Female migrant workers navigating the service economy in Shanghai

Home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood

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

“I believe we can change our fate.”

Introduction

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

1 Chapter 3 of the dissertation presents the text published in Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, with the modification of the words “article” and “essay” to “chapter,” endnotes converted to footnotes, and minor edits.
2 This is quoted from an interview with Pang Yuan, who is a 25-year-old hairstylist from Hunan.
customers could join the lucky draw to win different prizes, including the first prize – a fancy mountain bike. After settling down in their service room, Xiaorui started to talk about her journey as a migrant worker:

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

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

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

Even though not all beauty service apprentices will become entrepreneurs, most of

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

Figure 1. A snapshot of the hair and beauty salon Xiaorui works in.⁴

This chapter positions the beauty parlour industry as a distinctive industry because it offers financial rewards, upward social mobility, and, most importantly, the potentiality of entrepreneurship to rural migrant women, even though the process of being promoted from apprentice to senior beautician is considered painful, boring, and exploitative. The chapter studies rural migrant women working in Shanghai’s

⁴ The photos in this chapter are provided by the author.
beauty parlour industry, focusing on how the industry demands affective labour (Hardt and Negri 2004), and articulates this demand differently along the lines of migration, gender, and, especially, seniority.

The analysis looks at three types of female beauty workers: apprentices, senior beauticians, and entrepreneurs. Within each level, I interviewed women of different ages and marital statuses. At each level, the affective labour demanded from the women affects their minds and bodies in specific ways. Significantly, at all three levels, there are common tensions between the way the women are disciplined and their aspirations, both professionally and in terms of their personal lives. This is due to the way the lives of migrant women in China are governed not only by the economic demand for their labour to support the national economy or global capitalism, but also by the cultural expectations with regard to their reproductive maternal labour, enforced through the patriarchal familial structure (Fan 2003). To comprehend this double demand of labour from rural women, this chapter takes into account the consequences of their affective labour in this industry on their ability to enter into love relationships and to get married.
According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, affective labour is a form of immaterial labour that “produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108). They define affects as follows:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methods

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

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

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

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

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

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

In China’s migrant studies, researchers predominantly focus on the emotional sufferings of migrant women, who work long hours for low wages and have poor living conditions (Pun 2003, 2004, 2005; SACOM 2010; Sun 2012). Some explore the ways in which migrant workers experience love, intimacy and marriage (Ma and Cheng 2005). In recent years, studies have focused on young migrant workers to explore how rural Chinese youth is challenged by the global economy and neoliberal capitalism, and how they creatively produce new forms of labour and subjectivity as a response to the cultural changes of globalising China (Lukacs 2015; Zhang 2015; De Kloet and Fung 2017). Furthermore, Wagner discerns that lower-waged female workers have to take jobs not ‘worthy’ enough for male workers, exposing the problem of gender inequality (Wagner 2013, 364).9 The labour workforce is

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

**The Chinese Beauty Economy**

The PRC government tactically encourages the development of the beauty parlour
industry, which is deeply materialised and internalised in rural migrant women’s lives.

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

**Shanghai’s Beauty Parlour Industry**

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

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

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

Cindy Fan points out that migrants without an urban *hukou* “find their existence outside of the formal sector, picking up jobs shunned by local residents and relying only upon themselves for subsistence” (Fan 1999, 958). This discriminative culture is reflected in the beauty industry. In Shanghai, beauty service jobs are considered to be undesirable because the work involves intimate bodily contact and a zealous service attitude; therefore, the job opportunities in the industry are considered as “leftover jobs” to locals but as “golden jobs” to rural women. Owing to the discrepant social statuses, workers have to be more skilful to establish a productive client-worker relationship, which poses a challenge for the new workers – the apprentices – of the beauty industry.
Young, single migrant workers commonly join this industry as apprentices. Since these young women have limited working skills, being an apprentice is a way for them to attain valuable new skills. Apprentices usually do not have to pay any tuition fee for the parlour; however, they have to work for very low wages, and receive two meals a day and accommodation in a workers’ dormitory provided by their employers. As told by Andy, a hair salon manager, paying apprentices RMB1,000 per month is a gesture of kindness because these young workers do not yet have the necessary skills. Apprentices become “real” staff in the company only when they successfully pass the tests arranged by their employers. Although apprentices receive training and regular tests, there is no guarantee that they will pass and become gainfully employed. This exploitative, yet legal, apprenticeship system provides massive

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12 Although the management justifies their exploitation of labour, I found this apprenticeship system problematic because apprentices do not receive Shanghai’s legal minimum wage of RMB2,020 as they are classified as “apprentices” instead of as legal workers (see “Eleven Regions” 2015).

13 Apprenticeships keep young workers working in the salon whilst not giving them a clear schedule for promotion. As Siqi, a 17-year-old beautician apprentice, shared, she is making RMB1,000 per month, yet she has no idea when she will pass all the tests and become fully employed. Therefore, some migrant women prefer to pay a tuition fee in a beauty school to get trained to become a beautician, hairstylist or manicurist.

