

Migrant Women Walking Down the Cheap Road

Modernization and Being Fashionable in Shanghai

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If Modernity and Progress reside in the city, and if the city monopolizes modern culture, then the countryside is the city's emaciated other.¹

Introduction

Tu (土)? It is just like how other people say: you dress like this, you must have just arrived here [Shanghai] from *xiangxia* (乡下 “countryside”). To give an impression of *tu* is that you are coming from *xiangxia*. It is because people in *xiangxia* dress more *tu*. Actually, I do not agree that they are *tu*. It is just that people dress more comfortably there. The fact is that people in the cities do dress the same.

Elaine, 28-year-old dessert shop waitress, Hubei

Under the Economic Reform and the Open Door Policy announced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China put great effort into modernization, resulting in drastic economic growth, which has formed the socioeconomic spatial politics between rural and urban China.² Through the implementation of the nationwide *hukou* (户口 “household registration”) system, China is divided into rural and urban populations³ upon which different social values are imposed: urban citizens become the center of modern culture and rural people are assigned to the lower class.⁴ The discourse of modernity in the post-Mao era, as Yan Hairong comments, “produces the countryside both materially and ideologically as a wasteland stripped of state investment and inhabited by moribund tradition, with the two dimensions mutually reinforcing each other.”⁵ Addressing rural/urban politics, Yan argues that “the post-Mao culture of modernity is an epistemic violence against the countryside that spectralizes the rural in both material and symbolic practices”; therefore, “young migrant women’s pursuit of a modern subjectivity, situated in the culture of modernity produced by post-Mao development, has to be understood in the context of a reconfigured rural-urban relationship in China’s structured political economy.”⁶ Within this discursive context, the “countryside cannot function as the locus of a modern identity for rural young women.”⁷ Thus, rural women may grow to despise the countryside’s backwardness, and desire a more modern, fashionable city lifestyle.

This grand narrative of a rural/urban dichotomy, brought about by the post-Mao state, is transforming under the political rule of Xi Jinping, the seventh president of the People’s Republic of

China (PRC).⁸ Framed as “The Chinese Dream” by Xi’s government, the nation expresses its desire for continuous prosperity that must be executed by developing rural and inland China, in conjunction with the integration of individuals’ aspirations, including all citizens from rural and urban regions, to achieve personal wellbeing.⁹ Therefore, the National New-Type Urbanization Plan (2014–2020) has been put into effect,¹⁰ together with the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOHURD),¹¹ to facilitate urbanization and modernization in rural China.¹² Nonetheless, Wanning Sun reminds us:

A different China, consisting of myriad marginalized social groups, remains largely hidden. The members of these groups, each with the modest dream of greater equality and less discrimination in their lives, cast a disquieting shadow over the vision of a rejuvenated China with common prosperity that is the stuff of President Xi Jinping’s “China Dream.”¹³

Focusing on one of these marginalized social groups, this chapter questions how and to what extent gendered “subalterns”¹⁴—rural migrant women—gain access to the Chinese Dream. To answer this, I look at the lives of rural migrant women as providing a response to the impetus for modernization and the national political goal.

As mentioned by Elaine, one of my research participants from rural China, the way in which people from the countryside dress is seemingly “the same” as the way those from the global city (Shanghai)¹⁵ dress. In this way, the negative attachment of *tu*, literally earth, soil, or clay, which is imposed on rural bodies to signify a sense of backwardness in post-reform China, can be erased through embracing urban fashion. Fashion is a promising site to negotiate the conceptual distinctions between rural and urban, as well as the material culture of modernization. Accordingly, this chapter studies the lives of rural migrant women who, in the process of migration, are negotiating definitions of the “Chinese modern woman.” I focus on the ways these women are interpellated as *potentially* modern and fashionable at a specific site, the so-called “Cheap Road” in Shanghai. The *Qipulu* Clothing Wholesale Market, known as the Cheap Road by foreigners, is a wholesale district targeting fashion buyers from Shanghai and nearby regions. Having begun as a small shopping street in 1978,¹⁶ the Cheap Road has become a symbol of modernization reflecting the development of the market economy and witnessing the fashion trends of post-reform China. Following Miller’s *A Theory of Shopping*,¹⁷ shopping is read as not merely a form of hedonism or materialism and should not be extrapolated to the negation of consumerism and global capitalism.¹⁸ Rather, Miller argues, “shopping is not just approached as a thing in itself. It is found to be a means to uncover, through the close observation of people’s practices, something about their relationship.”¹⁹ I aim to study fashion shopping and its nuances, because fashion can allow “subjective thoughts and existences to take on greater autonomy.”²⁰ This chapter suggests that understanding fashion consumption makes a vital contribution to migration studies because it exemplifies the dilemmas of identity and subjectivity as faced by migrant women.

