

Beauty Influencers on the Short Video Platform Kwai: The Postfeminist Media Culture in Rural China

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Abstract: This study explores the postfeminist media culture in rural China. Existing studies mainly focus on subjects of young and single female professionals who work and live in metropolitan areas in China. The cultural symbols and the socioeconomic structure pertaining to urban localities hence become a context for Chinese postfeminism. Responding to a call for opening the postfeminism concept for intersectional and transnational interrogation, this study draws attention to how social media platforms and the state-supported E-commerce industry are complicating the gendered live experiences in rural China. As China's second-generation social media, the short video platform Kwai (TikTok-like platform) attracts an initial user base from smaller cities and rural areas. Many housewives become beauty influencers on this platform where they film makeup transformation videos and sell beauty products. This digital ethnographic study examines the multimodal discursive features of these videos and explores the influencers' business model. The findings reveal that the influencer culture manifests postfeminist sensibilities featured with a discourse of duality. Self-fashioning and economic independence are expressed as a remedy for and vigilance towards the failed patriarchal marriage. Rural women are suggested to both adhere to traditional family values and maintain autonomy. The influencers' business model provides a seeming solution to such a double requirement. Followers are encouraged to join the influencers' entrepreneur project, however, the multi-level marketing model behind this project only benefits the already established influencers.

Keywords: postfeminism, rurality, Chinese social media, short video platform, Kwai, E-commerce

1. Introduction

This study investigates the postfeminist media culture manifested in the performance and business strategy of rural beauty influencers in China. As China's second-generation social media, the short video platform Kwai (a TikTok-like platform) attracts an initial user base from smaller cities and rural areas. Many housewives become beauty influencers on Kwai by filming makeup transformation videos and selling beauty products. They promote a consumerist lifestyle and an image of the economically independent woman, demonstrating a rhetoric affiliation with the globalized postfeminist discourses. Existing studies on China's postfeminist culture mainly focus on subjects of young and single female professionals who work and live in China's metropolises (Chen, 2002; Liao, 2019; Thornham and Feng, 2010; Yang, 2020). The professional identities lift these young women out of the traditional culture and physically embed them in urban localities where consumer culture and aspiration prevail.

This study attends to a new technological and economic development: social media platforms and the state-supported E-commerce in China are tapping into the consumer market in rural areas. Spenders from lower economic strata are envisioned as the growth engine for the domestic economy. This calls attention to the heterogeneity of postfeminist subjects and the intersectionality of gender norms. The study hence explores how postfeminism, circulated by the globalized media and consumer culture, inflects in rural China. It examines the rural beauty influencer culture by contextualizing it against China's domestic social media ecology, urban-rural disparity and gender norms.

The study adopts digital ethnography (Varis & Hou, 2020) as an approach to gain an in-depth and holistic view of the cultural landscape of rural beauty influencers on Kwai. The collected data, including videos, images and texts are then processed through digital discourse analysis (Johns, Chik and Hafner, 2015) which helps to identify the local meanings and intricacy of postfeminist sensibilities. The study contributes to opening the postfeminism concept for intersectional and transnational interrogation. It also provides evidence to a wider discussion of the digital transformation of China.

The following literature review further situates this study in the research fields of social media and postfeminist cultures in China. The methodology section explains how the ethnographic fieldwork was conducted and data analyzed. The result section firstly reports how rurality is visually represented in influencers' videos, then identifies the postfeminist sensibilities and the business model. The last section draws conclusions and discusses the relevance of the study.

2. Literature review

2.1 Influencer and social media cultures in China

Influencers are highly visible social media figures, who due to their ability to attract attention from a large follower base and their personalized content production, can help brands and advertisers to spread commercial messages (Abidin, 2018). Studies on Chinese micro-celebrity and influencer cultures have reminded us of the critical roles played by the E-commerce industry (Guan, 2020), the domestic platform ecology and the state's governance (Zhang and de Seta, 2019; Craig, Lin and Cunningham, 2021). Li (2019) attends to the gendered design of mobile applications. Targeting female users, many video apps provide camera filters enhancing users' physical look. Although focusing on different platforms, these studies stress the importance of Kwai's market positioning and technical features in China's social media ecology when analyzing the rural beauty influencer culture.

