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

*Home, beauty, and the stigma of singlehood*

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## **Summary:**

# **Female Migrant Workers Navigating the Service Economy in Shanghai: Home, Beauty, and the Stigma of Singlehood**

Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, this qualitative research project, by combining multiple ethnographic methodologies, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, home-visiting and the Go-Along method (Kusenbach 2003), focuses on the everyday experiences of rural-to-urban migrant women working in the Shanghai service sector, in particular the ways they live, labor, and love. I ask the following questions: How should we, as cultural researchers, scrutinize the everyday experiences of these women? What do their experiences and feelings about their work and private lives reveal about migrant labor and gender in 21<sup>st</sup> century post-socialist China? What are the cultural, social, and economic implications of these women's decision to become migrant service workers?

Many scholars have drawn attention to the gendered dimension of the rural migrant workforce because industrialization in post-reform China primarily demands

female labor. This is because female workers are believed to be more obedient and less rebellious than their male counterparts, and easier to govern in the urban workplace. As described by Pun Ngai (2005), female migrant workers face “triple oppression” by the state, global capitalism, and patriarchy. A wealth of literature has framed rural migrant women, particularly factory girls, as the “victims” of the state-planned market economy (Lee 1998; Pun 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005; SACOM 2010). In this literature, service sector workers do not feature much, as the focus is on factory work. My study shifts the focus to the service sector and the specific problems, but also opportunities, the rural-urban migrant women working in this sector encounter.

Scattered around Shanghai, service workers live and work in different work environments under various conditions, and are subject to diverse employment policies and regulations, including different requirements in terms of qualifications, skills and attitudes, working hours and rosters, etc. Whereas the state media, social media, and scholars focus mainly on factory workers in relation to China’s rapid urbanization, there are some studies that seek to capture the experiences of service workers (Liao 2016; Otis 2003, 2008, 2012; Shen 2015; Sun 2008, 2009, 2010; Yan

2008; Zheng 2003, 2009).

My study adds to this work by mobilizing the concepts of aesthetic labor (Yang 2011; see also Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003), emotional labor (Hochschild 1979), and affective labor (Hardt 1999; Hardt & Negri 2004) to capture the complex ways in which Shanghai service work shapes female service workers' bodies, minds, and everyday experiences. Thus, I focus on the physical, mental, and economic transformations they undergo (as a result of their circumstances) and achieve (as a result of the agency they have) as a result of their move to the city. At the same time, I emphasize that these women live, labor, and love in Shanghai without neglecting or forgetting their rural migrant identity; from my research it becomes clear that these women do not leave their hometowns behind altogether, but remain precariously yet also strategically situated in-between rural and urban China.

To answer the main question of how, in the wake of the national economic transition from manufacturing industries to a service economy, rural-urban migrant workers in the service sector live, labor, and love in Shanghai, I focus on three specific issues: the notion of home, the economy of beauty, and the stigma of singlehood. First, I explore how, in a social context in which rural migrant women are

discursively categorized by urbanites as the “low-quality” (Anagnost 2004) and “suspicious” other (Sun 2009), these women nevertheless construct a sense of “home” in Shanghai. Second, I examine how rural-urban migrant women in the beauty industry, by engaging in a form of affective labor and by also participating as consumers in the beauty industry, come to transform their bodies and sense of self. Third, with early marriage and *shishi hunyin* (事实婚姻 – literally, *de facto* marriage) still prevalent in rural China, I ask how rural-urban migrant women present and legitimate their relationship status as single, married or having a boyfriend in relation to conflicting normative models of singlehood and marriage in their rural communities and Shanghai.

Together, the three sections show that rural migrant women in Shanghai do not leave the rural behind, but are in an in-between position, leading to a constant process of negotiation that renders their identity not fixed but flexible and that, as a result, creates possibility for strategic maneuvering, for example with regard to norms about singlehood and marriage. Additionally, all three sections highlight that not all rural-urban migrant women are in the same economic position. This enables an analysis of how different economic positions shape the affective lives of these women,

as well as a recognition that rural-urban migrant women in very different financial situations may still face the same problems, most notably discrimination by urbanites.

