



SINGLE

PROJECT REPORT
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**ASIA AND EUROPE
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT**



Festival-goer, Strawberry Music Festival, Beijing, 2016

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Single in the city

Introduction

Rapidly transforming cities in Asia such as Delhi and Shanghai are the backdrop to unravelling 'traditional', gendered, social contracts. Within a context of neo-liberal urbanisation, changes brought about by migration, new work opportunities, changing family patterns such as delayed marriage, divorce, open homosexuality, and a growing leisure and consumer society, are enabling the formation of new biographies for women.

'Single' women, for example, are increasingly visible, be it in media representations, the workplace or everyday practices of moving through the city. Yet this subjectivity of 'singleness' is precarious, marked by asymmetrical power relations reflecting moral panics centred on discourses of 'westernisation' and associated perceptions of the transgression of normative gendered comportment and space use. Their presence in and experiences of the city are informed by repertoires of gendered expectations embedded in urban and national histories. An imagined emancipation that may come with being 'single' is therefore contested in the light of a variety of cultural practices that impact on and constrain women's multiple life-worlds.

Taking new cultural geographies of gendered

urban space in Delhi and Shanghai as a marker of cultural change, the SINGLE project sought to analyse the relationship between gender, identity and the city. We defined 'singleness' as having both temporal and spatial understandings, repositioning it as salient to collective identity (e.g. family, the nation) as well as subjective experience (e.g. loneliness or independence), and as a phenomenon that women move into and out of across the life-course.

Using ethnographic, mobile and visual methodologies¹, nine projects collaborated to document the experiences of single women from diverse backgrounds in these cities, set within wider debates of globalisation, cultural encounter and urban comparativism. A conceptual framework centred on transcultural analysis linked the projects, underlining the oscillating boundaries and fluid cultural spaces and practices within diverse urban contexts, as well as emphasising the Humanities' role as a crucial tool of knowledge production.

The research examined both the situated contexts of women in each city, but also revealed

¹ Details on each project and its respective methods can be found on the website: www.hera-single.de

cross-cutting themes such as class, governance, and precarity. For example, new modes of subjectivity (e.g. 'modern') were produced in tandem with highly precarious situations for women (e.g. from casual employment to forms of violence), inflected by social position, that is, class, at times reinforcing, at other times shifting, boundaries between public and private space. Challenges to collective notions of identity, such as 'community', 'family' or even the nation-state, resulted in different forms of governmentality to monitor and regulate women's comportment and space use (from cultural tropes such as respectability to religious edicts and laws governing women's dress and access to space). These ideas are discussed further below as we outline in more detail each of SINGLE's key objectives illustrated by findings from the project.



Street art festival, Shahpurjat, Delhi

Objectives

1. To understand the impact of cultural encounters in transforming gendered identities and social relations in the globalising cities of Shanghai and Delhi
2. To examine change through a transcultural framework that is site specific and relational
3. To extend scholarship in comparative urban theory through inter-disciplinary, ethnographic and multi-sited research
4. To explore the role of transcultural arts practices and digital humanities in analysing cultural encounters

Acknowledgements

Given the social pressures on women's lifestyle choices in both cities, including threats and explicit acts of violence against them, many participants noted how the research created space for them to express thoughts, anger, frustration and desires. The SINGLE team would like to extend our deepest thanks to all the women involved in the project for giving us their time and their stories.

1. To understand ...

... the impact of cultural encounters in transforming gendered identities and social relations in the globalising cities of Shanghai and Delhi.

Economic transformation in both China and India in recent decades has led to both countries now being firmly inserted into processes of globalisation. Delhi and Shanghai act as hubs for cultural encounter as global flows of capital, people and ideas, connected to a discourse of neo-liberalism, are re-territorialised in the built environment, in the media landscape, in social, economic and political institutions, and in how women live, work and experience these cities.

While the findings indicate the importance of not assuming neo-liberalism to be a totalising project (see McGuirk & Dowling 2009; Ong 2011), it is recognised within SINGLE that it is a driver of cultural change which impacts women's lives. The global restructuring of labour, for example, has established new workspaces that employ women, across classes, in leisure and hospitality,

manufacturing, call centres and other business process outsourcing industries. With increasing education and participation in the workforce, social shifts are evident such as urban women tending to delay marriage. There are now approximately 73 million single women in India, a growth of 40% within ten years according to the 2011 census, while in China the number of single women aged 30 and above has almost tripled within a decade (from 0.92% in 2000 to 2.47% in 2010 according to the national census).