Micro-celebrities on Kwai are theorized as "unlikely creators" (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). Their content represents the vernacular aesthetics and creativity that are neither extraordinary nor spectacular. They would not have been able to produce highly visible cultural content due to the assumed vulgar taste and crude skills in the eyes of the mainstream culture in China. Indeed, Kwai firstly received much stigmatization from the mainstream media. Journalistic articles selectively report the most bizarre video content such as eating a light bulb or swallowing a golden fish (Liu, 2019). Kwai's stigmatized label signals a regime of representation in China's cultural landscape underlined by the entrenched urban-rural discrepancy. Rural middle school students identify with the micro-celebrity figures of "the social men" (*shehui ren*), who have "ample social experience, and could use brute force to solve problems and establish himself as a tough guy among his peers" (Li, Tan and Yang, 2019, p. 1508). By defying school and identifying with this alternative value, students are coming to terms with the broken promise of the upward socioeconomic mobility provided by formal education.

The abovementioned studies lay a foundation for the understanding on the cultural production of rurality on Kwai. To explicate rural beauty influencers' performance and business strategy, it is also important to mention the series of state-initiated efforts to informatize the countryside and how these efforts are manifested in Kwai's technical design and business model. In 2019, the Chinese Party of Communism Central Committee and the State Council issued the "Digital Countryside Strategic Development Plan". Among the many tasks including digitalizing agricultural production, infrastructure and public services, the internet is also applied as a commercial platform where agricultural products can be sold to cities and farmers become small entrepreneurs. Social media platforms like Kwai then become a locale for this state-supported E-commerce. Kwai adopts a social commerce model: purchasing happens in the context of social interaction. The strong online shopping and livestreaming functions distinguish China's domestic short video platforms like Kwai and Douyin from its overseas version TikTok (Kaye, Chen and Zeng, 2020).

2.2 The postfeminist media culture in China

Postfeminism suggests that "equality is achieved and feminism is no longer needed" (McRobbie, 2004, p.255). "The remaining difference between men and women should be understood as a result of the free exercise of individual choice" (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011, p.98). Postfeminist discourse takes critiques of feminism into consideration and engages with them actively. Sexist media messages are expressed ironically, implying the knowingness of feminist discussions (Gill, 2007). Women are portrayed as capable subjects for their opportunities and achievements in fields of education and employment (McRobbie, 2004). Fashion and beauty practices also contribute to the discourse of postfeminism in media. "The promise of women's liberation and freedom of self-choice are overwhelmingly packaged within the crushingly cruel beauty images that western women are judged against and incited to emulate" (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011, p.99). Consequently, beauty practices which prioritize prevailing ideas of femininity are naturalized as an unproblematic expression of the autonomous, self-regulating and self-choosing feminine subject (Stuart and Donaghue, 2011, p.117). The need for beauty and fashion is expressed in a makeover paradigm. It teaches women that their lives are lacking in certain aspects, thus needing to be transformed with modified consumption habits (Gill, 2007).

As a type of cultural sensibility, postfeminism evolves quickly in the media landscape and gets a stronger hold on more aspects of life (Gill, 2017). Not only the body needs to be monitored and transformed, one's psychological world shall also adapt to a new mode: to be positive, confident and resilient. In other words, postfeminism not only mutes the voices questioning the structural inequality of genders at the social level, but also disavows women's possibility to express insecurity, neediness, anger, and complaint (Gill, 2017). In recent

years, more scholars have examined postfeminist culture from intersectional and transnational perspectives. As a type of culture that is supported by globalized consumerist culture and media system, one expects to see postfeminist subjects beyond the assumed white, western, middle-class, heterosexual young women (Dosekun, 2015; Butler, 2016).

Scholars have theorized insightfully the temporal orders of postfeminist culture in China. Namely, how to explicate the relationship between the current consumerist and neoliberal discourses of feminism with the existing feminist moments in modern China? In Thornham and Feng's (2010) study on Chinese fashion magazines, female images embrace a passive and conventional femininity with much less trouble. This relatively easy acceptance of conventional femininity can be understood in association with China's gender politics after the socioeconomic reforms in the 1980s. The ideal image of women in contemporary China has been re-feminized since the economic reforms (Johansson, 2001). Yang (2020) elucidates this relationship between the reclaim of femininity and its later consumerist appropriation well in her study on contemporary chick literature in China. She terms the current postfeminist culture as "consumerist pseudo-feminism", which centers around subjects of middle-class women shaped by values and practices of consumption in the neoliberal economy. This feminist sensibility can be traced back to the "Women's Studies Movement" led by urban female elites in the 1990s. Yang argues that this consumption-based pseudo-feminism, resembling postfeminism, appeared in China before the arrival of the Western form of liberal feminism.

