

Group Images of Korean Women on Douyin: Representation, Generation, and Identification*

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Since 2023, the slogan “Question Korean women, understand Korean women, learn Korean women” has become popular in Chinese social networks. Previously, Chinese netizens have not paid such attention to women from other countries. In response to this phenomenon, this paper combines neoliberal feminist theories with thematic analysis to obtain a total of 80 valid samples from the Douyin platform to analyze the image of Korean women disseminated on the Douyin platform. Finally, it is concluded that the image of Korean women’s strict self-discipline, internal and external cultivation, sobriety of thought, and the spirit of courageous struggle have to a certain extent promoted the awakening of self-consciousness of female netizens in China; on the other hand, it is also necessary to realize that the image of Korean women disseminated in Douyin is not completely true, and it is also necessary to be alert to the phenomenon that the gender dichotomy has been reduced to the attraction of network traffic and capital as a sharp weapon.

Keywords: Douyin, Korean women, feminism, group images

Introduction

Since 2023, the slogan “Question Korean women, understand Korean women, learn from Korean women” has become popular in Chinese social networks. On China’s Douyin and Bilibili video platforms, vlogs of Korean women learning have received more than a million views, and Korean women’s “sober speeches” have received nearly 10 million plays on the Douyin platform. Previously, Chinese netizens have not paid such attention to women from other countries. The attention of Chinese netizens to Korean women is extending from their outward attire and beauty to their inner mental attitude. Nowadays, “Korean woman” is not only a title for Korean women, but also a new “life template”.

The essence of studying the group characteristics of Korean women on Douyin is to focus on women and understand the growth of women in both countries. Perspectives on the Korean women’s group and interpreting the influencing factors behind it are conducive to a better understanding of the Chinese women’s group, and provide some useful ideas for the international dissemination of Chinese and Korean content.

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Korean Women Under Neoliberal Feminism

Neoliberal Feminism

British feminist scholar Catherine Rottenberg introduced the concept of Neoliberal Feminism in “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism”⁰, which is a highly individualistic feminism that advocates for women to plan their lives individually in order to achieve a “work-family” balance”. Neoliberal feminism also favours women’s view of themselves as human capital and encourages women to invest in themselves in order to gain power. It also favours women’s complete autonomy and full responsibility for their own well-being.

Conflict Between Neo-liberal Feminism and the Traditional Image of Korean Women

With the strengthening of Korea’s economic power and the improvement of women’s education, the traditional ideology of male superiority over women has been impacted, and Korean women have advocated for emancipation, freedom, and equality, and their sense of independence and equality has further increased. While Korea’s liberal economy continues to grow, neoliberal feminist theories have had a wide impact in Korea, influencing women’s values, career development, and marital choices⁰. However, Korean women influenced by Confucianism are still unable to break away from the social roles traditionally assigned to them, and are forced to make self-sacrifices in order to achieve a balance between work and family. The conflict between neo-liberal ideology and the traditional roles of Korean women has increased the pressure on Korean working women, and more and more Korean women are choosing to “marry late and have children late” or even “not marrying and not having children”, which are different choices in the light of the conflict between these two concepts.

Research Methodology and Process

Research Methodology

This paper identifies and analyses the content of short video transmissions about Korean women’s images on China’s Douyin platform with the help of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in data that minimally organise and richly describe the data in detail, and summarises and organises the collected textual content in order to distil the themes.

Sample Selection

This paper examines the image of Korean women disseminated on the short-video platform Douyin in China. The keywords “Korean women” was searched on the Douyin platform, and the videos with more than 10,000 likes were screened out by the order of the number of likes; at the same time, after searching for keywords, the platform pushes out videos, such as “Korean women’s make-up”, “Korean women’s dressing”, “Korean women’s learning vlog”, “Korean women’s sober speech”, and other seven related topics, resulting in a total of 109 samples. Viewing the above samples and deleting duplicates, 80 valid video samples were finally obtained. According to the classification of topics, the article selected the Korean makeup posted by six beauty bloggers, the video of “bogyung”—Korean local blogger reproduced by Douyin self-media, the Korean reality show “Siren: Survive the Island”, total 23 short videos as case studies for analysis. The cases are analysed to investigate the representation, generation, and identity of Korean women’s group images in Douyin short videos.

