

**SELLING MOTHERHOOD:**

***Gendered Emotional Labor, Citizenly Discounting, and Alienation among China's  
Migrant Domestic Workers***

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*The feminization of care migration in transnational contexts has received a great deal of attention. Scholars, however, have been slow to investigate a similar trend in intranational contexts. This paper expands existing research on global care chains by examining the gendered emotional labor of migrant domestic workers pertaining to China's intranational care chains. While the former often foregrounds "racial or ethnic discounting," the latter is characterized by "citizenly discounting" whereby migrant domestic workers are subject to an overarching system of alienation, subordination, and exploitation owing to their second-class rural hùkǒu (household registration) status. Drawing on a participant-observation study of nannies, this article highlights how the intersection of gender and rural-urban citizenship is the key to grasping China's migrant domestic workers' experiences of extensive alienation at the nexus of work, family, and wider society. By delving into a particular set of political, economic, and cultural forces in the Chinese context, the article makes a distinctive contribution to a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the interface of gender, emotional labor, and care migration.*

**Keywords:** *alienation; care migration; China; emotional labor; gender; intersectionality; labor process analysis*

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Gendered emotional labor is a prominent phenomenon in the provision of care services. Inspired by Hochschild's influential work (1983), it has been well explored in the area of "global care chains" that focuses on the relationship between globalization, women, and care migration (Hochschild 2000; Yeates 2009; Murphy 2014). Under neoliberal capitalism, increased global inequalities and the lure of prosperity have precipitated a new era of migration characterized by a prodigious flow of not only talent and skills but also care and love from poor countries to rich counties. Hochschild describes this as the "brain drain" and "care drain" that further exacerbate the gulf between the two (2003, 17). Compared to the brain drain, the care drain is a hidden and undervalued feminized trend in which the extraction of migrant women's emotional surplus value from their left-behind children and families has enabled middle-class and wealthy women to devote themselves to their careers and avocations. Such redistribution of care labor across transnational contexts throws into sharp relief women's increasingly differential positioning along lines of race, ethnicity, and class.

In China, this global pattern of gendered care migration is manifested in “intranational care chains,” shaped predominantly by the country’s long-existing rural-urban *hùkǒu* (household registration) divide. For over half a century, the *hùkǒu* system has institutionally legitimized two classes of citizenship and played a key role in internal migration processes. Its persistence also speaks of the influence of Confucianism-informed hierarchical prejudices that are deeply entrenched in Chinese cultural history. Established in 1958 due to massive demographic pressure, *hùkǒu* served as a *de facto* internal passport system that restricted rural-to-urban migration and job mobility in order to improve the welfare of the existing urban population. It tied people to the household residential status that they attained at birth and created a dichotomy between the access to land for rural *hùkǒu* holders and most state-provided social goods for urban *hùkǒu* holders. As a consequence, rural workers were pushed down to the bottom tiers of a new rigid system of industrial labor stratification in post-revolution China (Walder 1984). Since it embarked upon economic reforms in 1979, China has lifted *hùkǒu*’s mobility barriers and subsequently unleashed an unprecedented wave of cheap labor flowing from countryside to urban cities and industrial zones. Despite being the powerful engine that has propelled China’s extraordinary rates of economic growth, hundreds of millions of rural migrants have been deprived of opportunities to settle in the city where they engage in income-generating activities. As Pun and Liu (2010a, 513) put it, they are suspended across “a spatial chasm” between production in the city and reproduction in the countryside that characterizes China’s “unfinished process of proletarianization.” In addition to the institutionalised exclusion, their second-class citizenship is endorsed by the state’s neoliberal development discourses, which label rural masses “low-*sùzhì* (quality),” “naïve,” “uncouth,” “backward-looking,” “burdensome,” “dangerous,” and “desperate for a modern revamp.”

This “citizenly discounting,” in contrast to the “racial or ethnic discounting” that features prominently in the literature on global care chains, defines the contours of China’s intranational care chains. It constitutes a focal point for discussion of gendered emotional labor and alienation among migrant domestic workers whose services of care and love are in high demand among the country’s expanding middle class. Drawing on a participant-observation study of nannies, this paper sets out to explore how the intersection of gender and rural-urban citizenship helps to grasp China’s migrant domestic workers’ experiences of extensive alienation in and out of their emotional labor processes. In particular, it draws attention to the combined impact of political, economic and cultural forces in China and contributes to a more integrated, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of the global trend concerning gender, emotional labor, and care migration.

