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Eating the Rice Bowl of Youth:
Gender, Migration, and Service Labor
in China Golf Industry

By

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Introduction

The term ‘rice bowl of youth’ (*qingchun fan* in Chinese) has gained popularity in China since the early 1990s. According to Zhang (2000), the rice bowl of youth refers to the urban trend in which a range of new, highly paid positions have opened almost exclusively to young women, as bilingual secretaries, public relations girls, and fashion models. The rapid transition from socialist economy to market economy in China created a large amount of new job positions in the tertiary sector. It became a new phenomenon that young women dive into the business world to embrace the modernity and urban lifestyle. Youth, for the first time, becomes a kind of commodity that can be sold in the market.

The use of ‘the rice bowl of youth’ declined in the past two decades compared to the initial stage of market reform. However, in some kinds of work, the narrative of ‘the rice bowl of youth’ still exists. For example, in Yu Ding’s fieldwork on sex workers in Southern China, she observed that the sex workers in the Pearl River Delta area constantly said they were ‘eating the rice bowl of youth’ in daily conversation (Ding, 2017). Similarly, when I was searching for the key words ‘golf caddie’ online, I constantly found narratives such as “caddies are eating the ‘rice bowl of youth’” in online forums and newspapers. Indeed, according to my observation, most job

advertisements of golf clubs request the prospective caddies to be younger than 28 or 30, and many employers only ask for women. Many netizens commented online that as long as a girl is good-looking and knows how to talk with clients cleverly (*hui shuohua* in Chinese), she can earn a good salary by working as a caddy. The notions of the qualities such as appearance and communication skills are very similar to public-relation girls and secretaries described in Zhang's article (2000). On the other side, to illustrate why golf caddies are eating the rice bowl of youth, a media report on the *New Magazine* pointed another aspect of caddy's work. The authors explained that many female golf caddies will leave the golf industry in their late 20s when they are not capable of doing intensive work and are obliged to get married by the social customs and pressure from their family (Yong & Wei, 2009). Their explanation of the 'rice bowl of youth' seems not to conform with the traditional meanings of the 'rice bowl of youth'. Rather than focusing on the sexual capital of caddies, the authors spilt a lot of ink on the demanding physical labor in caddies' work and the their social clock (Neugarten, 1976), a culturally defined timeline for marriage.

The discrepancy pushes me to think whether the connotation of the 'rice bowl of youth' has changed since the 1990s. If so, what is the new meanings of the 'rice bowl of youth' in China nowadays? In the case of golf caddies, to what extent does youth bring (dis)advantage to them in the workplace? By answering these questions, I hope to contribute to the discussion on the age anxiety (*nianling jiaolv* in Chinese), the widespread sentiment behind the use of the 'rice bowl of youth', in the Chinese labor

market. In this article, the discussion on the ‘rice bowl of youth’ does not only center on the consumption of gender and sexuality, but also pay attention to the over exploitation of the labor of the young people and the employers’ invasion of workers’ private life. I argue that the meanings ‘rice bowl of youth’ has altered in the media and daily use since the early 21st century. The ‘rice bowl of youth’ has been gradually developed a new version from the original unchaste and sexualized metaphor to emphasize more the anxiety of maintaining the physical vigor to be competent in professions that ask for a continuous investment of energy and free from family responsibility. The traditional and new meaning of the ‘rice bowl of youth’ simultaneously exist in the Chinese society. The situation of young female golf caddies cannot be depicted by either of the traditional and new ‘rice bowl of youth’ alone. On the one hand, the caddies’ appearance and gender identity offer them a lucrative employment opportunity. On the other hand, the caddies are overly exploited of the labor in their most energetic age and are forced to leave the industry when they are not capable to undertake the demanding work and are obliged to get married by the social clock.

The new meanings of the ‘rice bowl of youth’

The term ‘rice bowl of youth’ first appeared in the late 1980s with China’s opening-up policy (Ding, 2017). According to Zhang (2000), the rice bowl of youth refers to the urban trend in which a range of new, highly paid positions have opened

almost exclusively to young women, as bilingual secretaries, public relations girls, and fashion models. It contrasts with the 'iron rice bowl', a popular rhetoric under the socialist regime that refers to the permanent employment in state-held economy. As a part of the market reform, Chinese people are encouraged by official discourse to join in the risky yet lucrative business world. Many urban people gave up the 'iron rice bowl' and start doing business or get involved in jobs like modeling, entertainment, service, etc.

