What women want: an analysis of cosmetic surgery and social achievements in contemporary urban China

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vorgelegt von Valeria Lotti

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1. Gutachter/in: Prof. Dr. Klaus Mühlhahn

2. Gutachter/in: Prof. Dr. Beate Binder

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Table of contents

List of figures 6

Note to the reader 7

Chapter 1. Introduction 8

1.1 The beauty economy 9

1.2 Cosmetic surgery and *weizheng* 12

1.3 The meaning of being beautiful 15

1.4 Objectives and themes of this dissertation 19

1.4.1 Research questions 22

1.5 Chapter overview 23

Chapter 2. Literature review and theoretical framework 28

2.1 The body as a mirror of society 28

2.2 Chasing beauty between empowerment and oppression 31

2.3 Beautification in China and East Asia 34

2.4 Women's roles and youth's aspirations in contemporary China 38

2.5 Theoretical approach 42

Chapter 3. Methodology 48

3.1 Adopting an anthropological perspective 48

3.2 Site selection 52

3.3 Data collection 55

3.3.1 In-depth interviews 57

3.3.2 Questionnaire 59

3.3.3 Observation 60

3.4 Data analysis 61

Chapter 4. The individualization of desire: women's beauty quest amid post-socialist challenges 65

4.1 The ideal woman from the Celestial Empire to the People's Republic 66

4.1.1 The imperial age 66

4.1.2 The republic 73

4.1.3 The communist times 76

4.2 The reform era and the rise of the individual 79

4.3 New women, same challenges? 87

4.3.1 Rushing to marry or being leftover 88

4.3.2 The perception of gender inequality 92

4.4 Conclusion: the individualization of desire 98

Chapter 5. The face of success: interpreting women's beauty ideals 101

5.1 High noses, big eyes, and the myth of westernization 101

5.1.1 The foreign woman as the modern consumer 105

5.2 A desire for modernity 109

5.3 A look at the modern neighbors: South Korean beauty and Japanese charm 114

5.4 Pretty, rich and famous: wanting the beauty of the wealthy 117

5.5 Conclusion: the face of success 125

Chapter 6. The negotiation of naturalness: undergoing and categorizing *weizheng* 129

6.1 A question of face: cosmetic surgery priorities 131

6.2 Public, private, and "homey": stories of *weizheng* 137

6.3 Self-improvement and aesthetic medicine: the medicalization of beauty 142

6.4 Only advanced treatments: the de-medicalization of *weizheng* 150

6.5 Conclusion: the negotiation of naturalness 156

Chapter 7. Discussion and conclusion 160

7.1 Findings and arguments 161

7.1.1 The individualization of society has created the conditions for women to pursue beautification 161

7.1.2 The ideal beauty reflects the obsession with success 162

7.1.3 *Weizheng* practices call for a negotiation of naturalness in beautification 165

7.2 Limitations of this study 167

7.3 Areas for future research 169

7.4 Conclusion: urban women's beautification among individualization, success and naturalness 170

Bibliography 173

Acknowledgments 203

Summary 204

Kurzfassung 205

List of publications 207

List of figures

Figure 1. The Shanghai Marriage Market 18

Figure 2. Bus stop poster of Yestar cosmetic clinic 20

Figure 3. Bus stop poster of Mylike cosmetic clinic 20

Figure 4. The Yangtze River Delta 53

Figure 5. Court Lady 69

Figure 6. Courtiers Playing Backgammon 70

Figure 7. Zhenfei, consort of emperor Guangxu 72

Figure 8. Woman in a Canoe 74

Figure 9. The Movie Actress Chen Yunshang 75

Figure 10. Revolutionary poster "Study the battle spirit of the Red Army during the Long March, conquer nature, build up our nation" 77

Figure 11. Revolutionary poster "Strive for abundant harvest, amass grain" 78

Figure 12. Actress Angelababy on the cover of the magazine Cosmopolitan 81

Figure 13. Actress Fan Bingbing on the cover of the magazine Harper's Bazaar 82

Figure 14. Advertisement of a whitening powder 83

Figure 15. How GII is calculated 94

Figure 16. Advertising posters of Fan Beauty Secret 118

Figure 17. Actress Dilraba Dilmurat as the face of cosmetic company Colorkey 119

Figure 18. Pre- and post-blepharoplasty and epicanthoplasty 132

Figure 19. Pre- and post- rhinoplasty and genioplasty 134

Figure 20. The bottom half of Luo's face 135

Note to the reader

Chinese proper names follow a different order than Western names: first comes the family name, then the given name. The same rule applies to Japanese and Korean names. This rule has been respected in this thesis, therefore Chinese, Japanese and Korean names are mentioned in this fashion. Bear this in mind before looking them up in the bibliography. The pseudonyms assigned to the interviewees are, naturally, an exception, since they are not made of both family and given names but simply of one nickname.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2012, long before I even considered researching beauty, I was working in a translation company in Qingdao, Shandong, where I was the only Westerner. One sunny spring day, on our way to the canteen, my colleague looked at my arms in awe and said: “Your skin is so white and beautiful! Keep it like this, don't let it get darker”. I laughed at the idea of staying pale, because sun bathing was exactly what I was waiting for after a long winter. When I explained that to my colleague, she did not understand why a person who had the chance of having a fair skin would want to let it tan. And I, on the other hand, did not understand why tanned skin was to be avoided. We stood on two different positions, culturally constructed in the societies in which we had grown up. From that day I started to observe the women around me more carefully. In the street, many carried umbrellas to shield themselves from the strong daylight; in shops, they selected skin whitening lotions and creams; on the beach, they wore hats and clothes that would not expose their skin to direct sunlight. I found these habits quite odd, but at the same time intriguing. This old memory came back to me years later, when I was researching cosmetic surgery in China. I showed my girlfriends the picture I had taken with one of my interviewees and obtained two opposite reactions. One of them, a Chinese, said in admiration “Wow, she is so pretty!” while the other two, a German and a Russian, exclaimed: “What’s wrong with her face?” It was October 2018 and I was in Hangzhou on my second research stay in the field. The picture in object was a selfie of Luo and me, taken after our first meeting in a tea house: I was smiling next to a young lady with a pale thin oval face, a pointed chin, a straight high-bridged nose, and large double-lidded eyes. Luo’s appearance embodied quite well the mainstream beauty ideals chased by women in urban China. She did indeed chase these ideals, making use of several beautification treatments, including a nose job and a double-eyelid surgery. She was aiming to get as close as possible to what she believed to be the perfect face. This perfect face was what delighted my Chinese friend and at the same time puzzled my other two friends, who were not familiar with the standards of beauty in China. To them, Luo looked like a plastic doll, but to my Chinese friend she simply looked beautiful. Their contrasting

reactions reminded me of my colleague's and my contrasting views on skin tone years earlier. These cultural contrasts make beauty and beautification, in my opinion, such interesting research topics in the social sciences. Social science research, after all, aims at helping us understand why we act as we do, and my goal is to understand why women in China undergo certain types of beautification. I believe that understanding this may help us to better comprehend the characteristics of contemporary Chinese urban society: the habits and the social constraints of its (female) citizens and, most importantly, their desires.

1.1 The beauty economy

Since the start of the reform period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, China has undergone massive transformations that have led it to become the economic superpower that it is nowadays. These changes have had a great impact on the everyday life of its citizens, because they involved several industries and several aspects of China's booming economy. One aspect that registered an impressive growth was the "beauty economy", in Mandarin *meinü jingji* (美女经济), which literally means "the economy of the beautiful woman". This neologism, appeared in the early 2000s, is rather ubiquitous and has a very broad meaning that links economy to gender and popular culture (Xu and Feiner 2007). The beauty economy does not include only the beauty sector, but also all the products and events related to female beauty: it ranges, then, from the cosmetics sale to dieting programs and aesthetic surgery, and also to the organization of beauty pageants and of luxurious commercial events. Drawing on other scholars such as Hanser (2005, 2008) and Otis (2012), Osburg (2013: 144) sees the beauty economy as "a marketplace in which young, attractive women are used to promote commercial products and services". In fact, the beauty economy refers to all sort of businesses that promote female beauty or that use female beauty to attract customers: even a car sale show featuring pretty girls as hostesses belongs to the beauty economy. This stems from a great commercial exploitation of female beauty in line with the neoliberal economic policies of the reform era (Xu and Feiner 2007). This commercial exploitation of the image of young pretty women contributes to feminize the process of consumption, because it educates women to be "consuming and desiring individuals"; however, the use of these sexualized female images for commercial purposes also implies that women "are denied their personhood by being deployed as vehicles for sale" (Schein 2001a: 302).

Chinese youth, especially girls, have showed an increasing interest in bodily appearance through internet challenges and trends, which has quickly caught media attention. In March 2016 the so called "A4 waist challenge" was reported by international newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Telegraph*. The challenge started on *Weibo*[1], where young women had been posting pictures of themselves covering vertically their waist with an A4 paper sheet to show that the width of their waist corresponded to the width of the A4 sheet – only 21 centimeters (Boult 2016; Tatlow 2016). Several other beauty challenges have filled the Chinese social networks. For instance, with the "belly button challenge" girls tried reaching their belly button by bending their arm behind their back; with the "iPhone 6 knee challenge" girls put an iPhone 6 horizontally on their knees so to cover both knees (Chen 2015; Qin 2016). More recently, the "manga waist challenge" exploded on *Weibo*: it consists in laying with the upper part of one's body on the floor and the lower part on a chair, arching considerably the waist and the back, in an imitation of manga female characters (Wang L. 2021a).

The media coverage of such challenges is linked to the attention that the media have been giving in the last decade to cosmetic surgery consumption in China. The fact that more and more women were pursuing the ideal look through surgical methods has been often regarded as a slightly alarming phenomenon, but at the same time the growth of the sector has been observed in amazement (Eyles 2012; Lynch 2014; Juan 2015; Zheng 2017; Zhou 2017). Cosmetic surgery has become increasingly popular and accessible since China's first publicly known artificial beauty Hao Lulu made headlines in 2003 (Luo 2012). In 2004 China hosted its first Miss Plastic Surgery Pageant in Beijing; the event was sponsored by both private and public cosmetic surgery hospitals (Yang J. 2011). More recent media articles discussed and critiqued China's cosmetic surgery market, which seems to be on its way to become the largest in the world (SCMP 2019; Wu 2020). The media also reported a large use of cosmetic surgery apps and platforms, such as Gengmei and SoYoung, which in 2021 had respectively 36 million and 8.4 million users: in addition to providing reviews of surgeons and clinics and testimonies of patients, they can analyze one's face and suggest fitting aesthetic treatments, and even give access to micro loans (Zaugg 2020; Yipp 2021; Liu Z. 2019; Liu Z. 2020). In the last few years, both the press and the medical specialists have expressed concern about illegal beautification,

[1] *Weibo* (the full name is *Sina Weibo*, *xinlang weibo* 新浪微博 in Mandarin) is a microblogging website and one of the biggest social media platforms in China. Its main features are similar to those of Twitter and some of its newest features resemble those of Instagram.

as well as reported patients' complaints about badly performed surgeries (Li et al. 2017; Zhang 2017; Luo 2018; Xinhua 2019; Xinhua 2021; Wang L. 2021b). According to the national press agency Xinhua, the government has been working on an evaluation system to ban illegal plastic surgeons, following a massive crackdown on illegal beauty surgery in 2017 (Xinhua 2019). It is indeed a difficult task to give comprehensive and precise numbers about the quantity of the cosmetic procedures performed annually. The same can be said for the number of cosmetic clinics in China. This is partly due to the large amount of illegal beauty businesses. The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) publishes global statistics every year, after surveying plastic surgeons in many countries. China does not appear in every statistics, and the reason of its absence is usually the lack of sufficient data to make reliable statistics.[2] From 2011 to 2019, China featured in the following categories: it consistently ranked third from 2011 to 2019 (with the exception of 2012, when ISAPS did not conduct its global study) for estimated number of plastic surgeons after the United States and Brazil (ISAPS 2011 to 2019); and in 2011 it ranked third for total number of procedures and first for number of rhinoplasty procedures (ISAPS 2011). In 2017, SoYoung reported that 16.29 million cosmetic procedures had been undergone by 14 million people, which accounted for about 41 per cent of the global total; that 90 per cent of those consumers were women; and that a striking 96 per cent of treatments had been undergone by people under 35, revealing a consumer pool considerably younger than in other countries (SoYoung 2017; Liu Z. 2019). In addition, a report by the private consultancy iResearch estimated that in 2019 China had more than 80,000 illegal clinics and only 13,000 lawful companies (Wang L. 2021b). Besides undergoing cosmetic procedures in China, those who can afford it fly to Seoul, South Korea, to have the nip and tuck done by famous surgeons, since Korea is a hotspot of aesthetic surgery in Asia (Stevenson 2014). Korea has invested considerably on advertising itself as one of the top destinations for cosmetic tourism (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012). It ranked first globally for rhinoplasty in 2015; moreover, it ranked third for total face and head procedures in 2014 and 2015, and third for total procedures in 2015 (ISAPS 2014, 2015). Japan, too, has a quite flourishing cosmetic surgery sector that is well known to the Chinese public. Japan ranked second for total non-surgical procedures and third for total procedures in 2014, and then in 2016 and 2019 it ranked

[2] This piece of information was shared by an ISAPS representative in our email correspondence. She explained that their surveys in China do not always receive enough responses, whereas other countries show a more consistent participation.

again third for total procedures (ISAPS 2014, 2016, 2019). The purpose of these numbers and charts is only to give an idea of the size of the beauty surgery sector of China, as well as of those of South Korea and Japan, which are interrelated. By no means should they be considered precise and be relied on for further calculations. This dissertation does not aim to analyze a phenomenon by its numbers; all numbers do is help frame the context of the phenomenon. Without significant popular interest and involvement, the phenomenon of beautification would not be a phenomenon at all, but merely a trend restricted to a small group of people. Therefore, the beauty economy and in particular the cosmetic surgery sector would not have expanded as they have. As a consequence, this topic would hardly be significant on a sociological level.

1.2 Cosmetic surgery and *weizheng*

There is a large variety of beautifying procedures requested and performed on the Chinese cosmetic surgery market. Their aim is to modify the body, and especially the face, to get closer to the ideal look: thin figure, pale skin complexion, oval face, pointed chin, straight high-bridged nose and large double-lidded eyes. This ideal look is embodied by celebrities and portrayed in advertising campaigns all over the country. Even without precise statistical data, it is still rather simple to identify popular treatments, because they are under the spotlight of advertising campaigns and internet trends. Skin smoothening and purifying treatments are very widespread and advertised, because they aim at obtaining a flawless fair skin complexion, which is highly praised. Blepharoplasty, or more specifically Asian blepharoplasty, is also widely performed and is a common topic of discussion. It is usually called double-eyelid surgery and consists in creating a fold in the upper eyelid (the supratarsal crease) which makes the lid fall differently on the ocular bulb: the result is that the eye looks wider. This surgery is very popular because about half of East Asians lack a supratarsal crease or only have a partial presence of a fold, resulting in their eyes looking less deep and sometimes only partially open (Chen W. 2006; Kikkawa and Kim 1997; Lam 2014; Li and Ma 2008; Liu et al. 2017). Rhinoplasty, in other words a nose job, is another popular procedure. The peculiarity of rhinoplasty in East Asia is that it usually aims at nose augmentation, because East Asian noses tend to have a low tip, flat and thick nasal bones, and thick skin with abundant subcutaneous soft tissue (Jang and Alfanta 2014). These characteristics contrast with the ideal high-bridged nose; therefore, the shape of the nose can be modified surgically with an addition of septal cartilage (Kim and Han 2015). In order to slim down one’s face and make it more oval, a

popular treatment is the injection of neuromodulators (Xie et al. 2014). A surgical procedure is also available, namely malar and zygoma reduction, which consists in cutting and displacing part of the cheek and jaw bones, usually through intraoral and preauricolar incision (Kang 2016; Lee et al. 2017). However, this surgery is rather invasive, more than the above-mentioned blepharoplasty and rhinoplasty, and surely much more than injections, which are in fact not surgeries per se.

Once in a while, some "crazy" surgeries are reported on the media. The most recent are those aiming at slimming the calf, lengthening the legs, creating pointy elf-like ears, and elevating the skull (Tan 2021; Yipp 2021; Zhang and Wang 2021). These surgeries, however, do not belong to the most performed treatments, but instead represent temporary trends and therefore will not be taken into account in this research, though they certainly contribute to create a rather variegated cosmetic surgery sector in China.

One important thing to note here is that many among the most advertised and performed treatments concern the face. Certainly, the face is one of the first body parts that we look at when we meet someone and the one that we probably remember better when we try to identify people. I find, however, that such a particular attention to the face characterizes the cosmetic surgery sector of East Asia much more than that of other areas of the world. For instance, the United States and Brazil, which are the two largest plastic surgery markets globally, usually register a very high demand for procedures such as breast augmentation, liposuction and buttocks remodeling, in addition to face procedures (Edmonds 2010, 2013; ISAPS 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). This does not mean that East Asians only seek face procedures and do not request breast enlargements or liposuction. I am not talking merely about numbers, but about the popular interest expressed through the entertainment industry and via many advertising campaigns. This means, instead, that face procedures are in the spotlight in East Asia, because the beauty ideals that people aspire to in different areas of the world focus on different body parts, and this has all to do with their cultural and social environment. As mentioned earlier, beauty is culturally constructed: so are beauty ideals. We should never forget it. As noted by Miller (2006) and Cho (2012), Darwin already observed in 1895 that people around the world had different concepts of human beauty based on local criteria. Some cross-cultural studies nevertheless found some common criteria in assessing face attractiveness among different cultures, such as symmetry, which make us wonder whether beauty has a universal standard after all (Cunningham et al.1995; Langlois et al. 2000; Chen et al. 2014; Mu

2013). Even Chinese magazines describe beauty both as a feeling, thus subjective, and also as revolving around some objective criteria like the golden ratio (Zhou and Qi 2015). However, the rules of the body, intended as "the expectations for bodily presentation and displays, including displays of emotion" are for the most part the result of "historical and cultural norms of behavior for categories of identity including sex, age, race, ethnicity, and class" (Otis 2012: 14).

A second important remark has to do with the nature of these treatments. Some of these procedures are not fully surgical, and this determines their degree of invasiveness; or, to be more precise, it determines how their invasiveness is perceived. There are no universal criteria, however, that define a cosmetic procedure as "big" or "small". A big procedure could be either more invasive or concerning a larger body part, and a small procedure could be either less invasive or concerning a smaller body part. This classification is heavily dependent on personal judgment, in a way that makes the boundary between the medical and non-medical realm particularly blurred (Lotti 2020). Therefore, I identify *weizheng* (short form of *weizhengxing* 微整形) as the category of beautification peculiar to the Chinese cosmetic surgery sector. It is translatable as "micro-surgery" or "micro-treatment", but since neither of the two translations is completely satisfactory, I prefer to use its original name. This category constitutes the essence of contemporary beautification in China. Before my fieldwork, I treated cosmetic surgery as a whole. But, then, I discovered that it should not be treated as a whole, because people do not perceive it as such in the Chinese context. Some medical articles have dealt with this new category of beautification and attempted to give it a definition that differs from that of cosmetic surgery. For instance, Li et al. (2017: 328) defined *weizhengxing* as "guided by medical aesthetics theory, operating with medications, medical equipment and small-wound fine surgeries in order to restore and remodel the figure and face of the regular human body" (translation mine). Few lines above, they defined cosmetic surgery as "making use of surgery or other medical methods in order to reconstruct the beauty of the figure and face of the regular human body" (translation mine). Ma et al. (2011: 1810) also gave the same definition of cosmetic surgery, which appears to be a standardized one in the Chinese aesthetic medical literature. The differences between the definitions of the two categories are not that clear: we notice only a greater focus on the types of surgeries employed in *weizheng*, described as "small-wound fine surgeries", and a direct mention of beauty as the aim of cosmetic surgery. It seems, therefore, that the only quantifiable difference is that *weizheng* involves small surgeries. However, because of the lack of universal criteria that determine whether a surgery is big or

small, the whole matter becomes rather intricate and open to interpretations. The treatments that constitute the focus of this study (i.e. those altering the eyelids, the nose and other face traits according to the current beauty ideals) are usually (though not always) regarded as part of *weizheng*. Therefore, these treatments and their special category will be the focus of this dissertation.

1.3 The meaning of being beautiful

An essential step in the study of beautification practices is to consider what being pretty actually means. I believe that when debating beauty in a given society we ought to analyze the lexicon that is used in that society to refer to beauty, because understanding the use of a specific lexicon enables us to better study the topic. I agree with Whitefield-Madrano (2016) that, in the case of beauty, the lack of a formal classification system forces us to shape the meanings of the words that we use to describe different levels of beauty. This way, the words we use reflect our own awareness of the effect that beauty has on ourselves and on our life. If some word is not precise enough to express the exact level of beauty that we perceive, we create a brand new one or use an already existing one to which we attach a new meaning. In Mandarin, several words are commonly employed to describe female beauty, as I referred to in a previous publication (Lotti 2018). Terms such as *haokan* (好看), *piaoliang* (漂亮), and *meili* (美丽) all mean "beautiful", but carry slight differences. *Piaoliang* and *haokan* usually refer to outer beauty ("good looking, attractive, pretty"), while *meili* (or just *mei*) is beautiful in a more comprehensive way, including also beauty of character and manners. In addition, *meili* may evoke a more mature and conscious beauty. On the contrary, *ke'ai* (可爱) points out cuteness and tenderness (pretty in the sense of "cute, adorable"). It comes from the Japanese *kawaii* and is generally associated with younger and innocent beauty. Moreover, *ke'ai* is associated with a specific behavior of young women who talk to their boyfriends in high-pitched voices and behave in a childish manner: in this sense, *ke'ai* encapsulates ideal feminine attributes such as playfulness and docility (Chuang 2005). On a deeper level, *shanliang* (善良) is used to describe a woman who is very kindhearted and, because of that, beautiful. It is often translated into English as just "kindhearted", but in my opinion this translation fails to include all the shades of its meaning. Grace, one of my interviewees, gave me as an example the case of a woman that made the local Zhejiang newspaper headlines few years ago because she heroically saved a child: Grace

remembered that the woman was described as being *shanliang* because of her highly courageous act. This description had nothing to do with her looks, instead it referred to the beauty of her heart: her noble gesture revealed her inner beauty. In the Confucian perspective, it is moral virtue that makes a woman ideal. In this sense, moral virtue is a sort of inner beauty, a quality that comes from within. Since the social purpose of a woman according to Confucian values is to be a wife, bear children and manage the housework, her moral virtue is highly praised (Ip 2003; Cho 2012; Zemanek 2014). In fact, many of my respondents portrayed the ideal beautiful woman as possessing both outer beauty (*waizaimei* 外在美) and inner beauty (*neizaimei* 内在美). They often touched upon the inner/outer beauty debate: kindhearted and well-mannered women possess the inner beauty that makes them truly beautiful, because a pretty appearance without a kind heart is not enough to be real beauty. The popularity of female images described with adjectives like soft, considerate, and compliant shows norms of femininity that underline those feminine characteristics conventionally regarded as appropriate for a good wife – a sweet temperament and a nice appearance that make her unthreatening to men (Otis 2012; Xie 2021). Does this mean that inner beauty is paramount? Looking at how big the cosmetic industry has become and how deeply women care for their looks, it is hard to believe that inner beauty wins over outer beauty in contemporary Chinese society, where instead women strive to have it all and become *Miss Perfect* (Dippner 2016). My interviewees felt that appearance had become crucial in women's everyday life, even though sometimes they are reluctant to acknowledge it. Fen, who worked as a receptionist in a private cosmetic clinic in Hangzhou, expressed conviction that men first look at a woman's appearance. She said: “My boyfriend was very honest and told me that the first thing he looks at in a prospective girlfriend is whether she is pretty (*piaoliang*). If she is, then he considers if she has a good character, because he doesn't want a girl with a nasty character. But if she's not pretty, no chance”. Some popular Mandarin expressions show the importance of appearances: we live in a *waimao xiehui* (外卖协会), that is to say a society of appearance, where we are used to *yimao quren* (以貌取人), that is to say choose people according to their appearance, and where *kaolian chifan* (靠脸吃饭), a pretty face makes you earn a living.

There is no denying that the transition from a socialist society to a market-oriented society has contributed to increase attention to external appearance, because it has increased competition in the job market. Without state-allocated occupations, people need to compete for work positions. Some economic studies all over the world demonstrate that attractive people may

have a certain edge in the job market and more chances for professional success in life (Hamermesh 2011; López Bóo et al. 2013; Anyzova and Mateju 2018; Busetta 2021). This is also valid in China (Deng et al. 2020; Maurer-Fazio and Lei 2015; Fan et al. 2018). Otis (2012) describes the recruitment process in a luxury hotel in Beijing, pointing out that the women candidates are judged on how close they come to a feminine ideal that is based both on objective traits (e.g. height) and on subjective ones, such as looking too sexually available, which is interpreted as a sign of questionable morality. In this case it would seem that external and inner features interplay, but in reality the inner features are being evaluated according to external appearance: how can we assess a woman's sexual availability by only looking at her? Appearance-based competition does not only happen on the job market, but also on the marriage market. Women in China bear quite a strong social and familial pressure to get married before a certain age, usually by the time they turn thirty. If they fail, they risk becoming "leftover women" (*shengnü* 剩女), a label signaling that they are no longer fresh and thus nobody wants them anymore, just like leftover food. Leta Hong Fincher (2014) describes and discusses accurately this social phenomenon, which concerns mostly highly-educated urban women, who after spending their twenties focusing on their studies and their careers find themselves at thirty in a very difficult dating situation. In such critical circumstances, worried parents may take the matter into their own hands and meet with similarly preoccupied parents to do a little matchmaking (Zhang and Sun 2014). I went personally to observe one of these matchmaking places, the so-called "Shanghai marriage market": every weekend, parents gather in Renmin Guangchang, a square in central Shanghai, to find a suitable spouse for their adult sons and daughters (Figure 1). Beauty, among other characteristics, may be an important feature for daughters on the market. Being more attractive than other competitors may help a woman marry earlier, or in case she already passed the leftover threshold, it can still help her have an advantage over other women in the same condition. The overall social competition among women manifests also through comparisons among one's social circle. To put it in the words of Jin, a Hangzhou beautician: "Women feel competitive about beauty, so they often choose female friends who are less attractive (*piaoliang*) than them or undergo cosmetic surgery in order to become prettier than some other friends". It is not surprising, then, that medical beautification has become widespread in a society that, although still preaching morality and inner beauty, values external appearance in the public as well as in the private sphere. A survey conducted in three Chinese universities, including Shanghai Jiaotong University, revealed that physical appearance was very important to students, although they did not have good knowledge of cosmetic surgery practices (Zou 2012).

Figure 1. The Shanghai Marriage Market. Photo taken by the author in March 2017.

Lastly, from a psychological perspective, a certain association of beautiful with good exists worldwide. As suggested by evolutionary psychology, beauty delineated the healthy from the diseased, which was useful in selecting a sexual partner for procreation (C. Rosen 2004). Western psychology has assiduously explored the perception of body and face attractiveness: some studies have demonstrated that attractive people are considered to have better personalities and better prospects in life (Dion et al. 1972; Langlois et al. 2000; Little et al. 2006; Little et al. 2011; Penton-Voak 2011). Idioms too, which often picture simple truths, show the connection between beautiful and good. A very popular Mandarin idiom reads: *aimei zhixin, renjie you zhi* (爱美之心人皆有之). It is literally translatable as "everyone has a heart that loves beauty". A common translation is "everybody loves beauty" and simply shows that in the collective imagery what (and who) is beautiful is obviously to be loved. In this sense, it is possible to argue that women desire to be beautiful in order to be loved, which may lead to them obtaining some advantages. As Virginia Blum (2003: 17) puts it: "To be attractive for women means they get what they want. But what is it that women truly want – beauty or its putative social rewards?"

1.4 Objectives and themes of this dissertation

The final goal of this dissertation is to advance thinking and understanding of the significance of beautification practices in urban China. This topic has been an object of observation, research, and considerable speculation in the last two decades. Every new study may bring about new perspectives, thoughts and questions that will encourage discussion and expand knowledge. This study places emphasis on a particular category, *weizheng* or micro cosmetic surgery, and analyzes it as the distinctive form of medical beautification in urban China. In addition, this thesis also aims to partially correct a certain misconception about the matter, perhaps the most widespread of all, that is the belief that Chinese women undergo cosmetic surgery in order to look like Western women. This is a shallow and simplistic way of explaining Chinese beauty trends, which instead are the result of more complex cultural interactions.

This research analyzes Chinese society and its individuals from the perspective of beautification, because beauty is culturally constructed and is indeed a significant aspect of society: I believe that the way beauty is represented, promoted and individualized can help us understand the development of a given society. For the individual, physical beauty may be a means of portraying oneself, one's social circle and one's social status (Desjeux and Yang 2020). Hangzhou and Shanghai are wealthy and developed cities that show a keen attention to aesthetic treatments, host many cosmetic surgery clinics and beauty parlors, and overall display very well the beauty trends that are in vogue nowadays in urban China. For instance, bus stops in central Hangzhou in 2017 were often covered by advertising posters of cosmetic surgery clinics: Figure 2 shows the advertisement of a Korean-inspired clinic; Figure 3 shows the advertisement of a chain of cosmetic clinics. The popularity of beautification in this area makes it an appropriate field for this type of research.

Figure 2. Bus stop advertising of an aesthetic beautification clinic called "Yestar": from the image (the traditional Korean dress "hanbok") and the slogan ("I come from Korea"), one may deduce that it promotes Korean-style cosmetic surgery. Photo taken by the author in 2017 in Hangzhou.

Figure 3. Bus stop advertising of a chain of aesthetic beautification clinics called "My like". Photo taken by the author in 2017 in Hangzhou.

This research focuses specifically on female beauty for two main reasons. Firstly, women are by far the principal consumers of beautification practices in China. This does not mean that men do not play any role in the beauty market, but it is rather marginal, although it has increased

in the past few years. The marginality of male consumers is mostly due to a deep gender bias regarding beauty, which relates to widespread conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity. A man is generally valued for his skill to make money and to articulate emotions, while a woman is appraised for sweet temperament and beauty (Yan Y. 2002, 2003; Hershatter 2007). Evaluating women for their appearance encourages them to want to become prettier. Since men tend to be evaluated more for their earnings than for their appearance, they consequently put less emphasis on beautification. Secondly, the female body has been a ground for expressing social change throughout history. As beautifully put by Hesse-Biber et al. (2004: 49): "The female body is a cultural artefact defined and redefined over time in response to broad cultural and historical transformations". Therefore, observing and analyzing the beauty ideals that apply to female bodies and the beautification practices that women pursue is a way of observing and analyzing the characteristics of the society in which these women live. In the Chinese case in particular, women's body adornment has drawn the attention of the CCP since its foundation, as mentioned by Hershatter (2007).

Women desire to improve their look following a desire to improve their life. It is important here to define what improving means for these women: what are the standards of a "good life" for them? This can be a very subjective understanding that changes from person to person, according to their family and cultural background, their life experiences, their religious believes, etc. However, I think it is possible to sketch a more or less general standard of what kind of improvements women try to achieve in the area in analysis. It seems that in the big cities of the rich coastal provinces, women intend life improvement as a bettering of their career and/or romantic relationships, often resulting in a wealthier future. This is a very practical approach, and follows the trend of economic growth that China has been pursuing for the past four decades. A comfortable life is seen as a goal: why not try to do one's best to get it? Therefore, the society analyzed in this research is de facto a society of desire, where beauty is a form of capital. Anagnost (2013: 2) wrote: "*Life-making* here refers to investments in the self to ensure one's forward career progression as embodied human capital". I would add that the desired progression does not concern only one's career, but one's life in general. She also points out, however, that the promise of self-fulfillment comes with high costs related to the uncertainty of the individual's position in this society (Anagnost 2013). Therefore, we must not forget that individual agency is limited by societal constraints, but however not oppressed, because the disciplinary power that regulates bodies is constructive and productive (Foucault 1976, 1980). This means, in our case, that power contributes to develop the desires that act in women's pursuit

of beauty. And it also highlights the ambivalence of beauty, which is at the same time a means of control and of liberation of women, just as much as beautification practices are both tying women to gender norms and empowering them (Desjeux and Yang 2020; Miller 2006). To a certain extent, the norms that regulate bodies may also be the cultural conventions that guide social behavior and contribute to form individual habits and dispositions (the *habitus* theorized by Bourdieu 1979). These habits and dispositions are connected to social class and may be shown on the body, hence physical appearance becomes crucial. I argue that the beauty that Chinese women pursue represents a certain version of the woman, namely the modern urban woman of Chinese highly developed areas such as the Yangtze River Delta. The only beauty that fits this modern Chinese woman seems to be a certain type of *natural* beauty, that she tries to obtain not only in the results but also by means of cosmetic techniques that are themselves considered somewhat natural.

1.4.1 Research questions

After discussing the setting of this study, a simple straightforward research question arises: Why do women in highly urbanized Eastern China undergo cosmetic surgery?

In order to provide a detailed and well-constructed answer to this fundamental research question, this dissertation aims to answer three sub-questions.

1. What social factors have enabled women to pursue beautification?
2. What does the current ideal beauty symbolize?
3. What are the main characteristics and the significance of *weizheng* (micro cosmetic surgery)?

These sub-questions look at *what* in order to finally compose a *why*, in an attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon. I am aware that why questions are not easy to answer because they can be very complex, but I cannot ignore that the curiosity to know why guided my research from the start. Therefore, I find that breaking down the big question into smaller sub-questions is a suitable approach, since the sub-questions lead to core aspects that together compose the ultimate argument of this thesis. These aspects are individualization,

success and naturalness: each of them highlights a feature of women's pursuit of beauty in urban China.

The consumption of cosmetic surgery and the interpretation of beauty ideals can be examined from several different points of view: marketing, economics, social and political change, among others. I chose to analyze it from a perspective that is less related to the macro-conditions under which cosmetic surgery has developed and the macro-effects that its flourishing continues to cause, and more connected to the women's interpretation of beautification. This perspective involves an anthropological and ethnographic approach, because it seemed to me the most suitable to the research interest that I had and to the way I intended to investigate it.

1.5 Chapter overview

This dissertation is composed of seven chapters. The initial three chapters respectively consist of an introduction, a literature review and theoretical framework, and an explanation of the methodological approach. The following three chapters analyze the data collected during fieldwork and engage it in the formulation and discussion of arguments. Each of them answers one sub-question and highlights one core feature of women's pursuit of beauty. The conclusive chapter considers the limitations of this study and provides suggestions for future research.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The introduction presents the setting and the main themes of this research. The Chinese cosmetic sector is introduced together with the beauty economy. The chapter proceeds to introduce the current female beauty ideals of thin figure, pale skin complexion, oval face, pointed chin, straight high-bridged nose and large double-lidded eyes. Then, it gives an account of popular treatments and surgeries, such as face-slimming injections, skin-lightening treatments, blepharoplasty and rhinoplasty, which aim to reach the ideal beauty, highlighting the category of *weizheng* (“micro surgery” or “micro treatment”) as the principal feature of the cosmetic surgery sector in China. The chapter also discusses the most common beauty lexicon and the cultural association of beauty with goodness. It moves on to describe the objectives and focuses of this dissertation and its contribution in advancing the understanding of Chinese

contemporary society. The main research question “Why do women in highly urbanized Eastern China undergo cosmetic surgery?” and its three sub-questions are introduced. Finally, the content of each chapter is summarized.

Chapter 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

This chapter covers the literature related to the topic of female cosmetic surgery in China and then explores the theoretical approach that frames this dissertation. The first section incorporates seminal works dealing with the topic of the body as an object of social science research, such as those by Bryan Turner (1984) and Anthony Synnott (1993). The second part reviews the research, mostly feminist, on the pursuit of beauty through cosmetic surgery between empowerment and subjugation; notable studies include those by Kathy Davis (1995, 2003), Debra Gimlin (2002, 2012), and Alexander Edmonds (2010, 2013). The third part covers the existing research on beautification practices and the beauty industry of China in particular and East Asia in general, and includes works by Susan Brownell (1995, 2001, 2005), Wen Hua (2009, 2013), and Gary Xu and Susan Feiner (2007) among others. Finally, the fourth section of the literature review explores the role of women and the aspirations of youth in contemporary China, and it considers studies by Elizabeth Croll (1995), Gail Hershatter (2007) and Leta Hong Fincher (2014) among others. The last part of this chapter moves on to discussing the theoretical framework that sustains this dissertation, guided from the main themes that emerged from the examination of the relevant literature. Within a sociological institutional approach (Hall and Taylor 1996), Bourdieu’s (1977, 1979) concept of habitus interacts with Foucault’s (1976, 1980) notion of constructive power over bodies and is adapted to the analysis of beautification in contemporary China. My research aims to advance theoretical debates that have been addressed in the literature with regard to the significance of cosmetic practices in China, by building on and strengthening existing knowledge with new data and also by putting emphasis on those forms of medical beautification that are distinctive of the Chinese landscape.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The methodology chapter explains how this research positions itself in relation to area studies and discipline. Its approach combines sinology as an area study and cultural anthropology as a

discipline, employing largely ethnographic tools. The chapter proceeds to explain the selection of the fieldwork area: Hangzhou, Shanghai and the whole Yangtze River Delta are representative of urban Eastern China, because of their social, economic and cultural characteristics. Due to a certain uniformity in beauty trends and ideals throughout the country, they may be in some measure representative of all urban China. They may not, however, account for rural China, since the national urban-rural gap is considerable, and it would be risky to stretch urban findings and observations to the rural areas. The chapter then explores the data collection methods that have been employed during field research: from the selection of interviewees (mostly through personal networks), to the characteristics of person-centered interviewing and the features of observation. Finally, the chapter addresses the data analysis and data interpretation processes conducted by the researcher.

Chapter 4. The individualization of desire: women's beauty quest amid post-socialist challenges

This chapter answers the first sub-question: What social factors have enabled women to pursue beauty? It starts with an overview of beauty ideals from the past, passing through the main periods of the history of China: from the imperial Confucian age to the republican era, to the Maoist decades and finally to the reform era. It highlights the relationship between politics and female beauty throughout history. Then, the chapter explains that the market reform made a transition from a collective society to an individualized society, where people are encouraged to chase their personal desires, including chasing modernity and, for women in particular, beauty. This part draws on the individualization of the Chinese society argued by Yan Yunxiang (2009, 2010). However, gendered social pressures continue to exist in this urban and individualized society, and contribute directly or indirectly to women’s desire to pursue beautification. The chapter concludes that the individualization of society enabled women to pursue beautification, and it did even more so because it interacted with other factors related to gender inequality that push women to win the social competition through beautification.

Chapter 5. The face of success: interpreting women's beauty ideals

This chapter answers the second sub-question: what does the ideal beauty pursued by urban women symbolize? An analysis of what the current beauty ideals have come to represent needs

to consider the cultural and social influences that they have received, taking into account the high degree of development and international exchange of the Yangtze River Delta area. This chapter starts by confuting the myth of westernization and emphasizing the desire for modernity as a reason why women want a certain type of look. It argues that a desire for modernity is tightly linked to the desire for a certain type of beauty, much more than westernization per se. The chapter then goes on to explore the influence of South Korean and Japanese beauty in shaping this look, an influence that is also linked to the modernity of the two neighbors. The chapter then examines how this look represents the beauty of the wealthy, which is embodied by celebrities, including *wanghong*, aka internet celebrities. The conclusion of this chapter points at success as the paramount feature of the look urban women desire. Aspiring to a certain beautiful appearance is related to aspiring to success; even if it does not necessarily mean achieving material success, it does still represent the look of a successful woman. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to initiate a discussion that explores the significance of success in contemporary Chinese urban society and the relation that success has with the popular beautiful appearance. Hence, the symbolic value of the body linked to social status (with reference to Bourdieu's elaborations on representation and habitus) is at the core of this discussion.

Chapter 6. The negotiation of naturalness: undergoing and categorizing *weizheng*

This chapter answers the third sub-question: what are the main characteristics and the significance of *weizheng*? It explores facial cosmetic surgery, which represents the main type of aesthetic beautification practices taken in exam in this research. Non-surgical treatments, such as filler injections, and small surgical treatments, such as double eyelid surgery, usually fall into the realm of *weizheng*, that is to say, micro-surgeries or micro-treatments. This special category is the distinctive category of the Chinese cosmetic surgery sector and is thoroughly explored. The definition of this category and of the larger realm of cosmetic surgery is also addressed in this chapter, before diving into some interviewees' personal experiences of *weizheng* that highlight the different environments where these treatments are performed. The discussion of how beauty has been medicalized in the field of aesthetic medicine and how normalized such medicalization of body parts has become then leads to the exploration of a process of de-medicalization of *weizheng* within the medicalization of beauty. The naturalness of *weizheng* is put in direct contrast with the artificialness of conventional aesthetic surgery. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to initiate a discussion that analyzes the interpretation and

negotiation of naturalness that *weizheng* has brought about. Natural beauty seems to be the only beauty that fits the modern Chinese woman and that she tries to obtain not only in the results but also by means of techniques that are themselves considered more natural than those of proper cosmetic surgery. I argue that naturalness characterizes both the outcome and the process of *weizheng*, which manages to negotiate its distance from conventional cosmetic surgeries and to attract even those who would otherwise not consider undergoing cosmetic surgery.

