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Negotiating beauty: exploring beauty narratives of Chinese women in different life stages

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ABSTRACT

Under the one-child policy in China, post-80s women have experienced dramatic social, economic, and political changes that differ from previous generations. This article explores post-80s women's experiences of beautification in their different life stages from a feminist perspective, drawing upon 14 in-depth interviews with post-80s women to examine their perception of beauty and beauty practices in different life stages. Three main themes emerged that were intricately associated with two distinct life stages. During their transition from schoolgirls to young women, (1) participants perceive their younger selves as naïve, passive receivers of the beauty culture. When transitioning from young women towards becoming wives and mothers, (2) their values regarding beauty shift from emphasizing outer beauty to emphasizing inner beauty. (3) They also transition to embracing natural beauty standards. This paper argues that these women's perceptions of beauty and beauty practices are fluid and change across different life stages. 'Trivialised' everyday beauty discourse exists to enable them to negotiate beauty practices and gender roles. This research suggests that young Chinese women, especially those leaving high school and entering university, would benefit from readily accessible academic feminist knowledge and debate regarding beauty culture to facilitate critical thinking and informed decision making.

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Introduction

Beauty has been a contested concept throughout history due to its interconnection with pertinent gender issues regarding equality, violence towards women, representation and stereotyping in media, and intersectionality. Despite this, female beauty and beauty practices were often dismissed as frivolous topics rather than worthy subjects of academic study. This dismissiveness began to change notably in the 1960s when feminist research challenged the status quo and illustrated that beauty matters and is deeply intertwined with gender, race, class, power and politics. In earlier feminist work, female beauty was understood within the context of a patriarchal social structure and therefore considered a source of oppression for women whereby beauty standards and beauty practices were perceived as tools to control women's bodies, often leading to negative self-perception when failing to achieve unrealistic beauty standards (Bordo, 2003; Wolf, 1990). Consequently, much research focuses on female body dissatisfaction and women's experience of more extreme and noticeable beauty practices, such as cosmetic surgery and unhealthy dieting, which has led to feminist research on eating disorders in China (Holmes & Ma, 2023; Wen, 2013).

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Arguably, feminists' critique of beauty standards and beauty practices in this way enlarges the differences between men and women and symbolizes women's subordinate status (Jeffreys, 2015). Similarly, many feminists challenge the cultural dupe perception of women as passive victims of beauty culture. Instead, they position women as active and reflective knowers, where beauty is viewed as an expression of their agency and pleasure (Cahill, 2003; Davis, 1991; Frost, 1999). However, this dualistic notion that beauty is either oppressive or liberating is also challenged by many contemporary feminist scholars who are moving away from such a simplistic binary approach to understanding beauty. Similarly, Holliday and Taylor (2006, p. 180) point out that some feminists have tended to narrowly focus on 'who is in charge of the standards and definitions of beauty and what their motives are for maintaining them' (p.180), which neglects to explore fundamental questions such as what makes someone beautiful. Hence, certain feminists approach the study of beauty with greater diversity. Contributing to this intricate comprehension of beauty suggests that beauty has ethical implications (Widdows, 2018). For example, women might perceive an obligation to engage in beauty practices, and failing to do so could lead to feelings of moral wrongdoing. Additionally, scholars have conceptualized beauty as aesthetical labour that requires an investment of resources such as time and money and physical, mental and emotional effort/energy (Elias et al., 2017). Another facet of comprehending beauty is within Black feminist scholars' work, such as Craig (2006), who views beauty 'as a gendered, racialised, and contested symbolic resource', which leads to much more academic work that explores the link between beauty and racism (Dosekun, 2020; Figueroa & Moore, 2013; Tate, 2007). The above perspectives of beauty are not exhaustive or represent the full array of academic work concerned with beauty but make the case that academic discussion regarding beauty has become more complicated and nuanced.

Colebrook (2006, p. 132) proposed, 'How is beauty defined, deployed, defended, subordinated, marketed or manipulated, and how do these tactics intersect with gender and value?' This significant question represents a valuable approach to beauty that requires feminists to pay attention to the differences and uniqueness of women from specific social locations so we might understand their situations, thoughts and experiences. This study, therefore, focuses explicitly on the cultural discourse of post-80s Chinese women, as this group of women are from a specific generation born during China's single-child policy, who experienced the dramatic social, political and economic change within their youth after China's economic reform policy in 1978. Since 2000, the term post-80s (八零后; also known as the post-1980s generation) has become widely known in China, being used in articles and books, as well as in media and public discourse (Zhao, 2011). This term initially started to refer to young writers born in the 1980s and later came to refer to people born between 1980 and 1990 (Cheng & Foley, 2018). It is also important to contextualize these groups of women in the specific social and political time and space to understand their beauty discourse and practices. This study aims to reveal the shifting perspective of beauty and gender ideology behind these women's understanding of beauty and beauty practices. Responding to this context, this study draws on interviews with 14 Chinese women from urban China to understand their changing perceptions of female beauty and beauty practices as they have experienced different life stages, from being students to becoming workers, wives, and mothers. In particular, this study tries to avoid fitting these women's experiences of beauty culture into overly simplistic theoretical frameworks of oppression versus empowerment. Instead, it seeks to contribute to a new academic appreciation of studying and understanding beauty by offering insight into the richness and complexity of these women's beauty discourse within the context of their unique positions.

Literature review

Contextualisation of gender and beauty ideals in China

In pre-modern China, the philosophical concept of *yin-yang* within Taoism (also known as Daoism) and Confucianism has profoundly influenced the construction of gender (J. Liu, 2017).

