Female migrant workers navigating the service economy in Shanghai

Home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood

Ip, T.T.

Publication date
2018

Document Version
Final published version

License
Other

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Female Migrant Workers Navigating the Service Economy in Shanghai: Home, Beauty, and the Stigma of Singlehood

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor

aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam

op gezag van de Rector Magnificus

prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie, in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel

op donderdag 20 september 2018, te 12.00 uur

door

Tsz Ting Ip

geboren te Hong Kong
This work was supported by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) under the funded-project “Creating the ‘New’ Asian Woman: Entanglements of Urban Space, Cultural Encounters and Gendered Identities in Shanghai and Delhi” (SINGLE Project Nr: 586, 2013-2016). The HERA SINGLE project is coordinated by Prof. Christiane Brosius (Heidelberg University, DE), Dr. Melissa Butcher (Birkbeck, University of London, UK), and Prof. Jeroen de Kloet (University of Amsterdam, NL).
# Table of Contents

Table of Contents iii

Publication History vi

Author Contributions viii

Acknowledgements x

Introduction:

**Female Migrant Workers Navigating the Service Economy in Shanghai** 1

- Methodology 16
- Affective Labor and Beyond 24
- Home, Beauty, and the Stigma of Singlehood: Chapter Outline 27
- References 44

**PART I HOME** 58

**Chapter 1:**

“**At Home in Shanghai?**” Rural Migrant Women and the Cultural Politics of Jia 59

- Introduction 59
- Migration, Gender, and Home 62
- Methods 68
- A Discourse of Jia (“Home”) 71
- “Home is…”: Familial Home, Hometown, and Affective Home 73
- Working with Confucius 77
- The Multiplicity of “Home” 81
- Conclusion 87
- References 89
Chapter 2:
The Precarity of Trust: Domestic Helpers as “Working-Singles” in Shanghai

Introduction 95
Method 98
Trust and Mistrust: Domestic Helpers’ Everyday Life 99
Working as an Ayi 104
Honesty 112
Professionalism 121
Care 128
Conclusion 135
References 138

PART II BEAUTY 142

Chapter 3:
Desiring Singlehood? Rural Migrant Women and Affective Labor in the Shanghai Beauty Parlor Industry

Introduction 143
Methods 151
The Chinese Beauty Economy 154
Shanghai’s Beauty Parlor Industry 155
Apprentice 157
Senior 168
Entrepreneur 184
Closure 197
References 200

Chapter 4:
Migrant Women Walking Down the Cheap Road: Modernization and Being Fashionable in Shanghai

Introduction 205
(Un)fashionability of Rural Migrant Women 210
Methodology 214
Due to the funding requirements, this Ph.D. research was developed as a journal-article-based dissertation, consisting of five chapters: three chapters are journal articles, and two chapters are book chapters in edited volumes. Because of this format, repetition in describing the context of the study and in the literature review at times occurs. The format of Chinese terms and translations, the description of the research participants’ information, and the referencing styles of each chapter are based on the submitted and/or published version of the chapters. A list of all literature consulted is presented after the concluding section of the dissertation.

**Chapter 1**  “At Home in Shanghai?” Rural Migrant Women and the Cultural Politics of *Jia*  
Status: Resubmission  
Journal: *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*

**Chapter 2**  The Precarity of Trust: Domestic Helpers as “Working-Singles” in Shanghai  
Co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet  
Status: Under review  
Chapter 3  Desiring Singlehood? Rural Migrant Women and Affective Labor in the Shanghai Beauty Parlor industry
Status: Published

Chapter 4  Migrant Women Walking Down the Cheap Road: Modernization and Being Fashionable in Shanghai
Status: Published

Chapter 5  Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage
Co-authored with Esther Peeren
Status: Under review
Journal: European Journal of Cultural Studies
Author Contributions

Author’s Initials

Penn Tsz Ting Ip (PI)

Jeroen de Kloet (JdK)

Esther Peeren (EP)

Chapter 2

The Precarity of Trust: Domestic Helpers as “Working-Singles” in Shanghai

Co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet (JdK)

JdK and PI outlined the research direction, research question, and theoretical framework in 2014. PI provided the literature review, designed the semi-structured interview questions, recruited research participants, conducted participatory observations and in-depth interviews, analyzed the fieldwork data, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript between 2014 and 2016. JdK reviewed the fieldwork materials, informant lists, and the analysis of the fieldwork data. JdK and PI revised all versions of the manuscript together and submitted it in 2018.
Chapter 5

Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage

Co-authored with Esther Peeren (EP)

EP and PI developed the research outline, performed the literature review, and determined the theoretical framework together. PI performed the fieldwork and recruited research participants, developed interview questions, and conducted in-depth interviews and participatory observation, with EP providing advice. PI provided the fieldwork data for analysis, which was reviewed and commented on by EP. Both EP and PI analyzed the fieldwork materials and wrote the first draft together. EP revised and commented on the first draft of the manuscript. Both authors revised and reviewed the final manuscript.
Acknowledgements

Amsterdam is my Neverland. In this dreamland, I always feel at home and am always welcomed for being who I am. Here I have also pursued my dream, this Ph.D. degree, with incredible support that I could never dare to have dreamed of.

First, I would like to acknowledge my supervisor, Jeroen de Kloet, and co-supervisor Esther Peeren, for supporting my Ph.D. study with their insightful advice and patience when eliminating my outlandish ideas on theories and methodologies. Without their suggestions, I would not have finished this dissertation until 2046. Jeroen de Kloet, you are more than a supervisor to me. I began as a Research Master student in Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). In my elective class, Beyond Europe, I was first attracted by your intelligence and sense of humor, and later in the TransAsia Reading Group, by your personality and the positive vibes you give off. The way you care about the students, especially the Asian students who feel lost in the European education environment, impressed me affectively. I had wished to be your Ph.D. student since 2011. I was lucky, and am still lucky, that I can be one of the students in your academic family. I still remember the
first time we met – I had the rainbow P.S. zebra printed on my t-shirt and then I saw yours. This fashion sensibility was what guided me to write Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Esther Peeren, you may have never noticed how much I admire and respect you. Your efficiency, your work attitude, and your deep knowledge and familiarity with theories, have demonstrated to me the perfect way that a scholar should be. Your super-sonic speed in replying to my emails enabled me to adjust my fieldwork direction instantly when I was in Shanghai. I remember the times I was lost when I returned from the field and you cleared up my confusion and helped me to find a focus in my fieldwork materials. I am deeply thankful for the kindness with which you provided your support and spent your precious time in Amsterdam for me.

Thank you both for assisting me to feel at home in this beautiful city.

I would also like to thank Yiu Fai Chow; without your guidance, I could not have arrived at this stage. Meeting you in Hong Kong in the summer of 2011 reminded me how much small world theory applies – I had already received the acceptance letter from the UvA and was preparing for my journey to Amsterdam. You arrived as the new professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, in the same department where I had studied for my bachelor degree in 2001. Two weeks later, we met again in
Amsterdam. You changed my entire mindset of working and living as a person – you
told me to “enjoy.” My previous life had been about suffering and tolerance. It was a
liberating moment to enjoy being who I am and what I can become. I enjoy working
with you. Thank you for the generosity with which you gave the advice that became
the torch of my journey.

I am deeply grateful to the members of my Ph.D. Committee, Luiza
Bialasiewicz, Christiane Brosius, Shanshan Lan, Maaike Meijer, Rachel Spronk, and
Wanning Sun. I thank you for generously giving your time, advice, and support, and
for your preparation for the defense. I express my appreciation to Yuk Wah Chan,
Gladys Chong, Yiu Fai Chow, Pal Nyiri, Jack Qiu, and Gloria Wekker, for their
thoughtful and inspiring suggestions at the early stage of my research. I would also
like to express my thankfulness to Cindy Fan, Michelle Tsung-yi Huang, Kinneret
Lahad, Fran Martin, Linda Peake, Martina Rieker, and Alexandra Staub for their
insightful advice concerning my work.

My gratitude also goes out to the HERA-SINGLE team: Laila Abu-Er-Rub,
Lucie Bernroider, Christiane Brosius, Melissa Butcher, Maddalena Chiellini, Yiu Fai
Chow, Jeroen de Kloet, and Chenying Pi. I would also like to thank Tony Buchwald
and Nina Nessel from Heidelberg University for making the SINGLE team highly
organized and efficient. I thank the Humanities in the European Research Area for
funding this project. Travelling to Delhi, Leiden, Heidelberg, and Shanghai, our
meetings and deliberations enlightened me and enabled me to think from the Chinese
context to a cross-cultural one. I sincerely thank you all, my dear teammates.

I would also like to thank Eloe Kingma and Jantine van Gogh from the
Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) for their kind, generous, and
heartfelt support. Eloe Kingma, every time I see you, I wish to give you a big warm
hug. You give me not only support but also the strength to be who I am, and I enjoy
my life, study, and work at the UvA all the more because of you. I am really fortunate
that I have had such a great association with ASCA. I want to sincerely thank my
fellow ASCA researchers: Peyman Amiri, Uzma Ansari, Murat Aydemir, Sruti Bala,
Selçuk Balamir, Marie Beauchamps, Roxana Bedrule, Robin Celikates, Sudeep
Dasgupta, Pedram Dibazar, Enis Dinc, Simon Ferdinand, Yolande Jansen, Blandine
Joret, Annelies Kleinherenbrink, Jaap Kooijman, Christoph Lindner, Niall Martin,
Miriam Meissner, Judith Naeff, Nur Ozgenalp, Patricia Pisters, Thomas Poell, Noa
Roei, Suzanne Roggeveen, Mireille Rosello, Leonie Schmidt, Olga Sooudi, Eliza
Steinbock, Mikki Stelder, Hanneke Stuit, Jules Sturm, Lonneke van der Velden, Irene Villaescusa, Vesna Vravnik, Lucy van de Wiel, Thijs Witty, and Timothy Yaczo. I also thank the colleagues in our building, BG2, for their kind support and warm office chit-chat: Marten Jan Bok, Tessel Bauduin, and Sophie Berrebi. I would like to express my gratitude to our finance director, Digna van der Woude. Without your help, the financial management of our project would not be as smooth as it is. I would also like to thank Jobien Kuiper, Joan Mosselman, Dymph Verdiessen, and Swaan Levy Janssen for making our work environment wonderful. I am also grateful for the support of René Does, Gerard Duin, and Marc van Steekelenburg.

I thank my academic family, which, under Jeroen de Kloet’s care and love, shared hotpots and picnics: Siyu Chen, Gladys Pak Lai Chong, Zoenie Deng, Enis Dinc, Simon Ferdinand, Hongfei Liu, Jian Lin, Arjen Nauta, Rowan Parry, Leonie Schmidt, Laura Vermeeren, Irene Villaescusa, Shuaishuai Wang, and Guohua Zeng, and our special academic fellows Henry Chow, Jori Snels, and Vincent So.

My deepest thanks to my paranymphs and trusted friends: Rowan Parry and Imara Limon. I also thank Adriana Ivanova, Jian Lin, and Brina Orožim for their kind assistance. Thank you very much for organizing the defense with me.
This dissertation is based on research conducted in Shanghai between 2014 and 2016. I am in debt to a number of friends and colleagues for encouraging me to begin the work, and for supporting me to finish it. In Shanghai, I am grateful to my friends, especially Alice Chen, Joyce Chen, Jingwen Fan, Yujie Guo, Lucetta Kam, Koushou, Walker Lee, Henri Liao, Cherie Lim, Mimi, Pheebie, Matilda Ting, Minh Uyên, Xiaoyan Wu, Xiangqi, and Xiaoshu. Lucetta Kam, thank you for being so supportive. My work could not be accomplished without your generous help. I also thank Qingling Guo, Xiaofei Li, and Wayne Li. In India, I thank Sheba Chhachhi, Oindrila Duttagupta, Sukrita Paul Kumar, Aparna Parikh, and Shilpa Phadke. In the United States of America, I would especially like to thank Bonnie, Faye, Anthony Jimenez, Chen Laoshi, Ge Laoshi, He Laoshi, Wenjie Liao, Ralph Litzenger, Peter Stambler, and his daughter Alexa Goff and her family.

In Amsterdam, I sincerely thank Herma Coumou, Popel Coumou, and Harrie Hageman. Harrie Hageman and Herma Coumou, I am so lucky to be a friend of yours. Thank you so much for taking care of me and supporting me. I also thank Dawn, S Goh, Jessie Gong, Jimmy Huang, C Jern Ken, Jian Lin, Steph Liu, Jennifer Pang, Rowan Parry and his family Anna Parshina, Ivan and Mira, as well as Xiaoxiao Xu,
Mu Xue, Skyler, Gong Ting, Simpson Tse, and Zhuoer Wang. Xiaoxiao Xu, thank you so much for your expertise and patience in editing the photographs printed in this study. I also take this opportunity to express a deep sense of gratitude to my classmates from the Research Master of Arts in Cultural Analysis: Karin Anzivino, Tessa Askamp, Reka Deim, Serap Kanay, Imara Limon, Deborah Mebius, Chelsea Oostdijk, Brina Orožim and Ewoud Visser. I would like to convey my gratitude to my beautiful friends who share my ups and downs: Frieda Charlotte, Adriana Ivanova, Johnson Leow, Sandra Roberts, Clara Martin Sanchez, and Meghan Schalkwijk. I also thank my fellow Ph.D. students who study in other Dutch cities; without their support and suggestions, I would not have arrived at this final stage of my Ph.D. student life: Doreen Chen, Shuyi Nina Huang, Rasa Naviskas, Katrine Smiet, Yujing Tan, and Evelyn Wan.

In Hong Kong, I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing at Hong Kong Baptist University: Yiu Fai Chow, Gladys Chong, John Erni, Lucetta Kam, Amy Lee, Kwai Cheung Lo, Eva Kit Wah Man, Peter Stambler, and Daisy Tam. I also thank the Humanities Alumni Association: Edward Chow, Katy Kwok, KK Lam, Sui Lam, Kris Li, Beatrice
Liu, Ami Lo, Ste-Funni Tung, Priscilla Wai, Loretta Wong, Yvette Wong, Johnny Yip, Steph Yip, Tsui Man Yip, and Fiona Yu. I would also like to thank Stuart Christie, Kevin May and Lo Yin Shan. I thank Yuk Wah Chan, Nicholas Thomas, Angela Tse, and Katrina Yip, from the City University of Hong Kong, who supported my application to pursue the Research Master at the UvA. I thank my Hong Kong friends for their years of support and friendship: Amy, Besty, Bridget, Cabrini, Carol, Denise, Donna, Elaine, Fennie, Ivy, Katrina, Karyn, Manna, Ming & Sob, Pik Pik, Rick, Sammi, Sai Lo, Shukling, Sui, Tracy, Winny, and Zic.

My special acknowledgements are due to CRTV’s Wenwen Chen, LillKiddy Lam, Frederick Man, and Hong Tong Wu, for giving me a wonderful experience working as a DJ for the Chinese Radio program in Amsterdam. It is my radiant sentiment to place on record my warmest regards to Ardi Bouwers from China Circle. I would also like to thank the excellent team from CinemAsia: Janet Lie, Martijn van Veen, Dewi Vrenegoorand, and Doris Yeung. I thank Amal Alhaag, Wayne Modest, and Ninja Rijnks-Kleikamp from Museum Volkenkunde for their professional support of HERA-SINGLE art exhibition and conference.

I would like to express my earnest gratitude to my editors and editorial friends;
without your professionalism, this work would not have been possible: Alexander Hindley, Patrick Jered, Stephanie Kwiatt, Karyn Law, Rowan Parry, and Katrina Yip.

Patrick Jered, thank you very much for supporting me, I am forever indebted to you for your kindness.

To my grandparents, my extended family of uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces, who in one way or another shared their support, thank you for everything.

I would like to thank the generous support from my Dutch relatives: Uncle Ma and Auntie Ma, and their son and his family, Calvin, Bo Kam, Jay and Ryan. Growing up in a big family in a village with a four-hundred-year history in Hong Kong is a treasure. Yet I have also experienced the suppression of the ingrained Chinese patriarchy since I was a child and have learned to be tough and independent. I have proven to the villagers and my extended family that there is nothing wrong with being born as a girl. Girls can be strong and successful, and my parents are more than happy to have me as their second daughter.

It is my radiant sentiment to place on record my deepest sense of gratitude to my family: Daddy and Mami, thank you for being with me no matter where I am. I could not have gotten this far without your endless support, love, and care. Being
away from you is harder than I expected, and I do miss you both dearly. Please accept
my apologies for not being able to stay with you because I have a life goal that I must
pursue. I wish you both to stay healthy and strong. Kenix, my dear sister, growing up
with you is a venture. Your wisdom and courage have guided me through the brightest
and darkest times of my life. I cannot thank you enough for your love and guidance.
Morris, my brother, people think you are a lucky boy, but I know your path ain’t
easier than mine. Stay strong, your sisters are always here with you.

Luoyi, my love, my life partner, and my parallel universe, how can I thank
you with words? The time we opened the umbrella together at the Bund, I knew your
bravery and love would guide us to the future. I follow you: I thank you and your
parents for all your love, support, and encouragement, with actions rather than words.

Last but not the least, I have to truly thank all the rural migrant women I met
in Shanghai who made this research not only feasible but also full of precious
memories.
Introduction:

Female Migrant Workers Navigating the Service Economy in Shanghai

Shanghai is only a workplace for me. I work here 10 hours a day for 6 days a week. I don’t have time to have fun or enjoy life.

(Wang Qian, 21 years old, Gansu, waitress)

In 2014, I began the fieldwork for this Ph.D. research project in Shanghai. During an in-depth interview, Wang Qian, a 21-year-old waitress, inspired me to observe Shanghai from an entirely new perspective. I expected female migrant workers, who chose to work in Shanghai rather than their hometown, to feel a sense of excitement, expectation or even attachment towards the city. However, when asked whether or not she regarded Shanghai as her home, Wang Qian replied with a giggle, and told me that, to her, “Shanghai is only a workplace.” Shanghai may be a city with a reputation

---

1 In this study, Chinese terms and research participants’ names are presented in hanyu pinyin (汉语拼音), the official Romanization system used in the People’s Republic of China (PRC); Chinese terms are followed by the English translation in parentheses; terms in Chinese script are presented in simplified Chinese.
for offering opportunities to relax and have fun, but for rural migrant workers, who provide labor for the service sector, their everyday experiences in Shanghai are complex and their feelings about the city conflicted, owing to the drudgery of working around the clock.

Central to this dissertation are the everyday experiences of rural-to-urban migrant women working in the Shanghai service sector, in particular the ways they live, labor, and love. I ask the following questions: How should we, as cultural researchers, scrutinize the everyday experiences of these women? What do their experiences and feelings about their work and private lives reveal about migrant labor and gender in 21st century post-socialist China? What are the cultural, social, and economic implications of these women’s decision to become migrant service workers expected to deliver affective and aesthetic labor?

As announced by Xi Jinping, the 7th President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), China is opening its doors wider to welcome more foreign investment in the service sector (Shanghai Daily 2017). Further to his proclamation during the 19th Party Congress in 2017, China’s government-run press agency, Xinhua News Agency, reported: “China has been trying to shift its economy toward a growth model
that draws strength from consumption, services and innovation” (Yamei 2017). My study scrutinizes the everyday experiences of rural-urban service workers, who are situated in this context of a critical economic transition from manufacturing industries to a service economy (Magnier 2016; Yamei 2017; see also Mengjie 2015). Significantly, this transition not only has a financial impact but also cultural and political effects, which have drawn academic attention to the lives of rural migrant workers in the service sector (Liao 2016; Otis 2003, 2008, 2012; Shen 2015; Sun 2008, 2009; Yan 2008; Zheng 2003, 2009).

This project focuses specifically on the service industry in Shanghai, not only because it is one of the biggest cities in China, but also because it is “the largest consumer market among all mainland cities” (TDC Research 2016). Since service consumption as an element of achieving a higher quality of life has become

---

2 The proportion of Shanghai’s GDP attributed to the service sector in 2015 was 67.8% (TDC Research 2016).

3 Urban residents’ service consumption in Shanghai, as a proportion of consumer spending, has reached about 60%, which is close to the average level of developed countries such as the United States and Great Britain (Information Office of Shanghai Municipality 2016). The consumption of Shanghai’s citizens is transforming from subsistence-based consumption to enjoyment-based service consumption, while both economic and social developments are shifting towards a consumption-led and life-style-based service sector, which help to advance the city’s sustainability (Information Office of Shanghai Municipality 2016). It is important to note that Shanghai’s consumer market is supported by both the rising income level of inhabitants and the large inflow of tourists (see TDC 2016).
increasingly important in Shanghai’s economy, there is a growing need for service labor in the city. Such labor is generally provided by migrant women.\textsuperscript{4}

In this study, the term “rural-urban migration” concerns internal migration; it acquires specific meanings in relation to China’s progress towards industrialization, urbanization, and modernization, and is entangled with distinctive economic, geo-cultural, and gender politics. Unlike many other nations, China strictly divides its population into a “rural” and an “urban” one under the \textit{hukou} (戸口 – literally, household registration) system (Chan and Buckingham 2008).\textsuperscript{5} During the Maoist era (1949-1978), the PRC government initiated the household registration system to

\textsuperscript{4} According to the Hong Kong Trade Development Council Research, “Shanghai has been undergoing major industrial restructuring (TDC Research 2016). The share of low value-added manufacturing has decreased significantly, particularly the textile and heavy equipment manufacturing industries as many of them have relocated to outside Shanghai” (TDC Research 2016).

\textsuperscript{5} Population registration has a long history in China in the form of the \textit{xiangsui} system (乡遂制度 – literally, township system) and the \textit{baojia} system (保甲 – literally, neighborhood administrative system), also known as the “mutual responsibility” system (Young 2013, 29). The history of these systems can be traced back to the Xia Dynasty (21\textsuperscript{st} to 16\textsuperscript{th} century BCE), where families and clans were organized in the form of a “community-oriented” system, “for the purposes of taxation and social control” (Young 2013, 29). According to Jason Young, “the ruling elites of the Western Zhou Dynasty (11\textsuperscript{th} to 8\textsuperscript{th} century BCE) further developed ‘primitive forms of hukou-like institutions,’ known as the \textit{xiangsui} system. This system divided residential and rural areas into difference zones and categories that moved outwards from a royal centre to the far away barbarian lands” (2013, 29). In present-day China, the \textit{hukou} system divides the population into rural and urban, agricultural and non-agricultural categories embedded with different social roles, benefits, responsibilities, and limitations (see Chan and Buckingham 2008). For the history of the \textit{hukou} system, see also Wang 2005.
restrict rural-to-urban mobility and to counter the problem of rural depopulation (Solinger 1999). In 1958, the government officially enacted the Hukou Registration Regulation “to develop state-owned industries and to nurture a healthy and committed urban proletariat” (Siu 2007, 330; see also Young 2013). People with the rural hukou were designated as working in the agricultural sector; they were “confined to agricultural units based on collective land ownership and were excluded from the state industrial sector” (Siu 2007, 330). On their part, people with the urban hukou were entitled to “state-provided socio-economic benefits (especially in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s),” making the urban hukou highly desirable (Chan and Buckingham 2008, 588). The idea of a rural-urban divide intensified under the Open Door Policy

---

6 In their study on China’s hukou system in relation to land reform, Andreas and Zhan explain: “Rural land rights in China have long been based on hukou status. After collectivization in the 1950s, rural hukou (or agricultural hukou) entailed membership in the village collective; peasants were tied to the land and migration to the city was restricted” (Andreas and Zhan 2016, 798-9). In the 1980s, collective agriculture was replaced by the Household Responsibility System (HRS), in which “all households were entitled to an equal share of village land (based on the number of household members holding agricultural hukou), and land was periodically reallocated among households to adjust for changes in family size” (Andreas and Zhan 2016, 799).

7 As Chan and Buckingham write: “The designation of non-agricultural status entitled the bearer to state-provided housing, employment, grain rations, education and access to medical care as well as other social welfare benefits (a simple test of a person’s hukou status in this period was whether he or she held the entitlement to state-supplied commodity grain)” (2008, 588). Yet, it is imperative to note that my research participants kept reminding me how, as a result of rural urbanization in the 21st
and Economic Reform led by Deng Xiaoping from 1978, when the communist government started to open China up to the global economy. Those assigned the rural hukou were now allowed to work in the newly established Special Economic Zones (SEZs), but not permitted to stay permanently in the urban areas (Chan and Buckingham 2008). Since then, even though rural-urban migration has vastly increased, the hukou system has remained in place. The hukou system is, however, not immutable; the PRC government has been reviewing the pros and cons of the system for the state’s development. In 2014, the State Council issued the “Opinions of the State Council on Further Promotion of Reform of the Household Registration System” in order to promote the reform of the hukou system (The State Council 2014b). One of the adjustments was the abolishment of the distinction between the agricultural and non-agricultural hukou in selected provinces; in addition, some

century, land in rural China has become a valuable possession for them as people with a rural hukou; they can become rich when the central government offers to buy their land for urban development.

8 In the 1980s, the cities of Shenzhen, Shantou, and Zhuhai in Guangdong Province, and the city of Xiamen in Fujian Province were designated as SEZs, opening them up to the rural labor workforce (see Chan and Buckingham 2008).

9 According to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (The State Council 2014a), there were 282 million migrant workers at the end of 2016 (The State Council 2017). In the late 1990s, it was estimated that there were 110 million migrant workers in China (Solinger 1999, 18; see also Fan 2003, 26).
scholars have advocated the full abolishment of the rural / urban household registration system (see Chan 2012a).

The *hukou* system has been criticized because it serves as a population control system and also implies social control by being “aimed at excluding the rural population from access to state-provided goods, welfare, and entitlements so that the rural population segment remains cheap and easily exploited” (Chan 2012b, 188). Rural-urban migrant workers “work and live in the city, but are not part of the urban citizenry, no matter how many years and how hard they have worked in that city” (Chan 2012a, 68). This exclusion also manifests in the fact that, despite being needed, then, rural-urban migrant workers are looked down upon by urbanites as *suzhidi* (素质低 – literally, “low quality”) (Anagnost 2004) and discriminated against (Kuang and Liu 2012; Song 2016; Tse 2016).

Rural-urban migrant workers are known as *nongmingong* (农民工 – literally, “peasant workers”), which “refers to a group of industrial and service workers with rural *hukou*” (Chan 2010, 663; see also Pun and Chan 2013; Pun 2003, 2005).

---

10 The limited provision of education in rural China means that only 61.6% of rural-urban migrants have attended school up to junior high school level (National Bureau of Statistics 2015). This low education level helps to constrain rural-urban migrants’ upward social mobility, leaving them with limited capability to bargain for better wages when they opt to do urban work.
However, in Shanghai, the specific term *lai Hu* (来沪 – literally, come to Shanghai; Shanghai is generally known as *Hu* by the Mainland Chinese community) is used, emphasizing the destination over the rural location of origin. In Shanghai, it is also more common to address migrant workers as *Shanghai wailai wugong* (上海外来务工 – literally, Shanghai migrant worker) instead of as *nongmingong* (农民工 – “peasant workers”), which again draws attention away from migrant workers’ agricultural and rural identity. The term *Xinshanghairen* (新上海人 – literally, New Shanghainese) has also emerged to describe a specific subset of migrants from other parts of China who have settled down in Shanghai (meaning that they have received permanent residency there), underlining their economic contribution to the city (Farrer 2010; Sun 2009). Although this indicates that there is now a possibility for migrant workers to settle in Shanghai permanently, the chances of obtaining permanent residency remain slim, as it tends to be restricted to “highly educated and wealthy people” (Farrer 2010, 1216; see also Schilbach 2014).

Although both “New Shanghainese” and “Shanghai wailai wugong” are less

---

11 As James Farrer comments: “In contrast to the rigid population controls under socialism, the key to urban citizenship was no longer local ties or even ethnicity, but the ability to contribute economically” (2010, 1216).
stigmatizing terms than *nonmingong*, the strict control of rural-urban mobility for non-wealthy, less skilled, and less educated workers persists, and rural-urban migrants in Shanghai are still discriminated against. Research has revealed that “urban residents of higher socio-economic status have more prejudice towards rural migrants. Also, urban residents who have urban *hukou* at birth report greater prejudice” (Tse 2016, 2). Almost by default, rural migrants are considered as of a “lower” class than the Shanghainese, who sometimes call them *waidiren* (外地人 – literally outsiders).

Hence, in the eyes of urbanites, rural migrant workers can be said to experience a kind of social invisibility that Esther Peeren, following Akira Mizuta Lippit’s *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (2005), calls “the avisual” – they are not hidden, but out in the open, but cannot be seen in any other way than through stereotypes (2014, 36-37).

In terms of academic research, much has been done to scrutinize the socio-political roles and cultural impacts of the *hukou* system (Anagnost 2004; Chan and Buckingham 2008; Chan 2010; 2012a; 2012b; Fan 1999; 2003; Huang 2001; Kuang and Liu 2012; Shen 2016; Siu 2007; Solinger 1999; Sun and Fan 2011; Tani 2017; Wang 2005; Young 2013; Zhang 2012). Rural-urban migrant workers have drawn extensive attention across disciplines, including anthropological studies of

Many scholars have drawn attention to the gendered dimension of the rural migrant workforce because industrialization in post-reform China primarily demands female labor. This is because female workers are believed to be more obedient and less rebellious than their male counterparts, and easier to govern in the urban workplace (Pun 2005).12 Nügong (女工 – literally, female workers) can refer to women workers in general, but is more commonly used specifically for female factory workers.12 State-planned rural-to-urban migration has transformed rural women’s lives, because it became the norm for these women to finish school in their early teenage years and leave behind their rural families to take part in the migrant workforce (Zhang 2013, see also Chuang 2016; Tan and Short 2004; Yan 2003).
workers. In general, factory girls are addressed as *dagongmei* (打工妹 – literally, “working sister” or “working girl”), which denotes “a new kind of labor relationship fundamentally different from those of Mao’s period” (Pun 1999, 3). As explained by Pun Ngai,

*Dagong* means “working for the boss,” or “selling labor,” connoting commodification and a capitalist exchange of labor for wages. *Mei* means younger sister. It denotes not merely gender, but also marital status – *mei* is single, unmarried and younger (and thus of a lower status). In contrast to the term “worker” (*gongren*), which carried the highest status in the socialist rhetoric of Mao’s day, the new word *dagong* signifies a lesser identity – that of a hired hand – in a new context shaped by the rise of market factors in labor relations and hierarchy. (1999, 3)

According to Pun (2005), female migrant workers face a “triple oppression” by the state, global capitalism, and patriarchy (see also Sun 2009). A wealth of literature has framed rural migrant women, particularly factory girls, as the “victims” of the
state-planned market economy (Lee 1998; Pun 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005; SACOM 2010). In this literature, service sector workers do not feature much, as the focus is on factory work. My study shifts the focus to the service sector and the specific problems, but also opportunities, the rural-urban migrant women working in this sector encounter.

Scattered around Shanghai, service workers live and work in different work environments under various conditions, and are subject to diverse employment policies and regulations, including different requirements in terms of qualifications, skills and attitudes, working hours and rosters, etc. Whereas the state media, social media, and scholars focus mainly on factory workers in relation to China’s rapid urbanization, there are some studies that seek to capture the everyday experiences of service workers (Liao 2016; Otis 2003, 2008, 2012; Shen 2015; Sun 2008, 2009, 2010; Yan 2008; Zheng 2003, 2009). As Eileen Otis notes, “[b]y examining the construction of service work as a new form of labor within China’s economic transition, we gain insight into taken-for-granted gender and class inequalities constituted by modern consumer service industries” (Otis 2012, 169). What I aim to add to the existing studies is an analysis of the experience of rural-urban migrant women in the Shanghai
service sector that focuses on the physical, mental and economic transformations they undergo (as a result of their circumstances) and achieve (as a result of the agency they have). My study, as such, critically intervenes by opting for a perspective that includes both the work and private lives of migrant women in the service sector; I explore the ways in which these women live, labor, and love in Shanghai without neglecting or forgetting their rural migrant identity; from my research it becomes clear that these women do not leave their hometowns behind altogether, but remain precariously yet also strategically situated in-between rural and urban China.

To answer the main question of how, in the wake of the national economic transition from manufacturing industries to a service economy, rural-urban migrant workers in the service sector live, labor, and love in Shanghai, I focus on three specific issues: the notion of home (live), the economy of beauty (labor), and the stigma of singlehood (love). First, I explore how, in a social context in which rural migrant women are discursively categorized by urbanites as the “low-quality” (Anagnost 2004) and “suspicious” other (Sun 2009), these women nevertheless construct a sense of “home” in Shanghai. Second, I examine how rural-urban migrant women in the beauty industry, by engaging in a form of affective labor and by also
participating as consumers in the beauty industry, come to transform their bodies and sense of self. Third, with early marriage and shishi hunyin (事实婚姻 – literally, de facto marriage) still prevalent in rural China, I ask how rural-urban migrant women present and legitimate their relationship status as single, married or having a boyfriend in relation to conflicting normative models of singlehood and marriage in their rural communities and Shanghai.

Important to each issue are the popular Chinese terminologies adopted by the rural migrant women I interviewed. For instance, in the section on home, I examine the Chinese terms jia (家 – literally, home), laojia (老家 – literally, hometown), and jiaren (家人 – literally, family member), and how they influence the everyday experiences of rural migrant women working in Shanghai and the degree to which they feel at home in the city. Mobilizing the concepts of femininity and beauty, the section on beauty interrogates the discourse of xiandai nüxing (现代女性 – literally, modern women) in relation to the popular terms meinü (美女 – literally, beautiful woman/beauty), nūshen (女神 – literally, goddess), and baifumei (白富美 – literally, white, rich, and beautiful). By looking at the beauty parlor industry and the wider beauty economy, this section studies the ways in which the concept of mei (美 –
literally, beauty) shapes female migrant workers’ bodies and minds. Finally, the section on the stigma of singlehood looks at the word *danshen* (单身 – literally, singlehood) and the discourse of *shengnü* (剩女 – literally, leftover women) to explore the stigmatization of rural migrant women’s singlehood and of how they live their marriage or relationship, as well as the coping strategies the rural migrant women have developed to pre-empt or counter such stigmatization.

Together, the three sections show that rural migrant women in Shanghai do not leave the rural behind, but are in an in-between position, leading to a constant process of negotiation that renders their identity not fixed but flexible and that, as a result, creates possibility for strategic maneuvering, for example with regard to norms about singlehood and marriage. Additionally, all three sections highlight that not all rural-urban migrant women are in the same economic position. This enables an analysis of how different economic positions shape the affective lives of these women, as well as a recognition that rural-urban migrant women in very different financial situations may still face the same problems, most notably discrimination by urbanites.

Rural-urban migrant women in the service sector in Shanghai have to deal with various degrees of stress and challenges, including being rendered avisible. By
exploring the relation between service work and the issues of home, beauty and the stigma of singlehood, this study aims to draw attention not only to the exploitation and discrimination of rural-urban migrant women in this sector, but also to the strategies they develop to cope with the often harsh circumstances in the workplace, a city constructed according to a strict social hierarchy, and a nation that positions them as “low quality.” This study will show how they navigate between the structural forces that affect their lives and the moments and places where possibilities arise, when they can negotiate and embrace a position in-between the rural and the urban, the allegedly traditional and the presumably modern, thereby defying easy generalizations in which they are exclusively perceived as victims of China’s modernization processes.

In the following sections of the introduction, I will first clarify the methodology of the study, then present the key theories applied in the analysis of my fieldwork data, and finally, in the chapter outline, go into further detail about the three issues I focus on: home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood.