These changes have become entangled with the neo-liberal discourse of 'choice' (Lahad 2013), and the associated idea(l) of an autonomous, independent subject; thinking of self before family, as agentive, in charge of their own lives, self-managing (but also self-monitoring), claiming the right to access the city in pursuit of pleasure as well as work. Moving into and through the city, women encounter new aspirations and possibilities for how a 'happy' life can be imagined in which security, education and professional opportunities play a key role. For example, as Bernroider outlines in her Delhi study, prolonging singlehood can be used as a strategy to carve out more time and space to construct a particular identity or model of self. The young urban professionals in her study spoke of their desires for independence, to establish a career, to establish their own likes and dislikes, to get to know their own 'true selves' before tying themselves to another person.

With professional and educational credentials, single women can possess financial, social and cultural resources, creating both economic and political force, shaping cities through their presence and practices including attempts to formulate alternative narratives for themselves. As some women choose to be single, at least for some portion of their lives, it is possible to support this subjectivity with lifestyle and consumer choices that are now available in both Delhi and Shanghai. Companies, such as Japanese cosmetics firm SKII, have taken up the single discourse to promote products through 'empowering' 'leftover'



Mobiles and mobile women in China

women in China for example². The Chinese online retail store *Alibaba* used Single's Day (11 November³) for a 'crazy sale' similar to Black Friday in the USA, promoting the acceptability of being single and the need to reward themselves (Berke 2015).

'Choosing' to be single, however, did not preclude a desire for marriage, with a continued narrative that it is a means to attain security or personal happiness if 'the right man' can be found (Abu-Er-Rub; Butcher; Pi). However, the normative understanding of marriage as an inherent part of the life-course is challenged as women maintain prolonged and permanent singlehood as a viable option if the 'right man' cannot be found. Marriage is now reconceptualised as an 'option' instead of a 'must'. In this way, an apparent erosion of traditional family patterns does not necessarily lead to a decline in the importance of family relationships, but instead restructures them. Singleness involved different configurations of relationships that formed 'back-up-systems' on which women could rely. These included socialities beyond the family, such as work or friendship networks, becoming more prominent in both the Chinese and Indian context. These socialities are not seen to dislodge the centrality of marriage in many women's lives but rather are also framed increasingly within the discourse of choice.

However, the focus on choice within feminist debates presents a danger of concealing the need for structural changes to facilitate non-marketised forms of access and lifestyle. The ability to include marriage as an 'option', for example, appears predicated on particular forms of capital: it is professional women with the means to develop economic independence that are more likely to have the option to claim singleness. The pull of family is more evident in Penn Ip's study

2 Examples include: the SKII campaign in China (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/chinas-leftover-women-this-emotional-advert-wants-to-empower-the/>); in India: Benetton's campaign #united by donts (<http://www.prnewswire.co.in/news-releases/benetton-celebrates-unitedbydonts-574611601.html>), or the "My Choice" campaign of Vogue India featuring the Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone, see Bawa 2015.

3 China designates 11th November as Single's Day because 1111 looks like 4 bare sticks, that is, single men.



'Love Club' advertisement, Shanghai

of lower income rural migrant women in Shanghai whose experiences are shaped by China's post-reform economic system and a patriarchal culture. Female workers accept jobs 'not worth it' for their male counterparts, with long working-hours in exchange for low wages and limited space for promotion and self-development. Their sense of 'home' in Shanghai is always temporary and insecure given the *hukou* system⁴. Yet if women plan to leave the city it is not only because of the harsh work-life pressures, but also for family reasons. Marriage and child-bearing continue to impel rural migrant women to return to their or their husbands' hometowns.

Even for wealthier, professional women, there are barriers to professional and personal aspirations. While questioning the normativity of marriage, there is recognition that women's professional achievements are less valued compared to their male peers and still cannot compensate for their lack of marriage. There might be a lack of support within the family towards the development of careers, or restrictions on what is considered a 'respectable' job. In Chiellini's study of female taxi drivers in Delhi, the women often faced strong opposition from family members who did not believe it appropriate for a woman to be driving alone,

4 The *hukou* system is a law for household registration that was implemented in the 1950s in China. It not only records citizen's residencies, but also determines where certain groups are allowed to live and where not.