The yin-yang philosophy asserts that opposites hold elements of each other and combine to create dynamic unity (Fang & Faure, 2011). Yin-yang, therefore, offers a balanced understanding of gender that embodies equality, where men and women are interdependent and equally valued, neither being more or less important or better or worse than the other. However, many scholars argue that the concept of yin-yang has contributed to Chinese women's oppression (Hinsch, 1994; Mann, 2011; Rosenlee, 2012). For instance, Wang (2005) found different interpretations of yin-yang regarding gender construction related to a shift in meaning. Originally, the philosophy of yin-yang focused on harmony and balance. Later in the Han dynasty, the philosopher and writer Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒) (179–104 BC), known for his promotion of Confucianism, integrated the concept of yin-yang into Confucianism. He formulated the fixed distinction whereby yin refers to women, and yang refers to men concerning Confucian gender roles, which led to a rigid gender hierarchy and may be why some interpretations of yin-yang are related to women's oppression (Wang, 2005). For instance, the Confucian interpretation of yin-yang could be perceived as constructing gender differences unfavourable to women, e.g. men were associated with qualities like strength and assertiveness (dominance/control). In contrast, women were linked to qualities such as gentleness and receptivity (weakness/submissiveness).

Despite the potential for yin-yang to reflect the hierarchical imbalance of Confucian social structure and power, yin-yang initially emphasized the equilibrium, interdependence and complementary nature of the relationship between women and men rather than positioning them in opposition (Wang, 2005). Allan (1997) also challenges the conventional binary understanding of gender as strictly male and female and illustrates the fluidity and flexibility of gender in a Chinese philosophical context. In this sense, yin-yang differs from the typical Western binary perspective on gender. Therefore, it is worthwhile for academics to reconsider how gender is formed across different cultures. As such, J. Liu (2017) proposes that academics should consider the interdependent relationship between men and women, among other understandings. For instance, traditional Confucianism's influence on women's status and roles in China has been well researched (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002; Lan & Fong, 2015; Rosenlee, 2012; H. Zhang, 2016). Confucianism assigns clear roles in the family for men and women, which instil male superiority and women's submission and subordination, where they have little power outside of the domestic sphere and are expected to follow moral principles such as the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (三从四德). Furthermore, Chinese female beauty has been subject to patriarchal power that has shaped Taoism and Confucian doctrines. According to Man (2000), within Taoism, women's beauty served to please men, emphasizing physical appearance, which can be linked to conceptions of outer beauty. In contrast, Confucian understanding of female beauty was embodied in ethics and morality, which included chastity, filial piety and marital loyalty, which can be linked to conceptions of inner beauty. Both Taoist and Confucian ideologies shaped traditional Chinese femininity. Additionally, academic research has also found that from a Chinese context, female beauty is understood to comprise both inner and outer beauty, which strongly affect each other (Luo, 2013; Ma, 2023; M. Zhang, 2012), thereby illustrating the cultural influence of yin-yang on gender construction regarding beauty.

Following the Mao era (1949–1976), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) introduced Chinese economic reform in 1978 to facilitate economic growth. With this implementation, the CCP's opinion towards beauty practices completely changed from rejecting them to embracing them, fitting with a new neoliberalist economic model. Coinciding with the Chinese economic reform, more attention has been given to external female beauty, such as makeup, fashion and physical appearance, likely due to the impact of Western beauty standards and the fashion industry (Ye et al., 2012) as well as the development of China's beauty industry (J. Yang, 2011) and with it, Chinese female beauty standards (M. Zhang, 2012). Despite the CCP's efforts to promote women's rights and equality, the agenda of women's liberation appears to have been undermined, as some academics argue that the development of China's beauty industry has led to gendered discrimination towards women where women's bodies have become an economic tool that sustains the growth of the capitalist neoliberal

economy (Xu & Feiner, 2007). For example, J. Yang (2017) argues that although beauty salons appear as depoliticized spaces, they support the development of the neoliberal economy, which supports state interests. Similarly, the widespread emergence of Chinese beauty pageants during the 1990s encouraged ideas of women's value to be primarily judged by their appearance (M. Zhang, 2013).

The advent of Chinese beauty ideals arguably mimics a Western aesthetic as a way to develop a similar economic model (Xu & Feiner, 2007) whereby beauty standards are socially perpetuated in various ways ranging from the influence of internet celebrities who are highly visible in media to technological developments (Liao, 2019), such as the intervention of beauty camera phone apps that impose rigid beauty standards in everyday selfie practices (Peng, 2021; Shao, 2023). However, coupled with the development of the beauty industry and the promotion of beauty ideals, there has arguably been an increase in the objectification of women and the male gaze. It is worth noting that there is also a rising trend that emphasizes male appearance in the West and China (Hakim, 2018, 2020; Wen, 2021), and some scholars have found that cosmetic surgery attracts much interest from men across East Asia (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012; Holliday et al., 2019; Miller, 2006). However, beauty standards in contemporary China are often stricter and more rigid for women than men, where women are judged more harshly for not meeting these standards, forcing women to spend more significant effort on their appearance (Yuan & Tian, 2023). Furthermore, women are still the leading group who purchase beauty products and services in China (Baidu Marketing Centre, 2020), and cosmetic surgery has become more popular for women in China (Deloitte Consulting and Allergan Aesthetics, 2023). Additionally, for young women to attain social benefits in both private and public spheres, they engage with various beauty practices to fit in with normalized beauty standards (Ma, 2023).

Post-80s women in China

A generational approach has proven to be a valuable lens in Chinese studies, particularly in understanding the impact of external factors on individual behaviours within specific historical contexts (J. Liu, 2022a). Discussions regarding the *post-80s* generation in China have attracted much public attention (Zhao, 2011). Originally, the Chinese term *post-80s* appeared to refer to young writers born in the 1980s in the literary domain, as they created a distinguishing narrative in their writing that was mainly about city life and the youth who had tasted and embraced consumerism (Cheng & Foley, 2018). The Chinese writer Xiaobing Gong is credited as being the first to have introduced the Chinese concept of post-80s in an online post on the Chinese Tianya forum in 2003 to describe a group of writers born after 1980 – notably referring to the well-known controversial writers Han Han and especially Jingming Guo, who gained immense popularity and media attention (both positive and negative). Jingming Guo is known to have had a significant female readership, and his novels were adapted into a film series, *Tiny Times*. The films typify the *chick flick* genre, following themes of love, life and friendship between four female protagonists, featuring three actresses born in the 1980s and one born in 1990 (F. Yang, 2020). As the phrase gained popularity, it expanded to refer to the cohort born between 1980 and 1990.