Chapter 7. Discussion and conclusion

This final chapter recapitulates and discusses the key arguments of this dissertation. Women in urban China negotiate their social value of modern women (also) through their looks, acting within the requirements and pressures of the free market society, and taking into account the foreign and local influences that they receive. Individualization, success and naturalness each highlight a feature of women's pursuit of beauty. I argue that *weizheng* is the key category of medical beautification in urban China, and therefore my research on cosmetic surgery takes *weizheng* as the central object of study. I emphasize that studying beautification practices can provide a different but nonetheless useful perspective to study women's social status, considering how much weight bodily representation has in contemporary societies and how important the discourse of individual success is in contemporary China. This conclusive chapter also touches upon the limitations of this study, such as its geographic restriction and its reliance on data interpretation, and upon suggestions for future research, because there are still several aspects of the cosmetic sector and the beauty economy in China to explore, such as new beauty trends and the role of men as consumers of beautification.

Chapter 2

Literature review and theoretical framework

This dissertation takes into account a consistent body of literature that spaces into different directions and perspectives. This chapter is therefore divided into four sections, each of them covering a theme. The first section incorporates seminal works dealing with the topic of the body as an object of social science research; the second part reviews the research, mostly feminist, on the pursuit of beauty between empowerment and subjugation; the third part covers the existing research on beautification practices and the beauty industry of China in particular and East Asia in general; and, finally, the fourth section explores studies on the role of women and the aspirations of youth in contemporary China. In the last section, this chapter moves on to discussing the theoretical framework that sustains this dissertation, guided from the main themes that emerged from the examination of the relevant literature. Within a sociological institutional approach, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus interacts with Foucault's notion of constructive power over bodies and is adapted to the analysis of beautification in China. My research aims to advance theoretical debates that have been addressed in the literature with regard to the significance of cosmetic practices in China, by building on and strengthening existing knowledge with new data and also by putting emphasis on those forms of medical beautification that are distinctive of the Chinese landscape.

2.1 The body as a mirror of society

The first section of literature prepares the ground by referring to influential publications that have analyzed the significance of the body in society, mainly from an anthropological and a sociological perspective. These works contributed to my understanding of the indispensable relationship between body and society and of the importance of studying the body in order to study the society.

In *Natural Symbols*, anthropologist Mary Douglas (1970) suggested that by understanding the body it is possible to understand society. She saw the body as a powerful symbolic form, the site of symbols that are then employed to express social experiences and social relations. In turn, society trains individuals on how to perceive their body. The physical body and the social body are thus intertwined, and bodily processes acquire a social meaning. It was Bryan Turner who, in his book *The body and society* (1984), later laid the foundations of the sociology of the body. I find his description of the body to be a great depiction of its complexity and importance in several research fields.

> "The body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing – a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity" (B. Turner 1984: 8).

Turner recognizes the body as an aspect of both our natural environment and our socio-cultural environment. A simple example of this dual membership is the fact that the body has physiological needs whose content and timing are subject to social regulation and symbolic interpretations. Our bodies are located in a world of cultural beliefs, symbols and practices; what it is to be a man and a woman, then, is a social definition. Moreover, Turner recognizes that bodies are objects of labor: body practices, both individual and collective, make the body a site of symbolic work, where deformities are condemned and perfection is praised. The female body, in particular, has been historically the focus of social control in patriarchal societies: a woman's unrestrained body has often symbolized her unrestrained morality, implying that a woman *is* what she looks like. In contemporary society, body practices such as jogging and dieting may represent both an enhancement of women's personal freedom and a sexualization of society, in the sense that individuals have to be sexually acceptable in order to be socially acceptable. Mike Featherstone (1982) thinks that, in a hedonist society revolving around consumer culture, images of youth and beauty are associated with the desire for consumption and the body needs to be well taken care of because it is a passport to good things. Featherstone (1991) also argues that the new forms of representation arisen in the early twentieth century have placed increasing attention on bodily appearance, bringing about a modern self that has developed a keen interest in aesthetic looks as an important element in the quest for happiness. On a similar note, Antony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992) touch upon the body in their works on modernity and individualization, by pointing out that the modern self is aware of its appearance and of its capacity of modifying it. Giddens (1991: 77, italics in original) indicates

that the reflexivity typical of the aspirational individual in modern societies "*extends to the body*, where the body […] is part of an action system rather than merely a passive object".

Following Bryan Turner, sociologist Anthony Synnott (1993) stresses the need to put the body at the center of research in the social sciences, because the body is a social category and has high cultural symbolism. The contemporary body paradigm sees the body as "*plastic*, to be molded and selected at need or whim", but also *bionic*, with all sorts of implants reliant on technology, "*communal* and interchangeable in its parts" thanks to organ transplants, genetically *engineered*, and even *chosen* thanks to advanced reproductive techniques (Synnott 1993: 34-35). Synnot also pays attention to the beauty of the face, that he considers as the principal sign of one's attractiveness, to the point that it is a symbol of the self. He recognizes the advantages of attractive faces in many areas, from dating to the job market to crime accusations, and calls out the "beauty mystique" as the cause of this "aesthetic discrimination" that is an almost invisible cultural norm (Synnott 1993: 75). The beauty mystique is the ancient belief that beautiful is associated with good and ugly with evil, and it has been institutionalized worldwide, as shown by the increasing numbers of beauty pageants and cosmetic surgeries, concerning especially women. As a consequence, the pursuit of beauty is widely regarded as an investment with substantial returns. Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1979), too, argues that the body is a social product, because even its natural dimensions are the result of the different consumption habits and work conditions belonging to different social classes. Bourdieu's theories and arguments will be explored in the theoretical framework section of this chapter, because they are central in this dissertation. In her analysis of dress and fashion, Joanne Entwistle (2000) sees the body as a cultural object: adorning the body is part of human culture, since hardly any culture leaves the body unadorned. She proposes the idea of dress as an embodied activity embedded within social relations and argues that fashion involves both structure and agency.

Anthropologist Terence Turner (1980) proposed valid views on the social meanings of bodily adornments in his article "The Social Skin". Through the observation of the dress codes and habits of the Kayapo indigenous people of the Amazon forest, he explores the social meaning of bodily adornment, which becomes a language to express socialization. Turner suggests that studying systems of bodily adornment may be one of the most effective ways to understand the construction of the individual as a socio-cultural subject. These systems define social classes in relation with one another, showing a connection between aesthetic appearance and wealth. This connection, I add, is certainly different in contemporary industrialized societies, but it may

nonetheless be strong. In a later article, Terence Turner (1995) affirms that in the postmodern era the body is recognized as a crucial element that unifies human existence on social, cultural, biological, and psychological levels; thus the body is an important category of social and cultural theory.

2.2 Chasing beauty between empowerment and oppression

When the discussion touches the beautification of the female body, a question often arises: is that an indication of women's empowerment or a sign of their oppression by beauty norms? This debate has occurred more frequently in feminist discourses, bringing about some radically opposite views. Elias et al. (2017) argue that women in the twenty-first century are experiencing an intensification and an extension of beauty pressure to more parts of their body; therefore, the politics of beauty remains central in the feminist debate, which has witnessed a renewed interest in this topic thanks to the prominence of third wave feminisms that show a more positive attitude about the pleasures of beautification (see also Coleman and Moreno Figueroa 2010). A strong critique of the beauty mystique (to use the term by Synnott 1990) began with Simone de Beauvoir (1949), to whom many future feminists have referred, who saw women's interest in beautification as contributing to their oppression, because women annihilate themselves with narcissism. Naomi Wolf (1991) is, too, extremely critical of the cult of beauty, which she sees as a political weapon constructed by the society to weaken the growing power of women and condemn them to obedience, by selling them the myth that their value is measured on their physical appearance[3]. In her critique of the depiction of women in advertising and television, Susan Douglas (1994) showed how the American mass media and beauty industry have sold the myth that beautification is a sign of individual liberation. Anne Balsamo (1995) addresses the technological control of women's bodies through cosmetic surgery, that transforms the body into an object for technological reconstruction. The works of Sandra Lee Bartky (1990), Jana Sawicki (1991) and Susan Bordo (1993) represent a feminist Foucaultian perspective that sees

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[3] I must point out that I do not consider Wolf's work as academically valuable for my own research as the others cited in this literature review. This is mostly due to my disagreement with Wolf's extremist and conspiracy-related views regarding politics and society (including the current Covid-19 pandemic). Nevertheless, *The Beauty Myth* has been an influential book on the topic and must be acknowledged.

beauty as a disciplinary technology: even if women seem to choose freely to undergo beauty practices, their appearance is still heavily disciplined and regulated[4]. However, Bordo does not position women as victims of the patriarchal society: she argues that they are aware of the beauty culture in which they live, rather than merely being "cultural dopes" (Bordo 1999: 250). On a similar note, Kathy Davis stresses the interaction between cultural coercion and individual agency in cosmetic surgery, through the analysis of women's narratives in order to observe how they negotiate their bodies and their identity (Davis 1995). She argues that cosmetic surgery can be a way for women to take control of their bodies and their lives, because it alleviates the suffering for an appearance that they do not like; at the same time, it can also be a way for the society to control women's bodies, by promoting physical modification as the solution for their suffering and by creating standards by which other women are judged (Davis 1995). Moreover, Davis (2002, 2003) emphasizes that individual experiences with cosmetic surgery are deeply gendered. With respect to the concept of agency in beautification practices, she and Susan Bordo (2009) engaged in an ideological discussion: Bordo criticized Davis' conceptualization of agency as too tightly linked to media's promotional use of freedom and choice, while Davis (2003) affirmed her sociological use of the term within the relationship between agency and structure. Through the examination of magazine articles on cosmetic surgery, Suzanne Fraser (2003a) stresses the complexity of this topic, that cannot be reduced to a discourse of agency versus victimhood. Sociologist Debra Gimlin conducted extensive research on beautification and aesthetic surgery, stressing the necessity to focus on how cosmetic surgery patients experience embodiment (Gimlin 2000, 2002, 2006, 2012, 2013). In *Body Work: Beauty and Self Image in American Culture*, Gimlin (2002) argues that, far from being victims of the beauty myth, women use body work to escape the beauty myth and negotiate the relationship between body and self: though potentially being a place of domination, the body becomes also an instrument for resistance and agency in the construction of selfhood. Plastic surgery, thus, can be an empowering life experience. In *Cosmetic surgery narratives: A cross-cultural analysis of women's accounts*, Gimlin (2012) analyzes women's narratives of cosmetic surgery in the Unites States and the United Kingdom. She pays attention to the diffusion of cosmetic surgery through television and media, and examines how women normalize these procedures through strategies that stress both local notions of appropriateness and global discourses of lifestyle

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[4] Foucault's views on power will be discussed later on in the theoretical framework part of this chapter.

(Gimlin 2012). In addition, Gimlin (2013) deals with the cultural perception of breast augmentation in the United States, of its natural or artificial look, and points out that women who undergo cosmetic surgery raise the bar of beauty standards because of the popularity of the phenomenon.

There has been some notable research on the significance of cosmetic surgery in the Western society also outside of feminist scholarship. Alexander Edmonds (2010, 2013) provides an ethnographic analysis of the Brazilian aesthetic surgery scene. Besides being one of the largest markets of plastic surgery in the world, Brazil is the only country where these treatments may be given for free to those who cannot afford them: everyone has the right to beauty. However, equality still remains a dream: class, race and gender play a role in the motivations of such a diverse population, and the rhetoric of choice may just be a marketing tactic (Edmonds 2010). His research also deals with the meaning of femininity in a modernity where aesthetic enhancement is so popular and discusses the medicalization of beauty and the therapeutic effects of beautification (Edmonds 2013). Edmonds' research also helped me adopt a more comprehensive approach to the study of beautification.

> "Rather than view it only as a social construction […], I find it more fruitful to work from the assumption that physical attractiveness is an objective form of value, if not "possessed" by individuals, then observable within certain social relationships and moments. This approach matches the ethnographic method in being able to bring us closer to the views of actors for whom beauty is shaped by the exigencies of life as it unfolds" (Edmonds, 2010: 20).

Anthony Elliott (2008) discusses the social impact of the rise of cosmetic surgery. He points out that cosmetic surgery has become a lifestyle choice, not very different from fashion or fitness, and looks at how the media portray cosmetic surgery, believing that the media provide the most telling examples of cosmetic surgery culture and of its affinities with the global economy. He considers the phenomenon on a global level and acknowledges its impressive growth in Asia, and particularly in China. In fact, he argues that the beautification industry in Asia has adapted to local cultural trends and, thus, cannot be regarded as a pure imitation of Western practices and ideals. Since Elliott (2008) considers aesthetic surgery as a lifestyle choice, he argues that celebrity culture is at the basis of its success: technology has made people much closer to the celebrities through media, and thus much more interested in whatever the celebrities do in order to reinvent themselves and look more appealing to the audience,

including cosmetic surgery. Talking about non-Western, Kathy Davis (1995) observes that when aesthetic surgery is undergone by non-white people it is often a discourse of race that comes up, rather than one of beauty. Historian Elizabeth Haiken (1997) discusses ethnic surgery and issues of otherness, race and individual enhancement in the United States since the 1930s. Heyes (2009) suggests a critical approach that sees the ethnic element in any aesthetic surgery and therefore challenges the common biased understanding of white as non-ethnic and non-white as ethnic.

These studies underline that diverse factors are intervening in the game of cosmetic surgery and they all have to be taken into account to avoid simplistic explanations. Individual agency plays a role, but so do social constraints, and so do cultural and ethnic discourses.

2.3 Beautification in China and East Asia

In a comprehensive review of East Asian beauty, Henley and Porath (2021) consider the interplay of factors such as local cultural tradition, transnational cultural influence and cultural modernization behind contemporary cosmetic surgery practices in East Asia. Differently from ancient times where body modifications were visibly artificial, beautification practices today aim to invisibly reproduce a natural look, they are in a sense naturalistic body modifications. They reflect universal modernity not only in their natural aesthetic, but also, quite paradoxically, in their use of artificial technological means. Cho (2012) provides us with an overview of how the beauty standards have evolved in East Asia. Through a thorough analysis of ancient paintings, poetry and prose, he shows those beauty trends of China and Japan that have changed over the history and those who have remained more or less consistent. Cho explains Western aesthetic influences in recent times with the economic power of the West over the East, which made the standards of beauty of the latter reflect their vision of the former.

Susan Brownell (1995, 2001, 2005) conducted research on the body, sport and cosmetic surgery in China in relation to national modernity. She highlighted the transnational history of cosmetic surgery and argued that when it arrived in China it was not an empty frame waiting to be filled with local meaning, but instead already carried a meaning that raised ideological struggles in adapting its bourgeois features to a socialist society; however, in the reform era (post 1978) the struggles faded and instead this practice was “glorified as a natural expression of human nature,

of the personal freedom and individuality that had been suppressed under Mao" (Brownell 2005: 142). Remarkable is her account of how plastic surgery as a practice arrived in China through the first Chinese surgeons who studied in the United States, such as Song Ruyao, and who attempted to "create plastic surgery with Chinese characteristics" (Brownell 2005: 144). A significant point that she made regards the double eyelid surgery: since double eyelids naturally exist also among East Asians, she argued that the Chinese did not undergo double eyelid surgery for a desire to westernize their eyes, although they recognized a certain influence of Western culture. Brownell (1995: 10, 2001: 124) talks about "body culture" when referring to the promotion of beauty in the first two decades of the reform era. Inciting fashion models and athletes to display China's transnational image and culture had the aim to contribute to set beauty ideals and to encourage people to show their lifestyle by taking care of their looks. Moreover, she suggests that the boundaries between the body, the family and the state are more fluid in China than in the West and individual bodies are seen as interconnected, subject to pressures from the state, family or community that oppose individual autonomy (Brownell 1995).

Luo Wei's work deals with female cosmetic surgery in China. She suggests that the body culture has become even more complex and analyzes the websites of clinics that perform cosmetic surgery in order to see how the image of the woman is represented (Luo 2012). She draws attention to the way beauty standards are promoted: the clinics first recommend the ideals borrowed from the West, then create the features of the Oriental beauty from a dynamic interaction between the local and the global, and finally attempt to detach such ideals from the Western ones. Luo (2013) explores women's consumption of cosmetic surgery with a study on a sample of women in Guangzhou: she argues that the cosmetic surgery experiences of Chinese women are unique because they are "shaped by the particularities of China's beauty economy, gender politics, as well as the country's dynamic interactions with the globalizing forces" (Luo 2013: 3).

Wen Hua (2009, 2013) explores cosmetic surgery in China. In her book *Buying beauty: Cosmetic Surgery in China*, Wen (2013) considers the cases of China's artificial beauties as a starting point to inquire why women choose to undergo cosmetic surgery. She is curious about the almost sudden popularity of aesthetic surgery in a country that only a few decades ago used to wear unisex suits. Thanks to her fieldwork in Beijing, she explores the discourse of liberation and subjugation related to the phenomenon (already largely discussed in the feminist literature)

and adapts it to her specific cases: her interviewees, who often put emphasis on individual rights and freedom of choice, perceive cosmetic surgery as a means of liberation that improves self-image and self-confidence, but a critical scientific approach has also to take into account a hidden subjugation to cultural standards. In this respect she looks at the formation of modern Chinese beauty ideals, to what extent they are the result of influences from the West and domestic meanings. She concludes that "the new beauty standards in China are created from local forces, but they also involve aspects of borrowing and redefining. The globalization of beauty images is a hybrid process which invokes both the internalization of certain Western beauty ideas and the local redefining of global beauty ideals" (Wen 2013: 212). Also, she looks at the relationship between cosmetic surgery, state power, and the market forces that guide the beauty economy. On a more general level, she argues that "The changing image of Chinese women who have undergone cosmetic surgery represents the changing face of a "new" China that has undergone a dramatic and drastic social transition" (Wen 2013: 22), an argument that shares Brownell's (2005) perspective, to whom she often refers. Wen reported that most of her interviewees saw the double eyelid surgery as a simple pursuit of beauty following Chinese aesthetic standards and not as an attempt to westernize their look. She argues that this is because certain features have become for these women an embodiment of modernity. This perspective comes very close to my own perspective, and that is why I see Wen's book as a crucial work for my research. More recently, Wen (2021) explored male cosmetic surgery in China, looking at the popular "little fresh meat" (*xiao xian rou* 小鲜肉) beauty trend and the rise in the demand for male cosmetic surgery. She argues that women's appreciation of *xiao xian rou* reflects a changing gender power dynamic in contemporary China, which is however still far from shaking the foundations of the patriarchal ideology and of the consumer market. Yang Jie (2011), too, discusses the consumer market, while also acknowledging the influence of Euro-American beauty ideals in the Chinese beauty culture. She sees the impossibility of a total correspondence to Western ideals and the necessity of a local response reflected in Chinese body techniques. She argues that the meanings of body modifications are related to the opportunities, arisen in the market economy, to do aesthetic investments in one's body and to celebrate the freedom to do so. In this sense, reform era ideology connects gender to consumerism, reinforcing the role of feminine beauty in the development of consumer capitalism, because the female body sells products. Thus, young women (or tender women, *nennü* 嫩女) represent ideal consumers. In a more recent article, Yang Jie (2017) explores the

relationship between beauty and body, arguing that the body is a subject with agentive force and that beautification may incite new perspectives and even the formation of new subjectivities.

It is important to note that the meaning and role of the beauty economy (*meinü jingji* 美女经济) was explored by Xu and Feiner (2007), who framed it within a commercial exploitation of female beauty in line with the neoliberal economic policies of reform era China, and has been widely referred to in the literature.[5]

Several scholars, among whom Ruth Holliday, Joanna Elfving-Hwang and Kim Jongmi, have researched cosmetic surgery with a focus on South Korea, one of the main beauty hotspots in Asia, if not the principal. Holliday et al. (2019) stress that the Korean cosmetic surgery industry has had a very strong influence on China: Korean surgeons operate in China and Chinese patients go to have surgery in Korea, enacting a transnational flow of beauty practices typical of cosmetic surgery tourism. Kim's (2012) conversations with young Korean women about nose and eyelid modification show how these beauty ideals are seen as part of the search for an innovative Korean look instead of attempts of westernization. On a joint article, Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012), too, dismiss hypotheses of westernization and argue that the cosmetic surgery scene in Korea is influenced by a complex interplay of national and global values. The respondents of Elfving-Hwang (2021) adhere to the perspective that today's beauty ideals, though certainly influenced by the West, are perceived as symbols of a cosmopolitan drive rather than of a desire to look more Western. Through the analysis of Korean popular media discourse Elfving-Hwang (2013) suggests that the individual body is representative of the collective body of a social group and therefore the idea of self-improvement is required by the social group, not just brought about by Western individualism. In addition, she argues that investing in one's appearance is seen as a way of displaying appropriate social etiquette and as an act of productive citizenship in later life (Elfving-Hwang 2016). Interesting for my research

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[5] Both Yang J. (2011) and Xu and Feiner (2007) mention the book *Meili liandan zhang dami* [Beautiful Faces Grow Rice] by Lu Junqing (2004), that became a best seller in China. It is worth to note that Lu Junqing was in the beauty pageants business, as the head of one of China's largest PR agencies, and that he claimed that his book was groundbreaking for China's beauty economy. His book is filled with imaginary statements aiming to show that Western women benefit from the beauty economy and that beauty, especially Western beauty, is the key of achieving success, in the forms of the best jobs and the richest husbands. Lu's book is by no means a reliable source of information, but the fact that it was such a best seller is significant.

is what Elfving-Hwang (2021) affirms about the boundary between the perceived "natural" (unmodified) self and the modified self: this distinction is not clearly marked unless the results of cosmetic surgery are excessive. Therefore, there is an impressive flexibility toward altering one's appearance in Korea, and I suggest urban China, at least the Yangtze River Delta, may also be going toward a negotiation of natural appearance.

Laura Miller conducted extensive research on the Japanese beauty industry. In her examination of beauty salons, Miller (2006: 5) refers to "transnational body aesthetics and practices" to explain the diffusion of certain beauty procedures and trends, and indicates that beautification has flourished thanks to a self-confidence discourse, persuading young women that they are not able to gain self-confidence without the help of the beauty industry (Miller 2006). Like many other scholars mentioned above, Miller (2021) argues that beauty experimentation in Asia should be viewed as much more than a type of deracialization, that is, imitation of Western trends, and criticizes such interpretation as lacking the understanding that some beauty traits have been normalized within the context of Japanese culture. She suggests that, through bodily modification, the youth play with gender notions and express their individuality, fusing foreign and local feature to create new meanings (Miller 2021). Moreover, the younger generations try to undermine the ethnic homogeneity supported by their parents (Miller 2000, 2006).

Following the above-mentioned reasoning, I too reckon that beauty practices and ideals in East Asia, and specifically in China, have evolved beyond any westernizing aim and instead taken on a meaning more tightly linked to local and at the same time transnational success and modernity. Moreover, the meaning of natural beauty is being negotiated through the very cosmetic procedures that women undergo.

2.4 Women's roles and youth's aspirations in contemporary China

The social meaning of female beautification in China is connected to women's social condition. Elizabeth Croll conducted extensive research on Chinese women for decades and published many works, focusing on several aspects of their lives, such as labor, education, courtship and marriage, their status in the patriarchal family, female infanticide, etc. In two books, Croll (1983, 1995) looks at the emerging of a new image of femininity in China, through the analysis of the evolving reality of women's lives in parallel with the social and political changes that occurred

in the country throughout the twentieth century. She argues that during the Mao era the approach to gender neglected the particularity of women's bodies, for instance by standardizing clothes, thus denying women the means to express gender inequality and femininity, in this instance by means of women's fashion. After decades of reform, however, the female body was given femininity again, by being conceived as attractive, sensitive and vulnerable (Croll 1995). Croll (1978) also examined the evolution of the Chinese women's movement in *Feminism and Socialism in China*, suggesting the integration of socialism with feminism in order to further reduce the structural constraints that inhibit the advancement of women's role in society. She looks at the role of women in the revolution and at the equality that the socialist state promised them. Through a detailed historical analysis she shows the steps that were made toward a betterment of women's condition in China, but she also uncovers the great struggles that women still had to endure.[6] Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter (1988) explored the life of Chinese women in the 1980s, when gender equality ceased to be a government priority because of the rapid expansion of the market economy. In her book *Women in China's long twentieth century*, Gail Hershatter (2007) provides a comprehensive range of references, composing a little encyclopedia of all the research that had been done until then about Chinese women. She deals with Chinese women's condition in contemporary China with respect to family, employment and national identity. She also points at the strategic importance of female beauty and fashion in politics and society, from the end of the Qing era to today, stressing that the female body has always been connected to politics. Moreover, Hershatter (2007: 47) argues that consumption and the commodification of the body are regarded as signs of modernity and that fashion and beauty "became arenas for newly permitted self-expression and experimentation with fantasies of self".

In order to comprehend the struggles and achievements of contemporary Chinese women one must take into account the discourse of quality (*suzhi*). Ann Anagnost (2004) and Andrew Kipnis (2006) explore the concept of "population quality" (*renkou suzhi* 人口素质) that

[6] A non-academic book that offers an insightful look into the personal stories of Chinese women is *The Good Women of China* by Chinese journalist and radio host Xinran (2002). This is a journalistic fiction, nonetheless provided me with an intense understanding of what Chinese women have gone through since the establishment of the P.R.C. It shows the degree to which women were mistreated and/or ignored during and also after the revolutionary wave.

emerged in the early 1980s and spread through educational reforms aimed at the cultivation of highly educated citizens loyal to the state and capable to advance the country's economic success. Self-improvement has thus become essential in the realization of one's full potential, and from early childhood individuals are subject to rankings in classrooms and in youth groups to determine their *quality* as citizens (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006). Therefore, the body of the urban middle class citizen becomes an important site for displaying quality improvement, given the central role of the middle class in consuming and producing the *suzhi* discourse (Anagnost 2004, 2008). In her study of China's pursuit of modernity in the reform era, Rofel (1999) notices that gender differences are naturalized and even essentialized in the new gender ideology. Later, Rofel (2007) explores what it means for Chinese youth to embody cosmopolitan desires in many aspects of their life, highlighting that the fusion of market neoliberalism and political authoritarianism is shaping particular types of gendered subjects. Yan Yunxiang (2009, 2010) examines the process of individualization that the Chinese society has undergone in the reform era, where the interest for personal achievements and desires seems stronger than ever, noting that the pursuit of individuality started when the state requested individual involvement in the achievement of a market modernization. Kleinman et al. (2011) indicate the individualistic quest for happiness as one of the most important stories in today's China, suggesting that simple pleasures can bring happiness. Pleasures are the object of *Appetites*, a rich ethnographic work by Judith Farquar (2002) that shows that the embodiment of the mundane pleasures and desires of contemporary China is imprinted by history. The desires and aspirations of Chinese youth, together with their contrast with those of their parents' generation, have been object of research in recent times. De Kloet and Fung (2017) argue that the desiring self of the young Chinese is part of a complex interaction of global capital and socialist market economy with family and school. James Farrer (2002, 2014) points out that, despite a move toward cosmopolitan lifestyles and autonomous private relationships, marriage is still a milestone in the life of young Chinese individuals and requires parental approval. Harriet Evans (1999, 2002) has studied the evolution of the role of women in China, also for what concerns marriage. Evans (2008, 2010) argues that, partially resulting from the One Child Policy and the drive to individual success, parents concentrate more than before on their daughters' upbringing, and mothers also try to maintain a good relationship with them, though they still tend to have different expectations and aspirations in life. Désirée Remmert (2020) compares Chinese and Taiwanese youth, finding that they experience similar social pressures: the pressure to marry, the meddling of parents, and the anxiety of young women, who especially suffer private and professional consequences of failing to meet gendered norms to marry. They interpret life achievements as

both the ability to provide for parents and children, creating a harmonious home, and the capacity to obtain modern success, such as an international career and urban lifestyle. The mainlanders, however, seem to have a more optimistic vision of their future, which Remmert (2020) attributes to government and media encouragement, arguing that economic and politico-ideological discourses influence aspirations on both the individual and the societal level. Anett Dippner (2016, 2018) discusses the social struggles of Chinese middle class women. She looks at the "new" women who strive to become *Miss Perfect* trying to fulfill all the expectations that the country and the family have on them, but also the aspirations that they have for themselves (Dippner 2016). These women desire to manage a successful career and a loving family, while taking care of their appearance and of their inner beauty. They find themselves in a position where they attempt to balance traditional gender roles with a global consumer culture, where their behavior receives the influence of a strong internet celebrity culture (Dippner 2018). On a similar note, Xie Kailing (2021) explores in a most recent study the aspirations and the contradictions of the first generation of privileged only daughters (a result of the One Child Policy). These women strive for an all-embracing success that includes both getting an education and a career and conforming to the existing gender regime with marriage and parenthood. Xie (2021: 253) points out that on social media the expression "winners in life" (*rensheng ying jia* 人生赢家), that is to say individuals who display both family and career achievements, has replaced "successful person" (*chenggong renshi* 成功人士), that only highlights being successful in one's career. The women of Xie's study attempt to embody the gendered middle-class ideal against which a woman's success is measured, and also embody very well China's collective social aspiration with their determination to secure a privileged social position through individual effort. This privileged social position seems to be fully attainable for a woman only if, in addition to her professional achievements, she also has a married life: failing to marry is often interpreted as failing in life. Xie (2021) also addresses the refeminization of women since the start of the reform era, stressing that conventional feminine characteristics as beauty, youth and gentleness are essential. In her work on women's labor in the service sector, Eileen Otis (2012) observes that girls learn how to take care of their body since they are little; they are therefore conscious of their appearance, aware that their bodies are to be looked at and appraised in their personal and professional life alike. The ideal that many girls in China aspire to is that of an attractive wife and young mother who also has a successful career: few will achieve to be "white-collar beauties" who find a suitable husband before being labeled "leftover" (Guo 2010). A highly educated and/or a career woman who is

still unmarried at the age of about thirty years is colloquially called a *leftover woman* (*shengnü* 剩女 in Mandarin), a woman whom nobody wants anymore. Leta Hong Fincher (2014) wrote a book on the phenomenon: the expiration date for a woman before she becomes leftover is not fixed, though it usually starts as early as 25 years old and then develops in different stages. Hong Fincher (2014) argues that this situation leads women to rush into unequal marriages, and that the boom of the real estate market and the reinforcement of women's domestic role have contributed to intensify gender inequality. In response to Hong Fincher, Arianne Gaetano (2014) argues that these women do not necessarily tend to rush to marry but instead express ambivalence toward marriage, thus challenging gender norms.

That women, especially young women, in contemporary China are striving for success is a main factor that influences my argumentation. In particular, I find this social aspiration to be tightly linked with the meaning of beauty practices and beauty ideals.

2.5 Theoretical approach

The main themes that emerge from the review of relevant literature have guided me toward constructing a theoretical framework that could sustain my argumentations. As explained in the introduction, my main research question is: Why do women in highly urbanized Eastern China undergo cosmetic surgery? It generates three sub-questions: 1. What social factors have enabled women to pursue beauty? 2. What does the current ideal beauty symbolize? 3. What is the significance of *weizheng* (micro cosmetic surgery)?

I believe that in order to answer these questions it is necessary to approach cosmetic surgery from the perspectives of its recipients, exploring the cultural and sociological factors that can explain individual decisions to modify their bodies with aesthetic medicine. This perspective is close to the ones adopted by Kathy Davis (1995) and Debra Gimlin (2002, 2012), for instance.

Since I regard the beauty of the body as culturally constructed, I consider concepts of beauty as being institutionalized through culture. This view aligns with the views of sociological institutionalism, which I take as the environment where my research framework unfolds. Sociological institutionalism is one type of new institutionalism. In the words of Ensminger (1998: 774) new institutionalism is "the study of how institutions affect the behavior of

individuals and how individual behavior affects the evolution of institutions"; in short, it focuses on the interaction of structure and agency (Mackay et al. 2010). From the viewpoint of sociological institutionalism, institutions are not only made of normative rules and procedures related to people's strategic calculations, but also of symbols, moral norms and all those habits that guide people in their social interactions: thus, institutions and culture overlap (Hall and Taylor 1996). Culture itself is a system of routines, habits and symbols that provide patterns for behavior (Swidler 1986). In this sense, what individuals consider as rational action is already culturally and thus socially constituted (Hall and Taylor 1996). The relationship between institutions and individual actors is mutual and interactive (Di Maggio and Powell 1991; Hall and Taylor 1996; Martin 2004) and society could be seen as "an agglomeration of institutions" (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 55). Without a direct mention of sociological institutionalism, Bryan Turner too acknowledges that culture permeates our needs and desires: "The problem is that we live in a socially constructed reality and our pleasures are acquired in a social context, but this is also true of 'need'. To some extent the contrast between 'need' and 'desire' is grounded in a distinction between 'nature' and 'culture'. […] This distinction is difficult to maintain, because what we perceive as needs are in fact thoroughly penetrated and constituted by culture" (B. Turner 1984: 27). In addition, Hall and Taylor (1996) point out that sociological institutionalism emphasizes how practices are diffused across nations. By taking sociological institutionalism as the background of my research perspective, I acknowledge the impact of culture on social life and individual agency. Moreover, I can focus on the interactive relationship between the individuals and the external context regarding the enactment and interpretation of beauty practices and ideals.

Within a sociological institutional environment, the concept of habitus helps to explain the adoption of certain beauty ideals and practices, specifically related to images of wealth, modernity and success, which are all interconnected.

Pierre Bourdieu (1979: 190) defines the habitus as a generating principle of classifiable practices and at the same time as a classifying system of such practices: the social world or the lifestyle space (*espace des styles de vie*) is constituted by the relation between these two abilities of the habitus, that is to say that of generating practices and that of differentiating such practices through taste. Lifestyles are, then, systematic products of the habitus, which is itself a product of social class division. In an interview, Bourdieu (1988) explained the habitus with an easy example: there are more chances that the son of a professor will choose an interesting job with

a bad pay rather than a boring but highly paid job. This is because of his habitus, that is the result of both a personal environment and a social collective environment and that will make him do or not do certain actions. However, the habitus is not to be interpreted as destiny: it is instead an open system of dispositions that is continuously influenced and transformed by experiences. It is likely, though, that people will have experiences consistent with those that have formed their habitus.

In this understanding, the symbolic value of the body acquires relevance. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the body displays the tastes and dispositions of different social classes as well as one's character and personality better than any other manifestation of the self: bodily investments, such as make-up and aesthetic treatments, aim to make the body presentable or representable. Therefore, the body works as a language of personal identity and also of social identity, because it is itself the result of different types of taste and habitus of different social classes and, thus, a social product. In this sense, aesthetic and fashion treatments on the body are culturally constructed signs of distinction and acquire a value that is related to social status (Bourdieu 1977). In addition, explicit aesthetic choices are often formed as an opposition to the choices of other social groups, to mark a distinction between us and those groups that we perceive as socially inferior (Bourdieu 1979).

Several studies have employed Bourdieu's perspective of embodiment of class tastes, such as for instance Lupton (1996) and Kristjansson (2014) in their exploration of natural bodies and refined bodies. Bourdieu's perspective may be applied to my research as well, even though in this case the factor of class per se is not as important, because in China the paramount concept of success, which I connect tightly to beautification, is not strictly interconnected with the idea of class. However, being successful does mean being wealthy, and wealth is usually linked to upper classes, but not necessarily in the conventional European interpretation, as it will be discussed in Chapter 5. I adopt and adapt Bourdieu's thought regarding the idea that the body is the absolute site of the materialization of class taste and of the manifestation of not only the current social position but also its trajectory, given that the dimensions of taste and thus of habitus may transcend the social conditions where they are produced (Bourdieu 1979). I elaborate on this idea of the body as manifestation of a trajectory, by arguing that women's ideal beautiful face symbolizes success in a sense that transcends one's social class and projects the individual onto a path toward a superior status. Following this logic, it is not only true that women with similar social backgrounds share similar beauty taste, but also that women

regardless of their social class aspire to similar beauty ideals that symbolize success related to superior social status in Chinese urban society.

It has been pointed out by Ren (2013: 44) that the questions of taste, choice and style in China characterize consumption as a series of activities, not simply as a buying process; in this sense, consumption is one of the major ways in which the "middle-class norm" regulates the Chinese individual. The regulation of individuals through class norms evokes the institution-individual interactions discussed above, as well as Foucault's notion of a docile body that is governed by society (Foucault 1976). To a certain extent, the cultural conventions that guide social behavior and form the habitus may also be the norms that regulate docile bodies.

Body regulation is a concept that often appears in the research on body and bodily modification, especially in feminist literature, as mentioned in this literature review. It would be incomplete to analyze similar topics without considering this concept and without referring to Michel Foucault's thinking about body and power, which is also thoroughly analyzed by Bryan Turner (1984). Foucault (1976, 1980) posits that, in modern societies, power has taken the body as its focus and that the exercise of power is in fact extremely corporal. The body as an object of power is produced to be controlled, identified and reproduced. Power works on bodies both on an individual level with the disciplines of the body (anatomo-politics) and on a larger social level with the regulations of the population (bio-politics of populations). The body of the individual is then regulated in the interest of the population, and what seems a personal choice is instead controlled by society, often through the medicalization of bodies. Disciplinary power is key in producing what Foucault calls docile bodies, which may be subjected, trained and transformed. In this perspective, power is seen as constructive and productive: if it only had a repressive purpose, power would be "a fragile thing"; instead, it "produces effects at the level of desire – and also at the level of knowledge" (Foucault 1980: 59). Therefore, the same power that regulates the body also partly contributes to develop desires.

Drawing on Foucault, Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) observed that from the perspective of medical anthropology there is not only one body, but three bodies: individual body, social body and body politic. Each one represents a different level of analysis, with the basic interrelation being that, within the political system, the body politic attempts to regulate the social body (the populations) and discipline the individual bodies.

Foucault's idea that the body is a cultural construct and the principal site of power in modern society has made a significant contribution to feminist literature of the social control of women through their bodies. However, feminist scholars have also drawn attention to the limitations of Foucault's body-power relations, such as their tendency to overlook the agency of individuals in favor of the regulation of bodies. Joanne Entwistle (2000: 39), for example, considers Foucault's theories to be limited by their focus on structures (a limit that partially characterizes Bourdieu's theories too), but she recognizes that they can be "useful for understanding the structuring influences on the body and the way in which bodies acquire meaning in particular contexts". I agree with her. By doing so, Entwistle (2000) contends that one can decide not to adopt a certain aspect of an argument without rejecting the whole argument. I agree with her on this too. In my case, the combination of Bourdieu's concepts with some of Foucault's perspective to examine the body is definitely not a complete novelty. It is, however, fitting to my research and therefore I adopt it by selecting the parts of both theories that can sustain my argumentation.

My position is that beautifying procedures, though influenced by norms, may still be freely chosen acts to a certain extent. Beauty norms exercise power on women but, at the same time, women exercise power by modifying their bodies how they please. As Gimlin (2002) put it, the body is both a location of domination and a tool for resistance and agency. In this sense, I consider beautification treatments as having elements of both subjugation and empowerment, in a system of mutual individual-institution influence.

In a background of sociological institutionalism, which stresses the impact of culture, I acknowledge that body and beautification practices are culturally constructed. In this environment, the theoretical conceptualization of habitus and class taste by Pierre Bourdieu helps me interpret beauty ideals and prominent cosmetic surgery treatments in urban China. In addition, this interpretation takes into account, albeit secondarily, Foucault's ideas of power and body regulation, which cannot be overlooked in an analysis of aesthetic work on the body. The concept of habitus, regarded as the specific amount and use of capitals by the body (Bourdieu 1977, 1979), allows for a perspective in which physical beauty can be considered as a form of cultural capital. I agree with Morgan Cochennec (2004: 82) that beauty is generally considered as a feminine habitus and it is naturalized in ideological discourses about the "eternal feminine" (*l'éternel féminin*). This elaboration on Bourdieu's theories helps understand why it is essential to discuss the social aspects of beauty and beautification with a focus on women.

What do desire, modernity, beauty and other related notions mean to women? Gender in itself is not a central argument in this dissertation, but it is after all a research on female beauty and thus gender plays a certain role, however small. Women's beautification in a given society has something to do with gendered roles and with the concept of femininity in that society. However, debates on gender are not the focus of this dissertation and thus will not be directly addressed; the focus remains beautification. Through the beautification of their bodies, women perform their being a type of modern and successful women in urban China, not so much being women per se.

