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# The spear of capital and the shield of labor: Chinese model of emotional labor in domestic work

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## Abstract

The theory of emotional labor, originating from the institutional background of the Western social and cultural system, is committed to criticizing the emotional management and emotional alienation of service workers under capital discipline. This paper introduces the construction of social relations with acquaintances typical in Chinese rural society into the analytical framework. It presents a Chinese model of automatized emotional labor, different from the model of commercialized emotional labor, by analyzing the emotional model acquisition in the professional development process of domestic workers and the mechanisms of formation, maintenance, and reproduction of the model in the labor process. In the new model, consumers (customers) and workers are equal and mutually beneficial interactive subjects, and emotional labor is no longer the spear of capital but instead becomes a shield for workers against challenges in the labor process. Therefore, this paper puts forward a theoretical reflection on consumers–workers under the model of commercialized emotional labor.

**Keywords:** Domestic worker, Emotional labor, Localization, Automatized emotion, Labor process

## Introduction: the generality and particularity of domestic workers and the domestic service industry

According to *The Guidance on the Development of Domestic Service Industry* issued by the general office of the State Council, the domestic service industry is “the service industry that provides a variety of labor services to families to meet the needs of family life.”<sup>1</sup> Practitioners in this industry are generally referred to as domestic service workers or domestic workers in academic discussions (Ma 2011). As a subindustry of the service industry, domestic service shares the general characteristics of the service industry (He 2009). The production process requires face-to-face contact between domestic workers and consumers; its products are not material in form but mostly services to help people complete the reproduction process, including physical and emotional work, that is, physical labor and emotional labor (Hochschild 2003; Ma 2010).

<sup>1</sup> See *The Guidance on the Development of Domestic Service Industry* (August 24, 2010) issued by the general office of the State Council, ([mohrss.gov.cn/nmggzs/NMGGZSzhengcewhenjian/201008/t20100824\\_83077.html](http://mohrss.gov.cn/nmggzs/NMGGZSzhengcewhenjian/201008/t20100824_83077.html)).

The domestic service industry also has characteristics distinct from other service industries, such as hairdressing and catering—doing service work in the private sphere. If the service relationship were considered an instrumental labor relationship, it would be difficult to survive in the family as a private field that values automatic emotion; if it were considered an emotional labor relationship, the act of paying for an intimate relationship would not be compatible with the purity and nobility associated with an intimate relationship. Therefore, domestic workers have always faced the dilemma of being a “virtual family member” (*xuni jiaren*) or “quasi-family member” (*lei jiaren*) (Ma 2011), which is also the primary challenge concerning the emotional labor of domestic workers.

Meanwhile, with the commercialization of urban family functions and the increase in double-income families under the backdrop of the market economy, the demand for domestic workers continues to increase, resulting in an increasing number of domestic workers in recent years, which exceeded 30 million in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Due to government policies and capital investment, the domestic service industry has generally developed akin to modern commercial operations, whose business sales reached 690 billion Yuan in 2019<sup>3</sup> and are characterized by modernization, professionalization, and commercialization. However, the existing operation strategies of the domestic service industry, the low educational level, and the disadvantaged socioeconomic status make domestic workers difficult to obtain opportunities for career development and confine them to a passive position (Ma 2011; Su and Ni 2016; Sa et al. 2020). In terms of physical labor, the passive position refers to the fact that domestic workers are enlisted in mainly informal employment. They cannot engage in a formal and legal employment relationship with corresponding rights and interests protection and occupational welfare protection, and their work is characterized by instability (Wang and Wu 2009; Tong 2017; Wu 2019). In terms of emotional labor, commercial agencies discipline and control the emotions of domestic workers in the process of training and work to improve customers’ satisfaction with services, resulting in the emotional alienation of domestic workers (Hochschild 2003). Hence, emotional labor is an important leverage to control workers in the service industry.

Even the involvement of internet technology in the domestic service industry in recent years has only improved the economic benefits of domestic workers. The informal employment relationship remains, and physical and emotional control has become stricter and more explicit (Liang 2017). However, from a theoretical perspective, this control strategy clearly presupposes a single emotional model for customers and workers, and people’s subjectivity and diversity in the emotional model are obscured (Li and Liu 2017). Therefore, is the emotional labor discipline with a “consumer-centric” tendency in the existing business model the only emotional labor strategy in the labor process of domestic workers? What are the similarities and differences between Western and Chinese local practices in constructing consumer demand? These issues have yet to be discussed.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Interpretation of the Action Plan for Promoting Agriculture through Domestic Economics (2021–2025)* by the official of the Department of Services and Trade of the Ministry of Commerce (October 9, 2021) (<http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zcjd/jdgnmy/202110/20211003205892.shtml>).

<sup>3</sup> See Li Hualin, 2020, “Accelerating the recovery of offline consumption,” *Economic Daily*, November 19 (<https://proapi.jingjiribao.cn/detail.html?id=310,518>).

When participating in the activities for domestic workers held by a social work organization, we found a group of domestic workers whose emotional model in the labor process is quite different from that in the existing research. Although they were trained and introduced by agencies at the beginning of their career, their overall career development is less dependent on intermediary agencies. They have established a good interactive relationship with customers, resulting in greater independence and autonomy in work and life and a decent and friendly working environment. In this group, emotional labor has become a resource for the workers to build a good working environment rather than a means of capital control and exploitation.

In existing research on the emotional labor of domestic workers, the stability and good feedback on work rely mainly on the skill training and emotional discipline provided by agencies. However, the domestic workers in this paper have not been under the protection and discipline of agencies for a long time, and they emphasize that they are not performing but are truly expressing their emotions in the labor process. What protects them from emotional alienation and enables them to employ automatic emotions to achieve professional success? Or theoretically, is it possible for emotional labor to transform from a tool of capital control and exploitation to workers' resources, that is, is emotional labor the spear of capital or the shield of labor? This paper claims that the answers to these questions will be conducive to the better employment quality of the domestic service industry and the further clarification of the diversity and localization of emotional labor.