The new configuration of labor market in the market economy gave rise to a new sexual politics in China. With the boom of service and entertainment economy, young urban women convert their youth and beauty into employment opportunities. The shift from socialist 'iron rice bowl' to the 'rice bowl of youth' infuses youthful, feminine, urban bodies with value (Hanser, 2005). Youth becomes a special kind of commodity. The rice bowl of youth is loaded with material and sexual meanings as it becomes an object of consumption in the market economy and the roles of producers and consumers are gendered (Zhang, 2000). Individuals who sell their youth are often women, whereas the consumers who consume others' youth are usually men. People often carry a negative judgement on the eaters of the 'rice bowl of youth' because of the trade between sexuality and capital. Amy Hanser (2008) has linked the class distinction and the concept of 'rice bowl of youth' in her work on the female workers in Chinese retailing stores. In her observation of the high-end retailing departments, the recruitment of young, tall, and good-looking salesgirls is essential to the making

of class distinction. Social class in China is increasingly spoken through consumption and the gendered performativity of labor.

Since the early 21st century, the connotation of ‘the rice bowl of youth’ has changed substantially from the traditional meanings. In 2002, a media writer Yun Chen published an article on *Professions* to discuss how to eat the ‘rice bowl of youth’ nowadays. “To date, the phrase ‘the rice bowl of youth’ has changed from a negative term to a more neutral one. It no longer equals to ‘eat by pretty face’ (Chen, 2002).” Chen commented that IT programmers, athletes, and UI designers, etc., consists of the new group of eaters of the ‘rice bowl of youth’. While the new eaters do not rely on the aesthetic appearance to work, the physical strength, vigor, and creativity that tightly associate with youth have become the key factors for them to qualify the new professions. With the development of the new economy, such as cultural industry and IT industry, the firms urgently need young people who are trained with the technical skills in formal and professional education. Youth, now as a symbol of creativity and vigorous body, is given a special priority in the recruitment and promotion of workers.

Manifested in the popular reactions to the ‘rice bowl of youth’, the anxiety of the elapse of the youth become the mainstream in the labor market. If the beauty of young women is not sustainable as age grows, the physical vigor and creativity also run out over time. The magazine *Vocational and Technical Education* published an article in 2005 to present the voice from eaters of the ‘rice bowl of youth’ (Yan, 2005). Many

stories present a wide-spread anxiety: “I know I cannot do my current job for long, but I really do not know where to go in the future.” The tour guide Rong said that her boyfriend is unsatisfied with her job because she will leave home for several days in every tour and she have to spend more time to take care of the family if they get married. The DJ Zhu complained that every day when he finishes his job it is already in the midnight. Zhu realized that he cannot stay in fashion industry for long considering his health. While youth can be considered a category of privilege (Zhang, 2000), it also brings anxiety to the young people in the face of uncertainty and the expiration of youth.

Behind the ageism: Gender, work intensification and the invasion of workers’ private life

The obsession of youth is imbricated with the nation’s calling to catch the last train of global modernity and overcome the time-lag between China and the West. In the public discourse, youth is short, and young people in the golden age should make use of their youthful body to contribute to the construction of national economy. The yearnings for modernization develop an obsession with the new labor force who received modernized education. The experience of the older people is not only unhelpful, but is also determined as traditional, outdated, and unscientific (Wu, 2001). Ageism, a kind of workplace discrimination that has been legally prohibited in most developed countries (Z. Fang, 2021), is so common in China’s labor market that it is

not considered as morally wrong. In addition, as an opposite category of the old, youth is indicated with a socially determined expiration date in the workplace: the age upper limit on the job advertisement announces the close of door opening to the middle-aged job applicants. On the path towards a giant economy unit in the world, China relies on the intensive labor of the young generation in the territory sector to flourish the market economy.

The value of youth is not only about their presumably high productivity and creativity. Behind the discrimination against middle-aged job seekers, it is the long working hours of young workers in the workplace. In many ways, China's economic achievement has been built on the premise: 'get rich first, enjoy life later' (Cooke, & Jing, 2009). Work intensification is the result of the rapid growth of the private sector in market economy. Young laborers are favored by the employers thanks to their ability to work overtime and satisfaction of private life. At a first glance, the new 'rice bowl of youth' seems to be gender neutral. However, the employment requirement of continuous investment of energy in work unproportionally screen out more women in late 20s than men, as they are supposed to get married soon. In addition, Hamilton (1978) have pointed that capitalism goes hand in hand with the exploitation of women's domestic labor. By such, the men workers can contribute longer labor hours in work. Women workers are therefore deemed by the employers as less 'exploitable' employees who will shoulder the majority of family duties as they go to 30s (Huang

& Zhang, 2021). Ageism exacerbates the prevailing gender discrimination against working women in China.

