

A Comparative Study of the Influence of Feminist Development on Young Women's Aesthetics in China and Australia

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Abstract: The development of feminism has played a certain role in the promotion of women's status and the defense of their interests and rights in Western and Chinese society. Chinese and Western women have demonstrated the influence of feminism on aesthetic changes. The research theme of this paper is investigating the development of feminism in China and Australia, which explores the development process of feminism in China and Australia and the similarities and differences between feminism and women's perceptions of physical appearance. By comparison, literature review, and interview methods, this study found that the similarities between the development of women's rights and aesthetics in China and the West are that young female interviewees who are subject to feminism think that physical health is the most important thing, and that women have autonomy and choice in the management of appearance. The difference between the development of women's rights in China and the West on aesthetics is that due to the increasing influence of individualism and feminism in Australian society, Australian women have more freedom in managing their appearance, and they are less influenced by mainstream social norms regarding women's appearance. However, under the influence of social pressure and collectivism, Chinese women are more inclined to change their appearance to adapt to the standard of ideal female appearance in Chinese mainstream society. Feminists in China can use the results of this study to understand the causes and effects of gender inequality, and pro-feminist educators can promote gender education in schools and society.

Keywords: feminism, women image, aesthetic, China, Australia

1. Introduction

According to Cambridge Dictionary, the concept of "feminism" is the conviction that women have the same rights, authority, and opportunities as men [1]. The French term "féminisme" was coined by the French philosopher Charles Fourier in the 1830s. The philosopher proposed that women's liberation is a prerequisite for social progress. The idea of feminism has spread to many countries, and the feminist movements in the public sphere reflect the broad influence of feminism in society. The feminist movement was part of a social change that drove discussions about gender equality, women's rights, and gender stereotypes. Studying the impact of feminism on women's appearance can reflect how feminism has changed women's self-concept. Almost all women feel the social

expectation that women should be the ideal woman, which frequently manifests as body image issues, and this phenomenon is becoming normalised [2]. Feminist scholars believe that it is acceptable for women's bodies to differ from the image of an ideal woman in society. They resist the idea of women doing physically hurtful things to their bodies because of body shame or body aversion. In Western and Chinese history, women were excluded from many social and professional activities based on their gender alone. With the development of feminism in Western and Chinese society, women's rights and interests have gradually attracted the attention of society and governments, and consequently, considerable progress has been made. In the 1960s, feminists began to question the image of women presented in traditional theories based on patriarchal discourse because language used in these theories displayed a hostile attitude toward women or portrayed unrealistic images of women [3]. The goal of feminists is to include women in areas from which they were previously excluded [3]. The first wave of feminism occurred during the 19th and early 20th centuries [4]. During this period, feminists helped women gain the right to vote, which was a milestone for feminism [4]. In Australia, women in South Australia gained the right to vote for the first time in 1894 [4]. The first female member of the Australian Parliament was elected in 1921 [4]. Until 1962, Indigenous women in Australia obtained the right to vote [4]. Gender inequality has existed in Australian society. Throughout Australian history, women have been excluded from public and political life [5]. Kingston claims that Australian women are bound to the family, playing the role of "mother" or "wife" [6]. In 1975, the book "My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary" challenged the assumptions of egalitarianism in Australian society by pointing out that women were being exploited and underpaid [6]. The problem of gender inequality still exists in present day Australian society. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, Australian women are paid 17.5 percent less than men for the same job. In matriarchal China, women rarely experience gender oppression [7].