Methodology

This dissertation is a qualitative research project drawing on fieldwork conducted in
Shanghai between September and December 2014, between May and July 2015, and in October 2016. During these research trips, I conducted semi-structured interviews with rural migrant women. In total, I interviewed eighty-eight rural migrant women (n=88), aged fifteen to fifty-four when I first met them. The interview subjects were found through snowball sampling. The majority of these migrant women (n=81) worked in the food and beverage service industry, beauty parlors, boutiques, and in domestic service; the others (n=7) worked in different service sectors, including hospitality, banking, and property agencies. The interviews were conducted in cafés and restaurants, or at the workers’ workplaces: beauty parlors, restaurants, and the urban homes where those participants who were domestic helpers worked.

The main criterion used for the snowball sampling was that participants had to be rural women working in Shanghai in the service sector. The selected research participants come from different rural regions of China and have been in Shanghai for different lengths of time. They also have different marital backgrounds, education

---

13 The snowball method is useful in this study because the research participants “are enlisted to help find other potential respondents, [and] they become de facto research assistants” (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981, 153). In this case, the “respondent-research assistants [came] to represent the project in the community” (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981, 153) after being told about my research and the criteria for the research participants (female with rural hukou and working in the service sector).
levels, and monthly incomes. This means that I have also collected data from women with higher incomes in the service sector, who may have developed their skills and become service business owners, or whose wages are based on the commission system, as is common in the beauty parlor industry. Considering the importance of understanding the potential for upward social mobility that service work offers rural-urban migrant women, it makes sense to include data provided by high-income workers, instead of excluding them due to their greater financial power. Hence, the claimed monthly incomes of my participants range from RMB0 (USD0), in that some apprentices may not receive a monthly wage, to the majority, who earn RMB4,000–7,000 (= ca. USD600–1,055) a month, up to a single outlier with an income of RMB90,000–100,000 (= ca. USD13,600–15,000) per month.\(^{14}\)

Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with several male migrant workers in the service industry (n=5), local people with Shanghai urban hukou (n=4), and foreigners (people without either urban or rural Chinese hukou) (n=4). Their narratives assist in drawing a more comprehensive picture of rural

---

\(^{14}\) Apprentices in beauty parlors have the lowest income of all my research participants, but they do receive other benefits from their employers, such as three meals a day, and a living space in the workers’ dormitories.
migrant women’s lives, particularly in terms of how they are seen by other social groups. I obtained the verbal consent of the research participants for all interviews (n=101). The participants were asked to choose a pseudonym during the briefing, and were informed that their real name would not be recorded. Furthermore, I have amended the names of the companies involved in this study and/or mentioned by the participants. Under these conditions, some participants were willing to share intimate personal stories of their struggles with me, for instance the sorrow of being a widow, the stress of being newly divorced, or the perplexity of being a single woman in one’s late 20s. I also added most of my research participants as contacts on the social media platform Weixin (微信 – the English version of this app is known as WeChat), which is commonly used by people in China. My participants were told that I might have to follow up the conversation if I needed more data for my analysis. Eventually, I started casual conversations with the participants on WeChat, and successfully met some of them again on my second and third fieldwork trips in 2015 and 2016. Although not all

15 At the beginning of the interviews, participants decided to use their xiaoming (小名 – literally, nicknames), jiaming (假名 – literally, pseudonyms), wangming (网名 – literally, the names they use in social media platforms) or, in most cases, English names. The research participants were informed that the names they chose could be fake, but that the information and personal background they shared should be real.
participants replied to my WeChat messages, we “liked” and left comments on each other’s posts in the Moments, known as Pengyouquan (朋友圈 – literally, Friend Circle), a function similar to Facebook posts. The connection through WeChat enabled me to read the articles and images shared by the participants, allowing me to gather updates on their daily lives in a less intrusive way.

As Annette Lareau proposes, “in qualitative research, the way the researcher acts in the field is inextricably connected to data quality” (2011, 312). When I first arrived in Shanghai in 2014, I used snowball sampling to extend my network to local Shanghainese, expatriates, foreigners, and rural-urban migrants in the service sector. Informal conversations were held in which I told them the purpose of my fieldwork, shared my ideas on the topic of service work and rural-urban female migrations, my research focus and questions, etc. In these informal conservations, or through casual chitchat, I made clear that the research participants could also pose questions to me to express their curiosity about my motivations in studying rural migrant women. Their questions, which sometimes became criticisms, helped to adjust the focus of my study. Some people whom I randomly talked with eventually helped to introduce me to rural migrant workers in the service industry or became research participants themselves.
This method enabled me to reshape my academic language to a more mundane voice, so that people without academic knowledge could understand my research and help me to spread the word to potential participants. Moreover, the method of casually talking with diverse types of people in Shanghai helped me to get a better idea of the multiple lifestyles in Shanghai across different classes and occupations.

For the part of the dissertation dealing with home, I visited different participants’ living spaces, including the middle-class family homes where two rural-urban domestic helpers worked, one upper-class family home with a live-in domestic worker and two part-time helpers who assisted with cooking and chores, four rural migrant workers’ homes, and two migrant workers’ dormitories. I also visited two workers’ dormitories through the connections of my local contacts. By visiting the dormitories and workers’ living places, I gained a better understanding of their living conditions, which helped me to analyze the different ways in which some female migrant workers manage to establish a sense of home in Shanghai, even when living in dormitories or private homes, and/or separated from their families.

To get a better comprehension of the service sector in Shanghai in its different dimensions, other ethnographic methods were also employed. I frequented service
sector businesses (café’s, restaurants, pubs, beauty parlors, hair salons, and manicure shops) as a customer to engage with workers and other customers in a mode of participation observation (see Shen 2015). During my visits to these places, I talked with the service workers and documented my experiences as a consumer and my affective responses to the services provided in fieldwork notes. This allowed me to observe and experience the regular routines associated with the provided services, such as giving manicures, hairstyling, or waiting tables. Some of these consumer experiences I found familiar, yet at times I discovered significant discrepancies between my experiences in Shanghai and my earlier experiences in Hong Kong, where I was born and grew up, and in Amsterdam, where I live and work. These discrepancies stimulated my awareness that not all services are provided in the same way everywhere and increased my comprehension of the specificities of rural-urban women workers’ work-life in Shanghai.

Moreover, I observed the spatial use of the city by rural migrant workers in the hope of gaining a better understanding of how they build a relationship with Shanghai. Through my daily observations and casual conservations, I gained a sense of the rigid spatial segregation in Shanghai between local people considered to be of a higher
class and migrants assigned to a lower class, and established a better understanding of the ways in which rural-urban labor is extracted in the city. Furthermore, I incorporated the Go-along method (Kusenbach 2003) to walk with one research participant, Elaine, on the Cheap Road, where she would go shopping for fashion items with her friends. This enhanced my analysis of migrant women’s intimate relationships with the city as both consumers and workers. The data collected through the Go-along method is used in Chapter 5, where I present an analysis of migrant women’s self-transformation through fashion shopping on the Cheap Road. Last but not least, I gathered multiple fieldwork materials, including fieldwork notes, a fieldwork diary, photographs, and videos that I took in the field.

The methods used allowed me to gain the trust and friendship of some research participants. Between 2014 and 2016, I stayed in contact with these participants and managed to meet with them on my return trips. This allowed me to see how female workers’ lives change with time, especially for rural-urban migrant women. By the time I returned to Shanghai, some of my participants had changed their marital status from single to married, or had become mothers. Others had
encountered bad luck, losing their jobs or loved ones,\textsuperscript{16} or had returned to their hometown to take care of their family or to get married. Knowing how precious time outside work is to migrant women workers, I want to sincerely thank all the women who joined my project as research participants.

In the next section, I will present the main theories employed in this study to analyze the different forms of labor mobilized by the Shanghai service sector and to unpack the ways in which rural-urban migrant women’s bodies and minds are being shaped and manipulated through these forms of labor.

\textbf{Affective Labor and Beyond}

Laboring in the service sector is often particularly arduous because it involves the work of “serving” others, which implies having to fulfill their wishes and to please them at a level that exceeds that of the provided service. Thus, migrant service workers in Shanghai have to serve urban customers, who demand good quality services, including a zealous service attitude that includes hospitality, politeness, friendliness, and a particular form of femininity (Hanser 2007; Otis 2008).

\textsuperscript{16} One of my research participants, a divorcee, met a new boyfriend in Shanghai in 2014, but he passed away a year later.
Considering the demands made of migrant workers, who are mostly women, in the Chinese service sector, this study mobilizes the concepts of aesthetic labor (Yang 2011; see also Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003), emotional labor (Hochschild 1979), and affective labor (Hardt 1999; Hardt & Negri 2004). These concepts help to capture the complex ways in which Shanghai service work shapes female service workers’ bodies, minds and everyday experiences.

Arlie R. Hochschild argues that service work, particularly domestic work, involves what she calls emotional labor, because it requires the presentation of emotions and, as a result, the demand for workers to manage their emotions “through deep acting” (1979, 570; see also Hochschild [1983] 2012). As explained by Hochschild, “deep acting” can be performed by “directly exhorting feeling” or by “making indirect use of a trained imagination” ([1983] 2012, 38). As this study will show, the migrant service workers I focus on constantly have to engage in such management of their emotions. In addition, as Witz, Warhurst and Nickson describe, service work tends to require the presentation of an appealing physical appearance, which they argue imposes on the worker a demand for aesthetic labor – work on one’s appearance that can be time-consuming and/or expensive – in addition to emotional
labor. This demand, they emphasize, sexualizes female labor and commodifies female workers (2003, 35). Yang further argues that “the molding of the physicality of workers is required as the material signifier of the aesthetics and ethos of an organization” (2011, 348). Thus, service workers not only have to manage their emotions at work, but also need to modify their physical appearance.

Another term used to refer to the ways in which service work requires a certain degree of modification of workers’ bodies and minds is “affective labor” (Hardt 1999; Hardt & Negri 2004). Hardt and Negri define affective labor as “a form of immaterial labor,” that “produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (2004, 108). The manipulation of affects becomes part of the labor production in the sense that workers’ bodies and minds are involved in the process of production.

Several scholars have studied service work in relation to affective labor in China (Otis 2005, 2008; Yan 2008). Eileen Otis aptly states: “Embodied affective labor is simultaneously constructed in the workplace and made invisible as work that adds value, to the extent that affective labor is construed as part of women’s biology” (2008, 17, emphasis in text). Using Maoist gendered ideologies as an example, Otis
outlines that “[a]lterations of women’s bodies to conform to new gendered norms were tied to political restructuring and orchestrated on a mass scale” (2008, 18). Otis’ work interrogates the role of affective labor (2008, 17) and Hochschild’s emotional work (Otis 2008, 11-12) in China’s service sector, and argues that the formation of affective or emotional labor (and, I would add, aesthetic labor) is intensified by the new Chinese ideology that “the consumer is God” (2008, 16). As her study discloses, not only the imposition of a middle-class feminine, aesthetic sensibility is mobilized to provide quality services for urban customers, but also women’s bodies as a whole, considered as “vehicles for expressing nurture and care” (Otis 2008, 2, 17). Specifically focused on the service sector in China, Otis’ analysis (2008) is central for my study. I supplement her work by exploring the ways in which rural-urban migrant women in the service sector deal with an environment in which their employers and urban customers demand their corporeal and mental investment and adjustment, with a specific focus on the issues of home, beauty, and singlehood.

Home, Beauty, and the Stigma of Singlehood: Chapter Outline

Under conditions in which rural-urban migrant women are discursively perceived as
the “low-quality” (Anagnost 2004) and “suspicious” other (Sun 2009) by the urban people in the city, the section focusing on home first explores the ways in which rural migrant women come to feel or not feel a sense of “home” in their living place, their workplace, and the city of Shanghai. I show how, while some migrant women, like Wang Qian, quoted at the start of this introduction, experience Shanghai as exclusively a workplace, others do succeed in making themselves at home in the city. I ask what the barriers and enabling factors are for feeling a sense of “home,” what this sense of “home” consist of and when or where it is felt most strongly. Second, this section studies the urban home as a workplace in which migrant domestic helpers labor. I ask how these migrant women labor and sometimes also live in their employers’ urban homes, how they navigate gender politics in these homes and how they manage to build a relation of trust with their employers in what tends to be a low-trust situation. As a whole, the section destabilizes the idea of fixity often attached to the notion of “home” by showing that, in situations of labor migration, it does not have to be restricted to a single physical location (the hometown, the family home) and can become entangled with the workplace as one works in a home or experiences the place one works in as like a home.
The scale of internal rural-urban migration in China has caused issues not only for the migrant workers themselves, but also practical difficulties for the local government. As Wu Weiping writes, “the sheer magnitude of the migration is bringing significant challenges to cities and their spatial development” (2008, 102). Shanghai comprises more than 14 million inhabitants with a permanent residence permit, among which are 4.1 million rural migrant women, and 4.8 million rural migrant men (Chen 2011). They are part of China’s liudong renkou (liudong renkou – literally, the “floating population”) (Sudhinaraset et al., 2012, 1082; see also Zhang 2000). As Solinger notes, the “‘floating population’ consists of people who have in fact not ‘migrated,’ officially speaking,” which means that “‘they float and move,’ implying that they are not, and will not become, a permanently settled group” (1999, 15). Floating back and forth between rural and urban China, any sense of “home” these migrants have is likely to be unstable and precarious.

Sun Wanning has argued that one of the dominant emotional burdens of floating migrant workers is a sense of “spiritual homelessness” (2012, 76). She defines “spiritual” as indicating a “sense of awareness of a deeper meaning of life than mere everyday existence,” while “homelessness” refers to the “inability to
develop a sense of belonging” (Sun 2012, 76). Rural-urban migrants have to adapt to urban life, facing a cosmopolitan cityscape unlike that of their rural hometowns. Research has revealed mental health and related problems on the part of rural-urban migrants as they adapt to the urban culture (Gui et al., 2012). Ien Ang aptly writes:

To feel at home somewhere requires a reconciliation of geography, history, culture and identity. So if the condition of home amounts to our capacity to feel a sense of belonging, then feeling at home can only be arrived at if we succeed in claiming a space – the space where we find ourselves located – as home. Our sense of home is secure if there is a harmonious confluence of who we are, where we came from, and where we are now. (2015, 2, emphasis in text)

Following Morley’s work (2000), Ang affirms that “in a time of massive migration, mobility and displacement, this comfortable sense of home is often destabilized (Ang

17 In Shanghai, particularly, scholars have identified problems such as psychological distress (Wen et al. 2010, 2017) and loneliness (Wen and Wang 2009; see also Sun 2012), and have explored workers’ psychological well-being (Wen et al. 2010) and investigated the need for social support to improve the mental health of migrant workers (Wong and Leung 2008).
2015, 2). Instead, it is bound to be a dynamic and uncertain experience, dependent on its shifting social, cultural, spatial and political parameters” (Ang 2015, 2).

Home, then, is more complex than the place where either the body or the heart is. In a global context of mass migration, Sara Ahmed (1999) vividly criticizes the ongoing construction of home “as a purified space of belonging” and its association with “stasis, boundaries, identity and fixity” (339). From my analysis of the experience of rural-urban migrant women in Shanghai and their (in)ability to create a sense of “home” through living, laboring, and loving in the city, “home” emerges as something very different: an unstable, unfixed concept that can therefore also be shaped by the women in different strategic ways.

Building on Ang’s work (2015) on the conceptions of migration and home, Chapter 1 interrogates the nexus of tensions within rural-urban migrant women’s daily home-making practices and home-sensing experiences in relation to Chinese patriarchal Confucian culture and the hukou (“household registration”) system. I explore the everyday experiences of migrant women working in the food and beverage service industry in terms of how they live and make their home in Shanghai, socially, practically, and emotionally. Drawing on my empirical data, I first
summarize how rural migrant women define home. Three different tropes of “home” recur: the familial home, the hometown, and the affective sense of feeling at home. Then, I explore rural migrant women’s home-making practices in their work and living places. My analysis discloses that, while it is possible for these women to feel a sense of “home,” their sense of “home” remains precarious because of the complex power relations they are entangled in as a result of the hukou system and Chinese patriarchal culture. Ultimately, this chapter aims to broaden the sense of “home” beyond its attachment to a sense of “belonging,” because there are affective experiences that may also create a sense of “home” in the process of migration.18

Chapter 2, co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet, critically examines the concept of “home” in relation to rural migrant women working as domestic workers in Shanghai, who are regarded as low-trust employees by their urban employers. As China’s rural-to-urban migration has increased rapidly in recent decades, many young men and women are moving to the cities aspiring to better jobs with higher salaries. Some of the women opt for the job of ayi (阿姨 – literally, auntie), the common term used for a domestic worker (Yan 2008). Whether married or not, the ayi usually lives

18 This paragraph is amended from the article abstract submitted to Gender, Place & Culture.
a single life in the city. *Ayis* in Shanghai are what we call “working-single,” a term that refers to their single status in the context of the family, as well as to their loneliness in the isolated workplace. This single status contributes to the precarity and fragility of the trust-relationship with the employers (Hochschild 2002). *Ayis* have to deal with the problem of mistrust by their employers, who might perceive them as thieves or sexual seducers (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). At the same time, *ayis* are expected to produce affective labor (Yan 2008) within the spatial isolation of a domestic workplace that renders them precarious and puts them at risk of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence. Focusing on the ways in which they negotiate trust with their employers, we present an ethnographic study of *ayis* in Shanghai, drawing on nineteen in-depth interviews. Our analysis shows that *ayis* are sentient wageworkers that employ strategies to build trust in a low-trust familial workplace. Three main strategies for negotiating trust are identified: honesty, professionalism, and care. First, *ayis* express their sense of honesty to gain trust (Wee 2011). Second, *ayis* employ professionalism in the form of “face-work” (Goffman 1967) to build trust with their employers. Third, *ayis* employ care to build a trust-relationship with their
The second section of this study zooms in on the beauty economy. It explores the everyday experiences of Shanghai female migrant service workers in the beauty parlor industry and the ways in which rural migrant women physically transform themselves into “modern Chinese rural migrant women” by working and consuming in the beauty economy. As defined by Xu and Feiner (2007, 308), meinü jingji (美女经济 – literally, beauty economy) refers to “activities like beauty pageants that are typically commercialized and localized festivities that put beautiful women on parade, as well as the accompanying range of advertisements for TV shows and movies, cosmetics, plastic surgery centers, weight loss products, fitness programs, and the ubiquitous beauty parlors.” A study of the beauty economy, focusing on beauty parlor workers and on how rural-urban migrant women respond to advertising presenting a normative image of the “Chinese modern woman,” helps to unpack the ways in which migrant women gain access to upward social mobility and how this affects the ways in which they present themselves, in terms of how they shape their bodies and what they wear.

19 This paragraph is amended from the chapter abstract submitted to the edited volume Being Single in Urban Asia: Spaces and Mobilities, Pleasures and Precarities.
As Naomi Woolf comments, “‘Beauty’ is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics” ([1991] 2002, 12). In the 1990s, many state-owned factories and organizations closed down, resulting in women being laid off (Yang 2011, 346). To absorb this excess of female labor, the PRC government purposefully promoted the development of the beauty parlor industry (Yang 2011, 346). This economic scheme has modified the everyday lives of the former factory women, as well as the ways women “perform” and “purchase” their sense of beauty. After two decades of development, China’s beauty economy has grown exponentially and has attracted a new rural migrant generation to join the beauty parlor industry. As Otis discerns, some urban employers instruct the female workers “to adopt a middle-class feminine sensibility so they may effortlessly inhabit the world of wealth in which they labor” (Otis 2008, 2). In this way, female service labor is tied to emotional labor and to a particular normative idea of femininity.

Culturally, the term meinü (美女 – literally, beautiful woman/beauty) is widely used by customers to address female service workers in Shanghai. For instance, I have learned to call waitresses meinü instead of the gender-neutral term fuwuyuan (服务员 – literally, waitress/waiter). While meinü is a common term in everyday life,
beautiful female celebrities in popular culture are often labeled as *nüshen* (女神 – literally, goddess), and are commonly referred to by the popular descriptive term *baifumei* (白富美 – literally, white, rich, and beautiful). To be beautiful has become a goal for Chinese women, especially in the global city of Shanghai, where consumers are the “trend-setters for fashion and lifestyle products among the whole country” (TDC Research 2016). The growth of the beauty economy creates job opportunities for migrant women; they can learn beauty services as *shouyi* (手艺 – literally, craft/craftsmanship) and become beauty service workers in cities like Shanghai. Significantly, working in this industry also exposes them to the demand to be beautiful themselves; they have to please their urban customers and gain their trust by transforming themselves physically to meet Shanghai beauty and fashion standards. The consequences of this are explored in the two chapters that make up this section.

**Chapter 3** studies rural migrant women working in the Shanghai beauty parlor industry, focusing on how this industry emphasizes affective labor and articulates it along lines of migration, gender, and seniority. The analysis looks at three types of female beauty workers: apprentices, senior beauticians, and entrepreneurs. Bringing together Hardt and Negri’s (2004) theorization of affective
labor and Yang Jie’s (2011) notion of aesthetic labor, this chapter investigates how the affective and aesthetic labor demanded from these migrant women affects their minds and bodies, and their position and value in the marriage market. On the basis of fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, the chapter begins by exploring the ways in which the demand of Shanghai beauty parlor industry for affective labor impacts the ability of rural migrant women to enter into other forms of affective relationships. It goes on to argue that affective labor in this industry is not wholly negative, but modifies bodies and minds in ways that can be both oppressive and enabling, depending on, among other things, the beauty worker’s level of seniority. Finally, the chapter proposes that, in the beauty parlor industry, there is a reciprocality with affective labor that includes the workers as well as the clients.\(^20\)

Chapter 4 examines how new definitions of the “Chinese modern woman” affect the lives of rural-urban migrant women, with a focus on the way these women are interpellated as modern and fashionable at the *Qipulu* Clothing Wholesale Market in Shanghai, also known as the “Cheap Road.” It analyzes how the spatial

organization and commercial strategies of the Cheap Road allow rural migrant women a sense of being “modern,” and explores narratives from these migrants, focusing on their consumer experience, to explore how they transform themselves in response to the globalizing cityscape. This chapter suggests that the Cheap Road is organized spatially and commercially to sell rural women access to images of the “modern” and to the Chinese Dream. I argue that, by developing their fashion style through shopping, these women become “Chinese modern rural migrant women” capable of finding a point where their identities as migrant women and Shanghai women meet.21

The final part of the dissertation explores how rural-urban women migrant workers in Shanghai’s service sector relate to the conflicting gender norms and stigmas attached to marriage, family, and romantic relationships in their hometowns and the city. The popular term shengnǚ (剩女 – literally, leftover women) has been frequently used by the mass media to label educated, professional women who remain unmarried after reaching the age of 27 (Fincher 2014). In response to the increasing social and financial independence of women in urban China, the government also

21 This paragraph is amended from the abstract of my published book chapter “Migrant Women Walking Down the Cheap Road: Modernization and Being Fashionable in Shanghai” in The Routledge Companion to Modernity, Space and Gender. See Ip 2018.
encourages the use of this label, which marks women over 27 who remain single as unwanted and unfeminine (Fincher 2014; Gaetano 2014; see also To 2013, 2015). *Shengnü* constantly face social pressure from their peers and, more significantly, their parents. As Sandy To (2013; 2015) has shown, these women face a complicated negotiation between, on the one hand, the traditional patriarchal views about what constitutes a proper, suitable marriage and a marriageable woman held by their parents and, to some extent, by themselves and their potential spouses, and, on the other, the negative characteristics ascribed to them as career women; their emerging sense of self as more than a daughter, wife and mother; and their desire to choose a spouse in a different way and according to different criteria than in traditional matchmaking practices.

For rural-urban migrant workers in Shanghai, singlehood and marriage also require careful negotiation and coping strategies, but not in the same way as for professional urban women. As Terry, a 26-year-old migrant woman from Guangdong, noted after being told that I was researching singlehood among migrant women:

> Underclass, single migrant women don’t exist. It’s because they make so little money. They have to survive in Shanghai, so they have to find a partner, a
boyfriend or a husband, to share the rent with them. Shengnü are those who demand a lot from their partners and as a result they have become leftover. It is because they can’t find a man who suits their needs. But they must have certain qualifications to be leftover, for example high salary and high education, and they have their own thoughts.

While Terry’s assessment that shengnü remain unmarried because they are too demanding is problematic,\(^{22}\) she is right that rural-urban migrant workers are unlikely to be labelled shengnü. This does not mean, however, that they escape stigmatization if they remain single. In rural China, it is common for women to marry around the age of 20 or even younger, with early marriage being the norm (Fan and Li 2002, 629). Arianne Gaetano explains: “the centrality of marriage in rural women’s life course means that parents and daughters alike wish to maintain the young woman’s good reputation” (2004, 49). Labor migration to the city could be seen as a way to allow women to escape this early marriage norm. As Lucetta Kam reminds us, Shanghai provides a kind of anonymity that non-native people could not enjoy in their

\(^{22}\) Sandy To concludes that rather than overly high expectations on the part of professional women, the main cause of shengnü is the “persisting formidability of the Chinese patriarchal structure” which leads to “‘discriminatory’ and ‘controlling’ gendered constraints” (2013, 17).
hometowns, in which they gain the freedom to try different lifestyles (2007, 91; see also Dai et al. 2015). However, since rural migrants almost always remain attached to their hometowns and frequently return there, and because many rural migrant women are already married when they leave for the city, the question is to what extent they can actually try different lifestyles, such as a single one or one in which they live apart from their husbands, and how they navigate the distance between the gender norms in their rural hometowns and those in the city, as well as the stigmas attached to not complying with these norms.

On the basis of fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, **Chapter 5**, co-authored with Esther Peeren, explores how Chinese rural-to-urban migrant women cope with the stigmatization they face as a result of conflicting gender norms regarding singlehood and marriage in their home communities and in Shanghai. We focus on how migrant women legitimate their relationship status as single, married, or having a boyfriend in relation to these conflicting norms. We argue that the use of coping strategies that exploit the distance labor migration enforces between their rural hometown and their urban work and life space (which is often why their relationships are lived in non-normative ways in the first place) marks these women as more than
just victims of their circumstances and of prejudice. Although not ready to abandon long-standing norms and maintaining a strong desire to get married at some point, these migrant women are capable of anticipating and countering the stigmatization of their singlehood or of how they live their relationships by managing their position in-between the urban context and their rural hometowns in intricate and deliberate ways.\(^{23}\)

Together, the three parts of this study show that rural-urban migrant women working in the service sector in Shanghai create strategies to cope with the harsh circumstances in workplaces that demand not just physical but also emotional, aesthetic, and affective labor; in a city whose population is divided by clear class boundaries and hierarchies; and in a nation that positions them as rural migrants of “low quality” and prevents them from settling in the city. My study recognizes the multiplicity and complexity of these rural migrant women’s lives and defies both generalizations about their victimhood and overestimations of their agency. As Pang Yuan, a 25-year-old hairstylist from Hunan, vividly shared with me: “I believe we can

---

\(^{23}\) This paragraph is amended from the abstract for the journal article “Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage,” co-authored with Esther Peeren and under review at the European Journal for Cultural Studies.
change our fate.” I believe that, to an extent, this is indeed possible, but that it is necessary to balance recognition of migrant women’s agency with an awareness that how they live, labor, and love remains constrained by systemic discourses and by the ways the Chinese state organizes rural-urban labor migration. To attest to the specificity and multiplicity of the experiences of rural-urban women migrants working in the service sector (experiences that differ from those of factory workers and also between different parts of the service sector), and of their responses to these experiences, it is essential to listen carefully to their stories and to share them – it is this belief that has inspired this study.
References


Hong Kong Trade Development Council Research (TDC Research). 2016. “Shanghai:
Market Profile.”


Kam, Lucetta Yip Lo. 2007. “Noras on the Road: Family and Marriage of Lesbian


Siu, Helen. 2007. “Ground Displacement: Uncivil Urban Spaces in Postreform South


---. 2015. “‘My Mother Wants me to Jiaru-haomen (Marry Into a Rich and Powerful Family)’: Exploring the Pathways to ‘Altruistic Individualism’ in Chinese Professional Women’s Filial Strategies of Marital Choice.” SAGE Open


10.1177/1350508403010001375.


Part I

Home
Chapter 1:

“At Home in Shanghai?” Rural Migrant Women and the Cultural Politics of *Jia*

In this globalized world ‘home’ can clearly no longer be conceived as a taken-for-granted, fixed and inert space, where we feel naturally *at* home.

(Ang 2015, 2)

Introduction

‘Home’ is when my boss treats me better, cares about me more, and consider my feelings more.

(Wang Qian, 21 years old, Gansu, waitress)

Globalization has its distinctive impact on the millions of lives in rural China, particularly on the lower class rural migrant women. Although Deng Xiaoping announced the Open Door Policy and Economic Reform to invite foreign investment
into China in December 1978, one of the central institutions of the socialist state, namely the household registration system, which ‘grossly privileged those born in cities and their offspring,’ persisted (Solinger 2001, 185). The implementation of this household registration system, *hukou*, constituted a *de facto* policy to control rural-urban mobility.¹ Rural-urban migrant workforce is in effect a state-planned internal migration, aiming at employing the rural population to produce a cheap labour workforce in the service of urbanization and modernization (Chan and Buckingham 2008). After three decades, there are 277.47 million rural migrant workers (National Bureau of Statistics 2016) who comprise more than one third of the entire working population in China (China Labour Bulletin). Under the *hukou* system, rural-to-urban migrant workers cannot stay permanently in their urban destinations, and consequently, they are counted as *renkou liudong*, literally ‘floating’ or ‘population movement’ (Chan and Buckingham 2008, 590). In her study of migration and home, Ien Ang vividly asserts that ‘to feel at home somewhere requires a reconciliation of geography, history, culture and identity,” whereas “our sense of home is secure if there is a harmonious confluence of who we are, where we came

¹ This chapter uses *hanyu pinyin* (‘Chinese Phonetic Alphabet’), the official standardized Romanization system used in the PRC, as the transliteration system for Chinese words.
from, and where we are now’ (2015, 2). Building on Ang’s study (2015), I interrogate the nexus of tensions within the daily home-making practices and home-sensing experiences among rural migrant women in relation to Chinese patriarchal Confucian culture and the *hukou* system by exploring their everyday experiences in living, laboring, and loving in the Shanghai food and beverage service industry. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which rural migrant women feel or do not feel a sense of ‘home’ in Shanghai. Through my analysis, I argue that although there are moments of which these women can feel a sense of ‘home’ in the city, their sense(s) of ‘home’ remains precarious because of the complex power relations these rural migrant women are entangled in under the Chinese patriarchal Confucian culture and more imperatively, the geopolitics entailed under the *hukou* (‘household registration’) system. Following Ang’s work on migration and home (2015), this chapter aims to broaden the notion of ‘home’ to not only connect it to a sense of ‘belonging’ by showing that there are affective experiences, particularly related to service work and workplace practices, that can create multiply senses of ‘home’ during the process of migration. As Alison Blunt aptly states, ‘whether as a concept or a physical place, “home” is a highly fluid and contested site of human existence that reflects reifies
identities and values’ (2005, 512). To broaden the notion of ‘home’ and detach it from a singular definition of what ‘home’ should be for rural migrant women, this chapter explores the changing meanings these women assign to ‘home’ and the multiplicity of their home-sensing and home-making experiences.

Migration, Gender, and Home

In this qualitative study, I read ‘home’ as a complex and rarely positive conception for rural female migrants. As Mona Domosh pertinently writes, ‘the home is rich territory indeed for understanding the social and the spatial. It’s just that we’ve barely begun to open the door and look inside’ (1998, 281). The process of migration has simulated the discussion of ‘home’ across disciplines because the ‘door’ of one’s home no longer attached to a fixed ground. Seeing how the senses of ‘home’ can be easily destabilized and detached from a dwelling, family, or a stable feeling of comfort, Sara Ahmed (1999) aptly criticizes the association of home with ‘stasis, boundaries, identity and fixity,’ and points out the problem of constructing home ‘as a purified space of belonging’ (1999, 339). In the wake of massive migration, both globally and locally, a wealth of literature on the discourse of ‘home’ across disciplines can be found.
Ahmed 1999; Ahmed et al. 2003; Anderson 2012; Ang 2015; Asher 2009; Blunt and Varley 2004; Blunt 2005; Cain et al. 2015; Douglas 1991; McDowell 1999, 2013; Massey 1994; Oakley 1974). More specifically, women’s identities in relation to the gendered place called ‘home’ have been studied over the past few decades (Anderson 2012; McDowell 1999; Oakley 1974). In this literature, home is no longer simply where the heart is and is something that can be lost. Yet, migrant women’s experiences of home-sensing and their home-making practices may not always be negative because, as Ahmed (1999) suggests, migration creates both new challenges and possibilities for migrant women in which they can explore multiple senses of ‘home’ once they leave behind their place of origin.

In this study, I aim to broaden the notions of ‘home’ in migration studies by opening the ‘door’ of home and look inside. The study focuses on internal migration of rural-urban females in Shanghai. To leave their rural hometowns and become wage-workers, these women embrace a new identity as ‘women migrant labourers from the countryside’ or as they are more commonly known dagongmei (‘working sisters’ or ‘working girls’) (Pun 2003, 469), falling into the politics of gender, class, and global capitalism. Labour migration in China has been extensively studied since
However, limited work has been done to scrutinize the shifting rural-urban divide under the rule of Xi Jinping, the seventh President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), with his goal of urbanization in rural China. Under rural modernization, the state attempts to attract rural migrants to go back home to work (Taylor 2015). As Cindy Fan et al. explain, rural migrants do not aim to be migrant workers forever because ‘their social and economic futures in the city are uncertain;’ they may find well-paid jobs near their hometowns; and they want to keep their rural hukou because of the land they possess (2011, 2167). Thus, the rural population is ‘willing’ to be temporary migrants. This sense of temporality helps us to understand why it becomes challenging for migrant workers to feel at ‘home’ in Shanghai.

Significantly, the massive migrant-workforce in China is gendered and hierarchal, reflecting the ingrained Chinese patriarchal culture in which women are assigned to lower positions than their male counterparts. As Pun Ngai discerns, rural migrant women are under the ‘triple oppression’ of state, patriarchy, and global capitalism (2005). To leave home for work, rural migrant women leave behind the domestic sphere (see Massey 1994; McDowell 1999; Oakley 1974) and become
workers in the globalized city space. Hence, rural migrant women have to shoulder not only social exclusions, but also gender inequality, particularly in the service industry.

**Context: Service Workers in Shanghai**

Under the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015), the PRC government strategically prioritized the development of service sectors in tertiary industry because service sectors generate more jobs per renminbi of output, an important benefit as the country shifts to a slower growth rate (Roberts 2016). President Xi even stresses that services, household consumption, and innovation are the new economic drivers of China (Roberts 2016). Moreover, ‘higher technologies appeared and were applied to the workplace, service sector employment increasingly replaced the labour-intensive, lower-skilled jobs of the past’ (Solinger 2001, 176). Service work is hence a key site to explore the ways in which global capitalism and state governance manipulate the lives of rural-urban female migrants.

