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Precarious beauty: migrant Chinese women, beauty work, and precarity

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This study focuses on precarious labor, in particular, the experiences of a group of internal migrant women working in a beauty shop in South China. The study aim is to elucidate the ways in which migrant Chinese women negotiate the demands of work and life that help to shape the imaginations and aspirations of modern city dwellers. Women factory workers, it is argued, leave other employment for work in the aspiring Chinese beauty industry, which promises significant facets of modern identity such as urban status, cosmopolitanism, and upward mobility. Their work, nevertheless, remains fundamentally precarious because of not only low wages and limited job security but also the construction and circulation of femininity and assumptions about gender normality in both work and family. The precarious work also indexes the ambivalent relationship between the national affect of hope and the fragility of individual potentiality under neoliberal ethos.

Keywords: precarious labor; precarity; beauty shop; women; migrant worker; China

Introduction

South China is becoming recognized as a digital hub of global manufacturing, especially for consumer technologies, and for this reason it attracts a large number of internal migrants from the rural hinterlands, who flood into cities such as Shenzhen and Dongguan to make a living. The aim of the study is to explore some of the ways that a group of migrant Chinese women negotiate their lives and work in a beauty shop in a suburban area of South China. My own personal observation and interviews suggest that, in their daily lives, these women try to embody the glamorous and aspirational narratives of modern working women, through desiring and practicing beauty. Intertwined with gender, class, upward mobility, and sexuality is the specific and acute sense of precarity that these migrant women experience. This study attempts to map the precarious beauty that the women articulate, explicitly or implicitly.

The concept of *precarity* has been formulated mainly in the context of the Euro–American experience, as part of a larger discussion about post-Fordism effects, traumatic events, and creative responses to class struggle (Butler, 2004; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Muehlebach & Shoshan, 2012; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Precarious work is characterized by such factors as low wages, temporary status, long hours, mechanized patterns of working, informal or self-employment, insecurity and anxiety, and high mobility, flexibility, and creativity. One influential approach to precarity is rooted in the work of Italian autonomous Marxist thinkers and writers, such as Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and Michael Hardt, whose work is emblematic of many labor movements in Europe from the 1970s onward. Since

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the 1960s, increasing global circulation of capital has exacerbated inequality, resulting in waves of labor movements and struggles in the industrialized countries. The result has been an increased demand for global mobility and flexibility, which in turn has led to greater precarity in work. Scholars have argued that the development of digital media further contributes to the informalization of the labor sector, marking a shift toward immaterial or affective labor (Hardt, 1999). Autonomous Marxists see this development as creating a new kind of “common” or general intellect, according to which the society itself is becoming a factory. All activities are subsumed under capitalist development, in the process erasing the differences among types of work and the distinction between productive and unproductive labor. From this perspective, the precarization of work is not completely negative, as the refusal of work can be understood as the refusal of a life calibrated by capitalist production and exploitation. This theory has particular explanatory power when applied to a younger generation that is heavily influenced by postmodern popular culture, in terms of creativity and digitalization, as well as neoliberal-inspired entrepreneurship, which allows for different forms of labor other than full employment, and offers alternatives to the Western capitalist mode of development by arguing for the empowerment of the ordinary. However, such optimism is not universally shared.

Importantly, there is no singular experience of precarious work, and precarity and vulnerability within the labor force are context-specific, being segmented by gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and the like. Thus, feminist critiques of the autonomous Marxist view of labor can shed new light on precarity studies. Some feminists point out, poignantly, that the autonomist position assumes that precarious laboring subjects are single, male, urban, and young (Federici, 2008; McRobbie, 2010), whereas Negri, Hardt, and others direct us to the shift toward the immaterial, as well as toward affective labor, and celebrate the political potentiality and new socialities of the multitude from the bottom-up (Fortunati, 2007; Hardt, 1999, Hardt & Negri, 2000). Federici (2008) has noted accurately that uncritical acceptance of the concept of immaterial/affective labor would undermine the significance of reproduction work within the household, where women bear the work of capital accumulation to reproduce labor power. Yet, it is not only in the household but also in factories, dormitories, offices, bars, and clubs that women’s work is both a locus of struggle for better working conditions, of social discourse about hierarchy and patriarchy, and of capitalist reproduction and accumulation, as well as a regime in which to practice individual desires, sexuality, and relationships that enclose aspiration and hope (Cheng, 2011; Freeman, 2000; McRobbie, 2009; Pun, 2012).

