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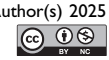

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Grafted Beauty, Complex Identity: Exploring Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in China's Beauty Service Industry

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Abstract

This study applies the concept of identity grafting, a dynamic process of selectively recombining rural and urban identity markers, to examine how young female migrant workers in Beijing's beauty service industry negotiate identity. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, walking interviews, and participant observation, this research identifies four interrelated forms of identity – repressive, born-again, integrative, and situational – illustrating how migrant women selectively suppress, reconfigure, or hybridise rural and urban identities to navigate complex social and economic landscapes. This study demonstrates that identity remains fluid and strategically performed to mediate workplace expectations and class mobility. This research positions identity grafting, not only as a theoretical framework but also as a methodological tool for analysing the interplay between structural exclusion and individual agency. It offers a new approach to understanding rural-to-urban migration in the Global South and emphasises the need for policies that recognise the adaptive strategies that migrants employ to navigate precarious economies.

Keywords

rural-to-urban migration, female migrant worker, identity grafting, beauty work

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Introduction

Globalisation and economic restructuring have spurred unprecedented internal migration movements worldwide, with China's rural-to-urban migration standing as one of the most significant demographic shifts in recent history. This vast relocation of people has not only reshaped national labour markets and social topographies but has also brought to the fore complex questions of social integration, inequality, and identity transformation for those who move (Fan, 2009; Ye et al., 2013). Within this broad phenomenon, the increasing participation of women in migration presents a distinct set of experiences and challenges (Awumbila, 2015; Bastia & Piper, 2019). Rural women migrating to urban centres frequently enter gendered employment sectors, where they navigate opportunities for economic advancement and personal reinvention alongside persistent structural inequalities and societal expectations (Guo & Shen, 2016; McDowell, 1999; Zhang, 1999).

The urban service industry, particularly in rapidly modernising economies, has become a key destination for many female migrants (Gaetano, 2015). Sectors such as beauty services offer a unique point for examining their lived realities. Here, young women are often positioned at the confluence of urban consumer culture and precarious labour conditions (Doshi, 2021). They become visible participants in the performance of modern femininity, while simultaneously grappling with the insecurities of informal work and the enduring rural-related stigma, often exacerbated by institutional frameworks such as China's *hukou* system[1] (Li, 2013). Understanding how these young women negotiate their identities amid such conflicting pressures, including balancing aspiration with exclusion, visibility with marginality, is crucial for a comprehensive grasp of contemporary urban dynamics and migrant experiences.

This study delves into the multifaceted identity negotiations of 34 young female rural-to-urban migrants employed in Beijing's burgeoning beauty service industry. It argues that their experiences of navigating demanding work environments (Mears, 2014), urban social hierarchies (Afridi et al., 2015), and deeply ingrained cultural biases, notably the 'suzhi'[2] discourse, which constructs social value based on notions of inherent quality and often leads to discriminatory practices (Yan, 2006), necessitate complex strategies of identity management. To illuminate these intricate processes, this research, drawing upon data from semi-structured interviews, walking interviews, and participant observations, employs the conceptual lens of 'identity grafting.' Adapted from horticulture, identity grafting describes a dynamic process wherein individuals selectively combine, adapt, and reconfigure elements from their origins with those encountered in new environments, rather than simply assimilating or entirely rejecting past affiliations (Lee, 2019; Lee & Qi, 2021). The following analysis identifies four interrelated modes of identity grafting: (1) the repressive rural identity in urban contexts; (2) adaptive self-presentation within beauty work; (3) the reclamation of rural values as identity resources; and (4) the context-specific deployment of rural or urban traits depending on situational demands.

This paper contributes to migration and gender studies within sociology in three interrelated ways. First, it extends the theoretical application of identity grafting beyond diasporic and transnational contexts, demonstrating its analytical value for internal migration

and urban labour. Second, it highlights beauty work as an important but understudied site of identity construction, where migrant women navigate aesthetic norms, client expectations, and professional aspirations. Third, it sheds light on the interplay of agency and constraint, showing how identity strategies reflect both creative self-making and structural limits. By situating these negotiations within broader debates on labour, gender, and urban transformation, this study emphasises the importance of attending to everyday identity work in precarious economies.

This article begins with a review of the literature on migrant identity and beauty work, followed by a discussion of identity grafting as the key theoretical lens. The methodology section outlines the qualitative approach adopted. Findings are presented in four sections, each reflecting a distinct stage of identity grafting. The discussion and conclusion consider the broader implications for understanding migrant identity, labour, and mobility in the Global South.

