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Performing “Asian Baby Girl” Aesthetics in and outside China

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This article employs gendered aesthetics as an analytical lens to further theorize femininities in transnational contexts, drawing on 25 interviews with Chinese women in China, the United States, Canada, and Australia. It provides a comparative analysis of performing “Asian Baby Girl” aesthetics in and outside China, examining narratives, practices, and consequences in three contexts: discursive construction, the dating market, and non-romantic daily encounters. It finds that women embodying ABG aesthetics in China disrupt traditional gender norms, challenging men with conservative gender attitudes by purposefully resisting the male gaze. In contrast, outside China, ABG aesthetics provoke progressive women due to their association with stereotypical, racially assimilated Asian women in the West. Engaging with Schippers' concept of "pariah femininities", this article offers new theoretical insights into femininities. It explores the portability and political consequences of pariah femininities, questioning whether such configurations inevitably cause gender trouble. By framing femininities as both practices and effects, this article shows that similar aesthetic embodiments can yield different outcomes depending on the social context. This nuanced understanding emphasizes the importance of viewing femininities as a contextual and relational construct, which often troubles more than gender itself.

Introduction

While gender has been thoroughly theorized in sociology and there is an established subfield theorizing various masculinities, there is substantially less work explicitly theorizing femininity/ies (Hamilton et. al, 2019). Within extant work on femininity/ies, scholarly debates revolve around the power of femininity/ies relative to different configurations of masculinity (Connell, 1987; Schippers, 2007) and, more recently, relative to multiple configurations of femininity (See Hamilton et. al, 2019). While the resulting literature is large and nuanced, most of their theoretical attempts in theorizing femininity/ies remain largely in relation to masculinities and in relation to the relationship between masculinities and femininities in the western context. Drawing on 25 interviews with Chinese women in China, United States, Canada, and Australia, this article uses gendered aesthetics as an analytical lens to further theorize femininities in transnational contexts. It presents a comparative study of performing "Asian Baby Girl" (ABG) aesthetics in and outside China, focusing on narratives, practices, and consequences of this gendered aesthetic performance in three contexts: on the discursive construction, on the dating market, and in non-romantic encounters in daily life. This article shows that performing ABG aesthetics in China is a gender project that most upsets men who hold conservative attitudes towards gender due to its embodiment of resisting "male gaze" in China, whereas performing ABG aesthetics outside China in western immigrant countries is a gender and racial project that most upsets women who hold progressive attitudes toward race due to its association with a stereotypical image of racially assimilated Asian woman in the West.

This article engages with Schipper's concept of "pariah femininities" (Schippers, 2007) to make new theoretical interventions on this concept as well as on femininities at

large. Based on comparative findings above, I examine the portability of pariah femininities as well as the political consequences of pariah femininities, namely, do configurations of pariah femininities necessarily cause "gender trouble" (Butler, 1999). It frames femininities as both practices and effects, and my data shows that sometimes practices do not necessarily yield effects as gender scholars have expected, as women navigate different systems of meaning throughout their social lives, even when they embody similar aesthetic appearances. Such gaps point to a more nuanced understanding of femininities. To address that point, this article moves beyond the literature on aesthetics, femininity, and embodiment to sociological analyses of significance of viewing femininities as a contextual relational construct, which often troubles more than gender itself.

An intersectional reading of femininities and aesthetics

Sociologists of gender have studied masculinities and femininities using various approaches, connecting gendered constructions to both the macro-level, such as nation-state building (Balogun, 2012; Joanne, 2009; Li, 2011), and the micro-level, such as resisting daily gender hostility (Hernandez, 2020; Thompson, 2015). For the purpose of this comparative case study, I categorize research on femininities in the sociology of gender into three interrelated conversations. These conversations, when viewed together, provide a more holistic and productive perspective on femininities circulating beyond national, racial, class, and ideological borders. The three bodies of scholarship are: the top-down construction of femininities, the bottom-up construction of femininities (which I summarize here as contested femininities), and the transnational study of femininities. Scholarly works in each category are cited to highlight the particular focus of each approach.

It is important to note that many scholarly works often accomplish multiple approaches. For example, Hoang's research on the sex industry in Vietnam intersects the examination of national womanhood with how women navigate these images for personal and financial benefits, fitting into both the bottom-up construction of gendered performance and gender transnationalism. In other words, categorizing a body of scholarship as focusing on "top-down" femininities does not imply that it fails to examine the spaces where women assert their own ways of performing femininities. Rather, it is useful to distinguish between these three scholarly conversations, each driven by different analytical lenses. This segregation highlights the significant implications of how femininities are constructed and embedded within discourses of identity and resistance across national, racial, ethnic, and class boundaries, all of which are crucial for examining femininities both theoretically and empirically in the context of increasing globalization and transnationalism.

Top-down femininity: national femininities

Previous studies have focused on the construction of national identity through *top-down constructions of femininities* (Balogun, 2012; Hoang, 2015; Joanne, 2009; Li, 2011). A major theme emerging from this research is how women embody their nation's identity through aesthetic practices and meet the expectations of national womanhood. For example, Balogun's study (2012) on Nigerian beauty pageants introduces the concept of "embodied nationalism", demonstrating how nationwide beauty pageants in Nigeria construct idealized female bodies to convey different nationalist agendas. In the similar vein, Hoang's research (2014) on the sex industry in Vietnam focuses on how female sex workers in Vietnam skillfully orient their aesthetic practices to project femininities embodying "a new pan-Asian modernity" for local business men and to a "poverty-stricken country in need of

Western charity" for Western male clients. This research highlights the production of a standardized image of womanhood tied to national identity, emphasizing a top-down construction of femininities. However, it leaves unexamined the experiences of women who do not conform to these national ideals but whose embodied aesthetics still become a performance of national and ethnic identity for others to interpret. How do these women navigate the national womanhood ideal in their daily lives? What sacrifices or pushbacks do they make to either mitigate national stereotype threats or highlight their ethnicity, which may otherwise be overshadowed by racist tropes? Acknowledging that nation, ethnicity, and femininity often inter-reference, this study also explores how women create subversive aesthetics related to their perceptions of their national and ethnic identities within a global status order.

Contested femininity: gender order reinterpreted

Another line of research examines how women produce and engage with diverse practices that define femininities within the hierarchy of women themselves, using a *bottom-up approach*. Similar research has examined the construction of masculinities within the hierarchy of masculinities (Chen, 1999). However, few studies empirically investigates how femininities are (re)constructed by women to stratify women (Hamilton, et al., 2019; Schippers, 2007; Bettie, 2000; Ispa-Landa and Oliver, 2020). Though limited, this line of research suggests an intersectional reading of femininities, showing how gender (or more specifically, the construction of femininities) is influenced or altered when viewed through the lenses of race, class, ethnicity, and nation (Pyke and Johnson, 2003; Bettie, 2003; Hunter, 2005; Hernandez, 2020; Shimizu, 2007). For example, Yen Le Espiritu's research argues that Filipino American women elevate Filipina chastity in their discourses about Asian and White

femininities to assert superiority over White women, whom they denigrate as embodying "moral flaws". Here, Filipina women construct and mobilize femininities as one strategy to decenter whiteness and to locate themselves above the dominant group, showing how femininities are tied to gendered discourses of morality to offset, if not combat, racial inequality. This line of research on contested femininities focuses on how women themselves articulate their positionality in relation to other women while attempting to resist their existing marginalized position in certain hegemonies (e.g. race and ethnicity).

Studying femininities transnationally

Drawing insights from sociology of globalization, recent research has focused on *studying femininities and aesthetics transnationally*, further examining gender and its global implications. While masculinities have been studied extensively, such as the global circulation of K-Pop and its transnational reception (Kim, 2021; Jun, 2011; Anderson, 2020), little attention has been given to studying femininities transnationally. Limited research examines how Western-rooted constructs of femininity take on new meanings in non-western contexts, particularly in developing countries participating in globalization (Adrian, 2003; Finnane, 2008; Li, 2011; Jones, 2003) For example, Sally McWilliams' study on contemporary Chinese women shows how wearing a wedding dress, an originally Western gendered construct, signifies female autonomy to young Chinese women, who see this performance of femininity through marriage "as indicative of the cosmopolitan, liberated female self" (p. 173). McWilliams interprets the wedding dress as connecting Chinese women to the circuits of a global neoliberal economy of cosmopolitanism, where women's assertion of femininity is still circumscribed by consumerist and postcolonial ideologies of female liberation. Drawing from transnational scholarship, I define "cosmopolitan

femininity" in this article as *both the imagination and performance* of certain models viewed as international ideals of femininity in people's self-fashioning efforts in non-western contexts. The concept of cosmopolitan femininity will be further explained as follows when put in relation to other femininity configurations.

