relationships are the norm, and it is worth noting that the government changed the *one-child policy* (一孩政策; pinyin: *Yī Hái Zhèngcè*) to a two-child limit in 2015 and three-child limit in 2021. Not only can parents have more than one child, but there are now also incentives, such as supporting policies and subsidies, for families to have more than one child to align with government population planning (Juan, 2017). In contrast, homosexuality is discouraged, as reflected in the government banning LGBTQ+ groups (Ni and Davidson, 2021). Hopefully, more studies regarding beauty culture in China will be able to gain access to LGBTQ+ participants, as it is important that their experiences and opinions are also researched.

Returning to the theme of gender identity and ‘doing gender’, since *second-wave feminism* began in the late 1960s, the theme of disciplining the female body has been a constant focus in feminist research. Especially in beauty culture studies, feminists have analysed the constraint of the female body by the beauty industry and the media (Bartky, 1997; Bordo, 2003). The significant work of Michel Foucault inspired many feminists to understand the formation of women’s bodies through bodily disciplines. However, some feminists also hold critical opinions towards Foucault’s work. For example, Foucault believed that power is not possessed by a few individuals or groups but by a ‘network of non-centralised forces’ (Bordo, 1993) and that power is maintained not through forces or threats but through a normalising power whereby individuals follow social norms through self-discipline and self-surveillance. In contrast to this, Bordo (1993) argues that although power is not held by individuals, not everyone is equally subjected to power, so there are dominant positions in social structures that create forces.

Despite the limitation of Foucault’s understanding of power, his significant work, such as *Discipline and Punish* (1979), is helpful in understanding how Chinese women’s beautification experiences are constructed and regulated by Chinese social and beauty norms. For instance, Foucault (1979) points out that discipline is a mechanism of power that controls the body’s operation and regulates the individual’s movements. In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), he expresses that the relationship between knowledge and power is related and that normalising power is embodied in the discourse, which can

change people's perceptions towards sexuality. He asserts that power and knowledge can be used as a form of social control to establish and maintain these attitudes, which is done via different dominant institutions, such as governments and industries. Understanding women's bodies has helped Western feminists develop their arguments regarding female beauty and beauty practices. In the next section, I will review the development of the relative feminist debate.

2.3 Feminism and beauty practices

During the 1970s, beauty practices and female appearance received a lot of attention from feminists. Most feminists perceived beauty practices in Western society to be oppressive, and the beauty system was perceived to be a significant factor in maintaining gender domination (Dworkin, 1974; Orbach, 1978; Chapkis, 1986; Bordo, 1993). Dworkin's canonical *Woman Hating* (1974) came out during this period, arguing that beauty practices are harmful to female bodies, yet women have to engage in beauty practices in order to meet beauty standards. According to Dworkin (1974, p. 113), this creates a context in which 'not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered' by society. Similarly, Orbach (1978) drew attention to the topic of women's body image and fatness. She views dieting practices as a form of oppression; therefore, women's obesity is a way to challenge gender stereotypes and escape the commodification of women, but women will be shamed as a result. Since then, many researchers have investigated dieting practices, eating disorders and the ways in which both can be positioned as part of normative femininity (MacSween, 1989; Malson, 1998; Bordo, 2003; Heyes and Jones, 2009; Holmes, 2016). Furthermore, many academics address the concern that many women from both the Global North, such as Korea and the US, and the Global South, such as China, Belize and Ghana, suffer from body dissatisfaction (Lee and Lee, 2000; Anderson-Fye, 2004; Jung, Forbes and Lee, 2009; Michels and Amenyah, 2017).

In the 1980s, the feminist debate regarding beauty practices circled around the concept of the cultural dupe. For example, Chapkis (1986) claimed that women's oppression is centred around beauty practices, which are reinforced by the beauty industry, the media and other dominant structures, such as classism and ageism. She examined women's everyday lives to discover their *beauty secrets*, which illustrated women's *obsession* with managing and controlling their bodies. Women are expected to be *naturally* beautiful, so

they have to engage in beauty practices in secret to give others the impression that they effortlessly fit into the beauty standard. Another powerful feminist work concerned with beauty practices and beauty standards is Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990), where she points out that there has been a backlash against the women's liberation movement. She argues that the pressure of engaging in beauty practices to conform to a feminine beauty standard has become stronger than in the past due to the development of mass media and consumerism. Moreover, similar to Chapkis (1986, p. 10), she also refers to a form of female secrecy, claiming that 'there is a secret "underlife" poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control'. In this same vein, Jeffreys (2015) explicitly argues that beauty practices have become more and more common, harmful and degrading, especially within the cosmetic surgery industry, which has a great negative impact on women physically and mentally. In addition, she reasons how powerful cultural expectations force women to demonstrate femininity by engaging in beauty practices that maintain 'femininity as the behaviours of subordination' (Jeffreys, 2015, p. 24). In contrast, Wolf's position shifted away from conceptions of subordination. In her later book, *Fire with Fire* (1993), she analyses beauty culture, emphasises the notion of choice and suggests that women can choose to engage in beauty practices while still being powerful. This new message in *Fire with Fire* appears to contradict her argument in *The Beauty Myth*. Furthermore, she argues that second-wave feminism's portrayals of perceiving women as the victim of a patriarchal society are disempowering and outdated and should therefore be replaced with 'power feminism', which is 'unapologetically sexual', 'free-thinking', 'pleasure-loving' and 'self-assertive'. These ideas largely characterise postfeminist sentiments on women's relationship with beauty culture.

It could be argued that the academic and cultural context of postfeminism has shaped beauty culture as well as approaches to studying it. A number of scholars appear to have adopted a postfeminist position on beauty, arguing that women are not passive victims and that beauty practices can be perceived as empowering and pleasurable (Davis, 1991; Crane, 1999; Frost, 1999; Cahill, 2003; Holliday and Taylor, 2006). Adopting a postfeminist position is also a way of challenging the connection between beauty and passivity in feminist writing (Holliday and Taylor, 2006). Davis (1991) disagrees with Chapkis' (1986) and Bordo's (1993) assumption that women who choose beauty practices are misguided, as it ignores women's ability to be active and knowledgeable when they

choose to engage in beauty practices. Davis (1991) criticises the cultural dupe approach to feminine beauty and thinks that women who are willing to engage in beauty practices, such as cosmetic surgery, may be aware of the oppression of normalised feminine beauty standards yet may consciously choose this behaviour as a solution to personal problems associated with expectation of women's appearance. For instance, by undergoing cosmetic surgery, their altered appearance enables them to meet patriarchal beauty ideologies. Similarly, Crane (1999) argues that women are not passive receivers of fashion images because they express critical responses to the fashion press. This argument was supported by Crane's observation that women often have their own personal preferences when evaluating fashionable clothing, so they are not passively following or being manipulated. This finding is in line with Kwan and Trautner's (2009) argument that women are not cultural dupes but actively pursue their cosmetic goals by engaging in beauty practices.

Feminists propose different reasons why women engage in beauty practices. Some argue that women's physical attractiveness acts as a form of currency that enables them to be 'empowered'. As Kwan and Trautner (2009) found in their study, individuals who are physically attractive are often linked with positive traits and better social outcomes. In contrast, perceptions of 'unattractive' individuals are associated with stigma, negative stereotypes and discrimination. Physical attractiveness also has a positive effects on social institutional levels, such as work, education and marriage. Although both genders face social pressure regarding their appearance, women's appearance norms are more well-defined than men's. Women are often conditioned to think more about their appearance and are more motivated to make changes (Kwan and Trautner, 2009).

Additionally, Frost (1999) describes how engaging in beauty practices can be seen as a potential source of pleasure and empowerment. She thinks engaging in beauty practices cannot be avoided; therefore, she believes that women should not only be encouraged to engage in beauty practices but also that their knowledge and skills should be valued. Frost (1999, p. 127) explains that the highly critical views of 'doing looks' can cause women to feel confused and unhappy, as research shows that 'attractive' people were mostly positive and 'unattractive' people were negative (Kwan and Trautner, 2009). Moreover, Rubin, Nemeroff and Russo (2004) investigated 25 young feminists' experiences of body consciousness, and they found that participants were maintaining a critical awareness and examining beauty culture with feminist scrutiny. At the same time, participants were aware

of the limits of rational resistance as they developed ambivalent feelings towards their bodies: '[T]hey not only experience[d] shame about their body but also ... [felt] guilty for continuing to engage in certain hegemonic thoughts and practices when they know better than to do these things' (Rubin, Nemeroff and Russo, 2004, p. 33). This research supports Liz Frost's (1999) argument that the process and outcomes of engaging in beauty practices have led to women being criticised, which could result in women feeling more confused and ashamed.

However, in line with broad critics of postfeminism, some suggest this overstates women's agency and ignores the constraints of a patriarchal structure (Bartky, 1997; Bordo, 2003). Bartky (1997) and Bordo (2003) adopt and apply Foucault's model of disciplining and normalising power when analysing the female body. Bartky (1997) argued that the forms of domination have changed to focus on women's bodies, producing a form of ideal femininity to control women's lives. The disciplinary power produces a body of a specific size and shape that allows the body to perform feminine gestures and movements. As a result, a 'woman's body is an ornamented surface' (Bartky, 1997, p. 136). Bordo (2003) shows how female bodies are constructed through diet, makeup and fashion practices. The discipline and normalisation of the female body becomes a form of social control, which results in women spending more time focusing on self-modification. Both scholars draw a connection between the experience of the female body in daily life and institutional powers, such as the beauty industry. Women are surrounded by images of ideal beauty created by the beauty industry, which lead women suffering from body dissatisfaction. There are other factors that also influence and construct a woman's body, including religious ideologies, national discourse, political institutions and media. As Bordo (2003) explains, women's bodies are the site of cultural and political struggles. This illustrates how the beauty system shapes women's personal choices through self-discipline and self-surveillance.

This notion of *choice* has been constructed by the ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism (Harris, 2004; Gill, 2007b; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Budgeon, 2015). The media has promoted the message that women are independent and liberated individuals who can embrace their femininity. However, as discussed earlier, their choices are often limited. As Crann *et al.* (2017) found in regard to genital hygiene, although women identify with the importance of personal choice, their choices are normally made in line

with socially constructed norms: female genitalia should be hairless, odourless and free of discharge, which is so-called natural. Despite this limitation, Braun (2009) found that choice and agency are key values and ideas in various *female genital cosmetic surgery* (FGCS) discourses, which makes it difficult to disagree with the position that if someone freely chooses to engage in this surgery, then we should acknowledge and respect their choice. The choice rhetoric around FGCS frames women's choice as an empowered and individual act and serves as a good example to illustrate the complexity of discussing women's choices in relation to beauty practices.

Furthermore, Stuart and Donaghue (2011) found that although women identify pressures on appearance, they emphasise their sense of personal autonomy regarding beauty practice choices. They argue that it seems neoliberalism has deleted the vocabulary for women to express social expectations and pressure regarding their appearance, instead emphasising women's autonomy to choose the degree to which they participate in beauty practices. Despite this, there was found to be a contradiction within participants' thoughts regarding who should be responsible for women's limited choices. On the one hand, the participants blamed the influence of the media for making their choices difficult or limited. Yet, on the other hand, they felt that strong-minded individuals should not be affected by the media and that it was an individual's responsibility to overcome the limitation of choice. It was also found that women's personal choice is emphasised when considering more extreme beauty practices, which are not considered part of social *norms*, such as FGCS. Meanwhile, beauty practices that are considered social *norms* are so deeply embedded that these behaviours are often not considered in terms of agency. Thus, from this example, we can start to see that there are many complex layers to consider when discussing women's personal autonomy regarding beauty practices.

Overall, the major debate on beauty practices has often centred around the question of oppression and liberation. On the one hand, some feminists argue that female bodies are oppressed by a patriarchal power and that beauty practices are perceived as a symbol of patriarchal control (Dworkin, 1974; Orbach, 1978, 1993; Chapkis, 1986; Jeffreys, 2015). On the other hand, some feminists believe that women engage in beauty practices to embrace their femininity as a way of liberating and empowering themselves. However, there are many other positions that do not fit into this dichotomy. For example, some feminists utilise Foucault's ideas of disciplining power to understand the female body

(Bartky, 1997; Bordo, 2003). Therefore, the debate does not need to be polarised as one or the other but can encompass different positions. Foucault's ideas of understanding power have led to a third position in the debate where feminists pay attention to the discursive framework of beauty practices by exploring how women's choices are constructed (Braun, 2009; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011; Crann *et al.*, 2017). Currently, Western beauty culture studies are shifting their focus. As Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017a) argue, feminist debates regarding beauty culture seem to circulate around polarised positions, such as empowerment or oppression. Thus, they introduce a new concept of aesthetic labour to expand the understanding of beauty culture. Aesthetic labour can be understood as follows: 'like all forms of labour, the meanings we make of it and of our bodies are... complex' (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017b, p. x). This thesis situates itself within these feminist debates to understand Chinese women's experiences regarding their engagement in beauty practices.

Historically, feminists have approached the study of beauty by focusing on patriarchal factors in Western society. These approaches have tended to engage in limited ways with intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990), marginalising the significance of factors such as class, ethnicity, sexuality or cultural differences. For example, even within a Western context, there is a lack of research on working-class women's beauty experiences. Yet, Taylor (2012) found that British working-class women's experiences with breast augmentation surgery are shaped by both gender and class. Interestingly, after Taylor (2012) examined how her participants positioned themselves within gender and class hierarchies, she found that most participants did not associate themselves with the working class, instead describing themselves as middle-class. These young women aspired to be independent and career-orientated workers, but they also wanted to be attractive women with a family. They liked to visibly display the result of their cosmetic surgery as a means of enhancing their confidence and self-esteem. Although I acknowledge there are class issues within beauty culture studies, my thesis focuses on middle-class women in China, as all of the participants in this study were middle-class. Therefore, it was not possible to compare their concerns with women from other classes.

Furthermore, the development of globalisation, media and the advertising industry have created anxiety for women regarding their appearance under the guise of self-improvement (Jha, 2016). This beauty pressure is not exclusive to Western women, as women from

different countries, religions and races face similar struggles. Within different national contexts, the focus of beauty culture is varied. Some academics have discussed how, for Black women, beauty is strongly linked with national identity and racial issues (Craig, 2002, 2006; Tate, 2007, 2009). Western beauty ideals dominate Black beauty norms; for example, there is a trend for African-Americans to idealise Caucasian features such as lighter skin colour, a long, slim nose with a high bridge and double eyelids (which they try to emulate through skin lightening products, nose implants and double eyelid surgery, respectively) (Kwan and Trautner, 2009). Since the Black Is Beautiful cultural movement started in the 1950s, people have begun to challenge colourism and racism as well as existing American culture. This has helped educate many young Black girls struggling with body dissatisfaction (Jha, 2016). Black women's curly hair has historically been viewed as less attractive than European straight hair, which originates from Eurocentric beauty ideals. Now, many more Black women try to legitimise the non-normative hair practice by wearing their hair naturally as a way of embracing their African heritage (Ndichu and Upadhyaya, 2018). With the advent of the Black Is Beautiful cultural movement, some feminists have pointed out the disproportionate body of research reflecting white women's issues regarding beauty practices. As a result, more research is being carried out to address this imbalance. It is, therefore, important for feminists to promote research that represents the concerns of women from diverse cultures. From the growing body of research, it can be seen that female beauty standards can be culturally specific and nuanced.

For instance, Listyani, Sadewo and Legowo's (2018, p. 5) study of Muslim women found that the ideal beauty standard for Muslim middle-class urban women includes 'smooth and white skin without stains, gaunt face and without wrinkles, nose sharp, eyelashes and thick eyebrows, red lips and slim'. In order to become beautiful or maintain their beauty, participants undertake beauty practices from four categories, including facial treatment, diet and exercise, fashion style and makeup. Participants said that their motivation for self-beautification was not to please their husbands but to impress their friends and gain confidence. They further revealed that if they looked beautiful, their husbands would be prouder, happier and more faithful.

In an Asian context, such as in India, Varghese (2017) found that skin lightening products were the most common cosmetics used by the women she studied, illustrating the existence

of a fair-skin beauty standard among women in Chennai. However, there was some resistance towards this beauty standard, as one of the participants expressed that physical appearance should not matter. In addition to lighter skin, there were many other beauty standards imposed on the women, including straight and silky hair and a feminine body. Varghese (2017, p. 68) thinks that women with a lighter skin tone could gain many benefits that ‘highlight how the aspiration for lighter skin is not merely a cosmetic choice, but rather a necessity attached to advantages such as greater access to opportunity and privilege’. Baghel, Parthasarathy and Gupta (2014, p. 173) found beauty to be a symbolic capital ‘used by people to differentiate themselves from others and gain a distinctive social identity’ in order to gain material benefit and enhanced status. People’s decisions to choose certain beauty practices are shaped by both social structure and their agency, which are integrated into people’s everyday life. Beauty is not only associated with class and privilege but also identity and pleasure. Through engagement in beauty practices, people not only look healthy but also achieve relaxation and pleasure (Baghel, Parthasarathy and Gupta, 2014).

In an East Asian context, there are many debates centred around the Westernisation of beauty standards. For example, in Japan, Darling-Wolf (2003, 2004) found that Japanese women’s conceptions of attractiveness matched Westernised media-defined ideals. Lee (2016) also argued that cosmetic surgery – especially double eyelid surgery (blepharoplasties) – symbolises Korean women’s acceptance of both patriarchal and racial oppression. However, Miller (2006) examined how beauty ideals are formulated. She found that these salons combined concepts of the ideal body and beauty practices within the Japanese context with beauty ideology regarding treatments and technologies based on a transnational beauty system. It was shown that beauty ideals and practices are spread through trade shows and conferences within the global beauty industry. Although globalised forms of beauty practices and consumption could be perceived as a type of cultural imperialism that influences local context, Miller (2006) found that Japanese salons actively adapt and offer what their customers want rather than simply mimicking services related to Western beauty standards. Miller (2006) argues that the reasons for Japanese women to engage in beauty practices are not merely an attempt to reproduce Western beauty ideals, such as undergoing double eyelid surgery, but that there are more reasons and motivations related to local cultural histories, meanings and values. In a similar vein, Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012) also challenged the belief that Western beauty ideals

have a homogenising effect on the global beauty standard. They investigated cosmetic surgery in a South Korean context and argue that beauty standards have little in common with Western women's facial features and bodies. Instead, they have 'more in common with a globalised image, embodying idealised elements from many different cultures' (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 58).

In terms of the comparison between Western and Chinese beauty standards, one study asked female participants to rank photos (in terms of beauty) of both Chinese and Caucasian models, male and female, which had been acquired from Chinese magazines (Jankowiak, Gray and Hattman, 2008). First, the researchers proposed that these results support cultural hegemony, which shows that Chinese women consider Caucasian facial features and height more attractive. Second, they suggested that their results could be because Chinese women associate Caucasian models with modernism, wealth and other desirable characteristics, such as independence. Research by Staley and Zhan (2011) compares Chinese women who studied in mainland China and Chinese women who studied in the US. The results showed that beauty standards change and alter within different social and cultural environments. This work highlighted that the ideas of beauty standards are largely socially constructed.

Regarding the differences between Chinese and American women's bodies, most participants described American women as sexier or having a better body shape – taller, stronger and fatter. Chinese women were described as straighter, slimmer, shyer and gentler. From these responses, the researchers formed two main conclusions, as follows: that the concept of beauty for Chinese women includes physical and personal traits and that Chinese women position their personalities as being more reserved and meeker, which is opposite to perceptions of American women. In this regard, there is a need for research that addresses the cultural and political specificities of beauty culture within particular national contexts. Next, I will focus on the Chinese context to illustrate historical changes regarding beauty practices.

2.4 Beauty practices within a Chinese context

Feminist academic literature informs and helps us understand beauty practices in China; however, it can be somewhat limiting when examining a specific national context.

Therefore, developing a feminist theory regarding contemporary beauty practices in China requires an understanding of Chinese culture and an appreciation of beauty practices within their shifting historical contexts. There may appear to be a disjuncture between the review of state history and my feminist approach to researching women's experiences. For instance, state history has been documented within a patriarchal social structure, which arguably presents past events and experiences from men's perspectives. Furthermore, reviewing state history predominantly follows a top-down approach to the formation of knowledge and understanding, which has been criticised for being simplistic. However, we do not have access to bottom-up academic feminist interviews with women from ancient China regarding practices such as foot binding to shed light on the complexities of beauty culture. In contrast to state history, feminist epistemologies challenge existing patriarchal discourse by combining a focus on women's narratives and everyday experiences with feminist theory. However, I chose to include a review of state history in this thesis for two main reasons.

First, there is not much academic feminist literature that has been generated by feminist epistemologies regarding China. Furthermore, in the past, there has been even less – if any – feminist documentation of women's voices and experiences regarding beauty. Thus, I had to rely on existing male-dominant knowledge from Chinese history to contextualise female beauty and beauty practices. Reviewing Chinese history illustrates the epistemological gap within Chinese beauty culture research, where women's voices and experiences have often been ignored and dismissed. There is a clear need for more feminist research to represent women's voices and experiences to fill this gap. Second, I review Chinese state discourse because it still has currency today. Young women's narratives on beauty are influenced and affected by predominantly male discourses, such as Confucian and Maoist discourses. Including these perspectives is unavoidable and necessary to review beauty practices and does facilitate discussion and a better understanding of contemporary China's social, political and cultural context.

Due to the long history of China, this review will be divided into the following four stages according to changes in the socioeconomic role of Chinese women and the political environment: Imperial China (221 BC–1912 AD); Republican China (1912–1949); New China (1949–1979); and Chinese economic reform (1979– present).

2.4.1 Imperial China (221 BC–1912 AD)

Before the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese men and women had been predominantly influenced by Confucianism for nearly the last 2,000 years. Confucianism played an important role in society by influencing and shaping political, social and moral values, especially regarding the construction of masculinity and femininity. Confucian doctrine can be summed up by the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues (三纲五常; pinyin: *Sāngāng Wǔcháng*) (Yuan and Cheng, 2009). The Three Fundamental Bonds guided people to deal with crucial social relationships. For instance, absolute obedience should be required from retainer to lord, from son to father and from wife to husband. In conjunction with this, the Five Constant Virtues related to the Confucian virtues of *benevolence* (仁; pinyin: *Rén*), *righteousness* (义; pinyin: *Yì*), *propriety* (礼; pinyin: *Lǐ*), *wisdom* (智; pinyin: *Zhì*) and *trustworthiness* (信; pinyin: *Xìn*). Furthermore, Man (2000) found that the concept of female beauty within Taoism has an emphasis on the female body and sexual attractiveness (characteristics fitting within the concept of outer beauty); however, female beauty within Confucianism focuses more on a woman's moral virtues, as discussed in the literature review (characteristics fitting with the concept of inner beauty). Although Taoism's and Confucianism's emphases on women's beauty may seem to be conflicting, Man (2000) pointed out that they both affect each other and maintain a 'super-stable equilibrium' in Chinese culture.

From a gender perspective, Confucianism instils a concept of male superiority. Chinese women and girls were expected to follow Confucian family doctrine, which linked feminine virtue with being a faithful wife, devoted mother and obedient child. For example, the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (三从四德; pinyin: *Sāncóng sìdé*) (Lan and Fong, 2015) were a basic set of moral principles for women. The Three Obediences refer to the principle that a woman should obey her father as a daughter, her husband as a wife and her sons in widowhood. The Four Virtues refers to the principles of wifely virtue, speech, manner/appearance and work. Women's beauty and identity were embedded with ethical practices and social expectations that restricted women's social activities and physical movement. Men and women were assigned clear roles in the family: men's work involved earning money outside the home, while women's work was centred inside the home, looking after the family. When a girl was born, they were restricted to their home to help with all of the housework, and they did not have a chance to be educated. After they

married, they had to carry out housewife duties in the husband's family. A women's role was often devalued, as their housework did not generate an income for the family. In contrast, boys were expected to learn and develop their money-earning skills from a young age. They would be educated or learn skills that would help them make a living in the future. Women, therefore, had to depend on their husbands for financial support (Zhang, 2016).

Continuing on the theme of dependency, some scholars have argued that social, aesthetic values concerning female beauty, such as small feet, are beautiful and that the notorious beauty practice of foot binding, which became normalised during the feudal period (221 BC–1912 AD), enabled men to maintain control over women and keep them in their place. It has been well documented by many authors (Levy, 1967; Feng, 1994; Ko, 2001, 2007; Wang, 2002) that this practice was a long and extremely painful process. Girls would have their feet bound at the age of four or five because, at this age, their feet were still growing and easier to reshape. Their four small toes would be folded under their feet and wrapped with several meters of cotton bandages by their mother or experienced women. After foot binding, the girl could not stand up for several months, or even a year, and could not walk properly. This process would break the girl's toes and bones in the foot arch, which would continue to be bound until the girl was around 10 to 15 years of age. Dworkin (1974, p. 111) considers the practice of foot binding a crime because 'millions of human beings, over a period of 1,000 years, were brutally crippled, mutilated, in the name of beauty'. It exemplifies Chinese women's oppression and their subordinate status during this period.

Moreover, foot binding was also associated with social mobility and status (Hong, 2013). *Bound feet* (缠足; pinyin: *Chánzú*), also called *three-inch¹ golden lotuses* (三寸金莲; pinyin: *Sān cùn jīnlián*) (Feng, 1994; Hong, 2013), became an important measurement of women's social value. If they wanted to marry a better husband in order to pursue a better lifestyle, a small foot was essential for an advantageous marriage. Women, therefore, had to bind their feet to secure a better future, as men were attracted to women with small feet.

¹ **Three-inch golden lotuses:** In this instance, *inch* refers to *cun* (寸; pinyin: *cùn*), a Chinese unit of length equal to 3 $\frac{1}{3}$ cm.

As a result, foot binding became normalised and customary. Foot binding was used within this patriarchal structure to separate the sphere of men and women (Hong, 2013). Women were forced into domestic spheres due to the limitation of their movement with small, bound feet. At the same time, this reinforced and maintained women's dependence on men, as they were already disadvantaged both socially and economically (Wang, 2002; Hong, 2013). This not only limited women's physical movement but also enlarged the gender difference between men and women, perpetuating women's inferior status and social role as a sexual object (Dworkin, 1974).

2.4.2 Republican China (1912–1949)

Following the Opium Wars (1839–1860), when China was defeated by the West, the Chinese patriarchal system was challenged by Western ideology, as was the Chinese Confucian way of living. Many Chinese people thought that *Westernisation* would help modernise the country as a means of regaining and establishing its power. During this time, Western feminism was adopted and localised while becoming part of the modern development of China (Chen, 2011). Many Chinese intellectuals advocated gender equality, especially women's rights and liberation, to achieve national emancipation and civilisation. They supported the development of the women's mobilisation campaign around the May Fourth Movement, which advocated for marital reform; female employment in the public sector; the abolition of polygamy, concubinage and prostitution; and far-reaching legal reforms that would guarantee women's suffrage and property rights (Gilmartin, 1994). Moreover, the de-Confucian culture movement became part of modernisation, which freed women from traditional roles and allowed them to leave domestic spheres to study and work. This clearly demonstrates that Chinese women's liberation was not a single issue between the genders but a fundamental part of Chinese national emancipation and modernisation (Wang, 1999).

During this period, it has been suggested that women's beauty practices changed dramatically. Due to the Western aesthetic influence, Chinese female beauty was shaped by a combination of Chinese and Western aesthetic standards. This aesthetic look was illustrated through women's clothing, hairstyles and high-heeled shoes. Women used to wear large, long gowns that hung to just below their knees and had long sleeves that covered their hands. Underneath this, they wore either trousers or a dress that hung down

to their feet. Their hair was put up into a bun with an accessory. With their three-inch golden lotuses, they all looked fragile and delicate, which illustrated the traditional female beauty standard at the end of the Qing dynasty (1912). Under Western influence, women started to wear more tight-fitting clothing. One type of dress that gained popularity was called the *qipao* (旗袍) (Tian, 2002). The original *qipao* fitted loosely on the body, but the new style was tighter on the body, which accentuated a woman's figure. It also featured short sleeves, leaving the arms exposed. At the same time, high-heeled shoes were another fashion element introduced to match the *qipao*. Women's hairstyles varied far more, from short straight hair to long curly hair (Tian, 2002).

It is worth noting that the changes in beauty practices were not uniform across all of China. Many women were liberated from foot binding in big cities, but breast binding became a new trend among upper-class young women, especially among Chinese female students in the 1910s. Women would wear a tight sleeveless top to make their breasts look smaller. This practice was unnatural and negatively impacted on women's health. Chin (2012) reported that breast binding could damage the function of the lungs, which affected breathing and possibly caused tuberculosis. Despite the harmful aspect of chest binding, Lei (2015) claims that it may have encouraged women's physical mobility and freedom, as middle- and upper-class Chinese women were allowed to enter the public sphere. It has been difficult for researchers to understand why these women abandoned foot binding but adopted and maintained similar harmful practices. A possible reason Finnane (2008) notes was that lower-class women would expose their breasts in public while breastfeeding, so the flat-chested look could disassociate upper-class women from poverty. Lower-class women in the villages continued to practise foot binding, while modern women in the cities utilised breast binding. As Lei (2015) found, this new practice represented the transition from the traditional aesthetics of female beauty to the combination of Western and traditional beauty standards. People's idea of female beauty had changed into a desire for 'natural beauty' and 'athletic beauty' during the 1920s and 1930s. The flat-chested look represented the modern, liberated Chinese woman's body. However, it was still an expectation and restriction placed on women's bodies in order for them to fit into the idea of modernised China.

2.4.3 New China (1949–1979)

After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, Chinese women's status improved dramatically because women's equality played a large part in the reformation of the Communist Party of China (Croll, 1983). Within the Maoist regime, there were many political mobilisation movements started, including land reform, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. During these movements, Chinese women were not only encouraged to enter the public sphere to participate in work but were also seen as equal to men (Hong, 2013). 'Women hold up half the sky' was a popular slogan (Hershatter, 2007). This ideology of women was displayed on many posters, where women were portrayed as strong and technically skilled. They promoted the popular *Iron Girls* images, typically showing women wearing unisex clothing while performing jobs that were once exclusively done by men. All of these changes in women's image illustrated Mao's ideology of women's equality and empowerment (Eber, 1976). Specifically, women were encouraged to challenge their gender roles – the traditional idea of a woman being a *virtuous wife* and *good mother* (贤妻良母; pinyin: *Xián qīliáng mǔ*) was discouraged and discarded by both men and women. Women were encouraged to expand their interests beyond household life by engaging with public issues and furthering their political and educational development to gain respect from their husbands (Evans, 2002).

Moreover, the Communist Party wrote the principle of gender equality into law and tried to stop male supremacy and women-repressing customs. For example, foot binding was banned in China after 1949. Women no longer needed to have three-inch golden lotuses to please men (Levy, 1967; Ko, 2007; Hong, 2013). Other forms of beauty practices, such as makeup and fashion, were discouraged by the Communist Party and were even banned during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Furthermore, the concept of female beauty was rejected and attacked as a form of capitalist decadence in a variety of discourses (Johansson, 1998). Li (2016) found that role-model female workers, who exhibited many traits fitting the ideal socialist worker, were perceived as beautiful from a Communist perspective. In contrast, feminine and sexually attractive women were negatively portrayed in many films. For example, in the film *The Intrepid Hero* (英雄虎胆; pinyin: *Yīngxióng hǔ dǎn*) (Yan and Hao, 1958), the female character A Lan is negatively portrayed as a sexually attractive woman who tries to seduce a man from the Communist Party.

However, Ip (2003) argues that the Communist regime was always interested in female beauty during the revolutionary process in China. First, women's engagement in self-beautification practices for political purposes was deemed acceptable. For example, spies and undercover informers might dress up to conceal their true political identity. Second, Ip (2003) points out that the Communist Party was aware of how female beauty could be influential, which is why it created a beautiful female character to promote its political message through popular media that functioned as a useful tool to spread propaganda. Lastly, she found that women's self-beautification was also used to glorify the Communist revolution as something that would improve their lifestyle. Nevertheless, the revolutionary rejection of female beauty applied to the majority of women in China, with exceptions in propaganda and rare instances of upper-class or elite status.

Generally speaking, there were found to be two main reasons why the Communist Party rejected beauty norms and the notion of beauty practices. First, it justified the party's revolutionary purpose, which was to liberate women. The Communists attempted to achieve this by freeing women from objectification, which included abolishing beauty practices. Prior to communism, women lived in a male-dominated society where they had to use their sexuality in exchange for economic support. Second, it was a form of dignity, as women refused to engage in beauty practices, which was an important strategy in fighting for liberation (Ip, 2003).

From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, Western feminists perceived Chinese women as heroes who had overcome the oppression of traditional Chinese patriarchy (Gilmartin, 1994). However, Jin (2006) argues that women were forced to enter the workplace and live life without any form of beauty practices, which could be seen as another type of oppression. Although women had the right to do the same work as men, they often had to carry on the traditional housewife role of taking care of the family by cooking, cleaning and looking after children and parents. Arguably, it seems that Mao treated women simply as labour power to serve his revolutionary purposes (Johansson, 1998). Moreover, Western feminists criticised this era, suggesting that Chinese women were caught in the structures of a patriarchal socialist state in which:

women were objects of a communist state that had used women's liberation rhetoric to further its own ends. In this version, Chinese women were still

victims, but of a new form of a socialistic patriarchal family; they were not liberated by ‘work’ but were instead now doubly burdened by a socialist state’s demands. Those women who proclaimed themselves liberated by the Chinese Communist Party were perhaps exemplars of ideology’s power. (Gilmartin, 1994, pp. 230–231)

2.4.4 Economic Reform (1979– present)

Following the Chinese economic reform initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, Chinese society experienced the huge economic and social changes of a fast-growing economy as individuals’ incomes and consumption increased. Prior to the reform, during Mao’s period ‘the economy strategies were based on state-run, state-planned economy and shared the view that individual consumption should be kept at a minimum’ (Johansson, 1998, p. 20). Although, today, the Communist Party promotes a capitalist economy and freedom of individual consumption, Chinese leadership believes that China is still a socialist society. The leadership refers to this situation as a ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’ (Rofel, 2007, p. 33)

With the development of consumerism in China, people’s attitudes towards fashion, beauty and beauty practices started to change. Chinese beauty pageants started to appear in the 1990s, where women were judged based on their physical appearance (Zhang, 2013). The Communist Party’s opinions towards beauty pageants changed from rejecting them to embracing them as they realised the value of publicly promoting China on a global scale as well as cultivating values which promote consumption of a beauty culture industry (Chao and Myers, 1998). As the importance of beauty was emphasised, promoting female beauty ideals became an important means to sell commodities (Johansson, 1998). As a result, the beauty economy emerged, including cosmetics, plastic surgery and advertising, and the beauty industry has flourished. Xu and Feiner (2007) argue that the beauty industry encourages the objectification of women and promotes Anglo-European aesthetics to develop economic policies similar to the West. Moreover, the beauty industry has played an essential role in the dramatic transformation of Chinese women’s identity and has heavily contributed to the construction of modern femininity (Xu and Feiner, 2007).

Western culture and mass media, including advertising and marketing, are arguably largely responsible for influencing and forming the new feminine archetype in China. In Western

society, mass media has played an essential role in defining female beauty ideals and body types (Dittmar, 2007). For example, women's magazines offer their female readers advice and tips on fashion, beauty routines and makeup to help them achieve female beauty ideals. The media also tends to link beauty with happiness, so often, unattractive women are more likely to associate themselves with negative feelings (Fouts and Burggraf, 2000). These factors encourage women to engage in a variety of beauty practices in an attempt to achieve these female beauty ideals. Western fashion magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle* and *Vogue* entered the Chinese market around the 1990s. Many luxury fashion brands, such as Prada, Jimmy Choo and Burberry, sponsor television programmes and advertising in fashion magazines. The collaboration between media and high-end fashion brands can be seen as a strategy to transform an image from 'ordinary' to a 'higher status' (Warner, 2014). As a result, there are many studies that have analysed female images in women's fashion magazines and television programmes and have found that female beauty ideals are often associated with luxury, beauty and feminine characteristics (Liu and Qi, 2006; Zhang, 2008; Wu, 2010). Zhang (2008) believes that although magazines try to promote a successful, independent and modern image of women, the main focus is on women's looks and a luxurious lifestyle. Moreover, after examining Chinese advertising between 1980 and 2001, Ye, Ashley-Cotleur and Gaumer (2012) claim that the image of Chinese women has changed over those two decades, from a position where women were portrayed as equal partners to men to a position where women are perceived as sexual objects.

