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# Social Media Celebrities and Neoliberal Body Politics in China

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Anett Dippner

No. 91 | September 2018



Freie Universität



Berlin

**KFG Working Paper Series**

**Edited by the Kolleg-Forschergruppe “The Transformative Power of Europe”**

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Dippner, Anett 2018: Social Media Celebrities and Neoliberal Body Politics in China, KFG Working Paper Series, No. 91, September 2018, Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) “The Transformative Power of Europe”, Freie Universität Berlin.

ISSN 1868-6834 (Print)

ISSN 1868-7601 (Internet)

This publication has been funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

Freie Universität Berlin

Kolleg-Forschergruppe

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# SOCIAL MEDIA CELEBRITIES AND NEOLIBERAL BODY POLITICS IN CHINA

Anett Dippner

## Abstract

Since 2015, a new category of media stars came to public awareness and sparked a controversial discussion in China: Internet Celebrities (Wanghong). “Wanghongs” build their fame and fandom mostly on their eye-catching and hyperfeminine appearance which they are presenting extensively on Social Media platforms to gain public attention and acquire followers and fans. The stereotypical so-called “Internet Celebrity face” (Wanghong lian) became the most discussed buzz word of the year 2016 and led to a society-wide discussion about new beauty ideals and the growing popularity of cosmetic surgery, the objectification and commercialization of the body, as well as the increasing importance of an appropriate appearance for the individual’s social and economic success since the 2000s. For tracing these questions, the article analyses the development and characteristics of this new group of celebrities and locates them in the booming “Beauty Economy”. By literally selling their beautiful face, Wanghongs convert symbolic capital through e-commerce and online advertising into real economic advantages. The utilitarization of “body capital” heats up the public discourse about yanzhi (value of a pretty face) in China’s status-conscious society. With an analysis of the so called “Internet Celebrities” phenomenon this paper looks behind the sparkling Social Media façade and reveals the social and economic conditions that led to this new ideology of beauty as capital in China.

## The Author



Dr. **Anett Dippner**’s research field is located in the intersection between area studies (Chinese studies) and social science. Since 2010, she is working on social change, social stratification and gender and women in China and East Asia at Freie Universität Berlin. Other topic related publications: *Miss Perfect. Neue Weiblichkeitsregime und die sozialen Skripte des Glücks in China* (Transkript, 2016) and *Beauty in East Asia* (Special Issue of ASIEN 2/2018, in publication)

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## 1. Introduction

This article starts with the observation that we can witness an intensification of feminine beauty norms and the commodified proliferation of beauty technologies in China in the recent decade. This development reached a visible peak with the growing popularity of so-called Internet Celebrities in 2015. In their striving for a perfect social media performance, Internet Celebrities rely mostly on their good looks and therefore subject themselves to a mixture of, on the one side, empowering and utilizing, but at the same time, also gender- and age-discriminating and disciplining techniques of the self. Their carefully carved and optimized appearance in social media forms the “projection surface” for a society-wide discussion about new motivations and mechanisms of beauty practices and ideals that seemingly now have arrived in the midst of society and have progressively become part of mainstream culture. Thus, Internet Celebrities became the symbols of a fierce discussion about new beauty ideals and the growing popularity of cosmetic surgery, the objectification and commercialization of the body, as well as the increasing importance of an appropriate appearance for the individual’s social and economic success since the 2000s.

This article sees itself as an explorative study and initial attempt to address this new phenomenon. As my research on this topic is still at the beginning stage, the findings of this article are based on preliminary qualitative research that includes a content analysis of images (see among others Bell 2011) posted on selected Chinese Internet Celebrity profiles (mainly on Weibo). The article employs a methodological mixture of visual semiotics (to identify symbols and their relation to broader systems of meaning in society), discourse analysis (to focus on sites of images in relation to a broader discursive framing) similar to Amy Shields Dobson’s (2015) analysis of postfeminist feminine gender performativity on MySpace profiles; an analysis of the general discourse about the Wanghong phenomenon in Chinese media (mainly focusing on, but not limited to, online media) and personal semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with five Internet Celebrities (whose Social Networking Services (SNS) profile amongst others I have analyzed) in China in order to consider the production side and the conditions shaping the production specifically.

My goal is to understand how a new awareness for “aesthetic vigilance” is constructed through the self-presentation of young women in the newly established Internet Celebrity culture - to borrow the concept of Simidele Dosekun (2017), who applied it to hyperfeminine self-constructions of women in Nigeria. Aesthetic vigilance can be understood as a calculative and self-governmental labor of risk-managing one’s attachments to beauty and its technologies against the backdrop of neoliberal discourses of self-optimization and capacity-building. As a new form of social knowledge, aesthetic vigilance is postfeminist and follows a neoliberal rationality of power in that it makes the women’s subjection to these forms of power seem reasonable and manageable (Bordo 1993; Davies et al. 2002; McRobbie 2015). Social media pull together themes of beauty, authenticity, labor, and entrepreneurial endeavor and can therefore be seen at the intersection of postfeminism, neoliberalism, and subjectivity. My approach is driven by the effort to understand the ways in which social media representations simultaneously utilize and complicate the construction of a “postfeminist” neoliberal femininity. Thereby I follow the argumentation of critical postfeminist scholars like Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, who wrote extensively about “aesthetic entrepreneurship” (Gill/Scharff 2011, 2017; Gill 2007; Scharff 2015), and will contribute to the question how the forces of neoliberalism are shaping experiences and practices related to beauty.

The construction of neoliberal body politics and aesthetic vigilance in social media communication manifest themselves in various discretionary ways, such as recommendations for care and beauty treatments, make-up or hair-style tutorials, workout tutorials and the so-called “fitspo” pictures that show perfectly modeled athletic bodies, or especially in the Chinese case, the so-called “cosmetic surgery diaries”; but also in the public discourse on the overwhelming economic success of attractive young women as Wanghongs. My approach is to trace these entangled processes of how normatively gendered body and beauty ideals are interwoven with narratives of success, and with which rhetorics and images of aesthetic vigilance and labor they are institutionalized – to then be able to explore how the Internet Celebrity culture sustainably shapes the sense of subjectivity of young Chinese women and fosters the establishment of new disciplinary practices on the body.

