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Home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood

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Publication date

2018

Document Version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Ip, T. T. (2018). *Female migrant workers navigating the service economy in Shanghai: Home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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Chapter 5:

Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage¹

Co-authored with Esther Peeren

Introduction

Rural-to-urban migrant workers in China, commonly referred to as the ‘floating population’ (*liudong renkou*),² face many challenges at the economic, cultural, social and emotional levels, similar to but also distinct from those faced by international migrants or internal migrants in different countries.³ Much scholarly attention has been devoted to their exploitation in various sectors of the Chinese labor market (Gaetano and Jacka, 2004; Pun, 2003; Qiu, 2016; Yan, 2008), their subjection to the

¹ The text in Chapter 5 is that of the article submitted to the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, with the modification of the word “article” to “chapter”.

² We use *hanyu pinyin* (Chinese Phonetic Alphabet, the official Romanization system used in the PRC) as the transliteration system for Chinese words.

³ For a discussion of the similarities and differences between international and internal migration, see King and Skeldon, 2010.

‘household registration’ (*hukou*) system (Fan, 2002, 2003) and their stereotyping and social exclusion by urbanites as ‘low quality’ (*suzhidi*) (Anagnost, 2004) and ‘uncivilized’ (Otis, 2012). At the same time, it has been pointed out that these workers tend to be aware of the challenges and stigmatization they will face in the cities, and have developed various coping strategies (Guan and Liu, 2013; Pun, 2003). These strategies manifest as forms of agency in the sense of a circumscribed capacity for transformation on the part of subjects constituted through the reiteration of prevailing norms (Butler, 1993: 15). On the basis of fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, this chapter zooms in on a particular gendered form of stigmatization, exploring how Chinese rural-to-urban migrant women deal with the conflicting gender norms regarding singlehood and marriage in their home communities and in Shanghai. Our findings challenge both conceptions of rural-to-urban migrant women as passive victims of discrimination and the idea that they can simply cast off the norms that shaped them once they reach the city.

When they should get married, how they should find an appropriate husband and what a relationship with a boyfriend or a marriage should be like are questions rural-to-urban migrant women struggle with in a different way from their non-migrant

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

In what follows, we look at the way female rural-to-urban migrant workers in Shanghai present and legitimate their relationship status as single, married or having a boyfriend in relation to the normative models of marriage and singlehood in their rural hometowns and the global city of Shanghai. We also examine the forms of agency mobilized to counteract the stigmatization incurred as a result of failures or refusals to enact these normative models. A particular focus concerns the physical

distance labor migration enforces between the rural hometown and the urban work and life space, as well as between migrant women and their husbands, boyfriends or children. We argue that this distance, on the one hand, forces migrant women to negotiate different, often conflicting normative models of singlehood and marriage. On the other hand, this same distance may allow them to avoid or counteract stigmatization by performing different norms in different contexts. Before developing this argument, we outline our methodology, provide an overview of the norms governing singlehood and marriage in rural and urban China, and discuss theories of stigmatization that explain the costs of diverging from the norm and the available strategies for avoiding or lessening these costs.

Methodology

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

personal contacts and rural-to-urban migrant support organizations.

All participants are rural-to-urban migrant women, but not all of them are low-skilled or low-paid. Most of them (n=66) work in the service industry: in beauty parlors and restaurants or as domestic workers. Their stated monthly income ranges from RMB1,000 to RMB8,000 (=ca. USD150-USD1,200), with apprentices not receiving any income and those working on commission earning a variable amount.⁴

The women were interviewed in their workplaces, their living spaces, cafés or restaurants. Of the interviews, 70 were audio-recorded with the participants' permission; in the other 6 cases, detailed interview notes were taken. Participants could choose whether to use their real name or a pseudonym.

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

⁴ In the urban context, all rural-to-urban migrant women tend to be seen as lower-class, regardless of their income.

relationship status earlier in the interview, found the question confusing or took it as inquiring whether they felt lonely. He Ayi, a 53-year-old domestic helper from Jiangsu, answered:

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

This response reveals that the term ‘single’ (*danshen*) can have multiple meanings. Etymologically, *dan* means single, only, and mono-; it can also refer to something unique and singular. *Shen* means body and can refer to both humans and animals. Interpreting *danshen* as referring to being a singular body and therefore potentially lonely, He Ayi indicates that she is in fact surrounded by her grandchildren.

