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Capitalization of Feminine Beauty on Chinese Social Media

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Capitalization of Feminine Beauty on Chinese Social Media

Capitalization of Feminine Beauty on Chinese Social Media

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan Tilburg University
op gezag van de rector magnificus,
prof. dr. E.H.L. Aarts,
in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een
door het college voor promoties aangewezen commissie
in de aula van de Universiteit

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Acknowledgements

As an ethnographic endeavor, this study investigates into Chinese women's 'beauty economy' in the digital era. More specifically, it zooms in on the social discourses about and practices of women's deployment and commodification of their beauty on China's social media. It has featured two rich digital identity fields — *wanghong* entrepreneurship and online livestreaming — where China has seen an increased commodification of women's feminine beauty as a repercussion of digital transformations.

The completion of this study has taken me over five years, longer than what I initially expected. However, the academic journey, despite intermittent frustrations and pitfalls, has largely been a rewarding experience, which sharpened my sensitivity to humanities. Besides, the journey offered me opportunities to get connected to invaluable insights from many great people. I am grateful to my supervisors, friends, colleagues and dearest family members, without whose support I would not manage to arrive here. Firstly, I would like to extend my deepest thanks to Sjaak Kroon, Max Spotti and Jan Blommaert, whose supervision, either in forms of comments or suggestions, has paved the way for my academic maturity. Their encouragement and deep belief in me have always protected me from self-skepticism. Great thanks to Karin Berkhout for all painstaking editing and formatting work that substantiates this work into a book. My thanks also extend to Pika Colpaert, whose meticulous review helped me arriving here.

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Table of contents

Introduction: From the self to the selfie	1
Part I: Background and framework	5
Chapter 1 The context of contemporary China	7
1.1 An unbalanced demographic structure	7
1.2 An unbalanced socio-economic structure	8
1.3 Consequences	11
1.4 New online opportunities	12
1.5 Purpose statement	15
Chapter 2 Identity, gender and erotic capital	17
2.1 Forms of capital in late capitalism	18
2.2 From capital to identity and gender	22
2.3 Erotic and aesthetic capital	25
2.4 Research questions	32
Chapter 3 Methodology and method	33
3.1 Digital ethnography	34
3.2 Case studies, research subjects and data types	37
3.3 Method	38
3.4 Data analysis: Ethnographic content analysis	41
3.5 Concluding Part I of the study	44
Part II: Designing feminine beauty	47
Chapter 4 Baifumei: Constructing aesthetic and erotic capital	49
4.1 Introducing the case	49
4.2 Baifumei and baifumei identity	51
4.3 Identity design, performance and beauty capital	53
4.4 Methodology	56
4.5 The Baifumei Bar	58

4.6	Performing the baifumei model	59
4.7	Baifumei audiences	66
4.8	Discussion and conclusion	70
Chapter 5	'Please abuse me': Benchmarking aesthetic and erotic capital	73
5.1	The stage: Celebrity culture on Weibo	73
5.2	Ludic 'selfie' learning environments	77
5.3	Methodology	78
5.4	Liujishou: The judge of quality and capital	80
5.5	Please abuse me...	82
5.6	Conclusion	95
PART III:	Selling feminine beauty	99
Chapter 6	Wanghong: The female-female market	101
6.1	Introduction	101
6.2	Aesthetic labor: Modeling	103
6.3	Methodology	108
6.4	Data analysis	112
6.5	Conclusion	125
Chapter 7	Livestreaming erotic capital: The female-male market	129
7.1	Introduction	129
7.2	Femininity and erotic capital	130
7.3	Methodology	131
7.4	The how and why of livestreaming	132
7.5	Dongbei Wuxue's chronotope	136
7.6	From crush to cash	143
7.7	Conclusion	144
Conclusion:	The care of the selfie	147
References		155
Summary		167

INTRODUCTION

From the self to the selfie

On 19 May 2017, the Chinese news reported a short item. A man working for a private corporation had been arrested for embezzling company funds (Li and Wei 2017). The amount was considerable: about nine million RMB (equivalent to about one million Euros¹). It turned out that the man had spent the money while chatting online with a young girl, who used a live broadcast smartphone application to perform what can best be described as elaborate flirting performances with a broad audience of men. The men watched the girl's performance and showered her with presents, to be paid on the spot through another app. The arrested man never met the girl he had extensive interactions with online. In another report (China Webmaster 2017), a similar online relationship led to a tragedy as soon as it went offline. A man became so impressed with the girl he was following online that he used highly sophisticated software operations in order to disclose her actual offline location. He paid her a visit which appeared not to be favorably perceived by the girl. Upon which the man murdered the object of his online desire and two other people.

Both incidents are connected to online practices which can be observed in tremendous quantities on Chinese Internet platforms. Large numbers of ordinary Chinese girls have embarked on a type of business in which their femininity is the central commodity. The (sometimes very lucrative) business is conducted entirely through cheap and widely available social media applications downloadable on handheld devices and operating at very low cost. In that sense, this new form of economic practice is 'informal' – there is no formal employment involved, no on-paper transactions, no other requirements of involvement than those usually attached to 'light' or 'ludic' social media practices such as 'following' and 'liking'. But we are observing a genuine 'market' here, a competitive one in which women need to attend to features of desirable femininity at great length and in infinite detail in order to attract large numbers of male customers; while men compete for the attention of the girls and need to display a generosity which, as we have seen, sometimes stretches the limits of their own resources. This study engages with such new, online, economic practices revolving around a designed femininity. It will inquire into their structures, modes of formation and of transaction, and will try to identify its importance for understand-

¹ In this dissertation, the exchange rate from RMB to Euros is 7.84, which is based on Google finance data on 20 October 2017.

ing the social, cultural and economic dynamics of the online world in contemporary China.

The second vignette above demonstrates something crucial in this domain: that the practices I will describe and analyze are online practices and can only happen the way they do because of the specific features of online environments. The women in this study perform practices of intimacy and affection which, in offline environments, could lead to unwanted and threatening effects, ranging from strong moral stigma to being physically harmed, as in the vignette. It is the online nature of the practices that explains their features, both at a micro-level (the specific semiotic work performed by the women and their audiences), and at a macro-level (the social and economic effects of the practices). It is the online dimension that enables women to operate in a relatively safe environment, and perform economic transactions that would be quickly condemned in an offline context. The women do not present and represent their physical, offline 'self' to their audience; they perform a carefully designed and performed artefactualized 'selfie' in which the platform resources offered by the online apps are being maximally exploited. This 'selfie' is a new form of representation of the self, typical for the online culture that has penetrated China to an amazing degree. The 'selfie', consequently is what will be central in this study. I consider the emergence of a 'selfie' culture (and economy) to be one of the most palpable sociological effects of the online-offline nexus characterizing societies such as China's today. In this study, I hope to scratch the surface of this new and important phenomenon.

This research has taken more than four years, ranging from early 2013 to mid-2017, the period in which I performed continuous academic exploration of various ways in which feminine beauty is played out in new online economies in China.² In early 2013, which marked the beginning of my PhD project, I was curious to know what identity categories Chinese females are living up to then, and was wondering whether we were witnessing fundamental transformations of gender perception, especially among Chinese young females. The first thing drawing my interest were the ways in which desirable femininity was constructed in Chinese online culture. The substantiation of this academic investigation of desirable femininity occurred around November 2013 when I started to notice and observe the popularity of using *baifumei* (白富美), an Internet catchword, as a label for an identity ideal with Chinese women. In the subsequent investigations on *baifumei*, I found Chinese women facing risks of potential and actual defamation during their identification with *baifumei* identity. Nonetheless they continued deploying elaborate tactics to navigate widely established perceptions linking female wealth to deliberate and 'immoral' use of feminine beauty through prostitution in various forms. Contrasted with

² Unless specified otherwise, 'China' in the current chapter refers to the mainland China, exclusive of Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions of the People's Republic of China and the region of Taiwan.

cautious positioning taken in *baifumei* identification where capitalization suspicion was intentionally avoided, another case came in view, one best seen as a ‘masochistic’ carnival in which a group of Chinese, especially young fashionable girls, were eager to send selfies to @Liujiushou, a male Internet personality renowned for his sexist and abusive comments on their looks.

After I spent about one year ‘wandering’ on Weibo, the site containing the observed carnivalesque events, I began to understand the paradoxical search for public online defamation while simultaneously attending extensively to their beauty and navigating the obstacles of negative moral judgment epitomized in *baifumei*. I found @Liujiushou to serve the function of a ‘benchmarking’ authority, in such a way that specific women could enter a market in which their beauty had become a real commodity. This finding prompted me to quest further for actual practices in which feminine sexuality was translated successfully into women’s personal economic gains, both between the same gender and different genders.

During this academic quest, I noticed that Weibo, China’s largest social media platform, featured an abundant number of young Chinese girls, working as attractive and glamorous self-employed fashion models on an unprecedented scale. Through a thorough investigation, I arrived at a better understanding of new forms of digital empowerment for ordinary girls in China to make money on the Internet by selling ‘a shared sense of belonging’ to groups of Internet users of the same sex. With time moving on, live-streaming apps emerged as a new online trend sweeping across all walks of life in China. I saw that many of those female models migrated to live-streaming sites. The new case study on these live-streaming practices revealed a real mode of conversion of feminine beauty into economic gains between female live-streamers and male audiences. In its totality, my research now included two stages of a process: the stage of formation and the state of commodification of feminine beauty as an online economic commodity, a new form of capital in the true sense of the word. And I had observed these phases in two different audience orientations: one, female-female, the other female-male.

The period in which I performed my research coincided with the development of a digital era characterized by intense socio-economic transformations (Drucker 2002), in which most people, especially those native young addictive smartphone users (the so-called ‘App Generation’, Gardner and Davis 2013), tend to organize their daily lives predominantly through Internet mediated interactions. With easy and cheap Internet access facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICT) *du jour*, such as 4G and Wifi, people nowadays ‘commute’ across a web of diverse physical-digital sociocultural spaces to socialize and construct their identities. China counts 710 million Internet users (CNNIC 2016), the world’s largest population of its kind, having given birth to a vigorous e-commerce and digital culture in general. People have witnessed a huge impact of such ICT in their everyday lives in China (for illustrations, see e.g. Luo 2012; Yang et al. 2014; Du 2016; Varis and Wang 2016; Dong 2017).

Given an increasingly seamless blend of our daily lives and digital practices, contemporary Internet studies are witnessing a noticeable departure from early studies, many of which reductively considered the Internet as a 'virtual' realm that is only secondary to the 'offline reality'. Contemporary gender studies under such techno-transformations correspondingly look forward to a digital turn as well, calling for more academic attention to the ever-emerging gender discourses through Internet-mediated-communications. My study should be situated in that academic and intellectual space.

PART I

Background and framework

This part consists of the Chapters 1, 2 and 3, and sketches the broad backgrounds and the conceptual and methodological options taken in this study. I first set the study against a number of large-scale characteristics of Chinese society: the deep inequalities characterizing both the Chinese demography (the male-female ratio) and its socio-economic stratification, and the spectacular rise of online infrastructures and highly advanced applications in China. Next, I turn to the central conceptual issues in this study: the definition of material and immaterial capital and its conversion modes, ultimately focusing on female aesthetic and erotic capital. Finally, I explain the methodological focus on design, online ethnography and different forms of content analysis.

CHAPTER 1

The context of contemporary China

This study demands a look at the overall socio-economic context in which the research sites and the subjects of my ethnography are situated. To make both thorough and reliable interpretations of my data and field notes I have taken during my fieldwork, I need to sort out the relevant contextual facts about China at the outset of this study, especially those that remain quasi-invisible in the actual analysis. More specifically, this sorting-out work takes a brief review of the Chinese social and economic landscape that is of great relevance to the current study, including Chinese recent demographic structure, wealth distribution and welfare coverage, all of which contextualizes Chinese youth's digital identity practices that will be central in the case studies that follow.

This contextualizing effect, I must emphasize here, is *structural*. I shall focus in this study on specific ('micro') practices in which the large background factors I will describe will rarely occur directly and explicitly. They are, however, the large structures of power, inequality and social categorization within which the specific online interactions occur, and the online interactions cannot be comprehended without referring back to these larger structural factors. Their influence, however, is not to be taken for granted. We shall see in the Chapters 4-7 that some of the practices I will examine there, derive their importance precisely from their *negative* relationship to the 'macro' power structures, the fact that they can modify, change or even reverse the general structural rules prevailing in Chinese society, within the confines of the specific online niches within which they occur.

1.1 An unbalanced demographic structure

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC 2015), China has the largest population around the world, with a total 1,374,620,000 inhabitants in 2015, the latest official census data in China. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, its big population has supposedly burdened the national socio-economic development, for which various birth control policies, such as the 'one-child policy', were implemented to curb the population growth. The effects cannot be said to have been positive overall. The longstanding 'one-child policy' was only abolished in 2015, when it became clear that China was facing a devastatingly aging population structure in the near future. With the effects of new birth-encouraging policies still to come, Chinese youth will continuously be burdened by fierce job

competitions and the tradition of filial piety demanding a provision for their aged parents. In this sense, becoming successful is more a fundamental living requirement for Chinese youths than a form of self-actualization.

Apart from its large size, the Chinese population also shows a seriously unbalanced male-female ratio, predominantly owing to sex-selective abortions facilitated by diagnostic ultrasound technologies (Chen et al. 2013), which tend to favor the male offspring over their female counterpart. According to *The World Factbook 2017* (2017), the male/female sex ratio at birth in China is as high as 1.15, the highest of its kind among all examined countries (Zhou et al. 2011). According to China's 2015 census, out of the total population there are 704,140,000 inhabitants who are male while the other 670,480,000 are female (NBSC 2015). Put into perspective, the male-female ratio is 1.05, which means that for every 105 males, theoretically there will be only 100 women at its maximum, to be paired when they grow into maturity and seek courtship. According to *The World Factbook 2017*, the estimated male/female sex ratio among China's total population hits even higher at 1.06 in 2016, showing an increase in the demographic imbalance in China. This situation has even been worsened by the fact that many women, collectively as a form of comparative 'scarce resource', crowd into urban cities in search of better economic prospects, which leaves men living in rural areas slimmer chances to make their way into either marriage or partnership.

This demographic structure in which women are a scarce resource creates a bottleneck in the male-female relationship market, and this given will be a backdrop of considerable relevance in this study. But it is not the only such given.

1.2 An unbalanced socio-economic structure

Demographic wealth disparity

Paradoxically, the large population of China, which subjects Chinese citizens to intense living burdens, at the same time constitutes one of the country's most valuable assets. With a secured lower-priced labor pool, compared to competing economies, this large population enables China to enjoy one of the fastest economic growth rates in the world. Yet, while enjoying one of the largest GDPs, China's GDP per capita is very low, which uncovers a wide wealth split between the country's haves and have-nots. This (non-socialist) inequality should, by large, be attributed to the Chinese central government's market-oriented economic policies determined to stimulate the domestic economy in favor of a small meritocracy, while tolerating a widening wealth gap between this elite class and the broader population. According to China Family Panel Studies (Li et al. 2015), the gap between Chinese rich and poor is ever-widening, and has been for the last 30 years, with the Gini Index of Chinese citizens' income increasing from 0.3 in the 1980s to 0.45 in 2015.

While the wealthiest families, accounting for 1% of the total population, enjoy around one third of the national wealth, the poorest, who account for 25% of the

total population, only share about 1% of the wealth. In the wave of China's internal migration, it is not unusual at all to see both the rich and poor living in close proximity to each other, but with profoundly split lifestyles (cf. Dong 2011; Du 2016). Contrasted with the rich who have a great zest for luxurious brands and overseas traveling, many poor still live on a minimal wage that hardly makes their ends meet. As previously argued, the wide wealth gap is, on the one hand, a consequence of China's active embrace of a market economy that favors meritocracy. While on the other hand, bureaucratism and nepotism, which are characteristics of the Chinese Guanxi³ culture, are also held accountable for such wealth disparity. Furthermore, bureaucratism and nepotism have impeded the social upward mobility of the poor. This blockage of social upward mobility has even been institutionalized in laws and regulations, such as *Hukou*, China's household system (to be discussed more fully in the following section) that lawfully separates the rural-to-urban migrants from the 'aboriginal' urbanites, which, to a certain extent, contradicts the advantages of the socialist system often proclaimed by the Chinese state.

Geographical wealth disparity

Apart from the demographic wealth gap discussed previously, economic developments across China are also characterized by a severe structural geographical disparity.⁴ This process of unequal regional development, in which wealth is concentrated in certain large urban areas, was part of China's economic re-awakening right from the start (Yang 1999). As is argued by Fan and Sun (2008: 1), China has seen rising "spatial inequalities among different regions and between rural and urban areas." More specifically, China has witnessed significant developmental discrepancies between the economically advanced coastal areas that dominate East China and underdeveloped 'inlands', mainly in West China. The 'widening gaps between the rich and poor' have induced "massive migration from *inland to coastal regions* (e.g., Fan 2008) and have motivated, if not directly provoked, protests and dissent across the country" (Fan and Sun 2008: 1). Under such a social context, more than 98 million migrant workers left their homes to work in urban areas up to 2003 (State Council 2004). However, as "social welfare benefits are closely tied with one's residence sta-

³ Guanxi (关系) refers to "special relationships two persons have with each other," which "can be best translated as friendship with overtones of unlimited exchange of favors" (Alston 1989: 28). As described by Luo et al. (2012: 142), Guanxi has its roots in Confucian philosophy, where it is seen as an element in keeping an equilibrium within a hierarchical society through practices that involve trust, generosity and deference. Guanxi will play a major role in Chapter 7 of this study.

⁴ See http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_148631a9601.3.fsc.html

tus within the *Hukou*⁵ system,” a rigid household registration system set up in Mao Zedong’s era, “migrant workers are largely excluded from social security and medical benefits in the urban cities because they are not official residents of those cities,” among other drawbacks including education and housing (Wong et al. 2007: 35). Despite more promising economic prospects in urban cities, migrant workers in China, however, are continuously marginalized and hardly integrated into the urban areas. They have been, to a large extent, excluded from the urban welfare system and can hardly secure their living like their urban counterparts.

Tilted welfare policies

While this widening wealth gap is gradually becoming a very severe issue, China lacks an egalitarian welfare system, and especially the absence of a public healthcare system for laid-off, migrant workers and farmers in rural areas is a considerable problem. This significantly aggravates Chinese citizens’ fears of being socially left out and economically impoverished. A national health survey shows that “57 per cent of patients in urban areas and 45.8 per cent in the countryside did not seek medical consultation” simply because they cannot afford it (Chan 2015: 8). Worries about potential living uncertainties, or about social degradation and becoming precarious, are widely shared in China, especially among migrant workers as a big part of the Chinese population. Here, too, the need of standing out from the crowd is an urgent matter, a crucial factor in ensuring living and social resources.

Besides, as I noted above, the urbanization of China has exacerbated the division between the rural and urban areas, which reportedly reduces many Chinese rural areas to obsolescence and depopulation, especially affecting the younger population. However, many rural-to-urban migrants are not positively received. By contrast, they are often faced with exclusion from the urban living facilities and corresponding welfare systems. The gap between the urban haves and have-nots, who often confront each other at the same or geographically proximate urban areas, gives rise to outcries for equal rights to enjoy the fruits of China’s spectacular development.

These different factors of inequality will also be an important background in my study, as it may render the (sometimes desperate) quest and intense effort for public visibility and economic advantage, which we shall encounter in later chapters, more understandable.

⁵ “The Hukou book, which records attributes of a household in what could best be seen as a regional entitlement status, has been dubbed ‘China’s No.1 Document,’ for it has the omnipotent power to determine many important aspects of life, if not the fate of the majority of China’s people. The Hukou system is often considered as unique to China. It is a quite elaborate system of controlling and regulating internal movements of Chinese citizens” (Tian 2003; Goldstein and Goldstein 1991; Chan 2009 as cited in Du 2016: 91).

1.3 Consequences

The fact that the Chinese male population far outnumbers its female counterpart has, at least, brought forth two profound social consequences. First, it results in an “increased level of antisocial behavior and violence and will ultimately present a threat to the stability and security of society” (Hesketh and Xing 2006: 13273). Second, the marriage costs become exorbitant for Chinese males in general. Marrying a woman may impoverish the to-be-groom’s entire family living in the rural areas, because of the high-priced gift money demanded from the bride’s side. Even worse,

when there is a shortage of women in the marriage market, the women have chances to ‘marry up,’ which inevitably leaves the least desirable men with no marriage prospects. (Hesketh and Xing 2006: 13273)

The ever-increasing marriage cost in China has largely contributed, in ways that resonate with Bourdieu’s (2008) famous study on the crisis of rural males in France, to the increase of the numbers of Chinese single men, often ridiculed on Chinese social media as ‘single dogs’ (单身狗, *dan shen gou* in Chinese). According to NBSC (2016), 3,495,613 people out of total sampled population of 17,752,717 are unmarried. Unmarried males take up 22.90% of the whole male population. That is, more than one fifth of men are single, while unmarried females only take up 16.39% of the entire female population.

This unmet need for partners may result in undesirable social consequences. In an interview-based study of unmarried men in rural Guizhou, one of the poorest regions in China, Zhou et al. (2011) have found ‘clear psychological vulnerability’ in unmarried men, who often feel marginalized under social pressures and have a strong sense of failure. With aggressive tendencies, empirical evidence is found that unmarried men could become a threat to social stability and public security. Furthermore, the crisis will considerably motivate heterosexual unmarried males to get involved into various strategies for attracting females.

Third, there is a great amount of sexual demand that cannot be satiated by marriage, which is the only legal access to sex, because of the limits to many Chinese men’s economic ability. This, in one way or another, shapes a big market for sex, in spite of the illegalization of prostitution in China. Apart from negative influences, however, the imbalanced sex ratio in China also has its positive consequences. Firstly, “[a]s the number of women in a society decreases, so their social status should increase and they should benefit from their enhanced value” (Zhou et al. 2011: 13274). Secondly, “less discrimination against girl children and lower female mortality” can be expected henceforth (Zhou et al. 2011: 13274).

The sexuality market thus created tends to capitalize a specific kind of femininity, which is of considerable importance to Chinese females in general, especially those rural-to-urban female migrant workers who generally lack other living skills needed

in the job market. Zhou et al.'s (2011) study showed that, apart from the victimhood narrative, some of the sex workers in China choose this job totally out of their own will. To them, sex or sex-related work, compared with other work available, is more lucrative.

As for Chinese males, some of them turn to prostitutes for recreational sex, either as a kind of physiological need or as a way of social status gain. Reportedly, lots of corrupted officials have been involved in various kinds of prostitution, including keeping a mistress, going to sex-involving nightclubs, etc. Despite government's harsh punishment and determination to demolish this social plague, the trend is still prevailing, especially among China's officials and businessmen. In fact, prostitution patronage is often more related to a manifestation of one's social and economic status, more than out of physical needs.

Prostitution, although illegal in China, takes various 'under-the-radar' forms, including feet-washing bars, massage shops, Karaoke bars, hotels, night-clubs, dancing pubs, and even hair salons, etc. I come from a small town in Henan Province of China. I got to know several friends working in this industry. Rather than maintaining silence, they are prone to discuss it openly and accept this long-stigmatized industry just as a kind of regular work. This, at least, bespeaks a transformative trend underway in modern China that increases its openness to sex-related services. However, this also reflects a dilemma faced by mainly rural female migrant workers, because they are offered less choice in the job market compared to the urban citizens. As previously discussed, the transformation is also visible in terms of these young girls' subjective attitudes towards their bodily capital, which offers them a job which, to a certain extent, they feel satisfied with.

This bodily capital becomes their currency and more importantly one of their important living materials, and in the remainder of this study I shall place this in focus. Despite this high tide of sex capitalization in China, an earlier literature in China often takes an elimination-oriented perspective towards prostitution, paying little attention to the reasons and operationalization of sex capitalization. This study intends to fill the literature gap through a focus on Chinese females' gendered identity and economic practices on the Internet.

1.4 New online opportunities

China's big population can silence the ordinary Chinese layperson, whose significance is easy to belittle in front of such a mass of others. Under such conditions, and given the other economic and demographic factors mentioned above, individuals' desire for standing out is omnipresent, and needs to be articulated through their everyday identity practices. As we have seen, the urgency of standing-out need in identity construction is compounded by the existing sex imbalance in China. More specifically, the financial and social difficulties in general for marriage and the scarcity of legal sex are to be resolved. Notably, Chinese mainstream political discourse encourages self-

questioning for personal pitfalls and tends to hide those institutionalized inequalities under the hood of personal lack of overall qualities, or *suzhi* (素质). In such discourse, to solve the previously emerging problems, one is prompted to look up to the prevailing social yardsticks privileging one's family background and social networks. In the context of urbanization, lots of people previously living in rural areas are migrating to more developed urban areas in search of an acceptable standard of living. Most of them, being undereducated, do not have much choice except going for the assembly lines, construction sites and other similarly labor-intensive jobs. There are slim chances for them to climb the social ladder and become a Chinese middle-class member (cf. Dong 2011; Du 2016).

Standing out from the crowd is a great challenge for many people in China due to severe disparity in terms of development opportunities. This disparity, as mentioned earlier, is outspokenly visible between China's coastal and west inland areas. Besides, there is also a big gap between the wealthy and poor. The social upward mobility is strictly confined to the political and economic elites. Such lack of equality of opportunity in China results in great survival anxieties among most Chinese citizens who are living in underprivileged conditions and are desperately looking for new opportunities. The Internet just responds to this demand with its connectivity and translocality for interpersonal communication (Du 2016). It has opened up new avenues to meet needs for marriage and sexuality in China.

The Internet has given birth to various platforms and presentational tools for one to construct desirable identities and extend one's social relationships. Techno-savvy Internet users can benefit a lot from new digital affordances that blur the boundary between 'online' and 'offline' spheres of life. More initiatives can be taken for identification, such as identity experiments and expansion, which are not only perceptually meaningful but also economically profitable for Chinese individuals. Furthermore, the Internet's affordances of connectivity and translocality could also facilitate social and economic upward mobility that are not so easily available to many in their offline lives. Besides, the legislation of Internet activities lags behind the rapid digital technology development, and some platforms can easily steer clear from legislative regulations, offering chances for those who are banned or otherwise constrained in offline contexts. In addition, activities previously occurring offline and currently migrating to online contexts have been transformed into a much more extended and fragmented social space, which gives birth to bigger groups or communities that can be accessed by their members in various ways.

It is to be noted that China has seen a great digital transformation of its economic sphere. A lot of traditional businesses have been brought forth to online marketplaces. Notably, China has given birth to *Taobao.com* in 2003, which has currently become the biggest online marketplace around the world. Taobao⁶ (淘宝) has remark-

⁶ Taobao (淘宝网, literally 'searching for treasure') is a Chinese online shopping website similar to eBay, Amazon and Rakuten, which is operated in Hangzhou, Zhejiang by Alibaba Group.

ably lowered down the economic and social threshold to start up a business compared with offline administration. It offers unprecedented chances to entrepreneurs in China and gives rise to great numbers of small start-ups, opening a phase of 'grass-roots' entrepreneurialism (Li et al. 2008).

The Internet is, without much doubt, among the most influential inventions of the last century. The Internet has profoundly transformed humans' living experiences, for example, interpersonal communication, entertainment, relationship development and consumption. It also has changed people's identity practices in general and became an indispensable part of our daily lives. Such a transformation, by and large, is attributable to the generalized availability of portable smart devices in the consumers' market, especially smartphones with full-fledged functions comparable to personal computers. Such smart devices and the technological innovations behind them have given rise to neoteric lifestyles with strong social connectedness and integrated 'online' and 'offline' lives (Varis and Van Nuenen 2017). Hence, neither those early Internet researches that tend to underrate online practices as secondary to 'offline realities', nor the dichotomization of our life into the 'virtual' and 'real' realms could maintain their initial explanatory powers (e.g., Donath 1999; Hine 2008). With increasing coverage and decreasing costs of Internet accesses in China, the Chinese are unprecedentedly open to varied digital resources for organizing social and general aspects of life. The intensive use of digital technologies and innovative ways of interpersonal communication, such as using 'Martian language' (Lee 2008), perpetually expand personal identity repertoires. It also enables Chinese people to shape new forms of group membership and group culture, as Dong's (2017: 132) recent study demonstrates. The emergence of new Internet technologies invites people to new behavioral and ideological expressions, or 'identity experiments', that would inherently transform the existing identification modes (Valkenburg et al. 2005; also Androutsopoulos 2006; boyd 2014; Blommaert and Varis 2015). The wide availability and increased affordability of the Internet and smart devices facilitate ordinary users to be capable of commanding huge attention and help them channel out their voices previously unheard. Besides, and as I shall demonstrate in later chapters, it also empowers Internet users to stand out from the crowd with more ease, at least under conditions to be discussed later. In this sense, people who are digitally literate and Internet-wise would have an advantage in translating their varied 'capitals', resources that could have been long repressed and depreciated in Chinese traditional culture, into their new currencies, which would further ensue social upward mobility.

According to CNNIC (2016), up to June 2016, the population of Chinese netizens has risen to 710 million, with a penetration rate of 51.75. And up to the same time, the population of mobile Internet users reached 656 million, taking up 92.5% of the total Internet population. Undoubtedly, the Internet has played an unprecedentedly important role in Chinese people's economic and social life, affecting a range of activities from shopping and calling a taxi to making friends and finding a potential marriage or sexual partner. I contend that the active embrace of the Internet in Chi-

na is of special importance to those that are traditionally underprivileged and under-represented in mainstream media, not only in terms of the economic prospects but also in terms of equality of development opportunities and social upward mobility.

1.5 Purpose statement

Despite a multitude of studies on Chinese youth identities, specifically with a focus on femininity and feminism, many studies only attend to offline encounters and communities. This academic bias in Chinese identity studies has not been problematic until recent times. Now that smartphones and other portable digital devices, such as tablets and smart watches, have become affordable to many and become an indispensable part of our daily lives, complementary studies are needed. The unparalleled connectivity facilitated by the 'app generation' takes on different forms for Chinese individuals to organize their daily lives and their identity practices within it. While refraining from overblown optimism that envisions a wave of social activism through and by means of China's Internet, this study intends to examine the new affordances the Internet has offered for ordinary Chinese netizens, especially females, who are less politically ambitious but more passionate for their identity construction and socio-economic upward mobility, in the context of contemporary China sketched above.

In essence, this dissertation will specifically examine Chinese females' new economic practices revolving around their own designed gender representations in digital China. Constraints as well as opportunities for Chinese females' identity construction will be carefully examined in various digital social contexts in China. In addition, it is also aimed at investigating how power relations and identification needs play out in current digital economic tides engulfing a country that is, demographically, characterized by a prominent male surplus and a lack of socio-economic equality.

CHAPTER 2

Identity, gender and erotic capital

This chapter will offer the main theoretical and argumentative dimensions of the study, and it builds on what we have seen in Introduction. There, I explained how several critical features of contemporary China's societal make-up pushed (mainly but not exclusively) young people to exploit the tremendous potential of new information and communication technologies. As Du (2016) convincingly argued, the online world has offered, for the millions of educated Chinese people qualified as the 'precariat' (Standing 2011), a public social space within which activities are possible that are hard to achieve in the offline social world. Du explained that precariat members construct an online 'memic' language based on often very advanced digital literacy skills, enabling them to raise, circulate and discuss views and information relatively freely and in ways for which no equivalent alternative exists offline. Du also showed that the precariat developed its own online E'gao culture, often based on 'cheap' parodies of elite and prestigious commodities and symbols, and the precariat also made and articulated an identity category of its own: *diaosi* (a word approximately translatable as 'the losers'). These online practices, Du suggested, together point towards the emergence of the Chinese precariat as a genuine social formation, articulating their own budding ideologies and held together by a complex of shared and socially powerful practices.

In many ways, my study must be seen as an extension of Du (2016). The broad panorama of phenomena and processes sketched there invites a large range of follow-up studies, engaging in a more selective and perhaps deeper way with some of the phenomena and processes mentioned there. More specifically, I will engage with the ways in which, in this context of transition and rapid technological-infrastructure development, a new economic niche is emerging revolving around the construction and marketing of an identity format for femininity. This new 'market', I shall argue, offers very specific new affordances, as well as constraints, for people in a 'grassroots' economic position in Chinese society: people for whom this newly emerging market offers a possibility to 'move ahead' in the socio-economic system by developing and exploiting its potential. The 'grassroots' dimension is an obvious extension of Du's (2016) argument, which also focused strongly on 'work from below' performed by otherwise unorganized (and socio-economically marginalized) people.

At the same time, my specific angle of approach demands a different theoretical framework, for the issues raised here will be more specific. They fit into a long-standing debate on the nature of capital in Late Capitalism, the formation of markets

of immaterial commodities such as gender, and the role of technology and infrastructure in such processes.

2.1 Forms of capital in late capitalism

Marx (1867/1992), in Volume I of *Capital*, offered a systematic account of the production and circulation of capital on which all capitalist societies are based. In Marx's political economy, the circulation of commodities, on the one hand, follows a succession of commodity-money-commodity circulation, in which commodities are priced and sold with an aim to buy new ones. At the same time, another circulation pattern occurs during the mercantile trading process, in which money is spent to purchase goods and goods are resold to gain more money. The latter form of circulation gives birth to the Marxist notion of capital. Marx argues that money is not in any way an equivalent to capital, but capital just takes the form of money in most human societies; it is money that has been commodified (Marx 1867/1992; see also Simmel 1900/2004 for a non-Marxian discussion). Furthermore, Marx contended that the essential feature of capital is its capacity for self-reproduction, which relies on the extraction and accumulation of surplus value by the bourgeoisie from the working class. This tendency (driven by 'greed', as Marx saw it) explains another core feature of capitalism: the permanent expansion of markets through innovation. When capital accumulation hits its limits in one market, new markets with new commodities will be created, allowing the maximization of profit.

Marx's differentiation between capital and money discloses the essence of capitalist exploitation and the internal mechanism of economic crisis, which has greatly contributed to a better understanding of the socio-economic realm we are living in today. However, Marx's theorization of capital predominantly attends to its economic aspects, specifically the immediate arena where mercantile practices come into play. Obviously, his observations were based on the capitalist system of his era, which was the era overlapping what Hobsbawm called 'the age of capital' and the 'age of empire' (Hobsbawm 1975, 1989). In Marx's lifetime, capitalism was developing from local or regional factory production to international (indeed global) industrial production supported by a strongly organizing financier industry. Material commodities were now mass-produced, its raw products were harvested in other parts of the world, and its markets were international. The technological innovations for this expansion of capitalism demanded heavy investments delivered by transnational banking corporations, and technological innovation as well as the expansion of scale were the drivers behind imperialism. The dramatic expansion of industrial production brought many millions of people into the exploited and subordinate class known as the proletariat, and put science at the heart of the demand for technological innovation (Hobsbawm 1989; Mandel 1999).

The continuous expansion of markets, however, pushed capitalism increasingly into the production and commodification of immaterial goods, such as art, music,

movies, ideas, and eventually also identities and lifestyles (Bauman 2001). The broad realm of culture became an object of capitalist mass-production, a 'culture industry', argued Adorno and Bernstein (1991) in an anticipation of what later became 'Cultural Studies' (Hall 2016). In an endlessly expanding consumer market, material objects such as refrigerators and cars would be 'packaged' in identity and status attributions, which in themselves would determine the commodity value of the object. Purchasing a refrigerator, for instance, would make someone 'modern', while the purchase of particular brands of cars would become a mark of elite status. Pierre Bourdieu (to whose work I will return below) added to this the insight that 'symbolic capital' as expressed, for instance, in a preference for certain kinds of music, art and cuisine, had become a type of capital in its own right (Bourdieu 1989).

This broad development in which material commodities became accompanied by immaterial ones, not as ancillary attributes of material objects, but as commodities, markets and capital in their own right, was theorized by Mandel (1999) as a new stage in the development of capitalism: 'Late Capitalism'. One of the characteristics of that stage of development of capitalism is that innovative technologies have become mass consumption commodities in their own right. Of course, scholars such as Mandel made these observations long before computers and Internet became commodified. These accurate predictions, however, were later used by Castells (1996) to describe the fundamental sociological effects of late capitalism. Castells identified an emerging new system of labor, of labor relations, of markets, of social groups, of identities and social interactions. Jointly, they demand attention to very different forms of economic practice than the ones we received from mainstream scholarship.

Before expanding on the argument about capital, we must pause to consider what Mandel, Castells and others (e.g., Eriksen 2001) identified as the major engine behind this large-scale overhaul of capitalism: technology. It is the mass distribution of innovative technologies that re-shapes the economic, social and cultural patterns of contemporary society at an amazing speed. The mass distribution, for instance, of automobiles changed the mobility patterns of large numbers of people, in the process affecting their entire ways of living (e.g., the choice of where to live) and working (creating new jobs such as the traveling salesperson). Similarly, the mass distribution of radio (and later television) changed not just the ways in which people entered a universe of knowledge and information, but also (as Hobsbawm already noted in 1989) their daily routines that were now punctuated by, e.g. the timing of the daily news programs. Possessing such innovative technologies became marks of class and status identities, as we have seen earlier, and they created the kind of mass culture which Adorno (and later also Bauman 2001) criticized. They also, in that sense, created new political structures and relationships. The introduction of new ICT, as items for mass consumption marks a new stage in the impact of technology on society. Eriksen (2016) defines this stage as one of 'accelerated change', with new forms of material and immaterial mobility, economic practice and knowledge economy being massified (and altered) at a blistering pace. Du's (2016) study of the emerging precar-

iat in China once again provides an illustration of this. In a mere handful of years, the widespread adoption of PC, mobile phone and Internet applications generated a social, cultural and political dynamics of sorts, with precariat members grabbing the opportunities for (otherwise extremely difficult) community formation and social interaction offered by these new technologies, without prohibiting costs attached to it. My study will further explore this accelerated change in China, focusing on specific forms of immaterial commodity formation and market-creation.

Immaterial economic practices have by and large been neglected in mainstream approaches, argued Bourdieu (1986/2011). Marx's theorization of capital, despite its innovation and great explanatory power, is reductionist when seen from a contemporary viewpoint, and lacks a full account of bourgeois society (Bourdieu, 1986/2011). For example, Marx's notion of capital is not capable of explaining how symbolic capital correlates with 'hard' capital in structuring the different strata of late-modern society, notably in fields such as taste, consumption behavior, and culture in the broadest sense of the term. Bourdieu contends, "it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory" (Bourdieu 1986/2011: 81). To fill this theoretical gap, Bourdieu re-theorized the notion of capital and introduced important immaterial forms to it. In the updated capital theory, Bourdieu defines capital more comprehensively as

accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated', embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. (Bourdieu 1986/2011: 81)

Departing from this conceptualization, Bourdieu (1986/2011) differentiated three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. In Bourdieu's capital theory, economic capital refers to "the sum of the resources and assets that can be used to produce financial gains" (Hakim 2010: 500). Marxist political economy provided a systematic account of economic capital, which is (as 'wealth') the most recognizable form of capital. Cultural and social capital, which are more intangible and have been neglected for long, are the main fields of Bourdieu's contribution to the capital theory.

According to Bourdieu (1986/2011), cultural capital consists of "information resources and assets that are socially valued, such as knowledge of art, literature, and music" (Hakim 2010: 500). Cultural capital has three different states, namely, 'the embodied state', 'the objectified state' and 'the institutionalized state' (Bourdieu 1986/2011). Cultural capital in the embodied state can take "the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu 1986/2011: 82). Cultural capital in the objectified state may take the form of various cultural goods, such as books, forms of music and dictionaries. And cultural capital in the institutionalized state may take the

form of educational qualifications (Bourdieu 1986/2011). Note that Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital is not independent of but tied closely to the other two forms of capital. As Reay (2004) emphasizes, cultural capital "cannot be understood in isolation from the other forms of capital, economic, symbolic and social capital, that together constitute advantage and disadvantage in society" (Reay 2004: 57). Social capital, according to Bourdieu (1986/2011), refers to

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. (Bourdieu 1986/2011: 86)

More specifically, Bourdieu considered social capital as being

made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. (Bourdieu 1986/2011: 82)

In Bourdieu's theory, social capital is instrumental and can be deployed by individuals deliberately for benefits through their participation in group activities. Social capital can be attained through a "deliberate construction of sociability" (Portes 1998: 3).

