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Between the mirror and the flag: Affective nationalism and aesthetic consumption in the Chinese diaspora in Lisbon

Między lustrem a flagą: nacjonalizm afektywny i konsumpcja estetyczna wewnątrz chińskiej diaspory w Lizbonie

Introduction

"When I choose Chinese skincare, it feels like I'm caring for my surface and my roots at the same time," Huixin told me once, as we walked through the city together.

Her words capture the central argument of this text, which examines how discourses of Chinese national pride, materialized in the phenomenon of *guochao*, manifest in the aesthetic consumption practices of Chinese women residing in Lisbon. I argue that the consumption of Chinese cosmetics and aesthetic products operates as a form of affective inscription of the nation onto the body. More than utilitarian choices or passing trends, these practices constitute gestures of belonging through which national pride, aspirations to modernity, and experiences of displacement are articulated and embodied.

In recent decades, aesthetic consumption has emerged as a privileged field for analysing social, political, and economic transformations in contemporary societies (e.g. Jarrín 2017; Liebelt 2019; Pussetti 2019). Far from constituting a merely individual

or market-driven sphere, aesthetics – understood here as a set of body-care practices, cosmetic consumption, and regimes of visibility – are deeply entangled with national projects, discourses of modernity, as well as subtle forms of governance (Jar-rín 2017; Liebelt 2019).

This article situates aesthetic consumption within a broader framework of neo-liberal governance, in which beauty practices are framed as forms of self-investment and optimization of the body. In this context, the body becomes a site of ongoing work, shaped by ideals of discipline, success and self-worth. Drawing on Nikolas Rose's work on neoliberal governmentality (Rose 2007), these practices can be understood as forms of self-governance through which individuals are invited to act upon themselves in line with broader social and political norms.

In the Chinese context, these dynamics have gained particular relevance as economic growth, intensified globalization, and the emergence of a renewed cultural nationalism reconfigure the relationships between body and identity (Yang 2015). Among Chinese women in Lisbon, such dynamics intersect with transnational formations of belonging, where aesthetic choices are shaped not only by market logics, but also by moral and affective attachments to national identity, often negotiated at a distance.

By mobilizing the concepts of consumer nationalism (Wang 2005), racialized branding (Kefala 2023), and affective governance (Yang 2014; 2015), the article analyses how emotions such as pride, nostalgia and gratitude are produced, circulated and embodied through the beauty market. The Chinese state, in articulation with commercial and media actors, mobilizes these emotions as technologies of power that regulate desires, orient behaviours, and produce specific forms of emotional citizenship. In migratory contexts, these dynamics are reconfigured, acquiring new layers of meaning as women negotiate belonging, identity and status between global and national markets.

By centring on the experiences of Chinese women in Lisbon, this article contributes to broader debates on transnational nationalism, gender and consumption, showing how the nation extends beyond its territorial borders through embodied affective economies. The female body – and, in particular, the “female beauty” – emerges here as a symbolic surface upon which state projects, global racial hierarchies and individual aspirations are simultaneously inscribed. By analysing these practices in the everyday life of the diaspora, the article reveals how contemporary nationalism operates less through explicit discourse and more through intimate gestures of self-care, consumption and self-presentation.

I begin by contextualizing transformations in consumption and the beauty market in post-reform China, situating the phenomenon of *guochao* within the broader framework of consumer nationalism. I then present the methodological and ethnographic framework of the research, following with an analysis of the aesthetic practices

of my interlocutors in Lisbon. Finally, I discuss how these practices produce ambivalent forms of belonging and emotional citizenship, revealing both potentials for agency and the tensions and contradictions that traverse aesthetic consumption in the Chinese diaspora.

Economic transformations, consumption and the production of subjects in post-reform China

In recent decades, China has undergone profound economic and social transformations, many of which are closely related to the ways in which its citizens consume (Latham 2006). Between the *gǎigé kāifàng* – the economic reforms initiated in 1978¹ – and China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, a genuine revolution in consumption has taken place (Davis 2000). This process not only consolidated China's position as the world's largest exporter, but also accelerated its transition into an economic power, reconfiguring urban ways of life and social expectations.

In this context, consumption is shaped not only by market dynamics, but also by deliberate governmental strategies. Economic planning policies have promoted domestic consumption as a means of increasing purchasing power, stimulating employment and strengthening the internal market (Woetzel, Mendonça et al. 2009). The state thus plays an active role in constructing a model of the citizen-consumer, one who is expected to contribute to national prosperity.

