Penn Tsz Ting Ip and Jeroen de Kloet

The Precarity of Trust: Domestic Helpers as "Working-Singles" in Shanghai

Abstract In this chapter, we analyze the working conditions of domestic helpers *(ayi)* and coin the term "working-single" to refer to their affective experiences in laboring in the private urban households, where they are being isolated, and, arguably, alienated. Whether married or not, the *ayi* usually lives a single life in the city. Focusing on the ways in which *ayis* build trust with their employers, we present an ethnographic study of *ayis* in Shanghai, based on nineteen interviews. We begin by outlining the reasons why rural-to-urban migrant women have chosen to work as *ayis*. Then, we follow Arlie R. Hochschild's theorization of "emotion work" and emotional labor to explore the tactics that Shanghai domestic helpers use to gain their employers' trust. Three main tactics are identified: honesty, professionalism, and care. These tactics enable *ayis* to attain moments of agency and create a sense of reciprocal intensity that shapes the production of emotional labor as well as the employer–employee relationship. We argue that the *ayi*–urban employer relationship is dynamic and intense. In this sense, the process of trust-building should be reconsidered as a power game in the context of rural migrant women's job security and work safety.

Keywords domestic workers; emotion work; care; reciprocity

Ip, Penn Tsz Ting and Jeroen de Kloet. 2024. "The Precarity of Trust: Domestic Helpers as 'Working-Singles' in Shanghai", In *Being Single in the City. Cultural Geographies of Gendered Urban Space in Asia,* edited by Christiane Brosius et al., 89–114. Heidelberg Studies on Transculturality 11. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1425.c20536

> *In the beginning, I was not used to it. I was shy. Also, some people guard against (fang 防) you. (Yaoyao Ayi, thirty-seven years old, Henan, part-time)*[1]

Yaoyao Ayi, a domestic helper in Shanghai, shared with us that some of her employers have the tendency to *fang* her, meaning that they act as if they were guarding against a theft. In China, there is a common phrase that runs as follows: "one should never anticipate to do harm to others, yet one shall guard against the harm others might do to one" (*hairen zhixin bukeyou; fangren zhixin bukewu* 害人之心不可有，防人之心不可无). The domestic helpers we interviewed repeatedly mentioned that their employers *fang* them. This gesture of mistrust makes it more difficult for them to do their work.

Central to this chapter are the lived experiences of the domestic helpers in Shanghai, culturally called "aunties" (*ayis* 阿姨), and the ways they manage to build trust in a climate of mistrust. As reported by *China Credit*, the president of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Xi Jinping frames the domestic service industry as a "sunrise industry" that plays a crucial role in the development of the care economy. However, the industry is facing problems, for instance, the lack of standardization and legal restrictions, which require governmental attention to protect the workers' safety and rights.[2] *Ayis* are forced to deal with the problem of mistrust of their employers, who might perceive them as potential thieves or sexual seducers.[3] In some extreme cases, domestic helpers endure sexual abuse and violence when working in the employers' homes.[4]

In this chapter, we analyze the working conditions of domestic helpers and coin the term "working-single" to refer to their affective experiences in laboring in the private urban households, where they are being isolated, and arguably alienated. Mindful of the fact that rural migrant women commonly work in the cities without the company of their spouses and children,[5] we also aspire to broaden the term "working-single" to incorporate married women living away from their husbands and / or children. This "working-single" status contributes to the precarity and fragility of the

1 Biographical information about domestic workers is presented following the sequence of their family name, age, and hometown, together with their job type, and the family type of their employers. All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the authors.

2 Mengyu Liu刘梦雨, "The Ecology of Household 'Trust': A Record of Promoting the Standardization of Domestic Service Industry in China家政 '信' 生态——我国推动家政服务业规范化标准化发展纪实," *China Credit* 中国信用, no. 2 (2020).

3 Arianne M. Gaetano, *Out to Work: Migration, Gender, and the Changing Lives of Rural Women in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015); Wanning Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

4 Mei Cong, "A Study of Domestic Helpers' Social Support Challenges 家政女工的社会支持问题研究." (M.A. diss., University of Jinan, 2019).

5 Penn Tsz Ting Ip and Esther Peeren, "Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (2019).

trust-relationship with the employers.[6] How do *ayis* build a sense of trust in low-trust familial workplaces? How do they navigate the social and sexual politics in private home spaces? How do they behave and perform domestic labor under the suspicious gazes of their demanding employers?

Focusing on the ways in which *ayis* build trust with their employers, we present an ethnographic study of *ayis* in Shanghai. This chapter begins by outlining the reasons why rural-to-urban migrant women have chosen to work as *ayis*. Then, we follow Arlie R. Hochschild's theorization of "emotion work"[7]and emotional labor[8] to explore the tactics that Shanghai domestic helpers use in order to perform emotional labor to gain their employers' trust. Three main tactics are identified: honesty, professionalism, and care. First, *ayis* express their sense of honesty to gain trust through verbal language and bodily gestures.[9] Second, *ayis* employ professionalism in the form of "face-work"[10] to build trust with their employers. Third, *ayis* perform care, an attribute essential to carrying out emotional labor and building a trust relationship with their urban employers. Focusing on the tactics they employ to build trust in low-trust workplaces, we explore and illustrate the ways in which these strategies enable *ayis* to attain moments of agency and create a sense of reciprocal intensity that shapes the production of emotional labor as well as the employer–employee relationship. Based on our analysis, we argue that the *ayi*–urban employer relationship is dynamic and intense. In this sense, the process of trust-building should be reconsidered as a power game in the context of rural migrant women's job security and work safety.

Certain scholars have pointed out that domestic helpers and their employers are situated in a reciprocal social relationship similar to that of lords and servants. Historically, as Esther Peeren proposes, "while servants are dependent on their masters, the reverse is also true: masters need their servants both for assistance with practical everyday matters and to maintain their social status."[11] Following Peeren,[12] we stress the reciprocity of the employer–employee relationship: *ayis* are not easily replaceable, unlike factory girls or waitresses, because employers have no choice but to put their trust in the employed domestic helpers, a process that takes time and requires affective labor on the part of the helpers. In the sociocultural context, *ayis* are generally portrayed as sexual seducers by China's media,[13]

6 See, for example, Arlie R. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1983] 2012).
7 Arlie R. Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979).
8 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*.
9 Cecilia Wee, "Xin, Trust, and Confucius' Ethics," *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 3 (2011).
10 Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967).
11 Esther Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 87.
12 Peeren, *Spectral Metaphor*.
13 Sun, *Maid in China*.

and therefore these working women have to trust that their (male) employers are decent gentlemen (*zhengrenjunzi* 正人君子) who would not sexually harass or abuse them. Conversely, they must convince their female employers that they can be trusted with their husbands. Unlike factory girls, waitresses, or beauty service workers, *ayis* are forced to deal with spatial isolation in the workplace that renders them precarious and puts them at risk of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence. Whereas the Chinese mass media predominantly neglects the precarity of the female rural–urban migrant domestic helpers, this chapter explores how these women find ways to work with their demanding employers. We have chosen to focus on the rural-to-urban migrant women in the study because they are considered as a particularly vulnerable and unstable group, being part of the "floating population," referring to the ways rural migrants cannot settle in the cities and have to travel between their rural homes and the urban workplaces.[14] Because the urban middle class tends to exhibit higher levels of pride and prejudice, and thereby discriminate against rural migrants, the means through which the rural-to-urban domestic helpers build trust with the employers in Shanghai, are more challenging and precarious.