Personal ad, marriage market, Shanghai



particularly at night. Apart from fear of violence, another common concern amongst women was marrying into a family that might not let them continue working, but rather expect them to have children and remain a housewife. Motherhood is a subjectivity that is still firmly held within the realm of family in these social contexts.

There are also psycho-social costs. Older women in Delhi, for example, noted times they were excluded from social events because of their single status. They recalled the invective of 'what's wrong with you' when turning down an offer of marriage or embodying androgyny in public space, and found it difficult to meet a man who has the right 'mind set' (Butcher). The search for 'Mr Right' could be made more difficult because of aspiration and shifting subjectivity. Female entrepreneurs in Shanghai state the difficulties of finding a partner because they wish their future husbands to make as much money as they do. While social pressure on women to conform to hetero-normative family life declined with age (once beyond child-bearing years), this then raised the problems of their invisibility and an assumption that they no longer desired, nor

should they desire, access to the city.

The social condemnation of single women's choices appears linked to wider debates associated with changes to the prevalent gender order in both Shanghai and Delhi. That globalisation is often perceived in political and media discourse as a process of Westernisation contributes to social anxieties and uncertainty that in turn consolidate the rejection and denigration of the status of single women, linking them with imagined social and family breakdown. While the experience of being single is differently felt and enacted across the life-course and cultural context, a common thread is the suspicion with which single women are often viewed, related primarily to ideas of immorality and the seeming threat of unregulated sexuality. As Bernroider and Butcher found in their studies in Delhi, singleness arouses suspicion in family members, neighbours, landlords, religious leaders and politicians. The state of being single was at times explicitly linked to social instability and the denigration of Indian 'tradition' that focuses heavily on the family as a central site for cultural reproduction. Solitary living is still viewed as exceptional in the Indian context, with the family or marital home maintained as the appropriate living space within cultural narratives of domesticity (Brosius 2017). Therefore, single women's mobility and social lives can be heavily regulated by urban structures beyond the family, such as landlords and neighbours, generating frustration and 'exhaustion' in their daily battles with the city (Butcher).

However, these social and economic constraints are being contested. In Delhi, young women (primarily middle and upper middle class) are engaging in new forms of protest including adopting and adapting forms used in cities in the global North such as the 'Take Back the Night', 'Slut Walk' or 'My dress is not a yes' campaigns (Abu-Er-Rub, Bernroider).⁵ Shanghai has hosted anti-sexual harassment campaigns such as 'I can be slutty yet you cannot harrass',

⁵ See also Kaur 2015 (<http://www.hera-single.de/envisaging-strong-and-single>) and Brosius 2017.

and performances of *The Vagina Monologues*.⁶ But perhaps more importantly it is in everyday practices that contestation is taking place. Designated places of consumption and leisure, for example, the mall or nightclub, may limit access but also provide a space for 'legitimate' displays of sexuality and desirability for young middle class women. The distinction between public and private is de-stabilised by the extension of the domestic (e.g. family life, consumption) into the public realm, and the seeking of privacy outside of the home (Abu-Er-Rub).

The city then becomes a site of ambiguity, of opportunity and constraint, that provides platforms for the performance of new subjectivity as well as the pain of not fitting in. How women must negotiate with the city is highlighted in Penn Ip and Laila Abu-Er-Rub's studies of the beauty industry in Shanghai and Delhi post-economic liberalisation. The industry offers financial rewards, upward social mobility, and the potential of entrepreneurship for rural migrant women in Shanghai who must also accept painful and intrusive body modifications to meet clients' beauty ideals in order to gain their trust. Being beautiful has become an important part of a modern, urban successful female subjectivity as it is equated with the potential to climb the career ladder. An apparent desire to appear 'modern' is not, therefore, necessarily an aspiration nor integrated into personal values, but rather predicated on the need to secure their position in the workplace (see Brosius 2017). However, as a result some also attain a new-found confidence, practical working skills, and a way to delay the demand to marry. Workers may also make demands on clients, treating customers' bodies as a site of modification, especially the 'unhealthy' parts which have to be 'fixed' through consuming more products and services in the beauty salons. Gendered imaginaries in relation to beauty not only then govern the bodies of workers in the industry, but also the bodies of their clients (Abu-Er-Rub; Penn Ip).