## **Theories and empirical research on emotional labor**

### **The concept and mechanism of emotional labor**

Classical sociological theories have concerned issues related to human emotion, although these discussions are generally implied and eclipsed by grand theories on social composition, coordination, and conflict (Wang 2000). Emotion at work, as a relatively independent research field, was not noticed by academia until *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* was published, the classic study by American scholar Arlie Russell Hochschild in 1983. Around the 1980s, consumer society in the USA took shape. In this process, enterprises imitated management and control strategies employed by factories in the labor process. On the one hand, they shaped labor in its traditional physical and mental aspects. On the other hand, they further included the feelings of workers in management and control to meet the needs of consumers. The emotional labor control process transformed the classic capital–worker relationship into the capital–worker–customer relationship due to consumer's intervention. These changes have aroused scholars' interest in and discussion on strengthening capital exploitation strategies and workers' emotional alienation.

Against this background, Hochschild puts forward the concept of emotional labor. Physical, mental, and emotional labor constitute the three basic elements of service work. Emotional labor refers to workers' internal emotional management and adjustment of their external expression, eye contact, and posture in accordance with the working principles of enterprises to ensure consumers feel good about the service and achieve the perfect service effect pursued by enterprises. Due to its potential to generate surplus value for capital, emotion is captured by the service industry. Therefore, the

private life of workers is pushed into the public sphere, from being owned by workers to being disciplined by enterprises. Hence, the alienation of workers is further deepened (Hochschild 2003).

The key to emotional labor lies in the feeling rules set by enterprises for the labor process. Human beings express and communicate their emotions through the feeling rules of culture in the process of socialization that starts at birth. Therefore, this aspect of emotion is considered to connect individual feelings and collective rules, taking into account the needs of both individual and collective units, in which individuals adopt a certain subjectivity and initiative. Some scholars define the expression beyond feeling management as automatic emotion (Zapf 2002). However, by ignoring workers' emotional subjectivity and initiative, enterprises establish a set of unnatural rules to regulate emotional feelings and expression to construct good feelings among customers through interaction. Under these specific emotional rules, workers must carry out feeling management to resolve the internal contradictions and conflicts generated by the two sets of rules of automatic emotion and alienated emotion.

Although feeling management could enable workers to deal with emotional challenges when interacting with customers in the service process, it is difficult to fundamentally resolve workers' internal conflict between the two sets of emotional rules, resulting in workers' alienation from themselves, that is, emotional alienation (Hochschild 2003; Tong 2013). Two distinct emotional types and emotional relationships are thus formed. One is automatic emotion in social life, and the other is alienated emotion in the labor process. The former plays a role mainly in the private sphere, while the latter mainly in the public sphere, such as the workplace (Guo 2013).

### **Empirical studies of emotional labor in the service industry**

Existing empirical research on emotional labor is based mainly on the above concepts and theoretical discussion, forming three approaches as follows:

#### ***The perspective of managerial control in the labor process***

From the standpoint of managerial control in the labor process, this research approach argues that the passive position of service workers derives from two sources. The first is the control of the capital. Capital constructs the "care work" of high-income families as replaceable and exchangeable service goods and formulates relevant labor rules and emotional regulations to standardize them. Female workers at the bottom of the labor market participate in such exchanges to obtain economic remuneration for their survival. In this process, their private lives and emotions are also managed and constructed as part of the exchange (Lan 2011; Liu and Xiao 2020). The second is the female identity of domestic workers. It is not a coincidence that the majority of service workers are female, and the construction of emotional labor in the service industry relies on the female gender. Instead, this fact is based on the differences in the unequal social status and economic resources between men and women. Lacking other support and resources, many female workers have no choice but to engage in occupations with high emotional labor needs and endure the dual exploitation of physical strength and emotion. Meanwhile, feminist scholars point out that the construction process of emotional labor further reproduces gender inequality and the gender hierarchy in the division

of labor. Emotional labor is constructed as nonskilled, auxiliary, and irrational. It is endowed with low labor value and has placed the social status and economic value of domestic labor and its practitioners at the bottom of the labor market for a long time (Guo 2009; Xiao and Jian 2020). Thus, the dual oppression of capital and gender hierarchy creates the long-term disadvantaged position of domestic workers in the labor market and labor process.

Labor process theory pays attention to both labor management and workers' resistance (Buroway 2005). However, with the dual oppression of capital and gender, domestic workers develop multiple types of resistance (Wen and Zhou 2007). Scholars have proposed two types of resistance, negative and positive. Negative resistance includes fake laughter, "voting with one's own feet," or changing identity (Hochschild 2003; Ma 2010; Su 2011).<sup>4</sup> Active resistance means that workers can mobilize some situational strategies for self-protection, have the opportunity to classify and control customers to safeguard their interests, and even cooperate with customers to fight against unreasonable regulations of enterprises (Loe 1996; Wharton 2009; Liang 2017).

The fundamental difference between these two types of resistance is that negative resistance does not formally challenge the existence of enterprises and the rationality of discipline, while positive resistance challenges the dual oppression of capital and gender and overturns the stereotype that female workers are at the bottom of the labor market, that is, powerless and passive (He 2009). Positive resistance partially protects the labor rights and interests of workers and has more potential to promote academic reflection and practice.

### ***The perspective of professionalization***

This research approach focuses primarily on the research topics of management and professionalization and directly discusses the question of "what it is" rather than the question of "what it should be" regarding emotional labor (Guo 2007; Wang 2014). Therefore, it focuses on exploring the concept, structure, and model of emotional labor rather than providing a reflection on it. Scholars with this approach suggest that emotional labor has both behavioral and psychological aspects, and its influencing variables can be divided into three dimensions: individual, contextual, and organizational. Individual factors refer to workers' preference and tendency to express emotions; contextual factors refer to specific events, scenes, and the environment in work; organizational factors include the organizational system and culture (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Grandey 2000).

Among these studies, a group of studies on organizational factors found that if the organizational system and culture support workers, workers are more likely to present deep action and less likely to suffer from emotional exhaustion (Brook 2009). The inspiration of this study is that even if the enterprise has formulated emotional rules, workers still have space to express automatic emotions with some support provided by the enterprise. Therefore, the distinction between automatic emotion and alienated emotion in emotional labor is presented. At the same time, this study reminds us that since the organizational system and culture have a significant impact on workers' emotional

<sup>4</sup> For example, the position of live-in caregiver with high emotional labor demands has transformed into that of hourly worker with low emotional labor demands.

expression, different dimensions of the system and culture, such as the family at the micro-level and the country at the macro-level, should play a similar role. Based on this clue, the importance of the influence of the macro-system and culture, that is, the differences between countries on emotional labor is revealed. Furthermore, due to the differences in emotional expression and in the social and cultural environments between China and the West, what characteristics will emotional labor have in China?