As a result of the Confucianism's penetration and development in Chinese society, the masculinity has effected on the society and caused a long-term impact on Chinese women. According to Menke, only during the Tang Dynasty did there not exist any social phenomenon of discrimination against women in Chinese society [7]. Hu et al. pointed out that Confucianism had an important influence on the shaping of gender norms in China, emphasising that women should assume family obligations and be in a subordinate position to men, depriving Chinese women of economic participation and political rights [8]. The feminist movement in China began in the early 20th century. The fourth international conference on women was hosted in Beijing in 1995 [9]. The congress raised the awareness of protecting women's rights in Chinese society at that time, and fostering the establishment of more feminism organisations, which greatly improved the status of Chinese women in society. The gender topic was then gradually introduced in Chinese society and caused discussion [9]. In addition to political institutions such as the national women's federation, some women's nongovernmental organisations have begun to establish and focus on the rights and interests of women in Chinese society [9]. Although the Chinese government was once shown to be supportive of feminism, and feminism was promoted by mainstream society, the current Chinese government and mainstream society have a non-supportive attitude toward feminism. This paper takes the contemporary female image as the research entry point, and deeply discusses the difference in the influence of women's rights on contemporary Australia and China to provide optimal strategies for the development of women's rights. Western and Chinese mainstream societies have opposite views on feminism. Western mainstream society is supportive of feminism. Western mainstream media have vigorously promoted feminist topics such as #Me Too and #LetHerSpeak. In addition, universities in Australia offer gender studies subjects, which enable more people to access knowledge about gender inequality in society and to think about possible solutions. In China, the government and mainstream Chinese society have a negative attitude towards feminism. Feminism is seen as a potential threat to social stability and an intrusion of Western ideology in China. According to Arroyo

et al., feminism can help women self-empower, reject the influence of social expectations about their bodies, and inspire eating disorder recovery [10]. Feminism can make women aware of the sociocultural and objectifying oppression of women, and it can provide a foundation for them to develop other aspects that have nothing to do with appearance or the body [10].

This article attempts to examine whether young women in Australia are more supportive of challenging social mainstream aesthetics than young women in China. In addition, the interview method was used to randomly interview 10 young women from China and Australia aged between 20 and 30 to explore the influence of feminism on their aesthetic concepts. In the interview, the author sets a series of questions based on their views on feminism, whether it is because feminism has changed the way of shaping their own image, and the relationship between feminism and female images. Section two describes the development and influence of feminism in Australia, section three describes the development and influence of feminism in China, and section four compares the similarities and differences between Chinese and Australian attitudes towards feminism, as well as optimisation strategies for the development of feminism in China.

2. The Development and Influence of Feminism in Australia

2.1. The Development of Feminism in Australia

The first wave of feminism was primarily concerned with abolitionism, the fight for women's right to vote, and the inequality between men and women as reflected in the legal system [11]. With the rise of feminism in the Western world, the first Australian-based women's suffrage society was founded in Victoria in 1884 [12]. Women travelled to various colonies where they lobbied the government and marched in the streets to increase their influence [12]. In 1902, The Australian government granted women the right to vote and run for office [12]. Australia became the second nation in the world which allow women to vote at the national level [12]. Having gained the right to vote, Australian women have fought for greater rights in the public and private spheres, including equal pay for equal work, marriage, divorce, and reproductive rights [12]. In 1969, the first women's liberation movement in Australia began in Sydney and Melbourne. The movement then spread to other parts of Australia. According to Grimshaw, most of the participants in the Women's Liberation Movement were university students or single young women who had relatively more freedom to be critical of society [13]. They quickly gained the attention of the media and had a social impact [13]. In addition, a number of female scholars in Australian academia also showed their support for feminism. They made women's history available to feminists by writing and publishing in small journals and magazines [13]. Ann Curthoys, founder of the Sydney Women's Liberation Movement, and Anne Summer, another liberationist, have pointed out the lack of attention paid to Australian women by most Australian historians [13]. In 1975, the first International Women's Day was held in Melbourne on 8 March in 1983, and Australia government showed its support to the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women which was published by the United Nations.

In current Australian society, feminism has made positive inroads. According to a 2016 report from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, young women are generally more educated than men [14]. In addition, Australia places highly among 128 nations in terms of childcare, anti-discrimination laws, equal pay for equal work, and access to education for women [14]. However, gender inequality has not disappeared from Australian society. According to Skinner and Pocock, Australian women continue to be influenced by traditional Australian gender stereotypes, in which women are perceived as the "caregivers" and men are perceived as the "breadwinners" of the family through their work [14]. This results in women being responsible for approximately twice as many household chores as men [14].

