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The beauty mirage: affective labour and precarious leisure of China's rural-to-urban migrant women

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex interplay between affective labour and precarious leisure among young rural-to-urban migrant women employed in Beijing's beauty service industry. By conceptualising leisure as fragmented moments of respite and sociality that occur within and around the workplace, the paper contends that these women strategically perform urban femininities to attain empowerment and transcend the devalued identities associated with their rural backgrounds, while their opportunities for leisure remain limited by work demands and structural inequalities. The beauty salon emerges as a paradoxical site, where apparent autonomy and pleasure are intertwined with disciplinary practices, surveillance, and the commodification of intimacy. Through analysis of participants' daily negotiations, the study shows that leisure extends affective labour, further blurring work-life boundaries and exposing empowerment as an illusion maintained by exploitative structures. By foregrounding the gendered and hukou-based dynamics that constrain leisure, this research calls for a re-examination of leisure experiences and labour rights for marginalised migrant populations.

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Introduction

In the context of China's rapid urbanisation, rural-to-urban female migrants have become a critical yet understudied demographic navigating the tensions between economic survival and gendered societal expectations. Existing scholarship has extensively documented the exploitation of first-generation rural-to-urban migrant women, whose experiences were predominantly shaped by disciplined factory labour and traditional domestic work (Ngai, 2005; Yan, 2008). However, less attention has been directed towards the younger generation of rural-born women (post-2000s), who increasingly reject such work in favour of urban service-sector employment (Fan & Chen, 2014), particularly in the beauty industry. China's beauty industry now has become a critical site for realising these ambitions. This shift reflects not only changing labour market dynamics but also younger migrants' aspirations to renegotiate their identities as modern subjects through glamorous service work (Liao, 2016).

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The experiences of these women are particularly salient because China's internal rural-to-urban migration is profoundly shaped by the enduring legacy of the unique hukou (household registration) system (Afridi et al., 2015). This administrative tool, categorising citizens as either rural or urban based primarily on place of birth, has historically restricted social mobility and access to essential urban services for rural migrants (K. W. Chan, 2019). The hukou system continues to institutionalise a socio-economic and spatial hierarchy that fundamentally shapes the precarity of migrant workers, their labour rights (Ye et al., 2013), and, crucially for this study, their access to urban leisure opportunities (Zhao & Liu, 2024). This system produces a distinct form of internal 'othering,' where urban belonging remains uncertain and contingent (Gao et al., 2021). The institutional constraints are thus foundational to understanding the specific ways in which these women experience and negotiate their leisure time and spaces.

The beauty industry, often celebrated as a site of feminine empowerment (McRobbie, 2008), employs vast numbers of young marginalised women performing affective labour to craft leisure experiences for middle-class clients (Donner, 2023; Liebelt, 2016). Contemporary research increasingly frames beauty salons as complex sites where feminised labour, class stratification, and precarity intersect, particularly within Asian contexts. Studies illuminate these multifaceted dynamics, highlighting the tensions inherent in such service work, which directly impact workers' own possibilities for leisure (Dutta, 2023, 2025). For young Chinese migrant women, the beauty industry serves as a space where they strive to embody modernity (M. Chan, 2012), standing in contrast to earlier migrant narratives and extending beyond the notion of mere employment. However, these promises of liberation are fraught with contradictions. Beauty salons, while appearing as havens for experiencing leisure, simultaneously function as sites where neoliberal logics and patriarchal norms reproduce oppression. The sector, while offering symbolic resistance to traditional labour hierarchies, also perpetuates low wages and job insecurity (Liao, 2016), raising critical questions about the limits of leisure and agency.

This study challenges conventional understandings of 'leisure' as simply time free from formal work obligations. Instead, it refers to the fragmented, precarious moments of rest, sociability, and self-expression that emerge amid labour. For this group of migrant women, extended hours, low pay, and the pervasive demands of affective labour mean that traditional 'free time' is not very applicable. In this setting, leisure must be understood as a situated and politicised experience shaped by the conditions of work itself. Indeed, what may appear as brief moments of reprieve or connection are not truly separate from labour. They are deeply entangled with the emotional and aesthetic expectations of the job, forming part of the work performance itself.

It is essential to approach leisure as a critical analytical lens as this perspective reveals how identity, agency, and social inclusion are negotiated and contested, particularly among marginalised populations (Watson & Scraton, 2013). Their leisure, or lack thereof, mirrors broader power dynamics. This study thus also engages with leisure politics, referring to the struggles over access to, and the definition and experience of, leisure, particularly how these are shaped by intersecting power relations of gender, class, and hukou status. In this framework, the beauty salon itself becomes a politicised space where clients' leisure is produced through the often-unrecognised labour of migrant

women, whose own leisure is simultaneously shaped and constrained by this very process.

This article emerges from a six-month fieldwork in the author's PhD project and addresses two interrelated gaps: challenging the dominant focus on factory labour in studies of Chinese migrant women by centring service work and the gendered constraints on their leisure, and critiquing neoliberal empowerment narratives that obscure structural barriers. This study argues that the beauty industry's veneer of empowerment obscures costs borne by migrant women, contributing to debates on affective labour, gendered migration, and the neoliberal co-optation of leisure.