Literature Review

The study of migrant identity has long been a central concern within sociology studies, generating diverse theoretical perspectives. Initial conceptualisations often framed migrant adaptation through linear models of assimilation, suggesting a progressive abandonment of origin cultures. Such paradigms have been critiqued for oversimplifying migrants' complex experiences and understating their agency (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018; Rytter, 2019). Consequently, scholarship has evolved to embrace notions of identity as fluid, negotiated, and hybrid, with concepts such as transnationalism and hybridity offering more nuanced frameworks (e.g., Dharani, 2024; Ong, 1999). However, a persistent debate revolves around how these identity processes unfold in contexts of internal migration, particularly where profound internal social stratifications, such as China's rural–urban divide and the *hukou* system, shape migrants' trajectories and their sense of belonging.

Feminist scholarship has critically expanded migration studies by foregrounding how gender intersects with migration, class, and ethnicity to sculpt distinct lived realities (Gaetano, 2008; McDowell, 1993; Skeggs, 2004). This perspective highlights that women's migratory journeys and labour market integration are frequently channelled into feminised sectors, where experiences of empowerment can coexist with vulnerability and exploitation (Li & Stodolska, 2021; Liao, 2016). Feminist analyses of labour, particularly in service economies, have introduced crucial concepts such as emotional labour and aesthetic labour. Emotional labour, the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display (Hochschild, 1983), and aesthetic labour, which involves the corporeal fashioning of a particular classed and gendered look (Elias et al., 2017), are paramount in many female-dominated occupations (Page et al., 2024; Sheane, 2012). These forms of labour are not only incidental but are often central to the value produced, particularly in customer-facing roles (Gimlin, 1996). Debates within feminist studies continue to explore the extent to which such labour offers avenues for agency and resistance or primarily functions as a mode of disciplinary control and self-commodification, particularly for marginalised women (Majumder & Arora, 2024).

The beauty industry provides a fertile ground for examining these feminist concerns. Studies on beauty work illuminate it as a significant site for the construction and performance of contemporary femininities, class aspirations, and urban modernities (Keyser-Verreault & Rail, 2023; Terán Tassinari et al., 2021). Research in this area (e.g., Xu & Feiner, 2007; Yang, 2011) explores how beauty salons are not just spaces of service provision but arenas where classed aesthetics are enacted and consumed, often reinforcing dominant ideals of femininity and bodily discipline (Barber, 2016; Elias et al., 2017). A key debate within beauty work studies concerns the dual nature of this employment for workers, especially migrants. On the one hand, it can offer opportunities for skill acquisition, economic betterment, and a sense of self-transformation and participation in urban consumer culture (Ip, 2017). On the other hand, scholars point to the precariousness of such work (Liao, 2016), the intensification of aesthetic and emotional demands (Dutta, 2023; Page et al., 2024), and the ways it can reproduce social hierarchies and the disposability of workers (Grossman-Thompson, 2019). The extent to which beauty workers can genuinely navigate or subvert these powerful industry norms, and the role of their diverse social locations (including rural origin and migrant status) in shaping these negotiations, remains a vibrant area of inquiry.

Much of the existing research on female migrant labour in China has, until relatively recently, focused predominantly on factory or domestic work, offering vital insights into labour control and resistance in those settings (Lee, 1998; Ngai, 2005). While invaluable, this has left a comparative gap concerning women's experiences in the burgeoning service sectors such as the beauty industry. This study directly addresses this gap by examining rural-to-urban migrant women in Beijing's beauty salons. It engages with feminist debates on embodied labour by exploring how these women manage the intricate demands of aesthetic and emotional self-presentation. Furthermore, it contributes to beauty work studies by analysing how migrant workers, often positioned at the intersection of urban aspiration and rural stigmatisation, actively negotiate their identities. While dominant narratives might portray these women as either passively conforming to urban ideals or being wholly constrained (Zhang, 2014), this research seeks to uncover the more complex, agentic strategies that they employ.

These insights also open space for identity grafting as a conceptual tool. Rather than viewing identity change as a stepwise integration into urban life, grafting captures the recursive, context-specific strategies through which migrant women adapt, conceal, or revalue aspects of their rural and urban selves. This framework emphasises identity as a method of survival under constraint, situated between institutional exclusion and embodied creativity.

