

Gender Essentialism in Chinese Reality TV: A Case Study of *You Are So Beautiful*

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Abstract

This article provides a feminist analysis of Chinese reality TV, using the recent makeover show—*You Are So Beautiful* (你怎么这么好看) as a case study. I argue that the notion of gender essentialism is highlighted in the production of *You Are So Beautiful*, which distances the Chinese show from its original American format—*Queer Eye*. This phenomenon is indicative of how existing gender power relations influence the production of popular cultural texts in post-reform China, where capitalism and authoritarianism weave a tangled web. The outcomes of the research articulate the interplay between post-socialist gender politics and reality TV production in the Chinese context.

Keywords

China, reality TV, post-socialist gender politics, *Queer Eye*, *You Are So Beautiful*, 你怎么这么好看

Introduction

Reality TV has now become a booming global business, with makeover shows representing an important genre of production in the industry (Redden 2018; Stone 2019). In China, we have witnessed the emergence of a long list of makeover shows, such as *My Style (Project Runway)* and *Changing Space (Changing Rooms)*, which can trace their original versions to the US or the UK (Sun 2013). Yet, none of them appears to be as controversial as *You Are So Beautiful* (你怎么这么好看), released by the leading Chinese streaming media—Mango TV in late 2019.

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Similar to the popular American makeover show—*Queer Eye, You Are So Beautiful* stars five celebrity hosts, individually specializing in dressing, make-up, interior design, cooking, and emotional healing, who provide “ordinary” guests with “uplifting” advice to change their lives.¹ By March 2020, *You Are So Beautiful* had been viewed over 760 million times nationwide (<https://www.mgtv.com/h/331520.html>), but this extensive market reach has come alongside mixed reputations. Many popular cultural commentators have noted a *Queer Eye* host’s tweet about *You Are So Beautiful*’s potential copyright violation and, thus, have introduced this debate to Chinese social media (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/yTV74D1NiYnDtNLz5h5lhQ>). In their critiques, *Queer Eye* is often invoked as an example, which champions the diversity of gender representations in Western popular cultures, and *You Are So Beautiful* is criticized for losing this progressive spirit, despite its similarities with the format of the American show (<https://www.8days.sg/sceneandheard/entertainment/hannah-quinlivan-s-makeover-show-called-trash-by-netizens-for-12313168>). Such criticisms have indeed influenced Chinese audiences’ perception of the show, evidenced by its low ratings on major Chinese film/TV-review-aggregation websites (<https://movie.douban.com/subject/34894594/>).

Echoing with the above criticisms, I argue that *You Are So Beautiful* provides an up-to-date case study, with which to uncover how “gender essentialism,” which advocates the notion of female-male dependency that upholds patriarchal socio-economic structures (Fung and Zhang 2011, 270), plays out in the Chinese TV production. The research is informed by Evans (2008) and Wallis’ (2015) conceptualization of post-socialist gender politics, accounting for the dynamic intersection of reality TV production, and gender power relations in *You Are So Beautiful*. To this end, I performed a multimodal analysis of twelve episodes of *You Are So Beautiful*’s inaugural season, focusing on how the notion of gender essentialism is promoted in the Chinese show, and how this phenomenon reflects existing gender power relations established in the socio-economic structures of the country. The research findings shed light on the intersecting vectors of gender and popular cultures in contemporary Chinese society, where capitalism and authoritarianism are intertwined (Wallis and Shen 2018). In this way, they contribute to a much-needed intellectual intervention, concerning the exchange of liberal ideas and cultural values occurring in the media in post-reform China.

China’s TV Industry

While remaining the owner of broadcasting companies in China, the Communist Party (CCP) no longer subsidizes the majority of their operational costs (Zeng and Sparks 2019). As part of the CCP’s reform of the economic structures, which shows notable similarities with Western capitalism (Rofel 2007), Chinese broadcasters have now become business entities, which depend on audience demographics and advertising revenues to sustain their daily operations (Keane and Zhang 2017). This situation has encouraged TV channels to seek production formats, which have proved “successful” elsewhere in order to stand out in this crowded market (Fung and Zhang 2011). Against this backdrop, Chinese reality TV production relies heavily on localizing shows

produced in major Western democracies. This localization can either be licensed, or given the insufficient protection of copyrights within its legal system, can take the form of copycats (Keane and Zhang 2017).

