

MAO, Jingyu. 2024.

Intimacy as a Lens on Work and Migration: Experiences of Ethnic Performers in Southwest China.

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Jingyu Mao's book, *Intimacy as a Lens on Work and Migration: Experiences of Ethnic Performers in Southwest China*, offers a rare glimpse on the labour and migration that ethnic performers take on in one of Yunnan's small-scale cities, referred to by the pseudonym Green City. Delving into the work culture of Yunnan's ethnic minority restaurants, Mao's book offers a thorough documentation of a group of individuals who work long, exploitative hours in the low-end economy, performing ethnic songs and dances to entertain clients.

The first chapter lays the theoretical and empirical foundations of Mao's ethnographic research. During her fieldwork conducted between October 2016 and April 2017, Mao spent time with and worked alongside her ethnic performer informants to entertain and serve customers, such as businessmen, tourists, government officials, and their friends at three ethnic restaurants. Customers enjoy the services of ethnic performers who accompany them at meals, serve them alcohol, and sing for them. All are intra-provincial rural-urban migrants from adjacent villages, and many – but not all – of the performers come from ethnic minority backgrounds, including Jingyu Mao, who herself is of Hani ethnicity. Green City is made up of 14 state-recognised ethnic minority groups, but the restaurants do not represent this full range of ethnic diversity and instead select one or two ethnic groups that are showcased through ethnic costumes. Ethnic performers are oftentimes pushed to perform as members of an ethnic group that they are unfamiliar with or do not belong to. For example, in one of the restaurants where Mao worked and did her research, ethnic performers could choose between Wa or Lahu ethnic costumes. Taking intimacy as a lens to sociologically enquire and display the broader processes of inequalities and misrepresentation that ethnic migrants face, Mao draws inspiration from what feminists have long told us: “the personal is political.” In the chapters that follow, ethnographic descriptions offer compelling accounts of ethnic performers' lived experiences to illuminate

how “the political” can be better interrogated when we take “the personal” seriously.

Chapter Two delves into a detailed description of ethnic performers' labour drawing on sociological concepts, including Nyíri's (2010) work on cultural authority and mobility, Hardt's (1999) theories on affective labour, and Ridgeway's (2009, 2011) contribution to gender as a frame. As interactive service work, physically proximate encounters and intimacy between guests and performers become a critical component expected from ethnic performers in Yunnan. Beyond the interactions that arise in service work, social categories such as the rural-urban divide, ethnicity, and gender are also sites of encounter that shape the performers' everyday experiences. Workers' bodies become sites where aesthetic standards are imposed, making them into desirable assets. At the same time, just as much as they are desirable, they are also disposable. Working in highly precarious conditions with limited employment protection, ethnic performers regularly resign themselves to standards that violate China's labour law and regulations.

In addition to being ethnic bodies, ethnic performers in Yunnan's Green City are also migrant bodies from neighbouring rural regions. Their rural status is defined by China's household registration system (*hukou* 户口), which controls the country's geographic mobility by dividing the population into agricultural and non-agricultural populations. More recently, *hukou* reforms suggest that the country is relaxing control over migrant movement – and yet, as Mao clearly outlines in Chapter Three, not everyone is rushing to transfer their rural *hukou* to an urban one, as scholars might have predicted. Mao's book offers a rare glimpse of the emotions that *hukou* evokes in China's rural citizens. By directing discussions on migrant workers away from China's more commonly studied coastal megacities, Chapter Three offers a rare account of how Southwest China's growth in investment and capital is steering new migration patterns in the region, but without modifying the social and behavioural subordinate roles imposed on rural citizens. As rural citizens, ethnic performers undergo mandatory daily training sessions to correct their body language, social mannerisms, and spoken Mandarin. In embodying these skills, ethnic performers are made to believe that they will eventually be entitled to full citizenship in the city.