This chapter builds on a qualitative study involving fieldwork research conducted in Shanghai between September and December 2014, between May and July 2015, and in October 2016, by one of the authors, Penn Tsz Ting Ip. During her fieldwork, she conducted in-depth interviews with nineteen domestic helpers working in Shanghai. To establish a more comprehensive understanding of the domestic service industry (*jiazheng fuwuye* 家政服务), the researcher also conducted an in-depth interview with a thirty-year-old businesswoman, Madam Ma from Zhejiang, who owns a domestic service company in Shanghai. In addition, the researcher interviewed two women—one from Shanghai and one from Hong Kong—both of whom had hired domestic helpers in Shanghai, to obtain a sense of employers' experiences of employing *ayis* in their homes. Altogether, twenty-two interviews were conducted, twenty of which were audio-recorded after obtaining consent from the interviewees. For the two interviews without audio recordings, detailed notes were taken during the interview. The research participants, aged from thirty-seven to fifty-four at the time of their interviews, were asked to use pseudonyms for themselves during their interviews in order to protect their privacy.

Trust, face-work, and emotional labor in performing domestic service

Historically, domestic helpers were of lower social rank in the Chinese community and worked for rich families. This changed after the Communist Party took over control in 1949. As Hairong Yan writes,

14 Sun, *Maid in China*.

> After 1949, domestic workers were no longer called by any of the old terms for servants. The early classical terms *baomu* (保姆—literally, "protecting mother") and, alternatively, *ayi* (literally, "auntie") became categorical terms for all domestic helpers regardless of their specific responsibilities… In both the Mao and post-Mao eras, rural migrant women were the main source for domestic workers.[15]

Despite their associations with family life, according to Yan,[16] *ayi* or *baomu* still became degrading terms for rural-to-urban domestic helpers. In the present as well, rural women in China travel from rural regions to the cities to do the "dirty work" of supporting the economic growth of urban China.[17] This phenomenon, embedded within social inequality, is constituted by the rural–urban divide under the household registration (*hukou* 户口) system.[18] Generally, rural women are considered to be of "low quality" (*suzhidi* 素质低) by the urban population.[19] This creates a precarious situation in which rural women must contend with discrimination in urban homes and grapple with the everyday problems created by mistrust.[20] Hence, Wen and

15 Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 19.

16 Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*, 19.

17 For the conception of "dirty work," see Bridget Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (London: Zed Books, 2000).

18 Penn Tsz Ting Ip, "Desiring Singlehood? Rural Migrant Women and Affective Labour in the Shanghai Beauty Parlour Industry," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2017).

19 Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004).

20 This situation is not unique to China. For example, foreign domestic helpers are of paramount importance for the working population of Hong Kong and face severe discrimination. See Adam Ka-lok Cheung and Lake Lui, "Hiring Domestic Help in Hong Kong: The Role of Gender Attitude and Wives' Income," *Journal of Family Issues* 38, no. 1 (2017); Nicole Constable, "Jealousy, Chastity, and Abuse: Chinese Maids and Foreign Helpers in Hong Kong," *Modern China* 22, no. 4 (1996); Nicole Constable, "Sexuality and Discipline among Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong," *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 3 (1997); Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Julian M. Groves and Lake Lui, "The 'Gift' of Help: Domestic Helpers and the Maintenance of Hierarchy in the Household Division of Labour," *Sociology* 46, no. 1 (2012); Hans J. Ladegaard, "Demonising the Cultural Other: Legitimising Dehumanisation of Foreign Domestic Helpers in the Hong Kong Press," *Discourse, Context and Media* 2, no. 3 (2013). Globally, migrants from the Global South perform "unwanted household tasks" or what is known as "dirty work" for families in the Global North. See Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work*; Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie R. Hochschild, "Introduction," to *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie R. Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Press, 2002); Pei-Chia Lan, *Global Cinderellas: Migrant Domestics and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Helma Lutz, *The New Maids: Transnational Women and the Care Economy* (London: Zedbooks, 2011); see also Rosie Cox, *The Servant Problem: Domestic Employment in a Global Economy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Leslie Salzinger, "A Maid by Any Other Name: The Transformation of 'Dirty Work' by Central American Immigrants," in *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*,

Wang write, "The negative perceptions held by urbanites and migrants toward each other, the consequent hostility and mistrust between the two, and a persistently segregated economy and labor market for migrants jointly work their way to pose a real challenge for migrants to socialize with urbanites on a friendly and equal footing."[21]

Wanning Sun shows that urban residents in China often find themselves caught in a situation where they feel they cannot trust their maids (*baomu* 保姆), yet have to put them in charge of their household, which involves a great degree of intimacy, responsibility, and confidentiality.[22] The specific nature of the job performed by *baomu* puts migrant women in "the boundaries of the public and the private, the paid and the unpaid, and those of the family."[23] Sun vividly criticizes mainstream newspapers for depicting the *baomu* negatively, for example, as stealing money from their urban employers, being negligent of the babies in their care, or seducing the man of the household.[24] Due to this bias in media representation, "migrant women—cast in the light of difference, however sympathetically—suffer a reproduction of their deprivation that is both social and discursive."[25]

This chapter conceptualizes trust in relation to domestic service work and Erving Goffman's "face-work."[26] Hence, before analyzing how *ayis*, as working-singles, affectively negotiate trust in such a difficult—if not hostile—environment, it is crucial to reflect on the notion of trust itself. Building up trust is a slow process that involves both a verbal as well as a performative dimension. It requires speech acts in which one expresses trust to another, but it also requires movements, behavioral patterns, and gestures through which trust is articulated.[27] The performative dimension

---

ed. Michael Burawoy, Alice Burton, Ann Arnett Ferguson, and Kathryn J. Fox (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

21 Ming Wen and Guixin Wang, "Demographic, Psychological, and Social Environmental Factors of Loneliness and Satisfaction among Rural-to-Urban Migrants in Shanghai, China," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50, no. 2 (2009): 155–182. https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0020715208101597.

22 Wanning Sun, "Indoctrination, Fetishization, and Compassion: Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman," in *On the Move: Women and Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*, ed. Arianne Gaetano and Tamara Jacka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 117.

23 Sun, "Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman," 117.

24 Sun, "Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman," 117.

25 Sun, "Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman," 125.

26 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*.

27 Interestingly, in Confucian ideology, integrity (*xin* 信) is one of the five virtues of the gentleman. Baiyun Gong, Xin He, and Huei–Min Hsu, "Guanxi and Trust in Strategic Alliances," *Journal of Management History* 19, no. 3 (2013): 363. According to Cecilia Wee, "One significant feature of *xin*, suggested by the character itself, is that *xin* is primarily concerned with speech acts. The character is comprised of a radical, *ren* 人, linked to *yan* 言, speech. This suggests that the person with *xin* (the 'trustworthy person') is one who does as she has said she would." She also comments, "The notion of *xin* is frequently taken to be largely isomorphic with the notion of trust, and passages involving *xin* are commonly translated in terms of 'trust' (and its cognates)." Wee, "Xin, Trust, and Confucius' Ethics," 516–517.

is related to what Goffman calls "face-work."[28] Face, in his definition, refers to

> an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share...
>
> ...One's own face and the face of others are constructs of the same order; it is the rules of the group and the definition of the situation which determine how much feeling one is to have for face and how this feeling is to be distributed among the faces involved.[29]

"Face" thus depends on the rules and values of both a particular society and the situation in which the social interaction is embedded. As Goffman further elaborates, "By face-work I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Face-work serves to counteract 'incidents'—that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face."[30] He additionally explains that a social relationship is a way in which the person is "forced to trust his self-image and face to the tact and good conduct of others."[31] In this sense, to build a good social relationship, a person has to first trust his/her self-image in which he/she has to perform "self-trust" before gaining trust from others. This is important for this study because trust is performative: prior to gaining trust from the urban employers, an *ayi* first has to trust her own self-image and ability to perform as a trustworthy domestic worker; they can build "trust" only based on the performance of trusting themselves.