### ***The perspective of localization***

In fact, not only does the perspective of professionalization raise the question of country-based distinction of emotional labor from the macro-dimension of the organization, but research on emotional labor originating in the West has also found significant differences resulting from the cultural background and social tradition in empirical research conducted in different countries. With the influence of globalization, the commercial power of capital and the impact of the traditional gender hierarchy constitute the origin of oppression in emotional labor. At the same time, due to the significant influence of social culture and systems on emotional expression and cognition at the macro-level, emotional labor in different countries and cultures presents great differences. When comparing the emotional labor of American and Japanese enterprises, some scholars found that differences in the local socialization pattern led to the different worker responses to feeling management at work (Raz 2002). Under the cultural background of American individualism, the emotional rules formulated by enterprises are regarded as an external and imposed control, different from and conflicting with workers' internal selves. Therefore, it is easy to experience emotional exhaustion and resistance. The Japanese cultural tradition has internalized the self-control of the organization as a part of one's personal quality. Therefore, there is a relative integration of external control and self-control, making it difficult to experience the feeling of conflict and emotional alienation. This study reveals that Hochschild's research ignores the locality of cultural background and suggests that researchers should focus on the influence of local culture when examining local issues (Sumi 2004).

Regarding the Chinese model of emotional labor, some researchers have proposed that due to the late start of marketization, there are significant differences among the needs of Chinese consumers for emotional interaction in services (Mei 2020). Meanwhile, the traditional interpersonal interaction model has also become a resource for workers to protect themselves in the workplace. The sisterhood has become the basis for workers to face conflicts together (Li and Liu 2017). Therefore, existing studies have noted the implications of localization of emotional labor and highlighted some key points in empirical research.

Based on the research mentioned above, we can see that research adopting the perspective of managerial control takes the position of service workers as the starting point of value and argues that the regulation of capital on emotional labor results in workers' emotional alienation. This approach emphasizes workers' disadvantaged position and harsh working environment. Therefore, this perspective focuses mainly on the commercialization of emotional labor by enterprise organizations in the organizational dimension while neglecting individual and contextual factors, especially the impact and role of macro-level social culture and systems on the internal mechanism of emotional labor.



The professionalization perspective concerns the concept, structure, and influencing mechanism of emotional labor on the premise of this mechanism having a reasonable existence and posits the influencing factors at multiple levels, such as individual, contextual, and organizational. On the one hand, this perspective neglects the subjective feelings of workers in emotional labor; on the other hand, it draws attention to the specific mechanism of emotional labor, which could facilitate a multidimensional analysis that is not afforded by the perspective of managerial control. The perspective of localization has realized the different characteristics of emotional labor under the specific system and sociocultural environment across different countries, carried out research on the Chinese cultural context, and put forward inspiring questions and analytical approaches. What is still missing is an analytical process and framework that could present the general characteristics of emotional labor in China.

Moreover, although existing research has begun to bring customers into the analysis, the examination and application of the unique tripartite interactive mode of capital, labor, and customers in the service industry are generally limited. These studies present mainly single images of “demanding customers” and “alienated workers,” as well as a simple interactive mode of oppression and resistance in the labor process while ignoring the diversified characteristics of workers and customers and the possibility of their diversified interactive practice.

Regarding the emotional labor of domestic workers, existing research focuses largely on the perspective of managerial control, pays attention to the control and resistance in the labor process, and is inclined to select intermediary enterprises as a research field displaying the alienation and resistance characteristics of workers’ emotional labor under the control of commercialized and standardized capital (Su 2011; Ma 2011; He 2009). The studies lack discussions of the multidimensional influencing mechanism and present a single image of domestic workers and customers under capital regulation and a simple interactive mode of commercial emotional labor. By including the life stories and work experience of domestic workers with strong autonomy beyond commercial organizations, this paper aims to fill the research gap and promote recognition of the localization model of emotional labor in the domestic market.

## **Research methods and framework**

### **Research methods**

The data for this study were obtained mainly through participant observation and interviews. First, the author conducted in-depth interviews with 13 domestic workers who participated in the activity organized by the author and a social work organization for an emotional labor group of domestic workers and identified five domestic workers with an automatic emotion model. To explore the situation of other domestic workers outside the group, the author contacted 11 other domestic workers, identified two domestic workers with an automatic emotion model, and conducted targeted in-depth interviews with them. The seven domestic workers with an automatic emotion model were mainly live-in caregivers.

Participant observation was conducted in the aforementioned group activities. Therefore, most domestic workers in this study have participated in interviews and group activities many times. The author has observed and communicated with them many

times over a long period of time. Although not all of this information has been preserved in written form, it provides important background information to support the views and findings of this research. Since the customer perspective is quite important for this study, the author conducted interviews from 2020 to 2021 with eight customers who live in Beijing or Shanghai and have employed or are still employing live-in caregivers.

In general, domestic workers with automatic emotion models are similar to other domestic workers in terms of age, education level, and type of work. They are all trained and introduced into this industry by domestic enterprises. However, in subsequent career development, the former have formed a sincere and sustainable emotional interaction relationship with customers, thus breaking away from the discipline and shackles of capital and enjoying a friendly working environment and career path.<sup>5</sup>

### Research framework

This paper takes the localization of emotional labor as the primary analytical approach. On the one hand, this paper incorporates the response of consumers (customers) to emotional labor into the analysis based on the existing concepts and theories of emotional labor and combines it with the multilevel influencing mechanisms of the individual, context, and organization from the perspective of professionalization. On the other hand, it focuses on the local culture and the characteristics of the emotional interaction mode under this cultural influence. Therefore, Chinese local culture, institutions, and internal emotional mechanisms are central to the analytical framework of this paper.