It is important to note that the marketization of the TV industry by no means suggests that broadcasters can operate outside of the CCP's political control (Shao 2019). The National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA),² which represents the most important regulatory body, supervises all forms of TV production within the country (Hu and Wang 2020). TV programs, determined to contain "vulgar qualities" or "violent footages," are generally banned by the NRTA (Zeng and Sparks 2019, 57). Specifically addressing the cross-border media flows, the NRTA has a quota policy, which requires all TV channels to restrict their annual import to only one production (Zeng and Sparks 2019). While the NRTA's control over the importation of Western TV shows is often based on seemingly apolitical grounds, such control encompasses an underlying political logic, which is in line with the CCP's overall ideological management promoting a whole package of "socialist values" to ensure the stability of the Party-State polity (Jiang 2019, 462).

Against this backdrop, Chinese reality TV production is influenced by both the market's demands and the CCP's administration. As Zeng and Sparks (2019, 57) put it, the production of a "politically acceptable show that produces a large audience" is important for Chinese broadcasters because it "not only satisfies the professional aspirations of its production team and the financial aspirations of its production company but also meets the cultural and economic goals set by the [CCP]." This cultural localization, which hollows out the core of original Western productions and replaces them with values accepted in the domestic socio-political climate, showcases how broadcasters adapt to a politically restrictive market economy in the Chinese context (Fung and Zhang 2011). This characterizes the unique definition of "success" in China's TV industry, where production needs to both meet the CCP's propaganda objectives and generate revenues. However, such a socio-political milieu poses significant challenges to Chinese TV producers as the political and economic goals do not always harmonize well. Against this backdrop, we have seen many programs fail to meet both criteria, and this has, in part, contributed to the stereotypical impression of China's creative industries' lack of creativity (Pang 2012).

Post-socialist Gender Politics

To a certain extent, the notion of gender offers scope to scrutinize how reality TV production is contextualized within China's socio-political climate. Such a contextualization can be unpacked based on an account of post-socialist gender politics. As Evans (2008) and Wallis (2015) note, post-socialist gender politics is an umbrella term, which describes the configuration of gender power relations in Chinese society by both capitalism and the authoritarian regime. It captures the process through which Chinese businesses engage with the consumer market, in the wake of the CCP's reform of the country's socio-economic structures (Rofel 2007). In this sense, post-socialist gender politics is informed by the historical contingency and contemporary relevance

of gender, which have a twofold impact on the definition of womanhood and manhood in Chinese popular cultures today (Wallis and Shen 2018).

In general, China's cultural industries have created a wide range of gender representations to address the diversity of gender identities in the post-reform era (Hu and Wang 2020). However, the diversification of gender representations has been undermined by a variety of forces, with heteronormative representations evidently being most valued in the consumer market (Wallis and Shen 2018). On the surface, such a phenomenon reflects a commercial consideration, as heterosexuals comprise the largest cohort of Chinese consumers. Yet, the promotion of heteronormative representations is also indicative of how Chinese capitalism reiterates gender essentialism by problematizing representations that do not fall into the notion of female-male complementary interdependence (Evans 2008). It not only exploits the importance of being normal and socially acceptable in accordance with the country's collectivist traditions (Ho et al. 2018), but also feeds into the global rise of pseudo-feminist rhetoric, which defines the sexualized features of women's bodies as an indicator of personal investment and individual achievement (Rottenberg 2018). The latter trajectory, in particular, is intersected with social stratification, which defines the middle-class style of fashion and beauty product consumption as a form of women's empowerment (Wu and Dong 2019). In this way, it dismisses the urgency of tackling structural gender inequalities, masking gender essentialism with a progressive veneer to ensure that it appeals to female Chinese consumers, especially those who are of an urban middle-class background (Peng 2021).

The problematic gender essentialism of Chinese popular cultures is most tellingly revealed by the stereotypical portrayals of women promoted by reality TV shows. For instance, through the critical review of *If You Are the One*, Li (2015a, 520) discovers that the Chinese version of the British dating show—*Take Me Out* deliberately incorporates “a typical component of beauty pageants which explicitly use women's bodies on a public stage as a forum for public engagements.” This is accomplished by featuring twenty-four young female guests, displaying overt sexuality to attract the attention of the male spectators of the show, who are to be selected by a male guest (Luo and Sun 2015). Such portrayals of women share similarities with their Western counterparts popular in the international consumer market. Yet, the Chinese production distances them from their Western origins by simultaneously starring two commentators, who act as “love gurus,” to offer different readings of sexuality in the show (Luo and Sun 2015). Although masked with a veneer of progressiveness, their readings of sexuality largely confine women to a subordinate position to “set hegemonic masculinist standards for the show” (Li 2015b, 527). In this process, the notion of gender essentialism becomes encoded in the show, underscoring the pseudo-feminist, patriarchal nature of popular cultural production, and consumption. This argument resonates with the findings by Fung and Zhang (2015, 265), whose in-depth interviews with Chinese TV producers confirm that, at the production stage of TV programs, they deliberately attempt to promote indigenous gender values to “suit the local understanding and acceptance of modern television.”

