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"Beauty Servitude" as Metaphor in Contemporary Chinese Discourse: An Invitational Rhetorical Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigates the contested metaphor of "beauty servitude" (fu mei yi) in contemporary Chinese public discourse, examining how women's beauty practices are rhetorically framed in relation to labor, obligation, agency, and structural constraint. Using qualitative rhetorical analysis, the study analyzes a public debate as its primary data source. The analysis combines high-frequency word statistics with inductive qualitative coding to identify recurring metaphorical patterns and argumentative strategies. Adopting invitational rhetoric as an analytical lens, this study shows that the metaphor both enables and constrains public understanding. While it invites attention to structural power and gender inequality, it may also limit recognition of women's embodied experiences and self-defined agency.

Keywords

invitational rhetoric, metaphor, beauty servitude

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, the term "beauty servitude" (fu mei yi) has emerged as a highly contested feminist buzzword in Chinese online discourse. Originating from feminist critiques of beauty norms, the term is commonly used to describe the time, labor, and emotional costs that women invest in appearance practices, including but not limited to, cosmetics, dieting, fashion and cosmetic procedures, in order to conform to dominant aesthetic standards (Li & Li, 2025). By metaphorically adopting the concept of military service as a point of reference, "beauty servitude" frames beauty practices as a form of compulsory labor rather than an individual choice.

The circulation of this term has generated extensive debate in public discourse. On the one hand, supporters regard beauty servitude as a critical concept that unveils the structural nature of beauty

norms and the ways in which women's bodies are regulated by patriarchy and consumer capitalism. On the other hand, critics argue that the term negates women's individual agency by portraying them primarily as passive victims, thereby reducing diverse aesthetic practices to a single narrative of oppression. From this standpoint, the concept of beauty servitude is regarded as a potential objectification of women, stemming from the denial of the legitimacy of personal choice and the pursuit of pleasure in beauty practices.

1.2 Need for the Study

Despite extensive debate, existing discussions surrounding beauty servitude largely remain at the level of normative debate. Most arguments revolve around issues such as whether women's engagement in beauty practices is indeed a matter of volition and whether women should be held responsible for the consequences of their aesthetic choices (Bone, Griffin, & Scholz, 2008; Komarraju, Arora, & Raman, 2021). These discourses frequently manifest as moral evaluations, positioning women either as autonomous subjects exercising freedom or as constrained subjects entrapped within the confines of structural oppression.

However, this line of debate reveals an important cognitive limitation. By focusing primarily on normative evaluation, existing research tends to treat "beauty servitude" as a self-evident concept, while overlooking its status as a linguistic and rhetorical construct. Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to how the metaphor itself frames women's relationship to beauty, shapes interpretive possibilities, and subtly guides public understanding. Without examining the rhetorical dimension of the term, current discussions risk reproducing polarized interpretations while neglecting the discursive mechanisms through which such meanings are constructed and circulated.

To address this, the present study approaches "beauty servitude" from the perspective of invitational rhetoric, a rhetorical framework that emphasizes dialogue, mutual understanding, and the offering of perspectives rather than coercive persuasion. Adopting a qualitative case-study approach, this research analyzes a widely circulated Chinese debate on women and beauty in order to examine how the metaphor of beauty servitude is rhetorically constructed and contested within debate discourse. Through this analysis, the study aims to illuminate the rhetorical dynamics of the metaphor and explore how it invites audiences to reconsider women's agency, gender equality, and aesthetic practices.

2. Research Perspective and Objectives

Metaphor plays a crucial role in shaping how social experiences are understood and evaluated. Rather than functioning merely as a stylistic device, metaphor structures perception by framing abstract social phenomena in familiar terms, thereby influencing how people interpret the social event (Zhu & Li, 2018). In the case of beauty servitude, women's everyday beauty practices are framed through the conceptual domain of compulsory labor, enabling these practices to be interpreted as structured and socially enforced.

In expressions such as "I have served beauty servitude for ten years" (wo fu mei yi shi nian), the

grammatical subject is explicitly marked as "I", positioning the woman as the apparent agent of the action. However, this syntactic structure gives rise to a mislead, whereby grammatical subjecthood is easily mistaken for semantic agency. While "I" functions as the grammatical subject, the actual semantic force, the social and institutional pressures that impose and normalize beauty standards (Fernandez-Lasa et al., 2024), remains unarticulated and structurally erased. In this sense, the grammatical subject does not coincide with the semantic agent: the woman appears to act, yet is simultaneously acted upon by an implicit system of aesthetic norms and disciplinary mechanisms. This mismatch between grammatical subject and semantic agent lends support to the hypothesis that the metaphor of beauty servitude is frequently interpreted as a matter of individual choice.

