


Smartphones, Weixin and Beautiful Bodies: The Role of Mobile Technologies for Crafting Desired Selves in Lhasa

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hoden said: “When we are outside, we need to be beautiful.” She hesitantly answered my question as to why Tsering, Drolma and she were refreshing their make-up for the third time since we had left the Barkor (*bar skor*) and arrived at the picnic ground a few hours earlier. After a heavy lunch the four of us were crouched together on comfortable benches in one corner of a large rented tent that belonged to a commercial picnic ground in North Lhasa. Choden, Tsering and Drolma had taken turns in serving their male tea friends (*ja rogs*) who were sitting in the other corner as well as outside in the sun with deep-fried biscuits (*kha zas*), boiled eggs and dried cheese and pouring sweat tea in their tiny glasses. The men were completely immersed in playing majiang and *sho* (dice game) and once in a while called the three to deliver cigarettes between the different game tables.

Despite my persistent inquiries, Choden did not explain to me on this occasion what exactly constituted being beautiful in her view. Yet, watching the three of them provided some clues what kind of beauty they desired: Choden skillfully balanced a little mirror on her knees while slowly applying black eyeliner and mascara to her eyes and lip-gloss to her lips. Tsering was busy coloring her toenails in dark green so they would match her green Tibetan dress (*phyu ba*), jade earrings and apron (*pang den*). Then she carefully checked in the mirror if her face looked still “light and clean” from the foundation she had applied one hour before. Drolma was rearranging the

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sunglasses on her head as well as her hair which was braided in a “Chinese braid” as she called the single plait braided from the crown of her head to the nape of her neck. The beauty session was followed by another round of taking pictures together with each of their smartphones. Already earlier today Choden had instructed me on how to handle her camera phone while she was leaning against a handrail next to a tree. “You need to hold the phone high” she exclaimed while scrolling through a series of apparently unsatisfactory photos I had taken so far. “I don’t look beautiful. My legs are too short”, she complained. Then she went on to slide her fingers over the screen to delete the images.² (Fieldnotes, 13 June 2015)

1. Introduction

During this picnic day, my three female friends, who had taken a day off from their busy lives as shopkeepers inside the Barkor, put a lot of effort into crafting beautiful selves. However, it was not only the careful attention paid to their appearance and the amount of make-up they had carried along that was noteworthy. Equally astounding was how deliberately and consciously they staged their beautified selves in order to photograph them with smartphones possessing built-in cameras.

Embedded in state-driven processes of economic transformation and infrastructural development, which intensified in the early 2000s, new information and communication technologies were introduced in Tibet at a rapid speed. As a result, the growing availability of mobile phones and the subsequent introduction of smartphones, mobile Internet as well as the free of charge Chinese mobile communication application Weixin³ profoundly transform the everyday experiences and practices of Tibetans in Lhasa and other parts of Tibet.⁴

² For reasons of confidentiality Tibetan friends and conversation partners are anonymised throughout this paper. Fieldnotes have been edited and Tibetan names are given in a simplified spelling for a better reading flow.

³ Weixin was released in 2011 and renamed WeChat in 2012 for international branding. In Lhasa, it is still widely known by its former name. Hence, I employ the Chinese term.

⁴ See Iselin 2016 on the role of mobile phones for the emergence of new place-making practices amongst pastoralists in Amdo and Grant 2016 on the performance of Tibetan ethnicity on Weixin. Research on the Internet and Tibetan cyberspace include Rabgey 2008 and Warner 2013.

Mobile technologies are adopted and used in culturally specific and gendered ways.⁵ This paper seeks to understand in which ways mobile technologies shape the subjectivities and experiences of Tibetan women in contemporary Lhasa. It explores how the usage of smartphones is intertwined with the performance of body and beauty practices in the everyday lives of urban Tibetan women who are in their 20s to mid-30s. My research on body and beauty practices, on which this paper is based, is informed by an understanding of bodies as socio-cultural and historical phenomena, sites for the social construction and performance of gender and as something people “do.”⁶ Due to an associated growing industry that mainly targets women and their bodily appearance, beauty, like smartphones and other consumer goods, is increasingly available in Lhasa as a commodity. As a consequence Tibetan women of different age and diverse educational and professional backgrounds engage in new practices to beautify their bodies. In this paper I argue that the integration of smartphones into women’s everyday lives opens up new potentials for experiencing and crafting desired gendered selves because smartphones introduce manifold options for consuming and “doing” beauty.

In order to study the complex relationship between mobile technology, beauty and the body, consumption and self, the paper explores three diverse but not unconnected aspects of smartphone usage in Tibetan women’s everyday lives. I will first show that smartphones are simultaneously material objects of and tools for consumption that are interpreted, customised and used in culturally and context specific ways. Secondly, I will discuss how smartphones shape women’s experiences of their bodies through taking, storing and editing photographs and selfies—photographic self-portraits—with built-in cameras and mobile applications (apps). In the last part of the paper, I examine how Tibetan women engage in gendered self-crafting by sharing beautiful selfies and body and beauty related posts on Weixin, currently the most popular smartphone-based social media platform in Lhasa.⁷ I also look at the conditions under which self-representation on Weixin takes place. Encouraged by the words

⁵ Hjorth 2014.

⁶ Koo and Reischer 2004. In this paper gender is understood as both a social and cultural construction and a process that needs to be repeatedly performed and produced (Butler 1990).

⁷ The platform continuously gains popularity in China and beyond with about 697 million active monthly users in the last quarter of 2015. See: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/255778/number-of-active-wechat-messenger-accounts/> (accessed 07.04.2016).

of Judith Okely—“anthropology thrives on the anecdotal”⁸—in this paper I share exemplary vignettes of my fieldwork. In doing so, I aim to weave together conversations and situations I observed and took part in ‘in the field’ (and after leaving) that relate to individual women’s practices and voices.

2. *Doing Fieldwork on the Beautiful Body*

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Lhasa (lHa sa), capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)⁹ over a period of seven-months between October 2014 and August 2015.¹⁰ My research engages with the making of gendered, specifically female, subjectivities in contemporary Lhasa by asking how Tibetan women engage in crafting desired gendered selves through the adoption, rejection, and modification of (new) body and beauty practices. I aim to understand how socioeconomic and sociocultural transformation processes are inscribed on and negotiated via individual female bodies. For this purpose, I spent most of my time socialising with women and exploring selected commercial places where the gendered body is beautified such as nail salons, beauty parlours, a gym and a shopping mall. Besides, I joined friends for activities outside these places including doing circumambulations (*skor ba*), sharing meals, hanging out in shops and going on picnics and pilgrimage.

In addition I carried out exploratory observations in and through Weixin. Retrospectively it was a fortunate coincidence that my mobile phone broke two months into my fieldwork. In one of the countless shops selling smartphones in West Lhasa, Weixin was downloaded by default onto my new iPhone. While the ubiquity of

⁸ Her keynote speech ‘Emotions in the field—across cultures, shared, repressed or subconscious’ was delivered at the workshop ‘The Researchers’ Affects’ at Freie Universität Berlin (03.–04.12.2015).

