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"No One Knows What's Gonna Happen Tomorrow": Mistress Arrangement and the Emotional Dislocation of Rural Women in Urban China

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Studies on urban to rural migration in China over the past three decades have paid little attention to the emotional strains of migrants, either overlooking the impotency of migrant social networks in providing consistent emotional and spiritual support or overestimating the affective connection between individual migrants and their rural families. This study, which draws upon 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in southern China, explores in-depth the intimate worlds of an array of migrant women who entered into long-term relationships with married men in their urban destination. I argue that some migrant women engage in the mistress arrangement as a means to navigate through social and emotional dislocation in the process of rural to urban migration. The relationship, socially stigmatized though, serves as a temporary shield that allows for care and ease in the city and an excuse to postpone an undesirable marital

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life back home. It, however, tends to place these women in a situation of isolation and dependency.

Keywords: migrant women; emotional dislocation; mistress; China.

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Since its market reforms launched in the late 1970s, China has witnessed large-scale rural-to-urban migration. Until the end of 2010, the population of rural migrants was averaged at 153 million. Scholars of internal migration in China have long observed the predicaments of migrant workers in cities: labor exploitation, denial of welfare benefits and political entitlements as well as secondary cultural citizenship (Jacka, 2006; Lee, 1998, 1999; Pun, 2005; Solinger, 1999). While a great deal of attention has been given to the legal, social and cultural rights and struggles of rural migrant women, few scholars have closely examined their emotional life. Some studies have documented the friendship, care, and comfort that migrants receive from one another but have overlooked the fragility and instrumental-oriented nature of migrant networks. Other studies assume that migrants, women in particular, are well connected with family and friends in their home villages and thus obtain spiritual and emotional support by exchanging letters, phone calls, and other means of communication (Chan, 2002; Lee, 1998; Pun, 1999, 2005; Tan, 1998).

Drawing upon 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper explores in-depth the intimate worlds of some migrant women involved in mistress arrangements in their urban destinations, having long-term relationships with married men upon whom they were financially dependent. The alternative intimate paths of migrant women who became mistresses of married men have been noticed by a number of scholars (Lang & Smart, 2002; Osburg, 2013; Shen, 2005, 2008; So, 2003; Tam, 2005; Tam *et al.*, 2009). Largely due to the lack of migrant women's perspectives, these studies tend to perceive the relationship as a long-term money-for-sex trade

and fail to capture the important emotional meanings that these relationships convey to migrant women.[1]

In this study, I seek to illuminate that some migrant women engage in alternative intimate relationships as one of the strategies they cope with the social displacement and emotional dislocation they encounter in the process of rural-to-urban migration. Labor migration compounded rural women's longing for security, care, and belonging while minimizing sources of emotional support. Often lacking other means of emotional support, some women proceeded to meet these emotional needs through stigmatized heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, I also analyze how extramarital relations become a double sword in both offering the emotional support and kindness rare in the cities and alienating women further from the existing yet fragile ties they formed within the city life, and thus place these women in further social marginalization.

Internal Migration and the Urban-Rural Divide in China

The massive rural-to-urban migration is largely a consequence of the entrenched urban-rural divide and inequality in China. In the 1950s, China inaugurated the household registration system, which delineated an institutionalized line of social difference. Legally, a person is registered as an urban or rural resident based on birth place, which for most people became a life-long status.[2] During the pre-reform era, the state issued grains, employment, pension, housing, health care and other welfare benefits to urban residents through their work-units. Rural residents, in contrast, provided their own grains by participating in collective communal agricultural work

[1]For instance, some argue that rural migrant women who have little opportunity in cities see marriage as a springboard for a better life, by becoming mistresses of financially stable men, specifically travelling Hong Kong and Taiwanese businessmen, as urban Chinese men are unwilling to marry them (Lang & Smart, 2002; Tam, 2005).

[2]Exceptions existed when peasants moved to cities upon official/state request, for example, to take jobs in state-owned enterprises or to attend college; they were then issued urban resident registration.

and received basic (and low-quality) medical care from the commune. Migration from a rural to an urban area was under strict government control to ensure that peasants stayed on the farms to provide food for cities where industrialization occurred. Residence status became an ascribed, inherited social distinction, which determined an individual's entire livelihood and welfare (Solinger, 1999).

However, in the socialist period, material inequality between urban and rural households was visible but "acceptable" in a time of a shortage economy (Solinger, 1999). In addition, the countryside occupied an "ideological high ground" (Yan, 2003). Rural areas had an image of "hard working, plain living" (*jianku pusu* 艰苦樸素) values central to those advocated by the state and prevalent in public discourse. Thus, the countryside held some positive symbolic meaning for peasants to identify with in the Maoist era (Chan, 1994; Kirkby, 1985; Yan, 2003).