The ‘agism’ in the labor market can date back to the rejuvenation of state cadres’ team since the early 1980s. In the Chinese traditional culture, the elderly is accorded the highest position in the family hierarchy, respected, and honored by the young (Xie & Xia, 2005). However, since the market reform, youth become to dominate the elderly in the political discourse. In response to the economic reform, the state leader Deng Xiaoping proposed the initiative to promote young state cadres in the government. Specifically, the initiative calls for ‘revolutionization’, ‘rejuvenation’, ‘knowledge-based’, and ‘professionalization’ in cadres’ team. From 1983 to 2017, the average age of the provincial, municipal, and county level official leaders has decreased by 8.6, 7.2, and 6.3 years respectively (Yang, 2018). The rejuvenation of state cadres is achieved by setting age limit in the selection and promotion of state cadres. For instance, in some local governments, if the township level, county level, and municipal level cadres are older than 30, 40, and 50 years old, they are nearly impossible to get promotion (Yang, 2018). In the meanwhile, the academic institutes, scientific research institutes, and high-tech state-owned companies clearly set an age requirement in the hiring procedure: undergraduate under 25, postgraduate under 30, and PhD under 35. Until now, most universities in China still only accept PhD under 35 to apply for the position of assistant professor (*Why Do Chinese Colleges and Universities Recruit Young Teachers to Be under 35 Years Old?*, 2021).

Following the internal reform in government, the private employers also set age limits in the hiring process, which facilitated a trend dubbed as the “age 35 phenomenon” (Huang & Zhang, 2021). According to the “Shenzhen Employment Survey Report” released by a non-governmental charity organization in May 2010, among the 1,560 work units in 103 industries in Shenzhen, nearly 40% of the companies clearly restrict the age of prospective employees. Among jobs with age constraints, more than three-quarters require job applicants to be younger than 35 years old, and 40.25% of jobs even restrict to under 30 years old (Chen, 2020). For job seekers older than 35, it is exceptionally difficult to find a non-managerial position. According to a report released last month by the Development Research Center of the State Council, nearly two-thirds of people aged 35 and above who were laid off in March last year were still looking for jobs in September (Leng & He, 2021). The Chinese labor laws prohibit the discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, and religion, but not including age (Zhou, 2007). The employers are entitled with the autonomy to recruit and optimize the human recourse base. “Most people in their 30s are married and have to take care of their family—they’re not able to focus on the high-intensity work. If a 35-year-old candidate isn’t seeking to be a manager, a hiring company wouldn’t even give that CV a glance”, said Helen, a tech recruiter in Shanghai (Shelly, 2018). Once job seekers get older than 30, the pressure to promote to management position increases a lot. The “30+ middle-age crisis” is rife in China.

The flourish of market economy is achieved by accumulating the intensive labor of the youth. One major impact of the marketization of the Chinese economy has been work intensification, particularly for those in the private and informal sector. According to the annual sample survey conducted by the national labor authorities (see *China labor statistical yearbook 2009*, 113), the average working hours per week in the urban area has remained steady at around 44 hours for professionals and technical personnel since the mid-2000s (Xiao & Fang, 2012). Along with the trending discussion on the overtime work in food deliverers and IT workers (C. He, 2021; Shelly, 2018), the discussion of ‘rice bowl of youth’ get popular again in the public space in recent years. Increasingly, the ‘rice bowl of youth’ in public discussion does not refer to the consumption of sexuality or the creativity and professional skills exclusively acquired by the youth. Instead, it begins to emphasize the intensive labor and overtime work that only young people could undertake in their 20s. After the long years of hard work, the eaters of the ‘rice bowl of youth’ need to find another way out.