Certainly, within an authoritarian context, the production of popular cultural texts is never independent of the political climate (Zhang et al. 2018). As Evans (2008) argues, the CCP's post-reform social governance avoids critical discourses of gender. This, in part, relates to the fact that such critical discourses are determined to contain socio-political replications, which may provoke public criticisms of the CCP's policies on gender issues (Wallis and Shen 2018), because these policies often do not effectively address gender inequality and related social justice issues (Liu 2014). This governance strategy, by extension, has reduced the scope for non-essentialist gender representations (Hu and Wang 2020), which potentially challenge mainstream gender values in Chinese society (Ho et al. 2018).

In reality TV production, the CCP's political interference with gender representations occurs at both censorship and propaganda levels. With regard to the censorship system, it is widely acknowledged that LGBTQ representations are largely prohibited on Chinese TV screens, with only one transgender dancer—Jin Xing ever achieving nationwide fame through appearing in reality TV shows (Davies and Davies 2010). However, even this iconic celebrity's public appearances were restricted after the NRTA issued an administrative order to censor all LGBTQ-themed TV shows in 2016 (Wang and Cao 2017). With specific reference to the propaganda campaigns, we have seen the mouthpieces of the CCP participating in a series of gender-related public debates, which illustrate the Party's official objection against the rise of masculine female (Li 2015a) and effeminate male celebrities (Zheng 2015) in Chinese popular cultures. Such propaganda campaigns define non-essentialist gender representations as not in line with the so-called "core socialist moralities" since their existence poses threats to traditional familial values, which are considered as the "foundation of social harmony" (Ho et al. 2018, 499). After measuring their impact, it is clear that the propaganda campaigns are certainly not as effective as the strict censorship measures, but they do contribute to the political engineering of Chinese reality TV production by guiding practitioners' creative practices (Zhang and Fung 2014). In this sense, the underrepresentation of non-essentialist gender ideals on Chinese TV screens also illustrates "the government's strategic bargain whereby greater consumption and lifestyle choices are offered to the populace in exchange for the suppression of political rights" (Wallis 2015, 226–27).

Case Study, Research Questions, and Methods

As a recent, topical makeover show attracting huge public attention (<https://www.mgtv.com/h/331520.html>), *You Are So Beautiful* is widely recognized as an adapted version of the American makeover show—*Queer Eye* (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/yTV74D1NiYnDtNLz5h5lhQ>). The Chinese production, which appropriates the format of the original Western version to address local audiences' aesthetics and tastes, involves a process of cultural reinterpretation adhering to indigenous gender values. This is first revealed by the five gay hosts in *Queer Eye* (Stone 2019) being replaced by three female and two male celebrities in the Chinese show, a move which implicitly underscores a notion of female-male complementary interdependence. Interestingly,

the balanced female-male ratio of the hosts is not reflected in *You Are So Beautiful*'s guest selection (Ten women and one man). The narration of makeover shows largely involves defining the guests as problematic and in need of "rescue" (Lewis 2007). The one-sided focus on women established in *You Are So Beautiful*, thus, speaks to an important aspect of gender essentialism, which targets women rather than men as social problems. In this way, the show provides an up-to-date example that sheds light on how the essentialist discourse of gender plays out on Chinese TV screens.

Furthermore, China's creative industries are often criticized for "lacking creative talents," and reality TV production is never free from this kind of criticisms (Pang 2012). Regardless of whether it is a fact, or a stereotypical impression, such criticisms have influenced Chinese audiences' perception of reality TV production in the country. Under these circumstances, being a widely watched show with a mixed reputation paradoxically turns *You Are So Beautiful* into an ideal case study with the potential to represent the average standards of China's TV industry in contrast to those isolated cases, which are extremely well-received by the market.

Taking post-socialist gender politics into account, I provide a feminist analysis of *You Are So Beautiful* by seeking answers to the following questions.

1. How does the production of *You Are So Beautiful* reflect the notion of gender essentialism?
2. How does the promotion of gender essentialism in *You Are So Beautiful* shed light on post-socialist gender politics in Chinese reality TV production and consumption?

Guided by these research questions, I primarily conducted a multimodal analysis of *You Are So Beautiful*. This multimodal analysis is based on a social semiotic account of communication (Chen and Cheung 2020). Its theoretical stance suggests that semiotic signs, which can take the mode of written language, sound waves, moving images, or even formats, are all available resources for meaning-making in communication (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020). These resources are constantly mobilized in the production of popular cultural texts to facilitate the "representations of reality," enact "social relationships," and organize "information into a cohesive and coherent whole" (He and van Leeuwen 2020, 669). This method moves beyond a two-step social semiotic interpretation of sign-meaning systems by also considering how lexical grammar is devised through the juxtaposition of different modes of semiotic signs (Machin 2016). In this way, it departs from monomodal textual analysis, representing a research method that is suitable for scrutinizing the "specificity of multimodal, televised texts" (Wilcox et al. 2018, 463).