## 2. China’s Wanghong Culture

In 2016, Chinese media giant Sina Weibo hosted the “Superstars on Weibo” award (Chaoji hongren jie) for the first time, raising public awareness for a new category of media stars and sparking a very controversial, society-wide discussion: Internet Celebrities (Wanghong). The term Wanghong (short for: Wangluo hongren) mostly refers to a private person whose profile on social media platforms arouses such great public interest that his or her pictures or videos are virally circulated and shared by tens of thousands, up to millions of fans and followers who subscribe to his or her profile page or visit it regularly, without any personal contact between the profile owner and the fans. In this sense, Wanghongs could be seen as the Chinese counterpart to the new professional group of “Instagram Influencers” in the Euro-American region. Unlike bloggers, whose reputations are based on polarizing statements on politically and socially relevant issues, Wanghongs are decidedly apolitical and devote themselves almost exclusively to the areas of fashion/cosmetics, lifestyle, gaming, comics, and entertainment. With the public tribute to the most successful Internet Celebrities of the year, it became clear that this new group of personas is increasingly becoming more important than “classic” film and media stars, not only in terms of income and advertising range but also in terms of social influence and as role models. It is estimated that around one million Wanghongs are currently active on China’s social media (Shen 2016: 3) and the number of Wanghongs with more than 10,000 followers increased by 57 percent between 2016 and 2017. At the same time, the total fan base grew rapidly from 100 million in 2014 to 470 million in 2017 (iResearch 2017)<sup>1</sup>. Especially among the younger generation and digital natives, the importance and influence of the new stars is growing: with 56 percent of Wanghong fans, the main target group is the 20- to 30-year-olds, and as many as 89 percent of the 15- to 19-year-olds are already familiar with Internet Celebrities (Xie 2017: 161).

Most Internet Celebrities have one thing in common: an exceptionally good look. In particular, female Internet Celebrities – and 90 percent of the winners of the “Superstars on Weibo” award were female – gained much of their fame primarily through their above-average attractive appearance and thus belong

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<sup>1</sup> Most surveys in this sector are not conducted by academic research, but by private economic institutes or e-commerce consulting agencies, so the parameters of their findings and statistics aren’t fully traceable. I nevertheless use these numbers in the text just to demonstrate the overall trend and scope of this new phenomenon.

to the category of so-called “beauties” (meinü).<sup>2</sup> Although there are also some men active in this category, known as “flower boys,” who rigorously subscribe to the same beauty standards, in this article I will only focus on female staging strategies, as women are without doubt quantitatively the main representatives of the genre of “meinü.”

However, their physical perfection caused criticism and ridicule among many commentators of the award ceremony. In some media reports, the laureates were referred to as “goddesses with noses that stick up in the sky [means surgically modeled and raised noses], and a face full of hyaluronic acid,” all designed from one cast, looking like Barbie dolls produced on the assembly line (Yu 2016: 45). Subsequently, the stereotypical so-called “Internet Celebrity face” (Wanghong lian) became the most discussed buzzword of the year 2016.<sup>3</sup>

But apart from the headlines in global media, an academic analysis of this new beauty boom in China is still missing. Especially in the case of the phenomenon of Internet Celebrities, whose emergence and growing publicity can be seen as a symptomatic manifestation of the beauty boom, research in China is mostly concerned with collecting mere statistics rather than discussing social implications and causes. In Western research literature, internet communication in China and especially social media like Weibo has been studied mostly under the presumption of exploring new channels for political opinion formation, democratization and socio-political protests of a critical online public (e.g. Chen/Reese 2015; deLisle et al. 2016; Le Han 2016; Marolt/Herold 2016; Negro 2017; Shan/Yang 2017). The fact that most of the Chinese are more concerned with entertainment, gossip and shallow topics in their digital life has been disappointing for those with hopes for new digital ways of political reform and disenchanting for others interested in internet communication analysis. Only recently have some more comprehensive studies with a more social focus on the Chinese Web 2.0 landscape been attempted (Chen/Ip 2018; Gong/Yang 2017; Kent et al. 2017; Zhang 2016b). But a detailed discussion of the Internet Celebrity phenomenon or the mechanisms and effects of bodily representations on social media is still missing. As the rising popularity of social media stars and influencer is, of course, not a culture-specific phenomenon limited to the Chinese region with similar trends to be observed worldwide, a growing body of Western research literature in the field of media and communication studies and also sociology, where we can find a wide range of examples of how to discuss different aspects of social media has emerged. Yet, even there, a special focus on bodily representations is still marginal compared to the overall publications on social media (e.g. Albury 2015; Cover 2016; Dobson 2015; Lister 2013; Marwick 2015; Rettberg 2014; Whitefield-Madrano 2016). To

2 According to a list of the 100 most influential and successful Wanghongs in 2016, compiled by the Chinese search engine „Souhu,” most of the Internet Celebrities (36 percent) belong to the category of „meinü” (beauties) and specialize mainly in beauty and fashion. The category “Manga and Comic” follows with a clear margin of 21 percent and the category “comedy and entertainment” with 17 percent (Shen et al 2016: 95). These genres all follow different rules and ask for different requirements from the actors within the genre. Good looks are a specific requirement in the category of “beauties,” but less important in categories like comics or comedy. This means not all Internet Celebrities gained fame only because of their extraordinary attractive appearance, but the representatives of the genre of “beauties” achieved most public awareness and thus shape the popular image of Internet Celebrities as beautiful and attractive. In what follows, I speak only about these representatives of the category “meinü.”

3 The question „Is the Internet Celebrity face pretty or ugly?” provoked an unusually high number of 2590 answers on the popular Chinese community platform „Zhihu,” most of which tended to be more negative. The question „If everyone does not like the Internet Celebrity face, why are more and more women getting one by surgery and become successful?” even received 3337 answers (Yang 2017: 71).