14 According to Yang, “It is common for salons to employ one or two technicians with beauty and hairdressing experience and then hire a number of people as apprentices, who are then trained by the
cheap workforce, favouring the development of the industry. This section explores the ways in which the apprentices’ bodies and minds are being modified, whereas their affective relationships are under surveillance.

*Adjusting the bodies and minds*

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

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

(Interview with Huniu, June 11, 2015)⁶

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

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

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⁶ The interviewee, Huniu, is a 19-year-old beautician apprentice from Anhui.
Huniu shared, the thing that impresses her the most is the change in her personality:

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

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

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

(IInterview with Huniu, June 11, 2015)

Huniu views her self-transformation into someone confident and caring as a positive
outcome. The manner in which she narrates her change shows how the workplace has affectively shaped her attitude to match the industry’s requirements according to which the customer’s experience takes priority over everything else.\footnote{Apprentices experience the modification of their bodies and minds for the production of affective labour, as the beauty parlour is a customer-oriented industry and the service provided is not only about beauty techniques but also about things such as hospitality, politeness, friendliness and, most profoundly, a customer-oriented attitude. Therefore, most companies I visited provided training to improve the attitude and demeanour of their workers, aiming to shape the workers’ minds so that they can recognize that the “most important thing is service,” as shared by Huniu.}

\textit{A story about pain}

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

\begin{quote}
Competition in Shanghai is keener than in other regions. If your service is off par, you will be eliminated. There are plenty of potential workers. What is lacking is people with good skills. Therefore, I must work hard. (Interview with Huniu, June 11, 2015)
\end{quote}
As a low-level skilled migrant worker, Huniu knows she must “work hard” to develop “good skills” and also display a positive attitude. Based on this sense of awareness, she welcomes the changes she has to make. According to Hardt and Negri, “a worker with a good attitude and social skills is another way of saying a worker adept at affective labour” (2004, 108). Being adept at affective labour, however, does not indicate that the apprentices are unaware of the modifications they undergo. This finding reveals the ambivalence of affective labour: workers accept bodily and mental modifications to help them survive in an industry in which they attain a newfound confidence and practical skills, and which is therefore both productive and disciplinary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Desiring singlehood**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Senior**

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

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

**Fashioning the bodies: The production of confidence**

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

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

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

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

Elaine feels that she has to put more effort to becoming a trustworthy professional due to her clients’ gender bias. Her narrative reveals that senior workers are not only at a higher rank, but are also in a gender hierarchy that assigns female workers a lower position than male workers in a male-dominated workplace. Hence, female workers feel the urge to transform their bodies in order to compete with their male co-workers. 23 However, what is missing from Elaine’s narrative is that the requirement of aesthetic labour also applies to men. Since the Shanghai beauty

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Chatting with clients**

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

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

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

I have been working in the salon for eight to nine years already. My clients and I are like old friends. We talk about everything except private matters. We like to talk about where to travel, what they like to do, and what they fancy.

Now, I talk more about parenting with my clients. (Interview with Yuki, May 29, 2015)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Desiring marriage, or not

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

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

People from my hometown think it is weird when someone reaches his/her marital age but remains single. If a woman stays in her rural hometown after school, she will usually get married somewhere between the age of 18 and 21. I am 26 now but am still single. Sadly, my parents worry about me. They arranged a few dates for me, which I attended. But I don’t feel any of them is
Marriage is a marker of normative familial life that is difficult to challenge even if rural migrant women have established a career in Shanghai. As Wallis states:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Producing excellence

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

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

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

(Interview with Maomao, July 1, 2015)

Maomao is the only beauty parlour worker I spoke to who had obtained an official certificate. By displaying her certificates and awards in her manicure shop, she gains trust from her clients. What is most valuable for her business is her certified skillset instead of her aesthetic labour, as reflected in the casual clothes she wears at work. With her documented professionalism, she attracts not only local clients, but also foreign ones.²⁷

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 3. Gina working in her manicure shop.

**Promoting health: The reciprocality of affective labour**

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

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

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

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

(Interview with Ms Xin, July 6, 2015)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Desiring marriage*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I think my friends in my hometown are immature, although we are the same age. Therefore, I don’t want a boy from my hometown. At the same time my chances to meet someone older than myself in Shanghai are limited. But I don’t want to find someone from another rural area because I don’t want to follow him to live in his hometown. I would only choose to either live in Shanghai or in my hometown. (Interview with Gina, October 13, 2014)
Financial empowerment, city-life experience, and the attachments to Shanghai and her rural hometown have turned finding a partner for Gina into a seemingly unsolvable problem. Female entrepreneurship has empowered these three women, offering them the power to choose a partner on their own terms, yet at present these terms cannot be met by what they see as suitable candidates.²⁹ The patriarchal society of post-socialist China is seemingly not ready for the rise of rural-urban migrant businesswomen.

Amongst my participants there was one entrepreneur in a happy relationship, Charlie. However, her partner is another woman. As such, Charlie deviates from current social norms prevalent in China which prescribe that a woman should marry an older, wealthier, “superior” man. This is an aspiration to which the other interviewees cling in spite of the negative impact it has on their prospects of entering into a fulfilling romantic relationship.³⁰ Charlie disregards dominant heterosexual

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

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

Closure

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

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

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