

**Achieving Beauty and Health:  
Exploring Public and Private Aesthetic Medicine in Xiamen, China**

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## Abstract

Based on 14 months of fieldwork, this dissertation explores women's changing understanding and practices of beauty and health enhancement in Xiamen City, China. It argues that women's beauty and health enhancement is not completed by limited treatments and plastic surgery procedures but reflects women's living and becoming in the world. Beauty perceptions involve women's imaginations of themselves and their relations to the socialist state, the capitalist market, biomedicine, Minnan patriarchal family, and ethnic minority identities. My dissertation begins with exploring the complexities of Whiteness with a focus on Chinese competing beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 (whiteness, youth, and slimness) in a context of long-standing globalization. Whiteness in Xiamen is related to skin condition (smoothness and flawlessness), diets, age, working or living environment, and not necessarily connected with the spread of European values or racial categories. The dissertation then shows how the Chinese medical system (public medicine and private medicine) makes women's pursuit of these beauty ideals an individual option rather than a citizen's compulsory responsibility. My dissertation also explains how beauty was intervened upon by biomedical standards of health differently in Xiamen's public and private hospitals. The Chinese biomedical system offers a special case to study the construction of biomedical authority without eliminating other medical systems, such as Chinese medicine, facilitated with *Renqing* 人情 (debts, duties, favours, etc.) and *Guanxi* 关系 (social relations, connections, networking). Finally, my dissertation demonstrates how some Chinese women realize their beauty and health ideals outside clinical settings. I show that though beauty and health are configured as individual pursuits, women incorporated beauty and health enhancement into their lifelong projects in relation to their gender and family roles, aesthetic citizenship, and aspirations for the future.

Keywords: Beauty, Health, Gender, Aesthetic Medicine, Globalization, Whiteness, Consumption

## Acknowledgements:

Being an anthropology student has provided me great opportunities to travel across different places in the world. During my early childhood, I rode my bicycle and talked to people in and outside the hospital. I realized that our world is full of diverse lives, people, and culture. I then expected that someday, I would leave Xiamen, the small, lovely city in my memory.

I did not plan to be a real anthropologist. From 2012 to 2016, I lived in Guangzhou, where I knew and studied Anthropology. Anthropology was a marginalized discipline. My mother and I were thinking about changing my major to Classic Chinese, History, or Economics, otherwise I was not able to find a desirable job. But I found that Anthropology was super interesting and stayed. My undergraduate study was inspired by changes of my family after the birth of my two nieces, Yiyi and Sisi. I discussed childbirth and childhood education in my undergraduate dissertation. Professor Liu Zhiyang, the supervisor of my undergraduate dissertation, encouraged me to apply for a PhD program, maybe because he felt that I was smart and able to complete one. Based on encouragement from him and other friendly professors at Sun Yat-Sen University. I finally decided to do my master application. During different periods of studies, my parents supported me without any hesitation.

In 2016 and 2017, I was studying my master's in Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University, Halifax. It was a cold place in winter, but most people there were wonderfully warm. I could not remember how many times my classmates and friends had invited me to their parties and expressed their concerns about my study or health. Learning Anthropology in my third language and also in a new social environment was very difficult. I usually spent time on readings and my assignments until midnight. During that period, I read some anthropological literature under the supervision of Professor Robin Oakley, who kept helping and encouraging

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## Introduction

### Seeing Beauty in Xiamen

At about ten o'clock in the morning, I received a WeChat message from Teng<sup>1</sup>, one of my research participants, as I was following Dr. Wang into the beauty treatment room of the Cosmetic Dermatology department at Zhongshan Hospital. Zhongshan Hospital is one of the most popular, top-level public hospitals in Xiamen, China, and is affiliated with Xiamen University. Like other public institutions, both Xiamen University and Zhongshan Hospital are funded and operated by the Chinese government. Zhongshan Hospital was initially funded by overseas Chinese and was opened to support Xiamen's public health system in 1928. It has four campuses, and more than 3,000 medical professionals work there. Zhongshan has become one of the most competitive hospitals nationwide. I conducted my research on the main campus of Zhongshan Hospital, which is located in Siming District, Xiamen. Most of the offices of Dentistry, Dermatology, and Plastic Surgery that I visited were in the Outpatient Building. During the COVID-19 period (2019–2022), only two main doors of the hospital were open to the public. Individuals who entered the hospital had to scan their facial ID and health barcodes on WeChat or Alipay.<sup>2</sup>

Teng told me that she was waiting for an appointment in the Dentistry Department:

It is my first time here. You can't imagine how many patients are here waiting for their dentists. Could you please do me a favour, my dear friend? I am worried about the

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<sup>1</sup> Some names of participants in this dissertation were given by participants themselves in their informed consent forms. Some did not leave a name and agreed that I selected pseudonyms for them. As mentioned in my ethics application, participants would use pseudonyms to protect their privacy. As a researcher, I was not able to know whether any of them used their real names or not.

<sup>2</sup> WeChat and Alipay are popular social platforms in China. Chinese people use these apps to chat, shop, transfer money, reserve appointments, and link their medical insurance accounts. These two social platforms relate to the Chinese national medical system. During the COVID-19 period, COVID-19 test results could be found by downloading health barcodes on these platforms. Chinese people were required to scan their health barcodes when entering public spaces.

condition of my skin, my pimples. Could you help me reserve an appointment with doctors there (in Cosmetic Dermatology)? It doesn't need to be a formal appointment, just a very short one. Because I still have another consultation with Dr. Yang (of the Plastic Surgery Department) later. Oh . . . and you should come with me.

So I asked Dr. Wang. "Are there any available appointments today? I mean, any this morning?"

"No, we have too many patients today, including some walk-in patients. As you can see, there are patients are still waiting on the sofa. Would you like to consult a doctor here?"

Although most appointments were reserved on WeChat, hospitals also allowed walk-in appointments.

"No, it's for my friend. She's asking if there are any available appointments."

Dr. Wang suggested, "You can suggest that she reserve it online; that would be more convenient."

"Ok, thank you. I'll let her know."

I quickly replied to Teng on WeChat. About one hour later, Teng finished her consultation in Dentistry and visited me in the beauty treatment room of Cosmetic Dermatology, where I introduced her to Dr. Wang, "My friend is here. She has another meeting, and I need to go with her. See you soon."

I was walking out of the room when Teng suddenly dragged me back. "Hi, Dr. Wang, just a quick question. If I want to enhance my skin health and beauty, how long will it take?"

Dr. Wang looked back at us, "What kind of health and beauty? You need to be more specific."

Teng pointed to me, “I mean, like her skin. I want to have lighter, cleaner, and smoother skin – like hers. If I want skin like hers, how long will that take, and how much money might it cost?”

Dr. Wang nodded his head, “I am not sure. It also depends on many different factors such as your diet, daily care, original skin and body condition. You’ll also need to undergo medical tests. So it’s difficult for me to calculate now.”

We thanked Dr. Wang and walked downstairs to the Plastic Surgery Department. We took seat near the department, and Teng said, “We haven’t seen each other for a long time. There was a COVID campus lockdown last month, so I wasn’t able to meet you earlier. I’ve been upset. As you can see, my – eyes . . .”

Teng leaned in towards me and asked, “Can you see it? I just realized you’re not wearing your glasses today. You’ll need to come closer, and you’ll see that my two eyes are different sizes, and my eyelids aren’t the same shape.”

“Yes, they’re a little bit . . .” I replied.

Teng looked worried, “No, it is not a little bit. They’re very different, especially in photos. I can’t bear it. I want a second corrective plastic surgery.”

“I am sorry to hear that . . . Have you talked to Dr. Yang?”

Teng said:

Yes. He said that they looked normal and natural. The difference is natural. But I don’t think so. This kind of mistake shouldn’t have happened. But he said that he could have a

look at my eyes today. He said he would do me a *Renqing* 人情<sup>3</sup> (favour) since I'm his former patient and acquaintance. He told me that the hospital wouldn't charge me the extra fee (for a corrective surgery). Also, I can reserve the surgery as soon as possible. But I feel like this corrective surgery should be free, because it is not my fault.

“So . . . you want him to make them more similar – similar shapes and sizes?”

Teng replied, “Yes, also I don't want my eyelids to be too natural, like an internal type. The length of my eyelids now is much like they were before. I still need to use eyelid glue to lengthen them when applying make-up. It's annoying. My eyelids should be wider, like yours.” In Chinese, external eyelids refer to wide, obviously double eyelids. Narrow, hidden, or unrecognizably double eyelids are categorized as the internal type.

I tried to comfort Teng, “But Dr. Yang told us that he thought my eyelids weren't natural but fake, during your first consultation. I feel like he thought I was a failed example. I got my current eyelids many years ago, and maybe they're outdated now.”

“No, they're beautiful. Do you remember that another girl also preferred yours? I feel like that's because we have different tastes. There is no superior type of beauty. I mean, even if I want to have wide, identifiable eyelids, I can still have healthy, natural beauty if I can keep a balance between my facial features. I feel like your eyelids suit your face.”

Around noon, and Dr. Yang finally called Teng back. He told her that their appointment had to be rescheduled as he was busy treating another patient in the operating room. Teng was

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<sup>3</sup> *Renqing* 人情 here means favour, but the meanings of it can be more complicated and diverse in Chinese. It can refer to responsibilities, duties, and debts among relatives, acquaintances, friends, and even unfamiliar people. *Renqing* helps Chinese people construct their *Guanxi* 关系 (social relations) and boundaries.

disappointed. “I need to visit him maybe next week. It’s difficult for me to leave campus during this COVID-19 period. Please trust your own decisions about what’s beautiful.”

As Teng talked, Dr. Wang passed by us. Teng called out, “Hello, Dr. Wang. Nice to see you again. Could you please have a look at our eyes? Can you guess which of us have artificial eyelids?”

Dr. Wang smiled, “I don’t feel I can guess, since I study dermatology.”

Teng insisted, “Just guess for fun. We won’t get annoyed.”

“Yours?” (pointing to Teng).

Teng and I laughed loudly. “Sorry, we both have undergone a double-eyelid surgery.”

Dr. Wang was surprised and turned to me, “What? You also had it. I haven’t paid too much attention to this. Hahaha.”

Teng then turned to me and said, “OK, even doctors have different opinions. I feel like I need to have corrective surgery immediately.”

The conversations between the doctors and Teng reflect important differences in the understanding of beauty and health. While Dr. Yang viewed unrecognizable changes in Teng’s eyelids as beautiful, Teng preferred obvious changes in appearance. Healthy and natural beauty is viewed differently by doctors and patients like Teng. Some women like Teng were not passive subjects but active individuals who might resist or challenge these standards. Also, women’s pursuit of beauty and health could not be completely resolved by treatment and surgery procedures alone; it might depend on women’s social experiences, struggles, and life-long improvements over time. Starting with Teng’s story, this dissertation will argue that women’s

pursuit of beauty and health is not simply about eliminating perceived imperfections and illness; it is about their ways of living in a world in which their beauty and health enhancements are related to their interactions with the state, the capitalist market, China's biomedicine, family, and so on.

From May 2021 to July 2022, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two hospitals: one public and one private, in Xiamen, China. During this time, I met a number of women who were pursuing beauty and health through biomedical means. Like Teng, these women shared their feelings, experiences, and stories with me. Based on my data, this PhD dissertation explores anthropological theories of globalization, consumption, and biopolitics. In Xiamen, women's beauty and health enhancements are not merely products of colonialism or globalization in this socialist country. For example, 'whiteness' does not merely refer to skin colour; and women's pursuit of whiteness is related to their diets, age, social position, living and working environments, and so on. This dissertation also explores Chinese biomedicine as a specific system wherein Chinese traditional medical tenets, such as balance and harmony, have been developed to construct a rationality for beauty enhancement.

In this introduction, I briefly outline the history of Xiamen City, with a focus on its biomedical system. I then provide the literature review for my dissertation, covering the anthropology of biomedicine with a view to my contributions to understanding Chinese biomedicine and biocitizenship. To frame my contributions about women's beauty and health enhancements in Xiamen, I also review a second literature on globalization and colonialism theory and a third on feminist studies of feminine beauty and health. A methodology section offering reflections on positionality follows. In the last part of this chapter, I will provide an overview of the dissertation's four chapters.

## Research Context: Xiamen 厦门, Southern China

Xiamen 厦门, also called Amoy, is a small harbour city in Minnan 闽南 region, Fujian 福建 Province, located in southeastern China, near Taiwan. Its local population is more than 5.3 million (Xiamen Statistics 2022). Xiamen City encompasses two islands (Xiamen Island and Gulangyu Island) and a region connected to the Chinese mainland, all connected by local public transportation systems (subway, ship, bus, etc.). While many people live, study, and work on the main island, Gulangyu Island has been a special place where local ecotourism has developed. Most villages and countryside areas are in the region connected to the mainland, and in some of these, Minnan patriarchal power<sup>4</sup> is still strong. Xiamen has many business, tourist, and compulsory education resources. It has participated in global trade since the 16th century (Pitcher 1893). The annual port cargo throughput of Xiamen Harbour was 219 million tons in 2022 (Xiamen Statistics 2023). The local dialect is Minnanese 闽南语, or Min(nan) Chinese, which has some similarities with the Taiwanese and Teochew dialects.



Figure 1. Fanghong, *Fujian Province in China*, 2005.

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<sup>4</sup>Minnan Region includes Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Zhangzhou City. It is the homeland of the Minnan people and Minnan subculture. Minnan region is a subcultural and political region. The Minnan subcultural group is one of the subgroups who maintain the patriarchal system in China.



Figure 2. Yorwba, *Locator Map of Xiamen in Fujian*, 2020.

In 1387, Ming (1368–1644)’s first emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, commanded local official Zhou Dexing 周德兴 to build up a city area in Jiahe Yu 嘉禾屿 (current Xiamen). Ming imperial power also increased the number of soldiers there and promoted a coastal garrison to prevent the invasion of Japanese imperial power (Xue [1769] 2020). In the early Qing period (1644–1683), Xiamen became a place for political power affiliated to Ming, such as Ming Zheng 明郑 (1628–1683), to resist Qing imperial power. Ming Zheng’s leader Zheng Chenggong 郑成功 (Koxinga) occupied Xiamen and Taiwan, stationing troops there in the hope of reviving the Ming dynasty. Xiamen became a place for the Han majority and Ming supporters to resist and survive. But after the death of Zheng Chenggong, Xiamen was soon put under Qing’s control (Xue [1769] 2020; Zhou 1832; Pitcher 1893).

Xiamen was still viewed as the southeastern gate to resist foreign imperial powers, such as the British and Japanese in Qing. In 1840, due to the failure of the First Opium War, the Qing government opened Xiamen and four other harbours to foreigners as free treaty ports. British imperial power soon colonized Xiamen. Gulangyu Island became a place for foreign countries to build their embassies (Pitcher 1893). In 1895, Japan colonized Taiwan and started to immigrate some Japanese and Taiwanese citizens into Xiamen. Due to the Chinese people's resistance in 1937, Japan had to evacuate these citizens. However, Japanese imperial power returned in 1938 and occupied Xiamen. Jails and schools were established to punish and educate people who resisted Japanese rule (History of the Strait 海峡问史 2022). To help local citizens, several foreign missionaries and biomedical hospitals, such as Hope Hospital 救世医院, were built, challenging the dominance of Chinese medicine in Xiamen. Xiamen citizens' understandings of health enhancement, as well as their daily diets, were to some extent influenced by colonialism and globalization. Xiamen's history and its specific geographical location have made it a special place to study women's beauty and health enhancements in China. This will be explained more in below sections.

### **The Chinese Nation-State, the Chinese Biomedical System, and the Chinese Practice of Biomedicine**

The People's Republic of China was established in 1949. In order to build up an independent, cohesive nation-state, China's communist government legitimized 56 ethnic groups to build up the Zhong Hua Min Zu 中华民族 (Chinese Nation). By incorporating these ethnic groups into a cohesive state, contemporary China also constructed a strong connection to Imperial China (221

B.C.–1911) by recognizing some of ancient China’s dynasties, most of which were ruled by the Han majority and ethnic minorities such as Mongolian and Manchurian. China currently has a population of more than 1.4 billion, and Chinese women comprise 48.85 percent of the population (China Statistics 2023). Although China aimed to build a socialist society, its global capitalist market was opened in 1978 in the hope of developing the economy rapidly and benefiting its citizens. With the support of Vice President Deng Xiaoping, China opened several free treaty ports, including Xiamen, beginning in the 1980s (Ong 2006).

Under these circumstances, these seaside port cities gained more assets compared to western China and brought lots of resources and opportunities to other areas, improving the success of Deng’s “Those Who Become Prosperous First Helping Those Who Lag Behind 先富带动后富” policy. In 2022, China’s yearly per capita income reached 84,781 Yuan (about 16000 Canadian dollars), up from 385 Yuan in 1978 (China Statistics 2023). Due to the large population, opportunities for getting good educational and medical resources are still limited. For example, focusing on 1.023 percent of the Chinese population above the age of 6 (1,363,035 people), China’s National Statistics concluded that while 14,948 men never received an education, the number of women considered illiterate was 36,444 in 2022 (382 and 1194 in Fujian Province) (China Statistics 2023). According to data provided by the Siming District government of Xiamen City (2022), about half of the middle school students (43,742 in total) were able to attend high school. China is now a competitive society where the old socialist job allocation system has been replaced.

Biomedicine has dominated the Chinese medical industry since the colonial period (1911–1949), while its related knowledge and practices were introduced to imperial China beginning in the late 18th century by European missionaries who delivered medical care to the

Chinese people out of charity to enhance their reputation and gain authority. In 1911, some protestant missionaries and biomedical practitioners competed with Chinese physicians to cure the Manchurian Plague (Andrew 2014; Lei 2014; Minden 1994). Rather than devalue Chinese medicine, some of these biomedical practitioners also employed Chinese treatments and sold Chinese herbs to help build trust with Chinese patients. Meanwhile, some practitioners were unable to communicate very well with their patients due to the practitioners' lack of knowledge of local language and cultural norms, such as filial duty, which shaped Chinese people's preferences for bodily holism (Andrew 2014). Surgeries aimed at cutting body parts were not accepted by the Chinese public (Heinrich 2008). The Manchurian plague not only proved biomedicine's efficacy in controlling epidemics but also helped Chinese medicine transform from an individual curative medical system to a public health system (Andrew 2014; Lei 2014; Heinrich 2008). From the 1910s–1920s, biomedicine finally achieved dominance in Chinese society. Many social elites argued that China should rebuild the state through radical reforms, and that the focus should be on promoting Western democracy and science, as well as eliminating outdated and superstitious traditions, including some traditional Chinese medical tenets or practices (Andrew 2014; Lei 2014).

In the 1920s, cosmetic surgery was introduced from the United States and Japan and has been popular in large Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai since that period. While in Beijing, people's understanding of cosmetic surgery was partially impacted by increasing demands for reconstructive surgeries during and after the Korean War, in Shanghai its popularity was also influenced by the fashion and film industries (Hua 2013). As well, Chinese women's traditional preferences for bodily holism and obedience to male family members were replaced by individual bodily improvements. Women's pursuit of beauty and/or Western lifestyles was

also viewed as a defence against the standards of being traditional, humble, and obedient and becoming, instead, patriotic and independent (Edwards 2000). However, during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), women’s pursuit of beauty and bourgeois lifestyles were devalued (Chen 2003), and cosmetic surgeries were considered “bourgeois vanity” in the Maoist era (Brownell 2005); and many cosmetic hospitals closed during this period (Brownell 2005; Hua 2013). With the development of China’s beauty market in the post-Mao era, the idea of changing one’s body or appearance has been increasingly accepted, and many have undergone cosmetic surgery procedures since the 1980s (Hua 2013). During the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) period (2002–2003), the Chinese government emphasized prevention and disease control in its public medical system (Mason 2016), and health, rather than beauty, became the goal. This emphasis peaked again during the COVID-19 period (2019–2022). Although the Chinese government has provided medical support to its citizens in its nationwide health insurance system to construct a healthy, strong Chinese population, beauty is not funded.

Xiamen has become one of the places where China’s contemporary beauty economy has developed, encouraging women to pursue beauty, consume beauty products, such as aesthetic medicine, and take advantage of their beauty assets. Xiamen has constructed a neoliberal framework since the 1980s, becoming an autonomous economic zone in which to practice Chinese neoliberal policies and attract foreign capital (Tang et al. 2012; Ong 2006). With the growth of the beauty economy, plastic surgery has attracted some Xiamen citizens. In the 2000s, cosmetic hospitals and clinics, such as Haixia 海峡 Hospital, actively promoted advertisements and participated in TV shows that promoted artificial beauty. These shows were also discussed by Hua (2013) in her studies of Chinese women’s pursuit of beauty and health. For example, the

famous Chinese “Ren Zao Mei Nu 人造美女<sup>5</sup> (artificial beauty)” Hao Lulu travelled to various Chinese cities (including Beijing, Xiamen, and so on) to undergo surgery and treatment procedures in the hope of enhancing her physical appearance. Furthermore, the success of aesthetic medicine in Xiamen has been linked to the local environment and weather. According to some patients and medical professionals, Xiamen’s hot, wet weather has contributed, to some extent, to the growth of pimples and darker skin; and some nearby cities, such as Nanping 南平, surrounded by mountains<sup>6</sup>, produce firecrackers, which has led to a large number of burn victims travelling to Xiamen for reconstructive surgery.

In Xiamen, beauty procedures and treatments are provided across an array of medical and social places, including public and private hospitals, clinics, medical workshops, beauty spas, and so on. While public hospitals are funded by the Chinese government and have a close association with the Communist Party, some private hospitals and clinics are partially funded by private and foreign capital. Clinics are also places for women to enhance their beauty and health. Medical workshops are another key location. Unlike hospitals and clinics, medical workshops are often unregulated and are often situated in small, private spaces, such as condo rooms. Carrying out plastic surgery and treatments in medical workshops and beauty spas is illegal, as will be discussed in my following chapters.

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<sup>5</sup> In Mandarin, 人造美女 (artificial beauty) is often used to describe women who enhance their physical appearance by undergoing plastic surgery procedures.

<sup>6</sup> Mountain regions in Nanping are prone to wildfires due to hot weather and dry vegetation.

	Certification (to employ aesthetic medicine)	Connection to national medical insurance	Presence of medical professionals	Price (impacted more by the state or market?)
Public Hospital	Yes, but limited choices (e.g., no tattooing, and so on)	Yes	Yes, fierce competition between doctors with graduate degrees	Fully controlled by the state
Private Hospital	Yes, more choices	Yes	Yes, but some have limited roles; some hire public doctors to help.	Impacted more by the market
Private Clinic	Yes	Yes	Yes, but very limited. Some hire public doctors to help.	Impacted more by the market
Medical Workshop	No, but some offer unregulated (Chinese) medicine.	No	Almost none	Impacted more by the market
Beauty Spa	No	No	No	Impacted more by the market

Table 1. Comparison among Medical Spaces

## Literature Review

My research is informed by previous anthropological work and feminist studies of beauty and health, and it contributes to three broad areas: the anthropology of biomedicine and aesthetic medicine; the anthropology of globalization and consumption; and the anthropology of femininity and gender.

### ***Section One: Anthropology of Biomedicine/Aesthetic Medicine, Chinese Biomedicine***

In this section, I will provide a literature review and discussion of anthropological studies of biomedicine. In so doing, I will clarify how my dissertation contributes to anthropological studies of Chinese biomedicine.

Previous anthropological studies have demonstrated how biomedicine has constructed its rationality and authority (Lock and Nguyen 2018; Kleinman 1995; Good 1994). Good (1994) criticizes the fact that while medical science has been constructed as the mirror of nature – reflecting objective, empirical knowledge – other types of medicine have been regarded as postulating culturally determined, often erroneous beliefs. By studying and comparing medical systems in different places, such as the United States and Turkey, Good explains how medicine constructs its semiotic system to represent illness, and medical knowledge is carried out through practices. Like Good (1994), Kleinman (1995) argues that medicine is a cultural system and a social product. Rather than limiting inquiry into disease as a pathological biology from a biomedical perspective, Kleinman describes illness as social suffering. Focusing on the medical system worldwide, Kleinman argues that an individual body should be connected to both individual and collective experiences. Kleinman also shows that while biomedicine has been constructed as an authoritative and rational global system that supports the development and expansion of the modern state, it is being challenged by other systems such as Chinese medicine, Shamanic medicine, and folk medicine in countries such as China and elsewhere. Under the paradigm of biomedicine, the doctor-patient relationship has been transformed into a client-consumer relationship. Lock and Nguyen (2018, 16–79) also demonstrate how the authority and rationality of biomedicine, with its reductionist, objectivist view, has spread globally. Focusing on countries such as China and Japan, they explain how biomedicine has contributed to both

colonization and the construction of the modern state, and how biomedicine has been indigenized, contributing to medical pluralism.

These anthropologists have provided me with a basic theoretical framework for studying diverse medical systems in China. Focusing on aesthetic medicine, my dissertation explores how the rationality and authority of biomedicine have developed in contemporary China. For example, I will explain how concepts such as healthy beauty, sick beauty, and natural beauty have been reconstructed in clinical settings, and how doctors and patients used these concepts to legitimize their understandings of beauty and health. Furthermore, my study is inspired Ning's recent critiques of healthiness (Ning 2021). Ning points out how biomedicine has posed individuals into binary categories. Individuals are categorized as abnormal/unhealthy and normal/healthy, who should meet social expectations about their self-control. But their needs, feelings, experiences and social factors, such as poverty, racism, and low wages, are usually neglected. I will explore how the Chinese women in my study have connected their aesthetic imperfections to illness but also to social suffering and experiences. I will explore how these Chinese women's understanding of beauty, health and their preferences for aesthetic medicine are related to their gender-based experiences, China's long history of globalization, and ethnic diversity. I will focus on women's feelings and expressions with connections to their daily beauty and health practices.

Furthermore, to the aforementioned literature, this dissertation will provide further discussions about the specificities of biomedicine in China. Other studies have focused on how biomedicine and its tenets have shaped Chinese medicine since the colonial period (1911–1949) (Andrew 2014; Scheid 2002). Biomedical and laboratory testing has been brought to Chinese medicine, creating a new hybrid method – *Bian Zheng Lun Zhi* 辨证论治 – that consists of

syndrome differentiation and determination of treatments, which in turn has been used to create a new national medical system. Although there have been many debates on this hybrid medical system, it has been supported by the national government and used to create a new medical system called traditional Chinese medicine, beginning in the 1950s (Andrew 2014; Scheid 2002; Farquhar 1994). The circulation and development of biomedicine in China can not be separated from the incorporation of Chinese medical knowledge. I will provide more examples to support this point. I will explain how Chinese medical concepts such as harmony and balance have been used in Plastic Surgery and Cosmetic Dermatology. I will explain how biomedicine has been constructed as the representative of objective, scientific knowledge, but it incorporates subjective feelings, such as a woman's perception of her appearance.

Using beauty and health as examples, this dissertation will explore how biomedicine has been shaped by the interactions between the state, Chinese citizens, and the capitalist market, with a focus on traditional Chinese aesthetics and regional values and concerns (for example, traditional Minnan understandings of beauty, which are connected to familial roles such as mother and wife) about biomedical interventions and women's self-enhancement. In this way, this study will contribute to anthropological studies of biomedicine and aesthetic medicine in China.

### ***Constructing Chinese Biocitizenship: Compulsory Health and Optional Beauty***

As a way of approaching women's understanding and pursuit of beauty and health in Xiamen, in this section, I will provide a literature review of anthropological studies of Foucauldian biopower and biocitizenship. I focus particularly on previous literature that has argued that women's

beauty and health enhancement is associated with the construction of biocitizenship and the development of the contemporary states and capitalist markets, alongside the development of biomedicine itself in countries such as America, Brazil, and China.

Foucault (1997, 1994, 1978) describes two poles of biopower in his theoretical framework. On the one hand, this new disciplinary power and its discourses work in productive ways that enhance and optimize individual bodies and populations. Biopower produces docile bodies through various disciplinary sites, such as hospitals, schools, and prisons. Individuals become both objects and subjects of biomedical knowledge and discipline. Under this regime, individuals use the “technology of the self” to regulate their bodies in their full lifetime and individual bodies have become machines to be disciplined, controlled, and optimized by biopower. On the other hand, the whole population is regulated through biological processes and knowledge categories such as fertility, infancy, and mortality rates. In this way, the population can be supervised and categorized by the state. Diverse technologies are used to control normalized and idealized populations.

Following Foucault’s theory, some anthropologists have introduced the concept of “biological citizenship” to study individuals’ health enhancement. Health has become a life-long project through which contemporary individuals also negotiate their relationship with the state. For example, Petryna (2002) introduces this concept to study victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Ukraine. Petryna defines “biological citizenship” as “a massive demand for but selective access to a form of social welfare based on medical, scientific, and legal criteria that both acknowledge biological injury and compensate for it” (Petryna 2002, 6). Individuals’ pursuit of health is related to a question of death and life, as well as to their belonging to a new post-socialist state. Rose (2007) uses the concept of “biological citizenship” to explain how

contemporary citizens are educated to take responsibility for health enhancement. Individual bodies have been viewed, manipulated, and exploited at the molecular level when the biopolitical morality values bodily optimization over the mere elimination of abnormality and pathology (Rose 2007; Rose and Novas 2005). Health, Rapp, and Taussig (2007) develop this concept as “genetic citizenship” to explain how citizens become active consumers who negotiate with the state, laboratory, hospital, and large pharmaceutical corporations.

Recent Foucauldian scholars have expanded the scope of their studies to include beauty, having noticed that there is no rigid distinction between beauty and health. They have argued that individuals’ management of beauty and health is associated with their political belongings to the state but it is also connected to social hierarchies linked with race, class, ethnicity, and so on (Kukuczka & Liebelt 2024; Jha 2024; Ali 2021; Pussetti 2019; Jarrín 2017; Edmonds 2010). Edmonds (2010) explores how beauty, or aesthetic health, has been incorporated into nation-building and the construction of modern biological citizens in Brazil. Edmonds also argues that beauty becomes part of a social hierarchy, interacting with class, race, and gender. Ali (2021) explores how women in Sudan use unregulated products, such as skin-lightening products and pills, to achieve Arab beauty ideals promoted by the postcolonial state and religious community in the hope of avoiding penalties and social exclusion.

In these recent anthropological studies, it is clear that individuals become not only self-regulated citizens but also active consumers. The term aesthetic citizen has replaced biocitizen in some of these studies. Following Edmonds, Jarrín (2017) explores how Brazilian women become aesthetic citizens who view beauty as both a right and as capital. Women’s management of and investment in their bodies are associated with both their self-improvement and the nation’s eugenic project. Like Edmonds and Jarrín, Pussetti (2019) explains how women enhance their

beauty and obtain beauty capital in Portugal. Women are aesthetic citizens who attain more beauty capital towards a better social life under the impact of race, gender, and class inequalities. Kukuczka and Liebelt (2024) examine how aesthetic citizenship, acting through individuals' everyday consumption and practices, reflects the state-led processes of making the ideal somatic form of belonging. Jha (2024) also links aesthetic citizenship to the state's regulation of ideal consumers and somatic belongings, then emphasizes that social exclusion and citizens' bodily resistance should not be neglected in beauty politics.

Following these studies, I will explore how women's beauty and health are not only related to different understandings and practices but also lifetime projects that are continually associated with the Chinese state, the capitalist market, ethnicity, regional culture, and so on. For example, women's enhancement of beauty and health might be connected to their sense of belonging as citizens/Minnan residents or to an ethnic minority/majority, but women are not merely docile subjects who are negatively controlled by the state or any powerful entity. My study is also inspired by Gershon's (2011) theory of neoliberal subjectivity. I will go beyond the theoretical frameworks noted above to analyze how my research participants' pursuit of beauty and health is related to their interactions with the socialist state, capitalist markets, different cultural/medical systems (for example, biomedicine, Chinese medicine, etc.), family, and local traditions such as *Renqing* 人情 and how they understand their identities, responsibilities, and risks across different contexts. For example, while women are served as people, or citizens, by public doctors, who are viewed as representatives of the state's biomedical rationality, in private hospitals and clinics, women are more likely viewed as consumers who calculate beauty/health investment and *Renqing* 人情. In this way, women were more likely to personalize their treatment and challenge doctors in private hospitals and clinics. However, in illegal medical

sites, such as medical workshops, the interactions between patients and staff tend to be invisible to state surveillance.

Furthermore, unlike Edmond or Jarrín, whose research seems to put beauty and health on the same level, the Chinese state has made efforts to clarify boundaries between beauty and health in its public health system. The priority of health was highly promoted especially during the COVID-19 period, while financial aid for beauty was eliminated from the public medical insurance system. Meanwhile, health discourses have become tools to define the rationality and morality of beauty enhancement in and outside Chinese biomedical settings. For example, concepts such as “healthy beauty” and “sick beauty” have often been used by doctors and patients to comment on others’ appearance, surgery, or treatment outcomes. These aspects are neglected in recent Chinese anthropological studies. Also, in recent studies, it is obvious that health, rather than beauty, has been explored more when studying the construction of Chinese biological citizens (Sun 2015; Mason 2016).

Following recent literature, this dissertation will contribute to studies of beauty and its relation to health with a focus on the COVID-19 period (2019–2022). Although beauty was giving way to health, some Chinese women did not stop claiming their rights to medical resources for enhancing beauty. When there were not enough available resources in public hospitals, some women sought help in the Chinese private medical system and even the black market. The Chinese government did not fund beauty but still provided a rational example of beauty in public medicine. It has also enacted laws and regulations such as “Service and Management Methods of Aesthetic Medicine 医疗美容服务管理办法” to provide a suitable social environment for its citizens’ beauty enhancement. Healthy slogans such as *You Sheng* 优生

(quality birth or optimal birth), supported by the national government, reflect disfavour for defective appearances.

On the other hand, some Chinese anthropological studies have focused on beauty instead of health without directly drawing on the concept “biological citizen” or “aesthetic citizen” (Hua 2013; Yang 2011). Class theory, instead of biocitizen theory, has been used to study Chinese people’s pursuit of beauty (Sun 2015; Hua 2013; Yang 2011). For example, Hua (2013) uses class theory to explore Chinese women’s pursuit of beauty since the 1990s. Hua argues that women’s beauty enhancement reflects the success of the Chinese capitalist market and the government’s political ideology, termed “*Xiao Kang* 小康 (comparative prosperity)”. Women’s beauty enhancement is related to their class. However, the so-called upper, middle, or lower class is not a suitable way of describing social divisions in Chinese society. After the Cultural Revolution (1960s–1970s), discussions of class have become politically sensitive in China’s mainstream media. The Chinese government has replaced class struggle with cultural, economic, and technological development in the hope of eliminating class differences and finally building a socialist society. Among Chinese women I met, rather than using the language of upper or lower class, they tended to use words such as better and worse taste, high and low levels of services or choices, urban and rural, large and small cities, regulated and unregulated, majorities and minorities, and VIP versus common patients to reflect social divisions and equalities. Thus, rather than focusing on class theory, this dissertation will develop the theory on biopower and aesthetic citizenship to study women’s pursuit of beauty and health in Xiamen.

## ***Section Two: Beauty Ideals in China: A Direct Product of Colonialism or Globalization?***

Anthropological studies of women's pursuit of beauty and health have been impacted by theories of colonialism and globalization. These include some previous Chinese anthropological studies (Krozer & Gómez 2023; Tate 2021; Leem 2017; Hua 2013; Kyo 2012; Yang 2011; Miller 2006). To argue that women's beauty and health enhancement is not merely a direct product of colonialism and globalization, this literature review will discuss some related anthropological studies.

Some anthropological studies have explained how the global, or Eurocentric, standards of beauty and health have shaped women's understanding and practices in different parts of the world, especially those that were colonized (Freeman 2000, 2014; McClintock 1995). These studies, to some extent, recognized that women's beauty and health enhancement is a result of cultural invasion brought about by colonialism and globalization. These studies have relied on the "West vs. East/Rest" dichotomy, which tends to pathologize the preferences for whiteness of non-Caucasian women, but neglects complicated historical interactions between different parts of the world. Beauty ideals such as whiteness and slimness may not be merely a result of cultural imperialism or globalization but may also relate to local traditions.

Some anthropological studies of feminine beauty and health have criticized Eurocentric views of cultural invasion and have challenged the opposition between Western and Eastern feminine ideals. They contend that women should not be seen as docile victims of colonialism or globalization but as active subjects who invest in and benefit from their beauty and health enhancement (Jarrín 2017; Leem 2017; Kyo 2012; Edmonds 2010; Aizura 2009; Miller 2006). Miller (2006) argues that Japanese women's preference for whiteness is not a result of colonialism but is related to the preference of indigenous Japanese nobility. The Japanese beauty industry has also been impacted by French culture. Aizura (2009) argues that Thai feminine

ideals of beauty and health might have been impacted by global interactions with other parts of the world such as (Imperial) China. Leem (2017) argues that the rise of the “Gangnam-style” appearance, which valued whiteness, very big eyes, a shaped jaw, and an unnaturally high nose, was not a result of Western cultural imperialism but was impacted by Korea’s historical interactions with Japan. Some Korean women also resisted this ideal and preferred enhancing their beauty in more safe and natural ways. Jarrín (2017) and Edmonds (2010) discuss how brown beauty, instead of white or black beauty, has been promoted to satisfy the desire for racial eugenics in Brazil; and Liebelt (2022) explains how women’s self-care and beauty consumption are associated with global consumerism, local elite culture, and Muslim culture in Istanbul, Turkey.

Also, Chinese anthropological studies have provided some examples of women’s changing beauty and health enhancement in different parts of China across different historical periods. Hua (2013) provides Chinese traditional preference for lighter skin as another critique of the view of cultural imperialism. Hua explains how Chinese feminine ideals were shaped by American and Korean ideals in different historical periods. In examining women’s pursuit of beauty in Guangzhou, Luo (2013) argues that Chinese women are pursuing balanced and harmonious feminine ideals instead of imitating Western standards of beauty. Also, Luo (2013) demonstrates how the neo-Confucian idea of “inner beauty” shaped Chinese women’s choices and understandings of beauty. Yang (2017) explores how beauty and emotional care are impacted by traditional Confucianist and Buddhist literature, and music in Beijing and Shanghai.

However, Chinese women’s changing beauty ideals cannot be understood as a linear historical process. Women’s pursuit of beauty and health is more complicated. For example, Imperial China participated in the global economy across many dynasties such as the Tang 唐

(618–907) and the Song 宋 (960–1279). Although there was a changing preference for plumpness during the Tang dynasty, Chinese women of the Song dynasty still preferred slimness (Kyo 2012). Following anthropological literature, my analysis does not impose a strict opposition between global and local, traditional and contemporary. Instead, in the following chapters, I will explain how traditional Chinese medical tenets such as balance and holism are developed within Chinese biomedicine to describe good, rational beauty enhancement. I will describe how Chinese women I met favoured diverse beauty ideals (tanning, fitness, whiteness, and so on) but pursued one of them or a hybrid beauty ideal (for example, white fitness or healthy whiteness). Women responded to popular beauty ideals in a flexible way.

Also, these studies have inspired me to focus on the complexion of whiteness as somewhat distinct from racial categories in this dissertation. Whiteness is more than a colour; it also refers to health, smoothness, and flawlessness of the skin. Some women also tend to link hair colour and facial features, such as a high, clearly defined nose, to their understanding of race and ethnicity. However, whiteness and blackness are related to racial traits and discriminations in both ancient and today's China. Ancient China built up its racial system based on the distinction between *Yi* 夷 (foreignness) and *Hua* 华 (China). *Yi* 夷 became an important concept to discuss otherness and the superior of China's agricultural civilization (Wang 2020, Clouser 2013). Ancient Chinese did distinguish themselves from foreigners based on their culture, customs, and also light skin colours. Before the 7<sup>th</sup> century, ancient Chinese people considered foreigners in today's South Asia (places such as Malays and Khmers) as Black and their category of Black was expended while travelling to the rest of the world (for example, today's East Africa) (Wyatt 2012). Guangzhou city, the capital city of Guangzhou (Canton), became the main port for these traders and slaves to enter imperial China (Mathews et al. 2024, Wyatt 2012). Kunlun 昆仑

became a word with connotation to people with darker skin complexions compared to ancient Chinese subjects (Wyatt 2012).

Ancient China's racial system was then challenged by the domination foreign imperial power such as British power after the Opium War (1839-1860). From 1821 to 1850, British colonies kidnapped and exported Chinese slaves and labours in cities in Guangdong and Fujian, like Xiamen and Guangzhou (Schottenhammer 2004). Discourses of equality and nationwide education on colonialism and racism have been supported by social elites and politicians since the colonial period (Mathews et al. 2024, Andrew 2014). However, Chinese anti-Black racism has existed. Immigrants have not been treated equal to Chinese citizens. From 2004 to 2014, Africans' renewal and application of visa became increasingly difficult. In Guangzhou, Africans usually lived and worked within limited social spaces in specific city areas such as Xiaobei and Dengfeng, and it was difficult for Africans to feel a full sense of belonging (Mathews et al. 2024, Castillo 2014). During COVID, Africans without legal status could not get access to free tests and treatment, leading to more difficulties. Some Africans were refused to enter a McDonald restaurant with an anti-Black slogan (Deabler 2020). Previous literature has also explained how Africans or Blacks have been associated with poverty, crime, and disease on Chinese social media (Mathews et al. 2024, Li & Ma & Xue 2009). My studies in Xiamen will bring some new insights into Chinese people's understanding of whiteness, rather than deny the existence of black stereotypes and discriminations in the Chinese society.

### ***Section Three: Being and Becoming Women: Femininity, Gender, and Beauty***

In this section, I look at the way that anthropological studies of beauty and health have been influenced by feminist theories. Some early feminist and anthropological studies of beauty and/or health have focused largely on men's oppression of women. Gender inequality, and men's control over women, has been a significant theme in such studies (Martin 1991; Morgan 1991; Wolf 1991).

Martin (1991), for example, argues that the supposedly neutral scientific descriptions of women's reproductive processes such as menstruation are highly gendered, based on stereotypes of females and males. It is assumed that women's reproductive processes are designed for fertilization and the growth of a child, and thus menstruation is viewed as a failure instead of a natural process. Morgan (1991) demonstrates how natural female bodies have been viewed as commercialized machines by male medical professionals. Women are educated to sacrifice their lives and money to transform their bodies to satisfy male expectations of them. These expectations are usually connected with gender roles and stereotypes such as youth, attractiveness, and motherhood. However, these early feminist studies have placed women and men in opposition, and render women as oppressed victims.

Some feminist and anthropological studies of beauty and/or health have emphasized that women's pursuit of beauty and health cannot be merely a product of gender oppression. On the one hand, some have explored how women's pursuit of beauty and health has been associated with social hierarchies related to race, class, ethnicity, religion, and so on (Ma 2023; Day 2017; Hua 2013; Edmonds 2010; Miller 2006; Popenoe 2003; Ping 2000). On the other hand, some have focused more on women's autonomy, lived experiences, and affects and emotions (Krozer & Gómez 2023; Jarrín 2017; Tate 2016; Luo 2013; Kang 2010).

Centrally important is Butler's (1993) argument that gender is performative. Female bodies are not linguistic signifiers but are materialized through the constant reiteration of (hetero)sexual discourses and norms. This constant reiteration is never complete, however, and it produces new openings for women's performances that exceed the norm. Butler criticizes Beauvoir's distinction between sex and gender. Sex, like gender, is regulated through norms and exclusionary means. Bordo (2004) also explores how women and their bodies have been connected to a cultural nature. For example, in food advertisements since the 19th century, women's hunger has been linked to their sexuality and desire for the male body and soul (Bordo 2004, 112–117). Bodily practices such as cosmetic surgery help culture represent homogenized feminine ideals such as slenderness. Bordo focuses on women's embodied experiences and argues that female bodies can be sites for docility and resistance.

Looking at issues of women's embodied agency in cultural contexts that are different than those that Butler and Bordo examine is an important contribution of social anthropologists of this topic. Miller (2006) supports Bordo's (2004) theory, arguing that women are not "cultural dupes" of the Japanese beauty industry as they are all too conscious of the system of values and rewards that they are responding to and perpetrating (Miller 2006, 6). The old model of "oppressor men/oppressed women" is not suitable as men are also enmeshed in a cultural system that enhances masculinity. Tate (2016) develops Butler's (1993) theory of gender performance to argue that black beauty is performative. It can be performed differently and can disrupt beauty normalizations. For Tate (2016), women's agency and subjectivity are also evident in how the Black diaspora dress and style their hair to create an anti-racist aesthetic and social capital. Unlike Tate, Jarrín (2017) criticizes Butler (1993) for ignoring that female embodiment is a lived, corporeal response to changing social milieus and not simply a reiteration of norms and

discourses (Jarrín 2017, 10). Women's beauty is a form of affective labour and capital which can shape women's perceptions of themselves and others. Following Jarrín (2017), Liebelt (2022) explores how Turkish women invest in aesthetic wellness to acquire pleasure, promote job opportunities and marriage competitiveness, and challenge Muslim identities.

When focusing on women's embodied agency, some anthropologists also have raised feminist concerns about consumerism, which exploits women as beauty/health workers and consumers in the name of female liberation and empowerment (Berkowitz 2021; Gill 2021; Wegenstein 2021). Using Botox as an example, Berkowitz (2021) explores how the beauty industry guides women's choices and practices by emphasizing their agency and autonomy. Gill (2021) explains that in educating women to be responsible, neoliberal subjects who need to employ endless beauty enhancements, contemporary beauty culture has colonized women's bodies. Wegenstein (2021) explores how, in the age of MeToo, women's bodies and their beauty have been exploited to satisfy male standards of desire with the help of the Internet.

Similarly, recent Chinese anthropological studies of beauty and/or health have tended to explore women's understanding and practices in broader historical and cultural contexts. Chinese anthropologists have focused on old feminist debates around gender oppression and liberation. Some of their studies have been impacted by Bordo's theories (Luo 2013; Hua 2013).

Yang (2011) explores how the feminine discourse of *Nennu* 嫩女 (tender young women) and *Shunu* 熟女 (older, mature women) was promoted under the influence of the developing capitalist market in Beijing, in post-Mao China. Yang demonstrates how women's liberation since the economic opening reform (1970s–now) has provided an excuse for the capitalist market to commodify and exploit women's bodies. Hua (2013) studies how, in Beijing, women's beauty

enhancement has been related to gender since the 1990s. While some Chinese women buy beauty to gain advantages in marriage and the job market, enhancing beauty can also be empowering for those who are pursuing liberation and independence. Following Edmonds (2010) and Bordo (2004), Luo (2013) explores how Chinese women understand and pursue beauty in Guangzhou. Luo views women as empowered social agents who manage their bodies under the impacts of their understandings of race, the male gaze, social position, consumer identity, belonging to the state, and neo-Confucian concepts such as “inner beauty,” which values women’s education, kindness, and intelligence.

Although these studies have provided some valuable examples of Chinese women’s pursuit of beauty and/or health, they are still largely impacted by the early feminist focus on gender opposition. I am not arguing that the impact of patriarchal power or gender inequality itself has diminished in Chinese society, as both men and women are under the influence of gender discourses. During my research, only a few male patients visited doctors in the name of pursuing beauty, and their pursuit of beauty was impacted, and sometimes even interrupted, by masculine discourses such as *Yang Gang* 阳刚 (masculinity and strength). While some patients – male and female – responded to dominant gender discourses and managed their bodies in diverse ways, they were also aware of the limitations and surveillance imposed on their bodies. For example, some women were aware of how their family roles, such as “mother,” limited their time and choice of beauty enhancement. This dissertation does not consider women’s pursuit of beauty and health as merely a result of gender opposition or male oppression. By focusing on women’s diverse experiences and feelings, I will show that women’s choices and practices interact with their age, generation, education, social position/job, family, and gendered kinship obligations and roles such as mother, daughter, and wife.

Furthermore, previous Chinese studies have focused on large metropolises, such as Beijing in China. But does the patriarchal hierarchy work differently in cities such as Beijing and Xiamen? Do women across China understand and fulfill their kinship obligations and gender roles in the same way? Does their pursuit of outer and inner beauty diminish the impact of traditional patriarchal power? Focusing on the regional level, my dissertation will contribute to studies of women's understanding and practices of beauty and health enhancement in the Minnan region located near China's southeastern border, where the Minnan patriarchal hierarchy is still strong. I will explore how women understand their kinship obligations, family/gender roles, age, generation, and social positions when constructing their femininity and pursuing health/beauty. I will explain how their health and beauty enhancements have been impacted by their feelings and experiences related to gender inequalities at the regional level.

## **Methodology**

From late May 2021 to July 2022 (just over 13 months), I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Xiamen, China. Before starting my fieldwork, I viewed public images and representations of female celebrities and ethnic minority women on various social media platforms such as Sina Weibo and RED. I also focused on regulations and laws related to female body management and aesthetic medicine. These preparations provided me with a basic context for my fieldwork and helped me develop my research questions. Following the Research Ethics Board of York University guidelines, I designed my questions in a culturally appropriate way and protected my participants' rights and privacy (see Appendix A for more details).

I began my ethnographic fieldwork at Zhongshan Hospital. Through my interactions with both medical professionals and female patients, I conducted participant observation and interviews. I observed female participants' interactions with their friends, families, medical professionals, and other patients, as well as the process of consultation, treatment, and plastic surgery. I also met more participants outside the hospital. In December 2021, I began my second stage of fieldwork by moving to Xinkaiyuan Hospital. While Zhongshan Hospital is a top-level public hospital controlled by the Chinese national government, Xinkaiyuan Hospital is a private hospital which cooperates with a famous public hospital called The First Hospital in Xiamen. Unlike Zhongshan Hospital, Xinkaiyuan Hospital is not fully funded by the Chinese government; it faces fierce competition and is more likely to be impacted by the capitalist market.

In July 2022, I completed my ethnographic fieldwork in these two hospitals and visited some medical professionals, as well as a few participants across different social and medical spaces/places, such as private beauty salons and workshops. I view these medical sites, especially these two hospitals, as socially significant sites for me to explore and compare the roles of the state and market in shaping women's choices and practices. For example, the comparison between medical products, services, and social interactions at public and private hospitals in China can provide more insights into how the Chinese government and citizens view demands for and usage of different medical resources such as public health insurance and aesthetic medicine. In total, I interviewed 30 female participants and 8 medical professionals in and outside clinical settings. Most of my female participants were between the ages of 20 and 50. I used snow-ball technique to recruit my participants. I introduced myself as a social anthropology student who was studying women's beauty and health enhancements. Sometimes, medical professional and patients I met helped by introducing me to others. I would share my

information flyer (see Appendix A) when any women expressed their interests in my research project. I told people that they did not need to give me their real names. An informed consent form would be signed when I recruited any participant. It was also very common that some people refused to be observed or interviewed and asked me to leave.

I visited or shadowed both medical professionals and female participants/patients at different times and in different spaces, such as consultation rooms and cafés. Using these ethnographic methods, I aimed to study and learn from a situated slice of China's aesthetic medical industry by exploring Xiamen women's understanding, practices, and experiences of enhancing beauty and health but also how impacts of the state, market, region, and ethnicity are entangled with their lives in relation to beauty and health. As is the case with ethnographic methods, my positionality impacted my research: My position as a PhD student in Social Anthropology at a Canadian university and as a single Chinese woman brought me both opportunities and challenges during my fieldwork. In the following sections of this introduction, I will explain how my interactions with people helped me to rethink myself (my position as a researcher, my appearance, and so on) and my research project.

### ***Section One: Participant Observation in Hospitals***

Street argues that a hospital is “a crucial site of production for the everyday state, a place where people engage with, imagine, and contest forms of state power” (Street 2014, 22–23). In her work, she documents how patients' experiences of suffering are closely associated with processes of political change and social transformation in postcolonial Papua New Guinea. Street also explores how medical professionals and patients respond to biomedical uncertainty and the

reproduction of social inequalities outside and inside the hospital. For example, she explains how patients make use of the results of medical technologies such as X-rays to be socially visible to medical professionals and their friends or families. Similarly, following Street (2014), Hannig (2017) contends that the hospital is not a place for the pure exercise of scientific rationale but a place to explore the power entanglement between religion and medicine. Medicine is also a profoundly religious endeavour in a hospital. Hannig (2017) also focuses not only on treatments, surgery, internal rules, and interactions inside the hospital but also on patients' activities and interactions outside the hospital. For example, based on interactions with and observations of medical professionals and patients, she describes how women also underwent moral/behavioural education and economic training during recovery, which transformed them into ambassadors of the biomedical model health and hygiene practices in their communities.

Furthermore, the interactions between patients and medical professionals would be more complex as some studies have argued that patients share their opinions and build up new social relationships across different medical and social spaces. In Edmonds's (2010) ethnographic studies of cosmetic hospitals and clinics, patients and potential patients tend to share their stories in the corridors of hospitals and clinics. In the waiting room, patients would express their anxieties for progress and outcomes of their cosmetic surgery. In Leem's (2016) ethnographic study of a Korean cosmetic surgery clinic, patient managers, rather than surgeons, are responsible for arranging schedules, caring for (potential) patients, and assisting communication between surgeons and patients. While patient managers sometimes have personal connections with patients outside the clinic, surgeons communicate only with patient managers during their office hours in the clinic. To track the interactions and relations between patients and various

medical professionals, Leem (2016) conducts observation and interviews with patients and medical professionals in and outside the clinic.

Following Street (2014), Hannig (2017), Edmonds (2010), and Leem (2016), I followed patients and medical professionals to observe their interactions. I took notes about their communications, schedules, and understandings/experiences of beauty and health. Medical spaces, such as the consultation room, operation room, and corridor, became important places to observe relations and communications between patients and professionals. For example, patients usually consulted several medical professionals, especially doctors and consultants, before making a final decision about promoting health and beauty. It was common to see patients and medical professionals share their understanding of beauty ideals and negotiate about future treatment/surgery procedures. While conducting participant observation, I focused on how patients and medical professionals express and deal with similar or different opinions on beauty or health.

I focused as well on how different medical professionals worked and cooperated. While I followed doctors at the public Zhongshan Hospital, I mainly followed a professional beauty consultant at the private Xinkaiyuan Hospital; this allowed me to observe how the consultation process differed between doctors and a professional consultant. Although beauty consultants tended to view clients as customers rather than patients, their understanding of aesthetic imperfections were still determined by biomedical standards of health. I also observed how trainees, nurses, doctors, and consultants worked together to help patients promote beauty and health. For example, trainees might be required to follow consultants or doctors, especially when there was no nurse, to study medical/beauty knowledge and practices. While some senior medical professionals taught trainees and asked them for help, others preferred to provide

consultations or treatments alone. Furthermore, in order to gain a broader understanding of women's pursuit of beauty or health outside clinical settings, I conducted participant observations with some individuals in public places, such as cosmetic stores and on the street, where there were no expectations of privacy. I observed individuals' practices of enhancing beauty and health in public spaces. While interviewing my participant Teng, for example, I observed how she put on make-up; and she took staged and edited photos for me.

A significant aspect of my methodology was to be in both public and private medical institutions so I could understand both the state and market connections of these medical practices. According to Edmonds' (2010) ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil, the experiences and interactions of patients and medical professionals in private clinics are different from those in public hospitals. In Brazil, certain cosmetic surgeries are eligible for coverage by public health insurance, so many people strive for opportunities to receive free surgery in public hospitals. Only a few people choose private clinics, and the environment in private clinics is better. The public hospital in Xiamen is totally controlled by the Chinese government. While Chinese government-funded medicine and treatment related to individual health and beauty had to be paid, the price of beauty treatments in the private hospital is largely determined by the market, which is under the surveillance of the government and the Chinese Consumers Association (CCA).<sup>7</sup> I compared the price, types of surgeries/treatments, and environment of these two hospitals. I also compared the daily experiences of patients, medical experts, and myself, as a researcher, at these two field sites. I focused on how patients obtained information about medical

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<sup>7</sup> Chinese Consumers Association (CCA) is an organization that protects the rights and interests of consumers. It was established in 1984 and is affiliated with the State Administration for Market Regulation (Chinese Consumers Association 2025).

professionals and medical sites and learned about their preferences for public or private hospitals.