As China’s global city (see Farrer and Field 2015), Shanghai comprises more than 14 million inhabitants with a permanent residence permit, and there are 4.8
million rural migrant men and 4.1 million migrant women (Chen 2011). Migrant workers face multiple challenges, such as problems in finding a safe place to live, limited access to social health care (SACOM 2012), and emotional suffering caused by alienation (Sun 2012). As the majority of these migrants having low education levels, with 61.6% of rural migrant workers only attending school up until junior high (National Bureau of Statistics 2015), they are being looked down upon as suzhidi (‘low quality’) by the city people (Anagnost 2004). Additionally, the local government has guidelines to restrict the employing of migrant workers in certain occupations, for instance, migrants cannot work for official or public services (Wen and Wang 2009, 160). Socially, migrant workers, who cannot speak the Shanghai dialect, easily disclose their outsiders’ identity, intensifying the boundaries between migrants and local people. This situation reflects the consequence of urbanization, namely the uneven distribution of capital and labour power between rural and urban China (Yan 2008). Although discrimination against rural migrants is severe, Shanghai attracts enormous numbers of young rural people for jobs and city life. The employers, for their part, tend to hire young, single migrant women because they believe these women are more obedient (Pun 2005) and, in a sense, easier to govern than married
women, since pregnancy and abortion may hinder their work performance.

As a waitress, the monthly wage is around RMB2,000 – 2,400 (=ca. 290USD – 350USD). Hiring young rural women with few working skills and little education, employers can maintain a low-wage system (Otis 2012). Moreover, working in this industry means spending long hours in the workplace, which causes workers to feel resentful of their circumstances. On the grounds of meager wages, long working-hours, no social insurance benefits, limited space for self-development, and keen competition among workers, my research participants often shared with me that the turnover rate in this industry is high.

More importantly, this industry demands workers to manage their emotions. As described in Arlie R. Hochschild’s theory of emotional labour, service work requires the presentation of emotions, whereas workers have to manage their emotions ‘through deep acting’ (1979, 570). This chapter acknowledges the emotions involved in service work, and focuses on the ways in which workers’ minds and bodies are shaped to fit the demands of the service industry in the form of affective labour. Hardt and Negri describe affective labour as immaterial labour ‘that produces

---

2 Data from participants. Official statistics about waitresses’ and waiters’ monthly wages are hard to trace; they can only be found on business-related websites, not in publications of government institutes.
or manipulates affects’ and define affects as follows: ‘unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and mind. In fact, affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking’ (2004, 108). In this sense, affective labour requires intricate interactions among workers’ bodies, minds, and geo-cultural environments.

Furthermore, the demand for affective labour in the industry is gendered and consequently executed in the form of ‘feminine labour.’ It has been argued that customers in China nowadays are like gods who expect to be served by deferential female servers and who enjoy consuming ‘gentle and demure, even girlish, femininity’ (Otis 2012, 47). Hence, workers may feel obliged to respond mentally and corporeally to the expectations of their urban customers (Otis 2012, 127).

**Methods**

The chapter is a qualitative study based on the self-narratives of young, rural migrant women, drawing on in-depth interviews with 12 rural migrant women, aged 21 to 31 at the time of the interviews, working in the Shanghai food and beverage service
industry. As Annette Lareau suggests, ‘in qualitative research, the way the researcher acts in the field is inextricably connected to data quality’ (2011, 312). My analysis of the interviews is based on intimate communication between researcher and the research participants, and incorporates follow-up conversations with them on WeChat, a social media platform. Additionally, I visited two workers’ dormitories and four other places where workers lived to observe their living arrangements. I also use interviews with rural migrant workers working in the beauty service industry, domestic services, and other service sectors. Including the 12 women in the food and beverage service industry, a total of 87 interviews were carried out. Moreover, the chapter incorporates participant observation, including my observations in the city and my experiences as a consumer of food and drink in Shanghai.

My fieldwork was conducted in Shanghai between September and December 2014, and between May and July 2015. The 12 principal research participants comprise one bartender, one chef, one cashier, two street food vendors, two restaurant supervisors, and five waitresses; 11 interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the participants’ permission. One participant preferred not to have her voice recorded; therefore, detailed interview notes were taken. In all interviews, I asked my
research participants to tell me what they understood by ‘home’ in order to investigate the ways in which their perceptions of home affected their everyday lives. Then, they were asked to narrate their affective experiences in Shanghai, particularly the moments when they felt at home.

The analysis begins with a conceptual discussion of home and a description of words combined with the character jia (‘home’) in Chinese. Three types of jia (‘home’) recurred frequently during the interviews with rural-urban migrant workers: home as a dwelling where they live with family members (familial home); home as their place of origin (hometown); and home as an affective experience (affective home). Based on their narratives, I analyze the home-making practices among rural migrant women in their workplaces and living places in relation to the impact of Chinese Confucian culture and the hukou system. Finally, I interrogate the discourse of ‘home’ in migration studies and argue for a broader sense of ‘home’ that not only associates it with a sense of ‘belonging’ in the light of my research finding that there are more affective experiences that can create a sense of ‘home’ during the process of migration.
A Discourse of Jia (‘Home’)

Etymologically the character jia symbolizes ‘a dwelling under which a pig is kept’, which refers to livestock farming, the mainstay of life (Pan 1998, 32). Nowadays, jia commonly indicates both jia (‘home’) and jiating (‘family’) in Chinese, unlike the simple meaning of home in English as the place where one lives. Jia in itself is a single character; a word is formed when combined with another character, and its meanings can also be broadened or altered. For instance, jiating (‘family’) is a conceptual understanding and always related to people with a familial relationship, that is, jiaren (‘family member’) (see Barlow 1994). Furthermore, when asked a person in China where her/his laojia (‘hometown’ or ‘place of origin’) is, the answer may expose her/his rural identity because the location of where one comes from is always connected to either rural or urban hukou. In this sense, laojia is entangled with the geopolitics of rural/urban ideologies with different social values.

In China’s migration studies, researchers focus on the ways in which the workers’ bodies and minds are constituted by state reforms, new technology and global capitalist practices (Pun 2003; Wallis 2013). Sun (2012) suggests that institutional practices cause migrant workers to suffer from alienation in the Marxist
sense and that some migrant workers have turned to writing poetry to creatively express their resentment and discontent. Through the scrutiny of workers’ poems, Sun diagnoses the chief emotional suffering of migrant workers as a ‘spiritual homelessness’ (2012, 76). She defines ‘spiritual’ as a ‘sense of awareness of a deeper meaning of life than mere everyday existence’, while ‘homelessness’ signifies the ‘inability to develop a sense of belonging’ (2012, 76). When migrant workers leave their homes to work in the city, the hukou system, the city’s discriminatory policy, and the industrial and neo-liberal practices collectively prevent them from building a sense of belonging.

However, I want to suggest that ‘home’ is more ambiguous than a singular ‘sense of belonging’ – one can feel a sense of ‘home’ through experiencing a sense of familiarity in a locality or by establishing an attachment to a place or person. Furthermore, ‘home’ is also the place rural Chinese youths aspire to leave. According to Pun, when rural people stay in their hometowns, they cannot feel at home and ‘desire to leave “home” to become wage-workers’ (2003, 480); however, when they work in the city, they feel aliened by the city, resulting in the sense of ‘spiritual homelessness’ identified by Sun. Thus, to experience being zaijia (‘at home’) or to
sense *jiadeganjue* (‘a feeling of home’) is not self-evident, neither in the rural hometown nor in the city. In the following section, I will discuss the different definitions of ‘home’ provided by the rural migrant women I interviewed, in order to explore the multiplicity and fluidity of ‘home’ (see Blunt 2005), and to understand the lived experiences of working women beyond the kitchen, housework, and domesticity (see McDowell 1999; Oakley 1974).

‘Home is…’: Familial Home, Hometown, and Affective Home

In each interview, I asked my research participants the same question: ‘What is “home” to you?’ Three types of definitions recurred frequently during the interviews: familial home, hometown, and affective home.

First, the relationships of *jiating* (‘family’) shape how migrant women define ‘home.’ Xiuxiu said:

> With my parents, my husband and daughter, then that place is my home.

(Xiuxiu, 24 years old, Anhui, waitress)
Xiuxiu’s answer affirms that ‘home’ is connected to *jiaren* (‘family members’).

Furthermore, Xiaofan noted:

> When two people get married, then work on that together, that would be it.

(Xiaofan, 22 years old, Hubei, waitress)

For Xiaofan, ‘home’ is not the place where she lives with her parents, but a family formed with her future husband. In this sense, ‘home’ is tied closely to the idea of hope for the future, as well as to the symbolic leaving of the parents’ home for a new communal life with a man.

Second, my participants tended to associate ‘home’ with their *laojia* (‘hometown’). As Helen answered, without any hesitation, ‘home is my hometown.’ Having defined ‘home’ as the hometown, these women aim to go back to their hometowns after working for some years in Shanghai. As Lucy explained:

> Home is my hometown. I will go back home one day. I believe in *yeluoguigen*.

(Lucy, 31 years old, Chengdu, supervisor)
*Yeluoguigen* is a proverb that literally means ‘fallen leaves that will finally return to their roots.’ These women attach ‘home’ to the hometown, reflecting a geographical sense of ‘home’ as their place of origin, which holds both memories of the past and hopes for the future.

Third, some migrant women identify ‘home’ as a place associated with particular affective experiences, such as relaxation, freedom, and satisfaction:

> It [home] is also where I can do everything at ease every day. Every day is *tashi* (踏实在 – literally, at ease) without fear. Now, I feel worried and tired every day. (Helen, 30 years old, Shenyang, chef)

Helen expressed that her present feelings as a migrant woman working in Shanghai were in direct contrast to her definition of ‘home.’ Lingnuo gave a corresponding definition:

> Home is a place you can show all aspects of yourself freely. (Lingnuo, 24 years old, Anhui, waitress)
Their definitions indicate that ‘home’ is not simply a physical place, ‘but also a virtual or rhetorical space’ where a person is ‘at ease with the rhetoric of those with whom they share a life’ (Morley 2001, 425). Significantly, while ‘home’ is not necessarily a physical dwelling, family members remain an important element of it:

Home is a feeling. It’s a place where my parents are. As long as they are there, home can be anywhere. (Vincy, 26 years old, Jiangsu, cashier)

In this way, the connection of ‘home’ with family members persists. Defining ‘home’ as a place where one can feel a sense of relaxation and freedom, or a place filled with care and love, one can feel ‘at home’ everywhere. Seen in this light, the sense of ‘home’ is fluid and can be attached to different localities.

The following section interrogates the ways in which the three tropes of ‘home’ identified by my research participants shape the everyday home-sensing experiences and home-making practices of these women in a context in which Confucian ideologies reinforce gendered ideals of ‘home’ and family.
Working with Confucius

China is experiencing a revival of Confucianism as a call for rebuilding Chinese moral values, particularly filial piety and family responsibilities (Fincher 2014; see also Chong 2012; Dirlik 2014). What influences rural migrant women the most is the hierarchy of human relations in Confucian doctrines, known as the ‘five cardinal relations,’ where social power was assigned based on age and gender, and ‘men and the elderly had the most power, and women and children were in positions of subordination’ (To 2015, 2). In this system, Chinese women are socially oppressed (Chow 1995) and Kristeva goes so far as to call Confucius ‘an eater of women’ (Kristeva 1981a, 1981b). How do these Confucian ideas influence migrant women not just in the rural hometown but also in Shanghai?

First, Confucian culture is instilled in workers by private enterprises in the city (Bell 2008, 12). Every week, Phoebe and her co-workers have to attend company trainings from 7a.m. to 9a.m. on different topics such as health and skin care, food and herbal knowledge, and traditional Chinese culture. Of all the lessons, she most enjoys learning the Dizigui (‘Standards for Being a Good Student and Child’), a famous Chinese Confucian education classic, which was forbidden during the
Cultural Revolution. This kind of training is ‘meant to increase workers’ loyalty and promote economic productivity’ (Bell 2008, 12). However, the training can also be seen as exemplifying how migrant women ‘are subject to various form of exploitation as they are often placed in situations where employers supervise them in both the workplace and their place of residence in “parent-child” relationships’ (Wallis 2013, 41–42). As Phoebe shared:

Other restaurants are not as good as ours. Our restaurant’s laoban (‘business owner’) always gives us lectures, except when he has business trips. (Phoebe, 21 years old, Jiangxi, acting restaurant supervisor)

Phoebe is trained to be an obedient child under her employer’s fatherly rule; in other words, the affective labour demanded in the workplace produces a new ‘social network’ and ‘forms of community’ within the company (Hardt and Negri 2004).

Second, rural migrant women can come to feel ‘at home’ in the workplace by forging family-like bonds with their co-workers according to Confucian principles. It is important to recognize that ‘for the Confucian, the concept of the family is broader;
it can and should be extended to others’ (Bell 2008, 89). This ideology is influential, as in my observation it is common to elevate co-workers to jiaren (‘family members’):

People who work here are not local people. We are from difference places. We get along really well. We are like brothers and sisters. (Xiaofan, 22 years old, Hubei, waitress)

Although Xiaofan did not claim to feel a sense of ‘home’ in Shanghai, the fact that she feels ‘like brothers and sisters’ with her co-workers suggests a sense of ‘family’. This resonates with the Chinese saying that ‘all within the four seas we are brothers.’ Furthermore, Lucy explained that the enterprise’s lingdao (‘leaders’) are like her elder brothers and sisters. She even called her former manager xiaoma (‘little mom’). This practice of familial naming is a form of securing social relationships. Such relationships, however, are problematically gendered and hierarchal, and enforce patriarchal Confucian normativity.

Third, close family members are usually associated with special values that
cannot be replaced (Bell 2008, 90); therefore, some migrant women expressed that they do not feel a sense of ‘home’ in Shanghai because their close family members – parents – are far away:

I don’t like Shanghai because my jiaren (‘family members’) are not here.

[Researcher: What about your husband? He’s standing right next to you.]

Right, he’s the only one. (Miss Hu, 22 years old, Anhui, street food vendor)

Miss Hu is married to a man from her hometown, where her parents have moved to a town near Shanghai to take care of their three-year-old son. She does not like Shanghai and does not feel it is her home because her ‘family members are not here.’ Several participants, like Miss Hu, migrated to the city with family members, such as husband or cousins; however, being away from one’s parents remains a principal reason for not feeling a sense of ‘home’ in Shanghai.

Caught in-between the resurgence of Confucianism and the implementation of hukou, rural women’s affective experiences of ‘home’ are built on a political ambiguity. The hukou system is not only a problematic citizenship exclusion system
(Solinger 2001), but also creates an inhumane institution, which deconstructs the family structure in rural China as ‘migrants are often forced to be separated from family members’ (Bell 2008, 88). As a result, Confucian doctrines, particularly that of filial piety, become ambivalent: on the one hand, young migrants have to work in the cities, living without their parents and often leaving their children behind in the rural hometown; on the other hand, employers instil Confucian values with regard to the parent-child relationship in the workplace to train their workers. Thus, the social fabric, the family unit, and the sense of ‘home’ are all decomposed as a result of labour migration. The senses of home connected to the hometown and the familial home propel an affective conflict that push these female migrants to experience a sense of homelessness in Shanghai, a city distant from their hometown where they live without their parents and, often, children and husbands.

The Multiplicity of ‘Home’

Still, it is not impossible for rural-urban migrant women to feel a sense of ‘home’ in Shanghai. As Wang Qiang shared: ‘I feel at home sometimes with my boyfriend. We live together.’ Her cohabitation experience replaces a sense of ‘home’ produced by
living with one’s parents. Accordingly, this section focuses on rural migrant women’s relationships to their living places in order to explore the diversity of home-sensing and home-making experiences.

While many employers provide a workers’ dormitory to control the labour force, some women workers choose to rent a place of their own to feel a sense of ‘home’ and gain privacy. Like Wang Qian, Lucy rents an apartment at RMB1,800 (=ca. USD260) per month. She was at first reluctant to share with me that she mostly lives alone, even though her husband works in Shanghai as well:

I rent my own apartment because the apartment rented by my company is not suitable for married workers. Overall there are family members at home, for instance my husband and parents…. Actually, my husband does not come home so often.

What is important is that Wang Qian, the young single woman, gets to experience co-habitation, whilst the married woman, Lucy, gets to experience a semi-single life from which her husband is mostly absent. Both of them ignore the gossip of their
relatives in their hometowns and gain a sense of autonomy by choosing their own way of living.

However, not every worker can afford to rent a place. I often heard migrant women complain that their dormitories are noisy and that they find it difficult to fall asleep. The daily struggles of living with others can be frustrating:

There are seven people live in this dormitory. It is not too crowded but I have to wait for hot water for a shower. Also, I don’t like living here because the path from the restaurant to this dormitory is so dark at night. I am afraid of walking alone. But no one walks with me. I don’t have a friend who can talk [with me] now. (Phoebe, 21 years old, Jiangxi, acting-supervisor)

After she was given a promotion, Phoebe moved from the big workers’ dormitory to a small apartment with seven colleagues, including a finance officer, who has his own bedroom. This living place, therefore, is still an extension of the workplace. Melissa Butcher states that human beings need to belong, to create a ‘basis of relationship formation’ that is ‘operationalized through the workplace, the social sphere (e.g.
friendship networks), and kinship. These interpersonal connections are marked by degrees of affective closeness and attachment’ (2009, 1355). Phoebe, however, shared that, when she used to come home in the apartment, she isolated herself from her co-workers by reading her English vocabulary book. Here, the living place is not a site for affective closeness and attachment, but a site where Phoebe can gain emotional comfort by creating a space of privacy. She desires time alone rather than ‘affective closeness’ with her colleagues, and is focusing on her career rather than on forming relationships:

I am single and have no boyfriend. I haven’t fallen in love for 3 years. I don’t need love. I am too busy with work at the moment. (Phoebe, 21 years old, Jiangxi, acting restaurant supervisor)

Whereas single women tend to be tightly connected to the discourse of ‘waiting’ for Mr. Right (Lahad 2016), Phoebe is an exception in that she professes to be too busy to fall in love. Her situation can be linked to Yodovich and Lahad’s suggestion that ‘one’s state of aloneness could also be seen as a way […] for challenging the
prescribed and naturalized heteronormative ideal of family life’ (2017, 9). Phoebe’s desire for isolation, then, would be read as a way to challenge the ideal of Confucian family life her employer seeks to instill.

When employers adopt Confucian values to train their workers to be obedient children, the emotional struggle of feeling a sense of ‘home’ in the workplace may be intensified because the work hierarchy that is linked to the family structure is not comforting and safe but oppressive and precarious. This shows that Bell’s stance on the role of New Confucianism in contemporary China, which sees it as the ideal political system for the country, is overly positive. In the end, Confucian values, both in the rural hometowns and in urban workplaces, suppress rural women rather than liberating them.3

Seen in this light, Phoebe’s ambition of changing to a job that offers better income and working condition can be read as signaling the failure of her employer’s attempt to manipulate her affective attachments through the Confucian trainings. Tellingly, she once sent me the following message in WeChat when she was on the way to the Confucian training at 5:45 in the morning:

3 Bell’s argument that democracy is not an ideal political system for contemporary China, but New Confucianism is, has prompted much debate (see, for example, Dirlik 2014).
To migrant workers like us, I know that learning is the only way to enrich our hearts. But honestly, I just don’t want to get up.

To Phoebe, it makes sense that rural migrants should be educated, especially in an industry where communication with foreign customers is inevitable, but she also identifies the obligation to follow trainings so early in the morning as a burden. To improve her chances on the job market, however, she has undertaken of her own accord to improve her English (because her English is not good enough, she has to be assisted by a Vietnamese waitress, Minh, to serve foreign customers). Every morning, she goes to the restaurant one hour early to study English and after work, she continues to study in the apartment.

When Sun associates rural-urban migrant worker with a ‘sense of homelessness’ that takes the form of an ‘inability to develop a sense of belonging’ (2012, 76), she may not fully capture the fluidity of ‘home’ and the affective experiences attached to it. Workers may resist the sense of ‘home’ and family imposed by the employer, but they can still find other ways of feeling ‘at home’ in Shanghai, especially after working there long enough to find comfort in the patterns of everyday
life they have established, which may include cohabitation with a boyfriend, living a single life apart from one’s husband, socializing with co-workers or finding time to be alone and study. Therefore, this chapter suggests that the study of rural migrant women’s conceptions of jia (‘home’) should acknowledge the multiplicity and changeability of these conceptions, rather than reinforcing singular, fixed definitions of what ‘home’ is and how one should feel about it.

**Conclusion**

As Pun (2003) has argued, young women (and men) from rural areas join the migrant workforce because they can no longer feel ‘at home’ when they stay in their hometowns as a result of the heavy promotion of migrant labour by the Chinese state; however, in the city, they may, as Sun (2012) points out, feel a sense of ‘spiritual homelessness’. As my analysis has shown, this generalized narrative disregards that there are possibilities for migrant women to construct senses of ‘home’ in Shanghai. Such senses of ‘home’ can be generated through different home-making practices, from co-habitation and living a single life apart from one’s husband to familial-naming in the workplace. However, it should also be acknowledged that for
migrant women the notion of ‘home’ always remains precarious to some extent because it is often primarily defined as a hierarchical familial place, under the influence of both Confucian family values and post-reform workplace practices. As Chow, Van Wichelen, and De Kloet vividly assert: ‘Home is not so much where the heart is, it is also a place where power resides, a place that potentially confines, limits and constrains, a place of immobility and unfreedom, a place at times of claustrophobia and xenophobia’ (2015, 12). In line with this, I have tried to broaden the sense of ‘home’ to not only attach it to a sense of ‘belonging’; my research participants show that there are other affective experiences that can also create a sense of ‘home’ in a situation of mass migration.
References


Amsterdam.


Solinger, Dorothy J. 2001. “Globalization and the Paradox of Participation: The


Chapter 2:
The Precarity of Trust: Domestic Helpers as “Working-Singles” in Shanghai
Co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet

Introduction

In the beginning, I was not used to it. I was shy.

Some people fang (防 – literally, guard against) you.

(Yaoyao Ayi, thirty-seven years old, Henan, part-time, families from other Chinese regions)

Yaoyao Ayi, a domestic helper in Shanghai, shared with us that some of her employers have the tendency to fang her, meaning they adopt a posture like guarding against a theft. In China, there is a common phrase, hairenzhixinbukeyou; fangrenzhixinbukewu (害人之心不可有，防人之心不可无), which literally means “one shall never

---

1 Domestic workers’ information is presented as follows: family name, age and hometown, job type and the family type of their employers.
anticipate to do harm to others, yet shall guard against the harm others might do to one.” The ayis (阿姨 – literally, auntie) we interviewed recurrently mentioned that their employers fang them. This gesture of “mistrust” makes it more difficult for them to do their work.

Central to this chapter is the question of how ayis manage to build trust in a climate of mistrust. Ayis have to deal with the problem of mistrust by their employers, who might perceive them as potential thieves or sexual seducers (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). Ayis in Shanghai are what we call “working-single,” a term that refers to their single status in the context of the family or their living away from husbands and/or children, as well as to their loneliness in the isolated workplace because they usually work alone, without peer-worker(s). This working-single status contributes to the precarity and fragility of the trust-relationship with the employers (Hochschild 2002).

How can they gain trust in low-trust familial workplaces? How do they navigate the gender and sexual politics in the homes, especially given their single life in the city? How do they behave and perform domestic labour under the suspicious gazes of their demanding employers?

Focusing on the ways in which ayis build trust with their employers, we
present an ethnographic study of *ayis* in Shanghai, drawing on nineteen in-depth interviews. This chapter begins by outlining the reasons why rural-to-urban migrant women have chosen to work as *ayis*. Then, we move to exploring the tactics that Shanghai domestic helpers as sentient wageworkers employ to gain their employers’ trust. Three main tactics are identified: honesty, professionalism, and care. First, *ayis* express their sense of honesty to gain trust (Wee 2011). Second, *ayis* employ professionalism in the form of “face-work” (Goffman 1967) to build trust with their employers. Third, *ayis* perform care to build a trust-relationship with their urban employers.

As Esther Peeren aptly notes, “while servants are dependent on their masters, the reverse is also true: masters need their servants both for assistance with practical everyday matters and to maintain their social status” (2014, 87). Following Peeren (2014), we stress the reciprocality of the employer-employee relationship: *ayis* are not easily replaceable, unlike factory girls or waitresses, because employers have to put their trust in the employed domestic helpers, a process that takes time and requires affective labour on the part of the helpers. More significantly, because *ayis* are generally being portrayed as sexual seducers by China’s media (Sun 2009), these
working women have to trust the (male) employers as decent persons that would not sexually harass or abuse them and they have to convince the female employers that they can be trusted with their husbands. Unlike factory girls, waitresses or beauty service workers, *ayis* have to deal with spatial isolation in the workplace that renders them precarious and puts them at risk of sexual harassment, abuse and violence. Whereas the Chinese mass media predominantly neglect the precarity of female rural-urban migrant domestic helpers, this chapter explores the ways in which these women find ways to work with their demanding employers, through the lens of trust.

**Method**

This chapter is a qualitative study involving fieldwork research conducted in Shanghai between September and December 2014, May and July 2015, and in October 2016, by one of the authors, Penn Tsz Ting Ip. During her fieldwork, she conducted in-depth interviews with nineteen domestic helpers working in Shanghai. To establish a more comprehensive understanding of the *jiazheng fuwuye* (家政服务业 – literally, domestic service industry), the researcher also conducted an in-depth interview with a thirty-year-old business woman, Madam Ma, from Zhejiang, who
owns a domestic service company in Shanghai. In addition, the researcher interviewed two women – one from Shanghai and one from Hong Kong – both of whom had hired domestic helpers in Shanghai, to obtain a sense of employers’ experiences of employing ayis in their homes. Altogether, twenty-two interviews were conducted; twenty of which were audio-recorded after obtaining consent from the interviewees. For the two interviews without audio recordings, detailed interview notes were taken during the interview. The research participants, aged from thirty-seven to fifty-four at the time of their interviews, were asked to use pseudonyms during their interviews in order to protect their privacy.

**Trust and Mistrust: Domestic Helper’s Everyday Life**

Historically, domestic helpers were of lower social rank in the Chinese community and worked for rich families. This changed after the Communist Party took over control in 1949. As Yan (2008) writes:

> After 1949, domestic workers were no longer called by any of the old terms for servants. The early classical terms baomu (literally, “protecting mother”)
and, alternatively, *ayi* (literally, “auntie”) became categorical terms for all domestic helpers regardless of their specific responsibilities. [...] In both the Mao and post-Mao eras, rural migrant women were the main source for domestic workers. (19)

Despite their connotations with familial life, according to Yan, *ayi* or *baomu* still became degrading terms for rural-to-urban domestic helpers (2008, 19). Until today, rural women in China travel from rural regions to the cities to do the “dirty work” supporting the economic growth of urban China, where more and more urban women choose to work instead of being full-time housewives and mothers who do chores and take care of children. This phenomenon, embedded with social inequality, where rural women are considered as *sužhīdī* ([素质低 – literally, “low quality”](Anagnost 2004), creates a precarious situation in which rural women have to deal with discrimination in the urban homes, and to face the everyday problems created by mistrust.³ Hence,

---

² For the conception of “dirty work,” see Anderson 2000.
³ This situation is not unique to China; for example, foreign domestic helpers are of paramount importance for the workings of Hong Kong and face severe discrimination (Cheung and Lui 2017; Constable 1996, 1997, 2007; Groves and Lui 2012; Ladegaard 2013), just as globally, migrants from the Global South perform “unwanted household tasks” or known as “dirty work” for families in the...
Wen & Wang (2009) write:

The negative perceptions held by urbanites and migrants toward each other, the consequent hostility and mistrust between the two, and a persistently segregated economy and labour market for migrants, jointly work their way to pose a real challenge for migrants to socialize with urbanites on a friendly and equal footing. (160)

Sun Wanning shows that urban residents in China often find themselves caught in a situation where they feel they cannot trust their *baomu*, yet have to put them in charge of their household, which involves a great degree of intimacy, responsibility, and confidentiality (2004, 117). The specific nature of the job performed by *baomu* puts migrant women in “the boundaries of the public and private, the paid and the unpaid, and those of the family” (Sun 2004, 117). Sun vividly criticises mainstream newspapers for depicting *baomu* negatively, for example as stealing money from their urban employers, being negligent of babies in their care, or seducing the man in the

Global North (Anderson 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Lan 2006; Lutz 2011; see also Cox 2006; Parreñas 2001; Salzinger 1991).
household (2004, 117). Due to this bias in media representation, “migrant women—cast in the light of difference, however, sympathetically—suffer a reproduction of their deprivation that is both social and discursive” (Sun 2004, 125).

Before analysing how *ayis* as working-singles negotiate trust in such a difficult if not hostile environment, it is crucial to reflect upon the notion of trust itself. Building up trust is a slow process that involves both a verbal as well as a performative dimension. It requires speech acts in which one expresses trust to one another, but it also requires movements, behavioural patterns, and gestures through which trust is articulated. The performative dimension is related to what Erving Goffman calls “face-work” (1967). Face refers to

an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share. [...] One’s own face and the face of others are

---

4 Interestingly, in Confucian ideology, *xin* (信 – literally, integrity) is one of the five virtues of the gentleman (Gong et al. 2013, 363). According to Cecilia Wee, “One significant feature of *xin*, suggested by the character itself, is that *xin* is primarily concerned with speech acts. The character is comprised of a radical, *ren* 人, linked to *yan* 言, speech. This suggests that the person with *xin* (the ‘trustworthy person’) is one who does as she has said she would” (2011, 516). She comments, “The notion of *xin* is frequently taken to be largely isomorphic with the notion of trust, and passages involving *xin* are commonly translated in terms of ‘trust’ (and its cognates)” (Wee 2011, 517).
constructs of the same order; it is the rules of the group and the definition of
the situation which determine how much feeling one is to have for face and
how this feeling is to be distributed among the faces involved. (Goffman 1967,
5-6)

Face thus depends on the rules and values of both a particular society, and the
situation the social interaction is embedded in. As Goffman (1967) writes:

By face-work I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make
whatever he is doing consistent with face. Face-work serves to counteract
“incidents”—that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten
face. (12)

He further explains, “A social relationship is a way in which the person is forced to
trust his self-image and face to the tact and good conduct of others” (1967, 42). In this
sense, to build a good social relationship, a person has to first trust his/her self-image
in which he/she has to perform “self-trust” before gaining trust from others. This is
important in this study because trust is performative: prior to gaining trust from the urban employers, an ayi has first to trust her own self-image and to perform as a trustworthy domestic worker; they can build “trust” only based on the performance of trusting themselves.

**Working as an Ayi**

There are different types of domestic helpers in Shanghai, which has an influence on the ways and degrees in which they can build trust with employers in their households. First, domestic helpers can be categorized by their job types: *zhongdiangōng* (钟点工 – literally, part-time), *zhujia* (住家 – literally, live-in), *quanzhi* (全职 – literally, full-time), *shewai* (涉外 – literally, for foreign families), *xiaoqu* (小区 – literally, working for the district, usually residential district), and *yuesao* (月嫂 – literally, maternity matron or care-giver for the care of a new mother and her new-born infants). Concerning these job types, twelve of the research participant in this study worked as part-time *ayis* (earning RMB20-50 per hour), one was a live-in *ayi* (earning RMB3,000 per month), one was a *quanzhi ayi* (earning RMB5,500 per month), one a *xiaoqu ayi* (earning RMB6,000-7000 per month), and three were *yuesaos* (earning
average RMB10,000 per month). Second, at the time of the interviews, the *ayis* worked for various types of families in Shanghai: eight worked for foreign families (including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan), six worked for Shanghai families, and five worked for Chinese families from other provinces. Some of the *ayis* had worked in different job type(s) for different family type(s) in the past.

Why have rural-urban migrant women chosen to work as *ayis*, how do they opt for a specific job type and family type, and what role does their own status as single, married (but perhaps living apart from their spouse) or divorced play in this? First and foremost, when asked why they chose to be an *ayi*, divorced women shared similar motives. Yao Ayi, a forty-five-year-old divorcee from Jilin, shared that after filing for divorce from her husband, she travelled to Shanghai to meet with her elder sister, who worked there as a waitress. Her sister told her that working in a restaurant was a harsh occupation and suggested that she might prefer to work in the domestic service industry instead. Thus, Yao Ayi’s worked as live-in *ayi* as her first migrant job in Shanghai, earning RMB1,000 per month, in 2006. Since she was divorced, she was flexible in terms of her living arrangements in Shanghai. She chose to work as a live-in *ayi* because the employer provided a room and meals for her. After eight years
of being a live-in ayi, Yao Ayi had saved sufficient money to rent a small apartment in
Shanghai and she then changed to working as a shewai. Yao Ayi’s friend, Li Ayi,
shared that she also came to Shanghai after her divorce. Her younger sister was
already in Shanghai working as a domestic helper by that time. Therefore, Li Ayi
followed her sister’s lead and began working as a live-in ayi. After ten years, she
remarried and changed to working as a part-time ayi. The relationship status thus
affects the type of ayi work migrant women preform to do. When asked about her
experiences as a live-in ayi, Li Ayi shared:

I was lucky when I first came to Shanghai. I met a very good old Shanghai
couple and their daughter and son-in-law. They treated me incredibly well.
The young couple worked and so they were not at home during the daytime. I
lived with the old madam in her bedroom. We even slept on the same bed. She
treated me very well.

(Li Ayi, forty-nine years old, Heilongjiang, part-time, Shanghai and foreign families)
Although she found sleeping on the same bed as her employer acceptable, being a live-in ayi was stressful overall:

You lived at their [employers’] home twenty-four hours a day. It was highly stressful. I haven’t worked as live-in for almost five years. If you asked me to work as live-in ayi now, I may not be able to adapt to that kind of life again.

Li Ayi chose to work in Shanghai not only because of her divorce, but also because she wanted to make some money for her child, who is now also living in Shanghai. In this way, she gained financial resources by working as a single mother – or, as we like to term this, as working-single. Likewise, Wu Ayi, a yuesao, as well as a trainer of yuesao, came to work in Shanghai after her divorce:

I didn’t need to rent a place [for being a yuesao]. Usually, yuesaos are single [Researcher’s note: meaning they are divorcees]. They work because their children go to school or their children need to buy a house for getting married. Like me, I become a yuesao because my son is going to get married. We need
some income.

(Wu Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, yuesao)

Divorced women often choose to work as a yuesao because they can live at the employers’ home for a month during their service. Additionally, if they are also mothers, they are more likely to be hired as yuesao because they have personal experience of child-care, which helps to gain trust from their employers.

Unlike divorced women, married women did not mention their marital status as a reason to work as domestic helpers; rather, their motives were diverse and they seemed to have more flexibility to choose their job type. Xiaocao Ayi, a forty-five-year-old yuesao from Jiangsu, shared that she chose to be yuesao because she liked babies and she felt young when she was with them, instead of out of an urgent need for a place to live in Shanghai. She explained that she came to work in Shanghai out of boredom:

People like us feel bored at home, right? It’s hard to join other industries, which is not easy. This is the only good option, right?
Married migrant women shared that they had few professional skills and little education, and that therefore the relatively well-paid occupation of domestic helper was a golden opportunity for them to make money:

[I] have no [professional] skills. When I first arrived [in Shanghai], I was worried. Anyways, I have been trained in the past few years. Yes, I don’t have any skills. Also, I like to work for a family. […] For farming, you have to work under the sun. I like to work at home to help cleaning and cooking.

(Guiqiao Ayi, forty years old, Shanxi, part-time, Shanghai families)

I did not have any skills and I was unfamiliar with everything in Shanghai. So, I followed her [a friend from her hometown] and worked for a Taiwanese family.

(Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families)
Thus, boredom, the desire to be a breadwinner, and the fact that they lacked professional skills led these married women to work as domestic helpers in Shanghai.