Resonating with the performative nature of "trust" are the notions of "emotion work" and emotional labor developed by Arlie Hochschild.[32] Hochschild's "emotion work" builds upon Goffman's approaches to emotive experience and his concept of "acting," in which acting is read as the direct management of behavioral expression and the management of feeling.[33] Hochschild explains Goffman's theory by using the actor playing the role of King Lear as an example, to suggest that the ways an actor focuses on outward demeanor and the constellation of minute expressions to perform an emotion, are known as "surface acting," whereas the technique of another actor who calls out his memories and feelings to elicit the corresponding expressions of his role, is known as "deep acting."[34]

To Hochschild, emotional labor in service work is produced in two basic ways: first, through "surface acting", referring to the facial and bodily adjustment of the workers to disguise their feelings. In her words, "We are

28 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*.
29 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 5–6.
30 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 12.
31 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 42.
32 Hochschild, "Emotion Work"; Hochschild, *Managed Heart*.
33 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), quoted in Hochschild, "Emotion Work," 558.
34 Hochschild, "Emotion Work," 558.

capable of disguising what we feel, of pretending to feel what we do not—of doing surface acting."[35] She stresses that the goal of performing "surface acting" is to provide service with a smile: "In surface acting we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves."[36] "Deep acting" refers to the mobilization of workers' emotions to provide service work according to the company's projected images, a form of social engineering that permits customers to enjoy better service experiences.

The notion of emotional labor has been used to analyze the tertiary industry of China, in particular the domestic work sector.[37] Xiao Mei emphasizes that through either "surface acting" or "deep acting," workers have different degrees of autonomy when performing their services, enjoying the freedom to choose how to, and not to, perform labor.[38] Based on a Marxist feminist perspective, Yihui Su and Annie Ni propose to capture the autonomous nature of acting and argue that female service workers' working experiences are encapsulated within both patriarchal suppression and the exploitative nature of domestic service.[39] Some scholars suggest that the industry of domestic service should be regularized to protect workers' rights, whereas some studies argue that the unstable working hours and the non-contract based working conditions of this specific industry allow more freedom and power for the service workers from a neoliberal economic perspective.[40] In this chapter, we take the middle ground, recognizing exploitation in service work but also acknowledging a certain autonomy in emotional labor.

Working as an *ayi*

There are different types of domestic helpers in Shanghai. Since different job types determine not only the working hours but also the work environment, requirements, and expectations of both the employers and the employees, these different types of domestic helpers perform differing forms of emotional labor and face-work to build trust with employers

35 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*, 33.
36 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*, 33.
37 Xiao Mei梅笑, "Positive Experiences in Emotional Labor: Deep Acting, Symbolic Boundaries, and Labor Autonomy 情感劳动中的积极体验:深层表演、象征性秩序与劳动自主性," *Society: Chinese Journal of Sociology* 社会 40, no. 2 (2020); Yihui Su 苏熠慧 and Annie Ni倪安妮, "An Analysis on the Gender Mechanism of Emotional Labor of Maternity Matron for the Newborn: Taking Shanghai CX Domestic Service Company as an Example 育婴家政工情感劳动的性别化机制分析——以上海CX家政公司为例," *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 妇女研究论丛 6, no. 150 (2016); Chaoguo Xing 邢朝国, "The 'Hyper Precarity' of Informal Employment Under the COVID-19 Pandemic and Workers' Coping Strategies: Taking Postpartum Doulas in Beijing as an Example 疫情之下非正规就业的'超不稳定性'及主体应对——以北京市月嫂为例," *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 妇女研究论丛 3, no. 165 (2021).
38 Mei, "Positive Experiences in Emotional Labor."
39 Su and Ni, "Gender Mechanism of Emotional Labor."
40 Xing, "'Hyper Precarity' Under COVID-19 Pandemic."

in their households. First, domestic helpers can be categorized by their job types: *zhongdiangong* 钟点工 (literally, part-time), *zhujia* 住家 (live-in), *quanzhi* 全职 (full-time), *shewai* 涉外 (for foreign families), *xiaoqu* 小区 (working for the district, usually residential district), and *yuesao* 月嫂 (maternity matron, or care-giver for a new mother and her newborn infants). Concerning these job types, twelve of the research participants in this study worked as part-time *ayis* (earning RMB 20–50 per hour, ca. EUR 2.50–6.30), one was a live-in *ayi* (earning RMB 3,000 per month, ca. EUR 382), one was a full-time *ayi* (earning RMB 5,500 per month, ca. EUR 700), one a *xiaoqu ayi* (earning RMB 6,000–7,000 per month, ca. EUR 760–890), and three were *yuesaos* (earning an average of RMB 10,000 per month, ca. EUR 1,270). At the time of the interviews, the *ayis* worked for various types of families in Shanghai. Eight worked for foreign families (including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan), six worked for Shanghai families, and five worked for Chinese families from other provinces. Some of the *ayis* had worked in different job type(s) for different family type(s) in the past.

Based on the interviews with the interlocutors outlined above, the present study seeks to answer the following questions: Why have rural–urban migrant women chosen to work as *ayis* when they are free to choose other jobs in post-reform China? How do they opt for a specific job type and family type? What role does their own status as single, married (but perhaps living apart from their spouse), or divorced play in the decision-making process regarding the job types?

First, when asked why they chose to be an *ayi*, divorced women shared similar motives. Yao Ayi, a forty-five-year-old divorcée from Jilin, said that after filing for divorce from her husband, she traveled to Shanghai to meet her elder sister, who was working there as a waitress. Her sister told her that working in a restaurant was a harsh occupation and suggested that she might prefer to work in the domestic service industry instead. Thus, Yao Ayi began to work as a live-in *ayi* for her first migrant job in Shanghai, earning RMB 1,000 per month, in 2006. Since she was divorced, she was flexible in terms of her living arrangements. She chose to work as a live-in *ayi* because the employer was able to provide a room and meals for her. After eight years of being a live-in *ayi*, Yao Ayi had saved enough money to rent a small apartment in Shanghai, and she then changed her job to work as a *shewai* for foreign families.

Yao Ayi's friend, Li Ayi, said that she also came to Shanghai after her divorce. Her younger sister was already in Shanghai by that time, working as a domestic helper. Therefore, Li Ayi followed her sister's lead and began working as a live-in *ayi*. After ten years, she remarried and changed to working as a part-time *ayi*. Relationship status thus affects the type of *ayi* work migrant women prefer to do. When asked about her experiences as a live-in *ayi*, Li Ayi said, "I was lucky when I first came to Shanghai. I met a very good old Shanghai couple and their daughter and son-in-law. They treated me incredibly well. The young couple worked and so were not at home during the daytime. I lived with the old madam in her bedroom.

We even slept in the same bed. She treated me very well." (Li Ayi, forty-nine years old, Heilongjiang, part-time, Shanghai and foreign families). Although she found sleeping in the same bed as her employer acceptable, being a live-in *ayi* was stressful overall. "You lived at [the employer's] home twenty-four hours a day. It was highly stressful. I haven't worked as a live-in *ayi* for almost five years. If you asked me to work as a live-in *ayi* now, I might not be able to adapt to that kind of life again." (Li Ayi, forty-nine years old, Heilongjiang, part-time, Shanghai and foreign families).