## **GENDERED EMOTIONAL LABOR AND CITIZENLY DISCOUNTING IN CHINA’S CARE CHAINS**

Much has been written about the gendered nature of emotional labor, which is described as the process of managing feelings and expressions in accordance with the emotional requirements of a job. Like physical and mental aspects of labor, emotional labor is “sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value.” (Hochschild 1983, 7). Selling is a process of alienation; workers experience the separating out of their labor power when entering into capitalist employment relations. Herein lies the pertinence of Marx’s four dimensions of alienation, namely *alienation from the product of labor*; *alienation from control over the labor process*; *alienation from our fellow human beings*; and *alienation from our human nature* or “species being,” referring to our capacity for conscious labor. The debilitating effects of alienation are particularly visceral and poignant when it comes to the selling of love and care where emotion is a core function of the labor process. Scholars in the field of global care chains have demonstrated the harm wrought by increased global inequalities and the

capitalist commodification of gendered emotional labor, the multifaceted struggles and dilemmas facing migrant female domestic workers, and the oft-hidden suffering of their left-behind children and families (e.g., Hochschild and Ehrenreich 2003; Parreñas 2001, 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Hoang, Yeoh, and Wattie 2012). Many of the existing studies illuminate the importance of gender and racial-ethnic identity in constructing transnational care regimes and in mediating workers' perceptions and practices. These invaluable contributions notwithstanding, scholars have been slow to focus their attention on the feminization of care migration in intranational contexts.

Given its distinct rural-urban migration, China provides a prime example of intranational care chains. Since the 1990s, the country has experienced the largest scale of internal migration in human history, driven by widening economic inequalities between urban and rural areas. According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, in 2016 there were 136 million rural migrants composing around 32 percent of the total urban employment; they flocked to cities to take up jobs in manufacturing factories, construction sites, and increasingly service industries—the kind of jobs in mostly informal or private sectors of the economy with the least autonomy, protection, and dignity. As the quintessential embodiment of precarious conditions of existence, rural migrants disproportionately suffer job insecurity, low pay and benefits, wage arrears, lack of training and upward mobility, alienation, discrimination, and violence (see e.g., Lee 1995, 1998; Pun 2005; Pun and Liu 2010a, 2010b; Huang and Yi 2015; Swider 2015). Significantly, the *hùkǒu* institution and its underlying Confucian values—notably relational hierarchy, interpersonal harmony, and collectivism—are instrumental in embedding, legitimizing, and masking glaring inequalities. They not only reinforce and exacerbate employers' exploitative practices but also spawn hostilities towards rural citizens in the urban environment. Despite recent new policy initiatives on permanent citizenship transfers, *hùkǒu* continues to function as a key social entitlement mechanism that

confers public benefits and services on urban *hùkǒu* holders, ranging from health insurance and pension to education and housing, while denying many of them to rural *hùkǒu* holders.<sup>1</sup>

The adaptive power of the state cannot be underestimated. Since the economic reforms, the state has come up with a series of neoliberal development discourses that have dramatically transformed the image of peasants from Mao-era liberation heroes to modernization losers. Government policies and media representations often invoke “*sùzhì*” (quality)—described by Anagnost (1997) as a “quasi-eugenic discourse” and a “cultural fixation”—to problematize the peasant body as having low quality, lacking civility, and hindering development. Responsibility is then adroitly placed on the individual, rather than on the social structure, for failing to achieve mainly consumption aspects of development—a drastic departure from the Maoist emphasis on production as the path to modernity. That the rural masses need to be disciplined into a modern citizenry seems to justify just-in-time provision of a cheap and docile labor force who have toiled at fueling China’s spectacular transformation into an industrial powerhouse. Migration is seen as a solution to rural poverty and backwardness; peasant workers, known as “*nóngmín gōng*,” are expected to be “modernized” in urban cities, acquiring *sùzhì* and self-development through their labor and striving to become the state’s ideal consuming subjects through commodity purchases. For average urbanites, rural migrants are not only the personification of the poorly clothed, bad-mannered, and uneducated class but also blamed for all manner of urban ills, from increased crime rates to urban unemployment. The media frequently report how urban residents and employers fall victim to violent crimes perpetrated by rural migrants who apparently lack human or professional “quality.”

Against this backdrop and amid soaring demand for domestics and caretakers among the expanding wealthy and middle-class, migrant domestic workers have emerged as one of the fastest growing labor forces. According to China’s National Development and Reform

Commission's Policy Research Office, in 2017, 28 million domestic workers, the overwhelming majority of whom were rural migrant women, worked in the domestic care industry, with annual sales projected to reach 400 billion Yuan (approximately 60 billion USD). Migrant domestic workers are concentrated in large cities where the demand greatly exceeds the supply; for example, in Shanghai, it was estimated that the demand rose to 1.8 million in 2016, compared to the existing supply of about half a million workers. Such a market imbalance has led to the mushrooming of an assortment of individual brokers, small businesses, and large corporations, legally or illegally joining a frantic search for workers. The rampant industrial growth, combined with the absence of regulatory frameworks, is responsible for growing instances of exploitation and abuse of care workers in private homes, as evidenced by local governments' official labor disputes records. The situation has only recently come to the state's attention; new legislative initiatives are in the pipeline, with a view to regulating employment relations, professionalizing care workers, and facilitating sound market expansion.