Taking insights from Yang's sophisticated theorization, this study further complicates this temporal order by focusing on rural women as postfeminist subjects. While liberal feminism referring to "the corpus of theories and practices critiquing asymmetrical power relations between genders" (Yang, 2020, p. 7) was introduced to female intellectuals and cadres in the 1990s, one can ask to what extent such values became salient in China's rural life experiences. Moreover, the state-led feminism did not criticize the hierarchy of masculinity and femininity. Neither did it dismantle the power relationship in the suture of biological sex with social gender. As the state's collectivist intervention retreated from the private sphere, the thousand-year-old patriarchy soon returned. In Yang's (1999) comments, the state-led feminism failed to bring lasting gender culture and psychology to the society. Studies of rural women's use of digital media confirm that the persistent patriarchal values still prescribe women's duties and codes of conduct. Digital media use reinforces these inequalities instead of challenging them (Wallis, 2015, 2018; Wang and Sandner, 2019).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a digital ethnographic approach. It served to explore the rural beauty influencer culture as locally situated experiences which involve the engagement with specific social contexts, platforms and semiotization (Varis and Hou, 2020). The data collection method was observation and it lasted for one month. To collect data systematically, the researcher created a new Kwai account in September 2021 and searched with the keywords "makeup counterstrike" and "makeup transformation". The search results led to a large number of makeup videos. Starting from this point, the data collection relied on the algorithmic curation of Kwai to recommend similar videos. Like TikTok trends, Kwai also has a mimetic design which encourages users to apply the background sound of an existing video to film new ones. This gives rise to an imitation public (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) and cultural tropes that to be iterated with creativity. Therefore, the data collection paid particular attention to the iteration of content, namely the similar subjects, plots, time and space in the videos. This helped to delineate the shape of transformation beauty videos as a genre and enhance the cultural representativeness of data collection.

The fieldwork site was hence not a pre-defined virtual location, but a result of construction following the ethnographer's observation for the major cultural tropes of the rural beauty influencer culture. In particular, upon every video, the researcher subscribed to the influencer, yielding an initial corpus of 50 influencers. This corpus was then narrowed down to 10 influencers who cooperate with the same beauty brand "Shezi". Focusing on one brand helped to provide a holistic knowledge of the business model of these influencers. Then the researcher watched all the recent 20 videos and the recent livestream recordings from these 10 influencers. Again, the observation attended to the patterns recurring in videos. Data were captured by taking screenshots and downloading videos to local drive protected with passwords. This amounted to 12 downloaded videos with transcribed voice-overs and 42 screenshots.

Digital discourse analysis (Johns, Chik and Hafner, 2015) was applied to the collected data. The analysis focused on the four dimensions of discourse: text, context, action and interaction, power and ideology. For the texture of these videos, the analysis attended to the use of visual cues, namely physical objects, settings and the presentation of bodies. The textuality was also relevant to the sequence of transformation scenes in the videos. As to the texture of the platform, the analysis attended to how the application directed the flow of usage. The context dimension considered both Kwai's position in China's social media ecology and the local context of the stories in the videos. Action and interaction considered how the video dialogues, often between a wife and husband, were constructed and how the influencers addressed followers. For power and ideology, the postfeminist cultural sensibilities identified from existing research were applied as sensitizing concepts to analyze the videos.

4. Results

4.1 The visual representation of rurality

The first noticeable feature of these videos is the visual representation of rurality. Figure 1 shows the starting scene of a video. It features a woman, played by influencer Tianyi, standing in the kitchen cutting vegetables. The bright and contrastive colors of her blouse are often associated with the rural aesthetics in China. For her appearance, she lost a few teeth. This starting scene produces a rural female body by using several indexical visual cues. Her outfit shows a vulgar taste; she is occupied with domestic labor and she cannot afford to see a dentist. The physical setting and objects convey a rural identity to audiences.



Figure 1: The visual representation of a rural woman's body **Figure 2:** The visual representation of the rural space

Figure 2 is the starting scene from one of Xinran's videos, illustrating how the rural space is produced. A woman is standing in a messy yard and holding a basin of corn, which seems to be just cropped. The agricultural labor and the physical space function as the visual cues to index rurality. Like Figure 1, this woman also wears a plain hairstyle and old-fashioned clothes. It is found from more of Xinran's videos that she puts tapes on her eyelids before the transformation, making her look more aged. Other influencers also darken their skin color or draw lines of wrinkles on the forehead.