Throughout my fieldwork, I learned about women's experiences and was particularly attuned to the affective dimensions. During my observations and interviews, I explored how women's pursuit of beauty and health involved their expectations of social relationships with others and/or their social positions. I took note of their feelings, emotions, and opinions and explored how they perceived themselves and how they felt and responded to other people's perceptions of them. Also, recent studies have illustrated how new digital technologies and new media have helped expand the surveillance of the female body (Elias et al. 2017). Given this, I explored how women use different "beauty apps," such as RED, to compare or communicate with their peers. I collected information on women's education, family, and social position (occupation, income, etc.); I documented their expenses for beauty and/or health; and I examined how women's social positions, occupations, and income were related to their pursuit of beauty and health. I also explored how women's pursuit of beauty and health helped them claim a (higher) social position, construct new social or individual identities, and improve social relationships with others.

### ***Section Two: Interviews***

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 medical professionals and 30 female participants above the age of majority (age 18). Seventeen female participants were recruited in clinical settings. I circulated my flyer (see Appendix A), which provided a clear introduction to myself and my research project, in hospitals to recruit my female participants in Zhongshan Hospital

and Xinkaiyuan Hospital. I recruited other participants, including female participants and medical professionals, by employing the snowball technique. Some of my participants shared information about my research project with their friends and families and recommended me to new participants. In my original research proposal, I planned to conduct face-to-face interviews. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and its related restrictions, some interviews were postponed and finally completed online via WeChat and RED. This change was also approved by the Office of Research Ethics at York University.

Under these circumstances, the women I interviewed in Xiamen were women who could afford cosmetic surgery and skin treatment. They had access to material and social resources in the urban area that is Xiamen. Some were students and housewives, while some worked in public or private institutions. None of them told me that they worked in factories or on farms. (There are no farms on Xiamen Island.) I need to emphasize Chinese women do not form a homogenous category as their experiences and backgrounds are very diverse and my study is about the experiences of this particular group of women in Xiamen.

All interviews were voluntary and mainly conducted in Mandarin. In my research proposal, I thought that interviews might be conducted in Mandarin, Minnanese (local dialect), and English. However, the use of Minnanese and English was very limited in Xiamen, especially in public spaces. Before conducting my interviews, I listed some potential open questions: Are you satisfied with your appearance and why? What do you think about your facial features (nose, eyes, cheek, mouth, etc.)? How do/will you respond to dominant ideals of beauty and health? Will you enhance your beauty or health and how? (see more detailed research questions in Appendix B) Some questions were not asked directly. For example, when discussing feminine

ideals in China. I sometimes used images of pop stars and celebrities as examples, and I asked participants to discuss their feelings about the appearance of these celebrities.

When interviewing medical professionals, I focused mainly on their professional knowledge and expertise: How do you contact patients and other medical professionals? How do you work with other medical professionals? How do you deal with different opinions of patients and/or other medical professionals? (see Appendix B) I conducted a second interview with five of my female participants in the final two months of my fieldwork. I explored their attitudes towards surgery/treatment outcomes and different opinions of their doctors – a research strategy inspired by Leem’s (2017) work. I focused on how they continued to maintain and enhance their beauty and/or health. However, due to the limited length of my fieldwork, a few participants were still waiting for a (second) corrective surgery or recovery.

### ***Section Three: Reflections on Positionality***

Previous anthropological studies have often linked the concept of “home” to physical structures and spaces such as a house, a city, and a country (see, for example, Miller 1988). Medical spaces such as hospitals and healthcare centers have been imagined as places distinct from home (Tufford et al. 2018). While activities and privacy at home are linked to individual autonomy and quality of life, medical spaces put patients under medical surveillance away from their family and friends (Tufford et al. 2018; Street 2014). However, in my research project, conducting fieldwork in hospitals has not been completely separated from conducting fieldwork at home. Hospitals are also places for me to rethink home.

I was born in a public hospital in Xiamen city in the 1990s. The hospital provided dormitories<sup>8</sup> for medical professionals. Many medical professionals and their families settled there. Until I was 10, I lived with my parents in this hospital, and it became my childhood home. During that period, I spent a lot of time with the children of other medical professionals and patients my age. We played games such as hide-and-seek throughout the hospital, outside of school hours. We also did our assignments together on the grounds of the hospital. In my childhood memories, the hospital was not quiet but lively and warm. Both medical professionals and patients treated us well. Sometimes, we might barge into a treatment room, but we were not punished for this. A medical expert would educate us and persuade us to play games somewhere else. Some patients got bored while waiting to register or for a consultation and joined our conversations. I remember that I usually rode my bicycle across departments to visit medical professionals and my parents. I considered them as my family. I preferred calling them uncle and aunt rather than doctor or nurse. Most medical professionals knew me and one of them called me “Small Trumpet” because I was always active and making noise. In the 2000s, that hospital was closed by the Xiamen government. Thanks to my childhood memories, I developed a basic understanding of medical spaces, such as consultation rooms and operating rooms, as well as the work of medical professionals. I felt comfortable in these places.

As a researcher, I was only able to enter the hospital to conduct my fieldwork with formal administrative permission from the hospital. Rather than talking in front of other medical professionals and patients, patients usually had one-to-one conversations with a doctor. Patients’ medical histories and other related records were documented by the national public health system on paper and online, giving both patients and medical professionals more convenient access.

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<sup>8</sup> There were two dormitory buildings located in the hospital.

Hospitals seemed to work more efficiently with more restrictions. Doctors could have interviews with me only during their spare time. I was no longer surrounded by familiar medical professionals and patients who played games or shared jokes and candies, as I had when I was a child, but was required to wear a white coat when following doctors and to be polite to every individual I met. I started feeling that being in the hospital was different from being at home. Instead of having the freedom to cross different medical spaces anytime, I was now required to comport myself like a medical expert.

My master's research project (Li 2018) in anthropology, on oral health in Chinese medicine and biomedicine, shaped my self-reflection and helped me develop my PhD research project. Based on my interactions and conversations with some female patients and medical professionals, I found that the understandings and practices of enhancing or maintaining health could not be separated from those of beauty. Also, the hospital was a place for people to discuss and connect with home, kinship, and social relations as people perceived and interacted with others even as they were being perceived and discussed by others. Patients, especially female patients, were more willing to talk about their family, kinship responsibilities, and feelings. Patients and medical professionals were working together to create good social relations. For these reasons, I eventually decided to explore more deeply women's pursuit of beauty and health in my PhD research project.

During my PhD research, I found that the state's surveillance of hospitals was especially strong thanks to COVID-19 restrictions. I was also required to dye my hair black or dark brown and to keep taking COVID tests to enter medical settings. As an anthropological researcher, I tried my best to introduce myself to everyone I met. It was quite common that female patients would presume that my knowledge of medical anthropology was actually that of biomedicine.

When they asked me to give professional advice, in the hope of making a better decision, I had to emphasize that I was not a medical expert and that I was here to study medical knowledge and explore people's understanding of beauty and health. I usually declined, politely and tactfully, to answer these kinds of questions. For example, I told them that I had not acquired enough medical knowledge to answer their questions, and that I respected their opinions and freedom of choice. I also suggested they talk more with their trusted doctors. This did help me rethink Edmonds' (2010) argument that in aesthetic medicine, aesthetic imperfections and pathology are usually defined and then diagnosed by Brazilian patients, not doctors. In Chinese hospitals, the pathology of physical imperfections was usually diagnosed by doctors. But with the spread of biomedical knowledge and technologies among laypersons, sometimes patients might question their doctor's professionalism, refuse to listen to advice from only one doctor, or try to diagnose their imperfections and even persuade the doctor. This, to some extent, showcased the changing power relations between medical professionals and patients.

Also, some female patients showed interest in my past studies and anthropological background. This was beyond my expectations. After I briefly introduced myself and social anthropology as a discipline,<sup>9</sup> some were very willing to participate in my research project. I was surprised that some medical professionals and women also helped introduce me to other people, who might be interested in my research project. I did not disturb their conversations or try to change their minds. There was no guarantee that people they knew would agree to talk with me, but some helped me recruit new participants or get information about new medical professionals

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<sup>9</sup> In China, only five universities have a bachelor in anthropology program. Compared to other disciplines, such as law and math, anthropology is a relatively new and marginalized discipline in China. When I studied anthropology at Sun Yat-Sen University (2012–2016), the Anthropology Department had fewer than two hundred undergraduate students (about 40–50 students per year). Compared to the large student population nationwide, this was rare. It was common to see about 50 students in a class in public high schools of Xiamen.

and medical sites. It was also common that some people refused to participate and asked me to leave when they wanted to stay with the doctor alone. A few participants told me to merely have a small talk with them rather than interview them, while a few divided an interview into several small ones due to personal reasons. I had to get their informed consent every time we talked. Every participant had an electronic copy of their informed consent form. My Guanxi 关系 (social relations, connection, networking) with these patients and medical professionals to some extent helped my studies in Xiamen.

I identify myself as a Chinese woman. I grew up in Xiamen City, and I have studied Chinese history<sup>10</sup> for about twenty years. When I was writing my PhD research proposal, I asserted that my research would be facilitated in certain ways because I was a Chinese woman, a position I shared with my research participants, and that I would be sensitive to their suffering and feel connected to them. Also, because I had had double-eyelid surgery and some other beauty procedures, and I had a basic understanding of some beauty practices and products, which helped me establish a rapport with my participants. But these do not mean that I always shared similar experiences and feeling with people I met. My previous doctor was a friend of my mom's classmate and my communication with my doctor was good. I was shocked when some women told me that they visited more than five doctors or medical sites and suffered a lot due to any bad professional skills or services. Under these circumstances, I was empathetic in a culturally appropriate way. For example, when my female participants were in a bad mood due to their appearance or failed surgeries/treatments, I would try to listen carefully and sometimes tried to

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<sup>10</sup> Like English, history as a discipline has been compulsory since I have entered primary school. When studying anthropology in Sun Yat-Sen University, I was also required to select courses from History, Sociology, Linguistics, and Archaeology.

say some common comforting words.<sup>11</sup> Their stories and experiences sometimes touched me, but I avoided expressing my personal opinions and feelings in front of them.

At the same time, because I had studied abroad for more than four years, my knowledge of recent changes in Xiamen and China was limited. For example, it was sometimes difficult for me to connect to my participants' feelings when they talked about *Nei Juan* 内卷 (fierce domestic competition) in Chinese society; the difficulties they had in finding a desirable job or partner; peer pressure around beauty and age, and excessive working hours. For example, some women told me that they had to work more than 12 hours per day (this could include taking care of their child) and thus could only go to bed after midnight, leaving them no time for proper skincare, and leading to poor sleep and bad skin. Some told me that they had to compete with thousands of people for an entry-level job and that they considered beauty a potential asset in this competitive job market.

## Overview of Chapters

Over the course of my dissertation, the scale of the processes in my analysis shifts from the global, to the national/state, to medical institutions, to the Minnan region.

My first chapter will focus on Chinese popular beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 (whiteness, youth, and slimness). Whiteness could be viewed as a part of *Bai You Shou* ideal, but it was also discussed independently by some women I met. Whiteness is related to skin colour but also to smoothness and flawlessness of the skin, as well as to diet, living or working

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<sup>11</sup> In Chinese society, it is very common to hear people saying words like, “All that is now past 都过去了”, “Cheer up 加油”, and “Everything will get better 会好的”.

environment, age, and social position. This chapter will also explore different popular beauty ideals such as fitness. These beauty ideals were associated with how the Chinese women I met imagine the appearance, make-up, and style of various other social groups such as ethnic minorities and foreigners. This chapter will show that race is not the primary topic when discussing whiteness. Rather than skin colour or skin health, hair colour and facial features, such as high noses, are more likely to be racialized. These racialized imaginations were also mingled with Chinese people's imaginations about the appearance of ethnic groups such as Uyghur. In this chapter, I will argue that for Chinese women I met in Xiamen, their pursuit of beauty and health is not merely a product of colonialism or globalization but has been impacted by traditional Chinese aesthetics and Chinese women's interactions with diverse medical, spiritual, and cultural systems.

My second chapter will explore the construction of Chinese aesthetic citizenship with a focus on the Chinese national medical system. While health has been incorporated into the establishment of a strong nation, access to beauty as a right of citizens is something that has been debated. Some Chinese women's pursuit of beauty is related to their interactions with the state, market, and medicine, as well as local traditions such as *Renqing* 人情 (debts, duties, favours, etc.) and *Guanxi* 关系 (social relations, connections, networking). The state's biopower poses strict surveillance on beauty in both the public and private medical systems. In public medicine, the Chinese state offers an example to guide its private medical system. Public doctors become the representatives of the state's biopower and sometimes entrepreneurs who run their own businesses. While the public medical system emphasizes the "common good" and provides conservative choices to enhance beauty, the private medical system aims at making more profits

by providing less-conservative choices with unstable prices impacted more by the capitalist market.

My third chapter will explore aspects of medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in Chinese society. I will explore how beauty is determined by different biomedical standards of health in public and private hospitals. This chapter offers a comparative study based on ethnographic data collected in Cosmetic Dermatology and Plastic Surgery at Zhongshan Hospital (a public hospital) and Xinkaiyuan Hospital (a private hospital). Public hospitals maintain stricter and more conservative health standards. For example, by defining women's beauty as sick, natural, or healthy in terms of what is funded in a public hospital, the state is constructing a new moral framework to guide women's choices and practices with respect to beauty enhancements. The word "natural beauty" is used to replace "healthy beauty" when traces of plastic surgery procedures are successfully eliminated. Women are educated to be responsible investors, while their beauty enhancement becomes a way of life in and outside clinical settings. Meanwhile, this chapter will show how China's biomedicine – as a specific type of biomedicine – has incorporated some Chinese medical tenets into its system. For example, Chinese traditional tenets such as harmony and balance have been developed and used to define the success of attaining natural and healthy beauty in Plastic Surgery at these two hospitals.

My last chapter will explore how women's practices and experiences of beauty and health enhancement are related to Minnan regional history and society. Based on sharing stories, photos, and diaries, I will demonstrate how women's beauty and health enhancements have been shaped by biomedicine and Minnan patriarchal power and have become a way of life. This chapter will show that some Chinese women's choices and practices are associated with their expectations about love, age, career, marriage, and so on. Compared to previous chapters, this

chapter focuses more on regional specificities. For example, women might associate their beauty practices and feelings with their gender and family roles, such as being a good wife. A good wife, or a wife who is *Hiân-Huē* 贤惠, is supposed to satisfy her husband by sacrificing her time and will, changing her appearance, and so on.

In conclusion, I will tie these threads together to support my argument that beauty and health enhancements are not merely about changing appearances through plastic surgery or beauty procedures but involve women's way of living impacted by diverse factors, such as their gender, family, social position, relation to the state, and so on. I will also point out the limitations of my research and its future possibilities.

## **Chapter One: Beauty and Health As Products of Cultural Invasion? Rethinking the Impacts of Globalization and Colonialism on Chinese Beauty Ideals**

In the summer of 2021, Susu invited me to go shopping with her. Susu was in her 20s and still studying for her bachelor's degree. She studied abroad and was spending her summer holiday in Xiamen. On a lovely sunny afternoon, we decided to meet at a one-stop shopping mall near her home. There were lots of cosmetics stores, handbag stores, and tea shops in this mall, and it was crowded with people. When I found her at a cosmetic counter, she had just started talking with a beauty consultant. She took hold of my hand and told the beauty consultant, "As I mentioned, we would like to try some make-up and skin care products, such as foundation."

The beauty consultant put four bottles of foundation on the make-up table. "I recommend these two colours for you." Then he turned to me, "These two are yours." Later, the beauty consultant helped apply different foundation colours on each side of our faces. "All right, now you can look at your faces in the mirror to select your preferred colour."

When I saw my face in the mirror, I felt like one side was a little bit pale. Meanwhile, Susu was joking when comparing our skin tones in the mirror, "Oh no, I should not try a foundation with you or stand nearby you in front of the same mirror. You are too white."

"White? I don't see a big difference between us."

"No, it's different. I feel like I need to add more white to these two foundations to attain your light skin tone. I am black." In Chinese society, it is common, and not considered inappropriate, to say that someone is black when commenting on a skin colour that is dark. This is related more to someone's health condition, age, diet, and living and working environments than it is to colourism, racism and racialized stereotypes. Also, many believe that skin colour can be impacted by skin care, daily schedules, and daily activities such as outdoor exercises.

The beauty consultant agreed with Susu's opinions, "Yes, you have a lighter skin tone. It is very good. We Chinese . . . many . . . still love the whiteness and flawlessness of our skin.

How do you feel about these two foundation colours?"

I pointed to the left side of my face. "I prefer this one. It looks natural on my face."

The beauty consultant asked,

Don't you like this one? I feel this colour is better. You do not need that one because its colour is too close to your original skin tone. As you can see online, on RED or other platforms, people usually select a lighter colour compared to their original skin colour (in their vlogs and on their profile photos). This colour is lighter, more beautiful, and it covers your flaws, such as the dark circles under your eyes, better.

The beauty consultant put one hand near the right side of my face, then he applied some blush on my cheeks. "It looks like your skin is healthy and glowing. You have a good complexion. This colour is very suitable for you."

Susu listened to the beauty consultant patiently, "Yes, that makes sense."

Susu's shopping experience with me and the beauty consultant highlights some insights into dominant beauty ideals in Chinese society. First, our encounter illustrates how pursuing whiteness – light, smooth, and flawless skin – is important for many Chinese women to be considered beautiful and healthy. Whiteness means more than skin colour and does not connect directly to members of a specific racial group. Like Susu, some Chinese women today might comment on their skin colour by using words such as black, white, or yellow. Following these reflections, this chapter explores the complexion of Whiteness in Xiamen, China. While scholarly debates have often linked beauty ideals such as whiteness to skin colour, racialized stereotypes, and China's colonial history, my focus on beauty and health will show that there are

more complicated aspects to consider, like the association between skin/bodily health, balance, and whiteness in Xiamen. Furthermore, this chapter will explore what I call “complicated whiteness,” with a special focus on Chinese social media platforms. Under the specific internet policy of the Chinese government, which blocks most foreign social platforms such as Instagram, it is very interesting to see how Chinese social platforms such as RED help circulate and discuss competing beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 (whiteness, youth, and slimness). Focusing on Chinese beauty culture, I will provide insights into Chinese understandings of cultural dominance and diversity.

I agree with Adrian (2003, 11–12) that we should remember that “globalization does not only happen to people; it happens by people. It is a set of human processes – constantly being made, unmade, and remade by human actors.” Understanding contemporary Chinese beauty ideals is essential for understanding the experiences of women in my study who are seeking aesthetic surgeries and self-improvement. Understanding beauty, I argue, helps provide a big picture of contemporary China and its globalization processes. By exploring women’s preferences for and practices of enhancing whiteness, this chapter will provide new insights into dominant Chinese aesthetics in broader social and historical contexts. One of my central arguments is that the popularity of whiteness is not merely a preference for white skin colour, as a result of globalization or colonialism. Indeed, this chapter will showcase how some Chinese women’s imaginations of social boundaries, such as those between racial or ethnic groups, are more often associated with specific facial and bodily features, such as a very high nose and light hair, than with skin colour or its condition. Overall, this chapter contributes to theories of globalization in its exploration of complicated whiteness in China, which goes beyond

commonplace assumptions about the opposition between the West and the East, colonizer and colonized.

In the first section of this chapter, I will explore women's preferences for whiteness. I will explain how, in Xiamen, whiteness is connected to skin health and beauty rather than merely to colourism and racism. Women's preferences for health and beauty ideals such as whiteness are also connected to their age, social position, schedule, geographical differences, and so on. Whiteness does not construct a strict colour or racialized hierarchy. I will also explore how Chinese women I met imagine the bodily and facial appearances of Caucasians and Uygur. Section two will introduce competing beauty ideals in China, especially the popular ideal of *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 (whiteness, youth, and slimness). Based on my research data, I will discuss how some female patients or participants understand and respond to the rise of this beauty ideal in China. This section also shows how some women in Xiamen hybridize beauty ideals with connections to fashion styles to temper the domination of *Bai You Shou* and promote greater diversity within Chinese beauty culture. In the last section, I will explore how women's understandings and practices of beauty and health interact with different cultural, medical, and spiritual systems and how the rise of digital technology and social platforms such as RED have contributed to diversified beauty ideals in China.

### **Literature Review: Beauty and Health in the Process of Globalization**

Anthropological studies have increasingly used theories of globalization and colonialism to study women's pursuit of beauty and health. Women's beauty/health practices and their ways of consuming beauty/health products have been associated with connections between the so-called

local and global, or metropole and colonized states, leading to debates about beauty ideals being influenced by cultural imperialism. Eurocentric standards of beauty and health have sometimes been used to explain women's preferences for certain bodily or facial features. For example, McClintock (1995) explains how the British colonial power used soap and related products such as mirrors as political tools to inculcate British ideals of beauty and cleanliness in colonial Africa. Van Esterik's (1996) studies in Thailand demonstrate how North American standards of beauty, such as a straight, Caucasian nose and large eyes, are prized among contestants in local and international beauty contests to such an extent that Thai women are encouraged to change their appearance through cosmetic surgery and by wearing Western style skirts rather than traditional pants to make themselves attractive and distinguishable from Thai men. Based on research on the Black Atlantic diaspora community, Tate (2016) demonstrates how black women's response to white beauty has been highly racialized in different historical periods. For example, black hair styling has been a way for black women to construct their black identity and resist cultural imperialism and racial assimilation.

The aforementioned studies have explored how European colonial power impacted colonized women's management of their skin, hair, and clothing. Yet colonized subjects responded to colonial biopolitical power in diverse ways, and anthropological research has revealed how women's choices and practices worked to manage or challenge social boundaries determined by race and racism during colonialism. Some studies have interrogated these assumptions of cultural imperialism and examined them with more focus on local specificities such as local aesthetics and social environment (Thomas 2020; Adrian 2012; Kyo 2012; Miller 2006).

Miller (2006) offers a detailed explanation of Japanese preferences for white or pale skin: A socially produced preference for white skin, she argues, is not merely a product of colonialism and globalization, but is related to Japan's own local history and indigenous ideas. In the premodern period, pale skin was valued among male and female nobility alike. Kyo (2012) studies Chinese and Japanese historical texts and argues that both Chinese and Japanese have admired white skin and slimness for a long time. One example of this is that Chinese cosmetic powder, which is made of rice or lead, has been used for skin-lightening since the Spring and Autumn period (770 B.C.E.– 476 B.C.E.). Except for during the Tang dynasty (618–907), slimness, rather than plumpness, has been considered more beautiful for more than two thousand years. Adrian's (2012) study of the Taiwanese bridal industry offers another example that challenges the assumption that the preference for white in the beauty or fashion industry is a result of cultural invasion. Young people's preferences for white wedding dresses are impacted not only by Western norms but also by their alienation from post-war mainland China and their need to make new social connections at church. Thomas (2020) provides another example to explore how South African women's preferences for whiteness are connected to their generational beauty ideals and traditional cosmetic practices of smearing and brightening the skin.

Some anthropological studies of whiteness, that focus on women's beauty and health enhancement, have also criticized such binary constructs and have emphasized how globalization enhances cultural diversity rather than being a simple matter of cultural invasion. Aizura (2009) argues that the Thai preference for whiteness implies the Thai racial economy and Thai aspirations for modernity. Also, Thai aesthetics have been associated with an understanding of the Chinese face-reading technique, which interprets an individual's destiny according to their

physiognomy. Leem's (2017) research in Korea demonstrates that the rise of the "Gangnam-Style" appearance, or Korean people's preference for whiteness, large eyes, a clearly defined jaw, and high noses is not a direct product of Western cultural imperialism but is also impacted by Japanese colonial power. Women's pursuit of beauty is also impacted more by their pursuit of modernity and local social categories such as class and age, rather than race. Pussetti (2019, 63) explores how specific forms of cosmetic investments and plastic surgery in Portugal help individuals, such as African-descent women, change their racial/ethnic bodily features such as skin colour. Women's understandings of ideal bodies and choices have been impacted by modernity and the European lifestyle. But rather than erasing the social and historical value of the black body, women are freely creating their ideal style between and beyond "the black and white," and "the West and Rest" dichotomy.

Although previous anthropological studies have demonstrated how women's pursuit of beauty and health has been impacted by globalization and colonialism in broader historical and social contexts, the use of the term modernity itself is still European and American-centred. Also, women's changing preferences for beauty ideals do not always involve a linear historical process. Yang (2011) and Hua (2013) have conducted important work in China that sheds light on this.

Yang (2011) examines beauty culture in Beijing and argues that post-Mao representations of *Nennu* 嫩女 (tender women)<sup>12</sup> and *Shunu* 熟女 (ripe women) legitimated China's growing beauty economy. Yang summarizes that Chinese social media related these two ideals to two ideologies – "Western modernity" and "Confucian tradition." But Yang ignores the fact that

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<sup>12</sup> *Nennu* refers to youthful, innocent, Confucian, and beautiful women who are easily controlled by men. *Shunu* refers to mature, older women with more education and social experiences.

contemporary China's market is not built on the hopes of attaining so-called "Western modernity" but on Chinese sociality. Furthermore, despite Confucianism and Western modernity, other cultural and religious systems, such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Chinese physiognomy, also have shaped Chinese women's understanding and practices of beauty and health. These will be discussed further in the following sections of this chapter.

Like Yang (2011), Hua (2013) completed most of her fieldwork on women's pursuit of beauty in Beijing. Focusing on the influence of globalization, Hua explains that Chinese beauty ideals were largely impacted by American fashion, such as American Barbie dolls in the 1970s, and were then replaced by Korean beauty ideals in the past decade. However, China's health and beauty ideals have not evolved in a linear fashion. For example, Disneyland characters, also considered American cultural icons, such as Disney characters Linabell and Stella Lou,<sup>13</sup> have become popular in China along with Japanese cartoon characters and Korean pop stars in the two past decades. The following sections will provide more examples to support this point. Also, Hua and Yang have both used the word class to discuss how women benefit from beauty enhancements. However, the concept of class and its Chinese counterpart *Jie Ji* 阶级 have been marginalized in China since the Cultural Revolution (1960s), and I did not meet anyone who used these concepts. In the following sections, I will explain how the Chinese women I met used words such as "advantage" and "good" to discuss topics related to social position and inequality. These women's social position, economic status, and Guanxi might impact their access to medical resources and enhancement of whiteness. For example, a good indoor working environment could help women improve sun protection.

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<sup>13</sup> Linabell and Stella Lou belong to the Daffy Family of Asian Disney. Linabell is a little fox and Stella is a bunny dancer. They are adorable, childlike characters with light skin colours such as light pink and purple.

Furthermore, these two Chinese studies do not provide enough discussion to show that China has had a long historical tradition that favours whiteness. Clouser (2013) provides a better discussion of Chinese people's preference for whiteness, arguing that it is not a direct result of imperialism or globalization but rather dates back to ancient China. Whiteness was related to physical beauty, refinement, and intelligence. Although ancient Chinese people had distinguished Chinese and foreigners by bodily appearance, whiteness was more likely to be linked with social position instead of a social hierarchy founded on racial distinctions. However, these discussions about whiteness are still limited as they focus too much on skin colour. I do agree with Clouser (2013) that the popularity of whiteness in China is not related to racism directly, but Clouser's theory of colourism also cannot fully explain Chinese people's preferences for whiteness. My chapter will discuss how whiteness has not been linked to any specific skin tone and the smoothness of skin can be more important than skin colour when talking about whiteness in China. My study of whiteness in this chapter is inspired more by the work of Krozer and Gómez (2023), which shows how, in Mexico, whiteness has been connected to personal appearance, race, and socioeconomic status. Roberts' (2012) study in Ecuador also helps me think beyond racism and colorism, as whiteness can relate to education and clothing. Based on these studies, I will discuss more about how whiteness has been associated with one's beauty, health, wealth, living/working environment, age, and job/social position in China.

Also, while these studies (Hua 2013; Yang 2011) do provide some discussion about the impacts of social media, such as TV shows and magazines, on women's beauty and health enhancements, recent anthropological studies of globalization have emphasized the influences of digital technology and the internet on women's bodies and practices (Gill 2021; Wegenstein 2021; Elias et al. 2017). Following these studies, in this chapter I will focus on how women

respond to competing beauty ideals and how they impact women's beauty enhancement on the internet and social platforms such as RED. Additionally, Yang (2011) and Hua (2013) collected research data in the capital city of China. The small city of Xiamen, which has participated in the global economy for more than five hundred years, provides a new case to study beauty and health under the impacts of globalization.

### **Section One: Beyond Eurocentric Aesthetics and Hygiene**

This section explores Chinese women's preferences for whiteness, slimness, large eyes, and a high nose. As I have established above with the help of the social science literature, Chinese women's pursuit of beauty and health is not a product of cultural imperialism but is, rather, impacted by a long process of globalization and Chinese tradition. My key argument here is that Chinese women's understanding of whiteness has always been complex, relating to the colour and (healthy) condition of the skin, age, diet, schedule, and living or working environments. Many female individuals and participants I met tended to link their preference for whiteness with Chinese tradition rather than a racialized ideal brought about by cultural invasion. Fifteen of my participants emphasized whiteness or white skin when explaining dominant beauty ideals. Compared to skin colour and whiteness, dressing, lifestyle, and other bodily features, such as hair and a high nose, were more often associated with race and racialized ideals. Meanwhile, by exploring women's pursuit of beauty ideals, this section will present ethnographic data to demonstrate how Chinese women imagine racial and ethnic minorities, as well as the entanglements between these imaginations. For example, the so-called Caucasian facial features, such as a high nose bridge, were often mentioned by women I met when discussing the facial appearances of northwestern ethnic minorities such as the Uygur.

### *Explaining Whiteness: Light Skin Tone, Smoothness, and Flawlessness*

I met Danielle on a rainy afternoon in September 2021 while she was waiting for her consultation with Dr. Hong at Zhongshan Hospital. She saw me in the consultation room and started chatting with me. Danielle was in her 20s and studying medicine. Her skin condition seemed to be very good, without obvious flaws. During our conversation, Danielle shared her understanding of the dominant beauty ideal in China. “It should be *Bai Jing* 白净 (white and clean) skin. Having *Bai Jing* 白净 skin can also help enhance natural beauty. I mean, it helps enhance beauty without undergoing surgery procedures.”

“Have you made any changes to obtain *Bai Jing* 白净 skin?”

“As I just mentioned, I am going to remove all the moles on my face today. I also tried peeling therapy in July and August. I have studied medicine, so I employed peeling therapy (by myself). The efficacy of my first therapy was not obvious, but that of the second one was very good! There was a little bit of acne and pimples on my face after the second treatment.”

As a public hospital, Zhongshan Hospital aimed to improve the local population’s health rather than merely perform beauty enhancements. Although the removal of skin flaws, such as acne, freckles, and pimples, was sometimes considered unnecessary at Zhongshan Hospital, it was not uncommon to see women wanting to remove these flaws to attain whiteness perfectly. Like skin tone, cleanness, or flawlessness, was a very essential aspect of whiteness.

“Does peeling help you achieve a lighter skin tone?”

Danielle said:

Yes, I feel it works. I have made a lot of effort to obtain lighter skin. I have tried to prevent myself from being exposed to sunlight, especially from July to August, when I was completing peelings. I left home for work before sunrise and went back home after sunset. I usually wore my sunglasses, mask, and clothes with long sleeves. If you want white skin, don't expose yourself too much to the sunlight. But I feel you are white enough.

I was surprised by her comments on my skin and her efforts to improve her own whiteness, “Why did you start pursuing whiteness? Has your pursuit of whiteness impacted your individual or social life – for example, your marriage, career, or other aspects?”

“No, I enhance whiteness because I like it. We [Chinese] love white skin.” Although it is not compulsory to pursue whiteness in China, its popularity cannot be denied.



Figure 3. Dannielle, *Before and After Photos*, 2021.

After our first meeting, Danielle shared more of her stories of enhancing and maintaining whiteness with me. On WeChat, she sent me some before and after photos of herself, as well as notes and pictures of her enhancement tools, such as medical cream and sunscreen. She emphasized the Chinese long-term preferences for whiteness again. “Not all people in the medicine industry do this. I know that the effort I made in the last season was too much. When I stopped doing those, I was not that white. But I am satisfied with my current whiteness, and I have kept undergoing beauty procedures, such as laser procedures.”

Previous literature has considered skin and its colour as sites to study social exclusion and hierarchy brought about by colonialism and globalization (Pussetti 2019; Edmonds 2010; Burke 1996; McClintock 1995). However, my research in this section offers critiques of this work. The preference for white, flawless skin does not help construct a strict social hierarchy in China. None of the females I met with agreed that pursuing whiteness helped them gain privileges or enhance their social mobility. None of them mentioned the concept of class or *Jie Ji* 阶级. Also, like Danielle, some related whiteness more to Chinese tradition or generational trends rather than to race. As one of the female patients said, “I do not feel that my light skin has helped me make friends or improve my career. You know, many people in our generation are pursuing whiteness. It is very common.” Whiteness does not guarantee any job position in China. It should be admitted that whiteness sometimes brings more opportunities for some women to pursue certain careers or promote social status. For example, a social influencer might benefit from having healthy white skin, but this does not mean that another social influencer with tan or darker skin cannot attract followers. Women’s success can also be impacted by various factors such as their education, humour, personality, intelligence, and skills. For example, famous RED

blogger 妮娜 Nina, who identifies herself as a Chinese African, has attracted more than two million followers through her comic videos.

Pursuing whiteness has been viewed as a personal, suitable, but not inclusive choice by some Chinese women. While some of the women I met emphasized that not every woman looked better in a lighter skin tone, others mentioned that their preference for whiteness did not prevent them from favouring different types of beauty. Some told me that they enjoyed enhancing whiteness as they felt they looked better in lighter and cleaner skin, but they felt that Beyoncé and Rihanna were also very beautiful. Some female patients I met were in favour of white skin but also used “black beauty 黑美人” and “black pearl 黑珍珠” to describe the beauty of darker skin. One female patient called her Chinese friend “black beauty” because this friend had a darker skin tone than hers. Some mentioned that they preferred tanned or other darker skin tones. Chinese women I met did not link colours such as white and black directly to race and racial stigmatization. Moreover, when Chinese women I met pursue whiteness as a personal choice, their understanding of this choice can be very broad, as there is never a single, dominant guideline to pursuing whiteness; in other words, there was no strict definition of whiteness related to a specific skin tone among the women I met. Women’s understandings of flawlessness and white or light skin tone also varied in Xiamen. While some women I met viewed their moles as flaws and wanted to remove them all, others were thinking about keeping and even tattooing them as they felt that having dark moles on the face helped set off the lightness of their skin tones. Sometimes, smoothness and flawlessness of the skin could be more important than lighter skin colour when women discussed whiteness.

Descriptions of whiteness in ancient Chinese literature can bring more insights into these discussions.<sup>14</sup> They have impacted Chinese society in a profound way, and today some people still use ancient literature and poems to describe beauty. In *The Analects of Confucius*<sup>15</sup> (n.d.), Zi Xia 子夏 asked Confucius 孔子, “How should I understand ‘Beautiful smiling face, eyes, feel like painting on the whiteness’ ‘巧笑倩兮，美目盼兮，素以为绚兮’。何谓也?”. Confucius answered, “First of all, we have whiteness, then we paint on it 绘事后素”. Using make-up and painting as examples, Confucius was educating his students that Ren 仁 (inner characters such as benevolence and ethics) should come before Li 礼 (ritual). Whiteness was used to refer to the good inner character of a person. In Chinese literature, it is common to see that whiteness is not mentioned directly but is signified by ice, snow, jade, and flowers, with connotations of good personalities and characteristics such as purity. The famous Chinese poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (806) used “Snow Skin and Flower Appearance 雪肤花貌” to describe Yang Yuhuan 杨玉环, who was considered one of the Four Beauties in Ancient China. Songci 宋词 master Xiang Ziyin 向子諲 (1085–1152) described Water Moon Avalokitesvara as “Ice and snow skin, with beautiful plum blossom make-up.” “High aspirations. Not disturbed by the secular world 冰雪肌肤，靓妆喜作梅花面。寄情高远。不与凡尘染”. Meanwhile, the pursuit of whiteness was not only the

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<sup>14</sup> Lots of ancient Chinese literature, poems, stories, Confucian texts, and operas have been reserved and circulated among Chinese people. Chinese has been a compulsory course nationwide (from kindergarten to post-graduate studies). It includes studies of Mandarin, Classic Chinese (poems, ancient literature, and so on), and even local dialects. (This depends on local government sometimes. In Xiamen, Minnanese might be incorporated into local Chinese courses soon.) It is very common that Chinese people, even kids, use poems to describe a person, thing, or their feelings. Phrases such as “ice and snow skin” are often used when describing whiteness.

<sup>15</sup> This Confucian classical reading has been incorporated into the compulsory classical reading list in China’s nine-year free public education since the 1980s. Most educated Chinese people read and are even able to recite some Confucian readings. Also, Chinese has become one of the most important compulsory subjects in China’s education system. The learning of classic Chinese has contributed to the preservation and development of ancient literature, such as novels and poems.

privilege of upper-class women in ancient China. Different types of white powder were widely used by people from different social classes since the Spring and Autumn period (770 B.C.E. – 476 B.C.E.) (Kyo 2012). *Historic Classic 战国策* (Liu 77 B.C.E. – 6 B.C.E.) also recorded that ordinary women in nation Zheng 郑 and nation Zhou 周 used powder to enhance their whiteness.

Although there are various historical records of Chinese stereotypes of blackness and blacks, Black was also considered a holy colour in imperial China. In the five-element system,<sup>16</sup> while white signifies 金 Gold, black signifies 水 Water (周书 n.d.). According to the five-elements system, Gold nourishes Water. Based on an understanding of the five elements, 周 Zhou Emperors (1100s B.C. – 256 B.C.) changed their dress and ritual colours – cyan, red, white, and black – in different seasons (Dai n.d.). Black skin can also be indicative of a good personality and character. Bao Zheng 包拯, a famous and respected official in Northern Song (960–1127), was portrayed as having bright dark skin in literature and artwork. Black skin was used to symbolize Bao’s persistent fairness and justice (Shi 1800s–1871). Additionally, compared to black, red is more often considered the contrasting colour of white in various social and cultural contexts, such as wedding parties (Adrian 2012). Some of the women I met used the Chinese word “Chun Hong Chi Bai 唇红齿白 (red lips and white teeth)” to describe the appearance of beauty. In this way, whiteness is related to one’s clothing choices and makeup in China. Some women told me that wearing red clothing or having red lips/black eyebrows helped them lighten their skin.

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<sup>16</sup> Some important Chinese medical tenets such as holism and balance are also connected to five element theory.

While there was a preference for light skin, Chinese women I met became aware that the determinants of skin colour can be very complicated, beyond the connection to personality or personal behaviour. Owing to the geography of China, some female patients considered that it might be more difficult for women to enhance whiteness in sub-tropical areas such as Xiamen than in northern China. Some also mentioned that the location and weather of some Chinese cities in Sichuan 四川 and Yunnan 云南<sup>17</sup> might help them maintain a lighter skin tone. As one of them said, “I have been to Sichuan, the weather was cool and cloudy, and you did not need to be exposed to heavy sunlight. Girls there were so beautiful, with white and smooth skin.” Also, these Chinese women know that their working environment and living schedules impact their pursuit of whiteness. Some of my participants complained that working outdoors or staying up for long hours or past midnight could negatively impact their skin and bodily condition. As my participant Teng told me, “I should not stay up late. It’s very bad for my skin’s health and beauty. You know, I sometimes have pimples and dark eye cycles. They are annoying. If I could sleep earlier, my skin would be better. But sometimes I am not able to control myself.” Some female patients also admitted that the lockdown during the COVID period prevented them from going outdoors and thus helped maintain their whiteness. These discussions support my point that whiteness is associated with people’s working and living environment rather than being an immutable racial identity.

My discussions with women like Teng also reveal that Chinese understandings of whiteness refer to not only skin tone/colour but also to the healthy condition of skin. In this way,

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<sup>17</sup> Sichuan, a province in western China, is famous for its location and weather. As home to pandas, Sichuan’s weather is cool, cloudy, and rainy. Yunnan, located in southwestern China, is home to many ethnic minorities. The capital city, Kunming, is famous for its cool weather in four seasons. People often say that Kunming has four springs.

whiteness becomes the ideal of both beauty and health. Here I should emphasize that pursuing whiteness, or having white skin, does not mean that women in Xiamen actually transform their skin into a white colour. As described by Danielle and some other participants, the perfect white skin looks like a peeled lychee or egg. Pale (in contrast to the desired whiteness) skin tone was also not preferred, as words such as lychee and flower were more often used to refer to healthy, pinkish skin. These explain how whiteness is connected to delicacy, smoothness, and flawlessness, as well as to a good combination of facial features such as a combination of black eyes and light, pinkish skin or the harmony between a healthy internal body and nice external skin in China. This aspect of harmony will be discussed more in my third chapter.

On the other hand, it became clear in my discussions of whiteness that sometimes having a healthy skin condition is more important than lightening skin colour. Some women I met contended that the biggest enemy of enhancing whiteness was skin problems such as pimples and acne. Nine of my participants complained that they had suffered from pimples and/or acne for a long time. Red, swollen skin and dark scars brought on by pimples and acne require long-term skin care and treatment. Freckles, moles, spots, wrinkles, dark circles, and unwanted facial hair can also be recognized as flaws, posing an unpredictable threat to maintaining whiteness; and all make maintaining or pursuing whiteness an endless project in women's lifetime. For this reason, I conclude that, for some women, rather than lightening the skin colour directly, the removal of skin flaws and improvement of skin condition is what enhances their whiteness.

Different skin treatments and beauty procedures in private and public hospitals also shape women's beauty choices when pursuing whiteness. Based on my data, while bleaching hardly ever occurred in clinical settings, pore cleansing and various types of laser treatments were widely used to help women obtain their smooth, flawless, white skin in different hospitals on

Xiamen Island. These will be discussed in more detail in the next two chapters. My next story will show how women's pursuit of whiteness is also complicated by Chinese medicine, as well as Chinese life-nourishing and dietetics culture.

### *Extending Whiteness: Managing Scalp and Hair by Using Chinese Medicine and Diets*

In early July 2022, I dyed my hair orange after completing fieldwork at Xinkaiyuan Hospital.

When I visited Ting in her office, she was combing her hair while heating the teapot. Ting was about 30 years old, and she had immigrated from Hunan<sup>18</sup> to Xiamen in her 20s. She was running her business by teaching Guzheng 古筝 (Chinese zither), Pipa 琵琶<sup>19</sup>, and tea-making.

Ting did not tie her hair up but put on a hairband decorated with pearls. When she was making a cup of tea for me, I looked at her long black hair.

Ting soon noticed and said, "Are you looking at me?"

"Yes, I am looking at your hair, you look so beautiful with your waist-length hair. But is it difficult to keep it in good condition?"

Ting made a comment on my orange hair:

Not very difficult. Your hair is also beautiful. You look very white with this hair colour. I mean, this colour whitens you. But this colour isn't suitable for me. Light colours, such as orange and light purple, can only make white people white, it's not for people with dark skin. Also, I prefer Chinese classical . . . traditional aesthetics. I love my black hair and light skin. My hair colour enhances my facial whiteness.

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<sup>18</sup> Hunan province is located near Sichuan mentioned in my previous discussions. The weather is similar in these two provinces.

<sup>19</sup> Pipa is a Chinese traditional string instrument.

“How do you care for your hair care? Do you use any cosmetic products?”

“Not really. I’m a crazy fan of Chinese medicine. I prefer *Yang Sheng* 养生 (life nourishing theory and methods).”

“*Yang Sheng* 养生?”

Ting continued to introduce *Yang Sheng*:

Yes, I often attend free online lectures to gain knowledge of the *Classics of Internal Medicine* 黄帝内经. We don’t need to learn it at school. I listen to lectures by famous Chinese medical professionals and do some self-learning. I also incorporate some knowledge of traditional dietetics. Chinese medicine sees the entire holism of your body. So, if your facial skin turns yellow, or loses its previous lustre, you need to be careful. There might be *Qi* 气 stagnation in your body.

“How do you deal with that?”

“I found a *Qi Gong* [*Qi Kong Fu*] master, and he used massage to help remove my stagnation. You need to take care of your *Qi* movement based on an understanding of the environment [Xiamen]. I’m not good at *Yang Sheng* 养生. I should stop staying up late. But it’s impossible for many young people. So, I focus more on *Shi Liao* 食疗 (dietetics).<sup>20</sup>”

“*Shi Liao* 食疗?”

Yes, if you stay up too late, you are harming your organs, especially your liver. The liver has a very close relationship to your kidney in Chinese medicine and might also impact your stomach . . . Bird’s nest<sup>21</sup> is popular in Xiamen, but you would spend a lot of money

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<sup>20</sup> *Shi Liao* 食疗 refers to dietetics in Chinese Medicine. But it is not always medical and can be part of a daily routine.

<sup>21</sup> The weather in Xiamen is very hot and wet. Local traditional dietetic culture considers bird’s nest a valuable food/medicine to suppress hot Qi and nourish Yin. (Local dietetic and medical systems contend that nourishing Yin Qi benefits women’s bodies.)

on a high-quality bird's nest. I cannot eat too much as my body is cold. It can be helpful if you can keep it in your daily diet for a long time, but I don't want to spend that much money . . . So, as suggested by one of my *Lao Zhong Yi* 老中医,<sup>22</sup> I am taking Six Ingredients Pill 六味地黄丸. In the meantime, I am trying a beauty mask and laser treatment to make my facial skin white and glowing . . . Also, people tend to neglect taking care of the scalp.<sup>23</sup> Some cosmetic clinics provide ginger therapy.

Ting shared some advertisements from some local clinics and beauty salons. Based on understandings of bodily holism, these places use ginger and sesame in their scalp and hair therapy to help customers gain healthy and beautiful light skin. The holistic discourses, such as “由内而外, 容光焕发 (from internal to external body, promoting radiance and becoming glowing)”<sup>24</sup> were often used in these advertisements. Ting's story is another example of how whiteness in Xiamen is not determined by the colour of bodily surfaces but is a natural, gradual result of holistic health and beauty. It reveals how women's pursuit of whiteness involves interactions among biomedicine, local dietetic culture, and Chinese medicine. According to participants like Ting, whiteness is a beauty and health ideal constructed on a holistic relationship between the local environment and the human body, shaped by every daily activity, emotion, diet, treatment, and natural body type. For example, according to my participants, people living in a southeastern city of China might have excess hot and wet *Qi*, leading to an imbalance of *Qi* and finally skin issues such as acne, which disrupts whiteness. Popular foods and ingredients such as sesame, bird's nest, and oviductus ranae were widely used to nourish women's bodily balance, which helps eliminate skin flaws such as pimples and acne. In this way,

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<sup>22</sup> *Lao Zhong Yi* usually refers to a senior, experienced Chinese physician.

<sup>23</sup> Scalp is also translated as head skin in Chinese.

<sup>24</sup> This means that if you want to have good skin on the surface of your body (skin), you should take care of your internal body.

I also conclude that although biomedical treatments, such as laser, are popular, biomedicine does not hold hegemony over women's pursuit of whiteness in Xiamen.

Another important observation that arose from my conversation with Ting, and one shared by other participants in my study as well, is the way that women's management of whiteness extended to that of other bodily parts such as the scalp, hair, lips, and teeth. As some other female patients and participants told me, red lips, bright eyes, suitable hair colour, and so on, all helped "whiten" the skin, by which they meant they all enhanced the appearance of clear skin and a light complexion. Make-up products, tattoos, and laser treatments were popular too, and this was partially because changing one's lip or hair colour with the help of these techniques was an easier and quicker way to enhance whiteness than managing one's internal health. However, the effect of these methods was limited according to some women I met. Applying and removing makeup could be time-consuming, and the use of make-up products, laser treatments, and tattoos increased the burden of daily skin care. In Chinese medicine, these might create an imbalance rather than solve real skin issues. Only a few participants admitted that they got used to using make-up products or tattoos.

This story demonstrates how the standards of whiteness and women's whiteness enhancements are not dominated by biomedicine, and that they extend to the management of other bodily parts such as hair and teeth. The next story offers further explanation for why changing hair colour has not become a suitable and desirable way for Chinese women I met to enhance their whiteness. Hair colour, rather than skin colour, is more likely to be related to social boundaries associated with race and ethnicity. Also, dying one's hair a light colour is not that common, nor is it fully accepted by the public.

### *Hair Colour, Dresses, and Lifestyle: Imagining Racial Identity*

One day in July 2022, I was walking to a taxi pick-up spot near my home when it was drizzling. I put on my hood to prevent my hair from getting wet. The driver arrived quickly, and I got in the taxi.

The driver looked back at me and said in English, “Hi, hello . . . you are Chenxin? I mean . . . your name. Sorry.”

I was surprised that she was speaking English to me. I tried to talk with her in Chinese, “Yes, I am Chenxin. You are Chinese, right? Why are you speaking English, a foreign language? Is the taxi industry in Xiamen that competitive?”

The driver couldn’t stop laughing:

Hahaha, when I was assigned to be your driver, I was so nervous because WeChat platform showed that you were using WeChat International, and your message was translated into English. Then I saw your whole face at the pick-up spot. But you did not have an umbrella,<sup>25</sup> you had yellow-orange hair, and you seemed to have a high nose too. You dressed up in a cool, sexy way, exposing your waist. I thought you might be a white (lady).

This comment speaks to the ways that, in Xiamen, hair (colour/style), nose, clothing, and lifestyle – not using an umbrella – have emerged as more important signifiers of racial identity than white skin. This supports Tate’s theory (2021, 2016) that the social construction of race is related to biological traits but also to an individual’s daily performativity. Dark hair – the hair colour of most Chinese – works as a social marker to construct social boundaries between different racial and ethnic groups. The story also demonstrates that for most Chinese, especially

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<sup>25</sup> This relates to a stereotype of foreigners in Chinese society – that foreigners are not likely to use an umbrella in light rain.

Han Chinese, black and dark brown hair are also socially and politically appropriate. They are recognized as common, normal colours across different social spaces such as hospitals, schools, and offices of local government. But light hair colours, such as orange and golden, are aligned with some Chinese women's imagination of white people.

My conversation with this driver reminded me of previous experiences at the beginning of my fieldwork. I did not expect that my hair would change people's perceptions of me and prevent me from entering some social spaces. When I applied to renew my national ID photo in the police office and started visiting hospitals, I was required to dye my hair back to its natural colour. As one of the officials said, "Unless your natural hair colour is light, you should dye it back. Except for some foreigners and minorities, most people in this city have black hair." After completing my fieldwork in hospitals, I changed my hair colour to orange. When some medical professionals and female participants met me, they expressed feelings of admiration, but they also mentioned that they were not able to have light hair because it stood out and was usually not permitted in workplaces. As one doctor who worked in a public hospital of Xiamen put it, "If I got this colour, I am not sure that my patients would consider me a reliable doctor." Light skin with dark hair is consistent with dominant whiteness and also reflects on one's position and professional skills in China. Under these circumstances, having light hair also symbolizes the freedom of choice to cross social boundaries under the surveillance of the state. A woman's hair is thus linked to her race, ethnicity, and job/social position, as well as signals potential foreignness.

Based on the work of Krozer and Gómez (2023), Clouser (2013), and Roberts (2012), my discussion in this section has explored the complexion of whiteness in Chinese society.

Whiteness can be related to (skin) health and beauty, but it is also associated with age, living or

working environment, diet, clothing, job, social position, education/knowledge, and economic ability. The meanings of whiteness may vary in different cultural and social contexts, but the link between whiteness and race is weak in China. As one woman told me, “The so-called white people might not be white. Chinese people can be white and black.” In this way, my work goes beyond previous China-focused anthropological studies of beauty and health (Clouser 2013; Hua 2013; Luo 2013; Yang 2011) to show how the pursuit of whiteness as a facet of the pursuit of beauty involves subtle and complex relational judgements about what constitutes whiteness. In other words, it is a “complicated whiteness” that women pursue in Xiamen, China. To support my analysis, the following story will provide another example for us to explore some Chinese understandings of race and ethnicity with connections to beauty and health.

### *Caucasians or Uygurs? Describing Appearances of Ethnic Minorities*

In March 2022, I met Xinxin to complete our interview. Xinxin was about 25 years old. She had just graduated and was looking for a job. Xinxin had successfully removed a large mole from her face by undergoing surgery procedures the previous year, but this experience did not persuade her to continue making changes to her facial features such as her eyes and lips. Xinxin still preferred enhancing whiteness by undergoing long-term laser treatments, such as Fotona, instead of trying more dramatic plastic surgery procedures.

I prefer enhancing beauty and health in a suitable way. Angelababy’s<sup>26</sup> face has been considered a desirable plastic surgery template. Many people want to have a facial appearance like hers, so they change their appearance according to her facial features

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<sup>26</sup>Angelababy is a popular Hong Kong model of both German and Chinese descent. Some of the women I met viewed her as a representative of mixed-blood beauty. Her face has become a template for some plastic surgery consumers in China.

such as nose and eyes. But for me . . . my ideal beauty is Xuan Mei 宣美,<sup>27</sup> because she has straight, long legs and her breasts and buttocks . . . she has a great body shape. But if I would like to change my facial appearance (in the future), it would be like Qi Wei 戚薇's.<sup>28</sup>

I was confused by her words. “Oh, you want to have a face like Qi Wei's?”

Xinxin explained her ideas in detail. “No, it is not a similar face but a kind of ‘*Gan Jue* 感觉 (feeling)’.” She continued:

I mean that Qi Wei's facial appearance is very “*Ri Chang* 日常 (daily)” [easier to achieve and looks approachable]. I only want to slightly change my appearance based on my current face. Also, her efforts show that you can have a better facial appearance by doing makeup and dressing up. But Dilraba 迪丽热巴<sup>29</sup> and Angelababy are far from us ordinary people . . . It's impossible to have a facial appearance like theirs unless undergoing lots of plastic surgery procedures to change your main facial features and your bones. They [people like Dilraba] are Xinjiang<sup>30</sup> residents, they are like Caucasians or White. Dilraba and Baby are taking advantage of their race . . . Some changes, like having a very high nose or removing bones, often require regular repairs over your whole lifetime . . . I prefer the Euro-American style. I mean, I would like to add some *Hun Xue* 混血<sup>31</sup> (biracial feelings) into my appearance, make-up, and dressing style. I obtain knowledge of these styles from biracial celebrities, such as Eileen Gu 谷爱凌 and Maggie Q. Rather than change my bones and facial features, I get some light highlights in my hair or dye my hair light and follow their clothing style.

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<sup>27</sup> Xuan Mei is a Korean pop singer.

<sup>28</sup> Qi Wei is a famous actress in China.

<sup>29</sup> Dilraba is the most famous Uygur actress in China.

<sup>30</sup> Xinjiang Province is also named Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Xinjiang is the largest province of China and is inhabited by various ethnic minority groups such as Uygur.

<sup>31</sup> 混血 is also translated as hybrid blood in Mandarin.



Figure 4. Dilarba Dilmurat, *A Selfie of Dilarba*, 2021.