The characteristics of Chinese culture are significantly different from those of Western culture, as has long been established in academia. In *Outline of Chinese Culture* (中国文化要义), Shuming Liang proposed that, compared with Western individualism, Chinese society is not collectivism-oriented but relationship-oriented (Liang 1987). The structure of this relationship is “the differential mode of association” (差序格局), which constructs a differentiated pattern of relationships based on blood, geography, and industry (Fei 1998). The interaction, production, reproduction, and relationships maintain the traditional community network. Overall, this set of rules of the life world is family-centered. Family-based culture forms the responsibility–obligation relationship between individuals and families and between individuals and communities, in turn forming the contextual social support relationship and social solidarity in the form of “the differential mode of association.” In this relationship structure, the family (clan) shows care for its members, and the individual makes every effort to contribute to the family (clan) (Zhang 1994). If this kind of reciprocal relationship were considered necessary in spheres other than family, people would generally simulate family relationships to promote mutual responsibility and trust (Wang 2001).

In the process of relationship construction, what is behind the material exchange, such as gift giving/returning, is the essence of the flow and the construction of favor. This exchange is both emotional and instrumental, and it is both rational social exchange and emotional communication (Zhai 2009; Yan 2017), and it is dynamic. The lagging repayment mechanism and expectation involve the two sides in the construction,

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<sup>5</sup> Any information relating to domestic workers and customers in this paper has been anonymized.



maintenance, and confirmation of the relationship; thus, relationships can continue and develop (Wang and Wang 2012).

Furthermore, although Chinese society has experienced transformation brought by modernization and the traditional social structure and culture are gradually being influenced by modernity, traditional relationship-oriented and family-based characteristics still exist in social practice in urban and rural areas. In general, when it is necessary to establish a mutually beneficial relationship in rural daily life outside the family, people still use the traditional way to transform the acquaintance relationship into a quasi-kinship relationship (Wang 2001).

Urban communities in China are gradually losing their characteristics as a traditional “acquaintance society” due to the urbanization process and large-scale domestic migration from rural to urban areas, and their characteristics as a “stranger society” are more prominent than those in rural areas (Zhang and Ruan 1999; Li 2002; Cai and He 2014). Against this background, commercial institutions can use the emotional discipline strategy to conduct business in cities and organize labor in the service industry.

However, compared with other fields in the service industry, domestic work has particularities. Most domestic workers grew up in villages with the characteristics of an “acquaintance society,” and the relationships in such society and its reproduction rules are deeply embedded in their socialization process. When domestic workers enter cities with the characteristics of the modern “stranger society,” on the one hand, the new environment may bring more adaptive challenges; on the other hand, the emotional model derived from the “acquaintance society” still constitutes a supporting resource for their individual development. In particular, the communication mode of the “stranger society” exercises its impact mainly outside the family, while the work of domestic workers takes place in the private sphere of the family. Domestic workers can enter the customer’s family and have a natural spatial advantage in relationship construction, which makes it easier to generate acquaintance relationships they are familiar with and leads to automatic emotions. The long-lasting attempt to establish quasi-kinship relationships between customers and domestic workers confirms this advantage; that is, the work of domestic workers, especially emotional labor, creates the conditions to continue their native community behavior. Therefore, this paper will use this logic of emotional relationship construction to analyze and discern the characteristics of the emotional labor of domestic workers in China.

### **Automatic emotion: the localized model of emotional labor in Chinese domestic work**

The particularity of domestic labor is that although the alienation of emotional labor is inevitable under the control of enterprises, emotional labor is indispensable to domestic labor. In other words, it is impossible to address alienation by eliminating emotional labor from domestic work. Therefore, the study of emotional labor has remained in the stage of academic criticism for a long time, which makes it difficult to promote the adjustment and improvement in practice. This issue is the theoretical problem when cooperating with social work institutions to carry out the emotional labor group activities of domestic workers. Bearing this problem in mind, we began to capture the

difficulties of emotional labor and experiences faced by domestic workers in group activities, aiming to extract general experiences that can be shared by workers in the industry.

However, we found that difficulties and experiences are not evenly distributed among domestic workers. In other words, some workers can always share their experience solving other people's problems. They do not have obvious difficulties in emotional labor but work in a friendlier working atmosphere. In subsequent research, we interacted with more domestic workers and found domestic workers with such experience. Therefore, we have gradually realized that the sharing offered by these people is not only based on individual "experience" but could also reflect the experience of a "type" since their perspective of perceiving and addressing problems is quite different from the business perspective; therefore, they have established an interpersonal relationship with the customer's family that goes beyond an instrumental employment relationship.

Previous studies on business emotion models have focused on the ternary analytical framework of the capital featuring customers and workers. In the specific emotional interaction mechanism, capital is regarded as the core and leading subject. On the one hand, capital has constructed the stereotyped image of hegemonic consumers in the labor field who demand unilateral emotional labor based on the pursuit of interest and a one-sided understanding of consumers' needs; on the other hand, capital disciplines workers to follow the business emotional rules of "consumer first" to achieve the profit goal. In this mechanism, capital is the main body that plays a shaping role, and customers and workers are the objects being constructed or disciplined, with obvious passivity. In the interaction, workers mainly provide labor, and emotion is instrumental to achieving service and interest goals. Compared with the core mission of service work, emotion is dependent and will end with the completion of the service interaction, which is the temporary characteristic of business emotion in terms of the time dimension. Based on cases of the automatic emotion mode, this paper focuses on customers and workers who were originally in a passive position and investigates the formation, maintenance, and reproduction of the automatic emotion model between these two sides and the potential impact of capital to sort out the characteristics of the automatic emotion mode and the multiple interaction mechanisms of these subjects.

### **The growing up: the acquisition of the automatic emotion model**

Domestic workers with automatic emotion models in emotional labor have grown up under similar backgrounds as other domestic workers at the macro-level. They are all from economically underdeveloped rural areas. Most of them have an education level of junior high school, and some have graduated from vocational high school or high school.

*My mother just lives like this. She is very good to us. Every morning, we can get up very late. She cooks and asks us to get up and eat breakfast. My father never beat us. He is very good to me. When there is a meeting, there is some meat for them to eat. But he didn't eat it all. He packed some for me. (domestic worker JC, 2018).*

*My family doesn't value boys over girls. I finished primary school and got good grades. I just played poker too much then and failed to get good grades. Since I was 12 years old, I have stopped studying. There are many children in my family. I am the youngest. My parents have not asked me to work or do chores at home. I just stayed at home. (domestic worker EH, 2017).*

The reflections of the above two domestic workers show they have not been influenced by the traditional idea of son preference. Even if their families were not rich, they grew up in a loving, open, and relaxed environment with their parents. Their feelings toward and relationships with their families and friends were generally positive. On the one hand, they learned how to establish and maintain a stable emotional relationship in their family life. On the other hand, they acquired the interpersonal communication mode of the traditional acquaintance society in the socialization process in rural communities. In other words, the local culture and its structure left a deeply rooted and active mark on the early life of these domestic workers. This background is the local cultural foundation at the macro-level of the automatic emotional model formed in the process of domestic work.