There is much academic research that discusses and captures the unique features of the cultural phenomenon of the post-80s generation experiencing dramatic and distinguished social and economic changes during their youth, such as '[the] one-child policy; the mass production of education; affluent economic life; diversified cultural structure; and globalisation and an open society' (Lian, 2014). Furthermore, academic research has explored social issues related to the post-80s generation, such as family and housing (Xian & Forrest, 2020) and educational homogamy (A. Hu & Qian, 2016). However, despite the significant academic attention the post-80s cohort has received, there has rarely been a discussion of this generation's gendered experiences nor a discussion regarding these females' experiences concerning changing social values, particularly relating to the growth of the beauty industry. Much research has addressed the negative consequences and gendered experiences of the one-child policy (一孩政策) that was introduced in 1979

and strictly implemented in urban areas of China. Some research has focused on the mothers' experiences, for example, being subjected to physical abuses such as intrusive examination and forced abortions, as well as suffering emotional abuse if they failed to give birth to a son (Croll et al., 1985; Milwertz, 1997). Daughters born during the one-child policy had an experience unique from boys and previous generations of women. In urban areas, the one-child policy challenged traditional Chinese gender ideologies, for in the past, girls were considered less important than boys, meaning the family would prioritize family resources such as care, attention and money for boys' education. In contrast, girls received fewer resources and were not expected to do well at school. However, during the one-child policy, a girl who was now the only child in the family would be treated with complete care and investment from their family – they were expected to do as well as boys, were encouraged to focus on their studies and never had to do any housework (J. Liu, 2017). During this period, where there was also a mass expansion of higher education, only child boys and girls developed and performed equally within the educational system (Fong, 2004).

Moreover, the Chinese economic reform of 1978 allowed Western brands and ideologies to enter China, during which young Chinese girls grew up amidst new ideologies and influences, such as beautification and consumerism. Girls were surrounded by Western media, advertising and brands, such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Vogue and Channel. These girls became women with distinguished life experiences compared to other generations. They lived having to navigate through a turbulent mix of traditional and modern social values that brought about a new form of Chinese femininity (Donald & Zheng, 2009; Zheng, 2016). Concerning previous research, this paper investigates women with similar urban backgrounds amongst China's post-80s cohort and explores their beauty narratives concerning their thoughts, feelings and experiences. This paper, therefore, aims to address the gap in previous academic research by giving voice to Chinese women born in the 1980s by addressing two main questions: 1) In light of China's political shifts and changing social values regarding female beauty, how do post-80s women personally understand female beauty and Chinese beauty culture? 2) Has their perception of female beauty and beauty practices changed in different life stages, from being students to workers to wives and mothers?

Methodology

To understand post-80s women's experience of beatification, this study sampled 14 Chinese women from urban cities born 1980–1990. It is essential to recognize the difference within the post-80s women, as those born in mainland cities had very different experiences than those born in areas such as Hong Kong or rural areas. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling after receiving ethical approval from [author's institution] in March 2018. This study posted a call for participants on the researcher's social media profile on WeChat. Women who identified themselves as post-80s generation were eligible for this study. Participants' ages ranged from 29 to 38, with a mean age of 31. Twelve participants in this study were only children; however, two women had brothers and came from rural areas but lived and worked in Beijing as adults. All participants identified as heterosexual. At the time of the study, eleven were married and had a child, and three were in a relationship with a boyfriend and did not have children. It is likely that due to the researcher's social networking and a snowballing method, most of the participants would be highly educated, white-collar workers living in urban areas. Two participants worked within the beauty industry, one whose business sold beauty products directly to customers alongside her full-time office job, and the other owned a beauty salon. After recruiting participants, they were sent an information sheet and consent form. Before arranging interviews, they signed and returned the consent forms. They were encouraged to express concerns about the research or interview process freely. All 14 interviews were conducted in person. Each interview lasted, on average, one hour. The interview schedule covered several key themes: 1) Their understanding of female beauty, 2) their personal experience of beautification and 3) whether their life stages affected their perspective of female beauty and beauty practices.

As a feminist researcher, this study considered the extensive literature addressing methodological considerations related to women interviewing women, particularly concerning the power dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee (Hesse-Biber, 2014). For instance, as Tracy (2013) highlighted, it is the feminist researcher's moral responsibility to acknowledge their power, its potential for misuse and reciprocity issues. For this reason, strategies were employed to mitigate the potential for imbalanced power dynamics, thereby facilitating participants' greater agency. In light of this, the researching interviewer shared commonalities with the participants, being a woman of similar age with similar educational experiences and social background. Additionally, drawing on previous research, one approach involved minimizing the perceived gap between the researcher and participants (Oakley, 1981, 2016; Tang, 2002). To foster a rapport and a sense of equality, the interviewer started each interview with an informal conversation, allowing the participants and interviewer to establish a connection. Initially, some participants expressed concerns about their performance during the interviews; however, the interviewer reassured them and encouraged them to view the interview as a casual conversation between women with no right or wrong answers. Furthermore, considering Reinharz's (1992) ideas, the interviewer openly shared their personal experiences with beauty practices when relevant during interviews. This approach was intended to create a more comfortable atmosphere and encourage interviewees to share their narratives (Reinharz, 1992).

To assist with the transcribing process, the researcher used a fieldwork diary to aid in getting a better understanding of each participant. The researcher recorded participants' clothing, attitude, personality, memorable interactions and first impressions in the fieldwork diary. The researcher used an open coding method to analyse the data, allowing them to categorize themes (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 those living within that culture. FDA has been used widely within feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2014), 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). Therefore, FDA assisted the researcher in identifying three main themes that were intricately associated with two distinct life stages. During their transition from schoolgirls to young women, (1) they perceived their younger selves as naïve, passive receivers of the beauty culture. When transitioning from young women towards becoming wives and mothers, (2) their beauty values shifted from outer to inner beauty and (3) ziran mei (natural beauty).