Xinxin's take on beauty is an example of the way women are constantly finding a balance between what they appreciate (for example, who is beautiful and healthy), what they are pursuing (for example, how to enhance beauty and health rationally in real life), and what they are not able to achieve (for example, beauty ideals that require crossing racial boundaries). Women's enhancement of beauty and health is shaped by racialized imaginations of specific facial features such as hair (colour), nose, and eyes, not just skin colour or skin condition. Although changes in prominent, racialized facial features, such as a high nose, can be realized with the help of biomedical techniques, the price of crossing racial boundaries might be very high when there are foreseeable high risks. As Xinxin said, changing a certain facial feature could require changes to other facial features and bones. While there is always a difference between women's self-expectation and their preferences, their beauty and health enhancements become a rational decision with a calculation of risks and investments. Furthermore, the second argument I will make in this section is that race is also "performative" in Chinese society. Based

on racialized imaginations, while some women take advantage of their racialized biological traits, some construct their racialized identities such as a biracial identity through acts such as hair styling and dressing up. In this way, their practices help reproduce racialized social boundaries.

Moreover, some Chinese women's understanding of race was not separate from that of ethnicity. Anthropologists have demonstrated how race and ethnicity are both socially constructed with connections to biological traits, culture, language, lived experiences, and history in different parts of the world (Brown et al. 2020; Weber 1997). This section supports the idea that race and ethnicity are sometimes constructed in similar ways in China. Most official dynasties in Imperial China were controlled by the Han majority. The places that are nearby today's Xinjiang, Yunnan, and Internal Mongolia, have become residential places for ethnic minorities. Although, like other provinces in China, Xinjiang Province is now inhabited by both the Han majority group and other ethnic minority groups, popular imaginations about certain ethnic minorities such as Uyгур have been mingled with those about racial groups such as Caucasians, or whites in Xiamen, China. For example, some women mentioned that big, sunken eyes and high noses were categorized as the prominent features of both Uyгур and Caucasians rather than the Han majority. Like Xinxin, some women did not clarify the difference between race and ethnicity when discussing these traits with connections to the natural advantages of Uyгур, Caucasian, and white. This kind of construction was very casual. They sometimes could not distinguish Caucasian and white. Some people I met even considered Uyгур as a kind of Caucasians or white people since these groups shared prominent facial features. But this situation might be a little different in other parts of China such as Xinjiang and Internal Magnolia where most residents are ethnic minorities.

Also, compared to places such as Brazil, where the categories of black, white, and mixed races are all attached to complicated hierarchies (Jarrín 2017; Edmonds 2010), in Xiamen, China, there was no strict hierarchy connected to mixed race. A biracial appearance could be attractive to some women like Xinxin, but that was not necessarily the dominant view. Race and ethnicity were not sensitive topics among the people I talked to. Chinese women I met were relaxed when talking about the so-called privileges and differences between different racial and ethnic groups. Section two will explore competing beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 in Xiamen to further my analysis.

## **Section Two: Reflections on *Bai You Shou* in Influencer Culture: Aesthetic Renaissance in a Sick Way?**

In this section, I will explore the Chinese beauty ideal known as *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 – whiteness, youth, and slimness – within the influential realm of social media, particularly on Chinese online social platforms such as RED 小红书 and Weibo 微博. By creating and reviewing online posts, some Chinese women’s imaginations of *Bai You Shou* have materialized. For example, women might post specific examples of makeup and dressing styles that help one achieve the *Bai You Shou* ideal. The popular *Chun Yu Feng* 纯欲风 (innocent sexy style) is often associated with enhancing *Bai You Shou* to value sexy but youthful beauty. Furthermore, the rise of the *Bai You Shou* ideal has not been considered merely a result of global cultural interactions but has led to more debates on Chinese traditional aesthetics. While some female patients and participants contended that the rise of *Bai You Shou* on social platforms such as RED revitalized

and exaggerated traditional Chinese feminine ideals, some argued that the spread of this ideal and its reflections or criticisms helped enhance the diversity of beauty ideals.

### *Rethinking Bai You Shou 白幼瘦*

With the development of the digital economy and social influencer culture, beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou 白幼瘦* have become popular on Chinese social media platforms since the 2000s.

The success and wealth of social influencers, such as 易梦玲 Yi Mengling,<sup>32</sup> 蔡萝莉 Cai Lolita,<sup>33</sup> and 李佳琦 Li Austin,<sup>34</sup> have inspired some Chinese women to enhance their beauty by pursuing *Bai You Shou*. However, there have been lots of reflections of and criticisms of the rise of the *Bai You Shou 白幼瘦* ideal. These include criticisms supported by the Chinese government. On May 25, 2021, 法制日报 *Legal Daily*, an official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, posted an article criticizing social influencer culture and popular preferences for light skin, youth, and slimness. As the author of the article, Luo, said, “There is a trend towards *Bai You Shou 白幼瘦*, its standards have become more and more weird in recent years. Many people choose to lie on the operating table, because of anxieties about their appearance” (Luo 2021).

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<sup>32</sup> Mengling is the most famous fashion influencer in China. She has more than 4.4 million followers on RED. Popular social influencers might earn a lot of money. In China, some social influencers and stars are sometimes called 208 万, a Chinese word that means earning 2.08 million Chinese Yuan in one day.

<sup>33</sup> Lolita is a social influencer with more than 3.4 million followers on RED. She is known for dressing up in cute Lolita costumes. Mengling and Lolita are viewed as representatives of *Bai You Shou* and *Chun Yu Feng*.

<sup>34</sup> Austin is the most popular cosmetic influencer and online seller in China. He has been called “妇女之友” “The Friend of Women” because he is very welcome among Chinese women. He has a beautiful face with light, glowing skin. Some women told me that this helped Austin become a good cosmetic products seller.

Like these critics, some Chinese people have described *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 as “social influencer aesthetics” on social platforms. Meanwhile, a face with large eyes, a high nose, and a sharp chin is termed “*Wang Hong Lian* 网红脸” – face of a social influencer, reflecting some influencers’ preferences for *Bai You Shou*. *Bai You Shou* and whiteness are connected and sometimes overlap. For example, the pursuit of *Bai You Shou* has made some social influencers difficult to identify with the help of digital technologies such as photo or video editing on social media. When facial features such as wrinkles and moles are removed from the screen to enhance whiteness, other features such as eyes and nose are further emphasized to distinguish social influencers from others. This has led to some social influencers to alter their appearance to having very large eyes and high noses. On the other hand, the faces of famous celebrities or social influencers might be used as templates when doctors help these social influencers change their appearances. Social influencers like Cai are often viewed as having a common *Wang Hong Lian* and a *Bai You Shou* appearance. As a result, while some Chinese social influencers do not obtain a desirable, distinguished look and keep changing their facial features slightly, others choose to make dramatic changes at the beginning to distinguish them from their counterparts. Sometimes facial whiteness and youth are both included in discussions of *Wang Hong Lian* as some famous social influencers with perfect skin look much younger than their real ages.



Figure 5. Yi, *A Photo of Yi Mengling*, 2023.

These two ideals have helped construct stereotypes of social influencers and the popular look of Chinese women. As criticized by some female patients and medical professionals such as doctors, “It is [*Wang Hong Lian*] too much. It is very sick and ugly. Don’t pursue that kind of sick beauty.” “*Bai You Shou* and *Wang Hong Lian* look not bad in photos and videos, but they would be horrible when seen in the flesh. If you are not a social influencer, you don’t need to have very big eyes.” Being an official lady in the public sector and being a social influencer who has her own business are connected to different beauty ideals. Women’s pursuit of beauty and health is thus connected to their social positions. However, rather than condemn social influencer culture, some female patients and participants I interviewed argued that the preference for *Bai You Shou* is a revitalization of traditional Chinese aesthetics. As previously mentioned, the preference for whiteness and slimness has a long history in China. Also, previous anthropological studies have discussed the popularity of young beauty or youth in early historical periods (Hua 2013; Ping 2002). As one of my female participants said, “It [*Bai You Shou*] is very

old, people are exaggerating this traditional ideal online.” Although some female participants and patients regarded *Bai You Shou* as a traditional beauty ideal separate from social influencer culture, attitudes towards it varied and were sometimes impacted by geographical and cultural differences.

In March 2022, I met Cici in a café. Cici was in her 20s and worked in finance. She was interested in classical music. Cici heard about my research project and contacted me on RED. The café had a small garden, and the inside place was quiet and provided a cozy space for an interview. The whole café radiated the fragrance of flowers such as roses, and classical orchestral music was playing. Cici was slim and had light skin. When I asked her what she considered to be the dominant beauty ideal in China, she put her coffee cup on the tiny table in front of us and said, “It should be *Bai You Shou*. But it depends on the place. For Xiamen, it is definitely *Bai You Shou*.”

I was very curious about her comparison, “It depends on the place?”

Cici confirmed her opinion and continued:

Yes, because I have studied in different places. If you are in big cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, you would be more likely to pursue fitness and a healthy body. But if you are living in a second or third-level city such as Xiamen, people’s opinions of beauty ideals in these cities are not that open. They tend to be more traditional and conservative. Also, there is a difference between the north and the south. I mean, in northern China, the average height of individuals is taller. It is different from that in southern China. Under this circumstance, women in the south are supposed to be slim and tiny, relatively. This is my opinion. You can see this kind of aesthetics on social media. And . . . in another special situation, during the “*Xiang Qin* 相亲 (matching date)”.<sup>35</sup> I am more likely to meet the requirements of *Bai You Shou*, but one of my friends has suffered a lot because of her tall, curvy body. So, this helps me to develop my opinion. She is about 175 centimetres. I have

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<sup>35</sup> *Xiang Qin* 相亲 refers to a matching date organized by a family member, friend, or acquaintance such as a colleague. People usually have a basic understanding of their dating person’s appearance, family, work, and character before starting to date.

many tall female friends; they would be under a lot of pressure if they were not slim enough.

Cici's opinion supports *Bai You Shou* as a traditional and popular beauty ideal in Xiamen. As she mentioned, the average height of local people became an important factor impacting women's pursuit of *Bai You Shou*. While men were not very tall and strong, women were supposed to be tiny and slim. Tall and curvy women found it difficult to be slim and youthful. Her story explains how women's bodies and appearances are viewed, exploited, and calculated by others, especially men, across different social spaces, from online social platforms to dating markets. *Bai You Shou*, thus, becomes valuable capital (Bourdieu 1984), associated with the promotion of sexual allure and obedience. "Northern girls/women" and "southern girls/women" have become new categories with which to regulate women's beauty and health enhancement. Cici did not exaggerate this geographical and cultural difference. Since 2023, southern Chinese women have been called "Nan Fang Xiao Tu Dou 南方小土豆 (Little Southern Potato)" on Chinese social media such as RED. This stereotype became popular in Chinese society after the boom of domestic tourism in Harbin in 2023. On the Chinese internet, some people started calling southern female travellers "Little Southern Potato" as a comment on their appearance, cuteness, and personality. When I searched this word on RED in February 2025, it was associated with hot topics such as "*Jiao Qi* 娇妻 (trophy wife)", "Harbin", and "Cute".

Furthermore, Cici's idea demonstrates the geographical variations of globalization when discussing beauty ideals. Although Xiamen and Shanghai both started their free markets in the 1970s, Shanghai is obviously the most developed metropolis in China. Cici was not the only participant who mentioned that Shanghai had more diverse beauty ideals and advanced medical techniques. Competing beauty and health ideals such as fitness are more accepted in big cities

such as Shanghai where *Bai You Shou* does not attract so many women. In this way, globalization helps enhance the diversity of beauty culture, but this process has been uneven. Therefore, I conclude here that the preferences for the *Bai You Shou* ideal in Xiamen are more related to geographical differences, gender, and family tradition than to race. I will return to the significance of kinship and regional tradition in chapter four. Focusing on social media (the internet, etc.) and digital technologies, such as photo editing, my next story will provide further discussion of women's responses to *Bai You Shou* and its criticisms.

### ***Retouching Photos? Pursuing Bai You Shou 白幼瘦 in a Rational Way***

In October 2021, the first female Chinese astronaut, Wang Yaping, was going to make her second trip to China's space centre. The official Weibo account of China Space posted a photo of Wang to celebrate women's success and achievement in the space industry. In this photo, Wang wore delicate make-up, and her facial features, such as her skin colour, were retouched. Her skin became very light and flawless compared to how it had looked in her old photo. This official image suddenly led to debates on China's social media platforms such as Weibo 微博. While some expressed appreciation for her beauty and success, others criticized the photo as not looking real and for reflecting the blind pursuit of whiteness and youth in a sick society. Some were surprised that even a successful woman like Wang had to “*Fu Mei Yi* 服美役 (Be a Slave of Beauty)”.



Figure 6. Weibo Account of China Space, *Wang's Official Image*, 2021, 2019.

Photo editing, or retouching, has been widely used to help Chinese women achieve the *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 ideal. Many female patients and participants admitted that they usually retouched photos before posting them to social platforms such as RED and Weibo. I shared the image above when meeting my participant Teng in a McDonald's store near Zhongshan Hospital. Teng was still doing her bachelor's degree and paid for her beauty enhancements herself. Teng held my phone and reviewed the comments. She then expressed her attitude towards the criticisms of Wang's image:

It is not necessary [to criticize]. Photo retouching is very common, and we women can view perfection and flawlessness in a rational way. The dominant beauty ideal emphasizes whiteness, tallness, slimness, good skin, and good hair. Maybe also dressing up properly. You know that *Chun Yu Feng* 纯欲风 is closely associated with the *Bai You Shou* ideal online. But there is a huge gap between reality and virtuality. I mean, girls can wear heavy make-up, dress up in a very sexy and cute way, and edit their photos on platforms such as RED. But this kind of style is not suitable for daily wear. Although women use photo retouching to meet the requirements of *Bai You Shou* ideals online, they usually do not strictly pursue those ideals in their real life . . . This is why women nowadays have too many anxieties. Without the internet, you hardly ever meet a beauty in your life, but now we can find and search for beautiful women anytime. Under these circumstances, people

tend to compare themselves to others' retouched, perfect looks online . . . Photo retouching and editing are constructing our aesthetic preferences. For example, we can see how the TikTok camera helps you get a smaller face when taking a photo. This is a kind of peer pressure, but people cannot live apart from others. Once you have realized that everyone is using photo retouching, you don't need to worry about your appearance. It's normal to have imperfections.

In January 2022, Teng and I met again for our second interview. This time she shared some new ideas.

Do you want me to take a photo and retouch it for you? Photo retouching helps us realize the *Bai You Shou* ideal in a rational way. It is because good photo retouching should be natural and helpful, with only a few changes to your appearance, to maximize your beauty. For example, when it comes to whiteness, you might be not sure about what degree of whiteness (skin tone) is suitable for you or which facial flaw you should remove. In this situation, we also take a shortcut to set up our goal. It is our freedom to pursue our preferred beauty ideal. It is unfair that sometimes the rise of other ideals such as fitness is based on the criticisms of *Bai You Shou*.



Figure 7. Teng, *Retouched Photo of Me Taken by Teng, 2022.*

Teng's story provides an example that demonstrates that some Chinese women no longer consider managing their bodies in an endless process. Retouching photos can also help women

perform their preferred beauty ideal in virtual social spaces. Compared to beauty enhancement in real life, making an ideal photo is very easy, sometimes merely requiring one click with the help of AI technologies. Meanwhile, fake, perfect photos also help some women blur the distinction between the virtual and real worlds, leading to an increase in peer pressure and anxiety. Under these circumstances, while some women are satisfied with having a perfect virtual appearance rather than undergoing endless surgery procedures in real life, some become more aware of their physical imperfections and use photo editing to set up their goals of beauty enhancement. Furthermore, women's pursuit of *Bai You Shou* is still devalued and disdained by its critics. This includes criticisms of the use of photo editing. But these critics seem to forget that photo editing has also been used to edit photos for government IDs in contemporary China. Some women I met emphasized their labour when completing their photo edits and regarded this as part of their daily project.

While some women contend that the popularity of *Bai You Shou* represents cultural domination and should be criticized, others have argued that the discrimination against women's preferences for this ideal emphasizes critics' obedience to new forms of gender inequality, instead of focusing on women's agency and bodily autonomy. For example, women like Teng support women's right to pursue *Bai You Shou*, even though its related requirements, such as slimness, might lead to health issues. This supports previous Chinese anthropological studies that have argued that beauty is not a direct result of globalization but relates to feminist discourses such as gender equality, labour, and mobility (Hua 2013; Yang 2011). That said, it does not follow that it is only criticisms and reflections on the *Bai You Shou* ideal that have led to recent competing beauty ideals in China, such as fitness. While fitness and strength had also been popular in China during the colonial and SARS periods (Mason 2016; Andrew 2014), the spread

of COVID-19 from 2019 to 2022 in China, and its related restrictions, also played essential roles in shaping women's understanding of beauty and health. This, again, supports my point that globalization does not happen in a linear process. The last part of this section will provide more insights into this aspect.

***From Chun Yu Feng 纯欲风 and Bai You Shou 白幼瘦 to Genghong Girl<sup>36</sup> 刘耕宏女孩 and Dopamine Girl<sup>37</sup> 多巴胺女孩: Learning Beauty Ideals***

From March to May of 2022, Shanghai city was locked down due to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus. Lei, a nearly 30-year-old Xiamen citizen who lived in both Shanghai and Xiamen, was very worried about our coming meeting and contacted me via WeChat. "I am not able to return to Xiamen as the whole city has been locked down. We are not allowed to go outside the home, and we don't have enough food. The government is working on this. But I feel burnt out." I comforted Lei and asked whether she would like to postpone our meeting. I was not surprised by the news of the lockdown because Xiamen had been locked down at least three times during the COVID period. However, the situation was worse in Shanghai in April.

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<sup>36</sup> The popularity of *Genghong Girl* contributed to the rise of the fitness ideal on Chinese social media. *Genghong Girl* refers to Chinese women who followed Genghong's exercise online to enhance beauty and fitness. Genghong Liu is an actor. During Shanghai's lockdown, Genghong and his family were very bored staying at home. So they started broadcasting their daily exercises and sharing tips with Chinese netizens on TikTok. Genghong became famous because of his skills, humour, and the use of Jay Chou's music during his broadcast. Jay Chou, Genghong's best friend, had been the most popular pop singer in China for about three decades.

<sup>37</sup> *Dopamine Girls, or Duo Ba An Girls*, refer to Chinese women who happily used colours with high saturation in daily make-up and dress in the post-COVID period. In February 2023, the concept "Dopamine Style of Dressing Up" was discussed by popular fashion influencer Chen Caini 陈采尼 on RED and TikTok. Chen argued that the use of high saturation colours might help Chinese people to restore energy and set up future positive goals during this difficult period. Chinese women often considered Dopamine Style as an example of the Y2K ideal (Chen 2023). Y2K refers to millennium aesthetics, which carry the future utopia. This aesthetic has returned to the global fashion industry since 2018. Y2K has become popular in different countries and places, such as France, America, Korea, and Japan (Yang 2023). From early 2022 to 2023, I frequently heard about Y2K from female individuals I met and got related information on Chinese social media.

One day in April, Lei contacted me again and told me that she had started following Genghong Liu, who was famous for providing his exercise and fitness show on TikTok. This then shaped her understanding of beauty and health:

I was bored at home. Also, the COVID period taught me lessons. We, young women, are usually brainwashed by consumerism and spend a lot of money buying unnecessary stuff. I should save more money. And the best way is to keep fit. During the COVID period, when I was forced to stay at home, I had difficulty buying food as there was a shortage of food in the whole city last month. I spent some money buying some medicine, which might help deal with small health issues such as sneezing and sore throat brought on by the spread of COVID viruses. When I stay at home, I don't want to waste money anymore. Health is the most important thing, as I grow older. I am now making efforts to enhance my fitness instead of pursuing slimness.

Lei's narrative reflects the impacts of the COVID pandemic on women's choices and practices related to self enhancement. Instead of focussing more on beauty and its related aspects, such as slimness, some Chinese women have started maintaining or enhancing fitness since the COVID period (2019–2022). Nine of my participants criticized the blind preference for *Bai You Shou* and emphasized that they preferred enhancing fitness and healthy beauty. Some of them admitted that COVID restrictions led them to put more attention on fitness. For example, during the COVID period, being infected with the COVID virus could impact not merely oneself but all individuals in one's social circle.<sup>38</sup> This led some women to start exercising and to take COVID tests frequently. This demonstrates that some Chinese women's preferences for beauty ideals such as fitness are more likely to relate to their age, social position, and social interactions rather than to race or the so-called aspiration for modernity. Some women even told me that they viewed wellness or fitness as compulsory but regarded pursuing the popular ideal of *Bai You*

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<sup>38</sup> Once a person tested positive for COVID, all individuals in her direct social circle would be tracked and required to take COVID tests. Also, they would be quarantined for about two weeks.

*Shou* as optional and sometimes even irrational. Their pursuit of wellness or fitness was also supported by the socialist national medical system, especially during the COVID period. Women's beauty could be pursued through self-discipline with connections to their understanding of being a good Chinese citizen. This will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

Furthermore, the COVID pandemic led to a rise in anxiety, unhappiness, and burnout among many Chinese, and these emotions have been associated with the rise of competing beauty ideals such as fitness. For example, happiness, which was often related to mental health, became one of the important themes when discussing beauty among women I met during the COVID period. Some individuals told me that they became more worried about their skin flaws, such as acne and scars, during the COVID period when they spent more time staying at home. Some started to rethink popular beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou*.

Based on the understanding of global Y2K culture, which was constructed in the 2000s and has revived since 2018, some Chinese women developed Y2K culture, constructing a new beauty ideal called *Dopamine Girl* 多巴胺女孩. Y2K culture promotes millennium aesthetics and holds a positive attitude towards beauty enhancements. Rather than focusing on certain bodily and facial features such as white and smooth skin, dopamine girl emphasizes colourful clothing and make-up to restore mental positivity and enhance overall appearance (Chen 2023; Yang 2023). While the old popular *Bai You Shou* ideal is often associated with reflections on a strict diet, sick aesthetics, and endless, hopeless enhancement, other beauty ideals such as fitness and *Dopamine Girl* have helped women reconstruct rational and positive attitudes towards a future life after going through lockdowns. With advanced AI technology, today some women are using beauty camera apps such as 美图 Meitu to try out different hairstyles and colourful outfits.

Eva, one of my participants, shared her experience of taking photos as a dopamine girl who stopped focusing on her facial skin and acne during the COVID period. It was interesting that some of her outfits and photos were created by using AI technology instead of being taken in person during the lockdowns of Xiamen. As she said, “You can upload your photo, and AI will help change prominent facial features of the model to yours in a new video or photo. I can show you different models and styles. But when I searched”短发 (short hair)”, there were a few choices.”

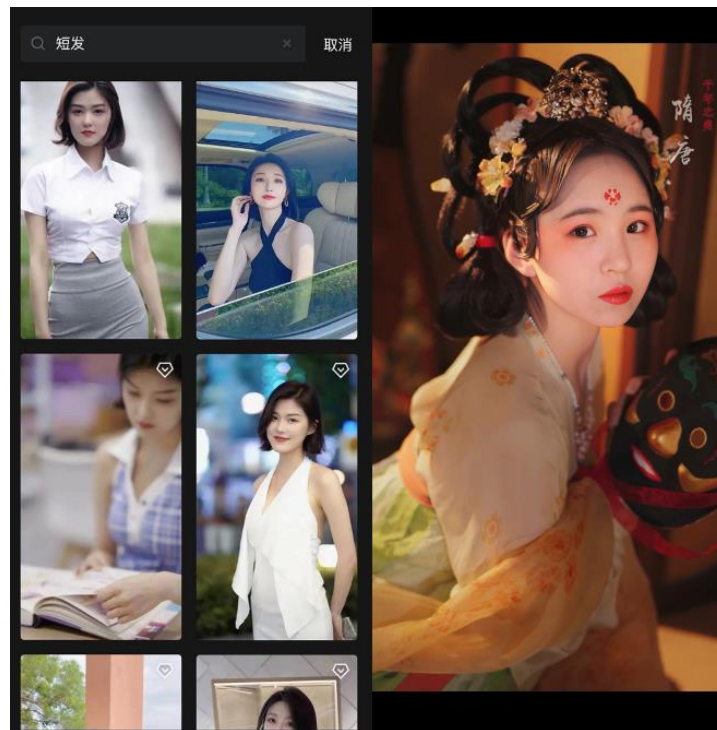


Figure 8. Eva, *Using AI Technology to Try New Hair and Outfits*, 2021.

Both globalization and the spread of COVID-19 and its national restrictions contributed to debates about various beauty ideals in China. But the rise of competing ideals such as dopamine girl did not necessarily lead to the marginalization and devaluation of popular older beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou*. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, some of the women I met

continued to embrace *Bai You Shou* even while focusing on bodily fitness and experimenting with new clothing styles. In this way, beauty ideals can be hybridized. The revival and development of these competing beauty ideals also support the idea that globalization happens by persons, but not in a linear process. My next section will provide more discussion about this.

### **Section Three: Blending Beauty Ideals in the Process of Globalization: Promoting Cultural Diversity 文化多元性 in the Chinese Way**

This section explores how digital technologies and social media impact the ways that some Chinese women imagine foreign fashion trends, which have influenced their make-up and fashion choices in the age of globalization. Women's imaginations about foreign fashion styles are impacted more by geographical and cultural factors than by race. The so-called Japan-Korean style, for example, groups Japanese and Korean ideals together into one category because of their close geographical connection and historical interactions. Some Chinese women have hybridized foreign fashion styles and practices in the hope of promoting the diversity of Chinese beauty culture. Meanwhile, some keep their preference for whiteness or *Bai You Shou* by understanding and practicing beauty in a more flexible way. This section also shows how women's preference for foreign styles is associated with their social positions, age, and generation and how they enhance their beauty and/or health to represent their desired personalities and tastes.

Additionally, this section will explore how various cultural, medical, and spiritual systems have impacted some Chinese women's beauty and health enhancement and will provide specific examples to show how traditional face reading techniques and different kinds of divination help them understand and manage their bodies in a holistic way.

### *Imagining Competing Foreign Ideals: Constructing Different Fashion Styles*

In April 2022, I interviewed Eva, a woman in her 20s, who shared her opinions and experiences related to fashion styles and beauty ideals. Eva learned about my study when we met in the beauty treatment room of Dermatology at Zhongshan Hospital. She contacted me about a month later, and we had an online interview on WeChat. When it came to her thoughts on the dominant beauty ideal, Eva strongly argued that although *Bai You Shou* had been very popular in Chinese society, women's understandings of beauty had become more diverse since the COVID period when foreign fashion styles were widespread on social media during.

I mean, it is more diverse now, thanks to globalization and our own [Chinese] developments of different fashion styles, such as Japan-Korean style, Euro-American style, and Hong Kong-Taiwanese style, with connections to various beauty ideals. Maybe it is also partially because I exercise a lot. Many people want to tan their skin when starting to exercise. But now some have become more casual about these beauty ideals [for example, tanning]. We are not blindly imitating foreign people and their aesthetic or health preferences; we are more open and can accept many different beauty ideals . . . For example, I had darker skin in middle school and was called a little black sister by some classmates. But they did not mean that I wasn't beautiful. I admit that during that period, I was a little bit annoyed by them. Then, as I grew up, I found that fewer people were focusing on my skin tone. Meanwhile, I felt that some people started tanning their skin following the rise of fitness culture. Also, with the rise of "girls helping girls" on Chinese social platforms in the past decade, we are more tolerant towards our bodies, our skin colour, and body shape . . . from slimness to fatness.

I was curious about the classification of these foreign fashion styles. For example, I did not understand the direct connection between Japanese and Korean styles. I also did not see how these styles were connected to certain beauty ideals. I asked: "Could you explain these styles more? How do they relate to diverse beauty ideals? Which style is related to which ideal?" She replied:

Hong Kong-Taiwanese style relates more to Hong Kong's beauty ideal. Or, some call it Hong Kong-style beauty. People prefer the appearances, clothing . . . of Hong Kong stars and Miss Hong Kong. They prefer the ideal beauty of the Miss Hong Kong Contest. For Euro-American style, you will see the fitness ideal with connections to a curvy body, tanned skin, and wearing a fitted dress with confidence. There are more examples on RED, Instagram, and Twitter. We also have French style, with close relations to the clothing styles of French fashion influencers. Some influencers with Japanese and Korean styles also share tips for dressing. They are also associated with pop culture in Japan and Korea. We also have Neo-Chinese style. People modify traditional clothes to show their body shape, and there is also some respect for Chinese traditional beauty ideals. It is also related to age and generation gaps. While French style is suitable for women above the age of 25, or mature and elegant women . . . or official women like me; Japan-Korean style is preferred by younger girls and students. We 90s generation might be impacted by 90s movies and music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and we prefer Hong Kong-Taiwanese style – it's a kind of nostalgia. For the 95s, they are closer to the 2000s generation. While the 90s prefer Jay Chou, the 95s prefer Japanese or Korean idols, bands such as Big Bang. And the 2000s, they prefer Chinese pop idols.

Eva was not alone in mentioning specific foreign styles, such as Euro-American style, when discussing fashion trends in China. With the help of developing digital technologies and social media, some Chinese women have constructed different fashion styles and connected them to different beauty ideals through imagination and hybridization. The production of beauty ideals is not a new topic in anthropology, and the concept of race has become very important in these studies (Krozer and Gómez 2023; Ali 2021; Tate 2021). For example, Tate (2021) talks about how famous white women, such as Emma Hallberg and Aga Brzostowska, mimic black women by engaging in practices such as painting their skin black and surgically altering their hips. Their racial cosplays and beauty enhancements continue white exploitation of black bodies and culture even as their recognition of black culture generates profit.

Rather than relating a specific style to the beauty ideal of a certain racial group, such as whites, my conversations with women reveal that geographical and cultural factors are more

important when connecting fashion styles such as Japan-Korean style. Women often linked Japan-Korean style to Japanese and Korean pop culture. But making a distinction between pop culture in these two countries was difficult due to their close relationship, as many Korean and Japanese pop stars developed their careers in both Japan and Korea. When describing different fashion styles, including Euro-American style, the women I talked to never mentioned concepts such as white, brown, black, or racial mimicry. Furthermore, when changing dresses and make-up according to their hybridization of these foreign styles, these Chinese women did not want to transform themselves into Japanese and Korean women or to cosplay particular pop stars to obtain recognition from Koreans and Japanese. Some women told me that they enjoyed blending these fashion styles and practices in ways that tempered the domination of *Bai You Shou*. As one of them said, “People call it Japan-Korean style, but make-up should be different in the real life of Japanese. But it is good that not all influencers are circulating *Bai You Shou*.” Some even told me that they adopted different foreign fashion styles for different social occasions, such as whether they were at and off work. This demonstrates that women’s pursuit of beauty is also impacted by their living and working environments in Xiamen.

Furthermore, there is no clear definition of these competing foreign fashion styles, and no one I met could describe them definitively. Some of the women I spoke with identified Fan Bingbing, a famous Chinese actress of the Han majority, as representative of Euro-American style because of her sexy, confident dressing style, make-up, and prominent facial features, such as wide sunken eyelids. The appearance of different races in Europe and America was all connected to so-called prominent facial features, while Bingbing was always recognized as a Han person. This is another example that illustrates that some Chinese women do not employ racial cosplay, but they do borrow foreign cultural elements based on their understanding when

describing beauty. Although Bingbing was often viewed by those I spoke with as an example of anti-slimness, they fully realized that her beauty could not be separated from her whiteness. This also supports the idea that some Chinese women hold their personal preferences and flexibly accept hybridized beauty ideals.

For Chinese women I met, their imagination and hybridization of foreign fashion styles reflect their understanding of cultural diversity based on their national ethnic minority policy. The Chinese world for cultural diversity is “*Wen Hua Duo Yuan/Yang Xing* 文化多元性 or 文化多样性”, as defined by Fei (1999). Cultural diversity cannot be separated from identifying and preserving ethnic cultural categories. This concept describes the Chinese national cultural system as “*Duo Yuan Yi Ti* 多元一体 (Diversities in Unity)”. This reminds me of a small book about Chinese ethnic minorities that I read in my childhood. In the book, every ethnic group was introduced by their costume, language, and culture (for example, their festivals, habits, beliefs, and so on) with images. In contrast to the ethnic typologies in my childhood reading, the new hybridized categories that Chinese women like Eva have worked to achieve reflect greater flexibility and diversity which they apply to their beauty practices.

Furthermore, the imaginings and preferences for foreign fashion styles and diverse beauty ideals reflect how the women in my study viewed themselves as being in the world. Choosing new make-up and clothing styles can reflect women’s expectations about changing social position, age, and generation. Their beauty practices have become technologies of self-improvement (Foucault 1997). For example, Euro-American style has been developed into various sub-styles such as American county style and American college style on RED. The latter style is related to sexy, sweet schoolgirls. It encourages women and girls to wear tight shirts,

crop tops, skirts, and even school uniforms. Some Chinese women are consuming the symbolic value (Bourdieu 1984; Baudrillard 1981) of these fashion styles to represent specific personalities (confident, cool, sweet, etc.) and pursue new ideals of beauty (for example, hot and sweet young schoolgirls who love whiteness and fitness). Apart from the impacts of these foreign fashion trends, the next story will explain how some Chinese women's health and beauty enhancements have interacted with diverse medical, cultural, and spiritual systems in Chinese society.

### ***Good Physiognomy 福相 and Horoscope: Learning Beauty Ideals in a Holistic Way on Social Media***

I did not recognize the importance of Chinese face reading techniques to women's pursuit of beauty before starting my ethnographic fieldwork. Before entering primary school, I was taken care of by my grandma. During summer and winter vacations, I accompanied her to temples several times a week. There, monks taught us that our benevolence would bring good fortune and “Yuan 缘 (destiny)” to ourselves and to those we loved. Also, our kind behaviour could improve our physiognomy.<sup>39</sup> My worldview was overturned after I left my grandma at the age of seven to attend primary school. In Chinese elementary education,<sup>40</sup> traditional knowledge about face reading, which could not be supported by science, was considered superstitious. During that period, my grandma lost all her assets because of fraud, and then my grandpa got cancer and died

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<sup>39</sup> The theory of physiognomy not only belongs to Chinese Buddhism but is also widely used by ordinary individuals. The theory of physiognomy and face reading contends that individuals' appearance and bodily/facial features show their fate, personality, and character. The enhancement of one's appearance can change one's fate. This theory is sometimes used in marriage decisions and the job market too.

<sup>40</sup> Chinese elementary education requires all Chinese to receive compulsory education for at least nine years. The content of this compulsory education is regulated by national standards of the Chinese government.

at a young age. I realized that good physiognomy and conduct did not influence one's future life, and I converted to atheism.

However, when conducting fieldwork in Zhongshan and Xinkaiyuan Hospitals, I found that improving one's physiognomy was still one of the common reasons women gave for why they consulted a doctor. In January 2022, I met Jing at Xinkaiyuan Hospital. Jing was consulting a doctor about repairing her eyelids. All the doctors she had consulted agreed that Jing's double eyelid surgery had failed, and that she was in a very bad situation as the size, shape, and width of her two eyelids were different. But Jing told me that she herself did not feel very nervous about her eyelids. "I am relaxed. It's not that bad. I had 'wolf eyes' when I was a kid. My family members all agreed that I should change my eyes someday."

"Do you mean '*San Bai Yan* 三白眼<sup>41</sup> (eyes with a large area of white)'?"

"Yes! Many people told me that at first sight, I seemed to be very rude and ferocious. They needed to spend more time with me to know that I was a good person. Even this plastic surgery failed.<sup>42</sup> Now, people say I look so cute, and I have no difficulty in making new friends." The failure of eyelid surgery can be related to several things, such as an imbalance between different facial parts such as the eyes and mouth, the failure to eliminate scars and traces, and the undesirable shape or size of the two eyes. Patients and surgeons can also view the surgery differently sometimes. In Jing's case, the shape of her eyes was asymmetric, and one of the double eyelids was not shaped well. However, her *San Bai Yan* was improved with the help of

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<sup>41</sup> *San Bai Yan* 三白眼 is a common word in Chinese physiognomy. It refers to eyes with a small iris and large area of white. It is often associated with unfavourable or debatable personalities such as aggressiveness.

<sup>42</sup> Although this plastic surgery was diagnosed as a failure by doctors, and Jing herself was not satisfied with the outcome, after this surgery, Jing's eyelids and shape were changed, which improved her physiognomy in a good way. This could happen at the same time. She told me that she looked like a fiery and unfriendly person with her previous eyes.

surgery, so that more area of her pupils was exposed. She then had bigger, rounder eyes, which enhanced her cuteness.

In Chinese society, women's facial features are not only associated with their age, race, ethnicity, and social position but also with their fate and fortune. Facial features such as moles are classified to present good or bad physiognomy. While a mole under the out canthus (external eye corner) might bring misfortune and tears to a woman's life, a mole on the nose can help predict sickness or the failure of one's career. Meanwhile, having a good physiognomy can help promote women's confidence and satisfaction in their appearance. While some women made a lot of effort to improve their physiognomy, Ting provided another opinion on this culture. She told me that she could not make big changes to her facial features such as her nose and the shape of her face.

Some women love having long eyelashes, large eyes, high noses, and sharp chins. As a fan of traditional culture, these kinds of facial features reflect a lack of “*Fu Xiang* 福相 (good physiognomy)”. If you would like to undergo any plastic surgery procedure, you should do some work on physiognomy literature to manage your appearance in a holistic way . . . This is a classic beauty. Good physiognomy does not mean a big, round face. Do you remember the face of the empress dowager in our childhood movie *My Fair Princess*? She has 福相. It delivers a holistic feeling of good fortune and cannot be described by certain facial features such as the concrete shape of the nose and eye. It is also a kind of prediction . . . Prediction can be used to name kids and predict the rise and decline of a nation, or business. It is like, some people also read daily horoscopes to make decisions. Sharpening the chin is the most horrible thing. It must harm my good fate . . . Also, they [medical professionals] produce big eyes in a singular way. But according to our traditional aesthetics, we have different types of eyes, not only big or small; we have eye styles such as “丹凤眼 (Chinese slanting eyes)”.

Owing to long-term global interactions with different cultural and medical systems, some Chinese women do not see facial features such as large eyes and high noses in a singular way. A

high nose is not only associated with imaginations about racial or ethnic groups but is also connected to one's personality and destiny in a holistic way in Chinese physiognomy. With the development and entanglements of different cultural and spiritual systems in Chinese society, it is also not unusual to see women read and balance the results of Chinese physiognomy, trigram divination, horoscope, and taro divination when making decisions about their pursuit of beauty and health. For example, in the winter of 2021, my participant Teng used horoscope and tarot card divination before undergoing plastic surgery, and she finally postponed it to spring of 2022. As Teng said, "The results of these two showcased that I needed to postpone it. I usually consult several doctors to compare their skills and advice to make sure that they are reliable. I feel that trying different divinations is good, too." Also, knowledge and techniques of these various cultural and spiritual systems have been circulated through social media. Many female patients and participants like Ting told me that they acquired knowledge about face-reading and divination on social platforms such as RED. Face reading and various divinations have become important parts of some women's pursuit of beauty. Chinese physiognomy culture and supernatural knowledge around the world help women rationalize their beauty practices without a connection to race.

### **Conclusion:**

In this chapter, I have focused on competing beauty ideals in China. I have argued that some Chinese women's pursuit of particular beauty ideals is not a direct product of cultural imperialism and colonialism but is also deeply associated with Chinese traditional aesthetics, as well as their understandings of age, health, balance, social position, and social boundaries. Although some previous anthropologists have brought the theory of globalization into their

research on Chinese women's pursuit of beauty and health (Yang 2011; Hua 2013), they tend to use the term Westernization to explain how the so-called Euro-American standards of beauty and health have shaped Chinese women's pursuit of so-called modernity and freedom. I contend that the contrast between the so-called West and East, colonized and colonizer, has been overstated. This chapter has presented China as a non-binary example to demonstrate that globalization need not to be a linear process. Women's preferences can vary across geographical locations during the process of globalization. Some Chinese women's love of beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou* and fitness has not evolved steadily across historical periods as a result of cultural invasion. While *Bai You Shou* was sometimes considered a revival of traditional aesthetics, fitness, which attracted Chinese people's attention during the SARS period, reappeared during the COVID period and was hybridized with *Bai You Shou* by some Chinese women.

I have explained that some Chinese women do not respond to popular beauty ideals negatively but have imagined and blended various beauty ideals. Foreign fashion trends have been constructed and circulated online in relation to specific make-up and clothing styles. Women's imagination of these styles and their relation to beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou* and fitness are based on the Chinese understanding of cultural diversity. Compared to race, concepts such as ethnic minority and foreigner were more important when Chinese women I met discussed aesthetic preferences. Some women tended to relate these concepts, not to specific racial groups, such as whites, but to cultural and geographical differences. These ideals have also been associated with women's jobs and social positions. Meanwhile, some Chinese women were fully aware of the domination or popularity of the beauty ideal *Bai You Shou*. The preference for whiteness was promoted, doubted, and criticized by different Chinese. Women's pursuit of beauty ideals such as whiteness was also related more to feminist discourses such as freedom,

choice, equality, and gender exploitation than to strict colourism or racism. This aspect will be discussed more in my last main chapter.

The notion of “complicated whiteness” has been one of my most significant contributions in this chapter. On the one hand, whiteness refers to not only skin tone but also to the delicacy, smoothness and flawlessness of the skin. In this way, whiteness is associated with both women’s beauty and health; it might be hereditary, but it also can be impacted by women’s daily practices, diets, and schedules. Knowledge and practices of various medical and cultural systems such as biomedicine, Chinese medicine, and folk medicine are incorporated into women’s bodily regimes. Skin has become a site to discuss living and working environments, emotions, character, and so on. On the other hand, some Chinese women were more likely to identify a person from a certain racial group by prominent bodily or facial features such as hair colour and high noses rather than white skin tone. But these imaginations also were mingled with those of ethnicity. For example, many women I met used these features to describe the appearances of ethnic groups such as Uyгур, and they found it difficult to distinguish the appearances of White, Caucasian, and Uyгур.

Furthermore, compared with previous literature, this chapter has provided Xiamen, China as a very special case to study the power of globalization. With national restrictions related to the spread of the COVID-19 virus and internet usage, globalization has exerted a large impact on Chinese women’s pursuit of beauty and health in a particular way. With a lack of access to foreign social media, women’s imaginations and understanding of different fashion styles also have reflected entanglements between the powerful state and the developing capitalist market. But it is still not clear how the pursuit of beauty and health has been regulated and supervised in Xiamen, and how women’s understandings and practices of beauty/health enhancements have

been impacted by the state machine, market, and medicine, and how their interactions vary across different social spaces such as hospitals and medical workshops. While this chapter has focused more on women's understandings of beauty and health under the impacts of globalization, my next chapter will explore how these understandings connect state structures and how some women's pursuit of beauty and health is impacted by biopower, as well as by their interactions with the state, capitalist market, and medicine.

## **Chapter Two: Navigating Health and Beauty as Aesthetic Citizens and Private Consumers: Understanding the Powers of the State, Market, and Biomedicine**

### **Introduction**

It was a quiet morning in early November 2021. I was following Dr. Chen and Dr. Shen in the beauty treatment room of the Dermatology Department at Zhongshan Hospital, a public hospital. The beauty treatment room was established for Cosmetic Dermatology. It was a double room designed for both consultation and treatment. The room was decorated with pink and white colours, with a faint smell of disinfectant. Dr. Shen was applying treatment gel on a male patient's face while Dr. Chen prescribed medicine for a female patient who had just undergone a laser treatment. Although I was unable to see the content of the prescription without this patient's permission, medications such as isotretinoin pills could be prescribed to patients to prevent the recurrence of acne and pimples. Two other female patients were sitting on the long sofa, waiting for their upcoming treatments.

When Dr. Chen gave the patient her bill, she was confused about her payment.

“Dr. Chen, why should I pay for the skin consultation and treatment here in Dermatology? Our national health insurance should cover them, right?”

Dr. Chen explained, “Sorry, treatments and surgeries related to the enhancement of beauty rather than health are not covered by our insurance system. The national government supports our health management, but beauty is still new, and the pursuit of beauty is only applicable to certain individuals.”

“Yeah, it sounds more like ‘Xiao Zhong 小众’ (applicable for certain individuals or minorities, etc.). But now, more and more people accept enhancing beauty through surgery and treatment (procedures). It [the medical system] should ‘与时俱进 (keep up with the times)’.”

Dr. Chen replied with a friendly smile:

We usually provide a face pack after treatment procedures. We got them from pharmaceutical companies, but we are not sure if we’ll get new ones. Now the Fujian provincial public health system is being updated and will be incorporated into the national one. Due to this update of the health system, we might merely be able to prescribe domestic face packs and [we must] make a clearer distinction between treatments related to beauty and health. For example, consultation fees for enhancing beauty are no longer covered.

Dr. Shen was employing peeling therapy on a patient’s face. She heard Dr. Chen’s words and continued, “Yes, I have also heard that some patients would like to use their [national] health insurance to cover the cost of beauty treatments. But that’s illegal now. Also, don’t worry about the cost. The cost of all treatments in our department is transparent to the public.”

Soon, the female patient left to pay her fees, and another patient opened the door and rushed into the room. “Hi, doctors, do you have openings for a walk-in appointment today?”

Dr. Chen put some documents on the consultation table and turned to talk to the patient, “Yes, we do not have too many patients today. You can check the WeChat reservation platform to see available appointments. Then, you need to pay for your upcoming appointment at the Registration Office before coming back.” She paused, then asked, “But are you local? If you are not, and you are here for the first time, you might need to go to the office directly (to check for available appointments). Don’t forget to bring your health insurance ID.”

The patient looked at the screen of the laptop on the table and asked, “Can I just scan the code and pay here to make a quick reservation? The last time I visited another doctor here he/she<sup>43</sup> asked me to scan the code. Also, the consultation is free, isn’t it?”

“It is not free. We follow the regulations of the national medical system, and—” The patient suddenly got annoyed and interrupted Dr. Chen, “Are you joking? I haven’t seen any related information. Why do I need to go to the Registration Office to wait for a long time to pay?”

The patient was too angry to listen to Dr. Chen’s explanations. Dr. Shen stood up and tried to comfort the patient, but the patient left and closed the door violently.

Dr. Chen was frustrated, “I wouldn’t dare to provide services.”

Dr. Shen comforted and encouraged Dr. Chen, “Don’t be sad. Patients might have their own difficulties. Maybe they don’t have enough money and time. They are just afraid of being deceived. It’s not your fault.”

Dr. Chen looked to Dr. Shen and calmed down.

I walked over to them and said, “Why did the patient get so angry? I have spent a lot of time in the Plastic Surgery Department, and most treatments/surgeries are not covered by the public [national] health insurance. Is the situation different in Cosmetic Dermatology?”

Dr. Shen replied:

Most treatments and surgery procedures are not free, but some may still be covered by medical insurance in unregulated places. It is likely to be a grey area<sup>44</sup> that some skin

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<sup>43</sup> In Chinese, the words he and she share the same pronunciation, “Ta”. I was not able to determine the gender of that doctor.

<sup>44</sup> In China, a grey area is usually used to describe the unregulated or black market.

problems such as acne can be diagnosed as illnesses. But now they all should be paid by the patients themselves [in regulated hospitals]. I have heard from patients that some staff in unregulated medical sites dare to help their patients using public health insurance to cover the cost of beauty treatments. I don't know how they . . . It is illegal.

A few female patients I met with had also mentioned this. I responded to Dr. Shen, “But why do they choose to do that? Only for their business? They are taking too many risks.”

“I don't know. It's complicated. Maybe they are doing that to give patients *Renqing* 人情 [in this context, the traditional term *Renqing* appears to describe a favour and gift] in the hope of constructing a good relationship and keeping them as a patient. Medical professionals in public hospitals usually follow restrictions as we already have many patients.”

“Is this related to COVID?”

“Ahh . . . All COVID tests and vaccines are free. Now they are paying a lot for your health. For example, if you must undergo surgery procedures because of a severe pathological issue or a disease, for example, the removal of a tumour, most fees should be covered by the public health insurance.”

With the dominance of biomedicine in China since the colonial period (1911–1949), enhancing the health of the population has been incorporated into the Chinese national project. In the hope of building a strong and powerful nation, having a healthy body has become a way for individuals to constitute a legitimate claim of citizenship (Andrew 2014; Scheid 2002). Based on my research data, China's national health insurance system has provided most citizens with decent health services and protections. In Xiamen, the individual payment of their health insurance is 450 Yuan (less than 90 Canadian dollars) per year, with 800 Yuan (about 150

Canadian dollars) national funding covered by the Chinese government in 2025, while it was 430 Yuan with 770 national funding in 2021 and 2022 (Xiamen Medical Security Bureau et al. 2024). An individual Chinese citizen's yearly disposable income was 36,883 Yuan in 2022 (China Statistics 2023). Financially disadvantaged, disabled, and elder citizens (usually over the age of 60 in China) are covered by the national health insurance for free<sup>45</sup> or with big discounts. All immigrants, workers, students, and residents who are living in Xiamen can pay and be covered by Xiamen residential health insurance (Xiamen Municipal Taxation Bureau et al. 2024). But residential health insurance is not the only choice for Chinese people to cover their medical expenses. People who have a regulated job<sup>46</sup> usually enjoy employment health insurance, which is paid for by their employers.<sup>47</sup>

But payments related to beauty enhancement are not covered. The removal of appearance imperfections and other beauty issues has not been considered medically necessary by the Chinese government. This division between beauty and health has been in place since the COVID period (2019–2022) when population health was the top spending priority nationwide.

Free consultations in public hospitals for beauty enhancement were eliminated, while COVID-19

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<sup>45</sup> The policy of free health insurance varies slightly across China. For example, in Xiamen, orphans, individuals receiving hardship support, parentless children, preferential care recipients with priority, revolutionary veterans of the “Five Elders” (senior veterans, retired soldiers, experts, teachers, and model workers), special childbirth policy family members, and severely disabled persons have free health insurance. Some individuals with financial disadvantages shall pay 10% of their annual fee, 45 Yuan for 2025 and 43 Yuan for 2021–2022 (Xiamen Municipal Taxation Bureau et al. 2024). These people are called “医疗救助对象 (medical assistance beneficiaries)” in Chinese.

<sup>46</sup> A regulated job position should provide employees with pension insurance, health insurance, unemployment insurance, work-related injury insurance, maternity insurance, and housing provident fund.

<sup>47</sup> Employment health insurance pays more than residential health insurance. Like residential health insurance, it is also connected to the national health insurance system as a part of the national medical system. Individuals can receive their monthly health benefits in their medical account. The amount of health benefits depends on their job position. When the total medical fee is above 10,000 Yuan (about 2,500 Canadian dollars), employment insurance can pay at least 90% of the fees, while residential insurance one can pay at least 65% of the fees (Xiamen Medical Security Bureau 2024). Then, the remaining fees can be paid by the balance accumulated in an individual's health insurance account instead of cash. The 医疗救助对象 (medical assistance beneficiaries) mentioned above usually pay 0–5% fees, with additional funding from the local government (Xiamen Medical Security Bureau 2024).

vaccines and tests became free and even compulsory for many citizens. With these changes, the pursuit of beauty was seen as optional and a form of consumption for relatively small groups of citizens, leading to the changing identification of some Chinese women from citizens or patients to beauty customers. Most patients and medical professionals I met maintained their enrollment in the public health insurance system, even though their primary concern was not their health maintenance but rather beauty enhancements.

While public hospitals provide common plastic surgery and treatment procedures with fixed prices,<sup>48</sup> prices in private medical places, such as medical workshops<sup>49</sup> and private hospitals, can fluctuate according to a doctor's skills, market competition, and their targeted customers (for example, aiming to attract more low-income customers or providing expensive treatments for wealthy customers), as well for services such as one-to-one post-surgery care. Although most hospitals and clinics are regulated by the Chinese government, what I am calling unregulated medical workshops still exist. Meanwhile, digital technologies such as health barcodes have been developed to manage and control individuals' movement. Chinese citizens

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<sup>48</sup> For example, in Zhongshan Hospital, the price of common plastic surgeries, such as double-eyelid surgery, was usually 6,000–8,000 Yuan (approx. 1200 Canadian dollars), while plastic surgeries related to changing the nose would be more difficult and expensive (usually starting from 8000 Yuan). In Dermatology, most laser treatments were 1000–3000 Yuan. According to data provided by China Statistics (2023), Chinese per capita disposable income is 36,883 Yuan (49,283 Yuan in urban areas and 20,133 in rural areas). In private medical institutions and illegal medical workshops, the price of double-eyelid surgery can range from 3,000 to 30,000 Yuan. One of my participants told me that the price might exceed 100,000 Yuan when the doctor/institution wanted to earn a lot of money instead of being honest with their patients.

<sup>49</sup> Medical workshops might hire unregulated medical professionals and provide medicine or treatment that is not tested enough by professional labs. While some use low prices to attract more patients who are not able to afford beauty medical resources in regulated hospitals and clinics, some workshops set the price very high and improve personalized services to attract a small number of wealthy patients. An unregulated medical shop refers to a place, usually a private condo room or a store, where unregulated medical staff might provide consultation, employ treatment/surgery, and sell unregulated medications or beauty/cosmetic products such as unregulated beauty masks. The name is a direct translation of the Chinese name.

have been educated to manage their health for both personal and national interests, especially during the COVID period (2019-2022).

Shifting from the focus on globalization and beauty ideals in my first chapter, this chapter focuses on the construction of Chinese aesthetic citizenship to explore how beauty has been considered a commodity and a right by some Chinese women. Following Kukuczka and Liebelt (2024), this chapter does not treat aesthetic citizenship as merely a political status, but as something that encompasses everyday acts and practices connected with social relations, emotions, and self-perceptions. My study will use Xiamen as a specific example, as Chinese traditions such as *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系<sup>50</sup> have shaped women's understanding and choices around self-enhancement. In the opening vignette of this chapter, it is clear that access to medicine was also impacted by the patient's residential location and *Renqing* 人情. In public medical institutions such as public hospitals, it was more difficult for doctors to balance professional codes and *Renqing* 人情, especially when they were supposed to deal with the irreconcilable conflict between limited medical resources during the COVID period and patients' demands for free or cheaper beauty enhancements in an efficient but also patient way. This chapter will also provide an overall picture of the Chinese national medical system. Specifically, I will compare the kinds of services offered and the relationship between patients and medical professionals in these places. I will also compare how *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 have been treated in different ways from the public medical system to the private one.

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<sup>50</sup> While *Renqing* refers to debts, favors, gifts, and responsibilities, *Guanxi* means the social relations built on the basis of *Renqing*.

Furthermore, this chapter will explore the role of the Chinese state in the development of the beauty market and aesthetic medicine. The role of the Chinese state offers a new example of technohybridity, which combines technonational and technoglobal approaches discussed by Liu (2012, 419–410). On the one hand, the Chinese government is working to control the production of medical knowledge and products and access to beauty and health. It provides a conservative example of beauty enhancement in its public medical system and uses this to regulate its private medical system. But there is a contradiction between some citizens' increasing demands for beauty funding and a health-targeted health insurance system. On the other hand, free treaty ports, such as Xiamen, have embraced foreign investment and biotechnology since the 1980s, leading to the rapid growth of the beauty market. Beauty has become an individual choice and responsibility. Thus, this chapter makes contributions to anthropological theories of biopolitics and consumption. In this chapter, I argue that in contrast to health, beauty is a much debated part of the construction of Chinese aesthetic citizenship from below, which has been impacted by entanglements among the state, the capitalist markets, and medicine, as well as local traditions such as *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系.

### **Thinking about Aesthetic Citizenship in China**

Following Foucault's theory of biopower ([1963] 1994), anthropologists have developed the concept of aesthetic citizenship (Kukuczka and Liebelt 2024; Pussetti 2019; Jarrín 2017) to explore individuals' pursuit of beauty and health enhancements as a somatic form of belonging. The management of individual bodies has not been thought of merely as a means of individual self-improvement but rather as linked to the development of the contemporary state and its

colonial or global history. Recent anthropological studies have explored the biopower of beauty in the governance of populations worldwide (Krozer and Gómez 2023; Liebelt 2022; Pussetti 2019; Jarrín 2017; Yang 2011; Edmonds 2010).

