BEAUTY PAGEANTS IN NEOLIBERAL CHINA: A FEMINIST MEDIA STUDY OF FEMININE BEAUTY AND CHINESE CULTURE

By

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To my Parents
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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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The purpose of the study is to examine contemporary Chinese ideologies and ideals of feminine beauty through the beauty pageant phenomenon, and investigate the relationships between feminine beauty and gender discourses, class dynamics, national identity, global consumerism. It is guided by mass communication theories and grounded in feminist perspectives.

This dissertation combined three qualitative research methods. Textual analysis of Miss Chinese Cosmos 2011 and Miss World China 2011 examined media presentations of beauty pageants for dominant messages and meanings about gender, beauty, consumerism, and globalization. Focus groups with thirty-eight Chinese college women provided insights into how urban young Chinese women negotiate the beauty pageant phenomenon in China. In-depth interviews with eight contestants in a regional Miss World China pageant allowed for a close look at the lived experiences of those who played a central part in the phenomenon.

The findings of the investigation revealed that certain stereotypical gender beliefs were perpetuated in the Chinese beauty pageants. Pageant contestants were portrayed as submissive and unambitious, and their bodies were sexualized and objectified for the
male gaze. Physical appearance was deemed the only redemption and final achievement for women. Tallness and thinness were the idealized in the Chinese beauty pageants, although a “delicate and soft” thin body ideal was preferred in China compared to the “fit and toned” thin body ideal in the West. A pro-Western beauty ideology was prevalent among young Chinese women, in which they believed certain attractive female facial features (e.g., big eyes, high nose bridge, and small chin) were essentially Western. The commercial nature of beauty pageants was bluntly represented in the pageant shows and highly internalized among the young Chinese women, suggesting a largely justified beauty economy in neoliberal China. Pageant conspiracy was popular in China due to the broadening socioeconomic gap and emerging consumerism, and the dream to become a celebrity and consequentially marry up was believed to have motivated young women in participating in pageants.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background of Beauty Pageants in Neoliberal China

In December 2003, then 19-year-old Rosanna Davison won the Miss World title for the first time for Ireland. She was not crowned in London, where the pageant is headquartered and regularly held, but in Sanya, the southernmost city in China and often referred to as Chinese Hawaii. Over the next decade, the Miss World pageant was hosted in China an additional five times, making the country a new hot spot for international beauty pageants. In 2007, Chinese model Zhang Zilin was crowned Miss World and became the first Chinese woman in the history of the country to win at a major international pageant (Eimer, 2007). In 2012, another Chinese model, Yu Wenxia, earned the title of Miss World (AFP, 2012).

In the past two decades, China has witnessed a burst of enthusiasm for beauty pageants. At the turn of 1980s and 1990s, fashion model contests started to surface in China. In 2003, the Communist party officially lifted the ban on beauty pageants by hosting one of the biggest international beauty contests, the Miss World pageant (Godfrey, 2004). Following the trend set by the central government, cities and local governments also zealously participated in hosting and sponsoring regional beauty pageants, hoping to attract national and international tourists and investors (Hon, 2003). The average Chinese resident, especially those who grew up believing beauty contests to be “a symbol of bourgeois decadence” (Watts, 2003), is now accustomed to the sight of young women walking on stage in bikinis.

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1 In this study, neoliberal China refers to the post-Mao Chinese society which has been undergoing a major economic reform and liberalization. The Communist party calls the current Chinese political and socio-economic system “Socialism with Chinese characteristics.”
Endorsement of international beauty pageants could be seen as part of China’s efforts in advertising the nation and its cities to a world audience. When the Miss World pageant came to Sanya for the first time in 2003, the city and local businesses not only covered the cost of the entire event, but additionally invested more than $30 million in building new exhibition halls and improving roads to handle the influx of business associated with the pageant (Watts, 2003). In 2007, the Miss World contestants were asked to help promote the 2008 Beijing Olympics by singing the official anthem of the Olympic torch relay (Eimer, 2007).

However, some argue that the strongest drive for China’s beauty pageant craze is in the spread of global capitalism and a consumer revolution within the country (Chao & Myers, 1998). In the past three decades, China has transformed from an unprosperous third-world country recovering from the aftermath of a catastrophic cultural revolution to the world’s second largest economy (Barboza, 2010). The nation’s planned socialist economy was replaced by a market-driven economy, and the political climate was greatly relaxed. As a result, the Chinese people started to have “greater disposable income and more leisure time and opportunity to spend it” (Latham, 2007, p. 225). The increasing acceptance of commercialism and consumer culture in the Chinese society was also linked to China’s accession to the World Trade Organization and the introduction of foreign media and advertising (Hopkins, 2007), as well as the country’s active participation in globalization and the official rhetoric media discourses that supported this agenda (Lee, He, Lee, Lin & Yao, 2009).

China’s newly formed “beauty economy” was used to explain the reemergence of beauty pageants (Xu & Feiner, 2007). Women in China, particularly the urban residents,
gained significant social power throughout the Mao era\(^2\) as gender equality was enforced in communism for the purpose of production (Latham, 2007). During the post-Mao economic reform, some Chinese women achieved further financial independence and consumer power. According to Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, cosmetics retail value in China reached 71 billion yuan (estimated 10 billion US dollars) in 2009 with China becoming one of the largest and fastest growing cosmetics markets in the world (Li & Fung Research Center, 2011). A new Chinese gender regime where women desire and pursue a “beauty-based femininity” and a consumption-oriented lifestyle was formed (Hopkins, 2007, p. 302).

In the 1980s, the number of broadcast stations and print publications in China increased remarkably and many started experimenting with a commercial business model by subsidizing production with advertising revenue (Latham, 2007). Since then, mass media in China have undergone major changes in content and format. In order to attract audiences and stand out from the competition, media outlets in China all endeavored to provide more entertainment and non-political content, replacing the less popular Party news and communist propaganda (Latham, 2007). In addition, as China further opens its door to the world, foreign media and popular culture have found ways into the Chinese society. Advertising is playing an increasingly important role in today’s Chinese media, where female models and beauty women appear regularly in print ads and commercials.

In spite of the economic and political gain beauty contests have brought to China, there have been social concerns about the burgeoning cultural emphasis on physical

\(^2\) The Mao era is referred to the history of China from 1949, the year People of Republic of China was founded, to 1976, the year Mao died.
beauty. In the Internet era young generations of Chinese are increasingly exposed to cultural messages and images from the West, while the desire to achieve something similar to the American Dream is escalating in the Chinese society. To the angst of some Chinese academics and policy makers, more and more Chinese college women and school girls now value good looks more than academic achievement in “securing a bright future,” and many of them are invested in getting the title of a beauty pageant which could then serve as the springboard to a career in the entertainment or fashion industry (“Chinese lawmakers,” 2005).

The young Chinese born after the 1980s, who like to call themselves “balin hou” (post 80s) and “jiulin hou” (post 90s), grew up in an entirely different social and cultural environment than their parents. Today, the majority of urban teenagers and young adults in China were born under the one child family policy, and they most likely never experienced war, famine, poverty, or the Cultural Revolution. Whilst these “singletons” are rebuked by the older generations and the Chinese society at large for being spoiled and self-centered, they are under unprecedented familial and social pressure to do well and succeed in life (Fong, 2004).

Although market reform has brought the nation as a whole economic prosperity, the distribution of wealth in China is far from equal; in fact, the disparity between the haves and the have-nots is widening (Li, 2011). A recently cultivated materialism in the Chinese society has also permeated the realm of dating and marriage. News about female celebrities marrying wealthy business men is increasing common, further promoting the idea that for women being physically attractive and glamorous is the ultimate shortcut to a comfortable life (He, 2010). The desire for wealth and attempts to
achieve it through marriage are not new phenomena in China, however, the level of acceptance and endorsement of such mentality and behaviors in the contemporary Chinese society is alarmingly high and merit serious attention.

**Feminine Beauty and Mass Media**

Abundant scientific evidence shows that physical attractiveness plays an important role in an individual's interpersonal interaction, including romantic relationships (see Patzer, 1985). Furthermore, in societies where a patriarchal system still dominates, women are more likely than men to be held accountable for and judged by their physical appearance and conformity to the cultural ideal of beauty (Wolf, 1991). A woman with high physical attractiveness is therefore valued differently, usually favorably, by society and by men. As the Chinese society becomes increasingly materialistic, many Chinese women now believe that physical beauty is a shortcut to finding a wealthy husband and having an upper-middle class lifestyle.

Not surprisingly, the demand for “cosmetic intervention” to improve one's appearance among Chinese women continues to reach new highs, and some of the most common surgical procedures include double-eyelid operations, nose-lengthenings, jaw-reshapings, and breast enlargements (Watts, 2004). South Korea has gained the status of the “Mecca” of cosmetic surgery in recent years (Huer, 2009), and many affluent Chinese women these days prefer flying to Seoul to get their face cosmetically enhanced by highly trained Korean cosmetic surgeons (Laurence, 2011). A beauty pageant specifically for “surgically enhanced” women - Miss Artificial Beauty – was even hosted in Beijing, and the winner of this world's first cosmetic surgery pageant was a 22-year-old student, who gladly attributed her victory to the excellence of her plastic surgeon (Agrell, 2004).
Even though most young Chinese women are still hesitant about undergoing cosmetic surgery due to health risks and the potential for social stigmatization, they remain highly sensitive and vulnerable to the pressure of being physically attractive, with incidents of dieting and eating disorders being common among Chinese female college students (Zhang, 2012). A propensity for body image dissatisfaction was also found in young girls in China, with adolescents across the country reporting weight concerns, dieting behaviors, body weight dissatisfaction, and eating disorders (Huon, Walton, Lim, & Zheng, 1999; Lee, Leung, Lee, Hong, & Leung, 1996; Lee & Lee, 2000; Jackson & Chen, 2010; Tam, Ng, Man, & Young, 2007).

The development of mass media, particularly electronic visual media, has fundamentally changed how beauty is depicted and perceived. In modern media, boundaries between fantasy and reality are blurred, and idealized images of beauty are presented as realistic and achievable (Freedman, 1986). Because of the high accessibility, popularity, and pervasiveness, mass media are one of the most powerful communicators of beauty ideals and likely to have a stronger influence on the viewer’s body image than any visual art form of the past (Mazur, 1986).

Social comparison theory has been frequently used in body image research to explain the mechanism through which mass media encourage women’s beauty-related concerns and behaviors (Festinger, 1954; Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people have a tendency to compare themselves to others to fulfill certain psychological needs. In the realm of body image, media often provide the standard of beauty for social comparisons. Because most media images are idealized, such mediated comparisons may lead to discrepancies
between perceived and desired body image, hence body image dissatisfaction. Beauty and body image are central ideas in beauty pageants, and young women who are exposed to beauty pageants, both through the media and through personal experience, may develop body image concerns by engaging in social comparisons with the pageant contestants. Specifically, employing this theoretical construct to study the impact of beauty pageants on individual young Chinese women could increase our knowledge of how perceptions of beauty are manifested.

As a socializing agent, mass media have also been criticized for the stereotypical representations of gender, particularly the portrayals of women as sex objects. Since the second wave feminist movement in the 1970s, British and American feminist film critics have developed their own theoretical approaches to study media text (Erens, 1990). According to Mulvey (1975/1989), cinema creates the visual pleasure that is essentially male, and women are represented as the signifier for the masculine other and the object for the “male gaze.” When Chinese beauty pageant shows are studied as media text, Mulvey’s cinepsychoanalysis provides a useful framework to analyze the extent to which Chinese pageant contestants are sexually objectified as a form of patriarchal oppression. Furthermore, cultural feminist film theorists argue that media representation of women has been an important site for gender discourses, and the Chinese beauty pageants will be examined for the negotiated meanings of gender and femininity within the struggles of power (Gledhill, 1978).

**Globalization and Transnational Feminism**

Second-wave feminists in the U.S. protested against beauty pageants like Miss America, arguing that beauty contests reinforce a dominant patriarchal system and hegemonic femininity by objectifying, controlling, and commoditizing women’s bodies
(Banet-Weiser, 1999). Globally, as international pageants like Miss Universe and Miss World extended beauty contests beyond the European-American context, issues of globalization, capitalism, and cultural imperialism further complicated the feminist discourse on beauty pageants (Parameswaran, 2004).

The 1996 Miss World pageant in India led to intense public debates over moral decay and preservation of national traditions as well as massive local protests against globalization and Western cultural imperialism (Oza, 2001; Parameswaran, 2004). Nigeria was the intended host of Miss World 2002, yet major religious and political riots occurred opposing the pageant, leading to the deaths and injuries of hundreds of Nigerians and the evacuation of the contestants back to London (Henry, 2003).

Many of the feminist critiques of international beauty pageants were centered on the exploitation of the Third World countries by promoting consumerist values, selling cultural products, and reinforcing westernized ideals of physical beauty and femininity (Cohen et al., 1995). For example, Miss Angola was crowned the 2011 Miss Universe in Brazil and she was only the second black woman from the African continent and the fourth in the world to win this title (Ethnolust.com, 2011). The fact that the majority of previous title holders of major international beauty pageants were white indicated that the Anglo-Saxon beauty standard still dominates the pageant world.

China has recently become a popular destination for Miss World and several other global beauty pageants. Unlike other developing countries, China has experienced minimum public opposition to beauty pageantry. Such a low level of resistance could be the result of government control over media and the intransigent silencing of public dissent by the Communist Party (Watts, 2003). Another probable
explanation is that Chinese people have had little exposure or knowledge of the feminist movements that have happened around the world in the past century, and are therefore less likely to organize and develop a feminist agenda against beauty contests.

As China becomes a key player in the global economy, international events like Miss World are considered important platforms for China to increase its global presence and influence while further engaging Chinese people in a global consumer culture. From a transnational feminist perspective, the importation of beauty pageants in neoliberal China could lead to the similar problems that happened in other Third World countries, i.e., the global capitalist machine working in tandem with the patriarchal social system in exploiting feminine beauty while creating insecurity among women (Mohanty, 2003). At the same time, transnational feminism also offers a theoretical lens to look at the possibility of resistance and evidence of agency among young Chinese women as they encounter the beauty pageant phenomenon in the context of globalization and consumerism.

The Present Study

Once deemed as trivial and uncultured by the academia, the subject of beauty pageantry has received limited attention in scholarly work and feminist writings. Moreover, there are fewer in-depth investigations on the cultural practice and implications of beauty pageants in contemporary China. This dissertation recognizes beauty pageantry as a feminist project and endeavors to break the bias against studying beauty pageants. Beauty pageants provide a rare opportunity and serve as a platform for media and feminist scholars to examine social and cultural constructions of gender and femininity, as well as representations of race, class, nation and power. With its inherent focus on concepts of beauty and the female body, beauty pageantry is also a
sensible subject in beauty scholarship to examine the performance of idealized femininity and practice of agency and feminine subjectivity.

This dissertation examines the phenomenon of beauty pageants in neoliberal China. It pays particular attention to the role of mass media, capitalist consumerism, and globalization in constructing the gender identity and beauty ideology for young Chinese women. Given the limitation of existing research and the intuitive nature of the topic, an exploratory and inductive approach seems appropriate for this dissertation. Using qualitative research methods, this study does not set to test any hypothesis. Instead, its goal is to explore new ways of understanding and conceptualizing beauty pageantry in the Chinese context.

Operationally, this study sets out to examine the beauty pageant phenomenon in neoliberal China and answer the research questions from three distinctive angles. First, the study examines the media text of Chinese beauty pageants for dominant cultural messages about gender, beauty, consumerism, and globalization. In particular, two recent broadcasts of Chinese beauty pageants shows are selected for semiotic textual analysis.

Second, the study investigates the cultural significance of Chinese beauty pageants through the perspectives and experiences of urban young women in China. The generation of Chinese women who grew up in the post-Mao economic reform has received little attention from global feminist scholarship especially in the realm of beauty. Thus, focus groups with Chinese female college students are conducted to examine how they negotiate the beauty pageant phenomenon in China and the factors that influence their viewpoints.
Third, the experiences of the women who participate in beauty pageants are of particular value to this study. Through individual interviews with the pageant contestants of a Chinese beauty contest, this study explores the breadth and depth of the first-hand experiences of these women with beauty pageants in China. Their insights are then used to complement and contrast the views of the college women who tend to form their perspectives based on information they consume from the media.

The findings of the study contribute to theory building in the fields of mass communication and feminist studies, as well as feminist discourses about gender, beauty, consumerism, and globalization. This study also makes a valuable addition to the existing beauty pageant literature by including neoliberal China and the lived experiences of urban young Chinese women as a new context. Finally, by making mainland China the main site of investigation, this study furthers understanding of Chinese culture and society and explores the current status and future possibilities of feminism in China.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, the researcher will draw on the relevant work of others to provide context for the subject of this dissertation: beauty pageantry in neoliberal China. The relevant literature taps into several areas of study including feminist scholarship on beauty pageants, sociological work on contemporary Chinese culture and society, research on female pursuit of beauty and body image, as well as discussions on nationalism, globalization and mass media. What emerged from the literature review provided a starting point for this study and framed the nature of the methodological approach as well as interpretation of the findings.

Beauty Pageantry as a Feminist Project

As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of the traditional beauty pageant has not yet received serious scholarly attention, likely because of the stereotypical belief that beauty contests are trivial and philistine. When the subject is addressed in feminist writings, the arguments tend to be one-sided: beauty pageants are “part of commoditization, power and control – as simply reinforcing narrow cultural expectations and understandings of women, gender and sexuality” (Cohen, Wilk, & Stoeltje, 1995, p. 5). Modern beauty pageantry originated largely as a Western concept, and studies of beauty contests in the developed world have focused on the social construction of gender and femininity, along with its interlocking relationship with race and class (Banet-Weiser, 1999). With the rise of transnational feminism, beauty pageants in countries from the global South have become valuable sites for feminist investigation of sexism, racism, neocolonialism and globalization in the non-western context (Cohen et al., 1995).
The Miss America Beauty Pageant

In the early 20th century, as women gained increasing acceptance and independence in American society, middle-class women emerged as primary consumers of fashion, cosmetics and other goods in the novel commercial culture (Banner, 1983). The Miss America pageant first appeared as a promotion for Atlantic City tourist resorts in 1921, and evolved into an annual event to celebrate “the young American woman as the symbol of national pride, power, and modernity” (Banner, 1983, p. 260-261). In the earlier years of the pageant, serious efforts were made by the producers to distinguish Miss America from other commercial pageants, such as offering scholarship-only awards to winners and runner-ups, stressing a “wholesome typicality and respectable femininity” of its contestants, and maintaining the non-profit status of the organization (Banet-Weiser, 1999, p. 41).

Regardless, the Miss America pageant has been a source of constant controversy and resistance since its inception. A crucial component of the Miss America pageant is the swimsuit competition, during which the contestants walk on stage in swimsuits and high heels and their nearly bare physical appearance is judged and scored. Religious groups attacked the swimsuit competition as vulgar and degrading, while feminist critics condemned it for creating anxiety about female bodies and constructing femininity for display (Banet-Weiser, 1999). One of the most famous protests against Miss America was the 1968 anti-pageant demonstration staged by radical second-wave feminists on the boardwalk of Atlantic City. While the protest unfortunately left a false image of feminists as bra-burners, it nevertheless made substantial contribution in the women’s movement (Dow, 2003).
Race is another center of debate in the Miss America pageant. Miss America had a long history of excluding non-white women from participating in the contest, and it was not until 1970 that the first African American woman made it to Atlantic City as a contestant (Deford, 1971). In the fall of 1983, for the first time in the Miss America pageant history, two black women, Vanessa Williams and Suzette Charles, won the title of Miss America and first runner up (Watson & Martin, 2000). Over the next seventeen years, an additional seven women of color were crowned Miss America and media attention gradually turned away from the issue of race and skin color of pageant winners (Watson, 2009).

The Miss America pageant was first televised in 1954 and was watched by millions of people in their homes (Deford, 1971). The competition enjoyed its heyday in the 1960s, and was moved from broadcasting networks to cable channels in 2006 (Itzkoff, 2010). The relationship between the Miss America pageant and feminist activism has been documented by dominant American media, and the popular press continues to shape the public discourse about feminism through its coverage of beauty pageants. According to Dow (2003), the media initially tended to trivialize the conflicts between Miss America and feminism and framed them into catfights between one group of women (the pageant contestants) and another (radical feminists). By the end of 1990s, mainstream media had started to promote pageant participants as warrior feminists who adopted a “particular version of liberal feminism – one that emphasized individualism, self-actualization and achievement within existing social hierarchies” (Dow, 2003, p. 145).
Beauty Queens on the Global Stage

In 1951, when Miss America winner Yolande Betbeze refused to wear a bathing suit in public, the company Catalina Swimwear withdrew its sponsorship of Miss America and founded the rival pageants Miss USA and Miss Universe. Earlier in the same year, British businessman Eric Morley created the Miss World pageant, which later became one of the largest and longest running international pageants. Beauty pageants and competitions sprouted all over the world in the second half of the 20th century and spurred interest from all conceivable social segments, both local and global (Cohen et al., 1995). Most contemporary beauty competitions are influenced by the European-American tradition of pageantry, and demonstrate remarkable similarity as they “put gender norm – conventionally, idealized version of femininity – on stage in a competition awarding the winner a ‘royal’ title of crown” (Cohen et al., 1995, p. 2).

Despite the universal elements of beauty contests, each pageant contest is grounded in its own unique historical context, cultural significance and local specialties. For example, during the Soviet Russia era, physical beauty and femininity was excluded from the communist ideology of gender, and public opinions on beauty contests were prevailingly negative (Moskalenko, 1995). The first Miss Moscow pageant was held at a time when the country was undergoing radical social change and capitalism was infiltrating from outside and within. The contest was a mixture of relational politics, capitalist business practice, and social frustration of the contestants. Even though afterwards Russian girls were sent to international beauty contests and brought home multiple crowns, the idea of beauty pageantry never really took off in Russia because it conflicted with the Russian cultural belief of beauty as “something to discover” and not to show (Moskalenko, 1995, p.73).
Following the spread of capitalism and globalization, beauty pageants have increasingly traveled to the global South. In particular, some developing nations in Asia have become new popular destinations for major international beauty contests like Miss Universe or Miss World.¹ However, the symbolic association of beauty contests with western culture and global consumerism had created regional conflicts. In India, supporters of global beauty pageants, including the state and media, considered the event as a golden opportunity to showcase the liberalization of the nation and the beauty queens as “hardworking individuals” and “patriotic citizens” (Parameswaran, 2005, p. 426). Feminist groups, progressive elements, and Hindu right-wing politicians, on the other hand, opposed the beauty contests and argued that such commoditized representations of women’s bodies and sexuality would pose a threat to the national and cultural border of India (Oza, 2001).

In Thailand, appreciation and evaluation of beauty is deeply entrenched in the country’s tradition, and beauty pageants including transvestite contests have become part of the Thai culture. Nonetheless, feminist activists in Thailand have objected to international beauty contests on two grounds: first, beauty pageants exploit women’s bodies and femininity for tourism and capital gain; second, beauty pageants patronize a Western (white) standard of beauty and create homogeneous criteria in judging physical appearance for women (Van Esterik, 1995). In a recent study of the spectacle of beauty pageants in Nepal, the researchers discovered conflicting and complex thoughts on the subject from the Nepali women: they believed beauty pageants could empower Nepali women and present Nepal in a positive light to the world, but at the same time they

were concerned about the objectification and commoditization of female contestants
and the indirect promotion of body image dissatisfaction (Crawford, Gregory, Gurung,
Kihati, Jha, & Regmi, 2008).

**Beauty Pageants and China**

China has had a unique history in the 20th century and did not participate in the
global beauty pageant scene until the last decade. As a result, the conception and
practice of beauty pageantry in contemporary China is essentially distinctive when
compared to pageants in other historical, geographic, and cultural locations. Under
Mao’s communist regime, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, feminine beauty
was stringently rejected and attacked as a form of capitalist and bourgeois decadence
in political and public discourse (Honig & Hershatter, 1988; Johansson, 1998). It was
not until China’s “open-door policy” in the 1980s was beauty revived as a popular
subject in public life in addition to the reformed economy (Brownell, 1998; Xu & Feiner,
2007).

Early forms of beauty pageants appeared during the Song Dynasty in China
between the 10th and 12th centuries, when then-titled “flower board competitions” were
held for women who were predominantly prostitutes (Pan, 2003). The female
contestants were judged by famous scholars and poets of the time based on not only
their physical look but also their abilities in playing instruments, chess, writing, and
painting. Similar beauty competitions continued throughout the following feudal
dynasties until the early 20th century (Pan, 2003).

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2 The Cultural Revolution refers to the social turmoil between October 1966 and October 1976 in People’s
Republic of China, when the country was controlled by the extreme left force and anti-intellectual
conservatism headed by Mao Zedong and his wife Jiang Qing.
Modern beauty contests, which resemble the beauty pageants of the West, were held during the Republic of China regime (1912-1948). A epicenter of the contests was the city of Shanghai, which was then called the “Paris of the East” (Laing, 2004). The most well documented pageant during that period of time was the Miss Shanghai pageant in 1946, which was staged to raise money for a national drought and famine relief (“China: Beauty Contest,” 1946). Female celebrities and movies stars in Shanghai were approached by organizers to enter the Miss Shanghai competition; however, many of them refused or backed out at the last minute due to social pressure as beauty contests were still viewed as vulgar events that only prostitutes and courtesans would take part in. Regardless of this negative view, the Miss Shanghai pageant generated considerable media attention and public discussion. In addition to the gossip about the contestants, the biggest shock came from the swimsuit competition which the Chinese had never seen before (Hu, 2007).

When Mao’s communist regime began in 1949, beauty contests were banned. Gender differences between men and women were erased in the interest of productivity, class struggle, and nation building (Zhang, 2000). In the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese women wore the same dark blue and grey clothes as men (Johansson, 1998), and an androgynous gender image was idealized (Honig, & Hershatter, 1988). During the Cultural Revolution, “female adornment, fashion and the use of cosmetics was practically outlawed” and any pursuit of beauty was considered counter-revolutionary (Johansson, 1998, p. 54). Not surprisingly, beauty pageants were condemned as “exploitative nonsense” and outright bourgeois ideology (Watts, 2003).
China began its economic reform at the turn of 1970s and 1980s, and in the following three decades the country has undergone tremendous economic and social change. China’s gender politics have also been reshaped in the post-Mao era, which corresponds with the emergence and development of a modern communism (Johansson, 1998; Yang, J., 2011; Zhang, 2000). The desexualized “iron maidens” in Maoist gender position was replaced by “a new breed of young women” with awakened gender awareness and self-conception of femininity, sexuality and social mobility (Zhang, 2000, p. 98). Beauty, once a politically charged subject and socially subdued desire, has grown into a national craze and flourishing industry (Xu & Feiner, 2007; Yang, J., 2011).

Fashion model or supermodel contests were generally considered the predecessor of contemporary beauty pageants in China. The first fashion show in the post-Mao era was held in 1979 by the French fashion designer brand Pierre Cardin, and fashion models began to be organized in big cities in China and sent overseas in the 1980s (Brownell, 1998). The early supermodel contests in China were emphasized in official rhetoric as “not [a] beauty contest,” and the contestants were said to show off clothes, not their bodies. The contestants competed on “learned skills” instead of “superficial beauty” (Brownell, 1998, p. 47), but in reality these contests had a lot in common with modern beauty pageants: women were judged based on their physical appearance in different attires (e.g., swimsuit and evening gown), their walk and movement on the runway, and their personality and English skills. The main purpose of many supermodel contests was to select beautiful women as representatives to “promote Chinese culture on the world’s stage” (p. 49), which was similar to competing
countries in many international beauty pageants. Moreover, the traditional emphasis on youth and height in supermodel contests was carried on to the later beauty pageants, and a high proportion of beauty pageant contestants in China either are professional models or have also competed in model contests.

Local Chinese beauty pageants started to appear in the 1990s, the majority of which were in the name of selecting ambassadors for cities and provinces. It was not until 2001 that China sent its first official representative to the Miss World pageant (Godfrey, 2004). Within two years, China hosted the Miss World pageant for the first time, indicating significant change in the Chinese government’s attitude towards beauty pageants. The Miss World pageant claimed to have a global audience of more than two billion, thus hosting Miss World gives China a golden opportunity in increasing global publicity as well as tourist revenue (Eimer, 2007; Godfrey, 2004). First in 2007 and again in 2012, the beauty queen of the People’s Republic of China took home the title of Miss World, which was viewed in China as the nation achieving another global ambition (Eimer, 2007, AFP, 2012).

In the course of two decades between the 1980s and 2000s, the state policy and attitude of the Chinese government towards beauty pageants took a 180 degree turn, from condemning it as bourgeois decadence to praising it as golden opportunity for publicity. This palpable shift had occurred under two conditions: First, the more China opened its door to the world and embraced the free-market model of economy, the more the state realized the value of hosting events like international beauty pageants in advertising China as a competent participant in globalization (Watts, 2003). Second, the economic reform led China into a consumer revolution and cultivated a new culture of
spending and consuming in Chinese society (Chao & Myers, 1998). Benefiting from the bourgeoning middle class and commoditization of gender, a beauty economy has been booming in China with beauty pageants being a “key source of employment, growth and glory for China” (Xu & Feiner, 2007, p. 308).

**China’s Emerging Consumer Culture**

The dramatic social, economic, and cultural changes in China in the past 30 years have expedited the sprouting of beauty pageants. By the end of 1970s, Mao’s egalitarian socialism had proven to be ineffective if not traumatic to the nation’s economy. The situation led to the overhaul of the state-controlled economic system and the introduction of free market forces. Underneath the proclaimed ideological difference, Zhao (1997) argued economic growth and bid for modernity were in fact shared goals in both capitalist and communist societies. China’s opening up to the West was merely a pragmatic strategy for national salvation. However, one of the side-effects of fast economic growth and modernization was the rise of mass consumerism, which also inevitably happened in neoliberal China (Zhao, 1997).

The longing for material goods and higher living standards among Chinese people was rooted in exhaustion and frustration with the ceaseless demands for self-sacrifice in puritan communism. When the economic reform finally occurred and people regained their opportunities to choose, capitalism rampantly swept the nation. To further the reform effect, the Communist party also openly advocated for new consumerist ethics while abandoning the old tradition of thriftiness (Johansson, 1998). The quality of life for urban Chinese increased significantly in the last two decades of the 20th century, and the ways this group of individuals earned and spent their incomes were revolutionized (Chao & Myers, 1998). Commodities became abundantly available due to
the expansion of imports and domestic production, and consumptions were no longer confined by necessities but expressions of taste and individuality (Chao & Myers, 1998).

**The Consumption of Beauty**

“In consumer culture, the beautiful body is put at the center of symbolic production, and the way we look becomes an image through which we see and understand ourselves” (Johansson, 1998, p. 12). Feminine body and beauty is a central project in capitalist consumerism, where women are simultaneously consumers and embodiments of the idealized femininity that is consumed. With the development of a consumer culture, China experienced a significant shift from “beauty fear” to “beauty fever” (Yang, X., 2011). The pursuit of beauty has been transformed from an anti-revolutionary criminal act into part of a liberating and modern lifestyle. Femininity, once concealed under unisex clothing and defined as “strong and tough,” has been reconstructed in light of the new gender politics of neoliberal China.

By the mid-1980s, beauty became a “socially proved concern for women of all ages” (Honig & Hershatter, 1988, p. 47). The popular phrase “aimei zhixin renjie youzhi” (everybody has the desire for beauty) was commonly used to accentuate and normalize the importance of beauty in human lives and to legitimize the consumption of beauty products in the Chinese society (Johansson, 1998). As a result, a meinü jingji (beauty economy) has emerged in China which encompasses everything from beauty pageants, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery to tourism, advertising and mass media (Xu & Feiner, 2007). In 2004, the beauty economy was the 5th largest consumer goods industry in China (Yang, J., 2011), and cosmetics retail value alone accounted for 79 billion yuan (approx. 11.8 billion US dollars) in 2009 (Li & Fung Research Center, 2011).
Since the return of advertising to the Chinese media in 1979, beautiful women have reappeared on magazines covers and in television commercials (Johansson, 1998). Attractive femininity is associated with both commodities and the new identity as being “cosmopolitan, leisured, luxurious, and sexy” (Yang, X., 2011, p. 19). Women’s magazines zealously offer their female readers strategies and tips on fashion, skincare, and make-up, creating the illusion that beauty is elaborately constructed with personal devotion and thorough consumption of products and services. At the same time, physical attractiveness has become an increasing advantage if not a prerequisite in employment and marriage for contemporary Chinese women.

During the economic reform, many urban Chinese left the state sectors in pursuit of higher-paying jobs in the business world. The word “qingchunfan” (rice bowl of youth) was used to refer to the lucrative positions exclusively open to young women, where youth and beauty are the top requirements for employment and professional success (Zhang, 2000). Beauty contest winners, actresses, fashion models, flight attendants, and women who work in the entertainment and service businesses are often considered takers of the rice bowl of youth. Growing up in the reform era and consumer culture, the younger generations of Chinese women are not burdened by the ordeals of the Cultural Revolution and are commiserative of their mothers’ deprived femininity and lack of self-fulfillment. They are also more likely to identify with movie stars and supermodels and to exchange youth and beauty for tangible commodities and financial gain (Zhang, 2000). The Drive for glamorous lifestyle and social mobility and the sense of urgency on taking advantage of one’s fleeting youth have made the rice bowl of youth increasingly appealing to young Chinese women.
Consumerism and modernization also contributed to an “anti-feminist” sentiment in some urban young women, who “choose to retreat from fully participating in public life back into the increasingly comfortable domestic milieu” (Zhao, 1997, p. 49). With the expanding gap between the poor and the rich, mediated by the readily available images of First World prosperity, materialism has pervaded Chinese society. In China, taking young women as mistresses has resurged as a symbol of social status for wealthy and powerful men (Levin, 2011). It was reported that some college students in Shanghai even openly posted the “prices” for themselves as mistresses, ranging from a few thousand to 75 thousand US dollars (“The moral degeneration,” 2011). The term “gold-digger” has begun to lose its negative connotation in neoliberal China as more and more young women are convinced that capitalizing on one’s youth and femininity is a legitimate way to achieve personal success and remain competitive in the commercial world.

The Generation of “Singletons”

Another key reform in the post-Mao era that has contributed to China’s cultural and socio-economic landscape today is the one-child family policy (Latham, 2007). China’s population rose 2.8% or 250 million between 1953 and 1970, and the government was concerned about its rapid population growth would compromise China’s social and economic development (Kane & Choi, 2002). Some also argued that this dramatic fertility transition was designed to shorten China’s journey to modernization and join the First World (Fong, 2004). In the late 1970s, China started implementing state-mandated birth quotas, restricting the number of children each
couple could have to only one in urban areas and two in rural areas.\(^3\) The one-child policy has directly resulted in the fact that the vast majority of urban Chinese youth born after 1979 are “singletons” (Fong, 2004). Instead of “waiting for modernity to produce low fertility” as in many developed societies such Japan, Italy, North Europe, China hoped to create a generation of “ambitious and well-educated children” by having each Chinese family invest heavily in their singletons (Fong, 2004, p. 2-3).

Growing up as the only child in a family definitely has given the younger generation of Chinese different life experiences than that of their parents or grandparents. Because they have so much attention and resources dedicated to them both from their own family and society as large, they are called the generation of “little emperors” (Reese, 1999). They desire high living standards and luxurious lifestyles that they see in the media, and they are comfortable with being consumers before they are producers. According to Fong (2004), the Chinese singletons are in fact no more spoiled than younger generations in developed nations. The difference is that they have been socialized to believe they deserve the First World socioeconomic affluence that China or their parents have yet to be able to provide. “These young people have been spared from having to compete with large numbers of siblings for family resources, only to find themselves in an even fiercer and more risky competition for elite status in a capitalist world system structured by steep inequalities” (p. 179).

In rural China, baby girls are being aborted or abandoned because of the single-child policy and young girls are being discriminated against regarding educational

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\(^3\) The one-child policy had more difficulties to enforce in the rural areas because rural families need sons to provide manual labor and old-age supports. So the policy was relaxed for rural residents and each couple could have two children, particularly when the first one was a girl.
opportunities and living conditions (Wheeler, 2011). In urban areas, on the other hand, the one-child policy has helped girls born in the cities enjoy the increasing gender equality in education and other social resources. The urban young women who grew up as singletons indeed have had better chances to succeed as individuals compared to their mothers and grandmothers, but at the same time they are also under unprecedented pressure to achieve elite status and financial security to support their parents at older age.

With the spread of materialism and fierce competition in the job market, more and more urban female singletons in China have come to accept the idea of marrying for money. Many decide that their desires for material comfort and financial security, both for themselves and for their parents, are stronger than their longing for love (Moore, 2011). Meanwhile in the entertainment business, attractive female celebrities are frequently reported to marry rich and powerful men (He, 2010). Therefore, drawing the connection between feminine beauty and masculine wealth, an increasing number of young women in China are motivated to pursue perfection in physical beauty and sometimes even participate in beauty pageants, as a way to meet these men.

**The Pursuit of Beauty**

From the perspectives of both evolution and socialization, it is suggested that physical attractiveness plays a significant role in interpersonal interactions and personality development (Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam, & Smooth, 2000; Patzer, 1985). Abundant research has demonstrated that physical attractiveness has profound and over-reaching implications on people’s lives, in which attractive children and adults are judged and treated more positively and exhibit more positive
behaviors and traits than unattractive children and adults (Etoff, 1999; Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005; Langlois et al., 2000).

The power of physical attractiveness has to a great extent led into the "what is beautiful is good" phenomenon (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Physically attractive people are perceived as more intelligent, more sociable and more successful than their unattractive counterparts (Patzer, 1985), and they are portrayed more favorably in the media (Smith, McIntosh & Bazzini, 1999). In most societies, women are more likely than men to be held accountable for their physical appearance and valued by their conformity to the cultural ideal of beauty (Mazur, 1986; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

As Naomi Wolf pointed out in her book The Beauty Myth, beauty is still the “currency” and “gold standard” for women where a patriarchal belief system dominates (Wolf, 1991, p.12). Feminist scholars have written extensively about the emphasis people place on female beauty and criticized the oppressive nature of modern beauty practices, which not only results in women’s body image dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem but also perpetuates gender inequality by treating women as sex objects and overshadowing their talents and competencies (Bordo, 2003; Forbes, Collinsworth, Jobe, Braun, & Wise, 2007; Jeffreys, 2005; Wolf, 1991).

