

From advocating “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) to refusing to “serve beauty duty”

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Abstract: From advocating “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) to refusing to “serve beauty duty”, the road of self-awakening and struggle of contemporary Chinese women can be described as bumpy and tortuous. The rise and development of “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) in China originated from the “heroin chic” in the 1990s and the BM trend driven by Korean pop culture (K-Pop) represented by Korean girl groups around 2020. Among many aesthetic trends, Chinese and even East Asian men selectively choose the trend of “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) as their aesthetic expectation for women, reflecting the negative impact of the gender role view in Confucian culture on men. The fashion of “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) has exacerbated the irrational behavior of “serving beauty duty”, and the awakened contemporary Chinese women have begun a series of rebellious behaviors to express their firm stance of refusing to “serve beauty duty”.

Key Words: “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) ; beauty duty; heroin chic; BM trend; self-awakening; anti-objectification

1. Introduction and Structure

This article is divided into two parts: the first part analyzes why the aesthetic trend of “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) can be popular in China from different perspectives such as nationality, history and time. This part explores the historical background of the introduction of the aesthetic trend of “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) into China, as well as the aesthetic psychology of men shaped by the Confucian tradition and the social psychology behind it. The second part discusses the change from advocating “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) to refusing to “serve beauty duty”, pointing out that the inner force of this change comes from women themselves. This part focuses on how Chinese women express their position of refusing to “serve beauty duty”, and through what specific behaviors the resistance of Chinese women is externalized.

2. Research Methodologies and Theories

This article adopts qualitative research methods to carefully sort out historical phenomena, analyze and summarize specific cases, and conduct in-depth interviews with key figures. This article quotes Michel Foucault’s “body as power” theory and gaze theory, Erving Goffman’s “body as social practice” theory, Barbara Lee Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts’ “gender objectification” theory, etc., attempting to use various theories to intervene in social phenomena so that the phenomena can be interpreted and analyzed more deeply.

3. Process of Analysis

3.1. The reasons why “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) was introduced to China and became popular

The so-called “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) means: Having a light and white skin complexion, having a slim and skinny figure, and having a youthful appearance. The reason why the “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) aesthetic trend is popular in China is due to both external and internal factors.

In the 1990s, skinny models represented by Kate Ann Moss were sought after by the fashion industry. This trend also swept into China after the “reform and opening up”. At that time, tank tops and belly-baring clothes were popular in China, and the emphasis was on thin materials and exposed designs. Kate Ann Moss, who had no fat on her body, undoubtedly fit this style of dressing. In fact, Kate Ann Moss is not a model in the traditional sense. She is only 1.64 meters tall and has a pair of thin and slightly deformed bow legs. The reason why she became the darling of the fashion industry is that she caters to the “heroin chic” aesthetic of the Western world in the 1990s.

This trend started in the United States in the 1990s, when Americans of that era were filled with a sense of hesitation, confusion, and world-weariness. A series of social problems, such as the sluggish job market, the decline in full-time jobs also in blue-collar wages, the uneven distribution of social wealth, and the widening gap between the rich and the poor, caused dissatisfaction, anxiety, and anger among Americans at that time. They were unable to create a prosperous life through their own efforts, and were also unable to change the current social situation. All these made Americans at that time question the “American Dream”, and a sense of emptiness began to spread.

Gao Yingdong (高英东), a Chinese scholar specialized in the research field of American studies once summarized: “The mainstream values that were once believed in have been shaken, and a ‘lower-class culture’ that rebels against the moral norms and order of civilized society and is separated from mainstream society has gradually formed. The core content of this culture is fatalism, violence and excitement.” [1] Those who believe in and spread “lower-class culture” numb themselves with opioid painkillers and drugs and demonstrate their rebellious attitude. In addition to being addictive, OxyContin, heroin, fentanyl, etc. will also cause users to lose weight rapidly and become pale, so thin bodies and pale appearance, almost sickly skin color have become a trend.