⁹ The TAR is an administrative entity created in 1965 by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which roughly corresponds with the central Tibetan province of *dBus gTsang*. In this paper Tibet is used to refer to the TAR and all areas in China which are predominantly inhabited by Tibetans.

¹⁰ During this time I was enrolled as a student at Tibet University. Given my status I constantly found myself in a negotiation process regarding my rights and duties as an international student and my role(s), responsibilities and positionality while conducting fieldwork. In short, I felt like an unofficial researcher gradually and selectively opening up about my research interests. My assumed and ascribed roles shifted between places and groups of people, over time, but sometimes also within a single day. Central experiences such as choosing a “safe” topic, self-censorship and surveillance are similar to those described by Yeh 2006 and Henrion-Dourcy 2013.

smartphones had struck me upon my arrival in Lhasa, it was only after I registered on Weixin myself that I began to pay more attention to the entanglement between body and beauty practices, mobile technologies and smartphone-based social media in women's everyday lives. Between April 2015 and March 2016 I regularly looked at posts of about 60 female contacts on Weixin's "Friends' circle" (Ch. *pengyou quan*)¹¹ feature and analysed 80 body and beauty related posts by 20 women in detail. Since many posts contained Chinese, friends assisted me with translations.¹²

The Tibetan women whose subjectivities, experiences and voices are at the centre of this piece have various educational, professional and personal backgrounds. What they share in common is that they are residents of Lhasa aged between 21 and 35, own smartphones, use Weixin and engage to some extent in "body work"—that is the work on the body by oneself or others in order to make it more beautiful.¹³ However, while some of them are married and have small children, others are single, live alone or together with their parents. Moreover, one group of young female professionals now employed in the public sector and by government-owned enterprises received part of their education in mainland China. Other women I spend time with quit their education before or after secondary school or did not attend school at all. Generally this second group of women is employed in the service sector or works as independent business women and shopkeepers.

3. *Developing Lhasa*

It was National day that marked the beginning of Golden Week¹⁴ when I arrived in Lhasa after more than two years of absence. In my field diary I wrote:

Towards our right mountains rise up the sky, on the left I discover *sKyid Chu* river. Somewhere along the 60-km bus ride from the airport to the city I spot a huge billboard displaying an advertisement for a cosmetic surgery hospital in Lhasa [...] As we are approaching the city

¹¹ In the English version of WeChat this feature is called "Moments".

¹² Besides one-to-one communication and membership in private group chats, I engaged in Weixin through liking and commenting on "Friends' circle" and by sharing photos of my own. While I agree with Miller *et al.* (2016: 4) about the importance of studying various social media platforms together, I look only at Weixin since it figured most prominently in everyday social life. In addition it was the platform I had easiest access to.

¹³ Gimlin 2007.

¹⁴ Golden Week is a seven-day semi-annual national holiday in the PRC.

more and more construction sites appear. Quickly I get tired of counting endless tower blocks grouped in what soon might be expensive new apartment and office complexes.¹⁵

Discounted holiday rates for breast enlargement, red cheek removal, teeth straightening and other similar procedures offered by the city's first professional cosmetic surgery clinic were highly visible on billboards, street signs, in public buses and taxis throughout the city.¹⁶ So were tri-lingual red banners with the slogan: "Welcome Friends from Home and Abroad to Jointly Compose the New Chapter of The Development of Tibet, China." Chinese national flags decorated almost every building around the Barkor. In the heart of the city the new four-storey shopping mall *Shenli*¹⁷ had opened while stalls from within the Barkor had been relocated to an indoor shopping complex called Barkor supermarket (*bar skor tshong grong*). The air felt less clean. Streets were blocked with cars and minor traffic jams common during afternoons on East Beijing road (*pe cin shar lam*), the main street in the city centre.

The growth of the beauty sector and the introduction of new means of communication in Lhasa over the past two decades have to be seen in the light of broader regional transformation processes operating under the paradigm of development. State-driven development policies with a focus on infrastructure expansion, economic growth and consumption were implemented in Tibet through government plans, strategies and forums since the mid-1990s after market reforms had been introduced a decade earlier. Efforts to develop and integrate Tibet economically and politically further into the PRC were intensified with the launch of the Open Up the West campaign (Ch. *Xibu da kaifa*) in 1999 and subsequent government development initiatives.¹⁸ Rapid urbanisation, waves of construction and demolition, the migration of Han Chinese and a growing availability of consumer goods are major manifestations of

¹⁵ Fieldnotes, 30.09.2014.

¹⁶ *Lhasa Weiduoliya zhengxing meiron yiyuan* (Ch.) belongs to a nationwide brand with chains in several cities. In English it is called "Lhasa Victoria Plastic and Cosmetic Hospital", in Tibetan *lHa sa we tu'o li ya mdzes bzo'i sman khang*.

¹⁷ The full name is *Shenli shidai guanchang* (Ch.), but Lhasa's residents call it *Shenli*.

¹⁸ The Open Up the West campaign was primarily presented as a strategy to narrow the gap between China's western provinces and the prosperous coastal regions (Helbig 2004). For analyses of state-led development and urbanisation processes in and around Lhasa see Barnett 2006 and Yeh 2007; 2013. On economic development in Tibet see Fischer 2014.

these policies, which shape Lhasa and its residents' lives in various ways that constantly continue to unfold.¹⁹

3.1 The Rise of New Mobile Technologies

In 2001 few people owned mobile phones in the TAR and rural landline access as well as Internet usage was amongst the lowest in China.²⁰ Telecommunication infrastructure expansion in the western regions including the TAR was first prioritised in China's ninth Five-year plan (1996–2000). This was the beginning of large investments that considerably modernised and expanded existing networks and communication technologies. By 2014 the TAR had an operating network of optical fiber cable as well as satellite and 3G communication technology.²¹ In the same year the number of registered mobile phone subscribers reached almost 95 percent of the total population with 363,000 new subscriptions during that year alone. Smartphones constituted the main form of Internet access.²²

The degree to which smartphones and mobile Internet are embedded into Lhasa's residents' everyday lives was instantly noticeable in October 2014 from strolling around in the city. It would be exaggerated to state that Tibetan shopkeepers had replaced counting prayer beads and reciting mantras with turning their attention to smartphones.²³ However, visits to friends' shops inside

¹⁹ The speed of these transformations accelerates constantly. In March 2016 I learned from posts of Tibetan friends eating chicken legs and French fries on Weixin about the opening of Lhasa's first KFC franchise. Around the same time, online news portals announced the building of a railway from Lhasa to Chengdu and the construction of "the world's highest ski resort" near the city.

²⁰ According to Harwig 2004, in 2001 around 1.2 percent of the TAR's total population had access to the Internet and two percent owned mobile phones. He notes a rural-urban and coastal-western region digital divide within the PRC. The extremely fast spread of new information and communication technology and infrastructure in all of China was possible due to immense state involvement.

²¹ An 2015, Lancan and Wenchang 2005.

²² These numbers are provided by Xinhua News, a news site run by the PRC's official press agency. In 2014, 2.92 million people in the TAR were registered as mobile phone users and 2.17 million people had access to the Internet: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/02/c_134030117.htm (accessed 04.04.16). Already in early 2013 mobile Internet usage had passed the 50 percent mark: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-03/15/c_133187625.htm (accessed 04.04.16).

