

墜

the  
fourth  
encounter



Research Workshop & Art Exhibition

PRECARIOUSLY

YOURS:

GENDER, CLASS, AND

URBANITY IN

CONTEMPORARY

SHANGHAI

December 2014

学术工作坊 暨 艺术展览

摇摇欲坠:

性别, 阶级, 城市

于当代上海

For Vagina's Sake

tactics

将阴道独白到底

global mega-city

Marriage Market

inequalities & disjunctures

(Re)negotiating

crisis of

neoliberal economics

leftover women

feminization

peaceful coupledom

visual mobility & in

"new" Asian femininity

阴道多云

critical

剩女

super-hot mom

Communitarian Narrative

中国式

gendering of urban space

art activism

patriarchal norms

of resistance

rapid reforms

Public Intimacies

Shanghai Lalas

Urban India

盛女的黄金时代

masculinity

ascetic socialism

generational change

shengnü

辣妈

intervention

post-traditional sexual expression

reimagining

!! PINKER Women Running

heteronormative society

post-feminism

Precarious Autonomy

emerging creative class

拉拉

Occupy the Public

The rapid reforms in China have resulted in increasing inequalities and disjunctures. While Shanghai is transforming into a global mega-city, like many other big cities in Asia, its dwellers are often confronted with a way of life enabled and disabled by precarity. This precarity is generally perceived to be along the lines of labour and class, characterised in Guy Standing's term "The Precariat," or those with short labour contracts and poor working conditions. Our focus is particularly on the intersections of such inequalities and disjunctures with gender.

In *Precariously Yours: Gender, Class, and Urbanity in Contemporary Shanghai* we have extended the notion of precarity towards the domain of gender, love and sexuality. In particular "single women" serve as a prism to explore the complexities surrounding precarity, urbanity and class. They are the ones that negotiate the changing gender roles in China, in whom we can witness a conservative return of patriarchy, coupled to a perceived crisis of masculinity. For instance, the derogative term *shengnü* – "leftover women" – gestures towards a group of women whose singlehood in their late 20s seems to be enough to evoke intense stigmatisation and reiteration of societal demands regarding love and family life.

*Precariously Yours* explored these questions through an art exhibition, workshop and public panel discussion. The

[SINGLE] team members and their invited guests aimed at answering the following questions: How do single women negotiate the multiple expectations and demands that society imposes upon them? What are their tactics of resistance against normative gender roles and expectations? How do they negotiate the gendering of urban space? How to love in a city that never stays the same? How to navigate through the city, as a young woman without getting lost or feeling unsafe? How to imagine the city as a more intimate and fragile space? What is to be lost and gained in remaining a single woman?

The workshop, which took place on December 4–6, 2014, in various locations in Shanghai, zoomed in on how tropes like *shengnü* can be read as imaginations of a “new” Asian femininity, how different modes of love and desire are being explored in diverse creative and sexual cultures in Asian cities and how art and activism attempt to intervene in hegemonic understandings of love, gender and sexuality. *Precariously Yours* engages not only with Shanghai, but also with other Asian cities so as to foster a comparative approach and allow reflections upon the lives and hopes of single women in a rapidly changing Asia.



## **SEX AND WOMEN IN THE METROPOLIS: A COMMUNITARIAN/NARRATIVE VIEW**

Concern over rapid social change in China tends to descend upon the great number of women who, enabled by life in the city, have ranged out of their embeddedness in traditional marriage and family structures. Easily transmuted to mistresses or sluts who are said to bring havoc to peaceful coupledom and feminine virtues, or passionately converted to consumerism and Westernisation that allegedly further erodes China's professed ascetic socialism, the so-called "surplus women" are visibly problematised. Yet, defenders/sympathisers of the surplus women





often converge with the critics on embracing a similarly liberal/libertarian view of the autonomy and choice that the women exercise. I call for a communitarian/narrative conception of self that may bring forth a more complex understanding of women living in the city.