Research Process

This paper takes the image of Korean women disseminated by Douyin short videos as the original theme, and focuses on and records the images of Korean women produced and portrayed by Chinese netizens in the

videos for generalisation. Specifically, this paper follows the six-part method of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing yourself with your data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report.

Images of Korean Women (Subject)	Video content/advocacy	Encode	Example
Perfect makeup and outfit	Chinese bloggers imitate and learn from Korean women's makeup and outfits	Show the outward appearance of Korean women	① Chen Yuanyuan "Korean high school students' Makeup" received 880,000 likes; ② Not a sister. "After trying Korean style friends say it's perfect" received 677,000 likes; ③ Tea CHARR "Deep Dive into the Essence of Korean Makeup" received 312,000 likes
High self-discipline	Korean female bloggers's learning vlog Chinese bloggers challenge to learn Korean girls' study routine	Show Korean women's study routines	① Will Fire Big Star "A Day in the Life of a Korean Study Blogger" received 310,000 Likes; ② Small Fish Classmate UAU "When I learnt from Korean female for a day" received 113,000 likes; ③ Pickle Pepper Ning Ning "Study 16 hours like Korean women" received 54,000 likes
Brave	Korean women boycott clandestine photography Korean women fight for abortion rights Korea's Ewha Womans University opposes backdoor admissions	Show mutual support among Korean women and their struggle for power	① Fishing Entertainment "Always admire the courage of disobedience possessed by Korean women" received 635,000 likes; ② Mango Entertainment "Korean Women, the Unmissable Female Power, the Awakening Pioneers" received 537,000 likes; ③ Entertainment Quack Sauce "It's not for nothing that Korean women are so united" received 481,000 likes; ④ Senior viewer Liu Genhong "Underneath the Exquisite Makeup is an Increasingly Powerful Female Force" received 91,000 likes
Confident and strong	Korea's All-Female Career Show "Siren: Survive the Island"	Show Korean women in all jobs of life	① Wild Entertainer's "Sisters are so cool! Ignite" received 630,000 likes; ② Hong Qianchen's "Highly recommend this hot-blooded inspirational show" received 317,000 likes; ③ Telecom Hakimi "Sis is really confident in every speech, worthy of being a special forces! Received 204,000 likes
Forward-thinking	Four non-movements Ewha Womans University Slogan Non-fertility slogans	Show Korean Women's Attitudes Towards Childbirth	① Seven seven "Korean women's handsome behaviour speech" received 517,000 likes; ② Hundred Things Entertainment's "Korean Woman Says No Birth" received 340,000 Likes; ③ Entertainment Salad "Korean Women The Embodiment of Female Power" received 164,000 likes;

Characteristics of Korean Women in Douyin

In recent years, Douyin has become one of the main channels of cultural exchange among contemporary people, with more and more Korean women figures appearing on the Douyin platform, carrying and reporting on Korean women-related daily news. The slogan “Question Korean women, understand Korean women, become a Korean woman” has become popular on Chinese social media platforms not only because Chinese netizens partly agree with the attitudes of Korean women, but also because Chinese women who grew up in similar social environments understand and resonate with the paths of self-transformation of Korean women. Korean women’s group portraits on Douyin show the following basic characteristics.

Strict Self-discipline

Korean women who have received a lot of attention on Douyin share a common characteristic; they maintain exquisite make-up, healthy bodies, and positive spirits, with clear goals and directions, practical execution, and a strong inner core, balancing external image and self-notation. Korean female blogger “UDAN” studied 9-12 hours a day to prepare for the Korean Civil Service Exam; similarly, Korean study blogger “Bemysself” prepared for the teacher’s exam for more than seven consecutive months, and so on. Korean women’s study method is studied by Chinese netizens, and this way of life reflects Korean women’s resilience, self-discipline, and the pursuit of advancement of women’s characteristics and strength, which is loved by Chinese girls.

