To Pursue Light Skin Tones: Is it a Constraint for Chinese Women?

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Part I: Introduction

Framing the Issue

Skin lightening, also known as skin whitening and skin bleaching, is the practice of using chemicals that attempt to lighten the skin tone or provide an even skin color by reducing the concentration of melanin in the skin (Mahéet al., 2005). Some chemicals such as niacinamide (Hakozaki et al., 2002), vitamin C and E (Telang, 2013) have been shown to help brighten the skin, while others have shown to be toxic or have questionable safety profiles. This includes mercury compounds that can cause neurological and kidney problems (LaCroix, 2007).

Whether in the past or at present, skin lightening has been popular in many parts of the world. The portraits from Elizabethan times where women were usually depicted as having alabaster white skin, red rouged cheeks, big bright eyes, fair hair, and high hairline indicate people's aesthetic preferences at that time, that is, the "Elizabethan Ideal Beauty." Under this aesthetic, pale skin was extremely important. It was considered "a sign of nobility, wealth and delicacy" (LaCroix, 2007). In order to keep their skin pale and flawless, the Elizabethan women of the high class applied ceruse, a foundation made from mixing the white lead and vinegar to the face and neck. Although the lead was toxic and caused numerous health problems, the ceruse was still considered the best cosmetic. Also, because it was expensive, only the wealthy could afford it (Arpita, 2018; LaCroix, 2007). The prevalence of this preference is thought to be linked to the class differences of the time, as sun-tanned skin was often associated with outdoor manual labor and lower class throughout the

Victorian era (Xie & Zhang, 2013). Therefore, looking pale was not only a sign of physical beauty but also a status symbol.

In the present India and Philippines, an expressed preference for light skin tone is prevalent. Statistically, the Indian community and diaspora around the world constitute a sizable market for skin lightening products. This privileging of lighter skin tones are present in the media, including advertising, actors, and the selection of Miss World and Bollywood actresses who tend to have lighter skin tones than the average Indian woman (Glenn, 2008). In Southeast Asia, lighter skin tones are likewise favored. According to a market research firm report published in 2004, about half of the respondents in the Philippines reported currently using skin lightening products; they seek not only to lighten their skin overall but also to deal with dark underarms, elbows, and knees (Glenn, 2008). The origins of the preference for light skin tone in these regions are unclear, but a considerable body of research agrees that colonialism was one of the important causes that cannot be ignored. During the colonial era, colonialists and settlers from Europe attempted to understand and interpret various cultural and language groups as a way of justifying their rule in the colonies (Arnold, 2004). They believed that the Caucasians represented the highest culture and embodied the best physical type. The most representative are their offensive comparisons between the light-skinned group, whose men were perceived by them as more intelligent and marriageable and whose women they considered more attractive, and darker-skinned groups, whose men they viewed as lacking intelligence and masculinity, and whose women they considered to be lacking in the physical beauty (Arnold, 2004).

In East Asian countries, the tradition of considering light skin tone as an important element in constructing physical beauty predates colonialism and the introduction of Western notions of beauty. In Korea, skin lightening is considered a big focus of skincare. Flawless skin like white jade and an absence of freckles and scars has been preferred since the first dynasty in Korean history (the *Gojoseon Era*, 2333-108 B.C.E.). Skin lightening methods such as applying *miansoo* lotion and dregs of honey has long been used (Jeon, 1987). In Japan, the preference for skin that is white and free of blemishes has been documented since at least the *Heian* period (794-1185), as in novels such as *The Pillow Book* and *The Tale of Genji* (Wright, 1998). Since the *Edo* period (1603-1868), applying white powder to the face has been considered a woman's moral duty (Ashikari, 2005). In China, the metaphors of women's skin like snow, frost or white porcelain, demonstrating and praising qualities of transparency, delicacy, smoothness, and whiteness" (Zhang, 2012, p. 440), are common used in classic literature. The well-known idiom "white skin covers three flaws" (*Yī bái zhē sān chǒu*, which means that white-skinned women would be beautiful even if their features are not attractive) sums up how Chinese people perceive and value the fair skin tone. The fact that it is still widely circulated today shows that China's light-skinned aesthetic is still the dominant one.

The skin lightening practices in different countries show that skin lightening is always shaped by social factors such as class, race, and colonialism. The influence of each factor varies from country to country due to their different histories. For instance, the importance of colonialism and racism in the development of skin lightening practices was more pronounced in India and the Philippines than

in those that had never been colonialized. However, based on my review of the skin lightening history in many countries, the most universal and essential characteristic embedded in skin lightening practice is being gendered, rather than being colonialized or racialized that are discussed more often. In other words, women are more likely than men to be held accountable for their skin tones and valued by their conformity to the cultural ideal of physical beauty, wherever and whenever they are (Thompson et al., 1999; Frost, 2005); regardless of country, women with lighter skin tones have been considered more feminine, more beautiful, and sexually preferable than those with darker skin tones, but the same is not true for men: "a man is considered handsome, if fair-skinned; yet manly and courageous, if 'brown'" (Frost, 1990, p.671). However, such an essential characteristic is often overlooked by researchers. Compared with colonialism and racism, at least, the gendered nature of skin lightening practices is less analyzed and discussed by research. This is, in my opinion, a gap in the existing sociological research dealing with skin lightening practices.

Theorizing the Issue

While examining the skin lightening histories in different countries can give people a general idea of the issue, drawing on the postmodern feminist theory can assist in deepening the understanding of it. Postmodern feminism, according to Kristina B. Wolff (2016, p.1), is "a body of scholarship that questions and rejects traditional essentialist practices, as established in and by modernity." That is, it initially assumes that the modernist conception of feminism's emphasis on gender differences between men and women ignores the differences within each gender. Such a

gender differentiation, according to Teresa L. Ebert (1991), is constructed and used by patriarchy to exert its influence, as how the gendered aspect has been internalized in the practice of skin lightening to the extent that it is perceived to be natural, unnoticed, and not subject to change in most people's eyes. Based on this, the postmodern feminist theory further points out that gender is developed from a discourse that we learn to adopt over time in specific historical, political, and cultural contexts, so that gender and gender differences are constituted by the way we talk, creates images and present ourselves to others, rather than being natural or innate (Ebert, 1991; Wolff, 2016). It is fleshed out by Mary J. Frug (1992), who has argued that the patriarchal power is subtlety exercised through the way in which language shapes and restricts our reality. Specifically, patriarchy, on the one hand, asserts and depends on binary oppositions of gender differences; on the other hand, it naturalizes these differences as biological and thus the inevitable effect of "nature," thereby making them "unnoticeable" and not in need of change (Ebert, 1991). Still using the skin lightening practice as an example, there have been studies bypassing patriarchy and explaining the gendered nature of skin lightening from a biological perspective, namely that women tend to have fairer complexions than men of similar ethnic backgrounds because there is less melanin in their skin and less blood flow (Frost, 1990), so it is natural for them to have lighter skin tones. Moreover, the postmodern feminist theory also claims that the impact of patriarchy on women is not balanced or equal due to their different and multifaceted social identities (Wolff, 2016). The nature and extent of patriarchy is therefore different for a wealthy white woman in Elizabethan England and a poor woman in South Asia.