Literature review

China's extensive rural-to-urban migration has produced a significant but marginalised demographic of female migrants navigating a labour market shaped by gender, class, and the hukou system. The hukou system, as previously noted, historically and contemporaneously restricts rural migrants' access to urban public services, thereby directly limiting the financial, temporal, and psychological resources necessary for meaningful leisure and full urban integration (Xiong et al., 2020). While reforms exist, their benefits often do not fully extend to migrants (Zhu, 2007). Their precarious employment, often a direct consequence of their hukou-defined marginalisation, leaves them exceptionally vulnerable, drastically narrowing their pathways to restorative leisure experiences.

Historically, research on Chinese migrant women focused on factory labour, highlighting exploitative conditions that severely limited any potential for leisure (Li & Stodolska, 2021; Siu, 2015). With the rise of neoliberalism and consumerism, younger migrant women (post-2000s) increasingly seek more than economic survival. Neoliberalism, as an economic and political philosophy, champions free markets and individual responsibility, often heightening workers' precarity (Gordon, 2019). Feminist critiques have highlighted how empowerment narratives within neoliberalism encourage women to pursue self-transformation and success, while obscure structural inequalities and reframe collective issues as personal challenges (McRobbie, 2008; Rottenberg, 2014). Within this ideological terrain, beauty work has emerged as a seemingly accessible route to urban modernity (Chew, 2019). However, how migrant women working in these feminised spaces negotiate leisure and labour under such ideological and material conditions remains underexplored.

While Western research highlights leisure's role in migrant integration (Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004), literature on women's leisure often emphasises themes of constraint and resistance, shaped by gender, class, and ethnicity (Green et al., 1990). Within the salon, femininity is both produced and contested through social interactions that offer leisure to clients but involve demanding labour for workers (Banerjee, 2023). This directly links the production of leisure for some to the constraints placed on others. Migrant beauticians are tasked with performing affective labour to curate clients' leisure experiences (Dutta, 2023) while simultaneously negotiating the pressures of modern femininity (Ip, 2018). Affective labour, central here, building on Hochschild's (1983) foundational work, refers to the management of emotion and relational experience. In beauty salons, such labour differs from more tangible forms of production, as it relies on nuanced emotional and bodily performances that impact workers' own well-being and

shape their ability to enjoy leisure themselves. This intertwines physical acts massaging, styling with performances of care and intimacy, making the worker's body a tool for affective production (Kang, 2010; Wolkowitz, 2006). These performances require subtle discipline and constant self-regulation (Otis, 2011). The critique that 'one woman's leisure is another woman's work' (Black & Sharma, 2001, p. 104) is pertinent, as migrant beauticians' affective labour sustains urban leisure cultures while their own leisure access is constrained.

However, this labour is not only exploitative. To delve deeper into these dynamics, a focus on affect and emotion, drawing from feminist scholarship, offers a critical lens to illuminate the embodied experiences of migrant women, revealing how social systems like capitalism, patriarchy, and the hukou regime are felt and navigated at a visceral, embodied level (Ahmed, 2014), shaping their perceptions of work, self, and their constrained leisure (Scott & Fletcher, 2024). It is acknowledged that beauty work may serve as a means of resisting traditional gender norms (López, 2022), adopting urban aesthetics as survival strategy (A. Gaetano, 2008), or cultivating shared affective agency and 'sisterhood' (Jenkins, 2019), however, it is also deeply implicated in dominant ideologies. Beauty salons often reproduce individualised empowerment narratives aligned with state discourses of suzhi (quality)[1] (Yan, 2008). This ideal of 'modern selfhood' not only reinforces existing social hierarchies by commodifying the bodies of rural women but also shapes how these women experience and embody their identities in urban spaces, particularly as their exclusion based on hukou status persists (Y. Sun, 2025). Feminist scholarship reminds us that the body is not only regulated but also generative. It is a site of discipline, but also of knowledge, performance, and resistance (Skeggs, 2004). In the context of beauty work, migrant women's bodies are commodified and regulated, but through embodied practices they may carve out personal moments that approximate leisure, even within highly constrained settings (Dutta, 2023).

Crucially, beauty work offers an escape from factory drudgery but simultaneously entrenches marginality and patriarchal norms through unstable employment, characterised by low wages, informal contracts, and expectations of perpetual youthfulness (Shi, 2024). These precarious conditions reflect the neoliberal appropriation of ideals like freedom and choice to legitimise structural inequality (McRobbie, 2008). This review thus highlights the need to re-examine Chinese migrant women's leisure and labour through a multilayered lens, focusing on how the affective and embodied nature of beauty work shapes their limited and precarious leisure. The following analysis centres on their lived experiences, where affective labour sustains urban leisure cultures while their own leisure aspirations remain largely unfulfilled.

Methodology

This study emerges from my doctoral six-month fieldwork of young rural-to-urban female migrants working in Beijing's beauty service industry, conducted between February and September 2024. The research received ethical approval from the relevant institutional committee. The research was situated in Haidian District, an area renowned for its concentration of prestigious universities (such as Peking University and Tsinghua University), leading research institutions, and the Zhongguancun Science Park, often referred to as 'China's Silicon Valley.' Haidian's economy is dominated by high-tech

industries, information services, finance, and education, all of which play a significant role in Beijing's overall GDP. Rapid development in the district, shaped by municipal policies supporting high-end service industries (Beijing Municipal Commerce Bureau, 2021), provided a strategic context for this investigation.