Feminist rhetoric provides a valuable lens through which to analyse the operation of such tropes in public discourse (Li & Wang, 2023). Rather than treating rhetoric as a tool for correcting or persuading others, it emphasizes the creation of communicative conditions (Liu & Liu, 2025). Within feminist rhetoric, the framework of *invitational rhetoric* (Foss & Griffin, 1995) proposes an alternative to persuasive and confrontational modes of discourse. It is grounded in the principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination (Foss & Griffin, 1995). An invitational approach does not seek to impose moral judgments or prescribe correct choices. Instead, it invites understanding by establishing a communicative space in which different experiences and interpretations can coexist (Li & Liu, 2024). The establishment of such an environment for interaction is imperative for individuals to actively enter the communication system and voluntarily pursue change. The impetus for change not stemming from external pressure exerted by rhetoricians, but from an internal drive to seek transformation. And it is precisely this self-transformation that nurtures the seeds of positive change: altering others often begins with altering oneself, thereby influencing society (Liu & Liu, 2025).

Drawing on Peirce's typology of signs, metaphor can be understood as a semiotic formation that is not confined to language-based cultural discourse. Just as invitational metaphors, which invite reinterpretation rather than enforce a single, fixed meaning, metaphors more broadly operate as fluid symbolic forms that are continually reshaped through social interaction and ideological change (Li & Xu, 2025). Therefore, by adopting the perspective of invitational rhetoric as an analytical lens, this study does not seek to determine whether beauty practices are inherently liberating or oppressive. Instead, it poses a series of inquiries into the rhetorical nature of the metaphor of beauty servitude, and whether it allows space for recognizing both structural constraint and women's agency. To operationalize this analytical focus, the study formulates the following research questions, which address the metaphorical construction and rhetorical orientation of beauty servitude in contemporary Chinese public discourse:

RQ1: What metaphorical meanings are associated with beauty servitude in contemporary Chinese discourse, and how is women's beauty practice framed through these meanings?

RQ2: From the perspective of invitational rhetoric, how does the metaphor of beauty servitude in public discourse influence particular ways of understanding women's relationship to beauty, especially

with regard to structural constraint and individual agency?

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Data

The data for this study consist of transcribed speech from a public debate on the motion "For women, loving beauty is freedom/not freedom", held as part of the 2025 Bilibili New National Debate exhibition match. The debate features speakers representing opposing positions, making it a rich site for examining how contested concepts related to women's beauty practices are rhetorically constructed and evaluated.

The analysis focuses on the debaters' prepared statements and argumentative exchanges, where the term beauty servitude and related expressions concerning beauty, choice, and freedom are explicitly or implicitly invoked. These texts were manually transcribed from the debate recording to preserve syntactic structures, evaluative language, and rhetorical strategies relevant to metaphor and agency construction.

Foss and Griffin (1995) theorize invitational rhetoric as a "non-patriarchal approach to communication" because the relationship between rhetor and audience is one of respect and equality that recognizes self-determination and allows for diverse points of view. This dataset is particularly suitable for the present study because debate discourse is inherently argumentative and reflexive. Speakers are required not only to present their own positions, but also to anticipate, reframe, or challenge opposing interpretations. As such, the debate provides a concentrated discursive environment in which the metaphor of beauty servitude is actively negotiated. In this sense, the choice of dataset also resonates with Kirsch and Royster (2010)'s call in feminist rhetorical research for a "commitment to engage dialectically and dialogically," where tensions, conflicts, and counterpositions are treated as productive sites of inquiry. Rather than viewing opposition as a limitation, this study approaches the debate format as an opportunity to examine how competing perspectives on women's relationship to beauty are articulated, contested, and brought into implicit dialogue within a single discursive space.

3.2 Methodology

This study adopts a mixed qualitative–quantitative approach, with qualitative rhetorical analysis as its primary method and corpus-assisted techniques as supplementary tools. The methodological procedure is designed to systematically identify salient lexical patterns while preserving close attention to contextual meaning.