#### **At the beginning of work: the formation of the automatic emotion model**

The previous section showed that this group of domestic workers is not distinct in terms of their upbringing. Why, however, have other domestic workers not formed an obvious and unified automatic emotional model? The existing empirical research has offered some answers; the main reason concerns the labor process, especially in the initial stage when workers enter the workplace. For example, some scholars suggest that the initial interaction experience between workers and customers at the beginning of work is the key to determining whether the original interactive mode can be continued (Su and Ni 2016).

Especially for live-in domestic workers (including nannies, babysitters, and maternity matrons) who need to stay at the customer's home, working and living alone in a strange home makes them feel the pressure of the unfamiliar environment on the one hand and look forward to establishing a good relationship with the customer to ensure everything goes smoothly on the other hand. Therefore, at the beginning of their work, domestic workers are generally careful. It is fortunate for domestic workers to establish an automatic emotional model with customers. Therefore, when talking about a good relationship with customers, a domestic worker will mention that it is "fate" (缘分); that is, establishing the automatic emotional model is a process of chance and luck.

For customers, this choice is made after deliberation. According to customer interviews, customers would only establish a long-term automatic emotional relationship with domestic workers when they meet the customers' basic requirements in the initial stage of work. These requirements include the following:

*I saw that her handwriting was very good. She graduated from high school, according to the resume. She also worked as a substitute teacher for grade one and grade two of primary school in her village. In fact, when she first came home, I found that she didn't cook very well, and her working ability and efficiency were average. But it is very important for the domestic worker to have a stable mood and a mild personality. So I thought she could do the work. After I got along with her for about two or three years, our relationship changed from a customer-worker relationship to a quasi-friendship. Now, after ten years, I think she is family. (Client Ms. C, 2021).*

*We have changed short-term domestic workers several times. Some of them have grand plans but little skill. Some of them tried to fool you, quite unreliable. As for*

*this sister, I think she really cherishes this job. Her family also needs money, so she works hard. She has a reliable personality and is good to [the] children. We don't have too many other requirements. I can do housework if she can't. (Client Ms. Y, 2021).*

In summary, the basic requirements of customers have two main aspects. One is the subjective quality related to personality and emotion, and the other is the objective working ability. After a period of observation and evaluation, when customers think that the domestic worker can meet these two requirements, they will choose to establish an interactive relationship with the domestic worker as a friend and family member. This decision also suggests that the formation of such automatic emotion has a significantly instrumental basis; that is, workers need to be competent in both their subjective quality and objective ability to establish an automatic emotion model. This fact is an important difference between the automatic emotion in the work of domestic workers and the automatic emotion within families.

Obviously, customers have more influencing power in the formation process of this model. In addition to the empirical support provided below, their main construction approach includes forming equal status between the two sides.

*When we travel on holidays, we book a separate room for her. We usually eat and live together. My brother and sister treat her very well. They don't take her as a nanny, but as an older [member] in our own family. They especially respect her. When my brother came, he did all the work he could do. (Client Ms. Y, 2021).*

*She could stay at this work because, first of all, I told her that everyone earns bread with their own hands. Her work is a kind of work, and the work of my husband and me is also a kind of work. Everyone lives on their own, without distinction between high and low. And I also told her that there was no special treatment of guests in this house. They were the same. She has a separate bedroom and uses the same daily necessities as me. For example, we use the same brand of quilt cover, just different designs, and colors. Then, I told her not to eat leftovers and not to use cold water to save money. Just do what she needs to do. So she has been treated equally from the beginning. (Client Ms. C, 2021).*

In the domestic industry and, in fact, the entire service industry, both the service concept of “consumer first” emphasized by intermediary companies and the large gap in social status and material wealth between customers and workers ultimately manifest in the unequal interactive relationship between customers and workers, which is also an obstacle to the formation of the automatic emotional model. The customers quoted above are aware of this fact and intend to break it, which is an important response to the automatic emotional interaction of workers.

Therefore, the automatic emotion model is not accidentally formed but has preconditions. From the perspective of workers, it marks the continuation of the automatic emotions learned in their native families and communities. As the place of domestic work is the customer's home, out of instinct and habit, workers almost unconditionally and actively start their interactive model of automatic emotion. From the perspective of customers, this step has subjective and objective preconditions. The objective condition

is that the laborer possesses basic labor skills and characters, and the subjective condition is that the customer intends to shape equal relations. In other words, customers' responses to workers' automatic emotional model are conditional and conscious. From the formation of this kind of automatic emotion model, the customer's family as the main workplace of domestic work and the relationship model in the acquaintance society are critical macro-foundations to generate automatic emotion in the micro-labor field. When customers and workers with the above characteristics meet in the family contexts, the formation of an automatic emotional model will follow.

### **Emotional interaction: the maintenance of the automatic emotional model**

After domestic workers live together with customers in the process of labor, their emotional relationships with customers may be similar to their relationships with sisters, parents and children, and friends.

After working in a factory in Guangdong, EH came to Beijing and worked as a domestic worker. EH forged a deep friendship with the customer, Ms. Hong's family.

