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Using Intimacy as a Lens on the Work and
Migration Experiences of Ethnic Performers
in Southwest China

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Declaration

I hereby confirm that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or professional qualification. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Jingyu Mao

25/06/2020

Abstract

This research explores how the lens of intimacy can be used to understand migration and inequalities and demonstrates the value of such a theoretical lens. It does so by focusing on the experience of a group of rural to urban, ethnic minority migrant performers in Southwest China, who perform ethnic songs and dances as part of their work at different venues such as restaurants and tourist sites.

Ethnic performance is a site of encounter where minority, rural, feminised service providers interact with Han, urban, masculinised customers, and such physical proximity may render their social distance even more significant. It is also an important site where performers encounter various bordering processes relating to the rural-urban divide, ethnicity and gender. Six months' participant observation and 60 in-depth interviews were used to understand various types of "intimacy negotiations" performers undertake regarding their emotions, sense of self, and relationships with significant others. While intimacy as a concept in sociology usually refers to the quality of closeness in relationships, this research uses this concept in more than one way, and explores how it can be used as a theoretical and methodological tool to explore broader social structures.

By adopting an intimacy lens to explore how migrant performers encounter the various bordering processes, this research points out how inequalities profoundly impact on people's emotions, sense of self and relationships. This approach also leads us to consider ethnicity as something we do, rather than something we are. I therefore propose the concept of "ethnic scripts" to refer to the culturally normative assumptions about ethnicity in China, which deeply shape the ways that migrant performers do ethnicity. Further, the lens

of intimacy reveals the ways that work closely intersects with informants' personal lives, as well as the importance of taking emotions seriously in understanding social inequalities.

Lay Summary

This thesis aims to understand the work and migration experiences of a group of ethnic performers in a small-scale city which I call Green City (pseudonym to protect the identities of the performers), Southwest China. It specifically looks at a series of intimate negotiations that ethnic performers have in relation to their emotions, senses of self, and relationships with significant others. This research also explores what sociological insights we can gain from looking at these intimate negotiations systematically—an approach that I call “intimacy as a lens”, which means to use micro-scale intimate negotiations to understand broader social inequalities.

Ethnic performers are people who perform ethnic songs and dances at different venues, such as restaurants and tourist sites. They are mostly rural-urban migrants and ethnic minorities coming from different ethnic origins. Among the extensive literature about rural-urban migrants in China, the experiences of ethnic minority migrants, those who migrate to small scale cities, and those who undertake service work rather than factory work are largely neglected. These are the gaps that this research aims to bridge. I have undertaken six months’ ethnographic fieldwork in three field sites in Green City: Waterfall Restaurant, Tea Park, and Forest Park (pseudonyms). During my participant observation in these field sites, I worked together with performers or observed their daily work routines. I also did 60 in-depth interviews with informants from these three sites and beyond, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their migration experiences and their work experience as ethnic performers.

Research findings reveal that performers encounter various bordering mechanisms during their daily work and migration journeys, having to

constantly negotiate the borderings between rural and urban and between ethnic minority and Han, and they experience these bordering processes in gendered ways. This thesis argues that the ways that ethnic performers encounter these bordering processes are intimate, emotional, and personal. This thesis further demonstrates that using these intimate negotiations as starting points and working from there to understand broader social issues is valuable. In a way, this thesis illustrates what it means to say that “the personal is political”, and that “the personal” can be a useful tool to start sociological inquiries.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

If you visit Green City¹ in Yunnan Province, Southwest China, you will probably be advised by local friends or tourist guidebooks to go and see local ethnic performance shows as part of your trip. The moment that you arrived at the local airport, you will see posters featuring ethnic minority people, most of whom are young women dressed in colourful minority costumes, smiling warmly and singing passionately against the backdrop of mountain views. The posters usually say something like “be ready to be welcomed by our most heart-warmingly hospitable ethnic minority people”, or “be ready to have a taste of our most authentic ethnic culture”. These posters were visible and prevalent among the numerous advertisements and billboards in Green City, which is striving to turn itself into a popular tourist destination.

It used to be the case that you have to go to formal theatres, or the stages in tourist sites, in order to watch ethnic performances. In recent years, you could also do that at your dining table if you visit certain restaurants in Green City. This normally involves ethnic minority people singing and dancing in front of your table, and making toasts to you in minority style. As someone who grew up in Green City, I initially found the recently-emerged forms of ethnic performances interesting. I had visited these restaurants and tourist sites as a customer before I began my research, and was touched by some of their performances. But after I tried to see ethnic performances through the performers’ points of view through conducting this research, I started to understand it in drastically different ways.

¹ Pseudonym for the sake of protecting the anonymity of informants.

In 2016, as I started doing fieldwork in one of these restaurants which features ethnic performances—I call it Waterfall Restaurant²—I sat down with a man named Jun for an interview. He is one of the ethnic performers, which is the group of people that this research focuses on. “I’m tired of working like a robot every day...Yes, that’s how I feel when I work in that factory in Guangdong³, I feel like I’m a robot when I sat on the assembly line everyday and every hour”. For Jun, escaping boring factory work was one of the most important reasons that he decided to come back to his home province, and find work in Green City, which is not far from the rural village that he comes from. Being a Lahu, which is one of the 55 groups of ethnic minorities in China, he learnt from his friends’ experiences that he could take up work as an ethnic performer, and that is how he started to work as a performer/waiter in Waterfall Restaurant. Ironically, by escaping boring factory work, Jun encountered perhaps even greater workplace challenges in the field of service work and ethnic performance.

This research focuses on the experiences of ethnic performers like Jun, who are rural-urban migrants, and some of whom are also ethnic minorities. Many of the informants never migrated to work outside the province because they lacked the resources and networks to migrate that far away. Some of them choose to move to a closer town or city to work for various reasons relating to family, personal preference, etc. Regardless of how far they move, migrant performers face challenges that are lived in and through their intimate lives. This project seeks to use the lens of intimacy to understand their experiences of work, migration and personal lives, as well as how they encounter various bordering processes through migration and everyday work. More specifically, by taking a close look at the ways that migrant performers encounter

² Pseudonym

³ A province in Southeast China, which is part of the Pearl River Delta Special Economic Zone, as also a major destination for rural-urban migrants in China.

bordering related to the rural-urban divide, ethnicity and gender, this research seeks to explore the value of using intimacy as a lens to understand broader social inequalities. In this introduction, I will contextualise who migrant performers are and why their experiences are worth researching, as well as the theoretical framework of the thesis—intimacy as a lens, border encounters, and finally a brief outline of chapters.

1.1 Migrant performers and ethnic performance

With the initial plan to conduct research on migrant workers in China, I did not intend to do this research in Green City, planning instead to do it in Shenzhen—a city in the Pearl River Delta which absorbs the largest number of rural-urban migrants in China. The choice of city was based on my imagination of migrant workers, who move from western, inland provinces to work in factories in eastern, coastal cities, or big cities like Beijing or Shanghai, which is the major pattern of rural-urban migration in China, as supported by statistics (Liang and Ma, 2004). Such imagination was also shaped by existing literature, which tends to depict a rather homogenous picture of migrant workers working in the factories, mostly notably in the Pearl River Delta (e.g. Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005). Such a picture was so ingrained in my mind that when I thought about potential informants for this research, my immediate inclination was to look for factory workers in Shenzhen.

I changed my initial plan because I lacked actual networks and resources to facilitate this research in Shenzhen. I started to think about places where I do have some networks to make conducting fieldwork easier, such as my hometown Green City, a small city in Yunnan province, Southwest China. It is by no means a popular destination for rural-urban migrants, and mostly people from adjacent rural villages would choose to find work there. My

interest in knowing more about rural-urban migrants' lives, ironically, were co-existent with my ignorance about the migrant workers whose labour I rely upon as a city dweller. Service workers in Green City are mostly rural-urban migrants, but I did not seem to realise it until I did this research, as their presence and work formerly seemed invisible to me. At that time, the most "visible" group of rural-urban migrants were the ethnic performers that I met as a customer some years ago—this also points to how visible the rural origins of performers are to other people. Browsing through the rural-urban migration literature, I found very little research about the experience of ethnic minority migrants in China. Furthermore, ethnic performance seems like an interesting form of labour in its own right. Ultimately, therefore, I decided to do this research about the migrant performers in Green City.

Not only is there little research about the experience of ethnic minority migrants within China (But see Iredale et al., 2001), there is also little research about people who move within their home province, and who do service work rather than factory work (although numbers of such migrants were actually rising rapidly in recent years) (Liang et al., 2014; Liang, 2016). A recent annual report on migrant workers shows that "Chinese workers appear to be increasingly reluctant to migrate far away from their hometowns...and inter-provincial migrants are also dropping" (Made in China, 2017). Meanwhile, recent *hukou* (household registration) reforms place small and medium sized cities at the forefront of the change, as they allow migrants to transfer their *hukou* from rural homes to cities if they are willing to do so.⁴ Furthermore, statistics also shows that more and more migrant workers work in service sectors, while factories are beginning to face labour shortages in some places (Choi and Peng, 2015). These contextual factors all point to the literature gaps to which this research contributes by

⁴ I have provide a detailed discussion about *hukou* and *hukou* reforms in the literature review.

focusing on the work and migration experiences of migrant performers in Southwest China.

Another factor that motivated me to do this research is my personal interest in knowing more about the younger generation of ethnic minority people in China. While the majority Han constitute 91.51% of China's population, 55 groups of ethnic minorities comprise the remaining 8.49%, according to official registrations. I myself am officially registered as Hani, one of the minority groups. As someone who is ethnic minority according to official registration, I am expected by others to say something about my culture once they learnt that I am a Hani. I sometimes feel guilty or ashamed at not being able to say something meaningful about Hani culture or identity, with which I have long since lost the connection. Sometimes I have even been a bit surprised by the questions people ask me—"Do you sing ethnic songs and dance during holidays?" or "Do you wear ethnic costumes during special occasions?". The fact that people impose "the common knowledge" about ethnic minorities in China when they encounter me as an individual is both telling and sociologically interesting. What is missing from such common knowledge or stereotypical imaginings is how young people who are ethnic minorities according to official registrations, but who may not feel very strongly attached to their ethnic identities, make sense of them. Even literature about ethnic minority people in China does not address this point adequately. The available movies, books and even literature tend to depict ethnic minority people as living in the remote mountainous area and practising distinct cultural rituals and ways of living which are not necessarily compatible with urban, modern ways of life.

On the other hand, in spite of its indulgence in stereotypes, ethnic performance becomes an important way for many Han Chinese to get to know about ethnic minority people. The idea of ethnic performance (*minzu*

biaoyan) is not foreign to many Chinese people. In the annual Spring Festival Gala—the show that most Chinese families watch during the Spring Festivals, and the most watched television programme in the world—there will always be performances of ethnic songs and dances with people dressed in colourful minority costumes, showcasing that they are part of the big Chinese nation-family (See Rydholm, 2005). Such images also proliferate in textbooks for elementary school students, where songs and dances have become “the most popular means of representing ethnic minorities in the textbooks” (Chu, 2015 477). Such essentialised ways of representing ethnic minority people are also prevalent in tourism spheres. For example, many cities in China have so-called “ethnic folk villages” (*minzu cun*), where ethnic performances are showcased for mostly Han audiences (See Yang, 2011). Ethnic tourism has also been incorporated into many scenic tourist sites in China, where they tend to depict minority people as naturally good at singing and dancing (Nyiri 2006). Therefore, ethnic performance is not just a commercialised way of promoting ethnic culture, but is also a political project showcasing certain images of the nation and representing ethnic relations between the Han and ethnic minorities in general.

The increasing popularity of ethnic performance in commercialised settings should also be understood in relation to the changing landscape of consumption and service work in China. The service sector barely existed in the socialist era of Chinese reform 40 years ago, and by 2018 it accounted for 52.2 percent of China’s GDP. It has become “a new engine for economic growth” in China (China Daily, 2019). Urban residents in China are witnessing a consumer revolution, although at the same time the inequality amongst different social groups is expanding as well (Pun, 2003; Davis, 2005). New forms of entertainments and consumptions are indeed expanding. It is common for more and more urbanites to patronise restaurants. New ideas keep burgeoning to attract the attention of

consumers, including a vast number of “*Nongjiale* (rural tourism) restaurants”, which seek to provide a nostalgic vision of dining for urban people who are detached from rural ways of living (Park, 2014). At the same time, tourism is also becoming more and more affordable for many Chinese citizens, while tourism itself becomes a way for urban middle class people to assert their privilege and gain cultural capital (Walsh and Swain, 2004; Nyíri, 2006; Nyíri, 2010).

The burgeoning commercialisation of ethnic performance should also be understood in relation to local conditions. Yunnan Province, where Green City is situated, is one of the most impoverished provinces in China. Promoting ethnic tourism becomes one of the most important ways for local government to develop the economy and borrowing government language, “lifting itself out of the poverty”. Therefore, the development and promotion of ethnic performance has both economic and political meanings. When ethnic performances are closely tied to ethnic tourism, promoting economic growth, and poverty alleviation, local government officials actively seeks to bring “cultural revival” to the local ethnic culture (Yang et al., 2008; McCarthy, 2011). Stories in the mass media proliferate about how ethnic minorities transform from a backward society to a new socialist era, and one Lahu village⁵ was often used as an example to showcase successful reliance on ethnic cultural revival to “escape poverty”.

It is in such a context that the commercialised ethnic performances emerged, and are expanding rapidly. Singing songs and dancing are rituals for certain minority groups during special occasions, festivals, or as part of their everyday lives (e.g. Du, 2008). However, under the context of commercialisation, what is performed is drastically different from its original form, and takes on different meanings from its original ones. If you searched

⁵ The name of the village will not be revealed as it may make Green City identifiable.

“minority toasting” in Chinese on the internet today, you would see all kinds of photos showcasing what it is like to have minority people singing and dancing around your dining table and toasting guests in ways characteristic of minority cultures. It is easy to see how such labour tends to rely on the gendered and sexualised labour of young women (a point to which I will return later), and offers an essentialised way to represent ethnic cultures. While ethnic performances in commercial settings have gained in popularity, little work has sought to theorise its implication, or focus on the people who undertake this form of labour.

Rather than focusing on the representation of such performances, or their “authenticity”, this research concentrates on the people who undertake such labour, and adopts an intimacy lens to understand their experiences. Their voices tend to be largely neglected in research about ethnic performances, or ethnic tourism more generally. And there is a lack of detailed, in-depth ethnographic fieldwork on ethnic performers’ everyday experiences. Their own voices tend to be marginalised and silenced, while their performances are often used as means to represent something else.

Ethnic performers, as this research reveals, tend to struggle with the meaning of such performance, their own existence in the city, the usually exploitative labour regime under which they work, and the emotional costs of having to constantly encounter all kinds of bordering mechanisms and forms of exclusion in their work and lives. Their experiences and personal struggles illuminate the changing dynamics of the rural-urban divide, ethnicity, and gender relations in contemporary China.

1.2 Border encounters and the lens of intimacy

In order to understand migrant performers' experiences of work, migration, and personal life, I use "work" as a starting point of enquiry, given how much time informants spend in their workplace. I argue that unlike working in factories, which is the focus of the majority of work on migrant workers in China, ethnic performance is a site where performers and guests encounter each other in a physically close manner.

The unique dynamics of ethnic performance, indeed, are different from factory work, as they involve "service encounters" between customers and service providers (Hanser, 2008). These encounters with customers, although mostly fleeting, may have a profound influence on performers' lives. Here, encounters do not only refer to how people from different social backgrounds interact with each other in a physically close manner in the service context (Hanser, 2008), it also addresses how work and migration become key sites where the labourers encounter various bordering mechanisms. As minority, rural, feminised service providers interact with Han, urban, masculinised customers, such physical proximity may render their social distance even greater. In that sense, borders proliferate in performers' everyday work lives, as bordering is at work "whenever a distinction between subject and object is established" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013:16). Meanwhile, as rural-urban migrants within China, performers are subject to "differential inclusion" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013): while their labour is desired, their settlement in cities is problematised because of the *hukou* system. Therefore, in a way, negotiating the meaning of borders and practicing border-crossing has become part of the performers' everyday lives.

I further point to the need to focus on the intimate aspect of border struggles, as migrant performers' experiences of encountering borders/bordering processes are always emotional, intimate, and personal. I propose the concept of "intimate negotiation" to refer to a series of "private" negotiations

regarding emotions, sense of self, and relationships. This research further shows the value of focusing on these intimate negotiations, and uses them as a theoretical lens to understand the social. In a sense, this approach seeks to “use micro-scale everyday bordering practices to both conceptualise and visualise what borders are at a more general level” (Yuval-Davis, 2013: 16).

Based on these theoretical considerations, this research proposes the following research questions.

1.3 Research questions

How do ethnic minority performers encounter bordering processes along the rural-urban divide and ethnicity through migration and work? And in what ways are such encounters also gendered?

What intimate negotiations do performers engage in along these borders in relation to emotions, sense of self, and relationships?

What is the value of intimacy as a lens to understand migrant performers' experiences of multiple borders?

1.4 Brief outline of chapters

In answering these questions, in Chapter 2, I provide the theoretical framework for this thesis, and bring together different strands of literature—including those of migration, performance work, ethnicity, and emotions—in shedding light on understanding informants' experiences. By centring these literatures around intimacy and bordering, this chapter sets up a conceptual framework which is advanced in the empirical chapters. Following the

literature review is Chapter 3, which explains the methodology of this thesis, including how the fieldwork was undertaken, as well as some of the challenges involved.

In Chapter 4, I seek to theorise the meaning of ethnic performance, and use it as the starting point of the inquiry. I show how ethnic performance is a form of interactive service work, as it involves physically-close interactions between guests and performers. Different theoretical frameworks are explored in relation to understanding the meaning of ethnic performance. Such exploration shows how a single framework cannot capture the complexity and multiple dimensions of ethnic performance work. Therefore, borrowing the idea of “service encounters” (Hanser, 2008), I argue that ethnic performance could best be theorised as a “site of encounter”, where people from different social positionings interact with each other in a close manner. Here, “encounter” has another level of meaning, as it also refers to how migrant performers have to constantly encounter bordering processes, most notably revolving around rural-urban migration, ethnicity, and gender. I discuss the ways borders proliferate in performers’ everyday work and migration journeys as a result of the intersection between capital, mobility, and labour regime (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). And two cases are used to discuss why the border encounters are always intimate, emotional, and personal, illustrating why the lens of intimacy should be used to understand these encounters.

Chapter 5 discusses how, as rural-urban migrants, the most significant border they have to encounter is the *hukou* regime which makes their performances, but not their presence in the city, desirable. The different cultural meanings assigned to the rural and the urban also play a role in their senses of self and emotions. The lens of intimacy allows us to see how the border crossing of the rural and the urban is fundamentally emotional.

Chapter 6 explores how working as ethnic performers also means that informants have to encounter ethnicity in their everyday work, and are subject to “ethnic assessment” according to pre-existing social scripts about ethnicity in China. I call these cultural normative assumptions about ethnicity “ethnic scripts”, and explore how performers’ ambivalences toward their ethnic identities enables us to think about ethnicity as something we do, rather than as something we are. I also explore how the commercialisation of ethnicity pushes informants to work on their emotions and senses of self in a way that accords with ethnic scripts in China. Here, the lens of intimacy leads us to rethink the meaning of being ethnic in contemporary China in an innovative way.

In Chapter 7, I explore how the lens of intimacy also illuminates how performers’ work and lives are governed by the gendered aspects of bordering. I discuss the different ways that female performers and male performers negotiate undertaking sexualised labour in ethnic performances, and how gender is negotiated in close association with ethnic scripts. The ways that undertaking sexualised labour overshadows female performers’ intimate relationships with significant others also reveals how work increasingly overtakes our “private” lives. Focusing on these intimate negotiations is crucial in revealing the working mechanisms of borders and how they proliferate in performers’ migration journeys, as well as everyday work.

This project concludes in Chapter 8 by further discussing the potential of intimacy as a lens in revealing the social, and how it can be an important part of understanding “the cultural politics of inequality” (Sun, 2013) in contemporary China.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review maps out crucial themes that are relevant to exploring migrant performers' intimate encounters with bordering processes relating to the rural-urban divide, ethnicity, and gender. By reviewing some key literature about rural-urban migration and ethnicity in China in general, this chapter firstly provides a broad context to situate migrant performers as the focus of this research. Also, by pointing out the lack of systematic engagement with the intersection between work, migration, and personal life, this chapter highlights the value of using intimacy as a lens to connect and understand these issues. Therefore, drawing on existing theories of personal life and intimacy, this chapter builds the framework of "intimacy as a lens", which puts the emphasis on the emotional, personal, and relational aspects of negotiation. Further, while recognising the multi-layered and intersecting inequalities that shape migrant performers' work and personal life, I argue that theories about borders are valuable in shedding light on the fluid boundaries of social positionings, instead of regarding them as static and unchanging. While encountering multiple bordering processes has become a crucial part of performers' work and migration experiences, as I will show in later chapters, using intimacy as lens is useful in contributing to our understanding of these processes.

2.2 Ethnic minority migrant performers in Southwest China

2.2.1 Rural-urban migration and the *hukou* regime

The ethnic migrant performers upon whom this research focuses are involved in one of the largest population movements in human history—rural-urban migration in China. It is widely recognised that rural-urban migration has been a major force in shaping Chinese society for at least the last three decades. The number of individuals who are away from their places of *hukou* registration has been rising since the 1980s, reaching 221 million in 2010 according to national census data (see Liang et al., 2014). Migrants are motivated to move to cities for various reasons, including economic reasons, family reasons, and the desire to see the outside world (e.g. Gaetano and Jacka, 2004). Amongst these reasons, the huge gap between the rural and the urban is the fundamental reason that motivates millions of migrants to find work in the city. This does not only refer to the large income gap between the rural and urban⁶, but also the unequal access to various social resources such as education, pension, and health care (Whyte et al., 2010). Just like the unequal global development that has pushed migrant men and women from the global south to seek work in the global north, migration to the cities has become migrants’ personal solution to a public problem (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). The present thesis is an attempt to explore the many dimensions of such “personalisation” of public issues.

Numerous studies have sought to theorise this significant phenomenon, from its political and economic impact on Chinese society to the life stories of the migrants involved in this huge movement. Many debates about China’s domestic migration centre on the *hukou* regime: the household registration system which divides the population into “rural” and “urban” populations, and registers people according to their place of birth. Established in 1958, *hukou*

⁶ Although the gap has been slightly narrowed in recent years, it still remains at a staggering 2.7 in 2017—which means that urban residents’ income is 2.7 times higher than rural residents in general, according to the National Statistic Bureau, 2018. This could be accessed at: <https://www.unicef.cn/figure-23-capita-disposable-income-urban-rural-19902017>. Accessed on 5th December, 2019.

was initially intended to control geographic mobility. However, its function has proven to be multi-layered, and it has become an integral part of China's economic and political system and social stratification (Chan, 2010; Liang et al., 2014). *Hukou* functions in a way similar to Castles's (1995) depiction of "differential exclusion", which ensures that migrants are incorporated into certain areas of society (most prominently labour markets) but are denied access to others—such as welfare systems. Without *hukou* to guarantee access to certain welfare provisions, public housing, and particular jobs in cities, migrants from rural areas have become marginalised as "second class citizens" (Solinger, 1999; Chan, 2010).

Hukou also helps to enable exploitative labour conditions for many migrant workers, as the overarching goal of economic growth, rather than ensuring migrants' labour rights, is the priority for local governments. It is particularly salient in the Special Economic Zones, which seek to lower labour costs in order to attract foreign investment (Pun, 2005). Therefore, many migrant workers are undertaking precarious work with long working hours, harsh working conditions, and compromised labourer's rights. In this sense, *hukou* further contributes to the making of China's new generation of working class people (Pun and Lu, 2010), as it put workers in a "permanent position of legal and economic instability and vulnerability" (Nyíri, 2010: 19). It is important to note that the state also encourages and facilitates rural-urban migration in various ways (Nyíri, 2010). The remittances that migrant workers send home become a substantial economic resource in many rural areas (see Murphy, 2002; Murphy, 2004a). Migrants are also expected to be turned into modern citizens through migration, and bring back their improved "quality" to construct their rural homes when they return (Murphy, 2004b; Nyíri, 2010).

However, not all migrant workers are willing, to or even able, to return to their rural home after living and working in urban areas for some time. In some

cases, migrant workers find themselves in an awkward position where they cannot really fit in the cities largely because of *hukou*, nor do they have the option to return home because of the enclosure of their rural land (e.g. Pun, 2016). This ambiguous position also contributes to their “quasi-identity”, where they are not completely workers (*gongren*) or peasants (*nongmin*), but peasant workers/migrant workers (*nongmingong*) (Pun, 2005; Pun, 2016). The “in-betweenness” or “out-of-placeness” that migrant workers experience in their daily lives is also related to the localised character of the *hukou* regime, where a clear distinction between locals and non-locals are drawn in terms of welfare provision and citizenship claims (Smart and Smart, 2001; Woodman, 2016). The sedentary assumption underpinning the *hukou* regime also means that it is difficult to take one’s benefits and entitlements elsewhere (Chan and Buckingham, 2008; Woodman, 2016). Therefore, a more important division than the rural/urban category of *hukou* is the local/non-local division, which means that even non-local migrants who obtain an urban *hukou* elsewhere can be subject to the same marginalisation that rural migrants face (Woodman, 2017).

This provides one of the explanations of why several waves of *hukou* reforms since the 1990s were unable to mitigate the socially unequal effects of, or to abolish, the *hukou* regime, with some of them even being counter-productive (Wang, 2010). The various *hukou* reforms allow local governments to have more power to decide on their own terms about local *hukou* provision (Chan and Buckingham, 2008; Chan, 2010). The most recent *hukou* reform was announced in July 2014, in which the State Council claimed to further *hukou* reform and abolish the agricultural/non-agricultural distinction.⁷ However, the reform is far from thorough: only the division between agricultural and non-agricultural is addressed, but the long-existing divide between local and non-

⁷ See http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-07/30/content_8944.htm in Chinese, and <https://chinaeconomicreview.com/hukou-reform-beijing-abolishes-agricultural-residence-class-rural-urban-split-remains/> in English. Accessed on 4th December, 2019.

local remains. Also, without further addressing the problem of land rights, which has long been closely attached to *hukou*, the *hukou* reforms remain incomplete (Goodburn, 2014). Despite recent changes (Andreas and Zhan, 2016), the right to use rural land is still deeply attached to rural *hukou*. While giving up rural *hukou* means giving up the right to use the land back home, transferring *hukou* to the cities becomes an undesirable option, even when it seems feasible under certain conditions (Chen and Fan, 2016).

Nevertheless, as a result of such reforms, small and medium-sized cities and towns (with populations of less than 500,000) are at the forefront of *hukou* reform (Goodburn, 2014; Zhang, 2018). Population control in these areas is more relaxed than it is in metropolises, and where the local government has less to offer in terms of public services and welfare provision (Tao, 2010). The more recent literature shows that in principle, “*hukou* acquisition should be open to all those with legal and stable residence in towns and small cities” (Zhang, 2018: 866). However, so far, literature about how *hukou* policies are actually implemented in small cities is still scarce (But see Chen and Fan, 2016; Guo and Liang, 2017). Furthermore, we have little insight about how migrants themselves experience such policy shifts in small cities. While most migration literature is about migrants who migrate to eastern and coastal cities, relatively little material draws attention to migration to and within western China (Howell and Fan, 2011). Therefore, this research seeks to bridge these gaps by putting the focus on a small-sized city in Southwest China, where population control is comparatively relaxed and the actual practices and implications of *hukou* policy require further exploration. With the *hukou* apparently less of a problem, does it still have an impact on migrants’ experiences of work and personal life? How would migrants themselves experience the *hukou* reform? Could the rural-urban divide have much more nuanced meanings other than *hukou*, and how do migrants

themselves experience such divides emotionally and personally? These are some of the questions that this research seeks to address.

Furthermore, in discussions of China's rural-urban migration, the experiences of ethnic minority migrants are largely unexplored, with a few exceptions that try to bring ethnicity into the discussion (e.g. Iredale et al., 2001; Howell and Fan, 2011; Liu, 2011). Therefore, we have little understanding of how ethnic minority migrants' experiences may differ from their Han counterparts, and whether ethnicity plays an important role in shaping migrants' work and life experiences. The lack of discussion about ethnicity in migration studies in China might be because of the difficulty of obtaining migration data that incorporate ethnicity, and also could be based on the assumption that ethnicity plays a small role in migration journeys (Howell and Fan, 2011). Chinese authorities also discourage discussions of migration or other social issues through the lens of ethnicity, promoting instead an ideology of assimilation—an issue to which I will return later (e.g. Ma, 2007). Despite the fact that the majority of migrants are Han, the number of ethnic minority migrants is rising in general (Iredale et al., 2001). Iredale et al.'s (2001) work is one of the first to focus on ethnicity and migration in China. Based on large scale census data, it provides an overview of certain ethnic groups' migration patterns and their impact on sociopolitical landscapes of both sending and receiving regions, with a special focus on the role of education (Iredale et al., 2001). Minority migrants' own personal voices are neglected in this sketch of general patterns. Also, while the main focuses are put on Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongolians, ethnic minorities in the Southwest are not addressed in this book. However, it is a timely reminder that ethnicity is not a small issue in migration studies in China, and needs to be addressed in future research.

There is also literature which does touch on the topic of ethnicity in studies about migration and work, however, ethnicity is not necessarily treated as a

central focus. For example, Pun's (2005) research shows that the migrant workers in factories are divided along the lines of kinship, ethnicity and gender, and these divisions are actively used by managers to discipline workers in certain ways. Also focusing on factory workers, one recent piece of research about Yi labour migrants in Dongguan explores the interaction between local government and Yi migrants who are also labour brokers. Yi migrants sometimes managed to draw on their minority status and customary law to make claims and gain bargaining power during labour disputes (Ma, 2019). Otis's (2011) research, focusing on bodily labour and service work, also highlighted ethnicity as a factor which deeply shaped the experiences of hotel workers in Yunnan, as these women workers tend to be regarded as sexually available because of the stereotypes regarding minority women in Southwest China. All these examples show that ethnicity is an issue that deserves to be further explored in research about rural-urban migration in China. Therefore, this research seeks to bring ethnicity into the discussion about rural-urban migration by focusing on a particular group of migrants—ethnic performers.

2.2.2 Ethnicity in China, tourism, and ethnic performance

The target group of this research—migrant performers in Yunnan province—come from different ethnic backgrounds, including but not limited to Dai, Lahu, Wa, and Hani. The unique dynamics of performance work may have different impacts on performers' personal lives. For example, ethnic performance is the kind of work that may require intense engagement with one's ethnic identity, therefore it can bring reflexivity in people's thinking and understanding about ethnicity. Also, the unique dynamics of ethnic performance may require performers to do their emotions or selves in different ways. All these intersecting issues make the minority performers' case worth exploring. In order to understand these issues, it is necessary to

firstly gain an understanding of what “ethnicity” means in contemporary China, and what existing research says about people who are involved in ethnic tourism, just like ethnic performers.

According to official statistics, there are 55 state-recognised ethnic minority groups in China. They make up 8.49% of the population, while the Han make up the 91.51% majority. These officially defined *minzu* (ethnic) categories are based on the Ethnic Classification Project carried out by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) in the 1950s, which recognised the 55 groups from 400 groups that filed applications for recognition. This project is problematic in many ways, since it undermined the rights and interests of some ethnic groups in order to maintain a unified picture of the PRC (Schein, 2000; Harrell, 2001; Mullaney, 2011; Zang, 2015). The most controversial ideology behind China’s *minzu* policy, according to Zang (2015), is the promotion of “*ronghe*” (assimilation or amalgamating) ideology instead of truly encouraging multiculturalism in China (see also Ma, 2007). It was in the early 1920s that the shift to *ronghe* ideology happened (Barabantseva, 2008), reflecting a break away by 1935 from the Soviet’s model of federalism, which emphasised self-determination for ethnic groups (Woodman et al., 2010). Since the CCP came to power in 1949, it adopted a unique model of Nationalities Regional Autonomy which eventually sought to achieve *ronghe*, rather than genuinely advocating self-determination and autonomy of ethnic minority groups (Zang, 2015). The assimilation ideology is also informed by a naturalised Han-centric view of China, under which Han culture is often labelled as advanced and modern, while ethnic minority cultures are labelled as primitive, backward, and calling for the helping hand of the Han people (e.g. Gladney, 1994; Harrell, 1995; Schein, 2000). At the same time, the seemingly contradictory efforts of preserving ethnic culture and promoting ethnic cultural revival also goes hand in hand with the assimilation ideology. As McCarthy’s (2011) ethnography in Yunnan about the Dai, Hui, and Bai

ethnic groups shows, state actors even actively participate in promoting ethnic cultural revivals in various ways. This participation proceeds from concerns for maintaining national stability, using ethnic cultures to make economic profits, and ensuring “a Han-centric vision of Chinese modernisation” (McCarthy, 2011: 10). In this sense, preserving or promoting ethnic culture is not necessarily in contradiction with the *ronghe* ideology, as long as they are under the cultural authority of the state (Nyíri, 2010).

Moreover, despite immense efforts to develop economies in ethnic minority regions (see Barabantseva, 2008) and fruitful achievements in raising the living standards of ethnic minority people, the economic gap between the Han group and ethnic minority groups has actually been widening alarmingly since the 1978 market reforms (Zang, 2015). Together with the widening gap between rural and urban areas, out-migration is increasingly common among ethnic minority people in rural areas. Ethnicity has become a segregating factor in the labour market, with ethnic minority people affected more by urban labour market declines than their Han counterparts (Maurer-Fazio et al., 2007), which means that there are even fewer job opportunities for ethnic minority migrants in the city. Some of the ethnic minority migrants consequently have to take up jobs with distinctive ethnic cultural characterisations, among which ethnic tourism roles have become an option.

The ethnic performers that this research focuses on are participating in ethnic tourism, which requires them to perform ethnic songs and dances for audiences including restaurant diners and tourists at scenic spots. Singing folk songs and performing folk dances are traditional community activities for many ethnic minority groups. However, the ethnic performances that this research focuses on are dramatically reconstructed for the purpose of ethnic tourism. When such activities go indoors and become something to be consumed, they may lose their original meanings (Chan and Yung, 2005).

For example, courtship songs used to be important rituals before proposing marriage in Lahu villages. In a society where the public manifestation of intimacy and love is strictly controlled, singing courtship songs is one of the occasions when such public expressions of intimacy become legitimate (Du, 2008). However, when such love songs are taken out of their context and performed in front of audiences and tourists, they have lost their original meanings.

Meanwhile, ethnic performances also serve both economic and political purposes. Performances of ethnic songs and dances were actively incorporated into the socialist state building project of the PRC, and the promotion of ethnic song and dance preservation is politically driven; the underlying intention is to strengthen the image of China as a unified and harmonious society (Mackerras, 1984; Zang, 2015). The promotion of ethnic songs and dances also relate to the common belief that ethnic minorities in China are naturally good at singing and dancing, which is a point that has also been actively used by market actors such as scenic spot businesses (Nyíri, 2006). In this way, ethnic performance of folksongs and dances, which have increasingly been used by market actors to make profits, do not just serve economic purposes, but also political purposes, as they reaffirm the state's cultural authority towards interpreting ethnic cultures and national images (Nyíri, 2006; Nyíri, 2010).

In understanding ethnic performers' experiences, useful insights can be gained from the literature about ethnic tourism, especially work focusing on ethnic tourism in Yunnan. However, most work in this area tends to be about the "representation" or cultural meanings of ethnic tourism (e.g. Walsh and Swain, 2004; Yang, 2011), as well as the ways that ethnic tourism shapes local economic and social conditions (e.g. Hillman, 2003; Yang et al., 2008). Less talked about is how ethnic tourism impacts on the individuals who

participate in it (But see Schein, 1997; Li, 2003; Walsh, 2005; Bai, 2007). In other words, the personal voices and experiences of people who participate in ethnic tourism—like ethnic performers in this research—are rarely regarded as the centre of the research. Also, while most of this research focuses on local people who engage in ethnic tourism, it neglects non-local migrants who take part in ethnic tourism.

Nevertheless, one important finding from this literature is the ways that participating in ethnic tourism shapes people's understandings of the meaning of ethnicity. "The daily reminder of ethnicity" at work pushes people to renegotiate their understandings of ethnicity, as it has become an issue that they have to confront on a daily basis (Li, 2003; Bai, 2007: 257). However, the emphasis of ethnic tourism literature tends to be on the separation between the tourist sphere and everyday life (e.g. Bai, 2007). In other words, this literature tends to suggest that it is because of people's ability to separate work and life, or to put a distance between their real self and the working self, which affords them leverage in negotiating the fluidity of ethnicity. For example, Bai's research about how Bai people participate in local tourism suggests that these people could choose the aspect of ethnic identification which is beneficial for them, and use it towards their own gain (Bai, 2007). Another example would be how Dai women who engage in the tourism business have to learn how to actively play upon tourists' fantasies of ethnic minority women in order to be successful. They do so by using different strategies to package Dai culture as a desirable commodity, and "consciously draw a line between a staged 'primitive/exotic' self and a 'modern' self in contemporary village life" (Li, 2003: 55). Such research seems to assume that people can successfully separate the "on-stage" self and "off-stage" self, and therefore can return to their own ways of being ethnic when the tourists depart (Hillman, 2003). While it is true that people can use different strategies to navigate the work landscape in which different

assumptions about being ethnic proliferate, such frameworks neglect the ways that participating in ethnic tourism can have a more profound influence on the individuals involved which cannot be avoided just by putting a distance between work and everyday life. Therefore, this research seeks to take informants' personal and emotional experiences as the central focus, while recognising the crucial role of "work" in shaping these experiences.

To summarise, in this section, I seek to contextualise migrant performers' experiences in relation to literature about rural-urban migration, ethnicity, and ethnic tourism in China. The reasons to focus on ethnic performers' experiences are that ethnic minority migrants who move to small cities and who are undertaking service work are overlooked in previous research. In the following section, I review literatures which are closely related to the central focus of this research—the intersection between work, migration and personal life, while proposing the theoretical framework of "intimacy as a lens".

2.3 The intersection between work, migration and personal life—intimacy as a lens

As this research focuses on a series of emotional, intimate and personal experiences of migrant performers regarding work and migration, in this section, I will review existing research that is relevant to these themes. Based on existing theories and the potential gaps, I will also explain what I mean by "personal life", "intimacy", and "intimacy as a lens".

2.3.1 Intimacy, emotions, and migration

The inequalities that rural-urban migrants experience has mainly been studied at the structural level, whereas individuals' love, intimacy, and emotions have rarely been taken as the primary focus of studies. In the

Chinese context, there are actually increasingly attention, or even anxiety, from the state toward migrant workers' "marital problems" or love life. As the Party's concerns about its political legitimacy rise, it worries that too many young people—especially men—being unable to find marital partners could potentially lead to what the Party would consider social unrest (Sun, 2019). By critically examining scholarly discourses produced inside and outside mainland China regarding this topic, Sun (2019) argues that some scholarly work—especially from mainland China—tends to attribute migrants' marital problems to their own personal qualities, without challenging the broader social inequality which causes their emotional and personal problems. Her own recent project specifically looks at young Chinese rural migrants' love lives, mainly from a set of visual materials that include workers' public displays of intimacy and wedding photos, and responses from the wider public and migrant workers themselves (Sun, 2016; Sun, 2018). The lack of time and space for intimacy compels workers to practice intimacy in public places, and when their photos were taken and put online, it became further evidence of their "low quality", drawing criticism rather than sympathy (Sun, 2016). Through a semiotic analysis of a group of wedding photos featuring workers on the assembly lines, she further asks how inequality of emotions can be studied empirically (Sun, 2018). By doing this, Sun convincingly argued that focusing on migrant workers' love, emotions, and intimacy lends us a novel lens to understand broader social inequalities, and therefore should be considered as part of understanding "the cultural politics of inequality" (Sun, 2013).

Indeed, despite the growing significance of love, intimacy, and emotionality in individuals' lives as well as their family relationships in China (Yan, 2003; Yan, 2010), emotions are rarely studied systematically in the rural-urban migration context. Emotions and migration is a relatively under-researched area in general, despite the fact that migration is a highly emotional process

(Svašek and Skrbiš, 2007). This means that many works on migration touch on the topic of emotion, but fail to consider emotion as an integral part of migration, nor do they put emotion at the centre of the inquiry (Svašek and Skrbiš, 2007; Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). In other words, there is a lack of a “specific engagement with emotions in migration and globalisation studies” (Svašek and Skrbiš, 2007: 372). This claim is also true in China’s context, as the writing of emotion tends to be scattered throughout the rural-urban migration literature rather than being organised and analysed in a systematic way.

Emotions are never absent from rural-urban processes: the loneliness and fragmented lives workers are living in factories; the anger and sadness of being marginalised and being looked down upon; the alienation of living and working under exploitative conditions; the heart break of separation from their “left-behind children”; as well as the pleasure of going out and see the world (e.g. Jacka, 2012; Zhou et al., 2014; Pun, 2016). These all point to the emotional nature of migration. However, what is less present in the literature on the emotionality of migration is the effort to take these emotions seriously in understanding their meanings. We need not just to describe what these emotions are, but to further ask what they mean, and how we could better make sense of them in relation to the social and cultural context where they arise.