Cross-cultural examination of pariah femininities

The purpose of this section is to further theorize the concept of "pariah femininities" in transnational contexts. By engaging with the concept of pariah femininities, I propose new theoretical interventions by asking (1) the portability of pariah femininities, namely, how portable specific configurations of pariah femininity actually are and (2) do configurations of pariah femininity necessarily cause "gender trouble" (Butler, 1999). To answer these questions, I draw from transnational scholarship to show why and how it could be cross-culturally unstable because it changes into variable forms in different sociocultural contexts under manipulation of women who are situated in status orders differently. In joining two bodies of theoretical frameworks, I attempt to develop a new way to theorize pariah femininities to make sense of their social implications in transnational contexts, by considering both *congruence* and *incongruence* in terms of the cross-cultural manifestations and consequences of globally circulating gendered aesthetics.

While gender has been thoroughly theorized in sociology and there is an established subfield theorizing various masculinities, there is substantially less work explicitly theorizing femininity/ies (Connell, 1987; Schippers, 2007; Hamilton et. al, 2019). Connell (1987) suggested that while hegemonic masculinity/ies exist(s), hegemonic femininity does not exist in the same way "because of the global domination of women." Schippers' larger

intervention was to challenge that claim, arguing that hegemonic femininity/ies does/do exist, and that there are other important configurations of femininity as well that challenge and sustain the gender order - "pariah femininities" are among them. Schippers (2007) theorizes pariah femininities as "the quality content of hegemonic masculinity enacted by women - desire for the feminine object (lesbian), authority (bitch), being physically violent ('badass' girl), taking charge and not being compliant (bitch, but also 'cock-teaser' and slut)." (p. 95) Women who embody pariah femininities are considered socially undesirable, subject to stigmatization, sanctions, and marginalization in society.

Schippers's conceptualization of pariah femininities helped articulate how normative gender relations in the West marginalize women who possess certain traits or characteristics that endanger gender complementarity (what Connell [1987] termed "categoricalism"). There are good reasons to suggest that pariah femininities are not a Western phenomenon alone, but how this contribution is valuable outside of Western contexts of gender complementarity requires further investigation. The social and cultural consequences associated with pariah femininities occupy culturally specific forms and meanings such that, for instance, what might qualify a femininity as "pariah" in one cultural context might accomplish something else in a different social context. The variation of both content and meanings associated with pariah femininities can tell us a great deal about gender relations and inequality in different social and cultural contexts. Indeed, Connell's (1987, 1995) theorization of "emphasized femininity" makes a similar argument arguing that hegemonic masculinities and the legitimation of gender inequality are accomplished, in part, through specific configurations of symbolically valued femininity. Here, configurations of pariah femininities help to articulate what precisely challenges gender complementarity in different contexts,

acknowledging Schippers' (2007) conceptualization of pariah femininities as jeopardizing gender hegemony. The oversight of locally defined pariah femininities and its interplay with regional gender politics in fact prompts further theoretical exploration of pariah femininities circulating globally, especially in non-Western contexts. Can such stigmatization sometimes be utilized in the politics of representation that potentially disrupts regionally defined hegemonic gender dynamics, and how?

Schipper's theorization of pariah femininities opens discussion for further theorizing gender(ed) constructs in non-Western and transnational context. In this article, for illustration purposes, I define pariah femininities not by their intrinsic qualities or their resemblance to hegemonic masculinities, but by their intended and actual effects. In other words, pariah femininities are characterized by their consequences rather than their content. This perspective shifts the focus from qualities to the actions and practices of women themselves, placing them at the center of gender hegemony. By defining pariah femininities, I am not interested in "character types" that reduce women to mere configurations of femininities, but rather in how these character types - terms used to morally and ethically categorize women - emerge and derive their meanings within a web of social relations. Therefore, I define pariah femininities as gendered practices enacted by women that, both in motivation and effect, disrupt normative heterosexual desirability.

This definition helps to operationalize pariah femininities as well, for it to be empirically tested in different social settings. First, we need to examine the *variation* of pariah femininities within the global circulation of constructs of femininities. To do that, we want to look at globally circulating aesthetics within the context of regional adaptation, considering its interplay with local, regional, and global interpretations of other systems of

inequality. This multi-scale approach, inspired by Connell and Messerschmidt's research on hegemonic masculinities (2005), highlights the congruence as well as incongruence between interpretations across different scales (e.g., local, regional, global). Adopting an analytical framework that distinguishes local, regional, and global femininities allows us to recognize the importance of place without "falling into a monadic world of totally independent cultures or discourses." (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.) By focusing on *congruence* — identifying ideas about race and class order that achieve cross-national consensus — and *incongruence* — discerning ideas that lose significance outside their original contexts — we can elucidate the processes and mechanisms through which configurations of "pariah" femininity either work as weaponized representations of feminine gender expression and performance that resists the normative understandings of femininity, or in other cases persists in its derogatory "pariah" connotations, which do not come from only its ill-fitted position in the gender hegemony, but involving other institutions on which their marginalization rest.

In the case of ABG aesthetics and its embodied femininity, the *incongruence* between its racial origins and its global adaptations highlights its evolution as it navigates different cultural landscapes. The ABG aesthetics serves as a global femininity whose initial emergence was rooted in unique racial landscape in the U.S., yet its racial connotations are co-opted for different reasons as it travels to China and readapts itself to maneuver into a type of pariah femininity that powerfully circumvents unwanted male gaze. The fact that ABG aesthetics travels across national borders is a case of the larger process of how the globalization of aesthetics has opened regional gender orders to new pressures of transformation through social embodiment of pariah femininities.

On the other hand, the *congruence* operates in the context of globalization and transnationalism, where the congruence of cultural elements across borders plays a crucial role in the dissemination and adaptation of globalized assets. While globalization scholars often focus on the local or regional reconstruction of a globalized asset, the factors that enable it to transcend borders are often overlooked (Schiller, 2005; Collins, 2009; Smith, 2005; Friedman, 2000). In the case of ABG aesthetics, congruence is evident in how the reworked ABG aesthetics in China incorporates elements that align with hegemonic ideals prevalent in the West and globally. This version of pariah femininity can be understood as a hybrid femininity, combining aspects of both pariah and cosmopolitan identities.

Pariah femininities are not culturally universal merely because of global gender hegemony that operates on heterosexual matrices, but because they are relational constructs that are continually reinterpreted and reworked within existing systems of power and inequality. Examining pariah femininities through a transnational lens allows us to explore the dynamics of "borrowings, appropriations, and alliances"" (Ong, 2011, p. 23) that unfold across class, racial, and national borders, shaping the ongoing work of femininities in a global context.

Method and data: Studying gendered aesthetics transnationally

In this section, I summarize how this study on gendered aesthetics with a transnational scope was conducted. The methodology is driven by two concerns: how to study aesthetics in a sociological context and how to study it transnationally. First, my approach to studying aesthetics is inspired by how cultural sociologists have studied this topic. In this study, I use what Ben Highmore's theorization to break down the sociological

meanings of aesthetics: "[S]ocial aesthetics…purposefully privileges practices, processes, and interconnections…[I]t has the ability to overcome the separation of (human) subjects and (inhuman) objects" (Highmore, 2019, p. 157). Second, to study it transnationally, we need to acknowledge that aesthetics do not have cross-cultural meanings, which explains potential variations of practices, interpretations, and receptions within a singular type of aesthetics.

Acknowledging the transnationality of aesthetics and its complexity, I conducted 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with self-identified native Chinese women across mainland China, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Interviews were conducted either in person or via video calls using Zoom and Tencent Meeting. Each session lasted from 60 to 100 minutes. The interviews were structured around three overarching themes: initiation into makeup practices, the evolution of personal makeup styles over time, and the respondents' own interpretations and justifications of their beauty routines. During the final segment of the interview, I request access to the interviewee's social media to have them discuss the makeup styles they showcase. In their narratives, I focus on their rationale behind each look and its intended expression. Additionally, if the participant has used dating apps, I inquire about their profiles, having them talk through the choice of photos and associated makeup. I also seek insights into feedback they receive regarding their images on these platforms. This interview structure was employed to gain a holistic understanding of the journey in beautifying oneself and to compare different cosmetic styles, including the ABG look, within this context. It does not mean, however, to diverge from the focus on ABG but rather contextualizes it by revealing how practitioners interpret it alongside other styles. In addition to the three main themes, specific questions were dedicated to exploring how respondents understand and define ABG. This line of inquiry allows us to learn where people's

knowledge about ABG comes from, allowing for a more contextualized understanding of the term both in online and offline realms.