My aim is to employ an inductive method to elaborate explanations that are inscribed within this theoretical framework. I take as examples and inspiration the works on beautification and cosmetic surgery by Davis (1995, 2003), Gimlin (2002, 2013), Edmonds (2011, 2013), and Wen (2009, 2013): they considered the power-body relation and class taste and habitus, but each applied it in their own way to their own research. I attempt to follow in their steps, because I am convinced that in the study of cosmetic surgery individual agency plays a role, and so do social constraints and cultural and ethnic discourses.

Lastly, it is important to note that the theories I refer to are all elaborated by Western scholars to analyze Western societies: this does not mean, however, that they cannot be efficiently applicable to Chinese contemporary society, especially since it has accentuated its market economy and capitalist development.

Chapter 3

Methodology

One simple but essential thing I learned as a sinologist is that several disciplines and approaches are suitable to study Chinese contemporary society, depending on the perspective from which we intend to examine a certain phenomenon. In studying advanced beautification in urban China I was not interested in numbers and hypothesis-testing but in stories and patterns, hence I oriented myself toward a qualitative study with an inductive approach. I took on an anthropological perspective, since I found that anthropology was the most appropriate lens for my objective. Although anthropology involves more than exploring reality from a human-centered position, it still allowed me to dive deeply into individual stories and to connect them to a larger social picture. Therefore, during fieldwork I conducted ethnographic research in Hangzhou and in Shanghai, which I selected as representative sites for urban China. For what concerns the writing style of this dissertation, I adopted writing in first person, a common practice in qualitative research that I believe indicates the researcher's role and participation more poignantly than writing in third person.

3.1 Adopting an anthropological perspective

Anthropology may be considered as an "art du détour", a way to learn how to decentralize ourselves from our own culture by exploring social and cultural logics that appear different from those that we are used to (Desjeux and Yang 2020: 48). Indeed, one of the major contributions of anthropology as a discipline is probably that it has always attempted to understand other societies beyond the Western ones by adopting viewpoints that are inherent to those societies (Crehan 2002). Italian anthropologist Ugo Fabietti greatly valued the role of the anthropologist as errant from a culture to another, incessantly facing new realities and trying to adopt different angles in a moving world (Fabietti 2012). The ability to decentralize is key in my research, which examines an East Asian society, its individuals and its phenomena.

Although the society in object is not some obscure aboriginal community but the very well-known People's Republic of China, studying it still requires to adopt a point of view that is as non-Eurocentric as possible. In this enterprise, I find that my training as a sinologist has played a crucial role. The study of China in many of its cultural aspects has enabled me to develop a thorough comprehension of its customs. But, above all, it has enabled me to cultivate a genuine interest for this complex society. I believe that comprehension of and interest for a society are invaluable factors when we aim to conduct research in said society. Arianne Gaetano (2016) reflected on the understanding of contemporary China that she developed over three decades of research. Her experiential knowledge taught her to be mindful of the complex power dynamics that unfold in cross-cultural research. She recalled her early experience as a foreigner in China and how this label (foreigner, *laowai* 老外) drove her to question the taken-for-granted categories that define identity, gradually learning that China and its people are complex and multi-faceted, just as foreigners are. In her research, this translated into avoiding stereotyping and homogenizing in favor of emphasizing individuality and agency, to produce "ethnographies of the particular", as feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) called studies that focus around the lives of a few key informants and integrate direct quotations from interviews.

Participant observation ethnography is a core methodology of anthropological research. We should bear in mind that ethnography is not just about collecting data on the terrain, but also involves implicit theories regarding society, culture, and individuals (Agar 1980). According to Bernard and Gravlee (2014) participant observation ethnography lays its foundation on humanism intended as using our feelings and beliefs to understand human experience. This type of humanism is integral to social science. The social sciences, and in particular anthropology, have a scientific element and a humanistic element in their pursuit of knowledge: the former focuses on the meaningfulness of our measurements, the latter questions whether our aims and means are worthwhile (Bernard and Gravlee 2014). This balance of humanistic and scientific elements makes anthropology the discipline that adapts best to the way I want to analyze Chinese society. Ann Anagnost (2013: 3) identified "the power of anthropology to trace out the connections between people's lived experience with larger processes working at the global scale". She referred specifically to East Asia, where the global economy has produced new possibilities and constraints in people's daily lives, which ethnography can describe and explore in detail. Indeed, anthropology aims to describe and analyze (Ruan et al. 2004), and qualitative research concentrates on exploring and explaining situations, instead of predicting and generalizing (Strauss and Corbin 1990). In doing so, we are able to understand complex social

processes and the influences of social context (Shah and Corley 2006). My research in this sense has both a descriptive and an analytic function, and neither of them should be dismissed as secondary. The description of a situation, an event, or a phenomenon is as important as investigating its motivations and consequences, because without an attentive observation there cannot be any thorough analysis, and without an analysis the observation remains unproductive. The fact that anthropological research makes great use of participant observation ethnography does not mean that this method is exclusive to this discipline, or that this discipline is restricted to this method. It would be a limitation to consider methods and disciplines bound to each other. As pointed out by Bernard and Gravlee (2014), disciplines cannot own methods: not only sociologists do surveys, and not only anthropologists do participant observation. Researchers should not be afraid of being flexible and mixing methods when this would lead to a better study. For this study, I largely employed a person-centered ethnographic approach. Levy and Hollan (2014: 313) describe person-centered ethnography as a method that uses interviewing and observation in order to investigate in detail "the complex interrelationship between individuals and their social, material, and symbolic contexts", because the study of individuals is a crucial aspect of social theory. The issue of individual agency has been at the center of research about globalized post-modern capitalist societies, and a person-centered ethnographic approach is one way of studying it. Ethnography "offers a social science metaphor within which the richness and variety of group life can be expressed as it is learned from direct involvement with the group itself" (Agar 1980: 11).

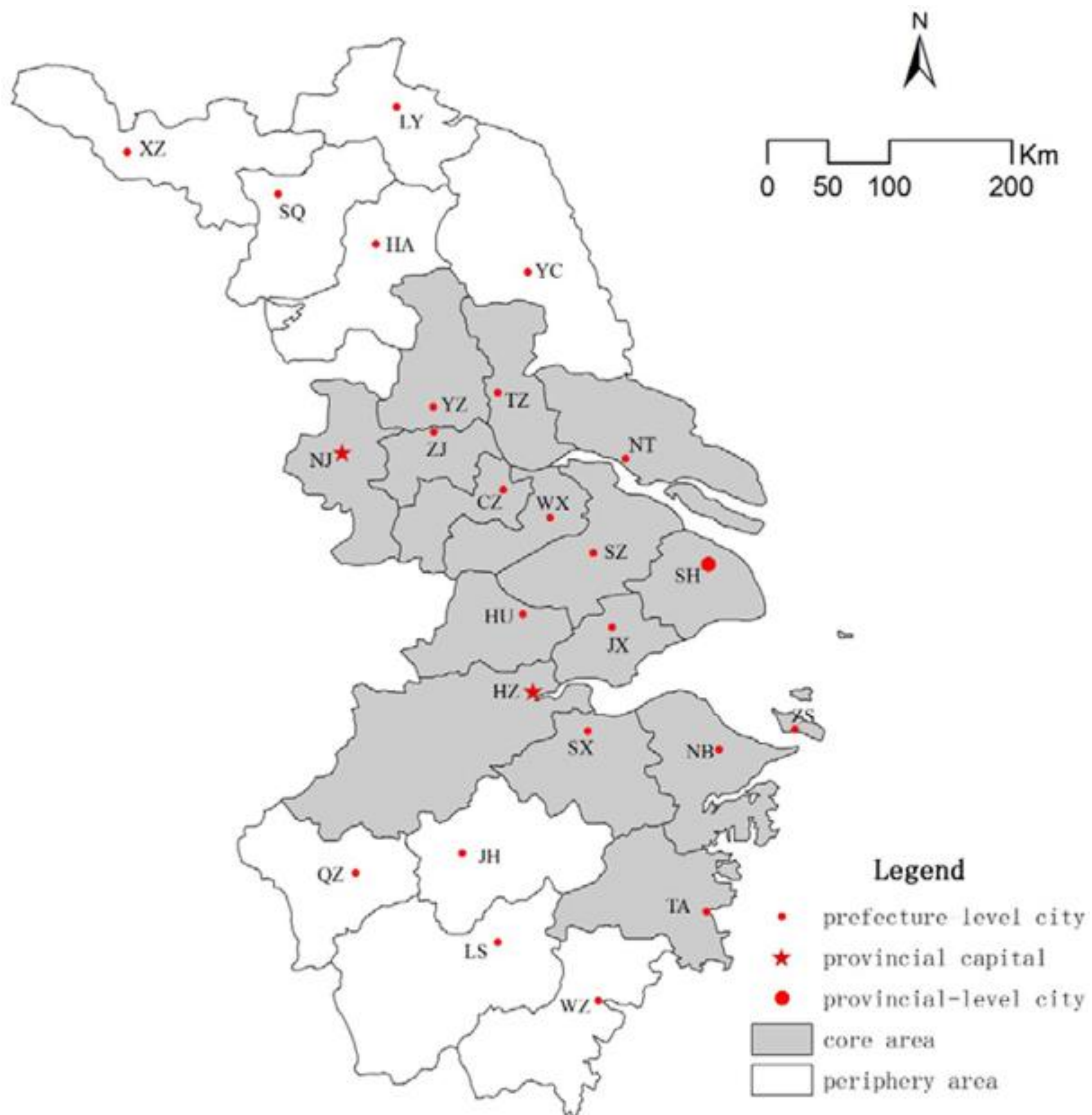
Ethnography is an embodied experience, because the researchers bring their body into the research process and use their sensibilities as research tools (Wacquant 2006). This is valid even if we do not conduct what Wacquant (2006) calls a carnal ethnography, that is subjecting ourselves directly to the same practices that the people we study are subjected to. Fundamental is the fact of being on the field, living in the phenomenon that we investigate. During my fieldwork I visited hospitals, clinics, and beauty parlors; I talked to beauticians, surgeons and "regular" women; I surrounded myself with beautification. I did not, however, have cosmetic surgery or any advanced treatment performed on my body, which rules out a true carnal ethnographic approach. Nevertheless, I did apply a face-slimming mask at the end of an interview at the request of one interviewee: does that count as subjecting myself to the practices that she subjected herself to? I want to believe so. I also participated in the international *qipao* festival, when I joined a large group of foreign young women parading around the West Lake wearing the typical Chinese dress. This activity is not directly related to beautification, but it is

related to a public display of female beauty, especially to a fusion of Chinese and Western beauty. However we choose to interpret my (limited) active participation to beautification, I see my study as a full result of my embodiment in the field. I like the definition of the ethnographer that Eileen Otis gives in her book: the ethnographer is “a student of cultural and social worlds”, who is grateful to people who open up their lives to him or her (Otis 2012: IX). This definition is in line with what Agar (1980) wrote several decades ago, namely that through direct personal involvement the ethnographer adopts a social role similar to that of a student, a child, a learner. Agar (1980) also attempts to draw two common profiles of the ethnographer: one type is multi-cultural and interested in the study of similarities and differences in cultures, and the other type is estranged from their own culture and therefore seeking new perspectives. These profiles are by no means the only possible ones, but just an attempt to recognize the weight that the researcher’s personal baggage and characteristics have in the shaping of his or her study. However, these profiles risk to establish an opposition between the native society of the researcher and the one she is studying, and might trigger a homogenization of the cultural differences that exist within both societies. I reckon that, should this happen, the cross-cultural perspective deriving from the researcher being from a different region of the world would lose part of its value. My identity as a European female researcher, multi-lingual, in my late twenties when I went on fieldwork has had a weight in the unfolding of my research. The subject of feminine beauty in China might be approached differently by another researcher, for instance a man, or someone in another age group, or a fellow East Asian. The researcher’s own cultural background may also play a role in guiding their interest toward certain topics instead of others: this was true in my case. Being a young woman who grew up in a society where taking care of one’s appearance is considered more often than not a woman’s duty, I developed some beliefs about beauty and beautification and was curious to expand them. Since the researcher gets close to the people and situation under investigation on fieldwork, she is also an instrument of both data collection and data interpretation (Patton 1990). In this sense, we must acknowledge that the researcher’s social position, although dynamic, may create a power imbalance with her respondents that is not easy to mitigate (Gailey 2014; Letherby 2003; Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994; Xie 2021). It has been observed by Otis (2012: 174): “Contemplating how bodies fit – or don’t fit – into sites of field research is important for grasping the ways that social context facilitate and limit the acquisition of data”. The body of the ethnographer is one of those bodies that negotiate their placement in the sites of field research.

3.2 Site selection

My field research was conducted in Hangzhou and Shanghai. From February to July 2017 I was based in Hangzhou, thanks to an affiliation of Freie Universität Berlin with Zhejiang University. Due to the geographical closeness and the very good rail connection to Shanghai, I found myself able to extend my research to Shanghai as well, where I had the exceptional chance to conduct observation in the consulting room of the department of plastic surgery of People's Ninth Hospital. When I returned to the field in September and October 2018, I conducted further interviews and observation in both cities, but mostly in Hangzhou. In addition to fieldwork in Hangzhou and Shanghai, I went on a short field trip to Seoul in August 2017. There, I explored the so-called cosmetic surgery street in the Gangnam district and visited one of the biggest clinics, where I had a talk with one spokesperson about their business.

Hangzhou and Shanghai are located in a geographic area called the Yangtze River Delta (in Mandarin, *changjiang sanjiao zhou* 长江三角洲). It covers the Southern part of Jiangsu province, the Northern part of Zhejiang province, and the municipality of Shanghai. In addition to Hangzhou and Shanghai, the Yangtze River Delta counts many other cities of historical, political and economic relevance such as Suzhou, Nanjing, Wuxi, Shaoxing and Ningbo (Figure 4). This area has had great contacts with the Western world due to its history of semi-colonialism, especially Shanghai, and to its more recent fast economic development that made it one of the most urbanized areas of the country, together with the Pearl River Delta in the South and the Beijing Tang area in the North (Erwin 1999; Guo and Liu 2012). It is indeed a privileged area under several aspects, including economy, infrastructures, business, and transportation facilities (Wang et al. 2012). Megalopolises like Shanghai can be described using Schein's words as "the sites of intersection between China and the cosmopolitan affluence that continue to be emblematized by the West" (Schein 2001b: 225). This means that the discussion about westernization that constitutes part of chapter 5 is particularly representative of local circumstances, though it may partially extend to other urban areas of China. From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Shanghai was China's biggest industrial and commercial city and a treaty port, "where Western and Japanese businessmen, sailors, industrialists, and adventurers made their homes and sometimes their fortunes" (Hershatter 1992: 245).



CZ: Changzhou; *HA*: Huai' An; *HU*: Huzhou; *HZ*: Hangzhou; *JH*: Jinhua; *JX*: Jiaxing; *LS*: Lishui; *LY*: Lianyungang; *NB*: Ningbo; *NJ*: Nanjing; *NT*: Nantong; *QZ*: Quzhou; *SH*: Shanghai; *SQ*: Suqian; *SX*: Shaoxing; *SZ*: Suzhou; *TA*: Taizhou (Zhejiang province); *TZ*: Taizhou (Jiangsu province); *WX*: Wuxi; *WZ*: Wenzhou; *XZ*: Xuzhou; *YC*: Yancheng; *YZ*: Yangzhou; *ZJ*: Zhenjiang; *ZS*: Zhoushan

Figure 4. The Yangtze River Delta region with its core and peripheral areas (Li and Phelps 2018: 450). Hangzhou and Shanghai are part of the core area.

From the second half of the twentieth century, an important feature of eastern coastal cities has been their vast majority of ethnic Han inhabitants, whereas the presence of ethnic minorities

has tended to be more relevant in internal and western regions (Fei 1981). I point this out because belonging to different ethnic groups may have an influence on what people perceive as Western and what they consider local. China is a very ethnically diverse country and researchers must always bear this in mind. In the Eastern coastal cities, being Asian usually means being Han, and being Western means being Euro-American, or in other words Caucasian: this is the perspective from which my research has been conducted. In this thesis the terms "White", "Western", "Caucasian" and "Euro-American" are used as synonyms with reference to beauty: they all refer to the facial and bodily features that characterize the people of European heritage living mostly in Europe, North America, and Australia. Generally the Chinese refer to these people as *xifangren* 西方人, which translates as Westerners.

A crucial reason why I selected the Yangtze River Delta lies on its economic and urban development. As I wanted to focus on urban China, I needed an area that was highly urbanized. As I wanted to research beauty treatments, I needed an area that was wealthy enough to allow its inhabitants to spend money on non-essential activities like beautification. Shanghai has been an important financial center for a long time. Hangzhou has experienced a considerable development in the last two decades, thanks to the growth of the technological and internet industries – for instance, Hangzhou hosts the headquarters of the e-commerce giant *Alibaba*. I find it necessary to underline that this area is not a case study that I see as representative of the whole China. I do not claim to generalize any findings to the whole country because I am aware of its cultural and social diversity. However, until a certain extent, I believe that my findings and observations are valid in other Chinese urban areas, due to social and economic similarities. Due to a very large urban-rural divide, the same cannot be said for rural areas, to which I would not apply my conclusions. The social and economic structure of China allows women in urban China to enjoy a higher quality of life than women in rural areas, which entails that they also have more resources to pursue beautification. Already in the 1990s and early 2000s urban areas had access to better health care, better education, and higher income, because the urban-rural gap had been growing since the economic reform due to the government's prioritizing urban development (Chen 2001; Lu and Chen 2004).

A further reason why I selected this area, and specifically Hangzhou, has to do with the relationship that Hangzhou has always had with beauty. This surely refers to the beauty of its landscape, which is renowned all over China. An old saying goes: "Up in the sky there is heaven,

down on earth there are Suzhou and Hangzhou" (*shang you tian tang, xia you su hang* 上有天堂下有苏杭). It celebrates the divine beauty of these two historical cities. In addition to the charm of its scenery, Hangzhou has also been traditionally connected with female beauty, according to popular culture. Of course, when it comes to popular culture it is hard to verify any information, because a big part of it is just myth. The legendary Xi Shi, one of the Four Beauties of ancient China, was said to be a native of present-day Zhuji in northern Zhejiang province, not far from Hangzhou, and her exquisite fairness was compared to the beauty of the Hangzhou West Lake by the Song dynasty poet Su Dongpo (Chan 2007).

The existence of such myths is intriguing, because myths originally hold a little truth and may influence people's perception of reality. What better place to conduct this research than Hangzhou, a city connected to beauty in such a picturesque way?

3.3 Data collection

A research study starts a long time before going on fieldwork. In the first year and a half of my doctorate, I spent considerable time reading the relevant literature to prepare a fitting research framework. The collection of first-hand data took place on fieldwork, where I adopted an approach that revolved around person-centered interviewing. I conducted informal interviews alongside general ethnographic observation, because the two forms of data collection are more effective jointly (Levy and Hollan 2014; Agar 1980). In minor part, I also examined advertising materials and media related to cosmetic surgery and beautification in general, but I consider this as part of observation. The most difficult step was establishing personal contacts with prospective informants. Before going to the field I had imagined a certain picture of this phase, but the truth was that I was deluding myself. Entering the beautification realm as a foreign researcher was very challenging; aesthetic medicine professionals, in particular, simply ignored my requests. My first attempts to access small cosmetic clinics were often received by skeptical if not alarmed glances from the personnel, for whom I clearly was an undesirable curious foreigner. The mediation of common acquaintances played a key role in this phase. These connections surprisingly stretched to all directions, both in and outside China, and proved extremely effective to open doors that otherwise would not open to a complete stranger. This immediately brings to mind *guanxi* (关系), one of the most Chinese out of all the Chinese notions: the crucial role of social connections in helping navigate one's professional (and often

also private) life. A positive effect of living in the area of interest for an extended period is that one has the time to develop *guanxi* through personal relations. It is even better if one can add already existing relations. In my case, I had some friends in Shanghai and did not know anyone in Hangzhou, but living there for several months gave me the chance to get in touch with enough people to build a network. *Chance* is a crucial word here that leads me to make a short reflection. Doing ethnography is a continuous process of discovery, of finding things. Discovery may in fact happen by chance, or more precisely by a combination of chance and sagacity: this is the original meaning that Horace Walpole (1960 [1754]) gave to the word "serendipity". Fabietti (2012) adheres to this meaning of serendipity, in which fortuity and the researcher's intuitive reasoning often lead to ethnographic discovery, especially of something that the researcher is not seeking. He warns us that not every little thing we find out on the field is a proper discovery, since this should be something that allows the researcher to change perspective on a certain matter and to evolve in the understanding of such matter (Fabietti 2012). Several anthropologists explored this concept of serendipitous discovery (see Van Andel 1994; Hazan and Hertzog 2012; Martinez 2018) and I too believe that my discoveries on fieldwork originated from a combination of luck and a certain dose of intuition. To contact the interviewees, both to set appointments and to ask quick follow-up questions, I used the Chinese popular messaging application *Wechat*, without which communication would have been much harder. Having a *Wechat* account allowed me to keep in touch even after I had left the field and was already thousands of kilometers away, and also to stay updated about news and events that might be of interest for my research. We often take internet and technology for granted, but we should recognize the great impact they have had upon our ability and resources to do research. In anthropology, the possibility to easily get in touch with the respondents even while not being on the field signifies that the gap between field and desk has been reduced (Schnegg 2014).

To respect the privacy of all my informants, their personal names have been replaced with pseudonyms. The choice of pseudonyms is not entirely casual, but follows one particular pattern: when the name with which the person introduced herself (or himself in few cases) was Chinese, then she has been assigned a Chinese pseudonym; in case they introduced themselves with a foreign name, instead, an English pseudonym has been created for them. I believe that this system of pseudonym assignment provides the readers with more cultural context about the interviewees, because it maintains their wish to appear more or less "international". In some cases, the interviewees with a foreign name are those who feel more international, as a result of living abroad or studying foreign languages at university – predominantly English, but in a few

cases also other languages, such as Italian, French and Japanese. For instance, Claire (30 year old, Hangzhou) felt the need to start our talk by stating that she was "no average Chinese girl, but more of a Western open-minded girl". This does not mean, however, that the interviewees who simply maintain their Chinese names do not necessarily speak a foreign language or have no experience of living abroad. It is simply an observation that unveils something more about the respondents' self-image. In some cases, to a Chinese name corresponds an interview conducted in Mandarin, and to a foreign name corresponds an interview conducted in English. However, this is not a rule, since the English pseudonyms clearly outnumber the English interviews.

3.3.1 In-depth interviews

I interviewed seventeen women in the Yangtze River Delta area. Four interviews were conducted in English, the rest in Mandarin. Seven interviewees had undergone aesthetic procedures on their face. One was considering undergoing a nose augmentation surgery following the successful experience of a friend. Seven worked in areas related to beauty and fashion. Nine were in their 20s, seven in their 30s, and one in her 40s. The majority resided in Hangzhou, one lived in Shanghai, and one in Shaoxing (another city in northern Zhejiang province) but often spent the weekend in Hangzhou. All of them were Han Chinese. The interview duration varied, the shortest being around thirty minutes and the longest being around two hours. Except for two interviews that were conducted on the phone, the rest was in person, one to one, in quiet locations where respondents could speak without being disturbed.

In addition, I interviewed a Chinese woman who lived in Tokyo: this is outside the research area and thus is not included in the main group, but it holds some significance in the overall picture about gender roles.

A remark must be added here. I chose to interview not only women who had undergone or were considering undergoing cosmetic surgery, but also women who were not interested in it. This choice depended on my intention to explore in a more comprehensive manner the understanding of aesthetic beautification that women have in that geographic area.

I also interviewed three doctors: two plastic surgeons and one physician that ran a cosmetic surgery-related business on the side. The two plastic surgeons worked respectively in Shanghai

Ninth People's Hospital and Zhejiang University Affiliated Sir Run Run Shaw Hospital. Out of the three interviews, two were conducted in person at the hospital and one in written form per email.

In-depth interviews are semi-structured qualitative interviews with an individual, which explore people's perspectives on a particular subject and provide the ethnographer with detailed understanding of their behaviors and also with a "thick description" of a particular social milieu (Gaskell 2000). They can be considered informal interviews, distinguished from formal interviews by their lower degree of control: everything is negotiable in informal interviews, since the respondents have more freedom to answer and to criticize (Agar 1980). This method is based on the idea that reality is socially constructed and, therefore, its aim is to understand individual realities and perspectives, and the researcher becomes a co-creator of knowledge (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In-depth interviews are a core methodology of person-centered ethnography and investigate the interrelationships between the individuals and the social, material and symbolic contexts in which they live (Levy and Hollan 2014). There is not a specific number of interviews required to sustain a qualitative study, because it depends on many factors. However, a quantity between fifteen and twenty-five interviews is often considered appropriate, but the general criterion is to stop when meaning saturation has been reached and we no longer find new information (Gaskell 2000).

Behind a successful interview is a well-prepared interviewer: to avoid wasting precious time, Gaskell (2000) suggests to make a topic guide that could be used both as a prompt to the interviewer and as a preliminary scheme for data analysis, since it contains the main themes extrapolated from the literature, thoughts and preliminary observations. If the researcher can speak the language of the respondent it is usually an asset, because it creates a stronger connection to the respondent's private experience (Levy and Hollan 2014). Indeed, I made a short topic guide and most of my interviews were conducted in Mandarin, except a few where the respondent herself felt so confident speaking English that she chose to have it as the interview language. In both cases, the absence of an interpreter contributed to creating a certain closeness between me and the interviewee. Following the suggestions given by Levy and Hollan (2014) and by Agar (1980) on how the interviewer behaves, I invited and led the person to speak, I listened sympathetically without interrupting and without trying to demonstrate my cleverness, and I encouraged talking with verbal and non-verbal cues. Silence is part of interviews and the researcher should not be afraid of it. I also observed non-verbal behavior,

because the way in which something is said can tell us as much about a person's perspectives and feelings as what they are actually saying. Levy and Hollan (2014) point out that in person-centered interviewing open-ended probes alternate with more specific questions. They also point out the difference between considering the interviewees as informants and seeing them as respondents. Using the topic of this dissertation, a question like "Can you describe what types of cosmetic surgery are performed in China?" treats the interviewee as an informant, as an expert witness of a certain practice. Questions like "Can you tell me about the cosmetic surgery that you underwent? How did you feel then and how do you feel now about it?" treat the interviewee as a respondent, as an object of study in herself, by exploring what she makes of the practice (Levy and Hollan 2014). In person-centered interviewing the two modes are often alternated, depending on the circumstances.

Angeloff and Lieber (2012) report a piece of advice by women's studies pioneer researcher Chen Yiyun: she warns social science researchers that the interviewees in China often say what they are socially expected to say, rather than what they really feel or do. I believe that this can be true especially when they are asked about politically sensitive topics. However, I reckon that my identity as a European young female researcher had some influence on the interviewees' responses and attitudes. I observed that women, especially those of my age, tended to see me approximately as their equal, as somebody with whom they could talk easily, being in a similar stage in life and having a genuine interest in a topic that they were also interested in. We shared something. A qualitative interview is, on paper, a conversation of unequals; thus, the researcher needs to build rapport in order to earn the respondent's confidence and transform the interview into an exchange of ideas and meanings (Gaskell 2000). Had my respondents perceived me as "the foreign researcher", that would have created a certain distance and exacerbated power imbalance between them and me. The fact that I was a foreigner was not astonishing for them, since most of them were accustomed to having foreigners around. Different circumstances applied to my interviews with the medical personnel. In that case, our roles were fixed: I was, indeed, a foreign researcher who was there to study their field of work and to ask them questions about it. Our interactions were cordial but strictly professional.

3.3.2 Questionnaire

During my follow-up fieldwork, in September and October 2018, I distributed a questionnaire on *weizheng*. Its purpose was to extend to a larger respondent group the question that was bugging me more and more: whether women consider *weizheng* to be surgery or not, and

whether they would do it (or have done it). The word that I used to define cosmetic surgery in the questionnaire was *meirong shoushu* (美容手术), because it conveys more explicitly the meaning of "surgery" (*shoushu*) than the word *zhengxing* (整形) would do, which instead is lexically similar to *weizheng* (微整). I spread the questionnaire through *Wechat*, because it is the most frequently used social media platform in mainland China. I started by sending it to my contacts in Hangzhou and Shanghai, asking them the following: if they were women, to answer it and then to forward it to their local female friends; if they were man, to forward it directly to their local female friends. I collected thirty-seven responses, nineteen in Hangzhou and eighteen in Shanghai: six of them had undergone *weizheng* and thirteen wished to do it.

I treat this questionnaire as a short structured written interview that was spread around in a snowball manner through my network. The anonymity of online interviews may make the respondents feel safer and encourage them to reveal more about their lives; on the other hand, their lack of human contact may lead the respondents to feel less empathic with the researcher and thus to reveal less about their lives (Snodgrass 2014).

3.3.3 Observation

Observation is a crucial practice of ethnographic research. I visited four cosmetic surgery sites: two private clinics and two public hospitals. The most prominent is the plastic and reconstructive surgery department of Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital[7], one of the largest public hospitals in China. Here, thanks to the mediation of one surgeon in particular, I was allowed to sit in the consulting room and observe the consultations between doctors and prospective patients. Additionally, I had informal conversations with two prospective patients who were waiting in line for consultation. The other places I visited were all in Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Affiliated Sir Run Run Shaw Hospital[8], a large public hospital; Wang Shenglin medical beautification clinic[9], a small private cosmetic surgery clinic; and the West

[7] The hospital's name in Mandarin is *Shanghai dijiu renmin yiyuan* 上海第九人民医院.

[8] The hospital's name in Mandarin is *Zhejiang daxue yixueyuan fushu shao yifu yiyuan* 浙江大学医学院附属邵逸夫医院.

[9] The clinic's name in Mandarin is *Wang shenglin yiliao meirong zhensuo* 王圣林医疗美容诊所.

Lake clinic, a private cosmetic surgery clinic affiliated to Yumeiren beautification company[10]. In this clinic, I had the chance to talk to the head of the administrative personnel. None of these sites, however, granted me extensive access to conduct observation as Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital did, which is why that one remains my primary site of observation. It is important to point out here that my observation cannot be called participant, because I did not actively take part in local practices related to beautification – with the only possible exceptions of trying on with an interviewee some beauty products provided by her and participating as one of the models in the International *Qipao* Festival at the West Lake, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. For this reason, I call my observation simply observation.

Informal talks about cosmetic surgery also happened on the Zhejiang University campus and on *Wechat*. I also visited beauty parlors, although that particular observation lead me onto a side research path that generated an article on legitimizing beautification in beauty parlors (Lotti 2020). That article focuses on the conceptualization of beauty work and of the role of beauticians, departing from the main focus of this thesis which remains the pursuit of beauty ideals as interpreted by the customers (or patients).

3.4 Data analysis

During interviews and observations I took notes, usually in an old-fashioned manner with a pen and a notebook, more rarely on a computer. I found that the respondents felt more at ease and relaxed if I they saw me take notes on paper rather than on an electronic device, and I did not mind. All the notes were subsequently transferred into my computer. In few cases, I felt that taking notes during our conversation would be inappropriate or uncomfortable for the respondent, and therefore I waited until the end of our meeting to pick up my notebook and write down everything, including my perception of the interviewee's attitude and non-verbal signs. It is often suggested in the literature that immediately after the interview the researcher write a protocol, containing the researcher's impressions about the respondent and the situation, in order to better contextualize the interview later during the analysis (Flick 2000). Additionally, four interviews were recorded after obtaining permission from the interviewees. The others felt

[10] The company's name in Mandarin is *Yumeiren guojijituan* 虞美人国际集团, and is also called Young Merry Real International Group in English.

uneasy at being recorded and I did not insist. The recordings were then transcribed: the one that was in English was transcribed by me, and the other three that were in Mandarin by a Chinese mother-tongue student. The audio recordings were analyzed along with the written notes, and I was responsible for the analysis and the reporting of the findings. The entire process required regularly switching between Mandarin and English, and the results depend on my ability to work with these two languages. The results also rely on my interpretation of the data, since this study is qualitative and inductive.

Ethnographic studies are usually characterized by an inductive approach, which consists of generating hypotheses from data, as opposed to a deductive approach, which collects data in order to confirm or disprove hypotheses (Agar 1980; Wutich et al. 2014). With this approach, the collection and analysis of data usually follows a dialectic process: the researcher collects some data, then tries to analyze it and get some sense, then collects more data to see if the previous analysis makes sense, and then refines the analysis considering the newly acquired data (Agar 1980). Schema analysis is an appropriate way of analyzing ethnographic data, because it identifies cultural schemas and patterns by paying attention to expressions, words, pauses, interruptions and other linguistic and paralinguistic features recurrent in interviews (Agar 1980; D'Andrade 1984, 1987, 1995; Wutich et al. 2014). Texts of newspapers, advertisements, films, TV programs, etc. are usually examined through content analysis, which requires systematic coding and unites qualitative and quantitative research (Bauer 2000). Although I analyzed some texts, such as beautification companies brochures and cosmetics advertisements, I did not conduct proper content analysis. Collection and analysis of data followed a dialectic process and a schema analysis, and my goal was to induce meaning from the data I had collected. The analysis of interviews (both in-depth and questionnaire) and observation involved connecting themes and identifying patterns. Some preliminary data analysis was carried out on the field, but extensive and detailed analysis was accomplished after returning from fieldwork. This distance in time and space from the terrain of study may produce in the researcher a feeling of dissociation from the initial findings; but on the other hand it may also allow her to reexamine with more clarity some important aspects of the research (Fabietti 2012). In my case, it did both things, and especially in the time between the first and the second fieldwork an examination from afar led me to identify the prominent themes and to focus on specific aspects during my second stay in the area.

Concerning the tools used to carry out data analysis, there exist nowadays several software programs that may help us not only to analyze, but also to keep track of our decisions during the process (Wutich et al. 2014). However, in case of methods such as schema analysis I agree with Wutich et al. (2014) that there are few differences between paper-based analyses and software-guided analyses. I used MAXQDA for some time before going on my second fieldwork, and the software was of assistance in visualizing the connections in a clearer way and in categorizing my data. Nonetheless, I did not feel the need to utilize it for subsequent analyses.

This study is largely inductive, starting from particular and going toward general. The only possible example of deductive reasoning would be the discussion about westernization in chapter 5, which started from general assumptions and used data from a specific field research to disprove them. But that accounts only for a small part of the findings of this study. Inductive approaches are theory-building, and that is what I attempt to do with this study. I will not cease to stress, however, that I would be careful to generalize my conclusions to the whole China, because my respondents were not a systematic statistical sample of the population (contrary to a survey). Theory-building in this case, then, concerns mainly the area where the research was conducted; however, it is arguably applicable to other highly urbanized areas in China that share social and economic similarities with the Yangtze River Delta.

Lastly, this study relies on my interpretation of data. One of the main features of qualitative research is to focus on context and to be fundamentally interpretive (Marshall and Rossman 2016). Van Maanen (1979) points out that interpretivist approaches interpret the meanings of social action: the researcher takes the point of view of the actors, that is to say, attempts to understand how individuals themselves interpret the meaning of their own actions. Is this not what anthropology does best, looking at a phenomenon through the perspective of those who are part of such phenomenon? The researcher tries to adopt the perspective of the subjects through empathy with them and tries to make use of the same resources that they use to understand their behavior (Giddens 1976; Smircich 1983). Therefore, it is safe to say that when doing ethnographic research we are concerned with understanding and interpreting meaning rather than finding empirical truths (Wutich et al. 2014).

In conclusion, I argue that I tried to follow the core characteristics of good qualitative research and, specifically, of good ethnographic research. I made large use of informal interviews, since informal ethnography deepens our understanding of human groups in a unique way that

hypothesis testing alone cannot do; I, as the ethnographer, took on the learner role and was conscious of the influence of my own identity on the results of the study; I searched for patterns during data analysis, in order to interpret the sense of my findings. Ultimately, my goal is to understand the meaning of a phenomenon through a perspective that is close to that of the people who experience such phenomenon. Gaskell (2000: 41) wrote: “The real purpose of qualitative research is not counting opinions or people but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue”. I think that these words beautifully describe the essence of our type of research.

Chapter 4

The individualization of desire: women’s beauty quest amid post-socialist challenges

This chapter aims at answering the first sub-question of the research question that motivates this study: what are the social factors that have enabled women to actively pursue beautification?

In order to answer this question, we need to examine the social conditions that have put women in the position of chasing their ideal beauty in contemporary China. An overview of the evolution of beauty ideals throughout history will provide an essential basis not only to analyze the situation of the reform era, but also to delve into the significance of the ideal beauty pursued by women in the area of Hangzhou and Shanghai in the following chapters. Although this study focuses on contemporary society, I believe that the overview would be incomplete if it did not include any account of the imperial time, since we must recognize that ancient beauty ideals have contributed to the birth of modern ones. However, an in-depth description of this path would take into account thousands of years and countless fashion trends, and this would no longer fit within the scope of this thesis. In a previous article (Lotti 2018), I introduced my argument about how female beauty adapted to the main ideological phases over time and here I will elaborate on it further. The establishment of the republic in 1912 marked a great sign of discontinuity and can be interpreted as the separation between ancient and contemporary times. Subsequently, the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 marked another great transition toward a socialist society. However, concerning the argument of this chapter, the greater change happened in the reform period that started in 1978, with a substantial shift from a collective to an individualistic conception of the self, which paved the way for the flourishing of the beauty sector as we know it today. Moreover, the examination of women's involvement in and desire for beautification has also to take into account the pressures that women bear in a fundamentally patriarchal and collectivistic society. This renders individualization a very complex concept that navigates constantly between old and new meanings of life in China.

4.1 The ideal woman from the Celestial Empire to the People's Republic

This sub-chapter is divided into three parts, each of them focusing on the female aesthetic ideals that characterized a specific age: first, the imperial age; then, the republican age from 1912 to 1949; and finally, the communist era from 1949 until the start of the reform period in the late 1970s. This division has been set according to the great social and political changes represented by the establishment of the republic, the birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the enforcement of the reforms.

4.1.1 The imperial age

For thousands of years China was an empire, since the first emperor Qin Shi Huangdi unified the territories of the Warring States under his sovereignty in 221 B.C. It is comprehensible that during this very long time, which ended with the establishment of the republic in 1911, the ideals of feminine beauty went through countless changes. However, some traits remained predominant throughout time and provide us with a valuable overview of the social and domestic life of ancient Chinese women. What we know about beauty trends in imperial China came to us mostly through paintings and literary texts. In his remarkable book about the cultural history of beauty in East Asia, Cho (2012) considers *Occasional Contemplations* (*Jianqing ouji* 閒情偶寄) by writer Li Yu (1610-1680) to be the first Chinese theory of feminine beauty. There, Li Yu discussed a woman's appearance in relation to her character and manners. For example, he evaluated the eyes according to their size, movements and proportion of black and white parts. It emerged that slim eyes were to be preferred as they symbolized a tender nature, in contrast to large eyes that were considered as a typical trait of loose women.[11]

[11] Here is a fascinating note on the sense of beauty in traditional Chinese philosophy, described by Desjeux and Yang (2020: 56). They report that, symbolically speaking, beauty is not a status but a flow, and that the sense of corporal beauty is organized around three dimensions: ambivalence, movement and context. Ambivalence is the alternation of positive and negative, based on *yin-yang* (阴阳), which distinguishes inner from outer beauty. Movement is linked to *qi* (气), the energy that circulates in the body and that affects the skin's health and beauty. Context goes beyond aesthetics and relates to *shi* (势), the circumstances, the state of things, which works as a basis for every interpretation of sense.

Family and social life in the imperial age was dominated by Confucian values, although other ideologies such as Taoism, Buddhism and a multitude of local beliefs also participated in shaping people's lives. Confucianism, however, was the only one that went closer to being a state ideology, since learning the Confucian classics was the main requirement to become an imperial official. Confucianism is a multifaceted philosophy whose exhaustive analysis requires a separate book, and in the interest of this thesis only the essential aspects regarding social relations will be addressed. As explained by Lippiello (2009), human relations according to Confucianism were guided by modesty, loyalty, sincerity and a comprehension of justice. Friendship was a paramount value, where the individual did not aspire at being recognized as an individual, instead found in friendship the joy of togetherness. In addition to the relation among friends, the other human relations were: father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, ruler and minister. Rituals (*li* 礼) were central in the Confucian thought: they maintained a balanced social structure and the stability of the state, by reinforcing the principles, the distinctions and the dynamics that were the foundation of social and family relations (Lippiello 2009; Buckley Ebrey 1991; Mitter 2004). Rituals reproduced social and gender hierarchies, therefore people who properly observed rituals were able to act according to their obligations and morally improve themselves and perfect the world (Buckley Ebrey 1991; Goldin 2014). Seeing that the Confucian society was patriarchal and valued the community over the individual, the social role of women was to marry and give birth to offspring, which resulted in their exclusion from major social activities and in their confinement at home (Cho 2012; Zemanek 2014). However, women knew how to work with their hands (mostly sewing) following the virtue of "womanly work" (*nü gong* 女红): "Regardless of class, a woman's moral worth was actualized by manual labor" (Ko 2008: 12). Women with a demure and delicate nature and appearance were considered ideal wives, since a virtuous woman needed to be modest and devoted to her household: bound feet are often regarded as a symbol of this virtue (Ip 2003; Cho 2012). The practice of foot-binding is without doubt the most famous beauty trend of ancient China, eradicated only in the first half of the twentieth century. This painful practice, that started when a girl was very young, involved tightly binding her feet in stripes of cloth to keep them from growing. Some scholars such as Goldin (2014) point out that foot-binding was not a Confucian practice, because its original purpose was linked to sexual attractiveness and had nothing to do with the cultivation of morality, which was the foremost pillar of Confucianism. Bound feet were indeed a symbol of eroticism, as described by Wang P. (2000: 55):

> "It shines with beautiful embroidery and irresistible charm on the surface, yet underneath there is only deformity and foul odor. It makes a woman appear celestial and high-bred; when bared, the feet resemble a pair of hooves. Adorned with shoes, bound feet invoke art and magic; under the bandages, however, is the trace of violence. Outside, a bound foot is erect and pointed like a penis; inside, it is creased and curved like a vagina. A pair of bound feet are sacred and dirty, a taboo and an object of desire. Footbinding contaminates and cleanses, curses and heals, masks and displays, seduces and kills".