The three forms of capital have different distribution patterns among a population. However, these forms are convertible into each other under specific conditions. Such convertibility is, by large, facilitated by the laboring time that is required to attain capital in all its three forms. Cultural capital, for instance, is convertible into economic capital "through the mediation of the time needed for acquisition" (Bourdieu 1986/2011: 84). And reversely, economic capital is convertible into cultural capital for the required time expenditure that needs to be secured by economic capital (Bourdieu 1986/2011). Economic capital, then, is also convertible into social capital. For example, when one buys another person a gift, one's "expenditure of time, attention, care, concern" has transfigured the items s/he has purchased into exchanges as a practice of friendship and kinship (Bourdieu 1986/2011: 87). Despite the mutual convertibility between capital in all its three forms, there are risks of failure in capital conversions, especially the one from tangible economic capital to the other two less tangible forms. In such potential failures of capital conversion, the time one has spent in a specific field may not be well acknowledged and fail its beholder's expectation of a future economic return.

In my study, I shall draw inspiration from Bourdieu's different forms of capital, focusing on the intangible ones and their conversion into tangible capital. I must now specify the specific forms of capital I will address.

2.2 From capital to identity and gender

As suggested both by Marx (1969/1992: 49), and Bourdieu (1986/2011: 84), capital is ‘accumulated labor’ from human beings. Accordingly, the production and circulation of capital are inseparable from human involvement in various forms of labor. On the one hand, capital, in all of its three forms, is generated and transmitted via human laboring of different kinds and in various arenas of production and consumption. On the other hand, the interaction between humans, as the laborers, and the capital production and distribution, foregrounds personal and social identity construction. I take this as one of the important points made by Bourdieu, and elaborated by e.g. Stuart Hall (2017): during the production and acquisition of capital, the laborers may transform their identities, construct new identities or reinforce established identities. Given the close relationship between capital and human identity certainly in the technology-driven economies of Late Capitalism, it is impossible to clarify capital without an investigation into identity.

2.2.1 *Identity in practice*

Identity is one of the most heated topics in socio-cultural studies. As argued by Cerulo (1997), “the study of identity forms a critical cornerstone within modern sociological thought” (1997: 385). In the literature, identity theories generally fall into three different strands of social thought: essentialism, constructionism and post-modernism. Essentialist identity theories tend to believe in the existence of a core of collective identities, such as “qualities emerging from physiological traits, psychological predispositions, regional features, or the properties of structural locations” (1997: 386–387). These qualities are believed to be internalized by a collective’s members and define who these members are in an ‘essential’ sense. This trend has been problematized by constructionist identity theorists who reject “any category that sets forward essential or core features as the unique property of a collective’s members” (1997: 387). Instead, social constructionism tends to consider every collective “a social artifact — an entity molded, refabricated, and mobilized in accordance with reigning cultural scripts and centers of power” (1997: 387). In this sense, identities are constructed and articulated through social interactions.

Postmodernists spot flaws in constructionist identity theories while sharing the constructionist’s stand of anti-essentialism. As suggested by Cerulo (1997), “some find constructionism’s agenda insufficient” and others “contend that the constructionist approach implied identity categories built through interactive effort”, which “underemphasizes the role of power in the classification process” (Cerulo 1997: 391). With an aim to “broaden the social constructionist agenda”, postmodernist identity theorists examine the “real, present day political and other reasons why essentialist identities continue to be invoked and often deeply felt” (Calhoun 1995: 199, as cited by Cerulo 1997: 391). Besides, postmodernists “view the variation within identity

categories” and “advocate a shift in analytic focus, deemphasizing observation and deduction and elevating concerns with public discourse” (Cerulo 1997: 391).

This study, on the one hand, mainly draws its theoretical insights from constructionists such as the American sociologist Goffman. On the other hand, the study also takes stock of from postmodernists’ emphasis on power relations played out in identity construction, as often emphasized in French philosopher Foucault’s works (e.g., Foucault 2003). Goffman’s contribution is often defined as a systematic account of human identity practices through a dramaturgical analogy (e.g., Goffman 1959). In Goffman’s identity theories, human identity presentations are likened to theatrical performances, in which we act upon social scripts in front of a specific audience. Goffman obviously draws here on the American traditions of Pragmatism (notably the work of Mead 1934) and Symbolic Interactionism (cf. Blumer 1969), working on the principle that human social behavior is interactionally organized and proceeds on the basis of anticipations of the other’s reactions. One of the most useful notions designed by Goffman with respect to identity work is ‘dramaturgy’, which denotes the performative nature of our daily identity presentations and equates social actions with social ‘acting’. Following this analogy and echoing one of Mead’s central insights, Goffman states:

The self (...) is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented. (Goffman 1959: 252–253)

In his sense, human identities are cast through social performances and decided in large by the audience’s reception of such performances. But in order for that to be successful, people need to be able to tune into their audience’s expectations. They need, in other words, to be aware of the normative codes that govern acceptable social performance.

Therefore, Foucault is another key researcher that is frequently referenced in the study. In *Abnormal*, Foucault (1975/2003) explains the genesis of the modern individual as an effect of a layered and very detailed system of social power. This power (called ‘biopower’ and reproduced by ‘governmentality’, Foucault 2007) extends over the entire lifespan of the individual, has almost every aspect of life and conduct as its object, and is implemented not just by the state and its institutions, but by a ‘total’ network of actors including the family and, above all, the individual him/herself. Foucault emphasizes that this power operates through norms, through often tacit conventions of how to do things, and that the main target of such power is to be ‘normal’ in each of the many social environments that make up an individual’s social life. These norms (and its effects: notions of ‘being normal’) are internalized by the individual in an incredibly detailed complex of what Foucault calls ‘technologies (or care) of the Self’. We continuously prepare and transform ourselves for ‘normal’ social performances, we take our clues from others in that process, often from those

we consider to be authorities on ‘being normal’, and we gather, learn and acquire the resources required for such social constructions of the Self. We are talking here about a potentially infinitely detailed range of what Blommaert and Varis (2015) called ‘microhegemonies’: small rules governing small segments of behavior, appearance and performance, subject to the ratification of others, and in that sense compellingly normative.

In addition to the general inspiration taken from Bourdieu as discussed above, these two theoretical instruments – Goffman’s notion of dramaturgical identity performance, and Foucault’s ‘technologies of the Self’ – will be used in this study to inquire into technologically supported gendered identity practices in online environments in China.

2.2.2 *Gender in practice*

The tremendous scholarly attention devoted to gender reflects its wide-range signification in the organization and meaning-making of our daily practices. The academic interest in gender departs from the long-held treatment of gender as an equivalent to the biological sex by introducing multiplicity into gender. Just as French feminist scholar De Beauvoir (1973/2015) argued in *The Second Sex*, “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (De Beauvoir 1973/2015: 301). Constructionists share De Beauvoir’s insight and similarly conceptualize gender as “an interactional accomplishment, an identity continually renegotiated via linguistic exchange and social performance” (Cerulo 1997: 387). This approach is epitomized by American philosopher and gender theorist Butler (1990: 519):

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [*sic*]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

Gender, on the one hand, is intertwined with our biological body, such as the biological sex that is endowed with us ever since our birth. This, however doesn’t explain the social role of gender, and on the other hand, gender is characterized by its *performativity*. This essential concept in Butler’s (1990) theory describes the realization of gender through bodily stylization. By using performativity, Butler treats gender as “a corporeal style, an ‘act’, as it were, which is both intentional and performative” (Butler 1990: 190). The resonances with Goffman’s dramaturgical approach are evident here.

Cultural requirements of gender performativity vary between ‘men’ and ‘women’, and this is where Butler’s approach can be related with Foucault’s ‘technologies of the Self’. Women, in most cultures around the world, are under great social pres-

sure to behave “womanly”, and such patriarchal repression is a major focus in feminist activism. Early feminists constantly advocated a downplaying of sexuality and physical appeals carried on females’ bodies in order to keep females from potential objectification and sexualization. The victimhood discourse in the early wave of feminism helped women around the globe achieve more equal job positions and wages as well as more chance for political participation. However, such discourse is problematized by other feminists for its extremist treatment of females’ body. For example, Butler (1990) contends that corporeality is a resource for all humans, and that a woman’s body is a legitimate object to be stylized for one’s own benefit. Becoming feminine requires a series of personal performances, which often involve work of appearance grooming (such as hairdo, hair removal, wearing makeup, etc.). The more skillful a woman is at such performances, the more feminine and attractive she might be perceived. Through learning, a woman can acquire the appropriate social knowledge to behave ‘properly’ and use these enskilled performances as a resource for personal benefits. In this way, females’ gender reflects to a certain extent one’s social knowledge about norms and ideologies as well as the work invested to acquire them, and becomes another form of capital for an individual.

Given the close connections I observe with the emphases I took from Goffman and Foucault, I shall adopt Butler’s view of gender performativity, because its actual patterns and structures lead us to conceive of such performances as moments of capital formation. I must be more specific now with respect to the particular kinds of capital I shall address.

2.3 Erotic and aesthetic capital

2.3.1 Erotic capital

As was discussed in Section 2.2, human identities are inseparable from capital production and distribution. Gender, as a special genre of human identity, is also intertwined with capital in all its forms. In fact, French sociologist Bourdieu (1984: 107) acknowledged the inseparability of gender and class, as suggested in his famous statement that

sexual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity.

However, according to Huppertz (2009: 46), Bourdieu paid little actual attention to the relationship between gender and capital and had not considered gender to be an independent form of capital. Against Bourdieu, who “tended to only use the concept of capital to examine class advantage,” Huppertz (2009: 46) emphasized “gender capital” as a form of capital in its own right, adding that “gender capital may also be a useful tool for understanding contemporary gender practices.” Furthermore, Bourdieu’s theory did not address the sex differentials in the capital distributions

across different cultures. In fact, these differentials have long been attributed to sexism, against which feminists had fought for long. For example, a discrepancy in work payment has been observed, which is gender-based rather than contribution-based. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler (1990) explained how patriarchal powers are operationalized under the hood of institutionalized gender discourses. For Butler, the notion of femininity must be abandoned if the gender inequalities are to be eradicated.

In other feminist literature, women who draw a livelihood from their sex-appeal are placed under moral scrutiny and enregistered in the victimhood and exploitation discourse. Women's belief in physical charm, if any, is seen as a form of reinforced sexism that females and feminists should avoid. Similarly, women's investments in physical attractiveness are often pathologized and perceived as in need of being rectified. However, a simplistic pathologization of such investments risks hypercorrection and may also be analytically unmotivated. Based on national reports from Great Britain, the U.S. and other countries, British sociologist Hakim (2010) revealed consistent differences between the two sexes across cultures. These sexual differences, which cannot be accounted for by socially imposed gendered differentials in forms of femininity and masculinity, has given birth to what Hakim calls 'erotic capital'. The gendered femininity constitutes one of the most important aspects of female erotica, according to Hakim, and is of great value to its beholders. She argues that erotic capital is convertible into economic, social and cultural capital and can be accumulated and deployed by females, for both their economic and social gains.

While some scholars express discomfort because of the non-measurability of erotic capital, Hakim (2010: 500) insists:

Acknowledging that there are difficulties of measurement is not an excuse for failing to recognize the social and economic importance of erotic power in all areas of social activity.

According to Hakim (2010), females possess more such erotic capital than their male counterparts; the neglect of erotic capital as a real given consequently should be seen as an effect of patriarchal bias precluding females' legitimate use of erotic capital. Erotic capital, in other words, is primarily a female attribute, which is why its value is depreciated. Hakim sees another factor for such devaluation: patriarchal ideology, which imposes "'moral' objections to the deployment of erotic capital," which has added to the dismissal of erotic capital as a legitimate object of analysis (Hakim 2010: 499).

But despite such obstacles, female beauty as a valuable resource has increasingly gained attention in social and cultural research. American economist Hamermesh (2011), in his book *Beauty Pays: Why Attractive People Are More Successful*, spells out a wide range of economic advantages conferrable by good looks, mainly in labor markets and employment, marriage and friendship matches. While Hamermesh's

findings are intriguing, his treatment of beauty only as physiognomy, according to Mears (2012: 815), is “an unsatisfyingly narrow idea that misses all kinds of factors (...) from presentation of self, the smile, sexiness, confidence, stylishness, and so on.”

Contrasted with Hamermesh’s reductionist treatment of physiognomy as the only representative of one’s erotica, Hakim (2010: 500–501) suggested six features of erotic capital. In terms of the earlier parts of my discussion, we can see these as normative aspects of ‘care of the self’ in view of dramaturgical gendered performance.

Aligning with Hamermesh’s argument, the first and most central element is ‘beauty’, i.e., bodily configurations that are considered to be desirable in a specific culture. As argued by Hakim (2010: 500):

Studies show that conventionality, symmetry, and an even skin tone contribute to attractiveness, and that it is an achieved characteristic, in part (Webster and Driskell, 1983), as illustrated by the *belle laide*. Great beauty is always in short supply, and is therefore universally valorized.

The second element of erotic capital, according to Hakim, is ‘sexual attractiveness’, which refers to one’s sex appeal or the attractiveness of ‘a sexy body’. As argued by Hakim (2010: 500), “sex appeal can also be about personality and style, femininity or masculinity, a way of being in the world, a characteristic of social interaction.” Compared to beauty, which “tends to be static (...) [and] easily captured in a photo,” sex appeal is less tangible and can only be depicted and expressed on film through “the way someone moves, talks, and behaves” (2010: 500). Hakim (2010: 500) argues:

Some men prefer women who are small, petite, even tiny, while others prefer tall and elegant woman. Some women prefer men with well-developed muscles and strong bodies, while others prefer a slender, ‘effete’, elegant appearance. Despite this variation in tastes, sex appeal is in short supply, and is therefore valorized.

The third element is about the quality of one’s social attributes, which include “grace, charm, social skills in interaction” that are able to “make people like you, feel at ease and happy, want to know you, and, where relevant, desire you.” (Hakim 2010: 500).

The fourth element is liveliness, one that is manifest in the form of libido and “a mixture of physical fitness, social energy, and good humour” (Hakim 2010: 500). Hakim contends:

people who have a lot of life in them can be hugely attractive to others — as illustrated by people who are the life and soul of the party. (2010: 500)

The fifth is social presentation, which concerns one's knowledge about ways of behaving oneself in specific occasions, including "style of dress, face-painting, perfume, jewelry or other adornments, hairstyles, and the various accessories that people carry or wear to announce their social status and style to the world" (Hakim 2010: 501).

The sixth and last element is sexuality itself, which pertains to one's sexual performance in general, "sexual competence, energy, erotic imagination, playfulness, and everything else that makes for a sexually satisfying partner" (Hakim 2010: 501).

According to Hakim (2010: 501), "for men as well as women, all six elements contribute to defining someone's erotic capital." However, "the relative importance of the six elements differs for men and women, and varies between cultures and in different centuries." Seen from the components of erotic capital, erotic capital is "a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts" (2010: 501).

Let us now turn to the convertibility of erotic capital. As we have discussed earlier, in Bourdieu's (1986/2011) capital theory all forms of capital are convertible into each other under certain conditions. Economic capital, which is often institutionalized in the form of properties, is immediately convertible into money. Cultural capital, which is often institutionalized in the form of 'educational qualifications', is also convertible into economic capital. Social capital, often institutionalized in the form of 'nobility', can also be turned into economic capital. Reversely, money can also be spent for a purchase of social and cultural capital. The convertibility of capital in its three forms has its base, according to Bourdieu (1986/2011), in *labor-time*:

The universal equivalent, the measure of all equivalences, is nothing other than labor-time (in the widest sense); and the conservation of social energy through all its conversions is verified if, in each case, when one takes into account both the labor-time accumulated in the form of capital and the labor-time needed to transform it from one type into another. (Bourdieu 1986/2011: 89)

Following the same logic of convertibility, Hakim (2010, 2011a) affirms the convertibility of erotic capital. Hakim (2010) contends that erotic capital has added value in areas where the public and private are intertwined and where a public display is of great importance. According to her, "erotic capital becomes valuable in occupations with business-related socializing and public display, which is more common in the highest-grade occupations" (Hakim 2010: 503). Erotic capital, on the one hand, shows a pronounced social and economic value in entertainment occupations, while on the other hand this value extends to private contexts. Conversely, capital in the three forms defined by Bourdieu is convertible into erotic capital. For example, "spending money on cosmetic dentistry, plastic surgery, a gym membership or per-

sonal trainer can also help to develop erotic power” (Hakim 2011b: 24). One can make investments in erotic capital.

As we mentioned, Hakim explains that women generally have more erotic capital than men. As contended by Hakim (2010: 508), “women can (...) exploit their erotic capital for upward social mobility through the marriage market instead of, or as well as, the labour market.” Compared with men, who “can usually make their fortune only through their jobs and businesses,” women have more privileges in the use of their erotic capital, they “can achieve the same wealthy lifestyle and social advantages through marriage as well as through career success” (Hakim 2011b: 24).

I adopt Hakim’s concept of erotic capital, on top of the theoretical instruments described earlier. In this study, I will focus on women’s monetization of their erotic capital through elaborate practices of care of the self and online dramaturgical performance in nowadays’ China. Let me now turn to these practices.

2.3.2 Aesthetic labor

Feminine beauty, despite its role as erotic capital in domains involving sexual relationships, is largely a specific form of natural beauty that can be well conceived and experienced by all human beings of both sexes and across cultures if put in a broad perspective. The universal conceivability of feminine beauty forms the base of its aesthetic value. While feminine beauty, as a form of natural beauty conferred upon a female body, could conjure up a gender discourse and be liable to sexualization, it may not be always or immediately played out within the domain of gender. In this sense, women’s beauty, which includes face, hairstyle, clothing, etc., is by no means reducible to lust and erotica. In a better way, erotic capital should be considered as a subgenre of women’s aesthetic capital that has been activated through contexts related to sexual relationships. However, in most ‘style’ service sectors, where sexual discourse does not find its heuristic application, the feminine beauty cannot be registered as erotic capital.

The aestheticization of women’s beauty is widely seen in service-based sectors, such as the clothing retail and restaurant industry, where the aesthetic value is crystallized through embodied labor. Such embodied labor has been conceptualized in varied terms by different scholars, with the influential ones being ‘body work’ (Crang 1994, 1997; Adkins 2000; Taylor and Tyler 2000), ‘emotional labor’ (Hochschild 1979, 1983) and ‘aesthetic labor’ (Witz et al. 2003), to name just a few. From the literature where ‘body work’ is preoccupied with sexuality and gender, and ‘emotional labor’ foregrounding ‘the feeling self at the expense of the embodied self’, Witz et al. (2003), proposed the concept of “aesthetic labor” equally addressing both the “embodied character” and performative aspects of labor involved in various service organizations (Witz et al.: 50). According to Witz et al. (2003: 34):

The labour of aesthetics is (...) a vital element in the production or materialization of the aesthetics of a service organization and particularly of the ‘style’ of service experi-

enced or consumed by customers. The increasing mobilization of aesthetic labour is particularly evident in the 'style' labour market of design- and image-driven retail and hospitality organizations.

Despite an acknowledgement of "important gendered and sexualized dimensions to aesthetic labour," Witz et al.'s (2003: 35) conceptualization of 'aesthetic labour' sways away from gender discourse and focuses more on the universality of its commodifiability, contending that "it is by no means only female labour that is subject to commodification via aestheticization." The commodifiable beauty traits form one's repertoire of 'aesthetic capital', which in Anderson et al.'s (2010: 566) definition, refers to "traits of beauty that are perceived as assets capable of yielding privilege, opportunity and wealth." According to Anderson et al. (2010), one's aesthetic capital is contained in personal beauty assets and often resides ostensibly in face and hair, body or physique, clothes and fashion and accessories. Rather than taking a feminist perspective (which often underscores the oppressive role of beauty practices through objectification of women in general and marginalization of minorities), Anderson et al.'s (2010: 572) literature review shows that, in spite of penalties, beauty and highly valued aesthetic traits yielded individuals a wide array of social, cultural, physical and economic privileges and wealth."

The aesthetic capital proposed by Anderson et al. (2010: 572) shares similarities with cultural capital and according to its authors "works in the same way as does cultural capital." With a focus on beauty traits, aesthetic capital, as a sub-concept of cultural capital, enables a direct address of the justification and valorization of beauty practices widely available in digital environments.

In sum, particular forms of labor need to be put into effect in order for aesthetic and erotic capital to acquire its value, prior to its being brought into the market for conversion into economic capital. The first phase involves elaborate technologies of the self-revolving around the construction and acquisition of normative modes of appearance and conduct; the second phase, similarly, involves tightly normative dramaturgical performances in order for erotic capital to be recognized, ratified and converted. All this needs to be done in a new technological context of which we know that it opens up opportunities (but also creates constraints) for new social practices, relationships and economies.

The two phases distinguished here – the formation of capital and its conversion in a market – will structure this study and determine the research questions. But before formulating those, one final major point needs to be made.

2.3.3 The care of the selfie

I shall investigate these processes in an online environment, and this has massive effects on my approach. As mentioned earlier, I see the online world not as a separate world, often qualified as 'virtual' (i.e. 'unreal'), but as an extension and expansion of the social world in which we all live (cf. Appadurai 1996; Castells 1996). To the

extent that the online infrastructures have brought new phenomena to societies, the newness has to be seen as pertaining to the entire social world, online as well as offline. These innovations do have their specificities though: the online world has enabled new forms of interaction, of social group formation, of identity performance, of knowledge and capital production and distribution. The specific features of some of these processes will be the themes of the chapters in this study, and I will engage in the Chapters 4-7 with highly specific online environments which we can best imagine as 'chronotopes' (Bakhtin 1981, 1984; cf. Blommaert and De Fina 2017): space-time arrangements in which specific norms operate, generating specific forms of identity and adequate conduct for those inhabiting them. We will see how such specific arrangements – e.g. those of a livestreaming chatroom in Chapter 7 – impose such normative orders onto participants, producing specific forms of affordances and constraints on adequate conduct of participants.

In terms of presentation of the self and identity performances, the most crucial feature of the online spaces to be examined here is that people in these online environments present specific artefactual representations of themselves, different from 'offline' self-presentations. As a shorthand for such online forms of self-presentation, I propose to use the well-known term 'selfie'. In the online spaces I shall investigate, people are concerned with 'the presentation of the selfie' as one (online) form of their 'self'. And in order to get this presentation in line with the chronotopic norms and expectations of the specific online spaces, an elaborate 'care of the selfie' will be observed. I distinguish three main targets of such 'care of the selfie', and all of them will consistently occur throughout the case studies in Chapters 4-7:

1. Online alias names;
2. Designed visual images;
3. Specific interactional and semiotic scripts.

With regard to (1), most ordinary netizens in China prefer to use a nickname. Exceptions would include genuine celebrities of various walks of life, and some occasional online visitors. As we shall see, the use of such online alias names is widespread in the specific online spaces we will examine, and very often the choice of nicknames reveals purposeful and strategic design. It is very deeply tied to the specific identity performed and presented in the online space, as it would index specific values, imageries or sentiments, all of which are communicated through that particular name. The same goes for (2): we shall see that the women presenting themselves in these online environments carefully design their faces and bodies according to specific models of beauty and attractiveness. And as for (3), the interactional conduct of the women will also be 'formatted' within specific genres and modes of communication, corresponding to the other aspects of the 'selfie'.

This focus on the 'selfie' explains my choice of a Goffmanian 'dramaturgical' approach, as well as my choice of Foucault's approach to the 'care of the self' as an

infinitely detailed set of normative regulations that are imposed upon the self, in order to appear to others as ‘normal’ (i.e. in line with the locally prevailing norms). It also explains my use of ‘design’ as a key term in describing the selfie. The term is borrowed from Kress (2010) and refers to the strategic semiotic work performed by subjects in interaction with others, with particular goals in mind (*italics in original*):

Design meets the interest *rhetor* (...) in full awareness of the communicational potentials of the resources which are available in the environment and needed for the implementation of the rhetor’s interest. (Kress 2010: 26–27)

As Kress emphasizes, design always proceeds on the basis of the available resources. In our case studies (especially Chapters 4 and 7) we will see how women consciously and with considerable effort try to acquire and refine the resources needed to design a particular selfie, which is then offered in commercial transactions (Chapters 6-7).

2.4 Research questions

I shall use the following set of hypotheses guiding my inquiries. Given China’s highly unequal male/female birth ratio, Chinese women, who are in a comparative population scarcity, are entitled to great bargaining power in terms of their erotic capital versus their male counterparts in sexual-related domains. In other domains that are remote to sexual relationships, Chinese women’s physical attraction takes the form of aesthetic capital, the valorization of which accords with the ‘aesthetic labor’ market. China, swimming in the digital tides with speedy information transportation, has witnessed an attention competition for various forms of scarce resources. Such competition, in a rapidly evolving new technological online environment, increasingly favors the valorization of the feminine beauty both as a form of aesthetic capital and as a form of erotic capital.

Based on the current Chinese social context and within the conceptual framework discussed in this chapter, the study mainly intends to answer the following four questions:

1. What is the social normative complex directing Chinese women’s capitalization on their physical beauty? How does that complex affect Chinese women’s beauty practices and their design of the selfie?
2. How is the construction of Chinese women’s aesthetic and erotic capital normatively tested and benchmarked in online environments?
3. How is Chinese women’s aesthetic and erotic capital commodified in female-female online interactions?
4. What are the wider social implications in China of these new forms of immaterial economy involving female aesthetic and erotic capital?

CHAPTER 3

Methodology and method

My research trajectory has been on the one hand determined by my consistent curiosity in feminine identity, on the other hand emerging from my personal digital activities, such as using Weibo to write posts and watching livestreaming. My horizon has unfolded with the passing of time and so have my methods of dealing with the data emerging from a multiple range of research sites. In this sense, the concrete methods of the study were not pre-defined within a well-established *a priori* framework but of an ethnographic fashion. They emerge from and are greatly responsive to specific sites, including *Baidu Tieba BBS*, *Sina Weibo*, *Yizhibo* livestreaming platform, where I have carried out this study. It leads to one of the most important aspects of this chapter: the methodology and method shown here are a result of a retrospection or a rear view of my whole research trajectory rather than having been clearly spelled out *a priori* at the beginning of this study.

Two major principles will guide the methodological approaches in this study. The first principle is that I will observe and examine the specific phenomena under scrutiny here as *social interactions* involving multiple parties, and driven by as well as oriented towards specific social relationships. I broadly subscribe here to an interactionist viewpoint, as articulated early on by Mead (1934) and later by Blumer (1969). This principle means that my primary aim is to make sense of the interactions as indexically related to specific forms of social relationships (e.g., intimacy, love, and so on). In turn, this involves great ethnographic attention to the specific contexts within which the interactions develop, and abstain from *a priori* generalizing assumptions in so doing.

The second principle, already mentioned in the previous chapter and closely related to the first principle above, is that of *design* as interest-laden and interest-driven semiotic work (cf. Kress 2010), performed in view of establishing the specific social relationships that participants are aiming for. In the empirical parts of this study, I shall look at specific forms of semiotic practice ('aesthetic labor', as I called it earlier) that is aimed at specific outcomes, and has to be made to fit into the normative formats required for such outcomes.

Those two general principles underlie my choice of more specific methodological tools and approaches.

3.1 Digital ethnography

As a male researcher, studying Chinese females' identity-construction perceptually poses challenges resulting from potential subjectivity interferences and insensitivity to females' struggles. However, various measures can be taken to face up with this challenge, such as proactive reflexivity. Put in the context of this study, I keep being reflexive about my subjectivity in the participant observations. Besides, I have rooted my interpretations deeply in the spontaneous communication in the research sites by making lengthy participant observations. In this journey of academic exploration, ethnography, as an anthropological research paradigm, turned out to be handy with its emphasized care for research subjects and the accountability of the concerned phenomenon from an insider's point of view. Besides, a notable attraction of ethnography lies in its emphasized open attitude towards all possible methods available to a specific fieldwork. In contrast with many other methodologies, ethnography does not strive for generalizations. Neither does it tend to prescribe a well-established method or a set of methods. Instead, ethnography is more problem-and-phenomenon-oriented, and therefore advantageous in terms of its responsiveness to practical issues emerging from the research sites.

According to Skågeby (2011: 411), ethnography essentially involves "a description of individuals, groups or cultures in their own environment over a long period of time." In a more detailed way, Bryman (2015: 432) considers ethnography as a research method in which the researcher spends "an extended period of time" to immerse him/herself in a specific social setting. The ethnographic researcher regularly observes the concerned social group members' behaviors, lends his/her ears to and gets engaged in conversations. Informants are usually interviewed "on issues that are not directly amenable to observation or that the ethnographer is unclear about (or indeed for other possible reasons)" (Bryman 2015: 432). Besides, a wide range of documents about the specified social group are collected if needed. All these measures collectively aim to develop "an understanding of the culture of the group's and people's behavior within the context of that culture" (2015: 432). Here, Bryman's practice-based discussion, despite its detailedness, in fact, is hardly exhaustive of all possible ways of ethnographic implementation. According to Prasad (1997: 103), while "ethnography is understood predominantly as a mode of data collection involving the development of close connections with subjects and situations being studied," as is the case in Bryman's discussion, this study tends to treat ethnography "as a methodology rather than a method which is linked to specific world views and approaches to understanding reality." In this sense, ethnography should not be reduced to specific methods applied in specific studies because ethnography intrinsically asks its practitioners, in other words the ethnographers, to adapt themselves to the sites under study without the confinement of any predefined framework. Making ethnography an instrument kit violates the essence promoted by ethnography itself.

With the advent of the Internet and an increased academic interest in Internet studies, traditional 'offline' ethnography branches out into looking at computer-mediated communication. According to Varis (2016), a diversity of terminologies has hence been made and used to address this digital turn, such as 'digital ethnography' (Murthy 2008), 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000), 'ethnography on the Internet' (Beaulieu 2004), 'Internet ethnography' (boyd 2008; Sade-Beck 2004), 'netnography' (Kozinets 2015) and 'Internet-related ethnography' (Postill and Pink 2012). However, among all these terminologies, Varis (2016) recommends the use of *digital ethnography*, arguing that the very term, compared with others, can lead to a better understanding of online communities and people's meaning-making processes and practices. Given the Internet and various digital spaces where "it would be extremely difficult to outline a simple set of techniques to follow," Varis suggests keeping digital ethnography "open to issues arising from the field" and to consider digital ethnography as a paradigmatic methodology, sharing Prasad's (1997) previous counter-argument against treating *digital ethnography* as "specific techniques" (Varis 2016: 61–62). In this regard, the consideration of digital ethnography as an overarching methodological 'supervisor' is more beneficiary than the treatment of it as an approach or method. This methodological 'supervisor' is not a dictator that imposes overwhelming restrictions on a research but one with democratic spirits, only prompting a researcher to interact with its participants and be sensitive to the concrete context. No further does it intend to push.

With a focus on China's recent Internet phenomenon revolving around gender, this study probes into the digital realm characterized by the fluidity of data transportation and the multimodality of CMC, which digital ethnography is apt to deal with. In accordance with the ethnographic methodology, I have attached great importance to the Chinese cultural context and specific social settings of the group in question. According to Blommaert and Dong (2010: 18), as shown in Figure 3.1, the research object in an ethnographic study "is a needle point in time and space, and it can only gain relevance when it is adequately contextualized in micro- and macro-contexts." Blommaert and Dong (2010) argued that it is this contextualization process that holds accountability for the reasons why a specific research subject has certain features but not others. Besides, this contextualization process also allows the ethnographic researcher "to see, in microscopic events, effects of macroscopic structures, phenomena and processes" (Blommaert and Dong 2010: 18–19). Hence an ethnographic research often begins with 'preparation and documentation' that offers the researcher enough contextual knowledge to conduct fieldwork.

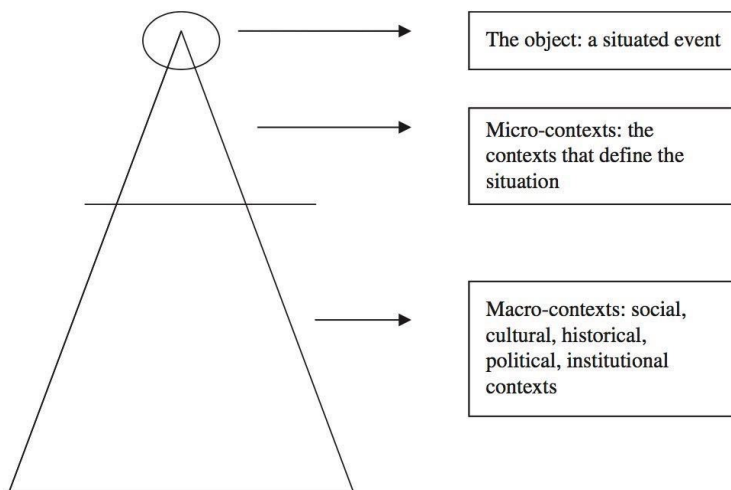


Figure 3.1 Relationship between context and the research object (Blommaert and Dong 2010: 18)

When preparation and documentation work is ready, fieldwork takes the turn. As is depicted by Blommaert and Dong (2010), the fieldwork is always chaotic, and it is about a learning process and then continued by observation and fieldnotes taking, interviewing and ‘rubbish’ collection. When all the needed fieldwork is completed, the research arrives at the post-field-work analysis and writing process in which concrete methods are coming ashore to analyze narrative and textual patterns, to identify argumentative/explanatory patterns, which collectively leads to the final results.

As to the data collection, first-hand empirical data are given priority, which are mainly collected via participant observations, ranging from lurking, i.e., to intense interaction. By lurking, I intend to be less obtrusive and try to learn the overall environment and the specific ‘conduct codes’ of the research sites, aiming to prepare myself for the later in-depth interaction with the social group members. To avoid over-interpretation or misinterpretation that could possibly result from the interference of my subjectivity, I have taken on board other documents as complementary data to assist my analysis and data legitimation. More specifically, to make the data more comprehensive and accountable, apart from multiple research sites, data are also gathered from various sources and in various forms, including observations, interviews, big website data and “documentary evidence of various kinds” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3). In general, data collection in this study is, relatively unstructured, qualitative-oriented and open to four specific cases emerging in contemporary China. This is determined by the mix of different types of methods and various types of data collected in the study that are characterized by multimodality and multilayeredness. As another consequence of choosing digital ethnography, the

data analysis of the study will be mainly interpretative based on my participant observations at respective sites.

3.2 Case studies, research subjects and data types

As discussed in Chapter 1, a series of socio-economic problems are chasing Chinese people today, including demographic and geographical wealth disparity, sex selection at birth, and lack of a wholesale and equal welfare system. At the same time, going through a transition from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0, China has witnessed the birth of an App Generation, in which this study is situated. Besides, China has also witnessed the popularization of online shopping (Yu 2014). Under all these digital contexts as a whole, this study generally aims to take a close look at new affordances the Internet has offered for Chinese young females' identity construction. Furthermore, this study is also interested in unveiling the ways in which those young females' identifications play out in the context of nation-sweeping consumerism.

In accordance to the overall research objectives and after a considerable period of participant observation, the subjects, mainly young females, are determined despite their varied expertise and the different motivations behind their digital identity practices. Those subjects include females participating in discussions on femininity, a group of female Weibo users who invite online sarcasm and ludic defamation, a Weibo female user named Linxiaozhai (@林小宅), who is highly successful in monetizing her bodily presentation, and a livestreaming hostess named Dongbei Wuxue (东北污雪) who makes a reputation and good money through live video broadcasting. Note that the predominance of women as research subjects does not mean Chinese males are absent from those digital scenes under investigation. Instead, males also play an indispensable part in the interactional construction of femininity discourse.

As shown in Table 3.1, the study includes four case studies in a chronological order. These four case studies draw their data mainly from three different kinds of research sites: *Baidu Tieba*, a Chinese BBS platform; *Weibo*, the largest social media platform in China; and *Yizhibo*, one of the most influential livestreaming platform in China. After having set the research sites, research subjects, data collection and analysis are ready to be taken on board, as detailed in following Section 3.3 and 3.4.

Table 3.1 Research sites, subjects and data

Case studies (period)	Research site	Subjects of case studies	Data types
1. Nov. 2013 – Oct. 2014	<i>Baifumei</i> Bar (a Baidu Tieba)	Females participate in a discussion of the feminine ideal with their male counterparts in the BBS group.	Threads (textual and pictorial) in the bulletin board system
2. May 2015 – Dec. 2015	Sina Weibo	A group of Chinese young females who send their photos to @Liujiushou, a male Internet personality, for his abusive comments on their looks.	Blogs and comments (textual and pictorial)
3. Feb. 2016 – Aug. 2016	Sina Weibo	Linxiaozhai, a ‘cute’ young girl, who starts her own commercial brand among her Weibo followers.	Blogs and comments (textual and pictorial)
4. Sep. 2016 – Jan. 2017	Yizhibo Livestreaming	Dongbeiwuxue, a female livestream host who makes good money through her watchers’ virtual gifting.	Video clips and comments (textual, pictorial)

3.3 Method

This section focuses on the various methods of data collection used in the study that includes participant observation, online interviews, thick-data collection, and document compilation. While participant observation dominates the data collection, each of the other methods also plays an indispensable role, offering necessary data as needed by the specific ethnographic fieldwork.

3.3.1 Participant observation

This study is a long-time hatch of observations on several threads of subcultural trends over China’s Internet, ranging from the use of Internet catchwords to the use of livestreaming apps. Furthermore, the topics under investigation, i.e., ways of designed and performed femininity in different online spaces, are the outcome of participant observations on social media. As the research sites under investigation are accessible to the public, these sites are, by nature, friendly to long-time participant observations.

Concerning the pattern of my observations, back-and-forth moves between the ‘lurking’ and ‘interacting’ stance turn out to be a commonplace. While participant observation, as the distinctive feature of ethnography (Reeves et al. 2008), enables me to have “a firsthand experience with participant[s],” lurking offers me the chance to “record information as it occurs,” avoiding potential data manipulations resulting

from methodic intrusions (Creswell 2014: 191). Lurking is often done during the initial phase of a case study in order to get familiar with contextual information about a research site in a less obtrusive way. Later when I think the timing is appropriate in a specific case study, interactive observations are made as an in-depth follow-up investigation. However, it should be noted that the demarcation between lurking and interactive observation is not clear cut. There are times when a seemingly 'unobtrusive' way of lurking could leave traces that influence the subjects' further behaviors. Hence, the lurking observation is considered in relation to the interactive observation.

After the decision has been made on which sites to conduct the study, the subjects for observation need to be specified. Those subjects are, in fact, of a great variety, including both human subjects and inhuman objects. The human subjects range from ordinary female Internet users to recognizable Internet celebrities. Despite the general focus on Chinese female netizens, my observation also, from time to time, indispensably diverges into the male to which females are greatly linked and attached. The inhuman objects, by contrast, include all settings, or the digital infrastructure, of a research site under investigation.

3.3.2 Online interviews

Observation, despite its practicability and the great role it plays in ethnographic studies, has its limitations. First, certain kinds of useful data may easily escape from a researcher's observation. For example, a longitudinal pattern of the subject, if it exists, may easily slip away from observations without the spending of considerably long time. Second, historical information about research subjects is not immediately available to observations. Third, a pronounced reliance on observations will easily leave the direction of the intended inquiry uncontrollable from the researcher's grip and hence undermines the effectiveness of the research.

To overcome these limitations, I have carried out online interviews with my research subjects. Apart from looking for answers to questions that escape from observational data, interviews also serves to deepen my understanding of phenomena under investigation and serves as a checkpoint of my interpretations on existing data.

The interviews done in the study are ethnographic in nature, which means they are not meant for a structured and controlled environment but for spontaneous and mutual communication. Before interviews, preparation work is still needed, in which I usually made a sketchy outline of natural ways to approach my interviewee and all potential precautions that I should attend to minimize my manipulations over the thread of communication. Even still starting with questions like in any interview, the ethnographic interviews in this study are more like an exchange among peers. Interviews are always arranged at the later part of my case studies. In this way, I have more time to know the social group under investigation, which helps me make my communication with interviewees more smooth and spontaneous.