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

with their husband or maintained a good relationship with him at a distance.

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

Norms Governing Singlehood and Marriage in Rural and Urban China

In 1950, the PRC government launched the First Marriage Law, replacing the deep-rooted tradition of polygamous patriarchal marriage with a ‘new democratic’ monogamous marriage system (Stockman, 2000: 102). To prevent child marriage, the legal age requirement for marriage was set at 18 for women and 20 for men. The law

also put an end to arranged marriages and marriages negotiated between kin groups (Croll, 1981: 1). What replaced such marriages was a system of ‘blind dates’ (*xiangqin*) organized by parents, relatives or friends (Luo and Sun, 2015).

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

In rural China, although the age requirement remains in force, the tradition of earlier marriage persists (Fan and Li, 2002). Meimei, a 22-year-old migrant from Anhui, shared that she got married in her rural hometown before reaching the legal age:

We did not register for the marriage license because our ages at that time had not reached the legal requirement [...] We had arranged a wedding banquet. So, legally we were counted as *shishi hunyin*.

According to the definition given by The Central People's Government of the PRC (2005), *shishi hunyin* or *de facto* marriage is

an unregistered marriage between a single man and a single woman living together without obtaining an official marriage certificate, with other people thinking they are husband and wife. This form of marriage composes 60-70% of the total number of marriages in rural areas.⁵

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

⁵ Translated by one of the authors.

obtaining a marriage certificate (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2005).

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

Throughout China, marriage continues to mark women's entry into adulthood (Ji, 2015), but there are significant differences between rural and urban contexts. As Gaetano explains, 'the centrality of marriage in rural women's life course means that parents and daughters alike wish to maintain the young woman's good reputation' (2004: 49). This is seen as particularly hard when young women migrate to urban

contexts where ‘liberal attitudes towards premarital sex and cohabitation’ challenge parents’ traditional authority ‘in decisions about marriage and control over their daughters’ sexuality’ (Gaetano, 2004: 49). Consequently, migrant women have to strike a careful balance between the new possibilities open to them in the city and their parents’ as well as their own inculcated adherence to Confucian ideals. While, on the one hand, this puts them in a difficult position, on the other hand, the physical distance between these women and their parents enables them to engage in behaviors that would be condemned in their hometowns, such as pre-marital sex and cohabitation (Sudhinaraset et al., 2012: 1089).

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

⁶ Lu and Wang (2013) note that the average age of marriage in China went up from 22.79 in 1990 to 24.85 in 2010. For women, it went from 22.02 to 23.89 in this period. In cities, it went up from 23.57

Importantly, the stigma attached to remaining single is not specific to rural areas or to China. The first is clear from the prevalent use of the negative label ‘leftover women’ (*shengnü*) for educated urbanites with professional jobs who remain unmarried after reaching a certain age, usually around 27,⁷ and who, as a result, are considered ‘unfeminine’ (Fincher, 2014: 16; Gaetano, 2014: 124; To, 2013). The second is evident from the persistence of negative labels such as “spinster” and “old maid” in western cultures, even though the age at which they are applied tends to be higher (Budgeon, 2008; Byrne and Carr, 2015; Lahad, 2012).

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

Xie Ayi: I followed my husband to work [in Shanghai] after I gave birth.

Before I got married, I had never worked outside my hometown. [...] I started

in 1990 to 26 in 2010, in towns from 22.69 to 24.56 and in the countryside from 22.49 to 23.73. As these numbers only include official marriages and not *de facto* marriages, they probably put the average age of marriage in the countryside too high.

⁷ According to the 2010 Chinese National Marriage Survey, 9 out of 10 men believe that women should be married before they are 27 years old. See National Bureau of Statistics, 2012.

working in Shanghai in 2001 when my child was only four months old. My mother-in-law helped by taking care of our child.

[...]