Findings

Transitioning from girls to young women: Naïve, passive receivers of the beauty culture

In participants' narratives, social climate and gender roles significantly influence their understanding of beauty and beauty practices. Several distinguished life stages were mentioned during interviews: High school, university, adulthood, marriage, motherhood, and having a career. Their attitude towards beauty practices noticeably altered according to these stages. For instance, during high school, many of them disregarded the significance of beauty and beauty practices because it was irrelevant to them – they all wore the same uniform. They had the singular priority of studying hard. However, when they entered university at around the age of 18, typically, their initial involvement in beauty practices commenced:

> It started at university because, in high school, everyone wears the same uniform. So, when you enter university, everything feels relatively fresh, and everyone thinks they are finally liberated. They will study what they wear and what looks good. Because you do not have to wear uniforms daily, you start thinking about how to dress. (Ying, 31, office worker)

Ying establishes a connection between entering university and a sense of liberation. This coincides with Zhang's (2012) research which found most women who are a single child want to be thin, tall, and beautiful at university. This feeling of liberation appears to be a reaction to the reduction of

extreme pressure and long study hours Chinese students experience during high school. Previous research has indicated that their parents expected women from single-child families to study hard and excel academically (J. Liu, 2017). Most parents invest significant family resources in their daughters, hoping for a better future outcome. It is commonly believed that performing well in high school will lead to students attending prestigious universities and, later, better job prospects with higher incomes. Consequently, students face intense competition and academic pressure due to the crucial role the Gaokao (高考; Higher Education Exam) plays in determining university admissions. Students experienced long school hours, attended evening classes, self-studied late into their evenings and often attended weekend study sessions (Davey et al., 2007). The pressure to do well at school is a strong reason why, during school years, these participants did not engage in beauty practices. Moreover, throughout their high school years, they wore unisex school uniforms, and their effort, time and attention were closely regulated.

In contrast, the observation that the process of transitioning from girls into women seems to be a significant motivation for participants to engage in beauty practices aligns with Tazzyman's (2017, p. 111) findings, which observed that young women adopt various forms of beauty practices or body modification as 'a sign of womanhood and the means of transition from girl to woman'. Part of this transition appears attributable to a new motivation to seek romantic relationships at university. All participants in this study identified as heterosexual and desired to conform to heterosexual beauty standards during their earlier years. They shared that a woman's appearance is essential in the dating market. They reflected on a range of beauty practices they utilized to enhance their outer beauty, hoping to maximize their chance of finding suitable partners. These findings align with previous findings that outer beauty can facilitate social advantage in both private and public spheres for women (Ma, 2023). Furthermore, participants frequently considered men's preferences regarding a woman's appearance when discussing dating and their appearance. For instance, participant Dan expressed her understanding regarding male preferences in the dating market:

> [Women's appearance] must be important. In fact, it is bullshit for a man to say he likes this and that. Really, a man is a visual animal. At first glance, he will see whether you look good. (Dan, 31, office worker)

Participant Dan used strong language to express her feelings about men's preferences regarding women's appearance. Although she did not like the idea of men judging her appearance, she later said she had encountered several occasions where men openly judged her appearance during social interactions or while dating. She also later expressed how she engaged in beauty practices to enhance her outer beauty to minimize the negative effects of her natural appearance. For participants, beauty practices are linked with womanhood, such as finding a boyfriend, and being perceived as feminine is physical and based on actions and behaviours, which aligns with previous research (Tazzyman, 2017). Participant Wen said during her interview that when she went out on dates, she would spend hours dressing up and beautifying herself. She also expressed a strong desire to be praised for her outer beauty. For example, Wen reflects on her youth:

> Before getting married, of course, I would love all the men to compliment me on my beauty, saying you are beautiful or whatever. Everyone is pursuing their perfection, so nowadays, many women are getting plastic surgery. After you get plastic surgery, for sure, everyone will think you are very beautiful, but after you get married and have kids, that is not the case. Isn't it?. (Wen, 30, office worker)

As Wen points out, most young women want to be praised for their beauty, and some would alter their appearance through cosmetic surgery. This supports the notion that young Chinese women's values are primarily based on their appearance according to social norms. They also feel a sense of value when they feel they are looking good. This emphasis on women's appearance is also associated with how heterosexual relationships are constructed in society, as Illouz (2012) found in modern cultural images of romantic love constructed by media and advertising. These images often associate love with youth and beauty and are central to the institution of marriage. Moreover, in the marriage market, men and women want to trade things like beauty for money or social status.

Women's media consumption reinforces the connection between beauty and beauty practices. Young women utilize beauty practices to enhance their appearance to enable them to exchange youth and beauty for a so-called better marriage (Wen, 2013). Thus, Wen later expressed that after marriage, she no longer cared about what other men thought about her appearance since becoming a wife and mother. These sentiments Wen expressed were shared amongst other participants.

It was found that participants' understanding of beauty changed considerably when they felt they had become more mature, especially for those who had become wives and mothers. Furthermore, when they reflected on their youth, most of them conveyed that when they were young, they were easily influenced by others, which led some to follow extreme dieting practices out of a lack of knowledge about health and out of a desire to be slim and beautiful. Clearly, they perceived their youthful self as being naïve, innocent, unknowing and even silly, as well as being victims of consumer and beauty culture. This aligns with some scholars' findings that young women are more likely to modify their bodies than women in other life stages, as they are more vulnerable to societal pressures that influence beatification. For example, Frost (2005, p. 74) states that 'it is between 14 and 18 years that most, and the most extreme, forms of body-hatred are manifest, and mainly in girls, which indicates that the dimension "youth" may have significance'. When participants reflect on their youth, an important theme that becomes apparent is dieting. For example, Dan reflected on her time at university:

> When I was at university . . . I ate in spurts and did not know what happened; I could not move after binge eating and did not even go to physical education class. Now, I exercise regularly, and I do not binge eat anymore. I control my staple food meals, and I do not overeat them. I now eat tiny staple foods. I cannot even finish a bowl of rice. I usually eat vegetables and fruits. (Dan, 31, office worker)