– **Prof. Josephine HO** (National Central University, Taiwan)

▲ Workshop Opening at the Rockbund Art Museum, 4 Dec 2014, with keynote speaker Prof. Josephine HO (right) and discussant Dr. CHOW Yiu Fai (Hong Kong Baptist University).

## **BEING SINGLE IN THE CITY. APPROACHING AUTONOMY, RESPECTABILITY AND PRECARIETY**

With a broad understanding of what 'being single' can mean, from never married, widowed, divorced, being away from family, or simply being alone in one's thoughts and aspirations, we argue that the single woman is governed by economic and cultural tropes of autonomy, respectability and precarity. Taking into account both spatial and temporal aspects of everyday life, her presence impacts on, and is impacted by, urban transformation, including discourses of modernity and neoliberalism that mark cities such as Delhi and Shanghai.

– **[SINGLE] Project Leaders:**

**Prof. Christiane BROSIUS** (Heidelberg University)

**Dr. Melissa BUTCHER** (Birkbeck College, University of London)

**Prof. Jeroen de KLOET** (University of Amsterdam)

## **SINGLE CHINESE WOMEN SUBVERTING THE "SHENGNÜ" LABEL**

More and more urban Chinese women may make a deliberate choice to reject the institution of marriage in an effort to maximise their individual liberty and economic independence.

– **Dr. Leta Hong FINCHER** (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology)

## **I'M NOT A FEMINIST BUT...! YOUNG WOMEN IN URBAN INDIA AND GENDER POLITICS IN A TIME OF GLOBALIZATION**

In a context where feminists are seen as undesirable to men, then often feminism as a politics is far too precarious for many young women to take on. Why is feminism and being a feminist so fraught in a post globalization period? In a post-feminist era, young middle-class women in Mumbai are articulating a self-image as “independent but not feminist.”

– **Dr. Shilpa PHADKE** (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India)

## **PRECARIOUS AUTONOMY: CHINESE WOMEN STUDENTS (RE)NEGOTIATING GENDER THROUGH EDUCATIONAL MOBILITY**

“For my mother’s generation, they only have one way of approaching [family and marriage]...After I came to Australia, I realized there’s more than one way to live life. It’s OK if people are different.”

“I want to give myself five years of my own time. To develop my career, to do the things I want to do. So the earliest [age to get married] would be around 28 I guess.”

– **Dr. Fran MARTIN** (University of Melbourne)

[SINGLE] fieldwork: Sunday, "Marriage Market" at Shanghai People's Park. While dads and moms desperately searching for "son/daughter-in-law" through marriage Ads with personal data of their children, a "lucky" bride got blessing from our team members.



长学女  
1976年1.62, 本科, 未婚, 大专, 计算机专业, 英语六级, 年薪4万, 户口, 诚意求偶, 70-76年未婚, 稳定, 有房  
12月  
62139890

13338003907

杭州女  
1983年, 1.63米, 本科, 未婚, 大专, 计算机专业, 英语六级, 年薪4万, 户口, 诚意求偶, 70-76年未婚, 稳定, 有房  
1381169804

1381169804

1381169804

1381169804

汇女  
1.61, 本科, 19年, 10祖籍扬州, 性稳定, 大专以上, 人稳定, 有房, 沪通, 诚意求偶, 房之内, 属虎不忌后, 诚意求偶  
15952561302

黄浦女  
76年158高中  
祖籍河南 公司财务  
15001708042  
寻 出生70年后 未婚  
户籍不限 有房 人品好

女, 籍贯山东, 中学老师  
持人才引进居住证(原籍潍坊)  
76年1.62, 本科, 未婚, 1.63, 5  
官职正, 四年制本科, 英语六级, 性  
格温柔, 无不良嗜好, 勤快活  
泼, 有购房能力, 父母退休, 非  
独生子女, 有意请速谈  
择偶要求: 如属我的资料符合你  
的标准, 你的条件和我的不  
多, 学历相当, 稳重, 学历中  
级以上, 人品好, 诚意求偶  
资料仅供参考, 谢绝回信  
(6) 11月 23日  
13866799391 本人  
13816071593 本人