This practice became integral to the traditional patriarchal family and valued as fundamental for a daughter's chances to enter a good marriage. Philosophically speaking, however, it was not a Confucian practice. But some kind of moral justification was found by both upper class women, who rethought this custom as a demonstration of virtues like diligence and perseverance, and male moralists, who considered it helpful to keep women from wandering outside the house (Goldin 2014). In the traditional society, women belonged to the domestic world while men dealt with the public world, and foot-binding adapted to this custom so well that it reinforced it. Yet, the finding of considerable quantities of tiny shoes to be worn outside suggests that women with bound feet were in fact not trapped at home: instead, they had the chance to move around the public sphere (Ko 2008).

A delicate and fragile figure with small feet and small hands was considered sexually attractive, as it is shown in many literary works such as the *Book of Later Han* and the poetry and prose of the Six Dynasties (Cho 2012). Figure 5 shows a typical beauty featuring a thin physique and slim eyes. As mentioned above, slim eyes were preferred to large eyes and were given a positive connotation related to a gentle nature. In this picture we observe two other typical beauty traits: round face and pale skin, accentuated by some rouge on the cheeks. Pale skin has been a beauty standard throughout Chinese history, and women usually applied white powder on their face and on the visible parts of their bodies, as showed in paintings dating to the Five Dynasties (907-960) (Cho 2012).

Figure 5. Court Lady, a silk painting. Slim eyes, thin figure, round face and pale skin (Cho 2012: 97).

The confrontation with today's beauty ideals highlights some key differences, since women now desire an oval face and large eyes, something quite distant from what we see in this picture. But a thin physique and pale skin are as fashionable today as they were more than one thousand years ago. A question, then, arises: have these two ideals been constantly unaltered or have they come back into fashion? Several paintings from the Tang dynasty (618-907) show women with plump bodies (see Figure 6). This led scholars to deduce that during this time the ideal body shape had changed from thin to fat. There is no definitive reason for this shift, but a sensible hypothesis is that the new ideal reflected the body size of some influential noblewoman.

Figure 6. Zhou Fang, *Courtiers Playing Backgammon*. It depicts the plump female figures admired in a certain period of the Tang dynasty (Cho 2012: 34).

In imperial times, princesses and empresses would set beauty trends, since their portraits were admired all over the empire and they occupied a prestigious position that allowed them to exercise power over other women (Cho 2012). In *The Old Book of Tang*, the imperial consort Yang Guifei (719-756) is described as "full and enchanting in appearance, skilled in singing and dancing" (Cho 2012: 30). Descriptions like this led scholars to the interpretation that her body size was quite large ("full") and that it influenced the body ideals of the time. However, it is not clear when exactly this trend appeared and how long it stayed in vogue after the death of Yang Guifei. All we know is that in the paintings of the following dynasties plump women were rarely portrayed, and this shift from a thin to a corpulent physique and back gives evidence of at least one interruption in the otherwise continuous ideal of a slender body. The imperial consort Yang Guifei is one of the Four Great Beauties (*si da meinü* 四大美女), the four women of ancient China renowned for their extraordinary fairness. The other three are Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojun, and Diaochan – the last one is a fictional character of the 14th century novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*sanguo yanyi* 三国演义). There is controversy about the lives of these women who with their charm managed to influence princes and emperors (Yang L. 2015). The Mandarin idiom *qingren yanli chu xishi* (情人眼里出西施), that corresponds to the English "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", literally translates into "in the eyes of a lover appears Xi Shi", one of the legendary beauties: this demonstrates how entrenched in the Chinese culture the Four Great Beauties are. The controversies about their actions are in part linked to popular legends that depicted beautiful women as frightening and dangerous, ready to use their beauty to entice men and cause terrible harms. According to Cho (2012), the Confucian view of women supported the idea of female beauty as vicious, because it was virtue, not beauty, that made a woman ideal. Concerning the aesthetic features of an ideal woman during the imperial age, Wang P. (2000) argues that what truly mattered the most were her bound feet: all the other beauty traits were not as valuable as this particular one, which made an ugly woman with bound feet to be considered superior than a pretty woman with naturally large feet.

At the end of the imperial age, during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), the Celestial Empire had increasing contacts with the West. As a consequence, beauty trends were contaminated. Figure 7 is a photograph of imperial concubine Zhenfei (1876-1900), believed to be the favorite consort of emperor Guangxu, and shows some of the ideals of beauty of the time: white and smooth skin, straight nose, sumptuous hair, and slender eyes with double eyelids. It is one of the first appearances of double-lidded eyes as a beauty ideal, in a time period where single eyelids were considered beautiful if they were clear (Cho 2012). Fair skin remained a constant

ideal trait throughout time. The origins of this ideal have to be found in what fair skin symbolized, that is, nobility and refinement, just like in Victorian England: noblewomen stayed in the shade inside their mansions, while peasants had to spend the day working in the fields under the burning sunlight (Schein 1994; Johansson 1998; Xie and Zhang 2013). Fair skin has enjoyed such a high consideration throughout China's history that it features in an old proverb: "A fair skin overshadows three ugly qualities" (*yi bai zhe san chou* 一白遮三丑) as reported by Johansson (1998: 60).

Figure 7. Zhenfei, consort of emperor Guangxu (Cho 2012: 218).

4.1.2 The republic

As a consequence of the new confrontation with Western cultures, at the beginning of the twentieth century Chinese intellectuals blamed Confucianism to be the cause of China's backwardness on a cultural, economic and political level. Traditional values seemed inadequate to new ideals such as democracy and progress: this prompted a rejection of old-fashioned female adornment and beauty practices, especially foot-binding, which was harshly criticized, thus making the first step toward its eradication (Lippiello 2009). With the establishment of the republic in 1912 and the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the modernization of society became a central argument for both politicians and intellectuals: the newly born republican China wanted to become *modern.* Some intellectuals argued that modernization was to be reached by abandoning completely the old Confucian values, while others thought that Confucianism could be adapted to the requirements of the modern world (Mitter 2004). Mitter (2004: 112) writes:

> "[…] modernity, in its many incarnations (Social Darwinism, liberalism, imperialism, capitalism, socialism), made assumptions that were clearly at odds with Confucianism. The modern mindset was concerned with dynamic growth rather than orderly stasis. It made assumptions that were less hierarchical than those of Confucianism, but also lessened social obligations from one group or individual towards another".

Therefore, the contacts with foreign countries and the new modernization drive made Western fashionable clothes, high heels, and makeup very popular among women living in big Chinese cities in the 1920s and 1930s (Dong 2008). Advertising posters of the early decades of the twentieth century often depicted women who showed off some traits of Western-inspired beauty and fashion, as portrayed in Figure 8: the model has permed hair and wears a bathing suit revealing large parts of her body, in an attire that does not align to the Confucian values of a modest and demure woman.

Figure 8. *Woman in a Canoe*, by Zhiying Studio. Advertisement poster for Great Eastern Dispensary Ltd., 1930s (Johnston Laing 2004: 216).

It seems that the modernization of society passed through – or was reflected in – the modernization of women's attire. Modesty was no longer the most valuable attribute of a woman and her body no longer needed to be covered by loose layers of garments. Bodily forms were wrapped in tighter clothes, such as a new design of the *qipao*, and (non-bound) feet donned Western-style high-heeled shoes (see Figure 9). The new ideal woman was boldly feminine, not timidly demure.

Figure 9. *The Movie Actress Chen Yunshang*, by Zhiying Studio (Johnston Laing 2004: 162).

As pointed out by Finnane (1996), in the 1930s the modernization of the female physique was encouraged with athletic activities in schools and with media attention given to professional athletes. This means that the beauty ideals set for urban women included not only charming garments, but also some physical strength. And this strength later became a key aspect of women's bodily representation after the establishment of the PRC in 1949.

4.1.3 The communist times

Mao Zedong and the Communist Party reinforced the already existing rejection of Confucian values, considered the main causes of China's backwardness; this repudiation reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) with the official banishment of Confucianism (Lippiello 2009). Similarly, traits of feminine beauty regarded as connected to those banned Confucian values were rejected. The Party aimed at liberating women from the ancient male-dominated system and considered the refusal of embellishment as a sign of their liberation and dignity (Ip 2003). Women's liberation and dignity were tightly linked to a discourse of gender equality, firmly promoted by the regime, which apparently expressed itself through the condemnation of what the communists called bourgeois femininity (Angeloff 2010). The rejection of beauty also signified women's revolutionary attitude, because those who rejected self-beautification were seen as more capable to endure poverty and work for the revolution (Ip 2003). On a more practical note, not wearing traditional feminine clothes and makeup enabled women to work in factories and farms alongside the men: this is why female and male fashion of that time was dominated by shapeless baggy khaki, grey, and blue outfits, the so-called Mao suit, which became a famous element of the Chinese communist iconography (Kunz 1996; Finnane 1996; Yang M. 1999; Angeloff 2010). Revolutionary posters often featured workers and peasants wearing that outfit, as seen in Figure 10, where a sun-tanned strong-looking woman is marching in the famous unisex blue suit. Western observers of that time commented on Chinese female clothing by describing it as simple and practical, but also as unfeminine or even plain ugly (Finnane 1996). However, Elizabeth Croll (1983) noted that, at least in Shanghai, clothes in Maoist times were not as colorless as many travelers described them: there was still room for personal decoration, different cuts and fabrics, and splashes of color.

In essence, what the Communist Party tried to do was to challenge the traditional gender dichotomies that saw the male body as strong and the female body as delicate. Socialist China promoted gender equality, therefore all types of inequality including that related to physical appearance had to be wiped away. In his writings, Mao criticized women's tight dresses and facial make-up as well as bound feet as forms of torture that were imposed on women's bodies (Schram 1992; Otis 2012). I find it significant that Mao put on the same level fashion trends belonging to the modernizing efforts of the republican decades of early twentieth-century and practices that were remnants of the traditional imperial values. To the Communist thought, all these were expressions of beauty that did not represent the revolutionary path on which the

country was marching. That is essentially the reason why they were rejected. The relationship between China's politics and female fashion is an intriguing topic to examine, and some studies such as Finnane (1996), Finnane and McLaren (1999), Hershatter (2007), and Brownell (1995, 2001, 2005) have highlighted that the image of the woman could be employed as a representation or a metaphor of the whole nation.

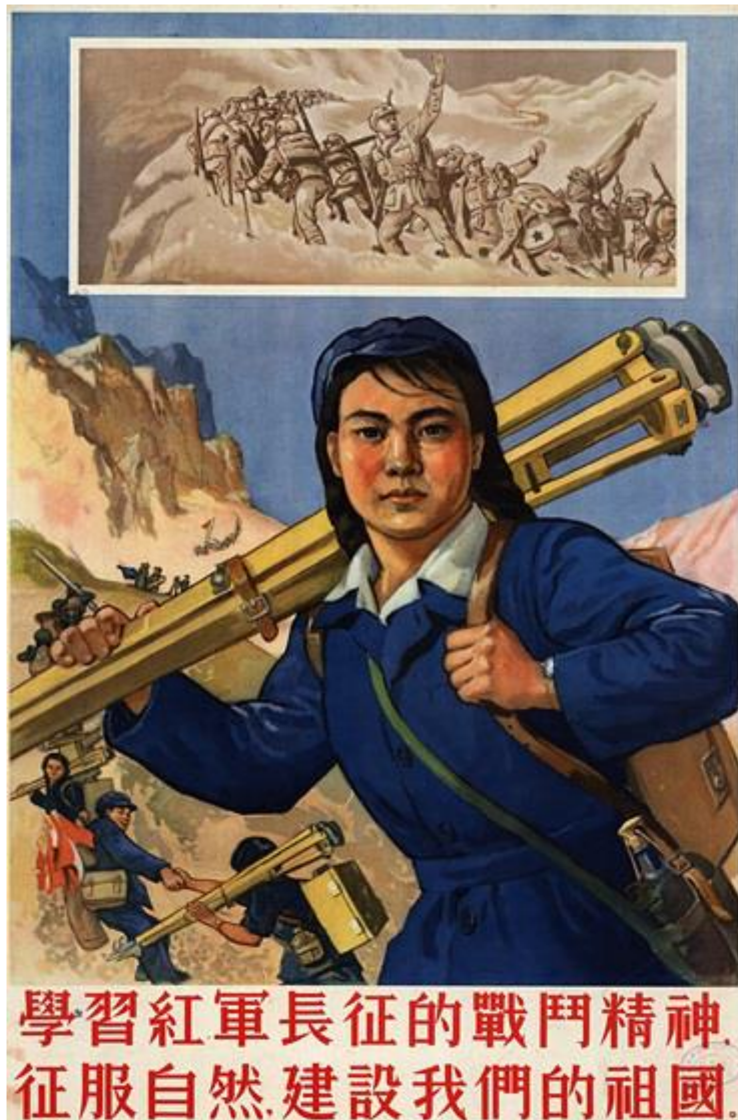


Figure 10. Revolutionary poster "Study the battle spirit of the Red Army during the Long March, conquer nature, build up our nation" (*Xuexi Hongjun Changzhengde zhandou jingshen, zhengfu ziran, jianshe womende zuguo* 学习红军长征的战斗精神，征服自然，建设我们的祖国), by Zhou Lingjian, 1953.

The Party's aversion to feminine looks reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when the red guards attacked women who dressed in a way that was considered too feminine (Finnane 1996). The ideal socialist women were better represented by the "iron girl brigades", which were agricultural and industrial workers with muscular arms and robust bodies (Hanser 2005). Figure 11 below shows an example of such muscular agricultural female workers. These models pictured in posters had the function to transmit party policy and therefore were thoroughly scrutinized before being published (Evans 1999). Haircuts both for men and women were usually short and simple, and the ideal face color was proletarian red as opposed to the bourgeois white that was in vogue before (Desjeux and Yang 2020). For the first time after centuries, slender physiques and porcelain skin were no longer the ideal attributes of female appearance.

Figure 11. Revolutionary poster "Strive for abundant harvest, amass grain" (*Duo fengshou guangji liang* 夺丰收广积粮) by the Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe Propaganda Group (上海人民出版社宣传画创作组), 1973.

After Mao's death in 1976 and with the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China entered the so-called reform era, a period of reforms and economic development that completely changed the structure of the country (Cao et al. 2010; Minzner 2015). For what concerns fashion and beauty, the urban population slowly abandoned their gender neutral revolutionary clothing and absence of make-up, and turned toward more glamorous Western-inspired attire. Opening-up to the rest of the world meant that European and North American beauty trends and practices massively entered China in the forms of cinema, fashion, cosmetics and advertisement, leading to a significant change in the pursuit of beauty.

4.2 The reform era and the rise of the individual

The reform era formally began in 1978 when the government led by Deng Xiaoping launched the *gaige kaifang* (改革开放), that is to say the "reform and open" program. This period is also called the market economy or the post-socialist era. The official party line, though, has been maintained as socialist, and that is why there may be skepticism at defining this era as post-socialist. However, I agree with Hanser (2005) who adopted the formulation by Lee (2002): China can be defined post-socialist because the planned economy does not play a central role in either production or consumption anymore. This is linked to the fact that the primary struggle of the post-socialist state is focused on economic growth and development, no longer on class struggle (Liao 2016). A side effect of the focus on development was the reawakening of Confucianism popularity through movements that promoted modernization but also held on to traditional Chinese culture: traditional values have been seen as key to contrast the hectic race to success that has characterized the country's fast development (Lippiello 2009).

During her life in China in the 1980s, Judith Farquhar (2002) noted that gender differentiation in clothing and cosmetics became extreme, particularly among the youth: young women were often seen wearing "rococo assemblages of ruffles, ribbons, sequins, and satins", perceived as very feminine outfits, while men opted for leather and cowboy fashion items that stressed their masculinity (Farquhar 2002: 211). This may in part be a consequence of the strong juxtaposition of fashion extremes that Croll (1983) observed in the early 1980s. Fashion trends of the "old" and the "new" China were coexisting: in big cities the *qipao* was having a comeback and at the same time the white wedding dress was becoming popular, but the Maoist blue uniform was still widely worn by women in the countryside. These opposite outfits represented the two ends

of the fashion continuum. The public images of Chinese women were also evolving, since the muscular factory girl of revolutionary times was being replaced by the new consumer woman, a refined lady that posed on billboards with televisions, cosmetics, and other goods: these two contrasting images coexisted for some time, because the Maoist icons still survived in private offices and homes (Croll 1983). Drawing on my own experience, I can confirm that hyper feminine "rococo assemblages" were still quite popular in 2010, the first time I went to China. They struck my unprepared eyes with unforgettable strength. I struggled to understand why a young woman about my age or even older would want to wear decorations that would look appropriate only on a primary school girl. Going shopping to small stores on and around my university campus in Beijing was such a source of wonders for me: kitty ears, sparkly bows, bright pink ruffled skirts and similar accessories were on display for students. All these items would have made my seven-year-old self very happy but indeed made my twenty-one-year-old self quite perplexed. A sexually aggressive touch, though, was given by leopard and tiger items, such as leggings and mini dresses, which apparently did not constitute any contradiction with the rest: they were worn in combination with the fairy princess items with no problem at all. These amusing chronicles aim to testify that women in urban China have indeed been experiencing a re-feminization, which can be interpreted as an attempt to celebrate the reacquired freedom to manifest their femininity and individuality suppressed during Maoism in favor of gender sameness (Evans 2002; Brownell 2005). Beautification plays a big role in the everyday life of urban women, since the body has become a terrain of self-expression. Images of attractive women are displayed everywhere: actresses, models and other celebrities appear in advertisements and on the cover of women's magazines, flaunting their outstanding beauty in fashionable dresses, much like their Western counterparts. The two magazine covers below (Figures 12 and 13) feature respectively Angelababy and Fan Bingbing, two celebrities who are widely admired in China for their beauty.

Figure 12. Actress Angelababy on the cover of the magazine *Cosmopolitan* (*shishang* 时尚 in the Chinese edition). May 2014.

Indeed, they are among those who embody today's beauty ideals: they have a slender physique, a smooth pale skin, an oval face, a long straight nose, and large double-lidded eyes. Moreover, they are not afraid to show their desirability by revealing parts of their bodies and to take advantage of their attractiveness to promote beautification products. These women seem to belong to a world very distant from that of the muscular factory girl of fifty years ago, but also from that of the modest woman of the imperial age.

Figure 13. Actress Fan Bingbing on the cover of the magazine *Harper's Bazaar* (*shishang basha* 时尚芭莎 in the Chinese edition). January 2018.

Here is a little anecdote that can function as an example of how the thinness ideal is enacted. One day at the gym in Hangzhou I caught the attention of a personal trainer. I was doing my usual exercises when he came to talk to me and give me some advice on how to do those exercises better. He took for granted that my aim was to lose weight and suggested I do a special training. But when I told him that in fact I did not desire to lose weight but only to stay in shape and develop muscles, he looked very surprised. He exclaimed that every girl wants to lose weight even if she is thin, because girls always want to be thinner. The celebrities in the images above align to the ideal of a thin body. Also, the skin tone of these celebrities shows that a pale

complexion is in vogue again, which is confirmed by the overwhelming amount of whitening cosmetics available for sale – a source of nuisance for those who simply search a “regular” body lotion or face cream. Pale skin, like a thin physique, has come back after being cast aside during the Mao era in favor of a revolutionary tanned skin. In Europe and North America the pale skin ideal faded away and has been replaced by the opposite ideal: since Coco Chanel made it fashionable in the 1920s, tanned skin has come to represent health, leisure, and luxury (Xie and Zhang 2013; Featherstone 1982). But in China and the rest of East Asia porcelain-white skin is an essential aspect of feminine beauty, as it is constantly reminded to us by cosmetic advertisements. Figure 14 below shows a comparison between a whitened hand and a non-whitened hand, and it was published on the *Wechat* account of one of my interviewees, Luo, to advertise a whitening powder used in the beauty salon where she worked. The photo was accompanied by the following sentence: *teyi zhaole pian huangse lai zheng mai yixia!* 特意找了偏黄肤色来证买一下! Translated, it reads: “If you want to get rid of that yellow skin tone, come buy this!” This caption suggests that yellow skin is something that needs to be eliminated from our sight, or at the very least mitigated, with the help of cosmetics.

Figure 14. Advertisement of a whitening powder published on Luo’s *Wechat* account. September 2018.

I could tell infinite stories about Chinese women's appreciation of fair skin, which also include many warnings directed to me by coworkers and fellow students for being such an irresponsible bearer of natural fair skin. The women I interviewed during my fieldworks in 2017 and 2018 took for granted the fact that the very least they could do was to avoid getting tanned, even if they did not want to actively obtain a lighter complexion with the help of cosmetics and treatments. Today's appreciation of fair skin dates back, as already said, to old meanings of class distinction. These meanings are not directly applicable as they were in the past, because the opposition between the pale noblewomen and the tanned peasants does no longer characterize contemporary Chinese society; yet the superiority of fair skin is still symbolically valuable. This symbolism of class distinction connects to what Pierre Bourdieu expressed about aesthetic and fashion treatments on the body: that they are culturally constructed signs of distinction and acquire a value that is related to social status (Bourdieu 1977). In addition, aesthetic choices are often formed as an opposition to the choices of other social groups, to mark a distinction between us and those groups that we perceive as socially inferior (Bourdieu 1979).

After discussing how beauty ideals have evolved, it is time that this chapter approach its main purpose, which is to analyze what created the conditions under which women felt personally entitled, as individuals, to pursue beautification in the reform era. In a previous publication (Lotti 2018) I borrowed and adapted the theory of the individualization of Chinese society developed by Yan Yunxiang (2009, 2010). This theory has become quite popular within the literature on China's social change and has therefore been referred to in several works, such as Kleinman et al. (2011) and Xie (2021). Yan Yunxiang (2009, 2010), who draws on the second modernity theory by Beck (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), argues that in the Mao era people had been disembedded from traditional family-centered society and placed into a new socialist society, where they assumed a social role as members of a collective instead of members of a family. But in terms of personal freedom, this new role hardly changed anything: they were still defined as part of a group, and thus still lacked the opportunities to develop their own individuality. In the reform era, people found themselves disembedded once again, this time from the collective, and became now free to choose their lifestyle. This great social change encouraged people to explore their individual identity, as well as to develop entrepreneurship and satisfy their desires. Yan's argument may be efficiently applied to the pursuit of beauty. Maoism dislocated women from the beauty practices of the traditional society and placed them into a new socialist format of adornment rejection. In both cases, however, they lacked the

freedom to pursue beauty according to their individual desires. Then, the reform era brought about a market economy that encouraged individual choice among an abundance of lifestyles, setting the conditions for the beauty sector to flourish and for the women to feel entitled to pursue their desires, including those that involved beautification.

Coherently, we can observe that in the reform era individualism has replaced familism, bringing the Chinese society closer to Western modern societies, which are mostly driven by an individualistic approach to life (Ruan et al. 2004). In other words, in the reform era "the mass of 'the people' was in eclipse and the particular 'paths', or personal stories, of individuals offered a fresh appeal" (Farquahr 2002: 177). This is, in the scope of this chapter, the greatest change that occurred in the twentieth century, greater that the two previous changes, i.e. the establishment of the republic and the birth of the socialist state. This is because the market society promoted an individualistic drive that stressed self-identity instead of collective identity. As theorized by Giddens (1991), self-identity becomes a question only in modernity, and a person's life becomes more and more an individualized project in late modernity: individualization and modernity, thus, go hand in hand. The next chapter will better examine the concept of modernity.

I argue that the process of individualization has played a prominent role in entitling women in contemporary China to chase beautification. The social transformation that occurred in the reform era had an impact on every aspect of people's lives, including their relationship with beauty. As explained by Ren (2013: 32, emphasis mine), "the foundation of Chinese state sovereignty has shifted away *from the collective body of the people and toward the individual body of the citizen*. [...] Increasingly, Chinese citizens are expected to rely on themselves in their life-building process". For the first time, the individual is expected to be *faber fortunae suae*, the master of his or her own destiny. This has surely made contemporary Chinese society more unequal, but also full of possibilities. This marks a great change in individual lives, very relevant for what concerns the pursuit of beauty. For what concerns politics, though, the shift to marketization did not imply any collapse nor any revolution: the political system remained essentially unchanged while promoting great changes in the economic system, making continuity and discontinuity the distinctive signs of China's shift to a market society (Wang H. 2004). This is why neoliberalism in China is, well, *special*. The essence of neoliberalism is linked to the promotion of globalization, free markets, private property rights, development – concepts that characterize the contemporary world but that seem unsuitable to the socialist

ideology. However, socialism too is special in China, therefore we should not be surprised by the coexistence of seemingly opposite systems: they have been interpreted in ways that suit the complex Chinese situation.

The commercial culture of the market society, with its wide access to fashion and beautification ideals, brought about women's re-feminization; this, as a consequence, resulted in the sexualization and commodification of the female figure, as discussed by scholars such as Brownell (2001). Pictures on billboards, magazines, and television often include images of partially undressed women, much more often than images of half-naked men, following the predominant forms of femininity and masculinity promoted in advertising: masculinity is related to wealth and the consumption of elegant products, while femininity is related to beauty and the consumption of beautifying products (Jacka et al. 2013). Improving women's physical appearance has been the purpose of the beauty economy, a very large and productive sector of the national economy (Xu and Feiner 2007). These are the ways in which the market culture influences individual desires. Consumers are told that if they buy the right products they will be able to satisfy their social but also their sexual desires, leading the poor to think that the rich can satisfy all of their fantasies. However, the influence of the market culture on the individuals cannot be relegated to being a deceitful advertisement stratagem, because consumption has indeed brought pleasure to people and has been regarded as "a liberation from the constraints of poverty and the limits on self-expression the state previously imposed" (Jacka et al. 2013: 181). This liberation that leads to pleasure is at the core of the pursuit of beauty: even only the possibility of undergoing beautification can already be seen as a source of pleasure. This choice was not available to women in Maoist times. Now that it is, it has rapidly become essential.

The flourishing of beautification has also affected women's access to the labor market. As pointed out by Hanser (2005), in contrast to the Mao era, in the twenty-first century the woman worker is likely to be a fashion model, rather than a model socialist worker: young women who once symbolized the potential of the socialist revolution with their muscular arms and strong bodies are now called on to represent a new capitalist modernity, one that is exemplified by their thin figures, big eyes, and fashionable clothes. The iron rice bowl (*tiefanwan* 铁饭碗), the symbol of the guaranteed services of the socialist state, has transformed into the rice bowl of youth (*qingchunfan* 青春饭), because in the market economy women need to take advantage of their physical attractiveness to navigate toward success (Hanser 2005).

4.3 **New women, same challenges?**

A discussion on the individualization process that led Chinese women to the pursuit of beauty cannot ignore the gendered limitations and pressures that women still bear. Although according to the 1954 Chinese constitution women enjoy the same rights as men and therefore are officially equal on any aspect, it is impossible to deny that some degree of inequality has persisted in everyday life through the socialist era well into the reform era (Angeloff 2010; Attané 2012). Traditional gender roles were questioned during the socialist regime, but this does not mean that they were erased. Although the dominant discourse promoted and celebrated gender equality, women were often assigned to less qualified jobs and expected to take care of the housework, which prevented them from advancing in their career path as successfully as men. Modern inequalities, thus, are the consequence of a socialist discriminatory work division, but they appear more violent now in the liberalized market, just like gender roles appear more stereotyped and gender differences more extreme (Angeloff 2010). Katie Curtin (1975) observed that there were some accomplishments of 1949 Chinese revolution that must be recognized and defended: the communist revolution swept away the system that saw women in subjugation, because the emergence of women into external and active life was a precondition for the establishment of sexual equality and of the abundant and free society that socialism wanted to realize. Until a certain extent, then, socialism transformed family relations and empowered women because it encouraged them to participate in public life (Lin 2001). Yet, there were great limitations in carrying out the socialist revolution in an underdeveloped country, and a deeply rooted gender inequality remained. The 1950 marriage law declared monogamy as the only legal form of marriage, condemning the concubine system, and promoted equality between spouses and marriage by consent of both parts (Angeloff and Lieber 2012; Xiao 2011). This surely marked an important step toward gender equality. Although such equality was often only on paper, it still enabled the birth of feminist movements in the urban areas (Kleinman et al. 2011). Later on, post-socialist China witnessed a resurgence of gendered roles, even though the principle of gender equality had been maintained in the 1982 constitution (Hong Fincher 2014; Angeloff 2010). As pointed out by Margery Wolf (1985), the opening-up policies were largely constructed on the traditional representation of the woman's role within the family and the society. However, the law on the protection of women's rights and interests (*funü quanyi baoxianfa* 妇女权益保险法), promulgated in 1992 and then revised in 2005, reflects the new ideals of modernization and individualization that want the (female) citizens to participate autonomously in the construction of their country: it claims that women have the

right to self-respect, self-confidence, self-sufficiency and self-development (Angeloff and Lieber 2012).

4.3.1 Rushing to marry or being leftover

In a popular book, Leta Hong Fincher (2014) argues that the boom of the real estate market has contributed to the intensification of gender inequality, because it has generated a huge gender wealth gap. This is partly due to the habit of buying homes thanks to a combination of assets by parents, grandparents and other relatives, because in big cities the prices are often extremely high. This implies that the homes are mostly bought for sons rather than for daughters, due to the deeply rooted patriarchy that still permeates Chinese family relations. Sometimes parents even prefer to help a male nephew buy a property instead of helping their own daughter. Moreover, and Hong Fincher (2014) sees this as a massive problem, when couples buy an apartment, they usually only put the man's name on the contract, even though the woman heavily contributes financially to the purchase. This way, if and when they divorce, she will have no right to claim the property although she paid for it as much as her husband did. Divorce and marriage constitute key aspects of women's lives that need to be included in any discussion about gender inequality and gendered pressures in China. I remember a conversation that happened several years ago in Qingdao. It was one of my first days of work in a translation company and my boss took me to lunch, together with the colleague with whom I shared an office. My boss was a thirty-something married woman, mother of a toddler; my colleague was a twenty-seven year old single woman; and I was a twenty-three year old single woman. While enjoying our hotpot, the conversation turned to the sentimental situation of my colleague, whom my boss nonchalantly scolded for not being married yet, and worse, for not even being in a relationship. Then she turned to me and sentenced: "It's fine that you're still single, you're younger, you've still got some time". She meant s*ome time* before my expiration date, s*ome time* before I approached the frightening thirty. I still had the time of which my colleague was running out. But what happens to women at thirty?

A post on the Women's Federation website in March 2011, translated and reported by Hong Fincher (2014: 3), read: "Pretty girls don't need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult. These kinds of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy

is, they don’t realize that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellow pearls”. Moreover, getting a very high degree of education may be counterproductive also for another reason: men tend to marry women who have a lower education degree and a lower wage than them; that is why women who hold a doctoral title are often nicknamed “the third sex” (Angeloff 2010: 82). In these circumstances, a strategic move in order to increase one’s chances to find a husband is to choose not to continue one’s education to the highest level. This is valid, of course, if one’s priority is marriage. And it seems that marriage is the priority of many women in China, given the pressure that parents exercise on them, to the extent that a woman who does not marry may be regarded as failing in her life (Xie 2021). A highly educated and/or a career woman who is still unmarried at the age of about thirty is conversationally called a *leftover woman* (in Mandarin *shengnü* 剩女). The term appeared in the late 2000s as a derogatory term that compared these women to leftover food that has gone bad and nobody wants to eat anymore. The expiration date for a woman before she becomes leftover is not fixed, though. It may start as early as 25 years old and then develop in different stages. Hong Fincher (2014: 16-17) explains that, according to the age group in which one falls, one can belong to: first, the “leftover warriors” (剩斗士 *sheng doushi*) from 25 to 27 years old; then, “the ones who must triumph” (必胜客 *bi sheng ke*) from 28 to 30 years old; and finally, the “Buddha of victorious battles” (斗战胜佛 *douzhanshengfo*) from 31 to 35 years old. In a society that lacks acceptance of single independent women, the existence of leftover women who choose to postpone or even rule out marriage indicates a renegotiation of womanhood and a challenge of patriarchal constraints, according to Arianne Gaetano (2014). However, girls generally tend to avoid to become leftover and thus may rush to get married (Hong Fincher 2014). Sometimes they accept to marry men that their parents have introduced to them. It is not a real arranged marriage, because both the bride and the groom have a say in it, but they just choose to trust their parents' judgment of who would be an appropriate spouse for them. One may wonder whether this habit has had a direct correlation to the rising of China’s divorce rate. The divorce rate in China has risen from 4 percent in 1979 to more than 21.8 percent in 2008, with 70 to 80 percent of divorce cases initiated by women (Kleinman et al. 2011). With the increase of the divorce rate, a woman’s beauty becomes a strategic capital, because she may find herself on the marriage market again later in life (Desjeux and Yang 2020). It seems, in fact, that women would rather be divorced than not marry at all. In addition, divorcing is relatively easy and non-expensive, unlike in some other countries, where it is a long and costly procedure. I learned this on a flight from Hangzhou to

Chiang Mai, Thailand, in July 2017. I was sitting next to a young woman who timidly started to talk to me; we ended up chatting for the whole duration of the flight. She was from Hangzhou, born in 1991 and already divorced at twenty-six. That caught my attention immediately. She told me her story without hesitation: she got married at twenty-five to a man suggested by her parents after dating him for few months, and then divorced after barely one year because their marriage was not working out and he had cheated on her several times. I expressed my consternation but she waved it away, saying that there was nothing to be sad about: divorce is part of life. Also, it is easy to get, you only need a few hundred Renminbi and a couple of papers signed and you are done.[12] I then asked her if she regretted listening to her parents' advice and if she was angry at them because, as I saw it, it was basically all their fault. But she did not see it the same way: they were just acting as responsible parents, wanting their daughter to get married at a reasonable age (i.e. mid-twenties) and thus there was nothing to be angry about. And responsible parents would do what they believe necessary in order to give their daughter better chances to get married. This example reinforces what written above: it seems that in China it is better to marry young and divorce early than never marry.

In a situation where marriage is regarded as essential, how important is it to men and women that their future spouse be handsome? The journalist Dorian Malovic (2016) reports of an internet survey conducted in 2012 that showed that men looking for a wife put physical appearance at the second place (more than 55% of the participants), while only 22% of women cared about the physical appearance of their prospect husband. Worldwide it is common opinion that men care a lot about their women's aesthetic appearance, while women in contrast are able to go beyond appearance and look at the substance of the men they are dating. This stereotype that men are usually more shallow than women when selecting a potential partner is, well, a stereotype. It should not be taken as real truth. Yet, sometimes common opinions and old sayings stem from reality and tend to highlight some aspects of society. The survey reported by Malovic (2016) would lead us to see a relation between women's pursuit of beauty and the marriage market in China, because a beautiful look is more likely to give them some advantages

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[12] Until the end of the 1990s a divorce was much more difficult to obtain than today, because of a state policy that decreed that divorce was to be avoided: this resulted in courts pressuring couples to reconcile (Xin 2017). In the early 2000s the marriage registration regulations were modified: divorcees did not need permission from their work unit anymore, and as a consequence the divorce rate increased tremendously (Xiao 2010).

in securing a good marriage. Osburg (2013) notices that in the new market society attractive women are often considered by newly enriched men as valuable trophies whose beauty reflects the prosperity of the man's business, and conversely women who participate in the beauty economy may see the act of securing a rich husband (or patron) as a confirmation of their own beauty and femininity.

During a walk around the campus of Zhejiang University I asked Olivia, a twenty-one year old student, if she thought that pretty women had better chances at making a good marriage. She thought they did. "Pretty women have a broader choice of prospective husbands... and of jobs too. When a girl is about 26-27 and still single, her family may push her to get married. If she's very pretty then she doesn't run the risk of being paired with someone she doesn't like, because she can probably choose among several good men who want to marry her". I met Olivia in March 2017 through a common acquaintance. She came from Guangdong province and at that time was a bachelor student in Shaoxing, a city near Hangzhou, where she later graduated. As of 2021, she moved back to Guangdong due to the severe impact that the COVID-19 pandemics had on tourism, after working in Beijing for a year and a half as a guide for Italian tourists. Since she majored in Italian language, our conversations were carried out in a balanced mix of Mandarin and Italian, which was fun for both of us. Being in her early twenties, she did not yet feel a real pressure to get married, but she had already started to wonder whether she would find a man to marry one day. "You know, most of the students in my university are girls, because foreign cultures and languages mostly attract female students. I don't know where else to meet a guy, as I don't go out to bars and night clubs". I asked her if she would consider marrying a foreigner, met perhaps on one of her future travels abroad: she hesitantly said that she was concerned about how her family would react to her marrying a foreigner, because her parents' wishes were important to her. She explained that the youth tend to marry people from their region, because parents do not like it if their kids go live very far from them. She said that she did not know if she would go back to Guangdong and settle down there, but she was not yet concerned. "I still have time, we'll see". Again, this concept: having still some time before one's expiration date, that is to say, before one turns into a leftover woman. Olivia was not alone in thinking that pretty women were advantaged in the marriage market. Fen, a twenty-two year old receptionist in a cosmetic clinic in Hangzhou, was sure of that too. But she was also sure that beauty alone was not enough to seize a good husband: she pointed out that a woman also "needs to be more capable (*bi nengli* 必能力)". What kind of ability was she referring to? "Being smart and knowing what you want" she explained in a business-like

manner. After all, a marriage is a contract. In order to get a better contract, then, Fen believed that a woman should be smart in her negotiations – and also do what she reckoned necessary to increase her beauty, including cosmetic treatments and surgeries. In this regard, she stood on the opposite bank from Olivia, who saw these treatments as a way of cheating and stated that, were she a man, she would be upset to find out that her wife had done cosmetic surgery. These two contrasting points of view have however one common ground: they highlight the weight of men's appreciation of women's body and beauty. Both women recognized that China is a patriarchal society and thus ruled by the opinion of men. Fen was very talkative regarding this subject. She said that when men see a woman who has a large bosom, they often jump to the conclusion that she must be a "slut", only because of the shape of her body. And men easily give the same judgment to a girl who goes out a lot partying. This is because the image of a sexy woman who has fun at parties does not coincide with the image of the good wife and the good mother that they have in their head. Since Olivia wanted to avoid being regarded as a bad girl, she did not go to bars and clubs. "If a girl does not look like a good mother or wife, then she cannot be a good woman" explained Fen, complaining that the role of the woman is not separated from that of mother and wife, because the definition given to her by the patriarchal society is either mother or wife. Liu (2016) points out that, although the twentieth-century reforms moved women into the public space and the reform era witnessed the sexualization of female bodies, women's sexual behavior remains heavily moralized. The woman's traditional collective role collides with her modern individual role, a contrast that is extremely prominent in the Chinese society because of the fast pace of its modernization. Kleinman et al. (2011: 278) beautifully wrote: "Even today, women's search for meaning includes a struggle for a valued identity and status: but the question of value for women is fraught as they must weigh their traditional economic and reproductive 'value' to others as daughters, wives, and mothers, against the newly visible individualist values of aspiration, accomplishment, and pleasure in their own personal lives".

4.3.2 The perception of gender inequality

> "There is no such thing as gender equality in China. Those who say that the situation is better here than in other East Asian countries probably only look at the surface, like all the news that we get here of many Korean wives dropping their careers to stay home.