There are a few notable exceptions which do take emotions seriously in understanding rural-urban migration in China (e.g. Wang and Nehring, 2014; Choi and Peng, 2016; Xiao, 2016). The role of emotions in shaping family relationships was well-recognised by Choi and Peng’s (2016) work, which focuses on the case of the migrant men and their masculinity. The emotional struggles of migrant young men were vividly captured as the authors depict the ways that these men were caught between, on the one hand,

westernised ideas of romance, and on the other, traditional practices of going back home and marrying local women. Migration has also compelled migrant fathers to be more emotionally expressive toward their children, especially when the children are left in the care of extended families back home (Choi and Peng, 2016). The emotional experiences of dating practices for migrants were also addressed in Wang and Nehring's (2014) work. Migrants without urban *hukou* status were devalued in the dating market of Beijing, and this also brought emotional turmoil upon the young people in romantic relationships. Migrant workers' constantly-mobile lifestyle also led them to find it difficult to engage in long-term and meaningful relationships. This point was echoed in Xiao's (2016) work, which proposed the term "emotional displacement" to describe how migrant women tend to lack emotional support as they are marginalised in the cities and constantly changing jobs. This concept was used to understand how some migrant women engage in extramarital relationships in order to earn respect and emotional support which are difficult to gain elsewhere (Xiao, 2016). These examples are by no means exhaustive, but they sophisticatedly show how migrants' emotions are deeply related to the broader social and cultural context, emphasising the need to take them seriously.

One commonality among these works is how emotions were usually theorised in relation to intimate relationships—be it family relationships, dating practices, or extra-marital relationships. Without diminishing the importance of such a focus, it would be beneficial to broaden the scope of this field of inquiry. That is to say, I propose to theorise emotions in relation to different aspects of migration experiences without confining the inquiry to the sphere of intimate relationships.

There is existing work which takes emotions seriously in theorising other aspects of migrants' experiences. For example, Sun (2010)'s work reveals

how *dagong* (migration out for work) literature provides us a glimpse of migrant workers' feelings of translocality—a framework proposed by Oakes and Schein (2006: xiii) to capture the experiences of those “being identified with more than one location”. This translocal experience manifests in more and more Chinese people's lives under the contexts of modernisation and globalisation (Oakes and Schein, 2006; Sun, 2010). The emotionally enriched *dagong* literature reveals different aspects of migrants' translocal experiences, which all closely related to their emotions such as alienation, displacement, and homesickness (Sun, 2010). Additionally, the role of anger was well recognised in understanding migrant workers' resistance as it is manifested through collective actions (Pun and Lu, 2010). It is also interesting in this work that the authors are asking whether emotions can have trans-generational characters. That is, whether the pain and suffering of the first-generation migrant workers could be transformed into the anger of the new generation of *dagong* subjects in facilitating resistance and collective actions (see Pun, 2005).

These are all excellent examples in showcasing the potential of focusing on emotions while revealing broader social inequalities affecting migrants. However, these studies rarely take into account the role of work in shaping migrants' emotional experiences of migration. While migrant workers usually work in exploitative conditions and spend most of their time in workplaces, the role of work needs to be recognised in order to better capture migrants' emotional and personal experiences of migration.

2.3.2 Intimacy and work

Indeed, although “work” has often been mentioned in rural-urban migration literature, as it is an important background element in understanding migrants' experiences, research about migrants' personal lives and work lives

seems to be two different clusters of literature. The present research seeks to treat work as an important site for migrant performers' negotiations of emotions, self, and relationships.

Migrants' existence in the cities is largely dependent on their work, as the term "migrant workers" suggests. Plenty of literature documents how migrant workers tend to undertake precarious work—working overtime, lacking holidays, and working under exploitative terms (e.g. Pun, 2005; Pun and Chan, 2012). Although China has strict labour laws and regulations, their enforcement is rather weak in the case of migrant workers. Local governments' priority has been to promote economic growth through local revenue, rather than ensuring the labour rights of workers (Friedman and Lee, 2010). Adding the fact that migrant workers are already often regarded as "outsiders" in the cities, it is more difficult for them to claim labour rights comparing to local residents.

A few existing research projects implicitly point to the intersection between migrant workers' work and their personal lives and intimate relationships. For example, the existence of "dormitory labour regimes" in many factories, which means that factories provide temporary accommodation for workers (enabling it to "exert greater breadth of control into the working and non-working day of labourers"), points to the blurred boundaries between work and non-work spheres for migrant workers (Pun, 2007: 246). Also, as mentioned before, the fact that migrant workers tend to constantly change jobs means that it is difficult for them to form and maintain meaningful relationships with other people (Wang and Nehring, 2014). The strains of precarious work for migrants are sometimes compounded by conflicts with gendered social norms. For example, the precarious working conditions of male migrant taxi drivers make them unable to fulfill their masculine ideals of being qualified providers for their families. Their grievances provide fertile

ground for potential collective actions (Choi, 2018). These empirical findings reveal the blurred boundaries between migrant workers' work and lives, calling for further attention to migrant workers' work lives in relation to their personal lives.

Although I have advocated greater attention to inter-relationships between migrants' personal and work lives, this raises further questions about the viability of the distinction between the two. The literature I have just been discussing tends to portray work as an impediment to migrant workers' right to "have a life". Although this representation is definitely true, it fails to recognise work as a constitutive part of migrant workers' personal lives. How, then, can we challenge binary thinking about work and personal life, and move towards viewing work as a constitutive part of subjective formation, emotions, and relationships?

This is not a challenge unique to research about rural-urban migration in China, but is also prevalent in literature about work and personal life in the west. Existing work about work-life intersection are mostly from a psychological point of view, and mostly explores work-life balance (for a review see Guest, 2002). Generally, there is a lack of exploration of the ways in which work intersects with personal life (Smart, 2007), although it has been increasingly recognised that we do not enter work and life as different spheres (May, 2011b), and who a person becomes at work does not stop when work is finished (Weeks, 2007).

That being said, this oversight is not universal across the sociology of work. Literature about immaterial labour particularly point out how work has to do with one's emotion, subjectivity, gender, sexuality and relationships (e.g. Adkins, 1995; Weeks, 2007). The emotional labour that workers are expected to do can make workers become alienated from their authentic selves

(Hochschild, 1983). However, this is a point that has drawn criticism for its assumption that there is an authentic self prior to social interactions (e.g. Bolton and Boyd, 2003). A better way to theorise the impact of undertaking immaterial labour on one's sense of self is to "ground the critical standpoint on subjectivity not in a claim about the true or essential self, but in a potential self" (Weeks, 2007: 248). This point has been echoed by other authors, who argue that workers are hired not because they have the qualities desired by the work, but primarily because of their ability or potential to be turned into what they are desired to be in their jobs (Akalin, 2007). Such expectation that workers should constantly work on their selves to better suit their work is well captured by Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) theory about borders, which will be illustrated further in the following section. Nevertheless, the aforementioned work all effectively pointed to the tendency for work to colonise more of a person's life in various ways.

When focusing on the case of ethnic performers, it is also important to recognise the unique dynamic of their work, which, as I will argue in Chapter 4, is a form of interactive service work (Leidner, 1991). It embodies different dynamics than factory work, which is the focus of the majority of research about migrant workers in China (e.g. Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005). A recent transformation in the labour market has witnessed an increasing number of migrant workers working in the service industry, while migrants employed in manufacturing work has fallen dramatically in recent years (China Labour Bulletin, 2019). This has not been sufficiently discussed in the migration literature. Whereas producers working in factories usually do not have direct contact with the consumers of their labour, people who work in the frontier of service jobs have close proximity to the consumers that they are serving. Therefore, the changing dynamics of migrants' work need further exploring.

Indeed, service work, if adopted as a broad conceptualisation, has become an important site for workers' negotiations around gender, emotions, bodies, and sexualities. For example, Hanser's (2008) work in three types of retail businesses in urban China reveals how class is reproduced in service work settings, and how such production of class is intimately linked with gender. Also, by recognising the "market-embodied labour" that hotel workers do in two different luxurious hotels in Beijing and Kunming, Otis's (2012) study is among the first few works that systematically examine service work under marketisation in China. Work has become an important component in hostesses and *xiaojie*'s (sex workers) negotiations of subjectivity, desires, and the everyday practices of citizenship, as they muddle through the terrain of consumption with the hope of achieving the idealised self-images (Zheng, 2007; Ding, 2017).

From this cluster of literature about service work in urban China, an inspiring point is how broader social structures profoundly shape the work that workers are undertaking. The intersecting mechanisms of social inequality revolving around rural-urban disparity, class, and gender are prominent themes in these works. By examining service work, intersecting broader inequalities are also revealed. Hence, in order to further unpack the ways that workers' personal lives intersect with their work, these broader regimes of inequality should be taken into account. I will discuss this point further in section 2.4 about bordering and inequalities. First, however, I will explain what I mean by "intimacy as a lens", drawing on theories of "personal life" and "intimacy".

2.3.3 Personal life and intimacy

The sociology of personal life was first coherently brought up by Carol Smart (2007). While moving away from what has traditionally been designated as

the sociology of family and kinship, personal life as a framework is much broader in scope, as it incorporates other relationships and areas of life that are crucial for individuals, and provide new ways of thinking about personhood and the blurring boundaries between the public and the private (Smart, 2007). It also seeks to ask “what is sociological about personal life, that is, what individual people’s personal lives say about society more generally” (May, 2011b: 2). Therefore, it shows the potential of using the personal to understand broader social inequalities and structures.

“The personal” designates an area of life which impacts closely on people and means much to them, but which does not presume that there is an autonomous individual who makes free choices and exercises unfettered agency. This means that the term “personal life” can invoke the social, indeed it is conceptualised as always already part of the social (Smart, 2007: 38).

This approach also largely challenges the “individualization thesis” (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), which assumes that people in modernity are autonomous, with all kinds of free choices, disembedded from their historical and cultural contexts, and disconnected from webs of relationships. The personal life framework emphasises how the personal is always relational, which means that people’s sense of self is “constructed *in relationships with others*, and *in relation* to others and to social norms” (May, 2011b: 7, italics in original).

Personal life also encourages us to think about different spheres of life as not separate areas, but as closely inter-connected (May, 2011b). There is a sense of “connectedness” underlying the concept of “personal life”, suggesting that we do not experience our lives in segregated spheres as they are defined by, for example, the sociology of work or the sociology of migration (May, 2011b). Our personal lives do not end once we step into “public” spaces. Although “personal life” endeavours to address such “connectedness”, the intersection between work and personal life remains an

under-theorised topic in sociology (Smart, 2007) which this research hopes to address.

The personal life framework invokes the type of consistent questioning of the division between the private and the public that I am advocating. Blurring the relationships between the public and the private allows us to see how our most private practices are not immune from the social forces that are shaping them (Plummer, 2003; Morgan, 2011). “Personal life” is also a more inclusive framework in the sense that it does not prioritise certain aspects of lives over others. In other words, it is about what matters to people. It therefore allows a rather open approach to the data, which does not give too much weight to any designated area or themes, but rather draws out what matters most for the informants. In that way, the personal life framework also attends to areas that tend to go beyond the sociological radar, such as family secrets and lies, objects imbued with meanings, etc. (Smart, 2007; May, 2011b).

In thinking about personal life in public spaces, our personal lives do not only include intimate relationships, but also interactions with strangers and acquaintances, considering how much time we spend interacting with strangers and acquaintances, and how such interactions play a role in our sense of belonging in a certain place (Morgan, 2009; May, 2011a). In public spaces we interact with strangers or people we barely know. Such interactions tend to be fleeting and not significant to us emotionally and personally. However, in *Acquaintances*, Morgan (2009) points out the significance of such “fleeting encounters”, which do have a significant impact on one’s sense of self and personal life, and therefore deserve sociological attention. In the performers’ cases, as I will show in the following chapters, their encounters with guests on a daily basis during work do have a profound impact on their emotions, senses of self, and intimate relationships with significant others. With researchers’ endeavour to challenge the clear

distinction between the public and the private with the personal life framework, it can be seen that performers' work in public spaces does have an impact on their private and intimate negotiations.

Despite efforts to attend to a wider range of relationships, much literature on personal life remains centred on family relationships. Family relationships are not the main focus of my research, as it is more concerned with people's intimate experiences of encountering different bordering processes through work and migration. Also, without specifically defined boundaries regarding what constitutes "personal life", which is also arguably one of the strengths of "personal life" as a framework, this framework can be too broad in practical theorisation—in a sense, every aspect of life can constitute one's personal life. Therefore, while borrowing useful insights from "personal life" as a framework, I seek to build a new framework of "intimacy as a lens", which is largely inspired by theories about "personal life" and "intimacy". While seeking to see the connections between these two strands of theorising, "intimacy as a lens" also seeks to define its own terms, and bring new insights to understanding the social world.

Intimacy normally refers to "the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality" (Jamieson, 2012: 1). Most existing research on intimacy is set in the Western context, partly because the concept of intimacy has often been linked with the "western" form of personhood and subjectivity (Jamieson, 2012). In the meantime, the actual practices of intimacy, love, and emotion flourish in societies that do not celebrate individualism (Yan, 2003; Du, 2008; Jamieson, 2012). The analytical power of the concept of "intimacy" remains to be further explored in non-western contexts, without which it would contribute to another form of Euro-centrism (Jamieson, 2012).

In thinking about the connections between the intimate and the public, I have found two strands of conceptual discussions useful—intimate citizenship and intimate geopolitics. “Intimate citizenship” is used to explore how much choice people have in terms of deciding how they are going to live their personal lives, and how their rights and obligations with regard to private life are recognised by the public (Plummer, 2003). The most significant contribution of this concept is to challenge the assumption that intimacy is merely a private matter, and to “explore how our most intimate decisions are shaped by (and in turn shape) our most public institutions” (Plummer, 2003: 3). It is also a call to move away from prioritising conventional couple relationships and family relationships, and to recognise new forms of personal life and intimate relationships, particularly those which pose challenges to heteronormativity, as well as norms of gender and sexuality (Roseneil, 2010; Roseneil et al., 2012). Generally, intimate citizenship is about how much agency people have regarding the conduction of their intimate lives, and how much of such agency could be practiced in real life and recognised by formal institutions such as laws, policies, states and polities (Roseneil et al., 2012). While this concept is useful in pointing out the inextricable link between the private and the public, however, it seems to be more relevant to people who are outside the heteronormative mode, such as “cyber citizens”, “lesbian and gay families”, and “test-tube babies”, as discussed in Plummer’s (2003) work. What, then, about the people who are living in heteronormative relationships—like migrant performers in this research, or people who conform to the norms of gender and sexuality? Does it mean that they have full agency to conduct their intimate lives and to achieve the personhood to which they aspire? Also, within the discussion of intimate citizenship, the definition of “citizenship” tends to be unclear. Therefore, while this research draws on the strength of “intimate citizenship” as a concept, it does not apply it directly to theorise migrant performers’ experiences.

“Intimate geopolitics” is another strand of literature I considered, as it brings in the important role of “intimacy” in understanding geopolitical issues which could potentially challenge the ways we think about border crossing, governmentality, and attachment and relationality (Pain and Staeheli, 2014; Barabantseva et al., 2019). “The lens of the intimate” was understood as “a variety of processes of attachment and relationality”, and was used to shed light on the new meaning of geopolitics, as well as the co-constitution of “the intimate” and the geopolitical (Barabantseva et al., 2019: 4). As such, it challenges the fixed scales and territories such as “the local” and “the global” as binary opposites. It also recognises governance power—particularly from the state—in shaping intimate relations through legal sanctions, socio-cultural norms, and juridical power (Barabantseva et al., 2019). However, an important departure of the present research is that it does not prioritise the role of state governance in shaping intimate lives, nor does it define “border” in a geopolitical sense or from a global point of view—I will discuss the meaning of border and bordering in the next section. The way that this research defines “intimacy” is also different from existing scholarship.

Therefore, after considering several relevant uses of intimacy, this research builds its own uses of “intimacy” for the sake of better capturing informants’ experiences of work and migration. Hence, this research uses the term “intimacy” to refer to a series of negotiations people have in regard to emotions, self, and relationships.

2.3.4 Intimacy as a lens—emotions, self, and relationships

Building on theories about “personal life” and “intimacy”, this section illustrates how the present research defines and uses the framework of “intimacy as a lens”.

Firstly, as mentioned before, this research seeks to theorise emotions without confining them to the relationship spheres. Also, rather than treating emotions as the consequences of migration and work, this research further asks what emotions do, and what can be revealed by focusing on them. This approach also seeks to situate individuals' emotions in relation to the broader "emotional regime"—the ways that different social and historical contexts shape people's emotional expressions (Reddy, 2001). Several literatures point out how "positive energy" and "happiness discourses" are crucial in constituting China's contemporary emotional regime (Kleinman, 2011; Hird, 2018; Wielander, 2018; Wielander and Hird, 2018). The use of emotions has also been incorporated in the state's techniques of governance, as the term "therapeutic governance" vividly describes how the state governs through discourses about emotions, most prominently discourses about "happiness" (Yang, 2014).

Secondly, in thinking about personhood, this approach emphasises the relational aspect of self-making, especially how people work on their personhood in relation to socio-cultural norms, which define "valuable personhood" in various ways (Skeggs, 2011). Theories about personhood in China effectively capture the changing landscape of self-making under the rapidly changing social and moral context (e.g. Yan, 2003; Rofel, 2007; Hoffman, 2010; Yan, 2010). The emergence of a sense of the individual and desires is regarded as a major landmark in China's individualization process (Yan, 2003; Yan, 2010). Rural-urban migrants are actually used as an example to illustrate the individualization process in China, as migrants "had to deal with their work and life in the cities as individuals, away from both home and family...In other words, mobility serves as an important agent of transformation as it enables disembedding, making it possible for the individual to break out of the shadow of the various sorts of collectives" (Yan, 2010: 497). At the same time, marketisation and increasing competition

nurtured what Rose calls the “enterprising self”, which means that individuals keep managing their selves as if they are projects (Rose, 1992). The state also plays a strong role in shaping the “enterprising self”, as young Chinese professionals actively incorporate patriotism into their senses of self (Hoffman, 2010). Meanwhile, neoliberalism and globalisation in the Chinese context encourage “the desiring self”, in which individuals’ aspirations, needs, and longings are closely related to consumption, sexuality, and cosmopolitanism (Rofel, 2007). However, some of these theories risk the same trap of the “individualization thesis” in the west, which neglects the ways that self-making is also relational, and less free-floating than assumed. Existing research has also demonstrated that individualism remains an ambition rather than an achieved reality in China, as the state and a series of institutionalised inequalities still penetrate in individuals’ intimate lives in influential ways (Wang and Nehring, 2014).

In China, the discourse of “*suzhi*” also plays a crucial role in understanding personhood. *Suzhi* is generally translated into “human quality”, which is used in the various governing processes in China, and is also widely used in daily life (Kipnis, 2006). *Suzhi* discourse was often related to neoliberal governmentality, since they share the similar deployment of value coding which “inscribes, measures, and mobilises human subjectivity as the powerhouse for productivity and development” (Yan 2003: 497). In that sense, some people are regarded as embodying high *suzhi*, while others are deemed as embodying low *suzhi*—rural-urban migrants and ethnic minority people are often related with the latter (e.g. Friedman, 2006; Jacka, 2009). Furthermore, *suzhi* is often used to legitimise inequality by suggesting that people are responsible for their own predicaments (Murphy, 2004b). Such ways of thinking about value and quality in human beings also share a resemblance with the western version of the “subject of value” (Skeggs, 2004; Skeggs, 2011). Skeggs’s (2004) work shows how working class

women in the UK struggle to “attach dominant symbolic value to themselves” while finding it incredibly emotionally demanding (Skeggs, 2011: 503).

Therefore, thinking about the self as relational is not just thinking about how individuals are embedded in social relationships and how they are shaped by social interactions with other people. It also entails considering how they are shaped by social and cultural norms revolved around gender, ethnicity, and the rural-urban divide.

Thirdly, in thinking about relationships, this approach emphasises the impact of work on personal relationships with significant others. Unlike the “personal life” and “intimacy” frameworks, this approach does not prioritise intimate relationships as the central focus. Rather, it regards relationships as one aspect of people’s intimate negotiations. Inspired by the discussion about personal life in public space (May, 2011a), this approach also considers performers’ relationships, or brief encounters, with customers, and how such encounters have an impact on their personal lives. It further seeks to blur the line between work and non-work spheres by focusing on performers’ relationships with other people, especially their significant others.

Fourthly, using intimacy as a lens, as suggested by the term itself, means regarding these intimate negotiations not just as consequences, but also as a methodological and theoretical tool to understand broader social issues. It means to start with the intimate realm, and work from there to understand broader social issues. To be more specific, this research asks what is the value of using intimacy as a lens to understand migrant performers’ experiences of encountering multiple bordering processes, as I explain in the following section.

2.4 Bordering and broader intersecting social inequalities

Indeed, the discussion of the intersection of intimacy and the public sphere would only be meaningful if the multiple constraints that performers face—imposed by *hukou*, the rural-urban divide, ethnicity, and gender, and more—are incorporated as well. Through the unpacking of the multiple intersecting inequalities embodied through work and migration, I seek to further explore the intersection between work and personal life.

Thus, in order to understand the intersecting multiple inequalities that shape migrant performers' experiences, the first framework I considered was "intersectionality", as it could potentially capture the ways that different systems of oppression are interlinked and constantly shape each other. Intersectionality as a concept was first raised by Crenshaw (1991) in her work arguing for the rights of black women. Later, this framework was expanded to theorise "the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 68). Essentially it points to the fact that identities and oppression in the social world are too complicated to be understood through a single axis. It also objects to the simplistic view that treats multiple positionings as additive, while neglecting the ways in which they constitute each other (Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006; Davis, 2008; Nash, 2008). Feminists in China also argue that adapting intersectionality to China's context requires further recognition of the roles of the state, the market, and culture in shaping the micro-level and meso-level of intersecting inequalities (Wang, 2017).

However, one critique of the intersectionality theory is that social positions, and the boundaries that define them, are not static, but are constantly subject

to change and negotiation. McCall (2005) calls this “intra-categorisation”, which is recognised as a crucial supplement to intersectionality theory (McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2013). While “inter-categorisation” refers to different categories such as race, class, and gender, “intra-categorisation” seeks to problematise the categories and boundaries themselves (McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2013). In this research particularly, the unsettled boundaries of different social categories are particularly salient in performers’ negotiations. For example, for my informants, whether or not they are “authentic” ethnic minorities is often subject to constant negotiation, and is dependent on the specific context (see chapter 6). Existing research also points out how the refusal to treat rural migrants as a homogenous group in search of urban citizenship, instead recognising “the boundary-transgression between rural and urban”, offers a new perspective to transcend the “orientalism” tendency in studies of rural-urban migrants in China (Jakimów, 2012: 657). In other words, the boundaries or borders themselves which are used to draw distinctions along the multiple social axes—such as ethnicity and the rural-urban divide—are unstable and fluid, and it is crucial to recognise this. Such negotiations along the fluid boundaries of social positioning are exactly the focus of this research, as the lens of intimacy reveals them to be crucial and relevant. Therefore, rather than using “intersectionality” as a theoretical framework to capture the multilayered inequalities that shape performers’ work and life, I use the concept of border/bordering to theorise such intersecting regimes of inequalities. And more importantly, through the lens of intimacy, I seek to explore the working mechanism of these intersecting inequalities/bordering processes, and the ways that they act upon individuals’ emotions, senses of self, and relationships.

Hukou is a form of bordering mechanism, although scholars have only recently started to bringing it into border scholarship to conceptualise how its

manifestations work as “border-making that take place apart from or alongside the bounding of national territory” (Johnson, 2017: 94). This emerging literature echoes recent critical border scholarship (for a review article, see Novak, 2017), which features a departure from classical border studies which regard national borders as the only or the most salient focus. Recent border scholarship also moves from spatial and functional borders to cognitive, symbolic, and emotional borders which play out in everyday settings in a situated way (e.g. Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2013).

Particularly, *Border as Method* (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) provides several useful theoretical concepts to understand issues that are relevant to this research, as it concerns the intersection between labour, mobility, and capital, and particularly how borders produce subjectivity.

Border as Method treats border as an epistemological device, which is at work “whenever a distinction between subject and object is established” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 16). The ways that performers encounter guests during work, and the ways they encounter the bordering process which ascribes different meanings to the rural and the urban and the ethnic minority and Han, speak volumes about the existence of multiple borders shaping their lives. Thus, in a sense, negotiating the meaning of borders and practising border-crossing have become parts of the performers’ everyday lives. In Chapter 4, I will explain in more detail the ways that ethnic performance could be best theorised as a site of encounter, in which multiple bordering processes are involved. Here, the meaning of “encounters” is two-fold. One is how interactive service work, which is based upon the co-presence and close interactions between guests and performers, could be theorised as a “site of encounter”. The second meaning of the “encounter” refers to how performers are inevitably shaped by the bordering process,

which pushes them to constantly negotiate meanings along the divisions of rural-urban, ethnicity, and gender. In that sense, encounter actually refers to how they experience the borders as a process rather than a substantial object.

Several points from *Border as Method* (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) are particularly relevant in lending useful theoretical lenses to this thesis. Firstly, the concept of “multiplication of labour”, in part, points to the increasing tendency for work to colonise more of workers’ lives, and the ways that labour shapes subjectivity, which is also a central theme of this thesis. Secondly, the concept of “differential inclusion” vividly captures how rural migrants are included in different terms, which means that in receiving areas, migrants are treated differently from locals in various ways. For example, as discussed before, local governments are not responsible for the social reproduction costs of migrants⁸, and they tend to compromise migrants’ labour rights in order to boost local revenues and attract investment. Migrants’ settlement in the cities is generally problematised as well, as the existence of *hukou* deprives them of many benefits that locals are entitled to. The differential inclusion of migrants means that while their labour is desired, their presence is not. This has inevitably led to “border struggles” for migrants, which means “the struggles that take shape around the ever more unstable line between the “inside” and “outside”, between inclusion and exclusion.” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 13). And border struggles proliferate precisely because of the ability of borders to shape and produce subjectivity.

These concepts are obviously inter-linked, and together they provide a more inclusive way to understand and theorise borders. In general, border is no

⁸ But see Guo and Liang’s (2017) article which captures the recent shift that local governments are expected to take in order to better account for migrants’ social reproduction.

longer solely or primarily about national borders, but is shaped by different social relations and practices regarding capital, mobility, and labour. It is important to think about border not just as a dividing device, but also as chains that connect people. The idea of border crossing exactly implies the inclusive and fluid character of borders.

What Mezzadra and Neilson's book focus less on is the intimate and emotional aspects of bordering and border struggles, which is the central focus of the present research. Therefore, in this research, I plan to use intimacy as a lens to understand how performers encounter these multilayered and intersecting bordering processes along the rural-urban divide and ethnicity, and how such encounters are also gendered. These theoretical discussions will further unfold in the following chapters.

2.5 Conclusion

By bringing together different clusters of research which broadly informed this research, I argued in this literature review the following points:

In the first section, I argue that previous literature about rural-urban migration overlooked three themes: migrants are overwhelmingly depicted as migrating to big cities, while those who move to small and medium sized cities are less studied. Secondly, ethnicity is an issue that has rarely been incorporated in previous literature about rural-urban migration in China. Thirdly, while migrants are mainly depicted as working in the factories, those who undertake service work are overlooked. These are the substantive gaps that this research is trying to bridge by focusing on ethnic migrant performers who move to an adjacent small city.

While pointing out the lack of systematic examination of emotion, intimacy, and migration, as well as the tendency to discuss work as if it exists outside of people's personal lives, this research seeks to bridge these gaps by using intimacy as a lens to understand migrant performers' experiences. Building on theories of "personal life" and "intimacy", this research proposes a new theoretical framework—"intimacy as a lens"—which refers to a series of negotiations people have regarding their emotions, senses of self, and relationships with significant others. It also points to the need to use these intimate negotiations as theoretical lenses to understand broader social issues. Meanwhile, it is also crucial to recognise the intersecting inequalities that shape informants' intimate negotiations, while not regarding these inequalities as boundary-fixed "social positions". Therefore, theories about borders and bordering are more useful than "intersectionality" to capture the ways that informants negotiate a series of boundaries which deeply shape their everyday work and migration experiences. In a way, border crossings and border struggles become part of performers' everyday lives. Several important concepts are borrowed from *Border as Method* (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) to shed light on these bordering processes, which include "the multiplication of labour", "differential inclusion", and "border struggles". The lens of intimacy will be used to understand the intimate and emotional aspect of these experiences of borders and bordering for migrant performers. I seek to further explain and demonstrate the value of "intimacy as a lens" throughout the thesis. But firstly the methods that used to understand migrant performers' experiences will be discussed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

How should intimacy and work be researched? In this methodology chapter, I firstly discuss the rationales that underpin the methodology of this research, which are closely related to the ontological and epistemological standpoints that this research adopts. I especially point to the relations between research rationales and the methods that were used to approach my research questions. In order to gain an understanding of how ethnic performers conduct their everyday work, and how that has an impact on their personal lives, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in three field sites which involve ethnic performance—Waterfall Restaurant, Tea Park and Forest Park in Green City (all pseudonyms), Southwest China. From October 2016 to April 2017, I spent a total of six months within and outside in these three sites doing participant observation and in-depth interviews with ethnic performers. I will give a detailed description and discussion of the fieldwork process and how data were analysed, and some of the fieldwork challenges will be discussed in a reflexive way, as well as in relation to ethical considerations.

3.2 Research rationales

This research is firstly informed by social constructionism, which rejects the idea that there is a Real World that exists “out there”, independent of our interrogation and understanding of it (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). Social constructionism also emphasises that all knowledge is contextual and largely based on social interactions (Burr, 2015). This research takes on this epistemological viewpoint and regards meanings as constituted by people’s beliefs, understandings, and interactions—the “truth” about the social world is not “out there” to be excavated (Mason, 2002). Especially since this research

is trying to explore the complexity of people's emotional and relational terrains, which is largely about subjective feelings and emotions that are intangible and free-flowing, it is impossible to understand these issues outside of actors' own "subjective frame of reference" (Williams, 2000: 212).

This research is also informed by feminist methodology which challenges the assumption that social research is a pursuit of truth which based on particular notions of reason, science, and progress (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). It rejects prioritising rationality over emotions in the pursuit of "truth". This research therefore challenges the dualism between emotions and reason, which is also one of the legacies of feminist methodology. Another way that feminist methodology informed this research is the need to recognise how gender shapes social interactions in various ways, thereby avoiding gender-insensitive research (see chapter 7). Furthermore, this project is deeply inspired by the feminist slogan "the personal is political" from second wave feminism in the late 1960s (Hanisch, 1969), which seeks to critically examine how social forces work on the most personal and private spheres. Another feminist theory that inspired this research is intersectionality, which recognises how a person can be subject to different but mutually constitutive social positionalities (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Therefore, although this research is not using feminist methodology in a strict sense, it is informed by it in various ways.

More importantly, one central argument of this research is to explore the usefulness of using intimacy as an epistemological device in sociological inquiries. In that sense, intimacy as a lens is also a starting point of inquiry, ways of knowing, and methods of analysing data. Therefore, the central argument of the thesis is also one of the methodological rationales that underpins the design and conduct of this research. In answering the central research question—what is the value of using intimacy as a lens to

understand migrant performers' work and migration experiences?—I conducted ethnographic fieldwork from October 2016 to April 2017, which mainly included participant observation and in-depth interviews with 60 informants. In the following section, I will describe how the fieldwork process unfolded. I will identify some of the choices that I made, and think about some of the challenges along the way in a reflexive way.

3.3 The fieldwork process

3.3.1 Choosing the field sites and negotiating access

As mentioned in the literature review, the choice of research city—Green City in Yunnan province, Southwest China—is related to several gaps in the literature about migrant workers in China. I decided to anonymise the name of the city since I consider it an effective way to protect informants' identities. As most migrant workers are from western, inland China and migrate to work in eastern, coastal areas, particularly the Pearl River Delta, these are the typical migrants that tend to be focused on by migration literature. However, recent data have shown that inter-provincial migration has declined (Liang et al., 2014), which means that increasingly migrants tend to move within their home province. Also, while less research focuses on migrants in small-scale cities, Green City, with a population of approximately 300,000 people, becomes an interesting case to explore; this is especially relevant in relation to the *hukou* reform in recent years, which allegedly aimed to eliminate any *hukou* transfer restrictions for medium-to-small sized cities (see Chapter 2).

Furthermore, with the most diverse ethnic groups in China—25 state-recognised minority groups—Yunnan is a place known for its multi-ethnic culture, tourism, and relative lack of conflict between different ethnic groups. That is also the reason that while minority rights in areas like Tibet and Xinjiang have attracted so much attention in the nation and worldwide (Zang,

2015), ethnic minorities in Yunnan are usually associated with harmony, exotic performance, and ethnic tourism. In 2015, in his domestic inspection tour to Yunnan, President Xi Jinping expressed his high hopes for this place –Yunnan should work hard to be a “model region of ethnic solidarity in the nation” (People’s Daily, 2015). He specifically relates this prospect with the challenge of poverty elimination in Yunnan, as Yunnan is also one of the most impoverished provinces in China. In recent years, poverty elimination campaigns have proliferated in China, seeking to eliminate poverty and build a moderately prosperous society by 2020. As a result, poverty elimination and economic growth have become the major priorities for many cities and villages in Yunnan.

With 14 state-recognised ethnic groups, Green City is trying to boost its economic growth by developing local tourism, with the display of ethnic culture as a crucial element in its tourism business. A village in Green City’s jurisdiction is frequently praised by both local and national media for lifting itself from poverty by developing ethnic tourism in the village, as it has turned itself into a tourist site where tourists can come and watch ethnic performances.⁹ While eager to promote ethnic tourism as part of its economic growth, multiple barriers exist for the city’s ethnic performers, who are mostly rural migrants who want to settle down in the city, just like other cities in China. Such tensions between desirable ethnic performance and the undesirable presence of rural migrant performers makes Green City a potentially informative site for this research. Moreover, practically speaking, Green City is my hometown, where I had some existing networks and resources which were helpful in facilitating this research, especially in relation to gaining access to field sites. The fact that I can speak the local

⁹ The specific link to the media reports on this village will not be given here since this will lead to reveal the real name of Green City.

dialect was also beneficial, enabling me to more easily have conversations with informants.

Ethnic performance indeed was burgeoning in Green City. Before I conducted the fieldwork, I only knew two of the restaurants where ethnic performance was available for customers. When I did the fieldwork, the number had gone up considerably, with an increasing number of restaurants including ethnic performance as part of their businesses. My chosen field sites, including Waterfall Restaurant, Tea Park, and Forest Park, were selected for both practical and theoretical reasons. I had been to these sites as a customer many years ago, prior to having the idea of conducting this research. I knew roughly what ethnic performances were like there from the perspective of a customer, and I thought I could gain access using personal connections. From a theoretical point of view, while tourist sites seem to be a highly public setting, restaurants seem to be comparatively private, as many restaurants in China have individual compartments where customers can enjoy meals in a private setting. I wondered how such distinctions would contribute to the different ways that ethnic performances were arranged, as well as different interactions between guests and performers. Therefore, the choice of these three different research sites were mainly based on the assumption that they could provide different insights to the project.

As I provide a detailed description of the three research sites in Chapter 4, in order to lay a foundation for the theorisation of the meaning of ethnic performance, I only briefly describe the three sites here. Waterfall Restaurant is a high-end restaurant, where customers can order ethnic performance at their dining tables. Ethnic performers are waiters and waitresses in the restaurant, who dress up in ethnic costumes that are designed for on-stage performances, and are ready to perform whenever required by customers. Tea Park and Forest Park are the two most famous tourist sites in Green City,

with tea culture and animals in the forest as the major attractions for tourists. Ethnic performance shows, following a fixed schedule, are part of the routines for these two tourist sites. Additionally, tourists who choose to dine in these two locations can also ask for “*bancan*” (accompanying meals), which involved performers performing at their dining tables in a manner similar to Waterfall Restaurant.

Gaining the needed access to do participant observation in these three sites was not without challenges, despite having friends who introduced me to the gatekeepers—i.e. people in managerial positions of the tourist sites, and the owners of the restaurants. The manager of Waterfall Restaurant, Ms Yang, initially suspected that I was there to learn their business secrets when my acquaintance approached her, and hesitated over whether she should give me a chance. Luckily, she agreed to meet me in person and further discuss the possibility for me to conduct research in her restaurant. During our meeting, I explained clearly my research intentions, and the fact that I was interested in learning about the life of the performers as ethnic minority people and as rural-urban migrants, rather than the techniques of running a restaurant. Ms Yang showed skepticism over what I could possibly learn from these workers in the restaurant. She also said, “they [referring to performers] are just dancing and singing, nothing outrageous!” Her response is revealing of how she needs to constantly justify the legitimacy of the business by drawing a clear line between service work and sex work. Later, I also learnt that Ms Yang was concerned about the potential threat to the customers’ privacy, as many business men and local government officials patronise the restaurant.

I also gained access to Tea Park and Forest Park through friends’ networks. The initial access was relatively easy. However, as argued by other authors, gaining access is not a “once and for all activity”, but rather is an ongoing

process that is constantly subject to negotiation (Thorne, 1980). Although I was allowed to observe regular *bancan* in Forest Park, I was not allowed to observe *bancan* for VIP customers, which was conducted in private compartments for some VIP clients. In Tea Park, I was allowed access to observing all the other activities, but not *bancan*. This has limited the data I could gain from direct observation. On the other hand, gaining access is also theoretically informative, as it reveals information about the organisation of group under research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The fact that I was denied access to observing certain *bancan* activities is revealing in itself (see discussion in Chapter 7).

Gaining access also involves negotiating potential roles in the field to justify my presence and also make myself useful there, which is an important part in many fieldwork circumstances (Bryman 2012). After some negotiation with gatekeepers, I decided to work together with informants in Waterfall Restaurant as a waitress/performer, considering it is the most reasonable option for me to justify my presence in the semi-private settings of the individual compartments of the restaurant. In that way, I was able to observe ethnic performance without disrupting the restaurant's business. Dressed the same way as my informants in the restaurant and working together with them on a daily basis also became an important way for me to build rapport with them. Such options did not seem to be available in the other two places, as the bar for performers is set higher, which means more training is required. Therefore, I shadowed informants' work by being in their workplace. I also tried to make myself useful by helping to pour tea for the audiences at the performance site in Tea Park. In Forest Park, I mostly observed informants' work by being in multiple locations—backstage, offstage, and in the dining hall for *bancan*. I tried to help performers as much as I could if they needed a hand with small chores like moving costumes, sweeping the floor, etc.

Meanwhile, gaining access to the field sites does not equal gaining consent from informants themselves. Gaining consent from informants can be ethically challenging, since they may feel powerless to say no, especially when their managers have already allowed me initial access. Therefore, I made sure to mention the reasons that I was there, and explained my research purposes in an approachable manner. I also mentioned that if they felt uncomfortable, I could avoid writing about them in my field notes. As investigations from the government proliferate in China, which can be intrusive, I made sure to mention to informants that this is not a government *kaocha* (fieldwork-style investigation) (Hansen, 2006). Gaining consent will be discussed in more detail in the section about reflexivity and ethical considerations, below.

Overall, I did three months' participant observation in Waterfall Restaurant, and one month each in Tea Park and Forest Park. There was also approximately one month's time during which I was not at these three sites, but was mainly interviewing informants outside of them, recruited by snowball sampling using existing informants' networks. I will describe these processes in more detail in the following sections.

3.3.2 Encounter and immersion—doing participant observation

This research is “ethnographic” in the sense that it involves “immersing” oneself in the social world of the informants for a certain period of time, and gaining understanding of their everyday lives by participating, observing, talking, and listening—in fact, any means to gather data to deepen the researcher's understanding (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Although in some cases “ethnography” and “participant observation” are used interchangeably, I follow the authors who suggest that “ethnography” is a more inclusive term, while participant observation is its core data collection method (e.g. Delamont, 2004).

In this research, although I was doing ethnography in my own hometown, I did not consider myself to be doing research as an “insider”, since I knew little about the group of people that I was trying to learn about. The social distance between the informants and me could be large, and I initially found it difficult to have a real conversation with them. Such feelings are mutual, and some informants later told me that they initially did not know how to talk to me.

As I will argue in this thesis, ethnic performance becomes a site of “encounter” for performers as they encounter multiple bordering processes during daily work (See Chapter 4). Similarly, for me, participant observation is not just a form of “immersion” where the researcher seeks to “fade into the background”, but also involves encounters between the researcher and the informants, especially during the initial period of fieldwork. Such moments of encounter can be theoretically informative as well.

Shortly after I started working at Waterfall Restaurant, there were rumours about me. When I was working with Mei, she said to me, “people tell me you’ve arrived from a Mercedes the other day, is that true?” Of course it was not the case. But from that rumour I learnt how some informants imagine what “city people” with privileges are like. Later that day, when I was sweeping the floor with Qi, who allegedly spread the rumour about me arriving in a Mercedes, she was talking about the plan to buy a good car in front of me and other workers. She said that she was saving money together with her boyfriend, hoping to buy a good-brand car pretty soon. Later I learnt that the money that they were saving is nowhere near enough to buy a car. I wonder whether Qi deliberately said such things in front of me as a form of “performance of respectability” (Skeggs, 1997).

Educational level also played a role in my initial contacts with informants. Some of informants initially called me “college girl” (*daxuesheng*). The other common thing that informants tended to say to me was that they were not sure what they possibly had to offer. Just as Woodman’s (2017) informants who thought that they were too little educated to have insights to help the researcher, many of my informants also shared the same sense of “inadequacy”. They worried that their experiences were not worth telling because they were not well-educated or “successful” from a common perspective. I generally feel that they tend to give little credit to themselves and their experiences. Sometimes they even felt embarrassed having to share their hardships with me. Some of them kept asking in the interviews —“am I really helping you with your thesis [by sharing these experiences]?” Nevertheless, I learnt a lot from the responses of informants encountering me as a researcher, and also as someone from a different socio-economic background. Adding the fact that I was usually introduced by a business owner or park managers, it took time for informants to not regard me as the boss’s friend sent to monitor their work.

Gradually, through “immersion”, as well as through showing up every day, informants got used to my presence, and got to know me as a person. I was even regarded as one of them as we work closely every day in Waterfall Restaurant. There were many work routines which required workers to work together in groups of two or three—sweeping the floor, clearing the tables, and waiting outside of guests’ compartments in case they needed anything. These all became important moments for casual conversations between me and the informants. In many cases, I chatted with other workers not just because of my role as a researcher who wanted to know more about their lives, but also because of the boredom of having to constantly wait and of doing repeated routines. Casual talks played an important role between workers to kill time and also to have some fun at work. This was also true of

other two sites. There were periods of time between scheduled performances when performers had to wait. Sometimes I watched the performers practice songs and dances, and sometimes we chatted with each other to kill time.