However, although research suggests that these women have to deal with the drudgery of domestic work (see Sun 2009), some ayis mentioned that they found their work comparatively easy compared to either factory or farm work, or “not tough at all”:

I started working as a domestic worker more than ten years ago, so I don’t want to make a change. If I worked in a factory, I would have to work overnight. Now, I work eight hours a day and it’s not tough at all.

(Hu Ayi, forty-one years old, Anhui, full-time, xiaoqu)

Likewise, Yao Ayi’s sister told her that to work as a domestic helper is less harsh than working in a restaurant. At the same time, being a domestic helper may mean limited opportunities for work-promotion or upward social mobility.

Ayis as working-singles, as we stated earlier, face a struggle over trust and constantly have to negotiate negative stereotypes. As Ke Ayi shared:
Every family is different. A bit of *shouqi*（受气  – literally, being bullied）is unavoidable. It is impossible to have none.

(Ke Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, *shewai*)

In sum, a range of different reasons make migrant women in Shanghai prefer the job of *ayi*, a job that provides income, relieves boredom, demands not much education, and is perceived as being less strenuous than other jobs available to this group. Nevertheless, it remains a precarious job, in which trust has to be constantly negotiated. In this range of attractions and constraints, we perceive the flexibility and precarity of domestic work: an *ayi* can to some extent select her employer, choosing both the job types and family types they prefer. But the employer in the end holds the power to fire or dismiss the *ayi*, especially as there is often no formal work-contract. After their careful selection of the types of domestic work, how do *ayis* give both themselves and their employers face by building up trust, especially as a “bit of *shouqi* seems unavoidable”? And how does their relationship status influence their ability to do this? In our research, we found that *Ayis* employ three distinct tactics to build trust with their employers, and consequently reduce the precariousness of their
job: honesty, professionalism, and care.

Honesty

Being honest, or more precisely: a performance of honesty, is one of the most effective ways to build trust in an employer-employee relationship, particularly between domestic helpers and their urban customers in Shanghai. Zhou Ayi explicitly shared that some of her employers would leave something in their house as a test to see if she would steal it. The “test” given by the employers is a test of an ayi’s honesty, and can be read as a rather explicit type of face-work:

They [the employers] tested me. Do you understand? They put money here [in the house] and then left. Some old people do that; even young ones do that.

(Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families)

The face-work of trust requires time, as Wang Ayi also explains:

Her [the female employer] domestic helper stole her stuff and his [the male
employer’s] money. So, she looks down on *ayis*. Her husband convinced her by telling her that, “Look at Wang Ayi. She has been working for us for a long time. She is an honest person and she won’t [steal].” In the beginning, she looked down on me. From my perspective, their *ayi* was not being nice because they trusted her and gave her their house keys, but she stole things from them. It’s not all right. […] Her husband explained to her that I am an honest person. Since I have been working for them, their home hasn’t lost anything. You do your own work; she does her own business. When you finish work [cooking], you tell her to eat. After some time, she knows [I am honest and not a thief].

(Wang Ayi, forty-seven years old, Chongming, part-time, families from other Chinese regions)

The building up trust is to some extent a one-way street: *ayis* have to gain trust, and thus face, from their employers, much more than the other way round. When some *ayis* are perceived to show poor conduct and breach the trust of their employers, it takes more effort, as well as time, for the “honest” *ayis* to build trust. Urban
employers worry about money being stolen by their domestic workers at home. Nonetheless, domestic services usually include the buying of groceries or other household products in which money is inevitably involved. In this sense, ayis literally have to “touch” the “money;” however, some ayis tend to avoid receiving money from their employers:

He [potential employer] said he would give me money for the groceries. I told him, “If I work for you, I won’t help with the groceries because I will have to ‘touch’ the money. It’s complicated.” Many ayis can’t gain the trust from their employers because of the grocery money. They steal from the grocery money. It’s real. I have met many ayis who do that.

(Zhou Ayi, thirty-nine years old, Zhandong, part-time, shewai)

No, I don’t buy groceries. After a long time, it’s hard to make it clear.

(Hu Ayi, forty-one years old, Anhui, full-time, xiaoqu)

In Zhou Ayi and Hu Ayi’s experiences, avoidance of situations in which their honesty
may be questions, in this case when buying groceries, is the best way to avoid mistrust from their employers, revealing that trust is a highly sensitive issue in urban families, especially when it comes to monetary matters. This resonates with Goffman’s observation that avoidance is a basic form of face-work (1967).

Nonetheless, some ayis have to help with the groceries. Hence, to establish a trust-relationship, these ayis proactively create tactics to deal with this sensitive matter:

I feel that the employers trust me. I use my own money to buy groceries. I give them back the invoices. Then, they give me the money.

(Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families)

Wang Ayi meticulously handles the grocery money, keeps the invoices, and carefully talks about her “writing” practice to her employer. In this way, she has successfully gained trust:

No matter how good she [the female employer] treated me. I had to position
myself properly. My father said, “When my children go to work, their personality is the most important. It doesn’t matter how much they earn, but they can’t be thieves.” I remember what he told me. Ayi is ayi. I don’t touch other people’s stuff. No matter how good people treat me; I have to position myself properly. The madam [her female employer] trusted me deeply. From the beginning until the end, I have been keeping their house keys. […] My education level is low but I used a notebook to write down everything for her. However, she had never read the notebook. Anyways, I feel comfortable to write things down. Otherwise, I wouldn’t know where the money goes. I heard that other ayis take their employers’ grocery money.

(Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families)

Marking down the expenses became a practice that Wang Ayi used as a tactic of guarding against future accusations of dishonesty. Full trust seems impossible; what is established is a semblance or performance of trust behind which mistrust (or, for the ayi, fear of being mistrusted) lingers.
Aside from shopping, the treatment of household items also requires face-work in order to establish trust. Objects in the home can be expensive, such as diamonds, or fragile, such as glasses, mugs, or vases. As Ke Ayi shared, the Hong Kong family she has been working for for thirteen years trusts her a lot because she does not break things. When she fell ill and quit her job, the family hired another ayi. But the family found the new ayi difficult to tolerate because she frequently broke their kitchenware. When ayis clean and tidy the house, they have to be extra cautious. Hence, ayis try to cater as much to the needs of their employers as possible:

I put things back in the same positions. [...] I won’t leave a mess. I won’t leave the employers to arrange their stuff. I put them back as they were.

(Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families)

No, I won’t [put things back in the same positions]. I work for them and I tidy everything up. But I won’t put things randomly. It’s because sometimes his stuff is quite messy and so he expects me to help tidy up his house. If I put them back in the same positions, he feels like I haven’t worked at all.
Due to the variety of preferences on the part of different families, ayis have to learn to observe the everyday practices of their employers and understand how they want jobs to be done. While some employers want their ayis to help with tidying up their houses, others request their ayis to put things back in exactly the same positions that they found them.

Most ayis in this study shared that when their employers give them the house keys, it can be seen as a gesture of trust:

I have six pairs of house keys. Some families have elderly relatives at home; therefore, they don’t have to give me the house keys. After you work for a while, they trust you and give you the keys.

(Hu Ayi, forty-one years old, Anhui, full-time, xiaoqu)

When asked about the practice of receiving house keys, most ayis shared that their

---

5 An Ayi did not disclose her exact age.
employers gave them keys after a period of observation. Xuexue Ayi described the effort she made to show her honesty before she received the keys:

You have to behave and cannot take people’s stuff. I never take anyone’s stuff.

I have worked for a family for more than ten years and they don’t change [to hire another ayi].

(Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families)

Moreover, some ayis receive the house keys on the first day they start working because the employers’ acquaintances or friends referred them, which shows how trust is transferrable:

The families gave me the keys when I arrived the first day. It’s all the same. I haven’t met any family that doesn’t give me keys. It’s because they trust you. I am referred by their acquaintances. They trust me. If I was referred by an agency, they [the employers] might have to reconsider doing this.

(Zhou Ayi, thirty-nine years old, Zhandong, part-time, shewai)
However, to keep the house keys is a huge responsibility; therefore, these ayis have developed a cautious way to be the guardian of the keys. As Zhou Ayi shared, she puts the house keys in a separate bag instead of on her own key chain as her way to protect the keys.

Although receiving keys is a gesture of trust, some ayis are reluctant to keep their employers’ house keys:

No, they may say they would give me the keys. But I said no. If you take their house keys, it’s not so good, right? It doesn’t feel right.

(Xiaocao Ayi, forty-five years old, Jiangsu, yuesao)

He [the male employer] gave me the house keys. I told him I wouldn’t take his keys. I explained to him that I would come to his house when he is at home. When he’s not at home, I won’t go. I don’t like to keep someone’s house keys. I am afraid of rumours.

(An Ayi, 40+, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families and foreign families)
For An Ayi, the fear of being marked as a thief outweighs the fear of being accused of seducing the male employer. This shows how *ayis* as working-singles have to navigate between the stereotype of seducer and other potential accusations from their employers. When there are thieves out there, An Ayi is aware that her employers will suspect her, even if she is innocent, because of her negative reputation in the city dwellers’ eyes (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). Thus, An Ayi decided to schedule a time with her employer each time she had to clean his house to avoid problems, rather than keeping his house keys.

In short, honesty is a key site for negotiating trust in the Shanghai domestic service industry. Honesty is performed and negotiated by being overtly careful in financial matters, by taking good care of household items, and by negotiations over possession of the house keys. After selecting their employers and job types, *ayis* painstakingly negotiate the everyday handling of their domestic work with their employers, thus building up trust over time.

**Professionalism**

A second tactic for negotiating trust is by performing professional face-work. The
professionalism of an *ayi* can be as practical as obtaining the required certificate. According to Wu Ayi, a *yuesao* needs to receive training to attain the *muying hulizheng* (母婴护理证 – literally, “the maternity and infant care division certificate”) in order to officially work as a *yuesao*. By attaining a certificate, a *yuesao* can gain the trust of her customers. However, attaining a professional certificate is only one way to perform a sense of professionalism. What *ayis* also claim is needed is experience and trust in oneself:

Researcher: Do you need to have childbirth experience to be a *yuesao*?

Wu Ayi: Yes, for enhancing trust from our clients, you have to. After this criterion, there are tests on theories about the health of the infants. […] For the infant, you need to know the body index. You need to observe [the infant]. You need to take care of the women’s wounds and breasts. You need to cook the special meals for the postpartum period. […] We need to teach the mothers the proper way of breastfeeding because it’s the most important.

When asked how she proves herself as trustworthy to clients, Wu Ayi said that she
would take out her certificate first, after that she would wash her hands because she was going to touch the infant. Then, she would change into her company’s uniform, which was soft and comfortable for the infant. The whole ritual, as guided by her company’s training, helped her to perform a sense of professionalism to her clients. In Goffman’s terms, it gives her face in front of the new parents who might have less knowledge of infant-care than her. She explained the process of this challenging trust-building relationship:

When you arrive at the employer’s home, they will check your identity to see if you are the right person sent by the company. After that, I start my work. Every day when they have any queries, I answer them. Those questions are about childcare professionalism. The quickest time to gain their trust is a week. Then, they will be at ease with you. That is the quickest time for them to kill their doubts.

(Wu Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, yuesao)

Significantly, Wu Ayi’s work is highly monitored by the clients, as they can leave
comments on her work-report, which is known as a “diary,” provided by the company.

She explained that her tasks are listed on an hourly basis in the report. Employers can request to have another yuesao if they are not happy with the performance of the assigned yuesao.

Noticeably, Wu Ayi expressed a sense of professionalism, which was backed up by her company. As Madam Ma, the company owner and the boss of Wu Ayi, explained, she provides trainings for the newly recruited ayis, in order to teach them the knowledge they need to be a professional yuesao. The yuesaos in her company obtain professional childcare knowledge, and learn the proper steps to take when they first enter the client’s home. Most importantly, the company has established rules and regulations for its yuesaos:

We use Dizigui (弟子规 “Standards for being a Good Pupil and Child”). You see this? These are the rules and regulations of our services. Do you understand, Dizigui? […] We need to read this. I need to teach them [the new yuesaos at her company]. You need to learn and to practice it at work. […] You need to be a good person first. Our occupation is very special. You must
be patient. So, the rules are set as a guideline and to constrain us to do things well. Then, you can take better care of the infants.

(Wu Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, yuesao)

Through these trainings, ayis develop “trust” in their self-image as professional yuesao, which helps in their face-work and then leads their employers to trust them.

For a yuesao, who works for the agency, it is easier to build trust, as their agency endows them with a professional image, and their short time service and replace-ability do not that much require a long-term process of trust building and developing a “proper subjectivity.” This is different for the other ayis. According to Yan Hairong (2008),

to train a domestic worker is to foster a proper subjectivity, so that she can see work and respond readily to it. Her “improved” subjectivity is supposed to mediate between the mind of the employer and her own body, thus producing knowing, willing, and affective labour that can anticipate and meet the needs of the employers. (96)
Unlike Wu Ayi’s situation, in which her company provides a uniform, most ayis have developed a dressing-down strategy to build trust with their employers. In the words of Ke Ayi,

I wore qipao (旗袍 – the traditional Chinese style dress for women) [before I worked as domestic helper]. My disposition was different from now. I am an ayi now; therefore, I dare not dress up.

(Ke Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, shewai)

And as Fang Ayi explained:

I met a female employer. She said she hired an ayi once, who dressed beautifully and moved seductively in front of her husband. Some ayis are indecent. Some male employers are decent, while some are not. […] For indecent ayis, he [referring to male employers in general] would touch her for sure, right? If you are very decent and you talk nicely, he won’t touch you, right? If you are indecent, he must touch you. You can’t blame anyone, right?
Fang Ayi’s explanation reveals that a proper dress code – dressing down – is a way to avoid sexual harassment from male employers and to eliminate doubts from female employers, as well as to avoid gossip by other domestic helpers. But when she adds “right?” to “he won’t touch you,” she reveals that even when dressing down one is never safe. In this light, her narrative reflects the precarious situation of “working-single” and the way in which ayis have to also trust their (male) employers to not sexually harass or abuse them. As He Ayi’s comments testify, gossip does circulate:

You know Xiaoliu? I suspect that she is having an affair with her male employer. The wife of her boss always travels. She [Xiaoliu] often wears make-up, and lipstick, and paints her eyebrows.

(He Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, part-time, shewai)

Some ayis employ the “dressing-down strategy” to construct trust with the urban
families. It is a kind of face-work that aims to avoid any suspicion of seduction; moreover, it is face-work through which the employers also gain face, as they will not be seduced. This is crucial given that the working-single status is perceived as a threat to the stability of the family (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). In other service sectors, such as the beauty parlour industry, female workers are required to dress up in order to meet the modern standards of service work in the global city of Shanghai (Ip 2017) and the demand for professionalism from their employers and urban customers (Wallis 2013). But for the ayis in our study, dressing down is one of the tactics used to perform professionalism.

Care

Besides performances of honesty and professionalism, some ayis also perform care to establish trust with their employers. For example through taking extra care of the household, even when that is not requested by the employers:

The other day I saw that her [the female employer’s] closet was really messy. I asked if she needed my help to tidy it up. She said, “okay.” Then, I helped to
tidy up her closet. I am quite efficient. And she trusts me. Her closet is like a mess. They [the employers] like to take whatever they need from the closet. It is a mess. So, I wanted to help her.

(Ke Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, shewai)

Ke Ayi’s initiative is a special offering, which is not part of her paid job. In return for Ke Ayi’s offering, her employer “trusts her” to tidy the closet, which is a very private space within the private space of the home.

While some ayis have chosen not to talk much with their employers to avoid misunderstandings and to create a sense of submissive obedience, some ayis proactively talk about personal issues with their employers to build trust. In the interview with Xuexue Ayi, together with her former employer, Madam Sun, they shared:

Xuexue: We talk about everything.

Madam Sun: We even talk about her daughter, if she has a boyfriend or not.

Xuexue: We are like a family. I generally get along well with other people. I
like Shanghai people, I think they *bubaijiazi* (不摆架子 – literally, do not act big or unassuming).

Madam Sun: I chat with her while she is working.

Xuexue: We get along very well. We communicate mutually.

Madam Sun claims that she knows Xuexue Ayi very well and that they talk about everything. As a result, Madam Sun trusts Xuexue Ayi, unlike the temporary *ayi* who help to do the chores, whom she believes would steal things. To treat an *ayi* as a pseudo-family member entails a negotiation of care: if the domestic worker is (like) a family member, they also have to be cared for, when they become sick, for example. Conversely, the domestic worker projects a sense of caring about the employer, even if she only does this to gain her trust. Here, trust is built through the practice of talking about “everything,” including the private life of the *ayi*, in order to help the employers feel secure about the person they hired. This form of trust, established with time, can help to blur – but not erase – the boundaries between employers and employees. Madam Sun claims Xuexue Ayi to be her friend, but one might ask whether such claims do not obscure the hierarchical relationship between employer
Moreover, some *ayis* have chosen to articulate or perform their care for the family by learning to cook the dishes that the family members like. As Yao Ayi shared, she bought the Chinese version of Jamie Oliver’s cookbook for her Western employer. When her employer saw the cookbook, she was tremendously impressed and bought the English version. She told Yao Ayi the dishes her family likes, and then Yao Ayi would check her Chinese version and cook for them. Correspondingly, Wang Ayi shared:

I know how to cook the dishes they like. I adjust their taste gradually. Sometimes lighter, sometimes heavier. They like to eat lighter. After finished cooking, I asked them if the taste was fine. They tell me if it’s too salty or too light. Then, I have learned it. It’s very arbitrary. I have learned it [their tastes].

(Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families)

---

6 Although Madam Sun did not hire a domestic helper after her retirement, she stays in touch with Xuexue Ayi and they meet regularly in the district to catch up on each other’s lives. She also refers jobs to Xuexue Ayi.
By performing care through catering to the taste of the family, and thereby probably disregarding her own food preferences, Wang Ayi secures a stronger and less precarious bond with the family. Both Yao Ayi and Wang Ayi claimed:

I feel really happy to work for foreigners. Tina’s family does not give me much pressure. I work for them every day. I get along very well with their son, with Tina, and the grandparents [Tina’s parents and parents-in-law]. We are like a family. I go back home at night. During the day, I work for them dedicatedly. They treat me like a family.

(Yao Ayi, forty-five years old, Jilin, part-time, shewai)

Shanghai people like others to call them xiaojie or taitai (小姐 / 太太, literally lady / madam). She [the female employer] asked me to call her Zhen Jie (真姐 – literally, Sister Zhen), and call her husband Brother Ye (叶大哥).

She said, “I work at the company, and you work at my home. We are equal. Please don’t have any pressure. Please work like in your own home.

(Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families
After working for Zhen Jie for a period of time, Wang Ayi was “permitted” to call her employers by their names with the designations of “sister” and “brother.” Wang Ayi shared that Zhen Jie trusts her deeply and treats her like family. Likewise, Yao Ayi feels her employers treat her like a family member. As Sun Wanning (2009) describes, domestic helpers are the “intimate stranger” of urban families:

The maid is most certainly an intimate figure, in the sense that she needs to anticipate her employers’ quirks and whims, cook to suit their fussy taste buds, and perform the most intimate bodily care, both for her elderly charges of suffering from incontinence, and infants needing a regular change of diapers. (2009, 13)

When pseudo-family ties are being constructed, the face-work of enfolding the ayi into the narrative of the family not only obscures the hierarchical relationship, but is also a way to neutralise the potential sexual danger from the ayi as working-singles.
The trust the familial discourse helps to establish may furthermore enable forms of exploitation:

The salary was very low at that time. I earned RMB3,000 per month. She [the female employer] treats me very well. Before summer holiday [meaning July and August], she usually paid me RMB6,000 in advance. She did the same before Spring Festival and Christmas. She paid for me in advance. She had never deducted the salary. Therefore, I worked for her for the next six years, but I had never asked her to increase my salary. I did not. So, when her friends’ [ayis] bargained to increase their salaries, they were bad ayis. So, she liked to take me out and told people that I was not her ayi; I was her friend.

(Zhou Ayi, thirty-nine years old, Zhandong, part-time, shewai)

When the employers treat an ayi as part of the family or as a friend, this signals that the ayi has successfully built trust through providing (extra) care. But it can also serve as a veil to cover up injustices, such as the refusal to raise Zhou Ayi’s salary.

The yuesao in our study have to care for urban families and their new-borns;
in some cases, they might emotionally bond with the child. It is almost inevitable for them to feel a sense of care because this is a job about care. The care ayis in this study perform towards their families, and the care they receive in return, a care that is often packaged in terms of family or friendship ties, helps to obscure their unequal and precarious relationship, and is part of a performance of trust. But this trust obscures social inequality: the yuesao have to leave behind their own children, commonly known as “left behind children,” in rural China (China Labour Bulletin). Yet, “given the prevailing free market ideology, migration is viewed as a ‘personal choice.’ Its consequences are seen as ‘personal problems’” (Hochschild 2002, 27). This framing as migration as a personal choice runs the danger of ignoring political and socio-economic structural factors and the widening gap between the rich and the poor in China.

Conclusion

Ayis live a working-single life in the city; even when they are married, they usually leave behind their spouses and children. Working alone in a strange family’s home draws them into a complicated daily negotiation of trust, amplified by their
working-single status. In addition, negative portrayals in the mass media of domestic workers as thieves or sexual seducers have produced discourses of mistrust and presented the *ayi* as low *suzhi* (literally, “quality”) (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). Following Peeren (2014), we have stressed the reciprocality of the employer-employee relationship: *ayis* are not easily replaceable, unlike factory girls or waitresses, because employers have to put their trust in the employed domestic helpers, a process that takes time and affective labour.

Through our analysis, we argue that trust requires face-work (Goffman 1967) that is both verbal and performative. *Ayis* chose their job because it gives a stable income, it is more attractive and less tough than factory work and demands not much education. But, as we have also shown, despite this, it remains a precarious job, as *ayis* can become dispensable for their employers. In order to avoid being replaced, *ayis* have to establish their value in the employers’ households by building a trusting employer-employee relationship. We observed three tactics through which *ayis* negotiate trust. They perform honesty over financial and material matters, including conscious deliberations over ownership of the house keys. They perform being professional, also by dressing down as to avoid striking a pose as if they want to
seduce the husband (or wife). Here, their status as working-single directly affects their face-work. Finally, they care for the families, and articulate this care through providing special food or devoting extra attention to the children and the chores. Through these tactics, *ayis* perform and negotiate a relationship of trust, but this relationship remains profoundly precarious: their bodies need to stay healthy, they are pushed to give up the care for their own children, they dress down, the wages are low at best and the working conditions are fragile and not juridically protected. While we want to steer away from purely negative portrayals of the work and life of migrant domestic workers in Shanghai, a univocal celebration of their profession would be equally naïve and one-sided. These narratives are not unique for China, but the speed with which China is changing and the growing disjunctures between the rural and the urban may well make the issue of inequality and labour protection more urgent.
References


Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Arlie R. Hochschild, eds. 2002. “Introduction.” In Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers, edited by Barbara Ehrenreich and


Part II

Beauty
Chapter 3:
Desiring Singlehood? Rural Migrant Women and Affective Labour in the Shanghai Beauty Parlour Industry

“I believe we can change our fate.”

Introduction

Colourful balloons, lucky draw flyers, and a bike; these were the first objects I saw in one of the hair and beauty salons I visited for my fieldwork study in Shanghai. Like the colourful balloons and flyers, the young female workers in this salon were all wearing colourful uniforms (see Figure 1). It was my first-time meeting Xiaorui, a 17-year-old migrant woman from Anhui, working as a beautician apprentice in this salon, located in Shanghai’s Putuo District. Her manager shared with me enthusiastically how the lucky draw flyers were part of their new promotion in which

---

1 Chapter 3 of the dissertation presents the text published in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, with the modification of the words “article” and “essay” to “chapter,” endnotes converted to footnotes, and minor edits.

2 This is quoted from an interview with Pang Yuan, who is a 25-year-old hairstylist from Hunan.
customers could join the lucky draw to win different prizes, including the first prize – a fancy mountain bike. After settling down in their service room, Xiaorui started to talk about her journey as a migrant worker:

I used to work in a factory. Working in the factory is not very harsh; as long as you are able-bodied, you can work. However, you won’t learn a skill. For people like us, without a good education level, it is better to acquire a working skill. I wish to learn beauty service skills. Therefore, my friend recommended this job to me. (Interview with Xiaorui, May 22, 2015)

Xiaorui is one of the 269 million rural-urban migrant workers in China, known as the “floating population,” who cannot permanently settle in their urban destinations (Li and Liu 2014). Of the many different ways to make money, she chose to be a beautician apprentice rather than a factory worker. Her narrative makes it clear that acquiring a working skill is crucial for her decision-making.

In her research, Pun Ngai focuses on young rural-urban women’s participation in consumption and explains their desire to be factory girls as resulting from their
interpellation by global capitalism and consumerism (Pun 2003). She concludes that the dagongmei (working sister) is “willing to harness herself to conditions of sweated labour so that she might ecstatically embrace the project of transforming herself” (Pun 2003, 487). Nonetheless, Xiaorui’s narrative reveals that Pun does not fully capture the breadth of industries or occupations these rural women feel called to join. Migrant women can be more than factory girls, especially when there are various low-skilled job opportunities available. There are complicated factors and driving forces behind a rural woman’s choice to become a factory worker, a waitress, or a beautician. What forms of migrant labour a rural woman is willing to engage in is an important but not yet extensively researched question in current scholarship about contemporary China’s migrant workers. Significantly, my interviews with research participants working in the beauty parlour industry revealed that, similar to Xiaorui, they joined this particular industry to acquire beauty, health, and money, as well as to learn a shouyi (craft) that would perhaps one day enable them to open their own business. Even though not all beauty service apprentices will become entrepreneurs, most of

3 In this chapter, hanyu pinyin (Chinese Phonetic Alphabet) is used as the transliteration system for Chinese terms, with the English translation given in parentheses. Hanyu pinyin is the official Romanisation system used in the PRC.
them will eventually become senior beauticians with better incomes if they are able to stand the drudgery of the work.

Figure 1. A snapshot of the hair and beauty salon Xiaorui works in.\footnote{The photos in this chapter are provided by the author.}

This chapter positions the beauty parlour industry as a distinctive industry because it offers financial rewards, upward social mobility, and, most importantly, the potentiality of entrepreneurship to rural migrant women, even though the process of being promoted from apprentice to senior beautician is considered painful, boring, and exploitative. The chapter studies rural migrant women working in Shanghai’s
beauty parlour industry, focusing on how the industry demands affective labour (Hardt and Negri 2004), and articulates this demand differently along the lines of migration, gender, and, especially, seniority.

The analysis looks at three types of female beauty workers: apprentices, senior beauticians, and entrepreneurs. Within each level, I interviewed women of different ages and marital statuses. At each level, the affective labour demanded from the women affects their minds and bodies in specific ways. Significantly, at all three levels, there are common tensions between the way the women are disciplined and their aspirations, both professionally and in terms of their personal lives. This is due to the way the lives of migrant women in China are governed not only by the economic demand for their labour to support the national economy or global capitalism, but also by the cultural expectations with regard to their reproductive maternal labour, enforced through the patriarchal familial structure (Fan 2003). To comprehend this double demand of labour from rural women, this chapter takes into account the consequences of their affective labour in this industry on their ability to enter into love relationships and to get married.
Affective labour and aesthetic labour

According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, affective labour is a form of immaterial labour that “produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108). They define affects as follows:

[U]nlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and mind. In fact, affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking. (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108)

Hardt and Negri use legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers as examples of affective labour, since in these industries workers are required not just to serve, but also to “serve with a smile” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108). This is also the

---

5 I read a smile as a corporal gesture that is material; what is intangible about it is that the workers are aware that to serve with a smile constitutes a worker’s service gesture and then becomes a customer’s consumption experience. As Hardt explains: “This labour is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness or community” (Hardt 1999, 96).
case in the beauty parlour industry, where rural migrant women are made to acquire both technical skills and a particular affective work-attitude through training and through being subjected to specific regulations and policies. In this industry, however, affective labour is neither entirely suppressive nor completely emancipatory. This chapter argues that affective labour is ambivalent, since it modifies bodies and minds in ways that can be both negative and positive, depending on the level of seniority and the particular situation of the worker. This chapter suggests that while affective labour manipulates workers’ lives, it can also harbour a potential for change, which is what Hardt calls “the potential of affective labour” (Hardt 1999, 98). Thus, this chapter explores the ways in which affective labour can also be a productive potentiality.

Significantly, aesthetic labour is highly in demand in the industry. While Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson designate this desire for an appealing physical appearance in an industry as aesthetic labour, which sexualises female labour to the problems of commodification via aestheticisation (Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson 2003, 35), Yang Jie focuses on the way aesthetic labour forges physical changes:

Aesthetic labour has become fundamental to the contemporary service
industries. Workers enter the labour market with capacities and skills that are seen as part of the raw material that is molded and commodified by industries in pursuit of profit and the promotion of the company image. The molding of the physicality of workers is required as the material signifier of the aesthetics and ethos of an organisation like a beauty salon. (2011, 348)

What is missing in Yang’s observation of aesthetic labour is that “the moulding” of workers’ physicality involves the adaptation of not only bodies but also minds. Aesthetic labour consists of the ways in which employers cultivate “the aesthetics and ethos of an organisation” through trainings and policies that change the ways workers feel about themselves, in addition to assigning uniforms and standardised make-up as “the material signifier.” As Hardt and Negri insist, “immaterial labour almost always mixes with material forms of labour,” since “the labour involved in all immaterial production” stays material, involving workers’ bodies and minds in performing affective tasks (Hardt and Negri 2004, 109). Hence, aesthetic labour, reconfigured as affective labour, targets workers’ simultaneous bodily and mental modifications.

Bringing together Hardt and Negri’s theorisation of affective labour (Hardt
and Negri 2004) and Yang Jie’s notion of aesthetic labour (Yang 2011), this chapter investigates how the affective and aesthetic labour demanded from rural migrant women affects their minds, bodies and their position in the marriage market.

**Methods**

Ethnographic methodology is used to analyse the affective labour of rural migrant women in Shanghai’s beauty parlour industry. This chapter is a qualitative study based on the narratives of rural migrant women, drawing on in-depth interviews with 37 rural migrant women, aged 15 to 49, working in different beauty service parlours in Shanghai. I interviewed these women in Shanghai between September and December 2014, and between May and July 2015, focusing on three kinds of beauty parlours, *meijia* (beauty of nail – nail salon), *meifa* (beauty of hair – hair salon), and *meirong* (beauty of face – beauty salon). My research participants consist of female

---

6 In beauty parlours, I interviewed nine beautician apprentices, nine beauticians, and one shop owner. In hair salons, I interviewed one receptionist, two hairstylist apprentices, one hairdresser, four hairstylists, and two hairstylists that had quit working in a parlour and at the time of the interviews were working for a multi-national cosmetics company. In the nail salons, I interviewed five manicurists, and three shop owners. The youngest participant in my research was 15 years old at the time of the interview. Most of the rural migrant women have a low education level and limited working skills.
workers in different positions, including apprentices, senior workers, and entrepreneurs who are the shop owners.\textsuperscript{7} I also arranged interviews with rural-urban migrant men, including one male manicurist who is also a shop owner and two hairstylists. Additionally, I interviewed one Shanghai beauty parlour owner, one former beautician who resigned from the industry, and one foreign client. I approached all 43 participants through personal contacts.\textsuperscript{8}

Furthermore, I incorporate participant observation as a method. It includes my observations in the city, and my experiences with rural migrant workers, local people, expatriates, and middle-class rural-urban migrants. Finally, I visited beauty and hair salons as a customer and held informal conversations with employees to increase my understanding of their day-to-day experiences. This chapter includes the fieldwork materials from my fieldwork notes and photographs taken in the field.

In terms of academic scholarship, there are scholars addressing aspects of the

\textsuperscript{7} During the interviews I asked the participants to share the reasons why they chose to work in this industry. Then, I asked them to narrate their experiences in Shanghai, in particular their feelings about on-the-job training and the relationships among their co-workers and clients.

\textsuperscript{8} All interviews with rural migrant women were conducted at their workplaces, with the exception of three interviews, which were held in cafés. I informed all participants that they could choose to use their real name or a pseudonym. Since most participants chose to participate anonymously, their names, company names, and other identifying information have been modified. I made audio-recordings of the interviews with the participants’ permission.
beauty economy in post-socialist China, such as cosmetic surgery (Brownwell 2005), mobile phone use by beauty salon workers (Wallis 2013), changes in consumer behaviour (Hanser 2004), and the ethnographic study of female workers in a beauty salon in southern China (Liao 2016). Yet, to date, limited research has been conducted on affective labour in the Shanghai beauty parlour industry.

In China’s migrant studies, researchers predominantly focus on the emotional sufferings of migrant women, who work long hours for low wages and have poor living conditions (Pun 2003, 2004, 2005; SACOM 2010; Sun 2012). Some explore the ways in which migrant workers experience love, intimacy and marriage (Ma and Cheng 2005). In recent years, studies have focused on young migrant workers to explore how rural Chinese youth is challenged by the global economy and neoliberal capitalism, and how they creatively produce new forms of labour and subjectivity as a response to the cultural changes of globalising China (Lukacs 2015; Zhang 2015; De Kloet and Fung 2017). Furthermore, Wagner discerns that lower-waged female workers have to take jobs not ‘worthy’ enough for male workers, exposing the problem of gender inequality (Wagner 2013, 364). The labour workforce is

---

9 As a report conducted by the All China Women’s Federation reveals, rural female migrant workers earn 20% less than male workers (Zhang 2013, 172).
apparently not only divided by age but also gender; therefore, it is important to take
gendered labour in consideration to explore the challenges migrant women face under
Chinese patriarchal traditions.

The Chinese Beauty Economy

The PRC government tactically encourages the development of the beauty parlour
industry, which is deeply materialised and internalised in rural migrant women’s lives.
During the 1990s, the government boosted this industry to absorb women laid-off
from former state-owned factories and organisations (Yang 2011, 346). Between 1998
and 2003, the All-China Women’s Federation trained these women and supported
them to open their own beauty and hair salons (Yang 2011, 346). The growth of this
industry goes hand in hand with the shift of gendered ideologies. During the Mao era,
men and women experienced gender naturalisation for the sake of mobilising “women
to do whatever men can do and to maximise the use of female labour” (Yang 2011,
353). Lisa Rofel states, “Maoist feminism is blamed for attempts to turn men and
women into unnaturally gendered beings. Women are said to have become too
masculine, while men were unable to find their true masculinity” (Rofel 2007, 13).
For the market economy, post-Mao gender positions shifted to emphasise biological differences (Rofel 1999). This ideological shift profoundly benefits the expansion of the beauty economy.\textsuperscript{10} The number of beauty parlours in cities is therefore growing rapidly.\textsuperscript{11} Moreover, as a transition of industrialisation, this industry plays a paramount role in developing the tertiary sector, whereas factory workers are turning to careers as beauty service workers due to better-paid opportunities and working environments (Chu 2015). In view of this historical backdrop, this industry emphasises rural gendered labour through purposeful national, political schemes.

**Shanghai’s Beauty Parlour Industry**

This chapter focuses on Shanghai because Shanghai is the most international city in China (Li 2013), in which rural women’s bodies are exposed to the historical city space, where global cultural flows are complex and hierarchal, creating both challenges and attraction for rural migrant women. However, as the PRC government

\textsuperscript{10} Xu and Feiner define (2007, 308) \textit{meinü jingji} (beauty economy) as “activities like beauty pageants that are typically commercialised and localised festivities that put beautiful women on parade, as well as the accompanying range of advertisements for TV shows and movies, cosmetics, plastic surgery centres, weight loss products, fitness programs, and the ubiquitous beauty parlours.”