They look at China and see that comparatively the rate here is lower. But gender equality includes much more than that!" (Mary, March 2017, Hangzhou)

We were sitting in a coffee shop in the city center, while the rain was pouring outside. Mary comes originally from Jinghua, a city in Zhejiang province, and moved to the regional capital to study at the prestigious Hangzhou Academy of Art. After finishing her studies she decided to stay because she liked living there. At the time we met she was thirty, single, and working as a web designer. Her straightforward opinion during our conversation highlighted a simple truth: gender equality is terribly hard to reach and involves much more than women not dropping their career for their family. In contemporary China gender equality is a principle, or even a utopia, rather than a reality, and this is shown clearly in the job market (Angeloff 2010, 2014). Yet, when asked about their opinion on the issue, most of my interviewees – with the exception of Mary and few others – compared their country favorably to Korea and Japan, which aroused my curiosity. Their point can be resumed as follows: even though there is still a lot to do to improve equality in China, at least the situation is not as bad as in Korea and Japan, where women receive such a strong social pressure that in most cases they feel forced to abandon their career after they get married. Here, instead, this happens less often, because husbands and parents are supportive of women's professional life, heritage of the communist times where men and women enjoyed possibly the highest work equality. Interestingly, the rankings of countries according to their gender equality index are themselves in contrast. The Gender Inequality Index (GII) measured by the United Nations Development Programme in 2019 ranked South Korea 11, Japan 24, and China 39 (United Nations Development Programme 2020a). According to these numbers, Korea is the country with the highest gender equality out of the three, and China the one with the lowest equality. However, in the Global Gender Gap Index report published by the World Economic Forum, China ranked 106, Korea 108 and Japan 121, making China the most equal and Japan the least equal out of the three countries (World Economic Forum 2020).[13] The reasons for such different rankings are probably to be found in the factors that the two studies consider in their analysis. GII takes into account several indicators that are related to the following three dimensions: health, empowerment, and labor

[13] In the GII, the top three positions are occupied by Switzerland, Denmark and Sweden (United Nations Development Programme 2020a). In the Global Gender Gap Index they are occupied by Iceland, Norway and Finland (World Economic Forum 2020).

market (see Figure 15). The Global Gender Gap Index considers the following four sub-indexes: health and survival, educational attainment, economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum 2020). It is evident that the factors are similar but organized differently: the calculations, then, must also be different. My aim here is not to assess which of the two studies is correct, but to acknowledge that measuring gender inequality is a difficult task that may lead to different outcomes.

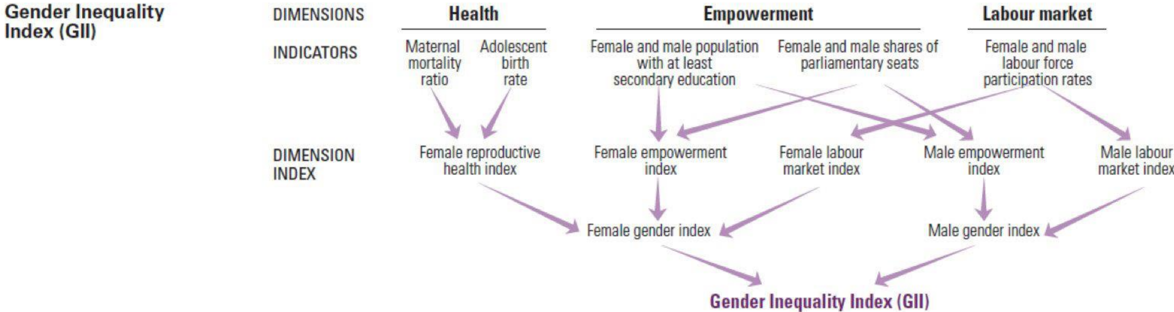

Figure 15. How GII is calculated (United Nations Development Programme 2020b)

This acknowledgment serves as a reminder that my respondents' perceptions regarding gender inequality in China are not to be interpreted as correct or incorrect; they are the product of the complexity of this matter. Gender inequality is an element that inevitably appears when doing research about women and must therefore be addressed. It is so in our case, because we are looking at the social and familial pressure that women are subject to, such as the pressure to get married, which is a rather gendered feature. This does not mean that men do not bear this pressure at all: young men are also strongly encouraged by their parents to take a wife and start a family. But they will hardly be judged rotten like leftover food if they do not marry before a certain age, because they do not have a strict expiration date as women do (Xie 2021). It is also necessary to note that my interviewees' perception of gender inequality stems out of their life experience in the Hangzhou and Shanghai area, which is one of the richest and most developed areas of the whole country. Therefore, it should not be taken as representative of the overall opinion on the matter. However, it seems that some traits are common to more areas around the country. Let us consider the story of another interviewee, Shan. She was born and raised in Heilongjiang, in Northeastern China, at the time we met she was in her thirties and had been

living for eight years in Tokyo, where she got married to a Japanese man and had two children. I met her in July 2017 in Tokyo, when I was staying in the small hostel she and her husband were running. She was very happy to meet someone with whom she could chat in Mandarin, since she missed her Chinese friends. In that moment we were both foreigners in Japan, brought together by our familiarity with China, and she felt that I might experience the same difficulties to adjust to the Japanese society that she had experienced. One of the reasons why she still could not completely adjust to the Japanese culture was the high degree of gender inequality that she experienced in her marital life, which she regarded as representative of the Japanese society. Her husband worked in an office, while she took care of the household and the hostel, which were located in the same building. When he got home from work he would just sit down and watch television, without helping her do any household chores. She said: “He looks very gentle and polite, but when he comes home he really doesn’t do anything, just sits in front of the TV, and if the children are crying he just goes ‘Mom the kids are crying!’ If I tell him what to do then he does it, but I have to tell him all the time, and I can’t scold him every day... we both get annoyed”. She attributed his behavior to the habit of Japanese wives of dedicating themselves to the household: “Japanese women see this as extremely normal. They quit their job after getting married to take care of their husband and children, which they think is a job too. But I’m not like them! After three years of marriage as a housewife, at home every day without another occupation, I was getting sick”. And that is why they decided to open a guesthouse, which was a good compromise between staying at home and having a job. I reported Shan’s experience because it represents the perspective of most of my interviewees: gender equality is slightly better in China than in Japan because at least Chinese couples have a more equal distribution of career and house chores. Fen, too, believed that gender inequality was less pronounced in China than in the rest of East Asia, though she saw inequality in the work sector as an important issue. She thought that the Chinese society was not yet developed enough to reach equality, letting some hope show through her words that in the future it will be possible to get to the required development stage. Another interviewee, Jin, who worked in the beauty sector in Hangzhou, found a slight consolation in the belief that women’s position in society improved significantly compared to the imperial age. “But this does not mean that there is gender equality... women are still supposed to get married, have children, stay home and give up their career if needed” she added. As Dorian Malovic (2016) observed, the division of labor between men and women still reflects to a certain extent the Confucian tradition, which placed the man’s actions in the external world (job and public life) and the woman’s actions in the internal world (family life). One of my interviewees, too, pointed this out. Sophie was a fashion

designer from Shenyang, thirty-two years old when we met, who moved to Hangzhou in 2013 after studying four years in France. According to her personal experience, the traditional concept of "men live outside, women live inside" (*nan zhu wai nü zhu nei* 男主外女主内) still partly applies to the Chinese society, especially in the countryside, where she feels that the pressure to fulfill such gender roles is higher. "Men still picture women in classic gender roles, such as bride and mother, and expect them to quit their career for their children… And society does too. Even though many women in big cities pursue their career, these gender roles are still strong in society". Moreover, Sophie believes that requirements for women are usually more demanding (*keke* 苛刻) than for men and that the standard participant in the job market is the man. She gave an example of this drawn from job descriptions: "When it's a male professor, they only write 'professor' (*jiaoshou* 教授), but when it's a female professor they specify 'female professor' (*nü jiaoshou* 女教授), as if the standard was the male professor... This, to me, is an example of gender inequality".

The growing perception of an existing imbalance between genders motivated some people in the Hangzhou region to initiate campaigns to raise awareness. Chun, a thirty year old single woman at the time of our interview, was an activist of the *HeForShe* Hangzhou Campaign, the local branch of a movement that advocates for gender equality all over the world. In fact, I met her in spring 2017 at an event where she gave a speech about the movement's ideals and goals. She was a confident career woman, born and raised in Hangzhou, who had studied and lived for ten years in Canada before returning to her hometown to take an important job position as the head of the "Hangzhou International Exchange and Service Center". However, she moved again to Canada in summer 2017. *HeForShe* is the United Nations global solidarity movement for gender equality, which was officially initiated in 2014 at the UN headquarters in New York City. A campaign in Hangzhou started soon after, sponsored by the local government, with the aim to raise awareness about gender inequality. Chun pointed out that, although supported by the government, their program is non-profit. In October 2015 they hosted a big international conference on gender equality, for the first time in China, which made her very proud: it was a great event, reuniting many people involved in equality activities around the world. After that, they continued to organize activities in schools to educate children and teenagers. A very interesting detail is that the first sponsor of the *HeForShe* campaign in Hangzhou was a cosmetic company called *Bolaya*. Chun explained to me that the UN-related programs cannot be sponsored by any company that promotes behaviors and substances that are regarded as

unhealthy – such as alcohol and cigarettes, for instance. As the person in charge of the Hangzhou campaign, she was approached by several prospective sponsors, including a cosmetic surgery company, which she firmly rejected because she saw it as an unhealthy sponsor: "I believe that cosmetic surgery goes against the core meaning of the *HeForShe* campaign, that is freedom and acceptance. With such a sponsor, it would be as if we were supporting the idea of drastically changing your body, but that is not in accordance with our message of freedom, and I don't want to give misleading messages". Instead, she accepted *Bolaya* as their new sponsor, with the UN approval. She justified this choice by saying that this company delivers a positive message, promoting skincare and fashionable looks to build an image that you like, accepting your body and yourself. She added that accepting diversity is key, especially in such an ethnically diverse country as China, and that *HeForShe* aims to promote equality through diversity and inclusion. She went on: "An equal society should allow us to express ourselves freely, even in fashion, so that we all would be less judgmental of others too. For example, here I work in a governmental office, and as people in governmental offices usually don't wear makeup, they told me not to wear it either, but I said 'This is me! Wearing makeup doesn't mean I can't work professionally!' So I reject their attempt to change me to become like them, but I do adapt my makeup to the professional role I am performing". She said that she was also aware that her body shape was considered too fat in China, but she simply did not care. Chun, as an independent, highly educated woman with a long experience of living abroad, felt confident about her body and did not feel the pressure to conform to the predominant beauty standards and social expectations. She was well aware of such standards and expectations, though, and this awareness motivated her to participate in a gender equality movement. Chun, Sophie and Mary may all partially embody the leftover women mentioned by Gaetano (2014), the ones who challenge societal constraints. Fen and Olivia, on the other hand, are more inclined to play within the existing rules, despite being very critical of them.

In a study of beauty ads, Johansson (1998) pointed out that the female image is symbolically connected to the contradictions of Chinese modernization. Advertisement gives conflicting messages about what it means to be a modern Chinese woman: on the one hand, it promotes the pleasures of the individualized consumer culture; on the other hand, it suggests that traditional values such as modesty and domesticity are what makes a woman modern. This reflects the ambiguities of the role women are supposed to play in the modernization process, if that of mothers and wives or that of independent pleasure seekers. It was valid twenty years ago and it is still valid now. Johansson (1998) argued that this ambiguity may be resulting from

the coexistence of contrasting ideals of beauty and modernity in China, and to the fact that women are motivated to aspire to all of them.

Even in the era of individual desires, China is still a rather patriarchal society where women are subject to high social and familial pressures to fulfill the role associated with their gender, i.e. getting married at a reasonable age and start a family. The choice of and the access to beautification are then linked to such pressures, because in a market society a woman has the means – and perhaps the duty – to make herself more marketable. Some women defy this role and other reinforce it.

4.4 Conclusion: the individualization of desire

The question of how the Chinese people responded, as individuals, to the institutional shift from a collectivist society to a new society that emphasizes individual skills has been of interest for many scholars, such as Kleinman et al. (2011). For what concerns this dissertation, the interest is specifically in how Chinese women responded to this shift by pursuing beautification. The first part of this chapter showed how beauty ideals have changed or stayed consistent over time. Since changes in beauty and body styles might be symbolic of a change of values and attitudes (Miller 2006), the beauty trends of each period might reflect its main ideological and social features. The empire promoted a Confucian society in which the woman's role was related to taking care of the household and she was praised for her fragile and modest appearance, with fair skin, tiny feet, slender eyes and a thin body (with the only known exception of a period during the Tang dynasty in which plump bodies were praised). After the end of the empire and the establishment of the republic, the image of the woman received influences from foreign fashion and strived to appear modern, with high heels, permed hair and revealing clothes. Her body was still thin but no longer fragile. During the communist era, the government promoted a very different feminine image: muscular, tanned and dressed with the unisex Mao suit, the revolutionary woman was a peasant or factory worker who did not care about fashion and make-up. Socialist modern China was represented by this strong "masculine" or better "non-gendered" female body (Chen 2003), as well as by the rejection of the woman with bound feet, since foot-binding was officially banned and this marked the triumph of a modern nation over old feudal practices (Ko 2008). Finally, the reform era brought about a re-feminization of women with a fast development of fashion, cosmetic and beautification businesses. The ideal look now

features a slender body, fair skin, oval face, large eyes and a straight nose, as well as stylish clothes, as shown by celebrities. The social significance of this look will be the object of analysis of the next chapter. Here I stress the importance of the process of individualization that enabled women to pursue beautification. This process constitutes a key institutional change. Confucianism left behind a strong cultural heritage that focused on viewing people not as individuals but from the perspective of their social roles (Zemanek 2014). This heritage has been challenged through the process of individualization brought about in the reform era. The shift from a collectivist to an individualist society has not totally undermined its Confucian core, but has raised citizens who strive to fulfill their individual desires. Similarly to how the muscular woman represented socialist modernity, the feminine well-groomed woman represents now the modernity of post-reform contemporary China: it is a different type, or perhaps stage, of modernity. China has persistently searched for its own variant of modernity, one that allows the past to be relevant and that draws on it (Mühlhahn 2019). This modernity is tightly linked to the fulfillment of individual desires through consumption, but has not repudiated its earlier stages. As argued by Rofel (2007), desiring has become the cultural practice of the reform era: people, especially the youth, imagine themselves as cosmopolitan citizens, who consume in order to reach their self-realization. The creation of what she calls "desiring subjects" is at the center of China's post-socialist profile (Rofel 2007). In general, as posited by Bryan Turner (1984), the body moves from a reproductive body in pre-industrial society, to a laboring body in the industrial period, and finally to a consuming body in the post-industrial stage.

This chapter has had the aim to highlight that the individualization of society that unfolded in the reform era has created the conditions for women to pursue beautification. The state's focus on the individual development of its citizens has allowed women to invest in the body that they desire. The desire for beauty is a product of this process of individualization, in which people have been stimulated to desire a better life and to work and compete to get it. It is important to stress, however, that this very society that promotes individual ambition is still deeply connected to patriarchal gender roles; therefore, women are subject to strong familial and social pressures that may in part contribute to encourage them to pursue beautification in order to get better life chances. Even in a highly developed region such as the Yangtze River Delta, these gendered challenges have not disappeared, and young women play within this system with various tactics. We should not forget that China, although in an individualization process, is still fundamentally a collectivistic society, where people may be more likely to engage in social

comparisons (Chung and Mallery 1999). Therefore, it is possible to presume that individualization has given women the means to chase beautification and at the same time the collectivistic culture in which they live has influenced them to compare themselves to others. The interplay of these two systems may well have contributed to enable cosmetic surgery to flourish so quickly in the past two-three decades.

The key elements of this chapter highlight the individualization of desire, and they lay the basis for the pursuit of the ideal look that will be illustrated in the following two chapters.

Chapter 5

The face of success: interpreting women's beauty ideals

This chapter aims at answering the second sub-question of the research question that motivates this study: what does the current ideal beauty symbolize?

An analysis of what the current beauty ideals have come to represent needs to consider the cultural and social influences that they have received, taking into account the special condition of the Yangtze river delta area for its high degree of development and international exchange. The chapter will begin by tackling the much-discussed issue of westernization, because this is one of the great debates concerning the reasons why Chinese women desire a certain type of face. It will then move on to addressing modernity, which I argue is tightly linked to the desire of a certain type of beauty, much more than westernization per se. The chapter will continue by exploring the influence that neighbor cultures and local celebrities have had on shaping such desire. All of these aspects have a common thread, because they are all linked to the concept of success. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to initiate a discussion that explores the significance of success in contemporary Chinese urban society and the relation that success has with the popular beautiful appearance. The following questions guide the whole discussion: why do women want specifically such appearance? What does it represent to them? Hence, the symbolic meaning of such appearance is at the core of this discussion.

5.1. High noses, big eyes, and the myth of westernization

> "I have no idea why we think this way. When we were born... when I was a kid, all my friends and I were thinking that Western people were pretty and their high noses, white skin… and we were thinking: I want to be more white, I want to be more white! I don't know why, it's just like this". (Hannah, July 2017, Hangzhou)

In a very hot and humid summer afternoon Hannah and I sat in an empty coffee house in one of the Zhejiang University campuses, an ideal place to have a long talk while sipping a refreshing beverage. I had met her a couple of weeks earlier through mutual friends. Hannah was twenty-six then, had recently moved back to her hometown Hangzhou after completing her master's degree in Scotland, and had just started teaching English in a local school. She was fluent in English and regarded herself as a fairly international young woman. She showed genuine interest in my research topic and was eager to be interviewed. Our conversation led us to explore her appreciation of Caucasian facial traits, to which she could hardly find a rational explanation. She simply said that as long as she could remember she had been watching Hollywood films and thinking that those actresses with blond hair, blue eyes and long straight noses were very beautiful. But she never asked herself why she felt like this, and when I did ask her, she replied that in her personal opinion the Western face is prettier than the Chinese face and that this is "just general thinking". The features of the Caucasian face most admired by the Chinese are a straight and high-bridged nose, large double-lidded eyes, an oval-shaped face, and a pale skin complexion. These coincide in fact with some of the ideal traits that women desire to achieve with the help of beautification. The Western media have tended to interpret this coincidence with a desire of Chinese women to westernize their looks, indicating that looking pretty means getting as close as possible to a Western aesthetic appearance (Cullen 2002; Lah 2011; Barret 2013; Ren Yuan 2016). This interpretation would bring up the question of whether East Asians perceive their own ethnic appearance as inferior to the Caucasian. When informally discussing my research interest with acquaintances in Europe, I often had to hear perplexed comments about Asians copying our faces with the help of cosmetic surgery. These concerns stemmed from the general assumption that East Asian beautification aimed at creating a more westernized look, without considering that the situation could be less simplistic than that. The Western media have usually not taken the trouble of digging deeper into the matter, preferring sensational headlines on westernization instead. An article published in 2011 by CNN online quotes a South Korean surgeon saying: "The Chinese and Korean patients tell me that they want to have faces like Americans. The idea of beauty is more westernized recently. That means the Asian people want to have a little less Asian, more westernized appearance" (Lah 2011). A *Washington Post* article reported by Christine Rosen (2004) mentioned the increasing use of cosmetic surgery in China in the early 2000s and pointed out that eyelid surgery aimed at giving the eyes a rounder and more westernized look. I reckon that these comments are influenced by a long-lasting habit of the Euro-Americans of positioning themselves on top of the modern world, that makes it easier to believe that others look at them

and imitate them in order to become like them. We might blame this attitude on centuries of colonialism along with centuries of Eurocentrism, which assume that non-Westerners are inferior on any level – cultural, political, scientific, and also aesthetic. In this perspective, the rise of cosmetic surgery in East Asia risks to be observed with an implicit bias that its aim must be to imitate Western beauty. This way of looking at Asian beauty trends finds Eurocentrism even where there is no sign of it, without considering that the reasons may be more complex than a racial desire to look white (Qian 2014). However, in order to analyze a social phenomenon that takes place in a specific part of the world and within a specific culture, researchers must adopt a more appropriate perspective. Only then will it be possible to comprehend the complexity of such phenomenon and therefore avoid falling into simplistic explanations. In this, I follow along the steps of several Western scholars who before me adopted a more comprehensive perspective when studying beauty and beautification in East Asia, such as Brownell (1995, 2001, 2005), Miller (2006, 2021), and Elfving-Hwang (2013, 2016, 2021). Their works were able to look beyond the initial simplistic westernization argument and embrace a larger and more culturally-informed perspective.

During our talk, Hannah sad that she was considering modifying the shape of her nose, but this was a desire that she hesitated to turn into reality. She blamed her nose for being "not good enough", but at the same time felt insecure about undergoing a surgery that would change it forever. Some time earlier she had been more inclined to do the surgery and even consulted a surgeon, following the recommendation of a friend who had done some aesthetic treatments. But she backed down when she learned that it would be a much bigger deal than the small modification that she had in mind. The doctor, in fact, told her that it would not make sense to just modify the tip of the nose without touching the sides and the bridge, but the idea of undergoing a bigger operation than expected frightened her. Therefore, she did not go through with it and decided to wait. The friend who recommended the surgeon to her had successfully undergone an augmentation rhinoplasty by inserting in the nose a piece of cartilage taken from her ear, which Hannah considered to be quite safe because it did not employ material that was extraneous to her body. It was, however, quite an expensive procedure for Hannah. Thus, both the invasiveness and the price of this surgery made her hesitate, although she still wanted to modify her nose. Hannah liked Western high-bridged noses very much. But she also reckoned that they were not suitable for East Asian faces: she told me that, in case she finally resolved to undergo the surgery, she would choose what she called "a medium height" for her new nose. The aesthetic balance of bodily features was more important to her than getting the movie star

nose she admired as a child, because she thought that a pretty appearance was linked to an overall harmony of all body parts, even concerning height and weight – "If you are 1.90 m you can have a strong body, but if you're only 1.50 m you can't be too fat otherwise you just look like a small human ball! Your size should fit" she explained to me. She applied the same concept of fitting characteristics to her idea of facial harmony, that according to her was "[...] more about if everything in your face fits". Hannah disliked her own nose but admitted that it suited her face, and this acknowledgement partially contributed to her hesitation to undergo a nose job: what if the new nose, albeit higher and prettier, did not fit her face as the old ugly one did? Sure, she would choose a medium height that would be more appropriate on her face, but what if something went wrong? These considerations kept her undecided. Whatever her own hesitations might be, Hannah recognized that her admiration for Western beauty played a role in her attitude toward her nose and even placed it in a wider context, stating that "yellow people" think that white people look pretty. She thought that, since white people are born with higher noses, they do not care much about this characteristic; the Chinese, on the contrary, value it and try to obtain it. She saw, however, the desire for a high nose as related more to the fact that it is considered pretty, and less to the fact that it is a Western feature, though the two factors are not disconnected. This is a subtle yet central distinction that lays the basis for the argument of this dissertation. During my fieldwork I heard many women criticize their own "flat" noses and praise "high" noses like mine, as did Hannah. Before starting my fieldwork, I happened to meet a young Korean-Chinese researcher in Berlin. She had undergone a double eyelid surgery several years earlier and tried to keep herself updated about beautification trends in East Asia. However, she was surprised to hear that several people undergo nose jobs in Europe too. She exclaimed: "But you already have high noses! (*Nimen bizi yijing gao le!* 你们鼻子已经高了！)". She could not understand the purpose of a nose surgery if the nose is already high-bridged. At first, her reaction made me laugh. Then it got me thinking, because it showed me what specific standards she was used to. She only thought about nose-augmentation surgeries performed on flat noses, because these were what she was used to see and hear about in East Asia. She did not even consider nose-reduction procedures, because these are not a predominant feature of East Asian beauty care – although they exist. This little anecdote simply highlights that the perspective from which we look at a phenomenon shapes our opinion and our knowledge of such phenomenon. This encouraged me to inquire later with my interviewees on why they liked long noses better than flat ones. The opinion of a beautician, Jin, was particularly helpful in this regard. I interviewed her in April 2017 in Hangzhou. According to her, there was

a rather rational explanation for the whole admiration of high-bridged noses: facial geometry. She clarified that a longer and sharper nose makes the face look more three-dimensional, and thus less flat and less wide. This way, it is possible to get a slightly narrower face without having to actually reshape its contours. Following Jin's reasoning, Europeans already have a high nose and thus a three-dimensional face, and therefore do not need to correct this geometrical aspect. East Asians, on the other hand, need a nose modification in order to obtain a narrower and three-dimensional face. “Nobody likes a flat face because it looks dull” she said. Hannah and Jin considered two aspects of the high-nose question that are related to facial geometry: the role of a high-bridged nose in the face and the harmony of all facial features. Chinese women desire a higher nose because it makes the face look narrower and more three-dimensional, but any modification must respect the overall facial harmony: inserting a full Caucasian nose onto a Chinese face breaks this harmony and does not look good. A real process of westernization would disrupt facial harmony by introducing elements that, to use Hannah’s expression, *do not fit*.

The conclusions that derive from my interviewees’ opinions still leave an important question unanswered: do the Chinese like a narrower and more three-dimensional face precisely *because* it is closer to the Caucasian one? This is a difficult question that requires to consider what the Caucasian face *represents* to the Chinese, more than what it actually is. How has the image of the white woman been spread and used in China in the last four decades?

5.1.1 The foreign woman as the modern consumer

The image of the Western woman has been widely employed in advertisement and, as a consequence, has come to be tightly connected to consumption. This is why scholars, such as Schein (1994), have discussed the “politics of white skin” in relation to the beauty aspiration of East Asian women. Until the 1990s, advertisements in China tended to feature Western models: the white woman appearing in these advertisements looked beautiful, rich, and especially modern, due partly to the modern products that she was promoting and partly to her confident and bold beauty. She was, therefore, attractive for both Chinese men and Chinese women, by igniting the desire of either wanting her or wanting to be like her. These advertising habits increased the perception that non-Caucasian beauty had been reduced to some kind of second-class beauty, and triggered several cultural movements. In fashion and advertising, such

movements have aimed at promoting Asian beauty, for instance by increasing the employment of Asian top models in fashion shows and photo shootings, compared to the 1990s where mostly Caucasian models were employed (Jacka et al. 2013).

That the Western woman has been constructed as the "foreign" and "modern" woman is confirmed by Kathleen Erwin (1999), who experienced it firsthand while working on the set of a Chinese drama. This is how she summarized the concept of foreigners in China: "Foreigners are modern, wealthy, and unable to speak comprehensible Chinese. They have blue eyes, prominent noses, and blonde hair. The term conflates all people of European descent, regardless of nationality. […] Foreign women are at best 'romantic' (*langman*) and 'open' (*kaifang*), referring to their sexuality, and more likely, licentious" (Erwin 1999: 245). Caucasians are the quintessential foreigners and "[…] images of foreigners, and especially white women, are utilized to create a transnational ideal of modern urban Chinese identity – an identity that simultaneously depends on and promotes ideals of global capitalism like freedom, openness, wealth, individual expression, and personal fulfillment" (Erwin 1999: 233). Therefore, the aesthetic features of the Western woman have come to represent the features of the modern society of which the East Asian women want to be members: wealthy, free, and personally fulfilled members. Davies and Han (2011) argued that these beauty traits are promoted as a "*consumer* ideal of beauty" and as a "symbol of social success", and that they are thus "effaced of *ethnic and racial* significance" (Davies and Han 2011: 149-150, italics in original). Therefore, instead of looking at a high-bridged nose only as a Western aesthetic feature, it would be more accurate to consider it as one of the features of modern successful individuals, no matter their ethnic background. However, I would be more careful than Davies and Han (2011) when talking about the ethnic and racial significance of the ideal appearance: in a previous publication I already suggested that these ethnic and racial meanings have been blended and combined with each other, instead of being totally erased (Lotti 2018). This is because beauty is related to cultural understanding, and thus cannot be completely detached from ethnic significance. What I mean is that the features of the ideal face had a certain degree of Westerness to which they have added a strong local Chineseness. None of my interviewees denied that a high-bridged nose is inspired to a Western nose; but at the same time, the way that this nose has been adapted to the East Asian face makes it acquire local meaning – to quote Hannah, "it fits". Ethnic significance is not erased, but modified accordingly to the circumstances. The high-bridged nose is a consumer ideal of beauty thanks to the ethnic significance that it holds: since Caucasian aesthetics has represented modernity and wealth, a nose that is inspired to such

aesthetics is a key feature of the modern high-achieving (and high-consuming) individual of urban China.

On a larger scale, we could say that the individual image of wealthy and modern Chinese coincides with the national image that China has been constructing in the last four decades. About twenty years ago, Susan Brownell already established a connection between the creation of the modern Chinese nation and the aesthetics of the modern Chinese woman. She argued that the image of the woman promoted in China is a representation of the image of China as a nation-state: modern, globalized, and wealthy (Brownell 2001, 2005). She connects the term "body culture" to a modern lifestyle. "I define body culture as a broad term that includes daily practices of health, hygiene, fitness, beauty, dress, and decoration as well as gestures, postures, manners, ways of speaking and eating, and so on. It also includes the way these practices are trained into the body, the way the body is publicly displayed, and the lifestyle that is expressed in that display" (Brownell 1995: 10-11, in Brownell 2001: 124). The ideal oval face with large double-lidded eyes and a straight high-bridged nose becomes thus a display of a modern lifestyle, inspired to the West but deeply Chinese. If Japanese gentlemen of the Meiji-era who started wearing Western clothes and accessories were considered as "manifesting efforts at being modern, not as racial sellouts" (Miller 2006: 123), why should women in contemporary urban China be held responsible of attempting westernization? The two cases, although set in very different historical times, are similar and thus need to be treated similarly. Since the worldwide circulation of culture is nowadays spread to the fullest thanks to globalization, a much easier global circulation of beauty images facilitates a process of normalization of foreign aesthetic features. Therefore, the adoption of some styles and trends that take inspiration from Euro-American looks does not mean that there is a real attempt to look Euro-American (Miller 2006). Although the understanding of aesthetics has usually been culturally different from country to country, globalization has brought these different understandings increasingly closer. However, globalization does not unify them, because regional and cultural differences remain, but it surely contributes to the spread of some trends, because it increases the interaction between beauty standards. To sustain this view, I rely on Appadurai's concept of flow, intended as a single economy of circulation of ideas, images, objects etc. across borders that keeps an eye to the emerging cultural and social differences (Appadurai 1990, 1996). Anthropological research has debated whether globalization generates cultural homogenization or cultural heterogenization: I agree with Arjun Appadurai (1990) that when phenomena are brought into new societies they become indigenized in one way or another, which prevents homogenization.

That human societies are in interactive contacts with one another is not a novelty in the social sciences, and it has been widely researched in anthropology. What is new in the contemporary world is the speed with which this cultural flow circulates, due to the advanced technologies that have entered our everyday life, most of all the internet. This thesis is not the right place for an in-depth discussion about globalization because, although certainly interesting, it would lead the argument far from our focus, which remains beauty. Globalization, therefore, needs to be addressed only within the realm of the spread of beauty ideals globally.

Those interviewees who had undergone some facial cosmetic surgeries never said to me that they modified this or that part in order to look more Western. Luo, Fen, Claire and the others were not motivated by such a desire. Qiao, a teacher of Japanese, underwent a double eyelid surgery because she wanted to deepen the fold she already had in her upper eyelid, to have larger East Asian eyes without losing her ethnic traits. This is in line with what Luo Wei (2012) observed when she examined the websites of some cosmetic clinics in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu: these websites highly advertised the "oriental eyelids" and the "oriental beauty" as a type of beauty that came from the re-elaboration and adaptation of certain Western features into East Asian beauty. In addition, Wen Hua (2013) reports that the women whom she interviewed seemed quite proud of being Chinese and to keep their Chineseness in their appearance: by undergoing cosmetic surgery, they did not aim at erasing their own ethnicity in favor of a westernized look. Moreover, the westernization argument does not consider another point: some of the desired looks may actually have a longer local history (Miller 2006). In fact, talking about the eyes, about half of the East Asian population is naturally born with double eyelids. Therefore, it is sensible to argue that those who seek this surgery do not usually want to look like Caucasians, but mostly like their fellow Asians with natural double eyelids (Chen 2006).

This section argues that in the beauty pursued by women in China, and more precisely in the Yangtze River Delta, there is no real desire to look Western, although some traits may be inspired to Caucasian facial features. It is true that Western female beauty has been admired in East Asia since the start of the twentieth century, as shown in the previous chapter. However, since the West has been regarded as modern and developed for quite a long time, its admiration goes beyond the ethnic argument: it can, instead, be related to the modernity that the West represents. In this sense, the physical appearance of the Westerners is an aspect of this modernity, and thus pursued for this reason. Women who live in a highly developed area, such

as in the cities of the Yangtze River Delta, have had a large exposure to Euro-American media culture, but still remain fundamentally Chinese and proud of it: we should not forget that. They pursue a certain look not in order to look like Western women, but in order to look like modern women, specifically modern Chinese women.

When I returned to the field in September 2018, I met up with Hannah again. She was still hesitant about undergoing surgery and thus her nose still looked the same. She was teaching English in another institute and asked me to participate in one of her classes as a foreign guest. People who are familiar with school and education in China know that learning English is a big deal, and that Western foreigners are generally believed to be all good English speakers – in fact many of them do earn a living by teaching the language, although the rules to be legally employed as an English teacher have become much stricter recently. I accepted her invitation and went to her class of first year college students. All I was required to do was answer few questions and ask few others in return, because the speaking skills of the students were not very advanced. But they were thrilled to have a *waiguoren* 外国人 (a foreigner) in their class and even eager to exchange with me their *Wechat* accounts. I introduced myself and my research on beauty and they seemed surprised and relatively curious. Their reaction to the combination of my being a foreigner and researching beauty was quite interesting: the girls complimented me for my high nose and long eyelashes, and a couple of courageous boys told me that I was pretty. We took some selfies together, which made me feel like an odd mix between a celebrity and a rare animal in a zoo. It was fun and to a certain degree flattering, and reminded me of the first time that somebody in China praised my nose and eyes during my undergraduate exchange stay in Beijing. Back then, too, I had found it odd but flattering. Did I represent the foreign and modern woman in their eyes?

5.2 A desire for modernity

"The modern art of dream" was the captivating title of a text contained in a booklet that I was given when I visited the office of Yumeiren beautification company. It described the story and the philosophy behind the creation of said company, with the use of inspirational phrases related to destiny, dreams, and changing the world. The unknown writer even went as far as wrongly quoting Friedrich Nietsche, and that showed quite a strong commitment in my opinion, although by means of a fake quote that hardly any reader would bother to double check. A quote from a famous foreign philosopher might give some prestige to the whole business, making it look less

business-like and more profound. This booklet came into my hands in late April 2017, when I got in touch with the Yumeiren office in Hangzhou and received all sorts of brochures and materials about their work. “The modern art of dream” was the first section of a booklet called “Realized the art of dream”, which told the story of the company's founder, Yu Wenhong. She was portrayed as a woman who managed to make her greatest dream come true, never giving up and never ceasing to believe in her dream. This idea of realizing one’s dream through hard work is in line with the individualization process that Chinese society has been experiencing in the past four decades, discussed in the previous chapter. The booklet quoted Yu Wenhong’s favorite motivational sentence, which I translated as follows: “In this world there are no desperate situations, there are only people who despair in (difficult) situations”.[14] Moreover, the booklet explained the aesthetic concepts of the company, which do not follow blindly Western trends but stress Asian and Chinese women’s particular understanding of beauty. It explained the company’s story since its founding in 1993, stating that in a little over ten years Yu Wenhong managed to carry out her plan, focusing on the magnificent change from “traditional beautification” (*chuantong meirong* 传统美容) to “medical beautification” (*yiliao meirong* 医疗美容), and to have Yumeiren navigate in stable water. The leaflet further stated that in more than twenty years Yumeiren succeeded in observing a “Chinese aesthetic perspective” (*zhongguo jiamei shijiao* 中国审美视角) while absorbing “advanced international experience” (*xianjin de guoji jingyan* 先进的国际经验).

These passages suggest some interesting points. First, there is some recognized difference between the understanding of beauty in the West and in Asia, and a good balance of the two is what this company promotes. The Chinese aesthetic perspective is combined with an advanced international experience in order to attain such balance. Second, traditional beautification is clearly placed in opposition to medical beautification, as if they were placed on a development path whose last and most modern stage is the medical beautification. In this path, the foreign/international equals advanced, whereas the Chinese/local equals traditional: in order to reach a modern beauty style, it is essential to make use of both international-advanced and local-traditional techniques. Thus, the “modern art of dream” seems to focus on this combination.

[14] The original Mandarin text was: *shishang meiyou juewang de chujing, zhiyou dui chujing juewang de ren* 世上没有绝望的处境，只有对处境绝望的人.

The exact meaning of the term "modern" (in Mandarin: *xiandai* 现代), however, remains vague in this booklet, as it does in the advertising materials of many other beautification companies, as well as in people's conversations. What is modern after all? Without embarking in a discussion on the overall modernization of Chinese society, politics and economics, which is way out of the scope of this research, it is important here to give a certain definition of modernity: a larger context will help to better frame the modernity represented by the ideal beautiful appearance, which is our primary focus.

"Modern" is often defined as opposed to "traditional", but even in that paradigm its definition is not easy to construct, because both concepts may have various understandings. Modernity can be regarded in relation to economic, social, technological, and personal development. All of these sides, in my opinion, are to be considered, because they all affect the mainstream understanding of modernity in nowadays China. Rita Felski (1995) exhorts us to see modernity as a set of connected institutional, cultural, and philosophical elements that emerge at different times, and not as a homogeneous Zeitgeist born at a particular moment in history. In order to give a more detailed explanation of how modernity could be intended, she defines two other concepts that characterize modernity: modernization and modernité. Modernization is "the complex constellation of socioeconomic phenomena which originated in the context of Western development but which have since manifested themselves around the globe in various forms: scientific and technological innovation, the industrialization of production, rapid urbanization, an ever expanding capitalist market, the development of the nation-state" (Felski 1995: 13). The modernization theory was developed in the United States during Cold War times, where modernization meant a revolutionary transformation of economic, political, and social aspects of traditional society, seeking to establish a universal frame of reference to describe global change, taking the Western industrialized and capitalist nation-state as its paragon (Latham 2000, reported in Gao 2010). The term modernité, borrowed from French, is "the more general experience of the aestheticization of everyday life, as exemplified in the ephemeral and transitory qualities of an urban culture shaped by the imperatives of fashion, consumerism, and constant innovation" (Felski 1995: 13). In short, modernité is the everyday life of much of the urban population of the world. I believe that these concepts can be very well applied to the Chinese case, because the Chinese urban population does live according to the above-mentioned imperatives of consumerism, innovation and fashion. The individual focuses on the self and on the aesthetic value of the self. This is, according to Miller (2006), typical of capitalist societies in late modernity, but it does not mean that it takes the same form in any society:

instead, it takes specific local forms in each one. The PRC is officially a socialist state, but it is clear to the researcher that the effects of its market economy have produced a de facto capitalist everyday life for its urban citizens. Journalist Tiziano Terzani commented with sorrow the desire of modernity of the Chinese people in the 1990s: an extraordinary civilization who had for millennia taken another path, facing life, death, nature and gods in a different way, now only desired to become as modern as the West (Terzani 1995). Sure, Terzani was looking at the matter with the nostalgic eyes of a traveler, but he understood very well the mechanisms behind the modernization of East Asia. In order to understand those mechanisms, we need to consider modernity for peoples who have a decentralized relationship with USA and Europe, which are the places of origin of modernity as we know it. Other areas of the world, such as East Asia in our case, have lived the journey to modernity under different conditions than the West, usually by creating some indigenous interpretations of modernity that would not be concerned with artificial traditional-modern distinctions (Mitter 2004). Eric Ma (2001) calls "satellite modernities" the simplified versions of Western modernity reproduced by newly modernized cities in developing countries with a high concentration of migrants. The formation of Western modernities involved complex historical processes, but the people in less affluent societies tend to perceive modernity as a simplified imagination where modernization coincides with westernization (Ma 2001). I believe that imagination and imaginary are key to the comprehension of the meaning of modernity in China; therefore I too, like Lisa Rofel, reckon that "modernity exists as a narrated imaginary: it is a story people tell themselves about themselves in relation to others" (Rofel 1999: 13). This aspect is particularly important in our study, because it is related to what modernity represents to people, rather than to what modernity actually is. In this case terminology is only marginally important; I am not looking for a definition of modernity, for this would not add any particular value to my work on beauty. What I try to do, instead, is to understand how people perceive and interpret modernity, what being modern signifies to them, and what role this representation of modernity plays in their pursuit of a certain aesthetic appearance. And in order to understand the passionate pursuit of modernity in all its forms – beauty included – that the Chinese people implement, it is important to consider their relationship with *the other*, that is to say the West. This relationship is the result of global political and cultural economies, and makes them repeatedly enact modernity by the means of new desires in an attempt to achieve parity with the West (Rofel 1999).

