

Homosocial Community of Care and Communicative Empowerment: Agency of Migrant Domestic Workers in China

Introduction

This article analyzes the agency rather than the hardship and sacrifices of migrant domestic workers generated in the context of China's rural-urban migration, using the case of Beijing Hongyan Social Work Service Center (Beijing Hongyan), a non-governmental organization (NGO) serving migrant domestic workers in China. The agency is defined as the capability "of exerting some degree of control over the social relations and structures in which one is enmeshed" (Fernandez, 2019, p. 9). In Beijing Hongyan, migrant domestic workers' agency is demonstrated in two aspects. The first is what Francisco-Menchavez refers to as "communities of care" built on a fictive kinship of sisterhood, which redefine families beyond the heteronormative nuclear family and reorganize care beyond the binary of paid public and unpaid private care work (2018, pp. 15-6). The agency also constitutes what Tungohan terms as "care activism" that goes beyond political and policy considerations and demonstrates migrant domestic workers' creative ways to care for themselves, for each other, and for the larger migrant community of domestic workers (2023). The second aspect is communicative empowerment, which means migrant domestic workers are facilitated to gain individual and social power by voicing through various channels of expressions (Luthra, 2003; Wallis, 2018). Despite not the focus of this article, it is necessary to first note the social structures in which migrant domestic workers' agency emerges.

Migrant domestic workers' experiences are predominantly shaped by the intersection of rural-urban citizenship hierarchy, gender, and informal economy. The majority of domestic workers in

China are females and rural-urban migrants, and are employed under informal conditions (Tong, 2017, p. 51). China has a long history of household registration (*hukou*) system, since the 1950s until now, which institutionally divides two classes of citizenships between rural and urban (Fu, et al., 2018, p. 815). Due to their rural residency status, migrant domestic workers have been restricted from receiving social benefits in cities, even though their work in cities has greatly contributed to China's phenomenal economic growth. Apart from the rural-urban divide, China's economic miracle is also based on the gendered labor regime (Tong, 2017, p. 43), where migrant domestic workers take up commercialized and marketized social reproduction which is hidden behind the evident production growth. In addition, the atomized social status of migrant domestic workers hinders their power to organize for collective negotiation, because as a form of the informal economy, domestic work is often isolated and takes place in private spaces (Tong, 2018, p. 1). Even worse, migrant domestic workers are left in a legal vacuum. The Labor Contract Law promulgated in 2008 does not recognize the relationship between households and domestic workers as a labor relation; it only involves the contractual relationship between "employer units" and "laborers" (Tong, 2018, p. 5).

In such contexts of structural inequalities and physical isolation, how do migrant domestic workers organize themselves into a mutual-aid community? By investigating WeChat official account articles posted by Beijing Hongyan, I argue that the organization produces spaces for diverse intimate practices of non-heteronormative care exchange among migrant domestic workers through the fictive kinship they foster with one another. The following question I want to investigate is: to what extent are their strategies of activism transformative and what are their implications for China's civil society? I argue that their collective public expressions and

performances led by the NGO provide a crucial moment of visibility and agency for migrant domestic workers who often disappear into employers' homes, yet they only contribute to policy advocacy rather than policy changes.

To illustrate these arguments, the article follows this sequence. I first introduce the organization of Beijing Hongyan. The following two sections elaborate on migrant domestic workers' agency in two dimensions, fictive kinship, and public expressions. What follows is a reflection on the possibilities and limitations of migrant domestic workers' agency demonstrated in their strategies of activism. The empirical evidence in this study comes from the articles posted on two WeChat official accounts, i.e., Beijing Hongyan Social Work Service Center (*Beijing Hongyan Shegong Fuwu Zhongxin*), and Swan Geese Chirp (*Hongyan Ming Jiujiu*). Both WeChat official accounts are hosted by Beijing Hongyan but have different focuses, with the former emphasizing the perspective of the organization and the latter functioning more as a platform for domestic migrant workers to share their experiences and thoughts.

Beijing Hongyan Social Work Service Center

Beijing Hongyan was launched in September 2014 in Beijing as a non-governmental organization. It aims at providing a space and multi-dimensional services for female migrant domestic workers. "Hongyan," in Chinese, means swan geese, a species of migratory birds, symbolizing migrant domestic workers moving between rural and urban areas. The first activity was held on International Women's Day, March 8, 2015. In 2016, Beijing Hongyan was officially registered as a private non-enterprise approved by the Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau. However, successful registration for legal status is usually not the case for labor NGOs in China because it is hard to reach the precondition for registering (Franceschini, 2014, p. 481) – finding

“a ‘business supervisory unit,’ which can only be granted by a government agency or its authorized organizations” (Chan, 2013, p. 10). If the requests to register are rejected, NGOs have to either register as a company or not register at all (Franceschini, 2014, p. 481). According to Beijing Hongyan’s 2018 Annual Information Update, the organizational structure includes a council of seven members, a supervisory board of three members, and an executive team of six members (Beijing Hongyan, 2019). These leaders are affiliated with different institutions, including other NGOs, foundations, law firms, and universities (Beijing Hongyan, 2019).