Grafting as a Tool of Understanding Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers' Identity

The concept of identity grafting originates from horticulture, where grafting merges two plant tissues to form a hybrid with attributes of both (Goldschmidt, 2014). In social sciences, this metaphor captures identity as fluid, negotiated, and strategically performed (Melnyk & Meyerowitz, 2015). Lee (2019 p. 6) defines identity grafting as 'the process of

reconciling normative disjuncture via the grafting of symbolic power', highlighting how individuals integrate, conceal, or emphasise cultural traits to navigate identity tensions. Unlike linear models of assimilation, this approach foregrounds migrants as active agents who continuously reshape identity in response to shifting demands.

This study applies the framework to examine how young rural migrant women working in Beijing's beauty industry navigate urban–rural identity contradictions, building on Lee's (2019) typology, four modes of grafting are identified: (1) *Repressive identity*, where rural traits are suppressed to meet urban norms (e.g., concealing accents or dress); (2) *Born-again identity*, involving wholesale adoption of urban values and disavowal of rural ties; (3) *Integrative identity*, combining rural and urban markers to construct hybrid subjectivities; and (4) *Situational identity*, entailing fluid self-presentation that shifts depending on context. These strategies reflect how migrant women manage institutional exclusions and classed expectations while pursuing limited opportunities for recognition and mobility.

Positioning identity grafting within migration studies challenges dominant rural–urban binaries. Existing literature often casts internal migration as a linear process of integration or marginalisation (Chen & Wang, 2015; Wen, 2006), overlooking how migrants mobilise both urban aesthetics and rural virtues to navigate hierarchies. This duality is particularly shaped by China's *hukou* system (Chan, 2019). Unlike elite transnationals who deploy flexible citizenship for strategic mobility (Ong, 1999), these women enact identity flexibility as a tactic of survival. Their grafted identities enable limited access to urban employment while reinforcing their social and economic precarity.

Feminist theories of performative identity (Belford & Lahiri-Roy, 2018; Butler, 1996, 2002; Zhang, 2014) further contextualise these dynamics. Identity grafting resonates with the view that identity is not fixed but constructed through iterative performances shaped by gendered and classed norms. Migrant women adopt urban comportment to meet employer and client expectations, while drawing on rural values, such as diligence or honesty, to counter exclusion. Grafting, therefore, captures the interplay of compliance and resistance within everyday practices, challenging binary models that frame migrants as either assimilating or resisting.

While identity grafting has been previously applied to migrant students in educational contexts (Lee & Qi, 2021), its potential in labour and gendered service work remains underexplored. This study extends the concept in three directions: it situates grafting within labour market dynamics; highlights the material dimensions of self-styling and symbolic capital; and critically interrogates the exclusions embedded in urban modernity. By linking identity grafting with feminist critique and grounded fieldwork, this framework offers a nuanced perspective on how migrant women adapt, assert, and survive within the unequal terrain of China's urban transformation.

Methodology

This study presents partial findings from the author's doctoral research on identity negotiation among young rural-to-urban migrant women in China's beauty service industry. A qualitative approach was adopted, drawing on 34 semi-structured face-to-face

interviews, five walking interviews, and participant observation. Participants were women aged 18–25, all born in rural areas and employed in beauty salons in Beijing for at least six months.

Beijing was selected for its large migrant population and restrictive *hukou* system, which exemplifies the institutional barriers that rural migrants face (Liu & Shi, 2020). All participants worked in Haidian District, where salons ranged from community shops to mid- and upper-tier establishments serving office workers, university students, and middle-class clients. Work shifts typically lasted 10 to 12 h and involved not only technical services but also aesthetic self-presentation, product promotion, and client interaction.

Field access was facilitated through prior industry connections, including a salon manager who acted as gatekeeper, enabling purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants, such as cafés, parks, or staff lounges, depending on comfort and availability. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 min and focused on migration experiences, work routines, and identity negotiation. Walking interviews allowed participants to guide conversations while moving through familiar urban spaces, generating context-rich reflections (Sun & Zhu, 2024). These were complemented by participant observation in salons and public settings, capturing spatial dynamics, peer interactions, and informal practices (Mackellar, 2013).

As a feminist researcher, I maintained critical reflexivity concerning the socio-demographic differences between myself and participants (Jackson et al., 2024; Kusek & Smiley, 2014; Lichterman, 2017). Most women were younger, possessed less formal education, and originated from rural working-class backgrounds, contrasting with my own position within an urban academic environment. Cognisant that my presence could inadvertently reproduce existing hierarchies, I made deliberate efforts to bridge this divide, including sharing insights from my previous research experiences in rural China and approaching their narratives with profound empathy and listening. Crucially, I prioritised centring participants' expertise and perspectives (Botfield et al., 2019), and carefully observed how trust was built and negotiated. A reflexive journal also supported this awareness throughout the research process (Carmichael & Cunningham, 2017).