闸北女  
1977年, 156 本科, 外  
企, 未婚, 月薪15万  
元。  
要求: 170以上, 未婚, 月  
薪一万以上, 大8岁以内  
品德优秀, 有独立婚房, 工作  
稳定, 有上进心。  
15900614336

黄浦女  
84年153 外企管  
大专 月薪5千 相貌  
秀气 本分 性格好  
13524181931  
寻 身高165以上 人品  
好工作 定有 有房  
2004年1月1日挂

普陀男  
1985年 1.76, 专升本, 国企月薪税后  
4千多, 独立婚房  
在宝山。  
要求: 工资大概相同,  
沟通合理, 不要太胖,  
小1-5岁有缘分女士。  
(6) 11月 23日  
1897121493

杨浦女  
年1.65, 本科,  
税后1.5万多。  
要求: 1.73以上, 人  
品好, 大专以上, 有房,  
性稳定, 性格大方  
为人。  
1362178688

宝山女  
1987年1.62, 本科外  
企, 年薪8万, 责任心强  
性格好, 祖籍浙江, 相  
亲: 江浙, 浙, 沪, 人  
品好, 有房, 工作稳定  
性格好, 82-87年, 1.  
73-1.85有诚意真心  
相往一定。 (6) 17  
(6) 17月 19日  
18721890415

松江九亭女  
1981年 1.65 交大  
硕士, 祖籍武汉, 上  
海有房, 外企工, 月  
薪2万。  
要求: 本科以上, 1.70  
以上, 户籍不限, 人品  
好, 稳重, 大8岁以上,  
收入万上, 随礼。  
(12) 11月 23日  
1306264878

浦东新区女  
祖籍黑龙江, 大连市  
有房, 77年, 1.62 未  
婚, 高中, 月薪4千。  
要求: 户籍不限, 大 7  
岁以内, 人品好有房。  
(6) 11月 23日  
13774494776

杨浦女  
1988年 1.67, 本科,  
法企, 月薪税后 6千,  
本份安, 性格好。  
要求: 1.75 本科以上,  
人品好, 有房, 工作稳  
定, 责任心强, 大度男士。  
(12) 5月 24日  
13917794187

宝山男  
78年, 未婚, 1.69 大专,  
国企单位, 月薪 5千,  
二室一厅, 本份大方。  
要求: 1.55 以上, 人品好,  
工作稳定, 中学以上, 有  
在一起。  
(6) 3月 8日  
13764349240 钱  
13122148240  
赵先生上  
海, 无孩  
厂电, 工  
性格好  
农房  
18934025  
寻: 年龄 35  
160 以上  
本科学历  
本人诚意  
2010年 12月

虹口女  
1988年 1.63, 本科, 五  
星酒店策划经理, 年  
薪 10万, 性格好, 内  
向, 诚意求偶, 沟通理  
解, 要求: 72 大女以上,  
人品好, 大专以上, 工  
作稳定, 收入6万以  
上, 有房, 住。  
(6) 17月 19日

虹口女  
1984年 1.60, 名牌大  
学毕业, 8万月薪, 任  
职, 年薪税后 20 万, 白  
皙清秀, 聪明智慧, 喜  
爱生活, 教育世家, 良  
好的素质和气质。  
要求: 1.70 以上, 人品好,  
收入 8 万, 性格开朗有  
魄力, 地区不限, 上海户口。  
(3) 17月 19日  
13671990842

徐汇女  
1983年 1.55 未婚,  
中专, 服装公司, 收  
入 4 千, 家境条件不  
错, 父母沟通合理。  
要求: 172 以上, 工  
作稳定, 性格好, 实  
在大 5 岁内。  
(6) 11月 23日  
15800596076