(Un)fashionability of Rural Migrant Women

Under the *hukou* system, rural migrant workers are labeled as *nongmingong* (农民工 “peasant-worker”), which “refers to a group of industrial and service workers with rural *hukou*.”²¹ *Nongmingong* work “in urban jobs (and chiefly in towns and cities), yet legally they are not considered urban workers.”²² Moreover, the rural labor workforce is gendered;²³ for instance, the young female workers in the factories are known as *dagongmei* (打工妹—literally, “working sister” or “working girl”).²⁴ These female workers are marginalized in the cities due to their rural *hukou* and their alleged low *suzhi* (素质 “quality”).²⁵ The political significance of geography intricately attaches to rural migrant women’s bodies and affects their lives, yet little has been done to capture the impact of fashion or to make sense of how rural

migrant women transform themselves to cope with these unequal social circumstances. How does modernization manipulate and shape the bodies and looks of migrant women?

Historically, fashion has been adopted as a tool to shape female subjectivity in China. During the Republican period (1912–49), intellectuals shed light on the definition of the ideal *xin nüxing* (新女性 “new woman”)²⁶ as part of the political agenda for modernization.²⁷ Being able to “speak a little English” and wear “flamboyant Western clothes” became the image of “modern woman.”²⁸ In the Mao era (1949–76), women were advised to wear gender-neutral outfits to mobilize the female population to join the workforce.²⁹ This erasure of femininity came to an end in the post-Mao period because the Reform State encouraged the beauty economy.³⁰ As Xiaoping Li states, “Since then, both the meaning of ‘fashion’ and clothing styles have undergone considerable transformation in accordance with larger societal changes” because “a high fashion modeled on elite fashion in capitalist consumer culture has come to dominate.”³¹ Hence, urban women have to face the challenge to be fashionable. Matthew Chew’s study of *qipao* (旗袍) explains, “Fashionable yet not outlandish, sexy yet subdued, *qipaos* represent one of the solutions in China’s present fashion market that alleviates urban women’s fashion dilemma.”³² While urban women struggle for a balance between socio-moral pressures and global fashion,³³ rural migrant women come to the city and feel the urge to transform themselves by embracing modern femininity.³⁴

As Lisal Rofel proposes, “modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge, forged within uneven dialogues about the place of those who move in and out of categories of otherness.”³⁵ Generally, modernity “assumes a noncontinuous break with what it constructs as the irrationalities of tradition.”³⁶ In China, rural migrants’ imaginaries of modernity are strongly attached to two contradictory conceptions: *tu* and *xiandai* (现代—literally, “modern”). As shared by Xiaomei, a 16-year-old salesperson from Jiangxi working in a fashion shop on the Cheap Road, the antonym of *tu* is *xiandai*. She clarified that *xiandai* is about the cities, and the Cheap Road is “modern” because it is a place that sells *shishang* (时尚 “fashion”). Her understanding of *tu* and *xiandai* reveals the intricate relationship between *tu*, *xiandai*, and *shishang*. In this chapter, I use Rofel’s theorization of modernization to study rural migrant women’s perceptions of *tu* and *xiandai* and to explore the ways in which modernization seeps into their lives.

Methodology

During fieldwork research conducted between September and December 2014, May and July 2015, and in October 2016, I conducted 88 in-depth interviews with rural migrant women through the “snowball” method, including one shop owner and four salespersons working on the Cheap Road. These research participants, aged 15 to 54 at the time of the interviews, are from different rural regions of China, and mainly work as service workers in Shanghai, in the food and beverage service industry, beauty parlors, and domestic service.

Drawing on my fieldwork data, this chapter first examines the self-narratives of rural migrant women, particularly with regard to their migration experiences, to investigate how they transform themselves in response to imaginaries of the “modern urban woman” in Shanghai. During the in-depth interviews, I asked semi-structured questions, including what the women brought from their hometowns to Shanghai, where they usually shop in the city, and how much they spend on fashion shopping. Additionally, I asked them how they feel when they go back to their hometown. As Miller argues, “[shopping] is found to be a means to uncover, through the close observation of people’s practices, something about their relationship.”³⁷ In light of his argument, I examine young migrant women’s new “modern” consumer experiences as revealing of their social relationships with Shanghai’s cityscapes and the women’s hometowns.

Second, the chapter analyzes the ways in which the Cheap Road addresses, through its spatial organization and commercial strategies, rural migrant women’s aspiration to become a “modern woman.” In her study of advertisements in Republican Shanghai, Barbara Mittler, following Mirzoeff’s work, argues that “[v]isual culture used to be seen as a ‘distraction from the serious business of text

and history' while images can in fact also be seen as a locus of cultural and historical change."³⁸ This chapter follows Mittler's study to analyze the advertisements and commercial images found on the Cheap Road in relation to emerging imaginaries of the "modern woman."