Under the current consumer culture and beauty frenzy in China, a lot of attention has been directed to physical appearance and the body. Urban young women spend a considerable amount of time, energy and money to improve their appearance, such as dressing up in fashionable clothes, going to hair and nail salons, and purchasing and applying skincare products and cosmetics. They are also the first generation of Chinese
youth who have had access to a diverse source of information through mass media (Johansson, 1998; Latham, 2007). As a result, it is very likely that these young Chinese women are actively participating in a beauty culture where they hold themselves against the beauty standards set by global and local popular cultures.

Women around the world are found to be suffering from body image dissatisfaction and related eating problems (e.g., Anderson-Fye, 2004; Becker 2004; Jung, Forbes & Lee 2009). There has been an unprecedented upsurge of scholarly interest in the body in the past a few decades. Body image dissatisfaction has become a hot topic in various scientific disciplines such as clinical psychology, cultural anthropology and feminist media studies (see Thompson et al., 1999). Abundant books⁴ have been published on the subject and there are even scholarly journals like *Body Image* and *International Journal of Eating Disorders* dedicated specifically to this field of research.

There is a common stereotype that Asians are naturally slim thus less likely to be subjected to body image issues compared to other races (Lee, 1996). On the contrary, research has showed that Asian American females demonstrated higher endorsement of mainstream beauty standards and experienced greater body image dissatisfaction when compared to White and Black American women (Evans & McConnell, 2003). In Asia, according to a series of cross-cultural studies conducted by Jung et al. (2009), Korean and Chinese college women and adolescents were shown to have higher levels of body image dissatisfaction than their American counterparts.

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⁴ A search of “Body Image” in Google Books on December 6, 2011 yielded more than 3 million results, indicating the popularity of this subject.
Due to the immense improvements in standards of living in urban China, the prevalence of overweightness and obesity has increased in the Chinese population across all age groups (Wang, Mi, Shan, Wang, & Ge, 2007). For many young Chinese women, their hunger for high-calorie foods and snacks is in constant battle with their desire to look like the ultra-thin female celebrities in the media. Body image related dieting behaviors and eating disorders are common among college women in China (Zhang, 2012), and particularly salient among female urban adults who are young, educated, and living in coastal areas (Luo, Parish, & Laumann, 2005).

**Cultural Beauty Standards**

In the past few decades, scientists have tried to understand human standards of physical attractiveness through the lens of evolutionary biology. The basic adaptationist approach and evolutionary signaling models have been applied in this line of research to understand human physical attractiveness and the variability in beauty standards across cultures (Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005). The findings of the research show that people in different cultures generally agree on who is attractive (e.g., Cunningham, Roberts, Wu, Barbee, & Bruen, 1995; Jones & Hill, 1993; Langlois et al., 2000), and some of the most prominent facial features associated with attractiveness include sexual dimorphism, averageness, and symmetry (Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005; Rhodes, 2006).

Evolutionary perspectives tend to focus on the role of sexual selection in the origins of some standards of female beauty and link female physical attractiveness to health and fertility (see Singh & Singh, 2011). Even though both men and women are shown to prefer certain physical traits of the opposite gender, men throughout the world are more concerned about the physical attractiveness of women than vice versa.
(Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005). Evidence indicates men tend to like women with facial features that are deemed both innocently childlike and maturely feminine, such as large eyes, small nose, small chin and lower jaw, high cheekbones and full lips (Cunningham, 1986; Johnston & Franklin, 1993; Hönn & Göz, 2007).

Height is another physical attribute that has a well-documented impact on human social interactions. Taller men and women tend to obtain greater success in the workplace and report higher self-esteem (Judge & Cable, 2004), and they are perceived as stronger, more dominant and smarter (Montepare, 1995). In regard to heterosexual attraction, both men and women prefer romantic relationships in which the man is taller than the woman (e.g., Courtiol, Raymond, Godelle, & Ferdy, 2010). Yet under the influence of the fashion industry and mass media, women often want to have a taller and thinner bodily figure as promoted by the media as the sociocultural model for feminine beauty (Guaradi, Orlandi, Boselli, & O’Donnell, 1999). In addition, recent studies show that longer leg length or higher leg-to-body ratio, which is a common characteristic of fashion models, is considered more attractive in women (Prantl & Gründl, 2011; Sorokowski & Pawlowski, 2008; Swami, Einon, & Furnham, 2006).

At the same time, feminist scholars have long argued that beauty and femininity are historically and culturally constructed (Banner, 1983; Darling-Wolf, 2004; Frith, Shaw & Cheng, 2005). In contemporary China, feminine beauty is negotiated in the framework of an “Eastern versus Western” dynamic (Johansson, 1998). Eastern beauty is perceived to be more gentle, soft and submissive, while Western beauty is more dazzling, sexy, and hedonistic. Confucian teaching extends deep in Chinese culture, in which virtue and modesty are highly valued qualities in femininity (Hofstede, 1997). The
appropriateness and politeness of a woman’s manner, as well as her ability to fulfill the role as a caring mother and loving wife, constitutes the traditional concept of Chinese feminine beauty (Johansson, 1998).

Beauty standards and ideals within a culture are also subjected to change as the local culture evolves and confronts other cultures. In the past century, the West has had profound impact on Asian cultures through colonization, wars, mass media and globalization, and an Anglo-Saxon beauty standard has been merged into the local beauty standards in many Asian countries (e.g., Ashikari, 2005; Li, Min, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008). Even though contemporary Asian women often claim that their conceptions of beauty are primarily “domestic” and based on traditional Asian aesthetics and values, the standards and ideals they adhere to are found to be similar to the western ones: thin, tall, fair skin, and large breasts (Ashikari, 2005; Johansson, 1998; Zhang, 2012).

Both evolutionary and feminist perspectives have provided useful explanations to why certain physical features are considered beautiful on human bodies and why there are also cultural differences and historical changes in human beauty ideals. However, it is important to bear in mind that even when certain cultural beauty standards are established as norms in the scientific field (e.g., large eyes, tallness, slenderness), the people who live in a particular culture may have very different interpretations of these standards and the impact of certain beauty standards on their personal lives may be more complex than the theoretical explanations.

**Cosmetic Surgery**

Today’s image-driven consumerist culture and beauty-based femininity impels women to pursue a perfect look. Under the general term of “plastic surgery,” cosmetic surgery operations and procedures are defined as “interventions that revise or change
the appearance, color, texture, structure, or position of bodily features, which may be considered otherwise to be within the broad range of normal” (Atiyeh, Rubeiz, & Hayek, 2008, p. 829). Despite of the social controversies, it is believed that cosmetic surgeries can help individuals improve the first impressions they have of others (Dayan, Clark, & Ho, 2004).

With the help of the mass media, cosmetic surgery has been successfully domesticated and normalized in the modern world through advertisements, tabloids, beauty magazines, and makeover reality TV shows (Gallagher & Pecot-Hébert, 2007; Sarwer, Magee, & Crerand, 2004; Tait, 2007). On a global level, female celebrities are regularly reported to undergo cosmetic surgeries to boost their popularity and career. It is also common for celebrity-wannabes, including many beauty pageant contestants, to resort to surgery to get a jump start in the entertainment business. In Venezuela, one of the biggest “pageant factories” of the world, the beauty queen industry relies heavily on the mastery of cosmetic and dental surgeons (“Beauty? Forget Bangalore,” 1996).

Cosmetic surgery has gained massive popularity in China particularly after the market reform (Brownell, 2005). College women in China have showed high acceptance and internalization of cosmetic surgery as a legitimate means of beauty pursuit (Zhang, 2012). Each year more than two million cosmetic operations are performed in China, and the top three most sought procedures among the Chinese are double-eyelid surgery, nose-bridge raising, and jawline reduction (LaFraniere, 2011). A beauty contest dedicated to women who were “surgically enhanced” was even held in Beijing, celebrating cosmetic intervention as a legitimate method in pursuit of beauty (Agrell, 2004).
The Western culture has placed various levels of impact on the conception of beauty in Asia. Since World War II, cosmetic surgery has become increasingly popular in Asia and many believe that Asian women resorted to surgeries because they were customized to a westernized beauty ideal (Haiken, 1997). Meanwhile, Asian Americans were found to alter their appearance through cosmetic interventions to look more “white” in order to avoid racial stereotyping and better fit in the mainstream American society (Gilman, 1999; Kaw, 1993). Even though fewer arguments are made today for cosmetic surgeries being used to erase one’s race or to look more like another race, a universal beauty standard, which evidently favors Anglo-Saxon concepts of beauty, is still relevant in the discourse on cosmetic surgery in contemporary Asia.

Second-wave feminists such as Susan Bordo argue that the beauty system controls the bodies and the checkbooks of women by placing high social importance on physical appearance, setting up impossible beauty ideals, and then providing products and services to fix the imperfections at a handsome price (Bordo, 1993). Therefore, cosmetic surgery can be seen as another oppressive act in the name of beautification of women for patriarchal interests (Jeffreys, 2005; Wolf, 1991). Davis (1995, 2003) advocated for an alternative view of cosmetic surgery recipients as women making knowledgeable decisions for themselves, instead of victims being “duped” by the beauty system.

Cosmetic surgery is an important concept particularly relevant to the discussion on beauty ideals. In most cases of cosmetic surgery, the patient/consumer is hoping to change his/her physical appearance in the direction of achieving the “ideal” look. When a social and cultural event namely beauty pageant claims to celebrate the “most
beautiful,” it becomes a natural platform where cultural ideals of beauty are collectively negotiated and embodied. The images of the idealized beautiful body promoted in beauty pageants could lead to new desires and provide new guidelines for women who want to improve their appearance through cosmetic surgeries. And at the same time, the cosmetic surgery industry could also contribute to the construction of cultural ideals of beauty since some of the pageant contestants might be the products of surgical perfection as in the case of Venezuela.

**Mass Media and Globalization**

Mass media have played an indispensable part in cultural globalization. With the power of the Internet and other communication technologies, people are now enjoying the convenience of having the world at their fingertips and having a means of exposure on the scale comparable to mass media (e.g., social media). At the same time, in many European and Asian countries, global deregulation has led to the collapse of local creative industries and their replacement by products launched in the U.S. (e.g., Hollywood) (Conversi, 2010). Furthermore, the production and distribution of media products like film, television, popular music and book publishing is dominated by a handful of media conglomerates based in a few Western countries (Jan, 2009).

Although media in China are still subject to direct government control and censorship, the Chinese media industry has been increasingly commercialized and open to foreign source and content since the 1990s (Latham, 2007). The younger generations in China are growing up playing Japanese video games, watching Hong Kong TV shows, and seeing Hollywood movies. Many of them prefer foreign media content over locally produced media content for higher production quality (Zhang, 2012).
With their consumption of information and cultural goods through mass media, young Chinese women today are active participants of the emerging global consumer culture. International fashion magazines such as *Cosmopolitan, ELLE*, and *Vogue* have all increased the volume of their publications in the Chinese market to meet the growing demand for luxury among Chinese female consumers (Haughney & Landreth, 2012). From these global media outlets, young women in China are not only seeking the information about the latest fashion and luxury, they are also learning about the globalized concepts and ideals of beauty and femininity.

**Media Representations and Stereotypes**

An extensive body of research built in the past 30 years has shown that gender stereotypes are pervasive in the media (particularly in advertising) and women are portrayed in stereotypical ways to suit the desires of the male audience and the interest of the advertising industry (see Frith et al., 2005). Early research explored the ways in which gender roles depicted in advertisements reflected the gender roles in society, such as showing women as mothers and wives confined to at-home settings (e.g., Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Dominick & Rauch, 1972). Some female gender stereotypes that are still prevalent in today’s media include the wife and mother, the sex object, and the person trying to be beautiful for men (Brandt & Carstens, 2005).

Feminist researchers have paid special attention to the role of women’s magazines in perpetuating gender roles, promoting unrealistic and unattainable beauty ideals, and sexualizing women’s bodies (Ferguson, 1983). Specifically, the intersection of gender and race has been explored through depictions of women in advertisements in women’s magazines. Frith, Cheng and Shaw (2004) found that Western models were more frequently portrayed in seductive dresses and as a seductive beauty type than
Asian models, and Western models were used in advertisements in Asia to fulfill the marketing strategy of “sex sells.” Along the same line, Nelson and Paek (2005) found that advertisements in the Chinese *Cosmopolitan* showed much lower degree of sexuality than the same transnational magazine in six other countries (including U.S., Brazil, France, India, South Korea, and Thailand), and there was a high contrast between domestic and international models regarding sexual explicitness in the Chinese context.

Stereotypical portrayals of women and minority social groups have also been consistently found in television commercials (see Signorielli, 1985). For example, a content analysis of 4,294 American television commercials found that attractiveness was associated with women more than men, and the majority of the attractiveness stereotypes were promoted by actual female performers and authoritative male voice-overs (Downs & Harrison, 1985). A recent study of over 3,000 New Zealand television advertisements reported that gender stereotyping had decreased to a certain extent, yet ethnic minorities (e.g., Maori and Pacific Islanders and Asians) were still largely stereotypically portrayed (Rubie-Davies, Liu, & Lee, 2013).

As an important agent of socialization, mass media to a great extent are responsible for creating and reinforcing the cultural and increasingly global ideals of femininity. Research demonstrates that the current standard of bodily attractiveness portrayed in American media is slimmer for women than for men, and is less curvaceous than it has been since the 1930s (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986). According to Mazur (1986), the Western ideals for female body shape fluctuated between full and slender figures in the 20th century, with the most recent trend toward
slenderization. He also pointed to the rise of mass media in promoting highly homogeneous beauty standards in the society (Mazur, 1986).

Sypeck, Gray and Ahrens (2004) found a striking increase in full-body portrayals of thin female models in American fashion magazines between 1959 and 1999, indicating a beauty ideal shift from a pretty face to a nice body in the U.S. This Western emphasis on “bodily beauty” was confirmed in Frith et al. (2005), where the dominant magazine ads in America were for clothing and fashion. However, the trend was reversed in the Eastern context, as the majority of the advertisements in Singaporean and Taiwanese magazines were for cosmetics and skincare, implying a stronger emphasis on “facial beauty” in Eastern cultures (Frith et al., 2005).

**Nationalism and Beauty**

In beauty pageants, individual pursuit and expression of beauty is elevated to represent a larger entity, often a city/region, nation/state, or ethnicity/culture. Large media events like the Olympics can be considered public relations instruments to help the hosting country gain influence in the international context (Chen, Colapinto, & Luo, 2012). Similarly, international beauty pageants provide China the venue to showcase its rapid economic growth and national pride. The production of nation and nationalist discourse often demonstrates a close relationship with the performance of gender norms and the ideological construction of gender difference (Sinha, 2004). For example, motherhood and femininity are frequently used symbolically to represent nation and nationalism, whereas men and masculinity are used to emphasize citizenship and individual responsibility in fighting for the nation.

Chinese culture, by modern western standards, is largely collectivist rather than individualist (Hofstede, 1997). Most empires in human history ended up breaking up into
many separate nations, yet China remained intact as a single nation for thousands of years. Many Chinese people today still take pride in their ethnic and cultural heritage as “the descendants of the Yan and Huang” and uphold a strong national identity (Murphey, 1991). Even though China has experienced countless wars and various regimes in the past two centuries, the ethnic makeup of China has remained highly homogenous. According to China’s 2010 Population Census, 91.5% of the Chinese population was of Han nationality, a 5.7% increase since 1990 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). This is also one of the main reasons that race or ethnicity has not been a central matter in Chinese beauty pageants as it has been in other nations or cultures.

Chinese nationalism, particularly in recent history, has been characterized by the continuous struggles, conflicts, and negotiations between China and other nations, cultures, and powers. Confucian thoughts and values play a fundamental role in the Chinese conception of nation and identity in the past as well as present (Whyte, 1991). Social hierarchies were able to be enforced in imperial China partly due to the widespread Confucian belief in fulfilling (and not challenging) one’s roles and positions in society and contributing to the harmony and civilization of the nation (Brownell, 1996). The idea of sacrificing oneself for the family or for the nation is well internalized among the Chinese, especially among women. When examining the revival of Chinese nationalism through the bodies of Chinese sportswomen, Brownell (1996, 1998) found that the Chinese nationalist discourse reinforced a fixed gender role where obedient females suffer on behalf of the masculine pride and for the success of the nation-state.
In the reform era, there has been a remarkable tone-change in Chinese nationalism, which was described as a shift from “communist nationalism” to “consumerist nationalism” (Brownell, 1998). In the 1990s, fashion models started to appear in big cities in China, and some of these tall young girls, often-time former athletes, soon found themselves representing the Chinese nation in the global fashion industry (Brownell, 1998). Since then, model contests and beauty pageants became important sites where an ideal Chinese femininity was negotiated and constructed in context with global beauty standards. For international success, Chinese fashion models and beauty queens need to prove that they can be professional, modern, and expressive like western women without losing their traditional oriental beauty and Chineseness. The organizers and audiences of those contests consider their national pride redeemed when they see Chinese beauty and femininity rise to the top of the world.

Globalization

The term globalization originated in the field of economics, referring to the increasing integration of economics around the world, particularly through trade and financial flows (International Monetary Fund, 2000). There are also four aspects of globalization that were often considered: trade and transactions of manufactured goods, capital movements and foreign investment, migration and movement of people, and spread of knowledge and technology (International Monetary Fund, 2000). Economic globalization eventually leads to the emergence of a global market or a single world market.

Globalization is at the root of economic growth of many developing nations, including China. By decollectivizing its agricultural industry, opening up the country to
foreign investment, and introducing capitalist market principles to industries and businesses, China experienced unprecedented economic growth between 1978 and 2010. In 2010, China overtook Japan and became the second largest economy in the world (Barboza, 2010). While economic growth has virtually eliminated poverty in urban China and reduced it greatly in rural regions, inequality has also unambiguously risen in Chinese society (Benjamin, Brandt, Giles, & Wang, 2005). Particularly among the urban population, the increasing wage inequality related to labor market and enterprise reform, the effect of reconstructing state-owned enterprises through layoffs, as well as government corruption have all played a part in widening the income distribution (Benjamin et al., 2005).

Like most developing countries, China has experienced both the positive and negative effects of globalization. On one hand, globalization allowed China’s rapid economic growth which lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese people out of poverty, increasing their life expectancy and general standard of living. On the other hand, there is an alarming increase in inequality and materialistic attitudes which has emerged in China as a result of the development of a capitalist ideology. Furthermore, environmental concerns might also be a direct result of globalization. It has been reported that 16 out of 20 of the world’s worst cities for air pollution are in China, and two Chinese cities (Linfeng and Tianying) are rated the most polluted places on the planet (Pickrell, 2012).

Since its inception, the term globalization has transcended the realm of economics to include the complex and dynamic flow of people, culture, and ideology.
Conversi (2010) argues that cultural globalization, in particular, should be conceptualized in tandem with the idea of Americanization:

Most local cultures have not been left untouched by globalisation [sic]. Some have survived, while others have been damaged beyond repair, as has the physical, social and natural environment around them. In the cultural field, globalization [sic] is far from being an egalitarian, multilateral and multidirectional development, since moves in any such cosmopolitan direction have been largely prevented by the Americanisation [sic] of mass culture (p. 44).

As part of the cultural globalization/Americanization, the practice of modern beauty pageantry was introduced to the global South. Most major international pageant organizations have increasingly set their eyes on the developing world and moved their annual pageants to nations like India, Brazil, and China. This strategic act not only helps offset the dropping popularity of beauty pageant in the West (Itzkoff, 2010), but also offers the opportunities for the global beauty industry to explore new markets and increase its customer base. In Thailand, feminists protested against international beauty pageants on the ground that female bodies and feminine beauty were exploited by global corporations for capital gain (Van Esterik, 1995). In the Caribbean, the “Miss Jamaica” pageant was criticized for promoting a white/European beauty ideal (Barnes, 1994).

**Theoretical Framework**

In addition to the existing literature relevant to the subject of the study, three specific theoretical approaches are selected as the theoretical framework of this dissertation, providing guidance for the data analyses.

**Feminist Film Criticism**

The rise of feminist film criticism was influenced by the second wave feminist movement and the development of women’s studies inside the academic world in the
1970s (Erens, 1990). Initial attempts in the United States at establishing the feminist film criticism were generated mainly based on sociological theories, emphasizing how portrayals of women in the film related to the historical context, the gender stereotypes depicted, the screen time the female characters were allotted, and whether they served as positive or negative models for the female audience (Erens, 1990, p. xvi). In the meantime, film critics in England began to integrate other theoretical tools of critical analysis, such as psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Marxism, and their major concerns centered around “the production of meaning in a film text, the way a text constructs a viewing subject, and the ways in which the very mechanisms of cinematic production affect the representation of women and reenforce sexism” (p. xvii).

Rich (1978/1990) provided critiques on both of the early approaches in feminist film criticism. She characterized the American/sociological approach as fundamentally phenomenological with the weakness being its overly subjective and testimonial analysis and lack of coherence in methodology; she characterized the British theoretical approach as fundamentally analytical with the weakness being its suppression of the feminist voice and overemphasis on the analytical tools (Rich, 1978/1990, p. 277). She then argued that the nature of women’s experiences with film and the culture under patriarchy was instead dialectical, and women had the power to transform the images and messages they receive from cinema and reprocess them to produce their own meanings (p. 278).

Claire Johnston was among the first feminist critics to analyze the sign “woman” as a structure and code and treat the fetishized female image as substitute for phallic sexuality (Gaines, 1990). Laura Mulvey’s seminal 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and
Narrative Cinema” is marked as one of the most important breakthroughs in feminist film criticism to use Freudian theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis to “develop a coherent feminist theory of narrative film as signifying system” (Gaines, 1990, p. 76). Classical Hollywood cinema, according to Mulvey (1975/1989), represents woman as the signifier for the male other, an object rather than subject, materializing man’s unconsciousness.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy [sic] on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 1975/1989, p. 19).

In a Freudian tradition, Mulvey (1973/1989) identified two aspects of (male) visual pleasures in cinema which are negotiated through sexual difference: voyeuristic-scopophilic gaze (using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight) and narcissist ego (identification with the image seen). As Mulvey reiterated recently in an interview, a crucial point of the male gaze is that it is also the female gaze – women look at themselves through the male gaze (Sassatelli, 2011). The notion of the “male gaze,” which was also explored in the work of John Berger (1972) and Erving Goffman (1979), has since become an key concept in understanding how patriarchal media texts are tailor-made for male desire and how effects of representations are particularly burdensome to women (Sassatelli, 2011).

Feminist critics both in the U.S. and in England had raised questions about the direction towards cinepsychoanalysis in feminist film theory. The masculinization of the spectator position in Mulvey’s essay was contested for omitting the question of female spectatorship and inspired the line of scholarship in female subjectivity and female desire (Smelik, 1999). Influenced by the British cultural studies and Stuart Hall’s
encoding/decoding model, Christine Gledhill felt the need to close the gap between the readings of films made by feminist film theorists and the ways in which these films were understood and used by women at large (Gledhill, 1978). In her 1988 essay “Pleasurable Negotiation, Glendhill (1988/1989) argued that “the ‘image of woman’ has been a site of gendered discourse, drawn from the specific sociocultural experiences of women and shared by women, which negotiates a space within, and sometimes resists, patriarchal domination” (p. 177).

Stacey (1991/1999) also critiqued the psychoanalytical feminist film criticism for its rejection of the process of identification in visual media as a form of reproduction of dominant patriarchal culture. Having studied the readings of Hollywood stars in the 1940s and 1950s by female cinema audiences, Stacey (1991/1999) argued “identification does not simply involve the passive reproduction of existing femininities, but rather an active engagement and production of changing identities” (p. 208). In the context of idealized beauty images in media, female spectatorship could lead to the identification with the mediated object of spectacle and the desire of physical transformation to become the ideal. As a result, such practices of identification with media ideals could produce dissatisfaction of one’s own self-image.

The analytical tools and perspectives provided by feminist film critics and theorists are valuable for studying the media text of beauty pageants in China. Even though televised beauty pageant shows have significant differences from traditional cinema in the way the text is created and presented, the explicit focus on gender and sexuality in beauty pageant shows makes the arguments made in feminist film criticism extremely relevant. Mulvey’s cinepsychoanalysis and the notion of the “male gaze” are
useful in studying the representation of feminine beauty in the Chinese beauty pageants and how the pageant contestants are sexually objectified for visual pleasure of the male spectator. From a feminist cultural studies perspective, Glendhill’s critique on the negotiation of meaning is going to provide the analytic framework to study the social, political, and ideological struggles in Chinese beauty pageants, and how meanings are negotiated as products of textual interaction.

**Social Comparison Theory**

Social comparison theory was proposed by social psychologist Leo Festinger in 1954. In his original theory, Festinger (1954) suggests that humans have a drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities, and when objective and non-social means for evaluation are not available, individuals engage in social comparisons to fulfill this drive. Festinger (1954) also hypothesizes that whenever possible social comparisons are made with similar others, and there is a unidirectional drive upward that leads individuals to strive towards a point slightly better than that of comparison others.

Social comparison theory has been revised several times since its original proposal, and one of the most significant revisions to the theory is that social comparisons may occur on dimensions other than abilities and opinions, such as personal traits and attributes (Wood, 1989). For example, Richins (1991) found that young girls tended to compare themselves with models in advertisements by focusing on the personal attribute of physical attractiveness, and the comparison process was likely to influence their self-perceptions of physical attractiveness and self-esteem.

Although Festinger primarily focused on comparisons on the interpersonal level, other researchers have used social comparison theory to explain comparisons with images in the media (e.g. Botta 1999; Thompson et al., 1999, Martin & Gentry, 1997). In
the past few decades, social comparison theory has played a crucial role in the emergence of body image research, examining the effects of idealized body media images on appearance-related self-evaluation. The theory suggests that exposure to idealized body image in the media tend to force audiences to compare their own bodies with the ones they see in the media. This comparison process can negatively affect self-perceived physical attractiveness as well as evaluations of others’ physical attractiveness (Richins, 1991).

Abundant empirical evidence has been established between exposure to idealized body images in the media and body image dissatisfaction among women and young girls (see Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Want, 2009). For instance, children’s television programming and commercials had an emphasis on appearance enhancement predominantly targeting girls, which might lead to higher incidents of dieting and eating disorders among females (Ogletree, Williams, Raffeld, Mason, & Fricke, 1990). Borzekowski, Robinson, and Killen (2000) found that the time spent watching music videos was positively related to adolescent girls’ concerns about appearance and body weight. Even for adults, watching a 30 minute body image-oriented advertising and programming focusing on the concept and representations ideal thin female body could negatively alter young women's perceptions on the shape of their own bodies (Myers & Biocca, 1992).

Another important development made in social comparison theory is that people do not necessarily compare with others who are similar to themselves (Martin & Kennedy, 1993). The comparison process can be “upward” - compared with those who are superior or better off than oneself, or “downward” - compared with those who are
inferior or worse off than oneself (Buunk, Cohen-Schotanus & Henk van Nek, 2007; Wills, 1981). Research has suggested that social comparisons of physical appearance tend to be upward, and such comparisons usually make women feel worse about themselves and more vulnerable to body image disturbance (Botta, 1999, 2003; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Richins, 1991).

Furthermore, people’s motivations for comparison vary in particular situations. Some scholars have suggested three basic motives in social comparison: self-evaluation, self-enhancement, and self-improvement (Martin & Gentry, 1997; Wood (1989). When women and young girls engage in upward comparisons with their peers or idealized images in the media, they tend to be driven by self-evaluation and self-improvement motives. In other words, most women have a desire to compare their physical attractiveness to those who are considered superior in appearance either to evaluate or improve their own appearance.

Sometimes, a downward social comparison of beauty-related attributes can also occur and it is likely to be triggered by self-enhancement motives. Wills (1981) introduced the concept of downward comparison and described it as a defense tendency, in which individuals search for others who are considered worse off in order to feel better about themselves or their personal situations. Such downward comparisons could enhance one’s subjective well-being (Wills, 1981). For example, a college woman might compare herself to a roommate who is heavier in body weight, and in doing so, would feel better about herself.

When exposed to beauty pageants in the media, Chinese college women may engage in social comparisons with the pageant contestants with a focus on physical
attractiveness. The fact that beauty pageant contestants tend to have similar age-range and social background with college women could make these comparisons even more probable (Festinger, 1954). Since beauty pageant contestants are generally believed to possess (at least part of) the cultural ideals of feminine beauty, these comparisons are likely to be upward and motivated by self-evaluation and/or self-improvement motives (Woods, 1989). The self-perception of physical attractiveness and self-esteem of the college women might be negatively impacted if they feel inferior compared to the pageant contestants when it comes to feminine beauty.

Social comparisons can also occur between women who participate in a beauty contest. Such comparison between pageant participants can be both upward and downward, and motivated by different motives (self-evaluation, self-improvement, or self-enhancement) (Wood, 1989). For example, one contestant might be driven to compare herself with another contestant who she considers a strong competitor in the competition (upward comparison) to evaluate or improve her own chance of winning (self-evaluation). She might also compare herself to someone who she thinks is less competitive (downward comparison) in order to boost her self-confidence (self-enhancement). The current study is interested in examining the extent to which the various types of social comparisons occur in beauty pageants and the potential impacts, both negative and positive, of these comparisons.

Transnational Feminism

Socialist and radical feminists have written extensively on the collusion of capitalism and patriarchy in forming multiple oppressions of women. Women’s labor is exploited simultaneously by capitalists and by men; and the nurturing and dependent role the capitalist patriarchal society subscribes to women fundamentally confines their
social mobility and devalues their work (Hartmann, 1981). In the global South, women’s labor, femininity and sexuality are further exploited by the capitalist machine because of globalization.

The term [transnational feminism] points simultaneously to the position feminists worldwide have taken against the processes of globalization of the economy, the demise of the nation state and the development of a global mass culture as well as pointing to the nascent global women’s studies research into the ways in which globalization affects women around the globe (Mendoza, 2002, p. 296).

As a contemporary feminist approach, transnational feminism attends to the intersections of gender, race, nationhood, and economic exploitation in the context of an emerging global capitalism. In transnational feminism, women of color were constructed as a community of non-white women defined not in terms of negation of whiteness or shared marginalization, but as an acclamation of a positive identity and shared strengths (McCann & Kim, 2010). Transnational feminism requires academics and activists alike to engage in self-conscious discourse that creates conditions for the voices of the oppressed to be heard.

Transnational feminism is a relatively new concept introduced to mark the shift form “global sisterhood,” a term used by First World, white, middle class feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, which was criticized for ethnocentrism (Gupta, 2006; Mendoza, 2002). According to Mendoza (2002), a major contribution the transnational feminists have made is that “they made possible the analysis of gender, race, and sexuality beyond the confinement of national borders and generated necessary spaces to established connections between women of different nations and cultures” (p. 303).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty is a prominent transnational feminist scholar and theorist. In her influential essay "Under Western Eyes," Mohanty pointed out that the
Western feminism tended to gross over the differences among the Third World women and treated them as a homogenous powerless group or victims of a particular socio-economic system. The material complexity, reality, and agency of Third World women’s bodies and lives were left out of Western feminist theorizing (Mohanty, 2003). She defined the category of Third World woman on the basis of “the common context of struggles against specific exploitative structures and systems that determine our potential political alliances” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 49).

Mohanty places the feminist transnational solidarity firmly within the framework of anti-capitalist struggles. According to Mohanty (2003), capital as it functions now depends on and exacerbates racist, patriarchal, and heterosexual relations of rule. Thus, theory, critique, and activism around anti-capitalism and anti-globalization have to be a key focus for feminists. She investigated the history of gender and work, and theorized the experiences of the women of the “Two-Thirds World” as workers and servers in the contemporary global capitalism. She also endorsed the language of “One-Third World” and “Two-Thirds World” to categorize the global communities based on the quality of life led by peoples in both the North and the South.

In recent years, developing nations like Brazil, India and China have grown rapidly in economic power and become key players in the global capitalism. Meanwhile, the One-Third World has developed a new strategy of exporting and glorifying the capitalist ideology and engaged people from the Two Thirds World in the production, and more importantly, consumption of cultural goods. In line with transnational feminist anti-globalization critique, international beauty pageants enable the global capitalist
machine to profit not only from the work but also the bodies and consuming power of the women of the Two Thirds World.

With major international beauty pageants being hosted in China and Chinese women exhibiting substantial consuming power in beauty products and services, a beauty economy is booming in neoliberal China. From a transnational feminist perspective, the global beauty industry thrives on the exploitation of the cheap labor of rural Chinese women as well as the insecurity of feminine beauty of urban Chinese women.

Moreover, the current global hegemonic norms emphasize individualism and consumerism as the best ways to achieve personal success and create a better world. Thus, as the media keep disseminating messages that link consumption of beauty products with achievement of feminine beauty and upward social mobility, more and more urban young women in China might prioritize their beauty pursuit over academic achievement and/or experience dissatisfaction of their own body image. From examining individual women’s negotiation of the beauty pageant phenomenon, this study calls into question the impact of global capitalism and beauty economy on the lives of urban young Chinese women, which then contributes to the transnational feminist critique and anti-capitalism and anti-globalization movement.

**Contributions of Present Study**

China is experiencing unprecedented social and cultural change following its economic reform and the globalization of the 21st century. With the emerging consumer culture in neoliberal China, individualism, materialism, and hedonism have become the dominant ideologies, replacing the socialist collectivism of the Mao era. The younger generations in China who grew up being the only child of the family are under high
pressure to achieve personal success and elite status. Fueled by the increasing intensity of competitions in education and employment as well as the enlarging social gap between the rich and poor, more and more urban young Chinese women are enticed to trade their youth and beauty for material comfort and financial security.

In the era of mass communication, beauty pageants are important sites where ideal feminine beauty is constructed, performed, and commoditized through the media. Through analyzing the text of beauty pageant shows, the relationships between feminine beauty and consumer culture, nationalism, and globalization are crystalized. Moreover, studying beauty pageantry as a contemporary cultural phenomenon through the perceptions and experiences of urban young women in China sheds light on how concepts such as gender, beauty, Chinese culture, and personal success are defined in neoliberal Chinese society.

This dissertation takes up the opportunity in exploring beauty pageantry as an important and timely subject regarding neoliberal China, particularly to understand the construction and negotiation of gender and femininity in context with mass media and globalization. The purpose of the study is to examine the contemporary Chinese ideologies and ideals of feminine beauty through the beauty pageant phenomenon, and investigate the relationships between feminine beauty and gender discourses, class dynamics, national identity, and global consumerism.

Social science has undeniably benefited from incorporating feminist perspectives, which allegedly defy broad generalization in methodology and conceptualization. In addition to the specific theoretic framework discussed earlier, this dissertation is essentially grounded in feminist thought and activism. The promise in
combating oppression, inequality and injustice in feminism has motivated the researcher to pursue a dissertation project that focuses on gender, femininity, culture, and globalization.

**Research Questions**

Based on the review of literature and the purpose of the study, the following research questions are proposed.

**RQ 1:** What are the gender discourses in beauty pageants in China?

**RQ 2:** What are the cultural beliefs and ideals about feminine beauty in beauty pageants in China?

**RQ 3:** How does the Chinese beauty pageant phenomenon relate to capitalist consumer culture and globalization of mass media?

The dissertation adopts an exploratory and inductive approach to examine the beauty pageant phenomenon in neoliberal China. To answer the research questions, three qualitative research methods were used: textual analysis, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. The significance and application of each methodology is detailed in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

This dissertation uses three different qualitative methods (textual analysis, focus groups, and in-depth interviews) for data collection and analysis. All three methods are essentially designed to answer the same set of research questions (RQ1-3) and fulfill the same research goal, which is to dissect the beauty pageant phenomenon in neoliberal China. Essentially, each method offers a unique vantage point from which the Chinese beauty pageant phenomenon is examined, and together they form a comprehensive picture of the subject under study. In this chapter, the significance and applicability of each method is outlined, and the detailed procedures of data collection and data analysis are discussed.

Qualitative Research

Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as ‘[a] process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem [where] the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15). In qualitative research, the researchers do not seek causality, prediction, or generalization, and instead they focus on exploring, understanding, and illustrating the situations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The benefits of qualitative methods include allowing the researcher to reveal and understand complex social processes and to illustrate the impact of social context (Shah & Corley, 2006).

In social science, there has been a debate as to whether the criteria of judgment established in the quantitative tradition, such as reliability and validity, is applicable in evaluating qualitative research methods and results (Flick, 1998; Glaser & Strauss,
Gaskell and Bauer (2000) proposed to develop criteria that were unique to qualitative research but at the same time functionally equivalent to the quantitative tradition. They offered two broad categories for quality assessment: confidence and relevance. Confidence indicated that the research results were empirical and reflective of reality, and relevance indicated that the research was linked to theory building and/or debunking common sense. Furthermore, the authors provided six quality criteria that could contribute to confidence and relevance of qualitative research: triangulation and reflexivity, transparency and procedural clarity, corpus construction, thick description, surprise value of the findings, and communicative validation (Gaskell & Bauer, 2000, pp. 345-349).

The researcher of this study\(^1\) fully recognizes the merit of qualitative methodologies in studying social phenomena and understanding people’s values and behaviors. She endeavors to adhere to good practices in qualitative research and produce quality results that will fulfill the criteria proposed by scholars like Gaskell and Bauer (2000). Specifically, the study examined the beauty pageant phenomenon in China from three distinctive angles: media representations of beauty pageants, the perspectives of the average urban young women in China, and the experiences and views of the pageant contestants. According to Flick (1992), the employment of mixed methods and perspectives in research could lead to triangulation of knowledge, which in turn could strengthen the confidence of the results.

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\(^1\) Writing in first-person is a common practice in qualitative research which conveys the interpretative nature of and the positionality of the researcher within the analyses. In this dissertation, however, the researcher decided to write in the third-person, following the tradition of the discipline of mass communication and media research. The decision was made after carefully weighing the pros and cons of both writing styles, and one key factor was that the researcher wanted to maintain and project an appropriate distance between her own background as a Chinese woman and the interpretations she made based on the contributions of the young Chinese who participated of the study.
Qualifications and Bias of the Researcher

Because the subject of this study was beauty pageantry in neoliberal China, the researcher decided to perform all data collection in mainland China. As a result, all the original data collected was in (Mandarin) Chinese, and the researcher was responsible for analyzing and then reporting the findings in English. The entire process involved a significant level of switching between the English and Chinese languages. Furthermore, the current study is qualitative in nature and adopts an interpretivist epistemological approach; thus, the validity of the results relies on both the researcher’s interpretation of the data and her ability to organize and express those interpretations in two different languages.