New female beauty ideals that are centred around women's looks quickly formed and solidified in China. Through the media, Western female beauty ideals have had a huge influence on Chinese women. These ideals combine traditional Chinese aesthetics and Western aesthetics. Zhang (2012, p. 437) described the modern Chinese women's beauty standard, saying that women should have 'a tall and thin body, big eyes, a watermelon seed-shaped face, fair skin, and *qizhi* (inner beauty)'. Furthermore, the ideal woman's body should have large breasts, large buttocks and long legs (Wang, 2018). Staley and Zhan's (2011) research illustrates how Western beauty standards have an impact on Chinese women. In their study, the researchers compared the perceptions of beauty between female Chinese students who studied in the US with female Chinese students who studied in China. Regarding body alteration, both groups felt that the face is the most important component of the Chinese beauty standard. Similarly, both groups held a desire for facial changes. Chinese women who studied in the US were much more aware that body shape is

important for female beauty, so this group of women were more likely to alter their height and weight compared to the Chinese women studying in China. However, both groups had a similar resistance towards plastic surgery due to the perception of the body as a gift that should not be altered, which derives from traditional Confucian values. The researchers thought that the Chinese women who studied in the US had a higher risk of developing body dissatisfaction, as they focused on both the facial and the bodily aspects of beauty, making it even harder for them to achieve such beauty ideals.

A variety of beauty practices have emerged as important means for Chinese women to achieve female beauty ideals. Beauty practices are normalised in society, as can be seen with the use of makeup, dieting and cosmetic surgery. For example, women in certain job positions, such as nurses, are advised to wear makeup to create a beautiful image, which would supposedly help them have a better mood and allow them to work better with their patients (Yao, Shen and Xiao, 2008). At the same time, weight loss is a common practice among Chinese women. Research conducted among a sample of 8,367 women in China showed that the number of women who wanted to lose weight was 11.7% in 2000 and had increased to 61.3% by 2010. In contrast, the number of women who did not want to lose weight reduced from 11.2% in 2000 to 0.8% in 2010 (Pan and Huang, 2013). This data clearly shows that a weight loss culture has been normalised in Chinese society. In line with these findings, Gao (2018) claimed that the cosmetic surgery industry is booming in China. A survey revealed that the cosmetic surgery industry increased from ¥28.4 billion (£3.18 billion) in 2007 to ¥224.5 billion (£25.1 billion) in 2018. Cosmetic surgery is not only one of the means for women to achieve beauty ideals but is also ‘a way of adapting to redefined gender norms, a gesture towards national modernity, a strategy of asserting self-control in personal lives, and an emblem of seeking upward class mobility’ (Luo, 2013, p. 1).

2.5 Conclusion

The majority of feminist literature produced regarding beauty practices is based within a Western context. 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 (Xu and Feiner, 2007; Harden and Chiung-Fang, 2014; Yang, 2017); debated the Western influence on Chinese beauty ideals (Zhang, 2012; Xie and Zhang,

2013); and studied women's motivation to engage in beauty practices – especially cosmetic surgery (Evans, 2001; Yang, 2011; Luo, 2012; Wen, 2013; Zhang, 2013). There are no studies concerned with Chinese women's overall experiences and attitudes towards beauty practice or their agency, which I propose to examine in my research. I will seek to understand how Chinese women negotiate their position in society regarding societal expectations of female beauty and beauty practices. This research will also engage themes of beauty oppression and empowerment, which have been neglected. Moreover, there is not much literature on everyday beauty practices (such as makeup, dieting and dressing up) which will be covered in this study. Certain beauty practices (such as plastic surgery and dieting/losing weight) have received more attention than others from different disciplines. Although it can be seen from the literature review that there is much discourse promoting beauty ideals, the extent to which women may or may not choose to adopt them differs. This is why it is considered important to carry out empirical research to investigate the relationship between socially promoted beauty ideals and women's thoughts and behaviours.

From this literature review, it is clear that there is a gap in the feminist academic literature on beauty practices and postfeminism studies in China. Scholars have not yet addressed Chinese women's experiences concerning female beauty and beauty practices from a feminist perspective, as the majority of literature on female beauty is based on Western women's experiences. With increasing attention being paid to the importance of women's appearance and more and more pressure to be beautiful being promoted by the media in China, clearly, more research needs to be done in order to understand Chinese women's experiences.

This chapter will discuss how I designed my research methodology; I will also detail the practical aspects of my research, including how my fieldwork and data analysis were conducted. In the first section, I explain why I adopted a feminist methodological approach, my epistemological and ethical stance, my decision to utilise a mixed method approach, and my sample and recruitment process. In Section 3.1.3, I emphasise the importance of reflexivity within feminist research by sharing my positionality and reflexivity. I illustrate how my personal development has changed my position in relation to feminist knowledge of beauty culture and how this affects my interpretation of the data.

In the second section, I discuss how I conducted my fieldwork and the practical issues related to it. In Section 3.2.1, I explain the process of conducting interviews, beauty diaries and follow-up interviews. Section 3.2.2 discusses the relationship between the participants and the researcher as well as insider/outsider status and feminist identity potentially affect the research process. Section 3.2.3 draws attention to the potential influence of my appearance within the research process. As my research topic is linked to beauty culture, I also reflect on my own appearance and how it might have affected participants' responses.

In the third section, I explain how I analysed my data and discuss potential issues regarding language and translation, as the interviews were conducted and analysed in Chinese before being translated into English.

3.1 Research design

3.1.1 Why do feminist research?

This study adopted a feminist methodological approach towards its epistemology, methods and practice for several reasons. Historically, dominant knowledge and theories were based on men's perspectives, which were described as representing the so-called truth. They believed that a researcher with what they considered *proper* training could produce objective knowledge, and if others duplicated their research, they would produce the exact same results (England, 1994). Furthermore, traditional qualitative research emphasises the detachment of the researcher in an attempt to maintain absolute neutrality and produce

value-free findings (Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Hesse-Biber and Yaiser, 2004; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). However, it was not until later that scholars such as MacKinnon (1982) argued that knowledge and objectivity are gendered and partial. Thus, feminism needed to challenge the status quo by developing feminist methodological approaches and reconsidering values concerning knowledge. With this came an emphasis on including women's lived experiences rather than theorising from a distance. Feminist scholars, therefore, challenge the ideology of objectivity and the strict dichotomy between being subjective and objective (Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Harding and Hintikka, 2003). Furthermore, many postmodern feminists have rejected the notion of objectivity, as no one can produce total knowledge or argue that all knowledge is partial (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). They believe that researchers are unable to produce value-free and objective knowledge of society; therefore, feminists suggest that researchers focus on the subjective experiences of women and offer interpretations of these experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

The key claim of feminist standpoint theory is that 'women's lives are systematically and structurally different from the men's lives and, that that these differences produce different (and differently complete) knowledge' (Wood, 2005, p. 64). Standpoint theory understands knowledge as 'always situated and constructed from the perspective of particular social positions and locations' (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995, p. 14). As Haraway (1991) explains, traditionally, the production of objective knowledge is to assert the power of the dominant class, which she called the *White Capitalist Patriarchy*. Feminists have a strong political stance that challenges existing patriarchal ideologies. If researchers follow the dominant methodologies to produce knowledge, they will fall into the trap of perpetuating, thereby perpetuating the dominant logic that exists in our society, such as the sex/gender distinction. Therefore, 'situated knowledge requires that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent' (Haraway, 1991, p. 198). This idea encourages me as a researcher to recognise the influence of my own social position and cultural background as well as my complex relationship with beauty culture in my research process. My positionality and reflectivity will be discussed in more detail later.

However, a criticism of feminist standpoint theory is that it only focuses on women's first hand experiences, which can be limiting, especially if we consider that one woman's experience may not represent another women's experience (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). Furthermore, the feminist standpoint starts from women's lived experiences, but the terms

feminist and *women's* are often used interchangeably (Maynard, 1997). Many women are not feminists and do not necessarily agree with feminists' social and political stances.

There are also issues involving researchers' interpretation. Some feminists suggest that researchers should let women 'speak for themselves' without interpretation (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). As Saukko (2008, p. 77) found, there is a potential tension between the desire to 'listen carefully and faithfully to the women's experiences of eating and body distress, and the impetus to critically assess the discourses ... from which their voices are made'. Although feminism encourages women to speak out about their experiences, only emphasising women's personal understandings of their lived experiences is limiting and problematic. Feminist research utilises theoretical frameworks concerned with patriarchal structure and women's oppression to help people understand the world. Thus, feminist research is never value-free or politically neutral. Women's experiences provide valuable knowledge but are insufficient for understanding the social world from a feminist perspective. This issue is well illustrated in the debate between Duits and Van Zoonen (2006) and Gill (2007a) with respect to girls' choices regarding their attire. Although we should respect women's agency, feminists need to be critical in order to understand these choices in a social and cultural context. In line with Maynard's (1997, pp. 23–24) ideas, 'feminism has an obligation to go beyond citing experience in order to make connections which may not be visible from the purely experiential level alone'. Therefore, we need to take women's experiences seriously as well as feminist theory. As a researcher, I have presented women's voices and experiences and interpreted them based on feminist knowledge and theoretical frameworks. It is important to systematically analyse participants' experience in relation to existing feminist literature to connect to and understand their experiences.

Furthermore, there is much debate regarding what constitutes feminist research (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Harding and Hintikka, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Many feminists have expressed that there is no singular feminist perspective and, therefore, no single feminist methodology (Westmarland, 2001; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Consequently, feminists continue to discuss the pros and cons of different approaches, evaluating each based on its own merit. Ethics has always been important in feminist research. *Ethics* means 'moral principles or rules of conduct' (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 74). Within feminist research, ethics is not only about 'making determinations about what is right and wrong'

(Leavy and Harris, 2019, p. 96) but also about applying this morality to research practices. Ethical practice is about ‘being a “good” researcher at the same time as being a “good” human being’ (Iphofen, 2009, p. 3). Bell (2007) identifies eight aspects of ethical practice that feminist researchers should focus on, including the following:

(1) Do no harm (beneficence); (2) confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity; (3) informed consent; (4) disclosure and potential for deception (e.g., relating to overt or covert research practices); (5) power between researcher and subject; (6) representation or ownership of research findings; (7) ensuring respect for human dignity, self-determination, and justice, including safeguards to protect the rights of vulnerable subjects; (8) demonstrating that the researcher has engaged with the above six issues, in order to obtain required formal ethics approval and/or show adherence to professional codes/guidelines.

As I have discussed earlier, feminist research cannot be perceived as value-free but as a reflection of the researchers’ values (Letherby, 2002). In forming my moral principles for this research, it was important for me to put participants’ well-being at the centre of my concern. As discussed below, constant reflection on my part was key to this process.

3.1.2 Mixed methods

This study employed a mixed qualitative research methodology, using in-depth interviews, beauty diaries and follow-up interviews. In-depth interviewing has been central to empirical feminist research and is considered as a valuable means of understanding and accessing women’s unique experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2014). This study aimed to explore the everyday experiences of Chinese women in relation to their own understandings of femininity and beauty practices. To achieve this, it required women to share personal experiences of engaging in beauty practices as well as describe their decision-making in relation to beauty products and services. Using interviews allowed me to gain access to aspects of their knowledge and unique experiences. As Reinharz (1992, p. 19) points out, ‘interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher’. The interview also gave me a

chance to better understand participants' experiences and opinions, as it allowed for real-time clarification so that answers could be more fully understood.

In terms of my second approach, diaries are commonly used in social science research to provide rich data on participants' activities, thoughts and feelings (Jacelon and Imperio, 2005; Bijoux and Myers, 2006; Day and Thatcher, 2009; Kenten, 2010; Morrison, 2012). Although feminists have a long history of studying beauty culture and have used diary-interview methods for academic research, there are no studies that examine women's everyday experiences through a beauty diary-interview method. The diary-interview method (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977) combines solicited participants' diaries and follow-up interviews. As Meth (2003, p. 203) explains:

Using diaries as part of a multiple method approach within a social research project is highly recommended. It provides the subjects of research substantial scope for reflection and self-determined knowledge presentation, it provides the researcher with extensive amounts of intensive material, reinforcing analyses of data gleaned from other methodological sources.

Moreover, this technique can provide a valuable source of data 'when extended periods of participant observation are not possible' (Jacelon and Imperio, 2005, p. 991). Through analysing participants' diaries, the researcher can gain insight into the daily activities of the participants, which can then be further discussed during follow-up interviews (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977).

My design of this diary-interview format was influenced by existing uses of this approach (Kenten, 2010). After discussing my participants' diary-writing preferences, I formed a diary template (Appendix A) in Microsoft Word and sent it to them via WeChat, as they expressed that they would prefer to write digitally. Choosing a suitable duration for the beauty diary was a key concern for this study, as researchers have to consider the balance between the need for rich data collection and the potential burden on the participants (Day and Thatcher, 2009). I decided that a one-to-two-week duration for the beauty diaries

should be sufficient to capture enough data. Depending on the participants' schedule, they could choose their duration and start time.

Utilising beauty diaries and follow-up interviews complemented the data collected in the initial interviews by providing a recording of the participants' presentations of daily activity regarding their engagement in beauty practices. These provided a snapshot of details, such as what types of beauty practices they engage in daily, what kind of thoughts they have regarding beauty culture and how their daily interactions with others provoke thoughts regarding beauty practices. Some of these details may have been missed if I had relied on the initial interviews alone. Furthermore, these diaries also allowed me to compare what participants said during their interviews with what they reported in their diaries, which provided another layer of analysis. It is possible that these findings were 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. However, this study wanted to focus on their self-reported thoughts and opinions.

Thus, these mixed methods were very appropriate for answering my research questions and allowed me to broaden my data collection (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). This scope enriched the data collection by allowing participants to express themselves in different ways and provided an opportunity to investigate alignment between participants' thoughts as expressed in the interviews and their behaviours as reported in their diaries. The design of this mixed method approach was also in response to findings in my MA Gender Studies dissertation and an additional two pilot interviews prior to the commencement of my PhD fieldwork. After these pilot interviews, I revisited the audio recordings and noticed that there were sometimes conflicts and contradictions in my participants' narratives regarding their reasons for engaging in beauty practices. After analysing the data, I wanted to interview the individuals again to better understand their reasoning and feelings behind their conflicting or contradictory opinions, but I was not able to. Thus, when I designed my research, I wanted to extend and enrich my contact with participants and the narratives they offered. It is worth noting that I did not intend to try and resolve these contradictions – which are common in such qualitative research (Gill, 2016a; Holmes, 2018) – but rather better understand them. The benefit of utilising a mixed methodological approach was that beauty diaries gave the participants more time and personal space to write things down.

Thus, the diaries gave them the opportunity to reflect on what they had said during their initial interviews and add or expand to their comments (Linabary and Hamel, 2017). Enabling the participants to write their beauty diaries after the first interview also created valuable time for them to reflect. This was then complimented by conducting a follow-up interview, where participants had another chance to clarify points that were unclear in the diary or that could be expanded upon.

Regarding language, I designed my study and questions in English. I then translated these questions into Chinese, the native language of the participants. I avoided academic terms such as *femininity* and *objectivity*, as these terms are less familiar in China. In this regard, I realised that there might be some translation issues. For instance, *beauty practices*, a term important to my study and referred to in Western academia, does not have an exact translation in Chinese. Moreover, the term *beauty practices*, as used within academic literature, is not clearly defined, nor does it have a universally accepted definition. In my literature review, I discussed why I chose this term to refer to the methods women use to alter their appearance. Thus, I checked similar terms to see how other academics have translated specific terms from English to Chinese. For instance, I looked at translations of *cultural practices* to determine how the term *practice* is commonly translated.

Theoretically, I could translate *beauty practices* in the same way that people translate *cultural practices*; however, this translated form of *practice* (习俗; pinyin: *Xísù*) is not commonly used in China. Language is socially constructed, I considered it best for me to develop a colloquial translation that could be readily understood by young, contemporary Chinese women rather than relying on traditional or formal translations that, although accurate, might not be familiar. In the end, I decided to use the phrase *bian mei de fang shi* (变美的方式; pinyin: *Biàn měide fāngshì*), meaning ‘the method(s) you use to make yourself beautiful’.

3.1.3 Research sample/recruitment

Twenty Chinese females aged 18–25 who live in Beijing were selected to participate in this study, which included taking part in an interview, keeping a beauty diary and attending a follow-up interview. This age group was selected because of data collected by the China Medical Beauty Consultation White Paper (Yin, 2019), which suggests that this is the age group where engagement in beauty practices is most sustained. Although the geographic

location was not the focus of my research, it did play an important role in data collection and analysis. Beijing is China's capital city and is classified as a first-tier city, having more economic power than other areas. Beijing is also the national political centre, cultural centre, international exchange centre, and science and technology innovation centre, a world-famous ancient capital and a modern international city. It can represent the current situation of contemporary China's modernisation, blending traditional and modern values. The people living there are more diverse, and the competition for financial success is more intense compared to that other city. In 2022, Beijing had a population of over 20 million (Population Stat, 2022). Beijing represents the centre of urbanisation and modernisation, where international beauty products and services are readily available for Chinese people to consume.

Recruiting participants can be difficult, so I tried a range of recruiting strategies (MacDougall and Fudge, 2001). I posted a call for participants on my personal social media WeChat to recruit participants (Appendix B). I recruited four participants this way, and they later introduced seven more participants to the study from their peer groups. At the same time, I posted a call for participants on internet beauty forums on Douban (Appendix C). The reason I chose Douban was that some forums target specific geographical locations. I chose several groups that focused on Beijing to ensure that my participants came from or lived in Beijing. I posted more than 10 requests in different groups on my social platform. Within a month, someone contacted me and became an interviewee. After their interview, she also introduced me to her friend, who agreed to participate in this study as well.

Due to the targeted age group of this study, I used an existing educational contact at a university in Beijing to help me to recruit students as participants. Upon contacting my former professor, I was invited to join the professor and their students on a university-organised academic excursion to visit an advertising exhibition. The professor introduced me to the students with a short preface, explaining that I was a PhD student recruiting participants for a study related to contemporary beauty culture. During the trip, I met a lot of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Among the students I met, five postgraduate students were interested in my research and directly approached me by their own initiative. They were students in their first and second years of postgraduate study. The undergraduate students seemed too shy to approach me, so I decided to approach them. I

invited several students to participate in my study, making it clear there was no obligation for them to accept. In the end, two first-year undergraduate students decided to participate. Thus, I recruited seven women through the university. I recruited 20 women in total, which was a suitable size for this study given the type of data I would be collecting and analysing. Due to the limitation of snowball sampling (Sadler *et al.*, 2010; Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019), the demography of the group was quite homogenous: all were heterosexual, of a similar age and socioeconomic status and highly educated.

Twenty participants undertook the initial interview (Appendix D). All were invited to keep a beauty diary and attend a follow-up interview; however, it was made clear that the beauty diary and follow-up interview were optional. In total, 14 of the 20 participants agreed to write a beauty diary and attend a follow-up interview. In the end, 10 out of the 14 participants completed a beauty diary and attended a follow-up interview. Of these 10 participants, 9 were university students, either undergraduate or postgraduate students. Thus, students were more likely to take on the task of keeping a diary while participants who worked were less likely. Some of the working participants said they were too busy, referring to their job as 996 (996 working hour system; 996 工作制; pinyin: *jiǔjiǔliù gōngzuò zhì*), which is a typical expression in China referring to working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week (Yip, 2021). 996 has become a popular term among young workers and represents how demanding their jobs are. Nine of the participants worked in Beijing, where the work environment is highly competitive, demanding and stressful. Therefore, it was very understandable that they could not participate in writing a diary and attending a follow-up interview. I was grateful for the time they were able to give for the initial interview, which took over an hour.

3.1.4 Positionality and feminist reflexivity

In this section, I will discuss my positionality and feminist reflexivity regarding my approach to researching Chinese beauty culture. The term *positionality* refers to an individual's view and the position they adopt within the social and political context of their research (Merriam *et al.*, 2001; Bourke, 2014). *Reflexivity* is the idea that a researcher should acknowledge their influence on the research process (Holmes, 2020). It is also 'an ability to notice our response to the world around us, other people and events, and to use the knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understanding' (Etherington,

2004, p. 19). Through self-consciousness, one can reflect on how their positionality might directly or indirectly influence the research design, process, outcomes and interpretation of the data. Taking into consideration Etherington's (2004) ideas of conducting reflexive research, the following section will discuss how my personal history with beauty culture led to my interest in the topic of women's engagement in beauty practices and how my personal development has changed my position in relation to feminist knowledge of beauty culture.

I have a long history of engaging in beauty practices and a complex relationship with Chinese beauty culture. It is not an easy or simple decision to write about myself, especially in relation to my past dieting habits. At the time, I carried within myself a feeling of shame. I also struggle with sharing my personal experiences, fearing persecution and judgement. I worry that others will perceive my work as narcissistic, self-centred or lacking objectivity, which could affect the legitimacy of my research and is a theme discussed among academics (Etherington, 2004). However, with the rising recognition of the importance of feminist reflexivity in research (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Ward, 2016; Linabary and Hamel, 2017) and the fact that this study adopted feminist standpoint theory, I deeply believe that it is necessary to share my personal experience honestly so that my standpoint is transparent and can be understood. Sharing my position and experience adds to our feminist knowledge and promotes transparency so that other researchers will be able to judge for themselves how my position may have affected the process of the research. I have identified three major stages of the development of my engagement in beauty practices, including my *obsession*, *rejection* and *acceptance* of beautification. I will reflect on my positionality and how my complex relationship with beauty culture may have shaped my research approach and findings.

The first stage of my beautification experience

My obsession with beauty culture started as I grew up in China, witnessing a dramatic shift in women's perception of beauty. My grandma's generation (the Communist era) was not encouraged to pay attention to physical appearance due to political ideology, whereas my generation has been bombarded by beauty advertisements, magazines, online blogs, products and services. When I was a little girl, I felt like a boy. I played with the boys and dressed like the boys. At school, I wore a tracksuit – same as the boys. I loved sports and playing basketball outside with all of the other kids. There did not seem to be any

difference between girls and boys. For a short time, I had a boyfriend, but even then, I never considered what it meant to be a girl, a woman. I just thought he was funny and handsome, and I really liked spending time taking with him. We started writing love letters to each other and occasionally held hands on the playground. It was not long before our teacher called our parents into the school for a meeting. We were warned that this behaviour was unacceptable and needed to stop. It did immediately. He and I never talked to each other again for fear of getting in trouble. I carried on studying hard and focusing on my studies, still wearing a tracksuit and not thinking about the way I looked.

However, after I entered university, there came many changes. It seemed normal for us girls to start finding boyfriends and to care about the way we looked. I spent most of my time controlling my diet and shopping to buy clothes, makeup and accessories so that I could follow the latest fashion trends. I also spent time mastering various beauty practices, such as putting on makeup, styling my hair and wearing high heels. My mother supported me financially to improve my appearance in accordance with beauty standards. She had benefitted from the economic reform policy in the 1990s and started her own very successful business. Her business was related to the fashion industry, so she was very aware of beauty culture and fully embraced it. Being a successful businesswoman meant that she had plenty of money to spend on beauty products and services, and she was very happy to pay for all of my clothing shopping bills, beauty salon memberships, hair salon memberships, gym memberships and well-being centre memberships as a way of showing her love for me and wanting me to have the best life possible. I was indulged and spoiled by her wealth and fully embraced the booming beauty culture of materialism and consumerism.

Another major influence on my development was Western TV shows and sitcoms. Because I wanted to study abroad for my master's degree, I had to pass an English test. I started to watch Western TV shows to improve my English. The TV drama *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) became my favourite show. I fantasised about being a cosmopolitan fashion woman with a slim body, wearing luxury clothing and high heels with *confidence*. Now, as I understand other scholars' work, such as that of Angela McRobbie (2007b, 2008, 2009) and Rosaline Gill (2007b, 2016b), I realise how heavily I was influenced by the postfeminist culture that promoted the idea that women gain empowerment through the power of consumption and celebrate their hyper-femininity by *choosing* to engage in

beauty practices (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011). I started to notice all of the so-called problems with my body according to Chinese beauty standards. Through this lens, my skin looked too dark and rough, my hair was messy, and I thought I looked fat. I constantly asked myself how I could become beautiful like all of those women in the magazines and TV shows. I continually searched for an answer – either on the internet or in daily life. During this time, I became obsessed with my body image, especially my weight. I would weigh myself several times a day to confirm whether I had gained or lost weight.

I developed a habit of keeping a personal diary from around the age of 10, during my fourth year in primary school. Thus, my engagement in beauty practices during university was well documented in my personal diary. My initial motivation was to be thin and beautiful like all of the models and actresses I saw on television. On reflection, I was not fat, but the message I told myself back then was still ‘I want to be thin’, and it was screamed everywhere in my diary. As Holmes (2016, p. 1999) articulates in her autoethnographic account of anorexia, ‘Less. I liked being less’. I had a record of my dieting experience; the first dieting record that I wrote in my diary was as follows:

Dieting record:

Breakfast: a boiled egg, a piece of cucumber, a cup of black coffee and a cup of soy milk.

Lunch: a boiled egg, a piece of cucumber.

Dinner: A piece of cucumber.

You can still find this so-called dieting advice online in 2022. It is called the *cucumber egg diet*, claiming a one-week weight loss of 10 kg (Sohu, 2020). After I followed this diet for 10 days, I lost many kilograms and felt over the moon. However, on the last day of the cucumber egg diet, I lost control and began binge eating, which made me sick. The guilt of what felt like failing my mission and self-hatred for not resisting the temptation made me cry. The emotional burden and physical pain in my stomach made me start vomiting. This was the first time I felt I had discovered a *secret* way to be thin and maintain my weight; I continued doing this, keeping it hidden from others for many years. Now, I understand that I had developed what is medically defined as *bulimia nervosa*, which is classified as an eating disorder. As Bordo (2003) found, eating disorders were previously virtually unknown in Asia, especially during the time I was living in China. I had never heard

anyone talk of eating disorders back then, so I did not realise what I was doing was unhealthy. For me, the fear of speaking out about my experience was rooted in a feeling of shame. These feelings of shame were extremely strong, and I continually hesitated to share them in my academic writing or out loud with anyone. Ironically, these experiences are still a strong motivator for my research. Due to my experience with bulimia, I now identify with many feminists' claim that they perceive eating disorders as deeply intertwined with the practice of normative femininities (rather than classified as an aberrant term, *disorder*) (Wolf, 1990; Orbach, 1993; Malson, 1998; Bordo, 2003; Malson and Burns, 2009). Over the years, I have internalised the dominant Chinese cultural discourse that women should be thin and beautiful, resulting in what Chapkis (1986) describes as women's *obsession* regarding how they manage and control their bodies. I was not aware of gender oppression and feminism back then. My reason was simply written in my diary: 'I want to be thin; I want to be beautiful'. I believed that I would be happier and more beautiful once I weighed less and that my life problems could be solved by losing weight.

The second stage of my beautification experience

This stage followed after studying for my MA Media Studies in the UK and later working for a media company in the UK. I was responsible for the company's public relations, and I organised and participated in the events. Many of the events involved Chinese celebrities, so most people were dressed very fashionably, especially the women. Most women at these events conformed to dominant standards of beauty culture, including me. There were two turning points that redirected me back to academia to become a researcher.

The first time I started to question my identity was at one particular event. I went to the film festival at Kingston Place in London for work. The venue was beautifully decorated, with unlimited champagne and exquisite refreshments. There were many celebrities, and the most eye-catching woman was a well-known Chinese celebrity called Bingbing Fan. She was beautiful and thin. I was wearing high-heeled shoes and a black dress, holding a glass of champagne and chatting with other guests. I had a moment where I suddenly realised that I was in a scene like my favourite TV show, *Sex and the City*. My so-called dream had come true. However, in reality, my feet were hurting, and I was hungry. I was not excited, happy or joyful; I felt empty and confused. I started to question the meaning behind everything I saw, asking myself, 'Why do women have to dress and look a certain

way? Why did these celebrities and TV shows have such a huge influence on these discourses?’

The second turning point was when my job became more stable. I started searching for answers to my questions regarding beauty culture and my identity. I had always enjoyed reading from a young age, so I went to the local library. There, I discovered the first book that impassioned me to reconsider my relationship with beautification. It was a book called *Beauty and misogyny: Harmful cultural practices in the West* by Sheila Jeffreys (2015). I did not know who she was back then, but I am now aware that the author has a controversial reputation among some members of the feminist community due to her trans-exclusionary radical feminist stance (Gander, 2018). Still, I truly appreciate her work regarding beauty, as it inspired me to think about beautification from a feminist perspective and motivated me to learn more about feminism. Jeffreys (2015) critically examines everyday beauty practices to consider whether they are beneficial or useful to women’s lives. I fully agree with Jeffreys’ arguments that beauty practices are harmful to the health of women and create stereotyped masculinity and femininity, which damage the opportunities of women, and that some extreme beauty practices, such as plastic surgery, have gradually become normalised in our society. During this stage in my life, I was determined to reject all beauty practices. I felt I was a *victim* of a patriarchal society. Although feminists’ debate whether women should describe themselves as victims, due to this term arguably being disempowering, I have used it because it does describe how I felt back then.

In the past, due to a lack of knowledge and information, I felt that I was heavily influenced by social norms constructed around Chinese women’s appearance. The journey of rejecting beauty practices was not easy. Initially, I was proud of myself for not doing my makeup or dressing up, but the feeling of being what I considered ugly quickly occupied my life. I did not know how to change the way I felt, so, occasionally, I would put on makeup and do my hair when I went out; then, I would feel guilty for not being a so-called true feminist. Chapkis (1986) also experienced and documented this dilemma: on the one hand, feminists’ work is to challenge social norms, but then they feel guilty for conforming to social norms. Yet, on the other hand, women who do not meet the social beauty norms feel ugly. She articulated this contradictory feeling of being a feminist and a woman when she said, ‘I am still filled with shame. I am a feminist. How humiliated I then feel. I am a

woman. How ugly I have been made to feel. I have failed on both counts' (Chapkis, 1986, p. 2). The confusion and complex feelings about my identity and feminism led me to return to academia to search for an answer.

The third stage of my beautification experience

The third stage of my beautification experience was embarking on and becoming immersed on my academic journey researching beauty culture. Over these years, I have finally understood and made peace with myself and my relationship with beauty culture and no longer feel subject to beauty pressure. Bordo's (1989, 1993, 2003) work really inspired me to start accepting myself. She dedicates her work to criticising the cultural construct of thinness as a form of social control over women's bodies. She shared her experience regarding the contradiction between her feminist work and everyday behaviour. I could identify with her experience of being accused of hypocrisy by her colleagues after she lost 25 pounds through a weight loss programme and was inspired by her idea that:

...feminist cultural criticism is not a blueprint for the conduct of personal life (or political action, for that matter) and does not empower (or require) individuals to 'rise above' their culture or to become martyrs to feminist ideals. It does not tell us what to do (although I continually get asked such questions when I speak at colleges)—whether to lose weight or not, wear makeup or not, lift weights or not. Its goal is edification and understanding, enhanced consciousness of the power, complexity, and systemic nature of culture, the interconnected webs of its functioning. It is up to the reader to decide how, when, and where (or whether) to put that understanding to further use, in the particular, complicated, and everchanging context that is his or her life and no one else's. (Bordo, 2003, p. 30)

My personal experience regarding beauty culture has become a strong motivator and passion for my research. I am researching for my younger self and other girls who face the challenges of beauty culture; I wish my younger self had the knowledge and support to enable her to find the courage to escape from her beauty struggles. I hope that I can share my experience with other young girls who, like me, might be struggling with their relationship with contemporary beauty culture. Hopefully, by more openly sharing our

experiences as women, we can reshape the dominant social discourse regarding beauty culture.

Writing about these aspects of my life has been a healing process (Bolton, 1999; Etherington, 2003; Bolton *et al.*, 2004; Bolton, Field and Thmpson, 2006). As Etherington claims, this process ‘strengthens our connections with our body, mind and spirit through sharing our experiences and newly discovered self-knowledge’. I have associated my experience of beautification with existing feminist literature. This illustrates how I have changed my position in relation to different feminist political standpoints. My rich experience and feelings within the beauty culture have benefitted and brought insight to my research. I found it easy to connect with and understand my participants’ feelings, regardless of what stage they were in or how they felt about beauty culture. During the interview, they expressed a variety of feelings and experiences, and I could often understand them. At the same time, I recognise that this reflects in complex ways on the question of power relations in the interview context, which I examine below.

Initially, my experience – and naivety – created a certain bias in the early stage of my data analysis. Unconsciously, I had created a linear narrative of my journey from being an unconscious beauty industry consumer to becoming an informed, conscious and liberated feminist. In some ways, I felt that there had been a linear progression of self-development, where I progressed from one stage to another. Because of this feeling, I attempted to understand participants by trying to figure out what stage they were at in their journey. I also tried to compare their experiences, thoughts, feelings and behaviours with mine, as if I could somehow formulate a framework to understand women’s experiences. However, after continually revisiting the data, I realised that thinking this way created a bias in my analysis. It was as if I was trying to fit their experiences into a preconceived mould based on my experiences.

My experience and immersion within the beauty culture helped me gain a better understand my participants and develop a rapport with them. I tried facilitating a respectful atmosphere and relationship with them so that they would be comfortable sharing their opinions and behaviours. Although I had my own values and personal understanding of Chinese beauty culture, I wanted to analyse the data by first trying to empathise with the participants’ positions. Therefore, I tried to focus and listen to the participants’ narratives

and learn to appreciate their perspectives. I believe that my *insider* status helped me to do this – although this idea is problematic, as discussed in Section 3.2.2.

3.2 Research process

3.2.1 Conducting interviews and beauty diaries

This study sought approval and was reviewed by the Ethics Board of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of East Anglia (Appendix E). After gaining ethical approval, I conducted the interviews and beauty diary interviews over a period of three months in Beijing (10 November 2019 to 10 February 2020). Every time I met my participants, I introduced my research project and provided them with a participant information statement sheet (Appendix F) and consent form (Appendix G). To protect their identities, I offered to give them a pseudonym or gave them the option to create one for themselves. They were all happy to come up with their own pseudonym.

Before starting the interviews, I always engaged in small talk with the participants so that we could get to know each other a little bit. Some of the participants expressed worry and concern about not performing very well during the interview. I always reassured them and encouraged them to think of the interview as a normal conversation or friendly chat between women and made it clear there were no right or wrong answers. Furthermore, I emphasised that they had the right to choose not to answer any of my questions. At the same time, I was willing to answer any questions they might have about my beauty practices. One concern I had regarded my judgement on appropriate responses to interviewees' questions. I was concerned that conveying my experiences might misguide and/or influence their responses. However, in the end, I decided to answer the interviewees' questions openly and honestly as a gesture of reciprocity (Ribbens, 1989). Although some of them came from different regions of China that have their own dialects, all of my participants spoke the official dialect, Mandarin. This is the result of the Chinese government's persistent motivation to standardise the Chinese language across all of China. As a consequence of this, the entire education system in China utilises Mandarin as its official language. Therefore, we easily understood each other.

Moreover, I smiled and nodded a lot and tried to create a friendly approach during the interview. As Bell (2007, p. 82) explains, nodding ‘reflect[s] a notion of caring that is particularly rooted in women’s experiences’. It allowed the participants to be themselves and encouraged them to talk openly about themselves, as this gesture fostered and symbolised an atmosphere of acceptance, regardless of what they said. It was important to build a rapport, so the first series of questions was designed to open up a general discussion regarding beauty culture in China. This allowed participants to share their own opinions. Once I thought participants felt comfortable and the conversation was flowing, I moved on to asking more personal questions. For instance, at this point, I was able to ask them about the clothing they were wearing for the interview. The conversation then freely moved on to discuss beauty practices in more detail, such as their makeup, footwear, accessories and other topics depending on what the interviewee had worn that day. This was one of the benefits of the face-to-face interviews – they allowed me to observe details and use these observations to engage with participants. Once they were comfortable discussing their personal beauty practices, it was easy for us to carry on and talk about their attitudes, beliefs and motivations. Key questions were prepared to facilitate the discussion of certain themes (Appendix H); however, I did not follow my questions in the order I designed, as I found this could interrupt the flow of the conversation. So, I allowed my participants to discuss and explore their answers in their own way, allowing them to share their unique experiences and lead the discussion in new directions. However, all of the key questions designed before the interviews were asked in every interview to ensure they all discussed similar topics to fulfil my research aim and ensure some level of consistency.