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

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

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

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

Xie Ayi's narrative echoes the imperative that, after marriage, a woman should follow her husband, which is part of Confucian doctrine but also of the globally dominant heteronormative matrix. In Xie Ayi's case and that of most women migrant workers, this norm clashes with the simultaneously imposed patriarchal one that prefers women

to stay in the home and not work outside it, which is again both Chinese and global (Shih, 2015: 298). In this way, contemporary rural-to-urban migrancy, as a state-supported phenomenon and, for many, an economic necessity, makes it impossible for women to fully adhere to the norms regarding singlehood, marriage and motherhood, resulting in stigmatization. In the next section, we specify how stigmatization works and how it may be countered.

Stigmatization and How to Counter It

The sociologist Erving Goffman ([1963] 1986: n.pag.) defines stigma as ‘the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance.’ Social disqualification occurs because of a perceived deficiency in relation to a norm that is usually accepted both by those who stigmatize and the stigmatized (Goffman, [1963] 1986: 88).⁸ Consequently, on the part of the stigmatized, ‘shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual’s perception of one of his [*sic*] own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing’ (Goffman, [1963] 1986: 7).

⁸ Although Goffman mainly discusses stigma in relation to physical deficiencies, he also cites the example of the stigma attached, in America, to spinsterhood.

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

Yang and Kleinman (2008), who focus on stigma in Chinese culture, relate it to losing 'face' in a social (*mianzi*) or moral (*lian*) sense. The first refers to the 'embodiment of social power in the interpersonal field', while the second consists of 'the group-evaluation of a person's moral reputation, record for fulfilling

social-exchange obligations, and status as a good human being' (Yang and Kleinman, 2008: 401). For Yang and Kleinman, stigma is primarily a moral experience that, in China, has collective repercussions because individuals are seen as bound to their families and because negativity (bad luck, deviance, even death) is considered highly contagious. Stigmatized individuals and their families are viewed as subjected to a 'social death' that finds expression in acts of 'social distancing and rejection', and leads to a loss of 'relationships' (*guanxi*), considered as a form of social capital in Pierre Bourdieu's sense (Yang and Kleinman, 2008: 402, 405).

While Yang and Kleinman use the examples of schizophrenia and AIDS, other studies specifically refer to the stigmatization of rural-to-urban migrants in China. Li et al. (2006: 7-9) show such migrants facing various forms of 'enacted stigmatization' (stereotyping, separation, status loss, discrimination, unfair treatment and exclusion), resulting in a 'felt stigmatization' that produces high degrees of social isolation and mental health problems. The effects of stigmatization, however, are mitigated by the financial gains rural-to-urban migration offers and by the fact that migrant workers expect to be stigmatized and steel themselves against it (Li et al., 2006: 12).

A similar qualification is proposed in a study by Guan and Liu (2013), who consider the perspectives of both stigmatizing urbanites and stigmatized migrants. Their research in Tianjin shows that rural migrants are indeed stigmatized by the urban population – as having an unattractive physical appearance, constituting a potential peril and coming from discredited places – and feel socially excluded as a result. However, they also develop several coping strategies: blaming stigmatization on external factors (such as the *hukou* system) rather than internalizing it, reversing stigmatization by characterizing the urban population as deficient (as Xie Ayi does when portraying women in Shanghai as sexual predators) or developing an urban identification.

Significantly, Li et al. (2006: 12) point out that the forms and effects of migrant workers' stigmatization are mediated by various factors, including gender. For both men and women, 'migration is associated with increased sexual risk behaviors in urban areas' (Sudhinaraset, Astone, and Blum, 2012: S68; see also Dai et al., 2015; Pei, 2011). However, rural migrant women face additional stigma. It is not uncommon for migrant women to end up working in the booming sex industry (Liu, 2012; Zheng, 2003) or to become mistresses to married men. The growing awareness

of this within China casts a suspicion of impropriety over all rural migrant women (Gaetano, 2004). Negative categorizations are reinforced in the mass media, with many films and television series blaming young, single migrant women for destabilizing urban families (Sun, 2004; Zurndorfer, 2015).

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

In the remainder of the chapter, we present a qualitative analysis of the interviews conducted with our research participants. We proceed from a discussion of

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

Adhering to the Norm – But What Norm?