In fact, the entire “Pan-Western” world was in turmoil around the 1990s, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, drastic changes in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the United States launching the Gulf War and the Kosovo War while becoming a technological and military power. All of this led to people’s uncertainty and lack of control over the future. When “lower-class culture” spread across the “Pan-Western” world and led to the popularity of addictive drugs, “heroin chic” also began to sweep the fashion industry, and the skinny Kate Ann Moss became a darling on the catwalk. Fortunately, although the Chinese in the 1990s absorbed this skinny beauty, they were not influenced by the negative mentality and values of the “Pan-Western” world; but unfortunately, it was precisely because the Chinese at that time did not see the decadent “lower-class culture” behind the “heroin chic” and criticize it, that they blindly regarded a skinny body as a symbol of sexiness.

In recent decades, the rampant spread of Korean pop culture (K-Pop) in China has also made the trend of “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) more and more intense. Lisa and Jennie, members of the Korean girl group BLACKPINK, led and promoted the BM trend in 2020, making the aesthetic pursuit of “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) take another step towards extremes. BM is the abbreviation of the Italian fashion brand Brandy Melville. The biggest feature of this brand is “one size” -- that is, size S. Whether it is tops or bottoms, the waist circumference is 58CM. The brand’s tone can be summarized as short, tight and revealing. The production and sales model of only one size is undoubtedly openly erasing and eliminating the differences in women’s bodies, and regulating all women with some so-called ideal body standards.

However, such a brand that conveys prejudice, discrimination and coercion has been sought after by a group of top young singers, actresses and idols. In addition to Lisa and Jennie mentioned above, even cellist Ouyang Nana (欧阳娜娜), who is regarded by many as a genius and inspirational young female, has started wearing BM brand clothes. As a highly educated intellectual and an elite in the classical music world, Ouyang Nana’s (欧阳娜娜) personal behavior undoubtedly plays a role of exemplary leadership.

BM brand clothes have extremely strict requirements on the wearer’s figure and weight. The following is a comparison table of BM height and weight:

150 cm	33 kg
153 cm	35 kg
155 cm	38 kg
158 cm	41 kg
160 cm	43 kg
163 cm	45 kg
165 cm	47 kg
168 cm	49 kg
170 cm	51 kg
173 cm	53 kg
175 cm	55 kg
178 cm	58 kg
180 cm	61 kg

Figure 1. The table of standard of BM wearers' height and weight
Source: https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_7614679

Faced with the standards required by this BM wearers' height and weight comparison table, netizens once burlesqued: "If I lose weight according to this standard, I will only be left with internal organs and bones in the end." Liu Qiaoyan (刘俏言), a reporter from Qian Jiang (钱江) Evening News, concluded after visiting BM's Shanghai store: "This is a change from people wearing clothes to clothes wearing people -- just cutting off the conventional large sizes not only saves a lot of effort but also reaps marketing benefits. BM has taken this to the extreme. BM's average waist size of 58cm makes most girls shy away from it, but at the same time, it has cultivated a group of 'BM girls' who are willing to buy it. The scrutiny of women's figures and appearances has never stopped. 'BM girls' seem to be at the top of the contempt chain and are proud of it." [2]

It is worth noting that Chinese men's acceptance of the above two trends shows strong inclinations and preferences. For example, the power aesthetics which highlights women's strength brought by Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bündchen and the voluptuous aesthetics highlights women's plump fullness brought by the Kardashian sisters are not quite accepted by most Chinese males.

Ultimately, "bái yòu shòu" (白幼瘦) is a product of a patriarchal society, reflecting men's possessiveness, control and excessive desire to protect women. One of the important reasons why the "bái yòu shòu" (白幼瘦) aesthetic trend is so popular in China even the whole East Asia is that East Asia is basically the "radiation" circle of traditional Confucian culture. Traditional Confucian culture is full of patriarchal discourse and order in which men are strong and women are weak, men are superior to women, and men are responsible for going out and earning money, while women stay at home and manage housework. In a society built on the foundation of traditional Confucian culture, men take the initiative and women are naturally docile, passive, and controlled. "bái yòu shòu" (白幼瘦) emphasizes the fragility, slenderness, petiteness and childishness of women who lack the ability to think independently, which caters to the social and aesthetic psychology of East Asian men.