bridge this gap, I will also include more comprehensive discourses on (neoliberal) constructions of the body in China in my considerations. Here we can find a broad array of literature, ranging from studies about the role of the female body as an object of consumer culture (Hopkins 2007; McWilliams 2013; Munshi 2001; Otis 2016) to discussions on gendered bodies and gender relations (Brownell/Wasserstrom 2002; Hooper 2015). Within the framework of sexual sociological studies, the gendered body is discussed in its function as a role model of incorporated heteronormativities (Farquhar 2002; Farrer 2002). In the course of criticism of public and political occupations of the sexual body, specific reference is made to beauty practices and their role in discourses of power (Brownell 2005; McMillan 2006). In the last few years, there has been a gradual increase and diversification in social analysis about various current body and beauty trends under the prism of neoliberal politics (Lee 2012; Luo 2012; Rofel 2007; Sun 2014; Wen 2013; Yang 2011). Most of these studies refer primarily to three factors to explain the increase and intensity of beauty practices: China's global market opening and the diffusion of global body and beauty ideals and gender role models via mass media, the establishment of an enormously influential and rapidly growing consumer culture targeting the new middle class and, last but not least, the increasing commodification of all areas of life due to neoliberal economic and political agendas (Kipnis 2007; Luo 2008; McWilliams 2013; Meng 2012; Otis 2016; Rofel 1999; Xu/Feiner 2007; Yan/Bissell 2014). Furthermore, I will also take studies on South Korea into account, as I find their neoliberal approach about the intrusion of capitalist market logic into the private sphere and the subsequent colonization of the body very convincing and applicable to the Chinese situation (Cho 2009; Elfving-Hwang 2013; Lee 2012; Park 2007). I would like to bring together these different strands and combine theoretical considerations from communication studies on the working principles and effects of social media with discourses on the body at the intersection of gender and area studies and neoliberal discourse. This will allow for a better grasp of the Internet Celebrity phenomenon in Chinese social media and its implications for narratives of vigilant body practices as a new feminine competence and a site of feminine subjectivity and empowerment.

If we understand social media as the mediatization of general, social communication processes then far-reaching social implications can be traced back to the "beauties" representations on Weibo, Weixin and other social media platforms, which also have visible "offline" effects on negotiations in the processes of subject formations and the contestation of social norms. In online communication on SNS platforms and images have gained a particularly dominant role: photos - above all the omnipresent "Selfie" - serve the social communicative use and consumption among peers and like-minded people. Yet they also increasingly create a parallel reality by collecting and displaying more and more images of specific representations and stagings as dogmatic (Astheimer et al. 2011; Autenrieth 2011). In this type of communication, images take on the function of a substitute of the body and thus also of the ego: they show a kind of "identity performance" (boyd/Ellison 2007) which can be interpreted as processes of identity constructions in terms of Goffman's "presentation of the self in everyday life" (Goffman 1956). Yet, these images have no clear difference between front- and backstage, both falling together in the supposedly "authentic" representation of the self in the "Selfie" (sic). To see each other, to show others how you want to be seen, and see how others see you – to be accepted or critically responded to – the social use of images links together presenters and respondents in a "glocal" peer review system that increasingly takes over the function of social normalization through "likes" or "shitstorms." In an age of deep mediatization, the self is increasingly constructed through new, highly mediated figurations of different, while at the same time being interrelated with actors that provide meaning. Thus, media-based narratives are acting in the way of epistemological techniques of



knowledge production and therefore shaping our sense of everyday reality (Reichert 2008).

If considered under an action-theoretical approach, the symbolism of the communicative handling - the images in social media – gain their meaning only through the interactive communication process (Krotz 2007). By acting in relation to others symbolically, the individual actor constitutes his or her world and truth. In this process, images serve as communicants, with the help of which a mediated construction of social reality can be understood. Thus, social media are not reflective of a preexisting reality but produce and constitute the sense for the real through repeated discourses and representations of material resources, objects and bodies (Couldry 2012: 21).

*“It is not just that media extend direct experience via a gradual process towards more indirect experiences: from the outset our social world is suffused with technological media of communication, and the ‘directness’ and ‘mediatedness’ of experience are inextricably interwoven with each other. In this respect, media are changing not only our Mitwelt, but more basically, our Umwelt: our directly experienced social reality [ ...].” (Couldry/Hepp 2017: 29)*

Thus, image-based communication in social media can be seen as the means of visualizing culture and social life, and as sites for new visual practices derived from changes in society (Hand 2017: 217).

But to understand the increasing importance of physical attractiveness and highly artificial and aesthetized body representations in all of their social dimensions, we have to step back from pure media research in favor of a more “non-media centric approach” (Couldry 2012; Horst/Pink 2015). In order to understand how digital media contribute to the construction of people’s everyday worlds, we also need to understand all other social, economic and political aspects of their worlds and lives. We need to look beyond the digital before we can understand how it plays out in this specific environment. Besides the implications of digital media on body ideals, bodily practices and individual subjectification, we also have to consider the entanglements of body and beauty norms with sociopolitical agendas and socioeconomic changes during the last decade in China. When we acknowledge these developments as inseparable from the occurrence of current phenomena like the Wanghong culture, this will offer us a new approach to understand the complex intertwining between a changing social reality, digital responses and their new offline implications.

The Wanghong culture (wanghong wenhua) is considered a new digital phenomenon, even though it has its roots in the emergence of early forms of networked virtual communication since the 2000s. First broad public attention was given to bloggers and authors in online forums that published controversial, eye-catching online texts, such as the bloggers Annie Baby and Mu Zimei with their liberal description of their love lives (Farrer 2007). Over time, the importance of images and photos in communication increased. “Sister Lotus” (Furong jiejie) can be seen as a pioneer in image-based online fame building, as she came to nationwide prominence in 2004 with the online publication of lightly dressed and quite bizarre photos of herself on various university community platforms. She was followed by numerous other “brothers and sisters” whose short-term “Internet career” was driven primarily by sensationalism and ridicule. With the maturation of mainly image-based communication and Social Networking Services, an increasing number of people received widespread positive online and offline public attention through the viral distribution

of their photos or videos.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Chinese communication researchers consider the year 2016 as the breakthrough for the Wanghong phenomenon, which by now has arrived in the midst of society and progressively shapes mainstream culture (Shen et al. 2016; Sun 2017; Yang 2017). With their expertise as fashion and beauty trendsetters, Wanghongs create a highly person-centered fan cult which revolves around their self-presentation on photos and (live-streaming) videos, which they provide on their profiles.

Much of the success of the Internet Celebrity phenomenon is based on the development of the technical prerequisites like smartphones and the dissemination of mobile internet access in most parts of China.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the mechanisms of the mediatization of social relationships inherent in communication on SNS enhance the immense popularity of Internet Celebrities. The premise of authentic authorship and the public display of one's personality in all its facets – at least it is said to be – promote a feeling of social connectedness and facilitate the development of virtual, parasocial relationships (Chung/Cho 2017; Giles 2010). It is precisely the assumed approachability and authenticity of SNS representations that create a new kind of “digital equality” fandom. Holders of SNS profiles are in theory on the same social level and are thus “approachable” through the transformation into a mediated dimension. Or to put it bluntly: Internet Celebrities are like you and me, just a little bit prettier, richer and more perfect.

