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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 2:

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

Co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet

Introduction

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

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

(Yaoyao Ayi, thirty-seven years old, Henan, part-time,
families from other Chinese regions)¹

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

¹ Domestic workers’ information is presented as follows: family name, age and hometown, job type and the family type of their employers.

anticipate to do harm to others, yet shall guard against the harm others might do to one.” The *ayis* (阿姨 – literally, auntie) we interviewed recurrently mentioned that their employers *fang* them. This gesture of “mistrust” makes it more difficult for them to do their work.

Central to this chapter is the question of how *ayis* manage to build trust in a climate of mistrust. *Ayis* have to deal with the problem of mistrust by their employers, who might perceive them as potential thieves or sexual seducers (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). *Ayis* in Shanghai are what we call “working-single,” a term that refers to their single status in the context of the family or their living away from husbands and/or children, as well as to their loneliness in the isolated workplace because they usually work alone, without peer-worker(s). This working-single status contributes to the precarity and fragility of the trust-relationship with the employers (Hochschild 2002). How can they gain trust in low-trust familial workplaces? How do they navigate the gender and sexual politics in the homes, especially given their single life in the city? How do they behave and perform domestic labour under the suspicious gazes of their demanding employers?

Focusing on the ways in which *ayis* build trust with their employers, we

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

As Esther Peeren aptly notes, "while servants are dependent on their masters, the reverse is also true: masters need their servants both for assistance with practical everyday matters and to maintain their social status" (2014, 87). Following Peeren (2014), we stress the reciprocity of the employer-employee relationship: *ayis* are not easily replaceable, unlike factory girls or waitresses, because employers have to put their trust in the employed domestic helpers, a process that takes time and requires affective labour on the part of the helpers. More significantly, because *ayis* are generally being portrayed as sexual seducers by China's media (Sun 2009), these

working women have to trust the (male) employers as decent persons that would not sexually harass or abuse them and they have to convince the female employers that they can be trusted with their husbands. Unlike factory girls, waitresses or beauty service workers, *ayis* have to deal with spatial isolation in the workplace that renders them precarious and puts them at risk of sexual harassment, abuse and violence. Whereas the Chinese mass media predominantly neglect the precarity of female rural-urban migrant domestic helpers, this chapter explores the ways in which these women find ways to work with their demanding employers, through the lens of trust.

Method

This chapter is a qualitative study involving fieldwork research conducted in Shanghai between September and December 2014, May and July 2015, and in October 2016, by one of the authors, Penn Tsz Ting Ip. During her fieldwork, she conducted in-depth interviews with nineteen domestic helpers working in Shanghai. To establish a more comprehensive understanding of the *jiazheng fuwuyue* (家政服务业 – literally, domestic service industry), the researcher also conducted an in-depth interview with a thirty-year-old business woman, Madam Ma, from Zhejiang, who

owns a domestic service company in Shanghai. In addition, the researcher interviewed two women – one from Shanghai and one from Hong Kong – both of whom had hired domestic helpers in Shanghai, to obtain a sense of employers’ experiences of employing *ayis* in their homes. Altogether, twenty-two interviews were conducted; twenty of which were audio-recorded after obtaining consent from the interviewees. For the two interviews without audio recordings, detailed interview notes were taken during the interview. The research participants, aged from thirty-seven to fifty-four at the time of their interviews, were asked to use pseudonyms during their interviews in order to protect their privacy.

Trust and Mistrust: Domestic Helper’s Everyday Life

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

After 1949, domestic workers were no longer called by any of the old terms for servants. The early classical terms *baomu* (literally, “protecting mother”)

and, alternatively, *ayi* (literally, “auntie”) became categorical terms for all domestic helpers regardless of their specific responsibilities. [...] In both the Mao and post-Mao eras, rural migrant women were the main source for domestic workers. (19)

Despite their connotations with familial life, according to Yan, *ayi* or *baomu* still became degrading terms for rural-to-urban domestic helpers (2008, 19). Until today, rural women in China travel from rural regions to the cities to do the “dirty work”² supporting the economic growth of urban China, where more and more urban women choose to work instead of being full-time housewives and mothers who do chores and take care of children. This phenomenon, embedded with social inequality, where rural women are considered as *suzhidi* (素质低 – literally, “low quality”) (Anagnost 2004), creates a precarious situation in which rural women have to deal with discrimination in the urban homes, and to face the everyday problems created by mistrust.³ Hence,

² For the conception of “dirty work,” see Anderson 2000.

