

# Book Review: Beyond Tears and Laughter: Gender, Migration, and the Service Sector in China by Yang Shen

*In Beyond Tears and Laughter: Gender, Migration, and the Service Sector in China, Yang Shen examines the life experiences of men and women who have migrated from rural China to Shanghai to make a living in the restaurant service sector, exploring how gender, class and hukou shape these experiences. Attending to the motivations, aspirations and desires of economic and social lives that are constantly being reshaped and drawing connections between work, intimate relationships, agency and subjectivity, this book is an excellent read for understanding gender and labour in contemporary China, finds Kanak Rajadhyaksha.*

***Beyond Tears and Laughter: Gender, Migration, and the Service Sector in China.* Yang Shen. Palgrave Macmillan. 2019.**

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In [Beyond Tears and Laughter: Gender, Migration, and the Service Sector in China](#), Yang Shen weaves together the everyday experiences of men and women who have migrated from rural China to Shanghai to make a living. In the context of a pro-urban development model and consequent migration from rural to urban areas, the book's focus is on migrant workers in restaurants, part of the burgeoning service sector that employs a large number of migrant workers in urban China. With the objective of examining how migrant restaurant workers experience transformation in a deeply unequal economy, Shen explores the ways in which workers' life experiences are gendered, the exercise and expression of agency and subjectivity in daily life and how gender, class and *hukou* shape everyday experiences.



Shen adopts an intersectional lens in studying the life experiences of migrant workers. She extends the dimensions of intersectionality beyond gender, race and class to also include *hukou* – a household registration system that categorises Chinese citizens as agricultural or non-agricultural. This lens serves to examine how social structures of patriarchy produce gendered experiences of work, construct ambition and desire and also shape life trajectories.

Locating her study in a restaurant in Shanghai, Shen uses a quantitative survey, in-depth interviews and participant observation to produce rich narratives of the meanings that migrant workers make of their roles as sons and daughters, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, and of their own ambitions and place in society. Shen's participation in her study as a table-server deserves special mention; working as a table-server, sharing the same living quarters as the migrant workers and her friendship with them have resulted in a nuanced understanding of the workers' lives and experiences.



Shen delves into the everyday working lives of the migrant workers, their intimate relationships and leisure time to explore how their lives have been transformed after migration. The concept of ‘non-patrilocality’ is crucial to understanding these experiences. Shen conceptualises non-patrilocality as a temporary space wherein migrant workers, both single people and married couples, neither live with their parents nor their in-laws. This alteration to traditional household structures has brought about profound change in agency and subjectivity for both women and men and has reshaped intimate relationships. Life after migration improves for women because it reduces household workload and restructures domestic responsibilities. It also allows them to escape complex relationships in their home villages, gives them financial independence and the opportunity to find partners for marriage. Parents continue to exert authority over children’s lives, with the children making room to exercise agency in whatever ways they can.

Shen’s findings show that gender, class and *hukou* come together to create a workplace that is gendered, feminised and hierarchical. Gender segregation across positions in the restaurant (inter-job segregation and intra-job segregation) is based on social constructions of what is appropriate work for both genders. Women are more commonly assigned the job of table-servers, a job that is higher up the ladder in a restaurant, while men are more commonly assigned to be pantry-helpers, a job lower down the restaurant job ladder.

Gender norms that workers held dear formed the basis for the kinds of work they chose at the restaurant – men often chose to be pantry-helpers because they believed the physical work involved was a man’s job, while women chose to be table-servers because this was work that required more sensitivity. Many male pantry-helpers, for example, did not want to be table-servers because they associated table-serving with being deferential, a quality that they associated with femininity. Societal norms of gender hierarchy conflicted with job hierarchy, making gender relationships complex. Women were not denigrated for working as table-servers because their primary role was considered to be that of mothers and daughters fulfilling filial obligations. Men doing the same were considered to have no future because in doing such work, they didn’t live up to societal expectations of ambition, enterprise and masculinity.

Migration results in agency being exercised in different ways and subjectivity constantly being reshaped through interactions with colleagues, customers and family. Narratives of everyday encounters add layers to the complexity of transformation experienced by migrant workers. Shen argues that the workers are able to exercise agency in some instances and choose to cope in others, depending on the situation. For example, women might choose to elope if their parents don't approve of their partners but continue to support their parents with remittances after marriage. Migration might alter filial piety with respect to romance and marriage but not with respect to economic support for parents. In the workplace, migrant workers might choose to retort when yelled at by customers or cope to make the situation more bearable.

Shen's description of how migrant workers spend leisure time is also an analysis of how they cope with low wages, restrictive work hours and the monotony of work coupled with the desire to be successful. Leisure is gendered. Women usually took up sewing and embroidering, the finished products of which they intended to use to decorate their homes. Many male migrant workers spent their leisure hours gambling, an activity they hoped would make them rich and give them lives they couldn't dream of otherwise affording. Financial success through gambling would mean an assertion of masculine values, something the men felt they didn't live up to as restaurant workers. Shen engages with agency as neither positive nor negative, but brings out the different forms in which it is exercised and how these forms change the life trajectories of those exercising it.

Migration gave both male and female workers horizontal mobility, with workers often switching across the service and manufacturing sectors, but it did not result in upward mobility. This gave the workers the feeling of being trapped in economic and social inequality for life. Shen's follow-up with the migrant workers she interviewed shows that most had left their jobs in the restaurant but were working in entry-level jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors, with wages that were similar, but with trade-offs in terms of intensity of work, holidays and leisure time.

The strength of Shen's ethnography lies in its empirical basis: she draws on motivations, aspirations and desires in economic and social lives that are constantly being reshaped. While migration does not level economic and social playing fields, it no doubt improves the financial condition of the migrant workers. In analysing experiences of life, rather than solely work, Shen efficiently draws connections between labour, intimate relationships, agency and subjectivity. Overall, this book is an excellent read for an understanding of gender and labour in contemporary China.

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