Complementing the interview data, I conducted a casual observation of online makeup videos and posts tagged "ABG" on platforms such as Youtube, Instagram, Red, and BiliBili. The videos were chosen based on the individual respondent's recommendation. For example, a respondent may mention specific videos, media posts, and/or uploaders when asked about how ABG style looks to them, and for the purpose of clarification, the respondent might either show me those media content during the interview or send relevant web links later for me to explore after the interview. I consider such visual observation of the ABG trend online as important for two reasons. First, it serves as a primary source for participants, especially those in mainland China, who frequently refer to online content to learn how to practice the ABG style. These digital portrayals become essential for understanding their adoption of this look. Second, those online visual materials have become an online archive that tells the transnational history of ABG aesthetic, which sets up the transnational context in which I examine its cross-cultural and -societal meanings.

For the sample characteristics, a total of 25 Chinese women, both in mainland China and overseas, participated in this study. They are all aged between 19 to 36: 14 of them are from 19 to 24, 9 of them are from 25-29, and 2 of them are above 30. All the respondents are heterosexual. In terms of current location, 10 of them reside in China and 15 of them reside overseas, with 8 in the United States, 5 in Canada, and 2 in Australia. In terms of their overseas experience, it should be noted that some of the respondents who reside in China also have experience with short-term overseas travel within 2 weeks or long-term overseas exchange program within 2 months. For overseas respondents, their length of overseas stay is

much longer than respondents in China, from at least 18 months to at most 6 years. They are all legal foreigners on the visa and they stay overseas for school and/or work.

A brief transnational history of ABG aesthetics

In this section, I want to detail what people need to know about ABG aesthetics before going to the findings to fully understand its variation and the importance of such variation. I will explain how it emerged originally and how it looks like today, especially after being transported into China, where ABG aesthetics is seen as "ahistorical", thus being more exposed to women's own manipulation to rewrite meanings into this aesthetics. In this article, for illustration purposes, I define ABG aesthetics in terms of its superficial appearance: an Asian woman's curated beauty look inspired by a gangster style. This look is characterized by darker or tanned skin, sharp eyebrows, long eyeliner, and revealing clothing, often accompanied by tattoos and dyed hair (typically from black to blonde). However, my focus is not on the validity of this definition. Instead, I am interested in the meanings that this aesthetic evokes when presented to different audiences as well as in different relational contexts.

A brief history of ABG: from 1990s to 2020s

Given its origin as an urban slang, there has been no formal definition of ABG in scholarly literature. On the website "Urban Dictionary", the most liked response describes ABG in this way: "An acronym for an 'aznbbygirl' meaning an asian female gangster. ABGs like to hang with gangsters and wear thin (slutty) clothing…ABGs are also known for dying their hair a lot. From blonde to black. They have many piercings: multiple on the ears, and stomach/lip… Could also have painted nails and tatoos. ABGs are super hot, but you would

probably get jumped if you tried to hit on them. They also loiter and hang out past curfew (Lolzercoptorzallday, February 7, 2009, Urban Dictionary).” This definition fits well with the historical emergence of ABG in the 1990s New York area, originally used to describe Chinese American women involved in gangster subcultures. These women were a part of, or admired the lifestyles of the New York Chinatown gangs.

Moving to 2020, ABG aesthetics gained its revival in the United States, primarily as a fashion trend on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Youtube. Many female Asian beauty bloggers in the U.S. were posting makeup transformation videos with tags like “#ABG” or “#ABG transformation”, gaining millions of views and kudos. Against this revival in the 2020s, the definition of ABG on Urban Dictionary also went on a change, as the newly defined ABG removes its connection to gangster culture, instead placing more emphasis on a variety of visual elements that, when taken together, makes a woman an ABG: "an asian girl who's typically identified by tattoos, revealing clothing, fake eyelashes, heavy makeup (strong arched brows), long nails and long dyed hair. [They are] normally seen at raves, parties, and clubs…For example, ‘Let's go to the Illenium concert where all the ABGs are at’ (by lululemone June 11, 2020).” (See below Figure 1 for visual illustration.)

Figure 1. The "Asian Baby Girl" Starter Pack in an article titled "Everything You Need to Know about the Asian Baby Girl Trend" in Nylon, an online magazine.

This study is done in the context of the ABG revival in the 2020s. From the definition given in 2020 above, the "contemporary" ABG refers primarily to young women who are highly social, outgoing, and have adopted a gangster aesthetic or personality without necessarily being involved with actual gangster activities. My primary aim in this article is not to document the evolving meanings of ABG in the U.S. context over the past decade. Instead, I highlight the fluidity in the discursive definition of ABG, emphasizing that they are shaped within specific sociocultural contexts and are continually subject to change, which later also emerges as one of the major findings below (the section on "discursive construction of ABG aesthetics").

ABG aesthetics in China

In the 2020s, ABG aesthetics saw its revival not only within the U.S. but also internationally as a global beauty phenomenon. In China, ABG-tagged videos and posts went

wild on social media platforms, such as BiliBili, Red, and Xina Weibo. Chinese female beauty bloggers filmed videos on ABG makeup tutorials oriented to Chinese women (See Figure. 2 below for a visual example). This ABG fashion trend gained its popularity especially between 2020 and 2022 on the Internet, with over 2000 videos with the keyword "ABG" or "Asian Baby Girl" or "Asian Baby Gangster" uploaded on BiliBili, gaining millions of views. Thanks to its online circulation, ABG makeup and aesthetics have become a new standard of beauty for young Chinese women. The respondents in mainland China in this study all acknowledged that they first learned about the term "ABG" around the 2020s through social media platforms, with a few exceptions who were familiar with it earlier due to short-term overseas travel. The online presence of ABG aesthetics in China significantly influences how these respondents define and practice ABG aesthetics themselves, symbolizing a new feminine identity for young Chinese women, through which they attempt to interrogate gender relations in Chinese society.

Figure 2. One highlighted image from an ABG makeup video. The original title of the video is "Alpha and cute! ABG hottie makeup that ordinary girls can copy!".

Findings

In this section, I show how Chinese women interpret and enact ABG aesthetics to resist gender hegemony in mainland China and racial hegemony overseas. The findings are categorized into three major themes: the discursive construction of ABG aesthetics, the meanings of ABG aesthetics on the dating market, and the performance of ABG aesthetics on daily life, each of which is divided into two separate discussions on Chinese women in China and overseas to highlight differences and similarities. I argue that the gendered implications of enacting ABG aesthetics transnationally can only be fully understood when taking into account the three aspects together.

On the one hand, Chinese women in mainland China perceive ABG aesthetics as a form of feminist resistance, challenging and rejecting the expectation for a docile and submissive Asian woman, particularly in the eyes of Chinese men committed to traditional notions of femininity. By disrupting the traditional desirability landscape using ABG aesthetics, women in China deliberately make themselves less appealing to men who hold conservative standards of femininity. On the other hand, Chinese women living overseas view ABG aesthetics as conforming to a stigmatized portrayal of a "white-washed" Asian, perpetuating existing racial inequalities while erasing their ethnic identity as Chinese. Consequently, due to its association with racial assimilation, this group of Chinese women distance themselves from adopting this aesthetics. Unlike their counterparts in mainland China, who enthusiastically embrace ABG aesthetics and incorporate them into their daily lives, Chinese women abroad exhibit reluctance to publicly wear this style, particularly when among their local Asian peers, fearing it might be read, particularly in the eyes of Asians, as shoring up existing White hegemony at the risk of effacing Asian ethnicity.

On the Discursive Construction of ABG Aesthetics

This section highlights how two groups of women discursively define ABG aesthetics in relation to two imagined femininities, namely, "American west-coast girl femininity" and "White femininity". Both groups of women use these two types of femininity to create what is and what is not ABG aesthetics. Respondents both valorize each of these femininities based on racial(ized) physical attributes, ethnic affiliation, and accessibility to class-based lifestyles. However, their discursive definition of ABG aesthetics differs most significantly in how they position ABG aesthetics in a constructed hierarchy of femininities. For Chinese women in mainland China, they interpret ABG aesthetics as an indicator of upper-class women's lifestyle, which symbolically situates them in transnational fantasies of a "California dream". On the other hand, overseas Chinese women think of ABG aesthetics as an Asian woman whose pursuits of beauty have been "white-washed", thus dissociating ABG with class meanings but reinterpreting it in its racial consequences. Overall, their discursive construction of ABG aesthetics contributes to their varied practices to (dis)orient ABG aesthetics to different audiences.

