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Home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood

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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)¹

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).² Since service consumption³ 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.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 *hukou* (户口 – literally, household registration) system (Chan and Buckingham 2008).⁵ During the Maoist era (1949-1978), the PRC government initiated the household registration system to

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).

⁵ Population registration has a long history in China in the form of the *xiangsui* system (乡遂制度 – literally, township system) and the *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 (21st to 16th 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 (11th to 8th century BCE) further developed ‘primitive forms of *hukou*-like institutions,’ known as the *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 *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 *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).⁶ 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).⁷ 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),⁸ but not permitted to stay permanently in the urban areas (Chan and Buckingham 2008). Since then, even though rural-urban migration has vastly increased,⁹ 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).¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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

factory work (Pun 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007; Pun et al. 2014, Pun and Chan 2013; Pun and Koo 2015; SACOM 2012), studies on communication with a focus on migrant youth (De Kloet and Fung 2017), and studies on the impact of new information technologies on workers' daily experiences (Qiu and Lin 2017; Qiu 2007, 2008; Wallis 2013). Other scholars have examined the social effects of rural-urban migration and the problems faced by rural-urban migrants in the cities (Anagnost 2004; Chapman et al. 2013; Cheng and Wang 2013; Gaetano 2004, 2015; Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Gui et al. 2012; Jacka 2006, 2012; Lee 2016; Ma and Cheng 2005; Solinger 1999; Sun 2010, 2012).

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

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), *nüshen* (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 avidual. 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.¹³ 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.¹⁵ 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 conversations, 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 conversations, 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,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.

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).

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* (流動人口 – 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).¹⁷ 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 wagedworkers 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

urban employers.¹⁹

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 reciprocity 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

²⁰ This paragraph is amended from the abstract of my published journal article "Desiring Singlehood? Rural Migrant Women and Affective Labor in the Shanghai Beauty Parlor Industry" in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. See Ip 2017.

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 *shengnü* (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.

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