The role of the state in steering and shaping the domestic care industry goes beyond migration, development, and regulatory policies. As the labor of social reproduction, migrant domestic workers have to contend with the double socio-cultural stigma of being a "peasant" and a "domestic servant." Their emotional labor is not only inscribed with the inferior rural identity but also undervalued by the subservient nature of domestic care work associated with women. The state has long embedded within its social policy expectations of "gendered familialism," assuming that care is primarily a female and familial responsibility (Baird, Ford, and Hill 2017, 12). While gendered familialism is a well-recognized feature of many national care systems, wide variation exists in the extent to which familial care is supplemented by the state and articulated through cultural values. Compared to countries such as Australia and New Zealand where the state prefers to develop a formal care infrastructure to assist

households, China has little or no state support for familial care. This has much to do with the Confucian doctrine of womanhood and family that prescribes women's socio-centric, self-sacrificing roles as a devoted mother, a dutiful wife, and a filial daughter. To be sure, traditional patriarchal values play an important role in buttressing state policies, normalizing female altruistic contributions, and widening existing inequalities among Chinese women. As wealthy and middle-class urban women pursue commodified, non-familial forms of additional care, an influx of migrant women from impoverished rural areas are turned into "obedient servants" who best suit the needs of their affluent employers (Yan 2008).

Together, these macro forces provide revealing insights into the systematic exploitation of an underclass of migrant domestic workers. To flesh out the structural skeleton, it is essential to explore the dynamics between collective and subjective processes by delving into the complexities and nuances of everyday practice. The following sections will take a close look at a group of nannies, focusing on the complex ways in which they are affected by the alienating experience of selling motherhood that extends beyond the immediate realm of workplace and employment relations. This is an analytical space left open by Hochschild that helps to restore "the full range of explanatory power to Marx's theory of alienation in its application to emotional labour." (Brook 2009a: 27).<sup>3</sup>

## **METHODS**

This article is the result of several years of field research on China's migrant domestic workers. The primary data cited are drawn mainly from a more recent phase of fieldwork between October 2015 and April 2016. The fieldwork was conducted in Shanghai inside a domestic service firm pseudo-named "Golden Love." Although China's domestic care industry as a whole operated in a largely unregulated and highly farraginous sphere of labor relations, Golden Love was among a few well-respected, large domestic service firms. Founded in 1997, it had six branches and 18 franchises in Mainland China, offering a wide



range of domestic services including childcare, early childhood education, eldercare, cleaning, cooking, and family security. Unlike many one-time labor brokers, Golden Love acted as both a staffing agency and a primary employer and took it upon itself to recruit and train workers before dispatching them to work inside, and under the authority of, private client homes.<sup>4</sup> Because of the increased market demand and the transient nature of rural migrants, with the aim of retaining workers it instituted an employee registration system, charging a non-refundable annual fee. Although the registration was conducive to a relatively long-term employer-employee relationship, turnover rates remained high. To attract migrant women and allow for effective management control, Golden Love also provided basic dormitory accommodation and group catering services inside the firm at a reasonable price.<sup>5</sup>

In line with the state's recent policy objectives, leading domestic service firms placed professional training high at the agenda. Golden Love offered two types of training programs: a systematic course, and daily supplementary sessions. Its training was targeted at maternity nurses (or postnatal carers), babysitters, and nursery teachers, who were together called *yùyīng jiāzhèng gōng* (child-nursing domestic workers) in occupational terms or *āyí* or *bǎomǔ* (nannies) in common parlance. Taught by specialists or academics, the systematic course, which lasted for 10 consecutive days, focused on practical skills (90 percent) and professional morals (10 percent). Upon completion of the course, workers could opt to take a government-approved examination and would receive an official certificate if they succeeded. The certificate was highly popular among migrant domestic workers, as it bestowed a desired “professional stamp” linked to better pay, employment opportunities, and self-esteem; some workers spent extra money to attend commercial training schools in order to boost their examination performance. The daily training sessions were centered on dummy demonstrations of care practices (e.g., nappy-changing, bathing, and stretching exercise) and group discussions about clients' feedback, workers' experiences, and specific childcare

routines (e.g., how to play with children and teach them to sing). Compared to the systematic course, these were informal, loosely structured, and often considered by workers a socialization space for whiling away the time before securing a job contract.

With the firm's permission, participant observation was undertaken inside Golden Love by following the minutiae of everyday life among a group of nannies. Training was given special attention because it formed a major part of the nannies' daily routines. In addition, conversations with trainees and instructors immediately after the class yielded useful information and perspectives. Invaluable insight was also gained from observing and participating in more relaxed group activities that were typically involved in social interaction in tight dormitory spaces, including cooking, eating, cleaning, and chatting. Furthermore, a series of unstructured or semi-structured interviews were conducted with more than a dozen nannies. These were then supplemented by interviews with Golden Love's boss and managing or training staff.