闸北女  
1981年 1.64, 未婚,  
独生女, 本科, 国企审  
计, 月薪 5 千。  
要求: 170 以上, 大专  
以上, 人品好, 工作稳  
定, 工资不低于 5500  
元, 独立, 一切随她。  
(6) 17月 26日  
15626468  
18964576098

虹口女  
1975年 1.62, 未  
婚, 学历本科, 外企  
收入 8 千, 家境条  
件可以。  
要求: 有房, 大 7 岁  
以内, 随礼。  
(6) 11月 23日  
13901618156

诚找胖女士  
沪男 65岁 1.70米  
本科 医师(退)  
4000/月 离独住房  
面貌端正 不嗜烟酒  
找65岁下 较胖女士  
本人 13122637697

普陀女  
1988年 1.58 本科,  
国企, 任团支部书记,  
性格好, 漂亮大方,  
祖籍河南。  
要求: 1.75 以上, 本  
科, 月薪 5 千, 工作稳定,  
大 5 岁以内, 诚意求偶  
(6) 17月 19日  
1322583023

浦东新区女  
1983年 1.63 大女  
本科, 外企月薪 7 千,  
沟通能力强, 性格温  
柔, 要求: 172 以上, 本  
科, 人品好, 善良大度,  
工作稳定, 大 5 岁以  
内, 80 年不要。  
(3) 17月 19日  
13701667564

浦东女  
1978年, 未婚, 1.58  
净高, 本科, 中学老  
师, 性格稳定, 开朗,  
性格好。  
要求: 大专以上, 1.70  
以上, 人品好, 工作稳定,  
性格大方, 孝顺父母。  
(6) 11月 23日  
13816755106

浦东新区女  
1989年 1.69 专升本,  
银行, 气质佳, 性格  
好, 本人上海有房, 在  
普陀区。  
要求: 年龄不限, 人品好,  
工作稳定, 大专以上,  
性格好, 人品好, 有责  
任心, 1.75 以上男士。  
(6) 7月 6日  
13901410238

杨浦女  
86年 182 未婚, 本科 500  
月薪, 月薪 7 千, 性格温  
柔, 170 以上, 本科有  
人品好。  
(12) 11月 26日  
1361972877  
13651661531

浦东男  
1977年 174cm 大专  
未婚 双休 双休 双休  
原籍广东, 现居江, 祖  
籍广东, 月薪 5000 独  
立房 无房  
要求: 找志同道合 贤  
惠 温柔过门子的姑娘  
50828016

松江女  
1980年 1.61 本科, 企  
业, 月薪 5 千, 性格温  
柔, 沟通能力好, 有房  
20-30 万, 诚意求偶, 沟通理  
解, 要求: 72 大女以上,  
人品好, 大专以上, 工  
作稳定, 收入 6 万以  
上, 有房, 住。  
(6) 17月 19日  
13925050511

普陀女  
1983年 1.58 本科, 企  
业, 月薪 5 千, 性格温  
柔, 沟通能力好, 有房  
20-30 万, 诚意求偶, 沟通理  
解, 要求: 72 大女以上,  
人品好, 大专以上, 工  
作稳定, 收入 6 万以  
上, 有房, 住。  
(6) 17月 19日  
13925050511

普陀女  
1988年 1.62 本科, 国  
企, 月薪 7 千, 性格温  
柔, 沟通能力好, 有房  
20-30 万, 诚意求偶, 沟通理  
解, 要求: 72 大女以上,  
人品好, 大专以上, 工  
作稳定, 收入 6 万以  
上, 有房, 住。  
(6) 17月 19日  
13925050511

浦东女  
1986年 1.64 本科,  
上市公司, 月薪 6 千,  
沟通能力好。  
要求: 人品好, 1.73 大  
女, 户籍不限, 工作稳  
定, 性格好, 有房  
181-84, 诚意求偶。  
(6) 6月 1日  
15921004252