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

Wen & Wang (2009) write:

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

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

Global North (Anderson 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Lan 2006; Lutz 2011; see also Cox 2006; Parreñas 2001; Salzinger 1991).

household (2004, 117). Due to this bias in media representation, “migrant women—cast in the light of difference, however, sympathetically—suffer a reproduction of their deprivation that is both social and discursive” (Sun 2004, 125).

Before analysing how *ayis* as working-singles negotiate trust in such a difficult if not hostile environment, it is crucial to reflect upon the notion of trust itself. Building up trust is a slow process that involves both a verbal as well as a performative dimension. It requires speech acts in which one expresses trust to one another, but it also requires movements, behavioural patterns, and gestures through which trust is articulated.⁴ The performative dimension is related to what Erving Goffman calls “face-work” (1967). Face refers to

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

⁴ Interestingly, in Confucian ideology, *xin* (信 – literally, integrity) is one of the five virtues of the gentleman (Gong et al. 2013, 363). According to Cecilia Wee, “One significant feature of *xin*, suggested by the character itself, is that *xin* is primarily concerned with speech acts. The character is comprised of a radical, *ren* 人, linked to *yan* 言, speech. This suggests that the person with *xin* (the ‘trustworthy person’) is one who does as she has said she would” (2011, 516). She comments, “The notion of *xin* is frequently taken to be largely isomorphic with the notion of trust, and passages involving *xin* are commonly translated in terms of ‘trust’ (and its cognates)” (Wee 2011, 517).

constructs of the same order; it is the rules of the group and the definition of the situation which determine how much feeling one is to have for face and how this feeling is to be distributed among the faces involved. (Goffman 1967, 5-6)

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

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

He further explains, “A social relationship is a way in which the person is forced to trust his self-image and face to the tact and good conduct of others” (1967, 42). In this sense, to build a good social relationship, a person has to first trust his/her self-image in which he/she has to perform “self-trust” before gaining trust from others. This is

important in this study because trust is performative: prior to gaining trust from the urban employers, an *ayi* has first to trust her own self-image and to perform as a trustworthy domestic worker; they can build “trust” only based on the performance of trusting themselves.

Working as an *Ayi*

There are different types of domestic helpers in Shanghai, which has an influence on the ways and degrees in which they can build trust with employers in their households.

First, domestic helpers can be categorized by their job types: *zhongdiangong* (钟点工 – literally, part-time), *zhujia* (住家 – literally, live-in), *quanzhi* (全职 – literally, full-time), *shewai* (涉外 – literally, for foreign families), *xiaoqu* (小区 – literally, working for the district, usually residential district), and *yuesao* (月嫂 – literally, maternity matron or care-giver for the care of a new mother and her new-born infants).

Concerning these job types, twelve of the research participant in this study worked as part-time *ayis* (earning RMB20-50 per hour), one was a live-in *ayi* (earning RMB3,000 per month), one was a *quanzhi ayi* (earning RMB5,500 per month), one a *xiaoqu ayi* (earning RMB6,000-7000 per month), and three were *yuesaos* (earning

average RMB10,000 per month). Second, at the time of the interviews, the *ayis* worked for various types of families in Shanghai: eight worked for foreign families (including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan), six worked for Shanghai families, and five worked for Chinese families from other provinces. Some of the *ayis* had worked in different job type(s) for different family type(s) in the past.

Why have rural-urban migrant women chosen to work as *ayis*, how do they opt for a specific job type and family type, and what role does their own status as single, married (but perhaps living apart from their spouse) or divorced play in this? First and foremost, when asked why they chose to be an *ayi*, divorced women shared similar motives. Yao Ayi, a forty-five-year-old divorcee from Jilin, shared that after filing for divorce from her husband, she travelled to Shanghai to meet with her elder sister, who worked there as a waitress. Her sister told her that working in a restaurant was a harsh occupation and suggested that she might prefer to work in the domestic service industry instead. Thus, Yao Ayi's worked as live-in *ayi* as her first migrant job in Shanghai, earning RMB1,000 per month, in 2006. Since she was divorced, she was flexible in terms of her living arrangements in Shanghai. She chose to work as a live-in *ayi* because the employer provided a room and meals for her. After eight years