Figure 1 and 2 illustrate the starting scenes of the makeup transformation videos. The woman is from the countryside. She lacks physical attractiveness and is tied to heavy domestic or agricultural labor. It needs to be addressed that Tianyi and Xinran are not pretending to be a rural woman, instead, they are accentuating the rural identity markers. In other words, they contextualize their performance to audiences who are familiar with the rural culture in China. The ends of the videos show a drastically different person. In Figure 3 and 4, both Tianyi and Xinran are transformed to a glamorous look. They wear sexy outfits and luxurious jewelry, with hair styled. Importantly, the makeup makes their skins smoother, brighter and faces well defined. Of course, beyond makeup, Kwai's video filter helps the influencers to get flawless skin, wide eyes and a sharper jawline, a gendered design of application suggested by Li (2019). These features appeal to the dominant definition of physical attractiveness of Chinese women.

The physical contexts also change. They are lifted out from the domestic and agricultural spaces to an “empty space” by standing in front of a filming backdrop. In Tianyi’s video, the background is decorated delicately with lights and curtains. However, the space becomes empty because it is no more socially defined. One cannot know who this elegant lady is, where she stands and what she is doing.

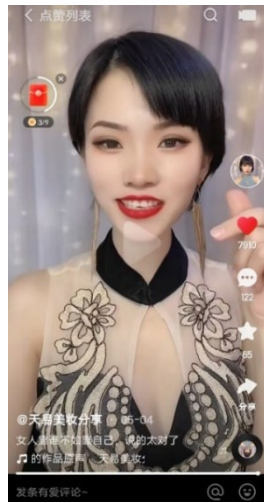


Figure 3: The transformed image of Tianyi

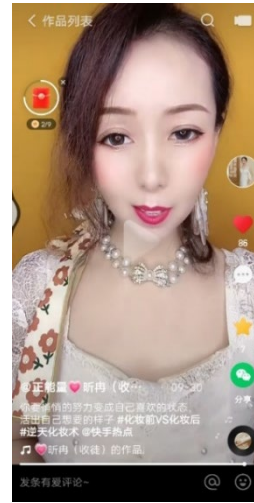


Figure 4: The transformed image of Xinran

4.2 The postfeminist sensibilities and the discursive ambiguity

The last section shows that the beauty influencers are portraying a story of makeover, a prominent element in postfeminist media culture. Now the analysis delves into the reasons why these women in the stories decide to transform their appearances. After browsing all the 72 makeover transformation videos from Tianyi, several major themes are identified. These include: a woman needs to attend a social event of her husband’s network. She is despised by her husband for the messy and aged appearance. A woman needs to participate in her child’s school activity, but the child feels embarrassed about such a scruffy and sloppy mother. A woman will visit or be visited by her judgmental mother-in-law who shows contempt on the wife only for her rural identity. A woman is a bride in her wedding dress, but no one recognizes her because of the ugly look. A woman gets a divorce from her husband or the husband had an affair. In very few cases, a woman goes to work, but most of the work-related stories feature the woman as a flight attendant.

These plots accentuate a rural housewife identity and a theme of “crisis in patriarchal and patrilineal marriage”. The woman in the videos is economically dependent on the husband and devotes her life to domestic labor. This can be seen from the social activities she attends, which all connect to the husband’s social network or the child’s education. The woman is married to the husband’s family, explaining why she is under the scrutinization of the mother-in-law. When the woman indeed appears as an individual in the job market, she is a flight attendant, whose work is often associated with femininity instead of professionalism in China’s popular discourses. However, in these transformation videos, the woman’s attitude towards traditional marriage life is ambiguous. The analysis now attends to the problem definitions and the recommendations for solutions in these stories.

In Extract 1, the wife blames the burden and economic situation of the family. She poses a structural problem where the husband plays a particular role. The crisis in the video is perceived as an outcome of a rural woman’s underprivileged structural position in the patriarchal and patrilineal family structure. This outcome is conveyed as unavoidable. A woman’s physical attractiveness will deteriorate, because she must take care of the family members, thus being other-oriented. However, money can improve the situation. The friend’s wife keeps the attractive look, because that friend earns enough money to treat his wife well. The division of labor in this patriarchal marriage is not to be challenged, but can be compensated with the husband’s economic power. Once the man is not playing the economic role well, there is an appeal to a woman’s economic independence and individualism. But the value of these two feminist tropes is ambiguous.