Spending time together, working together, and having conversations where I tried to be as open and honest as I could about myself and my own life—these all became important ways to build rapport with informants. Seeing guests treat me no differently to other workers in the restaurant also made informants feel I was one of them, rather than aligned with the managers or the customers. Building a good rapport before approaching informants for interviews was especially important for this research, since it explores sensitive topics like intimacy, relationships, and emotions. I normally spent at least one week at a field site before approaching informants for interviews, as any abrupt attempt to ask informants sensitive questions about their lives could be intrusive and unwanted. I discuss more about the ethical considerations of doing sensitive research in the following section.

More importantly, by “being there”, I got a sense of what informants’ mundane, everyday work lives are like. Just like many other migrant workers in China, my informants spent a lot of time at their workplace, ranging from 10 to 15 hours a day. Therefore, I think that the workplace is a good starting point for data generation, since informants spend so much of their daily lives at work. Being at informants’ workplace also led me to recognise the important role of work in informants’ personal lives. If I were not there, informants would probably just say something like “it’s just work”, since work is something so mundane and unremarkable. In that sense, I found participant observation useful in “revealing the unmarked”—something so easily faded into mundane everyday lives, and not yet articulated in language or even entering the informants’ consciousness (Salzinger, 2004). These reveals provide theoretical insights for researchers. By being there, and by

doing some of the work myself, I demonstrated the possibility of greater empathy with informants. During interviews, some of them said things like “you were there, you know how tiring the work is”, or “you know the ways that some of the customers treat us”.

However, there is also the risk that participating can get in the way of observing (Gomm, 2008). Doing the work myself was physically exhausting. On the first day working at Waterfall restaurant, I felt physically exhausted even before guests arrived for dinner, since I started working from 8:00 in the morning. I consequently later decided to only work one shift daily—either from 8am to 4pm, or 5 pm to 11 pm—in order to avoid burn-out. In Tea Park and Forest Park, my schedule was more flexible, since I could choose when to show up in the workplace and how long to stay. I normally stayed in informants’ workplaces for the same duration as their own shifts.

Sometimes taking field notes can become a challenge as well. I ruled out the option of using audio or video to record observational data, since that could be ethically challenging and could also influence the natural flow of conversations. Mainly relying on written notes, I wrote my field notes in a small notebook or on my phone. Every day after work, I would rewrite the field notes of the day in a more organised manner with richer details. Sometimes it seemed inappropriate to suddenly start writing in a notebook, especially in front of guests that I was serving. I therefore usually wrote a few key words on my phone when I saw something that was worth writing down. That seemed more natural, since many workers played with their phones sometimes to kill time (although they were usually required not to be seen by guests when they used mobile phones). However, using a mobile phone during work was banned in Waterfall Restaurant for a while, in the name of protecting guests’ privacy (a topic which I discussed in Chapter 4). During

that time, I had to hide my phone in a pocket, and went to the toilet more often to write down notes there.

Besides doing participant observation in informants' workplaces, I also hung out with them outside work time. I was wary not to disturb informants' precious days off, since that short period of time is luxurious for them. Therefore, I only hung out with them if they invited me. Shopping for clothes, visiting food vendors and barbecue booths, and visiting Karaoke bars and night clubs were things that we sometimes did when hanging out. Sometimes we would just take a walk in the city to enjoy some of its landscapes. I grew up in Green City from birth, and stayed there until going to a high school in another city. Hanging around in the city with informants was both pleasant and illuminating for me, as it sometimes revealed how we experienced the city in different ways. I went to some places in the city that I never paid attention to before, and I got a sense of exploring the city through an "outsider's" perspective. When we hung out, I usually tried to pay the bill whenever it was possible and socially appropriate in order to avoid putting more economic burdens on informants.

Another benefit of doing participant observation is that the time spent in the field enabled me to ask questions that made more sense to informants than during interviews. I arrived in the field with some "foreshadowed problems" (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 2) and academic imaginings about informants' lives, which were largely shaped by western literature. It could easily be the case that I would ask questions that made no sense to informants. This was particularly true when I entered the field as an outsider, who knew little about the community that I was trying to study. It is likely that I would have asked questions that informants would find difficult to answer if I had not spent time with them first (e.g. Wei, 2006).

There were indeed many surprises in the field whereby my “foreshadowed problems” were challenged. Initially I was even a bit disappointed when I learnt that not many of the performers were “authentic” ethnic minorities, and they learnt these ethnic songs and dances with little training just like I did. Frustrated by what I found, I even questioned the value of conducting this research for a while, or wondered if I was conducting the fieldwork in the wrong place. There were other surprises as well, such as that many informants were not very keen on transferring their *hukou* to Green City, despite the fact that they are theoretically able to do so. I thought about all the literature that I had read which talked about how *hukou* is an impediment for migrant workers to settle in the cities, and wondered why informants did not seem to be very keen on discussing the possibility of *hukou* transfer. Another surprise was that some young informants spent a lot of their hard-earned money on consumption and entertainment activities after work, such as going to the night club and barbecue booths. These unexpected moments and surprises in the field pushed me to put aside some of my pre-existing assumptions, whether from the literature or from my imagined notions about informants. These surprises proved to be fruitful later in the analysis process as I started writing the research findings about them, and tried to understand them through sociological lenses. They went on to become prominent themes in this thesis.

In general, participant observation involves both encounters and immersions. There were all sorts of challenges along the way, which shaped the ways data were generated. It therefore needs to be considered in a reflexive manner. Despite doing participant observation in the field sites and having casual talks with informants, I also did loosely structured interviews with some informants within and outside of these three sites. In the following section, I will detail the process of doing interviews, and discuss this in relation to interviews’ benefits and challenges.

3.3.3 In-depth interviews

The purpose of in-depth interviews, which is different from everyday casual chats, is to ensure the privacy and the depth of the conversation. As opposed to the fragmented data gathered from casual talks, in-depth interviews will allow the “co-construction of meanings” to emerge in a more systematic way (Mason, 2002a). Thus, informants were given more time, space, and privacy to talk about their migration experiences in in-depth interviews.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit informants who were the theoretical focus of this project (Bryman, 2012)—people who are migrant performers in these three field sites. I also interviewed service workers who are not exactly performers, but were doing service work in these sites, including security guards, chefs, tour guides, etc., based on their willingness and availability to be interviewed. Using snowball sampling, informants outside of these three sites were also recruited for interviews. However, in the present research, I have decided to only focus on theorising the experiences of performers and service workers within these three sites, as informants who work as performers have a unique experience of work which deserves to be explored in its own right.

Most people I approached were willing to do the interviews. However, finding the right time and place to talk became a challenge, as informants spent so much of their time at the workplace, and it can be difficult to find time to talk without being interrupted. I normally let the informants decide on the time and space that suited them to do the interviews. An empty compartment room in the restaurant, a quiet corner in the park, or a bench on the square, became the usual places for interviews. Although interviews were mostly conducted in non-work hours, there were times when informants were suddenly called

upon to work during an interview, requiring us to stop and/or find other times to continue the conversation.

Before each interview, I would briefly explain my research, and gain oral consent from interviewees for interviews and recordings, and encourage them to ask questions if they had any. Written consent was not used because some of the informants are illiterate, and signing one's signature is often viewed as sensitive and problematic in China's cultural context. I chose to not have an interview guideline, and to only have some key words in my mind to structure the interview, such as "work", "ethnicity", "intimate relationships", "migration", etc. Although it sounds more like an unstructured interview, however, even unstructured interviews have some underlying structures from researchers' ideas, research questions, etc. I started every interview with the same questions—"when is the first time that you migrated out to work?", and would follow the informants' own story telling from there. I used prompts and probes to encourage the flow of the conversation, and tried to ask more descriptive questions rather than abstract ones (Spradley, 2003). I generally tried to give informants as much space as possible for them to talk freely on their own terms, which is one of the characteristics of ethnographic interviews as compared to more structured interviews (Heyl, 2001). As it is rightly argued, understanding the cultural meanings of informants' own terms is usually the key to making sense of the social field being researched (Spradley, 2003). Besides, the time that I spent with the informants before the interviews was also helpful in enabling me to ask questions that made sense to them. The mutual-trust relationships developed between informants and me before interviews were also helpful in terms of enabling informants to trust me enough to share their personal stories, which is another characteristic of doing ethnographic interviews (Heyl, 2001). Generally, interviews were regarded as a way for informants and me to generate data together, rather than for me to "extract" data from them (Mason, 2002a). I

was learning from the informants through conversations and interviews to understand how they make sense of their own experiences of migration and work. I tried to be an attentive listener, and to be supportive and encouraging. I also avoided asking about topic areas if it seemed likely that informants may not want to “go there”.

Doing research about personal lives and emotions can be very emotional for both the researcher and informants (Brownlie, 2011). There were moments when informants or I cried in the interviews. I paid particular attention to the facial expression and body language of informants, and wrote down some observational notes after each interview. I normally wrote about when and where the interviews took place, the general atmosphere and dynamics, and other things that were worth noting. It can be a challenge to understand the emotions of participants when they themselves may be unsure of or have ambivalence over them. However, “even if people are uncertain of, unable to articulate, or may lie about their emotional state and experiences, there is an interpretation to be made” (Holmes, 2015: 63). Therefore, I also paid attention to the absent or inarticulable emotions when writing down observational notes, as well as during data analysis.

All the interviews were recorded by recording device after consents was gained from informants, and they were all transcribed in Chinese afterwards. There were times when informants asked me to stop recording so that they could say something off the record to me. I excluded these parts of data in the data analysis. All the interviews ranged from half an hour to three hours. I also did several repeat interviews with some of the informants, depending on all sorts of factors such as their availability, willingness to talk, whether we were interrupted during the first interview, whether the informants trusted me enough to share more about themselves, etc.

In total, I did 60 interviews with people within and outside of the field sites. This included 45 informants from the three field sites, and 15 informants who were recruited by snowball sampling outside the field. Of the informants, 33 were women, and 27 of them were men. Most of informants are young people aged between 16 to 30 years old (75%), and most of them (64.4%) were single. Most informants had an educational level of junior high school or lower (78.4%). The ethnic composition of the sample included 36.7% ethnic Han informants and 63.3% registered as ethnic minorities, including Wa, Hani, Lahu, Yi, Dai, and Miao. Among them, most ethnic minority informants came from Wa, Lahu, or Hani backgrounds. At the same time, all informants were intra-provincial migrants who were from adjacent towns and villages, of ranging in distance from Green City from half an hour to 4 hour's drive. Besides, none of the informants identify themselves as belonging to the LGBT community.¹⁰ Most of the informants speak fluent local dialect or Mandarin because they had been through a Han-style education system. Only three of them were not very confident in the fluency of their Mandarin or local dialect. I am aware that those who are able to speak the local dialect in Green City may reflect an already more urbanised population; I am therefore wary of over-generalising the findings from informants' experiences to those of ethnic minority people more generally. I have listed alphabetically the informants that I have quoted in this thesis in the following table:

Table 1: Informants quoted in the thesis

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Fieldsite	Workplace Role	Ethnicity	Education Level	Marital Status	The number of Children
Ai	23	Male	Forest Park	Performer	Wa	Junior High School	Not yet married	0

¹⁰ This is perhaps related to the overall discrimination against LGBT people in China. See a recent review article by Wang et al., 2019.

Table 1: Informants quoted in the thesis

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Fieldsite	Workplace Role	Ethnicity	Education Level	Marital Status	The number of Children
Bao	26	Male	Forest Park	Performer	Wa	College	Not yet married	0
Chen	32	Male	Waterfall Restaurant	Chef	Yi	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Cheng	21	Male	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Han	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Chun	22	Female	Forest Park	Performer	Lahu	College	Not yet married	0
Fang	28	Female	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Han	Elementary School	Divorced	2
Gao	26	Male	Tea Park	Performer	Han	Elementary School	Not yet married	0
Hua	22	Female	Forest Park	Performer	Lahu	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Huang	22	Male	Forest Park	Host	Wa	College	Not yet married	0
Hui	26	Male	Tea Park	Performer	Han	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Jia	17	Female	Tea Park	Performer	Lahu	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Jiang	26	Female	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Hani	Junior High School	Married	1
Jie	20	Female	Forest Park	Performer	Han	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Jun	23	Male	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Lahu	Junior High School	Not yet married	0

Table 1: Informants quoted in the thesis

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Fieldsite	Workplace Role	Ethnicity	Education Level	Marital Status	The number of Children
Kai	21	Male	Tea Park	Tour guide	Hani	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Lang	27	Male	Forest Park	Performer	Lahu	Elementary School	Not yet married	0
Liang	25	Male	Forest Park	Performer	Wa	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Mei	30	Female	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Han	Elementary School	Married	2
Meihua	38	Female	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Han	Junior High School	Married	1
Mi	21	Female	Forest Park	Performer	Hani	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Min	18	Female	Tea Park	Performer	Lahu	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Na	21	Female	Forest Park	Performer	Dai	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Ping	25	Female	Forest Park	Performer	Lahu	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Qi	21	Female	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Han	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Qiang	17	Male	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Yi	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Wang	21	Male	Tea Park	Performer	Lahu	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Wei	26	Male	Tea Park	Performer	Lahu	Junior High School	Married	1

Table 1: Informants quoted in the thesis

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Fieldsite	Workplace Role	Ethnicity	Education Level	Marital Status	The number of Children
Xia	18	Female	Forest Park	Performer	Wa	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Xiaobai	28	Male	(Formally) Waterfall Restaurant	Construction worker	Hani	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Xiaomei	21	Female	Forest Park	Performer	Wa	College	Not yet married	0
Xiaomi	17	Female	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Han	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Xiaoqing	17	Female	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Miao	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Yang	23	Male	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Han	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Yun	23	Female	Forest Park	Performer	Wa	College	Not yet married	0
Ying	17	Female	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Hani	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Zhang	19	Male	Waterfall Restaurant	Performer	Hani	Junior High School	Not yet married	0
Zhou	40	Female	Tea Park	Cleaner	Hani	Junior High School	Married	2

3.4 Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed in Chinese. All the recordings, transcripts, and field notes were stored in a secure place in my lap top as well as in the

university's cloud service system, and I am the only person who has access to these data.

Before systematically coding the interview transcripts and field notes, I read all the documents several times. Each time I kept a journal and wrote down the key themes that emerged from the transcripts, and also themes that I thought were interesting, puzzling, or even surprising. As I started analysing the data with a broad theme in my mind, "personal life", this enabled me to be open to all kinds of themes that were relevant and important to informants. However, exactly because "personal life" is such a broad theme, sometimes I could not help but feel overwhelmed by all these data. I found it difficult to decide which parts of the data were more or less relevant than others. As suggested by Richardson (2003), I used writing itself as a method of inquiry and knowing, long before I felt I could provide a coherent theorisation of the story that I want to tell. I started from writing the things that surprised me and things that were drastically different from what I had imagined based on existing literature before I entered the field. I also started writing things like descriptions of mundane everyday life—what the field sites were like, what I did in these sites, how work was arranged and conducted by informants, what they do outside of work, etc. By critically looking at these pieces of writing, thinking about what was missing from them, and considering how existing theories could or could not illuminate some aspects of what was written, I gradually found that these little pieces of writing came together in an increasingly clear and coherent way.

Alongside writing, I also used thematic analysis to code and analyse interview transcripts and field notes in a more systematic way. Although poorly defined, thematic analysis involves a range of decisions which the researcher should make explicit in their writing (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These decisions include what counts as a "theme", which not only relies on

the frequency with which such themes appear, but also depends on how they addresses the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Since this research is essentially inductive, as it seeks to produce theory based on existing data rather than the other way around, coding themes based on transcripts became an important step in starting the analysis. I coded all the transcripts manually using highlights and stickers. I also coded themes on electronic documents, which enabled me to go back and reread and rethink about the codes and themes again and again by searching key words.

Doing thematic analysis, using writing as a method of knowing, and revisiting and revising the specific research questions were processes that happened at the same time and mutually constituted each other. Data analysis is a fluid process rather than a once and for all stage of research, as I kept coming back to the transcripts and codes, while moving forward through writing and having conversations with existing literatures and academic colleagues.

At the same time, how the data were analysed was also shaped by my epistemological framework, as it determined my view about what constituted as knowledge, and how I could know. As this research takes social constructionism as its epistemological standpoint, it seeks to go beyond what the informants said in literal meanings, and seeks to understand the socio-cultural context underlying their discourses or shape their actions. From a constructionist perspective, “meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced, rather than inhering within individuals” (Burr, 1995, cited in Braun and Clark, 2006: 14).

Analysing data can be ethically challenging as well, since I am the one with power to interpret informants’ words and actions. Sometimes I did feel ambivalent about how much weight I should give to informants’ own interpretations. However, I am only presenting one way or one lens of

interpretation here, and I am by no means claiming that I know more about informants' "real" motives or emotions than they do. In Skeggs' (1997) research about working class women in Northern England, she discussed how her own theorisation of the women's experience may be different from their own interpretations. It happens especially when the researcher and informants "have differential access to frameworks for understanding" (Skeggs, 1997: 30). Nevertheless, power relations and different social positions do have a large impact on how the data were collected and interpreted. Therefore, these issues need to be considered in a reflexive manner.

3.5 Ethics in practice and reflexivity

In this section, I will detail how I made ethical decisions in the field, and think about these issues in reflexive ways. Ethical considerations are more than going through ethical forms and ticking boxes on checklists. There are many "ethically important moments" that the researcher may encounter during mundane everyday fieldwork—ambivalent moments that require the researcher's moral judgement, to which the answers are not readily provided in ethical guidelines (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Thus, there is a need to think about "ethics in practice"—"the everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research", and reflexivity could be useful in thinking through these ethical issues (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 263). Indeed, I find it difficult to think about everyday ethical conduct in fieldwork without being reflexive about my own roles and my relationships with informants in the field. Here, I refer to "reflexivity" as a conscious act in which researchers turn their scrutiny toward themselves to critically think through how their subjectivity influences their research, and how such subjectivity could be transformed from problems to opportunities (Mason, 2002b; Finlay, 2003). As researchers are part of the social world that they are trying to study, and as it is impossible to

distance oneself in the way that positivists may suggest to be necessary, to do reflexivity is also to think about “the location of the researcher vis-a-vis the field of study” (Carrington, 2008: 426). In thinking through ethical considerations in relation to reflexivity, I will mainly discuss the challenges of doing research on sensitive topics, emotions in research, and social positioning and power relations.

3.5.1 Research on sensitive topics: anonymity and consent

Researching sensitive topics such as people’s personal lives and intimate relationships can be ethically challenging. Informants are likely to be rendered vulnerable when asked to share information that is extremely personal (Brannen, 1988). In the context of China, sensitive topics also include “politically sensitive topics”. As pointed out by other researchers, one dilemma of doing fieldwork in China is that researchers are not entirely sure at which point the research will touch upon some politically sensitive issues since the standard of sensitivities is constantly changing (Svensson, 2006). Thus, protecting the information of informants is also crucial to preventing them from potential political harms.

The most important way to prevent harm is to ensure the anonymity of informants and the confidentiality of the information they shared. Pseudonyms were used to prevent informants from being identifiable. That is also the reason I decided not to reveal the real name of the city where I did the fieldwork, but refer to it by the pseudonym of Green City. As similar styles of ethnic performance also exist in other cities in Yunnan province, as well as other parts of China, readers are unlikely to recognise the sites by reading descriptions of them. All the field notes and recordings were carefully preserved, and were only accessible by me. Codes and pseudonyms were also used instead of real names to refer to informants in my field notes. All the field notes, recordings, and interview transcripts were stored in the cloud

service provided by the University of Edinburgh. Thus, even if other people accidentally gained access to my laptop, access to these materials would be protected with passwords.

Another way of preventing harm is to ensure that informants were recruited on a voluntary basis, and that they could decide whether or not to participate in the research and how much to reveal about themselves. However, gaining consent from informants is not as straightforward as it may seem. As mentioned before, gaining consent in field work is an ongoing process, involving not only the negotiation of access to the field upon first entry, but also throughout the whole process of fieldwork, including the consent to participate in research, to take field notes, and to record conversations (Thorne, 1980). One of the challenges for me was that I was working with a mobile group. Especially in Waterfall Restaurant, the turnover of the workers was high, with workers constantly leaving and new workers joining in. Therefore, I made sure to explain to every new worker what I was doing in the field, and gain their consent to include them in my field notes. Another challenge was in regard to gaining consent in semi-public settings. There were many other people in the field sites other than performers, such as tourists, guests, and gatekeepers. On one hand, it was not feasible to ask for consent from everyone in the field. If I were to approach every customer/guest to explain my research and gain their consent, it would make things much more difficult in the work setting—the work routine would be disrupted, and the disruption would probably not be welcomed by managers. On the other hand, it might not be desirable to gain consent from everyone in semi-public settings such as restaurants and tourist sites. People know that they are being observed by anonymous others by simply being there, therefore there is no reason that ethnographer should be subject to stricter requirements compared to other citizens and surveillance agencies (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). Therefore, I gained consent from people who were

directly involved in this research—performers and gatekeepers, but not customers who were coming and going all the time. At the same time, I made sure to respect guests' privacy (for example, by not insisting on going to VIP compartments when I was told this was undesirable), and I made no disruption to their visits and trips.

Another challenge in terms of gaining consent is to make sure that informants are not pressured to take part in research because of pressure from the managers. I made sure to mention to potential informants that they were not obliged to participate in this research just because the managers allowed me the initial access to the field. On the other hand, the fact that I gained access to the field through managers also had an impact on how I was perceived by informants. It took time to convince informants that I was not a “spy” sent from the government, and that my affiliations with people in managerial positions did not mean that I worked for them (e.g. Reinharz, 1997; Munro et al., 2004; Yeh, 2006). Thankfully, none of the gatekeepers expected me to do surveillance work for them. Still, such suspicion can be more salient in contemporary China, where political scrutiny permeates citizens' everyday lives in different ways. For example, local governments in China have long adopted the way of working by *kaocha*—doing “fieldwork-like-investigations” in local areas, especially in the rural areas—to gather data about different aspects of people's lives, and report these data to the higher-level government (Hansen, 2006: 87). Consequently, many local people are getting used to accepting these investigations, and may feel powerless to reject them even if they do not want to be investigated. This raises important ethical issues about how to explain research to potential informants who are not likely to be familiar with the notion of “ethnography”, but may have been exposed to “investigations” before. Overall, I found being as open as possible about my project and myself as a social subject and spending time in the field with informants to build up trust were important

ways to respond to these suspicions. It is also important, nevertheless, to acknowledge that there are limits in terms of being open about oneself, and a certain level of impression management, or even deception, are normally involved in ethnographic fieldwork (Bernard, 1995; Reinharz, 1997).

Besides, preventing harm in researching sensitive topics also includes respecting how much informants are willing to disclose about themselves. It is to recognise that informants are not powerless in the research process, as they have the agency to decide in what ways they would like to participate in the research. I have included in my brief statement before each interview that “you have every right to say stop at any point of the research”, and “you can refuse to answer if I asked any questions that you may not want to answer”. There was one instance when an informant decided to drop out of the interview whilst in the middle of it. I could see that he was struggling with having to face the emotions that arose from telling his story. I fully respected his decision, and excluded the half-finished interview from data analysis. At the same time, I also tried to prevent the infliction of emotional harm by not pushing the boundary of sharing. Once an informant told me at the beginning of an interview that she did not want to talk about her father’s death, because that was a very distressing event for her. I totally understood and respected her boundary of sharing, and made sure to not mention this topic in the interview or daily conversation with her. Indeed, the sharing of personal experiences can be very emotional and even distressing, but that does not necessarily constitute harm (Gabb, 2010). The important ways to prevent harm in researching sensitive topics include ensuring the anonymity of informants, making sure that they are joining in the research on a voluntary basis by gaining consent, and respecting how much they are willing to share about their personal experiences.

3.5.2 Social positionality and power relations

Being reflexive also includes thinking through how my social positionalities influenced the kind of data that I was able to collect, the relationships that I could build with my informants, and the ways in which the data were analysed and interpreted.

In terms of the outsider/insider division, I take the standpoint that the distinction between “insider research” and “outsider research” is sometimes unnecessary, since in a sense, all researchers in the field are both insider and outsider at the same time (Narayan, 1993). This is particularly true for me, since I was doing the research in my hometown, and I do consequently have some status as an “insider”. For example, informants and I share the same local dialect, and we have certain common knowledge about the local area. I did enjoy the benefit of having all kinds of local networks and resources, and gaining rapport with informants was easier than it might otherwise have been because we did share a lot of things in common (Scott, 2006). On the other hand, I was not an “insider”, since I have little pre-existing knowledge about the informants. In a sense, I had to “unlearn what I have learned” about many issues in order to convey the strangeness and intellectualise the mundane and the ordinary (Bernard, 1995: 154). For example, I had to re-evaluate common stereotypes about local ethnic minority people (which constituted my imagination of them in the research design stage prior to the fieldwork), or how I experienced the city myself as a local resident. As both an insider and an outsider, I agree that doing participant observation involves “immersing yourself in a culture and learning to remove yourself everyday from that immersion so you can intellectualise what you’ve seen and heard” (Jenkins, 1994: 437). Therefore, balancing “immersion” and “distance” in the field and building rapport while being wary of “over- rapport” (see Miller, 1952) are relevant to all researchers, whether

they are doing research as an insider or outsider. Compared to the insider/outsider division, perhaps more relevant factors in shaping the research process and power relations in the field are my social positionalities, including gender, ethnicity, and class.

As a woman researcher, I have to confront the gendered expectations that informants may have toward me. For example, female informants may feel more comfortable talking about families, relationships, and emotions with me, since these are regarded as common conversational topics between women (Munro et al., 2004). At the same time, approximately half of the interviewees were men. Interestingly, many of them were very willing to share their personal stories and feelings with me during interviews (although they may have controlled the way they told their stories to avoid challenging their masculinities). Unlike the stereotypes of being unemotional men or being more emotionally constrained, most male informants were not shy about expressing emotions using words or facial and bodily expressions during interviews. However, at the same time, I also had to confront sexist views from some of the informants, as they talked about their perspectives on some of the women in their lives and have made some sexist comments on me as a female researcher—an experience which is shared by many other female researchers (See Lee, 1997). For example, one male informant once said to me when he learnt that I was doing a PhD overseas—“what’s the point of getting all that education? Women are going to get married off anyway...such a waste of time!” Rather than confronting these sexist views directly, I sought to interpret them from a theoretical perspective—maybe he felt his masculinity was being threatened as he was interviewed by a woman who was more educated than him. However, extensive emotion work is also involved in this process. It is also necessary to point out that most sexist reactions I encountered in the field were not from informants, but from guests that I was serving. Such experiences enabled me to see from informants’

perspectives regarding what it is like having to confront gendered processes of bordering during daily service work.

My own ethnicity also played a role in shaping the relationships between my informants and me. I officially belong to an ethnic minority group—Hani—although this traces back several generations. Growing up in the Han community, I have lost almost all cultural connections with my ethnic origins, and am assimilated into being Han. One of the considerations that motivated me to do this research is the desire to know more about the meaning of ethnic identity, and the guilt of not knowing more about my own. I have therefore adopted the role of a “learner”, as someone who wanted to learn more about the meaning of ethnic identity and culture. Adopting the role of a “learner” could potentially help to reverse the unequal power relations between me and my informants, since they were the ones with the knowledge that I wanted to learn from (Wall and Stasz, 2010). Some of them did elaborate on the meaning of being ethnic minorities in contemporary China, and such elucidations were diverse and often personal. I have also surprisingly found that many informants share the similar concerns with me, as they too felt that they had lost the connection with their own ethnic identities. This enabled me to regard such “ambivalence” as a common issue that faces more and more among young people in China today, and to think about the social context which enables this to go beyond a private issue.

Nevertheless, I have learnt a lot from how my own ethnicity was perceived by informants, as well as my encounters with audiences and guests. Most informants assumed me to be Han, rather than being a Hani. Such an assumption reflects the cultural norm of how ethnic minorities are perceived and imagined. There were also times when informants felt that they shared more in common with me because of my status as an ethnic minority person. Those moments were when I realised how the umbrella term “ethnic minority”

could also provide some common ground for people to relate to one another more easily. Whenever asked by informants, I would be open and honest in sharing my own understanding of what this identification means to me—a sense of loss, a touch of guilt, as well as being not entirely sure whether this is something that should have meant more to me. I found such sharing useful in encouraging more conversations on this topic with informants.

Perhaps more present than other factors, the rural-urban divide also largely shaped my interactions with informants. Informants firstly and foremostly saw me as an urban person, before they got to know about my ethnic identity. The language of “class” has long been silenced in China’s society, while the new generation of working class migrant workers were struggling to be born (Pun and Lu, 2010). Rural-urban division becomes a more subtle and common way to talk about class and social stratification in China. As I mentioned before, the initial responses from some of the informants showed their insecurity about interacting with someone from the city, and raised their fears about not being treated as respectable people—feelings that perhaps they learnt from previous interactions with urban customers and residents. Conversations about the different lifestyles between urban and rural people were also prevalent in everyday fieldwork. For example, the appearance of my hands was commented on by an informant—“look at her hands, you could know from the look that they are the hands of urban people, unlike mine, rough and with calluses [from doing the farm work from a young age].” Therefore, it took a while before informants saw me as a sociable person, rather than all the labels attached to me. These encounters and interactions in the field also revealed how bordering was pervasive in informants’ everyday lives, and as something they had to constantly encounter and negotiate.

There were other factors that shaped field relations between informants and me, including but not restricted to my marital status, educational level, personality, status as a student in an overseas university, etc. At the same time, I am aware of my own biases and the value systems that I have brought into the interactions with informants, and how these shaped the way that I saw things. More important is also to recognise how my positionalities may further contribute to the power imbalances between the researcher and informants. Rather than trying to be detached and value-neutral, I sought to be reflexive and recognise how my own positions and values shaped the research in profound ways.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described why and how I used ethnographic fieldwork to address the research questions. This was a process that was filled with opportunities and challenges, as well as many ethically important moments. Many decisions that I made as a researcher were not just methodologically and ethically important, but also theoretically informative. While acknowledging that I am only trying to offer one interpretation, and there is no fundamental truth “out there” to be excavated, I regarded the fieldwork as a process in which informants and I generated data together. While learning from them, and trying to see things through their perspectives, I was nevertheless constrained by many limitations. It was therefore necessary to think about this process in a reflexive way, and to think about how to do the research ethically so that informants’ well-being would be cared for. In general, I have tried to turn some fieldwork challenges into useful theoretical insights, as the fieldwork process is itself illuminating and reveals many issues which deserve further academic exploration.

In the following four chapters, I will discuss the main findings of the thesis. The next chapter will seek to theorise the meaning of “ethnic performance”, and to think about the meaning of borders and “intimacy as a lens”.

Chapter 4: Theorising Ethnic Performance Work

4.1 Introduction

Although this project is about the value of using intimacy as a lens to explore broader inequalities, the starting point of such inquiry is work—in this case the ethnic performance that migrant workers are undertaking in Green City. The reasons for focusing on the role of work are multifaceted, and were mostly discussed in the literature review. Most importantly, it is a challenge to the assumption that we should discuss migrant performers' work and life as two separate areas of inquiry, as if they happen in parallel spaces without constantly shaping each other. This chapter shows the need to think about work and life as less distinct by firstly exploring the multi-layered meaning of ethnic performance. After an introduction of the settings and content of ethnic performance, different theoretical concepts will be used to shed light on the meaning of ethnic performance. I argue that what is going on in the workplace is much more complex and nuanced than a single framework—such as affective labour—can capture. Therefore, ethnic performance is better theorised as a site of encounters, in which ethnicity, gender, and the rural-urban divide all play important roles in shaping such encounters between service providers and receivers.

Furthermore, ethnic performance is also a site where different forms of mobility and labour regimes come together in a way that produce various forms of borders. Inspired by *Border as Method*, which suggests that border should be approached as an epistemological device (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), this chapter will show the ways that borders proliferate in performers' everyday work and migration journey. It will further point to the need to recognise and theorise the intimate and emotional aspect of such "border

struggles”—the constant negotiation around “the ever more unstable line between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’, between inclusion and exclusion” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 13). For example, the differential inclusion of migrants means that there is a tension between how, on one hand, performers’ performances are desired, and on the other, their presence as migrants without *hukou* is not. At the same time, while their performances are used to contribute to the intimacy at the banquet table, their own space for intimate relationships is compromised. These paradoxes should be understood as part of “border struggles”, and they highlight the role of intimacy in these negotiations. This chapter therefore further points to the value of using intimacy as a lens to theorise the different forms of encounters and bordering processes, as it reveals broader inequalities within the intimate and the personal.

4.2 The content of ethnic performance

This chapter will begin with an introduction to how performance work was conducted in three different field sites—Waterfall Restaurant, Tea Park, and Forest Park.

Waterfall Restaurant is a high-end *Nongjiale* (rural tourism) restaurant in Green City. *Nongjiale* restaurants have gained popularity amongst Chinese urban dwellers in the past 10 years. Aiming to provide authentic, rustic food from the countryside, *nongjiale* restaurants are embodiments of how romanticised rurality becomes a nostalgic ideal for urbanites (Park, 2014). Indeed, Waterfall Restaurant’s building and environment seek to make guests feel that they have entered a rural villager’s house. Upon entering the restaurant, what first appears is a courtyard, which resembles that of a farmer’s house. There are some vegetables and plants growing in a small plot, with corn cobs hanging on the pillars to create a harvest scene. When I

first walked into the restaurant, I saw waiters and waitresses dressed in colourful minority clothes having rest in the yard. It does appear to be an impressive scene for outside visitors. On the other hand, it is also a modern restaurant with high standards. The main dining area is a three-floored building in the yard, with 10 compartments designed for guests—each small room only accommodates one table of customers, which allows guests privacy during their meal. In the carefully decorated compartments, there are pictures and drawings of ethnic minority women hanging on the wall, which again suggests this is a high-end *nongjjiale* restaurant with local ethnic characteristics. All these suggest that this is not a cheap place to have meals, which is also reflected in the price of food.

What makes Waterfall Restaurant's case unique is that ethnic performances are undertaken by waiters and waitresses working in the restaurant. Their working uniforms are minority costumes—two sets of minority clothes of Wa and Lahu, which are both colourful and distinctive from Han costumes. Working in Waterfall Restaurant is demanding and tiring. The working hours are long—usually from 8 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock in the evening. Sometimes it can even stretch later into the night, depending on how late the guests stay. Working as waiters and waitresses is tiring itself since it is a popular restaurant with guests constantly coming in and out. Still, workers need to constantly shift their roles between performing and waiting tables since they need to perform songs to guests who have dinner in the restaurant whenever their performances are requested. Such extra labour is not recognised or remunerated.

A typical night at Waterfall Restaurant unfolds as guests come in for dinner at around six o'clock in the evening. By that time, workers in the restaurant have worked for seven hours since their workday starts at eight o'clock in the morning with a short break in the middle. They take shifts in doing tasks like

cleaning, buying vegetables from the market, serving guests who come for lunch, and doing preparation work for guests who come in for dinner—such as setting the tables, cleaning the compartments, and getting pre-ordered menus ready. Dinner time is often the busiest time during a day, since they have to squeeze in some time to perform for guests amongst their already demanding service work.

Ethnic performance can be requested for free by dining guests at Waterfall Restaurant. When they are called upon, everybody has to put aside their current service work and appear in front of the customers. Performances do not just entail singing minority songs in front of guests. While singing, performers have to take it in turns to massage guests' shoulders while proposing toasts to them—usually not in a negotiable way since competitive drinking is also an essential ritual during Chinese banquets (Kipnis, 1997; Mason, 2013). “You can't stop drinking while the song is still going on” (*geshengbuting jjubuting*) was often used to justify the compulsory drinking ritual by performers. Sometimes they also justify it by stating that it is part of the minority's culture. Every guest takes turns to enjoy such service—listening to songs while being massaged by an opposite-sex performer, as well as being the target of compulsory drinking. The atmosphere at the performance scene is often lively and passionate, with guests laughing, watching, and taking photos of the unique scene. The performance only ends when the guests say that performers can leave, at which point performers will switch their roles back to being waiters and waitresses. Their workload will increase at that point, since there will be more unanswered calls from customers.

Working as both waiters and performers in Waterfall Restaurant is certainly not an easy job. Performers have to shift between two different roles very quickly, and the work is generally tiring and demanding. One might ask, who

are these performers? Are they professionally trained to be performers? What are the contents of these performances? What's more, while dressing up as ethnic minorities and performing minority songs, do these performances have anything to do with performers' ethnic identities? I will come back to these questions after describing the kind of performances at two tourist sites in Green City—Tea Park and Forest Park.

Ethnic performance has become an important tourist attraction for visitors in Tea Park, alongside other attractions such as The Tea Museum, Tea Mountains, and temples to worship tea ancestors. The ethnic performance was initially designed to showcase that tea is an integral part of many minorities' everyday lives and is rooted in their cultures. There is one room named Lahu people's home (*lahuzhijia*) in the Tea Park. It is a medium-sized room with all the performances taking place there three times a day following a fixed schedule. Performances here are more stage-oriented, with performers being trained and the shows rehearsed. Without a clearly identified stage, the audience sits quite close to performers to watch their performances while drinking the tea (brewed using minority brewing methods) offered by the performers. With the fireplace burning, the tea brewing, and the minority performance going on, such minority song and dance shows seek to make the guests feel that they are actually enjoying tea in a minority family's kitchen.

The content of the show usually includes five to six songs and dances from different ethnicities, usually featuring the minority cultures of Wa, Lahu, Dai, Hani, which are the major minority groups that live around Green City. They are all undertaken by the same group of performers, which means that performers have to change costumes during the gaps between performances in order to dress up as minorities from different groups. The performance

lasts around half an hour, usually with an opening song to welcome guests' arrival, and a farewell song dedicated to the leaving guests.

Aside from the on-stage performance, another major part of performers' work is to *bancan*, which literally means "accompanying meals". This type of work largely resembles what performers are doing in Waterfall Restaurant. That is, they are performing minority songs to boost the atmosphere at the banquet table. They are also doing a series of tasks including urging guests' compulsory drinking, proposing toasts, and sometimes some bodily contact with guests as well, such as massaging guests' shoulders, drinking cross-cupped wine¹¹ with guests, etc.

The same activities of *bancan* also manifest themselves in Forest Park, although with higher frequency—performers have to do these on a daily basis apart from their routine work of on-stage performance. This is because Forest Park is much larger in scale, with groups of tourists coming to visit every day. In fact, Forest Park is the biggest attraction in the local area. It is a national park with an ancient forest and different kinds of animals. It usually takes two to three hours to have a tour in the park, during which ethnic performance is one of the attractions open for visitors to watch. The performance is formal in status compared to those in the other two sites. It resembles a professional show in the theatre with well-rehearsed minority songs and dances, as well as well-trained, semi-professional performers. The lighting effects, sound effects, and carefully decorated stage all point to the professionalism of the show. The show lasts for about half an hour, with the same group of performers dressed as different ethnic minority groups and performing diverse minority songs and dances.

¹¹ This involves the two people linking arms to drink the wine from their own cups, which is a ritual in traditional Chinese weddings that symbolises the bride and groom bonding.

Tourists who have dinner in Forest Park have the chance to enjoy performers' *bancan* at the dinner table while they are having meals. In a way, the Forest Park *bancan* partly resembles that in Waterfall Restaurant, with performances of songs and dances used to boost atmosphere at the dinner tables and the proposing of toasts and competitive drinking being important rituals. On the other hand, here, *bancan* is more organised and professional, with a host organising the whole process. There are also more activities involved in *bancan* here. For example, performers are normally expected to have cross-cupped wine with customers, usually from the opposite gender.¹² Hosts will usually present the performances in a stand-up comedy style, with jokes and stories that are supposed to introduce minorities' cultures and traditions to the guests. For VIP clients—managers' friends, superiors, and local cadres—more exotic “minority rituals” are provided, which include female performers sitting on male customers' laps while other performers force wine down the guests' throats. Such shows are surely impressive. With the *bancan*, guests' dining tables are always filled with laughter, songs, and cameras to record the special scenes. I also heard some tourists comment that they felt like they had only actually experienced the local ethnic flavours after the *bancan*. I will theorise the meaning of *bancan* in the next section.

In summary, there are different dynamics in working as ethnic performers in these three sites. But what is common amongst them is the fact that performers' work not only includes the performance of songs and dances, but also comprises various service tasks—waitressing, toasting, entertaining guests, etc. I will further explore the meaning of ethnic performance in the following section.

¹² I am aware that gender is non-binary. However, non-binary genders do not fit into the gendered culture in these spaces. Because the ways that ethnic performances are designed and organised largely rely on an essentialised understanding of gender. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

4.3 Exploring the meaning of ethnic performance

4.3.1 Performing ethnicity under the cultural authority of the state

First and foremost, ethnic performance involves what I call “performing ethnicity”, which means that performers’ exoticised bodies and presences are used to convey a sense of multi-ethnic culture, which in turn is promoted in nation-state rhetoric and embraced by the market economy. Ethnic performance was worth viewing from tourists’ perspective exactly because it is something extraordinary—something alien from most tourists’ everyday lives. It is under such circumstances that the performances can attract the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002). This attraction is also based on tourists’ craving to view “authentic” ethnic culture as part of living in the modern era (MacCannell, 1973). Such craving further serves to reaffirm tourists’ position as modern Han citizens (Walsh and Swain, 2004). Therefore, it is also a form of “Han gaze” which puts minority people in the position of the objects that are being viewed, while Han audiences are the viewers under whose gaze ethnic minority people are exoticised and eroticised (Schein, 2000).

