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Just an Update: “China’s Selfie Obsession” by Jiayang Fan

So you’re with this person, for some reasons she starts to tell you about her trip far away—few damn strange days. And so it goes... and goes... to the core of your Americana compassionate instinct, you feel her relief—of being there no more.

That character is Jiayang Fan. That 37 minutes you’re with her is about the time you’re within the pages of The New Yorker magazine December 25, 2017 issue. And that unfamiliar experience is of “China’s Selfie Obsession.” As she walks away, you realize all that she was trying to make is just one single point.

Fan lets you know that in light of the selfies culture, the wanting to be beautiful and the beauty of one person have never been as close to one another and as possible to be known like now in China, with all thanks go to beautifying apps and video-based social media. Through Fan’s eyes you see that “their selfies are becoming more and more similar, and so are their faces,” you will find it easy to agree with her that “flawlessness isn’t the same as beauty, and the freedom to perfect your selfie does not necessarily yield a liberated sense of self” (Fan, “China’s Selfie Obsession”). But in principle, this is nothing new. Has “a liberated sense of self” ever been a thing in Chinese culture?

TO BE BEAUTIFUL ONLINE

Seeing life with our own eyes is one thing, seeing life through smartphone’s cameras offers many things that seem better. Knowing that selfies and video selfies are intentionally taken and cropped,

it is “a matter of ordinary courtesy” in China to post what is well-edited and cleverly-filtered on social media (Fan, “China’s Selfie Obsession”). When what’s in and out of frame is auto-perceived to be by choice, it’s best that the whole process before making info public is all by choice.

Fan notes that the amount of time that most her Chinese friends spend on editing selfie is “about forty minutes per face; a selfie taken with a friend would take well over an hour,” and that is because “the work requires several apps, each of which has particular strengths.” Hmm, so it’s about being technologically sophisticated—you’d get that—it’s just a matter of personalization. Though that’s quite a lot dedication.

To better understand the role of technology in selfies culture in China, Fan zooms in to the picture of one successful Chinese technology company: Meitu. Established in 2008, Meitu started building its empire with the photo-editing Meitu app, and so far has made more than ten “simplified-Photoshop” photo-editing, selfie-enhancing apps, and since 2013 has developed several selfie smartphones, and in 2014 launched a successful short-video-based social media platform called Meipai. In sum, Meitu is the framer of “the market for online beautification” in China. To put this into perspective, “‘Meitu’ had entered the Chinese lexicon as a verb,” as to beautify selfies (Fan, “China’s Selfie Obsession”).

Saying that “Meitu’s apps are changing what it means to be beautiful in the most populous country on earth” to you is very ill-put of Fan. It’s important to note that this selfies culture, or this selfies obsession, is not at all determined by technology, but only the desire to connect to evaluate culture together of so many people in China. Technology doesn’t at all shape taste, it’s in the people’s urge to question what beauty is and what it means to be beautiful.

“The Chinese notion of beauty has been ingrained and uncontroversial for a long time,” Fan notes, Chinese people are somehow drawn to the Eurasian appearance, which is like looking

more Western with “big eyes, double eyelids, white skin, high nose bridge, pointed chin.” No matter what the beauty standard is, it’s no longer too far unreal because people now can achieve the good look they want with just desire and beautifying apps (Fan, “China’s Selfie Obsession”).

The engine of selfies culture is not the fact that selfies are beautifiable, but that people love self-beautifying their selfies. People love to have and see and try the possibilities.

#### PERFECTIBLE SELF-IDENTIFICATIONS

You may not be familiar with the “face”—not ‘The Face’ reality show with models competing to be chosen as higher-paid models. Well, quite like that but with much more complex social conventions. In Chinese culture, “face” is a collective concept. As for the sake of “face,” people ought to have the will to keep the good look for their family and community (Wood, “You Can’t Save Face If You Never Had It”). Maybe this is why so many people feel like they have the need to be seen as good-looking in public places and expecting others to do the same? The opposite of gaining “face” is the loss of “face.” The loss of “face” leads to the shame of public humiliation, of being excluded, not vice versa; meaning that the loss of “face” is deemed as choice. Maybe this whole thing somehow somewhat has a link to the fear of rejection?

China was once “a country where uniformity was absolute and the entire populace wore two colors—black and navy” (Fan, “China’s Selfie Obsession”). It’s not a culture of forgiveness. Therefore, it is advantageous for those with overall clean profiles and presentable profile pictures, since people favor the good-looking and have no tolerance for mistakes. And so there are few people that seem wholesomely likable and became famous just for that. And so there are others who wannabe so, and a lot of others who do not mind sending gifts to their idols.

Like many, selfies culture has celebrities, those that have many many likes on social media. In China, those are called ‘wang hong’. Being wang hong is not a new fascinating job or totally

strange pursuit in the digital world, it's not as bizarre as Fan sees it. Wang hong make their livings being online influencers, they're quite well-off with virtual gifting and endorsement deals. But since Chinese people don't have the taste for diverse opinions, wang hong only gain fame unless they avoid politics (Fan, "China's Selfie Obsession"). In China, "if you say something controversial, you'll get shut down," so Fan emphasizes, "The way to succeed is to listen to the Party and follow the government." Is this why people commit to filter themselves for the sake of going with the flow? Is this why being non-political perceived as safe and ideal in China, especially for young people?

So you know that the system there is failing their young people, who "have no safety net and also face an economy that produces many more college graduates than it does jobs for those with a degree" (Fan, "China's Selfie Obsession"). And now that in China, the social credit system has been activated with facial recognition database for surveillance, privacy control, and data tracking, and cameras are everywhere. Maybe it's like 'Black Mirror' episode 1, season 3, but with much more mind-numbingly extreme? For young people there, "the thing that gives their life meaning when everything else seems out of their control" is wang hong worshiping—seeing and interacting with clean profile celebrities online—their flawless live-streaming famous figures (Fan, "China's Selfie Obsession"). They would not mind buying stuff when they're inspired. But what does it feel like whenever they're reminded that their faces in the facial recognition database are just not as same as their Meitu faces online? What does it mean when they couldn't help but perfecting their DIY identification online?

What if their self-beautified-selfies are the only to make them see that their perceptions are included and kind of have a touch onto reality?

“A LIBERATED SENSE OF SELF”

Fan is right when she comments that “a liberated sense of self” is nowhere to be found within the intersect where pre-coded beauty standards overlap with consumerism “in a society that has long prized conformity.” But duh, who would sell and who would buy that “a liberated sense of self”? What good does it serve? Since like forever in China maybe, people ought to behave properly and look good for the sake of “face” all the time in all the public places, so how could “a liberated sense of self” ever been a thing there? If else, what is the great deal that one gets for uncovering their liberated sense of self? For people in China, in that super-fast-growing economy, in that jaw-dropping social media industry, nothing is really shaking the superstructure—the selfie obsession in China is just an update in the base.

All and all, Fan has succeeded in fashioning herself as a sophisticated outsider, she sounds like she’s about to level up to be a “What? What trend?” granny being discombobulated by Gen Z’s enthusiasm. And, selfies obsession in all its forms may not feel that extreme and contagious elsewhere, it is worldwide.

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