Chinese women in China: "After you wear this makeup, you feel like you're on the west coast of the United States…"

Respondents from mainland China construct ABG aesthetics in two ways. First, their construction depends on which specific group of Asians in the U.S. they align themselves to, where they see ABG aesthetics as embodying a free-spirited, confident "Cali girl" that otherwise elevates this aesthetics' status to embody a cosmopolitan femininity. Second, they connect themselves close to ABG aesthetics because of a perceived pan-Asian identity shared across Asians worldwide, which makes this aesthetics approachable to women in China.

Women in mainland China tend to conflate racial and ethnic categories when defining ABG or ABG aesthetics in their own words. Some conflate ABG with ABC (Asian-born Chinese) or Asian Americans, by using them as interchangeable terms in order to describe what ABG looks like to them. For example, Sally, a respondent in China, seemed to draw an equivalent between ABG and Asian American when asked about her general impression about ABG aesthetics:

> Author: …So how would you describe this ABG look to your own understanding?
>
> Sally: Well…Is ABG makeup an "Asian-American" makeup…? I don't know…Can I understand ABG that way? To me I feel like they are the same…

For mainland respondents like Sally, such conflation of terms has its reason. For them, the term "Asian American" means more than an ethnic category as an aesthetic category; the aesthetic connotations of "Asian American" look come from how they view differences between "traditional" and "fancy" Asian women, as told by Oreo:

> Oreo: When I started learning ABG makeup, I modeled it after Angelababy's makeup (See Figure 1.)…You can interpret such look as something that an Asian American girl who is very active in social circles would have...Of course if you pair such makeup with a big, pick-dyed wavy hair, it's even more like that.
>
> Author: When you try on this kind of makeup, are you painting your face in a way that makes you look like an Asian American to your understanding?
>
> Oreo: Yes, and it's not just like the *traditional* Asian American women; it should be *fancy* and make you stand out. It's like you are living a life that is closer to the European and American kind…It feels as if already integrated into the local society, that is, all aspects of your life basically has been westernized: although you have an Asian face, your dress and makeup go along an European and American mode of feeling.

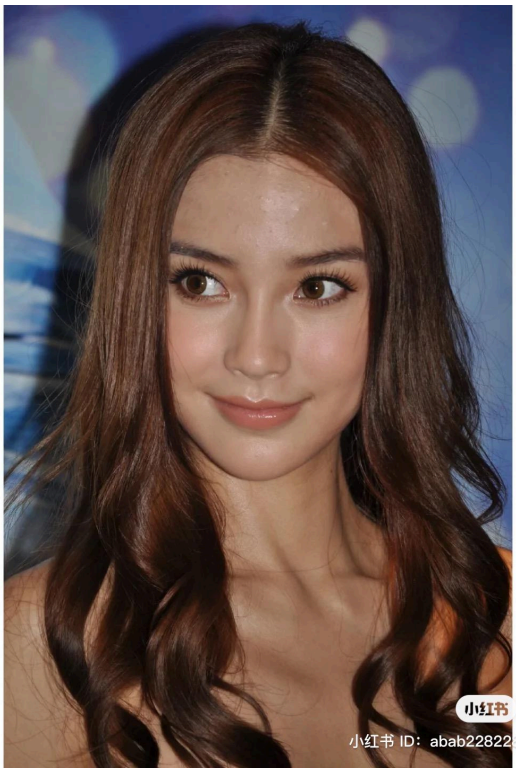

Figure 3. A photo of Angelababy, the Chinese model identified by Oreo to have the ABG or ABG-alike vibe. Note: The respondent searched for the photo and showed it to the researcher during the interview.

In her account, Oreo clearly distinguishes two sets of groups among the Asian American population, the "traditional" one and the "fancy" one, and those in ABG style falls into the latter category who she admires. The ABG style's association with "fancy" Asian women is further illustrated by Bowlin, when she sympathetically portrays this style as relates to a self-confident, free-spirited California girl basking in the sunshine:

> "I've heard people say that if I wear makeup like this, then that's what I've become…A lot of posts on ABG are about pretending that after you wear this makeup, you would grab your skateboard and go skateboarding on the beach in LA, or *after you wear this makeup you feel like you're on the west coast of the United States*… I *am* the girl on the west coast after I put on this makeup. There's this hypothetical existence. It's that moment where you just feel cool - it's like I'm an American West Coast girl now, and even though I'm not realizing it, I *am* now." (Bowlin, 19-24, in mainland China)

Respondents in mainland China, such as Bowlin, have imagined access to a lifestyle specific to an American west-coast girl. In their imagination, it is a style that represents a life centered on leisure, in which they have the money and time to dress up and enjoy life in urban surroundings. In other words, after putting on such makeup, they are not aligning themselves with the "traditional Asian American" population, just like how Oreo said. Although they often misattribute this style to be worn by Asian American in the US in general, it is clear in their mind that this style is distant from the working-class Asian American population. To them, ABG as a style symbolizes a situated position where a hedonistic lifestyle of a woman signals her upper-level within the class structure in the U.S., no matter which ethnic category she identifies herself with. To them, investing in ABG aesthetics is to perform a kind of cosmopolitan femininity that places themselves transnationally by symbolically realizing an alternative feminine ideal.

Chinese women abroad: "There's a sense of Asian beauty from a white person's perspective."

Unlike their Chinese counterparts in China, overseas respondents tend to view the term ABG not only in its aesthetic senses, but also more importantly in its racial connotations. Yiming, a respondent who has stayed in the United States since college, makes ABG aesthetics a political and ethical standing, by connecting it to the idea of racial assimilation:

> "In fact, a lot of ABG's makeup is similar to white people's, such as their tinted, long eyelashes, fly-like eyeliner and the kind of sharp eyebrows… So sometimes I can't help but think, is this really suitable for us Asians? Or maybe it's just that we're two races, but ABG is like 'I don't care if you live or die, I'm going to put that look on your face anyway.'... There's a sense of Asian beauty from a white person's perspective." (Yiming, 19-24, in the United States)

This idea that ABG aesthetic is a mimicry of white feminine aesthetics is shared among overseas respondents. Another respondent, Lizz, who migrated to the United States during her teenage year, justifies this aesthetic's connection to white culture in her recount of her makeup routines back in the middle school, where the majority of students there were white:

> "...I was just learning how to do makeup from my classmates who are white. I feel like they were putting on a lot of foundation, so I did that too; they were putting on a lot of mascara, so I did that too; they were applying heavy contours on their faces, so I did that too…I even painted my face darker because they like their skin to be tanned - but actually my original skin color is light…At that time, I thought I was pretty…" (Lizz, 25-29, in the United States)

Her talk was then followed by showcasing her selfies archived on her Instagram account: "This is a selfie I took then. I would say it's definitely an ABG, looking backwards from now."

Lizz is among overseas respondents who distance the past selves from present selves due to a radical change in style. They label their earlier style copied from their white peers as "ABG", which is different from the look they adopt now, which they define as "a look that really fits me and makes me truly comfortable" (Princess).

According to overseas respondents, ABG is defined as a parody of white aesthetics. Its association with whiteness further negates their ethnic identity as Chinese or Asian. Instead, by disengaging themselves from ABG aesthetics, they regain a sense of ethnic authenticity. This act of distancing indirectly echoes Bettie's idea of racialized class performance (2000), as in this case, performing ABG aesthetics is almost performing white, allowing them to pass as an "unmarked marker" to potentially mitigate racial discrimination.

