

“Beauty Servitude” as a Contested Metaphor in Chinese Competitive Debate: An Invitational Rhetorical Case Study

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Abstract: This study examines how the contested metaphor “beauty servitude” (服美役, fu mei yi) is constructed and negotiated in a widely circulated Chinese competitive debate about women’s beauty practices. Rather than treating the debate as representative of contemporary Chinese public discourse, the study approaches it as a strategically polarized rhetorical case. Using qualitative rhetorical analysis supplemented by lexical frequency mapping, it compares how the affirmative and negative sides frame beauty in relation to agency, embodiment, discipline, gender asymmetry, and self-regulation. Drawing on invitational rhetoric as an analytical lens, the study finds that the competing framings distribute rhetorical openness unevenly. Agency-oriented discourse affirms women’s self-determination and experiential diversity but tends to background structural constraint, whereas structurally oriented discourse exposes gendered discipline but may compress heterogeneous embodied experiences into a more unified account of oppression. The study argues that “beauty servitude” functions in this debate as a contested metaphor that simultaneously opens and restricts interpretive possibilities.

Keywords: invitational rhetoric; metaphor; beauty servitude

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, the term “beauty servitude” has emerged as a highly contested feminist buzzword in Chinese online discourse. Originating from feminist critiques of beauty norms, the term is commonly used to describe the time, labor, and emotional costs that women invest in appearance practices, including cosmetics, dieting, fashion, and cosmetic procedures, in order to conform to dominant aesthetic standards (Li & Li, 2025). By metaphorically adopting compulsory service as a source domain, “beauty servitude” frames beauty practices as socially organized obligation rather than merely individual preference.

The circulation of this term has generated extensive disagreement in Chinese online and mediated discussion. Supporters regard it as a critical concept that reveals how women’s bodies are regulated by patriarchy and consumer capitalism. Critics argue that the term can deny women’s agency by portraying them primarily as passive victims and reducing diverse aesthetic practices to a single narrative of

oppression. The present study does not claim to describe this broader discursive field. Instead, it examines how these competing interpretations are concentrated and strategically articulated in one competitive debate.

1.2. Need for the Study

Existing research has documented the contested and fluid meanings of “beauty servitude” and the tensions women experience between personal pleasure, social approval, and patriarchal discipline (Li & Li, 2025). Much of this discussion nevertheless remains organized around a normative question: whether a beauty practice should be classified as autonomous choice or structural subordination. Such a binary can position women either as fully autonomous subjects or as passive subjects of oppression before examining how those positions are rhetorically produced.

Treating “beauty servitude” as a self-evident diagnosis produces three analytical blind spots. First, it obscures how the metaphor transfers obligation, service, sacrifice, and restricted agency to beauty practices. Second, it encourages a binary opposition between free choice and



structural coercion, leaving less room for their coexistence. Third, it can authorize some women's experiences while making others less intelligible. A rhetorical analysis is therefore needed not simply to decide whether the label is correct, but to examine how the metaphor distributes agency, responsibility, and constraint and how it opens or closes space for different experiences.

To address this gap, the present study approaches "beauty servitude" through invitational rhetoric, a framework that emphasizes the offering of perspectives and communicative conditions supportive of equality, immanent value, and self-determination. Adopting a qualitative case-study design, the research analyzes a widely circulated Chinese competitive debate on women and beauty. It examines how the metaphor is rhetorically constructed and contested within this specific adversarial genre, rather than treating the debate as representative of Chinese public discourse as a whole.

2. Research Perspective and Objectives

Metaphor plays a crucial role in shaping how social experiences are understood and evaluated. Rather than functioning merely as a stylistic device, metaphor structures perception by framing abstract social phenomena in familiar terms, thereby influencing how people interpret the social event (Li & Zhu, 2021). In the case of beauty servitude, women's everyday beauty practices are framed through the conceptual domain of compulsory labor, enabling these practices to be interpreted as structured and socially enforced.