Both the tourists’ gaze and the Han gaze are carefully guided and shaped by “the cultural authority of the state” (Nyíri, 2006; Nyíri, 2010). The cultural authority of the state in tourism shows through its framing of the meaning of the scenic spots. It advances a set of clear and hegemonic narratives about how tourists should interpret the meanings of scenic spots (Nyíri, 2006). For example, billboards and signs are certainly one mechanism that the state is using to affirm its “cultural authority” over scenic points. Once one steps out of the airport of Green City, one can see billboards and signs presented by the local Tourist Bureau, inviting one to “search for the most authentic ethnic cultures in Green City”, or “be ready to meet with the most sincere and passionate greetings from minority people”. Ethnic minority culture is promoted alongside Green City’s fresh air and lush forests as the attractions

of Green City's tourism business. In this way, the state directs the tourists' gaze, and influences how tourists are expected to view things that they encounter in the tourism journey. Certain scenic spots in China are also mobilised to educate tourists as patriotic citizens (Nyíri, 2006). As mentioned before, Yunnan is a place that is known for its multi-ethnic culture and its relative lack of ethnic conflict, and was expected to become "a model region of ethnic solidarity for the nation". The development of ethnic tourism in Green City was certainly also shaped by such an ideology to showcase its colourful ethnic cultures and further engender tourists' nationalist pride.

The ways that ethnic performances are designed and framed, therefore, reaffirms the cultural authority of the state. In Forest Park, before each performance starts, a host introduces the show to the general audience by providing a brief introduction of the relevant minority culture and traditions. This introduction is largely similar to the textbook introduction of ethnic minorities in China. It resembles the official discourses of ethnic minorities—such as how they are born to be naturally good at singing and dancing and how they used to live in primitive ways but were saved by the socialist regime. Such introductions, in accordance with the scripted shows that follow, reinforce official views and stereotypes of ethnic minority people in China (e.g. Gladney, 1994; Harrell, 1995). I heard a member of one audience expressing his opinions about the show—"I have never encountered a real ethnic minority person in my life before. The show is magnificent! I feel that I have seen what I have read from text books about minority people for the first time in real life." This audience member's reflection reveals how ethnic minorities are under-represented in many parts of China, and invisible in most people's ordinary and mundane lives. It is in that context that the tourist gaze is successfully constituted, as it falls upon something that departs from the tourists' ordinary, mundane routines (Urry, 2002). When they do appear,

representations of ethnic minority people tend to be shown in a strictly scripted and managed way.

However, interestingly, the people who are “performing ethnicity” are not necessarily ethnic minorities themselves. Some of the performers are Han Chinese, and some of them are officially registered as ethnic minorities but do not think of themselves as authentic minority people. In fact, less than half of performers in the three sites identify themselves as genuine ethnic minorities. There is also a general trend in all these sites that Han people are increasingly taking over ethnic performance work, since they are deemed more professional and manageable compared to minority people by the managers. Since singing minority songs does not require much professional skill or knowledge of ethnic cultures, it can be easily learned. Han performers themselves understand little of the meanings of the songs that they are performing, and they usually memorise lyrics with the aid of *pinyin*—the romanisation of Mandarin. Therefore, it is worth exploring whether the work of ethnic performers would necessarily have something to do with one’s ethnic identities, and if so, in what ways. I will discuss such dynamics in more detail in Chapter 6, where I explore questions of ethnicity. But it is important to point out here the tension that performers’ work involves: they must perform the “authentic ethnic minority” to meet the expectation of tourists’ gaze despite their ambivalent feelings about their ethnic identities. Concepts such as “tourist gaze” and “Han gaze” cannot fully capture how people experience such work from their own point of view. Also, performers’ work does not only involve being gazed at from a distance, but also includes frequent in-person interactions with guests. It is with these considerations in mind that I turn to theorising the other dimension of ethnic performance—service work.

4.3.2 Doing affective labour and service work at the banqueting table

Ethnic performance is fundamentally a form of service work, as *bancan* at the guests' banqueting tables is in fact the most important part of the performers' work. Since *bancan* involves physically proximate, and sometimes even intimate, interactions between performers and guests as described above, it is a form of "interactive service work" (Leidner, 1991). Such work brings the production and consumption of service into the same time and space, with the quality of such work largely determined by the interaction between service providers and guests (Urry, 2002).

Therefore, in theorising migrant workers who undertake ethnic performance labour, this research departs from the majority of work about migrant labour in China, which tends to focus on migrants who undertake manufacturing and construction work (e.g. Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005), although there are also notable exceptions (Hanser, 2008; Otis, 2011), especially about female migrants who undertake domestic service work (e.g. Yan, 2008; Sun, 2009a).

Ethnic performers' work experience should also be theorised in the context of China's rapidly rising service sector. In 2018, the service sector—broadly defined—has contributed 52.2% to the national GDP, which shows that a changing structure of employment has been ongoing in China (China Daily, 2019; Evans and Staveteig, 2009). The expansion of the service sector also largely shapes migrant workers' work and life in the cities. While the percentage of migrant workers undertaking manufacturing and construction work continues to decrease, the number of migrant workers who undertake service work has been increasing steadily each year since 1995 (Liang, 2016). At the same time, factories in southern China started have facing labour shortages since 2004, a problem that has not existed since the late 1970s (Choi and Peng, 2015).

This social context points to the importance of theorising the service work that migrants are increasingly undertaking, since service work may embody different dynamics than factory work in many ways. Unlike factory work, which arguably mainly involves workers working alone facing a machine most of the time, service work involves close interactions between service providers and receivers. Such physical proximity brings new challenges to migrants who undertake service work.

For example, ethnic performers, who are also waiters and waitresses, inevitably need to undertake “emotional labour” to regulate their own emotions in the service process (Hochschild, 1983) to ensure that it is a pleasurable experience for the guests. They are also, implicitly or explicitly, required to do a substantial amount of “aesthetic labour”, regulating their physical appearances to be aesthetically pleasing and attractive (Warhurst et al., 2000; Witz et al., 2003). In fact, their youth and aesthetically pleasing appearances are the required for them to be hired in the first place. There are also constant reminders during work that they should work hard to keep appearing attractive. Sometimes managers directly comment upon someone’s *yanzhi* in the presence of other workers. *Yanzhi*, a popularised word from the internet, literally means a person’s degree of good looks can be calculated into numerical values. By measuring performers by their *yanzhi*, especially for female performers, the pressure of doing aesthetic labour is internalised by many workers as legitimate part of the work. In the context of ethnic performance, the meaning of aesthetic labour may have another layer of meaning, since the expectation is that performers should look like authentic ethnic minorities. Their bodies become the sites where different aesthetic standards and different expectations of what constitutes an authentic minority are projected. At the same time, performers’ work is also highly gendered and sexualised in many ways. The most notorious example

is how female performers are sometimes expected to sit on the laps of male guests while toasting. Sometimes sexual harassment from guests is even legitimated as part of the work. I will theorise the impact upon performers undertaking sexualised work in more detail in Chapter 7. To sum up, it is difficult to capture the nuances and multifaceted meaning of ethnic performance by using a single framework, despite the fact that such a theorisation does benefit from concepts including emotional labour, aesthetic labour, and sexualised labour.

Another way to consider the different aspects of labour that ethnic performers are expected to do is to employ the concept of “affective labour”. Unlike emotional labour, which is more about how people manage their own emotions inwardly (Hochschild, 1983), affective labour points to the dimensions of labour which are closely associated with “the creation and manipulation of affects” (Hardt, 1999: 96). Performers are not just managing their own emotions, but also creating a “vibe” or “atmosphere” which contributes to guests’ banqueting. They do so by doing various types of bodily work and emotion work, which involves not only singing and dancing, but also serving guests in a physically close manner—even having bodily contact with them, as described before. Through this work, they are trying to engender and manage certain affects at the banqueting table, such as excitement, pleasure, sense of intimacy, even a sense of nationalist pride—as discussed in relation to tourism under the cultural authority of the state in the previous section. To better understand what performers are expected to achieve by doing affective labour, it is necessary to first gain an understanding of the social and cultural meaning of banqueting in China in general.

Bancan should be understood in relation to China’s banqueting and business entertainment context. Banqueting and competitive drinking have long been

recognised as an important way for people to build up *guanxi* (relationships, networks, or connections) in China (Kipnis, 1997). Since the rise of marketisation in 1980s, banqueting has also become an important way for government officials and business elites to build up and maintain *guanxi* (e.g. Osburg, 2013). For them, banqueting and drinking has even become an integral part of their job outside of office hours and spaces, since it is an effective way to get things done (Mason, 2013). The important roles of emotions and feelings in *guanxi*-building has been increasingly highlighted by scholars (Barbalet, 2017), and successful banquet and business entertainment should be able to turn “interested, calculated, commodified relationships into ones rooted in ‘irrational’ sentiment and affect” (Osburg, 2013: 33). Doing so requires having shared experiences of pleasure and intimacy during business entertainment, which was previously usually achieved by going to places such as karaoke bars, massage parlours, etc. Sex services are sometimes included, as being able to do illicit things together shows a certain level of trust (Osburg, 2013).

However, things have changed at the official level since Osburg’s fieldwork was undertaken from 2002 to 2006. In 2012, President Xi launched an austerity campaign against extravagant consumption and corruption by officials. The sites that used to be important for elite entertainment became no longer acceptable—at least on paper. Government officials and public servants were even formally banned from entering karaoke clubs. This major change means that banqueting and business entertaining need to be conducted in a much more legitimate and discreet form. Sites where ethnic performance is conducted seem like a safe choice, since promoting local ethnic culture and celebrating the multi-ethnic culture of the state seem politically expedient. Dining in Waterfall Restaurant, which claims to be a *nongjiale* restaurant, would avoid the appearance of extravagant spending, although the price of banqueting there suggests a different story.

It is in these contexts that the meaning of ethnic performance as a form of affective labour should be reconsidered in relation to the changing landscape of business entertainment, as well as the mostly unchanging banquet culture in China. I argue that the things that performers were doing during *bancan*—through singing, urging guests’ compulsory drinking, proposing toasts, and sometimes even having bodily contact with guests—are all important ways to create certain atmospheres and sentiments at guests’ banqueting tables, thereby also contributing to guests’ *guanxi*-building process (see Chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion of the role of gender in this process). This is not to deny the existence of emotional labour in ethnic performance. In fact, certain affects are successfully conveyed due to performers undertaking emotional labour to manage their own emotions, as well as body work which involves aesthetic labour and sexualised labour.

Despite the fact that “affective labour” can contribute to our understanding of how performers’ labour is used to contribute to guests’ *guanxi*-building process, however, it still cannot capture the complexity, nor the multidimensionality, of ethnic performance as a form of labour. The fact that performers need to do multiple aspects of labour is better captured by the concept of “the multiplication of labour” in theorising how the bordering process also leads to labour being more diversified (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). In other words, one is expected to do multiple aspects of work at the same time, many of which tend to not be recognised or remunerated economically. In later chapters, I will also discuss how performance work involves working on one’s ethnic self in a certain way to meet guests’ expectation of meeting authentic ethnic minorities (see Chapter 6). Therefore, it is difficult to capture within a single framework the multi-dimensional labour that performers are undertaking, which is closely related to their emotions, sense of self, and relationships with other people.

Another shortcoming of using a single framework is that it cannot capture the tensions inherently lie within performers' labour. For example how performers' labour is desired on the one hand while their presence in the cities are not on the other hand. The bordering process works in a way which produces "differential inclusion" for migrant performers (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). In an ethnography about ethnic Yao people who travel across the Sino-Vietnam border to occasionally perform ethnic songs and dances in China (and lack any official identity in China, rendering them "illegal" migrants), Barabantseva (2015) convincingly argued that they are desirable and disposable at the same time. While their performances were desirable to showcase China's multi-ethnic culture, their presence is not, since they are illegal migrants without legitimate visas (Barabantseva, 2015). In a similar vein, migrant performers also face the tension of their performances being desired on one hand, and their presence as migrants without *hukou* being undesired on the other. In contrast to the migration of Yao people, this "differential inclusion" happens *within* the national border, but their relationships with the local population in the area to which they migrate is analogous.

Another tension lies in how performers' affective labour was used to facilitate intimacy, which is a crucial component of China's capitalist economic mode (Osburg, 2013), while their own time and space for intimacy was compromised since they have to be away from families in order to find work in the cities—a point I will return to in the following section. In *Love and Gold*, Hochschild provides the powerful metaphor which effectively captures how the nanny's love and care—like gold—are extracted from the global south, and re-implanted to middle class families in the global north (Hochschild, 2003b). Such metaphor could also be employed to theorise the performers'

dilemma of undertaking affective labour while compromising their own intimate space.

While affective labour as a single framework cannot capture the multidimensional meaning of performers' labour, it also cannot capture the power relations that are at play in shaping the service encounters. It is evident—as I will show in the next section—that the different social positions of performers and guests profoundly shaped how the service work was undertaken. To be more specific, the power disparity between rural, ethnic, and often feminised service providers and the urban, Han, masculine consumers largely shaped how the process of service work and its implication for ethnic performers. Therefore, without completely denying the usefulness of affective labour as a concept in this research, I argue that ethnic performance could be better theorised as a site of encounters.

4.4 Ethnic performance as a site of encounters

Considering ethnic performance as a site of encounters firstly means the need to consider what kinds of social forces are shaping such encounters, e.g. ethnicity, gender, and the rural-urban divide. It also means considering ethnic performance as a site where different forms of mobilities come together—the tourists' mobility and the migrant workers' mobility. The different forms of mobilities are all under the cultural authority of the state, and are ascribed different values. The mobility regime also shapes the organisation of labour, and therefore shapes the production of capital. Inspired by *Border as Method* (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), I will also consider ethnic performance as a site where different forms of borders were produced and maintained, and where border struggles proliferated.

The idea of theorising service work as a form of encounter is inspired by Amy Hanser's work about service encounters in the context of retail business in

urban China (Hanser, 2008). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, Michele Lamont, and Raymond Williams's work on social boundaries, Hanser's work compellingly shows how social distinction was produced from both organisational and interactional levels. This is called "distinction work". One of the ways that such "distinction work" is done is through the interactions between service workers and customers, during which service workers need to act in a way that recognises customers' status as respectable urban consumers with economic power and cultural tastes. Gender also plays a crucial role in the construction of "distinction work", as organisations heavily rely on workers' gendered and sexualised bodies to send messages about distinctions and class (Hanser, 2005). Hence, numerous "service encounters" reveal how symbolic boundaries are transformed into social boundaries, and what inequality feels like to people (Hanser, 2008).

Building on her work, I aim to further develop the idea of "encounter" in the context of ethnic performance work, and use it to refer not only to the physical interaction between workers and guests, but also the ways that workers encounter various bordering processes through work and migration. I will also highlight performers' own emotional and intimate experiences of such encounters—what I call the "intimate negotiation". Furthermore, it is crucial to think about the broader social and cultural context that shapes such encounters. While Hanser's work lies in a context in which "class" is the most prominent context that shaped the service encounter, in the context of ethnic performance, ethnicity is the most crucial element (though this does not mean that class and ethnicity are not mutually shaped and intertwined in China's context).

4.4.1 Encountering ethnicity, gender and the rural-urban divide

Most notably, ethnic performance as a site of encounters is "framed by ethnicity", in the same sense that social interactions are "framed by

gender” (Ridgeway, 2009). By “gender as a frame”, Ridgeway means the ways that gender works as a primary frame whenever and wherever we step into a social situation in order to relate with other people. For example, we need to use our common knowledge about gender to situate a person as male or female before we can engage in any form of social interaction with him/her, with failure to do so resulting in undesirable consequences (Ridgeway, 2009; Ridgeway, 2011). At the same time, although gender exists as the primary frame, it also constantly intersects with other institutionalised rules and cultural norms. In the case of ethnic performance, ethnicity also becomes an important frame that deeply shapes social interaction between guests and performers, since most guests are led to believe, and are constantly reminded, that they are interacting with “authentic” ethnic minority people.

Performers’ work uniforms—colourful minority costumes with bright colours and sparkling decorations—loudly broadcast their differences. These are not the costumes minority people would usually wear in their everyday lives, but are designed for on-stage shows. With their unique looks, such clothes clearly set them apart from other people in the restaurant. I myself wore these clothes when I was working at Waterfall Restaurant together with other performers. I have noticed how different I felt the moment I put on the minority costume. On my walk from home to the restaurant, people were constantly staring at me. In the workplace, guests often took out phones to take pictures of me with other performers. Some of them would also ask me where I was from, and what kind of *minzu* I belonged to. I felt that I had become an object of their gaze the moment that I changed into my costumes. It is therefore not surprising that performers would quickly change their costumes right after work, even it was only a short walk from the restaurant to their dormitories.

Indeed, the minority clothes that performers wear bear certain marks, contributing to the distinction between Han audiences and performers. I remember sitting on the stairs with other performers once in these clothes while some male customers passed by staring at us. One of them looked down and asked us—“Aren’t you cold in these clothes?” Without waiting for our response, another man said, “That’s how minority people are. They are not afraid of coldness, and they sit on the ground all the time.” At that time, none of us said anything. I found such responses ironic because none of us sitting there were “authentic” minority people—a concept that I will look at more critically in Chapter 6. Yet our dresses and body images seemed to further strengthen the stereotypes of ethnic minority people. Such small encounters are common in performers’ work, during which they are constantly exposed to audiences’ comments and questions about their ethnic identities. Those performers who do not identify themselves as ethnic minorities often make up something when being asked questions by the guests. It is an unspoken rule that the audiences must be given the impression that they are meeting “authentic” ethnic minorities. At the same time, the environment and the settings of the sites where ethnic performance takes place also constantly remind guests that they are interacting with ethnic minority people. This, as I show, has inevitably shaped the interaction between performers and guests.

At the same time, the service encounters are also “framed by gender” (Ridgeway, 2009), and the gendered frame intersects with the ethnic frame in various ways. As mentioned before, the content of the ethnic performance and *bancan* mostly reproduce “the Han gaze” (Schein, 2000), which shows the image of ethnic minority people in Southwest China as being exotic and erotic. Under this Han gaze, ethnic minority men and women are both feminised.

For example, the songs that are performed are the popularised versions of minority songs, which usually romanticise minority peoples' intimate relationships, with strong sexual connotations. There is one song that is especially popular which is titled "If You Are Going to Visit Me Tonight". It tells a story of a young beautiful minority woman waiting for her lover to come visit her. It ends with her singing, "if you want to visit me tonight, visit me during my dream, then you can do whatever you want to do with me." It shows the stereotype of minority women as more open and sexually available (Gladney, 1994; Schein, 2000). Guests would laugh every time they heard this song, especially male guests, some of whom would keep repeating and telling dirty jokes after the song ended. Other than that, the introductory lines from the host during *bancan* at Forest Park also bore a strong sense of gendered and sexualised bias and prejudice. In order to achieve the "fun" atmosphere, the host would tell jokes such as how minority people are born with passionate hearts, and fall in love quickly with other people. Such ways of framing the service encounter also shaped how performers and guests interacted with each other.

It is also notable that the customers who require the most extensive service are normally urban elite men. As mentioned before, sometimes female performers are required to sit on the laps of male customers while toasting. In a way, female performers are "projecting the idealised masculinity" to the male customers (Osburg, 2013: 10)—as female workers and as ethnic minority women who are often imagined to be more sexually open (e.g. Walsh, 2005). These all point to the sexualised and gendered nature of ethnic performance. It poses different challenges for male and female performers to undertake such work. Their intimate negotiations when encountering gender at the frontier of ethnic performance will be explored further in Chapter 7.

In a similar vein, ethnic performance as a site of encounters is also shaped by other important social divisions—most notably the rural-urban divide in this case. As shown before, the performance sites are embodiments of how the countryside is romanticised in rural tourism. The correlation between ethnic minority people and a rustic feel of the rural people is deliberately made strong. The accents and bodily features of performers are also used as markers to draw distinctions between the rural and the urban. I will further discuss what it is like having to encounter the rural-urban divide during everyday work life for performers in Chapter 5.

However, it is important to note that performers are not just experiencing encounters along the lines of ethnicity, gender, and the rural-urban divide in the context of service work. These encounters are informed by social divisions outside of the workplace, and are brought into the service interactions. Furthermore, while framing theories, such as the gendered frame (Ridgeway, 2009), are convincing in explaining the influence of existing frames in shaping interactions, they do not focus on how individuals themselves experience such frames and how such experiences impact on their personal lives.

Therefore, in the context of ethnic performance, it might be more useful to think about these encounters in relation to the borders that they produce, and how informants emotionally experience these borders from their own perspectives, rather than the other way around. In other words, it is productive to think about how certain frames frame the encounters. Apart from the social divisions that shape these encounters, ethnic performance is also shaped by the broader labour and mobility regimes. It is with such considerations that I turn to the following theorisation of the intersection of mobility, labour, and capital.

4.4.2 Bordering processes—mobility, labour, and capital

Ethnic performance should also be understood in relation to the important role that ethnic tourism has increasingly played in the local economy. The development of tourism in Green City “stems from nothing, and grows into prosperity”¹³, and its revenue tripled from 2006 to 2015. The flourishing ethnic tourism in Green City was evident. During my fieldwork from 2016 to 2017 in Green City, two new restaurants and bars opened which employ ethnic performance to attract guests. There is also a Lahu village in an adjacent town to Green City that is turning itself from an ordinary village into an ethnic-themed park that includes ethnic performance and charges ticket prices for visitors to enter (e.g. Oakes, 1998). The village has been widely promoted in the local and national media, as it successfully achieved poverty alleviation through revenues earned from ethnic tourism. This has shown how the cultural authority of the state in regulating scenic points does not just lie in its framing of the meanings of the tourist scene—it also shows through how the state uses tourism to boost the economy of “underdeveloped regions” (Nyíri, 2006). This is certainly true in the case of Green City, which is located in one of the most impoverished provinces in China. Tourism has consequently become one of the major revenue sources of the local economy, with ethnic tourism playing an important role in attracting tourists.

Ethnic performance could further be understood as a site in which different forms of mobility come together and are inscribed with different cultural values. For tourists, who are mostly urban middle class people, tourism becomes a way to consume culture and improve cultural taste. It is also an important way for them to practice their class privilege. In that sense, tourists’ mobility is desirable and is in fact promoted by the state. At the same time, the mobility of performers, who are mostly rural migrants, is encouraged and

¹³ This is from a local news report on line. The specific link will not be put here in order to ensure anonymity of the place being researched.

facilitated, because their labour is desired in the city. However, their settlement and entitlement are problematised by means of *hukou*. Here, *hukou* works as a bordering device which ensures the ‘differential inclusion’ of migrants (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Johnson, 2017), and structures their entitlement and settlement in the city.

Moreover, the differential inclusion of migrants, together with the mobility regime, also intersects with labour regimes in various ways for migrant performers. Like migrant workers in factories who mostly work under precarious conditions and for prolonged hours (See Pun, 2005; Chan et al., 2013; Chan, 2014), migrant performers in service work settings also work under exploitative labour conditions, though these conditions tend to be less theorised than factory work. The working conditions of migrant performers show most obviously through workplace rules.

As mentioned before, most migrant performers work for long hours, ranging from 10 hours to 15 hours a day. Some of them also have to take extra shifts such as *bancan* in order to supplement their meagre wages. Like many other rural-urban migrants in the informal service sector, one common characteristic of such work environments is that they tend to go under the radar of labour laws and regulations (Otis, 2011). For example, in Waterfall Restaurant, none of the performers have signed employment contracts in any form. They only have the restaurant owner’s verbal agreement to allow them to work there. This is actually illegal, and against labour law in China. However, local governments often have less incentive to strictly implement labour law, while they try to lower labour costs to attract investment and develop local economies (Friedman and Lee, 2010). Migrant workers as “outsiders” also have fewer resources and networks to assert their labour rights. Also, unlike workers in factories who can take collective action such as strikes and succeed in rare cases (e.g. Chan and Pun, 2009), collective

action does not seem like an option for service workers in small-scale businesses. Therefore, performers work in a context where the business owner has the power to define labour conditions and workplace rules on his/her own terms.

The restaurant owner of Waterfall Restaurant is a middle-aged woman, and everyone calls her Ms Yang. Before restaurant workers start work, they need to hand in photocopies of their identity cards, as well as a deposit of 1000 Yuan (roughly 100 Pounds Sterling) to Ms Yang, which is almost half of one month's wage. If the workers quit without Ms Yang's approval, they lose the deposit money. As a consequence, every time the workers want to change jobs, they risk losing their deposit money, which is not a small sum for them considering their wage.

Besides, it is notoriously difficult to take leave in Waterfall Restaurant other than the normal weekly day off, which is only a half day per week for each worker. There is also a rule that one worker can only take extra time off four times a year, under the condition that it is approved by Ms Yang, and two workers cannot take leave at the same time. Therefore, leave time is not a guaranteed right for workers, but a luxury. They have to carefully calculate and manage their chances to take leave, and also need to negotiate it with other workers because there can only be one person taking leave at a time. This sometimes creates tensions between workers, since conflicts may arise when they are negotiating the chance to take leave. Therefore, such working conditions create a situation in which on one hand, performers are expected to create intimacy at guests' banqueting table by doing multiple dimensions of work, and on the other hand, their own spaces for intimacy—such as spending time with family or friends, or having good relationships with co-workers, are largely compromised. In that sense, borders do not just connect

and divide different forms of mobility, but also bring two social groups' intimacy together.

To sum up, as rural migrants without local *hukou*, most migrant performers work without signing an employment contract with business owners. The lack of a labour contract and formal regulations means that workers are much more prone to exploitation and unreasonable treatment. It gives too much power to the business owner, and she/he becomes the sole rule maker in terms of all the working policies and regulations. It also creates a labour context that “allows customers to exert direct control over, and often dominate, workers” (Otis, 2011: 4), as managers will side with customers but not with workers even if workers are treated unfairly by customers. Such a context ensures that migrant workers are not only economically vulnerable, but also emotionally exploited. It is in this context that one can see the intersection of labour, mobility, and capital, which creates the proliferation of borders and border struggles. It further points to ethnic performance as a site where borders are produced and maintained. In the following section, I will seek to show some of the intimate negotiations that performers have when encountering these bordering processes.

4.5 Intimate negotiation along the borders

As discussed in Chapter 2, I define “intimate negotiation” as a series of private negotiations people have regarding emotions, sense of self, and relationships. In this section, I will give some examples to show what I mean by intimate negotiation along the borders.

The first example would be in relation to performers' sense of entitlement during work. Working in the restaurant as a waitress was a new experience for me, and the first thing I noticed was how customers treated me in a very different way than how other people treat me when they regard me as an

educated, urban, middle class person. There was one instance when I realised a customer had left her coat in the restaurant, and I ran to the parking lot to hand her the coat. I was shocked as she just took the coat from me and left without saying anything. That is why I did not feel surprised when there was a heated debate online earlier in 2019 in China about whether people should say thank you to delivery people, since a survey showed that being thanked when accepting deliveries is amongst the top three concerns for delivery workers (What's on Weibo, 2019). It was through the numerous encounters with customers that I realised how I took for granted the level of respect and social recognition that I have received for many years. The moment I started to dress like an ethnic performer undertaking a migrant's job, I was immediately subject to a different level of respect and social recognition. Such an experience also helped me to understand how borders were created during service encounters, and how one will have a series of emotional, personal, and intimate experiences of such borders.

For example, I remember vividly one scene of working together with a waitress named Fang at Waterfall Restaurant. As she and I were setting up the dinner table while waiting for the guests to arrive, she looked at the full table of delicate dishes and said to me: "You know, sometimes I wonder when could I ever afford to have such a feast? I don't think I will ever be able to do that." I know that Fang is probably right, since one such feast would cost more than half of her monthly wages.

It is not just the increasingly widened economic gap that was experienced by service workers like Fang during their daily working lives, but also the emotional gap regarding what they feel they are entitled to—for example, respect. For instance, an informant named Jiang talked about how it was normal for her to put up with guests' unreasonable requests and their temper during work. She said, "As a migrant worker, it is inevitable that you become

a person whom anyone can vent his spite upon”. For Jiang, being a migrant worker was immediately linked with being entitled to a lower level of respect. Such a different sense of entitlement was naturalised in all sorts of interactions with urban guests, and was ensured by different institutionalised regimes, such as the mobility and labour regimes discussed in the previous section.

Before the customers enter such service encounters, they already carry within themselves different “structures of entitlement”. The “structure of entitlement” shows how people from different social groups have different senses of what they are entitled to (Hanser, 2008: 8). It could be in relation to a formal type of recognition—for example, people deemed to have high cultural value may feel that they should be entitled to urban *hukou* and all the associated benefits, and they take such entitlement for granted (Woodman, 2017). At the same time, such structures of entitlement could also be in relation to some micro and mundane aspects of life, such as how much respect you expect to receive when you step into service encounters. Performers’ different senses of entitlement are an example of how they experience the bordering process which largely structures their sense of entitlement, and how such encounters have an impact on them both emotionally and personally.

Another example is after-work entertainment. Nothing is more enjoyable than finally finishing a long day of tiring work in the restaurant. I have noticed that many informants change their clothes immediately after work, even if there is only a short walk from restaurant to the dormitory. They seem to be eager to take off their work uniforms—colourful minority clothes that advertise their differences from most of the urban citizens, one that broadcast their ethnic and rural origins. Right after work, they change into their own clothes—mostly fashionable outfits, amongst which some are counterfeit clothes of

famous labels like Nike and Adidas. Some of the girls will reapply their makeup before stepping out of the restaurant. For some of the migrant workers, their time for socialising and entertainment is just starting after work.

It was at first surprising for me to find out that many informants spend a large amount of money on entertainment after work. Nightclubs, karaoke bars, and barbecue booths are places that they usually patronise with co-workers and friends. As they often get off work late, these socialising and entertainment activities usually happen late at night and usually end at or after midnight. I joined such entertainment activities on several occasions, trying to find out why many informants spend so much of their hard-earned wages on such activities. It is not easy to understand, since when I asked informants during interviews, they often found it difficult to articulate the reasons that they enjoyed entertainment activities so much. However, many of them did complain to me that it was difficult to save money since a large part of wages went to the consumption of clothes and entertainment.

Otis (2011) has proposed the concept of “aspiring urbanites” to describe how migrant workers respond to their marginal position by dressing up like and longing to become urbanites. This mainly applies to migrant workers in service sectors. They are in a marginal position in society because of the institutionalised regimes discussed in the previous section. These include the *hukou* system that renders them as second-class citizens and the absence of legal protections of their labour, which give too much power to customers and neglect the daily discrimination that workers experience at work. As a response, migrant workers aspire to look like or behave like urbanites in order to earn respect outside work. Other research has also shown that instead of viewing rural migrants’ consumption as individualistic choices, a more sophisticated understanding should take into account the social context that shapes their consumption practices (Zheng, 2003). For migrant workers

who are unable to gain power and recognition through formal channels, everyday practices—even just at a superficial and trivial level, could become a form of resistance (Ding, 2017).

These theories can also help us to understand the mentality behind the informants' consumption of entertainment activities. As I have described before, migrant workers who work at the frontier of service work experience different intersecting borders during their daily lives. Many informants mentioned that entertainment is useful in terms of releasing the stress they experience at work. More importantly, during such activities, they successfully transfer their roles from “producers” to “consumers”, thus entering power relationships in which they are the more powerful side. Interestingly, some informants also associate consumption of entertainment with the project of discipline of the self to become modern citizens by catching up with the trend, and by letting go of the “backward” and “country-bumpkin” self-images:

Lang: Men are like this. They prefer to have fun. If you don't go out and have fun, you will probably be left behind. But if you play too much, that's not reasonable either.

Researcher: Why would not going out lead you to fall behind?

Lang: If you don't play you will become a thoughtless man. You don't have contact with other people, right? You will become dumber, and won't know how to behave properly. You just sit there looking silly. Is that a good thing for you? No! Whether what you say is right or not, be open, right? People will think you are a fun person too. (Lang, 27 years old, male, Lahu, Forest Park)

For Lang, “knowing how to play” has become closely related to his self-identity and masculinity. He internalises the feeling that minority people are backward and shy, and therefore need to improve themselves by practising social skills and keeping up with modern lifestyles in the city. Hence, he treats entertainment and socialising as a kind of self-improvement tool, which could enable him to abandon the image of the rural, backward self, and to embrace the modern, open-minded self.

Besides, entertainment has become a major way for migrant workers to experience potential romance, love, and sex. Migrant male workers are usually undesirable marriage partners in the city. Their meagre wages mean that they cannot compete with male urbanites or better-off fellow villagers. More often than not, they are caught between the western ideology of romance and love and the need to conform to traditional practices of marriage with local girls back home (Wang and Nehring, 2014; Choi and Peng, 2016). With migrant workers being treated as undesirable marriage partners in the cities, they use entertainment opportunities to express their longing for romance, love, and sex. In fact, many informants meet their dates or future partners during these entertainment activities.

However, such opportunities do not come without certain costs. During a later interview, Lang also mentioned the conflicting feelings he had towards socialising. On one hand, his meagre wage does not allow him to spend much on socialising. On the other hand, he thinks women are realistic nowadays, and he feels the need to invest more in potential relationships.

Researcher: Do you think it is difficult to find a girlfriend?

Lang: It is a bit hard for us, yes. In the city, you have to spend money. You have to treat girls to meals, buy them presents, take them out to have fun, right? That's not small money if you sum it up. Otherwise, girls have other places to go. (Lang, 27 years old, male, Lahu, Forest Park)

Lang is stating that women overvalue the material conditions of men, and he does feel the stress relating to his courtship practices. The practices of bill-paying are gendered in China, with men are expected to pay the bill during dates to showcase their masculinity (Choi and Peng, 2016). This has added to the economic burden of dating for some migrant workers with low incomes. Sometimes, it further marginalised them in the urban marriage market. For migrant workers who do spend a lot of time and money on

consumption and entertainment, this has put them in a more vulnerable position, as their financial capabilities are further weakened by such practices.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that women are the ones that benefit from such activities. Female migrant workers are sometimes stigmatised for participating in entertainment activities. There is a clear double standard towards the desirability of men and women's participation. For example, some of the male informants specifically said that they do not want their future girlfriends or spouses to spend too much time going out and having fun. Meanwhile, they seem to be fine with themselves going out quite often. This has led to disputes between couples as well, sometimes even leading to the end of relationships. This is because of an essentialised understanding of gender and the moralising of women's sexuality. This will be further explored in Chapter 7, which examines the gendered aspects of border encountering experiences for migrant performers.

These two examples not only illustrate how performers encounter bordering processes in emotional and personal ways, but also show the blurred boundaries between their work and personal lives. The lack of respect or the sense of entitlement to be respected during work leads informants to seek respect and a sense of self-worth elsewhere. Through spending large amounts of money on consumption and entertainment activities, they aspire to add value to themselves, and become respectable (Skeggs, 1997). Consumptions and entertainment also become ways for them to work on their "project of self" (Rose, 1992), so that they can aspire to be urban, modern citizens who know their way around and are different from the backward, primitive self-images that they have to present at work. The borders between work and life are thereby challenged as well. Just as Kathi Weeks powerfully states in *Life Within and Against Work*:

Once we recognize that work produces subjects, the borders that would contain it are called into question. It is not only that work and life cannot be confined to particular sites, from the perspective of the production of subjectivity, work and life are thoroughly interpenetrated. The subjectivities shaped at work do not remain at work but inhabit all the spaces and times of non-work and vice-versa. Who one becomes at work and in life are mutually constitutive. There is no position of exteriority in this sense; work is clearly part of life and life part of work. (Weeks, 2007)

In that sense, these two examples—the sense of entitlement at work in relation to respect, and after work consumption and entertainment—are certainly interrelated as well. It is difficult to spot the borders between life and work, since it is difficult to say at what point work stops and life begins. However, there are other forms of borders that profoundly shape people's emotions, senses of self, and relationships. Since such borders are intimately and emotionally experienced by performers in this research, intimacy as a lens may provide us valuable perspectives to further explore the meanings of borders.

4.6 Conclusion: life, work, and intimate borders

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed description of what performers' work is like. By exploring the meaning of ethnic performance, and by theorising it through sociological concepts, I firstly discussed why work is a useful starting point of inquiry, and therefore deserves further theorisation. Furthermore, by showing how a single framework cannot capture the multi-dimensional meaning of ethnic performance, and as the multiplication of labour means that performers are expected to do several kinds of work at the same time, this chapter argues that ethnic performance could be best theorised as a site of encounters. This on one hand means that the service encounter between performers and customers, due to the nature of interactive service work, requires that they interact with each other in a

physically proximate manner. On the other hand, ethnic performance is also a site where performers have to constantly encounter multiple bordering processes at the same time. Such encounters are intimate, personal, and emotional—as shown through the examples of performers’ senses of entitlement to respect and their consumptions and entertainment activities. These intimate encounters with borders also point to the need to see work and personal life as closely related and mutually constitutive, rather than different spheres with clear boundaries.

This chapter lays a foundation for later chapters in theorising the usefulness of the lens of intimacy to understand these border struggles and border encountering experiences. Further, as I have shown in this chapter, these bordering processes most prominently revolve around the rural-urban divide, ethnicity, and gender. Therefore, in the following three chapters, I will discuss in more detail performers’ experiences of bordering processes through work and migration. As performers are firstly and foremostly rural-urban migrants, the rural-urban divide is something they have to encounter during their everyday lives, as I examine in the next chapter. Hence, the next chapter will illustrate the intimate negotiations migrant performers have along rural-urban borders. The lens of intimacy will be used to understand these border struggles in relation to the rural-urban divide.

Chapter 5: Intimate Negotiation Along the Rural-Urban Borders

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter set out how different borders proliferated in shaping migrant performers' experiences, amongst which the most significant borders are along the rural-urban divide, ethnicity, and gender. This chapter will continue the exploration of ethnic performers' intimate negotiations along these borders by focusing on how performers encounter the rural-urban divide emotionally and intimately. At the same time, the value of using intimacy as a lens to explore the meaning of the rural-urban divide will be demonstrated and discussed.

The first section of this chapter aims to bring emotions into theorising rural-urban migration, in particular the role of *hukou* as a formal rule, or a form of administrative border in defining and shaping the rural-urban divide. Taking seriously informants' complex emotional reflexivity regarding *hukou* will help to illuminate "the *hukou* puzzle" (Chen and Fan, 2016)—why migrants are not enthusiastic about transferring their *hukou* to an urban area, despite the fact that in theory they could do so. Taking account of emotions helps to provide alternative understandings rather than assuming migrants are making such decisions merely based on rational choices. It will also help to reveal the underlying assumptions of *hukou*, and how individuals' emotions reveal the broader emotional regime of our time.

Besides, *hukou* is just one amongst the many forms of bordering that shapes the rural-urban divide. The bordering process also works through attaching different cultural meanings to the rural and the urban. Such different value

systems shape migrants' personhood by motivating them to embrace migration in order to achieve valuable personhood. It is an example of how borders produce and shape subjectivities in different ways (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). This chapter therefore seeks to show the value of using intimacy as a lens to understand migrant performers' experience of encountering the rural-urban divide.

5.2 Bringing emotions into theorising rural-urban migration in China

During the Spring Festival of 2017, I went to a friend's home in a rural village to spend the festival there. It was two days before the Lunar New Year, and the road was busy with traffic as many people were traveling home for this special occasion—rural-urban migrants were also among these busy travellers. One image attracted my attention, and it still lingers in my memory vividly today. It was a man who was riding a motorcycle—from the way he dressed, he looked like one of the migrant workers who were driving home. What attracted me was a box of fruit attached to the back of the motorcycle, on the box there were three big characters—*Zhongguo Meng* (The China Dream). It looked like a gift he had bought for his family back home, as it is common to bring gifts home during Spring Festival. The man with the motorcycle traveled past our car quickly, but the three big characters lingered in my mind for a while.

The China Dream was a slogan brought up by President Xi Jinping in 2013, which depicts China's national goal of furthering its powerful role on the world stage. Needless to say, urbanisation is also part of this big dream, as are the hundreds of millions of migrant workers behind this dream. The China dream also emphasises achieving the happiness of the people, and ties this goal closely with the advancing of China as a nation. It could be said that rural-urban migration has become a means for many rural people to fulfill their "China dreams". Indeed, when informants were talking about the reasons to

migrate, they rarely regard economic reasons as the sole or most important driver that motivates their migration. Their migration journeys were motivated by complex emotions that were shaped by certain imaginaries and aspirations related to being good citizens and living good lives—such as that depicted by the China Dream. The image of the man carrying the fruit box struck me not just because of the emotions it evoked for me as a researcher, but also as a reminder of the need to put emotions at the centre of inquiry to understand rural-urban migrants' experiences.

Migrations are certainly highly emotional experiences. Nevertheless, however, with few exceptions (see Chapter 2), most work on rural-urban migration do not examine the roles of emotions in a systematic way. That is to say, little research puts emotion at the centre of the inquiry to ask what rural-urban migration makes people feel. Writing on emotion in this literature tends to be scattered throughout the work rather than being organised and analysed in a systematic way. Also, the exploration of emotions and migration tends to be confined to relationship spheres, while emotions relating to other aspects of migration receives less attention. This chapter is an effort to show the value of theorising migrants' emotions systematically for revealing the social. It is also an attempt to show how the lens of intimacy enables us to understand ethnic performers' experiences of the rural-urban divide as fundamentally emotional, and what we can learn from taking a closer look at these emotional experiences. Without confining the emotional to the relationship sphere, in this work, I will ask questions about what migration regimes make people feel. This also includes bringing emotions into theorising administrative migration regimes, which are too often assumed to be unemotional.

Also, it is an approach that will refuse to treat emotions as the consequences of migration. Rather, it will seek to use emotions as an analytical tool to

understand migration and personal lives. Further, despite the fact that it is notoriously difficult to define emotions, the theorisation of migration would benefit from a closer engagement with sociological theories of emotions. For example, the different definitions of emotions would influence the different theoretical approaches that could be used to research emotions and migration. In this chapter, I will largely draw on emotion theories such as emotional reflexivity (Holmes, 2010; Brownlie, 2011; Burkitt, 2012) and emotional regime (Reddy, 2001) to help make sense of people's emotions in relation to migration. Therefore, it is firstly necessary to specify how emotions will be defined, and what approaches and concepts are deemed useful in understanding migration in this context.

