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Ip, P.T.T.; Peeren, E.

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# Exploiting the distance between conflicting norms: Female rural-to-urban migrant workers in Shanghai negotiating stigma around singlehood and marriage

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs)**Penn Tsz Ting Ip and Esther Peeren**

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**Abstract**

On the basis of fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, this article 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 norms. Our findings reveal that migrant women, while not rejecting existing norms outright, actively pre-empt or counteract the stigmatization of their singlehood or of the fact that they live apart from their husband using coping strategies that exploit their position in between the urban context and their rural hometowns in intricate ways.

**Keywords**

China, coping strategies, double biography, Erving Goffman, gender norms, marriage, modalities of agency, rural-to-urban migrant women, Shanghai, singlehood, stigma

**Introduction**

Rural-to-urban migrant workers in China, commonly referred to as the ‘floating population’ (*liudong renkou*),<sup>1</sup> face many challenges at the economic, cultural, social and emotional levels, similar to, but also distinct from, those faced by international migrants or

**Corresponding author:**

Esther Peeren, University of Amsterdam, Spuistraat 134, 1012 VB Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: [e.peeren@uva.nl](mailto:e.peeren@uva.nl)

internal migrants in different countries.<sup>2</sup> 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 ‘household registration’ (*hukou*) system (Fan, 2002, 2003) and their stereotyping, discrimination 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 article zooms in on a particular gendered form of stigmatization, exploring how Chinese rural-to-urban migrant women strategically negotiate the conflicting gender norms regarding singlehood and marriage in their home communities and in Shanghai without, however, actively rejecting them. What these women engage in are what Saba Mahmood (2005) calls ‘modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse’ propagated by much western feminism (p. 153). Our findings, consequently, 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 in China 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, n.d.; 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 ways 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 modalities 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 one hand, forces migrant women to negotiate different normative models of singlehood and marriage. On the other hand, this same distance may allow them to avoid or counteract stigmatization by performing adherence to different norms in the city and the rural. 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 article 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 Penn Tsz Ting Ip 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 local feminist groups supporting minorities.

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. US\$150–US\$1,200), with apprentices not receiving any income and those working on commission earning a variable amount.<sup>3</sup> 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.

Toward 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 relationship status earlier in the interview, found the question 'Are you single?' 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 as though they are single. In response to this, the women either confirmed that they did indeed feel single 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, urban or countrywide norms regarding singlehood and married life. However, the responses also revealed how the migrant women position themselves strategically in relation to these norms, especially when unable to accord with them, engaging a ‘modality of action’ that, rather than rejecting existing norms outright, works to reconfigure the ‘kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm’ (Mahmood, 2005: 157), in this case by obfuscating or downplaying their non-adherence to the norm through distance maximization and minimization, as we will show below. Before delineating this modality of action, which 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 People’s Republic of China (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 (The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China (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 People’s Republic of China (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.<sup>4</sup>

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 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 or be ashamed. 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 urban 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., 2012b: 1087), which define marriage as 'the crucial state of a woman's life' (Shih, 2015: 298) and wield particular influence in rural areas (Liu, 2011).

While marriage continues to mark women's entry into adulthood throughout China (Ji, 2015), there are significant differences between rural and urban contexts. As Gaetano (2004) 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' (p. 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 premarital sex and cohabitation (Sudhinaraset et al., 2012b: 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. Zhang Fan, a 28-year-old former beautician from Shenyang, notes that 'a girl must be married off one day', indicating that, after a certain age, staying single carries a social stigma. The age at which this stigma is incurred is lower in rural areas than in urban ones, where both men and women marry later (Cheng et al., 2011; Ji and Yeung, 2014). As Xueniu, a 20-year-old manicurist from Hunan, shared,

I feel that [my classmates who got married at the age of 20] got married too soon. For me, I think I should get married when I am 23 or 24 years old. It is better for me to have a child when I am 25.

Because she has left her rural hometown and classmates behind, Xueniu can aim to get married at an age that, in the urban context, is still considered proper for a woman. Rural women who migrate to Shanghai experience less day-to-day pressure to marry young and, as a result, can spend longer looking for and picking a partner than would have been acceptable in their hometown.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to emphasize that while rural and urban China have different norms concerning when a woman should marry, 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 female urbanites with professional jobs who remain unmarried after reaching a certain age, usually around 27<sup>6</sup> 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, 2005; Lahad, 2012).