Regarding the beauty diaries and follow-up interviews, the initial plan was to transcribe the first set of interviews and analyse the diary entries before designing specific questions for each follow-up interview. However, during the fieldwork, I realised this was not feasible within the limited timeframe. Thus, I adjusted my design method. When I met participants for follow-up interviews (Appendix I), we first discussed their experience writing the diary and any potential improvements they felt could have been made to the structure of the beauty diary design. I then asked the participants to talk through what they had written. This approach let them lead the discussion and also lessened the volume of preparation I had to do in advance. I noticed that participants demonstrated reflexivity throughout their writing and follow-up interviews, similar to Linabary and Hamel’s (2017) participants.

They described themselves as having ‘learned’ or ‘evolved’ during this process (Linabary and Hamel, 2017, p. 107). Two participants put their own creativity into the beauty diaries by including personal photos to illustrate their outfits, makeup and hairstyle. Ten participants had follow-up interviews to discuss their experience of keeping a diary, reflect on beauty topics and address any issues raised in the diary. I will discuss their diaries in more detail in Chapter 6.

3.2.2 The researcher/researched relationship

Examining the relationship between participants and researchers can reveal issues of power relations potentially impacting research outcomes (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2014). I utilised several strategies to reduce the power hierarchy. First, researcher and participant comfort and security were important for the interview process. Therefore, all participants had the freedom to choose the location and time of the interview without restrictions. If they were unsure, I recommended public areas, such as coffee shops or tearooms, which have areas that lend themselves to private discussion, such as booth settings, segregated areas or well-spaced seating areas, allowing participants to talk freely without others being able to listen in. This guaranteed both parties’ safety while aiming to facilitate a comfortable atmosphere for sensitive discussion. It also had the benefit of not being too intrusive or invading their personal space, such as their homes. In the end, most of the interviews were conducted in coffee shops. Four interviews were conducted online. The participants I met at coffee shops were offered a free drink to express my gratitude for their participation in my research, which most accepted.

Second, I considered the effect of insider and outsider status. Data collection for this research was conducted in Beijing, where I was raised and where all of the participants were living. These similarities allowed me to use my partial insider status to gain access to interviewees. According to Oakley (1981), this insider status can decrease the negative impact of the interview situation by decreasing the possibility of there being an imbalance of power and authority. Despite my insider status, I was also aware that I am an *outsider* as well and that power relations were still at work here. This is something that has been increasingly reflected on in feminist research (Merriam *et al.*, 2001; Tang, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Therefore, I reflected on this issue in an effort to minimise the hierarchy of power relations by adjusting my usage of language and attitudes during the interview

according to the participants' reactions. For example, I am a bilingual PhD student who has lived in the UK for many years. Tang (2002) found that PhD students are perceived as successful achievers in China, so the concept of an international student's supremacy still exists among the majority of Chinese people. I was aware of my social position, so I tried my best to be approachable and friendly to minimise any feeling of disparity in the social hierarchy.

In the end, I was amazed at how much personal information my participants shared, addressing their boyfriends, parents, roommates and colleagues. Their openness towards me allowed me to better understand their thoughts and ideas. Even after we finished the formal interview, over half of the participants carried on talking to me about themselves. I continued the discussions with them unrecorded, as I saw how engaged we both were in the conversation. The conversations were not only about the participants at that point, as they asked me many questions regarding my education, my experience in the UK, my married life and so on. They were also hoping I could advise them on topics such as their academic skills, higher education, travel in the UK, how to find a boyfriend and so on. Although I knew I could say no to them and cut the conversation short, as a caring and sensitive person, I decided to carry on talking with them. Some feminist researchers have also asserted that researchers have a moral obligation to provide post-interview support (Brannen, 1993; Mitchell and Irvine, 2008). I felt I could not just walk away after they had shared their life experiences with me. I felt I had to give something back to them.

However, despite being honest with these participants about my personal experiences with beautification, I chose not to reveal or discuss my feminist identity. This was for several reasons. First, there are huge differences between being a feminist in the UK and being one in China due to different political environments, which I have discussed in my literature review. The ideology of feminism is discouraged by the Chinese government and being a feminist can be life-threatening. For example, on the eve of International Women's Day on 7 March 2015, five young feminist activists were arrested for protesting without having an approved license. Their protest through street performance art addressed sexual harassment on public transportation (Branigan, 2015). Their arrest required intervention by international feminist NGOs and their allies and support from over two million petition signatures worldwide before the *Feminist Five* were released on 13 April (Zheng, 2015a; Fincher, 2016). As a result, many women do not like to be called a feminist publicly, and

women who are feminist in their ideology may choose not to reveal their identity for fear of experiencing negative social consequences. Secondly, there are many misinterpretations of feminism and negative social stigmas and stereotypes associated with Chinese feminists (Hong *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, I did not want to be misrepresented. Lastly, and more importantly, I wanted to respect my participants' well-being. I felt that if participants thought I held a potentially oppositional political or philosophical perspective to them, it might cause conflict or discomfort for them. My goal was to create a harmonious atmosphere where I was there to listen and not influence them, allowing them to articulate their ideas and ideology.

3.2.3 My appearance during the interview process

I was aware that my appearance could be a factor that influenced the recruitment and interview results, especially in consideration of the research theme. For an extended period, I struggled with how to present myself. On the one hand, I wanted to wear smart clothing to present myself as an experienced researcher and convey my professionalism. However, a side effect might be that I would create a certain distance between myself and my participants, as they were all young women and most of them were still at university and had not yet experienced having to dress for the workplace. I was senior to them by default, and if I dressed very differently compared to them, it could enlarge the differences and create more distance. I considered that if I dressed casually without makeup, it could reduce the power dynamic and make me more approachable. On the other hand, I also considered that the participants knew we would be talking about beauty practices, so if, as an interviewer, I did not engage in beauty practices, it might make it more difficult for them to share their feelings towards beauty practices (as I might appear as an outsider). When I was in the UK, I could not decide what I should wear and wanted to observe other young women in Beijing before deciding. I thought that after being in Beijing and observing other women, I would be in a better position to judge what would be suitable to wear to appear approachable but not too casual, as I wanted participants to take me seriously. In the end, I decided to wear casual, smart clothing and makeup. Several of my participants expressed that I was approachable and easy to talk to. However, I am also aware that there was a limitation in my study due to my appearance during the fieldwork. There is a possibility that the way I chose to dress may have prevented some young Chinese women from wanting to participate in this study. For example, when I attended

the open day with other students during the recruitment (described above), I noticed that postgraduates approached me to discuss my research, but no undergraduates did. I decided to approach some undergraduates as I thought maybe they were shy. A couple did join the study, but others did not. After speaking with them, some of their responses were similar. They did not engage in beauty practices or find beauty practices interesting, so they felt that they had nothing of value to contribute to my study. It quickly became apparent that all of the students who chose to partake in my study did engage in beauty practices and were all wearing makeup. Therefore, a shortcoming of the way I dressed and how I presented my study may have resulted in only attracting young Chinese women who actively participate in beauty practices and who are interested in the beauty culture, therefore not representing young Chinese women who choose not to engage in beauty practices and who may not be interested in Chinese beauty culture.

3.3 Transcribing and analysis

3.3.1 Thematical approach

I audio-recorded the interviews and transcribed them from their native language, Mandarin Chinese. I transcribed verbatim and also incorporated punctuation to reflect participants' emphasis or pauses to avoid presenting the wrong meaning (Poland, 2003). I used my fieldwork diary to help me during the transcribing process to gain a better understanding of my participants. In my diary, I recorded participants' clothing, attitude, personality, memorable interactions and first impressions.

I used an open coding method to analyse my data, which allowed me to categorise themes within the data (Richards, 2014). The data was also analysed following Willig's (2008) six steps for Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA), which focuses on identifying the available discourses within a culture and economy and their implication for the people who live within that culture. The FDA has been used widely within feminist works (Bartky, 1997; Bordo, 2003), and it allows the researcher to identify dominant discourses – 'ways-of-seeing' and 'ways-of-being' that are difficult to notice as they have become 'common sense' (Willig, 2008, p. 113). *Discourse*, as defined by Foucault, 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about- a way of representing the knowledge about-a particular topic at a particular historical moment. Discourse is about the production of

knowledge through language' (Hall, 1997, p. 44). It is also historically and culturally situated. The FDA 'focus[es] upon the availability of discursive resources within a culture' (Willig, 2008, p. 113). As a feminist researcher, I was aware of the imbalance of power within data analysis and the ethics of representation; as Letherby (2002, p. 117) states, 'the researcher has ultimate control over the material and authoritative resources'. Although this was unavoidable in terms of the methodologies adopted here, I adopted two different analytic approaches in an attempt to be more aware of the issues at stake in considering my participants' concerns and reflecting their *voices*.

First, I took on Watts' (2014) *first-person perspective* approach to my data. I *tried* to get close to my data without imposing judgement by empathising with participants' perspectives and trying to understand their discourse (as discussed in Section 3.1.1). Before coding, I read the transcripts several times to understand my participants' viewpoints and ideas. I focused on how the participants understood beauty culture and which issues were the most concerning to them (Braun and Clarke, 2013). After this process, I identified the major issues and themes in my data from my participants' perspectives. At this stage, I printed off the transcripts so that I could read them easily and write on them. I found that utilising paper and pen helped me read and understand my participants' words better. The transcripts were formatted so that when they were printed off, every line of the transcript was numbered, and a wide margin was on the left for coding by hand. To do this, I extrapolated the codes as best I could from the language the participants used. If themes immediately appeared, I wrote them down further to the left side of the page. While coding, I realised that there might be more than one code per line, so I jotted these down. I then ran through the transcript codes and wrote down any themes and sub-themes that appeared.

Second, I moved on to what Watts (2014) calls the *third-person perspective* approach. At this stage, I allowed my knowledge and interpretation to play a role in the data analysis, enabling me to develop more specific coding (Braun and Clarke, 2013). I carefully applied my feminist theoretical framework and concepts to identify themes from the participants' narratives (Maynard, 1997). For example, I identified that some participants liked to discuss the concept of inner and outer beauty, so, within this theme, I applied relevant feminist concepts of oppression and liberation to help me analyse the data and understand the participants' ideas. This stage involved importing the original transcripts into NVivo

and re-coding the data from the beginning. While coding in NVivo, I also referred to what I had found in my pen-and-paper analysis. NVivo has the benefit of categorising and organising themes in a very efficient way. It allowed me to easily track themes and see all of the extracts referring to a theme without having to rely on my memory. At this stage, I was able to extract all of the major themes and sub-themes clearly from the first-stage data analysis. For instance, participants discussed their weight and appearance, which were categorised within the *outer beauty* standard theme and within the major theme, *female beauty*. It was also possible for some sub-themes to overlap into several major themes. NVivo made it easy for me to organise and edit themes as they continually changed and evolved during the process. Some topics overlapped into different sub-themes and major themes, which should have been expected in hindsight as these women's behaviours, ideas and experiences were interconnected. NVivo was especially helpful when I started writing up my thesis, as I could easily identify themes, find quotes and keywords, and see how the data might relate and be connected to other themes.

3.3.2 Translation/language

My interview questions, answers and discussion were in Chinese. I also coded and analysed the data in Chinese. This enabled me to interpret the data and consider the meanings and themes using native language immediately relevant to Chinese culture. This facilitated a workflow that helped me easily build up an understanding of Chinese culture (Hall, 1997). One definition of cultural is that culture emphasises conceptual sharing, which emphasises the similarity of 'the perceptions, cognitions, and the feelings of the members of a given society' (Schein, 2012, p. 312). Conceptual sharing not only concerns individual concepts but is also linked to 'different ways of organising, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them' (Hall, 1997, p. 3). The process of using concepts and language to give meaning to things is called a *system of representation*. From the same cultural background, conceptual sharing is often translated into a common language. The common language enables people to translate their thoughts into words to express meanings and communicate them with others.

The interactions I had with my supervisors and other non-Chinese people indicated that there were many Chinese cultural understandings I took for granted. This was very apparent during discussions where I had to continually explain the context, meaning and

significance of things that Chinese people would immediately understand. For example, after I conducted my fieldwork and transcribed my data, I kept everything in Chinese. Before my data analysis, I wanted to check with my supervisors that my method was suitable and that it was fine for me to carry on transcribing the data. So, I translated and analysed one of my interviews in English to show them the precise method I was utilising to analyse the interviews. When I met with my supervisor to discuss the translated transcript, it became apparent how much of the social context I had to explain and interpret for them to understand and appreciate what the participant was conveying. All of the participants used language containing cultural specificity in their interviews. For example, the concept of a ‘passer-by’, according to the Cambridge dictionary, means someone going past a particular place. In Chinese, it generally refers to unimportant people or someone playing a secondary role or supporting role in movies. These people are generally considered less attractive and rarely leave an impression on the audience. Therefore, when a participant talked about their attractiveness using the term *passer-by*, they meant that their appearance is unattractive and looks normal, just like that of other *passers-by* on the street – people we pass but never pay any attention to as there is nothing special to look at. This exemplifies how sometimes words and language convey meanings that are not associated with literal understanding or definitions. My knowledge and life experience as a female growing up and living in China helped me gain a deeper understanding of my participants through our shared experiences.

Meetings with my supervisors also helped me notice cultural differences between China and the UK that I may have taken for granted as being *normal* for all women. Sometimes, after translating my work and discussing my findings with my supervisors (who were British women), I realised that they did not understand what I was talking about because they did not understand the cultural context. Therefore, discussing my findings with women from another country helped me understand the degree to which something familiar to me or my participants might not be familiar to women from other cultures. Thus, certain details, subtleties and nuances needed to be expanded on so that these young Chinese women’s experiences and voices could be understood and appreciated by a global audience more easily.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the methodological and ethical considerations that shaped my research. I illustrated why I chose feminist methodical approaches and a mixed methods approach, including semi-structured interviews and diaries. I also discussed my positionality and process of reflectivity as well as the power relations between researchers and participants. In this chapter, I also discussed how my appearance, persona and relationship with the participants may have influenced the research process. I also covered language/translation issues in regard to data analysis. The theoretical framework and methodology established in my project provided insight into how my findings were generated and produced. I now move forward to discuss the major finding that emerged from my empirical data.

CHAPTER 4: Postfeminist beauty discourse: Individualism, choice and empowerment

The aim of this chapter is to understand the participants' motivation to engage in beauty practices. Through adopting a postfeminist framework inspired by key scholars' work on developing the concept of postfeminism, such as Gill (2007b, 2016a), Tasker and Negra (2007), and McRobbie (McRobbie, 2009), I use discourse analysis to examine my participants' reasons for beautifying themselves and then relate the findings to postfeminist discourse regarding the themes of women's individualism, choice and empowerment. Historically, postfeminism was understood as a Western cultural phenomenon with an emphasis on young, white, privileged, middle-class women, which tended to exclude women of colour and other ethnicities (Butler, 2013). Butler (2013) proposes an intersectional approach to postfeminism to better understand the reproduction of inequalities through postfeminist discourse. Moreover, Dosekun (2015b) examines postfeminism from a transnational perspective, arguing that postfeminism can be seen as transnational culture and that postfeminism is not only for women in the West but women worldwide. Drawing on the work of Butler (2013) and Dosekun (2015), I examine postfeminism in a non-Western context, specifically the Chinese cultural context.

This study demonstrates how young Chinese women employ postfeminist logic when they discuss their experiences engaging in beauty practices. The data shows several key postfeminist sensibilities, such as participants perceiving themselves as freely choosing subjects, liberation from male objectification and empowerment through the choice to engage in beauty practices. I found that the way my participants discussed their motivation regarding beauty practices mirrored Western postfeminist discourse, which supports the idea that postfeminism functions as a kind of transnational culture in China. I have divided this chapter into three sections according to the major themes of *pleasure*, *choice* and *confidence*, corresponding with important themes of postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007b).

In the first section, I discuss how my participants' pleasure was constructed through engagement in beauty practices. There were three distinct stages whereby the participants could gain pleasure: the experience surrounding the consumption of beauty products, the

process of beautification and the results of beautification. In the second section, the notion of choice is a crucial concern of Western feminist work that emerged under the influence of the ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism. This section seeks to contribute to the debate of choice regarding beauty practices from a non-Western context. In the third section, I identify contradictions within the participants' discourse of confidence regarding their beautification: they only seemed to want to emphasise the positive aspects of wearing makeup, such as linking it with confidence and empowerment, while ignoring the consequences of not wearing makeup. The notion of confidence reinforces and normalises beauty practices so that women conform to normative femininity and continue to engage in beauty practices. The logic and reasoning are that to feel more confident, they should engage in beauty practices and hold the opinion that they are *doing it for themselves*.

4.1 Pleasure: 'Dressing up makes me feel happy'

During second-wave feminism, beauty was perceived as problematic due to issues strongly associated with oppression and inequality. Many feminists explicitly or implicitly encouraged women to abandon beauty practices to achieve liberation (Dworkin, 1974; Bartky, 1990; Wolf, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Orbach, 1993). Nowadays, many women who engage in beauty practices experience negative feelings, such as shame and guilt (Frost, 1999; Rubin, Nemeroff and Russo, 2004). However, the discourse on beauty and engaging in beauty practices has transformed from being oppressive during second-wave feminism to being a source of pleasure and empowerment in Western postfeminist discourse (Jha, 2016). Furthermore, some feminists claim that beauty practices are a source of pleasure for women (Wolf, 1993; Walter, 1998). Clearly, the academic and cultural context of postfeminism has shaped beauty culture as *self-pleasure*, one of the key elements of postfeminist sensibility. Gill (2007b) states that engaging in beauty practices is constructed as women using beauty to 'please themselves'. Several feminist scholars argue that women are not passive victims and that beauty practices can be perceived as empowering and pleasurable (Davis, 1991; Crane, 1999; Frost, 1999; Cahill, 2003). Moreover, pleasure and beautification are strongly associated with each other in Western postfeminist media discourse; as Lazar (2015, 2017) identifies, beauty products and practices in advertising are perceived as fun and pleasurable. Thus, negative feelings associated with beautification perceived by second-wave feminists have been replaced with positive feelings, such as fun and pleasure, in postfeminist discourse. However, this has led to debate within feminist literature, where some researchers are critical towards these ideas (Stuart and Donaghue,

2011; Crann *et al.*, 2017). This chapter, therefore, remains critical of the ways in which the young Chinese women in this study used the ideas of pleasure and choice in relation to beauty culture.

When I asked participants why they engage in beauty practices or what thoughts and feelings they had when participating in beauty practices, *pleasure* was one of the themes that emerged from the data. All participants reported a sense of pleasure or fun when they engaged in beauty practices. This finding suggests that postfeminist sensibilities were evident in my participants' narratives. More specifically, most of them gave examples of feeling happy while doing their makeup. For instance, participant Xiaoxiao commented, 'Doing makeup definitely makes you happier; if it makes you unhappy, why would you still want to do it?' Clearly, there is pleasure in doing makeup, as Xiaoxiao used the word 'definitely' to emphasise her positive feelings towards doing makeup. Xiaoxiao and other participants clearly expressed their positive feelings towards beauty practices with certainty, so is it still appropriate to ask the dichotomous question of whether makeup is pleasurable or oppressive? As Craig (2006) suggests, maybe feminists are asking the wrong questions about beauty, which is why feminist theory often remains dichotomous in relation to this field. Therefore, it is worth building on Cahill's (2003) criticism of feminists' approach to beauty practices by expanding on her sentiment that 'pleasure in feminine beautification can neither be dismissed outright nor uncritically endorsed'. For instance, my analysis focuses on how women's pleasure is constructed within Chinese society and its complication in relation to gender equality. Although some feminist work identifies that when women engage in beauty practices, it can be a pleasurable experience (Frost, 1999; Lazar, 2015, 2017), they rarely reference women's first hand experiences of the pleasure provided by the three stages of beautification but instead mainly focus on media discourse analysis.

While I was analysing the interview data, a participant's response inspired me to consider how pleasure regarding beauty practices is constructed, which led me to identify three elements or stages of beautification that can provide pleasure. For example, Wenwen considered losing weight as a beauty practice, and when I asked her whether the process gives her pleasure, she stated:

Wenwen: Yes, I am very happy. This whole thing makes me happy, whether it is before, during or after ... They all make you happy, right?

Wenwen's answer made it clear that she gained happiness from the process of weight loss as well as the result. In addition, she felt that the 'whole thing' made her happy, using the time conjunctions 'before', 'during' or 'after' to explain what the 'whole thing' refers to. For her, the pleasure gained from the process of weight loss involved a timeline that can be understood as three different stages: before, during and after weight loss. However, Wenwen ignored the aesthetic labour involved in losing weight, which scholars has observed as being time-consuming and hard work (Wolf, 1990; Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017b). This partly corresponds with Cahill (2003, p. 42), which suggested a new approach to understanding the relationship between beautification and pleasure, 'distinguishing between the process and product of beautification'. The process refers to 'beautifying woman as [an] artist', who engages in the process of beautification, and the product is 'the beautified woman as artwork, the end result of that process' (Cahill, 2003, p. 45). If we draw a parallel within Wenwen's three stages, the timeline *during* is linked with the process of losing weight (women as artists), while *after* is linked to the end product of weight loss (women as artwork).

However, Cahill's (2003) framework does not fully correspond with or describe Wenwen's stages of beautification and the pleasure she receives. In Wenwen's explanation, there is one more stage missing from Cahill's framework: the pleasure she gains *before* losing weight. As I further analysed Wenwen's narrative, she talked about how, before she achieves her weight loss goal, she loves to window shop or go shopping for clothes she could wear after she has lost what she considers to be *enough* weight. This stage of pleasure was strongly associated with the shopping and pleasure associated with consumerism. This *before* stage could be described as a fantasy or visualisation, whereby pleasure is derived from her imagination or thought of consuming. In this section, I will discuss within a Chinese context the three main sub-themes that emerged from the data: the consumption of beauty products and services, the processes of beautification and the results of beautification as a way of enriching and deepening our understanding of women's pleasure regarding beauty practices. Following the discussion of this new approach to the analysis of women's pleasure in beauty practices, in this section, I will discuss within a Chinese context.

4.1.1 Consumption of beauty products and services

Six of my participants constructed their pleasure through consumption, which was strongly linked to buying beauty-related products and services. For instance, participants enjoyed searching for or discovering a beauty product or an item of clothing.

Wenwen: More specifically, I like to check information about mixing and matching clothing. When you become slim, you have more choices regarding what types of clothing you can wear. Just looking at those beautiful clothes and buying these beautiful clothes – it does not matter whether you wear them or not. They all make you happy.

In this extract, pleasure is related to the appreciation of beautiful clothes and the action of buying. First, Wenwen uses the word *beautiful* twice to describe clothes, which shows that she heavily values and derives pleasure from the aesthetic aspect rather than the practical function of clothing. This is in line with Postrel's (2003) work, which found that in our aesthetic age, more people pay attention to the way things look and feel, which is partly their reason for consumption. Although people have different aesthetic values, Wenwen does not appear concerned with the standard or quality of beautiful clothes. Instead, she emphasises her personal feelings. As Postrel (2003, p. 10) explains, 'Aesthetics offer pleasure, and it signals meaning. It allows personal expression and social communication'. In the case of Wenwen, she gains pleasure and expresses herself through her consumption of clothing. Furthermore, her pleasure comes from the shopping experience. Lehtonen and Mäenpää (1997, p. 143) define pleasurable shopping as 'consumption-oriented movement in a space where one has the possibility of making purchases'. This definition implies that shopping is a pleasurable social activity that relates to planning and searching for potential future purchases. Wenwen's pleasurable feeling does not involve the need to use or wear the clothing that she is considering buying; as she said, 'it does not matter whether you wear them or not'. Wenwen's pleasure is constructed through two key aspects, *aesthetics* and the *shopping experience*, which allow her to appreciate beautiful clothing and enjoy shopping as an activity that relates to beautification.

It is worth noting that participants were not only shopping for clothing and beauty products but were also shopping for beauty-related services. For example, when I asked Xiaokong about her hairstyle, she mentioned that although women who are 30 may look good, if you

look closely, their hair quality is not good. She thought that hairstyle is very important for women, saying, 'I spent ¥3,000 to buy a membership with a hair salon. After the hairdresser did my hair, I felt very good about myself, and I am so happy'. Xiaokong specifically mentioned how much money she spent at the hair salon, and considering the cost of living in Beijing, ¥3,000 is a relatively large amount of money to spend on only hair care. The importance she gave to the value of haircare was reflected in the value of the money she spent. Through consumption, she could take care of her hair and take control of her image. Her pleasure, in this instance, was related to her self-image but likely to also be linked with her ability to afford such luxuries. Shopping and being a capable consumer are strongly associated with postfeminist media culture, which emphasises the discourse that women are empowered consumers who celebrate their ability to consume. (Tasker and Negra, 2007).

Moreover, participants' pleasure gained from their shopping experience was derived not only from simply interacting with clothing or beauty products but also from the way they could utilise 'consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of self' (Tasker and Negra, 2007, p. 2). Similarly, Falk and Campbell (1997) found that when people shop, they ask a series of questions to find out whether products are suitable for them. These questions function as an evaluation of one's identity and self-formation – regardless of whether they purchase the products or not. For most of my participants, being beautiful was an important aspect of their identity. Through consumption, participants were able to imagine themselves as beautiful, and through this experience, they gained pleasure. For example, Huanhuan expressed the same positive feeling as Wenwen did towards shopping:

Huanhuan: One of my senior female schoolmates, she said that there is a decompression part [of shopping]. In fact, buying stuff will give her pleasure. When she buys clothing, she knows that this pleasure and feeling of being beautiful in these clothes is temporary, but she does not mind Like when I buy stuff, I feel that I am beautiful; at the time when buying, I am very happy.

Although Huanhuan recognised that the pleasurable feeling of going shopping and buying beauty products and services was a short-term feeling, she still went shopping with her schoolmate and enjoyed it. In her shopping experience, she daydreamed and enjoyed these

positive feelings in her imagination, as she may not frequently experience them in reality; thus, she did not mind feeling happy and beautiful temporarily. This links to Campbell's (2018) point that the key to understanding modern consumerism and hedonism is to identify the dynamic interaction between illusion and reality. Huanhuan associated buying beauty products with being beautiful, and the fantasy of being beautiful was projected onto something she could buy. The products brought a certain daydreaming experience, as 'in modern hedonism pleasure is not simply a quality of experience, but a self-illuminated quality of experience' (Campbell, 2018, p. 145).

Moreover, Huanhuan first gave the example of her friend who gained pleasure through shopping before explaining how she felt the same. She gives examples of how other people feel the same way as her to confirm that her feelings and beliefs are normal. Consumerism has become the norm for many people in China and is part of the new lifestyle of young Chinese people (Xu and Feiner, 2007; Li, 2014; Liao, 2019). However, Zhang and Wang (2006) found that Chinese adolescents do not strongly endorse materialistic values, so openly promoting consumerism would be judged negatively, as it would be associated with being materialistic, which is perceived as being superficial. This might be the reason why Huanhuan gave an example of others before revealing her own feelings.

China has become a consumerist society, and women are the largest consumers of beauty products and services (Ni, 2012; Baidu Marketing Centre, 2020). Shopping is a gendered activity often linked with the role of women and is perceived as a feminine activity (Falk and Campbell, 1997). Women tend to see shopping as a pleasurable activity that temporarily fulfils their desires and fantasies. This observation is in keeping with the postfeminist media cultural idea that a key aspect of shopping is enjoying oneself (Gill, 2007b; Tasker and Negra, 2007). Furthermore, it could be argued that the consumption of beauty products and services develops the Western neoliberalism economic model within China, where beauty standards mimic Anglo-European beauty standards (Xu and Feiner, 2007). In a similar vein of thought, some scholars posit that female consumers and workers within the beauty industry have been exploited in order to expand China's consumer capitalism (Yang, 2017).

4.1.2 Process of beautification

Seven of my participants mentioned that pleasure came from the process of beautification, predominantly through makeup. These participants enjoyed trying out different beauty practices and improving their makeup skills. According to my data, there are two ways for women to enjoy the process of beautification. The first is enjoying the improvement of their techniques and skills when beautifying themselves or others. For instance, two participants who earned money in the beauty industry both explained how they had transformed their habits into careers, so they perceived mastering beauty practices as developing and mastering skills that were part of their career plan. They, therefore, gained pleasure in the same way most people do when learning, developing and improving their skills. The second way to enjoy the process of beautification is linked with nurturing a bond of *sisterhood* – for example, women hanging out together and shopping for clothing or preparing to dress up together before going out.

First, regarding the pleasure of mastering makeup skills, Somus said that she loved makeup and loved trying different styles of makeup. Thus, she did some part-time makeup modelling work for Taobao.² Beauty product companies sent her beauty products, such as makeup or skincare products, which she tried on herself and then took photos of to send to them along with consumer feedback. Beauty practices were enjoyable for Somus and allowed her to express her playfulness. She said that if she got bored of doing makeup just on herself, she would *play* with others:

Somus: I will do makeup for my roommates. One girl knows how to do makeup for herself, and others don't know anything at all. Then, there is a girl who started learning how to do makeup during the summer holiday. She was very distressed because she has single eyelids and didn't know how to do makeup for her single eyelids. So, in fact, every time I played with her, she was quite happy.

We can see that Somus gained so much pleasure from doing makeup for herself that it encouraged her to do more for others. Yet, this could also be interpreted as contributing to

² **Taobao:** China's most popular online shopping platform – similar to Amazon in the West.

the policing of the beauty standards of other women close to her (Winch, 2013). This is also contrary to some feminists' perception that beauty practices consume, waste or cost women's time, energy and money (Jeffreys, 2015). In contrast, Somus did not see makeup as a tedious task; instead, she enjoyed the process of doing makeup. In a way, she saw herself as an artist, where her skills and technique were not only appreciated by her roommates but also something she could share with them. Clearly, they all gained pleasure from the process of doing makeup. Moreover, Somus gave the example of her roommate, who was distressed, struggling to beautify herself due to her single eyelids. Her roommate found it hard to do makeup because the mainstream makeup style is based on having double eyelids, which is a natural feature for Westerners; however, most Chinese have a single eyelid. The makeup style often aims to accentuate the eyes so that they appear larger. If a girl has single eyelids, she feels she has to learn how to use stickers (similar to double-sided tape) to create a double eyelid effect – a very hard skill to master – so that she can achieve the beauty standard. Later, Somus described how she would apply double eyelid stickers for her roommates, how she bought and tested different products and how she created looks for her roommates. Although it might be argued that Somus was engaging in beauty practices of her own volition, it could be perceived that she was policing and reinforcing specific beauty standards, e.g. double eyelids, onto her friends. The example also illustrates how Somus spoke in a way that implied that it was acceptable for her roommate to feel distressed at not being able to do makeup well. Rather than suggest to her friend that it is okay to not create a double-eyelid look, she accepted that having single eyelids is a beauty problem that is worth solving.

Furthermore, Somus also stated that if there was an occasion where it might be expected for her to wear makeup, but she does not want to, then she might not wear it, emphasising how she feels that doing or not doing makeup is a choice. However, for her, it was something that she did because she actually loved and was passionate about it.

Somus: It depends on my mood. I think I do [makeup] mainly because I like it. If the occasion requires me to do makeup, but I don't want to do it, in the end, I may not do the makeup.

Somus focused on seeing herself as a creator rather than an object; she even became a content creator to display her makeup skills on a Chinese social media platform. Some

feminists (Wolf, 1990; Jeffreys, 2015) often argue that beauty practices are oppressive because men objectify women or that women self-objectify themselves through beauty practices. However, Somus confirmed that even if there was a social expectation to wear makeup, she may choose not to, therefore freely choosing when she wanted to do it and exerting her will over social expectations. The fact that she loved to beautify herself and had even developed a career that was directly related to beauty practices showed she conformed to beauty norms. However, it was a complex situation where, although Somus said that she felt free *not* to engage in beauty practices, she never actually exerted this choice in her examples. Therefore, we could never be certain to what extent she was or was not free to choose. However, her behaviour did seem to support the idea that women are only really free to choose to what *extent* they participate but are actually unable to choose not to participate (discussed more in Section 4.1.3). Regardless, her attitude could be interpreted as illustrating how women can and do express positive feelings towards beauty practices that are in alignment with postfeminist and neoliberalist discourses.

Second, there is the pleasure gained from nurturing a bond of sisterhood through beautification. *Becoming beautiful* was one of the key factors for participants when sharing information and engaging in beauty practices together. Engagement in beauty practices offered them a chance to build relationships with girlfriends and foster opportunities to bond together. Moreover, 11 out of the 20 participants were students when the interviews took place. In China, university students typically share accommodations with others, and often, four girls will share a room. Roommates can therefore be seen to play an important role in the process of beautification. Participants who were students would often mention their roommates when talking about beautification. It seemed that for them, engagement in beauty practices was not a solo experience but rather a group activity that could bring fun into their life. For instance, part of the process of beautification involves social aspects, such as going shopping together, discussing what types of clothing match well, learning and doing makeup together and so on. The shopping experience functions as an expression of love that contributes to their bonding, especially for female consumers (Nichols and Flint, 2018). For example, Huanhuan discussed travelling with her friend in Shanghai and their shopping experience together:

Huanhuan: We went shopping – to the kind of shops that sell small accessories. When girls go out to this kind of accessories shop, they are very

happy. We tried on hats; I bought one. Then, [my friend] bought earrings. I am very happy to buy things.

Shopping is a social behaviour that is frequently undertaken with others (Kim and Hong, 2011). Huanhuan thought that girls are happy when they go shopping together and share in the buying experience and fun. When she went shopping with female friends, they would spend a lot of time together, contributing to the bond. As Tasker and Negra (2007, p. 95) state, 'consumption has another significance, acting as a bond between the sisters through the repeated borrowing, swapping, and exchange of such goods'. Huanhuan also enjoyed the process of dressing up with her roommates, as they would help each other dress better. She described the following situation:

Huanhuan: When everyone buys clothes to match, we communicate with each other. Like, I wore that outfit that day, and they said it could match. At first, the jumper is a bit oversized. My roommate gave me her opinion, saying, 'You should buy a waist bag to tie it up'. I said, 'Forget it, I don't have the money', and then, I tied my jumper up with my chain bag. When she saw me again, she said, 'It is okay, you could go out [on a date]'.

This narrative illustrates how the process of beautification can involve a lot of conversation between women with kind intentions, helping each other become more beautiful. The conversation functions as a bond between these women as they give each other advice about what clothing to purchase or how to match certain outfits. This advice they give each other can be linked with the postfeminist idea of the *female gaze*, where women judge each other and the judgement is consumption-oriented (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz, 2016). This so-called kind gesture of giving advice between women does not mean the structure of patriarchal power is absent. In fact, this type of discourse reinforces gender and beauty norms in Chinese society. This was exemplified in the interview with Huihui when she talked about her struggle to find her clothing style after no longer having to wear a school uniform. Her roommates were an important source of advice.

Huihui: Because after you arrive at university, you will be faced with the [life] stage of taking off your school uniform and not knowing what clothes to wear. You buy clothes for yourself, and then, you will try to find what types of clothing are suitable ... and then discuss it with roommates. I think university

roommates are important if you get on with each other ... and then, everyone is very happy to stay together.

As all of these examples show, after entering university, many of the participants faced the challenge of how to become beautiful according to beauty standards. They seemed to automatically seek help from their roommates to learn and master beauty practices. These young women discussed and helped each other gain the knowledge and skills to do makeup, styling and other beauty practices. Embarking together on a journey to master beauty practices brought them closer as they went through the process of beautification together, which developed a bond of sisterhood trusting each other's judgement. These young women's judgemental appraisal of each other encouraged them to engage in beauty practices with the goal of becoming beautiful according to mainstream, heterosexual beauty standards. This type of postfeminist discourse produced by the participants is problematic and can perpetuate existing patriarchal values, as Chinese society is still male-dominated (Leung, 2003).

4.1.3 The results of beautification

All participants reported a sense of pleasure after beautifying themselves. Most of them talked about how they felt prettier and happier after doing their makeup. As Sherry said, 'After doing makeup, it makes me prettier, and I feel very happy'. This and other similar sentiments were shared by the participants focused on the results of beautification. In these cases, it was not the process of doing makeup that made them happy, but instead, they paid attention to the result of how their look had changed. For example:

Gong: I know what I look like when I don't wear makeup; if I put on makeup, then I feel that I know how good I look with makeup. So, I will feel happy and look better when I put on makeup.

Gong pointed out the link between makeup and 'looking good'. It seemed that these positive feelings had nothing to do with the actual process of engaging in beauty practices but were more related to the outcome of being beautiful. It was difficult to discern to what extent these women actually enjoyed the process of beauty practices, as their attention seemed focused on the results.