Li Ayi chose to work in Shanghai not only because of her divorce, but also because she wanted to make some money for her child, who was now also living in Shanghai. In this way, she gained financial resources by working as a single mother—or, as we like to term this, as a "working-single." Likewise, Wu Ayi, a *yuesao* as well as a trainer of *yuesaos*, came to work in Shanghai after her divorce.

> I didn't need to rent a place [due to being a *yuesao*]. Usually, *yuesao*s are single [Researcher's note: meaning they are divorcees]. They work because their children go to school, or their children need to buy a house to get married. Like me, I became a *yuesao* because my son is going to get married. We need some income. (Wu Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, *yuesao*).

Although the demand for emotional management is more intense among *yuesao*s than with other *ayi* job types, divorced women often choose to work as *yuesao*s because they can live at their employers' homes for a month during their service. Additionally, if they are also mothers, they are more likely to be hired as *yuesao*s due to their personal childcare experience, which helps them to gain trust from their employers.

Unlike divorced women, married women did not mention their marital status as a reason for working as domestic helpers; rather, their motives were diverse, and they seemed to have more flexibility in choosing their job type. Xiaocao Ayi, a forty-five-year-old *yuesao* from Jiangsu, shared that she chose to be a *yuesao* because she liked babies and she felt young when she was with them, instead of out of an urgent need for a place to live in Shanghai. She explained that she came to work in Shanghai out of boredom: "People like us feel bored at home, right? It's hard to join other industries, which is not easy. This is the only good option, right?" (Xiaocao Ayi, forty-five years old, Anhui, *yuesao*).

Married migrant women shared that they had few professional skills and little education, and that therefore the relatively well-paid occupation of domestic helper was not a bad way for them to make money:

> [I] have no [professional] skills. When I first arrived [in Shanghai], I was worried. Anyways, I have been trained in the past few years. Yes, I don't have any skills. Also, I like to work for a family. … For farming, you have to work under the sun. I like to work at home to

> help with cleaning and cooking. (Guiqiao Ayi, forty years old, Shanxi, part-time, Shanghai families).
>
> I did not have any skills and I was unfamiliar with everything in Shanghai. So, I followed [a friend from my hometown] and worked for a Taiwanese family. (Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families).

As we can see from these quotes, it was boredom, and financial need, together with the fact that they lacked professional skills, that led these married women to work as domestic helpers in Shanghai.

However, although research suggests that these women have to come to terms with the drudgery of domestic work,[41] some *ayis* mentioned that they found their work either comparatively easy compared to factory or farm work, or "not tough at all." As one interviewee states, "I started working as a domestic worker more than ten years ago, so I don't want to make a change. If I worked in a factory, I would have to work overnight. Now, I work eight hours a day and it's not tough at all." (Hu Ayi, forty-one years old, Anhui, full-time, *xiaoqu*).

Similarly, Yao Ayi's sister told her that working as a domestic helper was less harsh than working in a restaurant. Nonetheless, being a domestic helper may mean limited opportunities for work-promotion or upward social mobility. More intensely, as "working-singles," *ayis* face a struggle over trust and must constantly navigate negative stereotypes. As Ke Ayi, a forty-three-year-old part-time domestic helper from Anhui, said, "Every family is different. A bit of *shouqi* 受气 [being bullied] is unavoidable. It is impossible to have none."

In sum, a range of different reasons makes migrant women in Shanghai prefer the job of *ayi*, including that it provides income, relieves boredom, demands relatively little education, and is perceived as being less strenuous than other jobs available to their social group. These women's narratives suggest that the informal service sector allows a certain degree of workers' autonomy and is therefore preferred by some women, particularly for its flexibility.[42] Nevertheless, it remains a precarious job where trust must be constantly negotiated, as observed by Chinese Marxist feminist scholars.[43] In this range of attractions and constraints, we perceive both the flexibility and precarity of domestic work. An *ayi* can, to some extent, select her employer: They can choose both the preferred job and family types. But in the end, the employer holds the power to fire or dismiss the *ayi*, especially as there is often no formal work contract. After their careful selection from among the various types of domestic work, how do *ayis* give

41 See Sun, *Maid in China*.
42 Xing, "'Hyper Precarity' Under COVID-19 Pandemic."
43 Su and Ni, "Gender Mechanism of Emotional Labor."

both themselves and their employers face by building up trust, especially as a bit of *shouqi* seems unavoidable? In what follows, we elucidate how *ayis* build trust with their employers and consequently reduce their precariousness by performing three distinct modes of emotional labor: honesty, professionalism, and care.

Honesty

Being honest, or, more precisely, performing honesty is one of the most effective ways to produce emotional labor for trust-building in an employer–employee relationship, particularly between domestic helpers and their urban customers.[44] Zhou Ayi explicitly stated that some of her employers would leave something in their house as a test to see if she would steal it. The "test" given by the employers is a test of an *ayi*'s honesty and can be read as a rather explicit type of face-work—a process of image construction built on one's integrity and trustworthiness.

> They [the employers] tested me. Do you understand? They put money here [in the house] and then left. Some old people do that; even young ones do that. (Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families).

The face-work of trust requires time, as Wang Ayi also explains:

> [The female employer's] domestic helper stole her stuff and [the male employer's] money. So, she looks down on *ayis*. Her husband convinced her by telling her that, "Look at Wang Ayi. She has been working for us for a long time. She is an honest person, and she won't [steal]." In the beginning, she looked down on me. From my perspective, their *ayi* was not being nice because they trusted her and gave her their house keys, but she stole things from them. It's not all right … Her husband explained to her that I am an honest person. Since I have been working for them, their home hasn't lost anything. You do your own work; she does her own business. When you finish work [cooking], you tell her to eat. After some time, she knows [I am honest and not a thief]. (Wang Ayi, forty-seven years old, Chongming, part-time, families from other Chinese regions).

When some *ayis* are perceived as showing poor conduct and breach the trust of their employers, it takes more effort, as well as time, for the "honest" *ayis* to build trust. Urban employers worry about money being stolen from their homes by their domestic workers. Nonetheless, domestic services usually include buying groceries or other household products, an act

44 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*.

that necessarily involves money. In this sense, *ayis* literally have to "touch the money." However, some *ayis* try to avoid receiving money from their employers:

> [The potential employer] said he would give me money for the groceries. I told him, "If I work for you, I won't help with the groceries because I will have to 'touch' the money. It's complicated." Many *ayis* can't gain trust from their employers because of the grocery money. They steal from the grocery money. It's real. I have met many *ayis* who do that. (Zhou Ayi, thirty-nine years old, Zhandong, part-time, shewai).

Another woman said: "No, I don't buy groceries. After a long time, it's hard to make it clear." (Hu Ayi, forty-one years old, Anhui, full-time, *xiaoqu*).

In Zhou Ayi and Hu Ayi's experiences, avoiding situations in which your honesty may be questioned, in this case when buying groceries, is the best way to avoid mistrust from their employers, revealing that trust is a highly sensitive issue in urban families, especially when it comes to monetary matters. This resonates with Goffman's observation that avoidance is a basic form of face-work.[45]

Nonetheless, some *ayis* do have to help with the groceries. Hence, to establish a trust-relationship, these *ayis* proactively create tactics to deal with this sensitive matter. "I feel that the employers trust me. I use my own money to buy groceries. I give them back the invoices. Then, they give me the money." (Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families). Wang Ayi meticulously handles the grocery money, keeps the invoices, and carefully talks about her "writing" practice to her employer. In this way, she has successfully gained trust.