The study received institutional ethics approval. All participants gave informed consent, and confidentiality was ensured through pseudonyms, anonymisation, and secure data storage. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage.

The Severance of Rurality: the Emergence of Repressive Identity

This section explores rural migrant women's repression of their rural identity during urban adaptation, focusing on the beauty industry's role in this transformation. Fieldwork revealed many participants, particularly in early employment, who articulated a profound disavowal of their rural origins, reflecting a broader societal hierarchy that esteems urban modernity while designating rurality as inferior. Within beauty salons, where self-presentation, aesthetics, and class performance are pivotal, these

women feel compelled to distance themselves from rural identities to meet urban expectations.

The perception of being 'rustic'[3] is a significant source of discomfort for many participants, reflecting a perceived lack of urban refinement. Wang, a manicurist, remarked:

> 'In my hometown, everyone dresses simply and in a somewhat rustic way.'

Similarly, Zheng, an intermediate beautician, reflected:

> 'After working here for a while, I realised it's hard to shake off that rustic style from the countryside.'

These accounts illustrate that rural identity, far from neutral, becomes an attribute consciously suppressed in an urban milieu where beauty-work mandates conformity with dominant urban aesthetics.

This repudiation of rural identity is profoundly rooted in China's overarching urban−rural hierarchy, where rurality is frequently equated with backwardness (Li, 2015). Such associations are amplified within beauty salons through interactions with urban middle-class clients, who function as patrons and aspirational models. The beauty industry, transcending mere service provision, operates as a site of class performance where workers must embody urban ideals. Consequently, rural migrant women seeking upward mobility face a paradox: suppressing their rural background to succeed.

Beauty salons, often furnished with luxury décor, intensify this symbolic gap. As the junior beautician Gao noted:

> 'I initially came to this shop because its luxurious decoration made it feel very impressive, unlike the low buildings in the countryside.'

This observation illustrates how beauty work exposes rural migrants to urban affluence, reinforcing their internalisation of urban life's superiority and the necessity of shedding their rural identity.

Moreover, this rejection extends beyond external performance to become an internalised conviction, aligning with Bourdieu's (2006) concept of symbolic violence. The urban−rural divide is not solely economic but enacted in daily interactions (Doshi, 2021). Fan, a junior beautician, compared her work with that of factory workers, stating:

> 'Factory work is very boring, with no future, and you're covered in dust every day. Beauty work makes me feel more refined.'

This sentiment reveals that repressive identity strategies are not merely products of external pressures but are actively embraced as pathways to self-betterment and perceived class mobility.

In the salon, women are subject to aesthetic discipline. They must maintain a groomed appearance, speak standard Mandarin, and adopt the comportment expected of urban service workers. These practices are not merely performative but reshape self-perception

(Otis, 2011). As Adkins and Lury (1999) note, aesthetic labour generates new class distinctions within gendered workspaces, reinforcing a hierarchy where social mobility is accessible primarily to those successfully embodying urban aesthetics.

However, suppressing rural identity does not invariably secure full urban belonging. Despite adhering to beauty norms, rural migrants remain structurally marginal. Their femininity is valued only insofar as it generates profit, rendering them disposable in a competitive service economy (Liao, 2016). Specifically, young women's corporeal labour and feminine attributes are intensively exploited, rendering them replaceable as a continuous influx of younger women replenishes the workforce (Grossman-Thompson, 2019). Thus, while transformation's promise exists, it is conditional upon sustained repression of rural identity and unwavering adherence to urban beauty norms.

Situating rural identity's rejection within beauty work's structural constraints, this analysis highlights that identity suppression is a strategy shaped by class aspirations, aesthetic labour, and the service industry's insistence on urban sophistication. The repressive identity documented here constitutes a common initial phase for many migrant women, where conforming to urban ideals necessitates detaching from rural markers. This suppression, however, is neither static nor absolute. As subsequent sections demonstrate, such repressive strategies often fracture when confronted with lived experience's contradictions, such as discrimination or economic precarity. While this section focused on rural identity severance as a response to structural pressures, the ensuing analysis reveals these women's identities as fluid and renegotiable. Their repressive act is one phase in a dynamic process of identity grafting, where rural and urban symbols are continually re-evaluated and recombined.