Huanhuan explicitly pointed out the relationship between the result of beautification and her feelings of happiness:

Huanhuan: I just think it's good to look good. When others see you being beautiful, it will satisfy your vanity. If you are good-looking, others will look at you, and you will be more confident. The second is that I am very happy, just being happy; this thing will make you happy. Then what else? In romantic relationships, you can reject others casually.

In Huanhuan's case, she wanted to conform to normative beauty standards to gain positive affirmations from others, which then allowed her to feel confident. Therefore, it appears that gaining confidence and pleasure is reliant on successfully conforming to contemporary beauty standards to win the approval of others. Huanhuan prioritised outer beauty and arguably self-objectified herself for others to look at and judge, which echoes postfeminist sensibilities discussed by Gill (2007). Part of the reason for self-objectification is that if most women believe that they have to look a certain way to be beautiful, they will try to fit into specific beauty standards to gain compliments and satisfy their vanity. This is why makeup has become a normative requirement for many young women in China, as most of my participants conveyed how wearing makeup enhances women's outer beauty. It was clear from the women I interviewed that not participating in beauty practices was not really an option due to negative consequences. However, they were free to choose the *extent* to which they participated. The extent of their participation depended on how they negotiated normative beauty practices while considering negative consequences and gaining pleasure via outcomes, such as positive comments from others.

Moreover, when Huanhuan described her engagement in beauty practices, she mentioned how it allowed her to freely reject men in regard to romantic relationships. Similarly, she emphasised previously how she engaged in beauty practices primarily for her own pleasure, yet prior to this, she had mentioned how despite this not being her main concern, she would consider whether she wants a boyfriend or not. From this, we can see she believed that looking good and dressing up gave her more power in romantic relationships to attract or reject potential partners, giving her more freedom to choose and thereby allowing her to feel confident. It is also clear that she was fully aware of the power and confidence gained from looking good and considered it when engaging in beauty practices.

The discourse she used could be interpreted as empowering dialogue because it expressed how she could choose to do something that made her happy while also gaining social benefit from it. Huanhuan's narrative illustrated the neoliberalist value of individuals making their own choices, free from the influence of cultural norms. However, this position is heavily critiqued by many scholars (Baker, 2008; Braun, 2009; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011), who point out that the autonomy one might feel when exerting their power to choose is seldom done – if at all possible – in isolation from social and cultural influence.

4.2 Choice: 'I am doing it for myself'

Ideas of agency are a key concern of feminism in the West, which promotes the idea that women should have the freedom and resources to be able to choose how to live their lives as much as possible. Under the influence of postfeminist and neoliberalist ideologies, the notion of choice has occupied public discourse in the West. Many feminists have examined the rhetoric of choice in respect to different aspects of women's lives, such as motherhood (Holmes, 2018), childcare (McKenna, 2015) and their work–life balance (Sørensen, 2017). Furthermore, many feminists have paid much attention to Western women's experiences regarding their choice of engagement in beauty practices (Duits and Van Zoonen, 2006; Clarke and Griffin, 2007; Gill, 2007a; Chambers, 2008; Braun, 2009; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011; Riley and Scharff, 2013; Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Crann *et al.*, 2017; Widdows, 2018; Terry *et al.*, 2018).

However, there appears to be no extant feminist research concerning Chinese women's experiences regarding the discourse of choice. Thus, one central concern of my research is understanding the discourse of choice through my participants' discussions on why they engage in beauty practices. When I designed my interview schedule, I did not promote any questions regarding choice, such as whether they chose to wear makeup, because I did not want to use existing Western discourse that might influence or prompt my participants. This *bottom-up* approach limited the risk of conducting research in a way that would generate data that *fits into* existing Western feminist theory and literature.

Bottom-up refers to developing an understanding of people based on listening to them and observing them. It places value on empathising with people's thoughts, feelings and perspectives of the world. Many feminists are keen to adopt this approach, as in the past,

men formed knowledge about women without any attempt to actually ask women how they felt or perceived the world (see Section 2.4). However, a *bottom-up* approach is not free from criticism, as it can be limiting when interpreting research findings in a larger context. Therefore, it can be beneficial to combine a *bottom-up* approach to research, such as interviewing women in China, while discussing findings in consideration of *top-down* theoretical frameworks, such as Western feminist theory – which is the approach this thesis takes.

Despite my not asking direct questions regarding choice, when my participants discussed their motivation to engage in beauty practices, eight of the participants frequently talked about and used the word *choice*. Furthermore, they also used the word *choice* during other stages of the interview. Generally, it was observed from the data that participants who used the word *choice* often held modern Chinese values that parallel neoliberalist values, which tend to promote individualism over more traditional values of collectivism. They prioritised their own personal feelings and needs regarding beautification. The women typically discussed beautification in relation to some form of personal benefit. They positioned themselves as independent women who make free and rational choices in the name of self-improvement.

These eight participants who used the word *choice* within their discourse often emphasised the fact that they beautified for themselves. This might suggest that doing it for others is not perceived as an autonomous choice but that choosing to do it for yourself is. After analysing participants' ideas of choice, I found that when they put an emphasis on their choice, they often conformed to normative femininity and mainstream beauty practices, such as wearing makeup and dressing up, which Stuart and Donaghue (2011, p. 98) refer to as 'choosing to conform'. Although these participants expressed that they felt they had a choice regarding whether they engaged in beauty practices or not, these participants all engaged in a variety of beauty practices. It, therefore, seems that their choice only applies to what degree they choose to conform to normative beauty practices, but they do not have the choice to totally reject beauty practices. The participants' choice rhetoric reflected the influence of broader sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in the West, which means that postfeminism can be seen as transnational discourse (Gill, 2007a; Dosekun, 2015b). In this section, I am interested in how choice was constructed in my participants' narratives and whether this discourse of choice enabled them to gain social power. After analysing

the data within the theme of choice, three sub-themes emerged: (a) women doing it for themselves, (b) women not doing it for men and (c) women empowered through the discourse of choice.

4.2.1 Women doing it for themselves

Participant Deer's narrative illustrates the first sub-theme particularly well – that women *do it for themselves*. Deer was wearing a smart, bright orange suit comprised of a very tight-fitting short skirt and a jacket that was cut in a way that also gave it the look of a cloak. Her makeup style was bold, and it was clear she had used an array of different beauty products. During the interview, when I asked Deer why she likes to wear makeup, she expressed the conflict between a male colleague and herself regarding the question of whether women do makeup for themselves or for others:

Deer: I remember that I had a particularly funny colleague at the time; he thinks I do makeup every day. Because I was working at 8 o'clock in Xi'an, and my family lived far away, I needed to get up at six o'clock, and at seven o'clock, I left the house because I needed an hour to do makeup and go to the bathroom I insist on applying body lotion, washing my face, brushing my teeth, changing my clothes, and then applying makeup and doing my hair. Then, I go out like this, fully dressed. My colleague, a male colleague, felt that I didn't need to look like this. He felt that the girls were naturally beautiful, and I told him, I said, 'Do you think that I am doing makeup because I want to show it to you guys?' He replied, asking, 'Otherwise, who else would you show it to?' I said, 'To show it to myself'. I saw my makeup, and I was happy. It was like this.

The conflicting idea in this narrative illustrates two significant aspects. First, it reveals the social culture and subtle hierarchy between women and men. For instance, her male colleague felt that he had the right to impose his values on her and tell her what he felt she should or should not do. This idea of men imposing their views on women's beauty is also illustrated and discussed more in Section 5.2.2. Furthermore, her male colleague held the traditional value that women do makeup for others, especially men. These traditional ideas on the purpose of women's engagement in beauty practices were confirmed by other participants, who held traditional values that I will discuss more in Chapter 5. Furthermore, the male colleague thought that women do not need to wear any makeup to be beautiful,

which reveals the Maoist ideas of women and what is perceived as natural beauty. He felt that Deer doing makeup every day was not right and felt he must point this out to her. Due to his social power, he felt entitled to tell Deer what she should or should not do according to his value system. Thus, he thought that Deer doing makeup for his sake was unnecessary.

Second, this example of conflict shows how Deer constructed her opinions. During our interview, she did not seem confrontational. Thus, this incident was memorable for Deer, and she recalled it quickly and vividly. This conflict showed how important it was for Deer to insist and express her opinion that women like her do makeup for themselves. Moreover, Deer used the words ‘particularly funny’ to describe her male colleague. In this context, her use of the word *funny* in her answer can be seen as her ridiculing her male colleague’s idea of women doing makeup for others. This might illustrate how she used discourse to disempower her colleague’s opinion while asserting her own. Choice appears to be linked with morality, whereby there are *right* or *wrong* answers, and one should choose the *right* one (Tait, 2007). Deer felt she had the right answer – that women do it for themselves; therefore, she could laugh about her male colleague with me. Deer’s belief that doing makeup for yourself is a legitimate reason, which could suggest that there are also wrong reasons for doing makeup, was also expressed by other participants. Therefore, it seems there is also a kind of policing among women over their motivations. This is in line with Widdows’ (2018) findings that beauty practices are strongly associated with morality, especially moral judgement in terms of right and wrong.

For example, participant Echo said that, according to the opinions of the mainstream internet, women doing makeup for themselves is promoted, while women doing makeup for men or others is presented as totally unacceptable. As we can see from Echo, Deer’s belief that doing makeup for yourself is a legitimate motivation is supported by the mainstream media. Furthermore, once Deer stated her opinion that women do makeup for themselves, the male colleague did not argue back. This reflects Braun’s (2009) suggestion that the discourse of choice functions as a bottom-line argument, which is hard to disagree with. Therefore, the rhetoric of choice enabled Deer to have the right to choose to do whatever was the right thing for her. It is worth noting that although these participants felt complete agency to choose to do the right thing for themselves regarding beauty practices,

what is considered ‘the right thing’ often needs to align with Chinese social values and beauty norms.

Similarly, although participant Xiaokong acknowledged that her social environment constructs her choice, she still believed she had a choice. Xiaokong was an insurance saleswoman, and her job involved meeting with many clients. She felt that when she met her clients for the first time, especially male clients, she would beautify herself. She expressed that appearance was crucial for the first impression at work; a good impression enabled her to gain the trust of her clients and facilitated the sale of her services. Thus, her company offered a training course on appearance management, and women were taught how to do makeup. Xiaokong clarified that wearing makeup was a company requirement for saleswomen. Her case links to aesthetic labour in the workplace; as Grugulis, Warhurst and Keep (2004, p. 7) state, ‘there is an increasing tendency for organisations to manage the way their employees *feel* and *look* as well as the way they behave so that work is emotional and aesthetic as well as (or instead of) productive’. In this context, I asked her whether she felt she had to engage in beauty practices:

Xiaokong: I think there is an influence of the environment on your subconscious. What kind of appearance that you think is okay, and the appearance that you think is good – maybe this is an influence of the social environment on me? But whether to choose to present this appearance is my choice. If it is a choice, then it will not be pressured if I do not choose, and if I am forced to choose, I may not choose to be forced.

Researcher: You will not be forced?

Xiaokong: Prioritising my feeling is better.

Xiaokong said that although she was influenced by her social environment, she still felt that she has the freedom to choose what she wants without pressure. She identified that there are two aspects regarding appearance. First, she said, ‘the appearance that you think is good’, which is associated with mainstream beauty standards, and then she admitted that beauty standards had an impact on how she perceived what was considered a *good appearance*. For her, a *good appearance* was the type of appearance that meets beauty standards. In this sense, she felt that she had less choice regarding the influence of beauty standards. Second, she felt that she could choose to conform to these beauty standards or

not. She said ‘if it is a choice’ to suggest that there is a choice regarding whether to conform to beauty standards or not. She thought she would not force herself to conform to beauty standards just because of social pressure, and she valued her feelings first; therefore, she would do whatever she felt comfortable doing regarding beauty practices. As Stuart and Donaghue (2011, p. 114) found, the notion of ‘being comfortable in yourself’ provides a reason for women to engage in beauty practices, but this does not address the idea that their feelings are constructed by society, making them feel the need to engage in certain beauty practices to feel comfortable in themselves.

4.2.2 Women doing it for themselves, not for men

The discourse of choice was also evident in participants’ discussions concerning beauty practices in relation to looking for a boyfriend. Some participants denied doing beauty practices to attract a boyfriend or husband. These findings agree with Stuart and Donaghue (2011), who found that women who choose to engage in beauty practices typically claim that attracting men is not their primary concern. Traditionally, it was perceived that women would beautify themselves for men, enhancing their social value (Wen, 2013). It was clear from the participants’ dialogue that some of them utilised postfeminist discourse regarding choice and potentially conflicting Confucian traditional discourse.

I met Huanhuan three times during my fieldwork, and each time, she had styled her hair and worn makeup. When I asked her why she liked to dress up, she explained:

Huanhuan: When I am dressing up, I will consider that I want to have a boyfriend, but this is not my main concern. My main concern is making myself better My main sense of accomplishment, [beauty practices] will give me pleasure. Being beautiful is part of the source of my pleasure and my sense of accomplishment. Having fun is also a source of pleasure. This is the key to my life. I am very self-centred, making myself happy, making myself feel good and making myself comfortable.

We can see that Huanhuan prioritised what she saw as her own needs when considering her reasons for engaging in beauty practices. This is in line with Gill’s (2007) argument that Western women no longer choose to dress up to attract men’s attention and satisfy men’s tastes. However, this is in contrast to the Confucian discourse that the predominant reason

for women to engage in beauty practices is to attract men to become their boyfriend and, later, their husband. Huanhuan was clearly aware of this traditional discourse, but it differed from her opinion – maybe that is why she called herself self-centred. Huanhuan also felt a responsibility towards herself; she expressed a tendency to make herself happy and feel good, and beauty practices were one of the ways she enjoyed herself. We can see that Huanhuan viewed herself as a neoliberal subject who emphasised autonomy and self-responsibility for her own life (McRobbie, 2007b). These neoliberal discourses appeared at different stages of the interview. For example, when we discussed how her fashion style was so eye-catching, she talked about how her style reflected her personality and that she did not care about what others thought of her; instead, she paid more attention to herself and her happiness.

Regarding the potential social regulation of beauty standards, she also rejected the idea that there was pressure for her to conform. It is clear that Huanhuan did not believe that she experienced any social or institutional constraints or pressure to conform. Instead, she saw herself as someone with the confidence and autonomy to be totally responsible for her life decisions and choices. Although some feminists perceive beauty practices as painful processes that cost time, energy and money (Jeffreys, 2015), Huanhuan highlighted her sense of accomplishment and pleasure when engaging in beauty practices. This idea of being oneself and pleasing oneself is central to postfeminist philosophy (Gill, 2007). Her explanation indicated that beauty practices could help her become beautiful, which gave her a feeling of accomplishment and pleasure. She, therefore, suggested that women do not need to care about men's approval regarding their looks and should do it for their own pleasure. Thus, she put herself in an equal position to men – even though she conformed to normative beauty practices – by reasoning differently as to why women do their makeup. She did not see herself as powerless or as a victim. Rather than indirectly lowering her personal status by doing her makeup for other men, she did it for her own pleasure which allowed her to feel empowered by expressing and acting on her agency.

4.2.3 Women empowered through the discourse of choice

The third theme is that women are empowered through the discourse of choice. Many participants emphasised that it was their choice to beautify themselves and that they primarily did it for themselves, not for men. From the participants' point of view, we can see how a feeling of choice can create a feeling of empowerment. In this section, I want to

closely examine how free choice can be seen as a form of empowerment from my participants' perspective. This discussion illustrates how the reasoning behind a choice matters when engaging in beauty practices. For instance, when I asked Wenwen what she thought of women who like to beautify themselves, she replied:

Wenwen: What is your starting point? If you want to use your sexual attraction and attract more attention from the opposite sex, such as the kind of women I mentioned before. I despise this kind of women in my heart. Because you can listen to English for an hour, but if you really think that you use [beauty practices] to enhance your self-confidence, you feel happy. I am doing makeup for my self-pleasure. I really appreciate it.

When Wenwen said, 'the kind of women I mentioned before', she was referring to a *green tea bitch* (绿茶婊; pinyin: *Lǜchá biǎo*). Before the interview, we had discussed the phenomenon of the *green tea bitch*. This term originated from the Haitian Grand Festival held in Sanya, Hainan, in April 2013 – an international lifestyle brand cultural exchange exhibition where a crowd of high-income people and attractive, young female models gathered. It was later exposed that some of the young female models had been sexually involved with the high-income male guests, which attracted a lot of attention online (Wang, 2014). The term *green tea bitch* originated from this incident, referring to the numerous young, slim and beautiful female models with long hair who wore white dresses (wearing white was part of the theme). The term has become more common since then, referring to young women who appear innocent and beautiful but use their sexuality to attract high-income men in exchange for financial benefits. Another term that is closely linked to the concept of the *green tea bitch* is the *gold-worship girl* (拜金女; pinyin: *Bàijīn nǚ*). For example, a famous Chinese woman who became known as a gold-worship girl was 22-year-old Nuo Ma, a Beijing model. She joined a famous Chinese dating show called *You Are the One* (非诚勿扰; pinyin: *Fēichéng wùrǎo*) (2010–2020). During this show, a potential suitor who was jobless invited her to ride on his bicycle, and she said she would 'rather cry in a BMW'. So, the phrase 'rather cry in a BMW car than laugh on the back seat of a bicycle' went viral after the show. In this context, the BMW brand represents a rich husband who can afford to drive an expensive car, while the bicycle refers to someone who cannot afford a car. We can see that one of Nuo Ma's principles for looking for a partner is that she wants to marry a rich man even if it is not a happy

marriage, but she won't marry a poor man, even if she feels happy with him. Nuo Ma's opinion was perceived as politically incorrect and was hugely criticised by the media and public, ranging from local to global audiences (Wong, 2011; Luo and Sun, 2015). Nuo Ma may represent an extreme case of what type of partner women are looking for; however, in general, Chinese women still expect financial support from men (Li, 2015), while men pay more attention to a woman's personality and appearance than her income. (Wang and Rong, 2011). In China, there are still rigid, traditional social expectations of men's and women's social roles in the dating or marriage market.

Because discourses such as the green tea bitch and gold-worship girl surrounding the topic of dating and marriage exist in China and are perceived negatively, this likely contributed to the reasons why my participants were against the idea of women using their outer beauty to attract men. After 1993, becoming financially successful or starting and developing a successful business became very desirable as a result of the economic reform. With the development of state capitalism, class was reconstructed in China and gradually created a gap between the newly rich and the poor (Zhu, 2011). As materialism and consumerism were promoted, media discourse presenting marriage as a business became visible, encouraging women to marry rich husbands. Some women came to value money more than the relationship and chose to enhance their outer beauty and objectify themselves in exchange for a better match, as described above. In contrast, McRobbie (2009, p. 63) argues that in Western postfeminist culture, when a woman is 'able to make her own choices, it seems as though the fearful terrain of male approval fades away, and is replaced instead with a new horizon of self-imposed feminine cultural norms'. In this instance, women do not make choices based on what men can offer them. Nevertheless, both result in heterosexual women beautifying themselves to gain social power, but their motivations can be understood and perceived differently.

It seemed from Wenwen's dialogue that she despised women who beautify themselves to gain sexual attention from men and that she felt they would be better off spending their time improving their inner beauty by doing something like studying English. *Studying English* is a way of expressing that to study is to do something useful and that people who are good at English are often perceived as having a privileged social status. Part of the reason why Wenwen looked down on these women was because of the phenomenon of the gold-worship girl in China. In line with Wenwen, many other participants also disrespected

women who tried to enhance their appearance to attract men or marry rich husbands. This again shows a form of moral policing between women regarding their behaviours and engagement in beauty practices. As Tait (2007, p. 131) states, ‘the post-feminist spectacle of transformation as a cure for suffering and a route to empowerment distances its practice from negative associations with vanity and gendered oppression’.

Wenwen’s response illustrates the discourse of choice in a way that describes women as being empowered. As she said, she respected women who beautify themselves to enhance their confidence and gain pleasure. In other words, women who are *doing it for themselves* – to empower themselves to gain social approval. This is different from the motivation of beautifying themselves for a better marriage. The postfeminist discourse of choice allows them to find a new way to negotiate their position, where they can still engage in beauty practices and not feel they are perceived as objects by men while also conforming to the traditional female role. From the participants’ perspectives, choosing to engage in beauty practices also empowered them. Although the discourse of choice and empowerment allowed them to conform to normative femininity without feeling forced or pressured, it also encouraged them to ignore the constraints of social structure. This analysis also illustrates how the postfeminist discourse of choice incorporates local discourse about marriage, which enables women to make sense of their life choices in their *own* way.

However, these participants later expressed the idea that enhancing one’s outer beauty could improve their chances of finding a better husband. Thus, there was a contradiction within their empowerment discourse. On the one hand, they were critical and disapproving of women who objectified themselves, using sexual attractiveness to gain a better future by attracting a partner with financial resources. On the other hand, they expressed how it was acceptable to enhance outer beauty to increase their chances of finding a *better* husband, albeit a financially successful and wealthy husband. The former behaviour was criticised, as it prioritised attracting men who are financially successful over personal qualities and characteristics. We can see that the behaviour of engaging in beauty practices to attract men is the same, whether it is to increase the opportunity of finding and securing a richer husband or a better husband. Although the motivations are different, it does seem that the same behaviour of engaging in beauty practices objectifies women so that they can attract partners. This similarity perhaps was not acknowledged, or perhaps participants did not

want to accept the social status of women's objectification because it could negatively impact their self-esteem.

Although it is important to recognise these feelings of autonomy, it is crucial to discuss the complexity of this concept in relation to feminist theory and debate. For instance, although some academics advocate that we respect and acknowledge women's freedom of choice (Frost, 1999; Duits and Van Zoonen, 2006), Gill (2007a) argues that this perspective 'remains trapped in precisely the individualizing, neoliberal paradigm that requires our trenchant critique'. With this in mind, we might consider to what extent Chinese women are free to choose to believe that they are living within a patriarchal system that has already limited their choices. Thus, rather than dislocating young women from social and cultural influence, we have to understand their choices within a Chinese social and cultural context. If we only respect and accept their feelings of autonomy, this denies any notion of cultural influence. Thus, I would like to illustrate the many social constraints raised by the interviews and will discuss in Chapter 5 the normalisation of beauty practices.

4.3 The paradox of confidence

As my participants continued to utilise postfeminist logic to explain their motivation and empowerment, I identified contradictions within their discussions regarding confidence. In this regard, the conversation with Ping turned out to be very insightful. Ping was a primary school teacher who had just started her job. When I finished the second part of the interview, I asked Ping whether there was anything she wanted to add. Ping started to talk about feminism: she thought that although Chinese women's status had improved, she felt that men and women were not equal yet. She continued on, talking about Chinese feminist activists and the famous movement called *Occupy Men's Toilets*³ (占领男厕所; pinyin: *Zhànlǐng nán cèsuǒ*). Following her thoughts regarding feminism, I asked her whether she

³ **Occupy Men's Toilets:** A movement that began when a female college student in Beijing called Maizi Li became fed up that, as a woman, she had to queue for a long time for the public toilet. She thought there was an unfair ratio of male-to-female toilet stalls. Occupying men's toilets was not her main purpose; she tried to bring awareness to a central gender fairness issue.

associated oppression with beauty practices and whether she felt it was a form of oppression for women. Her answer was a little surprising to me:

Ping: No, I do not link these things together. I do not think makeup is a kind of oppression. I think wearing makeup is my own choice, and it is a kind of self-confidence for me. I do put on makeup; when I go out, my whole personal state is not the same. Although you know that others can't tell the difference, my inner state is different. I feel more confident in my heart. If I meet someone, I dare to talk to people. Do you understand? If I don't wear makeup, I really want to walk past people with my head down, but if I do, I will bravely greet people.

Ping utilised postfeminist logic to explain the link between wearing makeup and choice and empowerment. Wearing makeup was Ping's choice, which made her more confident, yet she felt that if she did not wear makeup, she did not want to face people. The consequence of not wearing makeup was that she would feel less confident, but she did not point this out. Her emphasis was on the confidence she felt when she did wear makeup. If this statement is true, not wearing makeup should be neutral or natural, but she found it hard to face and greet people. Clearly, having a *natural face* (being makeup-free – see Chapter 5) did not give her a *neutral* feeling when socialising with others, so she would feel bad about herself and less confident when she was not wearing makeup. Therefore, wearing makeup seemed compulsory to interact socially with others, which is fundamental to functioning in society.

Many other participants tried to explain the logic between wearing makeup and confidence. For example, Huanhuan explained, 'Compared to before, I did not wear makeup. Now I often wear makeup and have learned how to dress up; then my whole *qizhi*⁴ (气质; pinyin: *Qizhi*) changed, and I became more confident as well'. From Huanhuan's point of view, her confidence was associated with positive feelings about herself after engaging in beauty practices. Similarly, participant Deer also mentioned the link between a good mood and confidence:

⁴ *Qizhi* can be likened to aura or temperament; however, in the context of female beauty, it is a complex term and is described more fully in Section 7.1.2.

Deer: Yes, I am in a good mood, and I am confident. Although girls must be confident, regardless of whether or not they put on makeup, they must be confident. But when they put on makeup, they could have real confidence and have a really high profile.

Deer's opinion was that girls must be confident, but she distinguished between confidence and *real* confidence. It seems she believed that girls must be confident, that this is the social norm and that we should all accept this statement. However, Deer felt there was a difference between when she was and was not wearing makeup. These feelings could not be explained by 'confidence' or 'less confidence', so she developed her own term, *real confidence*. In contrast, Min explained:

Min: Confidence. I do not think [wearing makeup] will enhance my confidence; I am more self-centred. But it is true that if you put on makeup, when you ask for directions, people are very enthusiastic. Yes, but if you look too plain, there will be some problems, right? Maybe in some formal occasions, you will say that you may be a little confident, not more confident, and I am not [meaning that] if you do not wear makeup, you are not confident. Because other people think you are not so refined, or maybe you think you are sick or in bad health or something else.

Min denied the idea that wearing makeup would make her more confident, as she did not want to jump to the logic that if you do not wear makeup, you are not confident. However, she mentioned the social factors that encouraged her to wear makeup, although she did not think it applied to her personally.

Overall, my participants emphasised the following two aspects of wearing makeup: 1) wearing makeup being their choice and 2) wearing makeup making them feel more confident. Although these women believe that wearing makeup was their choice, they felt that they *had* to wear makeup to gain confidence. This potentially devalued the way they felt and lowered their self-esteem when they did not wear makeup – or made them feel as if they could not be confident without makeup. This illustrates a limitation in the discourse of confidence. Furthermore, participants indirectly conveyed that not wearing makeup made them feel bad and that they felt they *had* to wear makeup to feel good. This is in line

with Orgad and Gill's (2021) argument that women's *discourse of confidence*, suggesting that women are responsible for their own condition, ignores social structure and systematic oppression.

Many participants seemed reluctant to reveal their negative feelings associated with not wearing makeup. They only seemed to want to emphasise the positive aspects of wearing makeup, such as linking it with confidence and empowerment, while ignoring the consequences of not wearing makeup. The notion of confidence seems to reinforce and normalise beauty practices so that women conform to normative femininity and continue to engage in beauty practices. The logic and reasoning are that to feel more confident, they should engage in beauty practices and hold the opinion that they are doing it for themselves. In this way, we can see that there is little option but to 'choose to conform' (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011, p. 98).

Furthermore, participant Holly's answer revealed something very interesting:

Holly: makeup is not [used] to make yourself less confident. It's not about making yourself confident, [not] that, but I think there is a certain connection with self-confidence. To what degree, the way to make yourself happy, I think.

She used a kind of double negative to explain the link between makeup and confidence, so we can understand that she thought wearing makeup would make her confident. However, Holly quickly denied this herself, as she did not want to say it. Later on, when Holly talked about her low confidence towards her appearance, she said she had been influenced by Western cultures, as she studied both in America and in the UK. She openly admitted that her appearance did not fit the mainstream beauty standard and felt less confident about it. However, she expressed how she had been working on accepting herself, as her American roommates inspired her. I identified that some of her ideas seemed to be influenced directly by Western society because of the way she talked about beauty practices and that her ideas of beauty were in line with the Western mainstream ideas of *love your body* and *accept who you are*.

Holly: Yes, [double eyelid surgery] is normal. Many people around me have done it, but I don't think it's natural; that's what I think. Although I don't

accept my appearance, I still want to convince myself to accept my appearance. I just want to be myself, and it was the experience of going to the United States on an exchange when I was in college that made me feel this way. At that time, the study place was in a village. This village was in a very tolerant and very free state. My roommate at the time was a fat girl, but she used to run marathons. So, she suddenly became fat after she stopped training – that's what she said. I think some of her ideas had a greater impact on me, and that is to accept your appearance. That means I look like this. Yes, then she has a few tattoos. She said that the next one she wanted to get was a skull tattoo with the following sentence: 'underneath we are all the same'. I think it makes sense. Actually, that's why appearance *bothers me so much* and shouldn't be something I am dissatisfied with about myself every day. Then I felt that I didn't want to keep trying to change my appearance.

After she finished talking, she clarified her roommate's nationality- an American girl. She felt that her roommate was fat, but her roommate accepted herself and was confident in expressing that appearance does not matter since, behind our appearance, we are all human. Because of this, Holly discovered that her moral value that *being fat is wrong* was not an absolute truth. As a consequence, she reasoned that she and her roommate held different opinions because their upbringing and psychological development had been different. Holly, therefore, believed that maybe she could learn to accept that it is okay to be fat and that weight does not matter.

Therefore, Holly felt inspired by her roommate talking openly about her experience of becoming fat but accepting it. Like Gill and Orgad (2015) found in *love your body* (LYB) discourse, part of women's power is revealing their pain, shame and insecurity. Holly's roommate's openness had inspired her to believe one should admit that they are not conventionally good-looking, as it can be a powerful tool during social interactions. From some of the participants' points of view, women should not blame themselves; they should work on accepting themselves. Women's dissatisfaction towards their bodies can be overcome with the right techniques, enabling them to adjust their mindset (Orgad and Gill, 2021). However, the discourse of LYB is problematic, as it blames women for not having the right mindset of accepting their bodies instead of addressing the inequality and injustice within social structures. Furthermore, one might argue that being confident and working on their psychological development is not a solution for women to solve their

problems related to their appearance. Therefore, I found that some participants adopted these Western ideas of LYB and accepting themselves rather than pointing out gender inequality regarding the beauty culture. They felt it was their personal responsibility to overcome these difficulties towards their appearance rather than question the beauty standards within Chinese society.

4.4 Conclusion

Through an analysis of the discourse of choice, pleasure and confidence, we can see that these eight participants' narratives illustrated postfeminist sensibilities. They perceived themselves as subjects free from the male gaze, enjoying and celebrating the pleasure of beautification as confident individuals. Postfeminist discourse was popular among my participants as a result of adopting Western values and ideologies and rejecting traditional Chinese values. As Meyers (2008) states, Western values and ideologies, including consumerism, materialism and capitalism promoted through media globally, can be seen as a process of cultural imperialism. Therefore, we can see the emergence of postfeminism as the process of cultural imperialism in many non-Western countries, such as China (Thornham and Pengpeng, 2010; Sun, 2017; Liao, 2019), Nigeria (Dosekun, 2015b), Singapore (Lazar, 2006) and the Middle East (Albouss, 2017).

In the first section, I examined how young Chinese women's pleasure of beautification is constructed through three different stages, including the consumption of beauty products, the process of beautification and the end results of beautification. My findings confirmed that there is a strong association between beautification and pleasure in young Chinese women's experiences regarding their engagement in beauty practices. Moreover, my analysis avoided traditional feminists' binary approach, which argues between pleasure and oppression. Instead, I illustrated the complexity of young women's experiences of pleasure regarding beautification in relation to consumerism, aesthetics, skills, career development and sisterhood bonding.

In the second section, I examined the discourse of choice within participants' narratives that they beautify for themselves. I identified the following three sub-themes: (a) women doing it for themselves, (b) women not doing it for men and (c) women empowered through the discourse of choice – although participants often used the discourse of choice to justify their reasons for engaging in beauty practices. In fact, the discourse of choice was

only emphasised when participants chose to beautify themselves. I argue that engaging in a variety of beauty practices is sometimes stigmatised in China. Thus, participants utilised the discourse of choice to justify their reasons for beautifying and gaining empowerment while, at the same time, detaching themselves from gender oppression by not participating in beauty practices for men but for themselves.

In the third section, I examined the discourse of confidence, which revealed the contradictions within participants' narratives. This finding added another layer of complexity to the discourse of choice. Although participants felt they gained confidence through engagement in beauty practices and emphasised the positive feelings of beautification, they often neglected the other side of the coin, which was that if they did not wear makeup, they would feel worse. Their confidence had to come from engagement in beauty practices, which somehow pushed participants into a position where they had to beautify themselves. Furthermore, the discourse of confidence has attracted a lot of attention from feminist scholars. One of my participant's experiences revealed how the discourse of confidence is part of neoliberalism and can be seen as transnational culture, travelling across borders.

Overall, through an analysis of the themes of pleasure, choice and confidence, I argue that postfeminism can be seen as a transnational culture in understanding women's experiences in non-Western countries, as my participants' narratives illustrated postfeminist sensibilities. However, I think that a postfeminist framework can be limiting, as it only partly reveals the shared ideologies that have evolved since the development of globalisation, consumerism and neoliberalism. In the next chapter, I will expand my argument by examining the participants' initial engagement in beauty practices, illustrating the local dominant discourse of Chinese beauty culture. Furthermore, it will be argued that the framework of studying non-Western beauty culture should be examined and understood through utilising local dominant discourse and value systems to enrich and broaden our understanding of beauty across different cultures.

CHAPTER 5: The normalisation of beauty practices among young Chinese women

Chapter 4 explored the dominant discourses surrounding the participants' motivation to engage in beauty practices, which focused on narratives of neoliberalist and postfeminist discourses regarding individualism, choice and empowerment. In this chapter, I examine young Chinese women's initial and early engagement in beauty practices, which illustrates the normalisation of beauty practices within a Chinese context. The participants' narratives can be perceived as the local dominant discourses, which reflect Confucian and Maoist values. This chapter aims to illustrate the complexity of Chinese women's choices regarding beauty practices, which are largely constructed by social expectations and constraints. These findings emphasise a complex situation where local value systems within the processes of neoliberalism and postfeminism in China construct young Chinese women's attitudes regarding beauty practices.

This chapter is divided into two sections according to the major themes: changing perspectives on beauty practices and fitting in with beauty culture. In Section 5.1, I discuss how changing social expectations would influence young women's initial engagement in beauty practices within a specific cultural context. When these women were in high school, they were expected to focus solely on their studies and not engage in beauty practices, which is reinforced by school policy in China. However, they developed strong motivations to engage in beauty practices at university due to peer influence and personal desires to find boyfriends. They expressed their desire to enter a heterosexual relationship, leading to them trying to fit into heteronormative beauty standards. In Section 5.2, I found that the participants had to *learn* how to fit into Chinese beauty culture, as there is a score measurement system developed to measure women's appearance. I will discuss how these young women engaged in beauty practices to avoid the social stigma associated with being *makeup-free* (素颜; pinyin: *Sùyán*). They, therefore, wore makeup to avoid being perceived as looking sickly, being lazy or being disrespectful to others.

5.1 Changing perspectives on beauty practices

Most of my participants discussed a major change in attitude towards beauty practices during their transition from high school to university. In high school, they often had less awareness of the perceived importance of beauty practices. When they went to university,

almost all of them developed a belief that it was essential to engage in beauty practices to create a good first impression and fit in with the university environment. Although in Chapter 4, I analysed the participants' discourse on engaging in beauty practices for themselves, many participants utilised choice discourse to justify their reasons for engaging in beauty practices. In this section, I focus on their discourse regarding *when* they first started engaging in beauty practices. When asked about the first time they engaged in beauty practices, over half of them thought they had been influenced by their peers because they wanted to fit into the university environment. This changing attitude is strongly linked to being a university student and entering adulthood. Chinese students finish their Gaokao (高考; pinyin: *Gāokǎo*) (university entrance examination) generally around the age of 18. The participants' narratives on their experiences of beauty practices demonstrated a strong theme related to life stage decisions, whereby different life stages affected their attitudes towards beauty practices (Tazzyman, 2014). Based on the data I obtained, female high school students are not required to fit into gender norms regarding appearance. Instead, they are often perceived as a gender-neutral body and are not encouraged to display femininity as associated with mainstream beauty standards. When the participants went to university, the social discourse on female beauty motivated them to engage in beauty practices. The changing discourse between high school and university shows how young Chinese women's beauty practices are the product of social discourse and disciplines. In this section, I will contextualise high school life to understand my participants' attitudes towards beauty practices. Then, I will discuss the strong influence of peer pressure at university. Later, I will discuss how the change in social expectations for young women's purpose can be linked to the male gaze.