Dan explained that she was on an extreme diet before bingeing to lose weight. Her experience of binge eating reflects existing research on EDs, which suggests women continue to be at a higher risk of experiencing EDs. Young Chinese women face gendered judgement towards their bodies, requiring self-surveillance (Holmes & Ma, 2023; M. Zhang, 2012). Dan regulated her body weight but did not understand her eating disorder experience concerning gender issues. She also described how she never used to remove her makeup as she did not know about makeup remover and skin care beauty routines. She felt that not using makeup remover nor knowing about health and skin care contributed to her having bad skin. She described her younger self as 'Silly, really is pure silly'. Feelings of being silly, stupid and ignorant were reoccurring themes in participants' narratives when reflecting on their youthful beauty practices. For instance, Jin recalls her extreme dieting and binge eating and explains:

> I was relatively ignorant then and wanted to lose weight as quickly as possible and wanted to be pretty and hopefully beautiful, and that was how relatively simple my thought was. (Jin, 31, office worker)

Participants acknowledged how an aspect of their youthful ignorance – lack of knowledge about the dangers of unhealthy dieting – resulted in them resorting to extreme dieting to lose weight. In hindsight, they recognized that this practice was damaging to their bodies, but at the time, they were unaware of the potential harm it could cause. However, at the time of the interview, they felt wiser and valued their health more than beauty. For instance, they expressed that if they want to lose weight, they will choose a healthier approach, such as going to the gym or eating slightly less (instead of starving). The participant's narratives concerning their youth included an awareness of the male gaze, a desire to conform to men's expectations regarding women's appearance, engagement in unhealthy dieting practices, reports of cosmetic surgery, and engagement with beauty practices in order to receive compliments from others. These practices resemble Chapkis (1986) perspective on the oppressive nature of beauty culture. Chapkis (1986) discusses women's beauty secrets and the obsession with exerting control over their bodies by describing women's everyday struggles concerning their hated bodily features and their involvement in painful beauty practices. Furthermore, the findings in this study align with Wolf's (1990) position that women face

considerable pressure to conform to beauty standards and that physical attractiveness is more important for women than for men.

However, feminists later argued that portraying women as cultural dupes disempowered women and was overly simplistic (Davis, 1991; Holliday & Taylor, 2006). Instead, they argued that women are thoughtful, critical, and active decision-makers who continually negotiate their position concerning beauty culture and standards, whether consciously or unconsciously (Gimlin, 2001; Heyes & Jones, 2009). This position was true for the participants in this study who engaged in reflective discourse. For instance, they acknowledged the beauty culture's oppressive nature and discussed beauty in relation to empowerment. Furthermore, they recognized how, in their youth, they were sometimes ignorant, but in the present, they position themselves as more knowledgeable, wiser and aware of the pressures within beauty culture. They were also aware of the complex social dynamics at play within beauty culture. These findings, therefore, reflect the ongoing debate within feminist literature regarding women's agency. Participants acknowledged how, at times, they were naïve and misled, making it challenging or impossible to exercise their agency, yet as they matured, they gained greater insight as well as cynicism, equipping them to make more informed decisions, especially later in life. This research, therefore, emphasizes the importance of considering specific circumstances that shape women's beauty choices, especially concerning women from different cultures.

Transitioning from young women to wives and mothers: shifting beauty values from outer to inner beauty

Most participants, particularly those who were married and had children, reflected on how their social roles had influenced their changing perspective of female beauty and beauty practices. A notable finding was that most participants reported a shift in their focus towards inner beauty later in life compared to their earlier years when they were more preoccupied with outer beauty:

> Previously, [when I was young], I felt that female beauty was more focused on external factors, such as being pretty, having a pretty face or having a good body figure. However, at my age, I have realised that inner beauty, such as having a good temperament or a kind-hearted nature, is more important. It gives off a unique feeling, a sense of approachability and comfort. That's how I [now] perceive beauty. (Ya, 38, schoolteacher)

Participant Ya expressed how, later in life, she has come to consider the importance of inner beauty and now values it more than outer beauty. In her youth, she felt that social expectations mainly focused on outer beauty. This study identified a trend that older participants, particularly those in their thirties, were more likely to emphasize the importance of inner beauty over outer beauty than in their youth. Furthermore, for participants, the definition of inner beauty was varied. Nevertheless, they shared a similar understanding – their shift towards valuing inner beauty represented their more profound understanding of the world. This shift was characterized by caring less about what they now considered superficial and directing their focus on what they believed to be more meaningful aspects of life. For instance, participant Shu described how when she was younger, she simply understood women to be beautiful if they were pleasing to the eye; however, she later developed a deeper understanding of the concept and came to appreciate the importance of inner beauty. Similarly, most participants described a transition in their values, focusing less on outer beauty and more on inner beauty as they matured and experienced personal growth. This transition was also described as a positive development in their life. For example, participant Ying uses positive words such as mature, improvement and self-cultivation to describe her understanding of inner beauty:

> I think [inner beauty] is vital for women around 30, right? People in their 20s may think that little girls are very pleasing to the eye and that it is good to look beautiful, but as I get older, I pay more attention to inner beauty. Because first, I think maybe the older you are, the more mature you should be, and then maturity will be accompanied by an improvement in knowledge and self-cultivation. Knowledge and self-cultivation will bring about the improvement of your quality. For example, when you walk down the street, you will not chatter like

> a little girl. Maybe you will deal with things in a different way than when you were in your 20s. (Ying, 31, office worker)

Macia et al. (2015) found that some women change the meaning of beautiful or pretty to fit their age. When they can no longer be beautiful in the traditional sense (outer beauty) because they become older women, they focus on inner beauty instead. At this point in their lives, qualities such as dignity, elegance, joy for life or a sense of humour make them feel beautiful despite the signs of ageing (Macia et al., 2015). Although there are clear parallels with Macia et al'.s (2015) participants, cultural nuances, such as the Chinese concepts of inner and outer beauty, meant that this study did not have to redefine a singular conception of beauty to suit their age. Instead, they actively associated the development of inner beauty as a sign of maturity, emphasizing positive development. Moreover, these findings complement those found in a previous study by Ma (2023), which found that young women utilize inner beauty discourse to counter beauty pressures and readdress the balance, as the advantages of their youthful physical beauty (gender and age bonus) diminish. Expanding on this, the participants in this present study utilize inner beauty to reflect their personal growth and increased knowledge. These variations illustrate how inner beauty can function as a conceptual tool for Chinese women of different ages to combat social pressure, empower themselves, and make sense of their life's meaning and values.