Building on Ang's work (2015) on the conceptions of migration and home, Chapter 1 interrogates the nexus of tensions within rural-urban migrant women's daily home-making practices and home-sensing experiences in relation to Chinese patriarchal Confucian culture and the *hukou* ("household registration") system. I explore the everyday experiences of migrant women working in the food and beverage service industry in terms of how they live and make their home in Shanghai, socially, practically, and emotionally. Drawing on my empirical data, I first summarize how rural migrant women define home. Three different tropes of "home" recur: the familial home, the hometown, and the affective sense of feeling at home. Then, I explore rural migrant women's home-making practices in their work and living places. My analysis discloses that, while it is possible for these women to feel a sense of "home," their sense of "home" remains precarious because of the complex power relations they are entangled in as a result of the *hukou* system and Chinese patriarchal culture. Ultimately, this chapter aims to broaden the sense of "home" beyond its attachment to a sense of "belonging," because there are affective

experiences that may also create a sense of “home” in the process of migration.

Chapter 2, co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet, critically examines the concept of “home” in relation to rural migrant women working as domestic workers in Shanghai, who are regarded as low-trust employees by their urban employers. As China’s rural-to-urban migration has increased rapidly in recent decades, many young men and women are moving to the cities aspiring to better jobs with higher salaries. Some of the women opt for the job of *ayi* (阿姨 – literally, auntie), the common term used for a domestic worker (Yan 2008). Whether married or not, the *ayi* usually lives a single life in the city. *Ayis* in Shanghai are what we call “working-single,” a term that refers to their single status in the context of the family, as well as to their loneliness in the isolated workplace. This single status contributes to the precarity and fragility of the trust-relationship with the employers (Hochschild 2002). *Ayis* have to deal with the problem of mistrust by their employers, who might perceive them as thieves or sexual seducers (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). At the same time, *Ayis* are expected to produce affective labor (Yan 2008) within the spatial isolation of a domestic workplace that renders them precarious and puts them at risk of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence. Our analysis shows that *ayis* are sentient

wageworkers that employ strategies to build trust in a low-trust familial workplace.

Three main strategies for negotiating trust are identified: honesty, professionalism, and care.

Chapter 3 studies rural migrant women working in the Shanghai beauty parlor industry, focusing on how this industry emphasizes affective labor and articulates it along lines of migration, gender, and seniority. The analysis looks at three types of female beauty workers: apprentices, senior beauticians, and entrepreneurs. Bringing together Hardt and Negri's (2004) theorization of affective labor and Yang Jie's (2011) notion of aesthetic labor, this chapter investigates how the affective and aesthetic labor demanded from these migrant women affects their minds and bodies, and their position and value in the marriage market. On the basis of fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, the chapter begins by exploring the ways in which the demand of Shanghai beauty parlor industry for affective labor impacts the ability of rural migrant women to enter into other forms of affective relationships. It goes on to argue that affective labor in this industry is not wholly negative, but modifies bodies and minds in ways that can be both oppressive and enabling, depending on, among other things, the beauty worker's level of seniority. Finally, the chapter proposes that, in the beauty



parlor industry, there is a reciprocity with affective labor that includes the workers as well as the clients.

Chapter 4 examines how new definitions of the “Chinese modern woman” affect the lives of rural-urban migrant women, with a focus on the way these women are interpellated as modern and fashionable at the *Qipulu* Clothing Wholesale Market in Shanghai, also known as the “Cheap Road.” It analyzes how the spatial organization and commercial strategies of the Cheap Road allow rural migrant women a sense of being “modern,” and explores narratives from these migrants, focusing on their consumer experience, to explore how they transform themselves in response to the globalizing cityscape. This chapter suggests that the Cheap Road is organized spatially and commercially to sell rural women access to images of the “modern” and to the Chinese Dream. I argue that, by developing their fashion style through shopping, these women become “Chinese modern *rural* migrant women” capable of finding a point where their identities as migrant women and Shanghai women meet.

Chapter 5, co-authored with Esther Peeren, explores how Chinese rural-to-urban migrant women cope with the stigmatization they face as a result of conflicting gender norms regarding singlehood and marriage in their home

communities and in Shanghai. We focus on how migrant women legitimate their relationship status as single, married, or having a boyfriend in relation to these conflicting norms. We argue that the use of coping strategies that exploit the distance labor migration enforces between their rural hometown and their urban work and life space (which is often why their relationships are lived in non-normative ways in the first place) marks these women as more than just victims of their circumstances and of prejudice. Although not ready to abandon long-standing norms and maintaining a strong desire to get married at some point, these migrant women are capable of anticipating and countering the stigmatization of their singlehood or of how they live their relationships by managing their position in-between the urban context and their rural hometowns in intricate and deliberate ways.