The Pursuit of Beauty: the Formation of an Integrated Identity

This section explores rural migrant women's active construction of an urban-oriented identity through participation in the beauty industry. Contrasting with the earlier repressive phase, this integrative stage reflects a more deliberate identity grafting, where urban aesthetics, consumer habits, and behavioural norms are selectively incorporated. The extent to which this grafted identity is internalised versus strategically performed is, however, shaped by structural conditions within beauty work.

Participants often distanced themselves from rurality by emulating urban clients. Exposure to urban style typically began during workplace training, where appearance and behaviour were explicitly linked to professionalism. Jia, a salon worker, described:

> 'During our training, the boss repeatedly emphasised that we are serving wealthy women in a big city. Our behaviour and identity need to match the profile of our customers.'

Similarly, Wang noted:

> 'We have a uniform dress code and makeup requirements, which not only demonstrate our professionalism but also reflect the beauty salon's aesthetic.'

From their words, salons act as disciplinary spaces, compelling workers to embody urban standards to maintain employment. Within China's consumerist economy, beauty work becomes a classed performance (Cohen 2004; Dávila 2012), where self-styling acts as a daily practice. Participants described learning from clients' dress, studying urban comportment on TikTok, and sharing appearance tips with colleagues. Rather than purchasing luxury brands directly, they often curated 'stylish but affordable' outfits by combining second-hand designer items with well-crafted fast fashion pieces to project refinement. For many, learning to dress and speak 'like a city girl' became their routine.

Strategic consumption enabled these women to obscure rural origins while gaining partial cultural legitimacy. In Bourdieu's terms, taste in clothing and body presentation functioned as symbolic capital, signalling intelligence, morality, and social worth (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Through urban femininity's aesthetic codes, migrant women attempted to reposition themselves as modern, respectable, and competent. Yet this process also reinforced class boundaries, upholding urban norms as the benchmark for legitimacy.

Crucially, this identity-work transcended appearance, reshaping participants' subjectivity through client interactions. Shi, a salon worker with six years' experience, reflected:

> 'Initially, I felt a mix of admiration and intimidation towards my customers. But as I got to know them, I began aligning with their style. They even recommended clothes and brands to me. Over time, I felt more confident.'

Beauty work, in her words, facilitated proximity to urban middle-class femininity, allowing women to internalise urban aesthetics through everyday interaction.

Simultaneously, bodily differences remained potent reminders of structural inequality. Shi reflected on this while providing hand care:

> 'The hands of city women are soft and delicate, untouched by farm work or household chores. […] Wealthy customers have fair, smooth skin, dress neatly, and carry themselves with elegance.'

Recognising this, she and other migrant women consciously refined their body language, posture, and gestures to further integrate into their work and customer circles. For these women, elegance became an aspirational and symbolic goal (Baldoz et al., 2001), cultivated through discipline and aesthetic labour.

These performances also yielded material consequences. Participants observed that workers with polished appearances and good client rapport were more likely to secure loyal customers and higher commissions. Wei, a salon manager, explained that income combined a modest base with salary performance-related bonuses. However, she added that promotions often depended more on appearance and communication style than skill or tenure:

> 'Sometimes, no matter how capable you are, being from the countryside still holds you back.'

Thus, identity grafting functioned as both a survival strategy and a conditional route to limited advancement. Yet this grafted identity remains fragile. The body, a site of class and gender inscription (Skeggs, 2004), is disciplined by dominant urban femininity. While adopting urban aesthetics signalled social aspiration, structural barriers constantly threatened these performances. The integrative identity required balancing urban symbols with concealing rural sensibilities, a balance undermined by limited resources, linguistic markers, and persistent social stigma (Doshi, 2021).

When such contradictions surfaced, through subtle client disdain or employer pickiness, women questioned their grafted identities' reliability. These ruptures destabilised their belief in such identities as pathways to belonging. This phase demonstrates identity grafting's aspirational potential but ultimately reveals the integrative identity's precarity. As the next section shows, such disillusionment often initiates a re-evaluation of rural identity, leading to the formation of what this study terms a born-again rural self.

Self-Defensive Born-Again Rural Identity

When rural migrant women confront systemic discrimination or cultural exclusion in urban spaces, whether through institutional barriers or embodied markers of rurality, many shift from suppressing their origins to strategically reclaiming rural identity as a form of resistance. This is not a rejection of urban life *per se*, but a tactical reconfiguration of rural traits into professional assets, shaped by the gendered and performative demands of the beauty industry. Unlike earlier phases of suppression, this stage involves deliberate mobilisation of rural virtues such as diligence, humility, and resilience to navigate workplace hierarchies and counter prejudice.