Sisterly Love With Strong Empathy

The slogan “Sisters are coming” has spread widely in Douyin. The slogan “Sister is coming” first appeared in South Korea, Ewha University backdoor admission incident—graduated sister in solidarity with the opposition to the school’s backdoor admission of the younger sister spontaneous protests, holding a banner “Don’t be afraid, sister is coming” to express opposition to the school “disguised wealth”. This incident also attracted a lot of attention from Chinese netizens, who commented that they “felt the power of women in action”. When women’s social issues were later discussed, Chinese female netizens also used the slogan “Sisters are coming” to show their solidarity. Such declaration of sisterhood is inspirational, and the sisterhood and empathy between women is a unique manifestation of the power of women (Wang, 2023).

Sharp Words and Strong Claims

On the Douyin platform, videos about “Korean women’s sober speeches” have received hundreds of thousands of likes. Korean women’s speeches and slogans are characterised by sharpness, and they express their demands in a straightforward and clear manner. For example, “No dating, no sex, no marriage, no pregnancy” advocated by the “Four Non-Movement”. From these slogans, it can be concluded that Korean women’s speeches are strongly emotional and gender-opposed, and that a short slogan expresses the collective consciousness of Korean women. As Chinese people are more moderate and middle-of-the-road in their expressions, it is rare to see such sharp slogans as those of the Korean women in the female community, and the Korean women’s declarations are seen by Chinese female netizens as a manifestation of freedom and bravery.

Repeated Oscillations Between the Independent Woman and the Pandering Man

On the one hand, Korean women are proactively playing a greater role in society. Korean women are beginning to break free from traditional concepts in their approach to marriage, family, and career, and are focusing on their own self-development, changing society’s stereotypical image of women. The video clip of “Siren: Survive the Island”, a Korean professional women’s survival variety show with 630,000 likes in Douyin,

focuses on independent women in various industries, demonstrating unique female power to become a female role model.

But at the same time, Korean women are not completely free from the male gaze. Many young and beautiful female anchors appeal to male aesthetics and preferences in order to gain attention, while the songs performed by today's Korean idol groups have strong female-conscious lyrics, the matching costumes and designed dance moves still send out signals of male-pleasing, and there is a disconnect between the lyrics and the dance moves.

Causes of the Popularity of the “Korean Women” Group in Douyin

Focusing on the process perspective, the following levels can be used to analyse the reasons why Korean female portraits have exploded in Douyin.

Douyin Accounts Open Korean Women's Popularity

Chinese media reports on Korea's “declining fertility rate”, “resistance to malicious secret filming”, and the “Telegram N” have opened a window for Chinese netizens to know Korean women. Secondly, the self-media accounts on Douyin reproduced or commented on the hot events in Korea, and these self-media's promotion of Korean women's slogans and description of Korean women's image shaped Chinese netizens' initial perception of Korean women. For example, the most reprinted news report in the media is about the topic of Korean women's fertility. As Chinese society is also facing the same fertility dilemma at the moment, it reflects the identification and resonance between Chinese and Korean women on the issue of unequal social status between men and women, highlighting the identity of women as the main narrative in society, and thus broadening Chinese netizens' horizons of understanding Korean women to a certain extent.

Enrichment of the Image of Korean Women by Douyin Bloggers

The high degree of freedom of expression on the Internet has given rise to the birth of individual opinion leaders who express their own views and attitudes while conveying facts. On the Douyin platform, the videos that have received the most attention from Korean women's groups are “The growing power of women under delicate make-up” posted by the account “Liu Genhong” and other related content and so on.

Unlike the official media's factual reports on Korean women, individual opinion leaders have their own understanding and evaluation of Korean women, while enriching the image of Korean women, converting attention to Korean women from make-up and dress to ideology. The image of Korean women as a whole is portrayed to Chinese users, making the overall image of Korean women more three-dimensional through the Douyin platform.