of being a live-in *ayi*, Yao Ayi had saved sufficient money to rent a small apartment in Shanghai and she then changed to working as a *shewai*. Yao Ayi's friend, Li Ayi, shared that she also came to Shanghai after her divorce. Her younger sister was already in Shanghai working as a domestic helper by that time. Therefore, Li Ayi followed her sister's lead and began working as a live-in *ayi*. After ten years, she remarried and changed to working as a part-time *ayi*. The relationship status thus affects the type of *ayi* work migrant women perform to do. When asked about her experiences as a live-in *ayi*, Li Ayi shared:

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

(Li Ayi, forty-nine years old, Heilongjiang, part-time, Shanghai and foreign families)

Although she found sleeping on the same bed as her employer acceptable, being a live-in *ayi* was stressful overall:

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

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

I didn't need to rent a place [for being a *yuesao*]. Usually, *yuesaos* are single [Researcher's note: meaning they are divorcees]. They work because their children go to school or their children need to buy a house for getting married.

Like me, I become a *yuesao* because my son is going to get married. We need

some income.

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

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

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

People like us feel bored at home, right? It's hard to join other industries, which is not easy. This is the only good option, right?

(Xiaoli Ayi, forty-four years old, Anhui, *yuesao*)

Married migrant women shared that they had few professional skills and little education, and that therefore the relatively well-paid occupation of domestic helper was a golden opportunity for them to make money:

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

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

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

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

Thus, boredom, the desire to be a breadwinner, and the fact that they lacked professional skills led these married women to work as domestic helpers in Shanghai.

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

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

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

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

Ayis as working-singles, as we stated earlier, face a struggle over trust and constantly have to negotiate negative stereotypes. As Ke Ayi shared:

Every family is different. A bit of *shouqi* (受气 – literally, being bullied) is unavoidable. It is impossible to have none.

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

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

job: honesty, professionalism, and care.

Honesty

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

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

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

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

Her [the female employer] domestic helper stole her stuff and his [the male

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

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

The building up trust is to some extent a one-way street: *ayis* have to gain trust, and thus face, from their employers, much more than the other way round. When some *ayis* are perceived to show poor conduct and breach the trust of their employers, it takes more effort, as well as time, for the "honest" *ayis* to build trust. Urban

employers worry about money being stolen by their domestic workers at home. Nonetheless, domestic services usually include the buying of groceries or other household products in which money is inevitably involved. In this sense, *ayis* literally have to “touch” the “money;” however, some *ayis* tend to avoid receiving money from their employers:

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

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

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

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

In Zhou Ayi and Hu Ayi’s experiences, avoidance of situations in which their honesty

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

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

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

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

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

No matter how good she [the female employer] treated me. I had to position

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

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

Marking down the expenses became a practice that Wang Ayi used as a tactic of guarding against future accusations of dishonesty. Full trust seems impossible; what is established is a semblance or performance of trust behind which mistrust (or, for the *ayi*, fear of being mistrusted) lingers.

Aside from shopping, the treatment of household items also requires face-work in order to establish trust. Objects in the home can be expensive, such as diamonds, or fragile, such as glasses, mugs, or vases. As Ke Ayi shared, the Hong Kong family she has been working for for thirteen years trusts her a lot because she does not break things. When she fell ill and quit her job, the family hired another *ayi*. But the family found the new *ayi* difficult to tolerate because she frequently broke their kitchenware. When *ayis* clean and tidy the house, they have to be extra cautious. Hence, *ayis* try to cater as much to the needs of their employers as possible:

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

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

No, I won't [put things back in the same positions]. I work for them and I tidy everything up. But I won't put things randomly. It's because sometimes his stuff is quite messy and so he expects me to help tidy up his house. If I put them back in the same positions, he feels like I haven't worked at all.

(An Ayi, 40+, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families and foreign families)⁵

Due to the variety of preferences on the part of different families, *ayis* have to learn to observe the everyday practices of their employers and understand how they want jobs to be done. While some employers want their *ayis* to help with tidying up their houses, others request their *ayis* to put things back in exactly the same positions that they found them.