In this case, women, as postmodern feminists have repeatedly indicated, have been rendered the silent, invisible other in patriarchy. Their "difference" is both nominally acknowledged and deemed unworthy of notice. In particular, their "difference"- the inequality, injustice, and oppression of women based on that difference – is largely invisible (Ebert, 1991). In other words, patriarchy "feigns an 'indifference' to the very difference (women/gender) on which its existence depends" (Ebert, 1991, p.888). This is evidenced by some widely held gender stereotypes, such as "women are more concerned with their physical appearance while men are more concerned with their abilities, so women tend to be less professionally competent than men." To deconstruct and undermine these patriarchal norms and stereotypes that are deeply entrenched in society and lead to gender inequality (Tong, 1989) is the goal of postmodern feminism, which coincides with my purpose in this paper, that is, to analyze and criticize the gendered aspect of skin lightening constructed by patriarchy. This is why I decided to adopt postmodern feminism as the theoretical framework for this paper.

Research Question

In this paper, I intend to demonstrate how the skin lightening practice is constructed by patriarchy from the perspective of postmodern feminism, based primarily upon an extensive literature review. More specifically, I will show how women are restricted when they are required to lighten their skin to look attractive in a patriarchal society. To examine the gendered aspect of skin lightening practices is important because it allows for an understanding of the gender inequalities that women encounter in their daily lives from a unique perspective. The goal of this paper is to better

understand the gendered connotations of skin lightening practices in a patriarchal society and the constraints it imposes on women.

The key question framing this paper is the following: *How is the practice of skin lightening constructed by patriarchy?* The sub-question is: *How are women constrained by the gendered practice of skin lightening?* Framing the research question in this way allowed for understanding both the body shaming and the injustices women face in the social sphere.

Research Boundaries

For the purpose of this paper, I limit my discussion of skin lightening practice to women in China, while still recognizing its prevalence in many other countries as well. This is because, on the one hand, China has the largest skin lightening products market in the world (Mak, 2007); on the other hand, the Chinese have a long history of preferring lighter skin tones. Moreover, although men may also be involved in the skin lightening practice, women will nonetheless be the focus of this paper as they represent the majority of the users of skin lightening products.

Part II: Extensive Literature Review, Findings, and Discussions

I divided this part chronologically into four main sections: the practice of skin lightening in ancient times when Confucianism was the dominant ideology, during the Nationalist government and Maoist period (from the 1930s to the 1980s), after the Chinese economic reform (from the 1980s to 2010), and that in recent years (after 2010). The reasons why I adopted a chronological logic and artificially used 1930, 1980, and 2010 as cut-off points to discuss and analyze the skin lightening practice and its gendered characteristics of the four periods respectively are: (1) The period beginning around 1930 was marked by political instability and the practice of skin lightening lost its popularity (Yeung, 2015); (2) The reforms that began around 1980 witnessed China's economic shift to marketization and its integration into the global economy, made the practice of skin lightening popular again and became industrialized, marketized, commercialized, and internationalized; (3) From the time around 2010, the importance of the Internet and social media for marketing skin lightening (and many other industries) has become more and more prominent, compared to that of the traditional print media (e.g., magazines) and television. It is important to note, however, that the events do not occur and end neatly one after the other. Things develop in a dialectical rather than a linear way. This means that the characteristics and influence of one period may remain when the next period arrives, rather than disappearing with it.

Skin Lightening in Ancient Times

The postmodern feminist theory assumes that "the very notion of gender is socially constructed, fluid, and conceptualized within a specific historical, political, and cultural context" (Wolff, 2016,

p.2). Based on this, to understand the gendered aspect of skin lightening in each period, it is inevitable to discuss and examine the economic conditions, social system, and dominant ideology of the time. Confucianism, also known as *Ruism*, is a system of behavior and thought that originated in China in the 5th century B. C. and has also influenced and spread to other East Asian countries. Since its creation and development by the philosopher Confucius, Confucianism has been the dominant ideology espoused by the rulers of most of the ancient Chinese dynasties and has been constantly interpreted, supplemented, and enriched by subsequent politicians and scholars. Although Confucianism is rich in content and covers a wide range of fields, I now will only talk about its propositions and implications of gender relations and the status of women.

Initially, it must be noted that the Confucianism is essentially a male-centered and male-serving ideology and that it was born, developed, and became popular at a time when society was patriarchal and took gender inequality for granted (Jiang, 2009; Tseng & Wu, 1985). In the early days of its composition, Confucianism did not outright claim that women were inferior to men, or demand what women should or should not do, but rather shied away from them. In other words, the content related to women was very limited and ambiguous. For instance, In the *Analects*, one of the most important doctrines of Confucianism, virtues such as *rén* (humanity, benevolence), *yì*(righteousness), *lǐ* (propriety), *zhì*(wisdom), *xiào* (filial piety), and *tì*(brotherly love – love and respect for the elder brother) are the most discussed and emphasized. Nevertheless, these do not equally speak for both men and women, but generally take men as the universal norm. That is, the moral cultivation and perfection that Confucius teaches are basically about how a man

should live (Jiang, 2009). More specifically, when talking about *xiào*, it normally indicates what a filial son ought to do, and how important it is for one to follow the will of one's father. Also, the virtue of *tì* is only about how younger brothers should get along with their older brothers, not about how they should get along with their older sisters. More than that, there is nothing in the *Analects* about how people should treat their sisters and daughters. Similarly, in another Confucius doctrine, the *Book of Mencius*, the main concern is still morality for men when guiding people on how they should handle interpersonal relationships. Although Confucius' doctrine claims that everyone can be a sage, and does not explicitly deny women's ability to be virtuous, it does not have the same criteria for men and women. When men are required to undertake a variety of social responsibilities to realize their personal values, obedience is the only virtue explicitly mentioned as necessary for women, as the Confucian philosopher Mencius said:

When a young man comes of his age of 20 as an adult, his father gives advice; when a girl marries, her mother gives her advice, and accompanies her to the door with these cautionary words, "when you go to your new home, you must be respectful and circumspect. Do not disobey your husband." It is the way for women to take obedience as the norm.

Jiang (2009) confirmed that this implicit gender inequality embedded in early Confucianism did not overtly discriminate against women and justify the oppression of women. It is the Neo-Confucianism developed during the Song Dynasty (after about the 10th century), that explicitly proposed that women are inferior to men and that women should obey their fathers, husbands, and sons. However, Jiang (2009) also empathized that the severe sexism and strict gender

roles in Neo-Confucianism is undeniably an outgrowth of the implicit sexism in early Confucianism, rather than a departure from or betrayal of it.

As mentioned before, patriarchy exerts its influence by asserting dichotomous gender differences. In a Confucian society, the constructed "gender difference" is primarily embodied in the distinct systems of social evaluation and expectation for men and women, as well as the differences in the available access to achieving class mobility. In one of the most famous Chinese realistic classic novels, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written in the middle of the 18th century during the Qing Dynasty, the author Cao Xueqin indicated how an upper-class man evaluated women at that time through the protagonist's words: "The unmarried girl was like a priceless pearl. Once married, she somehow showed many defects. Though at this point, she was still a pearl, it was a dead pearl without luster. As she got older, she was no longer a pearl but a fish eye." In this metaphorical assessment, we can see that men's opinion of a woman relies heavily on her marital status, age, and appearance: the unmarried, beautiful young women are favored; married, older, and sexually unattractive women are disliked. The unmarried status makes a woman favored because it means that she has not yet belonged to any men (or, more frankly, she is not yet the private property of any men) and is therefore "available," while being young and beautiful implies the higher reproductive and aesthetic value. In short, in the dominant view of society (or at least of a significant proportion of men), a woman's value lies in whether or not she is sexually and reproductively lucrative to men, especially her future marriage partner. For their male counterparts, however, looking young and beautiful has never been an important thing, nor have people judged them by their marital status,

age, or appearance. There are many ways for them to prove their personal capabilities and gain social recognition: they could inherit the family's property (money, houses, land, etc.), and had opportunities to achieve class mobility by studying or joining the army to enter politics, which women were forbidden to do. Though historically, there were a couple of female rulers who had greater power than any men in their times, they were exceptions. Their stories could only demonstrate what women were capable of doing, but not how equal men and women were (Jiang, 2009).