Consumption has also become a means of signalling belonging to the middle class, a social group that, although often described as unstable (Li, C. 2010), exercises a disproportionate symbolic power. The possession of the "right objects" – ranging from technology and cosmetics to real estate and automobiles – confers status and social legitimacy, functioning as markers of distinction and identity (Anagnost 2008). Aspirations generated by advertising discourses shape the social imagination even among those who do not materially attain middle-class status. As Ann Anagnost (2008: 514) observes, it is within this aspirational segment that consumption operates most intensely as a promise of mobility.

Media images – circulated through magazines, newspapers, cinema, television, and more recently social media and digital platforms – consolidate and reproduce ideals of modernity associated with individuals who are "elegant", "wealthy" and "confident". In post-Mao China, consumption emerges as a central means through which individuals pursue happiness and self-fulfillment (Yan, Y. 2011), articulating itself

1 The *gǎigé kāifàng* ("Reform and Opening-Up") refers to the reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong's successor, from 1978 onwards, which brought about significant transformations. Focused on both political and economic domains, these reforms had a profound social impact and helped to rehabilitate the country from the governmental failures of the past.

with the idea of *chénggōng* (success) and with broader notions of urban respectability and modernity.

The widespread proliferation of these images participates in the construction of a continually renewed landscape of social stratification, in which consumption becomes a means of ordering and hierarchizing society (Li, C. 2010). More than mere representations, these images function as technologies of desire (Rofel 2007), producing models of possible – albeit not always accessible – lives and shaping the aspirational imaginary of the new urban middle class.

Aesthetics as political economy: consumption, nationalism and the production of prestige

The aesthetic market does not escape the broader transformations that have redefined consumption in contemporary China: the *měinǚ jīngjì* (beauty economy/beauty market) has become one of the country's most dynamic and profitable economic sectors (Xu, Feiner 2007), generating several million yuan annually and displaying continuous and exponential growth (Statista 2023).

The relationship between aesthetics and national identity has deep historical roots. The appreciation of feminine beauty has played a central role in the construction of Chinese national identity, historically articulated through distinctions between the Han ethnicity and the “barbarians”, between a “civilized” and disciplined aesthetic and a foreign corporeality perceived as insensitive or undisciplined (Dikötter 2005). It is within this convergence of economic expansion and affective investment that the phenomenon of *guócháo* (national wave or national trend) emerges, understood as an expression of the strengthening of Chinese nationalism alongside China's rapid economic growth and rising geopolitical visibility (Zhang 2001). Emerging in the late 2010s against a backdrop of intensifying geopolitical tensions – particularly the trade conflict between China and the United States – and the consolidation of a state-promoted nationalism under Xi Jinping, *guócháo* represents not only a market trend but a politically inflected cultural moment in which consumer choices became entangled with expressions of national sovereignty and pride (Zhu, Wang, Lu 2003).

Historically, the consumption of *míngpài* (famous brands) was associated with Western products, regarded as symbols of modernity and cosmopolitanism, as well as visual markers of social distinction (Chadha, Husband 2006). In recent decades, however, a significant shift in consumer preferences has emerged, especially among younger populations, who have increasingly come to value and purchase cosmetics “made in China” (Zhu, Wang, Lu 2003). Brands such as Winona, Huaxizi, Perfect Diary, Florasis and Mao Geping have not only gained domestic recognition, but they have

also developed distinctive visual aesthetics inspired by Chinese cultural imaginaries, thereby promoting a new symbolic hierarchy within the beauty market (Li, H. 2008). This shift signals a reconfiguration of prestige, in which the national is no longer perceived as inferior to the Western, but instead comes to represent confidence, pride and sophistication.

National identity is not a natural given, but a political and cultural construction that is continuously reinvented. This construction is internalized by individuals through shared elements, such as language, history, symbols and affects, which generate national emotions such as pride, security, belonging, and attachment to the imagined community (Anderson 1991). Within this framework, the female body emerges as a privileged symbol of the nation, embodying ideals of purity, modernity and health that reflect not only aesthetic values, but also moral and political aspirations (Brownell 1998).