First, the debate data were collected from the video subtitles provided by the hosting platform. All subtitle content was extracted and converted into editable plain text for analysis. During this process, non-substantive materials, including the host's procedural introductions, transitions between debate segments, and sponsorship-related content, were manually removed to ensure that the dataset focused exclusively on the debaters' argumentative discourse. After this cleaning process, the final corpus contained 14,837 Chinese characters.

Second, the cleaned text was segmented using the jieba Chinese word segmentation library. Given the absence of natural word boundaries in written Chinese, word segmentation was necessary to enable lexical-level analysis. Following segmentation, Python scripts were used to identify and extract content words, excluding function words that primarily serve grammatical rather than semantic purposes. The frequencies of these content words were then calculated and ranked from highest to lowest.

The resulting list of high-frequency lexical items provides an overview of recurring semantic themes in the debate discourse. Rather than serving as standalone evidence, this frequency analysis functions as a heuristic tool to guide subsequent qualitative analysis. Specifically, the high-frequency words help identify dominant topics, evaluative tendencies, and recurring conceptual associations related to beauty, freedom, choice, labor, and responsibility.

Building on this corpus-assisted overview, the study proceeds with close qualitative analysis of representative excerpts. These excerpts are examined in relation to metaphorical framing and rhetorical orientation, in line with the research questions. In this way, quantitative frequency analysis and qualitative discourse analysis are integrated to ensure both systematic coverage and contextual depth.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1 Data Analysis

Selected results of this frequency analysis are presented in Figure 1. First, a frequency analysis of lexical items shows that the most frequently occurring terms in the debate are “freedom” (zi you, 125 occurrences) and “women” (nv xing, 102 occurrences), directly reflecting the core proposition of the debate. Other high-frequency words include “loving beauty”(ai mei), “self”(zi ji), “society”(she hui), “discipline”(gui xun), “male”(nan xing), “unfreedom”(bu zi you), “pursuit”(zhui qiu), “standards”(biao zhun) and “evaluation”(ping jia). These keywords closely align with the conceptual field surrounding beauty servitude, particularly debates over agency, regulation, and responsibility.

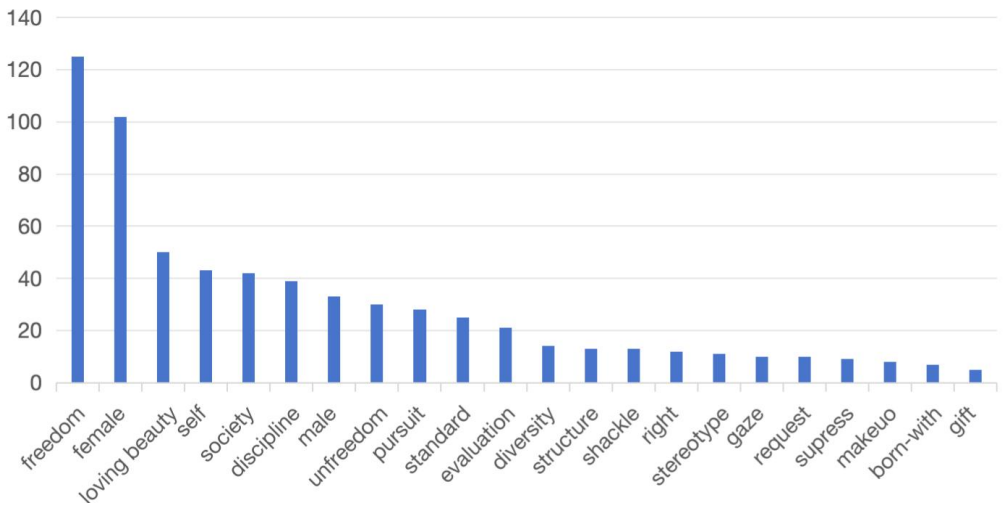

Figure 1. High Frequency Words

Building on this quantitative overview, the study then moves to a qualitative analysis of how beauty is conceptually defined in the discourse of the two opposing sides. Drawing on their evaluative statements, the affirmative and negative arguments were coded according to the attributed characteristics of beauty.

4.2 Coding Process

The coding process followed an inductive approach inspired by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather than applying predefined categories, the analytical codes were developed progressively through close reading of the debate transcript. In the first stage, the transcript was read repeatedly and segments expressing distinct rhetorical meanings were assigned provisional descriptive labels. In the second stage, similar labels were compared and grouped into broader conceptual categories based on recurring semantic patterns. Finally, the emerging categories were refined through constant comparison across the dataset, and representative excerpts were re-examined to ensure consistency in coding.