The researcher of this study is a native Chinese speaker who lived in mainland China for the first 23 years of her life. She obtained a bachelor’s degree in Arabic and English languages in China. By the time this study was proposed, the researcher had been engaging in graduate studies in the U.S. for six years, and she had successfully conducted two research projects in mainland China which were both recently published in peer-reviewed journals. Therefore, the academic background and language skills of the researcher qualified her as a bilingual and intercultural researcher who fulfilled the requirements for conducting this study.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of both data collection and data interpretation because a qualitative strategy often requires getting close to the people and situation under study (Patton, 1990). Hence, a qualitative researcher must constantly confront his or her own opinions and prejudices with the data and endeavor to acknowledge and take into account potential biases as a method of dealing with them (Rajendran, 2001).
The researcher of this study recognizes her cultural background and its potential influence on the outcome of the study. First of all, when encountering certain social commentaries about contemporary China in the data, the researcher's interpretations could be influenced by her own sociopolitical perspectives being a Chinese citizen living in the U.S. Secondly, the researcher of this study was a female in her late 20s, and the subject of feminine beauty might be approached with different emphases or from different angles had the researcher been a male or in a different age group. Lastly, the researcher has strong feminist inclinations and her own feminist stance could have a direct impact on the ways she conducted the focus groups and in-depth interviews as well as the framework she chose to use in analyzing all the qualitative data.

**Textual Analysis**

**Research Methodology**

Beauty pageant research emerged in the late 20th century and has not been established as a specific field of study. Published work on the subject has been scattered across social science fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and feminist media studies, and common methodological approaches included ethnography, content analysis, historical/archival research, and critical review. Textual analysis of audio/video material is often used in critical and cultural studies of film and television, but has yet to be applied to studying beauty pageants.

Textual analysis is performed to build knowledge and understanding of our own cultures through the examination of media texts and how they may be interpreted (McKee, 2003). For example, Pitcher (2006) conducted a textual analysis of a series of Girls Gone Wild videos and demonstrated how hegemonic femininity, postfeminist gender discourses, and capitalist exploitation were manifested in the media text. As a
defender of textual analysis as a stand-alone method, Fursich (2009) argued that the unique contribution of text-only analysis is its focus on the distinctive discursive moment presented by media text between the encoding and decoding processes, and its ability to uncover the “narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and ideological potential of media content” (p. 240).

Media in China are known for being state-controlled and heavily censored. In recent years, privately owned media groups have sprouted in China and there has been an upsurge in entertainment content, including beauty pageant shows, because of its low political sensitivity (Latham, 2007). The current study uses textual analysis as a research tool to investigate the media text of Chinese beauty pageant shows for the dominant ideas and values about gender, feminine beauty, consumerism, and globalization that are embedded in the text.

**Selection of Media Text**

Two recent broadcasts of Chinese beauty pageant shows were selected as the media text for this study. Hong Kong-based Phoenix satellite TV developed the Miss Chinese Cosmos pageant in 2003, which has since grown into one of the most publicized Chinese beauty pageants both in China and overseas. This pageant is designed to include only female participants of Chinese descent, and the show targets a global Chinese audience. A small group of contestants who compete in the finale are selected from the winners and runner-ups of regional competitions held all over the world. Every fall, the finale show of Miss Chinese Cosmos pageant is held in Hong

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2 In 2011, the Miss Chinese Cosmos pageant had six regional competitions: China, Southeast Asia, Europe, Great Australia, North America and Middle East.
Kong and broadcast on the Phoenix Chinese channel. In recent years, audiences of Miss Chinese Cosmos are also given the opportunity to watch the show on the network’s website via web streaming.

The Miss World pageant was the first major international beauty pageant that came to mainland China, and it has been hosted in China various times since 2003. As a result, the Miss World China pageant, which is the regional pageant of Miss World in China, is one of the most well-known beauty contests among the Chinese audience. Each year the winner of Miss World China represents the nation in the Miss World pageant, and this opportunity attracts thousands of Chinese women to participate in sectional competitions of the Miss World China pageant. Unlike Miss Chinese Cosmos, the finale show of Miss World China does not have a regular hosting location or media sponsor. Instead, the right to host and broadcast the Miss World China finale is bid for by willing cities and TV networks at the beginning of each year.

Due to language barriers and media access, international beauty pageants like Miss Universe and Miss World tend to have a limited audience base in mainland China. In contrast, pageants like Miss Chinese Cosmos and Miss World China enjoy the privilege of reaching local Chinese audiences through broadcast and cable networks. Furthermore, in spite of certain similarities between the two pageants, there are considerable differences regarding the organization, competition rules, sponsors, and participants of these events. Through examining these two pageants, the researcher

\[3\] With one exception of the 2009 Miss Chinese Cosmos pageant that was held in Shanghai.

\[4\] The eight sectionals are: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangdong, Hunan, Jiangsu, Xi’an, and Shenzhen.
could look for overarching themes in Chinese beauty pageants as well as explore specificities in individual pageants.

Qualitative data are essentially people’s thoughts, behaviors, emotions, artifacts, and environment that are reduced to sounds, words, or pictures (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Video is one type of qualitative data that “combines the power of images and sounds through time” (p. 14). For the textual analysis of this study, video footage of the finale shows of the 2011 Miss Chinese Cosmos pageant and the 2011 Miss World China pageant was collected as qualitative data. Digital recordings of the two shows were obtained by the researcher from the video archives of the pageant websites.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis often uses an inductive approach wherein critical themes emerge from the data (Patton, 1990). The challenge of qualitative data analysis lies in the ability of the researcher to examine the data in a holistic fashion, to put them into logical, meaningful categories, and to communicate his or her interpretation effectively to others. In the analysis process, the researcher makes efforts to find commonalities and patterns as well as differences and contrasts from the data, paying special attention to key statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question.

The process of identifying themes often starts from the act of transcription (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The sole researcher of the study is an English and Chinese bilingual. She transcribed the video of the two beauty pageant shows into written text in Chinese through repeated reviewing of the footage. The resulting transcript of each show took the form of a word document that contained three columns: the first column reports the beginning and ending time codes for each scene, the second column reports the visual component of the scene, and the third column reports the audio component of
the scene. Breaks between scenes were signaled by the speech of the host (e.g., the host announces the beginning a specific competition), change of music (e.g., beginning or ending of a song), and change of location (e.g., in-studio shots into street shots).

In the transcribing process, the researcher first transcribed the audio components of each the scene, which included verbatim all spoken words and detailed descriptions of all non-verbal sounds (voice-overs, music, and sound effects). Then, she restarted from the beginning of the footage and transcribed the visual components of each scene, which included the descriptions of camera shots, stage design, costume design, graphics, and captions.

It was crucial in textual analysis to preserve the original meanings of the media text; therefore, the Chinese transcripts were not translated into English because translation between languages would inevitably lead to a loss or change in meanings. The researcher performed the data analysis predominantly in Chinese and merged the ideas into English in the final stages of connecting themes to theory and reporting the findings. Supportive quotes were directly translated from the excerpts in the transcripts, and the translations were shown to two additional bilingual individuals to ensure accuracy.

The textual analysis of beauty pageant shows in China was completed in four stages. First, the researcher started with “open coding” in which she identified all the themes that emerged from the raw data until the category set became “theoretically saturated” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 110). The researcher employed theme discovery techniques as suggested in Bernard and Ryan (2010) for analyzing audio and video
data, which included looking for repetitions, similarities and differences, missing data, and theory-related material.

In the next stage, the researcher organized the list of themes into a codebook (Appendix A Textual Analysis Codebook) and applied codes to chunk of text (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The codebook the researcher developed contained three variables: pageant name (1 for Miss Chinese Cosmos, and 2 for Miss World China), first-order category/main theme, and second-order category/subtheme. Then the researcher applied the codes (e.g., code 1-1-3 refers to Miss Chinese Cosmos, gender discourse, female sexuality) to the chunks of the text in the transcripts.

Third, the researcher created an Excel® file with three worksheets representing three research questions. In each worksheet, all the chunks of text that were coded with this RQ were imported and indexed by their theme and subtheme codes. By further examining and comparing the data on each worksheet, the researcher began revising themes, combining categories, and reducing data.

In the last stage, the researcher started to generate substantive theory by drawing connections between the themes that emerged from the data and existing literature and theoretical framework. Theoretical arguments were presented in the findings, which were organized by major themes. Typifying segments of the text were sought from transcripts and included as exemplifying cases in the write-up to support the theory.

Focus Groups

Research Methodology

The second qualitative research method employed in this study is the usage of focus groups. The goal of this method is to interrogate the insights of young urban
Chinese women on the cultural phenomenon of beauty pageants. Focus groups are widely used in social science research as an effective means of gathering information from a group of individuals of similar social backgrounds or personal traits. Focus groups are also useful when the subject of interest is new or when little knowledge has been generated from previous studies (Morgan, 1997).

An extensive literature review shows that research on beauty pageants has primarily taken the form of historical/archival reviews, ethnographies, and content analyses of news coverage, while little attention has been paid to public perceptions of beauty pageants. In a recent study, researchers conducted two focus groups and seven interviews with urban Nepali women and examined their views towards the introduction of beauty pageants to Nepal (Crawford, Gregory, Gurung, Kihati, Jha and Regmi, 2008). The current study employs similar methods in studying how young urban Chinese women view beauty pageants.

Focus group can also be a valid and valuable method in feminist research, and particularly useful in studying issues of gender and sexuality (Montell, 1999). Compared to other research methods, focus groups “allow for a more egalitarian and less exploitative dynamic,” and the interaction among the participants produces a unique kind of data (Montell, 1999, p. 44). In a group interview, the ability to help direct the conversations and shape the research outcome can give the participants a sense of authority and empowerment. In addition, focus groups could be a consciousness-raising and empowering experience for both the participants and the researcher, providing the rare opportunity for feminists to conduct research that not only describes what is, but contributes in shaping what could be (Montell, 1999).
Furthermore, compared to the U.S., focus groups are an uncommon method of research in China, and the average Chinese person was not familiar with the concept of a focus group. Although this lack of awareness could potentially pose certain difficulties in conducting focus group research in China, the researcher believed that it in fact provided a unique opportunity to explore the effectiveness of using focus groups to collect scientific data in the Chinese context. The researcher’s experiences in conducting focus groups in China could eventually contribute to the scholarly discussions on qualitative research methodologies and their applications in different cultural locations.

Selection of Participants

The main goal of the current study was to investigate the social phenomenon of beauty pageantry in contemporary China. As a feminist exploratory study, it also focused on a particular group of people: young urban Chinese women. The reason behind the researcher’s decision to focus on this particular population is threefold. First, the research subject - beauty pageantry - has a natural interrelation with the female gender group, and women tend to have more routes of involvement as well as higher personal stakes in beauty pageants. Second, young adult women (18 to 28 years old) are the main force in the beauty economy. They consist of the largest consumer group to whom the modern beauty industry tries to sell products, services, and ideologies. At the same time, feminine beauty also has the strongest impact on the lives of young women (e.g., career, relationship, health, etc.). Finally, given the particular socioeconomic structure in China, women in urban China enjoy higher quality of life and have more opportunities to be exposed to cultural events such as beauty pageants and have more resources to participate in the beauty economy than rural Chinese women.
Table 3-1. Demographics of focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Year in school</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>23-26</td>
<td>1 senior 4 graduate students</td>
<td>1 environmental design 2 Chinese 1 bilingual broadcasting 1 telecommunication</td>
<td>1 upper middle 4 middle 1 lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>20-22</td>
<td>2 juniors 4 seniors</td>
<td>1 health insurance 1 preventative medicine 4 social policy</td>
<td>5 middle 1 lower middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>20-26</td>
<td>1 sophomore 3 juniors 1 senior</td>
<td>1 tourist English 1 Japanese 1 hotel management 2 hotel intelligence (IT)</td>
<td>4 middle 1 lower middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>22-24</td>
<td>1 junior 4 seniors 1 graduate student</td>
<td>1 sociology 4 English 1 journalism</td>
<td>1 upper middle 4 middle 1 lower middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>19-22</td>
<td>1 sophomore 5 juniors 2 seniors</td>
<td>2 telecommunication 6 photo-journalism</td>
<td>3 upper middle 5 middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 6</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>3 sophomores 4 juniors 1 senior</td>
<td>4 tourist English 3 hotel management 1 western cuisine</td>
<td>1 upper middle 4 middle 3 lower middle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In focus groups, research participants should be selected based on their relationship to the research question and common characteristics (Morgan, 1997).

College women between the ages of 18 and 28 were ideal participants for this study because they are likely to fulfill the basic demographic requirements for age, gender, nationality, and residency. In addition, compared to women in the same age range who are working or unemployed, college students are more likely to keep up with social

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5 The majority of the Chinese universities and colleges are located in urban areas, and college students are required to transfer their official residency to the city of the school during the entire period of their study.
trends, actively consume media, and have flexible schedules to attend the focus group meetings. Thirty-eight college women participated in six focus groups. Table 3-1 provides the demographic breakdowns of each group.

**Recruitment of Participants**

Three college campuses in a major city in China were the main recruiting sites for the focus groups. Two of them were local public universities and the third one was a vocational college specializing in hospitality. Calls for volunteers were sent out through online bulletin boards and listervs of student organizations at the selected campuses. In-class announcements were also made by professors on behalf of the researcher. In the recruitment call, the participants were informed of the subject of the study (beauty pageant) and the nature of the meeting (focus group). The incentives included in the recruitment call included refreshments and snacks at the meeting and a small individual appreciation gift at the end of the meeting.

Respondents answered the call for volunteers by emailing the researcher about their interest in participating in the focus groups. The researcher responded to each email of interest with a brief introduction to the researcher and the project, time-frame of the focus group meetings, and a short questionnaire regarding demographics and focus group availability. The questionnaire included the following items: age, year in college, major, campus name, family origin, family socio-economic class, past beauty pageant viewing experience, and date and time available for a two-hour focus group meeting on campus.

The researcher used the demographic questionnaire to screen for potential participants. Respondents who did not meet the basic requirement for age (18 to 28) or gender (female) were excluded from the pool. Based on the recruitment sites, all
potential participants were students studying and living on three college campuses located in a major city, which would have automatically qualified them as urban residents. The researcher decided to further rule out female students who had come from rural areas and lived on their university campus for less than a year, as these women might not have had enough time to adapt to an urban lifestyle or mentality.

Additionally, only four women (less than 10%) of all the respondents answered “no” to the question “have you ever seen a beauty pageant?” on the questionnaire. The researcher made a judgment call and decided not to set up different groups for viewers and non-viewers as she had originally planned; instead, she mixed these four women in with the others during group arrangement. As discussed later in the focus group findings, the pageant viewing experience of these college women turned out to be more complicated than the researcher had anticipated, and a simple division between viewers and non-viewers would not have made sense in the first place.

After the screening, potential participants were contacted with tentative schedules of focus group meeting times and locations. Final meeting schedules were made after the researcher received confirmation emails from the participants. Each group was over scheduled by one to two participants in case of no shows. Classrooms or conference rooms were sought for conducting focus groups, and other logistics were arranged with the help from the researcher's local correspondents on each campus.

**Snowball Sampling**

Many researchers favored the usage of strangers in focus groups over acquaintances (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1997). The main concern with having acquaintances in a focus group was that a participant might feel uncomfortable sharing extremely personal information on the thought of seeing the other group members again.
outside the group. Additionally, their responses might be influenced by any previous discussion on a similar topic of shared history. At the same time, using acquaintances can be beneficial in terms of group dynamics because the participants are familiar and comfortable with each other, and can remind each other of relevant experiences in their shared past.

In the case of this study, the researcher decided to allow snowball sampling and acquaintances in the focus groups due to culturally-specific reasons. Unlike most college students in the U.S. who have the freedom to choose their majors, classes, and housing, college students in China live in a much more controlled environment. Once a student is admitted to a school and major,\(^6\) transferring to a different school or major is nearly impossible. Most universities in China employ a pseudo-militant management model, where students are divided into small units based on major and admission year and required to live in single-sex dormitories with assigned roommates. As a result, college students in China often develop strong bonds with their classmates and/or roommates in college.

Given the background of the Chinese university system, it was not surprising that snowball sampling naturally occurred during the focus group recruitment portion of this study. For instance, in one email the woman spoke on behalf of herself and two of her roommates about their interests in participating in the focus groups. In another instance, one participant contacted the researcher a few days before the focus group meeting

\(^6\) An Entrance Exam policy was implemented by the Chinese Communist Party in 1952 that requires all high school graduates in China who want to go to college participate in the yearly national standard examination. Each student is also asked to fill out an application form in which they indicate their top choices of schools and majors. After the exams are completed, each school sets a “score line” or minimum score for each of the majors based on the overall performance of the applicants, and students are then admitted according to their test scores.
asking whether she could bring her friend - another female student in her major – who also became very interested after she shared the information. Lastly, at some focus group meetings, the researcher quickly became aware that certain participants in the group were acquaintances with each other.

During casual conversations after the focus group meetings, the participants further explained to the researcher why they preferred and enjoyed having their friends or roommates at the meeting. According to the women, they would always do things together with their roommates or classmates because they always had the exact same class schedule and they were used to each other’s company. Some of them mentioned that they invited their friends to join because they did not want to “come alone.” The thought of speaking in front a group of strangers made participants feel intimidated or uncomfortable, so they preferred to have people they knew in the room. Furthermore, growing up in a highly collectivist culture in China had made the women particularly wary of attracting unwanted attention from school authorities. Thus, participating in an event with other members of the same institution helped ease this apprehension.

**Group Size and Number**

Focus group on average consists of six to 10 participants, but depending on participants’ levels of involvement with the topic, the group size could be as small as four and as large as 12 (Morgan, 1997). As the current study explores the perceptions of beauty pageants among college women, the assumed level of involvement among the participants was high. In reality, the participants had lively and engaged discussions on the subject matter, which made smaller groups possible. Of the six focus groups conducted in this study, two had five participants, two had six participants, and two had eight participants.
The number of groups to conduct in studies such as this is dependent on when theoretical saturation is achieved. Theoretical saturation is considered reached when little new information is likely to be yielded by conducting additional focus groups and the full range of experiences have been uncovered (Krueger, 1988). Morgan (1997) suggests that three to five focus groups are sufficient to reach theoretical saturation in most cases. This study conducted six focus groups because the first few groups had a small number of participants and the researcher wanted to conduct multiple focus groups from both campuses to be inclusive of all possible viewpoints. The researcher was confident that theoretical saturation was achieved at the end of the sixth group.

**Focus Groups Guide**

The researcher was the moderator of all six focus groups. Prior to the meetings, a focus group guide (Appendix B Focus Group Guide) was developed by the researcher which included a list of questions or topics and their preferred order. The focus group guide started out with an introductory remark that the researcher read before each the focus group began. In this introductory statement, the researcher thanked the participants for coming and gave a brief introduction of herself and the purpose of the focus group meeting – collecting data for her dissertation. Because the participants might be unfamiliar with the concept of a focus group, the researcher spent some time explaining what was likely to happen during the meeting and what she generally expected from the participants (e.g., contribution to the discussion, speaking one at a time). At the end of the introductory remarks, the researcher offered to answer any questions the participants had about the procedure.

When all preliminary questions were answered, the researcher then proceeded with the list of questions. The questions were semi-structured and open-ended and went
from general to specific. First of all, the researcher asked the women to go around the table and introduce themselves. This provided the opportunity for the researcher to remember the participants’ names and served as a warm-up for the discussions. Then the researcher asked questions about ideal femininity in today’s Chinese society and the places the participants learned about these beauty ideals. Next, the researcher asked the women about their past experiences watching beauty pageant shows and their general impressions of beauty pageants in China. The researcher then moved on to personal experiences and feelings about beauty pageants. The researcher wound up the discussion by providing a summary of the topics covered so far by the group and asking the participants if there were anything they would like to add.

**Conducting the Focus Groups**

The six focus groups were conducted over the course of two and a half weeks between May 10th and May 24th, 2012 on the campuses of the three selected schools. The meetings were held in classrooms and conference rooms that were quiet and private. Before the participants arrived, the researcher set up the two digital audio recorders and placed a consent form and a name card at each seat. When the participants arrived, they were greeted and instructed to read and sign the consent form and put their name on the name card. They were served beverages and snacks while they were waiting for other participants to arrive.

When the meeting started, the researcher followed the focus group guide and asked the questions on the list. For the most part, the discussions proceeded in the order of the focus group guide, and occasionally the participants skipped ahead or went

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7 The researcher explained to the participants that they could put any name they would like to be called during the focus group meeting, and not necessarily their real name or full name.
back to previous sections when they were answering the questions. During the meeting, the participants were encouraged to talk about their personal perceptions and experiences with beauty pageants and comment on other participants’ statements. The researcher made efforts to follow up on interesting and unique remarks and probe for explanations to simple yes or no answers. The six focus group meetings lasted between one and a half and two hours. The entirety of each focus group meeting was audiotaped for transcription. At the end of each meeting, the researcher distributed a media usage survey (Appendix C Media Usage Survey) to the participants and collected them when they were completed. The purpose of the survey was to collect information on the media consumption habits of the focus group participants to be used in context with the focus group data. Lastly, the researcher thanked the women for their participation and gave them each an appreciation gift\textsuperscript{8} before they left the meeting. She also offered her contact information for any further questions.

**Data Analysis**

All six focus groups were conducted in Mandarin and then transcribed by the researcher in Chinese. Similar to the textual analysis, the researcher decided to perform the preliminary coding in Chinese and incorporate English during the theme developing process. In many cases, the researcher used paraphrases to convey the meanings of the participants’ statements. In the case of a long direct quote, literal translation was used, and the quotes were shown to two other bilingual persons to check for accuracy. In the report of the findings, the participants are given pseudo initials and each woman

\textsuperscript{8} Based on the recommendations of a school correspondent who was herself a female college student thus familiar with what college women tend to like, the researcher purchased simple cosmetic products (e.g., lip gloss, nail polish, hand cream, etc.) to give out as appreciative gifts to the focus group participants.
is referred to by her pseudo initials, her age, and her level of pageant viewing experience\(^9\) (e.g., D.H., 21, indifferent viewer).

One of the most commonly used techniques in analyzing focus group data is the analytical induction and constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof, 1995). In this study, the researcher followed four specific steps of this grounded theory approach. First, the entire transcripts were conceptualized line by line. Each statement was coded into as many categories as possible until a best categorical fit was determined. In the process, the researcher paid particularly attention to the meanings of the words the participants used and the context of the statements. Second, the researcher integrated the various categories into a more unified whole (theme) by comparing instances with category attributes. Next, the researcher began a clarifying of the logic by reducing the list of categories and characteristics, and delimited the theory from drawing connections between the existing knowledge on the subject and what was observed in the data. Last, the researcher summarized each theme and found distinctive examples from the data to advance the argument.

**Interviews**

**Research Methodology**

Beauty pageant contestants are a self-selected group of women whose insights are particularly valuable to this study. Many existing beauty pageant studies have been ethnographies, in which the researchers spent an extended period of time observing the pageant from the back stage and soliciting the stories of pageant contestants using both formal and informal forms of communication (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 1999; King-O’Riain, \(^9\) Based on the preliminary survey and focus group data, the researcher identified three levels of past pageant viewing experience among the participants: non-viewer, indifferent viewer, and involved viewer.
2006). Based on the scale and rationale of the current study as well as the researcher’s background in communications research, in-depth interviews were determined to be the most appropriate and effective method in this study.

Qualitative interviewing is a widely used methodology for data collection by social scientists that provides “fine-textured understanding of beliefs, values and motivations in relation to the behaviors of people in particular social context” (Gaskell, 2000, p. 39). In-depth interviews are semi-structured qualitative interviews with an individual respondent. Using in-depth interviews, the researchers can explore a range of viewpoints on a particular subject from a particular social milieu – a natural group of people who share certain characteristics and/or experiences (Gaskell, 2000). Like other qualitative forms of inquiry, this method is based on a naturalistic epistemology that considers reality as socially constructed and situational (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal is not to uncover “truth” in the singular form, but to gain understanding of the individual “realities.”

Similar to focus groups, in-depth interviews often use semi-structured, open-ended questions. Compared to surveys or questionnaires, in-depth interviews are not looking for precision or generalizability; instead they aim to capture the complexity of lived experience. In-depth interviews also make use of an “emerging design” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Insights gained from initial interviews are used to shape questions for subsequent interviews. In qualitative interviewing, the researcher serves as an instrument in the collection and analysis of data and plays the role of a co-creator of knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Research Site

Through a personal contact of the researcher in China, she was put in touch with the organization heading one of the regional competitions in the Miss World China 2012 pageant. The writer and executive producer of this pageant agreed to help the researcher recruit potential interviewees from the contestants at their regional competition and granted her access to the pageant site as an observer. After the competition was over, the researcher had a two-hour informal interview with the executive producer over lunch, and the content of this correspondence was incorporated in the data analysis.

The majority of the pageant activities were observed at a four-star hotel in a major city on the east coast of China. The researcher visited the hotel four times between June 14th and 23rd, 2012, and on June 24th she attended the finale show of the pageant which was hosted at a large theater in the city. The researcher was permitted to solicit the pageant contestants for interviews in their spare time and observed the entire process of the pageant from the back stage. She was also allowed to interact with the participants, their family and friends, and the on-site staff without interrupting the competition. The field notes of the researcher took during the time she spent at the pageant site were also used to facilitate data analysis.

Recruitment of the Interviewees

The beauty pageant contestants were wearing number plates on their clothes and were therefore easy to identify at the competition site. The researcher approached the pageant contestants during their break time and solicited them for an interview. She explained to the women the purpose of the interview (for a dissertation project) and expressed willingness to accommodate their preferences in meeting time and location.
The researcher also initiated conversations with friends and family members of the contestants about the interview opportunity, and one of the mothers later persuaded her daughter to accept the interview.

On the second visit to the competition site, the researcher negotiated with the pageant organization and was given permission to use a hotel room reserved for the pageant staff during the competition to conduct the interviews. This room was a quiet and private space, which was preferable for in-depth interviews compared to other possible locations such as a coffee shop or school library. It also made for a much more convenient environment for the pageant contestants to participate in the interview, which aided in recruitment.

However, there were also potential drawbacks of conducting the interviews at the pageant site. For example, the interviewees might get the impression that the researcher was affiliated with the pageant organization and restrain themselves from making negative comments about the pageant and their experience as a contestant. Similarly, because the interview was often scheduled right after the rehearsal, the interviewee might bring a competitive mentality to the interview and treat it as part of the performance. After weighing the pros and cons of all the options, the researcher decided to conduct all the interviews in the hotel room.

It is often deemed sufficient to have eight respondents in studies using in-depth interviews (McCracken, 1988). In this study, eight separate interviews with beauty pageant contestants were conducted during the researcher’s last three visits to the pageant site. By the end of the eighth interview, the researcher determined that theoretical saturation had been achieved (the researcher was no longer encountering
new information from the interviewees) and the recruitment process was then terminated.

**About the Participants**

The researcher approached twenty beauty pageant contestants (some through their on-site family members) for a potential individual interview. About half of the individuals politely rejected the request for various reasons. Some initially agreed but did not find time to participate. In the end, the researcher successfully interviewed eight women who were contestants at this regional contest of the Miss World China 2012 pageant.

The eight interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 24. Except for one woman (age 24) who was a working professional, the rest of the interviewees were all college students in their sophomore or junior year. At the time of the interview, six of the students were living in the city where the pageant was being held and two came from out of town. The families of the eight women were from a variety of cities and provinces in China. During the data analysis, the researcher gave each interviewee a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

**Interview Guide**

An interview guide (Appendix D Interview Guide) was developed for the in-depth interviews with the pageant contestants. As recommended by McCracken (1988), the guide began with biographical questions, followed by grand tour questions and focus questions and prompts. In this study, the biographic questions asked the interviewee to talk a little about her personal background (e.g., hometown, occupation, hobbies, etc.). The grand tour questions asked about the interviewee’s past experience with beauty pageants (e.g., when did you first start getting involved in beauty pageants?). The focus
questions included five main areas, which asked the interviewees about other people’s reactions to their participation in beauty pageants, their personal definition of beauty pageantry, their feedback as a contestant in the current beauty pageant, their goals and expectations in the competition, and the impact of their pageant experience on their views of themselves and of beauty. The guide ended with a wind up question which asked the interviewee to say something to the other young women in China who might also be interested in participating in beauty pageants.

**Conducting the Interviews**

After a pageant contestant agreed to an interview, the researcher scheduled a meeting time with her (often right after that day’s rehearsal or during the lunch break) and met her in the hotel room set aside for the researcher’s use. The researcher came to the room ten minutes prior to the meeting to prepare the room and set up the audio recorders. When the interviewee arrived, the researcher greeted her and guided her to sit across from her over a small table. She then presented the interviewee with the consent form and briefly explained the reasons for the paper work and the recorders. Since most of the interviewees had heard about the background of the researcher and the purpose of the interview from the pitch during the recruitment, the interview usually started immediately after the interviewee signed the consent form and indicated that she had no other questions.

During each interview, the researcher asked the interviewee open-ended questions (following the general guidelines of the interview guide) and encouraged the woman to share all aspects of her past and current experiences with beauty pageants. The researcher used emerging design in most of the interviews, in which she let the conversations flow naturally and allowed the interviewee to expand on areas of
particular interest to them. The researcher mainly consulted the interview guide to ensure that all areas of interest to the researcher had been covered. At the end of the interview, the researcher thanked the interviewee for her time, gave her an appreciation gift, and asked for her email address for future contact.

Eight interviews were conducted by the researcher over two weekends in June 2012 (two on June 16th, four on June 17th, and three on June 23rd). The average duration of the interviews was 40 minutes, with the interviewing times ranged from 30 to 55 minutes. The interviews were recorded with two digital audio recorders and the recordings were transferred to a computer.

**Data Analysis**

All eight interviews were conducted in Mandarin and the recordings were transcribed in Chinese by the researcher. Once again, the researcher chose not to translate the entirety of the transcripts into English before the analysis because the meanings and contexts in a conversation are best preserved in their original form of presentation. Hence, data analysis was initiated in Chinese in open coding, gradually moved into a hybrid of English and Chinese in theme development, and finally presented in English in the writing of the findings. When direct quotes were needed, the researcher performed literal translation of the sentences in the transcripts and checked with two other bilingual individuals for accuracy for the translation.

Similar to the focus group data analysis, analytic induction and constant comparative technique were used in analyzing the interview data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The method started with open coding, where the researcher divided the interview transcripts into discrete and self-contained instances and coded each instance into as many categories as possible. Then the researcher compared the instances and tried to
find the best categorical fit for each instance. Next, the researcher compared the instances with their category characteristics and modified and combined related categories. Themes were developed from the constant comparisons between instances and categories, and the researcher paid special attention to “negative cases” where individual interviewees held viewpoints that differed from those of the majority of the participants, and revised the themes accordingly (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

When the preliminary data analysis was completed, the researcher conducted “member check” with the interviewees to ensure her interpretation and reconstruction of their accounts were accurate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). She emailed all eight women with an executive summary of the findings and asked them for feedback and comments. In the email, the researcher also expressed interest in the interviewee’s life after the pageant and invited her to provide any update. Of the eight women, three responded to the email and indicated that their viewpoints were accurately captured and represented. Some of the additional information they provided in the email is discussed in the findings.

**Relationships between the Three Methodologies**

Three qualitative research methodologies were used in this study, and the triangulation of methods helped the researcher achieve a breadth and width of the information on beauty pageants in China and increased the credibility and validity of the results (Flick, 1992). The textual analysis data revealed the dominant messages embedded in media text of Chinese beauty pageant shows and examined the beauty pageant phenomenon from the perspective of media (re)presentation.

From the interactive and extensive discussions with the six groups of college women, the researcher gained an understanding of how they defined the ideal feminine
beauty, what their impressions and personal opinions on beauty pageants were, how they related other social issues with beauty pageantry, and how their media consumption habits might have influenced their perceptions of beauty ideals and beauty pageants. Overall, the focus group data allowed the researcher to study the subject from the perspective of average young urban Chinese women whose lives were directly and indirectly influenced by the beauty economy.

In-depth interview data provided the researcher with an insider’s view of the beauty pageant phenomenon. It helped the researcher see first-handed the impact of beauty pageantry on the lives of a selected group of young Chinese women, as well as how the experiences of these women contributed to shaping both media representations and public perceptions of beauty pageants. Essentially, the interviews complemented the textual analysis and focus groups to provide a holistic understanding of the beauty pageant phenomenon in neoliberal China.

Findings of the three methods are detailed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4  
FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the data analyses conducted for this study. Three research methodologies were used in this study (textual analysis, focus groups and in-depth interviews) and each methodology yielded rich qualitative data. The findings are presented in separate sections based on methodology, although all the data were analyzed to answer the same set of research questions (RQ1-3). In Chapter 5, further connections between the findings of the three sections will be made and overarching theoretical implications of these findings will be discussed.

Textual Analysis

The researcher of this study performed textual analysis on two particular Chinese beauty pageant shows. The finale show of the 2011 Miss Chinese Cosmos pageant was hosted in the evening of October 22, 2011 at the Kowloon Bay International Trade and Exhibition Centre in Hong Kong. There were 12 contestants\(^1\) who appeared in 2011 Miss Chinese Cosmos (Cosmos), which was broadcast live by Phoenix TV and aired on four Phoenix channels. The general rundown of Cosmos included: introduction of the contestants, introduction of the judges, first Q&A section, contestant dance performances, special awards announcement, twelve- to-six elimination announcement, second Q&A section, guest performance, and final awards announcement. There were five celebrity individuals who served as the main judges in Cosmos: Charlie Yeung, female actress from Hong Kong; Jiahui Ma, male writer and media critic from Hong Kong; Nick Cheung, male actor from Hong Kong; Leon Dai, male film director from

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\(^1\) The twelve contestants in the finale show came from seven regional contests: mainland China (5), USA (2), UK (1), Canada (1), Australia (1), Malaysia (1), Macao (1).
Taiwan; Jiping He, female playwright from mainland China. In addition, *Cosmos* also had three special award judges: two CEOs from two major sponsors of the pageant (both male), and a dance artist and dean of a Hong Kong dance school (female). The entire show lasted two hours and 36 minutes excluding commercial breaks.

The finale show of the 2011 Miss World China pageant was hosted on September 10, 2011 at a mountain tourist resort in Wuxi, a mid-sized city in Jiangsu province. There were 27 contestants who appeared in *2011 Miss World China (World)*, which was produced by the Miss World China Organization, and the recording was aired by Guangdong Satellite TV later that evening. The general rundown of *World* included: contestant opening dance, introduction of the judges, swimsuit competition, qipao show, guest performance one, evening gown competition, special awards announcement, top-15 elimination, guest performance two, top-5 elimination, Q&A section, final awards announcement. There were six judges in *World*: Zilin Zhang, former Miss World winner; Yinhua Han, female modeling coach from; Geping Mao, male makeup artist; Katy Koutsolioutsos, female co-founder of Folli Follie; Fang Chen, male CEO of Yuanyi Corp; and Kejun Qiu, male chief manager of Nanfang Daily Media Group. The latter three of the six judges were representatives of three major sponsors of the pageant. The show was one hour and 25 minutes long excluding commercial breaks.

**Representations of Gender Stereotypes**

Issues of representation are central to feminist media scholarship and cultural studies, in which gender stereotyping has been a key area of interest. Early studies directed attention to the stereotypical depictions of women in Hollywood films (e.g., Rosen, 1973) and TV commercials (Dominick & Rauch, 1972), and feminist scholars
have since extended their critique of gender (and other) stereotypes in various media forms (see Nordquist, 2001). Beauty pageant shows are a media text that has yet to be systematically studied for stereotypical representations. In this study, the researcher explores the dominant meanings of gender in beauty pageants in China through analyzing the media text of two pageant shows, paying particular attention to the stereotypical images and messages of gender promoted in the shows.

A feminine competition

Modern beauty pageants have been largely perceived as feminine events (Banet-Weiser, 1999). In many cultures, people use different titles to address women who are married (e.g., Mrs in English, and taitai in Chinese) and those who are unmarried (e.g., Miss in English, and xiaojie in Chinese), but only one for men (e.g., Mr in English, and xiansheng in Chinese). These titles show that marriage status plays a more important factor in determining a woman’s social role than a man’s. The names of most beauty pageants contain the word “Miss” in their titles, indicating that only unmarried young women or girls are to the ones who are expected to participate in pageants.

The contestants in both Cosmos and World were frequently referred to as jiali² (fine beauty), instead of xuanshou (contestants). Rarely appearing in everyday conversations in China, the word jiali is almost exclusively used in the context of beauty pageantry or advertising. Before modern pageants, jiali was known to describe the group of women who were wives, concubines, or mistresses of feudalist emperors in

² “Jiali” was first used in the poem “Chang Hen Ge” by a famous poet of Tang Dynasty Bai Juyi. The original sentence in the poem can be loosely translated into: “Although the Emperor had three thousand ‘jiali’ (beautiful women) in his palace, all his love was dedicated to one specific concubine Yang.”
Chinese history. Selected at a young age by the royal family based on physical beauty and family background, the jiali would spend the rest of their lives in the harem competing against each other for the love and attention of their husband as well as a secured and comfortable life for themselves and their families. A parallel could be drawn between the experiences of the jiali on the pageant stage and the jiali in the imperial harems. The two groups of women were both engaged in an arbitrary type of competition in which they present, compare, and trade their feminine beauty and sexuality for the recognition of the patriarchal system.

By using the terminology of jiali, the Chinese pageants also created a collective image of the women on stage. In the Western pageants, individual pageant contestants are often recognized for their uniqueness. For example, the contestants in Miss America are addressed by the state that they are representing (e.g., Miss California), and they are distinguished by their professions and specialties (e.g., Miss Alabama is a third year dental student). In the Chinese pageants, particularly World, the contestants were not introduced as individuals but given a group identity as jiali, and each woman was contributing a part to the final picture of feminine beauty.