Youth, Migration, and Service Work

The rural-urban migration has contributed a lot to the economic development of China by providing a steady flow of labor force. They are an important part of the service labor in the city. The existence of the labor market, as well as the labor mobility, were not permitted in the planned system under socialist China. In the 1950s,

capital and labor were firmly restricted by a host of institutions, and could not transfer among sectors, regions, or ownerships (Cai & Wang, 2003). The household registration (*hukou* in Chinese) system divided the rural and urban population into two separate groups and imposed strict constraints on mobility between regions. Since the market reform, as the planned system was incompatible with economic development, the labor allocation was made comparatively flexible in urban labor markets. To meet the growing labor shortage in urban areas, the government gradually relaxed its stance on migrant mobility. Although local governments restricted the employment of rural migrants to specific occupations that were classified as dirty, dangerous, and demeaning, there is a substantial increase in rural-urban migration, with the number of migrants reaching 50 million in the mid-1990s (Cai & Wang, 2003). This has increased to 150 million by 2006, making up 58 percent of the workers in the industry sector and 52 percent in the service sector (Cooke & Jing, 2009). The extensive participation of rural migrants in urban employment played a vital role in China's economic growth.

The young generation constitutes an important part of the rural-urban migrants and differs a lot from the first generation of migrants. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, out of the 151 million rural migrants that had moved to urban areas in 2010, young migrant workers below the age of 30 accounted for about 85 million (*Youth Employment and Migration in China*, 2013). To date, the young migrants, who are mostly born after 1980s, have embraced and integrated into the

urban life much better than the first generation of migrants. They have a yearning for urban identity and adapt to the city life actively (Huan et al., 2020). Besides, an increasing number of the young generation migrants undertake work in the service industry compared to their predecessors who mainly worked in the manufacturing and construction industry. Factories in China's manufacturing centers are struggling to find staff as more young migrant workers turn their backs on the production line to find easier jobs with "more freedom" in the growing services sector. Booming courier business is a popular choice, where food deliverers can earn US\$750 to US\$1,000 a month with companies including Meituan Dianping (H. He, 2019). However, the working condition of the young migrant workers is not less exploitative than their predecessors. The working condition of the food deliverer, for example, is reported by many newspapers and ignites a wide discussion about the exploitation by the platform on the internet. "After eating the 'rice bowl of youth', where should the food deliverers go?" An editorial essay pointed that the jobs of migrants are usually labor intensive while do not offer adequate training for the workers to undertake other jobs that are less physically demanding when their health is damaged.

Basically, most migrants are eaters of the 'rice bowl of youth' if consider the temporality of their presence in the city. Among migrant workers, women typically begin to return home in large numbers between age 25 and 35 to marry and have children. Men start returning in their mid30s. On average, migrants stay in cities for only approximately 7 years (Zhao et al., 2018). Government coined a term 'floating

population' to describe the group of migrant laborers who are mostly of poor, rural people moving to the cities in search of jobs, eventually returning home to raise a family (Liang et al., 2014). Young female migrant workers are especially discriminated in the trend of moving to cities for jobs. They are preferred by employers because they are more mobile than married women, they have nimble fingers, and they are less likely to get pregnant. Women's career development is rarely in their own consideration. They are often seen as temporarily offering economic benefits to the current family because as sooner or later they marry and join another family economic unit. In many stories, women were sending money to their elder brothers to help their brother financially (*"Dagongmei" - Female Migrant Labourers*, 2004). At the end, most of the young female migrants will go back to hometown and get married.

Prior scholarship has explored female migrants in manufacturing such as Lee's and Pun's pioneering work on factory girls in Guangdong province. The critical labor theory approach has revealed the highly controlled and monitored working space in the factories. However, the rising consumerism facilitated the boom of service sector in the urban area, which created a lot of positions occupied by female migrant workers. Their working conditions and life experience can differ a lot from the factory workers. How the young female migrant workers engage in the service economy is under-represented in the literature. The Golf industry in China is both a product of the market reform and a job creator in the service sector. The golf caddy's work

exemplifies the evolution of the engagement of young migrant labor force in the market economy. As a case study to decipher the term ‘rice bowl of youth’ popular in the tertiary sector, this article wishes to see the life experience of golf caddies through the lens of youth as a special capital in the labor market, and therefore reflect transformations in a larger picture of Chinese economic development.

Data and Methods

The article is primarily based on the data collected from May 2019 to June 2021 through interview, ethnographic observation, and survey questions. In the summer of 2019, I did an internship in a golf academy in Shenzhen and lived with two female coaches together for three months. Afterwards, I visited around ten golf clubs, driving ranges, indoor golf facilities in Shenzhen and talked to golf industry practitioners from time to time. Shenzhen has a vibrant economy made by the rapid foreign direct investment following the implementation of “reform and opening-up” policy in 1979. From an underdeveloped region, it now has become one of the most developed financial centers in China. In this special economic zone, businessmen from Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other areas gather there for business trip and become one of the most important investors and consumers of the golf industry in Shenzhen. According to Na (2015), approximately 40 percent of the investment on golf clubs is foreign capital of which half are from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macaw.