In what follows, the focus is: (i) building on feminist criticism of previous studies, which tend to overlook the gendered experience of precarity that inhabits power dynamics of laboring; and (ii) situating the discussion of precarity/precarious labor in the specific context of China, because “identifying ‘precarious politics’ in developing Asia, assuming it exists, and theorizing around it is a largely unanswered challenge” (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2012, p. 303; see also Allison, 2013). Precarity is both a life condition and a specific socio-historical condition. The precarious experience of migrant Chinese women workers in a beauty shop in South China suggests that precarious labor is best understood not only as precariousness within cultural work that hinges on flexicurity, a portmanteau of flexibility and security, but also as precarity in its capacity as a barometer of “both the multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living and, simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and solidarity that reach beyond the traditional models of the political party or trade union” (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 3; see also Fantone, 2007). This double meaning within precarity informs the perspective adopted herein toward migrant women workers, who are

oppressed under precariousness but also stand to benefit from the potentialities for new politics that precariousness is making possible.

In discussing the dramatic economic and social reform that China has undergone since the late 1970s, scholars argue that the neoliberal principles of private accumulation and self-interest have become co-opted by socialist sovereignty, using privatization as a specific neoliberal technology that enables self-governing and socialist state control from a distance in what has been termed “the new social” (Ong & Li, 2008). Pun’s (2005) analysis of migrant women workers in South China factories points out how the disciplinary techniques and discursive practices in the factory individuate the rural and flesh female body into productive industrialized labor. In this context, transgressions in the workplace serve as everyday forms (or a minor genre) of resistance, through which women workers tactically use “nuanced, although sometimes self-defeating, actions [to] prevent disciplinary power from producing a reified, unitary image of their bodies” (Pun, 2005, p. 78). The low wages, poor work conditions, long hours, rapid turnover, and temporal status all characterize migrant women workers’ precariousness and insecurity (Fan, 2004), but do not impede their capacity for aspiration (Appadurai, 2004; Rofel, 2007). In their longing for modernity, urbanity, and upward mobility, the migrant women workers in the beauty shop engage themselves with a simulacrum of the official narrative of the Chinese dream – a dreamscape that is partial and uneven in its geographies and that relies at its margins on the nostalgia for Fordism in post-Fordist societies (Muehlebach & Shoshan, 2012).¹

Although many studies focus on men subjects or factory workers as the iconic precariats, paying attention to the above-mentioned factors – their temporary status, long hours, and mechanized patterns of working, as well as profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety – this study directs attention to migrant Chinese women working in the beauty business, whose precarity is less visible. Unlike factory work, the beauty business is largely considered the province of women, and it evinces such feminine characteristics as caring, patience, and somatic, as well as emotional, intimacy. The prevailing sensibility of consumer culture manifests many gendered codes and cultural icons that construct and reify femininity in the beauty and fashion industry, echoing a postfeminist climate that uncritically celebrates individual choice, openness, and pleasure. Striking is that the construction of femininity and normality for the genders functions as the cornerstone of migrant women’s repudiation of factory work and embrace of beauty work, with its air of initiative, freedom, and modernity, a choice that actually limits these women’s options in work and life. The fantasy of neoliberal aspirations and the reconfiguration of femininity in work, along with the conviviality of consumer culture and individual freedom of choice, transform and conceal the precarity that working women constantly experience in their own socially constructed domains, in the household and in the beauty and fashion business.

In the observed beauty shop, as former factory workers learned to be beauty therapists, they brokered new ways of body modification, of desiring, and of life in general through their work. In a highly feminized space, migrant women aspired to travel, physically or imaginatively, from rural to urban, from factory to beauty parlor, and from tradition to modernity. They experience, in rapid succession, urban values, as well as ideas on appearance, cosmetics, behaviors, clothes, consumption, intimacy, and sexuality, connecting with and transforming the sensual awareness of themselves and their milieu. Modern life obviously enacts different modalities of material, tangible, visceral, and sensorial imaginations. Yet, the work of these women is profoundly precarious, particularly in what tends to be brief careers in the beauty industry, which requires fresh, young bodies, as does the factory. Their endurance of low wages, rapid turnover, insecurity, and anxiety intersects with the construction of femininity and the assumption of gender normality that undo their

aspirations. Their precarious beauty work also indexes the ambivalent relationship between the national affects of hope and promise, as well as the fragility of individual potentiality under the neoliberal ethos. The exploration of beauty work in this study suggests that the migrant women's experience of precarious labor is complex, non-isomorphical, and highly contested, being marked by gender, class, upward mobility, sexuality, and the uncertainty that prevails in post-socialist China.

To carry out the research for this study, I visited the beauty salon *The Way to Beauty* (*Mei Zhi Dao*, TWB), which is located in the business district in the Longhua District in the far north of Shenzhen, South China. I conducted participant observations as a client, visiting the shop seven times between late February and mid-May 2012. Although conventional ethnography has been characterized by long-term engagement in the subjects' lives, researchers have also developed approaches of "focused" or "short-term" ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005; Pink & Morgan, 2013). Briefly put, focused, short-term ethnographic work with data-intensive observations has proved useful when conducted in association with a dialog between theory and practice. Although the shorter time scale leads to certain limitations, this study involved intensive practical interactions and communicative activities with people in the field under the guidance of specific theoretical arguments. A range of data collection strategies was adopted, with a deliberate focus on the tacit and overt details of everyday lives, generating a substantial amount of data, especially with the support of ubiquitous digital media.