Expressions such as "I have performed beauty servitude for ten years" place the woman in grammatical subject position. Grammatical subjecthood, however, does not by itself establish unconstrained semantic agency: the social actors and institutional pressures that normalize beauty standards may remain unstated. The expression can therefore sustain two competing readings. It can foreground the woman as an acting subject who chooses aesthetic practices, or it can foreground an implicit system that acts through habituated self-regulation. This ambiguity makes the allocation of agency a central rhetorical issue rather than a fact that can be inferred from grammar alone. Invitational rhetoric was proposed by Foss & Griffin (1995) as a feminist alternative to models that define rhetorical success primarily as changing or controlling others. It is grounded in equality, immanent value, and self-determination and proceeds through the offering of perspectives rather than the demand that an audience adopt a prescribed position. Foss and Griffin also identify safety, value, and freedom as external conditions that make such offering possible. Subsequent work has emphasized both the framework's contribution to civility and its polysemic, contested development (Bone et al., 2008). The edited collection *Inviting Understanding: A Portrait of Invitational Rhetoric* brings together theoretical developments and

diverse applications of invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 2020), and has subsequently been reviewed as a wide-ranging portrait of the field (Li & Liu, 2024). Invitational rhetoric is therefore used here as an evaluative lens, not as a claim that competitive debate itself is non-persuasive or invitational.

This framework is especially useful for analyzing a contested metaphor because a metaphor can offer a perspective while simultaneously organizing the limits of that perspective. The analysis therefore asks whether each framing (1) recognizes women as equally entitled to interpret beauty; (2) treats women's worth as immanent rather than conditional on beauty, conformity, or ideological correctness; and (3) preserves women's capacity for self-determination. It also asks which experiences become speakable or are backgrounded when beauty is framed as personal expression, compulsory service, structural discipline, or embodied pleasure. These criteria guide interpretation after the inductive categories have been developed; they are not used as predetermined content codes.

RQ1: How do the affirmative and negative sides construct, contest, and reconfigure the metaphor "beauty servitude" in the selected Chinese competitive debate?

RQ2: How do these competing metaphorical framings enable or constrain equality, immanent value, and self-determination as understood within invitational rhetoric?

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Data

The data are drawn from the official Bilibili video titled "'Loving Beauty' for Women Is Freedom/Unfreedom |2025 Bilibili New International Debate Celebrity Exhibition Match" (Chinese title: "'爱美'之于女性, 是一种自由/不自由 |2025bilibili 新国辩·明星表演赛"; BV1MdwNeZEsN). The video was uploaded by the official account "bilibili 新国辩" ("Bilibili New International Debate") on 18 January 2025 at 20:34 China Standard Time and has a total duration of 62 min and 3 s. It was accessed on 21 July 2026 at <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1MdwNeZEsN/>. The affirmative side consisted of Ma Weiwei (first speaker) and Chen Luyu (second speaker), who argued that loving beauty is a form of freedom for women. The negative side consisted of Pang Ying (first speaker) and Zhan Qingyun (second speaker), who argued that loving beauty is a form of unfreedom for women (Bilibili New International Debate, 2025).

The event used a two-versus-two format. Each debater received a total of 12 min of speaking time, distributable across three rounds, with no individual turn shorter than one minute. The recording comprises: (1) an opening position-setting round in the order affirmative first speaker, negative first speaker, affirmative second speaker, and negative second speaker; (2) a first audience-question round in which both sides answered the

same question about how to determine whether one's aesthetic preferences are disciplined; (3) a second speech round conducted in the order negative first speaker, affirmative first speaker, negative second speaker, and affirmative second speaker; (4) a second question round containing one question for each side; and (5) a final round in the order affirmative first speaker, negative first speaker, negative second speaker, and affirmative second speaker. The analytical corpus retains the four debaters' substantive statements and question responses across all five stages.