3.3.3 Thick-data collection

Despite its shared origin in anthropology, digital ethnography is distinctive from traditional offline ethnography in many ways. One aspect of such distinctions lies in the kind of data digital ethnography needs to deal with. Compared with traditional offline data, digital data are more characterized by multimodality and multilayeredness. Given the unprecedented digital connectivity we are enjoying nowadays, communications over the Internet have produced innumerable sets of thick data. Although qualitative analysis is good at in-depth empirical investigation, the large-scale data generated in CMC readily question the 'enough-ness' and 'representative-ness' of small-sample data interpretation. This makes an investigation into thick data an indispensable part of digital ethnography. To better meet the needs of such technological transformation, in each of my case studies, a thick data set has been crawled down from the research site with the help of various tools for further analysis.

3.3.4 Document compilation

Apart from observations, thick data and interviews, also different kinds of documents are active information providers in the study. These documents are compiled and used both prior to ethnographic fieldworks and during the fieldworks, including national industry indexes and reports, census data, surveys and studies conducted by third parties.

Prior to my entrance into the research fieldwork, often related documentary materials were collected, which prepared me enough knowledge for my decision on what was both research-worthy and researchable (Blommaert and Dong 2010). Besides, those documentary materials were also helpful to my decisions on the research targets of each case studies, the patterns of forthcoming ethnographic fieldwork and the informants I need to attend to. During the fieldwork, documentary materials were also useful especially when the needed materials are non-acquirable from those methods previously discussed. In such occasions, certain documents, such as industry reports, offered the necessary data and helped me with drawing a global picture of the specific phenomena in the targeted research site. Apart from that, documentary materials, from time to time, also offered me new perspectives to my research site. For example, whereas observations and interviews are able to give a synchronic account of the occurrence of identity-construction in the research sites, documentary materials enabled me to have a diachronic account of the digital phenomenon in question. In addition, documentary materials were helpful for post-fieldwork data analyses such as the interpretation verification.

3.4 Data analysis: Ethnographic content analysis

The preceding sections made clear that this is an ethnographic cultural study focused on the design of a performable feminine identity in online culture. According to Gray (2002), to conduct an ethnographic cultural study, the researcher, as an ethnographer, often employs a mixture of different methods to probe into “the complex sets of relationships” in a diversity of “cultural processes” (Gray 2002: 12).

In general, the data from this ethnographic study are by nature suitable for an ethnographic content analysis (ECA for short), which is, according to Altheide (1987: 68), aimed “to document and understand the communication of meaning, as well as to verify theoretical relationships.” Compared to the traditional qualitative content analysis, ECA is distinctive in terms of “the reflexive and highly interactive nature of the investigator, concepts, data collection and analysis” (Altheide 1987: 68). In other words, the ethnographer plays an indispensable role in the data interpretation and ‘subjectivity’ is no longer considered as a fatal methodological weak point. Besides, ECA attaches greater importance to the specific context where the data is deeply situated and shows more interest in the multimodality of emergent data from the research sites. As argued by Altheide (1987: 68),

like all ethnographic research, the meaning of a message is assumed to be reflected in various modes of information exchange, format, rhythm and style, e.g., aural and visual style, as well as in the context of the report itself, and other nuances.

As introduced in Section 3.3, the data in this study are collected in multiple ways and from various sources, such as texts, pictures, audios and videos. In addition, the multi-sited data are largely unstructured and multi-layered. Such characteristics of the digital data, its multimedia content and multilayered-ness, constitute its multimodality, which by nature calls for a multimodal analysis. Furthermore, the data from those Internet sites are also distinctive in terms of their thickness compared with offline data. In a response to this, a thick-data compilation has been done and a follow-up corpus analysis has been conducted (see below).

3.4.1 *Digital infrastructures*

As in any ethnographic research, the context where the data is situated and collected is of great importance. In this study, the infrastructure or the configuration of a research site also forms the fundamental basis of ECA for at least two reasons. On the one hand, digital infrastructures influence how people participate in network activities and interact with each other. On the other hand, the digital infrastructure itself also, in many cases, becomes a part of the computer mediated communication itself and is influential to the overall understanding of the concerned phenomenon.

Digital infrastructures are multifaceted and multilayered. In the first layer, they mainly refer to the technological frameworks that define the interactivity between

the Internet users, such as the instantaneity of interpersonal communication, the kinds of resources a site allows for their users to deploy in their interaction. In the second layer, the digital infrastructure also contains the aesthetics of the concerned research site, such as the font, the heading, the motion of webpage elements and the prominence of them. In addition, the digital infrastructure also includes the organizational patterns of the target group, such as its population size and its composition in terms of the members' age, gender and professions. Last but not least, the infrastructure also attends to the target audience of the concerned group as this may influence the interpretation of the communicative motivation of the subjects.

3.4.2 Multimodal analysis

The online phenomena I shall analyze in this study are the outcome of 'design' as defined by Kress (2010: 26–27). This design, I mentioned earlier, is done by drawing on all available resources that have the potential of articulating the subject's interests. Thus, the wide range of media, such as pictures, graphics, audio and video recordings, etc., that I deal with in this ethnographic study calls for multimodal analysis. Multimodal analysis is dedicated to two aspects of the data, namely, modes and media. Modes, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001: 22), refers to "the abstract, non-material resources of meaning-making." While "writing, speech and images" are the commonplace examples of obvious modes, "gesture, facial expression, texture, size and shape, even colour" are examples of less obvious ones (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 22). By contrast, media refer to "the specific material forms in which modes are realized, including tools and materials" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 22). In other words, modes are more about the channel of meaning while media are more about the content of that meaning. This differentiation is meaningful because both two are considered of influence in the process of meaning production.

Modes

Modes in this study mainly include texts, pictures, both motionless ones and animated gif pictures, audio recordings, videos, and graphics. While texts dominate some of my research sites, videos dominate in others. In general, the more one mode is in motion, the more information that motion is able to carry and more probably that mode could result in a more mutual interaction. However, there are cases where textual information, because of its stability and ease for later-on reference, is considered more suitable for serious discussions. By contrast, videos are more suitable for entertainment and establishing social networks. A choice between the text and video, and more broadly between all other possibilities, influences the process of meaning production and perception.

Media

The investigation towards media mainly focuses on two aspects in this study: tools and materials. Compared with the analysis of modes, the analysis of media goes even

deeper for the specific employments of a specific mode. For example, there are many tools available to make video recordings on Chinese digital platforms. Despite the similar functionalities these applications offer to record a video clip of your life, there are many different accents, such as emoticons or stickers that you can add to your video clips dependent on which application you are using. In addition, different video recording applications may have different common use scenes and consequently may have distinctive implications for their users. Materials in this analysis of media mainly refers to the objects that are present in each kind of media used. For instance, the analysis of pictures will in most cases focus on the angle the photographer takes and the tone of the photograph. Besides, the materials present in the photos and the organization of them matter much in terms of the meaning it intends to convey to any target audience.

3.4.3 Database analysis and qualitative corpus analysis

In response to the unprecedented scale of the Internet data generated via CMC, small databases are built with the help of various data crawling tools. The size of data varies from case to case and is determined by the availability of data in need and the complexity of the phenomenon in question. In fact, an ethnographic interpretive approach does not in any way exclude qualitative corpus analysis. Analyses of these databases often help to depict the overall demographics of a group population under investigation. Besides, the database analysis can also assist the multimodal analysis by offering me enough information about the distribution of the use of different modes and media in the concerned group.

Among different kinds of databases built in the study, there is one database that is specifically dedicated to language. This corpus by nature leads to qualitative corpus analysis (QCA for short). According to Hasko (2012: 3), QCA is meant for “in-depth investigations of linguistic phenomena, as grounded in the context of authentic, communicative situations that are digitally stored as language corpora and made available for access, retrieval, and analysis via computer”. As argued by Hasko (2012), there are three unique goals of QCA: (1) “facilitating computer-aided retrieval of authentic examples of the language phenomena under investigation”; (2) “interpreting these empirical data in depth”; (3) “applying the ensuing insights to a broad range of intellectual explorations in language studies” (Hasko 2012: 3). However, the QCA in this study is not as ambitious as that in Hasko’s argument. Instead, it is primarily used to find the dominant language pattern(s) among the group members under investigation and then incorporate the corpus findings into the general ECA.

More specifically, in the corpus analysis, when enough data have been retrieved, the raw data, mainly in textual form, are awaiting further corpus-building processing that mainly unfolds in four steps: text cleaning, segmenting, key words and key phrases extraction and data interpretation. It should be noted here that “written Chinese sentences lack explicit delimiters between terms, appearing as a linear sequence of equally spaced ideography characters” and that hence a process of “term

segmentation” is needed, in which “meaningful morphological units” are produced by “taking a sequence of character strings” (Oard and Wang 1999: 149). When the segmentation process is completed, the segmented textual corpus is passed to a concordance program for keyword and key phrase extraction. The last step is key words and key phrases interpretation, in which the report and survey data, if needed, is incorporated into the final analysis.

3.4.4 Reflexivity

According to Blommaert and Dong (2010: 66):

what becomes ‘objective’ as a scientific result is subjective as a scientific process. Concretely: in order to be objective one must be subjective (...) and one must be aware of that subjectivity, that subjectivity must play a role in the way in which one constructs ‘objects’, that is, objective factual accounts of events.

In this sense, the ethnographer becomes the fundamental tool of ethnographic research. As a consequence, the ethnographic content analysis calls for the ethnographer to be highly reflexive. According to Blommaert and Dong, the ethnographer should first of all “distinguish what is exclusively yours and what could also have been observed and known by others” (2010: 67). During the reflexivity inspection, I, as an ethnographer, give an account of my personalized story in specific occasions where I have imposed certain influence upon the data collection and interpretation.

3.5 Concluding Part I of the study

At the end of the chapters in this Part I of the study, the bearings for the empirical work documented in Parts II and III should be clear. To sum up the main elements of the discussion so far:

1. The online practices and phenomena I shall examine need to be seen and understood against the background of a number of large-scale background facts about contemporary Chinese society. Of particular importance are: (i) the demographic structure of the Chinese population, with a relative shortage of women; (ii) the deep socio-economic inequalities in contemporary Chinese society, with a very small minority of (geographically concentrated) extraordinarily wealthy people set off against very large groups of disenfranchised Chinese, among whom a growing class of young and educated ‘precariat’ deserves special notice; (iii) the spectacular expansion of new online technologies in China, and the enormous level of participation of Chinese young people on social media platforms. These three facts play a major role in our story, even if they are only indirectly visible in the empirical analysis. It is important to underscore once more, however, that the actual phenomena I will examine could only come about due to these macro-

contextual factors, and derive much of their structure and meaning from it. In that sense, I consider my study to have larger sociological relevance, far beyond the micro-analyses I must offer.

2. At the core of my theoretical approach are: (i) the definition of aesthetic and erotic capital as specific forms of symbolic (immaterial) capital in Late Capitalism; (ii) the centrality of discursive-semiotic practices of identity 'design' as crucial to understanding the formation of these forms of capital; (iii) the fact that such practices of identity design must be seen as 'technologies (care) of the Self', i.e. as subject to strict normative ordering, depending in part on existing normative systems and in another part on newly created ones, typical of the online environments, such that we get a 'care of the selfie'; (iv) and that the commodification of identities designed in this way demands 'dramaturgical' performance, subject to the ratification of addressees ('customers' in the market). Since the kind of capital constructed in the processes I shall examine is tied to identities, and since the way of commodifying such identities is by means of specific forms of online interaction, the issue of normative ordering is of crucial importance. In that sense, I consider my study to inform us on changing normative patterns in China, specifically with respect to femininity and sexuality, and specifically enabled by the presence of online infrastructures.
3. In terms of methodology and method, my study is an instance of digital ethnography in terms of data construction, in which the data are subjected to an eclectic range of appropriate analytical methods drawn from the broad fields of discourse analysis, multimodal analysis and social semiotics.

Now that the bearings of the study have been established, we are ready to engage with the empirical case studies. Two separate parts will be offered, both documenting stages and aspects of the general processes of aesthetic and erotic capital construction and commodification. Part II of the study will offer two elaborate case studies documenting the phase of construction of a particular model of feminine identity, convertible into aesthetic and erotic capital. Part III of the study, then, will offer another two case studies, documenting the way in which these feminine identities are brought into a commodity market. Together, these four case analyses will show a number of ways in which the online sphere in China enables new, and different, forms of identity construction, social interaction, and economic practice.

PART II

Designing feminine beauty

Part II, comprising Chapters 4 and 5, offers two empirical case-studies in which we see how in an online environment, a particular model for the 'selfie' representation of feminine beauty can be designed. First, I describe the ideal of *baifumei*: a model of feminine beauty strongly articulated in online China, emphasizing a particular kind of physical appearance in connection to economic success. This connection potentially exposes *baifumei* to strong moral condemnations and suspicions of prostitution. Women have to deploy highly nuanced semiotic practices in order to avoid such ambivalences. In the second chapter, we will see one way in which such practices are developed. *Baifumei*-aspiring women submit their selfies to a male online celebrity who claims to be a 'connoisseur' of female beauty, and who passes sometimes harsh public judgment on them. This practice of submission, as well as the judgments themselves, are 'ludic', however, and involve irony and a carnivalesque reversal of values, turning negative judgment into a form of benchmarking of feminine beauty.

CHAPTER 4

Baifumei: Constructing aesthetic and erotic capital

This chapter is the first of four case studies (Chapters 4 to 7), each of which sheds light on a specific aspect of the online commodification of representations of female beauty in China. More specifically, Chapters 4 and 5 focus on two distinctive attitudes taken by Chinese women towards the conjunction of feminine beauty and wealth in the face of men's moral condemnation. These chapters address what I call the 'designing the model'. Chapters 6 and 7, by contrast, turn to 'selling the model': Chinese women's translations of their feminine attraction into real economic currency, both in female-female and female-male transactions.

It is useful to reiterate some of the theoretical vocabulary I shall use throughout these chapters. As outlined earlier, I will concentrate on social interactions in specific online chronotopes, in and through which carefully designed feminine 'selfies' are performed in interactions with audiences. Even if such interactions can be seen as forms of 'ludic' practice (in the sense of Huizinga 1950/2014), they have a 'hard' economic dimension in which immaterial (aesthetic and erotic) capital is converted into economic (money) capital.

To blaze the trail for a series of case studies, this chapter tries to contextualize women's capitalization of feminine beauty through identity design revolving around a gender ideal or model. This model is called *baifumei*, a widespread Chinese Internet identity catchword that is used to refer to the female ideal 'du jour'. Based on one-year fieldwork in an online bulletin board system (BBS) group named *Baifumei Ba*,⁷ the investigation will zoom in on both women's and men's attitudes towards *Baifumei*-oriented identity repertoires. I investigate: (1) how *baifumei* identity is constructed in concrete online discursive and semiotic practices, (2) how both Chinese females and males react towards such a gender ideal and (3) what kind of power relations are being played out in specific *baifumei* identity practices and how different powers interact with each other.

4.1 Introducing the case

On June 14th, 2014, just about one week after Chinese *Gaokao* (literally College Entrance Examination), the official account of the Tsinghua University Admissions Of-

⁷ The notion of *ba* in Chinese is borrowed from English word 'bar'. For convenience, hereafter *Baifumei Ba* will be addressed as *Baifumei Bar*.

fice @Qingxiaohua on Sina Weibo (the most influential social media platform in China), retweeted a post from a female graduate-to-be. In the retweeted post, the prospective graduate had just published two contrasting pictures. One was taken when she enrolled in the university, the other seven years later when she was ready to leave Tsinghua. As seen in Figure 4.1, the first photo features the girl standing in a cornfield, dark-skinned, randomly posed and modestly dressed. By contrast, in the second photo the girl manifestly displays a fairer skin, taking a gentlewoman's pose and wearing a better-matched dress. @Qingxiaohua commented on the original post, stating that Tsinghua University is a fertile land where *baifumei* (白富美, literally referring to women who are white-skinned, wealthy and beautiful) are born and groomed. Through the post, @Qingxiaohua welcomed all high school graduates to apply to Tsinghua University.

This 'inspirational' advertising unintentionally stirred up a huge dispute on the Internet and hit the headlines across several news media. Tsinghua University, as one of the most prestigious universities in China, was widely criticized for being a clumsy fashion-follower who should not have taken *baifumei*, a gendered female ideal that heavily stresses women's physical attraction, in publicizing its education programs. This incident brought the term *baifumei* and the identity repertoire associated to it into the spotlight for public discussion (China Daily 2014; Sina English 2014).



Figure 4.1 The becoming a *baifumei* graduate from Tsinghua University⁸

Making a debut in late 2011 at Liyi Ba,⁹ *baifumei* refers to an ideal female who is successful along two axes: beauty and wealth. According to China Youth Daily (2012), rather than a hype only favored by advertisement and soap series in China, *baifumei*

⁸ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-06/17/content_17595368.htm, retrieved October 2014.

⁹ Liyi Ba is an online Chinese soccer fan community named after former Chinese famous soccer player Liyi. See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/7694597.htm>

has turned into the preferred type of women in Chinese men's marriage market. The model has become reality.

4.2 Baifumei and baifumei identity

The compound *baifumei* (白富美) has been coined by Internet users out of three Chinese lexemes, namely *bai* 白, *fu* 富 and *mei* 美. Each of these three constituent lexemes has a range of related meanings and discursive figures (as shown in Table 4.1). When used to describe people, especially women, *bai* primarily refers to the whiteness of one's skin; *fu* to a great amount of wealth in one's possession; and *mei* to an attractive appearance.

Table 4.1 Meanings of the three lexemes of *baifumei* (in Youdao Dictionary)¹⁰

Lexemes	Meanings
<i>bai</i> 白	White; pure; blank; in vain; waste efforts; free of charge
<i>fu</i> 富	Rich; wealthy; abundant
<i>mei</i> 美	Beauty; beautiful; good; beauteousness; prettily

In both ancient and contemporary Chinese aesthetics, *bai* ('being white-skinned') is a quintessential quality of feminine beauty, the possession of which contributes to a woman's overall personal attractiveness. According to Johansson (1998: 77), having a darker skin historically indicates a person's belonging to "the large majority of poor working peasants." By contrast, having white skin signifies one's "membership of the aristocracy" and bespeaks one's *mei* ('overall physical attraction'), which leads to a more agreeable social reception. This is, on the one hand, a social belief that has been perpetuated by a booming cosmetics market in China promoting skin-whitening products. On the other hand, this dazzling range of skin-whitening products in China reflects Chinese women's desire for having such fair skin (Luo 2012). The fact that having a white skin takes the first place in the compound *baifumei*, shows the supreme importance of *bai* ('having white skin') to a woman's physical attraction. As an old Chinese saying goes, 'the possession of the white skin can write off all of a woman's physical disadvantages' (一白遮百丑, *yi bai zhe bai chou*).

Apart from having a white skin, a woman's *mei*, or overall beauty, includes a wide range of other bodily attributes, such as an oval face, a well-proportioned figure, nice and matching dress, and fashionable makeup. *Mei*, in many cases, also relates to the appropriateness of one's social performance in different social settings. A woman's compliance with social etiquettes increases her social acceptance, which can help to increase one's overall beauty (*mei*).

¹⁰ See <http://dict.youdao.com>

Compared with *bai* and *mei* that both highlight feminine beauty, *fu*, the second lexeme of *baifumei*, identifies a woman's economic status as an important criterion of self-accomplishment in the market economy embraced by China since the introduction of the 'Open and Reform Policy' in 1978. In spite of the strict emphasis on socialism in government, China has undergone irreversible capitalist transformations. Far from the egalitarian and proletarian ideals, China's new 'successology' promotes individual self-realization through material consumption. In such new social contexts, being rich is generally desirable. Given that China's old tradition favors men as a family's bread earner, economic independence has become even more important for Chinese women, who are enlightened by feminist pleas for equal rights to their male counterparts in all aspects of social life. In this social context, economic ability and financial success inevitably become a battlefield of power relations between men and women in contemporary China, and one in which women start from a structurally weaker position.

All attributes that are connoted in the three lexemes of *baifumei*, i.e., having white skin, being rich and being attractive, are desirable for Chinese women. But it is specifically the conjunction of feminine beauty and wealth that generates ambivalence. On the one hand, as we have seen, it represents the ideal model of feminine attractiveness. On the other, however, it generates moral suspicion about any *baifumei*-like woman – the hint that she has gathered her wealth by getting involved in prostitution. This moral suspicion over *baifumei* women was fueled by media reports such as that in September 2015 (Huaxia zaixian 2015): Guo Meimei, a one-time *baifumei* girl of the post-1990s generation in China known for her extravagant lifestyle, ended up in prison with a five-year sentence due to her involvement in gambling and prostitution. Consequently, with Guo Meimei being a prototype of *baifumei*, the social image of *baifumei* women carries negative connotations of being extravagant, materialistic, mercenary and morally corrupt. The caricature in Figure 4.2 features a stereotypic *baifumei*: a beautiful woman with a slim figure, fair skin, well-developed breasts and an elaborate hairstyle, who obsessively preens in front of a mirror and indulges in shopping sprees, buying piles of handbags of the big brands, such as Hermès and Louis Vuitton.

Given that *bai* is an essential part of feminine beauty in China and *mei* refers to the general feminine attraction, *bai* and *mei* together highlight the desirable elements of femininity in China. Taking on board *fu*, which refers to one's economic status, *baifumei* has put feminine beauty and wealth under one roof, making *baifumei* identity a two-dimensional identity repertoire. Feminine beauty, on the one hand, can be used as a resource, according to Hakim (2010), to achieve a prosperous economic status, by marrying a wealthy and influential man, or by securing a lucrative job. While feminine beauty can positively help a woman with both her social and economic upward mobility, it could also have a negative influence on the social interpretation of her wealth. If a woman is beautiful and rich at the same time, she may easily fall prey to moral suspicions. This is where elaborate social strategies,

especially connected to the dos and don'ts of self-disclosure in the form of an online selfie, are much needed for a 'moral metamorphosis', i.e., to shed off potential moral skepticisms and transform the condemnable *mei* to the appreciable *mei*.



Figure 4.2 A caricature of a *baifumei* girl¹¹

4.3 Identity design, performance and beauty capital

4.3.1 Online identity practices as inhabited performances

Baifumei naturally has a strong appeal to most Chinese females. While answering positively to this appeal, *baifumei* wannabes have put into practice various identity strategies to achieve *baifumei* authenticity. This authenticity needs to be designed (in the sense of Kress 2010) by drawing on the available resources, perceived as contributing to that kind of authenticity, and do so in very precise and specific ways specific to the online chronotopes. According to Blommaert and Varis (2011: 144), identity practices are “discursive orientations towards sets of features that are (or can be) seen as emblematic.” In this sense, to be considered as an authentic *baifumei*, one has to comply with the semiotic array of features and discursive practices that leads to ‘enough’ *baifumei* identity features – not too little and not too much. To get close to such level of enoughness and with that of authenticity, one needs to have a good control on the dose of ‘enoughness’ that ought to be perpetually adjusted, reinvented and amended (Blommaert and Varis 2011). This reminds us of Goffman’s (1959) conceptualization of identity construction, as well as Foucault’s (2003) notion of ‘care of the self’ (more on which later).

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) treats humans’ daily social encounters as theatrical performances in which people ‘play’ a kind of staged

¹¹ http://www.china.org.cn/china/2013-12/27/content_31022201.htm, last access in January 2014)

act in front of an audience. According to Goffman (1959), to 'stage a good character' the performer should have a good control of his/her demeanors lest any unintended *faux pas* happens jeopardizing the performed self-image. With a nuanced dramaturgical account of possible contingencies when impression management is in demand, Goffman (1959) recognized three measures as generally practiced by people to prevent undesirable incidents: (a) 'defensive measures' taken by performers, (b) 'protective measures' taken by the audience as well as by outsiders, and (c) measures employed by performers aiming to facilitate the audience's and outsiders' use of 'protective measures'. These measures were considered as a teamwork. In real social encounters, however, the audience is not a third party off the stage; Goffman (1959: preface, n.p.) argued:

The three parties are compressed into two; the part one individual plays is tailored to the parts played by the others present, and yet these others also constitute the audience.

Advancing from his dramaturgical model, Goffman (1967) addressed impression management in the frame of 'face-work', introducing the notion of 'line', by which he meant "a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he (the interactant) expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself" (Goffman 1967: 5). Goffman argued that only through a certain *line* that was decipherable to others can a person effectively claim a specific face. As the *line* is context sensitive, one's face based upon it is to be sustained in the dynamics of encounters. The impression management in the previous dramaturgy model here turns to be a face-work in real interpersonal communications that involves lots of interaction ritual elements, e.g. considerateness and modesty.

The advent of the Internet has innovated ways of interpersonal interactions, group formation and identity performance, provoking a profound rethinking of classical social-theoretical thought (see Blommaert 2017c for a survey). Miller (1995), in fact, brought Goffman's theory of person-to-person encounters to the study of electronically mediated communication. In his study, Miller (1995) designed a typology of homepages and likened them to traditional interpersonal encounters, stating that the 'electronic self' was not essentially different from the offline self. Miller's study, however, was conducted in the Web 1.0 era when the Internet was technologically confined to read-only websites connected by hyperlinks. Most of Miller's findings are no longer suitable for the Web 2.0, which is characterized with collaboration and interaction. Arundale (2010) and other researchers argued that Goffman's theories were outdated and did not fit within the study of online phenomena that obviously were absent from Goffman's observations. Against this view, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) in their research of online blogging and users' behaviors in Second Life illustrated the applicability of Goffman's theory in the online context, finding

that the online self is still ‘anchored’ to the offline self with certain character traits being suppressed and others emphasized. They concluded that

Goffman’s original framework is not only still applicable, but also of great usefulness as an explanatory framework for understanding identity through interaction and presentation of self in the online world. (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013: 110)

I will follow Bullingham and Vasconcelos’ (2013) view in what follows, be it with some caution, since the online performance will show some profound differences with the offline interpersonal encounters described by Goffman. One obvious difference is that in an online environment we are observing the ‘presentation of the selfie’ rather than of the ‘self’: people interact through digitally mediated artefacts *representing* their selves. This dimension of artefactualization will be, as we shall see, the site of much of the online identity work performed by the women in this study.

4.3.2 Capitalization of performed beauty and morality

As we have discussed earlier, according to Hakim (2010), one’s beauty, sexual attraction, sociality, liveliness, social presentation, and sexuality constitute erotic capital. As the fourth form of capital, erotic capital is comparable to economic, social and cultural capital. Erotic capital is of an equal status as the other three forms of capital and enjoys a similar convertibility as the other forms.

The conversion of erotic capital into economic capital can both be direct and indirect. Direct conversion of erotic capital is often seen in sex-related work, such as becoming a wealthy man’s mistress and working in various forms of prostitution. This kind of direct conversion is stigmatized in most of cultures around the world, including China. The indirect ways of erotic capital conversion are more acceptable, and often realized through the proxy of social or cultural capital. While marrying ‘up’ in China is a widely accepted practice, doing sex-related works for economic returns is hardly so. Just as discussed in the introduction chapter, marrying a wealthy man seems to be the only perfect way for a beautiful woman to become rich in a morally and socially acceptable way. In other words, if not born in a wealthy family, the only way for a woman to become a *baifumei* is through marriage.

As the conversion is often realized through proxies, appropriate social performances are needed as moderators to ease up the conversions. It is those performances that keep the identity practices of a conversion within the boundaries of morally agreeable practice. Such performances are scripted with great normativity. So, if one is trying to avoid stigmatization, one is supposed to have a good command of practical professional knowledge about norms and social anticipation, and these norms are now played out in an online environment.

As discussed in Section 4.1, *baifumei*’s internal constituents can well serve to exemplify the convertibility between erotic capital and economic capital, more specifically between feminine beauty and personal wealth. Although Hakim calls beauty

and other personal attractive attributes erotic capital, these constituents are not only meant for eroticism but are often interpreted as such. Hakim (2011) labels the economic benefits women can gain from their erotic capital as 'honey money', which denotes the capital's extension to eroticism but not necessarily sex. As erotic capital, according to Hakim (2010), is more than just feminine beauty, *baifumei's* exemplification of erotic-capital-to-economic-capital seems to be reductionist. However, identity practices and discourse around *baifumei* cover a wide social range and could uncover features and conversion processes of other elements in erotic capital. This is the more relevant since, as we have seen, *Baifumei* represents the 'model' for feminine attractiveness in China's mass and social media, and this model is articulated in a wide variety of practices.

4.4 Methodology

As Wittel (2000) points out, Internet is a facet of human life that cannot be neglected anymore, and the online aspects of lives humans lead are strongly intertwined with their online ones to the point that doubt can be casted on whether an online-offline divide can be still seen as tenable (Carter 2004). This being so, it follows that the advent of the Internet holds also deep implications for the social sciences and for ethnography, not solely as a method but also as a discipline with an epistemological and ontological underpinning. As pointed out by Garcia et al. (2009), traditional (off-line) ethnography has been adopted and adapted to investigate the doings of emergent digital cultural ecologies and practices (see Varis 2016 for a comprehensive overview) and in doing so, it has had to rethink its methods. Digital ethnography holds the advantage that it can bring the observer to a better understanding of online communities and of their meaning making processes and practices. By applying digital ethnographic methods for this case study, I have tried to capture more significant details than what might have been otherwise observable. Apart from conventional practices of observation and the writing of field notes leading to the writing up of a synoptic memo, the e-ethnographic work undertaken here embraces the meaning making process of signs like emoticons and animations as its data. This effort was done with the ultimate purpose in mind of uncovering the connections and conflicts between individuals and groups being part of the socio-cultural space at hand, i.e. the *Baifumei* Bar, moving away from the public discourse and knowledge gathered through mainstream media on this socio-cultural group of women. In so doing, this study strives to grasp the identification strategies and the legitimization and de-legitimization strategies employed by the Bar's members in order to gain the status of *baifumei*.

Tieba is an online semi-public community. More specifically, although the contents of *Tieba* are searchable across the Internet, a non-registered Internet user can only get a limited access to its contents and will be prompted to sign in for further view now and then. Hence a thorough ethnographic study necessitates membership,

which not only allows one an unlimited view of the *Tieba* 'threads' but also enables one to get update notifications from those members and blogs that are of interest. Since I had become a member of *Tieba* before this research started, I already had a certain knowledge about the technical and communicative affordances in this field. Starting in December 2013, I carried out a two-month non-participatory observation of a target field, '*Baifumei* Bar', on a daily basis, to familiarize myself with the decor and ambience of the site. Thereafter from the onset of 2014 to October, I engaged into immersive participant observation (see Figure 4.3). However, for fear of any intrusion that could compromise the results, data elicited in the participation process, only serving as personal temporary inquiries, have been excluded from the analysis.

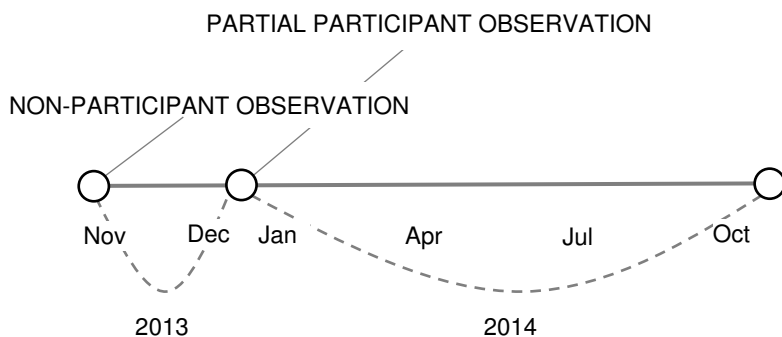


Figure 4.3 Timeline of the study

As the site is multilayered, observations were confined to the primary three layers, including the first layer (headlines), second layer (comments) and third layer (comments within comments). Apart from the static and pre-existing contents, enough attention was also directed to the dynamic threading process by tracking certain threads and bar members. As was observed, members of the target field barely extended their online communications and friendship to offline gathering or dating, therefore making the data for this study purely online. The choice of online data was not pre-designed but developed in the process of observational fieldwork. The data collection was achieved with the help of Evernote (Version 6.6) and its browser extension Evernote Web Clipper (Version 6.5.1) and screenshot utility software Inboard (Version 1.0.7) running on OS X.¹² Specifically, Evernote was mainly used to tag, mark up and store the text-dominated webpages while Inboard was used to tag and store the pictures and screenshots that were of any interest to me. Hence, the data analysis is not restricted to textual discourses but also includes the pictures, emoticons and animations that in total helped to uncover the nuanced complexity of se-

¹² OS X is a series of operating systems developed by Apple, Inc. for its Mac product line.

miotic identity practices in the site investigated. As an ethnographic endeavor, this study does not aim for a generalization of the events in the *Baifumei* Bar, but intends to document the ongoing dynamic patterns with which the members' varied identities came into play and how those identities were contested, negotiated and reconstructed.

4.5 The Baifumei Bar

The Baidu Tieba bulletin board system (hereafter *Tieba*), whose logo is shown in Figure 4.4, claims to be the largest online Chinese community in the world. It is officially described by its parent company Baidu, Inc. (www.baidu.com) as an interest-based communication platform, where Internet users can have topical discussions and make friends with each other. It covers a wide range of themes, including entertainment, games, novels, cities, life styles, etc. Until now, more than 8 million topical groups have been set up. As simulacra of offline bars, each of these groups is called a *ba* (吧), or 'bar' in English. However, the prominent difference between *Baidu Tieba* and offline bars lies in the fact that the former is free to use without a registration, while the membership of the latter in most cases is exclusive and paying.



Figure 4.4 The logo of Baidu Tieba

Entering the site of this study, *Baifumei* Bar, one first encounters its banner picture at the top of the page, as shown in Figure 4.5. This banner picture portrays a woman bathing in a bathtub. It is suggestive of what a *baifumei* could be like: a beautiful lady who owns a spacious house that is well furnished, which ensures her a decent and enjoyable life, along with a suggestion of intimacy and sensuality.

At the lower left side, we notice the icon of the forum. During the time of this research, the sign was changed, from an image of the famous Hollywood actress Audrey Hepburn, to a black 8 billiard ball, and then simply to the Chinese calligraphy of *baifumei* in the widely-practiced flat design. At the lower right side is a check-in button, which encourages its members to sign in on a daily basis to gain credits and get more privileges in the bar. After one's sign-in, one can see one's rank in the bar and the rank of the *Baifumei Bar* among all the bars in Tieba. The statistics in the middle of the header shows that *Baifumei Bar* harbors 214,653 followers and 1,581,193 published posts, and is ranked as the fifth biggest bar on Baidu Tieba. After the header comes the content area that is filled with multimedia posts, including texts, pictures and voice messages. Each post starts with a textual headline while it does not necessitate any contents to follow. A post, ever since its birth, is basically

open to all registered members for discussion at any time. Due to this unconstrained openness, lots of interruptions and trolling occur in the discussion thread, making the discussion discursively less coherent.



Figure 4.5 The header of *Baifumei* Bar¹³

4.6 Performing the *baifumei* model

Borrowing from Goffman's (1959) analogy of dramaturgy, it is only through a proper performance in front of an audience that an image of *baifumei* can be projected. In this sense, *baifumei* identity needs to be played out visibly and is constantly subject to its audience's interactional assessment of the performed 'selfie'. The selfie, as we have seen, consists out of a stage name, a doctored visual image, and carefully scripted interactional behavior. The latter, as we shall see, is achieved by balancing two major categories of acts, which I shall call 'affiliating acts' and 'distancing acts'. The 'performance' of *baifumei* often begins with a *distancing* act and a self-denial as a *baifumei* person. However, underneath this initial distancing move and others that may follow, affiliating practices are found being exercised implicitly. Let us now look at some concrete examples.

I came across *fang in September 2014 when I saw her top-ranked post in the *baifumei* bar, with 6578 replies up to the time of this contribution.¹⁴ She initiated the headline of her post as follows:

¹³ <https://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=白富美>, last access on 4 August, 2015.

¹⁴ Data are retrieved at 23:29 on 28 September 2014 (UTC+1:00, Amsterdam).

Example 4.1¹⁵

*fang:¹⁶ 不是白富美，只是喜欢爆照而已

Translation

I'm not a *baifumei* girl but a girl who enjoys posting selfies online.

*fang straightforwardly denies her being a *baifumei*, explaining she is just a selfie lover. Let us now take a look at these selfies. The headline is followed by the three pictures included in Figure 4.6:¹⁷



Figure 4.6 Three photos posted by *fang¹⁸

The choice and the visual architecture of the pictures is deliberate. Picture A in Figure 4.6 reproduces a screenshot of *fang's iPhone lock screen, backgrounded by a close-up photo of her. Compared with the selfie in a dim-lit bedroom in photo B, *fang's skin tone in A is much paler. While different from the half-length portrait in A, *fang in B displays her art of costume matching: a red blouse, patterned shorts, a bracelet and red high-heel shoes. C is a photo taken in a BMW car, a stereotypical emblem of wealth for most Chinese people. Observe that the driver in photo C is a man: *fang's

¹⁵ All translations from Chinese in this text are mine, unless specified otherwise. While I will consistently attempt to stay as close as possible to the Chinese originals, I opt for English stylistic equivalents.

¹⁶ For main subjects in this dissertation, most of whom are public online microcelebrities, I use their full Internet nicknames. For secondary participants, I have opted for the following system: * + part of the original Internet nickname. However, in two cases, namely 5.1 and 5.2 in Chapter 5, I have opted for @ + name invented by me as to fully protect the protagonists in these examples due to potential bad interpretations of the comments.

¹⁷ Originally, they are in a vertical sequence. To save the space here I arrange them in a horizontal line-up.

¹⁸ <https://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=白富美>, last access on 10 August 2015.

boyfriend and the owner of the car, as later confessed by *fang. The photos are *designed* in a well-ordered sequence from A to C, in which the attributes of being *bai* ('fair-skinned'), *fu* ('wealthy') and *mei* ('beautiful') are highlighted one after another. This clue unveils *fang's 'backstage preparation' (in Goffman's words) towards *baifumei* authentication. Observe also how the self-disqualification of *baifumei* in her opening line is instantly contradicted by the 'visual grammar' of the three photos (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996).

On the second étage of her post,¹⁹ *fang wrote as follows:

Example 4.2

*fang: 我发帖没说让别人评论，我说了我长期更贴，我的生活是怎样我就跟大家分享的是怎样，不存在什么其他的，所以要讨论或者说我坏话的人省省

Translation

You are not in any way obliged to comment on my post. As was said before, I will continuously update my life status in this post and show you what my life is really like without any other intentions. So, those who are ready to judge me or speak ill of me are kindly asked to leave for the sake of your time and energy.

With a departure from the *baifumei*-affiliating act in Figure 4.6, *fang here disclaims her intention of wanting-to-be-*baifumei*: her updates should be merely seen as a realistic documentary of her on-going life status. She suggests challengers to save their malicious remarks and leave her post. This, if interpreted in Goffman's (1959) terms, is an example of *dramaturgical circumspection*, in which a prior warning serves as a *defensive measure* and a safeguard. In the above two examples, *fang's stance toward *baifumei* develops from the initial pronounced 'distancing' to a covert graphical 'affiliating' and then to the 'distancing' again. The orderly stance pattern that is of a multimodal nature here is better referred as the "line" (as used by Goffman 1967) to address the pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts that a person takes in a communicative event. The line is dynamic and, as in *fang's case, is maneuvered constantly and strategically for appropriate impression management.

After Example 4.2, the post thread continued and got both positive and negative comments. *fang often dismissed the compliments and found a way out of the less commonplace challenges. On the 97th étage, a man who I call here Male A interacted with *fang as follows:

¹⁹ Étage or 'floor' is often used in Tieba as a simulator to a construction in the offline world. The first post of a thread is called the First Floor and the rest in the same way in a chronological order. An étage can be maintained by others' replying to it. Changing an étage in Tieba usually means an ending of the previous conversation turn and the beginning of a new one.

Example 4.3

Male A: 我要逆袭白富美。
 *fang: 🤦
 Male A: 嘿嘿，行不？
 *fang: 应该不行，哈哈

Translation

(As a loser) I wanna procure you, the *baifumei* girl.
 (A sweating face).
 Lol, is that ok?
 Honestly, it's not ok. Lol

In this example, by using ‘逆袭 (*ni xi*)’,²⁰ Male A shows his aspiration to have a *baifumei* girlfriend or marry a *baifumei* girl. This obviously refers to *fang, and Male A has manifestly identified *fang as a *baifumei* in spite of her disclaimers. *fang replies with a sweating-face emoticon which allows her to avoid a direct positioning. With ‘a sweating face’, *fang could either feel overstated or embarrassed by Male A’s words. Then Male A repeats his request and gets refused. The refusal is a reply made to Male A’s befriending (or marriage) request but does not directly rebuts his allusion to *fang’s *baifumei* identity. We see the play of affiliating and distancing practices at work here: disguised as a refusal, *fang tacitly found a chance to being confirmed as a *baifumei* girl.