Under the social evaluation system with clear gender divisions, the personal development paths for men – what and how they should do – are clear; women, however, are not expected to have any personal development but are only encouraged to rely on men, to serve men, and to meet men's demands. In this context, marriage is the only possible way for women to achieve class mobility, while the most direct way of attracting upper-class men to marry them is to promote their sexual attractiveness at a young age. This is why it is almost always women who are trying to enhance their physical attractiveness in a variety of ways, including skin lightening. In this sense, the practice of skin lightening is similar in nature to girding and foot-binding, although it does not seem as extreme in destroying the health of women as the latter. In the effect, it (as well as girding and foot-binding) not only satisfies the aesthetic fetish of men but also objectively restricts the range of daily activities and thinking of women, as keeping the skin fair requires avoiding prolonged exposure to sunlight (likewise, girding and foot-binding prevent women from walking properly due to the skeletal deformities). As a consequence, not only did the prejudice that "men are naturally

stronger than women" was becoming a fact, but the Confucian doctrine that the public sphere is for men while the domestic sphere is for women also seemed reasonable. This is how and why the practice of skin lightening in a Confucian society is constructed as gendered, and how it in turn works in practical terms to discipline women.

Skin Preference During the Nationalist Government and Maoist Period

The period from around 1930 to the time before the economic reforms of the 1980s witnesses that the preference for light skin tones lost its popularity (Yeung, 2015). Indeed, not merely the preference for light skin tones, but any sexual attractiveness, and even physical differences between men and women, was required to be ignored; instead, it was the individual labor force that was highly valued. Both Yeung (2015) and Chen (2016) argued that this change was led by the Nationalist government in power at the time. That is, in response to the Japanese invasion of China in 1931, as well as to fend off further foreign attacks, the Nationalist government enacted a series of actions in the name of civic duty and patriotism, in an attempt to strengthen the physical fitness of people, especially women, who had always been deemed to be the weaker sex. In June 1936, for instance, the government outlawed fashionable clothing and perms (Yeung, 2015). Violators were forced to go back home and change their attire; those resisting doing so would be fined and even imprisoned (Gao, 2006). With the governmental enforcement of these tactics and the strong promotion of bodybuilding, the popular culture soon began to encourage an austere aesthetic for women as well. In the Shanghai women's magazine *Linglong*, a writer condemned makeup by considering it as deceptive and temporary; and asserted that the robust body was the most vital

because it was “self-cultivated and will last until old age” (Gao, 2006, p.599). In this way, the tanned complexion acquired through outdoor sports replaced the fair skin as the “good skin” of the time.

The preference for the austere appearance continued to be enforced even after 1949 when the Maoist regime replaced the Nationalist government in ruling the country, but the meaning attached by the Maoist regime to it was quite different from that in the previous one. Specifically, the Maoist government perceived the pursuit of women’s physical beauty to be a manifestation of gender oppression and inequality, as the regime was concerned with social equality and the elimination of economic disparities. The authorities believed that by reducing the physical (as well as educational, occupational, and political) differences between men and women, the patriarchal oppression of women could be eliminated, thereby emancipating women (Ip, 2003). This political ideology was not only propagated directly by the authorities but also conveyed to the public through the mass media (e.g., newspaper, magazines, radio, etc.). The *All-China Women’s Federation* (ACWF) published exclusively by the political organs of the Communist Party, for instance, portrayed ideal women as hard-working, androgynous workers who pledged allegiance to the Communist Party rather than to her male family members; women were also encouraged to divorce if their husbands were found to be disloyal to the party and the state (Ip, 2003; Li & Zhang, 1994), which was an initiative challenging the Confucian patriarchy. In contrast to the high value placed on the individual labor force and loyalty to the Communist Party, the pursuit of sexual attractiveness was fiercely criticized and labeled as a sign of “petit-bourgeois.” The Maoist regime argued that the

pursuit of physical beauty would lead to disparities among individuals, thus weakening collectivism and distracting people from their devotion to political progress; to consume flashy clothing and cosmetics irrational and contrary to the party's goal of eliminating economic disparities among the people (Yeung, 2015).

To briefly summarize, the social preference for female appearances during the Nationalist government and Maoist regime is ascetic; the preferred complexion was no longer light but rather tanned through outdoor exercise and work. It was coercively constructed by significant political purposes, that is, responding to Japanese aggression and achieving the economic and political goals set by the Communist Party; and was not spontaneously formed, but enforced through laws, bans, political propaganda, and so on. In terms of the practical impact, the Confucian patriarchy was challenged and women were indeed empowered by the Constitution of 1950 and the new Marriage Law implemented in the same year (Li & Zhang, 1994): they were expected to realize their self-worth through labor and professional abilities outside the domestic sphere; they were given the right to education, to vote, and to divorce, which had previously been reserved for men. In my view, however, these social changes were not feminist in nature. Both the Nationalist government and the Maoist regime remained male-dominated (Yeung, 2015). In terms of motivation, they were willing to allocate some rights to women (which in fact should have been women's) simply because, in the context of war (including the Cold War since the 1950s), the widespread male participation in the military left a gap in the agricultural and industrial workforce that could be filled by women. This situation is similar to that of the US during World War II when the female percentage of the

workforce increased from 27 percent to nearly 37 percent between 1940 and 1945, and women had more opportunities than ever before, as widespread male enlistment resulted in labor shortages in many other industries. With the return of male soldiers at the end of the war, however, many women were once again pressured to return to the domestic sphere (Acemoglu et al., 2004). In terms of practice, the Nationalist government and the Maoist regime sought to "benefit" women by allowing them to live and dress more like men. This is typical of male-centric thinking, as it tacitly recognized that men's lives were standard, normative, and average (Mclntosh, 1988). Moreover, the individual differences and diversity within the group of women continued to be ignored, and women's pursuit of individuality was even stigmatized (as "petit-bourgeois"). It is in these ways that I argue that despite gaining some rights, women were not truly empowered in this period – the object of their obedience simply changed from the specific living men (their family members) to a masculinized regime.

Skin Lightening Since the 1980s

The Revival of Light-Skinned Preference & Third-Wave Feminism

It was not until the late 1970s when the Maoist era ended (marked by Mao's death in 1976) and China's economic reforms took place, that the emphasis on the connection between women's physical beauty and political beliefs gradually weakened. The economic reform was significant for China's economic development. Prior to it, China's economy was dominated by state ownership and central planning: between 1950 and 1973, China's real GDP per capita grew by an average of 2.9% per year, which was in the middle of the range of Asian countries during the same period;

from 1970 onwards, the economy entered a period of stagnation due to the Cultural Revolution (Brandt & Rawski, 2008). Since the start of economic reforms in 1978, China has moved to a market economy and strengthened its linkages with the global economy, with GDP growth averaging 9.5% per annum, which was accentuated after China joined the WTO in 2001 (Lee, 2004).