### 3. The “Internet Celebrity Face”: Aesthetic Labor and the Temptations and Pressure of the Beauty Economy

It is the representation of a seemingly perfect life and perfect looks that generates broad public attention and a lot of fans, who are all too eager to learn how to become as perfect themselves. A striking physical appearance that corresponds, as closely as possible, to the mainstream beauty ideal is one of the most central features and, as an eye-catcher in the world of images, a prerequisite for social media success. Internet Celebrities are regarded as beauty ideals who have become flesh and the so-called notion “Internet Celebrity face” (Wanghong lian) has been firmly established for the description of certain physiognomic

4 Examples are the cases of „Sister Milktea“ (Naicha meimei), Zhang Zetian and the Wanghong Zhang Xinyuan. The former gained virtually overnight national attention as the embodiment of the ideal Chinese woman after a photo of her with a mug of milk tea circulated online in 2009. She used her publicity wisely and recently became China's youngest billionaire at the age of 24. The latter advanced a career as a popular fashion and beauty model and internet star after the circulation of her private vacation photos from the Maldives in 2008. She is seen as one of the first-generation Internet Celebrities who gained fame by circulating beauty shots of themselves on SNS sites.

5 At the end of 2016, the number of internet users in China totaled 770 million. The number of mobile devices is even higher – 1.3 billion – with 50 percent equipped with mobile internet. 91 percent of Chinese internet users are active on Social Media sites and spend an average of 46 minutes a day on SNS sites - compared to 67 percent of Americans who use Social Media. Probably the most famous SNS platform is „Weibo,“ founded by Sina.com in 2009, which is often compared to Twitter as a kind of microblogging platform. In addition to microblogging services, private and commercial profile pages for self-representation in the manner of Instagram became increasingly popular. According to its own data, 400 million active users were registered on Sina Weibo in November 2015 and most of them own a personal profile page. The application “WeChat” (Chinese: Weixin), originally conceived as a messenger service from Tencent, had 963 million users in mid-2017. More than two-thirds of the users born mainly in the 80s to 00s log in daily and spend an average of 90 minutes in the application. 61.4 percent of users further access the WeChat Moments feature, which allows users to create and view personal profile pages, to check your friends' latest updates or post something yourself. Only 1.3 percent of the WeChat users do not use this possibility of viral self-representation at all.

characteristics. In public discourse, the term “Wanghong lian” implies, in most cases, a mocking undertone because it is seen as a derogatory generalization of a specific appearance of young women who all look the same – namely share an oval, “pickaxe-shaped” face (zhuizi lian) with oversized eyes, as well as a pointed chin and a clear nose relief. This ideal of beauty has been perfected by numerous Wanghongs through cosmetic surgeries to a degree, that the term “Internet Celebrity face” is now often used in everyday speech as a synonym for a very artificial, de-individualized appearance as often seen after cosmetic surgery. But even if the Internet Celebrity Face has been discredited, its fascination persists. Among the hundred most viewed streams created by women on the popular live-streaming platforms Douyu, Yangke and YY, 96 percent of the female hosts have an “Internet Celebrity Face.” What is more, among the ten top-selling shops on the Chinese Ebay counterpart “Taobao,” six are managed by typical Wanghong beauties, generating a turnover of RMB one billion per year. (Yang 2017: 72)

The combination of an attractive appearance and economic advantages is clearly emphasized in the Chinese public discourse and reflects the mockery of the all-too-uniform face. Wanghongs are considered the personification of the equation “beautiful = successful.” In social media, beauty - in the truest sense of the word - has become a business: the Beauty Economy (meinü jingji, alternatively called yanzhi jingji) (Xu/Feiner 2007). The “Wanghong Economy” (Wanghong jingji), a part of the Beauty Economy, has grown into a billion-dollar business as one of the main branches of social commerce, and which also is considered to be the fastest expanding and growing future market in e-commerce. In the Beauty Economy, attractiveness is regarded as the incentive that draws attention and thus generates sales opportunities. The beautiful body is accordingly degraded to a means of marketing and consumption. Social commerce, in which Internet Celebrities use their viral prominence to aggressively promote products and even distribute them in linked online shops, has in recent years become an important source of income in China’s booming e-commerce sector. The existence of Internet Celebrities is intrinsically inseparable from more or less obvious social commerce activities. Many Wanghongs either started their careers as Taobao models and expanded their online shops successively on social media platforms by advertising their products as their own-tested best choice (and thus blurring the line between authentic self-representation and business) or they gained their fan reputation with beauty product recommendations and styling tutorials over years.<sup>6</sup> This makes Wanghongs the perfect advertising medium for the fashion and cosmetics industry: according to intra-sectoral surveys, Wanghong businesses generated sales of around RMB 520 million in 2016, with forecasts for 2018 predicting a billion. In the second quarter of 2017, with 18 million products sold by social commerce advertised by Internet Celebrities, a monthly trading volume of RMB 54 million was generated, which showed a 106 percent increase over the previous year (iResearch 2017). As media giant Sina.com was involved in these statistics, the numbers may be a little overestimated, but the overall trend of a rapid growth in this sector is validated by different sources.

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<sup>6</sup> With the spread of e-commerce, a new professional group of so-called “Taobao models” (taobao mote or taobao nǚlang) emerged comprising amateur models presenting clothing, jewelry and accessories on order pages of online shops. At the beginning of the 2000s, this was still regarded as a quite popular job for young women who wanted to enter the beauty economy but did not meet the beauty standards of professional international modeling agencies. Many Taobao models made use of their experience and opened their own online shops, where they could present their products themselves. Of course, these former models and a new generation of Internet Celebrities like to share their product advertising photos from their shops also on their SNS profiles.

Internet Celebrities embody the new Chinese dream of self-made millionaires and their careers fuel the fairy tale of the girl who has nothing but her body, and who through clever marketing becomes a millionaire, such as Zhang Dayi, who presented her new products in her Taobao shop in a live streaming video on her Weibo profile in 2016 for the Chinese single's day. The video was viewed 410,000 times within two hours and received over one million "likes" and turned public attention into real cash: The sales of these products generated a turnover of RMB 20 million (Tian 2017: 43). Another Wanghong shooting star Papi Jiang is said to have sold the first commercial ad on her website for RMB 22 million in 2016 due to the tremendous marketing value of her 20 million fans (Epoche Times 2016). According to estimates, around 30 percent of all Internet Celebrities earn more than RMB 300,000 per month, while particularly successful ones can make several millions with advertisement or sales deals. Even "average" part-time Wanghongs earn a few thousand RMB per month.