Since the market reforms of 1979, urban-rural relations have been reconfigured. The national modernity project transferred from obtaining national self-sufficiency to engaging China with global capitalism. The city emerged as the center of capitalistic modernization both materialistically and symbolically. State investment largely leaned towards urban development, and the rural share of state capital investment plunged (Chan, 1994; Li, 2000; Yan, 2003). Furthermore, the countryside lost its hold on symbolic significance as a socialist classroom for moral education. It became constructed as "backward" and "traditional" through state and public discourse of development and post-socialist modernity. Peasants started to lose a positive association with country life as well as cultural resources upon which they could draw to form a meaningful identity (Jacka, 2006; Yan, 2003).

In the past three decades of China's economic reforms, an increasingly large number of the rural population have migrated to cities, serving as a major supply of the labor force for low-end jobs. Although Chinese internal migration policy has sought to be more migrant-friendly in recent years, it is generally a "guest-worker" model. Cities absorb and take advantage of the cheap labor that migrants provide without granting them local citizenship or equal social rights (Chen, 2005; Jacka, 2006; Solinger,

1999). Motivated to attract more investment by adopting pro-capital labor policies, excused by the high mobility of migrants, and buttressed by the wishful thinking that migrants would return to their hometown when they are unable to find jobs, urban governments failed to take into consideration the migrants' long-term settlement and welfare. Following the government agenda of labor migration, employable rural folks, who were generally the younger, healthier and better-educated bracket of the population, migrated on their own, leaving their family back in the village. According to official statistics, in 2006, about two-thirds of the migrant population was aged between 20 and 40 years, and over 80% had a minimum of a junior high school education.[3] Furthermore, 80% of the migrants traveled on individual bases.[4]

Emotional Dislocation of Migrant Women

About 40% of the rural-to-urban migrants are women, most of them are single and unmarried and are predominantly in sectors of service, sanitation, textiles, and toy and electronic industries. Rural women's unique migration experiences attract specific scholarly interest because they bear the double burden of gender and rural origin. While most attention has been given to the labor exploitation, social marginalization and cultural deprivation of migrant women (Jacka, 2006; Lee, 1998, 1999; Pun, 1999, 2005; Solinger, 1999; Zhang, 2001), some scholars have taken a closer look at their emotional life. Ethnographic work has indicated a trend of emotional dislocation among migrant women: a large number of female migrants share feelings of loneliness, anxiety, insecurity, and exhaustion in their urban sojourn (Jacka, 2006; Tan, 1998, 2005).

[3]In comparison, among the remaining rural population, 40% are between 20 and 40, and 60% have an equivalent level of education (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2008).

[4]In recent years, the percent of migrants who move with their family has increased gradually. The majority of migrants, however, are still individual-based (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011).

Furthermore, unmarried young women encounter a "unique" marital dilemma compared to their male counterparts. Migration changes women's aspiration for marriage and expands rural women's autonomy in courtship and mate selection. However, these women are caught in a dilemma to obtain a desirable marriage. Having been influenced by modern ideas of love and marriage and having enjoyed a degree of autonomy in the city, they are unwilling to settle for a traditional rural husband, and there are enormous structural and cultural barriers to finding an urban partner (Beynon, 2004; Chi, 2006; Jacka, 2006; Tan, 1997, 2005). Although they are typically asked by their family to return and get married in the countryside as they approach their mid-twenties, many migrant women delay their return and postpone marriage for as long as possible (Beynon, 2004; Jacka, 2006; Tan, 2005).

In search of potential sources of emotional support, some scholars have reported that migrants, women in particular, are remotely but tightly connected with family and friends in their home villages and thus obtain mental, spiritual, and emotional support by exchanging letters, phone calls, and other means of communication (Chan, 2002; Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005; Tan, 1998). However, recent studies have indicated that their remote families back home may not serve as an effective source of emotional care and support for migrant women in times of need and crisis (Jacka, 2006). Because of the large difference between rural and urban life experiences, a great number of migrant women do not depend on their rural family for empathetic words, useful advice or practical help. Some women even conceal bad news from their family as a way to protect their loved ones from burdens of frustration and anxiety. In addition, some rural women migrated to cities as a way to escape their patriarchal families, and they were even less likely to receive support from the family. Instead, they were dependent on friends and colleagues, and more often, on themselves (Jacka, 2006; Lee, 1998).

Indeed, networks of migrants constituted a crucial source of economic and social support. Previous studies have extensively documented the instrumental functioning of migrant networks, in terms of finding urban

jobs and housing and offering other practical assistance in the city (Cao, 2003; Lee, 1998; Zhang, 2001). In addition, migrants receive companionship and friendship from one another to varying degrees (Fan, 2004; Jacka, 2006; Pun, 2005). However, what remains unclear is the extent to which migrant networks, due to the high mobility and the social disadvantages of its members, are able to provide sufficient emotional support for migrant women. In addition, as Jacka (2006) has revealed in her study, women migrants often fail to form deep personal bonds with other migrants, locals (*laoxiang* 老鄉) in particular, which is largely due to the high level of competition that exists between them in the workplace and the caution to avoid gossip that may damage their reputation back in the village. Migrant networks, as Jacka (2006) argues, do not function as a substitute for the absence of family ties and have limited contribution to migrant women's emotional wellbeing. This paper presents an in-depth examination of migrant women's experiences in a mistress relationship in relation to the emotional stress and strains in the city. It seeks to illuminate the effect of the individual-based labor migration on the migrant women's social belonging and emotional psychological wellbeing as well as their agencies in seeking emotional fulfillment within the structural and cultural constraints in urban China.