江西女  
1980年 1.62, 外语系本  
科, 外企, 月薪税后 7 千以  
上, 人品好, 美丽。  
要求: 本科 1.70 以上,  
80-70 年, 性格好, 上  
进, 可共同买房。  
(6) 12月 15日  
15007996712

江精女  
1987年 1.74 本科, 央  
企, 月薪 7 千, 沟通能力  
好, 漂亮, 月薪 7 千, 性  
格好, 沟通能力强, 有房  
20-30 万, 诚意求偶, 沟通理  
解, 要求: 72 大女以上,  
人品好, 大专以上, 工  
作稳定, 收入 6 万以  
上, 有房, 住。  
(6) 17月 19日  
13925050511

普陀女  
1983年 1.65 未婚, 大  
专, 国企后勤工作, 月  
薪税后 3 千。  
要求: 1.70 以上, 人品好,  
性格好, 房子无按揭, 工  
作稳定, 大专以上, 江、  
沪, 沪有在一起。  
(6) 4月 19日  
18121017449

徐汇女  
1987年 1.74 本科,  
央企年薪 8 万, 稳定,  
本份文静, 性格好。  
要求: 1.78 以上, 大女以  
上, 有房, 人品好, 工  
作稳定, 有缘分共同买房。  
(6) 12月 16日  
13471888516

浦东女  
1989年 1.69 专升本,  
银行, 气质佳, 性格  
好, 本人上海有房, 在  
普陀区。  
要求: 年龄不限, 人品好,  
工作稳定, 大专以上,  
性格好, 人品好, 有责  
任心, 1.75 以上男士。  
(6) 7月 6日  
13901410238

普陀女  
1988年 1.68, 未婚,  
本科, 传媒工作, 月  
份薪 5 千, 性格好,  
沟通合理。  
要求: 1.75 以上, 人品好,  
工作稳定, 性格好男士。  
(6) 6月 28日  
1902

黄浦男  
1986年 1.76 交大硕  
士, 微软公司, 年薪 25  
万, 独立房 2 套, 父母  
另外有房, 性格好, 大度。  
要求: 本科以上, 正职, 人  
品好, 稳重, 1.62 以上, 性格好, 小  
5 岁以内。  
(3) 5月 1日  
8994

1986年 1.76 交大硕  
士, 微软公司, 年薪 25  
万, 独立房 2 套, 父母  
另外有房, 性格好, 大度。  
要求: 本科以上, 正职, 人  
品好, 稳重, 1.62 以上, 性格好, 小  
5 岁以内。  
(3) 5月 1日  
8994

## SHANGHAI LALAS AND LEFTOVER LADIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FEMALE PROFESSIONALS

Some factors that affect the career paths of lalas (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender-identified women) and shengnü professional women in Shanghai: for informants in creative jobs, governmental control plays an important role in their career choices and path; gender and sexual orientation plays an important role in the career choices and paths of the Shanghai Lalas; the Shengnüs would often deny any connection between their gender and their career choices and paths (whether negatively or positively).

– **Dr. Lena SCHEEN** (New York University Shanghai)

## LBT MOVEMENT IN SHANGHAI

“Occupy the Public – I! PINKER Women Running”  
Shanghai Nvai’s work has been focusing on “raising the awareness of gender equality and opposing the discriminations against LBT people.” Our programs include: Theatre Education, Art and Social Action, LBT Themed Salon, Oral History Writing, Eliminate Discrimination against Homosexual in Corporate Environment, Mapping of Lalas in China and Shanghai PRIDE.

– **Evie WU**, representative of Nvai (LBT NGO)

## **ANOTHER SOURCE OF POWER: LOVE AND DESIRE LIBERATED FROM SHAME — VAGINA MONOLOGUES IN CHINA**

*Inaudibility equates to invisibility. Hence visibility is the first step towards change.*

In the process of localizing Vagina Monologues, as a way of gender movement in China, we have discovered a feeling that affectively suppresses Chinese women – shame. Self-denial, ingratiation, discrimination, violence, among others that generated by shame are revealed from the real stories recorded and performed in “Chinese-style” Vagina Monologues: *Yindao Duoyun* (Cloudy Vagina), *For Vagina’s Sake*.