Some scholars, such as Crehan (2002), have observed that the fundamental opposition between traditional and modern is very popular in post-colonial societies and developing countries in

general: the main conflict is between those who advocate for the modernization of their society and those who invoke a return to tradition because modernity is a false god in the name of which tradition is erased. In the case of this research, it is a fact that my interviewees often mentioned the opposition between traditional (*chuantong* 传统) and modern (*xiandai* 现代), as casually as many people do in China when discussing their society. Development (*fazhan* 发展) is a subject that comes up spontaneously in these occasions and it usually involves a journey from traditional to modern, whatever these concepts mean to the speakers. In this sense, I find Ann Anagnost's description of modernity as "an imagination of temporality" quite intriguing: she refers to modernity as "a subjective awareness on the part of individuals of their positioning in a movement out of backwardness, ignorance, or tradition, on the one hand, and toward progress, enlightenment, and civilization on the other" (Anagnost 2013: 9). The traditional/modern opposition is, in this sense, not static; on the contrary, it involves a journey from a stage to another one. And this journey reminds us of the beautification path mentioned few pages above referring to the content of Yumeiren company's booklet: on that path, traditional beautification and medical beautification are placed at the two opposite ends, medical beautification being at the most developed stage. The "philosophy" of Yumeiren suggests to make use of both international-advanced and local-traditional techniques on the journey toward a modern beauty style. In this sense, modern beauty does not completely reject the traditional element; instead, it combines it with the most advanced aspects, in order to keep its own ethnic and cultural identity alive. I believe that this combination acquires a special significance in the area where this research was conducted, the Yangtze River Delta, which has been at the forefront of the country's modernization in the last forty years. Cities like Shanghai and Hangzhou are and have been for decades places of intersection between China and the cosmopolitan affluence coming from the West, as Schein (2001b) described those Chinese metropolises that were quickly developing and internationalizing. Nowadays they may have succeeded in becoming what Sassen (1994) called "global cities", and therefore may feature a prominent interaction of modern and traditional, new and old, foreign and local. Chapter 3 explained more extensively the reasons for selecting the Yangtze River Delta as a representative area for this research. Here it is only important to underline that the strategies adopted by beautification companies in this area, such as Yumeiren, promote a modern look without dismissing traditional beauty knowledge. Hence, this look, although modern and thus inspired to Western beauty due to the way modernity has been associated with the West, retains some elements of its traditional Chineseness. The ideal look that women pursue – oval face, large eyes, straight nose –

represents modernity because it represents the *modernité* of the Chinese urban lifestyle: this has taken its shape in a satellite modernity guided by the imagination of Western modernity, yet it has maintained local meanings. In this sense, the ideal look loses any attempt to westernization, because its Western-inspired beauty traits become in fact features of modernity. As a consequence, the women who pursue this look pursue a modern appearance, or at least what it is perceived as such. Talking about women, Erwin (1999) argued, following several other studies on the matter such as Barlow (1994), Chow (1991) and Li (1992), that throughout the twentieth century Chinese women symbolized the nation's pursuit of modernity, with its achievements and failures. In the case of beauty in the twenty-first century, I point out that it is not the women who symbolize the pursuit of modernity, rather it is the *look* that they choose that symbolizes, in their own eyes, modernity. However, by desiring that look women do pursue modernity, and we may wonder whether this makes them symbols of the nation's pursuit of modernity. The ladies of Chinese big coastal cities desire an in vogue appearance that positions them at the same level of their modern neighbors, whose fashion and beauty trends they have long admired and followed. These neighbors are South Korea and Japan.

5.3 A look at the modern neighbors: South Korean beauty and Japanese charm

At the end of 2018 several media around the world reported that South Korean women were rebelling against the strict beauty requirements popular in the country: they destroyed and threw away their make-up products, dared to wear glasses on TV, and rejected cosmetic surgery (Bicker 2018; Haas 2018; Jeong 2019; Lee 2019; Peters 2018). This protest originated from the high pressure that women in Korea have endured regarding their appearance since the country's beauty market has become increasingly more prominent on a global level. The country is considered the beauty hub of East Asia and has constructed a whole economy around that, earning itself the nickname of "the Republic of Plastic Surgery" (DiMoia 2013: 185). South Korea ranked third globally for total surgical procedures and face procedures in 2014, and third for total surgical and non-surgical procedures in 2015 (ISAPS 2014, 2015). Its cosmetic products are successfully exported all over East and South-East Asia and are becoming increasingly more popular in Europe too. Several of my interviewees said that they used Korean cosmetics, which are easily available in China: Claire, for instance, usually bought Korean beauty products because she found them good and not expensive. The reputation of South Korea as a beauty hub developed since the cosmetic surgery sector flourished in the 1980s under

special social circumstances – increased economic power of the elite, highly trained medical professionals, and acceptance of the use of medical techniques for individual beauty purposes (DiMoia 2013). The country's beauty industry now attracts so many people from abroad that cosmetic clinics and beauty stores in Seoul have employees specialized in dealing with foreign customers, usually speaking English and Chinese: I found this out in person in August 2017. After all, the country has invested considerably in advertising itself as one of the top destinations for cosmetic tourism (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012). During my stay in Seoul, I visited the famous cosmetic shopping areas and was impressed by the quantity and variety of products exposed in the shops. There was something for every taste, although skin purifying and skin whitening were probably the two main trends. The personnel consisted of girls in their twenties, and I should not have been surprised to find out that several among them were in fact Chinese, since a large amount of the customers who crowded the shops were Chinese. One afternoon I went to Gangnam, the district of cosmetic surgery, where most of the buildings on the main street are cosmetic surgery clinics. Being used to dealing with clinics in China that did not show a welcoming attitude toward curious researchers, I thought that I might encounter a similar situation in Korea too, but I was wrong. I went there with a Korean friend, and when we entered one of the tallest and most elegant buildings we were immediately received by a smiling secretary. When she learned that we were not there for any treatment but only wanted to know more about their work, she suggested we speak with one doctor of their English-speaking team, so that I would not need my friend to translate for me. That was a pleasant surprise, compared to the general skepticism I had encountered in Chinese beauty clinics. After a few minutes waiting, a young doctor joined us in the waiting room. She thanked us for our interest in their clinic and showed us their so called "museum room", which contained samples of implants, equipment and tools that we were even allowed to touch – the breast implants were soft and firm, of the best quality available on the market according to the doctor. She explained that in addition to Korean customers, their clientele was mainly composed of people coming from China, Russia and the Arab countries, hence the need for multilingual personnel. The account of this experience of mine has the purpose of showing how prominent the Korean beauty sector is both domestically and internationally, especially in relation to the Chinese public. The Korean-style beautification (*hanshi meirong* 韩式美容) has become highly valued in China since the beginning of the twenty-first century, thanks to the spread of Korean pop culture in the forms of TV dramas and K-pop music, which have enjoyed great success among the Chinese audience (Davies and Han 2011). The features of the ideal beautiful look promoted in the beauty shops and clinics in Seoul were very similar to those that I observed in Hangzhou

and Shanghai: a delicate pale oval face with a pointed chin, slim cheeks, a straight high-bridged nose and large double-lidded eyes. What does this similarity mean? It is hard to assess the degree to which the Korean beauty ideals have inspired the Chinese ones, because we lack the means to actually do such measurement. Moreover, it would not have any significance for this research, as our interest lies not in numbers and measurements. The similarity in beauty ideals suggests that Korean beauty exerts a certain cultural influence over the Chinese public, given the high popularity and reputation of the Korean beauty sector in China. My interviewees recognized such influence, some of them praising their neighbor's beauty industry and some criticizing it. Qiao, for instance, acknowledged that Korea was a famous destination for beautification treatments for wealthy Chinese, but showed some criticism about the whole sector. She especially criticized Korean cosmetic surgery style, lamenting that women end up looking all similar, because their treatments are "too much" (*tai duo le* 太多了). This type of criticism was not an isolated phenomenon: other people to whom I talked expressed similar considerations. Fen, for instance, was convinced that the Korean style appeared quite artificial, and that this helped China's cosmetic surgery gain more recognition and credit among its citizens, convincing some of them to do their treatments in China instead of going to Korea. None of my interviewees, in fact, considered going to Korea to have surgery. But they did buy Korean cosmetics because they appreciated the Korean cosmetic industry.

The influence of Korean beauty remains very strong in China. But South Korea is not the only neighbor to which China turns for beauty inspiration, because Japan too enjoys a considerable admiration by the Chinese public. Through common acquaintances, I had the chance to meet Doctor Chen, a physician who works in a public hospital in Hangzhou but who also has another job: he has opened a company that provides all the necessary arrangements for people to have cosmetic surgery in Japan. He studied and lived for several years in Japan and developed a good knowledge of the aesthetic medicine sector, although this was not his own professional expertise. But having great interest in aesthetic medicine made him pay attention to the trends and the desires of the Chinese public, who according to him seek beauty treatments that improve their features without changing them, because they want to keep their uniqueness. Doctor Chen believes that this is what the Japanese aesthetic medicine sector offers, being less flamboyant and more subtle than in Korea, but nonetheless flourishing. According to some estimations, the Japanese industry of aesthetic salons was already worth 4 billion US dollars at the beginning of the twenty-first century, even though it is hard to do exact estimations due to the lack of precise governmental regulations regarding aesthetic salons (Miller 2006). Doctor Chen explained that

the Chinese are generally attracted by Japanese technology and medicine, because they see Japan as a developed country that as such has both wealth and advanced technology. In a word, Japan is modern. Again, modernity seems to be an important guiding factor in the desire of beauty that women in our area of study experience. Japan has been the first East Asian country to reach a conventional level of Western modernity, as a consequence of post World War II development, and South Korea followed suit. For what concerns the development of the beauty industry, Japanese beauty ideals spread across East Asia, influencing the South Korean aesthetic sector in its initial stage, together with plastic surgery techniques coming from the West, mainly from North America (DiMoia 2013). Few decades later, women in China are looking at Japan and South Korea for beauty trends: they are the neighbors that achieved modernity and success before China and are thus regarded as some kind of models to take inspiration from. The fashionable attires of K-pop stars and the prestigious products of Japanese beauty brands act as beacons of “local modernity”, if I may say so, to the eyes of the Chinese public. This modernity is local because it is displayed by fellow East Asians who have many cultural (and in this case also physical) similarities with them. In this sense, such beauty trends are closer and more relatable than those coming directly from the West.

5.4 Pretty, rich and famous: wanting the beauty of the wealthy

Actress Fan Bingbing entered the cosmetic business by starting a line of skin care products called *Fan Beauty Secret*. She uses her own image in promotional posters, such as the ones below that advertise a moisturizing mask that promises a skin as youthful and bright as hers (Figure 16). Actress Dilraba Dilmurat, of Uighur ethnic minority, has been chosen as the face of cosmetic company Colorkey after becoming increasingly popular in Chinese television dramas over the last few years (Figure 17).

Figure 16. Advertising posters of a *Fan Beauty Secret* face mask, featuring Fan Bingbing herself, available online in early 2022 (Fan Beauty Secret 2022).

Figure 17. Actress Dilraba Dilmurat as the face of cosmetic company Colorkey. 2021.

Advertisement posters like these can be found on the internet (of course) but also in physical places such as bus stops, store windows and public transport in big Chinese cities. Celebrities look at the commuters with their imperfection-free face featuring perfectly white teeth, porcelain skin, and large double-lidded eyes. They seem to ask: “Don’t you want to be as beautiful as me?” In order to reach this goal, the advertisements suggest you use a special brightening face mask or a hot red lipstick that would turn your average appearance into a star-like beauty. This type of advertisement is certainly not a particularity of China, since music, movie and TV stars lend their image to advertise beauty products all over the world. Celebrities have a special role in the beauty sector, because they embody successful women with career,

fame, money, and a thriving social and romantic life. In setting beauty trends the more powerful have some influence over the less powerful, as it was for empresses and concubines during the imperial era (Cho 2012). In contemporary times we can observe this pattern in the case of celebrities and how their looks influence the taste of regular people. By the word "power" here I mean some sort of soft power. Joseph Nye, who introduced the concept of soft power in political studies, defined it as the ability to influence the behavior of others without forcing but instead by attracting and persuading them (Nye 2004). In our case, soft power involves charming the public by showing off a beautiful appearance and a great life. Not only "traditional" celebrities (e.g. actresses and singers) but also and especially Internet celebrities (in Mandarin *wanghong* 网红) exercise power over regular non-famous people via social media over the Internet, where the *wanghong* are increasingly more popular thanks to their massive use of social networks. Theirs is a brand new type of power that arose in the digital era of social media and that due to this characteristic I have attempted to call "social power" (Lotti 2018: 99). Celebrities are more powerful than their public because they are followed on social networks by such public: this status enables them to influence their public for what concerns beauty trends and practices. China's *wanghong* culture has been analyzed by Anett Dippner (2018): very pretty Internet celebrities build their fame and consequently earn money by devoting themselves to the discussion and promotion of fashion and cosmetics, and more in general entertainment and lifestyle. *Wangluo hongren* (网络红人, literally the "favorite of the internet"), shortened to *wanghong*, refers to a private person whose profile on social media is followed by a great number of fans, up to millions, who visualize and share her pictures and videos (Dippner 2018). Dippner's analysis focuses on the link between the activity of these internet celebrities – who are becoming more important than standard celebrities in terms of economic value and social influence – and the beauty economy, and as a consequence how they contribute to shaping women's sense of subjectivity and to promoting new beautification practices. They are exceptionally beautiful with the aid of cosmetic treatments (such as hyaluronic acid, fillers, and cosmetic surgery) and at the same time criticized and ridiculed because of their highly artificial look – the so-called *wanghong* face, which comes as close as possible to the mainstream beautiful ideal face. They are nonetheless imitated and followed because "they paradoxically embody a 'feasible' beauty ideal": being regular girls who made it, they make other girls believe that they can also make it if they have some discipline (Dippner 2018: 48). Cosmetic surgery is a job requirement for becoming a *wanghong*, part of the "discipline", and this is in line with the Chinese saying that beauty is 30% naturally inherited and 70% man-made. The *wanghong*

belong with no doubt to the new category of social media influencers who, according to Freberg et al. (2011: 90), "represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media". The habit of taking and posting photos of oneself (commonly called selfies) is one important use that celebrities and influencers make of social media, as do many regular non-famous women. There is a growing scholarship on the subject that touches several aspects of this habit, such as the renegotiation of privacy, the exploration of identity, and the research of fame and attention (Tiidemberg and Gomez Cruz 2015).

An example of the power of celebrities regarding beauty was given to me by Fen the receptionist. She told me of actress Zheng Shuang who, at a TV series-related event in 2013, publicly confessed that she had undergone surgery to improve her appearance and that she saw nothing wrong in it (Liu 2013; Sina Entertainment 2013). It was the first time that this happened in China and caused sensational reactions on the media. Fen believed that people appreciated Zheng's honesty and that this episode helped cosmetic surgery become less a taboo: as a consequence, beautification treatments grew in popularity. Zheng's status of famous actress contributed to make her declaration quite influential over regular women such as Fen. This would not have happened had she been one of those regular women, simply because she would not have exercised the same amount of power that her fame had given to her. Fen herself underwent several treatments in the clinic where she worked, which involved her mouth, nose, chin and eyes. She indeed had large double-lidded eyes, a straight nose and a rather oval face that terminated in a pointed chin. She admitted with no embarrassment that she admired the glamorous appearance of celebrities and that she followed some *wanghong* on social media, especially those who posted videos in which they talked openly about makeup, fashion and their experiences with cosmetic surgery. For instance, she followed the trend popular among *wanghong* to have numerous small treatments instead of fewer big ones. She did not exclude undergoing more treatments in the future, since she was only twenty-two when I first met her. Fen's story leads us to briefly discuss women's reaction to images of beautiful celebrities. Autumn Whitefield-Madrano (2016) pointed out that women tend to have two main reactions: they either compare themselves with images of pretty stars or identify with them. The former reaction denotes a lower self-esteem, a desire to become like those celebrities contrasted by the feeling that they will never be as pretty; the latter reaction denotes a higher self-esteem, a certain confidence that with a little work they will be able to look as pretty as those models. She calls these reactions respectively "social comparison" and "social identification" (Whitefield-

Madrano 2016: 155). People's engagement in comparison with idealized media images may often be involuntary and social comparisons can be divided into downward comparison with those who are perceived as inferior and upward comparison with those who are perceived as superior: comparison with advertising and celebrity images is usually an upward comparison that results in people's inferior evaluation of themselves (Martin and Kennedy 1994; Zhou et al. 2008; Tsai 2013). I would argue that women like Fen, who take inspiration from celebrities to improve their own attractiveness, perform what Whitefield-Madrano called social identification: instead of being discouraged by their idols' beauty, they are encouraged and motivated to try and chase it on their own. And that encouragement comes in part from what they see in the beautiful appearance of celebrities: success, which is the same attribute that enables the celebrities to actually exercise some sort of influence. The fact that the audiences regard them as successful, and therefore accomplished and rich, gives prestige to their appearance to the point that their facial features come themselves to symbolize success.

A criticism to women imitating the looks of celebrities curiously came from a beautician. Mei, whom I met in 2018 when she worked in a beauty salon in Hangzhou, felt that women in China tend to simply follow what is fashionable (*liuxing* 流行), rather than to search for their own personal style. And this is why they imitate celebrities' aesthetic procedures and "all end up wanting the same nose and the same eyes". To Mei, this attitude shows a lack of personal taste. Back then I found this criticism quite unusual, considering that it came from a person who worked in the beauty sector, where the imitation of attractive images is a key advertising technique. Beauty trends, as well as fashion trends, are supposed to be followed by the large public. Fashion designer Sophie stressed the importance of researching one's own personal style, yet she recognized that imitation is an essential part of how the fashion and beauty sectors work. Interestingly, she attributed this tendency to the Chinese cultural habit of conformity: she quoted a Chinese idiom that says "the shot hits the bird that pokes its head out" (*qiang da chu tou niao* 枪打出头鸟), which means that nonconformity gets punished. According to her, this behavior is so rooted in the Chinese culture that it applies well to the realm of beauty. Although I agree that the need to conform – which can be as well associated to peer pressure – may play some role in persuading women to follow beauty trends, I believe that the influence of celebrities' beauty has a deeper connection to the social status that they represent.

In his discussion on habitus and taste, Pierre Bourdieu (1979) argued that beauty practices, just like other practices, are related to social status. The differences, more than the similarities, are

central in his argument: every social condition is determined by the factors that distinguish it from other social conditions. Following this logic, women with similar social backgrounds should share similar beauty tastes and trends, which would be different from those of women from different social classes. However, it seems that a thin figure, fair skin, oval face with pointed chin, big eyes and high-bridged nose are the ideal beautiful features for women in urban coastal China regardless of the social background that they have. However, these features are still linked to social status, but in a different way: they are not determined by the *actual* social class to which a woman belongs, instead they *symbolize* an idealized higher social position. In this regard, I adopt Pierre Bourdieu's thought regarding the idea that the body is the absolute site of the materialization of class taste and of the manifestation of not only the current social position but also of its trajectory, given that the dimensions of taste and thus of habitus may transcend the social conditions where they are produced (Bourdieu 1979). Therefore, women's ideal beautiful face symbolizes success in a sense that transcends one's social class and projects the individual onto a trajectory toward a superior status. Anett Dippner (2018: 56), as well, proposes that nowadays "body practices in East Asia do not represent social status but are currently a means to an end in themselves and aim to help achieve such status". This means that they are not directly determined by the social class to which a woman belongs, hence cannot be considered as representing her actual social status. They do, however, represent the higher status that a woman aims to achieve, which can be both material and symbolic: the result of the beauty practices is a certain appearance that may or may not lead to a material increase of social status, but that does not matter because such appearance already represents an increase in itself. Therefore, I argue that the look that body practices aim to produce is actually the *representation* of the (higher) social status that the person desires, even if she does not achieve such social status materially. What counts is the appearance, after all, and when a pretty lady walks in a coffee shop no one is going to question whether she actually obtained material benefits out of her beautification process. She *looks* successful, just like famous actresses and internet celebrities, and that is enough. This is what I want to emphasize: the trajectory to a higher social status does not necessarily mean a material achievement of success; what counts is the image of success symbolized by the aesthetic features of the ideal face. This face may well be called the face of success. Moreover, I feel the need to add that, in addition to examining the meaning of the looks achieved through beauty practices, we should also explore the significance of the beauty practices themselves. But this will be the topic of the next chapter.

Another question arises here concerning class: when we talk about higher social status and wealthy class, what class do we mean exactly? Considering that social classes in China have not developed following the same path as in Europe, they are not easy to define. I would say that these terms mostly refer to the upper middle class, but here again we fall on the problematic question of defining the Chinese middle class. As pointed out by Rocca (2017: 3), "Objective criteria, such as education, income, occupation and level of consumption, are all difficult to measure in China, while subjective criteria, such as lifestyle, manners, political ideas and identification with a social figure, leave plenty of room for interpretation". It seems, however, that the following elements characterize the Chinese middle class: relatively high and stable income, professional or managerial occupation, higher education, and high standard lifestyle (Li 2010; Alpermann 2011). Zhang Li (2008; 2010) argues that a "new middle class" has arisen thanks to the privatization of property, and this is structurally different from the middle class that already existed before the establishment of the communist state in 1949. Privatization has given urbanities the opportunity to pursue special lifestyles, but there is still a lack of a distinct class culture in which the new middle class can recognize itself: their economic status seems to be the main criterion of class belonging and distinction. Therefore, she identifies a highly heterogeneous composition as a key characteristic of this new middle class. Miao (2017) describes an imagined middle class ideal marked by a lifestyle that depends on strong economic grounds. Zhang (2008: 25) sees "the cultivation of a distinct 'cultural milieu' based on taste, judgment, and the acquisition of cultural capital through consumption practices" as essential in forming middle-class subjects. She draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, highlighting the role that the new forms of living and consuming have had in constituting and not merely in displaying class status. The term used by Zhang Li and by many other scholars is *zhongchan jieceng* (中产阶层) that means "middle property stratum", clearly referring to economic property as a defining class factor; this way, they avoid using the term "class" (*jieji* 阶级) which bears a rather political meaning. Because of its difficult definition, the size of the middle class in China is open to debate too: according to different estimates, it may range from a low percentage up to about 60% of the whole population (Rocca 2017).

In conclusion, I argue that regular women imitate celebrities' beauty because to them this beauty symbolizes success, thus wealth and high social status: "beauty ideals tend to be conceived according to the features of the wealthy, and therefore women in China aspire to embodying the beauty of the highest echelons of society" (Lotti 2018: 100). This gives celebrities the power to influence people, bestowed on them by their higher social status of

successful individuals. Moreover, celebrities are the personification of the equation beautiful = successful. Their beauty symbolizes their success, and thus women try to reproduce it. As a consequence, their looks can be seen as the looks that are fit to the successful women of modern society. Those advertising posters of Fan Bingbing and Dilraba Dilmurat, then, are not only asking women: "Don't you want to be as beautiful as me?" In fact, they are also asking them: "Don't you want to look as successful as me?"

5.5 Conclusion: the face of success

Chenggong 成功 means "to succeed, to be successful" in Mandarin. I cannot recall how many times I heard this word during interviews and conversations in China: it seems that everything people do is linked to being successful in some way. The frequency of use of this word does not make it special, but it shows how entrenched the concept of success is in contemporary Chinese society – similar to the concept of development (*fazhan*) which comes up very often in conversations. There are several theories and models of success (*chenggongxue* 成功学), which are often mocked and rejected by those who fail to obtain it (Kan 2013). Success can come in different forms and can be perceived differently by each individual, and this is why it is no easy task to explain what success is. The social value of success in contemporary China, however, leads me to argue that generally success equals wealth. And this is why all the aspects examined in this chapter have a connection to wealth – the West, modernity, the developed neighbors, the celebrities. Wealth, be it extreme or just partial, is a key aspect of success in today's urban Chinese society. During our interview, Chun lamented that "[...] people chase success, now in China this is people's goal! But I honestly think they lost the ability to enjoy life and now are only driven by business and success".

The look of success, hence, is related to the celebration of the successful Chinese individual. This could be identified as the *nouveau riche*, a woman who is often portrayed in popular culture as someone who enjoys the "practical existence" of a comfortable life, the "freedom" of consumer choice, a "stylish appearance", the "prestige power" of her wealth, and a "cultivated appreciation for the finer things" (Ren Hai 2013: 35). In this sense, we can see her "stylish appearance" as a sign of the wealth, prestige and freedom that distinguish her from the non-successful person. The debate here could be whether this is a middle class person or rather someone belonging to the upper class, but the previous section already addressed the prickly

question of the Chinese middle class and its difficult definition. However, I believe that in the scope of this study whether we call it middle class or upper class is irrelevant: what counts is grasping that wealth is a key attribute of this growing social stratum. The ideal face that women desire – oval-shaped with pointed chin, large double-lidded eyes and a high-bridged nose – represents the achievements of the successful individual, and thus comes to represent success. What needs to be emphasized is that this look does not necessarily bring material success, but *represents* it: there is a symbolic link between appearance and success that may not imply any material link. The body is a powerful symbolic form, as argued by Mary Douglas (1970), Bryan Turner (1984), and Anthony Synnott (1993) among others. Therefore, I argue that we should look beyond the possibility of actually achieving material success (such as earning more money, improving one's career, or marrying a rich man) that this look may or may not bring to the woman who adopts it, and consider the cultural and social significance that this look already has: it symbolizes success just how it is, because it is the beautiful appearance that modern and successful women have. There is a fine yet essential line between achieving success and looking successful, and my argument does not focus on material achievements but instead on symbolic achievements. A question here would be whether these symbolic achievements are just illusions: they could be, but it does not matter. Beauty and beautification play around feelings and perceptions, those related to *appearing* a certain way. Desiring the face that symbolizes a wealthy modern woman does not mean believing that it will actually turn one into a wealthy modern woman. However, having that beauty means that she would look like a wealthy modern woman, which in a society very much based on appearance is good enough, and much more easily attainable than material success. Anett Dippner came very close to my symbolic achievement perspective here: "If good looks are no longer merely a gift from nature, they become instead the embodiment of the entrepreneurial individual in a neoliberal society – and thus ultimately a symbol of status. In a culture of 'embodied classes' as visible signs of new social hierarchies, beauty becomes the synonym for success" (Dippner 2018: 57). However, there is still a slight difference: she refers to a materially achieved success that is displayed by the *wanghong* through a certain beautiful appearance, which therefore is the symbol of such success. What I refer to, instead, is the beautiful appearance even *without* the materially achieved success: that appearance still symbolizes success regardless of whether the individual has achieved such success or not. Showing off that kind of beauty already means success.

The symbolic value of the face of success finds a theoretical ground in the notion of body representation formulated by Pierre Bourdieu. Since the bodily investments, such as

beautification practices, aim at making the body representable, the body works as a language that speaks about the person in that body (Bourdieu 1977). In this sense, the body is intended as a symbol. Most importantly, as explained earlier, the body symbolizes not only the current social position of an individual, but also her trajectory (Bourdieu 1977; 1979). This trajectory transcends the social class to which one belongs, since the ideal look symbolizes success regardless of one's social class. Also, the face of success has a symbolic value in that it represents success regardless of whether success has been materially achieved or not.

The ideal beauty and the desire to obtain it are related to success, in that that particular beauty in itself represents success. Beauty may give a woman the chances to achieve material success, for instance by marrying a wealthier man or finding a better job, but this does not matter: that particular pretty appearance is already a sign of success in itself, because it is the look that identifies successful women, that is to say, modern wealthy women. This argument confutes the assumption that Chinese women (and more broadly East Asian women) undergo certain cosmetic procedures in order to obtain a westernized appearance. Sure, some of the facial features that they consider ideal have received a Caucasian influence; nevertheless, women do not aim at looking Caucasian, because what these features have come to represent to them is the look of a modern and successful woman. Modernity and success were initially represented by Western societies (i.e. Europe and North America), at which China looked up when starting its reform period at the beginning of the 1980s. Beautiful women starring in Western advertisements and movies, therefore, were perceived as portraying the beauty of modern and developed women. Although it may be true that initially some Caucasian features were chased by Chinese women in emulation of what they saw, I argue that nowadays these features have lost their Caucasian significance and overcome the Western-Asian opposition: they have, instead, taken a significance that is more strictly linked to modernity, in the sense of individuality, freedom and wealth. Chinese women do not desire what the Western woman is, but rather what she has come to represent: a successful life. This emphasizes the great conceptual difference that exists between what the body is and what it represents.

What unites all the aspects discussed in this chapter is one red thread: success. The ideal look represents success and this is why women desire it. Although these aspects may seem to deal with different sides of the quest for beauty, they all aim to represent success, or what these women interpret as success. Modernity, inspired to the Western looks as well as to the Korean-Japanese beauty, is tightly linked to success. The celebrities are modern successful individuals

who show off their glamorous style and affluent life. The success red thread tells us something about how the urban woman in coastal China wants to appear and, thus, be considered within the society in which she moves. I quote Adina Zemanek's words about fashion magazines when I say that she wants to show "a woman image that is both firmly anchored in the local culture and has a marked global aspect" (Zemanek 2014: 94). She is a proud Chinese woman who is not afraid of taking inspiration from foreign trends and local celebrities in order to look accomplished and modern.

This chapter has focused on the beauty that women want to achieve, an ideal and sometimes even idealized face, and on what it stands for. How women attempt to achieve it, that is to say the significance of the cosmetic and surgical treatments belonging to the realm of *weizheng*, will be the content of the next chapter.

Chapter 6

The negotiation of naturalness: characteristics and significance of *weizheng*

> "We are more open about cosmetic surgery now, it's popular so it's not a secret anymore as it was before. On the contrary, sometimes people are so proud of their new pretty nose that they would gladly accept compliments on how well it has been done, and give advice to others who want to do it too" (Jin, April 2017, Hangzhou).

As somebody who worked in the beauty industry, Jin felt that she could give me an informed opinion on cosmetic surgery in China. Indeed, cosmetic surgery is increasingly more frequent and less a taboo in the country, to the point that it is often a topic of discussion on TV shows. People who undergo it talk about it with their friends and family, and if they are happy with the results they may recommend the same treatments to others. In my inquiries it appeared that recommendation from and emulation of friends and relatives was indeed a common incentive to undergo beautification procedures. For instance, Hannah was considering a nose job because her friend had done double-eyelid surgery and was happy of the result; Luo started doing cosmetic treatments together with her friends, in a sort of mutual influencing; and a prospective patient in Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital decided to undergo an under eye bag removal after a relative recommended it to her. Sophie, who worked in the fashion business, had a precise opinion about why women followed this imitation pattern: not to be left out of the group. Whatever the reasons, this emulation trend shows that people in China talk about cosmetic surgery more openly. Fen, as well, felt that the topic was no longer taboo and that this had positively impacted the quality and the offer of cosmetic surgery in China. Actress Zheng Shuang's public disclosure of her cosmetic surgery in 2013 opened a door, because then other stars admitted it too and the public generally appreciated their honesty and openness. Yet, many others still do not reveal easily that they underwent it. Some of my interviewees, for instance, told me in confidence that they usually would not say it out loud unless they are explicitly asked to. Claire, when I interviewed her in March 2017, criticized this attitude but yet partially enforced it. She had undergone a nose augmentation several years before we met, following the

suggestion of her parents who, she said, were not happy of her flat nose. “I admit it openly, what should I be ashamed of? But my mum still won’t tell anyone, she’s very Chinese about it!” To her, being “very Chinese” in this regard meant not revealing that one has undergone cosmetic surgery. However, she revealed it to me only when I explicitly asked. This reticence may find its roots in traditional Confucian values: our body is inherited from our parents whom we have the duty to respect, and thus we should not disdain our body because that would be a sign of disrespect toward our parents. Following this reasoning, admitting to have willingly modified one's body would mean admitting to disregard family values. However, this is just an interpretation. Being very Chinese may also mean wanting to appear modest, since modesty is traditionally a core value of good women: saying out loud what one has done in order to achieve beauty may be considered as a sign of vanity and exhibitionism. There may also be another explanation behind all this secrecy, one that does not apply only to the Chinese context but is rather universal: in a world where natural beauty seems to be the paramount beauty, the one and only legitimate beauty, women may simply be cautious to admit that their pretty appearance was a product of artificial techniques. But the boundary between what is natural and what is artificial in beauty may be in the process of changing.

This chapter analyzes *weizheng* (micro cosmetic surgery or micro cosmetic treatments) and aims to answer the third research sub-question that motivates this study: what are the main characteristics and the significance of *weizheng*?

In order to do that, we need to explore facial cosmetic surgery, which represents the main type of aesthetic beautification practices taken in exam in this research. I consider jaw and chin fillers, nose jobs, and double-eyelid surgeries as the paramount cosmetic procedures in urban China. Many of these treatments belong to the category of light cosmetic surgeries called *weizheng*. The definition of this category and of the larger realm of cosmetic surgery is also addressed in this chapter, followed by a discussion of how beauty has been medicalized in the field of aesthetic medicine and how normalized such medicalization of body parts has become. But within the medicalization of beauty there exists a process of de-medicalization of *weizheng* that emphasizes its “naturalness”, putting it in direct contrast with the “artificialness” of conventional aesthetic surgery. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to initiate a discussion that explores the interpretation and negotiation of naturalness that *weizheng* has brought about. Natural beauty seems to be the only beauty that fits the modern Chinese woman and that she tries to obtain not only in the results but also in the techniques employed. I argue, then, that

naturalness characterizes both the outcome and the process of *weizheng*, which manages to negotiate its distance from conventional cosmetic surgeries and to attract even those who would otherwise not consider undergoing cosmetic surgery.

6.1 A question of face: cosmetic surgery priorities

The field of cosmetic surgery in China is relatively young, because it originated only few decades ago as a branch of plastic surgery, whose other branch is reconstructive surgery (Ma et al. 2011; Ding et al. 2017). According to Ma et al. (2011), the cosmetic surgery sector brings together characteristics of surgery, plastic surgery, psychology, aesthetic medicine, and medical ethics. Cosmetic surgery is described as follows by both Ma et al. (2011: 1810) and Li et al. (2017: 328): "to make use of surgery or other medical methods in order to reconstruct the beauty of the figure and face of the regular human body" (translation mine).[15] This is probably a standardized description of cosmetic surgery in the Chinese medical literature.

Some cosmetic surgical procedures have become extremely popular. Blepharoplasty consists in creating a fold in the upper eyelid (the supratarsal crease) in order to have it fall differently on the ocular bulb, so to let the eye look wider and more open (Figure 18). This surgery is very popular because about half of East Asians lack a supratarsal crease or only have a partial presence of a fold, resulting in their eyes looking less deep and sometimes only partially open (Chen W. 2006; Kikkawa and Kim 1997; Lam 2014; Li and Ma 2008; Liu H. et al. 2017). However, the other half of East Asians are naturally born with an upper lid crease and thus can exhibit a natural double-lidded eye (Chen 2006; Miller 2006). The East Asian and the Caucasian eyelids differ substantially in the skin tissue, because the East Asian lid has a fuller and thicker tissue that contributes, together with a lower crease, to create a more slanted eye shape: a succesful blepharoplasty must not subvert but instead preserve these essential traits, or the outcome will look too artificial and cause unhappiness to the patient (Kikkawa and Kim 1997; Chen W. 2006; Miller 2006).

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[15] The original text in Mandarin from Ma et al. (2011: 1810) and Li et al. (2017: 328) reads: 用外科手术或者其他医疗手段，对正常人体容颜及形体美的重塑 *yong waike shoushu huozhe qita yiliao shouduan, dui zhengchang renti rongyan ji xingti mei de chongsu.*

As plastic surgeons explained to me, a blepharoplasty is often combined with an epicanthoplasty. The epicanthal fold (also called Mongolian fold) is a skin redundancy of the upper eyelid that covers the eyelid margin and, when very prominent, even the eyelashes. It is very frequent in the East Asian eye, and not necessarily to be removed when not prominent. When the epicanthal fold is prominent, though, it needs to be trimmed off in order to perform a successful blepharoplasty and possibly leave an acceptable scarring (Kikkawa and Kim 1997; Li and Ma 2008; Weng 2009; Zan et al. 2016).

Figure 18. Pre- and post-blepharoplasty and epicanthoplasty. The photo above was taken right before the surgery, and the photo below was taken several weeks after the surgery. The difference is noticeable: in the post-operatory picture, the upper eyelid shows a clear crease. Courtesy of the Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery of Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital.

According to DiMoia (2013), although Asian blepharoplasty has become popular in the last few decades, it has existed in for a longer time, at least since the nineteenth century when the first

accounts of it were published in Japan. He argues that what was new in the modern times (from 1950s onwards) was the "measure of self-transformation afforded by the procedure" and "the added sense of control that accompanied these changes" (DiMoia 2013: 185). In a word, agency, or to be more precise, the feeling of agency. Patients feel that, by undergoing this surgery, they are undergoing a bodily transformation that they have chosen and, therefore, of which they feel in control. It embraces the core concept of beautification, that is, the idea of self-improvement that will make us feel better with ourselves and with the others. This is a widespread narrative for all those activities that aim to make our life better, not only in a material sense but also and most remarkably in a sort of spiritual sense.

Rhinoplasty, commonly known as nose job, is another highly performed surgery. It usually aims at nose augmentation, mostly through dorsal augmentation and tip projection: this is because East Asian noses tend to have low dorsum and tip, flat and thick nasal bones, and thick skin with abundant subcutaneous soft tissue (Jang and Alfanta 2014; Li et al. 2014). These characteristics contrast with the ideal high-bridged and sharp nose and are therefore modified surgically with the addition of septal cartilage, while always paying attention to facial harmony, especially between nose and chin (Kim and Han 2015; Li et al. 2014; see Figure 19). As written in the previous chapter, I found out during interviews that people believe that a longer nose makes the face look more three-dimensional and, thus, less wide. Since the ideal face shape is oval, women do not like having a round "full moon" face. In this regard, there exist several procedures aiming to elongate the face and reduce its width, such as chin implants (see again Figure 19) and filler injections around the jaws and chin. Filler injections are very popular and apply to several parts of the face such as jaws, chin, mouth and even nose, where they may be employed to raise the bridge instead of inserting cartilage, thus obtaining temporary results. Part of the reason why filler injections are so popular is because they are a less invasive procedure than proper cosmetic surgery. I will go back later on to the concept of proper surgery, which plays a very important role in this chapter.

Figure 19. Pre- and post- rhinoplasty and genioplasty. The photos on the left were taken before the surgery, those on the right were taken three years after the surgery. The post-operatory pictures show a raised bridge and an elevated tip of the nose thanks to a costal cartilage augmentation rhinoplasty, as well as a more prominent chin obtained through silicone implant genioplasty (Li et al. 2014: 28e-29e).

The obsession to slim the face contours has generated a very high quantity of face-slimming masks easily available on the market. I myself tried on a jaw-slimming mask at the request of one interviewee: Luo brought it at our first appointment as a gift for me and I agreed to try it on with amusement. She and I both suspected that the mask would not have great effect, because the bony structure of my jaws would not give the slimming treatment enough flesh to work on. Nevertheless, I tried it on. This type of masks is very widespread among women in the area. Luo, in fact, was very concerned about the shape of her jaws and chin. She was quite active on social media and often published beauty-related content. In September 2018 she published on her *Wechat* account a peculiar photo of her face: she had drawn a dotted line that represented her ideal jaw line, significantly smaller and pointier that her current one, which was already rather oval thanks to several filler injections (see Figure 20). The photo also shows the results of other aesthetic treatments that she had undergone, such as filler injections on her lips to make them plumper, and an augmentation rhinoplasty that raised the tip and the bridge of her nose. She had also undergone double eyelid surgery, but since the photo only showed the lower half of her face her eyes were not visible. Luo was indeed a beautification enthusiast, who was sculpting her face little by little to satisfy her beauty desires.