At the earliest stage, Beijing Hongyan encountered financial challenges and staff salaries could only be advanced by other sister organizations (Lan, 2017). It was not until the spring of 2015 that Beijing Hongyan achieved financial stability, with a variety of funding sources, such as crowdfunding, Oxfam Hong Kong, China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, China Minsheng Bank, etc. Take Oxfam Hong Kong for example, it financially supported Beijing Hongyan from August 2015 to July 2016 to carry out community services towards migrant domestic workers (Oxfam Hong Kong, 2017) and also funded the 2017 Domestic Workers Art Festival, on the theme of “Hundreds of Hands Supporting Families” (*Baishou Chengjia*).

Beijing Hongyan has several interconnected objectives to promote the welfare of migrant domestic workers. It provides basic services to meet migrant domestic workers’ needs, establishes a platform for them to speak out, helps construct a mutual support network, raises their awareness and ability of self-protection, develops their ability to self-organize, conduct research-type investigations, and advocates for legal and regulatory changes in the domestic care industry. Most activities take place on weekends and holidays at a basement rented by Beijing

Hongyan in Wangjing Subdistrict, Beijing, in sharp juxtaposition with a modern high-rise building block. The activities cover a wide range from learning computer/smartphone skills, English skills, legal information, domestic worker handouts, traditional Chinese medicine therapy, and eco-friendly handcrafts, to practicing yoga and meditation. For example, the lectures on computer/smartphone skills focus on teaching migrant domestic workers to type and use the internet for various purposes, such as purchasing railway tickets, learning online recipes, searching for routes on web mapping platforms, etc.

“Home to Swan Geese” and Fictive Kinship

Beijing Hongyan creates a free space, in both terms of freedom and of charge, constituting what Piocos III says a “home away from home” (2021, p. 10), just as the place is named “Home to Swan Geese” (*Hongyan Zhi Jia*). On this site, migrant domestic workers can anchor their body and mind in an alien city, and establish a fictive kinship of sisterhood to help them reduce feelings of loneliness and frustration. Otherwise, they have no choice but to stay at employers’ homes without privacy, because they have limited urban spaces that depend upon consumption ability. At night, non-live-in migrant domestic workers would rather pay five yuan to sleep together on the ground than pay ten yuan for a bed in domestic companies (Mei, 2020), because they prefer to send their hard-earned money back to the family for the benefit of their children and other family members at the cost of their own better-quality life in cities (Sun, 2008, p. 477). When workers come to the organization after work, they sometimes fall asleep as soon as they lie on the mat on the ground, since not until then tiredness gets the chance to release in this relatively quiet and secure place.

However, the place was never easy to achieve. As mentioned above, funding was a prominent problem in the early times of the organization. The renovation of the basement was sponsored by WeChat crowdfunding in 2016, accumulating approximately 70,000 yuan (Beijing Hongyan, 2017). In response to migrant domestic workers' needs and opinions about their user experience, the interior design was completed with the help of other social work organizations. Migrant domestic workers are also major participants in cleaning and renovation. The space is divided into three sections with different functions, i.e., an activity room, a seminar room, and a kitchen. In this renovated organization space, migrant domestic workers can share available resources, cook and eat together, gather to celebrate public holidays, make handicrafts, or at least have a place to stay.

Apart from the basic skills training described above, which is commonly provided by labor NGOs, Beijing Hongyan inserts a gender perspective by conducting various care practices and activities, both somatic and psychological, for migrant domestic workers who often suffer from corporeal and emotional pains. Domestic workers' body, mind, and heart are carved by experiences of multiple roles related to being a woman – wife, mother, daughter, and domestic worker. Some migrant domestic workers come to Beijing to escape from domestic violence, and some are forced by financial hardship to work two or more jobs on the same day (Lan, 2017). Long years of care labor have left domestic workers in a wide range of occupational hazards, including exposure to toxic chemicals in household cleaning products, sharp injuries and burns, spine and muscle pains due to heavy lifting/holding and long-time standing/bending, and stress and strains caused by long working hours. Because of working in private homes, domestic

workers are more likely to encounter sexual harassment than people in other workplaces (Han, 2006, p. 68).