Then on the 348th étage, the following communication happened between *fang and a man who I call here Male B:

Example 4.4

Male B: 就是白富美
 *fang: ...
 Male B @*fang: 难道不是
 *fang @Male B: 我不觉得
 Male B @*fang: 我们就是穷屌丝
 *fang @Male B: 我也是
 Male B: 哈哈~ 握爪

Translation

You’re a *baifumei*.
 ...
 Aren’t you?
 I don’t think so.
 We are undoubtedly *diaosi*.
 Me, too.
 Lol...A hand shake with you

On this étage, *fang identifies with Male B as a *diaosi* (屌丝, literally ‘penis hair’ and figuratively ‘poor loser’),²¹ distancing herself from the covert *baifumei* identity established on the 97th étage. However, *fang’s self-identification with *diaosi* fluctuates. In one of her posts, she once became outraged at a boy, who immediately considered her to be a *diaosi* and refused further interaction. Hence, *fang’s self-identification with *diaosi* here is, to a large extent, a ritual performance aimed to establish a rapport with Male B. According to Goffman, acts of self-belittling

²⁰ The original Chinese term *ni xi* is a military jargon noun, which literally means ‘inverse attack’. It has been widely used on Chinese social media in its figurative sense to refer to one’s procurement of life-changing social upward mobility. See more in Lu (in preparation), *The Usage of Biaoqingbao on Chinese Media*.

²¹ For more discussion on *diaosi*, see Du 2016.

(...) when performed voluntarily... do not seem to profane his [her] own image. It is as if he [she] had the right of insulation and could castigate himself [herself] qua actor without injuring himself [herself] qua object of ultimate worth. By token of the same insulation he [she] can belittle himself [herself] and modestly underplay his [her] positive qualities, with the understanding that no one will take his [her] statements as a fair representation of his [her] sacred self. (Goffman 1967: 32)

Seen from the above examples, *fang's *line* is changeable and context-adaptive, from the initial distancing in the headline (Example 4.2) to the affiliating in her photo arrangement (Figure 4.6) and then a distancing again (Example 4.3) with another affiliating act following (Example 4.4). However, the *line* *fang takes is not in any way a consecutive distancing-affiliating sequence. What emerges prominently and importantly from my observational data is that *fang never makes her affiliating acts obvious, overt and pronounced. By contrast, she shows her distancing in a clear and assertive way. Although *fang did sometimes face questions on her real motives from critical participants, her *dramaturgical circumspections* and performed modesty won her a widely approved title of *baifumei* girl as attributed *by men*. It is an interactional achievement, resulting from highly skilled and flexible performance practices.

It should be noted here that modesty is highly valued as a traditional virtue in China. 'Virtue' is called *mei de* (美德, literally 'beautiful moral') in Chinese. With the same word '*mei*' (美, 'beautiful') as in '*baifumei*' (白富美), *mei de* indexes to the general beauty of a person. Chinese people usually tend to understate their personal accomplishments rather than speak highly of their own merits. So, a woman's modesty, if recognized, will be related to the Chinese virtue and add weight to the 'enoughness' of the *baifumei* identity. On the contrary, more brazen and self-asserting people would most probably encounter harsh comments and severe disagreements. The assessment of feminine beauty always involves moral judgments, including but not restricted to modesty. Cai et al. (2011), in a comparative study on the relation between modesty and self-enhancement in China and the United States, find that modesty is positively related to Chinese people's implicit self-esteem. Cai et al. (2011: 62) conclude that,

Chinese would partake in the cultural drama by deemphasizing the positivity of the self at an explicit level when high on modesty or when situationally induced to behave modestly; however, they would paradoxically benefit from their modest disposition or situationally induced behaviors by implicitly harvesting an enhanced self.

Goffman (1967) considered modesty as an interactional ritual code and contended that, "if a person knows that his modesty will be answered by others' praise of him, he can fish for compliments" (Goffman 1967: 24). This is well exemplified in *fang's case. Failing in showing modesty, however, could invite loads of challenges otherwise.

This is what *Vienna – the second case I discuss here – encountered in the bar when she overtly proclaimed her authenticity as a *baifumei* person. My first impression about her came from her profile photo (Figure 4.7): a white-skinned, well-dressed and seemingly good-natured lady in her thirties. This ‘selfie’, like those presented by *fang, fitted the *baifumei* model.



Figure 4.7 *Vienna's profile photo

The following Example 4.5 is an excerpt of her post thread:

Example 4.5

*Vienna: 这都是我自己打拼来的白富美我担得起

*Vienna:



Male C: 依我看，她就是个黑木耳，跟男人睡觉上位的

Translation

All I have has come about by my own hard work. I can assume the title of *baifumei*.
(*Vienna is driving a SUV)²²

According to what I see, she must be a *hēi mù'ěr* (黑木耳, literally ‘black tree mushroom’)²³ and struggled into such top position through sleeping with men.

²² Vienna posted three of her photos and deleted them later. Unfortunately, I've only preserved one of them, in which she drove a car by herself as shown in the picture below. In one photo that was deleted she was using her mobile phone in her living room. In the other one she was lying in a sun chair on a balcony.

²³ *Mù'ěr*, which literally means ‘tree mushroom’, is a very popular ingredient for Chinese cuisines. Given its resemblance to labia, *mù'ěr* has been widely used as a euphemism for vagina. Based on a stereotypical conception that the color of labia darkens after active sex, *hēi mù'ěr* (‘black tree mushroom’) becomes a derogative metaphor for women who are sexually promiscuous.

*Vienna: 我笑凭什么只有男人才是奋斗的女人就是靠脏的? 我权当你们是羡慕嫉妒恨一笑而过。	Laugh my head off. Why a successful man is thought to have earned his life by hard work while a woman by 'dirty' trades? I just see your words as a kind of envy and won't take it seriously.
Female A: 貌似长得漂亮就被鄙视了, , , 搂搂挺你~	It seems if you're beautiful you are to be disdained. I support you.
*Vienna: 男女注定不平等	It's destined that women are not treated equally as men.
Female A: 呵呵, , , , 我也改变不了某些观念~努力做自己吧~	Lol...I neither can change this kind of stereotypes~ Try to be yourself~
Male D: 你是鸡吗?	Are you a prostitute?
Male E: 我刚刚看了一些评论。有很多种辛勤工作。对懒人来说, 所有别人的钱都是不干净的。做自己。	I just read some of the comments. There are many kinds of jobs that need hard work. For those lazy people, all the money earned by others is unclean. Just be yourself.
Male F: 有钱的女人无外乎两种情况: 跟她睡的男人很成功! 跟她妈睡的男人很成功。你呢?	One can only become a wealthy woman in the following two circumstances: 1. The man she sleeps with is very successful! 2. The man her mother sleeps with is very successful. What's your case?

Quite different from *fang's case, *Vienna explicitly claims to be a qualified *baifumei* after a brief self-introduction. Alongside her claim, *Vienna posted three photos, in which the gold (or gold-like) necklace and the shining watch she wears, the SUV car she drives, the spacious living room she lives in and the sunbath she's enjoying on the balcony are all clues to her high-quality standard of living, and would support claims towards vintage *baifumei* authenticity. The different aspects of the design did not fit, however. In contrast to *fang, who used distancing acts towards *baifumei* identities so that men bestowed the label onto her, Vienna uses (obviously dispreferred) affiliating acts. As a result, *Vienna encountered loads of harsh challenges. As seen in Example 4.5, Male C, D and F all deny *Vienna's claim to *baifumei* identity. Their attacks share a similar theme: *Vienna must be a sexually promiscuous and exploitive person who relies on men to have a prosperous life. *Vienna repudiates all these 'charges', i.e. accusations, considering them as gender discrimination. She gets emotional support from Female A and Male E. Even if *Vienna dismissed the allegations as 'not to be taken seriously', she soon deleted this post with all its comments, and with her overt claim to *baifumei* identity.

Compared with *fang, *Vienna, openly claiming *baifumei* identity, breaks the normative code of *modesty* that must be enacted in interactional behavior by means of distancing acts. *Vienna's ostensible showing-off of her quality lifestyle and self-proclaiming her *baifumei* status is a *faux pas* or *gaffe*, which gets her shamed. Her focus on material comfort associates her with 'money worship' and incurs the negative stereotype of the materialistic woman. This stereotype has been well captured by Osburg (2013) in his ethnographic observation in Chengdu City, Sichuan Province of China:

Most men and women I interviewed assumed that any wealthy woman's path to success involved a man. It was most often assumed that these women had at some point used their sexuality, either by serving as a mistress or by strategically sleeping with the right man, to acquire capital, move up in an organization, or secure a business deal. (Osburg 2013: 151)

This stereotype, just like other kinds, does not come from nowhere. In China's recent large-scale anti-graft campaign, unprecedented in history, many high-rank officials were found guilty of corruption and accepting bribes. Most of these corrupted men reportedly had at least one extramarital relationship. As feminist researcher Chen (2014) argues,

Media accounts of corruption highlight officials' affairs with 'second wives' as the triggering motivation of corruption. Morality, and women's 'virtues or vices' in particular, becomes a crucial contributing factor in the discourse of corruption. (Chen 2014: 202)

In this context, it is little wonder that a self-proclaimed *baifumei* like *Vienna will face an immediate defamation. Designing and performing *baifumei* identity in a credible way, we can see, involves a delicate balance of images, statements and responses in which the women need to stay away from overt self-proclamation and let the men 'do the work' of identity ascription. Failing to find this balance results in immediate moral sanction.

4.7 Baifumei audiences

The performance of *baifumei* identity is offered to and responded to by its audience, and adjusted to the audience's attitudinal feedbacks. Given the close relation between *baifumei* performance and its audience's participatory role in monitoring the performance, the analysis of *baifumei* performance must include an investigation of the audience it involves.

Members of the audience of *baifumei* performance can be from all walks of life. While the audience members can be divided into various groups based on different

criteria, gender is one of the most influential factors in the constitution of the audience and the distribution of attitudes. Gender is a great factor in this: heterosexual women and men often hold different attitudes towards the *baifumei* identity. Heterosexual men are supposed to be interested in befriending, dating or even marrying a *baifumei* woman. While heterosexual women are readily willing to identify with the *baifumei* identity. The latter is in line with the Chinese ‘successology’ of *minglishuangshou* (名利双收), i.e. a woman’s success as manifested both in her good social reputation and her decent economic status. Given the possible split motivations for viewing the *baifumei* performance, the participation of each gender group differs, and so does these viewers’ influence on the performers themselves. The following two sections will discuss two distinctive groups among the two gendered groups: desperate men who proclaim themselves to be *diaosi* and women who aspire to the *baifumei* identity.

4.7.1 Desperate men: *Diaosi*

In Goffman’s *dramaturgy* analogy, young females, as shown in the previous analysis, play a vigorous role in posting and self-disclosure activities, constituting the primary performers on the stage of *Baifumei* Bar. Male members, who often enjoy watching the *baifumei* performance and discussing it, for most of their time, are the audience when *baifumei* wannabes play on the stage of the *Baifumei* Bar. Remember, however, that the role of audience is not a passive one: we have seen in both examples above that the audience eventually makes *decisive* moves in the performance, by granting or denying the *baifumei* label to the women who perform it.

Many of those ‘spectators’ often label themselves as ‘*diaosi*’ (屌丝), or ‘poor losers’, whose low-profile and coarse manners contrast sharply with the high-end and agreeable *baifumei* identity. In fact, the term *diaosi* has been widely used mainly by Chinese males both on- and offline. Yang et al. (2014) observed this *diaosi* identification phenomenon and consider it as a form of unobtrusive political struggle, or ‘infrapolitics’ (Scott 1990). Through this infrapolitics, the *diaosi* indirectly show their social discontent and make a covert political appeal to the government for hoisting social upward mobility in China. According to Witteborn and Huang (2017), *diaosi* represent “a resistance move against social groups and structures that are perceived as unjust, favoring the ones born into well-connected families and not giving credit to people who worked hard to climb the social ladder through education, diligence, and discipline” (2017: 146).

*ming, a boy who labeled himself as a *diaosi* person in the bar, expressed a feeling of disempowerment and articulated his surrender to the social inequality as follows:

Example 4.6

*ming: ㄎㄨㄚˋ ㄉㄩㄛˋ ㄌㄚˊ ㄩㄥ ㄩㄥ ㄩㄥ ... 白富美越来越多了。
穷屌丝只有跪舔的命。。。哎

Translation

ㄎㄨㄚˋ ㄉㄩㄛˋ ㄌㄚˊ ㄩㄥ ㄩㄥ ㄩㄥ ... More and more *baifumei* are emerging. Poor *diaosi* are destined to kneel down and lick *baifumei* ('like a dog') ...Alas!

In Example 4.6, the 'disempowered and surrendering' smiley 'ㄎㄨㄚˋ ㄉㄩㄛˋ ㄌㄚˊ ㄩㄥ ㄩㄥ ㄩㄥ', as it is commonly used online, is an illustration of *ming's reluctance to accept the social reality wherein *baifumei* girls are simply out of his reach. Interestingly, *ming's screen name is a Chinese phrase that writes 'zhuān zhǎo fēn mù'ěr' (专找粉木耳, literally '[I'm] only looking for a pinky tree mushroom'). A *fēn mù'ěr* ('pinky tree mushroom'), which is opposite to the aforementioned *hēi mù'ěr* ('black tree mushroom'), refers to a sexually inexperienced woman or virgin. A female virgin is culturally valued across China despite its objectification of females. It reveals *ming's longing for sexually engaging with a culturally desirable woman. However, ironically, he used a gif-formatted picture as his signature (Figure 4.8), which ridicules, and even inverts, his aspiration manifested in the screen name.

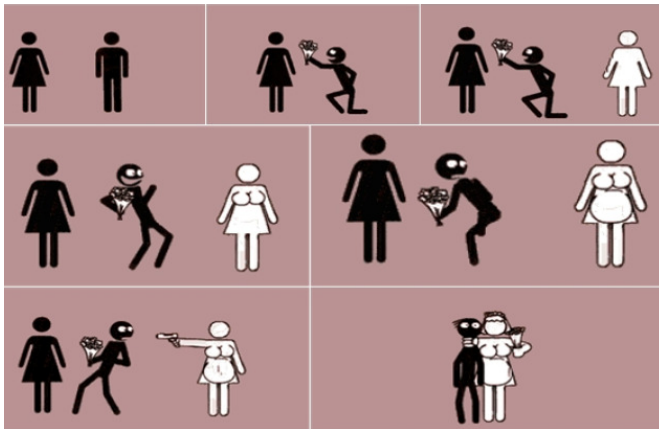


Figure 4.8 Key frames of the animated signature

The story starts when a man meets a woman. Happy, the man gets a bunch of flowers and intends to give them to this woman. But just then, another woman appears. Initially, the man is unimpressed by her. However, the man gets greatly fascinated when he notices her big breasts. The man turns away from the first woman. He intends to give his flowers to the woman with big breasts before he spots her rounded pregnant belly. He is scared and tries to flee but fails. The story ends with the pregnant woman taking a gun and forcing the man to stay with her and finally marry her.

Even though the gif picture in Figure 4.8 is not made by *ming, *ming's post in Example 4.6 foregrounds and re-contextualizes the picture and makes the man in the picture a representative of *diaosi* men, deprived of his right of choice by external circumstances and pressures (the gun in Figure 4.8), and forced into an awkward relationship. This interpretation is further supported by a hit video named '*Diaosi yu shang hei mu'er wu qing san miao xi dang die*' (屌丝遇上黑木耳无情3秒喜当爹, literally 'when a *diao* meets a sexually promiscuous woman, his love-making [with the woman] that only lasts for three seconds ruthlessly ushers him into his fatherhood'), which got 517,000 and 1,150,000 views on www.youku.com²⁴ and www.iqiyi.com,²⁵ respectively. The story resonates with what happens in Figure 4.8: a *diaosi* has been scapegoated for a dream girl's pregnancy and then been forced to parent the child. The narratives here underline the sarcasm of so-called '*diaosi ni xi*' (屌丝逆袭, '*diaosi*'s counteracting') to *baifumei* girls. This sarcasm, however, in another way makes the female members in the bar, the primary performers, more aware of the prestige of the *baifumei* identity; it is a factor increasing the wannabes' motivation to identify with it. Yet it should be kept in mind that the performance of one's *baifumei*-ness is constantly subject to the audience's evaluative gaze and response behavior, which necessitates a strategic positioning or *lining* with 'enoughness' in modesty (i.e., distancing acts) as well as in identity practices articulating *baifumei*-ness (i.e., affiliating acts). Overly showing-off acts, especially in terms of one's wealth and personal possessions, as shown in Example 4.5, can result in skepticism and rejection among the audience who identify themselves as humble *diaosi* disempowered from social upward mobility. Involved in a power relation between the privileged and disempowered, the authentication of *baifumei* identity is supposed to be achieved in a less dismissive and aggressive way that will not marginalize the majority who use *diaosi* strategically as one of their 'infrapolitics' of social struggles.

4.7.2 Women aspiring *baifumei* identity

We have seen that *baifumei* is a Chinese female ideal, which Chinese women aspire to, while remaining mindful of the risk of being identified as vainglorious and promiscuous when overlaying their act. Such risks, we have seen, do not always preclude women overtly displaying their *baifumei* features. But with stigmatizing discourse around morality suspicion looming large, Chinese women change their positioning strategically from time to time to draw themselves near to *baifumei* membership implicitly rather than directly claiming their authenticity and enoughness of *baifumei*. Careful and skillful design is required before the 'selfie' can be persuasively and effectively performed.

²⁴ See http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzg3MDE4ODk2.html

²⁵ See http://www.iqiyi.com/v_19r1fvqsy.html

While many Chinese women are willing to become *baifumei* persons, some of them may find that the ‘volume’ of physical beauty in their possession is predefined at the time of their birth. Frustration and a sense of inequality may dominate this group of women when they feel deprived of a chance to acquire and accumulate such physical beauty through personal efforts. With this point of view, emphasis on the physical beauty contributes to social discrimination and gender inequality. We saw earlier that many feminist authors revolt against the big role that feminine beauty has been playing in women’s job application and payment. Yet, while, admittedly, more importance should be attached to women’s working abilities in the job market, the value of feminine beauty in real social arenas cannot be dismissed. Furthermore, this pessimism about the valorization of feminine beauty results from a misinterpretation of the constituents of feminine beauty. In fact, feminine beauty is not only defined by one’s innate physical attraction but also by skills of ‘self-beautification’. Feminine beauty is acquirable, and so is the *baifumei* membership. Note also the cultural dimensions: apart from physical beauty, *baifumei* membership requires demeanor that have roots in Chinese culture, such as modesty and free-of-money-worship.

These *baifumei* wannabes, on the one hand, want others to recognize them as *baifumei*, while at the same time may perceive this female ideal at a remote distance from them, sharing a similar sense of deprivation with the male *diaosi* group previously discussed. Mimicking their male counterparts, the women of an inferior status sometimes call themselves *nüdiaosi* (女屌丝, a feminine inflection of *diaosi* group, which figuratively means ‘female poor losers’). However, there is gender difference between how *diaosi* and *nüdiaosi* are socially defined. According to Witteborn and Huang (2017: 148), “the male *diaosi* is defined by lack of actions, the path to accomplishing those remains open” while the “female *diaosi* is reduced to her looks, which can only partially be changed.” We shall see further on, however, that the degree of change should not be underestimated.

4.8 Discussion and conclusion

Studies of online identity-making in anonymous and disembodied Internet spaces such as Multi-User Dungeons, Chatrooms and Bulletin Boards found that individuals tended to experiment with identities that they do not have in the offline world (Rheingold 1995; Surratt 1998; Turkle 1995). Evidently, in online environments women do not face the risks of physical abuse or violence by others, and the online world also offers them a unique range of semiotic and discursive affordances: translocal circulation of knowledge and forms of interaction that do not necessitate offline co-presence (cf. Maly and Varis 2016). This does not make the performance of online *baifumei* identity entirely risk-free, though. We have seen how Vienna, who claimed to be an authentic *baifumei*, faced moral disapproval and defamation. By contrast, rather than direct and straightforward *baifumei* identification, most female members

in *Baifumei* Bar tend to keep a low profile in their identification moves. They avoid direct (affiliating) appeals towards *baifumei* membership and meticulously navigate through potential moral skepticism and condemnations via strategic distancing. There are several aspects to this.

First, due to the absence of physical co-presence in online communication, what has to be performed and communicated is an artefactual representation of their aspired authenticity as *baifumei*, a *baifumei* 'selfie'. Hence, an online testimony to a genuine privileged identity such as *baifumei* is demanding and should be achieved in strategic negotiation with other Internet users. In this chapter specifically, we see that the recognition of *baifumei* authenticity relies much on the performative self-positioning and negotiations that are operationalized through perpetual and strategic switching between affiliating and distancing *baifumei* practices, in an interplay of visual artefacts and discursive-interactional work with others. A strategy widely observed in the *Baifumei* Bar was female members' voluntary choice of low-profiling and self-disqualification, including claims to membership of the *diaosi*. Through such down-scaling identification process, alignment is established with audience members, and solidarity invoked for their outcry against the lack of social upward mobility in China, which meanwhile also creates a sense of belonging to the majority. As observed by Yang et al. (2014), China's online space witnesses a collective *diaosi* carnival, which serves both as a social change impetus and a device of cultural intimacy. Observe that no offline 'proof' is required for such forms of alignment, which relies on delicate online semiotic and discursive work.

Second, while the online world offers specific affordances, it is not entirely separate from the offline world. As we have seen, the online world is affected by prevailing social and cultural value judgments in the offline society. As Chinese society long values modesty as its traditional virtue, the denial of and distancing from *baifumei*, a privileged identity, shows one's good manners and adds to one's credit and credibility, which further leads to an easier *baifumei* authentication. By contrast, a direct, self-conscious and straightforward self-identification with *baifumei* violates China's mainstream social norm, and could probably result in the scrutinization of and skepticism about one's claimed authenticity, and eventually in moral stigmatization.

Third, the online-offline nexus also comes into play in other ways. Online identity construction and its final authentication is often susceptible to offline social realities, such as employment, gender inequalities and social upward mobility. The analysis has suggested that the social reality of the lack of social upward mobility, compounded by gender biases in China, contributes to the stigmatization of and skepticism about those girls' self-claiming as *baifumei*. Those offline realities make online *baifumei* identity work at once extremely valuable, and risky. It is valuable because it may offer a way up into society not available elsewhere. But it is also risky because of the influence of offline social positions rendering women vulnerable to various forms of defamation, stigmatization and discrimination.

In sum, given the ambivalence of *baifumei*, complex and delicate design and online dramaturgical performance is required for women to successfully obtain membership into the *baifumei* category. This requires mastering all the codes of online ('selfie') performance, adequate preparation, situated trial-and-error and, as we shall see in the next chapter, forms of online 'benchmarking' of the quality of their performances.

CHAPTER 5

'Please abuse me': Benchmarking aesthetic and erotic capital

Departing from Baidu Tieba BBS in Chapter 4, this chapter heads to Sina Weibo, China's most influential social media platform with a bigger user base. Other than women's cautious positioning seen in Baidu Tieba BBS, Sina Weibo offers me a contrasting perspective, where risks of defamation on sexual commodification of feminine beauty are braved up and even positively embraced among a group of Chinese female Weibo users.

Consistently following a digital ethnographic approach, this study aims to disclose the mechanism of 'benchmarking' the model of online successful femininity through 'ludic', even carnivalesque practices of fake-submission to a ritual of online patriarchal-normative judgment. 'Ludic' is here used in the sense developed by Huizinga (1950/2014), as a crucial aspect of culture. Huizinga emphasized that ludic practices are experienced as free and unconstrained; artful, entertaining and creative; generating a strong sense of authenticity even when one 'plays' different roles; requiring specific timespace arrangements; and often taken very seriously, even when practiced 'just for fun' (cf. Blommaert 2017b). In Huizinga's own words, play presents itself as "an *interlude* in our daily lives. As a regularly occurring relaxation, however, it becomes the accompaniment, the complement, in fact an integral part of life in general" (Huizinga 1950/2014: 9).

Seen from this perspective, much of the elaborate 'selfie' design discussed in the previous chapter is 'ludic': artful, entertaining and staged 'for fun', but taken very seriously as an integral part of life. We will encounter more of this in what follows.

5.1 The stage: Celebrity culture on Weibo

As the leader of the ad bloc of Chinese social media, Sina Weibo (Weibo hereafter) has turned into China's hub of information, social networking, and especially entertainment. The pan-entertainment environment established on Weibo bodes well for grassroots', especially grassroots women's, fame attainment in the wave of attention-economy that can be widely seen in the digital era.

5.1.1 Microblogging in China

Given China's ban on both Twitter and Facebook for political reasons, Weibo, as the earliest social media that introduced similar services in early 2007, has gained great success in China. According to CNNIC (2015), up to June 2015, it has more than 141

million users, accounting for 69.4% of all microbloggers and 21.2% of all Internet users in China, largely leading all other microblogging service providers. Notably, Weibo is especially popular among the youth in China. A report on Weibo users' development in 2014 shows that 72% of the monthly active users are young people between the ages of 19 to 35 and the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s constitutes the main force (Bai 2015).

Weibo combines microblogging functionalities with those of social networks, like Facebook. In addition to posting short messages and sharing pictures, Weibo users can upload videos, play games, and communicate through private instant messaging. However, unlike members of SNS, Weibo users are more inclined to follow strangers, including experts in the field, stars, and social celebrities and pay less attention to the content from friends and acquaintances. The loose social network on Weibo established user relationship through rich information flow. (Zhang and Pentina 2012: 312)

Weibo has reshaped many aspects of China's political, social and economic landscapes (Harwit 2014; Du 2016). As for social influence, Weibo does not only meet the youth's demand for information but also meets their need of connectivity. Besides, Weibo benefits people and organizations who have already been influential offline, including traditional media agencies, entrepreneurs, celebrities and communist party cadres, and it helps them reach out to a larger and more diverse audience than before. Importantly, Weibo opens up new possibilities for the grassroots, easing their connection to others, publicizing their life status and giving them an extra platform to make their voices heard (cf. Du 2016). Just as argued by Sullivan (2014: 24), "the speed with which information is diffused in the micro blogosphere has helped netizens to publicize and express their discontent with the negative consequences of economic growth, income inequalities and official corruption."

Apart from allowing for more space for civil journalism, Weibo also facilitates one's path to fame and wealth. At a time when "being recognized and talked about by millions of people has become a desirable goal for many individuals" (Rockwell and Giles 2009: 178), Weibo serves as a playground for identity experiments and becomes a hatcher for newly emerging 'Internet celebrities'. Taking Guo Meimei (whom we encountered in the previous chapter) as an example, this girl of the post-1990s generation who proclaimed herself to be the manager of the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), attracted huge public attention on Weibo through a series of disclosures of her extravagant life. In spite of the fact that the RCSC publicly and instantly distanced itself from the hype created by Guo, Guo's display of extravagance resulted in such a public outcry against RCSC's misuse of public donations that it introduced a long-lasting boycott on further contribution to RCSC. Throughout this scandal of public extravagance, Guo became an 'Internet celebrity' and her fame grew to the extent that she was invited to several TV programs as a guest. Although the story ended in 2014 in a dramatic way with Guo being arrested for being involved in bet-

ting on the World Cup and prostitution, and sentenced to five years in prison, her example triggered an ever-increasing zest for online fame, identity construction and the attention economy around it.

5.1.2 *The demotic turn in celebrity culture*

China has never seen such a pervasive celebrity culture as nowadays across both offline and online media. Various reality TV shows mushroom over a majority of China's provincial satellite TV channels, like *You're the One* and *Who's Still Standing* on Jiangsu TV, *Xchange* on Hunan TV, *The Voice of China* on Shenzhen TV, to name just a few, all of which offer a global template for ordinary people becoming celebrities and earning good money. In the social media camp, it is found that the majority of popular Weibo users are those from the entertainment industry, which fact has 'testified to the rise of celebrity culture in China' (Svensson 2014).

As observed by Turner (2014: 156), we have arrived at a 'demotic turn' of celebrity culture within which "the opportunity of becoming a celebrity had spread beyond the various elites and into the expectation of the population in general."

As a result of this 'demotic turn', pursuit of fame and popularity become an important motive for online self-presentation, especially on a social media platform like Weibo. The majority of popular Weibo users are from the entertainment industry, which has in another way testified to 'the rise of celebrity culture in China' (Svensson 2014: 169). Senft (2008) in *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, introduced the concept 'microcelebrity' to exclusively address the Internet personalities who have acquired huge fame. According to Senft (2008: 25), 'microcelebrity' practices involve "people 'amping up' their popularity over the Web using techniques like video, blogs, and social networking sites" – the online designed artefacts of representation mentioned earlier. Whether consciously or not, most Internet users are involved in such 'microcelebrity' practices to a varying extent. In view of becoming a microcelebrity, personal identities (represented online) are inhabited, managed and maintained as if they were 'branded goods' (Senft 2013). At the same time, as we have seen, these practices can be called 'ludic': they do not always involve mandatory practicing or severely policed rules (and are, in that sense, 'free', spontaneous and open to choose), nor do they proceed in fixed and explicitly rule-governed bounded communities. At the same time, they are taken very seriously and are subject to great investments of efforts from the participants.

These practices are normatively ordered, infinitely detailed, and dispersed over every aspect of self-representation online, a 'care of the self' in the sense of Foucault (1988, 2003) involving, in an online environment, work on the physical self as well as on the online artefactual representations of it (the 'selfie'). A tangible example is Internet users' selfie-beautification practices widely seen on social media, which cater for other Internet users' attention and liking. These maneuvers involve a repertoire of techniques ranging from the plain cropping to professional photoshopping. As Schwarz (2010) has observed in his study of the Israeli social network Shox, "we

are witnessing a shift from photographing others for self-consumption to documentation of the self for consumption by others” (2010: 165). He argues:

Just as celebrities are individuals whose images are amplified through broadcast media and made available to wide audiences, so these new self-portraits are produced and carefully selected for promotional purposes. (Schwarz 2010: 164)

Despite the demotic turn in celebrity culture, not all Internet users are equally empowered by Internet’s technology. People.cn (2014), one of China’s most influential state media, has published a report on the distribution of public influence on Weibo. Based on the average number of reposts per post as an indicator of public influence, as shown in Figure 5.1, traditional media still play the biggest role on Weibo, followed by enterprises and opinion leaders. According to the report, the result is only about the average influence of each group.

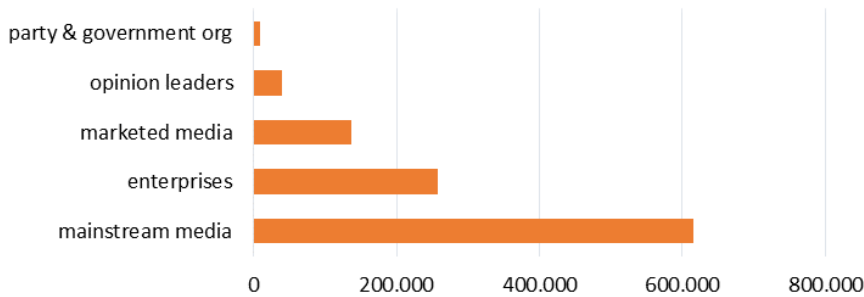


Figure 5.1 Average number of reposts per post per month in 2014²⁶

Apart from these big influencers, the majority of ordinary Weibo users and people from a weaker group do not have much say on the platform. As argued by Svensson (2014: 180), “ordinary citizens and marginalized groups do not have the same kind of voice and impact on microblogs, or in society.” The inequality is manifest in the composition of those verified opinion leaders, commonly named as ‘Big Vip’ (abbreviated as ‘Big V’) on Weibo. A report, which analyzed 300 of the most active opinion leaders in 2013, found a severe gender bias with only less than 10% of them being women (People.cn 2013). Besides, most of the Big Vip Weibo users were found living in the first-tier cities, such as Beijing, Shenzhen and Shanghai, demonstrating a geographically unequal distribution. Given the big influence those ‘Big Vs’ have, ordinary users’ voices could be overwhelmingly silenced and consigned to oblivion. By contrast, a plain post from an existing Big V could harvest hundreds of likes, comments and

²⁶ Source: People.cn 2014, data adapted from <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n/2014/1231/c354318-26305929.html>

reposts within seconds. In such inequality, if ordinary users and the weak want to make their voices heard and their identity presentations seen, they need to repack-age themselves with enhanced performativities. A resort to and a collaboration with 'Big V' for online exposure and attention becomes a widely chosen option.

5.2 Ludic 'selfie' learning environments

In Chapter 4, I drew mainly on Goffman's dramaturgical theory of identity to show that women's aspiration to *baifumei* identity categorization demanded intense attention to (and competence in) specific forms of balanced performance, in which the potentially risky ambivalence of *baifumei* had to be turned into their advantage. We maintain Goffman's framework in this chapter, but we need to add to it, so as to pay attention to the details of what such dramaturgical performances involve. We need to engage with the means brought to and deployed by people by digital empowerment, and update Foucault's (1988) 'care of the self': i.e. the techniques (or 'technologies' in Foucault's terms) which

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988: 18)

The technology part in the notion of 'technologies of the self', as Foucault underlines, does not refer to "hard technology, the technology of wood, of fire, of electricity" but "practical rationality governed by a conscious goal" (Foucault 1984: 255–256). Hence, digital technologies are not 'technologies of the self' per se. However, as "objects-to-think-with for thinking about postmodern selves" (Sherry 1995: 185), these digital technologies when getting subjectivized for personal use in identity-making practices give rise to the 'digital technologies of the self', such as microblogging, selfie-posting, You-Tubing, instant messaging, Tindering, etc.

Identity work is performed subjectively – it is about the 'self' engaging with others – and may vary from person to person let alone from one culture to another. In this chapter, I will specifically focus on design 'formats' required in nowadays China's prevailing celebrity culture, i.e., normatively ordered features of self-representation including elements such as jokes, deviant or outrageous forms of behavior, attractive pictures, lively emoticons, linguistic and graphic proficiency noticeable through the use of slang, clever word-play and so forth, and a good overall command of 'digital technologies of the self'.

This, I should stress, involves learning processes within existing communities of users, in which typically a grassroots user may opt to put on a performance inspired by established celebrities (or microcelebrities) to achieve an 'identification economy', i.e., an effective way of achieving a desired format of social identification. There are,

thus, ‘tutors’ as well as ‘learners’ in these online learning environments. But as mentioned above, these learning practices can be seen as ‘ludic’, playful and spontaneous, while they orient to sets of norms and recognize established leadership from ‘tutors’ and are being taken quite seriously.

In what follows, I shall investigate one such ‘ludic’ learning environment, in which a male blogger, Liujishou, is the ‘tutor’ of a large number of ‘learners’ who submit their carefully arranged ‘selfies’ to him for judgment. The interaction between Liujishou and his followers, I shall argue, is a form of ‘benchmarking’ for women’s online self-representations: a test of ‘quality’ to which they ironically submit themselves in order to gain a clearer (and tested) idea of their aesthetic and erotic capital.

5.3 Methodology

From the very beginning of this research, I conducted observations on how Liujishou, a microcelebrity on Weibo, collaborates with his followers in their identity construction and how they perform and display their own online representations. This observation period lasted for six months from May 2015 to November 2015, during which I made daily readings of Liujishou’s comments, his responses and his followers’ requests for his comments.

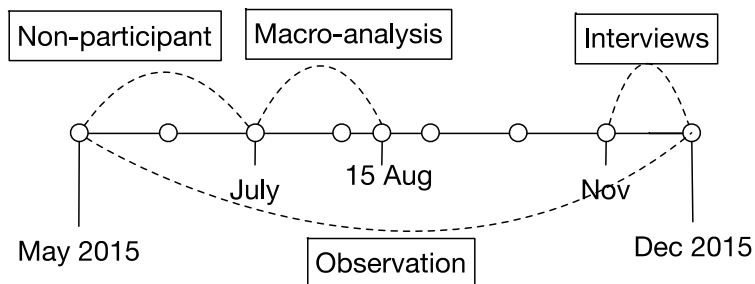


Figure 5.2 Research process

I collected the observational data in the form of memos with the assistance of clipping tools, such as Evernote Clipper, Inboard, as shown in Figure 5.3. Field notes were taken and attached to the memos.

Apart from manual data collection, I also relied on *Bazhuayu*²⁷ (2016), a website data collecting software, to gather all of Liujishou’s ‘quality judgments’ on submitted photos. After that, I segmented the collected comments with the help of *SegmentAnt*,²⁸ a freeware Japanese and Chinese segmenter,²⁹ to make the collected

²⁷ See <http://www.bazhuayu.com>

²⁸ See <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/segmentant/>

comments into a readable Chinese corpus. Then, the corpus was analyzed by *TextRank4ZH*,³⁰ a key-word extraction python script, which withdrew the most significant words from Liujishou's comments for a good depiction of the characteristic features of Liujishou's language usage. Apart from the analysis of Liujishou's comments, I also zoomed in to responses and requests from Liujishou's followers, especially those who submitted their photos to Liujishou for his comments.

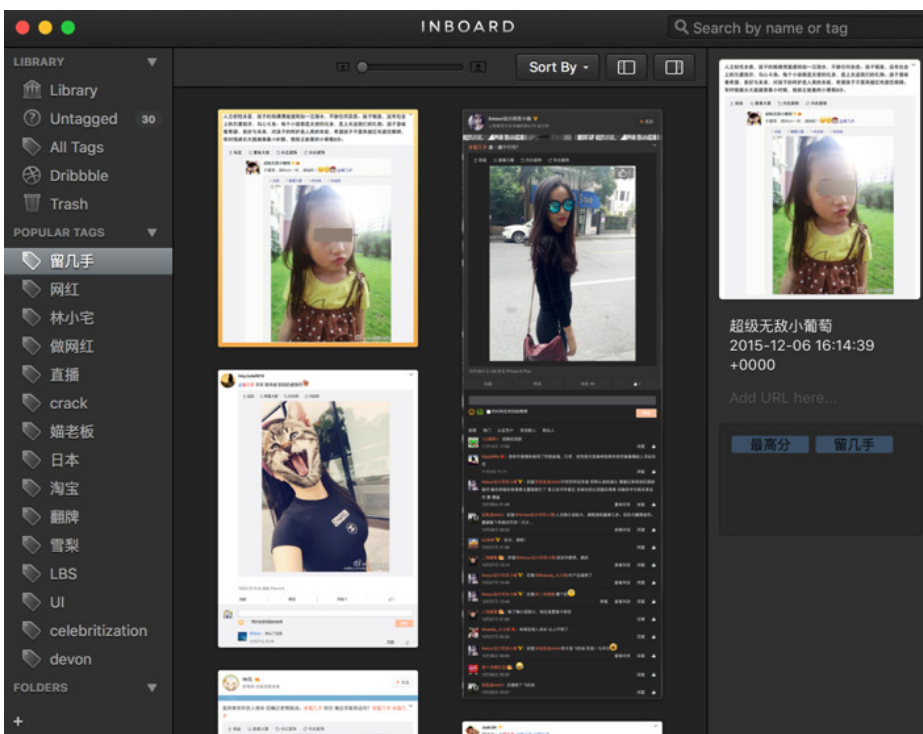


Figure 5.3 A screenshot of data organization in Inboard

To gather more in-depth data, I managed to make interviews with two girls, who had received comments from Liujishou, in the hope of disclosing the influence and perceptions of Liujishou's comments and the motivations behind the photo submission behavior. Data in this study, however, are not restricted to what I have listed so far. Commentaries from national newspapers, statistics from industry reports and exclusive interviews all make their presence as complementary data.

²⁹ Given that written Chinese does not use spaces as separators in between words like English, a Chinese corpus needed to be segmented before any further analysis. A segmenter can segment a Chinese corpus into analyzable chunks through insertion of blank spaces.