Delhi Fashion Week 2014

These paradoxes can also be seen in the media landscape. The beauty industry and representation of women as a site of cultural encounter, particularly in advertising, has been extensively critiqued (Abu-Er-Rub, see also Schaffter 2006, Munshi 2001). Stereotypes are reflected in media content in both India and China that focuses on particular body, age and social images, with, for example, little representation of single women above the age of 40 (an issue in Europe and North America also). While single women can represent freedom, choice, the possibility of having a career, being independent and successful, in short, a symbol of a 'modern' woman as noted above, they can also be portrayed as spinsters, 'old maids', or sexually threatening to social norms (see, for example, Lahad & Hazan 2014). The pre-eminence in women's lives of the search for a husband has been seen in 'Chic Lit' writing, television and films, for example, the Chinese film *Beijing Yushang Xiyatu* (Finding Mr. Right, 2013) and soap opera *Huanle Song* (Ode to Joy, 2016)⁷, and the Indian soap opera *Jassi Jaissi Koi Nahin* (There is no other like Jaissi.)⁸.

⁶ See Bernroider 2015 (<http://www.hera-single.de/vagina-monologues/>) and Kelleher 2009.

⁷ Huan Le Song is a 2016 TV drama – see <https://www.viki.com/tv/30127c-ode-to-joy?locale=en>

⁸ Jassi Jaissi Koi Nahin is an adaption of the Brazilian telenovela '*Yo soy Betty, la fea*' ('I am Betty, the Ugly one')



“When a woman speaks” campaign, Khan Market, Delhi

In China, there is also the persistent popularity of dating shows such as *Feichang Wurao* (If You Are the One).

Yet the contemporary media landscape in both cities is now beginning to reflect the presence of single women and the complexity of their lives. In China the focus tends towards sexuality and the implications of being a ‘leftover women’⁹, reflecting anxieties surrounding reproduction and the skewed gender ratio resulting from the One Child Policy. In the past in Indian cinema, the single woman was most likely portrayed as the ‘vamp’, the one who disturbs the natural order of things, that is, the hero and heroine’s search for each other and true love. More recent films, such as *Queen* and *Piku*, explore single lives with more nuance and complication. Media content has also begun to generate debate centred on safety and the difficulties of women’s where the ‘ugly’ female single protagonist turns into a beautiful woman and ends up in a relationship with a man she was secretly in love with.

9 A term used in China to denote women in their late twenties who are still single, introduced by the official Women’s Federation in 2007 to remind women not to be too demanding and to get married before it is too late (Fincher, L-H. 2014).

access to public space.

The discourse around safety and violence has come to dominate the representation of women’s relationship to the city, with different foci in each: for Delhi it is violence in public space while for Shanghai the issue is primarily domestic violence. Widely reported cases of sexual violence against women in the media play a significant role in constructing women’s imaginaries of Delhi as dangerous, often resulting in self-policing behaviours. The findings suggest that a public debate focused on safety reproduces public space as threatening for women and can reproduce the ‘immoral’ subject who traverses these spaces, especially at night. The way women use public space varies greatly, often depending on personal inclination, social and economic background, yet fear was a recurring theme in personal narratives from across the separate projects in Delhi. Public space was demarcated as something that needed careful negotiation.

Strategies to cope, and to create space in which participants felt comfortable included acts of aggression (in comportment and attitude), or retreat to familiar parts of the city. Some women developed their own safety systems, noting down



Advertising, Cheap Road, Shanghai

number-plates of taxis, having friends accompany them or insisting on calls when a friend reached home safely. They would adjust clothing, routes and behaviour according to the particular context they found themselves in (Abu-Er-Rub, Bernroider, Butcher). Single women involved in the creative industries proactively constructed their own spaces, opening up studios and galleries in line with the entrepreneurial drive of their age. This resulted in no longer needing to go into the city, avoiding its challenges, both from failing infrastructure and constraining social relations, as well as saving them time that could then be channelled into work (Bernroider). More recently a variety of technological means have been developed that aid women in navigating the city, including mobile apps for emergency calls, interactive maps, and cab services whose routes are traceable online. Social media is also used for sharing information both in terms of security and locating sites of leisure activities.