This difference was telling of the collectivism in Chinese culture (Hofstede, 1997). On one hand, by creating a collective identity for the pageant women, the Chinese pageant shows echoed the main theme of “Harmonious Society,” which had been stressed by the Chinese government in recent years (Fan, 2006). On the other hand, it also to a great extent annihilated the individuality of those Chinese pageant contestants. With reality television gaining popularity in China, personal fame and celebrity has become increasingly normalized and desirable among the Chinese youth. The fact that
beauty pageant shows like *World* largely played down the individual identity of the contestants was interesting and indicative of potential differences in the production goals between beauty pageants and other entertainment media in China.

Beauty pageants are known as *xuanmei bisai* (beauty selection contest) in China. Even though the pageant event as a whole was primarily framed as a competition, the actual content of these pageant shows was far from the traditional sense of competition as in sports or even in reality television. Throughout the entire pageant, there was no scoreboard showing the current status of the competition or any elaboration after each round of massive elimination. If not for the number tags that the women were wearing, they could very well look like a group of performers rather than individual competitors. However, in order to create a sense of excitement for the audience, the hosts in both *Cosmos* and *World* used languages such as *jilie* (fierce) and *canku* (ruthless) to describe pageant competition. After all, when the final prize was dear and scarce, all the young women on stage had to “fight” against each other to stand out and only the one who managed to capture the most positive attention could win the crown.

In most of the two shows, there was no confrontation and a minimum of interaction among the contestants on stage. The only occasion where the contestants could have gone “head-to-head” with each other was in the second round of Q&A in *Cosmos*. According to the rules, after one contestant gave her answer to a question, another contestant had the opportunity to challenge the previous answer and/or give an alternative. However, even in this section the women still refrained from showing any hint of competitiveness. One of the pageant judges asked Contestant No.3 Yichun a hypothetical question in which she needed to pick one of the twelve women to be the
winner of pageant. To avoid any confrontation, she gave a very diplomatic answer: “I really cannot pick one winner from all the women here on stage… because only all twelve of us together can represent the essence of the most beautiful Chinese woman.”

It was clear that Yichun, and most pageant women in Cosmos and World, appeared extremely acquiescent and non-confrontational on stage. In a traditional Confucian home, women were expected to obey their fathers, husbands, and sons (Tamney & Chiang, 2002). After various social revolutions in the 20th century, Chinese women have become less restrained by san cong si de (three obedience and four virtues)\(^3\) in Confucius teaching. However, as China witnesses a revival of Confucianism in recent years (Demick, 2011), being submissive and compliant may have regained its place in ideal femininity in China. As a result, the women in Chinese beauty pageants could be reluctant in exhibiting assertiveness or aggressiveness fearing that it might be perceived as unfeminine.

**Pageant hosts and gender roles**

There were four hosts\(^4\) in the Cosmos, three males and one female, and all of them were veteran pageant hosts from previous years. Being a relatively smaller production, World had only one male host and one female host,\(^5\) both of whom were first-time pageant hosts. The main functions served by the hosts in the two Chinese beauty pageants included announcing the proceedings of the show, introducing the

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\(^3\) San cong (three obedience): obey her father as a daughter, obey her husband as a wife, obey her son in widowhood. Si de (four virtues): morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work.

\(^4\) All four hosts were television personalities from Phoenix TV, they were Wentao Dou (talk show host), Tiger Hu (news anchor), LInjia Yuchi (entertainment host), and Xing Shen (entertainment host).

\(^5\) They were Xiaoyang Feng and Jie Luo, both entertainment television hosts from Guangdong TV.
participants (contestants, judges, sponsors, guest performers, award presenters, etc.), and engaging the live and television audiences.

Various traditional gender roles were found in both the male and female hosts in *Cosmos* and *World*. First of all, even though the actual age of the female hosts were similar to their male counterparts, on stage the female hosts of both shows appeared significantly more attractive and youthful than the male hosts. For example, the female host in *Cosmos* changed her outfits three times throughout the show, and the gowns she was wearing were form-fitting and accentuated her feminine physique. In comparison, the outfits the three male hosts were wearing, although eye-catching, had a lot less sex appeal. The visual impressions of the pageant hosts were consistent with the traditional gender expectation of a young beautiful female and an older less attractive male, which reinforced the patriarchal gender belief that youth and beauty was more valued in women than in men (Wolf, 1991).

Female Host (*Cosmos*): In the next segment, our contestants will take some hard questions from our three male hosts, one-on-one and face-to-face. … I hope the girls will have good performances, because a combination of intelligence and beauty is what makes the judges give out high scores. I hope the three partners of mine will not give too much of a hard time to these beautiful girls. Please welcome our Wentao, Yihu, Yuchi!

Male Host 1 (*Cosmos*): NO.1 contestant Kathy, born and raised in the United States. She used to be able to speak Chinese, but then she forgot it all. But recently she’s just learnt to speak again! [audience laughter] Hello Kathy…The first question I am going to ask you today, is to not let you understand my question. [audience laughter]

Secondly, the female hosts appeared more conservative and formal on stage compared to their male counterparts. The female hosts tended to use more neutral and proper language and stick to the scripted lines whereas the male hosts were more liberal and exaggerated with their expressions and incorporated more humor and
improvising in their language. Traditional gender roles often hold femininity on the opposite side of humor and it was considered “unladylike” for women to perform comedy until the early 20th century (Wagner, 2011). In China, people still believe that girls are supposed to be wenjing (gentle and quiet) and boys to be huopo (outgoing), and a woman who is overly expressive or opinionated in public is seen as unfeminine. In this sense, the two female hosts in the pageants conformed to the Chinese traditional feminine ideal of passivity and properness.

Moreover, it was interesting to note that only the male hosts had direct interactions with the contestants on stage in both pageants. In the first Q&A section in Cosmos, the three male hosts took turns chatting with individual contestants and challenging them with difficult questions or tasks. Later in the second Q&A section, it was also only the three male hosts who acted as liaisons between the contestants and judges. Similarly, the male host in World was the one who presented the questions of the Q&A to the five finalists, not his female partner. This arrangement was hardly coincidental because it not only situated the male hosts in a more authoritative position as the interrogators but also preserved a more sympathetic and unaggressive image of the female hosts, both of which reaffirmed the patriarchal gender stereotypes.

**Objects for the male gaze**

Mulvey (1975/1989) wrote in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female form which is styled accordingly” (p. 62). In Hollywood cinema (and other forms of visual media), the sign “woman” is constructed by and for a patriarchoal culture, in which
women’s bodies are eroticized and turned into the objects of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975/1989).

With the help of professional costume designers, hair and makeup artists, and stage coaches, the young women in Cosmos and World looked nothing short of stunning. On average, the contestants changed outfits between five and seven times over the duration of the show. The frequent changes of outfits served to create visual stimulation and keep the show interesting for the audiences. In Cosmos, the outfits the contestants were wearing were specifically designed for the pageant by a fashion designer and sponsor. The styles of the outfits fell into two general categories: dresses (short and long) and briefs (tank top and tight shorts). In World, there were four individual contests/shows based on the contestants’ outfits: sportswear, bikini, qipao, and evening gown. The styles and designs of the pageant outfits were purposefully selected in order to bring out the femininity of the contestants. The form-fitting cuts and long dress length accentuated the slender, curvaceous, and lanky physique of the women, and the sports bras and bikinis made sure they reveal enough of their skin/body so the visual pleasure of the spectators were satisfied.

One of the four special contests in World was called “qipao show.” A qipao is the traditional one-piece dress for women in China, and the style of qipao has changed along with fashion trends throughout the 20th century from a loose silhouette to a form-fitting garment (Yang, 2007). The qipao faded out from Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, and since then has been used mostly as formal wear in ceremonial and diplomatic occasions or as uniforms of restaurant and hotel staff (Chew, 2007). In recent years, the qipao reemerged as a fashion icon by the cultural
producers in China and around the world, bringing together the reminiscent and newfound fantasies of oriental exoticism (Chew, 2007).

In the qipao show, each contestant walked down the runway in a sleeveless and knee-length qipao, holding a lotus seedpod, lotus flower, or lotus leaf. Lotus is symbolic of purity in Chinese culture, so the arrangement not only symbolized the purity of these pageant women’s beauty but also nicely complimented the Chinese theme of the show. The qipao the women were wearing were further modified to look like a cocktail dress, baring their arms and legs while emphasizing their small waists and feminine figures. During this section, most contestants would slow down the pace of their walk to match the rhythm of traditional Chinese music, and make sure they were holding the props in extremely feminine ways, clutching them close to their bodies with dainty hand gestures. Many of them didn’t forget to strike a dramatic and sexually alluring pose before they turned around at the end of the runway.

Prerecorded self-introduction of contestant No. 1 (Cosmos): I am No. 1 contestant Shi Kaixi. I was born in the U.S.A but I grew up in a family that loves Chinese culture. I hope to make my contribution to the cultural exchange and communication between China and the West.

Prerecorded self-introduction of contestant No. 18 (Cosmos): I am No. 18 contestant Fu Jielin. I come from Malaysia. Singing and dancing is the passion in my life, and I will take my courage and confidence and conquer the stages all over the world.

In Cosmos, each contestant made her debut appearance in an avant-garde dress specially designed for the pageant show. With a pre-recorded self-introduction playing in the background, the contestant walked on the stage accompanied by two male dancers and proceeded to dance flirtatiously when the cameras followed them closely and focused on their bodies. Later on, the women changed into a more tight-fitting, Broadway-look costume and performed two group dances. Again, the cameras
would zoom in and out on the contestant’s bodies, and multiple camera positions would provide a 360-degree view of their performances.

According to Mulvey’s cinepsychoanalysis, when the images of these Chinese beauty pageant contestants were captured by the cameras and presented on the television screen, they too were turned into the fetishistic objects of the male gaze. Although it seemed like the women on the pageant stage were actively performing their femininity by walking, smiling, gesturing and dancing, the patriarchal nature of the media narrative did not allow them to be the subjects who controlled the gaze. In the end, the faces that were covered by flawless makeup, the arms, legs, and cleavages that were flirtatiously revealed through different outfits, and the movements that were instructed to look feminine and alluring, all contributed to the fact that these young pageant women were sexualized and objectified for the visual pleasures of the spectators.

According to Mulvey (1975/1989, 1981/1999), the spectatorship requires a masculine identification for both genders, and a female spectatorship was unlikely. While cinepsychoanalysis largely deemed identification as a cultural process that only reproduced dominant culture and reinforced existing patriarchal forms of identity, feminist cultural theorists drew attention to the potential of empowerment and resistance through identification in cultural consumption (Stacey, 1991/1999). Jackie Stacey then further argued that “Identification does not simply involve the passive reproduction of existing femininities, but rather an active engagement and production of changing identities” (1981/1999, p. 208).
When consuming cinema (and other visual media), instead of having an erotic desire towards the women on the screen, female spectators could have a desire to become more like the women they see (Stacey, 1991/1999). Following Stacey’s theoretical postulation on female spectatorship, female audiences of beauty pageants could identify the differences between themselves and women on the pageant stage with regards to physical attractiveness. This recognition could lead some female audience (e.g., young girls) to form their ideals of femininity based on the beauty queens in the pageants, whom they worship as role models. Some women may even engage in practices that transform their physical appearance (e.g., dieting, cosmetic surgery) to resemble the ideal image.

**Beauty as an achievement**

Beauty is considered an important social currency for women in patriarchal societies (Wolf, 1991). Women are more likely than men to be held accountable for their physical appearance and valued by their conformity to cultural ideals of beauty (Thompson et al., 1999). Feminist scholars have pointed to the oppressive nature of the “beauty system” as it disenfranchises women by simultaneously rendering the feminine body inferior and providing the only redemption through the title of beauty (Jeffreys, 2005). One of the key messages the two Chinese beauty pageants were trying to convey also advocated for this inherent significance of feminine beauty. By subscribing the status of achievement to feminine beauty, the Chinese beauty pageants to a great extent reinforced the patriarchal beauty system that tied women’s self-worth to their abilities to be acknowledged as beautiful.
The pageant hosts repeatedly stressed the fact that beauty was not a personal attribute or natural state of being; instead, it was a recognition and symbol of success that all the pageant contestants on stage were fighting to earn.

Female Host (World): This year’s Miss World China pageant travelled to eight major regions in China, and after over six months of preliminary contests, we have selected 27 jiali to compete on this final stage. ... Tonight the winner of the competition will have to excel in Swimsuit, Traditional Qipao, and Evening Gown shows plus the final Q&A section, which is not an easy task.

Male Host (World): Absolutely. Any road that leads to success is going to be very difficult, but at least tonight it is going to be a beautiful journey.

In order to earn recognition for their beauty, a pageant contestant needed not only personal efforts and determination but also professional assistance. In both Cosmos and World, the contestants were changed into different outfits so they could perform different styles of feminine beauty: from youthfulness (bikini) to elegance (evening gown), from modern (avant-garde dress) to traditional (qipao). Diligent production efforts were made to enhance the contestants’ performances, such as extravagant costume designs, perfect hairdo and makeup, carefully-arranged lighting and camera positions, and well-scripted speeches.

Jean Kilbourne eloquently pointed out in the Killing us Softly film series that the advertising industry keeps telling women how important it is to look beautiful and then how exactly to achieve the ideal beauty. In a consumerist society, not only are women’s bodies sexualized and commoditized to sell products, feminine beauty as a product and ideology is also being sold to individual women. As demonstrated in the two Chinese beauty pageants, being beautiful was not a task that a woman could simply accomplish on her own, instead she needed the help from the fashion, cosmetics, and media professionals to bring out her beauty in its best light.
To highlight the contestants’ achievements in beauty, both pageants established a set of specialty competitions and awards in addition to the final title. *Cosmos* had three specialty awards: “Miss Web Popularity” – the most popular contestant based on fan votes and personal blog visits, “Miss Photogenic” – the contestant who looked the best in front of the camera, and “Miss Cultural Personality” – the contestant who demonstrated the most cultural sensibility and knowledge. *World* had five special contests prior to the finale show, and the winners of these contests got to move up to the final 15 automatically. They were “Miss Sports” – the contestant who exhibited leadership and physical fitness in group sports, “Miss Culinary Arts” – the contestant who demonstrated the most competent and creative cooking skills, “Miss Bikini” – the contestant who looked the most confident and attractive in a bikini, “Miss Talent” – the contestant who had the most impressive talent, and “Miss Super Model” – the contestant who was the best at modeling different clothes. These awards were designed to acknowledge the physical appearance as well as the skills and qualities of the pageant contestants, indicating that feminine beauty could be multi-dimensional and it often took more than a pretty face to be considered beautiful.

Furthermore, both shows had Q&A sections in which the contestants were challenged with difficult questions. Particularly, there were two rounds of Q&As in *Cosmos*. The first round of was designed to give each contestant the opportunity to impress the judges and audiences with their skills and personalities, and the second round aimed more at revealing their intelligence and worldview. As indicated in the example questions below, these Q&A sections demonstrated that personal qualities
such as knowledge, confidence, intelligence, and humbleness were also crucial in the ultimate achievement of feminine beauty.

Male Host 3 (*Cosmos*, first Q&A): Contestant No. 6 Wu Chenceng. …She has a very impressive education background. She knows three foreign languages. Chenceng, could you say something in each language for us?

Male Host 2 (*Cosmos*, first Q&A): Contestant No. 7 Li Wei, from UK. I heard that you know a lot about healthy eating, and especially about tea. Why do you like tea? If I were to ask you to describe each of our judges with a type of tea, what would those be?

Judge Mr. Jiahui Ma (*Cosmos*, second Q&A): If today, among the six of you, you were not selected to be the winner, how would you handle the result? How would you explain it to your friends and family why that you lost?

Judge Ms. Jiping He (*Cosmos*, second Q&A): When the pageant is over today, if you will write a twitter message, what punctuation will you use at the end of the sentence? Will it be a period, an exclamation mark, a question mark, or something else?

**Cultural Ideals of Feminine Beauty**

**Physical beauty of the pageant contestants**

Modern beauty pageants have been criticized for homogenizing the criteria in judging physical beauty in women and patronizing Western standards of beauty (Cohen et al., 1995; Van Esterik, 1995). In *Cosmos* and *World*, all of the contestants were ethnically Chinese with the vast majority born and raised in mainland China. It was interesting to inspect the ideal forms of female physical beauty constructed in the two Chinese beauty pageants in the context of both the Chinese and the Western/universal beauty standards.

**The outstanding height.** In spite of a recent effort made by the Miss Universe Malaysia organization to eliminate the height limit 163cm (5’4.2”) for entering the pageant (Pak, 2012) it has been a common practice for beauty pageants all over the world to set minimum height requirements for the contestants. It is also a noticeable
trend in recent global pageants such as Miss Universe and Miss World that the contestants and title-holders have become increasingly tall. The most recent title holder of both Miss World China and Miss World, Yu Wenxia, is 178cm (5’10.1”), and most of the contestants in Cosmos and World were at least 15cm (6 inches) taller than the average woman in China.

By having such exceptional height standards, beauty contests further set apart the ideal from the reality and promote a beauty standard that was difficult if not impossible for most women to attain. When watching beauty pageants like Cosmos and World, young women in China might feel disappointed and discouraged knowing that their height alone already disqualified them from ever participating in a beauty contest. Their self-esteem might be negatively impacted by identifying this insoluble discrepancy between their own body image and the ideal image of beauty.

Between the two pageants shows, World had placed more importance on the height of the contestants in relation to ideal feminine beauty. In the first section of World, The Bikini Show, each contestant would walk down the runway when the host introduced her by her contestant number, followed by her name, her height, and a beauty statement that she wrote. Accompanying the verbal introduction was a graphic display of the contestant’s name, hometown, and height imposed on the television screen. With both the visual and verbal cues, the information of height was made a meaningful distinguisher of all the contestants in World. The audiences were led to

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6 The average height of the Miss Universe title holders between 2002 and 2011 is 5 feet and 10.2 inches.

7 According to the information disclosed in the pageant shows, of the 27 contestants in World, the shortest was 170cm (5’6.9”) and the tallest was 183cm (6’). Four contestants in Cosmos whose height was mentioned, which were 171cm, 173cm, 177cm and 177cm. The average height for women in China is 158cm (5’2”).
believe that height was a key criterion in judging female physical beauty in the beauty contest.

Furthermore, one of the five specialty competitions in World was the “Super Model Contest,” in which the contestants were judged for their runway skills and ability to display clothes. According to the rules, the winner of the Super Model Contest (same with the other four specialty competitions) was guaranteed a spot among the 15 finalists. As a result, the tall women in the competition who tended to have modeling backgrounds were then given an obvious advantage over the shorter women. As the result of World showed, the winner of the Super Model Contest was 178cm (5’10.1”) and made to the top five finalists, and the title holder of the pageant was one of the tallest contestants in the show (180cm or 5’10.9”). The fact that height was made a determining factor in the competition in World indicated that being tall was a crucial part of the cultural ideals for feminine beauty in contemporary China, and that beauty pageants in China shared the same trend that was found in the global pageant community.

Cosmos did not have a Super Model competition or specifically identify each contestant by their height. But during the first round of Q&A, the male hosts on different occasions commented on the height of certain tall contestants, particularly in comparison to their own height or the height of men.

Male Host 1 (Comos): No. 13 contestant Yang Shanyi. Her height posts deadly pressure on me. Her height is 177cm, but the reality right now is 187cm [with heels]. I find that I can only talk to her waist.

Shanyi: Hello everyone! Hello wentao!

Male Host 1: I think I should stand further away from you.

Shanyi: No, it doesn’t matter, really!
Male Host 2 (*Comos*): No. 3 contestant Zhang Yichun. Many people see you walking out and said: “wow, she is so tall!” ... I am wondering, do you have a requirement for height when you look for boyfriend? If a guy that is shorter than you (177cm), would you consider him?

Yichun: Just like what last year’s winner (also 177cm tall) said: “height is not distance, age is not a problem.”

Male Host 2: So wentao (male host 1) could also pursue you? He’s standing right there.

Yichun: Hmm [shy] I think there shouldn’t be a problem.

From the evolutionary perspective, the height of a person is often associated with physical and social power, and research has demonstrated that tall individuals indeed have a higher rate of success in the workplace (Judge & Cable, 2004). In most cultures, gender stereotypes tend to depict men as being taller than women, which is consistent with the patriarchal imagery of the dominant male and submissive female. When the height difference between the (taller) contestants and the male hosts became the focus of conversation in *Cosmos*, the assumed gender role balance was temporarily broken, leading to identity anxieties in both genders. The male hosts had to joke about their feeling of defeat and inadequacy while the female contestants also seemed uncomfortable about this reversal in gender stereotypic traits.

**The thin ideal and the soft female body.** If being tall had given some women a distinctive advantage in the Chinese pageant competitions, being thin was outright a minimum requirement for every woman who participated. In both *Cosmos* and *World*, the contestants were wearing outfits that bared their arms, legs and sometimes mid-sections. The cameras would zoom in on individual contestants as they walked up the runway, providing a close look at the overall physique as well as specific parts of the body. Given such detailed visual presentation, one needed not to be a beauty or health
expert to tell that the vast majority of these young women had very thin bodily figures and some of them even looked extremely underweight.

The thin beauty ideal has been studied extensively by scientists and feminist scholars from various disciplines, and most of them tend to agree that thinness is one of the most salient and internalized beauty attributes for women in modern societies (Bordo, 1993). In a developing nation like China, involuntary hunger remains a public health problem. However, due to rapid economic growth and influx of foreign media in the past a few decades, concerns of being fat and problematic eating attitudes are on the rise in the Chinese society. Even though most young Chinese women are slim by Western standards, there is still an overwhelming desire to become “just a little slimmer” (Lee, 1993). As Lee (1996) pointed out, anorexia nervosa was no longer bound by its Western cultural localities and needed to be reconsidered as being grounded in the transnational culture of “modernity.”

Most beauty pageants are organized with the goal of selecting “the most beautiful woman” according to current cultural ideals of beauty. Therefore, it was expected of the beauty pageant contestants to conform to if not exemplify the global trend of female thinness. However, within this universal thin beauty ideal for women there were interesting differences found between the “thin body” in the Chinese beauty pageants and “thin body” in the Western context. First of all, the contestants in the two Chinese pageants did not have the sun-tanned skin tone like the pageant women in the West. This was likely because of the cultural preference for fair complexion and low interest in tanning in China (Xie & Zhang, 2012). Another even less obvious but interesting disparity the researcher found between the two pageant cultures was that women in the
Western pageants tended to have highly athletic and fit bodies, whereas the bodies of the Chinese pageant contestants were generally soft-looking with no visible muscle tone.

From a feminist perspective, this “delicate and soft” body ideal in China reflects the position of women in contemporary Chinese society. Muscles and a muscular body are often associated with physical strength and power while a soft female body is considered beautiful, it can also be considered less powerful or weak because of the lack of muscles. To that end, young Chinese women are held to a cultural ideal of feminine beauty that requires them to sacrifice their physical strength and sometimes physical health. By keeping the bodies of women soft and non-muscular, the patriarchal system in China in effect reinforced the hierarchy of power between “the strong men” and “the weak women.”

In China, it is common for parents to discourage their daughters from playing sports or exercising because they believe that engaging in too much physical activity would make a girl look like a tomboy and sabotage her feminine image. A recent news report shows that dieting is the most popular method used to achieve and maintain a thin body in China, and there are a lot of exercise-free slimming treatments in the market that specifically target Chinese women (Chu, 2010). The fact that the Chinese pageant contestants in general had less toned and athletic bodies could be linked to the cultural practices in China that tended to preclude women from physical exercise.

Before the communist revolution, having pale skin tone and a delicate body was an indicator of high social class or affluent background and women with social means would refrain from all manual labor and physical activities to maintain a highly feminine appearance. The attitude towards gender and work changed tremendously during Mao
era and the idea that women could do just about anything that men could was promoted to increase communist productivity. However, as capitalist consumerism proceeds to take over the communist ideology in China, certain traditional and patriarchal gender beliefs are reinstated as the dominant gender discourse, such as the ideal female body needing to be delicate and soft.

**Ambiguity and homogeneity in facial beauty.** No one will argue that the face of a woman is an irrelevant factor in her beauty. Asian culture in particular seems to place higher importance on facial beauty than bodily beauty for women (Frith et al., 2005). However, facial beauty was not explicitly emphasized in *Cosmos* and *World* and it could be for practical reasons. On one hand, it was difficult to communicate effectively the criteria used in judging the facial beauty of the contestants. Unlike bodily attributes such as height or weight that have quantifiable measurements, judgments of facial beauty seemed harder to convey. On the other hand, it contributed to the political correctness of the Chinese beauty pageant shows in the communist society when they deemphasized the physical appearance (e.g., facial beauty) of the contestants and instead focused on the inner qualities of the women.

Both *Cosmos* and *World* were Chinese beauty pageants, and the racial and ethnic makeup of the contestant pools was highly homogenous given that over 90% of the Chinese population was Han (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). As a result, the facial features of the contestants in the two Chinese pageants demonstrated fewer apparent visual variations, especially compared to the contestants in pageants like Miss Universe or Miss America who tend to come from different racial and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, in major beauty pageant shows such as *Cosmos* and *World,*
the contestants were given a complete “makeover” before getting on the stage. After being transformed by professional makeup artists with stage makeup, the faces of these women all looked very attractive and similar.

Based on the observation of the researcher, the women in *Cosmos* and *World* tended to share one particular facial characteristic: a small chin or narrow jawline. Given that it is harder to change the look of one’s face shape than other facial features with makeup, it was notable that a large proportion of these Chinese pageant contestants had a *xiaolian* (small face) with *jian xiaba* (pointed chin), which is largely considered attractive for women in contemporary China. Being an Asian woman, the researcher was familiar with certain makeup techniques commonly used to modify the look of Asian facial features. In the two Chinese pageants, two specific makeup techniques were prevalent on the contestants: using strong eyeliners and fake eyelashes to make the eyes look bigger, and using shadow of different shades to create a narrower-looking and higher profiled nose.

According to evolutionary theory, beautiful faces tend to share characteristics such as symmetry, averageness, and sexual dimorphism (Rhodes, 2006), and some facial features, such as large eyes, small nose, and small chin, are considered particularly feminine and attractive on women (Cunningham, 1986; Johnston & Franklin, 1993; Hönn & Göz, 2007). Beyond racial singularity, the faces of the Chinese pageant women demonstrated a notable level of homogeneity both with the natural feature of small chin and makeup aftereffects of large eyes and defined nose. These features were in agreement with some of the universal ideals of female facial beauty, which further provided evidence to the evolutionary perspective of beauty.
Beauty on the Inside

Female Host (World): The swimsuit show just now was very beautiful, every contestant looked absolutely stunning.

Male Host (World): Yes. But it seemed to me that I not only saw the outside of these beautiful women, but also the beautiful light that shined through from the inside.

Female Host (World): Absolutely. In Miss World the physical appearance of the contestants is only one standard, and their inner beauty and compassion is also a key factor that the judges take into consideration.

In clear contrast to the reluctance in explicitly discussing physical beauty, the inner beauty of the contestants was lavishly advertised in both Cosmos and World. The hosts of the pageants repeatedly stressed the importance for the winner of the pageant to demonstrate intelligence, talent, and compassion beyond just a beautiful appearance. However, between the two pageants, different levels of efforts were made to underscore the individuality and personal substance of each contestant.

Cosmos was a self-contained international beauty pageant and its finale show was promoted as one of the biggest broadcast events on Phoenix TV. With only twelve final contestants competing in the two-and-half-hour finale, the show allocated an extensive amount of air time (four to six minutes on average) to each contestant and provided the opportunity for the judges and the audience to get to know these women as individuals. From both the self-introduction and the first Q&A segments, one was able to gain some basic knowledge of their personal backgrounds and the way they interacted with other people. For example:

Male Host 2 (Cosmos): No. 15 contestant Gao Xuan, from Australia. She is a graduate student in accounting. She plays erhu, and she is the winner of a TV host competition. She is also a famous “basketball baby” (cheerleader for basketball team).
Cosmos also made a point to highlight the talents and achievements the contestants had. For example, Contestant No.6 was a graduate student at a foreign language institute so she was asked to speak in both French and Korean to showcase her language skills. Similarly, Contestant No.13 was requested to draw a quick portrait of the male host on stage without any preparation to showcase her background in design.

In order to accommodate 27 contestants and four competitions in its 90 minutes of show time, World had to limit the time spent on each contestant individually. Other than the five finalists who answered one pre-determined question in the Q&A section, the rest of the contestants did not get to speak at all throughout the entire show. From a feminist perspective, the individuality and self-identity of these women were diminished by losing the ability to express their thoughts. This “silencing act” in World could have a rather negative impact on the audiences who were lead to believe that feminine beauty was an entity that existed outside the person who embodied it, and it was unnecessary to hear, know, or understand a woman as long as we could see her beauty.

The only chance for those women to present themselves beyond their physical looks was through a brief beauty statement announced by the host as part of their introduction. Despite being only a couple of sentences long, these statements to a certain degree expressed the views and understandings of these women about beauty, love, and life.

The most common themes in these beauty statements are outlined below with examples. 1. Confidence and passion: “I want to glitter like the stars, shine like the sun, please look at me without blinking;” “Let our youth fly on the stage, our passion shine
under the lights, our beauty spread everywhere.” 2. Hard-working: “Success only belongs to those who are ready;” “Nothing is impossible if you put your heart into it.” 3. Happiness and gratification: “The most precious gift from god is the smile we put on our face;” “I believe a great journey can be accomplished by ordinary steps.” 4. Compassion: “Beauty nurtures hearts, and love creates beauty;” “I am standing on the stage of Miss World because I want to spread love and beauty to every corner of the world.”

As an audience, there were likely to be two separate sets of viewing experiences of the Chinese pageant shows. Focusing on the visual aspect alone, one could be easily convinced that beauty pageants were just about young attractive women showing off their bodies in extravagant clothes with choreographed performances. But if the focus was placed on the rhetoric of the pageants, especially on what the hosts and the contestants were saying, one could come to the conclusion that beauty pageants were more about women’s inner qualities (e.g., talents, skills, intelligence, and compassion) than their slender bodies and beautiful faces. This “hybrid” experience was indicative of the distinctive cultural location of the beauty pageants in neoliberal China. On one hand, they imitated most of the visual elements of Western pageants that accentuated the physical beauty of young women; while on the other hand, they incorporated the culture-specific messages (influenced by the communist ideology) that pronounced the significance of inner qualities in ideal feminine beauty.

**Nationalism, Consumerism, and Globalization**

“**Beauty with Chinese characteristics and significance**”

*World* was hosted on the evening before the Mid-Autumn Festival, a traditional Chinese holiday for family reunion and celebration. The producers of *World* took it as an opportunity to incorporate a special Chinese theme into the pageant show. For instance,
at the beginning of each new segment a pre-recorded video would play on the big
screen that showed the contestants giving holiday remarks from a traditional Chinese
lake resort. This was a format commonly seen in Chinese New Year’s gala-type shows
and it was used to give the pageant a familiar Chinese sentiment.

Feminists have argued that beauty and femininity is historically and culturally
constructed (Banner, 1983). In the contemporary Chinese society, feminine beauty is
often conceptualized within a presumed cultural dichotomy between the West and the
Chinese (Johansson, 1998). A beautiful Western woman is imagined to have blond hair,
blue eyes, fair skin and large breasts, while being fashionably dressed and sexually
provocative; a beautiful Chinese woman, in comparison, is imagined to be dark-haired
and dark-eyed, modestly dressed, and sexually conservative (Zhang, 2012).

Each year, the winner of Miss World China would represent China and compete
for the global title of Miss World. Therefore, it was one of the main goals in World to
select a woman who could embody Eastern beauty ideals and also be competitive
among the Western beauties. A key competition in the Miss World pageant is called
“National Costume Contest,” in which each contestant showcases a specially designed
costume that represents the national culture that she is from. Qipao has been used as
favorite national dress style for Chinese women in international events (Chew, 2007),
and the Chinese contestant has almost always worn a qipao in the National Costume
contest in Miss World. As a result, a qipao show/contest was included in World not only
to extend the Chinese theme of the show, but also to help the judges assess each
contestant’s potential in representing the nation on the global pageant stage.
To further elaborate on its theme of “beauty with Chinese characteristics and significance,” *World* set up its final Q&A section to ask the five finalists to each describe an item that symbolized the Chinese tradition and culture: mahjong, Beijing opera, tea, tree peony (China’s national flower), and the Mid-Autumn Festival. The goal was to showcase the intelligence and eloquence of each contestant and also her familiarity with Chinese culture. Contestant No.28 Liu Chen was one of the five finalists, and her descriptions of the tree peony was witty, appropriate, and patriotic, which was likely to have contributed to her eventual win of the pageant.

Liu Chen: Just like our national flower tree peony, the winner of Miss World China is going to represent the glory of China, our five-thousand-year history, and the wisdom and beauty of Chinese women on the global stage. Through her, the world will witness the philanthropic nature of the Chinese nation!

**Special thanks to the pageant sponsors**

Since the beginning of modern pageantry, commercial sponsorship has always been an important component of pageant events (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Following this tradition, beauty pageants in China also have a strong commercial element and rely heavily on sponsorship. The finale shows of *Cosmos* and *World* were large-scale media events where their various sponsors were given the public recognition and free press that they were promised for their respective contributions. Major sponsors of the two particular pageants consisted of media groups, real estate developers, and fashion and jewelry companies.

Phoenix Television was the producer and also one of the major sponsors of *Cosmos*. Not only the logo of Phoenix TV was ubiquitous throughout the broadcast, a live online voting session was also held to attract traffic to the company’s website. *World* was produced by Guangzhou satellite TV, a state-owned television station, and
sponsored by one of the largest private media companies in China, Nanfang Daily Media Group. These media sponsors had the exclusive broadcast right to the pageant shows and the advertising revenue generated for their media channels.

Both *Cosmos* and *World* had a major sponsor that was a real estate developer.\(^8\) Real estate has been one of the fastest growing sectors and primary drivers of the Chinese economy in the past decade (Borst, 2012). It is a common scene in real estate offices in China where young and attractive women are hired as special *shoulou xiaojie* (female real estate sales agents) to attract customers. Along the same line, sponsoring beauty pageants provided real estate developers another opportunity to use feminine beauty as a convenient sales tool.

From swimsuit companies to hair product lines, the fashion and beauty industry has always had a strong presence in beauty pageants. In *Cosmos*, one of the major sponsors was a jewelry company which provided all jewelry the contestants were wearing during the show, and the president of this jewelry company was invited to be the guest judge of two specialty awards. In *World*, the international fashion group Folli Follie was their exclusive fashion sponsor, and the handbags and purses of the Folli Follie brand were carried on the stage by the contestants as props during the bikini and evening gown shows. In addition to the openly acknowledged product placements, the co-founder of the company Katy Koutsolioutsos was also one of the six main judges of the final competition.

The two Chinese pageants offered the audience the aesthetic satisfaction and novelty in seeing young attractive women present their feminine beauty in the format of

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\(^8\) *Cosmos* was sponsored by Guang Group and *World* was sponsored by Yuanyi Group, both were major real estate developers in China.
a competition. However, with all the direct recognitions or “special thanks” sent out to the pageant sponsors throughout the shows, the commercial nature of these pageants was unmistakably clear. There was no illusion that the purpose of these pageant shows was to make a profit for the parties that were involved in this commercial transaction: whether it was the commission for the production team, the advertising revenue for the media company, or the increased sales and reputation for the businesses.

Capitalism lies in the heart of modern pageantry as the organizers and the sponsors directly and indirectly profit from the pageant events through the production and consumption of feminine beauty. The prevalence and bluntness of commercial sponsorships in Chinese beauty pageants to some extent reflected the dominance of capitalism in neoliberal China. Transnational feminism suggests a shared context of exploitation and domination across North and South through globalization and capitalism (Gupta, 2006). As modern beauty pageantry becomes a shared phenomenon between the One-Third World (e.g., U.S.) to the Two-Thirds World (e.g., China), the impact of the capitalist beauty culture to which beauty pageants belong, also spreads across the two locations.

When the Chinese beauty pageants straightforwardly endorsed media group, real estate developers and jewelry/fashion companies, they were essentially using the images and fantasies of feminine beauty to promote the capitalist beauty and consumer culture. Young women in China who were exposed to and participating in these beauty pageants were then led to believe that not only feminine beauty was a product that could be consumed and turned into material gain, but its value was determined by the
big players in this capitalist system (e.g., the CEO of a sponsor company was the judge of the pageant).

**The global element**

In the past three decades, China’s economic reform and the tremendous economic growth that came after have completely changed both how the world views China and how Chinese people view the world. As more and more Chinese people become familiar with the term globalization, being proficient in more than one’s own native culture is increasingly a valuable asset. Many of the twelve *Cosmos* contestants claimed to have experience studying and working in a Western country and demonstrated familiarity with other cultures. As Contestant No. 12 Wei said in her self-introduction: “Having lived in different places in the world, I have developed a personality that combines the straightforwardness of the West and the persistence of the East.” One of the pageant judges who was female screenplay writer in her 50s expressed her amazement with the multi-cultural background and diverse experiences that some of the contestants had at a young age.

It was previously discussed that *World*, as a national pageant that affiliated with Miss World, presented their discourses of feminine beauty with the special frame of “Chinese characteristics and significance.” On the flip side of the same coin, being part of the overarching Miss World brand, there were a lot of international guidelines that the pageant organization had to follow in producing *World*. For example, the setup of the competitions had to be similar if not identical to the Miss World pageant, such as number/type of competitions, number of judges, and elimination procedures. Also, since a very important goal and ultimate ambition of the Miss World China pageant is to select a candidate who has the best chance to win the title of Miss World, the organization
always has to take into account their national winner’s potential for future global success.

Soon after *World* was aired, news came out in the Chinese media that doubts had been cast on the pageant winner Liu Chen. According to the people who were unconvinced about her win, Liu did not have a face that was beautiful enough to be the beauty queen, and especially she was not as beautiful as some of the other contestants (e.g., first and second runner-ups). The counter arguments that supported Liu suggested that Liu had an extraordinary height of 180cm (5’11”) and demonstrated excellent public speaking skills in the Q&A section. She was also the winner of the Talent Contest, which is important specialty competition in the Miss World pageant.