Within this context, the study explored how migrant women navigate leisure in a sector often celebrated for its potential to empower. However, this dynamism is accompanied by a high cost of living and a competitive environment. For these women, Haidian symbolises the modernity they seek, while also highlighting how their labour is both essential to and marginalised by the district's economic structure. This combination of opportunity and exclusion makes Haidian an especially insightful site.

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The final cohort comprised 34 rural-born women aged 18 to 25, all employed in Haidian's salons for at least six months. This demographic reflects the industry's prioritisation of youth. Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics.

To capture the multidimensionality of their experiences, the study employed methodological triangulation. Initial semi-structured interviews, conducted in Mandarin and lasting 60–90 minutes, explored participants' migration histories, workplace dynamics, and identity negotiation processes. These conversations, audio-recorded and transcribed,

Table 1. Participants demographic information.

Pseudonym	Age	Hometown	Position
Huilan	22	Sichuan Province	Manicurist
Huixin	20	Anhui Province	Intermediate Beautician
Jiamin	25	Sichuan Province	Manicurist
Linna	19	Anhui Province	Junior Beautician
Lixuan	25	Hebei Province	Manicurist
Mengjie	19	Hebei Province	Junior Beautician
Minghui	25	Henan Province	Manicurist
Mingzhu	18	Shandong Province	Junior Beautician
Qinghe	25	Anhui Province	Senior Beautician, Manager
Qiumei	25	Anhui Province	Senior Beautician, Partner
Ruilin	21	Anhui Province	Manicurist
Ruoyan	22	Liaoning Province	Manicurist
Ruoyun	20	Hebei Province	Manicurist
Shulan	25	Anhui Province	Manicurist, Owner
Shuying	20	Henan Province	Junior Beautician
Sumin	18	Sichuan Province	Junior Beautician
Wenjuan	23	Guangxi Province	Junior Beautician
Wenli	25	Shandong Province	Senior Beautician, Partner
Xinle	24	Henan Province	Manicurist
Xinling	22	Henan Province	Intermediate Beautician
Xuelin	24	Hebei Province	Manicurist
Xueqin	21	Hebei Province	Intermediate Beautician
Xueyan	22	Henan Province	Junior Beautician
Yanru	21	Heilongjiang Province	Intermediate Beautician
Yating	18	Henan Province	Junior Beautician
Yiran	24	Shanxi Province	Senior Beautician
Yuexin	23	Liaoning Province	Manicurist
Yunshan	23	Anhui Province	Manicurist
Yunzhi	25	Gansu Province	Manicurist
Yuting	18	Anhui Province	Manicurist
Zhilan	21	Shanxi Province	Manicurist
Zhixin	18	Guizhou Province	Junior Beautician
Zihan	21	Shandong Province	Intermediate Beautician
Zixuan	21	Shanxi Province	Manicurist

were complemented by five walking interviews where participants guided the researcher through their daily routines. This approach, inspired by Evans and Jones' (2011) work on mobility and place-making, unearthed spatial narratives of belonging and exclusion often absent in static interview settings (Y. Sun & Zhu, 2024). All interviews were conducted alongside continuous participant observation, further enriching the data by gathering extensive observational insights. Approximately 60 hours of audio recordings were collected from the interviews.

My position as an urban woman researcher shaped both how I gathered data and how I interpreted it. While shared gender facilitated rapport, my educational privilege and lack of rural migrant experience risked obscuring structural inequities (Nencel, 2014). For instance, participants frequently framed their salon work as a pathway to 'self-improvement,' emphasising skills like makeup artistry or client communication. However, my observations revealed how such narratives coexisted with unpaid overtime, exposure to harmful chemicals, and managerial surveillance. This dissonance represents a significant gendered tension. The discourse of 'self-improvement' often aligns with neoliberal feminist narratives, which can obscure the inherently gendered nature of the labour and its attendant exploitation. Productivity, defined by sales targets and client satisfaction, was frequently achieved at the expense of the workers' own well-being and genuine leisure. This was interpreted by the workers primarily through an aspirational lens, yet an analytical perspective reveals the exploitative undercurrents. By moving between empathetic insider perspective and critical outsider analysis, the study aimed to honour participants' agency while exposing the systemic pressures that shape their daily lives, avoiding both idealisation and pity.

Data analysis followed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017), which emphasises iterative coding and theoretical sensitivity to participants' lived realities. Initial coding began alongside data collection, with interview transcripts and field notes fractured line-by-line to identify emergent themes. Key initial coding themes included 'performing urbanity,' 'negotiating respectability,' 'affective cost of service,' 'aspirations for modernity,' 'precarious belonging,' 'hukou consciousness,' 'workplace solidarity/tensions,' 'commodification of self,' and 'leisure as performance/escape.' These themes captured the multifaceted nature of the participants' experiences, from the emotional burdens of their work to their strategies for navigating urban life and their understanding of their social position. For this research, focused coding then synthesised these fragments into broader categories, including 'aesthetic labour as mobility strategy,' 'leisure as contested entitlement,' and 'fragile sisterhood alliance.'

Memo-writing played a multifaceted role throughout this process (Gibson & Hartman, 2014). It involved not only documenting analytical insights and theoretical developments but also systematically recording emotional responses, underlying assumptions, and reflections on positionality during both fieldwork and analysis (Lempert, 2007). For example, memos captured the affective impact of observing micro-aggressions against workers or witnessing moments of camaraderie, and these recorded feelings informed subsequent interpretations. This reflexive, affect-attuned practice aligns with feminist commitments to recognising the co-construction of knowledge and foregrounding the relational, gendered dynamics embedded in research. Constant comparative analysis ensured that emerging theories remained grounded in data (Charmaz, 2021), while memoing enabled ongoing interrogation of my assumptions.