The beauty industry, while promoting urban sophistication, inadvertently creates openings for rural identity reclamation. Interviews reveal a (re)identification with rurality, framed as both a pragmatic adaptation and conscious resistance to urban biases. Qin, employed at a high-end salon, explained:

> 'I believe my greatest strength is my ability to endure hardship and work hard, a quality I developed from a young age. […] My boss often praises me for this, especially since some urban employees tend to slack off, but I don't.'

Such reflections show how rural-origin traits are reinterpreted as valuable within urban workspaces.

Daily interactions with urban residents further highlight how rural identity is perceived. Many participants reported that their rural background becomes visible through physical traits from past agricultural labour, making their origins difficult to conceal entirely. However, instead of viewing this as a disadvantage, some women reframe their rurality as a professional asset. Liu, a massage therapist, expressed:

> "My hands are strong […] Some even joke that I must have done farm work before, and I tell them, 'Yes, I did, and that's why I can give a wonderful massage.'"

Similarly, Xia, a beautician, noted how clients associate her with trustworthiness:

> 'Some customers say they prefer rural-born beautician like me because we work harder and don't try to trick them into spending extra money. I take pride in that.'

Such tactical reversals reveal how rural identity is repurposed. Urban clients' perceptions of rural authenticity intersect with the beauty industry's demand for emotional labour, creating niches where rural virtues are commodified.

Some participants believe that negative rural-related stereotypes stem from urban cultural biases due to limited exposure to rural realities. Therefore, some migrant women push back against these biases by actively highlighting the positive values associated with rural origins. Beautician Ying explained:

> 'Some customers assume that being from the countryside means being uneducated, but I tell them I support my siblings' schooling. That's my pride.'

This act of revalorisation challenges dominant narratives that cast rural migrants as lacking in cultural capital. Similarly, Han, a senior beautician, keenly observed that customers perceived them as more trustworthy due to their rural backgrounds, benefiting professional relationships. She described this strategic positioning:

> 'Some customers think rural girls are more honest and don't cheat, so I don't try to hide my background. I emphasise it. I tell them how I worked hard to get here, how I learned everything from scratch. Many of them appreciate that.'

In line with grafting theory, identity is not replaced through migration but layered and adapted (Lee, 2019). Rather than fully integrating, these women graft rural values onto their urban experiences, forming hybrid identities that express both continuity and change. Resilience and moral discipline, rooted in rural life, are reframed to align with urban professionalism. Unlike identity suppression, which involves outright rejection of rural identity, this phase represents a reconfiguration of rural traits into an urban-compatible form (Woods, 2018), demonstrating identity grafting as both negotiation and self-assertion.

This self-defensive identity is transitional and contingent and emerges within a broader tension between urban exclusion and rural pride. While state policy has long claimed to reduce urban–rural disparity (Whyte, 2010), the experiences of these women show how hierarchies persist. They cultivate a self-defensive, born-again rural identity, contingent upon their location within power landscapes (Anthias, 2013). This signifies not a retreat into rurality but a strategic re-engagement with rural traits serving their interests.

These tactical negotiations unfold within the beauty industry's contradictions, illustrating identity grafting's fluidity. The industry's reliance on emotional labour and trust-building creates opportunities and constraints, where rural identity is often valorised as authentic but simultaneously restricted to roles reinforcing classed stereotypes. As the next section will argue, this tension paves the way for more reflective negotiations, where some women begin to reimagine the value of rurality in terms not just of adaptation but of transformation.

Navigating Urban Constraints: the Strategic Flexibility of Situational Identity

Situational identity, as conceptualised by Lee (2019), manifests vividly in the beauty industry, where young female migrants strategically oscillate between rural and urban identity markers to navigate workplace demands and client expectations. This stage reflects a fluid pragmatism: women adapt self-presentation, speech, and values to maximise socio-economic capital across contexts. Switching between rural authenticity and urban professionalism highlights identity grafting's dynamism, while exposing China's urbanisation's structural contradictions.

The beauty industry's reliance on emotional and aesthetic labour amplifies the strategic value of situational identity. Rather than undergoing a rigid appearance transformation, young migrant women continuously negotiate their identities, responding to contextual expectations. Ren, a junior beautician, reflected:

> 'In Beijing and in the countryside, I have learned something, and I use them in a proper way […] The most important thing is to know how to behave in certain situations.'