In the present analysis, I sampled the twelve episodes of *You Are So Beautiful*'s inaugural season released on Mango TV's streaming channel and performed a multimodal analysis of each episode (<https://www.mgtv.com/h/331520.html>). The coding process incorporated Saldana's (2016) two-cycle coding approach. Specifically, I manually created the first-cycle coding for different sections within each episode.³ New codes were given to the same data units and were constantly compared with

existing codes throughout the second-cycle coding. The analysis identifies patterns established in the interactions occurring between the hosts and guests, as well as that between the hosts, to uncover elements reflecting the notion of gender essentialism therein.

The multimodal analysis enables cultural researchers to examine reality TV production through textual data-based research when interviews with producers are unavailable. However, one limitation of this method is its insufficient acknowledgment of TV audiences' agency in consuming the texts. To address this limitation in the present research, I also incorporated a "guerrilla ethnography" approach "akin to an investigative journalist trying to get at the heart of a story" (Fang and Repnikova 2018, 2167). The implementation of this strategy involves collecting and analyzing popular commentaries about *You Are So Beautiful* circulating on the most popular Chinese film/TV-review-aggregation—Douban to provide a glimpse into audiences' reflective readings of the show. While such an analysis is secondary in the research design, it complements the findings of the multimodal analysis by allowing the research to account for the interplay between the production and consumption of Chinese reality TV shows.

Analytical Discussion

The analysis of *You Are So Beautiful* thematically presented below, focuses on the Chinese makeover show's threefold gender stereotyping through (1) spectacularizing women with non-domestic achievements, (2) promoting women's fashion and beauty consumption, as well as (3) problematizing women's imperfect management of a home-work balance.

Spectacularizing Women with Achievements Outside of the Domestic Sphere

The notion of gender essentialism underlying *You Are So Beautiful's* stereotyping of women is first manifested by its spectacularization of women who have outstanding achievements outside of the domestic sphere. This spectacularization often takes place in the introductory section of an episode. In each episode, the storytelling of *You Are So Beautiful* follows a similar pattern. An introductory section, in which the anecdotes about a guest are introduced, is used to prompt a discussion between celebrity hosts before the guest first appears in the show. The introductory section aims to create a sense of mystery about the guest by highlighting the prominence of certain qualities they possess. In this regard, the extracts below provide a good illustration.⁴

Xin Wu [H]: Today, we are going to do the same. [We will] use these cards to get more information about the main character of this episode.

Ji Huang [H]: Whoa! She is the first female world champion of this international tournament, who won a title for China.

Ling Kun [H]: Yes!

Huohuo Han [H]: Everyone might consider that this is what men do, but she has won such a title too!

Ling Kun [H]: Probably, it was a car racing game! [She must be] a racing driver!

Huohuo Han [H]: Well, this could be the case?

Xin Wu [H]: She uses cosmetics when participating in the game.

Tiantian Fan [H]: So, she cannot be a racing driver.

Ling Kun [H]: But racing drivers can. A lot of female racing drivers would use eyelashes before entering the game.

The conversation quoted above occurs between the hosts in the introductory session of Episode 9, in which the guest is described as “one who brought a world champion title back to China.” Explicitly suggesting that “[being a world champion] is what men do,” one of the male hosts—Huohuo Han’s commentary frames the professional achievements of the guest as spectacular. In doing so, competitiveness becomes rhetorically associated with masculine qualities, framing women who excel in sports competitions as deviants. Huohuo Han’s commentary is endorsed by female celebrity host—Ling Kun, by providing a further prediction that rationalizes the guest’s “exceptional” success. Without receiving any objection from their fellow hosts in the show, it emerges from the introductory session that the gender of the guest forms a salient criterion through which her professional achievement is assessed. This gendered assessment is not unique to this episode but presents a degree of consistency throughout the production.