The lack of beauty products during the Maoist era was a result of the low per capita incomes as well as the ideology that opposed any attention to physical appearance, as mentioned in the previous part. When the ideological control was removed, the development of the beauty market was therefore possible. Since the economic reforms, the beauty market has been considered one of the most dramatic consumer developments. From 1986 to 1992, the number of local registered cosmetics factories has doubled; the domestic market alone was worth 4 billion *yuan* (The exchange rate was approximately 5.5 *yuan* = US$1 then) in output value with the *Xiafei* cosmetics company, whose cosmetics include the widely publicized skin whitening lotion, in the lead (Hooper, 2007). It was also around this time that a large number of multinational corporations realized the importance of the Chinese market. Among these are many beauty companies. For instance, L'Oreal entered the Chinese mainland market in 1997, and opened one of its worldwide research and development centers in Shanghai in 2005 (The other five centers are located in Aulnay and Chevilly in France, Clark, New Jersey in the US, Kawasaki, Kanagawa Prefecture in Japan, and India); Shiseido established Shiseido (China) Investment Co., Ltd. in 2003 to seize market opportunities and adopt marketing strategies more efficiently, and in 2004, it officially launched the cosmetics store

business in China. This undoubtedly provided more consuming choices for women who wanted to enhance their physical attractiveness and look more beautiful, thus making possible the revival of the preference for light skin tones during this period.

In addition to the cosmetics retail business, the local magazines for female readers have moved from the means of political propaganda to market-driven. Western women's magazines such as *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Marie Clair*, and *Bazaar* are also entering the Chinese market. These magazines, or called "glossies," are seen as "shaking up the local women's magazine industry in almost everything from marketing and advertising to magazine format and contents" (Chen, 2016, p.2831). Specifically, when the local women's magazines are mostly family-oriented and address topics about marriage, child-rearing, health, and family relationships to women of many age levels, the western ones focus primarily on fashion, beauty, and love, selling a fantasy, a glamorous dream populated by celebrities, high-end fashion and beauty products, as well as addressing a readership of mostly young, urban, professional women with increasingly consuming power and materialistic aspirations. Women are urged to be happy, which, rather than to be realized through one's self-sacrifice for the family, the party, and the country, is now equated with independence, self-realization, and not repressing oneself. This is embodied in the message of emancipation by stressing the celebrity interviewees' rebelliousness, their desire to be different and stand out from the crowd, and their ongoing journey of ceaseless change and progression after shedding a previous image of reservation and conformity. This idea, at first considered groundbreaking in China, is definite by Chen (2016) as "power femininity." Femininity, also called womanliness, refers to a set

of roles, behaviors, and attributes attached to women in any society at any time (Kimmel, 2001). The "power femininity," according to Chen (2016, p.2831), emphasizes "women's assertive individualism and power as consumerist agency;" it departs from the care-giving, self-sacrificial, and family-oriented "natural femininity" (Chen, 2016, p.2831) promoted in the local women's magazines. This had considerable resonance with the female readers of the time, which has been proved by the sales volume. In 2006, *Cosmopolitan China* and *Elle China* reached a circulation of over 500,000 copies each, one-fifth of the top-selling local title *Family*, though the price of the former is approximately six times that of the latter. In 2013, the numbers increased exponentially when *Vogue China* sold 1.7 million copies and *Cosmopolitan China* sold 9.5 million copies, as compared with *Family*'s 3.6 million ("About *Bosom Friend*," 2013). One thing that the rapid expansion of Western glossies has particularly benefited from is the explosive growth of cosmetics consumption in China - its cosmetics market has become the second-largest all over the world, generating $ 25 billion just in 2013 (Ren, 2014), and global cosmetics companies make considerable profits in the Chinese market. Estée Lauder, for instance, announced an overall sales growth of 40 percent in China in its full-year results for 2017 (Milnes, 2017). In these huge consumptions, the skin lightening products occupy a huge share, accounting for one-third of all facial skin care products sold in China (Chatterjee, 2009).

When widening the perspective to the whole world, it could be seen that the period when the idea of "power femininity" was becoming popular with women in China was exactly when the third-wave feminism in North America was booming. This makes me look for the connection between the two.

Different from the first wave focusing on women's rights to vote and the second wave campaigning for legal and social equality for women, the third-wave feminism is more concerned with the differences and diversity within women, critiquing those universal truths and norms that apply to all women of society and that minimize individual experience (Wolff, 2016). In other words, it encourages people to question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas such as gender, sexuality, beauty, femininity, and masculinity through which the patriarchy shapes and restricts women (Brunell, 2008). This is embodied in how third-wave feminists actively subverted, cooperated, and played with seemingly sexist images and symbols, turning slang terms that are pejoratively used in most contexts into proud labels (Brunell, 2008; Frug, 1992). The lipstick feminism as one variety of third-wave feminism, for instance, sought to embrace the sexual power of women, alongside feminist ideas, when some feminists in the second wave urged their fellow women to discard anything that men might use to objectify them and believed that women who enjoyed cosmetics and dressing were submitting to the patriarchal culture that sought to exploit them for their beauty (Edmonds, 2011). Specifically, what the lipstick feminists aimed at was those who refused to embrace their sexuality, and even abhorred the idea of men and would often take physical characteristics and persona that was far from what the average women looked like, thus creating stereotypes of what feminism and feminists looked like in the second-wave feminism. They proposed that a woman could be empowered by the wearing of cosmetic makeup, sensually-appealing clothes, and the embrace of sexual allure for her own self-image as a confidently sexual being; a woman deserved the choice to do whatever they want with their faces and bodies without being punished by an ideology that was using attitudes, economic pressure, and

even legal judgments regarding women's appearance to undermine them psychologically and politically (Mercer, 2010).

I argue that the proposition of the third-wave feminism represented by lipstick feminism and the idea of "power femininity" are related in some way, although no studies have been found to explore the relationship between the two. On the one hand, both of them intend to challenge the social norms that ignore women's individuality and diversity at the time. The lipstick feminism is considered a response to the ideological backlash against radical varieties of the second wave, with the negative stereotypes it generates such as the "ugly feminist" or the "anti-sex feminist," which argues that the pursuit for physical beauty and sexual attractiveness is not inconsistent with feminism (Walter, 2010). At the same time, the idea of "power femininity" can also be regarded as a challenge to the government and the party that artificially pitted women's pursuit for physical attractiveness and individuality against their political goals (to fight the invaders of other countries, and to consolidate the nascent socialist regime, respectively). It indicates another possible way for Chinese women to live – to please and improve themselves by consuming what they love, instead of sacrificing their dreams and hobbies, and dedicating their lives to families and political beliefs – at the time when China was beginning to actively integrate into the global economy but the influence of previous disciplines against women remained. On the other hand, the development of both the third-wave feminism and "power femininity" is not a rejection of the past, but a critical inheritance based on the great economic and professional power and status achieved by the previous feminist movements (Brunell, 2008). Even though the lipstick feminism appears to be a critique of the

second wave, it is by no means a wholesale denial of the second wave. On the contrary, the success of the second wave makes it possible for women to reclaim aspects of femininity that have earlier been seen as disempowering. Similarly, the reasons why the idea of "power femininity" can attract the attention of many Chinese women, especially those in urban areas, and be widely accepted by them is that, economically, policies for women's empowerment in the past decades have led to the recognition of women's labor and the rise of their economic status (Li & Zhang, 1994); ideologically, there is an intense need for people (not just women) to undo the wrongs of the Maoist era that the Communist Party interfered too much in people's private lives and limited their pursuit of individuality (Chen, 2016). Moreover, both the third-wave feminism in North America and "power femininity" in China shaped the local popular culture of the time, contributing to the emergence of popular female celebrities and female film and television images who dared to express ambition and individuality. According to Brunell (2008), the third wave's redefinition of women as assertive, powerful, and in control of their own sexuality gave rise to icons of powerful women, including singers Madonna, Queen Latifah, and Mary J. Blige, and the portrayals of women in films, television dramas, and even children's programming such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Girlfriends* (2000-08), *Mulan* (1998), Helen Parr and her daughter, Violet (*The Incredibles*, 2006). In China, as mentioned earlier, the local female celebrities interviewed by magazines always tend to talk about their experiences of rebellions and pursuing their dreams. The actress Gao Yuan Yuan, for instance, encouraged female readers to "just be yourself" rather than pleasing men when asked how to be desirable to men in an interview (Chen, 2016).