This supposedly simple equation of attractive mainstream appearance and commercial and economic success enhances the attraction and fascination for the mostly female fans. The myth of becoming famous with a photo almost overnight and earning a higher income than to be ever expected in a normal job by representing yourself in social media sounds tempting. That is why, despite the mockery of their uniform appearance, Wanghongs are acting as role models for many young fans. By staging themselves as the digital "girl next door," they paradoxically embody a "feasible" beauty ideal, which is supposed to be attainable for every woman with a bit of discipline, continuous care rituals and elaborate make-up arts, if she regularly follows the online recommended make-up practices, cosmetics recommendations and styling tips. However, this establishes a dangerous ideal of beauty and body image, criticizes the Chinese feminist activist network "Women Awakening Network," as the appearance of internet stars is usually anything but natural or just the result of skillful styling (Tsoi 2016).

Officially, only about 10 percent of the Internet Celebrities admitted they had undergone cosmetic surgery, but the real number is likely to be much higher. Talking to insider Yan Jiaqi, a Beijing based Internet Celebrity with 1.4 million followers as one representative of this new group of women, confirms the high rate of artificial beauties in the Wanghong business.<sup>7</sup> According to Yan, cosmetic surgery and regular minimally-invasive corrections are the "standard job requirements" in this profession. According to her experience, there is virtually no woman in the business who has not undergone several corrections, which she outright calls the prerequisite for success, alongside the continuous work on perfecting and maintaining beauty, among others through daily beauty routines, sports and diets as well as regular minimal corrections with botox and hyaluronic fillers. She herself speaks openly about having had various cosmetic operations, such as the creation of a double eyelid, an eye enlargement, a nose correction and the grinding of her jawbone, as well as various hyaluronic and botox injections. In addition, she abides by a permanently rigid diet, frequently works out to keep the body in shape and uses extensive skin care rituals. And in doing so, she describes herself as relatively "unpretentious" and simple when it comes to all that beautification work that can be done to the body compared to her colleagues. She judges her experience with surgeries as a "necessary measure for the work" and sees them as completely pragmatic: if something on her face did not correspond to the general mainstream ideal of beauty, then a little nip and tuck was necessary. She

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<sup>7</sup> Personal Interview with Yan Jiaqi conducted in September 2017 in Peking. Yan's Weibo profile: [https://www.weibo.com/yanyanmystic?is\\_hot=1](https://www.weibo.com/yanyanmystic?is_hot=1), last access 13.12.2017.

sees it as a kind of positive enrichment: “If it [cosmetic surgery] makes you happy and benefits your work, then it’s a good thing and should be done, of course.” If there was no professional necessity, she might have considered minor corrections, too, but she would not have done them so purposefully. However, the growing competitive pressure requires a steady keeping pace with the latest visual requirements, even if Yan, who worked as a model before she started her social media career, considers the current beauty ideal in China to be superficial, undifferentiated and de-individualized. But if the fans want to see an Internet Celebrity Face, then let’s have an Internet Celebrity Face. She says: “My greatest fear is that when people see me, they think I cannot achieve anything and would only be pretty. Or not even pretty.”

The intensive work on the body remains hidden in the published photos on SNS platforms, only the perfect result is visible. At the same time, however, according to the rules of the genre of SNS, these photographs also raise the claim to reality and authenticity, even if the recipients might suspect a certain amount of manipulation of the visible through image editing programs. Nevertheless, according to Roland Barthes (1989), images generate a moment of emotionality at the very moment of viewing, which also capture the viewer’s gaze in an immediate way. Thus, carefully staged and edited pictures can also unfold their seductive appeal to work on oneself. Because the digital “girl next door” in her virtual staging of the perfect body/make-up/life/etc. embodies both an imperative and a promise that even for a normal woman an optimized body/a more attractive appearance/a more successful life appears within reach with a little effort.

The increasing number of viral successors of private SNS-profiles show that more and more actors in the arena of glocal attentiveness strive for acceptance and therefore deliberately subject themselves to market-compliant standards of beauty and stereotypically gendered staging strategies. Subsequently, a gradual normalization of the behavior takes place with tendencies towards making actions and representations more and more flexible. And, above all, permanent self-objectification is being normalized: women only perceive themselves through the eyes of others and thus discover deficits that need to be worked on. This effect is also confirmed by studies on the influence of social media use on the self-image of female users: after comparing themselves with photos on SNS platforms, the test subjects felt emotionally worst, had the most negative self-image and the highest motivation to work on their bodies (e.g. with diets and sports) (Fardouly et al. 2017; Yan/Bissell 2014). The Wanghong Economy makes use of this effect by suggestively promoting a deficient self-image of the user’s body: under slogans such as “Let’s all become beautiful together” (*dajia yiqi mei*), the body is proclaimed to be obviously inadequate in its current state and the constant work on it is declared a “common task.” To achieve said goal, the Internet Celebrities (and the beauty and fashion industry they represent) will, of course, be happy to help with advice, tutorials, recommendations and exemplary representations in the pursuit of optimization. Social media profiles serve thus as a comparison portal, where not only highly artificial pictures of the profile owners serve as an incentive but where users are also encouraged to upload their own photos of progress and to evaluate and encourage each other.<sup>8</sup>

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8 An example is the SNS genre of “Cosmetic surgery diaries” (*zhengrong riji*), where patients who have undergone surgeries document their recovery, compare their “progress” with other patients and give advice to their readers on how to choose the right procedure and clinic.

The profound psychological, emotional and practical effects of the omnipresent medial representation of a highly artificial body image, as practiced in the Wanghong culture, on the self-image and self-perception of Chinese users can only be observed to a certain extent and needs more detailed research. Only recently have Chinese studies appeared discussing the influence of social media on modes of socialization and the subjectification of adolescents, as their main user group, as well as the fear of the normalization of a radicalized and highly objective body and gender image (e.g. Sun 2017).