Edmonds's (2010) study provides a detailed example of the construction of aesthetic citizens in contemporary Brazil. With the rise of social media and the beauty market, undesirable appearances can be viewed as health issues that bar participation in the body politic. Doctors, as powerful participants in the proliferation of the state's biopower, help patients with imperfections diagnose their problems and gain access to national funding. Patients who are diagnosed as sick enough are prioritized to obtain biomedical resources. In this way, undergoing state-funded plastic surgery becomes a way to guarantee the basic rights of Brazilian citizens, especially those from the middle and lower classes. Brazilians are enhancing aesthetic health to construct modern citizenship.

Like Edmonds (2010), Jarrín (2017) explains how beauty, or aesthetic health, has been incorporated into the national eugenics project in Brazil. Low-income Brazilians seek free plastic surgery as a health demand of citizens. Doctors and surgeons become gatekeepers for the state to allocate limited resources and work to generate profits for the private market. These studies have explored citizens as consumers who focus on both beauty and health. Compared to Edmonds, Jarrín (2017) focuses more on the affective aspect of aesthetic citizenship, explaining how citizens' perceptions of themselves and others help construct social relations and distinction, and then argues that these embodied perceptions demonstrate that the biopower of beauty works in a capillary way.

However, neither Edmonds' nor Jarrín's theoretical frameworks can be used to explain the complexities of constructing aesthetic citizenship in China, where health, rather than beauty,

is more likely to be associated with the rights and responsibilities of individuals and citizens. First, although beauty has constructed a new racialized hierarchy in Brazil, as argued in the previous chapter, there is no strict racialized beauty hierarchy in China. Beauty can help some women gain assets, but it is not always helpful. It is also important to explore how the Chinese socialist government plays a significant role in controlling the production of social inequalities and mobilities related to citizens' beauty enhancements.

Furthermore, some Chinese women's beauty and health enhancements might be impacted their interactions with the Chinese state, the capitalist market, and the national medical system. For example, while public hospital doctors represent the state's biopower by providing conservative, authoritative treatments to public patients, those of regulated private hospitals tend to treat female patients as customers who participate more in designing their surgery plans. My research data support the idea that some Chinese women are not merely citizens but are also consumers and patients when pursuing beauty and health across different social and medical spaces. They choose medical places and treatments according to their knowledge, age, taste, financial status, social relations with others, and so on. Also, the Chinese national medical system itself is complicated. For example, my data has found that Chinese medical tenets such as balance, holism, and traditions such as *Renqing* play important roles in Chinese biomedicine and sometimes validate the pursuit of beauty as a medical issue.

Additionally, my work moves beyond that of Jarrín and Edmonds by emphasizing that aesthetic citizenship might be constructed beyond the surveillance of the state. The significance of state-subject relations in recent anthropological studies of aesthetic citizenship is also mentioned by Kukuczka and Liebelt (2024). However, as I will show, some Chinese women construct their aesthetic citizenship beyond the state's surveillance by choosing private,

unregulated medical workshops. Also, as mentioned in the introduction, the construction of aesthetic citizenship should be associated with women's everyday acts, practices, emotions, and experiences, some of which might not be fully supervised by the state but happen in domestic areas such as private rooms and homes.

Some recent Chinese anthropological studies have also dealt with beauty and health, but theoretical studies of aesthetic citizenship can be further developed (Sun 2015; Hua 2013; Yang 2011). Sun (2015)'s research on Chinese biocitizenship offers a great example of understanding the entanglements between the state, market, and the biomedicine system. Sun demonstrates how *Yang Sheng* 养生 (life nourishing)<sup>51</sup> discourses have been promoted by popular media nationwide to produce ideal, healthy citizens in China. Some of these discourses have even been publicized via television channels and newspapers controlled by the Chinese government. Both bioscience research and reality shows have supported the growth of the *Yang Sheng* – whole health – industry. This Chinese medical concept has been developed and incorporated into today's biomedical system, guiding citizens to make constant risk assessments and management throughout their lives. According to this principle, being a good Chinese citizen also requires being a rational consumer who can select appropriate products (medicine, food, supplements, etc.) and treatments. *Yang Sheng*, and its related daily practices, plays an important role in constructing many Chinese citizens' self-medication, which to some extent makes up for the deficiency of the public health system (limited resources, expensive fees, etc.). In this way, Sun's research shows how health has been incorporated into China's nation-building project. Sun also

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<sup>51</sup> *Yang Sheng* is a concept in traditional Chinese medicine and has now also been incorporated into today's biomedical system in China. *Yang Sheng* refers to harmony as a way to maintain health and nourish/prolong life. It is often associated with healthy diets, exercises, and related daily practices such as combing one's hair.

explains how this up-down national health project<sup>52</sup> has also encountered doubts and resistance from some Chinese citizens. Their everyday criticisms and practices can be considered as part of biological activism, contributing to the construction of biocitizenship from below.

However, Sun's research focuses only on public hospitals, where the power of the state is the strongest in China's biomedical system. It is not clear enough how the state or market shapes Chinese citizens' understandings of *Yang Sheng* or how Chinese citizens respond to *Yang Sheng* and its related discourses across different social and medical settings. It is also important to explore Chinese citizens' pursuit of beauty and health in the private medical system, where the power of the capitalist market can be stronger. Also, Sun's theory of biocitizenship neglects beauty. But *Yang Yan* 养颜 (nourishing the appearance) itself has played an important role in Chinese *Yang Sheng* theory. On the other hand, although the Chinese government has worked to make a distinction between beauty and health in its public health insurance system, it is impossible to separate beauty from health in Chinese society. Health has become the standard of beauty, especially in Chinese public medicine. This will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

Unlike Sun (2015), Yang (2011) conducted fieldwork to explore Chinese feminine ideals in a beauty salon in Beijing. Yang draws more on the impacts of the Chinese capitalist market by examining women's responses to two consumer discourses: *Nennu* 嫩女 (tender, young women) and *Shunu* 熟女 (mature, older women). Chinese female citizens have been educated to buy and take advantage of their youth, slimness, health, and beauty, something that was considered

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<sup>52</sup> Up-down health projects refer to health projects initiated by the state in this dissertation. This chapter provides the *Yang Sheng* 养生 and the National Weight Management project as two examples of up-down health projects in China. The state usually encourages and educates its citizens to regulate their daily practices and diets in the hope of controlling its population's health. Although the Chinese government has encouraged consumption in the beauty/capitalist market, there is no specific national beauty project.

unethical before the opening of the capitalist market, to support the development of consumerism and the coming labour deduction. Managing one's healthy and beautiful body thus becomes a way for some Chinese women to celebrate their freedom, individuality, and rights as citizens/consumers. Although Yang provides a rough picture of the Chinese beauty industry in the early period, this study neglects the impacts of the Chinese medical system. These two Chinese studies do not clarify the relationship between beauty and health or explore women's beauty and health enhancements in diverse medical settings. Also, they have not constructed a theoretical framework to explore Chinese aesthetic citizenship.

Finally, this chapter will provide more cases to explain how the Chinese construction of aesthetic citizenship has also been largely impacted by Chinese traditions such as *Renqing* 人情 (debts, responsibilities, and favours) and *Guanxi* 关系 (social relations, connections, and networking). Based on *Renqing*, a socially appropriate relationship between doctors and patients has been built into the Chinese medical system. Mason's (2016) studies in Tianmen, China, in the post-SARS period (after 2003) show how these traditions shaped Chinese citizens' health enhancement. Following Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通, Mason (2016) introduces the concepts of *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 to explain how contemporary Chinese people have been educated to become civilized citizens for the good of the whole society/world. *Renqing* 人情 is translated into human feelings that establish sets of reciprocal obligations between partners in a relationship, while *Guanxi* 关系 provides a basis for ethical engagement, based on Confucian principles such as *Ren* 仁 and *Li* 礼, which serve as a primary source of material and emotional support (Mason 2016, 21). In Fei's studies of traditional Chinese villages and suburban areas, a community can be constructed and expanded based on these relationships.

Individuals are the centre of their social circles. This model was broken by Mao's policy of building up the national "common good" or "people's common good," which prioritized collective interests over personal ones with the establishment of a patriotic Soviet-style health care system in China. After Mao's death, Chinese people emphasized traditional *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 again. With the development of the capitalist market, these traditions were impacted by capitalist values, leading to a decline of social trust. Mason (2016) then explains how social ties based on these traditions were challenged by the outbreak of SARS. When the Chinese government decided to transform its national health care system to focus more on disease prevention and control of its population (protecting the public common good) rather than private profits, a new common value, which emphasized Chinese citizens' responsibility for being healthy and civilized for the global good, was promoted nationwide.

Mason's focus on traditional *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 inspires my studies of Chinese aesthetic citizenship, but I do not fully support Mason's theoretical framework, which places *Renqing* and the common (public) good in opposition. As I will show, there is no strict boundary between being a member of a community based on traditional *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 and being a desirable, patriotic citizen of a "common good" in Chinese society. For example, public doctors are required to follow strict regulations to avoid focusing too much on *Renqing* 人情 and to help their patients appropriately, but they are encouraged to work in several private medical institutions to improve their incomes and bolster their reputation. Chinese women can be good citizens, by following COVID restrictions or supporting the Chinese beauty economy, and good customers, who deal appropriately with *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系. Furthermore, while Mason (2016) focuses on the SARS period, this chapter

presents data on how the Chinese national medical system developed during the COVID period (2019-2022).

## **Section One: Marginalized Beauty and Conservative Aesthetic Citizenship in Public Hospitals**

### ***Suspicion of Necessity: Beauty Enhancement as a Waste of Money?***

It was a quiet Thursday afternoon in consultation room 3 of the Plastic Surgery Department at Zhongshan Hospital. I was talking with Dr. Zheng, who was in her 40s and was one of the most experienced doctors in the department. Dr. Zheng only had a few consultations that day, and one of her patients did not show up on time. When I was starting to conclude that this patient might not be able to attend that day, someone knocked on the room's door. Dr. Zheng asked the patient to come in and then briefly introduced them to me. She told them that I was a student who was studying women's beauty and health enhancements. I was not sure that this consultation would go smoothly. The male patient was aggravated and unhappy, while the woman held one of his hands and persuaded him to sit down.

The woman looked at Dr. Zheng and me, then said in a friendly way, "He is worried about his health. As you can see, he has a large tumour on his forehead. We consulted some doctors, and one of them recommended that we visit you. But we've never visited a doctor of Plastic Surgery Department to deal with health issues." The woman was explaining their situation.

Dr. Zheng smiled, "Never mind. In my opinion, he needs a surgery because—"

The man suddenly turned, annoyed, and disrupted Dr. Zheng's conversation, "You are a liar. I have consulted several doctors, and my situation turned worse. How can plastic surgery help me solve this problem? I don't trust you. You just want me to spend my money in your department."

The woman tried to stop her husband by waving her hands and apologizing to both of us. But the man kept repeating his opinion over and over. He became very agitated and got up from the chair. I could not say a word and sat in silence. It was not common to see a patient acting aggressively in Plastic Surgery and Dermatology. I was scared that any movement or obvious reaction might annoy the patient further.

Dr. Zheng kept her smile and persuaded the man gently, "I do understand your feelings and the situation. You do not need to make a final decision here immediately. You could consult more doctors. I will be here to help if you need me, but I suggest that you do not spend too much time consulting doctors, because the situation of your tumour is bad."

As Dr. Zheng explained, the man lowered his voice. But he seemed to persist in his previous opinion, "Of course you want me to spend my money here. It's ridiculous. All treatments and surgeries in the Plastic Surgery Department must be paid for by the patient. You [doctors] earn a lot [of money]. Plastic surgery is used by people who want to enhance beauty, so how can it help solve my health problems?"

Dr. Zheng explained,

All the doctors in this hospital receive stable salaries from the Chinese government. Public health insurance does not cover fees for enhancing beauty, but we do not earn money by employing plastic surgery. Public hospitals usually charge patients the lowest cost. If your tumour is tested to be pathological, your treatment becomes compulsory, and

your surgery fees could be covered by your public health insurance. Also, although we are doctors of Plastic Surgery, we are still able to treat illness and cooperate with doctors from other departments to complete some difficult surgeries. We do not merely deal with health issues but also help you solve them without altering your main facial features.

The man seemed to be persuaded. He sat down again. His wife quickly suggested that he schedule surgery with Dr. Zheng, and they reached an agreement about the surgery in about ten minutes.

“Have you completed a new COVID test and a blood test? Your COVID health code needs to be green before the surgery.” Dr. Zheng told the patient.

“Oh no, I need to do a new one.”

After they left the room, I asked Dr. Zheng, “Are you okay? The male patient was rude, but you were so kind and gentle.”

Dr. Zheng smiled,

I’m fine. He was annoyed, but he did not hurt me. He was annoyed by the difficulty of finding a nice doctor and obtaining appropriate treatment. As he said, he might have spent a lot of time visiting doctors in different institutions, but no one helped him in the right way. He was impatient about the long wait time, inappropriate treatment, and some bad doctors who wanted to earn more money, unlike me. But when he found that I was trying to help him, he could calm down and apologize. As medical professionals in public hospitals, we are serving the people rather than merely caring about who is right or wrong. We should keep good *Guanxi* 关系 and should not have unnecessary disputes and arguments with patients. The state pays for us. We are not earning money from patients, we are helping them.

Fortunately, Dr. Zheng soon helped remove the patient’s tumour, which was quickly tested by the pathology lab of the hospital. In the end, most of the surgery fee was covered by the patient’s public health insurance. When the patient and his wife visited Dr. Zheng again, the male

patient was very happy. The change in his attitude was beyond my expectations. “He was totally another person,” I said to Dr. Zheng.

Dr. Zheng smiled and nodded her head:

No, he is a good person, and I understand why he was so annoyed. He had some bad clinical experiences earlier. He was treated in a perfunctory way by some medical professionals who could not find a solution for his tumour. He did not have connections in the medical community so it might be difficult for him to trust a new doctor, like me. He also had some misunderstandings with doctors in our department. We put patients’ health first, then we talk about enhancing beauty. Also, beauty and health are not contradictory.

The Chinese government distinguishes beauty from health in its public health insurance system. Although Plastic Surgery and (Cosmetic) Dermatology play an important role in connecting beauty and health, health is viewed as the most significant in the Chinese public medical system; this was especially true during the COVID period. In this story, beauty was also an unavoidable idea in Plastic Surgery when the doctor took maintenance and enhancement of the patient’s appearance into consideration, but the doctor depicted beauty as optional. The overuse of medical resources in beauty enhancement was viewed as irrational and inappropriate. Under these circumstances, doctors worked as representatives of the state’s biopower to help patients understand the relationship between beauty, health, and responsibility, as well as freedom, necessity, and options.

This story is congruent with the analysis of Sun (2015) and Mason (2016) that the concept of public health and its connection with “the common good” have been emphasized in the public medical system by the Chinese government. The story shows that even in Plastic Surgery and (Cosmetic) Dermatology, where beauty was important, illness and health issues

were prioritized and dealt with efficiently. Meanwhile, Chinese citizens' pursuit of beauty and health was put under the state's surveillance by following strict COVID-19 restrictions during the pandemic. Their access to public spaces, such as public hospitals, and to medical resources, such as plastic surgery, was impacted by their health, public health insurance (residential health insurance, employment health insurance, no insurance), residential location (local or not local, foreign, etc.), job (which determined the type of health insurance), as well as the result of their COVID tests. Patients who tested positive for COVID-19 and those who interacted with them could be sent to a quarantine institution for further testing and observation. In this way, Chinese citizens were educated to value their collective interest even more highly during this period. Health was thus associated with the responsibilities and abilities of citizens. Health issues such as COVID positivity to some extent also led to temporary social exclusion.

Furthermore, Chinese citizens' attitudes towards optional beauty vary among generations. The story shows that the blurry boundary between beauty and health, or the value of beauty, was denied by some elderly Chinese people, especially those who were born before the 1970s and had benefited from the job allocation system<sup>53</sup> before the opening of China's capitalist market. Compared to patients in other departments such as Dermatology, those who visited the Plastic Surgery Department were almost always under the age of 50. In the tumour story I related above, the elderly patients did not treat beauty enhancement as a way of constructing their citizenship.

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<sup>53</sup> Before the transition to the capitalist market, China had a job allocation system, which guaranteed job opportunities for graduates, especially those from the colleges. Chinese citizens who held a degree from a college or secondary specialized school were usually assigned to a job position (owned by the government). (This allocation system still operates today but entries are only sometimes opened to certain groups of people, such as soldiers. This made college degrees or secondary specialized school degrees popular among the 60s and 70s population. But now having a master's degree is the minimum degree requirement for being a doctor in public hospitals.) The 60s and 70s age groups tended to get jobs more easily, based on skills and knowledge they learned at school. Owing to the development of the capitalist market, the job allocation system has almost been replaced by fierce job competition in Chinese society. Like health, beauty is also considered a form of biocapital that enhances individual competition in the job market for some younger generations.

Like them, many believed that beauty consumption was unnecessary or a waste of money, and this was more impacted by their stable job entries in the old job allocation system. But for younger generations, enhancing beauty is more often viewed as a significant way for them to compete with their peers in the current job market. As some of my younger participants admitted, they associated pursuing beauty, to some extent, with their careers and freedom.

The development of the internet and social media also have shaped different attitudes towards beauty. While some seniors who are not used to obtaining information and medical knowledge online have fewer opportunities or motives to know about plastic surgery, younger generations take advantage of the internet to book consultations and surgeries. Some young people I met followed public doctors on social platforms such as RED and Weibo so that they could obtain more reliable information and sometimes additional care in virtual spaces. Some even told me that this helped them keep in contact with doctors and maintain good *Guanxi* 关系. However, some older patients told me that they did not have a mobile phone or did not know how to use it efficiently to obtain medical knowledge. This is also related to the inclination to protect minors in Chinese society. Although the Xiamen government has not put restrictions on minors to prevent them from visiting doctors alone, public hospitals usually ask their guardians or parents (usually in their 40s) to sign and get double-informed consent for beauty enhancements to avoid being reported or sued.

Recent anthropological studies of the biopolitics of beauty and aesthetic citizenship have shown how beauty works to relate individuals to norms of national/social exclusion and inclusion, as well as to their identities, such as being good citizens and modern subjects (Krozer and Gómez 2023; Ali 2021; Jarrín 2017; Yang 2011). For example, Jarrín (2017) explains how obtaining nationally funded beauty resources is related to Brazilians' access to full citizenship

and their aspirations for modernity, and how the government and elites control social mobility by promoting eugenic beauty norms. The story in the introduction vignette shows how beauty governance is different in China where the Chinese government does not link access to beauty to Chinese citizenship directly. Also, as discussed in the previous chapter, beauty does not construct a strict social hierarchy or social exclusion in China due to China's global history and ethnic diversity.

Access to beauty is something that is debated among Chinese citizens, while access to health is unquestionably incorporated into China's national project. Beauty is not free, but beauty consumption is kept at relatively stable prices in public hospitals. Although previous Chinese anthropologists tend to link Chinese women's beauty enhancement to the pursuit of so-called modernity (Hua 2013; Yang 2011), beauty is shaped not only by neoliberal discourses, such as self-investment, but also socialist ones, such as the common good. The powerful socialist government put beauty into its national surveillance in the hope of regulating its capitalist market. The following discussion about access to beauty in China and the role of public doctors in the Chinese national medical system will provide more insights into this aspect.

### ***Medical Disputes, Distrust, and Doctor as a Judge***

After a month of following Dr. Zheng in Zhongshan's Plastic Surgery Department, I witnessed her having a consultation with a female patient who had previously undergone thread lift<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Thread lifting is a cosmetic surgery that buries threads to sculpt the face or breast.

procedures at an unregulated medical workshop to enhance her facial beauty. The patient told Dr. Zheng that she was suffering from unbearable pain due to the threads inside her facial skin.

“Dr. Zheng, I have consulted four different doctors, including you. Some refused to help me and asked me to visit my original surgeon. I also consulted a doctor in neurology. This doctor suggested I remove all the hairs and have a CT test.” The patient put some related documents on the consultation table.

Dr. Zheng replied with a friendly smile, “Who is your surgeon? I mean, who put these threads into your skin? We usually suggest patients find their previous doctor/surgeon who might understand the situation better, since I don’t know where and how the surgeon used these threads.”

The patient nodded her head and looked flustered, “I don’t know. I’m not sure whether he is a regulated doctor or not. I don’t know much about him.”

Dr. Zheng was surprised, “You don’t know?”

“No, it was a private medical workshop . . . not a hospital or clinic. An old acquaintance told me to go there. I didn’t know that this thread lifting could fail and be very painful. The surgeon said that he put about twenty threads into my facial skin.”

“No, it is impossible; I am not able to comment on this as it was not done by a regulated doctor. It’s impossible for me to know what this doctor’s process of thread lifting was. You might also need to undergo a type-B ultrasonic diagnosis.”

“Can you help me to remove all the threads inside my skin? I’m confused because different doctors recommend taking different tests.”

“You need to consider this carefully. You have talked to different doctors. It depends on you. You should decide who is professional and who can help you figure this out.”

“Why? I just want to take these threads out.”

During this consultation, the corridor outside the room was noisy. It sounded like someone was having a fierce argument. Suddenly, two men (from the private medical workshop where the patient had the threading done) ran into the consultation room and disrupted the conversation. They touched the female patient’s shoulder. “What are you talking about? We have told you that this problem can be solved easily. You should go back to the office with us.”

The patient did not move. The men turned to Dr. Zheng, “Are you saying that something was wrong and bad about that plastic surgery? We are here to listen to your ruling, please continue.” Dr. Zheng and the patient asked them to leave, but they refused. I was scared.

Dr. Zheng kept calm and continued to explain:

I cannot repeat the reasons again and again as there are still many patients and scheduled meetings today. First, I am not able to comment on other doctors’ plastic surgeries, especially when it was not done by a professional doctor. We have been educated and trained in different ways. Second, it is common to see that the contraction of threads causes pain. It is not always linked to the failure of the plastic surgery. Finally, I am not able to make a judgement about your situation, because I am not able to see the anatomical structure and whether or not there are any abnormalities.

After finishing her explanation, Dr. Zheng realized that the two men might be recording her words. “Are you using your phones to record our consultation? That is not permitted in the public hospital. Also, you did not get my consent. Please stop recording and leave the room. Doctors in public hospitals are not able to help with medical disputes between patients and other unregulated workshops.”

Then another woman (the patient's friend) entered the room after the two men and tried to stop them. "Don't bother her. You should not record the consultation between her and the doctor. This is a public hospital. Please follow the regulations."

All of them soon left the room, and the two men continued arguing with two women in the corridor until the female patient's friend persuaded them to talk outside the hospital.

Medical disputes are very common in Chinese society. They happen when patients themselves, or their families, friends, and acquaintances, express their discontent with the medical system through (violent) language and actions. Violent incidents that occur because of patients' dissatisfaction are called *Yi Nao* 医闹, which can lead to emotional pain, physical injury, and even the death of medical professionals (Zhang et al., 2017). In public hospitals, doctors, who are educated to serve Chinese citizens, usually do not take retaliatory actions against their patients. This story above provides one example that sheds light on medical disputes and *Yi Nao* in China. But *Yi Nao* 医闹 does not always appear when patients and doctors have disagreements.

In the Plastic Surgery Department of this public hospital, disagreements were quite common as perceptions of beauty vary among individuals. Patients tended to reach an agreement with doctors through further communication rather than by directly suing or attacking them. For example, to maintain a good *Guanxi* 关系 with patients (the public) and to protect the public doctor's reputation as a representative of the state's biopower, patients usually received financial compensation and free or cheaper treatment when a doctor was responsible for the failure of treatment. However, failure of treatment was usually acknowledged by public doctors only when it led to functional disabilities or health issues. Some of my female participants, who visited

other public hospitals in Xiamen, also complained that it was difficult for them to defend the failure of plastic surgery when there was merely a disagreement about beauty rather than any health or safety issues. Their stories support my argument that it is not common to see *Yi Nao* 医闹 in Plastic Surgery, where public doctors tend to provide conservative treatments and avoid severe mistakes. This will also be discussed more in my next chapter.

Discussions about *Yi Nao* 医闹 in other regulated medical sites, including private hospitals, also support this point. For example, some regulated private hospitals and clinics, like Xinkaiyuan Hospital, hired public doctors to attract more patients. Although these public doctors could be less conservative when working in private hospitals and clinics, they tended to minimize the risks of plastic surgery to avoid any severe failure and thus build their reputations. Patients mentioned that some regulated private doctors might offer them a discount if they sought corrective surgery due to dissatisfaction with their initial surgery rather than acknowledge the failure. Even when doctors in private medical sites recognized a failure of plastic surgery, they preferred to avoid *Yi Nao* 医闹 due to the public's negative impression of it. My participant Jing, who underwent a failed double-eyelid surgery when studying for her bachelor's degree in Inner Mongolia, told me that the doctor of the private hospital where the surgery was done recognized that it had failed and promised her a good discount for her corrective surgery. Although some of Jing's family members and friends wanted to help her negotiate or even argue with the doctor for more compensation, she did not trust the doctor's professional skill and was afraid of violent conflicts.

*Yi Nao* 医闹, leading to violent conflicts between patients and doctors, is more likely to happen in unregulated medical sites, such as private medical workshops, especially when

unregulated doctors risk employing unreliable surgery and treatment procedures. The China Youth Daily 中青报, owned by the Communist party, reported that many *Yi Nao* 医闹 and medical disputes have happened in unregulated medical sites but that they are difficult to solve due to the lack of regulated medical records, staff responsibility, and so on (Wei 2021). The behaviour of the two male staff in the previous story provides more insights into this aspect. Also, the story bolsters the claim that, in contrast to public doctors, staff in unregulated medical sites were more likely to defend or even act violently when there was a *Yi Nao* 医闹.

Although public doctors, famous for their professionalism, are generally viewed as reliable, authoritative judges, recent Chinese anthropological studies (Mason 2016; Hua 2013; Yang 2011) of beauty or health have not provided enough discussion about this, and their focus on medical disputes and violence between doctors and patients is limited. Following their studies, I have compared more incidents of these kinds of disputes in both public and private medical systems in China. Patients might visit a doctor in a public hospital to get an authoritative diagnosis and professional support in the hope of defending their rights in a medical dispute or case. Public doctors were thus viewed as representatives of national medical rationality and authority. The female patient mentioned above hoped that Dr. Zheng could help her fight the medical dispute and even inequalities between herself and the two male staff who worked at that unregulated medical workshop. The two men were very nervous about the conversation between Dr. Zheng and the female patient, and they tried to record or stop it. Chinese citizens' imaginations of doctors as authority figures also reflect that in China, the public medical system, like the biomedical system the world over, has become representative of objective, scientific medical knowledge.

However, rather than criticize or comment on other medical institutions or medical professionals directly, public doctors in plastic surgery at this hospital tended to handle this kind of situation gently. Public doctors served to help citizens rather than create more conflicts. During the limited consultation time, doctors might persuade patients to focus on the current problems (for example, facial appearance, disabilities, and so on). Doctors might say, “It makes no sense for me to criticize your previous doctor, we have only a few minutes, and we should focus more on how to deal with your problem.” Some doctors suggested patients to seek out certified organizations and institutions, such as the Chinese Consumers Association and local courts, to report medical disputes. In this way, they also avoided their counterparts’ revenge and unnecessary workload caused by getting involved in extra medical disputes (for example, additional consultations and so on) in this small city. Doctors might also decline to provide treatments to a patient in a tactful way when the patient was violent, irrational, or changed her mind again and again. Public doctors’ vulnerability should not be neglected. As Dr. Yang said:

I could not make too many comments on that failed surgery. I have seen so many patients. They change their minds again and again. Sometimes, they are deceived by an unprofessional doctor into believing that they can obtain their ideal beauty without considering their original facial characteristics. Then, even though you try your best to help them improve the situation, they still blame you.

In addition, the authority of the Chinese public system is related to its close connection with China’s national Communist government. Apart from learning biomedical knowledge, all medical professionals are trained to understand and practise communist tenets. For example, most medical professionals in the Plastic Surgery Department of Zhongshan were members of the Communist Party, and they were required to participate in regular communist meetings and activities. This included voluntary work and study in lower-level medical centres and quarantine

sites. It was common to see slogans such as “为人民服务 (serving the people)” and “公立性质, 值得信赖 (public nature, deserving trust)” in Zhongshan Hospital. Under these circumstances, patients also viewed doctors as representatives of the Communist government, who were able to help and support them with fair judgment and educate unregulated medical workshops and staff. My next story will provide further discussion about how professional public doctors at Zhongshan fulfilled their roles as acquaintances of patients, business owners, and the servants of Chinese citizens.

*Focusing on 人情 Renqing and 关系 Guanxi: Tang Ping 躺平 (Laying Down) or Nei Juan 内卷 (Joining Internal Competition)?<sup>55</sup>*

One day in late June 2022, two acquaintances of Dr. Hong visited her as she was consulting with another female patient. “Good morning, have you had lunch? I still have a few reserved appointments, and could you please wait for me in the treatment room near the stairs.” The two ladies left the consultation room, and Dr. Hong continued talking to her patient, “If you would like to, you can scan this WeChat code to add my official account. How can I help you today?”

It was very common for patients to add their doctor’s contact information in the Plastic Surgery Department so that they could keep in contact and let their doctors know when making a final decision. In Xiamen, patients might visit several doctors in different hospitals in the hope of getting the most suitable, professional advice before deciding to have surgery.<sup>56</sup> Also, sometimes doctors and patients wanted to spend more time discussing a surgery plan or post-surgery

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<sup>55</sup> Due to its large population and limited resources, many think that China has become a competitive society.

<sup>56</sup> In China, individuals are free to visit doctors so long as they reserve and pay for meetings. Some women I met told me that they even visited doctors in several cities.

recovery. Some doctors even opened their official accounts on social media platforms such as RED and Weibo, and some also worked for several medical institutions. The female patient scanned the code to add Dr. Hong as her contact on WeChat.<sup>57</sup> Then she undid two buttons of her clothes and showed some scars on her body. “As you can see, I want to eliminate these scars.”

“Oh, I see. We can treat burns and scars, but our machine is not really up to date. There is no guarantee that these scars will be removed. If you want to look for a better treatment, I suggest you visit doctors in the Burn Department of Hong’ai Hospital.”<sup>58</sup>

“Dr. Hong, could you please introduce me to a doctor?”

“Sorry, I do not have an acquaintance there. But I know that they use a very new machine called Dian Zhen Wang 点阵王. It’s helpful for patients who are scarred after healing from burns.”

“Ok, I also want to know . . . can I inject Botox here?”

“No, we can only use domestic [Chinese] drugs in large public hospitals. If you would like to find Botox in Xiamen, maybe you can also ask the doctors in Hong’ai. Em . . . Oh, you can go to Changgeng Hospital. It’s run by Taiwanese, and some Taiwanese doctors do not prefer Chinese domestic products.”

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<sup>57</sup> The WeChat code is a green digital barcode. By scanning someone’s WeChat barcode, people become WeChat contacts. It is common for doctors and consultants to print and show their WeChat barcodes to add their patients’ personal contact information. WeChat has become an essential tool for patients and medical professionals to keep in contact with each other. Some doctors use their official WeChat account to add patients. Some even used their private accounts.

<sup>58</sup> Hong’ai Hospital is a non-profit general hospital in Xiamen. Its establishment was supported by the State-Owned Xiamen C&D Corporation Limited.

The patient decided to leave. When Dr. Hong was waiting for her next patient, she told me,

You could have a chat with those two ladies. Perhaps they are bored in that small room. I sometimes see acquaintances here. But compared to younger doctors, who are good at using social media platforms such as RED, I only have a few acquaintances.<sup>59</sup> I don't want to put a lot of effort into expanding my patient group, because I will retire soon. It's also difficult to compete with younger doctors in this area, as they learn technological things so fast.

It was common for public doctors in Plastic Surgery, especially the younger ones, to keep in contact with their patients or followers on social media. Some even worked as part-time doctors in other private medical institutions in the hope of earning a better reputation and expanding their business.

I walked to the treatment room, and the two ladies told me that they were visiting Dr. Hong from another city in Fujian Province. They said:

We noticed that she [Dr. Hong] is working here, so we decided to visit here to have some injections and laser treatments. We reserved the consultation online last week. Having an acquaintance is better, especially in a public hospital. We are afraid that some unprofessional doctors might recommend useless treatments. It is usually difficult to fight against a failed outcome of plastic surgery or other treatment. We've also heard that there are better deals for updated beauty treatments and plastic surgery in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, but they are too far from Fujian.

In the Dermatology Department of Zhongshan Hospital, the situation was different. Doctors there tended to avoid providing their WeChat code for patients to scan. One day, I asked

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<sup>59</sup> Patients sometimes maintained and developed *Guanxi* with doctors. They usually kept contacting doctors via social media or met in person. Some of them wanted to visit the same doctor or introduce their friends and families to doctors in the future. These patients could be called acquaintances of doctors. Compared to doctors in public hospitals, doctors in private medical institutions were more like to rely on their acquaintances to develop their business.

Dr. Guo about the differences between Dermatology and Plastic Surgery in this respect. Dr. Guo told me that he also avoided adding patients to his daily contacts.

Some patients tried to add my WeChat account, and I agreed. At the beginning, everything was normal. They only kept in contact with me to share their recovery process. But the situation quickly became very embarrassing. They started to ask questions for their families, acquaintances, and friends. Some even felt that they had built up a closer relationship with me, so it was sometimes difficult for me to refuse them. I became not only a doctor but also their acquaintance or friend. Sometimes *Renqing* could be very troublesome and complex.

Public doctors need to navigate their mixed roles as servants of Chinese citizens, acquaintances of patients, and entrepreneurs. In this story, facing uneven distribution of medical resources among cities and hospitals, public doctors sometimes preferred to recommend their patients to colleagues, including those who worked in private medicine, instead of keeping them on as their own patients. As workers in the public sector, public doctors' basic salaries are stable and less impacted by the number of patients they treat. Workloads for public doctors in Plastic Surgery are less likely to be impacted by the increasingly competitive beauty market in China. As the story above illustrates, older doctors (usually in their 50s) who were going to retire and receive their monthly pensions were less interested in developing their own beauty business. As representatives of the state's biopower, public doctors like Dr. Hong had basic information about services and medical technologies in different public and private medical institutions. Young and capable public doctors (usually in their 30s and 40s) were supported by the state and local government to work part-time in several private medical sites to address the shortage of medical professionals and provide regulated medical services in the private medical system after 2012 (Xiamen Municipal Health Bureau 2011). While public hospitals like Zhongshan tended to offer

domestic drugs, private hospitals like Changgeng provided more choices by selling foreign drugs such as Botox. Chinese private medicine was supported and supervised by the state's biopower.

Doctors, patients, and researchers like me were all supposed to fulfill *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 in and outside clinical settings. For example, although I emphasized my role as an anthropological researcher rather than a medical professional or a friend of any one doctor, some patients tried to build a harmonious *Guanxi* 关系 relationship with me to become my acquaintance and then asked me to help them contact doctors or reserve appointments.

Discussions about Chinese traditions such as *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 are not new in anthropological studies of China. Fu and Chan (2016) explore how doctors treat patients with different *Guanxi* 关系 and how they deal with the dilemma of fulfilling *Renqing* 人情 while also practicing professional codes (for example, helping acquaintances get more access to medical resources, or treating all patients equally). Mason (2016) provides further explanations about how *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 could be easily expanded outside hospitals.

Following their studies, this section explains how medical professionals' relationship with patients can be extended to a patient's whole family or social circle, which went beyond their expectations. A doctor deemed nice by patients might be recommended to their friends and families, but these people might take advantage of this relationship (for example, wanting to have free online consultations without visiting doctors in hospitals; asking too many professional questions during a doctors' spare time, etc.), leading to excessive workload and burnout of doctors. In this way, *Renqing* 人情 can be troublesome when it creates doctors' responsibilities, debts, and even emotions such as guilt in and outside public hospitals. For example, my data

shows that some patients sent gifts to doctors. Flowers and flags could be accepted by some doctors, but public doctors usually did not accept gifts such as money. Improper gifts would be returned. The understandings of *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 differed among departments at Zhongshan Hospital. While some doctors of Plastic Surgery were able to maintain contact with patients, doctors of Dermatology usually avoided constructing closer *Guanxi* 关系 with patients as their patients' endless questions about skin issues – their own and their families' – outside clinical settings were all too common and tended to increase their workload.<sup>60</sup>

Doctors' attitudes towards building *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 to fulfill their roles as patients' acquaintances and as entrepreneurs are affected by generational differences and economic status. As the story shows, while elder doctors (in their 50s) tended to control their workload, some younger doctors (in their 30s and 40s) were more aware of expanding their social network and business when working part-time in the private medical system. For example, a few elder doctors told me that they just “wanted to ‘*Tang Ping* 躺平 (laying down)’ and wait for retirement.” New immigrants to Xiamen and young doctors who wanted to be financially independent were more likely to be impacted by the rising cost of housing and living expenses in Xiamen. As Dr. Yang said, “It is more difficult for younger generations to settle down in a new city, even though I have found a stable job, my salary does not allow me to buy a house in Xiamen.”

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<sup>60</sup> Changing one's appearance or removing scars and tumours by using plastic surgery usually requires a formal visit to a doctor or beauty consultant. However, small skin issues are very common for all individuals in their daily lives, and because patients and their families often don't want to formally visit a doctor to deal with these small ailments, patients tend to pester their dermatologists with questions pertaining to their families and friends.

However, compared to previous Chinese anthropologists (Fu & Chan 2016; Mason 2016), I do not view Chinese doctors' fulfillment of *Renqing* 人情 and professional codes, or *Renqing* 人情 and “common good,” as a contradictory relationship. Constructing *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 does not merely produce negative impacts on public doctor's careers or professional codes in and outside hospitals. I believe that it is possible for doctors and patients to make more social contacts and improve their relationships. By providing more services to more patients in the private medical system, public doctors are helping more Chinese citizens construct their aesthetic citizenship. While doctors can build their reputations and may be introduced to more future patients, patients may obtain reliable information about treatments, surgery, and different medical institutions for themselves and for their acquaintances. The development of the Chinese medical system, in connection with the growing capitalist market and Chinese traditions such as *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系, provides more choices and opportunities for some Chinese women to construct their aesthetic citizenship in Xiamen.

The coverage of medical expenses for health and beauty is strictly distinguished and controlled by the Chinese government in the public medical system. To guide its private medical system and citizens, the Chinese government provides a conservative, rational example of beauty enhancement in public hospitals. Public doctors play an important role in this. Although disagreements, disputes, and mistrust can sometimes also happen in public hospitals, public doctors are viewed as representatives of the national medical authority, objective judges, and public servants. Their roles become more complex when some public doctors also have a business in the private medical system. The interactions between doctors and patients are shaped by communist tenets such as the common good and Chinese traditions such as *Renqing* 人情 and

*Guanxi* 关系. The next section will provide further discussion of the Chinese private medical system.

## **Section Two, Private Hospital Influenced by the State and the Market: Being Patients and Consumers**

### ***We are Legal, Professional, and Certified Medical Professionals!***

From December 2021 to June 2022, I followed Master Luo and Dr. Zhao in the Plastic Surgery and Dermatology Department of Xinkaiyuan Hospital. Unlike Zhongshan Hospital, Xinkaiyuan Hospital was a private general hospital aimed at making profit. Patients who visited this department were often introduced by their acquaintances such as friends and families. Dr. Zhao was the only full-time doctor in the department who was able to conduct plastic surgeries and provide consultations. Most doctors who were able to work in plastic surgery were full-time doctors at The First Affiliated Hospital of Xiamen University, often called The First Hospital by Xiamen residents. Like Zhongshan Hospital, The First Hospital was another top-level public hospital.

Master Luo was a beauty consultant and a certified dermatologist. As a new, popular employment category, the beauty consultant plays an essential role in China's private medical system. Consultants are commonly responsible for giving professional suggestions about beauty enhancements and negotiating communication between doctors and patients. Some beauty consultants do not hold a medical degree, and there is no official certification test for regulated consultants in China. But beauty consultants have been accepted as medical professionals by some Chinese. Some patients I met preferred beauty consultants to doctors to obtain information

about plastic surgery and treatment and design plans for health and beauty enhancement. Also, compared to doctors, who might provide consultations to more than twenty patients per day in public hospitals, Master Luo and Dr. Zhao usually met with fewer than ten patients in Xinkaiyuan so that a meeting with them could last more than thirty minutes. But as the only full-time surgeon in the department, Dr. Zhao was also very busy with other duties because she needed to teach trainees and attend regular meetings at The First Hospital.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, some of my participants emphasized that professional beauty consultants could help develop a safe, personalized surgery plan. This will also be discussed in my next chapter.

One day, a female patient visited Master Luo accompanied by her family members. The patient told Master Luo that she was considering undergoing double eyelid surgery in the hope of obtaining beautiful eyes. It was obvious that the patient had not yet made a final decision. “Luo, you have provided many details about this surgery, but how about the price?”

“That depends on the levels.”

“Levels?”

“Yes, we provide the same plastic surgery at different levels. For example, for double eyelid surgery, the price can range from 7,000 to 30,000 Yuan<sup>62</sup> (about 1,400 and 6,000 Canadian dollars), depending on the package of surgery.” Here, the package of surgery means the choice of different surgeons, services, and surgery plans.

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<sup>61</sup> Based on cooperation between Xinkaiyuan and The First Hospital, there were regular meetings.

<sup>62</sup> One Canadian dollar is worth about 5 to 5.3 Chinese Yuan. According to data provided by the Xiamen Statistics (2024), Xiamen citizen’s disposable income was 64,362 in 2021 and reached 74,249 in 2024.

“Wow, it is not cheap, I remember that the price in a public hospital is usually 6,000 to 7,000 Yuan. Isn’t Xinkaiyuan a public hospital too? How dare you charge such high prices?”

Rather than answering that Xinkaiyuan was a private hospital, Master Luo said:

Xinkaiyuan is a certified, reliable hospital. The price is different. It depends on your selected doctors and their competence, reputation, technique, and so on. Public hospitals only provide plastic surgery on a basic level. They are more general. Here, I will design the plastic surgery with you and the doctor. It is only for you, very individually designed. We also provide very good service before and after the surgery. Doctors, assistants, and I will keep in contact with you during your recovery period.

The patient said, “You’ve talked very tactfully with me. Some professionals in other medical institutions have also mentioned similar things. But how can you prove that your hospital is more reliable? How can I believe that you are reliable?”

Master Luo smiled and gently replied to the patient, “I am reliable. As you can see, I have my certificate here. Also, I have studied dermatology and have my degree. We also cooperate with doctors from The First Hospital, which is one of the most famous public hospitals in Xiamen. The doctors there are very experienced and reliable.” Xinkaiyuan Hospital does have a collaborative relationship with the First Hospital; doctors at Xinkaiyuan often attend meetings and trainings in The First Hospital, and some public doctors from The First Hospital work part-time at Xinkaiyuan to provide treatment and services.

The patient was confused, “So what is the difference between visiting the doctor in First Hospital or Xinkaiyuan? Is it worthwhile for me to spend more money to get double eyelid here?” Master Luo replied to the patient that the surgery package was different and that doctors might not have an available schedule when working in a public hospital.

The conversations between Master Luo and the female patient illustrate the increasing competition among public and private hospitals since the 1970s (with the opening of the capitalist market). Rather than focusing on controlling the health of the population, Chinese private hospitals have promoted their popularity and authority in the hope of maximizing targeted patient groups. Compared to public doctors, doctors working in private hospitals rely for their income on their ability to attract business. To increase profits, some private hospitals have developed their businesses by offering luxury services. But, as the encounter above shows, luxury services attract only a small group of people, and many private hospitals cannot meet their customers' expectations for luxury services when they have difficulty proving their reliability and competitive edge.

It is often difficult for private hospitals to hire competitive doctors, who may prefer full-time positions in public hospitals, which offer stable incomes and foreseeable retirement compensation. With limited opportunities to hire well-known and accredited doctors, some private hospitals and medical workshops have chosen to cooperate with public hospitals, or even hire more beauty consultants without medical degrees. Under these circumstances, there are growing debates about the authority and reliability of private hospitals and medical workshops in China. Indeed, a number of women and medical professionals I met criticized the fact that certain private medical sites focused on attracting patients that would pay high amounts for cosmetic surgery and beauty services rather than improving the quality of their products or hiring more reliable doctors, and in so doing sacrificed patients' health or other interests. Some women I met were scared by a great deal of news online about illegal, greedy private medical sites that did not hire regulated doctors but nevertheless risked providing surgery procedures.

Also, this story shows that regulated private medical institutions are sandwiched between their public counterparts and unregulated medical workshops. These regulated, certified private hospitals like Xinkaiyuan Hospital emphasize their legitimacy by drawing a clear boundary between illegal medical workshops and themselves. For Xinkaiyuan Hospital, the best way to prove its legitimacy was by hiring famous doctors from public hospitals. As one doctor said, “It seems like an investment, but I am not sure how much money the hospital pays or earns by hiring those famous doctors.” Hiring more regulated medical professionals obviously leads to financial costs, if not yet profits, for private hospitals.

Patients usually become acquaintances of public doctors rather than those of the regulated private hospital. It is also nearly impossible to dispel some patients’ discriminatory attitude towards the private medical system. For example, some patients I met insisted that the success of plastic surgery was largely controlled by public doctors rather than private hospitals. They preferred to meet with public doctors at private hospitals in the hope of gaining better, personalized services rather than change their understanding of private hospitals. Plastic surgery provides a very special case to study women’s beauty and health enhancement, as women’s changing appearances are impacted more by doctors’ tastes and professional skills than by the reputation of private hospitals. This also makes famous public doctors competitive. My participant Zen, for example, told me that she chose to visit Xinkaiyuan because of the doctor. “I tried to visit Dr. Yin in the First Hospital, but it was too difficult to schedule a meeting with him there, so I tried to schedule a meeting with him here. I mean, many people are coming for the abilities and professionalism of the doctor.”

I found that compared to public medical institutions and illegal medical workshops, regulated private hospitals and clinics faced greater challenges dealing with the contradiction

between *Renqing* 人情 and professional codes. While public hospitals are fully supported by the state, the business of private hospitals and clinics usually depends on acquaintances, who are often introduced by the extension of *Guanxi* 关系. To attract more patients and increase profits, some private hospitals provide more types of surgeries and treatments, as well as personalized, luxury services. Public hospitals do not offer citizens access to services and products such as Botox and lip tattoos, but private hospitals do. As we learned in the story above, double-eyelid surgeries were divided into different levels. When a female patient chose to leave a public hospital and go to a private hospital instead, the patient was transformed into a customer who was able to participate in designing her own surgery in a more radical way.

But if there were any disagreements between a conservative public doctor and a brave patient, beauty consultants in private hospitals would help resolve communications between them, leading to challenges in dealing with *Renqing* 人情 (satisfying the patient) and controlling the safety or risks of plastic surgery. For example, as the only beauty consultant in Xinkaiyuan Hospital, Master Luo often worked to resolve disagreements and conflicts between public doctors and patients. Dr. Zhao sometimes needed to share the workload with Master Luo due to the lack of beauty consultants. This is also evident in the following encounter. Also, this point supports my contention that in contrast to public hospitals, in private hospitals medical professionals' workloads are more likely to be unstable and are not necessarily determined by professional titles and credentials.

Private hospitals are seen to have more personalized services and take more risks. Some female patients told me that they chose private hospitals in order to obtain their ideal results, or perfection, even if that meant taking a risk. As one female patient said to me:

I consulted a doctor, but the doctor refused my surgery plan. The doctor told me that breast reconstructive surgery is unnecessary and might harm my health. I don't care. I know it might lead to a few health issues. They [doctors in public hospitals] are too conservative and afraid of making big mistakes. But I can undergo surgery procedures here. Private hospital will satisfy your need, as long as it is not that dangerous.

The stereotype of a reliable, conservative public medical system and a bold and risky private medical system has been constructed in Chinese society. The next story provides another example that sheds light on this aspect of the Chinese medical system.

### ***Customer-Targeted Beauty: Patients Seeking Personalized Treatments***

It was about ten o'clock on a busy Wednesday morning. Dr. Zhao had just completed a consultation. She checked the time on her phone and asked assistant Li to help her prepare coffee and medical equipment. "Dr. Yin and his assistant are on the way. We need to get the coffee ready . . . Yes, and follow me to the surgery operating room now."

Li followed Dr. Zhao into the room. They wore new masks and worked together to disinfect the operating room. About ten minutes later, Li left the operating room to clean the table in Dr. Zhao's office. Li saw the trainees and me also sitting in the office, "Do you know Dr. Yin? He is so famous in Xiamen. You see, we are preparing many things for his arrival. He is a key figure in Xinkaiyuan now."

I was curious, "But why are you preparing all these things when he already has an assistant?"

Li explained:

They are very busy. Dr. Yin might need to complete at least four plastic surgeries today. Have you noticed that there are several patients waiting in the lobby? They are all waiting for visiting Dr. Yin. Xinkaiyuan made a lot of efforts to invite public doctors, including Dr. Yin. We need to actively cooperate with Dr. Yin and his assistant. Dr. Zhao usually works with them in the operating room. She needs to do more work.

Dr. Yin worked as a full-time public doctor at First Hospital and part-time at Xinkaiyuan. He was called a *Wang Hong* 网红 doctor as he attracted followers on social platforms such as RED.

After talking to Li, I walked to the lobby and tried to have some conversations with patients there. Gentle classical music was playing in the lobby area. I met Zen as she was waiting for her double-eyelid surgery with her friend who had come along to keep her company. Zen told me that she came here for Dr. Yin. “I know Dr. Yin has a full-time contract with The First Hospital. It is too difficult for me to reserve a consultation with him in that hospital, as public hospitals usually have too many patients.”

“How did you know that Dr. Yin also works in Xinkaiyuan?”

“Of course, he is so famous. Also, he has a team working for him. I mean, his assistants might put up advertisements or record patient information for him. I got this information about him online. I met him and one of his assistants last August. But the consultation was too fast. It was like five minutes. At that time, I wasn’t sure that he was reliable.”

“But how did you finally decide to choose Dr. Yin?”

“I also visited other doctors, such as Dr. Ru in the Hospital of Chinese Medicine. That doctor was so patient. I mean, sometimes we make a decision based on the doctor’s attitude.

Some doctors explain the surgery suggestion to you in plain words. Dr. Ru suggested that I select the suture method.”

“Okay.”

Zen continued, “Yes, it was also difficult for me to reserve a consultation with Dr. Ru. There were some platforms and WeChat programs helping people reserve consultations quickly, but they would charge you a fee. It is almost impossible for you to reserve a famous doctor in the Ninth Hospital of Shanghai.<sup>63</sup> They get booked up so fast.”

“It sounds like a ticket seller.”

“Yes, to some extent. I feel that it is not worth it to pay the additional fee for the first consultation as it is only five minutes. I mean, in some other places, including some illegal beauty salons, they spend more time on you. My sister was not satisfied with the Botox injection she got from Dr. Yin. But I found that he mainly specialized in double eyelids, so I still chose him as my surgeon.”

Zen was then called by Dr. Zhao to enter the office. Another female patient, who had observed my conversation with Zen, agreed to have a chat with me before visiting Dr. Yin. She said, “It seems like I need to wait for an hour, as she just entered the room. They told me to arrive earlier, but I was a little bit late. Oh, no. I feel tired. Could you please get me a cup of water? There should be some female trainees there near the reception desk, but I haven’t seen them.”

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<sup>63</sup> The Ninth Hospital of Shanghai is one of the most popular public hospitals for beauty pursuers.

“Okay.” I got her a cup of water and replied, “One trainee is having her break, and another one might be taking a patient for a clinical examination. I’m not sure. Dr. Zhao is helping Dr. Yin in the consultation room. Are you in a hurry?”

The female patient said:

No, I feel good. Don’t worry. That girl (Zen) should not have the first consultation with Dr. Yin. He is so busy. I had my first consultation with Dr. Zhao and then she introduced Dr. Yin. Dr. Zhao and I had a nice consultation, and we talked a lot to decide on the surgery plan. Dr. Zhao helped me communicate with Dr. Yin. Dr. Yin agreed and said he might make some small changes after seeing me in person. You know what, although doctors in public hospitals are reliable and professional, the aesthetic taste is better in private medical institutions.

When she expressed this opinion, two patients nearby echoed her view, “Yes, yes. I agree.”

She smiled and continued:

The price of surgery in public hospitals is not expensive. But public doctors tend to make double eyelids in a very similar and conservative way. They usually prefer natural, narrow eyelids. It’s difficult to persuade them to agree to your surgery plan sometimes. I mean, doctors here are more respectful of your aesthetic preferences, and they care more about you as a patient and customer. You still need the doctor’s final permission, but you can personalize your surgery.

While public hospitals are considered more conservative in how they manage individual bodies, private hospitals are known for better service and higher aesthetic tastes. Compared to public hospitals, in private hospitals, especially the regulated ones, the tensions between the state and the market are more intense. In private hospitals, patients’ access to medical resources and the construction of their aesthetic citizenship are largely impacted by their economic status and

*Guanxi* 关系. Beauty is highly personalized and commodified, producing what Pussetti (2019) views as bodily capital. Citizens become both patients and individual customers who should manage their beauty and health by making their own rational decisions, while medical professionals, such as doctors, have no duty to serve them without a specific payment. Profit is a key concept in the Chinese private medical system. But this does not mean that the Chinese state has lost its control over the private medical system. By encouraging doctors of public hospitals to work in various medical institutions, the Chinese state continues to strengthen its biomedical surveillance and power. But the shortage of regulated doctors remains a big issue for the state when it comes to regulating the beauty industry. I will return to this aspect in the last section of this chapter.

Under these circumstances, public doctors who work in private medical systems are better able to maintain a balance between their professional codes and *Renqing* 人情 when their position is transformed from being a public servant to being a business holder. In regulated private hospitals like Xinkaiyuan, maintaining this balance is helped by the work of other medical professionals such as other doctors, assistants, and beauty consultants. In Xinkaiyuan Hospital, consultant Master Luo and Dr. Zhao usually helped negotiate between doctors from public hospitals and patients. They also helped schedule meetings, surgeries, and treatments and monitored patients' medical histories, allergies, and COVID health codes. Both patients and doctors in private hospitals were building up their acquaintance system, full of *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系. To deal with the contradictions between professional codes and *Renqing* 人情, additional care, discounts, and referrals to famous doctors from public hospitals were given to patients.

This section focuses on the Chinese private medical system. The Chinese government has supported the development of the capitalist market in places like Xiamen, but it has retained some control over its beauty market by providing a rational example of beauty in public medicine. Regulated medical institutions become sites for the Chinese state to exert biopower. Apart from supporting public doctors to work in the private medical system, the Chinese state has announced new laws and regulations such as “医疗机构设置规划指导原则 (Guiding Principles for the Planning of Healthcare Institution Establishment)2021-2025” ( National Health Commission 2022) and “关于办理医保骗保刑事案件若干问题的指导意见 (Guidelines on Several Issues Concerning the Criminal Cases Related to Medical Insurance Fraud)” (Supreme People’s Procuratorate of the People’s Republic of China 2024) to encourage and regulate the development of the private medical system. For example, regulated private medical sites are not allowed to accept insurance for beauty expenses; doing so is considered a crime and harmful to the “common good” by the state government. Also, in Xiamen, public doctors and local government staff are required to visit regulated private medical sites regularly (sometimes once per month or once per season) to examine their services, machines, certificates, and medical professionals.