Each time I carried out participant observation, I spent more than six hours in the shop, observing and chatting with people. I did not attempt to conceal my role as a researcher or the nature of my research, responding freely to curiosity about my long trip from Hong Kong to Northern Shenzhen, during my first visit. I told the women that I was engaged in a school assignment to learn about factory women's views on beauty and fashion, and discussed with them the possibility that the materials I collected through the process would be published. In this way, I gained oral consent to my research because my informants felt uncomfortable signing forms: they were wary of undercover journalists who might be reporting on illegal and abusive practices of transnational factories in the wake of the much-publicized 2010 Foxconn suicides. Oral consent was, in sum, less intrusive and friendlier in this case, better protecting the interests of my informants.

As I became familiar with the women at TWB, I partook less of the services offered and spent my visits sitting, chatting, eating, and observing. My major informants were the therapists and some clients in the beauty shop. Most of them were young and single, though some were married, and a few had young children. In addition to these in-shop conversations, interactions, and observations, I also chatted with my informants through the instant messaging platform QQ from time to time. The amount of time spent in online exchanges was not easy to calculate because they could only spare brief moments to engage with me due to the nature of their work. I tried to make sure to initiate conversation at least twice a week, and sometimes we ended up talking for an hour or two.

My fieldwork was not limited to the beauty shop. I paid several visits to the surrounding Longhua manufacturing area to understand better the environment that my informants inhabited. Thus, my data also include many informal conversations with small-shop staff, food vendors, salespeople in malls, taxi and bus drivers, librarians, and people in other public places. These extensive environmental and conversational data serve as important supplements to my observations in the beauty shop. In the analysis, I try to articulate the particular lives, imaginations, and aspirations for which working migrant women dream and fight, and, in doing so, enunciate their acute sense of precarity.

The way to beauty

It is useful to discuss more fully the environment that these migrant workers inhabit, and in which their life stories play out in an intersection of the global reconfiguration of women's work, massive internal migration in a newly neoliberal China, and hybridized modern consumer culture in borderland areas. I focus on the story of one of the beauty therapists to illustrate the common sentiments that have grown out of the migrant women's personal experiences, cultural mediation, and aspirations for work and living.

TWB is situated in the business area in front of the south gate of Foxconn complex. Foxconn was frequently in the spotlight, alternately for its role as the biggest supplier for Apple and many other multinational hi-tech companies, and for its harsh working conditions, especially after the Foxconn suicides of 2010. These surroundings provided for basic needs such as housing, food, clothing, tech gadgets, medical treatment, and entertainment, as well as relaxation spaces, including Internet cafés, karaoke bars, roller-skating rinks, and, of course, beauty shops. Many migrant workers live in this area, some with their families.

TWB is located in a townhouse. The name of the shop over the front door is nonobtrusive. My friend Yang and I found it with the help of a nearby salesperson, whom I had asked to recommend a place for massage. As we entered, three young women in identical outfits approached us. Inside the shop were four chairs around a table on one side of the room, with three beds behind them. Two showcases for products and cosmetics posters lined the wall. A small counter was situated on the other side of the room. The women were watching a small television set. All of them were in their 20s, wearing what the Chinese would identify as a Thai-like uniform, consisting of a half-sleeved top that flared wide at the bottom, with flamboyant patterns in golden brown. Yang said that he would like a shoulder and neck massage, and, after a rate was agreed upon, one of the women, whom I will call Jin, led him to the inner room.² I followed, and saw that the room contained three more beds on one side and a cane bench on the other, as well as some kitchen items, including a rice cooker, pan, bowls, and chopsticks. Further into the room, there was a small patio where the water supply was located, and space for cooking and stacking miscellaneous items. The only restroom in the house was on the second floor, which also featured two other locked rooms. Later the women, who occasionally referred to themselves as beauty therapists, told me that they would sometimes nap in one or the other of the locked rooms or spend the night when they were unwilling to go back to their dormitory.

As Jin massaged Yang, I chatted with the other two women, Cen and Jia, who were standing by Yang's therapy bed. They told me that Jin was once a Foxconn worker and had first come to TWB to receive acne treatment. After two years of this treatment, she decided to quit her job at the factory and became a trainee at TWB. At the time of my visit, Jin had already worked in the beauty shop for six years and was now the manager of TWB. Jia was like Jin, one of the older of the workers. She had once worked in the automobile plant, BYD, but had switched to beauty work before coming to TWB. Cen was the youngest, having just had her 22nd birthday at the time. She was also the most active and talkative, eager to know where Yang and I came from, why we had come to Shenzhen, and what Hong Kong was like, where, she said, she wished to visit one day. Cen served as one of my most trusted informants over the following months, until she moved to another beauty shop.