³⁰ <https://github.com/someus/TextRank4ZH>

5.4 Liujishou: The judge of quality and capital

When I got my Weibo account in 2013, Weibo instantly recommended me some big names for further exploration. Liujishou (留几手)³¹ was just one of those recommended. My first visit to his homepage was greeted by his ‘coarse’ cover design, as seen in Figure 5.4, with six stick figures, including a fish, a flower, a little chick, a smiling face, the sun, and a mountain by a lake. The hilarious graffiti, coupled with a profile photo featuring a clown performer, challenged the conventional cover design on Weibo that normally expects artistic photos of people, pets or scenic spots: Liujishou’s is a ludic site where fun is made.



Figure 5.4 Liujishou’s cover design³²

Joining Weibo in 2010, Liujishou arose to fame for his sharp comments on Internet users’ looks, especially young women’s. In November 2012, as requested, Liujishou gave a ‘rating’ to ‘@不加V’, a public figure who was known for her sex diary online. Liujishou relentlessly scolded her ‘obscenity’ and shamelessness. This straightforwardness and sense of humor got him a blaze of publicity. Large numbers of young women started submitting their selfies to him, in search of a ‘rating’ or ‘mark’. As he became increasingly famous, even Chinese film stars sent him their photos and requested his comments. Furthermore, he even became an important opinion leader on China’s Central Television (CCTV), one of the most influential national media, at the annual World Consumer Rights Day gala that convened on March 15, 2013. At the time of the data collection for this chapter, 1575 posts won Liujishou more than ten million followers and thirty-two Weibo fan groups. Despite heated disputes over his comments, Liujishou holds an established reputation as the ‘Top One Beauty Connoisseur on Weibo’. Moreover, by maintaining intense interaction on his mi-

³¹ Liújǐshǒu (留几手) originates from Liuyishou (留一手), a Chinese idiom and also a very famous hot pot brand in China. The idiom Liuyishou (literally ‘preserve one hand’) means ‘do not give everything of yourself away and keep a private part for yourself.’ Liujishou plays with it and replaces 一 (‘one’) by 几 (‘several’) to create his Internet nickname.

³² Source: <http://www.weibo.com/nimui>, last access on 10 August, 2015.

croblogs, he enabled himself to make good money by means of embedded advertisements.

To have a good understanding of Liujishou’s commenting narratives, all Liujishou’s looks-rating comments, 179 posts in total, were collected. Once segmented by *SegmentAnt*, a Japanese and Chinese segmenting freeware, the corpus was passed for keywords extraction with the assistance of an open-sourced python program named *TextRank4ZH*. In total, the program returned seven key phrases reported in Table 5.1 below:³³

Table 5.1 Key phrases of Liujishou’s comments

Key phrases	Pinyin	Meaning	General positivity
逼逼	<i>bī bī</i>	Muttering and grumbling in an annoying way	derogatory
大脸	<i>dà liǎn</i>	With a big face	derogatory
没人	<i>méi rén</i>	Not anyone	neutral
女屌丝	<i>nǚ diǎo sī</i>	Female losers	derogatory
喜欢去	<i>xǐ huān qù</i>	Like to	neutral
大逼脸	<i>dà bī liǎn</i>	With a big and ugly face	derogatory
狗脸	<i>gǒu liǎn</i>	Dog-faced	derogatory

As seen in Table 5.1, five out of seven phrases are derogatory terms and they are mostly focused on *lian* (脸), one’s face, including *da lian* (大脸), *da bi lian* (大逼脸) and *gou lian* (狗脸). Both *da lian* and *da bi lian* highlight the bigness of a female’s face, which is culturally inferior to the general preferred ‘small’ aesthetics in China. *Gou lian*, as an equivalent to ‘dog-faced’, is applied to describe the ugliness of a face. It should be noted that *bi* (逼) in *da bi lian* is a homophone for 屌, a vulgar reference to female genitalia that is equivalent to ‘cunt’. The perceived obscenity of *bi* makes its use in any public sphere like Weibo marked. It is the same with *bi bi* (‘grumbling’), a rude expression for over-talkativeness, which can only be used in restricted occasions. Consistently, this coarseness and vulgarity extends to the term *nüdiaosi* (女屌丝, ‘female poor losers’). We earlier encountered *diaosi* (屌丝) as a catchphrase often used by males as a self-mockery of feeling underprivileged, with reference to male genitalia. With *nüdiaosi*, this obscene notion of ‘losers’ has been extended to the description of women by Liujishou. The use of vulgarisms in Liujishou’s discourse is so prominent that it is safe to infer that he deliberately does so: it is his own form of Goffmanian identity performance. In 2013, *People’s Daily*, one of the leading

³³ The meanings of the key phrases are my translations. The general positivity is decided according to my knowledge of Chinese as a native speaker.

national newspapers in China, opened fire on him by accusing both Liujishou and his followers' lack of a moral bottom line in their fame pursuit (Liu 2013). Nevertheless, lots of people have adopted Liujishou's particular register, in spite of its public low status. Fleming and Lempert (2011) have argued that the proscription of taboo words 'can intensify the performativity of would-be taboos items, investing the prohibited forms with a seemingly inherent power and efficacy.' Precisely the transgressive nature of Liujishou's jargon is where his role as 'tutor' in a learning environment is clearly visible.

However, Liujishou's rhetoric is not only visible in his use of taboo words. In fact, Liujishou has applied many other artful and aesthetic rhetorical devices, including antithesis, satire, hyperbole, rhymes, etc., some of which will be discussed in the case studies that follow.

5.5 Please abuse me...

In Liujishou's self-introduction on his home page, he proclaims to be the 'Top 1 Beauty Connoisseur on Weibo'. Among all of Liujishou's 179 ratings in the aforementioned corpus, 168 unambiguously offer numeric scores on his subjects' looks: 78 being zero, 63 being positive (averaged 3.6) and 27 being negative, with limitless negative at the lowest and 8 at the highest. Observe that while Liujishou gives 'marks', there is no fixed scale for these marks. This is another example of the 'ludic' character of his activities. While he overtly passes harsh normative (and patriarchal) judgment over women's appearance in their selfies, the judgment is informal, not controlled by explicit criteria and, as we shall see, also often worded in sarcastic humor.

Case 5.1

Case 5.1 is an example of the majority who have received a zero point in Liujishou's rating.

Figure 5.5 consists of three zones numbered by me from one to three. Zone 1, at the top of Figure 5.5, hosts the author of the page, i.e., Liujishou, followed by his signature, i.e., I look like an artist (我觉得我像一个艺术家). Zone 3 shows the initial request, i.e., a textual post embedded with a selfie while Zone 2 comprises Liujishou's comment concluding with his rating, in this case zero point,³⁴ after which he adds a short advice.

³⁴ Liujishou does not use a clearly specified scale for his rating. He uses divergent rating which appears very clear to his followers.



Figure 5.5 Liujishou's rating on @yunyun^{35, 36}

In Zone 3, @yunyun, the requester, wrote:

@yunyun

@留几手@留几手@留几手手哥，给高智商混子爱迟到来一发~

Translation

Brother Shou (A popular addressing of Liujishou within his fan group), please give this clever, delinquent and tardy girl a shot.

Liujishou replied as follows:

³⁵ Yunyun and Maomao (in forthcoming Case 5.2) are names coined by me for additional protection of the protagonists in the examples. They reflect common ways in which Chinese young girls are addressed.

³⁶ Source: http://www.weibo.com/1761179351/zEJgQwdVF?type=comment#_rnd1449608203148, last access on 10 August, 2015.

Liujiashou's comment 5.1³⁷

精神分裂少女暗恋公交司机，妄图以钢管舞色诱，上车后以没零钱用舞蹈补票为借口来一段大劈叉小劈胯(kuà)，老汉推车倒挂蜡叉(là)，敬业的大巴司机紧急疏散受惊的乘客，写好遗书后，来不及拨通家人的电话就以大无畏精神径直把车开往了市第三精神病医院。你为什么不要放弃治疗？哪个医生把你放出来的？0分，药不能停。

Translation

A schizophrenia patient, who fell in love with a public bus driver, tries in vain to seduce him using pole dancing. She gets on at the rear of the bus on the pretext of compensating for the bus fare by performing pole dancing as she does not have any small change to pay. She does several splits and performs the Plough sex position. The driver, with a great sense of responsibility, evacuates the startled passengers rapidly and hurriedly writes a will. Without any time to phone his family, the driver fearlessly heads toward the Third Lunatic Asylum in the city. Why do you want to abandon your medical treatment? Which doctor released you in such an irresponsible way? Zero points for you. Remember not to stop taking your medicine.

The comment, with a vivid description of the happening and a penetrative detailing of the characters' psychological activities, achieves a hilarious effect. Its vividness is based on a close observation of @yunyun's photo submitted, including the bus, the driver with his Chinese caption saying, 'what are you doing?', @yunyun holding the pole, an English caption 'Look at me', and the vacancy of bus chairs, all of which elements are noted and used in Liujiashou's appraisal. Liujiashou, we can see here, applies a detailed visual and textual scrutiny to the selfies submitted to him, and every possible detail of the picture and the text can be used by him to influence his judgment. Liujiashou uses elaborate stylistic and rhetorical skills in this. The two Chinese clauses underlined in Comment 6.1 bear a prosodic and structural parallelism, sharing a seven-character structure with a rhyme on à (*kuà* vs. *là*). This parallelism makes the reading of comments pleasurable and vivifies the succession of @yunyun's luring performance on the bus. Besides, Liujiashou uses two catchphrases, as highlighted in dashed underline, to fashion his comment, which, to some extent, added to the popularity of his rating among those young netizens who often favor a creative language use or use of buzzwords in their online expression.

@yunyun is awarded a zero score from Liujiashou, a commonplace score that occurs to many requesters who had been luckily rated by their 'Brother Shou'. Apart from scoring zero, some requesters were rated with negative marks and were subject to harsh criticism from Liujiashou. Only a small part of the requesters, i.e., 37.5% of the total, received positive scores.

³⁷ Source: http://www.weibo.com/1761179351/zEJgQwdVF?type=comment#_rnd1449608203148, last access on 10 August, 2015.

Case 5.2

Compared with Case 5.1, what follows is a case wherein the photo submitter, a young lady, got a negative score in an explicitly sexist comment from Liujishou.

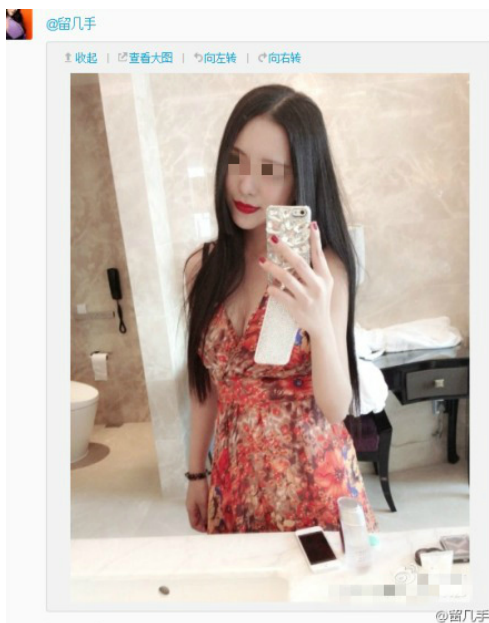


Figure 5.6 Liujishou’s rating on @maomao³⁸

Figure 5.6 features @maomao taking a selfie against a mirror in a flowery dress. With her long jet-black hair, a pair of crescent eyebrows and well-developed breasts, fair-skinned @maomao’s image corresponds to China’s aesthetics of an ideal woman as discussed in Chapter 4. In fact, many of Liujishou’s followers acknowledge that @maomao looks very like Bingbing Fan, a top actress and celebrity in China. In designing her selfie, @maomao obviously followed a very recognizable template. However, Liujishou, as the ‘beauty connoisseur’, did not highlight @maomao’s desirable physical appearance and overlooked her resemblance to Bingbing Fan. He rejected the obvious template used by @maomao, and chose another direction in his comments. Instead, @maomao was denounced by him as a sex worker (or hostess), whose image is not as bright and admirable as what she presented in her selfie. This echoes the ambivalences outlined in the previous chapter: displays of *baifumei* features may trigger strong moral disqualifications. Here is what Liujishou had to say about @maomao:

³⁸ Source: https://www.weibo.com/1761179351/A7Kndhykk?from=page_1005051761179351_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime, accessed in August 2015.

Liujishou's comment 5.2

此类女人出入不同酒店,对着镜子“咔嚓”来这么一张,打卡签到似的,风雨无阻,从不间断.配两部手机,自拍也不耽误谈业务.你知道她住的是几星的酒店,但永远不知道是和谁住,和几个人住,是不是和人住.酒店行业协会真应该送你面锦旗. 上联:放一炮换一地保一方经济,下联:稳官员招商促社会和谐, 横批:业界良心. 负分

Translation

This kind of women are frequent visitors to different hotels. They take selfies against mirrors, day in and day out, rain hail or shine, like check-ins at office. With two mobile phones by hand, they use one for selfie-taking and the other for doing business. While one knows how many stars the hotel she resides in has but one never knows whom she is with, with how many, and whether or not they are human beings. The hotel association should truly give you a silk banner. The first line of the couplet on the silk banner reads: Contribute to local economies by changing places after each sex trade (放一炮³⁹). The second line: Comfort civil servants, attract foreign investment (by luring foreign businessman) and enhance the social harmony. The horizontal line: Conscience of the sex industry. A negative score for you!

Seen from Liujishou's comment above, the story develops within a centered spatial setting — the hotel. It features double-faced women who publicize their frequent stay in starred hotels, while hiding their true identities as prostitutes. In an exaggerating (and perhaps sarcastic) way, Liujishou scolds these women, through the figure of @maomao, for their lack of moral scrutiny towards money and gives a vivid description of their boastful vanity. Besides, the comment also plays up the corrupted marriage between commerce and politics in China, in which sex trades are widely reported. All of this is done in an artful, almost literary way (a 'ludic' style), combining a lightness of tone with harsh social and political criticism.

Liujishou's comment on @maomao, which is heavily loaded with sarcasm and cynicism, runs counter to possible mainstream interpretations. This negative rating of @maomao's selfie received several disapproving comments from followers on Liujishou's page.

³⁹ The original Chinese expression '放一炮' is a soft adaption from '放炮' (literally 'set off a banger') that can further detour to '打炮' (literally 'fire a gun'), a more coarse and popular vulgarism for 'sexual intercourse'. Hence, '放一炮' in this case is a double softening form of '打炮' ('having a sexual intercourse').

Followers’ comments	Translation
*年: 好像范爷美	She looks so like Fan Bingbing.
*shu: 美成这样居然还是负分	It surprises me that such a beautiful girl got a negative score.
*wen: 这多美, 好吧不是手哥风格	She is so beautiful. Ok. It’s not Brother Shou’s style

Such disagreements show that Liujishou’s comment was not based on ‘case facts’ (the actual features of the self-presentation performed by @maomao) but on instant impressions and stereotypes: he discusses *categories* of public appearances of women, not individuals. He forms these categorical judgments in a reverse reading of Foucault’s ‘care of the self’: any and all details presented in the selfie can be read as indexicals of larger categorical features, and translated into heavily normative and moral statements.

This is where we see the ‘benchmarking’ function of Liujishou’s judgments: he sketches categorical normative templates for women to follow in their selfies. In addition, we see the ‘ludic’ nature of his comments in the highly skilled and elevated prose encapsulating his often coarse and obscene register. In Liujishou’s own words, his comments are ‘short acts’ and recreated facts. The selfie in Figure 5.6 only serves as a medium to be played out in Liujishou’s dramaturgy. As in this case, Liujishou is, in fact, depicting a pronounced social phenomenon, the prevailing selfie practices among young girls. And he uses the couplet, a traditional Chinese art form well practiced during the spring festival, the most important Chinese festival for a family reunion, to repudiate the societal decay wherein many beautiful young girls get involved into sex trade to support their extravagant life.

Case 5.3

Both in Case 5.1 and 5.2, the women submitting their selfies to Liujishou were downplayed and ridiculed. This is common practice in Liujishou’s rhetoric, and so is the verbal artistry with which he proceeds in doing so. However, there are cases in which Liujishou’s rhetoric speaks highly of the subjects that are central to the pictures. In what follows (Figure 5.7) we see such a case.



Figure 5.7 A little girl who received eight points in Liujishou's rating⁴⁰

Submitters' request

*xiaoputao: 手蜀黍，萌妹 zhi 一枚，请指教！

Translation

Uncle Shou, here comes a cutie girl. Please give me a comment!

Liujishou's comment 5.3

Liujishou: 人之初性本善，孩子的眼睛清澈透明如一汪湖水，不掺任何杂质。孩子眼里，没有社会上的尔虞我诈，勾心斗角。每个小孩都是天使的化身，是上天送我们的礼物。孩子意味着希望、美好与未来，对孩子的呵护是人类的本能，希望孩子不要再被红布遮住眼睛。有时候越长大就越羡慕小时候，我给正能量的小葡萄 8 分。

Translation

A human being is born fundamentally good in nature.⁴¹ And a child's eyes are always as clear, transparent and unpolluted as a lake. In the child's world, there will not be any hoodwinks and malicious competitions.⁴² All children are little angels and gifts given to us by God. They are the hope, the beauty and the future. It is our human instinct to protect our children. I hope the child would not be blinded by her fame. Sometimes, the more we grow up the more we envy our childhood. I would like to give *xiaoputao, who embodies positive energy, eight points.

⁴⁰ https://www.weibo.com/1761179351/zw6n2u8sY?from=page_1005051761179351_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime, last access on 10 August, 2015.

⁴¹ The original Chinese phrase '人之初性本善' Liujishou used comes from Three Character Classic (三字经), one of Chinese classic texts.

⁴² The original Chinese texts "尔虞我诈" (*er yu wo zha*, literally 'you hoodwink me and I cheat you') and "勾心斗角" (*gou xin dou jiao*, literally 'to fight and scheme about each other') are both idioms.

Different from previous cases where the photo senders are all adult females, the subject character in Case 5.3 is a cute little girl, specifically a known child celebrity named @xiaoputao, whose close-up photo features her standing in a lawn with her lips pursed and wide-open eyes staring away from the camera. In the rating comment, Liujishou holds back his usual harshness and pickiness. Instead, he praises the purity, spontaneity and positive energy he speaks by childhood in general (once again: the category, not the individual), and looks back nostalgically to his own childhood. Finally, he gives @xiaoputao a rating of eight points, an unprecedented high score, but warns her against being overwhelmed by her fame. Considering Liujishou's general preference for low scores, a positive score like that in Case 5.3 is highly exceptional. Despite an obvious subjectivity shown in the looks-rating, Liujishou's followers, based on their observations, spell out Liujishou's preference for an aesthetic of naturalness as illustrated in Figure 5.8.



Figure 5.8 Liujishou's aesthetic standards⁴³

In Liujishou's feminine-aesthetic universe, women who clearly are in touch with fashion and spend a great deal of energy on makeup generally receive low scores. By contrast, the more natural (or 'undersigned') a girl looks the more preferable she will become to Liujishou. Consequently, Liujishou often gives negative scores to girls who are normally considered attractive and fashionable (in terms of the *baifumei* ideal), while others with less doctored and more natural looks get positive scores.

The overturning of mainstream aesthetics often invites a hot discussion among Liujishou's followers who are abiding to social conventions and are less familiar with his argumentation and performance. For others as insiders, however, Liujishou's comments fit into an established script and constitute a playful performance of anti-mainstream categorical judgment of femininity. The ironic and ludic dimensions of what he does are widely recognized, in spite of his blasts of sexist obscenities, and

⁴³ <http://www.theworldofchinese.com/article/weibos-premier-sino-satirists>, accessed in June 2015.

women submitting their selfies to him know the rules of this game. Within Liujishou's unconventional rating system, selfie submitters are benchmarked in terms of their aesthetic and erotic capital, in a carnivalesque way: a negative score actually speaks one's stock of erotic capital in the *baifumei* market. Thus, the lower Liujishou's marks, the higher the market potential for the women he has rated. And in terms of 'care of the self': the task facing women who submit their selfies to Liujishou is to make the image the best possible 'bad' image, one that will prompt Liujishou to a merciless denouncement and an extremely low mark.

The structure of Liujishou's rating, as observed in Figure 5.8, shows the ironic rules he uses in his game. In terms of the *baifumei* ideal, the woman on the left is much more attractive than the one on the right. Liujishou's extreme marks express the exact opposite, turning his scale upside down in actual practice for many women submitting their selfies to him. The structural detachment and exaggerating content show that Liujishou's rating, as articulated by him in the interview mentioned before, is not to speak ill of his subject or neither has anything to do with the subject's actual lifestyle. What Liujishou does is to offer a planned scenario wherein his subject (@yunyun in Figure 5.5) plays a certain role like in a short act, either to entertain or to inspire an audience to some extent. Borrowing Bakhtin's (1984: 122) term, Liujishou's followers "live a carnivalistic life", where life has been "drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent 'life turned inside out,' 'the reverse side of the world (*monde à l'envers*)'". In a carnivalistic setting, just like in Liujishou's looks-rating, "the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended" (Bakhtin 1984: 122). In the carnival initiated by Liujishou, the ratings requesters, usually girls, take advantage of the 'ludic' abuse within a less risky online social space where they use their exposure in Liujishou's rating as a benchmark of their beauty capital.

The popularity of Liujishou is inseparable from the enthusiasm shown by his fans who continually offer him their pictures and ask to join him in this game. Despite the fact that Liujishou currently does not often grade others' selfies on a regular basis, there are people still sending him messages and requests containing the phrase 'please abuse me' (求虐, *qiu nue*). In light of what I just argued, this request is playful and ironic, for 'abuse' in effect means 'praise' for the women.

But who submits such requests to Liujishou? In order to get to know the community of female followers, grade-requesting posts of a one-month time span were crawled, specifically those non-retweets published from 0:00 on 20 September to 0:00 on 20 October 2015 with pictures. During this period, 436 Weibo users sent Liujishou requests, 431 of which were recognized as personal users, another 5 as organizations. Among these 431 photo submitters, 274 female. This aligns with the data from *kmsocial.cn*, a cross-platform social media management platform, which indicates that females predominate in Liujishou's community of followers, accounting for 66.3% of the total number, and female Weibo users show higher interest in Liujishou and his appearance-rating practice than their male counterparts. In a com-

munity led by someone known for his coarse and deprecating comments on women, this demography is quite remarkable.

Yet, it may be explicable. Liujishou himself listed three motives behind those photo submitters’ rating requests in an interview:⁴⁴ (1) to enlarge their fan base and hence become famous, (2) to seek revenge and (3) to entertain. The first one is crucial here: requesters who received Liujishou’s rating, according to Liujishou, would often enter the ranking list of ‘The Most Searched’ later on the same day. Hence, many Weibo users who want to enlarge their follower base would tend to turn to him for help, for receiving a blast from Liujishou is a sure step towards a larger audience, towards a scale of online exposure otherwise not easily achievable. Two examples below illustrate this kind of motivation:

Example 5.1

26岁一把年纪了再不@留几手这辈子的没法红了

Translation

I am already 26 and not young anymore. I will miss a once-in-life chance to become famous if I do not message Liujishou for this time.

Example 5.2

立志做一名网红女@留几手

Translation

I am determined to become a female Internet celebrity by messaging Liujishou.

Liujishou’s followers in Example 5.1 and 5.2 consider sending Liujishou their selfies as a potential path to Internet fame. The chase for fame is hardly separable from the motive of ‘to entertain’ given the fact that entertainment is what Liujishou offers to his general audience. The enlargement of one’s fan base and one’s increased visibility are by-products of Liujishou’s ‘entertainment industry’. Those who are referred by Liujishou as ‘those who seek revenge’ usually send their friends’ pictures without prior consent.

To obtain a clearer understanding of the motivation behind Liujishou phenomenon, I conducted an online interview, or rather a chat, with Lin, a girl who luckily received Liujishou’s rating, as transcribed below:⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See <http://ent.sina.com.cn/s/m/2013-03-28/02243887213.shtml>

⁴⁵ A methodological note can be useful here. In this transcribed online interview, readers will notice the density of emoticons used in the interviewer’s turns in the interaction, and the near-absence of emoticons in Lin’s answers. This difference in style shows the amount of careful and mitigating discursive work that needs to be done by a male audience member to sustain an interaction with female online celebrities-in-the-making such as Lin (‘celetoids’). Men attempting to approach such celetoids need to be extremely kind, playful and submissive.

Interview

- Me: 我是在留几手微博里看到你的可以聊聊当时是怎么想到@ 留几手的吗
- Lin: 就是无聊
- Me: 😊 不怕被虐吗
- Lin: 有什么好怕的我不在意这些
- Me: 🍷 打分对你有什么样的影响呢
- [...]
- Me: 我现在在做社交媒体研究对留几手现象很感兴趣
可以进一步聊一聊你让留几手打分的经历么 please
- Lin: 真的没什么经历
- Me: 哦那在@手哥之前你有什么期望呢
- Lin: 没抱希望因为微博太多人@他了 是隔了几天他才突然回复的
- Me: 哦手哥打分之后有什么特殊的经历吗
- Lin: 好多人找我
- Me: 私信吗?
- Lin: 嗯
- Me: 主要都说了些什么呢? 😊
- Lin: 有安慰我的有继续黑我的还要无聊的问我约吗 😊
- Me: 嗯可以想像得到打分之后有明显的涨粉吗?
- Lin: 有
- Me: 在@手哥之前有想到吗
- Lin: 没想那么多

Translation

- I just saw you having been commented by Liujishou. Could you talk about the reasons why you sent Liujishou your selfie?
- Just because I was feeling bored then.
- 😊 Were not you afraid of Liujishou's defamation?
- What should I feel afraid of? I do not care all these. I pay no attention to it.
- 🍷 What's the influence of Liujishou's rating on you?
- [...]
- I'm doing research on social media and have a great interest in Liujishou phenomenon. Could you please talk more about your experience with Liujishou's rating?
- Honestly, nothing special.
- Got it. Then what were your expectations before you sent out your selfie to Liujishou?
- I didn't hold much hope then. You know there were so many people sending him requests. It was several days later when he replied me.
- Oh. Any special experience after Liujishou's rating?
- Lots of people started looking for me.
- Via private messaging?
- Yes
- What did they mainly talk about? 😊
- Some comforted me, some continued to insult me. And even some asked me if they could date with me? 😊
- Got it. I can image that. Was there an obvious increase of your followers after this?
- There was
- Did you anticipate this beforehand?
- I did not give it much thought.

Me: 大概涨了多少呢	How many new followers have you got from this incident?
Lin: 几十个	Several dozens.
Me: 了解了 ^_^ 你是怎么选定@ 手哥的那张照片的哦那张照片对你有什么特殊的意义么	I see ^_^ How did you choose the very selfie that you sent to Liujishou? Was it of any special meaning to you?
Me: 🙄 可以告诉我吗你了解欧洲的什么了也可以问我哈	🙄 Could you tell me? If you have anything that you want to know about Europe, you can also ask me.
Lin: 也没什么特殊意义就是随便发的	Nothing special. I just sent it at random.
Me: 😊 了解了 thanks!	🍷 I see. Thanks.
Me: 新年快乐! 😊 11月份的时候和你聊过@ 留几手的事我可以把咱们的聊天放入我的论文吗? 我会匿名保护你的隐私的提前谢谢你 ❤️	Happy New Year! 🍷 I talked with you about your encounter with Liujishou on November. Could I put our conversation into my papers? I will protect your privacy in the form of anonymity. Thank you in advance. ❤️
Lin: 嗯	Yes
Me: 🙄	🙄

In the interview, Lin contended that her request was prompted by a feeling of boredom for a self-amusement purpose. It was a ludic act, and Internet fame was simply beyond her expectations. But her participation in the small act in which she played with Liujishou generated heated discussions on a much wider scale, after people had watched Lin’s performance under Liujishou’s directorship. Attention is a natural by-product of the performance. Thus, the traffic to Lin’s Weibo homepage increased and her follower base enlarged by several dozens.

Apart from following, there are three other forms of attention embedded in Weibo’s platform affordances: to repost, to comment and to like. The number of reposts, comments and likes one receives says much about one’s public popularity, and a change in it always means a change of others’ attention. Liujishou’s influence upon those who luckily participated in his drama manifests itself in the changes of those subjects’ follower base, reposts, comments and likes. To uncover the rewards of dramaturgical participation in Liujishou’s play of judgment, overall responses to eight randomly chosen looks-rating receivers were calculated; results are shown in Figure 5.9.

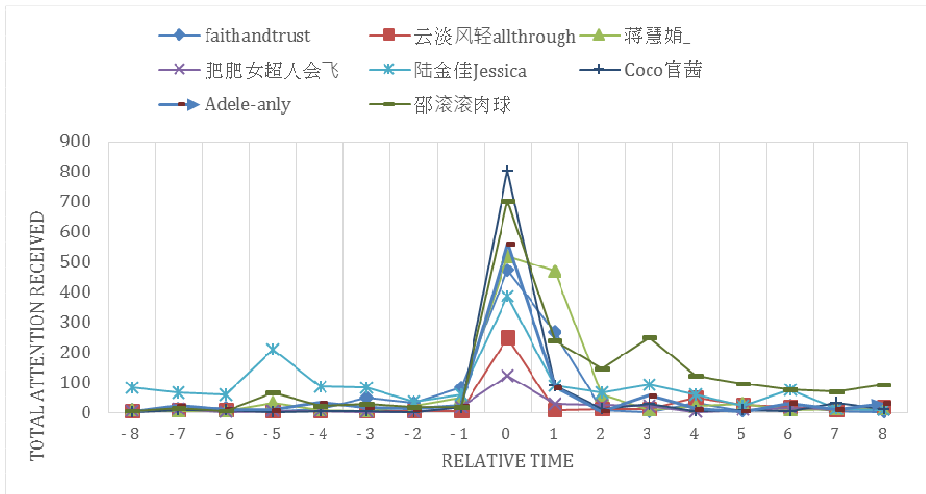


Figure 5.9 The influence of Liujishou's rating on the public attention dedicated to eight request senders' posts

Figure 5.9 highlights how responses, (i.e., reposts, comments and likes as represented on the vertical axis) to eight requester's posts changed in relation to the moment of Liujishou's judgment (represented by zero on the horizontal axis). Given that some users have not published many posts, readers' responses under investigation only covers eight posts written before Liujishou's rating (represented as from -8 to -1) and after that (represented as from 1 to 8). Seen from Figure 5.9, for each of the 8 cases, the number of responses reaches its peak at the post marked as zero on the horizontal axis: the one commented on by Liujishou. For each rating, the requester is brought into the spotlight and briefly achieves tremendous online visibility. However, this does not make one a celebrity in the traditional sense as the popularity (embodied as responses in the figure) drops drastically after the peak point and relapses to a proximity to its previous position. Those requesters who only enjoy an evanescent fame are 'celetoids' in Rojek's terms:

The accessories of cultures organized around mass communications and staged authenticity. Examples include lottery winners, one-hit wonders, stalkers, whistleblowers, sports' arena streakers, have-a-go-heroes, mistresses of public figures and the various other social types who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the next. (Rojek 2001: 20)

Based on Figure 5.9, the requesters taking part in Liujishou's ludic ritual of categorical judgment have not become microcelebrities at the same level as Liujishou. Many factors contribute to the requesters' failure in gaining a persistent fame. One factor is that requesters are not allowed to stage more than one performance in Liujishou's

dramas given that an abundant supply is always available and new candidates are immediately ready to jump in. However, in a positive view, being a celetoid is a step into the threshold of celebrity, a test-case for what real enduring celebrity may be like. As De Backer (2012: 146) argued, “every well-known star starts as a celetoid, by achieving or inheriting fame, or by having fame attributed to them.” The life stage of fame, according to De Backer (2012), follows a development from a celetoid as the departure point, if possible, to a celebrity in one’s lifetime and finally to an icon after the celebrity dies as shown in Figure 5.10.

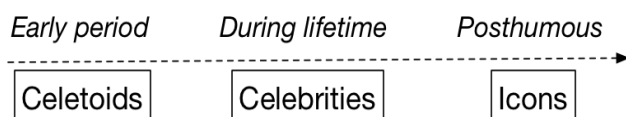


Figure 5.10 Life stage of fame (De Backer 2012)

Although Liujishou’s ratings usually have not made his requesters celebrities in the long run, his actions bring forth unprecedented amounts of attention to his subjects, offering them a foundation which may potentially prepare them for any further advancement into the celebrity realm.

5.6 Conclusion

Chapter 4 described *baifumei* as the online female attractiveness model, capable of being converted into aesthetic and erotic capital. It also sketched the risky nature of *baifumei* performances: a balance needed to be struck in online self-presentation, visual as well as discursive, in which enough features hinting at *baifumei* identity would be shown, while cultural standards of female modesty had to be observed in order to avoid derogation by male audiences. *Baifumei* was an identity label attached to women by others, I stressed there. In Chapter 5, a clear instance of this was shown: a man, Liujishou, passing judgment over women’s self-presentation online. But at the same time, we saw that this online genre largely proceeded along ludic lines in which actual categories are reversed in mock judgments, presented as little forms of staged play by Liujishou. This ludic dimension offered a space of agency to women: they know that getting a negative judgment from Liujishou, in the actual market of aesthetic and erotic capital, equals a positive judgment, and they play along with his performances as a way of benchmarking their market potential. And just like the women in Chapter 4 had to perform interactional rituals of modesty and self-disqualification in order to be granted the status of *baifumei*, the women in Chapter 5 sought ‘abuse’ from Liujishou in order to be confirmed in that status. Negative qualification was, in both cases, the step towards positive qualification. An un-

derstanding of these paradoxical rules of the game constituted, in both cases, a space of agency for women seeking upward social mobility.

In China's digital world, Weibo offers tremendous facilities for women aspiring to this attractiveness ideal (and the forms of capital attached to it) to gain a huge follower-fan base and online fame. As an exemplary online judge in this pursuit of identifiability, Liujishou stands out from the crowd for his satirical commentary and his role as an anti-mainstream 'beauty connoisseur'. He has managed to translate himself into a microcelebrity and online entrepreneur, overtly passing rude and sexist verdicts on an endless stream of women submitting their selfies to him for such treatment. I should underscore, as I did before, that the online nature of the rituals of abuse performed by Liujishou and his followers is relatively 'safe' for women. There is no physical co-presence, so the forms of violence observed here are ritual, ludic and free of physical danger for those involved in them.

The followers' (at first sight somewhat 'masochistic') fervor has been severely criticized by the mainstream media as another online hype without a bottom line. However, upon closer inspection, fans were perceptually putting on dramaturgical performances directed by Liujishou in joint action. Liujishou's use of vulgarism and anti-mainstream harsh refereeing in actual fact revolves around performable 'scripts' and strategic 'technologies of the self', aiming to activate the characters to play out desired identities. In such a ludic frame, those followers often feel at ease at their play, showing a disinterestedness in the negative roles they partake. The reward is a short (but coveted) period of 'celetoid' visibility, which serves as a learning experience for testing women's potential for more enduring *baifumei* celebrity.

The price to be paid for this is the overt ritual of defamation, as we have seen. In Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical heuristics, the request for 'abuse' can be seen as a performable script, enacted jointly by Liujishou and the women, to stage a Bakhtinian carnival capable of suspending the mainstream social norms:

Hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it — that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). (Bakhtin 1984: 123)

The Bakhtinian carnival creates an economical way to augment the participants' knowledge of the field in which they play. More specifically, Liujishou's followers' carnivalesque involvement in the rating rituals is a knowledge resource for self-rectification and self-presentation, where the conspiratorial deviance from the social convention has been transformed into the currency of attention within an 'identification economy'. This identification economy mode, in fact, is echoed in emerging *zihei* (自黑, literally meaning 'self-blackening') and *diaosi* subcultures in China, wherein volunteering self-stigmatization is widely practiced for strategic stance making and identity construction. This study, as a case study of microcelebrity, provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of this specific identification

economy, and the way how risks of moral condemnation revolving around the capitalization of feminine beauty has been circumvented by a positive carnivalesque twist.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I focused on the various ways in which aesthetic and erotic capital of women in online environments is carefully constructed, calibrated, performed and benchmarked. The next two chapters will engage with 'selling the model': the ways in which the capital thus constructed enters an online market as a commodity.

PART III

Selling feminine beauty

In Part III of this study, formed by Chapters 6 and 7, I present two case studies in which we see how the properly designed 'selfies' of feminine beauty are brought into economic transactions with audiences, converting aesthetic and erotic (immaterial) capital into economic (material) capital. First, I address a widespread practice of grassroots online fashion modeling called *wanghong*. Bypassing the gatekeepers of the conventional fashion and modeling industry, we encounter individual women who operate as fashion entrepreneurs in relation to a female audience. The ideal of feminine beauty is here embodied in 'selfie' performances of body and character, triggering affinity and identification and securing commercial success. Next, I move to the world of online livestreaming female-male commercial interactions, in which individual women-entrepreneurs create an atmosphere of intimacy and affection with men, who in return offer generous 'gifts' securing income for the women. Here, too, we see elaborate 'selfie' performances in which visual images and discursive moves need to be meticulously organized in view of success.

CHAPTER 6

Wanghong: The female-female market

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 and 5 focused on ways in which women in online China spent considerable effort (and took considerable risks) in the design of an online identity representing substantial aesthetic and erotic capital, following and performing a model which is socially ambivalent. In both chapters, we could see how the performance of this model to online interlocutors on the one hand responded to criteria of attractiveness much desired by audiences, while it on the other hand also involved risks of moral disqualification and defamation, even if these are produced in a ludic fashion and in a relatively safe online environment. In Chapters 6 and 7, I will examine aspects of the conversion of these forms of capital into material capital: the selling of this model of femininity.

Two steps will be followed. First, in Chapter 6, I will look into the female-female market in which the model is being played out. Chapter 7 will next engage with the female-male market. In this chapter, I shall argue that the ambivalence of the model does not necessarily lead to split market practices. On the contrary, we will see converging practices: Chinese women are swarming in large numbers towards *meinüjingji* (美女经济, literally means ‘female beauty economy’), which favors and popularizes “the beauty pageants and model competitions” in China (Xu and Feiner 2007: 308). In other words, there is a convergence towards a market in which the model, as discussed earlier, is the center, and much of this convergence happens online.

This chapter will address one aspect of these converging market processes, focusing on the *wanghong* (网红, literally ‘Internet red’)⁴⁶ economy, a subgenre of *meinüjingji* in the digital era, to exemplify the operationalization of female-female aesthetic capitalization. According to Wikipedia, “*wanghong* economy is the term used to describe the nascent Chinese digital economy based on influencer marketing in social media” (Wanghong economy, n.d.). While it may include online retailing and social media advertising, *wanghong* economy in this chapter restrictedly refers to the online retailing business model:

⁴⁶ In contrast with the west where red is associated with prostitution, as in ‘the red-light district’, in China 红 (‘red’) is often associated with ‘revolution’ and ‘fame’.

In the online retailing business model, e-commerce-based *wanghong* use social media platform to sell their self-branded products to potential buyers among their followers via Chinese customer to customer C2C websites, such as TaoBao. Celebrities work as their own shops' models by posting pictures or videos of themselves, wearing the clothes or accessories they sell, or giving distinctive makeup or fashion tips. Chinese e-commerce internet celebrities play a role as key opinion leaders (KOLs) in online retailing. *Wanghong's* fashion and lifestyle is favored by their followers. Their followers think that they can look like *Wanghong* if they put on their products or similar makeup. It enables their followers become their most loyal consumers. (Wikipedia, n.d.)

Lexically, *wanghong* is an Internet neologism that is coined through a combination of two stem words *wang* (网, literally meaning 'Internet') and *hong* (红, literally meaning 'red' or 'hot'). In its broad sense, *wanghong* refers to ordinary people who have managed to earn themselves a prominent status and reputation on the Internet. *Wanghong* in this chapter will be used in its narrow sense, which refers to ordinary women's catalog modeling practices on China's social media, where female fashionistas work as live mannequins to tout their endorsed brands. Different from traditional modeling industry that renders model candidates submissive either to agencies or fashion magazines, *wanghong* modeling is a 'grassroots' or 'crowdsourced' phenomenon in which models are much more autonomous and less dependent on such mediators or brokers, marking a demotic turn of the modeling industry in the digital era. At the same time, these crowdsourced practices are performed in a major economic arena and in conjunction with a billion-dollar industry. *Wanghong*, seen from that perspective, is not just a 'ludic' online genre of practice, but is also about hard material capital.