In addition to physical injuries, researchers find that emotional alienation is another prominent issue during the care labor process. Domestic workers are trained to exercise empathy and the imagination of pseudo-familial relationships to devote care and love to employers, yet sometimes in return with disparaging remarks about their rural status and the stigmatized identity of domestic “servants” (Fu, et al., 2018, pp. 823-5). Everyday subordination tends to disempower migrant domestic workers from self-advocacy and elicits compliance from them by internalizing discriminatory identities into their cognitive process (Ellerman, 2017). Along with that, intensive emotional labor in the nanny-child relationship, in other words, “selling motherhood,” can lead to acute distress when domestic workers have to separate from the employers’ children upon the termination of a contract; witnessing and practicing the privileged rearing for employers’ children also stimulate them to feel guilty about their own children (Fu, et al., 2018, p. 826). However, when similar individual trails of life experience converge, disempowerment will be transformed into the collective consciousness of shared identities and strong solidarity. The cohesion is rooted in migrant domestic workers’ relatable lived experiences, deeply felt and embodied, and therefore, they can empathize with and heal one another through homosocial care exchange.

In the mutual-aid community of Beijing Hongyan, migrant domestic workers become caregiver-receivers, breaking the normative narrative of domestic workers as sole caregivers. They are also instructed by organization leaders or workshop speakers to self-care. Intimacy is characteristic of

the various care activities and practices at Beijing Hongyan, which contain both physical interaction and emotional communication, and hence it requires, and forges as well, substantial mutual trust. To relieve occupational body pains, migrant domestic workers give simple massages to each other on hands, feet, or head, and practice *gua sha* (a scraping therapy rooted in traditional Chinese medicine) in workshops. The moment they hold and caress each other's hands face to face, lovingly and gently, is impressive, because their hands are easily neglected, despite an evident symbol of their labor. As a social work organization, Beijing Hongyan also holds workshops to introduce migrant domestic workers to varied therapy modalities for their well-being, including expressive writing, meditation, yoga, and drama therapy, which are usually dominated by the upper-middle class due to the high-level requirements of money and leisure time. Some migrant domestic workers fall asleep quickly during meditation because they are rarely able to wind down and release the long-existing heavy stress, and this safe and relaxing situation helps them to get the world off their back, however temporarily. The most straightforward flow of care is circulated through unburdening and listening: the organization space allows them to express authentically and the empathetic responses from others, such as being moved to tears, make them feel seen and heard, which strengthens their social support network.

Accompanying this process of intimate care exchange emerges fictive kinship, specifically, for migrant domestic workers, sisterhood, where they address each other as "sis." A fictive kinship is a form of social ties, based neither on blood nor marriage, but rather on close friendship ties, which facilitates migrant domestic workers to integrate into the host society (Kim, 2009). This "family away from family" (Francisco-Menchavez, 2018, p. 14) is bonded with their shared life

experiences and plight, which are rooted in intersecting systemic oppression along the lines of gender, rural-urban citizenship, and occupational hierarchy, and is also cohered with the reciprocal practices of care exchange. This type of family breaks away from a patriarchal and heteronormative structure, and care activities in this chosen family are no longer devalued commodities sold in employers' homes or unpaid care work socially assigned by gender roles within a household. Therefore, the horizontal circulation of care among migrant domestic workers provides an alternative perception of caregiving-receiving, beyond the discourse of care chains that focuses on the linear flow of care work from left-behind families in sending villages to employers' families in receiving cities (Francisco-Menchavez, 2018, p. 97).

Communicative Empowerment through Public Expressions

Beijing Hongyan creates diverse opportunities to bring migrant domestic workers from marginalized positions to center stage, breaking their silence and invisibility. Their expressions are publicized through two channels: art festivals and writing posted online (on WeChat). The former is outstanding events, taking place regularly every two or three years, using diverse media and forms, with migrant domestic workers lit by spotlights seen by broader audiences, while the latter is routine practices by migrant domestic workers, recording activities they engage in and thoughts and feelings about those experiences. Either participating in art festivals or writing requires a significant time commitment and the high mobility of migrant domestic workers increases the challenges to stable participation. Although domestic workers have long working hours and heavy work responsibilities and some have a nearly three-hour (one-way) commute between employers' homes and Beijing Hongyan, they are persistent in setting aside time for attending activities and writing. These public performances and written works fulfill their

(assumed impossible) dreams of being on stage and empower them to voice their experiences and opinions from their own perspective.