As I proceeded with this study, I became aware that the shop name, "The Way to Beauty", was something of a double entendre. On the one hand, the shop gives a gesture to its clients of the functions of such beauty parlor; it offers beauty makeover programs

that lead to satisfying results, inspired by the glamorous visions and magical sentiments of beauty, fashion, and stardom, promulgated by popular culture and the media in particular. Moreover, because of the location of the shop and the social conditions of both the therapists and their clients, their understanding of beauty is highly specific and informed by local factors. For example, the therapists introduced their bestseller – a facial toxin-release treatment – to some walk-in clients more than once. Their rationale, articulated by Jin, in a professional tone, was as follows:

Many of our clients worked in the factory are exposed to toxic elements; or they use various cosmetics that ruined their skin with chemical substances, so their faces would be dark, loose, dry, and flecked. Our treatment can help them to release all those toxins, tightening and whitening the skin. All products we use are naturally distilled, meaning that there are no harmful elements.

On the other hand, the name also reflects the beauty therapists' own transformation from factory workers into beauty business professionals. Except for Cen, all five of the other therapists or trainees I met in TWB were former factory workers, most of whom had worked for Foxconn or a neighboring high-tech firm. For them, their changes of profession all counted as personal choices and they seemed content with their choice to leave the factories. Jia told me that her hands were always rough when she worked in the factory, but now that she was constantly in contact with beauty products, she was quite proud of their restored smoothness, what she called “girly hands”.

It is not surprising that the therapists emphasized the feminine aspect of beauty work. Academic studies have well addressed the (re)construction of femininity in different labor regimes, whereas earlier studies on migrant Chinese working women tended to investigate the harsh working conditions and tough lives under factory exploitation (Fan, 2004; Pun, 2005, 2012). Scholars have shown that migrant women's identities can be narrated in a relatively more positive way in the context of the beauty industry, as a more feminine field of labor (Chan, 2012). That massage, beauty, and fashion are identified as feminine work indicates that although women play a significantly larger role in the labor market, some of the work that they take on remains fraught with problematic assumptions about men and women. The discourse of working empowering women has become increasingly confounded with a postfeminist mentality of play, pleasure, and choice, a constellation of ideas and beliefs in which any differences among men's and women's experiences can be explained through an individualistic language (Gill, 2014). This sensibility of femininity constructed in the workplace valorizes the supposed glamor and fantasy of beauty work in a way that fosters the growth of the female consumer market (McRobbie, 2009). The beauty and fashion industry provides women with ready-made aspirations to modernity, urbanity, and upward mobility under the name of freedom, entrepreneurship, and individual satisfaction, as in the case addressed here.

The Longhua District is the frontier of economics and the affective practices for migrants to experience and exercise their imagination of being modern and beautiful. Malls provide new tech gadgets, *shanzhai* phones, and apparel. Food stalls and supermarkets offer fresh and instant meals. Entertainment places, such as pubs, karaoke bars, and roller-skating rinks, offer new approaches to sexuality. Manicure and beauty shops tout the images of urban beauties that lure fandom.³ Eric Ma (2001) used the term *satellite modernity* to describe a hybridized version of Western modernity that is reproduced by newly modernized cities in the borderlands of Mainland China, where migrants are concentrated to consume modern aspirations. Though this model has the drawback of reifying the

center–periphery and East–West binary oppositions, it does nicely articulate the tangible sentiments the migrants have toward life and work in these areas.

The beauty therapist Cen’s story exemplifies the migrant women’s neoliberal fantasies about modern beauty and mobility in a migration-loaded developing area. Cen came from Duyun, Guizhou, in the south-west of China. When she was in middle school, she heard that cleaners in Shenzhen could have a monthly income of RMB2,000–3,000 (approx. USD322–483), and moved to Shenzhen with help of a family friend. Cen liked the idea that beauty work helped people to be pretty and elegant. She told me that once some former women Foxconn workers came to TWB to get training to be beauty therapists. Over the course of their association with the beauty parlor, they transformed themselves into good-looking and well-dressed modern young women, whom people usually took to be rich, elite city dwellers. For her, the beauty business not only embodies the yearning and imagination of modernity, but also evokes other desirable qualities such as upward mobility and cosmopolitanism. Cen had moved to Shenzhen four years previously, uncertain whether she would stay there, but convinced that her hometown was too small a place to afford her a bright future, whereas Shenzhen offered opportunities to make money, grow as a person, and have a better life in general, even if it was ambiguous what those opportunities were. She enjoyed the job rotations among different beauty shops in different suburban areas; having once worked in Xixiang, Bao’an District, Shenzhen, she had been with TWB for two years. Through these rotations she benefited by learning how different therapists performed treatments and about the trendy beauty products in different areas, the range of client needs, and so on.