Now there seems to be a contradiction as to why the same quest for a fairer complexion to enhance a woman's physical beauty, which in ancient and modern China was seen as the "patriarchal discipline for women" and "manifestation of gender oppression," is now seen as feminist. However, from my perspective, this is not a "contradiction," because a specific act such as the pursuit of physical beauty here has no meaning in itself; it derives its meanings from the social and cultural context in which it is embedded (Wolff, 2016). Things like that are not uncommon. For instance, while the South Korean feminists called for women to be able to go out without make-up in the pursuit of female freedom and independence (Kuhn, 2019), in North Korea, women's daily make-up is an act of individuality and freedom (Ko, 2020); in the Middle East, an Islamic woman is fighting for her rights by refusing to wear the *hijab* (Kenyon, 2018), but in Europe, the new generation of young Muslim women have taken it upon themselves to wear traditional clothing to confront the world's prejudice about their cultural identity, even if their parents would prefer that they not do so (BBC News, 2018). These demonstrate that feminism is practiced in many different forms. The power of feminists does not come from wanting a lighter or darker skin tone, makeup or no makeup, *hijab* or no *hijab*, to marry or not to marry, to have children or not to have children, but from the rather, they have challenged the norms set by the patriarchy and decided what to do and what not to do on their own terms. It is partly by leveraging feminist narratives in marketing that since the 1980s, the skin lightening industry has been vigorously developed, and the preference for lighter skin tones has regained people's favor.

Critiques from the Perspective of Consumer Culture

Traditionally, social science has tended to view consumption as a trivial byproduct of production (Miles, 2015). However, this view has faltered since the 20th century when the production has expanded on an unprecedented scale, the number of commodities has grown exponentially, and the variety of goods and the variety of goods has also increased to such an extent that all parts of people's lives have been commodified and available in the marketplace; what used to be the exclusive preserve of the privileged can now be found in the marketplace in a great variety of brands and styles, offered and consumed at certain prices (Lurry, 2011). In this context, what brands, styles, prices, and how many goods a person can consume is increasingly a reflection of his or her status; and people are also enjoying consumption as a favorite and effective way to introduce their identities (Ngo, 2019; Lurry, 2011). This is how the consumer culture has been formed, as well as why more and more sociologists have increasingly focused on the value and significance of consumption for its own sake and the relationship between consuming behaviors and personal identities. In China, the growing link between cosmetic consumption and independence, individuality, "power femininity," and modern lifestyles, is a concrete manifestation of consumer culture, and how it indicates gender identity. People perceive the ability to spend a portion of one's income on cosmetics, especially high-end cosmetics, as a sign of middle class and potential wealth, as the purchase of cosmetics is a purely pleasurable consumption, pleasing people above their survival needs (Rondilla, 2009); women enjoying physical attractiveness are seen as challenging the past image of women who sacrificed themselves for their families or political beliefs and are

therefore of feminist significance. In this connection, the symbolic value of purchasing cosmetics is becoming more and more prominent in comparison to the functional value of it.

In the context of consumer culture, consumption becomes an important way to understand gender identity. Loeb (1994) pointed out that the connection between consumption and gender identity could date back to the Victoria era. During that period, the most important social identity for a woman was that of a housewife; and one of the most important duties for a housewife was to consume in order to feed and satisfy the needs of all family members (Loeb, 1994). This is how Boden (2003) concluded that the identities of a "housewife" and a "consumer" at that time were identical. Advertisers took note of this, which made the 18th century witness the emergence of more and more advertising and marketing targeting female consumers (Boden, 2003). Not only were women being taught to be thoughtful mothers and wives and sensible purchasers of the household, but they were also beginning to be educated to spend more on themselves and invest in their physical beauty to create appearances satisfying the gaze of others, in view of the "explosion" of fashion and beauty products at that time (Ngo, 2019). With the rapid growth of advertising for the latest fashion and beauty products in the 19th century, consumption has become a significant way to construct and reinforce a gender norm for women: to be an excellent woman, one should not only be a considerate housewife, but also keep their appearances attractive. That is, as Boden (2003) said, women are manipulated to consume their identities as being feminine, rather than just buying beauty products and household equipment. The gendered characteristic of this consumer culture has been emphasized and strengthened by the market and even society until nowadays. When it comes

to shopping, for instance, women are always more likely than men to be considered as impulsive, irrational, and spending too much money; even the very activity of shopping is socially perceived as "women's things" and "all women's love" (Ngo, 2019; Yoo et al., 2017).

It is further noted by Lurry (2011) how the consumer culture attracts women with slogans of "liberation," "individuality" and "freedom," while in reality placing them under "manipulation." I argue that her point of view comprehensively summarizes many scholars' critiques of the notion of "power femininity." She says, first of all, the beauty standards are set by men, as whether in manufacturers, brands, or marketing agencies, the people making decisions are men in most cases (Lurry, 2011). This is because, structurally, women working in the fashion industry, like women in many other industries, are subject to so many restrictions and barriers because of their gender identity that they have more difficulty than men in advancing towards the top of a hierarchal corporation (Bass & Avolio, 1994). This is the so-called "glass ceiling," evidenced by the statistics that, by 2020, women have accounted for less than 30% of the senior management of companies in the Asia Pacific (Catalyst, 2020). In this case, the criteria for evaluating whether a woman is beautiful, fashionable, and confident are set from a male decision maker's perspective. When women believe they are investing in themselves and enhance their physical attractiveness according to their own preferences, the most fundamental cause, purpose, and motivation are still staying with the interests of men (Yoo et al., 2017; Lurry, 2011). Second, the identities and images that women believe they are free to choose and work on are not free, but merely a "mass production" of "choices" determined by the "producer" (Lurry, 2011). Beauty corporations are indeed intentionally

leading Chinese women to believe that light skin tone is an important beauty standard. Xie and Zhang (2013), for instance, conducted a content analysis on skin beauty advertisements in women's magazines (*Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*) from China and the US. In order to fairly compare the skin tone preferences of fashion magazines in the two countries, they created a six-degree standardized scale with reference to a commercial cosmetic company's color code, ranged 1 (very fair), 2 (fair), 3 (beige), 4 (wheat), 5 (bronze), and 6 (espresso). The results show that over 70% of the models in Chinese advertisements have the lightest coloration (very fair) on the skin tone scale while only 25% of the models in American advertisements have 'very fair' complexion; the Caucasian models in Chinese advertisements have lighter skin tones than the Caucasians in American ones; even the Asian models in Chinese advertisements have an overall lighter skin tone than the Caucasian models, though Asians naturally and generally tend to have a darker complexion than Caucasians (Xie & Zhang, 2013). Rondilla (2009) goes further and points out that the most preferred models for international brands in the Chinese market are those with half-Caucasian/half-Asian features. They are chosen specifically so that consumers can find the models' Asian heritage relatable but also perceive their Caucasian features, especially their very light skin tones, as a desirable goal to pursue. Third, when women choose what images they want and work hard on it, it is often perceived as a sign that they are freeing themselves from the traditional gender roles and focus on their own needs and beauty. Lurry (2011) thinks, however, this is not gain but loss since women often forget to love and cherish their natural body and beauty when pursuing the advertising-made, mass-produced images. In this sense, women are not only the subject of consumption but also treat their image as an object of consumption (Lurry, 2011; Yang, 2011): they are committed to consuming a variety of