\textsuperscript{11} Through the state’s efforts, China’s cosmetic and beauty sales have risen from US$24 million dollars in 1982 to a projected US$21 billion dollars in 2005 (Jakes and Xu 2005, 22).
employs the *hukou* (household registration) system to divide its population into a rural-urban segment (Chan 2012), discrimination against rural migrants has become a serious problem. Local people casually label rural migrants as *waidiren* (outsiders) who are *suzhidi* (low quality), addressing their degraded non-local social identity (Gaetano and Jacka 2004). Currently, Shanghai’s rural-urban migrant workers consist of more than four million women (Shanghai Women’s Federation 2010; “Migrant Population” 2011).

Cindy Fan points out that migrants without an urban *hukou* “find their existence outside of the formal sector, picking up jobs shunned by local residents and relying only upon themselves for subsistence” (Fan 1999, 958). This discriminative culture is reflected in the beauty industry. In Shanghai, beauty service jobs are considered to be undesirable because the work involves intimate bodily contact and a zealous service attitude; therefore, the job opportunities in the industry are considered as “leftover jobs” to locals but as “golden jobs” to rural women. Owing to the discrepant social statuses, workers have to be more skilful to establish a productive client-worker relationship, which poses a challenge for the new workers – the apprentices – of the beauty industry.
Apprentice

Young, single migrant workers commonly join this industry as apprentices. Since these young women have limited working skills, being an apprentice is a way for them to attain valuable new skills. Apprentices usually do not have to pay any tuition fee for the parlour; however, they have to work for very low wages, and receive two meals a day and accommodation in a workers’ dormitory provided by their employers.

As told by Andy, a hair salon manager, paying apprentices RMB1,000 per month is a gesture of kindness because these young workers do not yet have the necessary skills. Apprentices become “real” staff in the company only when they successfully pass the tests arranged by their employers. Although apprentices receive training and regular tests, there is no guarantee that they will pass and become gainfully employed. This exploitative, yet legal, apprenticeship system provides massive

12 Although the management justifies their exploitation of labour, I found this apprenticeship system problematic because apprentices do not receive Shanghai’s legal minimum wage of RMB2,020 as they are classified as “apprentices” instead of as legal workers (see “Eleven Regions” 2015).
13 Apprenticeships keep young workers working in the salon whilst not giving them a clear schedule for promotion. As Siqi, a 17-year-old beautician apprentice, shared, she is making RMB1,000 per month, yet she has no idea when she will pass all the tests and become fully employed. Therefore, some migrant women prefer to pay a tuition fee in a beauty school to get trained to become a beautician, hairstylist or manicurist.
14 According to Yang, “It is common for salons to employ one or two technicians with beauty and hairdressing experience and then hire a number of people as apprentices, who are then trained by the
cheap workforce, favouring the development of the industry. This section explores the ways in which the apprentices’ bodies and minds are being modified, whereas their affective relationships are under surveillance.

*Adjusting the bodies and minds*

Apprentices have to face bodily and mental modification in order to perform qualified services for their clients. First and foremost, they have to experience corporeal intimacy with their clients, for example, touching their facial skin, or their body, and washing their hair, during which their bodies and minds are being shaped in order to be accepted by the clients while performing these intimate tasks. Moreover, some beauticians have to conduct hair removal, which poses a new and challenging sensual experience for the apprentices. Thus, to stay in the industry, apprentices must first accept the bodily proximity.\(^{15}\) Furthermore, adjusting workers’ bodies is one of the training objectives. One participant named herself Huniu (literally, tiger girl) for my technicians. Such apprenticeships constitute a technically legal and efficient way of making profit, as apprenticeships involve long work hours and little or no payment” (Yang 2011, 346).

\(^{15}\) Miss Zhang, a 28-year-old migrant woman from Shenyang, entered the industry when she first came to Shanghai. However, she dislikes touching people’s faces therefore she chose to quit (Interview with Miss Zhang, June 11, 2015).
Performing beauty services requires flexibility in the hands and fingers. Our fingers have to stretch like this [showing the researcher how to stretch]. I have to practice this stretching exercise every day. Sometimes, after practicing the whole day, I can’t even hold chopsticks. But I can’t give up. If I don’t train, my hands will become tense. When I wash the client’s hair, he/she won’t be pleasant. Then, my employer’s credibility, and the company’s sales will drop.

(Interview with Huniu, June 11, 2015)\(^{16}\)

Although she feels pain during the processing, she accepts this painful process considering the sensual experience of her customers and the credibility of the salon.

Huniu’s narrative falls into Hardt and Negri’s definition of affective labour – immaterial labour that produces affects such as pleasure and wellbeing for the clients (Hardt and Negri 2004). Her experience is a form of bodily and mental modification, in which she has accepted pain for the sake of her client’s pleasant experiences. As

\(^{16}\) The interviewee, Huniu, is a 19-year-old beautician apprentice from Anhui.
Huniu shared, the thing that impresses her the most is the change in her personality:

Most of my bad personality traits have worn away after working in this parlour for two and a half months. It is because the most important thing here is service. (Interview with Huniu, June 11, 2015)

Huniu shared that she was a naughty daughter. She stole her parent’s credit card once and ran away from her village to spend their money in bars and to have fun with friends. Huniu is surprised by how much her personality changed in such a short period of time. She described this change as follows:

At the beginning when I served clients, I didn’t dare to talk with them. I handed them water without saying anything. Now, when I hand a client a glass of water, I say, “Please have some water.” I have become more confident.

(Interview with Huniu, June 11, 2015)

Huniu views her self-transformation into someone confident and caring as a positive
outcome. The manner in which she narrates her change shows how the workplace has affectively shaped her attitude to match the industry’s requirements according to which the customer’s experience takes priority over everything else.17

A story about pain

Although Huniu is subjected to affective labour, it is important not to read her as only a submissive worker. She once shared that she dislikes her trainer, a senior female worker, and aims to defeat her by learning all her skills. Huniu is strongly aware of the precarious position she is in because of the fierce competition:

    Competition in Shanghai is keener than in other regions. If your service is off par, you will be eliminated. There are plenty of potential workers. What is lacking is people with good skills. Therefore, I must work hard. (Interview with Huniu, June 11, 2015)

17 Apprentices experience the modification of their bodies and minds for the production of affective labour, as the beauty parlour is a customer-oriented industry and the service provided is not only about beauty techniques but also about things such as hospitality, politeness, friendliness and, most profoundly, a customer-oriented attitude. Therefore, most companies I visited provided training to improve the attitude and demeanour of their workers, aiming to shape the workers’ minds so that they can recognize that the “most important thing is service,” as shared by Huniu.
As a low-level skilled migrant worker, Huniu knows she must “work hard” to develop “good skills” and also display a positive attitude. Based on this sense of awareness, she welcomes the changes she has to make. According to Hardt and Negri, “a worker with a good attitude and social skills is another way of saying a worker adept at affective labour” (2004, 108). Being adept at affective labour, however, does not indicate that the apprentices are unaware of the modifications they undergo. This finding reveals the ambivalence of affective labour: workers accept bodily and mental modifications to help them survive in an industry in which they attain a newfound confidence and practical skills, and which is therefore both productive and disciplinary.

Consequently, young migrant women tend not to critically question the pain and exhaustion they suffer from working and training round the clock; they see pain as a way to attain a less exploitative position. In Shanghai, I constantly heard workers refer to their bosses as their role models because their bosses were also rural migrants who successfully baishouqijia (literally, built a home with empty hands). In our conversation, Huniu showed a similar sense of appreciation:
Mr. Zhu has many capabilities. Our boss hires him to be our trainer. Each training lecture costs RMB120,000! Mr. Zhu is the *nanshen* (God) in our heart. We learn different skills from him, such as service and communication skills.

We complain that it’s really tiring. He then asks us, “Are you tired? Tired! That’s right! Comfort is for dead people!” Therefore, we feel exhausted, yet we won’t give up. If we give up, our dream will remain only a dream. If we insist, our dream will come true. (Interview with Huniu, June 11, 2015)

When Huniu talked about Mr. Zhu she was brimming with enthusiasm, in a manner similar to a fan talking about her favourite pop idol. Through Mr Zhu’s training, Huniu finds some value in exhaustion:

We work from 9:30 am until 10 pm. After working hours, we have to start trainings. Sometimes our trainings last until 4 am. Although it’s exhausting, I can learn a lot. (Interview with Huniu, June 11, 2015)

Mr. Zhu trains Huniu to become a beauty worker who not only tolerates harsh
working conditions, but also accepts the drudgery and ascribes meaningful values to it.

Mr. Zhu has attached a specific meaning to pain and drudgery in which they no longer signify exploitation, but rather potential future rewards.

The expectation that “pain will be rewarded” circulates among young migrant workers, providing them with a glimpse of hope. Although only a few migrant women can become entrepreneurs, the apprentices are likely to become senior workers in the industry with higher wages after they pass the trainings. This section has revealed that the expectation that “pain will be rewarded” is a productive affect, which helps the apprentices adapt to the multiple demands of affective labour. Nonetheless, affective labour is not entirely liberating as it prevents the apprentices from entering other forms of affective relationships.

**Desiring singlehood**

Shanghai’s beauty parlour industry predominantly desires single, young migrant women as its workers. Employers tend to hire single women rather than married ones
to avoid the inconvenience caused by pregnancy and abortion (Pun 2005).\(^\text{18}\)

Additionally, young workers are highly in demand by the industry. Youth labour has been termed the *qingchunfan* (rice bowl of youth) (Zhang 2000; Hanser 2005). Zhang Zhen describes this cultural phenomenon as “the urban trend in which a range of new, highly paid positions have opened almost exclusively to young women,” which symbolises “the rise of a consumer culture endorsed by current official ideology – the ‘democracy of consumption’ promoted to prevent social unrest since the suppression of student movements in 1989” (Zhang 2000, 94). Attracted by the call of this demand, young, single rural migrant women march into the industry; however, to establish a relationship with the customers as part of the affective labour, apprentices are prevented from entering into other forms of affective relationships through both company policy and personal desire.

During my fieldwork, I found that it is common to have a “no-love policy” imposed by the employers in hair salons. As Andy explained, it is considered to be indecent to have lovers in the workplace and the workers usually become emotional if

\(^{18}\) Xinmeimei, a 21-year-old migrant from Anhui whose elder sister, Ms Xin owns the salon, shared, “we do not hire women who are dating someone but are not yet married because ‘this type of woman’ is unstable and would not stay in the same salon for long” (Interview with Xinmeimei, July 6, 2015).
they break up or have a fight; therefore, it is common for romantic relationships to be forbidden. Furthermore, young apprentices consider work as their main priority in life; romance, love and marriage are often put “on hold.” When asked about their expectations of romantic relationships and a suitable age to marry, I received this type of responses:

Do I have a boyfriend? No, I am too young to think about relationship.  

(Interview with Dandan, October 7, 2014)\textsuperscript{19}

I think I have to improve my beauty services skill first. I will think about marriage later. (Interview with Xiaoyue, July 6, 2015)\textsuperscript{20}

My classmates from junior high school will get married when they are 18 or 19 years old if they stay in our hometown instead of migrating for work. As for me, I will get married when I am 23 or 24. (Interview with Xiaorui, May

\textsuperscript{19} Dandan is a 17-year-old hairstylist apprentice from Jiangxi.

\textsuperscript{20} Xiaoyue is a 15-year-old beautician apprentice from Anhui.
Young migrant women who have chosen to work in Shanghai tend to expect their marital age to differ from their peers who have chosen to remain in rural China.

Huniu shared with me that, like other young migrants, she plans to get married when she is 25. Now she is 19, and she wants to develop her career first. These young workers exchange their youth for work; as Zhang Zhen discerns, eating from the rice bowl of youth incurs a delay of marriage and childbearing “in order to enjoy and capitalise on youth to the fullest. As a result, normative family structure and sexual behaviours are challenged as youth’s enlargement thwarts conventional domestic temporalities” (Zhang 2000, 95). When women getting married at 20 is considered normal in rural China, the determination of rural migrant women to defer marriage modifies the rural family structure, forming a new sociality of post-socialist China.21

By choosing a delay in marriage and a work-life where one has to regard customers’ experiences as the priority, the apprentices start to live an urban life as beauty service

---

21 The minimum age for marriage in China for women is 20 while for men it is 22. Nevertheless, some of my participants shared with me that their female friends got married when they were only 18. At this age, a marriage is not legal but constitutes a *de facto* marriage, common in rural China.
workers whose affective relationships are constituted by the industry. But how will their effort and pain be rewarded? The following section will explore an answer through an analysis of the next level of seniority in the beauty industry – that of the senior worker.

Senior

After completing their apprenticeship, beauty service workers are promoted to senior workers. In this rank, workers generally have a higher monthly wage. The lowest monthly wage for senior female workers I encountered was RMB6,000, whereas the highest was RMB25,000. The increase in income equips them with financial power and a potential for upward social mobility. They also enjoy a higher status in the workplace, where they become trainers for the apprentices and receive regular advanced trainings to keep up with fashion trends. As Jojo, a 28-year-old hairstylist from Jiangsu, stated firmly:

I am content about my life now. I found the drudgery of being apprentice was worth it. (Interview with Jojo, May 30, 2015)
Senior female workers are seemingly experiencing the “rewards” of what they went through as apprentices. Nevertheless, their bodies and minds are also still constituted by the industry, albeit in more intricate senses.

_Fashioning the bodies: The production of confidence_

Most commonly, the senior workers are paid under a bonus system in which they receive a basic monthly wage with an additional amount depending on their clients’ consumption and the company’s sales revenues. Some workers do not have a basic wage, so their income relies solely on their clients’ consumption. In this system, clients are fundamentally important for senior workers to receive a good income. As a result, workers’ bodies and minds continue to be subjected to manipulation in relation to both employers and clients.

Primarily, being a female hairstylist is arduous because Shanghai’s hair salons, mainly staffed by male workers, are a highly patriarchal space. As Elaine, a 27-year-old hairstylist from Hubei, told me, it is more stressful to be a female hairstylist because clients tend to have more trust in male hairstylists.\(^22\) She found it

\(^{22}\) Most female apprentices in hair and beauty salons learn to become beauticians instead of hairstylists, although they have to assist with hair-related services, such as washing and drying clients’
extremely difficult to establish her authority with clients in the beginning:

When I was promoted as hairstylist, I had to buy new clothes. It is important to be fashionable and modern to gain trust from clients. (Interview with Elaine, June 15, 2015)

Elaine feels that she has to put more effort to becoming a trustworthy professional due to her clients’ gender bias. Her narrative reveals that senior workers are not only at a higher rank, but are also in a gender hierarchy that assigns female workers a lower position than male workers in a male-dominated workplace. Hence, female workers feel the urge to transform their bodies in order to compete with their male co-workers. 23 However, what is missing from Elaine’s narrative is that the requirement of aesthetic labour also applies to men. Since the Shanghai beauty hair. Yuki, the senior hairstylist, told me that there are fewer female workers willing to be trained as hair-stylists because this commonly takes two to three years, while being trained as manicurists and beauticians often only requires three months. Yuki explained that since some migrant women aim to work in Shanghai for a few years and then return home for marriage and/or to start a business, the time it takes to become a hairstylist discourages them from choosing this occupation.

23 Ironically, senior female workers’ self-transformations may be subject to criticism from their rural relatives for making them too yangqi (literally, too Westernised), as Pang Yuan told me.
parlour industry is selling a fashionable, modern sense of beauty, all workers, regardless of their gender, are required to produce aesthetic labour.

In contrast to the job of hairstylist, the jobs of beautician and manicurist are regarded as female occupations; consequently, there are very few men working in beauty and manicure salons. This means that senior female workers in beauty salons and manicure shops face different challenges than female hairstylists. Lily explained how being a beautician extracts beauty labour:

This industry is about beauty. If our clients want to be beautiful, we have to impose a similar requirement upon ourselves. I have a skin-care routine and have undergone micro-cosmetic surgery. I am much more confident than before. (Interview with Lily, June 26, 2015)

During the interview, with a smirk on her face, Lily asked if I could tell whether her eyelids are natural or fake. Without waiting for my reply, she told me she had undergone a double-eyelid surgery. Clearly, Lily feels confident as a result of this corporeal change, which was performed to meet the clients’ beauty ideal, conforming
to dominant standards of beauty in Shanghai. Researchers suggest that migrant women desire to transform their rural self into a modern subject by migrating to urban China and partaking in the consumer economy (Pun 2003; Hanser 2004; Wallis 2013).

In light of my participants’ narratives, I want to emphasise that to be modern and urban for rural migrant women is not only a desire pushed by consumerism, but can also be a demand from the industry in which they work, where they have to meet the expectations of their clients to secure and improve their position.

Workers like Lily and Elaine feel confident because of the bodily and mental modifications they have undergone. Rural migrant workers in the beauty industry have a low social status in Shanghai and are commonly degraded as xijianchui (literally, wash, cut, and dry hair). Bodily and mental modifications enable these workers to feel confident and to face discrimination by urbanites, which also affects people in rural China. Being a manager, Lily is proud of how far she has come – both financially and socially. She enjoys driving her own car back to her hometown during Chinese New Year, rather than taking the train. Her relatives and friends from home admire her new fashionable appearance.

Lily’s new urban subjectivity might affect her fellow villagers in how they
view Shanghai and life as a beauty parlour employee. This was the case for Nina, a 36-year-old manicurist from Anhui:

When I was a high school student, I admired the skyscrapers in Shanghai, which I saw on television. Also, I saw other villagers who came back from working in Shanghai with new clothes and modern stuff. (Interview with Nina, June 26, 2015)

Nina came to admire city life and chose to become part of it by working in the beauty parlour industry. From their narratives, it becomes clear that rural migrant women are encouraged to undergo both bodily and mental modifications due to the demand for affective labour. Through this manipulation of their bodies and minds, however, they also gain a sense of empowerment and confidence. During my fieldwork, I observed that senior workers in the beauty industry were all well-dressed and stylish, making it impossible for me to tell whether they were rural migrants or local Shanghai citizens. This reveals the powerful impact aesthetic labour can have. Their new clothes and physical features not only give these migrant women confidence, but are also admired
by other rural women as signs of social superiority, leading them to aspire to work in
the Shanghai beauty parlour industry as well, and to undergo similar bodily and
mental modifications.

*Chatting with clients*

The Shanghai beauty parlour industry relies heavily on developing affective bonds
between clients and staff so that the clients will return to the beauty parlours. As
explained in the above section, senior workers live under the bonus system; therefore,
they have to establish a close relationship with their clients. Lily shared:

> In the beginning my plan was simple; I just wanted to make more money. But
> then I discovered that this job enables me to meet different types of clients
> who bring me different kinds of thoughts and knowledge. Thanks to my
> clients I can now make money on the stock market. (Interview with Lily, June

---

24 In the Shanghai beauty parlour industry, one of the most common tactics to bind clients is a
membership card. Customers can purchase a membership card to enjoy monthly or yearly services with
discounts. According to my participants, the price of a membership card can range from RMB3,000 to
RMB250,000. When employees sell a membership card to a customer they usually receive a
commission. Some companies require their workers to sell a certain number of cards each month. In
this way there are both rewards and punishments in place for the (non-)sale of memberships.
As the salon manager, Lily has achieved her goal of making more money. To her surprise, she gained even more than she expected, as she learned additional ways to make money. Lily also said that she is planning to buy an apartment in Shanghai and is collecting advice from her clients. Yuki similarly noted that she learns things from her clients, for instance about raising children from a client who is a child-care expert:

I have been working in the salon for eight to nine years already. My clients and I are like old friends. We talk about everything except private matters. We like to talk about where to travel, what they like to do, and what they fancy. Now, I talk more about parenting with my clients. (Interview with Yuki, May 29, 2015)

After years of working as a hairstylist, Yuki has accumulated such a strong base of “old clients” that she earns RMB25,000 per month. Significantly, she frames her relationship with these old clients as one between “old friends,” even though their
friendship is limited, as they do not share “private matters.” Moreover, Yuki explained that she does not force her clients to purchase services that are not suitable for them, nor does she push them to buy membership cards. Having received training in Japan, Yuki is a skilled hairstylist and she stated that providing the best service she can is her goal, rather than pushing clients to consume. Yuki’s advanced skills enable her to establish a productive affective relationship with her clients: they can maintain a form of “friendship” with her without discussing private matters (see Figure 2).

For senior workers whose skills are not as advanced, maintaining a good relationship with their clients through pleasant communication is vital. Zhang Feng, a 27-year-old manicurist from Jiangsu, explained her approach:

I only chat about happy things with my clients. I will keep them happy so that if I don’t do a very good job, they would not care about that. (Interview with Zhang Feng, November 14, 2014)

Maintaining clients’ positive experience is an integral element of Zhang Feng’s labour production. Chen Qian, a 20-old beautician from Anhui, has a similar strategy:
I will tell my client: Oh, you have lost weight, and you look prettier! But I won’t say something very fake. I will also ask how they are. We just talk casually like friends.

Becoming “friends” with clients can produce regular visits and a secure income. Through their conversations at work, migrant women also learn about the stock market, the property market, parenting, etc. As Lily claimed, she can attain “different kinds of thoughts and knowledge.” According to Hardt, one type of “immaterial labour involves the production and manipulation of affects and requires (virtual or actual) human contact and proximity” (Hardt 1999, 98). For senior workers, the human contact with their clients enables them to enter into a different cultural world.

My research findings suggest that workers do not only “serve with a smile” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108), but also entice their clients to give more than just money. Workers who make an effort to give more than merely their labour, receive additional rewards from the customers when the latter are willing to provide advice, commiserations, stories, etc. The workers’ cultural life is enriched and their new
knowledge circulates among workers and other clients. This cultural contact is a significant aspect of affective labour that partially enables rural migrant women to become urban subjects. However, their urbanity is still being challenged in the marriage market.

Figure 2. A snapshot of the hair salon Yuki works in, owned by her older brother.

Desiring marriage, or not

The beauty industry constrains the affective relationships of senior female workers, particularly with regard to their dreams concerning marriage. Elaine, a 27-year-old hairstylist from Hubei, and her flatmate Jenny, a 25-year-old hair salon receptionist from Jianxi, complained about the difficulty of finding marital partners and listed
three main reasons. First, long working hours and irregular work schedules hinder their chances of dating men working in other industries. Second, they do not want to date men from the same workplace as they feel these men are “playboys.” Third, women in this industry are stereotyped as “playgirls.” As Elaine explained, rural people believe that men and women in this industry like to “have fun” in the city. However, being a “playgirl” is more of a stigma than a “playboy” because girls’ conduct is more intensely policed in the marriage market. Hence, in being more fashionable and integrating with urbanity, they become less wanted as potential wives.

Migrant workers in Shanghai are far removed from their hometowns, yet the pressure on single migrant women to get married does not end. With tears in her eyes, Miumiu shared:

People from my hometown think it is weird when someone reaches his/her marital age but remains single. If a woman stays in her rural hometown after school, she will usually get married somewhere between the age of 18 and 21. I am 26 now but am still single. Sadly, my parents worry about me. They arranged a few dates for me, which I attended. But I don’t feel any of them is
my Mr Right. (Interview with Miumiu, October 7, 2014)

Marriage is a marker of normative familial life that is difficult to challenge even if rural migrant women have established a career in Shanghai. As Wallis states:

Single migrant women who remain “out of work” beyond the customary marriage age are often the target of such gossip in their home villages, with the assumption being that their reason for remaining in the city is that they are either doing some sort of illicit job [such as sex work] or are engaging in sexual affair, or both. (Wallis 2013, 112)

Miumiu fears being stigmatised in her rural community if she remains single. Nonetheless, she is the one choosing to reject her blind dates, rather than being rejected by them. This observation discloses her mental modification, which has led her to believe and desire that her husband should be “Mr Right” instead of simply any suitable man her parents arrange for her to marry. Jojo, who is two years older than Miumiu, also expressed a non-traditional attitude towards marriage:
I am a bit afraid of marriage. I am not sure if my husband will keep treating me well after signing the paper. I am worried about the problems with my parents-in-law. I have a lot of concerns because I feel that married people are not really so happy. (Interview with Jojo, May 30, 2015)

Unlike Miumiu, Jojo does not fantasise about marriage as a “happily-ever-after” fairy-tale involving “Mr. Right.” Instead, she views her future husband in more pragmatic terms:

My occupation is unstable because how much I earn relates to how much I work. If we plan to have a child, then I will not be able to work during pregnancy. Therefore, it is better for my husband to have an apartment without a mortgage. (Interview with Jojo, May 30, 2015)

Given the precarious situation in which pregnancy is considered a problem in the workplace, together with the pressure exerted by the Chinese patrilocal marital culture, Jojo’s worries about the consequences of marriage seem reasonable. Although Jojo’s
view of marriage is not the same as Miumiu’s, they both profess a different perspective on marriage than the one common in their rural hometowns. This signals the development of a new form of subjectivity among rural migrant women, leading them to adopt new views on whom they should marry and why.

Senior female workers who remain single are caught ambiguously between rural and urban China. Primarily, their strong financial power enables them to sustain an urban life in Shanghai, making marriage less urgent. However, it also causes difficulties when they look for a potential spouse in their rural hometown, as their income is higher than that of most men there; my research participants generally expressed a sense of reluctance to accept a man who earned less than them as a husband. Additionally, Pang Yuan shared that men in her hometown were less attractive to her compared with men in Shanghai. Elaine explained the dilemma rural migrant women face in this regard:

It is nearly impossible to dream that Shanghainese men would like to marry us rural women, because of our low social status.25 (Interview with Elaine, June

---

25 Their narratives are supported by the research of Nana Zhang, who writes: “for the majority of rural migrant women, finding a husband in the city, whilst desirable, is not easily achievable, due to their
These narratives explain why, even though there are more men in China’s population, rural migrant women’s choice of spouses is limited.26

Fran Martin states that under China’s post-socialist economy, “market capitalism is creating new formations of feminine gender identity based not on family or work-unit ties but instead on labour-market value and recreational consumption” (Martin 2013, 468). Senior female workers exchange their youth, beauty, and labour to accumulate value in the beauty labour market. They have also gained confidence through establishing an urban subjectivity; however, this “feminine gender identity” (Martin 2013, 468) and their social status as rural migrant workers in the beauty industry limit their ability to find a satisfactory marriage partner. Having outlined how the apprentices’ and senior workers’ bodies and minds are being moulded differently by affective labour, the following section will explore the highest level of seniority in Shanghai’s beauty parlour industry – that of the entrepreneur.

---

26 According to the 2010 population census, the gender ratio in China is 118.06 males per 100 females (“Chinese Mainland Gender Ratios” 2011).
Entrepreneur

The entrepreneurs are the owners of the beauty parlours, and they enjoy the highest position. They organise the on-job trainings for their workers, develop the company culture and policies, and determine workers’ wages and the bonus system. To run their businesses, the entrepreneurs not only manipulate their own bodies and minds, but also those of others in order to generate affective labour.

Producing excellence

During my fieldwork, I met four entrepreneurs: Gina, a 22-year-old manicure shop owner from Hubei; Ms Xin, a 30-year-old beauty salon owner from Anhui; Charlie, a 33-year-old manicure shop owner from Shenyang; and Maomao, a 43-year-old manicure shop owner from Shanxi. These entrepreneurs focus intensely on the beauty skills they possess and pass on to their workers.

Maomao started learning how to give manicures in 2002 because she saw the manicure business as “up and coming”; therefore, she invested time to learn how to paint different shapes and designs. Since she was already a skilled painter, painting fingernails came easily to her. Following the suggestion of her manicure teacher, she
trained professionally and, in 2005, she obtained a manicurist certificate from the Shanghai Labour and Social Security Bureau. She participated in manicure competitions and won several awards. Maomao explained:

One should attain a basic skill level certificate from the Bureau to be a manicurist, and a mid-level certificate to open a manicure shop. However, the institutionalisation of beauty-related parlours is not strictly governed; therefore, it is not illegal to open a manicure shop without the certificate.

(Interview with Maomao, July 1, 2015)

Maomao is the only beauty parlour worker I spoke to who had obtained an official certificate. By displaying her certificates and awards in her manicure shop, she gains trust from her clients. What is most valuable for her business is her certified skillset instead of her aesthetic labour, as reflected in the casual clothes she wears at work.

With her documented professionalism, she attracts not only local clients, but also foreign ones.27

27 During my visit to Maomao’s parlour, her Italian customer came and joined in our interview. Maomao explained that through self-education, she manages to speak simple English with her foreign
Like Maomao, Charlie chose to open a nail salon because she was already a good painter, a skill she acquired during fine arts classes. Her painting skills enabled her to offer special manicure patterns. Charlie chose to open her salon in the centre of Jing’an district, where her clients are mainly high-income office workers. She enjoys being her own boss because she can design the company logo and shop interior, and, most importantly, set the service prices.

As Gina was wearing a pink beauty mask during the interview, I could not guess her age (see Figure 3). When she told me she was born in 1993, I was surprised that at her age she was already an entrepreneur, employing one Shanghainese woman and two rural migrant women. At the start of her career, Gina paid RMB2,000 for a six-month manicure training. Then she became a manicurist and now she owns a salon on a university campus. A student client told me that Gina’s excellent skills help her expand her business.

Ms Xin started her beauty salon after she joined a direct-sales business selling cosmetics. She realised she could make more money by opening a beauty salon, and

---

28 Gina is a second-generation migrant. Her mother migrated to work in Shanghai when she was young; Gina followed her mother after graduation.
therefore invested in one. Although she herself does not provide any services, she knows the services offered in the salon and the skill levels of her workers. She decided to familiarise herself with the services because of a bad experience she had:

In the beginning, I knew nothing about this beauty business. I hired a senior beautician. She was also responsible for managing clients’ files. When she changed her job to another beauty salon near mine, she contacted all my clients based on the files and invited them to her new shop. (Interview with Ms Xin, July 6, 2015)

This experience taught Ms Xin a lesson. By acquiring more knowledge of the industry, Ms Xin trained herself to manage and surveil the workers effectively.

These four entrepreneurs’ stories confirm what Huniu, the apprentice, mentioned about keen competition: “There are plenty of potential workers. What is lacking is people with good skills” (Interview with Huniu, June 11, 2015). The skills of these entrepreneurs allow them to attract customers who demand high-quality service. Entrepreneurs who purely run the business without having any skills
themselves have to carefully select trustworthy workers with good skills. Moreover, rather than being modified by the demands of affective labour, the entrepreneurs manipulate affective labour by imposing it on the clients to stimulate consumption, as I will explain in the following section.

Figure 3. Gina working in her manicure shop.

*Promoting health: The reciprocality of affective labour*

According to Eileen Otis, “Service labour is defined by interaction. Service workers
endeavour to create, reinforce, or change the emotional and experiential states of
customers on behalf of the organisation that employs them” (Otis 2012, 11). Affective
labour can be seen as a flow between the clients and the workers in which their
affective relationship is not a one-way relationship, but a reciprocal, dynamic one in
which workers may also make demands on clients. The entrepreneurs understand this
logic and mobilise it for business; in this process, customers’ bodies become a site for
modifications, particularly the unhealthy parts that have to be “fixed” by consuming
beauty services.

During the interview with Gina, she told me that my fingernails were
unhealthy because of the dead skin sitting on them, yet I had no idea what she meant.
She then used a tool to point to my nails. Immediately, I realised it was the white skin
on my nails she was referring to. Being called unhealthy, I suddenly felt the need to
purchase her manicure service. The concept of health is widely used in the beauty
industry, as Ms Xin shared:

_Meirong_ (beauty) and _yangsheng_ (health maintenance) are connected. Health
care service is about full body treatment. It is more like a concept. Usually a
new client purchases beauty services because she is dissatisfied with her face.

Our beauticians would guide her to understand that her face reflects her bodily condition that is based on the traditional Chinese medical concepts. Then, she realises it is not only her face but also the rest of her body that needs treatment.

(Interview with Ms Xin, July 6, 2015)

Ms Xin named her salon the Beauty Preservation & Longevity Club. She trains her beauticians as beauty therapists, and claims that they have traditional Chinese medical knowledge. During my fieldwork observations, I found that it is common for beauty salons to provide both beauty and wellness services. The reverse affective relationship this produces is essential: it can help to establish a sustainable business because to nurse one’s health, one has to invest not only money, but also time.

As Paula Black critically notes, “in claiming to work with the physical body […] which improves emotional health, therapists are laying claim to a number of roles, which cut across occupations within the health professions” (Black 2004, 169).

Black follows Foucault’s notion of governmentality in stating that “the governance of the body pervades all aspects of social life and is not simply a characteristic of the
medical sphere” (Black 2004, 152). Furthermore, Alexander Edmonds explores the notion of health and argues that cosmetic and healing justifications become blurred “as patients engage in experimental regimes of self-tinkering aiming at a state of ‘esthetic health’” (Edmonds 2009, 467). Black’s research on British beauty salons and Edmonds’ on Brazilian plastic surgery focus on the upper social class’s consumption of health treatments, and ties into similar developments in post-socialist China.

What is specific to post-socialist China is the sense of distrust that pervades its consumer culture, as explained by Amy Hanser:

The sense of danger and distrust associated with shopping is heightened by regular media reports on consumer marketplace deceptions and scams, which range from faulty (even deadly) medicine and tainted food to fake police officers or marriage introduction services; the controversy in 2008 over powdered milk doctored with melamine is a particularly dramatic example of a widespread phenomenon. (Hanser 2010, 308)

The “sense of danger and distrust” connects bodies across the borders of class and
gender. As narrated by Yvonne, the Shanghai beauty salon owner, some of her clients visit her salon because they used poor quality cosmetic products, and consequently their faces were “damaged.” Under the threat of poisoned food, fake products, and polluted air and water, Chinese consumers are becoming ever more aware of their health. The need for healthcare is not only an upper-class demand, but shared by the working class. Ms Xin’s salon, for example, is located in a suburban area of Shanghai, where a lot of rural migrant workers live. Her beauty business is making good money from both migrant women and men.

My analysis has disclosed the reciprocality of affective labour, created by entrepreneurs adept at enticing their clients to undergo treatments. While workers serve with a smile, clients of different genders and classes are strategically made to bring more than just money to the table. Thus, clients’ concerns about their health and the trust they put in the workers giving them treatments become part of the affective labour circulating in the beauty economy.

Desiring marriage

The mentality of the entrepreneurs, informed by their high status in the salons and
their financial power, influences their experiences of conjugality and marriage. Ms Xin and Maomao were single mothers before they joined the industry. They chose this business because it offers them flexible working hours and a good income, which they believe to be beneficial for raising a child. Both single mothers desire a new relationship, yet they find it challenging to meet a suitable partner. Ms Xin shared:

Many people think the divorce rate in this industry is higher than in other industries, but I divorced before I joined it. I am not sure why people think this. But I have learned a lot because of this industry. I have met more people, too. I think women in this industry are tougher. First, they make good money. Second, they have higher beauty standards. Only if a man is stronger and more powerful, she will be interested. Otherwise, she will find the man weak. If she makes more money than her husband, problems will arise. (Interview with Ms Xin, July 6, 2015)

With an average income of RMB90,000–100,000 per month, Ms Xin hopes to find a man who earns as much as her, which poses a huge challenge to her dates. For a
divorced woman who has a son, she knows her chances in the marriage market are slim, but she would not consider lowering her standards. Maomao faces a similar problem:

As a woman, I wish to get married. I still believe in beautiful romantic love stories. I thought I was silly. Now, I’m 40 years old but I still desire love. You know, women in their 60s can still fall in love. I saw that in a film. So, I think love is not about age, it is a dream of every woman. (Interview with Maomao, July 1, 2015)

Desiring love and treating it as a dream, Maomao has failed to find a new husband:

I limit the age difference to maximum ten years. I cannot accept an old man, as he will need someone to take care of him. But when people learn that I have a son, they do not want to continue dating me. (Interview with Maomao, July 1, 2015)
Aging, having a child, and earning good money all pose a challenge to these divorced entrepreneurs in starting a new relationship. As Leta Hong Fincher writes: “patriarchal norms are still deeply entrenched throughout Chinese society” (Fincher 2014, 5). In the marriage market, rural women like Ms Xin and Maomao are considered to be of low value under the patriarchal system, diminishing their chances of finding a suitable spouse. Importantly, however, given their stable financial position, it is not necessary for them to marry merely for the sake of achieving financial security.