Cen’s fantasy about Hong Kong was particularly informative. She was eager to know what Hong Kong really looked like, especially now that all that separated her from Hong Kong was just a city border, and because her image of the city had been shaped by the dramas produced by the TVB broadcasting company. She described the Hong Kong of her dreams: TVB stars were everywhere; there were many small streets and lanes, full of Hong Kong-style tea restaurants and boutiques; and everyday necessities were cheap and of high quality. Cen’s aspirations for herself thus helped to create the Hong Kong of her fantasies in a manner nurtured by a disjuncture among past memories of media culture, present milieu, and imagination of futurity, which generate specific action and agency (Mankekar, 2015). Cen told me that she would definitely see the metropolis with her own eyes one day, once she had saved enough money, and would perhaps work as a beauty therapist there. She believed that her hard work in the beauty industry could bring her to Hong Kong, financially, practically, or, for the moment, imaginatively.

Precarious beauty

Cen’s aspirations about Hong Kong, however, are impeded by economic reality. The beauty therapists at TWB earned an average of RMB1,500 (approximately USD241) per month, including overtime, and they called themselves “The Moonlight Clan” (*Yue Guang Zu*), an expression used to refer to people who exhaust one paycheck before the next one arrives. A combination of low wages and high cost of living, together with the perceived demands of consumer culture – the overwhelming advertisements in malls, shops, restaurants, and entertainment outlets (such as pubs and billiard rooms) – was responsible for this state of affairs. Indeed, the services of TWB itself were quite expensive. The shop mostly promoted itself through word of mouth: old clients brought new ones, and the shops nearby would recommend the parlor to their customers, as well. TWB’s most popular treatment is an indication of just how costly its services are: although the first treatment

was RMB120 (USD20), subsequent treatments went for RMB680 (USD110) dollars. According to Lu, many clients received a package discount for purchasing 12 treatments up front for RMB2,000 (USD322). For lip or eyebrow tattooing, the price was RMB800–2,000 (USD129–322). In other words, the women who worked at TWB would have had a hard time affording the services that they themselves provided. Such pricing of commodities was common to the beauty therapists; their daily expenses would drain their wages if they did not manage their income properly.

Further, the working conditions for beauty therapists can be every bit as demanding as that in the factories. TWB therapists worked 7am to 10pm every day; there were no relief shifts. They might have two days off a month, but only on weekdays because weekends were usually the peak business days for the beauty shop. During the daytime, when there was less business, the therapists were required to be on call and would go to other beauty shops to provide services, apart from the rotation system referred to previously. There was no guarantee or even option of workplace stability.

The flexicurity of beauty work also informs such life choices as family planning and striking out as an entrepreneur. I once talked with a manicure shop owner. She was in her 30s and small and slim. She said she had been a factory worker many years ago, but had realized after getting married that working for others would not support a stable, long-term plan for life, especially if she chose to have a family. Her husband, who was still a factory worker at the time of the conversation, encouraged her to open a manicure shop, so she left the factory and started her own business. She had then to cater to the demands of her newly chosen calling, working times that most other people had off, early mornings, late nights, and weekends. During much of the day, she earned income selling phone covers, souvenirs, and beauty supplies to support the manicure business. She hired two former Foxconn women workers to cover for her when she had to take care of her son and run errands. This entrepreneur's feelings toward the beauty business were ambivalent: the work was very difficult and might not be highly remunerative. "But you own your business, [which is more] stable and flexible than working for others," she asserted. Nevertheless, whatever stability the shop owner believed that she had secured for herself remained tangential to the sense of flexibility, as her entrepreneurship has intensified her workload in supporting the family financially, physically, and emotionally. Her experience is but one example of a work environment that inures the workers to an exploitative regime under which women's labor is taken for granted.

For those workers who do not aspire to own their own beauty shops, entering into the beauty business is not easy. Lu worked in the BYD automotive factory in Chongqing for some time before coming to Shenzhen for beauty therapist training. Her family believed that Shenzhen offered more opportunities, including better pay and working conditions. The three-month training program for beauty therapists made her feel stupid and clumsy:

When I did my first practice, I found myself really stupid. Others did so well, and I always messed up. It was unlike assembling components of a given product in the factory, where every step was strictly defined, and all I needed to do was to follow the directions and repeat. It was dull and tedious but easy to navigate. In the beauty school, I need to remember different acupoints, some basic techniques, the functions and effects of various products, and the use of supplementary tools. You can model the teacher but you should have your own understandings and practice. It really took time to adapt.