²³ The distracting potential of smartphones and Weixin in general and for religious practice in particular was a sentiment raised by my friend Tsering, to give one example. While she was an avid user of Weixin, once she undertook to perform 100,000 refuge prayers she imposed a Weixin ban on herself for better

the Barkor and passing by many others on the way revealed the ubiquity of mobile devices as part of daily activities and interactions.

Inside China Mobile shops individuals and small groups of people were regularly standing in messy queues to recharge their phone balances or to register as new customers. In buses and cafes, during lunch and in the shopping mall: everywhere people seemed to be highly engaged with their phones, holding them closely to their ears and listening concentrated to a conversation or alternatively a voice message in Weixin, taking them close to their mouths to record and send of a message, scrolling through their screens or taking and uploading pictures. During afternoons in Tsering's and Drolma's shops, calls by women asking for their Tibetan dresses were received, tailors contacted, appointments for pick ups made or pictures of new merchandise sent to individual customers. During short breaks I often heard them laughing about some content exchanged in various private Weixin group chats, for example with their male friends from the picnic day. Plans for the evening were made with the help of smartphones and Weixin as well.

Certainly, Tibetan women in Lhasa owned smartphones already a few years back; they were not new in 2014. For example, amongst my interviewees who were employed in the public sector some had purchased their first smartphone during their studies in mainland China and others quickly after they had moved to Lhasa and started their jobs. Yet the usage of smartphones had increased in numbers and popularity among women from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. It was not limited anymore to a well educated, travelled and affluent group of Tibetan women that might be described as "cosmopolitan." Advertisements, the rise in budget smartphones and the introduction of a Tibetan font for the iPhone in 2011, as well as the development of the locally manufactured *Luoze* smartphone offering phone settings in the Tibetan language, might have contributed to this trend. 21-year old Lhamo for example bought her first smartphone in early 2014 for 1100 CNY (about 130 Euro), more than a third of her monthly income. Lhamo, who came to Lhasa at the age of six to work as an unpaid nanny in her uncle's house for twelve years, is employed by a small Chinese restaurant. After buying herself basic necessities such as a set of pajamas, toiletries and a second set of clothes she began saving for a smartphone. It is the most expensive item she currently possesses.

concentration and focus. During this time, the smartphone gave way to a digital mantra counter wrapped around her forefinger.

3.2 *Growing Beautyscapes*

Besides new mobile technologies, a highly professional and differentiated beauty industry constitutes a second recent phenomenon in Lhasa. Since the early 2000s department stores, shopping malls, gyms, beauty parlours, cosmetic shops and nail studios have turned into highly visible places in the city.²⁴ Through products and advertisements they target specifically women and their bodily appearance. In doing so, they encourage the creation of “the beautiful body” through consumption and suggest that beauty is increasingly available as a commodity ready to be purchased. The existence of low and high-end products and services ensures that women of different socio-economic status can participate in new forms of “doing” beauty in Lhasa, albeit to varying degrees. Moreover, the spectrum of circulating international products and services is vast: contact lenses enlarging the eyes and eyelid stickers creating the illusion of a double-eyelid are imported from Japan and South Korea, soaps, hair oil and *mendi* (a plant-based hair colour) cross the border from India or Nepal. Whitening creams, perfumes, facial masks and sun protection products come from Europe and the US. Most products are available as versions “made in China” as well.

One useful way to think about how the entanglement between new mobile technologies and the beauty industry shapes Tibetan women’s everyday lives is to conceptualise both as formative for the emergence of complex and highly connected beauyscapes. Here I draw on Appadurai’s concept of five scapes.²⁵ Scapes, according to Appadurai, are dimensions of global cultural flows that are fluid, irregular and highly perspectival. This means they depend on the situatedness of the actors, who both, move through and with them and also to a certain degree imagine them. It is within these scapes and at the disjunctures between them rather than in bound geographic locations that cultural flows occur in increasing speeds and shape people’s lives, experiences and imaginations. “Beautyscapes” then expands our focus to not only look at the existence of a beauty industry, which is tangible throughout the city of Lhasa but to also acknowledge online and offline material and immaterial multidirectional transcultural flows connected to beauty and the body. From this perspective Tibetan women’s engagement with beauty is not limited to physical locations where consumption or body work takes place. Commodities, practices, images, ideals,

²⁴ This is based on a survey I conducted in 48 beauty related businesses around the Barkor and informal conversations with residents as well as shopkeepers.

²⁵ These include ethno, techno, ideo, media and finanscapes (Appadurai 1990).

lifestyles, and services that inform women's understandings of their bodies, body work and beauty cultures are all part of beautyscapes that exist partially deterritorialized in transcultural beauty flows.

Scapes do not exist in isolation but in relation to each other. As for beautyscapes it is particularly relevant to note that they are highly connected with cultural flows of information and large complex repertoires of images related to beauty and the body including advertisement. For Appadurai these constitute mediascapes, primarily image-centred and narrative-based landscapes. Moreover, through smartphones and mobile Internet, two configurations of technology that belong to technoscapes, beautyscapes gain complexity because it is through these technologies that information and images are shared, circulated and accessed. In the next section I show that smartphones in addition to being objects of consumption serve as tools to access and navigate these beautyscapes.

4. Consuming (Through) Smartphones

Globally available consumer goods such as smartphones are not simply adopted by people across the globe; rather they are given diverse meanings when embedded into specific local contexts. The example of the iPhone and its success illustrate this poignantly since in Lhasa both are interpreted in distinctively Tibetan ways that express and stress cultural values and qualities perceived as inherently Tibetan. The great popularity of Apple as a brand is inscribed in the cityscape through the array of computer and mobile phone stores adorned with the Apple logo, even if some of them do not sell any Apple products, or only fake ones. The logo is printed on everyday commodities such as shoes and is available as (gendered) jewelry and accessories including tiny stickers for decorating fingernails. Many shops in the Barkor specialising in Tibetan clothes (*bod chas*) sell two-coloured vests and Tibetan dress with Apple logo patterns. Whereas items displaying an Apple symbol had turned into desirable lifestyle objects, the peak of the fashion hype concerning Tibetan clothes decorated with the symbol had declined towards the end of 2014, according to one friend, Drolma. While she kept a few colourful "Apple vests" in her shop she informed me that those had been especially fashionable the summer a year before. Already by December 2011 securing an iPhone from the US with the help of international students going on their winter holidays was a serious

concern for Kelsang, a TU employee by then in her early 30s.²⁶ At that time they were still more expensive in China than abroad. In the end, Kelsang managed to get one through another channel. When we met again in autumn 2014, she had switched to a newer model that she considered a bit old by then.

Of course many Tibetan women in Lhasa chose other brands or a no-name smartphone over an iPhone due to price, aesthetic reasons, a lack of knowledge or interest in typing in Tibetan, or a preference for writing in Chinese. However, amongst my conversation partners the iPhone was generally the mobile phone of choice.²⁷ Tsomo, a 28-year old married police woman and mother of a six-months old baby boy, provided a typical answer for the iPhone's success amongst Tibetans: "Because it has Tibetan language. Others do not have this."²⁸ Indeed, the iPhone was the first smartphone worldwide to introduce Tibetan *dbu chan* script as a font back in 2011. This fact was raised in many conversations. Besides this technical advantage some interpreted the high sales numbers of iPhones amongst Tibetans as a sign of gratitude towards the company. An understanding of iPhone consumption as a practice of gratitude turns the act of consumption into something meaningful and positive.