Successful *wanghong* women gain considerable exposure and status, and many are associated (in the gossip circuits) with male movie stars and *vieux riches*, a phenomenon largely contributing to the popular appeal of *wanghong*. For example, *wanghong* model @雪梨 Cherie became the girlfriend of Wang Sicong, the son of China's wealthiest business tycoon Wang Jianlin (see Sina Entertainment 2016). Zhou Yangqing, another *wanghong* model, is courted by Show Luo, a well-known Taiwanese singer, actor and host (see *Huabian.com* 2015). Fang Yuan, a model in the same *wanghong* cohort, married Aaron Kwok Fu-shing, a Hongkong-based singer, dancer and actor with a national reputation (see *ifeng.com* 2016). *Wanghong* models are very much in the public spotlight. Success in those activities may yield celebrity and fame.

They can also yield fortunes. Some *wanghong* models turned into successful businesswomen running their own fashion brands hosted on Taobao.com, China's biggest online marketplace affiliated with China's e-commerce giant Alibaba Group. Taking @雪梨 Cherie as an example, she reported a revenue of over 1000 million RMB (approximately 127 million Euros) in 2015, startling some observers who had previously been dismissive about *wanghong* entrepreneurial practices (CNR 2016).

According to CBNDData (2016), also an Alibaba-affiliated data company, the '*wanghong* economy' is estimated to be worth 58 billion RMB in 2016 (approximately 7 billion Euros), more than China's movie box office for the entire year of 2015. At the time of this writing (February-August 2016), the success of the *wanghong* economy gave birth to various *wanghong*-incubating programs on large TV channels, aimed at selecting and grooming future *wanghong* celebrities (Zhang 2016).

To unveil the process of the operation of *wanghong* economy between female catalog models and female buyers, this case study dives into: (1) the inter-female capitalization of feminine beauty, (2) the technologies of feminine-beauty design and (3) and the role that motivations for community-identification play in *wanghong* economy.

6.2 Aesthetic labor: Modeling

6.2.1 Women's modeling: Tradition and transformation

As contended by Hakim (2010), women's physical beauty is, universally, of great erotic value in the marriage market and service industry. However, the valorization of feminine beauty is not only rendered to be a sexual charm appealing to men. In fact, the erotic value of feminine beauty is on a par with its aesthetic value. A woman with culturally desirable physical features also constitute aesthetic value in women-dominated markets such as the fashion modeling industry. While editorial modeling could serve a general readership in both sexes, women's commercial fashion modeling, such as catwalk and catalog modeling mainly aims at potential female fashion buyers. As stated by Xu and Feiner (2007: 310):

The attempts of Chinese women to refashion themselves in terms of Western beauty standards represents a transformation of the communist ideal of woman as producer into the neoliberal image of woman as consumer that epitomizes Western affluent society. Consumers buy items that give one a sense of self, but as each woman buys the beauty accoutrements that she believes will make her look her best, she makes herself over into an idealized image of womanhood. As each woman aspires to this ideal, she is assimilated into the realm of commodities.

In commercial modeling, women mainly work as live mannequins, getting paid for their aesthetic labor, which

involves employees in a feminine performativity that relies on the workers possessing particular forms of social and cultural capital and reflects an ability to embody 'fashion'. (Pettinger 2005: 461)

They may appear on the catwalks of high-profile fashion events, glamorously displaying avant-garde fashion designs. The female modeling industry is a manifestation of

the operation of inter-female beauty economy, within which female model's bodily configurations embody or set up desirable aesthetic standards that are consumable to female fashion buyers.

According to Mears (2014: 1335), fashion models are "display workers" in an "aesthetic labor" market, where "looks are the primary factor on which they are hired." In line with the previous chapters, we also see features of staged ludic practice in modeling: women need to perform a specific kind of act, impersonating and embodying a specific ideal of femininity appealing to an audience. The models do not sell the product, but create the impressions of aesthetic value that trigger commercial transactions afterwards. In general, the modeling industry is in women's favor compared with their male counterparts. In the industry, more chances are available for female models than for male ones. Furthermore, female models are often better paid than their male peers (Mears 2014). In this sense, women, in general, enjoy a beauty 'premium' in the modeling industry and their role is indispensable in this specific niche of the clothing industry (the capital owners and investors of which are usually male) (see Table 6.1).

Notwithstanding such premium, female fashion models do have their own disadvantages compared to their male counterparts in traditional modeling industry. For example, they usually cannot expect a long career in the industry. In fact, while some male models become more popular when they are aging, female models may find it increasingly difficult landing an offer when they get 23 or 24 years old (Mears 2014). Agencies and booking offices are continuously hunting for new and young looks. In addition, the comparative fluctuating and blurry aesthetic standards become a setback for female models and may result in severe personal insecurities over one's career in the long run. Competition is also extraordinarily sharp, as agencies and booking offices, who work as gatekeepers and decision-makers of the industry, often leave models constantly objectified and submitted to scrutinizing gazes (Mears 2014). These picky gatekeepers are highly selective and reject the majority of women who only have an average look. As suggested by Entwistle (2002: 325):

The majority of fashion model agencies are pretty exclusive, rejecting many more people who walk through their doors than they accept. Indeed, many more models are in fact 'found' or 'discovered' by agents or scouts on the street than through 'on special' visits to agencies by young hopefuls.

While these remarks obviously apply to all and any aspect of modeling, some specific conditions apply in online environments for modeling. In fact, the newly emerging digital infrastructures have transformed important parts of the fashion industry enabling spatially and socially distant individuals to gather in new communities of knowledge and practice: new online "markets" in the real sense of the term (as predicted by Castells 1996; cf. also Blommaert 2017c). Besides, social media models' economic rewards are less controlled by agencies, fashion magazines and booking

offices, but instead closely tied into a niche fashion market that favors specific individualized designs. In this sense, the *wanghong* modeling, with its crowdsourced structure allowing women of different types, marks a demotic turn of the traditional fashion modeling industry, especially commercial catalog fashion modeling, in digital China. Through social media platforms, commercial catalog models can communicate directly with their customers and adapt with great flexibility to a niche consumer market. They are able to adjust their presentation patterns and styles in time based on consumers' comments and thus cater responsively to the consumers' demands.

Table 6.1 The body at work, from self to service (Mears 2014: 1333)

	Concept	Paid or unpaid	Emphasized body	Centrality of worker's looks	Exemplar research case
Varieties of aesthetic labor	Aesthetic labor	Paid	One's own body	High	Retail (Nickson et al. 2001)
	Market-embodied labor	Paid	One's own body	High	Luxury hotel services (Otis 2011)
	Display work	Paid	One's own body	High	Fashion models, strippers, actors (Mears & Connell forthcoming)
Commercial Activity	Affective labor	Paid	One's own body	Moderate	Fashion models (Wissinger 2007)
	Emotional labor	Paid	Own and others' bodies	Moderate	Flight attendants (Hochschild 1983)
	Bodily labor	Paid	Others' bodies	Low	Manicurists (Kang 2010)
Non-commercial Activity	Intimate labor	Paid and unpaid	Others' bodies	Variable	Sex work, care and domestic work (Boris & Parreñas 2010)
	Body work	Unpaid	One's own body	—	Weight management (Gimlin 2007)
	Beauty work	Unpaid	One's own body	—	Makeup (Kwan & Trautner 2009)

Apart from feminine beauty, culture also plays an important role in these demotic online catalog modeling practices. Models and their consumers may have shared hobbies or a shared sense of belonging to the same communities, which can help models procure the loyalty of consumers more directly and accurately. Just as contended by Entwistle (2002: 337), the calculation in modeling is not only about aesthetics, "the aesthetic sensibilities and cultural capital, as well as the social, cultural and institutional connections and relationships which sustain them" are all crucial to the conversion of feminine beauty into economic gains. According to Entwistle (2002: 337):

Economic calculations in aesthetic economies are always, by definition, cultural ones. (...) Cultural or aesthetic commodities have their own particularity, compared to other sorts of commodities. They are built upon categories of culture, such as cultural prestige, and depend upon a highly attuned aesthetic sensibility and an acquired cultural

capital. These cultural concerns are built into the everyday commercial decisions within the field of production itself, rather than featuring as mere by-products after production. Thus, while basic economic calculations of value have to be made about such things as price, fee, day rate or contract, these calculations are inextricably bound to more nebulous concerns to do with cultural value. To be a player in this field of production, one must be fully embedded within the particular culture of the field.

In this sense, online modeling requires more than just a desirable physical appearance. It also asks the models for enough stock of cultural knowledge, which contextualizes the embodied aesthetics and activates the translation of immaterial aesthetic capital into material economic capital. Acquiring social and cultural knowledge about how to be (sub)culturally attractive constitutes the aesthetic labor, which further leads to the valuation of such labor when performed by *wanghong* models.

6.2.2 Wanghong models: Icons and entrepreneurs

Wanghong practices are a Chinese subgenre of commercial catalog fashion modeling on social media. Different from traditional catalog models, *wanghong* models at the same time play the role of saleswomen, getting involved in the actual commercial transaction with their customers. Wanghong models, who may often be shareholders of the fashion brand they display, try on the clothes they intend to sell and present their try-on online by means of pictures or video clips, very much in line with the design practices we discussed in the previous chapters. Thus, very much like in the previous cases, *wanghong* modeling involves the elaborate design of selfies through visual, discursive and semiotic self-presentation in which particular models of femininity are indexed.

The *wanghong* market is primarily a female-female market. Sequentially, *wanghong* women's online performances takes the lead, after which their fans emulate *wanghong* fashion styles and tastes by purchasing the fashion products. *Wanghong* women sell their clothing designs mediated by a carefully designed glamorous presentation, and doing so create a beauty and desire fantasy for their potential buyers. Two facets of purchase motivation, often intertwined, are identifiable: (1) the buyer buys into the fashion design endorsed by female *wanghong* models and (2) the buyer buys *wanghong* women's clothes in attempts to approximate the model of femininity performed by the *wanghong* model.

As the desirability of feminine beauty is often culturally defined in a homogeneous way, *wanghong* models, who are embodying such homogeneous aesthetics, often seem to be clones of one another. As seen in Figure 6.1, all these *wanghong* models share similar physiognomic characteristics, including oval face, smoked eyebrows, cherry-shaped lips, relatively big eyes and long-length hair. We see clear reflexes here of the *baifumei* ideal discussed in previous chapters as well as of the extensive design that is done towards this specific ideal, and the *wanghong* industry clearly converges upon this specific model of attractiveness.

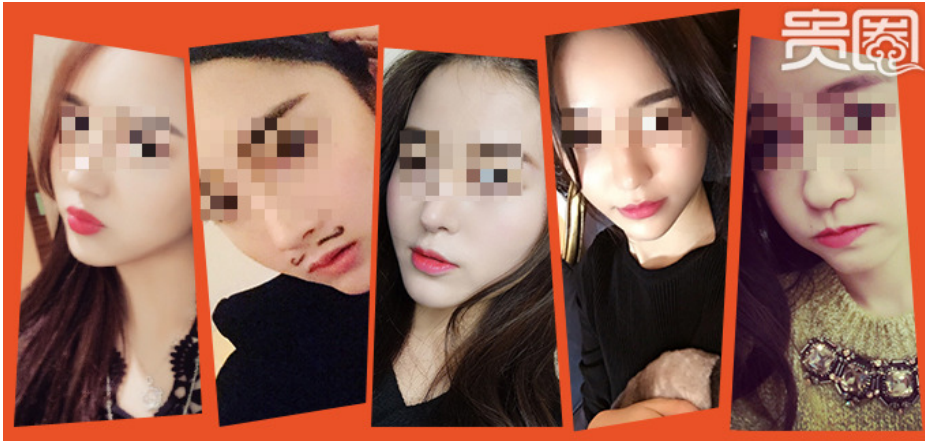


Figure 6.1 *Wanghong* faces⁴⁷

The norms of feminine beauty, which yield relative homogenous aesthetic standards, attract many Chinese women to reorder their bodily configurations by means of plastic surgeries. According to a report from iiMedia Research (2016b), “about 10% of Internet celebrities admitted that they had undergone plastic surgery.”⁴⁸ Despite public worries over this bodily perfectionism that may invite women to self-doubts and encourage them to submit to males’ gazes, Chinese women also use digital technologies to their advantage and manipulate their body image to a culturally desirable effect. In addition to physiognomic interventions, *wanghong* women are often technological savvy photo ‘engineers’, i.e., Photoshop-users. As mentioned earlier, they are skillful users of various picture-beautifying tools to alter the online presentations of their feminine body: a ‘technology of the selfie’, to put an online spin on Foucault’s (1988) terms. This technology, from another perspective, is comparable to Goffman’s (1959) identity dramaturgy, to whom all identities are performative by nature, with different ‘back-stage’ and ‘front-stage’ scripts. Furthermore, such identity-engineering affordances are cheap and user-friendly, deployable on our smart phones in all kinds of beautifying applications, making the alterations of body self-presentation much easier with less tempo-spatial restrictions. Photographic manipulations, ranging from adding color-filters to widening eyes and extending the images of the legs, have been widely publicized and are being widely used. Knowing the right angle for taking a selfie or the suitable filters for post-processing them have become part of the normative codes of online self-presentation.

⁴⁷ <http://ent.qq.com/original/guiquan/g205.html>, last access on August 7, 2017.

⁴⁸ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-36802769>

6.3 Methodology

This case study follows the general rules of digital ethnography and gives ample methodological attention to the context of the phenomenon in question. Using digital ethnography can facilitate an in-depth empirical account of identity practices through a lengthy digital investigation that intrinsically conjures up a wide array of methods as listed in Chapter 3. These methods, which are determined by the specificity of the case study rather than predefined, mainly include participant observation, field-noting, document-collecting and thick-data collecting.

6.3.1 Timing and tools

Despite my retrospective revisits to the research site and revisions of data interpretations, this study generally covers about six months from February 2016 to August of the same year. The study includes three procedural phases in a chronological order. As shown in Figure 6.2, the procedure begins with observation, goes through data collection and ends in data analysis.

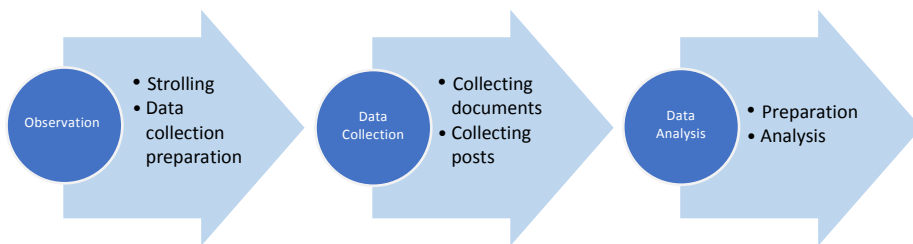


Figure 6.2 Research procedure

The observation period took approximately two months, running through the whole February and March of 2016. The first month was spent exploring Weibo, during which I managed to have a general review of the *wanghong* discourse and China's most influential *wanghong* personalities. When this phase was finished, I decided to focus on Linxiaozhai as a popular *wanghong* model. This decision was based on two considerations. First, unlike other *wanghong* women who were employed by big companies, Linxiaozhai's self-employment gives her more autonomy for identity performance; second, Linxiaozhai's childlike appearance sets her apart from those whose appearances fit too well into the so-called '*wanghong* face'. Linxiaozhai's distinctive style seemed more revealing of the operation patterns of *wanghong* economy. With that decision made, I moved into a focused observation phase on Linxiaozhai for the whole month of March, during which I had a regular check of her updates both on Weibo and Taobao, archived useful materials and took field notes for further data analysis. I collected various first-hand data from Linxiaozhai's Weibo

posts and the selling records of her Taobao webshop. When the observation on Linxiaozhai was completed by the end of March of 2016, I continued with the data collection process, during which I took on board more relevant documents from various sources, such as surveys and reports, aimed to help me achieve a better understanding of China's *wanghong* phenomenon. These documents, along with the first-hand materials, were then sorted and archived with the help of a wide array of dataset tools, including Discover (for taking footnotes), DevonThink Pro (for archiving raw data), Microsoft Office (for writing), Python (for scraping down thick-data), Pixave (for archiving and sorting photos). In July, I started with data analysis preparation, which mainly involved work of content transcriptions, text cleaning and segmentation. When the preparation work was done, the preprocessed data were passed onto the corpus analysis and multimodal ethnographic content analysis.

6.3.2 Methodic specification

Observation

The observation of the *wanghong* phenomenon started in February 2016 when I noticed a swarm of young attractive women vending lipsticks, facial masks, decorative accessories and fashion clothes on Weibo. Despite a suspicion of the phenomena being a practice generated by Taobao's commercial cooperation with Weibo, I was intrigued by the high visibility and popularity of this group of young women, who I later found was widely called '*wanghong*'. My search of '*wanghong*', as an entry, on Weibo returned a long list of names. Following some of these names, I dived into their posts, read their followers' comments and collected other materials about them on the Internet. I was greatly amazed by my finding that there was even an annual *Wanghong* Conference jointly hosted by Taobao and Weibo, on which a number of awards were conferred to the most popular *wanghong* women in China. As time went by, I came to know Linxiaozhai (林小宅), whose childlike appearance immediately surprised me. I was wondering how such a young girl could have made such a big success and achieved such popularity. Her active self-disclosures in the form of Weibo posts on topics such as included daily cuisines, travelling, make up techniques and personal emotional feelings also added to my initial interest.

Fieldnotes and documents

During the period of observations, fieldnotes were taken in various forms mainly with the help of Discover (an application on macOS), as shown in Figure 6.3. The application enabled me to capture instantly my thoughts on the first-hand materials on Linxiaozhai. It automatically added the time stamp each time I took down fieldnotes with embedded screenshots and attached documents for later reference.

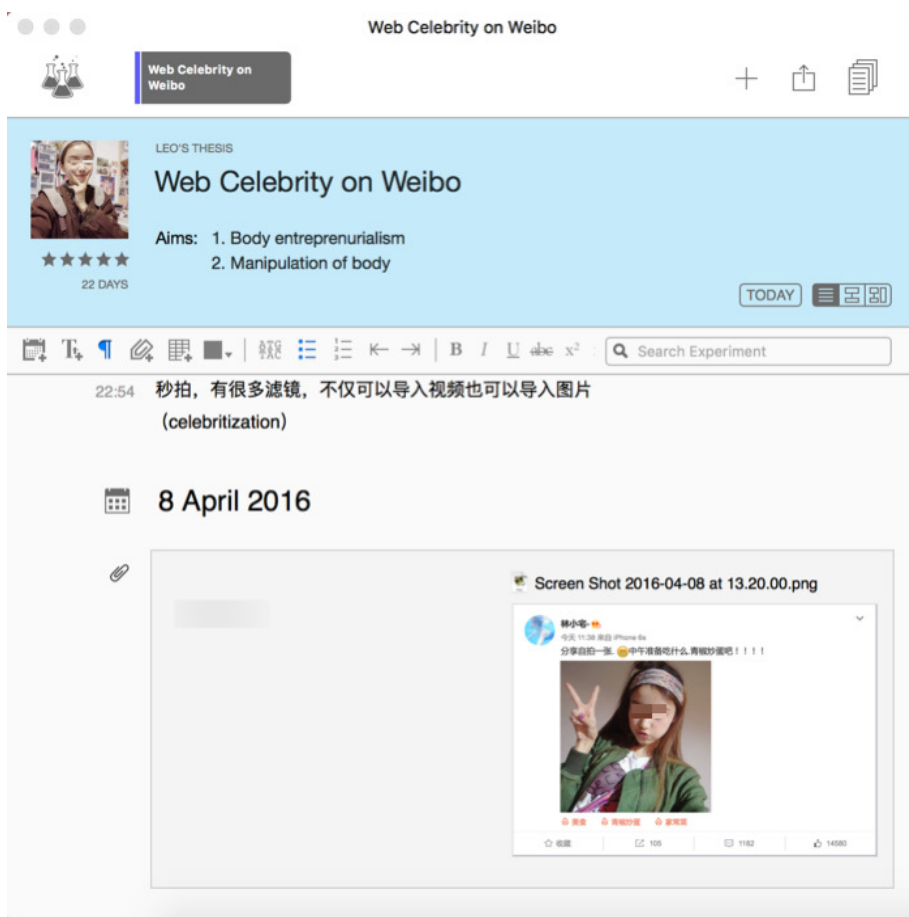


Figure 6.3 Fieldnotes taken in the Discover application

To understand the *wanghong* phenomena and the public discourse on Linxiaozhai's *wanghong* entrepreneurship, I also collected a broad array of relevant documents from the Internet with the help of DevonThink Pro, another database archiving application on MacOS, as shown in Figure 6.4.

These documents, including web pages, pdf documents, and pictures, account for 76 entries in total, 30 of which are shown in the list at the right panel of DevonThink Pro in Figure 6.4. These documents include Chinese and Western media reportages, industry reports, commercial advertisements, which served as a knowledge pool for me not only to familiarize with the themes in question but also prepare me for a later reference in the phase of data analysis. Notably, the application's tagging function has been useful to attach different sorting keywords to each entry of my collection for a more efficient reference.

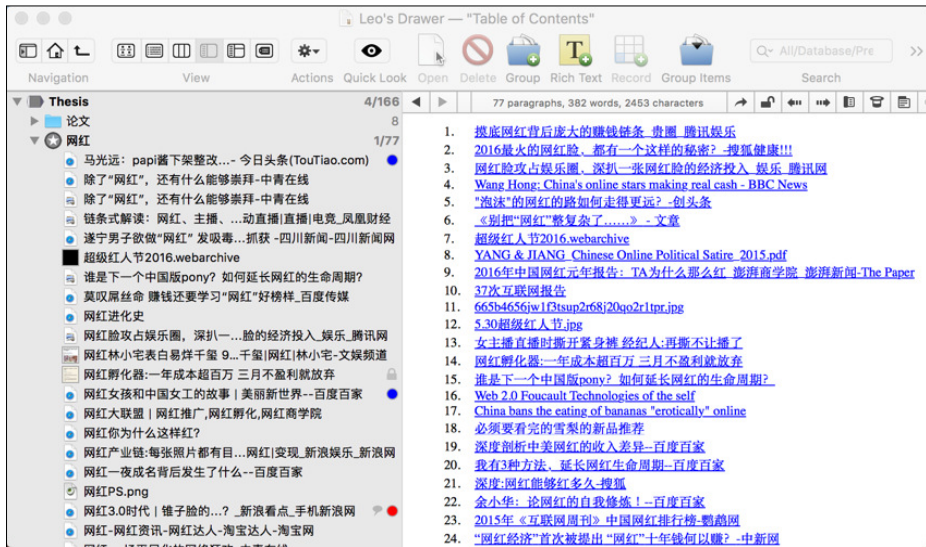


Figure 6.4 A screenshot of document collection in the study

Thick-data collection

As shown in Chapter 5, the data flow on Sina Weibo, as the most densely inhabited social media platform in China, is immensely fluid and hardly graspable. Observations during my lengthy stay on the relevant sites, despite the rich empirical data I could collect, still let go the thick and big-scale aspect of the digital data. An inclusion of a thick-data investigation helps to unveil the pattern of communication in a wider range. The thick-data investigation, which takes the form of corpus building, processing and analysis, can well inform the ethnographic content analysis. I used Bazhuayu (八爪鱼), the same one as in Chapter 5, to scrape down two sets of data from Weibo.com. The first data set is a collection of all posts published on 17 June 2016 which contain the Chinese term *wanghong* (网红), through which I intended to unearth the main themes around *wanghong* and the dominant attitudes towards *wanghong* identity. The second set is a collection of all the posts of Linxiaozhai, up to the time of the data collection on 15 July 2016, which serves to help me get a clue of the communicative interaction patterns between Linxiaozhai and her followers. I have used customized regular expressions to erase all the emoji, web addresses and punctuation marks before the text enters the process of corpus building and corresponding corpus analysis.

The quantitative data in the current study are meant to identify the trendy *wanghong* discourse and disclose the linguistic characteristics of Linxiaozhai's interactions among the overwhelming data pool of Weibo posts. Despite the quantitative data thus collected, this study cautions to generalize, which might overlook the underlying contexts as an inseparable proportion of interpretation of *wanghong*.

6.4 Data analysis

Data analysis in this case study is dedicated to shed light on the *wanghong* discourse through an observation of Linxiaozhai's *wanghong* entrepreneurship on Weibo. It begins with a corpus analysis followed by a more in-depth ethnographic content analysis.

6.4.1 Corpus analysis

Two sets of thick data were used in the corpus analysis. One is the database of Weibo posts containing the keyword 'wanghong' on 17 June 2016 and the other is that of all Linxiaozhai's Weibo posts on July 15, 2016. The former one is aimed at drawing a global picture of how *wanghong* has been generally addressed on Weibo while the latter one is meant for finding out the overall focuses of Linxiaozhai's personal *wanghong* practices.

Weibo posts with 'wanghong'

With the help of a specifically configured python script, I crawled down 858 entries of Weibo posts containing the keyword 'wanghong', published during the whole day of 17 June 2016. After that, the raw Chinese dataset was segmented by Jieba,⁴⁹ the same python package used in Chapter 5, into readable chunks followed by the operation of keywords extraction. The results of the keyword extraction are shown in Figure 6.5.

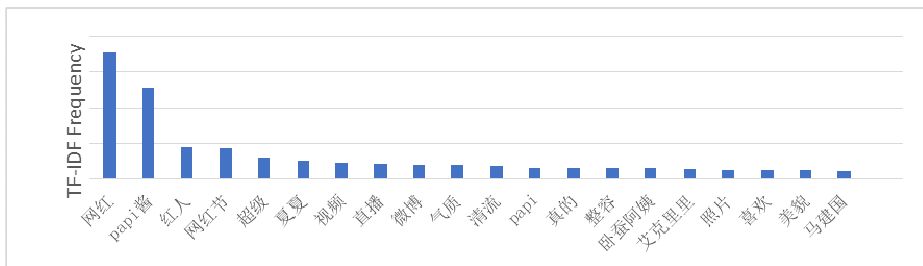


Figure 6.5 Top-20 keywords of Weibo posts with 'wanghong'

The corresponding Chinese-English translations of these keywords are listed below in order of their TF-IDF frequencies that statistically reflect the importance of each word to the whole corpus.

⁴⁹ See <https://github.com/fxsjy/jieba>

Table 6.2 Explanation of keywords (n: noun, adv: adverb, v: verb, adj: adjective)

Rank	Keywords	Explanations
1	网红	n. <i>wanghong</i>
2	papi 酱	n. Weibo username of a popular <i>wanghong</i> woman
3	红人	n. popular person; celebrity
4	网红节	n. <i>Wanghong</i> Festival
5	超级	adv. super, extremely
6	夏夏	n. Weibo username of a popular <i>wanghong</i> woman
7	视频	n. video
8	直播	n. a live broadcast v. to livestream
9	微博	n. Weibo
10	气质	n. charisma
11	清流	adj. fresh (in terms of one's charisma)
12	papi	n. a shorthand term to address papi 酱 (ranked second)
13	真的	adv. truly, really
14	整容	n. plastic surgery v. to have a plastic surgery
15	卧蚕阿姨	n. Weibo username of a female <i>wanghong</i>
16	艾克里里	n. Weibo username of a female <i>wanghong</i>
17	照片	n. photo
18	喜欢	v. love, like
19	美貌	n. good looks
20	马建国	n. Weibo username of a male <i>wanghong</i>

Seen from Table 6.2, the ranking list lands two kinds of reference to *wanghong*, namely, '*wanghong*' itself and '*Wanghong* Festival'. The latter points towards an influential joint effort by Weibo and Taobao to hold the *Wanghong* Festival on 30 May 2016, where an army of *wanghong* personalities were invited to walk the red carpet and compete for awards. Before and after the *Wanghong* Festival, Weibo and Taobao were bombarded by a dazzling array of *wanghong*-endorsed brands. It was the synergy of Weibo, China's biggest social media platform, and Taobao, China's most influential online marketplace, that produced this annual feast of online shopping.

Remarkably, six positions in the keyword list have been taken by Internet personality's names, i.e., 'papi 酱' (*papijiang*), '夏夏' (*xiaxia*), 'papi', '卧蚕阿姨' (*wo can a yi*), '艾克里里' (*aike li li*) and '马建国' (*ma jianguo*). Notably, the name of 'papijiang' has made its way to the keyword list in two different forms, one in its original form and the other as an abbreviated version 'papi'. This is not hard to understand given the fact that papi 酱 is the person who for the first time in history brought *wanghong* as an identity category into the spotlight (Cai 2016). With 'papijiang' and 'papi' referring to the same person, these five personalities are among the most

popular *wanghong* in China. ‘Papijiang’, ‘xiaxia’, ‘papi’ and ‘wo can a yi’ are females, with ‘aike li li’ and ‘ma jianguo’ being males.

The fact that the weight of female *wanghong* outnumbers their male counterparts and all females’ rankings are higher than those of their male counterparts, highlights female predominance in the *wanghong* industry and *wanghong* online discourse. Notably, the term ranked third is ‘celebrity’, which is suggestive of the approximation of those *wanghong* women’s fame to traditional celebrities. The terms ranked sixth, seventh and sixteenth are ‘video’, ‘live broadcast’ and ‘photo’, all of which refer to the popular medium forms through which *wanghong* identity is designed and performed.

There are two keywords, namely ‘charisma’ and ‘attractive appearance’ as qualifications pertaining to *wanghong* women, defying the reduction of *wanghong* women’s image only to the physically attractive. In thirteenth place in the ranking is ‘plastic surgery’, which is closely related (as mentioned earlier) to the long-existing social suspicion that many *wanghong* women underwent plastic surgery.

Together these terms constitute the broader field within which we can now focus on more specific forms of performance and practice.

Linxiaozhai’s posts on Weibo

All of Linxiaozhai’s posts were crawled down and segmented in the same way as the Weibo posts with ‘*wanghong*’ that were dealt with (see above) on Weibo on 15 July 2016. Top-20 keywords were extracted according to Jieba’s algorithm, as shown in Figure 6.6.

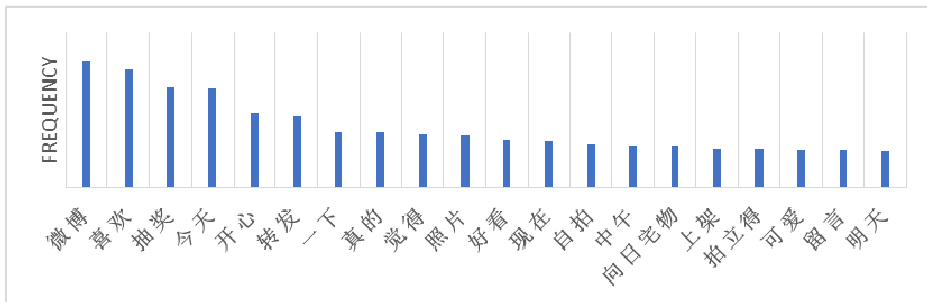


Figure 6.6 Keywords of Linxiaozhai’s posts

Seen from Figure 6.6, unsurprisingly, Weibo, as the platform where Linxiaozhai mainly exercises her *wanghong* practice, takes the first place in the keyword list. The second ranked term ‘like’, together with other emotive keywords, including ‘happy’, ‘feel like’, ‘attractive’ and ‘cute’, all demonstrate Linxiaozhai’s frequent disclosure of her personal preferences and emotions to her followers. These personal feelings, which may often be cautiously hidden from public visibility on the Internet in traditional celebrity culture, are overtly shared by Linxiaozhai over Weibo. This sharing

can generate a sense of intimacy between Linxiaozhai, as a *wanghong* model, and her followers in general. Both ‘raffle draw’ and ‘go for sale’ in the list pertain to Linxiaozhai’s personal entrepreneurship. The former is particularly telling of Linxiaozhai’s marketing strategy through which her followers are encouraged to spread the news of her new fashion releases on Weibo. While ‘go for sale’ generally refers to the beginning of a selling session for Linxiaozhai’s new products, it also demonstrates that there are frequent updates on the fashion items. This underscores the fact that Linxiaozhai’s *wanghong* modeling constitutes a full-time job, which requires considerable time and energy to operate.

Table 6.3 Keywords of Linxiaozhai’s posts with English explanations (n: noun, adv: adverb, v: verb, adj: adjective)

Rank	Keywords	Explanation
1	微博	n. Weibo
2	喜欢	v. like
3	抽奖	v. (conduct a) raffle draw
4	今天	n. today
5	开心	adj. feeling happy
6	转发	n. & v. repost
7	一下	adv. for a time
8	真的	adv. really
9	觉得	v. feel like
10	照片	n. photo
11	好看	adj. attractive, good-looking
12	现在	n. now
13	自拍	n. & v. (taking) a selfie
14	中午	adv. noontime
15	向日宅物	n. the name of Linxiaozhai’s Taobao webshop
16	上架	verbal phrase: go for sale
17	拍立得	n. polaroid
18	可爱	adj. being cute
19	留言	v. to leave a message
20	明天	adv. tomorrow

Another theme can be drawn from the keywords ‘photo’ and ‘selfie’, both of which speak of the main social media formats utilized by Linxiaozhai for presenting her daily updates on who she is and what she does. Furthermore, the presence of the keyword ‘polaroid’, the classic camera that Linxiaozhai incessantly offers as a reward in the ‘raffle draw’, is also related to photography. Taken together with ‘photo’ and ‘selfie’, this highlights the importance of the artefactual construction of self-identity for Linxiaozhai and her Weibo followers. Another keyword that calls for attention is

‘being cute’, which, in fact, is widely considered one of the most desirable qualities Linxiaozi has. ‘Cuteness’, as I shall show in the content analysis below, becomes the very element accounting for the idolization of Linxiaozi by many of her followers.

6.4.2 Content analysis

The content analyzed in this section includes Linxiaozi’s Weibo posts and comments from her active followers. Informed by the corpus analysis in the last section, posts and comments of my choosing are mainly those which have a large viewership. In addition, I also paid frequent visits to *Xiangrizhaiwu* (向日宅物), Linxiaozi’s webshop hosted on the Taobao marketplace, keeping an eye on the arrival of her new designs, the consequent marketing strategies and the way her followers provided responses and feedback to their purchases.

Who is Linxiaozi?

Linxiaozi (林小宅),⁵⁰ a girl in her twenties from Zhuhai, Guangzhou Province, is one of the most prominent microcelebrities in online China. By publishing selfies and video clips documenting moments in her personal life on kuaishou (快手, www.kuaishou.com), a shot-video sharing platform, she rose up as a star in 2015. She then transferred her attention to Weibo where she managed a big fan base and started her fashion business. At the time of writing, Linxiaozi had already amassed more than 2.7 million followers on Weibo.⁵¹

Linxiaozi loves cute girlish decorations, such as the frog-shaped hairband and the ball-jointed doll as shown on the left-hand side of Figure 6.7 and has widely been praised for her amiable appearance. Furthermore, because of her young ‘Lolita’ looks and her fascination with Japanese ACG (Anime, Comics and Games) subculture, she has been deemed as a 元气美少女 (*genkibishōjo* in Japanese Rōmaji), a jargon from ACG, which literally refers to ‘a healthy/vital and attractive young girl’. Taken together, Linxiaozi’s online self-presentation is elaborately and consistently designed and follows a clear template including (and even emphasizing) ludic features, as we shall see.

⁵⁰ Linxiǎozhái (林小宅): this Internet nickname consists of 3 parts. Lín (林) means ‘forest’ but is also a very common Chinese surname. We can assume that this is part of her real offline name as this is the only explanation which makes sense here. Xiǎo (小) means ‘small, cute’ and is also used to form a diminutive. Here it indexes the cuteness/kawaii culture she represents. Zhái (宅) refers to the Japanese term (お宅/おたく), which is widely used nowadays to refer to a fan of anime/manga, and even broader of Japanese culture. As we see in forthcoming examples, this is also part of Linxiaozi’s identity design.

⁵¹ Data accessed at 09:00 on 23 August 2016.



Figure 6.7 One of Linxiaoze's photos in her post⁵²

At such a young age, Linxiaoze has been running a fashion brand named Timtimxxz jointly with her sisters for several years. The webshop has a broad array of cute and girlish designs on sale and foregrounds Linxiaoze, the brand co-owner, as its house catalog model. As a routine, Linxiaoze regularly takes catalog shoots wearing forthcoming fashion designs just before their release for online sales. Her portfolio reveals that those pictures are often taken during trips to Asian countries such as Japan, Thailand and South Korea. The pictures are similar to her casual photo sharing practice, which, if any different, involves a little more refining work. That is basically the charm of her work: traveling, enjoying exotic delicacies while making good money without much of the toil in the traditional modeling industry. This is by large a beauty premium paid for her, one of many *wanghong* models in China, who are well received in *meinüjingji*.

Linxiaoze's capital

Linxiaoze's photo-shoots usually feature her pronounced aesthetic capital, which, as defined by Anderson et al. (2010: 564), "covers the privileges and wealth people receive from aesthetic traits, such as their face, hair, body, clothes, grooming habits and other markers of beauty." Linxiaoze's aesthetic capital is held mostly visibly in an amiable physique characterized by her baby-face and tiny figure, all of which are benchmarked and ratified by her followers (although the benchmarking is less outspoken than that documented in Chapter 5). The benchmarking and ratification of Linxiaoze's physical self-presentation is filtered and influenced by a shared knowledge of ACG subculture among her followers, who well recognize the specific capital stock that is indexed in Linxiaoze's self-presentations, and who are ready to accentuate this aesthetic value with references to ACG subculture. As seen in Figure 6.7, the cuteness manifest in Lolita-style decorations contextualizes Linxiaoze's physique and makes it not only attractive but also culturally consonant among other ACG

⁵² https://tieba.baidu.com/p/4660863712?red_tag=3149081725, last access on 6 July 2016.

hobbyists who are at the same time Linxiaozhai's customers. Given that Japan is the birthplace of ACG, Linxiaozhai's traveling and photo shoots in Japan adds to her authenticity as an ACG adept. The picture shown in Figure 6.8, which features a billboard and lamp with Japanese characters, activates emblematic symbolic capital to Linxiaozhai among ACG hobbyists.



Figure 6.8 Linxiaozhai, catalog shooting in Japan⁵³


Different from more traditional modeling professionals, Linxiaozhai has also assumed the responsibility of a saleswoman. Apart from the catalog modeling which directly influences fashionistas' consumption preferences, Linxiaozhai also keeps frequent 'personal' and frivolous status updates on Weibo: casually worded remarks on topics ranging from daily cooking, eating, playing, outgoing, shopping, consumption of cultural goods, personal tastes in terms of fashion, and often exuding playfulness, happiness and fun. Such updates suggest intimacy and peer-group friendship, bringing interaction 'down' to a range of mundane and ludic topics on which Linxiaozhai presents herself not as an opinion leader but as an equal to most women in her audience. An example of such updates is this:

Example 6.1

Linxiaozhai's Weibo post showing her meal⁵⁴

2015-3-18 10:40 来自  好吃的 iPhone 6 Plus

Translation

2015-3-18 10:40 (time stamp) from my  (looking like a rice ball hiding behind an iPhone) delicious iPhone 6 Plus⁵⁵

⁵³ <https://item.taobao.com/item.htm?spm=a1z10.5-c-s.w4002-15737659909.89.861d8e89Kxrg7&id=537301023445>, last access on August 10, 2017.

⁵⁴ Source: https://www.weibo.com/1965681503/C96mX5aok?from=page_1005051965681503_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime, last access on 13 October 2017)

我煮的鱼蛋🐶咖喱味不够重。不过还是挺好吃的.当然啦.这么简单的煮鱼蛋都不会.怎么可能嘛[呵呵]



These are fish balls I made.🐶(a bewildered dog) Despite that I should have added more curry, they are quite delicious. For sure, how could I cannot even prepare a simple dish like fish balls? [hehe (laughter)]

Informed by these status updates, Linxiaoelai's followers can interact with Linxiaoelai and leave their comments under her posts. Linxiaoelai offers something of a ludic learning environment to her followers, many of whom are still in school and cannot afford such a high traveling and lifestyle expenditure. Arguably, these consumptive practices are emblematic identity markers bespeaking the practitioner's taste and sensitivity to fashion. Furthermore, they relate to authenticity. As emblematic indexes to Bourdieu's (1986/2011) cultural capital, Linxiaoelai's display of cultural consumption is a conspicuous one that adds, as part of the overall design of her online presence, to her authenticity and attractiveness. This authenticity and cultural capital earned by Linxiaoelai leads to idolization among her followers, which further romanticizes the fashion designs on sale. From the purchases, her followers perceptually identify with her as an ACG hobbyist, a cosmopolitan young woman and a consumer of sophisticated cultural and material commodities. Along with her fashion clothes, Linxiaoelai's sells her lifestyle and identity.