The resulting framework illuminates how rural migrant women navigate beauty work as a paradoxical site of leisure, where autonomy coexists with neoliberal co-optation.

Crafting urban selves: affective labour and salon interactions

For the young rural-to-urban migrant women, I studied, migration stemmed from a determination to transcend the limitations and devalued identities of their upbringing. Growing up in rural China, they navigated a persistent gender ideology often confining them to domestic and agricultural labour (Fan, 2003), experiences which many later framed as monotonous and unfulfilling. Simultaneously, globalisation and urbanisation exposed them to urban ideals framing rural life as poor and lower-class, contrasting with the city's dynamism (W. Sun, 2009). This symbolic shift, coupled with the allure of urban modernity, fuelled their desire to escape the devalued rural identity and embrace more leisured urban lifestyles (A. Gaetano, 2008).

In Beijing's beauty salons, this resolve for a new urban identity manifested clearly. Here, leisure's deliberate performance was a conscious rural departure. The salon, stressing aesthetic transformation, became a stage to enact this desired self, often countering past identities. This aesthetic reinvention offered more than momentary affective 'escape.' It tangibly enacted disengagement from rural norms and embrace of an urbane, leisured self, reflecting their preference for new urban experiences.

This rejection of rural constraints was vividly reflected in interviews. Many contrasted the monotony of rural routines, such as 'endless farm work, scrolling TikTok, playing cards, visiting neighbours,' with the excitement of urban leisure culture. 'Back home, there was no such thing as fun,' remarked Qiumei, 25, from an impoverished village in Anhui Province. 'But in Beijing, I get to touch luxury skincare and learn about fashion. These are things I never dreamed of! [. . .] I really enjoy such interesting lifestyle.'

For Qiumei and others, the salon became a gateway to urban leisure that rural life could not offer. Shuying, a 20-year-old junior beautician from Henan Province, exemplified this transformation. She used her first paycheck to purchase a professional makeup kit, an act that significantly altered her self-perception. 'In my hometown, people always said I was a peasant girl. But in Beijing, when I style my hair and wear eyeliner, I feel like an urbanite.' Shuying cheerfully stated in the interview that, although it requires additional cost of time and money, it has nonetheless become one of the preferred leisure activities among young rural girls who engage with beauty services. She remarked, 'In my daily routine of applying makeup and preparing for work, I feel incredibly relaxed and happy. This is entirely different from life in the countryside. [. . .] Here, you have control over your appearance, allowing you to enhance your beauty.' Within beauty industry, leisure came to be understood as a refuge from dehumanisation and a retreat from authority and domination in the workplace, as well as a bastion of individual autonomy and 'freedom choice' (Goldman, 1983, p. 91).

In the salons I researched, training was not limited to technical skills but also encompassed instruction in urban etiquette, which itself forms part of the leisure-oriented culture of the city. Workers were taught to modulate their accents, adopt standard Mandarin, and refine their ability to communicate in a soft-spoken manner, which were closely associated with leisurely urban life. Additionally, regular aesthetic training sessions were provided, often resembling the kinds of self-care and grooming

activities enjoyed by urbanites during their leisure time. As Linna, a 19-year-old junior beautician, noted, 'It's like becoming a new person!' These practices, framed as self-improvement, allow women to temporarily inhabit an urban identity that feels both aspirational and liberatory. More importantly, such training provides migrant women, who may lack prior experience of city leisure, with opportunities to participate physically and mentally in the performative aspects of affective labour, while also engaging in the consumption and performance of leisure. By narrowing the gap between their own tastes and those of the urban middle class, this process facilitates their relationship with customers and colleagues, ultimately fostering an imagined community that is sustained not only by work, but by shared aspirations for leisure and self-cultivation. As Linna later remarked, 'After completing these trainings, I really feel closer to my customers' lives!'

Leisure also manifests in the social interactions forged between workers and clients. A typical salon service day involved physical care, such as facials, massages, and waxing, alongside continuous conversational labour. 'We chat non-stop, even when exhausted,' explained by Xuelin, 24, a manicurist. 'We should not interrupt our customers and always prioritise their comfort.' When urban middle-class clients talk about topics like technology, business, or investment, these young women, often with limited social experience, may feel confused or alienated, while must constantly perform deference, including lowering their gaze, softening their tones, laughing politely at clients' jokes. These affective performances are deeply shaped by hierarchies of class, gender, and place. In every interaction, expectations of deference and attentiveness serve to reinforce these social divisions (Chen, 2023), leaving workers gradually attuned to the boundaries that structure their everyday urban lives.

Despite these constraints, moments of genuine connection may emerge. In the semi-private space of the treatment room, conversations often transcend transactional boundaries. Xuelin described her bond with a regular client, a divorced urban businesswoman: 'She tells me about her ex-husband's affairs, and I share my troubles with rent. We're like sisters, even though she's rich and I'm just a migrant girl.' From these young girls' perspective, it is precisely within these scripted exchanges that leisure flourishes: a stolen laugh, a shared gripe about husbands, or a subtle eyeroll when discussing an overbearing boss. These micro-resistances (Shaw, 2001), evolve into a shared sense of intimacy (Dutta, 2023), embedded within affective labour. The feminist affective, material, and visceral transactions present in this setting involve exchanges that extend beyond monetary payment and service provision.