The media controversy that surrounded Liu was short-lived, but it raised an interesting question about the balancing act between the national and the international in beauty pageants like Miss World China. Brownell (1998) described a similar dilemma in early Super Model contests in China where the organizers had to decide “what kind of beautiful woman is most representative of China and therefore most suitable to promote Chinese culture on the world stage” (p. 49). In the case of Miss World China, the organization was also faced with the challenge to choose one woman out of all the contestants who would both satisfy the local/national aesthetics in feminine beauty (e.g., having a beautiful face according to the current most popular standards in China) and have competitive qualities required by international pageant competitions (e.g., being tall or having special talents). However, as globalization continues to infiltrate different cultural locations and blur the lines between national culture and international culture via consumerism and mass media, the question of “what is a beautiful Chinese woman”
may soon become "what is a beautiful woman" and the previous dilemma in the Chinese beauty pageants may become history.

When women like Liu Chen go on the global pageant stage and compete for the honor and pride of the nation, they are fulfilling a similar mission as the female athletes who compete in international championships or even the Olympics. Sportswomen in China, particularly those of successful careers, are treated as the symbolic figureheads of the Chinese nationalism. The military-style sports system in China not only regulates the bodies of these female athletes in terms of athletic performance but also feminine appearance, and they are celebrated as national heroines but not as “women” (Brownell, 1998). However, a recent trend of female athletes entering entertainment business is gradually changing the public perceptions of sportswomen in China. As more and more Chinese female Olympic medalists and beauty pageant winners appear on fashion magazine covers and in movie award ceremonies, the celebrity status and identity of these female champions are contributing to the establishment of consumerist nationalism in China (Brownell, 1998).

**Focus Groups**

Six focus groups were conducted with 38 Chinese college female participants to examine how urban young women in China negotiated the beauty pageant phenomenon and what factors influenced their viewpoints. In the focus groups, the researcher particularly asked questions regarding how the women defined feminine beauty, what their impressions and understandings were of beauty pageants, how they related the beauty pageant phenomenon to other social issues in China. Additionally, the researcher used the media survey data to make sense of how media consumption
habits of the women might have influenced their perceptions of ideal feminine beauty and beauty pageants.

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the focus group data. It summarizes the themes found in the focus group transcripts together with the media usage survey, and uses exemplars to advance the theoretical argument (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof, 1995). To protect confidentiality, all the focus group participants were given pseudo-initials, with each participant being identified by her pseudo initials, her age, and her level of pageant viewing experience (e.g., R.W., 23, indifferent viewer) in this document.

**Beauty Pageants in the Eyes of Urban Young Chinese Women**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, only four out of the 38 women who participated in the focus groups indicated in the screening questionnaire that they had never seen a beauty pageant. The researcher mixed in the four with the rest of the women in the group assignment because she decided that it would make less sense to have a group just with these four women. During the focus group discussions, the participants in each group showed various levels of knowledge and experience with beauty pageants and beauty pageant shows. The focus group data suggested that among these Chinese college women, there was not a division between “pageant fans” - those who watched pageants because they liked them - and “non-fans” – those who didn’t watch because they did not like them. Instead, their media exposure to the Chinese beauty pageant shows and their perceptions on the beauty pageant phenomenon turned out to be more complex than previously imagined.

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9 The four were L.M. (group 2, age 21), G.K, (group 4, age 23), T.R. (group 5, age 21), and B.B. (group 6, age 20).
Attitude toward the beauty pageant shows

In addition to the ones who had never seen any pageant, there were a number of women (fewer than half of the group) in each group who expressed clear indifference toward Chinese beauty pageant shows. A typical answer from these indifferent viewers would be “Every once a while I would see a beauty contest on TV, but I usually just end up changing the channel because I don’t find it interesting” (Z.D., 22, indifferent viewer); or “I have not paid much attention to beauty pageants because I don’t have time for that type of shows…also it’s not like I have any friend or relative who’s in the competition, so there’s no reason for me to watch, really” (H.F., 26, indifferent viewer).

However, there were two to three participants in each group who showed high familiarity with beauty pageant shows in China and claimed to have seen a number of different pageant shows. The analysis in this first section (attitude toward pageant shows) was predominantly based on the comments made by these more involved pageant viewers in the focus groups. To distinguish involved viewers from the non-viewers and indifferent viewers, the researcher paid particular attention to the occasions where they brought up specific pageants that they had watched as well as the in-depth knowledge they demonstrated about Chinese beauty pageant shows.

In spite of being the more savvy pageant viewers, the reviews these women gave Chinese beauty pageant shows were overwhelmingly critical and negative. Their biggest complaint was the lack of creativity and entertainment value in most Chinese beauty pageant shows. Speaking from a consumer’s perspective, they pointed out that the pageant shows did not provide them as a TV audience the additive value they expected from television programs.
Q.K., 22, involved viewer: Basically you have 20 to 30 women on the stage, every one wearing a tag with their name, height, three measurements, etc., and then they do their runway walks and then you have the winner…It is exactly the same format every year and it gets tiring on the eye.

Z.Y., 20, involved viewer: Beauty pageants are not entertaining enough. The audiences are always looking for entertainment, and there are so many other programs on TV that are better and more entertaining, so why watch pageants?

Beyond the entertainment function of beauty pageants, the savvy pageant viewers in the groups also found the presentation of feminine beauty in the Chinese pageant shows troublesome. As young women themselves, the participants expressed feelings of discomfort and aversion when they saw the pageant women dressed in skimpy clothing and showing off their bodies. They considered the performances in beauty pageants cheapening and demeaning to women. They also recognized the fact that pageant shows mainly catered to the interests of male audience as they put female bodies on display for the male gaze.

G.J., 24, involved viewer: Personally it just annoys me to see young women trying to show off their skinny bodies or big boobs. I find it tasteless and disgraceful.

W.T., 19, involved viewer: I guess boys would probably enjoy those catwalks because they get to see girls in bikinis, but for us female viewers it doesn’t do anything.

Furthermore, these women had issues with the evaluation system (or lack thereof) in beauty competitions. From a practical standpoint, they had doubts as to whether a selective group of so-called judges could give a credible and fair evaluation of the beauty of contestants. From a philosophical perspective, they questioned whether and how beauty could be measured at all.

J.Y., 22, involved viewer: Some of the judges are professionals, but some are just celebrities who happen to be popular at the moment. So not all of them have the necessary credentials to judge a beauty contest on the professional level.
Q.K., 22, involved viewer: A lot of beauty pageants right now try to incorporate the evaluation on contestants’ personal qualities in addition to the physical. But it’s impossible to judge someone’s personal quality by just asking a humanity question or a geography question. I think the biggest problem with beauty pageants is that they don’t seem to have a credible system of judgment.

J.W., 20, involved viewer: I have seen many beauty pageants, from Miss Hong Kong to Miss Universe, because I’m interested in knowing the standard of beauty in the world right now. But I always ended up being more confused because I don’t understand how they can make a fair choice. One time I was watching an international pageant and it came down to the top10 finalists. There were Miss China, Miss South Africa, Miss India, and … [brief pause, trying to recall information] well, basically women from all over the world. And when they announced the winner, she was the contestant from a very small country in Africa. I was like ‘how did they make that decision? What kind of the criteria did they use? I guess nobody really knows.

The only part of the Chinese beauty pageant shows the women showed particular interest in was the Q&A section, because they said they liked to see a beauty queen who was also knowledgeable, intelligent, and eloquent. A.D. (23, involved viewer), mentioned that she often imagined herself on the stage answering those tough questions and it was a fun exercise and a way for her to empathize with the contestants while she was watching a pageant show. M.L. (23, involved viewer), said that she preferred to watch beauty pageants over model contests because a beauty queen was judged upon her intellect and benevolence as well as her physical beauty, whereas a model only needed to please people’s eyes and sell products.

The Chinese word for beauty pageant is "xuanmei," which means “selection of beauty.” It was interesting to note that a similar term “xuanxiu” was frequently mentioned in the focus group discussions on beauty pageants. Xuanxiu, which means “selection of talent,” is the umbrella term commonly used to refer to competition-based reality television shows in contemporary China. While some women made a distinction
between xuanmei and xuanxiu as they compared and contrasted the two, others tended to consider xuanmei (beauty pageants) as a particular type of xuanxiu (reality television).

Fashion model contests emerged as a particular example that illustrated the blurring line between beauty pageants and other similar types of shows. On one hand, contemporary beauty pageant shows in China have largely borrowed the production style from the early super model contests of the 1990s, so to the average television audience in China a beauty pageant may look very similar to a model contest. On the other hand, both domestic and foreign reality television shows have gained massive popularity in China in recent years. Some of the talent competition shows such as *America’s Next Top Model* also involve female contestants competing based on their physical beauty, which could have contributed to ambiguous views among the audience.

Every year, only a few national beauty pageants in China are broadcast on network television. Most regional and local-level beauty pageants are either only available on local channels or never shown on TV. International beauty pageants are also unavailable due to media censorship in China. As a result, the average Chinese television audience has a limited exposure to beauty pageant shows, and as the focus group data suggested, a great deal of the media exposure to beauty pageants in China in fact came indirectly from news coverage of beauty pageants.

*P.L., 21, involved viewer:* I don’t remember seeing a lot of beauty contests on TV, but there is often news about so-and-so female celebrity was from of beauty pageant, things like that.

*P.Z., 26, involved viewer:* A beauty contest is just a spring board to the entertainment business. If you take a look at the Miss Hong Kong winners, they all went on to become singers or actresses...People only know their pageant history because the news always calls them “former Miss Hong Kong.”

*D.L., 22, involved viewer:* Many pageant contestants were former athletes, because female athletes tend to be very tall and have a nice body because of the
training. I read somewhere that Zhang Zilin the former Miss World also used to jump hurdles.

To provide some context for the women’s comments, the researcher did a small-scale informal content analysis of the online news coverage of beauty pageants in China in the past three years. The researcher searched the keyword “xuanmei beisai” (beauty contest) with a major Chinese search engine Baidu, and reviewed the top 20 unduplicated news articles in the result. The articles covered both domestic and international pageant events, and the content mostly conveyed four main areas of information: 1, Title of the pageant and the time and location of the pageant event; 2, Name of the winner, often paired with a photo, and a brief description of background of the newly crowned beauty queen; 3, Any notable history of the beauty queen before the pageant (e.g., “Internet sensation who recently made a trip to Japan”) and any future endeavor she may take on (e.g., “she is discussing a potential film deal with a known director”); 4, Any controversy about the pageant event itself or the participants (e.g., “Miss Delaware Teen USA officially started a career as porn star”).

Perception of the beauty pageant contestants

Although none of 38 college women in the focus groups claimed to have taken part in a beauty pageant as contestant, some did acknowledge that they knew someone else in real life (often a classmate or friend) who had competed in a beauty contest.

L.M., 21, non-viewer: A classmate of mine, she was recommended by our school to participate in the “Campus Flower” pageant in the city. I was working at the school radio station back then so I went to see her compete.

J.W., 20, involved viewer: There’s this girl at our college, she participated in the selection for the “plate holding girls” in the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. She is one of the fashion model majors … before she came here she was already competing in all sorts of competitions in her home town.
P.Z. (26, involved viewer) was a bilingual broadcasting graduate student and she went to college with a former Miss Universe China winner. She shared with the group the story of this national beauty queen whom she knew personally.

P.Z., 26, involved viewer: The girl's name is Tang Wen and we were in the same program in undergraduate. I think that was the year 2010, she represented China in the Miss Universe beauty pageant and ended up winning the Miss Congeniality award [wow - other women in the group looked impressed]. Well, she ran into some trouble with the school when she was doing all the competitions, because it took up a lot of her time and she had to miss a lot of classes. I think she ended up taking an extra year to graduate because she got so far behind on her school work…Oh she was very tall, 185cm (6'1”). You see, girls like her subconsciously influence the way we think about beauty. A tall girl can win Miss China and can go out representing China in the international beauty contest, so in our head we think it's better to be 185cm than 155 cm.

Based on their personal experience and media exposure to beauty pageants, the college women in the focus groups discussed some general impressions they had about the pageant contestants in China. First, the women believed that most of the young women in China who would participate in beauty pageants were what they called “yishusheng” (fine arts students). A fine arts school in China\(^\text{10}\) is considered a special type of institute that often has very different student body than that of a normal school. To be admitted to a fine arts school, one needs to demonstrate skills and talent in at least one art form. It is also common for the degree programs, such as dancing, singing, acting, or modeling, to screen their applicants for physical appearance as part of the admission process. Therefore, female fine arts students in China tend to stand out among women from the same age group with their good-looks and artistic talents. They

\(^{10}\) For example, Beijing Film Academy and Shanghai Conservatory of Music are two top fine arts institutions in China.
are also more likely to have stage experience, which make them ideal candidates for beauty pageants.

W.L., 22, involved viewer: I have friends who go to the college of fine arts here in town, and I remember seeing those posters for different contests, beauty contests I think, a lot of them.

Second, the women tended to agree that one of the most impressive qualities of the pageant women was their outstanding self-confidence. Because of the extraordinary confidence required to present themselves, both physically and personally, in a competition setting in front of thousands, the pageant contestants also represented a new generation of Chinese women who were taking full advantage of the increasing social power granted to women in Chinese society and the freedom of self-expression.

G.J., 24, involved viewer: It definitely takes a lot of guts to stand up on the stage of a beauty contest. Even though I think many things in beauty pageants look fake or artificial, I have to say I do admire the confidence of those girls.

W.X., 24, indifferent viewer: The older generations in China are more conservative and don't like to stand out from the crowd or to show off, but young women today, especially the 90-hou (post-1990 generation), are very open-minded and not afraid to express themselves.

Last, they were under the impression that the young women who participated in beauty pageants were driven by specific motives. Some of these motivations were considered more neutral such as having the urge to perform or wanting one's own beauty to be validated, whereas others carried a slight negative tone such as materialism or vanity.

Z.Y., 20, involved viewer: If a girl has always had compliments like “you are so tall you look like a model” or “you have such a lovely face,” she might want to know “am I really that beautiful?” She then decides to participate in a beauty contest just as a sort of self-assurance.

B.B., 20, non-viewer: I think there are two types of girls in beauty pageants: the type that loves to sing, loves to dance, and just loves to be on the stage in
general; and the type that just wants to be famous and make a lot of money.

J.W., 20, involved viewer: Some girls really want to be famous, be a celebrity. Participating in beauty pageants could get them recognized by the people in the business and give them a leg-up in the competition.

A.S., 20, indifferent viewer: Because they are pretty, those girls think they can achieve the fame and social status without having to work hard like most people. They just see it [the pageant] as a shortcut in life.

From the transnational feminist perspective, the impressions the Chinese college women had about the beauty pageant contestants were reflective of their own unique historical and cultural locations. As a group of urban young women in China, the lives of these female college students were situated at the intersection of capitalist consumerism and traditional Chinese and communist values. The women were critical of the materialistic and opportunist attitudes of some of the pageant contestants because they learned from their parents and schools to value hard work over chance, morals over money. But at the same time they seemed accepting of the idea that the Chinese society is becoming increasingly money-driven and young women are too taking advantage of the beauty economy.

Overall, these Chinese college women demonstrated a mixture of opposition and endorsement of capitalism and consumerism. Compared to the rural Chinese women whose labor was exploited by corporations for capital gain, the socio-economic background of the women in the focus groups - urban residents and college students – exempted them from the direct exploitation of capitalism. However, they were fully aware of the changes in the value system of the contemporary Chinese society caused by the emerging capitalist consumer culture. Accustomed to their roles as consumers, the attitudes of these urban young Chinese women towards capitalism were essentially
two-fold: they showed a degree of frustration and despise when they discussed how beauty pageants were treated as a shortcut in life and provided unfair advantages for some young women; they also tended to rationalize the thought that materialism and individual success was a central theme modernization and the trend was unstoppable. It was notable that none of the focus group participants admitted to having a desire to participate in beauty pageants themselves. Some women took the moral high ground by saying that they had no interest in being involved in such superficial affairs. However, most others quickly broke down and attributed their personal disengagement with pageants to a lack of self-confidence. Minutes ago the women were talking quite assertively and critically about the beauty pageant contestants, but as soon as they were asked to imagine themselves in the same situation, these young women became extremely self-conscious and abashed. Specifically, they didn’t think that their own physical appearance could match up to the pageant standards when “there are so many beautiful girls out there.”

**T.Q., 23, indifferent viewer**: Those national or international beauty pageants, I know for a fact that I won’t stand a chance of winning, not in my life time. I remember our school had a College Campus Youth and Talent Pageant a couple of years ago and someone came to our dorm to recruit participants. I don’t know why, but as soon as I heard the word pageant I immediately lost any desire to participate. It’s not that I thought I was ugly, just I knew I was not that beautiful. Also I didn’t have the confidence to show myself in front of people like those pageant girls on TV.

**W.L., 22, involved viewer**: Even if secretly I have thought about it, I will never have the courage to do it. Plus, modern beauty pageants all had very narrow standards, such as the height requirement, and I am not tall enough.

**N.N., 23, indifferent viewer**: I actually like participating in competitions and I have competed in English speaking contests and TV hosting contests on campus. But when it is a beauty contest, I don’t think I’ll go… I am not confident about my appearance…I want to lose weight.
This remarkable tone change was likely the result of a social comparison process that had taken place. The language the women used, such as “I’m not that beautiful” or “I’m not tall enough” revealed the very process in which they were comparing themselves with the women they saw in beauty contests. More importantly, according to social comparison theory, when people compare themselves with other individuals they perceive to be better off or superior, the comparison process is “upward” (Buunk et al., 2007; Wood, 1989). Based on the confessions these college women were making, it was clear that they perceived the beauty pageant contestants as superior in physical attractiveness as well as self-confidence; hence, the social comparisons they were engaged in were largely upward.

Research has shown that upward social comparisons with idealized images about physical attractiveness could lead to body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem among women (Richins, 1991; Martin & Gentry, 1997; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). Judging by the women’s reasoning on why they wouldn’t want to compete in pageants (e.g., “I am not confident,” “I know my limits,” “I need to lose weight”) as well as the connotations of their remarks, they sounded embarrassed and defeated. Therefore, it was safe to infer that when the focus group participants were prompted to make social comparisons with the beauty pageant contestants, their self-perceptions and self-esteem were negatively impacted.

Wood (1996) argued that social comparison information was not always deliberately sought after and it could be simply encountered. As a result, when people encounter social information, they could automatically compare themselves but then cognitively dismiss the comparison for defense or other purposes (Wood, 1996). In the
case of the focus group participants, when they encountered the social information of beauty pageants (e.g., engaged in a discussion about beauty pageants), many of them could have subconsciously compared themselves to the pageant contestants but dismissed the comparison process as a defense mechanism. This could explain why the discussion of beauty pageants and pageant contestants did not seem to have negative psychological effects on these college women until they were asked directly about their personal disengagement with pageants, i.e., they were coerced to register the social comparisons.

Furthermore, avoidance of upward social comparison may serve the purpose of self-enhancement and preserve one’s self-esteem (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Wood, 1989). For that reason, some of focus group participants may have deliberately avoided social comparisons with the women in beauty pageants to protect their own self-esteem, and they did so by psychologically distancing themselves with the pageant phenomenon. Finally, this could then contribute to the college women’s overall indifferent and negative attitudes toward the Chinese beauty pageant shows as well as some of their criticism of the pageant contestants.

The influence of beauty pageants on young women in China

On a personal level, the women tended to believe that competing in beauty pageants could be a valuable life experience for young women in China. J.Y. (22, involved viewer) remarked on the lack of self-confidence and public speaking skills among average young people in China today, and the benefit of participating in beauty pageants in improving one’s overall confidence. According to O.C. (24, indifferent viewer), beauty pageant experiences could help a woman see her own strength and weakness; even if she failed to win the title, the experience itself would make her a
stronger person. Finally, K.T. (20, indifferent viewer) saw beauty pageants as a great opportunity for young women simply because it could add one more path to one’s personal success.

Meanwhile, the women were also aware of some of the negative sides to participating in pageants. For example, some acknowledged that the feelings and self-esteem of the pageant contestants could be damaged if the results of the competition were not what they were hoping for. Others were concerned that there might be the risk of “losing oneself” or being corrupted during the process of beauty pageant participation.

W.T., 19, involved viewer: You may be asked to wear the clothes you normally wouldn’t wear. You may experience things that challenge your moral values. Your life may just be completely different afterwards.

G.K., 23, non-viewer: I would be worried if a friend of mine told me that she is participating in a beauty pageant because she wants to be famous. I really don’t consider the lifestyles of those female celebrities all that healthy; [brief pause] it could potentially be a buguilu (path leads to a point of no return).

The women also had particularly strong feelings about the potential impact of the beauty pageant phenomenon on the younger generation of Chinese women. A recent study has shown that middle adolescent girls (14-17) in mainland China report more appearance pressure from mass media and interpersonal networks than girls in early adolescence (10-13) and boys of the same age group (Chen & Jackson, 2012). Thus, the women’s instincts in worrying about the younger girls might not be baseless.

The concerns were mainly focused on certain ideas and values that were being promoted in beauty pageants. According to the participants, beauty pageant shows tended to create an illusion for the audience that winning a beauty contest was nothing but pure luck. P.L. (21, involved viewer) commented that pageant shows rarely revealed that most of their contestants had professional training in modeling or performing arts,
and that these girls put in a lot of effort in achieving and maintaining the perfect physical body. Without proper disclosure of the contestants’ background, young girls who were watching these pageant shows might be led to believe that any “pretty girl” could win a beauty pageant and that it was just a matter of luck.

There was also the concern that beauty pageants might be creating a “princess dream” for young girls: when a woman is beautiful and becomes a beauty queen, she is given a crystal crown and then cheered and praised by all the people. However, this connection between feminine beauty and personal glory could be unrealistic and deceiving.

**W.X., 24, indifferent viewer:** I have a cousin, she is only in 4th grade and she already knows a lot about beauty. She loves shopping for pretty clothes, and she once told me that she wanted to look like Fan Bingbing when she grows up.

**J.W., 20, involved viewer:** Nobody talks about the working conditions these female celebrities have to deal with on a daily basis. They don’t get to choose the jobs they do. It’s dangerous that the media never show that side of the story to the public, and the young girls are just attracted to the flashy images.

Finally, the women found beauty pageants potentially exploitive of feminine beauty. The word “meinü jingji” (beauty economy) was brought up in one focus group and the participants were especially critical of the fact that most beauty pageants and entertainment media in general only really cared about making profits for themselves and their sponsors, and not about the empowerment of women.

**L.M., 21, non-viewer:** I wish beauty pageants would really convey some positive messages like ‘truth, kindness, and beauty,’ but sadly all they are saying is ‘beautiful women are slim and fat women are doomed.’

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11Fan Bingbing is a famous Chinese actress and celebrity. She was frequently mentioned by the focus group participants, and according to the women, Fan was a living embodiment of all the physical beauty ideals in contemporary China: large eyes, tall nasal bridge, small face/narrow chin, porcelain white skin, long black hair, tall, and slender.
Q.K., 22, involved viewer: It [working in the entertainment business] is considered a “rice bowl of youth” type of profession and the turnover is fast. A young beautiful woman enters the business and she has a maximum of 10 years before she is replaced by some newer faces.

Definitions of Feminine Beauty in Neoliberal China

The physical beauty standards

The researcher encountered some initial reluctance from the focus group participants in expressing their opinions on physical beauty. The reluctance suggested a high cultural sensitivity among these college women toward the subject of feminine beauty in which no one wanted to accidentally say something that could hurt the feelings of others in the group. However, it did not take long before the ice was broken in the discussions on physical beauty, and one of the first things the women brought up was a rather particular beauty attribute “xiao lian” (small face). Across six groups, the women had an overwhelming agreement that a small face with a pointy chin was an important beauty mark for Chinese women.

T.Q., 23, indifferent viewer: We live in a fast-food era and everything is presented on the Internet and in front of a camera, so there is an increasing demand for physical perfection and people with small faces look prettier on camera.

G.J., 24, involved viewer: If you have a small face, your facial features will be accentuated and look more explicit; if you have a large face, people’s attention will be diverted to other parts of the face.

D.L., 22, involved viewer: Zhuizi lian (stabber shaped face) is very popular right now. The pointier your chin is, the more beautiful you are. Celebrities like Fan Bingbing and Li Bingbing all had their jawbones shaved down by plastic surgery to look prettier.

After that, the women continued to mention a number of specific physical attributes that were considered signatures of feminine beauty in China. At the top of the list were “da yanjing, shuang yanpi” (large eyes with double-eyelids), “gao biliang” (high
nasal bridge\textsuperscript{12}, "yingtao xiaozui" (a cherry-like small mouth), "bai pitu" (fair skin tone), "gaotiao" (being tall and lanky), "miaotiao" (slenderness), and "shencai yunchen" (proportional body figure).

The discussions on physical beauty standards yielded not only specific but also homogenous viewpoints among the participants, with the same vocabularies and examples being used by across groups. However, when the researcher tried to probe about the reasoning behind some of these standards, most women seemed confounded and admitted that they never gave it much thought while some attempted to provide justifications. W.L. (22, involved viewer) and G.J. (involved viewer, 24) believed that from an aesthetic and statistic point of view, tall people had a higher chance to have the optimal body proportion (e.g., leg-to-body ratio) commonly considered beautiful. That also explained why most designer clothing would look better on a tall person than a short person and why all the fashion models were extremely tall. On Chinese people’s preference for fair skin, many mentioned the popular saying “

Yibai zhe sanchou” which connotes “having fair skin can overcome any three ugly physical traits.” Apart from being a Chinese tradition that was passed down from generation to generation, L.J. (24, indifferent viewer) also argued that fair skin symbolized the simplicity and purity of feminine beauty.

It was worth noting that many of the physical attributes constituting the contemporary Chinese standards of physical beauty were in line with the findings in evolutionary research on physical attractiveness. For example, research has shown that

\textsuperscript{12} In China, people tend to prefer a nose with prominent and defined profile, and one of the most popular cosmetic surgical procedures sought by Chinese patients is nasal augmentation, in which an implant was inserted to the nose to make the nasal bridge look higher.
women with longer legs and a higher leg-to-body ratio, which is a common characteristic of tall fashion models, are rated more attractive by research subjects in different countries (Prantl & Gründl, 2011; Sorokowski & Pawlowski, 2008; Swami, Einon, & Furnham, 2006). Additionally, it has been established with consistent scientific support that women with certain child-like facial features, such as large eyes and a small chin, are considered more sexually attractive (Cunningham, 1986; Johnston & Franklin, 1993; Hönn & Göz, 2007).

Evolutionary theorists tend to argue that much of what humans find attractive in each other with regards to physical appearance is determined by our biological and psychological instincts to survive (Etcoff, 1999). Under this theory, people of different ages, genders, classes and cultures would generally agree on who is attractive based on these shared human instincts (Langlois et al., 2000). However, the evolutionary perspective does not go far enough to explain why people from different cultures tend to have very different interpretations of these universal standards of attractiveness and where they come from. Feminist theory, on the other hand, argues that ideals of beauty are culturally constructed, and the patriarchal system is responsible for setting the feminine beauty ideals that restrict women’s social and political empowerment (Wolf, 1991). Together, the two theoretical perspectives provided a focal point to look at how these young Chinese women understood physical beauty standards.

A pro-Western ideology of physical beauty

P.Z., 26, involved viewer: When you look at the Europeans and Americans, their faces look so three-dimensional...No matter from which angle you look at them, they just look prettier than us.

Some women in the focus groups approached the discussion on ideal physical beauty by framing it as a Chinese obsession with “Western beauty.” According to the
women, the word “xifangren” (Westerners) was used to refer to people from Western countries, particularly those of European descent or Caucasians; most Chinese people tended to believe that these Westerners had an unspoken superiority over people of other races when it came to physical beauty. In China, a typical Western woman is imagined to have large eyes, high nasal bridge, small face/chin, and lanky body, whereas a typical Chinese woman is perceived to have single eyelids, flat nose, round face, and dark complexion. And because the set of features that Western women often possess seem to match the ideal physical appearance by contemporary Chinese standards, many Chinese people are convinced that Western women are naturally more attractive than Chinese women.

Mass media are likely to have played a part in the forming this stereotypical view of Western beauty. China is not traditionally an immigration country, and the Chinese population demonstrates high racial and ethnic homogeneity (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). Even though the number of foreign nationals continues to grow in major Chinese cities, it is still uncommon for the Chinese to have encounters with other racial groups in their daily lives. With the increasing exposure to Western (particularly American) media content, many Chinese people today form their impressions of other nationalities from the media, which are known to promote idealized images of beauty. If a Chinese person’s perceptions of Westerners are mainly based on media representations (e.g., movie stars, pop singers, advertising models, etc.), it is not surprising that they are perceived as more attractive than Chinese. Furthermore, since xifang shijie (the Western world) is still largely considered economically and socially
advanced by the Chinese, the images of beauty as portrayed in the Western media are also likely to be perceived as imminently superior.

For the most part, the college women in the focus groups were just as infatuated with the “Western look” as the average Chinese person, and they largely granted legitimacy to this pro-Western beauty ideology. Some women were even annoyed by the fact that some Westerners seemed to have a different set of beauty standards for Asian women.

*T.Q., 23, indifferent viewer:* They think beautiful Asian women should look like the cartoon character Mulan, with long and narrow eyes, small mouth, and a round face.

*J.Y., 22, involved viewer:* There are a lot of foreign exchange students and teachers at our school, and I would often see couples of a Western man with a Chinese girl where the Chinese girl is, at least in my opinion, quite ugly. I don't know why, but those foreigners always seem to pick the short and chubby Chinese girls, sometimes with bad skin and weird facial features.

What was implied in the women’s comments was that Westerners were prejudiced against Chinese women by insisting upon them a different and apparently inferior set of beauty standards. To make their point, the women brought up the example of a famous Chinese model named Lü Yan, who achieved high praise in the Western fashion world with her uniquely Chinese look: small eyes with single eyelid, high cheekbones, wide jawline, thick lips, and dark skin tone. Like many other Chinese, the college women were appalled by Lü’s international success. The main issue they took with Lü’s international influence was that she failed to present to the world the real/contemporary standard of feminine beauty in China. Furthermore, the women questioned the intention of the Western world in promoting Lü as the face for the Chinese beauty and found the representation rather suspicious and even insulting.
Social cognitive theory is a learning theory based on the idea that people acquire knowledge directly from observing the behaviors of others, or “models” (Bandura, 1988). As demonstrated by the famous “Bobo Doll” experiments, the models people learn form could be presented through interpersonal imitation as well as media sources (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963). In social cognitive theory of mass communication, Bandura (1994) wrote, “a great deal of information about human values, thinking patterns, and behavior is gained from models portrayed symbolically through verbal or pictorial means” (p. 66).

The degree to which the Chinese college women had internalized the pro-Western beauty ideology was also indicative of this social learning process. From being exposed to idealized images of Western women in the media and the popular discourse that praised a Western appearance as the more attractive look, young women in China not only subscribe to the belief that attractive physical features such as large eyes and small face are essentially Western, but also that these perceived Western beauty standards are more valuable than the traditional Chinese aesthetics.

Qizhi and personal definition of beauty

P.Z., 26, involved viewer: When we look at women, there are two general types. The first type refers to those who truly have the fine looks: small face, big eyes, nice figure … most celebrities belong to this type. The other type, at the first glance the girl just looks like an average person and she doesn’t have any of the fine looks. But from her body, she exudes a special qizhi, something that really attracts your attention.

A.S., 20, indifferent viewer: I think a beautiful woman is when you lay your eyes on her, she would give you a comfortable feeling. That means she has good qizhi. She doesn’t have to dress well or has a nice figure, she just needs to convey a sense of freshness and naturalness.

When the women were discussing Chinese cultural standards of beauty, the focus was mainly on the physical appearance. In contrast, when they talked about their
personal definitions of femininity beauty, one particular word -“qizhi” – was frequently mentioned. Qizhi is commonly translated as “temperament,” “proclivity” and “disposition” in English dictionaries. However, the researcher believed that none of these translations really captured the essence of the word qizhi, which consisted of two Chinese characters: qi (breath or sense) and zhi (quality or character). According to Wu (2011), in Taiwan, women with qizhi were perceived to have a refined disposition that the society favored, and qizhi was positively correlated with the classy intellectual beauty type.

Given the ambiguous definitions of qizhi, the researcher asked the women to offer their understandings of the word in the context of feminine beauty. Three themes emerged from the women’s explanations. First, qizhi was understood as an (mostly positive) impression or feeling a woman would give others. For example, to D.L. (22, involved viewer), qizhi was when a woman was sincere and always spoke candidly. To G.K. (23, non-viewer) and B.B. (20, non-viewer), qizhi was reflected in a woman’s confidence, and cultured and dignified mannerisms, as well as her elegant postures. Second, qizhi was closely tied to a woman’s substance or personal quality. For example, L.M. (21, non-viewer) associated qizhi specifically with motherhood. She said “qizhi is a feeling of tenderness, a sense of warm, like a mother would make you feel.” Third, a woman’s qizhi could be communicated through her outer appearance. For instance, a qizhi woman’s makeup would be subtle and elegant instead of heavy and vulgar (J.Y., 22, involved viewer), and she would dress appropriately to the occasion and in a manner suitable to her personality (Q.K., 22, involved viewer).

Y.G., 22, indifferent viewer: A woman might not have a beautiful appearance, but when she stands in front you, you would feel a sense of ‘pressure.’ She was not
being arbitrary either; it is almost like you willingly choose to be dominated by her because she makes you feel comfortable.

Compared to qizhi, “qichang” is a newer Chinese term that has become popular in recent years over the Internet. The women surveyed believed that the word qichang first came out of the talent-based reality television shows in China which became popular in the early 2000s. In those shows, qichang was used to describe a contestant’s stage presence during the competition. Having strong qichang meant that the contestant was able to create an aura on stage that deeply engaged the judges and the audience. Qichang has also been used broadly to refer to a special sense of confidence that someone has that impresses those around him/her.

Both qichang and qizhi point to the quality of a woman that goes beyond simple physical appearance. According to the participants’ comments, they might not consider a woman beautiful if she was apparently lacking certain personal qualities (confidence, elegance, etc.) even though she was physically attractive. To a certain extent, the women in the focus groups were trying to distinguish their own views of feminine beauty from the dominant/masculine perceptions that tended to overemphasize the physical beauty of women. By stressing the importance of the nonvisual and personal qualities of the female gender, the women made their attempts at protesting against the prevalent male view that objectified women’s bodies by promoting an alternative viewpoint on femininity that was based upon personal/emotional connections instead of sex appeal.

**Beauty Pageants and Contemporary Chinese Society**

**Pageant conspiracy**

It became clear to the researcher that many women in the focus groups had generally negative impressions of beauty pageants because of some well-circulated
conspiracy theories among the general public in China. Words such as “neimu” (inside story), “heimu” (black curtain), and “anxiang caozuo” (black box operation) were frequently used in the discussions to refer to the unlawful deals the women believed were being made between the sponsors, the organizers, and the contestants of many Chinese beauty pageants behind closed doors.

Like most conspiracy theories, the women’s suspicion was mainly based on the anecdotal evidence they gathered from other people or in the media. An example that was mentioned in multiple groups was the Miss Hong Kong pageant, one of the longest-lasting and most prestigious beauty pageants in the greater China region, which suffered from numerous fraud scandals in recent years.

Q.R., 20, indifferent viewer: The contestants [of Miss Hong Kong] did not compete on their beauty or talent, it’s all about the backstage supporters! The winner last year, or the year before, she did not deserve that title at all because she did not stand out in any way, especially her appearance. Then everybody said that she won because she had a wealthy family that pulled some strings for her.

O.C., (24, indifferent viewer) spoke from the personal experience of a former roommate of hers, who participated in a local beauty pageant that was hosted in the name of selecting a city ambassador.

O.C., 24, indifferent viewer: She even made it into the top ten, but soon she realized that there were always three or four girls who would not have dinner with the group, instead they would join the sponsors and organizers in a separate room. At the end those girls all got to stand on the pedestal with crowns, and I’m sure some later became the girlfriends of some rich men.

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13 Miss Hong Kong is a beauty pageant organized by Television Broadcasts (TVB), the leading television network in Hong Kong. Miss HK is one of the most established beauty pageants in the region, with a history that dates back to 1973. The winners and runner-ups of the pageant have the opportunities to become signed artists at TVB, and many renowned actresses and celebrities in Hong Kong in the past four decades were discovered through this particular pageant.

14 Greater China Region is a term used to refer to Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.
[appears disgusted]. You see, this is the kind of thing that happens in beauty pageants, and of course it affects my views about it.

Even though not every woman in the focus groups was a strong believer in pageant conspiracy, there was nonetheless an obvious lack of confidence in the organization of public events like beauty pageants in China. Their lack of confidence could be seen as a manifestation of the broader issue of trust about the social justice system in China. R.W. (23, indifferent viewer) interned at a television station one summer and was encouraged by a producer to participate in the public contest the station set up to select their next anchor woman.

_R.W., 23, indifferent viewer:_ My first thought was, the winner must have been already selected! And this entire event was just a measure of self-promotion for the station. People like you and I, even if we participated in the contest, would be nothing more than just decorations in the background. No matter what they were telling me, in the back of my head I was like ‘there has to be some backstage deals.’

Some women further attributed the problem to the unitary sociopolitical system of China where democracy and transparency were not always available to the public. J.M. (19, indifferent viewer) drew an unlikely comparison between the selection of beauty pageant winners and the selection of national committee representatives in China, and she managed to make a clear point.

_J.M., 19, indifferent viewer:_ It’s just how things work in China. All they’re going to tell you is the result, never any detail or explanation of the standards or the procedures used to come up with the result. Just like that time they were casting votes for a national committee representative on campus, but a week later some teacher that nobody ever heard the name of just magically got elected, and I didn’t remember any of us seeing even a ballot [laughter in agreement]. I’m sure it’s the same in beauty pageants, nobody knows how the winner is selected, and nobody really cares, really.
Socioeconomic disparity and marry for money

In many cases, commentaries about conspiracy in Chinese beauty pageants had evolved into a discussion about the enlarging socioeconomic gap in China. The women explicitly suggested that money and power are always involved in the back-stage deals in pageants, where the title of a beauty queen could be easily bought by wealthy parents or influential parties that had an invested interest in a particular contestant. Some women thought that the existence of the social group called fuerdai (second-generation rich) were partially responsible for creating these social problems.