The majority of the nannies were married or divorced rural migrant women, ranging in age from their 20s to their 50s, fitting with the general domestic workers' profile in China. Although China is an ethnically diverse country, the impact of ethnicity is negligible in comparison with that of rural-urban citizenship. Nannies from certain rural origins (such as Henan province) were sometimes considered less desirable by urban employers due to perceived cultural prejudices. The same could be said of nannies' ages, zodiacal signs, dialects, physical appearances and personalities. Thus, while sharing the same rural identity, the nannies possessed wide-ranging positionalities that created a variety of care-giving scenarios across different care-receiving settings. These diversifying factors argue against a view of migrant domestic workers as collectively immiserated only by citizenship- and gender-based alienation, exploitation, entrapment, and subordination—although all of these are of crucial importance in understanding China's intranational care chains.

## ALIENATION IN THE EMOTIONAL LABOR PROCESS

China's rising domestic care industry is modeled on, as Yan (2008) argues, the age-old "master-servant" relationship that subjugates workers' interests and pursuits to employers' control, however partial, unstable, and contradictory the latter might be. That workers are alienated from control over the labor process merits close attention; it underscores the diverse and adaptable nature of workplace control in the process of commodification of labor power, as demonstrated most vigorously by Marxist writers in the field of labor process analysis (e.g., Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1979, 1985; Edwards 1990; Thompson and Smith 2010). Emotional labor processes, compared to those that consist mainly of physical and mental capacities, entail a different type of control that relies heavily upon emotional surplus value embedded in everyday interpersonal relationships. This is particularly tangible in the provision of domestic care services where knowledge and values concerning gender, family, and other intimate relationships are brought to bear on the management of workers.

Golden Love's training programs were, first and foremost, a controlling mechanism that aimed to foster impressions of credibility, attract and retain workers, mask workplace conflict, and maximize profits. A prevailing means of imparting power and authority was a systematic training course that placed a distinctive emphasis on mechanizing child-nursing care and instilling professional motherhood in a labor force seen as falling short of "quality." This was a fundamental first step in controlling emotional labor processes in which workers' diverse interpretations and creative potentials were submerged under the discursive clout of "scientific knowledge." Perhaps due to their generally low levels of education as well as second-class citizenship status, the nannies showed a strong propensity to subscribe to the view that child-nursing practices ought to be guided by scientific knowledge and experts. Many expressed positive opinions about the training they received and devoted themselves to acquiring new knowledge and skills. For example, Nanny Wáng, who was in her early 40s

and had worked as a nanny for more than 10 years, described how the training drastically changed her understanding of childcare:

When I was a mother in the countryside, I didn't know early childhood education at all. I was so stupid. I looked after my child all the time, but I didn't treat my child as a human being ... Now I know practices such as feeding, bathing, nappy-changing, and playing should follow scientific methods ... Training teachers have expert knowledge about children's each developmental stage. Even though we have 10 years' working experience, how could we figure out the theory? People who write books are able to extract from practice and standardize the best way of raising children.

In contrast to the systematic course's emphasis on scientific knowledge, Golden Love's daily supplemental sessions were geared towards acquiring conflict resolution and problem-solving skills where traditional cultural values assumed prominence. "Service mentality" (*fúwù xīntài*) was Golden Love's training mantra, frequently invoked by training instructors to underline the importance of creating positive relationships with clients. This abstract term, although not consistently defined, leans towards a gendered, familial approach to the relationship between care giving and care receiving. As explained by Instructor Zhāng, who used to be a nanny herself and was enthusiastic about promoting service mentality:

Nannies who simply quit the job when they feel dissatisfied or mistreated are not suitable for this line of work. Professional knowledge and skills alone would do no good if they ignored the importance of service mentality ... You need to "feel for others" (*jiāng xīn bǐ xīn*), understand clients and their needs, and make efforts to build good relationships. It is important you deal with setbacks by "feeling with one's heart" (*yòngxīn gǎnshòu*).

Her explanation became clearer when observing how she conducted daily training sessions. For the nannies, the relationship with clients was fraught with emotional conflict. Instructor Zhāng encouraged them to first "imagine" (*xiǎng xiàng*) how they would treat their own

children and families and then apply the same treatment to the client. This so-called “transpositional thinking” (*huànwèi sīkǎo*) was regarded as an essential step in nurturing highly prized professional morals. More importantly, in exercising the imagination of pseudo-familial relationships, Confucianism-informed traditional values were exalted as attitudinal and behavioral models. For example, a nanny during a class discussion complained she felt deeply insulted that her client let her eat only leftovers and had her use separate eating utensils. Instructor Zhāng did not pass judgement immediately and instead spoke to the whole class:

Let’s think how we will treat our own family members as a mother and a wife ... We will give the best first to the child, then to the husband, and last to ourselves, right? It is only natural for clients to prioritize themselves.