The encouragement to “consume national” (Li, H. 2008; Wang, Z. 2022) thus becomes a way of expressing patriotism and even a form of “social activism” (Li, H. 2009: 448). As Li Hongmei observes, in post-Mao China economic participation has become one of the primary means through which citizens engage in the national project. Within this framework, consumer nationalism (Wang, J. 2005) – understood as a central component of popular nationalism in contemporary China (Li, H. 2009) – operates simultaneously as a performance of the nation and as a mode of insertion into the imaginary of China’s national ascent. By favoring local products, citizens transform commercial choices into everyday practices of political affirmation. In this way, consumption transcends a purely utilitarian logic and becomes a form of emotional participation in the national project – an affective modality of citizenship exercised through the market.

Guócháo promotes not only the consumption of national products, but also an aestheticization of national pride, in which brands, influencers and consumers participate in the production of a patriotic aesthetic that celebrates reinterpreted cultural symbols. These range from classical motifs – such as ancient dynasties, calligraphy, or traditional colours – to narratives of technological modernity, including the launch of the space shuttle in 2003 or the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 (Li, H. 2008). This simultaneous coexistence of past and future produces a hybrid semiotic repertoire that celebrates the historical continuity of the nation while projecting its global ascent (Li, H. 2008).

Advertising plays a crucial role in this process, as contemporary Chinese campaigns intensively mobilize cultural, historical and affective symbols. As a cultural technology, advertising reconfigures objects by endowing them with abstract qualities such as glory, discipline, modernity or national vitality, thereby transforming everyday commodities into carriers of patriotic meaning (Jhally 1987, cited in Li, H. 2008). In this process, consumer nationalism (Wang, J. 2005) is transformed into a hybrid form of political and symbolic nationalism: a mode of engagement with the state that

operates through economic participation, yet relies on shared narratives and cultural sensibilities (Li, Whitworth 2023).

However, this logic cannot be fully understood without considering the racialized dimension of aesthetics. Whiteness continues to play a central role in the Chinese market, functioning as a valuable symbolic resource and a competitive advantage within the beauty industry (Kefala 2023). Even in a context of growing national pride, foreign brands – and often Chinese brands as well – continue to rely on white models, lighting techniques that accentuate the whiteness of the skin, and a globalized aesthetic that associates femininity, purity and status with whiteness. These images reinforce the persistent association between the West, modernity and social distinction, producing an aspirational imaginary in which global aesthetics continue to shape perceptions of quality and desirability (Xu 2022).

This ambivalence is particularly visible in the strategies of Chinese brands that, while claiming cultural authenticity, simultaneously resort to romanized brand names, Western models or cosmopolitan aesthetics to communicate sophistication (Li, H. 2008; Kefala 2023). Thus, *guócháo* does not eliminate the presence of whiteness; rather, it incorporates, negotiates and reconfigures it, revealing deep tensions between national pride on the one hand and fascination with global modernity on the other.

It is important to emphasize that this Chineseness is not produced solely by national brands. In order to appeal to local consumers, foreign companies actively appropriate Chinese cultural symbols, colours and motifs, producing special editions for the Chinese New Year, designing campaigns in the symbolic colours of red and gold, or employing stylistic references to the classical cultural imaginary. Chineseness thus circulates as a commercial and affective resource, shaped both by state interests and by global market strategies, operating simultaneously as an identity, an aesthetic, and a symbolic capital.

Chinese women in Lisbon and methodological considerations

Chinese migration to Portugal has historical roots, but a significant and diversified growth can be observed especially from the early 2000s onward (Gaspar 2017). While in an initial phase the primary driver of this mobility was predominantly economic, associated with the opening of Chinese shops and small family businesses (Rodrigues 2013), over the past two decades a new migrant profile has emerged. This includes highly skilled individuals who invest in business, technology and real estate (Amante, Rodrigues 2020), introducing into the Portuguese context a population composed of managers, specialized technicians and highly qualified professionals, often within a framework of temporary residence. The growing presence of Chinese

women students in Portugal, pursuing master's and doctoral degrees, also constitutes a relevant and still underexplored trend (Gaspar 2017) contributing to the sociological diversification of the Sino-Portuguese community.