The third section of this chapter focuses on the "go-along"³⁹ interview technique with Elaine. Before the go-along, I interviewed her about her fashion-shopping habits. Then, during the two-hour walk with her on the Cheap Road, she led me along her usual route and I video-recorded her commenting on her shopping experiences. Allowing Elaine to follow her usual path, this method enabled me to observe the "social architecture"⁴⁰ created by her path. After the go-along, I arranged a one-hour interview with her to inquire how she felt about our walk. Last, I analyze Elaine's fashion style and trace how it has gradually "developed" through shopping, and suggest that by developing their fashion style through shopping, rural migrant women become the "Chinese modern *rural* woman" who must find a point where their identities as migrant women and Shanghai women meet.

The Materiality of the "Modern"

This section studies the narratives of rural migrant women living between rural China and the city to capture the social relationships forged between the rural female migrant identity and "Chinese modern culture" through fashion shopping.

First, it is significant to point out that among all personal belongings, clothes are "undesirable things" for rural migrant women to bring with them from their hometowns. When asked what they brought from their home to Shanghai, their answers are enlightening:

I do not take clothes [from her rural home]. [Researcher: Why don't you bring clothes?] Basically, I purchase clothes here [Shanghai].

Miumiu, 26-year-old senior hairstylist, Anhui

Miumiu is not the only one who does not bring clothes from home. Her junior colleague Vivi shared:

When I first left [home], I brought only a few clothes for temporary use. Then, I bought new clothes. It is heavy to bring clothes. It is troublesome.

Vivi, 18-year-old hairstylist apprentice, Anhui

Although Miumiu and Vivi shared that clothes in Shanghai are more expensive than in their hometowns, they still decided to buy new clothes to avoid the burden of carrying clothes from their home to Shanghai. The reason for this is not only that clothes are "heavy to bring." Miumiu confided:

I work in the fashion industry as a hairstylist. It is better not to wear or buy clothes from my hometown because those fashion items are more *tu*. If I bring those clothes from home to Shanghai, I would not wear them. It would be a waste.

Miumiu, 26-year-old senior hairstylist, Anhui

In Miumiu's case, shopping is done out of need, as clothes from home do not fit well in the urban workplace. It is the need for fashion shopping that gives these female migrants a chance to experience self-transformations.

Second, I explore how rural migrant women's friends and family in their hometowns commented on their new outfits:

They think I am too fashionable. Therefore, every time I go back home, I wear the most *xixuan*-ian (休闲 "casual") clothes. Actually, some people are jealous. Although I am not a high-profile

person, I want to be more low-profile. My family was poor when I was young. [. . .] Now, people can feel that our condition is getting better. However, I do not want to *xuanfu* (炫富 “flaunting one’s wealth”). It is better to be simpler.

Eileen, 31-year-old senior hairstylist, Jiangsu

Eileen joined the beauty service industry 15 years ago, starting as a hairstylist’s apprentice without any income. She now earns RMB 10,000 (about \$1,455) per month as a senior hairstylist in a high-class salon. The effort she has made in the service industry has helped her to live a better life; however, she decides not to be “too fashionable” in her hometown. Moreover, Pang Yuan shared:

PANG YUAN: One time when I went back home for Chinese New Year, someone said to me, “This is really ugly! Why do you dress like this?”

RESEARCHER: Is it about the clothes you brought from Shanghai?

PANG YUAN: I think they dress weirdly and very *xiangqi* (乡气 “rustic”). However, they think I am very *tu* because what I wear has a lack of colors.

RESEARCH ASSISTANT: Is that black, gray, and white?

PANG YUAN: Yes, exactly! “Can you wear more colors [colorful clothes]? You are so young but dress up so *tu*,” they commented. My response was, ok, fine. “I am very fashionable here [in Shanghai], all right?” This is what I thought; however, I didn’t say it out loud.

Pang Yuan, 25-year-old hairstylist, Hunan

Because red is the traditional color for New Year celebrations,⁴¹ Pang Yuan’s choice of colors is considered unusual by her rural community. Both Pang Yuan’s and Eileen’s experiences show the responses of their rural communities where their rural peers may not appreciate their new fashion style. Thus, these rural migrant women become dislocated in their hometowns, someone to be gazed upon because a sense of “fashion style” is not only subjective, but also closely linked to history and culture.⁴² More importantly, *tu* is not a stable concept—there is a discrepancy between what *tu* is in Shanghai and what *tu* is in the rural communities. In short, both Pang Yuan and Eileen are aware of a certain level of transformation of their bodily images as they become more fashionable, putting them into a position to negotiate the unstable conception *tu*. Significantly, rural migrant women have learned to employ the sense of *tu* to measure the suitability of their rural male counterparts.⁴³ As Pang Yuan confided, she felt that rural men are less attractive than the men in Shanghai. It is less likely that Shanghai men will want to marry her, however, because of the embedded social hierarchy between urban and rural residents; therefore, she remains single. Thus, rural men are the “emaciated other” for rural migrant women.