These strategies highlight why the dichotomy of victim versus empowered needs to be challenged, as it traps women into roles that do not capture the complex negotiations involved in constructing a life of one's own in these cities. Women are inevitably caught up in broader socio-cultural mechanisms that influence personal decisions.



Yet tensions, for example, those revolving around marital pressures or restrictions on women's decision making, did not necessarily result in either submission or rupture (although these options were possible), but were more often dealt with in ongoing negotiations, continuous readjustments, accommodations where necessary, and efforts to bridge a generational gap that was never fully resolved. Both cities provided opportunities and aspirations that women might not have elsewhere, but built into this production of what is possible is the labour of resolving contradictions.



Street art, women's empowerment project by Sreejata Roy, Delhi

2. To examine ...

... change through a transcultural framework that is site specific and relational.

SINGLE aimed to produce a critical and reflexive engagement with concepts and methods that challenge dominant binaries of analysis used to describe processes of cultural transformation within urban and gender studies (e.g. victim vs empowered; West vs Asia).

One of the underlining concepts that brought us together as a starting point for looking at our places of inquiry was that of transculturality, premised on two key assumptions: while acknowledging the importance of regional specificity, we were reluctant to use a framework of 'container cultures' (e.g., South Asia, East Asia); similarly, we took a critical stance towards the concept of 'hybridity' as something that is a mix of container cultures ('local' and 'global', 'West' and 'East', 'modern' and 'traditional'). The transcultural as an analytical lens enabled an alternative examination of cultural entanglements by studying translation, appropriations, and the selective

rejection or resistance to what is apparently different or foreign.

In the context of rapidly transforming, increasingly diverse cities, such as Shanghai and Delhi, a transcultural approach has proven to be productive, addressing dynamic processes of cultural encounter and exchange with respect to gender, class, ethnicity and urban space (see Glick Schiller & Caglar 2011; Hou 2013; Pütz 2008). As Hou (2013: 7) has argued, a focus on transcultural placemaking 'recognizes the instability of culture(s) and the emergent nature of cultural formation', encouraging a perspective on the strategic and scalar uses of cultural practice (see also Glick Schiller & Caglar 2011; Pütz 2008). For example, the findings noted above highlight the transculturality of gender/ed placemaking: the entanglement of discourses of 'global' and 'creative' city living with ideologies of neoliberalism and feminism that mark both research sites; the transnational connections of youth cultures that are implicated in inter-generational conflict and challenge definitions of 'modern/



Navigating Delhi

traditional', 'Western/Asian'; and the capacity of women involved in the SINGLE project to navigate city and subjectivity in their own way while acknowledging power relations inherent in these spaces.

These processes of negotiating cultural change and encounter are seen in the use of labels such as cosmopolitanism, modern, traditional and Western. Constantly invoked by research participants these terms were used to define themselves, to distinguish themselves from others, to criticize certain ideas and phenomena, and to justify their choices and the choices of those around them. The meanings that women attach to such categories however are used strategically, to make sense of a society that is rapidly changing and that is infused by a sense of insecurity and uncertainty (especially when thinking of the future). For example, in Pi's study of professional women in Shanghai, 'Western' is often linked with greater gender equality and more personal freedom, and used as a criticism of the current situation in China. In Butcher's study of older single women in Delhi, 'tradition' and 'modern' were less demarcations of time but more often used to demarcate the social tensions that these women felt they must navigate. The younger urbanites of Bernroider's study tie their imaginations of 'urban modernity' to a cosmopolitan skill-set acquired through everyday practices in step with global trends and lifestyles, and their reformulated notions of a cultural heritage tied to the nation-state. For Chiellini's motorcycle riders, they adhere to what they perceive as a global culture of riding, made up of symbolisms of strength, independence and freedom, while consciously addressing what they regard as the problems of the Indian context, namely gender inequality and exploitation. Their identity as bikers is strongly linked to the change they want to see in the society they live in.

When pressed, however, women's use of these terms was often ambivalent and cautious. Traditional, modern, Western, Chinese, Indian, urban, rural, cosmopolitan did not have linear evolutions. Though the 'traditional' and the 'modern' are both imaginaries capable of



supplying coordinates for self-making in India and China, associated subjectivities were relational and accommodating multiple attachments. This becomes apparent in, for instance, seemingly cosmopolitan practices of clothing choice, where women select 'traditional' Indian Designer attire on certain occasions such as weddings and other religious festivities, and so-called 'Western wear' or a mix of 'Indian Wear' or 'Western wear' for leisure activities and/or work. Therefore, despite at times formulating the 'modern' and the 'traditional' as disparate ways of thinking, women could use both imaginaries as resources to navigate the daily challenges of city-life, as well as articulating supple subjectivities that adapt to specific contexts. Constructions of modernity could be globally versed, yet locally entrenched, with individuals discursively utilizing labels, sometimes mixing and matching, sometimes juxtaposing, in order to articulate a sense of self.