The case was selected purposively because the focal issue is stated as a direct opposition and the same metaphorical problem is repeatedly defined, challenged, and reformulated by both sides across prepared statements and question responses. The format therefore provides a concentrated site for examining how agency, freedom, discipline, and gendered structure are rhetorically allocated. The case is theoretically informative rather than statistically representative. Competitive debate is adversarial, role-governed, performance-oriented, and shaped by time limits, audience expectations, and the strategic need to maximize contrast. The analysis consequently addresses rhetorical mechanisms made visible in this event and does not infer the prevalence or ordinary use of "beauty servitude" across Chinese social media, personal narratives, or grassroots feminist writing.

3.2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative rhetorical case-study design supplemented by corpus-assisted lexical frequency analysis. Qualitative interpretation is the primary method; lexical counts are used only to map recurrent sites for contextual close reading. The study does not treat the small, single-event corpus as a basis for inferential or population-level quantitative claims.

First, the Chinese subtitle text associated with the Bilibili video was retrieved from the platform through a Python-based extraction process and converted into editable text. The final corpus retained the four debaters' substantive statements and answers across the five stages described above. Moderator introductions, procedural instructions, transitions, applause cues, and questions read by the moderator were excluded. Limited normalization corrected clear subtitle-recognition variants of focal terms without stylistically rewriting the speakers' wording. Under the prespecified counting rule—Unicode Han characters only, excluding spaces, punctuation, Latin letters, numerals, and metadata labels—the final cleaned corpus contains 14,020 Chinese characters in 1421 retained subtitle units.

Second, the cleaned transcript was segmented with Python 3.12.13 and jieba 0.42.1. A study-specific custom dictionary preserved compound expressions including "服美役" (beauty servitude), "爱美" (loving beauty), "不自由" (unfreedom), "积极自由" (positive freedom), and "消

极自由" (negative freedom). Punctuation, numeric-only tokens, single-character tokens other than analytically meaningful forms, and 194 function words, oral fillers, pronouns, and procedural expressions in an author-created stop-word list were excluded. The final cleaned corpus, corpus-construction script, normalization map, custom dictionary, stop-word list, full frequency table, and frequency-analysis script are provided as Supplementary Materials.

The resulting frequency list was used as a heuristic map rather than as standalone evidence. Overall frequencies identified recurrent lexical sites associated with women, freedom, beauty, self, society, discipline, standards, and evaluation. Side-specific frequencies then indicated where contextual comparison would be most productive. Every lexical pattern discussed in the findings was returned to its surrounding utterance; no rhetorical category was inferred from frequency alone.

Building on this corpus-assisted overview, the sole researcher used meaning-bearing utterances or short passages as the qualitative coding unit. Each selected unit was recorded with speaker, original wording, a descriptive interpretation, and one or more broader beauty-related features. Provisional labels were compared across the transcript and grouped through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The affirmative-side categories were subjectivity, diversity, equality, embodiment, active pursuit, and innateness or pre-social existence; the negative-side categories were discipline, gender difference and patriarchal structure, evidentiary appeal, constructedness, unfreedom, and diversity among women. An occurrence was counted when a meaning-bearing utterance or short passage was assigned a particular feature code; the same feature was counted no more than once within a coding unit, even when expressed through multiple lexical cues, while a single unit could receive more than one feature code. Accordingly, category totals indicate coded feature occurrences rather than raw word frequencies or mutually exclusive sentences.

All coding was conducted by one researcher; accordingly, no inter-coder reliability coefficient is reported. Dependability was addressed through an explicit codebook with inclusion and exclusion criteria, retention of original excerpts and speaker identity, an auditable corpus and coding workbook, constant comparison across the dataset, and re-examination of coded excerpts for counter-vailing instances. These procedures improve transparency but do not substitute for independent coding, and researcher dependence is acknowledged in the limitations. The codebook and original coding workbook accompany the other Supplementary Materials.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1. Lexical Overview

Figure 1 presents selected theory-relevant frequencies from the cleaned corpus. The most frequent retained

term was “women” (102 occurrences), followed by “freedom” (73), “beauty” (53), “self” (42), “loving beauty” (40), “men” (33), and “society” (31). Side-specific comparison clarifies the lexical sites of disagreement: the negative side used “unfreedom” 22 times compared with 7 on the affirmative side, “discipline” 20 times compared with 8, “standards” 17 times compared with 4, and “evaluation” 20 times compared with none. The affirmative side used

“pursuit” 17 times compared with 11 on the negative side and “shackles” 9 times compared with 4. These differences identify passages for close reading; they do not by themselves establish subjectivity, structural critique, or any other rhetorical function.