The Internet has given Australian women the opportunity to make their voices heard on social media. The wave of #Me Too has put enormous pressure on political leaders in Australia and has provoked a huge response in Australian society, with lots of women taking to the Internet to reveal the bullying and sexual harassment they have received in the workplace. This demonstrates how social media gives women a supportive forum to talk about their experiences and advocate for women's rights. Social media has also become a propaganda tool for anti-feminist groups. According to Davis, there are extreme right-wing groups in Australia that have set up Facebook groups to promote anti-public ideas. In addition to expressing ultra-nationalism, they also express ridicule and contempt for feminism and engage in anti-feminist propaganda [15].

2.2. The Impact of Feminism on the Image of Australian Women

According to Spyropoulou et. al, dark skin is considered one of the criteria for beauty in Australia [16]. Dark skin is regarded as the standard of wealth, since dark skin is associated with going on vacation more often versus spending most of the time at work [16]. In addition, full lips are considered to be a criterion for beauty in Australian society, representing a woman who is fertile and sexy [16]. Australian society's standard of physical beauty for women is narrow, with only very specific features or body types qualifying as beautiful [17]. According to a study in 2022, more than half of Australian girls were unhappy with their appearance [18]. Western feminists believe that although women today have gained more money, power, and legal protection than women in the past owing to the development of feminism in society, women are still more likely to hate and harm their own bodies to meet the requirements of the perceived ideal women. The pursuit of beauty became a form of feminism. Some Western feminists claim that the beauty industry is absorbing feminism and using it as a tool to sell products to customers. Some feminists argue that women who modify their looks and bodies deny the historicity of the female body. Women who can not accept their appearance as old cannot mature in other ways; instead, many feminists advocate for portraying naturally ageing women who have not had their bodies surgically altered. Nowadays, feminists in Western mainstream media promote beauty diversity, and they encourage women to love their bodies and be confident in their appearance.

3. The Development and Influence of Feminism in China

3.1. The Development of Feminism in China

Due to the great influence of Confucian culture in Chinese society, patriarchy and hierarchy are deeply rooted in Chinese society. In the old Chinese society, most Chinese women were excluded from the public sphere. Most Chinese women are forbidden to participate in public social activities, including being forbidden to work in government or firms. Dealing with family affairs is considered to be the responsibility and obligation of Chinese women. In addition, Chinese women are expected by society to put family interests above their own and the men in the family have more power than the women. Chinese women are required to follow the orders of the men in the family. Feminism as a concept first appeared in 1900 in an article titled, "On Interactions Between the Sexes". In China, the concept of feminism was first introduced during the May Fourth Movement in 1919 [19]. The Marxist view is that women's rights are damaged by the patriarchy. Marxists also claim that the Capitalist system contributes to the oppression of women because profit is the primary goal. They think that Capitalists exploit women, which leads to the marginalisation of women's rights. Influenced by this Marxist concept, mainstream Chinese society began to accept the social concept of equal rights. Mao Zedong, who was the leader of the Communist Party once said, "Women hold up half the sky" which emphasised the abilities of women and the value of gender equality. Female Communist Party officials made great efforts and contributions to advocating for gender equality in

China. According to Yin and Yu, these female officials successfully developed policies and legislation that guarantees women's rights in the public sphere, including support for equal employment and equal pay for equal work, which has effectively increased the participation of Chinese women in public facilities, social welfare and socialist production [20]. Besides, female officials also helped reduce the fertility burden of Chinese women [20].

With the advent of the Internet Age, feminists were able to express their emotional and political views to society on the Internet. However, the development of feminism still faces many obstacles. Presently, Chinese mainstream society exhibits a negative attitude towards feminism. Many Chinese people view feminism as a Western cultural invasion. Feminism originated in the West, and consequently, feminism is frequently viewed as a kind of Western ideological propaganda. There is an increasing number of people calling for the expulsion of this foreign culture, claiming that feminism goes against the values and morals of Confucian culture. Additionally, the government views feminism as a potential threat to the political stability of Chinese society since it is linked to social and political change. Some Chinese people have misconceptions about feminism. The "feminist movement" is viewed by the Chinese media as promoting women's dominance in society, which they consider as supporting the idea that women should be privileged. Some Chinese people believe that feminists are women who hate men. Many anti-feminists on the Chinese Internet suppress and exclude feminists through online violence, including harassing feminists, abusing them, and threatening them. Despite these obstacles, feminism still attracts an enormous amount of attention in Chinese society. In China, some young women regard elite women among feminists as role models for feminism. Yan Ning, a prominent female scientist in China, has become one of the most popular feminist icons for publicly refusing to marry and encouraging girls to study science. There are also many feminists who share their thoughts on the Internet in China and resonate with other women. For example, Shen Yifei, who is a feminist sociology professor working at Fudan University, often shares her feminist views on Chinese video platforms, gaining millions of fans.