It is within this heterogeneous context that this article is situated, drawing on the fieldwork I conducted as part of my doctoral research. This research is based on a multi-sited ethnography, between 2021 and 2024, that combines in-depth interviews, participant observation in beauty salons and aesthetic clinics, and the analysis of transnational digital networks, namely WeChat and Xiaohongshu. I conducted in-depth interviews with 37 Chinese women aged between 19 and 36. Some were first-generation migrants, born in post-Mao China and shaped by the socio-economic transformations brought about by the Reform and Opening-Up period.² Others were born into Chinese families already established in Europe, growing up in transnational contexts marked by different cultural and economic regimes.

Despite their different trajectories, all my interviewees self-identified as belonging to the middle class³ and were engaged in a wide range of professions, including manicurists, beauticians, physicians, designers, architects, lawyers, actresses, shop owners and pharmacists.

Participant observation in beauty salons and aesthetic clinics constituted a central axis of the research. These spaces, simultaneously commercial and intimate, function as privileged sites of female sociability and the circulation of aesthetic knowledge. Prolonged presence in these contexts made it possible to observe interactions between professionals and clients, informal conversations about brands, treatments and desired outcomes, as well as the processes of negotiating expectations surrounding the body and appearance. More than mere service-provision sites, salons and clinics emerge as arenas where aesthetic norms are produced, recommendations are exchanged, and narratives of cultural and national belonging are reinforced.

2 Unlike previous generations, who came of age under conditions of scarcity and political closure, these women grew up in a China already shaped by economic liberalization, expanding consumer markets, and the proliferation of digital platforms – a context in which national pride and consumer culture were increasingly intertwined from an early age, bringing with it increased access to consumer goods and new forms of mobility.

3 The Chinese middle class is a widely used yet analytically complex category, defined through both objective criteria – such as income, education, occupation and consumption – and subjective self-identification (Bonnet, Kolev 2021). In the Chinese context, its meaning is shaped by a specific historical trajectory, where the notion of “class” only gained official recognition in the 2000s, replacing earlier references to social “strata” (Pieke 2014). Today, middle-class status is not only associated with material assets, such as home and car ownership, but also with cultural capital and lifestyle practices (Hsiao 2015; Li, C. 2010). Beyond its economic dimensions, the Chinese middle class can be understood as an aspirational project, embedded in a broader “highly aspirational society” (Pieke 2014). It is driven by ideals of success and the “Chinese Dream” and characterized by a persistent sense of insecurity that fuels continuous self-improvement through education, consumption and the cultivation of socially valued lifestyles (Hsu 2007; Yan 2009).

Complementarily, the analysis of transnational digital networks was fundamental to understanding the media and affective dimensions of aesthetic consumption. These platforms function as spaces for sharing experiences and peer-to-peer advice, and for the circulation of narratives about products, treatments or brands. The observation of posts, comments, images and videos made it possible to trace how discourses of patriotism, modernity and authenticity are produced and amplified online. Here, the digital sphere is not treated here as a domain separate from “real life”, but rather as an extension of aesthetic and relational practices, in which affects and identities are continuously negotiated.

My positionality as a white, middle-class European woman shaped both access to the field and the forms of interaction that unfolded within it. Conducting research among Chinese interlocutors in Lisbon – both newly encountered participants and those with whom, over time, I developed some relationships – I navigated a space marked by linguistic, cultural and social distance, particularly as I am not a speaker of Chinese. This position required me to rely on forms of communication that exceeded language, while also foregrounding the partiality of my understanding and the mediated nature of the ethnographic encounter.

It is important to note that, for the purposes of this article, the primary source of data is drawn from the accounts of the Chinese women I interviewed across multiple settings – beauty salons, aesthetic clinics and digital platforms. While the research also involved interactions with other actors present in these spaces, including aesthetic and medical professionals, their perspectives are not foregrounded in this analysis. This delimitation is a deliberate methodological choice, aimed at centring the voices and experiences of the Chinese women themselves as the principal empirical foundation of the argument.

Affective governance and emotional belonging

In the era of globalization, Chinese nationalism has functioned as a symbolic barrier intended to protect collective identity from perceived threats to its subjective continuity (Duara 1993). In this context, the consumption of national products emerges as a coded form of belonging, no longer constituting merely an autonomous choice, but asserting itself as a practice imbued with political and affective meanings (Li, H. 2008; Wang, Z. 2022).