From a sociological perspective, the status of women in contemporary Chinese society has been continuously improving. More and more women have achieved economic independence, and men have gradually begun to lose their original dominant position. However, "bái yòu shòu" (白幼瘦) has allowed men to regain their desire for control. As mentioned above, "bái yòu shòu" (白幼瘦) particularly highlights the "childishness" and "cuteness". To put it bluntly, it is the infantile state of being brainless, without opinions, and able to be indoctrinated with ideas and dominated at will. If the beauty of the domineering queen symbolizes the subjective right of women to refuse sexual requests and implies the

frustration of men who may not be able to obtain what they want, then “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) refers to the sexy body that is easily accessible to men and can be manipulated at will. This kind of weakness symbolizes: easy to be captured, grabbed and manipulated.

Anyway, “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) reflects the aesthetic expectations of Chinese men, and embodies the social construction and discipline of women’s identity and beauty. In order to meet this deformed aesthetic expectation, “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) has become a goal set by many women for themselves, which has aggravated women’s appearance anxiety, and “serving beauty duty” has become an increasingly necessary but conscious choice for women. The so-called “beauty duty” refers to the act of consuming extra resources (such as time, money, energy, etc.) or even harming physical health in order to cater to the aesthetic standards of society. This situation often happens to women. Before the popularity of “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦), the sad history of women “serving beauty duty” had already begun. Knee and foot injuries caused by high heels, skin allergies caused by cosmetics and increased living costs, permanent damage to the body caused by diet pills and medical beauty, etc. are happening at any time. Fortunately, some women are already fighting back against this irrational behavior that caters to the male gaze.

3.2. Women’s resistance: refusing to “serve beauty duty”

Shan Dianshui (山点水), born in 1998, is a female photographer who likes to express herself in an unexpected and creative way. She once recruited 100 ordinary women on social platforms and shot a series of “Women Who Refuse to Serve Beauty Duty”, which was the front-page “Beauty Duty Escape Plan”. As for why she initiated this project, how she selected participants for the project, and how she took photos, this unique female photographer once said: “In today’s social environment, women have been instilled with the idea that they need beauty since birth, while men can have more resources without relying on their appearance, which is not fair at all. I hope that the subject of my photo shoot should have a strong desire to express herself and be able to accept her true and natural state. Directing actions and posing are almost non-existent in this project. As a photographer, I am more of a helper for these women to express their creativity. They are all shown in the lens in their true and unadorned state. During the shooting process, I will also share my thoughts on beauty, freedom and life with each female, and continue to explore and collide.”

“How do you understand and practice ‘not serving beauty duty’?” Before shooting, Shan Dianshui (山点水) always first asked the above question. It can be seen that as a thoughtful independent photographer, Shan Dianshui (山点水) initiated this project with the motivation of rebelling against men’s aesthetic expectations and the aesthetic conventions they impose on women, and giving women the freedom not to be “beauties” in the gaze of men. The pain women feel about their appearance comes from the social structure. There is no freedom to be “ugly” in society. To change all this, one must resist the “generally recognized” definition of “female beauty” by the male society. For Shan Dianshui (山点水), that is exactly why everyone must become part of the society that is given the freedom to be ugly.

The women who participated in the Shan Dianshui (山点水) photography project can be roughly divided into the following categories: women whose bodies were severely damaged by “serving beauty duty”, career-oriented women, women who refuse to wear makeup, and women who have cut their hair into a crew cut and refuse to grow long hair. Most of these participants have experienced difficult moments in their lives and gone through a difficult mental journey. They want to use the camera to record their transformation.