Example 6.2

Comment 6.2.1

*蓝: 第一次买宅家的衣服, 心里那个激动啊, 毕竟都是喜欢日系的妹纸, 对于矮个的妹纸来说, 这款裙子确实值得拥有, 158 感觉裙子短了点, 其他都还好

Translation

It is my first time to buy clothes from Zaizai's shop. I'm feeling so excited. As a girly girl,⁵⁵ I love the Japanese-style clothes as much as Linxiaoelai. The skirt is worth its value to a short girl like me, who is 158cm tall. All is not bad at all except that I personally would like the skirt to be a little longer.

⁵⁵ This is an VIP feature of Weibo, by which a paid premium Weibo user can customize the presentation of his/her smart phone.

⁵⁶ *蓝 played cute by using 妹纸 (*meizhi*) instead of its conventional form 妹子 (*meizi*).

Comment 6.2.2

*6: 实物一般。。有点失望。。是小宅太美了

Translation

The physical clothes are ordinary and even a little disappointing to me... If only I was as beautiful as Xiaozhai.

Comment 6.2.3

*欢: 质量炒鸡好喜欢啊啊啊

Translation

It is of superb quality.⁵⁷ Loving it so much (ah ah ah !!!)

Comment 6.2.4

*肖: 谢谢宅宅的美衣么么哒爱你宅子

Translation

Great thanks for Zhaizhai's beautiful clothes. Mua (onomatopoeia of air-kisses), loving you, Zhaizi.

Comment 6.2.5

*y: 早就想买了裙子很漂亮但确实很短容易见到内内喜欢小宅比心

Translation

I wanted to buy it for a long time. The skirt is very beautiful despite its shortness that may easily exposes your undies⁵⁸. Loving Xiaozhai. Giving you my heart.

Apart from the inherited physical configuration of LinxiaoZhai, to be a beauty also involves aesthetic work for LinxiaoZhai. Just as Mears (2014: 1335) argues, “aesthetic labor” is “useful for understanding the freelance work, non-standard employment beyond the hierarchical organization, such as fashion models,” who as “display workers” are hired primarily for their looks. As a catalog model, LinxiaoZhai’s aesthetic labor in her self-presentation often draws explicitly on Japanese *kawaii* (可愛い, かわいい, ‘cute’) aesthetics: adding lots of emoticons, making cute faces and applying decorative filters by using different beauty retouch applications, which “celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances” (Kinsella 1995: 220) and deliberately “make the wearer appear childlike and demure” (1995: 229). With a powerful digital toolkit, including photo and video engineering smartphone applications, LinxiaoZhai designs and elaborates her identity repertoire to the desired effects with various ‘technologies of the selfie’. We can see this in Figure 6.9, where LinxiaoZhai introduced the newly arrived collection for her Taobao webshop.

⁵⁷ *欢 originally used 炒鸡 (*chaoji*, literally ‘fried chicken’) as a substitute of 超级 (literally ‘superb’), which shares the same pronunciation ‘chaoji’ as 炒鸡.

⁵⁸ The original Chinese term 内内 (*neinei*) is a shortened and cute way to refer to ‘underwear’ (内裤, *neiku*), especially women’s.

(//•o•//)



Figure 6.9 Lin Xiaozhia's introduction to her new fashion collection⁵⁹

The post in Figure 6.9 starts with (//•o•//), a Japanese *kaomoji* (颜文字, which literally means 'face script') that is analogous to happy face emoticon 😊. Compared with the conventional emoji and emoticons, *kaomoji* is closely linked to the *kawaii* ('cute') culture originating from Japan (Katsuno and Yano 2007), a set of subcultural online practices which

not only place bodies on the computer screen but invest those bodies with the performed subjectivities of users. Cuteness frames those subjectivities within benign cultural codes of femininity. (Katsuno and Yano 2007: 295)

Linxiaozi deploys a broad *kaomoji* repertoire in her posts. This is significant given the very wide range of emoticons available on Weibo. Linxiaozi's choice of *kaomoji* marks her deliberate *kawaii*-stylization efforts as well as her advanced knowledge of the codes required for it. Apart from the *kaomoji* (//•o•//), Linxiaozi attaches a signature⁶⁰ in the post in Figure 6.9, which reads '来自☺崽崽的 iPhone' (literally 'from Zaizai's iPhone'), where 'Zaizai' (崽崽), a term that is often used to refer to



⁵⁹ Source: http://www.weibo.com/1965681503/DE3ea1trW?from=page_1005051965681503_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime, last access on 14 August, 2017.

⁶⁰ Weibo signature by default shows the specific device or platforms one uses for writing a post. As a premium service only available to paid Weibo users, the customization of Weibo signatures has been widely used for personal expression of individuality.

young pet animals, is employed by Linxiaozhai as her nickname. The nickname manifests Linxiaozhai's *kawaii*-ness, which glorifies the 'vulnerable, weak and inexperienced' as encouraged in *kawaii* subculture (Kinsella 1995: 220). In addition, Linxiaozhai's signature '来自☺崽崽的 iPhone' contains another *kaomoji* ☺, a smiley consisting of displaced eyes and mouth. In this example, Linxiaozhai's use of her nickname and adapted *kaomoji*, on the one hand expresses her girlishness and cuteness while on the other hand directs intimacy to her followers and fans in general. Following the *kaomoji* is a series of Linxiaozhai's photos that has been put into nine frames.



Figure 6.10 Illustration of Figure 6.9 with a legend⁶¹

In Figure 6.10, Linxiaozhai showcases two new collections. Those connected with a magenta line constitute the Series 1, which, as described in Lin's Taobao introduction page,⁶² features a 'Japanese-style lacy Pajamas and cute tracksuit' (pictures 1a, b, c and d). Noticeably, all the photos in Series 1 share a consistent pink background. By contrast, Series 2 in cyan features a T-shirt with heart-shape collar and tartan trousers, with a more spontaneous filter. It is found that both Series 1 and 2 are deployed in consistent filter patterns, and with a good symmetry the former in a  and the latter a , all of which bespeaks Linxiaozhai's highly advanced skills in the construction and framing of her photographic identity presentation (pictures 2a, 2b, and 2c). Further differentiation can be drawn between Series 3 (pictures 3a and 3b)

⁶¹ All lines and numbers in Figure 6.10 are added by me for a purpose of analysis.

⁶² See <https://world.taobao.com/item/535736219161.htm?fromSite=main&spm=a312a.7700824.w10032883-14752327008.5.SR1I0R>, last access on 15 August, 2017

from the rest in Series 2 as the modality varies between these two sets. More specifically, Series 3 (pictures 3a and 3b) depicts Linxiaoelai lying on the bed with legs pulled up, while the other three images feature her standing and gazing at the camera with a focused posture (2a, 2b and 2c). Consistently, Series 2 is also arranged in good symmetricity in a shape of $\bullet\rightarrow\bullet$.

Several days after Linxiaoelai's announcement of the arrival of the new collection, Yanfang, one of Linxiaoelai's followers published a post showcasing the very item bought from Linxiaoelai as shown in Example 6.3.

Example 6.3⁶³

🌸🌸🌸 这是一则阳台买家秀!! 第一次买家秀 (〰〰〰〰) 请笑纳!!!
@林小宅@向日宅物@宇宙超级无敌美少女之队长崽崽

Translation

🌸🌸🌸 This is a buyer's show on terrace. It's my first buyer's show (〰〰〰〰) so please forgive any inappropriateness.
@Linxiaoelai @Xiangri zhaiwu @Yuzhou chaoji wudi meishaonü zhi duizhang Zhaizhai.⁶⁴

The post contains the same *kaomoji* (〰〰〰〰) as that in Linxiaoelai's post, which highlights the important role *kaomoji* plays in the *kawaii* culture and in the process of Linxiaoelai's follower's identification with their idol. What follows is Yanfang's picture of her wearing the pajamas she just bought from Linxiaoelai's webshop.



Figure 6.11 Yanfang showing her newly bought item (the picture on the right)⁶⁵

⁶³ Source: <https://www.weibo.com/u/1965681503>, retrieved on August 14, 2017.

⁶⁴ The three phrases that begin with @ are referring to Linxiaoelai's public Weibo account, webshop Weibo account and private Weibo account respectively.

⁶⁵ Lines and arrows in Figure 7.11 are added by me for the analytical purpose.

Figure 6.11 consists of two pictures: the left one from Series 1 of Figure 6.10, is placed here for the convenience of analysis. The right one is from Yanfang, the follower of Linxiaoze. Obviously, Yanfang and Linxiaoze wear the same pajamas. And furthermore, Yanfang in the right photo is trying to mimic Lin's original tone by applying a similar pink filter. Her downward gaze and symmetric index fingers all direct attention, as illustrated in Figure 6.11, to the pajamas she just bought from Linxiaoze. A collaboration between the gaze and gesture accentuates Yanfang's strong identification with Linxiaoze. This kind of identification to an effect of idolization invites Linxiaoze's self-downplay and 'de-romantization' to reclaim her ordinariness despite glamorous photos of her intentional choosing as follows.

Example 6.4

Linxiaoze's post⁶⁶

今年以来突然很多网友开始叫我仙女。
对我来说其实这个称号真的太大了...
其实我是真的很普通的一个人...
可能我只是比较会拍照我知道我自己
哪个样子最好看.哪个角度最好看.我给
你们看的都是我我觉得我好看的一面。
我并没有那么完美。

Translation

Ever since the beginning of this year, there
have been many people who call me 'fairy
maiden'.
However, this title is too flattering on me.
In fact, I am just an ordinary person.
I know in what angle I should take my pictures
to look good. You all see me the way I show
you, in which I think I look the best.
In fact, I'm not that perfect at all.

Linxiaoze emphasizes her 'care of the selfie' that helps her achieve a desirable public image. Linxiaoze would like her followers not to be blinded by her online self-presentations and not to lose a sense of her just being 'a girl in the neighborhood'. This performed self-disclosure appeals to a 'deeper' and more fundamental insight into Linxiaoze's personality, and recalls the Goffmanian 'backstage' of identity performance, where the scripts may quite be different from or at odds with what is presented on the stage. While this act of self-disclosure might be intended to desacralize Linxiaoze herself and might be in accordance with the strong cultural norms of female modesty observed in earlier chapters, the integrity manifest in the act invokes a close relationship, or sincerity, between Linxiaoze and her followers, in a way akin to genuine friendship as seen in Example 6.4.

⁶⁶ Source: https://www.weibo.com/1965681503/E4DqEz5ru?from=page_1005051965681503_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime, last access on 15 August, 2017.

Example 6.5⁶⁷

*邱: 爱你你真好❤️个人观点我觉得不用太把宅宅当作网红看吧都是普通人每天看看小宅的日常啊啥的就像看朋友的日常一样ovo比起网红我更想把宅宅当朋友看(｡·ω·｡)/♡
你很坦诚也很真实所以这就是我为什么会喜欢你的原因因为你在做自己啊❤️

Translation

So nice to love you❤️. Personally speaking, I suggest not to treat Zaizai as a *wanghong* girl. Zaizai should be seen as a common person among us. I check Xiaozai's post updates on a daily basis as I do with my friends. oVo Compared with *wanghong*, I'd rather consider Zaizai as my real friend.
(｡·ω·｡)/♡
You are sincere and honest. That's the reason why I like you so much because you are always yourself❤️

The social proximity, as experienced by *邱 in Example 6.5, strikes a chord with the term 'parasocial' interaction, which "describes a media user's reaction to a mediated persona such that the media user treats the persona as a familiar other" (Horton and Wohl 1956, cited in Dibble and Rosaen 2011: 123). Such interaction between Linxiaozi and her followers embodies a steep difference between the microcelebrity and the traditional celebrity, whose charm is best maintained at a considerable distance from the fandom. Yuan et al. (2016), through a survey that investigates the media use in Hongkong and Macao, have testified to the positive influence of parasocial relationships on social media marketing, finding it contributes to customers' lifetime value. Linxiaozi has obviously created strong bonds of attachment and affinity, an 'imagined togetherness' (Mortensen 2017) with many of her followers for whom her public online self-presentation offers more than consumer information on new fashion items.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how the designed model of feminine attractiveness described in the previous part is converted in economic capital by elaborate online self-presentation practices, performed in a female-female complex of market transactions. The *wanghong* entrepreneurialism on Weibo, as exemplified by Linxiaozi, marks a demotic turn in the fashion modeling industry in online China. With easy access to social media, newly emerging digital infrastructures such as affordable and powerful smartphones, have offered Chinese women unprecedented demotic playgrounds for the commodification of performed identities.

Such infrastructural developments allow *wanghong* personalities to reframe their aesthetic capital and make technologically mediated artefacts of physical attractive-

⁶⁷ Source: <https://www.weibo.com/1965681503/E4DqEz5ru?type=comment>, last access on 15 August, 2017.

ness instantly visible to a wide range of consumers on social media. This 'grassroots' or crowdsourced modeling and fashion sales industry reduces the role and importance of intermediary modeling agencies and booking offices, once crucial players in the industry. At the same time, it greatly increases the importance of online infrastructures and cultural-technological competences as requirements for success in this new sphere of economic activity. Compared to more conventional models in the fashion industry, *wanghong* models enjoy more agency in their entrepreneurial decisions and are able to achieve success by playing out the power of individualized cultural scripts for beauty and aesthetics towards their followers. This is done through the creation of a sense of intimacy and affection, mediated by elaborate self-presentational and interactional work between the model/entrepreneur and her audiences. Self-employed *wanghong* models like Linxiaozyhai harvest considerable economic rewards in this newly shaped online market.

The combination of a childlike physiognomy and petite stature, elements of a desirable bodily image in the ACG subculture, has helped Linxiaozyhai land her successful *wanghong* fashion entrepreneurship on Weibo. We have seen how she expresses adherence to Japanese *kawaii* aesthetics via frequent use of *kaomoji*, injecting potentialities of (sub)cultural identification into the products she is modeling and strengthening a shared bond between her and her customers. Her followers consistently pick up the subcultural cues in the model's performance, and respond favorably to it by purchasing the commodities sensed to embody that model.

While this bodily desirability plays a fundamental role in personal *wanghong* practices, aesthetic labor is not negligible in Linxiaozyhai's modeling portfolio. Linxiaozyhai has observably enhanced her self-presentation design by means of a range of photo engineering tactics such as skin-color-tuning, and adding filters and frames. Technologically mediated artifactualization of 'selfies', as we see, largely contributes in the online conversion of immaterial aesthetic capital into material economic capital. The manifested technologies utilized by Linxiaozyhai in her entrepreneurship potentially prepare her way up the social ladder. The reward for Linxiaozyhai's *kawaii* performance is most significantly visible in her economic gains both on Weibo and Taobao. The currency here is, on the one hand, Linxiaozyhai's personal femininity shown in her daily updates on Weibo. On the other hand, the currency also includes Linxiaozyhai's mastery of emblematic semiotic resources that ties her followers with her into an enclave, creating a strong sense of intimacy, sharedness and community membership to all of them.

Linxiaozyhai's aesthetic capital starts with the physical body she is endowed with, combined with intense embodied configurations offered to her audiences in an uninterrupted stream of staged semiotic and discursive performances. The success of her *wanghong* entrepreneurship relies almost entirely on the followers' identification with the aesthetics embodied in her, rather than on the originality of the design and durability of related fashion products. In this sense, *wanghong* economy is an identification-based fashion economy, or alternatively an 'identification economy', where

needs of identification can be confirmed, realized and secured in economic transactions. It testifies to the importance of personal needs of social belonging, which helps one to perceptually manifest his/her preferred identities by means of connections with *wanghong* models via interaction and consumption converging upon a constructed ideal of beauty and attractiveness. By sharing the same hobbies and fashion styles with those idolized *wanghong* personalities, the *wanghong* followers are able to anchor their identity belonging in a ludic (but serious) community. We shall witness very similar phenomena when we turn to female-male market interactions in the next chapter.

Livestreaming erotic capital: The female-male market

7.1 Introduction

Apart from *wanghong* entrepreneurialism as discussed in Chapter 6, China has witnessed another Internet craze among Chinese youth that is widely known as Zhibo (直播, literally 'online livestreaming'). Even though livestreaming was invented quite some time ago, China turned it, for the first time in history, into an unprecedented public online 'carnival' with the largest number of participants. By June 2016, there were about 325 million livestreaming users in China, accounting for nearly a half of the Chinese total netizen's population (CNNIC 2016). Across about 200 livestreaming platforms (iiMedia Research 2016b), there are 4 million participants (both hosts and watchers) simultaneously present in about 3000 livestreaming rooms at peak times. Given the enormous scale of both the livestreaming users' population and livestreaming-related services in China, this mode of online practice has become part of modern lifestyle and the default mode of entertainment and communication among strangers. Such a lifestyle feature necessarily revolves around a high personal profile, stressing the importance of "visibility and self-disclosure", and considers attention revolving around beauty as "the path to success and empowerment" (Dobson 2007: 126). As Chinese scholar Zhang (1998) argues:

Beauty is democratic and a right of all citizens. It is a most economical and efficient tool for realizing the purposes and goals of life—the pleasures of everyday living, the health and happiness of the body and mind, and even social and political harmony. (Zhang 1998, as cited in Yang 2011: 342)

According to Yiguan Zhiku (2016), livestreaming hosting is, by and large, dominated by women, while men constitute a larger part of the audience. In this sense, livestreaming is a highly gendered part of online culture. This finding corresponds with Dobson's (2007) observation that many webcamming sites are "owned and maintained by teenage girls and young women from approximately thirteen to twenty-five years of age" (Dobson 2007: 125). Those webcamming hostesses, also widely referred to as 'camgirls', were described by Senft (2008) as 'microcelebrities' who strive for self-branding and strategic fishing for online fame and popularity. China's livestreaming shares similarities with webcamming practices in the US as observed by Senft. However, there are, at least, two significant differences between the two.

First, the Chinese population of livestreaming users far outnumbers that in the U.S. Second, the Chinese livestreaming technological framework is more advanced and tailored to the smartphone-based 'App Generation'. Livestreaming practices can be seen as a modernized identity 'playground' in which gender, aesthetic and erotic capital are being played out and converted into economic capital.

After the disclosure of woman-to-woman beauty capitalization in Chapter 6, Chapter 7 moves forward to examine the woman-to-man beauty capitalization manifest in livestreaming. I will examine livestreaming hostesses' capitalization of a specific model of feminine attractiveness in front of their male audience. More specifically, I want to find answers to the following questions: How do hostesses put their feminine beauty onto online display? What are the differences between self-presentations in the woman-to-man beauty capitalization compared with that in woman-to-woman beauty capitalization? Why are male audience willing to pay for the performances of these hostesses? What do they pay for what and how do these male audiences pay?

7.2 Femininity and erotic capital

Gendered representations of being a beautiful woman, arguably "a vital component of 'doing' femininities" in many societies (Lazar 2011: 37), is a special identity repertoire involving varying societal norms and personal tactics. As put by Butler (1990: 278), "gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed." In this sense, the taken-for-granted gender is a performance of predefined social norms, of which our corporeal bodies become the 'spokesman'. Because of implicitly embedded norms in gender, especially femininity, some feminists "have criticized normative beauty practices, and the highly profitable commercialized beauty industry that drives those practices, as oppressive upon women generally" (Lazar 2011: 37). However, the third wave of feminism shows severe disagreements with the victimological interpretation of females' beauty work, and instead considers beauty practices as pleasurable, agentive and strategic personal pursuits. This optimism, I would argue, largely holds true in China's livestreaming practices, where "girls' agency and experimentation" are widely visible (Ringrose 2011: 100).

As observed by Dobson (2007), webcamming is a "highly gendered, highly sexual and highly commodified global cultural landscape" (2007: 127). Similarly, livestreaming practices in China are also characterized by agentive feminine performance and capitalization of feminine beauty. Contrary to previous victimological interpretation held by the majority of first-wave feminists, China has seen a "deliberate re-sexualisation and re-commodification of bodies" among livestreaming hostesses, marking a transition from "an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze" (Gill 2003: 104). This view is also shared and highlighted by Hakim (2010, 2011), who argues that males in general have more sexual needs and are con-

tinuously facing the 'male sexual deficit'. This sex discrepancy has created a seller market and supposedly put a higher value on feminine erotica in general. Based on this fact, Hakim contends that females enjoy an embodied privilege over their male counterparts because they generally possess more erotic capital than men. Furthermore, beyond the sexual domain, feminine erotic capital can also generate symbolic value. Thus, Mears' (2015) ethnographic study shows that high-end businessmen appear to need "women's embodied symbolic capital", especially female models', in high-end VIP parties in the US to "generate status and social connections in an exclusive world of businessmen" (Mears 2015: 23). This distinction is demonstrated, arguably, through the presence of culturally desirable models of femininity, as a kind of cultural taste and as a valuable resource capable of creating an agreeable ambience for building business relationships and arranging other activities that could be translated into one's social capital in general. In this sense, femininities, if being designed and performed in culturally favored ways, are both convertible into social capital and economic capital. The operationalization of such potentials will be further elaborated in this chapter.

7.3 Methodology

Like the previous case studies, this study also takes digital ethnography as its methodology, which also includes various data from different sources, such as observations, field notes, professional reports, and statistics.

The research consisted of two phases. During the first phase, which lasted about two weeks, I paid a daily visit to the Yizhibo application on my iPhone to watch any livestreams that came to my interest as an unregistered lurker. Simultaneously, documents related to China's livestreaming were archived from multiple sources. During this phase, I familiarized myself with the field of livestreaming and located several cases that deserved extra attention. After two-weeks of online strolling, I decided to concentrate on Yizhibo (一直播) as the site for this case study. I signed up as a registered user and tried to get an insider's view by actively participating in communications within several show rooms I was following. During this phase, my observation was focused on the regularity of activities in the show rooms. I also bought livestreaming gifts from time to time to get an in-depth experience of the interaction pattern between a hostess and her audience. I even turned my smartphone's camera on myself to livestream for a short period of time, through which I got to know the digital facilities within a hostess' arsenal and experienced how it might feel when a hostess had to meet with hundreds of thousands of intangible gazes from an unknown audience.

Primary data in the study were provided by my on-site observations, followed by a multimodal analysis. Given that the livestreamed contents were fleeting, I recorded the programs in question for unlimited playbacks, notation and further analysis. The multimodal analysis took on board a variety of modes present on the research site

and in the attended shows, which was aimed to help me achieve a holistic interpretation of the livestreaming in question.

For ethical considerations, livestreaming shows investigated in this case study are ensured to be publicly accessible without a mandatory registration. Private information has been blurred or pixelated so that the data analysis does not pose threats to the hostesses and viewers who are involved.

7.4 The how and why of livestreaming

Livestreamed contents are largely dependent on a hostess' personal choice and her audience's requests. However, more fundamentally, the contents rely on digital infrastructures offered by a livestreaming platform. Consequently, the content analysis necessitates an *a priori* elaboration of the overall infrastructures that configure and contextualize the livestreamed contents.

Almost all influential Internet companies in China, such as Baidu Inc., Tencent Inc. and Sina Inc., have launched livestreaming services. Notwithstanding an astonishing array of livestreaming programs, the livestreaming infrastructures from different service providers share great similarities. Seen from Figure 7.1, Yizhibo (一直播), Yingke (映客) and Momo (陌陌), three of the most influential livestreaming platforms in China, look alike in their user interface layouts. More specifically, all of them have the status zone (marked as No. 1 in Figure 7.1) at the top, hostesses' performing zone at the center (No. 2), the threading of viewers' messages at the left lower part (No. 4) and the viewers' operation zone at the bottom (No. 5).

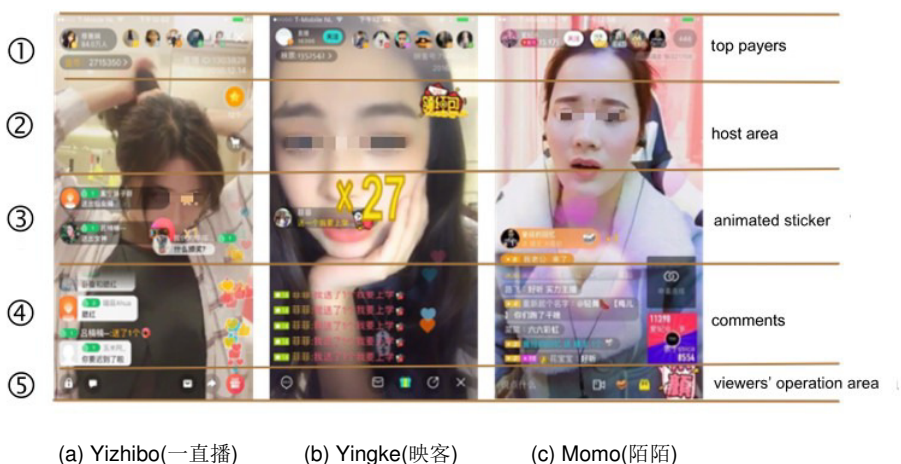


Figure 7.1 User interfaces of Yizhibo, Yingke and Momo⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Source: yizhibo.com; yingke.com; momo.com, last access on 14 December, 2016.

The homogeneous interface designs and livestreaming technological frameworks have resulted in severe competition between different livestreaming service providers in China. The success of each depends much on how many excellent hosts they can manage to attract. Given similar infrastructures across different platforms and my familiarity with Weibo, the incubating company behind Yizhibo (the company who developed and hosts Yizhibo), this case study will primarily focus on Yizhibo.

As an affiliated service of Weibo able to take advantage of the enormous Weibo user base, Yizhibo enjoys a rapid development and has become the first-tier livestreaming camp despite its rather late launch in May 2016. With an increasing number of celebrities joining Yizhibo's livestreaming service, it has already become one of most popular livestreaming platforms in China.

The logo of Yizhibo, as featured in the upper part of Figure 7.2, highlights the word 'yizhi' (一直, 'non-stop') in orange, emphasizing their 24-hour non-stop streaming (zhibo, 直播, 'livestreaming') service.⁶⁹ Below the logo, a sentence reads, 'if you want to broadcast, then keep it non-stop (要播, 就要一直播, *yao bo, jiu yao yi zhi bo*)', meaning 'if you want to broadcast, you should live stream non-stop'. As we can see, the slogan of Yizhibo promotes a lifestyle that attaches much importance to one's perpetual digital presence and sharing of personal daily activities (the 'always on' culture described by Baron 2010). According to the official introductory description, Yizhibo is a Chinese social media and livestreaming platform, the very site heavily inhabited by celebrities, VIP Weibo users, attractive women and men.⁷⁰



Figure 7.2 Yizhibo official introduction on its mobile webpage⁷¹

⁶⁹ 一直播 (Yizhibo) involves a word play, in which two terms 一直 ('non-stop') and 直播 ('livestreaming') are combined together by omitting a 直 that is shared by both terms.

⁷⁰ See <https://www.yizhibo.com>

⁷¹ Source: m.yizhibo.com, last access on 13 November 2016.

As a frequent Yizhibo user, I have observed a gender discrepancy among livestreaming hosts on Yizhibo. At the time of data collection, the gender distribution of the site-generated most popular hosts and hostesses on Yizhibo is as shown in Figure 7.3:

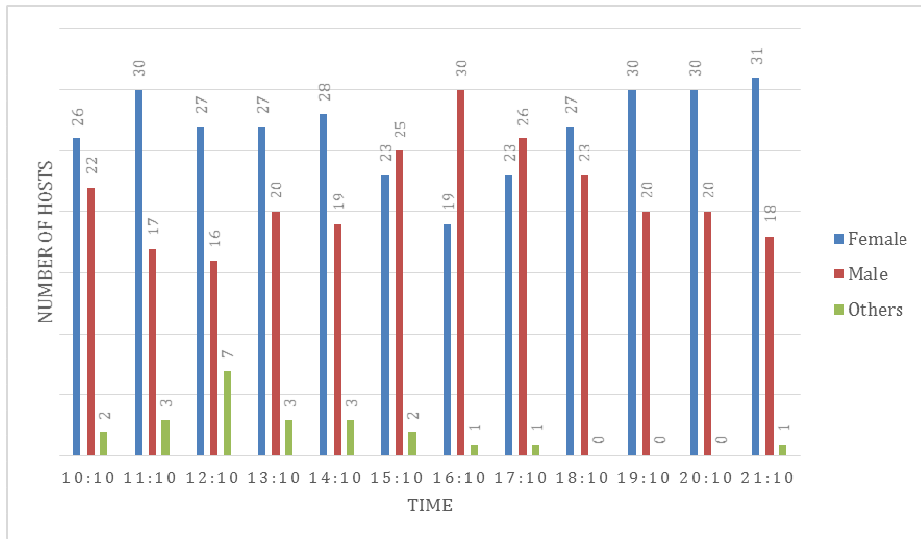


Figure 7.3 The gender distribution of Top-50 hosts and hostesses on Yizhibo within 12 hours (source: yizhibo.com, data retrieved 16 December 2016)

Figure 7.3 shows women's predominance in this newly emerging industry in China. This is understandable given the male/female ratio in China discussed in earlier parts of this study. Let me recapitulate some basic facts here. By 2015, 51.2% of China's population is male and 48.8% female (NBSC 2015). The prevailing sex selection at birth in China with the help of diagnostic ultrasound technologies (Chen and Meng 2013) results in a population with more males than females. Chinese males, especially those living in rural areas with a lower income, do not have enough chance to meet women. The situation has even been worsened by China's urbanization, in which process hundreds of thousands of young women have flocked into cities hoping for material and relational prosperity. The comparative scarcity of females tends to valorize Chinese women as a human resource in general and creates an ample capital 'market' for women, of which the Yizhibo livestreaming platform is an instance. Besides, according to Hakim (2010), women, by nature, outperform their male counterparts in terms of their stock of erotic capital. China's high male/female ratio has further enhanced the advantage of Chinese women's erotic capital sexual attraction over their male counterparts. As argued by Hakim (2010), women's erotic capital is much more demanded from their male sexual counterparts as a consequence of the 'male sex deficit' (Hakim 2010).

Motivations for hosting livestreaming vary from one hostess to another as seen in Figure 7.4. Some intend to make friends with those who share same interests while others consider livestreaming to be a full-time job, which demands meticulous planning work. Be it part-time or full-time, livestreaming takes on a pronounced economic prospect for most Chinese hostesses/hosts. Reportedly, females from Northeast China represent about half the total number of livestreaming hosts across the country (iiMedia Research 2016b). This on the one hand highlights the advantageous personality of the Northeasterners in terms of their talkativeness and sense of humor (Sun 2016). On the other hand, the popularity of livestreaming in the specific area results from a decaying local economy due to unsuccessful reforms of Chinese state-owned enterprises previously serving as the backbone of the local economy. With the highest unemployment rate in China, most people living in Northeast China are forced to look for new income sources. The emergence of livestreaming comes to their rescue and creates new jobs for them.

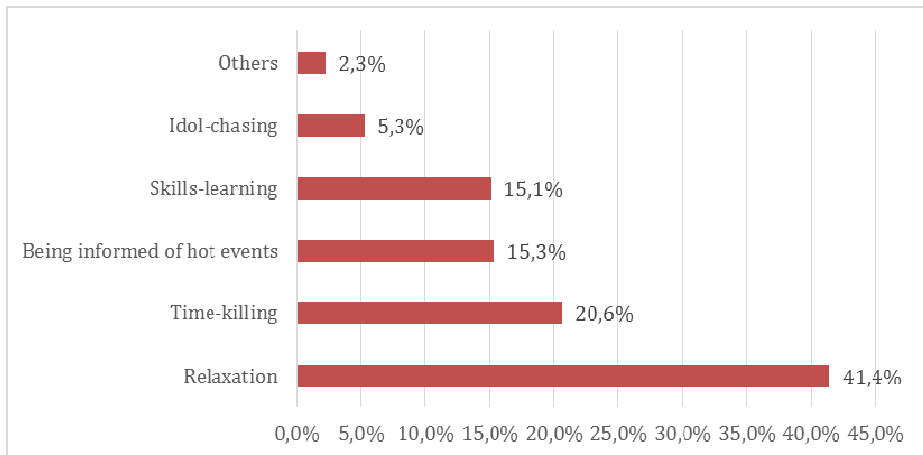


Figure 7.4 Survey of Chinese livestreaming viewers' motivations in the third quarter of 2016 (source: iiMedia Research 2016a)

With a low entrance threshold, China's livestreaming attracts large numbers of ordinary Internet users, or grassroots netizens, who were previously non-famous in most of the traditional offline settings. Livestreaming offers the underprivileged new chances for economic and social upward mobility. Those new faces, experienced as well as inexperienced in online cultural practices, step into the realm of livestreaming. For the lucky ones, the platform helped them to register into the hall of fame and success.

7.5 Dongbei Wuxue's chronotope

Despite varied livestreaming contents, such as singing, dancing, sports commenting, gaming commenting, etc., most hosts have taken the form of entertaining, ludic 'talk shows' as shown in Figure 7.5. Talk shows account for 44.5% of all the payment motivations, followed by gaming livestreaming.

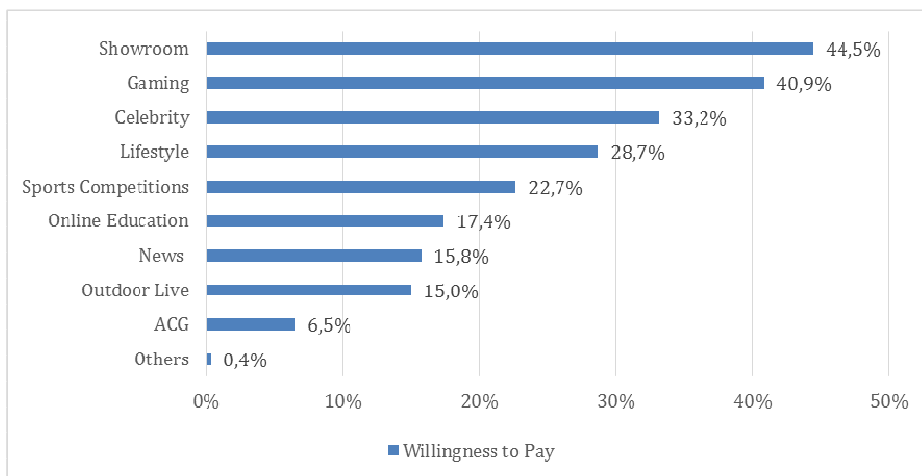


Figure 7.5 Ranking of livestreamed contents by viewers' willingness to pay in the third quarter of 2016 (source: iiMedia Research 2016a)

Given their popularity, this case study just focuses on such ludic but gendered 'talk show' livestreaming, and takes Dongbei Wuxue (东北污雪),⁷² a top-ranking 'talk-show' hostess on Yizhibo, as its focus of study. *Wu* (污), a Chinese adjective which literally means 'polluted' and 'dirty' is put in juxtaposition with *xue* (雪), the 'snow', which is generally considered to be pure (as it is white) in Chinese culture. As a screen name, Dongbei Wuxue's self-contradictoriness impressed me the first time when I got to know her. It displays a sense of cynicism, suggestive of the hostesses' dramatic, stylized and entertaining speech style.

At the time of my data collection on 11 December 2016, Dongbei Wuxue had already harvested 79,000 followers and earned 37,059,600 credits on Yizhibo, which amounts to 370,596 RMB (approximately 47,269 Euros) through 53 broadcasts within 46 days.⁷³ In other words, Dongbei Wuxue managed to grossly earn 241,693 RMB

⁷² Dongbei (东北, literally 'north east') in Dongbeiwuxue suggests that Dongbeiwuxue comes from Northeast China, where livestreaming hosting is widespread. Wuxue (污雪, literally 'polluted snow') overturns the conventional pure snow image, and induces a sense of sarcasm and humor.

⁷³ Data are retrieved at 14:39:16 on 11 November 2016.

(approximately 30,828 Euros) per month through online performances. Put into perspective, the average annual income in 2015 China was 53,615 RMB (approximately 6,839 Euros), which amounts to 4,468 RMB (approximately 570 Euros) per month (NBSC 2015). Solely from her livestreaming, Dongbei Wuxue's income is about 54 times the average national income per capita. Given the lucrative potential of the livestreaming industry, more and more Chinese, especially young females from modest backgrounds, begin to turn on their cameras and try their fortune. Examining how this economic model is operationalized necessitates an inspection of the digital chronotope that configures the livestreaming practices.



Figure 7.6 Screenshot of Dongbei Wuxue's profile page on Yizhibo⁷⁴

Put into Yizhibo's context, the interface of Yizhibo is characterized by a multimodal design, which is meant to be interactive and spontaneously responsive to ongoing communications during livestreaming. The essential structure is: a female hostess interacts with an online (male) audience, members of which can send messages and offer gifts to the hostess, all of which is publicly visible. These gifts are shown as symbols on the screen but, converted by the platform, represent real money income for the hostesses. Given multiple layers and centers in livestreaming, a multimodal analysis can help to offer an account of the variety of elements played out with different and changing prominence and significance. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001), modes often include four strata, upon which multimodal analysis can be grounded, namely *discourse*, *design*, *production* and *distribution*. The following will focus on each of these four strata to unveil the technological configurations of China's livestreaming as a social practice arena both for the hostesses' and

⁷⁴ Source: Yizhibo iOS application, retrieved at 14:26 on 9 January 2017.

audience's self-presentation. First let us have a close look at the interface design of Yizhibo as shown in Figure 7.7.

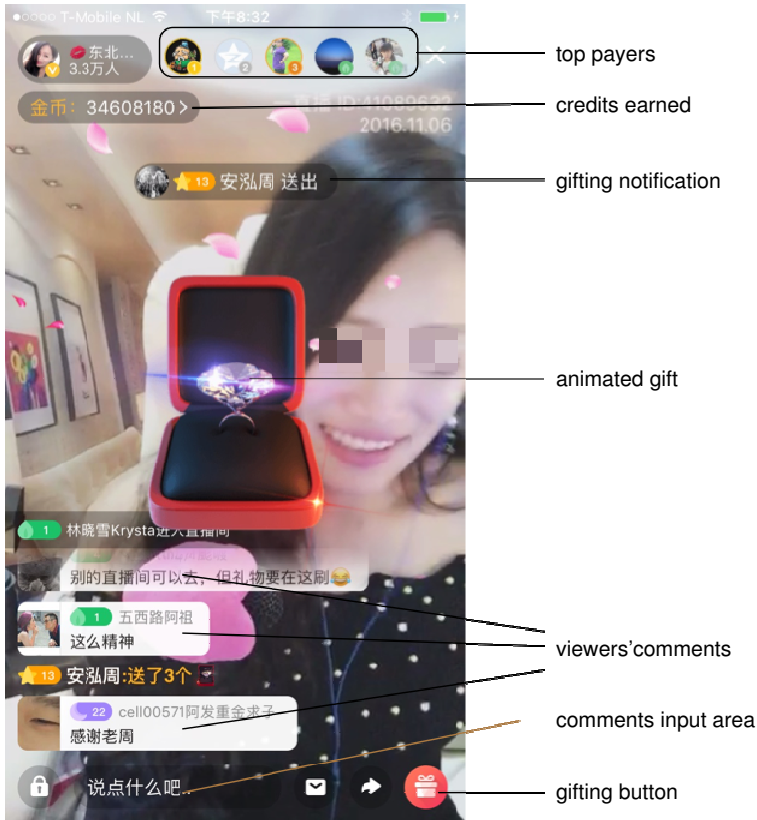


Figure 7.7 The Yizhibo livestreaming interface design⁷⁵

As shown in Figure 7.7, the livestreaming interface of Yizhibo, where Dongbei Wuxue broadcasts and communicates with her viewers is a conglomerate of elements in different modes and with changeable prominence. These contents include the audience's textual messages, Dongbei Wuxue's speech and body movement, interventions by her showroom assistants, background music, top-payers' avatars, and animated gifting effects.