For instance, sentences in which speakers construct themselves as autonomous agents who possess the authority to define their own choices are coded as “subjectivity”. The statement “Loving beauty is a way I engage in life—not because I’m a woman, just because I’m myself.” foregrounds the speaker’s personal identity and autonomy through the repeated use of the first-person pronoun and the explicit assertion “I’m myself” which emphasizes individuality rather than gendered expectations. Similarly, the utterance “I like being in a crowd; the moment I step out, I feel I'm in a state of being alive.” highlights lived experience and self-awareness, positioning the speaker as an active subject who defines her own sense of existence. Based on this standard, coding quantity of feature “subjectivity” is 22 in total.

Similarly, the category “diversity” was used to code utterances that explicitly emphasize the plurality or variability of beauty standards and challenge the notion of a single dominant aesthetic norm. The category “equality” was used to code utterances that frame beauty practices in terms of gender parity and equal rights between men and women. The category “embodiment” was used to code utterances that frame beauty as a lived, bodily experience expressed through concrete material practices such as clothing, bodily appearance, and sensory perception. The category “active pursuit” was used to code utterances that portray beauty as something to be consciously sought, defended, or actively claimed by women. Statements were coded under this category when they emphasized initiative, determination, or the need to actively pursue aesthetic expression and personal freedom. The category “Innateness & pre-social existence” was used to code utterances that construct the pursuit of beauty as a natural, universal, and pre-social human inclination rather than a product of social norms or gendered expectations.

4.3.1 Affirmative Side Analysis

Through inductive qualitative coding, the affirmative side’s construction of beauty can be summarized by the following recurrent features: subjectivity, diversity, equality, embodiment, active pursuit, and innateness or pre-social existence (see in Table 1 below).

Table 1. Affirmative Side Coding

Features	Reference Examples	Coding Quantity
Subjectivity	The word "I" precedes "love"—that is, only when I am the subject do I have the right and ability to love.	22
	Loving beauty is a way I engage in life—not because I'm a woman, just because I'm myself.	
	I like being in a crowd; the moment I step out, I feel I'm in a state of being alive.	
Diversity	You may not love my kind of beauty, but can you love another kind?	21
	My fellow debater, when you're troubled about weighing 70 kg, Lu Yu is troubled about weighing 35 or 40 kg. You'll find that it's because people don't accept aesthetic diversity that we're burdened with the shackles of beauty, right?	
	Beauty can be superficial, or it can be profound—it all depends on how you perceive it.	
Equality	There are two ways to resist male oppression and patriarchal society: the first is "appreciating each other's beauty together"—we women not only love beauty, but you men should also love beauty.	12
	Don't men have their own dress code? They definitely do; clothing is an expression of their inner world.	
	Do you think those men who wear baggy shorts and slippers have given up pursuing beauty? Their inner expression is "Wealthy and carefree."	
	Why can't women be like this? Why can't women appreciate different levels of beauty?	
Embodiment	Beauty is an innate pursuit in our hearts; it can be a two-foot red headband, a pair of healthy, unbound feet, or any color—you can wear it without any hesitation.	5
	I read an article by Simone de Beauvoir called "Clothing for Me," in which she wrote: "I like tweed, I like all bright colors and white—because white is so friendly to older women. … My favorite is still yellow. I buy one dress each season and wear it the whole season; the rest of the time I wear short skirts with blouses and sweaters."	

Active Pursuit	Even in the most barren times, there is a desire for beauty and freedom. Don't cede this battlefield to men—if you do, they”ll take over.	4
Innateness & pre-social existence	I’ve been saying that loving beauty is human nature, but we instinctively think I’m talking about it being women’s nature. You’ll find that no matter how social systems change or social realities evolve, people’s pursuit of beauty, truth, and goodness has never changed.	12

The affirmative side’s discourse reveals a systematic resistance to the metaphor of beauty servitude. Rather than refuting the term directly, the speakers redefine beauty in such a way as to render the servitude metaphor difficult to sustain through an explicit emphasis on grammatical and experiential agency.