Many friends with whom I discussed the topic had heard of the company's founder Steve Jobs. Pe Lha, a 23-year old women working for a government office in the city centre had read his biography. Once she explained to me over lunch that she really liked him, because he was "a person of action/conduct (*bya spyod*)" who proved to people that "if you work hard, you can do something big and important."²⁹ Another explanation stressed that by developing a great product, Jobs had done a "kind work" (*las ka bzang po*) for Tibetans, and had shared his product with the rest of the world, just as Tibetans make offerings and share with others.³⁰ Considering that speaking the Tibetan language is central for Tibetan's self-definition³¹, the importance of the iPhone's technical support of Tibetan language for its success should not be underestimated. In addition, during conversations I got the impression that through the iPhone some of my conversation partners felt a sense of international

²⁶ From my experience cosmetic products and smartphones are highly desired items from abroad. Like other foreign students I was requested to bring or send goods like perfumes, whitening creams or in one case a smartphone to Lhasa.

²⁷ The locally manufactured *Luo Zhang* smartphone is considerably cheaper than an iPhone. Furthermore, it will be interesting to see if the introduction of new Tibetan fonts for Android in early 2016 will effect the iPhone's popularity.

²⁸ Fieldnotes, 07.06.2015.

²⁹ Fieldnotes, 31.07.2015.

³⁰ Fieldnotes, 07.07.2015.

³¹ Cf. Yeh 2002: 236.

recognition and acknowledgment of Tibetans and Tibet since it was a well-known and globally successful product developed by a foreign brand that introduced the Tibetan script first. Accordingly, its creator's actions are interpreted through qualities and activities much valued by Tibetans including kindness, gratitude, making offerings and possessing (good) conduct.

As commodities, smartphones are also public objects seen by others while in use or when they are placed on the table in a restaurant, café or tea house. They can be beautified through material and immaterial practices. Thus, they turn into aesthetically-pleasing customised lifestyle objects that communicate individual statements via their owners' choices. Mobile shops reserve large sections for smartphone covers and small shops near the Barkor sell them as their main merchandise. I repeatedly encountered women exhibiting an iPhone cover that resembled a transparent and golden Chanel No. 5-perfume bottle. Now in her mid-20s, Tseten had graduated from a university on China's east coast one year earlier. Despite or, rather, because of its high cost, Tseten was very fond of the perfume spending hours comparing prices online. Other female friends enjoyed buying and using the perfume as well. I learned in conversations that, partly because of its price and international associations, Chanel No. 5 is associated with quality and an affluent lifestyle. In contrast, some friends preferred smartphone covers exhibiting butter lamps, folded hands or verses in Tibetan script. Due to her busy job in the Chinese restaurant as described earlier, Lhamo seldom finds time to go on pilgrimage or worship to the Barkor. She decided to customise her smartphone by attaching a small colourful plastic thunderbolt (*rdo rje*) to it, a symbol easily identified by fellow Tibetans as Buddhist.

Smartphones are not only items *of* but also tools *for* consumption. For some Tibetan women with access to a credit card and a good command of written Chinese, surfing online shopping platforms and ordering commodities online is part of their daily lives. Repeatedly I glanced over my friend Tseten's computer screen when she scrolled through fashion sites in her office. The shopping baskets usually filled up quickly, at times holding as many as 15 items out of which she chose one or two for ordering. "It takes about three days to arrive in Lhasa and comes from big cities in China", she explained.³²

Whereas until recently consuming beauty online was limited to women like Tseten who have access to a computer, the widespread availability of smartphones with mobile Internet extends the circle of those who access and consume beauty flows online. In addition, new

³² Fieldnotes, 12.04.2015.

deterritorialised spaces for material and immaterial beauty flows are created through smartphones and mobile apps. For example on Weixin cosmetics and accessories are sold extensively via personal profiles and money is easily transferred between members. Drolkar, a woman in her late 20s who attended inland Tibetan boarding classes³³ and returned to Lhasa for a government job four years ago, enjoys reading and watching make-up tutorials shared on Weixin and purchasing selected displayed products later. She also liked to get inspiration from images shared by her female contacts.³⁴

Beautyscapes gain complexity through mobile Internet and present women with more consumer choices. In nail salons I regularly observed how customers showed their smartphones to the beauticians in order to provide them with pictures of a particular nail design they wished to be performed on their nails. These designs had previously circulated on Weixin or on online platforms such as Pinterest. Despite a vast display of designs to pick from on the spot, women opted to arrive prepared with a design saved to their phones.

Smartphones are also used to navigate beautyscapes while they simultaneously contribute to their complexity in the first place. They can give women a sense of control over the beauty products they consume. During our interview Tseten shared with me that she had been deceived about the quality and prices of particular beauty products and services in mainland China when she was younger. She concluded: "I just want[ed] to be beautiful then they ha[d] the chance to cheat me."³⁵ A general concern with the quality of products was raised in many conversations. Some friends stated that "Chinese products are fake (*rdzus ma*) and harm (*nod pa*) the skin." Like Tseten, several women I spoke with regularly used the Internet and Weixin to access information about beauty products and practices. Interviewees mentioned that especially before trying out a new skin care product, they read reviews, compare prices and check if ingredients can harm their skin online. Moreover, buying cosmetics from Weixin contacts makes purchases more personal and products sold in this way are generally perceived as trustworthy. These examples illustrate how women creatively use mobile Internet and Weixin to make informed decisions about the beauty products they wish to consume.

³³ In 1984 Tibetan Junior High schools (Ch. *Xizang chuji zhongxue*) and Tibetan classes inside Chinese junior secondary schools (Ch. *Xizang ban*) were set up in mainland China to educate a future "elite" of Tibetans (Murukami 2006: 6).

³⁴ Interview, 01.08.2015.

³⁵ Interview, 06.07.2015.