However, while such interactions may contain elements that feel sincere, they take place within a commercial environment where emotional display is a central part of the role (Hochschild, 1983). The apparent authenticity of these moments is complicated by the fact that workers are trained to perform appropriate emotions, not always out of genuine feeling, but as a calculated, performative strategy to encourage sales. For clients, the salon serves as a site of leisure and comfort. For workers, however, these moments of intimacy are best understood as performances shaped by workplace expectations and economic pressures. Any sense of connection is therefore likely to be ambivalent. It may feel meaningful, but it ultimately maintains only the illusion of shared leisure, which regrettably remains largely inaccessible to the worker herself.

The salon's communal culture further illustrates the blurred boundaries between labour and leisure, a critical aspect of their precarious leisure. During rest periods

between appointments, workers often gathered to watch makeup tutorials on platforms such as TikTok, experiment with new hairstyles, or critique each other's make-up. While these activities undoubtedly foster camaraderie and offer a semblance of personal enjoyment, they also function, often unacknowledged by the workers themselves, as informal professional development. Learning new cosmetic techniques or hair styling skills, even in a relaxed, peer-led setting, directly enhances their ability to perform their duties, thereby extending the reach of work into their rest time.

Wenjuan, a 23-year-old girl from Guangxi, described how they 'mix styles' and create 'something new together' in leisure time, and apprentice Sumin remarked, 'it's fun to play dress-up ourselves.' These moments, perceived by the workers as leisure and a form of self-expression, are nonetheless deeply intertwined with the aesthetic demands and commercial imperatives of their profession, subtly reinforcing the notion that even their free moments within the salon are, in part, an extension of their labour. Thus, while subjectively important and offering a respite from client service, such leisure remains tethered to the logic of the beauty industry. This form of escape into work-related leisure emphasises the pervasive nature of their affective labour and the often-indistinct line separating their work lives from what they might consider their own time. This theme of precariousness, where leisure is constrained and shaped by work, is further explored in the subsequent section.

Leisure's burden: affective exhaustion and conditional respite

Although several participants were keen to describe their beauty work through narratives of empowerment, their accounts of 'fun' or 'relaxation' often unravelled upon closer inspection, because these accounts were frequently shadowed by stories of emotional depletion, bodily fatigue, and constant pressure. These affective burdens are compounded by the gendered discipline of aesthetic labour. As Wolkowitz (2006) emphasises, body work links discourses of gendered self-discipline, centred on crafting a respectable appearance, to the physical regulation of workers' bodies. The accounts of the beauticians reveal how their attempts to find enjoyment or relaxation are shaped and often undermined by these intersecting forms of discipline. Beauty work, as a prominent form of gendered labour in consumer societies, serves as a site to produce respectability and is simultaneously shaped by intersecting dynamics of race, class, and gender. This complexity brings fundamental questions to the fore regarding the theorisation of feminist labour, especially as it is continually reconfigured within neoliberal frameworks (Sharma & Black, 2001)

For instance, beyond mandatory makeup and uniforms, many salons may also pressure employees to undergo cosmetic procedures to better align with prevailing beauty norms. Wenli, 25, recounted how a close colleague took out a loan for double eyelid surgery, expressing regret on her behalf: 'Now she owes 8,000 yuan. To be honest, many of my peers take out loans for cosmetic surgery. It's quite disheartening.' Others reported spending half of their monthly wages on luxury skincare products to appear sufficiently 'urban.' They expressed that this allowed them to 'improve themselves' and 'better integrate.' This resonates with A. M. Gaetano's (2015) findings, which highlight how migrant women engage in urban consumer practices as a means of negotiating more liberating market discourses of femininity. Through these practices, they seek to

accumulate economic and social capital while enhancing their sense of belonging in the city. However, by positioning aesthetic transformation as a prerequisite for urban integration, they reinforce the idea that rural bodies require correction to be deemed acceptable in the city. This phenomenon also echoes with Kang's (2010) research on nail salons in the United States, where Korean migrant workers are expected to embody both exotic expertise and submissive demeanours to cater to predominantly white clients.

As Huixin, a 20-year-old intermediate beautician, explained: 'If you look tired, customers think you're unprofessional. We must be "living advertisements": always glowing, always energetic.' However, this performative vitality comes at a physical cost, including chronic pain from repetitive tasks such as threading eyebrows and massaging scalps, respiratory issues caused by prolonged exposure to chemicals, and sleep deprivation resulting from rotating shifts (Kumari et al., 2017). In this context, leisure becomes a paradox as the very self-care practices that signify 'urban sophistication' are also the bodily cost of labour. However, rather than fully recognising this contradiction, these young women navigate their work with an ambivalent awareness, shaped by the neoliberal ideals of autonomous subjectivity promoted by the state and its agents (Donner, 2023). Exhaustion and suffering are understood as their challenges to be managed, rather than as the result of structural conditions. This internalisation of responsibility reinforces the operation of neoliberal ideologies, which encourage precarious workers to see self-regulation and resilience as personal virtues, even within unstable environments. In this way, leisure is transformed from a potential space of rest into another site of labour, marked by ambivalence and unresolved tensions.

