
The book is divided in five chapters, an introduction and an afterword. In the first chapter, the author offers a detailed critical review of studies of labour and gender in the People’s Republic of China. In order to analyse the production of class and gender identity among hotel workers in the People’s Republic of China, the author draws on different bodies of scholarship on social practice and the body (among others, Bourdieu, Wacquant, Butler and Grosz). From the very beginning of the book, the author is committed to show how ideas about class, gender and ethnicity constitute intertwined and mutually productive aspects of her informants’ identities.

The following three chapters of the book introduce different case studies. In the first one, the reader enjoys a rich ethnographic account of service work in the context of a Beijing-based luxury hotel. This hotel offers top-quality, personalised service to a transnational, cosmopolitan clientele in the context of China’s highly competitive hospitality sector. The author describes the wealth of techniques through which the hotel management disciplines new employees into ideal high-quality service providers. The voices of the employees add to the description of these processes, which aim at producing a kind of service that the author calls ‘virtual personalism’; according to this model, workers must embody certain ideals of cosmopolitanism and class distinction, and offer the customer a highly personalised service. The author links her own ethnographic material with classic sociological literature on service work, starting with Hochschild’s classic study of airline workers in the USA, and including more recent work on retail, domestic service and the sex industry. Notwithstanding her concern with the wider debates on service work, Otis also shows how local social, economic and political conditions shape the everyday practices at play in the hotel.

The second case study takes the reader to Kunming, Yunnan province, where the author collected ethnographic data in another hotel belonging to the same transnational company. In Kunming, however, the hospitality industry caters for a
pool of customers that differs noticeably from Beijing’s. Here again, particular local conditions play a fundamental role in shaping relationships among the hotel’s customers, the workers and the managers. In the Kunming fieldsite the customers are mainly domestic business people, as opposed to Beijing’s transnational clientele; in addition, Kunming is the capital of Yunnan province. Yunnan is home to a vast number of ethnic minorities that, together with the large sex industry, appeal tourists from all over the country. As a result, in Kunming the main concern of both management and staff is to embody what the author calls ‘virtuous professionalism’: a model of service that is ‘modern’ and ‘civilised’, and attempts to differentiate itself from sex work.

The third case study looks at what the author calls the ‘informal’ service work sector in both Beijing and Kunming. In particular, the author focuses on female workers who, due to their rural origin, lack a permanent residence permit in the city. These workers, who cannot count on high levels of formal education, generally work in particularly unstable and exploitative labour conditions. Due to their residence status, they lack the legal protection often granted to urban-born workers. Literature on industrial work has often emphasised the physical distance between the ‘rural worker’ and the ‘urban consumer’. In this particular context, however, the physical proximity between customers and workers is the very vehicle through which social inequality is enacted. This is particularly evident in the case of rural-born migrants, who are readily discriminated as ‘country-bumpkins’ by their wealthier customers during their everyday interactions.

This book offers highly engaging ethnographic accounts of how class, gender and ethnicity are produced through the disciplining of working bodies in a large and complex industry. Throughout the book, Otis gives a nuanced picture of how transnational market forces are embodied at the level of different local situations, describing both continuity and change in employment and working practices across the Reform watershed.

The first two case studies, with their rich ethnography and sensitive discussion, certainly provide the most enjoyable part of the book. The ethnographic material provided in the fourth chapter, on the other hand, appears to be a bit thinner. Although interesting and well written, the third case study limits itself to confirming the findings of previously published works on this topic, namely, that rural to urban migrants remain particularly vulnerable in the urban context. In order to match the
depth of the discussion provided in the first two case studies, the author could have used the data in this chapter to further unpack analytical concepts like ‘rural’ and ‘urban’, and raise new questions about migrant labour in China.

Generally speaking, however, this book remains a fascinating read for all those interested in the sociology and anthropology of service labour, gender studies, as well as for anthropologists and sociologists of China and East Asia. Students and scholars interested in intersectional analysis of class, gender and ethnicity will enjoy reading a fine example of how this approach can illuminate complex social contexts.

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