Public intervention in Shanghai Metro by VM activists with slogans: “My skirt does not justify your sexual assault!” “The women are singing! Can’t you hear?”

– **WU Xiaoyan & CAI Luoyi**, Shanghai Feminist Activists

## **PUBLIC INTIMACIES**

How do new forms of representation and visual mobility, assertions and interventions from within political movements, as well as insertions by artists/art institutions in the public sphere of the city speak to changing articulations of feminism, and the women’s movement?

– **Sheba CHHACHHI**, Independent Artist (India)



▲ Exhibition opening at Fei Contemporary Art Center, 6 Dec 2014. [SINGLE] team (Left to right): Curator Dr. CHOW Yiu Fai, researcher PI Chenying, Prof. Christiane BROSIUS and FCAC Art Director LI Xiaofei. Works by artists: GUO Qingling, LIANG Yue and Lise Kolstad YUEN.







[SINGLE] fieldwork: ▲ Meeting local feminists at TeaPlus Women Bookstore ▼ Visiting lecture session "How to Quarrel without Hurting the Other Party" for single ladies & men at Love Club.

## PRECARIOUSLY SINGLE

Jeroen de KLOET

*Having spent over 20 years in Shanghai, this is my home,  
but I never actually integrated into the city, this  
underlying sense of being an outsider is a part of who  
I am since birth.*

GUO Qingling, this catalogue

Mei Li is a female journalist, working in the creative industries in Beijing; she is single, off and on, and by now in her thirties. She lives a wealthy life, with an apartment located in Sanlitun, the expensive embassy district in the east of Beijing, and drives in a fancy black SUV. In her free time she likes going out, to bars, rock festivals and trendy clubs. Her working conditions are rather unstable as she works for a foreign magazine, and journalists in China who work for foreign media generally do not have the privilege of a permanent contract. Like many of her contemporaries, she quite frequently switches jobs. While, according to the terms of her labour conditions, one may label Mei Li as living a precarious life, her wealth, her lifestyle and her mobility make this label slightly preposterous, especially when compared to the working conditions of the migrant women in the same city. Yet, when she wanted to buy life

insurance, Mei Li was confronted with special fees for single women. The possibility of single women giving birth in the near future puts them at higher risk, hence the difference in insurance fee.

Mei Li is part of a rapidly growing creative class in China, and like her counterparts in Western countries, this is a class whose lives are characterised by flexibility and insecurity. Yet, for Mei Li, precarity not only alludes towards her labour contract, but also her love life and its subsequent entanglement with legal arrangements such as buying an insurance. Her life is one of what has been termed as “precarious prosperity,” with work characterized by high flexibility and low security (Vlase and Sieber 2015). Her experiences prompt me to the question what is meant by precarity within the Chinese urban context: whose precarity are we talking about, and what kind of precarity precisely? How are these precarious modes enacted and negotiated in everyday life by single women?

### **Precarity and the Precariat**

Referring to the increased insecurities that characterise contemporary labour conditions, precarity was coined in the late 1970s by European labour movements, circulated throughout the 1980s, and is currently used to challenge neo-liberal claims of economic growth. There are claims that a new class has emerged, a new proletariat referred to by Guy Standing as the precariat. This emerging class

is closely connected to the rise of neoliberalism – an increasingly globalized ideology, or mode of governmentality and subjectivation, in which flexibility and an existence without basic security are the cornerstones of its economic system. In Europe the term has gained currency in the context of the rapid dismantling of the welfare state since the early 1990s. It has particular application in the creative industries, where studies have generally identified problems of ‘cultural labour, voluntary self-exploitation, free cultural exchange, marginal subsistence and episodic migration into other parts of the economy’ (Murray & Gollmitzer 2012: 419), to which we would add episodic migration towards different cities and different countries. According to Standing (2011: 16), ‘[t]o be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle’. This precarious existence impacts not only creative workers and academics in Europe and North America but also migrant workers in China, salesmen in Japan, and women like Mei Li. The precariat appears as a profoundly globalized assemblage of people, an emerging class that potentially allows for a new critical politics and modes of mobilization. However sympathetic I am to the main thrust of these arguments, there is a danger that differences over time and place are conveniently ignored in favour of a general anal-

ysis that thrives, first, on a causal relationship between neoliberalization and precariatization and that, second, connects the idea of precarity exclusively to work and labour conditions.