Methods

This paper draws upon ethnographic and interview data obtained during 12 months of field research in China, performed between September 2005 and August 2006 and in July 2007. I conducted nine months of field research in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, and three months of fieldwork in Ningbo, a major coastal city in Zhejiang Province. Both regions are among the most economically developed areas, and absorb a large number of migrant workers. I met potential informants who engaged in long-term extramarital relationships through mutual friends and acquaintances and obtained a total of 19 cases of mistress arrangements.

Although I was unable to interview all men and women in the 19 cases, I performed multiple open-ended interviews with 16 female respondents and four male respondents and had informal interviews with three other male respondents.[5] I also engaged in varying levels of participant observation research with all female respondents and six male respondents, visiting their homes and joining them for social and recreational activities. With their permission, I also interviewed neighbors, friends, and relatives of the respondents.

In my study, the relationships reportedly lasted from 10 months to a few years in length. The longest was a nine-year relationship, and the couple was still together at the time that I had completed my research. Among the 16 female respondents that I interviewed, nine of the respondents were migrants from rural or inland China who came to the coastal cities for job opportunities, and seven were legal residents of Guangzhou. The age of female respondents ranged from 18 to 38 years old. None of the respondents had more than a high school education. Their male partners were mostly involved in business. Fourteen respondents were from mainland China and two were from Hong Kong. Their ages ranged from the mid-thirties to early sixties. Ten respondents owned their own private business, two were high-end professionals (general manager and architect) and the other four worked for different companies, such as foremen, sales personnel, or office staff.

This study focuses on the experiences of migrant women who entered into a mistress relationship and I have further elaborated on urban women's experiences elsewhere (Xiao, 2015). For clarity, I present the situation of Ah-Fang — a migrant woman from rural Guizhou who cohabited with a married Chaozhou merchant, who talked about her trajectory into the mistress setting, her perceptions of the relationship and her partner as well

[5]Some male respondents were unwilling to schedule formal interviews with me to talk about their intimate life. However, I managed to converse with them and observed their interaction with their mistresses and friends at a number of informal social gatherings, from which I learned about their intimate practices. I gained permission from these male respondents to include my observation and notes taken during those social gatherings in my research.

as her plan for the future. The complicity of her situation presents a unique case as it contains multiple themes that have emerged in other cases of migrant women. Thus, I present the life history of Ah-Fang and purposefully move away from conventional techniques of weaving in multiple stories from multiple respondents. However, data from other rural migrant women are also supplemented when necessary to provide an informative analysis. I also include some analyses of urban women's experiences as a comparison to illustrate the effect of migration and rural/urban disparity on rural migrant women's social and emotional belongings. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

"Taking a Break": Trajectories Towards a Mistress Arrangement

My first visit to Ah-Fang's place was on a cloudy spring afternoon in 2006. Twenty-six years of age at the time of the interview, Ah-Fang had been with Bird (*niao* 鳥, as she called him), a married man from Chaozhou, for two years. Their two-bedroom apartment was one of the most spacious apartments I had seen in The Red Flag — a migrant neighborhood on the northern border of the urban district of Guangzhou. The floor was tiled rather than merely cement as in most migrants' homes in the neighborhood. The living room was furnished with a solid cherry-wood couch with matching armchairs and a tea table. Ah-Fang, a chunky and plain-looking woman with fairly light skin, was sitting on the couch, sewing beads onto a skirt — a bit of piece-rated work she did for her neighbor while watching Cantonese soap operas. In the corner of the room was a large refrigerator that was approximately 5'5" tall. Despite being one of the best migrant homes I had ever seen in the neighborhood, the apartment was plainly decorated, poorly lit, and lacked air conditioning, which was a common amenity in local Guangzhounese households.

Ah-Fang came from a small village in Guizhou Province, one of the poorest regions in China. Her father died when she was 10 years old. Not

enjoying school very much, she dropped out in junior high and started working in odd jobs, such as waitressing in a nearby township when she was 14 years old. Intrigued by her fellow villagers' exciting stories about urban life as migrant workers and the nice clothes and luxury goods they brought back home, she joined the army of migrant girls. With the help of her local neighbors, she migrated to Guangzhou at the age of 19 years.