The close reading below examines how these recurrent lexical sites function in context and how the two sides attribute agency, constraint, freedom, and value.

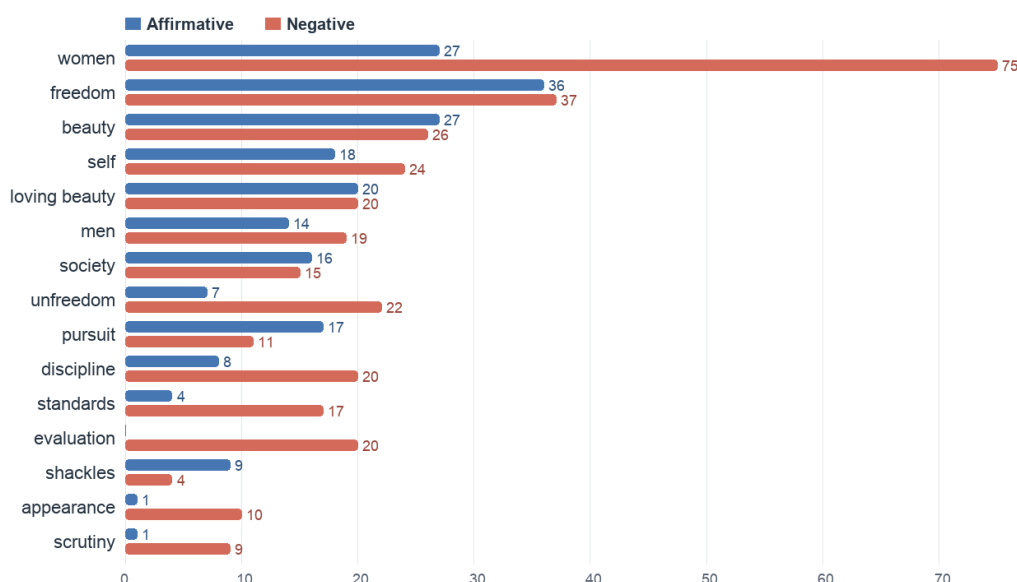


Figure 1. Selected lexical frequencies by debate side.

4.2. Agency-Oriented Framing: Affirmative Side

The affirmative side’s construction of beauty is organized around subjectivity, diversity, equality, embodiment, active pursuit, and innateness or pre-social existence (Table 1).

The affirmative side systematically destabilizes the “servitude” mapping by relocating agency to the speaking and experiencing subject. Rather than denying that aesthetic norms can constrain women, its speakers redefine beauty so that the act of loving beauty cannot be reduced to compulsory labor.

Statements such as “The word ‘I’ precedes ‘love’—only when I am the subject do I have the right and ability to love” frame loving beauty as an intentional action initiated by a speaking subject. In doing so, the discourse implicitly challenges the core assumption of beauty servitude, namely that women’s beauty practices are primarily structured by external coercion. If loving beauty is presented as an act that originates from “I”, the metaphorical mapping from servitude, a condition defined by lack of agency, to beauty practices becomes unstable.

Second, the affirmative side repeatedly emphasizes diversity in defining beauty. By insisting that different bodies, preferences, and aesthetic choices coexist without a fixed hierarchy, the discourse shifts attention away from structural constraint toward diversity of interpretation. In examples contrasting anxieties over different body

weights, aesthetic pressure is attributed not to beauty itself, but to social intolerance of difference. As a result, the metaphor of servitude is redirected: constraint is located in evaluative systems rather than in the act of loving beauty, thereby weakening the metaphor’s explanatory force.