Being relatively young compared with the other entrepreneurs in my research, Gina also faces problems in looking for a husband:

I think my friends in my hometown are immature, although we are the same age. Therefore, I don’t want a boy from my hometown. At the same time my chances to meet someone older than myself in Shanghai are limited. But I don’t want to find someone from another rural area because I don’t want to follow him to live in his hometown. I would only choose to either live in Shanghai or in my hometown. (Interview with Gina, October 13, 2014)
Financial empowerment, city-life experience, and the attachments to Shanghai and her rural hometown have turned finding a partner for Gina into a seemingly unsolvable problem. Female entrepreneurship has empowered these three women, offering them the power to choose a partner on their own terms, yet at present these terms cannot be met by what they see as suitable candidates. The patriarchal society of post-socialist China is seemingly not ready for the rise of rural-urban migrant businesswomen.

Amongst my participants there was one entrepreneur in a happy relationship, Charlie. However, her partner is another woman. As such, Charlie deviates from current social norms prevalent in China which prescribe that a woman should marry an older, wealthier, “superior” man. This is an aspiration to which the other interviewees cling in spite of the negative impact it has on their prospects of entering into a fulfilling romantic relationship. Charlie disregards dominant heterosexual

---

29 Although these business owners do not entirely belong to the group of so-called “three-high woman” – high educational level, high income, and high position (Sit 2014), they do have a high financial status, resulting in negative prospects for successfully entering into a romantic relationship and marriage.

30 Fan and Li describe this social phenomenon in rural China: “women may find marriage, and specifically hypergamy [marrying up], an attractive and in some cases the only option for economic betterment” (Fan and Li 2002, 621).
normativity by being openly gay, and she has already bought an apartment in Shanghai with her girlfriend. Although her position is exceptional, all four entrepreneurs in my study complicate the patriarchal hierarchy and male-dominated gender normativity in post-socialist China to some extent.

**Closure**

The grand narratives of China’s rural migrant women workers often portray them as the “victims” of the global capitalism and national economy (Pun 2003, 2004, 2005; SACOM 2010; Sun 2012). Media representations of rural migrant women mainly focus on their emotional suffering, which is one-sided and negative, particularly highlighting the ways in which they are abused and live in an insecure, precarious life in the cities. Moreover, academic scholarship tends to focus on factory work (Pun 2003, 2004, 2005) or domestic work (Sun 2009) as the two main sectors of female migrant labour in post-socialist China. In distinction, this chapter focuses on the Shanghai beauty parlour industry, recognising that it offers financial rewards, upward social mobility, and the potentiality of entrepreneurship to rural migrant women. The chapter analyses the rural migrant women working in the Shanghai beauty parlour...
industry, focusing on how the industry demands affective labour (Hardt and Negri 2004) and articulates this demand differently along the lines of migration, gender, and, especially, seniority. Through examining three types of female beauty workers, apprentices, senior beauticians, and entrepreneurs, this chapter has demonstrated the ways in which the affective labour demanded from the women affects their minds and bodies in specific ways at each level of seniority. Significantly, at all three levels, there are common tensions between the ways the women are disciplined and their aspirations, both professionally and in terms of their personal affective relationships.

Finally, as my research findings have shown, the affective labour that is demanded from the rural migrant women working in the Shanghai beauty industry is highly ambiguous: workers accept painful and intrusive bodily and mental modifications, but also attain a newly found confidence, practical work skills, and a way to delay the demand to get married. It is imperative to recognise, therefore, that the demanded affective labour is both disciplinary and productive, both oppressive and enabling. Moreover, the analysis reveals the reciprocality of affective labour in the beauty industry: workers not only “serve with a smile” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108), but also entice clients to give more than just money in return. This reciprocal
aspect, recognised and exploited in particular by the entrepreneurs, motivates workers to devote extra labour to stimulate continuous consumption from their clients.

At the end of her interview, Xiaorui told me that if she had stayed in her hometown, her parents would have pressured her to get marry even though she is only 17 years old. By choosing to work in the beauty industry, she can not only acquire a skill, but also delay the pressure from her parents, as she does not plan to get married until she is 23 or 24. Xiaorui shared with me that learning a beauty service skill is not her ultimate dream, but to open a business is. Her decision to delay marriage and her ambition to become an entrepreneur motivated her to enter this particular industry. Although she had no idea of when she would pass her apprenticeship, and was presently underpaid, she hoped to be promoted to an official beautician in the near future. Rural migrant women working in the Shanghai beauty parlour industry may see themselves as rising balloons with a potential for upward social mobility, but given the tensions generated by the ambivalence of affective labour, their future remains precarious.
References


Lahad, Kinneret. 2013. “‘Am I Asking for Too Much?’ The Selective Single Woman


“Migrant Population Residing in Shanghai Reaches 8.97.7 Million, Increased 196.6% in 5 Years 上海外来常住人口达 897.7 万，五年间增长 193.6%.” 2011.


Chapter 4:
Migrant Women Walking Down the Cheap Road: Modernization and Being Fashionable in Shanghai

If Modernity and Progress reside in the city,

and if the city monopolizes modern culture,

then the countryside is the city’s emaciated other.

Introduction

Tu (土)? It is just like how other people say: you dress like this, you must have just arrived here [Shanghai] from xiangxia (乡下 “countryside”). To give an impression of tu is that you are coming from xiangxia. It is because people in xiangxia dress more tu. Actually, I do not agree that they are tu. It is just that

---

1 Chapter 4 of the dissertation presents the text published in The Routledge Companion to Modernity, Space and Gender, with minor edits, and the amendments of endnotes converted to footnotes.

2 Yan 2008, 44.
people dress more comfortably there. The fact is that people in the cities do
dress the same.

Elaine, 28-year-old dessert shop waitress, Hubei

Under the Economic Reform and the Open Door Policy announced by Deng Xiaoping
in 1978, China put great effort into modernization, resulting in drastic economic
growth, which has formed the socioeconomic spatial politics between rural and urban
China.³ Through the implementation of the nationwide hukou (户口 “household
registration”) system, China is divided into rural and urban populations⁴ upon which
different social values are imposed: urban citizens become the center of modern
culture and rural people are assigned to the lower class.⁵ The discourse of modernity
in the post-Mao era, as Yan Hairong comments, “produces the countryside both
materially and ideologically as a wasteland stripped of state investment and inhabited
by moribund tradition, with the two dimensions mutually reinforcing each other.”⁶

---
³ Chan 2012; Solinger 1999; Sun 2014.
⁴ Fan 1999.
⁵ Yan 2008.
⁶ Yan 2008, 44.
Addressing rural/urban politics, Yan argues that “the post-Mao culture of modernity is an epistemic violence against the countryside that spectralizes the rural in both material and symbolic practices;” therefore, “young migrant women’s pursuit of a modern subjectivity, situated in the culture of modernity produced by post-Mao development, has to be understood in the context of a reconfigured rural-urban relationship in China’s structured political economy.”\(^7\) Within this discursive context, the “countryside cannot function as the locus of a modern identity for rural young women.”\(^8\) Thus, rural women may grow to despise the countryside’s backwardness, and desire a more modern, fashionable city lifestyle.

This grand narrative of a rural/urban dichotomy, brought about by the post-Mao state, is transforming under the political rule of Xi Jinping, the seventh president of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).\(^9\) Framed as “The Chinese Dream” by Xi’s government, the nation expresses its desire for continuous prosperity that must be executed by developing rural and inland China, in conjunction with the integration of individuals’ aspirations, including all citizens from rural and urban

\(^7\) Yan 2003, 579.
\(^8\) Yan 2008, 44.
\(^9\) Taylor 2015.
regions, to achieve personal wellbeing.\textsuperscript{10} Therefore, the National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020) has been put into effect,\textsuperscript{11} together with the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOHURD),\textsuperscript{12} for urbanization and modernization in rural China.\textsuperscript{13} Nonetheless, Wanning Sun reminds us:

A different China, consisting of myriad marginalized social groups, remains largely hidden. The members of these groups, each with the modest dream of greater equality and less discrimination in their lives, cast a disquieting shadow over the vision of a rejuvenated China with common prosperity that is the stuff of President Xi Jinping’s “China Dream.”\textsuperscript{14}

Focusing on one of these marginalized social groups, this chapter questions how and to what extent gendered “subalterns”\textsuperscript{15}—rural migrant women—gain access to the

\textsuperscript{10} Ahlers 2015.
\textsuperscript{11} Taylor 2015.
\textsuperscript{12} See www.mohurd.gov.cn.
\textsuperscript{13} Mars and Hornsby 2008, 20.
\textsuperscript{14} Sun 2014, 27.
\textsuperscript{15} Sun 2014, 27.
Chinese Dream. To answer this, I look at the lives of rural migrant women as providing a response to the impetus for modernization and the national political goal.

As mentioned by Elaine, one of my research participants from rural China, the way in which people from the countryside dress is seemingly “the same” as the way those the global city (Shanghai)\textsuperscript{16} dress. In this way, the negative attachment of \textit{tu}, literally earth, soil, or clay, which is imposed on rural bodies to signify a sense of backwardness in post-reform China, can be erased through embracing urban fashion. Fashion is a promising site to negotiate the conceptual distinctions between rural and urban, as well as the material culture of modernization. Accordingly, this chapter studies the lives of rural migrant women who, in the process of migration, are negotiating definitions of the “Chinese modern woman.” I focus on the ways these women are interpellated as \textit{potentially} modern and fashionable at a specific site, the so-called “Cheap Road” in Shanghai.

The \textit{Qipulu} Clothing Wholesale Market, known as the Cheap Road by foreigners, is a wholesale district targeting fashion buyers from Shanghai and nearby regions. Having begun as a small shopping street in 1978,\textsuperscript{17} the Cheap Road has

\textsuperscript{16} Farrer and Field 2015.

\textsuperscript{17} Huang 2008, 133.
become a symbol of modernization reflecting the development of the market economy and witnessing the fashion trends of post-reform China. Following Miller’s *A Theory of Shopping*, shopping is read as not merely a form of hedonism or materialism and should not be extrapolated to the negation of consumerism and global capitalism. Rather, Miller argues, “[…] shopping is not just approached as a thing in itself. It is found to be a means to uncover, through the close observation of people’s practices, something about their relationship.” I aim to study fashion shopping and its nuances, because fashion can allow “subjective thoughts and existences to take on greater autonomy.” This chapter suggests that understanding fashion consumption makes a vital contribution to migration studies because it exemplifies the dilemmas of identity and subjectivity as faced by migrant women.

**(Un)fashionability of Rural Migrant Women**

Under the *hukou* system, rural migrant workers are labeled as *nongmingong* (“peasant-worker”), which “refers to a group of industrial and service workers with

---

19 See Pun 2003.
21 Lipovetsky 1994, 10.
rural *hukou*.”

*Nongmingong* work “in urban jobs (and chiefly in towns and cities), yet legally they are not considered urban workers.”

Moreover, the rural labor workforce is gendered; for instance, the young female workers in the factories are known as *dagongmei* (工妹 – literally, “working sister” or “working girl”).

These female workers are marginalized in the cities due to their rural *hukou* and their alleged low *suzhi* (素质 “quality”).

The political significance of geography intricately attaches to rural migrant women’s bodies and affects their lives, yet little has been done to capture the impact of fashion to make sense of how rural migrant women transform themselves to cope with these unequal social circumstances. How does modernization manipulate and shape the bodies and looks of migrant women?

Historically, fashion has been adopted as a tool to shape female subjectivity in China. During the Republican period (1912–49), intellectuals shed light on the definition of the ideal *xin nüxing* (新女性 “new woman”) as part of the political

22 Chan 2010, 663.

23 Chan 2010, 663.


27 In the interval, inspired by modern Western culture, the concepts of gender evolved from the ingrained connection of females to the social relationship within *jia* (“home”), that is *nu* (“daughters”),
agenda for modernization.28 Being able to “speak a little English” and wear “flamboyant Western clothes” became the image of “modern woman.”29 In the Mao era (1949–76), women were advised to wear gender-neutral outfits to mobilize the female population to join the workforce.30 This erasure of femininity came to an end in the post-Mao period because the Reform State encouraged the beauty economy.31 As Xiaoping Li states, “Since then, both the meaning of ‘fashion’ and clothing styles have undergone considerable transformation in accordance with larger societal changes” because “a high fashion modeled on elite fashion in capitalist consumer culture has come to dominate.”32 Hence, urban women have to face the challenge to be fashionable. Matthew Chew’s study of qipao (旗袍) explains, “Fashionable yet not outlandish, sexy yet subdued, qipaos represent one of the solutions in China’s present fashion market that alleviates urban women’s fashion dilemma.”33 While urban

29 Yen 2005, 165.
30 Chen 2001; McWilliams 2013.
31 Yang 2011.
32 Li 1998, 74.
33 Chew 2007, 159–60.
women struggle for a balance between socio-moral pressures and global fashion.\textsuperscript{34} Rural migrant women come to the city and feel the urge to transform themselves by embracing modern femininity.\textsuperscript{35}

As Lisal Rofel proposes, “modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge, forged within uneven dialogues about the place of those who move in and out of categories of otherness.”\textsuperscript{36} Generally, modernity “assumes a noncontinuous break with what it constructs as the irrationalities of tradition.”\textsuperscript{37} In China, rural migrants’ imaginaries of modernity are strongly attached to two contradictory conceptions: \textit{tu} and \textit{xiandai} (现代 – literally, “modern”). As shared by Xiaomei, a 16-year-old salesperson from Jiangxi working in a fashion shop on the Cheap Road, the antonym of \textit{tu} is \textit{xiandai}. She clarified that \textit{xiandai} is about the cities, and the Cheap Road is “modern” because it is a place that sells \textit{shishang} (时尚 “fashion”). Her understanding of \textit{tu} and \textit{xiandai} reveals the intricate relationship between \textit{tu}, \textit{xiandai}, and \textit{shishang}. In this chapter, I use Rofel’s theorization of modernization to study

\textsuperscript{34} Chew 2007, 160.
\textsuperscript{35} Otis 2012.
\textsuperscript{36} Rofel 1999, 3.
\textsuperscript{37} Rofel 1999, 11.
rural migrant women’s perceptions of *tu* and *xiandai* and to explore the ways in which modernization seeps into their lives.

**Methodology**

During fieldwork research conducted between September and December 2014, May and July 2015, and in October 2016, I conducted 88 in-depth interviews with rural migrant women through the “snowball” method, including one shop owner and four salespersons working on the Cheap Road. These research participants, aged 15 to 54 at the time of the interviews, are from different rural regions of China, and mainly work as service workers in Shanghai, in the food and beverage service industry, beauty parlors, and domestic service.

Drawing on my fieldwork data, this chapter first examines the self-narratives of rural migrant women, particularly with regard to their migration experiences, to investigate how they transform themselves in response to imaginaries of the “modern urban woman” in Shanghai. During the in-depth interviews, I asked semi-structured questions, including what the women brought from their hometowns to Shanghai, where they usually shop in the city, and how much they spend on fashion shopping.
Additionally, I asked them how they feel when they go back to their hometown. As Miller argues, “[shopping] is found to be a means to uncover, through the close observation of people’s practices, something about their relationship.” In light of his argument, I examine young migrant women’s new “modern” consumer experiences as revealing of their social relationships with the cityscapes of Shanghai and their hometowns.

Second, the chapter analyzes the ways in which the Cheap Road addresses, through its spatial organization and commercial strategies, rural migrant women’s aspiration to become a “modern woman.” In her study of advertisements in Republican Shanghai, Barbara Mittler, following Mirzoeff’s work, argues that “[v]isual culture used to be seen as a ‘distraction from the serious business of text and history’ while images can in fact also be seen as a locus of cultural and historical change.” This chapter follows Mittler’s study to analyze the advertisements and commercial images found on the Cheap Road in relation to emerging imaginaries of the “modern woman.”

---

The third section of this chapter focuses on the “go-along”\textsuperscript{40} with Elaine. Before the go-along, I interviewed her about her fashion-shopping habits. Then, during the two-hour walk with her on the Cheap Road, she led me along her usual route and I video-recorded her commenting on her shopping experiences. Allowing Elaine to follow her usual path, this method enabled me to observe the “social architecture”\textsuperscript{41} created by her path. After the go-along, I arranged a one-hour interview with her to inquire how she felt about our walk. Last, I analyze Elaine’s fashion style and trace how it has gradually “developed” through shopping, and suggest that, by developing their fashion style through shopping, rural migrant women become “Chinese modern rural women,” who must find a point where their identities as migrant women and Shanghai women meet.

The Materiality of the “Modern”

This section studies the narratives of rural migrant women living between rural China and the city to capture the social relationships forged between the rural female migrant identity and “Chinese modern culture” through fashion shopping.

\textsuperscript{40} Kusenbach 2003.

\textsuperscript{41} Kusenbach 2003, 474.
First, it is significant to point out that, among all personal belongings, clothes are “undesirable things” for rural migrant women to bring with them from their hometowns. When asked what they brought from their home to Shanghai, their answers were enlightening:

I do not take clothes [from her rural home]. [Researcher: Why don’t you bring clothes?] Basically, I purchase clothes here [Shanghai].

Miumiu, 26-year-old senior hairstylist, Anhui

Miumiu is not the only one who does not bring clothes from home. Her junior colleague Vivi shared:

When I first left [home], I brought only a few clothes for temporary use. Then, I bought new clothes. It is heavy to bring clothes. It is troublesome.

Vivi, 18-year-old hairstylist apprentice, Anhui
Although Miumiu and Vivi shared that clothes in Shanghai are more expensive than in their hometowns, they still decided to buy new clothes to avoid the burden of carrying clothes from their home to Shanghai. The reason for this is not only that clothes are “heavy to bring.” Miumiu confided:

I work in the fashion industry as a hairstylist. It is better not to wear or buy clothes from my hometown because those fashion items are more tu. If I bring those clothes from home to Shanghai, I would not wear them. It would be a waste.

Miumiu, 26-year-old senior hairstylist, Anhui

In Miumiu’s case, shopping is done out of need, as clothes from home do not fit well in the urban workplace. Fashion shopping gives these female migrants a chance to effect self-transformations that enhance their work and life experiences in the city.

Second, I explored how rural migrant women’s friends and family in their hometowns commented on their new outfits, prompting this response from Eileen:
They think I am too fashionable. Therefore, every time I go back home, I wear the most *xiuxian* (休闲 “casual”) clothes. Actually, some people are jealous. Although I am not a high-profile person, I want to be more low-profile. My family was poor when I was young […] Now, people can feel that our condition is getting better. However, I do not want to *xuanfu* (炫富 “flaunting one’s wealth”). It is better to be simpler.

Eileen, 31-year-old senior hairstylist, Jiangsu

Eileen joined the beauty service industry 15 years ago, starting as a hairstylist’s apprentice without any income. She now earns RMB 10,000 (about $1,455) per month as a senior hairstylist in a high-class salon. The effort she has made in the service industry has helped her to live a better life; however, she decides not to be “too fashionable” in her hometown. Moreover, Pang Yuan shared:

Pang Yuan: One time when I went back home for Chinese New Year, someone said to me, “This is really ugly! Why do you dress like this?”

Researcher: Is it about the clothes you bought from Shanghai?
Pang Yuan: I think they dress weirdly and very xiangqi (乡气, “rustic”).

However, they think I am very tu because what I wear has a lack of colors.

Research assistant: Is that black, gray, and white?

Pang Yuan: Yes, exactly! “Can you wear more colors [colorful clothes]? You are so young but dress up so tu,” they commented. My response was, ok, fine.

“I am very fashionable here [in Shanghai], all right?” This is what I thought; however, I didn’t say it out loud.

Pang Yuan, 25-year-old hairstylist, Hunan

Because red is the traditional color for New Year celebrations, Pang Yuan’s choice of colors is considered unusual by her rural community.

Both Pang Yuan’s and Eileen’s experiences show the responses of their rural communities, where their rural peers may not appreciate their new fashion style. Thus, these rural migrant women become dislocated in their hometowns, someone to be gazed upon because a sense of “fashion style” is not only subjective, but also closely linked to history and culture. More importantly, tu is not a stable

---

42 Kommonen 2011, 371.

concept—there is a discrepancy between what *tu* is in Shanghai and what *tu* is in the rural communities. Both Pang Yuan and Eileen are aware of a certain level of transformation of their bodily images as they become more fashionable, putting them into a position to negotiate the unstable conception of *tu*. Significantly, rural migrant women have learned to employ the sense of *tu* to measure the suitability of their rural male counterparts. As Pang Yuan confided, she felt that rural men are less attractive than the men in Shanghai. However, it is less likely that Shanghai men will want to marry her because of the embedded social hierarchy; therefore, she remains single. Thus, rural men are the “emaciated other” for rural migrant women.

Third, *tu* is an adjective that is frequently used by my research participants. Etymologically, the character *tu* denotes earth, soil, or clay. But what is *tu* to rural migrant women? When *tu* refers to Nature, why is it used in such a negative way in their conversations? When I asked what *tu* is, I collected, among others, the following answers:

---

44 Gaetano 2015, 102–3.
Perhaps it is a feeling given to others that one has darker skin and dresses less clean. Then it gives an impression of *tu*. It is not wearing very nice clothes and being a bit darker. Then, you are *tu*. Just like this.

Elaine, 28-year-old dessert shop waitress, Hubei

I don’t know how to define *tu*. I think it is to look down upon [a person]. How to describe *tu*? It feels that it means people from the countryside.

Dongmei, 17-year-old salesperson at *Qipulu*, Henan

*Tu* refers to the ways in which one dresses and talks.

Xiaomei, 16-year-old salesperson at *Qipulu*, Jiangxi

By their definitions, *tu* is similar to “hick” in English, signifying a backwards person from the countryside. Elaine’s point about *tu* being about “darker skin” suggests agricultural work exposing one to the sun. When modernization creates imaginaries of the cities as being better than the countryside, *tu* becomes negatively associated with rural bodies. The use of the term is even more problematic when applied to young rural women who have come to work in Shanghai, as they are not peasants but
workers; some of them do not have the agricultural skills to accurately be called
*nongmingong*. As Phoebe, a 21-year-old migrant from Jiangxi shared, she feels
more comfortable to be labeled as “Shanghai *wailai wugong*” (浩海外来务工 –
literally, Shanghai migrant worker).

In her research, Zheng Tiantian documents how female migrant hostesses spend large amounts of time and money on hair products and hairstyling to avoid being associated with their rural backgrounds by their customers. As Zheng writes, “According to the hostesses, dirty or unfashionable hair reveals your rural background. They often critically comment on each other’s hair, saying, ‘That is so hick (*tuqi)*’.” While working in different sectors, my research participants share a similar desire to avoid being connected to their rural backgrounds. For them, being “modern” means to learn how to navigate the city without being looked down upon by the city residents. Fashionable clothes become a resource used by rural migrant women to achieve this. To comprehend the importance of commercial images

---

45 Zhang 2015.
46 Zheng 2003, 163.
47 The Chinese characters *tuqi* are not included in the original text in Zhang’s work.
48 Zheng 2003, 163.
selling rural migrant women imaginaries of the “Chinese modern woman,” the following section will examine the visual culture on the Cheap Road.

**Visualizing the “Modern”**

Drawing on Mittler’s approach to Shanghai’s modern advertisements, this section analyzes the spatial organization and commercial strategies found on the Cheap Road in relation to emerging imaginaries of the “modern Chinese woman.”

_Qipulu_ Clothing Wholesale Market, aka the “Cheap Road,” is located in the former downtown Zhabei district, which emerged as a business district, Jing’an, in 2015. The Cheap Road is situated close to the Bund and to Nanjing East Road, areas known for attracting tourists and business activities. Although the Cheap Road focuses on wholesale business, the fashion shops also sell clothes to retail customers, attracting enormous numbers of tourists and low-income migrants. People like to shop at the Cheap Road not only because goods are sold at wholesale prices, but also because the products are the trendiest. Moreover, transportation to the Cheap Road is extremely convenient, as it is located next to the Tiantong Road Metro Station.

---

Malls have been constructed close to each other along the Cheap Road and there are now 11 main wholesale market malls (see Figure 1). The first time I visited this shopping area, its high density of shops and pedestrians impressed me greatly. Drawing on my observations, I will summarize the three main commercial practices used to advertise imaginaries of the “modern”: first, the displaying of goods; second, the branding of shops; and third, advertising through billboards.

Displaying fashion products is the most common practice that shops use to attract customers. Because the shops are so densely arranged in the malls, this makes the visual experience on the Cheap Road very intense. Each mall consists of a basement and four or five floors with hundreds of small shops on each floor. On the Cheap Road, malls have different opening hours: some are open from 5:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and some from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. During the periods that salespeople are working on their wholesale orders and are busy packing batches of clothes into big plastic bags, the malls become extremely chaotic and uncomfortable for retail shoppers. Fashion items, plastic bags, dust, and dirt are scattered on the floors, which even makes it difficult to walk there (see Figure 2).
Figure 1 “Cheap Road” Street View
Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.

Figure 2 After Rush Hour on the “Cheap Road”
Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.
Retail customers have to tolerate the mess, but it is not solely a bad experience because they are able to touch the goods and feel their texture, and more importantly to judge their quality and size. Due to the dense spatial arrangement, retail customers not only have intimate contact with the commodities, but also with other customers and workers. In this way, the visual experience is not only intense but also compressed into a crowded space where every step creates a new sensual experience. As Mittler writes, “images, more than texts, offer the opportunity for the communication of excitement, mood and imagination.”\textsuperscript{50} The image of the densely displayed goods in the malls is the best advertisement, affording customers direct access to the imaginaries of the fashionable world.

On the Cheap Road, the second strategy of shop-branding is not only closely connected to fashion trends and popular culture, but also to history and politics. Many businesses have adopted Korean characters in their shop’s names in response to the popularity of Korean culture in China.\textsuperscript{51} There is even a Korean-themed shopping mall called S&S Fashion Plaza on the Cheap Road, which was built in 2009. As I observed, the shops on the Cheap Road closely follow trends and sell clothes and

\textsuperscript{50} Mittler 2007, 16; Dyer 1982, 86.

\textsuperscript{51} Hong 2014.
accessories that are prominently featured in popular Korean TV dramas and movies, such as *My Love From the Star* and *Descendants of the Sun.* Significantly, while Korean culture is dominant in this shopping district, Japanese culture is almost absent, although Japanese design plays an important role in the global fashion industry. Out of curiosity, I asked my research participant Elaine about this and she replied:

> After all, Chinese do not like Japanese. On the Cheap Road, I seldom see Japanese products. There are more Korean [products]. They do not say it is Japanese goods. They only say it is *waimao* (外贸 “foreign trade”).

Elaine described how Chinese people “do not like Japanese” due to the two World Wars. Japanese goods have become an exceedingly sensitive issue in the country. To avoid the possibility of being attacked if a boycott of Japanese goods occurs again, shop owners do not use Japanese characters as names for their shops. The absence of

---

52 Jang 2013.
53 Lee and Baek 2016.
54 Slade 2009.
Japanese culture indicates how the Cheap Road is not only a place for wholesale or retail activities, but also a geopolitical place with a particular political consensus.

Figure 3 Large Billboards on the “Cheap Road”
Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.

Third, the huge billboards displayed on the Cheap Road are a key medium for rural migrant women to access imaginaries of the “Chinese modern woman.” The first time I visited the Cheap Road, the large billboards on all sides of the shopping malls caught my attention immediately. The billboards are unlike the advertisements of the
luxurious high-class shopping malls in the Jing’an district. Most of the billboards on the Cheap Road have extremely simple visuals: usually only a female model wearing a fashionable outfit is represented (see Figure 3). These models are mainly white, with only a few Asians, marketing a global concept of fashion. They are dressed colorfully, with stylish attire and modest makeup. More importantly, all of them are posing confidently, and sometimes seductively, giving them a classy, international, and modern charisma (see Figure 4). Their poses holding bags, purses or other fashionable accessories, and doing nothing related to the home, distances them from the domestic sphere. Thus, a sense of modern, globalized femininity and confident, public individuality is constructed (see Figure 5).

The billboards are positioned on top of all the shopping malls on the Cheap Road, arranged neatly next to each other. It is unavoidable for customers to see these images as they walk along the Cheap Road because of their size. The impression is similar to the moment of “subconscious reception,” as Mittler describes people flipping the pages of a magazine and seeing the advertisements without looking closely at the texts.\(^{56}\) This “subconscious reception” is a “visual event”—“the

---

\(^{56}\) Mittler 2007, 16.
interaction of visual sign and viewer.”57 In the case of the billboards, a visual event is created when pedestrians scan the parade of the female models as they walk along the road.

Figure 4 A Billboard Model Poses Seductively on the “Cheap Road”
Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.

This visual event resembles the worshipping of a goddess. Here, I use the analogy of worshipping the goddess as a ritualized event, extending the meaning of

goddess to the “modern” female subjects who are commonly termed nüshen (女神 “goddess”) in Chinese popular culture. Nowadays, women who meet the aesthetic standard of the popular online term baifumei (白富美 – literally, white, rich, and beautiful) are commonly named nüshen. Hence, the female models on these billboards can be seen as the “modern” nüshen that rural women look up to, and from whom they learn how to dress.

Figure 5 Western Models Are Common on the “Cheap Road”
Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.
In short, imaginaries of the “modern” are being visualized on the Cheap Road through three main advertising techniques: a touch of the “modern” is made accessible in which rural migrant female women can feel fashion items before purchasing them; fashion shops reflect the trendiest designs, including a sense of politics and history; and the billboards create a visual event for female customers to worship the “goddesses” of a “modern” heaven. As Mittler writes, “advertising is involved in the ‘manipulation of social values and attitudes,’ and thus may even be said to fulfill ‘the function of art and religion in earlier days!’”58 The advertisements displayed on the Cheap Road enable rural migrant women to understand modern Shanghai culture. As Rofel reminds us, “modernity persists as an imaginary.”59 The Cheap Road provides an ideal shopping environment for lower-class women to feel, touch, and consume a sense of the “modern,” and helps rural migrant women to envision what a “Chinese modern woman” is. However, Mittler warns, “Advertising is a world that is prescriptive and pre-emptive at the same time: it offers impossible dreams and warns of possible realities; it shows and it judges alternatives.”60

59 Rofel 1999, 3.
60 Mittler 2007, 27.
Although the dream of being a modern goddess seems within reach for rural migrant women, the reality is perhaps different due to their marginalized status. In the following section, I will follow one of my research participants to explore the extent to which she feels she can transform herself by shopping on the Cheap Road.

**The Spatiality of Tu and “Modern”**

Elaine, a 28-year-old migrant from Hubei, was a hairstylist when I first met her in 2015. Since then she has changed her jobs and started working in a dessert shop in the hope of one day opening a dessert shop of her own. During our second interview in 2016, she shared with me that she is married and lives together with her husband and her brother and sister-in-law. Previously, she lived with another rural migrant woman, whom I met in 2015. After ten years as a migrant worker in Shanghai, Elaine’s life has drastically changed, but she still meets with her former housemate and shops on the Cheap Road with her regularly. Elaine goes shopping on the Cheap Road at least ten times a year. My analysis incorporates both interviews and the go-along method to document Elaine’s experiences on the Cheap Road, with a one-hour interview before the go-along and another afterward. Allowing Elaine to follow her usual path, this
method enabled me to observe the “social architecture”\textsuperscript{61} created by her path and to explore the ways in which the shopping experiences of a female migrant worker are affected by the structures of the malls.

During our walk, Elaine shared her view that people from the countryside are seemingly the same as Shanghai people. Her thoughts about this sameness are worth a closer reading. When asked about how she feels about the Cheap Road before our go-along, Elaine stated:

\textit{Qipulu} (“The Cheap Road”) is one of the clothing wholesale markets in China. It is different from other shopping malls. It is a district for wholesale in Shanghai. Therefore, people from other regions will come to purchase clothes. Many people go to \textit{Qipulu} to \textit{tao} (淘 – literally, hunt for nice goods). After \textit{tao}, they will polish the clothes and put them in their boutiques. The clothes will then look finer, and can be sold for different prices.

\textsuperscript{61} Kusenbach 2003, 474.
Elaine’s explanation clarifies the nature of the Cheap Road, which targets buyers from retail shops as a wholesale market. Fashionable clothes being sold in Shanghai can be transported to other regions in China through the retail shops’ buyers from different provinces, giving rural consumers a chance to purchase them. This allows rural people to dress the same as established Shanghai residents. As Elaine reminds us, rural people are not tu: they only wear simpler attire. Her claim is a rejection of the urban/rural geopolitics that people from the countryside are more backward.

When asked about the difference between the Cheap Road and other shopping malls, Elaine explained the hidden rules that retail consumers have to follow:

If you purchase clothes in Qipulu (“The Cheap Road”), you cannot return them. It’s unlike any other shopping mall. Sometimes he/she [shopkeeper] may exchange another item with you, but it is for sure he/she will not refund it.

Beside this rule, Elaine shared that shops offer no discounts, but consumers can bargain with the shopkeepers. There are generally no price tags on products, meaning
one has to ask the salesperson or the shop owner for a price. Given these specific circumstances, Elaine has learned to hunt for good quality, low-price products:

By touching the products, you can feel them and judge if you will feel comfortable when you wear them. You cannot feel it if you buy it in Taobao [an online shopping mall]. I do not buy winter clothes in Taobao for sure.

Qipulu is a shishizaizai de defang (实实在在的地方 “real place”).

While online shopping is extremely popular in present day China, Elaine considers the Cheap Road as a “real place” for shopping. She spends more than RMB 1,000 (about $145) per shopping trip on the Cheap Road when she finds nice clothes that she likes and that are of good quality. Earning RMB 5,000 per month, Elaine spends roughly RMB 5,000 (about $730) per year on clothes. This pre-go-along interview helped to understand her shopping habits as well as the hidden rules for retail customers.

During our two-hour go-along, Elaine walked with me on the Cheap Road following the route she walks with her friends, and explained to me how she usually
shops. Following Elaine’s route, we first walked to the Xingwang Clothing Wholesale Market, and she explained that after entering this mall, she and her friend would stay inside, walking to Shanghai Xingwang International Clothing City through the bridge that connects these two malls on the second floor. They have developed a shopping route based on the spatial arrangement of these two malls—each floor consists of different streets, and they walk sequentially from one street to another in order not to miss or repeat any shop. She skips the ground floor because the goods there are the cheapest and are of a similar style and quality to those she can find in her rural hometown. In Elaine’s words, clothes on the ground floor are more tu. Therefore, they start shopping on the first floor, and then move upstairs to the higher floors where the better products can be found. She explained that because she earns more now than ten years ago, she aims to buy products of better quality even though the price is higher. This practice suggests on the one hand the “sameness” she finds on the ground floor, and on the other hand the “otherness” she desires to acquire in relation to the distinction between tu and xiandai. In this sense, walking from the ground floor (the cheapest goods), to the fourth floor (the most expensive products), the spatial
structure is similar to walking from her rural hometown to Shanghai. This shopping experience thus helps Elaine to understand the distance between *tu* and “modern.”