The norm that married couples should live together and that parents, especially mothers, should live with their children (Evans, 2010) is also not exclusive to rural China but the scale and organization of rural-to-urban labor migration has forced many rural migrant families to live apart for extended periods, making it particularly hard for them to live up to this norm. 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 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). Thus, contemporary rural-to-urban migrancy, as a state-supported phenomenon and, for many, an economic necessity, makes it impossible for migrant women to fully adhere to the prevailing norms regarding marriage and motherhood, resulting in stigmatization. Such stigmatization may be stronger in cities, as urbanites do not have to live apart from their families and tend to view young rural migrant women who do so as

potential sexual seducers and thus as threats (Sun, 2010). Before outlining how rural migrant women deal with the stigmatization of their singlehood or married life in Shanghai and their hometown, we first specify how stigmatization works and how it may be countered.

## Stigmatization and how to counter it

The sociologist Erving Goffman (1986 [1963]: 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, 1986 [1963]: 88).<sup>7</sup> 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, 1986 [1963]: 7).

In Xie Ayi’s remarks, cited above, a sense of her potential stigmatization for not being a proper wife and mother is perceptible; her questioning interjections – ‘Right?’ – invoke and affirm the norm of living with your family, while her references to it not being ‘good’ for a husband and wife to be apart for long and to the danger of her husband having an affair if left uncared for 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 husband’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 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 and 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 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 et al., 2012a: 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).

The stigma attached to women with rural backgrounds in Shanghai is strongly sensed by these women and seen to affect their ability to find a desirable marriage partner. Elaine, a 27-year-old hairstylist from Hubei, noted:

It is nearly impossible to dream that Shanghainese men would like to marry us rural women, because of our low social status.

Thus, rural migrant women feel excluded from the Shanghai marriage market, considered undesirable not because of being well educated or having a successful career, like urban 'leftover women', but because of their rural origins. As a result, most rural migrant women who arrive in Shanghai unmarried end up marrying rural migrant men, often from their home provinces (Zhang, 2013).

Besides being stigmatized in Shanghai, rural migrant women also face potential stigmatization in their hometowns. Several of our research participants said that they worry about relatives and friends in their rural hometown spreading gossip about their supposed 'immorality' in the city. Such 'immorality' is ascribed particularly to women working in urban hair and beauty salons, who are rumored to be 'playgirls' (Ip, 2017: 569). Xiuxiu, a 24-year-old married waitress, 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 fear of being stigmatized in their rural communities for behavior seen as improper for a single or married woman is strong, but it 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, 1986 [1963]: 78) and to engage in behavior in Shanghai, such

as cohabitating with a boyfriend, that counters the ‘traditional moral standards’ of rural China (Farrer and Sun, 2003: 3).

In the remainder of the article, 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 (which may themselves be disagreed on, as is the case, for example, with what exactly it means to be ‘single’) to examining what happens when, mostly by necessity, they depart from the norm and face stigmatization. Finally, we trace the different modalities of agency mobilized to avoid or challenge such stigmatization, showing how rural migrant women preempt stigmatization (predominantly in their rural hometown) of their continuing singlehood or divorce by maximizing the distance between their hometown and the city, and counter stigmatization (predominantly in the city) of living apart from their family by minimizing the distance between themselves and their husband. On the basis of our analysis, we conclude that the assertion that their experience as migrants moving between rural and urban China has led to the formulation of ‘new life goals’ (Pei, 2011) does not extend to these women’s attitudes toward singlehood and marriage, which mostly remain in line with existing norms. This, however, does not mean they have no agency; by strategically reconfiguring their relationship to urban and rural norms as they move between these contexts, rural migrant women act to make their lives more livable (Butler, 2004).

### 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 felt 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 did not feel single because they had a good relationship with their husband.

Being ‘single’ can be understood as referring to the legal status of not being married, divorced or widowed. As such, it covers a range of relationship statuses from having no relationship at all to being in a relationship that, in all but legal status, is equal to marriage. As a self-description, being ‘single’, then, can have very different meanings, with *danshen*’s possible signification of ‘being alone’ and the current popularity of the designation ‘leftover women’ (Fincher, 2014; Gaetano, 2015; To, 2015; Wallis and Shen, 2018) further complicating the picture in China.<sup>8</sup> What becomes clear from the aggregated answers of our research participants 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 as an urbanite<sup>9</sup>), it is also interpreted in other ways. This in turn suggests that truly understanding what the

migrant women's answers reveal about their relation to the rural and urban norms and stigmas 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 also indicated an adherence to the norms concerning when they should marry and how they should find a husband that prevail 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 continues to be of great importance to the migrant women. At the same time, their geographical distance from the rural hometown and its norms gives them some room for negotiation. Miumiu, for example, indicated that, at 26, she felt pressured by her parents to get married and allowed them to help her by setting her up on blind dates, but she 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 30 blind dates, said, 'if I cannot find the one, I would not marry a random man. I want to be happy after getting married'. Here, going on blind dates emerges as 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).