Nonetheless, the participants in this study discussed with fluidity their evolving understanding of inner beauty concerning themes of personal development, professional development and being responsible for their families, which is in contrast with the larger volume of research that tends to focus on more rigid outer beauty standards and extreme beauty pressure women experience as part of their everyday life in China (Shao, 2023; Yuan & Tian, 2023). These post-80s women seem to be positioning themselves outside the mainstream beauty ideology. Unlike in their youth, they perceive themselves as informed consumers, mature women, and responsible wives and mothers. Arguably, inner beauty is partly embodied within the performance of their expected social roles as participants noticeably paid more attention to fulfilling their social roles as workers, wives and mothers. Luo (2013, p. 6) found that recent conceptions of inner beauty have departed from Confucian moral practices that 'stressed a woman's chastity, obedience, and filial piety'. Despite this, participants in this study did share Confucian values, such as the importance of being a good mother and wife and did not seem to challenge the traditional role set out by Confucianism. However, in Confucianism, a woman's value is measured by her ability to fulfil the defined role of supporting her husband, raising her children, and being responsible for domestic work while being subservient to her husband (Qiu, 2019). Although participants expressed values that overlapped with traditional Confucianism, these post-80s women grew up during an increasing recognition of women's rights and modern social values, which also emphasized individualism. Participants did not feel obligated to obey and be subservient to their husbands; instead, they believed that developing their inner beauty would stabilize the family. Some participants even suggested that men might appreciate and prefer this type of inner beauty:

> I think Chinese men do not necessarily like those women with extremely high attractiveness. It is the same with housewives. Although you may emphasise inner and outer aspects, you should also focus on your inner self. Because married men tend to appreciate women who are busy in the kitchen and taking care of household chores, including helping children with their studies. Most Chinese men consider these qualities to be the epitome of beauty. It is not necessarily about appearance. (Wen, 30, office worker)

Wen describes how married women's beauty involves looking after family and that married men may highly value this type of beauty. Similarly, participant Xiaoqing expresses how developing her inner beauty has reduced the amount of attention she can give to herself and her appearance, as well as reducing the time she can go out:

> Inner beauty means caring for your husband and children and keeping the home tidy. As for outer beauty, it might involve going to parties with friends and enhancing one's appearance. I am not someone who pays

> special attention to external beauty. Now that I have children, I have less time to go out, so I have been caring for them at home. (Xiaoqing, 31, housewife)

Despite inner beauty having the potential to empower women, rebut beauty pressures, build a sense of self-worth and enhance life meaning and values, it could also be perceived as a socially constructed concept, including personal values that reinforce traditional gender roles that uphold a patriarchal society. Therefore, like a tool, its power lies with those who learn to utilize it to their advantage. This aligns with Ma's (2023) findings that inner beauty is complex, fluid and negotiable according to different situations. As Jeffreys (2015) states, beauty practices involve significant time, money and effort to maintain normative beauty standards. This includes everyday beauty regimes, such as practising skincare or applying makeup, shopping for beauty services and products, cultivating a wardrobe, spending time learning, as well as contemplating and practising beautification. Hence, they cannot engage in beauty practices due to the amount of time, effort and money these participants invest into their family life. At this life stage, these women no longer seem concerned about attaining the mainstream beauty standards perpetuated on Chinese social media, such as *pale, young and slim* (白瘦幼; pinyin: bái shòu yòu) (Y. Liu & Li, 2023). It is worth noting that the popular phrase *bai shou you* can also be translated as *white, young and slim*. From a Chinese context, *bai* is perceived by Chinese as a positive word with no negative connotation unlike *pale*, which can have negative connotations such as being unhealthy. It is debatable whether the lack of care for beauty practices is because they simply no longer have the time or resources or because of their changing priorities to develop their inner beauty while becoming a good wife and mother or, more likely, both. For instance, Qing has not entirely abandoned a beauty regime but does express a lack of time:

> I usually do not have much time when I am free, like sometimes before I go to bed. Sometimes, I put on a facial mask after a bath, then wipe the floor and wash the dishes and clothes. (Qing, 29, office worker)

Similarly, the mothers in this study expressed how they spend less money on themselves as they prioritize their children's education, expressing, 'In China, raising children is like a money burning machine. No matter how much you earn, it is not enough for them to spend' (Lulu, 31, office worker). Unlike their mothers' generation, who grew up in a climate where women were socially expected to be devoted to their families, these participants have grown up amidst a mix of traditional and modern values (Lian, 2014). It was clear from their narratives that they wanted to fulfil the traditional gender role of being a good wife and mother but also to develop themselves and be independent career women. It, therefore, seems that for these participants, the role of a woman is less rigid and not as clearly defined as it used to be. Consequently, most participants invested their time and energy into developing inner beauty and qualities such as kindness, caring for the household, supporting their husbands, looking after the children and developing their careers.

Although most participants had reduced time, effort and resources into their outer beauty, this was not the case for two participants. These two participants believed that women should always consider their outer beauty. Notably, they both worked in the beauty industry, which supports Gimlin (2001), who stated that the 'true believers' in beauty work, such as beauticians, strongly follow the rules of beauty and feel more pressure than their clients to look beautiful all the time. For these two participants, insisting on investing in their outer beauty is a way for them to develop their careers through conforming and reinforcing beauty standards and potentially the pressure that goes with it.