With only an elementary school education, Ah-Fang had worked in three different factories, standing long hours beside the assembly line producing toys and electronics. Despite of being tired and bored at work, Ah-Fang enjoyed the consumption power with the money she earned herself. However, she felt lonely and homesick until she met Little Qiang, a male migrant working as a busboy in a sauna house. Little Qiang, a sweet lover, cheered her up when she was emotionally down, comforted her when she lost sleep, and caressed her after they made love. The young couple planned to marry when they had saved enough money. To earn quick money, Little Qiang participated in a larceny gang, which he kept secret from Ah-Fang. Unfortunately, he was caught and sentenced to seven years in jail. Ah-Fang could not keep from weeping when she recalled her feelings about his arrest:

> "It's really hard for me. I am still feeling sad when I recollect these bad memories at this moment... I had a hunch that something bad might happen that day. He had not been home for four days. That morning, one of the two puppies he raised died with no reason. I felt so empty in our apartment. And it has been empty ever since. He had too little earnings and too much time to spare, and thus went on the wrong track. If I had known earlier, I would have stopped him. Poor as we were, we could live a happy life, taking care of each other."

Ah-Fang tried to go through personal connections and bail him out. She spent over a thousand *yuan* to bribe people who might be able to help, but nothing worked. Feeling helpless and hopeless, Ah-Fang resented her boyfriend for being irresponsible: "He had never thought about my feelings. What was left for me if he was gone?"

Although stricken by stress and despair, Ah-Fang kept the pain from her mother and younger brother because she believed they would do

nothing but worry. To get the past out of her mind, she fully occupied herself, working overtime and joining her colleagues for off-work entertainment.

One night while having dim sum with her co-workers, Ah-Fang met Bird, a 40-year-old businessman from Chaozhou, who had a crush on her. In the beginning, Ah-Fang did not like him in particular. A few months later, she was placed into a detention center for skipping the renewal fee after her temporary residence permit in Guangzhou had expired. Bird had paid off the renewal fee and penalty for her, taken her to his apartment in Guangzhou, and treated her kindly. After she recovered, he asked her to stay, telling her, "Don't go back to the factories. I can pay you the few of hundred *yuan* you earn there." Scared, stressed, and desperate, Ah-Fang agreed. She said:

> "I was scared in the detention center. The guard was harsh... so when he got me out, I was very grateful to him. He is a nice guy, very kind... I was also really bored and tired of working in the factory, and had no hope for love any more. He told me early on that he had a wife and a family in Chaozhou. But at that time, I was thinking I would just take a break to have some fun, maybe for a couple of months, before I return home for good."

However, the relationship had lasted for two years by the time I met Ah-Fang. Bird covered monthly expenses of approximately 1,500 *yuan*, which included the rent. Each month, he also gave an extra couple of hundred *yuan* to Ah-Fang for her personal use. Bird made a living by selling inexpensive trendy accessories produced in his hometown to flea-markets vendors in wealthier cities, such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Dongguan. His business was not particularly lucrative, but sufficiently stable to feed his family in Chaozhou as well as to support Ah-Fang in Guangzhou.

Among the nine migrant women that I interviewed, three of them labored in the factories, two waitressed in restaurants, and the rest four worked in nightclubs (as waitresses and mammy) and hair salons where commercial sex was provided (although only two of them engaged in sex work themselves). Four claimed that they had romantic feelings for their

male partner, and the other five indicated they had developed varying degrees of attachment and attunement toward their man although they did not love them. Despite of the differences in the nature of their work and the affections they had for their male partner, these women highlight the emotional meanings the mistress relationships convey to them.

Similar to Ah-Fang, many perceived the arrangement as a temporary shelter from a difficult and over-taxing lifestyle. The physical labor they had performed was demanding, dreary and even demeaning. The dormitories where most of these women were housed by the employer as a part of their compensation, were overly crowded and poorly conditioned. It facilitated managerial control of the labor force and productivity at a great physical and social cost to individual migrants (Pun, 2005). They had also experienced different sorts of discrimination from the urbanities and harassment from the police, which reminded them of their secondary status. Like Ah-Fang who had the heartbroken romance and the scaring memories of the detention house, many of them also had traumatic experiences that place them in a more vulnerable position. For instance, Ah-Run's husband had ran away when his business failed, leaving her with heavy debts. To get away from the debt collectors, she left her hometown in Guizhou and migrated to Guangzhou in her mid-thirties. However, soon after she arrived in Guangzhou, she was stolen with all the money she brought with her. Ah-Ping was a pretty woman who used to have big ambitions. However, she was made drunk and lost virginity to a male client in nightclub where she waitressed. The unfortunate event destroyed her pride and dreams. Believing she had lost the most precious thing of a woman, she settled with the male client who promised to take care of her for lifelong and became his mistress.

The long-term intimate relationship provided various sources of security and belonging for migrant women. First, the households provided by the men served as a physical space in which the migrant women could feel at home, albeit temporarily, within a larger urban space in which they were treated as outsiders. Second, the material support from their men freed them from heavy physical labor and gave them a chance to "have fun."