Sociologists of emotions have long argued against the tendency to see emotions as entities within individuals' minds and bodies. Instead, it is necessary to see emotions as relational—as they emerge and evolve in relation to other people, and in relation to certain contexts. I follow Burkitt's theory in defining emotions as a response to the way in which people are embedded in patterns of relationship, both to others and to significant social and political events or situations (Burkitt, 2014). I also find the concept of "emotional experience" useful in that it allows us to talk about complex emotions without necessarily naming the emotional categories that we are referring to (McKenzie, 2016), such as positive and negative emotions, or happiness and unhappiness. According to McKenzie's (2016: 50) definition, to explore "emotional experience" is to recognise "the emotional dimensions of social experience", and to "reinforce the function of emotion as an experience that connects the self to society as mutually dependent concepts". This also reaffirms the insight that both emotion and emotional experiences are deeply embedded in patterns of social relationships. Therefore, by using emotion as a lens to understand performers' experience of encountering the rural-urban border, the broader social context that

shapes such encounters will need to be understood. It is difficult to specify when and where these encounters happen, as borders proliferate in many different aspects of social life (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). However, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that the encountering of the rural-urban divide can happen in many different contexts for rural-urban migrants, including encountering the urban landscape, interacting with other people, etc. It can also happen not just in real life encounters, but also in migrants' imaginaries as they think about their future plans and their entitlements as migrants. Among all these invisible borders that characterise the rural-urban divide, *hukou* policy is definitely a prominent one, and arguably a more or less formal bordering mechanism. Therefore my examination of the emotionalisation of the rural-urban divide will start there.

5.3 Encountering the rural-urban border through the formal rule of *hukou*

When one thinks of the borders that divide and define the rural and the urban in China, the first thing to note is probably the administrative border of the *hukou* system. *Hukou* has also long been at the centre of the debate on rural-urban migration in China. It classifies people according to their place of birth into agricultural *hukou* and non-agricultural *hukou*. Although this division started to be abolished in 2007 in Yunnan province (See Zhan, 2017), it still functions as a mechanism to tie people's welfare entitlements to certain places. Therefore, it still plays a significant role in constructing the rural-urban divide.

The following section firstly aims to point out one of the surprises that puzzled me when I found out that informants are generally not willing to transfer their *hukou* to Green City, although they can do so in theory. Responding to an article which systematically examined this "*hukou* puzzle" (Chen and Fan, 2016), I argue for the need to take into account the

roles of emotions in understanding this puzzle. I further explore what kinds of emotions are involved during migrants' negotiations around their senses of entitlement to local *hukou*, and how "emotional reflexivity" can be a useful concept here to understand their negotiation over *hukou*. Meanwhile, "emotional regime" (Reddy, 2001) will be used to understand these emotions in relation to their broader social and historical context: neoliberal governance in China.

5.3.1 The *hukou* puzzle

While it is well-recognised that migrants without *hukou* are rendered vulnerable in different ways (Solinger, 1999; Liang, 2016), it is often implied that urban *hukou* should be a desirable status for migrants to achieve. Therefore, it was initially surprising for me to learn that most of my informants were not as enthusiastic as I expected they would be to transfer their *hukou* to Green City, despite the fact that it is theoretically easy to do so—as I will discuss in relation to *hukou* policy in Green City in the following section. The same surprise was increasingly shared by other scholars, although it still remains under-theorised.

Chen and Fan's (2016) article is among the first which systematically explores this puzzle by asking why rural migrants do not want urban *hukou* (hereafter the "*hukou* puzzle"). By relying on the Floating Population Dynamic Monitoring Survey (2010-2012), which sampled 4,912 residents' committees and villages in 106 cities nation-wide using probability proportional to size sampling, Chen and Fan (2016) explore how migrant workers respond to changing *hukou* policies, and the rationales underlying their decision-making in relation to *hukou* transfer. The changing value of urban *hukou* and rural *hukou* is at the core of their theorisation. To be more specific, they argue that with the increasing benefits attached to rural *hukou*, the value gap between rural *hukou* and urban *hukou* is increasingly diminished. Migrants in many

places no longer need to obtain urban *hukou* in order to access many basic social rights—for example their children’s right to get education. As transferring *hukou* means losing the right to use rural land in most cases, maintaining rural land back home becomes the most important answer to the *hukou* puzzle. Therefore, migrants are motivated to “straddle the city and countryside in order to maximise their entitlements and minimise risks” (Chen and Fan, 2016: 31).

Undoubtedly, this article is among the first to bridge the theoretical gap of the *hukou* puzzle, and convincing evidence and arguments are provided to make sense of the puzzle. However, firstly, what is lacking is the perspectives and voices of migrants themselves. While the big data set is useful in revealing overall patterns, it cannot speak for people’s own experiences. Secondly, the underlying assumption of their theorisation is that migrants have all the knowledge they need to make these decisions. However, as shown through my field work, migrants do not always have all the information they need to make *hukou* transfer decision as a result of the fast-changing *hukou* policies, as well as their outsider status (a point to which I will return in the following theorisation). Thirdly, the underlying assumption that people will always make rational choices in order to maximise their profits largely neglects how emotions play important roles in these negotiations. There is a lot more to consider when migrants are making decisions about *hukou* transfer, such as their relationships with significant others, how they envision their entitlements, and what aspirations they have for their future lives. Therefore, considering *hukou* transfer is not just about rationally calculated gains and losses, but is fundamentally an emotional experience. It has already been pointed out that migrants do not make decisions regarding whether to stay in the city based solely on rationality, as emotion plays a major role in their decision making process (Du and Li, 2012). In the following sections, I show how we can understand the *hukou* puzzle differently by taking into account

different emotions that infuse migrants' encountering of *hukou* as an administrative bordering process.

5.3.2 *Hukou* policy in Green City—an opaque and changing system

It is firstly important to situate “the *hukou* puzzle” in its local context, as *hukou* policies are very different in different areas. The *hukou* system in China has changed over time, with gradual changes over the past 30 years loosening rigid controls over population mobility (Liang, 2016). The so-called “*hukou* reform” in 2014 was intended to abolish the division between agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou*. However, the reform was far from thorough, since the long-existing division between local and non-local *hukou* still remains (Goodburn, 2014). Despite the *hukou* reform, another change is that since the 1990s, local governments have more power and autonomy in dictating the implementation of their *hukou* policies, whereas the power was previously largely in the hands of the central government (Chan and Buckingham, 2008). Although as Guo and Liang (2017) rightly remind us, local governments' autonomy in deciding *hukou* policies are not without restriction, *hukou* policies can nevertheless be implemented quite differently in different places.

More importantly, the implementation of *hukou* policy in medium and small cities can be quite different from big cities like Beijing and Shanghai. Some literature suggests that *hukou* conversion—transferring one's *hukou* to the city—is easier in small to medium sized cities, because local governments may have less to offer in terms of public service and welfare provision (Chan and Buckingham, 2008; Tao, 2010). In fact, small and medium sized cities are purportedly at the forefront of the *hukou* reform (Tao, 2010; Goodburn, 2014; Zhang, 2018). There are also attempts to bring new ways to enable migrants to transfer their *hukou* to the cities. For example, the point-based

system, which is similar to some countries' immigration systems, was utilised by more and more cities in China to select the few, eligible migrants and grant them local *hukou*. Such selections are largely based on migrants' "personal qualities", such as educational levels, whether they are in formal employment, etc. Therefore, the primary aim is to develop local economies by attracting "talent", rather than promoting social equity (Zhang, 2012). Most migrant workers are not qualified for point-based migration, since they are not usually highly-educated, and they tend to take up informal employment (Lin, 2015); migrant performers in this research who work as service workers in small restaurants and tourist sites fall into this category. The point-based system, therefore, creates further inequality amongst migrant groups, and there is still a big gap between citizens' demand and state provisions (Guo and Liang, 2017).

More recent literature confirms that a differentiated approach to *hukou* acquisition (*chabiehua luohu*) was implemented in 2014 to allow cities of different sizes to have different *hukou* policy principles (State Council, 2014, cited in Zhang, 2018). Among them, the policy principles for towns and small cities (county-level cities) are that "*hukou* acquisition should be open to all those with legal and stable residence" (Zhang, 2018: 866). Such policy shifts call for more empirical data about how migrants themselves experience the loosening *hukou* policies in small and medium sized cities, which remains a relatively under-researched area. Therefore, Green City is a good example to explore, as it is a small city in Southwest China with a population of around three hundred thousand, and is not a popular migration destination compared to many big cities in the eastern coastal areas. One might wonder, therefore, whether migration regimes like *hukou* are implemented differently here, and what it means for migrants like my informants.

As reported in the news media¹⁴, some local governments were even encouraging people to switch their *hukou* from agricultural to non-agricultural, since they were under pressure from the central government to achieve certain quotas to increase the percentage of the urban population (as the number was often used to measure urbanisation). The process was often called *nongzhuancheng* (from rural to urban). Therefore, certain local governments were even pushing villagers who remained in the villages to transfer their *hukou* to the city in order to meet the requirement of this quota. On the government website of Green City, I found multiple documents at the provincial level urging the local governments to meet certain targets of *hukou* transference¹⁵. I suspect that at a certain point, Green City government was subject to pressure to achieve a certain target for purposes of achieving bureaucratic goals. Overall, the *hukou* policy in Green City and the ways it was implemented were more nuanced and complicated than the rather homogeneous depiction of *hukou* in most migration literatures would suggest.

Generally, without interviewing local government officials, I have little knowledge of how *hukou* policy was actually implemented in Green City. But as I am focusing on how migrants themselves experience *hukou*, my lack of knowledge about *hukou* policy in Green city may actually be beneficial, as this put me in the same position as many of my informants. Therefore, I would argue that it is important to recognise that migrants are exploring a quite opaque system of *hukou*. When Chen and Fan (2016) argue that migrants are making rational choices in order to maximise their benefits, the underlying assumption is that people have enough information to weigh their gains and losses, which is not what I have found in this research. As people

¹⁴ See for example: <http://news.cntv.cn/2015/03/23/VIDE1427112535332815.shtml>. In Chinese. Accessed on 4th December, 2019.

¹⁵ Out of anonymity concern, I shall not provide the website links here since otherwise it would make Green City identifiable.

are navigating a rather opaque system, the role of emotions is even more important, and therefore should not be neglected.

5.3.3 Emotional reflexivity in making *hukou* transfer decisions

I find the concept of “emotional reflexivity” particularly useful in shedding light on how emotions are always involved in shaping the ways migrants experience *hukou*.

Reflexivity—a capacity of humans to make sense of their lives based on existing knowledge (Giddens, 1991), is often defined as rational and based on calculation. However, previous literature has convincingly shown how it is necessary to bring emotions into the theorisation of reflexivity (Holmes, 2010; Brownlie, 2011; Burkitt, 2012). Emotional reflexivity is not a complete departure from the normative definition of reflexivity, but it points to the need to bring the emotional angle into understanding reflexivity. Therefore, the rational and emotional are inseparable in understanding reflexivity. In that sense, reflexivity can be defined as “an emotional, embodied and cognitive process in which social actors have feelings about and try to understand and alter their lives in relation to their social and natural environment and to others” (Holmes, 2010: 140). Reflexivity is emotional also due to the ways that emotions are “woven into the fabric of the interactions we are engaged in”, and emotional reflexivity “is therefore also central to the way we relate to ourselves as well as to others” (Burkitt, 2012: 459). Therefore, by using emotional reflexivity to think about informants’ decision making processes regarding *hukou*, it is crucial to think about how their emotions are deeply situated and shaped by their relations and interactions with others and with their social surroundings.

I define emotional reflexivity as the ways that emotions are always involved in shaping the ways that people think about their positions in the social world,

and take actions accordingly. I find this concept useful because when people are making decisions about *hukou*, they are actually thinking about something bigger than that—e.g. their life stage, sense of belonging, how they define success and happiness, and their aspirations and desires. In other words, they are thinking about their own personhood, their relationships with other people, and their relationships with their social world. The following quotes are examples:

If I could finally start my own business and be successful, of course I would want to transfer my *hukou* here and stay in Green City permanently. Who doesn't, really? But I would not dare to think about things this far ahead...It's useless to think about success and *hukou* and things like that when you are nowhere near it. The best thing to do is to focus on your current life, and try your best to succeed. (Yang, 23 years old, male, Han, Waterfall Restaurant)

I will probably think about transferring my *hukou* when I get married and settle down. Before that, it makes no sense to do so. I am the only daughter in my family. I cannot carry my *hukou* wherever I go, right? (Ping, 25 years old, female, Lahu, Forest Park)

Firstly, these two quotes are typical in showing how young migrants usually think about *hukou* in relation to their life stages. While male informants like Yang often attach *hukou* with having one's own successful career, female informants like Ping often attach *hukou* with marriage and settling down. Therefore, the *hukou* decision is also very much about what kinds of people they envision themselves to be, their relationships with other people, and the future lives they aspire to live. To think about *hukou* largely requires emotional reflexivity. Indeed, there are different emotions infused with this process.

A sense of shame was shown through Yang's remarks, as he does not think that he deserves to get an urban *hukou* since he is not successful at the moment. "Not dare to think about it" also suggests that getting *hukou* is something distant, out of reach, and could even be emotionally daunting. Informants like Yang tend to internalise that *hukou* is only for those who are

successful and established, as they are already accustomed to the mentality that some forms of citizenship in China become a reward rather than something equally accessible to every citizen (Woodman and Guo, 2017). Therefore they do not feel entitled to it, and they blame themselves for not being successful enough to gain it.

At the same time, these emotions could be understood in relation to migrants' sense of entitlement. It is crucial to recognise how people from different social positions may have different senses of what they should be entitled to. Negotiations around the sense of entitlement is inherently emotional. Hanser (2008: 8) has insightfully proposed the concept of "structure of entitlement" to understand how people from different class backgrounds have different senses of entitlement, and carry such different senses of entitlement with them into social interactions. The imaginary sense of entitlement matters, as research has shown how different kinds of cultural qualifications shape how migrants imagine their entitlement to *hukou*—e.g. migrants with higher educational levels think they deserve local *hukou*, and they take that sense of entitlement for granted (Woodman, 2017). Besides, Yang's reflection on himself as not being successful at the moment also shows how his definition of "successful" is largely shaped by the hegemonic masculinity ideal which closely relates one's masculinity with money-earning abilities (Choi and Peng, 2016; Choi, 2018).

What Ping says also reveals the underlying logic of *hukou* which regards sedentarism as the norm, and problematises the settlement of people who are constantly mobile (Salazar and Schiller, 2014; Woodman and Guo, 2017). "I cannot carry my *hukou* everywhere" is a common dilemma facing all migrants who might be constantly on the move. It means that it is difficult, if not impossible, for one to obtain a local *hukou* wherever they go. As *hukou* fundamentally works as a mechanism that ties a person's welfare entitlement

to a certain place, it is a system that normalises sedentarism. Allowing migrants to transfer their *hukou* from rural areas to urban areas cannot fundamentally solve the problem unless the *hukou* system is abolished completely. Ping also needs to think about her position as the only daughter in the family, and her relationship with her parents when thinking about *hukou* decisions. She mentioned in other parts of the interview that she felt the strong obligation to return to care for her parents when they got older as the only daughter in the family. Therefore, transferring *hukou* may not seem like an option for her. These all highlight the importance of emotional reflexivity in this process.

Secondly, even though having one's *hukou* transferred to Green City was theoretically easy according to the policies discussed above, in practice it remains difficult to achieve. Such difficulty mainly comes from the lack of the information on how *hukou* actually works for many informants. None of my informants seem to know about how things work exactly in Green City, and the information about *hukou* seems to be inaccessible for the majority of them. As mentioned before, even as a researcher I could not gather enough information about how *hukou* policy works in Green City unless I talked to government officials. It could be argued that the *hukou* system is quite opaque in Green City, as opposed to a clearly structured system such as the points-based system in many other cities. Migrants' outsider status makes it especially difficult for them to access such information, as they are less likely to have local networks and connections. Furthermore, with the *hukou* policy changing constantly, it is even more difficult to keep up with the most updated version of it. One cannot know exactly what kinds of benefits one would lose if one's *hukou* was transferred to another place. These all contribute to a sense of uncertainty and the lack of trust.

For example, some informants mentioned the ways that social policies regarding land are changing rapidly. They therefore have to be very careful when making decisions, or risk losing the few benefits that they have. The fear of losing out was amplified when a proper social security system was lacking:

Researcher: Have you thought about transferring your *hukou* to Green City?
Zhang: I haven't thought about it before. If you do transfer your *hukou* here, the lands back home will no longer be yours, and then you will have nothing left. If I don't have a proper job here...I do not dare to do this. I need to at least properly settle here, and have some kind of security (*baozhang*).
Researcher: What if you did have such security here?
Zhang: If that were the case...I think...I would want to transfer *hukou* here. I wanted to have my mother moved here...I mean move to live here. Because back home...I feel sad when thinking about how hard my mom has to work. (Zhang, 19 years old, male, Hani, Waterfall Restaurant)

I need to think about my children—if I have no land left for them, what will they do if they can't survive in the city in the future?...Everything is changing so fast in this society...The road leading to the Park, it used to be a muddy road...Who knows what the future may bring? (Zhou, 40 years old, female, Hani, Tea Park)

Echoing Zhang and Zhou, some informants are reluctant to consider *hukou* transfer because of their entitlements to land. At the same time, children's educations are the primary issue that motivates migrants to transfer their *hukou* to the city. These findings echo what has been discovered through large data sets (see Chen and Fan, 2016). However, it is still necessary to understand a series of emotional negotiations around the right to land. Maintaining the right to use the land back home can provide a feeling of security exactly because of the lack of comprehensive social security for rural residents.

In China, there is a large gap between urban pension schemes and rural pension schemes, with the former being much more developed than the latter. Without a comprehensive rural pension scheme established, rural residents still heavily rely on their land, family support, as well as private commercial insurance to maintain their old-age security (Shi, 2006). At the

same time, the regional inequality of social provision is also stark in China (Shi, 2017), meaning that while rich regions may have good pension schemes for local citizens, poverty-stricken regions may have very limited pension schemes or may even not have any rural pension schemes at all. Therefore, the fact that most migrants are expected to rely on themselves to arrange old-age security amplifies their fear of making the wrong decision, which would lead to detrimental consequences.

Meanwhile, since migrant workers who are not “locals” are usually excluded from local social welfare schemes (Tao and Xu, 2007; Shi, 2017), their land remains a safety net for migrant workers to fall back on if they cannot successfully remain in the cities. Giving up rural *hukou* largely means giving up the right to use rural land, and as long as there has not been a good system established to fairly remunerate people for giving up their land rights (See Tao and Xu, 2007), giving up rural land for urban *hukou* is a big risk to take.

This is also related to migrants’ lack of confidence in gaining access to social security in cities, requiring them to rely on the land back home to offer them a sense of security. Barbalet (1996) is right in pointing out how confidence and trust are social emotions, and they are emotions that emerge when actors are facing the unknown future. While confidence and trust arise when facing the imaginary future, they are both deeply shaped by past experiences. The lack of confidence and trust that they will gain enough social support in the city pushes migrants to insist on keeping their lands back home as a form of social security. This mode of emotional reflexivity was related to the earlier point about how migrants are supposed to be successful through individual efforts. In the next section, I will seek to show how these feelings and emotions are shaped by the emotional regime of neoliberalism, which emphasises individual responsibility.

Thirdly, some informants are not willing to transfer their *hukou* because of their senses of belonging and place-based identities. In order to understand these forms of emotional reflexivity around *hukou*, we need to firstly understand people's emotional attachments to places, especially to their home places. Previous research has asserted the importance of native-place (*jiexiang, laojia*) identities in migrant communities (e.g. Zhang, 2001), as this points to the importance of place-based identity in shaping migrants' interactions and belonging. However, what has been less talked about is how *hukou* plays an important role in shaping place-based identity.

While acknowledging that "place-based identity" as a term might be too broad and generic, Joniak-Luthi (2015) proposes the term "home-place identity" to theorise the various ways people form attachments to their home places. Emotions surely play a major role in these negotiations, and her informants employ different strategies to downplay the negative connotations attached to certain home places. For example, they may use more general terms to refer to their home places rather than bring up names that are usually associated with stigmatisation and may bring discrimination, such as by referring to the name of the province rather than the name of a specific city (Joniak-Luthi, 2015). The author also recognised that a person has multiple ways to define his/her home place, such as according to one's birthplace, place of residence, or parents' native place. However, one way in which the state influence penetrates seemingly individual identity politics is through the state-established household registration system: *hukou*. As one's *hukou* is registered in one's birthplace and clearly marked on one's ID card, it plays a role in shaping how people define "home place". It is in such a scenario that "state institutions enter into individualised identity politics" (Joniak-Luthi, 2015: 82), as sometimes people refer to the place where their household registration lies as their home place (*jiguan*). In that

case, *hukou* becomes one of the mechanisms which contributes to and sustains people's home-place identity:

Researcher: Have you considered transferring your *hukou* to Green City?
Liang: No. Why do that? I don't want to become a Green City person anyway. I think my hometown is a good place...And I'm a rural person after all (benlai jiushi nongcun ren) (Liang, 25 years old, male, Wa, Forest Park)

Informants like Liang mentioned that they do not wish to transfer *hukou* because they do not think of themselves as Green City people, or even urbanites. The emotions attached to their place-identity negotiations should be recognised when trying to understand their decisions around *hukou* transfer. When their state-endorsed place identity—manifested by *hukou* registration—confronts their individual definition of home place, the tension adds to their adherence to who they are and which place they choose to call home.

From Liang's perspective, we can also see how *hukou* actively plays a role in constructing home-place-identity. Some migrants do associate the place of *hukou* registration with their home-place identity. In a sense, it could be argued that the existence of the *hukou* system makes place-based identity more salient. At the same time, the difficulty of feeling a sense of belonging in Green City also prevents informants from taking a next step towards settling down there. Rather, it reinforces their sense of being "out of place".

In summary, rather than understanding migrants' juggling between the rural and the urban as a way to maximise their profits, it is important to recognise the important role of emotions in this process. I am not arguing that migrants are making decisions purely based on their emotions. Instead, emotions infuse migrants' decision making in relation to *hukou*, or how they imagine their future decisions to play out. Hence, emotional reflexivity is a useful concept here to capture the ways that emotions are always involved in

informants' reflexivity regarding *hukou* decisions. Moreover, emotional reflexivity reveals how migrants' consideration of *hukou* is closely related to their senses of self, relationships with other people and relationships with the social world in which they live. As one's emotional reflexivity is clearly situated in the broader social context, a further question needs to be asked— are there broader emotional regimes which shape people's emotional reflexivity? It is with this consideration in mind that I turn to explore the broader emotional regime in situating migrants' emotional reflexivity.

5.3.4 The intersection between emotional regime and migration regime

“Emotional regime” refers to “a normative order for emotions”, which is often enforced by political institutions in a given historical context (Reddy, 2001: 129). Elias' work on changing standards of etiquette and the emotions involved could be an example to show that there are different emotional regimes across historical and societal contexts (Elias, 1978). While Reddy's work mainly points to the overall emotional regime in a certain society as a singular form of norm (Plamper, 2010), Wettergren's work shows how organisations can embody certain emotional regimes which might be different from other institutions (Wettergren, 2010). Her work also shows that there are emotional sub-regimes existing in one particular historical context, and certain emotions can be used to challenge the existing emotional (sub)regime (Wettergren, 2009). Therefore, the meaning of emotional regime is still under negotiation.

It has been rightly pointed out that the intersection between emotional regime and migration regime needs further exploration, as it shapes how migrants regulate their emotional expressions in the context of transnational migration (Ho, 2014). Borrowing this idea, I employ the concept of emotional regime to

refer to a set of rules, norms, and practices about how to feel within certain historical and social contexts, and situate migrant performers' experiences in the broader emotional regime of contemporary China. This approach resonates with Barbalet's proposition of using a macrosociological approach to study emotions. Indeed, although it seems counterintuitive to study emotions, which are often thought to be private and exists at individual or interactional level, from a macro level, it can be beneficial to approach them in this way (Barbalet, 2001; McKenzie, 2016).

Then what could describe China's current emotional regime? I argue that the current emotional regime is deeply rooted in China's neoliberal governance, which expects people to be self-reliant. Although there is a lot of debate around the meaning of neoliberalism in China (e.g. Harvey, 2005; Kipnis, 2007), it is increasingly recognised that neoliberal ideology is used as a form of governance to shape individuals' subjectivities and emotions (Rofel, 2007; Yang, 2014; Wielander and Hird, 2018). Here, I take neoliberalism to mean how an "individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being" (Harvey, 2005: 65). This resonates with previous literature which points to the direct link between neoliberal governance in China and the discourse of *suzhi* and happiness (Yang, 2014).

Suzhi is generally translated into human quality, which is used in the various governing processes in China, and is also widely used in daily life (Kipnis, 2006). *Suzhi* discourse was often related to neoliberal governmentality, since they share the similar deployment of value coding which "inscribes, measures, and mobilises human subjectivity as the powerhouse for productivity and development" (Yan 2003: 497). In that sense, some people are regarded as embodying high *suzhi*, while others are deemed as embodying low *suzhi*—rural-urban migrants and ethnic minority people are often related with the latter (e.g. Friedman, 2006; Jacka, 2009). Furthermore,

suzhi is often used to legitimate inequality by suggesting that people are responsible for their own predicament (Murphy, 2004b).

Besides, “the quest for happiness is one of the most important stories in China today” (Kleinman, 2011: 267). Indeed, many mainstream discourses that characterise contemporary socialist China are to do with happiness, such as “positive energy” and “the China Dream” (Hird, 2018). Happiness is also used by the socialist state to measure their degree of success or, so to speak, the realisation of the China dream (Wielander, 2018). Under the current emotional regime characterised by neoliberal governance, the “happiness duty” (Ahmed, 2010) falls upon the migrants themselves. As Ahmed explains:

The happiness for migrants means telling a certain story about your arrival as good, or the good of your arrival. The happiness duty is a positive duty to speak of what is good but can also be thought of as a negative duty not to speak of what is not good, not to speak from or out of unhappiness. (Ahmed, 2010: 158)

Although Ahmed was talking about a different context in which migrants have to bear the burden of past colonial histories as well as present racism, the idea of the happiness duty could also be aptly applied to how migrants manage their emotions under the current emotional regime in China.

The emotional regime shapes migrants’ emotional reflexivity in that it promotes a form of individualistic understanding of success and happiness. Although academic work has emphasised that happiness should be viewed as relational (Holmes and Mckenzie, 2018) and that the ways in which broader social inequality shapes emotions should be recognised (e.g. Skeggs, 1997; Barbalet, 2001), however, in reality, neoliberal society is constantly reinforcing the idea that happiness is people’s own individualistic pursuit (Yang, 2014). In order to be happy, success needs to be pursued both

materially and symbolically—in other words, through social status. The China dream is about desire, about depicting what kind of life people should long for, and the attempt to relate individuals' desires to the broader project of nation building. In that sense, happiness could also be “effectively employed as a neoliberal technology of governance” (Yang, 2014: 39).

In line with the state's emphasis on the importance of being happy and embodying “positive energy”, as well as the ideology of “the China Dream”, migrants need to do emotional management to re-frame their negative emotions as positive ones. Although the sociology of emotions has challenged the dualism between “positive emotions” and “negative emotions”, as even “negative emotions” have positive meanings under certain circumstances (e.g. Cieslik, 2015), the current emotional regime in China deliberately encourages this clearly-divided way of understanding emotions as either positive or negative. For example, as the quotes from Yang and Zhang in the last section show, instead of showing their discontent about the unequal regime, they frame it as their own individual responsibility to achieve success and then gain entitlement to full citizenship in the city which is largely attached to *hukou*. To borrow Xiang's concept of “suspension”¹⁶, they suspend their subjectivity as it is related to the present, and aspire to a better future which is related to greater monetary success and more social security. However, multi-layered, institutionalised inequality means that they will have a slim chance of ever achieving this dream and being successful.

Furthermore, it is also important to note the absence of certain emotions in this process—for example, anger. While anger has the potential to bring social change (e.g. Holmes, 2004; Pun and Lu, 2010), migrant performers as

¹⁶ See an explanation of “suspension” here on the Compass Website: <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/event/suspension/>. Accessed on 5th December, 2019.

a marginalised group are not encouraged to express their anger under the current emotional regime, which largely limits individuals' or groups' space to express their anger or frustration over social inequality. The fact that they may not feel angry also implies how social inequality is so naturalised and internalised by people. Therefore, most of the time, informants use positive terms to frame their emotions in relation to *hukou*, such as the aspiration to be successful. The fact that they “do not possess the language of justice, rights and entitlements that is expected of a politically informed citizen” also means that they tend to blame themselves for the current hardship and exploitation (Sun, 2013: 29 ; Woodman, 2017).

To conclude, in this section, I have sought to emotionalise *hukou*—that is, I have tried to understand *hukou* as something migrants experience emotionally in their everyday lives. There are different kinds of emotions involved in this process, including the sense of entitlement, the sense of security and trust, and the emotions attached to the home place. Generally, informants internalise the idea that urban *hukou* are forms of privilege that one can earn by becoming established and successful, rather than understanding it as a form of citizenship which should be equally accessible to every citizen. The current emotional regime also encourages them to re-frame their “negative” emotions as “positive” ones. Therefore, rather than expressing anger over the social inequalities which deprive them of the right to have full citizenship in the city, they internalise the idea that it is their own fault for not being successful enough to earn urban *hukou*. Hence, they aspire to future success, which will mainly manifest through monetary earning ability.

This exploration shows that the experience of the rural-urban divide cannot be fully captured when conceived as an administrative division, as it is deeply embedded in personal, everyday experiences. Meanwhile, *hukou* is not the

only bordering mechanism that shapes the rural-urban distinction. The border struggle also includes the different meanings attached to the urban and the rural. In a sense, what informants desire to achieve, or aspire to become—happiness, personhood with value, respect at work—cannot be achieved by simply gaining urban *hukou*. It is with this consideration in mind that I now turn to theorise aspects of the intimate border struggle over the rural-urban border other than *hukou*.

5.4 The cultural aspect of the rural-urban divide: how the border produces subjectivity

The rural-urban divide does not only manifest through formal rules like *hukou*, but also works through the cultural systems of value that attach different meanings to the rural and the urban. In this section, the lens of intimacy will continue to be used to understand how border shapes subjectivity and personhood. To be more specific, I seek to show how the desire to become modern citizens motivates rural-urban migration, as performers embrace migration to try to achieve valuable personhood.

5.4.1 Desire, value, and the project of self: embracing migration to be modern

In China, while the urban is usually associated with being modern, the rural is often associated with backwardness (e.g. Cohen, 1993). In such a context, rural-urban migration actually becomes a way for many rural people to fulfill their desire to become modern citizens. Here, it is necessary to elaborate on the meaning of desire. Rather than seeing desires as individual pursuits, they should be understood as inherently social forces (Collins, 2018) which call for the exploration of the social contexts and power relations that produce them. As is rightly pointed out, the “desire for migration” and “desire pursued through migration” are often closely related (Carling and Collins, 2018: 918).

It is certainly true in this case, in which migrant performers desire migration and at the same time also seek to fulfill their desires through migration. Through the lens of desire, it is also possible to explore the subject-becoming of migrants as they move through different migration journeys. That is also the reason I relate desire with informants' projects of the self.

By "project of the self", I mean the idea of working on the self as if the self is a project that needs constant reworking, improving, and managing. As Nicolas Rose argues:

Contemporary individuals are incited to live as if making a project of themselves: they are to work on their emotional world, their domestic and conjugal arrangements, their relations with employment and their techniques of sexual pleasure, to develop a "style" of living that will maximise the worth of their existence to themselves (Rose, 1992: 9)

The project of self reveals the logic of neoliberalism, in which the state governs not through direct power, but through individual choices, autonomy, and freedom (Rose, 1992; Hoffman, 2006). At the same time, the state also governs through individuals' emotions and affects (Yang, 2014), as well as their desires.

In this research, it is easy to see how informants' desire for migration is intimately linked with their desire to become modern citizens. Previous literature has pointed out how the desire to be modern has motivated rural women's migration decisions, which can only be understood "in the context of post-Mao modernity that privileges the urban" (Gaetano, 2004: 46). The use of migration as a means to fulfill the desire of becoming modern is especially prominent for ethnic minority migrants, since the intersection of being rural and being ethnic further marginalises them in the pursuit of modernisation.

Wang is a young performer in Tea Park. Growing up in a Lahu village, Wang regarded being Lahu as an important part of his identity. At the age of 21, Wang had already migrated to several places in China, and he seemed to be proud when mentioning his extensive travel experiences to me. Being spotted by a businessman who has been to Tea Park and was impressed by Wang and his fellows' performance, Wang and four other Lahu performers were invited by the businessman to go to Shanghai to perform in an ethnic-themed restaurant. It was easy to notice the sense of pride in Wang's tone and bodily gestures when he was talking about that experience. He talked about how he and his friends managed to conquer all their difficulties and keep a foothold there for six months. He sounded disappointed when talking about how they had to end the short migration journey because of one team member's unexpected pregnancy. Nevertheless, Wang was still hopeful about the future opportunities of migrating. He mentioned to me that his web name is "artist that roams all over the world", since that was the aspiration he had for himself. He also seemed impressed when he learned that I was studying in the UK. He once said to me during a casual chat, "You know, I kind of admire you. As a Hani, you managed to travel so far to the UK. That's something!" It is clear that for Wang, and many other young informants like him, mobility was seen as a desirable experience, as it was seen as a part of their self-making project to be modern citizens.

Indeed, Wang thinks all of his migration experiences make him more confident and mature, and even set him apart from his less mobile peers. There were two other Lahu girls in Tea Park—Yi and Qin. They were both very young—aged 17 and 18—and they came from a village adjacent to Wang's. It was their first migration experience. They learned from Wang that Tea Park was hiring new performers, so they went to work there. Yi and Qin were always together wherever they went. They usually talked to each other in Lahu, and they often seemed shy and quiet in front of other people

(especially during occasions when they had to speak in the local dialect, which is more similar to Mandarin rather than Lahu).

When I told Wang that I would like to interview Yi and Qin as well, Wang seemed doubtful that I could successfully get them to talk with me. He even seemed a bit apologetic for his fellow Lahu friends' shyness and quietness:

They are different from me. I've been to a lot of places, and have seen the world for myself (*jianshimian*), so I'm very confident. See how I can talk with you so confidently and fluently? I doubt that they could (referring to Yi and Qin). Once during a meeting, the manager asked them something, they just sat there and said nothing...That was embarrassing! (Wang, 21 years old, male, Lahu, Tea Park)

From Wang's words, it was clear that he thought it was his previous migration experience that set him apart from his peers, unlike the silent Lahu girls who were too shy to talk to strangers. Wang attributed this to his extensive migration experiences, which exposed him to different experiences—as the *jianshimian* (out to see the world) discourse suggests. These experiences also equipped him with certain qualities and skills, such as being able to talk confidently and articulately.

Being embarrassed by his Lahu counterparts also suggested a sense of shame related to being dull, shy, and silent ethnic minorities who do not know how to conduct themselves properly during social occasions. Part of what Wang aspires to achieve by migrating is to avoid such shame by exposing himself to new experiences, and consequently becoming a more confident person. From Wang's case, we can see the ways that desire often works through the engendering of certain emotions, and that people respond to this desire by trying to invoke, manage, or avoid certain emotions, such as the shame that relates to unfulfilling desires.

It can also be informative to pay attention to how informants talk about their less mobile counterparts, as it can reveal what mobility means to them. I sometimes heard how young informants talk about some of their friends who stayed at home and did not move. Judging from the ways that they talk about these people, it seems almost immoral for a young person to stay immobile unless they have legitimate reasons—for example, taking care of sick family member or helping with house building at home. Otherwise, staying immobile is linked with a lack of effort toward self-improvement. As Yi (2011) points out, in certain contexts, those who embrace mobility in order to improve their *suzhi* and modern value are regarded as morally superior to those who stayed immobile. Such a mentality is shaped by the fact that the urban is associated with modern while the rural and the ethnic is related with backwardness.

The association between modernity and mobility in Wang's thinking is not unique. In fact, one of the ways that the state exercises its cultural authority around mobility is to turn rural migrants into modern citizens by various disciplinary discourses and practices (Nyíri, 2010). *Suzhi* discourse is definitely amongst them. This is the expectation that migrants should improve their *suzhi* through migration, as migration is regarded as an inexpensive substitute for education by many Chinese academic authors (Murphy, 2002: 45). In general, migration becomes a major way for migrants like Wang to embrace the modern self. Borrowing Rofel's (2007) terminology, becoming a mobile, modern person is definitely a part of their "desiring selves". That is, it is important to understand the yearning and longing to be modern if we want to understand what mobility means to migrants.

As is also evident in Wang's case, the meaning of mobility and the desire to be modern should also be understood in relation to the connotations attached to ethnic minorities in China. Modernisation has always been a

central part of China's nation building project, but not all people are equally incorporated into the modernisation project. In a study about overseas Chinese and ethnic minority people in China, Barabantseva (2010) convincingly argued that the two groups are regarded as two opposing embodiments of China's modernisation, with the former becoming the representation of modern value and the latter being associated with "backwardness, poverty, and traditional values" (Barabantseva, 2010: 16). She uses the term "localisation" to show how ethnic minority people are not equally incorporated in the modernisation project, as they become "bearers of ethnic minority identity who represent territorial and cultural spaces assigned to them by the state" (Barabantseva, 2010: 144). Therefore, while being mobile as overseas Chinese people represent modernisation, ethnic minorities are "attached to a particular locality", both physically and culturally (Barabantseva, 2010: 144). In that sense, it is understandable that ethnic minority migrants are using mobility as a way to reject localisation and embrace the modern self.

Particular tensions exist between ethnic performers who perform the "localised" ethnic culture and tourists who, through tourism and cultural consumption, are on the way to becoming modern and patriotic citizens (Nyíri, 2010). As described in the previous chapter, a major part of performers' work is to perform the imagined ethnic minority which places them on the opposite end of modernisation. As ethnic culture in China is celebrated as if ethnic minorities' evolution was frozen in time, ethnic performers become the cultural bearers of this "stillness" and "locality". That is part of the reason that mobility is used as a way to reject the localised self and to embrace the modern self. This point will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter, which concerns encountering ethnic borders.

To conclude, when modernity and rurality/ethnicity become two ends of the spectrum, informants work on the project of self by embracing mobility in order to become modern. However, ironically, it is after migration that performers are reminded daily about their outsider status, rurality, and low *suzhi*. As a result, they are constantly crossing the rural-urban border during and while off of work. At the same time, their border struggles actually further contribute to the hegemonic meaning of the rural-urban divide, as the divide remains something difficult to challenge. In a way, performers' experiences also show how the cultural authority of the state (Nyíri, 2010), which largely shapes the meaning of rural and urban, are experienced by people in personal, emotional, and intimate ways.

5.4.2 Encountering rural-urban borders in everyday work and lives

Rural-urban borders are experienced during informants' everyday work lives. For example, the need to discipline workers and raise their *suzhi* seems to be obvious for managers in Tea Park, as most workers in Tea Park were recruited from adjacent villages. The managers of the Park often comment on how Tea Park has good tourist resources, which seems to be compromised by the low *suzhi* of the workers. Therefore, when I was doing field work in Tea Park, there was a ritual every morning for all workers during the early meeting—two office staff would teach workers polite manners to use when greeting the tourists. Firstly workers' Mandarin was corrected if they spoke with strong accents. There were trainings targeting workers' body language when they greeted the guests. For example, they were taught to always allow the tourists to pass first, and at the same time to say "after you". Most of the workers find these short trainings ridiculous. Sometimes they laugh and comment on the uselessness of the training, but these are mandatory meetings which every worker has to attend every morning.

Workers' bodies and accents were under scrutiny as well. When I worked with informants in Waterfall Restaurant, sometimes I did get comments about my bodily appearance. Once, while I was sweeping the floor, a table of guests summoned me in front of them—it seemed that they had been observing me from a distance for a while. One of them asked, “you are not an ethnic minority person from a local area, right?” As I was wondering why such a question was asked, another of them added—“because your skin tone is fairer than the others”. Realising what the guests meant, I tried to answer ambiguously, since it is important to leave guests with the impression that we are all authentic ethnic minority people. I said that my skin tone was lighter because I had just come back from another province. The guests let me go once their curiosity was satisfied. There was also another time when guests commented on how it was weird to see ethnic minority people wearing glasses, which I do. Wearing glasses is a symbol embodying high cultural quality, which is also related to having high *suzhi*. This does not fit with guests' imaginary of what ethnic minority people should look like. These little incidents all show the embodied element of ethnicity.

Along with bodily appearance, informants' accents were also under scrutiny. In most cases, accent was the element that set rural people apart from their urban counterparts. Once I overheard a conversation between the restaurant owner, Ms Yang, and a seven year old girl named Jiajia, who is the daughter of a migrant performer working in the restaurant. Although born and raised in Green City, Jiajia speaks the local dialect with a rural accent, just like her mother. Ms Yang half-jokingly said to her, “Jiajia, you should stop speaking like your mom. You will be looked down upon by other people if you continue speaking with a rural accent.” Jiajia did not respond, and the conversation soon shifted to other topics amongst the group of people who were present. Ms Yang was not groundless when she suggested Jiajia's rural accent could incur discrimination. In fact, accent as a “particular expression of classed

embodiment” does relate to different kinds of emotions, such as shame (Loveday, 2016: 1146). The ways that shame was engendered in relation to accent also revealed the embodied dimension of *suzhi*, which Sun (2009) terms as “corporeal evidence”: “the complexion, hairstyle, accent, speech, body language, and, by extension, clothes of the mobile body” (Sun, 2009b: 619). The low *suzhi* associated with migrant bodies also constitutes their “out-of-placeness” (Sun, 2009b: 632). Here, the irony emerges, as performers seek to use migration to become modern (as shown in the previous section) while at the same time being deemed out of place, and therefore lacking value and quality.