3. To extend ...

... scholarship in comparative urban theory through inter-disciplinary, ethnographic and multi-sited research.

SINGLE contributes to recent debates in urban studies that have called for a shift away from an ethnocentric hierarchy of 'Global' and 'Developing' cities, and moving instead towards their comparative investigation through a relational framework (Ward 2008; Jayne & Edensor 2012). This incorporates an understanding of the 'worlding practices' of cities (Ong & Roy 2011), that is, the capacity of different actors to re-imagine their city as global in a variety of ways. In focusing on relational qualities of comparison, two themes emerged across the projects as examples of these practices: the formal and informal processes of skills development that women engaged with in order to 'become urban'; and the affective geographies that mark women's urban life-worlds.

Emerging within ethnographic narratives, the possibilities of the city as noted in Section 1 required particular competencies or skills: formally acquired through training in order to gain entry into the new economic arenas on offer (hospitality, retail, business process outsourcing, creative industries etc); and informally, learning how to 'be urban', including the strategies noted in Section 2 above that are necessary for navigating the city, new cultural codes and social mores. There are clearly classed implications inherent

in these processes as it was primarily women from lower class and/or rural areas that were considered to be lacking the skills needed to be urban (Chiellini, Penn Ip). However, women were also willing to undertake formal training in order to gain access to hoped for economic advantage as well as an imagined, desired, 'cosmopolitan' lifestyle.

Formal processes of learning were generally provided by employers and training centres in both cities, reproducing similar skill sets, appearance and models of customer service that replicates a global model of emotional labour adapted for localised conditions. For example, in post-reform China, Confucian doctrines are used by Shanghai businesses as a tool to train rural migrant workers to be 'good' employees. In Penn Ip's study of the hospitality industry women (and men) are trained to learn respect, to work without complaint, to submit to a sub-altern role. Employers and management staff play the role of a father to train their employees to become obedient, affirming the neo-Confucian conception of public order in the workplace (Wallis 2013). In Delhi, women taxi drivers from low-income or marginalised backgrounds are trained by a local NGO not only how to drive (an important skill that opens up the possibility of accessing the city in ways impossible to women who must rely on public transport), but also how to provide customer service. They are offered communication classes, an overview of women's rights, first-aid, English, self-defence, basic computer training, and classes on how to deal with harassment or provocation. The aim of this coaching is to develop transferrable life-skills, including confidence building, to enable engagement with the city and its inhabitants. As one research participant noted, "[the NGO] from the start to the end has been teaching us, people who didn't know how to go outside [...] to stand on their two feet, that girls can do everything on their own, can go out at night alone and how to



Clothing shop, Cheap Road, Shanghai



Love Club, Shanghai

do it” (Samira, interview by Chiellini).

Pi’s ethnography of the Shanghai-based Love Club presents it as a forerunner of the emerging love training business in China’s big cities. The Love Club offers a three-month training course, including consultation, therapies, lectures as well as social activities, ‘to help single men and women who have difficulties in love improve their love intelligence, clear their misunderstandings of love, and strengthen their socializing capabilities’ as noted in its brochure. The majority of its clients are single professional women who experience social and familial pressures as a result of their single status. What the Love Club and its trainers provide is not just knowledge of relationships and sex, skills of interpersonal communication, and methods of self-reflection, but a vocabulary to talk about themselves, to elaborate on their discomforts, confusions, fears, as well as desires, determinations and hopes. Equipped with explanations for their singlehood, they confront and counter social pressures imposed on ‘leftover’ women. Kang Jiali, a 33-year old clerk, explains how attending the Love Club ameliorates her anxieties: “I come to understand there are many other things a woman can live for besides marriage and love ... I can have my own circles and live freely. I want to be this kind of woman”.