Third, these women agreed to become a mistress when their men treated them kindly and humanely, for example, by offering hands and comfort at difficult times and indulging them to varying degrees. For many migrant women, kindness and emotional care were important, helping them to achieve a sense of dignity, rather than feeling like secondary citizens.

Ah-Ying recalled how she entered a relationship with a wealthy Hong Kong merchant who was 40 years her senior. Grew up in a poor village in Northwest China, she had always been dreaming of leaving the mountains of the big west and leading a decent life in the city. She ran away from home with just a couple hundred *yuan* and migrated to different cities to work. Experienced starving, homeless and heartbroken romances, she met the Old Man (*laotou* 老頭, as Ah-Ying referred) in the nightclub where she waitressed. Before the relationship began, the Old Man brought her gifts, which ranged from expensive suits and watches to shampoo and toothpaste, took her to cafe and restaurants, and simply enjoyed chatting with her and watching her eat. When he was away, he called frequently to see how well Ah-Ying was doing and to ask if she needed any help. Although finding him not attractive physically, Ah-Ying was impressed by his wealth and generosity with which she would be able to lead a comfortable life. Furthermore, she was touched by the ways he expressed his love for her. Ah-Ying said:

> "Nobody has ever treated me so well. He did everything for me without asking me to pay back. It felt like as long as I was happy, he would be happy. He also said a lot of touching words that no one had ever said to me. I felt he really cared about me… I was moved partly by his money, partly by his kindness (*yiban bei ta de qian gandong le, yiban bei ta de ren gandong le*)."

Isolation and Intimacy: The Politics of Home in the Mistress Arrangement

Ah-Fang quit her job after she moved in with Bird, half voluntarily and half at his request. She was tired of the tedious routine. Bird also persuaded her by indicating that it was pointless to labor for a meager wage. To Bird, keeping Ah-Fang from heavy physical labor was a way to

show his care for her. It also reserved Ah-Fang's labor for the household. The couple moved to the other side of the city to be closer to his locals. Ah-Fang had reduced her interaction with her coworkers and friends since the relationship solidified. After the move, Ah-Fang lost all contact with them except for two best friends. The physical distance made it difficult to join her friends for social gatherings and to maintain a relationship with them. More importantly, she cut off ties with some of them because she wanted to conceal the arrangement from acquaintances, particularly those who might spread the word to her family and village back in Guizhou.

Her best friends were two female migrant workers. Neither of them approved of her relationship with Bird. They believed Ah-Fang was wasting her time on a temporary and unstable relationship. However, they remained friends and hung out with Ah-Fang once in a while. When Ah-Fang had an abortion in 2004, they were the only ones who paid her a visit. Ah-Fang regarded them as true friends. However, both of them returned to their hometowns and got married in early 2005. Since they left, Ah-Fang had talked to them over the phone about six times, and gradually found it difficult to communicate with them: the long distance call cost money; more importantly, they had moved into different life paths.

With one exception, all of the migrant women in my study stopped working shortly after their extramarital relationship began.[6] Unlike the urban women that I interviewed who readily perceived that being a housewife supported by a man was a desirable status for a woman, migrant women often quit their jobs at the request of their lover. Men asked their mistress to stay at home as a way to show their love by relieving them from heavy work, such as in Ah-Fang's case. It also ensured that their mistress will be more devoted to the caretaking of the household. Some men even made their mistress to quit work, which was particular the case for those who used to work in the nightclubs. For instance, both Ah-Ying and Li Ya would like to continue working; they had a lot of fun with their co-workers at the nightclub

[6]The exceptional case was Ah-Yuan who continued to work as her lover's secretary when the relationship started.

who fully accepted their mistress arrangement. Their man, insisted that they stayed at home and away from their co-workers. "He would be mad if he found I hang out with the girls at the nightclub," Ah-Ying said, "He said they were bad girls and would spoil me." The domestication of their mistress also enforce the rule of "sexual exclusiveness" on the women's side, which often presented in a form of men's love and jealousy though. Li Ya, a former mammy in the nightclub, said, "My *Laogong* (老公, hubby) was crazy about me. He did not want me to interact with any other man. How could he stand I am still working in the nightclub?"

For migrant workers, the workplace is generally the most important milieu where they form useful social relationships that assist them in locating and securing employment, navigating through urban life, and maintaining connections with home villages. Quitting a job means losing the physical ground to create, maintain and expand important social connections. However, the network of highly mobile migrants is loose and fragile by nature. This is partly because many migrants travel across the country for better job opportunities. A number of female migrants also return home to get married and to settle down in the countryside in their mid-twenties and thus become disconnected from their previous migrant network. The highly mobile and temporary nature of the migrant network impedes the formation of deep emotional bonds between its members considering that friendship, trust, and compatibility take time to build and maintain. As a result of quitting jobs and thinning ties with old friends, migrant women, as they settled with their man, gradually find themselves isolated from the external world.

Isolation also comes from self-exclusion. Because their relationship with a married man is socially stigmatized, many migrant women not only voluntarily cut ties from local-based networks who might pass the word to their families, but also keep a distance from their local residential community. In doing so, they seek to avoid undesirable gossip and moral judgment.