However, unlike Bettie's case, these women have come to realize on their own that this is essentially a performance that distances them from their inherited Asian identity. This

realization is influenced by their gradual familiarization with racial politics in the country they live in. On the one hand, more frequent interactions with local Asians provide them with reassurance to navigate the multiracial landscape. Many respondents acknowledged that they no longer feel the need to wear this kind of makeup after seeing and meeting more Asians who grew up there and do not necessarily conform to that "white" look. On the other hand, they increasingly read ABG as symbolic markers of white-sanctioned race and class differences. For example, Daisy recalls her disenchantment with ABG aesthetics once she realized the extent to which it can be seen as a "colonial construct":

> "The other thing that makes me less desperate to be like ABG now is that I took a class on post-colonialism in college, and then I suddenly became uncomfortable with it. I just felt like it glossed over a lot of colonial and racial issues, because *I felt like that kind of cosmetic change in the face and in the body was actually very white. It's not Asian anyway.* There's no word called 'white baby girl', but Asian just get singled out for this style. I feel so uncomfortable…But I'm feeling conflicted because I still really like this style. I guess it's because I get compliments from others by wearing it. But at the same time I feel like it's untenable in its own sense." (Daisy, 19-24, in the United States)

Notably, Daisy expresses her conflicting feelings towards the ABG style, which places Asian women like her in a difficult situation where they are afraid of fully embracing this style due to its embedded racial politics. This point will be further explored in the next section, where Chinese women abroad encounter a significant dilemma when navigating romantic relationships while wearing an ABG-like style. This dilemma arises from the intersection between this style and the racialization of Asian women in the West.

On the Meanings of ABG Aesthetics on the Dating Market

This section highlights conditions where ABG aesthetics are best understood and practiced as a performance of pariah femininities. I highlight the different experiences on the

dating market between Chinese women in China and Chinese women overseas. Women in China practice ABG aesthetics to circumvent and challenge the male gaze in China. In contrast, women outside China experience these aesthetics not for their liberating potential but for their constraining effects, being categorized as a type of Asian woman that attracts the wrong kind of western male gaze.

Chinese women in China–"Pretty and powerful"

Previous scholars have demonstrated how women's aesthetics are sometimes weaponized expressions to resist what men define as femininity, which is also the case in respondents in China. For this group, ABG aesthetics are seen as a visualized revolt against ideal feminine traits in China, which they term as "East Asian feminine aesthetics". For instance, many respondents in China discussed ABG aesthetics as appealing because of their uniqueness relative to East Asian feminine aesthetics, like Lindsay and Christine:

> "I feel that this (ABG) style will be more in line with my personal preferences than most of these East Asian aesthetics of pursuing pale skin color, youthfulness, and thinness. I grew up not particularly inclined to that kind of East Asian aesthetics, so I feel that this ABG style is so pretty and powerful, and has its own unique kind of beauty." (Lindsay, 19-24, in China)

> "If compared with Korean-style makeup, ABG makeup is a little bit bolder with the color. I think the Korean makeup I wore before was very much from a male point of view, where my makeup was light, cute, and above all not noticeable. After I tried on ABG makeup, it actually felt more like a kind of mental change… I would want people to find out about my attractions, especially in sexual senses, without wanting to cover them up." (Christine, 25-29, in China)

Lindsay and Christine are among those respondents in mainland China who attribute characteristics such as "pale skin color", "youthfulness", and "thinness" to what they term "East Asian aesthetics". In their study, Liu and Li (2023) find that this "pale, young, and slim" female figure has become a controlling image, in Collin's terms, of a new beauty

standard of women in contemporary China. In their narratives, however, they further link this aesthetics to a type of femininity characterized by “cuteness”, which they perceive as non-noticeable and non-intimidating, and thus easily manipulated by men: “It’s all about that non-threatening vibe, like having long lashes, big eyes, and a pouty mouth…” says Oreo, “It is a kind of style that overall giving off a youthful and cute vibe.”

In China, ABG aesthetics represent a rebellion against the locally defined hegemonic femininity. It is this very disengagement from the dominant feminine ideals that renders women who embody this aesthetic as "pariahs" or outcasts in the landscape of heterosexual desirability. Respondents in China consider the “male gaze” and link the disempowering aspects of East Asian aesthetics to how they appeal to men. One respondent, Halle, observes that women who adopt styles outside the male gaze, such as ABG aesthetics, become less of an attraction target. In contrast, the typical East Asian female look attracts the male gaze on the street, as she noted from her experience with “street snap” in China:

> Halle: I spend a lot of time in Shanghai, Beijing, and Chengdu, where lots of people do the “street snap” photography. I would be photographed every time I went to Taikooli (a shopping center) in Chengdu…But one day I went to Sanlitun (a shopping center) in Beijing, and no one photographed me at all, but all my friends said that I looked very pretty that day.
>
> Author: Are you wearing the same makeup as you do in Chengdu?
>
> Halle: Exactly. I’m always wearing the same look that a lot of people would think of me as an ABG or ABC...And I have observed the kind of girls they shoot. In fact, it is kind of a very *mainstream* aesthetic [in mainland China] - I personally feel that it’s still rather tacky. Their faces are covered with a very light foundation, and they have big eyes, a pointed chin, and pale skin…and it was all male photographers taking pictures of them.

Women in China discursively distance ABG aesthetics from East Asian aesthetics that embody a woman who caters to the predominant male gaze in China. This act of distancing

creates a *context* for women to infiltrate ABG aesthetics with potentially gender progressive meanings. As I will detail below, the *politics* of this aesthetics really plays out in romantic scenarios, where ABG aesthetics yield its effects of redefining gender relations that in this sense makes it a pariah femininity, by disrupting men's normative desirability for women in China. For example, Amelia details her varied experiences with men when wearing different makeup styles. She notes that her ABG look has made her much less of a target in the eyes of men:

> "When I was a freshman in college I looked a bit more 'cute' during that time, and then there would be guys who would come up to you all the time wanting to approach you, which I found annoying… Then in my sophomore year I started to wear this kind of makeup, and then no one approached me anymore (laughs), so there were no relationships in college. I think it's so funny." (Amelia, 25-29, in China)

In addition to unmaking themselves a pursuit of male gaze in China, women in China who adopt the ABG style also fall outside the normative desirability landscape in the dating market. Some of them view the dating market in China a "battlefield", where they are ready to be explicitly or implicitly "attacked" by men based on their appearance during the first date. Ava, a respondent from China, recalls her dating experience as "disappointing": "...Men expect you to look pretty on the first date, but they also expect that you are not trying too hard to look like that…" The paradox arises when a woman feels she looks great with the ABG makeup, while men see it as "too much" and "not natural".

All the respondents believe that it is not their fault if their dating experiences end poorly. Instead, they interpret these men as too conservative to fully appreciate the heterogeneity of female beauty in contemporary Chinese society. Some respondents in mainland China believe that they can gauge men's reactions on their first dates by intentionally adopting the ABG aesthetics, even if they do not typically wear this kind of

makeup in their daily life. For example, Zakia, a respondent in Beijing, China, finds it as a good strategy to "filter out" men who have conservative views about female desirability, while helping her keep those who are more open-minded and willing to understand and appreciate this look by simply accepting who they are and how they look:

> Zakia: I have a sister who says I'll never get a man if I dye my hair like that. But I also don't want to dye my hair back again for a man…I've had many times where I went out with guys and maybe they wouldn't say anything at that moment, but then we never contacted each other after we came back. Others just outright say 'why do you bleach your hair like that?' Then one time I matched with a guy who I believe is an Asian American. He was doing business in China. When we were together, he said 'I noticed that in your profile you said you're an ABG. That's interesting." And then I told him that this is my ABG hair, and he said this style is quite suitable for me and this hair color is very nice.
>
> Author: So how did the date with that Asian American man go?
>
> Zakia: It went pretty well. Actually we talked a lot about ABG style. I even told him that to me ABG doesn't mean Asian Baby Girl; it means A Beijing Girl (laugh)...I just think he is the kind of man who can understand my style.

From Zakia's perspective, adopting ABG aesthetics helps women decide whether or not they want to pursue romantic relationships with men based on men's (mis)appreciation of such aesthetics. In other words, they seek out men who are not confined to the conventional notions of female desirability, which they associate with "East Asian aesthetics". By strategically embracing ABG aesthetics, these Chinese women see themselves as embodying a sense of untamed femininity, unbound by gender norms, unconcerned with conforming to mainstream beauty standards, and unperturbed by potential disapproval from men.

Chinese women abroad – "...a certain typical type of Asian girl in White people's eyes"

Overseas respondents talk much less frequently about the role of ABG aesthetics on the dating market, partially because of their discomfort in wearing this style publicly,

especially in situations where they perceive a male gaze. However, they do acknowledge that their style, regardless of whether they see themselves as performing an ABG style or not, attract a certain type of unwanted attention from men, as they are unwillingly categorized as "a certain typical type of Asian girls in White people's eyes", who "are thought to be social, hot, pretty, and party all the time", according to Daisy, a respondent living in the United States for more than four years.