> No matter how well [the female employer] treated me, I had to position myself properly. My father said, "When my children go to work, their personality is the most important. It doesn't matter how much they earn, but they can't be thieves." I remember what he told me. *Ayi* is *ayi*. I don't touch other people's stuff. The madam trusted me deeply. From the beginning until the end, I have been keeping their house keys … My education level is low, but I used a notebook to write down everything for her. However, she had never read the notebook. Anyways, I feel comfortable to write things down. Otherwise, I wouldn't know where the money goes. I heard that other *ayis* take their employers' grocery money. (Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families).

45 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 5–7.

Thus, marking down the expenses became a practice that Wang Ayi used as a tactic of guarding against future accusations of dishonesty. Full trust seems impossible; what is established is a semblance or performance of trust behind which mistrust (or, for the *ayi*, fear of being mistrusted) lingers.

Besides shopping, the issue of the treatment of household items also requires trust-establishing face-work. Objects in the home, such as glasses, mugs, or vases, can be fragile. Additionally, it is not uncommon for Shanghai families to store cash and valuable items such as jewelry at home. As Ke Ayi said, the Hong Kong family she had been working with for thirteen years, trusts her a lot because she does not break things. When she fell ill and quit her job, the family hired another *ayi.* But the family found the new *ayi* difficult to tolerate because she frequently broke their kitchenware. When *ayis* clean and tidy the house, they have to be extra cautious. In some cases, *ayis* try to cater as much to the needs of their employers as possible in order to secure their jobs. "I put things back in the same places... I won't leave a mess. I won't leave the employers to arrange their stuff. I put them back as they were." (Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families).

> No, I won't [put things back in the same positions]. I work for them, and I tidy everything up. But I won't put things randomly. It's because sometimes his stuff is quite messy and so he expects me to help tidy up his house. If I put them back in the same positions, he feels like I haven't worked at all. (An Ayi, ca. forty years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families and foreign families).

Due to the variety of preferences on the part of different families, *ayis* have to learn to observe the everyday practices of their employers and understand how they want the jobs to be done. While some employers want their *ayis* to help with tidying up their houses, others request their *ayis* to put things back in exactly the same positions that they found them.

Most *ayis* in this study said that when their employers gave them the house keys, it could be seen as a gesture of trust. "I have six pairs of house keys. Some families have elderly relatives at home; therefore, they don't have to give me the house keys. After you work for a while, they trust you and give you the keys." (Hu Ayi, forty-one years old, Anhui, full-time, *xiaoqu*). When asked about the practice of receiving house keys, most *ayis* said that their employers gave them keys after a period of observation. Xuexue Ayi described the effort she made to show her honesty before she received the keys. "You have to behave and cannot take people's stuff. I never take anyone's stuff. I have worked for a family for more than ten years and they don't change [hire another *ayi*]." (Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families).

Moreover, some *ayis* receive the house keys on the first day they start working because their employers' acquaintances or friends referred them, which shows how trust is transferrable:

> The families gave me the keys when I arrived the first day. It's all the same. I haven't met any family that doesn't give me keys. It's because they trust you. I am referred by their acquaintances. They trust me. If I was referred by an agency, [the employers] might have to reconsider doing this. (Zhou Ayi, thirty-nine years old, Zhandong, part-time, *shewai*)

Zhou Ayi's experience reflects the fact that by referring an employee to his/her social network, the employer becomes a *zhongjianren* 中间人 (intermediary), which is a key role in the establishment of a trust relationship in Chinese culture. It is because the "Chinese place a premium on individuals' social capital within their group of friends, relatives and close associates" that a *zhongjianren* "is vital to gaining even initial admission or introduction to connections."[46] However, keeping the house keys is a huge responsibility. Therefore, these *ayis* have developed a cautious way to be the guardian of the keys. As Zhou Ayi said, she puts the house keys in a separate bag instead of in her own key chain as her way to protect the keys. Although receiving keys is a gesture of trust, some *ayis* are reluctant to keep their employers' house keys: "No, they may say they would give me the keys. But I said no. If you take their house keys, it's not so good, right? It doesn't feel right." (Xiaocao Ayi, forty-five years old, Jiangsu, *yuesao*). "[The male employer] gave me the house keys. I told him I wouldn't take his keys. I explained to him that I would come to his house when he is at home. When he's not at home, I won't go. I don't like to keep someone's house keys. I am afraid of rumors." (An Ayi, ca. forty years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families and foreign families).

For an *ayi*, the fear of being marked as a thief outweighs the fear of being accused of seducing the male employer. This shows how *ayis*, as "working-singles," are obliged to navigate between the stereotype of seducer and other potential accusations from their employers. When there are thieves out there, an *ayi* is aware that her employers will suspect her, even if she is innocent, because of her negative reputation in the city dwellers' eyes.[47] Thus, the *ayi* quoted above, decided to schedule a time with her employer each time she had to clean his house to avoid problems, rather than keeping his house keys.

Honesty is a mode of face-work and emotional labor that is performed and negotiated by being overtly careful in financial matters, taking good care of household items, and through discussions over possession of the house keys. After selecting their employers and job types, *ayis* painstakingly perform the everyday handlings of their domestic work for their employers, thus building up trust over time. Being "working-singles," or, working singly, the *ayis* have to be extra careful to manage trust. After all,

46 Kai-Ping Huang and Karen Yuan Wang, "How Guanxi Relates to Social Capital? A Psychological Perspective," *Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2011): 121.
47 Gaetano, *Out to Work*; Sun, *Maid in China*.

when bad things happen at the employer's home, there are no witnesses to testify to an *ayi's* employer that she is innocent.

Professionalism

A second tactic for negotiating trust involves performing professional face-work. The professionalism of an *ayi* can be as practical as obtaining the required certificate. According to Wu Ayi, an aspiring *yuesao* needs to receive training to obtain the maternity and infant care division certificate (*muying hulizheng* 母婴护理证) in order to officially work as a *yuesao*. By obtaining a certificate, a *yuesao* can gain the trust of her customers. However, obtaining a professional certificate is only one way to generate a sense of professionalism. First, childbirth experience is a prerequisite for the job, meaning that, to be a *yuesao*, a woman has to be a mother herself and have first-hand experience in giving birth:

PENN: *Do you need to have childbirth experience to be a yuesao?*
WU AYI: *Yes, for enhancing trust from our clients, you have to. After this criterion, there are tests on theories about the health of the infants … For the infant, you need to know the body index.*[48] *You need to observe [the infant]. You need to take care of the women's wounds and breasts. You need to cook the special meals for the postpartum period… We need to teach the mothers the proper way of breastfeeding because it's the most important.*

As Wu Ayi explained, their clients do not trust a woman with no first-hand childbirth experience, because to take care of the infant and the mother, the *yuesao's* personal experience is treated as the prerequisite to prove that she is qualified for the job. Further, when asked how she proves herself as trustworthy to clients, Wu Ayi said that she would take out her certificate first, after which she would wash her hands because she was going to touch the infant. Then she would change into her company's uniform, which was soft and comfortable for the infant. The whole ritual, as guided by the training provided by her company, helped her to perform a sense of professionalism in front of her clients. In Goffman's terms, it gave her "face" in front of the new parents who might have less knowledge of infant care than her. She explained the process of this trust-building relationship:

> When you arrive at the employer's home, they will check your identity to see if you are the right person sent by the company. After that, I start my work. Every day when they have any queries, I answer

48 She is referring to the basic body indexes, including the heart rate, temperature, and body weight of the infants.

> them. Those questions are about childcare professionalism. The quickest time to gain their trust is a week. Then, they will be at ease with you. That is the quickest time for them to kill their doubts. (Wu Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, *yuesao*).