Third, beauty is rendered as embodied experience through clothing, color, bodily comfort, and personal narrative. These concrete descriptions resist treating aesthetic practice as a uniform abstraction. When beauty is narrated through idiosyncratic experience, the servitude metaphor loses some of its capacity to encompass every encounter with beauty.

Moreover, the affirmative discourse constructs beauty as an active pursuit and a site of contestation, rather than passive compliance. The metaphor of a “battlefield” suggests that aesthetic practices are not surrendered to patriarchal control but are actively negotiated. Importantly, comparisons with men’s dress codes normalize beauty as a human practice rather than a feminized obligation, further disrupting the gendered asymmetry presupposed by beauty servitude.

Finally, by framing beauty as innate and pre-social—a pursuit that precedes social systems and “is human nature”—the affirmative discourse explicitly dislocates beauty from the logic of social discipline. If the desire for beauty is positioned as anterior to society, then the metaphor of servitude, which relies on social coercion and institutional regulation, loses much of its persuasive grounding.

Table 1. Affirmative side coding.

Features	Reference Examples	Coded Feature Occurrences
Subjectivity	The word “I” precedes “love”—that is, only when I am the subject do I have the right and ability to love.	22
	Loving beauty is a way I engage in life—not because I’m a woman, just because I’m myself.	
	I like being in a crowd; the moment I step out, I feel I’m in a state of being alive.	
Diversity	You may not love my kind of beauty, but can you love another kind?	21
	My fellow debater, when you’re troubled about weighing 70 kg, Lu Yu is troubled about weighing 35 or 40 kg. You’ll find that it’s because people don’t accept aesthetic diversity that we’re burdened with the shackles of beauty, right?	
	Beauty can be superficial, or it can be profound—it all depends on how you perceive it.	
Equality	There are two ways to resist male oppression and patriarchal society: the first is “appreciating each other’s beauty together”—we women not only love beauty, but you men should also love beauty.	12
	Don’t men have their own dress code? They definitely do; clothing is an expression of their inner world.	
	Do you think those men who wear baggy shorts and slippers have given up pursuing beauty? Their inner expression is “Wealthy and carefree.”	
	Why can’t women be like this? Why can’t women appreciate different levels of beauty?	
Embodiment	Beauty is an innate pursuit in our hearts; it can be a two-foot red headband, a pair of healthy, unbound feet, or any color—you can wear it without any hesitation.	5
	I read an article by Simone de Beauvoir called “Clothing for Me,” in which she wrote: “I like tweed, I like all bright colors and white—because white is so friendly to older women. ... My favorite is still yellow. I buy one dress each season and wear it the whole season; the rest of the time I wear short skirts with blouses and sweaters.”	
Active Pursuit	Even in the most barren times, there is a desire for beauty and freedom.	4
	Don’t cede this battlefield to men—if you do, they will take over.	
Innateness & pre-social existence	I’ve been saying that loving beauty is human nature, but we instinctively think I’m talking about it being women’s nature.	12
	You’ll find that no matter how social systems change or social realities evolve, people’s pursuit of beauty, truth, and goodness has never changed.	

4.3. Structurally Oriented Framing: Negative Side

The negative side stabilizes the metaphor by locating beauty practices within discipline, surveillance, self-regulation, and gendered inequality (Table 2). Instead of treating beauty as an isolated preference, its speakers construct “servitude” as a relation between ordinary aesthetic practices and historically unequal conditions.

First, the negative discourse highlights the disciplinary nature of beauty practices by tracing shifts in justificatory rhetoric. Traditional expressions such as “women dress up to please others” are shown to have been replaced by contemporary neoliberal language, including “self-investment,” “self-improvement,” and “cultivating inner and outer qualities.” Beauty practices are no longer enforced explicitly by others, but are reframed as moral obligations women impose upon themselves. Through

this lens, servitude is not imposed externally but sustained through self-regulation, a key feature of modern disciplinary power.