## **Samenvatting:**

# **Vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders in de diensteneconomie van Shanghai: huiselijkheid, schoonheid en het stigma van het vrijgezellenbestaan**

Op basis van veldwerk in Shanghai behandelt dit onderzoek, door een combinatie van meerdere etnografische methodologieën, inclusief diepte-interviews, participatieve observatie, thuisbezoek en de Go-Along methode (Kusenbach 2003), de alledaagse ervaringen van vrouwen die van het platteland naar de stad getrokken zijn en in Shanghai in de dienstensector werken. Ik onderzoek hoe deze vrouwen leven, werken en liefhebben. Ik stel hierbij de volgende vragen: Wat vertellen hun ervaringen en gevoelens over hun werk en privéleven ons over migrantenarbeid en gender in het postsocialistische China van de 21<sup>ste</sup> eeuw? Wat zijn de culturele, sociale en economische implicaties van het besluit van deze migrantenvrouwen om in de dienstensector te gaan werken?

Veel onderzoekers hebben de aandacht gevestigd op de genderdimensie van de

plattelandsmigrantenpopulatie omdat de industrialisatie in het China van na de hervormingen vooral vrouwelijke arbeid vraagt. Vrouwelijke werkers worden gezien als gehoorzamer en minder rebels dan hun mannelijke equivalenten, en makkelijker onder controle te houden in de stedelijke werkomgeving. Zoals Pun Ngai (2005) omschrijft, krijgen vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders te maken met een “drievoudige onderdrukking” door de staat, het mondiale kapitalisme en het patriarchaat. Een rijke hoeveelheid literatuur heeft vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders, en met name fabrieksarbeiders, neergezet als “slachtoffers” van de door de staat geplande markteconomie (Lee 1998; Pun 1999, 2003, 2004, 2005; SACOM 2010). In deze literatuur komen vrouwen die in de dienstensector werken weinig aan bod, want de focus ligt op fabrieksarbeid. Mijn onderzoek verlegt de focus naar de dienstensector en de specifieke problemen, maar ook mogelijkheden, die vrouwelijke arbeidsmigranten van het platteland in deze sector tegenkomen.

Verspreid door Shanghai, wonen en werken dienstverleners in verschillende werkomgevingen onder een scala aan omstandigheden, en worden ze onderworpen aan diverse vormen van arbeidsbeleid en regelgeving, waaronder verschillende eisen wat betreft opleidingsniveau, vaardigheden en werkhouding, werktijden en roosters,

etc. Waar de staatsmedia, sociale media en onderzoekers zich vooral richten op fabrieksarbeiders in relatie tot China's snelle verstedelijking, zijn er enkele studies die de ervaringen van dienstverleners proberen vast te leggen (Liao 2016; Otis 2003, 2008, 2012; Shen 2015; Sun 2008, 2009, 2010; Yan 2008; Zhen 2003, 2009).

Mijn onderzoek draag bij aan deze literatuur door de concepten van “esthetische arbeid” (Yang 2011, Witz, Warhurst en Nickson 2003) “emotionele arbeid” (Hochschild 1979) en “affectieve arbeid” (Hardt 1999; Hardt & Negri 2004) in te zetten om de complexe manieren te vangen waarop dienstverlening in Shanghai doorwerkt op de lichamen, het gevoel en de dagelijkse ervaringen van vrouwelijke werknemers. Ik richt mij op de fysieke, mentale en economische transformaties die deze vrouwen ondergaan (als gevolg van hun omstandigheden) en verwezenlijken (als gevolg van hun handelingsvrijheid) door hun verhuizing naar de stad. Tegelijkertijd benadruk ik dat deze vrouwen wonen, werken en liefhebben in Shanghai zonder hun identiteit als plattelandsmigrant te verwaarlozen of vergeten; uit mijn onderzoek wordt duidelijk dat deze vrouwen hun thuisdorpen niet volledig achter zich laten, maar dat zij op precare maar ook strategische wijze tussen stad en platteland in gesitueerd blijven.

Om de hoofdvraag te beantwoorden over hoe migrantenarbeiders, in de nasleep van de nationale economische overgang van verwerkende industrieën naar een diensteneconomie, wonen, werken en liefhebben in Shanghai, concentreer ik mij op drie specifieke kwesties: de notie van “huiselijkheid,” de schoonheidseconomie, en het stigma rond vrijgezel zijn. Ten eerste verken ik hoe vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders een idee van “huiselijkheid” construeren in Shanghai, ondanks het feit dat zij binnen deze sociale context discursief door stedelingen worden gecategoriseerd als “verdachte” anderen (Sun 2009) van “lage kwaliteit” (Anagnost 2004). Ten tweede onderzoek ik hoe vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten in de schoonheidsindustrie hun lichamen en zelfbewustzijn transformeren door een vorm van affectieve arbeid te verrichten en als consumenten deel te nemen aan de schoonheidsindustrie. Tot slot, met vroege huwelijken en *shishi hunyin* (事实婚姻 – letterlijk: *de facto* huwelijk) nog steeds gangbaar op het Chinese platteland, onderzoek ik hoe vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten hun relatiestatus als vrijgezel, getrouwd of een vriend hebbende presenteren en legitimeren in relatie tot de conflicterende normatieve modellen van vrijgezel zijn en het huwelijk in plattelandsgemeenschappen en Shanghai.