Statements such as “The word ‘I’ precedes ‘love’—only when I am the subject do I have the right and ability to love” frame loving beauty as an intentional action initiated by a speaking subject. In doing so, the discourse implicitly challenges the core assumption of beauty servitude, namely that women’s beauty practices are primarily structured by external coercion. If loving beauty is presented as an act that originates from “I”, the metaphorical mapping from servitude, a condition defined by lack of agency, to beauty practices becomes unstable.

Second, the affirmative side repeatedly emphasizes diversity in defining beauty. By insisting that different bodies, preferences, and aesthetic choices coexist without a fixed hierarchy, the discourse shifts attention away from structural constraint toward diversity of interpretation. In examples contrasting anxieties over different body weights, aesthetic pressure is attributed not to beauty itself, but to social intolerance of difference. As a result, the metaphor of servitude is redirected: constraint is located in evaluative systems rather than in the act of loving beauty, thereby weakening the metaphor’s explanatory force.

Third, beauty is consistently rendered embodiment through everyday objects and personal narratives, such as “tweed, bright colors” “short skirts with blouses and sweaters” and other clothing, colors, and bodily comfort. These descriptions resist abstraction and moralization, which are often prerequisites for metaphorical generalization. When beauty is grounded in lived, idiosyncratic experience, it becomes less amenable to being framed as a uniform system of compulsory labor.

Moreover, the affirmative discourse constructs beauty as an active pursuit and a site of contestation, rather than passive compliance. The metaphor of a “battlefield” suggests that aesthetic practices are not surrendered to patriarchal control but are actively negotiated. Importantly, comparisons with men’s dress codes normalize beauty as a human practice rather than a feminized obligation, further disrupting the gendered asymmetry presupposed by beauty servitude.

Finally, by framing beauty as innate and pre-social—a pursuit that precedes social systems and "is human nature"—the affirmative discourse explicitly dislocates beauty from the logic of social discipline. If the desire for beauty is positioned as anterior to society, then the metaphor of servitude, which relies on social coercion and institutional regulation, loses much of its persuasive grounding.

From the perspective of invitational rhetoric, this discursive configuration is double-edged. On the one hand, it invites understanding by affirming women's agency and rejecting moralized judgments. On the other hand, by downplaying structural constraint, it risks foreclosing discussions of how power operates through seemingly voluntary practices.

4.3.2 Negative Side Analysis

In contrast to the affirmative discourse, the negative side consistently constructs beauty servitude as a structurally grounded and experienced metaphor. Rather than treating beauty as an individual preference or innate desire, the speakers frame women's beauty practices through the conceptual domain of discipline, surveillance, and unequal gender relations, thereby stabilizing the metaphorical mapping between servitude and aesthetic labor (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Negative Side Coding

Features	Reference Examples	Coding Quantity
Disciplinary	Previously, it was called "Women dress up for those who appreciate them"—you had to look beautiful for others; now the rhetoric has changed to "You must cultivate both inner and outer qualities," "You need to invest in yourself," "Become a better version of yourself."	11
	Today our competition starts at 06:30, but we were asked to come for makeup at 4 o'clock. I said angrily, "I don't want to put on makeup," and at that moment my younger sister looked at me and said, "Don't make things difficult for the organizer."	
Gender Differences & Patriarchal Structure	In history, under patriarchy, men are the first sex—they hold political and economic power, while women stay at home to provide free labor. Thus, women have always been a secondary gender.	7
	When men look at their own figures, they focus more on overall performance and state; but traditionally, when we evaluate women's bodies, we focus more on whether their appearance meets standards. That's the difference.	
Empirical Support	Data from 2024 shows 95.6% of medical aesthetics consumers in China are women. Assuming a 50:50 male-female population	5