Studies on the motivation for cosmetic surgery also indicate that SNS-based role models are playing an increasingly important role in the decision to perform cosmetic surgery and are significantly lowering the inhibition threshold. For example, around 70 percent of female cosmetic surgery patients strive for the controversial ideal of the Internet Celebrity Face (Zhang 2012: page number). For this reason, some clinics even offer a so-called “Wanghong package” for their customers: double eyelid surgery, eye enlargement and rhinoplasty in one operation (Yang 2017:71). The Internet Celebrity Face became a kind of standard treatment in beauty clinics where surgeries are mostly practiced according to seemingly objective universal aesthetics standards and not according to individual face and body features of the clients. This standard mainly bases on the golden ratio and consists of the so-called “3 parts to 5 eye cut” and “4 heights and 3 depths.”<sup>9</sup> This means, beauty is measured and standardized into “objective” numbers and no longer lies in the eye of the beholder – because “numbers don’t lie” (Whitefield-Madrano 2016: 13). The reduction of beauty to a set of narrow numbers gives way to a more technical and instrumental understanding of beauty and the body. A perfect golden ratio is seldom given by nature but mostly achieved with artificial help. The Chinese saying of beauty being only 30 percent naturally inherited and 70 percent man-made, coincides with this understanding of a deficient body, which has to be artificially enhanced as the only logical consequence. This fixation on numbers as new observable “facts of science” may, incidentally, explain why so-called “body challenges” on social media, based on the measurement of body parts like the iPhone-knee-challenge or the A4-waist-challenge, are so extremely popular in East Asia. The biological basis of beauty has seemingly become fact and shifted the knowledge and self-perception.

But the simple causal equation of online idols with real life imitation would be too short-sighted. It must be borne in mind that online beauty ideals as they are embodied by Internet Celebrities do not exist in a social and cultural vacuum but are connected to broader social trends. We can observe a general intensification of feminine beauty norms and the commodified proliferation of beauty technologies in China in the recent decade. The acceptance of cosmetic surgery and artificial looks as it is embodied in the Wanghong culture is closely related to an overall new “beauty boom” or “beauty craze” in China and East Asia. Since 2001, China has witnessed an explosive startup wave of beauty clinics: The demand for plastic surgery in major cities rose to around 7.4 million operations per year with annual growth rates of 200 percent in the last few years. Today, 12 percent of all cosmetic surgeries worldwide are practiced in China and, together with South Korea, China ranks third among the countries with the most cosmetic surgeries. The beauty industry experienced a huge boom between 2010 and 2015: Cosmetic surgery and non-invasive services made an annual turnover of RMB 150 billion in 2014 and with the Chinese plastic surgeons association forecasting

<sup>9</sup> The “3 parts to 5 eye cut” measures the face, from the hairline to the chin divides it into three identical parts, in which the distance between the ears can be hypothetically filled with five eyes. The four heights point to the higher parts of the face: Forehead, nose, chin and cupid's bow and the three depths of course to the less convex parts like the nasal root between the eyes, the philtrum and the upper part of the chin.



its revenue on RMB 800 billion for 2019 (Shang 2015). Beauty has become a big business in recent years – and the Internet Celebrities are, literally, only the most visible tip of the iceberg. They function, so to say, as the avant-garde in a general new movement of aesthetic labor and self-optimization.

The result is – as we see in the case of the Internet Celebrity Face – a devaluation of individual features in favor of a quite uniform look – although this look is paradoxically and clearly disparaged in public discourse. This paradox could be explained by a neoliberal adaption processes: The fear of falling out of the social norms produces a tight pressure to meet the narrowly defined canon of requirements – or as Sabine Maasen (2008) puts it in line with Foucault: In the logic of bio-aesthetic governmentality the fateful body turns into the body of options and thus is the starting point for neoliberal strategies of enhancement and empowerment in the form of capacity building and adaptation as I will explore in the next section.

#### **4. Seizing every Chance: Aesthetic Vigilance, the Autotelic Self and Growing Social Inequality**

Social institutions and the promises of the first modernity such as the nuclear family, meritocracy, social inclusion and equal allocation of resources have become increasingly brittle and dysfunctional for women after the global victory of neoliberal economic reforms and the side effects of capitalist modernization. With the collapse of these institutions, opportunities and chances in life are increasingly perceived as uncertain and insecure. The most important lesson learned from the last decades is that one has to adapt to the conditions in order to make the best of it. This is the entry point for a new neoliberal discourse, preaching that everyone has to accept that it is not possible to resist or secure him- or herself from all kind of difficulties encountered individually and collectively, but instead has to learn how to adapt to enabling conditions via the embrace of insecurity (Chandler/Reid 2016). The neoliberal subject is an autotelic self in the sense of Anthony Giddens (1994: 192). According to Chandler/Reid (2016: 45), the autotelic self embraces risk as an active challenge and turns insecurity into self-actualization, which means personal growth by developing resilience and adapting to change. All kind of problems faced in life are reassessed and understood as “positive challenges” which must be actively addressed. However, it does not matter whether these challenges and problems lie within the individual’s sphere of influence, or whether they are caused by systemic failures of the state and society – such as the toleration and even encouragement of highly gender-discriminating social and economic structures.

Threats are no longer externally produced but all lie in the capability of the individual to take responsibility for his or her own security. So, it is the resilient subject that has been taught, and accepted - the need to build capacity in order to make the right choices in the development of sustainable responses to threats and dangers posed by its environment. This contains a new neoliberal promise that gradually replaces the old promise of modernization (social equality, inclusion and upward mobility). Instead of hoping for a meritocratic societal structure with institutions which secure social justice, the new mantra of individual agency follows that if you just work hard enough on yourself and if you continuously improve yourself and adapt to all social requirements, then you will be relatively safe in a world where nothing is safe anymore. The pressure for aesthetic self-regulation can also be seen in this context. The improved, perfect body

becomes the bulwark against social insecurity, the visible sign of the awareness for capacity building and the acceptance of the requirements of neoliberal socioeconomic structures. Investing in “body capital” is the lesson learned from the disappointing experiences with the failed promises of social modernization since the 1980s.