Upon being asked whether they were single, 34 research participants affirmed they were and 39 research participants said they were not. The motivations given by those who identified as ‘single’ ranged from not having a boyfriend (24), not being married (3) or not being serious with a boyfriend (3) to being a widow (1). The motivations given by those who identified as ‘not single’ included being married (27) or remarried

(1), and having a boyfriend (10) or girlfriend (1). Nine women at first did not understand the question (as discussed in the methodology section). Upon being told that some migrant women may consider themselves single because they live away from their husband or boyfriend, three of these women affirmed they were single because they worked in the city alone or were not living together with their husband or boyfriend. Six of the nine noted that they were not single because they had a good relationship with their husband.

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

As noted, all but one of the unmarried research participants expressed a wish to get married at some point. Many research participants indicated an adherence to the norms surrounding when they should marry and how they should find a husband in their rural hometown:

My parents have been helping me to look for a husband. I want to get married as soon as possible. (Miumiu, 26-year-old hair stylist from Anhui)

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

These responses show that fulfilling parents' expectations and allowing them to play an active part in their search for a husband is of great importance to many of the migrant women. As a result, they tend to adhere to what their rural home community considers the proper age to get married. At the same time, conforming, at a distance, to the norm of participating in the system of 'blind dates' also gives migrant women some room for negotiation. Miumiu, for example, indicated that, at 26, she felt pressured by her parents to get married, but also insisted that she would have to have a certain 'feeling' for her potential husband. Similarly, 29-year-old bank employee Liu Hua, from Ha'erbin, after noting that she had already been on more than thirty blind

dates, said: ‘if I cannot find the one, I would not marry a random man. I want to be happy after getting married.’ In this way, going on blind dates becomes a win-win strategy, allowing the migrant women to please their parents and to somewhat assuage the stigma of enduring singlehood, while also asserting ‘greater autonomy and control over their immediate futures’ (Gaetano, 2015: 113).

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

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

If I have a boyfriend, I am still single. I’m not single if I’m engaged. (Chen Qian, 20-year-old beautician from Anhui)

In contrast, other research participants felt that having a boyfriend was enough to no longer be single:

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

If I was not yet married but had a boyfriend, then I would also not be single. I am more traditional. Some people may not think like this now if they have a boyfriend or girlfriend, they may feel that they are still single. But I don't. (Yuki, 32-year-old hairstylist from Fujian)

Yuki's assertion that it is 'traditional' to feel that having a boyfriend makes you no longer single stands in tension with the responses of Helen and Chen Qian, who adhere to the traditional norm of marriage as, in Helen's words, the only 'real relationship.' This shows that different normative models may coexist and be thought of as 'traditional', especially at times when significant changes are occurring in the practices subject to the norm. In this case, it may be surmised that, in the context of

rising marriage ages and the exigencies of migrant labor, relationships with boyfriends in the cities have become more prevalent and consequently more likely to be seen as a meaningful relationship status distinct from being single. In the following section, we discuss how rural-to-urban migrant women develop forms of agency that allow them to avoid or counter the stigmatization incurred by transgressing or challenging the prevailing norms of singlehood and marriage in the urban and rural context.

Stretching the Norm and Countering Stigmatization

Besides appealing to different, sometimes conflicting ‘traditional’ norms, some migrant women expressed adherence to certain norms, while indicating a willingness to challenge others. Thus, Zhuangzhuang stressed the properness of her relationship with her boyfriend, to whom she was engaged, while also noting: ‘I don’t want to get married at this young age. Marriage means a lot of responsibilities and burdens.’ Since, in rural China, a woman’s responsibilities after marriage generally include bearing children and taking care of the home, getting married would restrict her career opportunities. In addition, Zhuangzhuang expressed a fear of her marriage ending in

divorce, which she felt had become the new normal in China (Lu and Wang, 2013: 64).⁹ Although, at the age of 24, the normative expectation in her rural hometown would be for marriage to closely follow engagement, it seems that getting engaged is a way for Zhuangzhuang to postpone the responsibilities and risks associated with marriage, while earning money and developing her professional skills in Shanghai.