Third, *tu* is an adjective that is frequently used by my research participants. Etymologically, the character *tu* denotes earth, soil, or clay. But what is *tu* to rural migrant women? When *tu* refers to nature, why is it used in such a negative way in their conversations? When asked what *tu* is, I collected the following answers:

Perhaps it is a feeling given to others that one has darker skin and dresses less clean. Then it gives an impression of *tu*. It is not wearing very nice clothes and being a bit darker. Then, you are *tu*. Just like this.

Elaine, 28-year-old dessert shop waitress, Hubei

I don’t know how to define *tu*. I think it is to look down upon [a person]. How to describe *tu*? It feels that it means people from the countryside.

Dongmei, 17-year-old salesperson at Qipulu, Henan

Tu refers to the ways in which one dresses and talks.

Xiaomei, 16-year-old salesperson at Qipulu, Jiangxi

By their definitions, *tu* is similar to “hick” in English, signifying a backwards person from the countryside. Elaine’s point about *tu* being about “darker skin” suggests agricultural work exposing one to the sun. When modernization creates imaginaries of the cities as being better than the countryside, *tu* becomes negatively associated with rural bodies. Yet it is more problematic when young rural women come to work in Shanghai, as they are not peasants but workers; some of them do not have the agricultural skills to accurately be called *nongmingong*.⁴⁴ As Phoebe, a 21-year-old migrant from Jiangxi shared, she feels more comfortable to be labeled as “Shanghai *wailai wugong*” (上海外来务工—literally, Shanghai migrant worker).

In her research, Zheng Tiantian documented how female migrant hostesses spend large amounts of time and money on hair products and hairstyling to avoid being associated with their rural backgrounds by their customers.⁴⁵ As Zheng writes, “According to the hostesses, dirty or unfashionable hair reveals your rural background. They often critically comment on each other’s hair, saying, ‘That is so hick (土气 *tuqi*)!’”^{46, 47} While working in different sectors, my research participants share a similar desire to avoid being connected to their rural backgrounds. Hence, being “modern” is a way to learn how to navigate the city without being looked down upon by the city residents. Therefore, fashionable clothes become an immediate resource used by rural migrant women. To comprehend the commercial images selling rural migrant women the imaginaries of the “Chinese modern woman,” the following section will examine the visual culture on the Cheap Road.

Visualizing the “Modern”

Drawing on Mittler’s approach to Shanghai’s modern advertisements, this section analyzes the spatial organization and commercial strategies found on the Cheap Road in relation to emerging imaginaries of the “modern Chinese woman.”

Qipulu Clothing Wholesale Market, aka the “Cheap Road,” is located in the former downtown Zhabei district, which emerged as a business district, Jing’an, in 2015. The Cheap Road is situated close to the Bund and to Nanjing East Road, areas known for attracting tourists and business activities. Although the Cheap Road focuses on wholesale business, the fashion shops also sell clothes to retail customers, attracting enormous numbers of tourists and low-income migrants. People like to shop at the Cheap Road not only because goods are sold at wholesale prices, but also because the products are the trendiest.⁴⁸ Moreover, transportation to the Cheap Road is extremely convenient, as it is located next to the Tiantong Road Metro Station. Malls have been constructed close to each other along the Cheap Road, and there are now 11 main wholesale market malls (see Figure 18.1). The first time I visited this shopping area, its high density of shops and pedestrians impressed me greatly. Drawing on my observations, I will summarize the three main commercial practices used to advertise imaginaries of the “modern”: first, the displaying of goods; second, the branding of shops; and third, advertising through billboards.