Hired by the *yuesao* company instead of being a "freelancer," Wu Ayi's work is highly monitored by the clients, as they can leave comments in her work-report, known as a "diary," which is provided by the company. She explained that her tasks are listed on an hourly basis in the report. Employers can request to have another *yuesao* if they are not happy with the performance of the assigned *yuesao.*

Moreover, Wu Ayi expressed a sense of professionalism, which was backed up by her company. As explained by Madam Ma, the company owner and Wu Ayi's boss, she provides trainings for the newly recruited *ayis* in order to teach them the knowledge they need to be a professional *yuesao*. The *yuesaos* in her company obtain professional childcare knowledge. and learn the proper steps to take when they first enter the client's home. Most importantly, the company has established rules and regulations for its *yuesaos*:

> We use *Dizigui* (弟子规 "Standards for being a Good Pupil and Child"). You see this? These are the rules and regulations of our services. Do you understand, *Dizigui*?... We need to read this. I need to teach [the new *yuesaos* at her company]. You need to learn and to practice it at work... You need to be a good person first. Our occupation is very special. You must be patient. So, the rules are set as a guideline and to constrain us to do things well. Then, you can take better care of the infants. (Wu Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, *yuesao*). Through these trainings, *ayis* develop "trust" in their self-image as professional *yuesaos,* which helps in their face-work and leads their employers to trust them.

For a *yuesao* who works for the agency or domestic service company, it is easier to build trust, as their agency or company endows them with a professional image, and their short-term service and replaceability do not require as much of a long-term process of trust-building and developing of a proper subjectivity. This is different for the other *ayis*. According to Yan, "to train a domestic worker is to foster a proper subjectivity, so that she can see work and respond readily to it. Her 'improved' subjectivity is supposed to mediate between the mind of the employer and her own body, thus producing knowing, willing, and affective labor that can anticipate and meet the needs of employers."[49]

Unlike Wu Ayi's situation, in which her company provides a uniform, most *ayis* have developed a dressing-down strategy to build trust with

49 Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*, 96.

their employers. In the words of Ke Ayi, "I wore *qipao* (旗袍—the traditional Chinese-style dress for women) [before she worked as a domestic helper]. My disposition was different from now. I am an *ayi* now; therefore, I dare not dress up." (Ke Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, *shewai*).

And, as Fang Ayi explained:

> I met a female employer. She said she hired an *ayi* once who dressed beautifully and moved seductively in front of her husband. Some *ayis* are indecent. Some male employers are decent, while some are not… For indecent *ayis*, he [referring to male employers in general] would touch her for sure, right? If you are very decent and you talk nicely, he won't touch you, right? If you are indecent, he must touch you. You can't blame anyone, right? (Fang Ayi, forty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, *shewai*)

Fang Ayi's explanation reveals that a proper dress code for work, that is, no skirt or dress, no fancy outfit, and no make-up—in other words, dressing down—becomes a way to avoid sexual harassment from male employers, and to eliminate the doubts of female employers, as well as to avoid gossip among other domestic helpers. But when she adds "right?" to "he won't touch you," she reveals that even when dressing down, one is never safe. In this light, her narrative reflects the precarious situation of the "working-single" and the way in which *ayis* have to also trust their (male) employers to not sexually harass or abuse them. As He Ayi's comments indicate, gossip does circulate: "You know Xiaoliu? I suspect that she is having an affair with her male employer. The wife of her boss always travels. [Xiaoliu] often wears make-up, and lipstick, and paints her eyebrows." (He Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, part-time, *shewai*).

Some *ayis* employ the "dressing-down strategy" to build trust with urban families. It is a kind of face-work that aims to avoid any suspicion of seduction; moreover, it is face-work through which the employers also gain face, as they will not be seduced. This is crucial, given that the "working-single" status is perceived as a threat to the stability of the family.[50] In other service sectors, such as the beauty parlor industry, female workers are required to dress up in order to meet the modern standards of service work in the global city of Shanghai,[51] and the demand for professionalism from their employers and urban customers.[52] But for the *ayis* in our study, dressing down is a tactic used to perform face-work—a response to the social discrimination against migrant women.

50 Gaetano, *Out to Work*; Sun, *Maid in China*.
51 Ip, "Desiring Singlehood."
52 Cara Wallis, *Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

Care

Besides performing honesty and professionalism, *ayis* also manage their emotive expression of care to establish trust with their employers. In their study of domestic helpers in China, Su and Ni argue that care labor is a social construction under a patriarchal social order in which care workers need to perform certain feminine attributes, for instance, caring, obedience, and submissiveness.[53] Similarly, Hochschild criticizes how emotional labor always stresses femininity to provide care work.[54] In our study, we find that an *ayi* can build trust through taking extra care of the household, even when that is not requested by the employers:

> The other day I saw that [my female employer's] closet was really messy. I asked if she needed my help to tidy it up. She said, "okay." Then, I helped to tidy up her closet. I am quite efficient. And she trusts me. Her closet is like a mess. [The employers] like to take whatever they need from the closet. It is a mess. So, I wanted to help her. (Ke Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, *shewai*).

Ke Ayi's initiative is a special offering which is not a part of her paid job. In return for Ke Ayi's offering, her employer trusts her to tidy the closet, a very private space within the private space of the home.

While some *ayis* have chosen not to talk much with their employers to avoid misunderstandings and to create a sense of submissiveness and obedience, some *ayis* proactively talk about personal issues with their employers to build trust. In the interview with Xuexue Ayi, together with her former employer, Madam Sun, they shared:

XUEXUE: *We talk about everything.*
MADAM SUN: *We even talk about her daughter, if she has a boyfriend, or not.*
XUEXUE: *We are like a family. I generally get along well with other people. I like Shanghai people, I think they do not act big (bubaijiazi 不摆架子).*
MADAM SUN: *I chat with her while she is working.*
XUEXUE: *We get along very well. We communicate mutually.*

Madam Sun claims that she knows Xuexue Ayi very well and that they talk about everything. As a result, Madam Sun trusts Xuexue, unlike the temporary *ayis* who help to do the chores, whom she believes would steal things. Treating an *ayi* as a pseudo-family member entails a negotiation of care: if the domestic worker is (like) a family member, they also need to be cared for, if they become sick, for example. Conversely, the domestic

53 Su and Ni, "Gender Mechanism of Emotional Labor."
54 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*.

worker projects a sense of caring about the employer, even if she may only do this to gain her trust. Here, trust is built through the practice of talking about "everything," including the private life of the *ayi*, in order to help the employers feel secure about the person they hired. This form of trust, established with time, can help to blur—but not erase—the boundaries between the employers and employees. Madam Sun claims that Xuexue Ayi is her friend, but one might ask whether such claims do not obscure the hierarchical relationship between the employer and employee.[55]

Moreover, some *ayis* have chosen to articulate or perform their care for the family by learning to cook the dishes that the family members like. As Yao Ayi said, she bought the Chinese version of Jamie Oliver's cookbook for her Western employer. When her employer saw the cookbook, she was tremendously impressed and bought the English version. She told Yao Ayi which dishes her family liked, and then Yao Ayi would check her Chinese version and cook for them. Similarly, Wang Ayi also shared this impression:

> I know how to cook the dishes they like. I adjust to their taste gradually. Sometimes lighter, sometimes heavier. They like to eat lighter. After [she] finished cooking, I asked them if the taste was fine. They tell me if it's too salty or too light. Then, I have learned it. It's very arbitrary. I have learned [their tastes]. (Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families).