As previously mentioned, the notion of gender essentialism in the Chinese context is characterized by an emphasis on a *yin-yang* balance, which defines the social roles of women and men as interdependent and complementary (Liu 2014). Such a complementary interdependence confines women to the domestic space on the one hand, whilst encourages men to be adventurous and outgoing on the other hand (Song and Hird 2014). It shapes competitiveness into a masculine concept, which excludes femininity and womanhood from the qualities that bolster one’s career achievements. For women, being successful in their career, therefore, becomes symbolic of their loss of female virtues, as women are supposed to “take on attributes of care, emotionality, communicativeness, and gentleness” without challenging men’s dominance of the society (Liu 2014, 20). In the textual production of *You Are So Beautiful*, the celebrity hosts’ commentaries on the female guest’s success in an international tournament are in line with this gendered judgment of the female cohort, furthering an alienation of non-gender essentialist, career-oriented women in wider patriarchal Chinese society.

An even more blatant alienation of successful women is revealed in the first episode, in which a female guest—Jing Fang, labeled as a “female PhD holder,” is selected to kick off the show. At the beginning of the episode, Jing Fang is briefly introduced as a female academic, who obtained a doctorate from abroad. Yet, without any further explanation of her professional accomplishments, the video recording

displays footages of over two minutes, which use various montages to capture the guest's solitary routines, such as her walking in the crowds, sitting on a bus, and cooking and eating alone at home. Alongside the guest's voiceover explaining that she has been living by herself for over ten years, the editing of the footages places a heavy emphasis on her loneliness. Such an emphasis is further amplified by the production's choice of background music, which is characterized by a moody melody to illustrate the undesirability of the guest's lifestyle. A multimodal construction of the imaginary of a female PhD holder, who is socially self-isolated and in need of rescue, is thereby established.

Claiming to be a makeover show that aims to uplift guests, this episode of *You Are So Beautiful* is, however, nothing but a reflection of the stereotyping of female PhD holders in Chinese popular cultures. Across the world, while increasingly more female academics are pursuing a career in higher education, the likelihood of them being promoted to a senior level is much lower compared to their male colleagues (Maclean 2017). Gender inequality has shaped academia into a field, which is largely dominated by male professionals. This turns female PhD holders into a "peculiar" subtype of women in the eyes of the general public. In accordance with the portrayal of female PhD holders as nerds in Western popular cultures, this cohort of well-educated women is often designated as the *third gender* (第三性) in the Chinese language (Peng et al. 2021). This lexical choice describes female PhD holders as individuals, neither women nor men, who are often "unmarried, cold-blooded, pitiless, tough, and aggressive" despite possessing "unusual intelligence" (Xu et al. 2017, 562). It mocks the undesirability of female PhD holders in the marriage market, representing a socially constituted penalization of well-educated women because their "excessive" accomplishments in a masculine field pose threats to the male dominance of China's socio-economic structures (Peng et al. 2021). Exploiting this *third-gender* stereotype, this episode indeed endorses such an indigenous, chauvinist logic to restrict women's agency to challenge the patriarchal fabric of society.

Interestingly, the spectacularization of women with professional achievements seems to have formed the most unwelcome aspect of the show. On Douban, I noted huge volumes of commentaries from the show's spectators condemning its stereotyping of professional women. This includes the commentary from one who identifies herself as a "female PhD holder" and provides *You Are So Beautiful* with the lowest possible rating on the grounds that the group of women she belongs to were insulted by the show. This is the second most supported "long" review (<https://movie.douban.com/review/12157696/>) on Douban under the theme of *You Are So Beautiful*, which is upvoted over 1,000 times.⁵ Together with an enormous amount of commentaries providing the show with extremely low ratings on similar grounds, this showcases the importance of a self-reflexive process in contemporary Chinese audiences' TV consumption, as noted by existing literature (Gao 2016). In this sense, the negative reviews of *You Are So Beautiful* are indicative of the ability of a large group of Chinese TV spectator to identify problematic gender stereotypes.

Promoting Women's Consumption of Fashion and Beauty Products

As a makeover show, *You Are So Beautiful's* promotion of essentialist gender stereotyping continues as female guests are commented on or offered advice about how to improve themselves physically to achieve a better state of mind. Such a pattern of themed interactions, either occurring between the celebrity hosts or between the female guests and the celebrity hosts, is found throughout the sampled twelve episodes. In all episodes, the application of fashion and beauty products comprises the most salient aspect of the makeover tasks. It constitutes a male gaze upon these guests that facilitates a patriarchal definition of female ideals in the Chinese context. The extracts below are exemplary of this pattern.

Xin Wu [H]: So, you do not have lipsticks either?

Jing Fang [G]: No.

Xin Wu [H]: So, you have never used lipsticks at all?

Jing Fang [G]: [I] might have used it when I performed on the stage at my primary school.

Xin Wu [H]: But you see [. . .]. All of us are crazy about lipsticks.

Jing Fang [G]: Yes, but I do not understand why. I feel this [makes you] falling into the trap of consumerism.

[. . .]