On another occasion when several nannies joined forces to air their grievances against mean-spirited elderly clients, Instructor Zhāng applied the same technique. She said, “Do you think it is easy to get on with your own mother-in-law? What are your experiences as a daughter-in-law?” In the Chinese family culture, the relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law is notoriously thorny and necessitates special efforts on the part of the daughter-in-law to observe her duty and avoid confrontation. Instructor Zhāng’s questions led to a series of amusing anecdotes about the nannies’ roles as daughters-in-law in their own families, more or less reflecting such hierarchical norms. These and other transpositional-thinking techniques were effective in transmuting frequently occurring labor conflicts into what were normally considered everyday trivialities in the private sphere of the family. They brought women’s inferior position, self-sacrificing obedience, and perseverance to bear upon the regulation of the emotional labor process. Rather than being “paid labor” in capitalist employment relations, the nannies were trained to see “motherhood” as their primary identity, with the crucial corollary that structural conflicts and inequalities were hidden from the public eye.<sup>6</sup>

It was not surprising that Golden Love's training objectives proved hard to materialize in private homes. Under the authority of clients, the nannies' professional pride and dignity, derived from the utilization of either newly acquired knowledge or pseudo-familial relationships, began to crumble. Not infrequently, clients dismissed the nannies' scientific motherhood practices and insisted on their own beliefs or expectations about what it meant to be a good mother. This put the nannies in a predicament; most of them gave in to their clients' demands because of the inherent asymmetrical power in the "master-servant" relationship. Nanny Lǐ, 32 years-old and outspoken, recently moved to Shanghai and was keen on improving her education and skills. She had earned an official child-nursing certificate and was well regarded as a diligent and trustworthy worker. Her efforts and ambitions were, however, frustrated by her clients who denigrated her professional abilities. She said:

The last home I worked for was extremely difficult ... According to the training, the baby needed 90ml milk, but the mother forbade me to feed that much. She let me feed only 60ml. Two hours later, the baby started crying. She then asked me why the baby was crying. I said 60ml was not enough. "What a load of crap!" she swore and yelled at me like crazy.

Such treatment was commonplace inside clients' homes, which led to a more serious and insidious form of control over workers' everyday emotional labor processes. Some clients used digital cameras and compartmentalized time-space arrangements to monitor and mechanize nannies' daily activities (e.g., when and where to eat, rest, and sleep); others insulted them by making disparaging remarks about nannies' rural origins, accents, manners, clothing, body types, or even zodiacal signs. Nanny Kǎi was a relatively inexperienced young worker in her late 20s. She was only slightly overweight and tried hard to get slim, as "being fat" could be a source of ridicule. She recalled being told:

“Your speaking and behavior are so ‘rustic and uncouth’ (*tǔ lǐ tǔ qì*),” and “You have such a bad taste in clothing and embarrass my child and my family” ... The client constantly sneered at me and treated me with utter contempt. I couldn't imagine them as my families ... The client said, “You are turning my home upside down.” At heart, they thought of our nannies as “lower-class people” (*dī rén yī děng*).

Similar experiences were recounted by many of the nannies. Everyday interactions made them acutely aware of the two stigmatized identities of rural citizenship and domestic servant. In the eyes of clients, they were simply “those-who-work-for-bosses” (*dǎgōng de*) and had to put up with their bosses’ whims and caprices, which was a far cry from the “family-like” feelings that Golden Love’s training instructors took great pains to evoke.

#### **ALIENATION IN THE MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP**

Along with the alienation they experienced from the control exerted by Golden Love and their clients, the nannies experienced another more intimate kind of alienation in the mother-child relationship. Whether following professional morals or driven by maternal instinct, among the nannies there existed a strong consensus about the obligation to care for clients’ children like their own. Even though they were not blind to the fact that they were conducting paid labor, most found it difficult not to feel emotionally attached to the child in their care, as Nanny Wàn, in her mid-40s, mentioned:

When looking after other people’s child, I often think about my own child and feel naturally affectionate, really. Even though it was 20 years ago, I still remember how adorable my baby daughter was. Now every time I see other people’s child, I think about my own daughter and take care of the child in the same way.

The nannies’ often genuinely felt love was interpreted sometimes by the children’s mothers as a threat to motherhood, as illustrated by Nanny Wáng, who loved children dearly but always thought of child-nursing as an extremely difficult job. She said, “The child’s mother

sometimes got really jealous and said to my face, ‘You can’t look after the child like this. The child is closer to you than me!’”