fashion and beauty products in order to make their bodies as attractive as the advertisements portrayed them to be. This is undoubtedly an awakening of women's self-awareness and an encouragement of women's self-development, as opposed to the past gender role that women should always be ready for "living for the family" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.56). However, while the past gender roles have loosened up and opened up new possibilities, new forms of dependence and compulsion have appeared (Lurry, 2011; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). That is, some women may indeed be liberated from the traditional identities of mothers and wives, but are now bound by the "sexy body" depicted by advertising. Some scholars question the notion of "power femininity" in the same way (Yang, 2011; Budgeon & Currie, 1995). In their view, the role of "power femininity" is exaggerated, allowing for the more persistent and widespread material and social inequalities between men and women to be obscured by a rosy image of "progress" in female consumption (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Under the notion of "power femininity," women's empowerment is measured in terms of purely material consumption, especially of beauty products and services, without going further into the more structural aspects such as employment and political participation (Yang, 2011). Its emphasis on "blessings already achieved" may make people falsely believe that women's empowerment has been achieved, make women who are satisfied with such small favors adapt and voluntarily conform to the male gaze, and even provide an argument for those who seek to defuse the issues posed by the feminist movement (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In other words, consumption led by the "power femininity," while imbued with feminist rhetoric of agency and freedom, remains inherently committed to traditional patriarchal standards of femininity and the eroticization of the female body, and the rationalization of patriarchal capitalism,

rather than really aiming to bring about social change or the elimination of gender inequality. As Yang (2011) summarized, the rampant growth of China's beauty economy and consumer capitalism has largely capitalized on femininity. It has both provides women with the means to consume by opening a part of the labor market to them and treats their bodies as objects of consumption. But somewhere behind this, women are still motivated by the male-dominated power hierarchy and cultivate men's pleasure and taste.

Skin Lightening in Recent Years

The Younger Users of Skin Lightening Products

In the early days, marketing and advertising for beauty brands relied heavily on traditional media such as magazines, newspapers, and television, while in recent years, social media and e-commerce have become more and more effective in this regard. There is data to show that online platforms have become the most important channel for Chinese users to purchase cosmetics, as the penetration rate of online cosmetics shopping in China has risen from 53.4% in 2014 to 74.2% in 2018 (Daxue Consulting, 2020). It has also been reported that 57% of fashion and beauty corporations are engaging in social media and influencer marketing, and major brands are planning to increase their investment in this regard (Digital Marketing Institution, n.d.). Dennis McEniry, the president of Estée Lauder's online business, for instance, has acknowledged the significance of social media and influencers for marketing in China (Milnes, 2017). The brand's full-year results for 2017 have shown a 50% percent increase in e-commerce sales in China. The market "outpaced overall sales growth for Estée Lauder, which rose 5 percent to $11.8 billion for the year. Online

accounted for 20 percent of all company sales" (Milnes, 2017). L'Oréal, as Estée Lauder's competitor, has also clearly noticed the importance of social media, KOLs, and influencers. Most of its brands have their official accounts on Weibo, which could be considered as the "Chinese version of Twitter," with a large number of followers (Daxue Consulting, 2020).

Existing scholarship generally agrees that the reason brands are increasingly marketing on social media and e-commerce platforms, as well as partnering with influencers, is to appeal to younger consumers, or specifically, teens in Generation Z (those born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s) (Mediakix, 2020; Veirman et al., 2019), as this group accounts for a massive annual purchasing power of $44 billion in today's economy, and has a great potential to become brand loyalists as they grow up (Mediakix, 2020). Reaching out to teens through social media and influencer marketing is because, on the one hand, their use of social media has reached an extraordinary level with the diminishing influence of television and other forms of traditional media. While television used to be a popular medium for consumers and advertisers alike, recent surveys indicate that merely 36% of people between the ages of 24 and 36 are paying for cable or satellite TV; and 82% of Generation Z believes that TV advertising has little influence on their purchasing decisions (Mediakix, 2020). Almost half of the same group of people, in contrast, spend ten or more hours on the Internet. On the other hand, for teens, social media influencers are more relatable and approachable than traditional celebrities (at least it seems that way) and therefore more trustworthy to teens (Veirman et al., 2019; Digital Marketing Institution, n.d.). Despite a lack of consensus on the definition of influencers, scholars have summed up some characteristics of this group of people,

as well as the differences between them and traditional celebrities regarding the sources of fame and the nature of their influence. Whereas traditional celebrities are known and recognized by the public for their outstanding appearance (such as models) or talents (such as actors and singers), influencers attract followers and promote themselves by posting highly engaging self-generated content, either as experts in a particular area such as beauty, fitness, and food or more broadly by showcasing their overall lifestyles. Influencers share highly personal content online and interact frequently with their followers. These allow followers to see into the influencer's personal life, leading to an assumption that they have much in common with the influencer and that he or she is just like the boy or girl next door. As a result, teens trust their favorite influencers and regard them as credible sources of information and inspiration, which may influence consumption-related decisions because influencers often let their followers know which brands they like and dislike, which brands they used and are using, and overly display these brands in their photos and videos. Data is already available to demonstrate this significant influence, with 49% of consumers admitting that they refer to suggestions from influencers when consuming (Digital Marketing Institution, n.d.).

For beauty companies, partnering with social media influencers to promote their products is undoubtedly fruitful, otherwise, brands like Estée Lauder and L'Oréal would not have continued to invest in this area in recent years. For social media and influencers, there is also a corresponding increase in traffic and profitability. For adolescent users/followers, however, the picture is not so rosy. In order to promote beauty products, influencers tend to imply or emphasize the efficacy and usefulness of the products by showing their "flawless" skin (usually smooth, delicate, and fair,

without any wrinkles or blemishes), and call followers' attention to minor defects of the skin or invisible sources of troubles, suggesting that followers should apply the advertised products every day to control these things and have the same "flawless" skin as they do (Li et al., 2008). In this sense, the "flawless" skin is presented as fundamental and normal while any flaw is constructed as unnatural. This is exactly what has been mentioned before, and what critics of the notion of "power femininity" have pointed out, that the advertising-created, mass-produced images tend to lead women to ignore the fact that the body is naturally flawed, and even to portray the natural body as unnatural, problematic, and in need of alteration (Lurry, 2011; Yang, 2011; Li et al., 2008). For adolescent girls, frequent exposure to such visual content and marketing narratives can lead to concerns about body image and poorer mental health (Marengo et al., 2018; Perloff, 2014). This, to a great extent, stems from the comparison of their own physical appearance to videos and photos posted by social media influencers, as the image gap by the comparison can make them feel inferior about their physical appearance. Theoretically, this connection is based on the notion that upward social comparison may result in lower self-esteem (Marengo et al., 2018; Perloff, 2014). The low self-esteem in appearance makes these girls prone to impression management practices in social media. They may, for instance, underreport negative experiences and digitally edit or limit the publication of unflattering images on their online profiles.

Figure 1. Two influencers from Weibo, a Chinese social media platform similar to Twitter, are sponsored by OLAY and CLARINS to promote their skin lightening products respectively. They describe the product ingredients and functions, as well as how their skins become better after using the products. They have 4.48 million and 1.66 million followers respectively. Screenshots by Diwen Shi with the influencers' IDs pixelated.