It is this ambiguity that defines the particularity of the postfeminism culture in rural China. Firstly, in Extract 1, economic independence and individualism are presented as a debatable alternative which defies traditional values (“does not care about family”). A woman is forced to choose from either family or career and bear the

respective stigmatization and consequences for whichever she chooses. Independence is also the secondary choice when the husband cannot play his gendered social role. Secondly, the benefit of economic independence and individualism is solely footed on physical attractiveness. Such ambiguity is further illustrated in Extract 2.

Extract 1

Husband: A friend of mine and his wife are going to visit me. Go quickly to get some grocery.

Wife: Yes.

Husband: When they arrive, just tell them that you are the house servant hired by me.

Wife: Why?

Husband: My friend's wife is very beautiful, but look at you!

Wife: I now look like this, but it is all because of you. Ok, let me do my makeup first and go buy grocery.

Another scene, the woman begins to apply makeup

Wife: You always mention that other's wife is gorgeous, but why don't you reflect on how much the husband is investing on his wife? But how much you invest on me? I have to be calculating even about family expenditure because of your meager income. I take care of the children and parents. Now I've lost my good looks and you return me with despise. If a woman does not care about her family, and be economic independent, she will be beautiful wherever she goes.

Wife: It's the easy job of applying makeup. Let me wear an elegant makeup today and I won't lose your face...

This script comes from the video shown in figure 1 from Tianyi. While preparing for dinner, the woman asks for money from her husband as family expenditure. However, the husband is not only reluctant but also raises an ironic question. Without giving the money, he scorns her wife for economic dependence and challenges her confidence. The wife's later argument indeed illustrates an element of postfeminism. She considers herself belonging to the new generation of women in China, to whom economic independence is capable. In other words, gender equality has been somewhat achieved. However, the wife then explains the reason for her dependence. She confirms that in a marriage, a woman seeks protection and care. A woman is not going to take care of a man's spending.

This confessional talk reconfirms the traditional values in patriarchal marriage. The video ends with an ambiguous suggestion to women audiences: women should strive for independence, which is manifested in both economy (bank cards) and mobility (cars). The ambiguity arises again: if women are seeking protection and care from men, what is the need for independence? One of the interpretations in Extract 2 is "risk management". While the ideal situation is that a traditional marriage works out, but in many cases, there are problems, such as an irresponsible and inconsiderate man. In this case, although a woman can long for a traditional role, she should also be able to manage the risk.

Both Extract 1 and 2 show a discourse of duality. The discourse reinforces the traditional patriarchal gender orders and suggests women to be independent. The other-oriented, caring, and nurturing motherhood is not given up, upon which, physical attractiveness is demanded. The value of economic independence and individualism is ambiguous, which becomes the instrument of remedy and risk management. A vigilant and reflective neoliberal subject also shines through. It is the woman who needs to repair the problems in a marriage and to maintain risk consciousness and be resilient. Moreover, the phrase economic independence is introduced as a slogan, with unresolved tension and an undefined plan. Visually, whenever economic independence is portrayed as being achieved in the final transformed scene, what is really achieved is a glamorous look. The visual and vocal modes work in combination to sneakily conflate the two concepts: being economically independent equals physical attractiveness. The woman is empowered by beauty and fashion symbolically,

resonating with the empty context of the transformed scenes. This leads to the further analysis of rural beauty influencers' business model.

Extract 2

Wife: we are running out of milk powder for the baby. The water, electricity and property management bills are also due. Can you transfer some money to my bank card?

Husband: I will transfer the money after dinner. But let me firstly ask you a question: if one day we sperate, can you still make a living?

Wife: Make no mistake, women now are different from the old days.

Husband: How?

Wife: Because we all know to be economically independent and make a living by ourselves. We spend the money earned by ourselves. Now we don't have to depend on men.

Husband: ah, are you so confident?

Wife: Of course! Actually, women marry men for a sense of reliance and safety. She looks for a man who can care her, spoil her, love her and protect her. If a man cannot achieve these, what is the use of him? Is she looking for a man to raise? So as women, we should achieve: phones are charged, cars are tanked, bank cards with money saved. If you think I'm correct, please hit the heart button for me!