Samen laten deze drie secties zien dat vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders in Shanghai het platteland nooit volledig achter zich laten, maar zich in een tussenpositie bevinden; dit leidt tot een constant proces van onderhandeling waarin hun identiteit niet gefixeerd maar flexibel is. Dit proces creëert vervolgens ruimte voor strategische handelingen, bijvoorbeeld met betrekking tot normen over het vrijgezellenbestaan en het huwelijk. Daarnaast laten alle drie de secties zien dat er grote verschillen zijn tussen de economische posities van vrouwelijke arbeidsmigranten. Dit maakt een analyse mogelijk van hoe verschillende economische posities de affectieve levens van deze vrouwen vormen, alsmede erkenning van het feit dat vrouwelijke arbeidsmigranten in zeer verschillende financiële situaties nog steeds dezelfde problemen kunnen hebben, met name discriminatie door stedelingen.

Voortbordurend op het werk van Ang (2015) over de conceptualisatie van migratie en huiselijkheid, behandelt hoofdstuk 1 het spanningsveld rond de dagelijkse huiselijkheid-creërende praktijken en ervaringen van thuisgevoel van deze vrouwen in relatie tot de Chinese patriarchale confucianistische cultuur en het *hukou* (“huishoudregistratie”) systeem. Ik onderzoek de alledaagse ervaringen van migrantenvrouwen werkzaam in het restaurantwezen in termen van hoe ze leven en

een thuis creëren in Shanghai, sociaal, praktisch en emotioneel. Op basis van mijn onderzoek geef ik eerst weer hoe vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten huiselijkheid definiëren. Drie verschillende patronen van “huiselijkheid” keren steeds terug: het familiale huis, het thuisdorp, en het affectieve gevoel van je thuis voelen. Daarna verken ik de huiselijkheid-creërende praktijken van de vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten op de plekken waar ze werken en wonen. Mijn analyse laat zien dat, hoewel deze vrouwen zich wel degelijk thuis kunnen voelen, dit thuisgevoel precair blijft vanwege de complexe machtsrelaties waarin ze verwickeld zijn als gevolg van het *hukou* systeem, en de Chinese patriarchale cultuur. Uiteindelijk hoopt dit hoofdstuk het idee van “huiselijkheid” breder te trekken dan de notie van “ergens horen,” omdat affectieve ervaringen ook een thuisgevoel kunnen creëren gedurende het migratieproces.

Hoofdstuk 2, dat ik samen met Jeroen de Kloet schreef, werpt een kritische blik op het idee van “huiselijkheid” bij vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten die als huishoudelijke hulp in Shanghai werken en met wantrouwen bekeken worden door hun stedelijke werkgevers. Omdat migratie van het platteland naar de stad in China over de afgelopen decennia snel toegenomen is, verhuizen veel jonge mannen en



vrouwen naar de steden hopen op betere banen met hogere salarissen. Sommige vrouwen kiezen voor een baan als *ayi* (阿姨 – letterlijk: tante), de gangbare term voor een huishoudelijke hulp (Yan 2008). Of ze nu getrouwd is of niet, woont de *ayi* gewoonlijk als vrijgezel in de stad. *Ayis* in Shanghai zijn wat wij “werkend vrijgezel” noemen; een term die zowel verwijst naar hun vrijgezelle status in de context van de familie als naar hun eenzaamheid in de relatief geïsoleerde werkplek. Deze vrijgezellenstatus draagt bij aan de precariteit en fragiliteit van de vertrouwensrelatie met de werkgevers (Hochschild 2002). *Ayis* moeten omgaan met het probleem van het wantrouwen van hun werkgevers, die hen kunnen zien als dieven of verleidsters (Gaetano 2015; Sun 2009). Tegelijkertijd wordt van *ayis* verwacht dat ze affectieve arbeid produceren (Yan 2008) in de ruimtelijke isolatie van een privé-huishouden dat hen precair maakt en waarbinnen ze het risico lopen van seksuele intimidatie, misbruik en geweld. Onze analyse laat zien dat *ayis* bewuste werknemers zijn die verschillende strategieën gebruiken om vertrouwen op te bouwen in een wantrouwende familiale werkplek. We onderscheiden drie hoofdstrategieën: eerlijkheid, professionalisme en zorgzaamheid.