Second, the metaphor is further reinforced through explicit reference to patriarchal structures and gender asymmetry. By contrasting how men’s bodies are evaluated in terms of “performance and overall state”, while women’s bodies are assessed primarily through appearance and conformity to standards, the discourse situates beauty practices within a historically unequal gender order. In this framing, beauty servitude is not an individualized experience but a gendered condition rooted in differential social expectations.

Third, the negative side invokes numerical claims, reported experiments, historical cases, and expert authority as evidentiary appeals. In this study, these statements are analyzed as rhetorical resources used by the debaters rather than independently verified findings of the present

research. Their function is to authorize a movement from individual anecdote to group-level and structural claims,

thereby strengthening the apparent factual grounding of the servitude metaphor.

Table 2. Negative side coding.

Features	Reference Examples	Coded Feature Occurrences
Disciplinary	Previously, it was called “Women dress up for those who appreciate them”—you had to look beautiful for others; now the rhetoric has changed to “You must cultivate both inner and outer qualities,” “You need to invest in yourself,” “Become a better version of yourself.” Today our competition starts at 06:30, but we were asked to come for makeup at 4 o’clock. I said angrily, “I don’t want to put on makeup,” and at that moment my younger sister looked at me and said, “Don’t make things difficult for the organizer.”	11
Gender Differences & Patriarchal Structure	In history, under patriarchy, men are the first sex—they hold political and economic power, while women stay at home to provide free labor. Thus, women have always been a secondary gender. When men look at their own figures, they focus more on overall performance and state; but traditionally, when we evaluate women’s bodies, we focus more on whether their appearance meets standards. That’s the difference.	7
Empirical Support	Data from 2024 shows 95.6% of medical aesthetics consumers in China are women. Assuming a 50:50 male-female population ratio, women are 20 times more likely to undergo medical aesthetics than men. They found men in swimsuits had a slight math performance improvement vs. those in hoodies; but women in swimsuits saw a sharp math score drop vs. those in hoodies, along with lower self-evaluation and increased body shame. In reality: 40-70% of teen girls feel beauty filters cause negative self-image emotions; 56% of women dislike their looks; 80% feel beauty industry standards harm their self-esteem; half of girls feel pressure to be beautiful; 91% of women diet over body dissatisfaction. In Europe’s anti-stereotype movement (e.g., Portugal’s committee), phrases like “Little girls are naturally fond of beauty” are removed from primary school textbooks.	5
Constructed	This is what our side argues: don’t mistake this for human nature—beauty is an inherently constructed concept, deeply rooted in our minds. Humans are products of power, historical constructs, and cultural constructs—and the same applies to the pursuit of beauty. “Little girls are naturally fond of beauty; they love dressing up from childhood” is old folk wisdom, yet it’s the cornerstone of gender discipline and stereotypes. It uses the harmless-sounding word “beauty” to trivialize gender stereotypes, which is terrifying.	7
Unfreedom	The unfreedom we refer to isn’t tied to specific standards. For instance, wearing a red headband is unfree while wearing nothing is free. Rather, the freedom we mean is liberation from the discipline of scrutiny, not from a specific image. True freedom is not caring about standards—not desperately making others acknowledge “My look is also beauty.” There’s no need for that; indifference to standards is true freedom. If you want everyone to define themselves, abandon the standard of beauty (with its heavy historical baggage and real discipline)—just let everyone be themselves.	9
Diversity and Individual Differences Among Women	There’s nothing wrong with Teacher Luyu liking/pursuing beauty. Our topic today is never “Is loving beauty freedom for Teacher Luyu?” but “Is loving beauty freedom for women?” I’m a woman very different from Lu Yu—I’ve never longed for something because it’s beautiful since childhood. There is diversity among women.	3

Finally, the negative discourse explicitly rejects the naturalization of beauty by framing it as a cultural and ideological construction. Statements such as “beauty is

not human nature but a constructed concept” challenge narratives that present aesthetic desire as pre-social or innate. By exposing how seemingly benign ideas like “girls

naturally love beauty” function as vehicles for gender discipline, the discourse reveals how metaphor operates not only descriptively but critically.

