



*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 waged workers 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.