*After three or four months, our relationship became very good. Later, when my husband came, they found that my husband was also a very honest person. So they told me, "When we grow old, the four of us can live together. We can live on our pensions, and you just cook." We're so close.*

*Two years later, I went back to my hometown because I was pregnant. A month later, Hong was also pregnant. "Come back and cook for me. Let's live together," She said. So I went back. Apart from cooking, I did nothing. Hong's mother and mother-in-law did all the other household chores. I was paid 500 Yuan a month. At that time, it was a high salary.*

*I wanted to eat strawberries so much when I was pregnant. Five Yuan a kilo is too expensive. I looked at the strawberry for a long time, but I still didn't buy it. I went back and complained about the price to Hong at night. Later, I couldn't help but buy a kilo. You know what? Hong, her husband, her mother, and her mother-in-law each brought two kilos back. I finally returned to my hometown for eight months when I was pregnant. Hong asked my sister to come to Beijing, bought sleeping berth tickets, and said to my sister, "I entrust her to you. You have to take her home safely." Two or three months after giving birth to the baby, Hong called me to come back. So I live in Hong's house with my child. I only cook for them, and we take care of the children together. (Domestic worker EH, 2017).*

The relationship between EH and Ms. Hong has gone beyond the general cooperative relationship between customers and domestic workers. EH and Ms. Hong have also established interpersonal relationships with high trust. EH and Ms. Hong live as sisters. Even Ms. Hong believes that she values their relationship more than EH's sister. EH continued her work during pregnancy and took her child to Hong's home after birth, showing that the emotion between the two sides is similar to that found in kinship relations rather than an exchange relationship of work. Moreover, it is not the unilateral provision of the worker or demand of the customer; instead, it results from the common understanding and maintenance of the relationship between the two parties.

EH did not perform in this relationship. The detail that she complained to Ms. Hong about the price of strawberries demonstrates that her behavior is by no means the behavior of domestic workers under the rational exchange mode but an automatic expression of emotion based on trust. It is not just Ms. Hong, the hostess, but also Ms. Hong's husband, her mother, and her mother-in-law who respond to EH. The relationship between the two sides is similar to family and relatives (even EH's husband has become a family or kin member) rather than a master–servant or employer–employee relationship in the sense of occupation and class. The interaction mode of both parties is not limited to the duration of the labor relations. Even though Hong's family later moved out of Beijing, the two families still met when Hong's family visited Beijing every year.

Domestic QB has the same story.

*The couple is very reasonable. We are from the same place. We are good at communication and have the same living habits. The mother sometimes loses her temper with the child. I can say it to her frankly. I dare to do it. Indeed, they treat me like their own sisters. It is very comfortable for us to live together. (Domestic worker QB, 2021).*

In the business emotional model, the emotional rules emphasized by capital are the hegemony of customers and the unilateral and unconditional obedience of domestic workers. QB points out the mistakes her customer makes in the process of education and criticizes her as an elder. This observation reflects not only a kind of equal relationship between customers and workers but also workers' determination of the sincerity of the relationship under the automatic emotional model.

JC also had another emotional experience when helping a single mother take care of her children.

The mother trusts me very much. Sometimes I take the baby to my home to take care [of the baby], and she doesn't mind. When she has to go out to participate in competition, I support her very much. I can understand her. Her life is good, and I am also inspired by her. I take care of the baby as my own child. I treat it as my own child and treat the baby strictly. The baby talks like me and will say "disobedient" sometimes, and her mother will laugh.

*It's been more than 20 years. I still have a good relationship with my first employer. I will bring her things when I go home in the new year, and I will find her if I need to. (Domestic worker JC, 2018).*

JC has empathy for the mother of the child and supports her in competitions in her spare time, even if she must undertake extra work. Of course, the other party returned the trust, and JC could take the child back to her own rental house for care and even take the child back to her rural hometown for some time. JC's understanding of customers does not reflect a unilateral emotion but is recognized and reciprocated by the other party.

Customers will also recognize and give feedback about this sincere emotion.

*Because we respect her and regard her as our own family, the children regard her as their own family. They have grown up with this person's cook for many years. In the eyes of our two children, she is their relative. Although she is paid, she cooks three*



*meals a day for the two children, accompanies them as they grow up, and treats them very well. If my two children want to take care of her in the future or be grateful to her in any other way, I think it is totally fine. (Client Ms. C, 2021).*

In existing research, the majority of domestic workers who engaged in intensive care labor establish a similar “family” relationship with customers in a short time through strategies such as a deep performance of emotional labor. However, this relationship is only an expedient measure for workers to cope with work pressure, and it is difficult to obtain customers’ responses (Mei 2020). Therefore, it is still an alienated emotion. Interaction between these domestic workers and their customers is characterized by a “zero-sum game,” and the two sides compete for control over labor. In this process, on the one hand, companies combine the discourse of *suzhi* under the development doctrine with professional ethics in training to make domestic workers finally “agree” with the status differences and unequal rights between themselves and their customers. On the other hand, the customer defines the marginal position of the domestic workers and forces them to undergo emotional alienation entailing body-mind separation through emotional management that constitutes an oppressive interactive relationship in which the customer is the absolute controller (Su 2011; Zhou 2019). Therefore, in the labor process of most domestic workers, automatic emotional relationships are rarely found.

In the cases examined in this article, another type of customer is found, who is not constrained by the concept of “consumer first” in the consumption ideology of modern society but holds the consciousness of equality and responds to domestic workers with sincerity, tolerance, and trust so that an automatic emotional relationship in labor can be established. This observation reminds us that customers and domestic workers are critical interactive subjects in emotional labor. If only labor is required to provide emotion, either this unilateral emotional provision without response is difficult to continue, or the laborer will be emotionally exploited and oppressed, resulting in emotional burnout, eventually changing the essence of emotional labor. The standardization process of Chinese consumers (customers) has occurred relatively late, and there are great discrepancies in service cognition and demand (Li and Liu 2017), which is an important basis for domestic workers to generate automatic emotions in the labor process. Customers who do not fully agree with the concept of “consumer first” and give corresponding responses finally construct an automatic emotional interaction and sustain emotional involvement. Therefore, although the encounter between individuals who can practice the automatic emotional model seems random, there is rich fertile soil under their feet; the cultural characteristics and code of conduct of the “acquaintance society” are still preserved in Chinese society.

In addition, the above cases show that the automatic emotion model has the characteristics of sincerity, continuity, and reciprocity. Workers can criticize customers, which reflects the sincerity of such emotional relations and the diversity of expression methods. This situation is not one of unilateral obedience under the business model; it transcends the instrumental nature of emotional relationships under the business emotional model. In terms of maintenance, customers and workers in the automatic emotional model can maintain good emotional interaction after the end of labor relations. This mode can continue independently of the working relationship, while a business emotion relationship will terminate at the end of the work arrangement, which is temporary and attached to

the working relationship. In terms of emotional impact, the customer experience and the working environment of workers in the automatic emotion model are relatively better, and there is reciprocity between customers and workers, while the commercial emotional model is characterized by the emotional alienation and emotional exhaustion of workers, which will affect the results of labor.

