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### Female migrant workers navigating the service economy in Shanghai

*Home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood*

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## **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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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

the 1990s (Anagnost 2004; Chan and Buckingham 2008; Pun 2003; Solinger 2001). 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).<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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 alienated 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 *yeluoguijen*.

(Lucy, 31 years old, Chengdu, supervisor)

*Yeluogui* 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 – 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.<sup>3</sup>

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:

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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