As well as formal training, evidence from studies in both Shanghai and Delhi suggest that women also learn how to navigate the city through informal means, that is, through friends and peers, in face-to-face communication and through social media. This kind of learning includes instrumental guidance: how to use public transport, where to shop, how to dress, how to carry

themselves in public space, how to stay safe, where to socialise. As in Penn Ip’s study of the beauty industry, workers learnt from each other how to build trust with their clients through their own body modifications, but also how to manipulate their clients in order to bring in more business to the salon.

Informal learning was also a self-driven exercise as part of reflexive processes of managing cultural change. Affective responses of discomfort signalled the need for adaptation. In Chiellini and Butcher’s study, women often spoke of learning how to navigate the city as the development of a skillset that would make them feel secure and in control. Such strategies were of their own making through trial and error, or learned through the exchange of mutual advice as the city was recognised as a place that they needed to be prepared for.

This sense of the affective as implicated in the life-worlds of single women was a second area in which the two cities could be analysed in comparison. The affective geographies documented in the project highlight the sensory experiences of the city, and the universality of embodied responses to encounters with others, with the built environment, and with shifting cultural frameworks. For example, the Love Club (Pi) constitutes a collective, participatory space for single women to share their plight or simply exchange gossip, creating an affective sense of solidarity and comfort within the space of this network, even if purchased, as one participant outlined: “In the Love Club, I find actually many people also share my problems and difficulties.



Fieldwork, Delhi

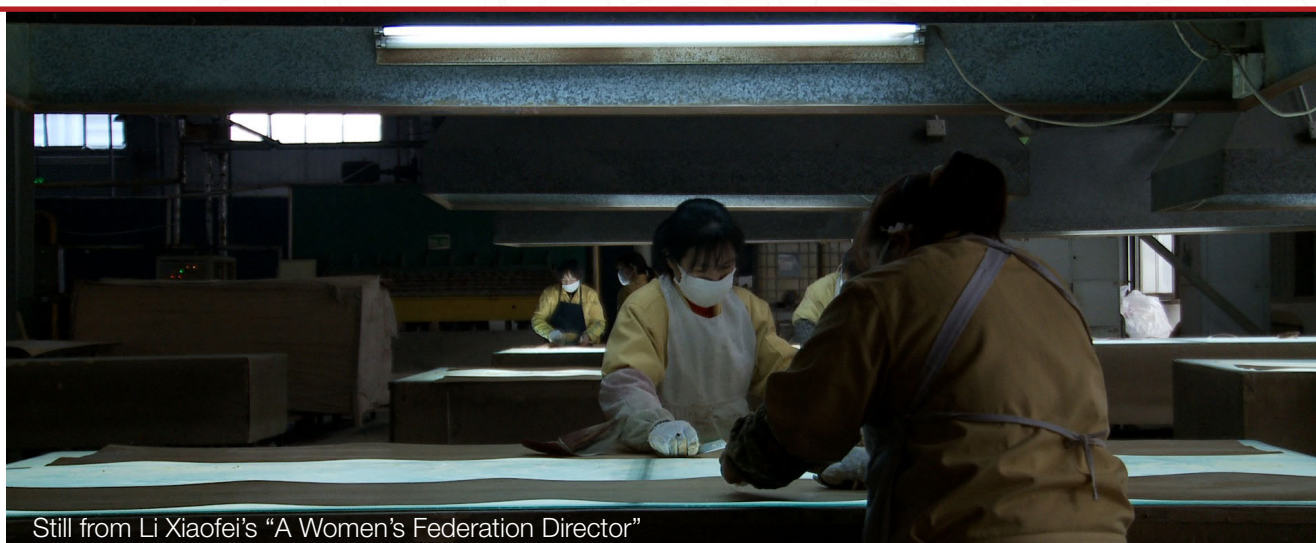
It is like you instantly panic when you find out you are ill; but when you realize there are other patients suffering from the same illness, you relax a bit” (Huang Jue, 26-year old architect).