4.3 Female entrepreneurship and influencers' business model

Figure 5 is the starting scene of a transformation video from Tianyi. The video features a housewife whose husband requires a divorce. On the bottom of the screen, there is a yellow shopping cart button. It is a purchase link directing users to the product Tianyi is using in this video and further her Kwai micro-shop. Figure 6 is the makeup application process. Tianyi is applying a BB cream by squeezing it directly onto her face, which also serves to demonstrate this product in front of audiences.



Figure 5: The shopping cart button in the video camera

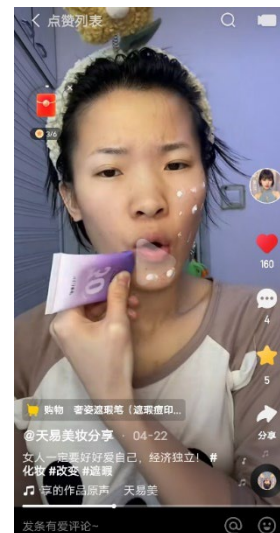


Figure 6: Displaying the product in front of the

Selling products is not the only revenue stream for beauty influencers on Kwai. Xinran's full screen name is "Positive Energy (heart emoji) Xinran (Recruiting Apprentice)". The parenthesis announces that she is recruiting apprentices. This apprenticeship is not only about learning makeup skills, but also the skills to start an influencer career, namely business tutoring. In Xinran's account description, she provides different services including influencer multi-channel network, makeup and filming tutorial, body slimming.

Both Xinran and Tianyi work with the same brand Shezi. The company is a cosmetic and food supplements producer whose major sale channel is social media platforms. Starting as a micro-commerce brand, Shezi recruits individual selling agents who promote and sell products on their own social media accounts. To be an agent, one needs to bulk purchase a large amount of products. The agents can also profit by recruiting sub-level agents. This shows a multi-level marketing model of the brand. In the case of Xinran and other influencers, the apprentices they recruit are the potential sub-level agents.

This agent recruiting and business tutoring revenue model explains the ambiguous meanings of economic independence in influencers' transformation videos. The scripted performance stresses the importance of women's income and attracts audiences to join the influencers' business. In this case, the makeup transformation videos construct postfeminist culture from two levels. For one, they call upon women to conduct self-fashioning practices as a solution to the crisis in the patriarchal family relationship. For another, they promote female entrepreneurship which is restricted in the business of fashion and beauty. This model also explains the recurring plot of a husband's low income in the transformation videos. Several influencers in the sample are mothers of two children with the influencer career being a side job. Having extra income from the wife beyond the husband's salary is promoted as both a solution for the poor family and for the self-esteem of the housewife.

5. Discussions and conclusions

This study explores the postfeminist media culture in rural China manifested in the beauty influencers' videos and business model on Kwai. An ethnographic investigation reveals that the influencers advance a makeover paradigm for audiences. The scripted videos depict rural housewives as taking a disadvantaged position in patriarchal and patrilineal marriage. Her physical unattractiveness is both a result and symbolism of such a position. Beauty and fashion routines are applied by the woman to help herself out. The glamorous look at the end of the makeover scene functions to empower the woman symbolically and signals her economic independence. The calling for female economic independence functions to inspire audiences to join the influencer business, where influencer trainees are recruited as agents for the cosmetic company.

The study identifies several particularities of the postfeminist media culture in rural China. Firstly, the acceptance of the traditional patriarchal values is not a knowing and assumed self-choice in comparison to Western postfeminism culture. Similar to the findings from previous studies, the essentialist gendered roles are embraced without questioning. The videos construct a taken-for-granted passive role in the patriarchal script. This finding illustrates the particular temporal order of China's postfeminist culture, in which the liberal feminist ideas do not have a strong presence in rural culture. This explains why economic independence and self-fashioning are discursively constructed as a remedy and rescue for the failure of the traditional marriage and gender relationship.

To summarize, if the urban postfeminist culture in China takes account of China's feminist discourses, its rural manifestation still conducts a dialogue with patriarchy. One may ask to what extent this cultural sensibility is "post"-feminist. Still, the remedy and rescue that provided by the videos subscribe to consumerist culture and a neoliberal mentality. The promise of women's liberation and freedom of self-choice are overwhelmingly manifested in the field of beauty consumption. The rural housewives also need to be resilient psychologically so as to manage the crisis in marriage life. The beauty enterprise recommended by the influencers again limits women's public profile to the region of fashion and beauty. Importantly, its multi-level marketing model benefits only the established influencers. The promise for economic independence is thus difficult to realize.

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