5. Experiencing the Self through the Smartphone: Selfie Sessions

A perky girl in her mid- to late-20s who talks a lot tries on her tailored light yellow and beige Tibetan dress in Tsering's shop. Tomorrow she plans to wear it for a picnic. She steps in the middle of the room and looks at herself in the large mirror placed in a corner. "How does it look? Does it suit me?", she asks. Her male companion, who is standing a bit shy near the entrance door, Tsering and me reply that the dress suits her. She then requests him to take a photo of her with the smartphone. Unhappy with the result, she skillfully snaps a series of selfies. The way she holds the phone in a high angle, poses and smiles comes across as routinised. Looking at her phone's screen, she now seems more convinced of her new look. After choosing a matching apron with the help of Tsering she pays and leaves, but not without suggesting to Tsering that she should start uploading customers' pictures to her Weixin profile in order to boost sales.³⁶

Today's smartphones are multi-functional media devices. Due to high-resolution built-in cameras, they offer new options to document visually the everyday and the self during mundane activities as well as on special occasions. Since pictures can be deleted and stored easily, smartphones contribute to the mass production of visual content including images of the self.³⁷ In addition to taking pictures together with smartphones, as was the case on the picnic day I described at the beginning of this paper, taking selfies—photographic self-portraits—with smartphones was an activity I observed regularly in a wide range of situations. The proliferation of selfie taking amongst women in Lhasa is linked to the purchase of smartphones and as such a fairly new activity. Accordingly, inquiring about a term for selfies in Tibetan language revealed that currently no term seems to exist.³⁸

It would be easy to dismiss selfies as trivial. However, my exploratory observations on women's selfie practices imply that the relationship between taking selfies and performing as well as experiencing one's own body is complex. In order to examine this relationship, I suggest that taking selfies with a smartphone is best conceptualised as a cultural practice in which a steadily enhanced

³⁶ Fieldnotes, 26.06.2015. Tsering followed her advice: a week later a selfie taken during the picnic turned up on Weixin in her personal "Friends' circle" next to a mannequin from Tsering's shop dressed in the very same Tibetan dress.

³⁷ Lee 2005; Hjorth 2014.

³⁸ Some friends used the phrase *so so par brgyab*. Karma, a tour guide in his late 20s suggested: "I think we have to coin a new term for that. I would say *rang len* or *rang brgyab*." (Chat communication, 09.03.2016).

mobile camera technology enables a new bodily practice.³⁹ The process of taking and looking at selfies shapes the way women experience their bodies, it informs their ideas about ideal and desired beauty and can lead to wishes for altering own's images or body.

In the fieldwork vignette described above, Tsering's customer opted for a photo to evaluate her appearance despite standing right next to a mirror and receiving feedback from three physically present spectators. In order to look at herself she trusted an image that depicted her in a particular fixed moment in time more than a glance in the mirror. Moreover, it was a selfie and not a picture taken by someone else that finally confirmed to her that she looked good. Through posing in a certain way and taking a series of selfies she created an image of her body that she perceived as pleasing.

Different to pictures taken by others, taking selfies turns the spectator into a creator. In this double role the level of control over one's own image is generally greater than when a photo is taken by someone else.⁴⁰ Hence, arguably the control over her own image gave Tsering's customer the possibility to experience herself as beautiful, on this occasion, through taking the best picture possible. When she sent Tsering a selfie taken during the picnic a few days later, her facial expression and the aesthetics of the image were strikingly similar to the one she had performed in the shop. This illustrates that performing and taking selfies is a practice that is repeated and learned over time.

Taking selfies also renders beauty ideals visible. On the first day of Saka Dawa when we were waiting in a vegetarian restaurant for our dinner, Choden was slightly absent. For a period of 20 minutes she was patiently and with utmost attention, working on staging the perfect selfie of her face. Her new sunglasses placed on her head, she posed sitting and standing while changing the position of her smartphone a few times. In my field diary I wrote:

"The camera doesn't take good pictures. Before, when Anne, me, Nyima and Drolma took a picture all together, my face looked nice. It was round. Now it is thin." Choden makes a supporting gesture by sucking part of her cheeks inside her mouth. "So you want a round face"? I ask. "Yes, it is beautiful." Now Drolma gets into the conversation: "No, a round face is not beautiful. An oval face is beautiful. Round was beautiful before." Choden is not listening to

³⁹ Lee 2005 writes about new cultural practices of the mobile phone. By extension, I think of taking selfies as one particular cultural practice of the mobile phone. See Tiidenberg and Cruz 2015 for an overview of the growing scholarship on selfies.

⁴⁰ Lee 2005: 5; Tiidenberg and Cruz 2015: 13.

her. She is already deeply immersed into taking another picture of herself.⁴¹

Neither Drolma nor Choden owned a smartphone in 2011. Back then a friend took our picture with a digital camera and printed it out. This fieldwork vignette illustrates several things. Firstly, taking a selfie is an occasion to perform and negotiate ideal feminine beauty. For Choden this meant to snap a selfie that showed her with a round face. “A face white and radiant like a moon” (*zhal ras dkra gsal zla ba*) is the first line of a short three-line proverb (*g.tam dpe*) invoked during this evening and on other occasions when talking about traditional concepts of ideal Tibetan feminine beauty. The perception of a round moonlike face is under negotiation as Drolma’s comment shows. Other conversations confirmed that women in particular did not perceive it synonymous with female Tibetan beauty anymore. I did not ask Drolma why she thought an oval face was more beautiful. Later I learned that having an oval face and a pointed chin are two features prevalent in Chinese selfie culture. As part of the constant cultural flow of images contributing to the beautyscapes that Choden and Drolma navigate, the aesthetics of selfies and the techniques for creating them travel as well. Given the fact that selfies are widely shared on social media and that China in particular has an elaborated visual culture concerning selfies as well as a distinct beauty culture, it needs to be acknowledged that some of these ideas find their way into Tibetan women’s beauty ideals and inform their concepts of beautiful selfies and by extension beautiful selves.⁴² However, as the differing opinions of Tsering and Drolma on the ideal shape of the face and the way beauty was “done” by them and Tsering on the picnic day show various beauty ideals coexist and are subject to negotiation, creative practice and individual choice.

Secondly, Choden compared her present selfies with a picture from the past. She related to herself and evaluated her looks through images and arrived at the conclusion that her face did not look the way she wanted and how she knew it from an older picture. For a long time she continued to try to take a selfie that would prove that she was still capable of having a round face in her picture. In the end she achieved a satisfying result and when I met her again a few days later, I noted that one selfie from the evening had replaced her phone screen’s background picture.

⁴¹ Fieldnotes, 19.05.2015

⁴² On China’s selfie culture see: <http://www.whatsonweibo.com/the-perfect-selfie-china-vs-america/> (accessed 27.07.2016) and Miller *et al.* 2015: 158–159. On current Chinese beauty culture see for example Hua 2013.

Several interviewees stated that their practices of taking pictures had changed after acquiring their first smartphone with a built-in camera. Dechen, a woman in her late-20s who had bought her first smartphone after she started working as a civil servant for the city government four years ago, explained that before she possessed a smartphone she mainly took pictures of landscapes or her surroundings, but not many pictures of herself or other people. Only after acquiring a smartphone she slowly took up shooting selfies “for fun”.⁴³ The majority of women I spoke with, however, did not own a private camera prior to buying a smartphone. In some cases the family possessed one before, but for most women having access to a personal camera was genuinely new. Clearly, having convenient, constant access to pictures of the self, evaluating and comparing them can change the way one relates to one’s body image and by extension the self. A statement by Drolkar illustrates this fact poignantly. Asked how using her phone’s camera affects the way she thinks about beauty Drolkar replied:

Much more careful, caring about this. [...] When I didn't use the smartphone, I didn't have a camera like that. Maybe I need to [ask]: “Ah, can you take a photo of me?” Or something like that. Then I didn't see myself very often. When I begin to use the smartphone, maybe all the time I can look at myself. Something like that. Then I go into caring [about] myself much more.⁴⁴

Her answer points out that taking a selfie is a new but everyday activity for her. As part of that she learned to see and experience herself through making and checking selfies regularly. Thus, not only did the frequency of looking at her images change, but so did the kind of images she takes as she herself is now their producer. Drolkar reflected that she began to spend more time on her outer appearance after the smartphone enabled her to take selfies. The constant access to photos of herself, she went on to explain, helps her not to become lazy in doing physical exercise or facial spas, which are two activities she associates with taking care of her body. Drolkar’s example indicates that selfies not only shape how women experience their body, but that they can also impact how bodies are disciplined. This is not something necessarily perceived as bad; Drolkar evaluated this change as positive.