Her narrative illustrates situational identity transcending binary frameworks. At work, Ren adopted urban elegance, using standard Mandarin and referencing city trends. However, when negotiating wages or recruiting rural peers, she emphasised her hometown's simplicity and trustworthiness as professional assets. This strategy is a calculated response. Salons encourage this blend of attributes. They prize polished professionalism while simultaneously they promote rural employees as authentic, sincere, and diligent. The resulting image reassures clients and builds trust, even as the same workplaces maintain rigorous standards for appearance, speech, and conduct.

Similarly, Shen, an intermediate beautician, described learning this balancing act through daily client interactions. She performed urban sophistication while subtly invoking rural values to build rapport:

> "Just identifying with your rural identity in your heart is not enough, you need to act! […] I tell my customers, 'My hometown always taught me to treat people warmly.' When they praise my work ethic, I add, 'That's how we were raised: to work hard and care for others.'"

This blending of values builds trust and distinguishes her from urban-born colleagues. This strategy, however, is fraught with tension. While rural traits such as warmth and diligence are commodified, they also risk typecasting migrants into lower-status roles. As Shen noted:

> "Bosses praise my 'humble attitude,' but I know they'd never promote me to manager. That's for city girls with backgrounds."

Situational identity also extends beyond the salon, allowing migrants to bridge urban workplaces and rural kinship networks. Jia, a senior beautician, leveraged her rural connections to recruit from her hometown:

> "When opening a new branch, I told my village girls, 'Come learn skills in Beijing, and it'll change your life!' To my boss, I'm both a reliable employee and a rural leader!"

Here, rural identity becomes a transactional resource. Jia's ties to her village gain her employer trust, while her urban experience grants her symbolic authority. However, her position depends on her ability to perform both identities effectively, while her recruits remain in low-wage roles.

In this regard, respondents acknowledged that their strategic adaptability did not guarantee long-term urban belonging. Lynn, a beautician, expressed this precarity:

> 'Even if I have a good salary and position now, I still can't imagine if I can become a Beijing resident in the future. It is impossible to buy a house or send my children to school here.'

Similarly, Wang, a nail technician, reflected on her current position:

> 'I'm 25, too young to return to the village, but too poor to settle here. My boss treats me well, and my family is proud. Honestly, I quite like the current situation.'

These reflections illustrate how situational identity operates as a practical response to uncertain urban conditions, allowing migrant women to navigate everyday demands while making sense of the limitations embedded in urban life. Rather than fully conforming or overtly resisting, they engage selectively with both rural and urban resources. Their rural ties, once suppressed, become fallback strategies in a city that denies permanence.

Situational identity reflects a tactical navigation of constraints, where women draw on both rural resilience and urban competence to create workable forms of belonging within institutional boundaries. This adaptability facilitates survival in precarious settings, while regrettably it often comes without transformative advancement. The strategies that enable them to manage daily demands can also reinforce the very hierarchies they must contend with (Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). This phase of identity grafting highlights the complex dynamics of migrant urban life, where flexible self-presentation signals resourcefulness while also exposing the enduring limitations to recognition and inclusion.

Discussion

This study positions, identity grafting, the strategic employ of rural and urban symbolic resources (Lee, 2019), as a critical framework for understanding how female migrant workers navigate identity within China's beauty industry. Situated at the intersection of aesthetic labour and urban aspiration, beauty work compels women to reconcile the demand for urban sophistication with the appeal of rural authenticity. Rather than transitioning from rural to urban identities, participants craft hybrid and situational identities that function as tools of navigation within exclusionary urban hierarchies.

The agency demonstrated through identity grafting is, however, complex, and often paradoxical, rather than inherently fully emancipatory (Deori & Rajagopalan, 2017). While reflecting adaptability in performing refinement and emotional restraint to approximate middle-class respectability, such performances do not guarantee upward mobility

and can expose women to dual marginality. Their capacity to succeed is frequently conditioned upon concealing or reconfiguring rural identity in ways that affirm dominant urban norms, thereby risking the reproduction of rurality's symbolic devaluation in alignment with broader state discourses equating urban belonging with class-based superiority. This identity flexibility, born of necessity, thus differs markedly from the strategic mobility of transnational elites described by Ong (1999). For these migrant women, it is primarily a response to structural exclusion, manifested in adaptations of dress, speech, and comportment within a hierarchical system. Nevertheless, this constrained context does not preclude agency entirely, as identity grafting also serves as a means of expressing aspiration and negotiating belonging, reflecting an intricate interplay where survival and self-making coexist.