	ratio, women are 20 times more likely to undergo medical aesthetics than men.	
	They found men in swimsuits had a slight math performance improvement vs. those in hoodies; but women in swimsuits saw a sharp math score drop vs. those in hoodies, along with lower self-evaluation and increased body shame.	
	In reality: 40-70% of teen girls feel beauty filters cause negative self-image emotions; 56% of women dislike their looks; 80% feel beauty industry standards harm their self-esteem; half of girls feel pressure to be beautiful; 91% of women diet over body dissatisfaction.	
	In Europe's anti-stereotype movement (e.g., Portugal's committee), phrases like "Little girls are naturally fond of beauty" are removed from primary school textbooks.	
Constructed	This is what our side argues: don't mistake this for human nature—beauty is an inherently constructed concept, deeply rooted in our minds.	7
	Humans are products of power, historical constructs, and cultural constructs—and the same applies to the pursuit of beauty.	
	"Little girls are naturally fond of beauty; they love dressing up from childhood" is old folk wisdom, yet it's the cornerstone of gender discipline and stereotypes. It uses the harmless-sounding word "beauty" to trivialize gender stereotypes, which is terrifying.	
Unfreedom	The unfreedom we refer to isn't tied to specific standards. For instance, wearing a red headband is unfree while wearing nothing is free. Rather, the freedom we mean is liberation from the discipline of scrutiny, not from a specific image.	9
	True freedom is not caring about standards—not desperately making others acknowledge "My look is also beauty." There's no need for that; indifference to standards is true freedom.	
	If you want everyone to define themselves, abandon the standard of beauty (with its heavy historical baggage and real discipline)—just let everyone be themselves.	
Diversity and Individual Differences	There's nothing wrong with Teacher Luyu liking/pursuing beauty. Our topic today is never "Is loving beauty freedom for Teacher Luyu?" but "Is loving beauty freedom for women?"	3

Among Women	I'm a woman very different from Lu Yu—I've never longed for something because it's beautiful since childhood. There is diversity among women.

First, the negative discourse highlights the disciplinary nature of beauty practices by tracing shifts in justificatory rhetoric. Traditional expressions such as "women dress up to please others" are shown to have been replaced by contemporary neoliberal language, including "self-investment," "self-improvement," and "cultivating inner and outer qualities." Beauty practices are no longer enforced explicitly by others, but are reframed as moral obligations women impose upon themselves. Through this lens, servitude is not imposed externally but sustained through self-regulation, a key feature of modern disciplinary power.

Second, the metaphor is further reinforced through explicit reference to patriarchal structures and gender asymmetry. By contrasting how men's bodies are evaluated in terms of "performance and overall state", while women's bodies are assessed primarily through appearance and conformity to standards, the discourse situates beauty practices within a historically unequal gender order. In this framing, beauty servitude is not an individualized experience but a gendered condition rooted in differential social expectations.

Empirical data and experimental findings function as additional legitimizing resources for the metaphor. Statistical evidence on gender disparities in cosmetic consumption, body dissatisfaction, and performance under objectifying conditions anchors the metaphor in measurable outcomes. These data transform beauty servitude from a symbolic critique into a socially observable pattern, strengthening its explanatory power.

Finally, the negative discourse explicitly rejects the naturalization of beauty by framing it as a cultural and ideological construction. Statements such as "beauty is not human nature but a constructed concept" challenge narratives that present aesthetic desire as pre-social or innate. By exposing how seemingly benign ideas like "girls naturally love beauty" function as vehicles for gender discipline, the discourse reveals how metaphor operates not only descriptively but critically.

4.4 Results and Findings

This study, grounded in a qualitative analysis of the controversy surrounding the phrase beauty servitude within contemporary Chinese public discourse, focuses on metaphorical construction and its rhetorical effects. The following research findings emerge.

4.4.1 The Meaning Construction and Labour Framework

Research indicates that "beauty servitude" is continually reshaped as a metaphorical expression within the debate. Discourses from opposing stances compete around this concept, resulting in a marked divergence in its meaning.

Opposing discourses tend to redefine women's aesthetic practices from personal choice to actions embedded within social structures. Within this framework, beauty is no longer viewed as a neutral

interest or preference but becomes closely tied to discipline, evaluation, and social expectations. Related expressions frequently associate aesthetic behaviour with time investment, emotional expenditure, and social pressure, endowing it with characteristics akin to labour.

This "labour" understanding does not stem directly from coercion but is progressively achieved through discursive transformation. Shifting from initial emphasis on external demands to please others, aesthetic burdens are repackaged as internal norms represented by "self-improvement" and "investing in oneself". This reframing positions such burdens as responsibilities women should proactively assume, thereby perpetuating the metaphor of "servitude" in a more concealed form.

Moreover, counter-arguments frequently employ statistical data, experimental research, and social case studies to highlight the unequal distribution of aesthetic pressures between genders. By demonstrating the systemic burdens women bear in bodily anxieties, aesthetic consumption, and self-evaluation, these arguments further define beauty as a distinctly gendered social division of labour, thereby strengthening the explanatory power of the view that beauty servitude constitutes a structural issue.