As ways of resistance, sometimes informants seek to re-frame the meaning of “the rural”. During their casual chats, or during interviews with me, some of the informants would comment upon how urban life is no longer so desirable because of problems such as urban pollution and food security risks. However, still, rural-urban encounters at work continue to shape their senses of entitlement, as well as what kinds of people they aspire to become. When the right to access respect and full citizenship is still largely attached to urban middle class people, and when hegemonic discourses about modern citizens and the good life still exist, “aspirational urbanism” becomes the most common response (Otis, 2011). That is, migrant workers’ response to their marginal position by dressing up like and longing to become urbanites has actually become part of many informants’ desirable personhood, as well as a way that they try to add more value to themselves. One of the ways informants do that is through after-work entertainment, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Another important way for informants to add value to themselves as migrant performers is to foster talents and cultivate ethnic selves. This requires them to embrace the “ethnic script” that is promoted by the market and the state. This will be discussed in the next chapter about performers’ intimate experiences of ethnic borders.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how informants constantly negotiate the borders along the rural and the urban, and how they experience such border-crossing intimately and emotionally.

Hukou is one of the major mechanisms that has constructed and sustained the long-standing rural-urban divide in China. While it is widely acknowledged that not having an urban *hukou* makes migrants' lives difficult in the cities, it might be surprising and puzzling to find that many migrants are not willing to transfer their *hukou* to the cities, even if they are entitled to do so in some small and medium-sized cities such as Green City. Existing research suggests the declining value of urban *hukou* and the rising value of rural *hukou* could explain this “*hukou* puzzle”. However, I argue that this theory largely neglects the role of emotions in this process, and implies that migrants have access to all the information they need to make rational decisions. In reality, migrants are exploring an opaque and fast-changing migration regime, which can be even more confusing for “outsiders” without local connections.

After exploring the different kinds of emotions that are engendered through migrants' encounters with or imaginaries of *hukou* policy, the concept of “emotional regime” was used to understand these emotions in relation to its social and historical context, i.e., the neoliberal governance in China. To be more specific, in line with the state's promotion of “happiness” and “positive energy”, as well as the ideology of “the China Dream”, migrants do emotion management to re-frame their negative emotions as positive ones. That is, instead of showing their discontent about the unequal migration regime, they re-frame it as their own individual responsibility to achieve success and thus

gain entitlement to the full citizenship in the city which is still largely attached to *hukou*.

Using intimacy as a lens to explore informants' emotional experiences of *hukou* points to the fact that *hukou* is not just to do with the state, but has become a daily practice of valuing. Therefore, migrants' experiences of *hukou* cannot be merely captured by referenced to its administrative dimension, as it is also deeply embedded in personal, everyday experiences.

It also needs to be made clear that I am not arguing that informants are making these decisions purely based on emotions, nor are they rationally considering the pros and cons. Rather, I am suggesting that emotions colour these processes, and must be taken into account if we want to get a better understanding of the *hukou* puzzle. Additionally, these emotions can be informative in revealing some aspects of the operation of *hukou* as a form of formal citizenship—for example, how it becomes a form of reward in China, and how it assumes sedentarism as the norm while in a sense problematising mobility. These emotions are better understood in relation to the broader social contexts that situate them, as shown in the discussion of emotional regime.

On the one hand, the rural-urban borders are constructed and manifested through concrete policies and rules such as *hukou*. On the other hand, borders are also sustained through the different meanings attached to the rural and the urban, while the state's cultural authority plays an important role in this construction. Therefore, intimacy as a lens also reveals how border struggles over the rural-urban divide has a profound impact on migrant performers' senses of self, as they embrace mobility to achieve modern selves. However, the fact that they have to dress up like ethnic minorities at work also poses the contradiction between the desired modern, urban

selves, and the undesired rural, ethnic, backward selves at work. How do migrant performers struggle over such contradictions? And what kind of impact do such border struggles have on their emotions, senses of self and relationships? It is difficult to fully understand the bordering process along the rural-urban divide without thinking about the issue of ethnicity and gender. Therefore, the following chapters will continue this exploration by focusing on the dimensions of ethnicity and gender.

Chapter 6: Encountering Ethnicity

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will continue to explore migrant performers' intimate struggle over borders. Just like the rural-urban divide, ethnicity is a form of border that migrant performers encounter in their migration journey as well as daily work. By using intimacy as a lens—more specifically by understanding informants' ambivalence over the meaning of ethnicity—a potential new way to understand ethnicity emerges which regards ethnicity as something people do rather than who they are. The concept of “ethnic scripts” emerges as this chapter continues to explore what shapes the ways that people do ethnicity. Further, the ability for borders to produce subjectivity is highlighted as I explore how ethnic scripts are actively incorporated into migrant performers' projects of self. As the intimate lens challenges our existing ways of theorising ethnicity, it is also crucial to think about encounters with the border as emotional, embodied, and personal. These all point to the importance of addressing the intimate aspect of border struggles.

6.2 Encountering ethnicity: ambivalence and practices

Situated in Southwest China, Yunnan is home to 25 officially recognised ethnic minority groups, while Green City is home to 14 groups of ethnic minorities, with major groups including Yi, Hani, Lahu, Wa and Dai. As mentioned above, Green City's multiethnic culture has consistently been a highlighted point in its tourism industry. *Minzu* literally means ethnicity in Chinese. The meaning of *minzu* has been contested and remains extensively debated. For example, it is largely debatable whether the meaning of *minzu* is exactly the same as ethnicity in the western context, since it carries with it

certain connotations that are unique in its context (e.g. Zang, 2015). While *minzu* used to be translated in English as “nationality”, it was later translated as “ethnicity”. The shift of the term reflects the underlying normative value of the state in different social and political contexts (see Barabantseva, 2008). Some scholars also insist that there is no completely equivalent term of *minzu* in English, as *minzu* carries meaning that cannot be fully captured by “nationality” or “ethnicity”. This is largely linked with the emergence of *minzu* since the 1950s.

The CCP (Chinese Communist Party) engaged in the *minzu* classification project in the 1950s, soon after it came to power. Among the 400 groups that filed applications for recognition, only 55 minority *minzu* groups were eventually officially recognised by the CCP (for a detailed exploration of the *minzu* classification project, see Mullaney, 2010). The eventual *minzu* classification was “the marriage between social scientific and state socialist practice” (Mullaney, 2010: 118). Although the project is not unproblematic, as it is arbitrary in nature, the *minzu* classification project has made *minzu* categories institutionalised and formalised, with every citizen’s ID card clearly classifying one’s *minzu* since the onset of ID card usage in 1984. Before that, *minzu* categories were also marked on other government documents, such as the *hukou* booklet. A child’s ethnicity is registered according to his/her parents’ ethnicity, and he/she is eligible to file an application to change ethnic registration after reaching adulthood.

One important finding of this research is that individuals’ ethnic self identifications are not always in accordance with their state registered identities. This is not because of the problem with registration; rather, it is the ambivalent feelings people have regarding the meaning of their ethnic identities. Such ambivalence is particularly salient for migrant performers, who constantly encounter ethnicity in their daily work and lives. Before

exploring what this ambivalence tells us about ethnicity, I will briefly illustrate how performers encounter ethnicity during work, and how such encounters evoke some sorts of reflexivity in their thinking and feeling about ethnicity.

6.2.1 Encountering ethnicity in daily work

As ethnic performance is increasingly taken up by people who are not ethnic minorities themselves, it seems at first glance that ethnicity is increasingly irrelevant in ethnic performance settings. As one of the performers named Gao said when commenting on the relationship between one's ethnic identity and ethnic performance—"It is no longer important if you are ethnic minority or not. If you put on ethnic minority costumes, you can be an ethnic minority as well." However, when looking closely, the performance of ethnicity is not as simple as putting on and taking off clothes, and ethnicity has become an issue which is not only relevant for performers during work. On the other hand, ethnic performance is "framed by ethnicity"—meaning that ethnicity has deeply shaped the performance setting, and therefore shaped the interactions of people in such settings (see Chapter 4). Before guests step into the ethnic performance setting, they already have in mind that they are going to interact with ethnic minority people. The settings of the workplace, as well as the workers' colourful ethnic costumes, continue to constitute ethnic frames. Therefore, ethnicity is something that performers have to constantly encounter in their everyday work lives. I will illustrate this point by telling the story of an informant named Kai.

Kai is a tour guide in Tea Park. Every day before he starts work, he has to put on a minority costume, as it is part of the job requirement for all tour guides in Tea Park. Every day, Kai shows tourists around Tea Park, introducing its tea culture tracing back thousands of years, and its relationships to local minority culture—he learned all these scripts from the tour guide manual produced by

the local tourist bureau of Green City, although he needs to adjust some of the lines to make them more in line with Tea Park's scenes. Although a Hani himself, Kai has little recognition of this identity—a point that will be explored further below. Nevertheless, Kai often gets questions from tourists about his ethnic identity. Seeing him dressed in the ethnic costume, many guests ask him questions such as which ethnic group he belongs to, what the ethnic culture of his ethnic group is, and whether he speaks the ethnic language. Several times, he has even been asked by tourists to sing ethnic songs for them—although that is not entailed in a tour guide's work.

Here, the multiple aspects of labour are involved. Kai has to present his body and manage emotions in a certain way to meet expectations of ethnic assessment. Body work and emotional labour are involved in his doing ethnicity at work. Furthermore, the multiplication of labour (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) also means that people need to do extra work to turn themselves into what is desired for the work. It is more about the potential to “become” the right person rather than being the right person. The labour to work on one's self has become one of the many dimensions of the job. Thus, Kai felt the urgent need to know more about what his ethnicity means, and ethnic minority culture in general:

After I took this job [as a tour guide], I felt that I really needed to learn more about Hani culture and customs. It is something essential to learn as a tour guide, as you know, tourism in Yunnan is mainly about ethnic minority cultures. That is what tourists want to see when they go to visit Yunnan. (Kai, 21 years old, male, Tea Park, tour guide)

Kai's comments about the impact of the work highlight how daily encounters with ethnicity at work have engendered his reflexivity towards the meaning of ethnicity. This is a point that has been observed in previous literature about people who engage in ethnic tourism. For example, in exploring the ethnic tourism in Shangri-La, Yunnan province, Bai (2007: 257) argues that ethnic tourism serves as “a daily reminder of ethnicity” for people who participate in

it, and push people to think more self-consciously and self-reflexively about the meaning of ethnicity. Other research about ethnic tourism similarly points out how engaging in ethnic tourism has pushed people to think about the meaning of being ethnic minorities in contemporary China (e.g. Li, 2003; Walsh, 2005). However, this literature tends to imply that people can move freely between the on-stage self and off-stage self, which means one's "authentic self" is detachable from the self at work. This viewpoint largely neglects how the need to constantly encounter ethnicity has a more profound impact on the workers, which they cannot simply get rid of by taking off their work costumes and entering non-work spheres of life.

Another point this literature tends to neglect is people's ambivalent feelings of comfort and discomfort with their ethnic identities. This is a point that was constantly brought up to me in the field. In other words, rather than assuming that a person is ethnic minority according to his/her *minzu* registration, which I would argue is quite an essentialised way to understand ethnicity, it is important to recognise that the person's subjective understanding and feelings towards ethnicity should be taken into account.

For instance, in the case of Kai, although he constantly encounters ethnicity at work, he actually has a lot of ambivalence about his own ethnic identity. Sometimes Kai would feel embarrassed when encountering these requests and questions from tourists, since he knows little about Hani culture and customs. Despite being officially registered as a Hani, Kai does not think himself as an authentic Hani person. His parents migrated away from their Hani village when Kai was very young. Growing up in a Han village, Kai felt that he has partly lost the connection with his ethnic origins.

Hani should be an important identity for me. However, I don't feel that I am an authentic Hani. When I get home, my parents sometimes speak Hani, and I don't understand. I don't know what are the major festivals that Hani should celebrate. I

don't know... I want to be a real Hani, but I don't think I can. My parents moved too early, I was only four at that time. (Kai, 21 years old, male, Hani, Tea Park)

Kai's ambivalence was shared by other informants who also had doubts about the meaning of their ethnic identities. In fact, one of the surprises for me as a researcher when entering the field was to find that not all ethnic performers considered themselves as "authentic" ethnic minorities—a point I mentioned in previous chapters. Some performers are Han, while others are ethnic minority people from different ethnic origins, mostly Hani, Yi, Lahu, Wa, and Dai. It is interesting to discover that even people who are officially registered as ethnic minorities, are ethnic minorities by descent, and have ethnic identities clearly marked on their official identity cards, have different understandings and emotions regarding their ethnic identities. "I'm not an authentic minority" (*wo bushi zhengzong de shaoshuminzu*) was a sentence that was repeatedly said to me by informants when I asked about their ethnicity during my fieldwork. For the convenience of theorising, I call these people "ascribed minorities", meaning that they feel their ethnic identities are more like something that has been ascribed to them from somewhere else—state recognition, family heritage, etc.—instead of something they really see themselves to be. If their ethnic identifications are not something that they can sit comfortably with, then what do such identifications mean to them? More importantly, why do they think that they are not "authentic" ethnic minorities? These are the questions that I will explore in this chapter.

6.2.2 Ethnicity as "doing" rather than "being"?

A lot of insights were gained from informants' explanations when they were trying to define who they think are "authentic" minorities. Below are two conversations I had with a performer named Mi and a chef named Chen, both of whom think of themselves as ascribed ethnic minorities.

Mi: I am Hani because my mother is Hani. But I think I'm Hanified...(*wo yijing bei Hanhua le*). Cause in fact I am not much different from Han. Even from my mother's generation, they stopped speaking the Hani language. I can't even listen to Hani language and understand it. (Mi, 21 years old, female, Hani, Forest Park)

Researcher: (Explains research)

Chen: I think it will be fruitless if you just keep trying to find ethnic minorities here (meaning in Waterfall Restaurant).

Researcher: Why is that?

Chen: Many of the ethnic minorities are inauthentic just like me.

Researcher: I didn't know that you were ethnic minority!

Chen: I am. I'm Yi. But...I don't think I am authentic Yi.

Researcher: Why is that?

Chen: I am authentic Yi by blood, but I know nothing about Yi. I know nothing about Yi culture at all, and I don't understand Yi language. My ancestors are all Yi though, my grandfathers from both my mother and my father's sides are Yi.

Researcher: Can they speak or understand Yi?

Chen: My father probably can understand Yi when other people are speaking, but he cannot speak Yi. But my grandfather's generation, they can both understand and speak Yi. (Chen, 32 years old, male, Yi, Waterfall Restaurant)

Mi and Chen's views are echoed by many informants, for whom ethnic identity is not something that can be strictly defined, but is subject to their own definition. Many factors influence how they think about such identities. For example, both of the informants mentioned the roles of language and costume in playing a role and shaping their sense of being ethnic. Some informants also mentioned their parents' migration, which brought them further away from the places where ethnic cultures are practiced in villagers' everyday lives, such as the story of Kai. Some of them also situate themselves against the backdrop of the "Hanification" process, which they think is the major reason that they stopped many practices in relation to ethnicity beginning with their generation or even earlier.

Just like Mi, many informants use "Hanification" to explain the reasons that they think they are inauthentic. Hanification or Han assimilation means the process through which ethnic minorities become increasingly assimilated to the Han. It means that they increasingly adopt Han practices, such as speaking Mandarin rather than minority languages. It is related to the state's overarching ideology towards ethnic minorities—*ronghe* ideology, which aims

to assimilate minorities into the Han, and eventually eliminate their cultural difference (See Ma, 2007; see Hansen, 2011; Zang, 2015). The state also uses the “civilising project”, such as education, with the aim to eliminate the supposed “backwardness” of ethnic minorities and enable them to catch up with the Han (Harrell, 1995). Education for many minority children is also intended to turn them into Chinese citizens, compelling them to choose between being Chinese and being ethnic minorities (Yi, 2005; Hansen, 2011). In a sense, these informants’ cases suggest that the project of Han assimilation has been successful. The younger generation of ethnic minorities growing up in the contemporary era has lost the close connection with their culture. They often define the old people who still remain in the village as authentic, and advised me to find them there.

Although Hanification definitely plays a significant role in explaining why some people stopped these ethnic practices and consequently lost their sense of attachment with their ethnic identities, this is not the only explanation. Informants’ descriptions also highlight the important role of *practices* in their sense of being ethnic. For example, both Mi and Chen’s answers highlight the importance of practices like speaking the language, understanding the language, and having certain knowledge about one’s own ethnic group. These are all important parts of one’s ethnic belonging. Such senses of being ethnic can be determined not only by blood or ancestry, but can also largely depend on practices.

This echoes existing theory which regards ethnicity as practices rather than pre-existing qualities within people. Building on Bourdieu’s theory of practice and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), Bentley proposes that by viewing ethnicity as practices which are shaped by the habitus building upon shared experiences, this perspective could “provide an efficient means of explaining the conjunction of affect and instrumentality in the phenomenon of

ethnicity” (Bentley, 1987: 28). It is important to note that, like all other practices, the practices of ethnicity are not fully based in individuals’ free will —practices are forms of habitus-informed doing (Bentley, 1987).

However, there are reasons that Bentley’s approach of practices of ethnicity cannot be directly applied to understanding performers’ cases. In performers’ cases, as ascribed minorities, even though they have stopped practising ethnicity because of their changing habitus, they still have to perform or to do ethnicity as part of their work as ethnic performers. For example, although Kai stopped practising ethnicity from a young age (the reason that he used to define himself as “inauthentic”), he still needs to do ethnicity in a way at work, as it is something that he has to encounter every day. There is a set of normative cultural expectations that have deeply shaped the ways that he practices ethnicity, rather than out of habitus. Therefore, while recognising ethnicity as something people do or practice, I find West and Zimmerman’s (1987) theory of “doing gender” more helpful in terms of inspiring me to think about ethnicity as something people do rather than who they are.

Instead of regarding gender as a fixed quality that exists within people, the “doing gender” approach sees gender as something people do. It is an accomplishment based on men and women’s constant doing to live up to social norms regarding femininity and masculinity. It is also important to note that to “do” gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behaviour *at the risk of gender assessment*” (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 136). In a similar vein, there are existing normative cultural expectations regarding how people should do ethnicity in China—I call these sets of rules and expectations “ethnic scripts”, which will be explored in the next section. And people can be subject to “ethnic assessment”, in the sense that they are expected to do ethnicity in a way that is in accordance with cultural norms. This is particularly salient for

ethnic performers whose work is in a setting which is “framed by ethnicity” and who have to encounter ethnicity on a daily basis. Just as it is well recognised that people need to “do gender” at work (e.g. Hall, 1993; Mavin and Grandy, 2013), migrant performers are also expected to do ethnicity at work, and ideally, to do it well.

For instance, to do ethnicity at work, Kai firstly has to dress up in ethnic costumes. He has to equip himself with knowledge about ethnic culture in Yunnan—mainly provided by the tourism manual. The depiction of ethnic minority people is very similar to the textbook version of ethnicity in China, which one can easily find in textbooks for school children (See Chu, 2015). For example, it depicts how ethnic minority people are naturally born with the talents to be good at singing and dancing, or how being hospitable to guests is ingrained in minority people’s warm hearts and pure spirits. They are also similar to what one can find in the advertisements on many of the billboards in Green City, advertising the colourful ethnic cultures that one can experience in Green City as a tourist. In other words, such representations of ethnic minority people are pervasive in the context of Green City, thereby becoming things informants have to constantly encounter and negotiate with.

Therefore, during his work as a tour guide, Kai has to be ready to face questions and comments about ethnicity, especially in relation to his own ethnic identity. He also has the obligation to perform ethnicity when required—for example to show some ability in speaking ethnic languages and singing ethnic songs. All these interactions are under the implicit guideline that guests should be convinced that they are interacting with an authentic ethnic minority person who embodies their imagination about ethnic minorities in Yunnan. These all mean that Kai is constantly subject to ethnic assessment at work, and hence he is required to do ethnicity well if he is to be a good ethnic tour guide in Tea Park.

To summarise, a shift of perspective from ethnicity as “being” to ethnicity as “doing” would better enable us to understand informants’ ambivalence towards their ethnic identities. This uses the perspective of doing ethnicity is a refusal to see ethnicity in an essentialised way. It recognises that while the state’s identification of ethnicity is fixed and rigid, individuals’ identifications are fluid and constantly under negotiation (Leibold, 2010).

Just as doing gender is deeply shaped by the normative cultural assumptions about what men and women should be like (West and Zimmerman, 1987), it is also important to ask what has guided and shaped performers’ doing of ethnicity. What are the normative expectations of performers when they are doing ethnicity at work? Inspired by scripting theory, especially the theory of “sexual scripts” (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Simon and Gagnon, 1986), I argue that the concept of ethnic script can be useful in illuminating performers’ experiences of doing ethnicity, both within the work setting and off work.

6.3 Ethnic scripts

In thinking about ethnicity as something we do, it is important to note that such practices do not exist in a vacuum, as they are informed by existing representations, common knowledge, and cultural expectations of ethnicity, which all form the “ethnic script”.

“Ethnic script” was proposed as a theoretical concept in existing research (Lerner et al., 2007). Drawing on script theory, the concept of ethnic script was used to describe prescribed normative behaviour according to one’s ethnicity—in this case education was regarded as part of the ethnic script for Russian Jewish immigrants in Israel, who heavily draw on the ethnic script to

understand who they are and draw ethnic group boundaries (Lerner et al., 2007). Here, Lerner et al. (2007) point out the collective meaning of ethnic script, meaning that it is not only relevant in individual negotiations of ethnic identities, but also relevant in group identity politics.

While Lerner's theory is explanatory in theorising how group boundaries are drawn by referring to ethnic scripts, their use of "ethnic script" is more like ethnic stereotypes—in this case how Russian Jewish people as an ethnic group always value education. One could reasonably argue that valuing education is more about "class" amongst Russian Jewish intellectuals, rather than an issue that is about ethnicity. More empirical and theoretical evidence is required to legitimise the existence of ethnic scripts in this case. Besides, ethnic script is mainly approached as something individuals use to make sense of a new social environment. Less talked about was how ethnic scripts can be influential in shaping people's behaviours. Further, ethnic script is approached as a singular matter, while in fact there can be multiple scripts existing simultaneously in defining normative cultural assumptions about the meaning of ethnicity.

Therefore, my use of "ethnic scripts" departs from Lerner's theory on these points, and I will put more emphasis on how China's context shapes the meaning of ethnic scripts. To be more specific, my use of "scripts" is closer to the "cultural scenarios" dimension of the script, in which Simon and Gagnon (1986) discuss sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). "Cultural scenarios", in their theorisation of sexuality, are the "cultural narratives constructed around sexuality" which are available for individuals to draw on to make sense of sexuality (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 816). Similarly, my definition of ethnic scripts is also the cultural repertoire of ethnicity, which largely informs people's practices and understandings of ethnicity. There is existing literature which implies that individuals in China make sense of their

ethnic identity in relation to the state's representations of ethnicity, although they do not use the term "ethnic scripts", nor do they systematically analyse it. By using the concept of "ethnic scripts", I aim to make more explicit the ways that existing cultural scenarios shape individuals' understandings and practices of ethnicity. As the meaning of scripts is to tell people ways to act, scripts reveal the connections between representations and everyday lives. How, then, do ethnic scripts inform my informants' ways of doing ethnicity? It is firstly necessary to briefly explore what the cultural repertoires are and what they say about ethnic minority people in general in China's context.

The multi-layered meaning of ethnic scripts will be explained in relation to existing literatures about the discourses and cultural representations of ethnicity in China. Meanwhile, as ethnic scripts clearly shape the ways ethnic performances are designed and presented, I will also use ethnic performance as an example to explain the meaning of ethnic scripts.

The first layer of ethnic scripts is the binary distinction between the Han and ethnic minorities, which is a recurrent theme in the literature about the cultural representation of ethnicity in China. While ethnic minority people are portrayed as "the other", the peripheral, and the exotic, such representations reaffirm the Han's position as the norm, the dominant, and even un-ethnic (Gladney, 1994; Harrell, 1995; Schein, 2000; Leibold, 2010). It could be said that it is performers' otherness, or the ability to perform such otherness, that got them into their jobs in the first place (Schein, 2006). Hence, in a sense, for ethnic performers, to do ethnicity at work is to keep performing such differences and otherness. Substantial body work and emotion work are involved in performing the minorities into "the other" in the society.

Secondly, ethnic minority people are also regarded as backward and primitive, and as associated with the past (Harrell, 1995). Such

representations of ethnic minorities share a resemblance with discourses about rural people in China, which also depict rurality as opposed to modernity (see Chapter 5). Therefore, the *suzhi* (quality) discourse is also often used to describe ethnic minority people in similar ways as rural people are portrayed. In fact, being ethnic and being rural are closely related. That is also the reason that people often kindly suggested that I look for authentic minority people in the remote mountainous rural areas. This was also because ethnic minority people are imagined to be pure and simple, uncontaminated by modern ways of living. In Forest Park, ethnic performance was incorporated into the natural forest setting, with wild animals living in a park which is also an attraction for tourists. The dances that performers perform on stage also tell stories about the “past”, such as one about how the Wa used to rely on hunting animals for a living before the socialist regime. In that dance, female performers wear grass skirts and their male counterparts wear only shorts. With long sticks in their hands, they imitate primitive people who are trying to hunt tigers for a meal. The primitiveness and backwardness of ethnic minority people that is portrayed through the performance also further produces their otherness and exoticism.

Another important layer of ethnic scripts is the portrayal of minority women as erotic and subject to different sexual standards (Schein, 2000; Walsh, 2005). This is particularly true for minority women in Southwest China. For example, for the Mosuo in Yunnan, the popular perception of minority women as being sexually promiscuous and available has been mobilised by the market to promote ethnic tourism (Walsh, 2005). Before guests set foot in the tourist place, they already expect to experience the erotic culture of Mosuo; this has put a lot of pressure on women from the local area, regardless of whether or not they participate in the tourism industry. Local gender relations have been challenged as well (Walsh, 2001). In this research, such gendered and sexualised ethnic scripts shaped the performance sites in various ways,

including how female performers are expected to drink cross-cupped wine and to sit on guests' laps. The gendered nature of ethnic scripts will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

There are certainly other aspects of ethnic scripts which cannot be summarised in an exhaustive manner here. Just as sexual scripts are multidimensional and constantly changing, ethnic scripts also never remain static and unchanged. It is also crucial to point out how ethnic scripts are clearly guided and shaped by the *ronghe* ideology which aims to eventually assimilate ethnic minorities and promote China as a unified nation with colourful ethnic cultures (Ma, 2007; Zang, 2015). The seemingly paradoxical effort to preserve ethnic cultures and eventually achieve assimilation are not necessarily in contradiction with each other, since states can achieve “a Han-centric vision of Chinese modernisation” (McCarthy, 2011: 10) by promoting ethnic cultures in state-promoted ways.

In China's context, ethnic scripts are heavily promoted by the state—this leads to the differential judgment of ethnic practices as well. Some ethnic practices are deemed to be good, and are thus distinguished for promotion and protection. Other practices, meanwhile, are regarded as bad, feudal, and superstitious, and it is deemed necessary to eliminate them (e.g. McCarthy, 2011; Zang, 2015). There are also other ethnic practices that are deemed dangerous, as they are associated with national separatism. For example, many ethnic groups in China have religious backgrounds, and some of their religious practices, especially those in relation to cross-border religious practices, are deemed as dangerous and a potential risk to national unity. When I was doing my fieldwork in Green City, I followed one of my informants to her home village during Spring Festival. It was a Lahu village with Christian traditions. I observed a scene wherein a village official was complaining about how the local priest was secretly distributing religious

materials from Myanmar, the border of which is just several miles from this village. Since there is a group of Lahu in Myanmar, with whom Lahu people in Yunnan border may have more cultural proximity than with the Han, their interactions were under close surveillance by the local government. When a conversation I was having with another local official shifted to the topic of “religion”, he suddenly refused to continue the conversation with me. Being aware that I was studying in a foreign university, this local official refused to discuss “sensitive” topics with me. However, from his responses, it is clear that certain ethnic practices are not deemed to be as harmless as others.

Another issue that needs to be considered is whether there is an ethnic script for each distinct group. Without denying that each minority group might have their own distinct script, I would argue that ethnic scripts provide an overwhelmingly hegemonic depiction of ethnic minorities in general in China. Under such a homogeneous normative representation, the distinct ethnic group disappears and is replaced by the umbrella term “ethnic minorities” (*shaoshu minzu*). This means that ethnic minority groups are largely treated as homogeneous, although they have different cultures and traditions.

While giving a homogeneous representation of ethnic minorities, it is important to point out that there are multiple ethnic scripts, and these ethnic scripts do not always give clear and coherent messages about ethnicity in China. For example, there are ethnic scripts which are clearly endorsed by the state (e.g. “Eliminate poverty, and not let one *minzu* brother or sister left behind”), and others which are promoted by the market to gain profits (e.g. “Be ready to be welcomed by our most hospitable and pure ethnic minority people”). More often than not, these different dimensions of ethnic scripts coexist, and it is difficult to distinguish which one is the government’s version or the market version of ethnic scripts. Therefore, ethnic scripts originate

from different sites, while the local variants which are from different sources add other layers to them. In other words, ethnic scripts are multi-layered, sometimes may conflict with each other, and can be mobilised in different contexts in different ways.

It is also important to point out that ethnic scripts that are discussed in this chapter mainly apply to ethnic minorities in Southwest China, and Yunnan province in particular. I have mentioned how Yunnan often seems to be a peaceful region relatively low in *minzu* conflicts or controversies. Therefore, the ethnic scripts that are described here may not apply to other contexts such as Xinjiang or Tibet. While the idea of ethnic scripts may be employed in different contexts, it is always important to recognise the local dimension of ethnic scripts, and to understand them in contextualised ways.

More importantly, although ethnic scripts seem to exist at the macro level, as they are more about the broader social and cultural context, it is crucial to explore how they work through individuals in the most micro and intimate ways. As I seek to show in the following theorisation, migrant performers' emotions and projects of self are heavily informed by existing ethnic scripts.

6.4 Cultivating the ethnic self: emotion, personhood, and ethnic scripts

6.4.1 The emotional politics of ethnicity

How does ethnic script as a concept help us to think about migrant performers' intimate negotiations over the border of ethnicity? I argue in this section that ethnic scripts work in a similar way to "feeling rules", which not only shape the ways that performers do emotion work within work settings, but also shape their emotional negotiations over being ethnic minorities in contemporary China.

At work, performers are expected to do “emotion work” in relation to the ethnic scripts. Both “emotion work” and “emotional labour” point to the need for people to manage their emotions, with the latter being more about the emotion work people do for paid work (Hochschild, 1979). Here, I choose to put “emotion work” at the centre of the inquiry instead of “emotional labour”. This is because “emotional labour” implies a dualism of the public and the private, as well as paid and unpaid work, which this research is trying to challenge, as the boundary between work and the personal becomes blurred. While “emotion work” was used to refer to how people manage emotions in private (Hochschild, 1979), the performance work that performers do crosses private/public boundaries. Moreover, it is difficult to distinguish the emotion work that people do as ethnic minorities with the part that they do as ethnic performers.

It is acknowledged that the ways that people do emotion work are deeply shaped by feeling rules, which are a set of social and cultural norms governing how people should feel in a certain context (Hochschild, 1983). Feeling rules, as a form of social norm, do not exist alone. This means that they coexist with other social norms in the society, such as norms about gender, ethnicity, and class, etc. While the gendered nature of feeling rules is well acknowledged by existing work (e.g. Lupton, 1998), little research touches on the issue of the racialized or ethnicized aspects of feeling rules.

Only recently researchers have started to challenge the racial silence in research about emotions and feeling rules. Kang’s (2003) work tries to bridge the gap by focusing on how the different work contexts shaped by varying intersections of race, gender, and class require workers to perform emotional labour and bodily service differently in nail salons (Kang, 2003). Outside of the service work setting, Wingfield’s work (2010) points to the ways that

workplace feeling rules are racialized in the US context, in that people from different racial groups are subject to different feeling rules. For example, black men are supposed to avoid showing their anger, since they are trying to avoid being fit into the racial stereotype of “angry black men”, whereas black women workers have more space to show their anger since they are not subject to the same feeling rules that apply to white women workers that require them to be feminine and docile. Hence, the intersection of gender and race influences the feeling rules of the workplace, and therefore shapes how people should feel, or in what ways they should express or suppress their emotions (Wingfield, 2010). Such research points to the importance of challenging the racial silence in the study of feeling rules and emotion work.

My exploration of the emotional politics of ethnicity will also start from “work”. At work, ethnic performers are subject to feeling rules which largely intersect with ethnic scripts. According to the ethnic scripts at play here, ethnic minority people are passionate, happy, and welcoming to guests. One could argue that as service providers, performers are expected to constantly show hospitality to guests, but ethnic scripts add another layer to the emotion work that performers are expected to do. Performers are expected to constantly show their emotions such as showing hospitality to guests, showing emotions in more dramatic ways, and being the cheerful and happy minorities. In fact, there is one popular song named Happy Lahu, which expresses the happiness of Lahu people living a good life under the communist regime, compared to the miserable lives that they were living before the communist party “liberated” them. Although showing happiness seems to be a feeling rule that similarly applies to the Han and ethnic minorities under the socialist regime, it might be dangerous for ethnic minorities to not show their happy faces, as it implies the national separatism orientation. Here, the “happiness duty” again falls on the shoulders of ethnic performers: they are not only

expected to speak about happiness, but also, crucially, not to speak about unhappiness (Ahmed, 2010).

At the same time, the undertaking of the happiness duty makes migrant performers valuable subjects under the commercialisation of ethnicity. Many tourists come to ethnic tourism with the expectation to view the happy minorities whose happiness are uncontaminated by modern ways of living (e.g. Harrell, 1995; Walsh and Swain, 2004). Ethnic minority people tend to be portrayed as worry-free and easily contented by limited material conditions. There is a local saying that is used to describe Lahu people, which was frequently used as scripts for ethnic performance—“[Lahu people] sing once they are full, they dance as long as they have drunk enough wine.” It implies that Lahu people do not need to worry about tomorrow. There is also a negative connotation attached to the saying which suggests that Lahu people are shortsighted and lazy. It is also often used to justify the Lahu’s disproportionate vulnerability to poverty. In the ethnic tourism context, sayings like this are often utilised to showcase the exoticism of ethnic minorities who are subject to different feeling rules as compared to the Han.

The emotion work that migrant performers undertake also requires them to endure prejudices against minority people at work. They have to regulate their feelings about potential discrimination and prejudice. The stereotypes and discrimination associated with ethnicity manifest themselves in performers’ daily working lives. It usually means that workers have to do extra emotion work to cope with the biases and stereotypes that are projected onto them. As Bao, a young performer in Forest Park described:

Yes, they think because we are dressed in minority costumes, we know nothing about the outside world. Once a tourist, a man, he really looked down upon us. He thinks that we knew nothing, and we hadn’t even watched TV before. At that time, Yuan (his colleague) was angry and wanted to argue with him. I said to her, there is no need to be angry. It’s only possible the man has a steady salary, and we might

earn more than him. Yes, I think in this way. (Bao, 26 years old, male, Wa, Forest Park)

Bao's account suggests that the intersection of ethnicity and class has shaped performers' daily working lives. In that situation, Bao had to do extra emotion work to regulate his colleague's and his own emotional response to the tourist's discriminatory remarks. It is also important to acknowledge that monetary power has become a way that Bao provides certain emotion rules for himself and his colleague. Their financial capabilities were used to mitigate their negative feelings towards discriminatory situations. As performers in Forest Park are paid quite well—compared to other migrant workers—because of the additional *bancan* rituals that they undertake during off-work hours, Bao is able to feel some kind of empowerment because of his financial capability. Here, his sense of entitlement to respect is related to economic status. This, in turn, is also deeply shaped by “hegemonic masculinity”, which associates masculinity with monetary power (Choi and Peng, 2016). This kind of sentiment has been shared by many other migrant workers in this research, who are trying to earn more money in order to become respectable. This has become another motivator pushing them to work harder, work for longer hours, and work under exploitative conditions. This also is part of the reason that migrant performers are trying to develop the “enterprising self” (Rose, 1992), and trying to capitalise on ethnicity by working on their projects of self. This will be discussed in the following section.

Ethnic scripts can also be used to understand some informants' ambivalence about whether or not they are authentic minorities. Informants' ambivalence towards their ethnic identities may also reflect how ethnicity is only valued in the work setting, in which ethnicity can become a valuable asset, but not outside of it. I have mentioned how migrant performers change their ethnic costumes right away after work, and they spend a lot of money on dressing

in a fashionable and “modern” way. This may suggest their wish to “pass” as Han in everyday life.

Meanwhile, while people may draw heavily on existing ethnic scripts to make sense of their ethnicity, there could be a large gap between everyday practices of ethnicity and ethnic scripts. It is ironic that sometimes ethnic scripts override people’s everyday experiences of ethnicity and become the “authentic” ones. I was initially surprised when I found that performers are not very critical of existing scripts of ethnicity, most of which are essentialised ways to describe ethnic minority people. For example, there were some introduction lines that the host had to say before each performance started, which were mostly about the characteristics of certain minority groups, as were then reflected in the songs or dances that followed the introduction lines. Such introduction lines are highly similar to the textbook version of introductions to ethnic minorities in China, which provide an essentialised understanding of ethnic minority people. According to such depiction, for example, Wa people are regarded as bold and unrestrained, while Dai people are thought to be gentle and attentive. I was surprised that most informants agree with such scripts, and refer to them when they are talking about their understandings of ethnic groups. However, later, I realised that this shows exactly the ways that ethnic scripts work. In other words, this shows how powerful the impact of ethnic scripts is, with people starting to define ethnicity in relation to what has been prescribed rather than their real life experiences.

Besides, ethnic scripts as feeling rules are constraining and empowering at the same time. It is also true that sometimes performers are trying to challenge existing ethnic scripts in different ways, or they try to use ethnic scripts in a way that is to their benefit. A host named Huang in Forest Park shared his story of trying to speak some simple English words in front of

guests when hosting to show that ethnic minority people can be modern as well. By doing that, he is intentionally challenging the ethnic scripts which depict the backwardness of ethnic minorities.

Sometimes performers also refer to ethnic scripts to urge guests' compulsory drinking. I have observed performers saying things like "if you don't finish the drink, you will risk jeopardising ethnic unity in China", or "you have to respect our ethnic culture". In this way, performers are able to put a swifter end to the toasting ritual. Otherwise they would spend too much time interacting with guests and urging their drinking. By referring to ethnic scripts, which emphasises ethnic unity in China, performers try to put themselves in a more powerful position when interacting with the guests. Sometimes female performers also refer to ethnic scripts to reframe the meaning of sexualised labour, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

In summary, ethnic scripts are influential in shaping how individuals feel about their ethnic identities, and the ways that they engage in emotion work in relation to ethnicity. Ethnic scripts are also useful in helping us understand how migrant performers engage in projects of self in various ways.

6.4.2 Cultivating talents and working on the ethnic self

The development of ethnic tourism and the commercialisation of ethnicity in Green City make ethnicity a valued asset. Stories have been shared by local and central media about how ethnic individuals achieve success by becoming ethnic performers or actors. Such stories are also popularly shared among performers. There are ethnic villages which manage to achieve "poverty alleviation" through engaging in ethnic tourism. The ways that economic development is framed in the context of Green City as an ethnic region specifically points to the connection between poverty alleviation, economic development, and the commercialisation of ethnicity. In a way, one

could argue that promoting one's ethnic self has come to be amongst the ethnic scripts in the local context. In other words, learning to be ethnic has been incorporated into individuals' projects of self, as they strive to access ethnicity as a form of resource in order to achieve "valuable personhood" (Skeggs, 2011).

Returning to Kai's story at the beginning of this chapter, it is interesting that the commercialisation of ethnic culture promoted his willingness to know more about his ethnic origins, even though he never thought of himself as an authentic minority before. For him, to "work on the ethnic self", or to do ethnicity in a certain way, could potentially be rewarded by the market. Such an effort to work on one's ethnic self does not only apply to performers who are ascribed minorities, but is also true for "authentic" minorities.

During one afternoon break in the Tea Park, I was staying with ethnic performers to observe their work lives—including the "boring time" when there are no performances or visiting guests. Wei, a Lahu performer, was singing a popular song with his guitar. After being his audience for a while, we started to have a conversation. Wei said that he thinks he needs to use more time to practice ethnic songs, despite the fact that he is actually more interested in popular songs. I asked him the reason, and he said, "Because wherever you go to *dagong*, many places need you to sing ethnic songs. When the audiences see you, they also expect to hear ethnic songs, not others". Being aware that the commercialisation of ethnic culture is taking place in Green City, Wei is consciously cultivating his skills and talents as an ethnic performer.

Growing up in a Lahu village, Wei thinks of himself as an authentic Lahu. However, later in the interview, Wei told me that he never knew how to sing ethnic songs or play guitar before he came to work in Tea Park in 2015. In his

own words, he never “touched a guitar before”. People in the village do sing Lahu songs during important rituals—such as church gatherings and the spring festival celebration. However, these songs are drastically different from the songs that are performed during ethnic performances. Also, working in Tea Park, Wei has to learn songs and dances from other ethnic groups as well. Nevertheless, his friend’s successful story of finding a job as an ethnic performer inspired him, and he decided to give it a go. He started to practice guitar at home, and learnt some ethnic songs by himself. This training continued after he got the job in Tea Park.

It is ironic that even though Wei is an “authentic” Lahu, who grew up in a Lahu village and practices ethnicity in his daily life, he still needs to learn to be ethnic in a certain way that is demanded by the market. Here again, somehow what ethnic scripts depict as “authentic” overrides Wei’s own experiences and become the “authentic” that recognised by the market and the state. Practising guitar and singing are not just about skills, but also about learning to embrace the ethnic self that will be desired by the market. While there are limited resources that ethnic minority people like Wei can access—not through education or social capital—ethnicity becomes an available resource one can draw on to achieve “valuable personhood”. In other words, the commercialisation of ethnicity, and the use of ethnicity as a means to achieve something, has been incorporated in performers’ projects of the self. Here, the commodity frontier (Hochschild, 2003a) does not only extend from the sphere of work to the sphere of home, but also extends to the subjective sphere, and shapes a person’s subjectivity and sense of self. Therefore, there are needs for individuals to work on themselves to attain the image that is desired by the market. In another interview, Wei detailed his reason for choosing ethnic performance as work.