Participant No. 1, Xiao Han (小涵), who once suffered from bulimia due to excessive weight loss, confirmed the clinical observations of Barbara Lee Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts. These two American social psychologists co-authored the article “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding

Women' s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks” , pointing out that women who experience “gender objectification” may suffer from a variety of clinical diseases such as eating disorders, acid reflux, and depression. Shan Dianshui' s (山点水) camera truly recorded Xiao Han' s (小涵) state after vomiting and her confusion and bewilderment. Xiao Han' s (小涵) former major was broadcasting and hosting. In order to enter her ideal university for further studies, she used extreme weight loss methods. In the end, she chose not to study broadcasting and hosting anymore, and at the same time stopped destroying her body.

“Do hosts have to be slim?” People once again questioned the hidden rules in some so-called “special” industries. This reflects the habitual “appearance consumption” of women in certain professions by the male society. Actors, models, hosts, flight attendants, etc. are all passively accepting this “appearance consumption” . Although it is extremely unreasonable, women in the above professions seem to have to endure it silently. They seem to never have the initiative to say “no” . If they choose to reject the “beauty” that is regulated and expected by the male society, they can only leave these industries. Xiao Han (小涵) eventually recovered her health and started a new career and life, but the male society' s “appearance consumption” of women in certain professions has not stopped. If allowing women to have the right to be “ugly” can already be considered a challenge, then allowing actors, models, hosts, flight attendants, etc. to have the right to be “ugly” is definitely a nearly impossible and arduous challenge.

Participant No. 2, Guo Guo (果果), used to work in a medical beauty institution and received many women suffering from “appearance anxiety” . The so-called “appearance anxiety” refers to the anxiety that arises when a person is not confident about his or her appearance. A more professional definition is: “Affected by social aesthetic standards and the context of social media, individuals develop negative emotions such as lack of confidence, dissatisfaction and disagreement with their appearance, body shape and other body images, thus falling into a state of anxiety.” “‘Appearance anxiety’ manifests itself as a state of connection between the body and the mind at the micro level, and as a result of the body’ s connection to society at the macro level. In other words, ‘appearance anxiety’ is not only an individual’ s psychological state, but also a social mentality that permeates the society. From the perspective of body sociology, the body is no longer a biological carrier that represents individual actions, but a social practice subject that connects individuals and society.” [3]

Women often attach importance to their appearance out of the motivation of seeking social recognition and attracting the attention of the opposite sex. The root of women' s appearance anxiety is actually anxiety about survival resources and survival ability, and anxiety generated by uncertainty about their own value. In this age of “appearance supremacy” , the role of appearance is often overemphasized. Women whose appearance conforms to the mainstream male aesthetic are relatively more socially attractive and are more likely to be treated more positively by others. They may have an advantage in competing for certain resources, such as finding a partner or even a job. This is why some women regard their “unsatisfactory” body image as the culprit of their failure in life. Guo Guo (果果), who no longer wanted to be an accomplice of appearance anxiety, finally chose to resign. She opened a craft beer bar and positioned it as a family-style pub where guests can relax, drink and chat, just like gathering in a friend's living room. Compared with sports bars featuring various games, Guo Guo' s (果果) bar attracts more female customers, and the discussion of female topics is placed at the center of the bar. In Shan Dianshui' s (山点水) lens, Guo Guo' s (果果) busy figure is her daily working state, and the relaxed feeling of drinking during a break is her daily life state.

Participant No. 3, Juno, is a college student also a swimmer. She used to have shoulder-length hair, but she chose to cut her hair short for two reasons: first, to facilitate exercise; second, to restore her natural vitality. According to her own recollection, one summer day she went to pick up her photo shoot. She saw that the photo of herself was exquisite down to the pores, but it was not the real her. After leaving the

studio, she went straight to the barber shop. For Juno, highly beautified photos actually cover up the wild side of human nature. The beauty of exquisite pores is actually an illusion without the sense of reality. Some mobile phone software that can beautify photos enhances this illusion.