Displaying fashion products is the most common practice that shops use to attract customers. Because the shops are so densely arranged in the malls, this makes the visual experience on the Cheap Road very intense. Each mall consists of a basement and four or five floors with hundreds of small shops on each floor. On the Cheap Road, malls have different opening hours: some are open from 5:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and some from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. During the periods that salespeople are working on their wholesale orders and are busy packing batches of clothes into big plastic bags, the malls become extremely chaotic and uncomfortable for retail shoppers. Fashion items, plastic bags,



Figure 18.1 “Cheap Road” Street View

Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.

dust, and dirt are scattered on the floors, which even makes it difficult to walk there (see Figure 18.2). Retail customers have to tolerate the mess, but it is not solely a bad experience because they are able to touch the goods and feel their texture, and more importantly to judge their quality and size. Due to the dense spatial arrangement, retail customers not only have intimate contact with the commodities, but also with other customers and workers. In this way, the visual experience is not only intense but also compressed into a crowded space where every step creates a new sensual experience. As Mittler writes, “images, more than texts, offer the opportunity for the communication of excitement, mood and imagination.”⁴⁹ The image of the densely displayed goods in the malls is the best advertisement, affording customers direct access to the imaginaries of the fashionable world.

On the Cheap Road, the second strategy of shop-branding is not only closely connected to fashion trends and popular culture, but also to history and politics. Many businesses have adopted Korean characters in their shop’s names in response to the popularity of Korean culture in China.⁵⁰ There is even a Korean-themed shopping mall called S&S Fashion Plaza on the Cheap Road, which was built in 2009. As I observed, the shops on the Cheap Road closely follow trends and sell clothes and accessories that are prominently featured in popular Korean TV dramas and movies, such as *My Love From the Star*⁵¹ and *Descendants of the Sun*.⁵² Significantly, while Korean culture is dominant in this shopping district, Japanese culture is almost absent, although Japanese design plays an important role in the global fashion industry.⁵³ Out of curiosity, I asked my research participant Elaine and she replied:

After all, Chinese do not like Japanese. On the Cheap Road, I seldom see Japanese products. There are more Korean [products]. They do not say it is Japanese goods. They only say it is *waimao* (外贸 “foreign trade”).



Figure 18.2 After Rush Hour on the “Cheap Road”

Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.

Elaine described how Chinese people “do not like Japanese” due to the two World Wars. Japanese goods have become an exceedingly sensitive issue in the country. To avoid the possibility of being attacked if a boycott of Japanese goods occurs again,⁵⁴ shop owners do not use Japanese characters as names for their shops. The absence of Japanese culture indicates how the Cheap Road is not only a place for wholesale or retail activities, but also a geopolitical place with a particular political consensus.

Third, the huge billboards displayed on the Cheap Road are a key medium for rural migrant women to access imaginaries of the “Chinese modern woman.” The first time I visited the Cheap



Figure 18.3 Large Billboards on the “Cheap Road”

Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.

Road, the large billboards on all sides of the shopping malls caught my attention immediately. The billboards are unlike the advertisements of the luxurious high-class shopping malls in the Jing’an district. Most of the billboards on the Cheap Road have extremely simple visuals: usually only a female model wearing a fashionable outfit is represented (see Figure 18.3). These models are mainly white, with only a few Asians, marketing a global concept of fashion. They are dressed colorfully, with



Figure 18.4 A Billboard Model Poses Seductively on the “Cheap Road”

Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.

stylish attire and modest makeup. More importantly, all of them are posing confidently, and sometimes seductively, giving them a classy, international, and modern charisma (see Figure 18.4). Their poses holding bags, purses or other fashionable accessories, and doing nothing related to the home, distances them from the domestic sphere. Thus, a sense of modern, globalized femininity and confident, public individuality is constructed (see Figure 18.5).



Figure 18.5 Western Models Are Common on the “Cheap Road”

Source: © Penn Ip, 2016.

The billboards are positioned on top of all the shopping malls on the Cheap Road, arranged neatly next to each other. It is unavoidable for customers to see these images as they walk along the Cheap Road because of their size. The impression is similar to the moment of “subconscious reception,” as Mittler describes people flipping the pages of a magazine and seeing the advertisements without looking closely at the texts.⁵⁵ This “subconscious reception” is a “visual event”—“the interaction of visual sign and viewer.”⁵⁶ In the case of the billboards, a visual event is created when pedestrians scan the parade of the female models as they walk along the road.

This visual event resembles the worshipping of a goddess. Here, I use the analogy of worshipping the goddess as a ritualized event, extending the meaning of goddess to the “modern” female subjects who are commonly termed *nüshen* (女神 “goddess”) in Chinese popular culture. Nowadays, women who meet the aesthetic standard of the popular online terminology, *baifumei* (白富美—literally, white, rich, and beautiful), are commonly named *nüshen*. Hence, the female models on these billboards can be seen as the “modern” *nüshen* that rural women look up to, and from whom they learn how to dress.