#### **Occupational mobility: the reproduction of the automatic emotion model**

A good emotional relationship between customers and domestic workers under the automatic emotion mode is also reflected in the occupational mobility approach. On the one hand, the mobility of domestic workers is related to their institutional identity; on the other hand, it is related to changes in the customer's family, such as an increase or decrease in the number of family members and family migration. In this case, the domestic worker must look for another job. However, the next jobs of domestic workers discussed in this article are introduced mainly by customers and rarely through intermediaries.

*She introduced me to her classmate to take care of their children. At first, I didn't think of it, but I agreed with her. This family is also very kind to me. Knowing there is no milk powder in the countryside, they bought us enough milk powder for half a year. Once my daughter washed her own clothes at home in winter. She told me that her hands were cold on the phone. The family asked me to buy a washing machine for her. I couldn't afford to buy a washing machine. Grandma (the mother of the family) called her two daughters, and three of them raised money to buy a washing machine for my daughter. (Domestic worker EH, 2017).*

*I haven't participated in training for so many years. I can always find a job. I'm very confident. The baby will go to school after the new year. A grandmother downstairs comes to see me. Her daughter-in-law is going to have a second child in October. They hope I can help with it. (Domestic worker JC, 2018).*

The automatic emotion between customers and workers is not limited to the labor process. When a domestic worker needs to find a new job, the customer will introduce her to another customer and provide emotional "endorsement" for the domestic worker based on their personal network to lay a good foundation for the future emotional relationship between the domestic worker and the next customer. This process is very different from obtaining work through intermediaries, and it is easier for domestic workers to reproduce automatic emotions through relationship replication.

The maintenance and reproduction of natural emotional patterns also have the characteristics of gift exchange and reciprocity. In the above case, the customer presented the "washing machine" as a material gift to EH's daughter, which constitutes a rational return to EH and a subjective recognition of the family-like relationship. This action has the characteristics of both emotional communication and rational exchange, showing the characteristics of long-term relationships, such as lagging and continuous involvement. It is a typical emotional interaction in a relationship-oriented society. Particularly, the "washing machine," as an expensive electrical appliance, has gone beyond the scope of reciprocity among ordinary acquaintances and is more akin to care and mutual assistance among family members. This case vividly portrays the "quasi-family" automatic

emotion construction between customers and workers. After the termination of labor relations, customers maintain an automatic emotional interaction model with workers.

*In fact, I take her as my family. Even when she didn't work in my house, I still cared about her. I called her and talked like a friend. When she was working in Beijing, she would come to my house on her rest day. She came to my home as if coming to a relative's house. Then we talked, had a meal, and she rested for a half day before leaving. (Client Ms. Z, 2021).*

This quote reflects the independence of automatic emotion from another perspective. After the end of instrumental labor relations, the automatic emotions formed before can continue. Although the formation of automatic emotion needs an instrumental foundation and is attached to the working relationship, its continuation and reproduction are independent. This fact also highlights the difference between the automatic emotion model and the business emotion model.

### **Challenges and alienation in automatic emotional relationships**

Of course, this group of domestic workers will also encounter challenges in their work in two main aspects. The first is the dilemma of labor payment negotiation in automatic emotional relationships.

*Everyone talks about wages in different ways. I think we can talk openly, but she does not. In the previous family and my family, she does not. After the new year, she suddenly said that she couldn't come. Then I offered to give her a raise, and she came. (Client Ms. Z, 2021).*

In traditional Chinese culture, the interaction between family members is based on automatic emotional relations, and the calculation of money is considered to be contrary to it. Therefore, the automatic emotional relationship with customers will, to some extent, restrict domestic workers from striving for higher labor payments from customers. This outcome reveals the negative impact on workers of the automatic emotional model formed in labor relations.

The second is “voting with feet,” when the reproduction of automatic emotions is blocked. When making lunch for a family, EH was scolded by the customer because of the regional difference in cooking the eggplant, and EH then chose to resign. HR also talked about the suspected theft at the customer's home in the group activity. Although the customer later learned that he had wronged HR and formally apologized to her, HR still resigned quickly.

The stories of EH and HR both show that domestic workers in the automatic emotion mode pay more attention to their interaction and trust with customers, and even “deep performance” is difficult to accept. Once the customer responds slowly or refuses to respond, both parties are likely to face a rupture of rationality and emotion, which makes these domestic workers tend to end the interactive relationship more quickly and decisively.

In addition, some customers in the survey cited cases in which their relationship with domestic workers changed from an automatic emotion model to a business emotion model.

*She has been in the intermediary company for too long, and she will go there on weekends. What they communicate with each other is this house and that house, and they will compare with each other. They learned how to fool customers and how to make a superficial effort. Later, when I asked her back when I had my second child, I felt something change. (Client Ms. Z, 2021).*

*My Dajie's (domestic worker) sister-in-law has gained rich experience in the agency. She goes to the agency on weekends. Whoever offers a higher salary, her sister-in-law immediately resigns and switches to that customer. Then, she teaches my dajie to do the same. Anyway, the employer has to pay when she leaves. (Client Ms. C, 2021).*

In other words, some domestic workers give up the automatic emotional model and choose the business emotional model under the influence of the overall atmosphere of the industry. This change also reflects the vulnerability of the reproduction of the automatic emotion model and further explains the main reason why the model is currently scarce. Of course, this situation also reminds us to further reflect on the negative influence of domestic intermediary enterprises on the overall normative rules of the industry. If capital acknowledges only the business emotion model, it will further eliminate the basis for forming the automatic emotion model.

Therefore, compared with the three main bodies of capital, customers, and workers in the business emotion model, the automatic emotion model is exhibited mainly by customers and workers in specific interactive situations without interactive space for capital. However, this situation does not mean that capital should be excluded or ignored in the automatic emotional model. When workers face challenges in the automatic emotional model, they must rely on the intermediary role of capital. On the one hand, capital can exercise a positive influence and regulate the wage system of domestic workers in terms of establishing and promoting general industry norms to solve the dilemma of labor payment negotiation between workers and customers under the automatic emotion mode. On the other hand, it can eliminate the negative impact if it can reflect on its one-sided assumption of “unilateral demand and control” emotional needs of consumers and admit the possibility and feasibility of establishing an automatic emotional model between workers and customers in training and management. By doing so, it can help the existing automatic emotional model avoid being eliminated by intermediary enterprises so that it can continue and expand the influence of the automatic emotion model and ultimately benefit capital, customers, and workers through good interaction and high work quality.