4.4. Comparative Synthesis: Four Rhetorical Mechanisms

Comparison of the two sides yields four higher-order mechanisms that answer RQ1: reallocation of agency and responsibility, re-scaling of experience, competing definitions of freedom, and stabilization or destabilization of the servitude mapping. These mechanisms concern the selected debate rather than Chinese public discourse as a whole.

4.4.1. Reallocation of Agency and Responsibility

The central disagreement concerns where causal and interpretive agency is located. The affirmative side places agency in the speaking “I,” embodied preference, and the individual’s authority to define beauty. The negative side relocates causal agency to social standards, patriarchal history, commercial discourse, and internalized surveillance. Responsibility shifts accordingly: the affirmative side warns against judging women’s choices, whereas the negative side redirects scrutiny from individual women to the structures that shape available choices.

This is not simply a disagreement over whether women possess agency. Both sides acknowledge women as acting subjects, but they assign different explanatory weight to agency. The affirmative side treats first-person experience as the primary interpretive ground; the negative side treats structural conditions as the ground required to interpret that experience.

4.4.2. Re-Scaling of Experience

The two sides also operate at different rhetorical scales. The affirmative side moves from concrete clothing, bodily comfort, family memory, and personal vitality to claims about beauty. The negative side moves from reported statistics, experiments, history, institutions, and group asymmetry to claims about women’s collective condition. Personal scale protects experiential heterogeneity but can make structural regularities less visible; structural scale reveals patterned inequality but can compress ambivalent or pleasurable experiences.

4.4.3. Competing Definitions of Freedom

Freedom is not a shared endpoint with a shared definition. The affirmative side defines freedom primarily as the capacity to choose, express, and assign personal meaning to beauty without external moral judgment. The negative side defines freedom as release from compulsory scrutiny and from the demand that one’s value be negotiated through appearance. Thus, “choosing beauty” and “being free from beauty as an evaluative system” function as rival criteria rather than direct answers to the same question.

4.4.4. Stabilization and destabilization of the metaphor

The negative side stabilizes the “servitude” mapping by repeatedly linking beauty to obligation, unequal labor, discipline, historical continuity, and self-surveillance. The affirmative side destabilizes it by linking beauty to pleasure, embodiment, diversity, universality, and active pursuit. Each side therefore changes the metaphor’s plausibility by reorganizing the semantic environment around beauty rather than merely accepting or rejecting a fixed definition.

Taken together, the debate constructs “beauty servitude” as a struggle over explanatory authority: whether the meaning of beauty should be grounded primarily in situated self-interpretation or in the patterned conditions that shape such interpretation. This comparative mechanism, rather than the frequency of any isolated word, constitutes the principal answer to RQ1.

5. Discussion

5.1. Agency-Oriented Framing: Invitation through Self-Determination

The affirmative framing most clearly enacts the invitational principle of self-determination by treating women as authorities on their own embodied experience. Its emphasis on plurality also supports equality among aesthetic perspectives, while personal narratives recognize value that is not reducible to a uniform political diagnosis. Yet its openness is selective. When first-person choice is treated as the primary ground of interpretation, the historical and institutional conditions that make some choices costly, compulsory, or intelligible can recede. The framing invites accounts of pleasure and self-expression while providing less discursive space for explaining how power operates through apparently voluntary practice.

5.2. Structurally Oriented Framing: Invitation through Recognition of Conditions

The negative framing expands equality from interpersonal respect to the unequal conditions under which aesthetic choices are made. It invites audiences to recognize experiences of surveillance, exhaustion, body shame, and the right not to participate in aesthetic evaluation. In that sense, it protects immanent value by refusing to make women’s worth conditional on appearance. Its limitation is the reverse of the affirmative side’s: a structural diagnosis can become so comprehensive that women’s own accounts of pleasure, identity, or ambivalence are interpreted mainly as evidence of internalized discipline. Structural recognition may then narrow self-determination by reducing the authority of situated self-description.