3.2. The Influence of Feminism on the Image of Chinese Women

The Communist Party promoted the abolition of beauty customs for women, which was viewed as an effective means to address the objectification of women and help increase gender equality. However, the growth of the beauty industry and its promotion on the Internet has contributed to the objectification of women. Chinese women are expected by Chinese society to exhibit traditional Chinese virtues, such as nurturing and obedience. In traditional Chinese culture, fair skin is valued because it is associated with a higher social status and wealth, in contrast to dark skin, which is perceived as indicating a lower class and a lifestyle that requires physical labour. This kind of aesthetic concept of white beauty has been extended to modern China. Fair skin represents family affluence and, potentially, social entitlement. In addition to fair skin, youth and slender body type are the other two criteria used to judge a woman's appearance in mainstream Chinese society. Chinese feminists have different views regarding the image of women. There are many Chinese women who believe that the traditional Chinese female image represents submission to men, and they instead advocate for a healthy and strong female image. They believe that if a woman is strong enough, she will be feared and respected by others, and that gaining muscle is a way of self-empowerment. There are also some feminists who believe that women should spend less time and energy on their appearance. These women choose to wear comfortable clothes and no makeup in their daily lives. They support the idea that wearing tight clothes is uncomfortable, and it aims to look sexy and please the male eye. They also claim that makeup is a conspiracy from Capitalists and patriarchal authorities. Women buying cosmetics can make Capitalists profit, and women spending a lot of time and energy on dressing up will result in women having less energy to develop their studies and careers.

Some Chinese women empower themselves through image construction on the Internet. Michel Foucault developed the feminist theory of the body as a place of power. The female body is not only a physical embodiment, but also a place where the different discourses of society meet, including the complex interaction of cultural institutions and society. Women's bodies are subject to social constraints and norms, and the way women present their bodies is also subject to social constraints. Today, under the influence of feminism, many Chinese women are challenging society's restrictions on their bodies. Many Chinese women post "revealing" photos on social media and are then reprimanded by relatives and boyfriends, perceiving that women's freedom to show their bodies was being restricted. Some women deliberately choose sexy pictures for their social profile images as a form of "revenge" against the criticism of others. Some Chinese women also believe that smiling in photos represents flattery to the outside world, and that non-smiling is a more independent female image and a powerful tool of empowerment.

4. Comparative Analysis of the Influence of Feminism on Aesthetics Between China and Australia

4.1. Similarities in the Influence of Feminism on Ideas of Appearance

In the process of the development of women's rights in China and Australia, feminism has played a positive role in the development of women's aesthetics. Through the development of feminism, the interview results found that women are more inclined to love their own bodies rather than blindly forcing themselves to conform to the ideal female image in mainstream society. Interviewees from both China and Australia claim that they were suffering from appearance anxiety and body shame. As a result of feeling this pressure, they were very concerned about their appearance. They monitored their body and hoped to use some means to better conform to social expectations of the female appearance. They went to beauty salons to get fillers, or searched the Internet for ways to lose weight in order to make themselves more aesthetically compatible with how they perceived mainstream society to view beauty. This indicates that women directly or indirectly perceive that their appearance is important in society, which determines how they are treated by others, and that how others evaluate them will affect their lives. After being influenced by feminism, they believe that physical health is more important, and they tend to take better care of their bodies. They give up dieting or stop doing beauty programs. They point out that dieting has negative effects, such as anaemia and malnutrition. They tend to go to the gym or work out at home to maintain optimal health. Some of them claim that they have become free and happier after changing their lifestyle. Under the influence of feminism, some interviewees realised that women's pursuit of beauty is an acquired consciousness shaped by society, and that women are not born to attach importance to the beauty of their appearance. Some of the interviewees claimed to be more accepting and appreciative of their bodies. Some interviewees expressed the belief that beauty should not be defined, and that people of all looks and shapes can be beautiful.