Wei: I’ve been looking for a job since I came back from Guangzhou [working in the factory]. I want to look for a job that has some space for advancement.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Wei: If it is just about earning money, I might as well go back to Guangzhou to continue working in that factory. I wish to have some space for self development and also career advancement....After giving it a lot of thought, I decided that for a person like me, the best choice is...to sing these ethnic songs. To choose this road is my best choice.

Researcher: Why is that?

Wei: Because as people like us... Firstly, you don't have good educational qualifications. In that case it's only manual labour you can do. Even if you can learn some skills from doing the labour, it's still very difficult for you to progress. If you choose to become a performer, and choose to sing ethnic songs...you don't need much cultural knowledge. As long as you are willing to learn. That's why I chose this road. (Wei, 26 years old, male, Lahu, Tea Park)

Even though it means that he will be constantly working on the skills and self images that fit the market's desire to see "authentic" ethnic minority performers, compared to tiring work in the factories with few career development opportunities, ethnic performance seems like a good career choice for Wei. He seems to be very aware of the importance of developing oneself, as he repeated the term "develop" (*fazhan*) several times in the interview. Working on the ethnic self does not only provide him with opportunities to find work as an ethnic performer, it also affords him chances of progress and self development.

Many other informants—mostly men—also talked about "self development" quite a lot in their interviews. It is noteworthy that they often associated one's own self development with local economic development and the promotion of ethnic cultures. The following is an example of how very aware of the market logic and the logic of development informants are, and how they try to situate themselves in that framework of development and fostering talent.

Lang: Have you heard about XX's (a village famous for ethnic tourism) slogan about their people "once they know how to talk, they naturally know how to sing; once they can walk, they can dance"?

Researcher: Yes I've heard. What do you think about that?

Lang: These are just bullshitting (*huyou*), of course. They tell the visitors that, so they will buy tea from there. So the people's life will improve. If you don't say such bullshit, who will come to tour the place and buy stuff right? See how all the tourist groups keep coming to their village? You have to learn how to bullshit. A person needs to constantly learn new stuff, or he/she will be left behind (Lang, 27 years old, male, Lahu, Forest Park).

Working on the ethnic self does not only involve practicing skills as performers, but also involves knowing how to present ethnic cultures in a certain way that is appealing to outsiders. It is also to constantly work on one's self in accordance with the existing ethnic scripts, especially those endorsed by the state and the market. Here, working on the ethnic self has been actively incorporated into each performer's "enterprising self", which means how contemporary individuals manage their selves as if they were projects which needed to be constantly worked on in various ways (Rose, 1992). Furthermore, the fear of being "left behind" is shared by informants other than Lang. Many of them internalise the ethnic scripts which depict ethnic minorities as backward and primitive, and consequently feel the urgent need to improve and develop themselves, in order to not be left behind.

Such senses of constant self-development and self-improvement are also related to mobility. In the previous chapter, I mentioned the story of Wang, who used to be a performer in Tea Park, and later was discovered by a business man who invited Wang to perform in his restaurant in Shanghai. Wang always takes pride in that experience of traveling and experiencing the outside world. He is also convinced that the opportunity of such mobility is a reward for his efforts to work on his ethnic self. Just like Wei, Wang also learned guitar starting from zero background in it, in order to get a job in Green City as a performer. Although he returned to Green City eventually, after working in Shanghai for six months, Wang is convinced that he will eventually get to a greater stage, as long as he keeps practising performance skills and keeps working on his ethnic self.

Wang's migration story also shows how the ability to perform the "localised" and traditional version of ethnic culture affords him a certain status which enables him to be mobile. He told me about how their performance at the

ethnic flavoured restaurant in Shanghai was greatly appreciated by audiences who seek out a taste of the authenticity of ethnic culture. Gaudette (2013) uses “the Jembefola’s path” to describe how African drummers convert their “traditional” music and culture into physical mobility to the Western world, whereby some of them manage to gain social mobility (Gaudette, 2013). Through African drummers’ stories, we can get a glimpse of unequal power relations at the global scale. In a sense, Wang’s migration story to Shanghai also resembles the African drummers’ story in that mobility was gained on the basis of utilising traditional cultures which were thought to remain immobile. While the link of traditional ethnic culture with immobility and localised characteristics has been pointed out in previous theorisations in China’s context (e.g. Barabantseva, 2010), individuals like Wang actively employ mobility to embrace modern and potentially cosmopolitan selves.

From Wei’s, Lang’s, and Wang’s stories, we can see how migrant performers like them feel the need to constantly foster skills and develop themselves—be that performance skill, social skill or mobility—or risk being left behind and lacking opportunities to progress. In the context of the commercialisation of ethnic culture, the instrumentalisation of ethnicity is becoming a valued asset, and is being actively incorporated into informants’ projects of self. However, to work on the ethnic self, in a way, is also to maintain the image of primitiveness and backwardness. It is to do ethnicity in a way that emphasises one’s difference and otherness. In this way, performers also actively participate in the production and reproduction of ethnic scripts on a broader level. Meanwhile, it is also important to note that it is mostly men who tend to work on their ethnicized selves and foster their talents, because they are less likely to be sexualised when undertaking performance work.

However, performers’ efforts to develop themselves and cultivate skills do not necessarily make them more respectable. The more they try to maintain and

develop their ethnic selves, the more they are subject to prejudice and stereotypes. Ethnicity as an asset is valuable in certain ways, but not others. Take the embodiment aspect of ethnicity for example: it is clear that ethnicized bodies are becoming desirable in the context of the commodification of ethnicity. Although Han people can also “pass” as ethnic performers, business owners believe that ethnic minority people, or at least rural people, may embody the bodily characters that make such performances seem more authentic. The team leader from Tea Park once shared with me his story of driving to a remote Lahu village to recruit “the right bodies”. He insisted that Han people could not add the “flavour” desirable in the performance. He ended up bringing five young women and men from that village to work in Tea Park. The newly recruited performers did not know how to sing or dance, so the team leader needed to train them from the beginning. Nevertheless, he considered this recruitment trip, as well as the intensive training, a worthy investment, as it would be converted into the park’s revenue later. In this sense, the commodification of ethnicity not only enables ethnicized bodies to become assets with market values, it also enables mobility—as shown through Wang’s story. The embodied element has also been incorporated into informants’ projects of self. One female performer named Xiaomei once said to me: “There was one point when I thought about dying my hair brown. But later I dropped this idea because I realised that it is important to retain the authentic image of an ethnic minority (*baochi yuanzhiyuanwei*).” This shows how performers actively avoid doing certain “modernising” body work to maintain their bodies as “authentic”.

However, desirable ethnicized bodies are at the same time the embodiment of low *suzhi*. During a chat I once had with one of the managers of Tea Park, he reacted with shock to my willingness to live in the ethnic performers’ dormitory. He said: “Are you sure you want to do that? Their dormitory stinks!” His reaction reflected how ethnic migrants’ bodies were imagined in a

way that embodied a lack of good hygiene practices, which is common in *suzhi* discourses toward rural people and ethnic minority people. Meanwhile, the identification of ethnic others of having (unpleasant) smells is a typical form of distinction and ethnic othering, and this is not just restricted to China's context (See for example Charsley and Bolognani, 2017). My later visits to the dormitory proved the manager's impression untrue. It is also ironic to note that having the skills to perform ethnic songs and dances is not regarded as part of the *suzhi*.

Another way that performers try to earn respect is through the reframing of the meaning of ethnic performance.

Many city people are very ignorant about ethnic cultures. Once a group of tourists from other provinces came—all looked well educated—but referred to us as “Ah Wa” rather than “Wa”. They never even knew the proper name of our ethnic group! ...I had to tell them the right name and some basic knowledge about us Wa. (Xia, 18 years old, female, Wa, Forest Park)

I like it pretty well (being an ethnic performer). I think it's a good thing to promote our own ethnic culture (*xuanchuan minzu wenhua*)... It is even good for our next generation's development if you think about it in a long term way. It's a beneficial thing for all of us if we succeed in promoting ethnic culture. (Ai, 23 years old, male, Wa, Forest Park)

By reframing the meaning of ethnic performance as a way to educate urban people who are ignorant about ethnic culture, Xia seeks to attach positive meanings to ethnic performance work, and also to address the power relations between performers and guests differently.

“Promoting ethnic culture” is a narrative that is often used by different actors to justify the meaning of ethnic performance. In a study about ethnic minorities in Yunnan, McCarthy (2001) points out that states are actually promoting multiculturalism to an extent, although it is under certain conditions, and with the aim to develop local economies (McCarthy, 2011). In that sense, “promoting ethnic culture” is in accordance with both state and market interests. It is also interesting to see how performers themselves use

this narrative in order to address the importance and meaningfulness of their work. Here, Ai mobilises the discourse that embodies mainstream values in order to depict one's self and work as less marginalised. It is a way for informants to try to "attach dominant symbolic value to themselves" (Skeggs, 2011: 503)

Also, by embracing the discourse of "promoting ethnic culture", informants try to include themselves in the state building project—showcasing China as a multinational unified country. In research about the career development prospects of young professionals, Lisa Hoffman proposes "patriotic professionalism" to describe how young people are "wedding individual career development with China's future prosperity" (Hoffman, 2010: 17). Similarly, some informants in this research are also seeking to combine their career advancement with the promotion of ethnic culture and the promotion of China as a unified, multi-ethnic country.

When ethnicity becomes a valuable asset, it is incorporated into the informants' projects of self as a way to achieve valuable personhood. Through working on the ethnic self in a way that fits the ethnic scripts desired by the state and market, informants achieve job opportunities, mobility, and chances of self-development. They closely align their "enterprising self" with official rhetoric, such as promoting ethnic cultures, boosting local economic development, etc. Through framing ethnic performance in such ways, they try to incorporate themselves into "dominant systems of value" (Skeggs, 2011). This framing is also a way for them to fight against marginalisation and otherness, whether as working selves or selves in modern society. However, in order to do that, they have to keep working on their ethnic selves, and also, in a way, to keep their otherness and exoticism in order to capitalise on their ethnicity in the context of commercialisation. All these suggest the potential for ethnic scripts to keep changing, as migrant performers and

ethnic minority people themselves are also active actors in the production and reproduction of ethnic scripts.

One may wonder whether there are “negative” emotions involved in this negotiation, such as resentment and anger, considering how informants are expected to constantly reinforce their otherness. Just like I have argued in the previous chapter, under the current emotional regime which promotes happiness and emphasises individual responsibility, informants tend to re-frame their “negative” emotions into “positive” ones. The same argument also applies here. For example, when Bao briefly mentioned his anger at having to deal with guests’ prejudice towards ethnic minority people, he emphasised how he successfully managed that emotion. He did so, again, by emphasising individuals success and money-earning abilities and relating this with his ability to promote the ethnic self in commercialised ways. It may also relate to the fact that gendered feeling rules make it difficult for male informants to express their “negative” emotions with me as a female researcher.

Hence, gender plays an important role here, as the discourse of hegemonic masculinity does not apply for women. Women performers do tend to more freely express their “negative” emotions, such as ambivalence about having to undertake sexualised labour. Therefore, it is difficult to understand performers’ encountering of borders along the rural-urban divide and ethnicity without thinking about how such encounters are also gendered. I will explore this in more detail in the next chapter.

6.5 Conclusion

Ethnic performance is a site of encounter, in which migrant performers have to constantly encounter the issue of ethnicity. This does not only mean how they need to closely interact with the mostly Han customers and give them the impression that they are interacting with “authentic” ethnic minority people. It also means that symbols and discourses about the right way to be ethnic are pervasive in their daily work lives. However, although ethnic classification is formalised and institutionalised in China, individuals’ understandings of ethnicity are fluid and diverse. There are many informants who have ambivalent feelings about whether or not they are “authentic” ethnic minorities, or what it means to be ethnic minority people in contemporary China.

The lens of intimacy, which takes such ambivalent feelings seriously and asks what we can learn from taking a closer look at these emotions, is useful in revealing a potentially new perspective in understanding ethnicity. Informants’ experiences and perspectives challenge the ways that ethnicity is generally viewed as a quality existing within individuals. Therefore, a new perspective is proposed to understand ethnicity as something people do, rather than who they are. This is particularly relevant for migrant performers, who have to do ethnicity in their daily work lives, and are constantly subject to ethnic assessment. Their doing of ethnicity is assessed in relation to the normative cultural ideas about the “right way” to be ethnic in China. Meanwhile, their doing of ethnicity is deeply shaped by these existing cultural scenarios of ethnicity in China, which come from various sources—the state, the market, mass media, etc. I call these cultural scenarios “ethnic scripts”.

Ethnic scripts in China are heavily state supported, and provide an essentialised and homogeneous understanding of what being ethnic means. According to these scripts, the modern, urban Han are distinguished from the backward, rural minorities. The scripts also eroticise minority women,

particularly under the influence of the market, which impacts on how women do ethnicity in the work context of ethnic performance. In a way, ethnic scripts form feeling rules, which shape how performers do emotion work within and outside of the work context. For example, the emphasis on selling simple happy minorities unaffected by modern life means that performers need to do extra emotion work beyond what they are expected to do as service workers.

They also have to endure prejudices about ethnic minorities from guests during work. Sometimes they do so by drawing on the other scripts which emphasise the promotion of ethnic selves and the value of financial success. This means that they actively incorporate work on the ethnic self into their “enterprising self”. Because hegemonic ethnic scripts sometimes even override informants’ real life experiences of ethnicity, what ethnic scripts depict comes to be regarded as more authentic than their own lived experiences of ethnicity. However, while some informants may be able to capitalise on doing ethnicity within the work setting, they are very aware that their ethnicity has little value outside this setting. Therefore, ironically, in order to not to be “left behind” and be mobile and modern, informants have to do ethnicity in ways that reinforce views of minorities as backward, immobile, etc. This shows how borders are reinscribed through work on the self.

At the same time, intimacy as a lens also enables us to examine more systematically how work shapes self and emotions, and how the impact of work has deeper implications for the project of self. Migrant performers cultivate their talents and work on their ethnic selves in order to capitalise on their ethnicities and thereby achieve valuable personhood. This is another example of how the work self frames the self. On the other hand, the ways that informants’ work on their projects of the self also reinscribe borders.

In this chapter, many theories about ethnicity are borrowed from theories about gender. This is not surprising, as many scholars have already pointed out how the relationship of ethnic minorities to Han in China is analogous to the relationship of women to men (e.g. Gladney, 1994; Harrell, 1995; Schein, 2000). This points to the importance of understanding ethnicity and gender in an intersecting way. An intimately situated way to understand gender will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Gendering the Border Struggles

7.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I have shown a series of border struggles of migrant performers in relation to the rural-urban divide and ethnicity. Migrant performers' experiences of encountering these borders through work and migration are emotional and intimate, and often have an impact on their personhood. In this chapter, I seek to show how these border practices and struggles are also inherently gendered. This does not only mean how male performers and female performers experience these borders in different ways, although they certainly do. It also means regarding gender as an integral principle in understanding migrant performers' experiences. It deeply shapes the borders of the rural-urban divide, ethnicity, and the ways in which these borders are always intersecting and mutually-constitutive. In this chapter, I will first draw on a young woman informant's hospitalisation experience to illustrate how her experiences of bordering are inherently gendered, and how these gendered bordering processes keep rendering her out of place. Gendered bordering processes also proliferate in migrant performers' daily work. I discuss in what ways ethnic performance is a form of sexualised labour, and detail women workers' ambivalence about undertaking such labour. The influence of work extends to women workers' non-work spheres, as it shapes their intimate negotiations with significant others. Therefore, women workers refer to certain aspects of "ethnic scripts" to try to reframe the meaning of their labour. While men workers seem to be less troubled by undertaking sexualised labour, they use different ways to reassert their masculinity, which is arguably challenged by undertaking feminised service work. This chapter further seeks to explore the meaning of encounters with the gendered bordering processes of the rural-urban divide and ethnicity for ethnic performers.

7.2 Gendered experience of being “out-of-place”

I would like to start the chapter with the story of a young woman informant named Ying, who was 17 when she first migrated to Green City. Ying worked as a performer at Waterfall Restaurant for three months. Her first time migration experience was a short-lived one, unexpectedly ended by a sudden illness. Ying’s experience of illness embodies multiple borders that migrant workers encounter, and it also shows how such experiences are inherently gendered. At the same time, it reveals how migrant women’s sexualities are deemed to be “out of place”, are assigned moral value, and are therefore under constant scrutiny.

One day, when I woke up, I got several messages from co-workers at Waterfall Restaurant, saying that Ying had been sent to the hospital the night before due to fierce abdominal pain at night. I decided to visit her that morning instead of going to work in the restaurant. When I arrived at the hospital, I was surprised to find out that Ying had been sent for surgery, as the doctor identified a tumour in her ovary. While she was in surgery, I met Ying’s aunt Zhen, a young woman who was also a migrant worker in Green City. As it was Ying’s first experience of migrating out to work, Ying’s parents had asked Zhen to look after Ying whenever she could. Zhen said that Ying’s parents were on their way to Green City. What seemed to worry Zhen more than the illness itself were the connotations associated with the illness. She said to me worriedly, “She [referring to Ying] is still a virgin. I know that she is —she has never been in a relationship before...How can you get such illness [in the ovary] as a virgin? It doesn’t make sense to me.” Later in our conversation, I began to understand why Zhen was so anxious about this particular illness that Ying has. Zhen worries that people back home will gossip about Ying’s illness, and attribute the illness to her promiscuous conduct in the city despite the fact that she is still a virgin. This would—in

Zhen's mind—impede Ying's future prospects of finding a good partner for marriage.

I understand Zhen's worry is not without reason. Migrant women's sexuality is under strict scrutiny, especially when they are young, single, and migrating alone. Their sexuality is also regarded as "potentially threatening to urban sexual mores and to state population-control policies" (Friedman, 2010: 160). As a result, migrant women are subject to scrutiny on their "virtuous reputation" based on their sexuality (Gaetano, 2004; Gaetano, 2008), and have to navigate a context in which mobility is associated with immorality. It is in such a context that some migrant women choose to work as domestic workers, as the interior spaces are regarded as safe and good for their reputations (Jacka, 2005; Gaetano, 2008). In contrast, for women who work in entertainment and service work, the association between their mobility and immorality can be particularly strong (e.g. Zheng, 2007; Otis, 2011), making workers feel the need to constantly defend their virtuous reputations in many ways.

Despite the fact that China is witnessing a shift to a more liberal culture and more diverse practices and representations about sex (Farrer, 2014), women's reputations and morality are still largely attached to their sexuality (Liu, 2016). This may be because sexuality is celebrated as an individual pursuit, which is tightly related with consumerism and the market economy, while gender as a critical category of inquiry is marginalised (Evans, 2008). More specifically, to marginalise gender as a critical lens to address issues in relation to sexuality is to ignore the unequal relations between men and women, with "sex and sexuality becoming components of individual exploration, dissociated from broader issues of power and injustice" (Evans, 2008: 378). The marginalisation of gender in discussions of sex and sexuality is partly due to how feminism is framed as a dangerous "foreign

concept” (Woodman, 2019), and how feminist activism continues to be suppressed by the state (see Fincher, 2018). Also, while research has suggested a more relaxed sexual culture in urban areas (Farrer, 2014), there is little research about the sex culture in rural China, where the underlying norms regarding women’s chastity may remain largely unchanged. Therefore, rural women may find themselves under more scrutiny in relation to their chastity, especially when they migrate out alone as a young single woman.

Ying is not the only one who was judged based on her virtuous reputation in relation to chastity. A married woman, Meihua, also mentioned that one of the reasons that she decided to migrate together with her husband was to avoid the potential stigmatisation of migrating out alone by herself. Na, a female performer in Forest Park in her 20s, shared similar concerns. She mentioned how she would deliberately dress in a more conservative way when going back home, and that she was very alert about the people who “talk behind her back”. Despite the fact that she has been cohabiting with her boyfriend for over a year in Green City, she insisted on sleeping in separate rooms when they visited Na’s home. Once, when she sent extra money home compared to the usual amount of remittance, her father called her immediately. Sounding angry, he asked her why she would suddenly have all that money, and asked her if she was involved in some illicit work (implying sex work). In such a context, women like Meihua and Na, who work in sexualised ethnic performance work, feel the pressure to constantly defend their virtuous reputations—a point which will be discussed further later in this chapter.

Returning to Ying’s story, her experience of being ill also vividly shows how she encountered the bordering of rural-urban divide and ethnicity, and how such encountering is always gendered. *Hukou*, as a form of more tangible

border that shapes the rural-urban divide (see chapter 5) was encountered through Ying's in-hospital experience as well.

Later that night, I visited the hospital again to see Ying. She was out of surgery and asleep, and I met Ying's parents, who had arrived from a village about 100 miles from Green City. Ying's mother said bitterly, "I told her not to go [migrate out to work], because she is too young, but she insisted. Look how she ends up like this." She seemed to share Zhen's worries about Ying's reputation and future prospects. Earlier in the interview, Ying said to me that she had decided to migrate out to find work mainly because she wanted to reject an arranged marriage. That man, who was much older than she was, was often present in her home, trying to persuade her and her parents to approve their marriage. Like many other migrant women, going out to work became a way for Ying to postpone marriage and gain autonomy as a wage earner (Gaetano and Jacka, 2004).

I visited Ying the next day in the hospital. Only Ying's mother was there when I visited. She said that Ying's father had gone to their town's hospital in order to get some kind of proof that hospital here requires if they want to use local medical insurance to cover some of the medical bills. This was because Ying's *hukou* was not in Green City, which meant that she could not use medical insurance directly without having to go through a complicated procedure. Although Ying's father had traveled for four hours in order to get the proof from the hospital in their town centre, the hospital refused to provide such proof without seeing the patient. Nobody seemed to be equipped with the knowledge of what to do in such a situation, especially under the opaque *hukou* system in Green City (see Chapter 5). Ying's parents therefore decided to transfer her to their local hospital as soon as they could to avoid a the heavy medical bill that they would find it difficult to handle.

Ying's struggle to find a place which recognised her access to medical insurance shows the non-portability of social welfare in China. That is to say that the localised characteristic of the social welfare regime, which is largely sustained by the *hukou* system, means that one's social welfare can only be recognised in the local area where one's *hukou* lies, and cannot be transferred and recognised elsewhere (See Shi, 2012). Many other informants mentioned that they do not dare to go to hospital when they are sick during their *dagong* journeys. Some informants also mentioned their experience of having to go home immediately for major treatment when they were working in other provinces. Therefore, Ying's experience is not just a particular case, as the same concern about the non-portability of social welfare is a much wider issue that concerns many migrant workers in China. At the same time, the localised social welfare regime also contributed to her "out-of-placeness"—a point I will return to in the following theorisation.

As Ying would not be able to keep working in Waterfall Restaurant, Ying's parents asked me to help her return her minority costume to work and try to get her deposit back from Ms Yang. As mentioned in Chapter 4, every worker has to hand in half of their monthly wage as a form of deposit to the restaurant owner. This has become a way for the restaurant owner to exercise certain forms of control in terms of workers' performance and mobility. At that point, Ms Yang said something to me which has left a deep impression on my mind. Taking the costumes from me, and handing me Ying's deposit, she said:

I have meant to fire her (Ying) for quite some time. She must be an ethnic minority who hasn't really been outside before. She often dresses in a sloppy way, and she speaks with such strong accent... I doubted that she would understand the customer's orders correctly or respond to their needs appropriately.

Ying is registered as Hani, although she does not identify herself as an authentic ethnic minority person, since she does not have much recognition about this identity (see discussions in Chapter 6). However, even though Ying is an ascribed ethnic minority, the fact that she was perceived by the business owner and other people as an ethnic minority meant that she was subject to the same marginalisation that applies to “authentic” minority people. Again, Ying seemed to be “out-of-place” because of her perceived ethnicity. Although Ying’s young and exotic body was deemed desirable in ethnic performance, she was constantly deemed the embodiment of low *suzhi*—judged by her accent, ways of dressing, and other social characteristics. Therefore, she was desirable and disposable at the same time: the *hukou* regime means that only her labour is desired in the city, but not her presence.

To reflect on Ying’s experience, as a young woman, at the age of 17, she migrated out to work mainly to escape the patriarchal system of arranged marriage, only to find herself being out of place because of the *hukou* system and her perceived ethnicity. Even her illness risked her being heavily stigmatised, because it was related to her chastity, on which she was being judged by the wider society.

Here, “out-of-placeness” has multiple layers of meaning. It firstly refers to how *hukou* as a bordering mechanism brings “differential inclusion” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) which makes migrant workers’ labour desirable, but not their presence. The localised character of citizenship in China means that one’s entitlement is only recognised within a locality—mainly the place where one’s *hukou* is registered (Woodman, 2018). As a migrant whose mobility is incompatible with the sedentary assumption behind the citizenship logic (Woodman, 2018), Ying could not access the social welfare regime in Green City, nor could she get her entitlement to

access medical insurance recognised. Secondly, as a young, single woman who migrated out alone, Ying was “out-of-place”, since she did not fit within the gender norms of the rural or the urban. While the urban is witnessing a shift to a more relaxed sex culture which normalises premarital sex (Farrer, 2014), rural women are still largely valued based on their chastity. As a result, Ying’s migration as a young and single woman meant that her chastity was constantly under scrutiny. Also, migrant women like Ying have to navigate sexuality and gendered borders between the rural and the urban and struggle to fit with the gender norms of either place. Thirdly, despite Ying’s ambivalence about her ethnicity, the fact that she was regarded as an “authentic” ethnic minority meant that she was deemed as “out-of-place”, since an ethnic minority’s “right place” is assumed to be in the remote, mountainous rural villages, rather than the urban setting. Her embodied characteristics such as accent and ways of conduct seemed to reaffirm her “out-of-placeness” and low *suzhi* (see Sun, 2009b).

Ying’s experience also points to the ways that migrant performers’ experiences of encountering multiple bordering through migration are always gendered. Meanwhile, gender intersects with other forms of inequalities, such as the rural-urban divide and ethnicity. Migrant performers encounter these intersecting borders not just through migration, but also through their everyday work. In the following sections, I will explore how undertaking sexualised ethnic performance has different implications for men and women performers, and how they cope differently. Firstly, I will explore in what ways ethnic performance is a form of sexualised labour.

7.3 Undertaking sexualised labour

In chapter 4, I pointed out the ways that ethnic performance can be theorised as a site in which rural, ethnic performers encounter urban, Han customers. Such encounters are intimate, not just because of the nature of interactive

service work, which involves closely proximate interaction. It is also because of how performers' emotional and aesthetic labour are used to create a sense of intimacy at guests' banqueting tables. A certain amount of bodily contact is also involved in *bancan* (accompanying meals), including massaging guests' shoulders, having cross-cupped wine with guests, and sitting on VIP guests' laps in Forest Park. It is fair to say that ethnic performance is heavily sexualised, and such sexualised work sometimes leads to sexual harassment in the workplace. In this section, I will firstly discuss why and how ethnic performance is sexualised.

7.3.1 Ethnic performance as sexualised labour—why and how

In her work about Asian manicurists in Korean Nail Saloons in the USA, Kang (2013) proposes the concept of “racialized sexualisation” to refer to how certain types of bodily labour performed by certain groups of people are sexualised because of the historical and cultural construction of race. The mundane and routine work of manicures performed by Asian women is imbued with sexual meanings according to the workers, customers, and public perceptions because of the racial meanings attached to Asian women in America. Kang's (2013) work highlights how race intersects with gender to shape sexualisation at work.

In a similar vein, in the case of ethnic performance, the meaning of ethnicity contributes to the sexualisation of ethnic performance. Also, the sexualised dimensions of ethnic scripts are often actively used by market actors to make profits. I have already discussed in the previous chapter the meaning of ethnic scripts which sexualise ethnic minority women, especially in the context of Southwest China. The portrait of minority women as child-like, primitive yet erotic, and subject to different moral standards regarding their sexuality has been extensively discussed in academic work (e.g. Gladney, 1994; Schein, 2000; Walsh, 2005). The social construction of minority women

as more sexually open is on the grounds that they are not subjected to the same moral code that constrains Han women's sexuality (Gladney, 1994). Such eroticised representations can also be related to the image of minority women as sexually dangerous and mysterious; for example, Miao women are believed to have the ability to use "Gu"—a sorcery to win their loved one's favour (Schein, 2000). In this case, regardless of whether performers are authentic minority people, when they dress up as, and perform to be, ethnic minorities, they are subjected to further sexualisation. This again shows the ways that the boundaries of sexuality and the boundaries of ethnicity are closely intertwined and mutually constitutive (Nagel, 2000).

In her work, Otis (2011) talks about how women workers in a hotel in Kunming try to distinguish themselves from sex workers through different means. Their presence is readily sexualised even before they have had any interaction with guests, since Yunnan is largely associated with erotic ethnic tourism, and these women workers (being seen as backward and primitive ethnic minorities regardless of their real identities) are often seen as sexually available. Therefore, women workers use "virtuous professionalism" to distinguish themselves from sex workers, and to emphasise the professional aspect of their work (Otis, 2011). Working under similar conditions, female performers in this research share similar concerns, since they are also being sexualised, especially when they are performing as "authentic" ethnic minorities.

At the same time, crossing the invisible yet powerful boundary of the rural-urban divide also means crossing sexual boundaries. Although rural women are often regarded as pure, simple, and as vanguards of traditional values, their migration, especially if they migrate alone, provokes doubt about and scrutiny of the morality of their sexual conduct, as Ying's story reveals. In a sense, the sexualisation of women workers as waitresses and performers is

further legitimised by their social positions as “the rural”, and therefore “out of place”, and “the ethnic” others. These all contribute to how they are readily sexualised even before interacting with guests.

The work settings and contents of ethnic performances are firstly scripted according to the ethnic scripts which eroticising minority women. In Waterfall Restaurant, there are multiple pictures hanging on the walls, showing images of minority women dressed in revealing clothes, some of them bathing under waterfalls. In Forest Park, a typical *bancan* starts with the introductory lines from the host, who is also amongst the ethnic performers. These introductory lines involve jokes to create a fun and relaxing vibe, usually including depicting minority people as passionate and quick to fall in love with other people. The songs and dances that are performed are also mainly about the romantic relationships of ethnic minority people, of which the usual image is of a young woman who has fallen in love and is waiting for her lover to visit her. The design and content of ethnic performance shows how ethnic scripts deeply shape the ways that ethnic performances are conducted.

Having imagined in many ways what performance work might look like, it was still quite shocking for me when I was working as a performer myself, standing together with other performers in front of guests’ banqueting tables with short skirts in minority custom styles. I soon learnt that some guests are easier to deal with than others—female guests often request less service than male guests. Once, after performing for a table with mostly drunk male guests, they refused to let us leave. A man insisted that he would choose the most beautiful girl to massage his shoulders when doing the toasting ritual. Jiang—the leader of waitresses team, jokingly said, “That’s fine. You can choose any girl you want. We are all available—either single or divorced.” All the guests laughed. There was another time when I was waiting tables together with Xiaomi and Xiaoqing. As we were standing there waiting for

guests to call upon us if they need anything, some male guests started talking to us. They asked where we were from, and whether we were single. A man jokingly said to Xiaomi—“Beauty (*meinü*), you should just follow me to Guangxi”—he is a business man in Guangxi province. Xiaomi said, “no problem, ask me again later when I finish the shift.” Apparently the guest found such a humorous response satisfying.

From the two cases above, we can see that women workers usually feel compelled to respond to male guests’ sexual attention—that includes flirting, awkward questions, or dirty jokes. It is common in sexualised service work that women are expected to respond to these sexual attentions in various ways (Adkins, 1995). This is not usually recognised as work, as it is often regarded as women just being themselves (Hall, 1993; Adkins, 1995; Coffey et al., 2018). Sometimes workers use humour to respond in a way that would not necessarily annoy the guests. Women workers also learn to respond in such a way that would not make guests lose face (*diu mianzi*). This echoes with Otis’s (2011) research about migrant women workers in luxury hotels in China, for whom giving guests face has become a way waitresses justify their compromises during work (Otis, 2011).

The sexualised working environment also legitimates and normalises sexual harassment, even though “sexual harassment” is a word that is largely absent when informants are articulating their experiences. Owning the word “sexual harassment” is crucial for women to articulate their experiences and realise that they are not alone in enduring this (Muta, 2008). However, none of the female workers particularly used the word to express their concerns, whether in daily life or in interviews. This does not mean that they do not have concerns with such issues, however.

I myself experienced sexual harassment during work at Waterfall Restaurant. Once, a drunk male customer touched my body after I served him. I was angry and shocked but suddenly did not know what to do. Dressed in working costume, I felt powerless to confront the customer. As a researcher, I was worried that if I reacted in any other way, I would be suspended from doing fieldwork there. I immediately walked out of the compartment. It was the end of the banquet anyway, and I did not have to serve him any more. Many performers were present and witnessed this scene, as it was after the toasting ritual. None of them said anything to me during or after the service. It seems normalised for performers to experience or witness sexual harassment at work. When I talked with one of my close colleagues at Waterfall Restaurant, she just said that it happens with drunken customers. She told me to be more careful next time.

Unlike workers in some western countries, who can turn to managers for support when experiencing sexual harassment (e.g. Coffey et al., 2018), there is no workplace regulation that protects workers against it. More importantly, the silence about sexual harassment at workplaces is to do with China's general handling of and political environment around sexual harassment and feminist activism at large. In 2015, during International Women's Day, a number of feminists were detained because they were planning to give out stickers about sexual harassment to raise public consciousness. Among them, five feminists were jailed, and only released one month later because of international pressure. They are being called China's Feminist Five (Fincher, 2016). The discussions regarding the need to establish specific laws against sexual harassment actually existed long before 2015; however, the current laws which prohibit sexual harassment in workplaces are poorly implemented, and do not provide clear definitions regarding what constitutes sexual harassment (The National Law Review, 2019). Moreover, in 2018, while the #MeToo movement was sweeping many

countries and areas, China's #MeToo Movement was heavily censored and suppressed by authorities (The New York Times, 2018). Numerous online posts were deleted, and the hashtag #MeToo was removed. Moreover, mostly urban, educated young women were involved in #MeToo, whereas it failed to reach the millions of female migrant workers.¹⁷ With the authorities failing to address the issue of sexual harassment, and their constant suppression of online and offline activities in addressing this issue, it is not surprising that sexual harassment was largely experienced by female workers in this study but had not yet been voiced.

While sexualised labour like ethnic performance is increasingly used to make profits, discussion and actions about gender inequality and gender-based violence are suppressed at the institutional and societal level. This enables sexual harassment to be prevalent in workplaces, and women have to bear the consequences and potential stigmatisation of it. Therefore, while “ethnic scripts” readily sexualise ethnic performances, women performers lack ways to articulate sexual harassment or to seek institutional protection. Nevertheless, they resist the stigmatisation of undertaking sexualised labour in creative ways. I will talk about these ways of resistance after discussing another important reason that ethnic performances are highly sexualised. I argue that this is closely related to the banqueting culture and political environment in China. Women performers' sexualised labour is utilised to do “distinction work” (Hanser, 2008) to make guests feel entitled, and to create a sense of intimacy at the banqueting tables.

7.3.2 Doing “distinction work” and creating intimacy at the banquet tables

¹⁷ Except one case in the Foxconn factory, in which women workers raised concerns about establishing anti-harassment infrastructures. No updates were reported on this issue. See: <http://en.hkctu.org.hk/content/metoo-movement-beyond-reach-china's-women-workers>. Accessed on 19th December, 2019.

The sexualisation of women performers is actively promoted by the work regime, as women workers' sexualities and gendered performances are used as resources to make privileged guests feel entitled and their social status recognised. As Hanser (2008) suggests, amongst service encounters, the "distinction work" needs to be done by workers to acknowledge guests' entitlement and distinct positions, and this eventually contributes to the social construction and reproduction of "class". It is also well recognised that "distinction work" is largely reliant on women workers' sexualities and gendered bodies, as gender has become "a powerful way of 'speaking', or making, class distinctions" (Hanser, 2005: 588). In a similar sense, the ways that women performers do "distinction work" are also largely related to their sexualised and aesthetic bodies. Such distinction work is easier to understand when put into the context of banqueting politics in China.

Once, when I was chatting with the leader of the performers' team in Forest Park—a young woman in her 30s named Lei, who is not involved in performance itself, but is in charge of the management of performers' team—she said:

To tell you the truth, it may seem like the important bit of performance is about on-stage shows for the tourists. However, the actual key point is about *bancan* (accompanying meals), especially the *bancan* for our VIP clients. That is why I can't emphasise *yanzhi* too much when we are recruiting new performers.

"*Yanzhi*" literally means that a person's degree of good looks can be calculated into numerical values. Lei's emphasis on performers' aesthetic appearances is closely related to how the company is using performers' aesthetic and sexualised labour to attract potential guests, and to make distinguished guests, the VIP clients, feel entitled.

The close connection between aesthetic labour and sexualised labour has been pointed out in previous research, as aesthetic labour can "extend to

sexualised labour through organisational demand for corporate ‘looks’” (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009: 1). Here, a particularly noteworthy point is how young migrant women’s yearning to become modern citizens is also closely related to the aesthetic labour that they do at work. This means that their efforts to become figures that conform to urban beauty standards can be turned into a form of aesthetic labour at work. In Chapter 4, I talked about how young migrant women embrace consumption to aspire to become modern and urban citizens. They spend a lot of hard-earned money on cosmetic products and fashionable clothes in order to achieve urban standards of beauty. Just as women are disciplined by their femininity in factory settings (Pun, 2005), young women’s self-transforming efforts are also utilised as a form of aesthetic labour in service work (Otis, 2016). The emphasis on aesthetic appearance at work has also, in turn, motivated women performers to invest more in improving their appearances. Therefore, the meaning of performers’ aesthetic work is closely entangled with the meaning of the rural-urban divide and ethnicity. The aesthetic labour one does for work and for the project of self are intricately linked; this, again, points to the blurred boundaries between work and non-work spheres.

How do performers’ aesthetic and sexualised labour contribute to boosting VIP clients’ experiences in Forest Park? With the progress of my fieldwork, I gradually got to know that one of the ways to provide distinction service to VIP guests is by doing some special “rituals” during the toasting process—female performers are requested to sit on male guests’ laps whilst forcing wine down their throats. It is a special part of the performance which would not normally be performed for ordinary guests like tourist groups. As such performances for VIP clients are conducted in individual compartments, I did not get access needed to actually observe them. However, the fact that I was excluded from such observations is revealing in itself, as it is related to the politics of banqueting and sexual politics in China at large.

In ethnic performance, the commercialisation of intimacy is evident. As Zelizer (2000) rightly points out, money does not necessarily “corrupt” intimate relationships, rather, economic activities are central to the function of all kinds of intimate relationships, including coupling, childcare, elderly care, etc (Zelizer, 2000). In a way, guests and tourists are “purchasing intimacy” by requiring ethnic performances—a kind of intimacy that is crucial to facilitate business deals and political “*guanxi*” among government officials and businessmen (Zelizer, 2000; Osburg, 2013; Uretsky, 2016). This is the reason that the most intimate performance takes place in private VIP rooms, with performers working their hardest trying to entertain guests, who are mostly businessmen, government officials, and the bosses’ friends.

As Ho and colleagues (2018) insightfully point out, the commodification of sex is closely related to national economy and politics. Therefore, it is essential to understand the politics of sexuality in China; otherwise it would be difficult to understand the controversy that on one hand, the commercialised sex is legally banned since the establishment of PRC, and on the other hand, it is still flourishing (Ho et al., 2018). The politics of the sex industry in China, they argue, prominently showed how the sex industry has become an indispensable force to boost the national economy—not only in profits directly gained from the sex industry, but also in the business deals that are facilitated and reached because of commercial sex (e.g. Zheng, 2006; Osburg, 2013; Ho et al., 2018). As economic growth is often used to justify the legitimacy of the governance regime in PRC, the tolerance of commercialised sex has political meanings. That is one of the reasons that it is mostly the “low end” kind of commercial sex that is being suppressed in “sweep away yellow movements” (anti-vice campaigns), while the “high end” sex industry is left intact (Ho et al., 2018). While it is left under-theorised what kind of effect Xi’s austerity campaign has had on the sex industry since 2013,

it can be speculated that commercialised sex might take more discreet forms. For example, less visible sexualised entertainment may take the place of lavish banqueting, while it still is essential in facilitating *guanxi* (Ho et al., 2018).

Ethnic performance in *bancan* is an example of how sexualised entertainment has taken a more discreet form. It is not just coincidental that ethnic performance has flourished in the past three or four years—this is related to Xi’s austerity campaign. Local government officials and public servants have been banned from going to karaoke bars and other entertainment sites. During my fieldwork, I saw government officials and business men taking their business deals to Waterfall Restaurant or Forest Park, especially if the guests were non-locals and they wanted to let guests experience the *minzufengqing* (ethnic flavour) of the banquets. Indeed, this seems like a safe option, since promoting ethnic culture is politically correct in China, as celebrating multi-ethnic culture reaffirms the sovereignty of the PRC (Gladney, 1994).

I was not surprised, therefore, when I was informed that I was not permitted to observe in the VIP compartments. It also seemed logical that staff in Waterfall Restaurant were forbidden to use mobile phones at work, on the grounds that “guests would feel unease if they knew that staff could take out a mobile phone and take photos of them”¹⁸. According to the restaurant owner, this is a request that was specifically brought up by some guests. In fact, she took pride that her restaurant could ensure the privacy of guests, and regarded it as one of the selling points of her business. During my observation, there were incidences nation-wide involving government officials having been filmed having banquets on public funds, and subsequently being punished. Banning workers from using mobile phones is one of the ways to

18 Quotes from field notes, from the restaurant owner Ms Yang.

prevent similar things from happening again, and to ensure the privacy of guests.