5.1.1 Peer influence

Most of my participants expressed that in high school, they focused on studying, which was part of the reason they did not think about beauty practices. High school students in China experience extreme pressure from their parents and teachers, who expect them to study hard so that they perform well in their academic exams (Davey, De Lian and Higgins, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2009; Bartlett and Fischer, 2011). This is also heightened by competition to do well so that they can gain access to better universities, resulting in them being able to get better jobs (*better*, in this instance, means more highly paid). They are less likely to have free time to think about anything unrelated to studying, including beauty

practices. High school students' main focus is on passing the National College Entrance Examination, commonly known as the *Gaokao*. The *Gaokao* is an extremely competitive examination, as it significantly affects their future career, salary and even marriage (Davey, De Lian and Higgins, 2007). Chinese high school students have very limited free time, and their parents often closely monitor them to make sure they study, resulting in female teenagers being unable to participate in or discouraged from engaging in beauty practices. However, in other Asian cultural contexts, some teenage girls aged 12–16 engage in beauty practices and are concerned about beauty. For example, tween girls in Singapore face issues of sexualisation and the teenage desire to fit beauty standards (Chua and Chang, 2016; Loh, 2016). In the West, there are many studies that have investigated the relationship and engagement between beauty culture and teenage girls (Banet-Weiser, 2014; Jackson and Vares, 2015; Holmes, 2017; Dejmanee and Dejmanee, 2018). Therefore, my data illustrates how cultural specificity constructs girls' and young women's experiences differently.

Within the Chinese context, participant Yuan explained her high school environment regarding beauty practices:

Yuan: When we were going to university, during the summer vacation, I went to buy a whole set of cosmetics with my high school friends and started to learn makeup. It all changed when we went to university. Everyone looks completely different compared to high school – that is, dress up and makeup, those types of things. When I was in high school, there was a different atmosphere there. Every girl and boy basically didn't dress up; they didn't care about their appearance. Maybe girls would, but generally, they didn't wear makeup or anything, and then I didn't even wear makeup when I was in high school.

Yuan explained her perception that when she was in high school, no one cared about beauty practices. The social environment in high school didn't encourage girls to think about beauty. Teachers and parents put considerable pressure on children to succeed in their exams at an early age (Davey, De Lian and Higgins, 2007). The main – or only – idea promoted by the school and social surroundings was the idea of studying hard. Another participant, Huihui, confirmed this idea:

Huihui: In my high school environment, I only studied hard in high school and didn't have an awareness of makeup. At that time, I felt that there was no need to wear makeup; I just needed to study. There were girls in the class who wore makeup, but the whole environment was still mostly people not wearing makeup. Then at that time, I only knew how to study, but I didn't have that consciousness. It's not like I chose not to do makeup. It's just that I didn't have the awareness back then. Moreover, I just needed to dress clean and tidy, and if I put on makeup, maybe my mom would hit me.

As Huihui explained, it is not about choice; it has to do with the environment, which does not encourage female students to engage in beauty practices. School is the key regulator of female students' time, behaviour and thoughts, where beauty practices are not relevant to and possibly a distraction from its central purpose. Parents typically share the school's opinion: they want students to spend all of their energy and time on their studies. As Cann (2013) found, school can be seen as a hyper-regulatory space. Students spend a large amount of time there together with repetitive daily routines. Chinese primary and middle school students are also strongly regulated by their schools, which the Chinese government regulates. *Daily Behaviour Norms for Primary and Middle School Students* (middle school in China also refers to high school ages 12–18) is a report issued by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. It aims to help Chinese students develop what are considered to be good behaviour and habits and promote healthy physical and mental development (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1994). One of the regulations related to student appearance states, 'Dress neatly, simply and neutrally, no perm, no hair dye, no makeup, no jewellery, no long hair for boys, and no high heels for girls'. The regulation clearly shows that female students are not allowed to engage in any beauty practices. High school female students often wear gender-neutral uniforms, such as tracksuits. Unlike school uniforms for girls in the UK, Chinese girls' uniforms rarely include a skirt. Many of the participants wore school uniforms when they were younger.

Moreover, the family environment does not encourage engagement in beauty practices either. As Huihui explained, if she started to wear makeup or dress up, her mum would punish her. As Huihui's mother grew up during Mao's regime, she thought a woman's appearance should be natural and simple. Therefore, teachers' and parents' attitudes restrict the students' freedom, making female students far less likely to engage in beauty

practices. Other participants also confirmed the idea that most female students did not engage in beauty practices. For instance, Gong said that most of her female classmates didn't wear any makeup in high school.

Most of my participants started to engage in beauty practices when they started university around the age of 18, which differs from what much of Western research shows on women's beautification experiences. In contrast, academic scholars have found that young girls become concerned with beautification around puberty, so the average age of first engagement in beauty practices is around 11 or 12 years old (Bloustien, 2003; Tazzyman, 2014). I think these differences in findings can be associated with the specific social context. When my participants discussed their first engagement in beauty practices, the dominant discourse was peer influence. Some participants directly expressed that their reason for engaging in beauty practices was influence at university. For example, Sensen expressed how her feelings changed from not accepting makeup to having to wear it:

Sensen: I think I have a lot of thoughts. In fact, I didn't accept makeup at all when I was in high school. I just felt I should be natural. Then, I went to university. Slowly, I felt that I had to wear makeup when I was going out. Speaking of this, university has changed me quite a bit regarding appearance.

Sensen's narrative illustrated a change from high school to university. During university, she gradually became used to the idea of wearing makeup. As I continued to explore why she felt the environment changed her, she started to talk about many of her roommates and friends:

Sensen: Regarding how girls become beautiful, I think there is another motivation to become beautiful because I feel that people around me –I always say that my roommates have more say because they know more. Under their influence, I thought I should dress up. I have a roommate who takes beauty very seriously. She thinks that she is not good-looking, so she is not in love. She will eat fruit for a week or something; she also eats apples. She will lose kilograms very quickly; she will lose 5 kg a week. If she is thin, then she will be very confident. I think a lot of – 90% – of her motivation comes from wanting to fall in love, so she has been losing weight like crazy.

Sensen believed that the people around her influenced her decisions regarding beauty practices. Her roommate was so motivated to become beautiful that it made Sensen feel uneasy not to participate.

Sensen: I was influenced by external reasons. Internally, I didn't want to be beautiful. I never thought about it. I thought maybe I might have limited cognition at the time. It was only when I realised that I was different compared to others – then I wanted to change.

She did not want there to be a difference between herself and her peers. She tried to do what was supposed to be the *right* thing for young women. By becoming beautiful, women are able to increase their beauty value and 'currency' within the patriarchal structure (Wolf, 1990, p. 12), as *beautiful* women are always more desirable to men than their peers (Reischer and Koo, 2004). Sensen's roommates also encouraged her to participate in their beauty regimes. The relationship between roommates is interesting: it often seems there is always some young women in the room who love to beautify themselves and influence others. For example, I discussed the participant Somus in Chapter 4, who loved to beautify herself and often helped her roommates do their makeup or dress up. In this case, Somus was a strong influence on her whole dormitory by encouraging and promoting their engagement in beauty practices. Similar conversations happened between Simona and her roommate: one of her current roommates had work experience and was really into beauty practices. Simona said her roommate taught her and recommended all of the beauty products. Simona started wearing makeup when she lived with her roommates, as she explained, and the major reason she engaged in beauty practices was as follows:

Simona: When I was an undergraduate, I especially loved studying. My roommates did not wear makeup; it's not like I was influenced by them. It's just that a few girls together will imitate each other, yes. Then maybe if they don't do makeup, I won't do it. But it's interesting to see them wear makeup every day when you come to this university, and you want to learn too. I think roommates are very important.

Compared to other participants, Simona started to think about makeup much later. As she explained, when she was an undergraduate, her roommates were not into beauty practices,

so there was not anyone close to influence her. However, she went to a different university for her postgraduate study. Her social environment changed, and her new roommates were very aware of the importance of engaging in beauty practices. She then explained how she became aware of the necessity of wearing makeup in her everyday life. Dohnt and Tiggemann (2006) found that peer influences are significant predictors of body image and beauty awareness. In this sense, Simona developed a close friendship with her roommates, which led to her feeling the need to engage in beauty practices to be accepted as part of the group. Winch (2012, p. 21) found that *girlfriendship* functions as a ‘system of mutual governance for the attainment of the ideal body’, as women are likely to seek self-worth and approval from other women. Simona gained social approval from her roommates, and as she said, her roommates then thought she was much more beautiful than in the past. She also explained that she received a positive response from others every time she engaged in beauty practices. For instance, all of the young women liked to complement each other for being beautiful when they saw each other wearing makeup. This illustrates how women judge each other as they internalise the male gaze to evaluate women’s appearance (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz, 2016).

Compared to the restrictions of a high school timetable, university lifestyle is much freer. Many participants felt they had plenty of time to do what they wanted to do. Free time could also be another factor that allowed the participants to engage in beauty practices at a certain age. As Lu explained:

Lu: I remember that everyone around me felt liberated at that time, and then I started going to college, and then I started to impress myself. It seems like everyone is. Everyone is talking about beauty. Maybe think so. It’s because I have a lot of free time in college, and then I have time to dress up myself.

Lu felt that after experiencing the stress from high school examinations, most women around her felt a sense of liberation. They were no longer restricted by school regulations or parents’ expectations and were free to immerse themselves in and explore beauty culture and engage in beauty practices. Although it might seem as if they suddenly started considering female beauty at this age, we cannot rule out that they may have thought about these things earlier. Despite not being allowed to engage in beauty practices at an earlier age, they were not isolated from beauty culture or mainstream media and advertising.

Nevertheless, from the participants' viewpoints – Lu, for example – it was not only the discourse surrounding beauty but also the fact that she had the free time to try it at university. So, young women go from not engaging in beauty practices in high school to university, where they can engage in beauty practices regularly, such as dressing up and wearing makeup, so it becomes the norm. Despite all of my participants engaging in beauty practices, they were also aware of the environment around them regarding beauty. For example, participant Sherry discussed girls wearing makeup in the university environment:

Sherry: College girls rarely don't wear makeup. I think 80% of them at university wear makeup. I think this is also because they are following the trend. In fact, in freshman year, everyone does not wear makeup, and then they may be influenced by roommates or the people surrounding them, and more and more changes are made. After a person in the dormitory starts to wear makeup, it will subtly change over time, and then everyone will wear makeup.

As Sherry expressed, wearing makeup gradually became the norm for female students, as many people would change their attitude towards beauty practices due to the influence of their peers. It, therefore, seems that university is an important site in understanding how gender norms are produced, as most of these young women are trying to fit into the heteronormative beauty standard whereby engagement in beauty practices enables them to meet these standards. This has the effect of enlarging the gender difference regarding appearance. One of the participants mentioned an interesting metaphor regarding university:

Sensen: University is a cosmetic surgery institute, and everyone has become better-looking after they come out.

Researcher: University is a cosmetic surgery institute. Yeah?

Sensen: A long time ago, on the internet, people [talked] about university as a plastic surgery institute.

Researcher: It's to make people look good, right?

Sensen: Yes, for girls, after you graduate from university, everyone becomes much prettier.

After the interview, Sensen showed me an online post. The article said that universities are cosmetic surgery institutes where boys become more mature and girls become prettier. It is a very gendered discourse regarding students' changes. It also fits with the traditional ideology of gender roles and different value measurements regarding gender (Brownell and Wasserstrom, 2002). For example, men's value is centred around being able to show their ability to survive in society, while women's value is centred around their looks (Wolf, 1990). The online post consisted of many photos of young women. The article showed a picture of each girl before she went to university and after she graduated to illustrate the contrast in how much each girl had changed. Furthermore, it was suggested that the before photos were ugly and the after photos were beautiful. In the photos before university, many of the girls were shown wearing unisex school uniforms or casual clothing, such as t-shirts and jeans. They did not wear any makeup, and some of them wore glasses. Their hair was either short or tied back in a ponytail. Some of them had body shapes that would be considered *chubby* or *fat* according to Chinese mainstream beauty standards (Lee and Lee, 2000; Leung, Lam and Sze, 2001; Zhang, 2012). In the after university photos, they conformed to the mainstream beauty standards, comprised of key facial features: a watermelon-seed-shaped face, a sharp chin, a tiny face, big eyes, double eyelids, a tall nose and physical features characterised as being tall and slim (Zhang, 2012; Lotti, 2018). Girls in the after photos can be seen to have engaged in a variety of beauty practices, such as wearing makeup, losing weight, dressing up and so on. The news report used exaggerated language to create a dramatic transformation between the before and after photos, placing negative associations with the before and positive associations with the after. The article emphasised how going to university is a key element for a girls' successful transformation, thereby creating a discourse where if girls want to become beautiful, they need to go to university. This article clearly objectified these university graduates and undermined any academic achievement or personal development they may have made yet reflected a dominant attitude and discourse that surrounds young Chinese women.

This discourse is linked with the participants' feelings towards beauty practices and heteronormative beauty standards. After they entered university, they conformed to the norm of becoming a beautiful woman according to social standards. These findings clearly reveal that online media promotes the normalisation of beauty practices and presents university as an important place for *girls* to become so-called proper and pretty young women in preparation for entering society. Such online articles and discourses are in line

with how my participants felt regarding beauty practices. They experienced peer pressure as everyone expected them to become beautiful. Many of the participants started to engage in beauty practices and conform to the social values that focus on particular female looks. Compared to high school, university created an environment for the participants to develop ideas of the importance of female beauty and time for them to practise their skills in beautifying themselves.

University can be seen as a test centre where young women practise so that they can pass the examination of the patriarchal value system. Most of the participants had been cultivated to believe that a woman's value should be centred around her looks. They conformed to normalised beauty practices in order to achieve heteronormative beauty standards. Therefore, I found that university can be seen as an important site for the production of gendered bodies. More and more young women are engaging in beauty practices to achieve heteronormative beauty standards. Furthermore, there is another important element in explaining why many participants started to engage in beauty practices while at university: to look for a boyfriend. In the next section, I will discuss how 'looking for a boyfriend' encouraged many participants to beautify themselves.

5.1.2 Heteronormative beauty standards

Laura Mulvey (1975) explores how the concept of the *male gaze* is linked with women's experiences of being objectified. The male gaze is still relevant to women (Oliver, 2017) and has become a way to reinforce heteronormative beauty standards, which corresponds to Foucault's idea that the male gaze results in self-surveillance (Foucault, 1979; Mills, 2003). This section discusses how the male gaze contributes to social norms regarding beauty standards and how the participants internalised the male gaze, engaging in beauty practices to meet heteronormative beauty standards. The participants' experiences are linked to Foucault's ideas on power, where the individual is a 'discursive subject' (Strozier, 2002, p. 12) that is influenced by a variety of discourses.

The previous section discussed the role of peer influence on decisions to engage in beauty practices. This section focuses on another major discourse regarding their first engagement in beauty practices: looking for a boyfriend. Social expectations for the participants had changed. At high school, girls are expected to focus solely on studying, but at university, girls are expected to become young women and find a boyfriend suitable for marriage.

Traditionally, the purpose of marriage for Chinese couples was to establish a relationship between two families. There was no consideration of love; in fact, on the contrary, personal affection between a couple was considered harmful (Wolf, 1972; Parish and Whyte, 1978). Marriages were traditionally arranged by parents, and there was no personal freedom for individuals to choose a partner who could meet their emotional and sexual needs (Whyte, 2000). Nowadays, Chinese society still holds strong traditional values, including the belief that everyone is expected to get married (Davis, 2014). In addition to there being an emphasis on young people finding a partner, parents also feel pressure to ensure their children marry. For example, if a Chinese person remains single after the age of 30, their parents will feel responsible for their child's so-called failure and will, therefore, want to help their child get married (Davis, 2014). Thus, teachers and parents are less likely to intervene in female students' beautification, and some parents encourage it as a way to help them get married. Obviously, feminists are critical of this mentality, believing that women should feel the freedom to marry or not marry without negative consequences and, thereby, without judgement. They certainly should not feel like a failure or be perceived by others to be a failure for not getting married. Furthermore, they should be free to choose or not choose to engage in beauty practices for their own reasons rather than be cajoled into it by parents with the objective of getting married. However, we can see that the social climate in China is not supportive of feminist ideology.

Most participants were not allowed to develop any romantic relationships during high school. However, this situation completely changed when they entered university. Most participants expressed that their initial motivation to engage in beauty practices was associated with seeking a boyfriend or maintaining existing relationships with boyfriends. When girls start to look for boyfriends, they are willing to fit into heteronormative beauty standards, as this will enable them to enter into a heteronormative relationship. Many participants described being aware of male preferences and how to meet their expectations. Many of the participants also felt that men liked 'pretty girls', where the beauty ideal for being pretty was typically in line with mainstream beauty standards. It was seen that the participants had internalised the male gaze and utilised a variety of beauty practices to try to meet these standards. The most common practices were doing makeup and dressing up. For example, participant Min revealed her understanding of men's dating preferences, indicating that men like women who dress femininely and engage in beauty practices.

Min: Yesterday, I introduced a good girlfriend to my male cousin, and I didn't think she was not good enough, so I sent her photo to my male cousin. Then my male cousin said that she was very plain. How can you say that a girl is plain because she didn't wear any makeup in that picture, and she didn't wear any earrings or other accessories? This is why he would think this, but if this girl had her hair curled, put on red lipstick and was wearing earrings or anything else, he would not say that this girl is plain.

Researcher: So, plain is now a derogatory term. She doesn't dress up?

Min: Yes. My cousin said that I had another cousin I could introduce her to and changed the topic. That's it.

From the conversation, we can see that the word *plain* (朴素; pinyin: *Pǔsù*) has become a derogatory term, describing women who do not engage in any beauty practices. Ironically, during Mao's regime, if young women tried to look and dress fancy, people would perceive them as bad girls, and they would be more likely to receive social attacks (McWilliams, 2013). Nowadays, if you dress fancy, people are not going to attack you, but if you do not beautify yourself, you may receive negative social judgement. Min felt that the reason her male cousin did not want to date her girlfriend was that her girlfriend did not wear makeup or engage in beauty practices. These everyday social interactions reveal what type of girl is desirable, thereby teaching women how to avoid being undesirable. In this case, Min's girlfriend would have to regulate her appearance through self-surveillance and learning how to beautify herself.

The idea that men have a preference for physically attractive women who dress up and wear makeup is often internalised by women and can affect the extent to which they engage in beauty practices. For example, participant Gong said she did not have to join in on the competition to dress up to impress boys because she already had a boyfriend. However, she was aware of how other girls felt in her class. As she explained, 'They all said that finding a boyfriend in our school is like a difficult task, and there are only four or five boys and more than 20 girls in one class, and everyone has to dress up more delicately'. This shows how the male gaze plays a key part in women's beautification, as women want to meet men's desires and their expectations of beauty standards, resulting in competition among women for male attention (discussed more in Section 5.1.2).

Participant Ping's experience also showed that if you did not fit into heteronormative beauty standards, you would find it hard to find a boyfriend and be treated as a leftover woman (Luo and Sun, 2015; Hong-Fincher, 2016):

Ping: The only time I had short hair in my life was before the start of my freshman year, you know? On a whim, I said I was going to say goodbye to my past I just wanted to get rid of the annoying things that were messed up in the past, such as the college entrance examination, and then after I cut it, I found that there were more annoying things. Because I am a bit curly, and the hair quality is not very good. Sometimes it is a little messy, and then I am not very good at taking care of it – not very good at styling my hair, and then it led to problems for the rest of me during freshman year. It didn't look good; I looked sloppier, and then I missed the opportunity when it was very easy to find a boyfriend in my freshman year ... [and because of this] ... I didn't have a boyfriend for four years in university.

Ping felt that boys did not like her short hair and that she did not know how to style her short hair well. She thought she was not good-looking according to male preferences and thought that was why she did not find a boyfriend during university. She expressed how she regretted having short hair and felt she missed the best chance to find a boyfriend, as following freshman year, most students had already found their boyfriends and girlfriends. Some participants had different experiences. Somewhat shockingly, one of the participants said her boyfriend thought she was ugly and suggested she should dress up:

Sherry: I first started wearing makeup because I was in a relationship when I was in university and had a boyfriend at the time. He wanted me to look good because I was really ugly at that time, and then he didn't like me to wear it, and I never did it. Makeup, and then he just made a request. I reluctantly agreed to him, and then learned a little and later found that makeup is indeed better than no painting, and later, so now I also wear a little light makeup at work.

Researcher: Did he call you ugly at the time? Didn't you argue with him?

Sherry: I didn't; I thought I was ugly back then.

It was also noted during the data analysis that even in cases where participants did not engage in beauty practices or challenge social expectations regarding courtship, they were

still aware of the norms or conformed to social norms without realising it. Thus, it still seems to be the dominant discourse that women should beautify themselves to be more likely to find a better husband. The people around them all hold similar values and reinforce those values through expectations that pressure others to accept these ideas. This was reflected in the data analysis through peer influence, where participants' peers were also entrenched within normative discourses and this discourse shaped their opinions and perceptions. Furthermore, family members also played an important role in shaping participants' ideas of beauty practices. For example, in the conversation I had with Holly, she said:

Holly: My mother's opinion is very similar to several decades ago; during the '60s and the '70s, people believed girls should dress up to find a husband.

Researcher: Yes, so your mother would push these ideas on you?

Holly: Yeah, and then she said you should dress up while you're looking for a boyfriend, or before you get married, you should dress up. After you get married, you don't have to. Then my cousin – she just got married – she said that the youth of girls is very short. Right? Then she also said that she loves makeup very much, and she also cut her double eyelids and used expensive skin care products. Then she said that when she was looking for a male ticket, she would not go out without makeup, but now she is married. After that, she felt that she doesn't have to do anything.

Researcher: So, she is the kind of person who was so different before and after marriage?

Holly: Yeah, that's the difference. And then I think [my cousin's] concept is similar to my mother's.

As you can see, Holly's mother held the traditional idea, due to her age, that women *should* beautify themselves to enable them to find a husband. It has been suggested that, in ancient society, beauty practices such as foot binding represented sexual objectification through the male gaze (Levy, 1967; Dworkin, 1974). The male gaze is also adopted by women, such as Holly's mother and cousin, so they believed that Holly should dress and beautify herself to increase her chance of finding a husband. The traditional idea that women should engage in beauty practices reinforces the idea that women's value is largely based on their beauty. Turning women into sexual objects through the male gaze has increased the inequality within the Chinese marriage market. Women who do not fit into

heteronormative beauty standards will not be desired by men and will become *leftover women* (Hong-Fincher, 2016). In the next section, I will discuss how people regulate and police heteronormative and mainstream beauty standards for women. This will be done by discussing the following dominant social norms in Chinese beauty culture: the beauty score measurement system and the stigmatisation of being makeup-free.

5.2 Fitting in with Chinese beauty culture

Discussing what the participants did or did not do regarding beauty practices revealed that their behaviours were restricted by their social environment. In this section, I will discuss how the participants understood social norms regarding beauty practices and what they did to fit into Chinese beauty culture to avoid being criticised by others. There are two dominant social norms, according to the participants, as follows: 1) that women should be beautiful according to the beauty score measurement system because a low score (being unattractive) means failure and 2) that women should wear proper makeup because being *makeup-free* (素颜; pinyin: *Sùyán*) is stigmatised in society. I will discuss these two aspects in more detail below.

5.2.1 Score measurement system

Chinese people reinforce beauty standards by openly judging women's appearance using a score measurement system according to beauty standards in Chinese contexts. During the interviews with the participants, it became apparent that it is commonplace for people to measure and judge each other's attractiveness. To facilitate this, a measurement system has been developed to rate women's attractiveness solely based on women's outer beauty. For instance, when the participants discussed a woman's appearance, they normally scored them on a scale of 1 to 10. It was clear from the interviews that Chinese women's appearance is often numerically quantified and measured in accordance with the beauty standard. Over half of the participants applied a score to themselves or other women when discussing women's appearance. When they mentioned measurement scores during the interviews, it seemed socially acceptable to openly quantify a women's appearance with a score. As a researcher, I did not anticipate this new culture of openly scoring one another and was initially shocked by what appeared to be a form of discrimination towards women's appearance. There is no research that discusses this form of gender

discrimination; thus, I want to draw attention to how this score measurement system works in China.

This score measurement discourse emerged while discussing different themes. Seven of the participants specifically mentioned the score measurement system. Participant Deer mentioned during the interview that she thought her look was average if she did not wear makeup. I asked why she felt this way. She explained that she had heard other people's comments on her appearance, which made her feel that she was not attractive.

Deer: When I was at university, our university's boys were very straightforward. They liked to score girls' appearances around them.

She explained that during her freshman year, she was part of the student union community. When a new girl joined the community, they would score her appearance. She said, 'One of the girls looked very nice; her score was eight points. I remember my score was five or six points'. Clearly, this score affected how Deer perceived her appearance to this day. When this interview took place, she had graduated and was working in a company, but this score still seemed to affect how she perceived her appearance. That explained why she thought that she looked average without makeup. She also found that when girls had a lower score, they would not be treated nicely by boys. Participant Echo also mentioned the way girls were treated badly if they were not good-looking:

Echo: I remember that in junior high school, there were there were some girls that were not very good-looking – really not good-looking – they would be picked on; they are really not good-looking, and they would be picked on by boys and given nicknames by their classmates in the class, and there were other similar bad behaviours from boys. It's kind of sad. At that time, boys were young, and they didn't think too much. But it did have a profound impact on these girls. Now, in general, although people will not express it very directly, they will still evaluate your appearance in their mind.

The observation Echo had from a young age affected her opinion towards women's appearance. Later in the interview, Echo was supportive towards certain women who

undergo cosmetic surgery. She explained how, in her opinion, girls with certain types of looks should undergo plastic surgery:

Echo: Maybe I hope that as long as you don't look ugly, normal is the best. For example, isn't there a score? One to ten points, about four points is okay. Two and three points can be saved; one and two points are a bit [difficult]. It is difficult for others to treat you [well]. No matter how kind you are, it will be difficult for others to change their attitude towards you.

Researcher: What's that score thing?

Echo: I remember that my classmate sent me a list, and then asked me what her score was from 1 to 10, and then asked me to give myself a score. Yes, that's it. I don't remember exactly what one point and two points looked like. Anyway, there are such pictures on the internet (Figure 1); you can check later.

She was sympathetic to women who only scored one or two points, as they would be treated badly by others. This scoring system is linked with social punishment. Depending on your score on the system, you are either punished or rewarded. For example, if you have a high score, people will praise you. However, if you score low, people will harshly judge your appearance, resulting in you feeling inferior. She mentioned how her classmates shared these scoring criteria from a resource on the internet. She later mentioned how she felt her appearance did not score well. Echo's ideas of the score measurement system were repeated in other interviews. For example, Xiaokong explained how she felt that if a woman scored four to six points, she should be *fine* and did not need plastic surgery. Apparently, some participants' engagement in beauty practices was not to enhance their beauty but to become *normal* so that they would not be treated badly by society.

It was shocking as a feminist researcher to see how young women in China are not only objectified but also quantified. It was also disheartening to learn how if they are scored low – by themselves or by others – they are deemed ugly and pressured into engaging in beauty practices just to look 'normal'. This phenomenon within Chinese beauty culture is contrary to much of the progression of women's rights feminists advocate for.

This score measurement system is often used by men to measure women's appearances, but I also found that this system had been internalised by many of the participants. When they talked about themselves, they also utilised the concept of *points* to refer to their attractiveness. For example, participant Huihui explained how her attractiveness was different when comparing looking in the mirror and looking through a camera when using score points:

Huihui: Anyway, I think my requirement for a beauty camera is because your photo doesn't look good when taken by a camera. I think photos are not as good-looking compared to real people. I think that looking at myself in the mirror may be a score point. If you just take pictures with a normal camera, you will definitely be uglier than when you look in a mirror; the camera is like this. Then I think that as long as the beauty camera makes my face the same as myself looking in the mirror, then there is no need to look better than in the mirror. Too much retouching of your photo is not good, and it is meaningless.

As Gill (2007b) explores in her discussion of postfeminist discourses, there is a shift from objectification to self-objectification regarding female beauty. Many of the participants used a scoring system to self-objectify themselves within the beauty culture. Moreover, most participants had developed a sense of how a girl was supposed to be: beautiful girls were fine, but 'ugly' girls would suffer from negative outcomes. These women's thoughts are in keeping with De Beauvoir (1997, p. 340) statement:

Through compliments and admonishments, through images and words, she discovers the meaning of the words 'pretty' and 'ugly'; she soon knows that to please, she has to be 'pretty as a picture'; she tries to resemble an image, she disguises herself, she looks at herself in the mirror, she compares herself to princesses and fairies from tales.

Therefore, we can understand how the participants had accepted the idea that *beauty is good and gets a higher score*, whereas *ugly is bad and gets a lower score*. This commonly accepted and used discourse shows how this beauty rating system had been internalised by these young women, as they used it not only to talk about others but also to talk about themselves, which impacted the way they felt. Women's appearance is more well defined than men's, and women are often conditioned to think about their appearance and are more

motivated to make changes (Kwan and Trautner, 2009). Thus, many of these participants were able to quantify how and to what extent they could modify themselves to fit in with mainstream beauty standards and improve their beauty scores.

Another significant finding is that within the score measurement system, body image was one of the most talked about topics among the participants. Almost all of the participants thought they were so-called fat according to beauty standards. However, when young women are called fat or consider themselves fat, it does not necessarily mean that they are of a size that would be medically classed as obese or overweight. In fact, when the participants reported their ideal weight, most of these women were already within a healthy BMI range and their ideal weight and BMI would be considered unhealthy. For example, participant Ping was 170 cm, and her weight was 57 kg. She said that when she weighed herself in the mornings, she did not dare wear any clothing or her weight would definitely be over 60 kg. Her ideal weight was not over 50 kg. I explained to her that as tall girls (I am 172 cm), it is quite normal for us to be heavier than 50 kg, but she refuted the statement I made:

Ping: Actually, I think for my height, my weight should not be over 50 kg. It's okay; I am neither tall nor short. If my weight was not more than 50 kg, I think it would be perfect, but I just can't do it.

Researcher: You want to weigh less than 50 kg at 1.7 meters height. You really think so?

Ping: I think it is very acceptable, and I think it is quite possible. It's reasonable if I can do it.

This clearly shows that Ping believed that it was reasonable to believe that girls who are 170 cm in height should weigh less than 50 kg. Later, she explained why 50 kg was the benchmark: there is a popular saying in China that *a good girl is no more than a hundred* (好女不过百; pinyin: *Hǎo nǚ bùguò bǎi*). This means that a good girl's weight should not be over 100 catties,⁵ which is 50 kg. The discourse of *good* and *bad* also plays a role regarding women's weight. Women's body weight is not only linked with beauty but also

⁵ **Catty:** A Chinese term that is used as a unit to measure weight.

linked with morality (Widdows, 2018). There is a ‘good girls’ weight’, which is less than 50 kg, while a ‘bad girls’ weight’ is more than 50 kg. Most participants expressed how they wanted to avoid being perceived as *bad*, so they had to try to fit into the social norm regarding weight. This is in line with Bordo’s (2003) idea of how society uses images and discourse to regulate female bodies and discipline their weight as a form of social control. This idea that a woman’s weight should not be over 50 kg was also shared by other participants:

Huanhuan: It was the first time I met the boy I am dating now. He just started asking, ‘How tall are you?’ and ‘What do you weigh?’ I said I was 165, then 50 kg, and he said it was just right. I wondered if the boy had any misunderstanding about the thinness of a girl. Girls would feel my body weight was quite thin, so they would say I don’t need to be thin anymore. But when he heard my weight, he said you were just right.

From Huanhuan’s narrative, we can see it is common for people to ask about each other’s weight. Weight is not considered an aspect to be kept private but is instead something women can openly talk about and comment on in China. There is also a gendered perception of women’s weight. As Huanhuan mentioned, there were different gendered reactions towards her body weight. Boys would think her weight was okay, while girls would think she was thin. The increasing emphasis on women’s thinness has also led to issues, such as eating disorders, among young women in China – and indeed, some of the weighing practices and perceptions of weight discussed above may well fall into this category. Some research shows that body dissatisfaction among young women is increasing and can be linked to the development of eating disorders (Staley and Zhan, 2011; Zhang, Lu and Jackson, 2015). This would be an area worth exploring further within Chinese beauty culture studies – particularly from a feminist perspective (Bordo, 1993; LaMarre *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b).

Moreover, being thin was important to the participants. It was not only linked with being beautiful but was also associated with social acceptance. During the interviews, various examples were given of women experiencing fat shaming in a variety of different settings in relation to beauty standards. If participants were perceived as fat by others, they

experienced public humiliation. The participants gave different examples of when they or their female friends had experienced shaming:

Gong: Once, I was buying clothes, and I liked some trousers. They were very skinny. I couldn't wear them when I tried them on. I asked if the clerk could help me get a larger size. She said, 'These trousers are so thin; why are you so fat and trying to wear thin pants?'

Researcher: It is really hurtful to say that to people.

Gong: That's it. Maybe it was a bit busy. I still feel very sad. I didn't buy those pants either.

Gong, in this example, was publicly shamed for having a 'fat' body. Being called fat in China is regarded as an insult, and as seen in this scenario, it is also socially acceptable for someone to call another person fat if that is what they think. Furthermore, being overweight is often associated with stigmas, such as being lazy or ugly. A continual repetition of body-shaming commentary directed towards women reinforces mainstream beauty standards that force women to engage in beauty practices to try to stay thin and beautiful. Fat shaming and discourse on thinness are a form of social control; as Naomi Wolf (1962, p. 187) argues, 'A culture fixated on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience. Dieting is the most potent political sedative in women's history; a quietly mad population is a tractable one'. Overall, the score measurement system and fat shaming are forms of social control that turn a woman's body into a *docile body*. Foucault's (1979, p. 136) concept of the *docile body* is defined as 'one that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved' (Foucault, 1979, p. 136). Their discourse normalises a certain body type and weight in everyday life. Most of the participants had internalised this type of cultural discourse and developed self-surveillance towards their appearance and body weight as in the Western context. However, in a Chinese context, the score measurement system has made social regulation of women's bodies visible and explicit.

5.2.2 Stigmatisation of being *makeup-free*

Regarding the term *makeup-free*, there are differences in celebrity culture on being makeup-free compared to Western discourse. For instance, female celebrities being makeup-free has become something that signifies they have 'appeared to come closer to

imparting their “real self” (Jermyn, 2020, p. 2). These types of celebrity photos in the West are shamed by journalists, reported as a misrepresentation because of filters through the media coverage. Nevertheless, these celebrities are also applauded for embracing their natural looks. However, in my research, the meaning of being *makeup-free* has nothing to do with celebrities and photoshop alteration. *Makeup-free* is simply a translation of the Chinese phrase *suyan* (素颜; pinyin: *Sùyán*), which means *women don't wear any makeup*. This is unlike in the West, where there are social movements such as *body positive* and women openly use social media to challenge beauty ideals and practices (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). The participants indicated that the idea of being makeup-free was stigmatised by Chinese society. As I discussed earlier, makeup has become normalised among young women at university in the Chinese context. Makeup becomes a duty in young women's lives that beauty norms require. When discussing the concept of being makeup-free, most of the participants had strong negative associations with the look. Their attitudes towards being makeup-free were varied and changed according to different social situations. For instance, in a workplace or corporate setting, all of them believed that you should not be makeup-free, as it creates a negative impression that you are not mindful of what the social situation requires are not mindful of what the social situation requires. It is almost like an unspoken dress code. Some of the participants even felt that being makeup-free could be considered disrespectful to others. In everyday life, most of them felt that if women chose to be makeup-free, they would appear sickly and that people around them would think that they were not looking after themselves. Being makeup-free is also associated with negative moral issues, such as being lazy or careless. I will discuss how the discourse on being makeup-free is constructed within a professional setting and everyday life.

In the context of the workplace, some participants reported that wearing makeup was part of their job requirements, especially in jobs that required meeting customers or the public – unlike the work setting in socialist China, where de-gendered and desexualised bodies were normalised (Liu, 2017). Furthermore, Liu (2017) found that *white-collar beauty discourse* promoted and emphasised female workers' youth, intelligence and beauty. As a result, being beautiful has become an important element of professional Chinese women's lives. For example, Xiaokong, an insurance saleswoman, said:

Xiaokong: The company will give you a set of standards. For example, you are required to wear light-coloured shirts, dark-coloured suits and dark-coloured shoes. You need to wear makeup and dress neatly.