This beauty pressure coincides with the idea that young women's value is primarily based on their youth and beauty. The fear of being a 'leftover' woman and the social stigma of single womanhood are central to young women (Luo & Sun, 2015). Young women want to gain social power through engagement with beauty practices that enhance their outer beauty. In this study, unlike young women, married women are often measured by a different set of standards. Participants expressed their desire to develop inner beauty linked to family devotion. The stigma of being a 'leftover' woman does not apply to married women. Married women are more concerned with cultivating

their inner beauty to benefit their families. It appears that Confucian culture instils patriarchal values, such as the idea that women should pay more attention to their family and put their family first. Participants in this study often reported spending more time and effort on their families and being less concerned about themselves. This fits with Qiu's (2019) research and notion of 'serving others'. Qiu (2019) found that the traditional gendered division of labour has contributed to the social phenomenon of 'study mothers' (陪读妈妈), who support their children's studies while residing separately from their spouses. Although both parents devote themselves to their children's development, women are especially willing to sacrifice themselves for their children's education (Qiu, 2019). It is, therefore, particularly challenging for wives and mothers to negotiate and balance their roles between work and family. In addition, although their social role has changed with the transition from young women to wives and mothers, they are still required to engage in aesthetic labour, which is discussed in the next section.

Transitioning from young women to wives and mothers: Ziran mei (natural beauty)

When reviewing participants' narratives, it was noticeable that they had each come to negotiate their position within Chinese beauty culture and arrived at their understanding of to what extent they feel it is appropriate to engage with beauty standards. Most of these participants stated that although they used to feel beauty pressure in their youth, they no longer do – since becoming married or entering a stable relationship with a boyfriend. For most of them, their approach to beauty is to look natural, which they describe as *ziran* (or *ziran mei* which translates as natural beauty, comprising of *ziran*: 自然 - nature and *mei*: 美 - beautiful). For example, Shishi explains, 'I think beauty is nature and natural beauty is best'. This notion of ziran has been explored and described by academics as when the ageing experience is perceived and accepted as a natural life process that is 'understood in terms of the characteristically Chinese traditional notion of "nature"' (Qi, 2021, p. 592). Ziran has also been described by academics as a concept rooted in Taoism (Feng, 2020; J. Liu, 2022b), which '. . .refers to a free state that is manifested in all the myriad things, including humans' (J. Liu, 2022b, p. 285). Taoist philosophy is associated with harmony and balance, it encourages individuals to align themselves with a natural flow of being and to let go of artificial constraints and oppressive human constructs. These sentiments have parallels with participants' ideas of natural beauty, which aim to develop a balanced approach to beauty practices whilst wanting to look natural and presentable. Qi's (2021) research found that Chinese women in their study do not link ageing with physical appearance decline and do not feel the need for cosmetic interventions to address signs of ageing. For instance, many of them rejected cosmetic surgery expressing beliefs that it looks unnatural:

> . . . you could clearly see that her features had been altered . . . And her whole face seemed unnatural. You could tell that her face did not look natural, and I was not too fond of it because it appeared unnatural. She gave off a fake feeling. (Nana, 35, schoolteacher)

This is in line with research by Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2007, p. 198) whose female Canadian participants, when citing media examples, similarly expressed 'that technological intervention could result in an unnatural look that was both inauthentic and bizarre'. Another aspect of natural beauty standards was that most participants suggested that an essential requirement is not to look messy (邋遢 – literally translates as 'dirty'). The word messy in this context is gendered because for men to be considered messy means they have not met basic hygiene standards. In contrast, for women, even if they wear clean clothes and have washed, they will be considered messy unless they dress appropriately and wear 'natural makeup' – to use makeup but not appear as if one has used makeup. This natural beauty standard might be related to the fact that most women in this study are living and working in the city. Their status as white collar workers ties in with Liu's (2017) research, which found there is white collar beauty discourse centred around social expectations concerning the appearance of professional women in the workplace, especially in sales and client-facing roles. Furthermore, as post-80s generation women, they not only feel pressure from the workplace to meet

beauty standards in order to be perceived as competent, but they also face pressure from their families' expectations for them to have successful careers. Beauty is a moral matter whereby it was expressed that women who do not engage with beauty practices are perceived negatively and stigmatized (Widdows, 2018). Participants had different ideas of what constitutes natural beauty. They also varied in their engagement with beauty practices and expressed that now they are older, they no longer feel they have to conform to beauty standards. However, it can be argued that overall, their thoughts and behaviours still adhere to beauty standards. In this case, standards such as white, young and slim which are more appropriate for young women, have been replaced with natural beauty standards that are more appropriate for their life stage. According to participants there are distinct differences between looking natural and being natural. Natural beauty does not necessarily mean not wearing makeup or not engaging in beauty practices. Ironically, the desire to look natural actually encourages the consumption of cosmetics and engagement in beauty practices (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, beauty practices such as wearing appropriate clothing, makeup and perfume have become so normative in their everyday lives that they almost feel these everyday beauty routines are not worth mentioning when talking about beauty practices. This might be due to the relative comparison between when they were young, and they invested an immense proportion of their effort and time. In contrast, now it was significantly less, so much so that it has potentially become invisible labour. We also have to consider the practice and application these women have applied to their learning and mastering of beauty practices; therefore, later, it might seem like nothing as it has become seemingly effortless, and under the guise of natural beauty, it is almost invisible. Therefore, although participants expressed how, later in life, they no longer feel the beauty pressure they did in their youth, they still self-regulate their appearance to conform to beauty standards.