The diasporic context introduces an additional layer of neoliberal pressure. Living in a European country structured by capitalist logics of productivity, self-presentation and individual responsibility, Chinese women in Lisbon navigate aesthetic choices that are never purely cultural. In this environment, the body becomes a site of ongoing

self-management, shaped not only by national affective attachments, but also by the demands of professional visibility, social integration and symbolic capital. The consumption of cosmetics – whether Chinese or Western – is thus embedded in a double neoliberal matrix: one inherited from post-reform China, and one encountered in the European context of migration. Understanding this double embeddedness is essential to reading the choices of my interlocutors not as free expressions of identity, but as negotiations conducted under specific structural conditions.

Liu (33 years old, born in Portugal) says:

While I was growing up, I was very influenced by my environment. I wanted nothing to do with China. China was my grandparents' land, even though my parents were also born there... It was the place we visited in the summer. The only thing I really appreciated was the food. Otherwise... I wanted nothing to do with China. I thought everything was bad, tasteless. Today it's completely different. I never thought it would influence my life so much.

This narrative can be interpreted as expressing a process of affective distancing followed by gradual re-attachment, shaped by both migration and shifting regimes of value. While growing up, Liu considered China as a peripheral and largely undesirable reference point, one associated with grandparents, seasonal visits and limited sensory attachment (notably food) rather than with identity or aspiration. Her youthful rejection of China reflects the internalization of dominant aesthetic and cultural hierarchies in a predominantly Western social environment, where Chineseness was perceived as outdated, tasteless or valueless. This distancing is not merely cultural but affective: China appeared to her as something to be disidentified from in order to belong elsewhere.

The turning point she describes – “today it's completely different” – signals a reconfiguration of both personal identity and broader symbolic landscapes. The renewed influence of China in Liu's life suggests not only biographical change, but also the impact of China's shifting global position and the growing circulation of positive, desirable representations of Chineseness. What emerges is a form of retrospective belonging, in which national identity becomes meaningful not through inheritance alone, but through new affective investments. Liu's surprise at how much China now influences her life underscores the contingent, relational nature of identity, revealing how belonging is not fixed but reactivated through changing emotional, cultural and political contexts.

Liu began to reconnect more closely with China and to spend more time there due to work-related obligations.

Now I appreciate what is Chinese much more. The architecture, the shapes, the beauty. I consume much more from China. Of course, everything is “made in China” [laughs].

But now I feel a different kind of affection... The quality, of course, is much better. But it's more than that – it's feeling... I don't know, that I really belong somewhere.

What Liu's account illustrates is not simply a biographical shift, but the operation of affective governance at a distance. Her gradual reattachment to China did not occur through direct state interpellation – she was not in China, nor was she exposed to its institutional structures – but through the diffuse circulation of desirable representations of Chineseness in digital spaces, consumer markets and transnational networks. This is precisely what Yang (2014; 2015) means by “emotional governance”: the production and management of affects not through coercion but through the saturation of everyday environments with emotionally resonant images, objects and narratives. Liu's surprise at how much China now influences her – “I never thought it would influence my life so much” – registers the effectiveness of this diffuse governance: it operates below the threshold of explicit political consciousness, working through desire, aesthetics, and a felt sense of recognition.

Like Liu, Mei (23 years old, born in Portugal) followed similar trends. Consuming Chinese or South Korean brands in a more arbitrary way, in her case the idea of Asian-ness became central to her negotiation between identity markers and social belonging:

I feel closer to my culture. On the other hand, I also think they understand better what I like. I can't really explain it (...) I grew up with China very present, but in a kind of... unreal way. Because I had never been there, but now I consume more things from there.

In this statement, Mei embodies the paradox she frequently experienced while growing up. Living in an almost exclusively Western environment – both due to her circle of friends and the spaces she frequented – she saw the consumption of Chinese products as a way of constructing an identity she wanted to make “more her own”. At the same time, Mei interpreted Chinese cosmetics as more suitable for Chinese skin, in line with a racialized incorporation. The idea that Chinese cosmetics are more “natural” (Wang, J. 2014) also resonates with the concept of “natural beauty” that Mei sought to embody. She frequently highlighted the use of substances such as ginseng, red rice or bamboo; these ingredients, whether actually present in cosmetic formulations or not, are commodified and reveal culturally specific aesthetic norms that echo desires for the embodiment of aesthetic politics.