Furthermore, identity grafting is not merely a discursive strategy but a process deeply embedded in the embodied routines of beauty work (Dutta, 2023). Through daily acts of styling, serving, and conversing, women continuously negotiate their visibility and belonging, transforming the beauty salon into both a workplace and a potent site of performative identity production where class, gender, and aspiration visibly intersect. Such nuanced, embodied identity work directly challenges the limitations of assimilationist migration frameworks that simplistically tie urban belonging to cultural conformity (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018). Indeed, while the symbolic valorisation of certain rural traits such as humility or diligence may afford temporary inclusion, it does not confer structural equity. Migrant women often remain economically essential while socially peripheral, a reality that starkly reveals the contradictions of an urban modernity demanding their labour while denying them substantive rights.

Ultimately, identity grafting is not only a theoretical concept but also a methodological lens that foregrounds the micro-practices through which marginalised subjects navigate power. It calls for migration research to attend to the everyday negotiations of self that occur under structural constraint. For meaningful inclusion to be realised, efforts must transcend symbolic recognition, addressing the need for institutional reforms that ensure equitable access to housing, healthcare, and education. By tracing how identity is crafted through labour, this study contributes a grounded analytical tool for examining internal migration in China and comparable contexts across the Global South.

Conclusion

This study has employed the theoretical lens of identity grafting to examine how young female rural-to-urban migrant workers in China's beauty industry negotiate their identities in response to the structural constraints of urban labour. By situating their experiences within the broader sociology framework of migration, gender, and labour studies, this paper contributes to scholarship in three significant ways.

First, it extends the theoretical application of identity grafting beyond diasporic and transnational contexts (Lee, 2019), demonstrating its relevance for internal migration. It conceptualises identity as a tactical, multi-layered process shaped by intersecting inequalities, and offers a framework for understanding how marginalised internal migrants navigate belonging through fluid, situational identity performances.

Second, the study highlights beauty salons as distinct sites of gendered identity construction. Moving beyond the dominant focus on factory labour in Chinese migration studies, it reveals how beauty work demands not only aesthetic and emotional labour but also enables women to revalue rural traits such as diligence and sincerity. These traits are tactically grafted onto urban performances to build trust, demonstrate competence, and gain limited professional recognition.

Third, it advances the understanding of identity flexibility as a form of adaptive agency. Migrant women's ability to switch between rural authenticity and urban polish exemplifies resourceful negotiation. However, this agency is constrained. Flexibility does not guarantee social mobility. Instead, it often serves as a survival tactic within unequal labour hierarchies.

The study emphasises that identity negotiation is not about fully abandoning or embracing either rural or urban categories. Just as the successful grafting of plants relies on the compatible integration of two varieties (Lee, 2019), the identity grafting of female migrants enables them to maintain continuity between rural and urban affiliations while simultaneously adapting to the demands of workplace expectations, client interactions, and economic constraints. Their identities are not positioned in-between rural and urban life in a fixed sense but exist within both spaces simultaneously, reflecting the layered realities of contemporary urbanisation.

In sum, this study provides a grounded view of identity construction among female migrants in an industry that both disciplines and rewards aesthetic self-presentation. These women challenge essentialised rural stereotypes and blur the symbolic lines between tradition and modernity, exclusion and belonging. Recognising such complex identity work is vital for developing more equitable labour and migration policies. Future research could examine how these identity strategies evolve over time or appear in other feminised service sectors, further illuminating the dynamics of survival and self-making in precarious economies in the wider context.

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Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. The *hukou* system refers to China's household registration policy, which classifies citizens according to their place of origin as either rural or urban residents. This system regulates population movement and determines individuals' access to social welfare provisions, education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and housing (Chan, 2019; Ye et al., 2013).
2. Suzhi (素质), often translated as 'human quality', is a Chinese sociopolitical discourse that links individual worth to moral, educational, and behavioural refinement. It has been used by the state to promote urban modernity and has served to justify the marginalisation of rural populations as lacking the necessary attributes for full participation in urban life (Anagnost, 2004).
3. The character 'rustic' (土) literally means 'earth' or 'soil' and is closely associated with agricultural life. It has evolved into a colloquial term implying something unrefined, outdated, or lacking sophistication, particularly when contrasted with urban life.

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