We can clearly see that wearing makeup has become a professional requirement. In other words, the makeup-free look is perceived as unprofessional. According to Xiaokong, she did not feel that her company's requirements restricted her behaviour. Instead, she felt that she would want to engage in beauty practices regardless of company policy. She believed that improving her image or enhancing her appearance was an important aspect of professional development and progress. A good first impression would help facilitate trust when establishing and maintaining client relationships. Therefore, she claimed that she would voluntarily improve her outer appearance. Sensen also expressed similar opinions regarding the requirement for female staff to wear makeup in the workplace. She worked as a bank cashier, providing face-to-face service to her customers. She would wear a uniform and light makeup to work. Some Western scholars studying beauty culture in the workplace have raised concerns. For instance, they found that some organisations have an increasing focus on employees' appearance and productivity at work, and employees can become sexualised. These changes happen more noticeably in the customer service industry (Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan, 2001; Hochschild, 2003; Warhurst, Grugulis and Keep, 2004). The type of work undertaken regarding beauty practices can be understood as aesthetic labour. *Aesthetic* refers not only to appearance but also to the 'voice, posture, demeanour, body language, self-presentation on social media and so on' (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017a, p. 35). Within the Chinese context, Liu (2017) found that compared to Mao's period, there is increasingly gendered control of women's appearance in the workplace. Furthermore, women's appearances have become sexualised and commodified, which has led to professional women facing new forms of inequality at work. Many participants agreed with this development regarding the requirement for women to wear makeup and dress up within professional settings. For example, Min said:

Min: If it is in a business situation, it is indeed because of a standard that everyone agrees with. When Peng Liyuan (spouse of Chinese President Xi Jinping) went out, she also had to dress up. Yes, it's not absolute when it comes to non-business formal occasions ... But makeup is required for formal business occasions.

Min considered wearing makeup a social norm for formal business settings, pointing out that even our president's wife must wear makeup when she visits other countries. The word *required* suggests that makeup is seen as an absolute and not a choice for women in some workplaces. This is different compared to the postfeminist discourse, where women *feel* they have a choice to engage in beauty practices. This case illustrates the social constraints that many professional women's jobs involve, which require aesthetic labour. If women are makeup-free in a formal setting, they are likely to be perceived negatively. As many participants reported, being makeup-free means that a woman is not paying respect to the situation or other people because they have not put effort into their appearance. Participant Simona discussed the aesthetic labour related to job interviews and the consequences of being makeup-free:

Simona: I think, especially at work, when you go to an interview without makeup, I don't think it's very good because it will make the other people think that you don't pay attention to the occasion. That is to say, that you didn't clean up and dress up shows that you don't have many expectations for a job position.

Furthermore, many participants reported that when they were makeup-free in everyday life settings, they were perceived as sickly, lazy or disrespectful of others. In this regard, being makeup-free is strongly linked with morality. My findings are in line with Widdows' (2018, p. 2) argument that 'beauty is a moral matter'. Wearing makeup is often seen as a moral duty, while being makeup-free is perceived as a moral failure. There is a clear message from society to young Chinese women that wearing makeup is morally good and being makeup-free is morally bad. Although participants claim that they would not want to judge other women's behaviours regarding beauty practices, they do judge themselves according to moral norms. My data shows that Chinese society has many moral judgements regarding women's engagement in beauty practices. Women are judged by society, and as a consequence, they internalise these messages. For example, Min explained the association between being makeup-free and being perceived as sickly:

Min: No makeup makes people feel less refined. Or they think that you are sick or not in good health or something.

Researcher: People will ask you, ‘Why are you sick?’

Min: Yes, some people asked me before, such as, ‘Are you in bad health? Do you want to take some time off?’ Once, I was not wearing lipstick, and a male colleague asked me those questions. I had my foundation and eyeliner; I just didn’t put on lipstick, and he just asked me like that.

Min shared her personal experience to explain why there is a strong association between being makeup-free and being perceived as sickly. The irony is that on this occasion, she *was* wearing makeup but not lipstick. She was surprised that her male colleague thought she was in bad health and that she needed time off from work. This is in line with the ideas of Dellinger, Williams and Dellinger (1997), who found that women who regularly wear makeup to work and then choose not to wear makeup on a certain day will receive comments expressing concern for their health. This is not a unique or unusual experience, as other participants expressed similar experiences regarding the negative judgements associated with a makeup-free look. Holly explained:

Holly: One time, it was because I had an early shift. If we had an early shift, we would be at the office at seven. My home is far away, an hour away, and I have to leave at six. So, I woke up very early and didn’t wear makeup when I went out that day, I didn’t wear any makeup. That is, I put on some BB cream or something, that day I just washed my face, put on my clothes and went out. Then when I went to the office, there was a young lady sitting next to me, and she was very nice. How can I say it? She looked at me with concerned eyes and asked, ‘Why are your dark circles so deep today? Why are your dark circles so serious today?’ Then I said, ‘I didn’t sleep well yesterday’, when in fact, I had a good night’s sleep, and I just didn’t do makeup that day. Then when I had a morning meeting, I deliberately did not let others see me. I played with my mobile phone and didn’t communicate with others because I was afraid that they would also see that my dark circles were heavy that day.

Due to her working hours, Holly did not want to spend time on her makeup. It is interesting that when her female colleague expressed a concern regarding Holly’s appearance, she made up an excuse instead of admitting she was not wearing makeup. It appears that she preferred to lie and attribute the dark circles around her eyes to a bad night’s sleep rather than be truthful and potentially face negative moral

judgement associated with choosing to be makeup-free. Furthermore, Holly tried to hide herself away from others later on and did not want to engage with people around her, behaving as if she had done something shameful that needed hiding. Widdows (2018, p. 30) found that ‘beauty failure is not a local or partial failure, but a failure of the self, which invokes shame of the self’. Being makeup-free can be seen as a beauty failure, which provokes a sense of shame. In addition to receiving derogative comments from people regarding being makeup-free, shockingly, some of the participants also expressed how they had been subjected to chauvinistic comments from men in more senior roles. For example, participant Xiaole gave examples of sexual discrimination she experienced from male lecturers at university when she was makeup-free:

Xiaole: Some of our graduate teachers⁶ made such remarks in class. He said that girls, female college students and graduate students who don’t wear makeup in class come to class straight after they wake up, which shows no respect for the teacher. The teacher has worked hard to teach you. You just let the teacher look at your yawning face, and there is no look, very yellow, and the teacher is (now) not in a mood to give you a lesson.

Researcher: Very yellow?

Xiaole: Yes, maybe everyone stays up late, and their face looks a very yellow colour without makeup. Just like that, there is more than one teacher telling us, mainly male teachers.

Researcher: Really?

Xiaole: Yes, girls must dress up and wear makeup, and some teachers will also speak sharply, saying that dressing up does not mean you are beautiful and that some girls do not understand aesthetics and dress themselves like prostitutes. Their words are very sharp.

It is clear from this that Xiaole’s male lecturer was complaining about female students who did not wear makeup to class. Furthermore, in addition to expecting girls to wear makeup, he also wanted what he considered their ‘yellow skin tone’ to be covered up with foundation. The male lecturer thought he was not treated properly or with respect if female

⁶ **Teacher:** Chinese do not usually differentiate between teachers in school and lecturers or professors at university and typically refer to them all as ‘teacher’.

students did not dress up and wear makeup for him. This is a form of internalised and patriarchal sexism. In such a situation, male lecturers are in a powerful role, as they decide students' study progress and future marks. So, their remarks would pressure female students to dress up and wear makeup to please them, feeling like they have no choice or risk being discriminated against. Conversely, lecturers do not require male students to dress up and wear makeup. This shows that if a man chooses not to engage in beauty practices (e.g. dressing up and wearing makeup), it is socially acceptable. Furthermore, Xiaole pointed out that there were other male lecturers who openly commented on female students' appearance, giving the impression that this is normal and socially acceptable in the university setting. Clearly, either these male lecturers are not aware of gender equality issues or they are aware but choose to exert their dominance upon female students, which reinforces and perpetuates the lesson that women should dress up and wear makeup to please men. Otherwise, they will potentially be subjected to negative consequences. The implication of this is that being makeup-free is not accepted by Chinese society, and women have to invest money and time into mastering or at least becoming proficient in many different beauty practices. This data shows that institutional settings help to regulate young women's beauty norms.

Another moral judgement associated with being makeup-free is *laziness*. Almost all participants mentioned the word *lazy* when referring to the lack of motivation to do makeup or other forms of beauty practices. No matter how much they had done regarding beauty practices, they all felt there were more things they could do. Their reason for not doing more was that they felt they were lazy. Most of them were not being judged by other women regarding their decisions on beauty practices, but they all judged their own behaviour. I have discussed how beauty practices, especially makeup, become a duty for these young women. The participants all felt obligated to wear makeup. If they were makeup-free, they must have been lazy because other young women managed to do it. For example, participant Huanhuan explained why she did not want to engage in beauty practices at university:

Huanhuan: I don't wash my hair at university because I don't think it's good to wash my hair too much. But I can't go out without washing my hair. Then most of the time at union, I don't wash my hair, I don't wash my face, and I don't wear makeup ... Most of the time, I am lazy and don't want to put on

makeup. My roommates laugh at me a lot. They said they have not seen a girl who looks so different.

Huanhuan expressed how she attributed her lack of engagement in beauty practices with being lazy, and Echo felt the same way towards herself regarding beauty practices:

Echo: I was doing an internship, and I used to put on makeup every day ... Then I wasn't wearing makeup every day ... maybe because I became more familiar with everyone, and then I am too lazy to care anyway. I think, mainly, because I am lazy.

When Echo first started her internship, she wanted to make a good impression, so she wore makeup and dressed up every day. However, later, she lacked the motivation to carry on with her daily beauty routine. Rather than thinking that engaging in beauty practices was needlessly time-consuming and a waste of money, her conclusion was that she was being lazy. The participants expressed this in very individualised terms rather than as a form of wider social resistance. Attributing their decisions to not engage in beauty practices to being lazy is potentially disempowering. It promotes the idea that engaging in beauty practices is something that should be done but that they have failed to meet social expectations.

Most of the participants rarely challenged the social norm of wearing makeup. They accepted the necessity of wearing makeup daily and did not express any doubts about doing so. If they 'failed' to wear makeup every day, they considered it being a moral failure. Within this Chinese context, the prohibitions and judgements were strong and explicit. Participant Lu expressed her admiration towards other girls who were motivated to beautify themselves. She agreed that women should take care of their appearance and look the best they can, but when it came to herself, she felt that she could not achieve this level of engagement in beauty practices. She felt that she could not wear makeup every day. She thought she should engage in beauty practices but that she was being too lazy. The idea behind this 'laziness' was that all participants agreed that women should wear makeup and dress up. All of the participants openly admitted their laziness because they knew they had 'failed' regarding their duty of beautification. Wearing makeup was a social norm as well as a duty for these young women.

Makeup is also linked with moral duty, while being makeup-free is stigmatised as a moral failure. Negative moral character traits are attached to those who are makeup-free, such as laziness, messiness and carelessness. Conversely, positive moral traits are attached to those who wear makeup and dress up. An implication regarding the negative associations with being makeup-free is that women engage in beauty practices to avoid being socially punished and shamed. The theme of body shaming appeared quite frequently in my interviews with all of the participants. Many participants mentioned that either they or a friend had been subjected to some form of body shaming by others. In the participants' minds, body shaming established what was socially acceptable and what was not acceptable regarding women's appearance. The experiences in these young women's daily lives regarding being makeup-free fit with Foucault's (1979) conception of institutional disciplining via social surveillance: people's comments and judgements play an important role in shaping and conditioning young women's behaviours. Moreover, my data also shows us how women are expected to spend their time and effort participating in aesthetic labour for their work and personal lives. In this case, there is a clear emphasis on the notion that women need to spend effort, time and money on their appearance on of studying hard and pursuing successful careers, which may contribute towards reinforcing derogatory gender stereotypes.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter aimed to further our understanding of how beauty practices have become normalised in China by focusing on young Chinese women's initial and early engagement in beauty practices. I discussed how changing social expectations influence young women's engagement in beauty practices. When these girls were in high school, they were expected to focus solely on their studies and not engage in beauty practices, which was reinforced by school policy. However, they later developed a strong motivation to engage in beauty practices at university due to changing social expectations and a personal desire to find a boyfriend. They expressed their desire to enter into a heterosexual relationship, thereby leading them to try to fit into heteronormative beauty standards. In the second section, this study also found that a score measurement system visibly regulates these young Chinese women's appearances. Many of the participants shared their experiences of how they measured themselves and how they had been measured by others. Furthermore, these young women engaged in beauty practices to avoid the social stigma

associated with being makeup-free. They, therefore, wore makeup to avoid being perceived as looking sickly, lazy or disrespectful to others. As a result, most participants expressed that they felt a moral obligation to wear makeup daily. These findings illustrate the process of the normalisation of beauty practices, specifically within a Chinese context.

CHAPTER 6: Solicited beauty diaries and interviews: Women's everyday experiences of beautification

In this chapter, I discuss the participants' beauty diaries and follow-up interviews to understand their insights regarding their everyday beautification experiences. Ten out of twenty participants completed a beauty diary and attended a follow-up interview to discuss their writing process. It was also a chance for them to further explain their thoughts from their diary. This chapter argues that the beauty diary–interview method provides richer and deeper data into participants' everyday life over a longer time frame compared to in-depth interviews. Although it may not offer alternative perspectives – compared with the initial interviews – on why women engage in beauty practices, it can be perceived as a supplement to this study by increasing the credibility, as it reflects the normative beauty practices investigated in Chapter 5.

6.1 Diary writing styles: Variety of self-expression

During the follow-up interviews, I asked participants about their experiences of completing the daily diary. One participant, Chang, was a beauty blogger, and she used to write daily for her job, so it became a habit for her to write about herself in a diary. Another participant, Echo, also used to write daily as a habit. Both found completing the beauty diary an easy task. Although most participants had rarely written in a diary before, they did not find any difficulties doing so and thought the guidelines provided were helpful. The only issue most of them raised in the follow-up interview was the feeling that they had nothing new or special to write about and that they felt they kept repeating themselves, which will be discussed in the next section. The design of the beauty diary included guidelines to assist the participants in writing. I included some open questions asking the participants about their experiences related to beauty, and these questions acted as prompts to help participants start writing their thoughts and experiences (Kenten, 2010). The open-format diary design was intended to allow participants a choice over what they wanted to write about and how they wanted to structure it (Meth, 2003; Morrison, 2012).

One result of the open format was that each of the participants approached their diary differently: each had their own personal and unique way of expressing their ideas, reflecting their understanding of how a diary should be written. After reviewing the diaries,

I categorised the data into three approaches to diary writing. First, six participants tried to answer all of the diary guideline questions. Therefore, their answers included their daily beauty routine, social interactions with others and reflections on beauty-related topics. Although my original design was intended to focus on their beauty practices and thoughts, it was clear that their beauty diaries also became a place for them to reflect on things they had discussed in their initial interview, pondering questions such as *Why should women be beautiful?* or *What is the female beauty standard?* Xiaole wrote in her beauty diary that:

Xiaole: I think that the aesthetics of some Chinese women who were born in the 1990s are influencing and combining local and global values. They are forming an aesthetic with Chinese characteristics, such as the deep-rooted conservative ideas of etiquette, which are deeply rooted in our parents' generation. At the same time, they also liberate themselves and look sexy and hot as feminine beauty.

During our initial interview, Xiaole discussed her struggle to fit into current beauty standards. Part of her wanted to be an independent and carefree woman who could dress the way she liked, but she also felt pressured to fit into traditional gender norms and, therefore, dress conservatively. We discussed many of her personal experiences during the interview, and it seemed she had reflected on her thoughts. In her diary, she had been able to form a conclusion based on her personal experiences, our discussion and her reflections. Similarly, in her follow-up interview after writing her diary, participant Simona also referred to our initial interview:

Simona: Before my interviewing, I would occasionally reflect on becoming beautiful, but I would not say in such a systematic way of thinking about the relationship between becoming beautiful and my daily life. After I finished the interview, the idea became clearer ... because there are very few chances for me to have such long conversations, and I have talked so much about [beauty culture], and I am thinking in the future, it would be very interesting to discuss other topics in such depth.

Although it is important not to adopt a position in which we see participants as being guided to a feminist consciousness (Opie, 1992), this excerpt suggests that Simona gained notable insight and reflectivity from participating in this research. She even asked me to

recommend some sociology and philosophy books on beauty. It was also notable that she expressed being able to think about and discuss other topics in depth, not just beauty culture.

In the second approach to journaling, two participants focused on briefly describing their beauty routine each day, which often resulted in few words being written. My research allowed the participants to write as little or as much as they wanted. I did not set a word requirement or limit, as I did not want them to feel burdened. In this way, they were able to freely express their thoughts within the time they wanted to spend writing a diary. I hoped this would lessen any potential feelings of the diaries being an inconvenience and make it more likely that participants could adhere to writing every day. For example, a typical diary entry by participant Xiaoqi focused on what she did daily:

Xiaoqi: Put on makeup in the morning (referring to applying liquid foundation, concealer, eyebrows, eye shadow, eyeliner, mascara and lipstick) because I want to go to an exhibition with everyone. I curled my hair with a curling iron at night because the lady who lived with me brought a curling iron [to the hotel we stayed in], and I had plenty of time [to do it].

Another example of this style of diary entry was written by participant Huanhuan, who liked to focus on her shopping experiences related to beauty products. Shopping was central to many of the participants' daily experiences with beauty culture. The *Double 11*.⁷ happened while many of the participants kept the diary. This is the biggest online shopping festival in China, hosted by major e-commerce sites such as Taobao, JD.com and Sunning. It is the most anticipated event among Chinese consumers (Huang, 2021). Therefore, many participants mentioned what they had bought during the event in their diaries. Participants discussed in the beauty diaries and follow-up interviews that they frequently bought beauty products, such as clothing and cosmetics. For example, participant Chang described her excitement after Double 11. She bought many clothes and makeup products online, so she was consistently checking her mail regarding the delivery information. She could not wait to try all of the products.

⁷ **Double 11:** An online shopping event in China similar to Black Friday on 11 November (11/11).

Lastly, most participants completed their Exclusively in the form of written text, but two included selfies and photos to capture their daily lives. I asked why they decided to use photos in their beauty diary, and they said they were inspired by *beauty bloggers* (美妆博主; pinyin: *Měi zhuāng bó zhǔ*) and *internet celebrities* (网红; pinyin: *Wǎng hóng*). Both participants aspired to be beauty bloggers and had held different jobs in the beauty industry, such as working as part-time models and posting pictures of their fashion styles online, which I will discuss in more detail later. We can see that beauty bloggers not only have influenced and contributed to China's fast-growing internet and beauty industries (Dippner, 2018a; Guan, 2020) but they have also a profound impact on some young women's daily lives and life pursuits. Internet celebrities 'embody every stage of neoliberal self-enhancement, from digital self-surveillance to self-consciousness up to self-fashioning (both of images and in reality)' (Dippner, 2018a, p. 58).

Internet celebrities offer an example for women on how to increase their beauty 'value' and live a 'better' life with higher incomes. This has the benefit of combating gender discrimination in the job market by optimising opportunities for young women (Dippner, 2018b). However, this idea is also criticised for how they prepare and normalise gender norms where a women's *value* is largely embedded in their beauty, and beauty practices are a necessary tool for women to master. For example, participant Gong said she always wanted to be a beauty blogger and tried to upload short five-minute videos on *Douyin*⁸ (抖音; pinyin: *Dǒuyīn*) every week to show what she wears and introduce why she mixes and matches clothing the way she does. She also suggested that I should do a beauty documentary to show women before and after plastic surgery. She said these types of videos are very popular on *Little Red Book*⁹ (小红书; pinyin: *Xiǎohóngshū*), where beauty bloggers like to show how they become beautiful through various beauty practices, including surgery. Gong's exposure to online beauty content as a creator made her very

⁸ **Douyin:** Chinese name for TikTok.

⁹ **Little Red Book:** An online social media and e-commerce platform connecting images and reviews.

comfortable sharing images of herself and her daily life. She wrote the following, including a photo:

Gong: What to wear: There is an important formal occasion today, so I'm choosing a formal [style]. The trousers are drapey, floor-to-ceiling wide-leg trousers, paired with black, pointed-toe high-heeled shoes, which have the effect of elongating proportions. Choose a light hemp-coloured short suit [jacket] for the top, which contrasts with black and easily stands out in a crowd.

We can see that Gong tried to explain her choice of outfit for that day. The same situation applied to Somus, who was a part-time model for Taobao. The company would send her makeup products, and she would take selfies using the product and post these online to promote these products and companies. In contrast to Gong's outfit sharing, Somus shared selfies in the diary to illustrate her makeup style:

Somus: Still makeup [once again writing about]
We have an icebreaker meeting for the students today, so I did a lot of makeup, the blingbling kind, and curled my hair!!!!

Although some participants demonstrated a different level of reflexivity regarding beauty practices and the initial interviews, overall, they all still engaged in beauty practices to enhance their outer beauty. Janesick (1999) suggests that the diary method may not offer a new perspective on data, but it can increase the data's credibility. The data from the beauty diaries and follow-up interviews confirmed that all participants engaged in different types of beauty practices and conformed to gender and beauty norms, which is in line with the narratives generated through their initial interviews.

6.2 'I keep repeating myself': Normalised beauty practices

When discussing their daily beauty routine in their diaries and follow-up interviews, a frequent narrative from participants was the feeling of repetition regarding beauty practices and that they felt there was nothing special worth recording. This narrative provides insight into how normalised and devalued beauty practices are among young women. Many of the participants went through their daily life following their beauty routine and taking normalised beauty standards and practices for granted. Most of them accepted beauty

norms in their everyday lives and did not intend to challenge these norms. As Dolezal (2010, p. 357) found, ‘women are expected to maintain their form, appearance, and comportment within strictly defined social parameters, or else face stigmatisation and the loss of social capital’. Ponterotto (2016) further explains how women’s bodies are regulated within Western culture, using the term *normalised corporeity* to refer to ‘the media-induced promotion of a norm of bodily appearance along with the physical, psychological and social consequences provoked by that normative canon’. Thus, beauty practices are part of the gendered aesthetic labour (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017b), which has become normalised in everyday life and media (Wen, 2013; Ponterotto, 2016; Liu, 2017; Widdows and MacCallum, 2018). This is in stark contrast to Mao’s era, where women were discouraged from engaging in beauty practices to align with gender-neutral discourse. Instead, the findings from this study confirm the normalisation of beauty practices and gender norms.

The participants’ narratives illustrated how engaging in beauty practices comprises many details, including a beauty routine, habits and attitudes, constructing the idea of a normalised body. These findings echo Foucault’s (Foucault, 1979, p. 136) idea that perceives the ‘body as an object and target of power’ enquiring much more detail to exercise power through ‘movement, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body’. Thus, we might interpret this in today’s society as meaning that for institutions (e.g. the beauty industry and government) to exert their power over women, they have to control and influence the details of their lives.

In the same vein, Bartky (1990) examines the disciplinary practices regarding women’s bodies and finds that women’s bodies are transformed and improved – according to normalised standards – through various beauty practices. While beauty practices are strongly associated with femininity, the continuation of beauty practices is also the continuation of *doing gender* (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990). Therefore, normative beauty practices reinforce existing gender norms and enlarge the differences between women’s and men’s appearance in China. This process of gender performativity is part of the larger narrative that encourages Confucian discourse on gender, thereby overwriting Mao’s gender-neutral discourse. Interestingly, in the West, there is increasing visibility of male beauty practices and the objectification of male bodies under neoliberal capitalism’s struggle as it is a way for males to increase capital – not only economic capital

but social, cultural, erotic and affective capital (Hakim, 2018, 2020). Although there is a notable trend in the Chinese beauty industry of promoting beauty products for men, it is a relatively small percentage of the market. According to Tmall Innovation Center's (2018) Men's Grooming Report, the male beauty market has grown more than 50% in the past two years. It comprises a relatively small percentage compared to the female beauty industry, but it is worth exploring further to fully understand Chinese beauty culture.

The repetition of beauty practices described in the beauty diaries illustrated two types of approaches to beauty routines. The first group of women had developed an awareness regarding the necessity of beautification in daily life but would make an additional effort to dress up for a special occasion. For example, participant Xiaoqi said, 'I feel like I don't know what to write in my diary because I repeat the same thing every day'. Xiaoqi's beauty diary documented the physical aspects of her beauty routine but did not include many of her thoughts. Below are two excerpts from her diary that illustrate her feelings of repetition:

Day 2 Date: 14 November 2019

Location: School

Daily morning cleansing and skin care

In the morning, I used facial cleanser and applied hydrosol, cream and serum after cleansing, because in the morning, I had to go to another campus for class.

I painted my eyebrows and put on sunscreen and a facial mask (beauty product).

The evening was the same as in the morning, plus, I applied a facial mask because I apply a facial mask every two to three days.

Day 3 Date: 15 November 2019

Location: School

Daily morning cleansing and skin care

In the morning, after washing with facial cleanser, I applied hydrosol, cream and serum, and put on simple makeup (referring to foundation, eyebrows, lipstick) but no eye makeup because in the morning we were departing from school at 6 o'clock, due to the high-speed rail station, to take the high-speed rail to Shanghai, so I did not have much time.

I'm not someone who wants to get up early just to put on full makeup.

Xiaoqi always followed her beauty skincare routine, but her makeup routine varied according to her daily activities. She was one of the participants who emphasised the importance of beauty practices but changed her level of engagement according to various social situations. For Xiaoqi, becoming beautiful was not a strong motivation but fitting in with social requirements and becoming what she considers to be a *normal* woman were important to her. Davis (1995) argues that the motivation for women to undergo cosmetic surgery is not necessarily to pursue beauty but rather a desire to be *normal*. So, this prompts the question: what is *normal* for young Chinese women? From my data, a *normal* appearance for women refers to mainstream heteronormative beauty standards. The mainstream beauty standard in China is that women should be *white, slim* and *young* (白瘦幼; pinyin: *Bái shòu yòu*). Thus, to have a *normal* look, many women put in great effort trying to fit into beauty norms. Although Xiaoqi may not like the idea of having to become beautiful, the process of becoming *normal* will result in her becoming beautiful according to mainstream beauty standards. Consequently, many participants expressed feelings of inadequacy when they were not wearing makeup. For example, they expressed that they felt they looked ugly without makeup but that wearing makeup made them look acceptable – although not beautiful. By applying skincare, their face becomes hydrated and youthful; by applying foundation, her skin becomes smooth; by painting on eyebrows and lipstick, her face becomes more defined.

However, Xiaoqi distinguished herself as someone who was not *into* beauty culture and felt she was different from the *beautiful girls* who love beauty culture (爱美的女生; pinyin: *Àiměide nǚshēng*) and are very invested in it. She expressed how she thought other women spent so much more time and effort on their appearance, giving her roommates as an example. Unlike her, they would spend over an hour getting ready in the morning, whereas Xiaoqi would only take half an hour. Interestingly, although Xiaoqi felt she was not one of these *beautiful girls*, she still engaged in beauty practices, which emphasises that beauty practices have become normalised in society. This study found that women do not need to love fashion and beauty or to describe themselves as being *into* beauty culture to engage in beauty practices. These findings align with the idea that *average women* also feel a moral obligation to participate in beauty regimes and their associated labour (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017; Widdows, 2018). This group of participants simply wanted to *fit in*,

so they self-disciplined their bodies accordingly. Through engaging in beauty practices, they were able to produce a gendered body that fit into heteronormative beauty standards.

The second group of women was characterised by participants who had become keen on wearing makeup and dressing up daily. They expressed strong desires to become more beautiful and put considerable effort into learning and discovering different styles and methods of beautifying themselves. The participants who loved beauty practices also reported repetition but in slightly different ways:

Somus: It just felt like I should try more new things. Normally, I don't have a problem with what I do daily, but then I started to write about my life, and I felt like it was repeated every day.

Although Somus felt she kept repeating herself in her beauty diary – as she did not want to be perceived as wearing the same style every day – we can see she tried out different makeup and hairstyles almost every day. In her diary, she simply wrote a description of her style. However, during the follow-up interview, she revealed that in her diary, she had tried to present a better image of herself, so she had not written some of her secrets:

Somus: I may be wearing makeup and looking polished when I go out, but my desk can be a real mess. Or another example – my makeup will be so well done, but it may have taken me an hour to draw an eyebrow.

Interestingly, Somus did not include these details in her diary, only in the follow-up interview. This example shows that diary interviews can offer access to an 'emotional space' and situation typically beyond the researcher's reach (Morrison, 2012, p. 68). Some participants tried to *hide* their beauty labour from the public to present themselves as being effortlessly beautiful young girls. Somus did not acknowledge this labour as invisible or as a burden, and she still wanted to try new styles and learn new beauty skills. As we can see, participants all engaged to varying degrees and *chose* different types of beauty practices.

One of the beauty diary guideline questions asked, 'What did you do to beautify yourself?' This question was designed to try and encourage the participants to record their daily beautification methods. From the initial interviews, I identified participants' attitudes

towards beauty practices and felt they could be categorised into two main types, normative beauty practices and extreme beauty practices. Extreme beauty practices were associated with risk and danger, which all participants rejected in their dialogue during the interviews. They mentioned practices such as liposuction, nose jobs (rhinoplasties), breast implants and facial contouring (cutting bone away from the jaw to slim the face). Most of the extreme beauty practices that they referred to were linked to cosmetic surgery. This attitude reflects how the Chinese cosmetic surgery industry has not yet gained consumers' trust in China (Gao, 2018) and is still not considered socially acceptable, at least among these participants. This also explains why Chinese patients are willing to travel and pay more for cosmetic surgery in South Korea because they believe they will get safer and higher-quality work done (Holliday, Jones and Bell, 2019). Interestingly, double eyelid surgeries were not considered one of the extreme practices. Instead, most of the participants considered it a minor surgical procedure, which was also suggested in research by Luo (2013).

Double eyelid surgery refers to the procedure that creates an eyelid crease above each eye, resulting in larger and wider eyes. It is the most popular form of cosmetic surgery among South East Asian women (Kaw, 1993; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012; Luo, 2013). Two of the twenty participants openly discussed their experiences and reasons for having double eyelid surgery. Another two participants said they planned to have double eyelid surgery when they had more money to pay for it. As a form of cosmetic surgery, it does have risk factors, as does any surgical procedure. It was considered a normative beauty practice by the participants, and the risks were not articulated. Larger eyes with double eyelids have become the beauty standard for Chinese women's eyes (Thornham and Pengpeng, 2010; Zhang, 2012), as discussed in Sections 2.3 and 4.1.2. This suggests that potential risk is not an essential determining factor on whether a beauty practice is perceived as extreme or normative. Rather, normative beauty practices are the product of social discourse, constructed through women's social interactions and experiences.

When considering normative beauty practices, such as such as dress, makeup and hair styling, most of the participants associated this with making positive change in their life. We can see from the table (Appendix J) that most participants engaged in dressing up, wearing makeup, hair styling and performing skincare routines. This data coincides with the JDND Consumption Index (2018), which illustrates how the consumption of cosmetic

products is becoming increasingly significant among the post-90s generation. Wearing makeup has gradually become a widely accepted social norm for women, arguably due to the influence of social media (makeup was banned during the communist regime, 1966–1977). There has now come a point where it is easier for young women to ‘choose to conform’ (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011, p. 98) rather than choose not to wear makeup. In this sense, women’s choice is constrained by social norms governing that women should wear makeup. Only decades ago, fashion magazines, such as *Vogue* and *Ray*, and beauty programmes, such as *Beautiful Lady* (美丽俏佳人; pinyin: *Měilì qiào jiārén*) (2006–2022), were the dominant sources of media that presented the major fashion trends on beauty practices (Sun, 2014). Nowadays, with such a quickly developing economy – and with it, technology – it seems from my participants that social media has become the most popular platform for individuals to gain their beauty practice knowledge, as more and more beauty bloggers and internet celebrities are sharing their beauty content on a variety of social media platforms. This clearly shows that young women nowadays are influenced by social media regarding beauty practices (Dippner, 2018a; Guan, 2020). For example, internet celebrities and beauty bloggers promote makeup through social media. Women wear makeup to look normal; however, it devalues how they look without makeup. If a woman does not wear makeup, she may feel abnormal or even ugly – as found in my data.

Furthermore, social media has become a useful tool to assist in the development of the beauty industry. Internet celebrities often endorse certain products, as do beauty bloggers, such as my participant Chang. They are now incorporated as part of companies’ marketing strategy, and brands promote their beauty products or services through key opinion leaders (KOLs) (Zhou, 2021). Beauty bloggers, internet celebrities and live streamers are KOLs; thus, they have become the centre of attention for companies to promote their products and for the public to consume the content they create and the opinions they express. For example, many of my participants mentioned the famous live streamer Jiaqi Li. People call him *Lipstick Brother No 1*, as he is famous for selling lipsticks. In one of his live-streaming sessions, he sold 15,000 lipsticks within five minutes. He also challenged the Guinness world record for ‘most lipstick applications to models in 30 seconds’ (Zhou, 2021). Many participants mentioned the influence of Jiaqi Li on young girls’ decision to buy lipsticks, as they liked to buy lipsticks he recommended.

As for other beauty practices, half of the participants discussed accessories, two mentioned exercise and posture correction, and four mentioned dieting. Although exercise can be associated with good health, the main reason participants gave for engaging in exercise was to sculpt a certain body shape. For example, participant Holly expressed wanting firm abs and a toned body. She mentioned that she liked to watch the *Victoria's Secret* show, and those models have long legs and well-defined abs (abdominal muscles):

Holly: I cannot train my body like them, but in a similar direction (style). If one day I can train my body like them, I would be very happy.

Although dieting and exercise can achieve different goals, they were both primarily associated in my findings with creating a certain size and shape of the body. Women's bodies should be not only slim but also toned, with defined abdominal muscles. For most of the participants, thinking about weight loss was normal, as it is a common practice among Chinese women. According to research conducted among a sample of 8,367 women in China, 11.7% of the women wanted to lose weight in 2000, but this increased to 61.3% of the women in 2010. The number of women who did not want to lose weight decreased from 11.2% in 2000 to 0.8% in 2010 (Pan and Huang, 2013). This data clearly shows that a weight loss culture has been normalised in Chinese society. We have examined the most frequently used beauty practices, including makeup, skincare, dressing up, dieting, exercise and others, and the data clearly shows that these beauty practices have become normalised in Chinese society.

6.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the participants' diaries and follow-up interviews, as these provided context to understand their everyday lives in relation to beauty and beauty practices. The data revealed that participants expressed their thoughts and ideas in their diaries in different ways. Two of the ten participants had clearly internalised mainstream beauty blogger discourse, utilising pictures and selfies to record their daily lives. Furthermore, the narrative of *I keep repeating myself* revealed how normalised and repetitive beauty practices are, which they have taken for granted. All of the participants engaged in various beauty practices daily, arguably contributing to the normativity of beauty practices and *doing gender*. Conforming to repetitive beauty practices reinforces heterosexual gender norms and beauty norms. We can see from the data that these beauty

diary interviews did not offer new perspectives on the understanding of female beauty as gleaned from the main interviews. However, they did offer more detail that richly portrayed the participants' everyday lives in relation to beauty culture.

In this chapter, I focus on my participants' understanding of female beauty and how they construct female beauty in the way they discuss themselves and others. 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, the participants placed a higher value on inner beauty, which enabled them to resist the pressures of outer beauty standards. This chapter 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 to be interrogated and cannot simply be perceived as a tool for women's empowerment.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first section, I argue that inner and outer beauty are inseparable concepts that are both important for the participants. I discuss how we can conceptualise inner beauty. The discourse of inner beauty is continually developing and changing, which is supported by the identification of traditional and modern inner beauty discourse found during the analysis. Furthermore, it was observed that the traditional and modern inner beauty discourse creates a dilemma regarding femininity among participants. In the second section, I examine the complex relationship between the concepts of inner and outer beauty. I discuss how my participants sought empowerment by adopting inner and outer beauty strategies. Outer beauty strategies accommodate social expectations and beauty norms to gain power, while inner beauty strategies resist men's dominant discourse on female beauty and reject the mainstream beauty standards that focus only on women's outer beauty. It is worth noting that inner and outer beauty strategies are not in polarised positions, so it is possible for both strategies to be utilised to enhance inner and outer beauty and gain power.