Mei's case complicates a straightforward reading of consumer nationalism as a conscious political act. Unlike Liu, who narrates her reattachment to China as a deliberate and meaningful process, Mei's relationship to Chinese products is more diffuse – shaped less by explicit national pride than by a racialized sense of suitability and a desire for a Chineseness that feels, as she puts it, “more her own”. This distinction matters analytically: it suggests that affective nationalism does not always

operate through identifiable feelings of patriotism but can work through more intimate, corporeal registers – the sense that a product “understands” one’s skin, that its ingredients carry a familiarity that exceeds their chemical composition. Here, the body itself becomes the terrain of governance and consumption becomes a practice through which racialized and national categories are not merely reflected but actively produced and sedimented (see also Pires 2025).

Li Hongmei (2008: 1146) argues that one way of selling transnationalism through products is by delivering Western values that are particularly appealing to younger consumers – such as freedom, individualism, happiness, mobility or pleasure – to the Chinese market. In this corollary, the inverse also appears to hold true, as reflected in the accounts of my two interlocutors: Chinese products appeal to tradition, belonging and familiarity.

Mimi (31 years old, born in China and living in Portugal for 4 years), told me:

I see all my (Chinese) friends buying Chinese products. Now they are much better than the others (Western ones). Before, in China there was nothing, but now it’s the opposite. Products from there are much better. They are also more suitable for our skin. Western cosmetics are very strong, very aggressive. The Chinese know better what they are doing.

To this discourse – which naturalizes certain medical and aesthetic practices by grounding their perceived efficacy in distinctive ethnic characteristics (Pires 2025) – Mimi adds that “all her friends” now use Chinese products and that her social media feeds are constantly saturated with messages stating that “to be Chinese is to buy Chinese”. This statement does not merely prescribe a mode of consumption; it also operates through affective resonance, gaining meaning precisely because it is shared, repeated and recognized by others. For Mimi, as for Mei and Liu, consuming Chinese products functions as a performative expression of national pride – asserting the perceived superiority of Chinese goods – while simultaneously serving as an affective anchor to a country that is geographically distant yet remains emotionally and symbolically hers. In this sense, consumption becomes a modality of emotional citizenship, through which belonging is enacted, stabilized and publicly affirmed within transnational contexts.

Mimi’s account adds a crucial collective dimension to this analysis. Where Liu and Mei describe predominantly interior, biographical processes of reattachment, Mimi foregrounds the social enforceability of consumer nationalism: “all her friends” buy Chinese products and her social media feeds continuously reiterate that “to be Chinese is to buy Chinese”. This points to the way in which affective governance operates not only through state and market actors, but also through peer networks and digital infrastructures that amplify and normalize particular emotional stances. The neoliberal

subject who “chooses” Chinese products is thus never choosing in isolation: she is embedded in a relational economy of recognition in which consumption is simultaneously an expression of individual identity and a response to collective social pressure. What appears as personal preference is, in this light, also a form of conformity – one that is experienced as belonging rather than constraint, which is precisely what makes it effective as a technology of governance.

Returning to the introductory vignette, in Huixin’s account the skin emerges not only as a biological surface, but also as a symbolic interface through which identity is negotiated and attachment to the nation is reactivated. Skincare becomes a practice through which distance is managed and belonging is sensorially anchored, allowing national identity to be both felt and performed in everyday life. In this sense, “being Chinese” resides not only in roots understood as ancestry or genetics, but also on the surface of the body and, by extension, in what is applied to it. Through aesthetic practices of care, identity is rendered visible, tactile and affectively sustained, transforming consumption into a mode of emotional citizenship enacted through intimate regimes of self-maintenance.

While conducting research on Chinese social media, I repeatedly encountered advertisements for Chinese cosmetic products that featured the image of a traditional woman whose age was deliberately ambiguous. These representations drew on classical Chinese postures and visual cues that evoke familiarity and intimacy, such as bodily restraint, softness and docility (Brownell 1998). The figure portrayed is neither overtly modern nor explicitly historical, but rather situated in a temporal in-between that allows her to function as a reassuring and recognizable cultural archetype.

This aesthetic strategy mobilizes affect by appealing to shared cultural memory and notions of continuity, positioning the cosmetic product as both culturally authentic and emotionally comforting. By invoking an idealized femininity associated with tradition, care and moral refinement, these advertisements link skincare not only to beauty or efficacy, but also to values of belonging, trust and cultural rootedness.