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

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

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

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

⁵ An Ayi did not disclose her exact age.

employers gave them keys after a period of observation. Xuexue Ayi described the effort she made to show her honesty before she received the keys:

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, to keep the house keys is a huge responsibility; therefore, these *ayis* have developed a cautious way to be the guardian of the keys. As Zhou Ayi shared, she puts the house keys in a separate bag instead of on her own key chain as her way to protect the keys.

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

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

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

He [the male employer] gave me the house keys. I told him I wouldn't take his keys. I explained to him that I would come to his house when he is at home.

When he's not at home, I won't go. I don't like to keep someone's house keys.

I am afraid of rumours.

(An Ayi, 40+, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families and foreign families)

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

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

Professionalism

A second tactic for negotiating trust is by performing professional face-work. The

professionalism of an *ayi* can be as practical as obtaining the required certificate.

According to Wu Ayi, a *yuesao* needs to receive training to attain the *muying hulizheng* (母婴护理证 – literally, “the maternity and infant care division certificate”)

in order to officially work as a *yuesao*. By attaining a certificate, a *yuesao* can gain the trust of her customers. However, attaining a professional certificate is only one way to perform a sense of professionalism. What *ayis* also claim is needed is experience and trust in oneself:

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

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

When asked how she proves herself as trustworthy to clients, Wu Ayi said that she

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

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

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

Significantly, Wu Ayi's work is highly monitored by the clients, as they can leave

comments on her work-report, which is known as a “diary,” provided by the company. She explained that her tasks are listed on an hourly basis in the report. Employers can request to have another *yuesao* if they are not happy with the performance of the assigned *yuesao*.

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

We use *Dizigui* (弟子规 “Standards for being a Good Pupil and Child”). You see this? These are the rules and regulations of our services. Do you understand, *Dizigui*? [...] We need to read this. I need to teach them [the new *yuesaos* at her company]. You need to learn and to practice it at work. [...] You need to be a good person first. Our occupation is very special. You must

be patient. So, the rules are set as a guideline and to constrain us to do things well. Then, you can take better care of the infants.

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

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

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

to train a domestic worker is to foster a proper subjectivity, so that she can see work and respond readily to it. Her “improved” subjectivity is supposed to mediate between the mind of the employer and her own body, thus producing knowing, willing, and affective labour that can anticipate and meet the needs of the employers. (96)

Unlike Wu Ayi's situation, in which her company provides a uniform, most *ayis* have developed a dressing-down strategy to build trust with their employers. In the words of Ke Ayi,

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

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

And as Fang Ayi explained:

I met a female employer. She said she hired an *ayi* once, who dressed beautifully and moved seductively in front of her husband. Some *ayis* are indecent. Some male employers are decent, while some are not. [...] For indecent *ayis*, he [referring to male employers in general] would touch her for sure, right? If you are very decent and you talk nicely, he won't touch you, right? If you are indecent, he must touch you. You can't blame anyone, right?

(Fang Ayi, forty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, *shewai*)

Fang Ayi's explanation reveals that a proper dress code – dressing down – is a way to avoid sexual harassment from male employers and to eliminate doubts from female employers, as well as to avoid gossip by other domestic helpers. But when she adds “right?” to “he won't touch you,” she reveals that even when dressing down one is never safe. In this light, her narrative reflects the precarious situation of “working-single” and the way in which *ayis* have to also trust their (male) employers to not sexually harass or abuse them. As He Ayi's comments testify, gossip does circulate:

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

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

Some *ayis* employ the “dressing-down strategy” to construct trust with the urban

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

Care

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

The other day I saw that her [the female employer's] closet was really messy. I asked if she needed my help to tidy it up. She said, "okay." Then, I helped to

tidy up her closet. I am quite efficient. And she trusts me. Her closet is like a mess. They [the employers] like to take whatever they need from the closet. It is a mess. So, I wanted to help her.

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

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

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

Xuexue: We talk about everything.

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

Xuexue: We are like a family. I generally get along well with other people. I

like Shanghai people, I think they *bubaijiazi* (不摆架子 – literally, do not act big or unassuming).