Conclusion

In China, beauty culture has undergone significant changes. For instance, during the pre-Mao era, women's beauty often served men. It could offer social mobility and status, yet sometimes involved oppressive practices. Later, during the socialist era, many beauty practices and products were banned, and gender neutrality in appearance and within the workplace was promoted. With the Communist Party's economic reform in 1978, a shift in attitude regarding beauty culture was signified, aligning with a neoliberal model, leading to the development of the beauty industry. The post-80s generation experienced dramatic and distinct social and economic changes that shaped their unique generational essence forming a distinct generational identity (Lian, 2014). However, some scholarly discourse debates the usefulness of generational categorizations, questioning the extent of differences among individuals born within defined timeframes compared to those born just before or after. This study's limitations also include sample size constraints and a lack of rural-urban distinctions within the post-80s generation cohort. Despite these limitations this study explored the narratives of a small cohort of urban post-80s Chinese women regarding their experience of Chinese beauty culture and beautification in different life stages. Their narratives offer a lens to understand women's perspectives of beauty and beauty practices in contemporary Chinese society. As Stanley (2013) states, individuals exist within social structures, so analysing the accounts of certain women in certain situations can reveal the social structures and categories. This paper therefore addresses a gap in research and serves as a starting point for academics to sample women from other generations and economic status to explore similarities and differences.

This article challenges the conventional binary framework frequently present in feminist discussions about women's agency regarding their engagement in beauty practices. Instead of solely viewing women's relationship with beauty culture through the lens of liberation versus oppression or empowering versus constraining, it offers a more nuanced understanding. In analysing the narratives, three main themes emerged, each intertwined with different life stages. Firstly, during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, participants described their younger selves as naïve, passive receivers of the beauty culture. Secondly, as they progressed towards marriage and

motherhood, there was a noticeable shift in emphasis from external to internal beauty standards. Lastly, the concept of ziran mei, became increasingly prominent. It was evident that women's thoughts and behaviours shift over time in relation to beauty culture and their relationship with beauty culture is dynamic. For instance, participants described how as they matured, they acquired greater insight and became more cynical of the beauty industry yet chose to participate, consciously negotiating the extent to which they engage, while also redefining its significance to them. Despite their uniqueness, they are all influenced by social, political, and cultural factors, including economic development and state policies. These women have grown up in an era where beauty products and services have become increasingly visible, with advertising and marketing campaigns specifically targeting them, obviously designed to influence people into buying them. The development of the beauty industry in China serves as a component of the socio-economic model aimed at achieving sustained economic growth and development. Economic motivations align with the idea that consumerism is a by-product of economic development reinforced by social values such as the belief that owning material possessions contributes to a feeling of superiority (Lian, 2014). Thus, beauty practices are in line with state policy that encourages the continual growth of the beauty industry. China's beauty industry is an essential part of economic development and is supported by the state authorized feminist organization, the All-China Women's Federation (Jha, 2016). It continues to promote women's participation in aesthetic labour to meet beauty standards and reinforce gender norms whereby women's beautification fits into Chinese heteronormative society, enlarging the gender differences and enforcing patriarchy. Arguably, state policies actively promote the development of the beauty industry which arguably contributes to the objectification of women (Xu & Feiner, 2007).

Under the only-child policy, parents put higher expectations on post-80s generation young women to achieve success in their life, typically defined as getting married, having children and a successful career (J. Liu, 2016). These notions may link to the emphasis participants placed on inner beauty later in life, as some characteristics reflect traditional Confucian gender roles. However, some conceptions of inner beauty also included individualistic personal development such as their confidence or intellect. Surrounded by a variety of social values ranging from Confucianism to neoliberalism, these women are confronted with numerous concerns, including job satisfaction (Lian, 2014b). Their narratives illustrate that female beauty serves as a form of capital for women to gain advantages in both the job and marriage markets (Ma, 2023b). This partly explains why, in their youth, they conformed to beauty standards to facilitate social advantage and find a partner. However, after getting married, they no longer felt this was necessary. While participants express notions of autonomy in relation to their engagement with beauty practices, they also explained how beauty norms are associated with negative social stigmas applied to women who do not engage in beauty practices, supporting the idea that beauty is a moral matter (Widdows, 2018b). For instance, married women are expected to invest in aesthetic labour to avoid negative stigmas such as being perceived as messy. Within Chinese beauty culture, strict beauty standards and social pressure make beauty practices a major concern for young women (M. Zhang, 2012). It is clear that social, political, and cultural factors impact these women's agency, where participants negotiate beauty standards amidst social pressures, balancing autonomy with social expectations.

Some academics argue that the government will not intervene concerning women's wellbeing unless there are potential threats to hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal society. Taking *dan mei* (耽美) culture as an example, the promotion of soft masculinities has been made invisible and marginalized by the state to perpetuate the heteropatriarchal social system (T. Hu et al., 2023). Participants reflected on past harmful practices which highlight increasing beauty-related health issues, emphasizing the need for critical examination of beauty norms. Many of the women in this study expressed how they no longer harm themselves to conform to beauty standards (e.g. through extreme dieting), this revelation raises concerns about harmful beauty practices to which they were susceptible during their younger years. This coincides with an increase in beauty-related health issues, especially for women, such as body image and eating disorders (Vu-Augier de Montgrémier

et al., 2020). These findings underscore beauty-related health issues, advocating the need for critical examination of beauty norms. Therefore, this article suggests that Chinese beauty culture profoundly influences women's everyday life. Clearly, it is essential to provide young girls with more knowledge and critical thinking to combat beauty pressure and prevent them from engaging in harmful beauty practices. As this study and recent research have found, young Chinese girls are at risk of developing eating disorders (Holmes & Ma, 2023). Although numerous factors other than beauty concerns contribute towards developing EDs, media perpetuation of beauty standards such as white, young, and slim cannot be ignored as a contributing factor that potentially influences young girls' thoughts and behaviours in ways that negatively impact their health. A vital intervention that could come from this research and listening to these women's narratives is that it raises pertinent social issues that require more research and public discussion. An aspect of this could be utilizing the knowledge these women have gained in later life and sharing these insights with younger women while coupling it with academic knowledge and debates. Therefore, it would be beneficial for Chinese universities to develop workshops and seminars to help young girls understand how beauty ideals are constructed and how our understanding of beauty can be distorted through dominant discourses promoted by the beauty industry, social media and government policy. It is also important that young women and girls are made aware of gender issues as well as provided with practical knowledge about the dangers of extreme dieting and how to live healthy lifestyles. When young girls are equipped with more knowledge and critical thinking, it will place them in a stronger position to make well-informed decisions that positively impact their health and wellbeing.

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