Mimi reflects on this:

When I feel sad, I use more products. When I use my cream – my ginseng-infused face cream – it feels like I’m back home, wherever I am.

However, these dynamics do not unfold in a linear manner and they are marked by ambivalences and tensions. While the global market continues to symbolize modernity, efficacy and social status, the consumption of national products emerges as an expression of cultural resistance and identity-based pride. This ambiguity is evident in the discourses of my interlocutors. Liu, for example, stated that she felt “proud to see that Chinese products are getting better and better”, yet acknowledged that,

in order to “treat” wrinkles, she preferred Western cosmetics, which she associated with “greater therapeutic efficiency”. For Liu, these choices did not constitute a conflict; in fact, they coexisted pragmatically, without one cancelling out the other. In line with Thomas Eriksen’s (2007) reflections on globalization and the persistence of cultural difference, these practices reveal how identity is continuously negotiated across scales of belonging. For Eriksen (2007), globalization does not dissolve cultural distinctiveness but rather intensifies its salience, producing new forms of attachment precisely in contexts of accelerated mobility and homogenization. Applied to the diasporic context, this insight illuminates why Liu does not experience her simultaneous use of Chinese and Western cosmetics as contradictory: each product operates within a different register of belonging, and it is through their coexistence – rather than their resolution – that identity is sustained. The persistence of cultural difference, in Eriksen’s sense, is not a resistance to globalization but one of its products.

For Mei, by contrast, the consumption of Western cosmetics did not produce the same emotional charge as the consumption of Asian products, whether Chinese or Korean. Mei, similarly to my other interlocutors, displayed luxury products on the shelves of her home, but she attributed a different meaning to them: packaging with Chinese characters and golden lids evoked a place that, despite never having been physically experienced, was nonetheless lived as deeply her own. In this sense, the cosmetic object functions as an affective mediator, enabling the inscription of belonging and memory within a context of displacement.

At this continuous crossroads between global and national markets, women – as the primary consumers of aesthetic products – see their bodies become privileged surfaces for the inscription of body politics. Between Western luxury brands and Chinese national brands, their emotions as women and consumers are constantly called upon to materialize through aesthetic choices. This process not only reveals regulatory ideals concerning bodily capital and economic capital, but also exposes the symbolic and material costs associated with such choices, which are often rendered invisible in celebratory discourses of consumption.

The notion of emotional governmentality proposed by Jie Yang (2014; 2015) thus offers a central analytical lens for understanding how the consumption of cosmetics – whether Chinese or Western – extends beyond the economic domain. The act of consumption becomes an emotional, political and cultural vehicle, deeply embedded in the construction of national identity, social stabilization and status differentiation. Within this framework, consumer nationalism (Wang, J. 2005) emerges simultaneously as an expression of pride, resistance and activism, while emotions are carefully managed through market instruments and amplified by transnational dynamics. At the same time, these practices reflect the coherences and contradictions experienced by individuals in everyday life, where belonging, desire and pragmatism intertwine.

Conclusion

This article has examined how aesthetic consumption among Chinese women in Lisbon is configured as a practice situated at the intersection of affective nationalism, emotional governmentality and migratory experiences. By tracing the circulation of cosmetic products, images and discourses between China and the diaspora, I have shown how the body – and, in particular, the skin – emerges as a symbolic surface upon which national belonging, aspirations to modernity, and forms of emotional citizenship are inscribed.

Far from constituting merely individual choices or depoliticized consumption strategies, the practices analyzed are deeply embedded in broader collective projects. The phenomenon of *guócháo* and the encouragement of national consumption reveal how the Chinese state mobilizes affects such as pride, nostalgia and gratitude in order to produce subjects who are emotionally aligned with the narrative of national ascent. In migratory contexts, these dynamics acquire additional layers of meaning: consuming Chinese cosmetics allows women to reinscribe their cultural identity within a space of displacement, functioning simultaneously as a gesture of belonging and as a form of symbolic resistance to Western aesthetic hegemony.

However, this sense of belonging is not constructed in a linear or tension-free manner. As the ethnographic narratives presented demonstrate, consumption oscillates between a desire for therapeutic efficacy associated with Western brands and an emotional investment in national products, revealing a constitutive ambivalence between global modernity and national pride. This ambiguity exposes the contradictions of consumer nationalism, which, while promoting cultural resistance, remains traversed by racial and aesthetic hierarchies inherited from the colonial imaginary, in which whiteness continues to function as an aspirational standard.