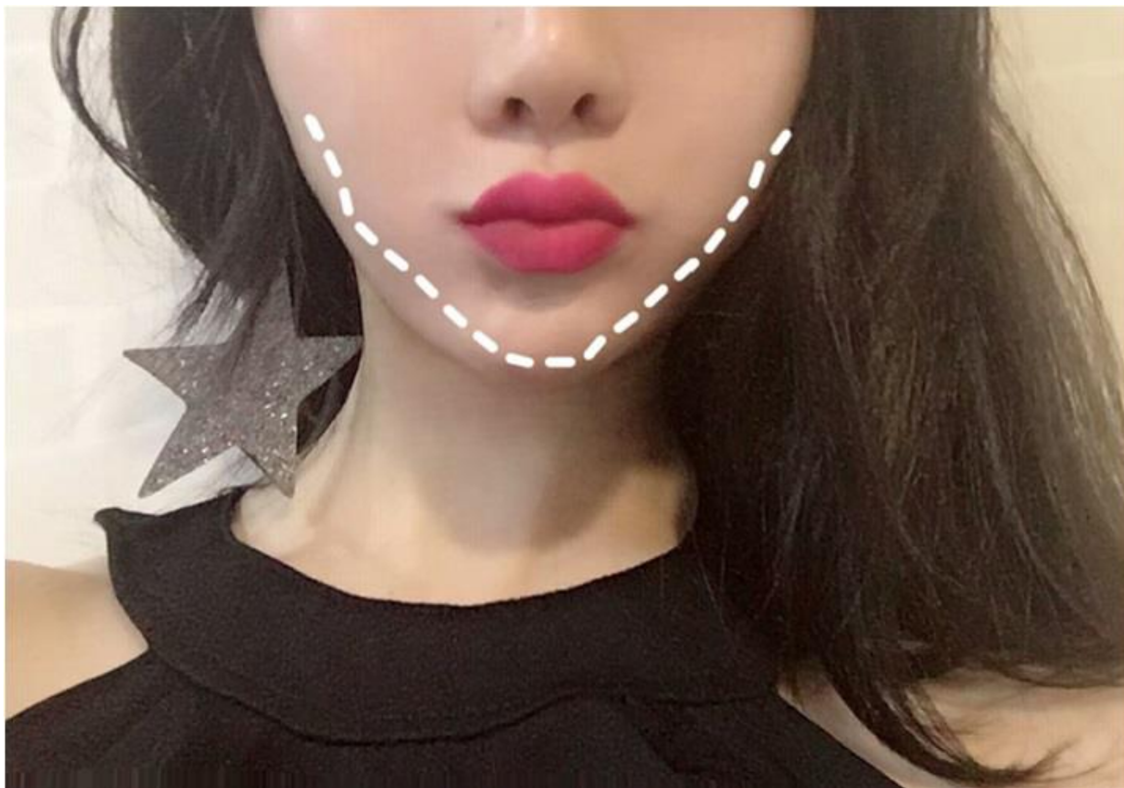

Figure 20. A photo of the bottom half of Luo's face, where she had highlighted the sharp V-shaped chin and jawline that she desired. Published by Luo on her *Wechat* account in September 2018.

A key point that we gather from all the above-mentioned information is that face treatments are very prominent in the landscape of Chinese cosmetic surgery. I argue, then, that this trait not only characterizes it but also distinguishes it from the cosmetic surgery landscapes of Western countries, specifically those of Europe and South and North America. In these areas, body surgeries such as fat liposuction and breast augmentation enjoy an equal or in some cases higher demand than face surgeries (ISAPS 2014, 2015, 2016). Indeed, the difference between West and East concern the main focus of cosmetic surgery. Let us consider ISAPS 2015 global statistics: USA, Brazil and South Korea were the top three countries for all cosmetic procedures according to that year's survey results. What were the most performed procedures in each country? In the USA, breast augmentation, liposuction, and eyelid surgery; in Brazil, liposuction, breast augmentation, and eyelid surgery; in South Korea, eyelid surgery, rhinoplasty, and fat graftin face (ISAPS 2015). Looking at which surgical procedures were the most performed in each country, we see very clear differences: all three most performed surgeries in SK involved the face, while in the other two countries only the third place went to a face procedure. A similar scenario unfolded in the ISAPS 2017 global statistics, in which Japan surpassed South Korea and ranked third after USA and Brazil for total number of cosmetic procedures. The three most performed procedures in the USA were again breast augmentation, liposuction, and eyelid surgery; in Brazil, too, breast augmentation, liposuction, and eyelid surgery; but the three most performed procedures in Japan were eyelid surgery, rhinoplasty, and facelift (ISAPS 2017). The top three cosmetic surgeries in Japan were all face procedures, and this highlighted once again the face as a central operating area of cosmetic surgery in East Asia. These data should be considered as a representation of the main trends of cosmetic surgery in Japan and South Korea that may be satisfactorily applied to China as well, since the beauty standards of East Asian countries converge on many aspects (as discussed in the previous chapter). Further confirmation came from doctor Zhang, a plastic surgeon in the department of plastic and reconstructive surgery of the Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital, who stated during our interview that small face cosmetic surgeries were the most performed in their department. In addition, a surgeon in the department of plastic surgery of Sir Run Run Shaw Hospital in Hangzhou also confirmed that the most performed cosmetic procedures in their department were face treatments, such as the double-eyelid surgery.

This focus on the face does not mean that women in urban China are not concerned with their body shape. They are very much concerned with it, and we know that body thinness is an ideal trait of beauty. Sometimes women resort to surgical procedures in order to lose fat, such as for

instance undergoing liposuction, but the popularity of body surgeries does not come even close to that of face procedures. Some of my interviewees attempted an analysis of why beauty surgery concentrates on the face. Fen thought that Chinese bodies do not have the same structure as Western bodies, and Chinese women do not have the same body culture and passion for sport that Western women have. As a result, they prefer to focus on face beautification. Claire argued that the reasons are to be found in traditional Chinese culture, according to which women did not show their body, therefore they focused on making the face pretty and remarkable. "Things have started to change for my generation" she said, "even though we still don't find as many women in bikini on Chinese beaches as in the West. But if you take my parents' generation it is still so: for example, if I am talking to them and the t-shirt slides on my shoulder showing the bra strap, my mum would immediately tell me to cover it, that it's indecent and not respectful." Other girls focused on the concept of respecting the others and giving them a good first impression of us. "The face is the first thing you see when you meet someone. If the face is pretty, it gives a good impression, and looking good is also a sign of respect towards the others" said Jin. Qiao, a teacher of Japanese, also thinks that wearing makeup is a must because it is a form of respect towards other people. Therefore, she reckons that face cosmetic surgery must have become popular because the first impression when we meet someone is very important: "We instinctively judge people by their look, so we of course want to look nice to give them a good impression of us". A similar opinion was expressed by Daisy, a young secretary in the language school where Qiao worked: "A good appearance is important because it's the first impression that you give to others. So it's important for both them and yourself."

Many face practices belong to the broad and enigmatic realm of *weizheng*, a term that may be translated as "micro cosmetic surgery" or more broadly as "micro cosmetic treatments".

6.2 Public, private, and "homey": stories of *weizheng*

Weizheng is an extremely fascinating category of beautification procedures in contemporary China. Some medical articles have dealt with this new category of beautification and attempted to give it a definition that differs from that of cosmetic surgery. For instance, Li et al. (2017: 328) defined *weizhengxing* (long form of *weizheng*) as "guided by medical aesthetics theory, operating with medications, medical equipment and small-wound fine surgeries in order to

restore and remodel the figure and face of the regular human body" (translation mine).[16] The same medical article had already defined cosmetic surgery as "making use of surgery or other medical methods in order to reconstruct the beauty of the figure and face of the regular human body" (Li et al. 2017: 328), as mentioned in the previous section. Trying to identify the differences between the two definitions is tricky, because the phrasing is quite similar. It seems that the only distinguishable differences are that *weizheng* involves "small-wound fine surgeries", whereas for cosmetic surgery the wound size is not specified; and that cosmetic surgery aims to "reconstruct the beauty of the figure and face", whereas beauty is not directly mentioned in the aim of *weizheng*, but only implied. Some academic literature of the early 2000s seemed to describe *weizheng* treatments as those that improved the beauty of the person by opening up the face, without cutting bones and implanting materials that would render the body "not whole" (Chen 2006). Chinese popular press also attempted to give some definitions of *weizheng*. A lifestyle magazine, for instance, indicated *weizheng* as a type of cosmetic surgery with characteristics that suit today's busy life (Qin 2012). It further attributed it the following qualities: knife-less, injection beautification, non-surgical plastic surgery (*feishoushu zhengxing* 非手术整形), and even lunch-break beautification because it is fast to do and to recover from (Qin 2012).

Definitions aside, what is *weizheng* in reality? Or more precisely, how is it perceived by people? What procedures belong to this category? Answering these questions is not an easy task, because it involves several and sometimes contrasting interpretations that will be further addressed later on in this chapter. However, it is safe to affirm that procedures that create small wounds are commonly perceived as belonging to *weizheng*, be they surgical or non-surgical. Filler injections of any type generally belong to *weizheng*. Even the creation of a fold in the eyelid through various techniques is usually perceived as *weizheng*. A certain ambivalence arises with procedures that are more clearly surgical, such as rhinoplasty, but that involve a small area and bring little modification to the face. As I previously discussed (Lotti 2020), assessing whether these procedures belong to *weizheng* depends on what paradigm we pick to

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[16] The original text in Mandarin from Li et al. (2017: 328) reads: 微整形是以医学美学基础理论为指导，运用药物、医疗器械以及其他微创性的精细手术操作，对正常人体容颜及形体进行修复与再塑 *weizhengxing shi yi yixue meixue jichu lilun wei zhidao, yunyong yaowu, yiliao qixie yiji qita weichuanxing de jingxi shoushu caozuo, dui zhengchang renti rongyan ji xingti jinxing xiufu yu zai su.*

define this special category, since people tend to follow their personal interpretation. If considering the degree of surgical complexity as the paramount criterion, then a nose job is not a *weizheng* because it requires breaking bone and implanting cartilage in the nasal septum. If, instead, what counts is the size of the area that is involved, then a nose job can be a *weizheng* because it operates on a rather small area. In the scope of this research, I am inclined to adopt the latter paradigm and incorporate rhinoplasty into the *weizheng* realm, as well as to see *weizheng* as a branch of broader cosmetic and plastic surgery.

Weizheng procedures are carried out in numerous medical environments that usually split into the two categories of public hospitals and private clinics. However, some treatments are widely performed in beauty parlors, that is to say, in a setting that is not medical but instead only beauty-related. The overlap of the cosmetic and medical realms, which I have partly examined in a previous publication (Lotti 2020), will be discussed later on in this chapter. This section explores women's experiences of undergoing *weizheng* in the above-mentioned environments, specifically undergoing a double-eyelid procedure. As reported by Miller (2021), the double-eyelid shape is usually created with three methods in East Asia: full-incision, partial-incision and non-incision methods, which obviously differ due to the size of the cut that is made in the eyelid. With the non-incisional technique, that in English may be called hidden thread (Lotti 2020) or also buried sutures method (Miller 2021), an extremely thin thread is sewn into the eyelid to create a crease without cutting the flesh. Since this may disappear over time, Miller (2021) reported of a newer and faster (perhaps only ten minutes) non-incisional technique that will add double stitches with some twisting to obtain a more permanent result.

When I met Qiao in summer 2017, she was in her mid-twenties and worked as a teacher of Japanese in a private language school in Hangzhou. She had been living in the city for a few years, having moved there from a smaller town of the same province because of work. About one year before our interview, she had undergone double eyelid surgery in Zhejiang University First Hospital (*zhejiang daxue di yi yiyuan* 浙江大学第一医院), a large public hospital in Hangzhou. After a careful consideration, she selected a public hospital because she considered it to be a safer option than private clinics: the fact that public hospitals were, indeed, large institutions run by the state and often affiliated to universities reassured her about their higher credibility. She was afraid of frauds in private clinics. Her surgery cost about 3000 RMB (around 400 € according to the average exchange rate for 2016), which she regarded as an affordable price in relation to her salary and living expenses. She recalled having a rather quick

recovery after the procedure: in about two weeks the swelling was gone and she could start to see her "new" eyelids. She felt very satisfied with the results, because the crease on her eyelids had been deepened and modeled just like she had desired. With a touch of pride, Qiao explained to me that her eyelids were not single-folded but naturally double-folded; only, the fold was not very profound. Thus, she was not looking for a radical change but only for an improvement (*gaishan* 改善) of the natural shape of her eyes. She wanted to feel better with herself and with her appearance, by taking a small step to adjust the vague fold on her eyelids and make it a more manifest fold. In her point of view, what she did was barely a cosmetic surgery: rather, it was more of a finishing touch on what she was already given by nature. It was a *weizheng*, a micro adjustment of her physical features.

Fen worked as a receptionist at the Wang Shenglin Medical Beautification Clinic, a small private clinic in Hangzhou. She had been working there for three years. She was originally from Shandong province and was twenty-two years old in March 2017 when I met her. She recalled that she had "always wanted to work in the improvement" (*qise* 起色), namely the beautification sector, because she liked the idea of improving herself and of offering assistance to others who wanted to improve themselves as well. During her three years as a clinic receptionist, she had undergone a nose augmentation and a double eyelid surgery, in addition to some filler injections around her mouth and other parts of her face. Being an employee of a cosmetic clinic, Fen enjoyed lower prices for aesthetic treatments in that very clinic, which made her feel privileged and partially encouraged her to pursue beauty. She considered the treatments she had undergone to be *weizheng*, perhaps with the only exception of the nose augmentation surgery, which she regarded as a somewhat bigger surgery. She was satisfied with the treatments she had received in the clinic, whose ethics and professionalism she praised by pointing out that the medical staff would refuse to perform treatments that they judged non-appropriate and to customers that they deemed non-appropriate, such as teenage girls. She denounced a large number of illegal beautification businesses in China where unqualified surgeons operate, because the demand is much higher than the supply and the domain of cosmetic surgery is disorganized and badly regulated. The clinic where she worked, however, was professional: founded in 2002, it counted only six people as permanent medical personnel plus four people as part time, who performed a maximum of seven-eight procedures on very busy days; their customers where mainly women (increasingly younger, she said) and usually requested face treatments. The fact that the clinic was small made her feel better cared for, in comparison to a large hospital with hundreds of patients. Fen was sure that by benefiting from

beautification, she had brought about amelioration (*gaishan* 改善) in her life: an increased quality (*zhiliang* 质量) of friends, an increased quality of life, and even increased possibilities to find a better job in the future. She saw beautification as an investment (*touzi* 投资).

Grace was a twenty year old undergraduate student of English who had no particular interest in aesthetic treatments. Her mother Yu, instead, was a forty-something former beauty parlor owner who was very fond of beautification. When I encountered Grace in May 2017, she joked that sometimes people mistook them for sisters because her mother looked much younger than her real age. About fifteen years ago, Yu decided to get double-folded eyelids to feel "more attractive and energetic" (*geng piaoliang, geng you huoli* 更漂亮，更有活力). Possessing a certain expertise in beauty, she decided not to go to any clinic but to study the procedure and have it performed in her beauty salon by her sister. She was conscious that it could be risky, but she thought they could manage it. They did and she was satisfied with her double-folded eyelids, even though it took three to four months to recover: she had to keep her eyes open as often as possible in order to keep the eyelids in the desired shape, and this was a bit troublesome. "It turned out good, but it was dangerous" said her daughter. "It already happened that people died under the knife of non-expert surgeons". However, now Yu would probably not accept to do *weizheng* again, since she thinks her "physical qualifications", that is to say her ability to recover, are not as good as before. She also had eyeliner tattoo, which was very popular in her youth years, because she wanted to look like she was always wearing eyeliner. In addition, she liked beauty treatments that rely on Chinese traditional medicine. Grace's uncle used to run a traditional medicine store where Yu learned what practices can be used for beauty purposes. Yu believed Chinese traditional medicine to be less invasive than Western medicine, because its practices mostly aim at regulating everyday habits: eating the right food and taking the right type of bath can help you to be "more energetic" and "let your inner beauty shine" (*rang neizaimei faliang* 让内在美发亮). Being satisfied with her double-eyelids, Yu later suggested several times that her daughter do the same, but in a proper clinic for a higher safety. The purpose would be to feel more confident, but Grace has always refused: "I'm scared, and I don't think it's a necessary beauty tool. I prefer to lead a healthy life, do sport, apply skin creams and so on to get the look that I want". She continued explaining her mistrust: "You have to consider the risk factor, because even if micro it is still a surgical treatment. I don't judge the women who undergo cosmetic surgery, it's their choice, but I think it's not wise. There are many other alternative treatments to become prettier. Also, for students like me it's a waste of money and

time: we don’t have much money and we need time to study, when we recover from surgery we waste precious time and that impacts our studies”. Grace emphasized the surgery side of *weizheng*, and this made her refuse to try it. Her mother, on the other hand, placed *weizheng* on the same level of the several beauty treatments that she has been dealing with for years: only difference, it is more advanced and requires a longer recovery, and this apparently is the sole reason why she would not undergo it now that she is older. However, Yu’s long recovery was probably due to the non-professional nature of the treatment she had undergone: when performed by professional surgeons the recovery can be much faster, as shown previously in Qiao’s case, whose eyes ceased the swelling after only a couple of weeks. Mother and daughter displayed two distinct attitudes towards blepharoplasty that easily represent the most common attitudes I encountered: for Yu, it is an advanced beauty treatment that a beautician with an accurate preparation can perform; for Grace, it is a small but real surgery that requires to be treated as such. Nevertheless, neither of the two questions its belonging to *weizheng*, as *weizheng* encompasses both non-surgical and surgical treatments.

Qiao, Fen, and Yu represent three experiences of *weizheng* performed in different environments: the first in a public hospital, the second in a private clinic, and the third in a beauty salon / home setting. The results do not differ from each other (with the possible exception of Yu’s longer recovery time); what differs is these women’s choice of one or another environment and their experience of it. In any case, they decided to undergo *weizheng* in order to improve themselves. What is the weight of self-improvement in the medical beautification sector? Let us explore it.

6.3 Self-improvement and aesthetic medicine: the medicalization of beauty

When I entered for the first time the consulting room of the Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery of the Shanghai Ninth People’s Hospital, I was surprised by how plain and unadorned it looked. I had expected a somewhat more elegant ambiance. Nevertheless, it was very lively, with an endless flow of people coming in and going out, which gave me the odd feeling of being in a post office. Two doctors sat at two desks, one in front of the other, and two other younger medical students sat on chairs against the wall and listened to the consulting. The staff was entirely composed by women. The room had white walls and no window, was square and not very big, the only furniture consisted of two desks, some chairs and, on the wall opposite the desks, a sink with annexed mirror. The only decorations were a small plant and a

three-part painting of countryside landscape hanging above the desks. Outside was the corridor where the patients waited in line to get into the consulting room, and it was full of people, quite loud and chaotic. The whole floor reminded me of other public Chinese hospitals I had visited before, confuting the idealistic portrait I had of plastic surgery departments being somewhat different than other medical departments: this floor looked just like any other floor in that hospital. In the room, people came in and went out continuously, since the consultations lasted only few minutes. People came in, sat at one of the two desks and showed some receipt-like looking papers to the doctor. At the end of the consultation, the doctor would either print some forms to start the process or agree with the prospective patients that they take some time to think about the surgery (*kaolü yixia* 考虑一下, "think about it": a phrase that was repeated countless times by both doctors and patients).

That morning I spent two hours and a half sitting on a chair behind the desk of Doctor Zhang, next to the medical students who were taking notes just like me. Nobody paid me more than a short uninterested glance, a sign that my presence there did not prevent the patients to go on with the consultations as they intended to. I blended in with the medical students sitting next to me, and the patients might have thought I was an exchange student, given my foreign looks. Dozens of prospective patients came in: men and women, younger and older, even a couple with a toddler, asking advice about both aesthetic and reconstructive surgeries. Doctor Zhang told me that small surgeries concerning the face were the most performed in her department and only cost few thousand RMB. She added that the average age of patients was quite broad, going from late teens to late fifties, that patients usually belonged to middle class, and that many of the youngest were college students. Concerning the age range and the most requested treatments my observation fully supported what she said. Their occupations and social classes were instead difficult to assess for me during my observation. In a few cases, Doctor Zhang asked Doctor Wu for her opinion, and therefore the two gave a joint consultation. One of the first questions both doctors asked the prospective patients was their age. Among all the people who came into that consulting room that morning, there were numerous young women looking for facial aesthetic treatments. A twenty-three year old woman, accompanied by her boyfriend, wanted to have filler injections to straighten the skin around her mouth, despite the doctors saying that she was too young for a wrinkle-removal procedure. The doctors made her smile to inspect possible wrinkles and then showed her, with the help of a mirror, that she did not qualify for a wrinkle-removal procedure. She looked like she had already done some cosmetic surgery on her nose, that was straight and high-bridged, and some fillers on her chin and jaw, because

her face contour was oval and pointy. She might have been a fanatic of cosmetic procedures, because after the wrinkle consultation she also had the doctors check her ankles for a fat removal procedure, which they deemed unnecessary. A woman in her early thirties asked Doctor Zhang several questions about nose, mouth and chin surgeries, clearly undecided on what exactly she wanted to do. The doctor first told her that she should decide on the procedures and then explained what was possible to do, for instance, on her chin. They went on to discuss a comprehensive price for several small nips and tucks. A twenty-four year old woman wanted to undergo a rhinoplasty and, after getting examined and asking for the price of the surgery, she also asked for information about other face treatments. Four women in their mid-twenties entered the room together and asked for information about double eyelid surgery: the doctors gently examined their eyelids with a thin metallic stick and then discussed about the price and the waiting time. Two women in their late twenties consulted Doctor Zhang together for double eyelid surgery and jaw and chin injections. Besides young women, who accounted for the majority, there were other people who came in for consultation about aesthetic treatments. A twenty-five year old man wanted to undergo a double eyelid surgery and looked quite worried about the procedure and the following recovery, needing to be reassured several times by Doctor Zhang. One woman in her late fifties wanted to correct her dropping eyelids. A fifty-one year old man wanted to remove the loose skin and fat deposit under his eyes. There were also people who sought reconstructive surgeries, such as a woman who asked advice about a possible skin-smoothening procedure on some scars and bruises on her chin. There was even a couple who brought their two year old daughter who had an extremely large mole on her cheek: the doctors reassured them that it could be removed without any consequences on the girl's face structure.

Outside in the crowded corridor people were waiting to get their consultation, moving around and chatting. Two of them seemed eager to talk to me, both women in their early fifties. One wanted to consult for a surgery to reduce the bags under her eyes. She did not know anyone who had done it, but felt she needed it to feel better with herself. The other was there to ask for explanations on why the surgery she had undergone had not turned out as expected. Following a friend’s advice, she had had the same procedure that the woman before planned to have, that is, the removal of the bags under her eyes, but she was not satisfied with the result. Nevertheless, she was glad that cosmetic surgery was fashionable and accessible now, unlike when she was in her twenties.

After the last patient had left, the atmosphere became much calmer. It made me realize even better how noisy and busy the room was during consultations: it was indeed similar to a post office.

I found the language employed by both doctors and patients during the consultations particularly informative. This section explores the significance of that type of lexicon: I will never cease to stress the importance of examining the words we choose to refer to a particular matter. The following verbs were used with consistency: *jiuzheng* 纠正, to correct; *jiaozheng* 矫正, to correct; *gaishan*, to improve. Prospective patients said that they wanted to correct their eyelids, correct their flat nose, correct the shape of their face. "Correcting" a body part holds the underlying understanding that that body part is defective and needs to be fixed, as if it were ill and needed to be cured. "Improving" could hint to a slightly different meaning, that the body has some potential of beauty that needs to be enhanced through aesthetic procedures. In this case, the body or its parts are not necessarily defective, but they require external help to become better. The role of cosmetic procedures, then, is to remodel one's flaws in order to make beauty flourish. When physical features are seen as flaws to be corrected through medical treatments, beauty is being medicalized (Edmonds 2013). On a larger scale, medicalization is intended as a process of treating a non-medical problem similarly to a medical problem (Conrad 1992). Or in other words, medicalization is a process of turning lifestyle matters into medical issues, entailing a long-term process of expansion of modern medicine into private domains and everyday lifestyles (Giddens and Sutton 2014). In this sense, aesthetic medicine has the tendency to conceive the body as a commodity which can be upgraded, reshaped, and restyled following new interests, fashions, and values (Davis 1995). Cosmetic treatments become a socio-cultural occurrence of medicalization of female beauty and the body exterior, especially that of healthy bodies, is regarded as an occasion for medical consumerism (Pitts-Taylor 2007). Women in modern societies are significantly influenced to view their bodies through a medical lens that transforms non-medical troubles into medical issues: therefore, they turn to aesthetic surgery to treat these problems (Gagne and McGaughey 2002; Gillespie 1996; Gimlin 2000; Miller 2006). Cosmetic surgery medicalizes the female body by fragmenting it into flawed parts that need to be fixed (Spitzack 1988); by so doing, it also transforms the body into an object for technological reconstruction (Balsamo 1995). Plastic surgeons have widely employed medical terminology, instead of aesthetic terminology, to define aesthetic flaws as medical conditions to be fixed (Merianos et al. 2013; Kaw 1993). An example of this in Chinese medical literature comes from Liu Youshan et al. (2017), when writing that cosmetic surgery uses many

techniques to restore/repair (*xiufu* 修复) body parts. In a medical sense, restore means to bring back to a state of health or strength: the use of this word presumes that the body parts to be restored are in fact sick and malfunctioning. This may be surely the case in reconstructive surgery, but in cosmetic surgery it suggests an attitude to medicalize aesthetic imperfections. Regarding medicalization, Knecht and Hess (2008) call for a rethinking of the process that would focus more strongly on agency, taking into account the interactions among actors, technologies, biologies and infrastructures. This implies distancing oneself from older perspectives that see medicalization as a process that imposes on and controls bodies and society, where power is understood as disciplining and not productive and the agents become objects and not subjects of medicalization (see for instance Zola 1972). Recognizing the role of actors does not mean, however, that the medicalization of bodily characteristics does not have an impact on women's own body image. A universal example could be the medicalization of body size: under the rhetoric of health, medicalized definitions of obesity have a strong impact on women's perceptions of their bodies (Wray and Deery 2008). A more localized example would be the medicalization of the epicanthal fold in Asia (Li and Ma 2008). In the Asian population a prominent epicanthal fold is usually a harmless ethnic characteristic related to the shape of the eye and the type of skin tissue. However, in the Caucasian population it is typically a pathological condition that needs to be removed in order to allow the eye to properly open. The medicalization of this characteristic has spread in Asia, making a prominent epicanthal fold a medical problem to be treated surgically with epicanthoplasty. When doctor and prospective patient in the consulting room of Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital discussed about correcting the single eyelid or correcting a low-profile nose, these facial characteristics were being medicalized. In several conversations I had about cosmetic surgery, it emerged an idea of justifying undergoing the procedure if it aims at fixing a physical defect. If cosmetic surgery can give you a "new life" (*xin shenghuo* 新生活), then it is good and no longer an act of vanity. But how do we define a physical defect and a new life? These concepts may vary considerably according to the circumstances. My interviewees, in particular those who had undergone cosmetic surgery or were considering doing it, used terms such as physical flaw to refer to the body parts they were not happy about, and in so doing those body parts were being medicalized. For instance, Hannah wished to correct her flat nose and Luo did all she believed necessary to improve the shape of her face. Hannah's nose and Luo's face contour were, thus, perceived as similar to unhealthy body parts that needed treatments in order to be restored.

“Women who love to laugh and have a bright and positive attitude toward life are the most beautiful to me. Cosmetic surgery is for those who are not self-confident”, said Olivia while we were walking together one afternoon. This statement sounds quite naive and judgmental, but it does hold some truth. If somebody is not self-confident, cosmetic surgery can actually help them boost their self-esteem. An improvement of one's look may entail an improvement of one’s self-confidence, since feeling prettier may be a great psychological boost to pursue the aim of a better life. Bai, for instance, said that, although she did not undergo any cosmetic surgery and did not think she would, she appreciated how beautification helped people feel better: beauty can make people confident (*meili hui rang ren zixin* 美丽会让人自信). Daisy said: “I have friends who did nose job and double eyelid surgery... They didn’t do it to get a better job or some practical benefit, but to feel better with themselves, to feel prettier, to have a personal improvement (*gaishan*).” Claire underwent nose augmentation several years ago, in the late 2000s. “I think you can choose to have a happy life in any condition, and shouldn’t be influenced from external factors, such as beauty advertisements that say you should look prettier in order to be happy” she said while we were having lunch. But then she added: “Cosmetic surgery is not essential, but sure, if you feel so bad with your looks that you can’t feel happy at all unless you change it, then surgery can help. I was young and my mum influenced me... I am an only child – as almost everybody in my generation – and my parents convinced me that improving my flat nose couldn’t do me any harm. It wasn’t a big deal, you can actually hardly notice the difference, the surgeon only slightly raised the bridge. My parents were satisfied, even if it’s not a really visible change... But I have to admit it gave me confidence”. In this sense, aesthetic medicine can have a therapeutic effect. Merianos et al. (2013) report that, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, cosmetic surgery includes procedures aiming to enhance appearance but also confidence and self-esteem. Indeed, since cosmetic treatments are advertised by emphasizing their medical appeal, women are persuaded to regard them as therapeutic treatments (Black and Sharma 2001). Strengthening self-confidence is often employed by the beauty industry today. Not only cosmetic surgery, but also makeup has the power to boost women’s confidence. “By literally concealing our anxieties and fears, makeup can arm women with a sort of shield against the flurry of stresses any of us go through every day” (Whitefield-Madrano 2016: 64-65).[17] Cosmetic surgery works in a similar way. I would

[17] Whitefield-Madrano (2016) additionally refers to an American research revealing that women's motivations to wear makeup mostly fell into two groups: enhancing one’s appearance and concealing one’s flaws. Which one of

say that it forges an armor, not as easy to put on and to remove as a shield could be, and therefore not as temporary, but that makes women develop a more profound and lasting feeling of confidence that is not washed off every night. In this sense, cosmetic treatments contribute to women's self-esteem and public social performances.

In East Asia, like in other parts of the world, women are exhorted to improve themselves by the media (Sun 2016) and the beauty industry sells them the message that cosmetic treatments will better their life (Miller 2006). With the state's interest in healthy citizens, women's bodies in urban China have been accustomed to external regulation, transformation, and improvement (Bordo 1993; Gottschang 2001). The improvement of the self aims at bringing self-satisfaction and can easily take place with the help of beautification practices. Fen, drawing on her work experience in the cosmetic clinic, affirms that women today talk openly about having aesthetic procedures done, because they are proud of improving themselves. She classified two main types of female customers who undergo treatments in their clinic: the first type is an independent woman in her thirties, usually single, who earns a good salary and knows what she wants; the second type is a woman who got married very young, has children, and wants to undergo cosmetic surgery partially to improve herself and partially to satisfy her husband's request. Satisfied (*manyi* 满意) is a word that came up often during the interviews that I conducted, mostly in two circumstances: it was used to describe a woman's feeling regarding her looks after a cosmetic surgery, or to describe how she felt about her natural looks, stressing that she did not want any treatment. If a woman feels satisfied of the appearance that Mother Nature gave her, then she will do nothing. But if she lacks satisfaction about her original figure, then she can undergo a cosmetic procedure that will eventually bring her to the stage of satisfaction. Kaw (1993) noticed that doctors deemed normal that patients felt dissatisfied with their eyelids, as if these perceived flaws were obvious obstacles to their personal satisfaction.

Differently from other medical fields, cosmetic surgery entails quite a lot of self-diagnosis, because patients go to the surgeon with a clear idea of what is wrong with their body (Davis 1995; Rosen 2004). Fraser (2003b) mentions that improving the body through cosmetic procedures may also improve mental health, as discovered by previous research. Some Chinese medical articles pay attention to the weight of psychological factors in aesthetic medicine. Li et

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the two groups one falls in often relates to one's self-esteem: enhancing one's appearance is connected to a higher self-esteem, whereas concealing one's flaws is connected to a lower self-esteem.

al. (2007) as well as Sun et al. (2020) stress the importance of providing psychological support for patients with poor mental health to help them accept their body image, because undergoing cosmetic surgery may influence their psychological state significantly. Liu Y. et al. (2017) suggest that, in order to reduce disputes due to disagreements on cosmetic surgery results, a pre-surgery psychological diagnosis may give surgeons the means to better understand their patients (here called "beauty chasers" *qiumeizhe* 求美者). Wang et al. (2020) indicate self-acceptance among the factors influencing anxiety and depression in women who received cosmetic surgery. Zhang et al. (2018) state that between 2.9% and 17% of cosmetic surgery patients have BDD (body dysmorphic disorder) focusing on several body parts, mostly skin, hair and nose. Body dysmorphic disorder is defined as "a mental disorder characterized by a person's obsession about a slight or imagined flaw in his or her appearance to the point of clinically significant distress or dysfunction" (Pitts-Taylor 2007: 2). It must be clarified that, since cosmetic treatments have become popular in modern society, many among those who undergo them do not suffer from body image issues (Greenburg et al. 2011).

The body is a central component of social self-identity. The increasing medicalization of beauty shows that the notions of disease and well-being are not only related to physical but also to psychological conditions. Feeling not attractive can be perceived as a disease by patients, and it therefore may need to be cured medically. To put it in Edmonds' words, "the rising acceptance of aesthetics in medicine simply reflects social recognition of the importance of appearance for well-being" (Edmonds 2013: 234). In its Constitution, the World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO 2020: 1). It is unmistakable that health encompasses much more than having a body free of disease. In accordance to this definition, beautification practices are indeed contributing to a person's health by enhancing self-esteem. And medicalizing beauty traits through the use of medical lexicon may become a way of highlighting the therapeutic role of aesthetic medicine. By medicalizing beauty traits, aesthetic medicine merges health and beauty (Edmonds 2013).

Some literature considers cosmetic procedures to be unique in the medicalization process because their risks are usually minimized, compared to other medical and surgical procedures (Merianos et al. 2013; Sullivan 1993). This risk minimization has predominantly, but not solely, an advertisement purpose. In the Yangtze River Delta region where this research has its focus, the minimization concerns principally the treatments that belong to the wide realm of *weizheng*.

This leads to a process that I call de-medicalization of *weizheng*. Beauty gets medicalized and thus medical beautification gets legitimized within the health discourse; but then *weizheng* gets de-medicalized. Let us explore this process.

6.4 Only advanced treatments: the de-medicalization of *weizheng*

On a spring day in 2017 I went to an appointment with Ping, an employee of the Yumeiren beautification company in Hangzhou. This company was founded in 1993 by Yu Wenhong, a woman who in about twenty years managed to create a big beautification business with several branches in China and in some foreign countries.[18] During my previous message exchanges with Ping, something intriguing had happened: to my inquiry about what type of cosmetic surgeries they provided, she had replied that they did not deal with cosmetic surgery at all. I was, then, curious to know what kind of beauty treatments they provided, if cosmetic surgery was not their field. When I finally met her, she received me into her office near one of the Zhejiang University campuses, a big open space that she shared with several coworkers. Nothing and no one in that place looked like they had something to do with the beauty business, and I would have never suspected they did if I had not known before. The office was as plain as it could be, with messy old desks and no decoration on the white walls. Regarding their services, it turned out that they provided *weizheng*, which they did not consider to be cosmetic surgery for a precise reason: it did not involve bone breaking. In Ping's opinion, which reflected her company's marketing strategy, the term cosmetic surgery (*meirong shoushu* 美容手术) referred to big and invasive cosmetic surgical operations where flesh is cut and bones are broken. And this was not what they provided. They performed *weizheng* procedures in a private clinic in the heart of the West Lake scenery, one of the most idyllic areas in Hangzhou, surrounded by nature and silence. While walking there, I thought that this little Eden might have a double beautifying effect on body and mind. The building was an elegant two-story house, furnished in a relatively classic and upper class style, with dark wood and velvet cushions. In the corridors there hung some framed newspaper articles about Yu Wenhong and in the foyer some people were waiting for their turn. The spokesperson who received me was a man in his forties, who took me to a small and classy sitting room. He confirmed what Ping had already told me, that

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[18] The story and the objectives of Yumeiren were discussed in Chapter 5.

is, they did not perform conventional surgery but only *weizheng* treatments, the majority of which were fillers and skin-smoothening procedures such as wrinkle-removal, and in a minor quantity also double-eyelid surgery. The majority of their patients were women aged approximately from their late twenties to their fifties. He said that this clinic "avoided drastic interventions" because China was moving toward "a more natural style of beautification". However, he added that in one of their clinics abroad there was the option to perform proper cosmetic surgery. He considered *weizheng* to be part of the broad *zhengxing* realm (cosmetic and plastic surgery) together with its "opposite" *dazheng*, that refers to more invasive conventional cosmetic surgery (*da* means "big" in Mandarin).

These considerations guide us toward a quick lexical analysis, which I partially addressed before (Lotti 2020). The character *wei* 微 in the word *weizheng* means "micro, tiny, slight" and, besides standing for small surgical modifications, it also evokes little effort and mild suffering.[19] The character *zheng* 整 comes from the words *zhengxing* 整形 and *zhengrong* 整容, both indicating plastic and cosmetic surgery – and the extended form of *weizheng* is in fact *weizhengxing* 微整形. If taken alone, the character *zheng* means "repair, put in order" and bears no immediate surgical or medical meaning. A literal translation of *weizhengxing* would be "micro plastic surgery", but its emphasis on the surgical aspect fails to express all the nuances contained in this beautification realm as well as the shades of meaning suggested by the Chinese characters. Therefore, a more appropriate translation could be "micro cosmetic treatment", which leaves more room for all the subtleties of *weizheng*. *Shoushu* 手术 means surgery in general, that is to say, any surgical operation performed on the body. When it is specified *meirong shoushu* 美容手术, then it literally means cosmetic surgery. Compared to *zhengrong*, the term *meirong shoushu* may be interpreted as putting more emphasis on the surgical part of the procedures. However, the three words *zhengxing*, *zhengrong* and *meirong shoushu* are all used to indicate cosmetic surgery, although with slightly different shades of meaning. An additional consideration has to be done in this regard. In Chinese native speakers' mind the

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[19] Curiously, a magazine article commented that China currently is in the *wei* era, referring to the prominent social media platforms *Weibo* and *Weixin* (the Chinese name of *Wechat*), and that therefore *weizheng* being a favorite fashion is in line with that (Zhang 2015). This observation originates from the fact that all three words have the same character 微 *wei*.

term *shoushu* may evoke images of disease, blood and pain that are related to the idea of surgical operations performed to restore health in an ill body. But advertisement for cosmetic treatments needs to be attractive, to show the prospective customers the benefits that they are going to get, not the possible pain caused by the procedures. The public is more easily lured if *weizheng* is promoted by avoiding any mention of *shoushu* and focusing on the pretty result after it. I find that this type of marketing has encouraged an interpretation of *weizheng* that understates its medical traits and emphasizes its beauty qualities, thus partially distancing it from proper cosmetic surgery. This is part of a process of de-medicalization to which *weizheng* has been subjected.

Chun, for instance, understood the commercial strategy around *weizheng*: "You see, I have big eyes with natural double eyelids so I would never think of doing a double eyelid surgery, I don't need it. But in general I think it's a matter of product branding: they target certain people, and what you buy is not only the product, but also the concept". Women who undergo *weizheng* buy a concept, that is, a less artificial, less invasive, and less surgical type of cosmetic surgery. They buy the concept of a de-medicalized beautification, which confers *weizheng* the possibility to negotiate a certain degree of naturalness for itself.

An indication that *weizheng* has been de-medicalized is the fact that people who are not fond of, and in some cases even against, cosmetic surgery may still be favorable to *weizheng*. Daisy told me that she did not like cosmetic surgery and that she would probably not try it, adding timidly that even if she was not very pretty she did not consider herself ugly, but felt quite satisfied of her looks. However, when asked if she would undergo *weizheng*, her response was different: she said that she saw *weizheng* as "similar to makeup but with some small risks" and would not rule out the possibility of trying it one day. Chun, who was involved in the *HeForShe* campaign in Hangzhou,[20] firmly refused a sponsorship offer made by a cosmetic surgery clinic. The first time I met her, she proclaimed her aversion to cosmetic surgery because of the message that it promotes, namely, "to radically change your body to conform to unrealistic standards". Nevertheless, I later learned that she was not unfavorable to less invasive cosmetic modifications, such as for instance the double eyelid surgery, because these, in her opinion, did not encourage drastic alterations of one's body. Mei, a passionate beautician, worked in a

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[20] See Chapter 4 for further information about the *HeForShe* campaign in Hangzhou.

beauty salon in Hangzhou where she performed skin treatments. She had a certain distaste for cosmetic surgery, labeling it as too extreme and too expensive, but praised the work of their salon's "*weizheng* specialist" who performed advanced treatments, such as the creation of double eyelids, with non-surgical methods like the hidden thread technique (Lotti 2020). The fact that *weizheng* procedures as advanced as this are performed in beauty salons is an indication of the de-medicalization of *weizheng*. It is, at the same time, also a sign of the legitimization of the salons within the medical realm, but this is a different topic (see Lotti 2020 for further details). In Japan, Miller (2006) had already acknowledged the existence of non-cutting alternatives to the double eyelid surgery, belonging to the industry of micro cosmetic surgery called *puchiseikei* (petite surgery) by the press. This name suggests what *weizheng* suggests, that is, minor transformations that distance themselves from real surgeries.