The factory, like the beauty industry, deploys a set of techniques to discipline women workers. Previous studies have shown how Chinese factories arrange a sophisticated and

complex system of bureaucracy, production management, transparent living spaces, and limited social networks to manage workers to guarantee productive efficiency and maximize economic benefit (e.g., Pun & Chan, 2012). Although it is difficult to argue that the beauty business, as compared with factories, makes less of an effort to regulate labor, the beauty school and the beauty shop suggest a conjunction of ideas, incorporating a transformation that involves mind and body and claims a commitment to femininity. Beauty therapists embody an implicit assumption of labor that requires high levels of intimacy, care, and emotions that can be knitted into a broader discussion of immaterial or affective labor (Hardt, 1999; Lazzarato, 1996). The move from the factory to the beauty shop provides working women a sense that they are doing what they should be doing and can do well: taking care of others; taking care of the household; being flexible, adaptable, sociable, and supportive; generating entrepreneurial initiatives; and working long hours. This is also what Gill (2014) refers to as the new laboring subjectivities in the sexist cultural and creative industry. The femininity associated with beauty work conjures a paradoxical picture of women who are liberated and empowered by their ability to choose their work but are restricted by this same ability. Put another way, their freedom is constrained by the very choice that offered such freedom.

The construction of femininity in the labor market correlates strongly with the socialization and feminization of work, where capitalism extracts value from the relational and emotional elements of women that are most likely to be their baggage (Morini, 2007). For example, it is usually women, not men, who feel compelled to change jobs when considering a family plan. Hua, for example, was pregnant for the second time when I met her in TWB. She had worked for Foxconn before the birth of her first daughter. She was then in her 30s and her daughter was entering first grade. She told me that both she and her husband thought that she should give up factory work to take care of their family. Working as a beauty therapist was seen as a more suitable alternative for supporting the family financially, practically, and emotionally.

The assumption of gender normality in different labor regimes and the valorization of beauty work as women's work serve to facilitate capitalist accumulation, enhance productive efficiency, and maximize social benefit. Such conceptions of gender and labor in contemporary China have historical foundations in the politics of Mao's era, when radical feminist movements elsewhere in the world influenced the socialist ideology in China, which viewed the participation of women in the workplace as a sign of gender equality. However, Mao's China, although it encouraged women to enter the workplace, did so primarily to promote class solidarity, so that gender was subsumed into class. The post-Mao government has faced increasing global influences, resulting in the encounter between neoliberal capitalism and socialist control. When the state oriented its strategy toward economic growth, it thereby declared that the primary struggle for post-socialist China was no longer focused on class but rather on development. This focus on development, however, does not seem to have created equality, social justice and democracy; instead, it has created and reconstructed the power of the elite class at the expense of the public (Harvey, 2005; Wang, 2004). Class has been the buzzword and the battlefield of countless domestic and international debates in the context of developing socialist countries. Nevertheless, while scholars continue to insist that gender remains constitutive of class (e.g., Lee, 1998), it is only recently that the public has become keenly aware through the proliferation of social movements and the popularization of many academic studies, of social problems that are unique to gender.

Under the hegemony of neoliberalism, however, the Chinese government has made enormous efforts to distract attention from problems associated with class and gender.

Instead, it primes the private self to optimize the economic gains (Ong & Li, 2008). The struggle of working men and women has been privatized progressively, which helps to explain why migrant working women increasingly feel the need to identify with a vision of femininity that is aspirational and fashionable, and readily promoted by the media, popular culture, and neoliberal cosmopolitanism, especially in special economic zones such as Shenzhen, where national narratives of growth, hope, global consumerism, and cosmopolitan urbanity have become deeply intertwined (McRobbie, 2010; Ong, 1999). The women therapists interviewed for this study actively seek to act as the material, visceral, and sensational signifiers of the corporate ethos, the iconography of beauty and fashion, and the bearer of reproductive labor and the future, in which they embody a proper femininity that clearly articulates their status and sexual identity as modern working women.

At one point, Jin was required to go to another beauty shop to help. She changed out of her uniform and put on her own clothes. It was the first time I saw her in casual wear, and it impressed me. She had a black shirt and a tight short skirt that showed her curvaceous body; the black silk stockings and the high heel made her appear more slender. As I accompanied her outside to the bus stop, people, especially young men, were gazing at her. She walked confidently with her head up high. I recalled that she told me that she felt the work in the factory was extremely exhausting and not enjoyable. Thus, she came to do the beauty work, from which she gained much satisfaction. Perhaps what she enjoyed about the beauty parlor was not the work per se, but the act of self-transformation into the embodiment of normative beauty, even when she sensed that such beauty was chronically precarious.