Xin Wu [H]: I am speechless. She [Jing Fang] does not even have lipstick. Is that true there is this kind of girl, who has no desire at all?

As shown in the above extracts, the promotion of cosmetic use as a means to improve women's desirability in gender relationships is a central theme in the conversation between the celebrity host and the guest. By deploying lipsticks as a symbolic item, the host—Xin Wu constructs the daily application of cosmetics as a stylized repetition of acts that supports women's performance of a routine in line with their "natural" gender identity. With a montage, in which the celebrity host remarks that the guest's opinion on consumerism is "peculiar," it becomes apparent that the guest's objection to fashion and beauty products is problematized in the show, and the solution to address this problem is to restore her sexual attraction to men through appearance management. Such a discursive pattern sheds light on another part of the lexical grammar that projects the notion of gender essentialism in the production of *You Are So Beautiful*.

In *You Are Beautiful*, celebrity hosts are criticized for providing female guests with makeup advice in a patronizing tone (<https://movie.douban.com/subject/34894594/>). These hosts often demonstrate how ignorant they are of their privileged socio-economic positions, which enable them to lead a very affluent lifestyle, in contrast to the larger population. In such themed interactions, gender issues become intersected with class distinction, which makes *You Are Beautiful* go beyond the simple stigmatization of women with non-domestic achievements. It feeds into the social construction of

female ideals, whose existence is based on the standards of beauty created by cultural industries to target middle-class, urban women in a much broader context.

Amid the rise of urban middle-classes, Western consumerist culture, which encourages mass consumption, has become accepted in Chinese society (Rofel 2007). Female consumers are targeted by segments of the commercial sector, and the fashion and beauty industry is representative of the feminization of capitalism (Wallis and Shen 2018). In this process, cosmetic consumption is repackaged as part of pseudo-feminist rhetoric, which enables middle-class women to reclaim the femininity that their previous generation lost during the pre-reform feminist movement (Wu and Dong 2019). However, cosmetic consumption, which constantly requires the investment of resources, such as wealth and time, is not only a class-specific type of lifestyle (Rottenberg 2018). More importantly, it is a form of pseudo-empowerment, which appears to build up female consumers' self-confidence, but simultaneously amplifies women's anxiety about their bodily features by associating their unmanaged appearance with undesirability. What results from this phenomenon is women being required to undertake beauty labor on a daily basis, rendering their bodies "a site for crisis and commodification" (Elias and Gill 2018, 68). This facilitates the penetration of chauvinist expectations that place huge burdens on the shoulders of women. In this sense, the production of *You Are So Beautiful* is indicative of the feminization of the consumer market in China's TV industry, which is in line with global trends.

It is worthwhile noting that the problematic promotion of fashion and beauty consumption in *You Are So Beautiful* has been spotted by some spectators of the show. This is most tellingly revealed by a popularly upvoted commentary on Douban, which explicitly suggests that this is why the show receives low ratings from audiences (<https://movie.douban.com/subject/34894594/>). This self-reflexive reading of the show, which requires a critical understanding of popular cultures, is not mentioned in most other commentaries. However, the scarcity of such commentaries does not mean that the problematic promotional culture of *You Are So Beautiful* has been overlooked by Chinese TV spectators, as the criticisms of such a tendency in Chinese reality TV have been touched upon in existing Chinese TV audience research (Gao 2016).

Problematizing Women's Imperfection in the Domestic Sphere

Another important essentialist discourse of gender established in the production of *You Are So Beautiful* refers to its problematization of women, who do not manage a perfect home-work balance. This pattern of gender stereotyping is often revealed when a single woman features as the guest in an episode. Episode 10 provides a representative example on this front.

Yong Li [GB]: Those who are not familiar with our family always thought [Lan Li and I] were brothers!

Ye Li [GB]: She has never dated anyone in her life!

Mao Mao [GC]: She is also very troubled [by the situation of her romantic life] and hopes to become more feminine.

Yong Li [GB]: She might look masculine but indeed has a girly heart. She was always busy with her work and had no time for appearance [management. . .]. We heard the programme has an excellent advisory team and hope that you could help our sister!

In this episode, the invited guest—Lan Li is a female martial arts instructor. Aged thirty-three with a relatively successful career but no prior experience of romantic relationships, the guest, to a certain extent, forms a “perfect embodiment” in the narration of women having issues of home-work balance management. Interestingly, the issues experienced by Lan Li are introduced not by the hosts but by three members of her own family in a video recording. From 3:13 until 5:14, two consecutive minutes of footage features Lan Li’s cousin and two brothers energetically seeking help from the production team of *You Are So Beautiful* on behalf of the martial arts instructor. This editing decision, in fact, comprises a subtextual message, which defines the guest’s personal issues as the problems of her entire family. In addition, edited footage from the video recording captures a series of snapshots of her daily life to underscore the absence of dress-wearing and artistic selfie-shooting in the female guest’s lifestyle. The juxtaposition of this footage forms another aspect of the lexical grammar, which facilitates the establishment of a stereotypical imaginary of women incapable of managing a home-work balance. This imaginary, by extension, links the guest’s family issues to the problems of wider society, which directly link to the stereotype of *leftover women* in Chinese popular cultures.

