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The Power of Chinese Cute: Cutification, Governance, and the "Little Sheep (Wo)man" Identity in Post-Zero-COVID China

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Abstract

This study explores the affective power of cutification and cute aesthetics in post-zero-COVID China, based on the “little sheep (wo)man” (??? in Chinese) identity on Chinese social media. In December 2022, the revocation of the zero-COVID policy in China witnessed the emergence of the identity “little sheep (wo)man.” The term drew from the cartoons watched by this Chinese generation back in the 2010s as a cutified identity for the infected people. This cutified identity, and the cutification of COVID-positive symptoms, marked a nouveau approach to studying cute aesthetics, which needs to be discussed separately from the concepts of kawaii (cute in Japanese) and cute consumption in a neoliberal context. In this sense, this study explores how this Chinese cute aesthetic functioned both as a strategy resisting exclusion resulting from zero-COVID governance and as a continuation of the zero-COVID policy. By investigating this duality, this study further asks how the “power of powerless” of cute can be understood in Chinese political paradigm, and how social media users may challenge and reinforce structures of governance through this cute aesthetic. Apart from the kawaii, this “Chinese cute” provided a rare example through which cute can be analysed as a lived social and political practice rather than merely a symbol or commercial style. It served as an overlooked form of expression, negotiation and resistance on social media while Chinese individuals navigate, struggle and internalise power relations under the centralised political system during public health crisis.

Posts relating to the “little sheep (wo)man” identity were approached and analysed by online ethnography. Being observed during a reasonable timeframe, posts are categorised based on substantive topics and identifiable recurring clusters. Dynamics embedded in both posted content and comment sections are then analysed in terms of the manifest of cutification (e.g. the adoption of childhood

cartoons, the self-expression of being “powerless” after being infected by COVID-19), and the reaction towards it (e.g. emotional empathy, mutual support, disliking this cutified identity), to unlock the discursive power possessed by this online identity. Besides, considering the imposed media censorship and other constraints, semi-structured interviews will be conducted alongside ethnographic observation to further understand the mechanism and empowerment of this Chinese cute aesthetic against the backdrop of the highly-centralised political system.

Through online ethnography, this study appears to be the very first attempt to understand Chinese cute aesthetics, and also one of the earliest studies that closely examines cute aesthetics from an online communicational perspective. The affective power this Chinese cute aesthetic possesses, and the political atmosphere in which it was nurtured, have enabled this study to bring nuanced understandings toward the internalisation and performance of decentralised power relationships through bodies and emotions on digital platforms, and thus to rethink the paradox of the authenticity of contemporary popular culture and political ideology based on this significant online cultural phenomenon of “little sheep (wo)man”.

Keywords: Chinese Cute Aesthetics; Cutification; Affective Politics; Post Zero-COVID China; Online Ethnography