Whereas, as described earlier, Choden corrected her look while taking selfies, some women edit their pictures after they have been taken with special mobile apps. Through these apps users turn into

⁴³ Interview, 02.08.2016.

⁴⁴ Fieldnotes, 01.08.2015.

digital producers of their beautiful images. A famous Chinese app tellingly called “Beauty Cam” was in high usage during 2015 amongst Tibetan women in Lhasa. It provides many functions and filters for modifying images. Using a white filter to alter one’s skin tone was a favorite feature for several of my interviewees. When I asked 25-year old Lhasa-born Palden, an unmarried employee of a large bank about the app’s functions she promptly replied: “It makes you beautiful. It makes you white.”⁴⁵ Similarly, receiving group selfies taken during interviews via Weixin revealed that some interviewees applied white filters and softeners to “beautify” their pictures before sharing them with me. I had the impression that, generally, modifications were primarily focused on the skin colour and that an overall natural look was desired.⁴⁶

The relationship between technology, images and the self is complex and perceived differently by individual women. Attitudes towards the augmentation of facial features varies. Some women, like Tsomo, expressed strong views against these mobile apps, especially when the resulting images were shared on Weixin. When I asked her what kind of pictures she posts on Weixin, she answered:

Tsomo: I don’t put my pictures a lot on Weixin. What I put mostly is places. [...] The reason for not putting is that...how to say...putting one’s own picture is very strange (*khyad mtshar po*). Many people who put photos use this program, for making themselves beautiful: If the face is not white it makes the face white. If the eyes are not big, it makes the eyes big. [...] Many people use this and then they put their photos. Doing like this, I don’t like it very much.

Anne: And what is the reason?

Tsomo: It is a lie, isn’t it? On Weixin a person looks very beautiful in the picture and then if you see this person in real you go: Aargh?⁴⁷

For Tsomo, the existence of apps such as the “Beauty Cam” raise questions over selfies’ authenticity. She evaluates edited selfies as “a lie” in whose creation and distribution she does not like to participate. Tse Lha, a 25-year old architect and graduate of a renowned university in Beijing questioned sharing selfies altogether.

⁴⁵ Interview protocol, 27.07.2015.

⁴⁶ There is a much larger question here on the desire for white complexion amongst Tibetan women in Lhasa, but I do not have space to elaborate on this issue in detail. Skin colour is linked to concepts of Tibetanness, such as through women’s red cheeks or the idea that Tibetans are traditionally red as opposed to Chinese who are white (cf. Yeh 2002: 237). It is notable that the two reasons most frequently invoked by my Tibetan conversation partners to explain this preference trace it back to the Tibetan proverb mentioned earlier and to a general Asian desire for light skin.

⁴⁷ Fieldnotes, 23.07.2015

She mentioned shyness and an understanding of photos as a form of disguise as reasons:

[I am] a little shy when I show my pictures to others. I don't know. I like to show myself to you. But, I am really uncomfortable to show my pictures to you because [it] is not real. Like [it] is just a moment to depict me. But I am a [person]...who is in motion, who is moving, who is vivid. I don't want to disguise. Like this. I don't like to take pictures. I feel uncomfortable.⁴⁸

Yet many women I spoke with liked to share their pictures and I argue that there exists a sociable aspect to storing selfies on the smartphone. Passing phones around to scroll through photographs together and chat about them was an activity I witnessed and was a part of regularly as when spending time with female friends. It was not uncommon amongst close friends to pick up someone else's phone without asking to skip through pictures. Thus, images, including selfies arguably already have an audience in mind. As Miller *et al.* note: "[...] selfies are mostly used in relation to specific audiences and to maintain social relationships."⁴⁹ In Lhasa, the rise of Weixin considerably expands the audience for presenting the self through pictures.

6. *Bringing the Self into Circulation: Explorations in Weixin*

For many of the Tibetan women I encountered during fieldwork Weixin is one of the first mobile apps on their smartphone. Weixin combines private one-to-one messaging with group communication functions as well as the option of following public official accounts. Many interactions take place between small-scale groups that users are free to create by inviting previously added contacts to personal chat groups. The most social feature of Weixin is a function called "Friends' circle", a personalised thread where users post pictures, texts, songs, articles and videos. This content can be seen, liked and commented on by every contact in a user's contact list. However, reactions to a post are only visible if they have been made by someone who is a mutual contact of the commentator and the original author of the post. Thus, any content by people beyond one's own contact list including friends' friends is hidden. This feature and the option to block individual contacts from participating in one's "Friends' circle" adds to a certain level of privacy. Nevertheless, since

⁴⁸ Fieldnotes, 20.07.2015

⁴⁹ Miller *et al.* 2016: 158.

shared posts reach the largest possible group of one's contact list, "Friends' circle" constitutes Weixin's most public feature.

The majority of my female Tibetan friends use Chinese language to post and comment on "Friends' Circle." Sometimes Tibetan and Chinese are used together in one post, conveying the same message in both languages. Tibetan seems to be used on its own for shorter phrases and content such as Tibetan food, festivals or pilgrimages.⁵⁰ A lot of circulated content is visual or aural, such as photographs, videos, emoticons, stickers, memes, songs and, in private conversations, voice messages. This is significant since it allows less literate women to participate on Weixin as well.

Sharing selfies and body and beauty related visual posts are part of self-crafting that takes place on "Friends' circle." Like other social media platforms Weixin opens up opportunities for gendered self-representation and for making the self socially visible.⁵¹ Whereas my female Weixin contacts bring a great variety of personal visual content into circulation, there exist common themes that I observed regularly. Topics covered through personal photos, which are often arranged in photo albums and supplemented with short captions include preparing and consuming food, family and friends, fashion and shopping, landscapes, visited places, picnics and religious activities like visiting monasteries as well as celebrating festivals. Posts about sitting in popular cafés, eating out at restaurants or visiting nightclubs and *nang ma* are frequently shared as well. Scrolling with Tsono through her "Friends' circle" showed, for example, that she regularly shares pictures of places she had visited, family celebrations, and her baby boy. For his first birthday several months after our interview took place she posted an album dedicated to the birthday celebration, which took place in a bakery in Lhasa serving special birthday cakes.⁵²

One kind of posts that might be specific to the Tibetan context covers what I label here "pilgrimage albums." These combine a display of selfies and sociality with religious activities and because of that allow various readings by different audiences. They display

⁵⁰ For religious content, specific stickers and memes in Tibetan offering good wishes and prayers are widely circulated, and an emoticon showing hands folded in prayer is found regularly. Switching between Tibetan and Chinese for different content are interesting topic for future research. See Yeshe 2008 for code switching in Lhasa in general.