In the Chinese language, the group of women, who have not married before their late twenties, are often referred to as *leftover women* (剩女) (Feldshuh 2018). This referential instance is widely used by both the media and the CCP in its official documents. The emergence of *leftover women* reflects the paradox of gender power relations in the post-reform era. In Chinese society, where the prosperity of a family is historically associated with a reliance on male offspring, the CCP’s four-decade implementation of fertility control policies has caused an imbalanced female-male ratio in the population (Jiang and Gong 2016). A common misinterpretation is that this imbalance has granted Chinese women a privileged status in the marriage market since there are more single men available than single women. However, women’s achievements are still largely measured against their fulfillment of familial roles, meaning that marrying a man and producing offspring for his family is always an essential element of the criteria for being good female citizens in Chinese society (Liu 2014). Against this backdrop, it can be seen that the discourse of *leftover women* is not only officially verified by the CCP’s propaganda campaigns but also widely accepted by the general public (Wallis and Shen 2018).

With a number of single women featuring in *You Are So Beautiful*, a consistent discursive pattern is established, which involves insulting this social group by defining them as in need of rescue. The stigmatization of *leftover women* permeating into the production of the show exemplifies how this particular segment of the female cohort

is often placed under the spotlight in Chinese popular cultural texts (Li 2015b). Yet, the focus on *leftover women* by no means suggests that married women are free from social pressures. Instead, they too are insulted when the show pursues the agenda of defining ideal womanhood in China. Episode 4 provides an example underlining such an agenda in the makeover show.

Xin Wu [H]: She is very similar to my mother. They all have achieved a lot in both their family and their career. They put their family, work, and children before themselves. Today's task is not just to help Dr Lang's mother. It feels like we were helping our own mothers as well.

In Episode 4, the heroine is one of the very few amongst the invited guests, who is more often praised than insulted by the hosts, possibly due to the fact that her social status is much higher than that of the other, younger guests. Yet, negative commentaries about the fifty-four-year-old medical professional, who is highly successful career-wise, are still presented, but in this case, they take the form of her son's complaints and, in this way, they distance the insult from the production team. In general, these negative commentaries address very specific areas, articulating assessments of both her physical attractions, through the eyes of the husband, and her cooking skills, through the eyes of the son. All these assessments point toward her familial roles as a virtuous wife and a loving mother. The makeover tasks in this episode, thus, reflect an underlying, patriarchal logic, which confines part of career women's identity to the domestic sphere, regardless of their professional accomplishments. Notably, as quoted in the above extracts, the leading celebrity host—Xin Wu's concluding remarks dismiss the uniqueness of the fifty-four-year-old female guest, defining her as an example of all Chinese mothers. While claiming to appreciate her sacrifice for family, the commentary simultaneously glorifies the sacrifice, which sub-textually rationalizes a chauvinist expectation of women, by normalizing the phenomenon of women acting as household service providers. With the absence of any reference to men in the narration, the burden of home-work balance management is placed solely on the shoulders of women. This discourse upholds the social construction of stigmas, which penalize women, who do not meet the essentialist criteria of being a female ideal compatible with the male-dominated socio-economic structures of post-reform China.

Existing research reveals that a female ideal, who manages a perfect home-work balance, is still popular in Chinese society (Wallis and Shen 2018). This female ideal derives from traditional Chinese gender norms, which require women to adhere to the so-called *Three Obediences and Four Virtues* (Liu 2014). Harmonizing well with the current socio-economic structures of Chinese society led by male power, this female ideal is always incorporated in the CCP's official discourses, manifesting as the political propaganda campaigns for female role models, typically including "scientists, entrepreneurs, celebrities, and workers," who not only excel in their profession but also triumph in the domestic sphere (Liu 2014). Under these circumstances, the rhetoric of women's home-work balance management underlying the cultural messages of

You Are So Beautiful appears to be in line with the requirement of “political correctness” in post-reform China.