The resilient subject is one that has accepted the necessity of adaption to “realities” of an endemic condition of insecurity and therefore the need to build capacity in order to make the “right choices” and to avoid threats and dangers posed by its environment. Making the right choice qualifies him or her as a modern, self-responsible and successful individual. And if you choose what is “scientifically” proven to be good – like the golden ratio – it can’t be the wrong choice. So to float with the current trends of “modern” lifestyle choices like the Internet Celebrity Face, despite all critical and mocking voices is the consistent implementation of the neoliberal logic: “If I want to become more popular, my face has to be smaller and smaller and the eyes bigger and bigger...they even sacrifice health and the normal functions of their body just to match the aesthetic ideal of the perfect Internet Celebrity face.” (Yang 2017: 72) This statement clearly reflects an awareness of aesthetic vigilance that is constructed through the process of neoliberal subjectivation in the discourses about resilience and capacity building: The autotelic self has a highly vigilant and critical gaze on his/her body as an important resource in the distribution of life chances.

The new profession of Internet Celebrities serves as a typical example for the construction of aesthetic vigilance. They suggest a tendency of identity demarcation: They incorporate neoliberal identity technologies in which the actor learns how – through calculative and self-governmental labor of risk-managing one’s attachments to beauty and its technologies – he or she succeeds in standing out from the great monotony of the many. The social media actor is literally the entrepreneur of his or her own opportunities by successfully positioning and marketing oneself in the global market of attention. And his/her SNS profile is the visible “wall of fame” of his/her success: The carefully staged and automatically digitally modified selfies on Chinese social media sites testify the continuous, vigilant self-narration, self-representation, and efforts of self-maintenance of the profile owners as autotelic selves (see Kwon/Kwon 2015 on the functions of selfies).

The fact that the outer appearance and body has been colonized, utilized and thus exposed to neoliberal optimization rationalities of the economic system is also shown in the very popular term of “yan zhi” or “lian zhi” (value of a face or facial capital) in public discourse, according to which the outer appearance - in particular of the face, but also of the entire body – is equated with other capital values in the sense of Catherine Hakim’s (2010) understanding of the erotic, or in this case: body capital. Although Hakim’s theses are representative for the Euro-American zone, they also describe quite precisely the East Asian logic of today: attractive wins and ugly loses in today’s rat race. Hakim seems to express exactly what many young Chinese women feel when she says: “Today, the financial returns of attractiveness equal the returns of qualifications. Many young women now think beauty is just as important as education.” (Hakim 2011)

A similar ideological turnaround can be observed in China. Until the beginning of the 2000s, education was not only regarded as a traditional virtue but also always contained the promise of social advancement. This promise has become fragile with capitalist economic and neoliberal social reforms and the privatization and economization of the higher education system, having produced masses of unemployed university



graduates who see themselves cheated on their chances in life. Career starters not only have to study at a high-ranked university, achieve an excellent degree and score high on the English test (the so-called “three pack”), but also need a lot of additional “competitive advantages” to enter the job market successfully in what is called the “historically most difficult time” for job entrants. These additional “soft skills” include a professional and attractive appearance and this may be the reason why high school graduates and university students with an average age of around 20 years account for the largest percentage of customers of beauty clinics in East Asia (Wen 2013:75-77) – in contrast to, for example, the US or Germany, where the average age of patients is between 40 and 50 years (ASPS 2016). On the one side, appearance gets a very practical value in the increasingly fierce competition in the job market. Since the education reform has devalued “hard” qualifications like university degrees, “soft” qualifications like attractiveness and social skills rise in importance. Or like an interviewed girl put it: “You have to be discovered among 500 applicants before you can show off your skills. A pretty face is your entrance ticket.” Tiantian, Zheng (2009) found in her analysis that a large number of female college graduates attached their half-naked, colorful portraits to their resumes and emphasized that they could sing and dance and that they were beautiful, decorous, gentle and good at socializing and drinking alcohol. An attractive appearance is seen as the best opportunity to get out of the status of the “New Poores” and the frustration of social immobility (Du 2016).

A second cause for the popularity of the body capital ideology can be found when we take a closer look at the social status of women in Chinese society – or what Leta Hong Fincher calls “the resurgence of gender inequality.” (Fincher 2014) From a distance, gender equality seems quite well developed under the surveillance of China’s state feminist agency, but a closer look reveals several throwbacks in the development of an equal society. Various economic and political developments in the last decades have contributed to the problematization of women’s vulnerability of opportunities in life. With the end of the socialist era and the latest neoliberal economic reforms in the 1990s, women have been stigmatized as socially endangered subjects in public discourses, including journals and women advisory books in China (but also in other East Asian countries) (Dippner 2016; Hooper 2015). The female journey through life seems to be problematic in all stations. It starts with unequal education chances when girls seek higher education. Then they experience a much rougher entrance into the job market. And finally, discrimination and faster unemployment when women are forced to handle both the burden of family care and job requirements. These facts are played down as an individual problem of women like a column from March 2011 that ran just after the International Women’s Day shows. It says: “Pretty girls don’t need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult.” (Fincher 2012) Even Chinese feminist scholars like Lin Huang (2012) recognize the vulnerable position of women and thus recommend the so-called “marriage economy” (*hunyin jingji*). This means to invest in a stable marriage with a capable husband as the main breadwinner, being the most secure “investment” for women nowadays. Set against the awareness of fewer educational and employment opportunities and the new stress on women’s domestic role, physical self-enhancement became an omnipresent mantra in a “society that only looks at the face” (*kanlian de shehui*).

These “side effects” of China’s reforms and economic growth have enlarged inequality patterns instead of making the “Chinese Dream” of common wealth come true. After the bitter awakening of this dream, many people from the middle stratum had to realize that contemporary social stratification features a reemerging class hierarchy, in which interest groups are controlling the unbalanced allocation of social resources. Or

like Caixia Du (2016: 36) puts it: “No matter how hard they try, they find there is always a glass board in their way, which only provides an illusion of the future at a distance but would never let them get through.” This perceived (gendered) inequality and stagnation may be the trigger why many young people – especially women – from second- and third-tier cities with medium educational background and few other resources for social advancement, are placing their hopes in the “body politics” of the Beauty Economy as the new “holy grail” for generating income and upward social mobility. With the educational system gradually losing the ability to facilitate inter-class flows, many young people are looking for alternative life paths. According to a nationwide in media debated survey, 48 percent of the university graduates of the post-1995 generation do not want to enter the normal job life after graduation due to missing job opportunities and the high competitiveness of the job market. Half of them rather want to seek their fortunes in the Beauty Economy as “little fresh meat” (xiao xianrou) (the Chinese Internet slang word for a willing, young and handsome person) to make “easy money” with good looks (Xinhuanet 2016). As more and more willing novices enter the market, a follow-up economy of its own has even established itself. Companies such as TopHot and Ruhnn call themselves “hotbeds” that make future Internet stars fit for fame, but they also hire established top talents and assume responsibility for content creation, marketing and all kind of business aspects such as market development, negotiations with business partners and business management, and the development of Multi Channel Networks (MCN). An advertising slogan by the agency Ruhnn makes the role of appearance in the process of commercialization clear: “Your task is to be beautiful like a flower, we take care of making money.” (Yu 2016:61)