Hoofdstuk 3 bestudeert vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten die in de

Shanghainese schoonheidssalonindustrie werken, en richt zich op hoe deze industrie affectieve arbeid benadrukt en articuleert in relatie tot migratie, gender en senioriteit. De analyse behandelt drie soorten vrouwelijke schoonheidsspecialisten: stagiaires, senior schoonheidsspecialisten en zelfstandige ondernemers. Door Hardt en Negris (2004) theorie over affectieve arbeid te combineren met Yang Jie's (2011) idee van esthetische arbeid onderzoekt dit hoofdstuk hoe de affectieve en esthetische arbeid die van deze schoonheidsspecialisten wordt verlangd hun lichaam, geest en positie op de huwelijksmarkt beïnvloedt. Op basis van veldwerk in Shanghai begint dit hoofdstuk met het onderzoeken van de manieren waarop de vraag van de Shanghainese schoonheidssalonindustrie om affectieve arbeid de mogelijkheid voor vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten om andere affectieve relaties aan te gaan beperkt. Hierna beargumenteert het hoofdstuk dat affectieve arbeid in deze industrie niet volledig negatief is, maar lichamen en geesten modificeert op manieren die, afhankelijk van onder meer de senioriteit van de werker, onderdrukkend of juist bevrijdend kunnen zijn. Tenslotte betoogt het hoofdstuk dat affectieve arbeid in de schoonheidssalonindustrie een reciprociteit inhoudt waaraan zowel werkers als hun cliënten deelnemen.

Hoofdstuk 4 onderzoekt hoe nieuwe definities van de “moderne Chinese vrouw” de levens van vrouwelijke migrantenarbeiders beïnvloeden, met een focus op de manier waarop deze vrouwen geïnterpelleerd worden als modern en modieus in de Qipu Lu Clothing Wholesale Market in Shanghai, ook wel “Cheap Road” genoemd. Ik analyseer hoe de ruimtelijke organisatie en commerciële strategieën van de Cheap Road vrouwelijke plattelandsmigranten een gevoel van “modern”-zijn toestaan, en onderzoek vertellingen van deze migranten, met name over hun ervaring als consumenten, om te verkennen hoe zij zichzelf transformeren in reactie op het globaliserende stadslandschap. Dit hoofdstuk suggereert dat de Cheap Road ruimtelijk en commercieel georganiseerd is om plattelandsvrouwen toegang tot beelden van het “moderne” en de Chinese Droom te verkopen. Ik beargumenteer dat deze vrouwen, door hun modegevoel te ontwikkelen middels shoppen, “Chinese moderne *plattelandsmigranten*” worden die in staat zijn om een punt te vinden waarop hun identiteiten als plattelandsmigrant én Shanghainese vrouw samenkomen.

Hoofdstuk 5, dat ik samen met Esther Peeren schreef, onderzoekt hoe vrouwelijke Chinese plattelandsmigranten omgaan met de stigmatisering die hen treft als gevolg van rondom conflicterende gendernormen met betrekking tot het

vrijgezellenbestaan en het huwelijk in hun geboortedorpen en in Shanghai. We richten ons op hoe vrouwelijke migranten hun relatiestatus als alleenstaand, getrouwd of een vriend hebbende legitimeren in relatie tot deze conflicterende normen. We beargumenteren dat het gebruik van coping-strategieën, die de door arbeidsmigratie gecreëerde afstand tussen hun dorpse en hun stedelijke werk en leven (die vaak de reden is dat ze op non-normatieve manieren leven) uitbuiten, deze vrouwen tot meer dan louter slachtoffers van hun omstandigheden en de heersende normatieve opvattingen maakt. Hoewel deze migrantenvrouwen niet klaar zijn om volledig afstand te doen van traditionele normen en een sterk verlangen houden om uiteindelijk te trouwen, zijn ze wel in staat om de stigmatisering van hun vrijgezelle status of van de manier waarop ze hun relaties inrichten te anticiperen en tegen te gaan door hun positie tussen de stedelijke context en hun thuisdorp op subtiele en doordachte manieren te navigeren.