In the article “No filter, no selfie; no photo editing, no sharing: appearance anxiety in the social media era”, Zhu Yiqi (朱亦祺) once wrote: “At the moment the photo editing is finished, the person in the photo is more like a robot than a human being -- a beautiful robot with flawless beauty. When posting the refined selfie to one’s social media, the joy brought by likes and comments will strengthen people’s dependence on filters and photo editing software, and they will unconsciously have a feeling of ‘Wow, I am very popular, I hope to have this kind of happiness again’. This will lead to the formation of the so-called ‘jealousy spiral’ -- by presenting an increasingly unrealistic self to compare with peers, creating an over-beautified environment that is increasingly out of touch with reality.” [4]

Ellie Turner, editor of Beauty magazine, once said: “Beauty and filter effects started as a quick solution to upgrade pictures, but they are just a false short-term boost. In the long run, they may reduce people’s self-confidence. If we start to believe the hype of beauty and filters on social media and try to emulate them in the real world, then the only people we confuse are ourselves.” As a swimming enthusiast, Juno hopes that her hairstyle will be convenient for her training and at the same time highlight her capable and free-spirited personality. The act of cutting her hair short also symbolizes her decision to step out of the “mimetic environment” created by highly beautified photos.

It is worth pondering that when Juno showed her buzz cut in front of her friends and family, she actually attracted vicious criticism. She recalled that the most common comments from people around her were:

“You look like a bad boy,” “You don’t look like a girl,” “It’s hard to find a job with this hairstyle,” and “You look like you just got out of prison.” These doubts and vicious comments reflect the male-dominated society’s stereotypes of women.

The so-called “stereotype” refers to “the cognitive structure and specific social cognitive schema formed by people’s relatively fixed ideas or expectations about members of a certain group.” This is a sociological term that can be used in many fields to explain people’s psychological reactions, such as race, gender, etc. When talking about gender, “stereotypes, as a social cognition, are people’s common beliefs, or fixed and simplified ideas about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of men and women.” [5] These ideas are usually based on traditional social structures and cultural customs, which influence people’s cognition, attitudes, and behaviors.

Stereotypes erase the individuality and differences that exist within a specific group. Their essential harm is to “limit diversity” and “limit the development of capabilities and opportunities of different genders.” “Stereotypes are also a factor in violations of a range of rights of women and LGBTI people, including the right to health, education, marriage and family relations, work, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, political participation and representation.” [6] Stereotypes can affect people’s self-evaluation. In the process of continuous exposure to gender stereotypes, people will gradually internalize the stereotypes and make them part of their personal self-evaluation.[7]

Juno’s bald head image undoubtedly breaks people’s stereotypes. In other words, in the eyes of the powerful others, she does not have the so-called “femininity”. Her behavior threatens the authority of the patriarchal society in regulating the image of women.

Olivia Wang, a reporter for the New York Times Chinese website, published an article titled “Super short hair, no makeup, loose clothes: Chinese women who refuse to serve beauty duty” in October 2023.

To compose this article, she collected some photos and information about Chinese women who refused to “serve beauty duty”. It could be considered as continuation of “Beauty Duty Escape Plan”.

Volunteer No. 1 Legend Zhu was once a popular model. In order to maintain her popularity on social media, she usually wears tight skirts, stilettos and heavy makeup, both on the catwalk and in her daily life. After graduating from college, she posted a series of photos of her bare face and short hair, which

attracted people's attention. She herself left a message in the post: "From a model to a natural woman, it's so comfortable! In order to maintain beauty, you have to keep investing time, money and energy to maintain beauty, but I found that most boys don't have this problem, and I think it's very unfair." She no longer works in the fashion industry and instead studies for a master's degree in urban planning. She began to mobilize the women around her to resist the dangerous diet culture.

Volunteer No. 2 Annie Xie suffered from anorexia nervosa at the age of 15 due to crazy weight loss. During her hospitalization, she accidentally read Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex". The idea that "women are not born women, but are shaped into women by acquired factors" deeply shocked and enlightened her. After being discharged from the hospital, she stopped dieting, wore loose clothes, did not wear makeup, and often did not wear a bra. When her ex-boyfriend described her current state as "degenerate", her response was: "I think it's ridiculous, and I never want to go back to the way I was before."