After walking in these two malls, Elaine guided me to the Korean-themed shopping mall. As per her suggestion, we skipped walking through the other shopping malls because they are not part of her usual routine. Then, we went to the last shopping mall, Baima Mansion, which is one of the wholesale shopping malls specifically dedicated to middle-age fashion. There, Elaine wanted to look for clothes for her parents, and eventually we walked to the shop owned by one of my research participants, Qiu Laoban, a 40-year-old migrant woman from Wenzhou. The three of us had a pleasant conversation, which was a new experience for Elaine because she had never chatted with a salesperson or shop owner on the Cheap Road except when she wanted to bargain.

During our post-go-along interview, Elaine shared that her affective experiences as a customer have been modified after working for ten years in Shanghai. Ten years ago, when Elaine first arrived in Shanghai, she found herself *tu:*
I was young at the time. I felt that I was a bit *tu*. I was fresh. I did not have money to buy nice clothes to dress myself up.

As a new migrant worker ten years ago, Elaine found Shanghai a stunning city where people “looked attractive.” She felt the urge to transform herself, especially because she was working in the fashion industry:

When I was promoted as hairstylist, I had to buy new clothes. It is important to be fashionable and modern to gain trust from clients.

In the service sectors, services workers are required to meet fashionable, modern standards; therefore, workers have to undergo a certain level of physical transformation.\(^{62}\) Hence, Elaine confided:

\(^{62}\) Otis 2012.
The Cheap Road is a necessity for the working class. It is because people of low income cannot afford shopping for fashion in Shanghai. But the Cheap Road, where we can find cheap fashion, becomes a necessity.

In her opinion, the Cheap Road provides an alternative for the working class to consume low-price fashion. Because the fashion clothes are “cheap,” the Cheap Road earns its name and becomes a necessity as highlighted by Elaine.

Rural migrant women’s fashion style can be gradually transformed through shopping in Shanghai, yet becoming a “Chinese modern woman” remains challenging. As Elaine shared:

Clothes in Shanghai are comparatively more fashionable and look more stylish. However, the clothes I buy are not so fashionable. I mainly buy clothes that are more xiuxian.

Elaine explained that she likes fashionable clothes, but somehow she cannot handle the kuazhang (夸张 “hyperbole”) style because her personality does not fit well with
it. Elaine explained that when she returns home, she also dresses a bit more casually because it is comfortable. She does not feel she has to restyle herself completely for the rural environment. Yet dressing casually does not mean not being “modern” enough to walk the streets of Shanghai:

At that time I found that Shanghai women looked attractive. The white-collar women were different than other women here. Now, I feel that Shanghai women are more or less the same, because they wear casual and comfortable clothes.

Her observation of how Shanghai women have changed their fashion style during the past ten years is crucial, because she has learned from these city women that wearing casual and comfortable clothes is a possible fashion style. However, the “sameness” she found has not dissolved the social hierarchy between rural and urban people. Elaine said that she is aware of the discrimination against waidiren (外地人 “outsiders” – literally, non-local people) in Shanghai. After working in Shanghai for ten years, Elaine dreams of returning home. She planned to earn more money in
Shanghai in order to save sufficient capital to start a business in her hometown or her husband’s. She also said that living in her hometown is more comfortable because her home is much more spacious than the rented apartment in Shanghai. Her dream echoes the national promotion of the Chinese Dream, in which the state attempts to persuade rural migrants to return home for rural modernization.

**Conclusion**

Drawing on this analysis, I suggest that it is inadequate to analyze rural migrant women through the lens of the “Chinese modern woman” without taking the rural/urban divide and rural political identity into account. Rural migrant women’s dilemmas in fashion are different than those faced by urban women63 because they have to learn to be modern in the city to avoid discrimination, and simultaneously find a sense of comfort when they return home. For Pang Yuan, her relatives applied pressure on what she chose to wear during Chinese New Year, where Eileen had chosen to dress simply in order to keep a low profile in her hometown. In Elaine’s situation, the “casual” fashion style is seemingly a balance she found to navigate both

---

63 Chew 2007.
Shanghai and her hometown. As Bourdieu reminds us, “Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.” In this sense, rural migrant women can transform themselves to be more fashionable, yet they always have to deal with the socio-moral pressures of rural and urban China, which each have different moral and fashion standards. Hence, rural migrant women should not be analyzed as merely “Chinese modern women”; rather, they are “Chinese modern rural migrant women” who must find a point where their identities as migrant women and Shanghai women meet.

Focusing on the commercial strategies on the Cheap Road, I conclude that the imaginaries of the “Chinese modern woman” aimed at rural migrant women are being visualized through three main advertising techniques: a sense of the “modern” is made accessible by allowing rural migrant women to intimately judge the commodities on offer; fashion shops reflect the trendiest fashion culture, but with

---

64 Bourdieu 1984, 6.
political and historical sensitivity; and billboards provide a visual event for female customers to worship “goddesses” from the “modern” heaven.

This chapter has also revealed that *tu* is an unwanted, undesirable element imposed on rural female’s bodies. Yet rural migrant women have themselves learned to employ the sense of *tu* to measure the suitability of their rural male counterparts. As discussed by Cindy Fan, single men and their parents must build large houses to attract single women in rural China. While rural migrant women enjoy a certain degree of self-transformation and autonomy in Shanghai, their own identity also remains deeply entangled with their rural *hukou*. They remain marked as rural migrant women by local people in the cities. In other words, “Chinese modern rural migrant women” can seemingly gain access to the Chinese Dream by embracing a sense of “modern” through fashion shopping on the Cheap Road, yet despite achieving a higher degree of personal wellbeing and a better financial position, they remain constrained by their rural identity, gender, and social hierarchy. Finally, this chapter suggests that future research could involve the perspectives of city dwellers and urban

---

66 Fan 2018.
customers to explore the degree to which rural migrant women manage to counter stereotypes through dressing fashionably.
References


Written by Eun-sook Kim and Won-seok Kim. KBS, Next Entertainment World, Barunson Inc., and Descendants of the Sun SPC. KBS2.


Part III

The Stigma of Singlehood
Chapter 5:
Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage

Co-authored with Esther Peeren

Introduction

Rural-to-urban migrant workers in China, commonly referred to as the ‘floating population’ (liudong renkou), face many challenges at the economic, cultural, social and emotional levels, similar to but also distinct from those faced by international migrants or internal migrants in different countries. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to their exploitation in various sectors of the Chinese labor market (Gaetano and Jacka, 2004; Pun, 2003; Qiu, 2016; Yan, 2008), their subjection to the

---

1 The text in Chapter 5 is that of the article submitted to the European Journal of Cultural Studies, with the modification of the word “article” to “chapter”.
2 We use hanyu pinyin (Chinese Phonetic Alphabet, the official Romanization system used in the PRC) as the transliteration system for Chinese words.
3 For a discussion of the similarities and differences between international and internal migration, see King and Skeldon, 2010.
'household registration' (hukou) system (Fan, 2002, 2003) and their stereotyping and social exclusion by urbanites as ‘low quality’ (suzhidi) (Anagnost, 2004) and ‘uncivilized’ (Otis, 2012). At the same time, it has been pointed out that these workers tend to be aware of the challenges and stigmatization they will face in the cities, and have developed various coping strategies (Guan and Liu, 2013; Pun, 2003). These strategies manifest as forms of agency in the sense of a circumscribed capacity for transformation on the part of subjects constituted through the reiteration of prevailing norms (Butler, 1993: 15). On the basis of fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, this chapter zooms in on a particular gendered form of stigmatization, exploring how Chinese rural-to-urban migrant women deal with the conflicting gender norms regarding singlehood and marriage in their home communities and in Shanghai. Our findings challenge both conceptions of rural-to-urban migrant women as passive victims of discrimination and the idea that they can simply cast off the norms that shaped them once they reach the city.

When they should get married, how they should find an appropriate husband and what a relationship with a boyfriend or a marriage should be like are questions rural-to-urban migrant women struggle with in a different way from their non-migrant
rural and urban counterparts. The prevailing gender norms differ between the rural and the urban, and the exigencies of labor migration make it more difficult to live up to them. While it is increasingly common for young women to leave parents, husbands and children behind in their rural hometown (China Labor Bulletin; Lee, 2016; Li et al., 2012), strict norms concerning parental involvement in the search for a spouse (To, 2015), the cohabitation of married couples and motherhood remain in force (Evans, 2010). The precarious position occupied by rural-to-urban migrant women in cities like Shanghai – where they work long hours and, as a result of being socially ‘distanced’, have few contacts outside of the workplace (Otis, 2012; Wen and Wang, 2009) – also affects how they relate to the norms regarding singlehood and marriage with which they grew up and those they encounter in the city.

In what follows, we look at the way female rural-to-urban migrant workers in Shanghai present and legitimate their relationship status as single, married or having a boyfriend in relation to the normative models of marriage and singlehood in their rural hometowns and the global city of Shanghai. We also examine the forms of agency mobilized to counteract the stigmatization incurred as a result of failures or refusals to enact these normative models. A particular focus concerns the physical
distance labor migration enforces between the rural hometown and the urban work and life space, as well as between migrant women and their husbands, boyfriends or children. We argue that this distance, on the one hand, forces migrant women to negotiate different, often conflicting normative models of singlehood and marriage. On the other hand, this same distance may allow them to avoid or counteract stigmatization by performing different norms in different contexts. Before developing this argument, we outline our methodology, provide an overview of the norms governing singlehood and marriage in rural and urban China, and discuss theories of stigmatization that explain the costs of diverging from the norm and the available strategies for avoiding or lessening these costs.

Methodology

This chapter is a qualitative study drawing on 76 semi-structured interviews with rural-to-urban migrant women aged (at the time) from 15 to 54. The fieldwork was conducted by one of the authors in Shanghai between September and December 2014, and between May and July 2015. The research participants were approached through snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981), extending from the researcher’s
personal contacts and rural-to-urban migrant support organizations.

All participants are rural-to-urban migrant women, but not all of them are low-skilled or low-paid. Most of them (n=66) work in the service industry: in beauty parlors and restaurants or as domestic workers. Their stated monthly income ranges from RMB1,000 to RMB8,000 (=ca. USD150-USD1,200), with apprentices not receiving any income and those working on commission earning a variable amount.4 The women were interviewed in their workplaces, their living spaces, cafés or restaurants. Of the interviews, 70 were audio-recorded with the participants’ permission; in the other 6 cases, detailed interview notes were taken. Participants could choose whether to use their real name or a pseudonym.

Towards the end of the interview, the researcher asked all participants the same question: ‘Are you single?’ (ni shi danshen ma?). She collected 73 answers. Most participants responded immediately that they were single, in a relationship, engaged, married, divorced, remarried or widowed. The researcher followed up by asking the participants to elaborate on their relationship status and on how they felt about it. Some participants, particularly those who had already shared their

4 In the urban context, all rural-to-urban migrant women tend to be seen as lower-class, regardless of their income.
relationship status earlier in the interview, found the question confusing or took it as inquiring whether they felt lonely. He Ayi, a 53-year-old domestic helper from Jiangsu, answered:

My daughter has two children and my son has a boy. There are three children at my home now. [...] Do you think I am lonely?

This response reveals that the term ‘single’ (danshen) can have multiple meanings.

Etymologically, dan means single, only, and mono-; it can also refer to something unique and singular. Shen means body and can refer to both humans and animals. Interpreting danshen as referring to being a singular body and therefore potentially lonely, He Ayi indicates that she is in fact surrounded by her grandchildren.

Whenever a married research participant expressed confusion about the question ‘Are you single’, the researcher and her assistant would explain how, in the context of labor migration, some married women who live and work away from their husband and children may feel like they are single. In response to this, the women either confirmed that they felt like this or clarified that they did not because they lived
with their husband or maintained a good relationship with him at a distance.

The responses to the ‘Are you single?’ question and the follow-up questions about how the migrant women felt about their relationship status frequently reaffirmed rural and urban norms regarding singlehood and married life. Yet the responses also revealed how the migrant women positioned themselves strategically in relation to these norms, especially when unable to accord with them. Before delineating these strategies, which mark a form of agency that may also be viable in other internal or international migration situations characterized by stigma-inducing disjunctions between gender norms in the home and host environment, we provide an overview of the prevailing gender norms with regard to singlehood and marriage in rural and urban China.

**Norms Governing Singlehood and Marriage in Rural and Urban China**

In 1950, the PRC government launched the First Marriage Law, replacing the deep-rooted tradition of polygamous patriarchal marriage with a ‘new democratic’ monogamous marriage system (Stockman, 2000: 102). To prevent child marriage, the legal age requirement for marriage was set at 18 for women and 20 for men. The law
also put an end to arranged marriages and marriages negotiated between kin groups (Croll, 1981: 1). What replaced such marriages was a system of ‘blind dates’ (xiangqin) organized by parents, relatives or friends (Luo and Sun, 2015).

In 1979, the one-child policy was implemented, leading to a profound rearrangement of the family and social structure (Zhang, 2017). In 1980, the Second Marriage Law was introduced, specifying that both parties must be willing to enter a marriage (China Internet Information Center, 2000) and may appeal for divorce. Because women could not seek a divorce within the traditional marriage system, the Second Marriage Law is viewed as liberating Chinese women (Xi, 2011). In an attempt to promote late marriage and childbirth – for population control purposes – the law also raised the legal age requirement to 20 for women and 22 for men (NPC, 2002).

In rural China, although the age requirement remains in force, the tradition of earlier marriage persists (Fan and Li, 2002). Meimei, a 22-year-old migrant from Anhui, shared that she got married in her rural hometown before reaching the legal age:
We did not register for the marriage license because our ages at that time had not reached the legal requirement […] We had arranged a wedding banquet.

So, legally we were counted as *shishi hunyin*.

According to the definition given by The Central People’s Government of the PRC (2005), *shishi hunyin* or *de facto* marriage is an unregistered marriage between a single man and a single woman living together without obtaining an official marriage certificate, with other people thinking they are husband and wife. This form of marriage composes 60-70% of the total number of marriages in rural areas.\(^5\)

In recognition of traditional customs and to ensure the stability of marriages in rural China, the state accepts *de facto* marriages if the couple cohabitates as husband and wife. Still, such marriages are technically illegal (The Supreme People’s Court of the People’s Republic of China, 2016) and people are encouraged to legalize them by

\(^5\) Translated by one of the authors.
obtaining a marriage certificate (The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2005).

Meimei, who at the time of the interview had (unofficially) divorced her husband, expressed regret at marrying a poor man addicted to alcohol and gambling, and joy at being in charge of her own life in Shanghai. However, she had not told her parents about the divorce because she did not want them to worry. This is typical of the new generation of female rural-to-urban migrant workers, described by Gaetano (2004) as caught in-between conceptions of the good daughter and the modern woman. In Chinese society, ‘filial piety’ and the continuation of the family line are especially valued due to the continuing influence of Confucian doctrines (Attané, 2012: 14; Sudhinaraset et al., 2012: 1087), which define marriage as ‘the crucial state of a woman’s life’ (Shih, 2015: 298).

Throughout China, marriage continues to mark women’s entry into adulthood (Ji, 2015), but there are significant differences between rural and urban contexts. As Gaetano explains, ‘the centrality of marriage in rural women’s life course means that parents and daughters alike wish to maintain the young woman’s good reputation’ (2004: 49). This is seen as particularly hard when young women migrate to urban
contexts where ‘liberal attitudes towards premarital sex and cohabitation’ challenge parents’ traditional authority ‘in decisions about marriage and control over their daughters’ sexuality’ (Gaetano, 2004: 49). Consequently, migrant women have to strike a careful balance between the new possibilities open to them in the city and their parents’ as well as their own inculcated adherence to Confucian ideals. While, on the one hand, this puts them in a difficult position, on the other hand, the physical distance between these women and their parents enables them to engage in behaviors that would be condemned in their hometowns, such as pre-marital sex and cohabitation (Sudhinaraset et al., 2012: 1089).

The fact that all but one of the unmarried women interviewed for this study expressed a wish to get married at some point indicates that marriage remains a central life goal for rural-to-urban migrant women. After a certain age, staying single carries a strong social stigma. However, rural women’s migration to Shanghai increases the age after which it is no longer acceptable to be unmarried, giving them more time to pick a partner than they would have had in their hometown (Lu and Wang, 2013: 64).⁶

---

⁶ Lu and Wang (2013) note that the average age of marriage in China went up from 22.79 in 1990 to 24.85 in 2010. For women, it went from 22.02 to 23.89 in this period. In cities, it went up from 23.57
Importantly, the stigma attached to remaining single is not specific to rural areas or to China. The first is clear from the prevalent use of the negative label ‘leftover women’ (shengnü) for educated urbanites with professional jobs who remain unmarried after reaching a certain age, usually around 27, and who, as a result, are considered ‘unfeminine’ (Fincher, 2014: 16; Gaetano, 2014: 124; To, 2013). The second is evident from the persistence of negative labels such as “spinster” and “old maid” in western cultures, even though the age at which they are applied tends to be higher (Budgeon, 2008; Byrne and Carr, 2015; Lahad, 2012).

What is specific to rural China is that the scale of rural-to-urban labor migration has made it common for families to live apart for extended periods. As Xie Ayi, a 38-year-old cleaner from Jiangsu, shared:

Xie Ayi: I followed my husband to work [in Shanghai] after I gave birth. Before I got married, I had never worked outside my hometown. […] I started

---

7 According to the 2010 Chinese National Marriage Survey, 9 out of 10 men believe that women should be married before they are 27 years old. See National Bureau of Statistics, 2012.
working in Shanghai in 2001 when my child was only four months old. My mother-in-law helped by taking care of our child.

[...]

Researcher: Why didn’t you stay in your hometown for your child?

Xie Ayi: My husband works alone in the city. No one cooks and takes care of him. It is not right, is it? It is also not good for a husband and wife to be separated for such a long period of time. Right? So, I let my mother-in-law take care of our child and I came to the city.

Researcher: Didn’t you like him living alone in Shanghai?

Xie Ayi: In Shanghai, he is alone. All women feel insecure when their men work somewhere else alone, right? No matter how good a man he is, there are different types of women out there in the city. Right? This is very realistic.

Xie Ayi’s narrative echoes the imperative that, after marriage, a woman should follow her husband, which is part of Confucian doctrine but also of the globally dominant heteronormative matrix. In Xie Ayi’s case and that of most women migrant workers, this norm clashes with the simultaneously imposed patriarchal one that prefers women
to stay in the home and not work outside it, which is again both Chinese and global (Shih, 2015: 298). In this way, contemporary rural-to-urban migrancy, as a state-supported phenomenon and, for many, an economic necessity, makes it impossible for women to fully adhere to the norms regarding singlehood, marriage and motherhood, resulting in stigmatization. In the next section, we specify how stigmatization works and how it may be countered.

Stigmatization and How to Counter It

The sociologist Erving Goffman ([1963] 1986: n.pag.) defines stigma as ‘the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance.’ Social disqualification occurs because of a perceived deficiency in relation to a norm that is usually accepted both by those who stigmatize and the stigmatized (Goffman, [1963] 1986: 88). Consequently, on the part of the stigmatized, ‘shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual’s perception of one of his [sic] own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing’ (Goffman, [1963] 1986: 7).

---

8 Although Goffman mainly discusses stigma in relation to physical deficiencies, he also cites the example of the stigma attached, in America, to spinsterhood.
In Xie Ayi’s remarks, cited above, a sense of potential stigmatization for not being a proper wife and not having a normative marriage is perceptible; her questioning interjections – ‘Right?’ – invoke and affirm the shared norm, while her references to it not being ‘good’ for a husband and wife to be apart for long, and to the ‘different types of women out there in the city’, mark deficiencies perceived as meriting stigmatization and shame. Although ‘extramarital love’ (hunwaiqing) by husbands is not highly stigmatized in China because of the country’s long history of polygamy and concubines (Farrer and Sun, 2003), wives are conditioned to fear their men’s infidelity and to see ‘women out there’ as a threat in the face of which they should remain constantly vigilant. This vigilance is complicated by the distance between spouses that labor migration enforces, even when they both work in the same city (because of the prevalence of gender-segregated dormitories) (Ma and Cheng, 2005).

Yang and Kleinman (2008), who focus on stigma in Chinese culture, relate it to losing ‘face’ in a social (mianzi) or moral (lian) sense. The first refers to the ‘embodiment of social power in the interpersonal field’, while the second consists of ‘the group-evaluation of a person’s moral reputation, record for fulfilling
social-exchange obligations, and status as a good human being’ (Yang and Kleinman, 2008: 401). For Yang and Kleinman, stigma is primarily a moral experience that, in China, has collective repercussions because individuals are seen as bound to their families and because negativity (bad luck, deviance, even death) is considered highly contagious. Stigmatized individuals and their families are viewed as subjected to a ‘social death’ that finds expression in acts of ‘social distancing and rejection’, and leads to a loss of ‘relationships’ (guanxi), considered as a form of social capital in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense (Yang and Kleinman, 2008: 402, 405).

While Yang and Kleinman use the examples of schizophrenia and AIDS, other studies specifically refer to the stigmatization of rural-to-urban migrants in China. Li et al. (2006: 7-9) show such migrants facing various forms of ‘enacted stigmatization’ (stereotyping, separation, status loss, discrimination, unfair treatment and exclusion), resulting in a ‘felt stigmatization’ that produces high degrees of social isolation and mental health problems. The effects of stigmatization, however, are mitigated by the financial gains rural-to-urban migration offers and by the fact that migrant workers expect to be stigmatized and steel themselves against it (Li et al., 2006: 12).
A similar qualification is proposed in a study by Guan and Liu (2013), who consider the perspectives of both stigmatizing urbanites and stigmatized migrants. Their research in Tianjin shows that rural migrants are indeed stigmatized by the urban population – as having an unattractive physical appearance, constituting a potential peril and coming from discredited places – and feel socially excluded as a result. However, they also develop several coping strategies: blaming stigmatization on external factors (such as the hukou system) rather than internalizing it, reversing stigmatization by characterizing the urban population as deficient (as Xie Ayi does when portraying women in Shanghai as sexual predators) or developing an urban identification.

Significantly, Li et al. (2006: 12) point out that the forms and effects of migrant workers’ stigmatization are mediated by various factors, including gender. For both men and women, ‘migration is associated with increased sexual risk behaviors in urban areas’ (Sudhinaraset, Astone, and Blum, 2012: S68; see also Dai et al., 2015; Pei, 2011). However, rural migrant women face additional stigma. It is not uncommon for migrant women to end up working in the booming sex industry (Liu, 2012; Zheng, 2003) or to become mistresses to married men. The growing awareness
of this within China casts a suspicion of impropriety over all rural migrant women (Gaetano, 2004). Negative categorizations are reinforced in the mass media, with many films and television series blaming young, single migrant women for destabilizing urban families (Sun, 2004; Zurndorfer, 2015).

Significantly, several of our research participants said that they worry about relatives and friends in their rural hometown spreading gossip about their supposed ‘immorality’. Xiuxiu, a 24-year-old married migrant woman, shared that she never wears fashionable clothes from Shanghai in her hometown, as this could cause her to be seen as involved in ‘dirty business’ in the city. Her story underlines that the threat of stigmatization is strong, but also affirms that rural migrants develop coping strategies to avoid it (Guan and Liu, 2013; Li et al., 2006). We found that such strategies often rely on exploiting the distance between the rural hometown and the city, which allows migrant women to create a ‘double biography’ (Goffman, [1963] 1986: 78) and to engage in behavior in Shanghai that counters the ‘traditional moral standards’ of rural China (Farrer and Sun, 2003: 3).

In the remainder of the chapter, we present a qualitative analysis of the interviews conducted with our research participants. We proceed from a discussion of
the tendency for rural-to-urban migrant women to adhere to the prevailing norms (without necessarily agreeing on what these norms entail) to examining what happens when they, deliberately or by necessity, depart from the norm and face stigmatization. Finally, we trace the different forms of agency mobilized to avoid or challenge such stigmatization, highlighting how they rely on either maximizing or minimizing the distance between the rural hometown and the urban workplace, or between husband and wife. On the basis of our analysis, we conclude that the frequently made assertion that their experience as migrants moving between rural and urban China has led to the formulation of ‘new life goals’ (Pei, 2011) only applies in a limited way to these women’s attitudes towards singlehood and marriage.

Adhering to the Norm – But What Norm?

Upon being asked whether they were single, 34 research participants affirmed they were and 39 research participants said they were not. The motivations given by those who identified as ‘single’ ranged from not having a boyfriend (24), not being married (3) or not being serious with a boyfriend (3) to being a widow (1). The motivations given by those who identified as ‘not single’ included being married (27) or remarried
(1), and having a boyfriend (10) or girlfriend (1). Nine women at first did not understand the question (as discussed in the methodology section). Upon being told that some migrant women may consider themselves single because they live away from their husband or boyfriend, three of these women affirmed they were single because they worked in the city alone or were not living together with their husband or boyfriend. Six of the nine noted that they were not single because they had a good relationship with their husband.

What becomes clear from the aggregated answers is that although being ‘single’ is most commonly taken as referring to not being in a relationship at all (in contrast to being ‘leftover’, which refers specifically to being unmarried), it is not a clear-cut category. Consequently, understanding what the migrant women’s answers reveal about their relation to the rural and urban norms and stigma’s associated with singlehood and marriage requires a detailed qualitative analysis.

As noted, all but one of the unmarried research participants expressed a wish to get married at some point. Many research participants indicated an adherence to the norms surrounding when they should marry and how they should find a husband in their rural hometown:
My parents have been helping me to look for a husband. I want to get married as soon as possible. (Miumiu, 26-year-old hair stylist from Anhui)

My parents will not allow me to get married at the age of 20. I think they will approve my marriage when I am 23 to 24. I will listen to their advice and follow their guidance. If they arrange blind dates for me in my hometown, that’s fine by me. (Wu Siqi, 18-year-old beautician’s apprentice from Anhui)

These responses show that fulfilling parents’ expectations and allowing them to play an active part in their search for a husband is of great importance to many of the migrant women. As a result, they tend to adhere to what their rural home community considers the proper age to get married. At the same time, conforming, at a distance, to the norm of participating in the system of ‘blind dates’ also gives migrant women some room for negotiation. Miumiu, for example, indicated that, at 26, she felt pressured by her parents to get married, but also insisted that she would have to have a certain ‘feeling’ for her potential husband. Similarly, 29-year-old bank employee Liu Hua, from Ha’erbin, after noting that she had already been on more than thirty blind
dates, said: ‘if I cannot find the one, I would not marry a random man. I want to be happy after getting married.’ In this way, going on blind dates becomes a win-win strategy, allowing the migrant women to please their parents and to somewhat assuage the stigma of enduring singlehood, while also asserting ‘greater autonomy and control over their immediate futures’ (Gaetano, 2015: 113).

Whereas we found almost universal affirmation of the norm that a woman should marry at some point, conflicting perspectives emerged regarding the point at which a woman would no longer be considered single. Several research participants remarked that only being married or engaged would take them out of that category:

I have a sick boyfriend at home. I think of myself as single. I think only when I get married it will be a real relationship and I will no longer be single. (Helen, 31-year-old chef from Shenyang)

If I have a boyfriend, I am still single. I’m not single if I’m engaged. (Chen Qian, 20-year-old beautician from Anhui)
In contrast, other research participants felt that having a boyfriend was enough to no longer be single:

I have a boyfriend now, how can I be labeled as single? (Yao Ayi, 45-year-old domestic worker from Jilin)

If I was not yet married but had a boyfriend, then I would also not be single. I am more traditional. Some people may not think like this now if they have a boyfriend or girlfriend, they may feel that they are still single. But I don’t.

(Yuki, 32-year-old hairstylist from Fujian)

Yuki’s assertion that it is ‘traditional’ to feel that having a boyfriend makes you no longer single stands in tension with the responses of Helen and Chen Qian, who adhere to the traditional norm of marriage as, in Helen’s words, the only ‘real relationship.’ This shows that different normative models may coexist and be thought of as ‘traditional’, especially at times when significant changes are occurring in the practices subject to the norm. In this case, it may be surmised that, in the context of
rising marriage ages and the exigencies of migrant labor, relationships with boyfriends in the cities have become more prevalent and consequently more likely to be seen as a meaningful relationship status distinct from being single. In the following section, we discuss how rural-to-urban migrant women develop forms of agency that allow them to avoid or counter the stigmatization incurred by transgressing or challenging the prevailing norms of singlehood and marriage in the urban and rural context.

**Stretching the Norm and Countering Stigmatization**

Besides appealing to different, sometimes conflicting ‘traditional’ norms, some migrant women expressed adherence to certain norms, while indicating a willingness to challenge others. Thus, Zhuangzhuang stressed the properness of her relationship with her boyfriend, to whom she was engaged, while also noting: ‘I don’t want to get married at this young age. Marriage means a lot of responsibilities and burdens.’ Since, in rural China, a woman’s responsibilities after marriage generally include bearing children and taking care of the home, getting married would restrict her career opportunities. In addition, Zhuangzhuang expressed a fear of her marriage ending in
divorce, which she felt had become the new normal in China (Lu and Wang, 2013: 64). Although, at the age of 24, the normative expectation in her rural hometown would be for marriage to closely follow engagement, it seems that getting engaged is a way for Zhuangzhuang to postpone the responsibilities and risks associated with marriage, while earning money and developing her professional skills in Shanghai.

The desire to postpone marriage, for various reasons, was not uncommon among our informants:

I’m too busy now. I will get married when I’m 28. (Zoe, 22-year-old property agent from Jiangxi)

I am single now and have no boyfriend. I haven’t fallen in love for three years. I don’t need love. I am too busy with work. Time is too intense now. If I get married, I would like to change jobs, but still work in Shanghai. However, I would see what my husband would want, and I would follow him. (Phoebe, 21-year-old acting restaurant supervisor from Jiangxi)

---

9 Lu and Wang (2013) note that divorce cases in China increased from 800,000 in 1990 to 2.87 million in 2011.
Both Zoe and Phoebe ascribed their desire not to want to fall in love or get married yet to the pressures of their jobs, with Phoebe, who had no boyfriend at the time of the interview, indicating that if she did get married, she would want a different, presumably less stressful job and would abide by her husband’s wishes regarding their future, even if that meant leaving Shanghai. Phoebe’s statement, crucially, is less an expression of an active wish to defy the prevailing marriage norms than a sign of her realization that, at the time of the interview, she simply could not live up to them.

Some women did deliberately transgress rural norms. Nana, a 23-year-old beautician from Sichuan, married a man from Anhui against her parents’ wishes and left her children with her parents-in-law there. Anan, a 26-year-old saleswoman from Fujian, got married much later than her friends from her rural hometown and chose a Shanghai man because ‘Shanghai men treat their women tenderly and are willing to do chores.’ Although Anan’s story suggests that Gaetano (2015: 112) is right to argue that labor migration ‘provides young rural women the chance to imagine different futures that could be achieved through making a better match than would be available in the countryside’, migrant women making unconventional choices do face stigmatization, especially in their rural hometown, and have to find ways to deal with
Thus, when asked whom she had told about her relationship with her boyfriend, Jojo, a 26-year-old hairstylist from Jiangsu, said:

Only my sister knows. I don’t want my parents to worry about this. They will ask a lot of questions.

Meimei, whose situation we discussed earlier, adopted a similar strategy of withholding information with regard to her divorce:

Since I was 17 years old, I have been working in the city. My parents do not ask me about my situation and even if they did ask, I would not tell them because I think I am a grown-up now.


Significantly, Meimei’s remark that her parents do not ask her about her life in
Shanghai suggests that audiences may also segregate themselves by refraining from seeking out information that could give cause for stigmatization (especially since, in the Chinese context, stigma extends to the entire family).

Goffman repeatedly stresses that moving away from one’s community facilitates audience segregation and makes possible the creation of a ‘double biography’: one for those who knew you where you lived before and one for those in the new environment ([1963] 1986: 78). The resulting ‘biographical discontinuity’ may be ‘bridged’ in various ways, including by gossip traveling between the two groups (Goffman, [1963] 1986: 78). In the case of Chinese rural-to-urban migrants, there is rarely a complete separation between the two contexts as people from the same hometown tend to cluster together in the cities. When information or gossip travels from the city to the rural hometown, this may interfere with the migrant’s attempt to ‘preserv[e] a good memory of himself [sic] among those with whom he no longer lives’ (Goffman, [1963] 1986: 78). Thus, Meimei anticipated that if news of her divorce were to reach her hometown, this would result in anxiety on the part of her parents and negative judgment on the part of the wider community.

In contrast to the women who exploit the distance between their rural and
urban homes to avoid stigmatization, married migrant women living apart from their husbands tend to counter potential stigmatization of their unconventional – if increasingly common – situation by minimizing the effect of physical distance on their relationship. Thus, several of our research participants took regular communication by phone as certifying that their marriage was being maintained in a proper manner and that the singlehood label therefore did not apply in any way:

Single? No, I’m not single. I have a husband! He sends me messages every day. He likes to ask if I’m heading to work, whether I have eaten lunch or not, and whether I’m home already or not. We stay in touch every day. (Sanyi, 32-year-old apprentice masseuse from Anhui)

Do I feel I am single? No, no. I have very good relationship with my husband. I love him very much. He loves me very much, too. I was separated from him for one year, which was for us the longest period of separation due to migrant work. However, I felt that we were still not too distant from each other. I felt that we were still together, as we talked on the phone every day. (Wang Ayi,
Wang Ayi added that she bought a mobile phone for her husband to ensure that they could stay in touch on an everyday basis. Less contact would presumably signal that the marriage was no longer being taken seriously and that physical distance had grown into emotional distance.

Besides using new technologies to bridge the distance, another strategy to certify the continued propriety of the marriage was to emphasize the existence of a relationship of trust between the spouses. Thus, Hu Ayi, a 46-year-old domestic worker from Sichuan living away from her husband because of the requirements of their jobs, noted that ‘it is difficult for us not to be apart’, yet was at pains to stress that they have a marriage certificate and that ‘our relationship is good and we trust each other.’ The transgression of the norm that spouses should live together is modulated by affirming the otherwise ‘proper’ nature of the marriage.

Research participants with husbands living elsewhere in Shanghai also used claims of regular contact to deny that they felt single or lonely and to certify that their marriage remained in good shape:
Single? No, I don’t feel so. My husband is here. We have dinner together every day. (Xiang Ayi, 53-year-old domestic worker from Jiangsu)

I feel that [my husband] is always with me, so I don’t feel I am single […] He is in Shanghai. We can see each other once a week. If he worked in another region and we didn’t see each other, I would feel lonely. (Guiqiao Ayi, 40-year-old domestic worker apprentice from Shanxi)

These women minimize the distance between themselves and their husbands in order to counter the stigma attached to their non-normative living situation, which results from their precarious position on the Chinese labor market. Declarations like ‘he sends me messages every day’, ‘we talked on the phone every day’ and ‘I call my husband every day’, whether true or conceived as socially desirable responses, help married migrant women perform a bridging of the physical distance to their husbands in order to maintain the status of a ‘good wife’ in their own eyes and those of others, including the researcher.

Thus, our research shows that while migrant women living outside the
prevailing norms of singlehood or marriage engage in various strategies that allow them to avoid or lessen stigmatization, they do not tend to actively contest or reject the norms. Only one research participant took an overtly non-normative stance in relation to singlehood and marriage. Anni, a 22-year-old bartender from Hunan, shared that she wished to remain single forever:

I only need to have a career, a job, my own car and a house. I don’t need a boyfriend, husband or lover. Love is too hurtful. I am fine being alone and I can take care of my parents.