The golf academy I stayed is located in a driving range that is near to the Mission Hill Golf Club. During my stay there, I spent my daytime observing the daily operation of the golf academy and talking to the driving range employees, including membership and course package salespeople, safeguards, and receptionists. During my fieldwork and afterward, I interviewed 7 female coaches and 4 male coaches in a semi-structured format. The interviewees are approached primarily based on convenience, but I also intentionally select coaches working in different kinds of places, including indoor golf, driving range, golf clubs, and private rooms outsourced by the enterprise owner to self-employed golf coaches in Shenzhen and Guangzhou. In each weekend, the golf coaches in the golf academy will bring clients to the golf course in the Mission Hill and other golf clubs. I followed them and had the chance to observe how golf caddies did their work in golf clubs. Mission Hill Club has the largest golf course in the world which makes it famous in the Chinese golf industry. It provides me a great opportunity to observe how the working experience of golf caddies looks like at one of the most luxury golf clubs in China.

In June 2021, I interviewed six golf caddies working in different golf clubs in Shenzhen. One golf club where my informant works at is a public golf club. The public golf club does not require membership fee and it is owned by the state. Other golf clubs are private and charge high fees per round and high membership fees. I obtained their contact through the network built when I was in the golf academy. Due to the covid situation and the regulation that the IRB required, I talked to them online

via WeChat. But the online format also offers benefits to get more information than we meet in person. Since we have never meet before, the subjects can complain about their clients and employers without worrying about losing personal information.

Golf in China: The Product of the Reform and Opening Policy

“Golf in China is the product of the Reform and Opening policy,” said Cui Zhiqiang, the former Secretary of the China Golf Association (Wei, 1998). In the early 20th century, golf was imported into China with its first appearance in Shanghai as a pastime of foreign residents. However, it was banned afterwards as a corrupting bourgeois lifestyle in socialist China. It is not until 1980s that golf recovered its legitimacy in China and gained its fast development in the 21st century. The initial purpose to build golf clubs in China was to attract foreign investment to the mainland. The opening of Zhongshan Spring Golf Club in Guangdong province in August 1984 marked the first establishment of golf clubs in China after 1949. Even though the construction of new golf courses has been rendered illegal due to the concern on the land use and environment pollution since 2004, the development speed of golf club did not cease.

The burgeoning development of real-estate economy in China facilitated the construction of golf courses in China, even if it is prohibited by the central government. In fact, 30 percent of the golf clubs are deficit, but the correlated real-estate developers benefit a lot from the golf courses as supporting facilities (Cooke &

Jing, 2009). The rapid increase of housing price in China since 2000s encouraged the construction of golf courses. Many of the newly constructed golf courses were approved in the name of sports parks, leisure parks, or Eco-parks. In addition, the approval of golf courses has not been strictly referred to a certain official department. Therefore, golf courses are approved by different levels of governments and various departments thanks to the need of attracting investments. By the end of 2007, the number of golf clubs in China has reached to around 260 (Shao, 2013). From 2009 to 2013, 197 courses opened and the total number of 18-hole golf courses increased to 639 (Na, 2015).

Since the 1980s economic reform in China, the value of sports was tremendously transformed under the commercialization of the sports industry and the promotion of urban lifestyle: modern sport gradually became a symbol of 'leisure class' as termed by Thorstein Veblen (2003). In the urban culture, sport has become an integral part of the commercialization of popular culture in together with cinema, travel, and shopping. Sport is an important new leisure activity for the urban residents and carries the meanings of healthy lifestyle, self-discipline, and consumer power. Besides, in accordance with the traditional culture, Chinese citizens have shown inclination to recreational and therapy exercises, such as walking, yoga, *Taichi*, and badminton, rather than intensive and aggressive physical activities (Huan, 2007).

Golf is associated in China with the image of high-end western sport and hence attracts a group of super-rich customers. In the domestic market, golf is often associated with the terms “green”, “oxygen”, “light” and “friendship” in the media coverage. Such combination of leisure and sport overshadows its athletic element and perfectly matched the preference of Chinese upper-middle class on recreational activities. To play on course is expensive. Most of the golf clubs are private and thus require membership, which charges 2-8 hundreds of thousand Yuan yearly, while China’s urban resident per capita disposable income of 2012 is only 24,565 RMB (Shao, 2013). Playing golf becomes a symbol of the newly rich and elite in China. There are many rich people playing golf to show off their wealthy status without any knowledge about the golf culture (Shao, 2013). According to a survey by Na (2015) of 1187 players, most of the golf participators play on course in the same year they start to practice on the driving range. Since many Chinese customers do not know the golf etiquette and rules on course, the use of golf caddies is very common and even mandatory in many golf clubs.