In these contexts—the campaign against extravagant spending and using public funds, as well as stricter surveillance of government officials—ethnic performance seems to become a safe choice. Moreover, merit can also be claimed for promoting and celebrating multi-ethnic culture in the local area. In this way, the sexualisation of ethnic performance is easily justified and legitimised.

However, female performers share a lot of ambivalence about doing this particular form of ritual during toasts. In a context in which women's sexuality is highly moralised and related to their reputations (Liu, 2016), undertaking sexualised labour has certain consequences for performers. How do women workers respond? I argue that they try to desexualise such labour by referring to certain aspects of ethnic scripts, which relate to undertaking ethnic performance work to promote local ethnic cultures.

7.3.3 Struggles and resistance: referring to the ethnic scripts

As mentioned in the previous chapter, ethnic scripts are cultural repertoires of ethnicity which people draw on to make sense of their practices of ethnicity. State discourses, media representations, and market-endorsed practices of ethnicity all constitute ethnic scripts. Sometimes multilayered or even contradictory messages are given by these ethnic scripts, as they are being used in different ways by different actors in specific contexts. In the context of ethnic performance, as I have shown, market actors actively mobilise popular perceptions of minority women as being sexually promiscuous and available, and this has been actively promoted in the tourism business. Meanwhile, ethnic scripts in the local context also encourage people to actively promote ethnic culture and embrace and

celebrate multi-ethnic cultures. This is particularly true in the local contexts where tourism has been used as one of the major strategies to achieve poverty alleviation. To put it more bluntly, it is politically correct in Green City's local context to actively celebrate and promote ethnic culture. This has also become one aspect of the local ethnic scripts. Therefore, some women performers refer to this aspect of ethnic scripts to try to legitimise and desexualise their labour.

When I first saw the VIP *bancan*, with all kinds of sitting on laps and forcing wine, all kinds of things. I even saw a guest try to touch the performer. When I went back from the scene, on my way to the dorm, I hesitated. I was wondering if I had chosen the wrong job. I felt all kinds of entanglements of thoughts in my mind, but I never told these to my family. If my parents ask what I do for work, I just say...well, just singing to the guests, dancing. And then toasting, you can drink if you want, and you can refuse to drink as well. So my mother has never known...it's like...put it bluntly you were like escorting...Anyway, sometimes things become more acceptable as time goes on, and you get used to it. Once one of my friends saw our performance, he pointed out that this job is like accompanying drinking (*peijiu*). I said, our work is formal work (*zhenggui*), and it is protected, something like that. (Chun, 22 years old, female, Lahu, Forest Park)

At first, I struggled to understand what Chun meant when she said that such work is "protected". Later, I started to realise that she was right—that this work gained its legitimacy through public endorsement and promotion, as it is part of the ethnic script to promote ethnic culture. When viewed from this perspective, a boundary can be drawn between legitimate ethnic performance and other types of sex-related work that are illegal and formally banned, such as escorting and prostitution. Political legitimacy and endorsement of ethnic performance enabled Chun to continue to maintain a sense of respectability. It is interesting to see how she referenced this aspect of ethnic scripts to defend the legitimacy of sexualised ethnic performance in front of her friend. However, a conflicted feeling, even a sense of shame, lingered as Chun chose not to tell her parents about the exact content of her work. This suggests the importance of looking at how the sexualisation of

women's work has had an influence on their personal relationships, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Other performers also shared similar ambivalence about undertaking sexualised labour. Some of them mentioned how different aspects of ethnic scripts are used to desexualise the labour.

(In terms of sitting on guests' laps) I shouldn't have minded it because it is minority culture, it is what the previous generation of performers kept telling us. But...I may not care as a minority person, but I would care as a woman. (Yun, 23 years old, female, Wa, Forest Park)

There's nothing wrong with rubbing guests' shoulders I think. It's part of our local ethnic culture, and the whole toasting process is to show hospitality to the guests—as they are often being shown in the real minority's villages. (Mei, 30 years old, female, Han, Waterfall Restaurant)

Yun and Mei's reflections also reveal how difference aspects of ethnic scripts are referred to in this particular context. By framing sitting on guests' laps as a way for simple and pure (*chunpu*) minority people to show their hospitality to guests, performers manage to downplay the sexual connotations of this performance ritual. For example, according to this logic, rubbing shoulders and sitting on laps are just ways of showing hospitality, as minority people would do to greet the guests. Any attempt to associate sexual meanings with such practices was to contaminate the pure intentions of minority people, and to diminish the cultural significance of minority rituals.

Besides, as the development of ethnic culture has been so tightly linked with local economic development, the local ethnic scripts encourage one to broadcast ethnic culture, and even to actively commodify one's ethnicity. Therefore, promoting local ethnic culture, again, is being used to give legitimacy to the labour.

Indeed, “it is minority culture/custom” is a popular saying when people are talking about ethnic performance. It sometimes becomes the weapon for performers’ resistance and attempts to achieve an inversion of power relations. For example, guests would sometimes require performers to perform another round of toasting. In order to try to avoid this, performers would try their best to make guests drink as much as possible within one round. They taught me to fill the guests’ drinking cups with as much strong liquor as possible. And when guests objected and said that there was too much for them to drink, performers would say things like: “that is our minority culture, and you should respect minority customs”, or “you can’t stop drinking until the song is over, it is our ethnic tradition.” Most guests would be compelled to finish their drinks with strong alcohol, and would not normally request another round of toasting. In this way, performers manage to bring a swifter end to the encounters they find awkward. By referring to such ethnic scripts, and by being in charge of urging guests’ drinking, an inversion of power relations between performers and guests is achieved temporarily.

It is revealing that while ethnic scripts legitimise the sexualisation of ethnic performance, female performers also actively refer to certain aspects of ethnic scripts to desexualise the intimate rituals and practices of accompanying guests, such as by re-framing certain bodily contact with guests as ethnic minority people showing their hospitality rather than as undertaking sexualised labour. In this way, women performers manage to maintain their respectability to an extent. This again points to the multi-layered meaning of ethnic scripts. It also shows how ethnic scripts can not only be constraining and repressive, but also can empower people when used in certain ways. As a result, migrant women constantly struggle with different versions of ethnic scripts, which may be in conflict with each other, and provide different meanings regarding being good women and being good ethnic minorities. This reveals the nature of ethnic scripts as being multi-

dimensional, and therefore needing to be understood in relation to their specific contexts. Further, the fact that migrant women need to constantly do more work to avoid being seen as sexually promiscuous also points to “the multiplication of labour” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) (although, again, such labour is not recognised or being financially remunerated).

So far, women performers’ experiences have been addressed in relation to the ways that they experience sexualised labour, while men performers’ voices seem to be neglected. Do men performers experience sexualisation at work in the same way? In the following section, men’s experiences of undertaking gendered service work will be explored.

7.4 Masculine compromise at work?

In *Masculine Compromise*, Choi and Peng (2016) convincingly showed how migrant men need to compromise their masculinity in various ways as rural-urban migration has provided them with a different context, especially highlighting the contrast between their dominance in rural China versus their marginalisation in the urban area. While these men see a particular version of masculinity as desirable, in reality, they have to adopt another set of practices which is not in accordance with their ideal masculinity. Whether these changing practices may lead to a changing ideology about masculinity and gender relations is a question that remained to be answered. While these masculine compromises are mainly talked about in relation to the family sphere—such as the gendered division of labour at home—the roles of work are less addressed. Do migrant men also have to compromise their masculinity at work? Research in factory settings has shown that migrant men are pushed to deal with their compromised masculinity in the workplace, since the factory work regime favours the labour of rural women (Kim, 2015; Tian and Deng, 2017). Less research focuses on such negotiations in the context of service work in China (but see Choi, 2018). As working in service

work is regarded as “women’s work” by popular perception, as well as by most male informants themselves, it is important to understand how male workers experience this feminised and sexualised labour, and whether they experience it in similar ways to female performers. Moreover, whilst most migrant men are making compromises in order to continue to be the breadwinners in their families, the same is not true of young and single men like my informants. Then how would young men defend their potentially challenged masculinity?

Most men performers in this research do feel that their masculinities are more or less challenged by undertaking service work, and some of them even respond to such challenges by changing jobs. Xiaobai is one of them. He used to work in Waterfall Restaurant as a performer/waiter, but that only lasted for several days. When asked about the reason why he quit that job so quickly, he said: “It’s just not gonna work well.” “Why?”, I asked. He paused for a little while—“...because you know, it is not a proper job for a man (*Dui yi ge da nanren lai shuo bu he shi*).” I tried to ask Xiaobai the rationales behind this statement, but he insisted that “it is just what it is”. Whilst it is possible that Xiaobai did not want to elaborate this point because he believed that as a woman researcher, I could not sympathise with him, it is also possible that he thought that service work was fundamentally feminised, and could therefore potentially threaten his masculinity. The qualities of “care” and “emotionally attending to others’ needs” behind service work are usually associated with femininity, and could be amongst the reasons that Xiaobai rejects it. After quitting that job, Xiaobai tried different kinds of jobs, such as working in a garage, courier services, etc. At the time of the interview, he worked in an advertising agency, and his work entails grounding bill boards alongside the street—a manual job that requires physical strength and endurance.

Then how about these men workers who stayed working as performers/waiters? Some informants defend their masculinity by referring to gendered divisions of labour at work. For instance, they would emphasise the heavy lifting part of labour—the physical work that requires the use of bodily strength that they think women cannot manage. Interestingly, some of them also refer to gendered ways of doing emotional labour as a way to defend their masculinity.

Cheng: Like...here...(pause)...things that you do in private compartments, such as serving wine and changing small plates, they feel like...like...meticulous work (*xi huo*)...so they really seem like...not right work for us [men]. Then...sometimes guests would lash out their temper on you, and you just have to take it. They wouldn't do the same if they were male guests being served by female waitresses. (Cheng, 21 years old, male, Han, Waterfall Restaurant)

Just like the male workers in factories who are exploring a gendered labour regime which favours women workers (Kim, 2015; Tian and Deng, 2017), Cheng finds himself navigating a service work context which favours women workers rather than men workers. He is also very aware of how gender shapes his interactions with guests. As the rules of gendered interaction may allow guests to be angry at men, but it is less acceptable for them to display anger at women (Goffman, 1976), male guests do gender-specific emotion work when interacting with service workers. Cheng is able to take pride in the fact that he can endure guests' gendered displays of temper, and such endurance is thought to be related to masculinity. Therefore, by pointing out the guests' gendered displays of anger, and how he is able to "take it", Cheng distances himself from women workers who do service work, and in this way, defends his masculinity.

The gendered division of labour also shows through performances. During on-stage performance, male performers tend to perform the hyper-masculine image of minority men, who used to rely on hunting to feed their families.

When they are performing as lovers, they are performing the image of men who always take the initiatives in relationships, in contrast to women, who passively wait for their lovers to visit.

Moreover, some of the informants defend their challenged masculinities by emphasising the future rather than the present. That is, many of them frame working as performers/waiters as only a temporary phase in their careers. In Waterfall Restaurant, men workers are often promoted to work in the kitchen and learn “solid” skills if they work for some time in their current position, and such a career path does not apply for women workers. Therefore, “learning solid skills” (*xue yimen jishu*) had become the common goal when male informants were talking about their future plans in interviews. None of them see themselves doing the waiting work for a long time. In fact, it is not difficult for them to be transferred to work in the kitchen after they get accustomed to waiting tables. In the kitchen, they work their ways from bus boys to assistant chefs, and then principal chefs. Several male informants mentioned their plans to learn to be chefs, and then open their own small restaurants in the future. Since staff who work in the kitchen are paid more than waiters and waitresses, this has become a desirable choice for men to save money and learn skills for their future businesses. Some male performers also emphasise how they are cultivating skills as performers at this stage, and therefore are aiming for a better stage, or better development prospects as performers—just like the cases of Wei and Wang which were discussed in the previous chapter. As cultivating skills as performers is largely incorporated in their “enterprising selves”, they tend to envision the successful future, rather than discussing the present.

More importantly, it is clear that men workers are experiencing sexualised labour in different ways than female performers. In previous sections, I mainly talked about how female performers experience sexualisation at work.

It is worth pointing out that male performers, too, are expected to work as waiters catering to guests' needs. For example, during *bancan*, they are also expected to drink cross-cupped wine with female guests, as well as providing brief massages for the guests. However, none of the male performers voiced their concerns or ambivalence about doing sexualised labour in their interviews.

In my analysis, it did show that female performers are more troubled by the sexualisation of work, while their male counterparts rarely mention their feelings towards the work regime. Mostly, female performers took the initiative to talk about how they were troubled by certain aspects of work, while male performers never mentioned these to me. At first, I regretted not taking the initiative to ask male informants about their feelings toward working under the sexualisation of work. However, instead of regarding this silence as the absence of data, their silence or reluctance to talk about these issues may suggest that they are not troubled by it in the same way as female performers, especially when performing sexualised work is less likely to cause people to think of men as immoral or to harm their chances of marriage. It could also be because they find it difficult to express emotions in front of a woman researcher. There is also a research gap around how men feel and react when they engage in sexualised work. Even in literature that includes male workers whose work is largely sexualised—such as Cuban hospitality workers in tourism—male workers' voices seem to be less highlighted (Cabezas, 2006). The silence of male performers regarding undertaking sexualised labour contrasts with female performers' clearly voiced concerns and ambivalence, which suggests the need to better understand men's experiences of doing sexualised work.

While at work, migrant performers can use different ways to reassert their challenged masculinity, as mentioned before. However, their masculinity

continues to be challenged outside of work, during which they find themselves judged by the standards of “hegemonic masculinity”, which are mostly measured by their monetary power and social status. Besides, while their female counterparts are judged because of the dubious reputation associated with doing sexualised work, men performers find themselves becoming undesirable marriage partners because of their meagre wage and lack of social status (Choi and Peng, 2016). This is also reflected in their experiences of love and romance in the city, which will be discussed in the next section.

7.5 Intimate negotiations with significant others

What does it mean for women workers to undertake sexualised work? In this section, I will try to understand this by looking at their intimate negotiations with significant others. So far, there is relatively little work that tries to think systematically and theoretically about the influence of undertaking sexualised work on one’s intimate relationships in China. One example would be work on the “white collar beauties” whose sexuality was used to boost business deals being left vulnerable in their own intimate relationships, as they are more prone to relationship breakups because of their work (Liu, 2016). However, this negotiation of the impact of work on personal lives formed only a small part of this discussion. We can also see a similar discussion of erotic dancers in Canada, whose full citizenship was threatened because of the work that they undertook, which positioned them “outside of discourses that elaborated what it meant to be a normal, moral, and patriotic citizen” (Ross, 2000: 248). Moreover, the social illegitimacy of their work makes it difficult for them to enter and maintain meaningful intimate relationships with other people, making small things like picking up kids at school a challenge (Ross, 2000). It might be because of similar social pressures that some female performers feel it necessary to disguise their work from significant others.

Jie: I never told him [her boyfriend] about the sitting on guests' laps part. Because he already became worried when he heard about us drinking cross-bodied wine with the guests. So I never told him there is such a thing. Although I myself do not need to do it very often because I am the host. But if he learnt that there is such an activity, he would definitely become suspicious, because he knows that if it is a thing, it will one day be my turn....My mother was initially against it [my work]. Because I told her it is *bancan*, and she doesn't understand what it is. I said it is like catering guests (*jie dai*), to toasting to the guests. She became worried after that. She said, what? you mean you have to drink it yourself?...Then she called me frequently during those days. She said, don't worry about the wage, if you can't take it, just go home. Even if you don't work, I can afford your expenses... Actually in her mind, she was already...imagining things.

Researcher: Right, she must be worried.

Jie: Yes, and then I explained to her many times that there's nothing outrageous, just singing to other people and clinking our cups. Nothing...you know, nothing going too far. (Jie, 20 years old, female, Han, Forest Park)

Jie knows that her morality as a respectable woman is challenged by the content of her work. She responded by not discussing the details of her work with her family and boyfriend. Such disguise and self-censorship makes her more vulnerable, since she has less support when she encounters hardships at work. While intimate relationships usually serve as strong support networks for migrants, Jie is intentionally distancing herself from such support because she does not want to become morally questionable in other people's eyes, or let her mother worry too much about her. It is ironic that Jie's work to contribute to guests' intimacy at banquets becomes an obstacle to her own intimacy. Distancing from significant others becomes necessary for Jie to maintain her respectability, but it comes at the price of potentially jeopardising her own intimate relationships. As the practices of intimacy include being able to share intimate knowledge with each other (Jamieson, 2012), the inability to share things about work—which constitutes the majority of Jie's time—not only makes her more isolated from her support networks, but also affects her practices of intimacy.

Moreover, such distancing and avoidance of talking about work does not always work well, since the stigmatisation attached to sexualised performance work can be difficult to avoid. Hua, another woman performer,

mentioned an incident she had with her ex-boyfriend, which she thinks is related to her work. Unlike Jie, Hua chose to tell her boyfriend about what happens at work, even though she kept this secret from her parents. Hua's ex-boyfriend showed understanding and support for her work. However, they later got into a fierce fight, where he accused her of behaving inappropriately when she hung out with some male friends in a private setting. In their fight, Hua's work was brought up frequently, when her ex-boyfriend accused her of being "badly influenced by her work", and of showing less respect for herself and their relationship. Hua's work became something that made her morally questionable, even when she was off work. They broke up shortly after the fight.

Hua is not the only one who is deemed less respectable and less desirable as a marriage partner because of working as an ethnic performer. When I was interviewing a male worker named Qiang in Waterfall Restaurant, he said half-jokingly, "I would never marry a girl from Waterfall Restaurant." I asked why, and he said, "I don't know how to explain. Nowadays the society is so complicated....they can be girlfriends, but definitely not the ones that you should marry." For some migrant men, they still value "rural femininity" that characterises women as being obedient, filial, domestically-oriented, simple, and chaste (Lui, 2016), that is one of the reasons that rural migrant men usually undertake sexual adventures and experience the urban ideal of romance and intimacy in the cities, whilst going back to their villages to marry local girls (Choi and Peng, 2016). For female performers like Hua, working in a highly sexualised setting makes one morally questionable, and no longer fit to the ideals as pure, simple, and conservative. They therefore become less desirable partners for marriage.

Qiang's feelings about how the society is "complicated" these days are shared by many male performers. They often use words like "chaotic" (*luan*)

and “complicated” (*fuza*) to articulate this feeling. This may be because of a paradox in China’s sexual culture. On one hand, China is witnessing a shift toward a more liberal and diverse sex culture in which young people have more space to explore and express their sexualities (Farrer, 2014). On the other hand, with gender as critical analytical discourse being marginalised, these more diverse sexual practices do not necessarily lead to more equal gender relationships or more fluid understandings of gender that can challenge its normative definition (Evans, 2008). This is one of the reasons that women’s sexuality is still highly moralised in China. For migrant men, the more diverse sexual practices and culture, on one hand, afford them more opportunities to experience sex and love, on the other hand, increase their anxieties about finding the “right” partner who still embodies the traditional rural femininity that is deemed desirable. Their marginalised positions make them feel more vulnerable in the dating market, and they therefore put more emphasis on qualities like “loyalty”, “chastity”, and rural femininity. Within the relationship sphere, they have different standards for “ideal girlfriend” and “ideal wife” (Choi and Peng, 2016). While they are open minded about their own sexual adventures, they still frown upon women who do the same thing (Ma and Cheng, 2005).

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter illustrates how the lens of intimacy enables us to understand migrant performers’ work and lives as governed by the gendered aspects of bordering. The ways that informants encounter bordering processes in relation to the rural-urban divide and ethnicity are deeply gendered, as shown through Ying’s story and men and women performers’ (different) negotiations in relation to undertaking sexualised and feminised service work.

Ethnic performances are sexualised labour because of the ethnic scripts which readily sexualise ethnic minority women in Southwest China, even before the encounters between workers and guests happen. This also relates to how women performers' aesthetic and sexualised labour are used to make guests feel entitled and to contribute to their *guanxi*-building processes in the banquets. Such a work regime also normalises sexual harassment, especially in the context of the current political regime, which constantly suppresses feminist activism.

Women workers' reputations are threatened because of the sexualised work that they undertake. This is due to the moralising of women's sexuality and essentialised understandings of gender and sexuality. Therefore, women workers feel the need to use different ways to desexualise their labour. To be more specific, they refer to the different aspects of ethnic scripts which encourage the promotion of local ethnic culture, and frame bodily contacts with guests as the practices of pure minorities showing their hospitality. In that way, women performers seek to justify the legitimacy of their labour, and manage bordering between respectable and shameful womanhood.

At the same time, migrant men performers experience the sexualisation of labour in different terms. Being subjected to the "Han gaze" (Schein, 2000) does not necessarily make them feminised, and they are less affected by undertaking sexualised labour, since they are not subject to the same standards of sexual morality. However, they still need to find ways to defend their masculinity from challenges stemming from their undertaking feminised service work and their marginalised positions in the society. They do so by emphasising the gendered division of labour, including manual labour that requires physical strength and gendered emotional management which enables them to manage guests who display more anger to them. They also

distance themselves from femininity as much as they can by doing different work or trying to avoid emotional labour. Besides, they defend their masculinity by emphasising the future, while depicting their current work and life situations as temporary. Some performers also cultivate their talents and ethnic selves to aspire to future success, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Through these means, men workers defend their masculinity by referring to essentialised gender norms regarding masculinity and femininity.

Undertaking sexualised labour also overshadows female performers' intimate relationships with significant others. Some of them withhold information about work from family members, which may help maintain their reputations, but leaves them vulnerable and with little support. They are also deemed undesirable marriage partners, and experience fights with partners because of work. These all reveal how work increasingly overtakes our "private" lives, and sheds light on the ever more blurring boundary between work and non-work spheres.

By looking broadly at intimacy as negotiated within work as well as "private" relationships, intimacy as a lens reveals how gender is negotiated in close association with ethnic scripts. It also reveals how it is a gendered process for a migrant worker travelling from the rural, but struggling to arrive in the urban.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This project is about what we can learn from systematically focusing on a series of negotiations which are generally conducted in “private” spheres and considered personal, and which therefore tend to go under the sociological radar. This research does so by focusing on a group of people who have received little academic attention before—migrant performers in Southwest China. As rural-urban migrants, performers’ experiences are less theorised because they are intra-provincial migrants who migrate to work in an adjacent city, which is small in scale and is not a popular migration destination. Their experiences are different from the “typical migrants” who migrate from inland, Western provinces to work in the Southeastern coastal areas, where most Special Economic Zones are concentrated and extensive labour forces are demanded to work on mostly manufacturing work (making China “the World Factory”). While in recent years the numbers of migrants who move within the province, and who work in service sector, have risen rapidly, the case of ethnic performers offers new insights in understanding this under-researched group of migrants. At the same time, ethnicity remains an issue that has rarely been addressed in rural-urban migration literature. Therefore, we have a very limited understanding of how ethnic minority migrants’ experiences might be different from their Han counterparts, and how ethnicity plays a role in shaping their migration experiences. This project is an attempt to bridge these gaps by focusing on the work and migration experiences of ethnic performers.

This project specifically focuses on a series of what I call “intimate negotiations” of informants, which is to do with their emotions, personhood, and intimate relationships. By focusing on these intimate negotiations, this project shows the value of using intimacy as a lens to understand broader

social structural issues that profoundly shape informants' work and migration experiences. In a broader sense, this research also explores the value of the lens of intimacy as a theoretical framework for future research.

8.1 Intimate border encounters

By adopting the lens of intimacy, which means starting from the intimate realm and working from there to understand broader social issues, this approach seeks to “use micro-scale everyday bordering practices to both conceptualise and visualise what borders are at a more general level” (Yuval-Davis, 2013: 16). Here, border is used as a concept to understand the constantly changing and unstable boundaries of social positionings—most notably in relation to the rural-urban divide and ethnicity for migrant performers. It is a move away from theorising borders as mainly national borders and in their geographical or material forms. Rather, borders can be symbolic and ideological, and are at work “whenever a distinction between subject and object is established” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 16). Some concepts are borrowed from *Border as Method* to understand the working mechanisms of bordering processes, which mainly include “differential inclusion”, “the multiplication of labour”, and “border struggles” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

As argued in Chapter 4, borders proliferate in performers' everyday work firstly and fore-mostly because of the ways that they have to do interactive service work. Different from working at factories, which is the focus of the majority of research on migrant workers in China, ethnic performance is a site where performers and guests interact with each other in a physically close manner. Inspired by Hanser's (2008) work on “service encounters”, I argue that ethnic performance can be theorised as a site of encounter. As minority, rural, feminised service providers encounter Han, urban, mostly

male customers, physical proximity may render their social distance even more significant. Such encounters are fleeting, but they can have profound impacts on performers' intimate negotiations. For example, the need to constantly respond to guests' comments and questions about ethnicity may serve as a "daily reminder of ethnicity" (Bai, 2007: 257) for performers, and it may engender their reflexivity in thinking more about what ethnicity means for them.

In Chapter 4, I also explore concepts that are useful in illuminating our understanding of ethnic performance work, such as "affective labour", "framed by ethnicity", and "the cultural authority of the state". I point to the difficulty of fully capturing the multifaceted meaning of ethnic performance with one concept. Therefore, from the performers' point of view, a more useful way to understand their experiences is to understand ethnic performance as a site of encounter, and to understand what it means for performers to encounter borders in their everyday work and migration journeys. Here, I expand the meaning of "encounter" to include not only service encounters between performers and guests, but also the ways that performers encounter various bordering processes through their daily work and migration, most notably revolving around the rural-urban divide and ethnicity.

Chapter 5 explores in more detail performers' intimate border struggles over the rural-urban divide. *Hukou* is first and foremost an important mechanism that contributes to the construction and maintenance of the rural-urban divide. While it is often thought to be only relevant at the administrative level, the lens of intimacy reveals that informants' negotiations over *hukou* transfer decisions are highly emotional. Therefore, emotions should be taken into account in understanding "the *hukou* puzzle" (Chen and Fan, 2016)—the fact that migrants are not eagerly willing to transfer their *hukou* to small and

medium-sized cities even when they are allowed to do so. The *hukou* puzzle was situated in the recent wave of *hukou* reform in 2014, and it is clearly applicable to the context of Green City—a small-scale city which technically allows *hukou* transfer. Such policy shifts call for more empirical data about how migrants themselves experience the loosening of *hukou* policy in small and medium sized cities, which remains an under-researched area. This research contributes to this gap by focusing on the types of emotional reflexivity informants engage in about *hukou* transfer decisions or imaginaries. They do not make such decisions just on the basis of rational calculation to maximise their profit; rather, their decision-making is shaped by their senses of entitlement, how they envision their future lives, and their life stages and relationships with significant others. Further, their emotional negotiations over *hukou* reveal the underlying logic of citizenship as a form of reward to “successful citizens”, which also regards sedentarism as the norm (Woodman, 2018; Woodman and Guo, 2017). As migrants without *hukou*, performers are subject to “differential inclusion” in the cities: whilst their labour is desired as performers, their settlement in cities is largely problematised. Also, informants’ emotional negotiations should be understood in relation to the emotional regime of contemporary China, which is significantly shaped by neoliberalism, emphasising personal responsibility, happiness, and positive energies. Under such an emotional regime (Reddy, 2001), migrants tend to re-frame their “negative emotions” into positive ones, and blame themselves for not being successful enough to earn urban *hukou*. The dominance of “positive emotions” and the relative absence of “negative emotions” speak volumes about the emotional regime of contemporary China.

Meanwhile, bordering processes around the rural-urban divide are not only confined to *hukou*, but also extend to other areas of life, and have intimate consequences for performers. The different meanings attached to the rural

and the urban also play a significant role in informants' personhood, as they are eager to use rural-urban migration to achieve the modern and valuable personhood to which they aspire. In that sense, bordering processes also works through the cultural authority of the state (Nyíri, 2010), as different meanings are assigned to the rural and the urban, as well as the ethnic and the Han. Ironically, while informants aspire to use mobility to achieve the modern self, they are rendered "out-of-place" after their migration. Such "out-of-placeness" is also largely related to the work that performers do, and the ethnic aspect of it in particular, which requires them to keep performing the primitive and backward images of ethnic minority people.

Therefore, ethnicity is another form of bordering process that migrant performers constantly encounter in their daily lives, which I explore in detail in Chapter 6. As performers need to dress like ethnic minority people, and have to perform ethnicity in daily work in certain ways, they have to encounter the issue of ethnicity in their daily work lives, regardless of whether they think of themselves as ethnic minorities. This thesis highlights the ways in which encountering ethnicity daily at work has engendered people's reflexivity about the meaning of ethnicity. By taking their ambivalences regarding whether or not they are "authentic" ethnic minorities seriously, the important role of *practices* in people's sense of being ethnic is highlighted. Therefore, a theoretical shift from viewing ethnicity as something we are to something we do is proposed. Meanwhile, there are existing cultural norms regarding the "right" way to do ethnicity in China, and the state's role in shaping such cultural norms is particularly strong. The idea of "ethnic scripts" is therefore proposed to understand how informants make sense of their individual ethnicities by referring to broader normative cultural ideas about ethnicity. Such negotiations are intimate ones, as they have an impact on people's emotions and senses of self. For example, in order to achieve "valuable personhood" (Skeggs, 2011), informants work on their

ethnic selves in certain ways which accord with state and market versions of ethnic scripts. Also, ethnic scripts become part of the “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1979) which shape how performers manage their emotions at work in order to become happy, worry-free ethnic minorities whose ways of living are incompatible with the modern, competitive world. Ethnic scripts also sexualise minority women, as they tend to depict minority women as subject to different moral standards of sexuality than the Han. Therefore, ethnic performance also largely involves sexualised work.

In Chapter 7, I explore the different ways that female performers and male performers respond to undertaking sexualised work, and how their border encountering experiences are always gendered. While men performers remain silent about undertaking sexualised work, women performers express concerns over doing sexualised labour. Female informants who work in sexualised ethnic performance work feel pressured to constantly defend their virtuous reputations, as they are still judged by a norm of rural femininity which emphasises chastity. Ethnic performers undertake sexualised labour to create a sense of intimacy at guests’ dining tables, which contributes to guests’ *guanxi*-building processes. In some circumstances, female performers are even expected to sit on male guests’ laps as a form of “distinction work” (Hanser, 2008), to make guests feel entitled. Sexual harassment is tolerated, and even normalised, as part of the work; this is especially true in the current political context in China, which largely represses feminist activism, including arresting feminist activists and heavily censoring the *#MeToo* movement online. Ethnic performance work is also sexualised because of ethnic scripts which sexualise ethnic minority women, especially in the context of Southwest China. Therefore, guests already have in mind that they are going to interact with exotic and erotic minority women, even before such interactions begin. Interestingly, while ethnic scripts sexualise female performers’ labour on one hand, on the other hand, ethnic

scripts are also drawn on by performers to re-frame the meaning of this labour. To be more specific, in the local contexts where promoting ethnic culture is closely related to economic development and poverty alleviation, local ethnic scripts encourage people to commodify their ethnicities. Female performers refer to this aspect of ethnic scripts to frame ethnic performance as “promoting ethnic culture”. In this way, they manage to legitimise and justify doing sexualised labour by re-framing its meaning. However, undertaking sexualised labour still has an impact on performers’ relationships with their significant others, as they are compelled to withhold information about their work from their significant others in order to maintain their reputations. This has an impact on their romantic relationships as well, as some female performers are rendered undesirable marriage partners because of the work that they do. This again shows the link between work and non-work spheres, as the impact of work can extend its influence to impact on the most private and intimate negotiations. At the same time, while men performers are not sexualised in the same way as women performers, they still have to deal with the fact that they are undertaking “feminised” service work. They respond to this in different ways. Most importantly, they aspire to future success which is largely related to money-earning abilities and hegemonic masculinity. This shows how border encountering experiences are always gendered.

In summary, while showing the ways that border struggles have proliferated in migrant performers’ everyday work and lives, this thesis explores the ways that such encounters are always intimate, emotional, and personal. Also, taking a closer look at these intimate negotiations provides a valuable lens to understand the working mechanisms of borders, as well as the broader social structure. In the following section, I discuss in more detail the value of “intimacy as a lens” as a theoretical framework.

8.2 Intimacy as a lens

This thesis has shown the value of the lens of intimacy as a useful approach in revealing the personal and the social. In this section, a more detailed summary will be provided in terms of what exactly is the value of intimacy as a lens, especially how it can have dialogue with existing theoretical approaches and how it can potentially be used for future research.

The value of intimacy as a lens firstly lies in how it has the potential to bring together spheres that tend to be studied as separate fields, such as mobility, work, ethnicity, personal life, and to see these spheres as intricately linked. It does not confine the scope of research to a certain institution, such as the family, but rather allows a more fluid investigation of intimate negotiations across different spheres. This is one way in which it resonates with the “personal life” approach, as it allows more fluid investigations of intimacy which transcend different spheres of life and which cannot be conveniently put into boxes that suit conventional sociological categorisation (Smart, 2007; May, 2011b). While using the personal as the starting point, the major departure of this approach is that it offers a more specific definition of intimacy as incorporating emotions, personhood and relationships, while personal life may risk having too broad a focus. Also, despite the fact that the personal life approach tried to move away from conventional approach to family life, it still (to an extent) prioritise family lives and intimate relationships as its major foci. Therefore, without prioritising intimate relationships, the lens of intimacy revealed the following six themes in this thesis.

Firstly, one of the key themes that the lens of intimacy reveals in this thesis is the intersection between work and personal life, as the lens of intimacy shows the blurred borders between work and non-work spheres, and reveal

that work has to be understood in relation to the personal lives of migrant performers. Here, “the multiplication of labour” as a concept is useful in theorising the ways that work intersect with informants’ personal lives in various ways (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Work firstly *intensifies* as it colonises more of informants’ lives. This is not only revealed through how informants have to work for prolonged hours, but also through how work intrude in more areas of their lives.

For example, work does not just mean how individuals can be alienated from their authentic selves (Hochschild, 1983), it also shapes their potential selves —i.e. what they aspire to become (Akalin, 2007; Weeks, 2007). Informants engage in a more playful and reflexive self-making which is nevertheless constrained by ethnicity and gender. For example, working in a context in which there are “daily reminders of ethnicity” (Bai, 2007: 257), and in which one’s ethnicity is commercialised, pushes some performers to work on their ethnic selves in order to capitalise on their ethnicities and add value to their personhood. Also, while female performers’ sexualised labour is used to contribute to the intimacy at guests’ banqueting tables, their own intimate relationships are compromised, as they have to hide information from their significant others and may be treated as morally questionable by their (potential) partners. While some performers escape factory work to avoid feeling like machines—like the case of Jun, which I mentioned in the introduction chapter—in service work spheres, they are subject to different forms of exploitation which relate to their bodies, emotions, sense of self, and relationships with others.

The multiplication of labour also means that work has *diversified*, meaning that informants are expected to do multiple aspects of labour at the same time (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). For example, they have to do emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) according to ethnic scripts to show happy images of

ethnic minorities living worry-free lives. Ethnic minority women, while doing “distinction work” (Hanser, 2008) to recognise the entitlement and privilege of elite male guests, also have to do extra work to deal with the stigmatisation attached to undertaking sexualised labour. While trying to leave the guests the impression of meeting authentic ethnic minorities, performers have to work on their ethnic selves in certain ways to successfully satisfy “ethnic assessment”. Many aspects of labour tend to be unrecognised and unremunerated, despite that they become increasingly important parts of migrant performers’ daily work.

Secondly, looking through the lens of intimacy, the ways that work shapes informants’ personhood also shed light on how we can think about personhood and self-making as relational. Contrary to the assumption that people who engage in ethnic tourism can put a clear distinction between the on-stage selves and back-stage selves (e.g. Li, 2003; Bai, 2007), this research shows that work penetrates informants’ self-making in more profound and intimate ways. This challenges the individualisation thesis, which emphasise that people have the autonomy to live their own lives without constraints from traditional social roles and structures in modernity (e.g. Beck, 1992). This fails to theorise self-making in relational ways, overemphasising people’s agency, and neglects the constraints of social structures.

This thesis shows that to claim self-making as relational does not only mean recognising how the self is shaped by social interactions with other people, but also requires recognising the ways in which self-making is shaped by normative socio-cultural repertoires of meaning. The most telling examples are found in the ways that existing ethnic scripts shape the ways performers work on their ethnic selves in order to achieve “valuable personhood”. Normative cultural ideas about the division between rural and urban also

push informants to aspire to become modern urbanites through migration and consumption. While recognising the agency that informants have to resist social inequalities, it is also important to recognise the ways that their personhood is nevertheless constrained by social inequalities.

Thirdly, the lens of intimacy highlights the importance of using an emotionally informed approach to studying social inequalities. Existing research concerned with the emotions of rural-urban migrants in China is mainly from psychological perspectives, including major focuses on their mental health, subjective well-being, and senses of happiness (e.g. Gao and Smyth, 2011; Cheng et al., 2014). This research approaches emotions from a sociological point of view, and regards them as a response to the ways in which people are embedded in patterns of relationships, both to others and to significant social and political events or situations (Burkitt, 2014). Also, the lens of intimacy is a departure from thinking emotions as mere consequences of inequalities, as it also regards emotions as a tool to understand broader social issues. This means to ask not only, “what does inequality feel like”, but also, “what do these emotions reveal?”.

Using emotions as a lens firstly means to take informants’ emotions seriously. By taking informants’ ambivalence towards their ethnic identities seriously, this research discovered the important role of ethnic scripts in shaping informants’ practices of ethnicity; recognising the different emotions informants have regarding *hukou*, this research proposes different answers to the *hukou* puzzle which do not assume that people make rational choices without having their actions shaped by emotions. Furthermore, informants’ micro emotional negotiations also reveal the broader emotional regime of our time, which emphasises personal responsibility, personal success, happiness, and other positive energies. The lens of intimacy also encourages researchers to theorise emotions outside relationship spheres, and the lens

applies to areas which tend to be regarded as unemotional. For example, *hukou* as a form of migration regime is often thought to be relevant only in an administrative sense, but the lens of intimacy, through informants' experiences reveals that *hukou* as a formal migration regime is fundamentally emotional.

Fourthly, intimacy as a lens allows us to understand inequalities as intersecting, while challenging the static boundaries of social categories in the intersectionality framework. As I discussed in the literature review, one of the drawbacks of intersectionality theory is that sometimes people cannot fit neatly into a certain category which ostensibly characterises their social positionings. McCall (2005) refers to this messy positioning as “intra-category”, seeking to problematise the very categories and boundaries of social positionings like race, class, and gender. The case of migrant performers shows exactly this instability and constant changing of boundaries, as migrant performers negotiate being rural or urban, as well as being ethnic minorities or Han. Their ambivalences over such rigid divisions show the importance of focusing on “intra-category” positionings in intersectionality theories. Whilst in this research I have sought to make up this limitation by adopting the concept of borders/bordering, this does not deny the fact that these inequalities do intersect with each other in various ways. Being rural is intricately linked with being ethnic, while gender plays a crucial role in shaping informants' experiences of being rural and ethnic minorities—as shown through the dilemma of female performers undertaking sexualised work.

Meanwhile, whilst “class” is a word that is largely absent from this thesis—mainly because none of the informants ever used it to articulate their experiences—this research shows how class is being produced and reproduced even whilst the language of class fades out in China's society.

Indeed, there is “a new Chinese working class struggling to be born at the very moment that the language of class has been sentenced to death” (Pun, 2005: 24). The silence within the language about class has been filled with new discourses such as neoliberal ones which emphasise personal responsibility, competition, and individualism (Pun, 2005). In this research, we can also see the ways that the language of class has been replaced by other vocabularies, such as the urban and the rural and the Han and the ethnic.

Future research could look more closely at the ways in which people talk about class without necessarily using the word itself in contemporary China. Meanwhile, class is and should be a crucial part of considering intersectionality in China. Obviously this research has other limitations, too. For example, it risks homogenising different ethnic groups, and by bringing in different strands of literature, it may lose the theoretical depth of focusing on one particular area. However, such drawbacks seem inevitable considering the broader theoretical approach that this research is proposing. Future research can hopefully contribute more empirical detail about how exactly the lens of intimacy can be applied to different social contexts.

Fifthly, the lens of intimacy should be part of the study of the cultural politics of inequality (Sun, 2013). Forty years of reform has turned China into one of the most unequal countries in the world. While studies of inequality in China tend to focus on its economic and material forms, the important role of “culture” should be taken into consideration (Sun, 2013). Cultural politics are essentially about meaning, but it is important to remember that meaning is not only conveyed through words and symbols (Nash, 2009). We should not neglect the ways that inequalities are felt and experienced by embodied persons with emotions.

Although what is important in a general way in cultural politics is how symbols are interpreted and re-interpreted in social life, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that it is embodied people with emotional ties to others and individual biographies who are making social reality (Nash, 2009: 34).

These emotions and intimate negotiations are all infused with meanings. It is vital to understand them, just like words, symbols, and rational choices. An example would be how the different emotions informants have regarding the *hukou* system are important to understand because they reveal different social meanings, such as the broader emotional regime which shapes informants' emotions.

Last but not least, the lens of intimacy can potentially lead to new ways of understanding broader social structures. It does so by allowing a rather open entry for important themes to emerge without making assumptions about what issues concern informants the most. By giving people a voice, and valuing their emotional experiences, intimacy as a lens uses micro-scale intimate negotiations to understand broader social inequalities. It is even more important to give a voice to ethnic minority people in China, since they are so often portrayed as voiceless, and because their presence, images, and cultures are always used by others to speak on their behalf rather than to allow them to speak for themselves.

In this way, the lens of intimacy requires the sociological imagination, which sees through the connections between personal biography and historical context (Mills, 2000). I find the value of focusing on people's emotional and intimate negotiations at exactly the point where I am unable to understand these private negotiations without understanding the broader context that shapes them. The lens of intimacy also blurs the boundary between the public and private. In a way, this project provides an answer to the question of what it means to say that "the personal is political", and more importantly,

illuminates how we can understand “the political” better if we take “the personal” seriously.

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