The association between ABG and racial stereotypes can be found in earlier discussions on hypersexualization of Asian women, where Asian women often find themselves in a dilemma. They cannot fully embrace their sexuality without risking being judged as self-objectifying their bodies and becoming targets under the racial politics of desirability. In the context of pariah femininities, an Asian woman who performs or is perceived to perform ABG aesthetics is believed to inevitably bolster (white) male sexual desire for an (Asian) feminine object. This exposes her to the risk of being targeted by men attracted to specific types of Asian women and being labeled by other Asians as a racial traitor. Bonnie, for example, describes how she sees ABG not in aesthetic senses but in political consequences it induces: "When you're saying that I'm ABG, you're not saying that my style is like an American-born style…you're saying that I'm like the style of *a certain typical type of Asian girl in White people's eyes.*" In so doing, Bonnie believes that it attracts a certain portion of men as well, who take a special interest in those Asian girls. In other words, wearing ABG aesthetics makes those women vulnerable to male gaze in the western context, due to its association with racialized beauty. Another respondent, Diana, recalls becoming a "hook-up target" when a white man asked her friend for Diana's number after

seeing a photo of her wearing ABG-like makeup. “That man is really disrespectful,” says Diana, “he told my friend, ‘Wow that girl is so ABG and I want that ABG!’”

In Diana’s account, ABG has gone far beyond its own aesthetic appeal, gaining hypervisibility because of who is wearing it. Daisy, another respondent in the United States, who used to have an obsession with ABG aesthetics, began to doubt the aesthetics itself once realizing how much this style can be “constraining” in its potential fetishization of a woman:

> “I’ve dated a white American before. I remember especially clearly, that is, I was putting a lot of pictures of different colored hair on that dating app, there was one that I dyed blonde hair at that time, and the makeup was drawn especially like an ABG kind of feeling. Then he asked me something like, “are you still blonde?” He told me that because his favorite picture was the one with blonde hair and that ABG-like makeup…That incident just made me think of something. It makes me feel like a lot of the people I’ve met who like me might just be stemming from a particular kind of appearance and style that I have, but I’m actually far bigger than that style itself…” (Daisy, 19-24, in the United States)

The above account illustrates the complicated struggle of Asian women who must carefully navigate a path between being desirable enough for romance and not being overshadowed by their aesthetic look. This situation forces them to confront the question of whether they are being approached by white men who fetishize Asian women. In such a situation, ABG aesthetics transition from their gendered effects within Chinese society to a non-pariah but fetishized femininity that reinforces gender and racial hegemony in Asian-White relations in Western immigrant countries, intersecting itself with the long-standing racialization of Asian women in the West.

On ABG Aesthetics in Women’s Daily Lives

This section focuses on non-romantic contexts, where Chinese women in and outside China practicing ABG aesthetics are placed outside the context of heterosexual configurations. In those non-sexual encounters, ABG aesthetics are practiced in similar ways

yet initiate different gendered effects, as the reception base changes from young-to-middle-aged heterosexual men to both young and senior generations, and men and women. As the context shifts, whether or to what extent ABG aesthetics can be understood as a form of pariah femininities fall under examination: the heterosexual paradigm is no longer the only rule for making pariah femininities work; instead, a more diverse and nuanced gender policing done by both men and women puts the gender effects of ABG aesthetics into question. Below, I detail the practices, feedback, and the effects associated with performing ABG aesthetics in broader social life.

Chinese women in China - "Why do you look like this? You look like you're about to eat people!" vs. "I always get compliments from girls around me!"

For a majority of women in mainland China, the ABG aesthetics requires a carefully curated set of beauty practices. These often include a variety of cosmetic consumption, including buying cosmetic products, fake hair, colored contacts, and specific types of clothing. For example, Didi, who has a lot of experience with ABG style, has developed a comprehensive set of makeup and dress-up procedures with the help of various kinds of beauty tools:

> "I bought some colored contacts. I think this look starts with lighter colored contacts. Hanging on my back closet is a wig. It is a light gray curly wig. With such a wig I might look a little bit more like an Asian American. I often wear two pairs of contacts, one is cold gray, the other is light brown. I would feel that, rather than going to great lengths in makeup techniques, directly changing one's pupil color and hair color is a more direct and faster method (to achieve an ABG look). In the summer I'd buy all sorts of fake tattoos and put them on my body. I also dyed my hair once, just for lighter-colored hair. I also look specifically into ABG-style outfits, such as tight tops and dresses...For makeup, I'll put blush on my cheekbones a little bit, but I won't put it on my nose top. That makes me look too cute…I'll also put on a lot of contouring." (Didi, 19-24, in mainland China)

As Didi and other respondents argue, such extensive beauty work prepares themselves to look like an Asian who spends most of the time living in the West, as they believe that their "original faces do not look 'American' enough".

While successfully giving off a sense of "American-ness", their ABG-like looks render them vulnerable to judgment from senior cohorts in Chinese society. Just as Hernandez (2020) has found about the moral unease of certain feminine aesthetics, ABG aesthetics in China falls into such categorization as subordinate aesthetics as "it is not what most women [in China] do". One respondent, Xuesong, who lives in a place in China she describes as "much more conservative than big cities like Beijing or Shanghai", says how her friend is seen by a senior family member as violating gender expectations by wearing makeup like this: "We got on the bus together with her aunt…I remember her aunt was criticizing her makeup all the time. She said, *'Why do you look like this? You look like you're about to eat people!'*"

Despite an overwhelming misapprehension of ABG among more senior members of the Chinese society, women in China find themselves most comfortable wearing this makeup when surrounded by young women who they think hold "more progressive" gender beliefs. They see this gender progress as embedded in acknowledging the heterogeneity of female aesthetics, where ABG aesthetics is just one of them. As mentioned above, this group believes that ABG aesthetics also embodies a figure of a free-spirited urban woman who lives a hedonistic lifestyle without any shame. The connection between ABG aesthetics and cosmopolitan femininity also partially determines a condition where ABG aesthetics actually offers women status: places where women dominate the social space. For example, Ophelia describes that she would feel most comfortable wearing this style when going out for a "girl's

party": "I would put on this kind of makeup when there's a girl's party or girl's night. *I always get compliments from girls around me!*" Lily offers another context where she would feel comfortable posting ABG selfies on Chinese social media platforms with a tag that excludes male users from seeing this content. "I like seeing kudos and comments from female users. You can see from their comments that they truly appreciate this kind of beauty." Here, we see that the boundaries between pariah and cosmopolitan femininities actually blend together under conditions that exclude men's presence and emphasize women's hyper-presence.

Men's absence from participating in appreciating ABG aesthetics to some extent secures women's fulfillment of "truly enjoying what this look has brought to me" (Lily). Different from prevailing misapprehension from men on the dating market, in non-romantic encounters, even if men compliment their look, they still take those compliments as "fake". "Men do not really appreciate this kind of beauty, you know," says Gia, who has been approached by men multiple times wearing ABG makeup, "they just think you are pretty and they want to have sex with you." In contrast, they believe that "women really know where the beauty of this style lies." In this case, Chinese women wearing the ABG style in China see themselves as performing a cosmopolitan femininity, yet not necessarily "pariahs". They believe that while this style still appeals to some men who seek attractive women, these men are "tuned off" by their lack of understanding regarding why these women are considered attractive. By defining ABG aesthetics as primarily oriented towards women, respondents in China are trying to imbue this aesthetic with new gendered meanings, aligning it more closely with contemporary gender dynamics in China.

Chinese women abroad - "Wow, I don't think any of the Asian Americans I know wear this makeup" vs. "I guess I just didn't want to seem so 'Chinese,' you know?"

Unlike women in China who can always find places where they practice ABG aesthetics at their will despite gender policing in China, overseas women find it difficult to locate places where they can practice ABG "safely". They view ABG aesthetics as something that cannot be publicly expressed as a term or something to be acted upon. They pay careful attention to where and how to say this term, with a sensitive awareness of racial ramifications it may carry. In line with how they discursively define ABG as distant from average Asians, they too point out the "behavioral" characteristics associated with ABG yet not essentially associated with overseas Asian populations at large:

> "I think there may be some other characteristics of ABGs, mostly behavioral ones, such as they like drinking boba tea, and they may act drama and gossip a little bit—just the kind of Asian girl who looks mean…But certainly not all the Asian women are like that. At least I don't think I know anyone who is like that. I feel like my Asian friends here are just busy everyday, running from classes to jobs, and some even barely do makeup. I think you can say that the makeup you're wearing is like American-style makeup, but I don't think you can label that as an ABG style." (Monica, 25-29, now in United States)

In Monica's narratives, her overt rejection to be labeled as "ABG" based solely on their makeup is due to ABG's association with a type of femininity that is not really desirable or admirable in their social circle with other Asian women. In Schipper's original construction of pariah femininities, the "socially undesirable" qualities that define pariah femininities are vague - it does not specify to whom they appear undesirable and how they acquire such undesirability. In making distinctions between ABG aesthetics and mainstream Asian women aesthetics, respondents such as Monica clarify the mechanism of this social undesirability. It is not about adopting hegemonic masculinity traits, but about the misaligned representation

of the Asian women diaspora, which may disrupt racial rather than gender relations in society.