Although beauty is not directly connected to Chinese citizenship, beauty is related to Chinese collective interests when there is a lack of medical resources for health management or when beauty enhancement disobeys health standards. Here, I support Yang’s (2011) argument that enhancing beauty has become a collective responsibility of some Chinese women when they are educated to consume beauty enhancements to face the transformation of the old job allocation system and contribute to China’s economic growth after the opening of the beauty market in China (1980s). By cutting beauty from the national health insurance system, I contend

that the Chinese government is shifting collective responsibility for beauty onto individuals. But Chinese citizens' responses to this shift vary, as reflected in the ongoing and increasing debates around beauty as a right of citizens. Health is another example of this shift, when individual schedules, diets, and exercises are emphasized in up-down health projects such as the *Yang Sheng* project. The difference is that access to health has been related to Chinese citizenship, when other things such as beauty need to give way to health to protect the "common good."

Based on my research, I contend that the socialist Chinese government takes advantage of the developing beauty industry to support its economy even as it recognizes the industry's negative side effects, such as the production of social exclusions and inequalities. China is trying to deal with this contradiction between the capitalist market and the socialist state by describing beauty as a rational option in its public medicine to prevent the construction of surplus citizenship. The Kardashians are used by some anthropologists as an example to explain surplus citizenship. They discuss how very rich people waste limited medical resources on endless beauty enhancements to obtain more fame and fortune (Kukuczka & Liebelt 2024; Jones 2024). In China's case, facing the power of the beauty market, the state is working to regulate beauty enhancements to avoid the construction of a strict beauty hierarchy and the waste of medical resources. In a country that values science and education, beauty should not fully determine one's success and social position. In the public and mainstream media controlled by the state, Chinese *Wang Hong* 网红 (social influencers), who use beauty as capital and pursue endless bodily transformation to achieve perfection and make fortune, are described as wasting medical resources, like the Kardashians do.

However, state interventions can be limited or betrayed by market rationality when some private medical sites and citizens bias its rational example of beauty in public medicine. The

standards of rational or healthy beauty are more flexible in some private medical sites. This will be discussed more in my third chapter. Some of the women I met with visited unregulated medical workshops to realize their aesthetic citizenship beyond the surveillance of the state. The last section of this chapter looks more deeply into the ways that *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 impact women's pursuit of beauty and health, as well as their construction of aesthetic citizenship, in unregulated medical sites when professional codes and the Communist understandings of the "common good" no longer play significant roles.

### **Section Three: Private Clinic and Beauty Salon: Free or Dangerous Zone?**

Apart from hospitals, there are also various medical sites that are unregulated, such as private medical workshops and beauty salons, in Xiamen. Like private hospitals, these medical sites expand their social networks based, to a large extent, on *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系. A medical workshop can provide unregulated treatment and medicine for beauty and health enhancements. The rationality and authority of these private medical sites are more likely to be impacted by the number of successful cases of beauty enhancement that they perform. I call them "unregulated medical sites" as some of those in Xiamen, as my participants told me, do not hire regulated doctors or use regulated drugs. For example, one of my participants, Jinyu, who owned a private medical workshop, told me that some of the staff had not studied medicine. Her workshop made profit mainly by offering skin care services, such as laser procedures, and by introducing patients who wanted to undergo surgery procedures to regulated doctors at other local clinics. (She did not admit whether there was any regulated technician who could perform laser procedures.)

Unlike regulated medical institutions, such as public hospitals and private hospitals, these unregulated sites are not always open to the public. Chinese citizens access these medical sites via the introduction of acquaintances who hold close *Guanxi* 关系 with them. In these sites, citizens who seek beauty and health enhancements are more likely to be treated as customers than as patients. These sites usually promise to achieve unrealistically high goals and provide private, highly personalized services to attract more customers. But it cannot be denied that some do provide successful treatment and surgery procedures. Women become customers whose choices and practices are highly impacted by the market, and it is not always possible for the state to supervise or control the movement and management of individual bodies in and outside these unregulated sites. For example, COVID tests and health maintenance might not be required to enter these medical sites. But these sites do not only exert a negative impact on China's national medical system; their use of unregulated drugs, plastic surgery, and services does meet the demands of some citizens and alleviates the pressure on regulated medical institutions such as public hospitals.

### ***Uncertified Medical Workshop: High Aims, Better Service and Taste***

Zen had an online interview with me in March 2022 after undergoing double-eyelid surgery. When I asked her questions about her past experiences of enhancing beauty and health, Zen began by sharing her experience of eliminating facial spots in an unregulated medical workshop. Compared to a regulated clinic, which has regulated doctors and nurses, a medical workshop is smaller and usually has only one department. It often provides unregulated medicine and medical professionals in a private space such as a private condo room. “My facial spots were not

removed by laser in hospitals but were eliminated by using a certain kind of medicine at a small medical workshop. I have to use a skincare cream to maintain my facial skin condition, otherwise the spots might appear again. So I have not worn makeup for a long time.”

“An unregulated workshop or a clinic? How did you know about that workshop?”

“I was born with these spots and was very annoyed with them. So my friend introduced me to the medical workshop, and I decided to get treatment there.”

I was curious about the medical products from the workshops, and asked, “Oh . . . But what kind of medicine and cream?”

“The staff there made that medicine by themselves. They would not tell anyone about the making process. The treatment process was different from that in hospitals. They just did an easy facial cleanse and then applied the medicine to your face directly. But the efficacy of that medicine was much better than [laser treatment] in big hospitals.”

“Wow.”

Zen continued:

Yes, I have a sister. We both have this hereditary skin issue. She visited the First Hospital in July, then I went there in August. She did a Chaomiao 超秒 [picoway].<sup>64</sup> The effect of that treatment was limited, and we haven’t seen any obvious change to her face. Mine was different. Staff in the workshop told me that their medicine and cream could help eliminate the poison elements deep in my skin.

“Would you like to share the name of the workshop?”

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<sup>64</sup> Picoway is a type of laser treatment.

Zen replied,

It's just their workshop, very individual and private. It looks like a folk medical workshop; maybe . . . they employ some black magic? Uh haha, When I visited doctors in public hospitals, sometimes I felt that they also knew what kind of skin treatment I had undergone. They might know something about their counterparts in other places. But they did not directly comment on this. It is worth it to undergo this kind of treatment in a private workshop.

It's common that some medical workshops call their drugs “folk medicine” as it does not require certification, but its efficacy is proven by some successful cases.

“Why?”

Zen offered more details:

They just charged me once. It was like 4,000 Yuan [about 800 Canadian dollars], much cheaper than laser treatments in big hospitals. They then included the price of the cream. Oh, I remember that . . . they told me that the cream included some Chinese herbal elements . . . In big hospitals, the price can be endless sometimes. You might need to spend more than 10,000 Yuan to buy several courses of laser treatments. After eliminating all the spots, doctors would suggest that you keep undergoing some light laser treatments to maintain your skin health and beauty. Also, it only took about 15 days for my scabs to fall off. But if you select treatments in big hospitals, it's a longer process as you need to recover after undergoing each laser treatment. Doctors in big hospitals care more about the weather and post-treatments. You are supposed to avoid hot and wet weather, as well as rainy days. I currently work in the fashion industry, which is close to the beauty industry. I have met many girls who have tried to undergo plastic surgery and beauty treatment procedures. They have been more hesitant to visit doctors in big hospitals. Because they do not feel that doctors there know more about beauty than their counterparts in medical workshops. Also, the doctors are always too busy . . . These workshops do better than hospitals as they give you additional care before and after the treatment. They checked my skin type. This impacted their treatment. They kept chatting with me to obtain information about my recent skin condition.

Although previous Chinese anthropological studies have argued that the Chinese state imposes strict biological surveillance, as it did before and during the COVID period (Chen 2022; Zhang et al. 2023), this story demonstrates that the existence of unregulated medical sites such as medical workshops is a testament to the power of the market in regulating individual's construction of so-called aesthetic citizenship. The Chinese beauty market has its own rationality which cannot be fully controlled by the state. During the COVID-19 period, the first communication between the staff of these medical workshops and individuals was usually completed on social platforms such as WeChat. Medical spaces were often transformed from spaces in certified hospitals and clinics to more private and personalized spaces such as offices, spa rooms, and homes. Like Zen in the story, some women visited both regulated and unregulated medical sites for health and beauty enhancements. Their enhancements cannot be separated from diverse daily practices, communication, and choices. Women supported the beauty market and claimed their rights as aesthetic citizens by accessing diverse, cheaper medical resources in the unregulated market, while challenging the strict biomedical and digital surveillance of the state.

Compared to regulated medical institutions, medical workshops dare to promise idealized results and high-level services. For example, based on my data, some of them dared to help customers enhance beauty even when there might be an unforeseen sacrifice of health. Some would tell patients that they could help permanently remove spots on the face, even if a public doctor had told them that some spots might reappear. While doctors in regulated medical institutions such as Xinkaiyuan Hospital would not perform dangerous or high-level plastic surgeries, such as upper-jaw reconstruction, under the restrictions of government regulations,<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The Chinese government has divided surgeries and medical institutions into different leveled categories.

some illegal workshops would provide these dramatic invasive surgeries. Also, the transmission of Chinese medicine (for example, a lost Chinese medical recipe and so on) and the relationship between it and biomedicine provides a safe space for these unregulated medical sites to prove their legitimacy and authority. For example, staff in these medical sites commonly regarded unregulated drugs as a lost Chinese medicine, whose ingredients, efficacy, and reliability were difficult to examine by current biomedical technologies. When I asked Zen about the detailed content of the medicine she applied to her face, she was unable to offer clarification: “It might be their own medical recipe.”<sup>66</sup> They said that it may contain some Chinese herbal medicine in it. It was not available on the public market.” The “shortcomings” of Chinese medicine, thus, promote the reputation and reliability of these unregulated medical sites and their medicine.

Furthermore, women who fail to obtain cheap, desirable medical resources in regulated hospitals and clinics usually can get a cheaper and better treatment package because of their *Guanxi* 关系 with medical workshops. Here, I am arguing that *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 become more significant in these unregulated medical sites. Some women used the Chinese word “*Geng Hao* 更好 (better)” to describe their new package. In Zen’s case, she really felt that the unregulated medicine and services were “*Geng Hao* 更好” than those of public hospitals. Also, prices for plastic surgery, treatments, and medical products in medical workshops are very flexible, following market demand and the economic status and expectations of female individuals. For example, as Zen and others I met told me, unregulated workshops often

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<sup>66</sup> In China, it is common that regulated Chinese medicine has been tested by both Chinese medical and biomedical science. Unregulated medical workshops and Chinese physicians might provide unregulated Chinese medicine, which has not been proven by biomedical science. These will be discussed more in the next chapter.

provided customers with medical products and treatments at very attractive prices – prices that were lower than those of their counterparts in public hospitals.

In this way, the rise of these unregulated medical sites has helped some Chinese citizens construct their aesthetic citizenship from below. Meanwhile, Chinese citizens are getting access to more medical resources when they are unable to obtain their aims in regulated hospitals and clinics. Public discontent with the medical system declines when people can obtain satisfactory treatment and care from unregulated medical sites, and this was especially true during the COVID-19 period. But these people also take some risks when unregulated workshops and beauty salons operate beyond the control of the state's biopower.

### **Conclusion:**

In this chapter, I have argued that beauty has been a much debated part of the construction of Chinese aesthetic citizenship from below. I have shown how Chinese aesthetic citizenship has been shaped by the negotiations among the socialist state, capitalist market, and medicine, as well as the Chinese traditions of *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系. Although there are connections between beauty and health, the Chinese state has drawn a clear boundary between them in its public health insurance system. Beauty as a right and demand of Chinese citizens is debatable and impacted by different opinions across generations. Health, rather than beauty, is prioritized in the national medical system. This division reached its peak during the COVID-19 period when most limited public medical resources were used to control the health of the population in China.

However, the Chinese government has reconfirmed this distinction since the beginning of the Three-Year Chinese National Weight Management project in June 2024 by relating fatness to

healthy diets and exercises rather than to beauty (National Health Commission et al. 2024). Health has been connected to both collective and individual responsibilities. Beauty is merely related to collective interests and responsibilities when Chinese women are enhancing beauty in a proper way to contribute to the beauty economy (enhancing beauty without doing harm to the population's health or enhancing beauty without going beyond the biomedical standards of health). Compared to health, beauty is more likely to be described as an option connected to individual choices and responsibilities. Meanwhile, the Chinese government has maintained its strict surveillance of beauty by incorporating beauty into the public medical system and by regulating the private medical system to prevent the construction of a strict beauty hierarchy. Chinese citizens have become patients, customers, and individual entrepreneurs when focusing on health and/or beauty enhancement.

The Chinese public medical system, especially the biomedical clinical system, has been constructed as the holder of objective and authoritative knowledge supervised by the Chinese government. The rationality and authority of the public medical system are also built on Chinese citizens' trust in their communist government. Doctors, who have been viewed as servants of the public and who might also be members of the Chinese Communist Party, are regarded as the representatives of the state's biopower in public hospitals. Doctors are sometimes considered as judges, who are able to give fair, objective answers to deal with medical disputes and disagreements, including disputes between patients and other private medical institutions. Public hospitals, thus, become places for witnessing the dominant position of the national biopower. For example, with strict COVID restrictions and regulations, public hospitals helped the state control and track the movements and health of citizens during the COVID period. Although public hospitals have participated in the marketing of beauty, beauty is conservative and optional as the

Chinese public medical system cares more about social welfare than profits. Given this, public medical institutions, such as hospitals, are also subject to citizens' discontent with limited medical resources for beauty. Public doctors tend to deal with *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 tactfully and emphasize the common good.

By encouraging doctors at public hospitals to work in several medical institutions, including private ones, the Chinese state has strengthened its biomedical surveillance in private medicine. Some regulated private medical institutions cooperate positively with public medical institutions in the hope of promoting their authority and legitimacy. Compared to China's public medical system, the private medical system is impacted more by the capitalist market as it targets profits. Beauty and health become commodities in the private medical system. Patients are transformed into customers, while doctors can develop their own businesses. Because of this, building *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 takes on greater significance in the Chinese private medical system. For example, for public doctors, adhering to professional codes and fulfilling *Renqing* 人情 and *Guanxi* 关系 are not always contradictory when working in a private hospital. Additional care, discounts, and more communication can be provided to patients when doctors are earning higher reputations and income. The private medical system has provided more diverse and less conservative choices for beauty enhancement, but the price of beauty enhancement is unstable. While Chinese citizens have participated more in designing their bodily changes, their access to beauty resources has been associated with their economic status, age, and residential location. In private hospitals, female patients are divided into smaller groups such as new/general patients, acquaintances, and VIP customers.

On the other hand, the Chinese private medical system has helped some citizens realize their aesthetic citizenship during the COVID-19 period beyond the surveillance of the state's biopower. For example, some were unable to enter public hospitals to access beauty resources due to testing positive for COVID-19, distant residential locations, and an inability to use digital technology. But in unregulated medical workshops, COVID restrictions were sometimes ignored and prices for beauty/health products were often cheaper than they were in public hospitals.

While biomedicine has been very important in the regulated medical system, the reliability of these unregulated medical sites is supported to some extent by the authority of Chinese medicine, which has not been well-proven by biomedical science. Meanwhile, Chinese citizens are taking unforeseen risks when pursuing beauty practices that fall outside the state's control.

While this chapter has provided a basic framework of the Chinese medical system with a focus on aesthetic citizenship, the next chapter will explore how beauty becomes a biomedical concept in and outside clinical settings. I now turn to how China's biomedicine is a specific biomedical system that incorporates Chinese medical tenets such as balance and harmony.

### Chapter Three: Jiankang Mei 健康美 (Healthy Beauty) and Bingtai Mei 病态美 (Sick Beauty): Reconstructing Natural and Cultural Beauty in Hospitals

It was a busy Monday morning in June. The weather was fine and cloudless, and flowers were in bloom outside the Plastic Surgery Department at Zhongshan Hospital. It was less than 30 degrees outside, but the temperature was higher in the corridor between the Plastic Surgery and Gynaecology Departments. More than ten patients were waiting for consultations. Dr. Hong was conducting a post-surgery exam of a patient's body, and I was preparing my notes in the room. The corridor became noisy as more patients gathered. Dr. Hong asked me to help her comfort and communicate with her patients in the corridor. As I was doing so, one patient suddenly got annoyed and tried to open the door of the room without Dr. Hong's permission. Then another patient followed him and asked me to check their wait times. I explained that their consultations were delayed and persuaded them to wait for maybe thirty minutes more.

Some patients then asked me to provide professional advice for them. I politely refused and told them that I was conducting research as a PhD student in social anthropology. When I introduced myself to some of the other patients, a young lady rushed towards me and said that she needed to have a consultation with Dr. Hong in five minutes. I told her that I would remind Dr. Hong soon. She smiled in relief and introduced herself to me. Ping, her preferred name, was interested in my research project, and she agreed to participate in it. She soon shared her disappointment about the outcome of her previous plastic surgery.

“I regret my decision. My facial appearance looks so fake. I prefer *Ziran Mei* 自然美 (natural beauty). Can you guess what kind of plastic surgery procedures I had?”

“Sorry, I have no idea.” I shook my head. I was confused by her use of the terms “fake” and “natural” as Ping’s face looked fine to me.

“Can’t you see my lower jaw? It’s too sharp. Obviously it’s produced by plastic surgery. Compared to my inborn lower jaw, it’s not natural at all.” Ping quickly showed her previous photos to me and explained her situation.

I comforted Ping and checked the time on the big screen<sup>67</sup> overhead. It was time for her consultation. I knocked on the door of consultation room 1 and reminded Dr. Hong. As Ping and I took our seats in the room, Dr. Hong was checking her medical history<sup>68</sup> on the computer screen.

“How can I help you?” Dr. Hong looked at Ping’s face.

“I’m not satisfied with the shape of my lower jaw. I shouldn’t have undergone this surgery. I had it last October.” Ping then shared her experiences of having double-eyelid and lower-jaw surgery. Compared to her sharp lower jaw, she was more satisfied with her new eyelids.

“Oh, it does not look natural and harmonious with [the rest of] your face. It’s too unnatural and sharp. But the implant cannot be removed merely by using a syringe. You’ll need to undergo another surgery. Also, you need time for recovery, and I suggest you change your

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<sup>67</sup> In the corridor of Zhongshan Hospital, there were big screens on the wall. Different departments usually had their own screens. All rooms of the Plastic Surgery Department shared one screen. Patients were able to check the time and their appointments on the screen. The names of patients and the number of rooms would show up on the screen. One Chinese letter of patients’ names would be confidential to protect patients’ privacy. (There are usually two to four Chinese letters in a full Chinese name.)

<sup>68</sup> In Chinese public hospitals, all medical cases of patients are stored in both paper and digital format. Patients’ medical history is linked to their medical account with a connection to the national medical system.

eyelids in the meantime. You could reserve that online.” According to Dr. Hong’s diagnosis, Ping’s eyelids and lower jaw both looked unnatural and should be reconstructed.

Ping’s consultation was completed in about ten minutes. When she was done, we had a chat in the corridor. Ping held my hands and stressed her opinions again, “Don’t change your appearance unless you have severe aesthetic imperfections. You look good. Sometimes I worry about the implant under my facial skin. I regret having ‘sick’ aesthetic preferences. We should pursue natural beauty.”

“Thank you for letting me know. Your advice is very helpful.” I nodded my head.

Ping had a look at her phone screen. “I need to go. Let’s chat on WeChat later.”

“Ok, goodbye and take care.”

When I went back to the consultation room, Dr. Hong was enjoying a small break and said,

She told us that she consulted staff in that private medical workshop. I am not sure that they are regulated doctors. Her original face was fine, but she felt, or some staff at that place made her feel, that she had severe aesthetic facial imperfections. Her new lower jaw looks very fake. We would not allow patients to undergo that kind of plastic surgery procedure in public hospitals. We appreciate healthy and natural beauty. But some private medical sites dare to approve [that kind of surgery], as they value profits more than patients’ health and rights.

For women I met in Xiamen, biomedical health standards largely determine the legitimacy of aesthetic imperfections in China. As illustrated by Ping’s story above, doctors in the Plastic Surgery Department at Zhongshan Hospital understood natural beauty as a specific counterpart of healthy beauty. Natural beauty was not merely inborn beauty but could refer to beauty that did not expose obvious traces of having undergone plastic surgery procedures.

Chinese tenets such as balance and harmony were developed in biomedicine to support the construction of natural and healthy beauty. Eliminating traces of medical procedures would be guaranteed by maintaining the harmony between facial features such as eyes and nose, as well as the effects of long-term self-care, maturity, and life experiences. Destroying harmony was, for the doctors and female participants in my study, connected to what they described as pursuing “fake” and “sick” beauty. While healthy beauty and natural beauty are promoted in biomedical clinical settings, the pursuit of sick or fake beauty is often seen as a violation of an individual’s rights or a waste of public medical resources. Meanwhile, the understanding of healthy and sick beauty differs among public and private medical institutions, such as public and private hospitals, in China.

The first chapter of this dissertation demonstrated that Chinese beauty ideals have been shaped by traditional aesthetics and globalization, while the second chapter described how some Chinese women, in both the Chinese public and private medical systems, enhance themselves and construct aesthetic citizenship in Xiamen. But I have yet to make clear how beauty, as a long-standing concern, has been redefined and treated in biomedical settings. In this chapter, I will turn my focus to the medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in Xiamen, China. I will compare how beauty is shaped by different biomedical standards of health in public and private hospitals. I will explore how women and medical professionals, such as doctors and consultants, interact to construct concepts such as healthy beauty, natural beauty, and sick beauty. Also, using beauty as an example, I will explain how Chinese medical tenets such as balance and harmony are developed in Chinese biomedicine to prove the rationality of biomedical knowledge and practices. In this way, my discussions in this chapter elaborate on the specificities of biomedicine in China, as well as its relationship to Chinese medicine. I argue that beauty is

shaped differently by biomedical standards of health in Chinese public and private medical systems.

In the first half of this chapter, I will provide a brief introduction to my main field site in the Dermatology Department of Zhongshan Hospital. I will explore the diagnosis and treatment of skin problems to explain the concept of healthy beauty. Using pimples as an example, I will demonstrate how Chinese medical and biomedical tenets, such as balance and harmony, have been incorporated to explain skin beauty and health. Then, I will compare medical practices in Cosmetic Dermatology at Zhongshan Hospital (a public hospital) and Xinkaiyuan Hospital (a private hospital) to help examine different understandings of healthy beauty. In the second half, I will deal with the concepts of healthy beauty, sick beauty, and natural beauty in the Plastic Surgery Departments of these two hospitals. I will use double-eyelid surgery as an example to explain how biomedical standards of health regulate the legitimization of aesthetic imperfections and the rationality of beauty enhancement in biomedicine. I explore how traditional Chinese medical tenets such as balance and harmony are developed in biomedicine to define healthy and natural beauty.

### **Biomedicalizing Beauty in China: Rethinking Ziran Mei 自然美 (Natural Beauty)**

Anthropological theories of biomedicalization elaborate on the earlier concept of medicalization. Medicalization describes how, by the end of the Second World War, medicine had begun expanding its jurisdiction by redefining non-medical issues, such as pregnancy, as medical problems (Martin 2010; Cahill 2001); the concept of biomedicalization has emerged to capture

the way that biomedicine has been transformed into a complex risk and surveillance system with the help of dramatic changes in technoscience since the 1980s (Clarke et al. 2003).

Clarke and her colleagues (2003, 163) have provided a very detailed definition of the term biomedicalization. Biomedicalization describes the second transformation of American medicine. It can be viewed as the increasingly complex, multi-sited, multidirectional process of medicalization. They list the five key interactive processes that both engender biomedicine and are produced through it:

(1) the political economic reconstitution of the vast sector of biomedicine; (2) the focus on health itself and the elaboration of risk and surveillance biomedicine; (3) the increasingly technological and scientific nature of biomedicine; (4) transformations in how biomedical knowledges are produced, distributed, and consumed, and in medical information management; and (5) transformations of bodies to include new properties and the production of new individual and collective technoscientific identities.

Their theories explain how biomedicalization is digitalized, stratified, and unanticipated, and how it is closely connected to the development of contemporary states, bioscience, pharmaceutical corporations, and the global capitalist market.

Recent social and anthropological studies of beauty and health have extended this theoretical framework for biomedicine even further. Some have described the biomedicalization of health and beauty through issues such as fatness and have explained how individuals have been medically supervised with the help of advanced biotechnology (Berkowitz 2021; Greenhalgh 2015). Others have explored biomedicalization with a focus on intersectionality and have expressed concerns about the negative implications of biomedicalization, such as social inequalities and racism (Wright 2022; Mire 2019; Edmonds 2013, 2010).

Mire (2019) explores the global biomedicalization of whiteness and skin aging. Focusing on beauty discourses in advertisements and technical reports supported by pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies, Mire examines how pigmented skin has been linked to health to regulate racialized female bodies. Meanwhile, Mire focuses on social inequalities and exclusions faced by non-white women. Mire's study has inspired my discussions about the medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in this chapter. Beauty is related to biomedical diagnosis and intervention and has been accepted by an increasing number of Chinese women as an individual choice and responsibility. However, Mire's framework cannot fully be used to explore the medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in China, where popular beauty ideals have not been related to a strict racialized hierarchy but to a complicated global history. Pursing a different direction than Mire, some scholars have examined the biomedicalization of beauty and health in various social and historical settings (Berkowitz 2021; Greenhalgh 2015; Edmonds 2010).

Berkowitz (2021) explores how Botox has been normalized by biomedical discourses, such as aging prevention and beauty/youth management, in the United States and how this has been helped by emerging social media and digital technologies. Biomedical professionals and companies have connected regular Botox injections with positive improvements in the individual and social lives of American women. Botox is a special case as it has bridged the gap between older daily beauty practices, such as make-up, and newer, more extreme beauty practices such as cosmetic surgery. Greenhalgh (2015) provides another example of the processes of biomedicalization in the United States when she addresses medicalized concepts such as fatness, ugliness, and a healthy and beautiful body. Biomedical terms such as *fatness*, *BMI*, and *normal body* have functioned as a moral discourse to divide American people into different social

classes. While people with normal body shapes are viewed as responsible, good Americans who manage their diets and activities properly, fat people are often discriminated against and marginalized in society. In contrast, Greenhalgh (2015) argues that the impacts of the biomedicalization of fatness reflect systemic inequalities as poor minorities of colour are not able to afford enough healthy food.

These two anthropological studies have inspired my study in China. My data demonstrate that in China, beauty is strongly influenced by biomedical standards of health. Beauty is often related to rational self-management and health risk assessments. But unlike biomedicine in the United States, the Chinese biomedical system and its rationality have not been constructed on the elimination of Chinese medicine in contemporary China. The biomedical concept of natural beauty in China involves Chinese medical tenets such as nature and harmony. Following Ning's (2018, 2012) study of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and biomedicine in North America, I will provide a new Chinese example to explain the connection between biomedicine and Chinese medicine, as well as their common focus on harmony and individual responsibility. Also, Greenhalgh's and Berkowitz's frameworks cannot be used to study China directly as the biomedical standards of health vary across the Chinese public and private medical systems. While public hospitals hold a very strict biomedical standard of health and tend to view the pursuit of perfection and sick beauty as irrational and unethical, private hospitals are more lenient with small health issues such as acne. These will be discussed below.

Edmonds's (2010, 2013) studies of the biomedicalization of beauty and health in Brazil provide an excellent theoretical framework for my research. These studies in Brazil explain how the medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty happened in diverse medical and social spaces such as hospitals, clinics, and homes. Edmonds (2010) explores how biomedical

technologies, such as plastic surgery, are used to help women pursue ideal social and national identities such as attractive social elites. Women's aesthetic imperfections are also legitimized as mental health issues with the help of doctors in both private and public medicine. Beauty enhancement is regulated by a logic of healing and requires women's constant self-care throughout their lifetimes outside the hospitals. Following Edmonds, I will explore the relationship between beauty and health in the Chinese biomedical system, and I will contend that the biomedicalization of beauty cannot simply be completed by some surgery and treatment procedures but also must be accompanied by everyday practices. I will explain how beauty and its related daily practices, such as diet and sleep, are regulated within biomedical morality. I will also extend his theoretical framework to explore how a beauty defect could be treated and defined differently by biomedical standards of health in different departments.

While medicalization and biomedicalization are central to these anthropological theoretical frameworks, they are less common in the Chinese anthropological literature on beauty and health. Previous Chinese anthropologists have explored the social implications of women's beauty enhancements (Hua 2013; Luo 2013; Yang 2011), but they have not used the concept of biomedicalization or explored how beauty has become a medical problem in their analysis. Furthermore, recent Chinese studies of beauty and health have largely focused on the impacts of the internet and social media (Guan 2021; Dippner 2018), but they have neglected the fact that the way that digital technologies are used is closely associated with the medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in China. A case in point is that my data demonstrates that the women I met used social media platforms such as RED to obtain biomedical information, get free digital tests, and evaluate their beauty imperfections and risks. Additionally, my chapter will explore a specific example of the impacts of COVID-19 and its related restrictions, which my

data shows were complicated. While there were strict regulations to control women's access to beauty in biomedicine, women's beauty enhancements could benefit from staying in highly medicalized settings, such as treatment or quarantine spaces at public hospitals, to maintain social distance during the COVID period (2019–2022). Meanwhile, women's connections to medical authorities, families, and friends were maintained with the help of social media. For example, digital technologies such as 3d printing and virtual meetings between doctors and beauty patients on WeChat and Red were widely used during this period.

## **Section One: Beauty with a Health Rationale in Dermatology**

### ***Beauty Treatment Room***

From September to December 2021, I spent most of my time in the beauty treatment room of the Dermatology Department at Zhongshan Hospital, a public hospital. The head nurse, Zeng, guided my first visit to Dermatology. The Dermatology and Plastic Surgery Departments were both located on the third floor, and I noted that there were more than ten rooms in Dermatology. Nurses and doctors were cleaning rooms and preparing to help patients. Dermatology had a small lobby with a reception centre. It was twenty minutes to eight in the morning, but five patients had already arrived and were waiting in the lobby. Walking down one of the corridors, I saw that Zeng was turning on a machine in one of the treatment rooms. Zeng was in her 50s and was going to retire soon. As a head nurse in Dermatology, she sometimes helped with the communication between doctors. I said hello to her, and we had a brief conversation about my

research project. She then directed me to the beauty treatment room of Dermatology on the fourth floor.<sup>69</sup>

When we entered the treatment room, it was about eight o'clock in the morning, and there were no patients in the room. I saw a doctor sitting beside the computer while another doctor sat on the sofa. Zeng introduced them to me, and I briefly introduced myself and my research project again. Zeng showed them my permission letter and left the room. Dr. Wang and Dr. Wang Hai told me that to conduct my research, I could stay on the sofa during appointments because patients usually spent a long time there before and after undergoing treatment, and I would have many opportunities to talk with them. The beauty treatment room included spaces for consultation and treatment. One of the rooms had a long sofa, a consultation space, and two operating beds for employing treatments; another smaller room had two operating beds with machines. Based on my observations, the consultations in the beauty treatment room were more open than those in the Plastic Surgery Department, as it was common to see several patients in the room at the same time due to the long treatment processes. But when it was necessary, patients were still able to have one-to-one consultations with their doctors. The door of the smaller room might be locked during medical treatments as the privacy of patients was guaranteed during the actual treatment.

I was surprised that the colour pink was widely used in the beauty treatment room of Dermatology, unlike in other departments. Pink is considered a very girly colour in Chinese society while white and blue relate more to dominant imaginations about medical settings. This colour choice distinguished it from other nearby departments. While Dentistry, which targeted

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<sup>69</sup> The room for beauty treatments was new compared to other rooms in Dermatology. Also, it was common for different departments to have a few additional offices and rooms in other buildings or on different floors.

both adults and youths, used diverse colours, other departments, like Plastic Surgery, tended to use white. Some patients I met also observed that pink was typically connected with young girls' ages and preferences. But this was not the case in Dermatology. The medical professionals here told me they ordered these pink curtains and cover sheets on purpose to help patients feel warm and relaxed. The wide use of pink in Dermatology seemed to align with the claim that they were concerned with offering emotional care for patients.



Figure 9. Li, *Beauty Treatment Room in Cosmetic Dermatology*, 2021.

In the Cosmetic Dermatology Department, it was recommended that all patients book a consultation online before visiting, as walk-in services were not guaranteed. Biomedical treatments in Cosmetic Dermatology usually did not include invasive surgery. Different kinds of beauty procedures, such as intense pulsed light, were very popular. An intense pulsed light would be delivered to the patient's facial or bodily surfaces to deal with skin issues and damage, such as swollen skin. Depending on the patients' skin problems, the spectral range of light varied. While doctors took turns providing consultations and some treatments, such as peeling therapy, *Ji Shi* 技师,<sup>70</sup> who were licensed technicians, would only employ treatments but would not diagnose

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<sup>70</sup> In Dermatology, some medical professionals were so-called 技师 (medical technicians, or licensed assistant physicians) who were certificated to employ beauty procedures. Unlike certified physicians, technicians were not able to diagnose patients or prescribe medicine, treatment, and surgery. When there were enough technicians in the beauty treatment room, doctors would merely provide consultations. Some medical professionals told me that this promoted the working efficiency of the Dermatology Department.

and prescribe. This cooperation between doctors and technicians contributed to high working efficiency in Dermatology. Beauty was highly medicalized in the Cosmetic Dermatology of Zhongshan. Skin beauty was related to skin health issues, requiring biomedical interventions. Doctors usually referred to all beauty procedures as medical treatments to deal with skin problems such as pimple scars, spots, and freckles. This will be discussed further in the following section.

### ***Pimples, Balance, Diet, and Care: Protecting Skin Health Before Enhancing Skin Beauty***

I arrived in the beauty treatment room at about half past eight on a Wednesday morning. The summer weather was very hot in Xiamen, and I ran to the fourth floor in a sweat. Although there were air conditioners in the corridor, the temperature was still high. No patients were waiting in the corridor. I quickly knocked on the door and entered the room. I saw Joyce sitting on the sofa with a medical mask. Joyce, who called herself a pimple warrior, was in her 20s and worked as a teacher. She was visiting Dr. Wang He in the hope of treating her pimples and finally removing pimple scars.

Due to the regulations of local and national governments, patients were required to scan their health code and wear a medical mask when entering public spaces during the COVID period. Wearing a mask did increase social distance, but I should admit that this regulation sometimes helped me to start my conversations and interviews as some patients were more likely to talk with me about their feelings and experiences when their faces were almost fully covered by a mask. As I was putting on my white coat, I said hello to her and introduced myself.

Joyce seemed interested in my topic and kept chatting with me. “I was waiting for Dr. Wang He. She is so famous, isn’t she?” Dr. Wang He was well-known for specializing in treating

pimples. Also, she was a humorous person who often kept a smile on her face to comfort her patients. Some patients said that it was extremely difficult to reserve a consultation with her. Many female participants I met outside hospitals also told me that they had heard about her. Some, including Joyce, told me that they would wake up before seven o'clock in the morning to reserve an appointment with Dr. Wang He.

“Sorry, I haven't met her. I am new here.” I quickly turned on my phone and searched for information about Dr. Wang He.

“She's always busy. Her available consultations will all be booked immediately. Also, she's a very nice person. She is so patient.”

When we talked, Dr. Wang He called Joyce's name. Joyce came to the consultation space and sat in front of Dr. Wang He. Like other consultations in Dermatology, Joyce's consultation was divided into several stages. Joyce was asked to remove her makeup and mask before the consultation. There was a wash basin located near the consultation space. Dermatology also provided patients with a medical facial cleanser to remove their makeup. Then the doctor checked her medical history and discussed her skin problems, especially her pimples, with her. This only took about five minutes. After completing the first brief consultation, the doctor asked her to undergo some basic skin tests, such as mite and allergy tests. Joyce had already done so and showed the doctor the results of her recent skin tests. This is very common in China, where experienced patients might consult doctors in several medical institutions or take some basic biomedical tests to save their time. Test results from regulated institutions and hospitals were usually accepted by public doctors.

After reading her test results, the doctor prescribed some medicine for her and said, “It's not time for you to undergo an invasive beauty procedure. I mean . . . it's too early. You should

deal with skin inflammation, which leads to the rapid growth of pimples on your face.” Joyce thanked the doctor and collected her documents.

Later, when chatting with me on WeChat, Joyce told me that she did biomedical tests and visited public doctors regularly. “I usually do the tests before visiting the doctors. If I have pimples, doctors will tell me whether I have skin issues such as inflammation and allergy [based on test results]. Maybe you don’t know that sometimes a pimple mark can be a kind of skin inflammation too. Public hospitals are better at treating these health issues.”



Figure 10. Joyce, *Joyce’s Photo of Pimples*, 2015.

Joyce usually got information about health and beauty enhancements on social platforms such as RED.<sup>71</sup> She told me that she viewed comments about beauty products, beauty procedures, and doctors online but did not consider RED a very reliable place to study biomedical knowledge. Joyce said:

There’re limited real comments and professional information now. Also, I am tired of influencers’ perfect photos without any skin imperfections. They are fake, but I still feel

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<sup>71</sup> Red, which is also named Xiaohongshu and Rednote, is one of the most popular social platforms targeting female users. It was originally a platform for women and girls to share their feelings and experiences of marriage, childcare, and domestic life. Now people also share tips and stories about their work, studies, and trips.

peer pressure when seeing these photos . . . I've tried some beauty routines and easy beauty procedures such as peeling therapy [recommended by RED posts]. They can't solve my pimples and pimple scars. But I need to try. Many people recommend these two doctors [referring to Dr. Wang He and another doctor]. I am still comparing Dr. Wang He with another public doctor from The First Hospital. Maybe I will keep visiting Dr. Wang as she is very patient and humorous.

Previous anthropological literature on beauty has demonstrated how beauty is impacted by biomedical knowledge and practices. Like health, beauty has been associated with individual moral obligation, risk management, and self-surveillance with the help of biomedical technologies (Berkowitz 2021; Mire 2019; Greenhalgh 2015). Following these studies, this section helps explain the medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in China. Beauty issues such as natural wrinkles, spots (freckles), pimples, and pimple scars (marks and pits) were related to skin issues or diseases that require biomedical interventions in Cosmetic Dermatology at Zhongshan. The story provides a typical example to show that Joyce's pimples and scars were diagnosed as a result of her skin inflammation, and her skin beauty enhancement (removing pimple scars) was determined by strict standards of skin health in this public hospital. Skin beauty was framed by biomedical concepts of health and sickness and put into constant correction and risk management. Healthy skin in this context means there should be no diagnoses of skin diseases or issues such as pimples. In other words, Chinese public biomedicine treats beauty when it does not go beyond biomedical health standards or healthy beauty.

The results of related medical tests determine the care and treatment individuals receive in biomedical clinical settings. These also have led to new categories of patients in China. For instance, in Cosmetic Dermatology at Zhongshan, patients like Joyce with a high risk for skin problems (e.g., hereditary and long-term pimples) were supposed to undergo biomedical treatments and tended to have limited access to beauty resources. Meanwhile, biomedical

knowledge of beauty is produced and circulated in different ways, leading to changing relationships between patients and doctors. As my data shows, women like Joyce also obtained biomedical knowledge and information online. Some also had virtual consultations and bought skin treatment devices such as Tripollar.<sup>72</sup> Their understanding and practices of enhancing skin beauty were partially impacted by posts and advertisements of pharmaceutical companies, suggestions from different doctors, and social influencers. At Zhongshan, some patients actively prevented skin health issues and got test results. Patients like Joyce would compare doctors and hospitals and write comments about them based on their feelings and experiences.

Beauty has become both a biomedical problem and a way of life. Women's beauty and health have been put under constant biomedical surveillance in and outside clinical settings. Women have obligations to follow biomedical knowledge and practices and keep self-risk assessments. Healthy, beautiful skin cannot be attained or kept by merely undergoing beauty procedures or skin treatments. Like cosmetic products, beauty procedures and medicine have been normalized in women's daily lives. As Joyce said, she tried different beauty products, medicines, and beauty procedures, such as peeling therapy. Women I met often used medicine, such as Erythromycin and Growth Factor, after undergoing beauty procedures or having small injuries, even though some did not get their prescriptions from a regulated doctor. Over-the-counter medicine and beauty products such as face packs could be easily accessed using food delivery apps such as Meituan and Ele.me. In China, daily care and self-management become very significant for patients when skin beauty is put at risk. Using pimples as an example, the growth of pimples and pimple scars can be impacted by diets, living or working environments, lifestyles, make-up, and emotions. Sugar was considered a very significant food with negative

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<sup>72</sup> Tripollar is a popular home-use skin care device. It is supposed to help prevent wrinkles and sagging skin.

impacts on skin health and beauty in Xiamen.<sup>73</sup> As I was told by some doctors and patients, eating sugar posed a threat to weight control and skin-health issues or diseases such as pimples and hyperglycemia. The disappearance of pimples could be temporary, and their reoccurrence could cause new beauty imperfections such as pimple scars. This also explains why public biomedical doctors in this story insisted that beauty could only be treated once skin-related issues, such as inflammation, were under control.

However, not all women normalize and follow biomedical practices to enhance beauty or consider their skin's beauty to be at risk all the time. The biomedicalization of beauty has encountered ignorance, resistance, and constraints. This supports previous anthropological theories that the changes biomedicalization brings about do not indicate an epochal shift with a totalizing coherence. Biopower and biomedical knowledge are not unstoppable or neutral but face a wide array of countertrends (Clarke et al. 2010; Mamo 2007). Doctors told me that long-term biomedical interventions on skin health and beauty were difficult when patients did not tell or remember details of their daily schedules, allergies, and diets. Doctors could prescribe a course of treatment and medication, but there was no guarantee that patients would follow all their guidelines or be able to normalize biomedical practices in their daily lives. Indeed, some women told me that they had stopped taking Isotretinoin because it led to skin-health problems such as herpes and the dry condition of mucous membranes. Another female patient stopped using it after about six months, and she did so without consulting a doctor as she felt that her pimples were under control. Mamo's (2007) study provides an example of how Lesbian couples

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<sup>73</sup> Although Xiamen, and the entire Minnan region, produces tea leaves and has become one of the most famous tea trade centres in China, the most popular drink among the younger generations in Xiamen is bubble tea. (During the Colonial period, it was coffee.) Bubble tea contains higher levels of sugar compared to traditional tea. Sometimes, making bubble tea does not require the use of milk but fake milk powder and sugar/syrup. It is not considered a healthy drink in China, and indeed, the addiction to bubble tea has been connected to the self-management of beauty and health.

wishing to get pregnant negotiate different knowledge sources, including their self-perceptions. My discussion also shows that women are not merely negative receivers of biomedical knowledge but also actively manage their health and beauty based on their own self-perceptions and other medical sciences.

Another point that supports this claim is that some Chinese women have also obtained knowledge of different medical sciences such as Chinese medicine and Tibetan medicine. For example, saffron crocus, a common ingredient in both Chinese and Tibetan medicine, was used to cook skin-care soup or make skin cream by some women I talked to. The use of Chinese medical knowledge is more complicated here. There is regulated Chinese medicine, which has been incorporated into Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), and unregulated Chinese medicine in China.<sup>74</sup> Whereas all regulated TCM physicians and doctors receive formal education in both biomedicine and Chinese medicine, some unregulated Chinese physicians work for private and/or family businesses and do not receive formal education. While visiting regulated doctors to eliminate skin issues such as spots and pimples, some women were using unregulated Chinese medicine or medical cuisine at the same time. Although the approach to diagnosis and maintenance of healthy skin was largely biomedical, some doctors I met, especially those who specialized in both biomedicine and Chinese medicine, also incorporated Chinese medical tenets such as balance and harmony in their diagnosis and treatment of skin issues like pimples.

Chinese medicine emphasizes the balance between *Yin* and *Yang* and that the flow of *Qi* 气<sup>75</sup> dominates the condition of the bodily system. An imbalance of *Qi* might lead to an

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<sup>74</sup> TCM is a contemporary version of Chinese medicine. It has incorporated both biomedical and Chinese medical tenets with the support of President Mao since the 1960s (Scheid 2002). Also, as mentioned in my previous chapter, some unregulated medical shops would use unregulated Chinese medicine.

<sup>75</sup> *Qi* is considered the basic element in the Chinese medical system. It flows everywhere, in and outside individual bodies. In this way, human bodies are not separated but incorporated with the outside world/cosmos.

imbalance between the internal and external body, which finally causes health problems and illnesses (Horden and Hsu 2013). Skin beauty is maintained when women sustain a harmonious nature. As I mentioned in the first chapter, in Plastic Surgery, the concepts of balance and harmony were focused on the facial surface, whereas in Cosmetic Dermatology at Zhongshan, they were more often used to describe the relationship between internal health and external beauty. The existence of pimples might reflect an imbalance or sickness. This concept of balance was also often related to another Chinese medical tenet called *Du* 度.<sup>76</sup> For example, *Du* is used to refer to the amount of Chinese medicine, such as herbs and stones, in a medical recipe. It was developed by doctors in Cosmetic Dermatology to describe legitimate treatments and beauty enhancements (for example, suitable beauty enhancement without pursuing perfection). This will also be discussed in my studies of Plastic Surgery in this chapter. In Dermatology at Zhongshan, the term *Du* 度 was also used when discussing the amount of food, care, and medicine used by women or their inappropriate daily schedules, such as staying up late and doing exercises. My next two stories will provide more explanations for my above discussion.

### ***Savage Candy and Unhealthy Skin, The Choice to Maintain Skin Health***

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<sup>76</sup> *Du* 度 is an important concept in Chinese medicine and China's biomedicine. It can be translated as degree, amount, and so on. It is often used to describe the amount of medicine in a medical recipe, as it is very common for Chinese medical professionals to change the amount of medicine based on their understanding of different patients' health/bodily conditions. Although sometimes two patients might use the same medical recipe, the amount of medicine might be varied. *Du* 度 has been developed to describe how medical professionals guide patients to make rational, correct decisions and control the result of a treatment/plastic surgery. For example, when patients have unrealistic goals, such as perfection, or they want to undergo dangerous surgery procedures or to pursue unnatural beauty, medical professionals would hold or control the *Du* 度 by persuading and guiding patients. In other words, when patients want to exceed the general standards of beauty, such as healthy and natural beauty, they are losing the *Du* 度 so medical professionals need to help their patients. The concept *Du* 度 has also been used in social interactions. When someone does not have proper social manners and often hurts other people's interests, people might consider this person as losing the *Du* 度.

One day in late October 2021, I started my fieldwork in the early morning without having had breakfast. At about ten o'clock, I felt hungry and dizzy, so I went to a small convenience store in the hospital to buy some food. Unfortunately, there were only some snacks in the store, so I purchased a small bag of candies. When I was eating my candies in the treatment room, I asked medical professionals and patients whether they would like to share them with me. While Dr. Wang Zhi<sup>77</sup> took some candies, most of them politely refused.

Dr. Wang saw us when she was walking into the room, “Don’t annoy my patients. Wow, you are distributing sweet food here.” I was confused by her words. Dr. Wang then smiled and told me that sugar is considered a cause of pimples biomedically, so sugar usually did not appear in Dermatology. Two female patients in the room echoed Dr. Wang’s view that they were eager to have some candies and bubble tea, but they had to control their desire in the hope of improving their skin health. In this way, the intake of high-sugar foods was connected to individuals’ self-management whereby individuals were responsible for resisting the temptation of sweet food to maintain their skin health and beauty. The failure to maintain a healthy diet, thus, was seen as a failure to be a good, rational person or patient who strived to enhance beauty and health via self-management and self-improvement.

Meanwhile, Dr. Wang and other doctors did not recommend that patients give up eating sugar completely, as the lack of sugar intake might cause other health issues, leading patients to a worse situation. Some female patients told me that they lost more hair<sup>78</sup> and faced more anxiety

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<sup>77</sup> Dr. Wang Zhi was the youngest doctor in Dermatology. He had worked in Zhongshan Hospital for only a few months.

<sup>78</sup> Hair has been considered significant when portraying beautiful women, especially in traditional Chinese literature such as *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Some women I met during my field work also emphasized the importance of managing their hair to promote their beauty and health.

after giving up having sugar. These sacrifices made long-term control of sugar sometimes impossible and finally led to the recurrence of pimples. As Joyce complained:

I've kept on a very strict diet. I haven't eaten any sugar since the first or second year of my undergraduate program. I didn't drink any sweet drinks such as milk tea. Basically, pimples are not caused by what you eat directly but by inflammation . . . problems of follicles. I don't eat sugar because it might stimulate follicles and pores . . . A doctor suggested I try Isotretinoin. It was only for patients with severe pimples . . . I took Isotretinoin for a long time, but this led to severe side effects. I didn't get new pimples, but it didn't let my skin produce oil. My skin became very dry. I had chapped lips throughout the whole summer. I've heard that patients who take Isotretinoin for more than a year might cure pimples. But I'm afraid of the side effects. I am not able to force myself to take this medicine for one year.

I recount this story because it tells us something about skin health and beauty in the Dermatology Department of Zhongshan. Beautiful skin cannot be defined without discussing health. It also supports my earlier point that skin health and beauty are not stable, and biomedical control of beauty can be limited. The choice of food might impact the skin and bodily health in unforeseen ways. In the stories told by some of my female participants, like Joyce, beauty could not be separated from constant risk assessments and self-management in private spaces such as the home. Women were educated to be responsible and rational when making any choice within the biomedical value. The measurement of sugar in the daily diet reflects how beauty was also connected to individual responsibilities and enterprise, including collaborations between biomedical authorities and individuals.

***Incorporating Chinese Medical Tenets in Dermatology: Zhong Kou Wei 重口味 (Heavily Flavoured) Food and Fa Wu 发物***

One day in November 2021, I was following Dr. Chen<sup>79</sup> in the treatment room. Dr. Chen had just completed a consultation and was giving the patient some tips. When Dr. Chen mentioned that food such as lamb should be avoided in daily diets, the patient was shocked.

“What? Is there a problem with lamb? I had a spicy lamb hotpot yesterday.”

“Wow, you did not mention this during the consultation.”

“What’s wrong with lamb? I thought it was a healthy kind of food.”

“Yes, it is. But having too much spicy lamb might lead to *Shang Huo* 上火. Lamb is also considered as *Fa Wu* 发物<sup>80</sup> in Chinese medicine. This might be one of the main causes of your pimples.” *Shang Huo* 上火 is a key concept in both unregulated Chinese medicine and Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). When the balance of *Yin* and *Yang* is broken by too much heat in the body, excessive heat might cause some symptoms such as bad breath, sore throat, fever, and so on. These symptoms have been categorized as results of *Shang Huo* 上火. The term summarizing these symptoms may vary across geographical locations and cultural systems. For example, in Canton, it is often called *Re Qi* 热气 (Hot *Qi*). The causes of *Shang Huo* 上火 are very complicated. It is sometimes caused by inadequate diet (for example, having too much food with heavy flavours, etc.), excessive emotions, and staying up late or lack of sleep. In Chinese medical terms, foods like pepper, lamb, and shrimp, which stimulate an imbalance of *Qi* and cause health problems, are called *Fa Wu* 发物. This term is widely used among Chinese medical professionals and laypersons in Chinese society. The doctors I met usually did not need to define

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<sup>79</sup> Dr. Chen provided consultations and treatments in the beauty treatment room every Monday.

<sup>80</sup> A category of food that might break the balance and induce disease more easily. Lamb is a very important example.

or explain the meaning of Fa Wu 发物 when providing professional diagnosis and advice as most patients had at least basic knowledge of this concept.

After the patient left, I told Dr. Chen that I was very surprised that she had incorporated Chinese medical tenets. Dr. Chen told me that although some traditional Chinese medical tenets and categories such as Fa Wu 发物 were debatable in biomedical clinical settings, we might find similar ideas in biomedicine. From a biomedical perspective, some spices, such as pepper, might stimulate the metabolic process and promote sweat, which could cause more difficulties in dealing with skin problems such as pimples.

Sometimes we do not make a very accurate diagnosis as patients don't tell us enough details about their family medical history and way of life. The consultation is usually very short. As some Chinese physicians have said, pimples might be caused by *Shang Huo* 上火. But when it comes to the cause of *Shang Huo* 上火, that can be complicated too . . . Communication is very important.

Compared to taboos around sugar, the disfavour of *Zhong Kou Wei* 重口味 (heavily flavoured) food corresponds to both biomedical and Chinese medical tenets. This is partially related to China's medical education system. In China, doctors are required to study both biomedical and Chinese medical knowledge in universities/colleges.<sup>81</sup> Doctors usually have a good understanding of basic Chinese medicine tenets, even if they choose to specialize in a biomedical field. At Zhongshan, it was common to see some doctors combining biomedical and Chinese medical tenets when employing skin treatments, especially treatment for chloasma, skin allergies, and pimples. Some doctors would suggest that patients – including those who had non-

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<sup>81</sup> Doctors who work in public hospitals need to have at least one university or college degree.

surgery procedures such as laser treatment and skin massage – avoid having 重口味 (heavily flavoured) food or Fa Wu 发物 (for example, spice).

Like Joyce's experience with sugar and pimples, Dr. Chen's comments above provide insight into how women's skin is put at risk by Chinese biomedicine in and outside clinical settings. In her words, skin health and skin beauty can be impacted by changing emotions, diets, and daily schedules, requiring women's constant self-management and active collaborations with doctors. However, compared to Joyce's story, her comments provide more details about how Cosmetic Dermatology at Zhongshan Hospital has incorporated both biomedical and Chinese medical tenets to construct the rationality of biomedicine when dealing with skin beauty and health. Compared to the way biomedicine was promoted during the Colonial Period (1911–1949), the construction of biomedical rationality and authority has been different recently. The indigenization of biomedicine in contemporary China (1949–now) is not supported by the devaluation of other Chinese medical systems. Doctors in the previous stories made connections between biomedical and Chinese medical tenets and thereby developed new content. The medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in China have supported the circulation of both biomedical and Chinese medical knowledge. This will be further discussed in the second section of this chapter. Also, biomedicine has maintained its dominance in Cosmetic Dermatology. Some doctors only used Chinese medical knowledge and concepts when they could find related knowledge in biomedical science.

In this way, this story provides a new example of the relationship between biomedicine and Chinese medicine. In Ning's (2018, 2012) study of biomedicine and complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in Canada, the developments of CAM and biomedicine in the

neoliberal era emphasize individual responsibility rather than collective responsibility. Ning argues that CAM's focus on wellness is not very different from the biomedical emphasis on individual responsibility. The individual body does not heal itself naturally but requires an individual's constant self-control and self-enhancement. In the story conveyed above it is clear that while biomedical and Chinese medical knowledge both emphasized holism and balance when dealing with skin beauty and health, individual beauty and health enhancements were impacted by individual emotions, daily practices and choices (of food, drink, and living place).

In the Dermatology Department of Zhongshan Hospital, patients' pursuit of skin beauty was largely impacted by biomedical standards of skin health. Health was still the priority in Cosmetic Dermatology. Aesthetic imperfections of the skin were dealt with only after the control/elimination of what dermatologists considered to be skin health issues, such as pimples. At the same time, doctors were careful to make sure that pharmaceutical medicine and treatment would not exceed the *Du* 度 and thereby damage individuals' health and balance. Attention to skin health came first as doctors and patients sought to repair the natural, healthy state of the skin before pursuing any superficial skin treatments. Attention to skin beauty, therefore, came second, even if this was the primary motivation of the patient seeking Cosmetic Dermatology services, and this was guided by the logic of restoration and prevention. Women's understanding and management of skin health and beauty often went beyond the biomedical clinical system. Their skin beauty reflected a healthy, harmonious human-cosmos balance, impacted by diets, schedules, emotions, weather, environment, and so on.

This section also provided insights into the indigenization of biomedicine in China. Chinese biomedicine did not construct its rationality by eliminating traditional Chinese medical systems. Chinese public biomedicine and Chinese medicine both value holism, as well as

individual responsibilities and choices. The next story will provide an example of how skin beauty was determined by biomedical standards of health in Cosmetic Dermatology at Xinkaiyuan Hospital, a private hospital in Xiamen. It will also compare how biomedical standards of skin health differed in public and private hospitals in Xiamen.