The limits of aesthetic reinvention further undermine leisure's emancipatory potential. Despite workers' meticulous efforts to embody urban femininity, class and hukou barriers persist. Xuelin recalled a particularly depressing incident: 'Yesterday, I'd just finished a four-hour manicure for a rich client. She loved the design, even took photos for her social media. However, when I described days I had devoted to selecting colours, mixing shades, and sketching patterns, she responded with a blank nod and appeared to regard me with a trace of disdain. No "thank you." It's like my effort meant nothing. In that moment, I felt invisible.'

By dismissing or questioning beauty workers' expertise, the client perpetuates the myth that beauty work requires no skill, thereby justifying low wages and erasing workers' agency. Such microaggressions are not isolated. During a participant observation session, I observed a client interrupting Yiran, a senior beautician, in the middle of a consultation: 'Do you have any training or education? It feels like you're just pushing random treatments on me.' Yiran later confided that the client herself had misunderstood the service description. 'I wanted to correct her, but I couldn't,' she said. 'If I argued, she might complain to the manager, and I'd lose my commission or even my job. So, I just smiled, apologised, and kept my voice soft. [. . .] They can't understand how much I need this job.'

Workers are expected to prioritise client satisfaction over personal dignity, even when they encounter unwarranted criticism. This dynamic forced participants' suppression of genuine emotions in order to conform to institutional expectations highlights the affective cost of their work (Jansz & Timmers, 2002). This emotional dissonance is a direct consequence of the affective labour they perform, and it highlights the precarity of their leisure and well-being. In Yiran's case, the salon's profit-driven ethos, where

urban customer's complaints can jeopardise earnings and employment, compelled her to perform deference, reinforcing rural-urban hierarchies. These interactions reveal that leisure for migrant workers remains contingent, functioning as a performance that urban clients, exercising class privilege, can withdraw at any moment.

Additionally, the salon's constantly surveilled spatial dynamics further erode the liberatory potential of leisure. Managers monitor break-room conversations via CCTV, reprimanding those who 'waste time' on 'gossip.' Yiran expressed her frustration with this pervasive surveillance: 'It's such an overreaction. A few jokes won't ruin the business.' However, when asked if she or her colleagues ever challenged these rules, she laughed nervously: 'How could we? I still need this job.' Under such conditions, even feelings of dissatisfaction must be carefully managed. As Manalansan (2010) argues, this sense of alienation from one's labour arises not from personal failure but from systemic inequities that transform leisure from a right into a privilege accessible to only a few. The constant scrutiny directly impinges on their ability to experience even fleeting moments of leisure as truly free or unobserved.

Moreover, as I described previously, even client interactions, ostensibly intimate, are subject to profit-driven scripting. Yiran told me that her trainee manuals explicitly instruct: 'Guide conversations toward upselling. If a client mentions stress, recommend our aromatherapy package.' This commercialisation of intimacy transforms leisure into a transactional performance, a phenomenon (Threadgold 2023, p. 96) describes as 'affect operationalised for an array of vested interests.' Here, affective labour, which is the emotional connections forged through laughter, shared stories, or empathetic listening, is co-opted to serve neoliberal logics of perpetual consumption. Xinling, 22, exemplified this tension: 'I used to love making clients laugh. Now, every joke must end with a sales pitch. It feels fake.' The 'fakeness' Xinling describes highlights the erosion of authentic connection and, by extension, the enjoyable, leisurely aspects of social interaction, which become instrumentalised for profit, thereby diminishing their restorative leisure potential for workers.

Therefore, the leisure experienced by rural migrant women in urban beauty salons is, at its core, a precarious construct through racialised, classed, and gendered power dynamics. These tensions set the stage for the next section, which examines how migrant women forge alliances, turning to one another for support and solidarity. Regrettably, while women workers come together to navigate the emotional and physical demands of beauty work, they also internalise neoliberal and patriarchal logics, which in turn reproduce hierarchies within the broader community of migrant women.

Contested solidarity: fragile sisterhood and internal divisions

In Beijing's demanding beauty salons, the bonds of sisterhood emerge as complex strategies for migrant women's survival and the pursuit of leisure. Workers frequently articulated their solidarity in familial terms, describing relationships as 'like sisters' or 'like family.' For example, when Zixuan struggled financially due to illness, colleagues collectively pooled their earnings to assist her. Similarly, Zihan, who faced harassment from a hostile client, found emotional relief when co-workers collectively demanded managerial intervention. Such solidarity functions as collective affective labour (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021), buffering against emotional stress and restoring

dignity essential for experiencing leisure. These alliances also enable subtle forms of resistance. Sumin described how she and colleagues devised covert signals to cope with tough clients, including coordinated distractions like deliberately dropping objects or turning up music. These fleeting but deliberate acts of resistance, though unable to alter the structural inequalities of their work, carve out micro-moments of agency and shared, hidden leisure, allowing them to momentarily disrupt the rigid hierarchy of the salon and the relentless demands of daily work (Rydzik & Anitha, 2020).

These sisterhoods can initially be seen as a meaningful collective strategy for navigating the uncertainties of precarious leisure (Chun & Cranford, 2018; Zhou, 2024). Through the sharing of tips, mutual emotional support, and pooling of resources, workers build vital informal networks of mutual support (Power et al., 2022), which preserve fragments of leisure and moments of respite in otherwise demanding circumstances. In these shared spaces, such as cramped break rooms and shared dormitories, social interactions allow workers to exchange stories, process difficult client encounters, and offer each other reassurance. Such practices generate peer support and a sense of solidarity, helping to alleviate isolation and sustain workers through the everyday extensive labour.