Volunteer No. 3 Zelda Liu told reporters about her experience of shaving her hair short. Many barbers were hesitant to face female customers like her, always trying to give her some so-called "suggestions on hairstyles more suitable for women". Some barbers also asked her in surprise why she wanted to shave her hair short. These suggestions were often uninvited, which made her confused: as a woman, why can't she decide her own hairstyle? Faced with the questioning of strange eyes, she insisted on her crew cut until one day she found that people around her no longer commented on her hairstyle, and no longer jumped out to give her "uninvited" suggestions. She described this newfound freedom as "refreshing".

The nature of the cases collected and focused on by Olivia Wang and Shan Dianshui (山点水) is highly similar, which reflects that contemporary Chinese women have adopted similar means to resist the male gaze and the aesthetic values of patriarchal society. Their growth experiences are also surprisingly similar, indicating that women's traumatic experiences are shared and recurring. The trigger points of women's awakening are also highly similar. The bodies that have been hurt or even destroyed by "serving beauty duty" are mostly the "fuse" that makes them determined to resist. In fact, refusing "beauty kidnapping" is only part of the overall behavior of contemporary Chinese women in resisting patriarchy. Leta Hong Fincher, author of *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, acclaimed that the young Chinese women, especially those with higher education, have begun to consciously transcend the inherent gender role division in Chinese society.[8] All signs show that women are consciously subverting the traditional order in China.

4. Conclusion

The American sociologist Erving Goffman once systematically expounded the logic of the body as a social practice, pointing out that people's attention to common presence in daily life will lead to attention to the body, and the presentation of the body will generate social psychological phenomena such as shame, humiliation and embarrassment, thereby prompting people to form common behaviors that conform to social norms. Interpersonal interaction has psychobiological characteristics. The body is not only the carrier of social significance, but also its expression. This view of the body is both biological and social. French philosopher Foucault called the body "the body of power". He believed that the body, as a product of social construction, has a high degree of social plasticity and instability. The social discipline of the body is ultimately used in the distribution of power. Women who refuse to "serve beauty duty" are actually resisting male authority and the gaze from the patriarchal society.

The so-called "gaze" refers to a viewing method that carries power operation, desire entanglement and identity consciousness. The viewer is mostly the subject who exercises power, and the viewed is mostly the object of power implementation, and is also the object of desire and desire. The behavior of looking and being looked at constructs the subject and the object, the self and the other, but in the interweaving of

multiple gazes, the status of the subject and the object faces the possibility of transformation. Therefore, the behavioral process of “gaze” produces complex and diverse social and political relations. In short, “gaze” is a projection of desire, which contains a specific power discourse and leads to the relationship of “control” and “being controlled”. “Gaze” gives the gazer the subjectivity of self-identification. The gazer uses “gaze” to monitor and discipline the gazed person’s words, deeds, appearance, posture and thoughts.

In the book *The Media and Body Images* published in 2005, academics Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter wrote: “The sexualization of the female image remains at the center of culture today ... the sexuality of women is constructed by men.” [9] Giving women the power to be “ugly” is to resist men’s aesthetic expectations and the objectification of women by patriarchal society. The American feminist and sociologist Catharine Alice MacKinnon believes that objectification is everywhere and all around women. She once used a memorable metaphor: “All women’s lives are filled with sexual objectification, just like fish living in water.”



Figure 2. Catharine Alice MacKinnon was holding a lecture at Stetson University.

Source: <https://www2.stetson.edu/law/news/index.php/2017/10/12/gender-equality-pioneer-catharine-mackinnon-presents-nichols-foundation-prominent-speakers-lecture-stetson-oct-19/>

The external environment’s objectification of women eventually turned into women’s conscious internal objectification. The reason why the “Beauty Duty Escape Plan” has caused a heated discussion and sensational effect in society is precisely because the essence of this project is that women resist the external view of objectification of women by rejecting internal objectification and removing the traces of internal objectification. From blindly advocating “bái yòu shòu” (白幼瘦) and consciously “serving beauty duty”, to breaking free from the “shackles of beauty” and refusing to “serve beauty duty”, the awakening, struggle and fighting of Chinese women are still continuing.

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