In addition, feminism emphasises women's autonomy and choice in the management of appearance. Some interviewees tended to make their own choices about how they dress or wear makeup rather than following the mainstream beauty standard of society after they were influenced by feminism. Some interviewees reported that changing their image is a way to express themselves according to their interests and preferences rather than following traditional gender roles or societal expectations.

4.2. Differences in the Influence of Feminism on Ideas of Appearance

This study found that, in terms of mainstream aesthetics and changes in female image, Australian women have more freedom in managing their appearance and are less influenced by mainstream

social norms on women's appearance compared with Chinese women, which is likely due to the increasing influence of individualism and feminism in Australian society. Most of the Australian interviewees felt that they had the freedom to manage their own image. Some of the Australian interviewees pointed out that receiving occasional comments from parents and friends about their looks and bodies, with most being positive, indicates that they are only mildly pressured by the opinions of those around them. Some of the Australian interviewees reported that the people around them have no right to dictate how they look. It is evident that individualism in Western society has some influence on the concept of human beings. In contrast, since Chinese women are influenced by pressure from society and collectivism in Chinese society, they are more inclined to change their appearance to adapt to the standard of ideal female appearance in Chinese mainstream society. Many interviewees from China claim that their parents and friends often judge their appearance according to the prevailing aesthetic of society. Their parents and friends still hold on to a traditional male-female concept and believe that women having a beautiful appearance is very important; while for men, the ability to earn a decent income is more highly valued. Although these interviewees were eager to eliminate mainstream society's requirements for the female image, they expressed feeling pressure from people around them, and they tended to manage their appearance in order to be considered "beautiful" in Chinese society. Some of the Chinese interviewees said that although they had promoted feminism with their family and friends, it was difficult to change their perception of mainstream social traditions. Many Chinese interviewees expressed the belief that many other women of the same age prioritise appearance and body management. Influenced by China's collectivist ideology, they want to fit in with others, so they tend to manage their appearance and body.

In order to accelerate the development of feminism in China, Chinese feminists can do research to understand the causes and effects of gender inequality, and then disseminate this knowledge to the masses in Chinese society using the Internet, thus increasing public awareness. In addition, educators who support feminism can promote gender education in school and in society, which can help people better understand gender equality, and can thus change social attitudes and values.

5. Conclusions

This study explores the development of feminism in Australia and China and its impact on the image of women in both countries. It also studies how feminism has influenced the self-image building of contemporary Chinese and Australian young women, and it analyses the similarities and differences in their influence on the concept of appearance. Through this research, it was found that the similarities between the development of women's rights and aesthetics in China and the West are that young female interviewees who are exposed to feminist values believe that physical health is more important than appearance, and that women have autonomy and choice in the management of appearance. The difference between the development of women's rights in China and Australia on aesthetics is that due to the increasing influence of individualism and feminism in Australian society, Australian women have more freedom in managing their appearance, and they are less influenced by mainstream social norms on women's appearance. However, under the influence of social pressure and collectivism, Chinese women are more inclined to change their appearance to adapt to the standard of ideal female appearance in Chinese mainstream society. In addition, this work also suggests some strategies to promote feminism in China, for example, Chinese feminists can do research to understand the causes and effects of gender inequality, and then disseminate this knowledge to the masses in Chinese society using the Internet, thus increasing public awareness. In addition, educators who support feminism can promote gender education in school and in society. This study has some limitations. The results are based on a small sample of interview responses, which limits the breadth and reliability of the study. In addition, the results are difficult to generalise to entire populations or cultures because human behaviour is often complex and diverse. More

research can be performed to learn more about how feminism has influenced other aspects of women's life such as lifestyle and career development.

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