Chiellini’s ‘go-along’s with the Bikerni motorcycle club reveal a similar formation of mutual support and affective bonding for these women who step outside normative expectations of permissible mobility. The club usually meets on the weekends for organized rides, and membership requires adhering to a set of values, including: respect for the road and road’s users; looking out for fellow riders; religious and gender inclusivity; and self-discipline. Proper riding attire is expected both for safety and to underline belonging to a community. This community rides not just for pleasure but also to do “good work and support good causes” (Elly, interviewed by Chiellini). Members of the Bikerni have delivered food to famine-hit areas of India, pointedly visited SHERoes café in Agra (run by women who have been disfigured by acid attacks), and have begun a movement called ‘Bikers against women’s exploitation’. While promoting social change, the club also constructs an atmosphere around the women in which they feel comfortable, respected and appreciated. The group becomes a safe space where women are not judged or reduced solely to their gender: “Being a biker makes you just one gender. Biker gender. So I feel comfortable there” (Lara, interviewed by Chiellini).

A further example of the formation of affective

community comes from Chow’s case study of the followers of kunqu, a regional form of opera in China. As fans, as apprentices, as teachers, as organizers, or as promoters, the women create and share an intimate and exclusive space beyond work and love. Building on the category of community constructed and maintained by what Sennett (2012) calls informal sociality, this network of women evolves and revolves around the creative practice of kunqu. Originating in the late Yuan Dynasty, kunqu is generally considered one of the oldest forms of operatic arts in China. Yet, as Chow discovered, single women in Shanghai’s contemporary creative industries, often known to each other, are also active in the kunqu scene as part of creating a ‘good life’ beyond work. Kunqu enables this community of informal sociality to come into being, engendering shared passion and friendship on the basis of a creative practice.

Such communities, constructed and maintained by women, centring on particular shared activities, whether biking or opera, provide an antidote to the discomfort of being single in a family-centric context. Affective solidarities and sensory experiences of the city, in addition to the different forms of training noted above, are also examples of how thematic, relational, points of comparison between cities can be generated.



Still from Li Xiaofei’s “A Women’s Federation Director”

4. To explore ...

... the role of transcultural arts practices and digital humanities in analysing cultural encounters.

SINGLE was envisaged as a collaborative project, facilitating exchange between Indian and Chinese activists and incorporating work with artist participants in order to fully explore the capacity to re-imagine cities and the gendered life-worlds of their inhabitants. The images reproduced throughout this report highlight the visual and creative methods used to further understanding of vernacular navigations of the city, as well as issues of identity, belonging, surveillance and censorship.¹

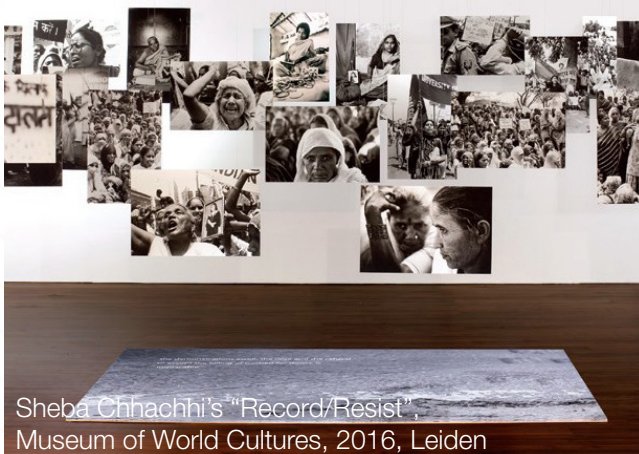
The team worked with feminist activists in Shanghai to explore the boundaries of legality in a heavily governed public sphere, while in India, women activists such as *Blanknoise* (see <http://blog.blanknoise.org/>) gave us an insight into their online productions as well as street protests. Shanghai artists Guo Qingling and Li Xiaofei, and Sheba Chhachhi, from Delhi, collaborated with SINGLE researchers to develop a series of works exhibited in the Fei Contemporary Art Center (Shanghai, December 2014) and the Museum of World Cultures (Leiden, September 2016).²

¹ See website, www.hera-single.de, for a gallery of visual material produced within the SINGLE project.

² The catalogue of the Shanghai exhibition can be

Chhachhi's video installation, using material from both participants' narratives and researchers' reflections, explored the interdependent relationship between the two and the intersubjective nature of research. Chhachhi's visual work, and that of influential Indian photographer Prabuddha Dasgupta, whose portrayal of urban women has had a significant impact on the representation of sexuality in the Indian public sphere, is also the focus of the research of Abu-Er-Rub and Brosius.

retrieved at <http://www.hera-single.de/outcomes/publications/>, a description of the exhibition in Leiden at <http://www.hera-single.de/precarious-lives/>.



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