Conversely, proponents challenge this by redefining the nature of beauty. Their core strategy lies in downplaying aesthetics' socially constructed attributes, instead emphasizing the inherent legitimacy of beauty's intrinsic pursuit. They portray aesthetic judgement as a natural inclination predating social norms, rather than an outcome of power relations.

In concrete terms, the affirmative discourse repeatedly emphasizes the "I" as the subject of aesthetic practice, framing the love of beauty as an active choice and self-expression rather than passive compliance. This renders aesthetic practice more akin to an act of agency than labour or obligation. Simultaneously, by concretising beauty through everyday experiences such as comfortable attire and personal preferences, the affirmative discourse deliberately avoids abstracting aesthetics into a unified institutional system. This strategy undermines the overall applicability of "beauty servitude".

4.4.2 Understanding Boundaries and Discourse Effects

From the analytical perspective of invitational rhetoric, the metaphor "beauty servitude" broadens pathways for understanding women's aesthetic practices in public discourse while also constraining the direction of discussion to some extent.

Within the agency-oriented affirmative discourse, related expressions emphasize women's subjective experiences and diversity in aesthetic choices. This helps resist narratives that uniformly portray women as passive recipients, presenting aesthetic practices as diverse and individualized. However, such emphasis often obscures structural conditions, rendering power relations difficult to discern within narratives of "voluntariness" and "choice".

By contrast, opposing discourse prioritizes revealing the institutional forces underpinning aesthetics. By analyzing how capitalist logic, patriarchal structures, and gender norms collectively shape aesthetic standards, it guides the public to understand women's aesthetic practices as outcomes influenced by social structures. Yet this analytical approach may overlook the complexity of individual experiences, failing to adequately reflect the pleasure, identity, and meaning women derive from aesthetic processes.

In summary, the operation of the beauty servitude metaphor within public discourse concerns not only the interpretation of women's cosmetic practices but also the contestation over the authority to define aesthetics. Affirmative discourse seeks to diminish the metaphor's explanatory power by emphasizing subjective experience, while counter discourse situates individual actions within social structures. This tug-of-war in rhetorical practice demonstrates that contemporary female discussions on aesthetics yield no singular conclusion, unfolding instead through ongoing negotiation between individual agency and structural constraints.

5. Conclusion

This study examines "beauty servitude" (fu mei yi) as a and metaphorical construct rather than a fixed feminist diagnosis. By analyzing debate discourse surrounding women's beauty practices, the paper demonstrates that the term operates as a contested metaphor whose meanings are continuously negotiated through public argumentation.

Addressing RQ1, the findings show that beauty servitude acquires its persuasive force through a labor-based metaphorical framework that reinterprets aesthetic practices as structured obligation. In structurally oriented discourse, beauty is framed as a form of gendered labor sustained through discipline, self-regulation, and unequal social expectations. Empirical data and historical references further stabilize this metaphor by anchoring it in observable gender asymmetries. In contrast, agency-oriented discourse resists this framing by redefining beauty as subjective, embodied, and pre-social, thereby weakening the metaphorical mapping between servitude and aesthetic practice. These competing constructions reveal that the metaphor does not describe beauty practices in a neutral manner, but actively shapes how responsibility, effort, and constraint are attributed.

In response to RQ2, the analysis shows that when examined through the lens of invitational rhetoric, the metaphor both enables and restricts understanding. Structural framings invite recognition of systemic power and gendered discipline, but may limit acknowledgment of lived experience and personal meaning. Agency-centered framings affirm women's subjectivity and diversity, yet often downplay the operation of structural constraints. The metaphor thus delineates interpretive boundaries: it opens space for critique while simultaneously narrowing how beauty, choice, and agency can be discussed.

Taken together, these findings suggest that debates over beauty servitude are not merely disagreements over whether beauty is "free" or "unfree". Instead, they reflect deeper rhetorical struggles over how women's relationship to beauty should be understood, evaluated, and morally framed. By foregrounding metaphor orientation, this study moves beyond binary evaluations and highlights the productive tension between agency and structure in contemporary feminist discourse.

Ultimately, the value of beauty servitude lies not in its capacity to deliver a definitive judgment on women's beauty practices, but in its ability to expose the limits of existing explanatory frameworks. Attending to how the metaphor operates rhetorically allows for a more nuanced understanding of

beauty as a site where constraint and choice, discipline and desire, coexist rather than cancel each other out.

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