This manipulation of one's own social media presentation may increase the likelihood that the posted content reflects a highly idealized image, facilitating upward appearance comparisons among users browsing their social media profiles, and ultimately damage their emotional wellbeing. This can be partially explained in regard to changes in body image perception (Marengo et al., 2018).

Regular exposure to the vast amount of images and videos posted on social media platforms provides users with many contexts in which they are led to compare their appearance with that of others, which in turn can have negative effects on their personal body image, in particular during puberty when women are hormonally influenced to gain weight and their skin is more prone to acne. In fact, there has never been a shortage of such depictions of slim, fair-skinned, youthful-looking women in traditional mass media. These images have become so prevalent that many people have begun to realize that they are problematic, so they may no longer be as effective as they once were (Perloff, 2014). Social media, however, with their emphasis on attractive peers rather than exclusively supermodels far removed from the lives of ordinary people, may "elide persuasion defense mechanisms" (Perloff, p. 4, 2014) and allows their users to internalize those unrealistic beauty standards and "ideal image" under the peer pressure. Based on this, in an attempt to get their bodies closer to the "ideal image" promoted by social media and influencers, a considerable number of adolescent girls may try to lose weight by over-dieting and over-exercising, and the age of the girls who do so or have such thoughts is getting younger (Perloff, 2014). In addition, it has recently been reported that there are Millennial girls selling their nude photos to loan sharks for small loans, only in order to purchase luxury bags and high-end beauty products, or undergo plastic surgery (Butler, 2018), which indicates that excessive body image concerns not only lead to physical and mental health problems but also implies financial and criminal risks.

I argue that the recent online marketing of beauty brand to a younger demographic, and its implied risks to teenage girls, to some extents, justifies the critique of the preference for light skin tones

from the perspective of consumer culture, as mentioned in the previous section. Specifically, it should be noted that beauty companies are like all other businesses in that their purpose is to make a profit. To accomplish this, they need to market their products in an effective way to convince consumers to buy them. The “effective” approach is not static but is shaped and influenced by the social contexts and social changes. For instance, in the early stages of China’s economic reforms when the country had just emerged from a highly politicized system and people had just regained the opportunity to pursue individuality, beauty products were marketed to attract mature, financially empowered women by emphasizing their connection to female freedom, rebellion, and modern lifestyles (Chen, 2016); in recent years (2010 onwards), with the saturation of the mature female market, it is natural for beauty companies to develop potential future brand loyalists by tapping into younger consumers (Mediakix, 2020). Therefore, they have shifted the position of shaping the “ideal body image” from traditional media to social media that is an important medium for young people’s daily communication and entertainment. In this sense, there is no real difference between the light-skinned models with Caucasian features in women’s magazines of a decade ago (Xie & Zhang, 2013; Rondilla, 2009) and the fair-skinned influencers of today’s social media, both of whom are deliberately chosen by beauty companies to convince their target audience of the importance of light skin tones. The negative influences of this deliberately portrayed, one-dimensional aesthetic standard get much more attention and discussion now than they did decades or so ago, in large part because teenage girls are more vulnerable than adult women due to their immature physical and psychological developmental states and lack of financial independence (Perloff, 2014).

Gendered Lookism against Women in the Labor Market and in the Workplace

Adolescent girls are more likely to suffer from body image concerns due to the "ideal female image" portrayed on social media, but this does not mean that adult women are immune to these. In various highly-visual content, women are expected to care for their skin through elaborate and expensive cleansing routines and lotion applications; they are expected to "perfect" their skin through the use of foundation, concealers, and various other cosmetics, to the point that when a woman's skin is not fair, soft, and smooth enough, she will be perceived as not feminine. In contrast, when a man's skin is rough, scarred, or wrinkled, he will instead be perceived as more masculine (Lafrance, 2018). Not only in the practice of skin lightening, but also in any aspects of the body and appearance (e.g., body shape, aging, and dressing), the public is far more tolerant of men than women. Women, for instance, tend to experience more weight stigma than men, even if they are overweight to a lesser degree (King & Puhl, 2013); older women more often face marginalization based on "lookism," or say physical appearance-based double standard and discrimination, while people used to associate older men with positive qualities such as being mature, wise and experienced (Ahn & Costigan, 2019). This highly gendered lookism has been rationalized and normalized in Chinese society, which is reflected in the barriers to women's employment.

The prevalence of the gendered lookism, on the one hand, makes women more likely than men to lose opportunities in the employment context due to non-personal ability related factors, even if they have the same qualifications as their male competitors. In a case in California, a male

executive ordered a manager to fire a female employee because the employee was not sufficiently "good-looking" or "sexy" enough to sell perfume, which was considered illegal gender discrimination, without applying similar attractiveness standards to male employees (Cavico et al., 2012). Chinese women are even worse off in this regard, as laws prohibiting physical appearance employment discrimination are absent (Lee, 2009). In this context, it is common to express preference and limitations based on gender, age, marital status, and physical appearance in the pre-employment process in China (Webster, 2011). Moreover, unlike the commonly held view that appearance-based discrimination only occurs in jobs that require low levels of skill and experiences such as front desk workers, retail salespersons, and waitresses, it is equally prevalent in those that are more specialized such as the health care industry (Niu et al., 2018). In a study investigating the prevalence of gendered lookism in nursing recruitment advertisements in China, the content analysis indicates that close to 50 percent of job postings for nursing positions ask for specific physical features. The tall women with a "good image," an attractive face, a smooth and fair skin tone, and aged from 25 to 35, are most preferred, which is no different from what employers in some other industries expect of female employees (Niu et al., 2018). It may be argued that expressing preferences for specific aspects of physical appearance in job advertisements does not constitute discrimination because the advertisement precedes the actual offer or rejection of a candidate. It should be noted, however, that job postings are expressions of the employer's conscious intentions, decisions, and preferences. Requirements and preferences in job postings encourage applicants with certain characteristics unrelated to professional competence to apply while discouraging others from considering them and, therefore, are discriminatory in intent. In

particular, with the current Chinese healthcare system still largely government-led (Liu et al., 2011), these requirements that apply exclusively to women beyond their professional competence can even more reflect the institutionalization and structuralization of the gendered lookism.

The most direct consequence of discrimination based on physical appearance is the unreasonable disparities in female employees' access to employment and growth opportunities. That is to say, unqualified candidates can be favored over those that are more qualified. For those who are employed, they are also at risk of experiencing workplace bullying in relation to their appearance or dress code. Last year, it was reported that some female receptionists at department stores, waitresses at banquet halls, and even nurses at plastic surgery clinics are not permitted to wear glasses at work. For example, according to a woman working at a plastic surgery clinic, she and her female colleagues were told by their employer that glasses might leave customers with an indifferent impression, so it was better not to wear them to avoid this risk. In addition, they were also asked to remove hair from their legs and arms, keep their body in shape, and prevent tanning to maintain a good image, as it is part of the brand image of the clinic (United Press, 2019). This suggests that the employer can derive economic value from the attractive physical appearance of their female employees. When employers award "preferential treatment" to attractive individuals in the workplace, the attractive physical appearance is converted into a form of capital, so that those with attractive physical appearance enjoy a "privilege" over those without. This, for one thing, results in differential access to and power over socioeconomic opportunities and outcomes (Mahajan, 2007). For another thing, the female body becomes objectified and capitalized upon (Mears, 2014),