It is tempting to presume a global proliferation of a precariat class but then one runs the danger of ignoring its specific articulations and mutations at different localities. Its association with post-Fordist flexible production and post-welfare states (Ettinger 2007) is called into question when pushed beyond its Euro-American-Australian comfort zone, towards China.

While neoliberalization has impacted China profoundly, unlike the West, this has not resulted in a waning role of the nation-state. In the case of China, the nation-state remains deeply implicated in the processes of economic reform, resulting in its consolidation rather than retreat. Therefore, it could be argued that precarity becomes another form of governance, one that impacts on women in particular ways.

Mei Li's precariousness is mapped onto different domains, not only related to her working in the creative industries, but also her love life as she has reached an age where love and intimacy are becoming increasingly precarious. This points at the affective dimension of precarity, and the curious unexpected implications that being single can entail such as making it difficult to buy life insurance in China. Intersecting with class, we note that being a single cre-



ative worker, or a single migrant woman, being a single office worker, being a single artists, these subjectivities or affective modalities act as prisms that hint at the complex entanglement between gender, sexuality, governmentality and subjectivity – not all singles are equal.

Singleness poses a fundamental challenge to a pervasive ideology in China (and beyond) in which women bear the burden of social and cultural reproduction, one that is always entangled with the future of the nation and the preservation of its traditions, something that is also defined at times as precarious. The emergence of the quite derogative term *shengnü*, or leftover women, referring to higher-educated single women over approximately 27 years of age, and the special programmes and regulations directed towards them and developed by authorities, is indicative of the challenges posed to single women in society.

### **Precariously Yours**

The *Precariously Yours* event was inspired by our wish to push the notion of precarity beyond its Western comfort zone, towards a location where neoliberalism is deeply entangled with the workings of the nation-state and its ruling power (Ong 2006), and beyond the confines of work and labour towards the domain of love. We ask ourselves: Where and how to love in times of precarity in China? And how precarious is love itself in 21<sup>st</sup> century urban living? It may well be that precarity is the general state of being, and

that its counterpart, a secure life backed up by the welfare state and by a long-lasting loving relationship, is merely the exception. In the interview in this catalogue, Lise Kolstad Yuen wonders, "How to find reliability in an unknown future? The human imaginative ability makes us search for sign or answers. I believe unpredictability fosters dreams and hopes, either purely personal or collective." Precarity can thus also provide the grounds on which to imagine life differently, it can be turned into a productive force for aspiration, imagination and hope. Being single then becomes not so much a temporary state marked as the 'in-between period' of not having a relationship, but a mode of being that allows one to aspire, to live life differently. But here the intersection with class becomes important, as powerfully revealed by the art work of Guo Qingling. She explains how difficult it remains in the end to know the other, and relates this to differences between her and factory workers or intellectuals. As she says about the factory workers, "I could feel them being happy as usual, but I didn't understand this community, I tried searching traces of this collective online, tried getting closer to them, but it was difficult, same difficulty as their livelihoods faced." Hence her choice to paint their backs, as a sign of this profound unknowability and invisibility, presenting a rear view of labouring.

But we may wonder if such unknowability is necessarily related to markers like class and education. Is it not a



quintessential part of the human condition? This reminds me of a statement by British writer Hanif Kureishi, who explains in *My Ear at his Heart – My Father* that after many years you will come to realise you don't know your father, or yourself, at all. In his words, "One thing you do see, though it takes a lifetime to understand it, is that a human being – your parents and then yourself – is profoundly unknowable." In this light, boundaries between the individual and the collective slowly but steadily evaporate; what remains are precarious connections, not only between people, but also within oneself. These are unstable, fragile and above all ephemeral moments of recognition and understanding.