Z.Y., 20, involved viewer: Many of these [pageant] girls are from rich families and their lives are carefree. They may participate in a beauty contest just because they are bored, plus they have the confidence to win because they know they have backstage supporters.

P.Z., 26, involved viewer: In China, if you were born into a wealthy family, you are pretty much guaranteed a good job and a bright future, but if your parents are peasants and you want to succeed and distinguish yourself, it’s very difficult.

Furthermore, the women claimed that the increasing socioeconomic disparities between the rich and the poor in China could have cultivated a desperate desire for instant success and quick profit among the younger generations. To some young women or girls, beauty pageants might seem like a channel where they could materialize their desire for instant success, because winning a beauty contest often led to a lucrative profession such as modeling or acting.

J.W., 20, involved viewer: A model in a beauty product commercial makes two thousand yuan (320 US dollars) in two days and all she needs to do is to smile and pose in front of the camera. Meanwhile a production assistant that works on the set of the commercial probably makes two thousand a month and it is hard work. Given the chance, anyone would pick the easier job with the higher pay.

Z.D., 22, indifferent viewer: A lot of them [young women in China] are 16 and 17 years old and quite naïve. They see the attention and followers those female
celebrities have and dream of the same lifestyle for themselves. Some of them may be doing poorly at school or coming from lower-income families, and they hope to change their destinies by competing in beauty pageants.

In addition to the allure of overnight fame, the women also mentioned another important motivation for young women to become a beauty queen: the possibility of marrying a rich man. Some brought up the fact that a number of previous Miss Hong Kong winners started a successful career as singer or actress after the competition and eventually landed a marriage with a wealthy businessman. Outside pageants, the women acknowledged the occurrence of young beautiful women marrying rich powerful men in China was seen as “just a fact of life.” P.L. (21, involved viewer) remarked that she would consider it “a fair exchange” if a woman who desired wealth and status married a man who wanted beauty and youth: “there was no robbery from either end.” Another woman in a different group (G.J., 24, involved viewer) even called marrying the rich “the most cost-effective job a woman could have.”

While the exchange between female beauty and male wealth had always existed in traditional marriages, the idea of young beautiful women actively seeking marriage with wealthy men was relatively new to China. In feudalist Chinese societies, most marriages were arranged between families where a young woman rarely got to choose whom to marry. In those arranged marriages, even when the groom was wealthy, it was unlikely the decision or intention of the bride to marry him. Since the Chinese Communist Party passed the Marriage Law of 1950, young Chinese have increasingly enjoyed the freedom to choose partners and form nuclear families with neolocal residence after marriage (Davis & Harrell, 1993). Arranged marriages decreased in
popularity in China and young people started to believe in marriage for love (Davis & Harrell, 1993).

The introduction of the market economy during China’s economic reform in the past three decades largely relaxed existing social taboos against personal wealth. In the communist era, being rich was once considered bourgeois and anti-revolutionary, but under the current regime of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” being rich has become a symbol of success and a desirable trait in the marriage market (Chao & Myers, 1998). As a result, the empowerment of women and the pervasiveness of capitalist materialism have worked together to make “marrying for money” an acceptable life goal for women in contemporary Chinese society.

Furthermore, as women of the “singleton generation” start to enter the market for marriage, they are not only under the cultural pressure to “extend the family line” but also under the financial pressure to support their aging parents and sometimes grandparents. In China, the patriarchal system still dominates many aspects of the social life, and having a young, beautiful wife remains a source of self-esteem and a status symbol for men. According to a recent New York Times article, some Chinese male millionaires are willing to pay tens of thousands dollar in matchmaking service fee just to find a future wife who is young (22-26), beautiful (porcelain white skin), and sexually pure (virgin) (Larmer, 2013). Under the workings of both financial reality and lingering chauvinism, more and more young women in China are becoming increasingly anxious about getting married, and in order not to be become one of the so-called “leftover women” (unmarried females over the age of 27), many of them are eager to

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15 People who grew up with the First Marriage Law like to call their spouse airen (beloved person), which is an interesting residual of the propaganda from that time.
find a suitable match when they are at their peak of youth and physical attractiveness (Magistad, 2013).

The women believed that because feminine beauty was valued highly by the society, there were higher expectations for women to be physically attractive than men, which often created unfortunate situations for the less attractive women.

X.G., 19, indifferent viewer: At least an ugly man could always work hard and hope to make a lot of money, and when he becomes rich he is going to be surrounded by beautiful women. But an ugly woman is pretty much doomed for her chance of finding happiness.

Q.K., 22, involved viewer: Employers sometimes include ‘good-looking’ in the job requirements of secretary or customer service positions, and they will always hire the prettier woman over the equally qualified but plain-looking one.

Lastly, while most of participants seemed to have taken a neutral position in “marrying for money” and largely treated it as a matter of fact, there were a few women in the focus groups who were more aware of the persistence of patriarchy and gender inequality in modern societies. However, even though they pointed out the inequalities women were facing, their attitudes tended to be cynical and pessimistic and they did not seem to believe there was real salvation for women.

X.C., 22, indifferent viewer: There is a saying ‘men control the world, and women control women.’ But in reality only the first half of the sentence is true. The second half was added only as a gesture of respect, something to make the women feel better when they serve the men.

J.W., 20, involved viewer: On the scale of the whole world, men and women still do not enjoy the same social status. If a woman wants to achieve the same thing as a man, she needs to put in a lot of more effort. But when she realizes she will never achieve the status on her own, she may as well just marry the man!
Women’s pursuit of beauty in China

**Cosmetic surgery.** Cosmetic surgery was a topic that would emerge from time to time in the focus group discussions. In the context of beauty pageants, the women tended to agree that cosmetic surgeries gave unfair advantages to the contestants who had them and should be prohibited. In the case of female celebrities, however, the women showed considerable understanding and tolerance about cosmetic surgeries. They brought up the prevalence of cosmetic surgery in the entertainment business and the fact that China might have been influenced by neighboring South Korea which was known for its strong cosmetic surgery industry.

*L.J., 24, indifferent viewer:* If a woman wants to work in the entertainment business and has an average look, she almost has no chance without some surgery because the beauty standards for female actresses are kept very high.

*A.D., 23, involved viewer:* You can tell that a lot of them had their eyes and chins fixed, because they all ended up looking like they were carved out of the same mold.

When the focus was switched to the general public, the women started to have divergent views on cosmetic surgery. Some of them considered cosmetic surgery an absolutely unnecessary measure in the name of pursuing beauty because of the physical pain, harms to the body, and health risks that were commonly associated with cosmetic surgeries. Some thought that the desire to change one’s appearance was a sign of self-doubt and psychological weakness.

*A.D., 23, involved viewer:* Honestly, I think it’s really unnecessary to go under the knife for beauty -- how painful! I don’t support cosmetic surgery because it’s harmful to the body, and women do not have to do things like this for men!

*Y.B., 20, indifferent viewer:* I think it [cosmetic surgery] is something better to avoid. I mean, if you are lucky, you’ll become more beautiful. Just like
Angelababy\textsuperscript{16}. Her surgeries made her look perfect and she is very fortunate. But there’re also people whose surgery was not successful, or they got addicted to cosmetic surgeries. It’s abusive to the body, and I don’t think it’s worth it.

\textit{Q.K., 22, involved viewer}: I understand if you had a birth defect and you wanted to correct it with surgeries; but if it is only because you can’t accept how you look, it’s a psychological problem.

\textit{F.N., 21, indifferent viewer}: If God gives you this look you should be satisfied with it. There’s no need to worry about how other people think.

There was also a side of the opinions that approached the subject with more pragmatism and progressiveness. These women acknowledged the real-life benefits of having cosmetic surgeries and claimed it to be a part of the personal freedom that should be left to each woman to decide for herself.

\textit{W.L., 22, involved viewer}: Cosmetic surgeries do serve some real-life purposes. It’s never beauty for beauty’s sake. Women go for cosmetic surgeries to gain more fame, make more money, or find wealthier boyfriends.

\textit{Q.K., 22, involved viewer}: Most definitely that I will not have cosmetic surgery myself, but I have no problem if anyone else chooses to do it for any reason whatsoever.

Moreover, the women in the progressive camp largely assumed a causal relationship between the improvement of one’s physical appearance through cosmetic surgery and the increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. Therefore, it was justifiable to have cosmetic surgery if the end result was a more positive self-perception.

\textit{G.K., 23, non-viewer}: If a girl thinks she is really ugly and her self-esteem is suffering from it, nobody has the right to tell her not to do anything about it. If in the end she gets the glory she always wanted even though the price is physical pain, I think it is well worth it.

\textsuperscript{16}Angelababy (born in 1989) is a female model and actress from Hong Kong. The public perception of her often involves the rumor that she has performed various cosmetic surgeries to her face, although Angelababy refuted all such allegations.
Finally, some women believed that different people had different values and different pursuits in life, and cosmetic surgery was just another path that led to personal success and happiness.

W.T., 19, involved viewer: When you have money you may choose to learn a new language or start a new hobby, but others may choose to get a double-eyelid surgery. The way I look at it is just a different type of investment.

Cosmetic surgery, as part of the feminine pursuit of beauty, has been theorized by traditional feminist scholars as largely oppressive and patriarchal (Wolf, 1991; Bordo, 1993). On one hand, the college women in this study showed a certain level of resistance to the idea of undergoing cosmetic surgeries in the name of pursuing beauty by deeming it “unnecessary.” However, their resistance was mainly based on health-related reasons or the traditional belief that one should not change the body he/she was given at birth. To a great extent, these young Chinese women did not treat cosmetic surgery as an oppressive act.

On the other hand, their views on cosmetic surgery seemed to be more in line with another feminist scholar, Kathy Davis (1995, 2003), who argued that women were capable of making informed choices to undergo cosmetic surgeries and they should not be seen as misguided, or victims of the system simply because they made that choice. The women in this study emphasized the fact that feeling confident and getting the same life opportunities as others was a right of every woman, and the choice individual women made to achieve those things, including cosmetic surgery, should be respected.

Overall, the women showed high internalization of the cultural belief that physical beauty was directly connected to women’s self-esteem and self-worth. They believed that by improving one’s physical appearance, even if through extreme measures such as cosmetic surgery, women would increase their confidence in jobs, romance, or any
other real life circumstance. Their criticism was mainly confined within health risk and physical harm on the personal level and not an oppressive act to a social group. Furthermore, they considered cosmetic surgery potentially empowering for some women as they execute their right to pursuit happiness.

**Weight control.** The college women pointed out that regardless of its perceived legitimacy, cosmetic surgery was expensive and not everyone who was willing to change her physical appearance could necessarily afford the surgical procedures. In comparison, they considered weight control was a more reasonable and economical way to improve one’s physical appearance. The majority of them believed in the “thin is beautiful” ideal. In every group there was at least one woman who admitted to have been trying to lose weight and more said they wished they were thinner. Based on the visual observation of the researcher and her familiarity of Chinese culture, most of the 38 participants had normal weight and average body type. Two women looked slightly overweight or “chubby” compared to the rest of the group, and a few looked underweight or “skinny.”

The common belief in China regarding the ideal weight for women could be summarized with the phrase “meinü buguo bai” (a beautiful woman is no more than 100 jin or 110 pounds) (H.F., 26, indifferent viewer). In one of the groups, the participants brought up the idea of Body Mass Index (BMI) and they had a unique perspective on the relationship between the ideal weight and the healthy weight.

**A.S., 20, indifferent viewer:** There is a bracket of BMI numbers that are considered healthy, and beauty is on the very end of the lower limit. If you go any lower than that, you’re not healthy anymore.

**W.L., 22, involved viewer:** Most Chinese people have healthy weights according to the BMI chart, but a lot of them are considered ‘fat’ by our own beauty standard.
According to the women, parents in China were largely unsupportive of their daughters in engaging in weight control just to be thin. Many of older generations in China had lived through the famines in the 1960s, and they still tended to associate thinness with malnutrition and unhealthiness. F.N. (21, indifferent viewer) described how her sister was in constant fights with their mother because of her dieting behaviors.

_F.N., 21, indifferent viewer:_ She has been on a diet ever since she went to college, even though she is already thin by most people’s standards. Every time she comes home my mom will nag her about it but she wouldn’t listen. That’s why my mom really hates skinny girls.

The women also believed that men actually did not find ultra-thin women more attractive and that the obsession with thinness was mainly a self-induced problem among young women and had little to do with the sexual preference of men.

_G.K., 23, non-viewer:_ I think there is a difference between what men think is a beautiful female body and what women think. Most women like the international fashion model type, really tall and really skinny. But men actually prefer women to have some meat on the bones, it feels better when they touch it I guess [laughter].

Lastly, most of the women admitted that dieting was an unhealthy way to lose weight. But at the same time, they still preferred dieting over other methods of weight control such as physical exercise, because they found exercise incompatible with their current lifestyle as a college student.

_N.N., 23, indifferent viewer:_ We’re all very busy and it’s hard to find time to exercise. You may start out as once a day, or once a week, but eventually it’s hard to maintain on a long-term basis.

_D.H., 21, indifferent viewer:_ I don’t normally exercise because it’s not convenient to shower here. We only have a public bathhouse and it’s always a hassle.

In brief, the thin beauty ideal was highly internalized by the Chinese college women in this study. They placed a high importance on a woman’s weight, and believed that how thin a woman looked was more important than how healthy she looked when it
came to indications of beauty. They also seemed to put more emphasis on losing/maintaining weight than toning the body which was reflected in their preference for dieting over exercise.

According to second-wave feminists, young women were victims to the patriarchal beauty system (Bordo, 1993; Jeffreys, 2005). These Chinese college women believed that young women were not pressured by older generations or the opposite sex to lose weight, but instead chose to do so because they wanted to look beautiful. From their negotiations of the weight control issue, young Chinese women in this study showed relatively low awareness of the social root of the thin ideal and mostly considered the practice of weight control part of the female obsession with beauty.

Mass Media and Beauty Perceptions

Each focus group participant was asked to fill out a media usage survey at the end of the meeting. The survey included questions about their general usages and preferences in television, film, magazines, and the Internet. These survey results would be used in combination with the focus group data to explore the potential relationships between these college women’s mass media consumption habits and their perceptions of cultural ideals of feminine beauty and beauty pageants in China.

Media consumption habits

There were considerable variations in weekly television viewing time among the focus group participants, both within a group and between groups. Some women watched as little as half an hour of TV per week while others watched over 25 hours. The intra-group difference could be explained by different dorm policies of each college campus. For example, some dorms allowed the students to have their own television sets installed inside their rooms, whereas other had strict rules against such personal
within a group, different television viewing time could be explained by the fact that some local students could go home on the weekends where they could watch TV with their families, whereas students from out of town did not have such opportunity.

In contrast to the variance in viewing time, the women showed similar tastes in television content. Across all groups, drama and entertainment had higher viewing frequencies ("often” or “sometimes”) than news, talk show, documentary, animation, and other genres ("rarely” or “never”). It was worth noting that in the focus group discussions, the women frequently used the word “yule jiemu” (entertainment programs) as an umbrella term to describe all programs that had high entertainment values. Some common entertainment programs the women mentioned included entertainment news, variety shows, and reality TV.

Originally in the survey, reality TV was listed as an individual television program genre but later excluded for validity reason. Even though the word “zhenrenxiu” (true man show) was the common term used in Chinese media to refer to reality TV, the meaning of the word turned out to be unclear to the college women. Some of them asked the researcher to clarify what zhenrenxiu meant in the survey and others wrote “competitions shows” or “matchmaking shows” in the “Other” column, indicating a general lack of understanding or agreement on the meanings of zhenrenxiu. Therefore, despite of the increasing popularity of certain local reality television programs (e.g., China’s Got Talent, If You Are the One), reality TV may not be established as a stand-alone television genre in mainland China.
The survey also inquired as to the women’s viewing habits of television programs produced in different regions in the world.\footnote{The regions included in the survey were Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Europe-America, and Other. The same regions were also used in the questions about Movies later. The selection of these particular regions was based on researcher’s native knowledge of the most commonly used categorization of television program source in China.} The results showed that mainland Chinese programs had the highest viewing frequency, which was not surprising given the censorship of foreign media content on Chinese broadcast and cable networks. However, as the women indicated in the focus group discussions, today’s Chinese media users often looked for foreign television programs on the Internet. As a result, programs from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Europe-America\footnote{“Oumei” (Europe-America) is the most commonly used term in Chinese to refer to the West. In the context of mass media, it generally refers to media content from all Western countries.} each attracted a set of frequent viewers from these college women and an average viewership overall. Japanese and Korean TV programs were the least frequently watched.

The majority of the women reported spending one to three hours per week reading magazines. Most women were subscribed to certain titles or read certain types of magazines on a regular basis. \textit{Duzhe}, a literary magazine, and \textit{Vivi}, a beauty and fashion magazine, represented the two most popular magazine titles and types among these college women. The rest included weekly news and entertainment tabloids, as well as specialty magazines on travel, photography, music, and health.

Based on the self-reported movie watching frequencies, the majority of those surveyed had at least one movie genre that they would watch “often” or “very frequently.” Among the six movie genres included in the survey,\footnote{The six genres are Action, Comedy, Drama, Thriller, Sci-Fi, and Romance.} romance and comedy were the two favorites among all the women while thriller and sci-fi movies had some
dedicated fans. Movies from the Europe-America region received overwhelmingly high viewing rates. More than half of the women indicated they frequently watched European or American movies. Movies from mainland China were second place in viewing frequency, followed by movies from Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Thailand, and India.

In the past two decades, because of the relaxation of rules regarding importing foreign media as well as the prevalence of piracy, “oumei dapian” (big productions from Europe-America) have established a solid audience base in mainland China. With no intent to generalize, this study provided some empirical evidence to the claim that the Chinese today are exposed to a considerable amount of foreign media content. Furthermore, the young Chinese women in this study showed strong interests and personal preferences in Western movies relative to movies from other regions.

As survey results suggested, all of the 38 women had regular access to the Internet. The majority reported between one and five hours daily Internet usage while a few said they were online more than 10 hours a day. The women also reported a range of online activities and the frequencies they would engage in each of them: stream music and watch videos (“very frequently” or “often”), use weibo, instant messaging, or do online shopping (“sometimes”), and read, check emails, play games, do research, or download videos (“occasionally”).

Media influences on perceptions of feminine beauty

Both the focus groups and survey data suggested that the college women that participated in this study were active media consumers, and media could have played

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20 Weibo is the most popular micro-blogging site in China. Known as the Chinese Twitter.
strong influences on their perceptions of cultural ideals of feminine beauty. Many of the participants mentioned watching entertainment television shows and reading blogs as personal interests, and they frequently quoted stories or people from the media to support their arguments. In the discussions of beauty ideals in contemporary China, different groups actually presented a very similar and specific set of beauty standards, and they tended to back up these ideals with similar examples from the media.

For example, some women suggested that the cultural preference for women to have a thin body and a small face could be partially attributed to the prevalence of electronic media in today’s Chinese society.

N.N., 23, indifferent viewer: The fact is everything is on television now. And they all say that the camera will add 10 jin [approximately 11 lbs] to anyone. So only the truly skinny people would look good on TV.

G.J., 24, involved viewer: And they will tell you that having a small face is the secret to being photogenic and wide faces just don’t look as pretty in front of the camera. That’s why we only see models with small faces in advertisements.

One woman further supported this argument by making a comparison between the female celebrities today and the ones before the digital media age.

T.Q., 23, indifferent viewer: If you look at the pictures of the celebrities of our parents’ generation, they didn’t have those tiny faces with pointy chins, like Angelababy. In fact, many of them had round face and chubby cheeks, like the famous singer Deng Lijun.21 [other women nod in agreement]. But if Deng was alive today, I guess she probably wanted to change her face to be smaller too.

According to Bandura (1994), the social learning process may occur deliberately or inadvertently through the observation of behaviors modeled via interpersonal or mass media channels. Thus, media as an important socializing agent might have played a

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crucial role in shaping these Chinese college women’s perceptions of the cultural ideals of feminine beauty. For example, the fact that across the focus groups the participants all had very similar accounts on a certain subject (e.g., a small face being beautiful) indicated that they were likely to have shared a common source of learning: the media. When the media present a female celebrity with certain facial features as highly attractive, popular, and successful, young women in China could learn to imitate the model by trying to achieve the “idea look” (e.g., through makeup or cosmetic surgery) and anticipate similar result for their imitated behavior, which is being valued by the society.

In addition to shaping public aesthetics of physical beauty, media also seemed to play a part in constructing beauty ideals that involved personal qualities in a social context. On the positive side, sometimes a particular female celebrity became recognized for her femininity because stories about her personal background and accomplishments were publicized in the media. Women in different focus groups mentioned the Chinese media personality Yang Lan\(^\text{22}\) and the British actress Audrey Hepburn as their ideal beautiful women. Beside their physical beauty, both Yang and Hepburn were highly regarded by young women because the media portrayed them as successful and inspirational female individuals.

On the negative side, a new class of women - “baifumei” (white, rich, and beautiful) - was recently created by the Chinese media. The characteristics of a typical baifumei woman were a combination of high physical attractiveness and unapologetic

\(^{22}\) Yang Lan is a female journalist and co-owner of the Sun Television Cynbernetworks in China. She is considered one of the most influential women in the Chinese media industry, and an idol and inspiration for many young Chinese women because of her beauty and success.
attitude and entitlement about materialism. Shortly after it came out, the term baifumei became massively popular on the Internet, and more and more Chinese youth started to adopt the ideology that beauty and wealth determines the ultimate social status of a woman.

**X.G., 19, indifferent viewer:** It all started with this one girl in *If You Are the One* who famously said that “I would rather cry sitting in a BMW than laugh riding on the back of a bicycle.” I don’t know if the media just want to create a controversy to attract viewers, or really want to promote this kind of girls as the new beauty ideal.

Further development in social cognitive theory posits that learning is more likely to happen when the observer feels a close identification with the model and if the observer feels that she/he has the ability to carry out the imitated action (Bandura, 1988). As active media consumers, the Chinese college women were frequently exposed to media representations of ideal femininity in contemporary Chinese society. Based on social cognitive theory, when these young women in China identified with the female celebrities they saw in the media (e.g., Yang Lan), they were more likely to adopt the behaviors that they modeled, such as pursuing a successful career or being involved in charitable causes. But at the same time, if they believed that they had the self-efficacy in following through certain behaviors modeled by the baifumei women in the media (e.g., insist on marrying rich men), they were also more likely to imitate those controversial behaviors.

**Media influences on perceptions of beauty pageants**

All the focus group participants showed at least basic understanding and familiarity with beauty pageants despite of different levels of viewership of the pageant shows. As discussed previously, much of the pageant knowledge the women had was likely to come from the overall media content they consumed. The media usage survey
results showed that entertainment programming was a major component of the women’s television consumption. In the focus group discussions, the women often drew examples directly from entertainment news to support their arguments.

Z.D., 22, indifferent viewer: You see those headlines in the news all the time, former winner of Miss so-and-so pageant married a millionaire. And young girls who saw this kind of news might just start to have their own ‘pageant dreams.’

S.D., 20, indifferent viewer: I read this the other day, there was this girl, a senior in high school, decided not to take the entrance exams because she wanted to participate in a pageant and become famous. What made it newsworthy was the fact that her mother was also very supportive of her daughter giving up college and making the shortcut in life.

The women reported in the survey that they were active Internet users, and in the discussions some of them attributed their low interest in watching beauty pageants to the Internet. They believed that most people in China today, including themselves, had already satisfied their voyeuristic curiosity about feminine beauty because an abundance of images and videos of beautiful women were readily available online. As a result, the main attraction of beauty pageant shows, which they believed to be the display of young women in skimpy clothing, was no longer a novelty and could not capture the attention of today’s savvy audience.

G.K., 23, non-viewer: I spend most of my free time online and I’ve seen a lot of pictures of beautiful women. Maybe because photo editing software is very common now, the women in those pictures all look perfect. And when I watch a pageant show, to be honest, those girls just look plain and unattractive compared to the photos I am used to.

P.L., 21, involved viewer: Maybe beauty pageants were popular ten twenty years ago because there was not much entertainment available back then and people had greater needs for visual stimulation. But now with power of Internet, there is a surplus of beautiful women everywhere you look and people start to get aesthetic fatigue.
Lastly, the women’s media consumption might have contributed to their tendency to believe in the conspiracy theories of beauty pageants. Just like in the U.S., entertainment media in China thrive on rumors and scandals of celebrities. Thus, the Chinese entertainment media might intentionally stir up rumors and scandals about beauty pageants and their contestants in order to increase tabloid sales and website traffic. The women in the focus groups showed significant interest and consumption of entertainment media but low interest and consumption of beauty pageant shows. As a result, their main information source about beauty pageants was entertainment news, which in turn led to their high endorsement of the pageant conspiracy. Furthermore, most beauty pageants in China were sponsored or hosted by state-owned television stations. In consequence, formal Chinese news media were unlikely to investigate any scandal about beauty pageants because it might lead to negative exposure of the government.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with eight women between the ages of 19 and 24 who were contestants of a regional pageant of 2012 Miss World China. This particular pageant took place in Shanghai, a major city on the east coast of China, and the interviews happened during the last two weeks of the competition. At the time of the interviews, the contestants had already participated in various competitions and sponsored events of the pageant for over two months.

All the interviews were conducted in the hotel where the pageant rehearsals were being held. This hotel/tourist resort was also one of the major sponsors of the pageant, providing the space and convenience for all the pageant activities to take place. There were between 50 and 200 people affiliated with the pageant present in the hotel at any
given time during the researcher’s visits, which included the pageant staff, the production crew, the contestants, and family and friends.

The majority of the contestants of this pageant were local college students. Other than a few who were accompanied by a family member or friend, most of them came to the rehearsals and competitions by themselves using public transportation. Judging from their appearances, the contestants all looked in their early 20s. The mother of a high school student told the researcher that her daughter who recently turned 18 was the youngest in the competition.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Major/Profession</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Past Pageant Experience</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ailan</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Telecommunication</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cai</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Fashion Modeling and Design</td>
<td>Hefei, Anhui</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feng</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Bilingual Broadcasting</td>
<td>Haerbing, Heilongjiang</td>
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<td>Hui</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Theater</td>
<td>Yancheng, Jiangsu</td>
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<td>Jialin</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Flight Attendant</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
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<td>Meili</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Musical Performance</td>
<td>Hefei, Anhui</td>
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<td>Nana</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
<td>Fuyang, Anhui</td>
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<td>Qian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Digital Media Design</td>
<td>Zibo, Shandong</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The eight women who participated in the interviews (pseudonyms) came from relatively diverse backgrounds (Table 4-2). Seven of them were college students in sophomore or junior years; they were studying a variety of majors in six different schools. The only non-student interviewee was a flight attendant working for a Chinese
airline. Only two of the eight women were born and raised in Shanghai, the city where this pageant was hosted, and the rest came from five different cities in four provinces. Of the eight women, three had never participated in any beauty-related contest prior to this one, two had previously participated in one beauty contest, and three had participated in two or more different beauty contests in the past.

**Becoming a Beauty Pageant Contestant**

**Supportive parents**

The eight interviewees came from diverse personal backgrounds with various levels of past pageant experiences and different attitudes and goals towards the current competition. However, they all shared something in common: parents that were very supportive of their involvement in beauty pageants.

Qian: My mom saw that I had lost all that weight since I started the modeling class and she said to me: ‘yeah, I think you should go to those competitions, to show off your new body!’

Cai: My parents have always kept an open-mind in raising me. As long as the general direction is positive, they always encourage me to experience things on my own….Their philosophy is even if my efforts do no lead to a desired result, at least I won’t have any regrets for not trying.

Ailan: My parents are quite supportive of me coming here. Because of my height, I look pretty tall and thin at my school, so my parents think this kind of event is a good place for me to present myself. They were less supportive before when I wanted to participate in Super Girl, because they thought I had very little chance [of winning] in a singing competition like that without any professional vocal training. This time [in a beauty contest] they think at least I have a chance to continue on.

Parental support seemed particularly important to these young Chinese women who were participating in beauty pageants, and there were culturally specific reasons. Except for Ailan and Qian who had a younger brother, the other six interviewees were all from single-child families. Because of the historical background of the single-child
policy in China, the singleton generation tends to be particularly dependent on their parents compared to other generations (Fong, 2004). Unlike many American parents who would let their children move away from home and start to care for themselves after graduating from high school, most Chinese youth live with their parents until they get married and rely on their parents for complete financial support throughout and sometimes after college. Therefore, Chinese parents often play a more involved role in the lives of their 20-something daughters, including participation in beauty pageants.

According to the interviewees, their parents supported their beauty pageant aspirations because they wanted the best for their children. Some parents believed the pageants provided a great opportunity for their daughter to get exposed and open doors for potential future careers; some hoped their daughter would gain valuable life experiences in a competitive environment and grow as an individual; and some just simply enjoyed the fact that their daughters looked beautiful and happy on stage.

Throughout the time the researcher spent at the pageant site, she saw a number of mothers who would show up to every rehearsal and competition to show support for their daughters. To some of the interviewees, their mother was the single most invested person in their pageant career.

Meili: Sometimes when I participate in a contest or event, my mom will come along to give me support. She will take photos and videos of me, and get me whatever I need at the moment. She always tells me that I really shine on the stage.

Feng: My main support is from my mom. Every time I heard her say 'my daughter is the best!' I would feel so happy. As I grew up my mom put in a lot of effort in educating and cultivating me, and I can't repay her in any monetary way yet. But if I can make her happy and proud, it is the best encouragement and motivation for me.
Feng’s family was from a northern province, and since the Miss World pageant started her mother decided to fly down and accompany Feng throughout the entire three months of competitions. During the rehearsals, Feng’s mother would give directions and critiques of her performance along with a lot of encouragement. Feng performed ethnic dancing, played traditional music instruments, and drew Chinese calligraphy in her talent performances, all of which she learned at a young age under her mother’s influence. Interestingly, this kind of collaborative effort between mother and daughter was similarly found in the portrayals of pageant families in American reality television, only that the pageant girl in the case of China was much older in age.

At the same time, the overwhelming support these pageant contestants received from their parents should not be interpreted as a general endorsement of beauty pageantry from all Chinese parents. Compared to most European and American parents, Chinese parents tend to be more involved in their children’s personal lives through “guan” (monitoring) and place greater emphasis on the academic training and achievement of their children (Chao, 1994). In China, parents set up strict regimes for their children so they don’t fail to get into a good university, which is still considered vital in securing a well-paying job. Therefore, it might be the case that many Chinese parents actually disapprove of their daughters’ potential participation in pageants because it would divert their attention from schoolwork, and only those young women whose parents are supportive made it to the competition.

23 For instance, American reality television series Toddlers & Tiaras began on cable television during 2008, which follows the families of contestants in child beauty pageants. The show started some controversies over the costumes the young girls were wearing, yet it provided the general public a close look at a certain aspect of the pageant world.
Fine arts background

During the field trip, the researcher was able to chat with the production crew and had a two-hour informal interview with Justin, the executive producer of the Miss World China Shanghai regional pageant. The information gathered from the crew and Justin in particular was used in the analysis to provide a factual background for the in-depth interviews with the pageant contestants and was presented without interpretation. According to Justin, the talent competition was an important component of this regional pageant. Above all, it was following the tradition of the Miss World pageant brand, which has always had the talent competition. More importantly, individual talent performances of the contestants carried a lot of weight in maintaining the entertainment value of the show. As a result, the contestants who had stage talents and experiences were particularly favored by the pageant organization.

In the focus groups, the college women expressed their impressions about beauty pageant contestants in China, most of whom they believed were yishusheng (fine arts major students). This impression was confirmed by the interviewees of this study, as a majority of them and the rest of the contestants at the current pageant had a background in fine arts. For example, Meili started learning ballet at the age of five and went to a dancing school to pursue professional training before she decided to study musical performance in a well-known art institute. One of the main reasons Meili was attracted to beauty pageants was that she got to practice the things she learned at school on the pageant stage.

Meili: Since the first time I competed in a beauty pageant, my goal was to find a platform to practice and perform what I learned. Otherwise I feel that I can’t give full play to my skills and talents…. Also, I’m pretty low-key in everyday life but a totally different person on stage. I feel like a shining star when I have the stage to myself.
Hui was a theater major at a performance arts college, and in the talent competition she performed a pop song with both singing and dancing. In addition, she volunteered to be the announcer in another contestant’s fashion exhibition. Being quite active on stage, Hui believed that opportunities like this really fit her personality.

Hui: I am a happy-go-lucky type of girl, and growing up I'm always the one that loves to be on stage and perform. That happiness and satisfaction I get from being on stage is hard to convey with words. My family and friends all think [beauty pageantry] is a perfect thing for me.

Cai and Qian came from a local university famous for its fashion modeling program. According to Justin, the modeling department of this university had been an important recruiting site for their regional Miss World China pageant, and the head of the modeling program was in fact a committee member and consultant of the pageant. Moreover, because of their professional training and stage experience, modeling students from this program had frequently brought home the title of this pageant, including the current event.24

In feudal China, xizi (opera singers or stage performers) were often looked down upon in the society because of the nature of their profession. Especially as a woman, being a stage performer was considered shameful because her beauty and talent was on display for strange men, which made her unsuitable for a respectable marriage. However, in contemporary China, stage performers are addressed as yiren (artists or talents), and many have reached the status of celebrity and accumulated large numbers of fans. Since the economic reform, there have been notable value changes among college-educated Chinese youth with dramatic increase in individualism and materialism.

24 As revealed in the final contest not long after the interviews, the winner of this Miss World China regional pageant was again a modeling student from this university.
A survey study showed that idol worshiping was a common phenomenon among Chinese youngsters, and stars (including pop, TV/film, and sports stars) consisted of the top personages worshipped (He, 2006). As a result, being a stage performer has become a desired career path for young Chinese women in the modern age, and those who succeed as models, actresses, singers, or dancers often found marriages with wealthy business men (He, 2010). The attitude shift in Chinese society towards stage performers may have contributed to the increasing number of young women in China who pursue fine arts majors and beauty pageants.

Furthermore, fine arts-majored female students often have very different paths and prospects of life compared to the average college woman in China (e.g., the focus group participants). Many of them were recruited at the age of 14 or 15 to a fine arts institute to study modeling or dancing because of their special physical attributes, such as being tall, having lanky figures, or having beautiful faces. They are also more likely to have a well-paying job as a stage performer when they graduate and not have to compete in schools or the job market like other college students. The fact that physically attractive young women in China are increasingly attracted to the life path as stage performers is indicative of the patriarchal gender belief that women should take advantage of their physical beauty as a valuable asset to secure a good life.

**Past experiences and motivations**

Meili first encountered beauty pageants in the summer when she graduated from high school and she participated in a local beauty contest in her hometown. Although
she did not win any award in that pageant, it led her to a later opportunity in that year’s
Miss Asia pageant,\textsuperscript{25} in which she made it to the top 10 finalists.

Feng was also a junior college student who was studying bilingual broadcasting
at a university in a nearby city. In her first year in college, Feng participated in a beauty
contest hosted by a television station in search of the next anchorwoman and made it to
the top 10. Not too long before the interview, she competed in a local car model contest
and won the first place.

Hui was a sophomore theater student and had only one but very memorable
pageant experience when she was much younger.

Hui: I was 13 that year and it was the summer break after seventh grade….My
parents thought it would be a good idea for me to get out of the house and
do something, so my mom entered me in this magazine model contest in
my home town, which was just like a beauty pageant. I remember we did
six rounds of competitions and each round I ended up having the highest
score! It then became a controversy as to whether the award should be
given to me, a 13-year-old kid! In the end they still pronounced me the
winner of the contest because I obviously had the highest score….From
that I also made the ‘first pot of gold’ in my life, 5000 yuan\textsuperscript{26} award money!

In a way, Meili, Feng, and Hui came from similar backgrounds. They were all fine
arts major college students with outstanding talents to perform on the pageant stage.

Compared to most other contestants, they had more experiences and achievements in
beauty pageants, and seemed more confident in the competition. For them, Miss World
China (and the possibility to compete in Miss World) provided a prestigious opportunity
to bring their pageant endeavors to a higher level. Meili, in particular, was extremely
devoted and determined to win a beauty queen title.

\textsuperscript{25} Miss Asia is an annual international beauty pageant hosted by a Hong Kong television network.

\textsuperscript{26} Equivalent of approximately 800 US dollars.
Meili: I don’t know about other people, but now that I’m here my goal is definitely to win! …I am very serious about this opportunity and I am doing my best to prepare for it.

Qian was a digital media design major, and she made the decision to join the amateur modeling club after losing 30 pounds. She told the researcher it was her dream to become a fashion model since she was a little girl, and going to model classes and participating in beauty contests were a way for her to explore this “model dream.”

Qian: Last summer, the amateur modeling club of our university was recruiting, and my mom said to me: “why don’t you give it a try, maybe you can lose some weight!” [chuckle] I now have been taking classes there for nine months, and I have lost 30 jin (33 pounds). This is the second beauty contest that my modeling teacher has introduced me to this year.

Cai, on the other hand, was a fashion model and design major in the university who already had many industry experiences modeling in China. Like many of her classmates, Cai signed with a modeling agency that regularly sent her to fashion show auditions around the country. By participating in beauty contests, she was hoping to venture out from the fashion world and discover new potentials.

Cai: I am a fashion model major and I never participated in any beauty contest before. Our department chair told me about this Miss World pageant and I think it is a great opportunity. On her recommendation, I am also going to compete in the Miss International pageant later next month.

Both Qian and Cai were participating in beauty contests because of direct recommendations from their modeling teachers. To them beauty pageantry was just a side interest that they chose to pursue at this particular time, and eventually they would continue their real career paths as designers and models. In contrast, Nana showed very strong internal motivation in participating in pageants and she believed that by

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27 According to Cai, she had modeled in Shanghai Fashion Week, Beijing Fashion Week, and fashion shows for designers like Gucci, Dior and Qi Gang in China.
competing in these beauty contests she could change her destiny and create a better future. Like many young people of her generation, Nana followed what she thought was the only way to succeed in life: getting a college degree. As she began the third-year in a teacher’s college in her hometown, however, Nana was determined to do something else.

Nana: I wanted to compete in last year’s Miss World but I missed the deadline, so this year I sent in my application online really early.... You know, I am not going to school here and where I am from I feel there are fewer opportunities like this.... Well, I have always wanted to do different things; I’m not the type that would just study and study.