Up until now, Beijing Hongyan has curated three Domestic Workers Art Festivals, adopting the art forms of photography, music, and theater, respectively, tapping incrementally inwards into migrant domestic workers' lived experiences and elusive selves. The process of creating artwork is simultaneously a process of self-exploration and self-liberation for migrant domestic workers. The first Art Festival, which featured a photography exhibition of domestic workers' hands and portraits, took place in 2017 at 798 Art Zone, a famous art venue in Beijing. The motivation was to let more people "see" migrant domestic workers whose hands support both their own families and their clients' families, which is the origin of the festival's name, Hundreds of Hands Supporting Families. The second Art Festival was held in 2020 at another art venue in Beijing. This time the focus is to let more people "hear" the voices of migrant domestic workers through singing and public speaking (Mei, 2020). Meanwhile, it launched the first music album¹ created by, about, and for domestic workers in China. The internet technology brought 170,000 online views to this event via live streaming (Beijing Hongyan, 2020). The latest Art Festival is highlighted with a theater performance, focusing on the body of migrant domestic workers. A roundtable discussion on the creation of the theater was presented in 2022 online due to a surge in Covid infections after China lifted its zero-Covid policy; the theater performance is planned to be shown in person to the public this spring (Beijing Hongyan, 2022).

¹ The music album of *Life Encounters* (2020), released by Beijing Hongyan Social Service Center, is available on Spotify for free. <https://open.spotify.com/album/24h4aZePtMdEvjEXubb1vm>, accessed on February 26, 2023.

The process where migrant domestic workers engaged in producing this music album, from composing, and lyric writing, to recording in a studio, constitutes a crucial site to investigate how marginalized voices are suppressed and reclaimed. The music album collects ten songs, and the majority of the song lyrics and melodies were collaboratively created by migrant domestic workers in a series of music workshops that were assisted by some songwriters who also focus on labor rights and social injustices (Yang, 2020). In the lyrics, migrant domestic workers utilize descriptive and expressive words to illustrate different aspects of their life experiences, including conflicting motherhood responsibilities of their own children and employers' children, the wide rural-urban gap in children's education and development, the significance of care work in society as a combination of physical labor (with hands) and emotional labor (with heart), homesickness in migrant life, and firmly saying no to domestic violence. Flowing from the bottom of their heart, these song lyrics manifest the strength, resilience, and resistance of migrant domestic workers, straightforwardly advocate respect and justice, and convey their fervent hope for a better future despite vulnerabilities, discrimination, and inequalities they are currently facing.

However, getting the songs written does not equate to getting the voice raised. Long-term silence and marginalization have deprived migrant domestic workers of their ability to speak up, both politically and physiologically. To participate in recording the album, migrant domestic workers have to spend an extremely long day on the only day off that week, commuting to the studio before dawn and completing one song recording after darkness, with repeated attempts (Yu, 2020). One migrant domestic worker, who had practiced singing for a long time during her limited daily time of walking the employer's dog, failed to make a high-pitch sound in the studio however many times she tried (Yu, 2020). Migrant domestic workers tend to lower their voices

for fear of making mistakes in employers' homes, so a long-time lack of speaking up in unequal power relationships leads to the lost function of speaking and singing on a high note.

Establishing a platform and channel is the first step to center marginalized voices, but not enough, because migrant domestic workers face layers of barriers to engaging in public spheres. They are excluded from society by interconnected structurally unequal systems and the systems are then reinforced by the competition between the "incapable" and the privileged, and further, the frustrating results can be devastating enough to prevent them from future involvement. Therefore, the founder of Beijing Hongyan, Mei Ruo, kept encouraging the participant to continue recording the song though the recording director suggested replacing her with others (Yu, 2020). What matters is not to select a star singer but that all the voices can be heard.

Another way to channel their expressions is the theater, where migrant domestic workers illustrate their life stories through the movement of the body and reclaim the ownership over their bodies that previously only served as vessels for childbirth and machines for domestic work. Beijing Hongyan and the major production team conducted interviews with migrant domestic workers and organized extensive dancing body (*shenti wudong*) workshops for collective creation and improvisation (Beijing Hongyan, 2022). Apart from participating in performances, migrant domestic workers also contributed to designing props and posters (Beijing Hongyan, 2022). However, it took a long time for migrant domestic workers to navigate the theatrical and dance form of expression. This art form of exploring the body, where, in migrant domestic workers' words, "you touch me and I touch you," is different from their existing perception of dance, the typical example of which to them is Square Dance (*guangchangwu*) consisting of standardized routines (Beijing Hongyan, 2022). With time and practice, they built

up a deeper connection with their own bodies and fostered stronger trust with other domestic workers through physical interactions and emotional exchange. Gradually, they grasped the way to express themselves through impassioned body moves injected with genuine emotions, thoughts, feelings, and identities – they feel their inner selves awakened. This process constitutes resistance against the dominant image of migrant domestic workers as silent and passive “servants” with rustic cultural tastes.