Since she moved to the village of The Red Flag, Ah-Fang had rarely left the neighborhood. In the previous two years, except for visiting her family in Guizhou (approximately once a year) and occasional "mega

shopping events" downtown (about three times a year), she spent almost every single day in the Red Flag. She spent most of her time at home, doing housework and watching TV. When she got bored at home, she went downstairs to play mahjong or pick up some piece-rate needlework with her neighbors. She did not consider having friends in the Red Flag; she did not share much of her life with neighbors nor invited them to her place. When anything bad happened, she would rather hide it from her neighbors than to seek their help. Ah-Fang kept a distance from those living nearby on purpose:

> "I am not in a great situation. I do not want people to gossip behind my back. It is a small community. Any news will be spread out quickly. They will point their fingers at me behind my back, especially the housewives who have nothing to do. They just gossip. I hate that. You are not that much better than I am, how dare you judge me?"

Unlike the urban women I interviewed who lived in modern housing complexes where neighbors had little contact with each other and who participated in largely self-selected social networks, Ah-Fang lived in an environment where people had more frequent interactions with each other. The residents of The Red Flag generally entertained themselves in the cheap and poorly equipped karaoke booths, sauna parlors, and mahjong houses run by their neighbors. The streets were also an important social and leisure space, where households on the ground floor were sites to sit and chat. I observed that many residents gathered at mahjong parlors even when they did not play mahjong there. Others would also stop to chat when they passed by.

Sharing gossip of the neighborhood was an important part of the daily routine for these residents. Long before Ah-Fang realized that her neighbors might know about her affair, I had heard some women gossiping about her.

"Ah-Fang must be an *ernai.*[7] She stays at home every single day and does not work. Who supports her? The Chaozhou man is much older, probably twice her age. Chaozhou men are traditional. They only marry

[7]"Ernai (二奶)," literally translated as "second wife," is a popular Chinese term for a woman involved in a financially dependent relationship with a married man.

women from the same place." Another woman commented, "They (*ernai*) are simply lazy. They do not want to work and want to be fed and live comfortably. Nothing comes free. You have to kiss his ass."

Scholars have argued that gossip is a moral discourse through which moral standards are disseminated and enforced (Collins, 1994; Farrer, 2002; Taylor, 1994). Ah-Fang's strategy of dodging gossip relieved her from acknowledging daily moral judgment. When asked why she was willing to tell me her story, Ah-Fang said, "It's not too bad to unleash the feelings that have been repressed in the bottom of my heart for so long. Plus, you are not from the local crowd; you do not gossip with them. It is safe."

In his innovative analysis of the relationship between the structure of social interactions and individual mental life, Simmel (1950[1903]) argues that the extensive but anonymous ties between individuals in a metropolis allow personal freedom and individuality and forge a blasé attitude among urban dwellers, while limited but dense interactions among people in smaller circles enforce conformity and uniformity as well as forge strong bonds between individuals. The migrant community is like a small town within a metropolis. The distance from the migrants' hometown villages and their marginalization in the metropolis enables a sufficient amount of freedom for individuals like Ah-Fang to be "deviant", as in the case of entering into a mistress arrangement. Social interaction in the migrant-concentrated neighborhood within the metropolis, however, resembles that of a small town or village in many ways. Rules of normality and morality are maintained in the community through intense daily encounters. Thus, "deviant" residents like Ah-Fang feel the pressure to hide their "delinquency" from others in this environment and to withdraw, at least partially, from the community. As they choose to stay on the outskirts of a close-knit neighborhood network, they are limited in the interaction and acquaintanceship with other women, failing to enjoy the benefits of strong human bonds in a small town.

Withdrawing from an earlier migrant network and a local migrant social community, Ah-Fang gradually found Bird to be a last resort for emotional fulfillment. Bird was generally a quiet man; he never had much

to say and was used to handling his emotions by himself. Seldom did Ah-Fang find him excited or irritated. Once he lost a lot of money in the lottery. Feeling a bit upset, Bird treated himself his favorite seafood meal. His philosophy was "nothing but food down in your stomach is real. Thus, treat yourself well and feed yourself well."

Unlike the urban mistresses I interviewed who perceived a man's financial provision as his testimony of love, Ah-Fang was less enthusiastic about the materialistic culture of love. Deep down in her heart, she was looking for a mutually caring relationship with Bird. Knowing him well, she acknowledged the subtle way in which Bird showed his consideration for her, such as voluntarily giving her extra few thousand *yuan* when she visited her family in Guizhou, or cooking her nutritious food when she was sick. Unhappy about Bird's poor communication skills, Ah-Fang said,

> "He is not totally indifferent or careless towards me. He is stern and hates to express himself. He cares about me a bit in the heart. Unlike him, I am always thinking about him. For example, when I do the grocery shopping, I always get what he likes. It is in my nature that I am always prioritizing other people's needs."