By performing care by catering to the taste of the family, and thereby probably disregarding her own food preferences, Wang Ayi was able to secure a stronger and less precarious bond with the family. Like Wang Ayi, Yao Ayi also states,

> I feel really happy to work for foreigners. Tina's family does not give me much pressure. I work for them every day. I get along very well with their son, with Tina, and the grandparents [Tina's parents and parents-in-law]. We are like a family. I go back home at night. During the day, I work for them with dedication. They treat me like a family. (Yao Ayi, forty-five years old, Jilin, part-time, *shewai*).

According to Wang Ayi,

> Shanghai people like others to call them *xiaojie* or *taitai* (小姐/太太, literally lady/madam). [My female employer] asked me to call her Zhen Jie (真姐—Sister Zhen), and call her husband Brother Ye (叶大哥). She said, "I work at the company, and you work at my home.

55 Although she did not hire a domestic helper after her retirement, she stays in touch with Xuexue Ayi, and they meet regularly in the district to catch up on each other's lives. She also refers Xuexue Ayi for jobs.

> We are equal. Please don't feel any pressure. Please work like in your own home." (Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families).

After working for Zhen Jie for some time, Wang Ayi was requested to call her employers by their names, with the designations of "sister" and "brother." Wang Ayi said that Zhen Jie trusts her deeply and treats her like family. Likewise, Yao Ayi feels that her employers treat her like a family member. As Sun describes,[56] domestic helpers are the "intimate stranger[s]" of urban families: "The maid is most certainly an intimate figure, in the sense that she needs to anticipate her employers' quirks and whims, cook to suit their fussy taste buds, and perform the most intimate bodily care, both for her elderly charges suffering from incontinence, and infants needing a regular change of diapers."[57]

When pseudo-family ties are being constructed, the care-work of enfolding the *ayi* into the narrative of the family not only obscures the hierarchical relationship but is also a way to neutralize the potential sexual danger of the *ayi* as a "working-single." As Yuting Liu and Xiao Suowei point out, it becomes common for domestic service companies to train the workers to mobilize the familial emotive expression when performing service works—a tactic of "deep acting" in the production of emotional labor.[58] The trust that the familial discourse helps to establish, may furthermore enable forms of exploitation:

> The salary was very low at that time. I earned RMB 3,000 per month. [My female employer] treats me very well. Before the summer holiday [meaning July and August], she usually paid me RMB 6,000 in advance. She did the same before Spring Festival and Christmas. She paid for me in advance. She had never deducted the salary [if I made mistakes]. Therefore, I worked for her for the next six years, but I never asked her to increase my salary. I did not. So, when her friends' [*ayis*] bargained to increase their salaries, they were bad *ayis*. As a result, she liked to take me out and told people that I was not her *ayi*; I was her friend. (Zhou Ayi, thirty-nine years old, Zhandong, part-time, *shewai*).

56 Sun, *Maid in China*, 13.
57 Sun, *Maid in China*, 13.
58 Yuting Liu刘育婷 and Xiao Suowei 肖索未, "'Servicing the Clients as Caring for One's Family, While in Daily Interaction It's Better to Keep Oneself as an Outsider': Emotional Labor and the Maintenance of Client Relations among Domestic Workers in Urban China '干活时把雇主当家人，相处时把自己当外人'——住家家政工的雇主关系及情感劳动研究," *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 妇女研究论丛 4, no. 160 (2020).

When the employers treat an *ayi* as a part of the family, or as a friend, it signals that the *ayi* has successfully built trust through providing (extra) care. But it can also serve as a veil to cover up injustices, such as the refusal to raise Zhou Ayi's salary.

The *yuesaos* in our study care for urban families and their newborns; in some cases, they might emotionally bond with the child. It is almost inevitable for them to feel a sense of care because the whole job is about care and the management of one's feelings through "deep acting." Likewise, the reciprocity of trust is established in which the employers have shown their care for the *ayis* in the name of family or friendship ties. Although such a trust relationship can be forged, the employer–employee relationship itself is obscured, putting the *ayi* in a more vulnerable position when they need to negotiate their wages. This trust also obscures social inequality: the *yuesaos* are forced to leave behind their own children, commonly known as "left-behind children," in rural China.[59] Yet, "given the prevailing free market ideology, migration is viewed as a 'personal choice.' Its consequences are seen as 'personal problems.'"[60] This framing of migration as a personal choice runs the danger of ignoring the political and socio-economic structural factors that are widening the gap between the rich and the poor in China. This observation reveals the ironic dimension of the care-economy in Shanghai: to be a "working-single" in the city, these women must prove to their employers that they have childbirth experience, meaning that they have children who are now cared for by their grandparents in rural China, known as "left-behind children" in the migration discourse. Hence, when city dwellers outsource care-labor to the rural-to-urban migrant women, the *ayis* must also outsource their own care-work.

Conclusion

Ayis lead a "working-single" life in the city; even when they are married, they usually leave behind their spouses and children. Working as a "single" in a stranger family's home draws them into a complicated daily negotiation of trust, which is amplified by their "working-single" status. Additionally, negative portrayals of domestic workers as thieves or sexual seducers in mass media have produced discourses of mistrust and the *ayis* are portrayed as low *suzhi* ("quality") by the urbanites. Following Peeren,[61] we have stressed the reciprocity of the employer–employee relationship: *ayis* are not easily replaceable, unlike factory girls or waitresses,

59 China Labour Bulletin, "Migrant Workers and Their Children," *China Labour Bulletin*. Accessed October 15, 2017. http://www.clb.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children.

60 Arlie R. Hochschild, "Love and Gold," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie R. Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Press, 2002), 27.

61 Peeren, *Spectral Metaphor*.

because employers must put their trust in the employed domestic helpers, a face-building process that builds up the sense of integrity and trustworthiness over time. Therefore, we argue that trust requires face-work that is both verbal and performative.[62] *Ayis* choose their job because it gives them a stable income; it is, in their perspective, more attractive and less difficult than factory work, and it does not demand a high level of education. But, as we have also shown, it remains a precarious job, as *ayis* can become dispensable for their employers when trust is not properly built. This gestures towards a tension between precarity and autonomy.

To avoid being replaced, *ayis* must mobilize different tactics to increase their value in their employers' households by building a trusting employer–employee relationship. We observed three tactics through which *ayis* negotiate trust and perform emotional labor. First, they perform honesty over financial and material matters, including conscious deliberations over ownership of the house keys.

Second, they employ tactics related to outer appearance to perform a sense of professionalism, for instance, through the strategy of dressing down to avoid any suspicion of seduction. This is a form of face-work through which the male employers also gain face, helping them to establish a social image of a decent gentleman. This tactic is crucial, given that the "working-single" status is perceived as a threat to the stability of the family, not only by the female employers, but also in the media representation of *ayis*.

Third, the women interviewed care for the families they work for, articulating this care by providing special food or devoting extra attention to the children and the chores—therefore performing a "deep acting" to produce emotional labor. Through these tactics, *ayis* perform and negotiate a relationship of trust, but this relationship remains profoundly precarious: They must maintain a healthy body to perform their job duties, they are pushed to give up care for their own children, they dress down, the wages are low at best, and the working conditions are fragile and not legally protected.