Golf Caddies and the Gendered Rice Bowl of Youth

Golf in China as a luxury sport participated by the newly rich, has fostered a service-oriented industry and created a large amount of job positions. Among these jobs, golf caddies’ work accounts for almost half of the job positions in the golf clubs. The caddie service in China has several distinctive features. Firstly, while the use of

caddies is optional and considered a luxury in the US, the caddie service in China is mandatory and cheap (usually 100-200 RMB per game) compared with the high membership fee (Janssen, 2009). Secondly, a golf caddie in China is more like a servant than a respected assistant, because the caddie needs to take care of the customer experience beyond simply playing golf, such as preparing drink and pleasing the clients (Yong & Wei, 2009). Thirdly, players can barely find male caddies in Chinese golf clubs. The majority of golf caddies in China are women, aging from 16 to 28, who come from rural areas and migrate to the city for job opportunities (Cao, 2016).

Golf clubs rely on the golf caddy's service to show off the social status of the clients. As Amy Hanser (2008) puts, the 'rice bowl of youth', and feminized, sexualized female bodies are used as a tool to produce class distinction in Contemporary China. Social class in China is increasingly spoken through consumption and the gendered performativity of labor, specifically, the service provided by young and good-looking women workers. Similarly, the golf caddy, as a service job, plays a central role in the distinction of social classes of the clients.

The private golf clubs, which charge higher playing fee than the public ones, tend to hire younger and better-looking golf caddies. My interviewee Amy (pseudonym) has been working in the golf industry for around eight years. As an experienced caddy, she worked in the public golf club after she got married in her

hometown and returned to the city for working opportunities. Before her marriage, she worked in a private golf club for a few years. She mentioned that there are a lot of senior caddies like her working in the public golf club. In comparison, the private golf clubs have more strict age restriction on the recruitment of caddies. A Golf Coach Fei, who has worked at a private golf club for ten years, told me that the private golf clubs prefer younger and better-looking girls, even if they have few experiences of serving the clients. The club would rather invest more efforts in training the young caddies than recruiting older caddies. “A golf club with seductive golf caddies will make it a higher-end brand,” said Fei. Besides, the youthfulness of golf caddies is not only an indicator for appearance and age, but a synonym of marital status. Golf caddy Cindy has been married. Her failure to find a job in private clubs was partially due to her marital status. “the private golf club only recruit girls (*nvhai* in Chinese), not married women (*yihun funv* in Chinese) like me,” Cindy grumbled. It exhibits that age sometimes is a scapegoat of the married status. There is a clear line between unmarried caddies and married caddies who are not qualified to serve the clients.

Not only the youthfulness of golf caddies becomes an important indicator of the golf club, but also the number of caddies on duty. According to Wang (2014), a high-end private golf club will provide one caddie to one client service. One caddie serving two clients or even one caddie serving four clients will negatively influence the image of the golf club. In fact, the public club in Shenzhen is often in short of caddies. Due to that, the club has to limit the number of clients to 200 per day. Amy complained

that in many cases she needs to serve two clients at the same time, which was not usual when she worked for the private golf club.

The Labor-Intensive Work and Private Life of Golf Caddies

My first encounter with a golf caddy was when I interviewed a female golf coach Li (anonym) and she told me that she entered the golf industry as a caddy. I was surprised initially since she has never mentioned it to me in our daily interaction. Later I understand that golf coaches are usually not willing to mention their past experience as golf caddies because it is not a decent job, even though the majority of golf coaches on the labor market are former caddies (F. Zhang, 2013). Golf caddies are perceived as service providers and are often being insulted by bad-tempered clients. In addition, a female golf coach has told me that a few of her clients would ask her if she has been a golf caddy and whether she had black history (*hei lishi* in Chinese) before, implying the sexual relationship with rich clients. Golf caddies, especially female caddies, are considered as a working-class job and the caddy-to-coach promotional way is less reputable than golf college graduates. As our talk goes deeper, her experience in the golf industry discloses the unusual scene in the industry with a luxury surface. Li comes from a remote village in Guizhou province. In the beginning, she was assigned by the vocational school that she was studying at to work in a factory. The overtime working schedule and huge workload was exhausting. Then Li asked her cousin who was a teacher at the vocational school to find another job for