### ***Pursuing Healthy Skin Beauty in Xinkaiyuan: Different Standards of Skin Health***

In late December 2021, I started conducting my fieldwork in the 皮肤美容科 Plastic Surgery and Dermatology Department of Xinkaiyuan Hospital. Most of the doctors in these two departments worked on part-time contracts and held their full-time positions in The First Affiliated Hospital. These doctors only attended Xinkaiyuan Hospital one to three times per week. There were three consultation rooms in this department. In contrast to the rooms in Zhongshan Hospital, these consultation rooms were painted white with floral designs and had luxury furniture.

From December 2021 to May 2022, I was following Master Luo in the main consultation room. Master Luo was the only professional beauty consultant who was also a certified dermatologist in Xinkaiyuan. She worked as the only doctor of Cosmetic Dermatology and was also the only beauty consultant in Plastic Surgery at Xinkaiyuan. Master Luo used one consultation room to provide paid beauty and dermatology consultations. It was called consultation room 1, or 专家室 (specialist room) in Chinese. It had a long sofa for patients and doctors to sit together during their conversations. After the 2022 New Year, the sofa was replaced by two new small leather sofas. Most female patients in Cosmetic Dermatology visited Master Luo to undergo beauty procedures rather than to treat a specific skin issue such as pimples. But this does not mean that access to beauty was not determined by biomedical standards of health

here. Master Luo was responsible for checking and treating patients' skin health. As was the case in public hospitals such as Zhongshan and The First Hospital, technoscientific tests, such as for mites, were used to facilitate diagnosis and treatment. Test results from other regulated hospitals could also be accepted.



Figure 11. Li, *A Photo of Room 1*, 2022.

In late April 2022, I met Cindy in the Cosmetic Dermatology Department at Xinkaiyuan. Cindy was around 35 and she had been worrying about skin aging for several years. Cindy often visited this hospital as she worked near it. She had a large, swollen pimple on her face. But it was time to have her next mesotherapy, which could help tighten her skin. Mesotherapy is a popular beauty procedure that helps moisturize the skin. It is usually recommended that it be applied to the patient's face once per month. Unfortunately, skin issues such as pimples might make the facial surface too fragile to undergo this laser treatment, and so in Zhongshan Hospital, doctors

usually refused to employ any laser treatment when the patient's facial surface was considered fragile. However, what counted as fragility and what was considered skin health differed in public or private hospitals.

Cindy had reserved a consultation with Master Luo via WeChat. She entered Master Luo's office and sat down, and a trainee brought her a cup of water. Master Luo and Cindy had known each other for a long time. They made small talk about recent life experiences before starting the consultation.

"Am I still able to have my mesotherapy procedure?" Cindy was worried about her skin health. She constantly looked at the swollen facial area in the mirror.

Master Luo checked her skin condition and said, "It should be fine. I will carefully prevent your pimple from being harmed by the laser light."

Cindy followed Master Luo to treatment room 1. During the procedure, Cindy lay on the treatment table in silence. After completing her mesotherapy, Cindy applied an ice bag and had a short talk with me. She told me that she had had pimples since adolescence, but unfortunately, she had never found a perfect cure for them. She also mentioned that she felt a bit of pain when Master Luo had applied the laser on her face. But it was tolerable, so she did not stop Master Luo.

"It [the pimple] looked good. The laser light did not break it. I hope it will be better soon."

In the public Zhongshan hospital, women's pursuit of skin beauty and health were guided by a biomedical logic of prevention and restoration. Patients were not allowed to undergo any beauty procedure if they were diagnosed with a skin health issue. To help patients maintain skin

health and beauty, any future issues that might affect the patient's skin, such as aging, lifestyle and diet, were all taken into consideration by the doctor. In other words, doctors at Zhongshan worked to help patients restore their general health status, treat their skin conditions, and prevent things from getting worse. Similarly, in Cosmetic Dermatology of Xinkaiyuan Hospital, maintaining skin health was a significant goal. However, the biomedical standards of skin health were different. In private hospitals, undergoing surgery and treatment procedures to enhance beauty was supported by medical professionals only if they would not cause harm to the current health of the skin. Small skin problems such as a single pimple did not prevent patients from having invasive beauty treatment procedures such as laser treatment. As some female patients shared with me, private hospitals were more flexible than public hospitals in their use of invasive beauty procedures, such as mesotherapy. As Cindy's story illustrates, they were willing to work around a visible fragility – a large pimple on her face – in order to proceed with a beauty procedure. It is unlikely that such a procedure would have been allowed in a public hospital. Private hospitals did, of course, care about the health of the patient, but they were also concerned with producing profits in their fee-for-service model.

Moreover, it was less common for the tenets of Chinese medicine to be part of skin health and skin beauty enhancements in Cosmetic Dermatology at Xinkaiyuan. This was in part because Master Luo did not specialize in Chinese medicine. (At Xinkaiyuan hospital, there were a few doctors in Dermatology trained in both Chinese medicine and biomedicine, but none of them worked in Cosmetic Dermatology.) Chinese medical tenets such as balance and harmony did, however, play a role in the Plastic Surgery Department of this private hospital – which I will discuss further in the second section. In unregulated private medical sites, the situation could be more complex because some beauty consultants do not receive any formal education in Chinese

medicine. Based on my data, some women who tried or wanted to try Chinese medicine to enhance their skin beauty and health usually visited regulated doctors in public hospitals rather than private hospitals and unregulated medical workshops. Most of them used Chinese medicine as a supplement to biomedicine, and only two of them insisted that they only visited regulated Chinese physicians and not dermatologists. They mentioned that doctors received formal education and training in both biomedicine and Chinese medicine in public hospitals, while some unregulated medical workshops provided unregulated Chinese physicians and Chinese medicine. Only a few female patients told me that they had tried or planned to try unregulated Chinese medicine, even if that meant taking unforeseeable risks. This also reflects that biomedicine has been more powerful when it comes to enhancing skin beauty and health in China.

This section explains how skin beauty is determined by different biomedical standards of health in Cosmetic Dermatology of Chinese public and private hospitals. Public hospitals are stricter and more conservative about skin beauty when having small skin health issues is an impediment to women wanting to access invasive beauty procedures. Moreover, the Chinese government does not fund beauty procedures, women's pursuit of perfect skin beauty might be considered unethical as a waste of public medical resources. All beauty procedures are called medical treatments when skin beauty itself is described by strict biomedical standards of skin health in public hospitals. Private hospitals, on the other hand, are less risk-averse and less conservative when dealing with skin beauty and health. They provide more choices for women's beauty enhancements and are more flexible. Private hospitals like Xinkaiyuan tend to make a clearer distinction between beauty procedures and medical treatments. Although beauty is still determined by biomedical standards of health, beauty procedures can be done even if there are small skin problems. Beauty procedures are more likely to be normalized and commodified in

private hospitals, where beauty has become a business. In Cindy's case, although she merely had a small pimple on her face, she still could buy her beauty procedure. Furthermore, stories in and outside hospitals provide examples of the co-existence of medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in Xiamen, where beauty has become an individual lifelong project, connecting with certain women's daily choices and practices across various social and medical spaces.

In the next section, I will turn to plastic surgeries, such as double-eyelid surgery, to discuss how beauty is regulated by biomedical standards of health in these public and private hospitals. I will introduce concepts such as healthy beauty, sick beauty, and natural beauty. I will provide more examples to explore the medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in China.

## **Section Two: Making It Natural: Normalizing and Racializing Eyelids in the Plastic Surgery Department**

### *Harmony 和谐 and Balance 平衡: The Construction of "Ziran Mei 自然美 (Natural Beauty)"*

It was just before five o'clock on a Thursday afternoon in June 2021. Dr. Zheng and I had spent more than an hour waiting for a patient. Dr. Zheng is a famous doctor in the Plastic Surgery Department at Zhongshan Hospital. I often followed her and Dr. Yang when they provided consultations and/or employed treatment/surgery procedures. When I looked at my eyes in the mirror, she suddenly noticed that I might have undergone plastic surgery on my double eyelids.

"I did not notice before that you had your double eyelids done; have you?"

"Yes."

"Oh . . . they (eyelids) are wide but still seems to be suitable for you. You have big, thick lips, and the height of your nose is good . . ."

“So that wouldn’t be suitable for others? As I’ve observed, you and the other doctors all seem to prefer narrow internal eyelids.”

Dr. Zheng nodded her head. “Yes, because that is suitable for most people. If someone would like to have wide eyelids, they should have suitable conditions in the area surrounding the eyes. This means that there should be enough space between their brows and eyes. Their eyes should be in harmony with other parts of the face. Also, some might have dead eyes when their eyelids go too wide.” Dead eyes here mean dull, glassy eyes.

As we were talking, a female patient came into the room to consult Dr. Zheng. She told Dr. Zheng that she would like to change her eyelids to the double style.

Dr. Zheng asked her, “But what kind of eyelids do you want?”

“I want ‘bling bling’<sup>82</sup> type. Thanks.”

“What is ‘bling bling’? Could you give me a specific example? Maybe you could use a celebrity as an example?” Dr. Zheng was confused.

The patient then turned to me and told Dr. Zheng, “I want eyes like hers.”

“Sorry, they are not suitable for your face. There is not enough space for such wide eyelids above your eyes. Also, it will look ‘unnatural’ or exaggerated with your other plain facial features.”

The patient looked a little bit disappointed but soon agreed with Dr. Zheng’s advice, “Okay.”

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<sup>82</sup> In Mandarin, the word “bling bling” is used to describe sparkling things, especially diamonds. Sometimes people use this word to describe sparkling eyes.

Dr. Zheng then continued to persuade her in a humorous way, “Yes, we are aiming at pursuing natural, high-level beauty now. Are you married?”

“No.”

“Good, so we only need to make some small changes to your eyelids. You will get more life experience and be nourished by your marriage someday, and you will become more beautiful.” In Plastic Surgery at Zhongshan Hospital, natural beauty often replaced healthy beauty to describe individual appearances.

As I was told by the doctors I met, and by my female participants who visited doctors in different local hospitals, it is not uncommon for public doctors to emphasize natural beauty at public hospitals in Xiamen. While a “natural” appearance is associated with healthy and *Gaoji* 高级 (high-level) beauty, an “unnatural” change of bodily or facial features is often considered to be sick, ugly, and abnormal. The conjoining of healthy and natural beauty only happens when all traces of surgery/treatment are eliminated. This also explains why natural beauty is a more significant biomedical concept in Plastic Surgery than in Cosmetic Dermatology, because traces of laser procedures, such as Mesotherapy and Picoway, usually disappear easily after recovery without in any way altering other facial features. I consider natural beauty as the developed version of healthy beauty, but the enhancement of healthy beauty does not always lead to natural beauty, because traces are not always eliminated, even though women’s altered appearances do not violate biomedical standards of health. This will be discussed further below.

The domination of natural beauty reflects how the Chinese public biomedicine develops with traditional Chinese medical concepts such as *Ping Heng* 平衡<sup>83</sup> (balance) and *He Xie* 和谐<sup>84</sup> (harmony) to construct a rationality of natural beauty. This is much like the situation in public Cosmetic Dermatology, but in private hospital biomedical definitions of balance and harmony were somewhat different. Doctors, including Dr. Zheng, emphasized the significance of maintaining balance and harmony in an individual's facial features, such as eyes and nose. Two Chinese dominant ideals of double eyelids also provide a specific example for us to understand these descriptions of balance and harmony. In China, double eyelids are divided into two main types – internal double eyelids and external double eyelids. While external double eyelids are wider with obvious folds and sometimes sunken eyes, internal double eyelids are usually narrow and sometimes appear undetectable. Doctors in Zhongshan and Xinkaiyuan Hospitals usually suggested that their patients, especially those who had *Dan Yan* 淡颜 (plain facial features),<sup>85</sup> get internal double eyelids, rather than external double eyelids, to avoid disrupting the balanced, harmonious relationship of their facial features.

This story also demonstrates that the construction of natural beauty, or facial balance and harmony, cannot be completed by undergoing certain surgical procedures alone but is a lifelong

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<sup>83</sup> In Chinese Medicine, the system of balancing *Yin* 阴 and *Yang* 阳 helps individuals maintain health. This involves the balance of *Yin Qi* 阴气 and *Yang Qi* 阳气 in different bodily parts, such as organs (Farquhar, 1994). Excessive doses of medicine and treatment can lead to a severe imbalance of *Yin* 阴 and *Yang* 阳. Today, balance can refer to the relationship between different facial features. For example, if someone gets a pair of identifiable eyes but the rest of her facial features are very plain, some might argue that her facial features are not well-balanced.

<sup>84</sup> A patient not only needs to maintain a balance inside the body (inside harmony) but also gain a harmonious relationship to the whole cosmos. Chinese Medicine has been considered a holistic medical system. In the Plastic Surgery Department, harmony was used to describe a reasonable combination of, or balance between, facial features recognized by patients and/or medical professionals.

<sup>85</sup> In China, a beautiful woman with plain facial features (a low nose and small/thin eyebrows) is called 淡颜系美女 (a plain beauty), 浓颜系美女 (an identifiable beauty) refers to woman with prominent facial features (e.g., a very high nose, large sunken eyes, long eyelashes, and full, brushy eyebrows), especially those with a so-called Caucasian appearance. (*Dan* 淡 is the antonym of *Nong* 浓 in Chinese.)

process. It explains how the biomedicalization of beauty in China happens in and outside clinical settings throughout women's daily lives. Also, previous anthropological literature has argued that biomedicalization is a more complicated process than medicalization, in that it is not confined to biomedical settings but involves daily technologies of the self (Berkowitz 2021; Mire 2019; Clarke et al. 2003). But unlike the biomedicalization of beauty and its related products in the United States or Brazil (Berkowitz 2021; Jarrín 2017; Edmonds 2010), Chinese doctors do not emphasize biomedicine's dominant control with respect to beauty enhancements and changing appearances. For example, Luo's (2013) study of beauty in China explains how anxieties about changing appearances can be out of the control of biomedical technologies and medical professionals. My discussions support this point in a more comprehensive way, as both private and public doctors I met with contended that after undergoing plastic surgery procedures, life experiences and new changes in social relationships, such as marriage, might continue to shape individuals' appearances.

As a traditional Chinese saying puts it, “相由心生 (appearances change following one's heart)”.<sup>86</sup> Surgery and treatment procedures merely help female patients get closer to their goal rather than to achieve it directly. Post-surgery recoveries and experiences vary among individuals. Natural beauty, thus, is involved with uncertain future changes in an individual's development, lifestyle, diet, and social conduct, such as getting married and pursuing a career. Beauty is constantly shaped, harmoniously and holistically, by interactions between the self and the outside environment. In this way, natural beauty does not refer to the opposite of, or an

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<sup>86</sup> Here, heart not only refers to ones' thoughts and mood but also to personalities and moral character. For example, if a female person is kind, she will have a benign face. This kind of understanding of appearances can also be found in knowledge about Chinese facial techniques. It is also widely recognized that one's heart is always associated with and impacted by one's (beauty) practices and social interactions.

absence of, cultural beauty. Natural beauty can be constructed through proper biomedical interventions such as appropriate plastic surgery procedures. Although traces of skin treatments and beauty procedures usually disappear easily, this can also be used to discuss enhancement of skin health and beauty. Using marriage as an example, a good marriage can help women gain more financial supports, keep appropriate diets or schedules, deal with negative emotions, and stay in a good living environment (preventing themselves from the harms of things like sun light and smoking).

Another way in which beauty is understood as a long-term project is that reliable Chinese doctors usually take patients' recovery and aging into consideration. In other words, they are helping patients in a sustainable way. In July 2022, I conducted an interview with Dr. Zhang at his office in The First Hospital.<sup>87</sup> He was trying to explain why the progress of designing plastic surgery could be very complicated for doctors. When talking about this, he also made a comparison between Chinese doctors of plastic surgery and doctors in the West.<sup>88</sup>

A few years ago, many female individuals visited South Korea<sup>89</sup> for a medical tour. Doctors there had more in common with doctors in the West. They were very bold. They could solve problems for their patients, but they did not consider after-surgery recovery or potential scars . . . Coloured people, such as yellow and black people, get scars and keloids more easily than white people. Chinese people are finding a balance between 骨相美 *Gu Xiang Beauty* and 皮相美 *Pi Xiang Beauty*.<sup>90</sup> They want to have nice facial

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<sup>87</sup> As mentioned in my research proposal, I would interview medical professionals outside Xinkaiyuan Hospital and Zhongshan Hospital. Many part-time doctors in Xinkaiyuan Hospital had full-time jobs in The First Hospital. I was also introduced to a few medical professionals in The First Hospital and other public hospitals in Xiamen.

<sup>88</sup> In Chinese, the West usually refers to Europe and North America.

<sup>89</sup> Owing to the development of the Korean entertainment industry (especially Korean pop culture), Korea's plastic surgery industry has become famous in China over the past two decades, leading to the growth of medical tourism to Korea.

<sup>90</sup> *Gu Xiang Beauty* 骨相美 is used to describe beauty with nice and sometimes identifiable (facial) bone structure. If a person tended to have more *Gu Xiang Beauty* rather than *Pi Xiang Beauty* 皮相美, it would be difficult for her to look very young in her 20s or 30s, as she had identified facial bones but not baby fat. *Pi Xiang Beauty* relies more on good skin condition. It seems to be more related to surface beauty. As one grows older, skin shows signs of aging. It is widely known that individuals with more *Pi Xiang Beauty* 皮相美 will age quickly when losing collagen, as there is not enough support for bones on their face. It is challenging for women to have and keep both of them.

features and bone structure . . . for example . . . a clear, sharp mandible angle and *Yuan Run* 圆润<sup>91</sup> in the meantime. Some plastic surgeries, such as Mandibular [Jaw] Osteotomy, will do damage to bones, and individuals will age quickly as their bones are not able to support their face.

Dr. Zhang was not the only doctor who emphasized the future maintenance of patients and the difficult of designing a suitable surgery plan. In Zhongshan and Xinkaiyuan Hospitals, double-eyelid surgery was the most popular plastic surgery. Rather than make dramatic changes in physical appearance, many doctors and patients I met preferred to make minimal changes several times to help achieve their desired appearance. In Chinese, they described this progress as “自然地变美 (enhancing beauty in a natural way)” or “追求自然美 (pursuing natural beauty).” This description also emphasizes the elimination of traces of surgery, as I mentioned above. Some of the women I met did not like to admit their experiences of having surgery procedures, as they believed that it was important to hide the traces of surgery. One of them told me that she decided to avoid making a big change to her appearance but had several successful, natural changes instead, such as minimal changes to the shape and width of her eyelids.

To conclude, in the Plastic Surgery at public hospitals, the rationality of beauty enhancement is shaped by healthy beauty and the accompanying concept of natural beauty. Enhancing natural beauty seems to prove that the female patients are making a suitable, sustainable, and rational choice because they are considering their future. The medicalization of beauty (beauty related to health and health problems) and the biomedicalization of beauty (privatized beauty) happen together while women pursue beauty as a way of living a balanced,

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<sup>91</sup> The Chinese word *Yuan Run* 圆润 can mean fullness or rounded. For example, we would say a full forehead, or a large, rounded lobe/face. According to knowledge about Chinese facial techniques, *Yuan Run* 圆润 means luck and good fortune.

healthy, and beautiful life. The next story will show how another Chinese medical tenet – *Du 度* – is developed in biomedicine to impact beauty and beauty enhancements.

### ***Enhancing Natural Beauty: Holding the Du 度***

It was a sweltering afternoon in August 2021; I met Moon when following Dr. Yang in consultation room 3 of the Plastic Surgery Department, Zhongshan Hospital. Dr. Yang kindly introduced me and my research project to Moon. When Moon and he were having their consultation, another patient, who had received medicine from Dr. Yang, returned to get more information about it. As Dr. Yang was giving this patient more guidelines about taking the medicine, Moon had a small break, which gave us a chance to talk. Moon told me that she was studying medicine and would like to participate in my research project.

“What a coincidence! I studied Chinese Medicine for several years. Your research topic sounds interesting.”

“Interesting?”

“We [medical students] also have conducted some research projects. But the topics we study are very serious, usually about testing the efficacy of medicine in clinical settings.”

“But it sounds very clinical.”

“Yeah, to some extent . . . but why did you choose this topic? I mean, you have a beautiful face. I like your facial appearance, especially your big eyes. Have you undergone any plastic surgery procedures?”

“Yes, I had a double eyelid surgery.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize that. It looks so natural.”

When Moon mentioned this, the patient left and Dr. Yang turned his face back to us and said, “No, from a specialist’s perspective, her eyelids are very fake. They are not natural at all. She has 肉条<sup>92</sup> and this should be eliminated.”

Moon replied, “But I like her eyelids. I feel that they look good.”

“No, it is not suitable for most Chinese people.”

Dr. Yang asserted that by analyzing approximate outcomes of plastic surgery procedures, he would encourage patients to make suitable choices.

We doctors are holding the “*Du 度*”. We need to make sure that we do not exceed the “*Du 度*” . . . Your face needs to provide a suitable condition for this type of eyelid. For example, if you would like to have very big and sunken eyes, you tend to have a high nose. Having double eyelids does not always make your eyes look more energetic or bigger. We should figure out the misunderstanding. Also, you are a student but not a social influencer or movie star, you don’t need to have a very recognizable facial feature.

Moon finally agreed with Dr. Yang’s plan to change her eyelids. But when we had a private talk after the consultation, she said, “I still feel your eyelids are beautiful. Don’t be disappointed. I prefer top-level public hospitals, but sometimes the aesthetic tastes are diverse and better in private ones.”

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<sup>92</sup> 肉条 refers to swollen skin under the eyelids. It might be caused by creating wide (external) eyelids. For individuals with natural internal eyelids, there is no 肉条 and the skin under eyelids would be narrow and flat.

The construction of natural beauty is impacted by the desire of doctors to attain balance, harmony, and *Du* 度. *Du*, which can be translated into English as degree and amount, is used to describe the amount of medicine in a medical recipe in Chinese medicine. The term 过度 *Guo Du* can refer to excessive or unnecessary treatments, workload, and so on. Some public doctors I met developed *Du* to describe the rational, appropriate use of aesthetic medicine such as plastic surgeries. Their use of *Du* was quite different from its Chinese medical counterpart, that of balance and holism. These doctors viewed the pursuit of perfection, or sometimes sick beauty, as an example to explain *Guo Du*. As mentioned in the story, it was not necessary for all women to have, for example, facial features such as very big eyes. The story offers another example of the relationship between beauty and health. Similarly, Brazilian anthropological studies have demonstrated how the biomedical standard of mental health becomes a determinant factor to help doctors legitimize women's beauty enhancements in both public and private biomedical systems (Jarrín 2017; Edmonds 2010). But the standards of mental health are not the most significant factor to legitimize women's beauty enhancements in Chinese public biomedicine.

On the other hand, the story demonstrates that having double eyelids is not always equated to having larger eyes. Unsuitable double eyelids cannot make eyes visually larger or sparkling. It is undeniable that some women without double eyelids already have large eyes. Some patients I met merely wanted to change the shape of their eyelids a little bit to make their eyes more beautiful. Also, beauty is not determined by the size or shape of eyes but by the whole combination of facial features. When constructing eyelids, managing the *Du* 度 is important. Doctors focus more on the whole condition of the eyes and their surrounding areas or other facial features. They make small surgical changes that appear natural – in this holistic sense – to help female patients. For example, my participant Suyu, who was about 20 years old and studying

Marketing, told me that she had searched for some information about having double-eyelid surgery procedures online, but she finally decided to give up. This was partially because she already had a pair of large eyes with single-edged eyelids. She mentioned that it was the condition rather than the shape of her eyelids that bothered her.

I considered having double eyelids but gave up. Some individuals have swollen double eyelids,<sup>93</sup> and most of them are the internal type. But my eyelids are flat. I once contended that I should make my eyes more energetic and sparkling by getting double eyelids. But I found that it was not the case . . . eyes would not look bigger. If I changed my eyelids, I might also lose my unique facial features. I mean . . . everyone has the dominant types of eyelids (natural double eyelids).

Suya used her hands to push a fold on her eyelids and continued:

I do not need to change my eyelids. I can make my eyes sparkling by wearing makeup when it is necessary . . . Wearing make-up makes me happy and more confident. It does not change my physical appearance, but it helps enhance my beauty.

Furthermore, in both hospitals, I saw some women suffering from the stigma of having unsuitable plastic surgery procedures or having obvious traces of surgery procedures. Although some women did undergo plastic surgery, traces of that plastic surgery needed to be eliminated to make even fake-looking eyelids appear natural and beautiful. Unlike plastic surgery involving implanting and moving bodily parts, both of which might lead to obvious rejection or absorption, double eyelid surgery procedures merely create scars and folds. Traces of stitches and changes usually disappear when women's new eyelids are in harmony with their facial features. In this

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<sup>93</sup> Some patients with double eyelids still chose to undergo double eyelid surgery procedures as they had swollen double eyelids. Swollen eyelids might lead to less energetic eyes. Swollen double eyelids can be caused by excessive fat. During the surgery procedures, the amount of fat and skin removed from the patient's eyelids varies, depending on the aesthetics, professional knowledge, and skills of doctors. Internal eyelids can sometimes transform into the external type after removing too much fat and skin.

way, women's new eyelids are considered natural. During the recovery period, women's eyelids are undergoing a transition from doctors' hand-made products to so-called "natural features" on their faces. But the existence of unnatural eyelids, which are not harmonious with other facial features, cannot be legitimized by some doctors. Through adhering to these expectations, women are also building a sense of being rational patients who are pursuing a high standard of natural beauty.

Following previous anthropological studies (Hanlon-Lundberg 2021; Leem 2017; MacDonald 2006) on the cultural dimensions of "natural" health, I have used women's pursuit of beauty to explain how a natural process is redefined and realized with the help of medical technologies. The doctor's advice is important for women to achieve this category of natural beauty by surgical means. My Chinese case also offers more insights into how women respond to the construction of natural beauty differently and how women's beauty enhancements cannot be separated from their choices and responsibilities. Some women I met might visit doctors in various public and private hospitals in the hope of legitimizing their beauty enhancement, as sometimes doctors' standards of natural beauty and failed plastic surgery varied slightly. This will be discussed again in another story of this section. I now turn to the uncertainties and anxieties that women face when enhancing their beauty in this redefined natural way.

### ***Unforeseeable Natural Beauty: Dealing with Uncertainties and Anxieties***

In March 2022, I met Zen near Xinkaiyuan Hospital to discuss her previous double eyelid surgery. Although Zen was promised “natural” double eyelids by Dr. Yin,<sup>94</sup> she was very worried about the outcome of her eyelids as she felt she and her doctor had not had enough communication. As Zen said,

We had two consultations. One was in August, and another one happened before undergoing surgery procedures. One consultation was about 5 minutes. Yes, it (double eyelid) looks very “natural” now. But we didn’t have enough communication about the actual width of eyelids. I was very nervous about the outcome. My original eyes were small. I just wanted my eyelids to be a little bit “natural.” But they would be too “natural” if they became the totally internal type. I mean . . . does it make any sense to suffer from the pain, if I only get eyelids that are like my previous ones (as narrow internal type eyelids are not recognizable).

Zen was not the only female patient who suffered from feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about her surgery outcomes. The surgical technologies for making double eyelids have been well-developed in China since the 1920s (Hua 2013). However, outcomes of a double-eyelid surgery are sometimes not foreseeable, especially for a difficult corrective surgery. Doctors in the Plastic Surgery Department tended to design the width and shape of eyelids based on their experiences. After removing some additional tissue and eyelid skin, patients’ eyelids would become swollen (with some hematomas) and it might take one to six months for a patient to see the final outcome of the eyelid surgery. The speed and result of recovery differ among individuals, and sometimes even between a person’s two eyelids. Also, as people age, their

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<sup>94</sup> Dr. Yin worked as a full-time doctor in The First Hospital. He and his assistant attended Xinkaiyuan Hospital every Wednesday afternoon. Many patients visited Xinkaiyuan for Dr. Yin. But Dr. Yin was very busy as he usually had at least three surgeries to complete. Given this, the opportunities to have a consultation with Dr. Yin were very limited. Some female patients told me that sometimes the consultation was completed by his assistant or Master Luo, and Dr. Yin might just have a quick look at the patient’s condition.

eyelids continue to change,<sup>95</sup> and there is no way that a single plastic surgery can account for that. For example, some people might lose fat around their eyes as they age, which causes their eyelids to narrow. These kinds of changes can also be impacted by other issues such as the way one sleeps or the daily use of their eyes.

Some patients conceded to the doctors' authority when deciding on a final surgery plan, and doctors were often able to persuade their patients to reach an agreement quite quickly.<sup>96</sup> But anxieties, uncertainties, and suspicion sometimes accompanied patients even after their decision had been made. Sometimes these feelings remained even after undergoing surgery procedures. Like Zen, some of my participants told me that they had only a few minutes to talk about the surgery with their doctors before going into the operating room. Doctors, especially those who also worked in public hospitals, were very busy. Some patients did not have a clear understanding of the surgical plan or what outcome to expect. When doctors mentioned making eyelids appear natural, they were not always specific about the exact width and shape of the eyelids. Patients could be in a panic, as they had minimal information about the size or shape of their future eyelids and little information about the doctor's personality and aesthetic preferences. So many patients resorted to searching for more information online.

The internet and social media have become popular tools to circulate biomedical knowledge of beauty in China. Some Chinese women have become well-informed, responsible subjects who deal with the heterogeneity of knowledge sources and grasp reliable information to choose the best course of action wisely. This next story will focus on the heterogeneity of

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<sup>95</sup> This also explains why minors were often discouraged from undergoing plastic surgery procedures in and outside clinical settings, because their facial appearance would continue to change prior to reaching maturity.

<sup>96</sup> Most consultations were less than ten minutes in the Plastic Surgery Department of Zhongshan Hospital.

biomedical knowledge. I will discuss how a woman might challenge a doctor's definition of natural beauty by redefining this term with the help of diverse biomedical authorities.

### *Debating Natural Beauty and the Legitimization of Corrective Surgery*

In July 2021, Teng had her first double-eyelid surgery at Zhongshan Hospital, which was also her first invasive plastic surgery. The surgery involved changes in the eyelids, levator muscle, and inner canthus.<sup>97</sup> In plain words, Teng underwent this surgery to change her eyelids and internal eye corners so as to have large, sparkling eyes. After undergoing the first week of her recovery period, Teng messaged me that her two eyelids and inner canthus were not symmetrical and were too narrow. "They look unrecognizable, and he [Dr. Yang] asked me to wait for recovery. I am worried about the outcome of my surgery. I don't want to undergo a second surgery."

Teng felt disappointed. But the only thing she could do was to wait for the outcome of her double eyelid surgery as it was not possible to undergo a corrective surgery during the recovery period. In December 2021, Teng met me and told me that her recovery process should be complete. "There has been no change in my eyelids recently. As you can see, they now have different shapes and widths."

"Have you talked to the doctor?"

"Yes, but he insisted that it was common to see a few differences between the two eyelids, even for a person with inborn eyelids. He contended that my eyelids looked natural, and that these few differences did not challenge the success of this double eyelid surgery." In Dr.

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<sup>97</sup> While the change of the levator muscle helped Teng alter her soft eye muscles, the cut of the internal eye corners could make her eyes larger.

Yang's opinion, slight differences between her two eyelids were normal and natural; this was something that could not be fully controlled by the surgeon and did not prove that his surgery had been a failure.

I asked, "How do you feel about his opinion?"

Teng said, "I do not agree with him. I am not satisfied with my current eyelids. Compared to my previous eyelids, they are different, so it is more difficult for me to make them symmetrical when applying make-up. It is more difficult for me to use double eyelid tape now."

Teng complained while putting make-up on her face. She asked me to look at her eyelids carefully and continued to talk, "I told him that I want to have corrective surgery procedures. But he will not cover my fee as he does not think that the first surgery was a failure. Also, he feels that corrective surgery is not necessary."

"Will a corrective surgery be cheaper?"

"Not at all. The fee might not change a lot. He even told me that based on the condition of my previous eyelids, he had done his best. I am afraid that he might also disappoint me next time and I will spend money on more than one corrective surgery."

Based on her understanding of her first failed double eyelid surgery, Teng decided to consult other doctors and spend more time comparing surgery plans. From January 2022 to December 2022, Teng consulted other public and private doctors in Xiamen. She compiled their diagnoses, suggestions, and corrective plans and sent them in a file to Dr. Yang.

“He considers me a patient. You know, it’s difficult for patients to challenge doctors’ authority and specialization. This explains why I need to consult other doctors and collect their advice. As a patient, and also a customer, I need to fight for my rights.”

“Did the doctor read your file and change his opinion?”

“No. He read it, but he insisted that differences between eyelids are acceptable, and narrow double eyelids were very natural and in harmony with my other facial features such as my eyebrows. He still argued that it was not necessary for me to have a corrective surgery.”



Figure 12. Teng, *Teng's photo 1*, 2022.



Figure 13. Teng, *Teng's photo 2*, 2022.

The experiences of Teng and Zen show that understandings of natural beauty can vary slightly among doctors, even among two public doctors. In Teng’s story, some doctors held a

stricter standard of natural beauty. They might consider that the identifiable difference between eyelids means a failure in attaining natural beauty with the help of biomedical technologies. It is typical to see patients and doctors holding different opinions about plastic surgery and its outcome. Varied ideas of natural beauty reflect tensions between patients and doctors, sometimes involving unequal power relationships. As mentioned in this story, Teng pathologized her new eyelids as her surgery results did pose more differences between her two eyelids, while Dr. Yang viewed them as natural, because various factors such as Teng's daily use of her eyes (for example, eye exercises, overuse and inappropriate use of eyes) and lifestyle choices like diet could impact her eyes. The idea of "natural beauty" here helped blur the responsibilities between doctors and patients. Both doctors and patients were categorizing what was normal, acceptable, or natural and what was fake, too symmetrical, or unnatural in their own ways. Unfortunately, this kind of negotiation does not always help patients like Teng to legitimize their imperfections successfully and sometimes leads to further medical disputes, as discussed in my previous chapter.

But if public doctors also hold different opinions on natural beauty, how are biomedical standards of health shaping beauty differently in public and private hospitals? My next story will focus on this aspect.

***Negotiable Natural Beauty: Communication between Patients, Consultants in Private Hospitals, and Public Doctors***

When I met Ping (the female participant I mentioned in my opening story in chapter one) in Zhongshan Hospital, she shared her experiences of being deceived by unregulated consultants in

a private medical workshop. It was the first time I heard about a beauty consultant as a job position in medical settings.

They had two or three beauty consultants in the consultation room. Some might be nurses or other medical professionals. I was not sure about their job positions. But they introduced some plastic surgery plans. I mean, very vague plans. I did not know how to refuse them as they kept recommending that I undergo surgery procedures. They kept pointing out my aesthetic imperfections. Finally, I was persuaded by them and decided to change my lower jaw. They treated me warmly during the consultation. I thought that I could trust them. But they disappeared after the completion of my surgery procedures.

Ping was not the only patient who complained that their doctors employed consultants whose job seemed to be to increase the number of procedures a patient had and thereby increase profits. Patients were concerned that some consultants might never have studied medicine or even a related field. When comparing doctors and consultants, Moon said,

I mean . . . they (consultants) are bold, as they sometimes recommend you undergo dangerous invasive surgery procedures. Doctors in public hospitals are more conservative, but consultants . . . medical professionals . . . in private hospitals have a better aesthetic taste.

Consultants are usually responsible for providing consultations and helping doctors design surgery/treatment plans.<sup>98</sup> Consultants usually develop a basic understanding of a patient's goals, current bodily/facial condition, social position, personality, economic status, medical history, and so on. Then, they would introduce doctors, surgeries, and medical products to patients. Later, they would contact doctors for advice and help doctors to design surgery plans and finally schedule the surgery. If the consultants had not studied medicine, the doctor's advice

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<sup>98</sup> Consultants would design a basic plan (with patients) during the consultation, but the final plan needed to be approved by the doctors themselves.

would likely dominate the surgery plan. Not all doctors wanted to meet with patients before surgery to have a second consultation. When the patient and doctor could not reach an agreement, the consultant would help persuade the patient and give them a workable plan. In this way, they help negotiate between doctors and patients in private hospitals and unregulated medical workshops.

Master Luo was the only consultant I met at Xinkaiyuan Hospital. She had received formal medical education and had received a certificate of dermatology. Master Luo spent most of her working hours keeping in contact with previous patients of Xinkaiyuan, providing basic consultations in dermatology and plastic surgery and negotiating treatment or surgery plans with public doctors who worked part-time at Xinkaiyuan. In most circumstances, patients would express interest in beauty enhancements when meeting Master Luo, but they did not have any specific plans in mind for changing their appearance. In China, it is common that women visit several doctors to compare their services and capabilities before making a final plan. It is also common for women to meet with consultants instead of doctors before deciding to change their appearance. I was told that some private medical workshops did not charge a consultation fee. But unlike consultants who worked in unregulated workshops, who were often criticized by female patients, Master Luo did prioritize patients' consumption of services and products. Master Luo emphasized that providing good services was significant for being a beauty consultant. An important way to provide good services was to help her customers legitimize their choice of beauty enhancements while limiting the risks to their health.

As a consultant, I must stand on the patient's/customer's side. I would let the doctor know the patient's requirements. But this only happens when there are limited (health) risks. The safety of patients should be guaranteed . . . Sometimes the customer and I designed a plan and sent it to the doctor, but the doctor refused to perform the plastic surgery. They might have different ideas [about the aesthetic imperfections and

enhancement of beauty]. I usually told my customers that I would negotiate the plan with a doctor for them. But sometimes customers did not meet the requirements for undergoing certain surgical procedures. For example, the customer and I preferred implanting cartilage from her ear to support her new nose, but the doctor said that we had to use a piece of rib, or the surgery would likely fail. In these circumstances, we had to listen to the doctor's opinions, because only doctors perform surgeries. Communicating together [the three of us] would be the best. Some customers might insist on using their old plans. Doctors might try to satisfy them. But if their requests were too dangerous or ridiculous, doctors would refuse to do the surgery. No treatment or surgery would be employed when there was a disagreement . . . I usually designed the plan based on four standards: safety, harmony, aesthetics, and long-term maintenance . . . You should also think about the patient's economic situation. Although we have divided surgery fees into five main levels, I usually do not recommend that patients select the most expensive one.

This story illustrates how beauty is defined by negotiable biomedical standards of beauty in private hospitals like Xinkaiyuan. Although women's claims to beauty needed to be legitimized by doctors' approval, the biomedical standards of health emphasized safety rather than doing no harm to women's bodies. Meanwhile, concepts such as harmony were still used to describe natural and healthy beauty. However, this negotiated way of producing healthy and natural beauty in this private hospital was not always guaranteed, as public doctors in this private hospital might be afraid of losing their good reputation when a patient's request was too dangerous or if traces of the patient's surgery could not be eliminated. Furthermore, like public hospitals, Chinese private hospitals also focus on future maintenance and changes in women's beauty. In this way, they also viewed beauty enhancements in the long term, which cannot be completed in biomedical settings or fully controlled by biomedicine. Post-surgery recovery, diets and life experiences all impact women's beauty enhancements. For example, some women told me that medical professionals, such as doctors and nurses, also gave them tips about maintaining diets and recoveries in private hospitals. Additionally, a second corrective surgery is not always necessary but is very common in private hospitals. Based on my data, the price of corrective

surgery was usually higher than that of the first plastic surgery, even when there was no severe failure or physical harm. This also made the legitimization of corrective surgery easier in private hospitals.

### **Conclusion:**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated several aspects of the medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in Xiamen, China. I have argued that women's pursuit of beauty in Xiamen is shaped by different biomedical standards of health in public and private hospitals. Comparing women's experiences in Zhongshan Hospital and Xinkaiyuan Hospital, I have explained how their beauty enhancements were negotiated through the biomedical concepts of natural beauty, healthy beauty, and sick beauty in both Plastic Surgery and Dermatology. My discussions have supported that the biomedicalization of beauty does not happen merely in clinical settings and is not fully controlled by biomedicine but is associated with the development of the pharmaceutical industry, digital technologies, the Chinese capitalist market, and so on, as well as women's constant self-surveillance and self-management. This chapter has also demonstrated how Chinese biomedicine is a specific branch of biomedicine.

First, I have compared biomedical standards of health in Cosmetic Dermatology of public and private hospitals. While any small skin issues, such as acne and pimples, prevent women from accessing beauty in public hospitals, standards in private hospitals are not that strict. Public Cosmetic Dermatology has also medicalized all beauty procedures by calling them medical treatments, even though these procedures, such as laser, do not treat any skin health issues but enhance the smoothness of the skin. Skin health and beauty have been treated based on a logic of

restoration and prevention, connected with women's responsibilities. Women usually fail to legitimize their pursuit of skin perfection without the help of public doctors, and mental health issues are not very important when women make successful claims for beauty in Chinese public medicine. Meanwhile, this legitimization process reflects how biomedicine has constructed its authority and rationality by developing traditional Chinese medical tenets such as balance and harmony. In private Cosmetic Dermatology, skin beauty enhancements can be encouraged so long as they do not destroy the overall condition of the skin, but women still need a doctor's permission to gain access to these beauty resources.

Then, I explored how biomedical standards of health determine beauty in Plastic Surgery at public and private hospitals. In public Plastic Surgery, healthy beauty is often replaced by natural beauty to emphasize the appropriate *Du 度*, as well as balance and harmony between different facial features, such as eyes and nose. Using double-eyelid surgery as a specific example, I discussed how natural beauty is recognized when traces of plastic surgery can be eliminated, while sick beauty is considered irrational and unethical. In other words, natural beauty can be obtained with the help of biomedical technologies such as plastic surgery; obvious traces pose threats to biomedical rationality. But attaining natural beauty also requires long-term recovery, which is impacted by women's health, aging, emotions, diets, lifestyles, social experiences, conduct (for example, making friends, getting married, etc.), and so on. This uncertainty can raise women's distrust in biomedical authority and doctors' capabilities. While public doctors are more conservative about healthy beauty and natural beauty, understandings of natural beauty are more negotiable and diverse when individual safety is guaranteed during beauty enhancements in private hospitals.

Based on these discussions, this chapter has argued that the construction of natural beauty and healthy beauty also means that women must make beauty enhancement a life-long project because natural, healthy beauty cannot be attained merely by undergoing treatment or surgery procedures. Women's beauty is constantly changing over the course of a lifetime. The biomedicalization of beauty has posed the risk of surveillance of women's bodies in their daily lives. Beauty has become a commodity, a business, and also an individual career in China. The pursuit of beauty and health, thus, requires women to calculate and speculate on risks and benefits. Women's personal choices and practices are regulated within biomedical values in and outside clinical settings. But women are also active participants who can resist and challenge these values. In this way, this chapter has supported the idea that biomedicalization of beauty happened in multiple sites and in a multidirectional way. Meanwhile, this chapter helps rethink biomedicine's emphasis on personal responsibility and choice. When pursuing natural beauty, women are facing unforeseen risks and changes, leading to anxieties. Women's choices are also impacted by social factors such as their ethnicity, geographical location, and age, as well as their interactions with family, doctors, and so on. This will be discussed more in the next chapter.

While this chapter has focused more on the medicalization and biomedicalization of beauty in Chinese hospitals, the next chapter will explore how women incorporate beauty enhancements as a part of their lives on the regional level. The last chapter will explain how women's pursuit of beauty and health is associated with the construction of their gender, family roles, and so on, across broader social spaces and how women produce aesthetic labour to obtain different forms of capital – such as social capital – in Minnan, China.

## Chapter Four: 女为悦己 (Pursuing Happiness): Being and Becoming Women in Minnan Region

In July 2022, I was waiting for Teng in a McDonald's restaurant in the Zhongshan pedestrian area<sup>99</sup> near the city centre of Xiamen. The place was chosen by Teng. McDonalds is a popular place for young Chinese people (those in their teens and 20s) to gather. Teng is the same female participant I mentioned in chapters two and three. She planned to share some of her experiences and new ideas about pursuing beauty and health with me. The traffic was bad and Teng arrived late. She was carrying a very big tote bag and called out my name in the crowd.

She ran to me quickly and said, "Please give me a second. Sorry, I need to finish applying my make-up in the washroom here."

I was surprised. I did not wear any make-up that day, because I did not consider it necessary for a meeting. But Teng was always strict in managing her appearance. About fifteen minutes later, Teng rushed back from the washroom.

She sat near me. I gave her a drink and asked, "How was your day?"

"Horrible. I mean, I spent the whole afternoon waiting for my dentist and my treatment ruined my make-up. It was painful. Also, I had to open my mouth wide during the dental treatment. I could not stop the drool leaking from the corner of my mouth. My make-up was messy. It was so embarrassing when I couldn't manage my appearance properly."

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<sup>99</sup>The pedestrian area is another street located near the hospital. The name Zhongshan is frequently used in China to name buildings, schools, hospitals, and streets to commemorate Sun Zhongshan 孙中山 (Sun Yat-Sen), the father of contemporary China. Sun had raised funding from overseas Chinese to launch the 1911 Revolution to end the Qing dynasty. He was the leader of the Chinese Guoming Party 国民党. During the colonial period, the Guoming Party worked with the Communist Party to fight against foreign imperial powers such as the Japanese. Then, civil war broke out between these two parties after the death of Sun.

“I can’t believe that. Sorry.”

“Also, I didn’t finish putting on my make-up at home.”

“What happened [when doing your make-up]?”

Teng heaved a sigh:

I planned to complete all my makeup before visiting the dentist. As I told you, I stayed at my aunt’s home during this summer holiday. But when I was doing my make-up, one of my 姑婆 *Gu Po*<sup>100</sup> visited my aunt. If she found that I was doing my make-up, she would criticize and condemn me. She might also circulate this news with other mean elders in my family. Some of them are *Lao Gu Dong* 老古董.<sup>101</sup> They’re so *Feng Jian* 封建.<sup>102</sup> If someone in your family is very *Feng Jian* 封建, you’ll know what I mean.

In Xiamen, *Feng Jian* 封建 is often used to criticize the now outdated Minnan patriarchal control of women’s appearance and choices.

“Wow, it’s true. I was not allowed to use any makeup before entering university. Can I take note of these experiences?” I asked Teng.

“Of course, write it down, please! Please show your readers how difficult it is to be a young Chinese woman. ‘*Tai Nan Le* 太难了 (So difficult!)’”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> *Gu Po* 姑婆 usually refers to someone’s father’s aunt. In the Minnan region, *aunt* is translated as father’s sister – *Gu Gu* 姑姑.

<sup>101</sup> *Lao Gu Dong* 老古董 is translated directly as *antique* in Mandarin. It often refers to someone or something old-fashioned and outdated.

<sup>102</sup> *Feng Jian* 封建 refers to *feudalism* and *feudal* in Mandarin. It is often linked to women’s sufferings in Imperial China. Some of my participants used the word *Feng Jian* to criticize the old social or patriarchal control of women and their bodies. Sometimes they would tell a joke: “大清亡了, 别这么封建”, which meant, “the Qing Dynasty is over, stop being that *Feng Jian* or stop controlling women and their bodies”. In Chinese, “i” of “Jian” is pronounced as “ee” of “Lee.”

<sup>103</sup> *Tai Nan Le* is very similar to “Life is Tough.”

I could not suppress my laugh, her critique was so biting. “I’m sorry.”

“As a student, I spend most of my part-time income on enhancing my beauty and health. My parents only give me about 1,500 to 2,000 Yuan [less than 300 to 400 Canadian dollars] per month. But they would not agree to pay for my double eyelid surgery and orthodontic treatment.”

“How much have you spent on pursuing beauty and health?”

“I usually earn more than 6,000 Yuan [about 1,200 Canadian dollars] per month giving tutorials. During the winter holiday, I could earn this amount of money in two weeks. Sometimes I work as a photographic model on Taobao.<sup>104</sup> I can get more than 10,000 Yuan per month.<sup>105</sup> But it’s a very difficult job. I’ve spent most of my part-time income enhancing my appearance.”

“Difficult?”

Teng said,

Yes, the mainstream beauty emphasizes *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 (whiteness, youth, and slimness). I need to manage my weight and appearance carefully when taking photos. For example, girls tend to look fatter in photos. Many young female models on Taobao are slim. I’m less than 48 kilograms, but photographers usually try to persuade me to lose some weight, otherwise, they need to re-edit the photos.

“Wow, you’re so slim.”

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<sup>104</sup> Taobao is China’s biggest online shopping platform, owned by Alibaba. Alipay also belongs to Alibaba. Alipay and WeChat are most important apps for electronic payment and social interactions in China.

<sup>105</sup> This is similar to a doctor’s basic salary in public hospitals.

Teng showed me her Taobao photos on her phone. “Even if you’re slim, they still edit your photos. As you can see, the clothes sizes are small. Young people prefer BM<sup>106</sup> style. What’s your size?”

I looked at the size chart on her phone screen. I found that my size was Large! “Wow, I have to take a large size, but I usually wear a small size in Canada.”

Teng said,

Yes, you can see [the difference]. I know it’s popular among some young girls to buy luxury commodities, but I believe that spending money pursuing beauty and health, instead of buying luxury bags/clothes, is a long-term investment. A person’s beauty does not depend on clothes. While my parents, who are in business, do not care about *Pi Mian* 皮面<sup>107</sup>, I feel that as a law student, I should manage my appearance and *Qi Zhi* 气质<sup>108</sup> to recommend myself [to my future customers].

“What do you mean when you say that your parents do not agree to pay for promoting your beauty and health? Do you mean that they do not encourage you or that they disagree with you?”

Teng nodded her head.

They know nothing about my surgery or treatment. Only my aunt knows that I changed my eyelids. They won’t approve of the changes in my appearance. They even criticize me when I change my hair colour. But I do not think that they have the right to comment on my appearance if I pay for these surgeries and treatments myself. I was a left-behind

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<sup>106</sup> BM refers to the American brand Brandy Melville. BM is well known for selling petite-sized clothes. It has been a popular brand in China in the past decade. It is common that some popular Chinese brands follow BM and produce clothes in a petite size. Some women I met criticized brands like BM, which only produce small clothes and help circulate toxic aesthetic value, such as keeping slimness.

<sup>107</sup> The word *Pi Mian* 皮面 is widely used in the Minnan Region to describe external beauty, and it can be translated as (surface/facial) appearances. While *Pi* 皮 can refer to skin in Chinese, *Mian* 面 sometimes means facial surface.

<sup>108</sup> *Qi Zhi* is a very broad word in Chinese. It might refer to one’s temperament, elegance, charisma, and appearance. Sometimes people might say, “Your *Qi Zhi* is good.” to express an appreciation of high-quality beauty.

child<sup>109</sup> and hardly ever saw them. They sometimes cannot recognize the changes in my appearance [if there are only slight changes]. I was very childish and sometimes had arguments with elders in my family. They felt that I was rebellious. But recently, I've become more tactful when communicating with my parents and other relatives. I know that it's impossible to deceive your family when you change your appearance. I've tried to share more information about aesthetic medicine with them. Sometimes I tell them stories and experiences of my friends who have also changed their appearance. In this way, I learn about their attitudes towards using aesthetic medicine. But they are still conservative about this. Because they feel that “身体发肤授之与父母”.<sup>110</sup> Sometimes, I would use deception out of goodwill. I . . . find some excuses and persuade them to accept me. I come from a very traditional [Minnan] family.

Teng's experiences are indicative of some important aspects of women's pursuit of beauty and health in the Xiamen region, which are the focus of this chapter. First, in the Minnan region, women's pursuit of beauty and health sometimes falls under the gaze of traditional patriarchal power. Second, women's attitudes towards pursuing beauty and health vary among different generations (ages). While those in the elder generations (50s and older)<sup>111</sup> tend to distinguish beauty from health and view beauty enhancement in a very negative way, younger generations (18–40s) – those born after the opening of the capitalist market – view enhancing beauty and health as a long-term investment, one that will help them achieve independence, among other things. Third, women's pursuit of beauty and health cannot be understood without focusing on their lived experiences, which involve constant beauty labour. Their beauty labour can create

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<sup>109</sup> Left-behind child refers to a child who is separated from the parents. This usually happens in China's underdeveloped and developing areas where job opportunities and social/educational/medical resources are limited. Parents often seek better jobs in bigger cities such as Beijing in the hope of affording more family expenses, while grandparents or older youngsters take care of the child.

<sup>110</sup> According to traditional Confucian tenets, “身体发肤授之与父母 (body, hair, and skin are inherited from one's parents)”. It is common that parents in the Minnan region interfere with their kids' freedom of choice around marriage, pursuing careers, and beauty/health.

<sup>111</sup> In Minnan, people in their 30s and 40s are usually considered middle-aged. In contrast to the younger generations, those in their 50s often benefited from the old job allocation system. Also, females in their 50s are usually retired.

social value, often connecting with changes in their social relations and positions. Social media, such as the internet, is helping women produce beauty labour and capital in new ways.

Following previous chapters, this chapter will explore how women pursue beauty and health as a way of life in and outside of medical settings in the Minnan region (Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Zhangzhou). In doing so, I follow recent feminist and anthropological studies of beauty and health. Focusing on regional specificities, I argue that women's health and beauty enhancements are not achieved through a single biomedical practice but are related to women's ways of being and living in the world, which are shaped by their daily interactions with family, friends, and so on. Beauty and health are not static states but ways of becoming. I will compare how women produced beauty labour and capital across social spaces such as homes, hospitals, and online platforms.



Figure 14. Claus Hansen and Maggern, *Fujian Map*, 2010.

In the first section of this chapter, I will provide examples around which to discuss how women's choices and practices are associated with their age, kinship obligations, and gender roles, such as mother and wife. In the second section of this chapter, I will focus more on how women's beauty and health enhancements are shaped by and respond to age and generational differences. For example, through the eyes of the Minnan patriarchal gaze, age 30 is seen as mature femininity, which guides women to behave, dress, and live in a proper way. But women's beauty and related practices can also challenge the understanding of age. The last section of this chapter provides examples of women engaging in beauty labour and even producing beauty capital in diverse social spaces, including virtual spaces.

### **Literature Review: Enhancing Beauty and Health as a Way of Living: Gender, Kinship, and Consumption**

Anthropological studies of beauty and health cannot be separated from gender studies. Early feminist and anthropological theories of beauty and health conceptualized women as victims and critiqued male oppression (Beauvoir et al. 2011; Wolf 1991). More recent theorists have declined to study women's beauty and health enhancements through the framework of gender oppression and have focused instead on intersectionality (Tate 2016; Edmonds 2010; Day 2007; Popenoe 2003; Ping 2000).

Rather than emphasize the impacts of gender oppression, Tate (2016) explains how colonialism and racism have impacted women's hair management in the Black Atlantic diaspora community. Hair styling has become a political tool for women to claim their racial identity. Edmonds' (2010) study in Brazil provides another example that helps explain how women's pursuit of aesthetic health is largely shaped by racialized hierarchies. Day (2007) shows that in

the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, middle and upper-class British women considered tuberculosis as a reflection of inner beauty and elite femininity rather than a terminal disease. Popenoe (2003) explores how women's pursuit of fatness is connected to their kinship relations, Islamic tradition, and social structures in an Arabian village in Niger. Ping (2000) studies the practice of foot-binding among Ming and Qing women, and she argues that this was not merely a product of gender oppression but was related to Manchurian oppression and reflected women's expectations for social climbing and a better sex life.

Some recent theorists have focused more on women's practices, feelings, and embodied experiences. They have emphasized the concept of beauty labour, or aesthetic labour, to explore women's investments and performances during self-enhancement and its implications, such as achieving beauty capital. Beauty labour refers not only to women's physical practices but also includes their emotional or affective labour. The idea of beauty capital has been developed based on Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital. Anthropologists have discussed how women's beauty labour – efforts, practices, emotions, and so on – to improve their appearance allows them to obtain beauty capital. Their beauty capital can then be converted into other forms of capital, such as cultural capital (taste, intelligence, knowledge, and so on), economic capital (money, assets), and social capital (reputation, social status, and so on). In this way, they study how women's pursuit of beauty interacts with social inequalities linked to gender, race, class, ethnicity, and so on (Krozer & Gómez 2023; Liebelt 2022; Pussetii 2019; Jarrín 2017; Kang 2010).