Algorithm Expands the Spread of Korean Women's Image

The Douyin short video platform provides accurate content based on users' personal preferences, and achieves seamless switching and connection of multi-scene fragmentation through powerful algorithmic recommendations⁰. In the case of the Korean women's group on the Douyin platform, the essence is that under the empowerment of technology, the self-expression of women's groups in the cyberspace breaks through the scope of topics in the past, transforming individual narratives into collective narratives. Through Douyin's algorithmic recommendation, users come into contact with the Korean women's groups recommended by the platform, and the “relay” of users at different levels spreads the message to more people.

However, a point that cannot be ignored is that the content on Douyin is more related to users' interests, which leads to the problem of one-sidedness in the dissemination of the image of Korean women, and users are

thus trapped in an information cocoon, resulting in limitations in dissemination.

The Catalytic Power of Emotional Communication

“Emotional communication” is one of the essential elements for the Korean female image to gain attention on the Douyin, and the emergence of short video platforms has provided a new field for emotional communication. Emotional communication is not only a concomitant social phenomenon, but also a social need of human beings. Taking the Korean feminist speeches “You don’t have to care about my appearance because I’m not your future wife but your future boss” as example, some Chinese women, who also face similar problems, have emotional resonance with the Korean women’s speeches, and have liked, commented, and retweeted them, further expanding the dissemination of the relevant content.

Image Identity Between Chinese and Korean Women

China and South Korea belong to the same East Asian cultural circle, and have similarities in emotional expression, values, ways of thinking, etc. Therefore, when the ideas and images of Korean women are disseminated on our platform, it is easier for our audience to produce psychological identity, which can be analysed from the following perspectives.

Mutual Redemption in a Patriarchal Cultural Environment

The female identity in traditional society is shaped by men and is an existence that lacks a sense of female subjectivity. On social platforms such as Douyin, women have more space and opportunities to participate in the discussion of gender issues, and women have a certain voice, which leads to the construction of female subjective identity. Once the book *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, released by Korean female writer Cho Nam-joo, and the film of the same name based on it were released, there was a gender split in social opinion. On Korean film scoring websites, the average female rating was 9.46, while the average male rating was only 1.7. The spread of the film through Douyin has also made more people aware of the social environment and social prejudice against women. Chinese and Korean women have collectively voiced “I am Kim Ji Young”. Due to the similarity between Chinese and Korean women’s cultural backgrounds and social situations, the discussions on the Internet triggered a resonance and a mechanism of retweeting, liking, and commenting to express their agreement, and the individuals who participated in these behaviours became a group, forming a collective consensus in such an environment, and strengthening the identity of Chinese and Korean women on an individual-to-individual, individual-to-collective, collective-to-collective, and collective-to-collective basis.

Identity in Social Context of Reproductive Stress

South Korea’s number of newborns in 2022 fell by 11,000 year-on-year to 249,000 for the first time since 1970, which fell to a record low. There are many reasons why the fertility rate in Korea is declining. For Korean women, who have received higher education, they are far from being treated equally in the workplace, and the gender discrimination that women face in life or in the workplace has exacerbated the problem of male-female confrontation, with many women reluctant to get married. And at the end of last year, China’s population of 1.411 billion fell below 10 million births for the first time, with only 9.56 million babies born. Chinese women are more able to empathise with Korean women as they are also facing the same problem of pressure to give birth that Korean women are experiencing.

However, the difference between Korea and China is that Korean women shown on Douyin are resistant and averse to childbearing, while Chinese women are more likely to hold a worrying attitude towards childbearing,

and expect the state to provide support in terms of policy and social forces to provide a more inclusive and comprehensive childbearing environment for women.

Identity in the Context of Awakening Self-consciousness

In recent years, discussions on various gender issues on Internet platforms, both in Korea and in China, have been very much on the rise in terms of feminism. With the birth of “Megalia” and other online feminist communities in Korea, women have opened up their past and ongoing practices online. This has led women’s groups to empathise with similar experiences and actively engage in feminist discourse⁰. The Chinese women’s self-awareness has awakened; more and more women are participating in the discussion of women’s topics, for example, many bloggers encourage girls not to be anxious about their looks, to reject the shame of menstruation, and to refuse PUA (Pick-up Artist, emotional control of the other party by means of mental suppression), and so on.