It is one thing to observe that migrant women beauty workers share a sense of precarity, yet it is quite another to come up with a broad explanation for their individual situations. Unlike the men and factory workers who are the iconic representatives in most studies on the subject of precarity, migrant women workers in the beauty business are less visible as precarious subjects because their struggles are not based on the class interest or solidarity on which labor unions and the media are usually focused. Rather, the struggles of these women are rooted in gender and kinship on a personal level (see also Cheng, 2011). In the cases discussed so far, migrant women's simulacrum of freedom of choice in work and self-enterprise is underpinned by gendered assumptions about women's and men's roles in the household and workplace. In another case, that of the therapist Lu, entering the beauty business was part of her mother's plan for both her and her brother, though Lu's dream had been to become a flight attendant who was "gentle and elegant" as she put it. She had even been recruited by Sichuan Airlines as a trainee, but her mother refused to pay her tuition because her younger brother needed the money for high school, so she was sent to work in a factory to support him. A year later, she was sent to the beauty school in Shenzhen, as her mother said, "to learn a trade". "I'm okay because he [the brother] is smarter than I am. I'm used to the life here, and I like what I do, though I still want to be a flight attendant one day."

I have no idea whether she could attain her dream or not. Many of the migrant women I encountered seemed to believe in the empowering magic of beauty work, which granted them a modern appearance and mobility, without sacrificing their identity and privilege, if any, as a woman, daughter, wife, and/or mother. It is not an exaggeration to say that for these women, beauty work is an extension of the household, where they are required to perform caring, somatic, and affective labor comparable with that in domestic work or reproduction. The construction of femininity and gender normality also conspires with the national project of promoting a harmonious society, in which the individual, constructed as a moral, nationalistic subject, should be loyal and filial to the family, and tens of millions of

such harmonious families would rejuvenate China, a narrative extended to the simulacrum of a Chinese dream.

A way to the future?

Precarity is a tangible thing for these beauty therapists. Beauty is consumable on the individual level: beauty work requires a constant supply of young, fresh bodies to maintain the alluring mask of aspiration and glamor. Underneath, there is the dirty reality of rapid turnover, a politics of disposable bodies like that in the factory. By my last visits, TWB had undergone many changes of personnel. Hua quit to give birth to her second daughter; Cen was rotated to another beauty shop in the Shiyan, Bao'an District; Lu was only there for a trial period after working in another beauty shop for about a year; and two more new trainees, whom I did not have the chance to meet, had begun working at the shop; another called Fang, whom I did meet, proved to be cautious about chatting with me.

Such rapid changes were commonplace for the beauty workers, but there were exceptions. Jin worked at TWB for over six years, and became the manager. I did not get to talk with her about her plan for the future, so it remained unclear whether she would be promoted to an upper managerial position because of her seniority and loyalty. Jia had her own plan to open and manage a beauty shop. She told me that she had already started to collect resources, build up networks, and look for a location. I was amazed by her careful plan and methodical progress in pursuit of it. Repeatedly, in casual conversation, she acknowledged the reality that beauty work was fleeting and that she needed to secure a means of self-sufficiency. This sentiment was expressed by a number of the senior beauty therapists at TWB. Unlike the newcomers and trainees, Jin and Jia were more circumspect when talking with others about their plans for the future. Beauty work would remain glamorous for migrant women, but it would continue simultaneously to exclude the aging laboring bodies that perform it.

Lu still dreamed of being a flight attendant. The last time I met her, she told me, "I've heard that some training programs in Beijing ask for nearly RMB10,000 (approximately USD1,610) as tuition, per year. That is a huge amount of money. I have to work hard and save as much as I can to afford it." A major source of uncertainty was whether her brother would go to college; if he did, she might need to support him.

Before Cen rotated away, she told me that if she could make money and bring it back home to spend, people in her hometown would consider her a woman of ability. Nonetheless, her real dream was still focused on big cities, and she was quite ambivalent about the prospect of either returning home with honor or of continuing to experience the freedom and pain of being alone in the wider world. She said that to buy a condominium in the Longhua area would be very expensive, several hundred thousand dollars for one hundred square meters, far more than similar real estate in her hometown. She kept asking me to help her to find out whether any beauty shops in Hong Kong needed trainees or interns, in which case she might apply to go to Hong Kong and make big money. And then? She responded to my question that she did not think that far ahead.

The migrant city of Shenzhen is a national, as well as international, focus of many nongovernmental organizations, especially after the 18 worker suicides at Foxconn in 2010. Social workers, volunteers, students, spontaneous worker organizations, and other forums for labor activists champion the rights of peasant workers. For those who wish to facilitate such social change, factory workers are much more visible than small-scale workers like those in the beauty shop, particularly because global manufacturing concerns are

being forced by strikes and worker movements to confront such issues as labor abuse and inhumanity, wages in arrears, and impersonal working relations.