We now begin to understand the features of the specific chronotope of live-streaming female-male talkshows. With all those multimodal elements in motion and responsive to each other, the message flow in the livestreaming is dialogical and re-

⁷⁵ Source: Yizhibo iOS application, last access on 9 January 2017. The lines and English captions are added by the author for further analysis.

sponsive to ongoing communications. When new messages pop up, previous messages will immediately move up on the user interface and recede out of the audience's vision. Given that online livestreaming rooms are often crowded with viewers, new messages from viewers constantly appear, move up and then disappear. In such a situation, it may be very difficult for any audience to catch a plain message in a rapid move. Hence, the quality of information reception should be taken into account, by showing the differences in the visual prominence of messages. In fact, the relative prominence of particular audience members within the parameters of the system, is collaboratively decided by one's profile photo, the relative length of the message, the status level autonomously generated by the platform, resulting in varied digital visibility. While viewers with a higher level always have a more stylish and fancy badge, a visually emblematic sign of a higher status and prestige, ordinary viewers' plain representation on the platform can be easily dismissed within the system of prominence based upon the time and money one spends at the platform. Just as shown in Figure 7.7, the top-five spenders among the viewers are listed on the top right on the users' interface, whose prominence is immediately visible to all viewers.

Compared with textual messaging, real-time video recordings of Dongbei Wuxue sitting in a chair or moving around in her showroom, play an essential role in livestreaming performances: these are Goffmanian dramaturgical identity performances by nature. However, different from staging up a performance in a theater, Dongbei Wuxue as the hostess runs a continuous livestreaming of her in front of an audience who can only communicate with her through text messages and gifting. The audience has no acoustic or visible-tangible presence. Given this exposure discrepancy, apart from text messages, gifting is an important tool for an audience to interact with Dongbei Wuxue.

As shown in Figure 7.7, the gifting button lies at the right below corner of the user interface, which is ergonomic for right-handed phone users. Gifts occupy a large and central space in the design, the very epicenter of the stage, as with the glittering diamond in Figure 7.7. Gifts are further technologically glorified by triggering an array of enlivening animate effects. Gifting, semiotized as a prominent act, considerably alter the existing communicative flows. Gift senders, especially those sending expensive items, are greatly appreciated by Dongbei Wuxue, and more likely to be addressed in friendly and intimate ways. Each time after receiving the gift of 'love', which costs 10 RMB (approximately 1 euro), Dongbei Wuxue immediately shows her 'love' by air kissing and playing a piece of love music that has been popularized by *Feicheng Wurao* (非诚勿扰, 'If you are the one'), a famous Chinese dating program hosted by Hunan Satellite TV. Figure 7.8 just features Dongbei Wuxue expressing her immediate gratitude for the audience's love gift through air kisses while depicting the verbal expression of 'I love you (我爱你)' by forming a heart-shape with her hands. This immediate expression of appreciation is orchestrated to a large number of viewers, amplifying the importance of generous gifts and the prominence of those who offer them.



Figure 7.8 Dongbei Wuxue's gestural response to a 'love' gift⁷⁶

The gesturing and facial expressions of joy are evident. Discursively, such moments of affection are expressed as follows:

Example 7.1

An episode of interaction between Dongbei Wuxue and *Re, a viewer of her live-streaming, who bought her virtual gifts⁷⁷

**Yilai and *Gangwan are Dongbei Wuxue's showroom assistants.*

[]: Visible actions performed in the showroom

(): My explanations

Italics: Textual comments

(Dongbei Wuxue is bantering with *Minuo, a viewer in her showroom) ...

*Re: [Send out 11 lollipops (gift)]

*Yilai: Thank you, Re (an abbreviated addressing of *Re).

Dongbei Wuxue: 感谢热

*Minuo: 我的妈

Dongbei Wuxue: 我的妈我的妈

开玩笑的

Translation

Thank you, Re.

Oh my God.

(Reading out *Minuo's comment)

Oh my God. Oh my God.

I'm just kidding.

⁷⁶ Source: Yizhibo iOS application, retrieved on 9th January 2017.

⁷⁷ Retrieved on 13 November 2016 from Yizhibo iOS application.

*Hushou:	我来了，我是黑粉	I'm coming. I'm one of your anti-fans.
Dongbei Wuxue:	我来了我是黑粉	(Reading out a *Hushou's comment) I'm coming. I'm one of your anti-fans.
	(...)	Hahaha... (Big laughter)
*Re:	[Send out a love (gift)]	
Dongbei Wuxue:	谢谢我热送的 I love you 哦	Thank you, my Re (still addressing *Re for short). Love you, ó (a sentence-final particle that conveys intimacy)
*Gangwan:	谢谢热	Thanks, Re.
*Yilai:	谢谢热 love	Thanks for Re's love (gift).
Dongbei Wuxue:	[(action) Sketching out the heart shape for 'love' in front of the camera]	
Dongbei Wuxue:	Mwah [Giving out a 'pronounced' air kiss to *Re]	
Dongbei Wuxue:	I love you 哟 [Still keep the shape of 'love'] 谢谢热啊	I love you, yó (a particle that serves to soften the expression before it) Thank youā (an exclamation particle to emphasize what comes before it), Re.

As soon as *Re sends in his gifts, Dongbei Wuxue's attention focuses on him, while interaction with other participants is not entirely interrupted. *Re, however, gets treated to repeated and emphatic verbal and nonverbal expressions of love and intimacy. Such moments of direct address in interaction shape the kind of ludic 'imagined togetherness' (Mortensen 2017) which is a key feature of online flirting, and which is much coveted by male audience members. All of this evolves in the highly specific contours of the online livestreaming chronotope, in which such ludic roles, relationships and practices can be enacted as features of 'normal' interactional conduct.

As a frequent visitor to livestreaming, I have also participated in gifting and have had a bite of the honor that a small amount of money could afford me. For example, the 'love' gift only costed 1000 Yizhibo credits, or 10 RMB (about 1 euro), which is just the price of a humble pack of cigarettes. However, this could buy 'loves' and intimacies as such from Dongbei Wuxue. Furthermore, gifting could add to this intima-

cy intensity expressed by the hostess, and reward its sender with the chance to communicate and befriend a kind of woman that one may find difficult interacting with in their offline life.

Most livestreaming hostesses, including Dongbei Wuxue, have the Chinese canonical feminine attractions described in earlier chapters as the 'model' for beauty design: white-skinned, oval-faced, nicely donned and good-looking. Given females' predominance in hosting livestreaming and males' predominance in watching livestreaming, the pronounced importance of feminine attraction conjures up Hakim's (2011) notion of 'erotic capital', which highlights females' advantageous stock of embodied capital over their male counterparts in domains that are related to sexuality. Following Hakim's (2011) conceptualization of erotic capital, what has been livestreamed is hostesses' erotic capital in its various forms. Hosted by hostesses, who come from different places of China, livestreaming programs turn to be a hub of feminine erotic capital, which is to be redistributed to hundreds of thousands of male audiences and is converted into economic capital for the hostesses. As we have seen earlier, Hakim (2011) lists six components of erotic capital: beauty, sex attractiveness, social skills, liveliness, social presentation, sexuality.

Many of those are highly visible in Dongbei Wuxue's livestreaming performances. With a slim figure, well-developed breasts and long hair, white-skinned Dongbei Wuxue resonates the Chinese *baifumei* model of feminine beauty, as discussed in Chapter 4. She is often scantily clad and not hesitating to disclose her sexiness. As a good jokes teller (more specifically, an excellent teller of *risqué* jokes), she is good at drawing male audience's attention. Being energetic, optimistic and talkative, Dongbei Wuxue has excellent social skills to maintain a nice rapport with her audience, including shifts from collective audience address into one-on-one interactions addressing specific audience members in acts of 'imagined closeness'. The 'selfie' she presents online is a virtuoso one, drawing on a vast repertoire of identity features and characterized by superbly executed performances. All these qualities bespeak Dongbei Wuxue's considerable stock of erotic capital. As this is in high demand, erotic capital is convertible into other capitals, especially economic capital, despite widely practiced cultural proscription of such conversion in China ever since Mao's era when prostitution was illegalized and politically eradicated. Notably, different from traditional business and mercantile practices, economic transactions in livestreaming undergo a semiotic 'romanticization' process, where the audience's money spent in showrooms is sugar-coated by a dazzling array of virtual gifts, which serve as cultural proxies that navigate the ambivalences mentioned earlier and reduce the risk of moral condemnations and allegations of prostitution.

The semiotic representation of the gifts, in particular, avoids the connotation of 'payment-for-sex' by calling on established Chinese traditions of courtesy and hospitality. In China, which is characterized by collectivism and *Guanxi*, gifting practices are widely seen at all walks of life, just as argued by Steidlmeier (1999: 121):

Gift giving is a prevalent social custom in China in all areas of life: in family and in significant relationships (*guanxi*), as well as in dealing with political authorities, social institutions and business people.

In fact, gift giving is not only appreciable but also considered mandatory in most social occasions in China, where “reciprocity is a foundational pillar of social intercourse” (Steidlmeier 1999: 121). Luo et al. (2012: 142) even qualify *Guanxi* as “the lifeblood of social interactions and business conduct in Chinese society.” This all-pervasive gifts-giving culture also has a profound influence upon heterosexual relationships both offline and online, such as online intimacies in this case study. Compared with the high cost for offline safe intimacies, the gifting expenses for livestreamed intimacies can be quite low. Hence, emerging livestreaming platforms provide males more chances to communicate and befriend with those desirable hostesses, who are less accessible to most males in their offline life.

7.6 From crush to cash

Given that the population of hostesses outnumbered that of hosts on Yizhibo, as shown in Figure 7.3, a hostess’ beauty, such as Dongbei Wuxue’s, is turned into erotic capital in interactions with an overwhelmingly male audience expecting a ‘ludic’ online romance and intimacy. For a female *diaosi*, or an economically underprivileged female, livestreaming can give her a stage to get to know ‘wealthy’ men, who, if developing a crush on her, may be willing to send her a big gift. Rather different from finding an offline ‘sugar daddy’, these livestreaming hostesses are not in any way obliged to substantiate online friendships and intimacies and step into an offline relationship with their economic supporters. Compared with traditional feminine erotica capitalization practices offline, online livestreaming offers hostesses more personal space and safety.

The conversion of feminine erotic capital to economic capital operates through virtual gifting (gifts giving) in livestreaming, with the capitalization process disguised by building up culturally necessary interpersonal ties and acts of reciprocity. More specifically, the virtual gifting practice is a mimicry of the offline gifting tradition in China, which can range from a bunch of flowers to a sports car, to establish *Guanxi*. This mimicry of China’s offline gifting tradition reduced the potential awkwardness of payments in livestreaming (‘paying for sex’), and naturalizes the conversion of immaterial feminine erotic capital into material economic capital. According to Mears (2015), women usually need strategies in their sexual relationships because an obvious payment linked to feminine erotica may easily reduce a woman to the status and stigma of a prostitute. To distance from such skepticism over prostitution, women are supposed to make extra efforts for moral justification – something we have encountered in most of the case studies reported here. Mears (2015) has found great gender inequalities in her ethnographic observations where attractive models usually

would like to go to high-end VIP parties without being paid. However, China's live-streaming practices have illustrated otherwise. The transition from party female models, who are unpaid for their attractive presence in VIP parties, to livestreaming hostesses, who are attractive and well paid for their digital presence, is only made possible by the Internet, which has transformed societal inequality and ushers in a new realm where new norms can be collectively generated and put into operation. In livestreaming some viewers are willing to pay millions of RMB to buy hostesses glamorous virtual gifts, to please the hostesses they prefer (see Li and Wei 2017). In return, hostesses often conspicuously show their gratefulness for the viewers' gifting and perform that appreciation to an extent that a big audience can well recognize and glorify the gift sender. All of this, however, stays in the online environment and does not migrate offline: the courtesy of the gift is responded to by means of a dramaturgy of online flirtation. The livestreaming hostesses usually respond more actively, elaborately and intimately to those big spenders, with words, facial expressions, body postures and gestures. In other words, with a certain amount of payment in the form of gifting, a viewer can gain chances of specific genres of interaction, ranging from being mentioned by name to being air-kissed and offered a love confession.

Put into Dongbei Wuxue's context, she performs a variety of practices, such as telling kinky jokes, singing songs, playing games and dancing, to enliven the communications within the showroom, to condition the conversion of her erotic capital into economic capital. As a reward, she is showered by virtual gifts whenever her audience members feel pleased. The virtual gifts she receives range from a bunch of roses to a thread of Ferrari sports cars, all of which are convertible into real money on the platform. On the audience's side, opportunities of entertaining with and getting intimacies from Dongbei Wuxue are desirable 'commodities', which are not readily available in most offline contexts.

7.7 Conclusion

Extending from the *wanghong* modeling entrepreneurialism in Chapter 6, this case study aims to clarify the conversions between erotic capital, social capital and economic capital, more specifically livestreaming hostesses' operational conversion of their immaterial erotic capital into material economic capital. This conversion is realized via the semiotic proxy of gifting, indexically anchored in traditional forms of courtesy and thus avoiding hints of prostitution, highlighting reciprocity and friendship-like social ties. This semiotic tactic 'back-stages' the hostesses' materialistic economic motives and 'front-stages' their interpersonal and communicative pursuits, which helps to avoid moral condemnations. The conversion begins with the hostesses' transformation of their (carefully designed) femininity into the time expenditure of feminine performances interacting with a large male-dominant audience. In other words, it is the socialization process of hostesses' erotic capital into a form of playful

romantic flirtation that converts immaterial erotic capital into material economic capital. When such immaterial-material conversion is procured without the socialization process, a hostess may be considered too materialistic, which further results in moral condemnations over explicit erotica capitalization.

On the viewers' side, by paying a rather small amount of money, they can get a chance to talk to their desired hostesses in a ludic, 'intimate' and affectionate way. With (alias) names being addressed by the hostess in front of a big audience, spenders among the livestreaming viewers are rewarded with an honor, a social prestige and a symbolic value: standing out from the crowd, being publicly recognized for one's exceptional courtesy. None of this, of course, involved the 'real' commitments and obligations usually attached to offline courtship and intimacy: it is ludic, based on a fantasy of male-female affection, but serious as an economic activity. In this sense, livestreaming can be turned into a stage for both viewers and hostesses to hunt for social recognition within a 'light community' inhabited by "focused but diverse occasioned coagulations of people" (Blommaert and Varis 2015: 54). Contrary to Goffman's (1961) dismissive treatment of 'poker players' not as a 'social group', Blommaert and Varis (2015: 55) contend that:

(Participants of light communities in focused practices) do display, enact and embody a strong sense of group membership – one not replacing their traditional 'thick' identities such as nationality, gender, social class, ethnicity and so forth, but a sense of group membership that might complement or, in some circumstances, even accentuate and intensify the 'thick' community identities.

In this sense, light communities formed around livestreaming hostesses and their talk shows are rather quite meaningful to participants. These light communities create and inhabit specific chronotopes that impose "conditions on who could act, how such actions would be normatively structured, and how they would be normatively perceived by others" (Blommaert 2017a: 96). These chronotopes are different from conventional social gatherings where flirting with a female stranger is generally considered rude and socially unacceptable. Instead, livestreaming communities enjoy increased tolerance with flirting and intimacies by introducing chronotopic 'carnavalesques' that suspend the conventional social norms where life has been "drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent 'life turned inside out,' 'the reverse side of the world ('monde à l'envers)'" (Bakhtin 1984: 122).

The hostesses are evidently in control of these processes. The Yizhibo livestreaming platforms offers different affordances and constraints to the different parties in the game, shaping a chronotopic environment in which the different parties can perform different acts. Hostesses and their in-time embodied movements are equally visible to everyone arriving at their showrooms. Hostesses can either talk to viewers in the form of speech or textual messages. Viewers, however, in most cases can only interact to their favorable hostesses through textual messages and gifting. This, on

the one hand, is a technological compromise, by which the livestreaming service providers try to cut down the cost of communication load that their servers have to handle. On the other hand, the unequal status division between a hostess and her audience creates a buffering zone for the hostess to circumvent any bullying and potential risks that can be hard to handle in offline intimate relationships. A hostess, in this way, can transform her immaterial erotic capital into material economic capital more safely without taking its conventional tolls in forms of moral condemnations and stigmatization. This is a staged, artful and ludic 'virtual' performance, not 'real' sexual engagement. A hostess can, consequently, freely choose topics and themes of her personal interests or that are more appropriate to be openly discussed. On the viewers' side, mediated by smartphone or computer screens and disembodied messages, they are less constrained and inhibited to carry out their intimacy work. In this sense, the power relations in the livestreaming industry can be seen as a space that offers each side democratic and socioculturally 'safe' agencies within confined digital infrastructures.

CONCLUSION

The care of the selfie

In his famous study on *The Lecture*, Erving Goffman (1981: 165–166) observed:

Those who present themselves before an audience are said to be ‘performers’ and to provide a ‘performance’ – in the peculiar, theatrical sense of the term. Thereby they tacitly claim those platform skills for lack of which an ordinary person thrust upon the stage would flounder hopelessly – an object to laugh at, be embarrassed for, and have massive impatience with. And they tacitly accept judgment in these terms by those who themselves need never be exposed to such appraisal.

Goffman wrote about offline performances, of course, but he anticipated several issues that emerged in the analyses in the previous chapters in an online environment. Let me first provide a brief recapitulation of my arguments in the previous chapters.

Looking back

This study is generally an ethnographic investigation of Chinese women’s discursive-semiotic and economic practices regarding the capitalization of feminine beauty in digital China. This feminine beauty, it argues, is designed and performed as a ‘selfie’, an online artefact invested with meticulous semiotic care and maintained in delicate online interactions with audiences. The study tries to disclose specific forms of interaction going between feminine beauty, wealth and morality through females’ (‘selfie’) identity constructions in different domains of social media. And it shows that the discursive-semiotic practices are themselves commodities that can be entered into a market of economic practices. They have become forms of capital. These immaterial forms of capital, which I called aesthetic and erotic capital, are lodged in an elaborate ‘care of the self’ (in Foucault’s sense), by means of which women transform themselves into ‘performers’ (in Goffman’s sense) whose ‘platform skills’ are demonstrated in online performances. Acquiring the platform skills, we have seen, involves careful maneuvering of established and emerging norms regulating the public presentation of female beauty, and performing them involves the ‘tacit acceptance of judgment’ (noted by Goffman) in terms of these complex and evolving norms of adequate performance.

I realize that there is a marked preference in the literature for examining topics such as these from a feminist perspective, in which the viewpoint of the woman prevails. In my approach, I treated the phenomena I analyzed primarily as *interactions* involving several parties in specific kinds of relationships. These relationships, I have attempted to show, are based on carefully balanced and interactionally negotiated sets of norms and expectations within particular chronotopic arrangements: the online spaces with their specific affordances and constraints enabling specific forms of identity design. It is through this impartial focus on interactions between several parties (rather than by ‘choosing the side’ of one of these parties *a priori*) that I could satisfy the methodological requirements of ethnography, and do justice to the complex multi-party involvement in (and co-construction of) highly delicate online relationships in this study. This is not to deny structural forms of inequality in society, such as the patriarchal moral predominance regarding women’s public behavior and character, the large-scale demographic gender imbalance in contemporary China, and the rapid growth of a large precariat in China. Such big structural factors were essential contextual influences upon my analyses, but rather than to prioritize them *a priori*, I chose to examine their *specific* effects in situated forms of online interaction. This methodological stance enabled me, for instance, to see in Chapter 5 the carnivalesque and ludic nature of forms of male-female online interaction which, at first sight, could quickly be dismissed as rude, sexist and abusive to women. And in a more general sense, it is this methodological choice that made me see the particular chronotopic arrangements of online spaces as offering possibilities for ‘safe’ self-presentation by women, unavailable in other spheres of social life. The ‘care of the (online) selfie’ is not identical to the ‘care of the (offline) self’ and such profound contextual differences need to be taken into account in any form of judgment of what happens.

The study started with the design of Chinese women’s attitudes towards the patriarchal moral skepticism revolving around women’s possession of wealth. Split stances have been observed in two case studies, in Chapter 4 and 5 respectively.

Chapter 4 examined *baifumei*, the Chinese female ideal widely disseminated through social media and used as a model for the female ‘selfie’ culture I document. I analyzed intricate relationships between wealth and feminine beauty with confrontational attitudes towards such relationships in China. I found that women strategically position themselves through forms of attaching and distancing practices amid constant moral skepticism towards their achieved wealth in relation to their ‘platform skills’, their deployable feminine beauty. With *baifumei* self-claimers being repudiated and defamed, a majority of women in the Baidu bulletin board group in question are alert to potential moral challenges and forced to constantly change their positioning according to the actual communicative events – the actual performances. The *baifumei* identity needs to be performed by women, but attributed by men. Chapter 4 also showed that Chinese men, who are often in a confrontational position to women in arenas like job and marriage markets, tend to label themselves as *diaosi*

(poor losers) with a remote reach to *baifumei* women, through which they vent their social discontents and perceived sense of social deprivation. *Baifumei*, in sum, become an intersection of different, indeed opposite, gendered identity constructions: the female beauty ideal confronted with male addressees constructing themselves as unable to ever acquire female partners of that standard. The discrepancies just outlined can be directly related to the macro-social and economic conditions structuring the domain of male-female relationships in China, sketched in Chapter 1.

Compared with these ambivalent attitudes towards *baifumei* identification in the face of moral skepticism (seen in Chapter 4), the case study in Chapter 5 focused on females' engagement with and exploitation of 'ludic' online moral defamation by men. The analysis showed, in fact, that such defamation was used in females' 'care of the selfie' as a form of benchmarking, a sort of public 'quality check' of their designed aesthetic and erotic capital prior to offering it to the market. The artfully worded male moral skepticism, which is based on the tradable potential of feminine beauty, i.e. its capital potential, was thus transformed into publicly ratified proof of a woman's feminine beauty in stock. While stigma and defamation around moral decay do sting, some women refocus their attention on their personal self-actualization and social upward mobility through the online performance of their femininity, in which they can display their 'platform skills' and submit it to public male judgment. This group of women turned 'submission' to defamation into a positive quality judgment, in a sort of ludic carnivalesque act, thereby effectively undercutting a dominant patriarchal ideology. The tightly scripted and formatted features of this online environment, we observe, offers 'safe' conditions for such acts of ideological subversion, unmatched by offline conditions. The women who submit themselves to these competitive masculine judgments do so 'virtually', not through a real-life self-presentation but through the presentation of a 'selfie', i.e. an online visual artifact suggested to reflect their 'real' qualities. This play of virtual reality manifestly creates otherwise inaccessible spaces of agency for women.

While Chapters 4 and 5 documented stages in the construction of aesthetic and erotic capital, Chapters 6 and 7 took us into an investigation of the operationalization of the feminine beauty economy in two realms on China's social media. Chapter 6 features economic interactions between women through *wanghong* women's catalog modeling practices on Weibo. I contend that the capitalization of feminine beauty within female peer groups as manifested in this 'crowdsourced' fashion modeling industry results from women's aesthetic needs and social acceptance tied with them: it is controlled by the normative complex identified in earlier chapters. In online *wanghong* modeling practices, models can circumvent the traditional dominance of modeling agencies and other (often male) brokers operating as gatekeepers to public exposure and success, and generate large audiences as well as very substantial incomes for women as new self-employed entrepreneurs. In the example I focused upon in this chapter, we could see how the model of femininity discussed earlier was performed through scripted 'selfie' fashion displays blended with displays of global-

ized mobility as well as of ludic everyday ordinariness, creating a multidimensional identity template for female audiences in which idealized identity aspirations as well as aspects of identity sharedness both figured and interchanged. Women in her audience could strongly identify with the *wanghong* model, both in terms of ambition and in terms of actual everyday life situations.

Next, Chapter 7 discussed the feminine beauty economy interactions between women and men, focusing on a female hostess' live-streaming on the Yizhibo platform. The conversion of feminine beauty into personal economic gains demonstrates that a hostess' performed intimacy valorizes the designed feminine beauty ideal, performed through 'selfies', in relation to an audience of men. Interactions in such livestreaming sessions are carefully organized and scripted, require great interactional and performance skills from the hostess (including digital literacy), and can be very lucrative in economic terms. This online genre of male-female interaction has rapidly become a genuine new entrepreneurial sector for women and a desirable form of social entertainment and consumption for men.

Interestingly, the hostess cashes in not through direct bill payment, but via her audience's virtual gifting, a traditional *guanxi* (关系) dynamics deeply rooted in Chinese culture. What we observe here is how an entirely new online phenomenon incorporates very old normative features, removing the transaction from the frame of 'prostitution' and 'trade' to a much less clear-cut kind of transaction, a 'grey zone' in which risks of moral (and legal) condemnation can be circumvented and suggestions of love and affection can be offered without 'real' consequences. It is at this point as well that we once again witness the unique affordances of online environments. The contact between women and men happen without physical co-presence, in a 'virtual' atmosphere which offers enough similarities with offline relational practices to attract male audiences to this type of femininity performance, while also offering sufficient differences to suggest exclusion of less-desirable moral (and legal) attributions prevailing in offline encounters.

The harvest

The whole study has exemplified aspects of an online feminine beauty economy that has been highly visible and widely accepted in digital China. Thus, while I hope that my analyses have also shed light on the micro-semiotic work performed in an online context by specific subjects, I consider my main finding to be the suggestion of a larger-scale transformation in China, driven by the online culture, in ways that are simultaneously cultural, social and economic. The online culture in China shapes new affordances for social identity performances aimed at converting immaterial into material capital. It creates new cultural and identity ideals and models, new forms of social relationships relating to such ideals, and a new labor market and arena for business entrepreneurship. All of this happens largely 'below the radar', in areas of-

ten qualified as 'informal' and easily overlooked in more conventional studies of the transformations happening in China in the past decades.

The online culture offers an infrastructure in which macro-conditions are introduced and played out. The valorization of feminine beauty is inevitably affected and enabled by the comparative demographic scarcity of women. I contend that a reckoning with this social fact of highly capitalizable feminine beauty leads to a more balanced structure of China's population and economy. More specifically, on the one hand, *meinujingji* (beauty economy) generates hundreds of thousands of jobs for women, spurs domestic needs and spells a new area of growth in Chinese economy. On the other hand, the recognition of erotic capital can create a democratic market for women's 'platform skills' in constructing particular modes of 'selfie', and can help to promote the de facto equal bargaining rights between men and women. Furthermore, increased allowance of the valorization of feminine beauty will add new momentum to China's booming economy and compensates for the gender-biased labor shortage that China has recently faced.

Just as Hakim (2010, 2011) contends, the new century is a time to acknowledge the value of aesthetic and erotic capital that is bestowed on women more than on men. It comes at an age when women are fully entitled to use their embodied capital, which has been repressed and downplayed for long, to achieve their personal aspirations, both in terms of economic and social upward mobility. Importantly, one's feminine beauty does not only include a woman's physical attractions but also includes her mastery of social skills in self-presentations. In this sense, a woman is not only entitled to a strategic deployment of her physical beauty, but also to chances of social-skill acquisition, both of which hold sway over the valuation of feminine attraction. The online world, I have argued, offers new opportunities for exploiting feminine self-presentation through 'selfies'. This specific new online environment has shaped chronotopes in which deviant but widespread forms of self-presentation can occur, in which socially and economically prevalent male-female power relationships can be renegotiated and turned upside down, and in which women can draw on democratically available resources and skills so as to optimize the capitalization of their feminine beauty.

Looking forward

Apart from economic gains, feminine beauty, as a big part of erotic capital, is convertible into social and cultural capital. The whole conversion cycle between erotic capital and economic, social and cultural capital as defined by Marx (1867/1992) and Bourdieu (1986/2011), must be left for further and more specialized studies, and I hope that my work points into useful directions in that regard. I have shown that online infrastructures have generated Late-Capitalist immaterial commodity markets in China, and that such markets are driven by elaborate discursive and semiotic work, competence in which is not confined to elite groups in Chinese society but is relative-

ly widely available. The online market for immaterial ('selfie') commodities such as the ones discussed in this study may, therefore, have a profoundly different structure from more conventional commodity markets revolving around different forms of capital.

This insight, even if only tentatively formulated here, raises fundamental questions about the nature of labor, the social and political conceptions of workers, and the structure of Late-Capitalist economies producing mass inequalities along with perhaps small, but nevertheless important opportunities for more democratically structured ('grassroots') trajectories of upward social and economic mobility. We have seen, for instance, how aesthetic labor drives the market of feminine beauty. This labor is entirely immaterial and semiotic, and makes use of low-threshold resources: someone's body and style of interactional conduct; a widely available and cheap online and mobile infrastructure of devices, connections and apps; and a culture of learning and sharing based on group affinity and the wide circulation of available models and templates. Capital investment, consequently, is minimal: individual women can, with minimal investment, start an independent business in which their skills in designing and commodifying an adequate 'selfie' can be blended with entrepreneurial skills, and yield profitable outcomes.

The online care of the selfie, as documented here, may suggest a moment of large-scale transition in socio-economic terms, even if it looks ludic and even if it lacks the formal and institutional properties of 'real' economic activity. Obviously, in comparison to the mega-scale of the Chinese economy, niched new economies such as the one I documented here will inevitably be seen small and contained within small niches in Chinese society. But there are two points that need to be considered in this respect.

First, even if small, new socio-economic practices such as these ones are not insignificant, given that they enable corrections to the large structural inequalities in China. This was instantiated by Dongbei Wuxue, a young woman hailing from the Northeast of China, which is one of the economic margins of the country. The fact that the Northeast is the hub for large numbers of women such as Dongbei Wuxue, earning a living on Yizhibo, is at least suggestive of a connection between structural regional economic inequality and the use of new economic opportunities in an online environment where spatial location can be overcome technologically.

Second, the new online feminine beauty economy I have documented here forms part of a larger complex of new online social and economic activities in China, many of which undoubtedly share features of the ones analyzed here. As Dong (2017) has demonstrated, consumer groups gather online in communities centered around learning, experience sharing and discussing aspects of their consumer behavior and preferences in ways very similar to the *wanghong* ones discussed in this study. Du (2016) and Yang et al. (2014), in turn, showed how a very large and self-conscious community of *diaosi* gather online along themes reflecting their precarious socio-economic position in Chinese society, and construct new forms of socio-economic

self-organization that way. We encountered these *diaosi* in this study as well. In that sense, I believe that my specific study has just scratched the surface of a much larger and more important complex of fundamental changes in China's socio-economic profile.

Seen from that angle, my study invites a range of explorations into several different but connected topics on the online-offline changes in China, the nature of which may now be identified more precisely. Further research will have to bring conclusive arguments to the case I now close.

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SUMMARY

Capitalization of feminine beauty on Chinese social media

This study is an ethnographic investigation of Chinese women's discursive-semiotic and economic practices regarding the capitalization of feminine beauty in digital China. This feminine beauty, it argues, is designed and performed as a 'selfie', an online artefact invested with meticulous semiotic care and maintained in delicate online interactions with audiences. The study tries to disclose specific forms of interaction going between feminine beauty, wealth and morality through females' ('selfie') identity constructions in different domains of social media. It shows that these discursive-semiotic practices are themselves commodities that can be entered into a market of economic practices. They have become forms of capital. These immaterial forms of aesthetic and erotic capital, are lodged in an elaborate 'care of the self' (in Foucault's sense), by means of which women transform themselves into 'performers' (in Goffman's sense) whose 'platform skills' are demonstrated in online performances. Acquiring these platform skills, involves careful maneuvering of established and emerging norms regulating the public presentation of female beauty, and performing them involves the 'tacit acceptance of judgment' (noted by Goffman) in terms of these complex and evolving norms of adequate performance.

Large numbers of ordinary Chinese girls have embarked on a type of business in which their femininity is the central commodity. This (sometimes very lucrative) business is conducted entirely through cheap and widely available social media applications downloadable on hand-held devices and operating at very low cost. In that sense, this new form of economic practice is 'informal' – there is no formal employment involved, no on-paper transactions, no other requirements of involvement than those usually attached to 'light' or 'ludic' social media practices such as 'following' and 'liking'. But we are observing a genuine 'market' here, a competitive one in which women need to attend to features of desirable femininity at great length and in infinite detail in order to attract large numbers of male customers; while men compete for the attention of the girls and need to display a generosity which sometimes stretches the limits of their own resources. This study engages with such new, online, economic practices revolving around a designed femininity. It inquires into their structures, modes of formation and transaction, and it tries to identify its importance for understanding the social, cultural and economic dynamics of the online world in contemporary China.

The practices under investigation are online practices and can only happen the way they do because of the specific features of online environments. The women in

this study perform practices of intimacy and affection which, in offline environments, could lead to unwanted and threatening effects, ranging from strong moral stigma to being physically harmed. It is the online nature of the practices that explains their features, both at a micro-level (the specific semiotic work performed by the women and their audiences), and at a macro-level (the social and economic effects of the practices). It is the online dimension that enables women to operate in a relatively safe environment, and perform economic transactions that would be quickly condemned in an offline context. The women do not present and represent their physical, offline 'self' to their audience; they perform a carefully designed and performed artefactualized 'selfie' in which the platform resources offered by the online apps are being maximally exploited. This 'selfie' is a new form of representation of the self, typical for the online culture that has penetrated China to an amazing degree. The 'selfie', consequently is the central focus of this study. The emergence of a 'selfie' culture (and economy) is considered to be one of the most palpable sociological effects of the online-offline nexus characterizing societies such as China's today. This study aims at scratching the surface of this new and important phenomenon.

Part I, *Background and framework*, sketches the broad backgrounds and the conceptual and methodological options taken in this study. First the study is set against a number of large-scale characteristics of Chinese society: the deep inequalities characterizing both the Chinese demography (the male-female ratio) and its socio-economic stratification, and the spectacular rise of online infrastructures and highly advanced applications in China. Next, it turns to some central conceptual issues: the definition of material and immaterial capital and its conversion modes, ultimately focusing on female aesthetic and erotic capital. Finally, the methodological focus on design, digital ethnography and different forms of content analysis is explained.

Part II, *Designing feminine beauty*, offers two empirical case-studies in which we see how in an online environment, a particular model for the 'selfie' representation of feminine beauty can be designed. First, the ideal of *baifumei* is described, i.e. a model of feminine beauty strongly articulated in online China, emphasizing a particular kind of physical appearance in connection to economic success. This connection potentially exposes *baifumei* to strong moral condemnations and suspicions of prostitution. Women have to deploy highly nuanced semiotic practices in order to avoid such ambivalences. In the second chapter, we will see one way in which such practices are developed. *Baifumei*-aspiring women submit their selfies to a male online celebrity who claims to be a 'connoisseur' of female beauty, and who passes sometimes harsh public judgment on them. This practice of submission, as well as the judgments themselves, are 'ludic', however, and involve irony and a carnivalesque reversal of values, turning negative judgment into a form of benchmarking of feminine beauty.

Part III, *Selling feminine beauty*, presents two case-studies in which we see how properly designed 'selfies' of feminine beauty are brought into economic transactions with audiences, converting aesthetic and erotic (immaterial) capital into eco-

nomic (material) capital. First a widespread practice of grassroots online fashion modeling called *wanghong* is addressed. Bypassing the gatekeepers of the conventional fashion and modeling industry, we encounter individual women who operate as fashion entrepreneurs in relation to a female audience. The ideal of feminine beauty is here embodied in 'selfie' performances of body and character, triggering affinity and identification and securing commercial success. Next, we move to the world of online livestreaming female-male commercial interactions, in which individual women-entrepreneurs create an atmosphere of intimacy and affection with men, who in return offer generous 'gifts' securing income for the women. Here too, we see elaborate 'selfie' performances in which visual images and discursive moves need to be meticulously organized in view of success.

In conclusion, this study exemplifies aspects of an online feminine beauty economy that has been highly visible and widely accepted in digital China. Its analyses have shed light on the micro-semiotic work performed in an online context by specific subjects, but its main finding is the suggestion of a larger-scale transformation in China, driven by the online culture, in ways that are simultaneously cultural, social and economic. The online culture in China shapes new affordances for social identity performances aimed at converting immaterial into material capital. It creates new cultural and identity ideals and models, new forms of social relationships relating to such ideals, and a new labor market and arena for business entrepreneurship. All of this happens largely 'below the radar', in areas often qualified as 'informal' and easily overlooked in more conventional studies of the transformations happening in China in the past decades.

Tilburg Dissertations in Culture Studies

This list includes the doctoral dissertations that through their authors and/or supervisors are related to the Department of Culture Studies at the Tilburg University School of Humanities. The dissertations cover the broad field of contemporary sociocultural change in domains such as language and communication, performing arts, social and spiritual ritualization, media and politics.

- 1 Sander Bax. *De taak van de schrijver. Het poëtische debat in de Nederlandse literatuur (1968-1985)*. Supervisors: Jaap Goedegebuure and Odile Heynders, 23 May 2007.
- 2 Tamara van Schilt-Mol. *Differential item functioning en itembias in de cito-eindtoets basisonderwijs. Oorzaken van onbedoelde moeilijkheden in toetsopgaven voor leerlingen van Turkse en Marokkaanse afkomst*. Supervisors: Ton Vallen and Henny Uiterwijk, 20 June 2007.
- 3 Mustafa Güleç. *Differences in Similarities: A Comparative Study on Turkish Language Achievement and Proficiency in a Dutch Migration Context*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 25 June 2007.
- 4 Massimiliano Spotti. *Developing Identities: Identity Construction in Multicultural Primary Classrooms in The Netherlands and Flanders*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon and Guus Extra, 23 November 2007.
- 5 A. Seza Doğruöz. *Synchronic Variation and Diachronic Change in Dutch Turkish: A Corpus Based Analysis*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Ad Backus, 12 December 2007.
- 6 Daan van Bel. *Het verklaren van leesgedrag met een impliciete attitudemeting*. Supervisors: Hugo Verdaasdonk, Helma van Lierop and Mia Stokmans, 28 March 2008.
- 7 Sharda Roelsma-Somer. *De kwaliteit van Hindoescholen*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Sjaak Braster, 17 September 2008.
- 8 Yonas Mesfun Asfaha. *Literacy Acquisition in Multilingual Eritrea: A Comparative Study of Reading across Languages and Scripts*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon and Jeanne Kurvers, 4 November 2009.
- 9 Dong Jie. *The Making of Migrant Identities in Beijing: Scale, Discourse, and Diversity*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 4 November 2009.
- 10 Elma Nap-Kolhoff. *Second Language Acquisition in Early Childhood: A Longitudinal Multiple Case Study of Turkish-Dutch Children*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur, 12 May 2010.
- 11 Maria Mos. *Complex Lexical Items*. Supervisors: Antal van den Bosch, Ad Backus and Anne Vermeer, 12 May 2010.

- 12 António da Graça. *Etnische zelforganisaties in het integratieproces. Een case study in de Kaapverdische gemeenschap in Rotterdam*. Supervisor: Ruben Gowricharn, 8 October 2010.
- 13 Kasper Juffermans. *Local Linguaging: Literacy Products and Practices in Gambian Society*. Supervisors: Jan Blommaert and Sjaak Kroon, 13 October 2010.
- 14 Marja van Knippenberg. *Nederlands in het Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs. Een casestudy in de opleiding Helpende Zorg*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Ton Vallen and Jeanne Kurvers, 14 December 2010.
- 15 Coosje van der Pol. *Prentenboeken lezen als literatuur. Een structuralistische benadering van het concept 'literaire competentie' voor kleuters*. Supervisor: Helma van Lierop, 17 December 2010.
- 16 Nadia Eversteijn-Kluijtmans. *"All at Once" – Language Choice and Codeswitching by Turkish-Dutch Teenagers*. Supervisors: Guus Extra and Ad Backus, 14 January 2011.
- 17 Mohammadi Laghzaoui. *Emergent Academic Language at Home and at School. A Longitudinal Study of 3- to 6-Year-Old Moroccan Berber Children in the Netherlands*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Ton Vallen, Abderrahman El Aissati and Jeanne Kurvers, 9 September 2011.
- 18 Sinan Çankaya. *Buiten veiliger dan binnen: in- en uitsluiting van etnische minderheden binnen de politieorganisatie*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Frank Bovenkerk, 24 October 2011.
- 19 Femke Nijland. *Mirroring Interaction. An Exploratory Study into Student Interaction in Independent Working*. Supervisors: Sjaak Kroon, Sanneke Bolhuis, Piet-Hein van de Ven and Olav Severijnen, 20 December 2011.
- 20 Youssef Boutachekourt. *Exploring Cultural Diversity. Concurrentievoordelen uit multiculturele strategieën*. Supervisors: Ruben Gowricharn and Slawek Magala, 14 March 2012.
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