her. She was then offered the chance to do an internship as a golf caddy in a golf club. Caddies have similar profiles with migrant workers in manufacturing. However, the life on the assembly line is not attractive to the young generation of migrant girls anymore. As one of golf caddies I interviewed said, “At least I can play my mobile phone when there is no client, but in the factory, you have to keep watch on the products, and you are not allowed to waste your labor time for entertainment.” To this extent, the prosperity of the service economy has offered the migrant workers opportunities to escape the strict labor control in factories.

There are many women like Li who are from rural areas and start their caddies’ work at a young age. A golf manager who has worked at golf clubs in Shenzhen and Beijing told me that they will intentionally recruit golf caddies directly from villages in Sichuan, Guizhou and Hunan provinces. Preference will be given to those who have athletic background. In recently years, there are many vocational schools opening golf related majors. These vocational schools collaborate with golf clubs to send their students to do internship as golf caddies. These students are able to ‘eat bitterness’ and have good knowledge of golf. But some golf clubs prefer to recruit caddies who have no experience in golf industry, so that the golf club can deliver a ‘proper’ golf value and service skills to golf caddies (Wang, 2014). The new golf caddies need to participate in caddies training and pass the examination before formally serving the clients.

Golf caddies often live in the dormitory provided by the employer. One reason is that the golf clubs usually locate in suburb areas and it is hard to find appropriate living spaces by caddies themselves. In the meanwhile, the dormitory is an important mechanism for the employers to manage the private life of caddies. The golf caddy Cindy deliberately refused the low-price dormitory provided by the golf club, because there is no kitchen, toilet or bathroom in the room, so that the caddies on each floor have to share common toilets and bathrooms at the corner. In addition, the door keeper of the dorm will regulate the time to turn off the light and caddies are not allowed to return to dorm after midnight. Pun Ngai and Chris Smith (2007) have theorized the space politics in the dormitory labor regime in China. The private space of migrant workers is erased, along with their private life. The entertainment activities of golf caddies are very limited and their social networks are confined in their colleagues. My informants rarely mentioned their private life. When asked about their life after work, most of them answered playing mobile phone and staying in the dormitory to restore their energy for work in the next day.

The caddy's work is a labor-intensive job. Serving a whole game for four to six hours, caddies need to walk 7-8 km. The caddies help the clients reporting the distance, evaluating the fairway, and knowing about position of green and hole. Some golf clubs will organize morning jog to train the caddies in their first month in work. Caddy Cindy (pseudonym) complained that she got stomach disease after working on course for several months, because she has to serve the clients as soon as the clients

come, no matter whether she has eaten anything for the four-hour physical work. When the clients outnumber available caddies, she constantly receives the message from the manager that ask her to urge the client she was serving to finish the round quickly. Working eight hours in a row happens frequently in the busy season. Another caddy Lu (pseudonym) said that her leg hurts in wet weather. She explained that working in the sun and wearing heavy trousers make their legs soaked by sweat for a long time. After a rainy day, moisture evaporated from the grass in a high temperature. The caddy needs to walk on the grass for at least 4 hours every day. It is therefore why many caddies retire from the job with occupational disease.

The intensive work brings a high earning prospective to caddies. The salary of golf caddies constitutes three components: basic salary, service fee (50-100 RMB per game paid by the golf club), and tips (usually 100-200 RMB per game but varies depending on clients and regions). According to Amy, the basic salary is usually the local lowest salary regulated by the labor law. The lowest salary in Shenzhen is around 2000 RMB. As for the service fee, if the client specifically orders Amy to serve, Amy could obtain 50 RMB from the club as reward. If the client is randomly assigned to her, she will only receive the tip from the client. Therefore, tip is an important component of caddy's income. However, golf caddies have to take the risk of getting nothing from the client after service, especially when the golf caddies serve Korean clients who usually do not communicate with the caddie during the whole game and are not willing to pay tips. Amy told me that her income can reach 10,000

RMB when she could serve two rounds a day in busy seasons. Usually, golf caddies earn 4000 to 6000 RMB per month which is slightly higher than average salary level of the blue-collar workers.