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

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

I am single now and have no boyfriend. I haven't fallen in love for three years.

I don't need love. I am too busy with work. Time is too intense now. If I get married, I would like to change jobs, but still work in Shanghai. However, I would see what my husband would want, and I would follow him. (Phoebe,

21-year-old acting restaurant supervisor from Jiangxi)

⁹ Lu and Wang (2013) note that divorce cases in China increased from 800,000 in 1990 to 2.87 million in 2011.

Both Zoe and Phoebe ascribed their desire not to want to fall in love or get married yet to the pressures of their jobs, with Phoebe, who had no boyfriend at the time of the interview, indicating that if she did get married, she would want a different, presumably less stressful job and would abide by her husband's wishes regarding their future, even if that meant leaving Shanghai. Phoebe's statement, crucially, is less an expression of an active wish to defy the prevailing marriage norms than a sign of her realization that, at the time of the interview, she simply could not live up to them.

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

this.

Thus, when asked whom she had told about her relationship with her boyfriend, Jojo, a 26-year-old hairstylist from Jiangsu, said:

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

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

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

Both Jojo and Meimei engage in what Goffman refers to as 'role and audience segregation' ([1963] 1986: 63) by choosing what (not) to reveal to certain people.

Significantly, Meimei's remark that her parents do not ask her about her life in

Shanghai suggests that audiences may also segregate themselves by refraining from seeking out information that could give cause for stigmatization (especially since, in the Chinese context, stigma extends to the entire family).

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

In contrast to the women who exploit the distance between their rural and

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

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

Do I feel I am single? No, no. I have very good relationship with my husband. I love him very much. He loves me very much, too. I was separated from him for one year, which was for us the longest period of separation due to migrant work. However, I felt that we were still not too distant from each other. I felt that we were still together, as we talked on the phone every day. (Wang Ayi,

43-year-old domestic worker from Anhui)

Wang Ayi added that she bought a mobile phone for her husband to ensure that they could stay in touch on an everyday basis. Less contact would presumably signal that the marriage was no longer being taken seriously and that physical distance had grown into emotional distance.

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

Research participants with husbands living elsewhere in Shanghai also used claims of regular contact to deny that they felt single or lonely and to certify that their marriage remained in good shape:

Single? No, I don't feel so. My husband is here. We have dinner together every day. (Xiang Ayi, 53-year-old domestic worker from Jiangsu)

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

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

Thus, our research shows that while migrant women living outside the

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

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

According to Anni, her job was not what was keeping her from following the norms, but the reason she did not want to follow them. Still, her remark about taking care of her parents shows that it remained important to her to adhere to the norm of filial piety. She also indicated that she thought of her parents in everything she did and would not go against their wish for her to marry someone from her hometown. By April 2016, 2 years after the first interview, Anni had gotten engaged, resigned from the bar, returned to her hometown and started working for a finance company there.

This suggests that even those few rural-to-urban migrant women who appear to privilege their career aspirations and (financial) independence over getting married may still choose to adhere to the marriage norm at some point.

Conclusion

Our research has shown that rural-to-urban migrant women in Shanghai frequently transgress the conflicting norms of singlehood and marriage prevailing in rural and urban China, but that they do so mainly out of economic or emotional necessity rather than out of an active desire to change the norms. We found some evidence that ‘migrant women have found the space, time, and means to postpone marriage and experiment with a burgeoning modern dating culture’ (Gaetano, 2015: 112), but even those women who engaged in marriage postponement and experimentation maintained a strong desire to get married at some point to someone their parents would approve of. Similarly, although the fact that, according to some women, a steady relationship with a boyfriend would suffice to no longer count as single, and that this view was by some considered to be ‘traditional’, suggests that the borders of singlehood are shifting, particularly in cities like Shanghai, marriage remains the

normative ideal that migrant women strive for. In the end, the evidence of migrant women formulating genuinely 'new life goals' (Pei, 2011) with respect to singlehood and marriage remains restricted to a desire on the part of some of them for a longer period of singlehood, which allows them to pursue certain career goals and to be more selective when it comes to choosing a spouse.

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

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