According to Anni, her job was not what was keeping her from following the norms, but the reason she did not want to follow them. Still, her remark about taking care of her parents shows that it remained important to her to adhere to the norm of filial piety. She also indicated that she thought of her parents in everything she did and would not go against their wish for her to marry someone from her hometown. By April 2016, 2 years after the first interview, Anni had gotten engaged, resigned from the bar, returned to her hometown and started working for a finance company there.
This suggests that even those few rural-to-urban migrant women who appear to privilege their career aspirations and (financial) independence over getting married may still choose to adhere to the marriage norm at some point.

**Conclusion**

Our research has shown that rural-to-urban migrant women in Shanghai frequently transgress the conflicting norms of singlehood and marriage prevailing in rural and urban China, but that they do so mainly out of economic or emotional necessity rather than out of an active desire to change the norms. We found some evidence that ‘migrant women have found the space, time, and means to postpone marriage and experiment with a burgeoning modern dating culture’ (Gaetano, 2015: 112), but even those women who engaged in marriage postponement and experimentation maintained a strong desire to get married at some point to someone their parents would approve of. Similarly, although the fact that, according to some women, a steady relationship with a boyfriend would suffice to no longer count as single, and that this view was by some considered to be ‘traditional’, suggests that the borders of singlehood are shifting, particularly in cities like Shanghai, marriage remains the
normative ideal that migrant women strive for. In the end, the evidence of migrant women formulating genuinely ‘new life goals’ (Pei, 2011) with respect to singlehood and marriage remains restricted to a desire on the part of some of them for a longer period of singlehood, which allows them to pursue certain career goals and to be more selective when it comes to choosing a spouse.

One reason for this may be that unconventional, non-normative relationships, even if induced by economic necessity, remain subject to ‘enacted’ and ‘felt stigmatization’ (Li et al., 2006). To avoid or counteract this stigmatization, migrant women negotiate the conflicting norms of the urban context and their rural hometown in intricate and deliberate ways. Our findings show that single women mainly rely on maximizing the distance between the rural hometown and the urban workplace through audience separation and the creation of a double biography, while married women living apart from their husbands tend to minimize this distance through assertions of regular contact and mutual trust. Future research will have to determine whether these coping strategies, which constitute forms of agency, are or could be used in other contexts of internal and international migration where differences in (gender) norms between home and host environments lead to stigmatization.
References


Li N et al. (2012) From rural poverty to urban deprivation? The plight of Chinese rural-urban migrants through the lens of *Last Train Home. East Asia* 29: 173-86.


The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China (2005) Shenme shi shishi hunyin? [What is de facto marriage?] Available at:

The Supreme People’s Court of the People’s Republic of China (2016) Zenme rending shi shishi hunyin? [How to define de facto marriage?] Available at:


To S (2015) “My mother wants me to jiaru-haomen (marry into a rich and powerful family)!”: Exploring the pathways to “altruistic individualism” in Chinese professional women’s filial strategies of marital choice. SAGE Open (Jan.-Mar.): 1-11.


Conclusion:

Past, Present, and Future(s)

Reaching the end of this dissertation, I wish to take the opportunity to revisit my research and my journeys and fieldwork in Shanghai, both in personal and academic terms. Following a reflection on the past, I will reflect on the present status of my chapters and the arguments developed therein, as well as rethinking my research position in the historical present – as a witness to an economic transition, led by Xi Jinping, in which the service sectors are taken as a tool to counter the problems of the economic slowdown in China after decades of industrialization. Then, I will engage with potential future research, relating it back to the three issues I have focused on: home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood.

Past: Outsider and Researcher

In 2014, I arrived in Shanghai to start my fieldwork. At that time, I had a limited network in Shanghai, so I contacted my Shanghainese friend Kikker and asked her if she knew of any rural migrant women willing to be my research participants. To my
surprise, she responded that there were no migrant workers in Shanghai. After calmly
telling her that there were in fact 4.1 million migrant women in Shanghai (see Chen
2011), and asking her how she could possibly say there were none, she explained:

There are *waidiren* (外地人 — literally, outsider) but you don’t see them. If
you want to find informants, you can find them in restaurants or hair salons.

Migrant women work in these kinds of places. Also, I have to tell you that I
don’t like them. They are noisy, dirty, and destroy the order here in Shanghai.

Her narrative has become imprinted in my head because it touched on two key
concerns of mine about this research project.

First, I was bewildered that my friend, a well-educated Shanghai woman, so
bluntly confided her feelings about rural-urban migrants, and had chosen to remain
blind to the omnipresence of rural-urban migrant service workers. Even though she
must have had to engage with these service workers whenever she consumed services,
these workers were seemingly “invisible” to her because they were “outsiders,”
perceived as noisy and dirty, who, to her, disturbed the order of Shanghai as she knew
it. Her words, as well as her presence during my fieldwork in Shanghai, constantly reminded me of the problematic of the strong rural/urban divide in China and the associated discourse of suzidi (素质低 – literally, “low quality”) people, which has been analyzed and theorized by Ana Anagnost (2004). Kikker’s remarks suggest that, among those with an urban hukou, it is regarded as acceptable to look down upon rural-urban migrants, an attitude that I wanted to challenge through my research. My apprehensions about how a group of people can be perceived as “invisible,” or be put in a blind spot as “the avisual” (Peeren 2014, 36-37) by local Shanghai people led me to want to assert their presence and position them as living meaningful lives in Shanghai, despite their visibility being obscured from the gaze of city people by a national policy reinforcing a rigid sense of social hierarchy and encouraging injustice.

The second concern Kikker’s remark raised for me is that I am also an “outsider” to the rural migrant workforce in Shanghai; I am of a different “class” and laojia (老家 – literally, hometown) than my research participants because I am a Hong Kong citizen. The discourse of outsider/insider for qualitative researchers has drawn intense discussion in academia (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Spradley [1980] 2016; Thomas et al., 2000; see also Kam 2013). As Dwyer and Buckle comment, the
benefit of “being a member of the group” or of being known as an insider is that “one’s membership automatically provides a level of trust in your participants that would likely not have been present otherwise. One has a starting point (the commonality) that affords access into groups that might otherwise be closed to ‘outsiders’” (2009, 58). The challenge of being an outsider to the research group is that participants may be less willing to share or disclose their experiences (see Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Recalling my experiences of when I first began doing interviews, I found it difficult to find connections with the research participants, let alone to build trust between myself as a researcher and those whose experiences I wanted to research. Seeing the challenges I faced, I started to search for and then watched the most popular Chinese and Korean TV dramas,¹ movies, music, and entertainment shows among the age groups of the migrant women I was approaching. Additionally, I learned Mandarin slang and some Shanghai dialect, and explored the popular terminologies used on the Internet and in people’s everyday lives in Shanghai. Thus equipped, I started to use my knowledge of popular culture to bridge the gap between

---

¹ As told to me by many of my research participants, they like watching Korean dramas, with Chinese subtitles, during their leisure time. Therefore, I watched not only Chinese television shows but also Korean ones.
my research participants and myself. In this way, I transformed myself from a total
outsider to the rural migrant community in Shanghai into someone able to share some
cultural experiences with my participants. I also befriended some of my participants
and made my return trips more fruitful with their help. All this enabled me to obtain
reliable accounts of the day-to-day lives of the women service workers, and the
challenges and positive moments they experience in Shanghai, which, in this study, I
mobilize to counter perceptions like Kikker’s.

**Now: Five Chapters and Multiple Lives**

My aim was not only to recognize the multiplicity and complexity of rural migrant
women’s lives in Shanghai, but also to defy generalizations about their victimhood or
celebrations of their agency. Building on a growing body of literature that has
captured the everyday experiences of service workers in China (Liao 2016; Otis 2003,
2008, 2012; Shen 2015; Sun 2008, 2009, 2010; Yan 2008; Zheng 2003, 2009), the
five chapters of this study comprehend the everyday experiences of rural migrant
women in the service sector in Shanghai through the lens of three issues: the sense of
home, the beauty economy, and the stigma of singlehood. My analysis shows that
some of the female migrant service workers interviewed find ways to cope with the challenges thrown up by their precarious everyday lives: struggles with their urban employers and customers in the workplace, difficulties securing jobs and/or places to live in the city, and the temptation to leave Shanghai to work in another city or to return home, among others.

My analysis reveals the multiple lives rural migrant women in the service sector live and how these lives nuance the grand state-supported narratives of industrialization, modernization, and urbanization in post-reform China. The everyday private lives of these women, who are more than just workers, deserve the kind of detailed analysis that is often absent from existing academic scholarship on their plight. Although there is a wealth of literature focusing on the sexual attitudes and sexual behavior of rural-urban migrants, as well as on the sex workers among them (Sudhinaraset, et al. 2012; Zheng 2009), other aspects of their everyday lives are apparently insufficiently juicy to capture the attention of academics or the media spotlight. Probing both the private lives and work-lives of Shanghai female migrant service workers, this study has documented their narratives and statements, as well as the cultural transformations they have experienced and are experiencing, and the
strategic practices they have developed to deal with these transformations in order to provide a counterweight to the often singularly negative narratives told about these women’s lives. As such, through my analysis, I contest generalizations by which rural migrant women are perceived to be victims of China’s urban development without any agency.

Future(s)

With regard to all three of the issues addressed in this study, future research building on this study is not only possible but necessary. For the discussion of labor migration and its effect on migrants’ sense of home, my research suggests that future scholarship should pay more attention to migrants’ continuing, complex relationship with their rural hometown (or country of origin in case of international labor migration). Because the migrants I have discussed tend to remain connected to their hometowns and may travel back and forth frequently between it and the city, their continuing attachment to the hometown as “home” may affect the extent to which they feel at home in the urban environment. Moreover, as my study shows, the rural place of origin and the city are governed by different social and cultural norms, including
gender norms, with different behaviors attracting stigmatization. Rural migrant women are not unaware of this, but, in many cases, develop sophisticated coping strategies to negotiate these different norms in order to avoid or lessen the degree of stigmatization. This is another reason why it is important to pay heed to the “in-between-ness” of migrants and the different social and cultural worlds they live in, almost simultaneously. Doing this allows us to capture aspects of migrants’ experience that may be missed in studies that exclusively focus on the relationship they develop to the cities they move to.

With regard to the beauty economy and its enforcement of a particular notion of female beauty, I want to suggest that it would be productive to revisit the valuation of youth. As my research participant Jojo, a 28-year-old hairstylist from Yangzhou, reminded me:

To work in this industry, one cannot be too old. People join the industry when they are 15 to 20 years old because it takes a long time for one to learn the techniques. If your age is too old, your capability to adapt to change and accept new techniques is lower. Also, your physical ability is worse than that
of the young ones.

Beauty service workers may also lose their jobs because they grow older and can no longer meet the beauty standards imposed by their employers and customers. Aging, as such, is a grave concern among migrant women working in the service sector, and especially the beauty industry. Furthermore, as explained by Otis, business owners can maintain a low-wage system to sustain their business by hiring young rural women with few working skills and a low education level and then firing them when they become more expensive (Otis 2012). This issue pervades the service sector as a whole, because youth and attractiveness have become an integral part of the services that are consumed, exploited by both the service industry and the customers (see Otis 2012). What happens to older migrant workers as a consequence of this – do they move to other sectors or return to their rural hometowns? – is an issue worth exploring in greater detail.

Last but not the least, in relation to the stigma of singlehood, the overwhelming academic and media attention for the discourse of “leftover women” has largely overshadowed the cultural and political problems faced in contemporary
China by other groups of singles and people in relationships considered unconventional. In this way, both the media and academics seem to be playing into the government’s hands, as “leftover women” is a term promoted by the government to deal with the fact that high-educated, high-income, high-professional women are less willing to get married, which is seen as undesirable (Fincher 2014; To 2013; see also Gaetano 2015). As this study has shown, rural-urban migrant women fall outside the category of “leftover women” because they are not professional educated women. This, however, does not mean that their remaining single as they get older is acceptable; like “leftover women,” they face stigmatization, especially in their rural hometowns, and have to devise ways of dealing with this. More research is needed, therefore, into the different forms the stigma of singlehood takes for different groups of women, and into the strategies these women can mobilize to counter this stigma.

Moreover, at a historical point when the government of the PRC has revised the One-Child Policy to the Two-Child Policy, I propose that it is not only the problematic of “leftover women” or female singlehood more generally that we should be concerned with, but also, for example, the way migrant women who are married may be stigmatized for living apart from their husbands and/or children, and at the
same time be pressured by their families to reproduce a second child. In addition, it is also relevant to look at singlehood among men, which is increasingly common, especially in rural areas, as a consequence of the demographic imbalance between men and women induced by the one-child policy and the preference for male children. More urgently, at a time that homosexuals and other sexual minorities are being suppressed by the Chinese government, I suggest broadening the investigation of stigmatization by focusing not just on singlehood and certain forms of married life, but also on other relationship forms, always taking into account that such stigmatization, as well as the strategies developed to cope with and challenge it, may take different forms depending on, for example, the context (urban or rural) or one’s class, profession or education level.

Finally, I propose that future research on rural-urban migrant women should contemplate not only focusing on the poorest, unskilled group, but also including the voices of the wealthier and more skilled. It is important to acknowledge various forms of diversity, including economic diversity, within migrant communities. I maintain that the more different experiences and voices research into migration and its effects can capture and take into account, the more insights it will produce.
I want to close with the words of Pang Yuan, a 25-year-old hairstylist from Hunan, which I also quoted in the introduction and in Chapter 3:

“I believe we can change our fate.”

These words, together with the narratives of all the migrant women interviewed for this study, remind me to remain hopeful and optimistic, even in the face of profound challenges, and to focus not only on the precarity of the lives of rural-urban migrant women working in the service sector in Shanghai, but also on their multiplicity and potentiality.
References


Kam, Lucetta Yip Lo. 2013. Shanghai Lolas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.


---. 2010. “Sex, City, and the Maid: Between Socialist Fantasies and Neoliberal


References (Full List)


Byrne, Anne, and Deborah Carr. 2005. “Caught in the Cultural Lag: The Stigma of Singlehood.” *Psychological Inquiry* 16 (2-3): 84-141. ISSN: 1047840X.


---. 2012b. “Migration and Development in China: Trends, Geography and Current
Issues.” *Migration and Development* 1 (2): 187-205. doi:

Chan, Kam Wing, and Will Buckingham. 2008. “Is China Abolishing the *Hukou*
System?” *The China Quarterly* 195: 582-606. doi:
10.1017/S0305741008000787.

the Experience of Migrant Mothers in Shanghai.” *Journal of the Society for

Chen, Shibiao. 2011. “Shanghai *wailai changzhu renkou da 897.7 wan, wunianjian
zengzhang 193.6.” [“Migrant Population Residing in Shanghai Reaches 8.977
Million, Increased 193.6% in 5 Years.”]. *Eastday.com*. September 26.

Chen, Tina Mai. 2001. “Dressing for the Party: Clothing, Citizenship, and
Gender-formation in Mao’s China.” *Fashion Theory* 5 (2): 143–72. doi:
10.2752/136270401779108590.

Cheng, Zhiming, and Haining Wang. 2013. “Do Neighborhoods have Effects on
Wages? A Study of Migrant Workers in Urban China.” *Habitat International*

Cheung, Adam Ka-lkok, and Lake Lui. 2017. “Hiring Domestic Help in Hong Kong:
The Role of Gender Attitude and Wives’ Income.” *Journal of Family Issues* 38


Press.


Written by Eun-sook Kim and Won-seok Kim. KBS, Next Entertainment World, Barunson Inc., and Descendants of the Sun SPC. KBS2.


“Eleven Regions Announced the Minimum Wage in 2015: Shanghai Contains the


---. 2010. “Uncertainty and the Problem of Value: Consumers, Culture and Inequality


Huang, Youqin. 2001. “Gender, Hukou, and the Occupational Attainment of Female


---. 2013. *Shanghai Lolas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.


Li, Laifang, and Baosen Liu. 2014. “China Focus: Many Migrants Unpersuaded by
Long-awaited Hukou Reform.” *Xinhuanet*. August 1.


---. 2001. “Belongings: Place, Space and Identity in a Mediated World.” European


Duke University Press.


Song, Yang. 2016. “Hukou-Based Labor Market Discrimination and Ownership


“Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security.” September 3.

---. 2017. “China has 282m Rural Migrant Workers by End of 2016.” March 15.

The Supreme People’s Court of the People’s Republic of China. 2016. “Zenme ren ding shi shishi hunyin?” [How to Define De Facto Marriage?]. The Supreme People’s Court of the People’s Republic of China, May 11.
http://www.chinacourt.org/article/detail/2016/05/id/1858204.shtml.


Tse, Chun Wing. 2016. “Urban Residents’ Prejudice and Integration of Rural Migrants


Summary:

Female Migrant Workers Navigating the Service Economy in Shanghai: Home, Beauty, and the Stigma of Singlehood

Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, this qualitative research project, by combining multiple ethnographic methodologies, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, home-visiting and the Go-Along method (Kusenbach 2003), focuses on the everyday experiences of rural-to-urban migrant women working in the Shanghai service sector, in particular the ways they live, labor, and love. I ask the following questions: How should we, as cultural researchers, scrutinize the everyday experiences of these women? What do their experiences and feelings about their work and private lives reveal about migrant labor and gender in 21st century post-socialist China? What are the cultural, social, and economic implications of these women’s decision to become migrant service workers?

Many scholars have drawn attention to the gendered dimension of the rural migrant workforce because industrialization in post-reform China primarily demands
female labor. This is because female workers are believed to be more obedient and less rebellious than their male counterparts, and easier to govern in the urban workplace. As described by Pun Ngai (2005), female migrant workers face “triple oppression” by the state, global capitalism, and patriarchy. A wealth of literature has framed rural migrant women, particularly factory girls, as the “victims” of the state-planned market economy (Lee 1998; Pun 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005; SACOM 2010). In this literature, service sector workers do not feature much, as the focus is on factory work. My study shifts the focus to the service sector and the specific problems, but also opportunities, the rural-urban migrant women working in this sector encounter.

Scattered around Shanghai, service workers live and work in different work environments under various conditions, and are subject to diverse employment policies and regulations, including different requirements in terms of qualifications, skills and attitudes, working hours and rosters, etc. Whereas the state media, social media, and scholars focus mainly on factory workers in relation to China’s rapid urbanization, there are some studies that seek to capture the experiences of service workers (Liao 2016; Otis 2003, 2008, 2012; Shen 2015; Sun 2008, 2009, 2010; Yan

My study adds to this work by mobilizing the concepts of aesthetic labor (Yang 2011; see also Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003), emotional labor (Hochschild 1979), and affective labor (Hardt 1999; Hardt & Negri 2004) to capture the complex ways in which Shanghai service work shapes female service workers’ bodies, minds, and everyday experiences. Thus, I focus on the physical, mental, and economic transformations they undergo (as a result of their circumstances) and achieve (as a result of the agency they have) as a result of their move to the city. At the same time, I emphasize that these women live, labor, and love in Shanghai without neglecting or forgetting their rural migrant identity; from my research it becomes clear that these women do not leave their hometowns behind altogether, but remain precariously yet also strategically situated in-between rural and urban China.

To answer the main question of how, in the wake of the national economic transition from manufacturing industries to a service economy, rural-urban migrant workers in the service sector live, labor, and love in Shanghai, I focus on three specific issues: the notion of home, the economy of beauty, and the stigma of singlehood. First, I explore how, in a social context in which rural migrant women are
discursively categorized by urbanites as the “low-quality” (Anagnost 2004) and “suspicious” other (Sun 2009), these women nevertheless construct a sense of “home” in Shanghai. Second, I examine how rural-urban migrant women in the beauty industry, by engaging in a form of affective labor and by also participating as consumers in the beauty industry, come to transform their bodies and sense of self. Third, with early marriage and shishi hunyin (事實婚姻 – literally, de facto marriage) still prevalent in rural China, I ask how rural-urban migrant women present and legitimate their relationship status as single, married or having a boyfriend in relation to conflicting normative models of singlehood and marriage in their rural communities and Shanghai.

Together, the three sections show that rural migrant women in Shanghai do not leave the rural behind, but are in an in-between position, leading to a constant process of negotiation that renders their identity not fixed but flexible and that, as a result, creates possibility for strategic maneuvering, for example with regard to norms about singlehood and marriage. Additionally, all three sections highlight that not all rural-urban migrant women are in the same economic position. This enables an analysis of how different economic positions shape the affective lives of these women,
as well as a recognition that rural-urban migrant women in very different financial situations may still face the same problems, most notably discrimination by urbanites.

Building on Ang’s work (2015) on the conceptions of migration and home, Chapter 1 interrogates the nexus of tensions within rural-urban migrant women’s daily home-making practices and home-sensing experiences in relation to Chinese patriarchal Confucian culture and the hukou (“household registration”) system. I explore the everyday experiences of migrant women working in the food and beverage service industry in terms of how they live and make their home in Shanghai, socially, practically, and emotionally. Drawing on my empirical data, I first summarize how rural migrant women define home. Three different tropes of “home” recur: the familial home, the hometown, and the affective sense of feeling at home. Then, I explore rural migrant women’s home-making practices in their work and living places. My analysis discloses that, while it is possible for these women to feel a sense of “home,” their sense of “home” remains precarious because of the complex power relations they are entangled in as a result of the hukou system and Chinese patriarchal culture. Ultimately, this chapter aims to broaden the sense of “home” beyond its attachment to a sense of “belonging,” because there are affective
experiences that may also create a sense of “home” in the process of migration.

Chapter 2, co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet, critically examines the concept of “home” in relation to rural migrant women working as domestic workers in Shanghai, who are regarded as low-trust employees by their urban employers. As China’s rural-to-urban migration has increased rapidly in recent decades, many young men and women are moving to the cities aspiring to better jobs with higher salaries. Some of the women opt for the job of *ayi* (阿姨 – literally, auntie), the common term used for a domestic worker (Yan 2008). Whether married or not, the *ayi* usually lives a single life in the city. *Ayis* in Shanghai are what we call “working-single,” a term that refers to their single status in the context of the family, as well as to their loneliness in the isolated workplace. This single status contributes to the precarity and fragility of the trust-relationship with the employers (Hochschild 2002). *Ayis* have to deal with the problem of mistrust by their employers, who might perceive them as thieves or sexual seducers (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). At the same time, *Ayis* are expected to produce affective labor (Yan 2008) within the spatial isolation of a domestic workplace that renders them precarious and puts them at risk of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence. Our analysis shows that *ayis* are sentient
wageworkers that employ strategies to build trust in a low-trust familial workplace.

Three main strategies for negotiating trust are identified: honesty, professionalism, and care.

Chapter 3 studies rural migrant women working in the Shanghai beauty parlor industry, focusing on how this industry emphasizes affective labor and articulates it along lines of migration, gender, and seniority. The analysis looks at three types of female beauty workers: apprentices, senior beauticians, and entrepreneurs. Bringing together Hardt and Negri’s (2004) theorization of affective labor and Yang Jie’s (2011) notion of aesthetic labor, this chapter investigates how the affective and aesthetic labor demanded from these migrant women affects their minds and bodies, and their position and value in the marriage market. On the basis of fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, the chapter begins by exploring the ways in which the demand of Shanghai beauty parlor industry for affective labor impacts the ability of rural migrant women to enter into other forms of affective relationships. It goes on to argue that affective labor in this industry is not wholly negative, but modifies bodies and minds in ways that can be both oppressive and enabling, depending on, among other things, the beauty worker’s level of seniority. Finally, the chapter proposes that, in the beauty
parlor industry, there is a reciprocality with affective labor that includes the workers as well as the clients.

Chapter 4 examines how new definitions of the “Chinese modern woman” affect the lives of rural-urban migrant women, with a focus on the way these women are interpellated as modern and fashionable at the Qipulu Clothing Wholesale Market in Shanghai, also known as the “Cheap Road.” It analyzes how the spatial organization and commercial strategies of the Cheap Road allow rural migrant women a sense of being “modern,” and explores narratives from these migrants, focusing on their consumer experience, to explore how they transform themselves in response to the globalizing cityscape. This chapter suggests that the Cheap Road is organized spatially and commercially to sell rural women access to images of the “modern” and to the Chinese Dream. I argue that, by developing their fashion style through shopping, these women become “Chinese modern rural migrant women” capable of finding a point where their identities as migrant women and Shanghai women meet.

Chapter 5, co-authored with Esther Peeren, explores how Chinese rural-to-urban migrant women cope with the stigmatization they face as a result of conflicting gender norms regarding singlehood and marriage in their home
communities and in Shanghai. We focus on how migrant women legitimate their relationship status as single, married, or having a boyfriend in relation to these conflicting norms. We argue that the use of coping strategies that exploit the distance labor migration enforces between their rural hometown and their urban work and life space (which is often why their relationships are lived in non-normative ways in the first place) marks these women as more than just victims of their circumstances and of prejudice. Although not ready to abandon long-standing norms and maintaining a strong desire to get married at some point, these migrant women are capable of anticipating and countering the stigmatization of their singlehood or of how they live their relationships by managing their position in-between the urban context and their rural hometowns in intricate and deliberate ways.
Samenvatting:

Vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders in de diensteneconomie van Shanghai: huiselijkheid, schoonheid en het stigma van het vrijgezellenbestaan

Op basis van veldwerk in Shanghai behandelt dit onderzoek, door een combinatie van meerdere etnografische methodologieën, inclusief diepte-interviews, participatieve observatie, thuisbezoek en de Go-Along methode (Kusenbach 2003), de alledaagse ervaringen van vrouwen die van het platteland naar de stad getrokken zijn en in Shanghai in de dienstensector werken. Ik onderzoek hoe deze vrouwen leven, werken en liefhebben. Ik stel hierbij de volgende vragen: Wat vertellen hun ervaringen en gevoelens over hun werk en privéleven ons over migrantenarbeid en gender in het postsocialistische China van de 21ste eeuw? Wat zijn de culturele, sociale en economische implicaties van het besluit van deze migrantenvrouwen om in de dienstensector te gaan werken?

Veel onderzoekers hebben de aandacht gevestigd op de genderdimensie van de
plattelandsmigrantenpopulatie omdat de industrialisatie in het China van na de
hervormingen vooral vrouwelijke arbeid vraagt. Vrouwenwerkers worden gezien
als gehoorzamer en minder rebels dan hun mannelijke equivalenten, en makkelijker
omschrijft, krijgen vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders te maken met een “drievoudige
onderdrukkings” door de staat, het mondiale kapitalisme en het patriarchaat. Een rijke
hoeveelheid literatuur heeft vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders, en met name
fabriksarbeiders, neergezet als “slachtoffers” van de door de staat geplande
literatuur komen vrouwen die in de dienstensector werken weinig aan bod, want de
focus ligt op fabriksarbeid. Mijn onderzoek verlegt de focus naar de dienstensector
en de specifieke problemen, maar ook mogelijkheden, die vrouwelijke
arbeidsmigranten van het platteland in deze sector tegenkomen.

Verspreid door Shanghai, wonen en werken dienstverleners in verschillende
werkomgevingen onder een scala aan omstandigheden, en worden ze onderworpen
aan diverse vormen van arbeidsbeleid en regelgeving, waaronder verschillende eisen
wat betreft opleidingsniveau, vaardigheden en werkhouding, werktijden en roosters,

Mijn onderzoek draag bij aan deze literatuur door de concepten van “esthetische arbeid” (Yang 2011, Witz, Warhurst en Nickson 2003) “emotionele arbeid” (Hochschild 1979) en “affectieve arbeid” (Hardt 1999; Hardt & Negri 2004) in te zetten om de complexe manieren te vangen waarop dienstverlening in Shanghai doorwerkt op de lichamen, het gevoel en de dagelijkse ervaringen van vrouwelijke werknemers. Ik richt mij op de fysieke, mentale en economische transformaties die deze vrouwen ondergaan (als gevolg van hun omstandigheden) en verwezenlijken (als gevolg van hun handelingsvrijheid) door hun verhuizing naar de stad. Tegelijkertijd benadruk ik dat deze vrouwen wonen, werken en liefhebben in Shanghai zonder hun identiteit als plattelandsmigrant te verwaarlozen of vergeten; uit mijn onderzoek wordt duidelijk dat deze vrouwen hun thuisdorpen niet volledig achter zich laten, maar dat zij op precaire maar ook strategische wijze tussen stad en platteland in gesitueerd blijven.
Om de hoofdvraag te beantwoorden over hoe migrantenarbeiders, in de nasleep van de nationale economische overgang van verwerkende industrieën naar een diensteneconomie, wonen, werken en liefhebben in Shanghai, concentreer ik mij op drie specifieke kwesties: de notie van “huiselijkheid,” de schoonheidseconomie, en het stigma rond vrijgezel zijn. Ten eerste verken ik hoe vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders een idee van “huiselijkheid” construeren in Shanghai, ondanks het feit dat zij binnen deze sociale context discursief door stedelingen worden gecategoriseerd als “verdachte” anderen (Sun 2009) van “lage kwaliteit” (Anagnost 2004). Ten tweede onderzoek ik hoe vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten in de schoonheidsindustrie hun lichamen en zelfbewustzijn transformeren door een vorm van affectieve arbeid te verrichten en als consumenten deel te nemen aan de schoonheidsindustrie. Tot slot, met vroege huwelijken en shishi hunyin (事実婚姻 – letterlijk: de facto huwelijk) nog steeds gangbaar op het Chinese platteland, onderzoek ik hoe vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten hun relatiestatus als vrijgezel, getrouwd of een vriend hebbende presenteren en legitimeren in relatie tot de conflicterende normatieve modellen van vrijgezel zijn en het huwelijk in plattelandsgemeenschappen en Shanghai.
Samen laten deze drie secties zien dat vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders in Shanghai het platteland nooit volledig achter zich laten, maar zich in een tussenpositie bevinden; dit leidt tot een constant proces van onderhandeling waarin hun identiteit niet gefixeerd maar flexibel is. Dit proces creëert vervolgens ruimte voor strategische handelingen, bijvoorbeeld met betrekking tot normen over het vrijgezellenbestaan en het huwelijk. Daarnaast laten alle drie de secties zien dat er grote verschillen zijn tussen de economische posities van vrouwelijke arbeidsmigranten. Dit maakt een analyse mogelijk van hoe verschillende economische posities de affectieve levens van deze vrouwen vormen, alsmede erkenning van het feit dat vrouwelijke arbeidsmigranten in zeer verschillende financiële situaties nog steeds dezelfde problemen kunnen hebben, met name discriminatie door stedelingen.

Voortbordurend op het werk van Ang (2015) over de conceptualisatie van migratie en huiselijkheid, behandelt hoofdstuk 1 het spanningsveld rond de dagelijkse huiselijkheid-creërende praktijken en ervaringen van thuisgevoel van deze vrouwen in relatie tot de Chinese patriarchale confucianistische cultuur en het hukou (“huishoudregistratie”) systeem. Ik onderzoek de alledaagse ervaringen van migrantenvrouwen werkzaam in het restaurantwezen in termen van hoe ze leven en

Hoofdstuk 2, dat ik samen met Jeroen de Kloet schreef, werpt een kritische blik op het idee van “huiselijkheid” bij vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten die als huishoudelijke hulp in Shanghai werken en met wantrouwen bekeken worden door hun stedelijke werkgevers. Omdat migratie van het platteland naar de stad in China over de afgelopen decennia snel toegenomen is, verhuizen veel jonge mannen en
vrouwen naar de steden hopend op betere banen met hogere salarissen. Sommige
vrouwen kiezen voor een baan als *ayi* (阿姨 – letterlijk: tante), de gangbare term
voor een huishoudelijke hulp (Yan 2008). Of ze nu getrouwd is of niet, woont de *ayi*
gewoonlijk als vrijgezel in de stad. *Ayis* in Shanghai zijn wat wij “werkend vrijgezel”
noemen; een term die zowel verwijst naar hun vrijgezelle status in de context van de
familie als naar hun eenzaamheid in de relatief geïsoleerde werkplek. Deze
vrijgezellenstatus draagt bij aan de precariteit en fragiliteit van de vertrouwensrelatie
met de werkgevers (Hochschild 2002). *Ayis* moeten omgaan met het probleem van het
wantrouwen van hun werkgevers, die hen kunnen zien als dieven of verleidsters
(Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). Tegelijkertijd wordt van *ayis* verwacht dat ze affectieve
arbeid produceren (Yan 2008) in de ruimtelijke isolatie van een privé-huishouden dat
hen precair maakt en waarbinnen ze het risico lopen van seksuele intimidatie,
misbruik en geweld. Onze analyse laat zien dat *ayis* bewuste werknemers zijn die
denken, met verschillende strategieën gebruiken om vertrouwen op te bouwen in een
wantrouwende familiale werkplek. We onderscheiden drie hoofdstrategieën:

- eerlijkheid,
- professionalisme en
- zorgzaamheid.

Hoofdstuk 3 bestudeert vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten die in de
Shanghainese schoonheidssalonindustrie werken, en richt zich op hoe deze industrie affectieve arbeid benadrukt en articuleert in relatie tot migratie, gender en senioriteit.

Hoofdstuk 4 onderzoekt hoe nieuwe definities van de “moderne Chinese vrouw” de levens van vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders beïnvloeden, met een focus op de manier waarop deze vrouwen geïnterpelleerd worden als modern en modieus in de Qipu Lu Clothing Wholesale Market in Shanghai, ook wel “Cheap Road” genoemd.

Ik analyseer hoe de ruimtelijke organisatie en commerciële strategieën van de Cheap Road vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten een gevoel van “modern”-zijn toestaan, en onderzoek vertellingen van deze migranten, met name over hun ervaring als consumenten, om te verkennen hoe zij zichzelf transformeren in reactie op het globaliserende stadslandschap. Dit hoofdstuk suggereert dat de Cheap Road ruimtelijk en commercieel georganiseerd is om plattelandsvrouwen toegang tot beelden van het “moderne” en de Chinese Droom te verkopen. Ik beargumenteer dat deze vrouwen, door hun modegevoel te ontwikkelen middels shoppen, “Chinese moderne plattelandsmigranten” worden die in staat zijn om een punt te vinden waarop hun identiteiten als plattelandsmigrant én Shanghainese vrouw samenkomen.

Hoofdstuk 5, dat ik samen met Esther Peeren schreef, onderzoekt hoe vrouwelijke Chinese plattelandsmigranten omgaan met de stigmatisering die hen treft als gevolg van rondom conflicterende gendernormen met betrekking tot het
vrijgezellenbestaan en het huwelijk in hun geboortedorpen en in Shanghai. We richten ons op hoe vrouwelijke migranten hun relatiestatus als alleenstaand, getrouwd of een vriend hebbende legitimeren in relatie tot deze conflicterende normen. We beargumenteren dat het gebruik van coping-strategieën, die de door arbeidsmigratie gecreëerde afstand tussen hun dorpe en hun stedelijke werk en leven (die vaak de reden is dat ze op non-normatieve manieren leven) uitbuiten, deze vrouwen tot meer dan louter slachtoffers van hun omstandigheden en de heersende normatieve opvattingen maakt. Hoewel deze migrantenvrouwen niet klaar zijn om volledig afstand te doen van traditionele normen en een sterk verlangen houden om uiteindelijk te trouwen, zijn ze wel in staat om de stigmatisering van hun vrijgezelle status of van de manier waarop ze hun relaties inrichten te anticiperen en tegen te gaan door hun positie tussen de stedelijke context en hun thuisdorp op subtiele en doordachte manieren te navigeren.