Despite her complaints, Ah-Fang took Bird as someone whom she felt emotionally close to and could rely upon in times of need. It was Bird who offered ears to her daily chatter and who helped make up her mind when she hesitated. Ah-Fang initially concealed from Bird the fact that she participated in my research, considering that he might not approve. However, she told him after our second interview. When I asked why, she said, "I am used to telling him about everything. It does not feel comfortable to hide something from him."

Among the couples in my study, the emotional bonds between migrant women and their men tend to be stronger than those of their urban counterparts.[8] For rural migrants like Ah-Fang, emotional support from

[8]As I have elaborated elsewhere (Xiao, 2015), many local urban women were more likely to get emotional support from their female friends and relatives while providing a large amount of emotional labor for their male partners; emotion was an important resource for them to invest in exchange for a consumerist lifestyle and access to a cosmopolitan type of femininity.

their man was as important as the economic provision in the relationship. Although all of these women ended up performing more emotional work for their partners, they viewed this as returning the men's kindness and caring for them. In comparison to Ah-Fang and those who had worked in factories and restaurants, migrant women who used to work in the night-clubs were more straightforward and calculative about material benefits they obtain in the relationship, such as Li Ya and Ah-Ping who bargained with their lover for the proper amount of monthly allowance and for desirable gifts on special occasions. However, they also tended to conceive their emotional exchange with their man as reciprocal and genuine as a family member, which distinguished themselves from sex workers and maids. For instance, Ah-Ying shared with me her feelings about her "Old Man" after they broke up:

> "Although we were no longer together, I have to say that he is a nice person. He treated me better than my parents did. I am willing to take care of him if he was sick and had no one to look after someday, just as I would tend to an elderly family member."

Ah-Hong, another migrant woman who used to be involved with a married man who ran a small mahjong parlor in Shenzhen, engaged in sex work to help pay his debts when he went bankrupt. Explaining why she was willing to do so, she said, "He treated me well. He never said no when I made requests and always helped me realize my wishes. I felt that he really cared about me and thus I was willing to follow what he said."

"No One Knows What's Gonna Happen Tomorrow": The Future Plan

Migrant women like Ah-Fang were dependent on married men both economically and emotionally, thereby forming unique bonds with these men. Rather than simply being a means for a better material life, the relationship represented a home where they obtained a sense of security, belonging, caring and even some fun. Given the nature of the extramarital

relationship, few migrant women sought a permanent settlement with their married male partner. While perceiving the relationship as transitional, they were trapped in the dilemma of planning a future beyond the relationship.

Ah-Fang had never imagined her relationship with Bird would last forever. Bird informed her early on that he would not divorce his wife, a woman who had already borne him two sons. Bird's wife was a hard-working woman who took good care of her in-laws and helped with the family finance by working part-time in a local factory. Bird regarded her as a dutiful wife and a good woman with whom he could spend his life, but he had no choice but to leave home.[9] He would be taken as a failure, having nothing to do if he stayed longer than a month in the village. The local tradition of entrepreneurship encouraged men to emigrate to make their fortune in the outside world.

Feeling close to him, Ah-Fang, however, did not regard Bird as an ideal marital partner. He was not good at expressing himself, too pragmatic, and not particularly caring. Ah-Fang confessed to me that she would not be likely to marry Bird even if he were single. She still hoped she would find someone who cared about her as much as she did for him.

Nevertheless Ah-Fang was unable to figure out a desirable future if she left him. At the age of 26, she did not want to go back to the sweatshop where she had labored for years. Her dream was to work in an office, as a secretary or a staff member. With only an elementary education, she did not even dare to apply for one. In addition, Ah-Fang did not want to go back to her hometown, to find someone to marry and settle down, as most migrant women of her age did. The older she became, the more pressure she felt from her family to get married. In the past year, each time when she phoned home, her mother urged her to return to meet with some potential suitors. However, Ah-Fang never imagined that she could find a compatible mate back home. "A lot of men in my hometown do not have a job. They idle around and drink, and beat their wives after they get drunk."

[9]As a matter of fact, Bird initially picked Ah-Fang because she looked like his legal wife.

Ah-Fang also resented the fact that rural couples had poor communication, an important reason that prevented her from returning for marriage.

> "My mother once introduced a young man to me. He was good-looking and was said to be honest and reliable. However, when I attempted to chat with him, he said he was tired and wanted to go sleep. It was so dumb. I do not want to live like my parents; they barely talked to each other."

Emphasis on good communication in conjugal relationships is a modern Western middle-class marital ideal (Illouz, 1997; Swidler, 1980) which, according to scholars, the younger generation of Chinese have gradually adopted along with the rise of individualism and the "triumph of conjugality" (Yan, 2003). Communication has become the golden key to a satisfying marriage. These particular ideals are well adapted to the increasing number of urban middle-class families with relatively well-educated spouses (Feng, 2006; Xu, 2000). In the countryside, good communication has also started to gain importance in marital happiness, although it has yet to become mainstream (Yan, 2003).