Beyond the *hukou* system, the daily encounters that ethnic performers have with ethnicity are also emotional. In much the same way that social theorists have written about the performance of gender, ethnicity is also not something people *are*, but what they *do*. In the context of contemporary China, ethnicity is an asset that draws on essentialist and reductive qualities such as a natural gift for song and dance, and a simple-minded, happy persona. These qualities are crafted through ethnic representations that circulate in tourism manuals and educational textbooks. Chapter Four illustrates the valued asset that “ethnicity” carries and how it is turned into a learned skill as part of the performers' broader project of selfhood. In the commercialised service economy, performers learn to present their bodies and manage their emotions which, alongside dressing up in ethnic costume, equips them with the knowledge and skills that meet the expectations of ethnic assessment criteria.

Chapter Five continues to explore the emotional role that wider social categories impose on ethnic performers by shifting focus

from ethnic scripts to gendered scripts. Ethnic performers are both gendered and sexualised. In the broader political and social scope of China – where feminist activism is repressed and chastity still expected of rural women – ethnic performers' gender and sexuality extends across their public work life and into the most private and intimate realms of their lives. Service work at Green City's ethnic restaurant is intimate, particularly for female performers who serve VIP guests by sitting on the laps of (oftentimes drunken) male customers. Even though they might acquire the ability to tolerate and even normalise instances of sexual harassment, sexualised service work affects their reputations and devalues their desirability as potential life-long partners outside the sphere of the restaurant.

Jingyu Mao takes the emotions of ethnic performers living along the margins of China seriously, and captivatingly captures the exploitative conditions and double-standards they are faced with in migration and in work. In so doing, *Intimacy as a Lens on Work and Migration* is a pioneering piece of work calling for readers to recognise the systemic limitations and pervasive social inequalities that many in China's ethnic rural populations are faced with daily. *Intimacy* is a crucial lens to begin to analyse the systemic limitations that govern the emotions of the country's ethnic performers who live in the constrained spheres of the low-end service industry. Mao's book is a call to finally come to recognise that their work is *real* labour and deserves to be understood as such.

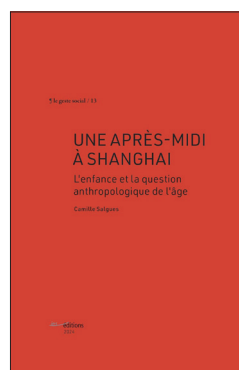
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SALGUES, Camille. 2024.
Une après-midi à Shanghai:
L'enfance et la question
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Camille Salgues, currently a postdoctoral researcher at the CERI Research Centre – Sciences Po Paris, stayed and worked in different Chinese universities, but also worked as an English teacher in several underprivileged schools for migrant children in Shanghai, where he gained an in-depth knowledge of youngsters who became the focus of his book, *Une après-midi à Shanghai: L'enfance et la question anthropologique de l'âge* (An afternoon in Shanghai: Childhood and the anthropological question of age).

Camille Salgues's research is in line with childhood studies, and specifically employs the concept of children's agency, stressing that children have a capacity to act independently and make their own decisions. This stream of research, which diverged from education sciences, developed in the late 1990s in anglophone academia through scholars such as Doris Bühler-Niederberger and James Allison. Today it is very prominent in the Anglo-Saxon academic world, but to a lesser extent in France. French specialists in this field are very few, making this book all the more important for the French academic community. Although Camille Salgues is tightly linked to childhood studies, he is developing an original research path built in reaction to mainstream childhood studies. His methodology consists of ethnographic observation, making use of the three years he spent in Shanghai's transitional areas (buffer zones between newly developed and "to be developed" urban zones). He spent long periods of time with the children: teaching them English, playing ping-pong or Chinese chess with them, and idling in malls or in the rubble-strewn areas where they lived. He does not envision children as a social category built by adults but rather tries to "observe the subtle interactions between [them]" (p. 47) by putting himself at the child's level.

The author wishes to reopen the discussion on childhood in the field of humanities and social sciences through a sociology of age. He first highlights that education is an adult issue rather than a children's one. Children do not talk about their lives through