Interestingly, whereas we found almost universal affirmation of the norm that a woman should marry at some point, conflicting perspectives emerged regarding when 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 norms 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. The fact that norms are not necessarily stable or fully shared opens up space for their negotiation and reshaping. In the following section, we discuss how rural-to-urban migrant women develop modalities of agency that allow them to avoid or counter the stigmatization incurred by not living up to 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 to legitimate the relationships they had or desired, some migrant women expressed adherence to certain norms, while indicating a willingness to (temporarily) 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).<sup>10</sup> 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)

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 to 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', we have already noted that migrant women do not usually end up marrying urban men and that when they make unconventional choices, they 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 (1986 [1963]) refers to as 'role and audience segregation' (p. 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 (1986 [1963]) 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 (p. 78). The resulting 'biographical discontinuity' may be 'bridged' in various ways, including by gossip traveling between the two groups (Goffman, 1986 [1963]: 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, 1986 [1963]: 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 rural stigmatization, married migrant women living apart from their husbands try to pre-empt urban 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 (linked to that of the rural migrant woman as sexual predator) 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 and fidelity 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 here 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.

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 when the opportunity presents itself.

## **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, in Shanghai, '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 of whom their parents would approve. 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', suggesting that the borders of singlehood are shifting, particularly in cities like Shanghai, marriage remains the normative ideal for which migrant women strive. 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, mutual trust and fidelity. Future research will have to determine whether these coping strategies 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 potential stigmatization in both contexts. What we have stressed here is that instead of dismissing these coping strategies because they do not amount to overt acts of resistance and subversion, they should be valued as modalities of agency through which rural migrant women in China make their lives more livable.

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## Notes

1. We use *hanyu pinyin* (Chinese phonetic alphabet, the official romanization system used in the People’s Republic of China (PRC)) as the transliteration system for Chinese words.
2. For a discussion of the similarities and differences between international and internal migration, see King and Skeldon (2010).
3. One outlier has an income of RMB90,000–RMB100,000 (=ca. US\$13,600–US\$15,000) per month. Importantly, in the urban context, all rural-to-urban migrant women tend to be seen as lower class, regardless of their income.
4. Translated by Penn Tsz Ting Ip.
5. 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 in 1990 to 26 in 2010, in towns from 22.69 to 24.56 and in the countryside from 22.49 to 23.73. Because these numbers only include official marriages and not de facto marriages, they probably put the average age of marriage in the countryside too high.

6. 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).
7. Although Goffman (1986 [1963]) mainly discusses stigma in relation to physical deficiencies, he also cites the example of the stigma attached, in America, to spinsterhood (p. 88).
8. Our data are not extensive enough to assess whether, in addition to its semantic ambivalence, there exist significantly different cultural understandings of *danshen* or 'single' in different regions of China. What our data do show, as indicated later in this section, is that among rural migrant women living in Shanghai, there is no agreement about whether someone stops being *danshen* when they are in a relationship or only when they marry. The meaning of *danshen*, therefore, is contested.
9. Terry, a 26-year-old advertising agent from Guangdong, makes clear that single rural migrant women fall outside the category of 'leftover' women:

*Shengnü* are those who demand a lot from their partners and as a result they have become leftover. It is because they can't find a man who suits their needs. But they must have certain qualifications to be leftover, for example high salary and high education, and they have their own thoughts.

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

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### Biographical notes

Penn Tsz Ting Ip is assistant professor at the School of Media and Communication at Shanghai Jiaotong University, guest researcher at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam, and member of the SSHRC-funded partnership 'Urbanization, Gender and the Global South: A Transformative Knowledge Network' (GenUrb). Her research interests include migration studies, urban studies, post-colonialism, globalization, affect theory and queer studies. Her PhD project was supported by the Humanities in the European Research Area under the funded project 'Creating the "New" Asian Woman: Entanglements of Urban Space, Cultural Encounters and Gendered Identities in Shanghai and Delhi' (2013–2016 SINGLE Project Nr: 586).

Esther Peeren is professor of Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam and Academic Director of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). She leads the ERC-funded project 'Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World' (2018–2023). Her recent publications include *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (Palgrave, 2014) and the edited volumes *Peripheral Visions in the Globalizing Present: Space, Mobility, Esthetics* (Brill, 2016, with Hanneke Stuit and Astrid Van Weyenberg) and *Global Cultures of Contestation: Mobility, Sustainability, Esthetics & Connectivity* (Palgrave, 2018, with Robin Celikates, Jeroen de Kloet and Thomas Poell).