7.1 Ideal female beauty: Inner and outer beauty

7.1.1 Inner and outer beauty

The foundation of my MA dissertation was to establish how ideal female beauty is understood by Chinese women and what female beauty means to them. Unlike other

studies that chose to focus on preconceived notions of beauty, my dissertation began by allowing participants to describe and define female beauty from their own perspectives. It was clear that female beauty comprises many characteristics that were discussed in relation to two overriding concepts, inner and outer beauty. These findings are supported by other Chinese feminists' studies, which identified that inner beauty is just as important for Chinese women as outer beauty (Man, 2000; Zhang, 2012, 2013; Luo, 2013; Wen, 2013). However, it can be seen in the vast amount of feminist academic literature relating to female beauty that the predominant focus has been on outer beauty and that inner beauty has seldom been the focus of scholars' attention. This idea is supported by Holliday and Taylor (2006, p. 180), who state that 'feminists have asked not what beauty is, but who is in charge of the standards and definitions of beauty and what their motives are for maintaining them'. Many Chinese scholars focus on outer beauty and marginalise the concept of inner beauty – despite identifying that inner beauty is just as important and sometimes more important than outer beauty for Chinese women.

Interestingly, this PhD project also started out in the same vein and was initially designed to focus primarily on aspects of outer beauty. The intention was to directly engage with feminist theory and debate derived from feminist literature, which typically addresses aspects of outer beauty. Therefore, to suit this purpose, I changed the focus of my questioning from broader exploratory questions, such as, 'Can you tell me if female beauty is important?' to 'Can you tell me if female appearance is important?' The latter intentionally primes a response relating to the concept of outer beauty.

To my surprise, most of the participants repeatedly discussed outer and inner beauty concepts despite there being no prompt to address inner beauty during the various stages of the interview. Even when a question was designed to discuss an aspect of outer beauty, their explanation would lead to a discussion of the importance of inner beauty. It was very apparent that inner beauty was just as, or more, important for many of the participants as outer beauty:

Wenwen: I think women'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.

Her opinion was that outer appearance was important but felt the need to explain how inner beauty was also important and that the two were entwined. It is possible that this participant felt that just discussing outer beauty was not adequate to address this topic. These findings are somewhat different to those in Dosekun's (2015) study of young women in Lagos, which also investigated female beauty. Unlike my participants, who were keen to discuss inner beauty, Dosekun's (2015a) participants had to be prompted by being asked what was important to them besides their appearance. Yet, her participants did not seem interested in talking about other aspects. Wenwen's intention to include both concepts in her response regarding female beauty shows very clearly that in Chinese culture, both inner and outer beauty are equally valued.

There are a number of examples that show how my participants thought that inner and outer beauty are inseparable. When I explored these themes with my participants, I asked them to describe their female beauty ideal. Some participants told me directly that inner and outer beauty are connected. For instance, after Ping reflected on my question, she replied, 'Female beauty is not only the physical appearance but also the inner beauty'. Meanwhile, other participants indirectly conveyed the connection between the concepts. For instance, 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?

Researcher: You could talk about both; tell me about ideal appearance and then inner state.

Sherry: For ideal appearance, the prettier, the better. And then, I really like A Jiao [famous Chinese actress]; I think she is really pretty. For personal state, I like Chen Yanxi [famous Chinese actress] because she is very lively, and she is very sunny, and then she has her own hobbies, which is quite enviable.

Although Sherry did not use the specific terms *inner* and *outer* beauty, she clearly distinguished the two concepts in her own words: *ideal outer appearance* and *ideal personal state*. When she discussed each in detail, we can see that ideal appearance was linked with outer beauty. To describe the 'ideal personal state', she used words such as

lively, sunny and has hobbies, Similarly, other participants referred to personal qualities and characteristics when talking about inner beauty and associated outer beauty with physical, external appearance. Inner beauty refers to personal qualities and characteristics, and outer beauty is associated with physical and external appearance. Compared to traditional Chinese philosophy, inner beauty is linked with moral practices, and outer beauty refers to physical attractiveness (Man, 2000). It seems that participants discourse of inner beauty has changed slightly, which I will discuss in the next section.

This study's findings align with those of previous Chinese feminist studies, which identified the concepts of inner and outer beauty for Chinese women (Man, 2000; Zhang, 2012, 2013; Luo, 2013). For instance, Man (2000) discusses the notion of female beauty in Confucian and Taoist texts. In analysing female beauty in courtesan culture, she found that being beautiful and intelligent was perceived as necessary for female courtesans. She felt that the contemporary discussions of female beauty in China closely followed those in the West, which focus on fashion and looks. However, inner beauty such as moral efforts and intellectual qualities, is only mentioned in the context of political propaganda. I think Man's (2000) statement does not apply to my participants, as she neglects how the concept of inner beauty still plays an essential role in Chinese women's daily lives. At the same time, I am aware that her work was produced back in 2000, and maybe the development of the beauty industry has shifted Chinese women's focus regarding inner and outer beauty. These findings suggest that many of the participants were influenced by or, at the very least, upheld beliefs that are in line with previous findings that female beauty emphasises both inner and outer beauty (Man, 2000; Ip, 2003).

Although the concepts of inner and outer beauty are inseparable, my analysis revealed a complex relationship between inner and outer discourses. Most of my participants expressed a preference for inner beauty over outer beauty – especially if there was a perceived disjuncture between the two. Although the participants placed a higher value on inner beauty, they did not feel that inner and outer beauty are polarised but that both are seen as necessary in order to be completely beautiful:

Xiaole: 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 inner beauty, and their insider does not match their outer beauty.

Xiaole was clearly aware here of the pervasive nature of mainstream outer beauty standards, but she criticised such constructs and questioned their value. She thought that women could more easily adjust or enhance their outer beauty to come close to fitting the beauty standard template. Although women can alter their outer beauty, it does not necessarily render them beautiful. She also articulated that inner and outer beauty should *match* each other. In doing so, she was expressing how each should be *balanced* – both need to be equally developed because if a woman only develops outer beauty without inner beauty or inner beauty without outer beauty, she will not be completely beautiful. Many of the women in this study expressed that inner beauty was more important to them than outer beauty, which has not been discussed much in previous academic literature.

The emphasis participants put on inner beauty could be attributed to the fact that this sample was comprised of highly educated women. As a consequence of their higher education, they may have developed insight, awareness and opinions 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 the objectification theory, women tend to internalise an observer's view to evaluate their physical selves as 'women's bodies are looked at, evaluated, and always potentially objectified' (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997, p. 175). However, my participants were aware of men's preferences towards women's appearance, yet they would attempt to develop the notion of inner beauty to resist how males define a woman's attractiveness. Most participants avoided focusing purely on outer beauty when judging another woman's appearance. However, they did judge each other within the context of inner and outer beauty. I illustrated the complex relationship between inner and outer beauty in my discussion of the participants' beauty strategies in Section 4.3.

7.1.2 Definition of inner and outer beauty

We have identified that, in China, female beauty consists of the symbiotic concepts of inner and outer beauty. This section examines in more detail participants' understanding of these concepts. The term *outer beauty* in this study refers to women's physical

attractiveness according to heteronormative beauty standards. Through engaging in beauty practices, women achieve normalised outer beauty standards to enhance their attractiveness. In line with previous research (Zhang, 2012, 2013), this study found that these beauty standards are relatively explicit and comprise key facial features, such as having a watermelon-seed-shaped face, a sharp chin, a tiny face, big eyes, double eyelids, a tall nose and a tall and slim body. The rise of *internet celebrity* (网红; pinyin: *Wǎng hóng*) culture has normalised these beauty standards (Peng, 2021), so participants referred to women who fit into this beauty standard as having a *microcelebrity face*. When the participants discussed the discourse of outer beauty, they often focused on the importance of women's appearance and the potential social benefits they could gain from meeting outer beauty standards. Previous research shows that beauty matters in society (Jha, 2016). Female beauty can be perceived as a form of currency and power (Chapkis, 1986; Wolf, 1990; Wen, 2013).

However, the concept of inner beauty is vaguer and harder to pin down. Unlike inner beauty in traditional Confucian teachings that emphasised 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. For example, Xiaokong explained which aspects of herself she wanted to improve regarding inner and outer beauty:

Xiaokong: 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 my 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 to stray cats, I may appear more positive in others' minds or very powerful and caring to others. I think this is the real me, not my performance. If I keep on insisting on one thing, others will recognise me. this is the improvement of my inner beauty. For outer beauty, it must be a goal to be thinner. But I know in my heart that it is difficult for me to be thin because I love to eat, and I also enjoy food. In addition to the first impression I said, I also feel that I did not have a higher education like you. Then I may not have enough depth in my thought, so I want

to learn more through the process of communication, visiting some exhibitions, watching movies and dramas, and improving myself while enjoying life; it will make me feel very comfortable.

Xiaokong discussed both aspects of beauty, and she pointed out that people often associate beauty with outer beauty, including having your hair and makeup done and being thinner. However, she put more emphasis and value on improving her inner beauty. She wanted to improve her image and the Impression she gave others by developing her positive personality traits and continuously learning throughout her life. Although most participants felt that outer beauty attracts more attention from the public, most of them put an emphasis on inner beauty and seemed to value it more. Interestingly, Xiaokong noted that enhancing outer beauty could contribute to her overall beauty – that it is not innate but something that can be improved. This is very different from the beliefs of Thai women, who see ‘beauty as an innate quality of the face’ (Omphornuwat, 2010, p. 98). In this instance, women are either innately beautiful or they are not. If they are not innately beautiful, engaging in beauty practices will not help them become beautiful. There is a clear distinction between beauty as something natural and looking good being ‘man-made’ (Omphornuwat, 2010). My participants generally believed outer beauty practices can enhance women’s beauty, which is a reason to pursue beauty.

Furthermore, the participants’ varying descriptions illustrated these complex concepts, but the concept of *qizhi* added another layer of complexity:

Sensen: She should be cultured and intelligent, generous, capable, and know a lot. For example, my sister – she knows a lot, and then she has a lot of depth. In fact, I don’t know where the depth comes from, as she has *qizhi*. Then she is also very exquisitely dressed. If a woman is good-looking, of course, very good, but no matter whether she looks good [physically] or not, she should at least know how to dress properly.

For Sensen, female beauty seemed to consist of many aspects ranging from intellectual ability and personality to appearance. She used the words *cultured*, *intelligent*, *generous*, *capable* and *knowledgeable* to describe aspects of inner beauty. Later, she used her sister as an example to explain her ideas of inner beauty, summarising them as *qizhi*. It is worth

noting that *qizhi* is a term that predominantly applies to females, but I will discuss it in more detail below. Sensen also mentioned physical appearance but did not feel that it mattered the most. Instead, she prioritised the importance of dressing up because she felt you could not control your physical looks. Later on, she reported body dissatisfaction but did not want to undergo plastic surgery to alter her body, which was why she prioritised the effort to create a better look. We can see there is a difference between physical looks and the way someone dresses up, which most participants did not clearly identify as an aspect of outer beauty. Most participants thought that physical attractiveness or being well dressed both counted as being beautiful. As participant Xiaoxiao said, ‘There are no ugly women nowadays. If you look on the street, every woman looks beautiful, as long as they know how to dress’. Therefore, women’s beauty can be attributed to dressing well.

It is worth noting that my findings also share similar elements with Bartky’s (1990) examination of the disciplinary practices of women’s bodies. She suggests that there are three categories that contribute to the performance of femininity:

Those that aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those directed towards the display of this body as an ornamented surface (Bartky, 1990, p. 65).

In comparison, my findings illustrate more specific disciplinary practices. In terms of the aesthetic look, this can be achieved by engaging in beauty practices to follow the latest trends, especially fashion and style trends (Harden and Chiung-Fang, 2014). These findings suggest that Chinese women’s beauty standards are more defined and restrictive, and that beauty pressure is intensified through these disciplinary practices.

Another layer of Chinese female beauty that participants frequently mentioned was *qizhi* that was frequently mentioned by participants and that was *qizhi*. For my participants, *qizhi* combines inner and outer beauty to create something akin to an essence, aura or charisma – but not exactly. The most common translation is the word *temperament*, yet this does not fit the context of participants’ discourse. I was not able to find any non-Chinese literature on *qizhi*, as it seems to be a uniquely Chinese concept. However, words such as *essence*,

aura, *charm* and *temperament* convey a similar meaning to *qizhi* – the idea that there are many complex and often subtle factors that contribute to creating the overall perception of a person.

In regard to the concepts of inner and outer beauty, the term *qizhi* was frequently mentioned by most participants. This word is commonly used in China to describe a woman's qualities. As Butler (1990) famously argues, gender is socially constructed and fluid: it can be learned and performed through social activities. In this regard, *qizhi* is closely linked with gender identity and the performance of being a *woman*. As Min romantically explained:

Min: Because I think that personal *qizhi* is hidden in the cities you have travelled to, the people you have loved and the books you have read.

For Min, *qizhi* can be understood as a personal experience gained through travelling, nurturing meaningful relationships and reading books. All of these combines to develop and enrich one's personal qualities. She used the word 'hidden' in relation to *qizhi* – being hard to capture and see. You have to *feel* it. This idea is in line with Huang's (2018) finding that *qizhi* is seen as 'empty', something that you could not capture visually in a picture but that you could *sense* through social interaction. Thus, it could be understood in a similar way to personality and personal characteristics. In other words, it is entirely socially constructed.

Xiaole: I just finished teacher Chen's class today. Her/his¹⁰ class is for teaching you to read and choose what books to read. Some of her/his thoughts, I think, are also quite pragmatic. Maybe you become beautiful, it depends on your *qizhi*, and beauty lies in your *qizhi*. You may have confusions, which, when you

¹⁰ **Gender pronouns** are not typically differentiated in spoken Chinese. The words for 'he' (他; pinyin: *Tā*) and 'she' (她; pinyin: *Tā*) are pronounced the same (*Tā*). Therefore, when translating, I have added gender pronouns when they could be derived from the context of the conversation. If it was not clear, I have used the gender pronoun s/he.

figure it out, you realise it, then your *qizhi* will be different, and your whole person will be different.

For Xiaole, *qizhi* was associated with what books you have read, which emphasises intellectual ability and thoughts. Reading books and being educated seems to improve people's *qizhi*. Wu (2011) noted that women with *qizhi* were positively associated with being classy and intellectual. Xiaole felt that women with these inner beauty qualities could be perceived as beautiful regardless of their physical appearance. Wenwen also provided insight into helping us define *qizhi* regarding appearance.

Wenwen: If you have inner beauty, it will become your *qizhi*, which will be reflected in your overall appearance.

This shows that developing your inner beauty forms your *qizhi*, which will be reflected in your overall appearance. In this way, *qizhi* is the embodiment of all of the different aspects of inner and outer beauty – something people feel, sense and perceive rather than just visually *see*. For instance, Zhang (2013) defined *qizhi* through three themes. First, *qizhi* could be understood as a positive impression that women give others. Second, *qizhi* is not only associated with positive personality traits, such as being confident, cultured and dignified, with elegant posture. Third, *qizhi* can be communicated through outer appearance. Although I agree with Zhang's definition of *qizhi*, I think this term has more cultural depth and meaning. I believe that *qizhi* is a Chinese cultural discourse that links inner and outer beauty together, functioning as a communicator. *Qizhi* discourse offers a comfortable space that allows Chinese women to emphasise and promote their inner beauty to combat the objectification within male-dominant discourse, which focuses on women's bodies.

7.1.3 Inner beauty: The dilemma between traditional and modern femininities

Yet, even if inner beauty can be understood as a form of resistance, it too can be seen as an ideological construction. This section will discuss the major discourse that emerged through participants' discussions on inner beauty. Through analysis of the participant narratives, it was found that inner beauty discourse is not without value and reflects complex ideologies that combine traditional Chinese patriarchal social values and contemporary neoliberalist values. On the one hand, some participants felt the obligation to

be a *virtuous wife and good mother* (贤妻良母, pinyin: *xián qī liáng mǔ*). This term is associated with women who desire to be ‘gentle, considerate, playful and who [take] care of everything’ (Evans, 2002, p. 337). On the other hand, they are eager to pursue their careers and be financially independent modern women. It will also be explored how these qualities often create a conflict between traditional and modern femininity:

Huanhuan: Inner ideal, I think that I did not actually say how strong you must be to be a woman. Now public opinion is very divided, saying either that a women’s career is particularly strong, and I don’t need a relationship, or like many other people say, that you are a small woman. In fact, I don’t think it’s bad to say that you value family or that it’s not good to pay attention to the family. I think women should have an independent consciousness, whether you return to the family to assist your husband and bring up children, or I’m pursuing my career. You should know what you want and have the confidence to assume your responsibility. I know what I’m doing, and I think it’s okay.

Huanhuan’s dialogue illustrated the dilemma many Chinese women face. There seems to be a dichotomy between the two types of ideal women, which can be separated into two categories: modern women who are strong, independent career women, who do not need a family life, or traditional women, who enjoy family life but do not have career ambitions. Within this dilemma, strong independent career women are often perceived negatively in society and closely linked to the Chinese word for leftover women (剩女; pinyin: *Shéngnǚ*), which has become popularised in China (Luo and Sun, 2015; Hong-Fincher, 2016; Lake, 2018). In 2007, the *All-China Women’s Federation* (中华全国妇女联合会; pinyin: *Zhōnghuá quánguó fùnǚ liánhé huì*) defined the term *leftover women* as women who remain unmarried over the age of 27. The common conception is that women having a higher level of education or career ambitions can lead to a disastrous marriage or be the reason they remain unmarried. One notorious online article from *Xinhua News* (新华通讯社; pinyin: *Xīnhuá Tōngxùnshè*) stigmatised higher-educated women who are still single. The article was titled ‘Do leftover women really deserve our sympathy?’ and said:

Pretty girls don’t need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult. These kinds of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their

competitiveness. The tragedy is, they don't realise that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls. (Hong-Fincher, 2012)

This and similar articles try to establish a relationship between being ambitious about your education or career and remaining unmarried. These opposing ideals of what a woman should be like – despite being in conflict with one another – seem to be normalised in society, leaving women to feel like they can only have one or the other. As such, we can imagine the conflicting feelings women might have about their identities. As a researcher who is female and Chinese, when I looked back at the transcripts of the interviews, I started to realise how socially conditioned some of my thoughts are:

Chang: Ideal female. For example, I like Shuang Zheng (a female Chinese actress). I like her so much, and I think she is one of my goals. Shuang Zheng is the kind of small (girly) girl, and thin, very thin, but I still pursue that kind of figure. It's also being unique and having a good personality and self-confidence. I think these three points are the most important to me. Second, I think girls must have their own careers. I think this is also very important. Because once you have an economic foundation, you can pursue a material life and be more capable of pursuing a material life.

Researcher: What do you mean in terms of material?

Chang: For example, if you want to buy clothes and cosmetics and then buy a house and a car – I think girls can do it without having to rely on boys.

Researcher: You are quite independent, but you also like sweet and soft girls like Shuang Zheng?

Chang: It's very contradictory. I don't know why. In fact, I like soft personalities, but I want to pursue my job like an independent modern woman. I think I can be a little softer to my other half or my family, but I might show my capability in my job. The character can't be too stubborn, and I'm quite scared that I will offend others. I think that I am still a bit influenced by traditional ideas. Although girls are strong, they cannot be stronger than boys – you have to save their *mianzi* (face).

Chang expressed her sense of independence and admiration for sweet and soft actresses. My question used the word *but*, assuming a contrast and opposition between being independent and sweet and soft. This assumption was shared by most participants, who felt

that such qualities were very contradictory. Looking back, it is apparent that within the discourse, the participants and I would unconsciously associate independence with being strong and traditional women with being soft. Although Chang was grappling with the idea that she could be both, she still alluded to the difficulties of doing so. Thus, it is difficult for a woman to be both an independent modern woman and a traditional family-orientated woman, yet these young women live in an era where both ideals exist in society. They are faced with the dilemma that if they focus on their careers, they will be criticised for not paying enough attention to their families. If they pay too much attention to their families, they will be perceived as not being successful or independent and as being weak because of their reliance on men – earning less so that they can look after children or parents. This has parallels with social expectations regarding women's beauty practices. On the one hand, it is expected that women should wear makeup, but on the other hand, they might be accused of paying too much attention to their appearance. Similarly, Wolf (1990, p. 33) found that in the Western job market, 'a woman can be fired for not looking right, but looking right remains open to interpretation'.

Chang held traditional Confucian values regarding female beauty, and at the same time, she tried to fit into the modern definition of female beauty – being strong and independent. To explain how this situation might have come about, we might look to the influence political discourse has had on women's liberation after new China was built. At that time, women's independence and self-reliance were promoted by encouraging women to work hard alongside men, dismissing femininity (Jin, 2006). Following the Chinese economic reform in 1979, the development of commercial discourse required women to be feminine, sexual objects and a good wife and mother (Hong-Fincher, 2016). Nowadays, ideal Chinese women should be independent and hardworking on top of the previous expectations. Examples of these high-achieving women can be found in Western postfeminist television, suggesting that feminist goals have been achieved and women *can* 'have it all' (Moseley and Read, 2002). Yet, it seems like an impossible task for women to achieve, as many discussions in the West have analysed why women *can't* have it all (Hewlett, 2002; Slaughter, 2012).

However, as Chang theorised in her discussion, she believed that in the future, she could achieve both goals by behaving differently in public and private spaces. In the public space, she could have the ambition to be a career-driven woman, and in private, she could

conform to the traditional family model and accept the husband being in charge of the family. She said, ‘girls cannot be stronger than boys’, which shows she holds traditional Confucian values regarding female inner beauty. The traditional Chinese belief of women being weaker than men came from a book designed to teach women in the Han dynasty that ‘a man is great because of his strength, a woman is beautiful because of her weakness’ (Ban, 1996). Here, *weakness* not only means physical weakness but also being modest with a low view of one’s importance. This Chinese teaching may help to contextualise why Chang did not want to be perceived as being stronger than men.

Moreover, the conflict between being traditional and modern is also shown in Xiaole’s interview when she discussed how she wants to pursue a unique personality. When Xiaole explained why she was attracted to Japanese Lolita culture,¹¹ it was not only because she thought the clothing looked pretty, but also because of her inner feelings:

Xiaole: Yes, I may look like a quiet and gentle person, but I am not a particularly quiet and gentle person. Although my appearance looks more like a traditional, sensible person, knowing how to deal with others according to common sense, and I know how to be polite. But I have an idea of rebellion. I want to break the shackles. I feel that I have a lot of shackles. I think it is a window of release. I just like it, and you are not qualified to judge me.

From external observation, she was a sensitive woman with a sweet smile, softly spoken with gentle gestures; however, intellectually, she had a sense of rebellion towards the generally accepted cultural constructs of traditional femininity. Xiaole expressed her rebellious feelings through Lolita culture. As Winge (2008) stated, Lolita culture empowers young people by allowing them to dress differently, escaping the trappings of adult life and resisting the dominant cultural ideologies. Dislike towards traditional femininity was illustrated in Xiaoxiao’s interview, where she disliked the sweet girl and preferred a gender-neutral style. She tried to detach herself from traditional femininity:

¹¹ **Lolita culture:** A subculture from Japan that is highly influenced by Victorian clothing and fashion styles from the rococo period.

Xiaoxiao: Not the kind of bitch quality, I don't like that. I like the temperament to be more gender-neutral, not particularly sweet.

Through the participants' understanding of inner beauty, three different forms of inner beauty could be identified from different historical periods. First, traditional inner beauty was embedded in ethical and moral practices derived from Confucius. Therefore, women who were perceived as beautiful would conform to Confucian teaching and were often associated with being good mothers, daughters and wives. Second, during the Maoist period, due to the political discourse, women's beauty was measured by their personal qualities, such as being described as a hard worker (Jin, 2006). Third, since the economic reform, the development of neoliberalism and consumerism has articulated the discourse of the Chinese woman as an empowered consumer (Tasker and Negra, 2007), where being independent regarding finance or other aspects of life is crucial for Chinese women's inner qualities. Moreover, the influence of Western individualism and gender equality was shown by many participants who wanted to detach themselves from traditional femininity and pursue a unique personality or become more gender neutral. The dramatic social and economic shift has created a discourse that contains contradictions between traditional and modern femininity. Some participants, such as Chang, wanted to *have it all* by practising inner beauty in a way that changes according to the environment they are in. For the private sphere, this would mean accepting the traditional family order and practising traditional femininity. In the public sphere, this would mean pursuing a career and being independent. However, other participants rejected traditional femininity and embraced neoliberalist discourse, which emphasises individuality. As a result, inner beauty can be seen as a tool to discipline young Chinese women. Although the participants valued inner beauty for empowering them, it does not necessarily function to liberate and empower young women due to the complexity of inner beauty discourse, which I will discuss more in the next section.

7.2 Women seeking empowerment through inner and outer beauty strategies

By focusing on the concepts of inner and outer beauty, my discourse analysis revealed a complex relationship between these concepts. In the previous section, it was established that the concepts of inner and outer beauty are important and inseparable. However, it was later identified that most of the participants prioritised and preferred inner beauty over outer beauty. In order to understand this prioritisation and preference, Hollander and

Einwohner's (2004) concept of resistance – which was later developed further by Johansson and Vinthagen (2014) – is useful and inspiring. Furthermore, Weitz's (2001) work helps provide a framework to understand how my participants used inner and outer beauty strategies to seek power through accommodation and resistance towards the mainstream beauty norms. Inner and outer beauty are not polarised positions; instead, they coexist and are both important for participants to gain empowerment. These concepts have a symbiotic relationship whereby each affects the other. However, what is actually meant by *empowerment* here was not often fully elaborated on by the participants, 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 discourses (Tasker and Negra, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2015). For example, advertising uses the term *empowerment* and its ideas to promote beauty products yet has no intention of empowering individual customers in other environments, such as politics and work (Whelehan, 2000). Therefore, the term *empowerment* has multiple socially constructed interpretations. Within the context of this thesis, *empowerment* is understood as a means by which women can exercise political power, utilise 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 chapter makes the case that this is limited because it does not improve their political power or change their position within the Chinese patriarchal society.

In this section, I will describe how participants used inner and outer beauty strategies to gain empowerment, outer beauty strategies that emphasise accommodation of heteronormative beauty standard norms and Chinese men's mating preferences for female attractiveness. In contrast, inner beauty strategies appear to offer resistance to beauty norms.

7.2.1 Seeking empowerment through outer beauty strategies

It seems common sense that beauty matters in society. This idea is supported by feminists who believe that female beauty matters for women because it is a form of currency and power available to women within a patriarchal society (Chapkis, 1986; Wolf, 1990). Many researchers have confirmed that not only is physical attractiveness positively linked with social power but also beauty practices can enhance a person's attractiveness – according to dominant social norms – enabling them to gain social power (Bloch and Richins, 1992;

Kwan and Trautner, 2009; Taylor, 2012; Baghel, Parthasarathy and Gupta, 2014). According to Kwan and Trautner (2009), physically attractive people are often linked with positive traits and better social outcomes. In contrast, unattractive individuals are negatively stigmatised, stereotyped and discriminated against. Therefore, conforming to mainstream beauty standards regarding attractiveness is the most common way for women to gain power (Weitz, 2001). In line with my research findings, most of my participants believed that women who reflected these mainstream outer beauty standards were more likely to gain power and enjoy a variety of social benefits personally and professionally:

Deer: Appearance is very important [for women], especially from a man's perspective. Men think [women's appearance] is very important. In my opinion, many people, especially men, 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] developing with you, and then I will make friends with you'.

Deer thought that beautiful girls are rewarded by being able to secure romantic partners more easily. This would mean that women who are more attractive according to mainstream beauty standards have more choices in the dating or marriage market. Deer explained that when men think of dating a girl, they first pay attention to the woman's outer beauty. This idea of men evaluating a woman's qualities according to her appearance was a viewpoint commonly shared by many participants. For example, Huihui explained the reason why she did not have a boyfriend yet:

Huihui: At that time, I was not good-looking anyway; I was really not good-looking. So how can I say, at that time, when I felt that I was not good-looking, in fact, at that time, I would not say that. I had low self-esteem because of this, but I would feel that I might not get a boyfriend until now. Maybe I feel that I am not sexually attractive or that there are no boys who like me. The reason why no boys like me, maybe, is because of my appearance. That is, I had this idea when I was in middle school.

Huihui felt that the reason why she could not attract men was that she was not good-looking. In other words, men only like girls who are good-looking. This is a common belief in China, which is in line with evolutionary psychologist Buss' (1994) postulation

that men's mating preference is for young and healthy women, as evaluated by their physical appearance and features of behaviour. He proposes that contemporary men have inherited these preferences from their male ancestors, who primarily valued a woman's reproductive value. Therefore, 'these physical cues to youth and health, and hence to reproductive capacity, constitute the ingredients of male standards of female beauty' (Buss, 1994, p. 53). Huihui believed that her physical appearance was not very attractive and explained that one of her motivations for engaging in beauty practices was to improve her looks and increase her chance of finding a boyfriend. Later, she explained how she wanted to engage in beauty practices to improve her outer beauty characteristics, such as her facial expression and posture. Her desire to improve herself and conform to beauty standards fits within the categories I identified as outer beauty, which for her were physical looks, aesthetics and performance. Moreover, her idea that women who engage in beauty practices can become attractive, thereby gaining power in the marriage market, fits well with the postfeminist ideas of empowerment. For instance, many feminists argue that women are not passive victims and that beauty practices can be empowering (Davis, 1991; Crane, 1999; Frost, 1999; Cahill, 2003). My findings confirm and support Davis' (1991) criticism of the cultural dupe approach to female beauty: she thinks that women who are willing to engage in beauty practices such as cosmetic surgery may be aware of the oppression of normalised female beauty yet consciously choose this behaviour as a solution to personal problems associated with their appearance. For instance, by having plastic surgery, their altered appearance enables them to fit into patriarchal beauty ideologies and gain empowerment.

Heterosexual women gain social power in the dating or marriage market by being attractive or engaging in beauty practices; however, there are many other forms of social power that can be gained. For instance, attractive women can gain help and attention from men, which will result in being rewarded:

Sensen: I think if you look beautiful, it's much easier for you to do things. For example, for some trivial things, you could ask for help from others, especially men. If you ask for help from them, and you look beautiful, it seems very convenient. Because I feel beautiful girls around me are always so lucky.

Sensen believed that attractive women could get things done more easily by asking for help from men. In other words, men will only help women they consider attractive. She also felt that beautiful girls are often luckier, indicating that she thought that attractive women had more social power, which would enable them to gain numerous benefits. Moreover, Sensen later explained her opinion on why she considered beautiful girls lucky: they could more easily find jobs although they may have average abilities; because they look so adorable, people like them more and job interviews are easy for them. Therefore, we can see that Sensen believed that attractive women not only benefit from receiving help concerning trivial matters but can also gain an advantage in important social events such as interviews. These beliefs are in line with Kwan and Trautner (2009), who suggest that physical attractiveness has a positive effect on social institutional levels such as work, education and marriage. Other participants shared the idea that women should look good during interviews:

Xiaoqi: I think female beauty is relatively important. When I was preparing for my postgraduate entrance examinations, the female seniors would emphasise that if you dress well and if your appearance looks good, you will have an advantage.

For Xiaoqi, dressing well would benefit her by creating a good first impression during the interviews. It is worth noting that these examinations are face-to-face, with students predominantly facing male examiners. So, as in Chapter 5, we can see that beauty functions to discipline women in institutions.

7.2.2 The limits of power obtained through outer beauty strategies

Many participants acknowledged men's dating preference for women who have outer beauty. Women who utilise outer beauty strategies can gain social power, but this also has limitations. As I discussed, outer beauty is not only about women's physical look but also includes other categories, such as aesthetic looks and performance, which can be improved by engaging in beauty practices. Min indicated that men are attracted to women who dress femininely and engage in beauty practices. Although women are aware of men's preferences when it comes to choosing a partner, sometimes, women's idea of what is attractive doesn't match men's expectations:

Min: Yesterday, I introduced a good girlfriend to my male cousin, and I didn't think she was not good enough, so I sent her photo to my male cousin. Then my male cousin said that she was very plain. How can you say that a girl is plain because she didn't wear any makeup in that picture, and she didn't wear any earrings or other accessories? This is why he would think this, but if this girl had her hair curled, put on red lipstick and was wearing earrings or anything else, he would not say that this girl is plain.

Researcher: So plain is now a derogatory term. She doesn't dress up?

Min: Yes. My cousin said that I had another cousin I could introduce her to and changed the topic. That's it.

The word *plain* (as discussed in Section 5.1.2) has become a derogatory term describing women who do not engage in beauty practices. Min felt that her male cousin did not want to date her girlfriend because her girlfriend did not wear any makeup or engage in beauty practices. These everyday social interactions reveal what type of girl is desirable, thereby teaching others how to avoid being undesirable: in this case, she has to learn how to beautify herself.

However, during the interview, Min had been dressed in a cool style that mimicked the type of clothes an edgy popstar would wear – an oversized music band hoodie with jeans and her hair tied back. Her style did not conform to female beauty standards. She later expressed that she was not a girly girl – more like a boyish girl. She wanted to meet men's mating preferences and had booked a makeup class to learn how to become a so-called woman (which actually referred to teaching women how to fit in with female beauty standards). She said she 'felt she is a woman now', meaning she felt she met the female beauty standard. We can see that Min was trying to fit into beauty standards to have more opportunities and power when it came to dating. She later discussed her personal frustration regarding dating. She did not perceive herself as girly girl, but she tried to become more feminine in an attempt to fit within her ex-boyfriend's expectations of what an attractive woman is:

Min: He prefers a casual style or maybe a more girly style. For example, I would wear a very feminine girl's dress when I'd go out with him, but I don't usually wear it.

Researcher: Is it the kind of style for dating?

Min: Yes, it is the kind like, with curly hair and wearing small earrings, and the lipstick colour cannot be too red. It should be red bean paste colour or light pink colour, just this kind of soft colour, yes, but I am not a very soft person. So, we broke up later.

We can see that Min tried to fit into dominant constructs of *femininity* by curling her hair and wearing accessories and lipstick, which is in line with West and Zimmerman's (1987, p. 125) discussion of *doing gender* – that gender is 'a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction'. Not only was Min engaging in beauty practices daily but she was also trying to meet male opinion and her boyfriend's expectations. It was seen in the interviews that, from the participants' point of view, men would openly discuss their dating preferences to encourage women to fit into the mould. Because of their social interactions with men, some participants learned men's preferences regarding women's appearances. However, Min gave up *performing* as a soft and feminine woman. Although embracing her *boyish* identity may be considered empowering, it means she would have fewer dating choices realistically – hence, having to break up. Thus, she relinquished power by not conforming to gender norms. This example also raises some questions regarding the level of effort required for women to *perform* gender. It illustrates how women may or may not tolerate beauty pressure and that some women embrace their own identity, even if it goes against social expectations. However, it was clear that Min was still trying to fit with female beauty standards.

There is another limitation of relying on outer beauty strategies, which participant Deer referred to as the 'age and gender bonus'. Women between the ages of 20–30 can gain more social power and benefits by being or looking youthful and beautiful. This benefit is most relevant to mating opportunities and, more specifically, heterosexual women finding a male partner. However, when women inevitably age, they will become stigmatised for no longer being *valuable* (see also *leftover women* in Sections 5.1.2 and 7.1.3). Thus, outer beauty strategies have a limited duration for women and create more stress, especially for women over 30 years old:

Deer: 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 baggage that I cannot put up with, which makes me feel this way. So, I was

thinking about how 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 poison.

As Deer put it metaphorically, compliments regarding women's appearance are like sugar water – the more compliments one receives, the thirstier they are for more. From her point of view, such compliments encourage or force women to pay more attention to their appearance and spend more energy on beauty practices. She, therefore, did not think that paying too much attention to outer beauty was healthy for women, using the word *poison*. After the age bonus is over, all their hard work on their appearance and efforts to master beauty practices will be gone without any recognition. Although some feminists' work argues that ageing can be liberating for women as it frees them from some of these beauty pressures, it seems from participants' sentiments that, in China, as women age, they are more likely to become devalued. However, more specific research would have to be conducted to confirm this.