Nonetheless, China has undergone dramatic social changes, with many different tastes, lifestyles, and cultural values having been accepted by different segments of Chinese TV audiences. Due to the achievement of past women’s movements and the spread of feminist thoughts, patriarchal values, well-received in the consumer market, are increasingly taking a progressive veneer. Often, this is by means of recontextualizing the management of a harmonious home-work balance as a way of empowering women, and in order to disguise its chauvinist essence (Rottenberg 2018). The promotion of hardcore gender stereotypes and patriarchal gender norms in *You Are So Beautiful* lacks sensitivity to this trend in today’s popular cultures. It is viewed as a blatant insult by many Chinese women, and this, in part, leads to the overwhelming low audience ratings of the show on major Chinese film/TV-review-aggregation websites.

Interestingly, Chinese people’s engagement with socio-cultural issues does not always exhibit an aversion to the regime’s interference, because of their reliance on the authority to push for their agenda within the authoritarian polity of the country (Peng 2020; Peng and Chen 2021). In the present case study, this is evidenced by a popularly upvoted commentary, which calls for audiences to lodge complaints about the show with NRTA (<https://movie.douban.com/review/12179548/>). Against this backdrop, we have seen the CCP’s mouthpiece—People Net openly criticizing *You Are So Beautiful*, despite the fact that the textual analysis reveals the production’s subtextual commitment to “political correctness” in the Chinese context (<http://ent.people.com.cn/n1/2019/1219/c1012-31513321.html>). While the CCP’s current administration evidently adopts a populist strategy to gain support from the population (Schneider 2018), one may argue that popular cultural texts adhering to “political correctness” could be deemed as “incorrect” because of their unpopularity with the audiences. If the argument holds, *You Are So Beautiful* has indeed become part of this vicious circle. Thus, the complexity of the political engineering of China’s reality TV production represents an emerging subject area, which indeed requires further intellectual intervention.

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided a case study of the makeover show—*You Are So Beautiful* to shed light on the manifestation of post-socialist gender politics in Chinese reality TV production. Primarily based on a multimodal analysis, I noted that the notion of gender essentialism forms a key concept underlying the production of *You Are So Beautiful*. This pattern of production is accomplished by (1) stereotyping women with non-domestic achievements, (2) promoting women’s consumption of fashion and beauty products, and (3) problematizing women’s imperfection in home-work balance management. The promotion of gender essentialism in *You Are So Beautiful* feeds into the rise of patriarchy in the post-reform era, and underscores how existing gender power relations are reinforced in Chinese society through the production and consumption of popular cultural texts.

In an authoritarian regime, the making of popular cultural texts is not independent of the political infrastructure. As existing literature reveals, Chinese TV production is also engineered by the CCP's propaganda campaigns and its censorship of non-essentialist gender representations (Wang and Cao 2017). The notion of gender essentialism reflected in *You Are So Beautiful* is indeed consistent with this political trajectory. It highlights how gendered discourses in Chinese popular cultures are upheld by the two pillars of post-socialist gender politics, which are built upon the market economy of capitalism and the regime's top-down management of ideologies and thoughts (Wallis and Shen 2018).

However, while being watched by a large number of audiences, *You Are So Beautiful* receives a mixed reputation in the market, with its promotion of gender stereotyping being heavily criticized on major Chinese film/TV-review-aggregation websites (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/yTV74D1NiYnDtNLz5h5lhQ>). To a certain extent, aligning the often incompatible political and economic goals poses huge creative challenges to Chinese TV producers. With *You Are So Beautiful* evidently being considered by many audiences as insensitive to the latest development of gender awareness in Chinese society, a vicious circle seems to have been created, leading to the unacceptability of the show with some segments of the consumer market, as well as with the CCP, despite the promising statistics of the show's market reach. Thus, the criticisms of the show by both the audiences and the authority have shed light on a paradoxically positive reading of the show, revealing that popular cultural texts, which promote backward gender essentialism, may provoke wider social debates to facilitate the penetration of progressive understandings of gender issues. Addressing the positive reading of a backward reality TV show, which is primarily concerned with promoting consumption, requires moving beyond a textual analysis-based research design. As such, I propose future research to address the intersection of post-socialist gender politics and reality TV production by engaging with audiences, producers, and policymakers to account for their interpretation and experience.

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Notes

1. Mango TV is affiliated to the state-owned Hunan TV Station.
2. NRTA was previously known as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT).

3. By sections, I refer to different parts of an episode in which a smaller theme is addressed. Each episode typically consists of six sections, including (1) introduction to the guest, advice on (2) the guest's home interior design, (3) dressing style, (4) cooking skills, and (5) personal life, as well as (6) concluding remarks. The sequence of advising sections is changeable between different episodes.
4. The original dialogs were in Chinese, and I translated them into English. The same rule applies throughout.
5. Douban allows Internet users to post either "short" or "long" reviews via mobile via PC devices, respectively.

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