This ephemerality is turned into an affective experience in Liang Yue's *Driving in the morning kills desperation*. The endlessly driving car turns the city into a perpetually moving backdrop, the highway keeps on unfolding itself towards the horizon. While the car may evoke a sense of intimacy and familiarity, the videowork refuses to show its interior, instead, what we see is the road ahead. And in the endless move forward, through the desolate city of Shanghai at night, what comes to my mind are the Talking Heads, who proclaimed that *we are on a road to nowhere*. But however barren this may sound, the empty cityscape, the endless road, the perpetual moving forward, it at the same time evokes fantasies of unexpected encounters, hidden turns, possible sideways. We are, after all, in the

city of Shanghai. To quote once more the Talking Heads,

*There's a city in my mind  
Come along and take that ride  
And it's all right, baby, it's all right*

While it is tempting to read the drive forward in Yue's work in terms of the alienating gendered city, and the back of migrant workers as a sign of distance and not being able to connect, the work of Kolstad Yuen traverses if not injects such readings with a sense of hope and aspiration – as her work revolves around the aspirations we have for the future, aspirations that cannot and should not be articulated in public, but that are there nevertheless, more privately, to be whispered in solitude, hidden in the back of our minds, in the corners of our affective bodies.

*It's all right.*

### **The SINGLE project**

*Precariously Yours* is part of a three year project funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) scheme. The project is supervised by project leader Christiane Brosius from Heidelberg University, together with Melissa Butcher from Birkbeck College, University of London and myself from the University of Amsterdam. This interdisciplinary project, *Creating the 'new' Asian woman:*



[SINGLE] fieldwork: Meeting the local residents at Dinghai-qiao, once an important industrial settlement in Republican and socialist Shanghai, now dislocated as a slum area pending demolition, another “leftover” of Shanghai.

*entanglements of urban space, cultural encounters and gendered identities in Shanghai and Delhi*, analyses the new cultural geographies of gendered urban space in Delhi and Shanghai, focusing on 'single' women across the life-course. The context of neoliberal urbanisation in India and China is enabling the formation of new biographies and spaces for women. Single women are increasingly visible in public, be it through media representations or everyday practices and mobilities. Their presence is informed by repertoires of cultural encounter stemming from urban and national histories, globalised media landscapes and flows of capital, concepts and people. Single women in the city have also come to legitimise urban aspirations to cosmopolitanism and Global City-ness.

Rapidly transforming urban centres such as Delhi and Shanghai, the sites for this research, are the backdrop to changing family patterns and the unravelling of 'traditional' social contracts as a result of migration, new work opportunities, delayed marriage, divorce, open homosexuality, and a growing leisure and consumer society. These cities are cultural contact zones, shaping and being shaped by global, regional and national flows. Yet the resulting subjectivities are precarious, marked by asymmetrical power relations reflecting moral panics centred on discourses of 'westernisation' and associated perceptions of transgressions of normative gendered comportment and spaces such as the domestic and the public. Gendered imaginar-

ies of emancipation are therefore contested in the light of a variety of cultural practices that impact women's multiple lifeworlds.

For more information on the project, please visit the project website: <http://www.hera-single.de>

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[SINGLE] fieldwork: The other "China Dream" under the gaze of *Precariously Yours*.





▲ [SINGLE] team outside Fei Contemporary Art Center (from left to right): LI Xiaofei, CHOW Yiu Fai, Laila ABU-ER-RUB, Lucie BERNROIDER, Maddalena CHIPELLINI, Christiane BROSIUS, Melissa BUTCHER, Jeroen de KLOET, Penn IP, PI Chenying.

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**G l E**

*curiously Yours...*