Rural migrant women who come of age in urban spaces are struggling between the new ideal of marriage with an emphasis on romantic love and good communication and the reality that they have to return to marry a peasant who is likely to carry patriarchal familial traditions. However, the dilemma is that the longer they delay their marriage, the older they become, and the more difficult it becomes to find a desirable mate.

Ah-Fang was caught in this dilemma. When asked about her future plans, she sighed,

> "I have thought about it a lot and came up with no good plan. Thinking about the future only makes me anxious, upset and desperate, so I stop bothering myself. It is pointless to think about the future. Life is like that. No one knows what's gonna happen tomorrow (*jintian buzhi mingtian shi* 今天不知明天事)."

"No one knows what's gonna happen tomorrow" captured the outlook of many migrants in The Red Flag, including but not limited to those

who became mistresses. Instead of making plans, Ah-Fang decided to wait until something happened (for example, Bird having to return to his hometown for good). At this point, she would have to take action. Instead of actively seeking out a future, she chose to remain passive to avoid the pain of having to solve an unsolvable problem.

In our last interview, Ah-Fang shared with me an idea that recently occurred to her:

> "I want to be sold as a bride to a man in a village in Jiangsu or Shandong. There are a lot of traffickers in my village. They sell young women to the bachelors in the villages on the east coast. The bachelors there cannot find wives among the locals and are willing to pay for brides. I have two aunts; one is in Shandong and the other in Jiangsu, who lead a good life. I am not sure if they were sold there, probably so — we do not have any connections because they are so far away. I think it might be a good idea to be sold to a man in those villages. I might eventually be able to find someone who cares about me as much I care about him."

In a situation without favorable options, Ah-Fang counted on luck for the future, fantasizing about having a good marriage by being voluntarily "sold" to a wealthier village far away. Ignorant the idea might sound, it gave her a slightest hope for a way out.

All the migrant women I interviewed, dreamed of marrying someone reliable and compatible. This was the best scenario for a woman as they believed. The real problem was how to find one. Ah-Ying had multiple attempts after she broke up with the Old Man; she dated a security guard, a computer mechanist and a peasant from her local village. None worked. One was financially unstable, another was sweet but played around, and the last one was dull and lazy, as Ah-Ying explained. Those who were still engaged in the mistress arrangement had more difficulty in finding the right one since they were asked to be faithful to their man. Seeing a future full of uncertainty, many of them, like Ah-Fang, lived by the day instead of seeking solutions in vain. In a sense, being passive and evasive is a defensive strategy these women adopted to navigate a confounding situation that they had little control over.

Conclusion

Ah-Fang's personal dilemma captures the social and emotional struggle that encountered by the rural migrant women that I interviewed. They sought to pursue a modern identity by leaving the "backward" countryside and migrating to the city, a center of post-socialist development. However, many of their dreams crashed, as they became screws in the engine of China's rapid development, being a piece-rate laborer at the assembly, a low-end service worker, and a secondary citizen with lower rights and status. In other words, they share the promises of urban-centered post-socialist modernity, but not much of the reality. The contradiction between the promise and reality of migration trapped many migrant women into distress, anxieties, and feelings of being lost. Furthermore, the gap between the migrant women's changing aspirations for marriage and the remaining structural and cultural barriers in achieving these aspirations adds another layer of emotional unfulfillment and suffering. The process of individual labor migration compounds rural migrant women's longing for security, care, and belonging, while minimizing sources of emotional support as they become disconnected from their rural community of origin and receive inadequate emotional offerings from the highly mobile migrant network.

In this paper, I argue that some migrant women engage in the mistress arrangement as a means to navigate through social displacement and emotional dislocation in the process of rural to urban migration. The relatively stable extramarital heterosexual relationship serves as an intermission in an unfulfilled life: it is an escape from an indifferent and sometimes hostile world, a temporary shield that allows for care and ease and an excuse to postpone an undesirable marital life. However, the socially stigmatized arrangement ironically further isolates migrant women from accessing an already scarce social support either from the work-based colleague network or from the local residential community.

By exploring the complicated emotional struggles that migrant women encounter as they enter, stay in and plan to leave the mistress

relationship, this paper illuminates the hidden yet profound consequence of urban-rural disparity and individual-based labor migration on migrant women, which negatively affects their emotional wellbeing and social belonging, as well as the (alternative) ways in which they cope with their social marginalization and emotional dislocation, an important yet under-developed theme in current studies of China's internal migration.

Given the illegitimate nature of the mistress setting, only a small portion of migrant women engage in such a relationship. As China's urban-centered development advances with the enlarging of urban-rural inequality and spectralization of the rural population, a growing number of women of rural origin come to the city, with a dream of a future that "no one knows what's gonna happen." Thus, further research is critical to systematically examine the migrant women's emotional (un)fulfillment, coping strategies and potential emotional outlets in the process of geographical and social dislocation.

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