A factor that had a certain influence on the above-mentioned interviewees' favorable opinions on *weizheng* was its safety, presumed to be much higher than that of "big" conventional cosmetic surgery. For instance, Mei's distaste for cosmetic surgery was partially motivated by mistrust: she considered it as too dangerous and badly regulated (*tai luan* 太乱). She, like many other women, saw her face as too wide and wanted it to be more oval, but would never attempt to undergo jaw-slimming surgery or cheek implants because she thought these procedures were way too dangerous. Instead, she had opted for jaw injections (*dazhen* 打针) to reduce the muscle's volume. This procedure was in her opinion a perfectly safe *weizheng*, and she would advise anyone to do it. The safety factor contributes to de-medicalize *weizheng*, neatly distancing it from proper cosmetic surgery in popular understanding. Chinese lifestyle magazines have also contributed to this distancing by praising *weizheng*'s safety. Though our focus on media and press is marginal, knowing what has been recounted still helps to paint a larger picture. *Chinese healthcare and nutrition* included being safe among the main features of *weizheng*, along with being quick, leaving no scar, and causing little pain, all reasons why it is increasingly chosen by people (Qin 2012). *Green Vision* denounced the confusing regulation (*luan*) of the Chinese cosmetic surgery sector and exalted the safety (*anquanxing* 安全性) of *weizheng*, saying that people feel more reassured when undergoing *weizheng* than traditional (*chuantong*) cosmetic surgery: with *weizheng* being beautiful and stylish becomes simple (Zhang 2015). However, not all magazines advertised the no-risk aspect of *weizheng*. *Popular standardization* took a different stance and questioned the safety of *weizheng*, expressing skepticism about the quality of the medications and the authenticity of the certificates, thus advising readers to prepare carefully and select regularly licensed clinics (Yan L. 2015).

Despite the trend of de-medicalizing lighter treatments, in autumn 2018 I got some evidence that women still considerably perceived such treatments as part of the cosmetic surgery sphere. In order to gain further insight about women's interpretations of *weizheng,* I devised a questionnaire whose aim was to ask a larger group of women than my interviewees if they perceived *weizheng* as cosmetic surgery and why. The word that I used to define cosmetic surgery in the questionnaire was *meirong shoushu*, exactly because it conveys more explicitly the meaning of "surgery" than the word *zhengxing* would do. With the help of my local acquaintances, the questionnaire was spread out through *Wechat* and answered by thirty-seven women in Hangzhou and Shanghai. The questionnaire showed that the majority of respondents believed that *weizheng* was in fact cosmetic surgery. Out of all the participants, only eight clearly stated that *weizheng* was not cosmetic surgery, usually because they saw it as bringing short-term changes and leaving small wounds. Among these eight, two respondents specified that belonging to cosmetic surgery depends on whether or not the treatments involve the use of a knife (*dong dao* 动刀) and the insertion of artificial pieces: procedures like botulinum and hyaluronic acid injection, thread technique eyelids, and skin-brightening treatments would not qualify as cosmetic surgery. Another woman justified her negative answer by saying that undergoing *weizheng* is "like catching a cold", easy and fast to recover from. The rest of the respondents considered *weizheng* as part of the cosmetic surgery realm, predominantly because it changes one's appearance in order to beautify the body, doing in essence what cosmetic surgery does, only on a smaller scale. One respondent pointed out that *weizheng* is not "traditional" (*chuantong*) cosmetic surgery, but it "still breaks the skin". Very interesting is, in my opinion, her use of "traditional" to refer to cosmetic surgery, which in itself is usually not regarded as a traditional branch of medicine. Another one said that the look created with the help of *weizheng* is not "innate" (*tiansheng* 天生) and another inflexibly sentenced that the body that our parents gave us should not be changed.

In addition, the respondents' personal experiences with *weizheng* revealed that six among them had done *weizheng* and thirteen were planning to do it. Among the treatments done were face narrowing injections and nose augmentation with hyaluronic acid injections. Some of those who did it admitted they were not very satisfied of the average results obtained; some went even further saying they regretted doing it. Those who were planning to do *weizheng* mostly wanted double eyelids, face narrowing injections, nose augmentation, chin augmentation, and anti-age, skin brightening and pore tightening treatments. Some of the women who were not willing to

undergo *weizheng* provided motivations on the lines of "I'm already beautiful (*xiannü* 仙女, a fairy) so I don't need it" or "I'm not yet that ugly". Others said that they were scared.

The conclusions that I gather from this questionnaire, as mentioned above, mainly regard women's perception of *weizheng* within the cosmetic surgery field. These responses suggest that the efficacy of the de-medicalization of *weizheng* has nevertheless not fully eroded women's opinion that *weizheng* pertains to the cosmetic surgery domain. The fact that *weizheng* encompasses the smaller and lighter procedures does not make it a separate beautification category, but simply a specific branch of wider cosmetic surgery. In this circumstance, its de-medicalization process acquires even more significance, since it situates it in contrast with the very field to which it belongs.

However, the condition of *weizheng* as surgical or non-surgical seems to be prone to variations, adjustments, and negotiations. Though Doctor Zhang clearly stated that she considered procedures like double eyelid as surgical, the team of plastic surgeons of Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital still opted for micro-treatment instead of micro-surgery when asked for an English translation of the word *weizheng*. By the use of this terminology, they tried to include a broader realm of treatments without focusing only on surgery. An effect of the de-medicalization of *weizheng* is the tendency to overlook its more surgical (and therefore more medical) aspect in order to highlight its subtlety, simplicity, and security. To the eyes of the consumers, these characteristics render *weizheng* and the beautified appearance that results from it more acceptable within a natural beauty discourse. This de-medicalization entails a process of re-classification of cosmetic treatments within the realm of aesthetic surgery.

I undoubtedly identify "natural" as the key feature of *weizheng*. Besides being an objective, naturalness is one essential aspect of *weizheng* as a concept that distances it from conventional cosmetic surgery, of which it becomes a more acceptable version. That in recent times cosmetic surgery, at least in the West, has been aiming at a natural look is no secret. By believing in a notion of natural beauty, it has attempted to reproduce an idealization of such natural beauty (Balsamo 1995), thus generating a sort of paradox of naturalness by remodeling the natural body in order to make it more natural (Jacobson 2000; Le Hénaff 2013). What is particular in the case of *weizheng* is that the way of performing beautification treatments (i.e. small-wounds and mostly non-surgical) also takes on a natural feature. In China, at least in the area of this research, it is popular opinion that beautification is following an increasingly more natural trend.

Fen, for instance, said: “We want to show off a natural beauty (*ziran meili* 自然美丽) because we don’t want to run the risk of looking fake”. Why would looking fake be so disgraceful? A possible argument would be that this refusal of artificiality is partially connected to modernity, since artificial-looking beautification results are perceived as outdated.

6.5 Conclusion: the negotiation of naturalness

This chapter has intended to explore *weizheng*, its nuances and its significance within women’s quest for beautification. This exploration has identified “naturalness” as the key characteristic of *weizheng*, and thus as the keyword of this chapter.

Aesthetic medicine, in China like in the rest of the world, has medicalized beauty, so that physical features have been treated as flawed body parts to be cured in hospitals and clinics (Edmonds 2013). This process makes use of a type of medicalizing lexicon that I witnessed during consultations in Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital, besides finding it extensively in the medical literature and in the media – for instance, phrases such as “correct”, “restore” and “improve” a body part. The medicalization of beauty has played a role in the flourishing of aesthetic medicine. Moreover, beautification is legitimized in a medical sense because it contributes to a person’s comprehensive health by bringing them satisfaction, self-confidence and ultimately happiness. It must be said that, in a different context, the medicalization of beautification may also be interpreted as a way for beauty workers to bestow themselves a nearly medical expertise and thus legitimize their precarious work (Lotti 2020). However, this is not the perspective of this chapter, which goes to examine the topic from a different angle than my above-mentioned article.

Beauty gets medicalized and thus medical beautification gets legitimized within the health discourse; but then, in order to negotiate a certain degree of naturalness that justifies undergoing the procedure, *weizheng* is continuously being de-medicalized: this way it can be perceived as less artificial than proper aesthetic surgery and thus more acceptable within the natural beauty discourse. Negotiating a higher naturalness for *weizheng* procedures distances them from regular cosmetic surgeries: this distancing attracts more customers, even those who would otherwise not consider undergoing proper cosmetic surgery for concerns regarding its risk factor and its artificiality. Natural beauty seems to be the paramount beauty, the one and only

legitimate beauty in this world: if a woman was not born with natural beauty, she can make use of beautification techniques that not only will give her results that resemble that natural beauty, but that are also themselves considered more natural than conventional cosmetic surgery techniques. Therefore, "natural" is the key objective of *weizheng*, but even more, it is one essential aspect of *weizheng* as an ensemble of techniques. By rejecting proper aesthetic surgery and doing *weizheng* these people are in fact defining *weizheng* as more natural and therefore more acceptable than proper cosmetic surgery, despite being a branch of it.

These processes of medicalization and de-medicalization are carried out by many parties. The use of a specific terminology highlights how medical professionals and prospective patients alike merge the boundary of beauty and medicine: women's physical features are thus medicalized in cosmetic surgery ("to correct a flat nose, to improve small eyes, etc."). Then, patients and doctors negotiate a de-medicalized status for certain treatments by including them in the wide realm of *weizheng*, that is to say decree that those aesthetic treatments qualify as more natural.

Naturalness may be connected with a desire to keep one's uniqueness in one's look after undergoing cosmetic treatments. There is a sort of pride in this and in expressing their own taste – especially for those who do not trust cosmetic surgery, like Mei the beautician. *Weizheng* then may symbolize a sort of compromise, a way of negotiating their ambition to change with their need to stay themselves. This compromise also helps them not to be criticized for changing too much, for becoming fake. It may be read like a statement that, even if they underwent some changes, they kept their unique individuality; they are still true, natural, real. Their femininity is legitimate because it is not artificial.

Davis (1995) also talked of women's negotiation in cosmetic surgery: it is the dilemma between the critique of seeing the body as deficient and the understanding of cosmetic surgery as the best option to alleviate their suffering. The negotiation in our case, however, is on a different level: it is between wanting to improve and wanting to stay natural. There is no intense suffering, but mostly a desire to improve oneself without fundamentally changing oneself. I argue that this negotiation is not related to a profound dilemma on whether to undergo beautification at all, but rather to a certain understanding of what beautification should be like in the era of modernity. I see this refusal of artificiality as connected to a modern society where it is essential to keep one's individuality, and where a non-natural beautification is inevitably perceived as non-individual and, thus, outdated. Several of my interviewees ridiculed fake-looking faces

(such as the so-called *wanghong* face mentioned in the previous chapter) and praised those celebrities who managed to subtly achieve the ideal face (oval, pointy chin, high-bridged nose, double-lidded eyes, pale complexion). One may wonder, however, how much space there actually is for any subtle expression of individuality in such a limited range of ideal face features. This question reasonably underlines the irony of beautification trends, where personality inevitably compromises with conformism.[21]

The modern, individualist and successful Chinese woman possesses natural beauty, that is, beauty that she has achieved with the help of non-invasive and non-properly-surgical *weizheng* procedures. The fact that these techniques are seen as less artificial than "traditional" techniques partly reduces the irony permeating the whole medical beautification realm, i.e. aiming to natural beauty through artificial procedures. We are dealing with a different concept of naturalness, one that has not much to do with an innate origin but more with a careful production. In this sense, beauty is not only culturally constructed but also materially sculpted, yet it can stay natural. *Weizheng* enacts a negotiation of the meaning of naturalness in female beauty, shifting it from the beauty that one is born with to the beauty that one has reached through a specific type of treatments. The attempt to create a natural look through artificial techniques underlines that there is no such thing as a "natural" body, because everything we do alters our bodies in some way. By altering their body with the help of certain natural procedures, women perform the version of naturalness associated to the modern woman. Elfving-Hwang (2021) argues that in Korea the distinction between the perceived "natural" (unmodified) self and the modified self is not clearly marked unless the results of cosmetic surgery are excessive. Therefore, there is an impressive flexibility toward altering one's appearance in Korea, and I suggest that it may be becoming similar in urban China, at least in the wealthy and modern Yangtze River Delta. "Cosmetic surgery is as much cheating (*qipian* 欺骗) as makeup" said Fen. In this sense, cosmetic surgery is normalized by being positioned at the same level as makeup for what concerns "cheating". This renders it less alien and more acceptable, just like

[21] Elfving-Hwang (2013) has addressed the question of conformism prevailing on individualism in reference to cosmetic surgery in South Korea. However, she motivated conformism as the individual being subjected to the gaze of the social group to which she belongs, resulting in her body being representative of said social group. What I intend here instead is that the individual, despite attempting to show her personality through her appearance, in some measure has to conform to a limited range of beauty ideals.

makeup. This is even more prominent in the case of *weizheng*, which is already perceived as a more natural category within the broad realm of cosmetic surgery, a category that fits the version of natural beauty associated to the modern woman.

Chapter 7

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the social factors related to women's pursuit of beauty in urban China. Since beauty is generally considered as a feminine habitus (Cochennec 2004), it is essential to discuss the social aspects of beauty and beautification with a focus on women. I believe that women's beautification in a given society also speaks of the gendered roles and the concept of femininity in that society. This dissertation contributes to the cultural analysis of cosmetic surgery in urban China, emphasizing *weizheng* (micro surgery) as its distinctive category. *Weizheng* is distinctive because it is tightly linked, more than other categories of cosmetic surgery, to the embodiment of the modern Chinese woman. In a framework of sociological institutionalism, where cultural values influence actors' behavior, I acknowledge that body and beautification practices are culturally constructed and analyze the beauty ideals and the beautification practices that women pursue in connection to the symbolic value of the body. In this environment, the theoretical conceptualization of habitus and class taste by Pierre Bourdieu provides the means to interpret beauty ideals and prominent cosmetic surgery treatments in urban China. In addition, this interpretation takes into account, albeit secondarily, Foucault's ideas of power and body regulation, which cannot be overlooked in an analysis of aesthetic work on the body.

In this research I have adopted an ethnographic approach, conducting interviews and observation in the cities of Hangzhou and Shanghai, which are situated in the Yangtze River Delta, a highly developed and urbanized area. Such qualitative approach typical of anthropological research allows to take on a perspective that considers the personal stories in relation to a larger social and cultural environment.

In this final chapter, I review the major findings and arguments of the previous chapters. In addition, I discuss the limitations of this study and suggest areas for future research.

7.1 Findings and arguments

The question that has motivated this research is the following: Why do women in highly urbanized Eastern China undergo cosmetic surgery? The three sub-questions that come from it concern, respectively, the social factors that have enabled women to pursue beauty, the symbolic value of the current ideal beauty, and the significance of *weizheng*. These aspects are all interrelated and their exploration forms a multi-faceted answer.

7.1.1 The individualization of society has created the conditions for women to pursue beautification

In the reform era, the state's focus on the individual development of its citizens has allowed women to invest in the body that they desire. The market economy brought about a re-feminization of women after the muscular and "non-gendered" female body (Chen 2003) of the Maoist times, together with a fast development of fashion, cosmetic and beautification businesses. The re-emergence of gendered concepts of beauty in the reform era has provided the urban Chinese with new options through which they can choose to represent themselves (Chen 2001). The ideal feminine look now features a slender body, fair skin, oval face, large eyes and a straight nose, as shown by many celebrities. The process of individualization constituted an important institutional change, yet Confucianism left behind a strong cultural heritage that focused on viewing people not as individuals but from the perspective of their social roles (Zemanek 2014). This heritage has been challenged but has not been undermined. As argued by Mühlhahn (2019), China has persistently searched for its own variant of modernity, one that allows the past to be relevant and that draws on it. Similarly to how the muscular woman represented socialist modernity, the feminine well-groomed woman represents now the modernity of post-reform times, where citizens strive to fulfill their individual desires. Rofel (2007) argued that desiring has become the cultural practice of the reform era: people, especially the youth, imagine themselves as cosmopolitan citizens, who consume in order to reach their self-realization. In a type of modernity so linked to consumption, the body becomes a consuming body (B. Turner 1984). It is important to stress, however, that this very society that promotes individual ambition is still deeply connected to patriarchal gender roles, generating some contradictions. In a study of beauty advertisement, Johansson (1998) pointed out that the female image is symbolically connected to the contradictions of

Chinese modernization, an ambiguity that may be resulting from the coexistence of contrasting ideals of modernity and to the fact that women are motivated to aspire to all of them. Therefore, women are subject to strong familial and social pressures – to get married before becoming "leftover", for example – that may in part contribute to encourage them to pursue beautification in order to get better life chances. It must be considered that, despite today's individualization drive, China has a long history as a collectivistic society: people may be more likely to engage in social comparisons in collectivistic societies (Chung and Mallery 1999). When I interviewed Chun, she admitted: "In Asia we do a lot of comparisons, we always compare ourselves to others... Look at your neighbors, look how good they are! We compare grades at school too". The collectivistic culture has influenced women to measure themselves against the others, and the new individualistic society has given them the reasons to compete against each other and the means to chase beautification in order to do so.

A society characterized by an individualization driving force has generated a strong stimulus to pursue personal happiness. The individualistic quest for happiness is one of the most important stories in China today: happiness can be brought by simple pleasures, giving a new positive connotation to being selfish and obtaining what one wants (Kleinman et al. 2011). Obtaining the beauty that one desires can be one of such pleasures. But at the same time it might also be a requirement to succeed in life. Thus, the individualistic quest for happiness is linked to a certain obsession with success that pervades the lives of Chinese urbanities.

7.1.2 The ideal beauty reflects the obsession with success

A fair and pure skin, an oval shape, a pointed chin, a straight high-bridged nose, and large double-lidded eyes are the ideal features of a beautiful woman's face. Beautification practices usually aim to attain one or more of these features. Why is this face considered beautiful? What does it symbolize? It is, I argue, the face of success, because it symbolizes the success exemplary of the modern Chinese woman. The urban woman wants to show "a woman image that is both firmly anchored in the local culture and has a marked global aspect" (Zemanek 2014: 94). She is a Chinese woman who is not afraid of taking inspiration from foreign trends and local celebrities in order to look accomplished and modern. Modernity, inspired to the Western looks as well as to the Korean-Japanese beauty, is tightly linked to success. The celebrities, whom regular women regard as models of beauty, are modern successful individuals who show

off their glamorous style and affluent life. We need to point out that the concept of success (c*henggong* 成功) in contemporary China has a clear connection to wealth, and the rising value of money among Chinese youth had been observed already at the turn of the twenty-first century by Stanley Rosen (2004), who noted that money had become essential for success in social life, thanks to the contribution of the media that legitimated wealth as a positive value. He reports of a survey in which the majority of the respondents (university students) agreed that the modern man must have the ability to make money. Rosen concludes that "the new stratum of upwardly mobile urban Chinese" are the role models now, replacing the working class (S. Rosen 2004: 170).

The look of success is related to the celebration of the successful individual, whose appearance is a sign of the wealth and prestige that distinguish her from the non-successful person. The ideal face that women desire thus comes to represent success. A strong emphasis must be put on clarifying that this look does not necessarily bring material success, but represents it, because the symbolic link between appearance and success may not imply any material connection. Since the body is a powerful symbolic form, I argue that we should look beyond the possibility of actually achieving success and consider the significance that this appearance has per se: it symbolizes success just how it is, because it is the beautiful appearance that modern and successful women have. The focus here is not on material achievements but instead on symbolic meanings. In a society very much based on appearance, displaying the look of success already means success. Therefore, the ideal facial beauty symbolizes success, regardless of whether the individual has achieved it or not and thus regardless of the social class to which the individual actually belongs.

The symbolic value of the face of success finds a theoretical ground in the notion of body representation formulated by Pierre Bourdieu. Since the bodily investments aim at making the body representable, the body works as a language that speaks about the person in that body (Bourdieu 1977). In this sense, the body is intended as a symbol. Most importantly, the body symbolizes not only the person's current social position, but also her *trajectory* (Bourdieu 1977). Hence, women's ideal beautiful face symbolizes success in a sense that transcends one's social class and projects the individual onto a path toward a superior status. Transcending the social class to which one belongs means that looking successful does not necessarily have a material link with one's social class. The symbolic value of the face of success is that it represents success regardless of whether success has been materially achieved or not. Beauty may actually give a

woman more chances to become successful, for instance by marrying a wealthier man or finding a better job, but this is irrelevant in the analysis of the symbolic value of the ideal face.

Arguing that Chinese women pursue the face of success also undermines a relatively widespread assumption that they undergo certain cosmetic procedures in order to look Western. Both they and we are aware that some of the facial features that they consider ideal have received a Caucasian influence; nevertheless, women do not aim at looking Caucasian, because what these features have come to represent to them is the look of a modern and successful woman. Modernity and success were initially represented by Western societies, at which China looked up when starting its reform period at the beginning of the 1980s. Globalization brought beautiful women starring in Western advertisements and movies, who were therefore perceived as portraying the beauty of modern and developed women. Although it may be true that initially some Caucasian features were emulated by Chinese women, I argue that nowadays these features have lost their Caucasian significance and overcome the Western–Asian opposition: they have, instead, taken a significance that is more strictly linked to a Chinese image of the successful woman. Over time the Western beauty ideals have been integrated and re-elaborated in the local society: they have lost their specific Western connotation and kept, perhaps even emphasized, their aspect related to modernity and wealth. Modern and rich is what China defines as "successful", and this is what people, in our case women, want to look like nowadays. I agree with Desjeux and Yang (2020: 59) on the fact that Chinese beauty as a mixed beauty (*beauté métisse*) symbolizes the way Chinese culture dealt with the globalization of the beauty market, and managed to reinterpret the codes of Western beauty and adapt them subtly to the local reality. Foreign beauty ideals have been re-interpreted into local terms and thus do not have the same meanings (Johansson 1998; Miller 2006). Contemporary life is featured by a coexistence of local and foreign, traditional and modern (Mühlhahn 2019) and by an intersection of local and global concepts of success (Long and Moore 2013). Xu and Feiner (2007) argued that beauty ideals in China highlight the global nature of beauty standards and the continuity of global commodity exchange. They contended that Western beauty standards permeate Chinese culture and thus women in China are expected to meet physical standards derived from Western bourgeois culture and become indistinguishable from international beauties. Compared to when this article was written (around fifteen years ago), today beauty ideals have evolved and taken a different meaning. It is likely that back then there was a more direct link to Western standards, but now this link has weakened and the connection to local standards has strengthened. Over time the beauty ideals have evolved and acquired a more local

significance, to a point that talking about westernization now as it was done two decades ago does not make sense. I find more appropriate to conclude that Chinese women do not desire what the Western woman is, but rather what she represents – which is, modernity and wealth: in one word, success. In this sense, there is a great conceptual difference between what the body is and what it represents.

I feel the necessity to point out that this argument may not apply to ethnically Asian women in Western countries. In their case the link with ethnicity may be much stronger, because of their need to blend in a Caucasian-dominated society where their face immediately identifies them as different (Le 2014). They may not feel comfortable with their face as a result of how the Western beauty industry has considered their ethnic features, especially the East Asian eyes: sleepy, weak, and dull (Kaw 1993). Therefore, they may try to mitigate it by artificially creating some traits of the Western appearance in order to be, if not like the Western woman, at least not *unlike* her. This might help them feel more accepted by a society in which they constitute an ethnic minority. Blum (2003) gives a different nuance to this interpretation: she posits that these bodily modifications are signs of parental success in the new land, as if the new generation showing the beauty traits of the dominant culture symbolized the family's submission to and accomplishment within said dominant culture.

7.1.3 The weizheng *practices call for a negotiation of naturalness in beautification*

Putting an emphasis on facial beautification uncovers the centrality of the *weizheng* category, which in turn sheds light on the kind of beauty the modern, individualistic and successful Chinese woman wants to attain. It is natural beauty, that is to say, beauty that she achieves with the help of non-invasive and non-properly-surgical *weizheng* procedures. Jaw and chin filler-injections, double-eyelid surgeries and even (open to debate) nose-augmentation surgeries are collocated into the rather flexible category of *weizheng*. These techniques are seen as less artificial than regular cosmetic surgery techniques and this partly reduces the irony permeating the whole medical beautification realm, i.e. aiming to natural beauty through artificial procedures. We are dealing with a different concept of naturalness, one that has not much to do with an innate origin but more with a careful production. In this sense, beauty is not only culturally constructed but also materially sculpted, yet in a natural way. If a woman was not born with natural beauty, she can make use of beautification techniques that not only will give

her results that resemble natural beauty, but that are also themselves considered more natural than conventional cosmetic surgery techniques. Therefore, "natural" is the key objective of *weizheng*, but even more, it is one essential aspect of *weizheng* as an ensemble of techniques. By rejecting proper aesthetic surgery and doing *weizheng* these people are in fact defining *weizheng* as more natural and therefore more acceptable than proper cosmetic surgery, despite being a branch of it. *Weizheng* is interpreted as a non-surgical category of cosmetic surgery, which shows how both the medical professionals and the public negotiate the boundaries of surgical and natural. Prospective patients often criticize the invasive and substantial changes produced by cosmetic surgery and praise a "natural" look, which arguably renders the choice of undergoing *weizheng* more socially acceptable. Within this negotiation, women actively contribute to enact certain interpretations of cosmetic surgery, and also negotiate their self-image in accordance with those interpretations. The idea that women negotiate their self-image with body work (intended as various practices such as dieting, exercise, and cosmetic surgery) was clearly expressed by Gimlin (2002). *Weizheng* enacts a negotiation of the meaning of naturalness in female beauty, shifting it from the beauty that one is born with to the beauty that one has reached through a specific type of treatments. I suggest, therefore, that urban China may be going toward a greater flexibility toward altering one's appearance, at least in the wealthy and modern Yangtze River Delta. The distinction between the perceived "natural" (unmodified) self and the modified self is not clearly marked, and this pushes further the boundaries of naturalness.

Aesthetic medicine, in China like in the rest of the world, has medicalized beauty, so that physical features have been treated as flawed body parts to be cured in hospitals and clinics (Edmonds 2013). This process is visible through a certain medicalizing lexicon – phrases such as "correct", "restore" and "improve" a body part - that I witnessed during consultations in Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital. The use of a specific terminology highlights how medical professionals and prospective patients alike merge the boundary of beauty and medicine: women's physical features are thus medicalized in cosmetic surgery. Moreover, beautification is legitimized in a medical sense because it contributes to a person's comprehensive health by bringing her satisfaction, self-confidence and ultimately happiness. Beauty gets medicalized and thus medical beautification gets legitimized within the health discourse. Michel Foucault (1976; 1980) posited that the body of the individual is regulated in the interest of the population, and what seems a personal choice is instead controlled by society, often through the medicalization of bodies. This may be partially applied to the case of *weizheng*, as well as to

cosmetic surgery in general, which tends to oscillate between subjugation to socially established beauty norms and empowerment of the individual to go after her desired body. Beauty norms exercise power on women but, at the same time, women exercise power by modifying their bodies how they please. As Gimlin (2002) put it, the body is both a location of domination and a tool for resistance and agency. In this sense, I consider *weizheng* procedures as having elements of both subjugation and empowerment, in a system of mutual influence between the individual and the society.

Patients and doctors negotiate a de-medicalized status for certain treatments by including them in the wide realm of *weizheng*, that is to say decree that those aesthetic treatments qualify as more natural. *Weizheng* is continuously being de-medicalized, and this way it can be perceived as less artificial than proper aesthetic surgery and thus more acceptable within the natural beauty discourse. Negotiating a higher naturalness for *weizheng* procedures distances them from regular cosmetic surgeries. Naturalness may be connected with a desire to keep one's uniqueness in one's look after undergoing cosmetic treatments. *Weizheng* then may symbolize a sort of compromise, a way of negotiating their ambition to change with their need to stay themselves. This compromise also helps them not to be criticized for changing too much, for becoming fake: their femininity is legitimate, because it is not artificial. This negotiation touches upon a contrast between wanting to improve and wanting to stay natural. It stems from a desire to improve oneself without fundamentally changing oneself. I argue that this negotiation refers to a particular understanding of what beautification should be like in the era of modernity. I see this refusal of artificiality as connected to a modern society where it is essential to keep one's individuality, and where a non-natural beautification is inevitably perceived as non-individual and, thus, outdated. Several of my interviewees ridiculed fake-looking faces (the so-called *wanghong* face) and praised those celebrities who managed to subtly achieve the ideal face.

7.2 Limitations of this study

This dissertation aims to better understand some aspects of Chinese contemporary society, namely those concerning women's desire for a certain beauty, through the exploration of cosmetic surgery and advanced beautification in urban China. Like all studies, this study has several limitations, which are going to be briefly examined.

First of all, this study looks at a limited geographical area, which can be considered as representative of urban China only until a certain extent. Hangzhou and Shanghai are located in a geographic region called the Yangtze River Delta, which is one of the most urbanized areas of the country, together with the Pearl River Delta in the South and the Beijing Tang area in the North (Erwin 1999; Guo and Liu 2012). It is indeed a privileged area under several aspects, including economy, infrastructures, business, and transportation facilities (Wang et al. 2012). The findings and observations of my research may be applicable to other Chinese urban areas, due to social and economic similarities, but this does not mean that they are unquestionably applicable to every urban area. Given that China is a considerably large country with significant regional differences in prosperity level and culture, some of the findings might be unique to the geographic and cultural location of the research site. Moreover, due to a very large urban-rural divide, I do not attempt to apply my conclusions to rural areas. That would require a separate research.

Secondly, this study is based on an ethnographic analysis of individual experiences and perspectives, and thus has no claim of complete objectiveness. Since my aim was to examine how a certain phenomenon is perceived within the social and cultural context where it develops, I needed to take account of my interviewees' opinions and stories. In addition to a geographical limitation, then, there may also be a limit to the validity of the data even within the fieldwork area. Narratives and experiences are personal and variable, and the respondents cannot represent a perfect sample of the population of that region, which means that the materials collected might not represent the entire width of the phenomenon under study.

Lastly, I was the sole researcher in this study, responsible for collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. My personal baggage and background characteristics have had a weight in the shaping of this study, because the identity of the ethnographer plays a role in the unfolding of the research. Since the researcher gets close to the people and situation under investigation on fieldwork, she is herself also an instrument of both data collection and data interpretation (Patton 1990). The entire process of data collection and analysis required regularly switching between Mandarin and English, and the results depend on my ability to work with these two languages. The results also rely on my interpretation of the data, since this study is qualitative and inductive. I recognize that having more than one investigator to look at the same data might provide a second opinion on the analyses and alternative interpretations, which might possibly lead to different conclusions.

7.3 Areas for future research

This research has focused on urban Chinese women's experiences of beautification and their interpretation of beauty ideals. An emphasis on urbanities does not rule out the possibility of exploring beauty-related topics in the rural areas. In fact, this is largely understudied and would benefit from more insights. A viable research path could be the analysis of rural women's interpretation of *weizheng*: is it related to the modern Chinese woman in the same way as it is for urban women? If it holds different meanings, what are they linked to? Rural beautification surely deserves more exploration.

Another topic for future research on beauty could be the comparison of what I labeled the "face of success" in China with the phenomenon of the "rich girl face" that has recently started to be discussed on the Western media. The "rich girl face" is an aesthetic trend that has become popular among millennials and generation Z in Europe and North America: it is inspired by the signature bee-stung lips, smooth skin, lifted eyebrows and chiseled jawlines of celebrities like Kylie Jenner, Kim Kardashian and Ivanka Trump in the US. It also features a no-shame attitude toward cosmetic surgery, which is proudly showed off on social media such as Instagram. Many magazines in North America and Europe have been reporting this trend since 2019 (Libbert 2019; Hastings 2019; Mason 2021). During the 42nd Italian congress of aesthetic medicine that was held in Rome in July 2021, the experts expressed their concern about the influence of social media on this trend, pointing out that people should not put aesthetic treatments on a shopping list as if they were going grocery shopping (Il Mattino 2021; Mason 2021; Melotti 2021). Exploring the similarities and the differences on a social level between the "rich girl face" in the West and the "face of success" in China would be a stimulating study.

Future research on cosmetic surgery and beautification in China should also consider the fast-changing nature of beauty trends. Some alternative trends are already developing in China, which take some distance from the facial ideals. For example, the Chinese web has been talking about the *gaojilian* (高级脸), that is to say the "high level face": this face features a larger and squarer structure compared to the mainstream oval face, with angular jaws and small wide-set eyes that might confer a woman a cold and distant allure (Baijiajao 2021). Even the single eyelid could find renewed glory in this look. This is simply a minor trend for now, but it might evolve later in time. What I mean to say here is that future research has to pay attention to the evolution of beauty trends, which implies considering the emergence of new treatments that may carry new symbolic meanings.

The topic of beauty is heavily related to the feminine universe, and studying women's beautification practices in the Chinese society sheds light on the gendered roles and the concept of femininity in that society. But beauty is not exclusively a prerogative of women, and future research should dig deeper into the role of men in the beauty economy. Women are by far the principal consumers of beautification practices in China, yet this does not mean that men do not play any role in the beauty market: it is rather marginal, but it has increased in the past few years. There have been some studies on male beauty and cosmetic treatments in East Asia, such as Wen (2021) and Monden (2018), but there is need for more research on the topic, especially since men are starting to play a more prominent role as customers of beautifying treatments. Gender differences take form through practices associated with femininity or masculinity, such as routine labors (West and Zimmerman 1987); in our case those can be beauty practices. How the role of men compares to the role of women in the cosmetic sector, what significance *weizheng* acquires to them, and how beautification impacts their masculinity are only few of the possible questions to investigate.

7.4 Conclusion: urban women's beautification among individualization, success and naturalness

If I had to summarize the core argument of this thesis in one (long) line, it would be as follows: urban women's pursuit of beauty has been enabled by the individualization of desire, the ideal facial beauty symbolizes that success so worshipped by contemporary Chinese individuals, and *weizheng* beautification practices are characterized by a discourse of naturalness. The beauty ideals that women pursue represent success, because they want to project an image of themselves that is related to success. The beautifying procedures that they undergo aim at naturalness, according to an ideal of naturalness that not only distinguishes the results from the artificial beauties of two decades ago, but also distinguishes the perception of *weizheng* as a treatment within the larger sector of aesthetic surgery. The beauty that characterizes the modern Chinese woman is natural through micro artificial procedures: this pushes the boundaries of naturalness toward a more comprehensive meaning.

I indicate *weizheng* as the key category of medical beautification in urban China and that research on cosmetic surgery trends in the country must take *weizheng* as an object of study.

Considering cosmetic surgery as a uniform bodily phenomenon overlooks those important nuances that are specific of the social environment of urban China.

I argue that the individual strive for success that characterizes the Chinese urban youth can be observed in beauty and beautification. Not only in the aim of beautification, but also and perhaps more poignantly in the meaning of the current ideals of beauty. In addition, and more precisely regarding women, we observe a negotiation of this modern beauty that must be natural even in the procedures. This social reading of beautification can help to advance the understanding of contemporary Chinese society, especially of its post-1980 generation that constitutes the present and the future of the country. Desjeux and Yang (2020: 59) posit that studying beauty in China helps analyze the generation gaps, because beauty trends are at the same time a source of socialization and of social tensions. They also point out that studying beauty involves the analysis of both private and public space. All of this renders beauty a total social fact (*un fait social total*).

I position my argument within a larger discourse of desire for success, related to *suzhi* (quality) and the overall social engineering of neoliberal China (see Anagnost 2004; Jacka 2009; Kipnis 2006; Remmert 2020; Rofel 2007; Xie 2021). My focus on beautification for success and as a symbol of success reinforces this discourse, pointing out at a specific and significant aspect of women's life, that is, their appearance. The fact that physical appearance is more significant for women than for men highlights the imbalance existing in the strongly gendered Chinese society. Studying beautification practices can provide a different but nonetheless useful perspective to study women's social status, considering how much weight bodily representation has in contemporary societies. Beauty matters and there is no use in lying about it. But far from condemning women who comply with this evidence as vane or weak, we should analyze the social factors that enable this condition and the symbolic implications of it. Beauty is not evil, and neither are beautification practices, from the simplest to the most invasive ones. Beauty is ambivalent, because it is at the same time a means of control and of liberation of women, just as much as beautification practices are both tying women to gender norms and empowering them (Desjeux and Yang 2020; Miller 2006).

This research was inspired by a strong sense of curiosity, which partially derived from personal experiences and interests. All the pages of this dissertation have aimed to further the understanding of the significance of beauty ideals and beautification practices in urban China, with the final goal of advancing the understanding of contemporary Chinese society. Some

aspects have been focused on more than others, due to the perspective that I chose to adopt. This leaves room for other approaches, providing a starting point for future efforts in studying the topic.

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Summary

The purpose of this research is to advance the understanding of beautification practices in urban China by analyzing those beauty ideals and those forms of cosmetic surgery that are distinctive of the Chinese landscape. The focus is on female beauty not only because women are the main consumers of beautification in China, but also because the female body has been a ground for expressing social change throughout history. This study adopts an ethnographic approach, including observation and person-centered interviews in Hangzhou and Shanghai in 2017 and 2018. These two cities are located in the Yangtze River Delta, a highly developed and urbanized area in Eastern China, which may be representative of urban China due to a certain uniformity in beauty trends in the country.

The findings of this research revealed that individualization, success and naturalness each highlight a feature of women's pursuit of beauty. Within a sociological institutional environment, the concept of habitus interacts with the notion of constructive power over bodies in order to analyze the social significance of beautification trends. Women in urban China negotiate their social value (also) through their looks, between market logics and traditional norms. I argue that the beauty that these women pursue represents the modern woman of highly developed urban areas and position my argument in a larger discourse of desire for success, related to quality and the overall social engineering of neoliberal China.

The individualization of society has enabled women to pursue beautification and encouraged them to win the social competition. This quest for happiness relates to an obsession with success that pervades the lives of Chinese urbanities, reflecting on aesthetic ideals. A fair and pure skin, an oval shape, a pointed chin, a straight high-bridged nose, and large double-lidded eyes are the ideal face features that symbolize success in a sense that transcends one's social class and one's material achievements. The treatments that aim to obtain the ideal face belong to *weizheng* or micro cosmetic surgery, a distinctive category of cosmetic surgery: naturalness characterizes both the outcome and the process of *weizheng*, distancing it from conventional cosmetic surgeries and pushing the boundaries of natural beauty toward a broader meaning. Studying the way female beauty is interpreted and negotiated, mainly by the post-1980 generation, can help us better understand the development of Chinese urban society.

Kurzfassung

Der Zweck dieser Forschung ist es, das Verständnis der Verschönerungspraktiken im städtischen China zu verbessern, indem die Schönheitsideale und Formen der kosmetischen Chirurgie analysiert werden, die für die chinesische Landschaft charakteristisch sind. Der Fokus liegt auf weiblicher Schönheit, nicht nur weil Frauen die Hauptkonsumenten von Verschönerung in China sind, sondern auch weil der weibliche Körper im Laufe der Geschichte ein Bereich für den Ausdruck sozialer Veränderungen war. Diese Studie verfolgt einen ethnografischen Ansatz, der Beobachtung und personenzentrierte Interviews in Hangzhou und Shanghai in den Jahren 2017 und 2018 umfasste. Diese beiden Städte liegen im Jangtse-Delta, einem hoch entwickelten und urbanisierten Gebiet in Ostchina, das potenziell repräsentativ für städtischen China aufgrund einer Einheitlichkeit der Schönheitstrends ist.

Die Ergebnisse dieser Forschung zeigen, dass Individualisierung, Erfolg und Natürlichkeit jeweils ein Merkmal des weiblichen Strebens nach Schönheit hervorheben. Innerhalb des Umfelds des soziologischen Institutionalismus interagiert das Konzept des Habitus mit dem Begriff der konstruktiven Macht, um die Bedeutung der medizinischen Verschönerung zu analysieren. Frauen im städtischen China verhandeln ihren sozialen Wert (auch) über ihr Aussehen, zwischen Marktwirtschaft und traditionellen Normen. Ich behaupte, die Schönheit, die diese Frauen anstreben, repräsentiert die moderne Frau entwickelter städtischer Gebiete. Ich positioniere meine Argumentation in einem größeren Diskurs über den Wunsch nach Erfolg, der sich auf Qualität und das allgemeine Social Engineering des neoliberalen China bezieht.

Die Individualisierung der Gesellschaft hat es Frauen ermöglicht, nach Verschönerung zu streben, und sie ermutigt, den sozialen Wettbewerb zu gewinnen. Diese Suche nach Glück bezieht sich auf eine Erfolgsbesessenheit, die das Leben chinesischer Großstädter durchzieht und ästhetische Ideale reflektiert. Eine helle und reine Haut, eine ovale Form, ein spitzes Kinn, eine gerade Nase mit hohem Nasenrücken und große Augen mit Doppelten Lidfalten sind die idealen Gesichtszüge, die Erfolg in einem Sinn symbolisieren, der über die eigene soziale Klasse und die eigenen materiellen Errungenschaften hinausgeht. Die Behandlungen, die darauf abzielen, das ideale Gesicht zu erhalten, gehören zur *Weizheng* (mikrokosmetischen Chirurgie), einer besonderen Kategorie der Schönheitschirurgie: Natürlichkeit charakterisiert sowohl das Ergebnis als auch den Prozess der *Weizheng*. Dies distanziert sie von gewöhnlichen

kosmetischen Operationen und verschiebt die Grenzen der natürlichen Schönheit in Richtung einer breiteren Bedeutung. Die Untersuchung der Art und Weise, wie weibliche Schönheit interpretiert und verhandelt wird, hauptsächlich von der Generation nach 1980, kann uns helfen, die Entwicklung der chinesischen Stadtgesellschaft besser zu verstehen.

List of publications

Lotti, V. (2018). “The image of the beautiful woman: beauty ideals in modern urban China”. *Asien*, 147, 92-104.

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