However, these moments of connection often remain deeply entangled with the emotional burdens of their work, effectively extending the boundaries of affective labour into spaces that might otherwise be reserved for rest. These sisterhoods are frequently shaped by the need to cope rather than resist. Their conversations centred on managerial pressures, job insecurity, and workplace inequalities, but these rarely culminated in collective action. Although many workers displayed a keen awareness of exploitation, they recognised, for example, that profits accumulate at their expense and that power is concentrated in managerial hands, these moments of critical reflection usually remain confined to private conversations. They seldom lead to collective initiatives that might improve working conditions or create opportunities for authentic leisure. Ruilin's failed attempts at collective wage negotiation and securing necessary breaks exemplify this limitation. 'Everybody was scared,' she sighed. 'They said, "We're just rural girls. Who will listen?"' This pervasive sense of vulnerability, rooted in their precarious migrant status, directly undermines their ability to claim rights, including the right to fair working hours or conditions conducive to leisure.

Moreover, the very forms of solidarity that help sustain their everyday survival can also reproduce patterns of exclusion, which further complicates their relationship with leisure. Despite their shared rural backgrounds and gendered precarity, some participants explicitly distanced themselves from factory girls, highlighting occupational skills and urban femininity as distinguishing factors. Wenjuan remarked: 'They just sit by machines all day, doing the same thing over and over. We have skills and leisure time in a better place.' Some participants prided themselves on their ability to present themselves well. Yiran elaborated: 'In a salon, we must always look good, including makeup, hair, nails. That makes us relaxed and attractive. [. . .] Factory girls? I don't think they care about these things. That's why they look out of place in the city.'

The fragmentation of this sisterhood, particularly the distinction drawn against 'factory girls,' is itself a complex outcome of their affective labour and precarious conditions. In performing urban femininity as an integral part of their job, and in aspiring to escape the social disadvantages associated with rural migrants, they

internalise and reproduce neoliberal values that emphasise individual distinction and upward mobility (Kang, 2010; Rottenberg, 2014). This performative boundary-making, while offering a coping mechanism within a precarious system, inadvertently creates divisions among women who share similar structural vulnerabilities. The precariousness of their position, shaped by persistent fears of economic instability and the possibility of returning to factory work or rural life, intensifies their psychological drive for self-differentiation. In this sense, their differentiation can be seen as a strategy to bolster their own sense of worth and to perform a more 'leisured' or 'sophisticated' urban identity, even if their actual leisure time and resources are severely limited.

However, this strategy fragments broader solidarity among the wider population of migrant women and may impede collective efforts to improve working conditions and achieve more equitable access to leisure. Such attitudes reinforce a gendered hierarchy among rural-urban migrants, a pattern that was particularly evident in their social interactions. One participant recounted how she avoided conversation with a factory girl who lived in the same rental building: 'I will avoid contact with her. We just don't have anything in common.'

These remarks illustrate how the service sector's proximity to urban consumer culture allows beauty workers to construct a more seemingly modern and leisured lifestyle that factory workers are perceived to lack. Several participants admitted that they had once worked in factories themselves. One such participant articulated her fear and the perceived benefits of her beauty job: "If I were to return to the factory, I wouldn't meet 'high-class' customers, chat with them to broaden my horizons, or have time to dress myself up. [. . .] I still really enjoy this kind of life". Clearly, for some participants, despite their awareness of the underlying exploitation in beauty work, the ability to engage in these practices, interacting with a different clientele and focusing on self-presentation, was framed as a valued, controllable form of leisure, distinct from the perceived drudgery of factory life.

Therefore, the beauty salon exposes the contradictions of migrant women's resistance and leisure pursuit. Although sisterhood offers support against affective exhaustion and creates a space for precarious leisure, it remains constrained by neoliberal logics that individualise struggle and valorise consumerist femininity. Rejecting 'factory girl' identities, while providing a temporary affective boost and performing a 'leisured' status, ultimately reinforces the negative discourse attached to rural labour and obscures shared experiences of oppression, echoing Rottenberg's (2014) concern about neoliberal feminism. Consequently, internal divisions, fuelled by affective labour pressures and the desire to escape precarity, limit collective power to challenge structures making their leisure precarious and labour affectively demanding.

However, I remain cautiously hopeful that within these fragmented solidarities lie traces of transformative potential. Acts like Zixuan's colleagues crowdfunding medical bills, or Ruilin's persistence in asserting their legitimate rights, show imperfect sisterhood can be a rehearsal for broader collective organising. The challenge lies in scaling these micro-resistances into sustained movements that bridge, rather than deepen, divisions among China's rural migrant women, thereby fostering a more robust collective capacity to negotiate for better working conditions and more meaningful and secure leisure.