By focusing on the beauty market, the article further shows how these dynamics fall particularly upon female bodies. Women, as the primary consumers of aesthetic products, become privileged vehicles of affective governmentality, interpellated to materialize national, moral and economic ideals through their body-related choices. In this process, female agency is simultaneously mobilized and constrained: while consumption enables the negotiation of belonging, identity and desire, it also reinforces a neoliberal logic that reduces women's contribution to their role as consumers and as surfaces of symbolic value. The production of an affective economy, in which consumption becomes a means of reconnecting with an imagined cultural intimacy, is particularly resonant in the diasporic consumers, who must navigate distance, nostalgia and questions of identity.

By articulating consumption, aesthetics and affects, this article contributes to a broader understanding of the subtle ways in which nationalism is lived, embodied and reproduced in everyday life, beyond the state's explicit discourses. The analysis

of the aesthetic practices of Chinese women in the diaspora reveals how the nation extends transnationally through affective economies that operate in intimate, domestic and corporeal domains. These practices, simultaneously personal and political, demonstrate that contemporary nationalism is not confined to territorial borders but is reinscribed in everyday gestures of self-care, consumption and self-presentation, configuring new modalities of emotional citizenship in contexts of global mobility.

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Summary

This article examines aesthetic consumption among Chinese women living in Lisbon as a practice situated at the intersection of affective nationalism, emotional governance and migration. Drawing on a multi-sited ethnography combining in-depth interviews, participant observation in beauty salons and aesthetic clinics, and the analysis of transnational digital platforms, the study explores how cosmetics and skincare products function as vehicles of belonging and national attachment. The analysis shows how the phenomenon of *guochao* and consumer nationalism mobilize emotions such as pride, nostalgia and familiarity, transforming everyday consumption into a form of emotional citizenship. In the diasporic context, these practices acquire additional meanings, allowing women to negotiate identity, modernity and cultural continuity while navigating global aesthetic hierarchies. At the same time, the article highlights the ambivalences and tensions embedded in these choices, particularly the coexistence of national pride with persistent racialized ideals of beauty and the neoliberal reduction of women's agency to consumption. By focusing on the body, and especially the skin, as a symbolic surface of inscription, the article contributes to broader debates on nationalism, gender and affect in transnational contexts.

Keywords: affective nationalism, aesthetic consumption, Chinese diaspora, beauty and gender

Translated by Author

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera analizę konsumpcji produktów kosmetycznych wśród Chinek mieszkających w Lizbonie jako praktyki sytuującej się na styku nacjonalizmu afektywnego, zarządzania emocjami oraz migracji. Opierając się na etnografii wielośrodkowej, łączącej wywiady pogłębione, obserwację uczestniczącą prowadzoną w salonach kosmetycznych i klinikach estetycznych oraz analizę transnarodowych platform cyfrowych, autorka analizuje, w jaki sposób kosmetyki i produkty do pielęgnacji skóry pełnią rolę nośników poczucia przynależności i więzi z ojczyzną. Analiza pokazuje, w jaki sposób zjawisko *guócháo* i nacjonalizm konsumpcyjny mobilizują emocje, takie jak duma, nostalgia i poczucie przynależności, przekształcając codzienną konsumpcję w formę emocjonalnego obywatelstwa. W kontekście diaspory praktyki te nabierają dodatkowych znaczeń, pozwalając kobietom negocjować swoją tożsamość, nowoczesność i ciągłość kulturową, równocześnie poruszając się po globalnych hierarchiach estetycznych. W artykule podkreślone są również ambiwalencje i napięcia związane z tymi wyborami, w szczególności współistnienie dumy narodowej z utrzymującymi się ideałami piękna związanymi z rasą oraz neoliberalne sprowadzanie sprawczości kobiet do konsumpcji. Skupiając się na ciele, a zwłaszcza na skórze, jako symbolicznej powierzchni inskrypcji, artykuł wnosi wkład w szerszą debatę na temat nacjonalizmu, płci i afektu w kontekstach transnarodowych.

Słowa kluczowe: nacjonalizm afektywny, konsumpcja produktów kosmetycznych, diaspora chińska, uroda i płeć kulturowa

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