Krozer and Gómez (2023) explore how post-colonial Mexican women manage their skin, clothes, and posture to enhance their whiteness and beauty in the hope of attaining racial, socio-economic, and cultural capital. Beauty helps women gain confidence and changes others'

perceptions of a woman's personality, social position, family, and heredity. Liebelt (2022) looks at how women's beauty desires and management of their face and hair help them negotiate traditional family roles, religious roles, and neoliberal entrepreneurship. Pussetti (2019) explores how, in Portugal, Eurocentric beauty has become a commodity and can produce various forms of capital, such as social capital (social integration) and symbolic capital (esteem or status). Jarrín (2017) argues that in Brazil, women's perceptions of beauty involve their memories, emotions, and lived experiences. Jarrín's framework views beauty as affective capital that can be transformed into economic capital, and vice versa, accompanying the movement of a person's place in Brazilian society (Jarrín 2017, 16). Kang (2010) introduces the concept of emotional labour to study women's nail management and their interactions with nail stylists. Women's choices of nail styles and intimate services reflect the social construction of feminine beauty based on their habitus impacted by race.

Some anthropologists working in this area have extended their studies to virtual spaces. Focusing on MeToo images (often naked, perfect selfies in a Kardashian style) circulated on social media, Wegenstein (2021) argues that this form of feminist activism has abused and exploited women's bodies. Elias et al. (2017) explore how women's appearance management involves constant emotional management across physical and virtual contexts in the neoliberal era. For example, when using beauty apps, women sometimes encounter peer pressure, leading to dissatisfaction with and anxieties about their appearance.

Chinese feminist and anthropological studies of beauty and health have also contributed to theories of beauty labour, although the development of the idea of beauty capital is limited in some of these works. For example, Guan (2021) studies how Chinese social influencers, who work as entrepreneurs in Chinese digital capitalism, have created attractive content on social

platforms such as Weibo to deliver information and emotional experiences to their followers since the 2000s. Yang (2017) shows how beauty salons in Beijing and Shandong provide a special kind of holistic service, which requires additional aesthetic labour between beauty service providers and customers. In another article, Yang (2011) explains how the Chinese beauty economy helped transform women from working labour to beauty labour in post-Mao China. Hua (2013) provides another example of how beauty is seen as capital in the marriage and job markets among Chinese women of different social classes. Unlike these theorists, Dippner (2018) has incorporated beauty capital into her theoretical framework. Dippner explores how social influencers conduct beauty labour (for example, writing a diary to record their experiences of undergoing plastic surgery procedures) and utilize their *Yan Zhi* 颜值 (beauty value) to obtain reputational and economic advantage.

These studies have inspired my own studies of beauty labour and beauty capital in this chapter. However, none of them can be used to fully explain women's beauty enhancements in Xiamen. First, English concepts such as social inequalities and hierarchies have been widely used in previous feminist and anthropological studies. But as mentioned in my introduction, class theory cannot be used to study Chinese society directly. How, then, do women express their understandings of social inequality and social hierarchies? This chapter will provide more insights into this question. For example, some women I met used words such as differences, distinction, low tastes, and ordinary/general patients versus VIP patients to discuss their understandings of inequalities. Furthermore, although many of these studies have examined women's beauty labour and capital under the impacts of various factors such as the state, market, family, religion, social position, and so on, the implications of these factors can vary in different regions of China. While some Chinese scholars have focused on large metropolises such as

Beijing (Hua 2013; Yang 2011), my work in this chapter will explore women's beauty and health enhancements in Xiamen, with a focus on how women's emotions and experiences are impacted by Minnan culture and family traditions. Also, while some previous Chinese anthropological studies have focused on specific social groups, such as social influencers and celebrities (Dippner 2018; Hua 2013), this chapter will provide stories of women with more diverse social backgrounds. But like the aforementioned anthropologists, I too will explore women's production of beauty labour and beauty capital across various physical and virtual spaces, such as homes, diaries, and the internet.

### **Section One: Being a Woman: a Wife, a Mother, and a Daughter?**

#### ***What Makes a Good Wife***

On a Tuesday afternoon in June 2021, I was with Dr. Yang in consultation room 3 of the Plastic Surgery Department at Zhongshan Hospital. The consultation room was located next to the treatment room. Some patients were weary of waiting. Two of them came to wait in line in the consultation room. When they walked into the room, a female patient, who was having her consultation with Dr. Yang, suddenly spoke to Dr. Yang in a very low voice.

The two other patients were confused, "Why do you lower your voice? We won't listen to your secret. Here, we are all women. Don't be shy."

"Sorry, I don't want to bother you. It's so shameful. I'm afraid that . . ."

One of the patients asked, "What's shameful? Pursuing beauty is our right!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you more about my situation."

The two patients stopped questioning the woman, who had chosen to sit in a corner of the room. Dr. Yang tried to divert everyone's attention and comfort her. "Don't be bothered with that. If you are bored waiting for your consultation, you can have an interview with her," he said, gesturing towards me. Dr. Yang looked at me and said, "We have an anthropological researcher in our department now. She's conducting research on women's pursuit of beauty and health. You can share your stories and feelings with her."

"Thanks for mentioning my research, Dr. Yang," I said.

"I hope you find some participants soon. You work so slowly."

Dr. Yang returned to scheduling surgery for one of the two female patients. To my surprise, when another patient started her consultation, the other woman came and sat near me. A lady who had just entered the room was following her. The woman asked, "Do you want to listen to my story?"

"Yes, but do you mind that I write it down in my dissertation?"

"Yes, you can call me Aunt Lin." Then she pointed to the lady following her. "This is my daughter. I feel that you might be in the same generation."

"Hi, Aunt Lin. Nice to see you."

Aunt Lin sighed and told me her story.

Ah . . . I'm more than sixty years old. I'm here to remove the implant from my breasts. It was about twenty years ago, my husband took me to Quanzhou [a city in the Minnan region] to visit a doctor. Or, the person was not a doctor . . . maybe a surgeon, or an [unregulated] expert? I'm not sure. We were in a small private clinic. They quickly decided to implant something into my breasts. I tried to refuse them, but my husband insisted. I finally got that implant in my body. I was very afraid of it. I was in pain during

and after the surgery and sometimes felt that there was a lump in my breast. My kids knew about my situation, but they did not know the meaning of it. I could not share my feelings and experiences with other people, because I was afraid that they might discriminate against me. Many people of my generation did not accept changing their appearances by undergoing plastic surgery procedures. I did not dare to receive a body examination either. I was afraid that other people would know about my surgery experience. I've been diagnosed as having [mental] depression for many years. But now my daughter and son-in-law are encouraging me to remove the implant. My son-in-law is also a doctor, but he can't work as a plastic surgeon. So, we're here to seek Dr. Yang's help.

“Thank you for sharing your story. What will happen if your husband finds out? Will he get annoyed?”

“No, we're not living together.”<sup>112</sup>

Seven days later, I met Aunt Lin in the consultation room again when she came for her post-surgery examination. Aunt Lin saw me and smiled with relief. “I feel better. I've removed my burden. I'll never worry again about criticisms and comments from other people. I do not need to satisfy my husband by changing my body when I do not accept it. I'm grateful for my daughter's and son-in-law's support.”

Aunt Lin was not the only woman I met who was forced or encouraged by their husband to change their appearance. Women's management of their bodies is associated with their gender roles and family obligations. A good woman should be a good wife who enhances her sexual allure and her ability to satisfy her husband. Women's bodies are exploited to help maintain the

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<sup>112</sup> In Minnan tradition, it is common for a woman choose to live with her husband or child. Women sometimes would like to take care of their child or grandchild. According to the patriarchal tradition, women usually have to live with their husbands or elder sons. But it is also common to see women live apart from their husbands today because of a broken marriage. Due to social restrictions, such as pressure from other family members, sometimes it can be difficult for a woman to get divorced. In cases like this, living apart is a compromise – a way for women to stay in a broken marriage.

authority of husbands. That women should obey and be subordinate to men was legitimized by the construction of 宗法制 (the patriarchal clan system) and Confucianism nationwide in ancient China.<sup>113</sup> Chinese feudal and patriarchal clan systems were established during the Zhou 周 Dynasty (1046 B.E.C.–256 B.E.C.). Confucius 孔子 himself was a solid supporter of Zhou’s ritual and ethical systems. The patriarchal system guaranteed men the power and right to control and dominate household, social affairs, women, and kids, while women were educated to serve their male relatives, such as fathers, husbands, and sons. This patriarchal clan power reached its peak during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) with the help of the dominant 程朱理学 (Cheng-Zhu School),<sup>114</sup> a branch of Confucianism. The Confucianist Zhu Xi 朱熹 supported “三纲五常 (Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues)”<sup>115</sup> which emphasized women’s obedience and men’s power.

With the elimination of feudalism and the rise of social movements, such as the New Cultural Movement during the colonial period (1911–1949), some social elites criticized patriarchal traditions and Confucianism and supported new rights of women, such as the rights to receive an education, to manage their own appearance (and stop certain practices like footbinding), to participate in social affairs, and to have some control in their marriages (Andrew 2014). With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, slavery and prostitution were banned to liberate slaves and women who had been oppressed. During Mao’s period, women were constructed as equal to men by Mao’s female labour discourses. Then, with the

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<sup>113</sup> Minnan is not the only place to preserve the patriarchal clan system. In ancient China, these clan families lived in different parts of China, and some of them moved to Minnan from other areas in their northern and southern China.

<sup>114</sup> Confucianist Zhu Xi once worked to create a school to transmit Cheng-Zhu knowledge in the Minnan region.

<sup>115</sup> Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues supported the emperor’s rule of subjects, the father’s rule of the son, and the husband’s rule of the wife.

opening of the Chinese capitalist market, women were educated to invest in their bodies and appearance to benefit their marriage, increase their competitiveness, and develop their careers (Yang 2011). Their beauty enhancements were also impacted by Neo-Confucian discourses such as inner beauty and outer beauty (Ma 2023; Luo 2013). The patriarchal clan system was challenged by communist discourses such as “the common good” in some other areas of China (Mason 2016), but it did not disappear.

In the Minnan region, outside the city large patriarchal clan families still exist. During the Spring Festival of 2022, I was visiting my grandma in a village outside Xiamen Island. I witnessed how people there, and those in nearby villages, lived with their clan members and performed Zhou rituals to worship their male ancestors in their ancestral temples. Some of my participants living in other Minnan areas also shared their experiences with me. Some complained a lot about their patriarchal families and told me that they could not wait to come back to Xiamen after the spring vacation. As Teng said, “I could not stand it. They (male relatives) wanted to control everything. They made comments on my appearance, behaviours, and career to push me to obey them. Some female relatives even helped them! They’re ignorant and not well educated. I want to go back to school.” The women I met frequently mentioned and criticized the controlling behaviour of male relatives or patriarchal families towards them. Financial dependence and patriarchal ethics could be the main reasons for women to obey their husbands when managing their appearance, especially older women like Aunt Lin who became full-time housewives and were not educated well enough to find a satisfactory job in a capitalist market. In this way, their obedience helped to prevent their alienation from the patriarchal family. This also explains why some women I met had to change their appearance with the support of

other younger family members. As mentioned in the story of Aunt Lin, her bodily alterations were socially and financially supported by her daughter and son-in-law.

In the Minnan patriarchal system, women are connected to several gendered kin roles, such as wife and mother. Each role has its own obligations and responsibilities, but they are connected. While Aunt Lin was required to satisfy her husband's desire by changing her breasts, she was also supposed to avoid letting her kids know about the conflicts that went on in private between her and her husband before they grew up. Being a good mother and a good wife at the same time meant that Aunt Lin was sacrificing her health, desires, and independence. Following previous anthropological studies (Krozer & Gómez 2023; Liebelt 2022; Jarrín 2017; Tate 2016; Edmonds 2010), these stories also demonstrate how women's beauty labour turns their bodies into sites of identity formation and resistance. They also show why women's production of beauty labour as a form of resistance in the Minnan region cannot be fully understood according to gender oppression theory. On the one hand, it is undeniable that sometimes women's beauty enhancements are largely determined by the patriarchal gaze, but not all men play the role of abuser or the authority. In Aunt Lin's story, her son-in-law and Dr. Yang became her supporters who worked to help her resist the control of her husband.

On the other hand, women like Aunt Lin and Teng might resist the male gaze to avoid being marginalized and discriminated against by some women. With the rise of neoliberalism in Xiamen, many younger women valued their independence with regards to bodily management more than changing their appearances to satisfy men. It was also common to see female patients criticize their peers' obedience to men. Sometimes their criticisms were very powerful. One day, I met a female patient who was annoyed by her friend's decision to satisfy her husband, and she immediately criticized her friend, "The Imperial Qing is over. You are still brainwashed by the

patriarchal system and feudalism.” Women’s obedience to men and support of the patriarchal gaze can be parallel to nostalgia for ancient feudalism. Some Chinese women consider their freedom of choice significant in the morality frameworks of pursuing feminine beauty and health in this new neoliberal era. This kind of criticism works to create new forms of gender inequalities and violence, leading to the vulnerability of women without full control of their beauty and health enhancements.

### ***Being a Good Mother: Beauty and Reconstructing the Self?***

It was a lovely summer afternoon; I was visiting Anne at her pet shop. Anne was making tea when I walked into the shop. I sat down and she quickly cleaned the table and offered me some snacks. Anne was only about 28 years old, but she had been anxious about her health and beauty ever since her first child was born.

“The most horrible thing is that I have a lot of puffiness under my eyes. It makes me look old and haggard . . . I mean, I’m older now, I have to protect myself from aging . . . It’s [having a child] very different from not having a child.”

“What kind of difference?”

“You will find that the dark circles under your eyes are very obvious compared to your previous appearance, before having a child. Also, you need to spend time with your child and take care of him, so you get less time for sleep . . . I’ve gained a lot of weight too. I was very thin, about 45 kilograms, but now I’m 53. I’m very worried that I’ll not recover my previous body shape.”

I continued asking questions. “Does this impact your budget or other aspects of your pursuit of beauty and health?”

Anne replied to my question:

Yes, I used to earn a lot of money and spend it quickly. But after having my child, I was staying at home and did not have any income. In the past, I usually spent lots of money in beauty shops. For example, I dared to spend 50,000 Yuan (about 10,000 Canadian dollars) per time in a beauty shop. But now it’s even impossible for me to spend 10,000 Yuan. I need to spend more money on my child . . . In the past, I bought something because I wanted to have it. But now I only spend money when it’s necessary . . . It’s also difficult to have your own time when you have a child. I stay up at night because I only have some time for myself when the child is sleeping. When the child is awake, he might be very noisy, and I need to take care of him. Also, I need to stay with him during the daytime. Only when he is sleeping can I play some online games with my husband. I used to go to the gym five times per week before having a child, but now it’s impossible. I have to accompany my child and do my work in the pet shop. I hardly ever do skincare. I can only maintain my appearance and health during my spare time.

I am telling Anne’s story to illustrate the point that women’s beauty and health enhancements are impacted by their gender roles and family obligations in Minnan. Being a mother means that women invest more time, money, and energy in their children rather than themselves. Meanwhile, being a mother can lead to the abandonment of one’s career and other aspects of their life, such as beauty. This phenomenon is very common in local (patriarchal) families, where women are generally responsible for childcare and housework. Compared to men, women are more likely to be viewed as caregivers and to lose control over their bodies. If a woman is not able to take care of her child, the older generation, especially mothers, in their family will help them. Some of my female participants told me that their mother or mother-in-law was taking care of their children so that they could continue their careers or spend more time managing their appearance. But in order to maintain close relationships with their children,

women usually spend most their spare time with them. This, finally, puts women under more pressure than their male counterparts. In other words, being a mother usually requires sacrifice and leads to a failure to construct one's ideal self.

When women as mothers begin to enhance their beauty and health, their resistance to male control is supported by the neoliberal discourses of independence and entrepreneurship. But even women with strong educational backgrounds and economic advantages often cannot resist the constraints of motherhood successfully when pursuing beauty and health. This was also very common among female medical professionals I met. One day, I visited a female doctor during her lunchtime in a public hospital. When we were having the interview, her daughter kept calling her via WeChat. The doctor tried her best to comfort her daughter and finally persuaded her to take a nap. The doctor told me that her daughter often called her during consultations. "She needs her mum, and I miss her too. I always try to persuade her that I am busy, but she cannot understand. She just keeps calling me. Winter and summer vacations are very difficult for me as she easily gets bored at home. I will turn on the TV for her using my phone, and sometimes she will stop calling." The doctor also agreed that she had no time for beauty enhancement, "It is impossible to put on make-up or do enough skincare when you have a child. You will see."

Compared to being a good wife, being a good mother seems to exert more demands on women's individuality and career, as well as on her pursuit of beauty and health. Even if there is no obvious patriarchal restriction, women's expectations for their children's wellness/success, intimacy, and love were guiding their choices and practices.

### ***Becoming a Confident and Independent Woman***

In the last month of my fieldwork at Xinkaiyuan Hospital (June 2022), I was following Dr. Zhao, the only full-time surgeon and doctor in the Plastic Surgery and Dermatology Department. Dr. Zhao had an open mind and was usually friendly to others. When I met her, I originally thought she was doing her internship at Xinkaiyuan Hospital as she looked so young. Dr. Zhao was working in consultation room 1, which was located near the main door of the department.

During this time, I met Wei and her daughter Yuyu. Wei was about forty years old but looked like she was in her 30s. She told me that she would like to share her thoughts on beauty and health enhancements, as she focused on her appearance a lot. Wei was very satisfied with her new double eyelids created by Dr. Yin.<sup>116</sup> Her daughter Yuyu was encouraged by the success of her mother's surgery and made a reservation with Dr. Yin to change her eyelids. Dr. Yin and Dr. Zhao required that Yuyu have some basic tests. All trainees were having their day off, so Dr. Zhao asked me to help guide Yuyu to the blood and COVID test centres. When I was introducing my research project, Yuyu became very excited and asked me several questions about my research. She also told me that she was going to complete a bachelor's degree in Canada.

Wei blushed when Yuyu did not stop asking questions. "She's usually very shy. Maybe she really liked you and your research project." Then Wei turned to Yuyu and said, "You need to be quiet in this office. This is a hospital. If you would like to, you can carry on your conversation with *Jie Jie* 姐姐 (elder sister)<sup>117</sup> outside the hospital."

Yuyu stood beside me and shook my hand, "Yes, of course, I have more to talk about with *Jie Jie*."

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<sup>116</sup> Dr. Yin was one of the most popular doctors in both Xinkaiyuan and The First Hospital.

<sup>117</sup> In Chinese, *Jie Jie*, or sister of a person, also refers to a female individual who is older. Sister does not only mean a blood relationship in Chinese.

Unfortunately, due to her blood phobia, Yuyu remained unconscious after completing her blood exam. Wei supported her on the chair. I ran to a nearby department and asked some medical professionals to help Yuyu. A doctor gave me a cup of hot normal saline. By the time I ran back to Wei and Yuyu, Yuyu had woken up. I helped her to drink some saline. About fifty minutes later, Yuyu told us that she felt better and did not want to miss today's COVID test. We supported Yuyu downstairs to complete the second test. Finally, Yuyu found a chair in the main lobby of the hospital and had a rest.

When Yuyu was sleeping, Wei slightly nodded her head.

Ah, she was really a good child . . . very good. I mean that she has a good personality, a good heart, and she is beautiful. She's very good, but she is too weak [physically and mentally], too innocent, and a little bit childish. She has never left me. She does not have a basic understanding of the outside world. I'm worried about how she can live in Canada by herself. As you can see, she was almost defeated by a small blood test.

"But she did very well, she overcame the difficulty. She did not complain," I said.

Wei was lost in thought for a while, then she held my hands and said, "Oh yes, you are right. I mean, as women, we seem to be weak. But I believe that we women will be stronger in the future. Because we're working very hard to improve ourselves. We're becoming more beautiful, smarter, and stronger."

On Wednesday, Wei and Yuyu arrived late at the department. They had to wait for the first patient who was undergoing surgery procedures. Yuyu was nervous and afraid of the coming surgery. She said, "Will it be very painful? I've never done that. Can my mom accompany me? I was a little bit regretful [about choosing to undergo surgery procedures]. I feel that I can't tolerate [the pain]."

When Dr. Yin's assistant called Yuyu's name, Wei accompanied Yuyu to consultation room 1. Wei left the room and came back to me, "I tried to accompany her to the operation room, but the doctor refused to let me in. But I think this is very good."

"Good?"

"Yes, she needs to leave me. It's a good opportunity for her to know that I'll not protect her and solve problems for her every time. She needs to confront the surgery, the interactions with the doctor, and her future recovery by herself. She's less than 18, but she will grow up."

Wei and I chatted in the lobby for about an hour, and then Yuyu was sent out by an assistant after completing her surgery procedures. "It was not that bad. I only felt pain during the anesthetic injection. The doctor would ask you about your feelings, and ask you to open your eyes when modifying the eyelids." Wei hugged Yuyu and put an ice bag on her eyes. Wei smiled and talked to me, "You're such a small kid. You're still lying with your mom. Nienie [Wei gave me a nickname here], as you see, she needs more opportunities to grow up." In the meantime, Yuyu still tried to join our conversation. Wei and I suggested that she rest, and I agreed to meet her outside the hospital someday. In July 2022, I met Wei and Yuyu during Yuyu's recovery. Yuyu's eyelids were not swollen, and she felt satisfied with her new look. "I feel good. I'm different. I feel that in addition to changing my appearance, I should also make more of an effort in my studies. I need to work hard on my language test. I'll be better. I hope I'll also attain a higher education degree, like you, in the future."

Wei felt gratified, "She wants to be an independent woman like you. She wants to leave me and try to live a new life. She wants to improve her studies and social interaction skills, like you."

This story provides more insights into women's gender and kinship roles, such as mother and daughter, in the Minnan region. Female minors I met were usually accompanied by their families, especially their mothers, when visiting a doctor, as women were typically considered the caregivers of the family. According to traditional patriarchal and Confucian tenets, mothers were responsible for educating and taking care of their children, while their children had to support their mothers in their old age. However, this tradition has been challenged by the growth of neoliberalism after the opening of the Chinese capitalist market. With fierce competition in the academy and job market, the younger generation has been largely impacted by neoliberal discourses such as independence, risk management, and personal investment. Younger women have recognized the significance of accumulating health and beauty capital. For some, their own future was their top priority, rather than the future of their mother, parents, or family. This also supports my discussion in chapter two about the generational differences in how one views beauty enhancements.

Despite these generational differences, this story does not show that China's developing beauty market has turned Chinese mothers into disadvantaged competitors with their daughters. Previous anthropological studies (Jarrín 2017; Edmonds 2010) have shown that neoliberal discourses around things like individualism and beauty capital have altered kinship roles and relations in Brazil, where mothers and daughters have become competitors for free medical resources and social positioning rather than merely beloved family members. This story, on the other hand, reflects that China's beauty market has not necessarily led to a deteriorated relationship between daughter and mother. The story of Yuyu and Wei shows that in China, some mothers have become models and investors in their daughters. The mother, Wei, guided and paid for her daughter to enhance both her internal beauty (good education, good personality,

independence, and so on), her external beauty (face, eyes, and so on) and health. The daughter, Yuyu, as a member of the new generation, constructed her femininity under the impacts of both neo-Confucianism and neoliberalism. Yuyu's beauty labour not only helped her obtain confidence in social interactions and recognition from her mother but also might impact other aspects of her future social life, including her expectation of attaining a higher education degree, leading to an increase in cultural capital and neo-Confucian inner beauty.

Stories in this section have illustrated how women's pursuit of beauty and health helps them construct their gender and kinship roles in the Minnan region. The ways that Anne, Lin, Teng, Wei, and Yuyu took self-improvements were invariably associated with their age (for example, adult and minor), generational obligations (for example, elder and younger), and gendered kinship roles (for example, mother and daughter). The upcoming story will provide another example of how women work on their beauty in ways that resist dominant standards of beauty.

### ***Dropping the Iron Bowl: Tattoos as a Signifier of Unhealthy Personality or Sociality***

It was a sunny morning in late August 2021 when a man took his daughter to meet Dr. Hong at Zhangshan Hospital. He pulled his daughter into the consultation room as she tried to run away from him in tears.

Dr. Hong quickly comforted the girl and asked, "How can I help you?"

The man sighed, "She is still a middle-school student, but she got tattoos near her breasts. She shouldn't have done that. We need to remove all of them."

The girl disagreed with her father. “I like my tattoos. I don’t think having tattoos is a big issue.”

Her father soon got annoyed and yelled at his daughter:

You are too young. You know nothing. Having tattoos “有伤风化 (disobeys tradition and morality)”. It’s also not good, not healthy. You don’t know what kind of dye they were using. Other people might have biases and discriminations against you. It might impact your future marriage. Having tattoos also prevents you from joining the army and being a 公务员 (public servant) in the Chinese government.

The girl continued crying. Dr. Hong tried to persuade the man:

Please, don’t blame the child. She didn’t get enough information about the meaning of getting tattoos. But you [the girl] shouldn’t insist that you have done nothing wrong. If you don’t want to join the army or industry related to national security, this is not a serious issue. But removing tattoos requires informed consent from both parents and the minors. Because she has constructed her value system and ways of thinking, you, as parents, cannot decide to change her body.

Dr. Hong asked the girl, “Do you want to remove your tattoos? It’s time for you to make this decision.”

The girl said to her father and doctor, “If you would like to, I would agree to remove them now.”

“No, you need to give the consent, because this is not for my future,”<sup>118</sup> said Dr. Hong.

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<sup>118</sup> In China, it is very common for elders to educate minors or to ask them to make their own decisions by saying things like, “这个是为了你的未来 (this is for your future)”, “这不是为了我的未来, 所以你自己要谨慎考虑 (it is not for my future (but yours), so that you have to consider it carefully)”. The doctor meant that deciding whether or not to remove the tattoo should be considered carefully by the girl herself. The girl needs to make an informed decision based on her plans and knowledge about her future career.

The girl, still crying, ran out of the room, and her father follow her out.

Dr. Hong turned to me and said,

It's common to see parents taking their children to remove tattoos, even their adult children. Many people in the younger generation have tattoos. About twenty years ago, when we left home to pursue our degrees, we were scared by the tattoos of other people outside the school, as we hardly ever saw tattoos. But now we are used to seeing tattoos as they have become very common. Some parents are afraid of tattoos, as some positions provided by the Chinese government have banned having tattoos. But people of your generation, born in the 1980s and 1990s, some of you don't care about finding a job in the public sector.

In Xiamen and the entire Minnan region, job positions in the public sector are viewed as stable and popular, especially in the eyes of older generations (those over the age of 50). Among my female participants, it was common to hear that they had been persuaded by elders in their families to apply for a position in the Chinese government. In China, these positions are called “*Tie Fan Wan* 铁饭碗 (iron bowl)”, because people who get these positions are not at risk of losing their jobs unless they make a very serious mistake, such as committing a crime. Also, the retirement compensation for these positions is generally good. The position of a public doctor, for example, is considered an “iron bowl.” However, people with tattoos are barred from these positions as they cannot pass the strict bodily examination. The negative impacts of getting tattoos also extend into broader social contexts. Tattoos are restricted on social media, and they cannot be shown on TV shows. Because of this, getting tattoos is sometimes considered unreasonable and irrational in Chinese society. Some young women I met emphasized that there were contradictions between having a public position and their beauty enhancements. For

example, public institutions, such as hospitals, had strict professional dress codes. Women were required to dress properly and retain common hair colours, such as black or dark brown.<sup>119</sup>

However, having tattoos and colourful hair are less problematic in the Chinese private sector. With the boost of the beauty economy over the past few decades, some people have preferred newer, more popular job positions such as social influencer and freelancer.<sup>120</sup> The popularity of these new positions has challenged the dominant requirements of government positions. Tattoos, which were traditionally considered unethical, are more likely to be accepted by a younger generation aspiring to flexible careers and social positions. On the other hand, altering one's body by getting tattoos without the permission of parents goes against the Minnan patriarchal tradition of filial piety. Given this, getting tattoos, which today are considered beautiful and the result of personal free choice, helps some young women resist patriarchal control and the dominant standards of beauty.

The story of tattoos helps us rethink women's beauty as a site of resistance and empowerment during the rapid transition of Chinese society over the past decades. Women in Minnan are no longer docile daughters or wives but individual entrepreneurs and citizens who manage their beauty and respond to beauty standards and gender inequalities differently. The next story will offer more room for discussion about the complexities of the male gaze and gender inequalities in the Minnan region and will support my previous claim that not all men are abusers who want to control women's beauty and health enhancement.

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<sup>119</sup> If a woman is born with light hair, that too is fine.

<sup>120</sup> Social platforms such as RED and Weibo do not ban tattoos. It is common for some social influencers and celebrities to share their photos without covering tattoos.

*Feminist Beauty: The Marginalization of Men's Voices*

On a Tuesday afternoon in August 2021, Dr. Yang was having a consultation with a female patient at Zhongshan Hospital. The air conditioner was on, and there was no other patient in the consultation room. The patient was asking for some information about intense pulsed light and Botox injections. After providing her with some basic information, Dr. Yang asked, "Have you ever considered undergoing a double eyelid surgery. It is very popular now. I think that your appearance might change a lot, if you had double eyelids."

The patient got annoyed, "Why don't you men choose to have double eyelid surgery procedures? Why don't you enhance your appearance rather than ask women to do so?"

Dr. Yang was shocked and stayed in silence for a while. Then he forced a smile and said, "It was just a friendly suggestion."

After the patient went to the treatment room to wait for her beauty procedure, Dr. Yang told me, "I'm a man, so I shouldn't have said that. It seems like everything goes wrong at the beginning."

I tried to comfort Dr. Yang, "Maybe you could explain your feelings and say you're sorry to her."

Dr. Yang soon followed the patient to the treatment room. When they walked back to consultation room 3, I saw them chatting with each other and smiling. The patient seemed to have changed her attitude and was now discussing the details of double eyelid surgery with Dr. Yang. I was very curious about what had happened and asked the patient whether I could have a chat with her.

She told me that she was interested in having this surgery, but she was afraid of being forced by others, especially by men, to change herself and her appearance. Therefore, she got annoyed when the male doctor asked her the first time. She used Kris Wu<sup>121</sup> as an example to complain about male domination in Chinese mainstream culture (including beauty ideals).

I was offended at first. I never asked anything about a double eyelid surgery, but he was asking me to think about that. I felt that he was judging my appearance from a male point of view. I'm growing tired of *Pu Xin Nan* 普信男.<sup>122</sup> They just feel like they are perfect and don't respect women. For example, they dream that their size is very big, and women should tolerate it.<sup>123</sup> But when I had a conversation with the doctor, I found that he was not PUAing<sup>124</sup> me. I mean, he was just recommending a popular plastic surgery. There was no other patient, and he was not commenting on me in front of a group of people. He did not encourage me or even push me; I was still able to make my own decisions. In the treatment room, I was lying down during the beauty procedures. I couldn't go anywhere and was just there with him. We were able to have a conversation there. After talking to him, I felt better. He really respected women and treated me in a friendly way. He also apologized to me.

For male doctors, the boundary between providing professional suggestions based on biomedical standards and promoting dominant feminine ideals under the clinical male gaze can be very blurred. Jarrín's (2017) study in Brazil provides a vivid example of the male clinical gaze. When the plastic surgery industry is dominated by male doctors, it is common to see male

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<sup>121</sup> Kris Wu is a Chinese Canadian superstar, who was arrested and accused of raping minors in 2021. He was also involved in scandals of commenting on and commodifying Chinese women. In 2023, he was charged with raping minors and organizing prostitution. He was finally sentenced to jail for fourteen years.

<sup>122</sup> *Pu Xin Nan* 普信男 refers to men who are overly confident about themselves but are very strict with women. They usually do not respect women. Also, they do not care about their behaviour, appearance, or the way they dress. But they require women to obey male control and manage their appearances. As reported by one of the victims of Kris Wu's case, Kris did not respect women and felt so confident about himself, especially his sexual abilities. His victims used this word to describe and criticize him. This word is also often used to criticize male domination of feminine ideals and women's bodies in China.

<sup>123</sup> This example has become a meme related to Kris's case. Kris's victim criticized him for being overly confident about his sexual power. Then, some Chinese netizens used this to tease *Pu Xin Nan*.

<sup>124</sup> PUA originally referred to male pick-up-artists but now it is related to gaslighting. Because some male artists taught the public how to attract, educate, and control women, PUA is also used as a verb referring to educating and controlling women. PUA is a hot topic when talking about sexual abuse and violence in China.

doctors commenting on their female patients' appearances and flirting with them. However, in previous studies by Chinese anthropologists (Hua 2013; Yang 2011), discussions about these kinds of interactions between male doctors and female patients were limited. Although making comments about one's body and appearance is very common in the biomedical and beauty industry, some women in my study had become less tolerant of such comments by the time I conducted my fieldwork, and they considered them inappropriate. This also led to some female patients' preference for female doctors.

On the other hand, male doctors can be viewed as professional supporters who help women resist patriarchal control of their bodies. As discussed in this chapter, in Minnan families, women's bodies could be controlled or at least impacted by their male relatives, such as fathers and husbands. Although the Minnan patriarchal system has declined, women's practices and choices of beauty enhancement can still be regulated by the related neo-Confucianist and Minnan traditional discourses, such as inner beauty and *Hiân Huē* 贤惠.<sup>125</sup> While *Hiân Huē* 贤惠 and *Hôu Zâ Môu* 好女 (good women) are often used to encourage women to satisfy men's expectations and make sacrifices, *Lân Làn*<sup>126</sup> (Shi 2012) and *Xiáo Zâ Môu* 肖女<sup>127</sup> emphasize women's rebellion and aggressiveness. However, when facing biomedical rationality, these Minnan discourses become less powerful as doctors help women legitimize their beauty based on biomedical standards of health. Women's autonomy and independence are emphasized when an individual's informed consent is required. Previous Chinese anthropological studies of beauty

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<sup>125</sup> *Hiân Huē* 贤惠 refers to women's ability to take care of their households, husbands, and kids. This is often used to appraise women's contribution and sacrifice.

<sup>126</sup> *Lân Làn* means lazy, slow, unregulated, and so on. It is sometimes replaced by *Lân Sàn* in Minnanese and Taiwanese. Taiwanese scholar Shi (2012) translates *Lân Làn Zâ Môu* into English as lazy and disgusting women.

<sup>127</sup> *Xiáo Zâ Môu* 肖女 could be translated as crazy women out of the control.

have lacked in-depth discussion about doctors' complex roles as supporters of women's empowerment and resistance against gender inequalities.

In contrast, this section has provided several examples that show how, in the Minnan region, women's pursuit of beauty and health was impacted by their gender, family roles, and obligations under the male gaze. One of my key points in this chapter is that we should not explore women's practices and choices as being the result of gendered oppression alone. Women can be victims but also active, independent, and rational neoliberal individuals who are able to measure or calculate their beauty and health investments. The next section will focus more on how age and generational differences shape women's understandings and choices of beauty and health enhancement. I will discuss how women measure their beauty and beauty practices in relation to their ages.

## **Section Two: Rethinking Age 30: Being Single and Being Beautiful**

### ***Only 30, Rethinking Age and Gender Stereotypes***

It was a busy morning in February 2022. My morning alarm did not work so I left home late and arrived at Xinkaiyuan Hospital at about half past eight. I carried many things, such as my laptop, notebook, and pens, but I had forgotten to put my hair up at home. When I rushed into Master Luo's office, she was there.

“Don't worry. I'll wait. Put on your white coat and we need to complete a COVID test before starting our work. Oh, you've put your hair down.”

I was putting on the coat; “I'll tie my hair up –but is there a restriction on our hairstyle?”

“Unlike in big public hospitals, we don’t have specific restrictions on hair. But we usually tie our hair up in the interest of hygiene. Also, it makes us look more professional and more reliable.”

I replied to Master Luo as I was putting my hair up. “I’m almost done. We can go now.”

“Wow, you look so adorable with those two ponytails. What an enviable [appearance]!”

“If you would like to, I can help you tie your hair up in the same way.”

“No, I’m too old to have this adorable hairstyle.”

I was confused because I always considered Master Luo a very beautiful young lady. “It’s no doubt that you are very young and beautiful.”

Master Luo thanked me and guided me to the COVID test office. The office was located near the parking ground. We decided to take an elevator to level P1 and walked to the office. When we entered the elevator, there were three female medical professionals wearing their white coats. Master Luo guided me to greet them. Everyone remained silent as the elevator was moving down. After getting out of the elevator, one of the female medical professionals asked, “Are you both coming from the Plastic Surgery and Dermatology Department?”

Master Luo and I replied, “Yes.”

“But how did you know?” Master Luo asked.

Of course, you two are both young and beautiful. You look so beautiful and “*Jing Zhi* 精致 [elegantly dressed].” You have make-up, a nice look, and your hair is tied up in a delicate way. As you can see, we are messy people in a messy way. It’s impossible for me to do makeup when waking up early in the morning. Wow, you also have good skin. You look so young. I come from another department. I would like to consult you for skin care and treatment.

“OK, see you soon.”

The exaggerated obsession with youth, or youthful beauty, is well documented in anthropological studies of China. For example, Hua (2013) describes how Chinese women in their 40s and 50s fear getting older and becoming less competitive in marriage or the job market. However, my research data show that with the blooming and expansion of China’s aesthetic medicine industry, these anxieties about ageing and losing beauty have expanded to women in their 20s and 30s. Anthropologist Berkowitz (2021) notes a similar trend in the United States. With the growth of neoliberal individualism and biomedical technologies, anti-aging has become a compulsory moral project in the United States. For example, Botox has been widely used to help women in their 20s to 40s prevent future skin aging issues such as wrinkles. Compared to Berkowitz’s study, this story reflects an even stricter youth culture in China.

On the one hand, it was very common to see that some Chinese women started trying to prevent ageing in their 20s or even earlier. As my participant Xinxin (the person I mentioned in chapter one where I discuss idealized appearances) said, “I started skincare and undergoing laser treatments before my 20s. The earlier you start doing skin care, the better skin you will have.” Like the case in the United States, skin has become one of the most important sites for fighting against aging in China. Women in different social positions – including housewives, students, medical professionals, businesswomen, and so on – have paid for expensive cosmetic surgeries and products such as fat implants and health supplements to prevent aging. The anti-aging project requires women to continue using these products in their daily lives and to calculate their investments. Some women I met told me that they were working to gain more assets in their future marriage, career, social interactions, and family life. The popularity of beauty ideals such

as *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦, discussed in my first chapter, also contributed to these women's pursuit of youthful beauty.

On the other hand, this anti-aging project is also connected to women's make-up, hairstyles, and clothing. In the story above, having double ponytails was not viewed as an appropriately mature hairstyle for a woman over the age of 30. It was marked as a specific age at which women should abandon girly cuteness and their limited personal freedom and begin to manage their appearance. My next ethnographic story offers another example of how, in Minnan region, some Chinese women's anxieties about reaching the age of 30 extend to diverse aspects of their social and individual lives in relation to their marriage status.

### ***The Age of 30, Too Old to Get Married?***

One day I met Dr. Zhao in her office when she was putting on her coat. Dr. Zhao said, "I feel so nervous. My *Popo* 婆婆 (mother-in-law)<sup>128</sup> is going to visit us in Xiamen."

I was surprised because I had once thought that Dr. Zhao was a trainee,<sup>129</sup> and I assumed she was very young, probably in her teens or 20s. But she was 31. "Are you married?"

"Not yet. We've not registered. But we've lived together, and our relationship has been stable. Our friends and families know that we are going to get married. We want to choose a special date for registration." Dr. Zhao started to apply her make-up.

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<sup>128</sup> *Popo* 婆婆 refers to the mother-in-law. But it is also common that a women call her boyfriend's mother *Popo* 婆婆 when they are having a stable, long-term relationship or are going to get married.

<sup>129</sup> Trainees in Xinkaiyuan are usually college students under the age of 20.

“Wow, you hardly ever wear make-up.” I was surprised that Zhao seemed so worried about her appearance today.

Master Luo smiled and said:

Yes, I can relate to your situation. I live with my mother-in-law. People in different generations have different ways of thinking. We sometimes have conflicts. But it's good that they are sharing my burdens by helping to take care of my daughter when I'm working here. But I'm sometimes thinking . . . why do people need to get married? People around me started pushing me to get married after I was about 25. I found that many friends also got married. They said that you might be too old to find a desirable husband after 30. Then I got married. I'm still in a mess. I have to spend less time hanging out with my friends and improving myself [for example, my appearance, career, etc.]. And the elders in my family keep pushing me to have a second child as soon as possible.

I nodded my head, “Yes, I don't want to get married. There will be many restrictions brought by a marriage relationship.”

Dr. Zhao shook her head, “I know it's common to see parents in Minnan push their child to get married and have babies. Luo and you must have a lot of stories to share about this. But do you know that this situation is also common for women in some areas of Northern China? They [families, especially elder family members] doubted my social value when I was not able to get a good husband before 30.”

Zhao continued:

You are still a child. You don't know what love is . . . the truth of love. I had similar opinions to yours at your age. But I changed my mind after meeting my husband one year ago. I've never loved a person that much. I want to have a family with him. I also want to have our child. If you want to have a satisfactory recovery after delivering a baby, you had better do it before age 32. Otherwise, your previous skin, beauty, and body shape might never return after having a baby. This also encourages me to get married soon.

As in my previous discussions, this story reflects the social and cultural sensitivities around turning 30 in Minnan. For women, being 30 means having less social capital. As was expressed in this story, older women have fewer opportunities to find a good husband, face decreasing fertility and longer postpartum recovery times, and generally face more criticism in and outside their families. But there are also generational differences when discussing the age of 30: Older women in the local patriarchal families felt that 30 was a significant age at which the younger generation (their children) should transform into adults (get married and become parents), so as to protect the continuation of patriarchal families; women in the younger generations (those in their 20s and 30s) were more focused on their own beauty, health, careers, and social networking. While some women I met enhanced beauty and health to fulfill their duties and kinship roles in the patriarchal family, some converted their beauty capital into cultural and economic capital.

Furthermore, Chinese anthropological studies of beauty (Yang 2017; Hua 2013; Luo 2013) have not yet focused on perceptions of age and beauty from the perspective of female medical professionals. In other words, it is not clear how women in different social positions perceive beauty and health in relation to age. Plastic surgery is not a male-dominated industry in China. I often followed female doctors at Zhongshan Hospital and Xinkaiyuan Hospital during my fieldwork. Female doctors, as well as other female medical professionals such as consultants, were also impacted by discourses around age, such as that 30 represents the age of maturity. As mentioned in the story above, female medical professionals' choices and practices were also related to gender roles, such as desirable wives, daughters, and mothers.

Different beauty and health standards are connected to specific age markers, such as the age of 30. Women, including medical professionals, are seen as falling into new social categories. In particular, women who do marry before age 30 are referred to as *Sheng Nu* 剩女 (leftover women), which is typically associated with stereotypes of being old, ordinary, or even ugly in Chinese society. Some of the women I met with admitted that this form of address did pressure them when they were single. Some also asked about my marriage status and were curious about my parents' attitudes. I should mention that I was only 26–27 when I was conducting my fieldwork, and I was surprised that they were thinking about the possible family and social pressures I might be suffering as I was identified as a single woman. When medical professionals were condemned because of their unmarried status, the condemnation was often based on a devaluation of their jobs and careers. For example, several medical professionals shared condemnation they received with me, “有好工作的剩女不还是剩女 (The leftover woman with a good job is still a leftover woman.)” or, “就算是医生,也不能改变你这个年纪还是剩女的事实吧? (What is the point of being a doctor, when you are still a leftover woman at this age?)” In Xiamen, women's pursuit of beauty and health was put under the surveillance of the biomedical system but also of the Minnan patriarchal family. Female medical professionals, who were representatives of national biomedical power, were also fragile and vulnerable when being evaluated by patriarchal authorities.

This section explores what it means to be age of 30 in the Minnan region. In Minnan tradition, at the age of 30 women are expected to abandon girlish comportment and dress and give up their carefree lifestyles that emphasize their individual choices. This final section will

provide examples of how women produce beauty labour and gain beauty capital in different ways across various physical and virtual spaces.

### Section Three: Pursuing Beauty Outside the Clinic

#### *Eva's Online Diary: Pursuing Skin Beauty and Health through Self-Encouragement and Reflection*

(The following parts are a few sections of Eva's beauty diary.)

The Fifth Consultation, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020

I have tried “*肌肤断食*”<sup>130</sup> (stop feeding the skin) in the recent period and felt its efficacy soon.

It usually changes a lot when I simplify my skincare process. But it cannot be used for a long period and the skin management method needs to be modified.

Aims: Fewer pimples and acne, Smooth Skin.

Am I able to use any cleanser or clean mask? (I need a recommendation.)

Feelings: The summer is coming. I am afraid of the growth of acne. What happens when I wear a medical mask (for a long time)?

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The Seventh Consultation

Morning: Skin Care Products 1 and 2

Evening: Nutrition Supplement, Red and Blue Light for 12 minutes (3 times per week), Product 1, Retinol for 30 minutes and wash it away (once every two days), medical skin mask for 10 minutes and wash it away (once per week), Product 1 and 2, Skin Repair

Feelings: The efficacy is obvious. My parents also feel good about my skin. But I can still see clear red and black pockmarks on my face in my selfies. I have got a few red, swollen

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<sup>130</sup> *肌肤断食* can be translated into English as *stop feeding the skin*. It usually means to stop using cosmetic products, especially skin care products. It is also one of the most popular methods to deal with skin problems in China. Some of my participants tried this method and they called it “less is more.”

acne this month, and the inflammation has been controlled properly. I should control myself not to squeeze my pimples. Sometimes I can feel the skin blockage and it is porous. I need to wear a medical mask due to the start of work. I have been under a lot of pressure. I have got sleep disorders for a long time. I am not able to keep my original diet too. I can only avoid eating sugar and milk.

My sister also says that my pockmark has become invisible. I should avoid having too many pimples due to my 疤痕体质.<sup>131</sup> I should be confident!!! She was in a similar situation. I should believe that long-term skin management will lead to positive results. Please be patient!

...

The Fifth Skin Peeling, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Feelings: Dr. Lin told me that my skin condition was much better. We should try one or two more peeling procedures and then we can move to a new stage of treatment. The skin has become smooth!

Eva (the same participant I mentioned in my first chapter) heard about my research project by chance in March 2022. As a middle-school teacher, she had a more flexible schedule to visit the hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic as she sometimes worked from home due to the COVID-19 restrictions. I met Eva at Zhongshan Hospital when she was waiting to see her doctor. I shared my research flyer with her. She soon contacted both my RED and WeChat accounts. When having the first interview with me, she was excited to share her stories.

I should tell you everything. I've suffered a lot and felt very aggrieved. I've tried different doctors and medical technologies. I sometimes also compared doctors and medical institutions I visited. My bad skin condition has also impacted my social interactions in a negative way. I broke up with my boyfriend as he didn't understand my feelings. He also considered that spending a large amount of money on skin issues was a waste [of money]. Women are always put under beauty surveillance. I've been afraid of meeting male friends, especially those who might pay a lot of attention to my skin condition/facial appearance. When they comment on my skin, I usually pretend to be confident and careless about my skin problems. I've got relief from this kind of health

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<sup>131</sup> 疤痕体质 refers to the bodies of people who scar more easily than others.

surveillance during this COVID period as I'm able to wear a mask and avoid doing make-up. My parents have supported my pursuit of skin beauty, but they don't understand the efficacy of beauty procedures. Many invasive procedures break people's skin surface first and then improve its growth. They would be worried about me when seeing my broken skin surface. I don't want to complain in front of them. I write this diary to record my feelings and experiences. I feel like I'm talking to myself when writing the diary. I sometimes chat with people like you on RED. They have helped me control my emotions. I haven't published or shared it, but I hope my diary might provide you with more insights about your research project.

Eva then sent me her diaries for 2020–2021 via WeChat after our second interview. As shown earlier in this section, her diaries recorded information about her practices of enhancing her skin beauty and health, as well as her feelings and experiences. In Eva's diary, her past experiences of dealing with skin issues caused depression and irrevocable trauma, leading to the decline of some of her social relations, especially her close relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Her diary offered her space to examine her self-perception and also her perceptions of other individuals such as her male friends, family members, and doctors. Her story illustrates my argument that beauty and health are not static states but are ways of becoming. Writing a diary to record the pursuit of beauty and health reflects Eva's production of beauty labour, and especially the emotional labour that goes into it. These writings helped Eva obtain affective capital and social capital (Jarrín 2017). Eva was finding meaning in enhancing beauty and health, making social connections with others through developing reflections and aspirations, and constructing a new, beautiful, and healthy self to fit into a new social circle. Meanwhile, her efforts cannot be separated from the support of her family, who gave her love and encouragement. Her story proved that women's beauty and health were not located on the body surface but interacted with different aspects of their individual and social lives.

Diaries are not new study materials in feminist and anthropological studies. For example, through reading diaries written by female participants after the first interview, Ma (2025) explores how women's beauty practices have been normalized in their daily lives and how they are intertwined with the social construction of gender in intricate ways in China. Following Ma (2025), I consider diaries a technology to extend the spaces and periods of observation. Compared to observations and interviews, diaries are private materials that are more closely related to women's personal and domestic lives. A woman might spend more time making a decision or refining her aims. It is also different for a woman to express her feelings and opinions in diaries than in front of a doctor or a researcher. Diaries can reflect her real-time feelings, emotions, practices, and changes without restrictions of social manners and gender expectations. In Eva's diary, it was obvious that with the improvement of her skin health and beauty, she kept encouraging herself and confirming her goals. Her diary also gave her a safe space to complain and express her anger or anxieties, while she was not able to do so in her real life. These details sometimes cannot be fully captured in an interview or during observations.

Meanwhile, Eva's diary and story also provide further insights into the male surveillance of beauty in the Minnan region. Compared to anxieties caused by peer pressure, men's criticisms of and comments on women's appearance and beauty enhancements were emphasized more in Eva's diary. Eva suffered a lot from male criticisms, especially those from her ex-boyfriend. She admitted that her beauty and health enhancements were partially impacted by male surveillance. It is also worth noting that COVID restrictions, such as wearing medical masks, reflected how both men and women were considered potential risks to the population's health, when they helped remove the male surveillance of women's (facial) beauty. Eva sometimes did not need to

wear any make-up and had more skin recovery time during lockdowns. COVID restrictions, thus, helped women conduct their beauty practices in a flexible way.

### ***Being a Beauty Vlogger: A Technology of Therapy***

Sally contacted me and started participating in my research project in March 2022. Sally spent most of her time on her full-time job and was also a beauty vlogger on the RED platform. She was very busy during that period and only spent a few minutes per day on our first interview, which took more than ten days to complete. Sally finally determined to meet me in person in April to complete our first interview. On a weekday afternoon, we met in a bubble tea shop. There were only a few people in the shop, and we quickly selected a very quiet seat. Sally started sharing her experiences of pursuing beauty. As a beauty vlogger, Sally also obtained information about enhancing beauty on social platforms such as Weibo and RED:

I did not start gaining information about aesthetic medicine on RED but on Weibo. The first time, I searched for related information from 粉熊 (Pink Bear)<sup>132</sup> on Weibo. Then I tried to use RED. When I developed interests in a doctor, I usually checked his Weibo account. In general, doctors tend to post their successful cases on Weibo. But the most important thing is that you should be careful about the negative comments of doctors. Some *Wang Hong* 网红<sup>133</sup> doctors have both extremely positive and negative comments.

“Recently I have seen some doctors opening official accounts on RED.”

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<sup>132</sup> Pink Bear is a well-known official account on Weibo, which shares post about aesthetic medicine. Many women I met told me that they knew about or had followed Pink Bear. Some said that they also sent their post to Pink Bear in the hope of sharing their stories and experiences with a broader audience.

<sup>133</sup> *Wang Hong* 网红 mainly refers to social influencers who gain a reputation through social media (Dippner 2018). It is also used as an adjective to describe people who attract followers by using social media. For example, here, *Wang Hong* doctors refers to doctors who gain attention and become popular on Chinese social media.

Sally replied,

Yes. But Weibo still provides more cases. Pink Bear . . . such a pity. She does not always post advertisements, but you cannot deny that there are some *Tuo 托*<sup>134</sup> [professional commentators]. Also, to avoid making conflicts, she tends to share positive feedback and cases. She sometimes even deletes hateful comments. To attract more followers, there are some posts seeking help for recommending doctors. I prefer reading real comments.

“Have you already changed your appearance by using aesthetic medicine?”

Sally unlocked her phone screen to show me her RED page. “Yes, you can check my RED account. I have posted my experiences of pursuing beauty. There are comparison photos of me, too. I’ve changed my nose and eyes. My nose is good, natural. I’ve often heard people say my nose looks so natural. But my eyes are too big.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you.”

“Yes, I’m still thinking about changing my lower jaw. But sometimes I admit that I’ve pursued beauty in an excessive way. People are too *Juan 卷*<sup>135</sup> about their appearances. Then they might impact you. You can see online platforms such as RED commenting on people’s appearances and promoting plastic surgery. Many girls would like to try aesthetic medicine.”

“*Juan 卷*? Do you mean fierce competition, like that in academic work [in high schools, universities, and graduate studies]?”

Said answered,

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<sup>134</sup> *托* refers to people who are recruited to make fake positive comments and attract customers.

<sup>135</sup> *Juan 卷*, also known as *内卷*, is translated directly as internal involution. It has been widely used to describe extremely fierce competition in Chinese society over the past decade. It is originally linked to competition in the academy and job market; more recently, its usage has expanded to more diverse contexts. Chinese people also invent an English word called “*卷不动* Unjuanable” to refer to “the incapacity to *Juan*.”

That kind of *Juan* 卷 is more positive. It makes no sense to 卷 for appearances. People are free to choose to pursue beauty. But don't be too strict and ridiculous. You have studied abroad. You must know something about LGBT. I'm also a member of the LGBT community. We admire people who work hard to enhance themselves . . . appearances, academics, or anything else. You must be popular in our community. Society has posed too many restrictions on women. You can see judgements and comments in different places. For example, many online platforms are harsh on women. On 虎扑<sup>136</sup> you might see how men comment on women's appearances. They're so sick. These places are occupied by men and don't have diverse aesthetic standards. They want everything. They want slim bodies with big breasts, small faces, big and innocent eyes. They prefer *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 (whiteness, youth, and slimness). They link appearances to sexual competence and practices too. This kind of comment is awful. I once tried 相亲.<sup>137</sup> There were more horrible experiences. They just wanted to find an outstanding woman and then control her. They might leave her at home. They didn't express their intention directly. But they already were obsessed with gender and age stereotypes. They felt that women were not normal without getting married before the age of 30. They didn't realize that not all women want a marriage relationship with a man or a child. They didn't even respect and understand the sexual relationship between two women. If one day you would like to try 相亲, don't tell anyone about your PhD degree. Some men, also women, might humiliate you. They feel that a female PhD is the third gender, and they might also judge your age. They don't want to admit your success but try to *PUA* [gaslight] you. In this way, they might be able to control you. They might ignore sexual desires between two girls or devalue your pursuit of beauty or other aspects of your social life. Also, I once consulted the very famous Dr. X. But he gave me too much advice. He pointed out the limitations of my eye, nose, and face shape, and asked me to eliminate my mole. I didn't want to follow his guidelines. I feel good about my mole and eyes. Although I want to make some small changes to my eyes, I don't want him to comment on me. I'm not doing this for anyone but for myself. Sorry, this interview has become an LGBT and feminist interview.

“Don't worry. Please, feel free to talk.” I said.