In short, imaginaries of the “modern” are being visualized through these three main advertising techniques: a touch of the “modern” is made accessible in which rural migrant female women can feel fashion items before purchasing them; fashion shops reflect the trendiest designs, including a sense of politics and history; and the billboards are a visual event for female customers to worship the “goddesses” of a “modern” heaven. As Mittler writes, “advertising is involved in the ‘manipulation of social values and attitudes,’ and thus may even be said to fulfill ‘the function of art and religion in earlier days!’”⁵⁷ The advertisements displayed on the Cheap Road enable rural migrant women to understand modern Shanghai culture. As Rofel reminds us, “modernity persists as an imaginary.”⁵⁸ The Cheap Road provides an ideal shopping environment for lower-class women to feel, touch, and consume a sense of the “modern,” and helps rural migrant women to envision what a “Chinese modern woman” is. However, Mittler warns, “Advertising is a world that is prescriptive and pre-emptive at the same time: it offers impossible dreams and warns of possible realities; it shows and it judges alternatives.”⁵⁹ Although the dream of being a modern goddess seems within reach for rural migrant women, the reality is perhaps different due to their marginalized status. In the following section, I will follow one of my research participants to explore the extent to which she feels she can transform herself by shopping on the Cheap Road.

The Spatiality of *Tu* and “Modern”

Elaine, a 28-year-old migrant from Hubei, was a hairstylist when I first met her in 2015. Since then she has changed her job and started working in a dessert shop in the hope of one day opening a dessert shop of her own. During our second interview in 2016, she shared with me that she is married and lives together with her husband and her brother and sister-in-law. Previously, she lived with another rural migrant woman, whom I met in 2015. After ten years as a migrant worker in Shanghai, Elaine’s life has drastically changed, but she still meets with her former housemate and shops on the Cheap Road with her regularly. Elaine goes shopping on the Cheap Road at least ten times a year. My analysis incorporates both interviews and the go-along method to document Elaine’s experiences on the Cheap Road, with a one-hour interview before the go-along and another afterward. Allowing Elaine to follow her usual path, this method enabled me to observe the “social architecture”⁶⁰ created by her path and to explore the ways in which the shopping experiences of a female migrant worker are affected by the structures of the malls.

During our walk, Elaine shared her view that people from the countryside are seemingly the same as Shanghai people. Her thoughts about this sameness are worth a closer reading. When asked about how she feels about the Cheap Road before our go-along, Elaine stated:

Qipulu (“The Cheap Road”) is one of the clothing wholesale markets in China. It is different from other shopping malls. It is a district for wholesale in Shanghai. Therefore, people from other regions will come to purchase clothes. Many people go to *Qipulu to tao* (淘—literally, hunt for nice goods). After *tao*, they will polish the clothes and put them in their boutiques. The clothes will then look finer, and can be sold for different prices.

Elaine’s explanation clarifies the nature of the Cheap Road, which targets buyers from retail shops as a wholesale market. Fashionable clothes being sold in Shanghai can be transported to other regions in

China through the retail shops' buyers from different provinces, giving rural consumers a chance to purchase them. This allows rural people to dress the same as established Shanghai residents. As Elaine reminds us, rural people are not *tu*: they only wear simpler attire. Her claim is a rejection of the urban/rural geopolitics that people from the countryside are more backward.

When asked about the difference between the Cheap Road and other shopping malls, Elaine explained the hidden rules that retail consumers have to follow:

If you purchase clothes in *Qipulu* ("The Cheap Road"), you cannot return them. It's unlike any other shopping mall. Sometimes he/she [shopkeeper] may exchange another item with you, but it is for sure he/she will not refund it.

Beside this rule, Elaine shared that shops offer no discounts, but consumers can bargain with the shopkeepers. There are generally no price tags on products, meaning one has to ask the salesperson or the shop owner for a price. Given these specific circumstances, Elaine has learned to hunt for good quality, low-price products:

By touching the products, you can feel them and judge if you will feel comfortable when you wear them. You cannot feel it if you buy it in *Taobao* [an online shopping mall]. I do not buy winter clothes in *Taobao* for sure. *Qipulu* is a *shishizai zai de defang* (实实在在的地方 "real place").

While online shopping is extremely popular in present-day China, Elaine considers the Cheap Road as a "real place" for shopping. She spends more than RMB 1,000 (about \$145) per shopping trip on the Cheap Road when she finds nice clothes that she likes and that are of good quality. Earning RMB 5,000 per month, Elaine spends roughly RMB 5,000 (about \$730) per year on clothes. This pre-go-along interview helped to understand her shopping habits as well as the hidden rules for retail customers.