Attention to such prominent instances of class struggles, inequality, and injustice in general, tends to overshadow gender-specific problems faced by individuals. I once visited the Migrant Labor Library computer lab, where a volunteer from a local NGO was holding a workshop to teach migrant workers how to use social media, such as Weibo, to fight for their rights when they felt that they were being exploited by capitalist manufactories.⁴ During the workshop, however, few people paid close attention; most were online surfing, chatting, shopping, or watching movies. This experience suggested to me that workers, although not heedless of the exploitation that threatens their own welfare, have come to feel themselves increasingly defined by their individual backgrounds, needs, desires, and struggles. The challenges facing workers are increasingly individualized, if not privatized, diverse, and manifold; therefore, a universal and unilinear narrative of solidarity would be unlikely to capture the nuances of their work and life.

The precarity in the work and life of beauty workers remains out of the spotlight. The beauty therapists at TWB did not participate in any unions or worker organizations, and they seemed to care less about the strikes or labor problems that remain the focus of the media and labor activists. The women at the beauty shop were motivated to be entrepreneurs or to some other form of self-reliance; although, or perhaps because, the future was fragile and uncertain, they did not stop aspiring.

Conclusion

In post-socialist China, massive migration from the poor inner north and west to the South Coast, with its opportunities and capital, represents a significant social change. Most of the immigrants work on assembly lines for transnational manufacturers. Their presence not only contributes to double-digit growth in China's economy and transforming the country into the world's factory, but also creates disputes and controversies over inhumane working conditions, labor abuse, inequality, and class polarization. Factory workers' precarious labor is already being investigated. In the study, I have tried to show how migrant women workers, in learning, practicing, and desiring beauty, experience profound precarity because of their low wage, insecure forms of living, and the high mobility and flexibility of the work. Moreover, their precarity is furthered in the construction and reproduction of gender norms and expectations that underpin the national narratives of prosperity, growth, modernity, and upward mobility promised to the migrant bodies.

The business that was the focus of this investigation, The Way to Beauty shop, created a space in which many workers turned therapists cultivated their ideas, behaviors, appearance, ways of life, modernity, and urbanity through their beauty work, while simultaneously being co-opted by the consumer-culture experiences of Longhua District and the media. Working conditions in the beauty shop were no less difficult than were those in the factories, but they demanded a new set of self-governing techniques that nurtured the discourse of feminine normality and reinforced prevailing standards of beauty and fashion. As a highly gendered workplace, the beauty shop became in effect an extension of the household regime, where family norms and assumptions about women directed them toward work, childbirth, childrearing, supporting a husband, self-sacrifice, and, generally, offering care to others, physically, emotionally, and affectively. In another regard, the processes associated with this kind of work are seeping into every social context that requires laboring bodies to be flexible, mobile, programmable, and subject to economic maximization. In that sense, the factory, the beauty shop, and the household are all characterized

by precarious potentialities and guaranteed risks. This sensation is an inseparable part of the national ideology that seeks to reconstruct a strong image of China on a global stage, where the opportunity is always uneven and risky for individuals, and people have the equal chance to experience inequality and precarity.

The study of precarious labor in China sheds light on the contextualized precarity in developing Asia, which is different from that experienced in the advanced capitalist countries. Further, in keeping with feminist notions of precarity, this study also promotes understanding of migrant Chinese women as precarious subjects. Notably, the seeming empowerment of modern working women and the promises of achievement induce women to aspire to work in the beauty business, which in turn becomes a fetter of their own flourishing. However, working women's experiences and struggles in the beauty business are easily conceded to worker solidarity and degendered politics fostered mainly by the state, social activists, and workers themselves. This invisibility of beauty workers to public discourse further enhances their precarity; they strive to embrace the future that is best available to them with a fragile individual, as well as collective, sense of insecurity, anxiety, and potentiality. Thus, the experience of women workers calls for new strategies and politics for struggle, a fresh dialog that can address at once gender, class, mobility, desires, and aspirations.

Notes

1. The idea of the Chinese dream was officially spelled out by Xi Jinping in a speech on 29 November 2012, two weeks after taking office. The core of this idea is an ideological continuation of national rejuvenation that nevertheless admits and encourages individual ideals and imaginations, as long as they are self-accountable and remain defined by the strong national characteristic of rejuvenation. Though the fieldwork was completed before the official promotion of the Chinese dream, this ideology had already infiltrated the society, in which neoliberal ethos joins with socialist control to influence every aspect of life in China.
2. All names that appear in this study are pseudonymous.
3. The term *shanzhai* is a Chinese neologism designating *counterfeit*. It usually refers to businesses based on knockoffs. Around 2005, some clusters of small companies in South China, particularly in Shenzhen, produced counterfeit and inexpensive smart phones – they dissected the top-end phones from well-recognized foreign companies, and imitated and modified the technologies, appearances, and functions of the phones. Today, *shanzhai* also refers to originality and a grass-roots form of innovation that challenges authority.
4. Weibo is a popular social media platform in China that is similar to Twitter.

Notes on contributor

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