Living in a city 230 miles away from the Shanghai, Nana had to take a 6-hour train ride to come to a rehearsal or event each time. Before this pageant, Nana had already participated in quite a few small-scaled beauty contests and she usually would not pass on any opportunity to compete. Her attitude towards beauty pageants was reflected in this particular comment: “I actually didn’t expect to win anything here; all I am hoping for is to find a stage to show myself and find some opportunities for the future.”

Ever since Zhang Zilin won the title of Miss World 2007, she has gained significant media visibility and commercial success as an A-list celebrity in China. The executive producer Justin told the researcher in a convincing tone: “Every girl here wants to be an album-selling singer, a big hit on the big screen, a cover girl on the magazine, or a spokesperson for a famous brand.” It was interesting to note that even though the connection between participation in beauty pageants and becoming a celebrity seemed obvious to the outsiders (e.g., the college women in the focus groups and Justin), the pageant contestants themselves were very cautious in making this
connection. In fact, Jialin, the flight attendant, was the only one that mentioned the word “mingxingmeng” (celebrity dream) in her interview.

Jialin: If I could win this contest and represent China in the international pageant, then it is a dream come true. You know, every girl has a mingxingmeng, and mine is realized if I get to be Miss World China. ...I don't have a particular profession in mind, I am interested anything, acting, advertising, spokesperson.

Overall, the interviewees reported different levels of past pageant experiences and the direct and indirect factors that had motivated them to become a beauty pageant contestant. Most of them were intentionally vague on the materialistic aspect of pageants, such as the winner having a chance to become a celebrity and make a lot of money. However, the women all shared the sentiment that beauty pageants were to them a channel for personal improvement, and that they belonged to new generation Chinese women who actively made efforts to better themselves and explore different possibilities in life.

Participating in Miss World China

Attitude towards the competition

By the time the interviews were conducted, the contestants had spent two months competing in this regional Miss World China pageant and participating in various sponsored events. Particularly, the contestants went on a three-day road trip for a series of pageant events in a distant province a couple of weeks prior to the interviews. The experience of travelling together and sharing hotel rooms had given these young women the chance to get to know each other and develop a special type of friendship or comradeship as fellow pageant contestants.

Ailan: I remember that in the quarter-final, the atmosphere was not so harmonious because we still saw each other as competition. But during the trip to Jingdezhen, because we were not competing but working
together in the promotional events for the sponsors, I got to make a lot of good friends!

The women talked fondly about the new friends they made in the pageant. Being similar in age, these pageant contestants found a lot in common with one another; and being from different schools and different hometowns, they also found enough new things about each other to keep the interactions interesting.

Jialin: At this pageant, we have girls who are from all over the country. When we get together we like to talk about the interesting things about our hometowns…. Maybe we are competitors on stage, but off stage we are friends.

Cai: All my friends at school were fashion models, and it was nice to meet girls who were from other majors. …We talk about each other’s curriculum at school and because it’s so different we all find each other’s schoolwork quite interesting. … Also, the ways they see things can be different from us [models], so for me it’s enjoyable to communicate with them.

Based on the observation of the researcher at the rehearsals, the dynamics between the contestants were indeed more amiable than hostile. Not only were the breaks and makeup sessions filled with jokes and laughter, the women also tried to help each other during the competitions. For example, Cai was giving tips to the contestants who were non-model majors about how to choose an evening gown that fit one’s figure and how to pose at the end of the runway. Meili was critiquing another girls’ dance routine because of her professional ballet background.

The collaborative and harmonious atmosphere at this regional Miss World China pageant could be indicative of two things. Firstly, unlike masculine sports that focus on the contestants’ toughness and competitiveness, beauty contests are special feminine competitions that emphasize tolerance and collaborations among the contestants. As a result, the women in the pageants might be carefully maintaining an optimum feminine image by being humble and generous to each other. Secondly, most of the women
participating in the pageants might not consider winning the competition the ultimate goal because they were mainly looking for the experience and the exposure. Hence, being friendly and establishing future relationships might be more important and beneficial than winning the title.

Furthermore, the majority of interviewees were hesitant in explaining their specific goals or expectations in the competition. In most Asian cultures, including Chinese, humbleness is considered an important virtue and openly speaking about one’s personal ambition could be perceived as arrogant or crude. Also, traditional gender role beliefs in China, which were heavily influenced by Confucianism, require women to be submissive to men (Tamney & Chiang, 2002); thus, women’s ambitions are often even further subdued in the Chinese society. Meanwhile, in a competitive environment like the pageant self-confidence was crucial to the spirit and image of a contestant and one did not want to appear under confident by not having an inspiring goal. Therefore, to strike a difficult balance, the tactic many of the interviewees chose to use was to minimize the importance of the results while emphasize the efforts one put in the process.

Cai: My goal is to do my best in the competition, and to show the best side of myself; any particular pressure to win or anything like that is unnecessary in my opinion.

Hui: My attitude is ‘let nature take its course.’ The fact is I don’t have to get a certain title or place to make this experience worthwhile. I believe that as long as you put your heart into something, you will get what you deserve.

Another possible explanation to the ambiguity in the women’s comments about goals and expectations was that they did not want to seem too utilitarian or too materialistic. In spite of the fact that China as a nation has greatly embraced capitalism and consumer culture since the economic reform, the lasting communist ideology still
leaves certain social stigma associated with extreme materialism. Both Hui and Feng stressed the fact that they were not in the pageant just to win the title because that would be too “gongli” (utilitarian).

Feng: I’m not like those people who would participate in all kinds of contests just to win as many titles as possible and use it as a way to become celebrities. I think my attitude towards pageant is very neutral. I am not opposing it -- otherwise I wouldn’t be here, but I’m not like ‘I have to win something’ either.

As previously discussed, these pageant contestants’ general attitude towards participating in beauty pageants showcased the progressiveness and confidence of modern Chinese women. However, when questioned about their goals and expectations in this particular competition, their answers were more in line with the traditional gender roles, in which they were trying to adhere to the affable and humble image of femininity. Specifically, they carefully avoided speaking directly about their ambition to win the competition and distanced themselves from utilitarianism.

This tone change was demonstrative of the negotiated position these young women had as pageant contestants in China. On the one hand, they wanted to show that they were the new generation of Chinese women who enjoyed the freedom to pursue personal advancements through participating in beauty pageants. On the other hand, in the context of a competition about ideal femininity, they were eager to be seen as a group of friendly, humble, and sophisticated women that posted no challenge to the traditional beliefs of femininity.

Model vs. non-model contestants

Meili: I am not as tall as some other contestants who are 180 cm (5’11”) and fashion models. I’m not sure what the judges’ standards are, very tall and very thin, or something else. But I told myself I needed to at least look thin, that’s why I’m on a diet. You know, normally I like all sorts of food and I
really eat a lot, but for this competition I told myself I had to restrict my appetite and to lose weight.

As a regional competition of Miss World China, this pageant shared most of the same components as the national pageant analyzed in the textual analysis. At the beginning of the bikini contest, the contestants would take turns walking down the runway and quickly say three things in front of the microphone: their name, height, and beauty statement. The majority of the contestants at this regional pageant were between 170 cm (5’7”) and 178 cm (5’10”), with a few over 180 cm (5’11”). As discussed previously, a good number of the contestants at this regional pageant were recruited directly from the modeling program at a local university. And in reality, these modeling-major students tended to stand out from other contestants when they were walking down the runway.

Justin: For example, a very pretty girl of average height came to our competition. She may be considered a real beauty by most people, but when she stands next to a 180cm model, you can’t even see her! … There are certain things that judges have to consider: height, qizhi, figure, face, and overall quality….It doesn’t matter if your face looks more Eastern or Western, and there is a certain jiazi (body frame) that is the standard. If you don’t have this jiazi, other things don’t really matter.

To a great extent, the prevalence of tall contestants and especially modeling-major students in this beauty pageant was reflective of a media-induced physical beauty ideal in contemporary China. Due to globalization of mass media, international fashion magazines such as Vogue and ELLE are readily available in China (Haughney & Landreth, 2012), which not only increased the demand and consumption of fashion and luxury goods in China, but also promoted the images of extremely tall and thin fashion models as the beauty ideal for Chinese women. When more and more Chinese people are used to seeing the particular type of “model body” on magazine covers, television
screens, and billboards, the sight of a woman of normal height and body frame, especially when she is standing next to a fashion model, could be a strange and unsatisfying experience. As a result, in beauty contests in China, the contestants are often held to the standard of fashion model regarding height and bodily figure, and those with modeling backgrounds have an apparent advantage in the competition.

In addition, the model contestants tended to have more runway experience which could be particularly beneficial in a beauty contest. Cai was one of the model contestants in this pageant who became close friends with many of the non-model contestants. She was delighted by the fact that her non-model friends were very appreciative of the help and critique she gave them on the runway, and that they were able to reevaluate modeling as a profession after they had to “walk in her shoes.”

Cai: The common view of fashion models is that we live a flashy lifestyle, and we can make a lot of money just by wearing different clothes and walking around. But a lot of them [non models] realized this time, after they had to deal with the high heels, the evening gowns, and the swimsuits, that modeling was not as easy as one might think. They now know that modeling is also something that requires a lot of time and effort to master.

Earlier on in the competition the non-model contestants might have felt intimidated by the fashion models because of their advantages in height and runway skills. But by the time of the interviews which was two months and several elimination rounds into the competition, all the women seemed to have found their own place and no one seemed particularly insecure.

Nana: When I first came to the contest, I felt that I was not very tall and other contestants had some obvious advantages over me. But after the quarter-final competition, I realized that I too had left a very positive impression on many people; and I thought to myself ‘I’ve got this’ [chuckle].

Feng: There are a lot of professional models at the contest and they are a lot better at walking the runway and much taller than us. So I try to learn from the way they walk. After all I’m not as professional.... But when it comes to
talent shows, it is my strong suit. When the lights come on and all the eyes are on me, I feel very confident about my performance and myself.

Nonetheless, there was abundant evidence showing that these beauty pageant contestants were engaged in social comparisons with each other throughout the competition. For example, in the two comments mentioned above, Nana considered herself “pretty average” when she first arrived at the pageant compared to other taller or more talented contestants, and Feng recognized that her own runway walk was unprofessional compared to the performance of the model contestants.

According to social comparison theory, beauty pageant contestants could be engaged in upward comparisons where they compared their own skills and attributes with the ones of the contestants who they believed to be more competitive (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). Their main motivation for these upward social comparisons were likely to be self-evaluation, as in they compared themselves to those whom they thought had better chances in winning in order to size their own chance in the competition (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989).

These upward comparisons might have initially led to low self-perception or self-confidence as hinted in Nana’s comments. However, based on the fact that most of the contestants were comfortable with their performance in the competition, they seemed to be able to redeem their confidence by focusing on the positive feedback and experiences. In the case of Feng, she concentrated on her own advantage in the competition – talent performance, and at the same time engaged in downward comparisons with contestants who did not have a strong talent for self-assurance purpose (Wills, 1981).
Social comparisons between the pageant contestants could also be motivated by a desire for self-improvement (Gruder, 1971). As mentioned earlier, model contestants held a key advantage over non-model contestants by having more runway experience. Non-model contestants motivated by a desire to improve their performances in the competition might compare their own runway techniques to the ones of the model contestants and learn from the differences. Moreover, the results of these upward comparisons were less likely to be detrimental to the women’s self-evaluation because the belief was that one’s runway techniques could be improved with time and efforts.

Lastly, when the focus of comparison was on a physical attribute, such as body figure, engaging in such upward comparisons could lead to negative psychological impacts on the pageant contestants (Jones, 2001; Suls et al., 2002). For example, Meili acknowledged an internal pressure to lose weight and control her diet since she started competing in pageants. Even though her intention was to demonstrate her self-discipline and determination, the remarks still revealed a degree of frustration and a lowered self-evaluation of body image.

Meili: There was this girl and we were sitting together at the makeup section during the quarter-finals. She was very thin and she was snacking the entire afternoon. I remember myself wondering: is her tummy going to stick out later in the swimsuit competition? Apparently not. She just had that flat body type, no matter how much she ate, it was never going to show…. unlike me.

Performing femininity in evening gowns and swimsuits

Many interviewees, particularly non-model contestants, mentioned the evening gown show as their favorite segment of the competition. Some said they struggled with the long dresses and the high heels at first because they were not used to clothing that was so restricting. But at the end they very much enjoyed and appreciated the
experience because it was considered a rare opportunity for most young Chinese women to dress up in formal expensive clothing like an evening gown.

During Mao’s communist regime, women in China wore the same styles of shirts and trousers as men as feminine dresses or blouses were deemed as bourgeois and anti-revolutionary (Johansson, 1998). After the economic reform in the early 1980s, Western-styled clothing such as jeans and t-shirts started to gain popularity and eventually replaced the communist unisex style of clothing as the mainstream in China. In today’s Chinese society, top global fashion can be found both in the media and on the street, and Chinese women have a massive selection of clothing available to them as China is currently one of the largest clothing manufacturers in the world.

However, for an average young woman in China, even if she lives in an urban area, the opportunity to wear a formal evening gown is still almost nonexistent. A typical young girl growing up in urban China is probably required to wear uniforms at school from first grade all the way till graduating from high school. Her parents are likely to discourage her from paying too much attention to beauty or fashion because they want her to focus on school work. Since most schools in China still operate under the communist ideology, there are no school proms or formal parties as in the U.S. where teenage girls could dress up. As a result, it was not surprising that many of these pageant contestants (except for the modeling-major students) had never had the chance to wear an evening gown until they came to the beauty contest.

Ailan: I particularly like the evening gown [competition], because I never wore one before! It made me feel very elegant and noble. I was transformed from a mere college student to a graceful and feminine woman.

The women were fascinated by the evening gown competition also because they got to experience and perform a more mature side of their femininity. As mentioned
earlier, the singleton generation in China tends to stay dependent, both financially and emotionally, of their parents until they form a family of their own. Thus, having spent most of their lives being a student in school and a child to their parents, many of these pageant contestants had yet to establish their identity as an adult woman. When they put on a formal gown, they were compelled to exhibit a femininity that was less familiar, yet exciting and new. The experience of transcending from a student and child to a woman seemed particularly memorable and valuable to them.

The swimsuit or bikini was another type of attire the pageant contestants had little experience with, and most of them found it more challenging than the evening gown. Except for a modeling-major student, the rest of the interviewees all admitted that they were faced with initial self-consciousness and embarrassment when they were asked to wear a two-piece bikini on stage. Sun tanning on the beach is not as popular in China as in many other countries because of a strong cultural preference for fair skin (Xie & Zhang, 2012). Afraid of getting dark, most Chinese women stay away from “low-coverage” bikinis, and some even wrap their face in nylon masks and wear full body suits on the beach (Levin, 2012). Moreover, China is still largely a sexually conservative society where wearing bikinis in public can be considered vulgar or inappropriate. Therefore, it might have been an unfamiliar and uncomfortable experience for the contestants to dress in two-piece swimwear in front of a large number of people, which led to varying levels of apprehension.

Feng: [What was your least favorite part of the competition?] The bikini! It’s just too little clothing…Normally I would never dress like that. I think many of us share the same sentiment, some of the contestants would say ‘uh, I feel so uncomfortable; too much skin is showing.’

Hui: The bikini competition was a little, [pause] how to say, awkward. After all China is a relatively conservative country and you don’t see people
walking down the street in bikinis. In a competition like this, you are wearing a bikini and there are a lot of people watching, so it’s pretty much the same as walking in the street, just with a smaller audience.

However, most of the contestants were able to overcome their self-consciousness by the sheer thought of comfort that they were not alone in the competition. The fact that other women were also on the stage wearing bikinis seemed to have given them a collaborative courage to face the swimsuit competition. This sentiment was similar to the one the researcher found during the focus group recruitment. Young women in China had a tendency to be anxious about being singled out or doing something differently than everyone else. Thus, having their peers around doing the same thing often made them more confident and comfortable in a new situation. Like Jialin said: “When we realize that we are all in this together, it’s not that bad anymore.”

Additionally, some contestants tried to justify the swimsuit competition by stressing the important role it played in a beauty contest. They argued that physical perfection was an indispensable part of feminine beauty, so having the contestants wear bikinis was a necessary measure if not the only fair way to judge beauty because no bodily flaw could be hidden or camouflaged when wearing a bikini.

Hui: It’s a beauty pageant, so it has to look at the outer as well as inner beauty. If you don’t display [the female body] in this manner, people cannot tell just how perfect a contestant is. It’s the only way to see if you have any physical defect, or if your body is proportional.

Meili: I think swimsuit is a necessary segment in beauty pageants because the purpose is to showcase the contestants’ figures. It is also a great motivation for me to lose weight because I have to show my body to people; I can’t have any extra flesh hanging. I will have to be perfect.

From a feminist perspective, these Chinese pageant contestants did not share the critique of Western feminists of beauty pageants on constructing femininity for
display (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Instead, they adopted the male spectator’s perspective, or the male gaze, to look at themselves and at each other (Sassatelli, 2011). They had internalized the idea that the perfection of female bodies was a key component of feminine beauty, and feminine beauty could only be properly evaluated by the spectators (e.g., pageant judges, audiences) when the female body was displayed and scrutinized as an object. The only reservation they had was over the conflict between a woman revealing her physical body in public and the conservative attitude towards female sexuality in Chinese society. Overall, these Chinese pageant contestants demonstrated a low level of feminist awareness of the male gaze, and treated their performances of femininity in the pageant as new and positive life experiences.

**Evaluation process and sponsors**

Based on the conversations with the pageant contestants, there was a general lack of information of the evaluation process used in this beauty contest. The women suggested that the organization did not disclose to them at any point the criteria used to evaluate or score the contestants, and the majority of the eliminations (except in the final competition) were privately made by the pageant committee.

Ailan: I thought there was going to be a question and answer section, but it seemed not to be. So I am really not sure what the standards are. There has been no scoring during the competitions, and every time they just call you afterwards if you passed.

Nana: How they evaluate our performance…I only know that there were different competitions such as evening gown, sportswear, and bikini, and they are judged separately. But they never showed us the scores after each competition. In the past we were just notified by phone whether we made the cut or not.

Like many aspects of the Chinese culture and society, ambiguity is a form of existence that many Chinese people tend to accept as normal. In the Western culture
social justice is largely based on installation of rules and surveillance, and clarity and transparency is expected in any type of evaluations. But in the Chinese culture, “people” are almost always a central factor and the fact that judgments are made with fluidity in a holistic manner is largely expected and sometimes preferred. As a result, in spite of the ambiguous evaluation system of the beauty pageant, most of the contestants still expressed high confidence in the fairness of the competition, which they believed to be ensured by a collective conscience of all the people involved in the judging process.

Hui: I believe that people’s eyes are all sharp. There’s no way that a girl is obviously outstanding and she ends up being eliminated. Excellence is there for all to see. At the same time, if the result does not meet your expectation, it can only mean that you are not good enough or others are better than you. You should be humble and learn.

At the same time, based on their own observations, many contestants also came up with some hypotheses about how the pageant evaluation worked.

Qian: I think having a talent performance is definitely a bonus. It gives you more time to be on stage, and if your talent is good you’re likely to win a lot of applause and points. At the same time, your appearance and overall qizhi is also important. When it comes to inner qualities, to be honest, I don’t think you can see a person’s inner qualities from just looking at her on the stage.

Hui: In my opinion, the appearance of a contestant is definitely a consideration. Then it’s her wenhua cengci (level of education and culture). I also think the confidence one presents on stage is very important, the way she stands, whether she looks nervous or calm...Lastly, how one interacts with others during rehearsals... people [in pageant organizations] also will take note of that.

From the perspective of the pageant organization, keeping the contestants uninformed about how exactly they were evaluated in the competition could be a strategic decision. Not informed of any specific judging criterion, the contestants were left to rely on their own imagination of the evaluation process, and every woman could be led to believe that she had certain advantages in the competition and that her
excellence and efforts would not go unnoticed. To some extent, while the pageant not only avoided any potential complaint of unfair judgment because there was no set standard to base an argument on, it also motivated the contestants to keep putting in efforts believing everyone had a chance to win.

Another way the pageant organization seemed to keep the contestants occupied and motivated was to engage them in various sponsored events. As mentioned earlier, the contestants of this regional pageant were brought to different provinces for a weekend of pageant events. Many interviewees found the trip an interesting experience and enjoyed traveling together with other contestants, although a few of them remembered it to be physically taxing.

Ailan: We spent a long of time on a bus, and there were a lot of photo shoots at the event where we had to stand in the sun wearing very little clothes. I got so tired after walking around all day and without much sleep.

Feng: The bus ride was 11 hours and we got there around 2 a.m. Then we had to wake up at 6 in the morning and start doing the makeup ... I remember having a stomach pain from not having time to eat or rest. But there were a lot of media taking photos of us. I had to smile so much my face got stiff at the end of the day.

It is common practice in beauty pageants to involve the contestants in various sponsored events. According to the pageant producer Justin, even though this regional pageant was officially affiliated with the Miss World brand, its organization and operation was entirely independent. Other than following certain structural requirements set by the Miss World British headquarters, the main goal of the organizers of this regional pageant was to secure enough sponsorship to fund all the pageant activities while making a profit. Therefore, for the most part the top priority of the pageant was to please its sponsors.
Being between the ages of 19 and 24, these Chinese beauty contestants had largely grown up with the emergence of a consumer culture in China. Throughout the interviews, the women showed high familiarity and acceptance of the commercial nature of most beauty pageants as well as the contestants’ responsibilities as ambassadors, and sometimes models and actresses, for the pageant and the sponsors. Some indicated that they personally did not care for certain sponsor events, but as a group these pageant contestants did not raise any question or concern about the business side of beauty pageants. In Ailan’s words, participating in the sponsor events was “lísuo dangran” (entirely reasonable).

Feng: When I told my family I was going to a beauty contest, some of them were wondering if there was going to be any qian guize (latent rules). And they told me if I see any sign of back stage deals, they would not want me to continue because winning a pageant title is not that important, especially if I have to make any sacrifice.

Largely spoken in euphemism, some women suggested a certain wariness about the involvement between the pageant sponsors and the contestants. Qian told the researcher that during one of pageant events, she and a few other contestants were invited to dine with the sponsors and special guests of the pageant. Even though they were just all sitting around a big table and having casual conversations, Qian didn’t seem to like the atmosphere.

Qian: To be honest, I don’t really like the normal business part of the pageant. I understand it’s a necessary commercial component, including all the dinners and stuff … but I am a design major, I prefer things to be simple rather than complicated.

According to Justin, many of the sponsors in this pageant were local businesses and wealthy individuals. Besides the commercial benefit from investing in pageants, some male sponsors and representatives also just enjoyed the fact that had the chance
to know some young and beautiful women. At the same time, many of pageant contestants such as Nana were looking for future career opportunities; hence, such social events provided them the venue to network with pageant sponsors and influential individuals who could help them achieve their goals.

In general, these pageant contestants expressed a high level of confidence and trust in the pageant organization regarding the evaluation system and the pageant-sponsor relationship. Compared to focus group participants, these pageant contestants painted a highly positive image of beauty pageants in China. Although they hinted at some issues such as lack of procedural transparency, they did not bring up any major concern. At times, it seemed like the contestants were trying to avoid making negative remarks about the pageant as a way to justify their own involvement. One particular incident at the very end of the finale show revealed that some women’s positive attitude was mostly pragmatic.

The top six contestants of each of regional pageants could advance to the national Miss World China pageant. Hui, as well as a few other women who participated in the interviews, ended up with an individual award but did not make it into the top six. In complete contrast to the positivity she presented in the interview about the pageant, Hui was enraged by the result and started questioning the pageant committee about their judgment right after the show was over. It turned out that Hui had doubts all along about the pageant procedure but chose to believe in the fairness of the organization. She claimed that there must have been certain backstage deals in the pageant because some girls who made it into the top six were clearly unqualified. Hui and her family were eventually able to calm down and accept the defeat, but this incident definitely left a bad
taste in the mouth of many people who were part of the pageant and left the researcher wondering how many of these young women actually believed in beauty pageantry while others were merely taking what they needed from an apparently flawed system.

**Perceptions of Self and Feminine Beauty after Pageants**

**Increased self-confidence**

Many contestants mentioned a boost in self-confidence as a result of their beauty pageant experience. By the time of the interviews, these women had already passed multiple rounds of eliminations in this regional pageant. According to the information provided by the pageant organization, they originally received over 300 applications from which the committee selected 85 as official contestants after screenings and auditions. Another 35 women were eliminated during the quarter-final competition, which means the eight women in the interviews were among the 50 remaining contestants in the competition.

Like any competitive event, making the shortlist and surviving eliminations was an encouraging thing for beauty pageant contestants. An anecdotal story Justin told the researcher provided some background explanation for this increase in self-confidence among the pageant contestants.

Justin: There was one girl at the quarter-final competition, she was doing fine during the audition, but when she got to the first rehearsal and saw so many tall beautiful girls, she just burst into tears right away. She didn’t even get on the stage...she knew she didn’t have a chance...I felt sorry for her, but it’s a competition, you know.

From a social comparison standpoint, the girl in this story was engaged in upward comparisons with other pageant contestants whom she perceived as superior in beauty, and her self-perception and self-esteem were devastated when she thought she could not match up or compete with them. On the opposite side, the women who
passed multiple rounds of eliminations in a beauty pageant might experience an increase in self-esteem when they make downward comparisons to their competitors whom they perceived as weaker or were eliminated from the competition.

Ailan: Before I always felt that I was too tall or too thin, and there was a sense of distance between me and the other students at school. You know, my schoolmates tended to be shorter. So in this competition, I got to meet so many tall girls and I started to feel like I am also a meinü (beautiful woman). Now when I go back to school, I feel different and more confident about my appearance.

The source of Ailan’s increased confidence was a newfound membership in the class of meinü. After being surrounded by other tall women in the beauty pageant, she discovered a sense of belonging after years of feeling alienated in normal schools. In the later member check email, Ailan told the researcher that she started doing part-time modeling jobs under the influence of the model friends she made at the pageant. She said the compliments she received during the pageant had given her a lot of confidence which motivated her to pursue higher goals in life. She was also thinking of going back for another Miss World pageant because she really enjoyed being on stage and the fact that she was experiencing something unique that other girls of her age didn’t have the chance to do.

Qian started amateur modeling before the pageants and her experience competing in beauty contests had compelled her to overcome a common fear that many young Chinese people had about public speaking and made her an overall more confident person.

Qian: As a non-professional contestant, I have to get used to being on stage and presenting myself. It was a lot of pressure at the beginning because I

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28 Some contestants refer to the contestants who had stage training and experience (e.g., modeling, dancing, acting, etc.) as “professional” and the ones who came from other backgrounds as “non-professional.”
was too shy….You can imagine, for example, in the classroom when a teacher asks someone to do a performance in front of the entire class, every student would lower their head and not want to be called on. It’s the common case in China. So I had to really break though this barrier and learn from the more experienced constants…. I felt that I have grown as a person so much faster in this competition than in any other setting.

The focus group women had perceived the pageant contestants in China as attractive and outstandingly confident young woman. This public impression was confirmed by the contestants of this pageant both from the ways they handled the interviews and the performances they put on in the pageant competition. The confidence of some of the women might have come from years of stage performance experiences before the pageant while others might have gained their confidence from participating in the pageant. Overall it is safe to postulate that beauty pageants both attract and produce young women with high self-confidence, and beauty pageant contestants as a group could be representative of the spirit of modern Chinese femininity which is positive, strong-willed, and fearless.

**Approaching the ideal femininity**

According to these pageant contestants, ideal feminine beauty was a combination of outer appearance and personal qualities.

**Meili:** After the Miss Asia pageant, I really started to understand what beauty is. First of all, every girl loves beauty and wants to be beautiful. Then I think beauty is from both the inside and outside. You need to have some substance, that’s why I tell myself to read more books and learn English. Also you need to learn how to *baozhuang* (package) your appearance, dress appropriately and pay attention to your mannerisms.

**Hui:** A very important part of this pageant is its emphasis on personal compassion and environmental awareness. I think a basic standard of beauty is being compassionate. If a woman only has a beautiful outside, she may be considered a *meinü*, but she is just a low-class *meinü*. Real *meinü* has to also have inner quality, she is not just a *huapin* (flower vase).
A lot of foreigners think the beauty of Chinese women is introverted and we all need to look a certain way, such as small eyes and round face…In my opinion, Chinese beauty is natural and easy going, just like Miss World Zhang Zilin, I think her femininity is very sweet and womanly….But I also don’t agree with the pale skin ideal in China. I think beauty is healthy and natural, and if you look like you are sick or unhealthy, you definitely cannot represent beauty.

Many of the pageant contestants suggested in the interviews that the very concept of beauty pageantry was closely associated with the pursuit of the ideal femininity. They believed that through all the training and competition they experienced at the pageant, they were also approaching the true embodiment of the ideal form of feminine beauty.

In addition to having a professional hair and makeup team and quality costume providers, the pageant made sure the contestants were properly coached on the stage. One of the committee members and judges of this pageant was a department chair at Cai and Qian’s university and a renowned modeling coach in the industry. She was also responsible for providing runway training to all contestants. Similarly, one of the executive producers of the pageant was an experienced stage performer and choreographer at a dance company, and she was giving instructions to the contestants on the opening dance as well as their individual talent performances.

Jialin, the flight attendant, said that she always admired the special qizhi many fashion models had, and during the runway training at the pageant she was able to learn how to walk like the models, with confidence and qizhi. Meili had been a ballet dancer since she was little and found the “catwalk” particularly challenging because of her outward foot stance and stiffened chest. But after months of training her runway appearance was improved tremendously and she felt beautiful walking as well as dancing. As a modeling major, Cai realized that the ideal image of feminine beauty was
not quite the same in the pageant as it was in fashion. Being used to the extreme thin, androgynous, and expressionless look of fashion models, Cai learned from her pageant experience that feminine beauty could also be soft, girly, and with smiles.

Cai: When I was modeling, they told us that on the runway we should look expressionless and the steps have to be steady and strong. So I feel that my runway walk was a little too masculine compared to the other girls in the pageant. I am learning to show more of the girly and feminine side of myself.

Another thing the contestants seemed to grasp from their pageant experiences was the importance of “image” in feminine beauty. On the pageant stage, the women were limited in the ways that they could communicate their femininity to the audience.

Because the regional pageant did not have a Q&A section, the contestants were only able to present their beauty through how they looked and how they moved. As a result, the women learned to pay diligent attention to the overall image they present in front of others, which included her physical appearance, manners, and qizhi.

Feng: Even when you don’t have perfect makeup on, you still need to have a perfect smile and spirit. Every moment you are outside, you need to let people around feel your sunny and positive attitude.

Meili: As a dancer, I used not to pay too much attention of what I wear. But now I think it’s very important to dress nicely or at least neatly when I go out in public. Also I used to sit with my knees open, a bad habit of being a dancer, but I realize other people might perceive me as uncultured if I sit like that. So from the pageant, I learned that a woman’s inner qizhi is very much communicated through the image she presents.

All of the eight interviewees considered their involvement in beauty pageants an overall positive experience that they would definitely recommend to other women with similar interests. Also, they appeared to be strong believers in the motto “nianqing buyao liubai” (live life to the full extent while you are young).

Qian: If you really have a dream, you need to at least give it a try. Because before you do it, you always think it is just a dream. Only when you put
you yourself out there and try can you know ‘oh, I could really do this, I could really be this person.

According to the women, the most satisfying part of participating in a pageant was the fact that they pushed themselves to chase after a dream. Even though they knew there were people who were against or indifferent to the idea of beauty contests, they were glad that they had the courage and determination to utilize their youth and beauty to achieve their goals.

Feng: I think when you are young, and you think you have the ability, there’s no reason not to do it. Otherwise when you get older, you might regret not trying, because even if you tried and failed, you can still tell yourself that you were brave….Or if one day you want to do it, but the best time has passed, you can’t achieve the same thing as when you were young anymore.

Meili: Every girl loves beauty, and every girl has a dream. What I want to say is that if you really have a dream, you have to go after it. Don’t wait on it! You have to act right now if you want to achieve something great in your life.

It was worth noting that there was a sense of urgency that the women were trying to convey in their comments. There seemed to be a latent assumption that beauty was not only an important but also a time-sensitive substance in women’s lives, and every woman should take advantage of her youth and beauty when she still had it. This sentiment not only suggested an ingrained gender belief among these pageant contestants that the value of feminine beauty was determined by a patriarchal social system, it also indicated a cultural anxiety in which Chinese women felt the pressure to trade their youth and beauty as commodities. Essentially, in a capitalist and patriarchal society like neoliberal China, young Chinese women did not feel completely in control of their own femininity and were urged to cash in on their fleeting beauty.
However, if one looked at the issue from a different perspective, the comments of these pageant contestants were celebratory of the fact that the new generation of Chinese women were given the opportunity to make life decisions for themselves and go after their personal dreams and desires. In a way, these women were proud of the fact that they were participating in beauty pageants, something that was potentially controversial in the Chinese society, and recommended that other young women bravely pursue their own dreams. To a great extent, the positive outlook these pageant contestants had about their lives and the unapologetic attitude they had about their beauty and youth could be seen as both evidence and a source of empowerment for the young generation of Chinese women.
The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the contemporary Chinese ideologies and ideals of feminine beauty through the cultural phenomenon of beauty pageants. It investigates the gender discourses, feminine beauty ideals, and consumerism in Chinese beauty pageants, and aims to further the understanding of construction of femininity and contemporary Chinese culture in context with mass media and globalization. Previous research has yet to focus on neoliberal China as a unique and important historical and cultural location for studying beauty pageants and feminine beauty. This dissertation is one of the first to explore this timely topic and its findings will contribute to feminist discourse and communication scholarship on beauty and China.

In social science, the application of several research methodologies in studying the same phenomenon, or triangulation, is used to facilitate validation of the data and increase the credibility and validity of the results (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This dissertation adopted an exploratory inductive approach and combined three qualitative methods. First, textual analysis was used to examine the media texts of two Chinese beauty pageant shows, which allowed the embedded messages and symbolic meanings about gender, beauty, and culture to be analyzed. Second, six focus groups with 38 Chinese college women were conducted, providing insights into the public perceptions of beauty pageants in China and the negotiations of urban young women of the phenomenon. Third, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight contestants of a regional Miss World China pageant, which offered a close look at the perspectives and lived experiences of the women who were part of the phenomenon under study.
In this chapter, the researcher reviews some major findings from the textual analysis, focus groups, and in-depth interviews and discusses the implications of these findings. The discussion is divided into four main areas. The first area focuses on the gender discourses in Chinese beauty pageants, paying particular attention to the traditional and patriarchal gender beliefs and objectification of female bodies. The second area focuses on the construction of ideal feminine beauty in Chinese beauty pageants, and how urban young women negotiated these ideals within the sociocultural and personal context. The third area discusses the implications of the Chinese beauty pageant phenomenon in relation to capitalist consumer culture and the globalization of mass media in neoliberal China, especially through issues such as pageant conspiracy, mingxingmeng, and cosmetic surgery. Last but not least, the fourth area examines the current status of feminism in China with the evidence found in the Chinese beauty pageants and with young urban Chinese women. In addition, this chapter discusses the limitations of this study and suggests areas for future research.

**Implications of Findings**

**Gender Discourses in Chinese Beauty Pageants**

Confucianism, which emphasizes the distinctions between sexes and their roles in the family, is at the root of many Chinese cultural and social beliefs (Tamney & Chiang, 2002). Under Confucianism, girls at a very young age are taught to be submissive to the males in the family and devote themselves to their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers (Tamney & Chiang, 2002). Based on the finding of the textual analysis and in-depth interviews, beauty pageants in China were framed as a special type of feminine competition, in which certain traditional and patriarchal gender beliefs were reinforced.
Beauty pageants are known as “xuanmei bisai” (beauty selection contest) in China, and the competitive nature of the events was emphasized in the organization of the pageants (e.g., multiple eliminations throughout the competition). However, unlike sporting events or reality talent shows, in which the participants are often portrayed as ambitious and aggressive, the contestants in the Chinese beauty pageants were frequently referred to as “jiali” (fine beauty), and portrayed as amenable and ultra-feminine. On stage, the Chinese pageant contestants were rarely given the opportunity to express themselves freely, if at all (especially in Miss World China), and their movements were highly confined by the choreographed dances, catwalks, and poses. Off stage, these pageant women also tended to maintain a humble and amiable image by avoiding discussions of their goals or expectations while emphasizing friendship over competition.

To the average pageant viewer in China, the young women who participated in a beauty contest were not portrayed as actively competing against each other; instead, they were passively exhibiting their feminine beauty to be judged, rated, and awarded. Not only did the winning and losing in a beauty contest seem coincidental because of the vague evaluation system, the pageant contestants also appeared emotionally detached from the competition when all they were shown doing was smiling and looking beautiful. In the end, beauty pageants in China perpetuated the stereotypical gender belief that women were docile, reserved, and unambitious, and all they could do were to gracefully “accept” what they were given in life.

A great deal of production effort was made in the Chinese pageant shows to bring out the best performances of the contestants (e.g., the extravagant stage and
costume designs, professional makeup team, and diligent runway coaching). The goal of each individual contestant's performance was to demonstrate her ability to embody the ideal feminine beauty and stand out in the competition. However, from a feminist cinepsychoanalysis point of view, in a patriarchal culture the media representations of pageant performances inevitably eroticized and objectified the women on stage for the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975/1989).

Some focus group participants of this study pointed out that most of the Chinese beauty pageant shows dedicated the majority of their air time to showing the contestants in costumes that revealed and accentuated their bodies, and this type of performance of femininity seemed to only cater to the interests of heterosexual male audiences. These young Chinese women showed rejections of the sexualized performances, such as the bikini contest, in beauty pageants because they felt alienated as an audience and objectified as women. In their opinion, beauty pageants would attract more female audience if they would make efforts to showcase the intelligence and individuality of the contestants in addition to their perfect appearance.

At the same time, the Chinese pageant contestants showed less critical opposition to the bikini contest than the college women. The interviewees who participated in a regional Miss World China pageant admitted that wearing bikinis on stage was psychologically challenging at first, but mainly because they were not used to exposing their bodies in front of a large audience and that the conservative sexual culture in China dictated a subdued female sexuality. Then they overcame the initial apprehension with a collective self-assurance that they were “not alone” and with the
idea that the female body was a key component of feminine beauty that needed close
scrutiny for perfection.