During our two-hour go-along, Elaine walked with me on the Cheap Road following the route she walks with her friends, and explained to me how she usually shops. Following Elaine's route, we first walked to the Xingwang Clothing Wholesale Market, and she explained that after entering this mall, she and her friend would stay inside, walking to Shanghai Xingwang International Clothing City through the bridge that connects these two malls on the second floor. They have developed a shopping route based on the spatial arrangement of these two malls—each floor consists of different streets, and they walk sequentially from one street to another in order not to miss or repeat any shop. She skips the ground floor because the goods there are the cheapest and are of a similar style and quality to those she can find in her rural hometown. In Elaine's words, clothes on the ground floor are more *tu*. Therefore, they start shopping on the first floor, and then move upstairs to the higher floors where the better products can be found. She explained that because she earns more now than ten years ago, she aims to buy products of better quality even though the price is higher. This practice suggests on the one hand the "sameness" she finds on the ground floor, and on the other hand the "otherness" she desires to acquire in relation to the distinction between *tu* and *xiandai*. In this sense, walking from the ground floor (the cheapest goods), to the fourth floor (the most expensive products), the spatial structure is similar to walking from her rural hometown to Shanghai. This shopping experience thus helps Elaine to understand the distance between *tu* and "modern."

After walking in these two malls, Elaine guided me to the Korean-themed shopping mall. As per her suggestion, we skipped walking through the other shopping malls because they are not part of her usual routine. Then, we went to the last shopping mall, Baima Mansion, which is one of the wholesale shopping malls specifically dedicated to middle-age fashion. There, Elaine wanted to look for clothes for her parents, and eventually we walked to the shop owned by one of my research participants, Qiu Laoban, a 40-year-old migrant woman from Wenzhou. The three of us had a pleasant conversation,

which was a new experience for Elaine because she had never chatted with a salesperson or shop owner on the Cheap Road except when she wanted to bargain.

During our post-go-along interview, Elaine shared that her affective experiences as a customer have been modified after working for ten years in Shanghai. Ten years ago, when Elaine first arrived in Shanghai, she found herself *tu*:

I was young at the time. I felt that I was a bit *tu*. I was fresh. I did not have money to buy nice clothes to dress myself up.

As a new migrant worker ten years ago, Elaine found Shanghai a stunning city where people “looked attractive.” She felt the urge to transform herself, especially because she was working in the fashion industry:

When I was promoted as hairstylist, I had to buy new clothes. It is important to be fashionable and modern to gain trust from clients.

In the service sectors, services workers are required to meet fashionable, modern standards; therefore, workers have to undergo a certain level of physical transformation.⁶¹ Hence, Elaine confided:

The Cheap Road is a necessity for the working class. It is because people of low income cannot afford shopping for fashion in Shanghai. But the Cheap Road, where we can find cheap fashion, becomes a necessity.

In her opinion, the Cheap Road provides an alternative for the working class to consume low-price fashion. Because the fashion clothes are “cheap,” the Cheap Road earns its name and becomes a necessity as highlighted by Elaine.

Rural migrant women’s fashion style can be gradually transformed through shopping in Shanghai, yet becoming a “Chinese modern woman” remains challenging. As Elaine shared:

Clothes in Shanghai are comparatively more fashionable and look more stylish. However, the clothes I buy are not so fashionable. I mainly buy clothes that are more *xiuxian*.

Elaine explained that she likes fashionable clothes, but somehow she cannot handle the *kuazhang* (夸张 “hyperbole”) style because her personality does not fit well with it. Elaine explained that when she returns to her rural hometown, she also dresses a bit more casually because it is comfortable. Therefore, she does not have to restyle herself for the rural environment. Yet dressing casually does not mean not being “modern” enough to walk the streets of Shanghai:

At that time I found that Shanghai women looked attractive. The white-collar women were different than other women here. Now, I feel that Shanghai women are more or less the same, because they wear casual and comfortable clothes.

Her observation of how Shanghai women have changed their fashion style during the past ten years is crucial, because she has learned from these city women that wearing casual and comfortable clothes is a possible fashion style. However, the “sameness” she found has not dissolved the social hierarchy between rural and urban people. Elaine said that she is aware of the discrimination against *waidiren* (外地人 “outsiders”—literally, non-local people) in Shanghai. After working in Shanghai for ten years, Elaine dreams of returning home. She planned to earn more money in Shanghai in order to save sufficient capital to start a business in her hometown or her husband’s.

She also said that living in her hometown is more comfortable because her home is much more spacious than the rented apartment in Shanghai. Her dream echoes the national promotion of the Chinese Dream in which the nation attempts to persuade rural migrants to return home for rural modernization.