Despite the clients’ jealousy that made the nannies refrain from lavishing motherly love and care, leaving the child upon completion of an employment contract was often a heart-wrenching process that involved considerable emotional adjustment. Some struggled to hold back their tears at the departure; others were tormented by a lingering sense of “loss” (*shīluò*) or “helplessness” (*wúnnài*). Nanny Kǎi, who was a soft-hearted person, spoke about parting in a sorrowful tone. She said:

To better control my emotions when finishing off a job, I would normally choose to sneak away without letting the child know ... After a while, I looked around and realized the child was no longer by my side. I then burst into tears. It was very strange.

The inevitable separation could take a heavier emotional toll if a close nanny-child bond was formed. Nanny Wáng recalled:

The child would often cry without me. His granny sent me a text message, saying that he kept looking for me the whole evening and cried for two hours until his voice went hoarse. Whenever receiving his granny’s message, I felt like a needle poking repeatedly in my heart, hard to bear. My heart was in great misery, but what could I do!

Coupled with the alienation from the clients’ children was the alienation many of the nannies experienced from their own children who were left behind in rural homes and communities with meager care resources. Nanny Zhāng, 36 years old, and her husband were members of the so-called “floating population” (*liú dòng rén kǒu*), frequently moving back-and-forth between country and city. They migrated to urban centers in search of work in the hope of providing a better standard of living for their child and families. Like many of migrants, they had to leave their only daughter in the care of grandparents and relatives, a choice fraught with sadness and loneliness. Nanny Zhāng felt the separation acutely, often



expressing guilt and remorse at failing to fulfil the needs of her daughter due to a long-term absence. She said:

I spend too little time with my daughter. Since she was 5 or 6 years old, we have been out for work. We returned home when she just started the first grade in primary school. Now we left again ... I feel bad every single day. I can only suppress (the feeling). There is no other way ... I owe the child too much, throughout my life for sure.

As indicated in global care chains literature, the nannies could find some solace in redirecting their emotional resources to the client's child. However, seeing the love and care that the client's privileged, well-pampered child enjoyed was a painful reminder of the socio-emotional deprivation of their own left-behind child. Adding to this was a simpler, equally painful realization that the knowledge and skills of professional motherhood that they took great pride in acquiring were neither designed for, nor applicable to their own child. For some, the disparities were translated into sources of self-blame, regret, or even shame, as Nanny Hé, in her early 40s, said:

Before working as a domestic, I never thought about this. Now I take such great care of other people's child. I make heart-felt efforts. Seeing clients' child being treated so well, I start to think how little I have given to my own son ... Sometimes I think quietly about it and feel deeply "ashamed and guilty" (*kuijìu*).

### **COPING WITH ALIENATION**

From the Golden Love training sessions to the care-giving activities inside clients' homes, the nannies were alienated from much of the dual employer control over their emotional labor processes. Moreover, their courses of action often were sandwiched between the *de jure* employer (Golden Love) and the *de facto* employer (the client) whose modes of control were conflicting. The resulting disintegration of scientific motherhood practices shattered the aspiring child-nursing professionals' pride and dignity. More acutely, everyday nanny-client

interactions highlighted the nannies' subjugated rural and domestic labor status, which was shrouded in pseudo-family relationships, patriarchal gender values, and the professional morals taught throughout Golden Love's training sessions. Nonetheless, for many the harsh "labor" identity did not precede or supersede, but coexisted uneasily with, the "mother" identity that they retained in the nanny-child relationship. Their motherly care and love towards their clients' children, which might be partly enhanced by the long-term absence of their own children, led to a vicious circle in which many suffered from chronic or acute emotional pain, or indeed both. This resulted in a two-fold alienation from both the "product" and "by-product" of their emotional labor.

Many returned to their rural homes as frequently as possible. They felt ambivalent about both the countryside and the city; while the countryside remained their home but held no future, the city was alluring but frustrating and alienating. Few of them found it easy to relate to and identify with urban locals who treated them with disrespect. Even among those who had become accustomed to urban lifestyles, there existed a prevalent feeling of isolation or rootlessness, which reinforced their attachment to rural communities and networks. They were indeed "liminal subjects" caught up in the Chinese teleology of development (Turner 1967; Yan 2008). Nevertheless, the betwixt-and-between position was not always alienating in the sense that it offered the possibility of renewal whereby the nannies could use their agency to mold and shape the status quo. This ability was further strengthened by the nature of their emotional labor; selling motherhood constituted an intimate self-exploratory process, a highly indeterminate and resistive state, which would predispose the living labor to wriggle and squirm against, to use the words of Bolton (2005, 5) "a mechanisation of the self." Despite being circumscribed by a range of institutional, material, and cultural obstacles, the nannies exhibited some of the "getting back" and "getting by" activities involved in the labor process (see e.g., Brook 2009a; Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Taylor and Bain 2003).