Historically, the swimsuit contest has been a focus of feminist critique on modern
beauty pageants which argues that it creates anxiety about female bodies and
constructs feminine beauty for display (Banet-Weiser, 1999). The format of a bikini
show in the Chinese beauty pageants is directly copied from the Western pageants, and
there has yet been any systematic feminist protest against it. The young Chinese
women who participated in the bikini shows demonstrated discomfort on the personal
level, but largely failed to acknowledge the “male gaze” or the sexualization and
objectification of women in these performances on the social level. The only rejection of
the bikini show came from the female audience of the pageants, but even they tended
to stop at the admission that they were not the “target audience,” therefore the only
thing they could possibly do was not watching it. As a result, China is unlikely to see any
organized obstruction against the bikini show in beauty pageants until there is
significant feminist conscious-raising and movement, hopefully by the newer
generations of young Chinese women.

One of the most important messages promoted in the Chinese beauty pageants
was that the public recognition of beauty, such as winning the title of a beauty queen, is
the ultimate achievement for women. By stressing the effort and determination required
to obtain the status of “beautiful” and the sense of accomplishment individual women
should feel when they finally achieve it, beauty was framed as a crucial and defining
part of femininity and directly linked to women’s self-worth.
Many of the pageant contestants in the interviews reported increased self-confidence after participating in pageants because of the experience in defeating other women to stay on top of the competition as well as a newfound self-identification in the class of meinü (beautiful women). Some also indicated the desire to participate in more and higher-level beauty pageants in the future because they really enjoyed the sense of achievement they got from excelling in feminine beauty.

The findings of this study indicate that the feminist critique of the beauty system in the Western context is also applicable to neoliberal China. The same “beauty myth” that Naomi Wolf (1991) wrote about was also endorsed in the Chinese beauty pageants when they suggested to young women in China that becoming a beauty queen is a real accomplishment that merits recognition, celebration, and ultimately reward from society. Through beauty pageants, the importance of physical attractiveness of women was reinforced in the contemporary Chinese society, which was increasingly image-driven and obsessed with feminine beauty. By framing beauty as the most crucial task and ultimate achievement for any young woman, the Chinese beauty pageants further substantiated the patriarchal and capitalist beauty culture. Young women were taught to associate their self-confidence and ability to succeed with their physical appearance, and to believe that their pursuit of beauty was worth any emotional and financial investment.

**The Chinese Beauty Ideals**

Theorists from both evolutionary and feminist traditions tend to agree that physical attractiveness plays an important role in people’s lives (Langlois et al., 2000). Even though certain physical attributes are considered universally beautiful for the female gender (e.g., large eyes, high waist-to-hip ratio, smooth skin, etc.) (Gangestad &
Scheid, 2005), other feminine beauty standards (e.g., slenderness and pale skin tone) tend to have historical and culturally specific roots (Mazur, 1986; Johansson, 1998). From investigating the beauty pageant phenomenon in China, two particular physical attributes – being tall and being thin – were found to be important in the ideal feminine beauty in China.

The thin beauty ideal has been extensively studied in the Western context for its close relationship to female body image issues and eating disorders (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Thompson et al., 1999; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). In China, research shows that urban young women are increasingly experiencing weight-related body image dissatisfaction (Luo, Parish, & Laumann, 2005), and some scholars argue that anorexia nervosa is no longer bound to specific Western localities but grounded in an international culture of modernity (Lee, 1996).

Just like in most Western beauty pageants, the women who competed in the Chinese beauty pageants were uniformly thin. One of the pageant contestants (Qian) told the researcher in the interview that she had lost more than 30 pounds since starting modeling lessons, and the weight loss was a primary motivation for her to start participating in beauty pageants. Another contestant (Meili) who was a trained ballet dancer was determined to “look her best” by sticking to a strict diet during the pageant so she could compete with the ultra-thin fashion model contestants.

Even though thinness was a shared standard in both Chinese and Western beauty pageants, the ideal thin female body appeared slightly different in the two cultures. In the West, particularly the U.S., there has been a fitness movement in which women are the key players as they continue to gain social power (Stern, 2008). As a
result, the ideal female body in the contemporary Western culture is not merely thin but also “fit” or “toned,” and physical exercise or “working out” is a common method Western women use to pursue and maintain a slender body with certain body parts (e.g., abdomen and thighs) being slightly muscular.

As demonstrated by the beauty pageant contestants in the China, the ideal thin female body in China is in contrast “soft and delicate” with no visible muscle tone. In spite of the fact the Communist Party once promoted the ideology that men and women had equally capable bodies to work and contribute to nation building (Yang, 1999), it seemed that many traditional and patriarchal gender beliefs have reemerged as the dominant gender discourse in China since the economic reform. Young Chinese women are often hesitant about physical exercise because they have been taught that girls are supposed to be wenjing (cultured and quiet) instead of overly active like boys, and because they don’t want to put any muscle on their bodies because it is considered unfeminine. According to focus group participants, weight control was extremely common among college women in China, and most of them preferred dieting over physical exercise.

The difference in the ideal thin body for women – “soft” versus “fit” - between the Chinese and the Western cultures is subtle but meaningful. American feminist scholar Susan Bordo has written about the pursuit of slenderness as a troubled intersection between the traditional construction of femininity and the new requirement for women to embody the masculine values in the public/work arena (Bordo, 1993). While young girls in the West are searching for a feeling of strength and an entry into the privileged male world through the anorexic body (Bordo, 1993), young girls in China are resorting to
extreme diets in pursuit of a thin body that make them look and feel more feminine. The difference reflects the specific social and political positions of women in the two cultural locations and the struggles women are facing against patriarchy. It could also suggest that certain theoretical perspectives on beauty and the female body developed in the West may not be able to explain the experiences of young women in contemporary Chinese society.

Compared to being thin, being tall is potentially an even more alienating beauty standard because a person’s height is mostly determined by genetics and unalterable. The average adult woman in China is 158 cm (5’2”) while the average contestant the Chinese beauty pageants is over 173 cm (5’8”). Before modern beauty pageantry was formally introduced to China, there had been super model contests in China in the 1990s (Brownell, 1998, 2005). Many women in the focus groups used beauty pageants interchangeably with model contests, because the two often share a very similar format of competition as well as contestant pool. In fact, a large number of the women who participated in the Shanghai regional Miss World China 2012 pageant were fashion model-major college students who stood substantially taller than the non-model contestants.

In beauty pageants in China, the contestants with a modeling background had obvious advantages not only because they had more runway experience which was useful in the competition, but also because their fashion model body type fit the “tall and thin” ideal in the contemporary Chinese culture. As mentioned by the college women in the focus groups, one of the top criteria in judging feminine beauty in China was height, because it was commonly believed that tall women with had better body proportions and
would look more beautiful in clothing. This viewpoint is consistent with the favorable perceptions of women with higher leg-to-body ratio among other population groups (e.g., Prantl & Gründl, 2011; Sorokowski & Pawlowski, 2008), and is likely to be influenced by the fashion industry and mass media, which religiously use tall women with lanky bodies to model fashion as well as ideal feminine beauty (Guaradi et al., 1999).

Many pageant contestants in China were fine arts-major students from specialized art institutions. These women tended to be trained in performing arts and were perceived as “different” from the college women in normal schools. None of the 38 focus group participants were fine-arts majors or had participated in any beauty contest. When they were prompted to compare themselves to the pageant contestants, many of them expressed feelings of defeat and inferiority about their own physical attractiveness, which indicated the negative impact of such body image related upward social comparisons on the self-perception of and self-esteem of young women. But at the same time, these Chinese college women showed strong resilience to the unwanted social comparisons with the pageant contestants by psychologically distancing themselves from beauty pageants (e.g., indifferent attitude toward beauty pageant shows) in order to preserve their self-esteem.

The pageant contestants, on the other hand, appeared to be actively engaged in social comparisons with one another. Driven to evaluate their own chance in the competition, the women compared themselves with the contestants whom they thought were strong competitors. While the perceived discrepancy in skills (e.g. runway skills) served as the motivation for the women to improve themselves and led to minimum negative psychological impact, when physical attributes (e.g., height, body type) were
the focus of comparison, the women appeared to have negative self-perceptions after
such upward comparisons. Furthermore, the women also engaged in downward
comparisons with the contestants who they thought were worse off in the competition
for self-assure purposes and maintained their self-confidence.

According to the college women in the focus groups, there was a very distinctive
and well-defined image of what a beautiful face looked like in contemporary Chinese
culture: large eyes with double eyelids, tall nasal bridge, small/narrow chin, and fair skin
tone. It was worth noting that even though most of the facial features mentioned above
are actually included in the universal standards for female facial attractiveness
established in the evolutionary research (see Hönn & Göz, 2007), these young Chinese
women seemed to believe that they were uniquely Western or Caucasian features, and
that Western women were essentially more beautiful than Chinese women.

This pro-Western beauty ideology demonstrated by these young urban Chinese
women could be an important addition to feminist critique of cultural imperialism and
globalization. When some argue that Asian women are increasingly adopting a
“westernized” beauty ideal and pursuing the “white” features through cosmetic surgery
(Haiken, 1997; Kaw, 1999), an alternative question could be asked: what makes certain
ideal/attractive facial features (e.g., large eyes, small chin) particularly Western or white?
Certainly not all Caucasian women have large eyes or a small chin, nor are all women
who have large eyes and a small chin Caucasian. So a possible answer to this question
is that the globalization of mass culture has reinstated a pro-Western ideology of
feminine beauty which leads people from non-Western countries like China to believe
that “what is beautiful is also Western,” regardless of the fact that certain facial features are considered attractive across cultures.

**Beauty Pageants and the Neoliberal Chinese Society**

Textual analysis showed that the two Chinese beauty pageants paid direct tributes to their various sponsors throughout the shows, whether it was including the name of the sponsor in the pageant title, putting the sponsor on the judge’s table, showcasing the sponsor’s products, or inviting the sponsor to present an award. The major sponsors of the Chinese beauty pageants consisted of big media groups, real estate developers, domestic and foreign fashion companies, as well as other local businesses. The fact that beauty pageants in China were completely forthright about the commercial nature of their events suggested a largely justified beauty economy in contemporary Chinese society (Xu & Feiner, 2007).

At the same time, the Chinese college women in the focus groups who were consumers in the beauty economy also showed high level of awareness and internalization of the commercial nature of beauty pageants in China. The women pointed out that all the parties involved in the Chinese beauty pageants were inevitably looking for some way to benefit themselves: if a pageant was successful, the media company could earn advertising dollars for producing and airing the pageant show, other sponsors could boost reputation and increase sales from the free publicity, the contestants could get the exposure they needed for professional and personal advancement, and the audiences could satisfy their voyeurism by gazing at the bodies of the young women on stage.

From a business standpoint, beauty pageants seemed to create a win-win situation for everyone. In reality, various issues had emerged within the beauty pageant
phenomenon in China. Many focus group participants and some pageant contestants raised their suspicions on the collusion between pageant organizations, sponsors, and contestants in fixing the results of beauty pageants. Under the enlarging socioeconomic disparities in China, terms like fuerdai (second-generation rich) and guanerdai (second-generation of government officials) were created to describe a new Chinese aristocratic class that often uses its wealth and power to achieve unjust advantages. Thus, fused by media censorship and a lack of transparency in the sociopolitical system in China, more and more Chinese people were inclined to believe in the pageant conspiracy.

Another social concern raised in the Chinese beauty pageants was that young Chinese women were increasingly enticed by a “mingxingmeng” (dream to be celebrity). Since the economic reform and the development of a consumer culture in neoliberal China, images of young beautiful women are frequently used for commercial purposes (Johansson, 1998; Yang, 2011), while feminine beauty is greatly associated with social and professional advancement for Chinese women (Zhang, 2000). The focus group participants in this study believed that a combination of rapid social change towards capitalist consumerism and a broadening socioeconomic gap between the wealthy and the poor in contemporary Chinese society had cultivated among the youth in China a strong desire for instant success as manifested in beauty pageants. Even though most of the pageant contestants in the interviews did not talk about “mingxingmeng” directly, they admitted that participating in beauty pageants was a carefully-sought opportunity for their personal as well as professional advancement.

The single-child policy has to a great extent improved life opportunities of the young generation of Chinese women, especially in urban areas, as they were allocated
the same family and social resources as their male counterparts (Fong, 2004). At the same times, these female singletons are also under great parental and social pressure to achieve personal successes while fulfilling certain expectations based on their gender. Most of the pageant contestants in the interviews either had a background in stage performance (e.g., dancing, acting, or modeling) or a desire to enter show business. They also suggested that their parents showed overwhelming support for their beauty pageant endeavors because they all believed that pageants provided a great platform for them to get experienced and exposed.

In addition to the prospect of getting a high-paying job as model or actress, participating and winning a beauty contest could also mean the opportunity to get to know and eventually marry a rich man. The women in the focus group participants suggested that young women in China were enticed by beauty pageants because they were attracted to the possibility of an easy and comfortable life, even when it meant marrying for money.

*J.W., 20, involved viewer:* It is very simple: the better a person is being paid at his (her) job the better he (she) will be living life. Then if the pay is the same, why would someone pick a profession that requires more hard work when he (she) could pick an easy one? You see, marriage is also a profession. It’s a profession that has the highest payoff!

Furthermore, the prevalence of the mingxingmeng among young Chinese women could be seen as a side product of China’s emerging consumer culture, as they both emphasize self-expression and individuality. During the Mao era, women’s appearance was masculinized and stripped of any aesthetic and erotic appeal; and after the marketization of the Chinese economy, images of fashionable, beautiful, and Westernized urban women have become one of the most familiar symbols of post-Mao memories (Johansson, 1998). Many of the pageant contestants said in their interviews
that they genuinely enjoyed exhibiting their beauty and talent on the stage for other people to see. As a group of “80 hou” and 90 hou” (post 1980s and 1990s generations), these pageant contestants demonstrated a strong drive to express themselves as well as the confidence and pride in doing something “different” than other girls of their age.

China has been considered a collectivist culture compared to most of the Western countries where individualism is more prominent (Hofstede, 1997). As China continues to shift from communist nationalism to consumerist nationalism under the influence of globalization (Brownell, 1998), vanity and materialism also rapidly spread among the youth in China who increasingly aspire to stand out and be recognized. Meanwhile, beauty pageants like Miss World China pride themselves for being the important sites where Chinese culture and feminine beauty is represented on the global stage. Therefore, to a growing number of young women in China, becoming a beauty queen is an ultimate path to self-expression and self-importance as well as the modern definition of individual success.

The young women in the focus groups suggested a very distinctive set of beauty standards concerning women’s facial beauty in the contemporary Chinese culture. The women also believed that most of these facial beauty ideals were in fact divergent from the traditional Chinese aesthetics while similar to the western/Caucasian ones. As active media users regularly exposed to local entertainment programs and foreign media content, these college women showed a high degree of internalization of the mainstream pro-Western beauty ideology.

In order to achieve the ideal facial features such as large eyes and a small chin, many Chinese women turn to cosmetic surgery (LaFraniere, 2011). In China’s emerging
consumer culture, more and more Chinese people, especially young women, are embracing cosmetic surgery as an expression of freedom, individuality, and modernity (Brownell, 2005). The college women in the focus groups also seemed to have adopted a consumerist approach to cosmetic surgery, holding the belief that consumers had the right to consume products and services that were legally available to them, regardless of the health risk or controversy it may cause. From a transnational feminist perspective, these young Chinese women’s attitude toward cosmetic surgery suggested that capitalist consumerism has made a strong foothold in neoliberal China. Consumption was deemed as a fundamental right of individual consumers while any potential damage resulting from the consumption fell within personal responsibilities.

G.K., 23, non-viewer: If we just see it [cosmetic surgery] on the same level as getting your hair done or your nails done, both are changing your bodies, just one is change the inner structure… If a girl thinks she is really ugly and her self-esteem is suffering from it, nobody has the right to tell her not to do anything about it. If in the end she gets the glory she always wanted even though the price was physical pain, I think it is well worth it.

Moreover, the women largely acknowledged the importance of physical appearance in women’s self-confidence and self-esteem and claimed to understand and respect the decisions made by individual women for themselves to undergo cosmetic surgery. In an image-driven society, these Chinese college women conceded that having an attractive appearance would help a woman achieve the happiness and success in life on which she might otherwise miss out. Although they were aware of the fact that women were under more pressure to look beautiful than men, they did not consider cosmetic surgery an oppressive act. Instead, their views resonated the arguments made by feminist beauty scholar Kathy Davis (1995, 2003), who stressed
the elements of agency and empowerment in women’s experiences with cosmetic surgery.

**Current Status of Feminism in China**

The main research goal of this dissertation is to examine the Chinese beauty pageant phenomenon for gender discourses, beauty ideals, and capitalist consumer culture in neoliberal China. Grounded in feminist theories and activism, this dissertation also has a secondary mission to investigate the current status of feminism in China and identify obstacles and potentials for China’s feminist movements. From interacting with urban young Chinese women and hearing what they had to say about beauty pageants, feminine beauty, and the Chinese society, the researcher was able to analyze the feminist position (or lack thereof) these women were holding and its implications for women’s political advancement in China.

The Chinese classic text I Ching (Book of Changes) stated: “Great Righteousness is shown in that men and women occupy their correct place; the relative positions of Heaven and Earth” (quoted in Croll, 1978, p. 13). For centuries prior to the revolutions in the 20th century, women in traditional China were subordinated and controlled in the family and in society by ideological mechanisms like Daoism and Confucianism (Croll, 1978). During the May Fourth Movement in the 1910s and 1920s, students and intellectuals protested against the corrupt government and foreign invasions in China and advocated for women’s liberation in hope of making China a stronger nation (Stacy, 1983). After 1949, the new government of the People’s Republic made a firm commitment to ensure equality between men and women, as the then-leader Mao Zedong famously said: “Women hold up half the sky” (Li, 2001).
The social status of Chinese women has been improved remarkably since the communist regime changed the structure of Chinese society through ideological revolution and economic reform (Guthrie, 2009). However, evidence of gender inequality still remains largely present in contemporary China. According to a recent report from the United Nations, women in China still earn about 70% of the income of men in spite of their increased participation in education and the workforce, and this economic gender gap is likely to be caused by a mixture of factors, such as women’s predominance in lower-paid positions, interruptions in women’s work life related to family concerns, and women’s generally weak bargaining power with gender-biased employers (UNDP, 2010).

From examining the beauty pageant phenomenon, this study also inspected the current status of women’s liberation and feminism in China. Based on the findings of this study, beauty pageants in China were framed as events that celebrated feminine beauty and contributed to the empowerment of women by providing a unique platform for young Chinese women to express their individuality and achieve personal goals. As part of China’s booming beauty economy, beauty pageants have allowed young and attractive women to benefit from the commoditization of feminine beauty in ways that were unavailable and unimaginable to the older generations. The pageant contestants were portrayed and perceived as a new generation of Chinese women who took initiatives to challenge themselves and explore new possibilities in life.

At the same time, beauty pageants enticed these young Chinese women to compete in contests that focused on their ability to attract and entertain an audience with their physical appearance and stage talents rather than their intelligence or
academic achievements. If physical attractiveness continues to be held as the most important achievement for women as reflected in beauty pageants, not only individual women would experience higher rates of body image dissatisfaction, women as a group will be subordinated because they are not judged and valued the same as men. Eventually women’s political advancement in China could be stifled if not sabotaged because of this patriarchal beauty system.

Feminist scholars in China have made endeavors in searching for an identity for Chinese feminism in a global context.

Differing from an earlier preoccupation with defining the feminism of the reform period vis-à-vis the Maoist approach to women’s liberation, Chinese scholars, under the impact of Western theory, rather turn to spatial definitions of Chinese feminism vis-à-vis international feminism and adopt the notion of the “local” to define their place in the world (Spakowoski, 2011, p. 31-32).

This dissertation attempts to contribute to the local definitions of Chinese feminism by providing a discussion on the feminist position (or lack thereof) of the young urban Chinese women participated in the study. First of all, both the college women in the focus groups and the pageant contestants in the interviews demonstrated various degrees of intellectual awareness and sensitivity of social justice and gender equality in China, but generally low familiarity with Western feminist thought. Based on the research data as well as the overall interactions between the researchers and these women, their ambivalent feminist position was likely to be the result of the absence of a systematic feminist education and conscious-raising in Chinese schools and families, together with the collision of the communist and capitalist ideologies in neoliberal China.

While a number of women who participated in this study recognized the persistence of certain patriarchal gender beliefs in the Chinese society which might be
preventing Chinese women’s advancement, most others tended to internalize these beliefs as part of the Chinese “chuantong wenhua” (tradition and culture). Six decades after feudalism was demolished by the communist revolution, certain patriarchal and subordinating gender practices (e.g., men taking mistresses) are making a come-back in neoliberal China to serve the emerging class of nouveau-riche men (Levin, 2011). Unfortunately, many young Chinese women seemed to be captivated by this trend without questioning the patriarchal origin of the so-called “tradition.”

Situated in the thriving market-oriented economy and consumer culture in China, these women largely assumed the commercial nature of beauty pageants and appeared detached from the fact that feminine beauty was commoditized and consumed for monetary gain. One of the most important feminist critiques of beauty pageantry - the issue of objectification of women or the “male gaze” - was mostly missing in the focus group discussions and strategically avoided in the interviews of the pageant contestants. Overall, these young Chinese women did not seem to share the feminist critiques of the patriarchal beauty system or the capitalist exploitation of feminine beauty. Instead, they demonstrated an impartial attitude toward the pragmatism and materialism resulting from the emerging consumer culture in China. In their view, capitalism and globalization was an inevitable path for China to achieve economic success and social advancement, even if it meant putting college women in bikinis on television.

In contrast to their debatable stance in feminism, the women in this study exhibited notable optimism about the ever-improving social status of Chinese women. They were confident that today’s young generation of Chinese women had more social power than any previous generation, and they were actively and consciously making
decisions for themselves in a rapidly changing social environment. They believed that feminine beauty essentially played an empowering rather than oppressive role in the lives of young women in China, and that the beauty pageantry was just another manifestation of the young generation of Chinese women taking charge of their own lives and making the most out of the global consumer culture of which they were a part.

**Limitations of the Study**

This dissertation is part of the initial efforts made to better understand feminine beauty and Chinese culture through the phenomenon of beauty pageants in neoliberal China. It is exploratory in nature and the main purpose is to open the door for future endeavors of this kind. Notwithstanding, due to the scope of the study and its ambitious task at hand, there are many limitations that apply.

First of all, this study took a snapshot of the phenomenon in question by only looking at a particular point of time (year 2012) in the history of Chinese beauty pageants. Such a limited time-frame has prevented the study from accounting for the entire course in which the phenomenon has been evolving and the critical historical events and moments that have contributed to its current status.

Secondly, the materials and individual perspectives included in this study might not be able to represent the breadth and width of the phenomenon under study. The two Chinese beauty pageant shows selected for the textual analysis were both (inter)national pageants, which did not allow for the potential differences among beauty pageants of various scales (e.g., local, regional, national) to be investigated. Similarly, the beauty pageant contestants were recruited from a specific regional pageant of Miss World China hosted in Shanghai, and many of the interviewees were students from renowned fine arts institutions in the region. Given their distinctive backgrounds and
experiences, the insights of these women might be substantially different from the contestants of other smaller-scaled beauty pageants in China.

Thirdly, the focus groups’ participants were college students of a particular region in mainland China, and their past experiences with beauty pageants as a media audience were scattered and uneven. As a result, their opinions of Chinese beauty pageants might be biased by their relatively low media exposure to pageant shows on television, and should not be used as equivalence of opinions of devoted pageant viewers in China. Also, since China is a considerably large country with significant regional differences in prosperity level and culture, some of the findings of the focus groups might be unique to the geographic and cultural location of the research site.

Lastly, the researcher was the sole investigator in this study and she was responsible for all the data collections and analyses. In qualitative research, it is useful for the researcher to immerse him/herself in the data by being involved in the collecting, transcribing, and analyzing processes. But sometimes it is also helpful to have more than one investigator to look at the same data and provide alternative interpretations. This study was conducted in mainland China and all the original data was collected in Mandarin Chinese. The data analysis process could have benefited from having another bilingual researcher with similar training in social science ensure the accuracy of all the translations and offer a second opinion on the analyses.

Areas for Future Research

This study examines the media representations, public opinions, and participant experiences of beauty pageants in contemporary China. Throughout the course of this study, the researcher came to notice a recent tide change in the beauty pageant scene in China. After a pageant craze swept the country in the mid-2000s, the Chinese
government recently started to implement media control on beauty contests and reality
competition shows in effort to correct the bourgeois ideology promoted in those events.\(^1\) The focus group data showed that beauty pageant viewership was low among young
women in China, and it could be the result of the decrease in the number of pageants
hosted by state-run media outlets and/or broadcasted on television. Future research
can take a historical approach and examine the present and past trends in Chinese
beauty pageants. By going back in time to the beginning of modern Chinese beauty
pageant and tracing its evolvement, researchers can paint a fuller picture of the beauty
pageant phenomenon in neoliberal China and discover new relevant issues in feminine
beauty and Chinese culture.

This dissertation focused exclusively on the perspectives of urban young women
in China and the findings shed light on the impact of the contemporary beauty economy
on the lives of young Chinese women. The focus group participants suggested that
most beauty pageant shows seemed to predominantly target the male audiences. The
researcher also observed at the pageant competition site that men played many key
roles in beauty pageants: from producers to judges, from sponsors to audiences. Even
though the lives of Chinese men might not be directly influenced by beauty pageants,
the roles they are playing in the Chinese beauty economy are worth examining. Focus
groups can be conducted with young Chinese men discussing the ideal feminine beauty
and the commoditized beauty culture in China, and the findings could be compared to
the ones in this study to develop a more comprehensive view of the beauty pageant

\(^1\) Based on personal exchanges with Justin, the executive producer of Miss World China 2012 Shanghai
regional pageant.
phenomenon in China that takes into account the male perspective as well as gender dynamics.

Field studies or ethnographies have been successfully used in previous studies of beauty pageants in different countries, and they are likely to be beneficial in studying the lived experiences of pageant women in China in the future. By spending an extensive period of time with the pageant contestants throughout the competitions, the researcher(s) can gain native knowledge and deep understanding of what beauty pageants mean to such a self-selected group of young and attractive women, as well as what their participations in beauty pageants means to the Chinese society as a whole. By engaging with the organizations of beauty pageants, the researcher(s) could also delve more deeply into the business side of the story and uncover the behind-the-scene forces that are driving the entire industry forward.

The findings of this study indicated that the current status of feminist awareness among young Chinese women was at a discouragingly low level. Although the participants were optimistic and confident that young women in China were taking control of their own lives and making efforts to improve their social status, they also appeared overly accepting and uncritical about the patriarchal gender beliefs and capitalist consumer culture in the Chinese society. The evidence of a potential lack of feminist education and conscious-raising in Chinese schools and families deserves more attention from feminist scholars. To contribute to the global women’s movement, future research should bring the issue to the forefront and systematically assess the current status of feminism in China for potential improvement.
Last but not least, the study is one of the first to examine beauty pageants in mainland China. Comparative studies of beauty pageants between China and the U.S., where modern pageantry originated, could yield important insights on how feminine beauty is constructed, experienced, and negotiated differently or similarly in two influential and sometimes opposing cultures. Also, future studies could compare and contrast beauty pageants in the Chinese communities in different parts of the world, such as Taiwan, Singapore, and Australia (example see Wu, 1997), and focus on how beauty ideals and discourses of feminine beauty evolve where Chinese culture encounters other indigenous cultures and/or national identities in a global setting.

**Conclusion**

Since the first Miss America pageant in 1921, the concept of beauty pageantry has evolved extensively in the American society. In the U.S., different people are likely to have different mental pictures of beauty pageants: some may think of large-scale media events such as Miss Universe or Miss USA, others may think of the homecoming queens in their high schools and colleges, and some may even bring up the child pageants they saw in *Miss Little Sunshine* or *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Furthermore, beauty pageants in the U.S. could be hosted for different purposes: some are to promote tourism or sell products, some are to celebrate a cultural identity, and some are to support and award outstanding young girls with scholarships.

In China, people’s memories of beauty pageants are still quite recent and uniform at times. The findings of this study showed that beauty pageants in China tended to be in identical formats and the contestants were predominantly college students with performance arts backgrounds. Compared to the U.S., beauty pageants in China also tended to serve a singular commercial purpose, whether it is a regional competition for
an international pageant like Miss World or an underwear model competition in the local mall. Even when the pageants attempted to claim philanthropy or Chinese nationalist pride as a main theme of the show, the bluntness and pervasiveness of commercial sponsorships just made everything else seem like an afterthought.

Under the rapid advancement of a capitalist consumer culture in neoliberal China, beauty pageants were perceived as just another type of commercial events or entertainment programs on television. While the businesses and individuals that sponsored the beauty pageants aimed at financial and status returns, the women who competed in pageants were hoping to realize their dream of becoming a celebrity or simply working in the entertainment industry. The increasing socioeconomic gap in contemporary Chinese society was believed to lead young girls to pursue quick success and shortcuts in life while generating social conspiracies about the “backstage deals” in beauty pageants. By and large, beauty pageants in China were imagined to be the vanity fair where feminine beauty was in open trade with masculine wealth and power.

Feminists have argued that beauty contests reinforce the patriarchal system and hegemonic femininity by objectifying, controlling, and commoditizing women’s body (Banet-Weiser, 1999), and international beauty pageants in particular promote consumerist values and westernized ideals of feminine beauty (Cohen et al., 1995). The current study indicates that these feminist critiques are also applicable to beauty pageants in neoliberal China, given the abundant evidence of patriarchal gender beliefs, commoditized femininity, and pro-Western beauty ideology. In addition, the young Chinese women in this study, while limited in their feminist awareness, raised issues
such as different expectations of physical attractiveness between men and women, and young girls being taught to pursue mingxingmeng or simply marry for money.

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine beauty pageants in neoliberal China as a new phenomenon that has yet received much scholarly attention. All the preceding pages have aimed at bringing an initial understanding of the various components of this phenomenon and providing a starting point for future endeavors in studying feminine beauty in China. Through the literature review and empirical findings, the researcher has tried to point out how important this issue is and how little is known about it. Essentially, it was an intrinsic sense of curiosity and urgency that inspired this dissertation, and hopefully the questions that have not been answered in this study will motivate more scholars to join this stream of research.

On August 18, 2012, Miss World celebrated its 62nd annual pageant in Ordos China, a mining city in Inner Mongolia on the edge of the Gobi desert (AFP, 2012). This year, China convinced the world not only of its ability to successfully host one of the biggest international pageants in a less expected location, but also its competitiveness in achieving the global epitome of feminine beauty by bringing home the Miss World crown for the second time since 2007. Even though the initial zest among the Chinese public and the central government seem to cool down after a decade, it is still fair to say that beauty pageants will continue to grow as an integral part of the beauty economy and as an inherent platform for feminist movement in neoliberal China.
# APPENDIX A
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS CODEBOOK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-Order Category</th>
<th>Second-Order Category</th>
<th>Miss Chinese Cosmos</th>
<th>Miss World China</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Gender roles between male and female hosts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Performance of femininity</td>
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<td>Feminine Beauty Ideals</td>
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<td>Thin/slender</td>
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<td>Soft and delicate</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Progressiveness and empowerment</td>
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APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Introduction

Hello everyone, my name is Meng and I am a doctoral student from University of Florida and I study mass communications. First of all, I want to thank you all for coming today to participate in my dissertation study about beauty pageants in China. Today we are going to have a focus group discussion. If you are not familiar with focus group, it is like a small group discussion on a particular topic. This is not a class and I am not your instructor. My role is to ask you some open-ended questions about beauty pageants and facilitate the discussion process, and also to keep us on track. Think of this as more like a conversation among friends, and please feel free to say whatever that is on your mind. Let me again ensure you that there are no right or wrong answers in this focus group, and I want to hear everybody’s opinions because they are all very valuable to my research.

Before we start, I want you to know that your participation in this focus group is entirely voluntary, so you do not have to answer the questions that you don’t feel comfortable answering or don’t want to answer. You can also excuse yourself from the focus group at any time, but please be mindful not to interrupt the discussion. Also please be respectful to other participants and try not to interrupt when someone else is talking, and please turn your cell phone off or switch it to silent. The discussion will last about an hour, and I will try my best to keep our conversation on track so we can finish on time.

You may notice that there are two electronic recorders on the table, and our focus group discussion will be recorded for the purpose of future reference. Please let me assure you that the recording will only be heard by me and the supervisor of this research, and it will be transcribed by me within four weeks of the focus group session. During transcription, the audio files will be kept in a secured place, and any information that could identify individual participant will be deleted. After the transcription the original audio files will be erased.

You will be asked to fill out a survey about your media consumption at the end of the focus group. If you need to leave immediately after the meeting, I will email you the survey and you can fill out electronically and send it back to me.

Ok, do you have any question?

So let’s all get to know each other a little bit, by briefly introducing yourself. Let’s go around the table and each say your name, where you are from originally, and who is your favorite female celebrity?

Grand Tour Questions

- In your opinion, what is considered ideal feminine beauty in today’s Chinese society?
• Where do you usually learn about this social/cultural beauty ideal? (media? celebrities)

• Beauty pageant viewing

• What beauty pageant have you seen/heard of before, and on what media did you see them?

• What are some of the things that particularly captured your attention in those pageant shows?

• What did you like and not like about the beauty pageant shows?

• What are some of the reasons that you choose not to watch beauty pageants?

**Beauty pageant general perspectives**

• How do you define beauty pageant? (Use a few sentences or words to describe your understanding of a beauty pageant)

• What are you general impressions about the phenomenon of beauty pageant in China?

• In your opinion, what are some of the things that might have contributed to the popularity of beauty pageant in China?

**Beauty pageant personal feelings**

• Do you personally know anyone who has participated in beauty contest(s)? If so, tell us a little about what you know.

• If one of your good friends or family members wants to participate in a beauty pageant, what will your reaction be?

• Have you thought about participating in a beauty pageant or any similar contest yourself? What make you (not) want to participate?

**Wind up & Media usage survey**

• (After moderator giving a summary of discussion) Is this summary complete? Does it sound OK to you? Is there something we have missed?

• Do you have any final comment?

    Thank you very much for your time. Please fill out the media usage survey. If you have any additional question or comment, I will be here for another 20 minutes and you can also email me.
APPENDIX C
MEDIA USAGE SURVEY

On average, how much time do you spend watching television **per week**?

How often do you watch the following types of television program? (place an X in the box that applies)

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<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Very often</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
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<td>Talk Show</td>
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<td>Drama</td>
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<td>Entertainment</td>
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<td>Reality TV</td>
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<td>Documentary</td>
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<td>Cartoon</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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Other: ________________________________

How often do you watch television program produced by the following countries or regions? (place an X in the box that applies)

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<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mainland China</td>
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<td>Taiwan</td>
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<td>Hong Kong</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
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<td>South Korea</td>
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<td>United States</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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Other: ________________________________
On average, how much time do you spend reading magazines per week?

List some of the magazines you subscribe to or read regularly:

How often you watch movies of the following genres, including going to the theater, watch it on DVD, on television or online? (place an X in the box that applies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
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<td>Action</td>
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<td>Comedy</td>
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<td>Drama</td>
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<td>Horror</td>
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<td>Sci-Fi</td>
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<td>Love/Romance</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Other: ____________</td>
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How often do you watch movies produced by the following countries/regions? (place an X in the box that applies)

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<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
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<th>Often</th>
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<td>Mainland China</td>
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On average, how much time do you spend using the Internet per day?

How often do you perform the following activities on the Internet? (place an X in the box that applies and feel free to add other activities that are not mentioned at the end of the table).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
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<th>Often</th>
<th>Very often</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Reading News</td>
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<td>Email</td>
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<td>Micro-blogging</td>
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<td>Shopping</td>
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<td>Chatting</td>
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<td>Playing games</td>
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<td>Watching video</td>
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<td>Music</td>
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Other 1: ________________________________
Other 2: ________________________________
Other 3: ________________________________

Your name as used in today’s focus group: _________________________
APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Biographical questions

- Tell me a little about your background?
- Where are you from in China? Family members?
- What do you do for a living? Or where and what do you study?
- What do you like to do in your spare time? (Interests, hobbies)

Grand tour questions

- Tell me a little about your past experience with beauty pageants
  a) When did you first start getting involved in beauty pageants?
  b) Other beauty pageant or similar competition that you have participated?
  c) How did you hear about the Miss World China pageant and what motivated to come?

Focus questions

- How are people you know reacting to you participating in pageant?
  a) Family? Do they know? Do they support/oppose it?
  b) Friends? Teachers?
- To you personally, what kind of event/activity is a beauty pageant?
  a) What is the purpose of a beauty pageant?
  b) Anyone else who shares this view with you? Anyone who has different view?
- Describe your overall experience as a beauty pageant contestant?
  a) What parts of the pageant did you find most and least enjoyable?
  b) What’s your relationship with other contestants? (Do you compare yourself with the other girls?)
  c) How do you like the pageant organization? (Can anything be improved?)
  d) Some memorable things from participating pageant?
- What do you hope to gain from this experience?
a) Have you set any specific goals or expectations
b) What's your plan after the pageant?

- In what ways has competing in beauty pageants changed (or not changed) your life?
  a) Do you feel different about yourself afterwards?

**Windup**
- What do you have to say about beauty pageants to other young women in China?
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Li, R. (2011, June 19). Quality of life is lowest in west; Guizhou comes last in a new well-being index that reinforces the gap between rich and poor provinces. *South China Morning Post*, p. 8.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Meng Zhang is a researcher who is interested in beauty, gender, media, and Chinese culture. Born and raised in China, Meng has a bachelor’s degree in Arabic and English from Shanghai International Studies University. She worked in media production in China both in advertising and documentary. In 2006, Meng came to the U.S. for graduate school and obtained a master’s degree in Radio and Television from San Francisco State University. Meng worked as public relation intern and marketing assistant in San Francisco before she started her PhD program at University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications. As a doctoral student in mass communication, Meng focused on topics related to mass media, beauty, and China, such as television and women’s body image, media representation and audience perception of sexiness, ideals of feminine beauty in China, skin beauty advertising between China and the U.S., and modern beauty pageants. Meng received her PhD from University of Florida in the summer of 2013.