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<sup>136</sup> 虎扑 is a social platform that mainly targets a male audience.

<sup>137</sup> 相亲 is a very popular type of social interaction in China. It is like an arranged date, but a woman's date is usually selected by others. A person will be introduced by an acquaintance, a relative, or friends to another person for dating. Some people might set strict standards of appearance, income, and so on when they are introduced to others.

As Sally said, what constitutes a good woman is often connected to appearance and reproductive and sexual abilities, in and outside the Minnan region. In these circumstances, women's pursuit of beauty and health becomes a political tool for them to voice their feelings and experiences. Beauty and health are related to women's freedom and independence in various aspects of their lives, such as dating, marriage, and childbirth. Sometimes this process involves strict criticisms about male surveillance and patriarchal power nationwide or even worldwide, which in the end promotes gender opposition and bias. In Sally's story, Minnan dating culture and its related beauty culture were toxic and outdated as they devalued women's education, independence, success, and personality. Sally's pursuit of beauty and health, as well as her vlogs, helped her fight against male domination and even marginalize the male voice.

Both Eva and Sally were recording their beauty practices and changing emotions in different ways. But diaries and vlogs became their technologies of therapy. The study of YouTube vloggers conducted by Dotson and Lafrance (2024) provides a similar case to understand their beauty labour. Dotson and Lafrance (2024, 31 & 49) discuss how recent vloggers understand healing from acne as a personal journey that is not merely supported by doctors and medicine but requires individual initiative and an online environment that encourages self-engineering and neoliberal values of working on the body. Eva and Sally did not complete their beauty and health enhancements in biomedical clinical settings but extended their practices and discussions to broader social contexts with the help of digital technologies. Their cases help explain how imperfections like acne and pimples became what Dotson and Lafrance (2024) call a disability related to women's "spoiled identity" (47), leading to criticisms on and the marginalization of women. These stories reflect how women produce beauty labour to attain more beauty capital (changing appearances, eliminating imperfections), social capital (voicing to

a broader audience, extending social circles, improving social interactions), and affective capital (changing people's perception, getting online support).

### ***Using Group Purchasing<sup>138</sup> or Being a VIP: Hierarchies of Pursuing Beauty and Health***

In March 2022, Ping contacted me to update me on her recent beauty and health enhancements. She had completed the corrective plastic surgery to modify her fake lower jaw back to its natural shape at the end of 2021. Due to her past painful experiences, she decided to give up on all invasive plastic surgeries and to spend money only on cosmetic products and general beauty procedures such as intense pulsed light.

“I've undergone three laser procedures this winter. I bought three tickets for them. They said that three tickets consisted of one course of treatment.”

“They? The doctors and technicians in the hospital?”

Ping replied to me:

No, I'm considering having beauty procedures in hospitals, but I've not tried it. I bought group-purchasing tickets for intense pulsed light from Xin Yang 新氧<sup>139</sup> on the WeChat platform. They cost me only about 300–400 Yuan [about 60–80 Canadian dollars]. The average price is about 1,000 Yuan. They are very cheap. However, the technicians of that medical workshop told me that they only used one mode. They only helped me whiten or rejuvenate the skin. I mean, for doing intense pulsed light, they might have several modes to deal with different skin problems such as telangiectasia. My skin was better in about 7–15 days, but then it returned to its original condition. I still need to buy some tickets.

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<sup>138</sup> To attract more customers to spend money on beauty procedures and plastic surgery, some medical institutions provide a good deal to group purchasers. Individuals who join a group and pay for procedures and surgery get a lower price.

<sup>139</sup> 新氧 is an official WeChat account sharing information about aesthetic medicine. It also acts as agent to help corporations and medical institutions to sell their beauty products. It provides followers access to its online shopping platform and also offers discounts. Sometimes there are options of group purchasing.

“How do you come to know about group purchasing?”

“Some of my friends shared the information with me. Also, we know other girls in the WeChat group chat, and they sometimes share this information. Are you conducting your fieldwork in Xinkaiyuan now? What are the prices there? Do they offer any group purchasing prices?”

“I need to ask my teacher [Master Luo].”

The next day, I asked Master Luo: “Do we have any group purchasing?”

Master Luo gave me a detailed explanation:

We hardly ever offer group purchasing opportunities. Sometimes, the group purchase price itself in some medical institutions is ridiculous [very low]. I don't know what machine they are using. If you're using a good machine, you need to balance the cost and income. For example, some machines are worth tens of thousands of Yuan. How can they lower the price in that way? Maybe there are some staff who haven't studied aesthetic medicine or medicine. So they are paid less. Maybe their machines are very outdated and used by several institutions. I know that some medical institutions are renting or borrowing machines and sharing their technicians. Some institutions at lower levels might offer the lowest price to attract customers. We do have some discounts. For example, if you want a lower price, you might pay for at least one course of treatment at a time. Customers who are not able to pay for the full course of treatment might separate the treatments and payment with their friends or even other customers. We once tried to offer very low prices to some social influencers. We wanted them to post some good comments and recommendations online in the hope of attracting more customers, but this didn't work well. Also, they didn't really advertise for us, but some continued bringing their friends and families to enjoy this lower price. Soon, we gave up the group purchasing.

“Did the income of the department increase after eliminating group purchasing?” I asked.

“Not really, but it’s good that we cut unnecessary costs. Like group purchasing, medical institutions also offer discounts or coupons to their VIP customers. But the service and the quality of treatment for VIPs would be much better than for those with group purchasing.”

Group purchasing provides some economically disadvantaged women opportunities to pursue beauty and health. Women can share and collect information about beauty procedures and surgery. In this way, personal experiences, social ties, and emotions are emphasized through the spread of information. Experiential knowledge is also incorporated into the dissemination of aesthetic medicine. Meanwhile, women who use group purchasing are constructing their own small communities. Finding a partner or being accepted by a group to pursue beauty and health also means that women are sharing their costs and wins with others. Getting a beauty procedure at a desirable (lower) price requires the participation of enough individuals in this community. For example, my data shows that a private hospital could offer lower prices for laser treatments to women who belong to a group-purchasing community, but to do so, at least 50 women would need to participate in this discount together. These types of discounts offers led some group-purchasing communities to seek out potential members online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, the development of group purchasing did not necessarily lead to homogeneous and harmonious groups but, rather, sometimes created divisions among members. Group purchasing brought a basic quality of service, and sometimes unreliable treatments, to some women, but it also constructed stereotypes and discrimination against those who used these services. Some of my participants told me that they were not willing to join group-purchasing communities, as the treatments they offered were too cheap to be reliable. “They [the women

who join] are deceived by the low prices. Group purchasing itself is “low.”<sup>140</sup> They should gain more medical knowledge and related information rather than make random decisions.” In previous Chinese anthropological research (Hua 2013; Luo 2013; Yang 2011), terms such as class and middle-class are widely used to discuss social hierarchies and inequalities. However, instead of using the term class or hierarchy directly, some Chinese women I met often used terms such as cheap, low, and lower to discuss social divisions in Xiamen. These women’s beauty consumption could be viewed as a reflection of their economic status, aesthetic tastes and social position. But for some women, their choice of limited, cheap services might reflect their abilities of obtaining useful information and social networking (for example, getting information about discounts and group purchasing by developing their Guanxi with others).

This section has explored how women produce beauty labour and attain beauty capital across different social spaces, including online spaces. By examining online diaries, small online communities, comments and posts on different social platforms such as RED, Weibo, and WeChat, this section has shown how women’s understanding and practices of beauty and enhancements are connected to other factors such as age, gender, family roles, and social position in the Minnan region of China.

### **Conclusion:**

In this chapter I have argued that women’s pursuit of beauty and health is a way of being and becoming in the world, and that what it means for individual women is shaped by their age,

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<sup>140</sup> The English word “low” is directly used to mean cheap in Chinese conversation. Sometimes, it also refers to questionable taste.

generation, kinship roles/obligations, social relations and social positions. In Xiamen, Minnan region, women's beauty and health enhancements were never completely attained through treatments or surgery procedures alone; achieving beauty and health was a long-long project, always in process and beyond the full control of biomedicine.

Without question, my research in Xiamen has, to some extent, lent credence to previous anthropological studies in China (Hua 2013; Yang 2011) that show how women's bodies and appearance are often subject to male surveillance. Women's management of their bodies and appearance is certainly connected to the enhancement of their sexual allure and reproductive abilities. However, my research has gone beyond a gender-opposition framework to study how women's beauty and health enhancement in the Minnan region could be related to their own individual choices. This chapter has provided more examples to explore how women balance difficult gender, kinship roles, and obligations under the impact of the Minnan patriarchal system and also under the impact of neoliberalism. Fulfilling the roles of being a good, beautiful wife and a mother may come into conflict with being a professional doctor at the same time, when women were supposed to spend more time, money, and energy on taking care of their children. Also, I have argued that not all men in Minnan were abusers and bullies who pushed women to work for docile gender roles, such as a beautiful *Hiân Huē* 贤惠 wife. Men's responses to traditional patriarchal power varied. Sometimes, men (for example, some male relatives of my participants and male doctors in the aforementioned cases) could be supporters of helping women's empowerment and their resistance against male dominance.

In addition, this chapter has shown that age and generation identity largely shaped women's beauty labour in the Minnan region. While younger generations (those in the 18–40 age range) considered beauty and health as individual assets that could be converted into different

kinds of capital, such as social and economic capital, the elder generations (those over 50) usually did not view beauty as capital. This difference in perspective was largely shaped by the rapid social transition that occurred in China following the opening of the capitalist market. The importance that people attributed to beauty capital in the marriage market was also framed by the dual influences of neo-Confucianism and neoliberalism. While some of the elder women I met considered beauty enhancement as a tool to satisfy men, others (typically younger women) saw that goal as unethical and refused to abide by it. Furthermore, the chapter has demonstrated how 30 became a culturally and politically sensitive age marker for some Chinese women to rethink their pursuit of beauty and health, as well as their career, family, and other aspects of their individual and social lives. Although the preference for youth, or for a youthful appearance, was very common, women's dress, make-up, and social expectations (such as getting married) were connected with stereotypes and social expectations associated with the age of 30. The contradictory relationship between youthful appearance and mature sociality produced added anxiety and social pressure for women.

I have discussed how women's pursuit of beauty and health does not merely involve their personal choices and practices. My research has veered away from describing women as victims and has, instead, looked at them as active investors, whose feelings and experiences of beauty and health reflect their ways of being and becoming in this Minnan patriarchal world. The implications of their beauty practices and choices were very complex. With the help of digital technologies, women extended their voices and performed their practices in diverse virtual spaces. Independence and anti-patriarchal thinking have become powerful tools for women to legitimize and normalize their beauty practices, leading to the build-up of a lifelong enhancement project. Meanwhile, women's beauty and health enhancements, thus, helped them promote social

distinctions, leading to the increasing social boundaries between married and unmarried, male-controlled and free, high-taste and low-taste women. Women's experiences, and their effects, across various private and social spaces have provided specific cases with which to study how biomedical and local patriarchal power have become entangled with the construction of neoliberal subjects and social inequalities in Chinese society. Biomedicine and the Minnan patriarchal system have both shaped women's beauty and health enhancements in profound ways.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that women's pursuit of beauty and health in Xiamen is not merely about enhancing appearances or eliminating pathologies, nor is it achieved through certain treatments or plastic surgery procedures alone; it is, rather, a way of living in the world. As I have discussed in previous chapters, some Chinese women's understanding and pursuit of beauty and health are associated with their interactions with the socialist state, capitalist market, and Chinese biomedical system. Chinese traditions related to *Renqing* 人情 (favour) and *Guanxi* 关系 (social relations, such as kinship and friendship) are crucial social frameworks that shape how women are able to access state entitlements as well as possibilities for market consumption. Women's choices and practices of enhancing beauty and health should not be considered direct products of globalization or colonialism but reflect how women imagine their age, gender, ethnicity, social position, and aesthetic citizenship.

To support my argument, in the first chapter I started exploring women's beauty and health enhancement on a large scale by delving into competing beauty ideals in China during the process of globalization, and in the last chapter I narrowed the lens to a regional perspective, which focused on women's practices, feelings, and experiences in the Minnan region of China. In this way, my dissertation demonstrated the complexities of beauty and health in China in broader social and historical contexts, then provided a fuller picture of the Chinese national medical system and its biomedical system before examining women's beauty and health enhancement as a way of living in Xiamen city, in Minnan.

Throughout the dissertation, I have endeavoured to show that some Chinese women's beauty and health enhancement has been a continuing process and that some Chinese women

have achieved beauty and health through long-term self-care, maturity, experiences, and social conduct, such as getting married and working towards their independence. In my first chapter, I discussed how beauty ideals such as whiteness were impacted by diet, living and working environments, and so on. In my second chapter, I explored how some Chinese women maintained and improved their *Guanxi* 关系 with medical professionals, such as doctors, to gain access to more medical resources and information. In my third chapter, I introduced the biomedical concept of natural beauty, which emphasized the elimination of traces of plastic surgery procedures. Women's pursuit of natural beauty could not be achieved through surgery procedures alone but required future recovery and changes based on their living experiences. In my last chapter, I offered further examples of women's beauty and health enhancement as a way of living in the Minnan region. Women were female patients, aesthetic citizens, rational consumers, and investors who constructed idealized gender and family roles such as good wives and daughters.

Based on discussions in these four chapters, my dissertation revealed the Chinese state as a powerful biopolitical machine and the specificities of the Chinese capitalist market. In my first and third chapters, I discussed how the so-called *Wang Hong Lian* 网红脸 (face of a social influencer) and sick beauty were devalued by the state-controlled media and public medicine, while in the capitalist market, the pursuit of *Wang Hong Lian* and *Bai You Shou* 白幼瘦 could be encouraged by the success and wealth of some social influencers. In the second chapter, I argued that the state's control over its population reached its peak during the COVID-19 period (2019–2022) in China. With COVID restrictions, the Chinese state was controlling the movement and choices its citizens in and outside medical settings. Medical travel and transnational shopping in

the hope of obtaining better or cheaper medical resources became difficult. Also, both public and private medical institutions were controlled by the state with connections to the public health insurance system. Public doctors, who were also representatives of the state's biopower, were encouraged to work in private hospitals. However, the overuse of medical resources for beauty enhancement and the existence of unregulated medical workshops reflected the power and limitations of the capitalist market. In the last chapter, I presented some cases that show how biomedical authorities helped some women fight against patriarchal power and complete self-enhancement as a way of rational investment.

Also, the dissertation introduced China's specific type of biomedical system. Biomedicine has become a political regime of the socialist state to supervise and control the population's health and beauty, as I discussed in the second and third chapters. In chapter two, I explained how the health of individuals was considered the most essential element in the construction of a strong, independent Chinese nation, whereas beauty enhancement was not deemed compulsory. By incorporating this optional beauty into the Chinese medical system, the Chinese state extended its surveillance of individual bodies across public and private medicine. Meanwhile, unregulated medical workshops and beauty salons satisfied some Chinese women's demands for beauty enhancement. Then, in my third chapter, using beauty as an example, I explored how Chinese medical tenets such as *Du*, balance, and harmony were developed in Chinese biomedicine to promote biomedical rationality and authority. Beauty was impacted by different biomedical standards of health in public and private hospitals. But the domination of biomedical standards of health in Cosmetic Dermatology and Plastic Surgery did not lead to the devaluation or elimination of Chinese medicine. Meanwhile, public medicine held a more conservative view of beauty. Patients could attain healthy and natural beauty with the help of

medical technologies, but both biomedicine and Chinese medicine emphasized patients' personal responsibility and choice. Also, interactions between biomedical professionals and female patients were shaped by traditions such as *Renqing* 人情 (debts, duties, etc.) and *Guanxi* 关系 (social relations).

Additionally, I explored how some Chinese women's understanding of beauty and health was related to social categories such as race and ethnicity. In the first chapter, I argued that women's understandings of beauty and health were linked to how they envisioned ethnicity and race, which have been intermingled in today's Chinese society. For example, the imaginations of white people sometimes overlapped with those of ethnic minorities such as the Uyghur in northwestern China. But in contradistinction to the concept of race, whose Chinese counterpart would be *Zhong Zu* 种族 – *Hei Ren* 黑人 (black people), *Bai Ren* 白人 (white people) – *Min Zu* 民族 (nation or ethnicity) was more widely used. Meanwhile, black and white were not politically charged words, as they were related (descriptively) to skin colour more so than to racialized categories. Whiteness did not refer to a certain racial group but to colour, smoothness, and flawlessness of skin. Also, this dissertation provided insights into Chinese people's understandings of social inequalities. In the final chapter, I argued that my research showed that words such as ordinary and VIP, low and good/high, social position and status, rather than *Jie Ji* 阶级 (class) were commonly used when Chinese people talked about social inequalities; and I contrasted this with previous anthropological studies in China in which the concept of class took precedence.

### **Self-care and Common Good: Rethinking Positive Values in a Competitive Society**

Edmonds' (2010) study of Brazilian feminine beauty argues that beauty is not merely negatively impacted by other social categories such as race, class, and gender but is an independent social domain that is constituted by social relationships and moments in its logic (Edmonds 2010, 20); and as Edmonds explains, it constructs an independent social hierarchy in Brazil. This dissertation offers a different example of studying beauty. In China, beauty is impacted by, and also impacts, different forms of power related to the state, the market, globalization, medicine, and so on. Beauty did impact the construction of social inequalities when women took advantage of their beauty enhancement in job seeking and marriage. However, it was obvious that beauty did not create a strict social hierarchy in China. It was not compulsory for all Chinese women I met to pursue certain competing beauty ideals such as *Bai You Shou*. Beauty, especially external beauty, could not guarantee one's success or social position. Unlike Edmonds, I did not see women's beauty enhancement as simply a result of their aspirations for so-called modernity.

In this regard, I was inspired more by Jarrín's (2017) study in Brazil, which explored women's enhancement of beauty by focusing on their social relations and perceptions. Women's understandings of beauty and the value of beauty were impacted by their self-perceptions and how they were perceived by others. Following Jarrín (2017), in the dissertation I viewed beauty as a key aspect of sociality in China. Women's pursuit of beauty and health involved the anticipation of a better, more fulfilling life, one that is associated with obtaining a better job, higher social position, and recognition by others. In this situation, women's self-care was conducted based on their self-knowledge. However, this positive framework could not fully explain women's beauty enhancement in China, where women were not only neoliberal entrepreneurs who calculated beauty capital and assets. As Chinese citizens of a socialist state, women's beauty enhancements were impacted by, and also impacted, socialist morality,

especially in the Chinese public medical system. For example, women's pursuit of beauty was often judged according to the concept of *Du* 度 (degree). I often heard similar criticisms about women's beauty enhancements: "Oh, she is over the *Du* 度 as she is wasting public medical resources, even though she pays for that. She is already very beautiful and there is no perfect beauty." Apart from the tensions between the capitalist market and socialist state, women's choices and practices of beauty and health were also reflected in their interactions with neo-Confucianism and the Minnan patriarchal system.

Some women's beauty and health enhancement provided a new example to study Foucault's (1997) theory of "technologies of the self." Foucault (1997) explains how moral principles such as law and Christian morality have prevented people from taking care of themselves and treating themselves better than others in Western society. For example, Christian asceticism always refers to a certain renunciation of the self, and people are educated to renounce the self in order to gain access to the next level of reality. Based on some Chinese women's experiences and feelings related to health and beauty enhancement, I determined that taking care of the self was sometimes difficult; although Christian ideology is not dominant in China, some Chinese women's "technologies of the self" are similarly impacted by the moral principles of diverse cultural and social systems. In the Minnan region, for example, the Minnan patriarchal and Confucian systems preserved and perpetuated traditional gender discourses and gender roles, such as mother, wife, and daughter, which impacted women's beauty practices and choices. Some of the women I met told me that they did not think about what they needed or who they were, as their husbands, fathers, or other family members had already guided them to make choices and improvements. Some were aware of the negative impacts of these two moral systems

on their self-improvement but still hesitated to defy the rules or discourses pertaining to things such as inner beauty.

But social morality did not always obscure women's "technologies of the self." Other social, moral, and religious systems, such as Chinese physiognomy and neoliberalism, encouraged women to take more advantage of their appearance. Some women viewed beauty as an asset or capital in their individual and social lives. In their words, their self-care helped them obtain *Yan Zhi* 颜值 (beauty value). Also, with increasing scandals and debates around aesthetic medicine and the beauty industry, some women felt that the freedom of self-improvement might be a new moral trap for exploiting their bodies and thus became more conservative in how they cared for themselves. Within the national framework, women's "technologies of the self" were intervened by the socialist discourse, such that of the "common good," which mitigated the domination of Minnan patriarchy. Although the capitalist market developed quickly in China, collectivity, rather than individuality, was still more highly valued in Chinese mainstream social media controlled by the government. Irrational beauty practices and choices were devalued, while a proper contribution to the beauty economy was preferred.

In line with this, China's national medical system provided restrictions and guidelines for Chinese women to achieve self-improvement. Although many doctors and patients recognized the positive aspects of women's beauty and health enhancement, beauty always gave way to health, especially in the public medical system funded by the Chinese government. The pursuit of irrational beauty and perfection was usually denied by doctors during the COVID period as this could lead to the overuse of medical resources. It was common for doctors to tactfully persuade and educate their female patients based on their professional knowledge. But in private hospitals, the situation was better for women, who found opportunities there to pursue their goals

of beauty enhancement once profits and business were prioritized. Doctors in the private system went further in helping their female patients acknowledge their needs and beauty imperfections by introducing popular ideals and medical products that would address these, such as advanced laser treatment. On the other hand, the unknown negative effects of aesthetic medicine and the long treatment or recovery periods put women in the position of having to care for themselves, leading to anxieties and sometimes unforeseen risks. For example, the effects of fat implants needed to be observed over the long term, and sometimes fat did not remain in the same place on a woman's face for more than one year, so women needed to constantly monitor this.

On the other hand, my dissertation provided insights into rethinking how women's protection of "individual good" did not necessarily conflict with or harm the "common good." My research was conducted during the COVID-19 period when compulsory tests and strict restrictions in China protected the common good and the health of the population, leaving limited medical resources for women's beauty enhancement. I heard some people complain about COVID lockdowns, but I met others who supported these restrictions that protected both the populations' health and the requirements of social distance between individuals. When public doctors worked in different medical institutions and introduced their patients to their counterparts in other institutions, they were fulfilling *Renqing* 人情, building their reputations and careers, and were also serving the public. Women who followed social influencers and celebrities in pursuing beauty and health were simultaneously constructing their ideal selves and helping this sick nation recover from the emotional and economic depression of the COVID period. In this way, women's support of the beauty economy could be very positive, involving the construction of their femininity, independence, and aesthetic citizenship in Xiamen.

### **Beauty in China's Capitalist Market**

Beauty is not a new topic in Chinese society or in Chinese anthropological studies. Chinese women have pursued and consumed beauty and have considered it a kind of asset for more than two thousand years. But what is the significance of beauty in China's capitalist market today? Before starting my research fieldwork, I did not expect that beauty would provide me with such a compelling example to explore the Chinese capitalist market and its connections to medicine and the state.

As my previous chapters have shown, beauty consumption did help the development of the Chinese capitalist market during COVID-19, and medical professionals and some Chinese women both benefited a lot from this. Beauty itself is a commodity in today's China. Beauty enhancement is related to the consumption of cosmetic products, aesthetic medicine, and beautiful clothes. Beauty is also an icon of neoliberal individualism and is related to Chinese feminist thinking around women's independence and female empowerment. By responding to beauty ideals, women are making connections to femininity, globalization, neoliberalism, and state surveillance. Women are becoming active consumers, citizens, and patients. Some Chinese women are working on constructing these different identities, even mixed identities, while doing beauty enhancement. For example, beauty can be viewed as an optional choice of both neoliberal consumers and socialist citizens. With the growth of the beauty industry and biotechnology, some women's access to beauty has become easier with more diverse choices in the beauty market.

My study of China has also provided insights into the powerful state and its regulation of the capitalist market. As I discussed in my second chapter, although the Chinese government eliminated all funding for beauty from its national medical insurance program during the COVID period, it also promoted its surveillance of the beauty industry. Thus, even as the state imposed

strict regulations on plastic surgery, and categorized surgeries according to levels of danger, by publishing articles and news in its official media, the state constantly shaped Chinese women's understanding of healthy beauty and natural beauty. Furthermore, in China's public medical system, we can see how the state employed public doctors and other medical professionals to educate and guide citizens, as well as provided a state-funded model to other private medical institutions. The public medical system also provided limited but stable medical resources for beauty enhancement during the COVID period. In this way, the Chinese state worked to prevent exposing its population to inequalities, violence/death, and social exclusion based on neoliberalism and aesthetic citizenship.

Admittedly, the Chinese beauty market has developed rapidly and has shaped some Chinese women's understanding of entertainment and success, but the state has worked to strictly control the beauty market and to prevent constructing a beauty hierarchy in China. By providing examples of natural, rational beauty in public medicine, the Chinese state has shown a negative attitude towards some citizens' pursuit of surplus citizenship (Kukuczka and Liebelt 2024), which uses endless public medical resources to obtain personal beauty capital. From the state's perspective, the pursuit of surplus citizenship is unethical as it contravenes socialist discourses around the "common good." As a socialist state, China has maintained a national strategy that prioritizes science and education to develop its productivity and economy since the 1990s. In contrast to previous Chinese anthropologists (Hua 2013; Yang 2011), I contend that beauty is not the dominant, or even a very important, industry in China's developing economy. The development of digital technologies, such as the internet, has led some Chinese women to overestimate the role of beauty when talking about success, and they neglect, I think, that the success of women can be impacted by various factors such as their knowledge, education,

personality, and creativity. Rather than emphasizing the visuality of its citizens, I contend that the Chinese state has focused more on the non-visual aspects of its citizens when it values education, personality, and patriotism.

Beauty has created both opportunities and chaos in China's capitalist market. The growth of the unregulated beauty market has caused some concern for the national government. Based on my research data, the strict COVID restrictions and regulations opened up more opportunities for unregulated medical workshops and beauty salons. While patients and medical professionals had to follow strict processes and regulations around COVID, such as getting vaccinations, to move in and outside regulated medical institutions like public hospitals, unregulated medical workshops could move to domestic areas that did not have to adhere to these COVID requirements. These kinds of unregulated workshops could also provide highly personalized services and foreign medical products, rather than the Chinese domestic medicine and products used in public hospitals, thereby helping patients who prefer foreign aesthetic medicine avoid expensive medical trips to nearby countries such as Thailand and Japan. There is no guarantee that all of the money of Chinese citizens can or will circulate in the regulated beauty market. The transmission of unregulated Chinese medicine and folk medicine also has made it difficult to eliminate the unregulated beauty market. In these ways, China, as a young socialist state, has provided a unique place to study beauty, consumption, and the capitalist market.

### **Limitations and Future Interests:**

Although this dissertation contributed to literature in social anthropology, its limitations should also be discussed. First, my research relied heavily on data derived from my conversations and

interviews with female individuals. This is because I was able to bring my personal laptop into medical institutions to take notes efficiently and record some of the interviews. It was easier for me to get permission to take text notes than to make video and audio recordings. Fortunately, I still incorporated some data based on my observations throughout the dissertation. For example, I focused on women's gestures, facial expressions, and how they dressed during our meetings. I also focused on the weather, the environment of hospitals, and women's interactions with medical professionals, friends, and so on. In my future research, I hope my research data can be obtained in a more multisensory way.

Second, most of my female participants were under the age of 50. This was the case, to a large extent, because of the ways that beauty enhancement relates to age divisions in Chinese society. For example, women over the age of 50 were considered elders, and many of them retire in their early 50s. While women of this age often viewed beauty enhancement as unnecessary and dangerous, younger women were more likely to regard beauty as a form of capital. Those who were actively pursuing beauty, then, tended to be younger (including minors who were supervised by their parents). Fortunately, however, I was still able to interact with a few women in the over 50 cohort during my fieldwork. Still, I hope that in future anthropological research on Chinese women's beauty and health enhancement the age range will be more diverse. With the development of the capitalist market and consumerism in China, a growing number of women may come to consider beauty as a form of capital and incorporate beauty enhancement into their lives. Also, with the rise of the retirement age, which is supported by the Chinese government, Chinese people's understanding of female elders might also change in the future.

Third, it was a pity that I was able to conduct most of my ethnographic fieldwork in only two hospitals due to the length of my research program and COVID restrictions. Most of the

research participants were patients and regulated medical professionals in public and private hospitals. But fortunately, I was able to interview the owners of one medical workshop and one beauty salon, which helped me gain more insights and information about beauty and health enhancement that takes place in unregulated medical spaces. Also, my research was conducted on Xiamen Island, so I did not have the opportunity to cover what was going on in more rural areas. Given this, most of my data is geared towards providing a detailed comparative study of a public and a private hospital. Given the opportunity, I hope to conduct future fieldwork on China's national medical system and to visit more private medical spaces, especially unregulated medical workshops which do not employ regulated medical professionals.

### **Did Beauty Labour and Suffering Succeed?**

As an anthropology student, I woke up at around six in the morning on the day of my first field site visit to Zhongshan Hospital. I was wide awake and full of energy as I had gone to bed early the night before. I repeated to myself some important research questions in Mandarin and Minnanese while I brushed powder on my pinkish face. It took nearly an hour to do my make-up and another hour for my hair. This was a normal daily schedule for me to complete skin care and make-up, the same as I had done in the first three years of my PhD. I had just completed half my hair when my dad knocked on the door impatiently, "Hi Chenxin, I think we need to go. I am not in a hurry as I have asked for a day off, but you might be late. I can bring you to the hospital. You need to visit the doctors there today. Do you remember? Don't waste your time on that hairstyle. It makes no sense when you are doing your research there."

When my participants and I were discussing beauty labour and experiences, we usually were surprised by the way we had normalized beauty practices such as skin care and make-up in

our lives. Several hours of beauty labour, which included too much work, was considered normal or even compulsory. From my perspective, beauty was usually wonderful. My beauty labour was enjoyable, relaxing, and something I did daily. I did not connect my beauty and health enhancement to suffering. But how and when did I get so used to producing beauty? This question made me recall my childhood memories of growing up in a local hospital. Beauty was everywhere. When I rode my bike to the Dentistry clinic to visit my father, I saw female patients who tolerated pain when dentists modified or cleaned their teeth. When I observed female patients standing in lines to register their medical cases, I watched how they combed their hair to pass the time. When some of them shared their food with me, they might tell me to eat more fruit rather than candy, as they believed this would help me to have healthy, beautiful skin. The use of medicine, biomedical technology, and dietetics had been a significant part of my life. I once believed that beauty labour was easy and helpful when people made proper choices and engaged in proper conduct – but now?

Unfortunately, I have found that beauty cannot be separated from suffering, anxiety, and even death. Women who did not meet popular beauty ideals, such as whiteness, might receive more encouragement and concern to continue working on their appearance. It was very common to see women sharing their concerns about others' difficulty, skin beauty and health. For beautiful women, beauty enhancement produces happiness but also reflects worries about ugliness and aging. Beauty and the perception of imperfection can both lead to social and emotional suffering and uncertainties. These impacts are more likely to be seen now that contemporary aesthetic medicine, such as plastic surgery, has made beauty and health enhancement such a time-consuming project for women. Even a woman who is rich and free enough might worry about her new eyelids during her recovery. Also, if pursuing beauty under

the neoliberal guidelines is sometimes considered a positive thing, beauty enhancement that is impacted by patriarchal or other forms of power is often devalued. Beauty market has contributed to the construction of new forms of gender violence and exploitation. It was not uncommon for me to witness illness and death in a hospital due to my childhood experiences. But it was a shock to realize that while some women were using lots of medical resources to attain perfection, others were getting sick and dying during COVID-19 in different parts of the world.

However, should I say that beauty is toxic, or that it is a permanent prison for women? No. In the course of my research, I found that beauty was also inspiring, flexible, and powerful in Xiamen, China. I remember how often the rooms in hospitals were occupied by women who were listening to and supporting each other, filled with laughter and hope. My dissertation did discuss how beauty could be used as a form of social control and biopolitical surveillance, but I was impressed by the brave, interesting women I met who reflected on their beauty practices and choices, dealt with anxieties and worries, redefined beauty by themselves, and fought against unfair treatment. I also felt empathy for women who were sometimes disadvantaged because of their appearance or suffered from male control and gender violence when pursuing beauty. Beauty is powerful, but I do not want to exaggerate it. There is no beauty hierarchy or universally accepted beauty ideal for all women to aspire to in China. Women's success and experience can be impacted by many factors, such as their education, personality, skills, and so on. Beauty is a way of living in the world, and it is not uncommon to see women stop doing beauty labour or change their preferences for no specific reason. In my opinion, beauty is full of women's feelings, experiences, and possibilities. Beauty has many different sides, but I tend to

hold a positive perspective about how women in China are choosing beauty as a way of living in the world.

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## Glossary

### 1. **Bai You Shou** 白幼瘦 (whiteness, youth, and slimness)

*Bai You Shou* has become one of the most famous feminine ideals in China. It is not a new cultural product of colonialism or cultural invasion but is related to traditional Chinese aesthetics. There are and have been many debates around the concept of *Bai You Shou*.

### 2. **Balance** 平衡 and **Harmony** 和谐

Balance and harmony are Chinese medical tenets. Chinese medicine emphasizes a harmonious cosmos-human relationship of individuals and nature. When *Yin Qi* 阴气 and *Yang Qi* 阳气 in and outside an individual's body are in balance, the individual enjoys harmony with nature (or the outside environment). Chinese physicians also use the words *balance* and *harmony* to describe a good relationship between the external body (appearance) and the internal body (the movement of *Qi*, personality, and so on) or the internal organs in human bodies (Hsu). In Chinese medicine, beauty is not separate from health, as *Yang Yan* 养颜 (nourishing the appearance) is a part of *Yang Sheng* 养生 (nourishing the life). Today, balance is used to describe a good combination of facial features in biomedical settings.

### 3. **Cultural Diversity** 文化多样性/文化多元性

Cultural Diversity is a popular concept in contemporary China. It refers to understanding, respecting, and maintaining differences in different cultural systems. It is also a core concept in China's minority policy as it supports protecting the culture and language of ethnic minorities in China. Chinese sociologist Fei (1999) described China's cultural system as “多元一体 (diversities in unity).”

### 4. **Dan Yan** 淡颜 and **Nong Yan** 浓颜

*Dan Yan* 淡颜 refers to the beauty of plain facial features, such as a beautiful but not very prominent nose, thin and delicate eyebrows and lashes, and so on. Female stars such as Liu Yifei 刘亦菲 (who played Fa Mulan in the Disney movie *Mulan*) are considered representatives of *Dan Yan* 淡颜 beauty. *Nong Yan* 浓颜 beauty is used to describe beautiful women with facial features such as a very high, straight nose, large sunken eyes with long eyelashes and bushy eyebrows. *Nong Yan* 浓颜 is often related to the so-called Caucasian look in China. Actresses Dilraba and Bingbing Fan are considered to be *Nong Yan* 浓颜 beauties.

### 5. **Du** 度

*Du 度* is often translated as degree and amount in Chinese. In Chinese medicine, *Du 度* can be used to describe the amount of medicine in a medical recipe and the amount of treatment/medicine used by Chinese physicians to help their patients deal with illness. For example, two patients might use the same medical recipe, but they have different bodily conditions, so physicians adjust the amount of the medicines in this recipe for each of them. It is also used in describe personality, social abilities, and social interactions. When a person is good at socializing, maintaining good relationships with many people, and handling disagreements or conflicts properly, we can say that this person holds *Du 度* well. This concept has been developed in biomedicine. In Plastic Surgery, it is common to see doctors use it to describe how they manage plastic surgery procedures to achieve a satisfying result and how they guide patients to make rational, realistic choice. For example, doctors might say that they hold the *Du 度* by making small, unrecognizable changes without bringing harm to patient's body.

#### 6. **Fa Wu** 发物

Fa Wu is a category of food that might cause bodily imbalance and induce disease. For example, seafood, lamb, and beef are regarded as Fa Wu, and women who have long-term skin issues, such as acne, are usually told to avoid them.

#### 7. **Feng Jian** 封建

*Feng Jian* 封建 means feudalism and feudal in Chinese. It often came up in my research in discussions of women's suffering, which was attributed to the impacts of outdated, feudal and patriarchal control of women in today's Chinese society.

#### 8. **Guanxi** 关系

*Guanxi* 关系 is a significant concept that refers to social relationships in Chinese society. In Chinese tradition, *Guanxi* 关系 usually refers to relationships founded on mutual material and emotional supports in the principles of Confucianism (Mason 2016). *Guanxi* 关系 has been extended to describe the relationships between families, friends, classmates, colleague, and even the relationships between doctors and patients. It is often facilitated with *Renqing* 人情.

#### 9. **Minnan** 闽南 Region

The Minnan region includes Xiamen 厦门, Quanzhou 泉州, and Zhangzhou 漳州 City. It is the homeland of the Minnan people and Minnan subculture. The Minnan region is a subcultural and political region. The Minnan subcultural group is one of the subgroups who maintain the patriarchal system in China. Some Minnan people still use Minnanese 闽南语 or Min Chinese as their first language.

#### 10. **Nei Juan** 内卷

*Nei Juan* 内卷 refers to fierce domestic competition. It has been impacted by the fast development of the Chinese capitalist market (which quickly replaced the previous labor-oriented market) and a growing population. The word *Nei Juan* 内卷 is often used to describe China as a hustling society.

#### 11. **Re Qi** 热气

*Re Qi* 热气 is also called hot *Qi*. Too much *Re Qi* 热气, or cold *Qi*, can cause bodily imbalance and disease, such as fever.

#### 12. **RED** 小红书

RED, also called *Xiao Hong Shu* and Rednote, has been one of the most popular social platforms in China in the last two decades. It is highly gendered because it was originally a place for women to record their menstrual periods and/or babysitter experiences. In time, more and more women started sharing their experiences around health/beauty enhancement, shopping, cooking, studies, and so on. RED developed with the rise of social influencer economies. Compared to WeChat and Alipay, its function is limited, but it is now an online shopping platform too.

#### 13. **Renqing** 人情

*Renqing* 人情 is a core concept in Chinese people's social interactions. *Renqing* 人情 can be used to describe individual feelings and emotions in relation to a set of reciprocal obligations between individuals (Mason 2016). In this way, it also refers to debt, favors, and gifts. Sometimes giving *Renqing* 人情 is the start of a close relationship between a doctor and patient.

#### 14. **Ren Zao Mei Nu** 人造美女

In Mandarin, *Ren Zao Mei Nu* 人造美女 (artificial beauty) is often used to describe women who enhance their physical appearance by undergoing plastic surgery procedures.

#### 15. **Shang Huo** 上火

*Shang Huo* 上火 is a symptom in Chinese medicine. It happens when there is too much heat in the human body, which can be caused by inadequate diet, excessive emotions, grueling daily schedules, weather, and so on.

#### 16. **Shi Liao** 食疗

*Shi Liao* 食疗 refers to medical dietetics in Chinese Medicine. *Shi Liao* 食疗 can be a daily practice carried out under the guidelines of experienced, knowledgeable lay persons; it does not require permission or suggestions from a qualified Chinese doctor. Shi Liao maintains and enhances an individual's health through proper food and drink in accordance with the

individual's bodily condition, personality, life schedule, and so on. For example, if one has a strong body with too much hot *Qi*, gentle, "cold" food, such as bird's nest and green tea are favored, while oily and spicy foods, such as hot pot, should be avoided.

#### 17. **Wang Hong** 网红 (Social Influencers)

In China, social influencers who share their experiences and lives online to gain fame and fortune are called *Wang Hong* 网红. With increasing scandals and negative news, *Wang Hong* 网红 has now also become a stereotype referring to irrational people who sacrifice health to pursue unnatural beauty. A face with large eyes, identifiable double eyelids, prominent nose is sometimes called *Wang Hong Lian* 网红脸 (face of a social influencer). Some famous doctors, including surgeons who employ plastic surgery, are called *Wang Hong* 网红 doctors, because they gain attention and reputation by posting their cases and experiences on social platforms such as RED.

#### 18. **WeChat** 微信

*WeChat* is the most popular social platform in China. An individual's WeChat account is usually connected to their citizen ID, medical insurance account, and bank account. Chinese people use WeChat to maintain social contacts, shop, play online games, reserve appointments, and pay bills. Alipay has been WeChat's competitor.

#### 19. **Weibo** 微博

*Weibo* is another social platform in China. It was more popular in 2000s and 2010s. It provided digital spaces for people to make social contacts, including interacting with their favourite stars and celebrities. In the past two decades, many Chinese netizens, especially females, have now moved to platforms such as RED.

#### 20. **Xiao Zhong** 小众

*Xiao Zhong* 小众 is a common Mandarin adjective that means applicable to certain people or minorities. For example, if plastic surgery is not very popular among a certain group of individuals, or is only accepted by certain individuals, a Mandarin speaker might say that it is a very *Xiao Zhong* 小众 choice.

#### 21. **Yan Zhi** 颜值

*Yan Zhi* 颜值 refers to beauty value in Chinese. It can be used to describe the advantages of having a good physical appearance. People who support *Yan Zhi* 颜值 might say: "颜值是第一生产力 (beauty value is the primary productive force)."

#### 22. **Yi Nao** 医闹

In China, *Yi Nao* happens when some patients express their discontent with the medical system through language and actions. Sometimes their language and actions are very violent. *Yi Nao* is common and can even lead to injury or death of medical professionals.

### 23. **Zhong Kou Wei** 重口味

*Zhong Kou Wei* 重口味 is often used to describe a person who prefers food with heavy flavors, such as very oily and spicy food. These foods are considered bad for an individual's health and beauty in Chinese society.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Sample of Flyer

Date: 2020.06.20

#### Calling of Research Participant

#### 参与调查者号召

To whom it may concern,

致启者,

I am a second year PhD student in Social Anthropology, York University, Canada. My PhD research project explores ideals of feminine beauty and health in Xiamen, China. I will focus on how women respond to ideals of feminine beauty and health, as well as the things they do to support their beauty and health. I will explore how their pursuits of beauty and health impact their individual and social life (career, marriage, social position, etc.). I will explore how Chinese women's understandings and knowledge/practices of beauty and health have been shaped via encountering different cultural or medical systems such as Korean pop culture.

我是来自加拿大约克大学的博士二年级学生。我的博士课题旨在研究女性对美与健康典范的追求，以中国厦门为例。我会关注女性如何应对社会主流赏美和健康标准，还有她们在追求美与健康方面的实际努力。我会研究女性对美与健康的追求如何影响她们的个人和社会生活（事业，婚姻，社会地位等方面）。我将以全球化的视角来研究女性赏美及其相关形象的传播。并且，我会研究女性在这方面的知识和日常实践是怎样被不同的文化和医疗体系（比如韩流）所影响。

I am now conducting my fieldwork at 《I will insert the name of my fieldsite here》. In order to explore women's understandings and practices of beauty and health, I will interview 25-30 female patients. During interviews, I will ask some open questions. For example, how do you think about your facial features, appearance? How do you think about beauty problems or health issues such as skin problems? Will you enhance your beauty or health and how? How do you acquire knowledge and practices of promoting beauty and health? How do your pursuit of health and beauty help you construct your identities, or claim a higher social status? Each interview will take about one hour. I only provide some potential questions here, and some questions might be asked in an indirect way or be changed according to your answers. As participants, you are not required to answer all questions during the interviews. You can refuse to answer any question, give me advice, and stop interview anytime. I will also observe 5 female participants' daily routines of make-up and facial skin care at their home. I will take video or photograph to record their practices.

我正在\_\_\_\_\_ 进行田野调查。为了研究女性对美丽与健康的理解及这方面的实际行动，我将采访 25-30 女性。在采访中，我将会问一些开放性问题。例如，您对自己的样貌，外形有什么看法？您对例如皮肤问题的美容或健康问题有什么看法？您是否计划或如何提升自身的美貌与健康？您如何获得这方面的知识或习得这方面的技能？您对美丽与健康的追求是否帮助塑造个人认同，获得更高的社会地位？每个采访约耗时一小时。我在这里给出了一些可能在采访时会提到的问题。但根据您的回答，一些问题可能不会被直接提起或者会被修改。采访过程中，您，作为被采访者不需要回答所有的问题。您可以拒绝回答任意问题，对我的采访给出建议，或随时停止接受采访。还有，我计划拜访 5 名参与调查者，观察她们在家时如何进行日常化妆与护肤。在观察她们的日常行为过程中，我将录像或拍摄照片。

Furthermore, I will collect your personal information such as your age, educational background, and personal income for analysis, but you can also refuse to provide any personal information during interviews. Your data will be coded, protected in my laptop and only I have the access to your file. Unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. If I took any photo or video of your daily practices, I will change your voice and cover parts of your face to protect your privacy. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. I will write a fieldwork dissertation and submit it to the Faculty of Graduate Studies, York University. I will also do academic presentations of my fieldwork dissertation. Your data might be used – in an anonymized form – by me in subsequent research investigations exploring similar lines of inquiry. But such projects will still undergo ethics review by the HPRC, our institutional REB. Any secondary use of anonymized data by the researcher will be treated with the same degree of confidentiality and anonymity as in the original research project.

另外，为了进一步的研究分析，我将收集您的个人数据，比如年龄，教育背景和收入，但是在采访过程中您可以拒绝提供任何个人信息。您的数据在我的电脑中会被匿名编码，受到保护，并且只有我有权限查看。除非您特意强调，您的名字不会出现在我的任何调查报告或出版物中。如果我在观察您日常化妆护肤的过程中拍摄任何照片或视频，我将修改您的声音并部分遮挡您的面部来保证您的隐私权。您的个人隐私将在最大程度下受法律保护。在我完成田野调查后，我会撰写田野论文并上交到约克大学的研究生委员会。我也可能对我的田野论文开展学术展示。该研究的调查数据可能会以匿名形式被调查者在相关的其他研究中使用。但调查者将来调查项目中的数据使用也会受到人类参与调查者审核委员会，即我校人权道德委员会的监管。任何对匿名数据的再次使用都会得到和原调查同等程度的隐私和匿名保护。

Each participant will be offered a small bag of tea. There is no coercion to participate in this research. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researcher, this medical institution, and York University. You can stop participating in this research project anytime. If you decide to stop participating, you may withdraw without penalty, financial or otherwise, and you will still receive the promised inducement. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete (November 2021).

每个参与调查者会获得一小包茶叶作为感谢礼。如果您不再愿意当志愿者，结束参与调查，或拒绝回答某些问题，都不影响您与调查者，医疗机构，或约克大学的友好关系。如果您选择停止参与，您也可以撤回您贡献的调查资料，您不会有任何处罚或罚款之类的损失，并且您仍然可以收到调查感谢礼物。只要您决定撤回某一方面的资料，在这个部分与您相关的一切数据都会清零。您也可以在参与调查之后，调查者完成资料分析之前（2021年11月），选择撤回您的资料。

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, or you are willing to participate my research, please feel free to contact me at [vonnies94@yorku.ca](mailto:vonnies94@yorku.ca), my wechat account vonnie\_0129, or +86 13696929849. (If you have decided to participate, you could contact me directly.) You may also contact my supervisor, Alexandra Widmer at [swidmer@yorku.ca](mailto:swidmer@yorku.ca) and/or +1 (416)736-2100 Ext: 33716, the Graduate Program in Social Anthropology at [gpdanth@yorku.ca](mailto:gpdanth@yorku.ca) and/or +1 (416)-736-5007, or, the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (telephone +1(416)-736-5914 or e-mail [ore@yorku.ca](mailto:ore@yorku.ca)).

您有任何其他关于调查的疑问吗？如果您有任何关于本研究或您作为参与调查者身份的任何问题，或有意愿参与调查，请发邮件到 [vonnies94@yorku.ca](mailto:vonnies94@yorku.ca)，联系我的微信账号 vonnie\_0129，或拨打+86 13696929849。（若您决定参加调查，可直接联系本人）您也可以联系我的导师，Alexandra Widmer 教授，发送邮件到 [swidmer@yorku.ca](mailto:swidmer@yorku.ca) 和/或拨打+1 (416)736-2100 分号: 33716。联系我们研究项目专业，社会人类学，发送邮件到 [gpdanth@yorku.ca](mailto:gpdanth@yorku.ca) 和/或 +1 (416)-736-5007。或请联系调查道德办公室（约克大学，Kaneff大楼，5楼）的管理与政策顾问（电话+1(416)-736-5914 或 邮件 [ore@yorku.ca](mailto:ore@yorku.ca)）。

Best wishes,

祝好，

Chenxin Li

李晨昕

## Appendix B: Questions

(I have listed some potential questions for interview below. I will ask these questions in an indirect way. All of my interviews are semi-structured, participants are not required to follow a strict guideline. According to my participants' answers, I will follow them and change my questions during interviews.)

### 1, Interviews with patients

- (1) Basic information: age, (personal) income, occupation
- (2) How do you understand dominant ideals of feminine beauty or health (in Chinese society)? (Here I will use images of pop stars, celebrities for example. I will ask them to discuss their feelings about the appearance of these stars and celebrities. I will ask them to express their attitudes toward beauty problems and healthy issues such as aging, thinness/fatness, skin problems, facial defect, etc.)
- (3) Are you satisfied with your appearance and why?  
How do you think about your facial features (nose, eye, cheek, mouth, etc.)?
- (4) How do/will you respond to dominant ideals of beauty and health?  
Will you enhance your beauty or health and how?
- (5) Do you want to share any tip/your daily routines for promoting beauty and health?
- (6) Do you employ any beauty/cosmetic product or medicine and how?  
How much do you spend on it?
- (7) Do you want to have cosmetic surgery procedures?  
How much will you spend on them?  
  
If you had any cosmetic surgery procedure, how do you feel about it?  
  
Where/When/How did you receive the cosmetic surgery?
- (8) Do you want to receive a beauty/medical treatment?  
How much will you spend on it?  
  
If you have received a beauty/medical treatment, are you satisfied with it?  
  
Where/When/How did you receive the treatment?
- (9) Apart from cosmetic surgeons, do you want to consult other medical experts such as Chinese physician for promoting beauty and health? Have you consulted other medical experts?  
Do you employ practices from different medical systems? (For instance, do you employ Chinese medicine and beauty treatment at the same time?)
- (10) How do you get access to medical resources?  
  
How do you obtain information of medical resources, surgeons?

How do you contact/communicate them?

(11) How do you acquire knowledge and practices of promoting beauty and health?

(12) How do your pursuits of beauty and health impact your individual/social life?

Does your pursuit of beauty or health help you claim a higher social status?

How do your pursuit of beauty or health impact your social interactions and your social relations?

Does your new appearance help you construct your social identities, gender roles, and family roles?

Do you take advantage of your beauty or health in job hunting, marriage, etc.?

## 2, Interviews with medical experts

(1) Basic information: occupation, expertise, etc.

(2) How long have you become a medical expert/surgeon/nurse/Chinese physician?

How long have you been worked here?

How long have you learnt Chinese medicine/folk medicine/Japanese medicine?

How often do you perform a cosmetic surgery?

(3) Do you work with other medical experts? (For instance, does a surgeon work with nurses or work alone? Does a surgeon work with a Chinese physician?)

How do you work with them?

How often do you work with them?

(4) Do you perform practices from different medical systems?

How do you perform, combine, improve these practices?

How do you deal with tensions and entanglements between knowledge and practices of different medical systems?

How do you acquire knowledge and practices of promoting beauty and health?

(5) How often do you meet your patients?

Do you contact your patients directly?

Do you have a consultation with your patients before performing the surgery/treatment?

What would you do, if you and your patients have different understandings of beauty/health?

What would you do, if your patients are not satisfied of the outcomes of cosmetic surgery/treatment?

(6) How do you deal with disagreement with your patients or other medical experts?

How do you deal with your patients' complaint about the outcomes of cosmetic surgery/treatment?

How do you deal with your counterparts' complaint about the outcomes of cosmetic surgery/treatment or your cooperation?

How do you maintain or improve the relationship with your patients/other medical experts?

- (7) How do you respond to ideals of beauty and health in (Chinese) society? (Here I will use images of pop stars, celebrities for example. Here I will use images of pop stars, celebrities for example. I will ask them to discuss their feelings about the appearance of these stars and celebrities. I will ask them to express their attitudes toward beauty problems and healthy issues such as aging, thinness/fatness, skin problems, facial defect, etc.)
- (8) How do you promote your beauty/health?  
Do you employ any beauty product?  
Do/Will you have any cosmetic surgery procedure?  
Do/Will you receive any beauty/medical treatment?
- (9) Would you recommend any cosmetic surgery/beauty or medical treatment/beauty products?

### 3, Second Interviews with some of my female participants

- (1) What beauty treatments/products have you employed recently?  
Have you received any cosmetic surgery procedure?  
(Progress, place, time, brand, type, etc.)
- (2) How do you feel about it?
- (3) If you are not satisfied with the outcome, how do you deal with it? (tolerate, complain, receive a new treatment/surgery, etc.)
- (4) If you have mentioned this to your medical experts, how do they deal with it? (no response, complain, angry, give new suggestion, etc.)
- (5) If you have received another treatment/surgery, are you satisfied with it?
- (6) How do you keep contact with medical experts (your surgeons, etc.) after receiving surgeries?
- (7) Have your experiences reshaped your understandings of ideals of feminine beauty and health?
- (8) Have your experiences influenced your social relations with others (medical experts, friends, families, etc.)?
- (9) How do the outcomes of treatments/surgeries influence your daily routines of promoting beauty and health (skin care, make up, exercise, diet, etc.)?  
How have your new appearance impact your individual and social life? (See more examples in question 12 in section1)
- (10) Have you shared your experiences with others and how?  
Have you shared your experiences on any social platforms or social apps?
- (11) Have you made comments on or recommended any product/treatment/surgery?  
Have your comments influenced your medical experts' reputation and how?

## Appendix C: Categories of Eyelids

This appendix provides examples and explanations for different types of eyelids discussed in this dissertation.

### 1, single eyelid

Single eyelid refers to an eyelid without a visible fold. It can also be translated into English as monolid and single-edged eyelid. Visible folds on eyelids might be impacted by eye care or eye use habits. Some people who are born with single eyelids might obtain double eyelids by proper eye massage or the loss of eyelid fat.



Figure 15. Suya, *Suya's Selfie*, 2021.

### 2, internal double eyelids

Double eyelids refer to eyelids with a visible fold. It is often divided into the internal type and the external type. The internal type is narrow. It is sometimes difficult to be noticed within enough social distance. The folds usually start closer to the inner corners of the eyes with inner epicanthic folds. Obtaining the internal type of double eyelids was viewed as a popular and also conservative choice by some women I met. Yuna, who was a photographer at her age of 24, got her internal double eyelids on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. Then, she sent me a photo of her eyelids in November 2021. She found that the shapes of her two eyelids were a little bit different, but was still satisfied with her changing eyelids during that period.



Figure 16. Yuna, *Yuna's Photo 1*, 2021.

### 3, asymmetric eyelids and multi-creased eyelids

It is not uncommon for a person's eyelids to become multi-creased or asymmetric, especially during the post-surgery period. This period usually takes about six months for a double eyelid surgery. These unexpected changes usually confirm the failure of a surgery. In January 2022, Yuna sent me this photo when we had an interview. She told me that her right double eyelids turned to multi-creased eyelids in early January, and she was preparing for her future corrective surgery.



Figure 17. Yuna, *Yuna's Photo 2*, 2022.

### 4, external double eyelids

External double eyelids are obvious, relatively wider double eyelids. Sometimes they exist with sunken eyes (see Figure 18). People with external double eyelids have a well-defined parallel fold on their eyelids. (The double eyelids usually run parallel to the upper eyelids.) Parallel double eyelid is a specific type of external double eyelid (see Figure 19).



Figure 18. Fan, *Fan Bingbing's Selfie*, 2024.



Figure 19. Li, *Li's Selfie*, 2025.