5.3. The Paradox of Invitation in an Adversarial Genre

The comparison suggests that invitational capacity is not an intrinsic property of either position. It is an uneven

rhetorical effect: each framing recognizes one set of experiences by backgrounding another. The affirmative side opens space for agency but can close discussion of structure; the negative side opens space for structural critique but can close discussion of self-defined meaning. This pattern also qualifies the application of invitational rhetoric to competitive debate. Because speakers are assigned opposed positions and rewarded for contrast, the debate does not create the full conditions of safety, value, and freedom described by Foss & Griffin (1995). Invitational rhetoric is therefore most productive here as a diagnostic vocabulary for identifying partial openings and closures within persuasive discourse, consistent with later recognition that the theory is plural, contested, and not the only appropriate response to difficult public conflict (Bone et al., 2008; Kirsch & Royster, 2010; Li & Wang, 2023; Li & Xu, 2025; Liu & Liu, 2025).

5.4. Scope, Researcher Dependence, and Future Research

This study is limited to one highly stylized competitive debate. Role assignment, time constraints, audience orientation, and the obligation to defend polarized positions may amplify contrast and suppress ambivalence. The lexical counts describe only the cleaned transcript and do not support population-level inference. In addition, all qualitative coding was conducted by one researcher. The codebook, audit trail, full excerpts, and explicit countervailing cases enhance transparency, but the interpretation remains researcher-dependent and no inter-coder reliability claim is made. Future research should compare competitive debate with social-media posts, first-person narratives, and grassroots feminist writing using documented sampling, multiple coders where appropriate, and a shared cross-genre coding framework.

6. Conclusions

This study examines “beauty servitude” as a contested metaphorical construct rather than a fixed feminist diagnosis. Through a case analysis of one Chinese competitive debate, the paper shows how the term is strategically negotiated through opposing constructions of agency, freedom, discipline, and structural constraint.

Addressing RQ1, the analysis identifies four mechanisms through which the debate negotiates “beauty servitude”: agency and responsibility are reallocated, experience is scaled as personal or structural, freedom is defined as either self-expression or release from scrutiny, and the servitude mapping is destabilized or stabilized through contrasting semantic associations. The negative side’s evidentiary appeals and structural vocabulary strengthen the metaphor’s plausibility; the affirmative side’s embodied narratives and agency-centered vocabulary weaken its capacity to encompass all beauty practices.

In response to RQ2, neither framing is wholly invitational or wholly restrictive. Agency-centered discourse

supports self-determination and experiential plurality but can background unequal conditions. Structurally centered discourse supports equality and immanent value by exposing discipline and defending the right not to be aesthetically evaluated, but it can reduce the authority of women’s self-defined meanings. Invitational capacity is therefore best understood as a distributed and partial effect within the debate.

Taken together, these case-specific findings suggest that disagreement within the selected debate is not merely about whether beauty is “free” or “unfree.” It reflects a deeper rhetorical struggle over how women’s relationship to beauty should be understood, evaluated, and morally framed. By foregrounding metaphorical orientation, the analysis identifies a productive tension between agency and structure while avoiding claims about the frequency or representativeness of these framings beyond competitive debate.

The contribution of this case study lies not in deciding whether women’s beauty practices are definitively free or unfree, but in showing how a contested metaphor makes some relationships among agency, discipline, pleasure, and constraint easier to articulate than others. Attending to these openings and closures offers a more precise account of the tension between agency and structure while preserving the limited, genre-specific scope of the evidence.

Supplementary Materials

The additional data and information can be downloaded at: <https://media.sciltp.com/articles/others/2608051500533224/SALA-26010149-SM.zip>.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. This study analyzed a publicly available debate video and its publicly accessible subtitles and involved no recruitment, intervention, interaction, or collection of private information from human participants.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable. The study used publicly available debate material and did not recruit or interact with human participants.

Data Availability Statement

The source video is publicly available at: <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1MdwNeZESN/>. The cleaned corpus, custom dictionary and frequency outputs are available in the Supplementary Materials.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

No AI tools were utilized for this paper.

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