In this study, we have steered away from purely negative portrayals of the domestic work and the life of migrant domestic workers in Shanghai. But it is hard to deny all the social inequalities with which they are faced. Granted, they have the power to select their job type, as well as their employers under the post-reform market economy. In a sense, this may help these workers to enjoy some space of freedom and construct a relationship based on trust. However, these "new servants,"[63] as Yan terms them, are situated in a precarious circumstance where the urbanites are positioned as the higher social strata and the rural-to-urban migrant women are the subordinated, backward others.[64] Domestic work remains

62 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*.
63 Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*.
64 Penn Tsz Ting Ip, "Migrant Women Walking Down the Cheap Road: Modernization and Being Fashionable in Shanghai," in *The Routledge Companion to Modernity, Space and Gender*, ed. Alexandra Staub (Oxford: Routledge, 2018).

a kind of "dirty job" that city women are unwilling to do, making the performance of such care-labor at times suppressive, and the identity of domestic helpers stigmatized and vulnerable. Social inequality thus prevails; rural-to-urban migrant women must invest not only their skill and time, but also their emotions to gain some trust in the family workplace. They are the precarious "working-singles" of twenty-first-century Shanghai.

ORCID®

Penn Tsz Ting Ip https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3619-8293
Jeroen de Kloet https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2314-5424

References

Anagnost, Ann. "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*)." *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 189–208. http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-2-189.

Anderson, Bridget. *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour*. London: Zed Books, 2000.

Cheung, Adam Ka-lok, and Lake Lui. "Hiring Domestic Help in Hong Kong: The Role of Gender Attitude and Wives' Income." *Journal of Family Issues* 38, no. 1 (2017): 73–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14565700.

China Labour Bulletin. "Migrant Workers and Their Children." *China Labour Bulletin*. Accessed October 15, 2017. http://www.clb.org.hk/content/migrant–workers–and–their–children.

Cong, Mei. "A Study of Domestic Helpers' Social Support Challenges 家政女工的社会支持问题研究." M.A. diss., University of Jinan, 2019.

Constable, Nicole. "Jealousy, Chastity, and Abuse: Chinese Maids and Foreign Helpers in Hong Kong." *Modern China* 22, no. 4 (1996): 448–479. http://www.jstor.org/stable/189304?origin=JSTOR-pdf.

Constable, Nicole. *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

Constable, Nicole. "Sexuality and Discipline among Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong." *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 3 (1997): 539–558. http://www.jstor.org/stable/647082?origin=JSTOR-pdf.

Cox, Rosie. *The Servant Problem: Domestic Employment in a Global Economy*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Arlie R. Hochschild. "Introduction." In *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, edited by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie R. Hochschild, 1–13. New York: Metropolitan Press, 2002.

Gaetano, Arianne M. *Out to Work: Migration, Gender, and the Changing Lives of Rural Women in Contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015.

Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis.* New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1967.

Gong, Baiyun, Xin He, and Huei-Min Hsu. "*Guanxi* and Trust in Strategic Alliances." *Journal of Management History* 19, no. 3 (2013): 362–376.

Groves, Julian M., and Lake Lui. "The 'Gift' of Help: Domestic Helpers and the Maintenance of Hierarchy in the Household Division of Labour." *Sociology* 46, no. 1 (2012): 57–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511416166.

Hochschild, Arlie R. "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 551–575. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2778583.

Hochschild, Arlie R. "Love and Gold." In *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, edited by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie R. Hochschild, 15–30. New York: Metropolitan Press, 2002.

Hochschild, Arlie R. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, [1983] 2012.

Huang, Kai-Ping, and Karen Yuan Wang. "How Guanxi Relates to Social Capital? A Psychological Perspective." *Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2011): 120–126. https://doi.org/10.3844/jssp.2011.120.126.

Ip, Penn Tsz Ting. "Desiring Singlehood? Rural Migrant Women and Affective Labour in the Shanghai Beauty Parlour Industry." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2017): 558–580. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2017.1387415.

Ip, Penn Tsz Ting. "Migrant Women Walking Down the Cheap Road: Modernization and Being Fashionable in Shanghai." In *The Routledge Companion to Modernity, Space and Gender*, edited by Alexandra Staub, 320–337. Oxford: Routledge, 2018.

Ip, Penn Tsz Ting, and Esther Peeren. "Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (2019): 665–683. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419847108.

Ladegaard, Hans J. "Demonising the Cultural Other: Legitimising Dehumanisation of Foreign Domestic Helpers in the Hong Kong Press." *Discourse, Context and Media* 2, no. 3 (2013): 131–140. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2013.06.002.

Lan, Pei-Chia. *Global Cinderellas: Migrant Domestics and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Liu, Mengyu 刘梦雨. "The Ecology of Household 'Trust': A Record of Promoting the Standardization of Domestic Service Industry in China家政'信'生态——我国推动家政服务业规范化标准化发展纪实." *China Credit* 中国信用, no. 2 (2020): 22–31.

Liu, Yuting 刘育婷, and Xiao Suowei肖索未. "'Servicing the Clients as Caring for One's Family, While in Daily Interaction It's Better to Keep Oneself as an Outsider': Emotional Labor and the Maintenance of Client Relations among Domestic Workers in Urban China '干活时把雇主当家人，相处时把自己当外人'——住家家政工的雇主关系及情感劳动研究." *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 妇女研究论丛 4, no. 160 (2020): 73–87.

Lutz, Helma. *The New Maids: Transnational Women and the Care Economy.* London: Zedbooks, 2011.

Mei, Xiao 梅笑. "Positive Experiences in Emotional Labor: Deep Acting, Symbolic Boundaries, and Labor Autonomy 情感劳动中的积极体验：深层表演、象征性

秩序与劳动自主性." *Society: Chinese Journal of Sociology* 社会 40, no. 2 (2020): 111–136. https://www.society.shu.edu.cn/EN/.

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Peeren, Esther. *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Salzinger, Leslie. "A Maid by Any Other Name: The Transformation of 'Dirty Work' by Central American Immigrants." In *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*, edited by Michael Burawoy, Alice Burton, Ann Arnett Ferguson, and Kathryn J. Fox, 139–160. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Su, Yihui 苏熠慧, and Annie Ni倪安妮. "An Analysis on the Gender Mechanism of Emotional Labor of Maternity Matron for the Newborn: Taking Shanghai CX Domestic Service Company as an Example育婴家政工情感劳动的性别化机制分析——以上海CX家政公司为例." *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 妇女研究论丛 6, no. 150 (2016): 43–55.

Sun, Wanning. "Indoctrination, Fetishization, and Compassion: Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman." In *On the Move: Women and Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*, edited by Arianne Gaetano and Tamara Jacka, 109–128. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Sun, Wanning. *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Wallis, Cara. *Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

Wee, Cecilia. "Xin, Trust, and Confucius' Ethics." *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 3 (2011): 516–533. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23015356.

Wen, Ming, and Guixin Wang. "Demographic, Psychological, and Social Environmental Factors of Loneliness and Satisfaction among Rural-to-Urban Migrants in Shanghai, China." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50, no. 2 (2009): 155–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715208101597.

Xing, Chaoguo邢朝国. "The 'Hyper Precarity' of Informal Employment Under the COVID-19 Pandemic and Workers' Coping Strategies: Taking Postpartum Doulas in Beijing as an Example 疫情之下非正规就业的 '超不稳定性' 及主体应对——以北京市月嫂为例." *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 妇女研究论丛 3, no. 165 (2021): 37–52.

Yan, Hairong. *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.