However, there are also differences between the two countries in terms of women’s expression of consciousness and their fight for their rights. Korean women’s slogans are usually more explicitly gender-oppositional and extremely confrontational, but these strongly confrontational expressions rarely appear in the Chinese context. Chinese women’s language is more moderate, subtle, and introverted, and they tend to speak from their own point of view, for example, “not getting married and not having children to keep you safe”. This difference is not only a reflection of cultural differences, but also an aspect of Chinese culture that expresses disapproval of certain statements made by Korean women.

Reflection

The Pernicious Involution of the Supremacy of Appearance

As mentioned earlier, the Korean women who get attention on Douyin share a common trait of maintaining extremely delicate make-up and highly disciplined body management in their lives. Under the operation of the logic of capital, Korean society has gradually developed a supremacy of appearance, and whether or not one is beautiful and slim has become a measure of a woman’s value. More and more Koreans continue to invest time and money in order to have a more youthful and beautiful appearance^{0 0}. And the images of Korean women widely disseminated in Douyin usually convey women’s extreme pursuit of appearance and body shape.

The supremacy of appearance in Korean society actually reflects the subordinate status of women. Such an evaluation system has permeated every aspect of daily life in China and Korea through mass media propaganda. Of the 80 valid samples, more than 40 sample videos were about Chinese women learning Korean women’s body management, make-up, and dressing. Although the aesthetic characteristics of Korean women are demonstrated to a certain extent, the body anxiety and face value anxiety conveyed at the same time are also cause for alarm. The sub-healthy aesthetics conveyed by the vicious involution in appearance, transmitted through social media, instill consumer culture and aesthetic standards in individuals, facilitating the exploitation of women by capital to the detriment of feminism⁰.

Conflict Amplification of Gender Issues

In recent years, with the polarization of groups and the antagonism between men and women in the Internet discourse field, “gender antagonism” has become one of the serious social problems and network culture problems. In the rapidly developed information age, gender binary opposition has become a weapon to attract network traffic and capital⁰. Of the 80 valid samples collected, 27 videos were published by the marketing

accounts. Although the videos released by these marketing accounts show the characteristics of Korean women's courage to pursue power, the high likes also reflect the recognition of Korean women by Chinese females. But at the same time, it also reflects that in order to attract network traffic, marketing accounts deliberately create the topic of gender opposition, citing inflammatory words to attract attention, which aggravates the problem of gender opposition to a certain extent.

Communication Barriers to Intercultural Communication

Although Korea and China have highly similar social and cultural backgrounds, there are also many cultural differences. Although the image of Korean women on Douyin has had an impact on the Chinese Internet, due to the differences between Korean women and Chinese women in social environment, economic status, and personal concepts, Chinese women do not fully agree with Korean women's views to a certain extent. However, the one-sided images of Korean women in Tiktok cause the limitation of communication, and the group images of Korean women are not completely presented, which is also the communication barrier between China and South Korea in the communication process of feminist development.

Conclusion

The discussion of "Korean women" on Douyin has been high, and the image of Korean women has had an important influence on Chinese women. Chinese netizens' attention to Korean women ranges from dressing, beauty make-up, and other appearance to learning Korean women's pursuit of self-discipline, hard work, sober and independent attitudes to life, which also shows that feminism in China does not only stay in the discussion, but also influences the concept and practice level. This also shows that feminism in China is not only discussed, but also influenced by concepts and practices.

This paper explores the construction and dissemination of Korean women's image on the Douyin platform in the context of neoliberal feminist theories. On the one hand, the image of Korean women's strict self-discipline, internal and external cultivation, sobriety of thought, and courage to struggle have led the awakening of self-consciousness and the precipitation of the spiritual kernel of female netizens in China, which is a supplement to the connotation of feminism in the new era. On the other hand, it is also important to realise that the Korean women spread in Douyin do not represent the entire Korean women's group, and there are limitations to the one-sidedness of the spread of their image. It is also important to be wary of the fact that in the information age, algorithmic technology has become a barrier to cross-cultural communication, and gender antagonism has been reduced to a weapon to attract network traffic and capital.

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