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

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

Madam Sun claims that she knows Xuexue Ayi very well and that they talk about everything. As a result, Madam Sun trusts Xuexue Ayi, unlike the temporary *ayis* who help to do the chores, whom she believes would steal things. To treat an *ayi* as a pseudo-family member entails a negotiation of care: if the domestic worker is (like) a family member, they also have to be cared for, when they become sick, for example. Conversely, the domestic worker projects a sense of caring about the employer, even if she only does this to gain her trust. Here, trust is built through the practice of talking about “everything,” including the private life of the *ayi*, in order to help the employers feel secure about the person they hired. This form of trust, established with time, can help to blur – but not erase – the boundaries between employers and employees. Madam Sun claims Xuexue Ayi to be her friend, but one might ask whether such claims do not obscure the hierarchical relationship between employer

and employee.⁶

Moreover, some *ayis* have chosen to articulate or perform their care for the family by learning to cook the dishes that the family members like. As Yao Ayi shared, she bought the Chinese version of Jamie Oliver's cookbook for her Western employer. When her employer saw the cookbook, she was tremendously impressed and bought the English version. She told Yao Ayi the dishes her family likes, and then Yao Ayi would check her Chinese version and cook for them. Correspondingly, Wang Ayi shared:

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

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

⁶ Although Madam Sun did not hire a domestic helper after her retirement, she stays in touch with Xuexue Ayi and they meet regularly in the district to catch up on each other's lives. She also refers jobs to Xuexue Ayi.

By performing care through catering to the taste of the family, and thereby probably disregarding her own food preferences, Wang Ayi secures a stronger and less precarious bond with the family. Both Yao Ayi and Wang Ayi claimed:

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

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

Shanghai people like others to call them *xiaojie* or *taitai* (小姐 / 太太, literally lady / madam). She [the female employer] asked me to call her Zhen Jie (真姐 – literally, Sister Zhen), and call her husband Brother Ye (叶大哥). She said, "I work at the company, and you work at my home. We are equal. Please don't have any pressure. Please work like in your own home.

(Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families

from other Chinese regions, and foreign families)

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

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

(2009, 13)

When pseudo-family ties are being constructed, the face-work of enfolded the *ayi* into the narrative of the family not only obscures the hierarchical relationship, but is also a way to neutralise the potential sexual danger from the *ayi* as working-singles.

The trust the familial discourse helps to establish may furthermore enable forms of exploitation:

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

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

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

The *yuesao* in our study have to care for urban families and their new-borns;

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

Conclusion

Ayis live a working-single life in the city; even when they are married, they usually leave behind their spouses and children. Working alone in a strange family’s home draws them into a complicated daily negotiation of trust, amplified by their

working-single status. In addition, negative portrayals in the mass media of domestic workers as thieves or sexual seducers have produced discourses of mistrust and presented the *ayi* as low *suzhi* (literally, “quality”) (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). Following Peeren (2014), we have stressed the reciprocity of the employer-employee relationship: *ayis* are not easily replaceable, unlike factory girls or waitresses, because employers have to put their trust in the employed domestic helpers, a process that takes time and affective labour.

Through our analysis, we argue that trust requires face-work (Goffman 1967) that is both verbal and performative. *Ayis* chose their job because it gives a stable income, it is more attractive and less tough than factory work and demands not much education. But, as we have also shown, despite this, it remains a precarious job, as *ayis* can become dispensable for their employers. In order to avoid being replaced, *ayis* have to establish their value in the employers’ households by building a trusting employer-employee relationship. We observed three tactics through which *ayis* negotiate trust. They perform honesty over financial and material matters, including conscious deliberations over ownership of the house keys. They perform being professional, also by dressing down as to avoid striking a pose as if they want to

seduce the husband (or wife). Here, their status as working-single directly affects their face-work. Finally, they care for the families, and articulate this care through providing special food or devoting extra attention to the children and the chores. Through these tactics, *ayis* perform and negotiate a relationship of trust, but this relationship remains profoundly precarious: their bodies need to stay healthy, they are pushed to give up the care for their own children, they dress down, the wages are low at best and the working conditions are fragile and not juridically protected. While we want to steer away from purely negative portrayals of the work and life of migrant domestic workers in Shanghai, a univocal celebration of their profession would be equally naïve and one-sided. These narratives are not unique for China, but the speed with which China is changing and the growing disjunctures between the rural and the urban may well make the issue of inequality and labour protection more urgent.

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