Migrant Domestic Workers’ Agency

By creating fictive kinship and expressing themselves publicly with diverse artistic forms, migrant domestic workers demonstrate their agency through reciprocal care exchange, increased self-expression, heightened awareness of their rights such as signing contracts with their employers and seeking legal protection, improved confidence both on and off stage, and enhanced dignity of care labor. They also inspire other migrant domestic workers through their stories and performances shared on various internet channels, thus further extending their impact.

Although Beijing Hongyan creates a space to empower migrant domestic workers through care activism and helps them better adapt to urban life, these activities have not led to policy changes or legal reforms so far. For example, domestic workers of intermediary employment agencies still lack protection from the Chinese Labor Contract Law due to the ambiguous criteria for an employment relationship. The limited transformative outcome is closely related to formidable political restraints on labor NGOs in China. The state establishes mechanisms to control and monitor NGOs, from registration to operate throughout the process (Cheng, Ngok, & Huang, 2012). Albeit Beijing Hongyan gained official recognition and legal status by successfully registering as a non-profit enterprise, the organization’s existence is bound to its ability to

navigate state-NGO relations. In order to survive, NGOs in China generate flexible strategies of activism to reduce the risk of stepping beyond the government's prescribed boundaries (Chan, 2013, p. 17). As a service-oriented organization rather than a movement-oriented organization, Beijing Hongyan focuses on "non-sensitive" activities, such as providing information about labor laws and conducting care and cultural activities, and utilizes cooperation with the academic community as a major means to advocate for policy changes. This is similar to the strategy adopted by green NGOs in China of "self-imposed censorship and de-politicized politics" to avoid being seen as a threat to the authoritarian state (Ho, 2008, p. 29). Thus, the organization becomes instrumental to the authorities' objectives by preserving social stability (Franceschini, 2014, p. 483).

The agency of migrant domestic workers is also limited by the unbalanced relationship between the NGO and workers since the internal governance of Beijing Hongyan is not rooted in migrant domestic workers themselves. Beijing Hongyan was initiated and operated by a group of salaried social workers and is backed up by oversea donations such as Oxfam, Hong Kong. In order to gain the trust of foreign donors and secure funding sources, Chinese NGOs have to carry out activities that align with the international discourse on democracy and human rights, such as emphasizing "capacity building," and meanwhile need to translate these diverse languages and practices into what is permissible to Chinese authorities (Franceschini, 2014, p. 487). Thus, either the relationship between Beijing Hongyan and workers or that between Beijing Hongyan and donors hinders the full representation of migrant domestic workers. NGO-sponsored public performances are also found to present a narrow view of migrant domestic workers compared with their own online expressions on social media that show more diverse and positive

perspectives (Wallis, 2018, p. 213). Moreover, the emotional cost of empowerment is laid on migrant domestic workers, though it is an effective strategy to gain greater empathy and visibility for justice advocacy through affect and emotions in public performances (Wallis, 2018, p.219). However, considering that migrant domestic workers currently are not able to form an organization autonomously due to past and present structural inequalities, Beijing Hongyan provides a meaningful starting point for them to practice organizing and mobilizing skills.

Conclusion

This article has examined agency of migrant domestic workers in China by investigating the community of care and communicative empowerment led by a service-oriented labor NGO. The community of care provides a redefinition of family and an alternative perception of feminized care migration among Chinese migrant domestic workers. The shared lived experiences and identities have forged their vulnerabilities into intimate solidarity based on a fictive kinship of sisterhood. Through diverse cultural and somatic practices, care circulates “horizontally, from migrants to other migrants” rather than in a linear flow from the left-behind family in the sending village to the employer’s family in the host city (Francisco-Menchavez, 2018, p. 97). Thus, the exchange of care transcends the binary of devalued commodities in capitalist markets and unpaid social reproduction within households. Communicative empowerment is built on a myriad of artistic public expressions that are incited and organized by Beijing Hongyan to amplify the influence of migrant domestic workers’ voices. Although these creative strategies of the agency have not led to policy changes, the care practices and sisterhood bonds provide crucial social support networks for migrant domestic workers to adapt to displaced urban life and challenge the mainstream stigmatized image of migrant domestic workers by reaffirming the importance of care work and domestic workers.

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