Making a clear distinction between ABG aesthetics and mainstream Asian women aesthetics is a pattern found among all respondents abroad, who acknowledge that they came to learn such distinctions from their Asian counterparts in the western country they reside. Those Asian counterparts tend to be Asians who were born and raised there, whom the Chinese respondents consider as a group they "feel naturally close to" and thus can "learn from them" (Penny). Observing their lifestyle, including what makeup they put on their face, how they dress themselves, and how they pass as someone who has so "gotten used to life here" (Ivy), influences how overseas Chinese women see the difference between ABG aesthetics and the aesthetics that they believe the majority of Asians are doing. For example, Ivy, a respondent with three years experience of living and working in the U.S., says that her overall style leans more towards "a localized Asian look":

> Ivy: When I learned about ABG, I didn't think about transforming into that kind of makeup…After all, having been here for a long time, I probably didn't care that much about my appearance. I might just put on some eyeliner and contour my face, then I'd be on my way... It's more of a localized Asian look here.
>
> Author: What does that localized kind of Asians feel like to you?
>
> Ivy: Dark skin tone. The eyebrows look natural - probably they wouldn't draw eyebrows…They prefer to retain their original eye color without wearing contacts. And they are confident. I'm very envious about that…And this look is more common on the street, especially since I'm currently abroad. The girls who grew up here just don't wear a lot of makeup.

Ivy clearly suggests a distinction between a "localized Asian look", namely, a mainstream look adopted by overseas Asians, and an ABG look, which she implies lots of care work on one's face. Even though we may notice some shared makeup routines between these two

looks, for example, features like uplifted eyebrows, long eyeliners, and fake eyelashes, overseas Chinese women still view them as merely daily beauty routines shared among themselves and their Asian American/Canadian/Australian peers. In other words, overseas Chinese women routinize beauty practices that Chinese women in China consider as "non-routine" ones in China, despite sometimes both their makeup look similar or undistinguishable from one another.

Some respondents carry this point of unpolished beauty even further that distances overseas Chinese from ABG aesthetics. Poppy, another respondent in the United States, adds an anecdote of herself deliberately "dressing down" when she hangs out with her Asian American female friends:

> "Wow, I don't think any of the Asian Americans I know wear makeup…My current leader at work is an ABC, and I feel like she just does two things every day: eyebrows and eyelashes. That's all I can tell. It's almost like no makeup…And I would dress down if I go out with my ABC friends, because I think it's just weird to be with them if you're too fancy. You would feel a little bit of pressure if you are dressed up, because they just don't do that… I once went home in the middle of a hangout with my last round of friends to change my outfit, just in order to go out with one of my ABC friends. I changed to wearing a pair of jean shorts and a casual top. Just keep it simple." (Poppy, 19-24, in the United States)

In this case, Poppy is even more aware of the gender policing that results from the racialization of Asians in the West. This careful avoidance of "being too fancy" within the same gender does more than navigating interpersonal relations, but also an preemptive action to disengage a woman with being potentially read as not "Asian" enough. Opting for the mainstream Asian look is an affirmative action of reassuring one's "Asianness" that is untamed by the White gaze. Therefore, distancing oneself from ABG aesthetics, which they consider as catering to the White gaze, is also distancing oneself from a racialized femininity attached to a particular subordinated group of Asians in the western context. Instead, what

overseas Chinese women aspire for is a kind of politically correct Asian female look, which they characterize as minimal maintenance of beauty and personal charisma such as "self-confidence vibe".

Having repositioned in new racial relations, overseas women also engage with cosmetic consumption differently from women in China, in order not to be recognized or labeled as an ABG. In contrast to mainland respondents, overseas respondents try to engage in beauty consumption activities to the minimal extent. However, lots of them are obsessed with one beauty practice: the eyelash extensions, a beauty routine that also distances itself from the typical ABG look, by investing themselves in seeking Chinese eyelash extensionists. Among overseas respondents,, Princess is the one who is passionate about eyelash extensions, and has her own taste of what ideal eyelashes look like on an Asian woman like her:

> "…My favorite eyelash extensionist is Chinese…I still prefer Chinese people for eyelash extensions, because their aesthetic feels much closer to what I want…I've been in contact with eyelash extensionists who are not Chinese, and they would produce eyelashes that are very thick and dense, like a fan. That kind of eyelashes is actually the ABG style…And their techniques are different as well. Chinese eyelash extensionists have so-called "Chinese-style curly eyelashes", which is not the same as sticking false eyelashes directly onto your own eyelashes. This kind of Chinese eyelashes will be more suitable for my eyes because I have single eyelids. If I go to a beauty salon owned by White or Asians who were born here, they just stick false eyelashes onto my own…it wouldn't look good." (Princess, 25-29, in the United States)

For respondents like Princess, the eyelash extension technique employed by Chinese-owned beauty salons conveys a more subtle sense of Asian beauty tailored specifically to Chinese women, which differs from the ABG-styled eyelashes. The latter are indistinguishable from what White extensionists or Asians growing up there would do to Asian women. Craving for Chinese-style eyelashes is typical among Chinese respondents living overseas. They believe

that an aesthetic consensus can only be achieved within the same ethnic niche - in this case, a Chinese community that has not been assimilated into White aesthetics towards Asian beauty. By investing themselves in the embodied work they consider white Americans or white-washed Asians would not undertake, they too physically distance themselves from the ABG aesthetic. In practice, these women carefully navigate a course between being labeled as an ABG and being read as having an ill-fitted face among Asian communities in the country they reside.

The above story of "distancing", however, does not illustrate the full nuance here. These overseas Chinese women do spot a safe place to practice ABG aesthetics, where they do not need to worry about being under the "white-washed" radar - that is the context where they are surrounded by Chinese women recently migrated to the west or who "still haven't figured out how things work here", using Isabel's words. Isabel is a respondent who has been in the United States since middle school. She openly admits to her fascination with embodying the ABG style when she hangs out with her Chinese friends, seeing it as a means to set herself apart from them:

> Isabel: Back when I was in the tenth grade, I went to a SAT prep camp in Shanghai, and it was all international students over there. They did have a totally different vibe from the few Chinese folks I'd seen back in high school in the US... They were all fair-skinned and skinny with long hair, and they seemed to be dressed in designer labels. I was basically surrounded by these kinds of girls at the time... we were all hanging out together, hitting the clubs... and that's when I came across the whole 'ABG' thing. Honestly, thinking back then, I'd say my mindset wasn't great—I kinda wanted to distance myself from being seen as a typical Chinese international student. I was like, 'Okay, I didn't really grow up in China, and you guys are all going to NYU (New York University) that kinda stuff…' I guess I just didn't want to seem so 'Chinese,' you know? There's this term called 'fresh off the boat,' which basically means you just arrived from China or wherever, and you stick out like a sore thumb, totally unable to blend in with the locals…

> Author: Then how do you think your style back then differed from those Chinese students?
>
> Isabel: So I've got a few friends from USC (University of South California). And I gotta say they have a typical style [that is different]...I kinda copy that vibe by learning from them... The overall vibe is like, everyone's got pretty, but the makeup is different, such as heavy eye makeup…and arched up eyebrows…probably thick eyelashes, too.