Many fresh graduates from golf related vocational college have to make the choice between becoming a caddy or assistant coach. While caddy is physically demanding, assistant coaches earn much less than caddies. KF is a graduating student from Hunan Golf Tourism Vocational College. She did her internship as an assistant coach at my visited golf academy in 2019 summer with a monthly stipend of 1,200 RMB, which cannot even cover her living expense. She told me that many of her female classmates in college prefer to work as caddies.

“Although they (female classmates) want to be coach, coaches earn less than caddies. You need to make some money before you become a coach. But I think it may not be a good choice to be a caddy first. Other coaches they learn a lot and accumulate client resources. But for sure golf caddies can know many people and if you really do well, the clients will find you as their coaches. But if you do not play really well, unless the boss likes your body... The golf industry is very complicated.”

More than three times I heard from male assistance coaches that they are not willing to work as caddie because they are not favored by their gender *and* caddie’s work is painstaking.

For caddies who have no education background in golf, the chance to become a coach is tiny. Li is a special case in her successful experience of becoming a golf coach. When she described her past experience of golf caddie, she emphasized her talent at playing golf and how hard she trained on course after work:

“The manager will encourage us to practice golf in spare time, because if the golf caddies can play well and offer some advice to the clients, the clients will be very happy. I found it very interesting at the first time I played golf. I shot 130 meters using the seventh iron at the first time. After that I started to spend all my spare time on practicing golf skills. Sometimes there will be a golf team training in our golf club, I will get up in the early morning and train with them... But the process is so difficult, because just finishing the daily job is exhausting already. I am very lucky to have a master to guide me. When I got the CGA basic certificate, he told me that I can go out and be a trainer.”

However, not many female golf caddies become golf coaches. “Golf caddie is a rice bowl of youth,” wrote in a report of golf caddies in the *New Magazine* (Yong & Wei, 2009). Many female golf caddies will leave the golf industry in their late 20s as they are not capable of doing the intensive work and are obliged to get married by the family pressure. In the report, a golf caddie named Liu directly said that most of the senior golf caddies will go back to their hometown and marry a man from the same

village. “Pretty golf caddies might be promoted to do receptionist or clerical work, but I have never known anyone who marries a rich client,” said Liu. When I ask Amy about her future plan, she said that she might go back to hometown again when she cannot physically bear the work. In the meanwhile, she mentioned that although her colleagues want to change to another job, the practical situation is that it is time to get married and give birth to children in the hometown. The social pressure for marriage and to take care of the family is another force pushing female caddies out of the golf industry.

Conclusion

The socio-economic restructuring in post-socialist China since 1978 has profound effect on the employment pattern of Chinese citizens. One of the most striking change is the reduction of permanent jobs in state-owned companies and the increasing job openings in the market economy. The impact has also changed the culture of marketplace regarding gender, age, and class. The desirable image of women workers changes from the strong and hardworking women to youthful and feminine bodies. The popular idiom “rice bowl of youth” since the early 1990s perfectly presents such transformation. Youth and beauty are the most valuable body capital that the girls can utilize to make money in the new economy.

The destiny of golf caddies is imbricated with the development of market economy in China. The reform and opening-up policy facilitated the prosperity of

service industry and the migration of rural laborers to urban industries. The youthful body provided the young female migrants a chance to work in the most lucrative sports establishments - golf clubs. However, the work is physically demanding and requires heavy emotional labor. While they spend youth on the golf course, what waits for them is unemployment as they get older and married. The job positions only welcome young girls who are energetic and free from family responsibility. The dormitory life will be the first impediment of the family life.

The value of youth in its energetic body and nice-looking appearance is imbricated with the exploitation of the young generation to contribute to the accumulation of capital in post-socialist China. The capital here does not only refer to the commodity produced on the assembly line, but also include the intangible product and service that accounts in the calculation of gross domestic product (GDP). The media use of the 'rice bowl of youth' increasingly refers to the intensive work exclusively opened to the young people. Young workers are demanded by the employers to sacrifice their private life and invest all their time in work. In the meanwhile, middle-aged job seekers cannot find non-managerial positions in the labor market. In particular, the age discrimination against middle-aged workers is much more severe to women than to men. While the new meanings of the 'rice bowl of youth' seems to be gender neutral, the new connotations exhibits the another dilemma of women workers in the market economy: women are pushed out to job positions because of their married status and the presumable role of care giver in the family.

Where there is age discrimination, it is combined with gender. Even though the age anxiety is wide-spread in China across industries and gender, women employees eat ‘two rice bowls of youth’, implying that they either depends on the youthful appearance or the unmarried identity to secure employment opportunities.

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