because capitalists are able to exploit the sexual attractiveness of their female employees to win profits, please customers, as in the case of the aforementioned employer of the plastic surgery clinic, to regard female employees as "walking billboards." These economic benefits attached to an attractive physical appearance promote the pursuit of physical attractiveness among women. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the "privilege," "power" and "benefits" mentioned above are not what they really refer to, but rather a front for capitalists to more easily conveniently exploit the beauty and sexual attractiveness of their female employees for greater profit. Women are never granted any real power or privilege from this, as even if women utilize both their professional abilities and sexual attractiveness, their chances of promotion in the workplace are still lower than that of men who do not have to use sexual attractiveness (Bass & Avolio, 1994); the average income of working women is still generally lower than that of men; and China's female employment rate has even declined over the past decade (Whiting, 2019). Moreover, the attempts to gain greater competitiveness in the labor market by increasing attractiveness will undoubtedly reinforce stereotypes of what constitutes femininity and attractiveness, and lead women to meet the beauty standards preferred by men (Mears, 2014). This, in turn, will reaffirm the differentiation between men and women established by the patriarchy (Ebert, 1991) and the subordinate status of women, making them vulnerable to exploitation and exclusion in the workplace. They may feel hurt, rejected, shamed, devalued, disillusioned, and frustrated in the short term (Mahajan, 2007). In the long term, as a study has suggested, those who with persistent discrimination experiences are more likely to engage in risky health behaviors such as substance or alcohol use (Lee et al., 2017); some of them may also be forced to accept unsatisfactory career paths and are thus more likely to fall into

poverty.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the public's tacit acceptance of the idea that women have an obligation to stay attractive can, in turn, reinforce the stereotypes against women in other aspects, such as the prejudice that women are emotional, irrational, wasteful with money, and only care about their physical appearance. Specifically, the normalization that women should be attractive usually points to the fact that the costs women pay in this regard are ignored and disregarded. Many men, for instance, are often unaware that maintaining a good figure requiring dieting and time spent working out; that keeping skin smooth, fair, and looking young requires spending money on skincare products and cosmetics and possibly regular visits to beauty salons; and that for those women who are required by their employers to wear make-up to work, it takes extra time every day to do so (Tan, 2020). However, once these men learn this at some point, that it takes money and time for women to maintain their physical beauty, they will in turn accuse women of not being sensible enough and spending money, time, and energy on things that do not make sense. This sounds unbelievable, but it is indeed what many women have experienced: they are required to be beautiful, yet they are criticized for spending too much time and money on beauty products. Society has therefore developed a stereotype against women, defining them as irrational, emotional, wasting of money, and only concerned with physical appearance rather than professional advancement (Yoo et al., 2017), which further rationalizes the exclusion of women in the labor market and in the workplace. Not only is this the case with lookism against women, but many other patriarchal disciplines and accusations against women are contradictory in this way. When talking about issues,

for instance, there are always people who regard the lower number of female scientists, philosophers, and politicians as evidence to argue that women are less capable and hard-working as men are, while ignoring the fact that there have been less than a hundred years since women were granted the same right to education as men. The University of Oxford, for instance, did not grant degrees to women until 1920 while the University of Cambridge until 1948.

To briefly summarize this section, the rapid growth of social media and e-commerce in the last decade or so has changed the way the beauty industry market itself, allowing them to more easily reach the adolescent groups, who are considered to be consumers with huge potential and possible brand loyalists in the future, through the online platform and social influencers. Recent statistics have proven that this is indeed a highly effective marketing approach for beauty companies, but the single "ideal female body image" that has been constructed in this context and socially normalized is extremely risky for women – whether it is for adolescent or adult women, for those who enjoy dressing up or not, for those who are working or not yet working. This risk manifests itself, foremost, in body shame and body image-related mental problems. The more profound problem, however, is the polarized system of evaluation of men and women – attention is paid to a women's physical appearance over her abilities, even if she has extraordinary professional skills. This prevents women's personal abilities from being accessed fairly and makes them vulnerable to gendered exploitation in the workplace, resulting in women being marginalized and disempowered.

Part III: Conclusion and Future Studies

I began this major research paper by introducing the practice of skin lightening and its historical popularity in some countries, including the UK, India, the Philippines, China, Japan, and Korea. These histories indicate the associations between skin lightening practices and factors such as class, race, gender, and colonialism. While other factors manifest and influence differently in different countries, the gendered aspect of skin lightening practices is essential and universal. In other words, regardless of the history of skin lightening in any country, it is always women rather than men have been required to lighten their skin, and lighter skin tones have always been associated with femininity rather than masculinity. This differentiation in skin tone preferences for men and women, according to postmodern feminism, is constructed and exploited by the patriarchy to exert its influence. This paper, built upon an extensive literature review, assists in providing relatively comprehensive knowledge on the gendered aspect of skin lightening practices, including how the practice of skin lightening was socially and culturally constructed in history and at present, how the preference for lighter skin tones has changed with social changes, and moreover, how women have been empowered or disempowered by the gendered skin lightening practices.

With a view to China's long history of skin lightening and its position as the largest market for skin lightening products today, I limit my discussion of skin lightening practice to women in China and pose my research questions, "*How is the practice of skin lightening constructed by patriarchy?"* and "*How are women constrained by the gendered practice of skin lightening?"* Overall, I concluded from my literature review and analysis of secondary data that the

one-dimensional beauty standard of the female body, represented by the preference for lighter skin tones, is essentially a patriarchal discipline upon women for the most part: it creates excessive body image concerns and body shame, objectifies female bodies in the pursuit of one-dimensional "ideal beauty," and limits women's individual pursuit and personal development in society.

In the means of answering the research questions, this paper has employed a chronological logic to analyze the practices of skin lightening at different periods in China. I have distinguished four time periods based on the changes in social systems and the years in which social changes took place: the ancient period, from 1930 to the late 1970s, from the 1980s to before 2010, and in recent years (after 2010). Specifically, I first provide an introduction to Confucianism, which is the dominant ideology in most of ancient China. I argue that, in this male-centric social system, the preference for lighter skin tones is a way in which the patriarchal society leads women to serve and rely on men, restricting the range of daily activities and thinking of women. I then demonstrate the fact that the preference for lighter skin tones fell out of favor starting in the middle decades of the 20th century because of the Nationalist government's policy towards foreign aggression in the 1930s, and the Maoist regime's policy of consolidating its rule and confronting ideological struggle. While it is true that women's rights have progressed somewhat in terms of results, I do not believe that the ascetic aesthetic of the female body promoted by the government during this period is feminist in nature. This is because women are benefited in a way that leads them to be more like men, indicating that men's lives are standard and normative; and women's quest for individuality is stigmatized. I continue by showing that the preference for lighter skin tones has regained popularity

since the 1980s as a result of political and economic reforms during this period. I demonstrate how and why consuming skin lightening products and involving in skin lightening practices then has been linked to feminism and modern lifestyle, as well as how this association is criticized by some other scholars from the perspective of consumer culture. In the final section, I illustrate that marketing for skin lightening products has increasingly relied on social media and influencers in recent years, with the aim of attracting younger consumers and brand loyalists. Statistics show that it is an effective way of marketing for beauty companies. However, the one-dimensional "ideal beauty" it constructs not only indicates a risk of physical and mental health, financial and criminal exposure for adolescent girls but also hinders the personal development of adult women in the labor market and in the workplace. In other words, both adolescent and adult women are disempowered by the *one-dimensional* beauty standard represented by the preference for lighter skin tones.

In the course of my literature review for this paper, I was not able to gather as much data as I would have liked about how women involved in skin lightening practices react to this beauty standard, what meanings they attach to the fair skin tones, as well as how they link to this beauty standard to the feminist movement, within which area more research can be completed. More research can also be conducted upon the comparison between the preferences for lighter skin tones in Asia and that for tanned skin in Europe and North America, which I have not been able to cover in this paper.

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