Voting with their feet or exercising “labor mobility power” (Smith 2006) was by far the most popular way to regain autonomy and control over the emotional labor process. This was partly facilitated by the existing supply-demand imbalance in China’s care market. The majority of the nannies at Golden Love signed short-term contracts that would enable them to switch clients easily; there were quite a few cases where the nannies quit the job before the contract ended and relinquished their rights to claim money owed to them. Reacting to clients’ control, some made visible the value of their affective ties to the child, using it for leverage in negotiations over matters such as rest breaks and pay increases. This strategy proved to be especially effective when the child developed a close bond with, and was highly dependent on, the nanny. Others chose to change their mode of work from live-in care to hourly care; the latter paid much less but allowed them to escape from too much of the performance of “front-stage” (Goffman 1969) smiling as well as the client’s 24-hour time and space control. Not all, however, could afford such resistance or reworking strategies. Factors such as family circumstances, length of work experience, care-receiving settings, and personality were important in mediating individual resistance. Far more common was that the nannies strived to get by and remain resilient in the face of social disadvantage and adverse conditions. For example, conscious efforts were made to reduce emotional investment and adopt a more “rational” (*lǐ xìng*) view. Nanny Hé, an experienced worker who preferred avoiding any possible trouble, said:

Clients wouldn’t treat you like their family member. It is not your home. You are no more than a hired nanny ... I need to keep my distance ... Anyway, I try to exercise some self-restraint. During the day I am too busy to think about it. After the baby falls asleep, I reflect on the day’s work and tell myself that this is just a job.

These actions would render specious any attempt to portray China’s migrant domestic workers as homogenous, docile, or compliant. However, caution should be sounded about

romanticizing individual strategies; as noted by Otis (2008), self-created, dignity-preserving tactics often foster assent to existing social hierarchies and inequalities. First, the fact that the nannies subscribed to the superiority of scientific knowledge and professional certificates resulted in an internal division between “haves” and “have-nots.” Driven by the Bourdieusian sense of “distinction” (1984), those who called themselves “child-nursing professionals” (*yùying shī*) saw their educational possessions and practices as an important feature distinguishing themselves from ordinary nannies, which in turn compromised the exercise of collective voice.

Secondly, the nannies showed little hesitation in embracing the state’s promotion of modernity; they became not only producers of wage labor but also increasingly producers of selves for consumption. Aspiring to be the state’s ideal consumers, the younger nannies were particularly eager to adopt urban chic and perform alternative identities through purchases such as clothing and makeup to belie their low-class status and bolster their self-confidence. Unfortunately, the reliance on consumption neither enabled rural migrant women to discard peasant origins nor aided their integration into urban communities, as demonstrated in Zhang’s account (2014). Consumption was also widely used as a tool for assuaging the nannies’ feelings of uneasiness or guilt stemming from their inability to provide their own children with adequate parenting and loving care. As Nanny Hé described:

I have earned money and try to satisfy my son’s material needs, giving him the best. This includes sending him to a good school, dressing him well, and giving him good food. In the past, I didn’t have such money to spend ... Now I will satisfy him as much as possible ... This is the best I can do. Regarding others such as motherly love, I can only make phone calls. Really, that’s all I can do.

In addition, the nannies drew on the cultural convention that gift-giving and remittance practices could maintain rural *guanxi* (personalized relationship) networks—the kind of social

capital that they obviously lacked in the city. Due to such material flow and exchange, the home was significantly reinforced as a unit of consumption, rather than an emotional haven.

Thirdly and more strikingly, many of the nannies' coping mechanisms mirrored the Confucian ideals of gendered familialism. There was little resistance against women's subordinated positions and self-sacrificing obligations either in the emotional labor process or in the family relationship. It was true that working in the city contributed to migrant women's economic independence and reconfigured wife-husband and intergenerational dynamics in the rural home, as depicted, for example, by Choi (2016) and Chung (2016). Nonetheless, the nannies acted more or less in compliance with the conservative socio-centric woman as a devoted mother, a dutiful wife, and a filial daughter, which was appropriated by the state in its care policy framework and by Golden Love in its professional training regime. While the embrace of such patriarchal values could be used as "a conscious strategy" to obtain some degrees of material or symbolic advantage, as Hoang (2016) points out in her study of Vietnamese women in Taiwan, this embrace attested to the depth and extent of gender embeddedness in both political-economic processes and personal lives. For the nannies, who also were second-class rural citizens and thus lacked the power needed to redress gender imbalances, the challenge of alienation remained particularly daunting.

## CONCLUSION

This article has expanded the existing research on global care chains by examining, through the prism of the Marxist concept of alienation, the gendered emotional labor of migrant domestic workers in China's intranational care chains. The article has shown how the intersection of gender and rural-urban citizenship is the key to understanding the subjective experiences of alienation imposed by an interconnected set of political, economic, and cultural forces. Of particular importance is the *hùkǒu* divide, which is implicated in the state's neoliberal development discourses, dictates care migration processes, and metes out social

injustice to rural citizens. This distinct citizenly discounting, combined with the entrenched and pervasive gendered familialism, is consequential with respect to everyday micro-practices among migrant domestic workers, whose wellbeing, dignity, and freedom are exposed to the effects of extensive alienation at the nexus of work, family, and wider society.