Isabel's selective adoption of ABG aesthetics appears to contradict the pattern observed among overseas respondents who are hesitant to embrace such aesthetics. However, it reinforces the idea that women's performance of femininities is inherently a relational construct, adding nuance to our understanding of femininities as effects not only in heterosexual configurations but also in cultural distinctions. For respondents like Isabel, who have spent years abroad, the overall "vibe" conveyed through ABG aesthetics serves as a tangible marker to differentiate themselves from those who may not fully comprehend gender relations, particularly "what is considered as female beauty" in a Western context. In this sense, ABG aesthetics are strategically employed to signify an individual's "Americanized" background without having to articulate about it. It helps signal to others a fuller integration into American society and positions them within a distinct, and possibly higher, social stratum compared to those who embody aesthetics more prevalent in East Asian countries.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this section, in addition to concluding, I present a table below charted by region and relationship to summarize the findings. I have established above contextual meanings of multiple femininities, such as "west-coast girl femininity" that symbolizes a cosmopolitan female figure, "White femininity" that symbolizes a "white-washed Asian" when used on

Asian women of diaspora, subordinated femininity that symbolizes a marginalized or subcultural womanhood due to gender policing at the societal level, and pariah femininity that undo the normative gender relations as how Schippers defines it. I want to highlight here that those meanings only emerge and gain legitimation when we take both the practitioners (i.e. those who enact ABG aesthetics) and the audience (i.e. those who bears the effect of that enactment) into account in order to fully understand the mechanism and consequence of embodied aesthetics and femininities.

	Meanings of ABG Aesthetics for Chinese Women (in China)	Meanings of ABG Aesthetics for Chinese Women (abroad)
Discursive construction	"West-coast girl femininity" / cosmopolitan femininity	Asian women who take on "White femininity" / "White-washed" Asian women
Dating Market	A pariah and cosmopolitan femininity	Not a pariah femininity but a fetishized femininity
Daily Lives	Not a pariah femininity; subordinated femininity in the eyes of some senior cohorts and cosmopolitan (thus desirable) in the eyes of young women in China.	Marginalized femininity; sometimes a pariah femininity as a gender strategy, e.g. when surrounded by Chinese women who recently migrated

Table 1. A synthesis of empirical findings of ABG aesthetics in China and abroad

The table above highlights not only important variations within femininities, affirming what previous gender scholars have argued about multiple femininities, but also important variations *within* pariah femininities, namely, under which conditions of interaction a gendered aesthetic, such as ABG, is perceived to embody and display pariah femininity or

not. This demonstrates that pariah femininities, like hegemonic masculinities, are not best identified by what they look like, i.e., the "character types" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005); we have to look at how they are interpreted to have meaning within existing systems of power and inequality: in the case of ABG aesthetics, its performance by women appears as a gender project in China, whereas its performance by women appears as a gender *and* racial project outside China.

The comparative case of ABG aesthetics reiterates what Schippers believes that pariah femininities "do" (i.e., the effects of pariah femininities on gender). Yet, it also adds empirical and theoretical nuance to our understandings of pariah femininities in two ways. First, as the study demonstrates, we need to pay careful attention to contexts and perceptions when it comes to pariah femininities. As I document here, pariah femininities sometimes lose their distinctive "pariah-ness" in terms of offering authentic challenges to gendered forms of power and inequality. This quality is contingent upon how specific configurations of femininity are made sense of by others, and as I show here, ABG aesthetics are not made sense of in the same ways by all actors or in all contexts.

Second, this research details how pariah femininities can actually gain gendered empowerment when being in contact with other hegemonic elements of femininity, for example, a feminine figure symbolizing cosmopolitanism. While pariah femininities were first offered by Schippers (2007) as a configuration of femininity distinct from what she theorized as "hegemonic femininity," here I show how the boundary between these configurations can at times be blurred and depends on both motivations for their mobilization and the reception of the audience. These two ways of developing sociological theorization of

femininity/ies can also be extended to the study of masculinities and related gender(ed) projects.

However, this study has its limitations. First, a majority of female participants in this study identify themselves as "middle-to-upper class" in the post-interview questionnaire, which is especially the case when it comes to overseas respondents. I hypothesize here that the practice of ABG aesthetics is also a classed phenomenon, where women with certain class backgrounds may not even be able to hear about this term or participate in this beauty trend. In this sense, this study does leave those groups of women unexamined. Future research on gendered aesthetics can detail such class variations within the women's community. Secondly, while acknowledging different social contexts where the politics of ABG aesthetics is produced differently, this study still builds upon data drawn largely from heterosexual tropes. While this study mentions the homosocial aspect of ABG aesthetics, for example, performing ABG style in women-dominating spaces, it still overlooks conditions where "rules of attraction" in ABG aesthetics may or may not be articulated or performed differently in non-heterosexual contexts, e.g. in lesbian communities. This points to another question for future research to answer: the connection between sexuality and gendered aesthetics. The proposed two ways of intervention could potentially be of interest to scholars of gender, sexuality, and aesthetics.

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Appendix: Interview Guide/Questions

Note: The same interview guide was used for both groups of respondents in this study, with slight modifications made based on which questions were not applicable for them to answer. For example, Chinese respondents in China may not be able to answer questions about their overseas living experience.

Part 1: reactions towards recruiting post/email

This part is intended to warm up the conversation by reminding them of their first acquaintance with this project.

- Where did you see this post?
- Why would you like to participate in this study? Or, what aspects of the post (content, photo, etc.) stand out to you?
- For those who do not consider themselves "ABG": Why would you still like to participate in this study, thinking of yourself not an ABG/ABG style?

Part 2: the first encounter with ABG and their reflections on this term

Because ABG is such a "muddy" word whose meanings, representations, and implications intertwine with one another as a combined result of media rendering, industry marketing, and interpersonal representation, instead of providing a neat definition of this term, I intend to situate it within multiple discourses I expect to generate from my interviews. This part aims to do so by inviting participants to provide their own understandings on ABG, whether they consider it a cultural phenomenon, an ephemeral trend, a fashion style, or a racialize expression, etc.

- Do you remember what was your first time to see/hear/use this word? Where?
    - Note 1: If the participant talks about a video or video uploader (such as a youtuber), continue to ask about the video or youtuber. Such as: On what platform did you see this word? Have you followed such videos since your first encounter?
    - Note 2: whether the participant has experience abroad might result in variations in understanding and experiences towards this term. Pay attention to this subtopic.
- What's your initial impression of this term? How did you come up with this impression?
- What else do you think can (or cannot) describe such a style? What do you think a typical ABG looks like?
    - Have you encountered anyone who (verbally) describes you as ABG or ABG style? What were your responses to that?

Part 3: the presentation/representation of ABG (on media and in real life)

- Did you search for this term after you first heard about it?
- Under what kind of conditions do you see/hear/use this word? (give examples)
- Do you think you know someone with this ABG style? Why?
    - What specifically in this person do you identify as ABG?
    - Tell me about your friend group and what kind of makeup styles your friend group wears.

About ABG makeup tutorials:

- Have you watched ABG makeup tutorials? Where?
    - Do you have someone you would consider an ABG icon for those makeup tutorials?
    - How would you describe this person and their look?
    - What do you like about them?
    - Normally which parts of the makeup tutorials do you pay special attention to?
    - Do you apply such makeup in your daily life? Under what kind of conditions?

About ABG makeup in life:

- Have you tried out this style/makeup before? (note differences between style and makeup)
    - If yes:
        - Why would you like to try out? Tell me about your first time trying out this style.
            - How did you learn to put on the ABG style?
            - How have you picked up different things over time? How have you made changes to how you do this style?
        - What are your makeup procedures now?
        - What kind of cosmetics products do you use when doing this makeup? Why?
        - Under what kind of conditions do you want to put on such makeup/style?
        - What clothing do you typically wear with this style?
        - What are the common reactions (to your makeup/style)? Have you paid attention to their reactions?
        - Have you tried out other makeup styles? What do you think are the differences between this ABG style and others? In what situations do you use other makeup styles?
    - If not:
        - Why? Would you like to try it out in the future?

- Have you tried out other makeup styles? What do you think are the differences between this ABG style and others?

Part 4: An experiment: let participants talk about makeup

- Ask to see their social media (i.e. instagram) and have them talk through what kinds of makeup looks are on their social media accounts. You could have them talk through how they chose that look and what they feel it expresses.
- Ask if I can see their dating profile. Go through each pic and talk about how they chose each one, the makeup in each, etc. You can also ask them about reactions that they get on the app about their images. This is especially good because dating apps have a limited number of pictures.

Part 5: Demographic information (to be asked in post-interview survey)

1. What is your age/age group?
2. What is your gender?
3. How do you identify your sexual orientation?
4. Are you located overseas or in China?
    a. If overseas:
        i. Which country are you in?
        ii. How long have you been abroad?
        iii. Are you currently in school or working?
    b. If in China:
        i. Where in China are you located?
        ii. Are you currently in school or working?