⁵¹ Cf. Miller *et al.* 2016: 115–116, 155–157.

⁵² Interview protocol, 23.07.2015. The content shared on Weixin most probably changes over a women's life course and is directly linked to changing gender expectations. For example by looking mainly at posts by women aged 21 to 35 I got the impression that unmarried woman post more selfies than their married counterparts. This is a preliminary observation requiring further research.

daytrips to pilgrimage sites like monasteries, lakes and mountains. One album by 22-year old Tseyang, who moved to Lhasa recently from eastern Tibet and works in a beauty parlour, is a fairly typical example for this. The album is described with the phrase “Today we went to worship” and shows her visiting Ganden monastery together with a girlfriend. It contains photographs of the monastery and its surrounding as well as selfies of the two women in which they experiment with different model-like poses in front of a yellow washed monastery wall and a doorframe. Since visiting monasteries is often combined during summer with picnics and can be framed as sightseeing, photo albums by government employees centred around picnics can also contain photos of pilgrimage sites.⁵³

Generally, albums display women’s engagement in enjoyable social activities carried out during free time together with other people including not only family and friends but also colleagues (*las rogs*). Selfies picturing same-sex friendships or group pictures of friends are commonly shared as well. Yet, friendships between a woman and a man are depicted rarely and I did not see romantic photographs of couples either. Hence, women share photos that show them as part of broader social worlds and networks while reproducing normative offline behaviour. In addition, a great number of visual posts shows how they spend time in public places linked to the costly consumption of food, entertainment, clothes and cosmetics. These are posts displaying entangled notions of lifestyle, consumption, enjoyment and socio-economic status. Photos are never blurry, which indicates that they are not snapshots but are taken with effort and are carefully selected before they are shared on “Friends’ Circle.” Importantly, women look neat and beautiful in the photos they display and usually smile. Drolkar, who stated laughingly that she “always” posts pictures of herself told me:

When I am in a very comfortable place, having a nice dinner or having a very happy party or something, I wanna share about this with my friends [...] Sometimes, when I feel myself is: “Wow, today is very beautiful.” And when I have a picture, then I put this on WeChat.⁵⁴

Similarly, when I asked Tseten why she posts pictures of herself, she answered: “Sometimes if I see ‘Oh this picture is beautiful,’ then I will put it [up]. And also sometimes if I have some very special things I want to share.” Asked which comments she likes to receive

⁵³ Government employees in Tibet are officially prohibited from practicing religion since 1996. See for example Barnett 2006: 98.

⁵⁴ Fieldnotes, 01.08.2015

she said: "Of course the good one! 'Oh so nice, you are so...' maybe someone says 'beautiful.' And maybe someone says: 'Oh you have a very rich life.'" ⁵⁵ Both, Tseten and Drolkar want to present themselves as happy and beautiful. Content shared by other female contacts suggests that the same is true for many women. While this might seem trivial or not surprising, the conditions under which participation on Weixin in Lhasa takes place need to be acknowledged.

The way Tibetan women use Weixin for self-crafting is subject to limitations and norms which determine what is possible to be written and shared. As a Chinese mobile app Weixin operates within a framework of state surveillance and (self)censorship also found on the Chinese Internet or when using mobile phones. ⁵⁶ In short, users face constraints due to the possibility that state bodies but also private contacts practice surveillance online. Consequently, I rarely saw political statements on "Friends' circle" amongst my Lhasa based female Tibetan contacts. ⁵⁷ In addition, Weixin users have neither control over the meanings ascribed to their posts nor over the entire audience their content will be exposed to. Through reposting content travels far beyond its originally intended audience and I observed several times how for example personal photographs shared in chat groups or on "Friends' circle" appeared on someone's elses "Friends' circle" with a changed caption.

By choosing to post on "Friends' circle" women show themselves to their entire contact list, allow their contacts to interact with them and to form opinions about them based on this content. Audiences' reactions are encouraged through the "like" and commenting functions of the app and positive feedback is desired when engaging in self-crafting on "Friends' circle." Thus, it appears crucial to ask who comprises the audience and what the relationship between self and audience is. While these questions require more detailed attention in future research, my impression is that Weixin contacts of Tibetan women in Lhasa largely reflect offline contacts. Therefore one main use of the platform seems to lie in strengthening already existing relationships. Depending on their social lives Tibetan women

⁵⁵ Interview, 06.07.2015.

⁵⁶ In November 2011 a regulation was enforced which requires all landline, Internet and mobile phone users in the TAR to register with their real names: <http://english.cntv.cn/20130619/105406.shtml> (accessed 27.07.2016). The PRC also has its own distinct social media platforms including QQ and SinaWeibo while blocking Facebook Twitter, Google and YouTube.

⁵⁷ This is not to say that sensitive content is not shared via "Friends' circle" amongst Tibetans in Tibet. Grant (2016) for example analyses how Tibetan men in Xining perform Tibetan ethnicity through sharing viral posts.

have diverse Weixin contacts that can include relatives, colleagues, superiors, customers, school and university friends, friends from the gym, tea friends (*ja rogs*) and dharma friends (*chos grogs*) to give a non-exhaustive list. These manifold audiences can be engaged with individually through group chats where group-specific news and content as well as more private views and pictures are exchanged. In contrast, though ambiguous posts challenging gender norms or perceptions of what kind of sensitive content is permissible for circulation might be shared occasionally, the women I befriended on Weixin seem to utilise “Friends’ circle” mostly for the normative performance of gendered selves that conform to social expectations prevalent in their everyday lives outside of Weixin.

6.1 Profile Pictures: Anonymous, Beautiful and Tibetan?

Amongst my female Weixin contacts only a small number of women uploads personal pictures or selfies for their profile pictures. Colourful flowers and landscapes, cartoons, Tibetan and Buddhist symbols and references appear to be preferred subjects for profile pictures. Famous female movie stars, singers and models are just as common. In combination with the fact that only few of my contacts use their actual names when they register as users, I read these choices as attempts to create at least some level of anonymity.⁵⁸

Women make direct references to desired feminine beauty in their profile pictures. Pe Lha, whom I got to know in a high-end gym, studies English eagerly in her free time. Her profile pictures, which she swaps once in a while, depict women’s torsos with visible abdominals and her background picture shows a blond woman in a bikini performing a yoga posture at the beach. Her personal caption below the picture reads in English: “Sexy Lady, Sexy Life.” Pe Lha’s pictures express an aspiration for feminine beauty that is created by engaging in body work at the gym. When I once inquired about her selection, she explained to me that the images serve as a motivation and a reminder for her to work out hard in order to achieve a muscular and fit body, like the ones in the photos.⁵⁹

If we assume that profile pictures are not chosen randomly, those displaying female beauty can be read as manifestations of individual women’s engagement with traditional concepts of Tibetan beauty and wider transcultural beauty flows. Images of idealised Tibetan

⁵⁸ The app allows the labeling of friends with nicknames, which makes recognition easier, especially since some people change their names and pictures frequently or possess more than one account.