It should be noted that China's intranational care chains are concurrent with global or transnational circuits of care migration; the latter are often characterized by racial or ethnic discounting. Both processes are manifestations of dehumanizing capitalist exploitation and wrenching inequalities in which love is "an unfairly distributed resource" (Hochschild 2003, 22), the young, old, or infirm in poor households are deprived of good-quality care, and care burden is transferred from middle-class and wealthy women in affluent localities to migrant women from impoverished areas. While gendered emotional labor is a common theme in the research on care migration, this study focusing on a non-Western context draws attention to the significance of exploring intersectionality and Collins' "matrix of domination" (1990) in concrete social worlds. That gender intersects with other systems of oppression—such as citizenship, race, ethnicity, and class—at institutional, group, and personal levels merits future research attention. Moreover, applying Marx's theory of alienation to China's domestic workers sheds light on the constant shift between non-alienating bonding with care-receivers and the alienating features of labor that heavily affect rural migrant women in and out of their emotional labor processes. Together, these perspectives create possibilities for thinking more inclusively about the oppression and resistance people experience in everyday working life across different national contexts.

As this study illustrates, constructing reproductive labor as paid work or professional training is not sufficient in itself for an actual negotiation of gender norms to take place. Two policy and practical implications emerge, which are concerned with the role of the state and collective struggles. First, addressing the *hùkǒu*-based welfare discrimination and the

regulatory weakness in the domestic care industry will be a promising step towards ameliorating exploitation. The state's investment in adequate care infrastructure, intervention in fair distribution of and access to resources, and wide support for women's workplace participation are also indispensable for transforming the gendered nature and systematic undervaluation of domestic care. Crucially, these changes are premised upon the state's ability and willingness to directly challenge the prevailing cultural norms and expectations that underlie both the *hùkǒu* hierarchy and gender inequality. Secondly, collective struggles hold the key to influencing state action, eradicating alienation, and reinstating work as a key aspect of meaningful life. As revealed by the nannies' complex and oft-contradictory struggles, individual strategies could carve out a small arena of autonomy and control, but without liberating their emotional labor from a subjugated second-class position, their feelings of alienation, the degradation of family life, and the patriarchal gender order. Organized labor movements in China, despite rising labor disputes, have largely failed to grapple with the link between *hùkǒu*'s structural exclusion and labor rights violation, as well as gender and family issues. In the face of tightened government control, it behoves labor unions and civil society groups to find creative ways to combat injustice and inequality, further collective interests, and counter, as Friedman (2014) asserts, "alienated politics" in China that prevents workers from participating in policy-making processes at the class level.

## NOTES

1. Since the 2000s, reforming the *hukou* system has gradually become a political and economic necessity. However, the existing reforms vary greatly across cities and provinces. For example, large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, where rural migrants are highly concentrated, impose increasingly more stringent criteria for obtaining urban "green cards" than small and medium cities. In addition, a high proportion of inter-provincial migrants find it considerably harder to convert *hukou* than those migrating within the same province. More importantly, the removal of barriers to job mobility has not

been accompanied by adequate welfare and social security reforms. Despite the implementation of a series of new pro-labor laws in recent years, no major changes have been made to the huge difference in social security coverage between rural migrants and urban locals.

2. China bans the hiring of foreign nationals in domestic services. However, a growing demand for English-speaking, educated nannies and maids has spawned a black market of undocumented Filipino domestic workers, estimated around 200,000, concentrated in big cities.

3. Although Hochschild's emotional labor thesis, especially with respect to its critique of capitalist commodification and consumerism, has proved to be inspiring, it has been criticized on several fronts. These include an overemphasis on the detrimental effects of emotional labor, partial theorization of alienation that does not go beyond the immediacy of workplace relations, a tendency to dichotomize the private self and the commodified public self, and the lack of a class angle and a more dialectical analysis of workers' struggles. The scholarly dialogue between Brook (2009b) and Bolton (2009), for example, offers an important review.

4. Workers in this agency-mediated triangular employment relationship are particularly susceptible to precarious and exploitative working conditions due to legal loopholes or ambiguities concerning employer responsibilities (Fu 2015).

5. See Pun and Smith (2007) for a compelling analysis of the dormitory labor regime in China, which constitutes a new spatial politics of labor process that links the space of work-residence to production in ways that facilitate management control and capital accumulation.

6. In her study of rural migrant women working in a cosmetic department, Otis (2016) observes a similar mode of employer control where the mastering of new body rules for feminine beauty tends to deflect the women from questioning their low-wage and precarious working conditions.

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