Conclusions

This study offers a novel exploration of how young rural-to-urban migrant women negotiate leisure and labour within China's urban beauty industry. By centring the beauty salon as a paradoxical space, simultaneously a site of demanding work and ideal leisure, the analysis reveals how these women navigate aspirations for urban modernity against the constraints of systemic marginalisation. To clarify the scope of this investigation, the study has deliberately focused its conceptualisation of 'leisure' primarily on the fragmented, often precarious moments of respite, sociality, and self-expression that occur within and immediately around the demanding context of their beauty service work. This includes the performance of leisure as an intrinsic part of their labour and the brief, often informal, social interactions during work hours or in work-adjacent spaces. This delimitation is crucial because, for this specific group, the clear demarcation between formal work and 'free time' leisure (such as extended holidays or dedicated recreational pursuits outside the work sphere) is often blurred by long hours, low pay, the pervasive nature of affective labour, and the socio-economic constraints imposed by their migrant status. Examining these interstitial and often work-bound moments of leisure is therefore particularly revealing of their lived realities and the specific politics of their leisure under conditions of precarity (Clarke & Critcher, 2016). While acknowledging that leisure experiences outside these immediate work-related contexts are also important, this study's main contribution lies in illuminating the contested nature of leisure within the feminised service workplace itself.

The salon enables temporary escapes from rural identities stigmatised as 'backward' or 'uncivilised.' Through aesthetic reinvention and affective labour, workers craft performances of urban femininity that momentarily transcend their rural origins. Curating polished appearances, exchanging beauty tips, and forging intimate client relationships allow them to inhabit roles as modern, skilled professionals, which is a stark contrast to the gendered and classed marginalisation they face elsewhere. These acts of self-fashioning are inextricably linked to neoliberal logics that commodify both femininity and emotional labour. Workers' smiles, gossip, and creativity, though authentic in brief moments, ultimately serve profit margins, reducing their humanity to marketable affect. The integration of feminist affect theory has been central to understanding these embodied and emotional dimensions, revealing how systemic pressures are felt and navigated by these women.

Crucially, this leisure remains precarious and exclusionary. Despite their efforts to embody urban sophistication, rural hukou status denies migrant women access to urban welfare systems, rendering their belonging provisional and impacting their capacity for stable, worry-free leisure. As Qinghe poignantly noted: 'I've styled a CEOs' wife who calls me "little sister," but when I need a housing loan, I'm just another peasant worker. Nobody will help me.' This fundamental insecurity means that any leisure enjoyed is often against a backdrop of instability, making it a cruel mirage, which is an ephemeral taste of inclusion that ultimately highlights their systemic exclusion from the secure urban life that makes genuine leisure possible. Even within the salon, a site of their labour but also social interaction, any sense of ease or acceptance is fragile: managers police their appearances, clients weaponise class privilege through microaggressions, and the spectre of rural identity haunts their claims to urban belonging.

The study further complicates narratives of migrant solidarity. While beauty workers cultivate sisterhood to withstand exploitation, such as by pooling resources during crises or devising covert resistance tactics, they simultaneously reinforce hierarchies among rural migrant women. By distinguishing themselves from 'factory girls' through sartorial choices, femininity performance, bodily discipline, and other forms of cultural capital (Skeggs, 2005), they internalise neoliberal discourses that valorise consumerist femininity over collective struggle (M. Lazar, 2014). This performative boundary-making, while briefly empowering, offers a narrow and problematic vision of femininity and gender equality (M. M. Lazar, 2009). It perpetuates divisions that obscure women's shared structural oppression and does little to advance the broader leisure rights of migrant women.

Ultimately, this research challenges romanticised notions of leisure as inherently liberatory. For rural migrant women, within and beyond the Chinese context, leisure emerges as a contested space in which agency and exhaustion coexist uneasily alongside solidarity and fragmentation, hope and precarity. The title of 'beauty mirage' reflects broader societal contradictions where the promise of modernity and individual success, often channelled through consumer culture and feminised service work, frequently masks deepening inequalities and novel forms of precarity for those situated at the margins. By exposing these contradictions, the study calls for a reimagining of the leisure experiences of groups marginalised in dominant discourse, as well as labour rights frameworks that address the affective and embodied dimensions of exploitation in feminised service work. Future research might explore how fragmented sisterhoods could evolve into broader coalitions, bridging divides to challenge the intersecting inequalities of gender, class, and hukou that define migrant women's lives in urban China.

Note

1. Suzhi (素质), often translated as 'quality,' refers to a set of moral, cultural, and behavioural attributes promoted by the Chinese state to distinguish between desirable and undesirable citizens. The concept is frequently used to justify social hierarchies and urban – rural distinctions, particularly in discussions of migration, citizenship, and modernity (Anagnost, 2004)

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Novelty statement

This paper offers an original theoretical and methodological contribution to leisure studies by interrogating the under-researched nexus of leisure, affective labour, and gendered migration in China's urban beauty industry. This study reveals leisure's paradoxical role in feminised service work: migrant women's performance of leisure for urban clients becomes a mechanism of both self-reinvention and subjugation. Theoretically, it advances debates on affective labour by demonstrating how leisure is co-produced through racialised, classed, and gendered power dynamics, rather than merely consumed or experienced. It introduces the concept of precarious leisure to capture how rural women's autonomy within beauty salons remains contingent on exhausting bodily discipline and neoliberal self-optimisation.

Methodologically, the paper innovates through its multi-sited ethnography, combining participant observation, face-to-face interviews, and walking interviews to trace how leisure is spatially negotiated in workplaces and urban margins. This approach captures the embodied and emotional dimensions of leisure often overlooked in migration studies. By centring rural-to-urban migrant women, a group marginalised in both leisure and labour scholarship, the study challenges Western-centric frameworks, offering critical insights into how China's urban-rural divide reshape leisure's possibilities and limits. These contributions urge a reimagining of leisure theory to account for the intersectional inequalities underpinning affective service economies.

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