⁵⁹ Fieldnotes, 08.08.2015.

feminine beauty are popular profile pictures. Cartoons and photos show Tibetan women in Tibetan dresses wearing traditional turquoise, coral and amber jewelry. A variation on the depiction of Tibetan women was a profile picture by Diki, an unmarried woman in her late 20s. The black and white photo displays the back of a woman's neck with a tattoo of the syllable *Om* in the Tibetan script. Long black hair and a mala imply that the woman is Tibetan. Diki was educated for seven years in mainland China and has been working for a high-profile government institution ever since her return to Lhasa six years earlier. She shared with me that due to her position, she restrains from taking part in public activities considered religious. Her profile picture allows different readings: Possibly it is an intended reference to Tibetan Buddhism that is inscribed on the female body, possibly it is a primarily aesthetic statement. Maybe it is both. Other friends chose heavily made-up female Korean and Indian movie stars for their profile pictures. These female stars gained fame in Lhasa through the circulation of Korean films and series on TV and DVDs from India. Female South Korean stars are particularly admired for their light pigmentation and large eyes. These beauty ideals are reproduced when taking selfies as described earlier.

6.2 *"Living a Happy Life"; "Sweating a Lot": Desired Bodies, Desired Selves*

Selfies and body and beauty related posts on "Friends' circle" are a form of gendered self-crafting that can express aspirations and socio-economic status. Sharing visual messages that show carefully crafted selves is furthermore entangled with gender norms, notions of appropriate and desired feminine beauty and consumption practices. 32-year old Pema works in a shop near the Barkor. She is financially independent and lives alone. Her small child stays with her parents in a village near Lhasa. Pema keeps a collection of selfies and pictures of herself that she likes in her smartphone. All of them show her with make-up and accessories such as sunglasses on her head and earrings. Her appearance is neat and arranged. While she wears jeans and T-Shirts in most of them, some show her in Tibetan dress as well. Periodically she posts a selection of these photos along with sayings about friendship and personal growth. Romantic sayings about life, love and friendship are commonly shared by Tibetan women. Many of these statements, which are predominantly composed in Chinese, can be found on websites and are copied from contacts' "Friends' circle." They are creatively reworked by attaching selfies or adding short phrases. Pema for example added her "Good Night" wishes to

several of these posts. Thus, she uses widely circulated and socially approved messages to interact with her contacts and combines these posts with a display of pictures of herself that she regards as beautiful. Another post by Pema concerns body weight, a reoccurring theme addressed by women on "Friends' circle." Here she decided to display an album of nine pictures of herself. The caption reads: "Every year my weight is changing. My old slim self doesn't exist anymore. Is there any method that the glory can return?" This post illustrates how Pema relates critically to her body and compares it to images depicting moments in the past. She expresses an aspiration for a slimmer body and invites others to give advice and to comment on her past images. In a third post she stands in a cosmetic product store examining a perfume. A second picture shows a selfie of her made-up face, she is smiling. Her comment reads: "Although you don't accompany me, I can still live a happy life" followed by a smiling emoticon. The intended recipient of this indirect post is unknown. It is notable through her choice of pictures that she communicates a notion of a happy life associated with consuming beauty products. Moreover this post portrays Pema as an independent woman able to afford desired consumer goods.

Drolkar creates selfies and body and beauty related posts regularly. During her schooltime and university studies in mainland China, she was often unhappy with the way she looked and considered herself "fat" until she began to attend yoga classes. In Lhasa she continues to do yoga twice a week. Additionally, she is a gym member.⁶⁰ Within one month, she composed several posts on "Friends' circle" showing her seated on a yoga mat, staying in the warrior position or standing in front of a huge mirror in the studio and taking a selfie. Rather than looking exhausted or sweating in her pictures, she seems perfectly relaxed and beautiful. Thus, Drolkar crafts desired images of the self while simultaneously crafting a desired body. In another post she photographed a small group of women during a yoga class laying on their mats and resting. The caption reads: "Sweating a lot". Here, Drolkar shows how she spends her leisure time engaging in a specific kind of body work. She depicts herself as crafting a desired body through practices available for those with leisure time, the necessary financial means and in some cases knowledge of Chinese, the language of instruction in the gym she visits. In her posts sharing a lifestyle and expressing aspirations for a particular kind of beauty is intertwined with a display of socio-economic status. Accordingly, the gym, spa or nail salon sometimes serve as the sole motive of shared photos. Being present at and

⁶⁰ Interview, 01.08.2015.

having access to these places are considered worth circulating in their own right. Not only the final image of a beautiful self is presented but also the process and the places involved in its creation.

Sharing selfies is a dynamic and individual practice loaded with diverse meanings that can also change over time as Palden's decision illustrates. Whereas until one year ago Palden posted selfies, when I met her she did not like to share and receive comments on photos focusing on her physical appearance (*rnam pa*) anymore. Instead, she preferred to share feelings and activities:

When I want to share my true feelings to the WeChat-friends, I will take pictures. Like we climb the mountain. I think it's very great and I want to share it with my friends. I want to share the positive energy in my WeChat Friend's circle. Now they think: 'Wow.' Like climb mountain or something: 'Wow.' 'You climbed a mountain. Good job.'"⁶¹

In Palden's case, this was a conscious move influenced by a recent decision to focus on "inside" rather than "outside" change, which she credits partially to a rediscovery of Tibetan Buddhism after returning to Lhasa from a major city on the Chinese east coast three years ago.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have aimed to offer some preliminary thoughts on the role of new mobile technologies for crafting desired selves and the construction of female subjectivities in contemporary Lhasa. Given its exploratory character, this may have resulted in more questions than answers. I have argued that smartphones introduce new potentials for the daily performance of body and beauty practices, which in turn are crucial for the performance of gendered selves. Mobile technologies contribute to the emergence of increasingly complex beautyscapes, which many Tibetan women in Lhasa navigate on a daily basis. Accordingly, transcultural beauty flows present them with a great number of body and beauty related consumer goods, images and inspirations. Smartphones are used as tools to access and navigate these beautyscapes.

Through built-in cameras, mobile apps and the adoption of a new cultural practice, namely taking selfies, women create images of their beautiful and often thoughtfully beautified selves. Consequently, they become producers and spectators of their own images. Thus, they experience the self in a profoundly new way that alters their

⁶¹ Fielnotes, 27.07.2015

self-perception and can turn into a motivation to work on the body even more. Besides, storing pictures on smartphones and sharing them on Weixin makes images of the self available to the gaze of a broader audience that is often composed of offline contacts. The voices of individual women on sharing selfies illustrates that perceptions of the relationship between self and technology are dynamic and subject to change.

As a social media platform Weixin constitutes a new venue for engaging in gendered self-crafting and for relating to others through images. Gendered self-crafting on “Friends’ circle”, Weixin’s most public feature, takes place under conditions that privilege a depiction of the self as social, happy, and beautiful. Many women opt to present beautiful selves, which they create through an engagement in body work, the consumption of beauty products, the use of phone cameras and mobile apps. These posts display aspirations, desired beauty and socio-economic status. Lastly, I have intended to show that engaging with individual Tibetan women’s practices and ideas of the beautiful body in connection with their adaptations of mobile technology is a dynamic field of study that provides a window into women’s everyday lives in Lhasa and a starting point to explore their aspirations, desires and feelings.

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