In sum, most participants were aware of the social expectations regarding women's appearances and the beauty norms in China. Furthermore, they saw themselves as actively engaging in beauty practices to gain empowerment and, therefore, accommodating the outer beauty standard, including physical looks, aesthetics and performance. However, we cannot overstate women's agency by focusing on their choice, as their choices are constructed by the social and cultural environment. So, perhaps they 'choose to conform' (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011). This is in line with Braun's (2009) argument that although women have a choice, which can be portrayed as empowering, this interpretation can be limiting. Outer beauty strategies are 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 utilising beauty practices that are 'time wasting, expensive and painful to self-esteem', which also limits a women's physical freedom (Jeffreys, 2015, p. 6). These types of power gained through outer beauty strategies are not reliable, as they rely mostly on male help or attention to exchange some benefit. Furthermore, women can

potentially lose their identity as they try to fit into the norms of femininity. It can create a temporary illusion for young women to believe they have a lucky life – until their power fades as they age and lose their feminine attractiveness. Therefore, outer beauty is not very sustainable for women through their different life stages, which may explain why many participants believed that cultivating inner beauty is more important. They realised that the power of inner beauty does not fade and can instead continue to enhance as a woman ages. Next, I will discuss some of the reasons why the participants valued inner beauty more and how, although inner beauty discourse may combat issues such as sexual objectification, it might also be perceived as another way to discipline women.

7.2.3 Seeking empowerment through inner beauty strategies

Although my participants all identified that having outer beauty could enable them to gain social power, they also realised that this power was not stable, as it derives from men's favour. The power gained through outer beauty strategies can also be considered a form of subordination within a patriarchal society (Dworkin, 1974; Jeffreys, 2015). However, Foucault's (1978, p. 95) argument that 'where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' may explain why the participants sought alternative ways of gaining power and may sometimes have expressed resistance to outer beauty. Therefore, it could be interpreted that participants attempted to broaden the definition and understanding of female beauty as their way of challenging the male-dominant discourse of female beauty, which is focused on outer beauty. They maintained and emphasised inner beauty discourse to resist the male-dominant discourse and empower themselves in ways that do not rely on male favour.

The participants discussed two reasons to cultivate inner beauty. First, they used inner beauty strategies to resist male-dominant discourse on female beauty, as men only emphasise the value and significance of outer beauty. Second, participants rejected mainstream female beauty standards by focusing on cultivating their inner beauty. It is worth noting that most of my participants did not engage in any beauty practices to resist these feminine norms, unlike Weitz (2001), who found her participant cut her hair short and spiky to *beat* the system. My participants gave examples illustrating a gender bias, believing that men valued and paid more attention to female outer beauty but that women focus on inner beauty:

Deer: [My best male friend] asked me a question first. He asked me, ‘interesting soul compared to a beautiful appearance, which would you choose?’ I said that because I particularly like Xiaosong Gao (高晓松; pinyin: *Gāoxiǎosōng*) (a celebrity known for their unattractive appearance but intelligence), a man like Xiaosong Gao is an interesting soul.

Researcher: Interesting soul?

Deer: Yes, so I told him that I like Xiaosong Gao. If you ask me this question, I will definitely choose interesting souls. For me, interest is more important than looks. I asked him, ‘What about you?’ He said, ‘You don’t need to ask me; I will definitely choose a good-looking appearance’. Then I asked him why, and he said to me, he said, ‘Sometimes the interesting soul can be cultivated slowly, and even if a girl is not interesting, it does not matter as long as she is looking good. If she looks good, I do think it’s okay if she’s not funny. But if she is not good-looking and she is very interesting, I think that I will just chat with her, and I do not think about [whether] we will have a future romantic relationship’.

We can see that Deer’s male friend offered two options: an interesting soul or a beautiful appearance. The *interesting soul* can be understood in this context as inner beauty. It clearly shows that this male friend prioritised women’s outer beauty above inner beauty. In contrast, Deer preferred inner beauty above outer beauty. In this case, Deer’s preference for inner beauty can be seen in her preferences when choosing a partner. Similarly, when she evaluated her female friend, she also paid attention to her inner beauty. Therefore, Deer evaluated men and women similarly by focusing on their inner beauty qualities, but she wanted to emphasise how men and women evaluate people differently:

Deer: In terms of appearance, my female friends are actually very ordinary. But all these girls, why can I be good friends with them – it’s all because of their personality, and I like girls with good personalities. I think for me, personality is more important than appearance.

Researcher: Yes, it’s very interesting. So these men are different compared to you, and they generally focus on girls’ appearance?

Deer: That’s right.

Deer not only preferred inner beauty when it came to dating but also felt the same way regarding making female friends. Although Deer did not openly criticise men's preferences regarding inner and outer beauty, the way she tried to repeat and emphasise her preference seemed to be a way to reject male ideas of female beauty.

These ideas of inner beauty being more important than outer beauty to the extent of affecting whether someone can be perceived as beautiful or not, regardless of whether they are physically attractive, were not mentioned with regard to male discourse on female beauty. Although I am aware there is a limitation – as I did not interview men directly to understand their opinion – women revealing their feelings towards male preferences shows that they are not happy about or accepting these preferences. According to objectification theory, 'women's bodies are looked at, evaluated, and always potentially objectified' (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997, p. 175). Women tend to internalise an observer's view to evaluate their physical selves. But from my participants' point of view, they were aware of men's preferences towards a woman's appearance, yet they attempted to develop the notion of inner beauty to resist how men define women's attractiveness. Most participants paid more attention to inner beauty than men and avoided focusing purely on outer beauty when judging another woman's appearance. This shows that, in some way, they rejected the male objectification of women and showed resistance to this type of discourse. However, I am aware that most participants were still eager to achieve outer beauty standards. As I said earlier, inner beauty and outer beauty strategies are not in polarised positions but entwined, whereby the participants could negotiate them according to their own preferences and needs.

The second inner beauty strategy is utilised to reject the mainstream idea of female beauty and focus on cultivating inner beauty. My participants often criticised beauty standards based on physical appearance in the media. For Simona, she recognised that Chinese celebrities become popular based on their outer beauty rather than their intelligence or personality:

Simona: I think women should be confident and independent and then be educated. Nowadays, Chinese idols, although they are famous, when I heard them talking, I don't want to see this person anymore. In fact, they are beautiful. Do you know Chaoyue Yang (a Chinese female celebrity)?

Researcher: I heard about her, but I never watched her interview.

Simona: I have to admit she is very pretty, but do you know a Chinese programme called *I can I BB*? In one of the episodes, she was the guest. If you don't listen to her talking, you think she is pretty to look at, but once she started talking, I had to fast forward. I don't want to listen to her; her image has a big 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 her mouth; I think she is not beautiful at all. The way she talks is very poor quality.

This quote shows that Simona recognised how Chaoyue Yang represents a mainstream beauty standard in the media. However, she did not think Chaoyue Yang was beautiful because she lacked inner beauty. Although media discourses have a huge impact on beauty standards, Simona was not a passive receiver regarding the media's influence here: she actively voiced her opinion rejecting these standards. She used the Chinese word *dazhe* (打折; pinyin: *Dǎzhé*), which can be directly translated into English as a form of *discount*. *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 – the overall value can be diminished. It also shows that a lack of inner beauty is problematic for women because if they only look pretty without so-called 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 (Darling-Wolf, 2003, 2004) found that Japanese women often criticised the media's focus on women's appearance.

Additionally, Simona used inner beauty to measure and judge other women, which shows critically how inner beauty could be a tool to discipline and regulate women. Despite this potential criticism, investing in and developing inner beauty seems like a reliable way for women to cultivate themselves, benefiting more throughout their life. Many participants want to pursue the development of their inner beauty, which will enable them to feel beautiful even as they get older. For example, Simona expressed admiration towards her female professor, who is in her fifties, saying that she thought the professor has *qizhi* and so is very beautiful. Simona was inspired to improve her inner beauty so that as she aged, she was still able to feel beautiful.

In summary, a significant observation to note is that women partially disassociate themselves from patriarchal structures where women are objectified and sexualised by addressing the importance of inner beauty. Instead, they treat and perceive one another humanely, thereby giving value to inner beauty characteristics and qualities. However, that is not to say that these values and qualities are not products of a patriarchal society. For example, some inner beauty qualities and characteristics might be perceived as subordinating women and certainly as articulating particular versions of femininity. Nevertheless, it shows how women can resist male-dominant discourse by emphasising the importance of inner beauty and valuing it more greatly. As Zhang (2013) argues, stressing the importance of personal qualities allows women to protest against the dominant male discourse of objectifying women's bodies. Chinese women utilise inner beauty strategies to resist the dominant male discourse on female beauty, and they develop a feeling of womanhood to take their place back. It is not only for other women but also for themselves. Moreover, inner beauty strategies are also used to reject mainstream beauty standards. Women should pursue inner beauty and develop their intellectual and professional abilities instead of paying attention to appearance, which can be seen as a waste of time, money and energy. However, the definition of inner beauty illustrates state interest by turning young women into what it considers to be successful, financially independent neoliberal subjects while maintaining a patriarchal structure to keep women in traditional gender roles in society. These findings show 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: 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 young Chinese women. Although my participants valued inner beauty as a way to empower themselves, it does not necessarily function to liberate and empower young women due to the complexity of inner beauty discourse.

7.3 Conclusion

This chapter explored what female Chinese beauty is according to my participants' responses. I argued that inner and outer beauty are inseparable within the Chinese context. Previous studies have failed to discuss inner beauty in relation to the large amount of feminist literature on beauty culture studies, so I wanted to draw attention to the concept of inner beauty and its implications for a broader – yet more culturally specific – feminist

understanding of beauty culture. I argue that the concept of inner beauty is neither value-free nor has a fixed definition. Inner beauty discourse has different meanings for my participants that can encompass both traditional and modern conceptions of femininity. As a consequence, participants navigate their own way between traditional and modern discourses.

In the last section of this chapter, I analysed the complex relationship between inner and outer beauty. I found that my participants sought empowerment by adopting inner and outer beauty strategies. Outer beauty strategies involved accommodating social expectations and gender norms to gain power. In contrast, inner beauty resisted the male-dominant discourse on female beauty and rejected the mainstream focus on women's outer beauty standards. It is worth noting that inner and outer beauty strategies are not polarised. Instead, women in this study were able to adopt both inner and outer beauty strategies simultaneously, although participants placed a higher value on inner beauty, which was seen as enabling them to gain empowerment. However, I argue that inner beauty discourse is complex and mixed with traditional gender ideology and neoliberalist values; thus, it 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, the beauty industry and other dominant discourses.

In this chapter, I will summarise the key contributions of this thesis, including the conceptual debate of postfeminism as transnational discourse. I then discuss my findings in relation to the key feminist debate of women's agency within beauty culture and the methodological contribution. I also illustrate the marginalisation of the concept of inner beauty within feminist work and how it can be a crucial conceptual tool to understand the extra layer of complexity within women's relationship with beauty culture. Lastly, I will outline my research limitations and implications for further research.

This thesis was concerned with young women's engagement in beauty practices and presents a detailed analysis of the complexities involved in young women's negotiations with beauty cultures in contemporary China. I set out to investigate how young women articulate their reasons for engaging in beauty practices and how they understand and define female beauty. More importantly, following on from the above questions, I examined to what extent postfeminist discourse applies to Chinese women's relationship with beauty practices. The analysis chapters revealed that participants utilised postfeminist discourse of *choice* and *pleasure* when explaining their motivation. However, when discussing their initial reasons for engaging in beauty practices, it was revealed that beauty practices have become normalised because of peer influence and heteronormative beauty standards. The analysis of beauty diaries also confirmed how the daily repetition of beauty practices reinforces gender norms. Furthermore, this thesis illustrated an additional layer of complexity relating to the participants' situation within Chinese beauty culture. It was found that Chinese women utilise inner and outer beauty discourse to reclaim and define the term *female beauty* in a way that is fluid and continually negotiated.

8.1 Debate concerning postfeminism in China

A key contribution of the thesis was to examine whether postfeminism can be seen as transnational discourse to understand Chinese women's beautification experience within a globalised context. The vast majority of postfeminism studies have come from Western feminist scholars and are based on the experience of Western media and women. With increasing scholarly attention being paid to postfeminism in China, a major discussion is whether postfeminism exists in China (Thornham and Pengpeng, 2010; Kung, 2014;

Chang and Ren, 2016; Dippner, 2018b; Liao, 2019; Li, 2020; Yang, 2020). However, most research has so far been based on examining postfeminism within media contexts, and postfeminism has not yet been well addressed in regard to Chinese beauty culture, which is related to media discourse but not reducible to it. Therefore, in Chapter 4, I explored young Chinese women's motivations to engage in beauty practices regarding the discourse of choice and pleasure. They perceive themselves as freely choosing subjects, free from the male gaze, enjoying and celebrating the pleasure of beautification as confident individuals. Postfeminist discourse was observed in the participants' narratives as a result of their adopting Western values and ideologies and partly rejecting traditional Chinese values.

I found three aspects of young Chinese women's pleasure of beautification: the consumption of beauty products, the process of beautification and the end result of beautification. This aligns with some feminists who argue that beauty practices can be perceived as pleasurable (Frost, 1999; Cahill, 2003). However, my participants' experiences of pleasure were complicated. For instance, I explored how the pleasure of beautification is associated with consumerism, aesthetics, skills, career development and sisterhood. Moreover, I examined participants' narratives, which illustrated the discourse of choice whereby they often used ideas of choice to justify their reasons for engaging in beauty practices. Participants articulated their choice along the lines of women doing it for themselves, women not doing it for men and women being empowered through the discourse of choice. Furthermore, the discourse of confidence also shows that, on the one hand, the participants gained confidence through beautification and often emphasised positive feelings (Orgad and Gill, 2021). On the other hand, if they did not engage in beauty practices, such as wearing makeup, they would not feel confident.

These findings primarily emphasise the existence of postfeminism in China and the complex situation of how young Chinese women's feelings and choices are constructed by postfeminist discourse and local value systems. Thus, a postfeminist framework can be limited as it only illustrates transnational ideologies, such as consumerism and neoliberalism. Therefore, I examined local value systems and social contexts in Chapter 5. I discussed how young Chinese women's engagement in beauty practices is constructed and limited by the discourse of peer influence, heteronormative beauty standards and a desire to fit in.

In Chapter 7, I illustrated the culturally specific discourse of the symbolic relationship between inner and outer beauty in a Chinese context. Young women utilise inner and outer beauty to gain empowerment and negotiate with Chinese beauty culture. Yet the concept of inner and outer beauty being closely connected is not exclusive to Chinese culture. East and South East Asian cultures have also been influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, whereby the concepts of inner and outer beauty have shaped discursive constructions and understandings of female beauty. Indeed, in the academic literature on beauty culture in East and South East Asia, the concepts of inner and outer beauty are often discussed together (Lee, Rudd and Kim, 2001; Darling-Wolf, 2004; Omphornuwat, 2010). The concepts of inner and outer beauty also have historical currency in the West. As Sontag (2005, p. 682) explains when referring to Ancient Greece, ‘beauty was understood as a virtue: a kind of excellence from the Greeks, but the concept of beauty includes the “inside” (character, intellect) and “outside” (looks) are separated in modern society’. However, the concept of inner beauty is rarely discussed in feminist literature. As Holliday and Taylor (2006) found, feminists rarely examine the definition of beauty but focus on questioning existing beauty standards. When feminists talk about beauty, it is automatically assumed that it refers to women’s outer or physical appearance. Existing academic literature rarely considers the concept of inner beauty and therefore, seldom discusses the relationship between inner and outer beauty. Many feminists have sought to move beyond a focus on the female body by paying attention to women’s interior or psychic life. These feminists discuss how women can cultivate psychological strength to survive in a neoliberal society (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Gill and Orgad, 2015; Scharff, 2016).

Meanwhile, within the Chinese context, the extant scholarship focuses on outer beauty and *marginalises* the significance of inner beauty – despite 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. Chapter 7 addresses the importance of the concepts of inner beauty within the context of Chinese culture. Previous studies failed to discuss it in relation to feminist literature on beauty culture studies, so I have drawn attention to inner beauty and conceptualised it to broaden the feminist understanding of beauty culture. Therefore, we can see that participants’ motivations regarding their engagement in beauty practices are deeply rooted in local value systems and in the process of neoliberalism and postfeminism. As such, the central

argument of this thesis was that postfeminism can be seen as transnational discourse to understand Chinese women's experiences within a globalised context. However, postfeminism offers a particular conceptual lens emerging from the Western context. It is, therefore, useful to be coupled with other perspectives formed from local dominant discourse and concepts to facilitate a suitable framework for studying Chinese beauty culture.

8.2 Feminist debate regarding women's agency

Within the development of beauty culture studies, a key concern of feminism has centred around the idea of agency. Under the influence of postfeminist and neoliberalist ideologies, the notion of choice has occupied public discourse in the West. Feminists pay attention to the discursive framework of beauty practices by exploring how women's choices are constructed (Braun, 2009; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011; Crann *et al.*, 2017).

This thesis situates itself within these feminist debates to understand Chinese women's experiences regarding their engagement in beauty practices. I found that participants' beautification experiences could not simply be interpreted as oppressive or liberating. Participants acknowledged pleasure and empowerment by engaging in beauty practices but also understood the limitations of outer beauty within a patriarchal structure. In Chapter 4, I showed young women's feelings of agency, pleasure and empowerment through beauty practices, but I also discussed how those narratives are problematic within Chinese society. Thus, in Chapter 5, I showed the social constraints within Chinese society and how different life stages require women to fulfil different roles. In high school, beauty practices are discouraged by schools and parents. However, in order to meet social expectations and enter heterosexual relationships during their university period, women have to engage in beauty practices in an attempt to meet men's expectations of female beauty standards. Moreover, the development of a score measurement system that emphasises questionable value judgements of good and bad appearance reinforces the need for Chinese women to engage in beauty practices to avoid social stigma. The findings showed that the score measurement system visibly regulates young women's appearance. The social stigma of being makeup-free has partially removed their agency from beauty practices. Participants wore makeup to avoid being perceived as looking sickly or seeming lazy and disrespectful to others. Their beauty diaries further confirmed beauty norms by illustrating the repetition of engaging in beauty practices. Certain beauty practices – makeup, dressing up, dieting

and so on – are normalised in society, so participants engaged in these beauty practices regularly.

Although Chapter 5 illustrated the social constraints of beauty practices for young women, I could not argue that young Chinese women are simply passive victims of beauty culture within a patriarchal society without agency. The reason being that participants actively negotiated with beauty discourse and redefined the term of female beauty to gain empowerment, as shown in Chapter 7. However, I argued 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 examination of inner and outer beauty discourse that illustrated women's engagement with beautification is more complex than the overly simplistic binary interpretation in terms of oppression and liberation. For instance, participants had developed reflexivity towards beauty culture and fluidly negotiated to gain empowerment, which showed they were not victims or cultural dupes. They were aware of the beauty standards, requirements and expectations regarding women's appearance. Thus, they were not simply passive receivers, yet they were not free from social constraints. Their discourse of inner and outer beauty provides an example to understand women's complex experiences within Chinese beauty culture beyond a feminist binary approach. This thesis illustrated the complexities of women's experiences within beauty culture and suggested their agency is fluid, changing and developing over time.

8.3 Methodological contribution

Although diaries are often used in social science research, there are no studies that utilise diaries to examine women's engagement in beauty practices in China. Diaries enable researchers to collect rich data concerning participants' activities, thoughts and feelings over a longer period (Jacelon and Imperio, 2005; Bijoux and Myers, 2006; Day and Thatcher, 2009; Kenten, 2010; Morrison, 2012). Thus, this study utilised a mixed methodological approach, including in-depth interviews and a beauty diary–interview method (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977), which combined solicited participants' diaries and follow-up interviews. To access young Chinese women's life experiences regarding their engagement in beauty practices in more detail, the beauty diary–interview method provided an alternative way to examine women's everyday life experiences of

beautification. It enabled this research to access and observe activities and events in different places and spaces that are often impossible for an in-depth interview method to access. Moreover, the follow-up interviews provided the participants with a chance to reflect and crystallise their thoughts and gave them another opportunity to express themselves. This had the benefit of lessening the potential for the participants' words to be misrepresented, thereby increasing the research findings' reliability. By adapting Kenten's (2010) framework of studying homosexual people's everyday experiences, this thesis has provided an example of how we can study women's everyday beautification experiences, including diary design and guidelines.

In Chapter 6, I discussed the results of the beauty diary–interview method. Participants expressed their thoughts and practices in their diaries in various ways, which included writing and photo formats. Furthermore, participants often utilised the narrative of *I keep repeating myself* during the follow-up interviews, revealing the repetition of daily beauty practices. All participants repeatedly engaged in various beauty practices daily, which arguably contributes to the normativity of beauty practices and *doing gender*. By conforming to repetitive beauty practices, this reinforces heterosexual gender norms and beauty norms. The beauty diary–interview method provided richer and deeper data into participants' everyday lives over a longer period compared to a single in-depth interview. Although it may not offer alternative or new perspectives on initial findings, it can be perceived as a supplement to this study by increasing its credibility as it reflects the normative beauty practices investigated in Chapter 5. The incorporation of the beauty diary–interview method was, therefore, worthwhile. I hope this study encourages other researchers to utilise creative methods to fully explore women's everyday lives so that we can gain richer insights.

8.4 Research limitations and implications for further research

There are limitations to this study insofar as the sample was relatively small and the demography of the group quite homogenous: all participants were heterosexual and of a similar age and socioeconomic status. There are limitations associated with this relatively small sample that could be addressed by future research by incorporating a more diverse selection of women of different ages, classes and socioeconomic backgrounds. From the data, we can see that age plays an important role in terms of beauty practices. Older women are often not expected to engage in beauty practices in a Chinese context. As most

academic research focuses on Western women, it is rare to find studies that focus on older women in China. Furthermore, there are significant cultural differences between older women in the West compared to older women in China. As I discussed in the literature review, the older generation of Chinese women grew up during Mao's regime, where they were encouraged not to engage in beauty practices. Therefore, researchers must focus on studying older Chinese women who lived during Mao's era to broaden and contextualise our understanding of Chinese beauty culture. I think it would be worth examining these women's experiences to understand how social and political factors influenced their perception of female beauty and engagement in beauty practices. Moreover, rural women and working-class women are also underrepresented, so future research would benefit from being more inclusive and investigating these women's perceptions and motivations regarding beauty practices in China. Furthermore, in the West, Taub (2003) found that lesbian beauty standards differed from mainstream standards and that participants reported how they were influenced by lesbian beauty norms. Thus, it would also be valuable to investigate Chinese LGBTQ+ communities to be more inclusive of people who are often marginalised. Furthermore, marketing research has also shown that an increasing number of men beautify themselves in China. Thus, it would be beneficial to understand men's experiences so that we can come to more fully understand and appreciate Chinese beauty culture. As stated in the introduction, the beauty industry is a relatively new phenomenon in China and has been rapidly developing, so there is much scope for academic research to be done.

8.5 Concluding remarks

Within the dramatic social and economic changes in China, this study fills a gap within the existing academic literature by doing feminist research regarding postfeminism and beauty culture in China. It also offers insight into a sample of 20 young Chinese women's experiences of engaging in beauty practices while sharing these women's voices with the global feminist community. An important aspect of this study is to draw attention to postfeminist studies in China by interviewing Chinese women regarding their agency, choice and beauty practices. It, therefore, provides a case study which facilitates an understanding of whether postfeminism is transnational discourse. Thus, this research will contribute towards broadening our academic knowledge of beauty culture while making a unique contribution to feminist and Chinese cultural studies.

considering my own position as a Chinese woman who has lived and experienced the beauty pressures in China, I feel that I have benefitted from learning more about feminism and being able to listen and read about how other feminists think and feel. While learning, I have had many wonderful moments where I am touched or inspired by what I am reading. Sometimes, I feel like my questions have been asked by other feminist authors, and in those moments, I feel connected to them. I also feel that I have benefitted from being part of the feminist academic community, where I have received much intellectual stimulation and emotional support.

Although it is difficult to change social, political and cultural environments, I hope my research will facilitate some positive change where other women and I can open up a dialogue where it is acceptable to talk out loud and create a space where we can become more informed on how beauty culture is constructed and how it may affect our thoughts and behaviours. Only through sharing our experiences, raising awareness, openly engaging in discussion and disseminating knowledge can we encourage positive change and loosen the grip of the beauty industry as it imposes beauty standards on women. Maybe such a movement could crack the foundation of the patriarchal value system in China, where it is normal and acceptable for women to experience and be subject to blatant objectification, sexual harassment and moral judgements – among other forms of gender oppression. I hope that China's beauty culture and ideology can one day shift towards a new value system that is liberating and truly empowering for all women of China.

Appendix A: Beauty diary template

My Beauty Diary

Date of first diary entry:

If you have any questions or concerns about your diary, please contact Hua Ma through WeChat at florama99 or email to Hua.ma@uea.ac.uk

Guidelines for diary completion

Thank you for choosing to participate in my research by keeping a diary. This one to two-week diary is specifically interested in your day-to-day experiences of beauty practices and body consciousness. There are two ways you can record your daily diary: written and/or audio recorded. Please try to fill in or audio record your diary entry every day, by reflecting on what types of beauty practices you engage in and to record the place and events where you become aware of your appearance and beauty related issues, in either a positive or a negative way. These thoughts may have arisen through comments said to you, something you hear or see, a look from someone, your reaction to a TV drama, social media content or an advertisement or any other situation. In completing your diary, please try to include the following:

- The date
- What beauty method did you use? Do you have any related thoughts?
- What happened to make you aware of your appearance and beauty? Where you were? Who else was involved? How did it make you feel? Did you mention this to anyone else, who, how did they react?
- If you wish, you can include any photos which capture your feeling and explain why. For example, beauty products, beauty images in the media or advertisements.

If there are any other experiences that you would like to write about, that didn't happen within these two weeks, please add these. Please don't worry about grammar, spelling or handwriting. You and your diary entries will remain anonymous. If you know of anyone else who may be interested in taking part in the research, please pass on my contact details. Thank you for your participation.

Day 1

Date:

Guidelines for diary completion

What beauty method did you use? Do you have any related thoughts? What happened to make you aware of your appearance and beauty? Where were you? Who else was involved? How did it make you feel? Did you mention this to anyone else, who, how did they react?

Day 2

Date:

Guidelines for diary completion

What beauty method did you use? Do you have any related thoughts? What happened to make you aware of your appearance and beauty? Where were you? Who else was involved? How did it make you feel? Did you mention this to anyone else, who, how did they react?

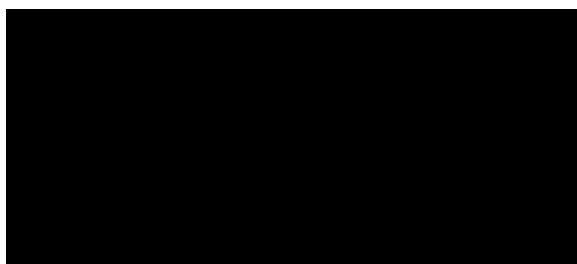
[6 pages followed this format]

Please add anything else you have remembered or thought about in the space below, but that did not happen during the time that you kept the diary.

Thank you very much for completing the diary.

Please return this to Hua Ma through WeChat at florama99 or e-mail to
Hua.ma@uea.ac.uk

Appendix B: Call for participants on personal social media



研究招募通告

亲爱的女生们：

你们好，我是英国东英吉利亚大学(University of East Anglia) 博士在读的一位女学生。我的研究是关于中国女性对女性美的看法以及她们如何实践自己的所知道的变美方法（比如说：穿衣打扮，减肥，化妆和整容等等）。我希望招募年纪在 18-25 岁的中国女生，通过采访的形式来让你们分享自己对女性美这一系列话题的想法和个人感受。

衷心邀请符合要求的女生，抽出你宝贵的时间来参与我的研究。如有兴趣者或者有疑问，请与我联系，我会详细的为你讲述我的研究和回答你的疑问。

希望得到各位女生的帮助和支持，衷心感谢！

祝好

马华

Email: Hua.ma@uea.ac.uk

微信：florama99

本人已回国，在北京的小伙伴们欢迎邀约。
我在北京计划停留到年底进行我的学术采访，希望深入了解和学习，当今中国年轻女性的想法和生活方式。衷心邀请有符合条件的女生接受我的采访，也希望大家帮忙转发扩散我的招募信息，感恩。😊

Appendix C: Call for participants online beauty forum



请爱美的女孩看起来：招募研究被采访者



来自: 花子 2019-10-01 20:38:08

亲爱的女性朋友们:

你们好, 我是英国东英吉利大学(University of East Anglia) 博士在读的一位女学生, 我的研究是关于中国女性对理想中女性美的看法以及她们如何实践自己的所知道的变美方法 (比如说: 减肥, 化妆和整容等等)。我希望招募20名年龄在18-24岁的现居北京的中国女生, 通过采访的形式来让你们分享自己对女性美这一系列话题的想法和个人感受。衷心邀请符合要求的女生, 抽出你宝贵的时间来参与我的研究。如有兴趣者或者有疑问, 请与我联系, 我将会详细的为您讲述我的研究和回答您的疑问。希望得到各位女生的帮助和支持, 衷心感谢!

祝好

马华

Email: Hua.ma@uea.ac.uk

Appendix D: Participants' Details

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Relationship to the researcher
Wenwen	25	Postgraduate student	Classmate
Xiaoxiao	23	Postgraduate student	Introduced by friends
Echo	20	Undergraduate student	Recruited online
Xiaoqi	23	Postgraduate student	Introduced by my Professor
Simona	21	Postgraduate student	Recruited at the university
Gong	18	Undergraduate student	Recruited at the university
Somus	18	Undergraduate student	Recruited at the university
Chang	22	Postgraduate student	Introduced by a participant
Xiaole	24	Postgraduate student	Recruited at the university
Huanhuan	23	Postgraduate student	Recruited at the university
Sensen	22	Bank cashier	Introduced by friends
Deer	24	Office worker	Introduced by friends
Holly	24	Editor	Classmate
Huihui	23	Office worker	Introduced by my family
Yuan	21	Undergraduate student	Introduced by a participant
Sherry	22	Office worker	Introduced by a participant
Min	23	Office worker	Introduced by friends
Xiaokong	24	Insurance Saleswoman	Introduced by a participant
Ping	22	Teacher	Introduced by a participant
Lu	21	Undergraduate student	Introduced by a participant

Appendix E: Ethics approval form



Research and Innovation Services

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1603 591574
Email: grec@uea.ac.uk
<https://portal.uea.ac.uk/ren/research-integrity>

Hua Ma
School of Art, Media & American Studies
UEA

30th September 2019

Dear Hua,

Our reference: HUM 19-122

I am writing to you on behalf of the University of East Anglia's General Research Ethics Committee, in response to your request for ethical approval for your project *'Becoming "Beautiful": Feminine Beauty, Beauty Practices, and Women's Agency in Contemporary China'*.

Having considered the information that you have provided in your correspondence I am pleased to confirm that your project has been approved on behalf of the Committee.

You should let us know if there are any significant changes to the proposal which raise any further ethical issues.

Please note that this approval is valid for up to five years. If your project lasts for more than five years, you must re-apply for ethics approval no more than five years from the date of this letter.

Approval by the General Research Ethics Committee should **not** be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study GDPR compliant, please contact your institution's Data Protection Officer.

Yours sincerely,

Victoria Hamilton

**pp. Hannah Chroston, Secretary
General Research Ethics Committee**

Appendix F: Participant Information Sheet



Hua Ma
PhD Student
20.09.2019

School of Art, Media and
American Studies
University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Becoming “beautiful”: Feminine Beauty, Beauty Practices, and Women’s Agency in Contemporary China

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study regarding Chinese women’s experiences and attitudes towards beauty practices and feminine beauty. I am interested in understanding your motivation, attitudes and belief towards engagement with beauty practices and how you describe feminine beauty. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are aged between 18-24 and represent the younger generation of women in China. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don’t understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researchers:

Hua Ma, PhD student, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, School of Art, Media and American Studies, University of East Anglia.

This will take place under the supervision of Prof. Su Holmes, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, School of Art, Media and American Studies, University of East Anglia

(3) What will the study involve for me?

Your participation will involve having one interview with Hua Ma. This will take place in public space such as coffee shop or tearoom, at a time that is convenient to you and the interview will be audio recorded. You will be asked: to describe feminine beauty; to reflect on and interpret the representation of feminine beauty in the media; to discuss whether there are beauty ideals or standards; to express your opinions of why women generally/personally engage in beauty practices; and to describe your personal consumption and application of beauty products and services. Following this interview, you will be invited to participate further in this study by writing a diary over one to two weeks. This participation is entirely optional. If you agree to participate in the project, you will be asked to write a diary over a 1-2-week period detailing on a daily basis your beauty practices, as well as any thoughts or feelings you may have in regard to beauty and appearance topics. You will also be given a few questions to act as prompts to aid you in your writing process. At the end of this diary period we will meet for a follow-up interview to discuss what you have written.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

It is expected that the interview will take between 60-90 mins.

Optional:

Writing a diary for 1-2 weeks, and a Follow-up interview 60-90 minutes

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time. You can do this by email (Hua.ma@uea.ac.uk) or by phone (07511455548). You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the

information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results. However, you are only able to request to be excluded up to the point when this thesis has been written up.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Discussing issues relating to your personal experience might bring up issues of concern. We are able to stop the interview at any time you feel uncomfortable.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

I would hope that by talking about your experience that it will allow you to reflect on the beauty culture in China and understanding how this culture is part of your identity in contemporary China, so it will help you to know yourself better regarding beauty culture. An important aspect of this study is drawing attention to women's body and beauty culture research in mainland China. It not only contributes to academic knowledge but also shares your generation of women's voices to the global cultural research.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2015). Your information will be stored securely, and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Hua Ma will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by providing a contact detail on the consent section of this information sheet. This feedback will be in the form of a one-page lay summary of the findings. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's The General Research Ethics Committee (G-REC) in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities,

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Hua Ma
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
School of Art, Media and American Studies
University of East Anglia
Norwich NR4 7TJ
Hua.ma@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:

Prof. Su Holmes
Susan.holmes@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted, please contact myself or my supervisor. If you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact Dr Karina Aveyard at K.Aveyard@uea.ac.uk.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return to Hua Ma during the scheduled interview. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

Appendix G: Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- ✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study up to the point when the writing up has been completed.
- ✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

Audio-recording YES NO

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study? YES NO

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

Email: _____

Signature:

PRINT name:

Date:

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2nd Copy to Participant)

I, [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- ✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study up to the point when the writing up has been completed.
- ✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

Audio-recording YES NO

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study? YES NO

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

Email: _____

Signature:

PRINT name:

Date:

Appendix H: Interview schedule

Aims

What is the participant's perception of beauty practices and female beauty ideals?

Why do they engage in beauty practices?

Are these beauty practices perceived by these women as obligatory or a source of pleasure and self-expression?

What factors influence their decision on beauty practices?

Potential questions for semi-structured interview

Introduce yourself

Theme: female beauty ideals

Do you think female beauty/appearance is important? Why or why not?

Can you describe the female beauty ideals?

Do you think by engaging in beauty practices it can enhance your female beauty? Or make you attractive, why?

Theme: Beauty practices

What type of practices would you include within beauty practices and why?

(prompt: makeup, skincare, whitening, dieting, exercise, shapewear, dressing, plastic surgery, ear piercing/other piercing, hair styling, nail, hair removing)

When and how did you begin your beauty practices such as wearing makeup or dressing up, why?

Can you tell me your daily beauty practices routine now? Fashion style?

What types of beauty practices you are familiar with and engage in frequently, why?

What types of beauty practices have you resisted and why?

Are there any beauty practices you wish to do in the future, and why?

Do you alter your beauty practices depending on the situation and places, such as going to work, dating, go out with friends? Why?

Theme: Reasons

Why do you engage in beauty practices?

What thoughts and feelings do you have when participating in beauty practices?

Can you explain to me whether there is any social expectation for you / women to engage in beauty practices?

(Prompt: Do you think doing beauty practices daily is necessary for women? Why?)

Do you agree with this statement: “Wearing makeup is way to show your respect to others?” Please can you explain your reasons why you do or do not?

Theme: Influence

How do you think media influence your choice of beauty practices?

What types of media you access often?

Can you describe the ideal feminine beauty which is represented in the media?

Who do you think who is can represent those ideal feminine beauty?

What do you think the media portrays standard of ideal feminine beauty?

Do you want to achieve it? Do you have pressure to achieve it? why or why not?

Do you think the media has an influence on your beauty consumption choices? why or why not? if yes, can you tell me an example of it?

Appendix I: Follow-up interview questions

Diary Based Interview Questions

- Do you normally keep a diary?
- How did you find keeping the diary?
- Were there any problems with the diary?
- Did knowing that I'd be reading it affect the content?
- Is there anything you didn't include?

Subsequent questions related specifically to the individual diary entries.

Appendix J: Beauty practices

Beauty practices	Number of participants who engaged in these practices as reported in their beauty diary
Dressing up	8
Makeup	9
Dieting	4
Exercise	2
Hair styling	7
Skincare regiment	9
Posture correction	2
Wearing fashion accessories	5

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