Conclusion

Drawing on this analysis, I suggest that it is inadequate to analyze rural migrant women through the lens of the “Chinese modern woman” without taking the rural/urban divide and rural political identity into account. Rural migrant women’s dilemmas in fashion are different than those faced by urban women⁶² because they have to learn to be modern in the city to avoid discrimination, and simultaneously find a sense of comfort when they return home. For Pang Yuan, her relatives applied pressure on what she chose to wear during Chinese New Year, where Eileen had chosen to dress simply in order to keep a low profile in her hometown. In Elaine’s situation, the “casual” fashion style is seemingly a balance she found to navigate in both Shanghai and her hometown. As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, “Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.”⁶³ In this sense, rural migrant women can transform themselves to be more fashionable, yet they always have to deal with the socio-moral pressures between rural and urban China, where both localities have their different moral and fashion standards.⁶⁴ Hence, rural migrant women should not be analyzed as merely “Chinese modern women” because they are “Chinese modern *rural* migrant women” who must find a point where their identities as migrant women and Shanghai women meet.

This chapter reveals that *tu* is an unwanted, undesirable element imposed on rural female’s bodies. Focusing on the commercial strategies on the Cheap Road, I conclude that the imaginaries of “Chinese modern woman” are being visualized through three main advertising techniques: a sense of the “modern” is made accessible by allowing rural migrant women to intimately judge the commodities on offer; fashion shops reflect the trendiest fashion culture, but with political and historical sensitivity; and billboards provide a visual event for female customers to worship “goddesses” from the “modern” heaven.

Significantly, rural migrant women have learned to employ the sense of *tu* to measure the suitability of their rural male counterparts. Thus, rural men are the “emaciated other” for single rural migrant women. As discussed by C. Cindy Fan in this volume, single men and their parents must build large houses to attract single women in rural China. Doubtlessly, rural migrant women can enjoy a certain degree of self-transformation and autonomy, yet their identity is deeply entangled with their rural *hukou*. In other words, they remain marked as rural migrant women by local people in the cities. Respectively, “Chinese modern *rural* migrant women” can seemingly gain access to the Chinese Dream by embracing a sense of “modern” through fashion shopping, yet in achieving their personal wellbeing and livelihood they remain constrained by their rural identity, gender, and social hierarchy. Finally, this chapter suggests that future research could involve the perspectives of city dwellers and urban customers to explore the degree to which rural migrant women manage to counter stereotypes through dressing fashionably.

Notes

1. Yan 2008, 44.
2. Chan 2012; Solinger 1999; Sun 2014.
3. Fan 1999.
4. Yan 2008.

5. Yan 2008, 44.
6. Yan 2003, 579.
7. Yan 2008, 44.
8. Taylor 2015.
9. Ahlers 2015.
10. Taylor 2015.
11. See www.mohurd.gov.cn.
12. Mars and Hornsby 2008, 20.
13. Sun 2014, 27.
14. Sun 2014, 27.
15. Farrer and Field 2015.
16. Huang 2008, 133.
17. Miller 1998.
18. See Pun 2003.
19. Miller, Daniel. 1998. *A Theory of Shopping*. New York: Cornell University Press, 4.
20. Lipovetsky 1994, 10.
21. Chan 2010, 663.
22. Chan 2010, 663.
23. Fan 2003.
24. Pun 1999.
25. Anagnost 2004.
26. In the interval, inspired by modern Western culture, the concepts of gender evolved from the ingrained connection of females to the social relationship within *jia* (“home”), that is *nu* (“daughters”), *fu* (“wives”), and *mu* (“mothers”), to a more individual concept, that is *nǚxing* (“woman”) (Chong 2013, 244; see Barlow 1994).
27. Edwards 2000.
28. Yen 2005, 165.
29. Chen 2001; McWilliams 2013.
30. Yang 2011.
31. Li 1998, 74.
32. Chew 2007, 159–60.
33. Chew 2007, 160.
34. Otis 2012.
35. Rofel 1999, 3.
36. Rofel 1999, 11.
37. Miller 1998, 4.
38. Mittler 2007, 14–15.
39. Kusenbach 2003.
40. Kusenbach 2003, 474.
41. Kommonen 2011, 371.
42. Lipovetsky 1994.
43. Gaetano 2015, 102–3.
44. Zhang 2015.
45. Zheng 2003, 163.
46. The Chinese characters 土气 (*tuqi*) are not included in the original text in Zhang’s work.
47. Zheng 2003, 163.
48. *World Market* 2003.
49. Mittler 2007, 16; Dyer 1982, 86.
50. Hong 2014.
51. Jang 2013.
52. *Descendants of the Sun* 2016.
53. Slade 2009.
54. China Daily 2005.
55. Mittler 2007, 16.
56. Mittler 2007, 16–17.
57. Mittler 2007, 15; Dyer 1982, 2.
58. Rofel 1999, 3.
59. Mittler 2007, 27.
60. Kusenbach 2003, 474.
61. Otis 2012.

62. Chew 2007.
63. Bourdieu 1984, 6.
64. Yan 2008, 180.

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