If the alleged equation “beautiful = successful” is elevated to a social normalization dogma, then this will have serious consequences for the understanding of the body and self-image for women. In contrast to Bourdieu (1987), body practices in East Asia do not represent social status but are currently a means to an end itself and aim to achieve social status. And this way of upward mobility, initialized by the utilization of the body, is becoming the more important, the more class affiliation is consolidated. While in the 1980s, at the beginning of the capitalist market economy in China, social mobility was easily realized - even with low individual capital due to the occupation of new economic niches - social class membership has been stabilizing over the past few years as economic growth has leveled off and social advancement is becoming increasingly difficult, especially for those with limited resources. The prospects are low, social mobility rare and the possibility of an improved and secure material living standard seem remote. Therefore, the “potential for opportunities” (jihui chengben) must be maximized to seize every chance that might coincidentally come by. Someone might check your SNS profile and if he likes your photos you can become a nationwide meme the next day - you just have to be ready.

Beauty becomes the aspiration of a generation of frustrated and stagnated social climbers because it inherits the promise of neoliberal self-governance. Beauty is not seen as a rare gift from nature for a few lucky but is understood as an egalitarian concept of meritocracy. Or like Chinese women self-help literature puts it in a nutshell: There are no ugly women, only lazy ones (Dippner 2016: 101). If you have the discipline and the necessary skills, then everyone can be beautiful and successful. In its physical limitations, the body appears to be an ideal access point for optimization measures, which are easier and faster to implement than other forms of capacity building. Thanks to the promises of modern consumer-oriented medicine, physical optimization seems to be as easy and promising as never before, and guarantees optimization without great effort. As a result, on the one hand, we clearly have an empowerment of the individual to

actively change and improve his or her own image and thus his or her social position through rational investments in his/her appearance. On the other hand, there is also a growing imperative for the application of beautification practices. If good looks are no longer a gift from nature, it becomes the embodiment of the entrepreneurial individual in a neoliberal society and thus a status symbol. In a culture of “embodied classes” as visible signs of new social hierarchies, beauty becomes the synonym for success. The more significant the external appearance is for the affiliation of the social position and social identity, the more the eye is fixed on externally noticeable and measurable assets.

Especially the lower class, middle class and those who are defined as the new Chinese precariat (Du 2016), occupy a very unstable social position and are highly sensitive to economic and social changes. They make more efforts and take bigger risks to accumulate capital and secure their privileged status. Or like Ren Hai puts it: “The regularization of the Do-it-yourself way of living in everyday life makes individuals vulnerable in their life-building process. They live in the border zone between rich and poor, between haves and have-nots, between employed and unemployed and between winners and losers.” (Ren 2013: 125) It is this group that is mostly dedicated to the neoliberal rhetoric of self-optimization and self-improvement as a strategy against risks and insecurities. Therefore, beauty is used as a placeholder, a substitute and sometimes even as a replacement for other relevant capitals in the construction of social position. The former editor-in-chief of Harper’s Bazaar China, Yu Xiaoge, paraphrases the psychological mentality of this group with this humorous statement: “I can’t wait, I’m so busy, I’m feeling anxious, I must become beautiful, I must become slim, I want it right now. Everything must be now, now, now.”<sup>10</sup> This explains the rise of explicitly niche cosmetic products and the popularity of cosmetic surgery as the easiest and most promising way to achieve your body goals within a short period of time.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In the controversial reactions and public discussions about the supposedly stereotypical appearance of Internet Celebrities in the aftermath of Sina’s “Superstars on Weibo” award, the ambivalences of neoliberal strategies are particularly clear reflected. On the one hand, they appear as techniques of empowerment that can bring wealth and fortune, on the other hand, as subtle techniques of social normalization with more and more constraining effects. In this dilemmatic intermediate realm of opportunity and coercion, the bio-aesthetically aware subjects have to position themselves. Therefore, social media representations simultaneously utilize and complicate the discourse of a postfeminist neoliberal femininity. The analysis of self-representations of Chinese Internet Celebrities also reveals the construction processes of the aesthetic vigilant subject: They embody all stages of neoliberal self-enhancement from digital self-surveillance to self-consciousness and up to self-fashioning (of images and in reality). Work on the body is seen only as one of many measures to optimize opportunities and build capacities against systemic challenges such as

10 Personal Interview of the author with Yu Xiaoge conducted in September 2017 in her office in Beijing.

11 An example is the APP “iSNOB” on which “international top-notch experts” rank Top 10 lists of cosmetic, fashion and lifestyle products. The pay APP describes itself as the “Michelin Guide of China’s Fashion and Lifestyle for elite consumers” and hit number one in the iTunes download charts for 43 consecutive days after its release.

gender discrimination in the job market and unstable family relationships.

Work on the body symbolizes not only the process-like nature of work on the self but can also be seen as a substitute for the multitude of optimization imperatives applied to the individual in today's Chinese society. But it is the body, as Baudrillard (1985) has already pointed out, that remains the only concise object and thus it becomes the object most worth concentrating in the multi-option society of modernity. In its physical limitations, the body appears to be an ideal access point for optimization measures, which are easier and faster to implement here than other forms of capacity building. Physical adaptation and optimization according to certain standards such as the Internet Celebrity Face are positively connoted in the discourse of postfeminist neoliberal self-enhancement and seen as a sensible capacity building of the individual as a vulnerable subject, which must arm itself against the incalculable challenges in China's modernized society. Under this assumption, the vigilant gaze on the body and aesthetic labor are clearly emphasized, indeed glorified. Fans admire their new social media idols for their courage and discipline of constantly controlling and monitoring their bodies and "making something out of themselves" by exploiting all of their opportunities. Even if one possesses nothing but the naked body, economic and social success can still be achieved through constant aesthetic vigilance and calculative, self-governmental aesthetic labor – or as an article of a Chinese online fashion website puts it: "If your wallet and your heart are strong enough, then you are only 15 hyaluronic shots away from an Internet Celebrity Face." (Fashion.qq 2015)

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