### **Conclusions: the mechanism and implications of the automatic emotion model**

From the above cases, we can preliminarily discern the local automatic emotional labor model in the labor process of Chinese domestic workers and its influencing mechanism, including how they differ from emotional labor in the global business context.

First, at the macro-level, the relationship culture of the local acquaintance society and the private family field as the main workplace are the basis of this emotional labor model in the domestic service industry. The construction of quasi-kinship relations in Chinese acquaintance society and the construction of human relations based on gift exchange make relationships both emotional and instrumental. This fact is the social and cultural

basis for the interaction between customers and workers under this mode. The domestic industry focuses on the work carried out in the private field of the family, which provides a natural industry foundation for the continuation and expansion of the above automatic emotional model of kinship in the domestic field. These two factors together constitute the macro-social foundation of the automatic emotion model of the Chinese domestic industry. In contrast, the business emotion model unilaterally advocates the consciousness of “consumer first” as it ignores the local social and cultural situation.

Second, at the micro-interaction level, automatic emotion embodies sincerity, continuity, and independence, which is in sharp contrast to the instrumentality, temporality, and dependence of the emotional relationship of “performance” under the business emotion model that aims to complete the service. In the formation process, the automatic emotion model requires not only the undifferentiated emotional provision of workers but also the acceptance and response of customers. Objectively, it requires workers to demonstrate a basic work capacity, and subjectively, it requires customers to actively build equal relationships. In this process, the automatic emotional relationship has a certain degree of instrumentality in the formation stage. The maintenance process of automatic emotion is clearly manifested in the material exchange of gifts and the construction of human feelings, in which emotional and instrumental characters coexist. However, workers’ multiple emotional expressions toward customers illustrate the sincerity of the relationship so that the interaction in the automatic emotion model is dominated by an emotional orientation, supplemented by the instrumental orientation of completing the work. The emotional orientation has greater importance and priority, and the reproduction and continuation of this emotional interaction further show the independence of this emotional model. This observation, in turn, promotes our understanding of the prominent position of emotionality in the overall mechanism.

Third, from the perspective of emotional interaction subjects, the automatic emotional model highlights the subjectivity and initiative of customers and workers in the formation of an emotional labor model in the absence of capital. This situation urges us to reflect on traditional capital management, the tripartite framework of capital—the customer—worker under control, and the resulting negative impact. The construction of the emotional hegemony of customers and the one-sided emphasis on workers’ obedience to emotional discipline by capital show the limitations of investors’ cognition of customers and workers. On the one hand, as the core subject in the development and professionalization of domestic service, capital with “consumer first” consciousness will have a negative impact on the automatic emotional model of customers and workers; on the other hand, the absence of capital in the micro-mechanism will also bring challenges to labor payment negotiations in the automatic emotion model. Therefore, the emphasis on the dual subjectivity of customers and workers in the micro-mechanism does not mean the exclusion of capital. Due to the scarcity of automatic emotion models and the fact that China regards intermediary enterprises as the core subject of industry development, the development and improvement in the domestic industry require capital with extensive market influence. In other words, expanding the influence of the automatic emotion model in the domestic industry requires the joint participation of capital, labor, and customers. However, the premise is that the capital is aware of the limitations of the business emotion model, adopts the automatic emotion model for reference in

management, advocates this model to improve service efficiency and the labor environment, and transforms emotional labor from the spear of capital profit to the shield of workers against work challenges.

In short, it is based on the local cultural background, such as the construction model of social relationships in the acquaintance society, that customers and domestic workers can establish an automatic emotional model with sincerity, continuity, and independence through interaction during the labor process, which is a mutually beneficial working model. For customers, the work quality of domestic workers can be guaranteed and improved; for workers, their working environment and stability are guaranteed. This arrangement is also conducive to the sustainable development of the domestic industry. Given the small proportion of such domestic workers discussed in this paper among groups of domestic workers, the localized automatic emotion model does not occupy a dominant position in the process of domestic workers' labor. As an ideal type, an automatic emotion model also has difficulty achieving the goal of wide promotion in pure form. However, this paper hopes that people can see other possibilities beyond the existing business model through the presentation of the automatic emotion model and promotes reflection on and adjustment of the mainstream business model. As mentioned at the beginning of the fourth section, emotional labor is an indispensable part of domestic labor. Although it is difficult to directly affect the labor relations at the macro-level and structural environment of the domestic industry by adjusting emotional labor, such an adjustment is conducive to improving the interactive experience between workers and consumers in the micro-labor field and thus the micro-working environment and work quality.

For other service industries, since the working space is the public domain rather than the family, the length and frequency of service interaction are far lower than those of domestic labor, so it is difficult to learn from the relevant mechanism of the automatic emotion model. However, the cognition of the subjectivity and diversification of Chinese consumers contained in this model, as well as the pursuit of a win-win for customers and workers and higher service labor quality will help the service industry to further realize the narrowness and limitations of its "consumer first" concept.

By comparing the above aspects, we can further summarize the characteristics and significance of localized automatic emotional labor. First, this comparison urges us to theoretically reflect on the underlying assumptions of the business emotional labor model. This "consumer first" emotional rule presupposes the binary opposition between consumers and workers. The localized natural emotion model suggests that the consumer is not a single emotional demander but a subjective constructor and responder. On the premise of respecting their emotional subjectivity, consumers and workers can form a win-win and reciprocal emotional relationship. Especially from the perspective of emotional labor research, since automatic emotion has a deep social foundation, there is still some room for adjustment and improvement in the business emotion model. Second, from the perspective of cultural comparison, in the process of urbanization and modernization, maintaining the relationship structure of "the differential mode of association" and relationship construction rules based on traditional villages in Chinese society may pose challenges to the professionalization and specialization of some positions



in the service industry. They may become a supporting resource to solve difficulties. Research on emotional labor needs to be expanded to conduct the cross-cultural comparison of emotional labor and promote national comparisons and discussions.

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